

"Thou art an whore an errant whore a bitche yea worse than a bitche ":

The Language of Sexual Slander in Early Modern England

The English language in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries experienced rapid growth, wide expansion, and broad dispersal, thanks in large part to the introduction of the printing press and the presence of theatres. These expansions and inventions provided English speakers with a large and colorful vocabulary, which they turned to many uses. Among the most invective and inventive was the language of sexual slander, the vocabulary used to call another's chastity and sexual morality into question. Primarily a weapon wielded by women, pejorative language provided a means for policing moral standards, for appending new disputes to existing litigation, and for attacking the social status of another woman. Examining the language of sexual insult, the use and context of slanderous words, and the derivation of those words may provide clues not only to early modern concepts of sexual morality, but also to the interplay of language and social status in early modern society.

The evidence of these slanders comes mostly from defamation cases in both church and civil courts. Because these cases dealt with sexual behavior, they were deemed spiritual rather than temporal matters, and thus usually came under the dominion of the ecclesiastical courts. Only when the allegations included temporal matters as well – as when "thief" went along with "whore" – did the defamation case go

to the common law courts.¹ Slander litigation saw a marked increase in late sixteenth- and early-seventeenth century England: in several counties between the 1560s and 1580s, defamation cases accounted for a quarter of all church court business, and in London, defamation suits grew from a third of all litigation in the 1590s to three-quarters of it in the 1630s.² The "extraordinary fullness" of the records from these cases provides a considerable bank for the vocabulary of sexual insult; since judgment in these cases depended upon what was said, moreso than proof of any action, the records include many direct (and often quite colorful) quotes and recollections.

By far, the word which appears the most frequently is "whore," though it seems an insult to the ingenuity and creativity of the slandering women to reduce their inventory of abuse to that single term. The standard form of sexual defamation seems to be "long sequences of insult," compiling attributes of sexual incontinency, uncleanliness, disease, and vagrancy.³ Once case which illustrates the accumulating force of insults ran thus: "Tinker whore, tinker's bitch, whore, quean, drab and scold, dronkard, dronken whore, dronken quean, dronken harlot, dronken drab, and dronken scold, and said she was a noughtie, an evell and a bad and lewd woman."⁴ One woman, in Skipsea, complains of being called "arrande whore, gull snowted whore, common whore, curtaile jade and many other suchelyke slanderous wordes;" another in York was

¹ J. A. Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander in Early Modern England: The Church Courts at York* (York: University of York, 1980), 7-8.

² Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 32.

³ Laura Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult in Early Modern London," *History Workshop* 35 (Spring 1993): 4, accessed February 6, 2011, <http://proxy.mbc.edu:2054/stable/4289204>.

⁴ Sharpe, 9-10. Sharpe goes on to note, "It seems an oversimplification, as well as a disservice to the richness of the English language, simply to classify the sentiments expressed under the heading 'whore'."

described as "'hott arsed Bitch, or hot arsed whore, or hot arsed queane, or some wordes to the very same effect."⁵

Records show that the word "whore" applies exclusively to women, who also participated in more cases of adultery and fornication. Men's slanders had to do with perjury, lying, cheating, and thieving.⁶ Though the term "whore" in modern usage generally applies to a prostitute, someone whose business it is to exchange sex for money, this was not necessarily the case in the early modern period. The financial implications were vaguer, pertaining to the economic complexities of marriage rather than to a stricter sense of the transaction, and use of the term did not necessarily constitute an accusation of actual sexual misconduct. In many cases, the insult is merely the easiest way a slanderer of calling a woman's general reputation into question, of demeaning and debasing her, whether the slanderer had any suspicion of fornication or adultery or not.⁷ When adultery did come into the equation as a true accusation, rather than as a vague slur, the phrase "my husband's whore" appears with greater frequency. As "the culture and legal practices of early modern society contained few avenues for condemning male sexual misconduct," this construction allowed the injured wife to complain not only about the other woman, but implicitly, if indirectly, about her

⁵ *Ibid*, 15-16.

⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

⁷ "Elizabeth Stokes, a 20-year-old servant who heard Phoebe Cartwright call Margery Hipwell 'impudent quean' in Fleet Street at seven o'clock one April morning in 1613, told the court she did not think 'that Phebe Cartwright by calling Margarie Hipwell queane did meane that shee had committed fornicacion or adultery or plaid the whore with any man but only spake the same wordes in her anger', after a wrangle between the two women and Margery's husband." Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 59.

husband as well.⁸ In this way, language translates men's adultery into a battle between women, providing wives with an opportunity for criticism not otherwise afforded them within the strictures of their society.

Terms, Definitions, and Trends

The earliest meaning of "whore" is, indeed, "a woman who prostitutes herself for hire; a prostitute, harlot," dating from around 1000, from Old English *hóre*, possibly through Old Norse *hór*, which meant "adultery." By 1275, however, the word had attained its second, more general meaning of "an unchaste or lewd woman; a fornicatress or adulteress."⁹ "Quean," on the other hand, originally had a far more general meaning, and acquired its sexual connotation later on. Initially, in Old English as *cwen* or *quena*, the term meant simply "a woman, a female." The derogatory context of "a hussy, a prostitute" came along by the late-14th century, in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*.¹⁰ "Slut" similarly had a more general connotation to begin with, though here the term was always derogatory in some sense, meaning "a woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance; a kitchen-maid; a drudge." The word appears in this first connotation by 1402, and it morphed quickly into meaning "a woman of a low or loose character; a bold or impudent girl; a hussy, jade" by 1450.¹¹ "Drab" follows the same

⁸ *Ibid*, 103.

⁹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "whore, n." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified November 2010, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/228780>.

¹⁰ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "quean, n." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified November 2010, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/156192>.

¹¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "slut, n." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified November 2010, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/182346>.

rapid transition, meaning "a dirty and untidy woman" in 1518 and "a harlot, prostitute, strumpet" by 1533.¹² The short time period these words took to change meanings points to the strong connotation between dirt and sexual misconduct.

Two other common appellations for sexually transgressive women follow different paths of usage. "Harlot" was initially a male-oriented term, and actually retained this connotation into the seventeenth-century. Initially, in the thirteenth-century, "harlot" meant "a vagabond, beggar, rogue, rascal, villain, low fellow, knave... sometimes a man of loose life, a fornicator." In the fourteenth-century, the term took on the connotation of "an itinerant jester, buffoon, or juggler" or of "a male servant or attendant, a menial." Only by the late fifteenth-century does "harlot" begin to mean "an unchaste woman, a prostitute, a strumpet."¹³ Here the transformation is less of dirty or filth and more of vagrancy and demeaned social status. The other frequently-used term, "bitch," has a bestial connotation. From about 1000 on, and into modern usage, the word means "the female of the dog," from Old English *bicce* and Old Norse *bikkja*, but by 1400, the word applied to female humans as well, in various pejorative contexts, particularly "a lewd or sensual woman."¹⁴

As far as descriptive adjectives go, many focus on the themes of disease and dirtiness that the nouns themselves hint at. "Pocky" and variations thereof all derive from "pock" and "pox," which early on referred to "any of several infectious diseases

¹² *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "drab, n." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified November 2010, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/57356>.

¹³ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "harlot, n." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified November 2010, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/84255>.

¹⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "bitch, n." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified November 2010, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/19524>.

characterized by a rash of pustules, especially smallpox, cowpox, and chicken pox." By 1503, however, pox often referred directly to "the French pox," syphilis, and the marks it left on a body.¹⁵ The other notable adjective which shows up with considerable frequency is "errant" or "arrant." Initially this word, derived from Latine *errare* (to wander) or *itinerare* (to journey), meant simply "itinerant, traveling." By the sixteenth century, however, it too had acquired a pejorative context, meaning "straying, wandering, erring... straying from the proper course or place... erring in opinion, conduct, etc; deviating from the correct standard."¹⁶ Taken in a context of sexual insult, "errant" thus picks up on the theme of vagrancy, misconduct, and deviation from the prescribed social norms.

Beyond these words themselves, women constructed more complex ideas about whoredom, focused largely, at least in the insult language, on appearance. The unchaste woman had, in popular terminology, distinct visible features. Chief among these was the whore's nose, with women describing others as "'saddlenosed whore', 'flatt-nosed whore,'" or with noses turned up "'like a drabbs taylor."¹⁷ Gowing suggests that the nose was the central focus of physical insult because "noses stood in for the tails they were compared to" - the tail being a vague but euphemistically charged reference to the

¹⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "pox, n." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified July 2010, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/149197>; *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "pocky, adj." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified September 2006, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/146430>.

