

# The Shrew Reconsidered

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The discussion of this paper starts with the problem of whether *The Taming of the Shrew* is a farce or not. It is followed by some remarks on the characters of the hero and the heroine.

## Farce-Comedy

E. M. W. Tillyard, in discussing the problematical subject of *The Shrew* as farce or comedy, concludes: "In sum, when you include all the factors in your ken, you cannot be happy in taking the main plot either as farce or as comedy. It is more comedy than farce but not sufficiently more to enable you to take it serenely as such. All you can do is to admit that the *Taming of the Shrew* suffers from a bad inconsistency and perhaps to conjecture that one of Shakespeare's motives in writing *Much Ado About Nothing* was to mend his failure."<sup>1</sup> E. K. Chambers, on the other hand, asserts that *The Shrew* is "more strictly a farce"<sup>2</sup> and "it must be admitted that the treatment of the central theme in *The Taming of the Shrew* has a brutality about it. Brutality, especially in sexual matters, is quite in the tradition of farce."<sup>3</sup> We must admit that *The Shrew* is basically a farce in plot. The theme of the main plot, the taming of a shrew, is a traditional, farcical subject. The minor plot is a Plautine farce of intricate intrigues. Characters in the play are mainly stereotyped and without depth: Katherina is a shrew, Petruchio a tamer, Bianca an obedient girl, Baptista an indulgent father, Lucentio a romantic lover, Gremio an old pantaloon, Tranio a clever, scheming servant, Grumio a funny servant, Biondello a cheeky page, etc. These stock characters are engaged in mechanical actions, and humour of the

play largely comes from the situations, comic jokes, coarse wit, clownish gags, and physical blows. There are many farcical scenes which are merely for fun: "knocking at the gate" confusion of the first appearance of Petruchio with Grumio (I. ii. 5-42), Hortensio with a broken lute upon his head (II. i. 142-159), Grumio-Curtis scene (IV. i. 1-94), "beef and mustard" scene (IV. iii. 1-31), Taylor scene (IV. iii. 87-164), confusion of the Pedant and Vincentio (V. i. 14-52), and other scenes. The device of the play used in the minor plot is the "disguise" and the ensuing mistaken identities. Lucentio disguises as Cambio, Hortensio as Licio, Tranio as Lucentio and the Pedant as Vincentio. All these elements of the play assert that it is a farce. The play shows the world of farce which is without pain or conscience. It also has the high speed of action of the farce.

Yet, though *The Taming of the Shrew* is a farce in its structure and spirit, it contains something beyond the farce. The development of the character of Katherine transcends the genre of farce. Petruchio is not a mere manipulated puppet of the farce, but he has a more subtle, deeper character, and even "shows a moral seriousness."<sup>4</sup> Our main concern, therefore, is the change of Katherine's character and the psychological depth of Petruchio's character. Thus we can conclude that *The Shrew* contains some truly comic elements which elevate it above most farce. So we had better define this play as a farce-comedy, something between low and high comedy, which relies chiefly on farcical devices, but which has something superior to the traditional genre of farce.

### **Katherine and Bianca**

The main plot and the minor plot are mechanically brought together through the two sisters in the play, Kate and Bianca. The contrast between them is obvious: Kate is shrewish and Bianca obedient. Kate is addressed even as "this fiend of hell" (I. i. 88), while Bianca seems

to have "Maid's mild behaviour and sobriety" (I. i. 71). This contrast is presented in another pairing of sisters, Adriana and Luciana, in *The Comedy of Errors*. Adriana becomes shrewish and nags her husband when he is away. Luciana becomes the counselor of her sister and proves a model of wifely obedience and duty. Kate seems an extension of Adriana and Bianca of Luciana. However, this analogy is simplifying the real issue of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Kate, who is an intolerable, self-willed shrew at the beginning, becomes a dutiful and obedient wife; while Bianca, who appears to be modest and submissive at first, proves a difficult, self-willed wife in the end. This change is an irony of the whole play and gives it a deeper dimension. The theme of appearance and reality is presented through Bianca. Bianca appears to be a modest girl and seems to have a maidenly, mild behaviour; but she is in reality a self-willed woman. This is proved as early as in the fiddler scene, in which she enjoys her flirtations. Left alone with two young suitors, Lucentio and Hortensio, her submissiveness completely disappears.

