
Shakespeare's Liberties: Transculturation, Transgression, Transmutation *The Taming of the Shrew*

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Like all of his fellow Elizabethan dramatists, Shakespeare wrote for a rapidly expanding, hectic- paced, turn- of- the- century theatre business eager to consume new plays every week. This exerted extraordinary demands on playwrights, who resorted to all sorts of source materials for ideas and plots, lifting and adapting, magpie- like, traditional folk stories, historical, classical and biblical texts, mediaeval romances, prose and verse narratives, or Italian novellas. From its inception, Elizabethan drama was profoundly transcultural, openly mining a literary quarry where the “otherness” of continental European cultural traditions was deconstructed and re- encoded within local ideological, social, political and theatrical frames (Weber, 1989). This brief reflection aims to revisit Carl Weber’s discussion of transculturation as one of the forms of interculturality, in order to explore Shakespeare’s treatment of his source material in one of his most controversial comedies as a typical instance of Renaissance transculturation practices.

Shakespeare did not invent any of his plots, but rather selected, compressed, restructured and rearranged events and characters from the texts that he studied as a schoolboy at the King's Free Grammar School of Stratford-upon-Avon. In fact, all instances of classical erudition found in the Shakespearean canon correspond closely to that offered by the Elizabethan school curriculum (Bate, 1997), which would have started by the fundamentals of Christian doctrine and continued into a solid training in Latin grammar and the complete works of fundamental authors of classical Rome, the great imperial model and mirror that Elizabethan England proposed to imitate and surpass. Students would then have proceeded to a deep scrutiny of the work of Erasmus, with particular emphasis on the art of rhetorical embellishment, discussed in his *De Copia*, or *Foundations of the Abundant Style*. They would have practised their Latin further by writing letters, speeches and essays, and covered a wide

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repertoire of Latin literary works, especially those of Ovid. Such school-cultivated composition techniques, with their emphasis on rhetorical elaboration, accompanied Shakespeare throughout his career as a writer and informed the creative writing strategies that he later transposed onto his poetry or placed on his stage, insufflating them with sublime language and making them available to vast audiences.

As a *receptive* reader, Shakespeare remembers his school texts almost verbatim; he can perceive the dramatic potential of that material and maximise it, and he is aware of his audience's horizon of expectations. As an *interventional* reader, Shakespeare never leaves his source texts untouched: he resignifies, transmutes, complicates, obscures, subverts, and beautifies them. Such strategic opacity operations -the deliberate obscuring of his source materials in his own texts (Greenblatt, 2004)-, are explicit enough to attract attention to themselves and invite reflection on contextually relevant topics: politics, philosophy, family relationships, gender relationships, art, the theatre itself. The liberties that the playwright takes with his old school texts interpellate the intelligence and the collective memory of his audience, irrespective of whether they know how to read and write or not, in a multiple process of reading and co-authoring that permeates all the spaces in the theatrical event.

This process of interventional appropriation closely resembles the cross-cultural dialogues that characterise intercultural practices. Elizabethan England systematically sought to absorb the Renaissance civilisation, refinement and prosperity of the powerful Italian city-states which imprinted their influence on Western Europe, in a dynamic conceptualised by German theatre director and theorist Carl Weber as *transculturation*, one of the many facets of interculturality. Weber defines transculturation as a form of intercultural exchange between two countries, or two societies, usually materialised as festivals and similar events on an international or global scale. Transculturation also involves

a cross-cultural collaboration and appropriation which brings forth art works that combine elements from separate cultures and their indigenous artistic traditions. A growing trend of such intercultural activities has become especially visible in the performing arts. The term "intercultural" is used in this context to signify transactions between separate indigenous cultural systems when, either unilaterally or mutually, elements of one culture are accepted or adopted in the other culture. (1989, p.12)

Weber reads Western performance history as a *narrative of transculturation*, in which dramatists composing plays during a given historical period find inspiration in already existing dramatic traditions but also incorporate these apparently alien aesthetic paradigms and their social, political and cultural values as a prism through which they can examine their own time:

