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Summer of Shrew, Part 2: Tamed? Really?

Who's the boss of this house? In 'Taming of the Shrew,' appearances can deceive

July 18, 2013 // [THEATER](#) // [Oregon ArtsWatch](#)

By **DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER**

Is Shakespeare's shrew really tamed?

That's the question that every production has to tackle, and it's the prospect that gives many theatergoers pause. "I just can't take the ending," one of my English department colleagues told me recently, and she's not alone. "The Taming of the Shrew" probably outranks even "The Merchant of Venice" on the list of plays that smart, educated people think they don't want to see. They don't worry that it's going to be boring; the fear is actually that it will be too entertaining—it's a very funny, fast-paced comedy—and that it will put us in the uncomfortable position of being asked to laugh at the taming of a fierce, independent woman. The fortune-hunting Petruchio marries fiery Kate against her will, calls her his "chattel," carts her away from her family, deprives her of food and sleep and clothes until she parrots whatever he says, then commands her to teach her neighbors the duty a wife owes her husband—which she does, at length, finally offering to put her hand beneath her lord's foot to "do him ease." This is a comedy?

Of course, there's lots of comic business swirling around Kate's younger sister, Bianca, to divert us from the taming plot. Borrowing liberally from Italian farce, Shakespeare piles on the commedia tricks: an ardent lover in disguise, ludicrously inept rival suitors, zany servants to speed the matchmaking along.



Portland Shakes: Hortensio (Sam Dinkowitz) woos Bianca (Foss Curtis); rival Lucentio (Peter Platt) peers on. Photo: David Kinder.

Still, a nagging sense persists that you've got to ignore the moral to enjoy the show. The Portland Mercury's [review](#) of the current Oregon Shakespeare Festival [production](#), for example, said that it offered "superb" comedy, "but only if you can stomach the 'obedience of women' thread that runs throughout the entire play." Having seen the versions at OSF and the [Portland Shakespeare Project](#) several times, I'm convinced that thread is much more tangled than you might think. Shakespeare's play does raise challenging questions about the way we define gender roles. But the answers aren't as obvious as they seem.

There is, admittedly, a long performance history to bolster the view that *Shrew* remains popular (to quote the editor of a new [Cambridge](#) edition) because it presents "the acceptable face of sadomasochism." Just as you can spot a Hamlet by his skull, you could spot a Petruchio for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth century by his [whip](#), which he cracked like a lion-tamer to subdue his beast of a wife. And the allure of titillating violence continued well into the twentieth century. A [poster](#) for Franco Zeffirelli's 1967 film version showed Richard Burton carting a busty, smiling Elizabeth Taylor over his shoulder with the caption: "In the war between the sexes, there always comes a time to surrender—unconditionally!" Even Cole Porter's clever musical adaptation, "Kiss Me Kate," traded on this erotic tease: with a [poster](#) showing a coquettish Kate bent over Petruchio's knee as he raises his hand for a smack, the 1953 movie might have been titled, "Spank Me, Petruchio." Rather than offer pleasure despite the taming plot, these shows promised pleasure through the spectacle of taming itself.

Given this tradition, any production that offers a Kate who doesn't surrender unconditionally risks being

branded “revisionist” or “apologetic.” If you create an untamed Kate, the argument goes, you’re pandering to audiences at the expense of Shakespeare’s play—reading it against the grain to make it politically correct. But what’s struck me most in working on the play, both in the scholarly archive and in production, is the deep ambiguity of Shakespeare’s own script. (Really, scripts plural, but we’ll get to that in a later installment.)

Shakespeare was a revisionist himself, of course, taking popular narratives and recasting them in much richer, more complex terms. (Comparing “Hamlet” to earlier revenge tragedies is like comparing “The Wire” to “Lethal Weapon 2.”) “The Taming of the Shrew” is no exception. Many versions of the shrew-taming narrative circulated in Elizabethan England, and most would strike a reader today as violently misogynist. In a ballad called “[A Caution for Scolds: or A True Way of Taming a Shrew](#),” for example, a husband takes his outspoken, disobedient wife to a doctor, who ties her to a bed, shaves her head, lets out her blood, and tells her that he’ll cut her tongue and let her bleed another gallon unless she quiets down. Happy ending: “Thus has he made a Sweet Wife of a Shrew.” In the ballad often proposed as Shakespeare’s folkloric source, “[A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife](#),” a husband can’t control his wife, so he beats her bloody and knocks her unconscious, and then he kills his old horse, skins him, salts the hide, wraps his unconscious wife inside, and leaves her in the cellar. (That’s the “merry jest,” I presume.) When the wife comes to, she promises to be obedient; her husband takes her out of the horse’s hide; and all the neighbors congratulate him on knowing how to tame a shrew.

