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From Shakespeare's Comedy of Love

As in The Comedy of Errors, a world of romance and a world of money collide. But the ultimate outcome is rather different. In the end, the marriage of Bianca and Lucentio is shown as satisfying both the conventions of romance and the conventions of society: the young man is both a successful lover and a good catch. But this satisfaction does not outlast the final scene. An extra factor is introduced, which plays havoc with both conventions—the character of Bianca herself. The heroine of Supposes, though technically the center of the action, appeared only briefly; but Bianca is given a character, and a will, of her own. Her sweet disposition is part of a deeper strategy, as Katherina recognizes: “Her silence flouts me and I’ll be revenged” (2.1.29). When we see her with her rival tutors, her essential nature is revealed:

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.

(3.1.18–20)

And throughout the scene she keeps a subtle but firm control over the men. Her conduct at the end will be more surprising for Lucentio than for the audience. Both socially and artistically, he has won a conventional sweetheart in a...
conventional way; and when the prize turns out to have been a baited trap, not merely the character but the conventions he has operated under are mocked.

The inadequacy of both conventions is that they take too little account of personality. Bianca can play her role in a courtship, and her role in a business transaction, without revealing her true face. But the play, unlike so many romantic comedies, goes on for one scene after marriage, and Lucentio learns to his dismay what lay behind that romantic sweetness. On the other hand, Petruchio has been concerned with personality all along. The taming plot presents in a deeper, more psychological way ideas that are handled superficially and externally in the romantic plot. Education is one such idea: Bianca is surrounded by instructors, none of whose credentials would bear examination; they have really come to win her, not to teach her (the one real pedant in the play is disguised as someone else). But Petruchio, in his “taming school” (4.2.54), really does teach Kate, and teaches her that inner order of which the music and the mathematics offered to Bianca are only a reflection. Disguise is also treated differently in the two plots: Petruchio disguises himself as a ruffian and a bully (I will argue later that this is only a disguise); and he achieves more with this psychological transformation than do the suitors of the other plot, no matter how many hats, robes, and false noses they may don. This repeats a process I have mentioned before: one world builds on features of another world, but develops them in its own way. The Bianca plot is introduced first, and the taming plot may be said to be (in part) a reflection of it at a deeper level; but in the bulk of the play the two plots run along side by side, and we are led to compare them. The most striking effect, perhaps, is in 5.1, when the false Vincentio confronts the real one. Here the external, farcical confusion of the Bianca plot reaches its climax; and this frantic scene is watched by Katherina and Petruchio, who are above the battle, having achieved their own peace already in a scene with the same Vincentio, playing a game of confusion with ideas rather than names and faces.

Petruchio, like Lucentio, has a literary tradition behind him; but it is the older, more elusive tradition of folktale. Lucentio is irrational, but in a familiar way; he lives in a daylight world, and we have no difficulty understanding anything he does. Petruchio’s behavior can in the end be rationalized, but it strikes us at first as strange and eccentric, a series of private jokes he does not always share with us: Motive and action are connected in an oblique, sometimes puzzling way. He has a tinge of the exotic, bringing with him suggestions of a world of adventure quite different from the closeted worlds of money and learning inhabited by the other characters:

Have I not in my time heard lions roar?
Have I not heard the sea, puffed up with winds,
Rage like an angry boar chased with sweat?
Have I not heard great ordnance in the field,
And heaven’s artillery thunder in the skies?
Have I not in a pitched battle heard
Loud ‘larums, neighing steeds, and trumpets’ clang?

He invades the ordered propriety of Padua like a natural force, and the feelings of the inhabitants are considerably ruffled in the process. (His behavior at his wedding is much more piquant for being seen through the outraged eyes of Gremio than it would be if we saw it straight.) No small part of the disruption is that he professes the conventional social motives, but more blatantly than is socially acceptable:

I come to wive it wealthy in Padua;
If wealthy, then happily in Padua.

She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,
My household stuff, my field, my barn,
My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything,
And here she stands. Touch her whoever dare.

