

Phi Alpha Theta Pacific Northwest Conference, 8–10 April 2021

Mary Sweeney, Seattle University, undergraduate student, “Cursing in Medieval England: ‘By God’s Bones’ and Other Obscenities and Expletives”

Abstract: Many scholars who study letters, drama, and literature from late medieval and early modern England focus on political and social content, but recently linguists study this material using linguistics. For example, Melissa Mohr’s work on cursing has opened up new avenues of study. As useful as this is, it only takes up a small slice of English life and the usage of swear words. My research into the letters of elite and gentry men and women such as the Cely and Paston families, reveals how language both establishes social solidarity and disrupts it. I ask why these words were said, question who can say them, and ultimately see if using swear words caused and social disruption within English society. My work uses qualitative analysis of the letters to examine how the correspondents use blasphemy, phrases such as how “God”, “by God’s bones,” “God knows,” and more, to express such things as emotion and social standing. I use sociological theories of power relative to religious and social status in the formation of social scripts to better understand the nuances of languages of power. Looking at the use of swear words matters because it adds demotion to people’s lives and reveals continuity of protected speech.

Cursing in Medieval England:
“By God’s Bones” and Other Obscenities and Expletives

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We are often told that certain words are bad, and that we are not allowed to say them. Saying “damn” or calling someone a “bitch” are taboos in Western Christian society that we can only say around our closest friends or to our worst enemies. Now, these words are taboo in specific context, as well as were in medieval England. These are not the regular words people think of today. In the Middle Ages the church controlled the people, so saying anything against God, such as “by Gods bones” or “God Damn you” would ostracize you from the town’s inhabitants. Swear words have continue usage throughout time, and open up new avenues of study. My research into the letters of elite and gentry men and women, such as the Cely and Paston families, reveals how language both establishes social solidarity and disrupts it. I ask why these words were said, question who can say them, and ultimately analysis if using swear words caused any social disruption within medieval English society.

Most of the work done with cursing has been done by linguists.¹ They tell us, for example, the word “swear” often times is the word we use for negative language, such as saying, “fuck” and is used typically as a noun verb and occasionally an adjective. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “swear” as “an act of swearing; an oath.”² This word was primarily used with promises people would make, whether that be a knight to a king, or a peasant to a landowner. Swearing, or oaths, were an important part of medieval society. To swear and swearing kept society together and created order and provided consequences for those who broke their oaths. Breaking an oath could end in being shunned from society and even death. Swearing as a verb, but can be more profane. It is, “to make a solemn declaration, solemnly or profanely.”³ To use swear as a verb has more of a negative connotation and can be used in multiple occasions. In medieval society it can be related with an appeal to God or a sacred object, hence, “by God’s bones.”

Oath is a much older word, the first mention in the early medieval epic, *Beowulf*. Similar to “swear,” an “oath,” as shown in the English Oxford Dictionary is a “formal declaration invoking God as a witness to the truth of a statement.”⁴ The word oath has a much more legal meaning behind it, because it automatically evokes God or a secular being some being, to get witness to a promise that you are making. An oath is typically made to a family member, a legal or government official, or someone of the royal court. It can also be made as a promise to someone. Swear and oath, can be used interchangeable, to swear, is more used as a verb whereas oath is a noun, that can be used as a verb, if the negative words and phrases used are to call on God. If an oath or swear were broken then either the community around the person or God will be the one to punish the person.

Religious scholars: however, are interested in blasphemy because it has a more religious connotation. As a noun, blasphemy means, “profane speaking of God or sacred things; impious irreverence.”⁵ It is the worst form of swearing in medieval England, and meant that one was slandering God’s name, which was a sin. The church took blasphemy very seriously and because the church was one of the major landholders they were the dominant ones in society. They had the ability to create and establish rules. If these rules were not met, or went against the church they were considered blasphemy. Hence, this is why saying oaths and phrases such as “by Gods bones or “Gods nails” giving God physical human attributes is a high form of blasphemy.

Letters, such as the Cely Letters (1472–88), written by the male head of household, Richard Cely, reveal important markers of status and gender. However, these letters are vexing to work with because most of them were written by a secretary, and do not reflect the actual voice of the sender. The Cely family were London wool merchants, who traded wool and other goods. The letters document the lives of the Cely family and their activities and the 247 letters and 200

other documents that was entered as evidence in a court case that involved Richard Cely and his brother, George.⁶ These letters are hard to interpret, because voice is obscured by the formality of the secretary. Therefore, historians can only infer the emotion contained in a curse.

Melissa Mohr, an influential scholar of English language cursing, examines popular swear words to identify how they have changed throughout history. She tells us that people in the Middle Ages were often unconcerned with words dealing with excrement, such as “shit,” because defecating was a more public action back since there was little privacy. However, oaths by God could be seen to damage a smooth-running society and even injure God himself.”⁷ Swear words may not have been said every day, like it may be today. In the Middle Ages, a person who swore was punished by a friends and neighbors in a way that could result in ostracization, unless this was done in literature. Mohr can do this because *The Canterbury Tales* is a witty collection of stories and tales, showing a more uncensored version of medieval life than a letter written by a secretary ever could.

