5. **Divisive Speech in Divided Times?**

Women and the Politics of Slander, Sedition, and Informing during the English Revolution

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Abstract

This essay delves into a series of court records and examinations against provocative speeches, seditious utterances, and incidents in which women engaged in the politics of civil war and revolution in mid-seventeenth century England. It looks at the potential potency ascribed to women's disaffected and well-affected speech, and how reported speech was tied to larger political discourses about honesty, order, and affection in a world turned upside down. While early modern women often deployed tested 'weapons of the weak' to navigate power within interpersonal relations, civil war and revolution produced new discourses and conceptions of loyalty, order, and honesty that informed women's engagement with the politics of slander, sedition, and informing within urban communities.

**Keywords:** slander; sedition; informing; English revolution; female speech

Following a series of disconcerting skirmishes amongst elites, Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell's Council of State released a new ordinance against challenges, duels, and 'all provocations thereunto' in June 1654. The Council expressed concerns about those who continued to pursue 'private Quarrels' that threatened 'all good order and government' after the civil wars. In addition to its ban on challenges and duels, the ordinance criminalized the 'disgraceful, provoking words or gestures' responsible for most clashes. With this move, the Council articulated the power that quarrelling had to solidify and foment divisions within a nation recovering from civil war. Though it crafted the

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legislation to quell conflicts within the upper echelons of English society, the ordinance was taken up by some everyday litigants concerned about the consequences of provoking behavior. Did pervasive anxieties over the threat revolution posed to the social order alter perceptions of worrisome speech? While scores of studies of slander and defamation tell us how early modern men and women navigated social relations through gendered insults and gestures, we still know relatively little about the relationship between divisive speech and female agency within the context of the civil wars and revolution.

In its investigation of the politics of everyday life, this essay explores the relationship between women’s speech and the perceptions and practice of slander, speaking sedition, and informing within English urban communities during the 1640s and 1650s. By delving into a series of depositions from Colchester and Exeter session courts, it considers how anxieties over civil war and revolution influenced how women and the courts deployed female speech to investigate what made men and women honest, well-affected, and orderly. While examinations from the 1640s and 1650s reveal significant continuity in their descriptions of troublesome speech, at times they also detail how civil war and revolution further destabilized normative concepts of manhood and womanhood and fueled contested visions of what it meant to be a loyal subject. These fissures empowered those who used disaffected and dangerous speech, but also those who regulated it to prescribe acceptable patterns of behavior within their communities. As utterers and regulators, women consciously and unconsciously engaged shifting notions of patriarchal authority and unease over gender and social inversion.2 Speech that threatened to upend hierarchies or questioned loyalty, allegiance, and affection relied on the identities and emotions of those involved—including the officials charged with extracting and recording these narratives. These cases, situated within their own contexts, suggest that increased anxieties over political authority, reinforced by the rhetoric of a world turned upside down, emerged in female speech that engaged these changing dynamics to promote or deny women's agency.

Slander, sedition, and the politics of informing

Early modern English women found speech to be a powerful tool to navigate social relations and everyday power structures.3 Normative conceptions of

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2 Walker, Crime, Gender and the Social Order, p. 212.
3 See, for example, Amussen, An Ordered Society; Capp, When Gossips Meet; Freist, Governed by Opinion; Gowing, Domestic Dangers; Ingram, 'Law, Litigants, and the Construction of "Honour"';
womanhood articulated in prescriptive literature required women to remain docile and quiet, limit their speech, and refrain from gossiping and rumor-mongering. Subordinates who violated these prescribed norms were thought to undermine hierarchical and patriarchal values. Yet subordinate women and men exercised speech to navigate interpersonal relations and power dynamics within and between households, among neighbors, and within their communities. The uneasy relationship between normative ideals and linguistic practice enabled women to engage prescriptive discourses in speech acts that promoted their agency.

We know less about whether women’s use of speech acts in interpersonal or communal relations altered within the larger context of civil war divisions and revolution. In 2005, Alex Shepard noted that there was a general trend amongst social historians of early modern England to study the period from 1560 to 1640—a time of economic and social dislocation—and to end their research right before the outbreak of war. Social historians had paid little attention to the civil wars and revolution, despite it being an area ‘ripe for research’. By peering into communities within civil war and interregnum England, we may locate instances where women continued to use speech to position themselves by contesting the honesty of others. Turning to London and its environs in particular, we know that, prior to the revolution, women with adequate resources frequently looked to London’s consistory court to prosecute slander cases. This court provided merely one of several avenues to pursue and resolve interpersonal tensions in the metropolis, but its loss undoubtedly left some women scrambling for new mechanisms to navigate conflicts.