... when in the Roman theatre Plautus, Terence, and others

adopted the New Comedy from the Greek tradition and viewed their own society through its paradigm, they created an early example of transculturation. In turn, their works eventually provided the stuff of transculturation for the Renaissance authors of the *Commedia Erudita* who developed their plots and characters from the Roman model. In both instances, the works resulting from the process presented a new and different identity- the model was fused with the indigenous culture and became part of its tradition. Molière adopted the structures of *Commedia dell' Arte* which Italian players had brought to France. He explored the model in his early farces until he had thoroughly transfigured it, and thus created a distinct form of French comedy which had absorbed the Italian tradition. Earlier, across the channel, the Jacobean theatre had embraced the new Italian stage technology. Its proscenium, its perspective design, and its machinery weren't merely copied; mediated with the indigenously developed masque, in the work of artists like Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson, an original performance mode was developed, until a Puritan Parliament put an end to all theatrical activity. (ibid, p.15).

Perhaps one of the most notable instances of such Renaissance transculturation practices might be found in the multiple transgressions and transformations that Shakespeare operates in *The Taming of the Shrew*. This comedy furnishes a perfect instance of how a complex historical transcultural narrative can produce diverse and disparate reading processes that define conditions of production, textual peculiarities and multiple and conflicting forms of reception on the part of audiences and critics. It also effectively illustrates the ways in which Shakespeare transcends the cultural otherness of continental narratives, as well as his experimental appropriation of the Roman/ Italian paradigm to serve theatrical, political, social and aesthetic purposes.

The title of the play bears immediate resonances of the ancient theatrical tradition of the *Shrew Comedies* -comedies about the subjugation of indomitable wives-, which brings together the conventional features of the so-called *taming plots* with the stock comic figures of tamer and shrew. Some of the source texts used by Shakespeare are rooted in European popular culture and include elements of Roman comedy, *fabliaux*, French popular literature, mediaeval plays and a more recent development, *Commedia dell' Arte*. He also extracts ideas and plot functions from *The Arabian Nights*, Erasmus' *Colloquies* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and, closer to his time, George Gascoigne's *Supposes* -the English translation of Ariosto's *I Suppositi*-, the official sermons of the Anglican church, Renaissance pamphlets on marriage and the *jest books*, joke compilations of the Tudor era. He has read and probably watched numerous plays on the topic, written by his contemporaries, and there is even a play registered in 1594, *The Taming of A Shrew* -either a direct source or a co- descendent from a lost Ur- Shrew-, whose authorship dispute still remains unresolved between those who posit Shakespeare's hand and those who dismiss it.

Shrew is, then, clearly inserted within a well-known theatrical tradition in Europe and in Elizabethan England. Far from ignoring the conditioning effect of this tradition on his audience's horizon of expectations, Shakespeare deliberately plays at evoking that common ground. He knows that the public flocking to his theatre is expecting to see yet another version of the popular old story of the "husband/tamer" subduing the "shrewish wife"; a sexist, misogynistic story of domestic punishment and social disciplining of a woman who refuses to conform to her role. However, from its very title, *Shrew* disturbs that horizon of expectations in order to problematize, disappoint and frustrate it, posing, as becomes evident later, a semantic dispute; almost a linguistic trap. Line by line, the play surprises audiences by stubbornly refusing to offer what they anticipate and thus referring back to the title, again and again, to invite a deeper understanding. *Shrew* is, primarily, about the contrast between what is expected and what is obtained; between the apparent and the real; between the literal and the metaphorical; between an old, uncomfortable theatrical tradition and Shakespeare's emancipatory dramatic art.

Shakespeare further complicates the taming plot by interweaving it into the farcical component of a secondary plot -the "Bianca Plot"- taken from traditional romantic comedy -also expected by his audience-, in which he includes vestigial *Commedia Dell'Arte* stock comic types. Finally, he integrates both plots within a third story that operates as the framework of the play- the only one which, suggestively, he leaves open and unresolved. Within this complex multidimensional construction the dramatist accommodates the parody and problematization of the multiple genres he manipulates and intertwines into the structure of the play, while simultaneously deploying -and proselytising- a new form of experimental comedy.

