

The Taming of the Shrew and the New Historicism

William Babula
Sonoma State University

Most commentators on William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* begin with Kate's concluding speech of submission to Petruchio in Act 5. The modern response to her apparently self-extinguishing speech has been the establishment of the ameliorative tradition of *Shrew* production and critical interpretation, sometimes referred to as the "revisionist" position. Along these lines, many directors feel that they can make the final speech more palatable by a variety of ironical devices such as an obvious wink by Kate to the audience, or Kate's overhearing her husband's wager as in the 2000 Ashland production so her submissive speech is just good business sense to collect the bet, or Kate's running off from Petruchio to continue the chase after her speech as played by Taylor and Burton in the 1966 Zeffirelli film. But numerous critics argue that this ameliorative approach is not a modern distortion of early modern sexual politics but that Shakespeare himself has ameliorated not only Kate's concluding speech, but the entire play by a variety of distancing devices based on a conscious theatricality. The most obvious example of which is the two part Christopher Sly Induction.

The Induction, which creates a play-within-a-play structure, which reminds us "that we are watching a play and not reality,"¹ functions in several ways to undercut an unambiguous interpretation of Kate's final speech. Harold Goddard, an early "revisionist," saw the play and Kate's speech as ironical and inconsistent with Shakespeare's treatment of other heroines—which may explain why it is the only play that Shakespeare created as a play-within-a-play. According to Goddard, "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."² Goddard also stressed the point that the play is an interlude put on by strolling players, which brings "its main plot to the edge of

farce.” This movement to farce, which functions as another distancing device, also allows *The Taming of the Shrew* to be turned on its head as Bianca is revealed as the true shrew at the end of the play when she chides her husband as a fool for betting on her duty.³ Howard Bloom makes a similar point but he dismisses the Induction, with the unwarranted claim that it could have fit any number of Shakespeare’s plays.⁴

Tori Haring-Smith in her book on the stage history of *The Taming of the Shrew* writes of the troupe putting on the play for Sly: “It can distance the play by allowing the audience to see the actor behind each character; the characters become imaginary constructs. This technique is as artificial as *commedia*. . .”⁵ Dorothea Kehler finds in her essay “Echoes of the Induction in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” a subversive, feminist subtext.⁶ In all of these cases, from Goddard to the present, the ambiguity, the dialectic, is generated for the most part by Shakespeare’s use of the play-within-a-play structure that creates a conscious theatricality, which distances the action from the audience.

But a new historical approach presents a compelling contrasting view that returns to an older misogynistic interpretation before the so-called “revisionists” like Goddard emphasized the ameliorative approach. Lynda Boose points out the historical context of the submission scene where Kate offers to put her hand beneath her husband’s foot in her article, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member.”⁷ According to Boose, “What transpires onstage turns out to be a virtual representation of the ceremony that women were required to perform in most pre-Reformation marriage services throughout Europe. In England this performance was in force as early as the mid-fifteenth century and perhaps earlier.”⁸

She goes on to describe the Sarum (Salisbury) Manual in which the bride “prostrates herself at the feet of the bridegroom.” In another manuscript of the Sarum Rite the bride is directed ‘to kiss the right foot’ of her spouse. Given this historization, Boose argues that the ameliorative tradition “serves the very ideologies about gender that it makes less visible by making less offensive. To tamper with the literalness of Kate’s physical submission onstage deflects attention away from an equally literal history. . .”⁹ For her, Kate’s submission reenacts the Sarum rite of literal female prostration.

Can there be a reconciliation of historical fact and dramatic effect? The answer may lie in the old joke of the Induction and the new shrew joke at the conclusion of the play under the larger concept of conscious theatricality.

The action at the conclusion, which Boose sees as the dramatic equivalent of the historical demeaning ring ceremony, is, as she points out, a recreation of a ceremony no longer allowed in Reformation England. She writes, “For the wedding ceremony that Shakespeare’s text alludes to, while almost certainly recognizable to an audience of the 1590s, was itself an anachronistic form outlawed by the Act of Uniformity over forty years earlier.”¹⁰ Her interpretation of this embedded ceremony is that Shakespeare recreates the ceremony of male dominance into a vision of a golden-age lament for a world gone by.

