

University of Guelph, Department of History

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PhD Final Oral Examination

‘Devilische Wordis’: Speech as Evidence in Scotland’s

Witch Trials, 1563-1736

ABSTRACT

Date: Wed., July 27/16

Time: 1:00 pm

Location: MCKN 132

Advisor:

Elizabeth Ewan

Examining Committee Members:

David Smith

Greta Kroeker

External Examiner:

Dr. Michael Graham (U of Akron)

Chair:

Matthew Hayday

This dissertation examines the links between speech and witchcraft during Scotland’s witch-hunting period in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. As this thesis argues, verbal performances were a key feature in many definitions of witchcraft, from the curses and quarrels of maleficent witches, to the healing prayers of charmers, to the verbal pacts of diabolical witches. While witches in general were believed to possess a wide variety of powers, it was their utterances that most often brought them to the attention of the kirk and community, and which most often formed the majority of the evidence filed against them in their trials. Indeed, it was in the context of the court room that contested definitions of witchcraft found common ground in the words of witches. Consequently, speech should be seen as the unifying factor in popular, religious, and judicial definitions of witchcraft.

This research draws on a wealth of printed and manuscript sources on Scottish witch-hunting, in particular, the process notes of the Justiciary Court and the kirk and presbytery session records. This material is supplemented by transcripts of additional trial material, sermons, demonological tracts and treatises, and other sources. The majority of the dissertation focuses on the legal evidence sought and submitted in the trials, demonstrating how local and central judges determined what constituted proof of witchcraft. While other historians have pointed out the connection between witches and words, this has generally been seen as a characteristic of popular folk belief rather than judicially-defined witchcraft: witches were accused of cursing, but convicted of having served the Devil. Alternately, the relationship has been explained as a consequence of the gendered stereotype of witchcraft, rather than an important feature in its own right. By focusing on speech as the commonality, however, we can better understand why women were most often accused of this crime, as well as revealing how witch-hunting was part of a larger concern and anxiety over speech in early modern Scotland.

