
Feminist Struggle in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

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Audiences have historically found something both abhorrent and endearing in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593–94).^[1] Seeing Katherina tamed by Petruchio, according to modern sensibilities, is offensive. Conversely, seeing Katherina and Petruchio fall in love is uplifting. While many see this play as anti-feminist—Phyllis Rackin calls the play “crudely misogynist” (Rackin, 53) and Linda Woodbridge says she “find[s] it hard to regard [*Shrew*] as much of an improvement over the . . . shrew-taming tradition” (206)—other readers have considered it feminist, not in the twentieth-century sense, but as a general contribution to the advancement of women (see below). Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* lays out both sides of the Renaissance debate over women—as do other contemporary texts. *Shrew* makes an unclear statement about how women should be treated, just as do other Renaissance texts, reflecting anxiety about women's status in the English Renaissance.

Linda Woodbridge reviews the feminist interpretation of *Shrew*, although she concludes that “feminism as we know it did not exist in Shakespeare's time” (Woodbridge 221–22 n. 22). Following the lead of Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, I use Hilda Smith's definition of feminism:

[A] view of women as a distinct sociological group for which there are established patterns of behavior, special legal and legislative restrictions, and customarily defined roles. This definition includes the obvious corollary that women's roles and behaviors are based on neither rational criteria nor physiological dictates. It assumes a process of indoctrination from earliest childhood, both by overt and covert means, which determines the differing life styles of men and women. And, finally, it views the role of women as more restricted and less personally fulfilling than that of men. (Smith 370)

Smith warns that we should not “discuss only the end products of a feminist train of thought, i.e., specific goals,” as feminist, while “ignor[ing] the process which led the feminist to designate those aims as significant” (Smith 369–70). Henderson and McManus uncover literary evidence of each element of Smith’s definition in “the defenses of women published in the English Renaissance” (Henderson and McManus 31). Moria Ferguson argues that early female writers wrote “to urge or to defend a pro-women point of view which includes resistance to patriarchal values, convention, and domination, or a challenge to misogynous ideas” (Ferguson 27). Woodbridge requires a radical goal before she will conclude that feminism exists—a requirement that will not be met for centuries to come. Moria argues that women’s writing was active advocacy for women. Betty S. Travitsky and Anne Lake Prescott show that during the Renaissance gender was an important theme in writings, both from men’s pens and, importantly, women’s pens. Thus I conclude that although Renaissance English feminism was not identical to or as radical as modern feminism, it did exist. The contribution of that early stage was a growing awareness that the nature of women did not justify their inferior status in society and that that status needed to change (see Yachnin’s discussion of knowing and power).

The underlying assumption of *Shrew*—that husbands have the right to tame their wives, who lack autonomy and are subject to their husbands—supports an anti-feminist interpretation. “Though little fire grows great with little wind,” Petruchio boasts to Baptista, “Yet extreme gusts will blow out fire and all; / So I to her, and so she yields to me, / For I am rough, and woo not like a babe” (2.1.134–37).^[2] Petruchio successfully forces Katharina to yield, modifying her nature, a patriarchal transformation. The closing scene of the analog *The Taming of A Shrew* (1594) further supports an anti-feminist reading of *Shrew*. Sly returns, closing the frame, unlike in *Shrew*, and informs the tapster, “Ile to my / Wife presently and tame her too,” offering his analysis of the Petruchio/Katharina plot he just watched (*The Taming of A Shrew*, 19.18–19), showing a Renaissance sensibility towards the idea of wife-taming. Sly gets the message to head home and use the knowledge just received from the performance to tame his own wife.

Shrew's ambivalent statement about the status of a wife in a Renaissance marriage parallels the treatment of marriage found in a contemporary conduct book written by Robert Snawsel. *A Looking Glass for Married Folks* (1610) negotiates the boundary between the progressive idea of not beating one's wife (moving toward a general view of human dignity and human rights) and the reactionary idea of male domination (preserving traditional ideals). In *A Looking Glass*, four women and one of the women's husbands discuss marriage. A conversation between three of these characters—Xanthippe, Margery, and Eulalie—is particularly relevant for understanding Renaissance ideas about marriage. Eulalie, Margery, and Xanthippe all take independent positions about marriage, positions that can be transposed onto society:

EULALIE: But Paul, as I said before, teacheth, that wives should be in subjection to their husbands with all reverence, and not to be check-mates with them; and Peter sets down Sarah for an example to women, who called her husband "lord."

MARGERIE: We have heard these things before as well as you. But the same Paul, I trow, teacheth, that husbands should love their wives, as Christ did his church.

