SYLVAN BARNET

The Taming of the Shrew
on Stage and Screen

The last scene is altogether disgusting to modern sensibility. No man with any decency of feeling can sit it out in the company of a woman without being extremely ashamed of the lord-of-creation moral implied in the wager and the speech put into the woman's own mouth.

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (1897)

The speech in question (5.2.136–79) is given in full on pages 108–109, but a brief reminder of the context, and a brief extract, can be given here. Three men have made a bet on whether their wives will come to them on command. Kate comes when called but the other two wives resist. When they finally appear, Kate gives them a long lecture, part of which runs thus:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign—one that cares for thee....
Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Ev'n such a woman oweth to her husband....
Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,
And place your hands below your husband's foot,
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready, may it do him ease.

Among the famous players who have spoken Kate's lines are Edith Evans, Peggy Ashcroft, Lynn Fontanne, Claire Booth Luce, Katharine Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, Vanessa Redgrave, and Meryl Streep. And Laurence
Olivier. (Yes, Laurence Olivier, when at the age of fifteen he played Kate at Stratford in an all-male production of The Taming of the Shrew.)

Performers have, of course, delivered the speech in various ways. Some have played it straight, assuming that the words mean just what they say. Some (such as Mary Pickford in a film version) have given a wink to the audience, thereby indicating that they are going along with an act so as to delude their big baby of a husband into believing that he rules the roost whereas in fact they are really in charge. Others, when they placed their hand beneath their husband's foot in apparent submission, have suddenly jerked their hand upward and have tipped the complacent oaf from his chair, again to show that they are in charge. It is perhaps hardly necessary to add that these signs of mastery are not found in productions before the twentieth century.

The Taming of the Shrew has never been regarded as one of Shakespeare's greatest plays, but it has had a long and prosperous stage history. Whether it will continue to delight spectators who live in an age that has learned something from the women's movement is uncertain, but some feminist critics—Germaine Greer, for instance—have given the play their approval, and it apparently continues to delight audiences.

Of the earliest performances, in the late sixteenth century and the early seventeenth, we know almost nothing except that the play was popular enough to engender a sort of theatrical reply, John Fletcher's The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tamed (c. 1611), in which Petruchio, now a widower, marries again and is tamed by his new wife. The Taming of the Shrew was staged at court in 1633, and was reported to have been "liked," but that is about all we have for the first half of the seventeenth century. From 1642 to 1660 the theaters were closed by act of Parliament, but with the return to the throne of Charles II, drama was revived. The Taming of the Shrew, however, did not appear on the stage in its original form; like most other early plays, it was drastically adapted to suit a new taste. John (?) Lacy rewrote it entirely in prose, omitting the induction and turning Shakespeare's Grumio into the chief character, whom he called Sauny, probably a form of Sandy (from Alexander). This version, titled Sauny the Scott: or The Taming of the Shrew—performed at least as early as 1667, though not published until 1698—continued on the stage for about two centuries. Crude though some of Shakespeare's play is, Sauny is infinitely cruder. To take a single example: Petruchio, proposing to Margaret (Kate is called Margaret in this version), says, "Hold, get me a stick there, Sauny. By this, deny to promise before your father, I'll not leave you a whole rib. I'll make you do't and be glad on't." On the other hand, Lacy reduced to two lines the wife's long speech on subordination, perhaps a sign that even in the late seventeenth century the speech was regarded as hard to take.

What competition Sauny had from the late seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth came not from Shakespeare's original but from other adaptations, the most enduring of which was David Garrick's Catharine and Petruchio (published 1756). Garrick's play is closer to Shakespeare's than is Sauny, but he omits the Sly induction and the Lucentio subplot (Bianca is already married to Hortensio), omits many other passages of dialogue, transfers some speeches from deleted characters to the survivors, revises other lines, creates some of his own—including a brief passage at the end, in which Petruchio says he will "doff the lordly husband"—and condenses the play into three acts. Shakespeare's text is about 2,650 lines, Garrick's—even with the added dialogue—runs only to about 1,000 lines. Still, compared with Lacy's version, Garrick's short three-act play was fairly close to Shakespeare; it was highly popular for a century, and even after Shakespeare's play was restored to the stage in 1844, Garrick's was occasionally performed—and preferred.

