

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

William Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew



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The Taming of the Shrew

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of Shakespeare's comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Cornelia Pearsall and Paul Barickman for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction finds in the mutually violent expressionism of Kate and Petruchio that they are made for one another, and raises again the peculiar question of the play's induction. Marjorie B. Garber begins the chronological sequence of criticism by analyzing the induction to the Kate-Petruchio plot, since both Sly's dream and the lovers' relationship rely upon imagery of transformation and metamorphosis.

In Marianne L. Novy's reading, the game element in the comedy establishes a protected space where individuality and marriage, energy and form, can exist together without the fears of patriarchal violence and feminine resentment. Ruth Nevo argues that *The Taming of the Shrew* is a "psychodrama," in which Petruchio comically "cures" Kate by appealing to her intellect, since his absurd tantrums parody her own irregular behavior. Very different in her views, Coppélia Kahn is not satisfied with such comic playfulness, and instead insists that Shakespeare's profound insight is to "make the taming mirror the threat to manhood hidden in marriage."

Jeanne Addison Roberts reads the play in terms of the romance convention of metamorphosis and asserts that Shakespeare reverses the Ovidian mode of transformation, since Kate and Petruchio humanize one another. Relying upon seventeenth-century marriage manuals, Carol F. Heffernan sees Kate and Petruchio as rising above the bourgeois values that, then and now, took the world of marriage as a business.

Richard A. Burt argues that *The Taming of the Shrew* does not resolve conflicts, but rather manages and controls them so as to reinforce social norms. In this volume's final essay, Joel Fineman sets Kate's figurative and feminine

language against Petruchio's more literal and supposedly masculine mode and tries to establish that Kate's subversive rhetoric ironically works so as to help strengthen patriarchal dominance.

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Introduction

The Taming of the Shrew, when acted, seems almost the simplest of performance pieces, a fine farce in an immemorial tradition of male supremacy. Well before the advent of feminist criticism of Shakespeare, Harold Goddard declined to accept such an interpretation:

Richard III proves that *double-entendre* was a passion of the youthful Shakespeare, and both *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love's Labor's Lost* illustrate the fact that he was fond of under- and over-meanings he could not have expected his audience as a whole to get. But it is *The Taming of the Shrew* that is possibly the most striking example among his early works of his love of so contriving a play that it should mean, to those who might choose to take it so, the precise opposite of what he knew it would mean to the multitude. For surely the most psychologically sound as well as the most delightful way of taking *The Taming of the Shrew* is the topsy-turvy one. Kate, in that case, is no shrew at all except in the most superficial sense. Bianca, on the other hand, is just what her sister is supposed to be. And the play ends with the prospect that Kate is going to be more nearly the tamer than the tamed, Petruchio more nearly the tamed than the tamer, though his wife naturally will keep the true situation under cover. So taken, the play is an early version of *What Every Woman Knows*—what every woman knows being, of course, that the woman can lord it over the man so long as she allows him to think he is lording it over her. This interpretation has the advantage of bringing the play into line with all the other Comedies in which Shakespeare gives a distinct edge to his heroine. Otherwise it is an unaccountable exception and regresses to the wholly un-Shakespearean doctrine of male superiority, a view which there is not the slightest evidence elsewhere Shakespeare ever held.

In Goddard's reading, the Christopher Sly induction is an intentional analogue to the subtle gulling of Petruchio by Kate:

In the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, Christopher Sly the tinker, drunk with ale, is persuaded that he is a great lord who has been the victim of an unfortunate lunacy. Petruchio, in the play which Sly witnesses (when he is not asleep), is likewise persuaded that he is a great lord—over his wife. Sly is obviously in for a rude awakening when he discovers that he is nothing but a tinker after all. Now Petruchio is a bit intoxicated himself—who can deny it?—whether with pride, love, or avarice, or some mixture of the three. Is it possible that he too is in for an awakening? Or, if Kate does not let it come to that, that *we* at least are supposed to see that he is not as great a lord over his wife as he imagined? The Induction and the play, taken together, do not allow us to evade these questions. Can anyone be so naïve as to fancy that Shakespeare did not contrive his Induction for the express purpose of forcing them on us? Either the cases of Sly and Petruchio are alike or they are diametrically opposite. Can there be much doubt which was intended by a poet who is so given to pointing out analogies between lovers and drunkards, between lovers and lunatics? Here surely is reason enough for Shakespeare not to show us Sly at the end when he no longer thinks himself a lord. It would be altogether too much like explaining the joke, like solving the equation and labeling the result ANSWER. Shakespeare wants us to find things for ourselves. And in this case in particular: why explain what is as clear, when you see it, as was Poe's Purloined Letter, which was skilfully concealed precisely because it was in such plain sight all the time?

This is consonant with Northrop Frye's observation that Kate in act 5 is engaged in much the same occupation as in act 1, getting back at Bianca for being the favorite (and spoiled) daughter, except that Kate, schooled by her husband, now has social convention on her side against Bianca. And yet the most celebrated of Kate's speeches remains a permanent scandal:

KATHERINA: Fie, fie, unknit that threat'ning unkind brow,
And dart not scornful glances from those eyes,
To wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor.
It blots thy beauty, as frosts do bite the meads,
Confounds thy fame, as whirlwinds shake fair buds,
And in no sense is meet or amiable.

A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled,
 Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty,
 And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty
 Will deign to sip, or touch one drop of it.
 Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
 Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
 And for thy maintenance; commits his body
 To painful labor, both by sea and land;
 To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
 Whilst thou li'st warm at home, secure and safe;
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands
 But love, fair looks, and true obedience—
 Too little payment for so great a debt.
 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 asham'd 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.
 Why are our bodies soft, and weak, and smooth,
 Unapt to toil and trouble in the world,
 But that our soft conditions, and our hearts,
 Should well agree with our external parts?
 Come, come, you froward and unable worms!
 My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
 My heart as great, my reason haply more,
 To bandy word for word and frown for frown;
 But now I see our lances are but straws,
 Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,
 That seeming to be most which we indeed least are.
 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.

Unlike John Milton's "He for God only, she for God in him," I rather doubt that any audience ever could have taken this to heart. A good actress

can do marvelous things with: “I am asham’d that women are so simple.” The clearest representational truth of *The Taming of the Shrew* is that Kate and Petruchio, both violent expressionists, were made for one another, and doubtless are likelier to live happily ever after than any other married couple in Shakespeare. If you had the Bianca-doting Baptista for a father, and you were Kate, then the amiable ruffian Petruchio would become an ideal, indeed an over-determined match.

That still leaves the puzzle of the induction, with the curious status it assigns to the Kate-Petruchio agon as a play-within-a-play or rather farce-within-a-farce. Brilliant as the induction is, it performs strangely in our mobile society, where class distinctions hardly are as they are in England now, or were in England then. Goddard may have been imaginatively correct in analogizing Sly’s delusion and Petruchio’s (if he is deluded), but socially the analogy cannot hold. Petruchio and Kate are in the same social class, but the drunken Sly is indeed lunatic when he accepts the deceit practiced upon him. Shakespeare’s meanings are necessarily ours, but his social judgments remain those of another nation, at another time.