1Folktale analogies with the taming plot are discussed by Jan Harold Brunvand, “The folktale origin of The Taming of the Shrew,” Shakespeare Quarterly XVII (Autumn 1966): 345-59.
The citizens of Padua would probably agree with both attitudes; but it is part of their decorum not to insist on them so brazenly (though Baptista comes quite close). And Petruchio at times is simply rude: “If she and I be pleased, what’s that to you?” (2.1.296). He woos roughly, dresses like a madman and brawls at his own wedding; and the native population responds with a mixture of chuckling appreciation and shock. But the occasional attempts by other characters to insist on proper behavior are undermined by irony. Gremio says of his wooing, “You are too blunt; go to it orderly” (45), but since Petruchio’s entrance has been accompanied by no fewer than three other characters in disguise (one of them introduced by Gremio himself), the old man’s insistence on the proprieties seems comically out of place. Similarly, the character who rebukes him most roundly for his appearance at the wedding—“See not your bride in these un reverent robes. / Go to my chamber; put on clothes of mine” (3.2.112–13)—is Tranio, who has much less right to the clothes he is wearing than Petruchio does.

Katherina is a match for him in that she too is unorthodox. Instead of playing, as Bianca does, the dutiful, submissive daughter, she asserts her own will quite overtly. She objects to being treated simply as part of Bianca’s wedding arrangements: “I pray you, sir, is it your will / To make a stale of me amongst these mates?” (1.1.57–58). It should be noted that she has wrung one important concession from her father by her behavior: she insists that whoever marries her must do so “when the special thing is well obtained, / That is, her love, for that is all in all” (2.1.128–29). There is obviously no point in trying to match her against her will. But he makes no such conditions with Bianca, whose will he assumes he can control, whose love he thinks he can give to the highest bidder:

’Tis deeds must win the prize, and he of both
That can assure my daughter greatest dower
Shall have my Bianca’s love.

(335–37)

The shrew’s unorthodox behavior has its value, forcing attention to her personality and her wishes, keeping her from being simply a counter in a social game.

It is in this sense, however, that Petruchio “kills her in her own humor” (4.1.174), for he attacks her through a disruption of orthodox behavior far more drastic than her own. It is more drastic, paradoxically, because it operates at a seemingly more trivial level: he disrupts the ordinary social amenities that she has taken for granted all her life—food, sleep, clothing. The devastating effect on Katherina demonstrates the truth of the Abbess’s lecture to Adriana in The Comedy of Errors: “In food, in sport, and life-preserving rest / To be disturbed, would mad or man or beast” (5.1.83–84). Our comfort and our sense of well-being depend on the smooth operation of the normal domestic round. Yet in denying her this Petruchio claims, paradoxically, that he is acting the loving husband:

As with the meat, some undeserved fault
I’ll find about the making of the bed,
And here I’ll fling the pillow, there the bolster,
This way the coverlet, another way the sheets.
Ay, and amid this hurly I intend
That all is done in reverent care of her.

(4.1.193–98)

He concludes, “This is a way to kill a wife with kindness” (202). Throughout his behavior runs this constant sense of paradox, of a crazy inversion of motive and action: with a fine display of choler, he throws the meat away—because it engenders choler (155–69); in their bedchamber, on their wedding night, he preaches “a sermon of continency to her, / And rails and sweats and rates” (176–77). Simple bullying would, one feels, produce an equally simple reaction, enraged resistance or blind submission. But Petruchio’s paradoxical behavior teases Katherina’s mind into action. She picks up the incongruity in his “kindness”:
And that which spites me more than all these wants,
He does it under name of perfect love,
As who should say, if I should sleep or eat
'Twere deadly sickness or else present death.

(4.3.11-14)

She offers no explicit explanation; but clearly her mind is running on the nature of "perfect love," and her worries over food and sleep are a stimulus to reflection on this deeper issue.

In place of the clear motives and two-dimensional action of the Bianca plot, we have a more oblique dramatic method. There is no explicit statement from Katherina or Petruchio as to why this bizarre, inverted image of love should have the effect it does. We, like Katherina, are teased into working it out for ourselves. In rejecting clothing that is merely "fashionable" (4.3.69-70, 94-97), or in overcoming Katherina's scruples about kissing in the street (5.1.142-49), Petruchio appears at first glance to be insisting on the unimportance of the more superficial social conventions. As he puts it, "'tis the mind that makes the body rich" (4.3.170). And he had flouted conventional taste at his wedding, with an equally solemn assurance that "To me she's married, not unto my clothes" (3.2.117). The usual clichés about appearance and reality come to mind at once. But I wonder. In taking such elaborate care to dress absurdly at his wedding, and in criticizing the tailor's efforts so severely and in such detail, Petruchio actually demonstrates a concern for the importance of clothing, and a considerable fascination with it. And his behavior over Katherina's dress is of a piece with his other attacks on her domestic comfort. He seems to be demonstrating to her the importance of small social amenities, by denying them to her and forcing her to realize how much she depends on them. Over and over again, her dismay and indignation—at having her gown show up late for the wedding, at not being allowed her own marriage feast, at being denied food and sleep, at not being allowed to dress in the fashion, like other gentlewomen—push her, un-
The madcap seems as much concerned with the respectable, nonromantic side of marriage as any citizen of Padua.