XANTHIPPE: Well let him first do his duty, and then I will do mine.
(Snawsel 188)

Eulalie subscribes to a traditional view of marriage, with one progressive exception: although the man is superior, the wife can exercise power in the relationship. Xanthippe is more militant about women's rights when she says her husband should "first do his duty, and then [she] will do" hers, referring, as Margery indicates, to Saint Paul's command in Ephesians 5:25 that a man treat his wife with love and respect—his "duty," upon the execution of which his wife's "duty" is contingent (Snawsel 188).

As in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," a sexual subtext underlies the conversation in Snawsel's text. Alisoun, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, tells her fellow pilgrims she holds on to power in her marriages using sex: "If that I felte his arm over my side, / Til he had maad his raunson unto me; / Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee" (TWB 410–12). She makes it clear that sexual organs are both practical and pleasurable: "To purge uryne, and eek for engendrure," and "In wyfhood I wol use myn

instrument / As freely as my Makere hath it sent" (134 and 149–50, respectively).

Alisoun has sex with her husband only after the husband pays the ransom, or in Xanthippe's words, does his "duty," and does so in part to fulfill her own lustful desire. For Alisoun, as well as Xanthippe, sex becomes a bargaining chip in the relationship. Eulalie appeals to traditional sexual subjugation in her expected reply: a woman should "yield . . . to her husband," letting her "desire be subject to" his (Snawsel 188). She adds, "You are married now unto your husband, what manner of man soever he be; you have no liberty to change him for another, or cast him off," acknowledging a wife's limited legal recourse (Snawsel 189).

But to this traditional avenue of woman's agency (i.e., sex), *Looking Glass* adds another: framing herself to her husband's moods. Eulalie recommends that Xanthippe become a "looking glass" and reflect her husband's mood. When her husband is in a foul mood, Eulalie puts on a sad countenance also, and look[s] heavily. For even as a looking glass, if it be a good one, doth show the countenance of him that glasses himself in it, so it beseems an honest wife to frame herself to her husband's affection, and not to be merry when he is melancholy, nor jocund when he is sad, much less flee when he is angry. (Snawsel 190)

Through reflection of the husband, the wife can reveal the "good which [she] may have by [her] husband, if [she] would be loving and submissive to him" (Snawsel 191). In this paradigm the woman's power is defined by her willingness and ability to express herself within the husband's pattern. The wife is not treated violently, but she is also not a free agent. Thus a woman's freedom extends only so far as she does not challenge her husband's authority. In addition to sexual empowerment, handed down from medieval literature, Snawsel advocates for empowerment beyond sexual pleasure. Eulalie subtracts sex from the exchange, indicating something new. Before, female empowerment could be excused as necessary to satisfy a biological urge, a weakness of the body. Now, the pursuit of happiness motivates the wife to reflect her husband's moods.

Shakespeare's *Shrew* exploits the same idea as Snawsel's conduct-book. The final scene depicts the culmination of the taming process when Katherina delivers her famous speech that delimits the marriage contract:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
 Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
 And for thy maintenance; commits his body
 To painful labor, both by sea and land;
 To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
 Whilst thou li'st warm at home, secure and safe;
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands
 But love, fair looks, and true obedience—
 Too little payment for so great a debt. (*Shrew* 5.2.146–54)

Katherina understands that she must submit to Petruchio if she is to find peace—the line “Too little payment for so great a debt” shows the degree of her transformation. Just prior to this scene is the climactic exchange between Petruchio and Katherina:

PETRUCHIO. I say it is the moon.
 KATHARINA. I know it is the moon. (*Shrew* 4.5.16–17)

Petruchio has finally tamed Katherina. By entering into the bargain, accepting Petruchio's ultimate proclamation, regardless of its absurdity, Katherina mirrors Eulalie's advice for Xanthippe to yield to her husband through a sort of mirroring.