Shakespeare's own play was first restored on 16 March 1844, when Benjamin Webster and J. R. Planché staged it in London in what was thought to be the Elizabethan style. Webster (1797–1882) was an English actor, dramatist, and manager of the Haymarket Theatre in London; Planché
idea as pedantic, asserting that if one were to forgo visual effects of the modern theater one might as well simply stay home and read the play. Shakespeare, it was said, would eagerly have used nineteenth-century stage machinery if it had been available to him. One review trounced not only the performance but also the author, saying that long ago it had been justly decided that Garrick’s Catharine and Petruchio was superior to Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew. Planché’s own verdict on his experiment, however, was unambiguous: “The revival was eminently successful, incontestably proving that a good play, well acted, will carry the audience along with it, unassisted by scenery; and in this case also, remember, it was a comedy in five acts, without the curtain once falling during its performance.”

The Webster-Planché revival of The Taming of the Shrew did not, however, permanently restore the original play. Garrick’s Catharine and Petruchio was occasionally revived in the next few decades, but it was finally driven from the stage by Augustin Daly’s presentation of Shakespeare’s play in 1887. Daly (1839–1899), an American dramatist and manager, first produced The Taming of the Shrew in New York, with two of America’s most highly regarded performers, John Drew and Ada Rehan. Although Catharine and Petruchio had been acted in Philadelphia as early as 1766, Shakespeare’s own play was not done in America until Daly gave it. The production was immensely successful; in 1888 Daly gave it in London and in Stratford-upon-Avon, and it remained in his repertory. Although he purified some of the language—for example he deleted such words as “lechery” and “belly,” and the stuff about wasps and tails in 2.1.210–16—telescoped some of the scenes, and kept a few of Garrick’s additions—including Petruchio’s remark that he will “doff the lordly husband”—his version is, on the whole, faithful to Shakespeare. He even retained the induction, which is seen only occasionally today. But his use of elaborate scenery, common in the period, required some telescoping or rearrangement of scenes so that the massive sets would not have to be set up, struck, and set up again. Thus, Daly

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(1796–1880), an Englishman of Huguenot descent, was a dramatist, musician, and an antiquary with a keen and highly scholarly interest in the history of costume. Despite reviews of their production, one of which even includes an illustration of the stage, it is a bit unclear exactly how they staged the play, but apparently they used no scenery other than some portable furniture, two screens, and a painted curtain at the rear. Actors entered and exited through a split in this curtain. The locale of each scene (e.g., “In a public place in Padua,” or “A room in Baptista’s house,” or “A public road”) was indicated by a placard fastened to the rear curtain. The changes occurred from one scene to another. The only change of scenery was the shift from a view of the exterior of an inn (painted on the rear curtain) to a view of the Lord’s room in which the visiting troupe performs. The front curtain fell only at the end of the play. Planché used Elizabethan costumes, and given his great knowledge of the subject, they were accurate. This attempt to imitate Elizabethan staging, it should be noted, took place almost forty years before William Poel’s far better known staging of Hamlet in what was thought to be an Elizabethan manner. Webster and Planché—like Poel—did not go all the way; that is, they did not use boys to play the female parts, but even so, the production was an amazing departure from mid-nineteenth-century theater practice, which relied heavily on illusionistic scenery.

Webster and Planché revised The Shrew again in 1847. In both productions they used the induction—indeed, it was the induction that prompted Planché to the experiment of staging the play in the Elizabethan manner, for he took seriously the idea that the story of Baptista and his two daughters is a play performed, by a group of traveling players visiting a Lord’s house, for the entertainment of the Lord who plays a trick on the drunken tinker. Given the absence of a written epilogue, at the end of the play—the actors bowed to the Lord, and at a sign from the Lord, a servant carried out the sleeping tinker. Reviewers were divided in their responses; some praised its “beautiful simplicity,” others ridiculed its underlying
made one scene—set in Petruchio’s country house—out of Shakespeare’s 4.1, 4.3, and 4.5. That is, by removing 4.2 (which takes place in Baptista’s house) and 4.4 (in front of Baptista’s house), he played the “taming” in Petruchio’s house as a single scene. The other two scenes of the fourth act, scenes 2 and 4, dealing with Tranio and Lucentio, i.e., with what is commonly regarded as the subplot of the play, Daly ran together, giving them before the newly made long scene in Petruchio’s country house.

