Introduction

At a number of points critics of *The Taming of the Shrew* are in general agreement. No one doubts that Christopher Sly is skillfully characterized—in his coarseness, his liveliness, his unaffectedness, his candor, his partial yielding to illusion, his incongruous mixture of two styles of life, his difficulty in acting the gentleman and attending to even a rather popular brand of theatrical fare. No one doubts that Petruchio and Kate are made, if not altogether well-rounded characters, at least human beings of vitality and imaginativeness, so that they have an interest and plausibility that stereotypes would not have. Each first acts in a way that suggests a rather single-ply, rigid nature, and then reveals a capacity for crucial action of another quality and value. No one doubts that the Bianca plot is of secondary interest, that it turns on a conventional love story, that it has in it more of intrigue than of the romantic intensity that Shakespeare would later develop in his lovers, and that despite its manifest limitations, Shakespeare had pumped theatrical life into it by the multiplication of candidates for Bianca’s hand and by a brisk representation of their schemes and styles. No one doubts that the suitors are effectively distinguished from each other—Gremio, the clownish overage lover; Tranio, the virtuoso quasi-competitor who loves to play the gentleman; Hortensio, who can settle for an unromantic down-to-earth arrangement like a sensible man in Restoration comedy; and Lucentio, the straight man and winner. No one doubts that the lesser characters are, in brief space, endowed with much individuality and substance—Baptista, the worried and well-meaning father; Grumio, the spirited servant who finds...
histrionic pleasure in opposite roles, whether taking it from Petruchio or dishing it out to other servants; Biondello, the lively-talking aide-de-camp in the war of love; the conscientious and frustrated Tailor; the earnest Pedant, grimly determined to succeed in his role as Lucentio’s helpful father; the actual Vincentio, driven into a tempest by successive experiences of being put upon.

No one doubts, finally, that all these materials from diverse sources (see A Note on the Sources, p. 115) have been combined with so much ingenuity that the play has a convincing air of unity. The play within a play is an old device: no one feels any hiatus between the audience (Sly and the Lord’s household) and the performers of a play (the actors presenting the two love affairs). The taming plot and the relatively straight love plot are brought together mechanically by the fact that the two women are sisters and that the marriage of one depends on that of the other; by the fact that Bianca’s suitors collaborate in finding a suitor for Kate and, even more than that, in assisting him in his suit; by the fact that Petruchio first aids Hortensio and that Hortensio later plays along with Petruchio’s game as wifetamer; and by the fact that the final wedding celebration is a joint affair. The two actions are held together organically by the fact that the women wooed, the wooers, and their methods of wooing are in contrast, not only aesthetically but, by implication, morally; and by the still more striking fact that the apparent contrast, which seems so obvious at first, is reversed in the final act. When Kate and Bianca undergo a partial change of roles at the end, we see them, not simply as ending parallel plots, but as ironically revealing different aspects of one fundamental situation—the relations of husbands and wives.

In recent years critics have begun to detect a still subtler form of unity, one that considerably raises the aesthetic status of the play. This is "the unity of "supposes." " When Lucentio is made to use the phrase "counterfeit supposes" (5.1.115), Shakespeare is alluding.* It is assumed, to his

*There is a similar allusion in Tranio’s decision that "supposed Lucentio / Must get a father, called 'supposed Vincentio' " (2.1.400–01).
accepts a “wife” and two women accept husbands. “Acting” is the means of moving people toward a desired feeling and role; in this sense The Taming anticipates the much-quoted line in As You Like It, “All the world’s a stage. . .”

