Taming Trope Turnabout: John Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed*

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Abstract

Within literature and history exists a long-standing tradition of men tyrannizing over women and harsh penalties for any woman who does not conform to society's expectations. From these trends emerged the taming tradition, almost how-to guidebooks, in which a representative patriarch subdues and reforms an unruly woman. This man, most notably Petruchio from William Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew, *controls the errant female via her output in physical pleasures, will power, and ability to speak. With the transition into the Jacobean era, many changes were taking place; government and society were adapting, and there was widespread debate about customary gender roles. Playwright John Fletcher responded to the taming trope but told the story directly reversed in his work* The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tamed, *where a woman character shows Shakespeare's Petruchio—now a widower—how to behave, thereby earning a companionable kind of equality in her marriage to the former woman-tamer. Though likely intended as a parody, or even a cruel kind of comedy where the humor comes from the impossibility of the situation, this text complicates the taming tradition by directly reversing the gender roles. Despite situating the woman as the tamer over the errant husband, however, Fletcher's play utilizes the customary elements of a taming tale and ultimately finds its happy ending in the protagonists settling back into traditional roles within the gender hierarchy. While contemporary audiences might have found this comedic, the modern feminist can read into this dramatic situation the fomentation of gender discontent.*

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"He that knows better how to tame a shrew, / Now let him speak: 'tis charity to show."—

Petruchio, *The Taming of the Shrew* (4.1.146-7), William Shakespeare

The epigraph above is self-conscious because Shakespeare's text in many ways epitomizes a popular canon of instructive literature on the subject of "how to tame a shrew." The popularity of the tales, songs, jokes, manuals, and plays belonging to this taming tradition coincided with real, historical concerns about outspoken women and the male-dominated hierarchy. During the Jacobean era, debate about women's role and social status poured onto public stages and reached particular intensity in the 1610s (Chetty 93). At this point, playwright John Fletcher engaged creatively with the subject by inverting the traditional expectations. In his play *The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tamed* (1611), Fletcher's protagonist Maria appropriates the repressive techniques from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* by asserting her mastery through her physical pleasures, her will power, and her shrewd speech. Though likely intended as a parody, or even a cruel kind of comedy where the humor comes from the impossibility of the situation, this text complicated the tradition by directly reversing the gender roles in the traditional taming tale. While contemporary audiences probably found this comedic, the modern feminist can read into this dramatic situation the fomentation of gender discontent.

In the England of Shakespeare and Fletcher, the social and political system was built on the foundation of distinctive gender inequality. Government and society depended on each person knowing and keeping his or her place. The idealized woman was subservient and controlled. She had virtually no voice. She was to be silent, obedient, and responsive without independent agency while, simultaneously, being receptive to input from male authority, first her father and then her husband, regarding their words, wills, and desires. Men were empowered, expected, and encouraged to control their women into compliance. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare illustrates the core of the shrew-taming tradition—the idea that masculine authority and input must control a woman's output.

Following in the footsteps of his great predecessor and courting the public taste, Fletcher also engages with the topic of gendered social conformity, as well as the techniques applied to achieve it. With his work, a sequel to Shakespeare's tale audaciously appropriating the Bard's characters, this young playwright followed up on a popular trend and also a public issue:

> Fletcher recognises sexism as a significant issue to be addressed and makes clear the complex interaction of conflicting subjectives and power in this play. The emphasis is both on the individual empowerment of the protagonist as well as social transformation—the need to change society as it was currently arranged. (Chetty 94)

Though young and relatively new to the London theater scene, Fletcher had the creativity and the daring to take a diametrically opposite approach and to parody the culturally familiar story by telling it with the genders reversed. In his text, Fletcher spotlights a female protagonist subduing a man whose mercurial temperament recasts him not as the rightful representative of patriarchy but as the socially distasteful other. This depiction seemingly empowers the woman to tame her "tyrant." Although it is unlikely that Fletcher had any larger social or reformist intentions, his text, when read against historical context, reveals and complicates the major tenants of the taming tradition through their explicit inversion.

