



Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One
-Plato-

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SHAKESPEAREAN PC: ROLE PLAYING AS A SURVIVAL SKILL

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(Editor's note: The following was presented at the Philological Association of the Carolinas Conference, March 2008, Asheville, NC)

A colleague recently gave me a copy of the journal he edits which included a paper about *The Taming of the Shrew* in which the author argued that our discomfort with the play is the result of the hatred we feel for ourselves. First, the major premise made me angry and, second, I found it disheartening that such a misinformed perception would be considered publishable. The author's blatant pandering to the demand for "cutting edge" criticism made me take a hard look at what my profession is becoming. Just when did writing about literature become so intensely personal that we must now respond to literary texts as if they are an attack on our innermost selves? The genius of great authors such as Shakespeare is that they created characters that genuinely mirror the human experience. We see our-

selves in them. While we may not like what we see, we cannot deny the resonance we feel when we read about them or see them come to life on the stage. Until now, it seems. Oh, yes, we've always deplored Macbeth's vaulting ambition, the hypocrisy and prejudice of *The Merchant of Venice*, and the brutality of *Timon*; but, now, it's open warfare on any character who is too manly, too submissive, too good, too angry, too distracted, or too whatever.

The Taming of the Shrew provides us with a good example of the kudzu-like encroachment of Political Correctness. Kate appears to be smart, witty, and strong willed and Petruchio seems to be masterful and more stubborn than she. And, at twelve years old, I thought the play was funny. Then I grew up and went to graduate school and learned all about the patriarchy and feminist theory and now I understand that if I find it amusing, there must be something wrong with me. I can appreciate Kate's "less-than-submissive" characteristics as an indication of a strong and independent female nature; but I *must* be uncomfortable with her aggressive and abusive actions. And I *must* certainly and absolutely loathe her capitulation to patriarchal domination at the end of the play. If I want to study, teach, or write about this play, I *must* seek to explain her behavior away or blame it on someone else—preferably Petruchio—since he's so convenient and so conveniently male.

I don't doubt that in its origins Political Correctness was a good thing in its attempt to create a level playing field. In and of itself, equality is a good thing. But when, in the demand for equality, some groups become somehow more deserving than others, old patterns of discrimination are re-established by the newly equal. All those who disagree with that newly "protected" group's actions or the agendas by which their equality is expressed are then undeserving of even their previous rights. In fact, individuals previously holding power (i.e. white, heterosexual males) are not only expected to be ashamed of their previous privileged status but also to renounce it, hate it, and make endless amends for it. The greatest danger of Political Correctness, then, is that individuality is sacrificed for membership in increasingly smaller and more tightly defined categories wherein everything we think and feel and determine must comply with the agenda of these special interest groups in order to offend no one...no one, that is, except, perhaps, white, straight men.

But rather than castigating either Kate or Petruchio, I want to know why we can't credit them with the brains their creator obviously assumed they possessed and examine their behavior as a demonstration of how to survive in a hostile world. I'm not talking about a Kate who smirks at the audience to let us know she's only pretending to be tame or Petruchio being portrayed as a braying, bumbling, misogynist. I'm talking about men and women having the brains to see how to best deal with the situation they find themselves in adopting a role such as motivator or manipulator in order to control the chaos of social interaction.

Let's begin with Kate. Other than her sister and the Widow, there are no

women in the play from whom Kate might have learned some social skills. Her mother is absent, as are aunts and serving women. So, from whom, exactly, is Kate supposed to learn social skills? Her father who betrays her in his favoritism toward Bianca? Her sister who only appears to be compliant but steals her marriage? If this were "real life", Kate as the eldest daughter probably would have stepped into her absent mother's place and taken over the management of her father's house. Because Baptista is a wealthy man, Kate may have been directing a large household staff and acting as his hostess from a relatively young age. As a young girl, she may have assumed a strong, aggressive stance in order to establish a sense of authority over household staff. Perhaps she assumes that loud and angry is the way to behave in all social circumstances. We know this is not true but Kate may not.