If that’s what Shakespeare’s audiences expected to see when they went to a play called “The Taming of the Shrew,” they would have been thrown for a loop. Instead of torture porn, Shakespeare dishes up the template for a romantic comedy. Kate and Petruchio meet cute: we’ve seen Kate beat her simpering sister and brain her music tutor; we’ve heard Petruchio boast of the battles and tempests he’s braved; and when they finally face off, the sparks fly.



Kate (Maureen Porter) gives Petruchio (James Farmer) as good as she gets. Photo: David Kinder

They quip, pun, thrust, and counterthrust with such rapid-fire synchronicity that it can only be called verbal foreplay:

PETRUCHIO: Come, come, you wasp, i'faith you are too angry.

KATHERINA: If I be waspish, best beware my sting.

PETRUCHIO: My remedy is then to pluck it out.

KATHERINA: Ay, if the fool could find it where it lies.

PETRUCHIO: Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting? In his tail.

KATHERINA: In his tongue.

PETRUCHIO: Whose tongue?

KATHERINA: Yours, if you talk of tales, and so farewell.

PETRUCHIO: What, with my tongue in your tail?

In their first encounter, their tongues are already leading them to that promised comedic tail-end: the bedchamber. And it's very much a match of equals, at least on the linguistic level; every line one-ups the previous with a paired length and rhythm. (You can see why the scholar Stanley Cavell argued that 1930s screwball comedies like "The Philadelphia Story" were indebted to Shakespeare for their strong heroines and witty banter.) In the Portland Shakes production, Maureen Porter and James Farmer circle each other during this dialogue in a simmering pas de deux, drawn together by their interlocking language. Nell Geisslinger, who plays Kate at OSF this season, points out in an [interview on Dmae Roberts' Stage & Studio](#) radio show the importance of this scene in establishing her rapport with

Petruchio so that the audience will root for them to pair up despite all the obstacles that ensue. In a nifty visual reveal, Ted Deasy's tattooed Petruchio rips off Kate's sleeve to discover that she's tatted up, too. They're made for each other!



At OSF, Kate (Nell Geisslinger) and Petruchio (Ted Deasy) size each other up. Photo: Jenny Graham

Okay, but what about Kate's final speech of submission, after Petruchio wins the bet that she'll prove the most obedient wife? Are we supposed to imagine that a screwball heroine like Katharine Hepburn would stoop to say "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign"? (Kate the Great actually did play Katharina in 1955, and gave us the wonderful retort: "I never realized until lately that women were supposed to be the inferior sex.") There are many ways that actresses can dance around the speech—Mary Pickford famously winked at the camera in the [first sound film version](#) in 1929—but they're often accused of sidestepping its intent, adding a feminist spin to distance themselves from Shakespeare's patriarchal message.

I'm not so sure about the singularity of that message, however. (Not to mention the danger of conflating

what any of Shakespeare's dramatic characters say with what the playwright actually believed.) The first thing to notice about Kate's speech is its length: at 43 lines, it's nearly twice as long as any other speech in the play. That in itself is surprising for a play called "The Taming of the Shrew." One of the primary goals of shrew-taming in the Renaissance was to make an obstreperous woman stop talking, and there were a host of unpleasant devices to threaten her into silence. (Exhibit A: the notorious [scold's bridle](#). Exhibit B: the [cucking stool](#).) If that's the goal, it's clearly a flop. Kate's doing all the talking here; it's the actress's star turn. And consider what she says a little bit more closely:

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 labour, both by sea and land:
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe...

This is a classic account of separate spheres—the husband goes out to work for a living while the wife stays at home—but is that what happens in this play? None of the husbands has worked a day; they're all gentlemen with lots of servants who've inherited wealth from their fathers, and they're planning to live in the future off their wives' dowries. "Commits his body to painful labour"? Forget about it. Petruchio's come to "wive it wealthily." And let's not forget that the "sovereign" of the land when Shakespeare wrote was a woman: Queen Elizabeth I. I think Mary Pickford could do a double wink here. Porter and Geisslinger both make a smart choice to address this part of the speech to Bianca's new husband, Lucentio, as a forceful reminder that he'd better do some labour to keep his wife secure. Rather than a speech of subordination to women, it becomes an instruction to husbands on their duty, too. (Of course, there's also the irony that on Shakespeare's stage, these lessons on marriage would have been delivered by a sixteen-year-old boy in drag, making them perhaps a little harder to buy as nature's law.)