When Lord Protector Cromwell and his councilors released the ordinance against challenges, duels, and all provocations in June 1654, little did they know that it would be taken up by a diverse range of men and women across Middlesex county. Given the popularity of London’s consistory court and the evidence of increased concerns over women’s ‘unruliness’,

Sharpe, Defamation and Sexual Slander in Early Modern England; Walker, Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England.
6 Gowing, Domestic Dangers; Gowing, ‘Gender and the Language of Insult in Early Modern London’.
it is unsurprising to find that litigants and officials around the London metropolis exploited this new legislation.\(^8\) The ordinance’s targeting of conflict and provocations—verbal and gestural—heavily influenced its implementation within the Middlesex court. Many of the cases prosecuted centered on ‘provoking’ behavior that questioned normative social and gender relations. The Protectorate’s anti-dueling legislation provided a new tool that transformed how some litigants and the court reported and defined interpersonal conflicts.

Given the origins of the ordinance—and the image of manly swashbuckling it conjures to mind—it is intriguing that women made up a significant proportion of the accused. During the first year of its implementation, women accounted for roughly half of those accused of provoking language or gestures in the Middlesex sessions, and slightly over half of those bound by recognizance. While petty criminals were regularly bound by recognizance to appear before the court, justices often bound suspects by recognizance to avoid filing an indictment. Binding by recognizance could resolve disputes without recourse to costly, time-consuming legal action.\(^9\) The number of women bound by recognizance for provoking words aligns with other studies that indicate women were more frequently prosecuted by recognizance.\(^10\) Unlike breach of the peace cases, several recognizances taken against women who provoked their neighbors included the alleged incriminating language or gestures articulated, along with the usual formulaic legalese. Records detail a series of examples of women using the language of sexual insult to attack another woman’s common fame or a husband’s manhood. William Riley prosecuted Anne Soames for jeering that he was a rogue who brought his wife to the tavern simply to pimp her out. Marie Peacock was similarly accused of uttering ‘provoking words and gestures’ at Marie Harrison and her husband. Peacock allegedly labeled Harrison a ‘Baud’, and told her husband that Harrison was ‘a Bitch’.\(^11\) The steady run of cases against women who provoked their neighbors using insults that undermined gender relations gives further credence to historians’ claims that civil war heightened anxiety over the potency of female speech acts.\(^12\)

\(^8\) Gowing, Domestic Dangers.
\(^9\) Ibid., Prosecution and Punishment, p. 95.
\(^12\) Walker, Crime, Gender, and the Social Order, p. 99; Hughes, Gender and the English Revolution, pp. 139–140.
The quick and broad adoption of the ordinance against provocations in the Middlesex courts appears to have been rather unusual. There is scant evidence from the Exeter and Colchester courts that litigants and authorities manipulated this ordinance to arbitrate everyday tussles between poorer and middling neighbors, and this pattern holds in other county quarter sessions courts. Further research into interpersonal squabbles pursued via civil suits in courts such as the Common Pleas or the King’s Bench may help historians better understand how prospective litigants navigated the closure of ecclesiastical courts during the 1640 and 1650s.\(^\text{13}\)

The politics of slander and its regulation that infused interpersonal conflicts also permeated women’s engagement with seditious and scandalous speech. Evidence from a variety of sources suggests that women uttered seditious words, even if they were prosecuted for it less frequently than men.\(^\text{14}\) In spite of the exhortations against loud and impertinent women in conduct literature, women engaged in gossip, rumor-mongering, and seditious conversations. Ballads, plays, and legal records are merely a few of the genres that capture elements of oral culture where women expressed views about politics within their households and communities.\(^\text{15}\) The weight of a woman’s speech was dependent on the motivations, dispositions, and identities of the speaker and those of her audience. When they spoke or reported sedition, women balanced the multiple identities that intersected in definitions of loyal and well-affected subjects and neighbors during the 1640s and 1650s. The gravity of their speech was deeply situated not only within the immediate contexts and local customs where it was uttered, heard, and re-told, but also within the larger social, cultural, and economic force fields that informed the potency of the act.\(^\text{16}\)

As reporters of seditious and scandalous behavior, women’s voices could also gain authority despite their subordinate status. While informing might limit the subversive potential of radical speech, it was also one of the few ‘forms of agency’ that women could use to influence the politics of civil war and revolution in their communities.\(^\text{17}\) Occupation, allegiance, and

\(^{13}\) See, for example, Brooks, *Pettifoggers and Vipers*; Brooks, ‘Interpersonal Conflicts and Social Tension’, pp. 357–364.


