



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

One for the Money, Two for the Shrew – A Personal Perspective on Shakespeare & Chauvinism

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My elder daughter, Kathrynne, and I are two physicists with theatrical ambitions. Together we want to direct a performance of Shakespeare's comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*. We share a conviction that humor bears much potential for nurturing gender equity. However, we have yet to see a performance of the play realize this potential to our satisfaction, despite having witnessed more than fifteen different productions between us. Some have been highly entertaining but often for what we regard as the wrong reasons. We would like to stage a production that is amusing for the right reasons, the reasons we believe Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote the play.

I want to make clear at the outset today I have no academic credentials that would entitle me to speak on Shakespeare with authority, and I certainly have no theatrical training to prepare me for my directorial debut. I do attend performances of Shakespeare frequently, however, and I began taking my daughters with me when they were barely old enough to comprehend adult conversation, in the hopes that they would become equally comfortable with Elizabethan blank verse, a strategy that my younger daughter, Athena, now assures me succeeded. By the time they graduated from high school, each had seen performed all but four of the thirty-eight plays in the Shakespearean canon.

While I have always been merely a spectator in the world of theatre, Kathrynne does bring some directorial experience to our enterprise. In the spring of 1996, she became, to the best of my knowledge, the only person ever to direct a performance of Shakespeare at the Clarendon Laboratory in Oxford, England. She was eleven at the time. It was my wife Patti's sabbatical year from the Harvey Mudd College physics department, and I had persuaded the Jet Propulsion Laboratory to send me abroad to learn from a world expert how to retrieve atmospheric constituent profiles from infrared spectra. Kathrynne's acting troupe consisted of the daughters of physicists and other new friends that she had met at school. For the better part of the academic year, they rehearsed *Twelfth Night* on a weekly basis while snacking on Patti's oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. Athena, at the age of eight, played six parts, each having one line. One Oxford don was quite taken aback that his daughter Agnieszka was learning about Shakespeare from Americans. Right up until the day of the production, Kathrynne nearly despaired of pulling it off. Two cast members failed to memorize their lines: Agnieszka read from cue cards, and Kathrynne had to substitute for the other. Nevertheless, the performance was a resounding success - Malvolio stole the show with his speech about how "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Afterward Patti and I gave each cast member a T-shirt: Kathrynne's read "Despondent Director".

Ever since this experience Kathrynne and I have been working together on our interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew*. This play portrays the immemorial battle between the sexes, and when it comes to rooting, she and I have always been, as it were, two for the shrew.

The forces of patriarchy arrayed against the heroine are staggering. Not only do all the men of her acquaintance revile her, she has not a single ally among those of her own gender. And to make matters worse, she must often contend with the gender biases of directors, even among those who are sympathetic to her plight. Nevertheless, in the end, she proves admirably resourceful.

In the very first sentence of his introduction to the Royal Shakespeare Company edition of this play, the scholar Jonathan Bate poses three questions that a director needs to consider:

Is the heroine really a shrew?
Should we call her Katharina?
Is she really tamed?

Implicit in each of these questions is a barrier to achieving gender equality. The first question addresses the harmful influence of gender-based stereotypes. We all have our own favorite examples. Mine is the contention that women are by nature ill suited to rigorous analytical thinking. I find this myth particularly aggravating, given that my wife has a PhD from Cornell in physics, my elder daughter is finishing a PhD in astrophysics at Penn State, and my younger daughter will enter a PhD program in mathematics this fall at the University of Colorado. Athena informs me that, in recent years, popular clothing stores that cater to young women have cultivated this myth by selling T-shirts that read "Too pretty for math" or "Allergic to algebra". Unfortunately the source of the problem is not restricted to patriarchal capitalists. In graduate school Patti once wrote a letter to the editor of Ms. magazine, complaining that their issue listing the top 100 women to watch did not include a single woman from the fields of science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. What message did that issue convey to young girls with a passion for mathematics?

In our play the pernicious stereotype in question is that a strong, angry, and independent woman must necessarily be a shrew. Katharina can be petulant and prone to feel sorry for herself, but scholars increasingly acknowledge that she doesn't fit the shrew stereotype very well, at least according to its strict dictionary definition - a woman given to railing or scolding, or other perverse or malignant behavior. She is, in fact, a woman of few words, and her put-downs are often more witty than scolding. And despite her ill treatment, she continues throughout the play to address each of her male antagonists as "sir". If you have seen a production where Katharina is introduced in a violent rage throwing objects against a wall, please be aware that none of this behavior is in Shakespeare's text. It is simply how the director has tried to convince you that she is indeed a shrew.

To emphasize the play's contemporary relevance, Kathryn and I are planning a modern dress production. It will attempt to follow how we see Shakespeare actually using the word *shrew* in the play, namely, as a pejorative term invoked by insecure men of modest intelligence to describe a woman they fear, a regrettable practice that, in our experience, persists today, though perhaps the word *shrew* is less popular now than some other choice epithets.

We want to establish Katharina's temperament at the outset. Imagine a darkened stage. A battle cry pierces the air, and, as the stage lights come up, we find ourselves in a martial arts studio where a master is leading a class through a synchronized series of moves that provide training in the art of self-defense. All the students but Katharina are male.

The answer to Jonathan Bate's second question, "Should we call the heroine *Katharina*?" is "Yes, that's her name." This question reveals a second obstacle in the path toward establishing gender equity, for how we are identified affects how we are treated. I find it curious that most scholars and critics who write about this play, including, in particular, those who regard it as a vicious misogynistic attack on women, refer to the heroine as *Kate*. This suggests to me that they have a tendency, perhaps unconscious, to view Katharina from Petruchio's perspective, that is, from a patriarchal perspective. Petruchio wants to impose a new identity on her, and part of his strategy is to give her a new name. Our production, however, aspires to present the action from Katharina's point-of-view. If we are going to respect her inherent worth and dignity, the least we can do is call her by the name she chooses to go by.

For me this is more than an academic question. It is not entirely a coincidence that my elder daughter's forename is similar to that of the play's heroine. (For the record, my daughter's given middle name is Juliet.) When she was an infant, my wife and I affectionately called her Kate or Katie. Upon reaching the age of five, however, without having yet seen a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew*, she politely explained that her name was *Kathryne*, not *Kate*. To us she has been *Kathryne* ever since.

Once she became acquainted with the play, I believe Kathryne learned a few things from Katharina about defending her identity. At the age of twelve and attending her third season at the Utah Shakespearean Festival, she dined one evening at the Royal Feast - its theme was "Titania's Enchantment". At one point during the festivities, Oberon, the presiding fairy king, approached our table and asked Kathryne to dance. Having already devoted several years to training in classical ballet and destined to become a member of the Pasadena Dance Theatre company, she was only too happy to accept his invitation. (Actually he sought her sister's hand first, but Athena, who prefers basketball to ballet, declined.) Once on the dance floor, she identified herself, "My name is Kathryne." Without acknowledging his source, he responded, "No, you are called plain Kate, and bonny Kate, and the prettiest Kate in Christendom, Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate." Immediately recognizing what had been tactfully omitted from this speech, she countered, "Just don't call me 'Kate the curst!'" At which point, the fairy king broke out in uproarious laughter.

Jonathan Bate's third question, "Is Katharina really tamed?" gets to the heart of what has remained controversial about this play for over 400 years. The play's title implies that Petruchio subdues Katharina. He boasts ostentatiously about his conquest in the final act where, at his urging, she exhorts wives to obey their husbands - and she certainly doesn't state explicitly that she is just joking. Indeed one critic, Professor Stevie Davies, laments, "Women endured centuries of purgatory to redeem themselves from the abusive attitudes enshrined in *The Taming of the Shrew*."

Kathryne and I don't believe that abusive attitudes are "enshrined" in this play; they are just the daunting forces that Katharina must confront. Despite having endured public humiliation at her wedding, starvation, and sleep deprivation, she somehow finds the inner strength to withstand her husband's abuse, insisting at last that, "I will be free/Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words." This is a heroic speech and was recognized as such by the suffragettes in England who found a kindred spirit in Katharina in their early twentieth-century campaign for voting rights.

Resistance is a necessary step in fighting gender bias. At a recent mathematics conference Athena learned that JC Penny and Forever 21 no longer sell "Too pretty for math" T-shirts, largely due to complaints submitted by female mathematicians. Although critics often fail to notice, Katharina's resistance is equally successful, at least in so far as Petruchio ceases to be physically abusive after her declaration of freedom – he may pretend not to have heard her, but his actions indicate otherwise.

At the banquet in the final act, Petruchio's chauvinistic colleagues goad him into an exorbitant and irresponsible wager on his wife's obedience. He behaves like a teenage boy whose wounded vanity prompts him to issue an ill-conceived challenge or dare. In Virginia Woolf's words, he is still mired in the "private-school stage of human existence." When he proposes the wager, does he know he is going to win? The question is best answered, I think, in one performance I saw where he immediately turns toward heaven to pray. Katharina has given him no reason to believe that she has been tamed by his abuse, but her newly acquired aptitude for acting gives him reason for optimism that she might pretend to be obedient. But why, you may ask, would she freely choose to masquerade at the banquet as a patriarchal fantasy figure?

It is here, Kathryne and I believe, that directors and critics often fail to look at things from Katharina's perspective. Remember that, at the play's beginning, she has no friends, and at its end, she has but one. Other than her husband, everyone she knows still scorns her, and, lest we have forgotten this, Shakespeare begins the last scene by having Hortensio's wife tease Petruchio for being married to a shrew. Early in the play Katharina has bemoaned, "I will go sit and weep/Till I can find occasion of revenge." In my theatrical experience, the protagonist who vows vengeance in act one usually achieves it in the final act.

I must confess that I find it hard not to admire the sheer ingenuity of Katharina's mode of vengeance – sowing the seeds of discord in every heterosexual marriage present. Unfortunately her panegyric on obedience sometimes has the same effect on members of the audience who do not realize that she is pretending or who have been misled by a misinformed director. The husbands leave the banquet discontent, envying Petruchio, and wishing their wives were more like Katharina, while the wives squirm rightfully at the inequity of her speech. To Katharina, this must all be quite amusing. It is merely a welcome bonus that her performance may also endear her to her husband.

So here then is Shakespeare's fundamental message: proclaiming that women are inferior to men is like asserting that the sun is the moon or that an old man is a young budding virgin – it's absurd. The conclusion of the play is too rooted in real-world dilemmas to provide a romantic fairy-tale ending, where the lovers live happily ever after. Rather it issues a challenge. Has Katharina's theatrical performance convinced Petruchio to acknowledge that she is his equal, at least in the art of pretense? Or must she continue to feign obedience to keep him happy? Shakespeare does not let on. Tomorrow morning Petruchio may demand breakfast in bed, and Katharina, grateful finally to have someone with her interests at heart, may oblige. Alternatively, she may refuse, insisting that she deserves breakfast in bed since after all, it was she who won his bet for him. And who knows how Petruchio will respond? Will he move beyond his patriarchal prejudices? My family has a saying, "Don't attribute to malice what is due to stupidity." He may prove educable. Like society, he's a work in progress.

Even if Petruchio's awakening is slow in coming, however, Katharina's struggle for equality may ultimately bear fruit. My career has been spent at the juncture of two academic disciplines that have proven remarkably resistant to advances in gender equity – physics and computer science. In graduate school, I was warned that male physicists don't become feminists on behalf of their wives; they become feminists on behalf of their daughters. I can readily imagine Petruchio becoming absolutely incensed when his daughter first encounters gender bias.

If this happens, Petruchio may be surprised to learn the extent to which gender bias is embedded in the very language that we speak. Once we are asked, for example, to identify who is taming whom or whether a wife is a shrew or a subordinate, other more enlightened alternatives are easier to ignore. In 2010 researchers at Yale studied gender bias in physics, chemistry, and biology by sending out résumés describing a young job applicant. The résumés were all identical except that half listed the applicant's first name as *John* and the other half as *Jennifer*. You probably won't be surprised to learn that, on average, the respondents ranked *John* higher than *Jennifer*. What may surprise you is that this result was true independent of the respondent's age, sex, area of specialization, or level of seniority. It came as no surprise to my wife, however, who explained to me that when she writes letters of recommendation for her physics students and wants to convey that two are of comparable ability, she must vary her language depending upon the gender of the student.

It is not always easy to recognize gender bias, let alone overcome it, even for those of us who are genuinely committed. But we must try not to let gender-based expectations blind us to unanticipated possibilities. From family experience, I can attest that ballerinas do sometimes become astrophysicists and basketball players do sometimes turn into mathematicians.

My daughters' generation has the means to make progress. Kathryn plans to forgo a post-doctoral position in academic research and apply directly for a fellowship in government to promote the advancement of women in science and education. The best strategy, however, may simply be to demonstrate that chauvinistic attitudes are archaic. By using humor, especially in the form of irony, to promote gender equality, Shakespeare was far ahead of his time. There is a part of me that hopes a few years from now when Athena accepts her PhD in

mathematics, she will emulate Katharina and use the occasion to mock patriarchal expectations by wearing her “Too pretty for math” T-shirt. It’s hard for injustice to sustain itself if it can be made to look preposterous.