Mention has already been made of William Poel, who in the later nineteenth century advocated staging the plays in the Elizabethan manner, that is, without the cumbersome scenery whose erection and removal required intervals between scenes, or required rearrangement of scenes. In 1913 Martin Harvey, the English actor-manager, consulted with Poel and produced The Taming of the Shrew in a “neutral” locale, that is, a locale that became Baptista’s house, or Petruchio’s house, or whatever, by means of the dialogue and a few props brought in by the itinerant players who, at the Lord’s request, perform the story of Kate and Petruchio. The players entered from the rear of the stage; Sly watched them from a bench at the very front of the apron. The background, at the start, was a tapestry (really a painting of a tapestry) depicting a landscape; this tapestry then parted, revealing white curtains with decorative medallions to indicate the Lord’s room with its erotic pictures (Induction, 2.49ff.). Harvey has described the staging of the piece:

Any change of scene was suggested by the actors themselves, who moved into this hall either such screens as could be found in the house of the princely host crudely to suggest a street, or else some trellis-work covered with leaves cut from the neighboring garden to represent a leafy lane; or again, some of the Lord’s own hangings were let down from the ceiling of the hall for interior scenery.

Strictly speaking, the itinerant players did not always use only what might be found in a lord’s house; a table was let down from above to indicate Petruchio’s house. But Harvey’s point and his purpose are clear enough. He wanted to keep the play moving, and he wanted to emphasize the idea that the play, with its two wooing plots, is a theatrical performance, not a bit of real life. By emphasizing the play as a play-within-a-play, performed for the Lord by a traveling company, the offensiveness of the taming plot was reduced; it was only a play, not life but theater.

On the other hand, an occasional production seeks to emphasize the reality of the story by doing it in modern dress. H. K. Ayliff in 1925 and Barry Jackson in 1928 used modern dress, though Barry Jackson’s expressed reason was to help the players to approach the play freshly, freeing it from encrusted conventions. The most famous production of the twentieth century, however, that of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in 1935–36 and again in 1940, was not in modern dress. In fact, the theatrical elements were played up, insuring that the play seemed remote from real life. Thus an actor occasionally missed his cues so that another actor would loudly repeat the cue line. Among the many outrageous bits of business—the production is said to have resembled a three-ring circus—the one that seems to have evoked the most comment is Petruchio’s skipping rope with a string of sausages. But one other point should be made in connection with this production. Despite the emphasis on farce, which helped to distance or make unreal and therefore presumably infensive the story of the taming, Lunt did convey (under his antics) a sense of love for Kate. G. B. Stern, in And Did He Stop and Speak to You, clearly sets forth this point:

The Taming of the Shrew, being a rampageous comedy-farce, absolves us from a moral need to “make allowances” for Petruchio’s methods of taming; but when Alfred played the part, by another silent revealing moment that I shall never forget, he let us in on the man’s deep reluctance to assume such brutal insensitivity: it happened at the end of one of those mannerless brawls between the pair, where one might have assumed (and perhaps Shakespeare meant us to assume) that the bully only cared about getting his way by shouting and stamping like a madman; but after Kate the Shrew had swept off, crying from thwarted rage at having met her master,
Petrucho suddenly collapsed from sheer weariness and leaned exhausted against the door. ... by his complete surrender conveying how hatefully the masquerade had gone against the grain, and that he loved Kate, really loved her, but in carrying on in this abominable fashion until she capitulated lay their only hope of ultimate happiness.

One other point should be made about the Lunt-Fontanne production: Lunt and Fontanne, who performed together in many plays, were known as a loving husband and wife, and audiences must have more or less kept this in mind while they watched a performance. That is, the potentially offensive elements in the play must have been softened, in the audience’s mind, by an awareness that the two figures “really” were in love. (Other husband-wife teams to perform the play successfully were Frank and Constance Benson, Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton, E. H. Sothern and Julia Marlowe, and in a film, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor.)