In present western culture, words such as damn and shit cause a reaction where people are taken aback and offended. Social class plays a role In medieval England, even the most minor of vulgarities such as, “by my faith” was considered offensive by church officials and the congregation. However, over time attitudes towards swearing and blasphemy changed from vexed to annoyance. By 1500, saying anything relating to Christ as a suffering entity was forbidden because this alluded to the death of Christ, something considered sacred in medieval society. Saying anything that had to do with the renewal of the crucifixion was seen as blasphemous. This in turn meant that if people were to say, “by God’s bones” or “By God’s corps,” they would be rightly punished.⁸ Such words could lead to suspicions of blasphemy by a surveilling public. Everyone in the community would listen for people who swore. If anyone was

found, and when they turned them in they would be considered a lawful neighbor who contributed to the stability of society and the church.

Therefore, there were two kinds of oath swearing, or using God in a negative term, each having different effects. The first is sincere swearing, which is more of a promise to God. Sincere swearing was extremely important in medieval culture and society. This specific idea of swearing is different than what the definition may be. As shown in the Oxford English Dictionary swearing is “to make a solemn declaration or statement with an appeal to God.”⁹ In this instance, swearing is making an oath not just to God but to other people. For example, in the Cely Letters, John Pasmer sent a letter to George Cely asking for money and admission that in return Pasmer was to renew his oath with George.¹⁰ Making these sincere oaths meant that if you were to break them, it angered people in society, but they were not the punishers. God did the enforcing, and that had existential consequences. “If you broke your oath God was supposed to punish you, either directly, by visiting a plague upon your children or livestock, or indirectly.”¹¹ Oaths had less religious connotations, however. God’s punishment was far more fearsome than any punishment the king could inflict.

Vain swearing, on the other hand, was negative swearing, which trivializes God’s name. Vain swearing was often used to insult someone and was added as an intensifier. The use of these words and phrases often shocked and offended people when they heard it, which seemed to be the point of them.¹² Whether these words were used to judge, used for life, death or simply while playing cards, God was the one who had to judge a person, not the neighbors, the bailiff, the sheriff, or the king. Unfortunately, due to the nature of letters and the fact that they were written formally, vain swearing is not mentioned in either the Cely letters or the Paston letters.

However, there are hundreds of ways in which we can see these phrases in action in medieval literature.

The Cely letters relate to a specific court case regarding money. Normally I would expect that in these letters, the Cely family would be angry for not getting their money and thus, swear in the letters. After examining the letters this was not the case. In fact, the letters were very formal and often said nice things about other members of the family. For instance, in document 43, In a letter to George Cely from Richard Cely, George's older brother. Richard thanks him for the black coat that was given to him, for during his voyage it was the black coat that kept him company.¹³ These letters were also written by another person, most likely a secretary for the family, for those who could not write. Other letters were written by the eldest brother Richard. When looking at letters one can see the content of letters during the medieval period and how, not all situations called for cursing.

Literature, on the other hand, is filled with cursing. Compared to the Cely letters Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, is not family friendly. The letters have a purpose of correspondence for a lawsuit, whereas "The Miller's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales* is about a carpenter and his beautiful young wife, Alison, who is young and wild, but suffers from her husband's jealousy. Nevertheless, Alison and Friar Nicholas, a young astronomer who is living with the Carpenter begin an affair hiding it from the carpenter. The tale is told by the drunk Miller, the narrator of the story, who "began to swear, 'Christ's arms and blood and bone's I've got a splendid tale for the occasion'" and immediately the Miller begins swearing to the crowd about his unbelievable story.¹⁴ Chaucer brings his tale using some of the most heinous of swear words so much so that he swears about Christ's body parts, an act of heresy itself, to show how powerful this story is. The story further picks up steam when a third lover comes in and gets

tricked. “The night as dark as pitch, as black as coal; out of the window she put her arse-hold, and Absolon, as luck would have it, kissed her with his mouth smack on her naked arse relishingly not knowing what it was.”¹⁵ Chaucer’s word choice shows the freedom of literature, and how swearing is allowed in types of literature, but when it comes to formal letters that is forbidden.

The Canterbury Tales are an excellent example of how venial swearing can still be used in literature and not entirely disrupt society, but it mocks pompous fools, marks social class, pushes against prudish restrictions and makes it sound like fun. Some of the worst forms of swearing may be used, but it is still allowed because it was a satirical work of literature. Therefore, one can get away with more if it was written for satirical purposes and not an important document or letter, such as the Cely Letters. Satire does not disrupt society as much as it makes people uncomfortable. There may be a slight disruption when reading this a loud, but since you were not the one thinking these swear words and simply read from a book, it was considered okay. In order to see if this is fully true one would have to look further into letters and other satirical poetry.

The gendering of letters and oaths taken is prevalent also in the Paston letters from husband to wife, both of whom used a secretary. A formulaic formality is prevalent throughout the letters, giving no signs of swearing, with an extra attention to how respectable and honorable both the writer and recipient are. For example, letters sent to Margaret that begin with “mother, or right worshipful mother, may seem like women have less power if they have to write this much in letters, but this is not the case. Women did not need to put swear words in their greetings or in their letters to be powerful.

Women did not show their power through swearing, but through exhibiting their disappointment. When Margaret's son abandoned his troops in 1469 she took assertive action. She did this by beginning with a brief, "warmly." Margaret then said, "if you want my blessing, I order and request you to see that your brother gets help quickly."¹⁶ She directed her son to do something. This letter is a typical, and is not typically how Margaret talks. Margaret is only a mother, but by ordering her son to do show showed that despite her son growing up she still had control over him. This letter also shows the small disruption that Margaret causes with her son and the community around him. Of all people to call John to man up and do his duty, is his mother. This disrupts the idea that men are the dominant ones in a relationship. When writing to one's mother, one does not swear, however, Margaret's son, John was not happy.

John reassured his mother that he sent soldiers, and everyone would be saved by the time they get there. He took an oath to his mother, promising that he and his siblings will be safe. In his reply.¹⁷ This oath is something that kept the family together. If it were to be broken John would have to answer to both God and his mother, which is something no child wants to do. Despite this oath and his reassurance to his mother, Margaret did not believe him.

Women too can disrupt society with their words rather than their actions. By swearing, taking an oath, or committing blasphemy, women used language to convey their power. In the Paston letters, Margaret exclaimed, "you think I wrote fables and stories, but I do not so."¹⁸ She's maintaining her power over her son. She does this even more by bringing God into the conversation she mentions how good God has been to John, and how he should never disobey him. "And for the love of God, remember this well and thank God and accept it patiently."¹⁹ To society saying for the love of God can either be sincere or exclamatory. It all depends on the tone. For the love of God is an oath of shock, annoyance, frustration of anger. In this letter,

Margaret is so fed up with her son that she swore using God's name. This disruption caused no further letters to be written on this topic.

Being told not to say certain words makes people want to say them even more. However, in medieval society, saying these words could have negative consequences. These words, "for the love of God" or "Holy blood," may not seem like anything to us, but to people saying anything relating to God was blasphemous. Language has the power to persuade, provoke, insult. Cursing was mentioned more in casual letters than business letters. As well, for casual letters it seems that women swear oaths more than men, as shown in the Paston letters. The Cely and Paston letters, reveals important markers of status and gender. This gendering of letters shows how women are able to disrupt society even more than men, just by saying a few negative phrases. Despite this, there are still consequences for women. The best place to see the actual usage of swearing to express emotion is in literature, like that of *The Canterbury Tales* where an author of the stature of Chaucer can get away with all kinds of vulgarities.

Almost anyone can swear, but there may be consequences. There is a multitude of reasons for why people swear. Although it disrupts society, and saying anything against God such as "by Gods bones" or "God Damn you" would ostracize you. On the other hand, it gives people a more personable character, and is an important bond that holds a society together.

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Notes

¹ Melissa Mohr, *Holy Shit: a Brief History of Swearing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² "swear, n." OED Online. March 2021, Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.seattleu.edu/view/Entry/195607?rskey=haaKRR&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 05, 2021).

³ "swear, v.", OED Online. March 2021, Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.seattleu.edu/view/Entry/195608?rskey=XivJFy&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 05, 2021).

⁴ "oath, n.", OED Online. March 2021, Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.seattleu.edu/view/Entry/129495?rskey=hKEKTP&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 05, 2021).

⁵ "blasphemy, n.". OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.seattleu.edu/view/Entry/19934?rskey=SUXfKO&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 05, 2021).

⁶ Alison Hanham, ed., *The Cely Letters: 1472-1488* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁷ Melissa Mohr, *Holy Shit: a Brief History of Swearing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 91. The Catholic church, as a religion, worships the death of Christ during their ceremonies and often has crucifixions and crosses as their symbol of their religion. This transgression of a theological tenet had two powerful implications. First, the violation of a norm disrupted society, but then the community's reactions had the power to restore society. The crucifixion brings people together under the same religion to worship the Catholic church; however, by saying anything that is against Christ or personifying him disrupts the flow of the community.

⁸ Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing a Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 56.

⁹ "swear, v.". OED Online.

¹⁰ Hanham, ed., *Cely Letters*, p. 224.

¹¹ Mohr, *Holy Shit*, p. 113.

¹² Mohr, *Holy Shit*, p. 113.

¹³ Hanham, ed., *Cely Letters*, p. 40.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, David Wright, trans. (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 81.

¹⁵ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, 96.

¹⁶ Diane Watt, *The Paston Women: Selected Letters* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2004), p. 99.

¹⁷ Watt, ed., *Paston Letters*, p. 46.

¹⁸ Watt, ed., *Paston Letters*, p. 59.

¹⁹ Watt, *The Paston Women*, p. 99.