

## **1. THE TAMING OF THE SHREW**

The dating of *The Taming of the Shrew* has got earlier and earlier until now the scholarly consensus is that it is probably the earliest Shakespeare comedy (displacing *A Comedy of Errors* from that title) and possibly the earliest of all his plays. The Arden editor makes an informed guess at 1589, just before the *Henry VI* trilogy. Shakespeare was then 25 and had probably only recently come to London from Stratford. The play, especially the induction, is full of references to Warwickshire life.

Fletcher's play *The Woman's Prize or The Tamer Tamed*, written about 1611, is an answer to *The Taming of the Shrew*, and assumes the play to be well known, though there is only one record of a performance of it in Shakespeare's lifetime, in 1594. The play was not published until the first Folio of 1623.

Another, very similar play called *The Taming of a Shrew* was published anonymously in 1594 and has survived. The relationship between the two plays has been the subject of much scholarship and controversy. Some scholars have argued that *A Shrew* was the immediate source of *The Shrew*, some that it was an early draft by Shakespeare. But opinion has now swung behind the theory that *A Shrew* is later, and that it is a Bad Quarto of *The Shrew*. There are bad quartos of several Shakespeare plays, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. The copyright of a popular play was a valuable property, and there were frequent piracies. The texts and prompt-books of unpublished plays were carefully guarded by the company bookkeepers. The commonest way to obtain a text for unauthorized publication was by bribing an actor who had appeared in the play to reconstruct it from memory. It is usually possible to work out which actor this was, since he would remember his own part very well, would remember the rest of the scenes in which he was on stage reasonably well, but would often be reduced to guesswork and fabrication for the scenes in which he did not figure. On these grounds it seems likely that the actors who had played Grumio (probably Alexander Cooke) and Sly (William Sly) some years earlier were responsible for the attempted reconstruction.

The aspect of *A Shrew* which has attracted most interest is that relating to the role of Christopher Sly, the drunken tinker, who reappears, with other actors from the induction, in several later interludes and in an epilogue. This is the only respect in which *A Shrew* seems superior to *The Shrew*, and scholarly opinion has now swung behind Alexander in his belief that the additional scenes featuring Christopher Sly had been in *The Shrew* when William Sly and Cooke had performed in it, but had subsequently been cut to reduce the number of actors needed when the reduced company went on tour. These cuts would have allowed the actors playing Sly, his 'Lady' and the Lord to double as Pedant, Vincentio, and Hortensio's widow, thus reducing the number of actors needed from 16 to 13.

The very early date now assigned to this play should perhaps make a difference to our response to it. Where mature Shakespeare is concerned we do not usually expect to have to make allowances for the attitudes of the time. We expect Shakespeare, who is for all time, to rise above them. Yet no-one, as far as I am aware, mocks Shakespeare for believing in the Divine Right of Kings. Rather we praise him for humanizing and liberalizing that idea by focussing also on the responsibilities of kingship. Shakespeare has, however, been savagely attacked by the feminists for the views on marriage expressed in *The Taming of the Shrew*, despite the fact that Shakespeare's position is liberal and humane in relation to the way in which the same theme was conventionally handled at the time. There is, for example, no earlier version of this common story in which violence is not used against the woman. As the Arden editor, Brian Morris, writes:

The deepest sources of *The Shrew* lie in the folk-tales and ballads Shakespeare would

have known from boyhood. In each case Shakespeare modifies his material in the direction of romance, softening the element of physical and sexual confrontation to allow the more tender mysteries of love to be seen through the ritual parades of aggression and courtship. (87-8)

\* \* \*

Shakespeare's primary source for the sub-plot of *The Taming of the Shrew*, that is, the story of Bianca and her suitors, was George Gascoigne's *Supposes*, a translation of Ariosto's *I Suppositi*, published in 1573. Shakespeare acknowledges his debt to *Supposes* in Act.V, when Lucentio, hitherto passing himself off as the tutor Cambio, reveals his true identity to Baptista:

Here's Lucentio,  
Right son to the right Vincentio,  
That have by marriage made thy daughter mine  
While counterfeit supposes bleared thine eyne.

