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Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member

LYNDA E. BOOSE

FOR FEMINIST SCHOLARS, THE IRREPLACEABLE VALUE IF NOT pleasure to be realized by an historicized confrontation with Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* lies in the unequivocalty with which the play locates both women's abjected position in the social order of early modern England and the costs exacted for resistance. For romantic comedy to "work" normatively in *Shrew's* concluding scene and allow the audience the happy ending it demands, the cost is, simply put, the construction of a woman's speech that must unspeak its own resistance and reconstitute female subjectivity into the self-abnegating rhetoric of Kate's famous disquisition on obedience. The cost is Kate's self-deposition, where—in a performance not unlike Richard II's—she moves centerstage to dramatize her own similarly theatrical rendition of "Mark, how I will undo myself."

Apparently from the play's inception its sexual politics have inspired controversy. Within Shakespeare's own lifetime it elicited John Fletcher's sequel, *The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tam'd*, which features Petruchio marrying a second, untamable wife after his household tyranny has sent poor Kate to an early grave. As the title itself announces, Fletcher's play ends with Petruchio a reclaimed and newly lovable husband—"a woman's prize"—and, needless to say, a prize who still has the last words of the drama. Yet Fletcher's response may in itself suggest the kind of discomfort that *Shrew* has characteristically provoked in men and why its many revisions since 1594 have repeatedly contrived ways of softening the edges, especially in the concluding scene, of the play's vision of male supremacy. Ironically enough, if *The Taming of the Shrew* presents a problem to male viewers, the problem lies in its representation of a male authority so successful that it nearly destabilizes the very discourse it so blatantly confirms. Witness George Bernard Shaw's distress:

No man with any decency of feeling can sit it out in the company of a woman without being extremely ashamed of the lord-of-creation moral implied in the wager and the speech put into the woman's own mouth.¹

Yet the anxiety that provokes Shaw's reaction hardly compares with what the play's conclusion would, by that same logic, produce in women viewers.

¹ *Saturday Review*, 6 November 1897, as quoted in editor Ann Thompson's introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare *The Taming of the Shrew* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), p. 21. See Thompson's introduction for further instances of this reaction. All *Shrew* citations refer to this edition, and quotations from other Shakespeare plays refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); all references will appear in text.

For Kate's final *pièce de non résistance* is constructed not as the speech of a discrete character speaking her role within the expressly marked-out boundaries of a play frame; it is a textual moment in which, in Althusserian terms, the play quite overtly "interpellates," or hails, its women viewers into an imaginary relationship with the ideology of the discourse being played out onstage by their counterparts.² Having "fetched hither" the emblematic pair of offstage wives who have declined to participate in this game of patriarchal legitimation, Kate shifts into an address targeted at some presumptive Everywoman. Within that address women viewers suddenly find themselves universal conscripts, trapped within the rhetorical co-options of a discourse that dissolves all difference between the "I" and "you" of Kate and her reluctant sisters. Kate vacates the space of subjectivity in

I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
Or seek for rule, supremacy and sway,
When they are bound to serve, love and obey. . . .
Come, come, you froward and unable worms,
My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
My heart as great, my reason haply more,
To bandy word for word and frown for frown.
But now I see our lances are but straws,
Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,
That seeming to be most which we indeed least are.
Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,
And place your hands below your husband's foot.
(5.2.161–64, 169–77)³

In doing so, she rhetorically pushes everyone marked as "woman" out of that space along with her. And it is perhaps precisely because women's relationships to this particular comedy are so ineluctably bound up in such a theatricalized appropriation of feminine choice that Shakespeare's play ultimately becomes a kind of primary text within which each woman reader of successive eras must renegotiate a (her) narrative.

Inevitably, it is from the site/sight of the subjected and thoroughly spectacularized woman that virtually all critiques of *The Taming of the Shrew* have felt compelled to begin. For when Kate literally prostrates herself in her final lines of the play and thus rearranges the sexual space onstage, she reconfigures the iconography of heterosexual relationship not merely for herself but for all of those "froward and unable worms" inscribed within her interpellating discourse. Not surprisingly, the discomforts of such a position have produced an investment even greater in female than in male viewers in reimagining an ending that will at once liberate Kate from meaning what she says and simultaneously reconstruct the social space into a vision of so-called "mutuality"—an ending that will satisfy the "illusion of

² Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).

³ My discussion does not impinge upon the textual controversies surrounding the play. Nonetheless, an essay that has influenced my thinking about the text is Leah S. Marcus's as yet unpublished essay, "The Shakespearean Editor as Shrew Tamer"; see also Marcus's "Levelling Shakespeare: Local Customs and Local Texts" in this issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

a potentially pleasureable, even subversive space for Kate.”⁴ Thus, the critical history of *Shrew* reflects a tradition in which such revisionism has become a kind of orthodoxy. For albeit in response to a play which itself depends upon the exaggerations of gender difference, the desires of directors, players, audiences, and literary critics of both sexes have been curiously appeased by a similar representation: whether for reasons of wishing to save Kate from her abjection or Petruchio from the embarrassment of having coerced it, almost 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.”⁵ Ultimately, what is under covert recuperation and imagined as tacitly at stake is the institution of heterosexual marriage.

To insist upon historicizing this play is to insist upon placing realities from the historically literal alongside the reconstructive desires that have been written onto and into the literary text. It is to insist upon invading privileged literary fictions with the realities that defined the lives of sixteenth-century “shrews”—the real village Kates who underwrite Shakespeare’s character. Ultimately, it is to insist that a play called “The Taming of the Shrew” must be accountable for the history to which its title alludes. However shrewish it may seem to assert an intertextuality that binds the obscured records of a painful women’s history into a comedy that celebrates love and marriage, that history has paid for the right to speak itself, whatever the resultant incongruities.

As dominant onstage as the ameliorative tradition of *Shrew* production has been,⁶ the impulse to rewrite the more oppressively patriarchal material

⁴ The phrase comes from Barbara Hodgdon’s essay, forthcoming in PMLA, “Katherina Bound, or Pla(k)ating the Strictures of Everyday Life,” which offers an insightful assessment of the visual pleasures that performance of this play makes available to the female spectator.

⁵ Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), p. 218. Other essays that specifically address the knotty problem of reading through gender that this play in particular poses include Shirley Nelson Garner, “The Taming of the Shrew: Inside or Outside of the Joke?” and Peter Berek, “Text, Gender, and Genre in The Taming of the Shrew,” both in “Bad” Shakespeare: *Revaluations of the Shakespeare Canon*, Maurice Charney, ed. (London and Toronto: Associated Univ. Presses, 1988), pp. 105–19 and 91–104; Joel Fineman, “The turn of the shrew” in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, eds. (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 138–59, esp. pp. 141–44; Marianne L. Novy, “Patriarchy and Play in The Taming of the Shrew,” *English Literary Renaissance*, 9 (1979), 264–80; Kathleen McLuskie, “Feminist Deconstruction: Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*,” *Red Letters*, 12 (1982), 15–22; Martha Andresen-Thom, “Shrew-taming and other rituals of aggression: Bating and bonding on the stage and in the wild,” *Women’s Studies*, 9 (1982), 121–43; John Bean, “Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in The Taming of the Shrew” in *The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely, eds. (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 65–78; Jeanne Addison Roberts, “Horses and Hermaphrodites: Metamorphoses in The Taming of The Shrew,” *SQ*, 34 (1983), 159–71; Coppélia Kahn, “The Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare’s Mirror of Marriage,” *Modern Language Studies*, 5 (1975), 88–102; Robert B. Heilman, “The Taming Untamed, or, The Return of the Shrew,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 27 (1966), 147–61; and Richard A. Burt, “Charisma, Coercion, and Comic Form in The Taming of the Shrew,” *Criticism*, 26 (1984), 295–311.

⁶ For accounts of this production history, see Ann Thompson, pp. 17–24. In his discussion of the inappropriate historicization at work in Jonathan Miller’s attempt to imagine Petruchio as spokesman for the new Puritan ideals of companionate marriage, Graham Holderness demonstrates how the Miller BBC television production provides yet another instance of a theatrical attempt to save this play from its own ending (*The Taming of the Shrew* in the

in this play serves the very ideologies about gender that it makes less visible by making less offensive. To tamper with the literalness of Kate's physical submission onstage deflects attention away from an equally literal history in which both Kate and the staging of her body are embedded. As it turns out, the play's most (in)famous theatrical moment owes far less to Shakespeare's imagination than it does to a concrete analogue that Kate's prostration seems to be staging. For whatever else may be going on in *The Taming of the Shrew's* finale, the scene dramatizes a now correctly ordered version of the play's earlier negated, parodic marriage. It represents a ritually corrected replay of both the offstage church ceremony that had been turned into anti-ceremony by Petruchio's irreverent behavior and the bridal feast at which Kate was displaced and re-placed by the seemingly virtuous Bianca, who, at the end of 3.2, was chosen to "bride it" in her wayward sister's stead. Finally, after Kate is allowed to return to Padua for Bianca's wedding, it is Kate who displaces Bianca as the virtuous and honored bride. This displacement converts what was billed as Bianca's bridal feast into the missing communal celebration to honor the earlier marriage that Kate's staged submission here recuperates into communal norms. Neither the feast nor the postponed consummation may take place in this play until the hierarchical features of the marriage rite have thus been restoratively enacted.

The referential context for Kate's bodily prostration in 5.2 is anchored by its placement inside a speech that incorporates verbatim the "serve, love and obey" (l. 164) of a bride's wedding vows. Not only do her words re-present those vows, however; her body reenacts them. For what transpires onstage turns out to be a virtual representation of the ceremony that women were required to perform in most pre-Reformation marriage services throughout Europe. In England this performance was in force as early as the mid-fifteenth century and perhaps earlier; and it may well have continued in local practice even after Archbishop Cranmer had reformed the Book of Common Prayer in 1549 and excised just such ritual excesses.⁷ Kate's prostration before her husband and the placing of her hand beneath his foot follow the ceremonial directions that accompany the Sarum (Salisbury) Manual, the York Manual, the Scottish Rathen Manual, and the French Martène (*Ordo IV*) for the response the bride was to produce when she received the wedding ring and her husband's all-important vow of endowment.

According to the Use of Sarum, after the bridegroom had given the vow, "With this ryng I wedde the, and with this golde and siluer I honoure the, and with this gyft I dowe thee," the priest next "asks the dower of the woman." If "land is given her in the dower," the bride "prostrates herself at the feet of the bridegroom." In one manuscript of the Sarum Rite, the bride is directed to "kiss the right foot" of her spouse, which she is to do "whether there is land in the doury or not."⁸ The York, Rathen, and

Shakespeare in Performance series [Manchester and New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1989], pp. 21–25).

⁷ J. Wickham Legg, *Ecclesiological Essays* (London: de la More Press, 1903), p. 190.

⁸ George Elliott Howard, *A History of Matrimonial Institutions*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1904), Vol. 1, pp. 306–7. "Tunc procidat sponsa ante pedes ejus, et deosculetur pedem ejus dextrum; tunc erigat eam sponsus" (*Surtees Society Publications*, 63, 20 n.). See also J. Wickham Legg, pp. 189–90, and *The Rathen Manual: Catholic Church, Liturgy and Ritual*, ed. Duncan MacGregor

Martène manuals, however, direct “this courtesying to take place only when the bride has received land as her dower.” As Shakespeare’s audience knows, Petruchio has indeed promised Baptista that he will settle on his wife an apparently substantial jointure of land. And while Kate offers to place her hands below her husband’s foot rather than kiss it, the stage action seems clearly enough to allude to a ritual that probably had a number of national and local variants. Thus Giles Fletcher, Queen Elizabeth’s ambassador to Russia, writes of a Russian wedding:

the Bride commeth to the Bridegroom (standing at the end of the altar or table) and falleth downe at his feete, knocking her head upon his shooe, in token of her subjection and obedience. And the Bridegroom again casteth the cappe of his gowne or upper garment over the Bride, in token of his duetie to protect and cherish her.⁹

Within the multi-vocal ritual logic of Christian marriage discourse, the moment in which the woman was raised up probably dramatized her rebirth into a new identity, the only one in which she could legally participate in property rights. Yet the representation of such a public performance obviously exceeds the religious and social significances it enacts. Giles Fletcher, for instance, reads the Russian ceremony through its political meanings. In its political iconography the enactment confirms hierarchy and male rule. And yet in its performance both in church and onstage, the woman’s prostration—which is dictated by the unvoiced rubrics of the patriarchal script—is staged to seem as if it were an act of spontaneous gratitude arising out of choice.