In sixteenth-century England, a woman who was too outspoken or whose public behavior did not match cultural expectations of the "feminine" was labeled a scold or a shrew. Women who fell under this category were subjected to cruel, public punishment. The spectacle aspect was meant as a general corrective to restore the dominant ideology of gender hierarchy and "the expectation for women to be chaste, silent, and obedient because through such education 'the student learns to acquiesce to the prevailing social hierarchies by internalizing the dominant value system and tempering passions that threaten social order'" (qtd. in Nesler). Seeing the pain and shame of another was a powerful preventative measure, and these public reprisals were harsh for that purpose. Fear of anything undermining patriarchal power, described as a "crisis in gender," was correlated with a noted upsurge of crimes specifically gendered as female in the court records of this period.

This phenomenon was also likely the impetus for the invention and application of punishments exclusively designed for women (Boose 184). The first step to enforce women's social conformity was to redefine crime so as to identify—and subsequently penalize—any behavior outside the requisite, submissive mode. Under this system, women were brought before civil authorities for "offenses" such as refusing to work as servants, quarreling with neighbors, and scolding or dominating their husbands (Underdown 119). A further step was to invent and implement barbaric consequences like the cucking stool and the scold's bridle (Boose 186, 199). The ability

to assign a charge to these offenses isolated the perpetrator and made the perceived danger seem manageable to masculine authorities. Ultimately, all of these countermeasures were brought to bear on the disruptive, unruly woman.

The public exposure, punishment, and reclamation of disruptive female "criminals" easily transitioned from the village street and civil courts to the city theatre. Shakespeare reacted to this phenomenon with a theatrical comedy depicting how a virulently male patriarch tames an outspoken woman for his personal use and on behalf of society: "*The Taming of the Shrew* offers a virtual manual of techniques devised to persuade women of the natural basis of culturally determined differences" (Freedman 127). In the relationship between men and women someone had to be dominant, and Shakespeare's message was that the master should be the man. By illustrating step-by-step the process of shaping Kate into an idealized version of womanhood, Shakespeare upheld one of society's most fundamental myths, which "privileges men over women, sanctions the exchange between men of their daughters and wives, and equates misogyny with civilization itself" (Freedman 130). Men were not simply permitted to rule over women's utterances and social actions; they were expected to do so. Despite its offensive acquisitiveness, Petruchio's "view of the marital relation is sanctioned by his society, and he is quite serious about treating Kate as his chattel. His object is to put her in her place as a woman and wife" (Paris 342). Thus, Shakespeare embodied the basic tenets of the taming tradition.

By contrast, the Fletcher taming text comically suggests "there will be more interest in the situation and more truth, if there is not merely action but interaction, if (to put it simply) the woman fights back" (Leech 52). Impossibly spirited and clever, Maria does not just resist Petruchio, she completely turns the tables on him. *The Tamer Tamed* "undermines our expectations through a resolute, witty woman and a series of tricks that profoundly challenge our assumptions about Jacobean society" (McMullan xvii). Taking on each area of gendered suppression illustrated by Shakespeare and supported by early modern patriarchal structure, Fletcher's tamer presents the radical idea that all wives could deserve the kind of equality she laims. Though the contemporary audience might have found this comedic, the modern feminist can read into this dramatic situation the fomentation of gender discontent.

One area challenged by Fletcher's protagonist is the idea that women are not allowed voice regarding their sexual desires and physical pleasures. A wedding with its rich garments, its sumptuous feasting, and its expec-

tation of the eventual sexual consummation was intended to delight the senses. Society marked this occasion as the transition from maiden to matron and as a rare celebration and pleasure for a woman. In Shakespeare's taming narrative, Petruchio denies his reluctant bride these enjoyments:

> 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, Petruchio spectacularizes himself in such a way as to humiliate the bride. . . . [H]e deprives her of the reverence that she is on this one day due. (Boose 192)

