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“I Warrant You We Will Play Our Parts”: The Role of Performance in *The Taming of the Shrew*

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Abstract

Shakespeare’s play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, has a long and contentious history due to the discontinuities regarding its portrayal of naturalized gender hierarchies. This paper seeks to complicate a prescriptive reading of the play’s gender politics by unpacking the role of metatheatrics and gender performance within its narrative. This paper draws on historicist and Shakespearean scholars to highlight how its metatheatrical Induction and the role of gender performativity call attention to the instability and artifice of early-modern patriarchy. The play’s Induction establishes a framework of performance that undermines the misogyny of the events in Padua, for it forces the audience to question the stability of gender as a fixed marker of identity. Thus, the narratives of the play, which depend upon the double-layered performance of gender, effectively denaturalize gendered roles and behaviors. By revealing the performative nature of gender and marriage, *The Taming of the Shrew* disrupts, but does not overthrow, the very norms that drive its plot. The paper ultimately argues that *The Taming of the Shrew* neither condemns nor supports its inherent sexisms; rather, it utilizes a complex depiction of gender to challenge patriarchal constructions of gender and converse with the various tensions that threatened the social world of the early modern period.
It would be naive to assert that Shakespeare’s drama *The Taming of the Shrew* is neither contentious nor problematic. Since its first performance in early-modern England, scholars, audiences, and fellow playwrights have debated the play’s portrayal of female submission and male dominance. Its representation of women is overtly misogynistic; its narrative only concludes when a headstrong woman succumbs to her domineering husband through a hyperbolic speech defending naturalized female subordination. The play-text is laden, however, with implicit contradictions to this message of a naturalized gender hierarchy. Following oppressive silence, women speak out. Moments of submissive conceding are paired with ironic language and farcical humor. The overarching negotiations of power, gender, and marriage are seemingly inconclusive and the interpretations of these fluid gender dynamics are multivocal, shaping not only contemporary stagings of this play but also our understanding of the culture and social world of early-modern England.

I argue that the play neither opposes nor supports the patriarchal themes it presents. Rather, *The Taming of the Shrew* reveals the social tension between traditional gender roles and the performative nature of gender, a prevalent political issue in Elizabethan England. The story is not so much a moral play as an experimental one, operating within the structures of patriarchy while still productively destabilizing those same norms. *The Taming of the Shrew* demonstrates that enduring gender norms—namely marital roles, submissive femininity, and masculine power—are performative in nature. While the textual characters perform roles within their metatheatrical social world, the play itself propounds that the customs which propel its narrative are also performed acts and structures. In recognizing the performativity of marriage and gender, the play admits to the instability of these roles and relations, thereby challenging, but not overthrowing, the norms driving its plot. This reading of *The Taming of the Shrew* destabilizes the insistence on a binary reading of the text, making space for a more complex understanding of gender and power, as well as of the Early Modern period itself.

Shakespeare’s use of an Induction within the context of this play is vital for understanding the conflicts it presents. In theater, inductions—explanatory scenes that precede the main text of the play—serve to summarize the bigger stories they frame, frequently commenting upon or moralizing the following narrative. The Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew*, due to its seemingly dislocated purpose in the plot of the play, is often omitted from performance and film interpretation. The inclusion or exclusion of this piece of text, however, drastically alters how the audience is invited into the story. In this short scene, a beggar, Christopher Sly, passes out in a bar and is carried to the house of wealthy Lord. This Lord and his servants plan to perform a grand hoax on the beggar: the lord’s pageboy is instructed to dress up as a woman and play the role of Sly’s submissive wife. When Sly awakens in wealthy garb and sees his wife, he believes himself to be a master and lord. A troupe of actors then arrives to entertain him, and the play they perform constitutes the plot of *The Taming of the Shrew*. 
The main plot in Padua, performed by the Lord’s men of the Induction, centers on Kate and Bianca, the daughters of a wealthy merchant, Baptista, who avows that no suitor may court the demure Bianca until Kate, the ill-tempered “shrew,” is married. Two suitors orchestrate elaborate disguises in order to remain in Bianca’s company and woo her into marriage. Meanwhile, Petruchio, a brazen man from Verona, arrives in Padua, intending to find a wealthy bride. Upon meeting Kate, the two engage in a verbal battle of wits; Petruchio secures her hand in marriage by falsely telling Baptista that she has consented to marry him. After the wedding, Petruchio announces a plan to “tame” Kate into submission and she eventually succumbs to Petruchio’s abuses. Against the wishes of her father, Bianca chooses a suitor, and at her wedding banquet, the guests are shocked to see Kate’s changed behavior. Kate then delivers a speech endorsing the submission of wives to their husbands; the guests acknowledge Petruchio’s victory over her shrewishness. The play concludes but never returns to the original plot of the Induction.