When we examine Kate's first appearance in the play, we find that she has reason to be angry. Her father deliberately and publicly paints her as an obstacle to her younger sister's happiness because no one is willing to marry the elder daughter first. Her sister's suitors waste no time in loudly protesting that Kate is "too rough" and needs to develop a "gentler, milder" nature if she is to ever get a husband.¹ But her first speech of the play isn't to chastise or to berate them. It is to ask for help from her father: "I pray you, sir, is it your will/To make a stale of me amongst these mates?" (I.i.57-58). If we only listen to her detractors, both the characters and the critics, we assume that she is what they say she is—loud, aggressive, and angry—a woman to avoid. Yet isn't she provoked to defensive anger at being abandoned by her father and being publicly embarrassed? Tita French Baumlin points out that:

Katerina [uses] her language to drive away not only potential, undesirable suitors but family members and potential friends, as well. Her language serves then, not to graft her firmly into the network of social interaction but rather to isolate her from all humanity.²

Couldn't her defensive and angry facade be a form of protection that keeps others—including her father and sister—at arm's length?

And what about Petruchio? His first appearance is in a scuffle with his servant, Grumio, outside of Hortensio's house early in the play that distracts us into believing that he is a bully and an egotist. Yes, he wrings his servant by the ears, but it is Grumio who initiates the exchange and who drags Hortensio into the discussion, not Petruchio. While I wouldn't claim that being wrung by the ears is a gentle admonition, it is not a beating either. Is it possible then that Petruchio is not the brutal bully he has been painted by the Politically Correct? Petruchio's thoughtful preparation just prior to meeting Kate certainly suggests a far less abusive perception as he very clearly outlines his strategy:

I'll attend her here,
And woo her with some
spirit when she comes.
Say that she rail, why then
I'll tell her plain
She sings as sweetly as a
nightingale;
Say that she frown, I'll say
she looks as clear
As morning roses newly
wash'd with dew;
Say she be mute, and will not
speak a word,
Then I'll commend her volu-
bility,

And say she uttereth piercing
eloquence;
If she do bid me pack, I'll
give her thanks,
As though she bid me stay
by her a week;
If she deny to wed, I'll crave
the day
When I shall ask the banes,
and when be married.
(II.i.168-180)

As we can see, his plan is to agree with her, ignore any rudeness on her part, and read every utterance as positive. This is not the speech of someone who intends to beat or otherwise intimidate a woman into submission. Yet, an initial—and increasingly PC—condemnation of him may be keeping us from acknowledging that he actually rescues Kate from an abusive situation where she is isolated and either ignored or reviled by her family and their friends.

I won't deny that what he intends is a manipulation of Kate, but is manipulation always a bad thing? The OED defines manipulation as “The action or an act of managing or directing a person, etc., especially in a skilful manner; the exercise of subtle, underhand or devious influence or control over a person, organization, etc.”³ I know, and I'm willing to bet that you know as well, the exactly right button to push to infuriate your spouse or your children. I'm also willing to bet that as college professors you do your share of manipulating your students into producing better work. We can dress it up in positive terms and call it motivation if we like, but isn't it really the same thing?⁴ Doesn't the more pejorative term really mean “what I'm doing to you is good for *me*” and the more positive mean “what I'm doing to you is good for *you*?”

Let me speculate that Petruchio

adopts the role of manipulator in order to make things better for Kate. In adopting the role of manipulator, he simply out-talks everyone. Kate does the same but in a way that pushes people away. As Hortensio points out, those around her simply see her attempts as "shrowd" and "froward." An important difference between the two, however, is that Kate appears to speak out of turn, or to speak when she is not invited to speak, while Petruchio's speech is publicly and socially sanctioned because of his gender. A witty tongue was a trait highly prized in poets and scholars, but outspokenness in women was not a trait admired during the Renaissance when women were repeatedly—if unsuccessfully—exhorted to be quiet. Given such a cultural attitude, when Kate attempts to manipulate others she fails. This is something Petruchio does not have to contend with.

Yet, Petruchio's manipulation of Kate seems to take on an unexpected outcome—one seldom acknowledged by the PC Police. If we examine the verbal exchanges between them from the end of the wooing scene in Act II to the conclusion of the play, we find that when Petruchio speaks to Kate in private, he does so plainly and directly, without guile or subterfuge. He learns to do this when he fails to move Kate with flattery and flowery speech during their first meeting when he, finally, resorts to plain and outright directness:

Thus in plain terms: your
father hath consented
That you shall be my wife;
your dowry 'greed on,
And will you, nill you, I will
marry you. (II.i.269-271)

He doesn't insult her or berate her, but he does make it clear that he is not put off by her angry boldness. Reading carefully, we see that what Petruchio repeatedly does

throughout the play is to establish a firm objective and move forward. This does not mean that he acts without her best interest in mind; it merely means that he doesn't let her control the situations that arise.