Due to Petruchio's clownish antics, no one anticipates Kate's arrival or admires her appearance; after the ceremony, she is dragged away before the feast at her father's house and is then denied the meat set out at her husband's home; and, finally, her bridegroom only unsettles and agitates her in bed. No time is wasted in Kate's re-education because, as soon as she enters her husband's house, her food, sleep, and sexual relations are curtailed and controlled by her self-appointed tamer (Shakespeare, *Shrew* 4.1, 4.3). It was customary for a bride to get little sleep on her honeymoon, but Kate gets neither rest nor sexual fulfillment. She is shown her desire only as a tease before her "loving" husband takes it away: "Petruchio makes Kate aware that she is completely in his power and depends on him for the necessities of life, like food and sleep. . . . Petruchio is demanding that Kate relinquish her own sense of reality and assent to his. . . . Realizing that she will never have anything she wants as long as she resists, Kate capitulates" (Paris 343). Her pleasure, even her very sustenance, is demonstrably dependent upon her husband's input.

However, while Shakespeare's Kate is alone and completely within Petruchio's power, Fletcher's Maria is publicly surrounded by a community of self-asserting, pleasure-seeking women. In Fletcher's text the local wives rally around the new bride who stands for female desire. In an introduction to a new print edition of the play, Celia Daileader and Gary Taylor explain that, essentially, the women

> protest by *having fun*. So as not to become 'prisoner[s] to [men's] pleasure', they create a sanctuary for their own pleasure. . . . In memory of the ill-dressed, ill-fed Katherine, the rebels demand money for fine clothes, gorge on pudding and pork, and drink, and drink, and drink, and drink. (20)

According to the dictates of patriarchy, a woman was to embody maiden modesty and moderation. Maria and her comrades rebelliously celebrate indulgence and excess. The sheer number of women involved and the public nature of the event could suggest that this is not an issue of discord in one marriage but a general challenge to the cultural subjection of a woman's pleasure to that of a man. As a martial group, these women "remain determined to correct the inequities of the past, a past which seems explicitly to include the lessons taught by Shakespeare's consideration of gender issues in *The Taming*" (Smith 44). Maria and her sister rebels give their bodies expression through riotous merry-making in the upper chamber, which is a quasi-sacred space associated with the subjugation of their bodies by defloration (Johnson 126). As one would expect, the bridal suite was the site of great physical fun on the wedding night, but in Fletcher's play the groom is deliberately excluded.

The larger point seems to be that these women do not need a man to have a good time: "Locked in and prepared for survival due to their domestic foresight, the women create a transgressive, self-sustaining community independent of men . . . and obtain power over their own households and bodies" (Nelser 10, 11). With provisions to delight their physical bodies and a sense of female solidarity, these wives practically assault the men with their exuberant presence. In this scene, Fletcher's women feast themselves, manifesting their oral enjoyments through good food, rather than waiting to be fed like a pet (Daileader and Taylor 23). In this way Maria's outpouring of desire and pleasure appears to flout gender ideology, but another way that she revolts is by refusing to grant her husband conjugal rights: "The bedchamber into which the women barricade themselves serves as an externalisation of their own bodies, as they protect themselves from the men's attempts to enter both it and them" (Chetty 95). Because she is out of his reach and he cannot physically force her to accept his dominance, Petruchio is compelled to wrestle with her intellectually and philosophically. Despite Maria's open profession that she willingly consented to her marriage with Petruchio, he must conform to her standards as a husband before she will grant him conjugal rights (Barnhill 270). She will not automatically surrender to his desire or accept input from his sexual advances.

This does not mean, however, that Maria disregards desire and the pleasure of sexual intimacy. When Petruchio implies that if she does not yield he will go and sleep with some other woman, Maria rejoins that she will just take another man for a lover, ignoring the sexual double standard (Fletcher 1.3.230-36). Just because she does not wish to be ruled by him

does not mean she will deny herself; her desire for independence coexists with her heterosexual desire (Daileader and Taylor 12). Fundamentally, Maria does feel desire for her mate, but she masters it until she can enjoy this pleasure without sacrificing her selfhood in the process. The process of her opposition "departs from irrational unruliness traditionally associated with shrews," depriving not "from passionate imbalance, but instead [arising] from a calculated plan to preserve her identity within marriage" (Crocker 411). Admonishing her little sister Livia on the subject, Maria states that a "childish woman that lives a prisoner to her husband's pleasure has lost her making [i.e. betrayed her creation], and becomes a beast, created for his use, not fellowship" (Fletcher 1.2.136-9). Maria has too much integrity herself and desires a more substantive marriage, so she exercises patience and self-control.

