Self, Marriage, and Family in *The Taming of the Shrew: An Overview*

*The Taming of the Shrew* (1593-4) introduces themes and ideas—including identity formation and the connections between construction(s) of self, marriage, and family relationships—that will recur in the various plays we read this semester. I will focus this class on three topics for discussion: (1) the transformation and refashioning of self identity as seen in the Induction scenes; (2) the views of masculinity, femininity, and gender roles as they are presented in the competing views of marriage in the play; and (3) the constructions of self and marriage present in the family structures and models in the play. This early play, though often performed as a farce, offers a complex view of the interrelations and tensions between identity formation, marriage, and family structures. Today's class will offer an introduction and overview of those relations and conflicts.

As we begin to discuss these issues, we may want to consider an observation by Merideth Skura. In her psychoanalytical reading of Shakespeare's plays she states "...the simple fact that Shakespeare's plays are about families. It is remarkable how many of the plays develop out of specific moments in what we might call the cycle of generations that makes up a family. Both comedies and tragedies begin in those moments of crisis or transition that open new worlds.... Characters grow up in and then out of families; they start their own families and struggle to keep them together; they watch their children leave to set up new families; and, finally, they fall back to become their children's children" (204). Skura also notes "the conflict between family inheritance and personal individuality, between old memories and new perceptions, between being part of the family unit and being the head of a new family" (205). Shakespeare's early comedies, including *The Taming of the Shrew*, do not offer a resolution to those conflicts but suggest, instead, that resolutions and constructions of self and family are always being negotiated.

**I. The Induction: Christopher Sly and Self-Fashioning**

Though productions of the play, including filmic versions and recordings of performances—such as Franco Zeffereli’s movie version starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton (whose real life marital struggles color our understanding of their performance of Kate and Petruchio) and the recent staging of the play for the DVD in the Kultur series—omit the Induction, the two scenes in the Induction are related to the main plot of the play in several key ways. For our purposes this class, however, I will focus only on one of those aspects: the possibility for transformation of identity.

Two versions of the subplot involving Christopher Sly and the main plot presenting the courtship and marriage of Kate and Petruchio are available:
1. *The Taming of The Shrew*: Shakespeare's play that begins with the framing device of the lord's pastimes of hunting and tricking the tinker Christopher Sly. Sly watches as traveling players perform the comedy that is the main plot of the play. At the end of this "play," though, the sub-plot involving Sly does not return.

2. *The Taming of A Shrew*: a play text performed and published in the 1590s. It may (or may not) have been a source for Shakespeare's play, or it may have been an earlier or later version of the Shakespeare's text. In this version, Sly does return at the end of the play and claims that he too, like Petruchio, has learned how to tame a shrew. (If you want to read this version of the play, please let me know.)

The Induction scenes raise questions about what constitutes identity. In his seminal New Historical study of constructions of self identity in the early modern period, Stephen Greenblatt argues that identity in Elizabethan England was not fixed and static, but an ongoing process in which self identity was constantly being "re-fashioned" by forces outside of one's self. The Induction presents the re-fashioning of Sly's identity. The aristocratic lord in the opening scene for his amusement-saying it will be "pastime passing excellent" (Ind 1.63)-wants to stage a dramatic performance that will cause the beggar Sly to lose his identity as a tinker and assume a new identity: "Would not the beggar then forget himself" (Ind.1.36). One of his attendants, the first huntsman, replies, "Believe me, lord, I think he cannot choose" (37). As a pastime, similar in violence to the hunt which they have just completed, the lord and his attendants determine that they can and will re-fashion a new Sly, a process in which--they assert--Sly has no choice; he will forget his former self and construct a new self: "My lord, I warrant you we will play our part / As he shall think by our true diligence / He is no less than what we say he is" (65-7).

The Induction scenes suggest that the process of identity formation, including gender roles, is determined by (1) role playing and (2) other people's perception and understanding:

1. By "playing" their assigned roles, the lord and his attendants alter Sly's perceptions of himself. In a similar way, their performance also redefines the nature of their own selves.
2. Sly, after some initial confusion, begins to see and understand himself based on his relationships with others, "what we say he is." His identity is determined by the perceptions, understanding, and projection of who they want him to be.

The Lord asks a boy, his page, to disguise himself as a woman and play the role of Sly's aristocratic wife. This performance, which Sly finds convincing, suggests that gender roles may also be determined by performance: a boy can convincingly assume the characteristics, appearance, and manner of a girl. (The performance by the page draws
attention to the fact that on the Elizabethan stage all female roles were performed by males, and that such well-known women as Juliet, Cleopatra, Desdamona, and Ophelia were all performed by boys.

The Induction suggests that identity, class, and gender can all be transformed—at least temporarily. And that transformation is the result of performance. When Sly asks his "wife" to remove her clothes and come to bed with him, she declines, saying that sexual activity may mentally and emotionally upset him, and one of Sly's attendants redirects his attention to the comedy that is about to be performed. (The performance, then, is perceived as being less dangerous than sex. Sex, like love, can be socially disruptive.)