From the perspective of twentieth-century feminist resistance, it is hardly possible to imagine this scene outside the context of feminine shame. Yet is it necessarily ahistorical to presume the validity of such a reading? Absent any surviving commentaries from sixteenth-century women who performed these rituals, perhaps we can nonetheless indirectly recover something about such women’s reactions. In 1903 the Anglican church historian J. Wickham Legg transcribed the French Roman Catholic cleric J. B. Thiers’s discussion of the ways that eighteenth-century French women had come to restage this ceremony:

the bride was accustomed to let the ring fall from her finger as soon as it was put on. Necessarily she would stoop to pick up the ring, or make some attempt at this, and so a reason would be given for her bending or courtesying at her husband’s feet, and the appearance of worship paid to him would be got rid of.¹⁰

(Aberdeen: Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society, 1905), p. 36. In comments on the wedding-ritual structure that underwrites the scene of Lear, Cordelia, and her suitors, I had earlier suggested the possibility of such a literal, ceremonial basis to the line “I take up what’s cast away” (1.1.253) that France speaks to Cordelia (“The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare,” *PMLA*, 97 [1982] 325–47, esp. pp. 333–34).

⁹ *Of the Russe Common Wealth*, chap. 24, fol. 101, as quoted in Legg, p. 190.

¹⁰ Legg, p. 190. See also J. B. Thiers, *Traité des Superstitions qui regardent les Sacremens*, 4th ed. (Avignon, 1777), Book 10, chap. 11, p. 457. Although the “falling at the feet of the husband” had been banished from the Anglican Rite for some 350 years by the time Legg wrote, his recognition of the women’s resistance in the French text prompts him to decry “innovators in their slack teaching on the subject of matrimony” and comment acerbically that “the modern upholders of the rights of women would never endure this ceremony for one moment.” As

What seems at work in the women's behavior is the same impulse that motivates certain feminist *Shrew* criticism—the creation of explanatory scenarios that will justify Kate's actions. Confronted by a ritual of self-debasement, the women strive to construct another narrative that will rationalize their stooping.

To locate the staging of *The Taming of the Shrew's* final scene inside of the pre-Reformation English marriage ceremony may provide the missing historical analogue, but it hardly explains why Shakespeare chose to use it. For the wedding ceremony that Shakespeare's text alludes to, while almost certainly recognizable to an audience of the 1590s, was itself an anachronistic form outlawed by the Act of Uniformity over forty years earlier. Embedding the Kate and Petruchio marriage inside of a performance understood as prohibited inscribes the play's vision of male dominance as anachronism; but the very act of inscription collocates the anachronistic paradigm with the romantically idealized one and thus also recuperates the vision into a golden-age lament for a world gone by—a world signified by a ceremony that publicly confirmed such shows of male dominance. On the other hand, through just that collocation, the play has situated the volatile social issue of the politics of marriage on top of the equally volatile contemporary political schism over the authority of liturgical form. By means of constructing so precarious and controversial a resolution, the play works ever so slightly to unsettle its own ending and mark the return to so extremely patriarchal a marriage as a formula inseparable from a perilously divisive politics.

Thus it seems appropriate to perceive both *Shrew* and the world that produced it as texts in which gender is foregrounded through the model of a layered social fabric, with crisis stacked upon social crisis. According to David Underdown, the sense of impending breakdown in the social order was never “more widespread, or more intense, than in early modern England”; moreover, the breakdown was one that Underdown sees as having developed out of a “period of strained gender relations” that “lay at the heart of the ‘crisis of order’.”¹¹ The particular impact of this crisis in gender speaks through records that document a sudden upsurge in witchcraft trials and other court accusations against women, the “gendering” of various available forms of punishment, and the invention in these years of additional punishments specifically designated for women. As the forms of punishment and the assumptions about what officially constituted “crime” became progressively polarized by gender, there emerged a corresponding significant increase in instances of crime defined as exclusively female: “scolding,” “witchcraft,” and “whoring.” But what is striking is that the punishments meted out to women are much more frequently targeted at suppressing women's speech than they are at controlling their sexual transgressions. In terms of available court records that document the lives of the “middling sort” in England's towns and larger villages, the chief social offenses seem to have been “scolding,” “brawling,” and dominating one's

stays against such “modern ideas,” he then invokes Augustine and Paul and digresses from his topic (marriage customs) to include Augustine's definition of a “good *materfamilias*” as a woman who “is not ashamed to call herself the servant (*ancilla*) of her husband” (pp. 190–91).

¹¹ “The Taming of the Scold: the Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England” in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 116–36, esp. pp. 116, 136.

husband. The veritable prototype of the female offender of this era seems to be, in fact, the woman marked out as a “scold” or “shrew.”

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SCOLDS AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY ANTIQUARIANS

Much of what we can recover about the lives of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English women and men we owe to the English antiquary societies that arose during the nineteenth century. Just past the midpoint of that century, on one side of the Atlantic Ocean one English-speaking nation moved inexorably towards a civil war over the proprietary ownership of slaves. On the other, more ancient and presumably more civilized, parent side of the ocean, in the calm of an autumn evening in 1858 at the home of a member of the Chester Archaeological Society in the County of Chester, Mr. T. N. Brushfield, Medical Superintendent of the Cheshire Lunatic Asylum, presented a two-part paper, “On Obsolete Punishments, With particular reference to those of Cheshire.”¹² His title betrays no sense that his real fascination throughout both parts of the paper is with devices that were used in bodily punishments meted out in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English villages and towns to women judged guilty of so egregiously violating the norms of community order and hierarchy as to have been labelled “scolds” or “shrews.” What becomes apparent from Brushfield’s material is that being labelled a “shrew” or “scold” had very real consequences in the late sixteenth century—consequences much more immediate and extreme than the only one that overtly confronts Shakespeare’s Kate, which is to play out the demeaning role of being a single woman in married culture and to have to “dance barefoot on her [younger sister’s] wedding day” and “lead apes in hell” (2.1.33–34).

Among the “obsolete punishments” of Brushfield’s disquisition lie the real consequences. The instrument to which one part of his presentation is devoted is the “cucking stool,” a chair-like apparatus into which the offender was ordered strapped and then, to the jeers of the crowd, was dunked several times in water over her head—water that might be a local river but was equally likely to have been the local horsewash pond (Fig. 1). Although Brushfield is unaware of the point, gender-specific punishments for minor offenses only became the rule in English towns and villages by the fifteenth century.¹³ The cucking stool, which had apparently originated as a punishment for crimes most often linked with marketplace cheating on weights or measures, had been used until then as a punishment for men as well as women.

The cucking stool—which seems to have originated as a dung cart and in many places retained its association with excrement through such designs as the privy-stool model¹⁴ (Fig. 2)—went by several different names and

¹² *Chester Archaeological and Historic Society Journal*, 2 (1855–62), 31–48 and 203–34.

¹³ Underdown, p. 123.

¹⁴ In his otherwise quite useful book, *Juridical Folklore in England: Illustrated by the Cucking-stool* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1944), John Webster Spargo spends pages trying to deny the cucking stool-privy stool connection and invalidate, one by one, the etymological links in the numerous terms that support that connection. His argument is finally unpersuasive and seems ultimately to depend upon no more than his own determination not to believe that this could have been possible. It seems to me, however, quite logical to believe that cucking-stool punishments would have included the additional humiliation of enthroning a woman on a

existed in a variety of models in several English counties. Often it seems to have been either mounted on a cart or affixed with wheels (Figs. 3, 4, and 5) in order that the occupant could be drawn through the streets and publicly displayed en route to her ducking. Indeed, in the first of the Padua scenes, the very real cultural consequences of being defined as a scold leak through the layers of fictive insulation. What the old pantaloone Gremio proposes—that instead of “courting” Katherina a man should “cart her rather” (1.1.55)—is a fate probably much like that which a Norfolk woman was ordered to undergo: “to ryde on a cart, with a paper in her hand, and [be] tynkled with a bason, and so at one o’clock be led to the coking stool and ducked in the water.”¹⁵ As folklorist John Webster Spargo makes clear, “Punishing scolds was not . . . the semihumorous hazing which it sometimes seems to be.”¹⁶ According to a 1675 legal summary,

A Scold in a legal sense is a troublesome and angry woman, who by her brawling and wrangling amongst her Neighbours, doth break the publick Peace, and beget, cherish and increase publick Discord. And for this she is to be presented and punished in a Leet, by being put in the Cucking or Ducking-stole, or Tumbrel, an Engine appointed for that purpose, which is in the fashion of a Chair; and herein she is to sit, and to be let down in the water over head and ears three or four times, so that no part of her be above the water, diving or ducking down, though against her will, as Ducks do under the water.¹⁷

Punishing scolds with the cucking stool and male brawlers with the pillory was apparently so orthodox a response to disorder that the practices are affirmed even in the Book of Homilies. In the words of Hugh Latimer in his homily “Agaynst strife and contention”:

And, because this vice [of contention] is so much hurtful to the society of a commonwealth, in all well ordered cities these common brawlers and scolders be punished, with a notable kind of pain, as to be set on the cucking stool, pillory, or such like. . . . If we have forsaken the devil, let us use no more devilish tongues.¹⁸

As to exactly what kinds of brawling, wrangling, breaking of the public peace and begetting of public discord were considered disruptive enough to define a woman as a scold, most descriptive evidence from court records simply problematizes the definition further by expanding the term. In the

privy stool before riding her through town and ducking her. The punishment was primarily a shaming ritual to begin with, and women’s shame has a long history of connection to the body “privates.”

On matters of the reliability of T. N. Brushfield’s research, however, Spargo’s comments—together with his widely accepted respectability as a folklorist—prove quite helpful. In Spargo’s own work on cucking stools, he relied often upon Brushfield’s research, calling his paper on punishment the “best of all” and “most comprehensive” (chap. 1, n. 15, and p. 11).

¹⁵ Brushfield, p. 219. Since the use of “rough music” or noise-making instruments to call people out of house to watch the shaming of the scold is common to this punishment, I assume “bason” refers to such an instrument. The paper that the Norfolk woman carries would most likely have had “scold” written on it for her to display and thus participate in her own humiliation.

¹⁶ p. 122.

¹⁷ William Sheppard (or Shepherd), *A Grand Abridgment of the Common and Statute Law of England* (London, 1675), s.v. “scold,” as quoted in Spargo, p. 122.

¹⁸ Church of England, *Certain Sermons or Homilies* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1908), p. 154.

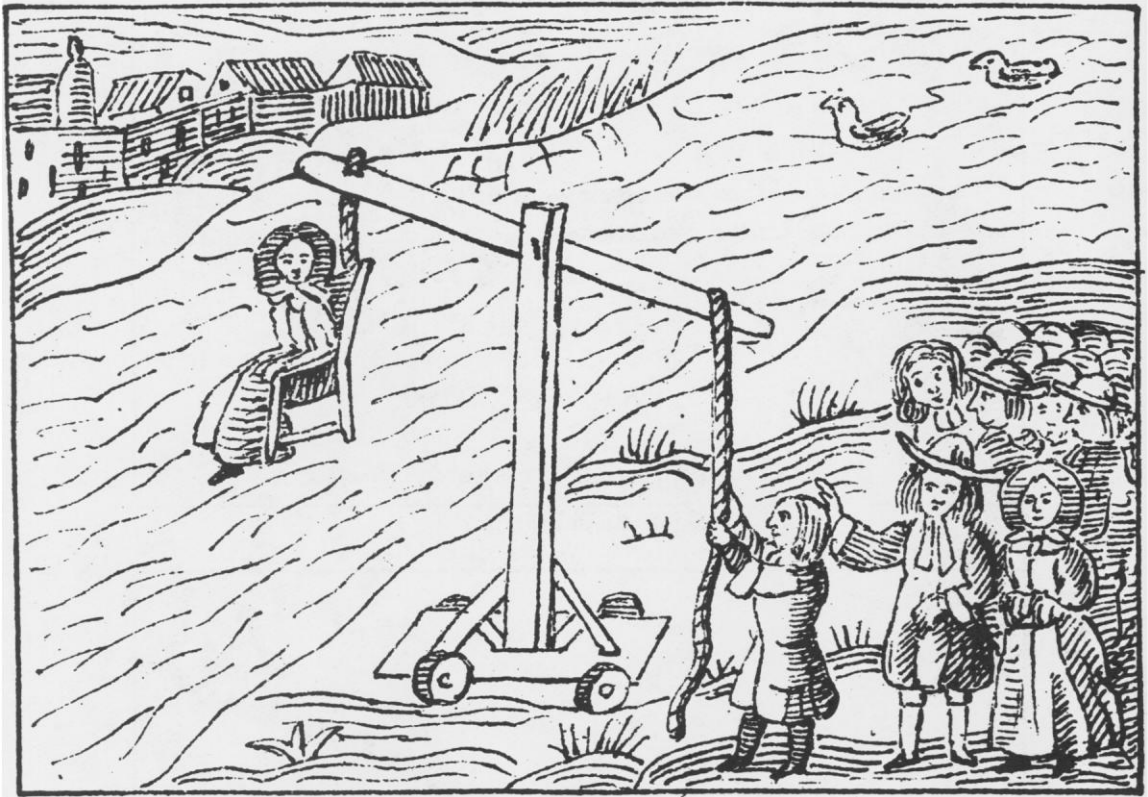


Fig. 1: Brushfield, p. 203.

