Henry Goodcole, in his capacity as the ordinary or visiting chaplain of Newgate prison, heard Elizabeth Sawyer’s final confession two days before she was to be hanged following a conviction of “witchery” in connection to the death of her neighbour Agnes Ratcliffe. In his published account of this last confession, Goodcole is relentlessly clear about what first caused Sawyer’s downfall: her “tongue.” The only topic that rivals Sawyer’s tongue in Goodcole’s pamphlet is the nature of “the Divels accession unto her” that her tongue provides. That access is emphatically physical. The connection between these two dominant concerns in Goodcole is fairly straightforward; Sawyer’s verbal transgression quickly leads to bodily transgression through physical intimacy with the devil in the shape of a dog, who, in turn, visits physical harm on Sawyer’s enemies. In short, Elizabeth Sawyer’s unruly speech has very tangible consequences.

But when the Jacobean playwrights Thomas Dekker, William Rowley, and John Ford dramatize Elizabeth Sawyer’s fate in *The Witch of Edmonton*, which clearly draws on Goodcole for source material, they question and revise significantly Goodcole’s primary warning about the dangers of unruly speech—and with specific attention to women’s speech. Like Goodcole, the playwrights foreground the physical nature of Mother Sawyer’s relationship with the sinister Dog, though to drastically different effect. On stage, Sawyer’s interactions with Dog move beyond the sensational to evoke haunting sadness, especially in light of the emotional isolation and physical abuse we see her suffer at the hands of her neighbours.
This sensitive portrayal of Sawyer’s connection with Dog—which nonetheless skillfully avoids glossing over the terror and repulsiveness of such a relationship—is in line with the play’s critical awareness, long recognized by scholars, of the extent to which economic hardship, social constructions, and prejudices create witches. Beyond enhancing the play’s sympathetic treatment of Sawyer, however, Dekker, Rowley, and Ford’s staging of the relationship between witch and familiar turns Goodcole’s central moral message about the tongue into a complex challenge of pervasive, dismissive attitudes that associated unruly female speech with transgressive female bodies. This challenge arises from the playwrights’ demonstration that such attitudes are precisely what force Mother Sawyer into a pact with the devil—a pact that turns out to suddenly enact or literalize her persecutors’ previously unjust conflation of her liberal speech with a transgressive body in a way that exposes the real horror and absurdity of this association, and the tragic effects it has on Sawyer herself.

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