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Angry Shrews or Merry Wives? Teaching Shakespeare's Women

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"Angry Shrews or Merry Wives? Teaching Shakespeare's Women"

by Mary Villeponteaux

In her 2005 book *Shakespeare and Women*, Phyllis Rackin challenges some of the assumptions that have shaped our understanding of women in Shakespeare's culture. Rackin argues that the feminist narrative about early modern England is a selective one that has "too often emphasized patriarchal power, male misogyny, and women's oppression" (2). Quoting a "wise old teacher" who once warned her that, in historical research, we are likely to find what we look for, Rackin argues that because we expected to find a history of women's oppression when we studied the history of early modern women, oppression is exactly what we found (9). Rackin acknowledges that women in Shakespeare's world were certainly oppressed in many ways: they were excluded from universities, lost their control over their property when they married, and could easily be abused by their husbands since wife beating was perfectly legal (7). But this is not the whole story; this is the part of the story we have chosen to emphasize. For example, while it is well known that women lost control of their property upon marriage, it is less widely recognized that women in Shakespeare's day often possessed significant economic power, either as a result of inheriting money and property from relatives, or simply as a result of their own employment. Until the late seventeenth

century, women were admitted into practically every trade and guild in England, and there is evidence that in some regions women might have comprised nearly half the apprentices (Orgel 73). Amy Louise Erickson points out that the well-known law of primogeniture may mean that “land pulled inexorably toward males,” but early and frequent death as well as the chance that a marriage would produce no males at all meant that land “spent a good deal of time in female hands along the way” (5). And of course, it has long been known that certain aristocratic women wielded considerable power, not to mention the fact that Elizabeth I ruled so successfully for 45 years. Rackin also notes that when we do find evidence, in Shakespeare’s culture or his plays, of women who do not conform to what we have imagined is the Renaissance standard of chaste, silent, and obedient, we often characterize the cultural reaction to such women as intense anxiety. Rackin does not deny that women were oppressed and that transgressive women sometimes inspired anxiety, but she seeks to interrogate this one-dimensional history of Shakespeare’s culture that has been selected, told, and retold: a “history of men’s anxiety in the face of female power, of women’s disempowerment, and of outright misogyny” (9).^[1]

While Rackin and other scholars who have challenged the monolithic account of women’s oppression in the Renaissance focus primarily on the way women’s position has been represented in the scholarship, there has been little attention to the implications of this revision to the way we teach Shakespeare, and for that matter other

Renaissance literature. Yet this challenge to the received wisdom about women in Shakespeare's age surely has important repercussions for pedagogy. In this essay, I consider several aspects of Shakespeare pedagogy in light of Rackin's argument. I argue that we should indeed revise our teaching of Shakespeare, but that we can do this without radically altering the curriculum. Rackin criticizes the current popularity of *Taming of the Shrew*, which raises the question of whether this play should enjoy the curricular presence that it does now. But I make a case for teaching *Shrew* as a case study in Shakespeare's rich and complex language; if we teach *Shrew* so that our students discover many possible ways of interpreting the play's resolution, it ceases to be a play that unambiguously celebrates women's subordination. Furthermore, we can and should complicate the historical context in which we place *Shrew* as well as other plays, such as *Merchant of Venice*, that stage powerful and authoritative women. Finally, I argue that the revision of women's history proposed by Rackin and others should make us wary of teaching any history without attention to its status as a narrative shaped by our own cultural present. I advocate a use of history in the classroom that acknowledges and explores that history's status as a construction of our culture, and a classroom approach that encourages students to respond in the present moment to the literature we teach.