Another Renaissance text, “A Homily on the State of Matrimony” from *The Second Tome of Homilies* (1623), offers a different view of marriage relations.^[3] Whereas Snawsel portrays a wife seeking a non-abusive relationship, this sermon declares that a violent husband “setteth forward the devil's work” if he strikes his wife (“Homily” 175). The Church of England considered the husband/wife team better equipped to resist the devil's temptations to sin than either partner alone. If a husband prevents a unified marriage, through “rough sharp words, or stripes,” then the devil can gain entrance and counter the work of God (“Homily” 174). The homilist also invokes the nature of prayer as a reason against a hostile marriage: “for in the time the mind is occupied with dissention and discord, there can be no true prayer” (“Homily” 175). The homilist is not concerned with women's equality of dignity. Working from the words of 1 Peter 3:7, the homilist reminds readers that, “the woman is a weak creature, not endued with like strength and constancy of mind” (174). Whereas the woman is subordinate to the husband, she still is a vital member

of a team, a helpmeet for the work of God who should be respected. These official church proclamations did not authorize domestic violence, and *Shrew* abides by the teaching found in the homily. Petruchio does not hit Katharina in the play, but he knows how “to kill a wife with kindness” (*Shrew* 4.1.208). Petruchio designs a method to tame Katharina through exaggerated, carefully directed hostility towards others that he predicts she will interpret as kindness, for “all is done in reverend care of her” (*Shrew* 4.1.204). Still, he does not hit her. By the end of the play the two describe the nature of their “new” relationship as a team. But even with the pro-woman tendencies of the homily and *Shrew*, it is clear that equal dignity is not the aim. Both the homily and the play reaffirm the wife’s subordinate position as sanctioned by St. Paul: Petruchio claims of Katharina, “She is my goods, my chattels, she is my house” (*Shrew* 3.2.230).

Petruchio might have gotten his method of nonviolent wife-taming not from religious decree, but from conduct-books. Another societal change that aligned with the religious teaching was the reinvention of “a gentleman,” found in conduct books. Gentlemen sought to be differentiated from common men through marital relationships. Whereas a common man might choose to beat his wife, a gentleman would rule the home through “policy rather than by blows”; thus violence was replaced with policy, that is, a strategy that instills a desire to follow (Dolan 14). William Gouge, in his *Of Domestic Duties: Eight Treatises* (1634), advises against becoming physically violent with one’s wife, and to a lesser degree with one’s servants. Gouge does not mince words: “May not then a husband beat his wife? . . . I think he may not” (Gouge 226). Gouge provides several reasons for his admonition: the Bible does not allow it, it prevents children and servants from respecting the wife, and it is a sign of mental instability: because a man and wife “are one flesh,” only “a frantic, furious, desperate wretch will beat himself” (Gouge 226). Instead of by violence, a man is to rule by policy. Beating does not result in allegiance; it encourages further defiance. The same is true of servant-beating: Thomas Becon, in an earlier conduct book, *A New Catechism Set Forth Dialogue-Wise in Familiar Talk Between the Father and the Son* (1560), also recommends restraint on the part of the master to “patiently bear with” servants, “exhorting them henceforth to be more diligent and

circumspect in doing their duty”. Becon suggests that beating inferiors “becometh not Christian modesty” (Becon 234).

After returning with Katherina to his house, Petruchio, as if having imbibed these conduct-book prescriptions, in a soliloquy tells the audience, “Thus I have politicly begun my reign” (*Shrew* 4.1.188). In that same soliloquy, Petruchio compares taming a wife to training a falcon. Analogues to using policy to rule the household are found in documents about falconry. A falconer would not beat his bird but manipulate its nature to his own end. That is the mark of a good falconer no less than of a true gentleman: to control through strategy (or policy) not brute force. George Turberville, in *The Book of Falconry or Hawking* (1611), teaches that the falconer’s first interaction with the hawk should happen while the bird is “hooded” with a head covering that blinds the bird (Turberville 309). In this condition the bird is defenseless. The hood is not removed “until she know her meat” (Turberville 309). The falcon becomes tame because the trainer approaches the bird while it is blind, removing the hood, then offering meat and re-hooding. Simon Latham explains in *Latham’s Falconry* (1615) how the tamed hawk finds pleasure in the ritual of the hood. The falconer must accustom the bird to his presence (for both Latham and Turberville the falconer is male and the falcon is female). This is done through use of the hood and food. “[W]hen you find her,” Latham says, “gentle and willing to be touched without [startling], you may pull off her hood . . . and quietly and gently put it on again” (Latham 311). Do this while offering food, Latham advises, so as to “draw her love unto the hood and yourself” (Latham 311). The bird begins to attach itself to its captor, even find affection. This is the metaphor used in Petruchio’s soliloquy to compare taming to falconry. Katherina is denied food until she is “passing empty” and kept awake but without knowledge of Petruchio’s next action (*Shrew* 4.1.190). He keeps her hooded (in a manner of speaking), to “curb her mad and headstrong humor” (*Shrew* 4.1.209). His goal is to tame her, “To make her come, and know her keeper’s call” (*Shrew* 4.1.194).

Nowhere in these Renaissance texts are women equal to men in dignity. In each instance of moderation of a man’s violent potential, the woman is still inferior. In “A Homily on the State of Matrimony,” inferiority comes from biblical injunction: “Let women be subject to their husbands” (“A Homily” 176; e.g., Ephesians

5:24). The “chief ornament of holy matrons,” the homilist says, is to suffer an abusive husband (“A Homily” 177). Submission is the pre-eminent feminine trait. William Gouge, while relatively progressive when he laments servants are better protected by the law because “[w]ives cannot have so good a remedy by the help of law against cruel husbands,” still maintains that men are superior (225). Even though Renaissance texts, including *Shrew*, do not declare women equal, rudimentary feminist idea of identifying inequality is evident.

The best-known case of domestic violence as it relates to Shakespeare’s *Shrew* is the ballad *A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife Lapped in Morel’s Skin, for Her Good Behavior* (c. 1550). In that poem, a shrewish wife is beaten bloody and restrained by her husband in a freshly salted horsehide, salted “because [he] would not have [the hide] stink” (Dolan 281). The husband’s olfactory sensibilities are more delicate than his tolerance for human torture. Frances Dolan, drawing on the work of Linda Woodbridge, sees the poem as a “domesticated version of medieval romances” (Dolan 257). Whereas a medieval knight would slay a mythical dragon on an epic quest, Renaissance men would vicariously master their wives in literature—and in life. Woodbridge says that the brutality of wedding night torture presented in “the language of romance” is a “grim and cynical commentary on a loveless, deromanticized world where a man has no dragons to conquer but his wife” (Woodbridge 203). Again Petruchio’s method is represented in Renaissance texts. Although he does not approach the same level of physical violence against Katherina as is found in *A Merry Jest*, he does approach the prospect of taming as if he were on an epic quest:

Think you a little din can daunt mine ears?
 Have I not in my time heard lions roar?
 Have I not heard the sea, puff’d up with winds,
 Rage like an angry boar chafed with sweat?
 Have I not heard great ordnance in the field,
 And heaven’s artillery thunder in the skies?
 Have I not in a pitched battle heard
 Loud ’larums, neighing steeds, and trumpets’ clang? (*Shrew* 1.2.199–
 206)

Petruchio's enticement to marry Katherina originates from his desire to become rich. Once he realizes her infamously "curst" reputation, he reframes the wooing for money as a quest. Petruchio can gain respect from men in society by conquering Katherina, fulfilling the ideal medieval romantic quest.

Shakespeare's play does not make a simple statement about the treatment of women, in part because other Renaissance texts are also divided. It does, however, make an extraordinary statement: Katharina is not "equal" in the modern sense, but she is also not oppressed in the Renaissance sense; Petruchio treats Katharina markedly different from the husband's brutal treatment of the wife in *A Merry Jest*. Katharina resists submission, unlike Eulalie. The status of women was in flux during the Renaissance, changing slowly. From a modern perspective, as the ongoing critical disagreement shows (cf. Bloom 28–35 and Rackin 51–62), a complex confluence of culture, of which literature, and drama more specifically, is part, determines the status of women in society, both Shakespeare's and our own. Difficulty arises when deciding whether *Shrew* makes a positive or negative statement about women because audiences see *Shrew* through a lens that interprets the play reliant on modern sensibilities. But anxiety about the status of women is not purely a modern development; this anxiety plagued Shakespeare and his contemporaries as well, as Paul Yachnin points out: "Shakespeare's drama participated in the early modern struggle between the opposite positions of knowing on one side and power on the other" (Yachnin 9). Shakespeare's *Shrew* does not emancipate women, achieving full knowing, or awareness, nor does it imprison women, expressing full power; Shakespeare exposes a marital struggle that contrasts with brutal Renaissance depictions, and simultaneously compares with "progressive" Renaissance depictions, and consequently captures a significant moment of change. Shakespeare's *Shrew* illustrates the tension of social change during the English Renaissance and places that tension on stage for reconsideration by audiences.

Notes

[1] See Holderness for a discussion of four important productions of the play, including Michael Bogdanov's 1978 production that emphasizes patriarchal abuse and Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film that emphasizes the couple's mutual growth.

[2] All quotations of Shakespeare come from Evans.

[3] *The Second Tome of Homilies* is the second collection of sermons produced by The Church of England, as the longer title of the first set of sermons, *Certain Sermons, or Homilies, says, "to be Declared and Read, by all Parsons, Vicars, or Curates Every Sunday in Their Churches."*

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