

THE WOMAN'S PRIZE

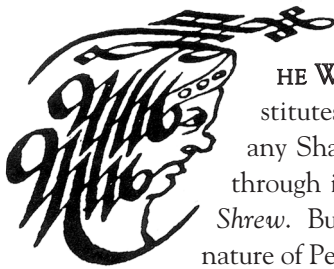
A Sequel to The Taming of the Shrew

George Swan



Livia: Tis as easy with a sieve to scoop the ocean, as
To tame Petruchio.

The Woman's Prize Act 1 Scene 2



THE WOMAN'S PRIZE by John Fletcher, also known as *The Tamer Tamed*,¹ constitutes the only known non-Shakespeare pre-Restoration dramatic sequel to any Shakespearean play.² It has been studied and debated by critics primarily through its many connections to Shakespeare's great comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*. But one question that has never been answered, or even asked, is why the nature of Petruchio was so altered, and whether or not it was altered to satirize a particular individual at the time that it was written. I propose that this version of Petruchio was intended to satirize the theater patron, Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, whose death in 1604 left him vulnerable to the kind of satire that no one would have dared to produce earlier.

Dating *The Woman's Prize*

Because the play was not published until it appeared in 1647 in the first Beaumont and Fletcher folio, long after Fletcher's death in 1625, the date of composition remains a matter for argument. However, that there is no argument that it was Fletcher's alone who wrote it³ may suggest that it was written before he began his collaboration with Beaumont c.1606. Though others date it later, in *From Farce to Melodrama*, Tori Haring-Smith dates it to c.1605 (271). In *English Comedy*, Ashley Thorndike speculatively dates it to 1604-05 (71).

As discussed by Thorndike, a date somewhere in this range may be perceived in lines from Act II Scene 2: "[The] infliction/That kill'd the Prince of Orange, will be sport/To what we purpose" (957-8). Although the Prince of Orange had been murdered back in 1584, an extremely vivid account of the punishment inflicted upon his murderer was published in 1602, which suggests a date for *Woman's Prize* closer to 1603-4 (Thorndike 71).

A reference to the siege of Ostend in Scene 3 reflects the same time period. Here the female characters, barricaded in a bedroom and, armed with domestic cannon (loaded chamberpots), prepare for combat: "The chamber's nothing but a mere Ostend/In every window pewter cannons mounted/You'll quickly find with what they are charg'd sir" (483-6). The Siege of Ostend opened on July 5, 1601, and concluded on September 8, 1604.⁴

Thorndike also calls attention to the reference in Scene 3 to Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, the major Irish rebel chieftain during the Nine Years War with the Irish rebel chieftains: "These

are the most authentic rebels, next Tyrone, I ever read of" (623-4). Tyrone had surrendered (on good terms) to the Lord Deputy, Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, on March 30, 1603.

Thorndike likewise attends to a portion of this Act II Scene 6 passage of dialogue between Petruchio, Moroso, and Maria, "Captain" of the women's rebellion, in which Petruchio agrees to the women's terms:

Petru. No more wars: puissant ladies, show conditions,
And freely I accept 'em.

Mar. Call in Livia.
She's in the treaty too.

Enter Livia above.

Mor. How, Livia?

Mar. Hear you that, Sir?
There's the conditions for you, pray peruse 'em.

Petru. Yes, there she is; t'had been no right rebellion,
Had she held off. What think you, man? (1373-81)

Maria's sister Livia has joined the women's rebellion, though late. In a work styled by George B. Ferguson the "definitive treatment" of the dating of *The Woman's Prize*—Baldwin Maxwell discerns that Petruchio's lines "merely state that the rebellion is now complete" (qtd. in Ferguson 355). Yet Livia too is accounted for in the battle of the sexes peace conditions. Fletcher underscores this later (Act II Scene 6) when Petruchio warns Petronius, father of the dissidents Maria and Livia: "For Livia's article, you shall observe it. I have tied myself," and Petronius agrees (1452-4).

Tyrone's submission of 1603 resolved the plight of that particular archrebel. But why should the playwright have made such a point of the inclusive nature of the peace agreement? Perhaps because, as part of his terms of agreement in 1604, Lord Mountjoy had amnestied, not only Tyrone, but all rebels across Ireland. After July 4, 1605, a playwright would have been much less likely to have used this event to symbolize amnesty, for it was on that date that King James reversed Lord Mountjoy's generosity.

Probably in response to an appeal from Sir Arthur Chichester, newly appointed to head the English administration in Ireland (Beckett 41), on July 4, 1605, James issued a proclamation denying the reports that he planned "to give liberty of conscience or toleration of religion" to his Irish subjects, claiming that he would never "confirm the hopes of any creature that they

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should ever have from him any toleration to exercise any other religion than that which is agreeable to God's Word and is established by the laws of the realm;" adding that "all priests whatsoever made and ordained by any authority derived or pretended to be derived by any authority from the See of Rome shall, before the 10th day of December, depart out of the kingdom of Ireland" (Bagwell 19-20). No one in an English audience would have been ignorant of these immensely important events.

Admittedly, there are allusions to post-1604 events, or sources, that might indicate a date for the surviving text of approximately 1611.⁵ E.H.C. Oliphant holds to a date of 1604 for the original text, suggesting an extensive rewriting a few years later, around 1610 (152-4). Oliphant identifies various signs of later alteration or abridgement (154-6). There are also some indications of a possible Jacobean revival of *Taming of the Shrew* (Morris 64). As Oliphant notes, the subtitle, *The Tamer Tamed*, is obviously a glance at the Shakespearean title (156). Since Fletcher would have been just twenty-five years of age in 1604, *The Woman's Prize* could possibly be his first play (Wallis 180).