When Maria initially refuses to bring Petruchio up to her bed, Fletcher's male characters assume that her purpose is to preserve her purity (1.3.107-8). However, far from subscribing to the cult of eternal virginity, Maria advocates for the rights of wives, herself in particular, to have a fulfilling sex life (Daileader and Taylor 21). As Maria schemes with Livia and her cousin Bianca after the wedding, Fletcher adapts Petruchio's analogy of hawk training for Maria's speech with considerable innuendo and double entendres (1.2.147-57). Despite the veiling metaphor, it is hard to miss the orgasmic nature of her description:

> The play becomes a celebration of female sexuality, of female pleasure, as Maria rejects the lie-back-and-think-of-England mentality encouraged by the conduct-books in favor of a sex-life—and by extension, a domestic life—that will provide her with what she wants and needs. Petruchio, if he wants to consummate the relationship, will have to realize what these requirements are and adjust himself to them. (Chetty 94)

Maria is not interested in her own enjoyment at the expense of Petruchio's. Her aim regarding sexual consummation is in favor of mutuality. The masculine worldview may associate love and duty in marriage with how well the wife satisfies her husband sexually, but Maria demonstrates the power of withholding sex—a common trope in dramatic comedy—to draw men's attention to other aspects of the relationship (Smith 52). This dynamic is only one stage of her campaign to tame her tyrannical husband. The field where Fletcher's tamer takes her stand is in favor of physical pleasure expe-

riences for women, not dependent on men.

Losing no time, Fletcher's Maria turns the tables on Petruchio and the traditional notion of taming by letting loose the output of her pleasures and refusing the input of her husband's desire. Next, Maria's output challenges convention regarding will power. She seizes her opportunity to assert her demands while the marriage is unconsummated, and she claims the higher ground. If he submits, she will have laid the foundation for greater equality. Maria's steps here are by no means random. Her actions are strategic since she "has decided to exert her sovereignty, and locks herself in her apartment until Petruchio will submit to the terms of her demands" (Ferguson vii). For the benefit of the audience, in the very first scene where Maria is introduced, Fletcher has her a "fundamental objective: to bring about Petruchio's recognition and acceptance of her independent soul, encompassing, as it does, her will and intellectual powers" (Johnson 102). Maria is intentional, almost methodical, in how she demonstrates her will power and works against domination by male authority.

During her dominion in the upper chamber, Petruchio and her father—both recognized male authorities—try to talk Maria back into "proper" obedient submission. However, as both representatives of patriarchy urge her to her "duty," she cleverly elucidates her unique position. Seizing the moment of liminality after the wedding ceremony and before the consummation to stage her protest, "Maria creates and occupies a threshold between maid and wife, effectively defying patriarchal definition and categorization of women according to their marital status" (Johnson 127). As a married woman, Maria is no longer subject to her father, and as her marriage is unconsummated it is not yet legitimate; therefore, she is not subject to her nominal husband (Fletcher 1.3.191-8, 208-18). This liminality creates for Maria a scenario of power, one from which she is in a position to negotiate. Attempting to manipulate Maria by an appeal to her emotions, Petruchio next speaks in the name of love, more than duty, as he demands her obedience (Johnson 153). He still imposes his will, but he also veils the misogynist ideology with interpersonal rhetoric. However, Maria's rhetoric resists his attempt because, when "Petruchio insists that Maria owes him obedience because she is a wife, she claims their marital obligations should be mutual" (Crocker 413). A shrewd woman, Maria not only sees through Petruchio's subtle subjugation, but she also asserts her will rationally.