*Supposes* could have been the title of Shakespeare's play too, for 'supposed', that is assumed or wrongly guessed identities are the theme not only of the sub-plot.

At the most obvious level, the level of traditional farce, Tranio pretends to be Lucentio, Lucentio Cambio, Hortensio Litio, and the Pedant Vincentio. These are false identities deliberately assumed. But at a deeper level, a more psychologically realistic level (that is the level of Shakespearean comedy rather than farce), there is the much more interesting false identity in which the character himself temporarily believes. The purpose of the Induction - the story of Christopher Sly - is precisely to focus our attention on this psychological phenomenon: that one's sense of one's own identity is a malleable and shifting thing, much dependent on the mirror of men's eyes. That is, there is a strong temptation to see ourselves as others see us; to allow ourselves to be defined as human beings by the way others behave towards us. And since the judgement of others is usually based on little knowledge of our true natures and potentialities, they usually cast us as stereotypes.

It is common in the practice of Voodoo that if everyone else in a tribe treats a man as already dead, he will die. If everyone conspires to treat him like a dog, he will eventually go about on all fours barking. This is exactly the principle on which the perpetrators of the joke on Sly work:

My lord, I warrant you we will play our part  
As he shall think by our true diligence  
He is no less than what we say he is. (Ind.i 69-71)

Sly's sense of his own identity is as strong as any man's:

What, would you make me mad? Am not I Christopher Sly, old Sly's son of Burton-heath, by birth a peddler, by education a cardmaker, by transmutation a bearherd, and now by present profession a tinker? Ask Marian Hacket, the fat ale-wife of Wincot, if she know me not. (Ind.i 17-22)

But he cannot produce Marian Hacket, nor anyone else, to confirm his identity. Indeed, he is told that Marian Hacket is a figment of his own strange lunacy. With nothing and nobody to substantiate his identity, he quickly loses his grasp on it:

Am I a lord, and have I such a lady?  
Or do I dream? Or have I dreamed till now?  
I do not sleep: I see, I hear, I speak,  
I smell sweet savours and I feel soft things.  
Upon my life, I am a lord indeed  
And not a tinker nor Christopher Sly. (Ind.ii 68-73)

To deprive someone thus of his true identity is indeed to make him mad. Petruchio and Kate later play a similar joke on a smaller scale on Vincentio, conspiring to treat him as though he were a ‘fair lovely maid’. Hortensio comments:

'A will make the man mad, to make a woman of him. (IV v 35)

But these are only extreme examples of what people do to each other, unconsciously, in any society at any time. We are forever foisting false identities upon one-another, and allowing ourselves to be thus deceived. The Existentialists called it inauthentic living, or living in bad faith. Its consequences can be tragic, as in *King Lear*. But Shakespeare more often approaches the problem in the comic mode, partly because, like the Existentialists and unlike Ben Jonson, he sees human beings as capable of radical change, of reclamation, and partly because he sees laughter as an essential part of that reclaiming process. Mockery may be in bad faith; but merriment is always authentic. And so, of course, is true love.

\* \* \*

*The Taming of the Shrew* is very carefully structured. Its basic structure is the counterpointed stories of two couples, Petruchio/Kate and Lucentio/Bianca. All four, as we first meet them, are inauthentic personalities. Lucentio allows himself to fall into the stereotype of the lover besotted with his mistress' beauty:

Tranio, I saw her coral lips to move  
And with her breath she did perfume the air.  
Sacred and sweet was all I saw in her. (I i 174-6)

He does not know how to fall in love except in the prescribed romantic manner. He has watched her at a distance for a few minutes and heard her speak two sentences. Yet

Tranio, I burn, I pine, I perish, Tranio,  
If I achieve not this young modest girl. (I i 155-6)

When Shakespeare wanted to handle the same situation tragically, he gave his lover the name of Troilus, who placed on Cressida the intolerable burden of having to pretend to be not flesh and blood, but the ideal of womanly perfection he took her to be. In this play Troilus is the name of Petruchio's spaniel.

