

interpretation

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page

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|---|
| 1 | eva brann | "an exquisite platform": utopia |
| 27 | laurence berns | gratitude, nature, and piety in <i>king lear</i> |
| 52 | hiram caton | on the induction of <i>the taming of the shrew</i> |
| 59 | catherine and michael zuckert | "and in its wake we followed"
the political wisdom of mark twain |

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ON THE INDUCTION OF *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW*

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Although *The Shrew* is a long-standing theatre favorite, critics have not thought it anything more than good farce. I shall risk adding to the laughter by suggesting that the play also has a serious, even a philosophical side. My purpose is to discuss the main acknowledged difficulty of the play, the relation of the Induction to the body.

The action begins with the drunken Sly being cast out of an inn. He is abducted by a lord who deludes him into the belief that he is a lord recovering from a long derangement and illness. The taming play is presented to him as part of the cure prescribed by his physicians. But Sly and company are dropped at the end of Act I, scene 1, with the result that the Sly episode is left without a conclusion. This incongruous feature, abetted by the bad condition of the folio, has led to patching and tinkering by editors and producers. The division between Induction and body was introduced by Pope and has been ratified by all subsequent editors.¹ Although it has no basis in the folio, the division in effect asserts the independence of the play from the Induction. Directors, at a loss to understand how the two parts fit together, sometimes omit the Sly episode (as Burton's movie version did); and sometimes a denouement is invented and placed at the end of the taming play.²

Such measures are no doubt meant to correct the apparently defective coherence of the play rather than its dramatic quality, which is sound. The transition from the Induction to the body merely follows the convention of the "play within the play," which Shakespeare used successfully on several occasions. But the problem of coherence is that the play within replaces the original play; that is, a play initially about Sly is transformed into a play about the shrew. Moreover, the conventional taming idea is given a novel and puzzling twist when the express audience of the taming play, Sly, is shown sleeping through the play. It is improbable that such a striking feature, however odd it might seem, is not ultimately essential to the coherence of the work. Our task, then, is to find an interpretation that shows the Induction to be integral to the sense of the taming play.

I

The lord tells his servants that the trick on Sly is merely for amusement.

¹ Pope gave no reason for his emendation, which Theobald accepted without comment.

² For a summary of these practices in recent American theatre, see Sears Jayne, "The Dreaming of *The Shrew*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XVII (1966), pp. 42-43, 55-56.

Sly is told by the lord and his servants (who speak and act entirely according to the lord's instructions) that he is a lord who has forgotten his identity owing to a delirium provoked by some "foul spirit" (Ind. ii.13-16). This explanation leads to the presentation of the taming play as part of the cure. Since the explanation is an aspect of the hoax, it is not trustworthy. But is the explanation given to the servants trustworthy? Apart from the evident deviousness of the lord, there are two specific reasons for doubting it. Since the lord's pastime is fox hunting, the name "Sly" hints at some underlying appropriateness in the relation between them. It is just visible in the circumstance that corresponding to the joke about his being possessed by a foul spirit is Sly's genuine weakness for alcohol. Perhaps in his playful way the lord is serious about Sly's not being himself; perhaps the "cure" is intended to have some real effect. By considering the matter in this way, a marked parallel between the Induction and body comes into view. The lord is to Sly as Petruchio is to Kate, because both are tamers who undertake to reduce persons of violent dispositions to manageable docility. What then is Sly's malady?

The page says that his "frenzy" feeds upon melancholy, which the comedy is supposed to remedy (Ind. ii. 131-32). In view of the theme of the taming play, the melancholy ought in some way involve failure with women. This anticipation is confirmed; the Induction opens with Sly being driven from an alehouse by the hostess. His humiliation is paralleled in Lucentio's humiliation by Bianca. Since the taming play presents two ways of wooing, one of which ends in failure and the other in success, presumably it would teach Sly how to distinguish the right from the wrong way to woo. It would thus appear that the lord contrives to make Sly recognize his faults by presenting them in Lucentio, the cure taking effect at the moment he realizes this. But such an interpretation is rendered doubtful by the fact that Lucentio's wooing is inseparable from his gentility, whereas Sly is surely no gentleman. Besides since Sly falls asleep, it would be inappropriate to imagine a cure for him that involves instruction and therefore wakefulness.