Countering will for will and rhetoric for rhetoric, Maria simultaneously withstands her husband's enticement and expose his bad temper. Though Petruchio can speak fairly, he upholds the gendered ideology that

allows him to rule her. Therefore, he is unprepared for her refusal to obey, and, after being publicly humiliated, Petruccio "unleashes a rant debasing women's bodies and utterly dismissing their minds" (Johnson 120-21). After Petruchio recovers from his irritation and embarrassment, he agrees to Maria's demands—expecting to conquer her more directly afterward. Petruchio's assent ends the initial skirmish and brings the women down, but he still has to contend against Maria's will. Although she descends from her high ground, Maria still refuses to yield to Petruchio; whereupon, he resorts again to bullying and threats. In "exposing Petruccio's penchant for violent outbursts Maria essentially exposes to what extent Petruccio's authority as husband depends upon physical coercion and how little it has to do with reason" (Johnson 155). He cannot contend with her oppositional will so he defaults in his frustration to the tyranny of physical force; thus, Fletcher invited the audience to laugh at Petruchio while also potentially exposing a weak point in the taming.

Since cultural tradition did allow a husband to exercise authority over his wife's body in force as well as in pleasure, Maria has cause to be afraid. However, in her response, "Maria makes clear to Petruccio that overpowering her body does not amount to enjoying control over her person . . . [it] would [in fact] entail permanently losing the chance of a privileged access to her 'mind' and 'appetite'" (Johnson 138). The *intangible* of her personhood, her heart and soul, are lost to him if Petruchio forcibly compels her to his will. Presenting women as composed of more than mere body, Maria rejects input from her husband's will and insists on equal consideration for the output of her will and her words.

Another contentious area where early modern men tried to exercise control over the female threat were women's words and speech. Returning to historical context, it is 'striking' 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" (Boose 184). Considering all of the bad jokes and bawdy stories during this era that dealt with the dangers of female sexuality and cuckoldry, this comparison illustrates how seriously the establishment took the threat of outspoken women. In the early modern mindset, the female gendered offenses of speech and sexuality were linked:

> 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. Given these connections . . . control of women's speech becomes a massively important project. (Boose 196)

In order to maintain a standard of morality and good social order, the male establishment must, therefore, exercise control over women's speech. The domestic patriarchy which Jacobean society was built on depended on women accepting and functioning in their lower status. The ideal woman accepted the input of male authority in silence. It is no surprise, then, that "the woman with a sharp tongue breaks the social order: she is strictly disorderly. Discordant, disruptive, unruly, she threatens to sabotage the domestic harmony which depends upon her general submissiveness" (Jardine 106). As the head of the home, every man was therefore responsible for keeping his wife quietly in order.

The character of Petruchio, as represented by both Shakespeare and Fletcher, takes this responsibility very seriously; however, where in *Shrew* Petruchio is prepared for trouble by Hortensio's warnings (Shakespeare 1.2.45-50), in *The Tamer Tamed* Petruchio is taken completely by surprise when Maria starts talking (Fletcher 1.3). Petruchio is more upset by her continuing to speak than he was when he heard she was fortified against him for the night. Both he and Maria's father, Petronius, command her to be silent, and when she does not comply, they get extremely agitated (McMullan xvi). Rhetoric and the power of speech are supposed to be masculine, but Maria wields both with precision.

The threat is not just the fact that women speak out, but there is danger in what they say. Before she has been tamed, Kate boldly claims a right to speak her feelings (Shakespeare, *Shrew* 4.3.74-82). However, by the end of that scene, she has been so mortified and badgered that she stops resisting and even affirms whatever Petruchio states as the truth. This concept of controlling and imposing male perspective on the woman is a consistent tenet of the taming tradition: "the 'tamer' imposing on the 'tamee' an alternative version of reality" (Johnson 143). On the journey back to her father's house, Kate irrationally agrees with Petruchio's representation of the time, the sky, and everything that they come across (Shakespeare, *Shrew* 4.5). Her speech is now completely controlled by her tamer. To show off this accomplishment, Petruchio publicly showcases Kate not only submitting quietly to his will—throwing away her cap—but also acting as a mouthpiece for his philosophy, preaching his doctrine of female subordination to the other wives (Paris 344). This is the desired end of the taming

tradition, to take a formerly disruptive woman and make her a model of the idealized feminine.