One of the strongest criticisms of Petruchio's manipulation is that he abuses Kate by sending her to bed on their wedding night without dinner and then keeps her awake all night with lectures about faithfulness in marriage. While this may not be pleasant, one missed meal and one night of not sleeping is hardly the torture so many critics charge him with; but it is in keeping with manipulating the circumstances to keep someone off kilter and, therefore, less confrontational. Looking at the big picture, as Petruchio seems to do, wouldn't learning that there is a time and a place for manipulation—particularly witty and skillful manipulation—be a good thing for their marriage?

Take, for example, the exchange between the two when Petruchio announces they will go back to Padua for Bianca's wedding in Act IV. This exchange clearly tells us that he is not finished with keeping her on tilt. First, he orders new clothes for her as a surprise only to destroy them moments later. His reasons for destroying the garments are made clear when he says:

Well, come, my Kate, we
will unto your father's
Even in these honest mean
habiliments;

.....
For 'tis the mind that makes
the body rich. (169-72)

By manipulating her, he shows her that she is a person who "honor peereth in the meanest habit" (174) and she needs not be dependant on or disguised by outward show—whether it is good or bad. His actions tell

her that appearance is less important than the qualities she carries within herself. That he means to join her in more modest attire is an outward acknowledgement that he is going to support her however she appears, and together they will manipulate her family into conceding their value without distracting clothing or improper behavior. Martha Andersen-Thom, in her article "Shrew-Taming and Other Rituals of Aggression," points out that they *both* will appear at the wedding feast in the clothing of those who "conspicuously align themselves against a world that sets too much store in appearances."⁵ Her observation cannot fail to point out the differences between this couple who values the inner qualities of men and women, and the other characters gathered in their finest "ruffs and cuffs, and fardingales, and things"(56).

The manipulation of Kate continues when she points out that Petruchio has mistaken the time of day when he intends they should begin their journey. He replies:

Look what I speak, or do, or think to do
 You are still crossing it

 I will not go to-day, and ere I do,
 It shall be what a'clock I say it is. (IV.iii.192-195)

It's clear from his insistence that they will leave for Padua when he wants to leave and they won't go unless Kate acquiesces to whatever he has in mind. Those critics who see only the "bad" Petruchio interpret this scene, and that of their entire journey, as bull-headed male insistence on being right no matter how outlandish the circumstances. But this is really a turning point in the play. When Kate corrects his misidentification of the sun as the moon, he—once again—manipulates her response:

It shall be moon, or star, or

what I list,
 Or ere I journey to your father's house.—
 Go on, and fetch our horses back again.—
 Evermore cross'd and cross'd, nothing but cross'd!(IV.v.7-10).

Kate has learned, by untold stops and starts in her journey toward Padua (stops and starts that Petruchio makes right alongside her), that Petruchio has a reason for asking her to agree with him. While she may not understand the reasons for his insistence on this point, she eventually agrees to do as he asks, saying "Be it moon or sun, or what you please.../Henceforth I vow it shall be so for me" (13-15). And in agreeing to do as he asks, she is finally able to join him in manipulating those around them. She goes so far with her agreement that, much like extending an inside joke, she indulges in a bit of word-play regarding Vincentio:

Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet,

 Happy the parents of so fair a child!
 Happier the man whom favorable starts
 Allots thee for his lovely bed-fellow! (37-41)

Vincentio, far from being offended, is amused at her teasing and joins them for the remainder of the journey. Petruchio's manipulation has resulted in a distinct change for the better in Kate's behavior that we can anticipate will allow her to survive—with her personality intact—and surmount the negative perceptions of familial abandonment she has previously experienced.

Kate's adoption of Petruchio's role as manipulator makes it possible for her to speak publicly in order to prove that she is not the virago they have made her out to be.