But there is a still subtler element in the functional identity of parts which creates the unity of the play. The “supposed” servants of Sly not only tell him he is a Lord but hold before him verbal pictures—of omnipotence, luxury, pleasures—that move him in their own way toward imaginative acceptance of his high role. At least he accepts the external circumstances in which he finds himself; perhaps he even accepts the idea of a lordly personality in himself. The further he goes in this direction, the more fully the induction anticipates the taming plot. For a part of Petruchio’s method (by no means all of it) is to hold before Kate a picture of what she potentially is and may become if she will but cease resisting it—a “most patient, sweet, and virtuous wife” (3.2.195). It is possible to assume that she imaginatively accepts this picture of herself and, under the stimulus of Petruchio’s love, makes it come true. If this interpretation is valid, then the play—not only one of Shakespeare’s earliest but a farcical one—has advanced remarkably, at least to the edge of a philosophical realm. For it induces us to reflect on the belief in the primacy of the idea, on the creative powers of the imagination, on the view that, in Hamlet’s phrase, which has become a cliché, “Thinking makes it so.” Hence The Taming, never thought one of Shakespeare’s high achievements, moves up into the company of the truly Shakespearean, in which, however stereotyped the exterior and however obvious the popular appeal, there is a heart of profound meaningfulness and hence enduring excellence. It is possible that a once underrated play may be in danger of being overrated.

So far we have been summarizing the main grounds of agreement among critics, especially the grounds on which The Taming has been praised. However, the argument for unity depends somewhat on how we understand the change in Kate—transformation, acceptance of discipline, discovery of true nature, rejection of an assumed role? This is not so demonstrable as is the tight interweaving of plots at the level of overt action. When it is asserted that the play uncovers Bianca as the real shrew and reveals that Kate is not a shrew at all or else was only pretending to be a shrew to serve her own ends, surely we come into the realm of the arguable. There is something of the arguable about The Taming; indeed there has been, alongside the areas of unanimity, considerable difference of opinion about it. We can profitably change our course, then, and approach the play from the other side—in terms of the disagreements, or at least the changes of opinion, about it.

One argument grows out of sheer factual uncertainty: did Shakespeare, or did he not, keep Sly in the play for occasional comments in the later acts, and for an epilogue completing the dramatic “frame”? In The Taming of a Shrew, a play related to this one (see A Note on the Sources), Sly stayed on. Hence, what about The Shrew? There are various opinions: (1) Shakespeare forgot about Sly; (2) Shakespeare originally wrote a Sly epilogue, but it dropped out; (3) the loss of Sly, though not a major blot, is unfortunate; (4) the loss of Sly is fortunate, and shows Shakespeare’s artistry. If Shakespeare did originally give Sly the closing lines, and if these did disappear—from an acting script and hence from the printer’s copy—the only compelling reason for this (in the opinion of the present editor) was not aesthetic but practical: it simplified production problems such as size of cast. There is no merit in the argument that the elimination of Sly prevented an anticlimax, for this begs the question whether a Sly epilogue would inevitably be anticlimactic. There is likewise little merit in the argument that the Sly story comes to its logical end when Sly takes himself for a Lord and thus in anticipation parallels Kate’s transformation into a lady. For, while Kate can, with effort, retain her new moral identity, Sly cannot, with any amount of effort, retain his new social identity. Hence it is possible to visualize a very effective Sly epilogue which would work by contrast, making us note the discrepancy between an imaginable
change of being and a temporary change of status, between a hypnotism for the therapy of the subject and the imposition of a dream for the fun of the observers. We can imagine, also, the use of Sly for a cynical irony such as we know in "black comedy": the end of his new lordship might hint the diminution of Kate's new ladyship. Or, in a lighter vein, Sly might entertain, as he does in _A Shrew_, visions of being a wife-tamer, and thus introduce an implicit contrast between those who can pull off such an exploit and those who cannot. Well, the imagining of alternative endings serves only one purpose: showing that the present one is not necessarily ideal. Surely most readers feel spontaneously that, in the treatment of Sly in _The Shrew_, something is left uncomfortably hanging, and many stage directors borrow additional Sly materials from _A Shrew_.