¹⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "errant, adj." accessed March 14, 2011, last modified November 2010, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/64100>.

¹⁷ Gowing, "Gender and Language," 10.

general buttocks-genital area of a woman.¹⁸ The nasal focus may also have had a connection to a medieval punishment for prostitution or adultery, no longer common in early modern England, but not extinct, either: slitting the nostrils.¹⁹ These descriptions are, of course, a construct; a sexually deviant woman was no more likely than anyone else to have a turned-up nose. The idea that morality could become visible, however, "must have been an appealing one, enabling the application of instant and observable divisions between honest and dishonest women."²⁰ The language of sexual insult included elements of physical description as a way of making an abstract concept concrete.

As noted above, women often used insults related to "pocks" or "the pox." Filth and disease formed another common thread in slanderous language. This idea had both a spiritual and a medical basis. The "Sermon Against Whoredome and Uncleanesse" in the First Book of English Homilies, published in 1547, explicitly states the connection between sexual deviancy and physical corruption: "Christ saith that evil thoughts, breaking of wedlock, whordom, and fornication defile a man, that is to say, corrupt both the body and soul of a man, and make them, of the temples of the holy Ghost, the filthy dunghill, or dungeon of all unclean spirits."²¹ Like physical appearance, filth and disease made a whore visible rather than covert. Actual dirt and other befouling agents

¹⁸ Tails are, however, a key focus of sexual insult of women. They were imagined as the locus of sexual pleasure, and the acts women were supposed to have engaged into satisfy that pleasure were visualized with bawdy exaggeration." Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 80-81.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 103.

²⁰ Gowing, "Gender and Language," 10.

²¹ "A Sermon Against Whoredome and Uncleanesse," 1547, The Anglican Library, University of Toronto, Toronto, accessed March 28, 2011, <http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/homilies/bk1hom11.htm>.

featured heavily in some of the more scatological insults. Among the coarse and colorful descriptors included in this set of insults are: "maggottie whore," "mangy carrion," "shitten whore," "scurvie fatt arst quean," "gouty legged whore," "rotten whore," and "stinking gill."²² Other accounts include women threatening to drag a suspected whore to a pump in order to wash her clean, combining the linguistic concept and verbal insult with the threat of a publicly-shaming physical activity.²³ This idea of filth connects to several of the terms themselves, with words like "slut" and "drab" originating from terms attached to slovenly behavior or appearance.

The other befoulment came from within: disease. While spiritual authorities may have attempted to assign blame and punishment equally, early modern venereological literature did not. Women were portrayed as the causal agents of disease, in whose heated wombs healthy semen, if mixed with that of other men, could turn into poison.²⁴ These concepts find their way into the insult language of the period: "burnt-arse whore" and variations thereof refer to the effects of sexually-transmitted diseases upon women.²⁵ Men did suffer the effects of the disease visibly as well, however, with sexual organs scarred, burnt off, eaten away, or cut off as a result of disease.²⁶ Men were victims, not agents, however, with the literature speaking of women as carriers, responsible for consuming men.

²² Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 66-67; Ingram, 313.

²³ Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 17.

²⁴ Kevin P. Siena, "Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox: English Venereology and Social and Sexual Danger," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8, no. 4 (April 1998): 562-563, accessed February 6, 2011, <http://proxy.mbc.edu:2054/stable/3840410>.

²⁵ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 82; "Gender and the Language of Insult," 13.

²⁶ Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 13.

Words As Power-Play

So who was using all these words? In almost all of the records of defamation cases, both the slanderer and the slandered were women.²⁷ This predominance points both to the nature of sexual slander as something damaging to women's reputations more than to men's and to the forum that debating slanders offered women that they could not get through other means. The evidence in these cases comes largely from the middling classes – the wives and daughters of tradesmen and craftsmen in the city, of sailors in dockside towns, and of husbandmen and yeomen in the country.²⁸ Gentlewomen appear to have considered it beneath them to fight over words in such a public venue, and servants and the poorer classes could not afford the costs of taking a case to court.²⁹ This does not, however, mean that women of higher or lower status did not use these same words or that they did not insult or slander each other, only that far less evidence survives of the verbiage they may have used for such attacks. The women on both sides of the cases were almost always married, with many slanders coming from wives calling out their husbands' mistresses.