\(^{17}\) Ibid; Weil, *A Plague of Informers*, pp. 23–24.
interpersonal histories infused women's examinations and their plausibility before urban magistrates. The existence of these contingencies, not to mention the problematic nature of the records themselves, questions whether we can make any claims about the agency of women's speech in mid-seventeenth century England. The remainder of this essay will consider how concerns over social and gender relations, patriarchal authority, and disaffection that emerge in examination narratives could promote and denigrate women's ability to engage in the politics of civil war and revolution within their communities.

Bad patriarchs and unruly women: The politics of women's reported speech

Most studies of sexual slander during the civil war examine how parliamentarians and royalists employed gender inversion to malign their enemies in printed rhetoric. The representations of unruly women and cuckolded husbands that filled pages of civil war pamphlets drew on popular insult language and shaming rituals men and women exercised to uphold normative social and gender relations. Because authority was gendered and hierarchical, these labels threatened to undermine the authority of those men who violated concepts of manhood and the patriarchal household.

Yet we also know that historians have uncovered how unsteady gender relations truly were. Though England was clearly a patriarchal society, with authority resting with male heads of household, familial relations were 'reciprocal' as well as 'hierarchical'. Male authority was bound by expectations that men run their households with affection and care, provide economic support, and ensure order among its inhabitants. In practice, husbands shared significant responsibilities with their wives, who helped manage households and supplemented their income. Laboring men also had alternate conceptions of manhood untethered from the patriarchal household. These ambiguities informed tensions in gender relations, which, historians argue, were 'acute' during the early modern period. As Ann Hughes has claimed, the upheaval of the mid-seventeenth century was

20 See, for example, Underdown, The Man in the Moon; McElligott, The Politics of Sexual Libel; McElligott, Royalism, Print and Censorship, pp. 45–62; Peacey, “Hot and Eager in Courtship”.
‘bound to raise questions about family structures and proper relationships between men and women’. Civil war further destabilized normative conceptions of male patriarchal authority, which led to heightened concerns over male and female behaviors that rejected legitimizing codes of conduct.

The following section will delve into narratives contained within examinations from Colchester and Exeter session courts that describe women who engaged with these tropes to consider whether such words may have been spoken—or recorded—to provide the utterances with heightened authority or agency. Women’s speech within these examinations not only explored unsteady conceptions of the ‘bad patriarch’ and the ‘woman on top’, but also fluid concepts of affection, loyalty, and order during moments of political crisis. At first glance, urban sessions courts may seem an odd place to investigate female speech and divisive politics. Similar to county quarter sessions, many urban courts prosecuted a variety of felonies and misdemeanors, including theft, breaking and entering, regulatory infractions, offenses against the peace, and, at times, rape and murder cases. Mayors and aldermen administered the courts, which meant that magistrates could significantly influence the implementation of justice within their town. Some borough and city courts had relatively extensive powers. These courts shared criminal jurisdiction with the quarter sessions and assize courts, and, when they had an official recorder, they had the authority to prosecute felonies and even some capital cases. Both the Colchester and Exeter sessions had considerable authority to prosecute cases in the seventeenth century, and evidence indicates that women were involved in litigation at higher rates in urban sessions courts. Peter King has suggested that accessibility and leniency enhanced the likelihood that women would be prosecuted in borough courts, and, when possible, greater numbers of women featured as both complainants and offenders when prosecuting by recognizance.