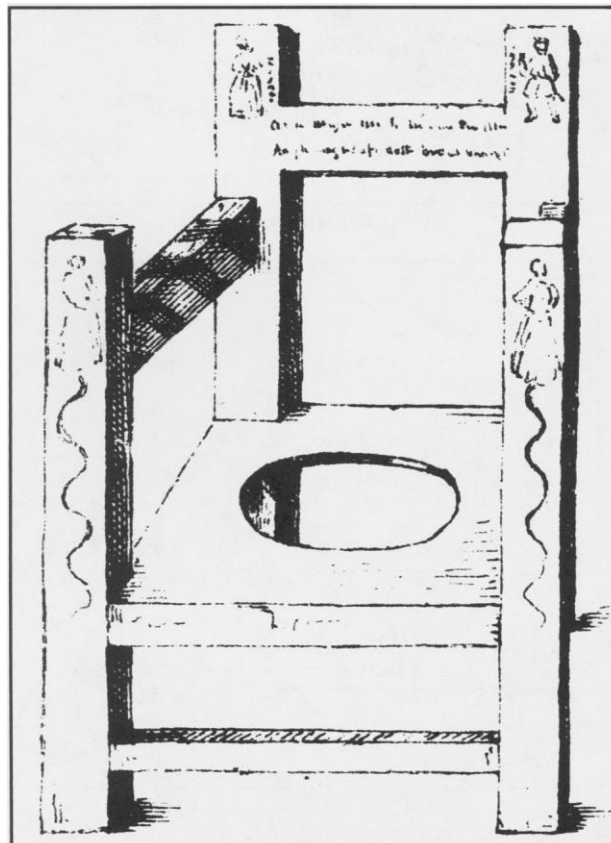


Fig 2: Brushfield, p. 218.

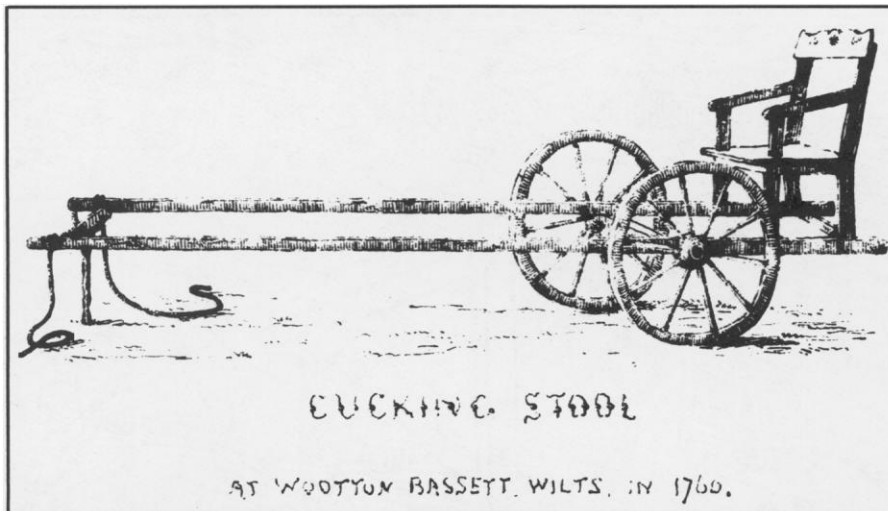


Fig. 3: Brushfield, p. 233.

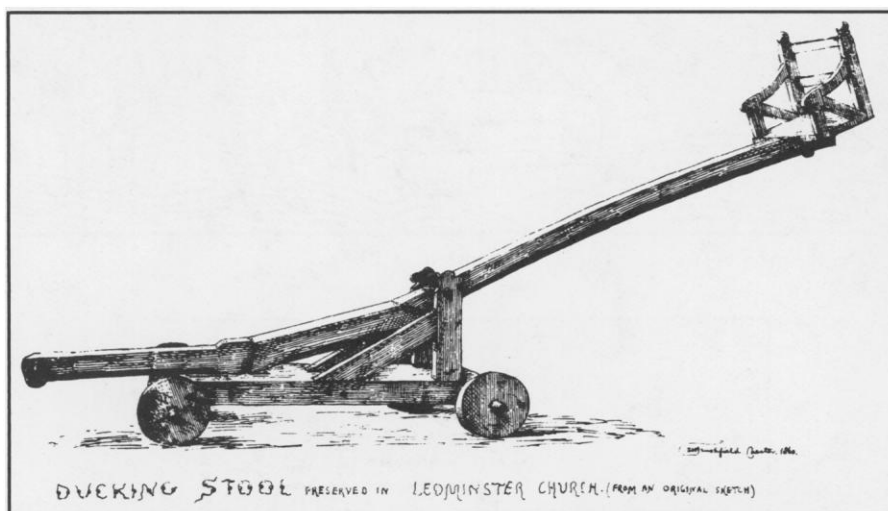


Fig. 4: Brushfield, p. 208.

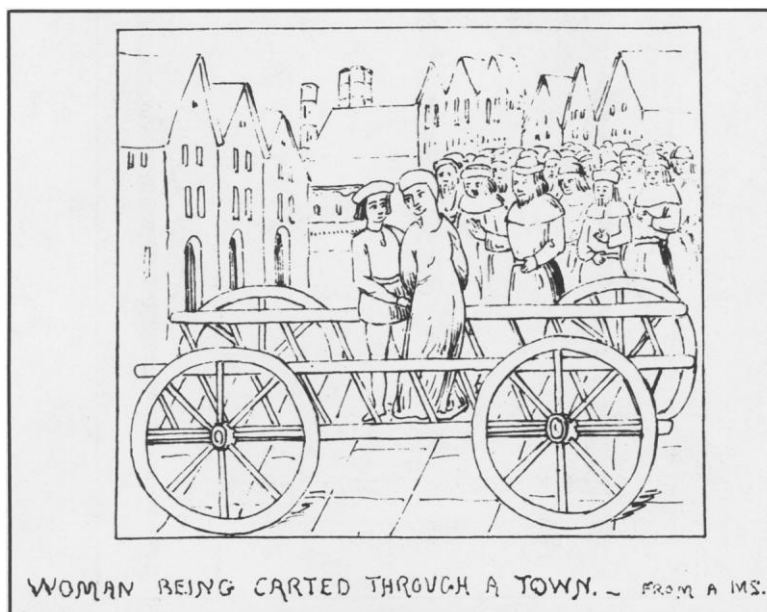


Fig. 5: Brushfield, p. 233.

mid-sixteenth century at Halton, one Margaret Norland was ordered to the cucking stool for having “made an attack upon Robert Carrington, and struck him with her hand contrary to the peace”; Alice Lesthwyte, widow, is likewise ordered cucked “for entertaining other men’s servants”; and the wives of three townsmen are similarly sentenced because they “were common liars and scolds.”¹⁹ Woven into various court records is the information that women called “common chiders amonge their neighbours” or women haled in for the offense of “Flyten or chiden”²⁰ might likewise belong to the category of “common scold.” Above all, the scold seems to have been an assumed category of community life. But since this almost exclusively female category²¹ was defined by an exclusively male constabulary, and since the number of charges for verbal disruption brought against males are by comparison negligible, one can speculate that a “scold” was, in essence, any woman who verbally resisted or flouted authority publicly and stubbornly enough to challenge the underlying dictum of male rule. What is ultimately at stake in the determination to gender such criminal categories as “scold” and “brawler” is the reinforcement of hierarchy through the production of difference. And when the society’s underlying model of “the publick Peace” is inseparable from and constituted by the reinforcement of gender difference, then behavior that is tolerated—even tacitly encouraged—for the gander can, for the goose, become perceived of as a serious offense.²²

The records of cucking-stool punishments occasionally make a reader aware of the victim’s fear, pain, and jeopardy. Both this instrument and the scold’s bridle, however, were devised primarily as shaming devices; both are implicated in the long history of women’s socialization into shame and its culturally transmitted, narrowed allowances of female selfhood that linger on as omnipresent, internalized commandments long after the historical experiences from which they arose have passed from memory. And in this regard the ritual of female punishment seems fundamentally different from that of punishments devised for men. The cucking of scolds was turned into a carnival experience, one that literally placed the woman’s body at the center of a mocking parade. Whenever local practicalities made it possible, her experience seems to have involved being ridden or carted through town, often to the accompaniment of musical instruments of the distinctly “Dionysian” variety,²³ making sounds such as those that imitated flatulence or made some degrading association with her body. By contrast, the male ritual of being pilloried in the town square, while a more protracted and in some respects physically harsher ritual of public exposure,

¹⁹ Quoted from Brushfield, p. 217.

²⁰ p. 222.

²¹ In “Sex Roles and Crime in Late Elizabethan Hertfordshire,” *Journal of Social History*, 8 (1975), 38–60, Carol Z. Wiener notes that she has found two cases of male scolds (one in 1584, another in 1598) in the St. Albans archdeaconry court (p. 59, n. 64).

²² Lewis Coser has even suggested that violence cannot be considered entirely deviant for men, since within certain subcultures it begets respect (“Some Social Functions of Violence” in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 364 [1966], 8–18); and Carol Z. Wiener, citing Coser, suggests that Elizabethan communities may have admired the violent behavior of males, even when it was illegal (p. 59, n. 65). Such attitudes would logically produce different ways of seeing verbal disruptions and noisy challenges to authority.

²³ L. J. Ross, “Shakespeare’s ‘Dull Clown’ and Symbolic Music,” *SQ*, 17 (1977), 107–28, discusses the distinction that was made between the use of “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” music for specific occasions. The charivari is, of course, another “rough music” ritual.

did not spectacularize or carnivalize the male body so as to degrade it to nearly the same extent. Nor for that matter was the body of a male offender subjected to the same disequilibrium of being hoisted and immersed, a movement that spatializes the social categories of high-low/male-female, or to the loss of self-possession that is literalized by depriving the scold of the ability to stand her ground. Furthermore, for a woman to be paraded through town in a cart carried the special disgrace of being made analogous to a capital offender, the only other criminal transported by cart to meet his/her punishment.

The punishments designated for scolds were part of an ideological framework through which a patriarchal culture reinscribed its authority by ritual enactment. Because scolds were seen as threats to male authority, their carnivalesque punishments of mocking enthronement partake of the inverted structure of "world-upside-down" rites.²⁴ Especially given the restriction of both the crime and its punishment to women, however, such enactments also suggest a blunted form of community sacrifice, a scapegoating mechanism through which the public body expels recognition of its own violence by projecting it onto and inflicting it upon the private body of a marginal member of the community.²⁵ Thus both the figure of the "scold" and the cucking stool belong to the purview of comedy in ways that the male brawler and his punishment at the pillory do not. The shrew is, according to M. C. Bradbrook, "the oldest and indeed the only native comic rôle for women."²⁶ And during this period, the "scold" or "shrew" flourished as the object of mockery in such literary forms as the drama and ballad. In Fletcher's shrew play, *The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tam'd*, outraged husbands mock their rebellious wives by imagining them as explorers of a new world who discover not a continent of riches but islands of obedience:

We'll ship 'em out in Cuck-stooles, there they'l saile
As brave *Columbus* did, till they discover
The happy Islands of obedience.

(2.1.57–59)²⁷

Yet beneath these frequent belittlements of women's authority lurk the anxieties that must have prompted such displacements in the first place. Below, in the lines of a late-sixteenth-century ballad that is representative of

²⁴ On inversion see Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top" in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 124–51; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986); Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down: Comedy from Jonson to Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); and essays in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, Barry Reay, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), including Reay's introduction, pp. 1–30, Martin Ingram's "Ridings, Rough Music and Mocking Rhymes in Early Modern England," pp. 166–97, and Peter Burke's "Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century London," pp. 31–58.

²⁵ See especially René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977). But see also Patricia Klindienst Joplin's perceptive critique of Girard's failure to consider how issues of gender relate to the selection of a scapegoat figure on whom a society's own violence can be both enacted and blamed ("The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours," *Stanford Literature Review*, 1 [1984], 25–53).

²⁶ "Dramatic Rôle as Social Image: a Study of the *Taming of the Shrew*," *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch*, 94 (1958), 132–50, esp. p. 134.

²⁷ *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ed. Fredson Bowers, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), Vol. 4, p. 43.

the genre, the parodic picture of a female monarch who had “rid in state” and sat “enthroned” suggests the kind of cultural hysteria that Underdown documents between 1560 and 1640.²⁸

She belonged to Billingsgate
And often times had rid in state,
And sate i' th bottome of a poole,
Inthroned in a *cucking-stoole*.²⁹

Beyond the obvious patriarchal capital, the creation of the social mechanism of shaming rituals for women is paradoxically even more effectively conservative for the way it sets up an equally powerful counter-site for the containment of men. For the abjection of what is already subordinate or marginal creates a social space where, by mere association, the dominant group may itself be controlled.³⁰ It is fear of that very association that makes Mr. T. N. Brushfield react with an excessive and inappropriate overflow of sympathy when he reads about a group of thirteenth-century male bakers who cheated their customers at market and who were consequently sent to the cucking stool along with guilty female brewers. When he reads of men being made to endure a punishment he assumes must always have been used exclusively for women, Brushfield rallies his indignation against the “excesses of mayors and others having authority” for having caused the “greater degree of degradation” that the bakers “must have felt . . . by being exposed to the public gaze” in a punishment “reserved for females.”³¹ Characteristically, he passes over various descriptions of women’s punishments unremarked. As a nineteenth-century Englishman, Brushfield simply assumes both the gendering of punishment and the abjection of the feminine and thus erroneously projects that model back onto the social space of thirteenth-century England.