While Petruchio and Kate, as we have noted, are admired as lively and charming creatures, forerunners of Benedick and Beatrice in _Much Ado About Nothing_, there is lack of agreement on their natures and on the nature of the transactions between them. No one doubts, of course, that they come to love each other; the problem is what they bring to that love—and how they exercise it. The older view was that Petruchio was a very skillful psychologist, one who really knew how to handle a difficult woman. On the other hand, many commentators, especially in the nineteenth century, tended to feel that Petruchio's methods were not civilized and that though they may once have been countenanced, they would never do in modern life. That sense of real life, or what it is and should be, which repeatedly infiltrates literary judgments, appears in estimates of Petruchio: There have been editors who get on the bandwagon and declare him out of date and yet rather wistfully intimate that it is too bad he has gone out of date while the world still has need of him. But in repudiating Petruchio's methods, critics have had to find ways of redeeming Petruchio, since the play obviously does not make him an intolerable man. So it has been said that he is not so much "taming" Kate as leading her to a needed dis-

cipline; that in no essential does he pass the bounds of gentlemanliness; that he simply offers Kate a picture of male strength that can elicit the respect without which she cannot love; that the heart of his method is a love which begets love. Here we have Petruchio transmuted from the relentless and mechanical task-master, required by a monstrous female, into a remarkably gifted gentleman-lover who simply brings out the best in an extraordinary woman—a best that, as it comes out, totally displaces a worst that had once seemed pretty much the whole story. This view is much more in tune with modern views of the right relations between men and women. But this interpretation too, if not utterly replaced, has been given a new twist and all but turned upside down by a still more "modern" view. In this reading of the play, Petruchio, far from "taming" or subtly having a beneficent influence on a woman, is in reality tamed by her. While having the illusion of conquering, he is conquered by her; when she says what he wants to hear, she is being ironic, undermining him with a show of acquiescence and virtually a wink to the audience. In this view, Shakespeare wrote What Every Woman Knows over three hundred years before Barrie.

Kate, of course, has been done over in the same way. Once, she was naturally and unquestionably taken to be a shrew, that is, a type of woman widely known in life and constantly represented in song and story. Then critics began to contend that Kate differed from the stereotype: that instead of being simply aggressive and contentious, she was ripe for love, wanted love, and really suffered from the fact that, inside the family and out, Bianca more readily attracted affection. Here is the move toward seeing Kate, not as an allegorical abstraction, a figure of shrewishness, but as an actual human being with impulses and motives experienced by all of us. This move goes still further. In one modern view (that of Nevill Coghill and the late Professor Goddard), Kate's disagreeableness of manner is not a primary fact of personality but is caused by lack of affection at home: Baptista, a "family tyrant," has petted and spoiled Bianca, and Kate is the unhappy byproduct of parental irresponsibility and stupidity ("gross
partially” toward Bianca). In this view, Kate is very much like a modern problem child. But the distinguished director of Shakespeare, Margaret Webster, offers us a still different Kate. To Miss Webster, Kate is a strong, intelligent, independent woman who is stuck in a stuffy household, “despises” her father and her “horrid little sister,” thinks the local boys “beneath contempt,” and finds in her fresh and vehement style the only available outlet for the talents and energy of a superior woman. Here we have the feminist’s Kate, the modern woman whom it is perilous to hold back from self-expression and leadership—a far cry from the nagging Xanhippe that every now and then, from the beginning of time, would affect a husband doomed, unless he took strong measures, to be ridiculed for his misfortune. But Goddard and Miss Webster agree in one thing: it is really Kate who takes over Petruchio, takes him over by simulating an obedience that is a paradoxical mastery. Her last long speech, then, is only a prolonged ironic commentary on the subordination of wives, and could be taken literally only by naive believers in male supremacy.

As might be expected, critics differ on where Shakespeare stood. The most widely held assumption is that Shakespeare believed in the subordination of wives, and that in his age he could hardly do otherwise. While some readers accept this as calmly as most people accept what has happened long ago, others regret that Shakespeare was so little in accord with modern views; as early as 1897, even G. B. Shaw could insist that “the last scene is altogether disgusting to modern sensibility.” The reader with a severe case of “modern sensibility” can either join Shaw in slapping Shakespeare’s wrist or else go him one better by arguing that Shakespeare was really a modern at heart. The unspoken assumption here is that the “divine Shakespeare” could not possibly disagree with our answers to fundamental problems, especially those we have come to more recently. So various commentators say flatly that Shakespeare did not believe in the subordination of wives. Of Kate’s long speech on the duty of wives (5.2.136–79), Goddard, amazed at three centuries of acceptance, exclaims, “as if Shakespeare could ever have meant it!”

