

Regulating Women: The 'Mass Media' of Early Modern Society?

Anne Knutsford - a 'Public Bawd'?

You, Anne Knutsford, are ordinarily much addicted and given to lyinge sweringe and cursinge, and for a women so vitiously disposed, you have been and are amongst your neighbours and such as know you commonly accompted reputed and taken.¹

In the open street at Nantwich Anne Knutsford did call Ann Blagg a whore, porkie arst whore, Coon whore and a bitch and bid her run thou bitch like Jim Baxter and bring me home the money thou owest me, with such base and scandalous speeches in the presence of a great many people.

In Nantwich, before all Hallows tide, Margaret Howell in a very bitter scolding and cursing manner did grivously curse Anne Knutsford and pulled her by the bosom, and bid the plague of Christ take her.²

In early modern society women dominated the world of speech. They played an important role in the dissemination of knowledge and were the 'mass media' of the seventeenth century. In broadcasting information they were the 'mouths' of community affairs. The censors of intelligence were the Church Wardens who were the whistle-blowers on gossip, and the 'ears' of the community ruling body. They closely monitored female conversation and brought it to the attention of the Consistory Court. This was the route that gossip followed before it came to the attention of the church court functionaries. The approach to women's speech was ambivalent. On the one hand, it was regarded as mere tittle-tattle, whilst on the other it was rigorously censured.³ Church Wardens were often unpopular community figures and some women they reported even cursed them.⁴

The records of the Chester Consistory court incorporate detailed data about the language that offended ruling authorities. The manuscripts of proceedings provide insights into the popular politics of early-modern towns and permit access to a micro-history of gossip that contributes to the debate over such macro-historical questions as gender, social politics, female social space and the controversy about whether, over time, the status of women has declined or improved.⁵ Networks of power and factional divisions are presented in an examination of the attitudes of those involved in cases involving verbal crime and the dissemination of female attitudes and beliefs in the community. The Consistory court provided an official platform from which to broadcast public disputes and offered women an opportunity to present their grievances publically. Archival records show a significant female presence in the London Consistory and Archdeaconry courts in the period 1572 to 1640.⁶ Church court records about women draw attention to a 'recognisable women's voice'.⁷

Contentious female language was associated with regions of the cultural and bodily 'low'.⁸ The societal taboos which were progressively introduced also had clear-cut associations with female sexuality. Women who disturbed the peace of the community were reprehended.⁹ The curses, charms, magic and spells that were unacceptable were perceived as word-magic and taboo.¹⁰ Bakhtin explains that the 'grotesque' body of the carnival and the spectacle of popular culture is one of ambivalence where orifice, protuberance, apertures, the genitalia, particularly the phallus and bowels are exaggerated. Copulation, defecation and over-indulgence are accentuated and this is reflected in the language people used. Most important in this analysis is the continuous flow and dissemination of speech. Bernard Capp, in *When Gossips Meet*, accurately portrays the contemporary view of gossiping women. Females gossiping in alehouses are portrayed unfavorably as 'idle, irresponsible, spend thrift, bad neighbours and treacherous wives.'¹¹ Similarly, instances recorded in other courts of Europe demonstrate female domination of speech.¹² The registers of the consistory courts in France show that gossip was a predominantly female occupation moreover, women enforced a collective morality through gossip.¹³

Between 1600 and 1675 in northwest England, hundreds of women were prosecuted for verbal infringements. The subject has attracted the attention of a number of scholars who agree that crimes of speech typically involved a high proportion of female offenders across a wide geographical area that includes London¹⁴, Devon, York, Wiltshire and Somerset.¹⁵

One woman who appeared in the Chester Consistory court was a Nantwich midwife named Ann Knutsford. In 1663, she was accused of 'lying, swearing and cursing'. The language that she used outraged the community who censured her for 'abusing and injuring townfolk' with 'scandalous speeches', for having a 'scurrilous tongue' and for 'revealing the secrets of women'.¹⁶ This incident sparked off more than ten years of litigation which was to involve eventually over one hundred people from every level of the social scale.

Before examining the events that took place, it is worth establishing some details about Anne Knutsford. She was born in Nantwich, to prosperous parents Raphe and Margery Elcocke and had three sisters, Bridgett, Sarah and Ellen and three brothers, Ephrain, Raphe and Samuel.¹⁷ Knutsford's family had once owned property in Mill Street, but ownership was in dispute in the 1660s and led to a long-running quarrel over pew space. Anne Knutsford married Thomas some time between 1640 and 1644. Thirteen children, born between 1645 and 1677, were recorded under the name of Thomas Knutsford and were baptised in Nantwich church.¹⁸ Thomas was her only surviving son and he became a tanner in later years.¹⁹ By 1660 she had been

midwife in Nantwich for fifteen years. Her practise took her to Wybunbury, Wrenbury, Wigsbaston and Acton.²⁰ Her house was located in 'Baron's Fee', the largest district within the hundred of Nantwich. Her husband, Thomas Knutsford, was a labourer who paid Hearth Tax on two hearths in 1664.²¹ She was midwife to her close neighbours. In 1662, however, troubled circumstances emphasised the disturbed nature of relationships between them. A turn of events ensured that Anne Knutsford's nearby residents became her adversaries.²²

In Cheshire, as everywhere in the early-modern period, bringing forth children was a risky business. Women came close to death and were aware of the dangers they took in experiencing confinements.²³ The circumstances of a woman's delivery were a social equaliser. These circumstances applied to all women regardless of their social standing.²⁴

The following analysis provides an intimate account of contemporary opinions and beliefs. It brings to light the fears of Nantwich townfolk. It reflects upon and illuminates their most intimate dark secrets and identifies numerous webs of conspiracy that found expression through a process of litigation that sought to control those women, such as Anne Knutsford, who utilised their imprecatory power to achieve their aims. What follows is an exploration that brings to light the lives and experiences of the people in a town that was to be deeply divided, in spite of its attempts to resolve its conflicts.

'Husht, Negative and Averse'

In the Chester Consistory Court of the 1660s the Chancellor, John Wainwright, heard instances of the moral kind. Deputy registrar, William Wilson, undertook the administration of the Court. The Clerk of the Court, Henry Prescott, who later succeeded William Wilson when he died in 1689, recorded the details of the case.²⁵ Henry Prescott wrote in his diary that most of the business of the Chester Consistory Court took place in the 'better inns of Chester'. These were the Falcon, the Calf's Head Clubb and the Fountain.²⁶ They spent many hours drinking wine and ale in Chester inns. Two hours' journey by road from Nantwich, however, lived Anne Knutsford, who worked out her strategies to deal with her legal business in Blossam's Inn. Henry Prescott, whose diary was written at a slightly later date than the period under investigation, provided an insight into the ways in which the functionaries of the Court perceived the population at large. People of the lower social hierarchy were described as 'the Mob'²⁷ and 'vulgar spectators.'²⁸ The attitude of the townfolk to the functionaries of the court was equally as suspicious. On one occasion, Henry

complained about the cool reception he and the Chancellor received when they approached the diocesan town of Wigan, as 'husht, negative and averse'.²⁹

Midwife, Anne Knutsford, generated a great deal of paperwork for the Chester Consistory Court. In the 1660s she was involved in ten official separate instances of litigation, and six unofficial instances.³⁰ The people involved, numbering more than one hundred, were artisans, shopkeepers and tradesfolk. Several were of gentle status, and two were high-ranking members of the community. Where evidence has allowed, further information on their backgrounds has been recovered from their wills and inventories and applied to locate the information within a more precise social context. Some details, such as those relating to the births of their children, baptisms and marriages, have been taken from the Nantwich parish records. Investigation of these data lays bare the details of a legal struggle that was related to money-lending, property ownership, and the problem of maintaining one's status in Nantwich's fluctuating circumstances. The participants of the same drama of accusation, in what they say (and also what they do not say) to the Court, and what they reveal through their depositions, throw light upon the concealed dimensions behind the dynamics of ill-will; elements which ultimately drove such accusations.

