

Horses and Women in *The Taming of the Shrew*

by Joan Hartwig

An Elizabethan gentleman was acutely aware of the quality of his servants, his horses, and his wife, as Falstaff's response to his page's news that Bardolph has gone into Smithfield to buy him a horse parodies:

I bought him [Bardolph] in Paul's and he'll buy me a horse in Smithfield. An I could get me but a wife in the stews, I were manned, horsed, and wived. (2 *Hen IV*: I.ii.49-51)¹

Smithfield, the site of Bartholomew Fair, had been a mart for horse trading as long as memory holds, and the horse coursers there were renowned for trickery.² Thus, Falstaff's evaluation of buying a servant at Paul's, a horse at Smithfield, and a wife from a brothel implies that none of these would be good bargains.

The association of women and horses is of long standing, both in terms of the practical marketplace and in symbolic analogies. King Henry V in his brief courtship of Princess Katherine of France laments the fact that wiving and riding a horse are not equally easy efforts.

If I could win a lady at leapfrog, or by vaulting into my saddle with my armor on my back, under the correction of bragging be it spoken, I should quickly leap into a wife. (*Hen V*: V.ii.136-39)

The audience no doubt remembers Vernon's description of Prince Hal's extraordinary leap into the saddle, fully armored, before the battle at Shrewsbury "as if an angel dropped down from the clouds/ To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus/ And witch the world with noble horsemanship" (*1 Hen IV*: IV.i.108-10). The Bawd in *Pericles*, cautioning Lysimachus about Marina's hesitance to comply, explains: "My lord, she's not paced yet; you must take some pains to work her to your manage" (*Pericles*: IV.vi.57-58). Hermione, somewhat unfortunately as it turns out, recognizes the analogy in her playful appreciation of Leontes' praise: "You may ride's/ With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs ere/ With spur we heat an acre" (*The Winter's Tale*: I.ii.94-96). Hotspur to his wife's question, "Do you not love me?", responds, "Come,

wilt thou see me ride?/ And when I am a-horseback, I will swear/
I love thee infinitely" (*1 Hen IV*: II.iii.106-108). These are only a few of many
associations between horses and women that appear throughout the Shake-
speare canon, and all of them voice commonplace assumptions about the na-
ture of that analogy.

In a 1534 treatise on husbandry, attributed to Sir Anthony Fitzherbert, af-
ter discussing the benefits of keeping horses, cows, and sheep together in one
pasture in order to get the most even grazing, the author begins a list of the
properties "that a good horse hath." Of the fifty-four properties listed, two are
like a man: "to have a proude harte" and "to be bolde and hardy." Then follow properties that resemble a badger, a lion, an ox, a hare, a fox, an
ass, and finally the ten "properties of a woman":

The fyrst is, to be mery of chere; the seconde, to be well paced; the
thyrde, to haue a brode foreheed; the fourth, to haue brode buttockes;
the fyfthe, to be harde of warde;³ the syxte, to be easye to lepe vppon;
the .vii. to be good at a longe iourneye; the .viii. to be well sturryne
vnder a man; the .ix. to be alwaye besye with the mouthe; the tenth,
euer to be chowyng on the brydell.⁴

Fitzherbert is quite serious about his list of properties, but it is amusing to
note that the ten properties like a woman exceeds all other categories in
length, and that the list begins briefly, but honorifically, with how a
good horse is like a man and ends more prolixly and bawdily with
how that same horse is like a woman.

That a good horse is well esteemed, as is a valued wife, may be inferred
from Master Ford's expression of jealous mistrust: "I will rather trust . . .
a thief to walk my ambling gelding, than my wife with herself" (*The Merry
Wives of Windsor*: II.ii.272-75). When Hortensio and Gremio agree to find a
husband for Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* so that they may both pursue
Bianca, Gremio voices his willingness to pay for such a man in this measure:

I am agreed, and would I have given him the best horse in Padua to
begin his wooing that would thoroughly woo her, wed her, and bed
her, and rid the house of her. (I.i.139-42)

All these remarks share an assumption that a woman and a horse are com-
modities to be bought and sold. Petruchio's initial offer to marry Kate could
not be more explicit in treating her as an object of sale:

As wealth is burden of my wooing dance—
Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,
As old as Sibyl, and as curst and shrewd

As Socrates' Xanthippe, or a worse,
 She moves me not, or not removes, at least,
 Affections' edge in me, were she as rough
 As are the swelling Adriatic seas.
 I come to wive it wealthily in Padua—
 If wealthily, then happily in Padua. (I.ii.66-74)

Grumio's following remark—"Why, give him gold enough and marry him to a puppet or an aglet-baby or an old trot with ne'er a tooth in her head, though she have as many diseases as two and fifty horses"—specifically links the sale of Kate with the purchase of horses. And Kate's father, following the conclusion of Petruchio's arrangement for the impending wedding and his departure to Venice "to buy apparel 'gainst the wedding-day," says: "Faith, gentlemen, now I play a merchant's part/ And venture madly on a desperate mart" (II.i.328-29). Tranio's and Gremio's bidding for Bianca in such a mass of detailed wealth—"Tyrian tapestry . . . ivory coffers . . . six score fat oxen . . . houses . . . two thousand ducats by the year . . . argosies" (II.i.348-82)—sounds very much like the bidding at a horse auction.

Even in Petruchio's hasty wooing of Kate they jest about their relationship in terms of the copulation of horses. When Petruchio asks her to sit on him, she replies, "Asses are made to bear, and so are you." Petruchio returns, "Women are made to bear, and so are you," to which Kate responds, "No such jade as you, if me you mean" (II.i.200-203). Hardly the enthusiasm of Cleopatra's imagination when she pictures Antony on horseback and wishes herself the horse—"O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!" (*Antony and Cleopatra*: I.v.21), but the association between women and horses is Kate's immediate thought as well.⁵ Petruchio concludes their wooing scene that employs other animal and insect analogies (the turtledove, the buzzard, the wasp, the cock, the crab) with remarks about her "princely gait" and with the assertion that "I am he am born to tame you, Kate,/ And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate/ Conformable as other household Kates" (II.i.261, 278-80). To the buyer of horses, the gait of the horse as well as his general conformation is of utmost importance. The wildness of Kate is associated more specifically with the horse than with the other animals mentioned. Petruchio later has a long passage that evokes an analogy with taming a hawk (IV.i.177-83), but even this passage ends with reference to controlling a horse—"And thus I'll curb her mad and headstrong humor." Therefore, his method of taming his shrew quite appropriately corresponds with the taming of horses in the Renaissance.

Training the horse to obey his rider's signals is known as the "manage." Although today the terms of manage are usually gentle, using the hands on the reins, pressure from the legs, and placement of body weight as aids to signal the horse of its rider's wishes and reserving the spurs,

whip, and voice commands for unusual circumstances, in Shakespeare's day harsher methods were employed, as Gardiner's remarks to the Lord Chancellor make clear:

For those that tame wild horses
Pace 'em not in their hands to make 'em gentle,
But stop their mouths with stubborn bits and spur 'em
Till they obey the manage. (Hen VIII: V.iii.21-24)

Shakespeare does not always suggest approval of such measures,⁶ but in *The Taming of the Shrew* Petruchio's harsh treatment of Kate is not out of line, if we view his taming of her as analogous to the taming of a horse, bringing both into the control of the rider.

The manage includes many movements besides the normal gaits, halts, and turns, and there were different ideas of the sequence in which these movements should be taught to the horse. Of general acceptance, however, was the idea that a horse must first be "paced" and then taught to "stop." In other words, the horse must learn to travel smoothly at the desired gait and at the rider's signal and then to stop in a disciplined way. Gervase Markham describes the "stop" as "a suddaine and firme setting downe of all his forelegges together without any further motion."⁷ Similarly, D. H. Madden describes the "stop" as essential to another stage of teaching the manage, the "career," a fast run of eighty or one hundred yards: "the essential characteristic of the career, wherein it differed from the ordinary gallop, was its abrupt ending, technically known as 'the stop,' by which the horse was suddenly and firmly thrown upon his haunches."⁸

Petruchio's treatment of Kate in his house and on the road back to Padua resembles the kind of exactitude and repetition of exercises that a rider requires when training his horse in the manage, including the precise stop as Petruchio requires Kate to assess the sun as moon and Vincentio as a young maiden.