One of Rackin's most powerful examples of our present-day devotion to stories of women's oppression is the popularity of *The Taming of the Shrew*. In the chapter

entitled "Our Canon, Ourselves," Rackin compares the ubiquity of *Taming of the Shrew* to the relative obscurity of another Shakespearean comedy about wives, *Merry Wives of Windsor*. She calls them "two comedies that illustrate with remarkable clarity the modern preference for stories in which women are put in their (subordinate) place" (51). The popular *Taming of the Shrew* of course ends with an apparently submissive woman who makes a long speech urging wifely obedience, whereas *Merry Wives* focuses on two active and witty women who get the best of Falstaff, as well as their husbands, by the end of the play. There are 246 listings for *Shrew* in the MLA Bibliography from 1980-2003, and it is also one of the most frequently produced of all of Shakespeare's plays and has been the basis for many films and other spin-offs (11). Citing these facts as evidence for our modern preference for *Shrew*, Rackin makes the case that this overwhelming popularity says more about our own culture's anxieties and fantasies than about Shakespeare's, since there is no evidence to suggest that Shakespeare's play was particularly popular in its own time (51-53).^[2] While Rackin's claim about *Shrew*'s popularity is based on scholarship and production history rather than curricular presence, I would wager that it is also one of the most frequently taught of all Shakespeare's comedies. Certainly in my twenty years of teaching Shakespeare, I have taught *Taming of the Shrew* innumerable times, including it in most of my Shakespeare survey courses. *Merry Wives of Windsor* I have taught exactly twice.

This raises the question of whether we should modify our curricular choices according to this fuller, more complex view of women's history. Should we take to heart Rackin's point, for example, about the immense popularity of *Taming of the Shrew* versus the relative obscurity of *Merry Wives of Windsor* and strive to include in the curriculum Shakespeare's plays that show women of power in a more favorable light? This question echoes one asked in the very early days of feminist criticism: why do we so seldom teach the comedies? Why do our school curricula tend to favor the tragedies, in which women are often either evil or victimized? On what basis do we make our choices when we compile our reading list for the Shakespeare survey?

Obviously every teacher of Shakespeare has to make choices, and set priorities. In a lighthearted pedagogical essay, Gladys Veidemanis makes this point by caricaturing several familiar types of Shakespeare teachers. Mr. Relevance wants to talk about the plays in the vernacular of his students; in his own dated lingo, he wants his students to think the plays are "groovy." The Media Slob wheels in an AV cart (in the days before Smart rooms) and justifies non-stop viewing of the plays. The Frustrated Barrymore wants to perform the plays—all the roles, all the parts—for his students. And then, according to Veidemanis, there is the teacher whose notion of what is basic to Shakespeare studies is nothing less than everything: Shakespeare's life, the history of the times, literary criticism, Renaissance thought, Shakespeare's sources, versification, production history.... Of all the types she is the worst, argues Veidemanis, because her

students slowly sink under the weight of everything that must be accomplished in order for this type of teacher to think she has done justice to Shakespeare (3).

Veidemanis's point is that in teaching Shakespeare we have to set clear priorities; she makes an argument for her own priorities in teaching a Shakespeare class, and I think that all self-critical Shakespeare teachers do the same. So I must ask myself: what are my priorities? Which aspects of or approaches to Shakespeare are truly necessary for my students?

My first priority in teaching Shakespeare is close attention to the language. The language is often difficult for the average twenty-first-century reader or audience member to understand, so attention must be paid to it if my students are going to leave my class feeling any confidence in their ability to read the plays in the future. And of course, the language of the plays was the most important aspect of theatre for Shakespeare and his audience as well. Shakespeare did not write many original plots and did not usually stage visually spectacular plays; his audiences said "I heard a play," not "I saw a play" as we would say today. So helping my students understand and analyze Shakespeare's language comes first for me, and I try to accomplish this by close reading of particular passages in class discussion as well as in writing assignments. However, also important to me is the historical context of these plays. My belief has been that no one can completely appreciate the subtleties of Shakespeare's work without some historical and cultural context. For example, how can you really

appreciate the tetralogies if you know nothing about the dynastic wars that preceded the Tudors, the so-called “Tudor myth of history,” not to mention the tensions in Shakespeare’s own day over the ideology of monarchy itself? Finally, I do want students to find the plays relevant to their own lives, or at least, I want them to respond authentically and personally to these plays. For example, if my students cannot respond with empathy to the story of Lear and his daughters based on their own experience with parents or grandparents who are growing older, then I fear they will not fully appreciate the play.