Silencing the Midwife: Publishing the Prohibition of Practice

At the direction of Richard Walthall, promulgator of the cause, on 5th February 1663 a large number of Nantwich townfolk organised a petition against Anne Knutsford, midwife, of Nantwich. Nineteen people initially signed the petition, then thirty people more appeared in court to give evidence and a further ninety-three people were involved indirectly. The petition was directed at the midwife for cursing and numerous other charges of verbal violence. Almost immediately, upon receipt of the petition, John Wainwright, 'Doctor of Lawes' and the 'Bishop of Chester', acted against Knutsford with an interim order; on the basis of the Petition, Wainwright issuing a Prohibition of Practice. The document was made public and fastened to the door of Nantwich Church.³¹

According to the processes of the Chester Consistory Church Court, signatories to such a petition were required to attend court as witnesses. Although the crime was not felonious, some cases that started out at the church court, ended up at Quarter Sessions or Assize courts. The witnesses, or 'deponents' as they were called, were required by the Court to give evidence about 'Items', or a list of charges which were read out in the Court. The verbal accounts of witnesses, known as 'depositions', were often found to be contradictory. Investigation of these inconsistencies exposed details

of concubinage, bastardy, debt, stealing, lying and sexual impropriety. Anne Knutsford made common knowledge of such sensitive, secret, information.

Discrediting the Midwife: Bawdry and Gossip

In examining the underlying implications raised by the accusations made against the midwife it is useful to explore the ways in which resentment was generated through gossip and hearsay. What follows examines the depositions in the case of Anne Knutsford to find out more about the 'real' issues, that is, the details that some witnesses wished to conceal and it raises questions about why there was so much concern about the midwife's language. A reputation for public bawdry accumulated slowly. Resentment over alleged female verbal criminals existed in Nantwich long before accusations were made. The litigation involving Anne Knutsford matured into a full-blown accusation within three years, but the initial momentum behind the circumstances, that is, the conversations involved, were generated in Nantwich ten years before the petition that led to her presentation in court.

The depositions of the townsfolk contain the details of several levels of conspiracy. Landowner and notable, Captain Richard Walthall, initiated the most important stratagem to silence the midwife. On the surface it was orchestrated by Walthall as a campaign of hostility against a midwife with a 'scurrilous tongue.' In reality, it was organised by a network of notables whose activities, in a town conscious of maintaining high levels behaviour, were doubtful. Some people claiming to be of 'good credit' were in debt, while others, such as Sir Philip Egerton and Richard Walthall, were involved in extra-marital affairs with females, a few of whom were prominent members of Nantwich society. When these relationships produced children, Egerton and Walthall became anxious since they knew that any midwife was required by law to disclose the identities of the parents of bastard children. Knutsford's knowledge of the extra-marital affairs of the people of Nantwich, especially those of the local notables, made her vulnerable to allegations of spreading gossip. Critics of the midwife, finding safety in numbers, would join forces and give support to each other when thrust into the public eye before a court. The neighbours supported each other in their accounts with the deliberate intent of implicating the midwife in gossip-mongering. Their mutually supportive accounts deflected rumour away from themselves and onto the midwife. Their public demonstration of solidarity ensured protection from the midwife's words and it also shielded them against the negative moral judgements of influential members of the community.

When the midwife became indicted as the source of ill will, her enemies said that her words and behaviour were antagonistic and disruptive. They complained that she offended the morality of 'good neighbourliness.' She was rebuked for her language, charged as a 'public bawd' and accused as the source of social scandal. Numerous conversations emerged in which the midwife had, over the previous years, implicated high born townsfolk in improper behaviour, and these conversations were repeated by witnesses in court. The townsfolk, afraid of the stigma that might be incurred, protested that Anne Knutsford had slandered them. The petition implied that Anne Knutsford's words were pure invention. Her critics hoped that Knutsford's allegations of sexual impropriety, bastardy, insobriety, stealing, prostitution and concubinage would be quashed by a legal battle in the public arena of the Court, and would result in Knutsford being branded as a rumour-monger. Such discourse, however, pointed the finger of moral suspicion squarely at them. Thus, gossip and hearsay - what had been said, what had been heard, and what was said to have been heard and said - were like lines in a script, mouthed by actors in a public drama. The circumstances surrounding Anne Knutsford, provided a useful public forum for acting out the rising tension which had long simmered below the surface. The so-called 'defamed' of Nantwich cried out in a single chorus of public outrage. By bringing a Petition designed to discredit her, one that was aimed at precluding her from practising, the witnesses hoped to stop her and others from gossiping about them and restore their credit and reputation. However, in this they were much mistaken.³²

Many of the signatories of the petition in 1663 appeared as witnesses to give evidence to the court of what they knew in relation to the charges brought against Anne Knutsford. Some signed the petition, but did not appear in court, whilst some appeared but did not sign the petition. Some claimed that they signed the petition, but in fact they did not. Those who were unable to write made their mark, which was usually the first initial of the Christian name.³³ The court issued a list of 'Items' that set out in precise details the crimes of the midwife as follows:

You, Anne Knutsford, have been and are a woman of very uncivill language towards your neighbours, and have abused and injured many or some of them who are persons of quality by your scandalous speeches, as the witnesses in the cause to be produced against you can particularly demonstrate.³⁴

Further to the allegations of verbal crime, the midwife was accused of behaving 'imodestly'. Her speech and behaviour was construed in a way that reflected unfavourably upon her as a female. Amongst these allegations was one of violating a

sacred bond between women. The townsfolk complained that Anne Knutsford spoke lightly of the most intimate details of women in labour:

you have imodestly by words not bifittinge a midwife or modest and civill woman rivealed the sicrettes of women who had been in trauell [labour] the particulars whereof the witnesses to be produced are required to declare.³⁵

Most female signatories gave evidence about the midwife speaking 'imodestly' and 'rivealing the sicrettes of women'.³⁶ However, most of the women who were asked to provide depositions, presumably by Walthall, were unable to say that they *personally* were victims of Knutsford's indiscretions. Instead, they repeated what they had heard others say. Knutsford's critics repeated gossip and hearsay - what had been said, what had been heard - and what was said to have been heard and said. Cursing, presumed to be the midwife's main crime, was closely related to gossip. Knutsford was accused of offending people with lies, swearing and curses, as is described below:

You, Anne Knutsford, are ordinarily much addicted and given to lyinge sweringe and cursinge, and for a women so vitiously disposed, you have been and are amongst your neighbours and such as know you commonly accompted reputed and taken.³⁷

Those who prepared the certificate assumed from the outset that the midwife wronged its signatories. The signatories had previously established their high status in the town and this allowed them to assume respectability. They claimed for themselves the status of 'persons of good name, quality and reputation'.³⁸ They made their charges against Knutsford in the following words:

By rieson [sic] of your lewd and civill life and scurrilous disgraceful and immodest language as aforesaid, your neighbours both men and womane, persons of good quality and reputation, are much offended and abused.³⁹

Lying, swearing, cursing and 'rivealing the sicrettes of women' had already led to her exclusion from the profession of midwifery when these allegations had been first raised in February 1663. The long list of 'Items', that is wrongdoings presented in Court in March 1663, also included a condemnation of Knutsford for practising midwifery when forbidden by the Bishop and Minister from doing so.⁴⁰ In addition, the midwife faced charges of professional neglect. Her enemies claimed that she selected her patients, not out of concern for the well being of mother and child, but for financial reward, thus neglecting poor folk.⁴¹

The final Items united the signatories in a common voice of disapproval. The people of Nantwich substantiated their allegations. They appeared in public to discredit the midwife where they announced that she was a nuisance and that 'all and singular' were in agreement with the Items brought against her.⁴² But as the following analysis will demonstrate, 'all and singular' did not agree. There was much contention between neighbours, especially amongst the people who tried to discredit Anne Knutsford, the midwife of Nantwich.