Partisan divides that permeated corporate and community politics in battleground cities emerge in pre-trial examinations, which survive in the records of the Exeter and Colchester sessions. Several historians of women and gender have argued that court records, particularly depositions, offer

23 Hughes, Gender and the English Revolution, p. 1.
27 See Gowing, Domestic Dangers, pp. 13–14.
exceptional insight into early modern women's experiences.\textsuperscript{29} However, these and other scholars have problematized their use as both evidence of historical events and as texts that illuminate early modern mentalities. No one has done so as thoroughly as Frances Dolan, in her searing critique of historians’ half-hearted recognition of the problem in \textit{True Relations}.\textsuperscript{30} Her work has rightly influenced how historians engage with depositions as ‘fictive’ mediated narratives, but several historians argue that the collaborative and relative nature of depositions does not necessarily bar their use in studies of popular mentalities.\textsuperscript{31} Examinations, constructed to support legal processes, contextualize the expression of language and narratives that deponents, clerks, and magistrates believed might promote or prevent certain outcomes. Popular knowledge of the law suggests that those who gave testimony were well able to understand and navigate legal frameworks and officials’ expectations.\textsuperscript{32} Women who gave examinations in response to male authorities could engage a variety of competing popular discourses and legal formulae in their statements. Speech that comes to us refracted through legal examinations tells us something of the concepts early modern people used to fashion authoritative accounts and to denigrate those whose views or agency clashed with their own.\textsuperscript{33} Examining the very complexity of examination narratives can shed light on how women, through the courts, engaged with popular concerns over gender and social inversion, disorder, and disloyalty within their communities and the nation.

\textbf{The bad patriarch}

In June 1645, just weeks after the bloody battle of Naseby, a young female servant gave a gut-wrenching testimony before five male authorities in Colchester. In the examination of Frances Evans, we find a carefully recorded narrative that details, in the third person, how Evans’ master, John Andrew, repeatedly forced her to have sex with him when she would have been around twelve or thirteen years old. It began in January 1644 on a day when her

\begin{itemize}
  \item Dolan, \textit{True Relations}, esp. Chapter 4; Davis, \textit{Fiction in the Archives}.
\end{itemize}
mistress was away at church. Andrew allegedly called Evans to his bedside, where he ‘told her that’ if she did not go to bed with him, ‘he would pull her lymbe from lymbe’. The text further claims that two months later, when Andrew’s wife went to ‘watch’ with Goodwife Austen, he forced Evans to lie with him again. After this episode, Andrew regularly had ‘carnal knowledge’ of Evans on Wednesdays when his wife was at church, and, on Saturdays, when she went to the market.

Evans’ examination offers a narrative of a household undermined by an unrestrained and tyrannical patriarch. Though it recounts how Evans engaged in illicit sex with her master, the constructed narrative portrays her and her mistress in a sympathetic light. Andrew, on the other hand, is represented as violent, uncontrolled, and profane. Andrew’s wife is described as a model of womanhood—a mistress who attends church, engages in household duties, and provides support and fellowship to women in her neighborhood. Evans, meanwhile, is presented as a victim who attempted to deflect her master’s assaults by reasoning with him. In the examination, Evans reported that she expressed fears about getting pregnant. The text states that Andrew retorted that she was too young and it would only be in two or three years hence that he might ‘enter her body’. Elements of the narrative also suggest that the young Evans and her audience constructed her story with great care. The text provides a particularly vivid and explicit discussion of the sexual assault, which was unusual in most rape cases, though it happened more often in cases involving children. In the sentence describing Evans’ first accusation of Andrew forcibly having sex with her, the clerk revised the text. These revisions may have been made after the statement was read back to Evans, or in response to questions posed by the authorities present. The multivocal narrative depicts an innocent, terrorized female servant who suffered under the rule of her immoral master—a bad patriarch, a violent man who exploited the ritual life cycle of a dutiful wife to assault his servant, whom he was expected to protect.

In many ways Evans’ examination depicts a crime that appears to be wholly removed from the context of England’s bloody civil war. But read closely, we can see how the political conflict emerges within the narrative. Parts of the examination suggest that the violent realities of war intersected

34 Essex Record Office (ERO) Chelmsford, D/B 5 Sb2/7 (22 June 1645).
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
38 For information on pre-trial processes, see Herrup, The Common Peace, p. 88; Cusack, Everyday English, p. 92.
with the violence of the master against his servant. When describing the
assault, it states that Andrew consistently laid siege to Evans until she felt
‘something prick her’ and ‘blood came from her’. 39 Much of the narrative
details how Evans’ expressed fears of what should happen to her should her
master continue to violate her as she approached her childbearing years.
Andrew supposedly shrugged off any immediate danger due to her being
so young, but he did note what might happen should Evans actually prove
with child—she could simply blame it on a ‘soldier in the army’. Should she
dare blame it to him, he would ‘kill’ her. 40 Given the pervasiveness of cases
against women who had sexual relations with soldiers, such a scenario
could be convincing.