But the recent arguments—Rackin’s and others—about the need to revise our historical understanding of women’s place in Shakespeare’s world has made me re-examine my priorities in teaching Shakespeare. In the remainder of this essay, I will consider the impact Rackin’s argument has on my teaching priorities: attention to the language, cultural context, and personal relevance of Shakespeare’s plays for my students.

Phyllis Rackin challenges the prominence of *Taming of the Shrew* and implicitly suggests that *Merry Wives* should be an equally popular play. But I would have to defend *Shrew* as a curricular choice on the basis of my interest in getting my students to grapple with Shakespeare’s language. If the process of interpreting language is foremost for me, few plays make better classroom reading than *Taming of the Shrew*.

However, in encouraging my students to analyze this play's multiplicity of possible meanings, I am assuredly not pushing the conservative interpretation that the play simply dramatizes the conventional belief that domestic harmony depends upon wifely submission, and that this was an unquestioned belief held by Shakespeare's original audience. On the contrary, my approach to the play has always included a kind of debate format, in which I urge students to construct their own interpretation of that controversial final scene in which Katherine wins the wager for her new husband by being the only wife to come obediently when summoned to the room. After Petruchio has Katherine display more signs of her newfound obedience by taking off her cap and throwing it to the ground at his command, he orders her to teach the recalcitrant wives their duty, which results in her long speech on wifely obedience. This final speech is so subtle, so loaded in its language, and so nuanced in its context that it makes a wonderful site for classroom debate. Almost any interpretation of this speech can be challenged on a textual basis. For example, one student might point out that Katherine's language when she describes wifely duty in marriage employs the political metaphor that we have learned is a Renaissance commonplace: the husband is to the family as the prince is to the state. There is no reason that Shakespeare's audience would have found her assertion that a wife owes her husband "such duty as the subject owes the prince" anything but sincere (V.ii.155).^[3] Another student might counter that Katherine's description of the basis of wifely submission cannot possibly be sincere, since she also

describes obedience as a debt wives owe their husbands, in return for the husbands' attention to their wives' physical needs. When Katherine depicts the husband as slaving away and risking his life so that his wife can lie "warm at home, secure and safe," she is surely being ironic, since she has been nothing but starved and sleep-deprived at the hands of Petruchio (V.ii.151). Other points of debate: surely there is an inherent irony in having a female character proclaim the necessity of womanly submission by means of the lengthiest speech in the play during which she completely dominates the stage. What about the fact that, on Shakespeare's stage, the actor playing Katherine was a boy? When in her speech she points to the "soft and weak and smooth" bodies of women as another sign that they were meant to submit to masculine power, might there be an inherent joke that the audience would have recognized? On the other hand, one might counter, look at the language of punishment and reward that Katherine employs: a "woman moved" — that is, an angry woman — gets nothing, according to this speech; she is like a muddy fountain that no one will want to touch. Surely that is exactly the lesson Katherine has learned: her shrewish behavior made her miserable because it brought such social disapproval; now she has learned that submission is profitable; therefore, her speech is sincere. And there are other arguments we might make, both those based on a careful reading of the language of this speech, and others based on its context.

This final scene never fails to arouse the kind of debate that I want my students to engage in, and that I hope will help them improve their skills of analysis and interpretation, not to mention their appreciation for the complexity and richness of the language Shakespeare puts in his characters' mouths. Usually my classes end up agreeing that there are three fundamental—and fundamentally incompatible—ways to read this final scene. First, Katherine's submission is genuine. She has realized the error of her shrewish ways, because she recognizes and enjoys the rewards available for a docile wife; she realizes how unpleasant her behavior has been for those around her and truly wants to modify it, and perhaps she even accepts Petruchio's superiority over her. In other words, she is happily tamed and wants to be an obedient wife. Second possibility: Katherine is not tamed. She has kept her freedom in words even while making the outward signs of submission so that she can end the extremely unpleasant taming process. But her speech is full of ironies and jabs at Petruchio that the audience should hear, though Petruchio probably does not. She continues to fight her husband just as she has all along, only now she fights more subversively. Third possibility: her speech is an "inside joke" between herself and Petruchio. They have reached an unspoken agreement by which she will be "tamed" in public, but neither he nor she has any expectation that this will be the dynamic of their private life. If we assume that *Shrew* expresses nothing but the Renaissance orthodoxy of wifely submission, the play loses much of its richness, and certainly it becomes a poor curricular choice.

But while I might defend *Shrew* as a curricular choice because it can provide such a rich opportunity for debate and interpretation, I take to heart Rackin's argument that this play presents a skewed look at marriage and the position of women in Renaissance England. I want to continue to teach *Taming of the Shrew*, because it does so well the work of teaching students to analyze and interpret, but I can try to present the play in a way that complicates the women's history that goes along with it. My traditional introduction to this play has included examples of other shrew-taming narratives from Shakespeare's time as well as information about punishments for shrewish wives, such as cucking stools and scolds' bridles. I can modify and add to these ancillary stories that I tell; for example, I can talk about the way wife beating, while legal in Shakespeare's day, was frowned upon and discouraged in the state homilies on marriage, which urge husbands to eschew violence and set good examples for their wives by being themselves temperate and reasonable. I can talk about the fact that, while there is evidence that cucking stools and scolds' bridles existed, there is no evidence that they were used frequently. I can challenge the pervasive notion that women in early modern England "had to" get married: Amy Louise Erickson points out that, at any given time, the majority of adult women in Shakespeare's England were in fact unmarried—in contrast to our own society, in which the majority of women at any given time *are* married (9). In recent years I have modified my account of women's position in sixteenth-century England to include many of these ideas, in part because in my classes

I was seeing the result of exactly what Rackin and other scholars have been pointing out: students seemed to have learned a history that exaggerated women's oppression and would confidently announce that women in Shakespeare's day had no rights at all. When after their wedding, Petruchio forces Katherine to leave with him before the wedding feast begins, he pretends to "rescue" her from all the friends and relatives who urge them to stay. "I will be master of what is mine own," he declares. "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" (III.ii.230–232). In the last few years I have often encountered students who argue that Petruchio's claim here simply reflects the Renaissance ideology that women are no more than man's property. While it is true that women had fewer rights than men and were often objectified, they were not regarded as the equivalent to inanimate property.

Another play that I like to teach because it inspires debate and close reading is *Merchant of Venice*. This is a play that might also present a positive example of a powerful woman, if we permit it to. As Rackin comments, after an initially optimistic reading of the powerful heroines of this and other middle comedies by early feminist critics, such plays were later deemed not nearly so liberating for women. *Merchant*, for example, was reinterpreted as a play that teaches the importance of daughterly obedience (11). Lindsey Kaplan's *Merchant of Venice: Texts and Contexts* is a case in point. Kaplan chooses four cultural contexts to explore in this volume: Venice, Finance,

Religion, and Love and Gender. The section on Love and Gender is by far the shortest of the four (only a little more than half as long as the section on Religion) and includes excerpts only from texts on marriage and male friendship. Kaplan chooses to include two very conservative writers on women and marriage, Juan Luis Vives and Thomas Becon. She includes also an excerpt from Agrippa but notes that its exposition of women's superiority may be intended ironically. Kaplan does a wonderful job of complicating the representation of Jews in Shakespeare's England, discussing not only the familiar vilification of Jews but also actual Jews living in England, controversies about religious conversion, and Protestant views of the Jews' Hebrew Bible as a source of religious legitimacy; her point is that early modern attitudes toward Jews were complex and not exclusively negative (244–249). If we could similarly complicate our account of early modern women in relation to *Merchant of Venice*, we might see that play come into its own as a complex and fascinating representation of a woman's economic, intellectual, and even social power. Part of the problem may lie in the difference between stated rules and ideals for women's behavior, and the reality of women's lived experience. Maybe we should broaden the context in which we read and teach Portia to include not just precepts for and about women (precepts written by men), but also histories of real women, women like Bess of Hardwick who ran their own manorial holdings (as Portia apparently does). We could read about women who had far more choice in marriage, including the choice of whether to marry at all, than Kaplan's