Parody and Theatrical Display

Anne is a very frequent curser and swearer, and will ordinarily goe down on her knees and curse people grivously, and this deponent hath seen her doe soe diverse times.⁴³

Before examining the depositions of the witnesses that supported the charges against Anne Knutsford, it is important to examine the charges laid against the midwife for cursing, lying and professional neglect. Firstly, let us explore the charge of cursing. The midwife had a distinguished reputation for her use of language. She was quick-witted and particularly imaginative with her choice of ribald expressions. She launched scathing attacks upon the pretentious. She parodied notions of respectability and exposed hypocrisy in colourful language and in physical demonstration. Her aptitude with rhetorical speech allowed her to expose the pretences of the respectable and she made no distinction between victims of high or low status. Such rhetoric became indictable, however, when it came to include cursing, and, as the evidence below will demonstrate, she frequently resorted to ritualistic public demonstrations of cursing to achieve her aims.

Nine close neighbours in Pepper Street gave evidence against the midwife for cursing. Janet Brookett, in her deposition said that Anne Knutsford cursed James Wilson.⁴⁴ Barbara Croxton, said: 'Anne Knutsford is accounted to be addicted to lying and swearing and cursing.'⁴⁵ Similarly, Jane Wright grocer, said she heard Anne Knutsford 'curse her father.'⁴⁶ Margaret Jackson also supported the claims of Anne Knutsford's propensity for cursing.⁴⁷ Certainly, these depositions are proof that Anne Knutsford's language was scurrilous and that she cursed publically. Amongst those she cursed was Margaret Birkerton; a teacher of reading and sewing who had lived in Nantwich. It is difficult to establish the nature of her association with Anne Knutsford.

Her deposition does give evidence in support of many of the items against the midwife and she had allegedly been on the receiving end of Anne's sharp tongue:

She hath done as much to this depots. selfe to her owne face before severall people of late calling her salt bitch and drunken salt women bitch, and the like, and thou hast a hole I may put my head in.⁴⁸

The teacher illustrated the midwife's tendency to attack without provocation. She referred the Court to unprovoked attacks upon the Proudman.⁴⁹ Margaret Birkerton, however, also provided evidence of a very serious nature against Anne Knutsford for cursing. The charge was serious because the midwife publicly executed the curse in the formal ritual style. Knutsford was accused of getting down on her knees, while raising her hands and eyes dramatically towards the heavens. The curse executed in this way was a theatrical display, performed with the intention of attracting the attention of as many people as possible - publicly magnifying the issues that the 'audience' may not have been aware of. Margaret Birkerton saw the midwife perform this ritual many times. She did not say who the curse was directed at, but she did draw attention to the regularity of the midwife's attacks.⁵⁰ Margaret Birkerton affirmed solidarity with her neighbours and stated her familiarity with them.⁵¹ She claimed she was cursed along with many others.⁵² In contrast to the rest of her short deposition, she stated that the midwife was a skilled practitioner and that she had a good reputation: 'Anne is a good midwife and generally accounted soe to be.'⁵³

52 year-old Thomas Proudman, shoemaker and neighbour of Anne Knutsford gave further evidence. In the course of his everyday life he had frequently witnessed the midwife's curses and claimed that he was present when Anne cursed members of her own family: 'Anne is much given to cursing and swearing on any idle occasion' and recalled an occasion when Anne Knutsford cursed her father, beat him up and threw him out of doors.⁵⁴ The shoemaker signed the certificate to demonstrate his loyalty to the community.⁵⁵ Anne Knutsford's language also offended other people in Pepper Street.⁵⁶ Because Thomas Proudman was a close neighbour he overheard quarrels when the midwife cursed her family:

Her sister and brother in lawe both say on several occasions say that she is one much taken notice of to be given to vain cursing and swearing. This deponent did hear her one time curse her owne father and bid the divill rid the world on him and he was the basest villane that did get children.⁵⁷

Innkeeper, Elizabeth Cliffe said that she was present when Anne Knutsford cursed Sir Phillip Egerton and Captain Richard Walthall. She claimed that she also was a victim of Knutsford's rumormongering but that when she confronted the midwife, Knutsford then cursed *herself* and subsequently denied gossiping:

Anne hath very falsely and iniustly raised a scandall upon this deponent and Sir Philip Egerton, as alsoe of Captain Walthall and Samuel Husseys wife and notice thereof being given to Anne Knutsford she came to this deponent one time and fell downe on her knees and grivously swore and cursed her selfe if ever she had reported any such thinge by any of them or ever iniured any of them by her.⁵⁸

Most significantly, the Minister of Nantwich church, Richard Jackson, supported the claims of those who had subscribed to the Certificate.⁵⁹ He said 'Anne is too much adicted to lyeing, swearing and cursinge And for such a one is comonly taken and reputed in the neighbourhood.'⁶⁰ However, he was unable to provide an example of it. Similarly, coster, William Blundell, shared the common view of the midwife as a curser and swearer.⁶¹ William Blundell, as with the Minister, referred to hearsay, and did not provide a specific example alleging that his wife was a victim of a curse and he did not make a distinction between cursing and swearing.⁶²

The above evidence demonstrates that whilst the townspeople were mutually supportive in their attack on the midwife for cursing, some individuals, such as the Minister and William Blundell, could not support the consensus of opinion with fact. In their depositions they reveal that they relied solely upon what they had heard others say about the midwife. Similarly, 76 year-old widow, Margaret Wirkstad was anxious to fortify her position of good standing in the community because the midwife referred to her as a witch:

And this deponent hath been told that by persons of credit that Anne reported that this deponent was a dun arse and a leather-faced witch, and when she met with her she had noe luck that day.⁶³

Wirkstadt supported the general view of the midwife as a common curser.⁶⁴ She stated: 'Anne is much given to idle vaine cursing and swearing and lyinge, And is ordinarily taken of for such a one.'⁶⁵ Although Wirkstadt did not disclose the names of the 'persons of credit' who asked her to appear, it is reasonable to assume that, since she was related to Richard Walthall, she was probably induced to appear by him.⁶⁶ Margaret Wirkstad also had a keen interest in defending her own reputation. She refuted any association with the term 'witch'. Widows were susceptible to accusations of witchcraft

by disgruntled townfolk. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that Margaret Wirkstad was anxious to show her sympathy for the respectable Nantwich townfolk. Margaret said Anne Knutsford called her husband 'an old rotten Rogue.'⁶⁷ Nevertheless, she tried to persuade Anne to curb her tongue, but, as her deposition will illustrate, the midwife's response was less than enthusiastic:

And one time this deponent being in company with Anne was advising her to be fair conditioned amongst her neighbours, and in a familiar way be [sic] laid her hand upon Anne's hand when Anne before all sundry sufficient neighbours answered to this deponent, 'ah! the divill, lay thy hand off me!'⁶⁸

Anne Knutsford did not defer to the respectable folk of Nantwich society and before 'all sundry', parodied her neighbour's kindly efforts. Margaret's attempts to urge Anne Knutsford to curb her tongue fell on deaf ears. Margaret Wirkstad then promptly sought to safeguard her name and position in the community. Eventually she demonstrated solidarity with those who wanted to put an end to the 'lewd and scurrilous life' of the midwife.⁶⁹ She set down her signature on the petition, joined the others and washed her hands of Knutsford.