The spaces in which the slanders took place also points to an aspect of how women could wield power in society. Often the records demonstrate that the defamation took place with the woman standing in a liminal space of some kind or

²⁷ "Three quarters of all defamation cases were brought by women, and nearly half were both fought and defended by women. Sexual slander was also predominantly a women's crime: nearly two-thirds of these cases were brought against women. As both plaintiffs and defendants, most of these women were married." Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 61.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹ Laura Gowing, "Women, Status, and the Popular Culture of Dishonour," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1996): 231, accessed February 6, 2011, <http://proxy.mbc.edu:2054/stable/3679238>. "For gentlewomen, the fighting over works that might vindicate lower status women could simply mark them out as further dishonoured."

another, either from her doorway or leaning out of a window.³⁰ As J. A. Sharpe notes, women in England enjoyed a social freedom which defied the expectation that chastity and good reputation meant keeping women "out of contact with the outside world."³¹ Religious doctrines, advice pamphlets, and common thought all assigned women a "passive, dependent, home-based" role which contrasted the active role of men in the world outside of the home.³² Though this association was "only viable in the idealized worlds of the advice manuals," the concept still held some currency in early modern England.³³ Women who slandered others could call upon these ideas to reinforce their own virtue by contrast to the women they defamed, by remaining nominally within their own homes, keeping to the doorways and windows to call out to women passing by in the street. In literal terms, the image meant nothing; a woman calling from her doorway one moment was perfectly likely to be walking down the street herself later that day. The semiotic importance, however, was far greater, as it symbolically turned one woman into the good, passive, homebound wife and the other into the straying streetwalker.

The language at use in sexual slander also demonstrates the deep divide between expectations of men's reputations and of women's. As Laura Gowing notes, "There is, after all, no way to call a man a whore," and so the insults directed at men must be

³⁰ Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 1-11 *passim*.

³¹ Sharpe, 18.

³² Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 302. Also Gowing, "Women," 225-226: "But in public discussions of female honour, chastity essentially meant passivity, the avoidance of sin. It was the absolute opposite of the activity, work and consequence that constituted male honour."

³³ Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 11.

different: whoremaster, cuckold, whoremonger, adulterer, fornicator.³⁴ The male-specific accusations often center not around a man's activity, but around his wife's.³⁵ A man's sexual behavior affects his reputation far less than it affects a woman, but what insults a man is calling out his inability to control a woman under his authority, usually his wife, but potentially also a sister, daughter, or other relation. Chastity, honor, and honesty were all construed differently for women than they were for men, as for women, these virtues all derived from or bore connections to their sexuality, whereas society judged men's worth "through a much wider range of values."³⁶ For a man, honesty meant not lying, prudence meant having sound judgment, temperance meant not drinking or eating to excess and not allowing a vicious temper to rule, fortitude meant the ability to endure hardship and to confront fear . For a woman, all of these virtues centered on sexual chastity: honesty meant not deceiving her husband, prudence and temperance meant behaving soberly rather than wantonly, fortitude meant not giving in to carnal temptation.

Despite this dominating perception in society, the moral authorities attempted to hold men to the same standard as women. The "Sermon Against Whoredome and Uncleanesse" focused its admonitions on men rather than women and aimed its advice equally at both parties:

And here are all degrees to be monished, whether they be married or unmarried, to love chastity and cleanness of life. For the married are bound by the love of GOD so purely to love one another, that

³⁴ Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 4.

³⁵ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 62-63.

³⁶ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 2; "Gender and the Language of Insult," 3, 225-226.

neither of them seek any strange love. The man must only cleave to his wife, and the wife again only to her husband: they must so delight in one another's company, that non eof them covet any other.³⁷

Most of the homily chastises men for adultery and whoremongering; though this condemnation does, of course, imply the participation of a woman as well, the religious authorities seemed more concerned with curbing male behavior.³⁸

Examining the goals of women employing terms of sexual slander can shed further light on the choice and use of the words involved. What were women who slandered each other hoping to achieve? One probable answer is a measure of social control. Gossip and observation formed an informal institution for ensuring adherence to the cultural and moral norms. As previously noted, women in early modern England enjoyed considerable mobility in their daily lives, meaning that confinement was not an effective method of preserving chastity. Likewise, chaperonage was unusual outside of the upper strata of society. It fell to women to observe and comment upon each other, to ensure that everyone obeyed the same rules and that any deviants could be called out and appropriately punished.³⁹ Women were expected, in many capacities, to observe the changes in each others' bodies, particularly where pregnancy was concerned.⁴⁰ This function relates their verbal criticism of sexual deviancy to other forms of social control,

³⁷ "A Sermon Against Whoredome and Uncleanesse."