The result is a manifestly polysemic and multifaceted text, every member of the audience seeing in it what they are likely to find in terms of their prior knowledge and experience: those expecting the old, rehashed story of tamer and tamed will find an almost pornographically patriarchal rewrite. Already in our times, theatregoers expecting to be scandalised and offended by what they perceive as the brutalising of the heroine will find in *Shrew* a feminist warning against a situation from which there is neither escape nor a happy ending. *Shrew's* controversial nature and the receptive discomfort, even downright rejection, it has frequently generated, can be traced back to such multiple, mutually discrepant interpretations of Shakespeare's lines.

Ultimately, what seems to lie beneath the controversies is a linguistic theory about the relationship between *signifier* and *signified*; between the referential and representational uses of language (McRae, 1991). One of the challenges facing the audience consists of discerning between two possible readings of the characters, their circumstances, and the very nature of the play unravelling onstage: a literal, linear, univocal reading and a figurative, metaphorical, multivocal reading requiring a decentering and a collective problematisation of their common knowledge and experience of *Shrew* comedies.

Shakespeare's theatrical experiment is sustained by the play's dominant metaphor, anchored in the word *play*, which refers to at least five types of activity: ludic, theatrical, musical, linguistic and sexual. Katherine, the heroine of the main plot must learn to *play* in terms of, perhaps, four of these five meanings. Her situation at the beginning of the

play is one of extreme oppression on the part of her immediate family circle and her social sphere, which has paralyzed and pigeonholed her into a stereotype, that of a “shrew”. Such stigma, inherent to the stock comic type of the *nagging wife*, is clearly encouraged by her perverse father and reproduced and naturalised by an almost exclusively male environment, reading her assertiveness in terms of a deviation and never missing an opportunity to viciously torment and bully her in the most violent terms. This cycle of violence and exclusion produces an Other within the Other. Her feminine condition constitutes Katherine as an Other within the patriarchal and misogynistic Paduan society, but also, as an exceptionally intelligent, linguistically resourceful woman who raises her voice and confronts her social milieu, Katherine is a Woman-Other: the one who refuses to submit, to conform to her appointed place in society and to fulfil her “destiny” as daughter, sister, marriageable girl, and wife.

The unique relationship that obtains between Katherine and Petruchio generates a discrepancy between received ideas of a “shrew” and the complexity and depth of Katherine, and between an alleged “taming” and the resourceful strategic display that Petruchio sets in motion. Petruchio’s identity and his way of *being-in-the-world* are driven by *play*, and he resorts to *play* to show the woman he loves that there is a happy, even enjoyable, way out of her terrible situation, and that she must find it for herself. The key to her emancipation, to which also concur the emancipation of language and the emancipation of comedy, materialises the moment Katherine discovers that she can be free “in words”. By the end of the play, she has learned to *play*: to perform, to improvise, to free herself from her anger and resentment, from her literal, univocal, monolithic and tragic vision of life, and in that emancipation she has found joy and the possibility of building a happy relationship with a husband as unconventional and outlandish as herself. And with her, the audience, that off-stage participant in the theatrical event, has also learnt to *play* at reconsidering the universe.

Additionally, at the centre of the multiple transformations of the theatrical metaphor is the ultimate awareness that Elizabethan dramatists write for a stage inhabited by *male bodies*. Shakespeare allows these bodies to flow through manifold gender dimensions in constant flux, interaction, overlap and kaleidoscopic rotation. At any given moment, what the audience sees onstage is an actor playing a female role; or another actor playing a page-boy who plays another character’s wife, or an actor playing an old man who is (mis?)taken for a maiden on the road to Padua. The bodies of characters and actors, multiple theatrical signifiers (Elam, 2005), transcend all possible layers of meaning.

Furthermore, such liminality of the gendered, re-gendered, de-gendered and multi-gendered body onstage materialises within a distinctly situated geographical context: the London districts known as The Liberties, that *othered*, marginal Elizabethan world, home to theatres, brothels and gambling houses. London’s theatrical activity is a permanent object of persecution predicated, among other reasons, in the practices of transvestism that constitute it. From pulpits and city hall offices alike, indignant voices are raised against what they consider the immorality of a man’s body dressed in feminine clothes and acting and interacting with other male bodies onstage, corrupting –so the Puritan city authorities believe– vulnerable youthful minds with abominable gestures and ideas. The vast majority of the population, however, calmly continue to attend plays, perhaps in the

certainty that there is more "reality" on those stages than anywhere else in their daily lives. They probably understand, intuitively, that the actor's body is a *signifier*, arbitrarily, volitionally associated to one or more *signifieds*, but at the same time also a *metaphor*, a universe of meanings worth exploring. The here-and-now of the theatrical event offers that opportunity, without moralistic interference and with the unlimited freedom of imagination. The London city authorities, incapable of any reading that is not literal, will never understand the metaphorical essence of the theatrical event and will try to suppress it over and over again. *Liberty*, and *The Liberties*, will remain on the margins.