Sly resists with great vehemence the attempt to foist the new identity upon him. He rails at the servants for addressing him as "lordship" and "honour." He refuses elegant food, drink, and attire as unsuited to himself. To refute the claim that he is a lord, he asserts that he is a menial of the lowest sort: "by birth a pedlar, by education a card-maker, by transmutation a bear-herd, and now by present profession a tinker." He apparently thinks of himself as a humble but honest man without ambition or claim on the world, which he is content to "let slide."

Missing from Sly's self-appraisal is any indication as to why he is both abject and indifferent to the world, yet defiant, as he is toward all those he encounters. His defiance, and indeed intransigence, makes its appearance in the opening lines of the play:

Sly: I'll feeze you, in faith.

Hostess: A pair of stocks, you rogue!

Sly: Y'are a baggage, the Slys are no rogues. . . .

Look in the chronicals, we came in with Richard
Conqueror. . . .

Hostess: You will not pay for the glasses you have burst?

Sly: No, not a denier. . . .

Sly is belligerent, surly, and unjust in refusing to mend the damage he has caused—in short, a rogue without doubt.³ This tinker, who later rejects the least suggestion of his nobility, now introduces as confused evidence of his quality the association of his family with “Richard Conqueror,” that is, William the Conqueror and Richard the Lion Heart, both of whom were famed for pious deeds of great magnitude. Sly is not without some pride and, hence, not without some belief in his own goodness. This is perhaps most evident when he answers the hostess’ threat to call the police by saying that he “will not budge an inch” but will answer the charge “by law.” A servant reports that during his drunken stupor he even threatened to bring the hostess to court (Ind. ii.87). Sly talks like an innocent man. He also uses the formulas of piety, swearing twice by saints and praying once. In his brief speeches there are altogether six mentions⁴ of things connected with Christianity, whereas none of the other characters of the Induction mention any but pagan deities. Indeed, Sly’s given name, Christopher, seems to hint at the missing element of his self-identification: Might he be a Christian of fanatical Puritan persuasion? A number of disparate details fall into place upon this interpretation. His violent rejection of titles and refinements answers to fanatical humility and simplicity. He is content to let the world slide because he believes in another world. His confused genealogy argues less his esteem for royalty than for crusading and reforming zeal. And it provides a connection between Sly’s belligerence and his stout belief in his own innocence. Since Sly believes that the hostess is at fault, to him his anger is not bluster and menace but anger in service of justice, or indignation. When indignation goes unchecked, it easily transforms itself into fanatical zeal. The “foul spirit” that caused his distemper would thus appear to be the frenzy of the zealot. Let us consider whether these conjectures correspond to the lord’s diagnosis and treatment.

On first inspection it is easier to characterize the healthy state, lordship, to which the lord wishes to bring Sly than the diagnosis. Since the lord does not prevent Sly drinking, but on the contrary has his servants offer him sack, it is reasonable to assume that the alcoholism is a figure of his frenzy. There are indications that the lord diagnoses Sly’s condition as beggary. This makes some sense. Beggars entreat, while lords command; the transformation from beggar to lord would thus be a “transmutation”

³ The Elizabethan audience would probably have identified Sly as a vagabond, who were common at the time and who usually followed Sly’s professions. Charles Whibley, “Rogues and Vagabonds” in *Shakespeare’s England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917), II, pp. 484-510.

⁴ Ind. i.9; ii.1, 24, 98, 137.

to an opposite. The treatment would perforce arouse in Sly a desire for command and contempt for his base conditions. The exhibition of Petruchio's successful campaign against Kate is well suited to that purpose. Once more, however, we note a theme struck in the Induction and continued in the body, but which is not applicable to Sly because he sleeps. Furthermore, the treatment administered to Sly in the Induction has no obvious connection with transforming him into a lord. The treatment does not instruct but arouses a passion; and the passion is not love of glory, but erotic desire.

The whole treatment of Sly is geared to this purpose. It begins when the lord directs that Sly be quartered in his most voluptuous bedroom. The cure, including the taming play, is staged here. (This setting is complemented in the taming play by the conclusion, which sends brides and grooms off to the marriage bed.) The treatment entices Sly to indulge in various pleasures; he is especially exposed to some "wanton pictures," which prepare him for the more lifelike image of the page disguised as his lady. The efficacy of the treatment is apparent when, immediately upon being persuaded that he is a lord, Sly calls for his wife. Throughout the remainder of the episode his one desire is to make love to her.