Why, gentlemen, you do me double wrong  
 To strive for that which resteth in my choice.  
 I am no breeching scholar in the schools,  
 I'll not be tied to hours nor 'pointed times,  
 But learn my lessons as I please myself.

(III. i. 16-20)

Bianca is, in reality, "a clever and convincing picture of a pretty, sly, little thing."<sup>5</sup> Since her gentleness and submissiveness is not genuine, it is natural that Bianca proves a shrewish wife in the end. The character of Bianca does not change, while that of Kate does undergo a metamorphosis.

### **Petruchio's Method of Taming**

It is true that Petruchio is more a fortune-hunter than Bassanio in

*The Merchant of Venice.* Hortensio asks Petruchio the motive of his coming to Verona and the answer proves his materialistic intention. Hortensio asks: "what happy gale/Blows you to Padua here from Verona?" (I. ii. 48), and Petruchio replies :

Such wind as scatters young men through the world  
 To seek their fortunes farther than at home,  
 Where small experience grows. But in a few,  
 Signor Hortensio, thus it stands with me :  
 Antonio, my father, is deceased,  
 And I have thrust myself into this maze,  
 Haply to wive and thrive as best I may.

(I. ii. 49-55)

This materialistic intention is amplified by his speech after the wedding.

She is my goods, my chattels, she is my house,  
 My household stuff, my field, my barn,  
 My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing.

(III. ii. 229-31)

It is also true that the method Petruchio uses to tame Kate is that of training young falcons. He openly compares her to a falcon.

My falcon now is sharp and passing empty,  
 And till she stoop she must not be full-gorged,  
 For then she never looks upon her lure.

(IV. i. 176-178)

It is a traditional way of shrew-taming. The tamer watches his bird continually until it is subdued and finally gives way to his will. Petruchio does not allow Kate to have any of the wedding feast and takes her on the cold, dirty and unpleasant journey to his home. He gives her

no food and no sleep until she begs them in absolute need. Nevertheless, Petruchio is not a mere fortune-hunter or a wild tamer. In the course of the verbal combat of the wooing scene, Petruchio falls in love with her in the true sense of the meaning. His defence of Kate after the wooing scene supports this point.

Be patient, gentlemen, I choose her for myself.

If she and I be pleased, what's that to you?

'Tis bargained 'twixt us twain, being alone,

That she shall still be curst in company.

(II. i. 295-298)

He feels real warmth for her as an individual of wild, proud spirits. Therefore, he does not use much of physical force as traditional taming. His main method of taming is psychological. Petruchio deliberately assumes the role of a male shrew in order to change Kate into what he wants her to be. His posing of willful, autocratic, irrational man is so complete that one of his servants comments that "he is more shrew than she" (IV. i. 76); and the other says, "He kills her in her own humour" (IV. i. 166). His display of bad temper in the wedding scene is a caricature of hers. Petruchio is making himself a sort of mirror that reflects Kate's shrewish nature in order to let her see herself as she is. In this way Petruchio's acting is as significant as that of Richard III. They are similar in adopting roles in achieving their aims: Petruchio plays the role of a shrew to make Kate give up shrewishness; and Richard III plays successively the role of a passionate lover, an injured friend and a saint to seize the crown. Another method Petruchio adopts is to hold before Kate an imaginary mirror in which is reflected a picture of what she may become. This method is revealed from the beginning of the wooing scene. Petruchio thus announces his method of wooing.

Say that she rail, why then I'll tell her plain

She sings as sweetly as a nightingale.

Say that she frown, I'll say she looks as clear  
As morning roses newly washed with dew.

(II. i. 170-173)

He praises her beauty, modesty and chastity. By the way, it is revealing to note that "Petruccio's language is the most poetical in the play and the most interesting."<sup>6</sup> Petruccio says exactly what Kate wants to hear unconsciously.

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 hazel-nuts and sweeter than the kernels.