But only Miss Webster faced the fact that to make Shakespeare a modern, one had to do something better with the wifely duty speech than ignore it or just assert that though the longest speech in the play, it doesn’t count. So she went whole-hog and treated the speech as Kate’s choicest joke of all on Petruchio, who from now on, we judge, will be simply a complacent husband, happy in the laughable illusion that he has an obedient wife.

It is doubtful that we can know “what Shakespeare thought,” and in a sense it does not matter; what is important is how the play is to be taken (it is by no means impossible that the play “believes” something other than what Shakespeare as a man may have “believed”). All the aspects of it that have been taken now in one way, now in another, come together pretty well in the issue of what the play is to be called. By many critics it is called a “farce” and is discussed as a farce; yet there are those who deny vigorously that it is a farce. This difference of opinion is caused by a loose use of the term farce. Some people take farce as simply hurly-burly theater, with much slapstick, roughhouse (Petruchio with a whip, in the older productions), pratfalls, general confusion, trickery, uproar, gags, and so on. Yet such characteristics, which do appear generally in farce, are surface manifestations. What we need to identify is the “spirit of farce” that lies behind them. We may then be able to get away from insisting either that The Shrew is farce or that it is not farce, and to get on to seeing what it does with the genre of farce.

A genre is a conventionalized way of dealing with actuality, and different genres represent different habits of the human mind or minister to the capacity for finding pleasure in different styles of representation. “Romance,” for instance, is the genre that conceives of obstacles, dangers, and threats, especially those of an unusual or spectacular kind, as yielding to human ingenuity, spirit, or just good luck. On the other hand, “naturalism,” as a literary mode, conceives of man as overcome by the pressure of outer forces, especially those of a dull, glacier-like, grinding persistence. The essential procedure of farce is to deal with people as if they lack, largely or totally, the physical,
emotional, intellectual, and moral sensitivity that we think of as “normal.” The enormous popularity of farce for several thousand years indicates that, though “farce” is often a term of disparagement, a great many people, no doubt all of us at times, take pleasure in seeing human beings acting as if they were very limited human beings. Farce offers a spectacle that resembles daily actuality but lets us participate without feeling the responsibilities and liabilities that the situation would normally evoke. Perhaps we feel superior to the diminished men and women in the plot; perhaps we harmlessly work off aggressions (since verbal and physical assaults are frequent in farce). Participation in farce is easy on us; in it we escape the full complexity of our own natures and cut up without physical or moral penalties. Farce is the realm without pain or conscience. Farce offers a holiday from vulnerability, consequences, costs. It is the opposite of all the dramas of disaster in which a man’s fate is too much for him. It carries out our desire to simplify life by a selective anesthetizing of the whole person; man retains all his energy yet never gets really hurt. The give-and-take of life becomes a brisk skirmishing in which one needs neither health insurance nor liability insurance; when one is on the receiving end and has to take it, it’s possible to bounce back up resiliently, and when one dishes it out, the pleasure in conquest is never undercut by the guilt of inflicting injury.

In farce, the human personality is without depth. Hence action is not slowed down by thought or by the friction of competing motives. Everything goes at high speed, with dash, variety, never a pause for stocktaking, and ever an athlete’s quick glance ahead at the action coming up next. No sooner do the players come in than the Lord plans a show to help bamboozle Sly. As soon as Baptista appears with his daughters and announces the marriage priority, other lovers plan to find a man for Kate, Lucentio falls in love with Bianca and hits on an approach in disguise, Petruchio plans to go for Kate, Bianca’s lovers promise him support, Petruchio begins his suit and introduces Hortensio into the scramble of disguised lovers. Petruchio rushes through the preliminary business with Baptista and the main business with Kate, and we have a marriage. The reader is hurried over to the rivalries of Bianca’s lovers, making bids to Baptista and appealing directly to the girl herself, back to Kate’s wedding-day scandals and out into the country for the postmarital welter of disturbances; then we shift back and forth regularly from rapid action in the Kate plot to almost equally rapid action in the Bianca plot. And so on. The driving pace made possible, and indeed necessitated by, the absence of depth is brilliantly managed.

