

*Words Like Daggers: Violent Female Speech in Early Modern England.*

Kirilka Stavreva.

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This is an engaging, well-researched, often-original study of violent female speech in early modern English culture, focusing primarily on scolding, “witch-speak,” and Quaker prophecies. In subtle readings of historical documents and literary texts, Kirilka Stavreva delineates the rhetorical and performative strategies used by women who defied social norms to express anger and aggression and shows the impact of such speech on sociolinguistic hierarchies, especially hierarchies of gender. Broadly speaking, Stavreva’s claim is that despite efforts of authorities to control women’s verbal aggression and reinforce traditional gender norms, women were in practice often able to subvert such efforts and introduce slippage into gender categories, resulting in the “dynamic regendering or transgendering” of female speakers (xxiv). Stavreva by and large does not present new archival work about women’s violent speech, relying instead on the scholarship of Laura Gowing, Bernard Capp, Marion Gibson, and other historians for documentary evidence. Nevertheless, Stavreva powerfully contributes to our understanding of the nature of women’s violent speech by attending not only to what women say, but how they say it. Most original here is her focus on the acoustics of women’s speech and its embodied physicality. To Stavreva, soundscape and spectacle are almost as important as semantics in the subversion of gender and other social norms.

Three of the book’s six chapters focus on the figure of the scold. In chapters 1 and 2, Stavreva examines representations of the scold in sermons and church court cases, helpfully explicating the elaborate classification systems used by preachers to catalogue “sins of the tongue” (2), then analyzing church court cases of actual scolding in rich detail. Although preachers’ admonitions were directed at both men and women, their discourse associated violent speech with violations of gender norms in sometimes paradoxical ways. Thus, while a brawling man is said to have “a woman’s tongue in his head” (15), a women’s fiery tongue could masculinize her through her contentious assertion of agency. Enforcing gender norms could display incongruities in gender categories. Stavreva also shows that some women were able to take advantage of blurred boundaries between unacceptably disruptive speech and speech with a positive claim to moral authority; indeed, scolding could be an effective way to call abusive husbands to account or to enhance what Stavreva calls “livability” (44). Chapter 3 moves the

discussion into the literary and dramatic realm by looking at the scold in shrew-taming plays and ballads, with special attention to Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. In an interesting yet somewhat forced reading of Kate's final speech as penitential ritual, Stavreva again finds something subversive in the performance of the normative, parting company with feminists who have seen Kate simply capitulating to normative gender hierarchy at the end of the play. For Stavreva, Kate's "exuberant performance" (65) and gender-bending ability to deploy learned masculine rhetoric makes compliance with gender hierarchy open-ended and provisional.

In chapters 4 and 5, Stavreva probes pamphlets about witchcraft cases and Jacobean plays in an analysis of what she inventively calls "witch-speak" (72), her term for the curses, spells, and other utterances attributed to accused witches and assumed to have magical power. What witches actually said was seldom clearly recorded; the force of witch-speak instead derived from ambiguity and nonverbal forms of expression, including "strange howling" and "incomprehensible" murmuring as well as loud threats (78). Stavreva's observations about the sounds and gestures associated with witch-speak are especially perceptive, as is her discussion of the "allure" of witch-speak and its power to escape containment by the didactic purpose of most witchcraft pamphlets (93). Less satisfying, though certainly thought provoking, is her discussion of witch-speak in Jacobean plays. Stavreva equates Lady Macbeth's persuasion of her husband with a witch's "overspeaking," implying that Macbeth is literally bewitched by his wife (107–08). Discussion of other plays at times displays a similar heavy-handed literalism. Nevertheless, her unexpected inclusion of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and Ford's *Broken Heart* pays off with unusual insights in this chapter.

The book's final chapter focuses on Quaker women's "cries" (129) in protest of the violent suppression of Quaker communities in the mid-seventeenth century. Stavreva shows how these women incorporated strategies of the scold and the witch and gave them a new moral legitimacy, and her attention to acoustics again leads to some original conclusions. Stavreva's epilogue meditating on Margaret's curses in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* provides an effective capstone for this book. Denounced by other characters in the play as both scold and witch, Margaret at the same time effectively usurps cultural authority by drawing on attributes of these figures. History is on her side.

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