During the sixteenth century, local authorities seem to have recognized how effectively male social behavior could be controlled by kidnapping the popular traditions of gender inversion and using them to shame acts of male rebellion inside the abjected feminine space. As Natalie Davis has demonstrated, gender inversion in European folkloric tradition originates as a means by which the overthrow of social order could be ritually represented.³² It had thus evolved as a subversion from below. By the late sixteenth century, however, the political symbolism of the crossdressed, unruly woman seems to have been appropriated for new uses, this time from above. In reactions against enclosure that Underdown aptly defines as involving a complex “combination of conservatism and rebelliousness,”³³ peasants from especially the western wood-pasture regions of England

²⁸ See “The Taming of the Scold” (cited in n. 11, above).

²⁹ Quoted from Brushfield, p. 226.

³⁰ The totalizing power of Lady Macbeth’s three-word injunction—“Be a Man!”—whether spoken by a woman or another man and whether spoken in 1591 or 1991, is so powerfully controlling only because the threatened category it invokes—woman—has been culturally defined as the space of abjection. Conversely, note how powerless is the injunction to “Be a Woman!”

³¹ p. 212.

³² See Davis, “Women on Top.”

³³ *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 110.

dressed as women and, through riot, attempted to return the world to the status quo that enclosure had turned upside down. In Wiltshire the leaders of “skimmington” peasant riots adopted the name of “Lady Skimmington,” a folk hero(ine) signifying unruliness, and led “skimmingtons” (demonstrations) against “Skimmington,” an authority figure.³⁴ In another enclosure riot in Datchet, Buckinghamshire, near Windsor, in 1598, the men cross-dressed, likewise signifying their rebellion under the sign of the universal figure of disorder. When the Datchet rioters and later the “Lady Skimmington” leaders from Braydon were caught, they were punished by being made to stand pilloried in women’s clothing.³⁵ By signifying male rebellion against hierarchical privilege as a feminized act, the authorities located insurrection within the space where it could be most effectively controlled: in the inferiorized status of a “womanish” male. The women convicted of the Datchet riot were, by contrast, sentenced to their usual punishment at the cucking stool, wearing their usual clothing. The site of shame for both sexes was, it seems, the same: the space of the feminine.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (written perhaps in the same year as the Datchet riot) Falstaff’s public humiliation is played out by featuring him crossdressed at a fictional site closely associated with the place where the Datchet rioters were punished. In *The Taming of the Shrew* Kate is the archetypal scold whose crime against society is her refusal to accept the so-called natural order of patriarchal hierarchy. But since Kate cannot be socially controlled by gender inversions that would treat her like a man, she, like her sister scolds of the era and the rebellious women in Datchet, is instead treated to ritual humiliation inside the space of the feminine. In Shakespeare’s play the shaming rites begin at the famous wedding. Kaja Silverman’s comments on clothing are helpful in understanding this scene. As Silverman rightly notes, it is historically inaccurate to equate spectacular display in the sixteenth century with the subjugation of women to the controlling male gaze. Until the eighteenth century, when “the male subject retreated from the limelight, handing on his mantle to the female subject. . . . in so far as clothing was marked by gender, it defined visibility as a male rather than a female attribute.”³⁶ On the day of the bridal—traditionally named for the bride because she is the ritual figure being honored on that day—Petruchio’s actions make Kate the object not of honor but of ridicule. Usurping the bride’s traditional delayed entry and robbing her by his outlandish attire of the visual centrality that custom invests in brides synecdochically in the bridal gown,³⁷ Petruchio spectacularizes himself in such a way as to humiliate the bride. Without ever falling into the abjected space of being “womanish” himself, he deprives her of the reverence that she is on this one day due. To her father’s distress at “this

³⁴ See especially pages 106–12 in *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion* for a detailed discussion of “skimmington” and of the complex political associations that were deployed through gender inversions in the popular politics preceding the Civil War. Also see Buchanan Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority: Rural Artisans and Riot in the West of England, 1586–1660* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980), pp. 100–108, 129.

³⁵ *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion*, p. 111, n. 20.

³⁶ “Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, Tania Modleski, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 139–52, esp. p. 139.

³⁷ The attention paid to Hero’s dress in *Much Ado About Nothing*, 3.4, fits into this tradition.

shame of ours" (3.2.7), Kate rightly insists that Petruchio's delayed arrival—which initiates a behavior that he will later insist is "all . . . in reverend care of her" (4.1.175)—is really an instrument by which publicly to shame her:

No shame but mine. . . .
 Hiding his bitter jests in blunt behaviour.
 And to be noted for a merry man,
 He'll woo a thousand, 'point the day of marriage,
 Make feast, invite friends, and proclaim the banns,
 Yet never means to wed where he hath wooed.
 Now must the world point at poor Katherine,
 And say, 'Lo, there is mad Petruchio's wife,
 If it would please him come and marry her!
 (3.2.8, 13–20)

Having cuffed the priest, quaffed the bridal Communion,³⁸ sworn in church "by gogs-wouns," thrown the sops in the sexton's face, then grabbed "the bride about the neck / And kissed her lips with such a clamorous smack / That at the parting all the church did echo" (ll. 167–69), Petruchio succeeds in converting the offstage wedding ceremony into such a disgrace that its guests depart the church "for very shame." He then follows up this performance by asserting his first head-of-household decision. In spite of custom, community, and even an unexpected entreaty from Kate herself, this "jolly surly groom" refuses Kate her bridal dinner, defining his wife as his material possession and making the arbitrary, even anti-communal determinations of a husband's authority supreme:

I will be master of what is mine own.
 She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,
 My household-stuff, my field, my barn,
 My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything. . . .
 (ll. 218–21)

Because shame is already a gendered piece of cultural capital, Petruchio can transgress norms of social custom and instigate the production of shame without it ever redounding upon him. He politically begins his reign, in fact, by doing so. By inverting the wedding rite in such a way that compels its redoing and simultaneously depriving Kate of her renown as the "veriest shrew" in Padua, he seizes unquestioned control of the male space of authority. Of course, all the woman-shaming and overt male dominance here are dramatically arranged so as to make Kate's humiliation seem wildly comic and to festoon Petruchio's domination with an aura of romantic bravado bound up with the mock chivalry with which he "saves" Kate by carrying her away from the guests in a ritual capture, shouting, "Fear not, sweet wench, they shall not touch thee, Kate" (l. 227). But what is being staged so uproariously here is what we might call the benevolent version of the shaming of a scold. Kate is not being encouraged to enjoy even what

³⁸ As another indicator that *Shrew's* wedding ceremonies evoke the pre-1549 rite, the offstage act of Communion to which the text alludes is, once again, an anachronism. Prior to the reform, the Sarum, Hereford, Exeter, Westminster, and Evesham books had all included a special bridal Communion of bread and wine. Legg even notes the connection: "Shakespeare, no doubt describing an Elizabethan marriage in . . . *Shrew*, speaks of the drink brought at the end of the ceremony and of the sops in it" (p. 196).

pleasures may have attended the narrowly constructed space of womanhood. She is being shamed inside it. For, as Petruchio says in 4.1, she must be made, like a tamed falcon, to stoop to her lure—to come to know her keeper's call, and to come with gratitude and loving obedience into the social containment called wifedom. But she will do so only when she realizes that there are no other spaces for her to occupy, which is no doubt why Petruchio feels such urgency to shunt her away from the bridal feast and its space of honor in Padua and lead her off to the isolation defined by "her" new home, the space over which Petruchio has total mastery. Petruchio's politic reign is to construct womanhood for Kate as a site of seeming contradiction, the juncture where she occupies the positions of both shamed object and chivalric ideal. But it is between and inside those contradictions that the dependencies of "wifedom" can be constructed. When Kate realizes that there are no other socially available spaces, and when she furthermore realizes that Petruchio controls access to all sustenance, material possession, personal comfort, and spatial mobility, she will rationally choose to please him and encourage his generosity rather than, as he says, continue ever more crossing him in futile imitation of birds whose wings have been clipped—birds that are already enclosed but nonetheless continue to try to fly free: "these kites"—or kates—"That bate and beat and will not be obedient" (ll. 166–67). Ultimately, in her final speech, Kate does, literally, "stoop" to her lure.

Kate is denied her bridal feast. Nonetheless, the bridal feast that is absent the bride acts as a particularly apt metaphor for the entire play, for the space of the feminine is actually the space under constant avoidance throughout. Even Bianca, who has seemed to occupy the space with relish, bolts out of it in the surprise role reversal at the end of the play. But in a world where gender has been constructed as a binary opposition, someone is going to be pushed into that space. Inside the pressures of such a binary, if the wife refuses or escapes this occupation, the husband loses his manhood. And thus, as Kate is being "gentled" and manipulated to enter the feminine enclosure of the sex-and-gender system, the audience is also being strategically manipulated to applaud her for embracing that fate and to resent Bianca for impelling poor adoring Lucentio into the site of non-manhood. Through Bianca's refusal to compete in the contest of wifely subordination, Lucentio is left positioned as the play's symbolically castrated husband whose purse was cut off by a wife's rebellion. Since someone must occupy the abjected space of a binary—and since doing so is so much more humiliating for men—better (we say) in the interest of protecting the heterosexual bond that women should accept their inferiorization. By dramatizing Kate's resignation as her joyous acceptance of a world to which we recognize no alternatives exist, Shakespeare reinscribes the comfortingly familiar order inside of a dialogue that challenges the social distributions of power but concludes in a formula that invites us to applaud the reinstatement of the status quo.

* * * * *

In the past fifteen years or so, historical scholarship has shifted away from its perennial concentration on the structures of authority and has begun to view history from the bottom up. What has emerged from approaching

historical records in entirely new ways and proposing newly complex intersections of such data³⁹ is a picture of England that requires us to read the social text in terms of such phenomena as the widespread and quite dramatic rise in the years 1560–1640 in those crimes labelled as ones of “interpersonal dispute,” that is, ones involving sexual misconduct, scolding, slander, physical assault, defamation, and marital relations. Keith Wrightson and David Levine offer an instructive explanation of this phenomenon: the statistical increase during these years reflects less a “real” increase in such crimes than a suddenly heightened official determination to regulate social behavior through court prosecution.⁴⁰ This itself reflects the wider growth of a “law and order consciousness,” the increase of fundamental concern about social order that manifested itself in the growing severity of criminal statutes directed primarily against vagrants and female disorder. In other words, what had sprung into full operation was a social anxiety that came to locate the source of all disorder in society in its marginal and subordinate groups. And in the particular types of malfeasance that this society or any other seeks to proscribe and the specific groups it thereby implicitly seeks to stigmatize, one may read its ideology.⁴¹

For Tudor-Stuart England, in village and town, an obsessive energy was invested in exerting control over the unruly woman—the woman who was exercising either her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man. As illogical as it may initially seem, the two crimes—being a scold and being a so-called whore—were frequently conflated. Accordingly, it was probably less a matter of local convenience than one of a felt congruity between offenses that made the cucking stool the common instrument of punishment. And whether the term “cucking stool” shares any actual etymological origins with “cuckold” or not, the perceived equation between a scolding woman and a whore or “quean” who cuckolded her husband probably accounts for the periodic use of “coqueen” or “cuckqueen” for the cucking stool.⁴² This particular collocation of female transgressions constructs women as creatures whose bodily margins and penetrable orifices provide culture with a locus for displaced anxieties about the vulnerability of the social community, the body politic. Thus Ferdinand,

³⁹ For an exemplum text on working with multiple documents coming from a variety of sources, including hitherto unused ones, see Alan Macfarlane, with Sarah Harrison, *The Justice and the Mare's Ale: law and disorder in seventeenth-century England* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981).

⁴⁰ *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700* (New York: Academic Press, 1979). See also J. A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550–1750* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 53; and “Crime and Delinquency in an Essex Parish 1600–1640” in *Crime in England 1550–1800*, J. S. Cockburn, ed. (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 90–109.

⁴¹ In the twentieth century the social offenders who had four centuries earlier been signified by whoring, witchcraft, scolding, and being masterless men and women have been replaced by those whose identity may be similarly inferred from the fetishized criminality the state currently attaches to abortion, AIDS, street drugs, and, most recently, subway panhandling (read homelessness).