Grumio's description to Curtis of the journey from Padua to Verona is not only an illustration of Petruchio's being "more shrew than she"; it is a picture of inept horsemanship and manage.

Thou shouldst have heard how her horse fell, and she under her horse;
thou shouldst have heard in how miry a place; how she was bemoiled,
how he left her with the horse upon her, . . . how I cried, how
the horses ran away, how her bridle was burst.⁹ (IV.i.64-71)

This passage recalls Biondello's earlier description of the horse upon which Petruchio arrives for the wedding, as unsound and diseased (III.iii.47-60). Both of these passages present horses and riders in discord with each

other, and thus counter the more usual image where a horse and rider in concord exemplify the harmony of man and nature.

A further aspect of the literal association between horses and women has to do with the condition that Kate herself embodies—that of the shrew or scold. Petruchio has not heard of Kate's reputation, but Hortensio assures him that she is "renowned in Padua for her scolding tongue" (I.ii.98), and the audience has enough evidence early in the play to see how she came by her reputation. In two essays in *The Reliquary* (1860 and 1873), Llewellynn Jewitt describes the bridles that were common in the cure of scolds, variously called the "brank," the "Scold's Bridle," or the "Gossips' Bridle":

The Brank consisted of a kind of crown, or framework, or iron, which was locked upon the head; and it was armed in front with a gag, a



Figure 1, *The Chesterfield Brank*

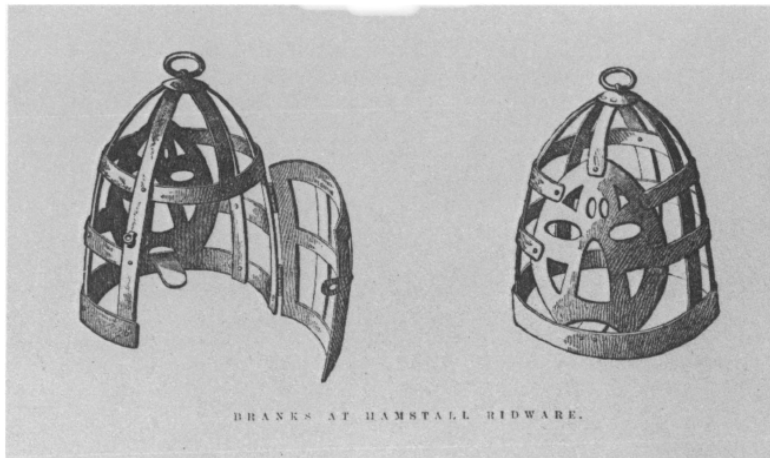


Figure 2

plate, or a sharp-cutting knife or point, which was placed in the poor woman's mouth, so as to prevent her moving her tongue—or it was so placed that if she did move it, or attempt to speak, it was cut in the most frightful manner. With this cage upon her head, and with the gag firmly pressed and locked against her tongue, the miserable creature whose sole offending perhaps was



Figure 3, The 'Witches Bridle'

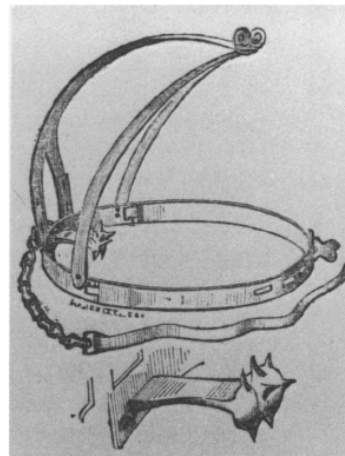


Figure 4, The Stockport Brank

that she had raised her voice in defence of her social rights, against a brutal and besotted husband, or had spoken honest truth of some one high in office in her town, was . . . led by a chain, by the hand of the bellman, . . . through all the principal streets of the town, for an hour or two, and then brought back bleeding, faint, ill, and degraded. Let them fancy all this, and then say whether it is not indeed a happy thing that our lot is cast in better days than those in which such disgusting public punishments could be asked for by husbands, or neighbours; inflicted by the authorities and tolerated by the people themselves.¹⁰

Mrs. Eliza Gutch records more recently (1893) the practice of “wife-selling” which requires the wife to be led into the marketplace “with a halter round her neck.”¹¹ These literal representations of the associations assumed by English folk between women and horses from ages past make Petruchio’s harsh treatment of Kate seem mild by contrast.