Often when historians discuss women’s experience of the violence of the
civil war, we look to soldiers as the actors in atrocities. However, anxieties
over manhood spilled into the partisan divides, as royalist and parliamentar-
ians both made claims to male authority. Andrew’s alleged assaults on Evans
not only violated dominant notions of patriarchal authority tied to the
household, but also parliamentarian concepts of manhood that emphasized
self-restraint and reason. 41 Andrew is presented as consistently violating
his obligations as a patriarch while shielding his crimes under the violence
of war. Delivered before five Colchester authorities, concerns over Evans
and Andrew’s relationship were inevitably tied to larger concerns over
manhood and male authority. Even the oblique reference to the unnamed
trooper Andrew would allegedly blame for any unwanted pregnancy tapped
into pervasive anxieties about the proper comportment of parliamentarian
and royalist armies in the 1640s, which were tied to larger discourses over
manhood. 42

In this testimony—whether she offered it through compulsion or
voluntarily—Francis Evans held her master to account for both of these
violations. Servants who deposed against masters often did so to avoid any
association with their master’s criminal behavior, but Evans’ report of rape
required courage and bravery. She likely feared retaliation, damage to her
reputation, and how authorities would perceive her admission of the rape. 43
While the deposition of Francis Evans details her extremely vulnerable,
subordinate status, it also presents her as a disempowered woman who

39 ERO Chelmsford, D/B 5 Sb2/7 (22 June 1645).
40 Ibid.
42 Ibid., pp. 68–109; Donagan, ‘The Web of Honour’.
was able to articulate how her master violated the ideals of the patriarchal household in an attempt to hold men to account.

The woman on top

Tensions over the origins and exercise of patriarchal authority within royalist and parliamentarian rhetoric also emerge in anxieties over the ‘woman on top’. Royalist discourse derided effeminate and inadequate parliamentarians who were ruled by their domineering wives. Within royalist print, the republic was run by Amazonian women, hypocritical fornicators, tinkers, traders, and effeminate cuckolds. It was truly a world turned upside down. As a contested category, gender informed social and political crises as well as people’s experience of them. Fears of gender inversion expressed in representations of the woman on top were not merely figurative, but also based on the literal threat that assertive women posed to normative gender relations.

The marital misfortunes of the parliamentarian commander Robert Devereux, the third Earl of Essex, provided easy fodder for royalist authors who depicted parliamentarians as unmanly or impotent rulers incapable of controlling their households. Essex had been cuckolded twice before civil war broke out. His first wife, Frances Howard, sought an annulment from Essex so that she could marry Robert Carr, James I’s favorite. Howard claimed her marriage to Essex had never been consummated due to his impotence—assertions that were publicly confirmed. Essex’s humiliation, followed by the fall of Howard and Carr after their conviction for the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, filled the pages of underground verse and libels. In the 1630s, Essex faced another scandal when he separated from his second wife, Elizabeth Paulet, following the death of their infant son. The child was reasonably rumored to be the offspring of Paulet’s affair with the royalist Sir William Uvedale. Royalist newsbooks, ballads, and pamphlets depicted ‘impotent’ Essex as a failed patriarch emasculated by his unruly wives. Royalist armies proudly displayed banners depicting Essex as a cuckold as they marched into battle. His story was so well known that one royalist newsbook claimed that he was even ridiculed in the ‘table

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45 Hughes, Gender and the English Revolution, pp. 103–104; Bellany, The Politics of Court Scandal.
46 See, for example, Cleveland, The character of a London-diurnall with severall select poems, p. 46.
talk’ of commoners.47 It is hardly surprising that the symbolism of Essex as cuckold seeped into the politics of slander within England’s communities.

While we know men expressed their disaffection through jeers at Essex’s cuckoldry, women could also explore the ambiguous potency of female agency in the representation of Essex as a failed patriarch emasculated by his wives. When the Exeter widow Dorothy Graye allegedly drew on the same rhetoric in her conflict with John Bremlecombe, her recorded words engaged the ‘inverted’ power Lady Essex exerted over her weak, unmanly husband. According to the examination of Elizabeth Gosse, Graye and Bremlecombe got into a verbal spat while they drank together at Bedford house in 1647. Gosse alleged that the drunk Graye told Bremlecombe that if she was his wife, she would ‘make him weare more horns than Essex’.48 In Gosse’s examination, Graye did not accuse Bremlecombe of being a cuckold, but rather she laid claim to the agency of the ‘woman on top’, who had the power to make him one through her behavior.