⁴² Spargo devotes considerable time to examining this and other etymological questions; see esp. pp. 3–75. An exchange in Middleton's *The Family of Love* depends on the equation. In response to her husband's threat, “I say you are a scold, and beware the cucking-stool,” Mistress Glister snaps back, “I say you are a ninnhammer, and beware the cuckoo” (*The Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. A. H. Bullen, 8 vols. [London: Nimmo, 1885], 5.1.25–28). My thanks to Sarah Lyons for this reference.

in saying that “women like that part, which, like the lamprey, / Hath nev’r a bone in’t. / . . . I mean the tongue,”⁴³ jealously betrays his own desire for rule over what he sees as the penetrable misrule of his Duchess-sister’s body/state. In his discussion of the grotesque tropes that connect body and court, Peter Stallybrass comments on the frequency with which “in the Jacobean theater, genital differentiation tended to be subsumed within a problematically gendered orality.”⁴⁴ Within that subsumption the talkative woman is frequently imagined as synonymous with the sexually available woman, her open mouth the signifier for invited entrance elsewhere. Hence the dictum that associates “silent” with “chaste” and stigmatizes women’s public speech as a behavior fraught with cultural signs resonating with a distinctly sexual kind of shame.⁴⁵

Given these connections between body and state, control of women’s speech becomes a massively important project. By being imagined as a defense of all the important institutions upon which the community depends, such a project could, in the minds of the magistrates and other local authorities, probably rationalize even such extreme measures as the strange instrument known as the “scold’s bridle” or “brank.” Tracing the use of the scold’s bridle is problematic because, according to Brushfield,

notwithstanding the existence at Chester of so many Scold’s Bridles, no notice of their use is to be found in the Corporation [town or city] books, several of which have been specially examined with that object in view. That they were not unfrequently called into requisition in times past cannot be doubted; but the Magistrates were doubtless fully aware that the punishment was illegal, and hence preferred that no record should remain of their having themselves transgressed the law.⁴⁶

Since the bridle was never legitimate, it does not appear, nor would its use have been likely to be entered, in the various leet court records with the same unself-conscious frequency that is reflected in the codified use of the cucking stool. Because records are so scarce, we have no precise idea of how widespread the use of the bridle really was. What we can know is that during the early modern era this device of containment was first invented—or, more accurately, adapted—as a punishment for the scolding woman. It is a device that today we would call an instrument of torture, despite the fact—as English legal history is proud to boast—that in England torture was never legal. Thus, whereas the instrument openly shows up in the Glasgow court records of 1574 as a punishment meted out to two quarreling women, if the item shows up at all in official English transactions, it is usually

⁴³ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (New York: Norton, 1983), 1.2.255–56, 257.

⁴⁴ “Reading the Body: *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and the Jacobean Theater of Consumption,” *Renaissance Drama*, 18 (1987), 121–48, esp. p. 122. See also Frank Whigham, “Reading Social Conflict in the Alimentary Tract: More on the Body in Renaissance Drama,” *English Literary History*, 55 (1988), 333–50; and Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

⁴⁵ The stigma that joins these two signs is clearly a durable one, for even in the twentieth century, if a woman is known as “loud mouthed” or is reputed to participate (especially in so-called “mixed company”) in the oral activities of joking, cursing, laughing, telling boisterous tales, drinking, and even eating—activities that are socially unstigmatized for males—she can still be signified negatively by meanings that derive from an entirely different register.

⁴⁶ p. 46.

through an innocuous entry such as the one in the 1658 Worcester Corporation Records, which show that four shillings were "Paid for mending the bridle for bridlinge of scoulds, and two cords for the same."⁴⁷

In the absence of what historians would rank as reliable documents, very little has been said by twentieth-century historians about the scold's bridle.⁴⁸ There are those who attempt by this lack of evidence to footnote it as an isolated phenomenon that originated around 1620, mainly in the north of England and one part of Scotland. I myself have some increasingly documented doubts. And while problems of documentation have made it possible for historians largely to ignore the scold's bridle even within their new "bottom-up" histories of topics such as social crime, I would argue that its use and notoriety were widespread enough for it to have been an agent in the historical production of women's silence. As such, the bridle is both a material indicator of gender relations in the culture that devised it and a signifier crucial for reconstructing the buried narrative of women's history. Records substantiate its use in at least five English counties as well as in several disparate areas of Scotland; furthermore, likely pictorial allusions turn up, for example, on an eighteenth-century sampler handed down in an Irish family originally from Belfast,⁴⁹ or in the frontispiece of the 1612 edition of Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, where a woman kneels, a skull placed close by, and receives the Bible in one upstretched hand while in the other she holds a bridle, signifying discipline.⁵⁰ As I will argue below, the instrument is probably also signified in a raft of late sixteenth-century "bridling" metaphors that have been understood previously as merely figurative; the item itself may well have appeared onstage as a prop in Part II of *Tamburlaine the Great* and *Swetnam the Woman-hater Arraigned by Women*. Moreover, it almost certainly appears as the explicit referent in several widely read seventeenth-century Protestant treatises published in London.

In Mr. T. N. Brushfield's Cheshire County alone he was able to discover thirteen of these 200–250-year-old artifacts still lying about the county plus an appallingly large number of references to their use. In fact some eighteen months after he had presented his initial count in 1858, Mr. Brushfield, with a dogged empiricism we can now be grateful for, informed the Society that he had come across three more specimens. There are, furthermore, apparently a number of extant bridles in various other parts of England, besides those in Chester County that Brushfield drew and

⁴⁷ Brushfield, p. 35 n.

⁴⁸ David Underdown's "The Taming of a Scold" is a notable exception. Literary essays that have brought the scold's bridle into focus and have included depictions of it include Joan Hartwig's "Horses and Women in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 45 (1982), 285–94; Valerie Wayne's "Refashioning the Shrew," *Shakespeare Studies*, 17 (1985), 159–88; and Patricia Parker, who calls the scold's bridle "a kind of chastity belt for the tongue" (*Literary Fat Ladies*, p. 27).

⁴⁹ The sampler is an heirloom in the family of Michael Neill, who provided this information.

⁵⁰ My knowledge of this bridle comes from Deborah Shuger. In the frontispiece the woman with the bridle is only one figure in a quite complex visualization of interior Protestant virtues, and it is impossible to know whether the bridle she holds intentionally depicts the instrument used on scolds or is purely an allegorical representation of interior discipline. But in a culture where the allegorical is simultaneously the literal and a bridle is being used to produce exterior discipline on unruly women, the problem of signification is such that one representation cannot, it seems to me, remain uncontaminated from association with the other.

wrote about,⁵¹ and each one very likely carries with it its own detailed, local history. Nonetheless, so little has been written about them that had the industrious T. N. Brushfield not set about to report so exhaustively on scolds' bridles and female torture, we would have known almost nothing about these instruments except for an improbable-sounding story or two. As it is, whenever the common metaphor of "bridling a wife's tongue" turns up in the literature of this era, the evidence should make us uncomfortably aware of a practice lurking behind that phrase that an original audience could well have heard as literal.

Scolds' bridles are not directly mentioned as a means for taming the scold of Shakespeare's *Shrew*—and such a practice onstage would have been wholly antithetical to the play's desired romantic union as well as to the model of benevolent patriarchy that is insisted on here and elsewhere in Shakespeare.⁵² What Shakespeare seems to have been doing in *Shrew*—in addition to shrewdly capitalizing on the popularity of the contemporary "*hic mulier*" debate by giving it romantic life onstage—is conscientiously modeling a series of humane but effective methods for behavioral modification. The methods employed determinedly exclude the more brutal patriarchal practices that were circulating within popular jokes, village rituals, and in such ballads as "A Merry Jest of a Shrewde and Curste Wyfe, Lapped in Morrelles Skin, for Her Good Behavvour," in which the husband tames his wife by first beating her and then wrapping her in the salted skin of the dead horse, "Morel." In 1594 or thereabout Shakespeare effectively pushes these practices off his stage. And in many ways his "shrew" takes over the cultural discourse from this point on, transforming the taming story from scenarios of physical brutality and reshaping the trope of the shrew/scold from an old, usually poor woman or a nagging wife into the newly romanticized vision of a beautiful, rich, and spirited young woman. But the sheer fact that the excluded brutalities lie suppressed in the margins of the shrew material also means that they travel, as unseen partners, inside the more benevolent taming discourse that Shakespeare's play helps to mold. And, as Ann Thompson's synopsis of *Shrew*'s production history clearly demonstrates, such woman-battering, although not part of Shakespeare's script, repeatedly leaks back in from the margins and turns up in subsequent productions and adaptations (including, for instance, the Burton-Taylor film version, to which director Franco Zeffereilli added a spanking scene):

In the late seventeenth century, John Lacey's *Sauny the Scott, or The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1667), which supplanted Shakespeare's text on stage until it was replaced in 1754 by David Garrick's version called *Catherine and Petruchio*, inserts an additional scene in which the husband pretends to think that his wife's refusal to speak to him is due to toothache and sends for a surgeon to have her teeth drawn. This episode is repeated with relish in the eighteenth century in James Worsdale's adaptation, *A Cure for a Scold* (1735).⁵³

⁵¹ I am particularly indebted to Susan Warren for her invaluable research in Cheshire County into this issue. Not only was she able to locate the whereabouts of several of these items, but she discovered from an overheard conversation between two women that the notion of a woman "needing to be bridled" was apparently still alive in the local phrasing.

⁵² See especially Peter Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985).

⁵³ pp. 18–19.

What turns up as the means to control rebellious women imagined by the play's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century versions is, essentially, the same form of violence as that suppressed in Shakespeare's playscript but available in the surrounding culture: the maiming/disfiguring of the mouth.

The scold's bridle is a practice tangled up in the cultural discourse about shrews. And while it is not materially present in the narrative of Shakespeare's play, horse references or horse representations—which are, oddly enough, an almost standard component of English folklore about unruly women—pervade the play.⁵⁴ The underlying literary “low culture” trope of unruly horse/unruly woman seems likely to have been the connection that led first to a metaphoric idea of bridling women's tongues and eventually to the literal social practice. Inside that connection, even the verbs “reign” and “rein” come together in a fortuitous pun that reinforces male dominance. And there would no doubt have been additional metaphoric reinforcement for bridling from the bawdier use of the horse/rider metaphor and its connotations of male dominance. In this trope, to “mount” and “ride” a woman works both literally and metaphorically to exert control over the imagined disorder presumed to result from the “woman on top.” Furthermore, the horse and rider are not only the standard components of the shrew-taming folk stories but are likewise the key feature of “riding skimmington,” which, unlike the French charivari customs of which it is a version, was intended to satirize marriages in which the wife was reputed to have beaten her husband (or was, in any case, considered the dominant partner).⁵⁵

In shrew-taming folktale plots in general, the taming of the unruly wife is frequently coincident with the wedding trip home on horseback.⁵⁶ The trip, which is itself the traditional final stage to the “bridal,” is already the site of an unspoken pun on “bridle” that gets foregrounded in Grumio's horse-heavy description of the journey home and the ruination of Kate's “bridal”—“how her horse fell, and she under her horse; . . . how the horses ran away, how her bridle was burst” (4.1.54, 59–60). By means of the syntactical elision of “horse's,” the phrase quite literally puts the bridle on Kate rather than her horse. What this suggests is that the scold's bridal/horse bridle/scold's bridle associations were available for resonant recall through the interaction of linguistic structures with narrative ones. The

⁵⁴ See especially Joan Hartwig (cited in n. 48, above) and Jeanne Addison Roberts (cited in n. 5, above), as well as Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540–1620* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ Antiquarian folklorist C.R.B. Barrett notes, the first recorded skimmington at Charing Cross in 1562. See Barrett “‘Riding Skimmington’ and ‘Riding the Stang’,” *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 1 (1895), 58–68, esp. p. 63. Barrett discusses the way that a skimmington usually involved not the presentation of the erring couple themselves but the representation of them acted out by their next-door neighbors, other substitutes, or even effigies. Thomas Lupton's *Too Good to be True* (1580) includes a dialogue that comments acerbically upon the use of neighbors rather than principles.

As Martin Ingram (cited in n. 24, above) notes, “the characteristic pretext” for such ridings “was when a wife beat her husband or in some other noteworthy way proved that she wore the breeches” (p. 168). The skimmington derisions frequently incorporated the symbolics of cuckoldry—antlers, or animal horned heads, once again collapsing the two most pervasively fetishized signs of female disorder into a collocation by which female dominance means male cuckoldry.

⁵⁶ See Thompson (cited in n. 1, above), p. 12.

scold's bridle that Shakespeare did not literally include in his play is ultimately a form of violence that lives in the same location as the many offstage horses that are crowded into its non-representational space. The bridle is an artifact that exists in *Shrew's* offstage margins—along with the fist-in-the-face that Petruchio does not use and the rape he does not enact in the offstage bedroom we do not see. Evoked into narrative possibility when Petruchio shares his taming strategy with the audience—

This is a way to kill a wife with kindness,
And thus I'll *curb* her mad and headstrong humour.
He that knows better how to tame a shrew,
Now let him speak—'tis charity to show
(4.1.179–82, my italics)

—the scold's bridle exists in this drama as a choice that has been deliberately excluded.

The antiquarians and few historians who have mentioned this instrument assign its initial appearance to the mid-1620s—a date that marks its first entry in a city record in northern England. There is, however, rather striking literary evidence to suggest that the scold's bridle not only existed some twenty to thirty years earlier but was apparently familiar to the playwrights and playgoers of London. The bridle turns up in Part II of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (c. 1587) not as a metaphor but explicitly described as an extremely cruel instrument of torture that Tamburlaine devises for Orcanes and the three Egyptian kings who dare to protest when he kills his son, Calyphas, for being too womanish to fight. Demeaning their protest as dogs barking and scolds railing, Tamburlaine determines how he will punish their insolence:

Well, bark, ye dogs! I'll bridle all your tongues
And bind them close with bits of burnish'd steel
Down to the channels of your hateful throats;
And, with the pains my rigor shall inflict,
I'll make ye roar. . . .⁵⁷

The scold's bridle is, furthermore, the key referent to understanding the condign nature of the punishment that the women jurors of the 1620 *Swetnam the Woman-hater Arraigned by Women* devise for the pamphlet writer, Joseph Swetnam, who had publicly declared himself the chief enemy to their sex. The dramatists, most probably women, dared—at a unique moment in English theater history—to produce and have put on the stage at the Red Bull theater a bold, political retaliation against the author of the notoriously misogynist pamphlet, *The Arraignement of Lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women*. Having brought "Misogynos" to trial, they order him to wear a "Mouzell," be paraded in public, and be shown

In every Street i'the Citie, and be bound
In certaine places to Post or Stake,
And bayted by all the honest women in the Parish.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts I and II*, ed. John D. Jump (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), 4.1.180–84.

⁵⁸ *Swetnam the Woman-hater: The Controversy and the Play*, ed. Coryl Crandall (Purdue, Ind.: Purdue Univ. Studies, 1969), 5.2.331–33. Given the impetus behind the writing of this play, it

The above lines describe the standard humiliations involved in the bridling of a scold. Probably because so little has to date been said about scolds' bridles, Simon Shepherd gives a tentative and parenthetical interpretation that "(presumably 'Mouzell' alludes again to [Rachel] Speght's pamphlet)."⁵⁹ Unwittingly, the gloss obscures the key point in the women dramatists' triumph. Onstage, their play seeks poetic parity through condemning Swetnam to endure precisely the kinds of humiliation that women were sentenced to undergo based on nothing more than the kinds of stereotyped accusations Swetnam's pamphlet reproduces.

Another pre-1620 allusion where the literal bridle seems once again the likely referent occurs in the exchange Shakespeare earlier wrote for his first "shrew scene," the argument between Antipholus the Ephesian's angry wife, Adriana, and her unmarried, dutiful, and patriarchally correct sister, Luciana. Luciana's insistence that "a man is master of his liberty" and Adriana's feminist challenge, "Why should their liberty than ours be more?" provokes a dialogue that seems to turn around a veiled warning about scolds' bridles from Luciana and the furious rejection of that possibility from Adriana.

Luc. O, know he is the bridle of your will.

Adr. There's none but asses will be bridled so.

Luc. Why, headstrong liberty is lash'd with woe. . . .

(*The Comedy of Errors*, 2.1.13–15)

Another likely scold's bridle allusion turns up inside the shrew discourse in *Mundus Alter et Idem*, the strange voyage fantasy purportedly written by the traveler "Mercurius Brittanicus" but actually written by Joseph Hall and published (in Latin) in 1605. The work—which Hall never publicly acknowledged but which went through several printings and was even "Englished" as *The Discovery of a New World* in an unauthorized 1609 translation by John Healey⁶⁰—is accompanied by elaborate textual apparati that include a series of Ortelius's maps, on top of which Hall has remapped his satiric fantasy. In Hall's dystopia the narrator embarks on the ship "Fantasia" and discovers the Antarctic continent, which is geographically the world upside down and therefore contains such travesties of social organization as a land of women. This is named "New Gynia, which others incorrectly call Guinea, [but which] I correctly call Viraginia, located where European geographers depict the Land of Parrots."⁶¹ The geography of Viraginia includes Gynaecopolis, where Brittanicus is enslaved by its domineering women until he reveals "the name of my country (which is justly esteemed throughout the world as the 'Paradise of Women')." ⁶² In the province of "Amazonia, or

seems at least worth speculation that if women ever did dislodge the convention of boy actors during this period and appear onstage in women's roles themselves, this play would seem a prime location for such a possibility.

⁵⁹ *Amazons and Warrior Women: Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (New York: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 208.

⁶⁰ Huntington Brown, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1937).

⁶¹ *Another World and Yet the Same: Bishop Joseph Hall's Mundus Alter et Idem*, trans. and ed. John Millar Wands (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1981); see "Book Two: Viraginia, or New Gynia," pp. 57–67, esp. p. 57.

⁶² p. 58.

Gynandria," the fear of a society based on gender inversion emerges into full-blown nightmare: men wear petticoats and remain at home "strenuously spinning and weaving" while women wear the breeches, attend to military matters and farming, pluck out their husband's beards and sport long beards themselves, imperiously enslave their husbands, beat them daily, and "while the men work, the women . . . quarrel and scold."⁶³ What constitutes treason in this fantasized space is for any woman to treat her husband gently or with the slightest forbearance. As punishment for such treason, Hall's misogynistic satire adds one more twist to the shame-based model of gendered punishment by invoking a scenario of transvestite disguise similar to that which Shakespeare exploits in the boy-actor/Rosalind/Ganymede complications of *As You Like It*: the guilty wife "must exchange clothes with her husband and dressed like this, head shaved, be brought to the forum to stand there an entire day in the pillory, exposed to the reproach and derisive laughter of all onlookers . . . [until she] finally returns home stained with mud, urine, and all sorts of abuse. . . ."⁶⁴ Mercurius Britannicus is able to escape only because, since he is dressed in "man's attire and . . . in the first phase of an adolescent beard,"⁶⁵ he is assumed to be female and thus enjoys a woman's freedom of movement.

Hall's Amazon fantasy—in which men may not select their dress, eat their food, conduct any business, go anywhere, speak to anyone, or ever speak up against their wives' opinions—is, of course, only an exaggeration of the lessons Kate is compelled to learn in Petruchio's taming school. The parallels derive from the fact that underlying both Hall's satire and Shakespeare's play is the same compulsive model that underwrites their culture—the male fantasy of female dominance that is signified by the literary figure of the shrew/scold. Long before the Amazon fantasy emerges, the shrew story is implicit even in Mercurius Britannicus's opening description of Viraginia's topographical features. In the region of Lingua-docia (tongue), the society has ingeniously devised a means to control the "enormous river" called "Sialon" (saliva) that flows through the city of "Labriana" (lips). The overflow from Labriana could "scarcely . . . be contained even in such a vast channel, and indeed, . . . the Menturnea Valley [chin]—would be daily threatened by it had not the rather clever inhabitants carefully walled up the banks with bones."⁶⁶ In the Healey translation the reference to scolds and the implied model of containing them is even clearer. In Healey almost all provinces and cities are associated with women/excess voicing/mouth through such names as "Tattlingen," "Scoldonna," "Blubberick," "Gigglo tangir," "Shrewes-bourg," "Pratlingople," "Gossip-ingoa," and "Tales-borne." To control the river "Slauer" from bursting out and overflowing "Lypswagg," the "countrimen haue now deuised very strong rampires of bones and bend lether, to keepe it from breaking out any more, but when they list to let it out a little now & then for scouring of the channell."⁶⁷

Scolding is a verbal rebellion and controlling it was, in the instrument of

⁶³ p. 64.

⁶⁴ p. 65.

⁶⁵ p. 66.

⁶⁶ p. 57.

⁶⁷ Brown, pp. 64–65.

the bridle, focused with condign exactitude on controlling a woman's tongue—the site of a nearly fetishized investment that fills the discourse of the era with a true “lingua franca,” some newly invented, some reprinted and repopularized in the late sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century. Among this didactic “tongue literature” there is a quite amazing play by Thomas Tomkis that went through five printings from 1607 to 1657 before its popularity expired. In this play, called *Lingua: Or The Combat of the Tongue, And the five Senses For Superiority*, a female allegorical figure—Lingua, dressed in purple and white—is finally brought to order by the figures of the five senses who force her into compelled servitude to “Taste.”⁶⁸

If—as I have speculated—the underlying idea for bridling a woman comes initially from a “low-culture” material association between horse/woman, it was an association being simultaneously coproduced on the “high-culture” side within a religious discourse that helped to legitimate such a literalization. For in addition to a number of repopularized theological treatises in Latin that dedicate whole chapters to the sins of the tongue and emblem book pictures that show models of the good wife pictured as a woman who is literalizing the metaphoric by grasping her tongue between her fingers, the era is stamped by that peculiarly Protestant literature of self-purification in which the allegorical model of achieving interior discipline by a “bridling of the will” appears as an almost incessant refrain. From the Protestant divines came a congeries of impassioned moral treatises that, as they linguistically test out their truths by treading the extreme verge between literal and metaphoric, frequently move close to eliding any boundary between interior and exterior application of self-discipline. Such suggestions occur in works like *The Poysonous Tongue*, a 1615 sermon by John Abernethy, Bishop of Cathnes, in which the personified tongue—“one of the least members, most moueable, and least tyred”—is ultimately imagined as an inflamed and poisonous enemy, especially to the other bodily members, and therefore the member most worthy to be severely, graphically punished.⁶⁹

Discourse about the tongue is complexly invested with an ambivalent signification that marks it always as a discourse about gender and power—one in which the implied threat to male possession/male authority perhaps resolves itself only in the era's repeated evocation of the Philomela myth (a narrative that Shakespeare himself draws upon in a major way for three different works)—where a resolution to such gender contestation is achieved by the silencing of the woman, enacted as a cutting out—or castration—of her tongue. It was a male discourse that George Gascoigne had already

⁶⁸ Catherine Belsey also refers to this play; see *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and difference in Renaissance drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 181.

⁶⁹ Other tongue treatises include an address by George Webbe, Bishop of Limerick, called *The Arraignement of an unruly Tongue. Wherein the Faults of an euill Tongue are opened, the Danger discovered, the Remedies prescribed, for the Taming of a Bad Tongue, the Right Ordering of the Tongue* . . . (London, 1619); an offering by William Perkins in *A Direction for the Government of the Tongue according to Gods Word* (Cambridge, 1593); a sermon by Thomas Adams on *The Taming of the Tongue* (London, 1616); a series of “tongue” sermons by Jeremy Taylor (1653); and Edward Reyner's *Rules for the Government of the Tongue* (1656). The latter is accompanied by a prayer that the book shall prove “effectuall to tame that unruly Member thy Tongue, and to make thee a good Linguist in the School of Christ.” Spargo provides further data on the publication of all these treatises (pp. 110–20).

taken to perhaps the furthest limits of aggression in 1593. Reduced to a court hack by the censorship of his master work, *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers* (which he had retitled *The Posies* and tried without success to slip past the censors), Gascoigne, in his last moralistic work, *The Steel Glas*, created a poetic persona who has been emasculated—hence depotentiated into the feminine—only to be raped and then have her tongue cut out by “The Rayzor of Restraint.”⁷⁰

A discourse that locates the tongue as the body’s “unruly member” situates female speech as a symbolic relocation of the male organ, an unlawful appropriation of phallic authority in which the symbolics of male castration are ominously coimplicit. If the chastity belt was an earlier design to prevent entrance into one aperture of the deceitfully open female body, the scold’s bridle, preventing exit from another, might be imagined as a derivative inversion of that same obsession. Moreover, the very impetus to produce an instrument that actually bridled the tongue and bound it down into a woman’s mouth suggests an even more complicated obsession about women’s bodies/women’s authority than does the chastity belt: in the obsession with the woman’s tongue, the simple binary between presence and absence breaks down. Here, the obsession must directly acknowledge, even as it attempts to suppress, the presence in woman of the primary signifier of an authority presumed to be masculine. The tongue (at least in the governing assumptions about order) should always already have been possessed only by the male. Needless to say, theologians found ways of tracing these crimes of usurpation by the woman’s unruly member back to the Garden, to speech, to Eve’s seduction by the serpent, and thence to her seductive appropriation of Adam’s rightful authority. Says the author of a sermon called *The Government of the Tongue*:

Original sin came first out at the mouth by speaking, before it entred in by eating. The first use we find *Eve* to have made of her language, was to enter parly with the temter, and from that to become a temter to her husband. And immediately upon the fall, guilty *Adam* frames his tongue to a frivolous excuse, which was much less able to cover his sin than the fig-leaves were his nakedness.⁷¹

Through Eve’s open mouth, then, sin and disorder entered the world. Through her verbal and sexual seduction of Adam—through her use of that other open female bodily threshold—sin then became the inescapable curse of humankind. All rebellion is a form of usurpation of one sort or another, and if Eve’s sin—her “first use of language” through employment of her tongue—is likewise imagined as the usurpation of the male phallic instrument and the male signifier of language, the images of woman speaking and woman’s tongue become freighted with heavy psychic baggage. Perpetually guilty, perpetually disorderly, perpetually seductive, Eve and her descendants become *the* problem that society must control.