But while analysing Petruchio's methods and abstracting a philosophical pattern from them may be a necessary critical exercise, it is not finally an adequate account of the play. Something more intangible has to be reckoned with: the spirit in which Petruchio goes to work. It is here that the modern sensibility is on dangerous ground with *The Taming of the Shrew*. We feel a little uncomfortable with the harshness of Petruchio's method, with the very real suffering he inflicts; we try to reassure ourselves that he and Katherina are really in love all the time—romantically in love, in the manner we are used to in comedy—and toying affectionately with each other.  

We think hopefully of Beatrice and Benedick. In the theater, performers are at great pains to assure us that since the couple love each other, no real harm is being done; and since the dialogue is uncooperative, they frequently resort to mime to make the point clear. It is true enough that Petruchio is not just a sadist who beats his wife into dumb submission; but to react against this view by importing too much romantic softness into the play would be to falsify it in the other direction.

One cannot deny that the taming is a rough, brutal business, and for all its effect on Katherina's mind the initial impact is physical. She journeys, dirty, wet, and starving, to an ice-cold house, where she is denied food and sleep. And yet the effect is different from the earlier, cruder shrew plays (such as *Tom Tyler and his Wife*) where if the shrew submits at all it is, in M. C. Bradbrook's words, "either to high theological argument or to a taste of the stick." The taming of Katherina is more interesting, more fun to watch; otherwise the play would not be so consistently successful in the theater. It is not just that we sense the philosophical purpose behind the knockabout; there is something attractive in the knockabout itself. A clue is provided, I think, in one of the key images Petruchio uses to describe his method:

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.
Another way I have to man my haggard,
To teach her come and know her keeper's call,
That is, to watch her as we watch these kites
That bate and beat and will not be obedient.

The style of the speech reflects the tough, alert mind of the seasoned sportsman. Katherina is trained, quite literally, as one would train a hawk. (In contrast, Bianca is described in the following scene as a "proud disdainful haggard" (4.2.39) who will not be tamed.) Petruchio greets her submission with another image drawn from sport: "Thus the bowl should run / And not unluckily against the bias" (4.5.24–25). The taming of Katherina is not just a lesson but a game—a test of skill and a source of pleasure. The

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4 Modern attempts to soften the play have been surveyed—and amusingly dissected—by Robert B. Heilman, "The 'Taming' Untamed, or the Return of the Shrew," *Modern Language Quarterly* XXVII (June 1966): 147–51.  
5 In the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1962 production (directed by Maurice Daniels from John Barton's 1960 production) Katherina was rewarded for her submission by being given back the hat Petruchio had refused her; in Trevor Nunn's 1967 production for the same company, their first meeting began with a long pantomime in which Petruchio pretended to have only one arm. Katherina approached him with an expression of sympathy; her reaction when the "missing" arm suddenly appeared combined indignation with wry amusement. She and Petruchio were thus established as characters who enjoyed playing games with each other. In both cases the effect was to soften the characters' relationship, to assure us that no real wounds were being inflicted.

roughness is, at bottom, part of the fun: such is the peculiar psychology of sport that one is willing to endure aching muscles and risk the occasional broken limb for the sake of the challenge and the pleasure it provides. And the sports most often recalled throughout the play are blood sports, hunting and hawking—thus invoking in the audience the state of mind in which cruelty and violence are acceptable, even exciting, because their scope is limited by tacit agreement and they are made the occasion for a display of skill.