A bold young dramatist

In 2006, Stanley Wells supposed:

Indeed it is fascinating that, only about twenty years after Shakespeare had given expression in *The Taming of the Shrew* to the orthodox patriarchal view of the place of women in marriage, Fletcher should produce so powerful and so independently plotted a counterblast to it . . . [I]t was bold of the young dramatist to take on his senior in this way, especially because *The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tamed*, adopts a very different attitude to the place of women in society from that offered in . . . *Shrew*" (203-5).

In 2003, Gordon McMullen of King's College, London, asserted that Fletcher knowingly "took the risk of writing an irreverent 'sequel' to Shakespeare's *Shrew*." He adds: "If we ever needed proof (if his plays are somehow not enough) that Shakespeare had a sense of humour, then this is surely it" (xiv).

But are Wells and McMullen correct? Why might Fletcher in latter 1604 have wished (or

ABSTRACT

The Taming of the Shrew's sequel was John Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize or The Tamer Tamed*. Internal evidence for the latter play suggests an earliest composition date of around March 1603-September 1604. The male lead for both plays is named Petruchio. The female lead in *Shrew* is the harpy Katherine. The female lead in the sequel is Maria. In *Shrew*, Katherine is tamed by Petruchio into a subdued wife. By contrast, in its sequel, Petruchio is tamed by Maria into a compliant husband. Following the plot of the original, Maria turns the tables on her husband through a trio of episodes wherein he attempts to gain the upper hand and fails. Each of these episodes reflects the Earl of Oxford's ill-starred biography. In *The Woman's Prize*, Petruchio, his deceased first wife (unnamed), and Maria are models for de Vere, his first wife Anne Cecil, and his second wife Elizabeth Trentham. Fletcher might have hesitated to bait the living Earl, but after June 24, 1604, Oxford was dead.

dared) to satirize *Taming of the Shrew*? How could the twenty-five-year-old Fletcher so publicly appear to needle that work's successful author? What happened between Tyrone's submission on March 30, 1603, and the end of the Siege of Ostend on September 8, 1604? I submit that what happened was the death of Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, who died on June 24, 1604 (Nelson 425). News of "great Oxford's" demise spread swiftly enough that only three days later his name disappeared from lists of peers eligible to sit in the House of Lords (416). Might this have allowed the still-callow John Fletcher the opportunity to exploit the popular *Taming of the Shrew* and to capitalize on reports of the death of an influential blueblood playwright?

Had Fletcher the time after June 24 (or June 27) to prepare a new play during 1604? Theater owner and manager Philip Henslowe's Diary, a folio memorandum account book, provides an invaluable source regarding the work practices of Fletcher's contemporaries c.1592-1603. John C. Meagher sees that, around the turn of the seventeenth century: "Few of the plays recorded in Henslowe's Diary . . . seem to have taken longer than three weeks between their initial approval and their final delivery" (197). Ben Jonson's Prologue to *Volpone* boasts that, all alone, he wrote *Volpone* in five weeks.⁶

Taming of the Shrew

As is well-known, *Taming of the Shrew* climaxes with the wedding of two sisters: the spitfire Katherine to Petruchio and the mild-mannered Bianca to Lucentio. The heart of the play is Petruchio's toilsome taming of the shrewish Katherine. Katherine's last words in the play are the famous antifeminist speech that includes this passage:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
 Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
 And for thy maintenance commits his body
 To painful labor both by sea and land,
 To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
 Whilst thou li'st warm at home, secure and safe;
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands
 But love, fair looks, and true obedience—
 Too little payment for so great a debt.
 Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
 Even such a woman oweth to her husband;
 And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
 And not obedient to his honest will,
 What is she but a foul contending rebel
 And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
 I am asham'd that women are so simple
 To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
 Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,
 When they are bound to serve, love, and obey. (5.1.147-65)

The speech virtually satirizes itself. Nevertheless, any outrage over Katherine's abject surrender would have been eased due to its locus in a "play-within-a-play."⁷

From the perspective of the English audiences of 1604, Irish patriot Tyrone had proved disobedient to England's will, "a foul contending rebel and graceless traitor" to his loving lady, Queen Elizabeth. Similarly, in *Woman's Prize* Bianca will prove—from Petruchio's perspective—a "foul contending rebel."

The Woman's Prize

Taming of the Shrew and *Woman's Prize* share three characters: Petruchio, Bianca, and Lucentio's servant Tranio, who has been promoted to a gentleman-friend of the widowed Petruchio. While other characters have been given new names,⁸ the female lead, Maria, is an entirely new character, replacing Katherine, his wife in *Shrew*. In Act I Scene 3, newly-married Maria barricades herself in a house stocked for a monthlong siege and denies her maidenhead to her eager bridegroom, Petruchio. "Colonel" Bianca, cousin of Maria and Livia, is identified by "Captain" Maria to Petruchio and to Maria's father, Petronius, as commander in chief of their female uprising. Repeatedly, Bianca verbally extends Maria's personal motives for rebellion into reasons for women to resist men generally.⁹ In Act I Scene 2, Maria identifies herself to Petruchio from her upper story window:

Petru.	Prithee peace, Let me not think thou art mad. I tell the woman, If thou goest forward, I am still Petruchio.
Mar.	And I am worse, a woman that can fear Neither Petruchio Furius, nor his fame, Nor any thing that tends to our allegiance; There's a short method for you. Now you know me! (575-581)

Maria tells Petruchio to sleep alone, cautioning him that she posts sentries:

Petru.	I'll hang first.
Mar.	And I'll quarter if I do not. I'll make you know and fear a wife, Petruchio. There my cause lies. You have been famous for a woman tamer, and bear the fear'd name of a brave wife-breaker. A woman now shall take those honours off, And tame you. Nay, never look so big, she shall, believe me, And I am she. What think ye? Good night to all. Ye shall find Centinels. (679-88)

For Maria, though tame enough to begin with, has been alerted by Bianca to the need to come to terms with her husband while she still has the bargaining power of her chastity:

Nay never look for merry hours, Maria,
If now you make it not. Let not your blushes,
Your modesty, and tenderness of spirit,
Make you continual anvil to his anger.
Believe me, since his first wife set him going,
Nothing can bind his rage: . . . (181-85)

Hence, the now feisty Maria reassures her:

Farewell all poorer thoughts, but spite & anger,
'Till I have wrought a miracle. Now, Cousin,
I am no more the gentle tame Maria.
Mistake me not, I have a new soul in me
Made of a north-wind, nothing but tempest.
And like a tempest shall it make all ruins,
'Till I have run my will out. (196-202)

This has been Maria's prayer, to

Never unlock the treasure of my womb
For human fruit, to make it capable,
Nor never with thy secret hand make brief
A mother's labour to me, if I do
Give way unto my married husbands will,
Or be a wife in anything but hopes.
'Till I have made him easy as a child . . . (249-55)

Is the bride's uprising implicitly a distaff gambit to welcome Petruchio to take his challenging woman in hand? Does Maria not cry: "Come beat me"? Witness the Act III Scene 3 exchange between Petruchio and Sophocles (i.e. Hortensio):

Soph. Pray you tell me one thing truly; do you love her?

Petru. I would I did not—upon that condition
I passed thee half my land.

Soph. It may be then,
Her modesty requir'd a little violence?
Some women love to struggle.

Petru. She had it,
And so much that I sweat for't, so I did,
But to no end. I washed an Ethiopie.
She swore my force might weary her, but win her
I never could, nor should, till she consented. . . . (1651-61)

In brief, the answer is no. Indeed, coolly menacing is Captain Maria's defense of her integrity:

Petru. If I should beat thee now, as much may be,
Do'st thou not well deserve it, o' thy conscience,
Do'st thou not cry, come beat me?

Mar. I defie you.
And my last loving tears farewell. The first stroke,
The very first give me, if you dare strike,
Try me, and you shall finde it so, forever
Never to be recall'd. I know you love me,
Mad till you have enjoy'd me. I do turn
Utterly from you, and what man I meet first
That has but spirit to deserve a favour,
Let him bear any shape, the worse the better,
Shall kill you, and enjoy me, . . . (2431-49)

Not even Colonel Bianca could incite such ferocity.

In Act II Scene 5, maids and wives arrive from country and city to reinforce Maria and Bianca against Petruchio and Petronius. In front of Petronius, Maria tells Petruchio that she neither wants his company nor thinks of him. The female forces sing to Petruchio, Petronius, and Tranio:

A health for all this day
To the woman that bears the sway
And wears the breeches,
Let it come, let it come.
Let this health be a Seal,
For the good of the Commonweal,
The woman shall wear the breeches.

Urged by his friends to be patient and show a willingness to negotiate, Petruchio capitulates to the conditions demanded by the insurgents as he outlines to Petronius in Act III Scene 3:

Petron. There's no talking to 'em;
How are they, Sir?

- Petru. As I expected: [Reads.] Liberty and clothes,
When, and in what way she will: continual moneys,
Company, and all the house at her dispose;
No tongue to say, why is this? or whether will it;
New coaches, and some buildings, she appoints here;
Hangings, and hunting-horses: and for plate
And jewels for her private use, I take it.
Two thousand pounds in present then for music,
And women to read French.
- Petron. This must not be.
- Petru. And at the latter end a clause put in,
That Livia shall by no man be importun'd,
This whole month yet, to marry.
- Petron. This is monstrous.
- ^z Petru. This shall be done, I'll humor her awhile.
If nothing but repentance and undoing
Can win her love, I'll make a shift for once. (1402-20)

Nevertheless, Petruchio's troubles remain incomplete. Maria rejoins her new husband, only to engage in a series of episodes reminiscent of those used by Petruchio in *Taming of the Shrew* by which means he tamed the banshee Kate.¹⁰ Three times Maria takes Petruchio at his word in order to humiliate him: When he feigns illness, she treats him as a plague victim; when he declares he will abandon her to roam abroad, she helps him on his way, handing him provisions; and when he pretends that he he has died, she pours contempt over his supposed corpse.

Why should Fletcher invoke these three instances, specifically? I submit that this trio of episodes resonates in the life, and 1604 death, of Edward de Vere.

Act III: The plague episode

United with Maria, but appalled by her bravado, in Scene 4 Petruchio informs his confidant, Sophocles (Hortensio), that he will traduce her by faking his own death:

. . . and did Heaven forgive me,
And take this Serpent from me? And am I
Keeping tame devils now again? My heart aches.
Something I must do speedily. I'll die,
If I can, handsomely, for that's the way
To make a rascal of her. I am sick,
And I'll go very near it, but I'll perish.

Maria's self-preserving response is to flee the plague by carting off the household goods (hangings, linen, plate, wardrobe, armoire) to leave her failing husband behind: "Let's save ourselves, Sir." The Watch arrives to lock Petruchio in quarantine, and the Doctor arrives to bleed him. The Watch suggests to Petruchio that he prepare his will: "Do you want pen and ink? While you have sense, Sir, settle your estate." Petruchio can break out of this predicament only by drawing a gun. Like Oxford, he never does execute his last will and testament.