The “taming-school” of which Petruchio is the master and Hortensio the somewhat awed witness does effect the desired transformation in Kate by teaching her the discipline of “curbing” her will to her master’s signals. His control, as she asserts in her final speech, must depend upon “honest will” rather than upon whimsy or tyranny, as some of Petruchio’s stratagems may seem at the time he produces them. But seen from the metaphorical analogue of taming the wild horse to graceful “manage,” his insistence on her submission seems quite reasonable.

In contrast, the apparent humanistic training of Bianca by her disguised suitors in music, Greek and Latin, and in poetry does not humanize Bianca in the least. She becomes, when released to be herself, the stubborn and willful



Figure 5, *Seen in Newcastle-on-Tyne*



Figure 6, *The Branking of Mary Curtys*

*How would Mary Curtys
tongue was branked for
Skandals*

wife; whereas Kate's apparently brutal treatment releases her into a gracefully obedient and respectful wife. Lucentio and Hortensio disguise themselves in order to tutor Bianca, and Petruchio disguises himself in order to instruct Kate. But whereas the former disguises, which present the young admirers as different people, are donned to insinuate them into where they are forbidden, Petruchio dons his disguise—changes in manner and clothing which do not change his identity—in order to lead Kate out of her father's and of her own self-inflicted prison. Lucentio and Hortensio change their outward identity to manipulate within the status quo, but Petruchio changes himself psychologically into manic tyrant in order to change the situation, the institution of marriage, and the bride into realities that do not depend upon social prescription. He hints at his more human form of realism when others protest that his "unreverent robes" ill befit the occasion of a wedding. Petruchio challenges the entire social structure when he asserts, "To me she's married, not unto my clothes" (III.ii.113).

The final contest of wills between Petruchio and Kate defines the matter more explicitly. Kate wishes to follow the quarreling relatives "to see the end of this ado," but Petruchio demands a kiss. She says, "What, in the midst of the street?" And he, "What, art thou ashamed of me?" Kate's careful response is "No sir, God forbid, but ashamed to kiss." Yet when Petruchio threatens a return to Verona, she concedes to the man rather than to fear of social judgment.

The symbolic associations of the horse and rider figure are several throughout history, but the horse as appetite and passion and the rider as mind, reason holding the body under control, is an analogy pervasive from early times. Beryl Rowland, in a study of the horse and rider figure in Chaucer's works, observes that "under the influence of the Christian Church the significance of the figure appears to harden: the horse is equated with the body or with Woman, the evil repository of sex; the rider is the soul or Man." Rowland continues:

The less alarming analogy whereby the woman is the horse to be bridled and controlled by man is so commonplace as to become proverbial. . . . So fundamental is the analogy in our thinking that token symbols such as the bridle, harness, collar or saddle-girth are often substituted, and the symbolism persists even today in the marriage ceremony in which the ring is the halter used by the groom to harness his bride.¹²

When the rider is able to keep his mount under his control, both the horse and rider are figures of nobility. The complementary relationship that accrues honor to both is what Petruchio and Kate have achieved at the end of the play.¹³ Even the wager that the three newly-wed husbands make

on their wives resembles wagers commonly made on the performances of horses by their proud owners. That Kate wins the wager for Petruchio is no surprise, since she has learned the “manage” well. Her recognition that acceptance of her husband as her “lord” and her “sovereign” allows her to realize herself fully may seem too “conformable” for modern sensibilities. Yet the final lines of her speech recall the metaphor that has been operative throughout the play. The hand placed below the foot to “do him ease” suggests the image of a rider ready to mount his horse, using the hand instead of stirrup to ease him into the saddle. We might be reminded of the Dauphin’s praise of his palfrey:

The dull elements of earth and water never appear in him, but only in patient stillness while his rider mounts him. . . . ’Tis a subject for a sovereign to reason on, and for a sovereign’s sovereign to ride on; and for the world, familiar to us and unknown, to lay apart their particular functions and wonder at him. (*Hen V*: III.vii.20-37)

So Kate, as she accepts Petruchio for her sovereign, transforms from unhappy shrew into graceful woman, creating “wonder” in her world.

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NOTES

1. All citations of Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works*, gen. ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore, 1969).
2. See Ben Jonson’s depiction of Jordan Knockem in *Bartholomew Fair*, and D. H. Madden, *The Diary of Master William Silence* (London, 1907), 255-56.
3. A probable reading for this difficult phrase is “capable of great physical endurance and exertion in (1) watching or guarding (2) a duty or office entrusted to one, (3) parrying.” Many values are given for both key words, “harde” and “warde,” in the OED. Shakespeare most often used “ward” to mean “a posture of defense,” but Fitzherbert’s treatise predates Shakespeare’s work by over half a century. For Shakespeare, see esp. *1 Hen IV*: I.ii.176-78 and II.iv.182-85; *Troilus and Cressida*: I.ii.245-57; and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: II.ii.224-27.
4. *Fitzherbert’s Book of Husbandry 1534*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (London, 1882), 63-65.
5. The anonymous play, *The Taming of A Shrew* (1594), a possible source for Shakespeare’s play, has little of the equine imagery. Especially notable “additions” in Shakespeare’s version are this exchange between Petruchio and Kate, the description of Petruchio’s diseased horse on which he rides to the wedding, and Grumio’s description of the journey from Padua to Verona. See *The Taming of A Shrew* in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, vol. 1 (London, 1957).

6. See Charles Blake McClelland, "The Equestrian Element in Shakespeare's Plays and Poems," unpublished Master's thesis, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 1961, 42-56, for an extended discussion of the "manage."
7. Gervase Markham, *Cavelarice or the English Horseman* (London, 1607), quoted in McClelland, *The Equestrian Element*, 46.
8. D. H. Madden, *William Silence*, 287.
9. To "draw Dun out of the mire" was a country game in which one of the players impersonated a dun horse stuck in the mud. See, Paul Fatout, "Roan Barbary," *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, 15 (1940):74, n. 49.
10. Llewellynn Jewitt, "Scolds; And How They Cured Them in the 'Good Old Times,'" *The Reliquary* (October 1860):66-67. The illustrations which follow are all taken from this essay. Figure 1 is Jewitt's engraving of the Chesterfield Brank — on the front of the brank are the initials "T. C." and the date "1688." Figure 2, "Branks at Hamstall Ridware," shows one of the more complicated frame-works. Figures 3 and 4 show the more savage kinds of tongue gags. The brank in Figure 3 was called the "Witches Bridle" (dated 1661) and was formerly at Forfar, while that in Figure 4 was preserved at Stockport. Figure 5 is from "Gardiner's England's Grievance Discovered, in relation to the Coal Trade," printed in 1655; it illustrates the description by "John Willis, of Ipswich," of what he actually saw in Newcastle-on-Tyne. Figure 6 is a "representation, showing 'How Oulde Mary Curtys tongue was branked for skandle,' at Yarmouth, sometime in the seventeenth century" (Jewitt, 78).
11. Mrs. Eliza Gutch, ed., *County Folk-lore*, vol. 2 (London, 1901), 298-99.
12. Beryl Rowland, "The Horse and Rider Figure in Chaucer's Works," *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, 35 (1966):246, 248.
13. Jeanne Addison Roberts comes to a similar conclusion in "Horses and Hermaphrodites: Metamorphoses in *The Taming of the Shrew*," forthcoming in *Shakespeare Quarterly*. Peter Saccio, in "Shrewd and Kindly Farce" (Paper delivered at the meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, Minneapolis, April 1982), also counters recent revisionist tendencies toward interpreting Kate's submission to Petruchio as being intended irony.