Take one more example of the way the text itself challenges taming. I've typed Petruchio's final lines below, exactly as they appear in the [First Folio](#) of 1623:

Come Kate, wee'le to bed,
We three are married, but you two are sped.
'Twas I wonne the wager, though you hit the white,
And being a winner, God give you good night.
Exit Petruchio

The rhyming couplets suggest that all the marital couplings are complete, but do you notice something odd here? "Come Kate, wee'le to bed," says Petruchio, but then the stage direction just says, "Exit Petruchio." What about Kate? Why doesn't she exit, too? Doesn't she want to go to bed with her husband to do her duty? Since about 1700, nearly every editor has changed this stage direction to say "Exit Petruchio and Katherina," which is what you need for a comic resolution, but that's not what the Folio says. When the Folio Petruchio issues his final call, Kate doesn't come. There are also no explicit stage directions to indicate whether Kate actually puts her hand under her husband's foot, or whether she kisses him when he asks her to. There's plenty of room for actors to make choices. (Tracy Ullman famously put her hand beneath Petruchio's foot and then grabbed it and pulled it out from under him.) I don't want to fetishize the Folio, since it has oodles of printing oddities (it prints "weee'le to bed" with four "e"s!), but I think it's useful in opening up possibilities for interpretation that later, more standardized editions foreclose. And it suggests that productions that don't present Kate's unconditional surrender might actually be more faithful to the original version than those that do.

Geisslinger and Porter have different takes on the final speech, but both stay true to the text without give any hint of being tamed. They're fully in control, relishing the opportunity to hold the stage and order the other actors around. When Geisslinger's Kate offers her hand to Petruchio, he demurs, but she jabs him into position like a dominatrix directing a client, and then clasps him in an embrace of her choosing.



Kate (Geisslinger) and Petruchio (Deasy), Bianca (Royer Bockus) at OSF.
Photo: Jenny Graham

Porter adopts a cutesy Southern drawl on the line, “Why are our bodies soft, and weak, and smooth,” as she waltzes across the stage, sidling up to the men; she’s having fun surprising everyone once more by playing the part they didn’t expect her to take. Rather than the harsh voice she uses for the rest of the play, her voice is supple, modulated, manipulating her audience at will.

Watching these virtuosic performances, I thought back to Petruchio’s own description of his taming method in an exhausted soliloquy to the audience. Rather than call Kate a shrew (a little [rodent](#) reputed to have a venomous bite), he draws on the aristocratic pursuit of [falconry](#). To tame a falcon or wild hawk, a gentleman would keep it awake and hungry until it learned to fly to his lure (to “stoop,” in falconry parlance). When Kate is at Petruchio’s house, exhausted and famished, he sees his plan in action: “My falcon now is sharp, and passing empty, / And til she stoop, she must not be full gorg’d / For then she never looks upon her lure.”



No meat for Kate! Servant (Crystal Munoz), Kate (Porter), Petruchio (Farmer), Hortensio (Sam Dinkowitz) at Portland Shakes. Photo: David Kinder

It's still an animal metaphor, of course, but the goal is not to take away the hawk's sharp power but rather to redirect its attack on the chosen prey. When Kate lights into the onlookers in her final speech, she has the speed and acuity of a falcon on the hunt. I was reminded of the times I've seen one of those bird of prey [demonstrations](#) at the Oregon Zoo, when the hawk swoops over your head to catch its hunk of meat. It's technically been tamed, but when those talons zoom by, you don't feel as though you're in the presence of anything domestic. You feel the thrilling current of a body taking flight.

So to question the orthodoxy of the taming interpretation, I've noted the untamed length of Kate's speech, the inaccurate and perhaps ironic way she describes gender relations, and the ambiguity of the stage directions. Next time, I'll explore whether there's another script for *Shrew* that might change its ending entirely. And I'll ask a question that goes back to the Renaissance: who's the real shrew in the play?

NOTES:

- For excellent materials on "The Taming of the Shrew" as a Renaissance audience might have interpreted it, check out Frances Dolan's [Bedford edition](#) that offers "Texts and Contexts," or David Wootton and Graham Holderness's collection of scholarly essays, [Gender and Power in Shrew-Taming Narratives, 1500-1700](#).
- For a thoughtful analysis of Kate's names in the play and their significance (is she Kate? Katherine? Katherina?), see Laurie Maguire's essay, "The Naming of the Shrew," in the [Norton Critical Edition](#).

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