
Forum

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***The Taming of the Shrew*, by Shakespeare and Others**

To the Editor:

In the May 1992 issue of *PMLA* you have printed a study by Barbara Hodgdon called "Katherina Bound; or, Play(K)ating the Strictures of Everyday Life" (107 [1992]: 538–53). Once past this trendy title, what do we find? *The Taming of the Shrew*, a text about four hundred years old, reflecting the views of a patriarchal society, is blamed and ridiculed for expressing the general consensus of that time and place. Calling Kate's final speech "recipe discourse for a patriarchal dish to be swallowed whole" is just a crude way of saying that Kate is at fault when reflecting the author's views. Hodgdon goes on, "Kate ventriloquizes the voice of Shakespeare's culture and lets it colonize her body" (541). Kate is Shakespeare's mouthpiece. It is an entirely different question to examine whether the views of his time have lost validity by now.

Hodgdon admits that she is "overreading" Shakespeare and that she hankers for the "texts that lurk in [the play's] margins" (539, 538). She needs more to buttress her arguments and introduces lines by a recent author, Charles Marowitz. She says that he "unsettles the value systems authorized by 'high art'" (540). Actually, that witless scene of buggery is out of place. It clarifies nothing. Graffiti smeared on a surface remain surface dirt; they do not demolish a construction.

It is worth noting that elsewhere in her study Hodgdon blames Columbia Pictures' *Taming of the Shrew* as "perhaps even more infamous for its credit line, 'by William Shakespeare with additional dialogue by Samuel Taylor'" (543). If so, how infamous is Charles Marowitz? It would be fair to judge offenses with equal weights.

Unjustified assumptions are everywhere in her piece. Hodgdon finds "near rape" in the Induction; she also asserts that the play "shares affinities with pornographic films." She does not substantiate these accusations, because they are spurious. There is no whiff of obscenity in the text she is trying to revise.

When Petruchio is beastly to his servants, to the tradesmen, and to Kate, it is wrong to call him sadistic. The label suggests that he derives emotional satisfaction from being brutish. Sadism implies a lustful pleasure in humiliating others.

When Hodgdon calls a country house “reminiscent of remote Sadean territories,” she strives for an unwarranted association (539). That country retreat would have evoked in Elizabethan times the setting of the hugely popular *Decameron*. Bits of Freud, Sade, or Foucault only help in obscuring Shakespeare.

Finally, it is not fruitful to compare the Elizabethan habit of using boy actors to play female roles with present-day transvestism. The two phenomena have clearly very different causes and hence do not illuminate each other. It is misleading to suggest that because the actor playing Kate is a boy, her words and actions in the final scene of the play can be moving “between masculine and feminine positions” (540). Uneven doses of behavior traits labeled masculine or feminine can be encountered every day of our lives among the people we meet. This was true also four hundred years ago. The oscillation of Kate’s speech is in the nature of things. There seems no need to credit it to the existence of a boy actor.

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To the Editor:

The main problem with performance-oriented literary criticism of Shakespeare is that it too often lends itself to facile interpretations. In the case of Barbara Hodgdon’s article (“Katherina Bound; or, Play[K]ating the Strictures of Everyday Life”), we can dismiss the trivializing aspect of the punning in her title and turn rather to the argument itself. For example, in discussing the Burton-Taylor *Shrew*, Hodgdon starts a paragraph off by alluding to the titular figure’s “refusal to listen to dirty jokes” (546); surely the subject of salacious humor should be as foreign to *PMLA* as to the playwright himself. To introduce such a stereotype into discussion of such a drama (which was basically a response to the medieval wife-beating farce and not itself farcical) is to belittle the play’s value. It might also be contended that any notion that sexuality is “dirty” would have been the furthest thing from the minds of Shakespeare and of his characters (who had common sense enough to know that what is “natural” is not in itself smutty). The distance between the play and the film is particularly evident when Hodgdon admits that some of the “box-office success” of the Zeffirelli production derived from what she allows was “viewers’ voyeuristic fascination with its stars.”

Further, in asserting that “*Shrew* is (always) already popular culture,” she minimizes the impact of this

nonfarcical drama, putting it in the same category as Hollywoodish slapstick. Clearly, the very term *popular culture*, stressing the adjective to the detriment of *Kultur*, almost always has drawbacks. The basic value of this play is partly in its mythic relation to the *Märchen* tradition, granted, but that is no reason to go out of one’s way to be anti-intellectual. The claim that “George Sidney’s 1953 film of Cole Porter’s *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) moves ‘Shakespeare’ even more definitively toward its popular origins” is beyond the pale, for a musical comedy is surely as far from the true man from Stratford as a Verdi opera is closer to him. To add to the demotion, Hodgdon enlists no less than “*Playboy*’s inaugural issue” in her defense (547), as if pornography were not at the opposite end of what a dramatist “not of an age, but for all time” was truly after. (I applaud the correspondent in the *English Journal* who protests that “a reference made to” *Playboy* there is improper in a learned, academic periodical [81 (1992): 97].)

Taking the perspective of some feminist critics, Hodgdon reports on Carol Neely’s observation about the “tendency . . . to tame Kate’s taming in order to fracture the play’s patriarchal panopticism” (541). This drama, however, was historically not geared to any patriarchal tendencies; if anything, what shines through at the end is what even feminists often acknowledge is true “mutuality” in Kate’s final big speech. The major taming device used throughout is rather that of falconry: the image of the falconer artfully controlling his bird (what was called “manning the haggard”). The relation of falconer to falcon, moreover, is scarcely “patriarchal.” It is key imagery like this that is missed in the filming of some of Shakespeare’s plays. Instead we get in Hodgdon’s account passing gratuitous innuendos on such matters as Taylor’s “frequent successes in ‘bitch’ roles” (surely her support for AIDS victims is not one of them) and on how “the game in Zeffirelli’s film is to exchange ‘Hump the Hostess’ for ‘Get the Guests’ ” (545; as if the dramatist would ever have allowed for “gamey” delights of this sort).

All this is not to insist that Hodgdon is stagestruck (she is obviously well qualified to speak on her subject), though an element or two of that tendency does shine through. But it does show how far we have got from what Shakespeare wanted.

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To the Editor:

Barbara Hodgdon’s “Katherina Bound” repeats the notorious tale that the 1929 Pickford-Fairbanks *Shrew*