Her final speech, and the longest speech of the play, clearly demonstrates this. When the ladies have withdrawn, their husbands wager on their wives' behavior and then send for them one at a time. Bianca and the Widow suspect a trick and decline to oblige their husbands. Kate, however, obliges. She recognizes that doing what her husband asks will not hurt her, even if someone else is having a bit of fun at her expense. His previous negotiations with her allow her to realize that Petruchio offers her a way into the society that has been denied her in the past. She understands that:

To *say* as he says, to *do* as he directs, is not necessarily to *be* what he may wish — that is, his thing, his possession, an extension of himself. She can be herself, she can assert herself, moreover, using just those behavioral and verbal forms Petruchio has insisted upon.⁶

Therefore, Kate's speech is certainly not, as other critics would have it, a capitulation to a physically or intellectually stronger partner or a sly game of pretend at Petruchio's expense. In the end, manipulation has shifted into a negotiation of peace between the two and, therefore, her scolding of the other wives concerns that very thing—a wife's valuing her "loving lord." Andresen-Thom points out the mutually beneficial ramifications of Kate's having learned this survival skill:

Petruchio's *betting* on Kate's performance expresses his willingness to risk depending on her. And Kate's response expresses reciprocally her dependence on him; her outstretched hand signals trust in his restraint and good will. Mutual vulnerabilities have been displayed in the faith that neither will abuse the license they grant each other. Kate is free to demean Petruchio by crossing him; Petruchio

is free to step on her. But neither attacks the other because both have become partners.⁷

And because of that partnership against those who would devalue them both, Kate does not condone society's expectations of women but addresses a husband's realistic expectations of the woman he values above all others: that their "soft conditions and...hearts/ Should well agree with [their] external parts" (V.ii.166-167). Kate's humble offer to place her hand beneath her husband's foot, far from being a surrender, is as much a manipulation of Petruchio as his manipulation of the men he challenges to wager on their wives in the first place. Their public support of each other gives us a happy ending and we can echo Petruchio's claim that now they can enjoy "peace...and love and quiet life" (108).

Whether you agree with me or not, I do hope that you would agree that as critics and scholars our job should be to illuminate the text and not to advance what Camille Paglia calls "Identity Politics."⁸ We can and should be able to reconcile the behaviors we don't like about a character with our modern—okay, more politically correct—sensibilities in ways that won't leave us feeling like we've sanctioned physical violence or embraced patriarchal domination, or worse, gone over to the enemy...whoever the enemy is. These reconciliations are really acknowledgements of the survival skills that allow us to negotiate, manipulate, or maneuver our way through circumstances that we cannot otherwise control. Rather than condemn these behaviors, we should applaud them. At the very least we should abandon the attempt to sanitize the plays into politically correct pabulum. After all, Shakespeare didn't gift us with our flaws, he only wrote about them.

ENDNOTES

¹William Shakespeare. *The Taming of the Shrew. The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. G. Blakemore Evans et al, eds. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977. 138-71. I.i.55. All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²Tita French Baumlin, "Petruccio the Sophist and Language as Creation in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Studies in English Literature* 29 (Spring 1989): 238.

³"Manipulation." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. March 2008. 19 March 2008. http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00301234?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=manipulation&first=&max_to_show=10.

⁴*The OED Online* defines motivation as "the (conscious or unconscious) stimulus for action towards a desired goal, esp. as resulting from psychological or social factors; the factors giving purpose or direction to human or animal behaviour." March 2008. 19 March 2008. http://dictionary.oed.com/pallas3.tcl.sc.edu/cgi/entry/00316490?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=motivation&first=1&max_to_show=10.

⁵Martha Andresen-Thom, "Shrew Taming and Other Rituals of Aggression: Baiting and Bonding on the Stage and in the Wild," *Women's Studies* 9 (1982): 136-37.

⁶Andresen-Thom, 139-40.

⁷Andresen-Thom, 140.

⁸Camille Paglia. *Break, Blow, Burn*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005.

Mary L. Hjelm graduated from Washington State University in 1996 with a Ph.D. in English. She came to USC Salkehatchie in 2002 where she spent three years as Academic Dean before returning full time to the faculty. This paper, originally presented at the Philological Association of the Carolinas' 2008 conference, reflects her theory that Shakespeare's dramas are games in which the characters consciously adopt roles such as negotiator, manipulator, lover, or deceiver in order to achieve specific goals which, then, allow them to succeed within hostile environments. *Shrew* remains her favorite play.



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