In the absence of depth one is not bothered by distractions; in fact, what are logically distractions are not felt as such if they fit into the pattern of carefree farcical hammer and tongs, cut and thrust. At Petruchio’s first appearance, the “knocking at the gate” confusion is there for fun, not function (1.2.5–43). The first hundred lines in 9.4.1, between Grumio and Curtis, are a lively rattle, full of the verbal and physical blows of farce, but practically without bearing on the action. Kate is virtually forgotten for sixty lines in 4.3, as Petruchio and Grumio fall into their virtuoso game of abusing the tailor. Furthermore, action without depth has a mechanical, automatic quality: when two Vincentios appear (5.1), the characters do not reason about the duplication but, frustrated by confusion and bluffing, quickly have recourse to blows and insults, accusations of madness and chicanery, and threats of arrest—standard procedures in farce from Plautus on. Vincentio’s “Thus strangers may be haled and abused” (106) is not a bad description of the manners of farce. Mechanical action, in turn, often tends to symmetrical effects (shown most clearly in The Comedy of Errors, in which Shakespeare has two pairs of identical twins): the lovers of Kate and Bianca first bargain with Baptista, then approach the girls; Hortensio and Tranio (as Lucentio) resign their claims to Bianca in almost choral fashion; Bianca and the Widow respond identically to the requests of their husbands. In this final scene we have striking evidence of the manipulation of personality in the interest of symmetrical effect. Shakespeare unmistakably wants a double reversal of roles at the end, a symmetry of converse movements.
The new Kate has developed out of a shrew, so the old Bianca must develop into a shrew. The earlier treatment of her hardly justifies her sudden transformation, immediately after marriage, into a cool, offhand, challenging, and even contemptuous near-bitch. Like many another character in farce, she succumbs to the habits of the generic form. Yet by some modern critics she is treated as harshly as if from the start she were a particularly obnoxious female.

...All these effects come from a certain arbitrarily limited sense of personality. Those who have this personality are not really hurt, do not think much, are not much troubled by scruples. Farce often turns on practical jokes, in which the sadistic impulse is not restrained by any sense of injury to the victim. It would never occur to anyone that Sly might be pained or humiliated by letting himself act as a Lord and then being let down. No one hesitates to make rough jokes about Kate (even calling her "fiend of hell") in her hearing. No one putting on a disguise to dupe others has any ethical inhibitions; the end always justifies the means. When Kate "breaks the lute to" Hortensio (2.1), farce requires that he act terrified; but it does not permit him to be injured or really resentful or grieved by the loss of the lute, as a man in a nonfarceical world might well be. Verbal abuse is almost an art form; it does not hurt, as it would in ordinary life. No one supposes that the victims of Petruchio's manhandling and tantrums—the priest and sexton at the wedding, the servants and tradesmen at his home—really feel the outrageous treatment that they get. When Petruchio and Hortensio call "To her" to Kate and the Widow (5.2.33–34), it is like starting a dogfight or cockfight. Petruchio's order to Kate to bring out the other wives is like having a trained dog retrieve a stick. The scene is possible because both husbands and all wives are not endowed with full human personalities; if they were, they could not function as trainer, retriever, and sticks.