³⁸ "Contemporary ecclesiastical theorists were keen to stress the culpability of men as well as women for adultery; Puritan writers like William Gouge noted the unfairness of society's willingness to centre women's reputation on their chastity." Gowing, "Gender and Language," 2.

³⁹ " Given the widespread involvement of women in work and social activities which took them out of the home, confinement was inapplicable, while protection was unlikely to be used outside the upper strata. Reliance would, therefore, have to be placed on normative restriction; it was gossip, and the knowledge that behaviour would be commented upon and that reputations could be lost, which helped reinforce and reassert these normative restrictions." Sharpe, 20-21.

⁴⁰ Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 13.

such as the midwife's responsibility to learn the name of an illegitimate father's child from the woman in childbed, or to skimmingtons and other public methods of shaming individuals for illicit behavior or poor decisions.

Women also commented on each other's behavior as a way of strengthening perception of their own virtue. As seen by how they positioned themselves in liminal spaces, women could implicitly comment on their own virtue by explicitly commenting on someone else's lack of it. This comparison could extend to less semiotic expression as well. Gowing provides one example of a woman who detailed her moral superiority to another: "Elinor Kilby used a typical formula... 'I am an honest woman than thou art... I do not get my living as thou dost by laieing thy legs abroad And I would be ashamed to give entertainment to so many men as thou dost in yt base and lewd fashion.'"⁴¹

Sexual slander could also arise as the result of pre-existing disputes and court cases. Both the insults and the resulting prosecutions thereof had a place in the litigation culture of early modern England. Martin Ingram, examining church court cases in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, describes the atmosphere in which these cases developed:

Depositions specify a wide variety of reasons why the litigants had 'fallen out', ranging from squabbles over card games to disputes over religion. However, most of these 'jars' resolve into a few basic categories of roughly equal importance numerically: tensions over lawsuits already in train; quarrels over money or bargains; personal jealousies, whether sexual or otherwise; and disputes over various

⁴¹ Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 9.

minor trespasses such as damage done by pigs, shooting at dogs, or the beating of a neighbour's maidservant.⁴²

In this atmosphere, whether in small towns or in crowded London neighborhoods, small-scale disputes could rapidly turn into deep enmity. Ingram identifies status-consciousness as one of the reasons for these rivalries and contentions.⁴³ When wives became involved in the disputes, they may have found it easiest to attack each other on sexual grounds owing to the general lower involvement of women in cases of perjury, theft, cheating, and other temporal crimes.⁴⁴ Gowing suggests that the inundation of sexual slander cases in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century may not reflect solely a concern for moral policing, but could also implicate that.. This method of attack would still reflect the concern of early modern society with women's sexuality, however; if the worst thing you can call a woman is a "whore," it still centers her worth and her virtue in her sexual fidelity rather than in any other behavior. As chastity defined a woman's spiritual wholesomeness, so too did it reflect her legal capacities and dictate her social stature.

With so much of female worth centered on appropriate sexual behavior, it should then come as no surprise that sexual language became the preferred weapon of status-conscious women in the early modern era. Social status and economics met in the problem of adultery; adulterous women threatened order in more than one way, usurping both power and currency not rightfully theirs. Despite the practice of sexual

⁴² Ingram, 315.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Sharpe, 29.

insult as a corrective action of the community, "the most immediate concern of defamers was with the effects of illicit sex upon their own house."⁴⁵ A man with a mistress spent money on her that should have been going to his own household, particularly in matters of luxurious clothing and expensive food. One woman complained that her husband "can be contented to spend ten shillings on thee but he will not spend two pence in my company."⁴⁶ Adultery also could confuse issues of inheritance, with the possibility that bastard progeny would inherit wrongfully from their mother's husband, or that they could possibly demand restitution from their biological fathers, especially if the mother was unmarried.⁴⁷ Illicit sexual relations thus disrupt household economics in both directions.⁴⁸ Even if an adultery case went to a church court, however, the diversion of household funds was not theft, and thus was not subject to judicial reconciliation. Language, then, became the way for other women to fight back and reassert authority and order.

