Lashing Out Against Disobedient Wives: Domestic Violence and *The Taming of the Shrew*

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In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the intent of domestic violence was to control the scolding and shrewd woman. In Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate represents the early modern "scold," and her taming by Petruchio mirrors the practices of public shaming used by husbands during the play's time period. Along with the historical context of violence against wives, which reveals that early modern audiences were familiar with domestic abuse and would not have been shocked by its representation in the play, the comedic nature of the play undercuts the seriousness of Kate's abuse, and her apparent subordination at the play's end. Contextualizing domestic violence in early modern England thus reveals that Shakespeare's Shrew was a farcical portrayal of abuse in the household, specifically directed at the figure of the disruptive and disobeying wife, rather than a serious social commentary on the violence against women and gender inequality.

The characterization of Kate as the shrew who requires taming aligns with the image of the unruly wife in sixteenth century England who likewise necessitated forms of social taming, evident through practices that promoted her public embarrassment and humiliation. Kate's actions in the play—particular her outspoken personality and violent rejections of male authority—are thus farcical representations of the disorderly woman, which the early modern audience would have recognized during the performance of the play. Lynda E. Boose's essay, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," identifies the disruptive "scold" as "any woman who verbally resisted or flouted authority publicly and stubbornly enough to challenge the underlying dictum of male rule" (190). References to Kate's scolding nature are evident throughout *Shrew*; before the audience meets her, Hortensio describes Kate as, "Renowned…for her scolding tongue," identifying her sharp language and freely given opinions as problematic (1.2.99). Hortensio then gives her the title of "Katherine the curst," an identification that signifies both Kate as an obstruction to Hortensio's relationship with Bianca and her cursed nature, which may be referring to early modern England's association of shrewd women with witches during the time period (1.2.126). Petruchio alludes to Kate's "proud-minded" character, reflecting the stubbornness of the unruly woman, while Baptista prepares him to be met with "some unhappy words," again referring to Kate's mouth as the source of her scolding and consequently troublesome nature (2.1.130, 138).

As a result of her shrewd character, Kate incites Petruchio to employ a variety of techniques meant to mold her into a quiet and agreeable wife. However, while Kate hits Petruchio in the play, at no point during the taming does he use blunt physical violence against her, though he threatens that he will " cuff [her]" if she "[strikes] again" (2.1.222). Petruchio's nonaggressive reaction and Kate's response, that he will not be a "gentleman" if he hits her, aligns with changing sixteenth and seventeenth century viewpoints. The early modern community did not consider domestic abuse a criminal assault, and violence was allowed as "part of a husband's prerogative in the exercise of his patriarchal power," though it was also widely believed that his power was not to be excessive (Sokol 130-1). A number of texts from that time period addressed the husband's rightful extension of authority over the household, and reforms by Puritan preachers and Protestants in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries upheld that violence was not ideal for subordinating a wife (Detmer 277). Instead of "resorting to the 'common' man's brute strength," Emily Detmer states in the essay "Civilizing Subordination" that other forms of managing a wife besides physical violence were popularized at the time, though the purpose was not to improve the situation of women, but rather, "[enhance] men's ability to subordinate" (274, 279). During the early modern period, women were considered naturally inferior to men; the reign of Queen Elizabeth was simply an "[exception] to the normal rule" (Sommerville 40). The husband was in charge in the household, and while the wife was not to be treated like a slave, her purpose was to help her husband serving under his direction (Sommerville 79-80). The changes in domestic violence thus emphasized developments to male authority, rather than improvements to the living conditions and rights of the
wife. As a result, Petruchio’s act of taming Kate reflects the new, accepted method of exercising control over the disobedient wife, who was the focus of popular concern until 1640 (Amussen 75). A subtle act that humilates Kate in her role as a bride is Petruchio’s clumsy attire and late arrival at the wedding. She experiences public “shame” at Petruchio’s initial absence, stating that “the world [points] at poor Katherine” (3.1.8, 18). The public humiliation that Kate undergoes by temporarily being left at the altar is similar to the shame experienced by other aberrant women who were forced to wear bridles to prevent them from speaking, or who were carted through the streets and mocked, a practice which was related to the use of a ducking or dunking stool for the same purpose of causing shame (Boose 189-190; Schneider 243). In both circumstances, the proud and disorderly wife becomes the object of public attention and is purposefully embarrassed by the husband to teach her a lesson. The marriage ceremony is further made into a shaming act through the kiss, while maintaining the “good household… whose workings were not visible” to the neighbourhood (Amussen 77). The methods Petruchio uses to tame Kate are consequently representations of the ways in which scolds were treated during the time of Shakespeare’s writing of the play. The purpose of the play, then, is not to reveal the atrocities that women experienced during the period; the audience was familiar with the customs of public shaming and the accepted practices of domestic violence. More importantly, the comedic quality of Shrew prevents the work from becoming a serious commentary on the issue of violence against women and their subordination in early modern society. In stark contrast to Shrew is Othello, where themes of domestic abuse are likewise unveiled, although the result is the dishonouring of the husband because of his jealousy and great physical violence against his wife Desdemona (Sokol 133). The farcical undertones of Shrew, which are in part emphasized by the satirical, slapstick-style physical interactions evident in events like the wedding kiss, create an environment where jests concerning abuse are welcome and accepted by the viewers. It is also not expected that the society who watched Shrew were any more altered in their opinion towards the social positions of women in relation to men, or at the very least appalled by the taming of Kate, than the society within the play. B.J. Sokol and Mary Sokol rightfully draw attention to the fact that none of the characters comment on Kate’s abduction from her wedding or the subsequent abuse that she experiences at the hands of her husband (137). Instead, much of the abuse against Kate is told through other characters, like Gremio, who describes the wedding and the incident of the horse falling on Kate to Tranio and Curtis. Both events concerning forms of violence against Kate thus become comedic stories that are meant to entertain other characters in the play, and the audience. Within the context of the play as a farcical depiction of violence against wives, Kate’s final speech becomes difficult to interpret. However, Kate’s reference to a wife as “froward, peevish, sullen, sour / And not obedient to [her husband’s] honest will” in the speech depicts the early modern image of the scold and the need to subordinate her, emphasizing Kate’s transformation from the shrew to a now “obedient” and loving wife (5.2.157-8). While the speech can be read ironically, Petruchio’s response, “Come on, and kiss me, Kate,” reiterates the comedic and farcical nature of the text since his short, humorous statement manages to overshadow Kate’s entire speech (5.2.180). The play ends on a happy note by showing that the husband has successfully gained authority over his wife, and that the shrew accepts, whether ironically or not, her tamed personality, which aligns with the early modern belief that taming through acts of violence was meant to result in a compliant wife. Detmer agrees, claiming that the play would have made “wife-beating reformers proud” by encouraging the audience to “enjoy the permissibility [of abuse] because of the absence of blows and the harmonious outcome” (279). The Taming of the Shrew is consequently a farcical depiction of the taming process that was popularized in early modern England to control disorderly wives, instead of a severe observation on the subordination of women by abusive husbands. The image of Kate as the scold and Petruchio’s violent actions to tame her portrays exaggerated and humorous representations of well-known concepts related to maintaining order in the domestic sphere. While modern audiences are uncomfortable with the violence against Kate and her apparent acceptance of her role as the obedient wife at the play’s end, the text served as a comic example of family life and the ways in which it was disrupted by a shrewd woman.

