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.
The action rises to a climax in Act 3 with the farcical violence of Petruchio rescuing his bride from her family and friends, but neither Kate nor Petruchio expresses any wish to remain isolated in Petruchio’s country house. Acts 4 and 5 dramatize Kate’s gradual reintegration into society. Certainly the play works against Norbert Elias’s thesis that the civilizing process depends on the coercive power of a strong central government; the basis of Kate’s transformation is the self-understanding she develops in her relationship with her husband. But her domestication is complete only when it is made public. Hortensio assures Petruchio that “the field is won” (4.5.23) as soon as Kate yields to him over what to call the sun, but Petruchio arranges a series of increasingly public demonstrations of Kate’s new civility. The incident with Vincentio adds a stranger to the audience that already includes Hortensio and the servants. Next, Petruchio demands a kiss in the public street. Finally, Kate wins the wager on whose wife is most obedient before the assembled group of family and friends. Her education culminates, then, not in achieving intimacy with Petruchio but in winning recognition and approval from the social group. The pattern of interrupted feast, solitary fast, and celebratory feast marks the stages of her separation from and return to society. Significantly her final speech explaining the rationale of her obedience is not a private act of submission to Petruchio but a public demonstration of her full acceptance of her position as Petruchio’s wife and a public reprimand of the Widow and Bianca for their failures “to serve, love, and obey” (5.2.164) their husbands.

Kate’s demonstration of obedience is presented as a victory, not a humiliation. Her offer to place her hand under Petruchio’s foot acknowledges her submission in a hierarchical relationship, but the gesture also expresses gratitude at being cherished and pride at fulfilling her husband’s desires. Petruchio certainly demands that Katherina submit to his will, but we know, as she does, that he won’t step on her hand. Shakespeare, then, does not ironically subvert the patriarchal power structure portrayed in The Taming of the Shrew. As David Underdown has demonstrated, in the period between 1560 and 1640 a perceived threat to patriarchal order from unruly women produced a widespread fascination with literary shrews as well as a marked increase in legal proceedings against assertive women. The representation of Kate’s domestication as a paradigm of the civilizing process responds to that cultural anxiety by affirming women’s subordination. Readings of Kate’s endorsement of patriarchy as ironic are, I think, unconvincing. Unlike Petruchio’s claim that Kate is “My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything” (3.2.232), which is qualified by the farcical context, Kate’s exposition of wife’s submission stands unqualified and unrefuted. Similarly, in The Comedy of Errors the Abbess’s lecture to Adriana on how a nagging wife can drive a man mad (5.1.68–86) is consonant with the view of marriage in the play as a whole. Neither play is designed merely to teach uppity women their places. Both suggest that husbands and wives should be subject to each other in love, but both also endorse a hierarchical view of marriage in which wives owe obedience to husbands that husbands do not owe wives.

As tempting as it is to explain away Kate’s final speech, such revisionism deflects needed attention from the patriarchal ideology the play enacts. As Lynda Bose convincingly argues, “the impulse to rewrite the more oppressively patriarchal material in this play serves the very ideologies about gender that it makes less visible by making less

---


offensive." Similarly, to ignore the play’s consistent exclusion of physical brutality also obstructs the feminist project of writing the history of the construction of gender in Western society. While endorsing women’s subordination within patriarchal marriage, The Taming of the Shrew mitigates the violence used to control unruly women in the real world and in the shrew-taming literary tradition. Although sparring verbally with Katherina excites Petruchio in their pre-marital battle of the sexes, his goal is “peace . . . love, and quiet life” (5.2.108), and he puts a stop to the violence she initiates. His use of physical and economic force to deprive Katherina temporarily of food and sleep is relatively mild compared with the horrifying brutalities of actual social practice and with the sadism of earlier versions of the shrew story. For example, in contrast to the hero of A meere Jeste of a Shrewde and curste Wyfe lapped in Morrelles skin, who subjects his bride to a brutal sexual initiation, Petruchio on their wedding night lectures Katerina on continence. Not only do the methods employed in Petruchio’s taming school appear humane in the context of a society that tortured women judged to be scolds with cucking stools and scold’s bridles, the play also demystifies the patriarchal authority it confirms. Discussions of unruly women in the years around 1600 usually represent female insubordination as a perversion of natural order and a symptom of an incipient breakdown of all social order. In contrast, Kate’s shrewishness is a danger to no one but herself. Although Katerina invokes the familiar analogy between familial and political order in her final speech, her subjection to Petruchio is presented, not as an inevitable alignment with the natural relations between men and women, but as the result of protracted negotiations between two people, anticipating Locke’s theory of a contractual basis for marriage rather than re-inscribing the family as the divinely instituted origin of political power. 8