While Graye’s alleged gibe seems commonplace enough, the meaning of the slight against Bremlecombe was intertwined with the history of the place in which it was uttered: Bedford house, the town residence of the Earl of Bedford. Evidence suggests that Gosse, Graye, and Bremlecombe all lived within Bedford house, so they likely knew of the house’s history within the earlier stages of the civil war. Not long after the outbreak of the war, Exeter fell into parliament’s hands, but a royalist assault placed it in their control in 1643. Exeter’s secure royalist defenses brought the pregnant Queen Henrietta Maria from Oxford to Bedford house in 1644. She gave birth to the princess Henrietta Anne there on 16 June 1644, which was celebrated with the ringing of bells.49 As the Earl of Essex’s forces made their way toward Exeter, the Queen was obliged to flee, and she left the Princess at Bedford house under the care of the royalist governor. In late July, Charles I traveled to Exeter to encounter Essex’s forces, where he met his daughter at the house. When the Earl skirted the city, Charles pursued his troops into Cornwall, forcing Essex to flee. The Princess remained at Bedford house until the royalists surrendered the stronghold in April 1646, when she was ceremoniously sent out of the city with the governor’s wife and other high-ranking royalist women.50 Given its rich history, those who

48 Devon Heritage Center (DHC), ECA Book 64, fol. 111r.
49 Stoyle, From Deliverance to Destruction, p. 97; Miller, ‘Henriette Anne’.
50 Stoyle, From Deliverance to Destruction, pp. 98–99.
inhabited Bedford house likely had exposure not only to the royalist rhetoric slandering Essex’s manhood, but also the competing discourse fashioning Charles I as effeminate, and Queen Henrietta Maria as a licentious papist whose immoderate power informed Charles’ unmanliness.51

Gosse’s account of Graye’s drunken jibe against Bremlecombe mocked his inadequacy in its use of the imagery of Essex as cuckold, but it also laid claim to the agency that the image of women on top afforded. For her unruly and unsettling words, Graye would be sentenced to a turn in the house of correction as a ‘lewd and disorderly person’.52 The exploitation of the trope of the cuckold, while conventional, was not necessarily conservative—the immediate cultural and social environments of the alleged utterance arguably influenced both the use and the effect of this politically charged slur. Whether Gosse fabricated the offense with the magistrates or Graye truly uttered the jeer, the circulation of a claim that Bremlecombe was as weak as Essex amongst the inhabitants of Bedford house likely made the smear more potent, but also more dangerous.

Unruly women and the politics of disaffection

Women who railed against civil war enemies during the civil wars represented the larger social and ideological threat of the revolution, but these divisions could also empower subordinate members of a community to police disaffection vocally. We see these realities in a case against a woman who was accused of taking extreme exception to the royalist army’s defeat in Exeter in 1646. A series of examinations against Mary Cholwill, the wife of William Cholwill, describe an unruly woman whose behavior aligned with parliamentarian discourses of royalist excess and crudeness. The first examination comes from Thomas Skinner, a pewterer charged with collecting Cholwill’s rate. Skinner claims that Chowill ‘reviled’ him with ‘opprobrious and scandalous terms’ and said that ‘every Rogue was putt in Office nowe’. When Elizabeth Beare came before Exeter authorities, she also related the highly incendiary speech that Cholwill allegedly gave, likely while they drank together. According to Beare’s examination, Cholwill’s frustration at the royalists’ surrender of the city led her to state that she would ‘rather the Turks should come in the Cittie’, and that ‘the Castle and

52 DHC, ECA Book 64, fol. 111r.
the Cittie should be sett on fyre, or words to that effecte’. Beare also reported that Cholwill called her a ‘Roundhead’, attempted to force her ‘to drink to the confusion of Parliament’, and continued to ‘abuse’ her with verbal jibes, such as ‘whore’ and ‘vagabond’. A third deposition from the wife of Leonard Collins also claimed that Cholwill called her a whore, a bitch, and a witch.53

The excessiveness of Cholwill’s alleged behavior was not simply about her being an unruly and disorderly woman, but also a disaffected one. Her uncontrolled speech and loss of control aligned with parliamentarian conceptions of royalists. Beare’s examination suggests that Cholwill’s drinking—which included drinking healths—mirrored the excessive imbibing associated with royalists.54 In Skinner’s examination, Cholwill’s disaffection justified her rejection of his authority to collect rates. Her disaffection was also linked to her slanderous jibes. Each deponent depicted her as attacking their reputation, while they are represented as well-affected members of the city. Beare’s examination draws on women’s social authority to police the uncontrolled speech of their female neighbors, but the potency of her words reporting Cholwill’s alleged personal assaults on Beare’s honesty is tied to Beare’s alleged affection for parliament.