Works Cited
Boose, Lynda E. “Scolding Bridles and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member.”
James Bond is an iconic character who appeals to multiple audiences: women want him and men want to be him. Since Ian Fleming’s original conception of the character, Bond has undergone various transformations in both written and visual form. One particular area of growth is Bond’s attitude toward, and treatment of, women. Comparing the 1953 novel *Casino Royale* to the 2006 film of the same name affords an interesting chance to examine the Bond’s character’s change in attitude.

While the 2006 film is arguably the best in the franchise at honouring Fleming’s original work, there are some definite variances between the novel’s original Bond and Daniel Craig’s portrayal. In her essay, “Becoming James Bond: Daniel Craig, rebirth, and refashioning masculinity in *Casino Royale*,” Katharine Cox argues that, in the 2006 film, “Fleming’s problematic responses to women are ... tempered” for a modern audience, and the “gender ambiguities” of Fleming’s original Bond are “made overt, causing Bond to resemble a hybrid of gendered roles” (2). These ideas are further examined by Lisa Funnell in her essay, “I Know Where You Keep Your Gun,” as she proposes the “Bond-Bond Girl hybrid” that she feels Craig embodies. In transitioning the original Bond to the silver screen of the 21st century, the character undergoes an ideological shift and there is a decrease in overt misogyny. Directorial choices place Craig’s Bond as the object of the gaze, allowing Bond to play the role of both the heroic, masculine spy and the attractive, somewhat feminized object. Daniel Craig’s portrayal of Bond exemplifies the ambiguities present in Fleming’s model of the character. The tones of misogyny and sexism are quieted, revealing a Bond who is both a direct replica and a direct contradiction of the original character conception.

It is significant to note that in the mid-twentieth century, when *Casino Royale* was written, the spy genre was dominated by male authors and characters. The characters tended to embody what are considered traditionally masculine traits, such as calmness under pressure, bravery against threats of danger, and stoicism in the face of physical pain. On the surface James Bond, who never seems to break a sweat while facing the most perilous of dangers, appears to conform to these conventions. Cox, however, notes that both the Bond of Fleming’s first novel and the Bond presented by Craig are far more human than a first impression suggests. She writes that Craig’s Bond is “hesitant, flawed” and “unquestionably [...] ‘human,’” which she specifically recognizes as representative of Bond’s permeability. “This Bond is barely in control,” Cox further notes, and examples of this can be found specifically in the scene where Bond is tortured by Le Chiffre, as he is continually beaten, and eventually his physical boundaries are permeated as Le Chiffre carves a Cyrillic ‘Ш’ into Bond’s palm (4-7). Most notably, Bond does not always prevail at all times, as he is captured, physically harmed, and eventually rescued by others. By representing Bond as fallible, Fleming – more covertly – and Craig – quite overtly – portray a more ambiguous portrait of what it means to be masculine, and Cox suggests that Bond’s permeability is a distinctly feminine quality. In this way, the Bond of both the novel and the movie strays from traditional masculine qualities of the spy trope. Bond is wounded, maimed, and tortured, and through this he shows that he is human – he makes mistakes, he bleeds, and he is afraid.

It is also important to consider the position of women in both the novel and film versions of *Casino Royale*. The re-positioning of the prominent females in *Casino Royale*, as well as the tempering of the novel’s overtly sexist