Dream and Structure: *The Taming of the Shrew*

Marjorie B. Garber

The “flatt’ring dream” (Ind.1.44) of noble birth, which is devised as a joke upon Christopher Sly, is a framing device in *The Taming of the Shrew*, permitting the story of the “taming” itself to be presented as a play-within-a-play. Such an induction is not uncommon in the plays of the period: the ghost of Don Andrea in Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* (1584–88) is explicitly invited by Revenge to “serve for Chorus” (1.1.91) as the play unfolds, and the induction written by Webster for Marston’s *Malcontent* (1604) places the actors of the King’s Men in their own persons on the stage. In these cases, however, the use of the introductory scene is different from that in *The Shrew*; Andrea has played a principal part in the circumstances surrounding the *Tragedy*, while the *Malcontent* induction is a way of explaining the company’s pirating of Marston’s play. *The Shrew*’s induction is both longer and more elaborate than either of these (it introduces ten characters who never again appear), and its personages are related neither to the main action nor to the circumstances of production. Sly’s dream is in fact more of a play-within-a-play than the inductions of the *Tragedy* or the *Malcontent*, and the events it contains are connected to the Kate-Petruchio plot by analogy. The metaphor of dream, like the stage metaphor, presents the audience with the problem of comparative realities and juxtaposes a simple or “low” illusion with the more courtly illusions of the taming plot itself.

The Shrew’s induction owes its existence, at least in part, to identifiable sources and analogues. Its ultimate source is a story in the *Arabian Nights*,

From *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis*. © 1974 by Yale University. Yale University Press, 1974.

"The Sleeper Awakened," which made its way to England in three known forms: a letter from Juan Luis Vives to Francis, Duke of Béjar; a collection of stories assembled by Richard Edwards and published in 1570, now lost; and a story in the *De rebus burgundicis* of Heuterus (1584). The Heuterus version alludes to a comedy to be presented to the gulled sleeper and is thus the most likely actual source. None of the versions, however, drop the framing device as Shakespeare does; in all of them the prologue is balanced by an epilogue in which the effect of the dream on the sleeper is made clear. This is also the case in the anonymous *The Taming of a Shrew*, *The Shrew's* most celebrated analogue. The omission of the epilogue-frame is thus an important characteristic of Shakespeare's version of the dream; it marks the story's transformation from the narrative to the dramatic mode. The symmetry of prologue-epilogue is pleasing in a tale, but—as Shakespeare may have reasoned—less feasible in a comedy, where a return to the frame might constitute an awkward anticlimax. Similarly, as has been frequently suggested, the induction as it stands provides a thematic parallel for the later action: Sly's acceptance of a new personality—after some initial resistance—foreshadows Kate's own. Contrary arguments have been advanced by some scholars to suggest either (1) a "lost" epilogue, or (2) a flaw in the play's construction because of the lack of one; by and large these contentions are merely the inverse of the others (an epilogue could be climactic rather than anticlimactic; the thematic parallel was meant to operate by contrast, when Sly loses his new identity at the close) and seem more conjectural than persuasive. Robert B. Heilman's contention that "surely most readers feel spontaneously that . . . something is left uncomfortably hanging" seems to take insufficient note of the difference between reading a play and watching one (*The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*).

In any case, the formal device of the induction has a considerable effect upon the play as a whole, and its importance is closely linked with the fact that it purports to tell a dream. The frame performs the important tasks of distancing the later action and of insuring a lightness of tone—significant contributions in view of the real abuse to which Kate is subjected by Petruchio. Its most important single advantage, however, is the immediacy with which it establishes the deliberate metaphorical ambiguity of reality and illusion. This is a role which we are accustomed to ascribe to the play metaphor, and the play metaphor is in some sense operative here. Because of its inherently formal and concrete character, however—*The Shrew* takes place upon a stage, and the recumbent Sly is presumably visible on the upper stage while the main plot unfolds upon the lower—the play metaphor has limitations. Though we may suspend our awareness of varying planes of reality in drama, we

can never wholly escape it: Sly is always present upon the upper stage, Theseus and Hippolyta comment throughout the "Pyramus and Thisby" play, Prospero summons and interrupts the pageant of the nymphs. Even "All the world's a stage" and "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" are in a real sense set pieces, calling attention to the remarkable circumstance of a player on a stage comparing himself extensively to a player of a player.