On the other hand if the ceremony is put in the context of the Induction, which presents an unreal world from which we are distanced through the device of an elaborate play-within-a-play joke, and one which disappears, the outdated and outlawed ceremony recreated in the play may also reflect that unreality and distance. For this ceremony of submission had in fact disappeared as well from ritual forms in post-Reformation England. Just as the phrase “to obey” has disappeared from the wife’s vows in contemporary wedding ceremonies and for much the same reason. The old joke turns into a newer and much more complicated one, tied to the Induction. For all of the strength of her historical argument, Boose never deals with the effect of the Induction and its creation of a play-within-a-play structure, which separates it from the vicious and cruel history of the treatment of women she goes on to explore in great and effective detail, tracing the history of such devices as cucking stools and scold’s bridles, both gender specific punishments for “unruly” women who chose to exercise their sexuality or their tongues without a male in control.¹¹

Returning to the play-within-a-play structure, we are made very aware that the performance that the players will put on is not real. It is a play put on for a foolish tinker who himself has been at war with women. Thus Shakespeare may not simply be evoking a Golden Age of female obedience and submission to male domination but questioning the reality of that Golden Age of gender roles.

A review of the connection between the Induction and the play put on by the strolling actors is instructive. The Induction jest goes back to “The Sleeper Awakened” in *The Arabian Nights* and to old ballads like “The Frolicksome Duke, or The Tinker’s Good Fortune.”¹² The main plot derives from numerous folk tales, ballads, and literature, which tell of men taming their shrewish wives, including Chaucers’ Marriage Group in *Canterbury Tales* and the Tale of Tom Tyler in “A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife Lapped in Morel’s Skin.”

The main point of connection is the jest concept. In both the Induction and the Kate/Petruchio plot similar jokes are played on deceived characters. An examination of the Induction will show how in fact Shakespeare has very carefully connected the plots and the two jests.

First Sly in Induction 1 is introduced as a braggart, a role that is not unlike Petruchio's. In fact a good case can be made for doubling of the roles, another reason for the disappearance of Sly. The Lord and Huntsmen then enter and argue over the virtues of three hounds—a comic and not very flattering parallel to the closing act of the play with its argument over the virtues of the three new brides. Then the Lord spies Sly and decides to pull the “Sleeper Awakened” jest to convince Sly he is a lord who has been asleep and dreaming he was a tinker these past fifteen years. In the next movement the traveling players appear and the lord gets them to promise to put on a play for Sly. As part of the jest a page is to dress as Sly's lady and the Induction 1 ends with the lord's orders on how the disguised page is to act and speak.

In Induction 2 the main thrust is upon the metamorphosis of Sly. The images described in the paintings all fit this theme of metamorphosis from Adonis to Io to Daphne. These mythological transformations are all sexually related and when applied to Sly they take on an aura of absurdity. And if Sly's metamorphosis is ironic, a similar argument can be made of Kate's. And Petruchio's transformation cannot be ignored in this context. He too is changed.

While there are numerous parallels in the Induction to the Kate/Petruchio plot, the main point of comparison is the comic submission of the page to the tinker which parallels the submission of Kate to Petruchio. The Lord orders his servant to dress the male page as Sly's wife and to give the page these instructions on how to behave and what to say:

He bear himself with honorable action
Such as he hath observed in noble ladies
Unto their lords, by them accomplished.
Such duty to the drunken let him do
With soft low tongue and lowly courtesy.
And say, “What is't your honor will command,
Wherein your lady and your humble wife
May show her duty and make known her love?”