II. Masculinity and Gender Roles Present in the Competing Views of Marriage

Comedy as a genre can be characterized, in part, by the plot in which a community that confronts social threats (that may be either internal, external, or both) is renewed finally by the agency of love. That communal renewal and closure is celebrated with marriage and propagation. *The Taming of the Shrew*, though, is somewhat different: the play does not end with marriage. Instead, the marriage of Kate and Petruchio happens in Act III. The second half of the play offers a view of married life and the restructuring of identities and relationships within marriage. Like most of Shakespeare's comedies *The Taming of the Shrew* presents two settings: the household of Baptista and the household of Petruchio. Kate moves between two locations dominated by men.

In Elizabethan England, even more so than now, a marriage was NOT a private affair for the two lovers; instead, marriage was a familial, communal, religious, political, and public act. It is in that conflation of multiple concerns where we can see the gender roles in the play "performed." Coppelia Kahn notes that "Shakespeare rarely portrays masculine selfhood without suggesting a filial context for it...Yet, at the same time, an intense ambivalence toward the family runs through Shakespeare's work, taking the familiar shape of conflicts between inheritance and individuality and between autonomy and relatedness" (217).

A. The play presents two competing views of marriage:

1. Hierarchical model in which men dominate
2. Model based on affection and equality between husband and wife

B. Both views are present and competing in the play
1. Petruchio's violent domination of servants and Kate
2. Kate's final speech: subservience, equality, or "play"?

C. Gender roles in marriage as performative:

1. Performances of the feminine: the page, Bianca, Kate
2. Performative masculinity: Petruchio

III. Constructions of Self and Marriage within Family Structures and Models

C. L. Barber in one of his influential essay about families in Shakespeare's plays notes, "...the almost complete absence, in the early work, of confrontations between sons and fathers-the very thing that is to become central in the first major tragedies. In the early work, there is a very strong tendency to submerge or transcend conflict by identification, so that the sensibility is profoundly sociable. Concern for kinship and kindness extends benign family relationships out into larger contexts of society and nature and focuses on unkindness in violations of family and extended family. Figures of adult male authority in the older generation are characteristically weak or vulnerable, and they command loyalty or sympathy.... The chief source of menace, however, is in women. For behind the identification with maternal, cherishing attitudes, motivating it at deep levels, is the danger of being abandoned or overpowered. So a central preoccupation of the early work is with overpowering women-either being overpowered by them or overpowering them" (190).

Family relationships, including the relationships between sons and fathers and attempts by men to control and "tame" overpowering women, in The Taming of the Shrew can be viewed from several different perspectives:

A. Absent mothers: in this play, like many of Shakespeare's plays, there are no mothers or even mention of mothers.

B. Father-son relationships: the sons are in the process of separating from their fathers, though the fathers are presented positively.

1. Lucentio, when he arrives in Padua with his servant Tranio comments at length about his father and his father's "love and leave" (1.1.5) and "his good will" (1.1.6). Later, Lucentio must reinvent and re-fashion the image of his father (literally) to accommodate his changed views of home and the world. His father, when he arrives in Padua, must adjust himself to meet that re-fashioned image.
2. Petruchio, similarly, comments three times upon entering Padua of the death of his father and the beginning of his new life away from home. He says, for example:

Such wind as scatters young men through the world
To seek their fortunes further than at home,
Where small experience grows. But in a few,
Signor Hortensio, thus it stands with me:
Antonio, my father is deceased,
And I have thrust myself into this maze,
Happily to wive and thrive as best I may. (1.2.45-53)

C. Father-daughter relationships:
Baptista's relationship with his daughters is more complex that that of the sons with their fathers. Baptista is supportive of his youngest daughter Bianca. But he is presented as weak and overpowered by Kate. Susan Bassnett, while discussing the "wayward sons and daughters" in Shakespeare's early plays, notes that "Absolute obedience to a parent, like obedience to a monarch, is a concept that Shakespeare questions in these plays..... Rebellion against parental authority is primarily against the father.... That the father must be obeyed is clear; the forces of law are on his side. But in every case the father is proved wrong by the events that take place" (63-4). Bassnett also argues (and we may debate) that in his early plays Shakespeare presents "personifications of authority in decay and the younger generation, in rebelling against their parents, does not seek anarchy, but rather seeks to assert a new system of values, firmly rooted in a wider, more humanitarian vision of the world" (71). Does Kate and her rebellion against her father-and husband-suggest a "wider, more humanitarian" world view? Does Bianca's performance as daughter and later as wife suggest a broader perspective than her father's?

D. Sister-sister relationship:
The relationship between Kate and Bianca is marked initially by overt physical and verbal violence and competition. By the end of the play, though, Kate has learned to express that violence and competitiveness in more subtle ways. The final scene in the play marks that competition in a family that is bound together but also marked with division. Skura states that in Shakespeare's plays, "The family is so important that characters cannot even imagine themselves without one, yet every family must bring on its own destruction."
**Taming of the Shrew: Works Cited and Consulted**