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Summer of Shrew, Part 4: Which end's up?

17th century audiences loved John Fletcher's ribald retort "The Tamer Tamed." Now, it's coming back.

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By DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER

Why have we forgotten about a sequel to “The Taming of the Shrew” that turns its gender roles upside down?

In the previous two installments of this series, which ends today, I’ve tried to show how looking closely at Shakespeare’s scripts in their cultural context can make “Shrew”’s depiction of taming much more ambiguous. The assumption seems to persist that a Kate who isn’t fully tamed departs from the spirit of Shakespeare’s play. In an otherwise laudatory [review](#), for example, Dennis Sparks objects to the Portland Shakespeare’s Project’s mocking treatment of Kate’s final speech, claiming that she needs to express a “subservient tone” because “unfortunately those were the times in which the Bard was writing.” Yet as we’ve seen, a winking performance of obedience might actually come closer to rendering the many ironic layers that texture “Shrew.”

The times in which the Bard was writing also turn out to include room for debate. Recent scholarship has emphasized the range of views about gender roles that circulated in the Renaissance. For every pamphlet that denounced outspoken women, another responded in women’s defense. Alongside the ballads I mentioned in Part 2 that depict shrew-taming in violent terms, rival folklore collections chronicled wives who taught their husbands a lesson. Playwrights participated in this dialogue as well: the early seventeenth century saw a host of plays that questioned the status of women, including Ben Jonson’s “Epicoene, or The Silent Woman,” Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton’s “The Roaring Girl,” and Nathan Field’s “Amends for Ladies.”

Among these plays, one took “The Taming of the Shrew” squarely in its sights. John Fletcher’s “The Woman’s Prize, or The Tamer Tamed,” probably written between 1609 and 1611, is the only sequel to a Shakespeare play not by Shakespeare that was performed during his lifetime. It offers some of the best evidence that even Renaissance audiences didn’t always buy Petruchio’s taming strategy. “Tamed” puts women on top of the men who would tame them. It’s outrageously funny. It’s being performed in rotation with Shrew at the [Portland Shakespeare Project](#) this month. And hardly anyone has heard of it.

Here’s the main plot: After Petruchio’s first wife passes away, he plans to marry a new wife, Maria, whom everyone pities because she’s going to get the harsh treatment from the taming master. But once Maria has a chat with her cousin Bianca, she decides that she’s going to stand up for women’s equality by taming her husband instead. After the wedding, Petruchio bets the other guys that he’ll have the best sex that night. (It’s a really raunchy play). But he loses when Maria and Bianca emerge up on the balcony, having borrowed a tip from Lysistrata and barricaded themselves inside Maria’s father’s house to prevent Petruchio from consummating the marriage. A siege begins: the men try to force the women out by cutting off their supplies, but wives from all over the country flock to Maria’s taming school, and the women have a big party, singing that they’ll wear the breeches from now on.



The Country Wife (Holly Johnson) and the City Wife (Jane Vogel) rally to flank Maria (Kayla Lian) as her father (David Bodin) is nudged aside in a rehearsal for Portland Shakespeare Project's staged reading. Photo: Kate McMullan

Petruchio has to agree to their terms: liberty and better clothes. He thinks the battle is over, but Maria hasn't finished. She rejects her new clothes and refuses to obey Petruchio, proclaiming that men and women are equal. As a countermove, Petruchio pretends to be sick, so Maria locks him in the house and runs away with their possessions, telling everyone to keep away because he has the plague. He breaks free and threatens to go abroad; Maria says it'll do him good. Out of desperation, he pretends to be dead, and Maria gives a eulogy lamenting the waste of a life he led. He gives up his pretense; Maria declares that she has tamed him and asks him to kiss her; and Petruchio celebrates being "born again."

Fletcher's written a point-by-point refutation of "Taming of the Shrew." Instead of Petruchio the tamer, he gives us Petruchio the tamed. Instead of isolated wives, he creates a community of vibrant women. Instead of sweet Bianca, he salutes Colonel Bianca, the rebels' commander-in-chief. Even on the level of language, Fletcher reverses Shakespeare. As I discussed in Part 2, Petruchio uses a hawk-taming analogy to explain his strategy for quieting Kate: he would "man [his] haggard," his wild hawk, by keeping her hungry and awake until she obeyed him. Bianca turns this metaphor upside down: she celebrates "the free haggard"—the unmanned hawk—"which is that woman that has wing, and knows it," who will "show her freedom" and "command / What she desires." Rather than learn to please their husbands, these women let their own desires drive their action.

What's most subversive in "The Tamer Tamed" is the suggestion that Petruchio never really tamed Kate, after all. Maria says she fears "Neither Petruchio Furius, nor his fame," with the suggestion that his fame rests on a false rap. One of his friends admits that "the bare remembrance of his first wife / Will make him start in's sleep, and very often / Cry out for cudgels, cowl-staves, anything, / Hiding his breeches out of fear her ghost / Should walk and wear 'em yet." This sounds like post-traumatic stress disorder; Petruchio's still reliving his battles with Kate because they were never over. Despite her final speech in "Shrew," Fletcher suggests, Kate was still trying to wear the breeches. I think that's our clearest evidence that even a seventeenth-century audience thought that the ending of "Shrew" was open to more

than one interpretation.



