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Termagants and Drunkards: Refiguring the Shrew in *Boss for Three Days*

In the climactic scene of *Boss for Three Days*, viewers encounter a wife who successfully realigns marital hierarchy. Bette, an aggressively autonomous and dynamic female character, re-establishes domestic order at the close of the play by placing her husband firmly beneath her authority and control. Bette's vituperative and domineering personality links her to the stock-figure shrew popular and prevalent in medieval literature. Yet unlike her famous counterpart, Mrs. Noah in the mystery cycle plays, Bette subverts the didactic instruction of Uxor's meek and submissive posture by becoming "mistress of everything" (381) in the words of her compatriot Lijsbet.

Uxor's submission signals the established resolution of the shrew's rebellion. As Rosemary Woolf explains, in the corpus of medieval narratives possessing the "malicious, shrewish wife and the suffering husband ... it is the latter who, in the battle as to who shall wear the breeches, is exceptionally allowed the victory" (*The English Mystery Plays,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, 139). Bette's brash disobedience to the traditional authority of her husband in both public and private spheres boldly appropriates that victory for the wife. Bette does not become the chastened Mrs. Noah at the end of *Boss for Three Days*; instead, she becomes herself again — the shrew who is still defiant, still outspoken and still in control.

Crucial to Bette's role as the shrew is not simply her triumph over her husband through the sheer force of her physical strength and formidable character. More important than her victory is her "usurpation" — provided for her specifically, and indeed ironically, by her mate Jan. The unjustly shrew-bitten husband whom a medieval audience would expect to sympathize with and rally behind does not materialize in Jan.

Although it seems that the farce is aimed at amusing male audiences with Bette's unnatural and even "sinful" behavior, Jan's actions do not prove any more noble than his wife's. Amazingly, Jan exhibits qualities characteristic of the shrew, perhaps exceeding those of his wife. In fact, the farce actually produces the greatest humor by exposing Jan as a man controlled by his appetites — for ale, sex, and mastery — appetites normally ascribed to the shrew. Just as Jan accused Bette of being a bad wife (which he calls her four times in the play) but is himself the worse spouse of the two, so he castigates her for being ruled by excess, when in reality it is he who is unable to control either his physical or his psychological urges.

Rosemary Woolf's examination of this stock figure describes the shrew as "greedy, a slave to her belly, inconstant, fickle in her speech, disobedient, and impatient of restraint, ... desirous of vain glory, a liar, a drunkard, a babbler, no keeper of secrets" and especially prone to sexual desire and adultery (138-39). To be sure, the audience's first encounter with Bette clearly establishes her propensity for curses, shouts, and complaints as well as physical violence: "Go and do as I tell you, / or I'll give you such a beating / that your ribs will crack" (161-63). The audience's sustained and numerous encounters with Jan,

however, greatly outnumbering those with his wife, betray in him the intemperate appetites that should typify *her*.

Jan's love of ale and his increasingly intoxicated state typify him as a drunkard. Jan gulps and swigs beer throughout the play only to exchange the ale for wine during the dinner scene in his home. When he and Imbrecht lament their miseries at the opening of the play, Jan identifies beer as the cause of his and Bette's discord: "Neighbor, you know my *whole* situation. / I like to drink in the tavern" (my emphasis, 88-89). Apparently, unrestrained drinking at the village pub represents one of Jan's favorite activities, but Bette foils his dissipation by regularly discovering him at the tavern, scolding him publicly, and then forcing him to return home with her.

When Jan successfully purchases three days of mastery, his greatest victory is that he may go "drinking without worry" (215). He exults that other husbands must "sit now by the fire / and wind and spin" (204-05) at their homes. Unlike him, "they dare not drink because of the wives, / who scold and berate them" (206-07). Jan exercises his mastery by declaring to Bette that he will not sit at home and that he will not stop drinking until he pleases: "Now I want to go drinking, till I am drunk" (223). In fact, during this triumphant speech, Jan proclaims repeatedly that he "shall now go drinking" (201). Becoming intoxicated without Bette's interruption represents Jan's ultimate idea of mastery in his own house: he in the tavern drinking to excess and Bette at home "more quiet than a mouse" (220). Even when Jan meets Imbrecht on his way to the tavern, he forestalls boasting of his conquest because "first, in any case," he explains, "I must drink" (227). As he finishes the generous draught Imbrecht pours for him, Jan concludes that the beer benefits his "total well-being" (241), as opposed to any other form of nourishment, one supposes.