'Rivealing the Sicrettes of Women': Measures and Counter-Measures

High on the list of charges brought against the midwife was that of behaving 'imodestly'. Those seeking higher status in the town construed claimed that Knutsford's language reflected badly on her, not only as a midwife, but also as a female. Her speech was contrary to the outwardly accepted standards. She was alleged to have violated a sacred bond between women by revealing the private details of women to whom she provided assistance as midwife.

The women of Nantwich were outraged to find that Anne Knutsford had spoken so freely of them and the intimate details of the delivery of their children. Since Knutsford, as midwife, was required to provide details of bastardy, some, such as Elizabeth Cliffe, Dorothy Hussey and Anne Blagg, were more outraged than others. Witnesses lined up to give evidence about this charge. Many were anxious in their attempts to make public knowledge the midwife's 'imodesty' and her indelicate 'rivealing of the sicrettes of women'. Few were able to say that they were victims of the midwife's indiscretions. They spoke of what they heard *others* say about it. Once again we are in the realm of gossip and hearsay.

In an effort to discredit the midwife, some townsfolk referred to fictitious victims. Such people did not sign the petition and neither did they appear at the Court.⁷⁰ Janett Brookett accused the midwife of having said: 'Richard Yorksalls wife was rotten and stunke so that she could scarce sit by her for the smell.'⁷¹ Of her client, Mrs Booth, she said: 'when she went to John Booths wife in bed she found her drunke and with the childe upon the hearth.'⁷² In similar fashion, she said of the Minister's wife: 'she took a child from Mrs Jackson that stunke like a turd and came from her in peeces as black as a thrush'.⁷³ There were also turbulent words spoken between the midwife and James Wilson, whose wife was Anne's client. It was at a social occasion at the alehouse that somebody asked after *his* good health. The midwife's reply to James Wilson was less than civil. Anne Knutsford made it clear that it was his wife who had recently given birth and not Wilson, and so, as she complained, why ask about his good health:

she answered with an oath that if he were so, [in good health] his wife were not, for she had been twice with her of a child but she bled soe exceedingly at the fundament that she had noe minde to goe againe.⁷⁴

Perhaps it was common for Anne Knutsford to speak in frank and open terms about her profession but Nantwich people thought she went too far. In the social climate of this town, she contravened unwritten laws associated with the kind of language expected of a midwife and she violated these rules in reference to the female body. The details of women's bodies during labour ought to have remained private and were to be discussed only by women. Several prominent member of the community alleged that the midwife contravened this law.⁷⁵

Margaret Jackson contradicted her statement about Knutsford's alleged gossip about Mrs Milton.⁷⁶ Other important women gave evidence in support of the midwife. Elizabeth Walley who accepted the midwife's denial of the allegations supplied one such testament. Moreover, she favoured Knutsford's word above others and provided the Court with evidence.⁷⁷ Similarly, Elizabeth Brumall found no fault with the midwife's language and said so explicitly in her deposition.⁷⁸ She was careful to say that she did not socialise with the midwife, but found Anne Knutsford to be of help when she needed it. Clearly, she did not wish to condemn her for indiscretion, despite in contradiction to the other townsfolk.⁷⁹

The 'Sicrettes' of the People of Nantwich: Concubines and Bastards

Hugh Delves, his wife was as arrant a whore as ever turned tale to hedge, and Randle Mottershead got her last child and had fuckt her a hundred times up the house and down.⁸⁰

The evidence demonstrates that the alleged secrets that the midwife revealed were not related to the natural bodily functions of Nantwich women in labour. Neither were they related to the midwife's crude speech. The secrets she revealed were related to what she knew about Nantwich's bastards and concubines. Anne Knutsford's profession naturally put her in a position to know some of the more intimate details concerning sexual relations in Nantwich. For instance, she was consulted by women about the approximate delivery date of the births of their children. According to the depositions, the midwife spoke too freely of such matters. Though such concerns were indeed confidential, it was not these particular details that the townsfolk were anxious to conceal. For example, the midwife made public knowledge of Captain Richard Walthall's receipt of payment in kind, that is, in sexual services, from women who rented properties from him. As the evidence of the following pages will show, these women were Elizabeth Cliffe, Dorothy Delves, Janet Brookett and Ann Blagg. The details might have remained secret had Anne Knutsford, their midwife, not laid bare the details before all Nantwich.

When the likelihood of an issue of bastardy arose, the men of Nantwich had much to lose. This predicament brought forth an army of men into what was formerly a mostly female concern. It was suggested that the midwife spoke in rude terms of Captain Richard Walthall and Sir Philip Egerton. These prominent and respected members of the community were the subject of gossip which related the details of torrid sexual encounters with two well-known and respectably married women: Elizabeth Cliffe and Dorothy Hussey. Illicit sexual dalliances out of wedlock were unacceptable in Restoration Nantwich, firstly, because the women were 'cuckolding' their husbands, but more importantly, because such sexual adventures raised issues of bastardy, prostitution and concubinage. According to the depositions, the evidence was based upon hearsay. The information relating to Walthall, Egerton, Cliffe and Hussey, for example, had been an continuing subject of gossip in Nantwich. The midwife, who, owing to her profession, had access to more intimate knowledge than most, simply spoke more freely of them. The most serious offences occurred when, it was alleged, the midwife said that Captain Walthall paid for the sexual favour of Mrs Dorothy Hussey, Knutsford expressing it thus:

Mr Walthall did give Samuel Hussey's wife 50 shillings a year to occupy her.⁸¹

In addition, the midwife was reported to have said that Sir Philip Egerton paid Mrs Cliffe a little less handsomely for the same kind of service:

Sir Phillip Egerton gave Mrs Cliffe 40 shillings a year to occupy her.⁸²

Dorothy Delves was yet another prominent member of Nantwich society touched by scandal in this way. The midwife disclosed the intimate particulars about a relationship between her and wealthy notable Randle Mottershead. This relationship, Anne Knutsford said, produced a bastard child. Of Dorothy Delves, the midwife spoke in very uncivil terms:

Hugh Delves, his wife was as arrant a whore as ever turned tale to hedge, and Randle Mottershead got her last child and had fuckt her a hundred times up the house and down.⁸³

The midwife similarly accused Sir Philip Egerton of fathering the child of Elizabeth Cliffe. It was alleged that she said:

Mrs Cliffe was an arrant whore, and Sir Phillip Egerton got most of her children and she would not care how many children she had for he gave her forty pounds a year.⁸⁴

Dorothy Hussey, who rented property from Captain Walthall, was also accused of behaving improperly with him. This affair, according to the midwife, also resulted in bastardy. Of this relationship, Anne Knutsford had this to say:

coming to this deponent from Samuel Husseys where she had been laying his wife in bed, [Anne Knutsford] told the deponent that she had been with Sam Husseys wife and had taken her a young Walthall in the world, for she was an arrant whore, and her Landlord Walthall was the father of it, and she kissed out her rent with him for fifty shillings a year.⁸⁵

According to the depositions of the Nantwich townfolk, Anne Knutsford generated rumours of bastardy whilst joking about the illegal ways in which some of her clients had made a living. For example, during the lying in of Mrs Leeth, to whom she was midwife, Anne Knutsford apparently demonstrated great dexterity, for as she delivered a child she looked out of the window where, at the same time, she spied two people whom she surmised to be lovers. The midwife observed the details of the tryst

and recorded her observation of their first union. In accordance with her profession, she calculated the time and place of conception of Mrs Delves' first child and linked it to that first observed meeting:

[Anne] looked out of the window and saw Mrs Delves and Randle Muttershead together at Mrs Delves door.⁸⁶ Look yonder, ugly Muttershead does goe. He has got Mrs Delves first child and kisses her up the house and down, and I reccun'd her for to the very house that he got it, and it was his.⁸⁷

Edward Blagg accused the midwife of speaking ill, of levelling accusations of cuckoldry, and of spreading malicious rumours about persons of credit. The marriage of an older man, such as Delves, to a younger woman was a classic situation likely to provoke charivari. It was too much for Anne Knutsford to resist. According to Blagg's deposition she said:

one time seeing John Hussey, since deceased, and his wife, being a young woman, walking together, said to this deponent and others that were there, 'soe howe nowe yonder old foole is of that young whore, he thinks that he marryed a mayde but she has been a whore there seven years to my knowledge, its an easie thing to cozen such an old foole for if I were to be marryd againe I could make a straight comodity and cozen him'.⁸⁸

Margaret Jackson persuaded the Court that it should pay no heed to a similar accusation of Anne Knutsford's, namely that Mrs Walley 'when she was a widow' had been guilty of prostitution and of receiving gold in return for sexual services.⁸⁹ She asserted that the midwife's words had no meaning and that she used wild language recklessly without basis in truth or fact:

And in her ordinary discourse talking of severall people would frequently calle them if they were younge people, young whores, and if old people, old whores and she is generally taken notice of for such an abusive woman.⁹⁰

Indeed, the midwife's talk of bastards, prostitutes and concubines was not well received by Nantwich society. She found herself challenged by yeoman, Edward Blagg who was intent upon defending the honour and reputation of Dorothy Hussey. He publicly upbraided Anne Knutsford, in his words: 'blaming her for it and commanding her modesty of Hussey's wife.'⁹¹ The midwife stood her ground. Unrepentant, she did not retract a word. Indeed, she claimed superiority on the subject of prostitution, especially in relation to Dorothy Hussey. She answered:

Hold your tongue she's as arrant a whore as ever turn'd tale to hedge
I know more than you doe.⁹²

Edward Blagg alleged that he heard the midwife accuse Mrs Leeth, (who did not sign the petition or appear as a witness) 'to her face' of receiving stolen goods. The midwife implied that Mr Leeth, an excise man, stole commodities and thereby made an easy living. The midwife, who clearly regarded the incident as a joke, bantered about the easy way in which Mr and Mrs Leeth obtained their livelihood. The yeoman, however, was not amused. He defended his neighbour and challenged the midwife.⁹³ Evidently there was no love lost between Blagg the yeoman and the midwife. Indeed, they were sworn enemies.⁹⁴ The Chester Consistory Court heard evidence of the shoemakers, Mr and Mrs Proudman, who were friends of Ann and Edward Blagg. The court records disclose the fact that Anne maligned the yeoman's wife Mrs Blagg as 'a porky arst whore and called her also in the open street a whore and double whore.'⁹⁵

The above illustrates that the midwife was held responsible for creating destructive gossip but the depositions also reveal an underlying theme. The women who were involved as concubines were either 'paid' by Walthall or 'paid' him in sexual services for the rent on their properties. As noted above, according to Anne Knutsford's testimony, Mrs Cliffe received 'forty pounds a year' from Sir Philip Egerton, and Samuel Hussey's wife received 'fifty shillings a year' from Richard Walthall. Although Anne Knutsford certainly did reveal information that her clients believed was of a private sexual character, she said in addition much that was related to even more sensitive issues of property and wealth. Of course, according to law, bastardy in early-modern Nantwich was always the result of fornication outside of wedlock. In the common law court it was punished very severely.⁹⁶ Both offenders, male and female, were subject to the punitive measure of whipping or gaol at the house of correction. Those accused of such an offence had the option of pursuing a suit at the Consistory Court and this is exactly what the townsfolk did.

Who is a Bastard? Richard Walthall

⁹⁷Richard Walthall was the focus of much gossip in Nantwich. The midwife's accusation of his involvement with his female tenants was more likely than not to have been truthful. His behaviour was highly questionable. Elizabeth Johnson's deposition clearly demonstrates that he paid her, and other people, to appear at the Court to speak

well of him. In addition, he was implicated in a number of liaisons, vividly described by the midwife. Later, in 1675, he was married 'clandestinely' to wealthy Maria Wilbraham.⁹⁸ As with others of high standing in the community, he was deeply disturbed by the midwife's gossip. He took aggressive measures against the midwife to discredit her from naming him as the father of the town's bastards.

At least four deponents testifying against Anne Knutsford were related to Richard Walthall. Most of those who were not had a financial obligation to him. For example, the Johnsons, were indebted to him and leased land from him.⁹⁹ Innkeeper Elizabeth Cliffe, who also rented property from him, was vague and confusing in her admission that she was related to him through her 'gratfather [her grandfather so that she and Walthall] were brother and sister as she hath been told.'¹⁰⁰ Although she was vague she was more certain than his other relatives, who could not explain their connection by kin at all. Margaret Wirkstad, for example, said she was related to Richard Walthall but could not say how. In her deposition she said: '[her husband] was neare a kin to [the promoter of the cause, Richard Walthall] but how neare she well knoweth not.'¹⁰¹ Margaret Jeurl, said that she and Richard Walthall were cousins, but she was unable to account for the family connection. Of her connection with him she said the following: 'Mr Walthall and this respondent doe ordinarily call Cosens but what if kin they are?'¹⁰² Similarly, Elizabeth Church, who was also related to Richard Walthall, could not account for the family association: 'her husband is of kin to Mr Walthall but how neare she knows not.'¹⁰³ So many were related to him but none could explain the family connection. Some, such as Elizabeth Church, were even hostile when asked to explain her family association. Was it not unusual that so many members of Nantwich town were related to him? Why was it that they could not, (or would not), own up to the family connection? Was it not possible that the rumoured associations of Captain Richard Walthall and respectable married women of the town were not without foundation? Was it not possible that Captain Walthall might have fathered a number of bastards around the town of Nantwich, like his forefathers before him?

The evidence given by the witnesses for Richard Walthall and against Anne Knutsford in their depositions reveals a number of inconsistencies. Much of the evidence they gave indicates a consensus that was reached without basis in fact. It was probably true that Anne Knutsford had a scurrilous tongue, and that she had cursed people frequently, however, none of the deponents claimed to have been materially or physically damaged by the midwife's curses. They were concerned about the damage to their reputations. Most of the evidence they gave to the Court was hearsay, not fact. If any hearsay was true then it was probably the observations made by the midwife about prostitution and bastardy, it was also challenging social and economic circumstances which drove the accusations. It is clear that Anne Knutsford was present as an eye-witness on several occasions when various alleged lovers were seen to have met secretly. What is more, she was consulted by each of the women involved to deliver

their children. In the capacity of midwife, Anne Knutsford was required by law to express any doubts she had about the parentage of the children she delivered. Her disclosures about bastards meant she was simply doing her job.

Captain Walthall, supported by his Nantwich allies, reacted immediately. He approached the Court to silence the midwife. He was the principal protagonist in the action to silence Anne Knutsford. He initiated the first petition, and sought support from the townsfolk who were in debt to the midwife; he then paid them to sign the petition and offered to pay them to appear. As noted above, the Minister of Nantwich, Richard Jackson, was commanded by Richard Walthall in February 1663 to publicise Bishop Wainwright's prohibition against Knutsford, in order to stop her from practising midwifery, and Walthall insisted that the prohibition be made public and placed on the church door.¹⁰⁴ Chester Consistory Court heard the cause on 24 March 1663. The Minister said that the midwife was guilty of disturbing the peace of the neighbourhood.¹⁰⁵ His evidence raises a number of questions. Why did the Minister rely so heavily upon hearsay? Why did he act so quickly upon the evidence of Richard Walthall? Why was it that Mr Pratchett, who was referred to in the document, was not called to give evidence? As for Anne Knutsford, curser, revealer of secrets and 'public bawd' - if she was such a disreputable one, what was she doing at Church?