By comparison, dream—and Sly's dream—escapes these limitations of structure. The content of the dream, like the content of the play-within-a-play, can be measured against the play of which it is a part: in just this way, commentators remark the similarity in theme between Sly's change from beggar to lord and Kate's from shrew to wife. But at the same time something more subtle is achieved by the suggestion made to Sly that he has been dreaming. The "dream" to which the lord and his servants refer is Sly's conviction that he is a tinker named Christopher Sly. Thus, what they call his dream is actually the literal truth, while the "truth" they persuade him of is fictive. When Sly wonders aloud, "Or do I dream? Or have I dreamed till now?" (Ind.2.69), he states the general case of the problem of illusion. His own problem is concrete: he suspects that he has been awake and is now dreaming, while the servingmen attempt to persuade him that the opposite is the case. We know—or think we know—which judgment is correct, and thus Sly's pragmatic solution,

I smell sweet savors and I feel soft things,
Upon my life, I am a lord indeed
And not a tinker nor Christopher Sly

(Ind.2.71–73)

strikes us as comic, while it permits a continued play upon the interchanged terms: "These fifteen years you have been in a dream / Or when you waked so waked as if you slept" (ll. 79–80). But in the later plays, and particularly in the romances, this rhetorical and formal interchange, which is in Sly's case simple confusion, becomes a serious interpenetration of planes. When Miranda says of her memory of Milan that it is "rather like a dream than an assurance" (*The Tempest* 1.2.45), or when Leontes tells Hermione that "your actions are my dreams" (*The Winter's Tale* 3.2.80), a much more highly refined version of the same handy-dandy is at work. The extremely formal, local, and concrete use of the dream figure in *The Shrew* thus provides a starting point of sorts. It is largely device in *The Shrew*; in later plays it will become part of the dream world of transformation.

At the moment when the drunken Sly is first discovered onstage by a lord and his huntsmen, the lord exclaims:

O monstrous beast, how like a swine he lies!
 Grim death, how foul and loathsome is thine image!

(Ind.1.34–35)

Although they are conventional epithets, terms like “beast” and “swine” immediately establish a line of significant imagery with which the induction—like the play as a whole—will be much concerned: the imagery of transformation or metamorphosis. The entire “supposes” plot based on Gascoigne turns on change of guise—Lucentio as a tutor, Tranio as Lucentio, the pedant as Vincentio, as well as the more symbolic changes undergone by Kate and Petruchio. With superb economy Shakespeare introduces the theme at once in a casual, almost accidental way. For part of the effectiveness of the “beast-swine” terminology lies precisely in the fact of its conventionalism: the imagery enters the play in the form of metaphors so common as to lack strong metaphorical force; yet as the play progresses this seeming convention becomes more and more relevant and particular. The lord’s next lines point out the chain of development:

Sirs, I will practice on this drunken man.
 What think you, if he were conveyed to bed,
 Wrapped in sweet clothes, rings put upon his fingers,
 A most delicious banquet by his bed,
 And brave attendants near him when he wakes—
 Would not the beggar then forget himself?

(Ind.1.36–41)

He appropriates to himself the role of a stage director, a playwright, even a god; he will “practice” on Sly to make him “forget himself.” This lord is no Prospero, and his transformation of Sly is of the most broad and external kind, but it is significant that even at this early point Shakespeare conceives of transformation in terms of dream. His seeming metamorphosis will appear to Sly “even as a flatt’ring dream or worthless fancy” (l. 44). The lord, as one might expect, takes a contemptuous attitude toward dreams, which he equates not only with “worthless fancy” but with lunacy (l. 63). He is the instrument of Sly’s transformation but he stands outside of it, secure in his knowledge of the real state of affairs.

The sybaritic components of his intended charade—“wanton pictures,” “warm distilled waters,” “sweet wood,” “music,” “a costly suit” (ll. 47–60)—anticipate the ministrations of Titania to the ass-eared Bottom (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 4.1) whom Puck “translated” in similar fashion. The “wanton pictures” also continue the covert imagery of metamorphosis which began with “beast” and “swine.”