Similar tensions emerge within a 1651 examination of the recently widowed Mary Campin, who reported the disaffected talk and rumor-mongering of Fayth Barrell to Colchester authorities. A series of overlapping concerns about the instability of political, social, and gender relations intersect within this deposition. Not long before Campin shared her statement in May, the Council of State had gained information of a potential royalist rising that would advance near Colchester.55 Campin’s examination before Mayor Furley suggests that city authorities were investigating the origins and spreading of a prophecy predicting Charles II’s successful invasion. While Campin’s examination accuses Barrell of claiming that ‘the prince would be heere before Michaelmas next’, it also shares troublesome speeches from Barrell that were likely to provoke Colchester officials living in fear of a royalist invasion.56 Indeed, Campin’s deposition first relates Barrell’s abusive language against Colchester magistrates. Campin’s information starts off by noting some scandalous talk that she had overheard three months prior. Barrell allegedly declared ‘that none but peddlers tinkers and coopers sate

53 DHC, ECA Book 64, fol. 102b v; Stoyle, From Deliverance to Destruction, p. 132.
55 Underdown, Royalist Conspiracy, 47; Davis, ‘Colchester, 1600–1662’, pp. 413–414; CSPD 1651, pp. 90.
56 ERO Chelmsford, D/B 5 Sb2/9 (22 May 1651).
upon the bench and ruled in this towne'. Next, the examination claims that Barrell declared that a ‘Company of Roundedly things ruled this land, but she hoped to see them dare long all upon a stringe’. Barrell’s reported dangerous talk engaged both the ubiquitous jeers against roundheads and the classist trope depicting ‘mechanical’ men overtaking the state. By labeling Colchester officials as peddlers, tinkers and coopers, Barrell’s reported taunt drew upon a rich rhetorical discourse of social inversion that represented Cromwell and his fanatic crew as lowly artisans. This language mirrors royalist rhetoric of the world turned upside down to undercut the legitimacy of the local bench, and ties those who sat on it to a ‘Company of Roundedly things’. The narrative depicts Barrell as a woman who believes her professed adherence to the traditional social and political orders justifies her abuse and rejection of those in authority. While the examination tells us little of Barrell’s exact words or actions, their representation within this mediated text may well meld Campin’s agenda with that of the Colchester bench.

Anxiety over rumors and prophecies also permeate Campin’s examination against Barrell. The agency of female prophets such as Elizabeth Poole and Anna Trapnel similarly provoked those whose power they threatened. Campin’s information claims that Barrell predicted that Charles II would return, but it suggests Barrell was recounting the prophecy of a traveling musician named Hills. As Hills came from Magdalen Green, he supposedly saw ‘a bright starre, in which there was a greate man in a golden chair with a crown on his head and Cromwell’s head in his hand’. Barrell’s alleged acceptance of this prediction, coupled with her repetition of it, provoked concern that empowered Campin to speak of it. Campin’s examination suggests that Mayor Furley already knew of Hills’ prophecy, directly from Hills. According to Campin’s statement, Barrell claimed ‘that the said Hills had said he had told Mr. Mayor of it’. Given the Mayor was present for Campin’s examination, it is possible that this part of her examination was informed by questions the magistrate posed to her. However, it is also conceivable that Campin shared this part of Barrell’s conversation to enhance the legitimacy of her information. Competing concerns over Barrell’s language may also have been fueled by the power invested in the speech of female prophets.

Though Campin’s examination does not accuse Barrell of having seditious

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Knoppers, “Sing Old Noll the Brewer”.
60 ERO Chelmsford, D/B 5 Sb2/9 (22 May 1651).
61 Mack, ‘Women as Prophets during the English Civil War’.
visions, it does suggest that Barrell was eager to share Hills’ predictions to those who would listen.