Anne Knutsford ignored Walthall's 'Inhibition,' and continued to practice midwifery.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, she displayed contempt for the Court, Richard Walthall and his allies, and, in a symbolic gesture of defiance, contrived what was in her opinion the more useful function for the document. The Registrar wrote:

[Anne Knutsford] you have not only contemptuously abused the Authority of this court - when the inhibition was served upon you, you said it should serve to wipe your arse with.¹⁰⁷

When Anne Knutsford continued to practise midwifery, during February 1663, Richard Walthall then replied with a final case against the midwife. A list of twelve articles was produced with the intention of discrediting her and ending her practise.¹⁰⁸ The subsequent examination of the depositions of witnesses revealed that the midwife's 'lewd and scurrilous tongue' had indeed unearthed some uncomfortable facts from the lives of Nantwich folk. Anne Knutsford was a loose cannon in an extremely volatile community. Richard Walthall acted to protect his honour and reputation in relation to his associations with Elizabeth Cliffe and Dorothy Hussey. Their appearance at court gave them the opportunity to publicly demonstrate their innocence, which no doubt explains why they agreed to appear for Walthall and to discredit the midwife. Elizabeth Johnson's evidence explicitly demonstrates that Walthall 'secured' witnesses to appear

against the midwife.¹⁰⁹ The deponents appeared as witnesses, firstly, because they were paid to appear by Richard Walthall, and secondly, because they wanted to conceal that they were in debt to the midwife. Elizabeth Cliffe, Dorothy Hussey, Ann Blagg, and Dorothy Delves could not meet the expense of maintaining a high profile in society, and neither were they in a position to pay rent to Walthall. When they paid in kind the midwife delivered their illegitimate children. Walthall's allies did not act for the sole purpose of curbing the tongue of the 'lewd and scurrilous' Anne Knutsford, but did so because they were afraid that others might believe her.

The Midwife, Good Credit and Moneylending

There were previous legal disputes between the midwife and various petitioners, in foregoing years. Barbara Croxton informed the Court of an altercation between herself and the midwife, which came shortly before the cause with Walthall. It resulted in Anne Knutsford bringing a 'Citation' against Barbara Croxton for allegations she made about Anne Knutsford, Mrs Walley and Mrs Brumall.¹¹⁰ The litigation with Croxton subsequently went ahead later that same year. Anne Blagg's deposition told of an ongoing antagonism which had resulted in legal action between herself and Anne Knutsford, but Anne Blagg did not say that she was in debt to the midwife. Janet Brookett's account is significant in drawing attention to Ann Blagg's concealed motive which was unrelated to allegations of sexual slander, cursing and defamation. Mrs Janet Brookett's account of the people who have subscribed to the certificate stated that, although she was familiar with many of them and acknowledged them as persons of good 'repute', she was unable to say the same of their good 'credit.' She claimed that many of them were financially indebted to the midwife:

she knows most of the persons subscribed to the Certificate now shewed her and saith that they are persons of good repute, but this deponent hath heard that severall of them are or have been engaged to Anne for money that she hath lent them.¹¹¹

It is clear from this report that the witnesses withheld this information from the Court. Why did they not tell the Court that they owed Anne Knutsford money? The fact that Anne Knutsford was a moneylender adds a further dimension to the social role of the midwife. She wielded financial power and was a moneylender, even to those 'of good quality'. It is not unreasonable to suggest that those who signed the petition did so in order to control not only the midwife's verbal power but also her financial control over

them. The midwife's critics, those who sought legal action against her, in 1663, were fearful not of cursing, nor of revealing secrets, but that the midwife would expose the circumstances of their indebtedness.

In conclusion, the main protagonist in this drama of accusation and counter-accusation, the midwife, has much to tell us about attempts to regulate female behaviour and public and private female power. Anne Knutsford was no shrinking violet; this was a very powerful woman. She would go on to defend her reputation through the Court with counter-suits and citations against her enemies. She wielded a great deal of power within the community, and was well acquainted with the strategies of defence and attack. The extent of her power may be affirmed by the legal measures that her neighbours, headed by Captain Richard Walthall took to silence her. Her greatest strength lay in her verbal power. She attacked persons of any status, but demonstrated a tendency to attack the pretentious, and of course, those who owed her money. In this context, gossip and cursing were clearly a pragmatic response to the pressures of every day existence.

Evidence from the 1660s examined here shows that the middle strata of Nantwich, often lived in the shadow of debt. Some of those families, according to the evidence, were even forced to compromise their ideals of respectability in order to survive. Such people lived in fear, and were, during the period under question, found to be constantly in conflict with each other. The period of 1660 to 1670, and particularly the year 1663, stands out as a period of an unusually high rate of prosecutions in Nantwich. The evidence discloses with great certainty the fact that Nantwich was a deeply divided community during the time in question. Some wives, even those of gentlefolk, were forced to imperil their good names when harsh conditions forced them to offer landlords sex instead of money. Money, power, reputation and honour were often at stake, and a position of status in a social hierarchy based upon reputation, good character and credit were fought over. As in most early-modern towns, an unblemished reputation was of the utmost importance to the townspeople of early-modern Nantwich. Each person considered it essential to maintain one's status in what was an unstable environment. A person's reputation was fiercely defended in court and community. Local gossip and hearsay were carefully guarded, monitored, and subject to censure, and the townsfolk were highly litigious. The litigation process was a counter measure, reflecting the attempts of worried townsfolk to defend themselves. During one altercation in this on-going drama, when Anne Knutsford was censured for using ill-spoken words, she retorted: 'it was noe hanging matter.'¹¹² Some people might agree with her, but I doubt that the good folk of Nantwich would.

Notes

¹ CRO EDC5/1663/4/16. Cheshire Record Office EDC5/1667/2 Nantwich (Referred to from this point onwards as CRO). Anne Knutsford cites Margaret Howell for slander.

² Anne Knutsford cites Margaret Howell for pulling her by the bosom.

³ F. G. Bailey, *Gifts and Poison: The Politics of Reputation* (Oxford, 1971). This study examines the function of gossip in communities. See also A. Clark, 'Whores and Gossips: Sexual Reputation in London 1770-1825', in A. Angerman, G. Binnema, A. Keunan, V. Poels and J. Zirkzee (Eds.), *Current Issues in Women's History* (London, 1989).

⁴ See, for example, Thomas, K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic, Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1971), p. 600. Joanna Westhilde of Herefordshire, in 1617 cursed the churchwarden John Smith 'in words he could not understand.'

⁵ For a thorough account of women in medieval Europe to the eighteenth century, see O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Volume One, 1500-1800* (London, 1995). The pioneering study in this area is A. Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* third edition (London, 1992). It was first published in 1919. Central to Clark's book is the argument that the female role as mother after the Reformation was devalued, and even ridiculed. Patricia Crawford's account corresponds with Clark's picture of a general decline in the status of women. See also P. Crawford, 'The Construction and experience of Maternity' in V. Fildes, (Ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy McLaren* (London and New York, 1990). In her book *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720* (London, 1993), Patricia Crawford concentrates upon the female apprehension of the religious upheaval of the Reformation and examines women's beliefs and practices. For an account of medieval and early-modern 'disorderly women', see also R. M. Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York and Oxford, 1996).

⁶ L. Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ For more details on the origins of 'foul language,' see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), and P. Stallybrass and A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986).