To viewers of the play, Jan's immoderate love of ale aligns with the stereotype of the shrew, yet Bette is obviously cast in that role. Should not her actions resemble those of the drunkard, more than Jan's? He does criticize her for having a great thirst and drinking her mug of beer to the very last drop, but we have only Jan's word for it. Because his word and honor prove dubious in the play, the aspersions he casts upon his wife are questionable. She seems to be constantly taking him home from the tavern, not joining him there for drinks.

In addition, in the audience's encounters with Bette she does not drink. For example, when Imbrecht offers Bette wine in the play, she refuses: "Don't pour one for me" (316) and asks to eat instead. Jan gives her another task to perform, however, although Bette suggests again, "I would rather have something to eat now" (326). For a woman who is supposed to be consumed by drinking and even has the opportunity to share wine with her guests, Bette does not drink. But she does watch her husband exercise unchecked autonomy, drinking and going where he will, and enjoy unmitigated authority, ordering her to clean, sew, cook, scrub, and satisfy his every whim — that is, all of the whims he desires *her* to meet.

Those appetites that Bette cannot satisfy for Jan, he satisfies in the tavern, the one place he desires never to see her. One is the thirst for beer, and the other is a "thirst" or longing that clothes this husband in the garb of the shrew: sensuality. Like Eve and her sin of gluttony in the garden in eating the apple that was pleasant to her eye, the shrew reveals her gluttony in carnal appetites as well. Like Eve who coveted the fruit which was forbidden to her and unnecessary for her sustenance, the shrew craves "fruit" that is equally superfluous to her.

Not limited to the fleshly desires of eating and drinking, the shrew's appetites make her prone to lasciviousness and adultery. Yet in *Boss for Three Days* the only character who has any connection to extramarital sex is Jan. Just as he imbibes without any semblance of moderation, so he

apparently enjoys the company of other women whom perhaps he meets at the pub (which would, of course, explain his wanting Bette at home and not with him). When Jan first offers gifts to his wife in the hope of three days of mastery, Bette retorts: "Fie on the furs, fie! / You bought it for another belly" (180-81), and continues: "You son of a whore, you'll let slip yet / for whose benefit they were bought" (182-83). Jan does not convincingly refute Bette's charge of adultery; his only response uses the sugar-coating of "dear love" to reply: "It's all a lie" (184). One cannot help wondering what "it" is and if "it" could be talk of whores and mistresses.

Jan complains bitterly about Bette's limiting his drinking and about her intrusion into the tavern. His triumph of uninterrupted sanctity at the pub is as great as his victory of unchecked drinking. Besides the pub's ale, one must wonder about its great attraction, especially as Jan gloats, "Even if I didn't come back before tomorrow, / my wife would be well-satisfied" (216-17). Although his wife will sit quietly and meet his every request at their home, Jan still proposes to leave — apparently to enjoy with someone else what he could now demand of his submissive wife in addition to housekeeping duties like scrubbing, cleaning, cooking, and sewing.

Additional evidence against Jan's fidelity surfaces in the matter of the fur, about whose origin Bette is concerned. She immediately suspects the fur was not bought for her, but for another "belly" — an interesting choice of words suggesting the womb, the flesh, and appetite, all of which Bette applies to some other woman and all of which carry strong sexual connotations. The viewer knows Jan originally considered giving Bette only a petticoat or a piece of cloth. When he arrives home and meets her anger and threats, Jan offers her instead a fur he has imported from England. Simply put, the short lapse of time between deciding to give Bette a gift and offering her the fur contradicts the possibility that he imported it expressly for her, leaving us to wonder about the truth of the rumors Jan calls lies.

Jan's desires for ale and for illicit sex make up only the physical dimension of his excessive appetites. Perhaps more intriguing is his hunger for mastery and control which the audience experience first-hand, watching Jan spiral from exultation at the moment of victory — the barter achieved — to his over-reaching that precedes his fall — the barter voided. The crucial attribute of the shrew is her disobedience motivated by a desire to control where she should not control, meaning a wife's predominance over her husband.

Interestingly, the shrew most often brings death or harm to herself by disobeying her husband's wise directions and good advice. As Woolf explains, in numerous satires and *fabliaux* of the period the shrew is the agent of her own undoing (140). Her own unnatural and wicked desires for independence and, in fact, dominance make her irrational and incapable of simple self-control. Of course, Bette parallels the shrew in her desire for mastery of her home as she is particularly caustic and violent at the beginning of the play. Most certainly, she bristles against her husband's orders; nonetheless, she does exactly what he says and plays her part in front of Imbrecht and Lijsbet. In essence, she exercises self-control and keeps to her agreement.