Similarly, the cruelty is made limited and acceptable by reminders that Petruchio is putting on an act. The memory of Sly may create some detachment in any case; but even in terms of the shrew play Petruchio is seen as a performer. In their first interview, Katherina says of his bombast, "Where did you study all this goodly speech?" (2.1.256). And a slight but visible gap opens between the character and his performance when, after his flamboyant abuse of the tailor, he asks Hortensio, aside, to assure his victim that he will be paid (4.3.162). When, by the end of the play, we realize the value Petruchio places on settled domesticity, the suggestion that his brawling was a performance becomes a virtual certainty. (It might also be noted, by the way, that Petruchio uses the sense of detachment given by a performance as the basis of one of his most ingenious taming devices; he assures the other characters that Katherina's shrewishness is only a pretence, since "Tis bargain'd 'twixt us twain, being alone, / That she shall still be curst in company" (2.1.297–98). This robs Katherina of the chief means of exerting her will, since the others can no longer be sure if her displays of temper are serious. This device, however, is not developed, since, from this point on, the real issue is not her relation to the other characters but her relation to Petruchio.)

We can enjoy Petruchio's brutality, then, because it is limited and conventionalized; and this, rather than any notion of romantic love, is the real source of our pleasure in the taming. This is, when viewed dispassionately, a peculiar frame of mind, but it is common enough in spectators of sport and drama. However, it is not automatically created by drama (as it is by some sports), and one of the functions of the Induction is to invoke this state of mind in preparation for Petruchio. The Lord is in many ways analogous to Petruchio. When he first appears we hear him speaking of his hounds, with appreciation, enjoyment and concern:

Huntsman, I charge thee, tender well my hounds.
Brach Merriman—the poor cur, is embossed—
And couple Clowder with the deep-mouth'd brach.
Saw'st thou not, boy, how Silver made it good
At the hedge-corner in the coldest fault?
I would not lose the dog for twenty pound.

(Induction, 1.16–21)

(We may recall this passage later when Petruchio, returning home, demands "where's my spaniel Troilus?"—4.1.134.)
The Lord is also a connoisseur of acting:

This fellow I remember
Since once he played a farmer's eldest son;
'Twas where you wooed the gentlewoman so well.
I have forgot your name, but sure that part
Was aptly fitted and naturally perform'd.

(Induction, 1.83–87)

He later tries a hand at acting himself, impersonating one of his own servants. Quickly but firmly, Shakespeare establishes the Lord as a cultivated lover of pleasure. And, like Petruchio, he has a sense of propriety beneath his sense of fun. The first sight of Sly offends him: "O monstrous beast, how like a swine he lies! / Grim death, how foul and loathsome is thine image!" (Induction, 1.34–35). His joke on Sly is one more sport, a pleasant relaxation after the day's hunting; but he sees that if it is to remain sport, it must remain under control: "It will be pastime passing excellent / If it be husbanded with modesty" (Induction, 1.67–68). He looks forward to the page's performance, and the servants' reactions, but adds,
To a compassionate eye, the Lord's treatment of Sly, like Petrucho's of Katherina, is cruel fun; but we are not allowed to be so compassionate. Sport and acting are both invoked to give us the detachment necessary to take pleasure in the trick, and the Lord's essential restraint ensures that the balance is maintained.

The appeal to our sense of sport also has important implications for the development of Katherina herself: We watch her progress, not just as a wife, but as a player in Petrucho's game. Their first interview is revealing. He begins by laying out his plan of attack quite simply: he will turn everything she does upside down, and throw her into a state of confusion (2.1.170-81). But when she appears, his early attempt to dominate the conversation breaks down as he engages him in tight, fast repartee, demonstrating that she is a keen fighter, worthy of his best efforts; and the result, as we have seen, is that his simple device of contradiction is replaced by a more subtle and intricate strategy. This increases the pleasure of the game, since there is no sport in playing too weak an opponent. And in her final transformation her sporting nature is not crushed but redirected. The location of the scene is unusual: often enough, in Shakespeare's comedies, we see the beginning or end of a journey; but here, as the dialogue emphasizes, we are on the open road, in transit between Petrucho's house and Baptista's—as it were, on neutral ground, in a free area where anything can happen. And here Katherina finally displays the fruits of Petrucho's teaching. Her obedience is signaled by submission to her husband on the most basic of matters—perception itself. She sees literally with his eyes, her mind becomes a reflection of his:

Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun.
But sun it is not when you say it is not.
of detail is missing, and with it the zest displayed by Katherina at the beginning and end, and by Petruchio throughout. But this sense of the importance of pleasure is not just a palliative to make the taming acceptable: it is close to the heart—arguably it is the heart—of the play’s vision of social life. It is presented as the raison d’être of the play performed for Sly, and for us:

Your Honor’s players, hearing your amendment,
Are come to play a pleasant comedy.
For so your doctors hold it very meet,
Seeing too much sadness hath concealed your blood,
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy.
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.