In Hackney, an entry in the old Register of the Church of Saint Augustine records: "Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxenford, was buried the 6th day of July, anno 1604." A note upon the page's margin reportedly reads "The Plague" (Nelson 426). Anyway, since 30,578 Londoners had been killed by plague between December 23, 1602, and December 22, 1603, a 1604 London theatrical audience would quickly associate a middle-aged man's unexplained death with the plague.¹¹

Because Oxford died intestate (Nelson 431) there was no probate inventory; nor have we any record of what ought to have been substantial arms and goods. Despite the efforts of his creditors, these remained with his wife, though she didn't have to cart them off.

Act IV: The travel abroad episode

In Scene 1, Petruchio, in front of Sophocles (Hortensio), threatens Maria that he will leave her: “Now Damsel, What will your beauty do if I forsake you?” Daring her to risk his absence, Petruchio intends “but to try her,” but Maria confounds him by welcoming his departure:

Mar. Sure sir
You have hit upon a happy course, a blessed,
And what will make you virtuous?

Petru. She'll ship me.¹²

Mar. A way of understanding I long wished for,
And now 'tis come, take heed you fly not back, Sir.
Methinks you look a new man to me now,
A man of excellence, and now I see
Some great design set in you: you may think now
(And so may most that know me) 'twere my part
Weakly to weep your loss and to resist you,
Nay, hang about your neck and like a dotard
Urge my strong tie upon you. But I love you,
And all the world shall know it, beyond woman,
And more prefer the honour of your country,
Which chiefly you are born for, and may perfect,
The uses you may make of other nations,
The ripening of your knowledge, conversation,
The full ability, and strength of judgement,

Than any private love or wanton kisses.
Go, worthy man, and bring home understanding. (2774-94)

In Scene 4, his bluff called, Maria informs him that the wind is for France. What is the meaning of this?

No one who knew anything about Oxford need to be reminded that back in 1575, he had left his pregnant wife, Anne Cecil, for France and his long-desired continental tour, from which he would not return until eight months after the birth of his daughter (Nelson 130). The scandal of his homecoming, the breakup of his marriage, the rumors that the child wasn't his, and most particularly, his wrath at the way his father-in-law had dealt with the problem, allowing it to become, as he called it, "the fable of the world" (146), would leave the memory of his continental trip forever embedded in the minds of his community as the prologue to his cruel refusal to acknowledge his wife and daughter for six long years. Thus we see in "Captain Maria" either Oxford's second wife Elizabeth Trentham, or her stage double, turning the tables on Petruchio-de Vere.

Act V: The broken life episode

In Act IV Scene 4, prior to his purported embarkation for France, Petruchio shares good-byes with his impatient wife:

Mar.	I am sure you'll kiss me ere I go; I have business, And stay here long I must not.
Petr.	Get thee going. For if thou tarriest but another dialogue, I'll kick thee to thy chamber.
Mar.	Fare you well, Sir, And bear yourself, I do beseech you once more, Since you have undertaken doing wisely, Manly, and worthily, 'tis for my credit, And for those flying fames here of your follies, Your gambols and ill breeding of your youth, For which I understand you take this travel, Nothing should make me leave you else, I'll deal So like a wife that loves your reputation. . . . (2866-79)

Maria's farewell to her still unrepentant mate foreshadows her response to his next caper, which is to counterfeit his own decease. Sophocles (Hortensio) announces that Petruchio's journey has concluded with the return of his corpse—Petruchio's grief over his devil-wife has been the death of him.

In Act V Scene 4, Sophocles and Petronius accompany Petruchio's coffin, and are met by

Maria dressed all in black.¹³ Petronius berates her, blaming her stubbornness for Petruchio's death before he could reach the sea. He invites her to weep for him. The virginal Maria agrees that she weeps from mighty cause. Her eulogy, however, sounds more like a dyslogy:

Mar. But what's the cause? Mistake me not, not this man,
 As he is dead, I weep for't; Heaven defend it,
 I never was so childish. But his life,
 His poor unmanly wretched foolish life,
 Is that my full eyes' pity, there's my mourning.

Petron. Dost thou not shame?

Mar. I do, and even to water,
 To think what this man was, to think how simple,
 How far below a man, how far from reason,
 From common understanding and all gentry.
 While he was living here he walked amongst us.
 He had a happy turn, he died. I'll tell ye,
 These are the wants I weep for, not his person.
 The memory of this man, had he liv'd
 But two years longer, had begot more follies
 Then wealthy autumn flies. But let him rest,
 He was a fool, and farewell he; not pitied,
 I mean in way of life, or action
 By any understanding man that's honest;
 But only in's posterity, which I
 Out of the fear his ruins might outlive him
 In some bad issue, like a careful woman,
 Like one indeed born only to preserve him,
 Denied him means to raise. (3303-26)

Reviled by his supposed widow, Petruchio rises from his coffin to bewail his sorrow: "Unbutton me, I vow I die indeed else? O Maria, Oh my unhappiness, my misery." Petruchio's collapse unlocks Maria's true devotion at last:

 . . . I have done my worst, and have my end, forgive me.
 From this hour, make me what you please: I have tam'd ye,
 And now am vowed your servant. Look not strangely,
 Nor fear what I say to you. Dare you kiss me?
 Thus I begin my new love. (3331-37)

And so it ends happily ever after.