Before turning to film and television versions, we can look very briefly at what seem to have been the two most interesting recent stage productions, both of 1978. In New York’s Central Park, Joseph Papp directed Meryl Streep and Raul Julia, in a production that did not seek to evade the difficulties (for a modern audience) of Kate’s speech on obedience in the fifth act. The production was true to the text—Streep’s Kate was shrewish, and Julia’s Petruchio was dominating—but the personal charm of the two leading performers insured that the audience was never alienated. Such a passage as Petruchio’s “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” drew boos, but good-natured ones. In an interview in The New York Times Streep said she had no trouble delivering the big speech in the last act. The man whom she had loved, John Cazale (who played Alfredo in The Godfather), had recently died. Two years earlier, in Measure for Measure, Cazale had played the lustful Angelo, to Streep’s virgin Isabella. At that time, Streep suggested, she and Cazale found their love in a sort of Kate-Petruchio relation. At one point in the interview Streep said, “What I’m saying is, I’ll do anything for this man. ... Why is selflessness here wrong? Service is the only thing that’s important about love. Everybody is worrying about ‘losing yourself’—all this narcissism. Duty. We can’t stand that idea now either. It has the real ugly slave-driving connotation. But duty might be a suit of armor you put on to fight for your love.”

The second important recent production was Michael Bogdanov’s at Stratford-upon-Avon. It began with a quarrel in the audience; a drunken member of the audience upbraided a female attendant, shouting something to the effect that “no bloody woman is going to tell me what to do.” (You have already seen the connection with the rest of the play. The drunk was Sly, who later became Petruchio, and the theater employee became Kate.) The drunk leaped onto the stage and began tearing down the set, wings, and drop flats showing a perspective view of a street in Renaissance Padua. Such scenery was indeed out of place and old-fashioned for the Royal Shakespeare Company. The havoc he wreaked revealed a more typical RSC set: metal frames and a catwalk. The implication was that the play is not some museum piece from the Renaissance but is something relevant to our own time. The drunk—Sly—then collapsed, the lights dimmed and then rose to reveal (to the accompaniment of hunting horns) the Lord and his huntsmen in modern red hunting outfits. As the play proceeded, Sly became Petruchio—in this role, he entered on a motorbike, and all in all behaved like a drunken ruffian. Apparently the director wished to emphasize the brutality of the story, beginning with the angry behavior in the audience, continuing with the Lord’s hunting party (a pelt was tossed onto the drunken Sly), and running throughout the rest of the play. Unlike most productions, there was little or no slapstick comedy; the brutality for the most part was merely brutal, not funny, and Kate’s big speech on submission was uttered flatly, or (according to some reviewers) with a touch of sarcasm. The sound of hunting horns at the end of the play con-
nected with the beginning, apparently to emphasize the cruelty of a story in which men treat women like animals.

Two film versions of The Taming of the Shrew are historically important, one with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks (1929), the other with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton (1966); the first of these versions is scarcely accessible and we will say little about it. The text is chiefly an abridgment of Garrick’s abridgment; this version uses only about five hundred of Shakespeare’s lines, and only a handful of the lines that Garrick added to Shakespeare. It omits the induction with Sly, beginning instead with a Punch and Judy show (the puppets look like Petruchio and Kate) presented in a public square. We witness their fighting, then the camera pulls back, moves down the street, and we encounter Petruchio coming to town. Putting aside its merits and the fact that it is the first talkie made of a play by Shakespeare, the film is important for a reason that has already been mentioned: at the end of her speech preaching obedience, Kate winks to the women. She then sits on Petruchio’s lap, but the poor fellow doesn’t know that his wife is merely indulging him in his fantasy of male supremacy; everyone sings merrily, the camera pulls back for a long shot, and the scene fades out.

