

Kimberly Chapman
Hush



Imagine a world where women are hushed. Not hard to do. But hushed by bridling? It was all too common in the Middle Ages.

Scold's Bridle was a torturous, iron cage that locked the head in place. A mouth bit suppressed the tongue. The idea was to silence an outspoken woman, to get her under control like an unruly horse. They were first recorded in Scotland in 1567 and later used in Belgium, Germany and England.

Modeled after an animal bridle and bit, they were named after a scold - a woman who nagged her husband, gossiped or exercised too much independence. Victims included wives, widows, paupers and witches as well as preaching Quaker women.

Worn for a few hours or days, the masks had animal and grotesque characteristics. Long ears showcased the victim as an ass, while a pig snout referred to filthy crimes. An over sized tongue meant too much talk. The bit included sharp, protruding spikes or razor sharp edges. Moving the tongue to speak, eat or drink would most likely draw blood. Drooling was constant.

Even though the bridles were illegal, laws weren't always enforced. A magistrate official (who had jurisdiction over the bridles) led the victim by chain or leash to a public gathering place. Some bridles included bells or breathing whistles to announce her arrival. Once in place, she was heavily mocked and assaulted with hurtling garbage.

With punishment so severe, the bridle served as a successful means of social control. One would have to think twice about being dragged through the streets in an iron mask so heavy it could break the jaw and teeth and pierce the tongue – all while blood, vomit and saliva ran down the chin. And there was the angry mob to contend with as well.