Bianca, for her part, is content to be, for the present, whatever her father and her suitors seem most to admire her for being - that is, the stereotype of the 'young modest girl'. After her marriage, when her husband tells her that her disobedience has cost him five hundred crowns, she shows her true colours:

The more fool you for laying on my duty. (V ii 129)

If Lucentio seems the perfect suitor and son-in-law (and he is quite unscrupulous in presenting himself as such), Petruchio seems at first quite the opposite - a selfish, boorish, insensitive, mercenary bully. Yet at the end it is to be Petruchio who is happily married, while Lucentio is already beginning to repent at leisure. Petruchio has far too much commonsense to turn himself into a spaniel for any woman. Yet his determination to mock romantic love has driven him, for lack of any other sort in his life, into the opposite stereotype, that of the cynical hard-boiled materialist:

I come to wive it wealthily in Padua;  
If wealthily, then happily in Padua. (I ii 74-5)

We realize that this is something of a pose, since only a moment earlier Petruchio has told Hortensio:

Crowns in my purse I have and goods at home  
And so am come abroad to see the world. (I ii 56-7)

His rich father having recently died, he has no need to 'wive it wealthily', and, in the event, shows less interest in Kate's dowry than Lucentio does in Bianca's. Petruchio enjoys and wins some admiration for his pose of outrageousness and insensitivity, with no romance in his soul. But men grow into their poses. He is in some danger of losing his capacity to respond with authentic feeling, to fall in love.

Before he even meets her, Petruchio senses that he will find in Kate a fellow spirit. Their personalities are comparable in that Kate, being far too spirited to assume the stereotype of the modest maiden, has also flown to the opposite extreme and assumed that of the shrew. She has been long humiliated by men less intelligent than herself (including her own shallow father), who are taken in by Bianca. Her intelligence, having no creative outlet, has turned to bitter wit, her strength of feeling to destructive violence. She earns a reputation for shrewishness - 'Kate the curst' - to which she feels obliged to play up, as the only defence for her self-respect. Erving Goffman speaks of 'minstrelization, whereby the stigmatized person ingratiatingly acts out before normals the full dance of bad qualities imputed to his kind, thereby consolidating a life situation into a clownish role'. If it were to go on much longer she would become the inauthentic self that she is treated as, the mask and the face would become one. She would become incapable of genuine sympathetic feeling.

Moreover, actual shrews were believed in Shakespeare's time to be not only shrill and aggressive, as they are, but utterly vicious and literally poisonous, malign, evil, even satanic, so that to call someone a shrew came close to suggesting that that person was possessed by a devil, and there are fifteen reference to Kate in precisely those terms. Of course Shakespeare does not intend such terms to be taken literally. They acquire a psychological meaning evident in such lines as:

My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,  
Or else my heart concealing it will break.

The anger of her heart, that is, threatens to swamp and distort the rest of her personality. Petruchio's taming can thus be seen as (in Brian Morris' words) an attempt 'to exorcize an evil and irascible spirit'.

Shakespeare does not need to spell out in so many words, (it should be obvious in any competent production) that Petruchio quickly falls in love with Kate. He recognizes in her a woman as spirited and independent and intelligent as himself, a worthy opponent, who, could her qualities be channelled into a creative partnership, would be a worthy mate. He pretends not to notice her shrewishness not simply to infuriate her, but to tell her not to accept what 'the world' says of her:

Why does the world report that Kate doth limp?  
O slanderous world! Kate like the hazel twig  
Is straight and slender, and as brown in hue  
As hazelnuts and sweeter than the kernels. (II i 246-9)

His taunts are simultaneously statements of faith in her true potential. Treat a woman as if she were beautiful and she becomes beautiful. As a black girl in a class of mine once wrote:

I am as Nature is  
Ugly, when you see me ugly  
Beautiful, when you see me beautiful.