Zeffirelli’s 1966 film is much better known, and is often screened in courses in Shakespeare. As is usual in Zeffirelli’s works, there is a great deal of bustling. Zeffirelli omits the induction and replaces it with some business of his own invention: a solemn service is interrupted by the sound of cannon, and masked figures appear, suggesting that what follows is part of a saturnalia. Kate and Petruchio fall in love almost as soon as they see each other, but they fight like maniacs. For example, early in the film Petruchio swings from the ground to an upper level, pursues Kate across rooftops, falls through a roof into a pile of wool, pins Kate down, and vows to marry her. Before the film is over, windows have been smashed, plates have been thrown, servants have been chased—and indeed, at the end, after Kate gives her lecture on obedience, Kate slips away, thus requiring Petruchio to set out on yet another chase.

In addition to omitting the Sly induction, this film greatly reduces the Bianca-Lucentio subplot and amplifies the vigor of Kate and Petruchio, seeing in these two lovers an energy that sets them against the hypocrites and fools who surround them. Unfortunately, the vigor is often tedious; Petruchio is a drunken brute (it has been said that Burton was playing himself) who engages in lots of hearty, self-satisfied laughter. But as with the Lunt-Fontanne production, probably the viewer keeps in mind the fact that the two chief characters are married, and such an awareness softens and supposedly makes acceptable the coarse-ness. It should be mentioned, too, that Petruchio not only changes Kate but also changes himself, from a boor to a somewhat genial, civilized person.

Passing over Cole Porter’s musical of 1948, Kiss Me Kate, which uses the story but is not really a version of Shakespeare’s play, we can, finally, look briefly at what today may be the best-known version of the play, the BBC television production directed by Jonathan Miller, which starred John Cleese of Monty Python fame. A greater contrast with the Zeffirelli production is scarcely imaginable, for Cleese—an unfunny Petruchio—played down the farcical and physical elements. Briefly, as Miller explains in an interview in Shakespeare Quarterly, Summer 1981, he saw the play as one “about the setting up of a sober household and the necessity for marital obedience in order to maintain it.” Petruchio, in Miller’s view, is not a dashing cavalier but a sober puritan; one of the most important lines in the play, according to Miller, is Petruchio’s “To me she’s married, not unto my clothes.” Of this line (3.2.117) Miller says, “That is the great line which expressed Calvinism. The idea that you are, in fact, naked before the eye of God, and that that is the way you come before the eye of your partner.” In Miller’s view, Kate is shrewish because her father has withheld his love from her; Petruchio does not so much tame Kate as teach her or treat her, by holding a mirror to her. Miller cut the Christopher Sly material—strange, since the BBC usually makes only very small
cuts—and at the end added, over the credits, Psalm 128, about the orderliness of the family ("How blest is he that fears the Lord, and walketh in his way"), while the characters all jointly sing a part song, i.e., the characters harmoniously reconcile their voices. A bold if not unassailable interpretation, it offers a welcome contrast to the usual farcical productions.

_Bibliographic Note:_ For information concerning performances, see the books by Coursen, Haring-Smith, and Holderness cited in Section 11, _The Taming of the Shrew_, of the Suggested References.

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**Suggested References**

The number of possible references is vast and grows alarmingly. (The _Shakespeare Quarterly_ devotes one issue each year to a list of the previous year's work, and _Shakespeare Survey_—an annual publication—includes a substantial review of biographical, critical, and textual studies, as well as a survey of performances.) The vast bibliography is best approached through James Harner, _The World Shakespeare Bibliography on CD-Rom: 1900–Present_. The first release, in 1996, included more than 12,000 annotated items from 1990–93, plus references to several thousand book reviews, productions, films, and audio recordings. The plan is to update the publication annually, moving forward one year and backward three years. Thus, the second issue (1997), with 24,700 entries, and another 35,000 or so references to reviews, newspaper pieces, and so on, covered 1987–94.

Though no works are indispensable, those listed below have been found especially helpful. The arrangement is as follows:

1. Shakespeare's Times
2. Shakespeare's Life
3. Shakespeare's Theater
4. Shakespeare on Stage and Screen
5. Miscellaneous Reference Works
6. Shakespeare's Plays: General Studies
7. The Comedies
8. The Romances
9. The Tragedies
10. The Histories
11. _The Taming of the Shrew_

The titles in the first five sections are accompanied by brief explanatory annotations.
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