Interest in women is a *volte face* for Sly. His indifference to sex is so great that he calls the hostess "boy" and tells her to warm herself on her "cold bed," while he himself sleeps on a cold hearth. He is so unaccustomed to women that he does not know the proper form of address to wives, nor does he suspect the page's disguise even though they sit together.

The lord explains the way in which Sly's treatment proceeds: He is to "recall" the "ancient thoughts" that lie submerged in his alcohol-frenzied mind (Ind. ii.31). The wanton pictures all depict "ancient" characters, namely, pagan gods and heroes. The lord's use of pagan divinities, together with Sly's frequent mention of Christian pieties, all point to Christianity as the "novelty" that has obscured Sly's original nature. If Sly's malady is religious fanaticism, we need but grasp how loosening Sly's desire would restore his health.

Sly vacillates between self-abasement ("beggary") and the intransigence peculiar to righteous indignation. (Notice that Sly's list of occupations argues his instability.) His appeal to law and justice show that he understands himself as subject to the law; exaggerated or fanatical submission to law tends toward servility. The conviction of his own righteousness will grow in Sly to the extent that he is conscious of his submission to law. And to the degree that his submission is greater than that of other men, he will come to believe in his superior piety. Hence, Sly is both defiant and abject. Of all the virtues, justice is the most severe; it upholds Shylock's contract with Antonio and sends soldiers to face death in the field. Justice is ranged against the natural appetites insofar as it divides them into those that are lawful and those that are not, whereas desire as desire recognizes no such distinction. The natural ally of justice in its struggle with desire is spiritedness or anger. But if spiritedness grows

beyond what is needed for the support of justice, if, like desire, it becomes emancipated from reason, it will produce its own injustice—the injustice of the righteous. Such is perhaps the root of the combination of piety and ferocity in Sly. The right treatment of that condition would attempt to restore justice by tempering his spiritedness. The taming of Sly's virulence would accordingly be accomplished by "recalling" the desire that has retreated before the surging floods of anger. Love, in short, softens the heart.

II

We are now prepared to confront the frequently mentioned fact that Sly after all nods during the taming play. Shakespeare goes out of his way to call this incident to our attention. It is apparent that his sleep is induced by boredom (I.i.251-52). What is there in the opening scene that would be tedious to Sly? It opens with two long speeches on Lucentio's plan to study philosophy. If from the almost universal silence of critics about this striking passage it may be inferred that even they doze through it, how much more a man of Sly's stripe?⁵ Lucentio's man Tranio utters what Shakespeare perhaps thought would be the displeasure of the audience with Lucentio's musings, for the subject is dropped and is not heard again. We nevertheless suggest that the speech is not an idle, faulty start, but the true beginning of the taming play.

Lucentio says that he has come to Padua to study "Virtue, and that part of philosophy / Will I apply that treats of happiness / By virtue specially to be achiev'd." His choice of cities is deliberate, being governed by his opinion that the wisdom of his native Pisa is a "shallow splash" compared to the depth of Paduan wisdom (I.i.21-24). The wisdom for which Padua was then renowned was the so-called "Latin Averroism," which asserted, contrary to the dominant view in the Middle Ages, the independence of philosophy from theology. Lucentio apparently anticipates a secular wisdom.

Certainly he has a good deal to learn. The changeability of his opinions is underscored by his dependence on Tranio's advice. It is typical of him that he abandons his plans for study when he falls in love, at first sight, with Bianca. Yet Lucentio continues to be a student. His humiliating bet with Petruchio teaches him that he has misjudged Bianca's character; that beneath her mild exterior there lies a nature as refractory as Kate's (V.ii.182, 189). The play concludes with Lucentio resolving to attend Petruchio's taming school. The opening theme of the taming play is therefore dropped only in appearance. It is continued, so to speak, on another level, a level invisible to Sly. This bifocal character of the play is anticipated and prepared by the Induction. The lord applied a twofold

⁵ The incongruity of Sly as the audience for Lucentio's speech has been remarked only by William Hazlitt (*Complete Works*, IV, pp. 342, 344) and E. P. Kuhl ["Shakespeare's Purpose in Dropping Sly," *MLN* XXXVI (1921), p. 326], but neither offers an interpretation of it.