⁹ D. Underdown, 'The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England', in A. Fletcher & J. Stevenson, (Eds.), *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 128. Underdown broadly argues that an increase in verbal crime was recorded in most southern counties, particularly towns which had a high economic profile with high immigration and passing tradesfolk between the years 1560 and 1640.

¹⁰ G. Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (Oxford, 1991), p. 14.

¹¹ B. S. Capp, *When gossips meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*. Oxford, (2003). See also N. Parsons, 'Reading gossip in early eighteenth-century England'. Basingstoke, UK, (2009).

¹² A. Cowan, Gossip and street culture in early modern Venice, *Journal of Early Modern History*. 2008; 12 (3-4): 313 and A. Cowan Seeing is believing: Urban Gossip and the Balcony in Early Modern Venice, *Gender and History*. 2011; 23 (3): 721-38.

¹³ S. Lipscomb, 'Crossing Boundaries: Women's Gossip, Insults and Violence in Sixteenth Century France,' *French History*, Volume 25, No. 4, (2011).

¹⁴ L. Gowing, 'Language, Power, and the Law: Women's Slander Litigation in Early Modern London', in J. Kermode and G. Walker, (Eds.), *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (London 1994), p. 43.

¹⁵ J. A. Thompson, 'Her Good Name and Credit': The Reputation of Women in Seventeenth-Century Devon, PhD thesis (Cincinnati, 1987). My thanks to Sally Hickey of the History Department, University of New England for bringing my attention to this thesis. L. Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996). L. Gowing, 'Language, Power, and the Law', pp. 26-48. Having examined marriage cases between 1572-1640, Gowing found a total of 5,371 witnesses who appeared. She argues that women sued half of the time and 35% of witnesses were women; in defamation cases 46% were women, and in these cases fought between women 60% of witnesses were women. G. R. Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives* (London, 1979). J. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550-1750* (London and New York, 1984). J. Addy, *Sin and Society in the Seventeenth Century* (London and New York, 1989).

¹⁶ CRO EDC5/1663/4/16.

¹⁷ See EDC5/1662/18 in which it is recorded that 'Anne Knutsford is commonly reputed to be the daughter of Raphe Elcocke the younger'. Anne was brought up in a house on Mill Street. Raphe Bostocke of Willaston, of gentle status, 60 years, was a contemporary of her father, Raphe. Widow Margaret Wilkes, of Beam Street, Nantwich was a contemporary of Margery, Anne's mother. She gave evidence to say that she and Anne's mother had lived together in Beam Street, when her husband died. Her brother Samuel, was a mercer; in 1662 he was 32 years old.

¹⁸ See CRO EDC5/1668. However, it is unlikely that Anne Knutsford gave birth to all of these children. Some of the children listed were probably the children of her eldest son, Thomas, born in 1645.

¹⁹ Anne Knutsford, gave birth to daughter Jane, on November 5 1662. The three children born between 1671 and 1677 were more likely than not, the children born to her son, Thomas.

²⁰ For information about the scope of Anne Knutsford's practise, see EDC5/1663/54 which gives information about 'the severall townes and parishes of Nantwich' she encompassed in her rounds as midwife.

²¹ See CRO MF 13 Hearth Tax Records, Nantwich, 1664.

²² See EDC5/1667/2 in which Knutsford's close neighbour, Mr Illedge (he lived nine doors away from her) refers to an argument which occurred 'in the open street in Nantwich in Pepper Street, near Thomas Knutsford's house.' Anne Knutsford's house on Pepper Street, was nine doors away from neighbours, Hugh Delves, Thomas Proudman, Richard Illidge and Richard Yoxall.

²³ On the subject of the dangers of pregnancy in early-modern Europe, see chapter five, of O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Volume One, 1500-1800* (London, 1995). See also J. Gelis, *History of Childbirth: Fertility, Pregnancy and Birth in Early Modern Europe* translation by R. Morris (Cambridge, 1991). For an informative guide to childbirth in England, see V. Fildes, (Ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy McLaren* (London, 1990), and an earlier work by A. Eccles, *Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1982). For an enlightening account of the privileged position pregnant women enjoyed in Germany see U. Rublack, 'Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany,' in *Past and Present*, Number 150 (February 1996), pp. 84-110. See also L. Gowing, 'Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth Century England', *Past and Present* (August, 1997).

²⁴ R. C. Richardson, *Puritanism in Northwest England: A Regional Study of the Diocese of Chester to 1642* (Manchester 1972), p. 111.

²⁵ See J. Addy, (Ed.), *The Diary of Henry Prescott, LL.B.*, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire (1987).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³⁰ CRO EDC5/1662/18/19, Nantwich, EDC5/1663/16 Nantwich, EDC5/1663/54 Nantwich, EDC5/1664/6 Nantwich, EDC5/1664/57, EDC5/1664/68 Nantwich, CRO EDC5/1662/59, EDC5/1667/2 Nantwich, EDC5/1667/62 Nantwich, EDC5/1668/10 Nantwich. Reference was made

within EDC5/1663/4/16 to six separate suits that were settled between neighbours outside the jurisdiction of the Chester Consistory Court.

³¹ CRO EDC5/1663/54. Prohibition of Practice. Anne Knutsford, whereas we are sufficiently informed by very good testimony of your scandalous life and under carriage and misbehaviour in the office of midwifery in revealing the secretts of women, and in other things, we have thought good to suspend you from any further practice or expense of that office untill you have cleared yourself unto us and we do hereby inhibit and command you not to proceed any further in the execucion [sic] of that office as you will answere the contrary at your peril notwithstanding any Licence or Despensation [sic] to you by use, or any other, either by Authority from or under the lordshippe of Yorke, or any other person, under the seal of our office on the 5th day of February, 1663.

³² CRO EDC5/1663/4/16 Nantwich. These are to certify whom it may concerne that we whose names are subscribed doe very well knowe Anne Knutsford of Namptwich. And that Anne is a woman of very uncivil language towards her neighbours: and doth comonly abuse and iniure many of them by her scandalous speeches. That contrary to her profession of a Midwife, she hath revealed the secretts of women. That she is ordinarily addicted to Lying, swearing, and cursinge. And herein (for anything we knowe) shee perseveres without the reformation of her manners. Witness our hands.

³³ CRO EDC5/1663/4/16 Nantwich. Those who signed the petition were Richard Jackson, Minister, William Harrison, Church Warden, Thomas Burroughs, Church Warden, Margaret Jackson, Mary Maisteron, Margaret Jeurl, Elizabeth Proudman, Dorothy Delves, Elizabeth Cliffe, Elizabeth Church, Dorothy Hussey, Barbara Croxton, Elizabeth Johnson, Hana Harrison, Elizabeth Harware, Margaret Wickstad's mark, Mary Ellidge's mark and one more name that is illegible and an initial which is also illegible.

³⁴ CRO EDC5/1663/4/16 Nantwich, Items.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ The following Item records how she continued her rounds despite the word of the Court:

[Anne Knutsford] was privately and personally inhibited and publicly in the congregation soe declared to bee, [inhibited] But have proceeded to exercyze the office of midwife to the wives of John Pratchett and Johnathan Chones

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.* you have been sent for and decided to doe your office of a midwife to some woman or women in or neare the towne of Namptwich, who [was] in trauell of childbirth; and because they were poore you have neglected them and left them, and gone to other women who were past that peril, and sayed you must, would, and soe did, doe to others that were richer; and by reason of such neglect such poore woman, or women miscarried.

⁴² *Ibid.* Anne Knutsford hath been and is a public bawd and has fame in Namptwich aforesaid, as the witnesses to be produced can particularly declare upon their depositions, which they are required to express at large.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Birkerton.

