Sexism and the Battle of Sexes in

*The Taming of the Shrew*

In *The Taming of the Shrew* a feminist argument is not explicit, but as we watch the battle between Kate and Petruchio, sexual politics must be on our minds. Kate’s resistance to Petruchio is at least in part the resistance of the feminine to male dominance; as in *The Comedy of Errors*, the feminist possibilities of his story provoke the author’s partiality for the status quo. Whenever Shakespeare’s comedies challenge the limits to sexual equality, they end by strenuously reaffirming those limits. Shakespeare’s later comedies, however, seem to avoid both the feminist challenge and the heavy-handed defense against it. In *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, Viola and Rosalind do not confront the political order; they simply preside in its absence. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, we are triumphant over the feminine, but in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, the happy ending does not depend on masculine control of women. When we leave the domain of the comic heroine (as opposed to the world of the shrew), we do so without triumph and without finality. Illyria and the Forest of Arden are not, like Kate’s resistance, shown up as errors; they are states of mind that we visit and leave, revisit and leave again. The later come-

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dies do not share social and political power with the
women; but they do emphasize areas of experience to
which other kinds of power—emotional, imaginative,
personal—are more relevant.

The Taming of the Shrew deserves extended consider-
ation as the play in which the theme of the battle of the
sexes is fully and finally elaborated. Here the rebellion
of the feminine is sullen and pointless. It is not analog-
ous, like Hermia’s rebellion in A Midsummer Night’s
Dream, to the periodic rebellion of all citizens against
the restraints of their society; it does not send us off into
an alternative world in which we experience the terror
and delight of life beyond the social order. Kate’s chal-
lenge is entirely negative: she resists the arrangements
of society but does not call to mind what is beyond
society itself. If Kate were in love with another man, or
even merely found Petruchio antipathic, she would call
to mind the irrationalities of sexual attraction, something
beyond the power of society to control. But Kate is no
Juliet. Her antagonism to her father’s choice is not based
on her own sexual preference or on sexual antipathy to
her father’s choice. It does not resonate with anything
larger than itself. Petruchio, on the other hand, repres-
ents not only his own desires but the arrangements of
society itself. He does so by his cheerful insistence on
society’s archetypal institution, married cohabitation,
which Kate resists. The dialectic between the two is
unequal because Kate represents the alternative possi-
bilities very feebly while Petruchio is splendid and tri-
umphant as a representative of the status quo.

Petruchio dominates Kate physically, socially, and eco-
nomically; he is also the central consciousness of the play
and the one character whose will prevails. Insofar as the
play dramatizes the battle of the sexes, it ends in complete
humiliation for the feminine; insofar as it is a power
struggle, Kate loses. By the end of the play Kate herself
speaks for wifely obedience. “Thy husband,” she instructs
her sister,

is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign—one that cares for thee

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband,
And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she but a foul contending rebel
And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
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.

(5.2.146-47, 155-64)

In The Taming of the Shrew, the difference of the feminine
from the masculine implies only its inferiority. Kate is less
powerful, less wealthy, less cheerful, less in the play-
wright’s confidence—less everything than Petruchio.
When the conflict with women is stressed but unequal, as
it is here, we are surely justified in leveling the charge of
sexism.

Many critics, however, have argued against doing so.
One of the most interesting articles to take up the issue is
Coppleia Kahn’s “The Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare’s
Mirror of Marriage.” Kahn’s article illuminates both the
play’s intentions and its limitations when judged from a
feminist point of view. Kahn’s major argument is that
Petruchio “has gained Kate’s outward compliance in the
form of a public display while her spirit remains mischie-
vously free.”1 Surely the play invites us to accept just such
a distinction between Kate’s public and private selves and
to agree that Kate’s taming has not crushed her spirit. If
we do accept this distinction, we may go so far as to read
the final speech as though it were ironic. Though the
speech “pleads subordination,” says Kahn, “as a speech—

1Coppleia Kahn, “The Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare’s Mirror of Mar-
a lengthy, ambitious verbal performance before an audience—it allows the speaker to dominate that audience.”