The play as a whole is metatheatrical, for the use of the Induction draws attention to The Taming of the Shrew’s very nature as a work of drama, creating two layers of performance. The Induction, then, provides an entry point into the play “that flags performance, deception, and trickery involving impersonation and role-playing” (Mitchell 240) as central to the plot, establishing a metatheatrical framework for the play. The Induction communicates, above all else, that gender can be believably performed. Both the Lord’s Page as well as Elizabethan male and boy actors perform as women, creating a double-layered performance wherein the actors are both performing as the Lord’s men who in turn perform as the characters of the play proper. Michael Shapiro notes, however, that the use of male actors in female roles “was not merely a latent metatheatrical fact, but became explicit when Sly’s defiant response to the Hostess’ threat to call the police includes the line, ‘I’ll not budge an inch, boy’” (Shapiro 150). By calling attention to the true gender of the Hostess, the Induction underscores its own theatrical artifice: this gendered word reminds the audiences that the female characters are theatrical constructs. The Induction “inevitably [leads] to an awareness that these male performers were offering versions of femininity” (Shapiro 146-147) based in cultural norms, conduct books, and marriage manuals, rather than an essential or biological construct of womanhood. In fact, the Lord himself asserts that the construction of Sly’s marriage is but “a flatt’ring dream, or worthless fancy” (Shakespeare, Induction, 1.40). Because actors knowingly present inaccurate constructions of femininity and audiences knowingly engage with these “fancies,” the metatheatrical frame “generate[s] deconstructive power” (Shapiro 144), meaning that gender must be inherently performative and in service to a specific, dream-like end in order for the play to continue.

The Induction literally sets the stage for a play dependent on the actors’ productions of gender and the characters’ abilities to create gender identity through performance. The characters in the Induction attest to their performative roles: “my lord, I warrant you we will play our parts/As he shall think by our true diligence/He is no less that what we say he is” (Shakespeare
Induction 1.65-67). They promise an effective duping of Sly through their presentation of marital roles. Representations of gender dynamics, status, and power create the meaning of the play as well as the masculine identity of Sly. The male actors are aware that they represent constructions of gender dynamics just as the characters within the Induction are aware that marriage and submission can best be believably acted through exaggeration.

Such exaggeration is demonstrated in the lord’s verbose description of the ideal performance of femininity, necessitating twenty-five printed lines of prose that describe the proper “instructions” (Induction 1.126) of womanly behavior. These scenes in the Induction force the audience to think about the metatheatrical nature of theater itself, “[encouraging] an active engagement with representation as representation” (Smith 295). The Induction as a metatheatrical framework prevents gender expressions, particularly that of femininity, from settling into a stable position. Every role must be read through this fluid, unstable use of representation and performance. Thus, the Induction reveals that the role of a lord or a woman, and therefore the dynamics that form between them, is not essential or determined. So-called naturalized structures of power cannot take root on the stage.

The metatheatrical framework of the Induction, by its very nature as a framing tool, comments upon The Taming of the Shrew as a whole. The Induction moralizes and comments upon the larger text, so the metatheatrical performativity of the Induction claims a similar thematic drive for the characters of Padua. The lord’s hoax and the plots in Padua become inexorably linked both thematically and linguistically. Burns asserts that the argument over hunting in the Induction closely mimics the argument at the end of Act 5 over which of the three male characters possesses the best wife: “the final scene uses and re-uses the materials of the Induction and transposes them to higher terms” (Burns 88). Thus, the performance of the Induction, and all of its implications for the constructed representation of gender, reflects the performance exhibited within the social world of Padua. If the king’s actors of the Induction effectively perform sensationalized femininity and marital hierarchies, then it is likely that the male actor playing Kate would also knowingly perform the character’s submission under similar pretenses. As Smith argues, the “intersection between performance and gender” (289) is quickly established through various features, ultimately dominating the relationships and conclusions of the entire play. For example, the play frequently comments upon the difference between private and public behavior, conveying the character’s recognition that performance within the construction of their own social world dictates roles, behaviors, and norms. One’s role, therefore, is always subject to change.

Notably, Petruchio capitalizes on social performativity in order to secure his engagement to Kate. After the two speak in private and Kate verbally expresses distaste for Petruchio’s assertive marriage proposal, he nevertheless explains to the other men that Kate’s dissention is due to her predetermined role: “‘tis bargained twixt us twain being alone,/That she shall still
be curst in company” (Shakespeare 2.1.296-297). In this assertion, Petruchio implies that Kate’s identity and femininity are unfixed; she can fluidly move in and out of expectations of female behavior in order to appeal to a different social situation. Thus, socially performed roles, attitudes, and behaviors do not reveal truth but actually cloud meaning and intention. Similarly, performance enables Petruchio to knowingly embody and pursue various social roles throughout the play: first the fortune seeker, then the wooing romantic, and finally the aggressive husband. Petruchio explicitly reveals his plans to perform these roles, stating that he has “politicly begun [his] reign” (4.1.167-168), a word connoting not only the intentional organization of parts, but also scheming, crafting, or cunning behavior (“Politic” OED). Petruchio even tells the audiences that role-playing itself gains him power and status:

I attend her here,
And 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 (Shakespeare 2.1.166-169)

In Petruchio’s plots, performance is the primary means of attaining desired outcomes, similar to how the characters of the Induction knowingly and verbally act out various roles in order to dupe Sly. Gender, marriage, wooing, and submission are performed constructions that textual characters and actors alike use for their respective benefits.

One significant question emerges in light of this feature: what is the play’s attitude towards these performative constructions, particularly that of the submission and dominance dynamic which restores order at the conclusion of the play? While *The Taming of the Shrew* does not explicitly challenge patriarchy, the play’s metatheatrical performance of patriarchal systems, specifically marriage hierarchies and gender essentialism, reveals the systems as inherently unstable and unnatural. In fact, the behaviors of various characters, in an attempt to perform or enforce patriarchy, reverse the power of these structures. Petruchio’s dominance, Bianca’s wooing, and Kate’s submission are “performances of subjection and domination that actually reshape rather than reinforce gender hierarchies” (Smith 297).

Most notably, Petruchio’s severe actions against Kate reverse the power of patriarchy within his social world. His assertion of dominance eventually breeds sympathy for Kate in the other male characters. Grumio’s narration of Petruchio’s exaggerated performance at the wedding ceremony reveals that “the community does not voice its support of his enactment of patriarchy” (Smith 305). In a conversation following Kate and Petruchio’s marriage ceremony, Peter states that “he kills her in her own humor” (Shakespeare 4.1.160) and Curtis remarks that “she, poor soul,/Knows not which way to stand, to look, to speak/And sits as one new risen from a dream” (4.1.165-166). These two voices, among others, reveal that Petruchio’s patriarch-
chal dominance shames him rather than Kate. Curtis attests to his own soured perception of Petruchio following his aggressive performance at the wedding ceremony: “by this reckoning he is more shrew than she” (4.1.70). Similarly, Petruchio’s hasty and forced departure from the wedding banquet “is, in fact, most insulting to the […] host, Baptista, the father of the bride and ruling patriarch” (Smith 306). Thus, his marriage to Kate does not establish a neat and proper incorporation into their patriarchal society. Petruchio’s performance of patriarchy and dominance actually offends and sets him apart from that society.

Similarly, the wooing of Bianca works not to overthrow but instead to challenge constructions of patriarchy. Throughout the play, Bianca performs the role of the ideal woman: demure, gentle, and obedient. While scholars construe or critique her various suitors as vestiges of patriarchy, her marriage at the end of the play counters and opposes that very system; she chooses her husband without the consent of her patriarchal figurehead. Bianca’s father, Baptista, expresses explicit resentment towards her actions: “but do you hear, sir, have you married my/daughter without asking my good will?” (Shakespeare Act 5.2.114-115). He even refers to their marriage as “knavery” (5.2.118). While Bianca was able to adequately perform femininity early in the play, she eventually acts against the ideals and constructions of marriage and is not properly initiated into the system that she once performed and practiced.

Bianca’s behavior and speech changes drastically following her marriage. She becomes outspoken and direct, relying on sexual innuendos and witty retorts in her interactions with various male characters. The other men note this change, going so far as to claim that the bride has been “awakened” (5.2.42). Bianca’s prior performances of femininity are compared to the state of sleep, silence, or unconsciousness. Her awakening is not just one of coming into herself, but one of shaking off the performative layers that kept her subdued. Bianca’s former behavior may have been a believable performance. But this performance was ultimately false and unstable as she chooses to awaken when it serves her best.

Similarly, Kate’s performance of submission is marked by parody, skepticism, farce, and irony rather than indicative of proper wifely subordination. As the play progresses, her acts of submission become increasingly exaggerated, suggesting that Kate only mocks female subjection. In fact, Kate openly tells both Petruchio and the servants that she is parodying submission through the repetition of her husband’s commands, “thereby exposing her wifely submission as a calculated performance” (Smith 309):

PETRUCHIO. I say it is the moon.
KATE. I know it is the moon.
PETRUCHIO. Nay, then you lie. It is the blessed sun.
KATE. 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 for Katherine. (Shakespeare 4.5.20-23)

This subversive, even critical, tone towards Petruchio undermines the notion that she is in a position of pure submission and reverence. Kate has not been worn down by Petruchio’s berating; rather, she has strategically performed submission and informed the audience of her intentions. She then mocks Petruchio’s dominance through an elaborate use of irony: “My mistaking eyes,/That have been so bedazzled with the sun/That everything I look on seemeth green” (4.5.47-48). She appears to have conceded to Petruchio’s dominance and reign, but her language and calculated decisions to perform femininity undermine his authority by proving his methods of control to be ineffective and trivial. Most importantly, the play’s final lines express explicit doubt and suspicions regarding Kate’s taming, ultimately framing the final moment with a recognition of her performative submission: “‘tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so” (5.2.192). Even the characters who most closely witnessed Kate’s transformation into wifely subjection are skeptical of its validity and the play is left with this doubt as its final word on the matter. Thus, if the conclusion of the story is dependent on Kate’s submission, and she fails to assimilate to these constructs, then patriarchal marital hierarchies prove ineffective and unstable. Even those who appear to be “tamed” leave the audience wondering.

Kate’s final, complex speech of submission demands a nuanced reading, particularly considering the lingering effects of the Induction. Following Petruchio’s command to tell the other women what they owe their husbands, Kate states:

Thy husband is they lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
Thy head, thy sovereign—one that cares for thee,  
And for thy maintenance commits his body  
To painful labor both by sea and land,  
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,  
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe. (5.2.150-155)

Most notably, this passage contains language similar to that used in the Induction, where the male Page, by performing according to certain male fantasies, convinces Sly that “she” is his submissive wife. Kate’s declaration of female submission is linguistically linked to the Page’s performed acts of wifely duty. In fact, they are nearly interchangeable in content: “thy husband is thy lord [...] we are bound to love, serve, and obey” (5.2.150,168); “my husband and my
lord, my lord and husband/I am your wife in all obedience” (Induction 2.103-104). Thus, Kate’s speech could be seen as equally performative as the Page’s successful enactment of femininity and wifely duties. Just as the Page performs his vision of female behavior, so does Kate’s final speech function as “the final incarnation of an elaborately but transparently constructed ideal of upper-class femininity: that is to say, a doubly theatrical replication of a socially generated role” (Shapiro 166).

Thus, the performative nature of gender and marriage in The Taming of the Shrew functions in opposition to the long-upheld patriarchal norms that provoke and constrain its narrative. Kate’s exaggerated submission, Bianca’s femininity, and Petruchio’s dominance all reveal the inherent instability of gendered roles and hierarchies due to their performative nature; Kate effectively performs submission yet maintains power through irony and farce. Bianca properly performs her role as obedient daughter but ultimately undermines her father’s patriarchal power in order to fulfill patriarchal marriage norms. Petruchio’s performance of dominance actually opposes the patriarchy he set out to enforce, thereby damaging his position in the social world of Padua. If these gendered behaviors and structures are not naturalized, then they are not fixed and result in further social instability. Gender hierarchies, then, are ineffective systems of power. We can reasonably conclude that the play does not endorse these traditional structures but instead dramatizes their ineffectiveness and faults for the sake of humor. After all, The Taming of the Shrew conforms to the generic structure of comedy.

While the play might condemn certain elements of gender hierarchies, it notably fails to dismantle them; the plot still functions within these confines and necessitates a conclusion in which patriarchy maintains control, even when it is shown to be performative and unstable. The characters do destabilize gender hierarchies and patriarchal domination, but the male figures maintain social and economic power at the end of the play. This complex tension between the endorsement and condemnation of patriarchy dominating the text reads as a response to the social threats of early-modern England. Louis Adrian Montrose argues that the rule of Queen Elizabeth I heightened the focus on the performative nature of gender and power within the highly patriarchal society of early-modern England. Traditionally, “all forms of public and domestic authority in Elizabethan England were vested in men” (Montrose 64), meaning that the presence of a female ruler, whose position of power was justified not only by English law but also by divine order, would inevitably “generate peculiar tensions within such a ‘patriarchal’ society” (64-65). The presence of a female ruler subjected all English men to a female sovereign. This system of power, however, both disrupts and reaffirms patriarchal structures. Queen Elizabeth’s rule weakened male domination and asserts that the patriarchal political power typically attributed to men is actually a construct that women too can embody and perform. However, the public fixation and politicizing of her sexuality as well as her “difference to other women may have helped to reinforce” (80) male hegemony.
This anxiety regarding female sovereignty and the performative instability of patriarchal structures is present in *The Taming of the Shrew* as well as Shakespeare’s contemporaries who responded to his play with more overt social or political messaging about female subordination, suggesting the Elizabethan preoccupation with this social threat. If gender and power are only performative—meaning that a male Page can play a wife just as a Queen can operate in a traditionally male space of power—what implications does this performativity have on society? And further, does this necessitate reformative change?

Kate, Bianca, and the Page in the Induction all refer to their husbands as “lords,” using this title to qualify a woman’s inferiority to her spouse. This title would have had complex implications considering the presence of a female ruler, who was the ultimate authority over the lords of English society. With Queen Elizabeth as sovereign, the title of “lord” would not have possessed the same power or authority, for masculine authority was no longer the highest standard of control. This reordering of gendered roles evoked sexually charged metaphors of dominance and submission as English society grappled with the fact that there was a woman “on top.” In fact, Kate and Petruchio utilize this sexualized tone to discuss their relationship:

PETRUCHIO. Thou hast hit it; come sit on me.
KATE. Asses are made to bear, and so are you.
PETRUCHIO. Women are made to bear, and so are you.
KATE. No such jade as you, if me you mean. (Shakespeare 2.1.195-201)

This “banter precipitates a series of fluid power shifts” (Smith 300), for the pair consistently flip the hierarchical structuring of power, exposing its inherent instability and unfixed nature and “contradict[ing] the idea that courtship and marriage are changes in which women necessarily, by definition, lose” (300). Thus, *The Taming of the Shrew* operates within the tensions and anxieties around the intersections of power and gender, just as Elizabethan society experienced similar disruptions and threats.

*The Taming of the Shrew*, aware that power and gender are self-fashioning and unstable, is yet uncomfortable dismantling these configurations and secures patriarchy as the driving force and conclusive power for the plot. It is understandable, therefore, that there is no ending to the plot of the Induction. Sly is not presented with his own conclusion following Act 5, for revealing the end of Sly’s “dream” (Shakespeare Induction 1.40) would legitimize the fallout of the patriarchal systems that sustain his vision of masculine power. The “flatt’ring dream, [and] worthless fancy” (Shakespeare, Induction, 1.40) of female subordination is left dubiously unresolved, just as Kate’s final submission is questioned but not fully denied. In this sense, the play should not be interpreted as moral; it neither condemns nor supports the subjugation of women. Rather, the play’s double-layered, open-ended dialogue reveals the artifice and instability of socially
performative roles and power structures, the very ones that early-modern England feared to lose but could not fully embrace. Shakespeare’s controversial work is “a creation of Elizabethan culture: for it also creates the culture by which it is created, shapes the fantasies by which it is shaped, [and] begets that by which it is begotten” (Montrose 86). The Taming of the Shrew’s incoherent vision of female subordination and male dominance arises in the deconstruction and disruption of its own ills.

Works Cited


“Politic, n.2c.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2018.


Notes

1 Shapiro highlights that “conduct books regularly enjoin wives to silence, reverence, and obedience” (152). One such example he provides is “The Form and Solemnization of Matrimony” from *The Book of Common Prayer* (1559).

2 To make her argument, Burns argues that “the two hunt conversations employ not only the same images but even the same numbers. Like the lord, who enters boasting about his hound—‘I would not lose the dog for twenty pound’ (Ind.1.19-21)—Lucentio proposes to wager ‘twenty crowns’ on his wife’s obedience (5.2.70)” (Burns 88).

3 One example is found in a conversation from Act 5: “Am I your bird? I mean to shift my bush,/And then pursue me as you draw your bow” (5.2.47-48).

4 By setting herself apart as a uniquely privileged woman, exempt of the expectations of others, Queen Elizabeth utilized patriarchal language to maintain her own power and difference: “As she herself wrote in response to Parliament in 1563, “though I can think [marriage] best for a private woman, yet I do strive with myself to think it not meet for a prince” (Neale, Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments 1559-1581, 127). The royal exception could prove the patriarchal rule in society at large” (Montrose 80).