In identifying the farcical elements in The Shrew, we have gradually shifted from the insensitivity that the characters must have to the mechanicalness of their responses. These people rarely think, hesitate, deliberate, or choose; they act just as quickly and unambiguously as if someone had pressed a control button. Farce simplifies life by making it painless and automatic; indeed the two qualities come together in the concept of man as machine. (The true opposite of farce is Capek's R.U.R., in which manlike robots actually begin to feel.) There is a sense in which we might legitimately call the age of computers a farcical one, for it lets us feel that basic choices are made without mental struggle or will or anxiety, and as speedily and inevitably as a series of human ninepins falling down one after another on the stage when each is bumped by the one next to it. "Belike you mean," says Kate to Petruchio, "to make a puppet of me" (4.3.103). It is what farce does to all characters. Now the least obvious illustration of the farcical view of life lies, not in some of the peripheral goings-on that we have been observing, but in the title action itself: the taming of the shrew. Fundamentally—we will come shortly to the necessary qualifications—Kate is conceived of as responding automatically to a certain kind of calculated treatment, as automatically as an animal to the devices of a skilled trainer. Petruchio not only uses the word tame more than once, but openly compares his method to that used in training falcons (4.1.184ff.). There is no reason whatever to suppose that this was not meant quite literally. Petruchio is not making a great jest or developing a paradoxical figure but describing a process taken at face value. He tells exactly what he has done and is doing— withholding food and sleep until the absolute need of them brings assent. (We hardly note that up to a point the assumptions are those of the "third degree" and of the more rigorous "cures" of bad habits: making it more unprofitable to assert one's will or one's bad habits than to act differently.) Before he sees Kate, he announces his method: he will assert as true the opposite of whatever she says and does and is, that is to say, will frustrate the manifestations of her will and establish the dominance of his own. Without naming them, he takes other steps that we know to be important in animal training. From the beginning he shows that he will stop at nothing to achieve his end, that he will not hesitate for a second to do anything
necess ary—to discard all dignity, or carry out any indecorous act or any outrageousness that will serve. He creates an image of utter invincibility, of having no weakness through which he can be appealed to. He does not use a literal whip, such as stage Petruchios were once addicted to, but he unmistakably uses a symbolic whip. Like a good trainer, however, he uses the carrot, too—not only marriage, but a new life, a happier personality for Kate. Above all, he offers love; in the end, the trainer succeeds best who makes the trainee feel the presence of something warmer than technique, rigor, and invincibility. Not that Petruchio fakes love, but that love has its part, ironically, in a process that is farcically conceived and that never wholly loses the markings of farce.

Only in farce could we conceive of the occurrence, almost in a flash, of that transformation of personality which, as known only too well in modern experience, normally requires a long, gradual, painstaking application of psychotherapy. True, conversion is believable and does happen, but even as a secular experience it requires a prior development of readiness, or an extraordinary revelatory shock, or both. (In the romantic form of this psychic event, an old hag, upon marriage to the knight, suddenly turns into a beautiful maiden.) Kate is presented initially as a very troubled woman; aggressiveness and tantrums are her way of feeling a sense of power. Though very modern, the argument that we see in her the results of paternal unkindness is not very impressive. For one thing, recent research on infants—if we may risk applying heavy science to light farce—suggests that basic personality traits precede, and perhaps influence, parental attitudes to children. More important, the text simply does not present Baptista as the overbearing and tyrannical father that he is sometimes said to be. Kate has made him almost as unhappy as she is and driven him toward Bianca; nevertheless, when he heavily handicaps Bianca in the matrimonial sweepstakes, he is trying to even things up for the daughter that he naturally thinks is a poor runner. Nor is he willing to marry her off to Petruchio simply to get rid of her; “her love,” he says, “is all in all.” On her wedding day he says, kindly enough,

“I cannot blame thee now to weep,” and at the risk of losing husbands for both daughters he rebukes Petruchio (3.2.97ff.). (The Baptista that some commentators describe would surely have said nothing but “What do you expect, you bitch?”) We cannot blacken Baptista to save Kate. Shakespeare presents her binding and beating Bianca (2.1.1ff.) to show that he is really committed to a shrew; such episodes make it hard to defend the view that she is an innocent victim or is posing as a shrew out of general disgust. To sum up: in real life her disposition would be difficult to alter permanently, but farce secures its pleasurable effect by assuming a ready and total change in response to the stimuli applied by Petruchio, as if he were going through an established and proved routine. On the other hand, only farce makes it possible for Petruchio to be so skillful a tamer, that is, so unerring, so undeviating, so mechanical an enforcer of the rules for training in falconry. If Petruchio were by nature the disciplinarian that he acts for a while, he would hardly change after receiving compliance; and if he were, in real life, the charming and affectionate gentleman that he becomes in the play, he would find it impossible so rigorously to play the falcon-tamer, to outbully the bully, especially when the bully lies bleeding on the ground, for this role would simply run afoul of too much of his personality. The point here is not that the play is “unrealistic” (this would be a wholly irrelevant criticism) but that we can understand how a given genre works by testing it against the best sense of reality that we can bring to bear. It is the farcical view of life that makes possible the treatment of both Kate and Petruchio.