Kate’s exposition of a wife’s duties is general and normative rather than personal, but she justifies worship obedience on the basis, not of the religious sanctity of the conventional sexual hierarchy, but of its justice and convenience. The only inherent superiority she attributes to men is their greater physical strength, and she describes a wife’s duties of “love, fair looks, and true obedience” (5.2.153) as just recompense to a husband who endures “painful labor” to care for her (149). 9

The Taming of the Shrew offers Kate and Bianca no alternative to the limited choice between spinsterhood and patriarchal marriage. In the context of contemporary discussions of domestic relations, it supports the ideal of marriage based on mutual love within the framework of masculine authority. 10 Petruchio’s announced desire for a rich wife and Baptista’s offer of his youngest daughter to the highest bidder allude unmistakably to the practice among the property-classes of arranging marriages on an economic basis, and the play explicitly subordinates these financial motives to the emotional responses of the female characters. Petruchio’s success consists not in winning a rich wife but in winning the love and obedience of a shrewish one and is proved not by Kate’s humiliation but by her triumph. Her prompt response when Petruchio sends for her and her long final speech demonstrate to the community she lives in and to the audience that she is no longer wild but self-assured, self-controlled, and considerate—a civilized woman who understands human relationships as a balance of duties and privileges. By her


public submission to her husband and her dominance over
the Widow and Bianca, she simultaneously acknowledges
her dependence and asserts her personal worth. Kate, in
short, achieves what she has always wanted: a dominant
place as a valued member of society.

The comedy's happy ending embodies the achievement
of mutual love and understanding recommended by the
proponents of companionate marriage who insist also on
husbands' authority over their wives. The Taming of the
Shrew is distinctive, not in its unresolved tension between
mutuality and inequality, but in its uncompromising
acknowledgment of the demand that women choose their
own subordination. The play exposes the inequities and
potential brutality of male power, the patriarchal attitudes
and institutions only temporarily disguised by courtship
rhetoric such as Lucentio's, and the voluntary subjection
required of women by love within a framework of gender
inequality. At the same time it shows men and women
achieving happiness by actively asserting control over
gender. By the last scene all the major characters
have been able to fulfill their personal desires through their
relationships with each other. Petruchio has a rich and spir-
ited wife as well as "peace... and love, and quiet life, /... and
to right supremacy" (108-9). Lucentio has Bianca, and
Bianca has parental approval for the husband she
has chosen for herself; moreover, she is still learning her
lessons as she pleases. Baptista and Vincentio have seen
their children married to their social equals, with appro-
priate financial settlements. Even Gremio and Hortensio,
who lose Bianca to Lucentio, have the satisfaction of
watching their successful rival's discomfort with his
wife. In spite of—or better, because of—the tensions and
rivalries of personal relationships, the conclusion of The
Taming of the Shrew presents us with an image of a
society that conforms to all the members' individual de-
sires. And the supreme example of eating his cake and
having it too is Shakespeare: By transforming the tradi-
tional shrew story of a struggle for domestic mastery into
a process of domestication, he manages to satirize the
absurdities of social convention while simultaneously
celebrating the human capacity to shape society to express
individual values. By presenting Kate's transformation in
a play-within-a-play, he also allows the unsettling implica-
tion that this happy reconciliation of individual freedom
with repressive communal values is possible only in a
work of art.
Important Notice to Students: Materials used in connection with this course may be protected by Copyright Law (Title 17 U.S.C). The Board of Education of the West Essex Regional School District, according to West Essex board policy 2531, requires that all administration, faculty, staff, and students using copyrighted materials for educational purposes do so in accordance with U.S. Copyright Law. The use of these materials on reserve is for students enrolled in the English I course.

Notice of Copyright:
This material may be protected by Copyright Law (Title 17 U.S.C.).

MLA Citation: