

# ENCOURAGING WHISTLE BERRIES: PARADOXICAL INTERVENTION IN *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW*

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The choice between living by obedience and living by exasperation is a little observed theme in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Nonetheless, that theme reveals the way characters choose to be in relationship with each other. Indeed, the structure of the play from the opening Induction to the concluding inflammatory remarks by the "tamed" shrew Katherine presents characters with that choice: obey or exasperate. What each character chooses shapes the possibilities for trust and intimacy.

For many modern readers of Shakespeare's play of domestic negotiation, this dichotomous choice is obscured in theoretical and political approaches to the drama. The feminist reading of the comedy, for instance, draws the conclusion that Petruchio's taming of Katherine's temper signifies the triumph of patriarchal authority and the marginalization of the feminine voice in the early modern period.<sup>1</sup> There is much evidence for this gendered critique. Petruchio makes it clear at his wedding with Katherine the Shrew:

I will be master of what is mine own.  
She is my goods, my chattels. She is my house,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Charlotte Artes, "'Tell Thou the Tale': Shakespeare's Taming of Folktales in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Folklore* 120 (December 2009), 317–26; Lynda Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.2 (1991), 179–213; Frances Dolan, "Household Chastisements: Gender, Authority, and 'Domestic Violence,'" *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Dympna Callaghan (New York, 2009); Michael Friedman, "The Feminist as Shrew in *10 Things I Hate About You*," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 22:2 (2004), 27–44; Natasha Korda, "Household Kates: Domesticating Commodities in *The Taming of the Shrew*," ed. Dympna Callaghan (New York, 2009), 149–64; Laurie Maguire, "The Naming of the Shrew," *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Dympna Callaghan (New York, 2009), 123–37; Bernard Parris, "Petruchio's Taming of Kate: A Horneyan Perspective," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 54 (1994), 339–44; Edith Williams, "The Bitch Archetype and its Transformations: The Happy Marriage of Kate and Petruchio," *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 16 (1995), 154–66.

<sup>2</sup>Professor Robert Collmer in an email to me on June 22, 2010, rightly suggested that there is a hint early in the play that Petruchio is doing more than taming or suppressing his wife. "In fact,

My household-stuff, my field, my barn,  
My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything (3.2.220–3).<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to resist the feminist reading. Petruchio regards his wife as his property, his instrument of male desire and control, in short, “anything” he wants her to be. Scene after scene advances Petruchio’s psychological battering of Katherine’s shrewish behavior. Petruchio tames Katherine through acts of public humiliation, food and sleep deprivation, and contradictory outbursts. It is Petruchio’s high-jinx and his volatile, slap-sick escapades, such as his showing up at the wedding in mismatched clothes and his refusal to stay for his own nuptial dinner that are easily construed as forms of abuse at once confusing and exasperating Katherine.

These transgressive forms of domestic expression have their historical antecedents in medieval literature and the oral tradition of European folklore. The authoritative international reference, Aarne and Thompson’s *The Types of the Folktale*, identifies Tale Type 901, The Taming of the Shrew, in 400 variants of the story<sup>4</sup>. Many of the folk motifs are reflected in Shakespeare’s play,<sup>5</sup> particularly the husband’s irksome tricks that publicly coerce his fiery wife. Petruchio recalls these folkloric predecessors in prancing before the different audiences in the play, proudly boasting to Katherine’s father, her sister, his friends, an assortment of suitors, servants, even strangers, of his delight in his vivacious wife and his confidence in his masculine prowess to subjugate her waywardness. His theatrical wooing overpowers Katherine’s resistance and, finally, bends her will.

I find, however, that even after acknowledging this evidence for the subjugation of women, sexual politics is at odds with the very premise of comedy. The comic mode, as Northrop Frye explains, brings us into the presence of archetypal life-generating and life-diminishing forces.<sup>6</sup> Comedy affirms renewal. It celebrates the power of love to bring new life into being. At the play’s conclusion, when the masks of comedy have dropped, and characters’ awareness of human limitation as well as possibility has more or less expanded, people can begin life once more, no matter the number of times they have fallen

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Petruchio’s claim that a woman is his house (3.2.221) may suggest the idea that she is not just an object but a place of blessing for him.”

<sup>3</sup>All references to the play are from the Norton Critical Edition, ed. Dympna Callaghan (New York, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, “The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography” (*FF Communications*, No 184) (Bloomington, 1971).

<sup>5</sup>Jan Harold Brunvand, “The Folktale Origin of *The Taming of the Shrew*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17:4 (1966), 345–59, provides evidence for the pervasiveness of the shrew tale type and repertoire of motifs in oral folk form throughout England and Northern Europe during the early modern period.

<sup>6</sup>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York, 1967), 285–7.

and failed. Comedy bestows new beginnings. It offers the opportunity to experience the joys of being alive in close relationships. Even if, hypothetically, Shakespeare had represented Petruchio as a sensitive husband who valued his wife as his equal conjugal partner, the deeper, philosophical claim of intimacy would emerge from beneath sexual politics as the focus of the play. To remain faithful to comedy's vision of nuptial energy and happiness, the characters of *The Taming of the Shrew* must successfully negotiate the conflict between the desire for intimacy and the often chafing and vacuous claims of daily life.

In my reading of Shakespeare, the turbulence that is acted out between Katherine and Petruchio is less about demanding spousal obedience and following a husband's commands, and more about obedience in its etymological sense. Derived from the Latin root, *Ob-audire*, obedience means to hear, to listen to, or to pay attention.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the domestic quarrels between Petruchio and Katherine concern hearing, listening, and paying attention to spouses rather than following their orders. What Katherine and Petruchio face, as well as the other two sets of brides and grooms, Bianca and Lucentio, and Hortesio and the widow, is this choice: to obey, that is, to pay attention, or to exasperate, to live life as outbursts of irritation. In comedy, husbands and wives can either listen to each other and discover who they are and what they want in life, as well as experience in the best moments the flash of desire and the rapture of intimacy, or they can blame their marital partners as the sources of annoyance and the insufferable obstacles to the attainment of happiness.

This obedience/exasperation dichotomy arises in the deconstruction of the frenzy between Petruchio and Katherine. An analysis of the flow of discourse and praxis between the two characters reveals gaps in the patriarchal interpretation of the play. Petruchio's treatment of Katherine, I argue, is a psychological strategy that resembles Milton Erickson's paradoxical intervention. Petruchio's objective is to transform Katherine's wildness into a sensibility ready for marital intimacy. In the process, Petruchio's own petulance and shrew-like behavior is ironically tempered and there is evidence that he has the reflexive awareness that would allow him to become an attentive husband. In the comic resolution of the play, the impulsivity and the brawling of both

<sup>7</sup>*Online Etymology Dictionary*. Another source of etymology is David Steindl-Rast, a psychologist and Benedictine monk. In his book *A Listening Heart: The Spirituality of Sacred Sensuousness*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1999), Brother David uses the etymological meaning of obedience in his description of its practice in monastic communities. In the tradition of Benedictine spirituality, obedience is a kind of listening rather than a protocol for following commands. As monastery bells chime at regular intervals, the monk listens and releases his focus from one thing or activity and turns to the next in the daily rhythm of prayer and work. The simplicity of food, furnishings, habitation, and clothing in monastic communities reflects a conscious intention to pay attention to one thing at a time, lifting the mind above its interior chatter toward states of wonder at the beauty and sensuality of even plain and uncomplicated forms in nature and culture.

husband and wife have been tamed and given way to something else; but more of this in a moment.

First, a brief explanation of Petruccio's analogous use of paradoxical intervention. The concept, associated with, among others, twentieth-century American psychiatrist Milton Erickson, is a therapeutic method that induces change by paradoxically encouraging the behavior the therapist seeks to discourage.<sup>8</sup> In that rhetorical sleight-of-hand, the original problem is reframed and the patient is liberated to draw upon a wider range of responses to life, other than the one which has caused the social dysfunction. In a vivid example, Erickson recounts that he had a patient who had become agoraphobic, withdrawing in shame from routines of ordinary life because of an embarrassing experience she had had as a college student.<sup>9</sup> One day at the blackboard, she experienced the undisguised emission of flatulence. Mortified, she ran out of class, withdrew from the course, and isolated herself from all who had witnessed or heard about her embarrassment. Her isolation was painful. Eventually, she sought relief with Erickson who offered a perspective that was in alignment with her own belief system. Erickson appealed to her Catholicism by encouraging her to wonder at the divinely created complexity of the human body. With a physiology textbook in hand, he showed her an anatomical diagram of the sphincter muscle and explained that flatus or gas is caused by peristaltic action in the large intestine. Only an omnipotent, omniscient Creator, Erickson argued, could have designed a complex physiological system of autonomic controls in which solid, liquid, and gaseous materials were in motion but only gas would be emitted. Erickson prescribed what he whimsically called the Whistle Berry treatment. In the privacy of her home, the patient was instructed to prepare a meal of beans heavily garnished with onions and garlic, and then dance around her home naked. Rather than suppressing the flatulence, she was to relish the Whistle Berries, the outbursts of flatulence, fully appreciating what Erickson had identified as the US Navy's affectionate slang for gas. Whistle Berries, are a commonplace experience of sailors because of the navy's culinary practice of serving beans. One could imagine the patient getting better as she learns to relish the Whistle Berries in the privacy of her home, even, perhaps, classifying them according to musical notation: *adagio con brio*, *largo*, *andante*, *moderato*, *prestissimo*, *sostenuto*, *tranquillo*, and so on. Erickson was reframing a

<sup>8</sup>Jay Haley, ed., *Conversations with Milton Erickson*, v.1 (New York, 1985). In these conversations, Erickson provides clinical examples of the strategies of paradoxical intervention and its effects upon his patients. Leon F. Seltzer in *Paradoxical Strategies in Psychotherapy* (New York, 1986), provides a useful history of paradoxical therapy, describing its development and its connections to the major theories of psychotherapy, such as psychoanalysis, behavior therapy, gestalt therapy, and systems theory.

<sup>9</sup>Peter Blanciak, *Reframing: The Essence of Mediation*, August 2002. <<http://www.mediate.com/articles/blanciak.cfm>>.

humiliating experience by encouraging the patient not to repress biology, but to induce and enjoy what God had so ingeniously created. The therapy worked. The woman got over her embarrassment, resumed her education, and soon after married, never again suffering from the Whistle Berry Effect.

Clearly, there are differences between the patient-doctor relationship in the Erickson anecdote, and the spousal relationship in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. To mention only the obvious, one is a report of a scientific intervention into a corporeal medical condition, and the other is an artistic rendering of human psychosocial conflict. Nonetheless, there is a valid application of Whistle Berries to Shakespeare's grand fiction. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio uses paradoxical intervention to tame Katherine in two ways.

First, he encourages Katherine and praises her behavior, paradoxically encouraging her Whistle Berries, her shrewish outbursts:

'Twas told to me you were rough, and coy, and sullen,  
And now I find report a very liar,  
For thou art pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous,  
But slow in speech, yet sweet as springtime flowers.  
Thou canst not frown, thou canst not look askance,  
Nor bite the lip, as angry wenches will,  
Nor hast thou pleasure to be cross in talk  
But thou with mildness entertain'st thy wooers,  
With gentle conference, soft and affable (2.1.236–44).

Here Petruchio is working paradoxical intervention. He praises Katherine's uncongenial outbursts, and, like Milton Erickson with his flatulent patient, reframes them by giving them positive names. Her volatility is gamesome, her impulsiveness sweet as flowers, her anger is mildness. He praises the qualities he wants to draw out of Katherine rather than condemning the shrewish behavior by which she is identified and censured by everyone in the play.

Second, while he carefully avoids criticizing her shrewish behavior, Petruchio confronts Katherine with a series of paradoxes that challenge her categories of reality. When the sumptuous banquet of food is brought to the table after their long journey on their nuptial night to Petruchio's home, Katherine, famished and exhausted, is prevented from eating. Petruchio in a volatile outburst accuses his servants of having burned the food, and throws the dinner, dishes, and utensils off the table, cursing his servants: "You heedless joltheads, and unmannered slaves" (4.1.146). This outburst is enacted in the service of love and care for his wife, Petruchio claims, who insists that the perfectly prepared meat was, contrary to appearance, burned. Consuming burned meat produces

choler, and so he is protecting Katherine by ordering her to refrain from eating such foods. Katherine is confused, tired, and goes to bed hungry.

Days later, when the dressmakers present beautiful and stylish clothes they have made for Katherine, Petruchio in an angry outburst disparages the quality, and calls these items of beauty and glamour ugly and coarse, all the while insulting the tailor: “Oh monstrous arrogance! Thou liest, thou thread, thou thimble ... Thou flea, thou nit, thou wintercricket” (4.3.106–8).