Kate's wildness is not natural to her; it is a perverted manifestation of her energies. The process of taming her is therefore not one of breaking her spirit - it is her spiritedness which Petruchio loves - but of redirecting those energies to creative ends, of bringing her back to her true self, 'conformable' not only to her husband, but to her own nature and true womanliness.

The purpose of Petruchio's ill-treatment of his servants and the tailor is to provoke Kate beyond self-pity to compassion. It is a rough, comic, means of releasing feelings long dammed up in her, of reversing the flow of her feelings, which had been for years antagonistic to all and sundry, so that they can flow again towards others sympathetically. Petruchio never bullies Kate: his strategy is to kill her with kindness, that is, to kill the shrew in her, which is her own enemy as much as his. The violence is all in Kate, who is seen striking Bianca, her innocent music-tutor and Petruchio, who responds calmly but firmly, 'do that again and I'll hit you back'. This tendency to violence is surely the outward sign of the violence that she is doing to her own nature, to her capacity to relate to others in a kind or loving manner.

The nearest Petruchio comes to bullying, or at least browbeating, is the scene where he insists that the sun

shall be moon or star or what I list,  
Or ere I journey to your father's house. (IV v 7-8)

But surely this is only Petruchio's way of saying that if Kate continues to set her will against him, they will get nowhere. Also he is perhaps satirizing her continuing allegiance

to the outer world, as opposed to the microcosm of their marriage. The play's comic vision, its alternative to inauthentic conformity with the outside world, is expressed in Petruchio's insistence that he and Kate, will she but join him in the game, have the ability to impose their own values on the world. Not only is Petruchio impervious to public opinion and to appearances ('To me she's married, not unto my clothes'), he asserts that he and Kate would have the power to remake reality simply by agreeing. Their marriage could be its own world with its own rules, times and planets. In a similar spirit John Donne was to chide the 'unruly sun': 'Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?'.

When Kate at last agrees not to go on opposing him, Petruchio expresses his satisfaction in this image:

Thus the bowl should run  
And not unluckily against the bias. (IV v 24-5)

The natural bias of a wife should make her curve always towards her husband. Kate had hitherto unnaturally set her self always against him. That the image should be drawn from a game is significant. Petruchio is inviting her to play the game of life on his side. As soon as she agrees to enter into it in that spirit, it ceases to be a torment and a humiliation to her and becomes simply 'merriment', as in the encounter with Vincentio, where they both greet the old man as if he were a blushing maiden.

It is not in Petruchio's nature to go on beyond this point being unreasonable and autocratic. This was never his true character, but merely his strategy for reclaiming Kate from her shrewishness. Once he feels she is working with him, not against him, he can drop all that, and will make no more unreasonable demands on her. Her shrewishness had been her only defence when, in the absence of anyone else who valued her, her self-respect was difficult to maintain. She can make her great speech at the end because she feels she is at last appreciated for her true self. She has confidence in her marriage as a viable partnership, in herself as the best wife of the three, and in her husband as the best husband. Petruchio has succeeded in releasing what he had hoped for all along - her love. His success far exceeds his hopes, in spite of his apparent self-confidence. He is as surprised as his rivals by the completeness of it:

Why, there's a wench! Come on and kiss me, Kate. (V ii 180)

