The Taming of the Shrew

The Taming of the Shrew is almost the only one of Shakespeare's comedies that has a regular plot, and downright moral. It is full of bustle, animation, and rapidity of action. It shows admirably how self-will is only to be got the better of by stronger will, and how one degree of ridiculous perversity is only to be driven out by another still greater. Petruchio is a madman in his senses; a very honest fellow, who hardly speaks a word of truth, and succeeds in all his tricks and impostures. He acts his assumed character to the life, with the most fantastical extravagance, with complete presence of mind, with untired animal spirits, and without a particle of ill humour from beginning to end.—The situation of poor Katherine, worn out by his incessant persecutions, becomes at last almost as pitiable as it is ludicrous, and it is difficult to say which to admire most, the unaccountableness of his actions, or the unalterableness of his resolutions. It is a character which most husbands ought to study, unless perhaps the very audacity of Petruchio's attempt might alarm them more than his success would encourage them. What a sound must the following speech carry to some married ears!

> “ Think you a little din can daunt my ears?
> Have I not in my time heard lions roar?
> Have I not heard the sea, puff'd up with winds,
> Rage like an angry boar, chafed with sweat?
> Have I not heard great ordnance in the field?
> And heav'n's artillery thunder in the skies?
> Have I not in a pitched battle heard
> Loud larums, neighing steeds, and trumpets clang?
> And do you tell me of a woman's tongue,
> That gives not half so great a blow to hear,
> As will a chestnut in a farmer's fire?

Not all Petruchio's rhetoric would persuade more than 'some dozen followers' to be of this heretical way of thinking. He unfolds his scheme for the Taming of the Shrew, on a principle of contradiction, thus:

> “ I'll 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 volubility,
> And say she uttereth piercing eloquence:
> If she do bid me pack, I'll give her thanks,
> As tho' she bid me stay by her a week;

> If she deny to wed, I'll crave the day,
> When I shall ask the banns, and when be married.

He accordingly gains her consent to the match, by telling her father that he has got it; disappoints her by not returning at the time he has promised to wed her, and when he returns, creates no small consternation by the oddity of his dress and equipage. This however is nothing to the astonishment excited by his madbrained behaviour at the marriage. Here is the account of it by an eye-witness:

> “ Gremio. Tut, she's a lamb, a dove, a fool to him;
> I'll tell you. Sir Lucentio; when the priest
> Should ask if Katherine should be his wife?
> Ay, by gogs woons, quoth he; and swore so loud,
> That, all amaz'd, the priest let fall the book;
> And as he stooped again to take it up,
> This mad-brain'd bridegroom took him such a cuff,
> That down fell priest and book, and book and priest.
> Now take them up, quoth he, if any list.
>
> Tronio. What said the wench when he rose up again?
>
> Gremio. Trembled and shook; for why, he stamp'd and swore,
> As if the vicar meant to cozen him.
> But after many ceremonies done,
> He calls for wine; a health, quoth he; as if
> He'd been aboard carousing with his mates
> After a storm; quaft off the muscadel,
> And threw the sops all in the sexton's face;
> Having no other cause but that his beard
> Grew thin and hungerly, and seem'd to ask
> His sops as he was drinking. This done, he took
> The bride about the neck, and kiss'd her lips
> With such a clamorous smack, that at their parting
> All the church echoed; and I seeing this,
> Came thence for very shame; and after me,
> I know, the rout is coming;—
> Such a mad marriage never was before.