The paradoxes and the Whistle Berry outbursts continue. As they depart for Katherine’s father’s house to celebrate her sister’s marriage, Petruchio observes how bright the moon is. This is a flippant challenge to Katherine’s epistemology of time and perception. When Katherine protests he is wrong and that it is the sun and not the moon, Petruchio threatens to abandon the trip and return home. Katherine yields to Petruchio who immediately claims the opposite, how brightly the sun shines. Katherine agrees as she shifts back and forth from “This is day,” to “This is night,” and back again to “This is day,” to tame Petruchio’s preposterous confabulations.

As they proceed on their journey, they meet Vincentio, Lucentio’s father. Petruchio again baits and switches, observing that the bearded Vincentio is a beautiful young woman. Katherine does not protest, but extends the compliment:

Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet,  
Whither away, or where is thy abode? (4.5.38–9)

Petruchio switches:

This is a man, old, wrinkled, faded, withered,  
And not a maiden, as thou sayst he is (4.5.44–5).

And Katherine is quick to respond with grace and style:

Pardon, old father, my mistaking eyes,  
That have been so bedazzled with the sun (4.5.46–7).

This apology is the turning point in the play. It measures Katherine’s change of mind. It is her first admission of an error in her judgment. Why is this important? Because her habitual responses to life have been self-righteous spasms of fury.

Petruchio has been using paradox to intervene in Katherine’s tempestuous reactions, particularly when she does not get what she wants. When the world is not obedient to her desire, she responds in violent outbursts or Whistle Berries. Here Katherine’s categories of time, identity, and gender are challenged in the verbal dueling with Petruchio.

This toying with Katherine is not intended to drive her mad. Rather, it is part of reframing. Petruchio uses paradox, an apparent contradiction that is resolved by appealing to another set or order of reality. While Petruchio's claims—that day is night, and that a man is a woman—seem to contradict reality, it is not the truth claim that is the point. It is rather the listening that is significant, paying attention to Petruchio, stretching to hear what he is saying, understand it, and suspend assessment of it as long as possible. Before Petruchio, Katherine responded to life with reckless appraisal. She judges experiences instantly as foolish or stupid, before taking the time to understand. Those outbursts of unpredictable appraisals—Whistle Berries—have made her a shrew. She is inaccessible, unapproachable, defended, and too difficult to talk to, woo, or wed. Petruchio's intervention impedes her rush to judgment. Ultimately, it blocks Katherine's expression of exasperation. Petruchio demands that she turn her attention to him, listen to what he is saying, and before surging to assessment, see the world from his point of view, however much that perspective seems wrong or perverse. In this way, Katherine's listening becomes disciplined; it is an expression of obedience. The reflexive dash to judgment is tempered. Before judgment comes listening. Before assessment comes obedience.

What is evident to Petruchio is that no one has paid attention to Katherine the woman while everybody is exasperated with Katherine the Shrew. Katherine's conduct has isolated her, and in her frustration at not being taken seriously, she is exasperated, thrashing her sister, and berating her sister's suitors and even her father. Petruchio alone has the audacity to engage Katherine's tempests. He is shrewd in his dealings with her. *Shrew* and *shrewd* come from the same root, meaning given to peevish and malignant behavior. Since the late sixteenth century, however, according to the *OED*, *shrewd* has lost its negative meaning and come to denote clever and calculating conduct.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the play both Katherine and Petruchio are peevish or shrewish. Petruchio cudgels his servant when he is slow to understand Petruchio's demand to knock at the door of his friend. Katherine is mercurial and ropes her sister's hands to wring from her the name of her preferred suitor. Both Petruchio and Katherine are explosive. At first, however, only Petruchio is capable of being shrewd. His responses to Katherine are calculated to induce changes in his wife. In contrast, Katherine's shrewish behavior is wildly impulsive. When she does not get an obedient world around her, she erupts into brawling. We are confronted with two characters who

<sup>10</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. v. XV (Oxford, 2000), 369. Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All* (New York, 2004), notes that the meaning of *shrew* moves across gender boundaries from male referent to female in the early modern period. At the play's end, Garber argues Katherine has come to understand what her shrewish independence means in the context of sexuality and marriage (66). Garber's distinction illuminates Katherine's relationship with Petruchio, but does not get at the epistemological shift in the way Katherine has come to know reality and engage other characters as social agents.

share turbulent personalities. One of them seeks to induce change in the other so that intimacy in their marriage can be realized.

