HUSBAND BEATING IN ENGLISH ICONOGRAPHY:
THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE MONTACUTE HOUSE MURAL

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ALTHOUGH WE ARE PRIMARILY CONCERNED in our own times with the control of wife beating by brutal husbands, the Renaissance thought a far more serious threat to society existed in the beating of husbands by unruly wives. David Underdown states that

in [Renaissance] England the more elaborate forms of charivari—distinct from simple rough-music processions accompanying the carting or “riding” of a whore—were nearly always directed against couples of whom the wife had beaten or otherwise abused the husband. Recorded instances of this form of charivari nearly all date from the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (121)

However, husband beating itself was illustrated much earlier in English ecclesiastical art, which also pointed accusingly to the sinful behavior of husbands that caused such ferocious female responses. In this paper I shall examine some examples of carved misericords on the subject and an important secular representation on a large plaster wall panel of an English folk punishment of an offending husband. Caught drinking beer by his wife, this man allowed himself to be beaten by her and thus became subject to a cruel “Riding of the stang” at the hands of his jeering neighbors. Such evidence in iconography suggests “what every woman knows”—that an abusive shrew is often created by a bad husband.

Renaissance literary defenses of women, no matter how tongue-in-cheek, often make exactly this point. For example, Henry Care, translator into English of the 1670 edition of Henry Cornelius Agrippa’s De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus (Cologne, 1532), actually mentions the customary English “ridings,” or village punishments of men
who have allowed their wives to beat them, in his discussion of rebellious wives and inadequate husbands:

A Lascivious Husband will make a Wanton Wife; a spend-thrift Husband an extravagant Wife. We should therefore take St. Austin's counsel, and such as we would have our Wives appear unto us, the same should we first approve ourselves to them. 'Tis an impudent and impious fellow (saith Seneca) that requires of his Wife an undefiled Bed, yet he himself defiles it. . . . So in some places the Husbands are punisht only for the faults of the Wives; as in Catalonia, whoever is Cuckolded, payeth a summe of money; and in Paris, he rides in disgrace through the City, the Cryer proclaiming these words before him, So do, so have; from which our English Custome of Ridings is not much different. (Agrippa 48–49)

Thus, male domination over the female sex, which was upheld by both church and state, involved responsibility on the part of the husband for any deviations from normal behavior in the home.

The usual patriarchal argument for such male domination and female submission within the family was based both on St. Paul's admonitions in Ephesians 5.22–23 and on the classical belief that reason must govern the animal appetites and instincts in humankind, i.e., the head must rule the body. Since males were considered to be more reasonable than females, they were made heads of households, as the king was made head of the nation. The best known expression of this familial and political hierarchy to speakers of English is undoubtedly Kate's speech at the end of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*:

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?

(5.2.155–60)

Kate is careful here to point out, however, that the husband's will must be "honest," for neither wife, child, nor servant was legally bound in Early Modern England to obey a dishonest or immoral command from