The most striking and at the same time laughable feature in the character of Petruchio throughout, is the studied approximation to the intractable character of real madness, his apparent insensibility to all external considerations, and utter indifference to everything but the wild and extravagant freaks of his own self-will. There is no contending with a person on whom nothing makes any impression but his own purposes, and who is bent on his own whims just in proportion as they seem to want common-sense. With him a thing's being plain and reasonable is a reason against it. The airs he gives himself are infinite, and his caprices as sudden as they are groundless. The whole of his treatment of his wife at

home is in the same spirit of ironical attention and inverted gallantry. Everything flies before his will, like a conjurer's wand, and he only metamorphoses his wife's temper by metamorphosing her senses and all the objects she sees, at a word's speaking. Such are his insisting that it is the moon and not the sun which they see, &c. This extravagance reaches its most pleasant and poetical height in the scene where, on their return to her father's, they meet old Vincentio, whom Petruchio immediately addresses as a young lady:

> Petruchio. Good morrow, gentle mistress, where away?
> 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 do spangle heaven with such beauty,
> As those two eyes become that heav'nly face?
> Fair lovely maid, once more good day to thee:
> Sweet Kate, embrace her for her beauty's sake.
>
> Hortensio. He'll make the man mad to make a woman of him.
>
> Katherine. 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
> Allot thee for his lovely bed-fellow.
>
> Petruchio. Why, how now, Kate, I hope thou art not mad:
> This is a man, old, wrinkled, faded, wither'd,
> And not a maiden, as thou say'st he is.
>
> Katherine. Pardon, old father, my mistaken eyes
> That have been so bedazed with the sun
> That everything I look on seemeth green.
> Now I perceive thou art a reverend father.

The whole is carried on with equal spirit, as if the poet's comic Muse had wings of fire. It is strange how one man could be so many things; but so it is. The concluding scene, in which trial is made of the obedience of the new-married wives (so triumphantly for Petruchio), is a very happy one.—In some parts of this play there is a little too much about music-masters and masters of philosophy. They were things of greater rarity in those days than they are now. Nothing, however, can be better than the advice which Tranio gives his master for the prosecution of his studies:

> The mathematics, and the metaphysics,
> Fall to them as you find your stomach serves you:

> No profit grows, where is no pleasure ta’en:
> In brief, sir, study what you most affect.

We have heard the Honey–Moon called ‘an elegant Katherine and Petruchio’. We suspect we do not understand this word *elegant* in the sense that many people do. But in our sense of the word, we should call Lucentio’s description of his mistress elegant:

> “ Tranio. I saw her coral lips to move,
> And with her breath she did perfume the air:
> Sacred and sweet was all I saw in her.

When Biondello tells the same Lucentio for his encouragement, ‘I knew a wench married in an afternoon as she went to the garden for parsley to stuff a rabbit, and so may you, sir’—there is nothing elegant in this, and yet we hardly know which of the two passages is the best.

The Taming of the Shrew is a play within a play. It is supposed to be a play acted for the benefit of Sly the tinker, who is made to believe himself a lord, when he wakes after a drunken brawl. The character of Sly and the remarks with which he accompanies the play are as good as the play itself. His answer when he is asked how he likes it, ‘Indifferent well; ’tis a good piece of work, would ’twere done,’ is in good keeping, as if he were thinking of his Saturday night’s job. Sly does not change his tastes with his new situation, but in the midst of splendour and luxury still calls out lustily and repeatedly ‘for a pot o’ the smallest ale’. He is very slow in giving up his personal identity in his sudden advancement. ‘I am Christophero Sly, call not me honour nor lordship. I ne’er drank sack in my life: and if you give me any conserves, give me conserves of beef; ne’er ask me what raiment I’ll wear, for I have no more doublets than backs, no more stockings than legs, nor no more shoes than feet, nay, sometimes more feet than shoes, or such shoes as my toes look through the over-leather.—What, would you make me mad? Am not I Christophero Sly, old Sly’s son of Burtonheath, by birth a pedlar, by education a cardmaker, by transmutation a bear-herd, and now by present profession a tinker? Ask Marian Hacket, the fat alewife of Wincot, if she know me not; if she say I am not fourteen-pence on the score for sheer ale, score me up for the lying’st knave in Christendom.’

This is honest. ‘The Slies are no rogues’, as he says of himself. We have a great predilection for this representative of the family; and what makes us like him the better is, that we take him to be of kin (not many degrees removed) to Sancho Panza.

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