

Sandy Bardsley. *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. viii + 214 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3936-2.

Reviewed by Michelle Wolfe (Department of History, Ohio State University)
Published on H-Women (May, 2008)



Policing Women's Speech in Late Medieval England

Keen to expose witchcraft beliefs as “erronious” and “popish,” the Elizabethan squire Reginald Scott found himself championing a marginal class of Englishwomen along the way. He characterized the typical woman accused of witchcraft as a poor, elderly “scol[d].” Scott had no need to explain what a scold was. His readers would instantly recognize the stereotype: a shrewish female who cursed and criticized not only those in her household but her neighbors as well. The scold was a woman who could not keep her negative, or worse, insubordinate, words to herself. And, when one of her usual bursts of verbal abuse coincided with a local mishap, Scott explained, the scold’s status as a neighborhood nuisance would get upgraded to the threat level of “witch.”[1]

Scott’s sharp sociological observations influenced contemporaries.[2] They also neatly dovetailed with the conclusions of later historians. Modern scholars have generally agreed that English witch accusations fell most heavily on older, poorer women with a known penchant for public reproof.[3] But this historiographical association of accused witches with waspishness went beyond the study of early modern witchcraft, shaping initial scholarship on the crime and phenomenon of scolding. The scold has been deemed the historical “sister” of the witch by historian James A. Sharpe.[4] The first critical examination of scolding, by David Underdown, placed it next to witchcraft as a distinctively early modern, gendered phenomenon.[5] The second, by Martin Ingram, contested Underdown’s periodization. But it went further in depicting the scold as the witch’s demographic

and behavioral twin: aged or economically marginal, and intrusively ill-tempered.[6]

Sandy Bardsley’s study should, once and for all, pull the scold out from under the witch’s historiographical shadow. In the first contemporary monograph devoted fully to the medieval construction and prosecution of scolding, Bardsley establishes the significance of scolding to the history of public and political speech and the history of women’s community roles. Establishing an approximate timeline for the rise of scolding as a crime, Bardsley pursues a multidimensional argument. She situates scolding as a symptom of the broader political tensions and social mobility of post-plague England. She argues that scolding was demographically plastic, enabling different communities to police the public speech of different women. And, she claims that the rise of scolding represented a crest in the ebb and flow of England’s culture of misogyny, marking a moment when deviant speech was feminized.

To create a rough chronology for scolding prosecutions, Bardsley did an extensive amount of court-roll sampling, supplemented with a full survey of a few jurisdictions. She found that frequent and widespread prosecutions started in the second half of the fourteenth century. She also found an explicit gendering of the crime, with women constituting over 90 percent of defendants in secular courts and more than 80 percent in church prosecutions. But, while the freshly minted late fourteenth-century scold was clearly gendered female,

Bardsley finds that her age as well as marital and economic status varied enormously by jurisdiction. She employs both statistics and case studies to show how local conditions and specific court officials set distinctive agendas in scolding prosecutions. Finally, she contextualizes scolding's emergence in broader post-plague concerns regarding insubordinate speech. As the line separating the upper and lower orders became less firm and less fixed, authorities turned their attention to policing the political speech of peasant men and the public speech of women.

Bardsley goes further, exploring how scolding served as one weapon in a larger statutory war against women's public speech. She charts how the rise of scolding as a legal category coincided with the decline of the hue and cry. The 911 of mid-medieval England, the hue and cry combined community policing and litigation. It raised a public alarm and summoned the aid of immediate neighbors during an attack against person or property. At the same time, it brought the attacker to court, at no charge to the victim. Women made extensive use of the hue and cry in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; it was a form of public speech by which they could accuse wrongdoers and take those wrongdoers to court.

Bardsley sets the fall of the hue and cry into disuse in the late fourteenth century alongside a simultaneous rise in methods of criminalizing women's speech. As women lost access to the hue and cry, they found themselves targeted by the new crime of scolding. Simultaneously, the gendered majority of defamation defendants underwent a radical shift, from mostly men in the late thirteenth century to mostly women in the early fifteenth century. Women's public speech in post-plague England thus took two harsh hits: their access to legitimate public speech was curtailed while their general exercise of public and neighborly speech—particularly assertive speech—fell under increasing censure. Bardsley adds to these blows a proposed spike in negative cultural representations of women's speech, culling examples from conduct manuals, sermons, mystery plays, and church decoration. With this accumulation of legal, literary, and artistic evidence, Bardsley argues for a distinct feminization of deviant speech in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England.

Bardsley is utter dynamite in her chapters on the context of post-plague speech policing and the different speech crimes of women and men. There, she uses statistical evidence, gender analysis, and historical context with equal deftness. And there, she is at her most per-

suasive: in illustrating the post-plague context, in documenting how women's public speech underwent new and harsh post-plague restrictions, and in showing how the further masculinizing of public speech meant a much more limited (and often emasculating) attack on men's voices, even those emitted from peasant's mouths.

Bardsley's treatment of scolds and gossips in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art and literature is more methodologically daring but less powerful. Her reading of individual works in that chapter works perfectly as a background account of how hostility toward women's speech infused late medieval culture. But it does not serve as well as an argument that those works demonstrate a distinct historical upswing in the cultural representations of that hostility. As Bardsley notes, hostile depictions of women's speech can be traced back to antique Europe and forward to this day. And, the historical interpretation of medieval literary and artistic evidence raises enormous issues of oral transmission, evidentiary survival, textual ambiguity, and historical comparison. It is, thus, a particularly tough sell using such evidence to argue that the culture and discourse of this period was more misogynistically inclined than another.

Overall, *Venomous Tongues* is a successful and important book. It provides a much needed treatment of a critical moment in the history of women's exercise of, and exclusion from, public speech. It will be extremely useful to historians of speech, gender, community conflict, and medieval and early modern society. Bardsley gives the medieval scold an exceptionally illuminating moment of her own in the spotlight. From it, the early modern witch can only benefit.

Notes

[1]. Reginald Scott, *Scott's Discovery of Witchcraft ... published in anno 1584* (London: 1651), 5.

[2]. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Scott, Reginald (d. 1599)" (by David Wootton), <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/view/article/24905> (accessed April 22, 2008, and March 28, 2008).

[3]. For the concurrence of witch accusations with perceived or admitted scolding behavior, see Alan MacFarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 1970), 158-160; for poverty, age, and scolding, see James A. Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 172; and for age in the larger

European context, see Alison Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany," *Past and Present* 173 (November 2001): 50-89.

[4]. Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 185.

[5]. David Underdown, "The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England," in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern Eng-*

land, ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stephenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 116-36.

[6]. Martin Ingram, "Scolding Women Cucked or Washed: A Crisis in Gender Relations in Early Modern England?" in *Women, Crime and the Courts*, ed. Jennifer Kermode and Garthine Walker (London: University College of London Press, 1994), 48-80.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: Michelle Wolfe. Review of Bardsley, Sandy, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14508>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.