The series of forces intersecting in Campin’s examination underscore how gender informed the politics of disaffection within communities and between individuals. In the examination we see both women drawing on the power that professed loyalty or disloyalty to a regime may bring. Barrell, on the one hand, is presented as one who adopted popular royalist discourse against social inversion in attempts to undermine local authorities and justify her affection for Charles II—albeit without much success. Campin, on the other, is presented as the ‘honest’ woman reporting subversive speech to exact justice on a disaffected person who violated normative codes of conduct. Such representations of female agency underscore the tensions and contradictions in how transformations wrought by civil war and revolution could inform the agency and perceived veracity of women’s speech within interpersonal and communal conflicts. The city’s investigation of Barrell’s seditious desire for Charles’ return may well have offered Campin an ideal opportunity to explore grievances she had with Barrell or royalists more generally.

Campin’s history with the Colchester sessions court suggests she may have viewed herself as an informant against those whose behavior threatened the ideals or legitimacy of the Commonwealth. A year before she gave witness against Barrell to Mayor Furley, Campin recounted to him a scene she had witnessed two years previously, not long after the siege of Colchester in 1648. Campin alleged that, while she was working as ‘a helpe’ within the house of John Maidstone, one Turner visited Maidstone’s house. She allegedly overheard Turner ‘whisper’ to Maidstone’s wife, after which the wife asked Campin to make a fire in the chamber. Campin reported that Turner and Maidstone went up into the chamber, where he immediately began to kiss Maidstone. Campin’s statement further claims that Maidstone bid her to fetch some beer for the couple, and that, as Campin brought it to them, ‘she did see the said Turner stand against the said Maidstones wife, shee being at the bed sit leaning backward and her coates up above her w[ai]st’. When the two heard Campin approach, Turner reportedly moved to the window ‘with his breeches in his hands’, and Maidstone put on her clothes.

Mary Campin’s information raises a series of questions about the significance of her reported accusation against Turner and Maidstone. First, it is worth noting that Campin’s information, given two years following

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62 ERO Chelmsford, D/B 5 Sb2/9 (7 November 1650).
63 Ibid.
the alleged incident, came a few months after parliament’s new legislation against adultery in May 1650. The infamous act made adultery a felony that was punishable by death. While Turner and Maidstone could not be prosecuted ex post facto, the timing of the information suggests Campin may have been aware (or made aware) of the act when she provided her testimony. Campin, the wife of a husbandman, may have been socially inferior to her mistress, but the new legislation may have empowered her to communicate her narrative of the incident to the local Colchester authorities. Who, precisely, mistress Maidstone was raises another set of questions. It would be interesting to know what was the relationship, if any, between the accused Maidstone and the godly, prominent Maidstones of nearby Boxted, Essex, or to John Maidstone, the future MP for Colchester who served as a member of Essex’s sequestrations committee starting in 1650. Should there have been a relation between the families, such a striking example of household disorder would have delighted the disaffected, who could draw on the trope of the hypocritical puritan. Regardless of the identity of the accused, Campin’s information against Turner and Maidstone in 1650, and her examination against Fayth Barrell a year later, indicates that Campin engaged within the politics of the civil war as they played out in the Colchester community.

Conclusions

Given that modern political conceptions of radicalism and conservatism do not align with early modern views of female agency, it is hardly surprising women’s speech during the civil war and revolution cannot easily be described as repressive or liberating. Depositions, produced within the context of the legal system, do not provide us straightforward evidence of the degree to which divisions forged during the 1640s afforded an enhanced voice for women within the communities of civil war and revolutionary England. Yet they do allow us to consider how civil war and revolution, and the unsettling of gender and social relations that provoked fears of inverted authority, created new mechanisms and paths to political agency through

which women and their communities could pursue conflicts and rivalries with neighbors. As the tensions within Mary Campin's examination against Faith Barrell suggest, the politics of disaffection charged social relations in which women strove to negotiate power in their everyday lives. Yet Campin's deposition also uncovers strains within gender and social relations that provoked genuine concern over a world turned upside down. The reality of female assertiveness represented in examinations reveals tensions over the power of female speech to provoke quarrels and disrupt social relations within an already divided society. Examples of women engaging in speech acts to enhance their authority are often matched by ones where we find others desirous to right the social order. Experiences such as these further chipped away at normative concepts that required silence, passivity, and obedience from subordinate members of households and communities. They reveal women’s ability to provoke and agitate their social superiors, and show us that women’s speech could be empowered when it manipulated clashing concepts of affection, honesty, and order in an unsettled, divided society.

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