(Induction 1, 109-116)¹³

By the same token we have Kate in Act 5 who has learned how to behave and what to say after her experience in Act 4 with the confusion between the sun and moon and the old man and the

budding virgin. Like the Page, she plays the subservient lady, agreeing to accept her husband's version of reality, to a somewhat intoxicated lord Petruchio. Note how the phrase “Such duty” from the Induction reappears in Kate's concluding speech:

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband . . . (5.2, 159-160)

It is not hard to imagine the body of Kate's speech to be exactly what the lord in the Induction advised:

What is't your honor will command,
Wherein your lady and your humble wife
May show her duty and make known her love?
(Induction 1, 114-116)

Kate's way of showing her duty is:

And place my hand under my husband's foot. (5.2, 181)

As she concludes her speech, the parallel situations are a caution to the audience not to take Kate's speech any more seriously than the disguised page's or Kate's transformation anymore seriously than Sly's. As Margie Burns has argued, Kate has become sly as an adjective rather than Sly as a capitalized character. And it is appropriate that Sly and the old Induction jest disappear as the new jest and the new “Sly” replace it.¹⁴

When placed in the context of the Induction, the ameliorative tradition of *The Taming of the Shrew* is not a later modern imposition but an outgrowth from Shakespeare's own early modern ambiguous material and intentions. If it reflects a historical reality, it challenges at the same time that reality.

As Boose writes, women who were forced to participate in this ceremony found ways to resist this feminine shame. She quotes an Anglican church historian's transcription of how women in France came to restage this ceremony: they would “accidentally” drop the ring during the demeaning ritual so their stooping had a justification unrelated to the symbolic submission and the appearance of worship paid to the husband would be got rid of.¹⁵

But Boose gets this example from eighteenth century France and an earlier example of a bride knocking her head against her husband's shoe from a Russian wedding. She admits she has no surviving commentaries from English sixteenth-century women and is trying to recover a woman's likely reaction from these foreign and later examples. And as she noted the English ceremony was itself an anachronistic form outlawed by the Act of Uniformity over forty years earlier.¹⁶

Ultimately the historical and the dramatic can be reconciled by the very fact of the anachronistic nature of the ceremony which is played before an audience informed through the Induction and its numerous ironic parallels to the main action that this is not reality but a play-within-a-play device Shakespeare has employed to distance himself and the audience from the very sort of historic degrading ring ceremony that Boose deplures.

Even a quick review of Shakespeare's most likely source, "A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife Lapped in Morel's Skin, for her Good Behaviour" (printed c. 1550) points out the difference of Shakespeare's intent. In the ballad the husband beats his shrewish wife bloody then wraps her in the salted skin of a dead old horse named Morel. This wife has a gentle sister like Bianca who is her father's favorite. The father also warns the suitor of his daughter's shrewishness but the suitor goes ahead and tames her with the Morel skin and salt treatment. The ballad concludes with a celebration of the taming and these closing lines:

He that can charm a shrewd wife
Better than thus,
Let him come to me, and fetch ten pound
And a golden purse. (115-118)¹⁷

Petruchio's lines, spoken much earlier in the play at the end of Act 4 scene 1, echo the concluding lines of the ballad:

He that knows better how to tame a shrew,
Now let him speak; 'tis charity to show. (4.1, 198-199)

The lines come early because the focus has shifted. Kate will make her transition in Act 4 when she acquiesces to her husband's demands and accepts the sun as the moon and the old man as a young budding virgin. She learns how to play the game. At the same time these lines remind us of the conscious theatricality that started with Sly and the Induction. Petruchio is speaking directly to the audience in his appeal for assistance.

Petruchio's last lines to Kate after her ironical speech of submission suggest a very different ending from the "Morel" ballad. Unlike "Morel" where the ending coincides with the taming, Kate has had time to regroup. And she chooses an outlawed form of submission that an astute Petruchio may recognize and wonder if she is putting him on, but if he does, he doesn't care. He says:

Why, there's a wench! Come on, and kiss me Kate. (5.2, 184)

And finally:

Come, Kate, we'll to bed. (5.2, 188)

We have both an affirmation of affection and the triumph of the now sly Kate.¹⁸ We are not presented with the brutal male triumph as we are in the "Morel" ballad. In fact, the last lines about shrews are spoken by Hortensio and Lucentio who will be dealing with their own newly shrewish wives. Hortensio says after Kate and Petruchio exit.