The words used to insult a woman for sexual deviancy lowered her status. As previously discussed, the language of sexual insult focused around themes of degenerative appearance, dirt and filth, and disease. Together, these concepts point to another common thread in the language of insult: vagrancy. An unchaste woman was a "hedge whore," "barn whore," "hollow tree whore," with verbiage removing her from the normal, approved bounds of human society, the house and village, and placing her

⁴⁵ Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 14-15.

⁴⁷ Siena, 568.

⁴⁸ "A whore outside the house consumes money and goods, a whore in the house produces profits that come from the wrong source." Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult," 15.

in the margins, in the wilds, with the animals.⁴⁹ Drawing off of the economic connotations of adultery, women also attacked a deviant's worth in that regard: "twopenny whore," "twelvepenny hackney," "tinckers truell" (referring to a whore kept by a tinker, a proverbially impecunious profession).⁵⁰ Sexually deviant women were also "common," belonging, like livestock pastures, to every man and to no man.⁵¹ Words like "harlot," "drab," and "slut," as previously noted, derive from terms related to vagabonds, rogues, and, menial labor, and "bitch" strikes even lower, reducing a woman to the level of an animal. The cumulative effect is that the language of sexual slander not only assaulted a woman's virtue and reputation, but her very place in the fabric of early modern society. Insult aimed to remove a woman from her station, to push her from respectability to drudgery, from wealth to poverty, even from humanity to bestiality.

The examination of the language of sexual slander may reflect in the other direction as well, giving an indication of what kinds of words in early modern English were considered low or vulgar. Almost none of the commonly used pejorative words came from a French or Latinate base; nearly all derive from German, Dutch, or Scandinavian languages. The only Latinate word which appears with any frequency is "errant/arrant," with its connotations of wandering. This correlation may relate to the lingering effects of one of the major transitions in the development of the English

⁴⁹ Ingram, 313.

⁵⁰ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 66-67; "Women," 232.

⁵¹ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 67.

language: the introduction of Latinate terms via Norman French after the 1066 Conquest.

When William I took the throne of England, he brought with him a new ruling class composed of French-speaking Norman nobles. Through the thirteenth century, the educated and the elite spoke in French almost exclusively, with Latin serving as the language of international communication and much record-keeping, but English resurged during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, perhaps as a result of ill-feeling towards the French during the 100 Years' War and other conflicts. Henry IV was the first primarily English-speaking monarch, possibly monolingual in English only, and his son Henry V gave his accession speech in English.⁵² The monarchy set the standard for the aristocracy and for official records-keeping, and as a result, English gained respectability as a language on an equal level with the Latin-derived Romance languages. Scholars began to translate works from Latin into English which previously had only been translated into French, Italian, or Spanish. What many of these translators discovered, however, was that English did not necessarily have appropriate cognates for every purpose: "as one anonymous writer complained... *There ys many wordes in Latyn that we have no propre Englysh accordynge thereto.*"⁵³ As a result, the translators had to Anglicize Latin words, beginning the influx of Latin-derived words into the English language.

⁵² Joseph M. Williams, *Origins of the English Language* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 72-80 *passim*, accessed March 29, 2011, <http://books.google.com/books?id=RamwAZ6fpaoC>.

⁵³ Williams, 87.

That the women of middling status who engaged in sexual slander used primarily non-Latinate words for their slanders does not indicate that the linguistic class distinctions of the post-Conquest era were still in effect. England no longer had a Norman-French speaking upper class and an Anglo-Saxon speaking lower class, and hadn't for centuries. Women of middling status, especially in London, certainly had access to the new, Latin-derived words which entered the language in the late-fifteenth through the early-seventeenth centuries. The printing press, the spread of literacy and education, and the theatres all provided means for men and women to gain access to a wider vocabulary than their ancestors might have had.⁵⁴ Additionally, many of the non-Latinate words were nonetheless new to the English language, deriving not from Anglo-Saxon origins, but entering usage through England's increased connections to and trade with the Netherlands. As the printing press came from Germany and the paper from the Low Countries, new words came along with them. Furthermore, since few gentlewomen went to court for slander, no evidence exists to prove either that they did or did not use the same non-Latinate terms of abuse. What the predominance of these Germanic-, Dutch-, and Scandinavian-derivate words may indicate, however, is that the association of those words as low or vulgar, and of Latinate words as more respectable or more refined, may have lingered on long after the assimilation of both sets of vocabulary into the common language. The verbiage of insult thus provides