The Petruchio of *Shrew*

The First Folio of 1623 contains a few clues to the staging of early productions of *Taming of the Shrew*. If, as we're told, the production was dominated by the antics of Will Kemp's Grumio, and the tall Thomas Pope's Petruchio, the performance was farcical, with Pope's Petruchio less brute than braggart. Also, according to the Folio, behind some scenes music softly played.

Thomas P. Robinson summarizes the character traits of the figures in *Taming of the Shrew*. These are not, essentially, Robinson's own interpretations, but derive from that play's literature (plus the comedy itself):

Katherina calls [Petruchio] a crab-apple; coarse clay; traveled, experienced; knows men and how to handle them; a rugged character. He is out to marry money, and Katherina is offered in jest, but he takes her up in earnest, though with good-natured bravado, and acts his assumed part with "fantastical extravagance, with complete presence of mind, with untiring animal spirits, and without a particle of ill-humor from beginning to end." (97)

Contrast this original Petruchio with Maria's version. According to her, this Petruchio's life is that of "an uncommon simpleton"; remote from "gentry"; had he survived a couple of years longer, he would have "begot more follies than a wealthy autumn [begets] flies." *Shrew's* Petruchio scarcely seems the source for Fletcher's version, yet the inconsistency becomes explicable upon reexamination of *Shrew*. The Petruchio-Katherine tale of *Shrew* is a play-within-a-play. At its close, Katherine and Petruchio exit, and that Italian comedy ends with two additional sentences commenting on Petruchio's taming of Katherine. There follows no wraparound.¹³

As we have it from the First Folio, the play-within-the-play ends, but the wraparound story set in England remains open-ended. Thus an opportunistic Fletcher-on-the-make might exploit the inconclusive metafiction of *The Shrew*¹⁴ by continuing the histories of Petruchio and Bianca, updating their relationships and turning the earlier play upside down. How better for a twenty-five year-old, devoid of writing experience, to launch a career than by piggybacking upon a proven hit, devising a fresh Petruchio?

But if *Shrew* is not the source of Fletcher's Petruchio, whence came he?

Oxford's reputation

Recall Maria's farewell to Petruchio. Famed were the "follies, gambols, and ill-breeding" of Edward de Vere's early years. No one in Oxford's community would have forgotten his treatment of his wife and their daughter, seemingly ignored by him for six years following his return from Italy in 1576 (Nelson 141-54). This separation would doubtless have been even longer had not the Queen made a return to his family a condition of Oxford's pardon for another of his escapades, the impregnating of one of her young Maids of Honor, for which he was banished from Court c.1581-3 (231-32). Nor would his community have forgotten the sad death of the young undercook, mortally wounded by a stab in his thigh by Oxford's rapier while he was having a practice bout with a tailor's apprentice in the yard of Cecil House (47). Then there were the two years of notorious "brabbles and frays" between his corps of retainers and the Vavasors and Howards during the mid-80s (280-87).

But what was most unforgivable of all, was that by age forty, the seemingly profligate Oxford had lost all the estates, wealth, and power that a peer of his rank required to maintain his reputation. It was typical for a noble to rollover debt, aware that his assets sufficed for the crown to recoup from them after his death. But two other elements of Edward's financial biography appear to be unique. First, by 1586 or so he had alienated nearly all of his lands (both inherited and granted). Thus it became obvious that there were to be no assets from which to recoup. Second, writs of extent then were taken out against his former estates—not merely during his lifetime (unusual in itself), but after their sale to innocent buyers. In the English practice, a writ of extent meant a writ of execution issued from the Exchequer. This writ issued upon a debt due to the Crown, or else upon a debt due to a private party, if upon recognizance (or statute merchant or staple), by which the sheriff was directed to appraise a debtor's lands, and, rather than to sell them, to set them off to the creditor for a term during which the rental would satisfy a judgment. Like Fletcher's Petruchio, Oxford died intestate, either because there was so little left to leave or to prevent his creditors from taking what was left.

Why might young Fletcher have been particularly heedful of Oxford's high-profile financial foundering? Perhaps because his father too had died in debt to the Exchequer (Fleay 168).

Oxford's first wife, Anne Cecil

Maria of *The Woman's Prize* is insensitive to the Katherine tamed by Petruchio at the conclusion of *Taming of the Shrew*. In Act I Scene 2, cheerleader Maria denounces Katherine to the enthusiastic Livia and Bianca:

- | | |
|------|--|
| Mar. | A weaker subject
Would shame the end I aim at, disobedience.
You talk too tamely: By the faith I have
In mine own noble will, that childish woman
That lives a prisoner to her husbands pleasure,
Has lost her making, and becomes a beast,
Created for his use, not fellowship. |
| Liv. | His first wife said as much. |
| Mar. | She was a fool,
And took a scurvy course; let her be nam'd
'Mongst those that wish for things, but dare not do 'em:
I have a new dance for him, and a mad one. |
| Liv. | Are you of this faith? |
| Bya. | Yes truly, and will die in't. |
| Liv. | Why then let's all wear breeches! (279-293) |

Here Maria evokes women like Anne Cecil who live a prisoner to their husband's pleasure.

By contrast, Maria proclaims herself as faithful to her own noble will. Unlike Katherine of the final act of *Shrew*, and perhaps the submissive Anne Cecil, the vinegary Maria has a mad new dance for Petruchio (de Vere). Where did the theatrical London of 1604 remember encountering this code of conduct, previously? Who was Maria?