In relation to scolds’ bridles and the ways that the violent self-discipline urged by these treatises seeks to legitimate a literal practice, Thomas

⁷⁰ In particular see Richard C. McCoy’s essay, “Gascoigne’s ‘*Poëmata castrata*’: The Wages of Courtly Success,” *Criticism*, 27 (1985), 29–55.

⁷¹ As quoted in Spargo, pp. 118–19, n. 28; Spargo notes that there has been considerable controversy over authorship.

Adams's 1616 sermon, "The Taming of the Tongue," is of particular interest. With a title suggestively close to that of Shakespeare's play, it envisions a future of brimstone and scalding fire for the untamable tongue and warns that the tongue is so intransigent that "Man hath no bridle, no cage of brasse, nor barres of yron to *tame* it."⁷² Likewise, in a sermon by Thomas Watson, we are told that

The Tongue, though it be a little Member, yet it hath a World of Sin in it. The Tongue is an unruly Evil. We put *Bitts* in Horses mouths and rule them; but the Tongue is an unbridled Thing. It is hard to find a Curbing-bitt to rule the Tongue.⁷³

Thus, when William Gearing dedicates his ominously titled treatise, *A Bridle for the Tongue: or, A Treatise of ten Sins of the Tongue* to Sir Orlando Bridgman, Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas, his use of the bridle goes too far beyond the metaphoric to be construed as such. If anything, it seems prescriptive. In the dedication Gearing points out that the "Tongue hath no Rein by nature, but hangeth loose in the midst of the mouth," and then invokes the Third Psalm to proclaim that the Lord will "strike" those who scold "on the cheekbone (jawbone), and break out their teeth." Speaking here in an already gendered discourse, Gearing appears to invoke scriptural authority as justification for legalizing the iron bridle as an instrument of official punishment.⁷⁴ In the process, his scriptural reference graphically suggests what could well have happened to the hapless women who were yanked through town, a lead rope attached to the metal bridle locked firmly around their heads, their tongues depressed by a two-to-three-inch metal piece called a "gag." Besides effecting the involuntary regurgitation that the term suggests, the gag could easily have slammed into their teeth with every pull, smashing their jawbones and breaking out their teeth, until finally the offending shrew would be tied up and made to stand in the town square, an object to be pissed on and further ridiculed at will.

There is one known account written by a woman who was bridled. We may infer from Dorothy Waugh's testimony that she experienced the bridling as a sexual violation. When her narrative reaches the moment of the gag being forced into her mouth, her embarrassment nearly overwhelms description and her words stumble as they confront the impossibility of finding a language for the tongue to repeat its own assault. Repeatedly, she brackets off references to the bridle with phrases like "as they called it," as if to undermine its reality. Physically violated, made to stand bridled in the jail as an object of shame for citizens to pay twopence to view, and released still imprisoned in the bridle to be whipped from town to town in a manner that parallels the expulsion of a convicted whore, Dorothy Waugh several times asserts "they had not any thing to lay to my Charge," as if the assertion of her innocence could frame her experience within the discourse of legality and extricate it from the one of sexual violation that it keeps slipping towards. Waugh's account of her "*cruell usage*

⁷² Quoted here from Spargo, p. 115, n. 21, the sermon was first printed in Adams's *The Sacrifice of Thankfulness* (London, 1616).

⁷³ "On the Government of the Tongue" appears in *A Body of Practical Divinity* . . . (London, 1692), pp. 986–94.

⁷⁴ (London, 1663); Spargo concurs with my reading (p. 118, n. 26).

by the Mayor of Carlile" occurs as the final piece of seven Quaker testimonies that comprise *The Lambs Defence against Lyes. And A True Testimony given concerning the Sufferings and Death of James Parnell* (1656). Originally haled off to prison after she had been "moved of the Lord to goe into the market of *Carlile*, to speake against all deceit & ungodly practices," Dorothy Waugh's implicit subversions of the local authority and substitution of biblical quotations as a source of self-authorization is clearly what impelled the mayor into so implacable an antagonism. To the mayor's question from whence she came, Waugh responded:

I said out of *Egypt* where thou lodgest; But after these words, he was so violent & full of passion he scarce asked me any more Questions, but called to one of his followers to bring the bridle as he called it to put upon me, and was to be on three houres, and that which they called so was like a steele cap and my hatt being violently pluckt off which was pinned to my head whereby they tare my Clothes to put on their bridle as they called it, which was a stone weight of Iron by the relation of their own Generation, & three barrs of Iron to come over my face, and a peece of it was put in my mouth, which was so unreasonable big a thing for that place as cannot be well related, which was locked to my head, and so I stood their time with my hands bound behind me with the stone weight of Iron upon my head and the bitt in my mouth to keep me from speaking; And the Mayor said he would make me an Example. . . . Afterwards it was taken off and they kept me in prison for a little season, and after a while the Mayor came up againe and caused it to be put on againe, and sent me out of the City with it on, and gave me very vile and unsavoury words, which were not fit to proceed out of any mans mouth, and charged the Officer to whip me out of the Towne, from Constable to Constable to send me, till I came to my owne home, when as they had not any thing to lay to my Charge.⁷⁵

If we may be thankful about anything connected with the scold's bridle, it is that so many were found in a county whose antiquarian groups were especially diligent in recording and preserving the local heritage. Mr. T. N. Brushfield meticulously preserved all records he uncovered, even to the extent of making detailed drawings of the bridles he found in Cheshire and neighboring areas. But in doing so, he also unwittingly managed to preserve some of the ideas and attitudes that had originally forged these instruments. Thus his own discourse, as he describes these appalling artifacts and instances of their use, stands smugly disjunct from its subject and seems disconcertingly inappropriate in its own investments and responses. As he opens his introduction of the scold's bridle, for instance, he rhetorically establishes a legitimating lineage for his authority by deferring to—without ever considering the implications of the text he invokes—the work of one of England's earliest antiquarians. He thus begins: "In commencing a description of the Brank or Scold's Bridle, I cannot do better than quote a passage from Dr. Plot's *Natural History of Staffordshire*" (1686). He then proceeds, without the slightest dismay or query, to pass along the following description from Dr. Plot:

Lastly, we come to the *Arts* that respect *Mankind*, amongst which, as elsewhere, the civility of precedence must be allowed to the *women*, and that as well in

⁷⁵ pp. 29–30. My thanks to Ann Blake for alerting me to the existence of this first-person account.

punishments as favours. For the former whereof, they have such a peculiar *artifice* at *New Castle* (under Lyme) and *Walsall*, for correcting of *Scolds*; which it does, too, so effectually, and so very safely, that I look upon it as much to be preferred to the *Cucking Stool*, which not only endangers the *health* of the *party*, but also gives the tongue liberty 'twixt every dipp; to neither of which is this at all lyable; it being such a *Bridle* for the *tongue*, as not only quite deprives them of speech, but brings shame for the transgression, and humility thereupon, before 'tis taken off . . . which, being put upon the offender by order of the magistrate, and fastened with a *padlock* behind, she is lead round the towne by an *Officer* to her shame, nor is it taken off, till after the party begins to show all external signes imaginable of humiliation and amendment.⁷⁶

To be released from the instrument that rendered them mute, the silenced shrews of Dr. Plot's narrative were compelled to employ their bodies to plead the required degradation. Yet to imagine just what pantomimes of pain, guilt, obeisance to authority and self-abjection might have been entailed is almost as disturbing an exercise as is imagining the effects of the bridle itself.

Although Brushfield did unearth evidence that the scold's bridle had been used as late as the 1830s, it is clear that the use of such an instrument of torture at any time in England's history had managed to disappear beneath a convenient public amnesia until only a decade prior to his 1858 report. No longer used in public punishments, the bridles had been recycled behind the walls of state institutions; most turned up in places like women's work houses, mental institutions, and other such establishments that, by the nineteenth century, had conveniently removed society's marginal people from public view. In the 1840s the scold's bridle seems to have caught the eye of the antiquarians, and Brushfield is therefore at pains to describe in detail the variety of bridles in the rich trove he has collected in Cheshire. Some, he tells us, are

contrived with hinged joints, as to admit of being readily adapted to the head of the scold. It was generally supplied with several connecting staples, so as to suit heads of different sizes, and was secured by a padlock. Affixed to the inner portion of the hoop was a piece of metal, which, when the instrument was properly fitted, pressed the tongue down, and effectually branked or bridled it. The length of the mouthpiece or gag varied from 1 ½ inch to 3 inches,—if more than 2½ inches, the punishment would be much increased,—as, granting that the instrument was fitted moderately tight, it would not only arrest the action of the tongue, but also excite distressing symptoms of sickness, more especially if the wearer became at all unruly. The form of the gag was very diversified, the most simple being a mere flat piece of iron; in some the extremity was turned upwards, in others downwards; on many of the specimens both surfaces were covered with rasp-like elevations. The instrument was generally painted, and sometimes in variegated colours, in which case the gag was frequently red. . . . A staple usually existed at the back part of the instrument, to which was attached a short chain terminating in an iron ring;—any additional length required was supplied by a rope.

Wearing this effectual curb on her tongue, the silenced scold was sometimes fastened to a post in some conspicuous portion of the town—generally the market-place. . . .⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Quoted from Brushfield, p. 33.

⁷⁷ p. 37.

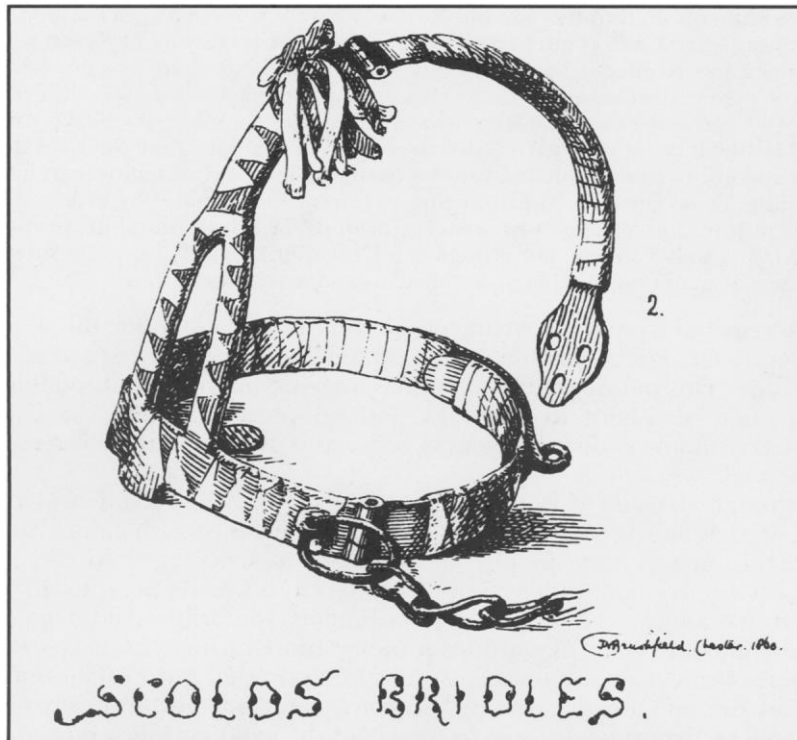


Fig. 6: Brushfield, p. 269.

One bridle (Fig. 6) that was formerly used in Manchester Market “to control the energetic tongues of some of the female stall-keepers,” as Brushfield puts it, was found in the mid-nineteenth century still retaining its original coverings of alternating white and red cotton bands; its “gag being large, with rasp-like surfaces; the leading-chain three feet long, and attached to the front part of the horizontal hoop.”⁷⁸ The spectacular red and white carnival festivity of the Manchester bridle would have no doubt been augmented not only by some appropriately carnivalesque parade and by the bridled woman comically resembling a horse in tournament trappings but likewise by the colorful if painful effects that almost any gag would have been likely to produce. Such effects are vividly illustrated in the account of a witness to a 1653 bridling, who saw

one Ann Bidlestone, drove through the streets, by an officer of the same corporation [i.e., the city of Newcastle], holding a rope in his hand, the other end fastened to an engine, called the branks, which is like a crown, it being of iron which was musled, over the head and face, with a great gap [*sic*], or tongue

⁷⁸ p. 269. This information was forwarded to the Chester Archaeological Society some eighteen months after Brushfield had read his paper and is included by the secretary in the 4 April (1860?) minutes. In the body of the paper, he had earlier noted that bridles with their leading-chains attached to the nose-piece or front of the horizontal hoop—as is the chain on the Manchester bridle—were those designed to “inflict the greatest lacerations to the wearer’s tongue” (p. 37).

of iron, forced into her mouth, which forced the blood out; and that is the punishment which the magistrates do inflict upon chiding, and scoulding women.⁷⁹

The same witness declared that he had “often seen the like done to others.”