remedy for Sly's malady. His ferocity is to be tamed by arousing his desire, and his abjectness cured by transforming him into a lord. In order to effect these different cures, the taming play must present an action appropriate to each. Now the taming play is called both a comedy and a history (Ind. ii.129, 140). As a comedy it is a salty piece appropriate to dispelling Sly's melancholy and virulence; it addresses the same passions that the lord treats in the Induction. Viewed as history, the taming play is about lordship. We suggest that Sly's nodding and his sham transformation into a lord indicate his inattention to this theme, since its effectiveness presupposes a teachable "patient." At the level of history, Lucentio replaces Sly as the addressee of the play.

As history, Lucentio's courtship of Bianca, whom he calls "Minerva," is the pursuit of wisdom. He conducts his courtship in the disguise of a pedant. The disguise reveals Lucentio's understanding of the pursuit of wisdom. In changing places with his man Tranio, he becomes, by his own description, a "slave" (I.i.218), quite in keeping with his dependence on Tranio and his suppliant approach to Bianca. As befits his literary education, he woos with poetry and music rather than by deeds. Wisdom for Lucentio is something like the life of the ideal courtier as portrayed by Castiglione, that is, a mixture of classical and Christian notions. From Petruchio's perspective, Lucentio's modesty, compliance, and civility must appear as "beggary."

Petruchio's understanding of wooing as taming is likewise consistent with his education, which was war (I.ii.197-208). He pays court to Kate like a general fated to conquer an enemy. Yet his subtlety is missed if one mistakes his rough, boisterous, whimsical manner as the vulgarity of the fortune seeker.⁶ His conduct is controlled by "policy," which is to kill Kate in her own humour; he *adopts* Kate's character as the means of taming her.⁷ The genuine center of Petruchio's character, which is also his genuine ruthlessness, is an inflexible determination to succeed at whatever he undertakes. That enables him to appropriate a certain kind of rationality, the calculation of means. He does not woo Kate for her beauty but for her dowry.⁸ When Lucentio discovers that his beautiful Bianca is no less refractory than Kate, he learns Petruchio's lesson that fine feelings ought to be replaced by calculation.

Petruchio reminds one of a Machiavellian "captain." Shakespeare seems to be experimenting with the Florentine's teaching, perhaps in order to determine the extent to which it might be useful as a corrective for certain defects in men like Lucentio. By that I mean that the play exhibits the

⁶ This has been clearly seen by Schomberg, who wrote that Petruchio "erfasst das Leben wie es ist, ohne Illusionen." *The Taming of the Shrew: Eine Studie zu Shakespeare's Kunst* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1904), p. 99.

⁷ See II.i.131-37, 170-80; IV.ii.178-201.

⁸ Petruchio's long commentary on why Katherina must be called "Kate" (II.i.185-95) suggests that he thinks of her as Fate, which parallels Lucentio's regard for Bianca as "Minerva."

desirability of a kind of controlled or muted Machiavellianism rather than Machiavelli's own doctrine. The difference is visible in the play's dramatic structure. Petruchio makes his appearance as a character in the lord's play, and hence in service of ends determined by the lord. The teaching is muted by the un-Machiavellian restraint with which it is communicated. Indeed, the settings of the Induction and play (Burtonheath, a few miles from Stratford, and Padua) seem to indicate that the dramatic relationship between the lord and Petruchio is an image of Shakespeare's own understanding of Machiavelli.⁹ Whereas Petruchio, despite his flamboyance, is at bottom unpoetic, the lord, as author of the taming play, knows how to combine poetry with calculation. Whereas Petruchio acts exclusively for his own advantage, and claims that in so doing he benefits his fellows (IV.ii.200-01), the lord's playfulness bespeaks a mind free from the constraints of needs, which enables him to minister, in very different ways, to Sly and Lucentio. Perhaps Shakespeare thought that poetic play is a higher form of lordship than Machiavellian mastery, not because its results are more certain, but because they are more humane.

⁹ The verisimilitude of the setting and *personae* of the Induction strongly suggest that Shakespeare portrayed the lord in likeness to himself. See Sidney Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 236-37.