⁴⁴ CRO EDC5 1663/4/16, Nantwich. Deposition of Janet Brooket. Brooket asserted the following: 'Anne Knutsford is said to have cursed James Wilson of Namptwich.'

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Barbara Croxton.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Jane Wright. Jane Wright snubbed the midwife socially, but acknowledged her acquaintance professionally. She stated: 'all though she hath soe often made use of her as a midwife, yet she hath very little acquaintance or familiarity with her at other times.'

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Jane Wright. Anne Knutsford is a woman very much given to vaine swearing and cursing and lying upon many occasions, for which and other reasons this deponent and the rest, subscribed to the certificate now shewed her the contents whereof are all of them true. And she is much taken notice of for such a one.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Birkerton: 'Anne Knutsford is a woman of a very uncivill and base scandalous language towards people without any cause or provaccon at all many times and hath abused with her bad tongue both Thomas Proudman and his wife who are very civill persons, and others.'

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Birkerton.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Birkerton. Anne is a very frequent curser and swearer, and will ordinarily goe down on her knees and curse people grivously, and this deponent hath seen her doe soe diverse times. And she is commonly accounted such a one.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* Of her neighbours, Margaret Birkerton had this to say: [the] persons subscribed to the certificate and of what she has heard generally of their good standing they have the report of very civill good people and she believes [they] are soe.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Birkerton. The neighbours are much offended and many of them iniured by Anne's base tongue. And the contents of the Certificate inteste this deponent verily believes are all true and she knowes most of them to be true.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Birkerton.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Thomas Proudman.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Thomas Proudman. In his statement, he asserted the following: 'for these reasons....the neighbours being much offended he believes the contents [of the petition] thereof are true'.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brooket: 'these differences were ended before Christmas last.' Janet Brookett, for instance, said that the midwife cursed her and her husband, and she made reference to a separate instance of litigation involving a 'difference' with the midwife. She said that they had since patched up their quarrel

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Thomas Proudman.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brooket.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brooket.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Richard Jackson.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of William Blundell. Anne hath been and is one much given both to lying and cursing and swearing, And comonly taken notice of for such a one and her neighbours are much offended at it in her.'

⁶² *Ibid.*, Deposition of William Blundell. Anne Knutsford is a woman of very uncivill and unhandsome words and language to her neighbours and is apt to iniure them by her tongue as she hath done this deponents wife and others.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Wirkstad.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Wirkstad. 'Anne Knutsford hath a very bad and scandalous tongue and is very apt to slander and abuse her neighbours.'

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Wirkstad.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Margaret Wirkstad in her statement said the following: [her husband] was 'neare a kin to the party prdcent but how neare she well knoweth not'. Mr Wirkstad was a Mariner by trade in Namptwich and followed it as long as he lived and since his death her sonne keeps the same ship and this deponent looks to his praise.'

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Wirkstad.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Wirkstad.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Wirkstad. Wirkstad stated her affinity with the others in agreeing with the other townfolk. She asserted she 'believed the contents [of the items to be] true.'

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brookett. Several incidents were alleged to have occurred at the home of Mr and Mrs Richard Yorksall, Mr and Mrs Wilson and Mr and Mrs Booth where, it was alleged Anne had been midwife. Similarly, deponents referred to 'poore' people, none of whom provided evidence or signed the petition.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brookett.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brookett.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brookett.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brookett.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Jackson. Anne Knutsford did report very uncivill and unhandsome things concerning women before men which this deponent was ashamed to heare though she doth not nowe particularly remember them

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Jackson. Mrs Milton was not soe weake as she reported to be but she had a thigh as big as the maine post of the house and was well enough to give sucke though she included her husband for that her suck run downe her sides and down her thighs

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Elizabeth Walley. She her selfe never heard Anne to be immodest in revealling the secrets of any woman, though she hath heard something to that purpose, but Anne denied it be soe, and whether she did soe this deponent can not depose.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Elizabeth Brumall: 'she hath heard that the articulate Anne Knutsford hath devulged the secretts of some women in the time of their trauell and particularly of this deponent and such things as were unfitt to be declared, but whether she did soe or noe this deponent can not testifie, but she the said Anne hath denied that ever she spoke any such words as were charged against her concerning this deponent and wished that she might never enter into the Kingdome of heaven if ever she spoke them.'

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* She having very little to do with her but in time of need either for her selfe or friend, hath heard that some of her neighbours say that they have been much iniured and offended by Annes foule tongue, but whether she were guilty of any such thing this deponent knoweth not.

⁸⁰ Deposition of Edward Blagg.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Edward Blagg.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* Deposition of Margaret Jackson. Anne is a woman very apt and ready to scandalies and abuse her neighbours and others with her tongue and particularly this deponent heard her say that Mrs Walley when she was a widowe preferred some affection for Mr Massey of Namptwich and inbragled him and got a great bagg of money and plate from him that which weighed her downe all of one side as she carryed it home.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.* This deponent also heard her tell Mrs Leeth to her face that she got all by the exciseman, and then being blamed for it made only a laughter of it, Mrs Leethes husband being an exciseman.

⁹⁴ See, for example, EDC51664/68 Anne Knutsford cites Anne Blagg. This cause discloses further antagonism between Anne Knutsford and Anne Blagg. The events recorded in this case took place in July 1663. The conflict began, however, in the early months of 1663.

⁹⁵ Deposition of Elizabeth Proudman.

⁹⁶ J. Addy, *op. cit.*, p. 158. Addy suggests that fornication, of course, encouraged bastardy, and that bringing a child into the world was, in a patriarchal society, unacceptable. Furthermore, he argues, tying down the father was an 'unquestionably anti-social act.'

⁹⁷ See CRO EDC5/13/1675, Nantwich, Andrewes c Bristowe, Marriage of Richard Walthall to Maria Wilbraham. Richard Walthall paid a bond of five hundred pounds to be married secretly to Maria Wilbraham in the house of Ralph and Margaret Briscoe. See QDR7 MF96/6 where Briscoe has a house listed under non-conformist groups in the Register of Dissenting Meeting Houses, 1689-1853. Andrewes admonishes the 'promoter of the cause.' The meetinghouse was in Barker Street Nantwich. The entry is dated 15th January 1695 but the meetinghouse was established before this date.

⁹⁹ Deposition of Elizabeth Johnson: 'they hold a small garden under Mr Walthall for three lives.'

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Elizabeth Cliffe.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Wirkstad.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Deposition of Margaret Jeurl.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Elizabeth Church.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Richard Jackson. The Inhibition was delivered to the deponent and he was required by a messenger sent from Mr Walthall to publish it in the Church where accordingly he did when Anne Knutsford was in the Church and this deponent hath been told by severall persons of credit that after that time she did the office of a midwife to the articulate Pratchetts wife as Pratchett himselfe told this deponent

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Richard Jackson: He testified that Anne is 'too much adicted to lyeing, swearing and cursing and for such a one is comonly taken and reputed in that neighbourhood.'

¹⁰⁶ Items against Anne Knutsford: 'for the misdemeanours aforesaid and other reason appearing to the judge....was privately and personally inhibited and publiquely in the congregation soe declared to bee...but have proceeded to exerceze the office of midwife to the wives of John Pratchett, Johnathan Chones and soe are reputed to have done.'

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Items against Anne Knutsford, John Wainwright v Anne Knutsford.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Elizabeth Johnson.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Barbara Croxton. Croxton deposed as follows: Last Sumer Anne Knutsford did serve this deponent with a Citation out of this Court for words pro deposed which she told Mrs Brumall but Anne sent Mrs Walley to this deponent to desire her that the suite might be staid, and thereupon it was soe but Anne alsoe served her with another Citation a while agoe.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brookett.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Deposition of Janet Brookett.

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