Oxford's second wife

As of the 1588 death of his wife, Oxford, then thirty-seven years of age, had failed to acquire a male heir. Heirs (unlike Sir Edward Veer, his illegitimate son by Anne Vavasour) derived only from wives. By 1592, Oxford had sold nearly every estate he had. Not later than December 27, 1591, he "mended his fortunes" by the traditional method of marrying an heiress, one of the Queen's maids-of-honor, Elizabeth Trentham. Approximately thirty-two years of age at her wedding, she would prove "De Vere's strong-willed and businesslike second wife" (Anderson xix).

The daughter of a wealthy Staffordshire landowner, Trentham was the eldest of six. On July 4, 1591, prior to their wedding, her brother Francis and a partner of his (John Wooley) bought ten acres of land in London (the Great Garden at Aldgate) from de Vere, to, according to a later document: "to have the same assured" to Oxford "for life, and in default of such assurance, receive the rents for life, the reversion and remainder, and the entire fee simple, to be disposed of for the advantage of Elizabeth, sister of the said Francis Trentham" (Nelson 335). Then on March 12, 1592, her brother Francis and their uncle, Ralph Sneyd, bought more property (the Rectory of Walter Belchamp) from Oxford, "to be held by Trentham and Sneyd to the use of Oxford and his wife, the Countess, during their lives" (Crick website), probably in order to secure the property from his creditors (Nelson 336). Through these means, Oxford was reestablished by 1597 in an estate appropriate to his rank, King's Place, also known as Brooke House, further to the north but in the same general neighborhood as Oxford's home during the 1580s, Fisher's Folly. As of September 2, 1596, this estate was being acquired by Elizabeth, Francis, Sneyd, and Giles Young (Crick). Thus, for purposes of protecting what remained of Oxford's assets, control of the Earl's estates and properties were transferred into the hands of the Trentham family.

In Act III Scene 3, Maria, having forced her husband to capitulate to her terms, speaks

"...there is a Manor place which is a Fayre House
all of bricke havinge a Fayre Hall and a parlor a
faire ketchyn a Pastory a drye larder with Buttry
Pantery and all other houses of Office necessary
and many Fayre Chambers a Faire long Galerye a
proper Chapell and a Closet commynge out of the
great Chamber over the Chapell a proper lybrayre to
laye bokes in many other proper Roomes wythin the
same Place And also a Fayre barne to ley haye a
Faire Stable Roome able for stabling horses And the
said house is inclosid on the backside wyth a greate
brode dyche and without that a Fayre large garden
inclosid to the sayd House with a pale necessary for
a garden or an Orcharde And at the furder ende of
the sayd house [an] Orcharde havinge but Fewe
trees of Frute therin wiche conteyneth di acre or
thereabouts And at the Hither end of the House
comynge from London ys a Faire large garden
grounde inclosyd with a bricke wall."

*A description of Brooke House
from a royal grant of 1547*

dismissively to grumbling Petruchio and Sophocles (Hortensio) of her new home, suggesting they replace it with something more grand:

- Soph. Good morrow Lady, how is't now?
- Mar. Faith sickly,
 This house stands in an ill ayre.
- Petru. Yet more charges?
- Mar. Subject to rots, and rheums; out on't, 'tis nothing
 But a tiled fog.
- Petru. What think you of the Lodge then?
- Mar. I like the seat [surroundings], but 'tis too little. Sophocles,
 Let me have thy opinion, thou has judgement.
- Petru. 'Tis very well.
- Mar. What if I pluck it down,
 And built a square upon it, with two courts
 Still rising from the entrance?
- Petru. And i'th midst
 A college for young scolds.
- Mar. And to the southward
 Take in a garden of some twenty acres,
 And cast it off the Italian fashion, hanging.
- Petru. And you could cast yourself so too. Pray, Lady,
 Will not this cost much money?
- Mar. Some five thousand.
 Say six: I'll have it battel'd too. (1743-64)

This acquires a new light when seen as based on the Court community's perception of Oxford's present financial situation wherein his wife and her brother own his bailiwick while he resides there at their sufferance. In addition, Maria's terms to Petruchio include "new coaches." Indeed, the Countess of Oxford enjoyed her own coach, which we know by her letter of November 20, 1602, to Julius Caesar, Judge of the High Court, in which she explains why she missed their appointment: "... being by a late mischance in my coach prevented from the hope of any present opportunity to meet you at the Court . . ." (Nelson 408). Although coaches had been in use by the aristocracy since the 1560s, by the early seventeenth century their use within the narrow cobblestone streets of London was still mostly limited to funerals and state occasions.

That Elizabeth Trentham relied on her coach for personal transport suggests an arriviste with grandiose social ambitions.

Following the plague episode in Act IV Scene 2, Petruchio remains hopeful about Maria as he recollects what led him to marry her: “. . . upon my conscience I shall forgive her yet; and find a something certain I married for—her wit.” By wit Elizabethans signified intelligence. If de Vere was the model for Fletcher’s Petruchio, it follows that his wife, the canny Elizabeth Trentham, was the model for Maria.

The foregoing analysis should suffice to suggest (if not substantiate) that as of 1604, an impecunious John Fletcher—a man who had to make his way via the plaudits of the playhouse audiences¹⁵—saw his opportunity with the June 24, 1604, death of Edward de Vere to compose a play based on the still popular *Taming of the Shrew*. Lest these conclusions seem to be squeezed from a sheer compendium of coincidences, why during 1604 might Fletcher have personal reasons to bait the bygone earl? And why particularly through his matrimonial tactics? Part of the answer may lie with a shared connection to Henry Hastings, third earl of Huntingdon, and his family.

