

The Stupefied Bystander: Complicity in *The Taming of the Shrew*?

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Various therapies have been applied to Katherina's final speech on the duty of wives to husbands, and especially to its conclusion:

Then veil 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.¹

According to different stage traditions, the actress may motivate Katherina by showing her falling in love with Petruchio at first sight, or by delivering the speech with a wink to the audience.² Other options are to take it as the ritual fulfilment of the 'shrew' plot, conducted in a spirit of farce; or to see Katherina as an example of the battered wife; or to detect a bawdy innuendo in 'My hand is ready, may it do him ease'. The speech can of course be taken 'straight', as endorsing Pauline and Renaissance conceptions of the proper subordination of women. If this is indeed its intent, it is odd that everywhere else in his work Shakespeare's heroines should be so spirited and so enterprising.

I incline to the view of those who sense some kind of game going on between Katherina and Petruchio, and I believe the evidence for collusion is stronger than has been recognized. The critical scene is IV.v., on the way to Padua, when in broad daylight Petruchio exclaims 'how bright and goodly shines the moon!', and Katherina replies 'The moon? The sun; it is not moonlight now'. He insists that it is the moon, she that it is the sun: he orders the horses back again; she says 'be it moon, or sun, or what you please', whereupon he declares it is the moon, and she agrees, to which he retorts 'Nay, then you lie. It is the blessed sun'. Katherina responds

1 *The Taming of the Shrew*, V.ii.175-9. All quotations are from the Oxford Shakespeare, ed. H. J. Oliver.

2 See Ann Thompson's introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare, pp.21-4.

Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun,
But sun it is not, when you say it is not,
And the moon changes even as your mind:
What you will have it named, even that it is,
And so it shall be so for Katherine.

(IV.v.18-22)

This could be taken as the humouring of a lunatic, or as an act of submission: the point is that Petruchio and Katherine are now for the first time in agreement.

The new concord is immediately demonstrated as Vincentio appears, and Petruchio addresses him as though he were a woman: 'Good morrow, gentle mistress, where away?' He then turns to Katherine:

Tell me, sweet Kate, and tell me truly too,
Hast thou beheld a fresher gentlewoman?
Such war of white and red within her cheeks!
What stars to spangle heavens with such beauty
As those two eyes become that heavenly face?
– Fair lovely maid, once more good day to thee.
– Sweet Kate, embrace her for her beauty's sake.

(IV.v.28-34)

The point of the scene can be fully realized only in performance, but in performance it is unmistakable. Vincentio has to stand dumbfounded while Petruchio makes these remarks, and his stupefaction grows as Katherine outdoes him:

Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet,
Whither away, or where is thy abode?
Happy the parents of so fair a child;
Happier the man whom favourable stars
Allots thee for his lovely bedfellow.

(IV.v.37-41)

Vincentio, on the stage, can only register more comic disbelief. Petruchio then changes tack:

Why, how now, Kate, I hope thou art not mad:
This is a man, old, wrinkled, faded, withered,
And not a maiden, as thou say'st he is.

(IV.v.42-4)

There must be some exaggeration in 'old, wrinkled, faded, withered', but Katherine is equal to the challenge:

Pardon, old father, my mistaking eyes
 That have been so bedazzled with the sun
 That everything I look on seemeth green.
 Now I perceive thou art a reverend father;
 Pardon, I pray thee, for my mad mistaking.
 (IV.v.45-9)

No doubt 'bedazzled with the sun' is aimed at Petruchio, but the main effect of this scene is that Vincentio is a stupefied bystander, turning in bewilderment from one speaker to the other, as Petruchio and Katherina join in this game at his expense. They are now a partnership, even if in competitive roles.

The next scene (V.i.) is concerned with the exposure of the impersonations in the Lucentio – Tranio – Bianca sub-plot. Petruchio and Katherina are observers for most of it ('Prithee, Kate, let's stand aside and see the end of this controversy' – V.i.54-5), but it concludes with the new spirit in their relationship confirmed.

KATHERINA Husband, let's follow, to see the end of this
 ado.

PETRUCHIO First kiss me, Kate, and we will.

KATHERINA What, in the midst of the street?

PETRUCHIO What, art thou ashamed of me?

KATHERINA No, sir, God forbid, but ashamed to kiss.

PETRUCHIO Why then, let's home again. (*To Grumio*)

Come, sirrah, let's away.

KATHERINA Nay, I will give thee a kiss. Now pray thee,
 love, stay.

PETRUCHIO

Is not this well? Come, my sweet Kate.

Better once than never, for never too late.

(V.i.129-40)

The following scene is the last in the play. When at the banquet the Widow misinterprets a remark of Petruchio's, Katherina intervenes to take his part (and her own). As the altercation develops, Petruchio projects the idea of a contest, and a wager, with himself and Katherina on the one side:

A hundred marks, my Kate does put her down.

(V.ii.35)

When the ladies have withdrawn, the wager scene proper follows: a hundred crowns to the husband whose wife is most obedient when

summoned. As the women are off-stage, evidence of complicity between Katherina and Petruchio is meagre, but we know they have acted in concert in baffling Vincentio, and that Petruchio has declared to the company his confidence that Kate can 'put down' anyone opposing them.

The message Lucentio sends to Bianca is in the terms stated to the servant: 'Go, Biondello, bid your mistress come to me' (V.ii.75). Whether Bianca interprets 'bid' as meaning 'ask' or 'order', she does not comply: 'she is busy, and she cannot come' (V.ii.80). Hortensio's message is more humbly expressed: 'go and entreat my wife/To come to me forthwith' (V.ii.85-6). Petruchio remarks on 'entreat', but Biondello again returns alone:

She says you have some goodly jest in hand.
She will not come; she bids you come to her.
(V.ii.91-2)

It is a reasonable presumption that this reply ('some goodly jest in hand') has been made in Katherina's presence, and it is a reasonable conjecture that Petruchio's declining of 'bid' and 'entreat' in favour of 'command' could be a signal to her:

Sirrah Grumio, go to your mistress,
Say I command her to come to me.
(V.ii.95-6)

(Why is Grumio sent instead of Biondello?) When Katherina appears, this is the working-out of the 'shrew' pattern, but within that pattern has not the play now created a sense of Katherina and Petruchio operating as a team?

What is your will, sir, that you send for me?
(V.ii.100)

When the company is re-assembled, it is a victory speech that Katherina delivers. This opens up various opportunities to an actress, but one of them must be to pound her rivals with this set of platitudes, and to exaggerate them to score more points. The seemingly outrageous proposition – 'place your hands below your husband's foot' – is clearly a challenge, a dare. I see it also as the final touch to a successful collusion, anticipated in Petruchio's 'A hundred marks, my Kate does put her down', and reaching back further to Kate's address to the bewildered Vincentio: 'Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet.'