(Induction, 2.129–36)

This genial theory of the function of art is matched shortly afterwards by Tranio’s view of education: while acknowledging the importance of “This virtue and this moral discipline” he insists, “No profit grows where is no pleasure ta’en” (1.1.30,39). The same may be said of Petruchio’s education of his wife. The final image of social pleasure is the wedding feast—which, for the only time in Shakespeare, is held on stage. Throughout we have been reminded of the civilizing influence of food and drink. It softens the rivalry of Bianca’s suitors: Tranio proposes they should “do as adversaries do in law, / Strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends” (1.2.277–78). It consoles Gremio in his defeat: “My cake is dough, but I’ll in among the rest / Out of hope of all but my share of the feast” (5.1.139–40). And it provides the setting for Katherina’s display of obedience, placing it in a context of social pleasure and pastime.

In the wager the men lay on their wives, the analogy with sport is invoked once more, and more explicitly than ever. When Katherina spars with the Widow, their husbands cheer them on:

Petruichio. To her, Kate!
Hortensio. To her, Widow!
Petruichio. A hundred marks, my Kate does put her down.

(5.2.33–35)

And when Petruchio objects to the stake—

Twenty crowns!
I’ll venture so much of my hawk or hound,
But twenty times so much upon my wife—

(71–73)

the difference in the wagers seems to be one of degree, not kind. He displays a confident player’s zest for the game; and he displays also a complete trust in his partner, a confidence in her ability to play her own hand. If he enjoys making the wager, Katherina enjoys winning it: The sheer length of her speech, the care she lavishes on its rhetoric, tell us that. Here, as with the taming itself, we must not be too quick to adjust the play to our own assumptions about love and marriage. The fact that Katherina relishes her speech as a performance does not necessarily mean she is ironic or insincere. She is simply enjoying herself. Her submission to her husband is not something to be admitted with shame, or rationalized, but celebrated—particularly in the presence of women who have just failed the test she has so triumphantly passed.

Sport, playacting, education—the taming of Katherina is not finally any of these things, but something sui generis, the working out of a personal relationship. But these other activities are analogous, and are placed in the play as points of reference. The achievement of “peace . . . and love, and quiet life” (108) in Petruchio’s marriage is seen as part of a whole range of activities whereby men

Critics have varied widely in their reactions to the speech. Coghill, ibid., clearly sees it as ironic. For George Ian Guthrie, in Shakespeare (London, 1951), Katherina speaks “with fervent conviction” (p. 58). Charles Brooks concludes “she plays her part so well that only she and Petruchio know how much is serious and how much put on.” See “Shakespeare’s Romantic Shrews,” Shakespeare Quarterly XI (Summer 1970): 354.
try to bring order and pleasure into their lives. In showing this, the play also shows us as creatures of convention: our most pleasurable activities are organized, limited, bounded by rules; and Petruchio’s ultimate lesson may be that order and pleasure are inseparable. We also load ourselves with superficial conventions: The play identifies romantic love and a stuffy sense of propriety as two of these, and comically explodes them. But sport and playacting—both highly conventionalized activities—are seen as genuine sources of strength and enjoyment, and Petruchio’s application of these activities to his marriage, while it may seem bizarre to the citizens of Padua, is triumphantly justified.

The characters of The Comedy of Errors and The Two Gentlemen of Verona are comically trapped by limited orders of understanding; they find it difficult, if not impossible, to rise out of their private worlds and see them in relation to other worlds (though Julia is to some degree an exception). But in The Taming of the Shrew Petruchio, Katherina, and the Lord have a special vision, an awareness of life as a play or a game, that gives them a power to control not only their own lives but other people’s. They have a sense of convention, and therefore a power to manipulate convention, to create experiences rather than have experiences forced upon them. The Lord in creating a new identity for Sly, Petruchio in creating a new life for Katherina, and she herself when she finally joins in this act of creation—all of them convey some of what we imagine to be their own creator’s zest in the act of making a new world come to life.
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