Shakespearean comedy is disruptive of *gender* and *genre*: it problematizes the binary gender logic (Belsey, 2005) in the same way that it stretches and strains the conventional categories of the dramatic genre. Ultimately, what the audience must resolve is the discrepancy between what they know about comedy and *this comedy*, in order to understand what the poet seems to be suggesting. It is no accident that the confluence of plots at the end of the play presents a sharp contrast, not so much between two different conceptions of marriage, but rather between an exhausted and obsolete genre, which Shakespeare implacably parodies, and a new, experimental genre that emerges, fresh and unoccluded.

Finally, it should be remembered that *The Taming of the Shrew* is a *framed play* which, unlike all the other plays-within-plays that Shakespeare embeds into his writings, acquires such prominence in stage and film versions that it often overshadows, or directly swallows, the framework that contains it. The story of Sly, the drunken tinker whose ontological, social and cognitive status is modified by the character of the Lord, spans two scenes prior to the opening of the first act and outlines the main axes that recur across the play through the kaleidoscopic multiplication of fictional dimensions. Significantly, the framing plot is not resolved at the end of the play and Sly's story dissolves after the first scene of Act I. The inclusion of a framework reinforces the play's self-referential emphasis on theatrical illusion, but, perhaps more meaningfully, on the value of performance -of *play*- as a gateway to a dimension from which there seems to be no desirable return.

The constant references to Italian place names, and the (for Shakespeare) unusually frequent snatches of Italian in the dialogue, help to establish the special, separate quality of the play world- particularly since Sly has been so firmly placed in Warwickshire (Induction, ii. 16-23). [...] But the distancing does not last: gradually the writing relaxes and by the time Katherina meets Petruchio the stiffness is gone, and some of the earthiness of the Sly scenes is restored. In the process Sly himself disappears, perhaps because the audience has replaced him: the play world has acquired for us the same level of reality that the Induction had: we are watching, not a play within a play, but a play. And we remain in that state till the end, for [...] Shakespeare's Sly does not return to us. But at least he has made us aware of the play world as a special experience. (Leggatt, 1974, p.45)

The treatment of the framing plot seems to indicate another of the liberties, perhaps

the most important, that the playwright takes with his source texts and with the conventions of the genre. It is not only the text that is framed in the play, but also the identities that inhabit it: *gender* identities and *genre* identity, especially comedy, which Shakespeare *plays* at revising and reinventing.

What distinguishes all the examples mentioned is that they didn't merely flesh out the structure lifted from a foreign culture with indigenous subject matter, but they truly transformed their model. Even where early efforts still bordered on copies, soon the models became infused and mediated with native literary and/or performance traditions. Often the foreign text is deconstructed, the resultant findings then rearranged according to codes inscribed in the native culture, and an original performance text constructed. Eventually, the model "disappears" in a new text or technique, which gains its own identity of form and of content. Such "disappearance" of an adopted model in the newly encoded text of performance, dramatic script, or theory is the mark of "transculturation". (Weber, 1989, p.9)

One of the most notable features of Shakespeare's style is his capacity to creatively transcend the limitations imposed by the genres and source texts with which he works. The variety of strategies that he employs to break, circumvent, flout and stretch all kinds of boundaries to their critical points is transmuted, on each of his lines, into a moving, shifting multiplicity whose direct experience and appreciation is certainly less complicated than any attempt to explain it. Then, as now, Shakespeare speaks to multicoloured, diverse audiences and he makes sure that everyone can understand and perceive some, or many, of the facets of the beauty and intelligence of his work. Every generation finds, and will continue to find, the colours in his text which it needs to discover in order to see, understand, justify and accept itself. And Shakespeare will always be there, very much alive, always new, to continue to surprise his audience.

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