Fletcher inverted not only these techniques but also their outcome in Maria's shrewd speech. Initially, she provokes Petruchio to speak out in confusion and anger all of his conventionally masochistic notions about duty and gender. What he says sounds like mindless repetition of the prevalent male worldview and leads Maria to taunt him (Smith II). His rote parroting and her derisive reply only emphasize how ineffective his words are unless he can enforce them: "making him engage with her solely on the grounds of wit and hear what she has to say, instead of physically coercing her to say what he wants her to say" demonstrates his weakness (Johnson 137). In front of other men in the community, Maria refuses to adhere to Petruchio's script, compounding his humiliation. Then she disappears into her upper-room sanctuary and refuses to listen until he says what she wants to hear and signs agreement to her demands (Fletcher 2.6). There is no power in Petruchio's words to subdue Maria.

Moreover, Fletcher continued the taming narrative by having Maria appropriate the technique of imposing her version of reality onto Petruchio. When he plots to get sympathy by pretending to be ill, Maria sends physicians and locks him into his room, spreading word that he is infectious (3.5). Later, when Petruchio has violently forced his way out, Maria complains that he had insisted on being quarantined and would not let her near him out of care and protection for her (4.2). In an aside to the audience, Petruchio admits that if he didn't absolutely know how it really happened, even he might be convinced by her pretty speeches.

In a final triumph of words, Maria not only subverts Petruchio's culturally supported ideology about gender and marriage, but she also makes him a convert to her philosophy. Through his invocation of conventional gendered platitudes, Fletcher set up Petruchio as the voice of traditional taming and the early modern masculine hierarchy. In a direct reversal of the final scene where Shakespeare's Petruchio has Kate mouth self-abnegating attitudes about women (5.2), Fletcher's Maria has Petruchio rehearse before an amazed audience—in the theatre and onstage—his wife's subversive doctrine (Smith 54). The woman-taming spirit is broken. None of Petruchio's employed techniques have conquered Maria. Weary and resigned, "Petruchio finally relinquishes the cultural fantasy of masculine authority," disavowing the "tyrannical power of marital sovereignty, [and] he achieves accord with Maria" (Crocker 417). He has admittedly taken in Maria's spoken output and will pass it on as a lesson to other men.

So long as Petruchio was a threat, Maria had to resist and counter-

mand him. Once the fear of his domination is removed, Maria can become affectionate, receptive, and "feminine" again: only "when Maria is convinced that Petruchio has finally given up his belief in his power to tame her does she relent and accept him as a de facto husband" (Leech 53). Rather than completing a revolutionary proto-feminist triumph by having Maria rule over Petruchio, Fletcher re-establishes patriarchy. Critics and scholars, including George Ferguson, Gordon McMullan, and Molly Smith, debate and disagree about the meaning of Maria's ultimate submission to Petruchio after she believes that he has been tamed. Whatever the reason, it is unsurprising that the comedy ends with an arguably happy marriage and restored gender hierarchy.

Petruchio, as Shakespeare's representative of the traditional taming trope, changes roles in Fletcher's work. Yet at the end of his supposed taming, and the conclusion of Fletcher's play, Petruchio emerges still married and still master in ways consistent with conventional patriarchy. His pleasures may have been checked and postponed, but they were never truly reformed in the manner observed in taming texts where a nonconforming woman was the subject. In the midst of widespread cultural debate about traditional gender roles, playwright John Fletcher joined the conversation about taming by directly reversing the standard story in *The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tamed*. In Fletcher's imagined scenario a woman shows a man how to behave, thereby earning a companionable kind of equality in her marriage. This play does not appear to be a serious stance regarding the relative power and position of the sexes, but rather, as a comedy, it aims to make the audience laugh, perhaps callously, at women's inability to actually get the upper hand, rather than to question the masculine status quo. However, whether intentional or otherwise, Fletcher's play suggests the possible fomentation of sociohistorical fissures in gender relations that could be tied to the early stirrings of feminist discontent.

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