But this picture, of course, is incomplete; for the sake of clarity we have been stressing the purely generic in The Shrew and gliding over the specific variations. Like any genre, farce is a convention, not a straitjacket; it is a fashion, capable of many variations. Genre provides a perspective, which in the individual work can be used narrowly or inclusively; comedy of manners, for instance, can move toward the character studies of James’s novels or toward the superficial entertainments of Terence Rattigan. Shakespeare hardly ever uses a genre constrictively.
both *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, the resemblances between which are well known, Shakespeare moves away from the limited conception of personality that we find in "basic farce," such as that of Plautus, who influences both these plays. True, he protects both main characters in *The Shrew* against the expectable liabilities that would make one a less perfect reformer and the other less than a model reformee, but he is unwilling to leave them automatons, textbook types of reformer and reformee. So he equips both with a good deal of intelligence and feeling that they would not have in elementary farce. Take sex, for instance. In basic farce, sex is purely a mechanical response, with no more overtones of feeling than ordinary hunger and thirst; the normal "love affair" is an intrigue with a courtesan. Like virtually all Renaissance lovers, Petruchio tells Kate candidly that he proposes to keep warm "in thy bed" (2.1.260). But there is no doubt that Petruchio, in addition to wanting a good financial bargain and enjoying the challenge of the shrew, develops real warmth of feeling for Kate as an individual—a warmth that makes him strive to bring out the best in her, to keep the training in a tone of jesting, well-meant fantasy, to provide Kate with face-saving devices (she is "curst . . . for policy" and only "in company"—285, 298), to praise her for her virtues (whether she has them or not) rather than blame her for her vices, to never fall into boorishness, to repeatedly protest his affection for her, and by asking a kiss at a time she thinks unsuitable, to show that he really wants it. Here farce expands toward comedy of character by using a fuller range of personality. Likewise with Kate. The fact that she is a shrew does not mean that she cannot have hurt feelings, as it would in a plainer farce; indeed a shrew may be defined—once she develops beyond a mere stereotype—as a person who has an excess of hurt feelings and is taking revenge on the world for them. We do not, because we dislike the revenge, deny the painful feelings that may lie behind. Shakespeare has chosen to show some of those feelings, not making Kate an insentient virago on the one hand, or a pathetic victim on the other. She is jealous of Bianca and her lovers, she accuses Baptista of favoritism (in the opinion of the present editor, without justification); on her wedding day she suffers real anguish rather than simply an automatic, conventionally furious resolve for retaliation. The painful emotions take her way beyond the limitations of the essentially pain-free personality of basic farce. Further, she is witty, though, truth to tell, the first verbal battle between her and Petruchio, like various other such scenes, hardly goes beyond verbal farce, in which words are mechanical jokes or blows rather than an artistic game that delights by its quality, and in which all the speed of the short lines hardly conceals the heavy labors of the dutiful but uninspired punster (the best jokes are the bawdy ones). Kate has imagination. It shows first in a new human sympathy when she defends the servants against Petruchio (4.1.150, 162–63). Then it develops into a gay, inspired gamesomeness that rivals Petruchio’s own. When he insists, “It shall be what o’clock I say it is” (4.3.193) and “[The sun] shall be moon or star or what I list” (4.5.7), he is at one level saying again that he will stop at nothing, at no irrationality, as tamer; but here he moves the power game into a realm of fancy in which his apparent willfulness becomes the acting of the creative imagination. He is a poet, and he asks her, in effect, less to kiss the rod than to join in the game of playfully transforming ordinary reality. It is the final step in transforming herself. The point here is that, instead of not catching on or simply sulking, Kate has the dash and verve to join in the fun, and to do it with skill and some real touches of originality.