(II. i. 246-249)

Petruccio proves a warm gentleman-lover who protects his shrewish lover in the face of the slanderous world (II. i. 295-98). All that he does "is done in reverend care of her" (IV. i. 190). The blow he gives the priest who marries them is given in defence of her modesty; when he carries her off from her father's house, he is saving her from a band of thieves who would rob him of her; when he refuses to allow her to eat, it is out of consideration for her health and temper. For Petruccio, this method is "a way to kill a wife with kindness" (IV. i. 194). Petruccio's aim is to show Kate what she really is and bring out the best in her. Finally he succeeds in taming Kate, who becomes a charming, cooperative wife.

### **Katherina's Self-Discovery**

Kate is a real shrew at the beginning. However, "Katherine does in fact develop in the course of the play in the direction of the feeling and humanity which she seemed initially to lack."<sup>7</sup> Thus our main interest is Katherina's change of character through her discovery of

what she really is and what she really needs. On the morning of the wedding Kate discovers the shame and misery of being kept waiting by her bridegroom and the indignity of not being allowed to preside at her own wedding dinner. She tries to protest against the unreasonable behaviour of Petruchio.

Gentlemen, forward to the bridal dinner.

I see a woman may be made a fool

If she had not a spirit to resist.

(III. ii. 218-20)

Petruchio does not listen to her request, but he takes this chance as the best opportunity to change Kate into what he wants her to be. Petruchio forces her to go with him on the journey to his home in the country. A series of maddening events for Kate follows: the journey is cold and fatiguing, she is not allowed to take any food, and even sleep is withheld from her. Petruchio's shrewish actions, autocratic and unreasonable, enlist Kate's sympathies for those who suffer under them. When he knocks over a basin of water and then accuses the servant for letting it fall, Kate makes a defence of the poor man, saying "Patience, I pray you, 'twas a fault unwilling" (IV. i. 142). When Petruchio makes an angry fuss about the meat, which, he says, is burnt and overcooked, she tries to calm him and make him take a more reasonable attitude: "I pray you, husband, be not so disquiet./The meat was well, if you were so contented" (IV. i. 154-5). Petruchio's unreasonable behaviour makes her aware of the reasonable order and decency for which she previously had no appreciation. She is also forced to see the absolute need of human beings. Kate has never entreated before, but she has to entreat for food in absolute need.

But I, who never knew how to entreat,  
Nor even needed that I should entreat,  
Am starved for meat, giddy for lack of sleep,

With oaths kept waking, and with brawling fed.

(IV. iii. 7-10)

She has learned to ask help: "I prithee go and get me some repast" (IV. iii. 15). The last stage of Kate's psychological change is revealed in Act Four, scene five. Petruchio and Kate are on their way to their father's home in Padua. He makes her agree that the sun is the moon: "I know it is the moon" (IV. v. 16). Then she is told by him that it is the sun after all. Her answer to this shows the change in Kate's character.

Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun,  
But the sun it is not, when you say it is not,  
And the moon changes even as your mind.

(IV. v. 18-20)

The battle of Kate and Petruchio is over when she learns to obey her husband. She accepts his wishes and she finds her real femininity. Hostility is replaced by affection, good humour and partnership. Her obedience does not mean slavery to her husband. She discovers true love, peace and contentment in Petruchio. The long struggle between Petruchio and Kate reaches its end. Kate finally accepts her natural role as a wife when, under pressure from Petruchio, she kisses him, saying "Nay, I will give thee a kiss. Now Pray thee, love, stay" (V. i. 138-39). The core of this play is thus Kate's change which amazes even her father: "she is changed, as had never been" (V. ii. 114). Katherina turns out to be an obedient, cooperative, charming wife. It is the victory of the love between Petruchio and Katherina. Her discovery culminates in the following passage.

I am ashamed that women are so simple  
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,  
Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,

When they are bound to serve, love, and obey.

(V. ii. 160-63)

Thus the change of Katherina's character is complete.

On the whole *The Taming of the Shrew* proves an entertaining piece of work. The great popularity of this play in the theater depends not only on the well-contrived plot but also on the vivid characterization of the hero and the heroine. Without their charming characters, the play would have been less popular.

#### Notes :

<sup>1</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Early Comedies* (London, 1965), 87.

<sup>2</sup>E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey* (London, 1925), 44.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>4</sup>D. A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare* vol. I (New York, 1969), 75.

<sup>5</sup>Tillyard, 98.

<sup>6</sup>B. Ifor Evans, *The Language of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1952), 28.

<sup>7</sup>Traversi, 76.