Oxford and the Hastings family

Oxford’s connection with the Hastings family began in childhood. On July 1, 1562, when he was twelve years of age, his father (Earl John) and Henry Hastings, third Earl of Huntingdon, drafted a marriage contract, styled an *indenture of covenant*, stating that within a month of attaining the age of eighteen, Edward was to select as his bride one or the other of Henry’s younger sisters, the Lady Elizabeth or the Lady Mary (Cross 29), a contract that was to disintegrate following the death of Earl John in August 1562. A decade later, when Edward married Anne Cecil in a double wedding at Whitehall in December 1571, it happened that the second bride was one of the Hastings sisters, the Lady Elizabeth (Anderson 50).

How might John Fletcher, born December 20, 1579, have been conscious of this background to Edward and Anne’s wedding vows of 1571? As a young man, John’s uncle Giles was close enough to the Cecil circle to celebrate the marriage with an eclogue in Latin hexameters addressed to Lord Burghley, Anne’s father and Edward’s guardian (Nelson 75). According to Finkelpearl, John Fletcher’s biographer, Fletcher “near-certainly had lived in London by 1601 in his Uncle Giles’s home” (17n39).

In 1603, another incident transpired involving Oxford and the Hastings family. On or about March 16, 1603, as Queen Elizabeth was approaching death at Richmond Palace, Henry Clinton, Earl of Lincoln, and Oxford shared a meal at King’s Place, during which, according to Lincoln, Oxford denounced the impending accession to the English crown of King James VI of Scotland. Apparently he suggested to Lincoln that their best interest in the royal succession lay with the teenaged Henry, Lord Hastings (1586-1646), who besides heir to the Earldom of Huntingdon and “of the blood royal” (Nelson 412), was a relative of Lincoln’s first wife. Various Protestant elements saw the Hastings family—descendants of Edward IV—as legitimate claimants to the Crown. In fact, many years earlier, when Elizabeth was dangerously ill with the smallpox, it was thought she might choose his uncle, the third Earl of Huntingdon, to succeed

her. De Vere, it was asserted, said Lincoln should have the young man spirited to France, there to form a party to enthrone him as King of England.¹⁶

Meanwhile Robert Cecil, Oxford's brother-in-law, was just arriving at the peak of his power. Following the Queen's death in March, Cecil began to investigate Lincoln's charges against Sir John Peyton, Governor of Jersey (previously Lieutenant of the Tower) that, while Elizabeth was dying, Peyton had been meddling in State affairs. When questioned, Lincoln and Peyton concurred that one of the peers most against James's succession had been the Earl of Oxford. Talk along such lines as were attributed to Oxford could have been seditious (Anderson 344-45). But how could the still lowly John Fletcher of 1604 have been aware of such matters?



Fletcher and the Hastings family

In fact, it so happened that John Fletcher was also closely involved with the Hastings family. Knowledge of Fletcher's family context and the milieu of his patrons, the fifth Earl and Countess of Huntingdon, is of tangible merit in understanding his plays, for the Huntingdons endured as Fletcher's patrons throughout his long career (Finkelpearl 29). It is in tandem with his relationship with the fifth Earl and his Countess, Lady Elizabeth Stanley, that Fletcher's partnership with the aristocratic Francis Beaumont must be weighed.

Although we lack direct evidence of the circumstances wherein Fletcher met either Beaumont or Huntingdon, it could have been the fifth Earl of Huntingdon who brought the two aspiring young writers together. Either that or Beaumont, with his theatrical connections, introduced Fletcher to his cousin Henry Hastings. Hastings and Beaumont had known each other almost from birth. They were of exactly an age, having been near-neighbors during their youth and contemporaries at Oxford and the Inns of Court (28). However it came about, Beaumont and Fletcher must have met at some point in the years immediately following Fletcher's arrival in London in 1601 or '02,¹⁷ certainly well before Oxford's death on June 24, 1604.

Notwithstanding that he was the younger figure, contemporary tradition assigns to Beaumont the advisory attitude in their literary partnership (Schelling 1, 7). Precocious Francis Beaumont had published his first poem anonymously at the age of seventeen in 1602, an Ovidian epyllion, *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, that shows amazing sophistication and technical

This, the only certain portrait of John Fletcher (1579-1624), is currently on sale. For it to take its place beside the other writers of the period at England's National Portrait Gallery, the Gallery must raise £50,000 by January 20, 2008.

proficiency for a youth his age (Finkelpearl 56). For roughly eight years between 1605 and 1613, Beaumont and Fletcher lived together near the Globe Theater in Southwark on the Bankside. Closer than brothers, in community of bed and board, they shared clothes and even, it was rumored (by Aubrey), a woman. Whatever Oxford's status in the theatrical community by that time, these writers would certainly have known him or of him, and—via John's uncle Giles if not by common report—his failure to honor his early marriage agreement.¹⁸

But was ridiculing the late seventeenth Earl of Oxford not reckless, even for a playwright under the protection of the powerful Hastings family? Even though Oxford was dead and unable to retaliate, would it not seem beyond the pale to satirize a man while his family were still in mourning for him? Apparently not, for the resemblance of Oxford's circumstances to the character and circumstances of Fletcher's Petruchio are too obvious to deny.

In conclusion

The June 1604 death of Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, has been observed to coincide conveniently with Fletcher's hypothesized July-September 1604 composition span. Many scholars have shown how the plot of *Taming of the Shrew*, in which the virago Katherine is tamed by her husband, has been reversed in *The Woman's Prize*, wherein he himself is tamed by his second wife. Added to these points may be the way that the characters of Oxford and his second wife Elizabeth Trentham, as perceived by the Court community, conform to the leading characters of Fletcher's play.

As Todd Lidh has shown in his argument that *The Woman's Prize* is a sequel, rather than a stand-alone work:

. . . to have a taming battle between two unrecognizable characters would not have contained the same levels of knowing as a battle between a well-known Petruchio and the new iteration of his wife. Just as the characters in Fletcher's play are aware of Kate and her history, Fletcher's anticipated audience would be familiar with Shakespeare's characters and the changes introduced. It has been said that ideas reach saturation in their life-cycle when parodies and spoofs appear; these latter's existence is wholly dependent on the audience "getting the joke" by being familiar with the original, and I think Fletcher's audience was expected to understand the history of the characters portrayed to best see the revision and inversion of taming. (330)

But Lidh and previous commentators, unaware of the play's connections with the Earl of Oxford and his wives, have missed a large part of the dramatic and comic force of the play as it would have been experienced by the audiences of the early seventeenth century. Only with that awareness can the irony of Petruchio's comeuppance be fully appreciated. _____ 🍷

Notes

1 Editor's note: The text of *The Woman's Prize* has been modernized here for greater ease of understanding. Original spelling versions can be found online at <http://www.uq.edu.au/emsah/drama/fletcher/ff/prize/prizeindex.htm>—to which our line numbering corresponds. It's also available in inexpensive paperback as *The Tamer Tamed; or, The Woman's Prize* (Revels Student Editions, 2007), edited by Celia R. Daileader and Gary Taylor.

2 Gross: The play is in every sense a sequel . . ."; Lidh (66-67); Cone (65); Leech (52-53); Thorndike (70); Haring-Smith (8); Boyce (624, 628); Finkelppearl (252); Wallis (157).

3 Charles Squier: "There is a consensus that *The Woman's Prize* was by Fletcher alone (120); Stanley Wells: ". . . Fletcher apparently unaided . . ." (202), E.K. Chambers: "There is general agreement in assigning the play to Fletcher alone" (3.222).

4 However, Charles Mills Gayley of the University of California fancies: "I cannot persuade myself that the reference to the siege of Ostend determined the earlier date. That siege was likely to be a subject of colloquial reference for twenty years after its conclusion" (607-8).

5 See, e.g., George F. Ferguson (18-19); Baldwin Maxwell, (360-63); and Charles Mills Gayley: "The coincidence of Jonsonianisms in connection with a Jonsonian character of 1610 may indicate that date as the upper limit of composition for *The Woman's Prize*" (lxvii). However, as with efforts to date some of Shakespeare's works through apparent references to Chapman or Daniel, such methods are rarely conclusive since possible derivations of this sort can usually be read either way.

6 Haring-Smith: "These five weeks fell in February and March 1606, and a few weeks later the play [*Volpone*] was staged at the Globe by the King's Men" Campbell (vii).

7 "Because Sly and his retinue are the primary audience for these productions, we can dismiss any facet of the play which displeases us—a character, plot incident, or its message—simply by arguing that it was designed to entertain the stage audience, not us" (Haring-Smith 166).

8 In 2003, the Royal Shakespeare Company Director Gregory Doran coordinated the names of characters in *Taming of the Shrew* and *Woman's Prize* so that characters in the latter play, Jacques, Pedro, Moroso, and Sophocles, are restored to their former play names, Grumio, Peter, Gremio, and Hortensio, respectively (Smith-Howard 200).

9 "Through most of the first two acts, Fletcher's Bianca serves as a coach for Maria, educating her in the ways of a strong-willed woman. She also serves as the catechizer for Livia, who comes to join their rebellion. With Maria properly educated, Bianca proceeds to educate the now-ensconced Livia and eventually the City and Country women who join their crusade" (McMullan xvi-xvii).

10 "Anticipating an audience familiar with Shakespeare's Petruchio and his methods for shrew-taming, Fletcher creates similar situations for his characters that are inverted versions of those moments in the older play" (Lidh 75).

11 According to Mark Anderson, de Vere perished of causes unknown (357). Alan Nelson offers: "Since the last Hackney burial attributed to plague occurred on 5 June 1594, Oxford was clearly thought to have died from some other cause," although he admits that the old Register lists "the loss of 260 parishioners to 'ye plague' from July to November 1603. . . ." (426).

12 The OED gives as its first usage of "to ship" as "7d: to send off, send packing, get rid of, dismiss, expel": Shakespeare: *Titus Andronicus* 1.1.206: "Would thou were shipt to hell."

13 Of course, having been interred on July 6, 1604, in the churchyard of St. John-at-Hackney

(Nelson 425), Oxford was already in his coffin.

14 “Various theories have been proposed to explain the absence of any epilogue in *The Taming of the Shrew*” (Haring-Smith, 214n4).

15 “Writing was his only alternative to the sort of meager country parsonages to which his brother Nathaniel and his cousins Giles, Jr., and Phineas were bitterly restricted” (Finkelpearl 18).

16 Editor’s note: Oxford’s plan recalls that of his illustrious ancestor, the thirteenth earl of Oxford, who, having fled the army of Edward IV, escaped imprisonment in France, returning to England to lead the army of Henry Tudor to victory over Richard III, thereby establishing the Tudors on the English throne (Seward 305-8).

17 Francis Beaumont and his brother were entered as members of the Inner Temple on November 3, 1600 (Wallis 132).

18 Editor’s note: As Ruth Miller had posited, Oxford himself felt called upon to apologize (however obliquely) to Mary Hastings in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* for having ignored Mary Hastings and her sister (42-3), which suggests that this bit of his personal history was common knowledge among Court circles.



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