sources would suggest. We could read about the frequency with which women acted as estate executors, and put Portia's father's will in that context. And we could read about the mobility that wealthy women enjoyed, the freedom to travel to London and even choose to remain in the city unaccompanied by male relatives, as a context for understanding Portia's independent journey to Venice.^[4]

I would argue that without radically revising our Shakespeare curriculum, we can nonetheless revise the Shakespeare we teach: *Shrew* does not have to be rejected as a curricular choice in order for us to broaden our own, and our students' historical perspective on Renaissance women, and acknowledge that their story is not an unrelentingly oppressive one. By continuing to teach provocative and textually rich plays while providing a context that allows issues of women's nature and place to be as complex as they doubtless were in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, we can try to broaden the narrow perspective that has prevailed.

But along with close attention to the language and cultural context of Shakespeare's plays, I have another desideratum in my teaching: I want my students to find the plays personally meaningful, relevant, plays that can speak in some way to their own lives. As I have concentrated over the last couple of years on these issues of historical and cultural context in my teaching, and my desire to present a cultural context that is somehow "correct," I have seen a problem arise. What if, in attempting to

situate these plays in their “correct” cultural context, I undermine my students’ own authentic response to them?

This can work in at least two ways. First, I think we can inadvertently create a distancing effect by emphasizing that these plays are products of a culture not our own. Lena Cowan Orlin has suggested that one reason for our relentless focus on the stories of women’s past oppression is because this perspective makes our present moment seem better by contrast: if Renaissance women had no freedom or power, we can pat ourselves on the back and say, “You’ve come a long way, baby” (75). I agree that this is indeed one effect of emphasizing early modern women’s oppression, and I think this exaggerated version of women’s oppression also creates a distancing effect for students who have been taught to see the past through that lens. My students twenty years ago were both more shocked and more personally responsive to tales of women’s oppression in Shakespeare’s day, because these ideas were newer to them, whereas my students today, as I mentioned, seem to have learned an exaggerated version of women’s oppression that often does not trouble them at all, probably because it seems an old story that has nothing at all to do with their lives.

The other inadvertent effect of historicizing the text is that it can shut down an authentic response—a “presentist” response, if you will. Last year I taught *Shrew* in a graduate seminar, and one of my students reacted with pure outrage to the play. My

impulse, developed over many years of teaching the historical and cultural context of Shakespeare's plays, was to try and temper her response by focusing on that context. I wanted to point out that, compared to other Renaissance shrew-taming literature (such as the infamous "Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife"), Shakespeare's play presents a relatively non-violent, even gentle taming. I wanted to argue that, since wifely subordination was a given in Shakespeare's culture, the play's original audience would hardly be shocked by Katherine's stated intention to obey her husband. And so on. But a new mindfulness about the hazards of trusting this received narrative of the past, and maybe, too, new doubts about the efficacy of historicizing the plays, made me hold my tongue. Instead of trying to convince this student not to respond to Shakespeare's play with outrage, I let her react as herself, in the present moment. The results were gratifying. She cared so much about this play (by "cared about" here, I mean "hated") that she wanted to write her research paper on *Shrew*. She argued in her final essay against the contemporary popularity of the play. She did read the many essays that situate *Shrew* in its sixteenth-century context; she did learn a great deal about the ideology of marriage in Shakespeare's age, and as a result of our class discussion of the play, she was certainly aware that Katherine can be understood as a subversive rather than subdued character as the play's end. Nevertheless, she remained unconvinced that this is a play that belongs on our contemporary stage. Arguing that *Taming of the Shrew* is a play that finds comedy in spousal abuse and that celebrates the process of wifely

subordination, she wrote a thought-provoking and thoroughly researched paper that might not have been possible had I tried to “historicize” her initial response to the play.

In her introductory essay to the volume *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare*, Evelyn Gajowski explains “presentism” as “based on the understanding that all our knowledge of Shakespeare, including that of his historical context, is shaped by the ideologies and discourses of our cultural present” (12). She argues that both the present and the past are “unpoliticized,” drained of their political content, by a historicism that exhibits no awareness of the influence our present moment exerts over our construction of the past (7). My graduate student’s outraged response to *Taming of the Shrew* was indeed a politicized reaction that, I am arguing, proved fruitful pedagogically and would have been stifled by an insistence on “historicizing” the play, if “historicizing” had meant somehow insisting that she pretend to a sixteenth-century subjectivity (as we have imagined it to be) and deny her own position as a twenty-first century woman.

Historicism poses a risk in the classroom, if teaching Shakespeare’s plays in their “historical context” stifles a genuine reaction to the plays in the present moment. And if we construct for our students a “historical context” without raising their awareness, and our own, that such constructions are inevitable shaped by our present cultural moment, we miss an opportunity to ask our students to think critically about both the past and

the present, not just Shakespeare as a Renaissance icon but Shakespeare as a construction of the twenty-first century.

Gajowski asks what kinds of constructions of meaning emerge from a theoretical strategy that insists upon a heightened awareness that we are situated in the twenty-first century (13). What kind of pedagogy would be the result of this theoretical strategy, this presentism? I do not want to remove the context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history and culture from my teaching of Shakespeare, but I do want to treat that context more carefully and present it more mindfully. I want my students to recognize that this context, too, is a construction, just as are our interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. And I have learned the value of allowing my students to respond as they are, who they are, to Shakespeare's plays.

Endnotes

[1] Rackin does not construct her argument in a vacuum. She draws upon the work of other scholars, such as Lena Cowen Orlin. In her essay "A Case for Anecdotalism in Women's History," Orlin argues that the stories of real women's lives that can be found in the archives, even though often fragmentary, provide a picture of independent, often self-supporting women quite different from the familiar portrait of the oppressed Renaissance woman. Rackin's own argument may be traced through three works. Her essay "Misogyny Is Everywhere" appeared in Dymphna Callaghan's *Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* and is the basis of the first chapter in her book *Shakespeare and Women* (2005). In 2009, her essay "Dated and Outdated: The Present Tense of Feminist Shakespeare Criticism" appeared in *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare*. In this essay, Rackin continues her analysis of what feminist scholarship has had to say about early modern women, placing the rise of the dominant story—that women were

unrelentingly oppressed—in the context of conservative politics and academic backlash against feminism of the 1990s.

[2] I question this claim, since Shakespeare's apprentice Fletcher wrote a sequel in 1611 called *The Tamer Tam'd*, a fact that Rackin actually discusses in a later chapter of *Shakespeare and Women*. It seems to me that the existence of a sequel is pretty good evidence for *Shrew's* popularity. On the other hand, Fletcher's play does appear to support the more subversive readings of *Shrew*, rather than those that claim that the play simply embodies the conventional notion that wives should submit to their husbands' authority, since Petruchio, in Fletcher's play, remembers his married life to Katherina as one long brawl.

[3] This and all further quotations from Shakespeare's plays refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

[4] Amy Louise Erickson discusses both women's marital choices and their position as executors of wills in *Women and Property in Early Modern England*. For a fascinating discussion of women's travel to London, see "Inside/Out: Women, Domesticity, and the Pleasures of the City" by Alice T. Friedman.

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