

Gossip is censure. Judgment. Condemnation.

In its early usage, first noted in English around a thousand years ago, the term “gossip,” a portmanteau evolving from the Old English words “God” and “Sibb” indicated a spiritual relation between two people, similar to what we would commonly refer to today as a Godparent in a Christian context. Over time, a short period of time, the meaning shifted to refer first to companions in childbirth, eventually coming to mean “female friends” more generally. By the 16th century this non-derogatory meaning had all but disappeared, and the word had taken on its current associations: idle chatter and rumor.

Scene One

A place of comfort. Two bodies in proximity. Touching. You take my hand, and look at my nails. Start to clip and file them into shape. We laugh. We talk about life. Our friends. Our lovers. Our jobs. What kind of birth control we use. You make me tea from nettles you harvested because you know I have period cramps. You take care, adding lacquer to each nail slowly, not covering the cuticle or leaving too much on the skin of my fingers. You rub my hands with almond oil, easing the tension in my wrists that comes from balling my fingers into fists.

Although the European witch trials can trace their history back to shifts in Christian doctrine in the 13th century, they hit their peak from 1560 – 1630. Constructed from a belief in the possibility of human collaboration with the devil, scholarly consensus estimates between 40,000 – 60,000 executions took place over the full duration of the trial period, which began to see its decline by the middle of the 18th century. At least 80% of the victims were women. Idle hands and idle tongues are the devils playthings after all.

Scene Two

A place of comfort. Two bodies in proximity. Touching. The music is loud as you lean over, bringing your lips so close to my ear it almost feels like a kiss. The beer still tastes sweet on my tongue, and your breath still clings to the smoke from your last cigarette. You whisper warnings in my ear, tell me who to avoid, how to stay safe, who put what in someone else’s drink, and who took something that wasn’t offered. Whispered warnings at the bar, at our workplaces, on the street, or in our homes. Whispered warnings that weave a network of protection between us, solidifying our support of each other in the face of an imagined reality that disregards us.

In her book, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* feminist scholar Silvia Federici traces the how the demonization of “gossip” was used to dismantle chains of solidarity between women. Tracing the evolution of the term, as I have above, Federici links this linguistic evolution to the slow dismantling of a women’s place in the public sphere, and the rise of both the persecution of women as witches, and what we recognize today as the hallmarks of patriarchal world views. She describes with sickening clarity, the “scold’s bridle,” later referred to as the “gossip bridle” a punishment device popular in the 16th and 17th century. Similar to a bridle bit used for horses, the device projected into the mouth, and was frequently studded with metal spikes, designed to rip the offending gossips tongue if she attempted to speak. Words are weapons after all.

Words, are also fictions, imagined realities condensed to mean a specific thing, in a specific time, in a specific context. Words are reflective of those in power. Fictions that condensed into imagined realities have enabled large numbers of strangers to cooperate effectively, but also created schisms and divides. Stratified power. Language holds power. Those in power hold tight to language.

Gossip is care. Protection. A defense against the imagined realities that no longer serve us. It is whispered between us. It is a weapon.

A good friend once told me she calls the line in her monthly budget that she sets aside for manicures “femme armour.” We must harden our nails, and sharpen our tongues to use them more effectively.