Petruchio (Peter Platt) starts to grasp Maria's strategy as the Country Wife (Holly Johnson) keeps watch in a rehearsal for Portland Shakespeare Project's staged reading. Photo: Kate McMullan

Seventeenth-century audiences adored "The Tamer Tamed." When it was performed back-to-back with "Shrew" for King Charles I in 1633, the Master of the Revels recorded that "Shrew" was "Likt" but "Tamer" was "Very well likt." There is, of course, the possibility that "Tamer Tamed" was very well liked because the audience thought it was a spoof; that is, instead of arguing subversively for female power, the play was just caricaturing disobedient women through rowdy misogynist stereotypes, and was actually quite conservative. That is a possibility, but I don't think it's likely, for two reasons. The first is that "The Tamer Tamed" was censored for that 1633 court performance, and when something's censored, it's usually because it challenges the official order. The Master of the Revels said that "Tamer Tamed" contained "foul and offensive matters" and that he had to purge it "of oaths, profaneness, and ribaldry" so that there wouldn't be any "offensive things against church and state." We don't know

exactly what those offensive things were, but the censorship certainly suggests that Fletcher was perceived to be going against the norm. The second reason is that an epilogue was added to “The Tamer Tamed” for its court performance reassuring the audience that the play didn’t advocate female supremacy, and you don’t need an epilogue saying that you’re not advocating female supremacy unless you’re worried that someone would see your play and think that you were advocating female supremacy. There are limits to Fletcher’s critique: the women still work within the institution of marriage (except perhaps Bianca; it’s not clear in the text whether she has a husband), and once Petruchio capitulates, Maria announces, “I have tamed ye, / And now am vowed your servant.” But Maria commands the play with wit and savvy, masterminding each plot twist and flummoxing the men with her good-humored resistance.



A “new love” for Petruchio (Platt) and Maria (Kayla Lian) as her father (Bodin) and the Country Wife (Johnson) applaud.
Photo: Kate McMullan

Even the spectacle of women reveling in bawdy humor, not just suffering as the butt of men’s jokes, could be enough to qualify Fletcher’s play as radical in the twenty-first century. (I’ve been trying to

make the case for “Tamer” as the “[Bridesmaids](#)” of the Renaissance.) Working on a speedy rehearsal schedule with the Portland Shakespeare Project acting company, my Linfield student Kyra Rickards and I developed three rules for glossing unfamiliar words in the script:

- 1) If it’s a food object, it’s either an aphrodisiac or a purgative.
- 2) If it’s a non-food object, it’s a euphemism for male or female genitals.
- 3) If it’s a reference to riding horseback, it’s not about riding horseback.

This embrace of bodily pleasure and social inversion—what literary scholars call the “carnavalesque” mode—makes Fletcher tremendously entertaining, but may also have contributed to his obscurity today.

Fletcher was arguably more popular than Shakespeare in the seventeenth century, and Restoration critics like John Dryden suggested he might have been a better playwright as well. (Fletcher succeeded Shakespeare as the playwright for The King’s Men and collaborated with Shakespeare on several plays: “The Two Noble Kinsmen,” the lost play “Cardenio,” and perhaps “Henry VIII.”) The success of “Tamer” seemed to have spurred revivals of “Shrew,” rather than the other way around. At the end of John Lacy’s 1667 “Shrew” adaptation, for example, the male hero concedes: “I’ve Tam’d the Shrew, but will not be asham’d, / If next you see the very Tamer Tam’d.” “Tamer” was revived throughout the eighteenth century, but when the cult of Shakespeare began to flourish around his bicentennial celebrations in the 1760s, Fletcher started to lose ground. The scholar Gary Taylor has proposed that “the logic of bardolatry typically deifies one writer by demonizing others”; in the case of Shakespeare-worship, the victim was Fletcher. His plays (and his collaborations with Francis Beaumont) were called “gross and indecent” even by their own editors, and “Tamer” seems not to have been performed again until the feminist movement revived it in the late 1970s.

Recently, “Tamer” has enjoyed a bit of a renaissance. The Royal Shakespeare Company paired “Shrew” and “Tamer” to great [acclaim](#) in 2009, and closer to home, Bag & Baggage Productions tried a [double-bill](#) in 2010 with a slimmed-down “Shrew” as the first act and a truncated “Tamer” after intermission. When I’ve taught the plays together in a Linfield seminar on Shakespeare and his rivals, students tend to replicate the 1633 court verdict: “Shrew” is liked, but “Tamer” is very well liked. It’s the retort so many people crave to redress Kate’s taming in “Shrew.” The Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Portland Shakespeare Project productions of “Shrew” are so rich and entertaining that audiences won’t leave in need of a palate cleanser. But if you want to see Shakespeare in dialogue with one of his most celebrated contemporaries, and you want to see the play that was originally preferred to “Shrew,” then you won’t want to miss *The Tamer Tamed*. The times in which the Bard was writing won’t ever look the same.

NOTES:

There are two widely available editions of “The Tamer Tamed”: [one](#) edited by Celia R. Daileader and Gary Taylor for Revels that champions the play’s feminism; the [other](#) edited by Lucy Munro for *New Mermaids* that takes a more cautious approach.

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WEDNESDAY: An introduction to the Portland and Ashland productions.

THURSDAY: Who does the taming, and who's getting tamed?

FRIDAY: A Sly figure and an alternate text shift the balance of the play.

TODAY: The final episode—Fletcher's "The Tamer Tamed."