2 SERVINGMAN: Dost thou love pictures? We will fetch
 thee straight
 Adonis painted by a running brook
 And Cytherea all in sedges hid,
 Which seem to move and wanton with
 her breath
 Even as the waving sedges play with wind.
 LORD: We'll show thee Io as she was a maid
 And how she was beguiled and surprised
 As lively painted as the deed was done.
 3 SERVINGMAN: Or Daphne roaming through a thorny
 wood,
 Scratching her legs that one shall swear
 she bleeds,
 And at that sight shall sad Apollo weep,
 So workmanly the blood and tears are
 drawn.

(Ind.2.49–60)

These Ovidian reminiscences are of course a form of sexual temptation, with emphasis on verisimilitude, leading to the crowning jest of the substitution sequence, when the young page impersonates Sly's supposedly love-sick lady. But Adonis, Io, and Daphne are all associated with transformation myths, which here stand in ironic contrast to the false metamorphosis of Sly. The lord and his attendants are having a private joke, which is all the more telling for its appositeness to the play's major themes. They flatter Sly by comparing him indirectly to such august personages as Jove and Apollo, whose beloveds have undergone a number of startling transformations. When the disguised page enters, as he does almost immediately, the ribald joke is complete.

"Dream" in this context becomes a kind of code word, a sign for the initial inversion which is the Induction's central trope. What the lord insists are "abject lowly dreams" (Ind.2.32) are the only truths Sly knows. But there is an element of verbal ambiguity present as well. "Persuade him," the lord instructs his servants, "that he hath been lunatic";

And when he says he is, say that he dreams,
 For he is nothing but a mighty lord.

(Ind.1.64–65)

"Nothing," here as always in Shakespeare, is a word of great power. While the sentence means "He is nothing *except* a mighty lord," articulating the

deception, it is also capable of meaning “He is nothing—*but at the same time* a mighty lord.” This is the essential ambiguity of the dream state, in which illusion and role playing reach their apex. So likewise the lord will insist to Sly at the close of his Ovidian catalogue, “Thou art a lord and nothing but a lord” (Ind.2.61). His remarks have one meaning to the gulled and another to the initiate. He himself is not confused as to Sly’s identity, nor are we. Since we observe the mechanics of alteration, we know that Sly’s metamorphosis, unlike Bottom’s, is not a metamorphosis at all. But for Sly the situation is radically different. When he speculates

Or do I dream? Or have I dreamed till now?

he is weighing the same two possibilities occasioned by the lord’s unconscious pun on “nothing.”

In a sense he is “dreaming on both,” for the answer to both of these questions is no. The whole matter of dream is a fiction contrived by the lord. But Sly, accepting the dream hypothesis, is at a loss to know which of the two contrary states—tinker into lord or lord into tinker—corresponds to the facts. Since he is (ostensibly) *inside* the dream, his evaluation of it can only be subjective. As we have seen, this quandary is resolved in the direction of humor when Sly wholeheartedly attempts to embrace the page-turned-lady. In the main plot of the play, however, the same ambiguity is turned to metaphor, and assumes a more far-reaching significance.

Petruchio’s device for controlling the quick-tongued Kate is itself a species of metamorphosis; as one of the servants points out, “he kills her in her own humor” (4.1.169). The fiction he constructs is that of the shrewish husband, irascible and determined not to be pleased, totally unresponsive to fact and reason—a personality wholly inconsistent with the Petruchio who wooed her. He arrives for his wedding dressed in rags, curses at the priest, announces he will not attend the wedding feast, and abuses his servants without cause, reversing in the process all her expectations about his behavior and calling into question that which she has taken for reality. The final reversal comes as he leads her supperless into the bridal chamber, where a servant reports that he is

Making a sermon of continency to her,
And rails and swears and rates, that she, poor soul,
Knows not which way to stand, to look, to speak,
And sits as one new-risen from a dream.

(4.1.171–75)

Kate has now been placed in the same ambiguous position as Sly found himself