Brushfield—having described some six or seven variations of the bridle, including one “very handsome specimen” that was “surmounted with a decorated cross”⁸⁰ (Fig. 7)—leads up to his tour de force, the “STOCKPORT Brank” (Fig. 8). This “perfectly unique specimen, . . . by far the most remarkable in this county,” currently belongs, he tells us, to the corporate authorities of Stockport, whom he thanks effusively for granting him the honor of being the very first person privileged to sketch it:

The extraordinary part of the instrument . . . is the *gag*, which commences flat at the hoop and terminates in a bulbous extremity, which is covered with *iron pins*, nine in number, there being three on the upper surface, three on the lower, and three pointing backwards; and it is scarcely possible to affix it in its destined position without wounding the tongue. To make matters still worse, the chain (which yet remains attached, and . . . measures two feet) is connected to the hoop at the fore part, as if to *pull* the wearer of the Bridle along on her unwilling tour of the streets; for it is very apparent that any motion of the gag must have lacerated the mouth very severely. Another specimen was formerly in the WORKHOUSE AT STOCKPORT, and was sold, a few years ago, as old iron!⁸¹

As he recounts the unauthorized sale of this extraordinary item as scrap iron, Brushfield rises to outrage. He then launches into an indignant description of how this bridle—which was originally and legally the property of Brushfield’s own Chester—had been given away some thirty years before by the Chester jailer. Of this abuse of property rights, Brushfield insists that, while “The liberality of the donor cannot perhaps be questioned . . . the right of transfer, on the part of that official, is altogether another matter!” Therefore, “An inventory of these curious relics, taken once or twice a year under the authority of the city magistrates, would,” Brushfield exclaims, “effectually curb these ‘fits of abstraction.’ ”⁸² And as T. N. Brushfield’s disquisition on scolds’ bridles devolves to issues of male ownership, legitimate transmission, and proprietary rights, as his language slides into a recommendation for *curbing* dangerous signs of liberality, and as he speaks forth his own authoritative proposals for instituting control over rights to own these brutal instruments that carry with them a silenced women’s history, it may well seem to the stultified reader that 1858 is really still 1598 as far as any progress in the complexly burdened history of women’s space within culture is concerned. Were we to shift the venue from sex to race, the assumption would be accurate. For while Mr. T. N. Brushfield read his paper on “obsolete punishments” and registered genteel disapproval over his forefathers’ use of such a barbaric control on the fair sex of Chester County, on the other side of the Atlantic, England’s cultural heirs had carried this model of control one step further. By 1858—as readers of Toni

⁷⁹ Brushfield, p. 37.

⁸⁰ p. 44.

⁸¹ p. 45.

⁸² p. 45.

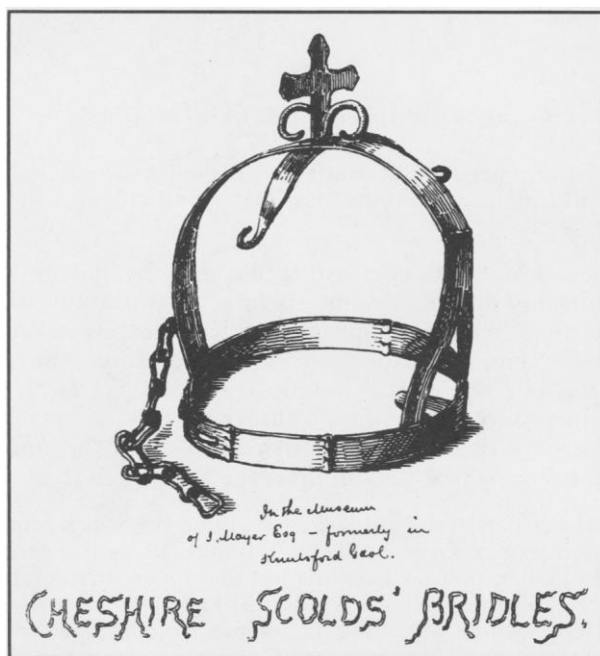


Fig. 7: Brushfield, p. 42.

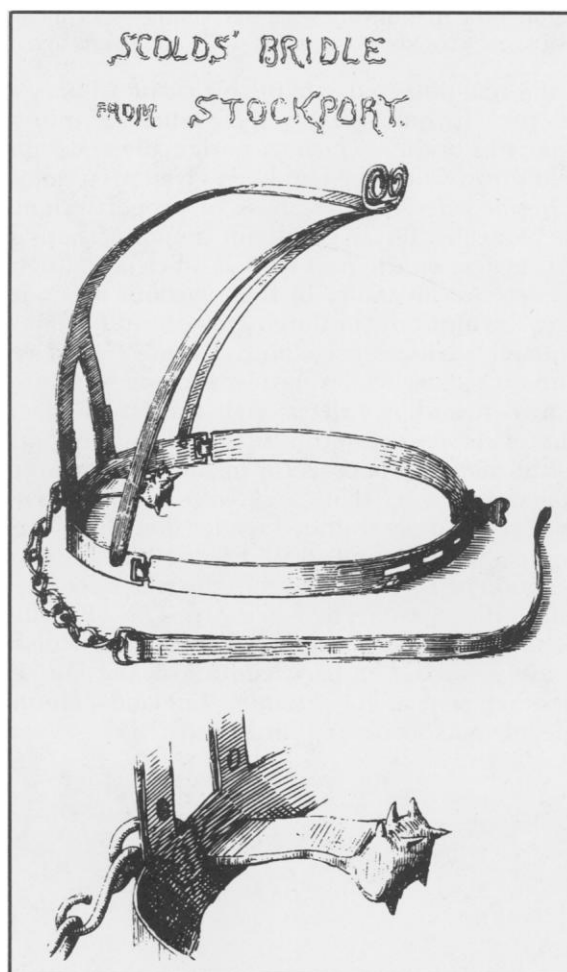


Fig. 8: Brushfield, p. 80.

Morrison's *Beloved* will recall—the scold's bridle had been cycled over to the American South and the Caribbean, where in 1858 it was being used to punish unruly slaves.⁸³

Among historians, “scolds” or “shrews” are commonly defined as a particular category of offender, almost without exception female. In David Underdown's descriptive scenario, “women who were poor, social outcasts, widows or otherwise lacking in the protection of a family, or newcomers to their communities, were the most common offenders. Such women were likely to vent their frustration against the nearest symbols of authority.”⁸⁴ And, we might add, such women were also the most likely to have the community's frustration vented against them. But the evidence that T. N. Brushfield has left about the bridle suggests that this definition of scolds—which is derived mainly from various legal records, most of which are, in any case, documents of cucking-stool punishments—may be far too narrow.

From the rich evidence T. N. Brushfield compiled from a variety of archaeological journals, offbeat treatises, collective town memories, and information given him by senior citizens acting as quasi-official transmitters of oral history in towns and cities around Cheshire, we discover that the scold's bridle was apparently a symbol of mayoral office that passed from one city administration to the next, being delivered along with the mace and other recognized signs of officialdom into the keeping of the town jailer. The jailer's services, we learn,

were not unfrequently called into requisition. In the old-fashioned, half-timbered houses in the Borough, there was generally fixed on one side of the large open fire-places, a hook; so that when a man's wife indulged her scolding propensities, the husband sent for the Town Jailer to bring the Bridle, and had her bridled and chained to the hook until she promised to behave herself better for the future.⁸⁵

One member of Brushfield's antiquary group was a former mayor of the town of Congleton, where hooks on the side of fireplaces still existed. According to his account, so chilling was the memory of this method of controlling domestic disputes that husbands in nineteenth-century Congleton could still induce instant obedience from their wives just by saying, “If you don't rest with your tongue, I'll send for the Bridle, and hook you up.” The local bookseller at Macclesfield reported to Brushfield that he had frequently seen the bridle produced at petty sessions of the court “*in terrorem*, to stay the volubility of a woman's tongue; and that a threat by a magistrate to order its appliance, had always proved sufficient to abate the garrulity of the most determined scold.”⁸⁶ By 1858, although the signified

⁸³ In Morrison, Paul D. carries with him the memory of having “had a bit in [his] mouth. . . . about how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it. [Sethe] already knew about it, had seen it time after time. . . . Men, boys, little girls, women. The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye” ([New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987], pp. 69, 71).

⁸⁴ “The Taming of the Scold” (cited in n. 11, above), p. 120. It was thought unseemly to duck or publicly punish women of higher status, primarily because in that class the status of the husband was invested in the wife, no doubt making officials reluctant to sentence such wives to punishments more harsh than a fine.

⁸⁵ p. 42.

⁸⁶ p. 42.

object had disappeared from social practice, it still existed within the culture as a powerful signifier of what had become a silenced history of women's silencing.

For evidence like the above we probably owe T. N. Brushfield a debt of gratitude. He preserved material that suggests a whole secondary, shadowed subtext to the history of women and the law—a history outside the law and yet one that took place inside England's much touted rule of law; a history that had no juries, no court trials, no official sentences, and that left few telltale records of itself; yet a history that was nonetheless passed down, circulated, and tacitly authorized in town after town, inside county court-houses, city jails, mayoral offices, corporate holdings, and authenticated by an entire set of legitimating signifiers. In the town of Congleton, not only was a husband "thy lord, thy king, thy governor / . . . thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign" (*Shrew*, 5.2.138, 146–47), he was also the law, and his tyrannies were supported by the existing legal institutions. And while such a grim history as that which is carried by the iron bridle may seem far indeed from Shakespeare's zesty comedy about the taming of shrews into conformable Kates, I would insist that it is not. For Kate the fictional shrew is but one of those women whose real history can all too easily be hidden behind and thus effectively erased by the romanticized version of her story that Shakespeare's play participates in creating.

* * * * *

Around 1640 the proverbial scold seems virtually to disappear from court documents. As Susan Amussen informs us, the "formal mechanisms of control were rarely used after the Restoration."⁸⁷

The prosecution of scolds was most common before 1640; while accusations of scolding, abusing neighbours, brawling in church and other forms of quarrelling usually make up between a tenth and a quarter of the offences in sample Act Books of the Archdeacons of Norwich and Norfolk before 1640, they do not appear in the samplebooks after 1660.⁸⁸

Why did "scolds" apparently disappear? Were they always just the projections of an order-obsessed culture, who disappeared when life became more orderly? Or is the difference real and the behavior of women in the early modern era indeed different from the norms of a later one? Did they really brawl, curse, scold, riot, and behave so abusively? Brushfield clearly assumes that they did, and thus is able to rationalize the otherwise disturbing fact that so many of these illegal instruments of torture turned up in good old Cheshire County, his own home space. As he says, "if such a number of tongue-repressing Bridles were required," then they were so because the women must have been so disorderly as to have turned Cheshire into "a riotous County indeed." Benevolently, however, he then continues, forgiving England its disruptive foremothers and invoking the authority of the Bard himself to authorize his beatific vision of silent women:

⁸⁷ *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 130.

⁸⁸ p. 122.

Suffice it, however, for us to say,—and I speak altogether on behalf of [all] the gentlemen,—that whatever it may have been in times gone by, yet it is certain that the gentleness and amiability of the ladies of the present generation make more than ample amends for the past; and Shakespeare, when he wrote those beautiful words,

“Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low; an excellent thing in woman,” unintentionally, of course, yet fully anticipated the attributes of our modern Cheshire ladies.⁸⁹

And it well may be that in his work on scolds’ bridles, T. N. Brushfield may unwittingly have described the silent process of how gender is historicized. He may have recorded the social process by which the women of one generation—perhaps as rowdy, brawling, voluble, and outspoken as men have always been authorized to be—were shamed, tamed, and reconstituted by instruments like cucking stools and scolds’ bridles, into the meek and amiable, softspoken ladies he so admires in his own time.⁹⁰ Perhaps the gentle and pleasing Stepford Wives of mid-nineteenth-century Chester are precisely the products that such a searing socialization into gender would produce—and would continue to reproduce even long after the immediate agony of being bridled or of watching a daughter, mother, or sister being paraded through the streets and forced to endure that experience had passed from personal and recorded memory. The history of silencing is a history of internalizing the literal, of erasing the signifier and interiorizing a signified. The iron bridle is a part of that history. Its appropriate epigraph is a couplet from Andrew Marvell’s “Last Instructions to a Painter”⁹¹—a couplet that could in fact have been written at exactly the moment that some curst and clamorous Kate in some English town was being bridled:

Prudent Antiquity, that knew by Shame
Better than Law, Domestic Crimes to tame.

⁸⁹ p. 47. The Shakespeare lines Brushfield quotes are, of course, King Lear’s words as he bends over the dead—and very silent—Cordelia.

⁹⁰ Such a progress would complement the transformation Margaret George defines as “From ‘Goodwife’ to ‘Mistress’: the transformation of the female in bourgeois culture,” *Science and Society*, 37 (1973), 152–77.

⁹¹ I defer to David Underdown, who earlier used these lines as an epigraph to “The Taming of the Scold.”