The high point of Katherine's transformation is expressed as after-dinner entertainment. At a family reunion Petruchio wins a wager among the three husbands to determine the most obedient wife. In the play's concluding moment while the entire cast of players watches in astonishment and while many readers react with disappointment or anger, Katherine kneels before her husband as the docile wife, and expresses her obedience:

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,  
Even such a woman oweth to her husband  
...  
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 (5.2.159–60; 181–2).

One could easily conclude that Katherine has been brutalized and bullied into submission. I suggest, however, that to argue in this way is to ignore the matter of Katherine's deeper understanding of obedience as paying attention. In the lines preceding those just quoted, Katherine admonishes the other two brides who refuse the call of their husbands:

Come, come, you forward 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 (5.2.173–9).

Katherine defines the choice here. Addressing her just married sister and the widow, she chastises them and reveals what true obedience is. To live life in bursts of exasperation is to frown and “bandy words.” When others do not fulfill expectations—are not obedient to one's desire—then responding like a shrew is weakness, and leaves one as powerless as “unable worms.” One cannot bring the reasons of the heart to life by squabbling. Exasperation stalls intimacy and abandons one to bitterness and isolation. The two other brides—Katherine's sister Bianca and the widow—misunderstand Katherine's response to Petruchio and dismiss obedience as an irritating command rather than as a call to listen and pay attention. Cracks in their marriages are already visible. Spouses are people to put up with and tolerate. They get in the way of desire. The widow says:

Lord, let me never have a cause to sigh,  
Til I be brought to such a silly pass (5.2.127–8).

Hearing a spouse's call is a "silly pass" "And Bianca, the idealized Petrarchan woman, is already briskly critiquing her groom. When Lucentio—who pursued Bianca in the tradition of courtly love—gently scolds his wife:

I would your duty were as foolish, too.  
The wisdom of your duty, fair Bianca,  
Hath cost me five hundred crowns (5.2.130–2).

Bianca replies: "The more fool you are for laying on my duty" (5.2.133). Only a fool, she ridicules, would pay attention to obedience.

In contrast to Petruchio and Katherine who are in the process of creating a marriage of mutuality and intimacy, the two newly married couples lack the awareness that there are more possibilities in spousal relationships than putting up with the annoyances and banalities of life. These women are prepared to take on their husbands as sources of exasperation.

One final note: Is there evidence that Petruchio's taming treatment of Katherine is intended to do more than merely control his wife and put her in her submissive place? Evidence can be found in act 3, scene 2. Petruchio himself is willing to be a listening husband as much as he desires a listening wife. When he shows up in a beggar's costume for his marriage, Petruchio is criticized by Katherine's father and reminded that his clothing does "shame to your estate, / An eye-sore to our solemn festival" (3.2.93–4).

Petruchio replies:

To me she's married, not unto my clothes.  
Could I repair what she will wear in me,  
As I can change these poor accoutrements (3.2.110–12).

Petruchio confesses his awareness of his faults. Marriage, he says, will require changes of him that are more complex than merely changing clothes. He instructs his father-in-law, that marriage is a bond between persons requiring mindfulness and high intention. It is more demanding than adhering to custom or obeying a dress code and a rigid etiquette. Marriage, Petruchio implies, cuts deeply into the sanctuary of the self, to the place of desire and choice. Marriage is a rhythm that compels obedience: one spouse calls the other, and the other pays attention. Katherine has learned to give up exasperation when life fails to give her what she wants. She listens to her husband, to his desire, and entertains his categories of reality and ways of perceiving the world before drawing a conclusion. In this practice of obedience, displays of intimacy appear and give

rise to the possibility of an exuberant conjugal relationship. On the contrary, exasperation suffocates intimacy, closes the mind, turns attention away from the other, ridiculing spousal claims, and lamenting the loss of identity and desire. Ultimately, exasperation denies the power of the self to be an agent of intimacy.

Paradoxical intervention affects Petruchio and Katherine to different degrees. Their outbursts cease; their quarreling abates. Each seems to understand that obedience is the threshold to intimacy. Katherine has become, like Petruchio, not tamed but shrewd. At the conclusion of the play, Katherine, having been acquitted from the domination of Whistle Berries, more clearly than Petruchio is on the path to realizing the generative potency of marriage.

If comedy as a literary form celebrates the release of human beings from the things that limit the energy and expression of life, then *The Taming of the Shrew* dramatizes the power to hear, to pay attention, and to be obedient to the call to intimacy rather than surrender to the tyranny of exasperation.

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