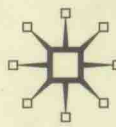




Gender and Power  
in Shrew-Taming  
Narratives, 1500–1700

Edited by David Wootton  
and Graham Holderness



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David Wootton

*Anniversary Professor of History, University of York, UK*

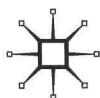
and

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# Introduction

Graham Holderness

A decade ago materialist-feminist and historicist criticism of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* had reached something of an impasse. In 1996, summarising the fortunes of the shrew over the previous ten years, Paul Yachnin argued that modern opinion on Shakespeare's play could be divided between the two dominant schools of thought in contemporary Shakespeare criticism, 'knowledge' and 'power'.<sup>1</sup> 'Power' readings see literature as 'merely reproductive' of the 'social formation' and its 'ideological complex' (Yachnin para. 1); 'knowledge' readings adopt the rationalist view that 'Shakespeare's plays are alive in some uncanny way, persistently conscious of their own production of meaning and therefore free of the history in which they were produced and in which their meanings are constantly being revised' (para. 3). In this latter perspective *The Taming of the Shrew* is a document of enlightenment, which resolves the harsh discords of its crude 'taming' materials, to produce visions of reciprocal accommodation and free mutuality between the sexes.

All Yachnin's examples of arguments from 'knowledge' are works published in the early 1980s, and this seems to have been the dominant paradigm up to about 1990. Linda Boose opened her influential materialist-feminist essay 'Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds', published in 1991,<sup>2</sup> by stating her conviction that the field had long been occupied by such 'knowing' readings, readings that sought to interpret the play in terms of 'mutuality' and a positive fulfilment for both sexes. 'Everyone it seems, wants this play to emphasize "Kate's and Petruchio's mutual sexual attraction, affection, and satisfaction ... and deemphasize her coerced submission to him"' (Boose quoting Carol Thomas Neeley). 'The critical history of *Shrew* reflects a tradition in which such revisionism has become a kind of orthodoxy' (Boose 181), an orthodoxy Boose and others found it necessary to challenge.

In response to this development, Yachnin lamented the demise of ‘knowing’, complaining that ‘intentionalist interpretive models have been displaced by functionalist models of cultural reproduction and contestation and because aestheticizing interpretive practices have been replaced more or less by politicizing practices’ (para. 23). The critical ground of *The Taming of the Shrew* became dominated in particular by a materialist-feminist consensus, which ‘reads the play historically for information about early modern, and modern, gender relations’ (para. 2).

The verdict of ‘power’ on *The Taming of the Shrew* and shrew-literature in general, as delivered in much work from this period, was clear and uncompromising: the play and its central trope of ‘taming’ are documents of barbarism. Historical studies had shown how the shrew-plays grew out of a context of male supremacy and female oppression. Stories of women tamed, exemplified in ballads, tales and jests as well as theatrical versions, are not merely records of female subjugation, but ideological methods of endorsing and indoctrinating the misogynist ideas underpinning patriarchal society. Although a more sophisticated adaptation of the taming motif than many of its sources, Shakespeare’s play nonetheless encodes the same crudely sexist ideology as its common sources. At the very least such taming-narratives support and sustain domestic repression, including physical ‘correction’; at the worst they celebrate and endorse such extreme forms of female punishment as the cucking stool and the scold’s bridle.

Paul Yachnin summarised the position as he saw it in 1996: *The Taming of the Shrew* was ‘beyond redemption’:

In the case of *The Taming of the Shrew* ... the central reason for the dominance of power readings is that feminist Shakespeareans have marked this play off as beyond redemption. Shirley Nelson Garner has argued that history has passed *The Taming of the Shrew* by. As such, it can no longer be said to be a work of literature which might be saved in one way or another by virtue of the presence of a knowing author; instead it is of the nature of a joke whose spirit has long since vanished, the dead letter of an outmoded misogynist culture. (Yachnin para. 23)

These sentiments now seem to belong to the category of dead letters much more securely than does *The Taming of the Shrew*. This indicates the extent to which recent historiography and cultural criticism have revised and reassessed gender relations in the early modern period.

Historical work on early modern women, gender, marriage, the home, property and social customs has largely overturned the grimly oppressive scenarios of earlier scholars, in which women could scarcely dare to speak up for fear of cruel physical punishment. New and enhanced insights were generated by social and cultural historians who penetrated deeper into what later became the 'private' spaces of the home and conjugal inter-relationship, to reveal that peoples' lives were not invariably aligned with the doctrines of social order preached from ecclesiastical pulpit and judicial bench, or with the most extreme forms of coercion and corrective punishment. Keith Wrightson, in his immensely influential *English Society 1580–1680*,<sup>3</sup> insisted on 'the private existence of a strong complementary and companionate ethos, side by side with, and overshadowing theoretical adherence to, the doctrine of male authority and public female subordination' (92). Anthony Fletcher<sup>4</sup> went so far as to claim that the period saw 'a crisis in men's control over women' (xvi), and called for an exposure of 'the huge untold story of the contestedness of English patriarchy within the early modern home' (191).

Scholars have exhaustively mined public and private records to pursue these hypotheses, and successfully demonstrated that women wielded and exercised power and authority in many areas of social life: control over medicine, food production and other peoples' bodies (Wendy Wall<sup>5</sup>); or power over moveable property and assets within the home (Natasha Korda<sup>6</sup>). Frances Dolan showed that women were perpetrators of, as well as victims of, domestic violence and punishment;<sup>7</sup> Garthine Walker that women were by no means 'characterised by passivity and weakness';<sup>8</sup> and Pamela Brown that women could exercise considerable power through the verbal and intellectual dexterity of jesting.<sup>9</sup> Together these scholars and critics have greatly complicated our understanding of gender conflict, marriage and domestic authority in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The net effect of these various studies has been to allow for a recognition that in the early modern period, authority in marriage and the domestic polity was contested and unstable; women commanded kinds of authority previously underestimated, and were therefore relatively empowered; and gender was much less of a binary absolute than it later became. Laura Gowing<sup>10</sup> even suggested that gender divisions in themselves were not at this time stable, that 'sex was a matter of degree' rather than of kind (4).

Naturally the scholars cited here do not portray early modern England as a woman's paradise, nor do they seek to quarrel with the established evidence of female oppression. Their concern is rather to complicate our historical picture, to expose the conflicts and contradictions within

received ideologies, and to describe the consequent slippages and instabilities in the practice of ideology. They have ‘sought to discover’, as Pamela Brown says in a book that forms an important reference point for several of our authors,<sup>11</sup>

How women may have taken part in revising, negotiating, or resisting ideological paradigms rather than assuming that women were tragic victims, passive ciphers, or cultural sponges. (8)

It remains essential, Brown goes on, to recognise the depth and extent of patriarchal oppression.

While it is crucial for historians and literary scholars to study the increasing enclosure of women within the household, the rise of witchcraft persecutions, and the horrifying controls placed on women’s tongues from cuckold to scold’s bridle, it is also important to consider ... the fissures between the theory and practice of subordination. (8–9)

Or as Bernard Capp<sup>12</sup> puts it, ‘a significant gulf existed between patriarchal ideal and social practice’ (375). The contributors to this volume embrace this new historiography of early modern gender and power, the position of women in family, household and society, the domestic polity, the fates and fortunes of real-life ‘shrews’. In our collective view this excavated history makes *The Taming of the Shrew* a more rather than less interesting play; a fuller rather than flatter document of historical experience; a richer rather than thinner source of insight and understanding on crucial issues of sexual politics, culture and language. By the same token the Shakespeare play also needs to be read in its intertextual relations with other dramatic works that flow from and against it, constituting a unique tidal rhythm of protracted cultural conversation.

Much of the interest generated in and around the early modern ‘shrew’, archetype of female insubordination, naturally takes its bearings, if not its origins, from Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* and its innumerable stage, film and critical interpretations. This volume of essays assumes the First Folio play-text to be part of a much larger body of dramatic and literary material, congregated around the archetypal figure of the shrew, and produced from the Middle Ages through to the Restoration and beyond. We are concerned here with *shrews*, rather than with ‘the’ (or even ‘a’) shrew, and with the multiple connotations

and denotations attaching to a type that could be a man as well as a woman, and could attract positive as well negative valencies.

We take a long historical view of the shrew, tracing its pre-history in the Middle Ages and its changing fortunes through the reigns of the Stuart kings. We are interested in the shrew as a dramatic figure in its many theatrical representations, often interlinked, through this period: in Shakespeare; in the anonymous play *The Taming of A Shrew*, that preceded the publication of the First Folio version by almost 30 years; in Fletcher's 'response' play *The Tamer Tamed*, performed in 1611 alongside a revived *Taming of the Shrew*; in free adaptations of the earlier shrew plays that enjoyed currency in the Restoration period, such as John Lacey's *Sauny the Scot*; and in adaptations and translations that took the English shrew abroad to the European stage. At the same time we recognise that the audiences who flocked to see new and revived shrew-plays were also simultaneously consuming shrew-stories in multiple discursive sites such as poems, ballads, folk-tales, jest-books and prose pamphlets, and that these extra-theatrical manifestations of the shrew, and the social practice and custom they reflected, were equally part of their cultural experience.

The history that emerges from the following studies is not only extremely complex but also deeply contested. The dynamic of theatrical 'response' visible in *The Tamer Tamed* was, these scholars argue, indicative of a subversive and oppositional energy that was almost always present or contingent in discourses around the figure of the shrew. From mediæval devotional manuals to dramatic productions of the 1630s, the shrew is presented as a corrective exemplum of the need for patriarchal authority and wifely obedience. And yet, in practice, such representations frequently provoke resistance, argument, a paradoxical destabilisation of patterns of authority and the dissolution of gender norms. Anna Bayman and George Southcombe observe that shrews hit the cultural headlines at certain key moments in this period: notably 1602–4, with Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, Dekker's *Medicine for a Curst Wife*, and possibly the genesis of *The Taming of the Shrew*; and 1607–12, with Ben Jonson's *The Silent Woman*, Dekker and Middleton's portrait of the notorious Mary Frith or Moll Cutpurse, *The Roaring Girl*, and a republication of the anonymous *The Taming of A Shrew*. In each case, as our authors show, it is possible to integrate the dramatic works into lively contemporary controversies on gender and power, active in popular culture and political debate as well as on the stage. And in none of these do we find anything resembling a fixed, secure or stable evaluation of the shrew.

In the course of revisiting the shrew in this new context, the contributors to this volume extend the semiotic and chronological range of the term and its uses. They study shrews in a long theatrical history from the Middle Ages to the reign of Charles II, and in a wide range of discursive contexts. They explore reproductions of the shrew-plays in different English contexts, and from as far afield as the Low Countries. They also consider a number of other related and controversial questions: the dating of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and its connection with other shrew-narratives; the relation between the various textual formations of the shrew-drama, and the modern editions that have been constructed from them; and the salient problems of gender and power around which these texts and performances persistently revolve.

Bayman and Southcombe suggest that *The Taming of the Shrew* is beginning to look less rooted in the 1590s, when *A Shrew* was first published, and more like a Jacobean play that might be linked to the accession of James I, a revived interest in issues of patriarchy and a vigorous series of debates about gender and the role of women. They compare the Shrew-plays with the treatment of shrews and shrewishness in contemporary pamphlet literature, and find 'a great variety' of perspectives and opinions. By contrast Sandra Clark shows that ballads about unruly women make close links between shrewishness and domestic violence, though on the part of the woman, not the man. Clark's collection of grimly comic tales highlights masculine anxieties about dangerous, even murderous women. At the same time Clark shows that there were also ballads of 'negotiation' which apportion equal blame for unruly conduct among men and women, and recommend compromise rather than subjection as the preferred solution.

The contributors to this volume are acutely aware of the enlarged historical context lying behind these plays. They are also attuned to new currents in bibliography and textual theory, springing from a general reaction against the dominance of New Bibliography in the format of the modern edition. Leah Marcus for instance shows how many of the textual characteristics that can appear to reinforce the Shakespearean play's assumed patriarchalism are not features of the early printed texts, but subsequent editorial accretions. The placing of the Sly-scenes, the arrangement of *Dramatis Personae*, the treatment of theatrical 'asides', the impact of accrued stage directions that have no primary authority, all contribute to the play's effect on its readers. An 'unedited' text that removes much of this accretion offers the reader a strikingly different play. Pursuing a similar textual inquiry Margaret Maurer and Barry Gaines focus on Bianca, and offer a radical revision of her role by



reference to *The Tamer Tamed*, and by restoring the unedited F1 text in which we find quite a different Bianca.

Holly Crocker traces the history of the term 'shrew' (initially a masculine descriptor) from mediaeval sources, and shows that it remained a term of 'gendered bivalence'. Both men and women can behave as shrews, and as such neither could be capable of ruling either themselves or the household economy: 'wife and husband might be guilty of shrewish behaviour in a disordered domicile'. The Petruchios of both Shakespeare and Fletcher manifest themselves behaviourally as male shrews through 'feminized displays of frenzied misrule', and thereby 'forfeit their presumption to wield masculine authority'. Richard Madelaine also interrogates the gender connotations of the shrew in an essay that draws parallels between shrew-taming and the training of theatrical apprentices. If shrew and shrew-tamer are in one sense respectively trainee and veteran actor, then the gender issues become complicated, since both were male, and the trainee would aspire to become the trainer. In this dimension of the action, which could become overt in theatrical performance, the acquisition of skill and accomplishment through discipline and correction is the shrew's route to professional success and the claim to mature male and female roles.

*The Taming of the Shrew* and the other shrew-plays reveal a remarkable richness of iterability and a protean capacity for appropriation. Helmer Helmers examines Dutch adaptations of the shrew-taming drama from the mid-seventeenth century, showing that Shakespeare was not only introduced to Holland but mediated to Europe via Dutch translations and adaptations. The best-known example is an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Abraham Sybant's *The Mad Wedding* (1654). Helmers goes on however to introduce two unfamiliar Dutch farces, both of which are adaptations of the Christopher Sly dramatic framework. Detailed comparisons prove that these plays derived from the English shrew-drama and not from any independent or common source. Since they both use the whole Sly story, and incorporate verbal imitations of lines unique to *The Taming of A Shrew*, the prima facie assumption would be that the 1593 play was the immediate source. But the farces also contain echoes of the First Folio version, indicating that both texts had somehow combined, either in print or in performance, or indeed that their combination occurred at an earlier date. In the second example, which was popular between 1657 and 1664, the tale of the drunken tinker has mutated into a ribald piece of Dutch anti-Cromwellian propaganda. These examples of translation and adaptation further complicate the history of the shrew, not