Kate’s final speech is “an imaginary or formal solution to unresolvable social contradictions,” but that appearance of resolution is an “ideological mirage.”! On the level of plot, as many readers have noted, if one shrew is tamed, two more reveal themselves. Bianca and the widow refuse to do their husbands’ bidding, thereby undoing the sense of closure Kate’s “acquiescence” produces. By articulating the contradiction manifested in the scene’s formal organization and its social “content”—between the “headstrong women,” now Bianca and the widow who refuse their duty, and Kate and her praise of women’s submission—the seeming resolution of the play’s ending is exploded and its heterogeneity rather than its unity is foregrounded. But can transgression of the law of women’s silence be subversive? It has become a theoretical commonplace to argue that transgression presupposes norms or taboos. Therefore, the “female dramatizable” is perhaps no more than a release mechanism, a means of managing troubled gender relations. By transgressing the law of women’s silence, but far from subverting it, the Shrew reconfirms the law, if we remember that Kate, Bianca, and the widow remain the object of the audience’s gaze, specular images, represented female bodies on display, as on the cucking stool or in the cart, the traditional punishments for prosti-


tutes and scolds. Representation contains female rebellion. And because the play has no final framing scene, no return to Sly, it could be argued that its artifice is relaxed, that the final scene is experienced naturalistically. The missing frame allows the audience to forget that Petruchio’s taming of Kate is presented as a fiction.

Yet even with its missing frame and containment of woman through spectacle, the Shrew finally deconstructs its own mimetic effect if we remember the bisexual aspect of the representation of women on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. Kate would have been played by a boy whose transvestism ... emblematically embodied the sexual contradictions manifest both in the play and Elizabethan culture. The very indeterminateness of the actor’s sexuality, of the woman/man’s body, the supplementarity of its titillating homoerotic play (Sly’s desire for the page boy disguised as a woman, Petruchio’s “Come Kate, we’ll to bed”), foregrounds its artifice and therefore subverts the play’s patriarchal master narrative by exposing it as neither natural nor divinely ordained, but culturally constructed.

From Shakespeare’s Comic Commonwealths

The understanding and cooperation between Kate and Petruchio in the last act has prompted several of the play’s most perceptive critics to comment on their creation of a separate world, what Marianne Novy calls “a private world, a joke that the rest of the characters miss” or what J. Dennis Huston calls “a select society, which includes themselves, the playwright, and perhaps a few members of his audience.”1 I believe that this emphasis on an exclusive community in collusion against the rest of the world assumes a twentieth-century opposition between public and private worlds that distorts the play’s conceptual and structural dynamics.2 Unlike Christopher Sly, who remains suspended in his dream of aristocratic splendor, Kate returns to her old environment.3

From Camille Wells Slights, Shakespeare’s Comic Commonwealths (University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 50–54. Reprinted by permission of University of Toronto Press Incorporated.


3In The Taming of a Shrew, which most scholars now see as a bad quarto or memorial reconstruction of The Taming of the Shrew, Sly falls asleep after commenting on the play several times and in an epilogue awakes in his own clothes and interprets his experience as a dream. Some scholars have argued that Shakespeare intended The Taming of the Shrew to include similar scenes and have proposed various explanations for their loss. Other hypotheses are that Shakespeare deliberately dropped Sly from later scenes for artistic reasons or that Sly’s expanded role is an unauthorized addition by those responsible
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