This scene on the road to Padua (4.5) is the high point of the play. From here on, it tends to move back closer to the boundaries of ordinary farce. When Petruchio asks a kiss, we do have human beings with feelings, not robots; but the key line in the scene, which is sometimes missed, is Petruchio’s "Why, then let’s home again. Come sirrah, let’s away" (5.1.146). Here Petruchio is again making the same threat that he made at 4.5.8–9, that is, not playing an imaginative game but hinting the symbolic whip, even though the end is a compliance that she is inwardly glad to give. The whole wager scene, as we have already noted, falls
essentially within the realm of farce: the responses are largely mechanical, as is their symmetry. Kate's final long speech on the obligations and fitting style of wives we can think of as a more or less automatic statement of a generally held doctrine. The easiest way to deal with it is to say that we no longer believe in it, just as we no longer believe in the divine right of kings, which is an important dramatic element in many Shakespeare plays. But to some interpreters, Kate has become such a charming heroine that they cannot stand her being anything less than a modern feminist. Hence the claim that she is speaking ironically. There are two arguments against this interpretation. One is that a careful reading of the lines will show that most of them have to be taken literally; only the last seven or eight lines can be read with ironic overtones, but this means, at most, a return to the imaginative gamesomeness of 4.5, rather than a denial of the doctrine formally asserted. The second is that forty-five lines of straight irony would be too much to be borne; it would be inconsistent with the straightforwardness of most of the play, and it would really turn Kate back into a hidden shrew whose new technique was sarcastic indirection, side-mouthing at the audience while her not very intelligent husband, bamboozled, cheered her on. It would be a poor triumph. If one has to modernize the speech of the obedient wife, a better way to do it is to develop a hint of Professor Goddard's: that behind a passé doctrine lies a continuing truth. That truth is that there are real differences between the sexes, and that they are to be kept in mind. That view at least does not strain the spirit of Kate's speech.

The Katolatry which has developed in recent years reveals the romantic tendency to create heroes and heroines by denying the existence of flaws in them and by imputing all sorts of flaws to their families and other associates. We have already seen how the effort to save Kate at the beginning has resulted in an untenable effort to make Baptista into a villainous, punitive father and Bianca into a calculating little devil whose inner shrewishness slowly comes out. But it is hard to see why, if we are to admire Kate's spirit of open defiance at the beginning and her alleged ironic defiance at the end, we should not likewise admire the spirit of Bianca and Hortensio's widow at the end. It is equally hard to see why we should admire Kate's quiet, ironic, what-every-woman-knows victory, as some would have it, over an attractive man at the end, but should not admire Petruchio's open victory over a very unattractive woman earlier. In fact, it is a little difficult to know just what Kate's supposed victory consists in. The play gives no evidence that from now on she will be twisting her husband around her finger. The evidence is rather that she will win peace and quiet and contentment by giving in to his wishes, and that her willingness will entirely eliminate unreasonable and autocratic wishes in him. But after all, the unreasonable and the autocratic are his strategy, not his nature; he gives up an assumed vice, while Kate gives up a real one. The truth is that Kate's great victory is, with Petruchio's help, over herself; she has come to accept herself as having enough merits so that she can be content without having the last word and scaring everybody off. To see this means to acknowledge that she was originally a shrew, whatever virtues may also have been latent in her personality.

What Shakespeare has done is to take an old, popular farcical situation and turn it into a well-organized, somewhat complex, fast-moving farce of his own. He has worked with the basic conceptions of farce—mainly that of a somewhat limited personality that acts and responds in a mechanical way and hence moves toward a given end with a perfection not likely if all the elements in human nature were really at work. So the tamer never fails in his technique, and the shrew responds just as she should. Now this situation might have tempted the dramatist to let his main characters be flat automatons—he a dull and rough whipwielder, and she a stubborn intransigent until beaten into insensibility (as in the ballad that was perhaps a Shakespearean source). Shakespeare, however, makes a gentleman and lady of his central pair. As tamer, Petruchio is a gay and witty and precocious artist and, beyond that, an affectionate man; and hence, a remarkable therapist. In Kate, Shakespeare has imagined, not merely a harridan
who is incurable or a moral stepchild driven into a misconduct by mistreatment, but a difficult woman—a shrew, indeed—who combines willfulness with feelings that elicit sympathy, with imagination, and with a latent cooperativeness that can bring this war of the sexes to an honorable settlement. To have started with farce, to have stuck to the main lines of farce, and yet to have got so much of the supra-farcical into farce—this is the achievement of *The Taming of the Shrew* and the source of the pleasure that it has always given.

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*The Taming of the Shrew*
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