⁵⁴ Albert Croll Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 187, accessed April 2, 2011, <http://books.google.com/books?id=9g8b-Es1WVwC>.

insight into the continuing development of the English language in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Examining the language of sexual slander in early modern England provides both social and linguistic insights. Socially, women used insult as a means of commenting on each other's private lives, particularly as a way to expose adultery. Wives verbally assaulted their husbands' mistresses as a way of redressing a situation that was both emotionally and economically troubling to the household. Much of the language focused on making the "whore" visible, so that the intangible sexual deviancy became a recognizable trait, the better for calling out illicit activity. Sometimes, however, the sexually-related insults had no relation to actual sexual activity, but were instead used as the simplest and most effective way of belittling another woman's worth. Through vulgar and explicit terms, sexual slander attacked a woman's appearance, her behavior, and her value, with the cumulative effect of aiming to lower her social status to that of a vagrant. Linguistically, the predominance of non-Latinate words in the vocabulary of insult suggests that English speakers still perceived words of Latinate origin as superior to words of Germanic or other origin, even after the assimilation of both sets of vocabulary into common usage.

Coda: Sexual Insult in Shakespeare's Plays

2 *Henry IV*, 2.4 – Falstaff, speaking to the prostitute Doll Tearsheet, discusses the relation between sexually deviant women and disease.

FALSTAFF

You make fat rascals, Mistress Doll.

DOLL TEARSHEET

I make them! gluttony and diseases make them; I make them not.

FALSTAFF

If the cook help to make the gluttony, you help to make the diseases, Doll: we catch of you, Doll, we catch of you; grant that, my poor virtue grant that.

Cymbeline, 2.4 – Posthumus, hearing that his wife has been unfaithful:

POSTHUMUS

Hark you, he swears; by Jupiter he swears.
 'Tis true:--nay, keep the ring--'tis true: I am sure
 She would not lose it: her attendants are
 All sworn and honourable:--they induced to steal it!
 And by a stranger!--No, he hath enjoyed her:
 The cognizance of her incontinency
 Is this: she hath bought the name of whore
 thus dearly.

Othello, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 5.2 – Othello, once Iago persuades him of Desdemona's infidelity, calls her "whore" and other slurs repeatedly, also calling on ideas of the "common" status of adulterers and alluding to the language of filth, including:

3.3: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,
 Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof:

4.2: Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
 Made to write 'whore' upon? What committed!
 Committed! O thou public commoner!
 I should make very forges of my cheeks,
 That would to cinders burn up modesty,
 Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed!

Heaven stops the nose at it and the moon winks,
 The bawdy wind that kisses all it meets
 Is hush'd within the hollow mine of earth,
 And will not hear it. What committed!
 Impudent strumpet!

4.2: I took you for that cunning whore of Venice
 That married with Othello.

5.2: She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore.

The Comedy of Errors, 2.2: Adriana, accusing her husband of infidelity (in a rare reversal), calls upon the language of contagion and disease stemming from extramarital intercourse.

ADRIANA

How dearly would it touch me to the quick,
 Shouldst thou but hear I were licentious
 And that this body, consecrate to thee,
 By ruffian lust should be contaminate!
 Wouldst thou not spit at me and spurn at me
 And hurl the name of husband in my face
 And tear the stain'd skin off my harlot-brow
 And from my false hand cut the wedding-ring
 And break it with a deep-divorcing vow?
 I know thou canst; and therefore see thou do it.
 I am possess'd with an adulterate blot;
 My blood is mingled with the crime of lust:
 For if we too be one and thou play false,
 I do digest the poison of thy flesh,
 Being strumpeted by thy contagion.
 Keep then far league and truce with thy true bed;
 I live unstain'd, thou undishonoured.

Whores are also common themes in *Measure for Measure* and *Timon of Athens*; infidelity is a concern in *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Interestingly, for the most part it is the men in Shakespeare who use the language of sexual insult, far more than the women.