But the distinction between Kate’s public and private selves seems to me a false one. The public forms of equality are important (as Kahn, elsewhere in her article, agrees) because they affect the life of the spirit itself. It is true, of course, that the limits to Kate’s equality as a wife are only public. As long as Kate publicly defers to her husband, comes when he calls and says what he wants her to say, their private relationship may be quite playful, equal, and happy. Male dominance is merely a social form, irrelevant to the private relationship—or so the play implies. But this is Shakespeare at his most self-flattering: he imagines the feminine offering explicit social subservience without sacrificing its delightful equality as a sexual partner. Kahn sometimes seems to accept the bargain Shakespeare offers in *The Taming of the Shrew*: If women will go along with male dominance as a mere formality, we may all agree that it is as silly a formality as you like. But the price is to go along with it.

Elsewhere in her article Kahn refuses this easygoing bargain. Her objections to it are clearest in her discussion of the climactic scene of the play, Act 4, scene 5. Here Petruchio and Kate argue over whether it is night or day, whether they see the sun or moon above them. When Petruchio threatens to punish Kate once again for her contrariness, Kate suddenly decides to let it be “moon or sun or what you please.” And if you please to call it a rush-candle, Henceforth I vow it shall be so for me” (13–15). There follows this dialogue, as Petruchio presses his advantage:

**Petruchio.** I say it is the moon.

**Kate.** I know it is the moon.

**Petruchio.** Nay, then you lie. It is the blessed sun.

**Kate.** Then God be blessed, it is the blessed sun.

But sun it is not when you say it is not.

And the moon changes even as your mind.

Kate has learned to maintain her independence through ironic exaggeration; if Petruchio says it is the moon, Kate knows it is the moon. When she cries “Then God be blessed, it is the blessed sun,” her thankfulness is partly sincere. She feels blessed at having finally learned how to keep a pocket of freedom for herself within the limits of Petruchio’s dominion over her. But as Kahn points out, Kate’s solution is no solution at all. “Her only way of maintaining her inner freedom,” says Kahn, “is by outwardly denying it, which thrusts her into a schizoid existence.... Furthermore, to hold that she maintains her freedom in words is to posit a distinction without a difference, for whether she remains spiritually independent of Petruchio or sincerely believes in his superiority, her outward behavior must be.... that of the perfect Griselda, a model for all women.”

Although the play presents Kate’s capitulation as a gesture without consequence to her soul, it cannot seem so to a feminist reader. The battle of the sexes as a theme for comedy is inherently sexist. The battle is only funny to those who assume that the status quo is the natural order of things and likely to prevail. To the rest of us, Kate’s compromise is distressing.

Perhaps Shakespeare himself was also dissatisfied with the resolution to *The Taming of the Shrew*, for after this play he abandons both the shrew and the feminist challenge for the comic heroine and the challenge of the green world. C. L. Barber’s distinction between satirical and saturnalian comedy may be helpful here. Satirical comedy, he says, “tends to deal with relations between social classes and aberrations in movements between them. Saturnalian comedy is satiric only incidentally; its clarification comes with movement between poles of restraint and release in everybody’s experience.” The shrew is a figure of satire

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1FENTIL, p. 99.

2Ibid., p. 99.

and the comic heroine of saturnalia. The shrew is an aberration in the social order. At the end of the shrew comedy, “relations between social classes”—in this case the classes of men and women—are returned to the status quo. When the shrew challenges the social order, it reasserts itself in response; the comic heroine, by contrast, comes into her own when and where the social order may be taken for granted. The shrew is a representative of specific class interests rising against the power structure, whereas the comic heroine represents something beyond definition by class altogether, something that offers “release in everybody’s experience.” The comic heroine has a more general significance than the shrew, who is a local, political disturbance only.

Satirical comedy has a kind of righting moment: disorder is introduced into a society that rights itself like a balance toy that has been pulled over. The pleasure comes from seeing the center of gravity rejoin the center of resistance so that equilibrium is reestablished. But in saturnalian comedy the pleasure comes from a temporary release, as it were, from the laws of gravity altogether. The return to normalcy is implicit, but it does not provide the energy that drives the play. In The Taming of the Shrew, where the Other is a figure of satire, the return to normalcy is the goal throughout, and every action is directed toward it. In As You Like It and Twelfth Night, however, where the Other is saturnalian, our expectations of a return are muted or suspended during much of the action. We are occupied with the festivity or disorder, by the alternatives to the status quo, more than with the journey by which we return to it.
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