Now, go thy ways, thou hast tamed a curst shrew. (5.2, 192)

And Lucentio concludes:

'Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so. (5.2, 193)

The shift is significant. Petruchio is not left on stage to brag about the taming as the last lines of the "Morel" ballad do. Like the outlawed ceremony, Shakespeare is suggesting that Petruchio is past his time as well. If anyone is in ascendancy it is perhaps the "sly" Kate who has learned how to tame a male. The anachronistic ceremony is not a longing for a golden age but a recognition at least for Shakespeare that male/female relations are changing. As added proof consider the heroines to come in his plays including the wonderfully articulate Beatrice and the determined Rosaline. In the end, the new jest of a Kate transformed from shrew to sly replaces both the old jest of the Induction and the anachronistic ceremony of submission.¹⁹

Through his use of distancing, the play-within-a-play, farce, and the anachronistic ceremony Shakespeare has created a character who runs counter to the images of the shrew created in the culture of the time. As Margie Burns comments, "At the beginning of the play, Sly disappears, to be replaced by Katherina the shrew; at the end of the play, Katherina the shrew disappears, to be replaced by someone evidently rather . . . sly."²⁰ While reminding us of Goddard's interpretation, this transformation also provides an explanation for the disappearance of Sly and the Induction cast. Burns argues, however, while Kate is now sly enough to fool her husband and the result is an ambiguous ending, it is not one in which Kate is a sneak and her husband a dupe. Rather irony and earnestness are related to each other, not merely antitheses.²¹ Thus while Kate's final speech may be sly and ironical, or as Holly Crocker asks, "Real or ruse, that's the frightening question,"²² it also is a speech of reconciliation. And while Petruchio may be half-fooled and half-aware of the irony, like the metamorphoses depicted in the Induction, Kate has changed to loving and clever wife. And ultimately so has Petruchio, from fortune hunter to husband and lover. Ultimately both the devices of the play and the anachronistic

historical context validate the ameliorative approach as Shakespearean.

Notes

1. Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) p.200. For a full discussion of conscious theatricality see Chapter 5, "The Great Globe Itself", pp.192-238.
2. Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Vol.1 (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1951) p. 68.
3. Goddard, pp.68-69.
4. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) p. 28.
5. Tori Haring-Smith, *From Farce to Metadrama, A Stage History of The Taming of the Shrew, 1594-1983* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985) p.166.
6. Dorothea Kehler, "Echoes of the Induction in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Renaissance Papers*, (1986), 31-42.
7. Lynda Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," *SQ*, 42 (1991), 182.
8. Boose, 182.
9. Boose, 182.
10. Boose, 184.
11. Boose, 186.
12. Haring-Smith, *From Farce to Metadrama*, endnote 4, p.212.
13. All citations are to *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. David Bevington, (New York: Bantam, 1988).
14. Margie Burns, "The Ending of the *Shrew*," *Shakespeare Studies*, 18, (1986), 41. Burns presents a comprehensive analysis of the connections between the Induction and the main plot and argues that the play is complete as is and the concept of a missing Sly ending is beside the point.
15. Boose, 183.
16. Boose, 184.
17. "A Merry Jest," in "Shakespeare's Sources" in *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. David Bevington, (New York: Bantam, 1988) p. 127.
18. Burns, 60.
19. Burns, 60.
20. Burns, 54.
21. Burns, endnote 10, 62.
22. Holly A. Crocker, "Affective Resistance: Performing Passivity and Playing A-Part in the *Taming of the Shrew*," *SQ*, 54 (2003), 158. Crocker employs the Lacanian principle as it relates to gender identity. The full quotation reads: "Real or ruse, that's the frightening question; and Katherine's bearing suggests that the active/passive binary meant to represent gender difference is really only a ruse."