\* \* \*

George Bernard Shaw wrote of *The Taming of the Shrew*: 'The last scene is altogether disgusting to modern sensibility'. But why should we expect Shakespeare to write in terms of twentieth century sensibility? Hamlet is not spoiled for us if we do not believe in ghosts, nor the history plays if we do not believe in the Divine Right of Kings. The play is, unfortunately, a favourite for producing in modern dress, which perhaps encourages the audience to bring to it completely irrelevant standards of women's rights. Kate's speech on marriage is as much a definitive statement of the received wisdom of Shakespeare's age as is Ulysses on degree in *Troilus and Cressida* or Henry on the rights and responsibilities of kingship in *Henry V*. Why should it be any more disgusting to believe that in a well-run household the wife should obey her husband than to believe that in a well-run country a subject should obey his king? The humanist tradition which Shakespeare inherited is well represented by this passage from *A Very Fruteful and*

*Pleasant Boke Callyd the Instruction of a Christen Woman* by Juan Vives (translated by Richard Hynde about 1529):

The woman is nat reckened the more worshipfull amonoge men, that presumeth to have maystrye above hir housbande: but the more folyshe, and the more woorthy to be mocked: yea and more over than that, cursed and unhappy: the whiche turneth backwards the lawes of nature, lyke as though a souldiour wolde rule his capitayne, or the mone wolde stande above the sonne, or the arm above the head. For in wedlocke the man resembleth the reason, and the woman the body. Nowe reason ought to rule, and the body to obey, if a man wyll lyve. Also saynte Paule sayth: The head of the woman is the man.

At least Shaw did not claim, as many modern critics and producers have done, that Shakespeare could not possibly have meant us to take Kate seriously. As early as 1920 there began a theatrical tradition that during her final speech Kate should wink at the audience, or in some other way clearly indicate to them that she is speaking ironically. But surely the scene becomes really disgusting if we have to believe that Kate must play the hypocrite and pretend to believe all that.

*The Taming of the Shrew* is not a realistic play. The comic mode allows for sudden transformations. Obviously in real life no woman would change as completely and as quickly as Kate does; but within the play's conventions, it presents no difficulty that Kate should become conformable and Bianca shrewish as quickly as other characters remove their disguises, or as Christopher Sly will have to become Christopher Sly again when the Lord has tired of his game. It is all part of the pattern of 'supposes' working itself out symmetrically, and rather mechanically, as befits a quasi-farcical comedy.

Kate believes what she says. But that does not mean that we are to imagine her henceforth downtrodden. She speaks with great pride and dignity in her new-found 'natural' role of devoted wife. The husband can expect his wife to be obedient to his will only if that will is 'honest' - that is, excercised with respect for her nature and integrity. By the end of the play we know that Petruchio is so in love with Kate, so full of admiration for her, that he will neither need nor wish to rule her. And if we speak of rule by gentle persuasion, that will be equally Kate's. Perhaps Kate had read the book called *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, and found it indeed *A Very Fruteful and Pleasant Boke*, since Vives wisely says there:

If thou by vertuous lyvyng and buxumnes, geve hym cause to love the, thou shalte be maistres in a mery house, thou shalte rejoice, thou shalt be gladde, thou shalt blesse the daie that thou were maryed unto hym, and all them that were helping there unto. The wise sentence saieth: A good woman by lowely obeysaunce ruleth hir husbande.

\* \* \*

This essay was written before the screening of the BBCTV production. I was surprised and delighted by the extent to which Jonathan Miller's interpretation coincided with mine and demonstrated its coherence, viability and convincingness in production, and that despite the absence of the induction (presumably on grounds of time). Sarah Badel's Kate was a mature and intelligent woman whose 'devilish spirit' was very clearly a perverse manifestation of the frustration of her deepest needs. But the revelation of the production

was John Cleese's Petruchio - a sensitive, almost definitive performance which wisely avoided the many opportunities which offered for funny walks or other exaggerated posturings and easy comic effects, concentrating instead on the usually-neglected interior of the character, Petruchio's transformation from callous braggart to loving husband. The climax of the production came when Petruchio, visibly moved by Kate's final speech, had to swallow hard before he could say: 'Why, there's a wench!'.

[© Keith Sagar 2001. This essay may be quoted with due acknowledgement.]