Jan, on the other hand, violates the single stipulation of their agreement within minutes of settling the barter with his wife. Bette offers sage instruction that they keep their barter a secret and "let no one know about it" (191). Jan agrees, "Oh no, upon my honor I shall be quiet about it completely" (192-93), but then foils himself by committing the one trespass that will assure his fall. Mirroring the shrewish behavior of the "blabber," "no keeper of secrets," and "desirer of vain glory," Jan's first words to Imbrecht violate the promise of secrecy he made upon his honor: "I shall tell you without leaving a word out" (226).

Jan's success, which he is able to parade in front

of Imbrecht when he and Lijsbet come to dinner, only exacerbates his already overweening desire for control. The attraction of supremacy proves too much for him, and he commits a series of blunders that bring about his fall. Jan's complete loss of self-control begins when he declares: "I shall make her regret the furs / by God, which I gave her, / in order to be able to live in peace / for three days and be lord" (338-41). He continues by criticizing Bette and her pastry in front of their company, which one imagines settles the score for her scolding at the tavern. And finally, Jan completes his own duping when he recognizes that "we may risk everything" (396), but finds the lure of making Bette "jump through a hoop" too attractive (362).

Bette bears Jan's "fun" and accepts it as part of the bargain: she complies with each of his requests. But when she is humiliated in front of Lijsbet who chides and berates her for selling herself into submission, Bette forsakes the fur. Of great significance is Jan's responsibility, though inadvertent, for Lijsbet's diatribe.

Because Jan "tells all" to his neighbor, thereby breaking his vow of silence, Lijsbet learns of the barter and castigates Bette for it, who then proclaims, "Fie, God curse the furs" (392). Drinking by Jan's fire, Imbrecht tells his friend, "I can see, people do a lot for money" within range of his wife's eavesdropping ears (308). When Lijsbet overhears the two men whispering about Jan's little exchange, her criticism begins. Her question, "How did you sell yourself like this?" (365), borrows the monetary image of her husband's words.

Sensing Jan's impending doom, Imbrecht advises his friend to curb his ambition of making Bette regret the bargain. Jan plows forward nonetheless. He boasts of the brave words with which he was able to "conquer my wife" (361), but chokes on those words in the form of a pastry.

Jan's exchange of a fur for three days of mastery convince him of his own manhood: "Don't I speak like a man?" (334). Jan finds great satisfaction in his words. It is a singular experience for Jan to be lord in his own house after twenty-five years of marriage. That he reigns for such a limited time and brings about his fall through his own misrule raises the question of who is the rightful master in the marriage. Is Jan a man or only "like a man" as he asks? Is Bette a bad wife or married to an "idiot" as she asserts? In a play that emphasizes the hierarchical arrangement of power between husband and wife, both Jan and Bette resemble the shrew, but only Bette overpowers her husband and only Jan orchestrates his own defeat.

The Messenger who opens the play sheds light on these questions of rightful power distribution and gender roles within marriage. The Messenger announces to the men of the audience that "It is said that he does not get his will, / who is married to a bad woman" (2-3). We can deduce from his words that a bad wife is one who exercises some measure of authority over her husband, who makes decisions independently of her husband, and who pursues a course that does not always or necessarily follow her husband's wishes. In other words, she is a shrew.

The Messenger calls attention to the double standard when he suggests that husbands should exercise dominance over their wives, and wives should submit to their husbands. In *Boss for Three Days*, however, it is this shrew, this "bad" wife, who resumes the management of her home after the interruption of her termagant-husband. After the temporary chaos of Jan's rule, she reestablishes domestic order with a husband with some obligation to his home.

Because the pair share the pointedly "feminine" behavior of the shrew, one must ask: Is Jan a bad husband? Considering Lijsbet's summation of the matter, "He [Jan] doesn't know how to be your master / without this smart trick" (368-69), one wonders how long the pair would stay afloat with Jan drinking his days and nights away at the

tavern. Is Bette justified in her "masculine" actions as master? Should we consider her suffering caused by a husband who drinks incessantly, who never wants to be at home, yet who does not desire her company at the tavern? Has Bette assumed the master's position in her home because she is best suited for its management and hence for good cause? She seems to have won it fairly. Both in word and deed, she overpowers him. The Messenger, Jan, and Imbrecht call that being a "bad wife." Lijsbet and Bette call it household economy, domestic order, and adult responsibility. Regardless, in the war of the shrews, the wiser and stronger one wins.