

# Early Modern Literary Studies

***The Taming of the Shrew*, presented by Propeller at the Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield,  
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Directed by Edward Hall. With Ben Allen (Biondello), Darrell Brockis (Vincentio), Joseph Chance (Viola), John Dougall (Gremio), Finn Hanlon (Lucentio), Lewis Hart (ensemble), Christopher Heyward (Tailor / Widow), Vince Leigh (Petruccio), Chris Myles (Baptista), Liam O'Brien (Tranio), Benjamin O'Mahony (Grumio / Pedant), Gary Shelford (Hortensio), Dan Wheeler (Katherina), and Arthur Wilson (Priest / Bianca).

Touring, 8 November 2012 - 20 July 2013. Seen at the Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield, 11 May 2013.

Propeller's unusually serious and considered production of *The Taming of the Shrew* was as disturbing a version of this difficult play as I have ever seen. Partly this was because of its pace (it came in at three hours), which forced the audience to notice the full effect of every episode; partly it is because *Shrew* was paired with the company's sombre and autumnal *Twelfth Night*; mainly, though, it was because of Vince Leigh's exceptional Petruccio. Without sacrificing anything of their customary ensemble ethos, Propeller nevertheless managed to foreground Leigh's Petruccio to the extent that it was his story rather than Katherina's that took centre stage. The evening opened with the stage set for the wedding of Christopher Sly, also played by Leigh, and it was after he collapsed incapably drunk and the bride had run off in tears that the wedding guests launched into the Induction sequence and Sly settled down to watch the play. As soon as the moment came for the entrance of Petruccio, though, Sly found himself left unexpectedly alone on the stage, at which point a copy of the text was thrust into his hand and he began to act the role, still 'on book' at first but soon growing into it to such an extent that it was his reaction rather than Katherina's for which I at least was waiting in the final moments. I have seen single-sex casting take the sting out of *Shrew* - certainly this was the effect of the Mediaeval Players' mid-eighties version, where a Katherina who was taller than Petruccio eventually agreed to collude in a role-playing

game which gave both of them satisfaction - but that did not happen here, not least because Propeller's general policy of refusing to foreground the fact that the women are played by men meant that I simply lost sight of the fact that Katherina's predicament was not that of a real woman. In this version, as Katherina became more reasonable, Petruchio became less so; the only possible answer to his 'Why, is this not well?' was 'No, it's anything but', and there was no hint of comfort for her or collusion by her in the final test scene.

What was a defeat for Katherina was not so for all women, though: not only were Bianca and the Widow still looking well up for a fight, but no sooner had Katherina apparently capitulated than she left the stage to return moments later not as Katherina but as a character from the Induction, which now resumed with Petruchio abruptly shorn of his victory and having to revert to being nothing more than Sly, whose real bride, shrewish as ever, awaited him. Of course the evening also contained laughs - it wouldn't be Propeller if it wasn't funny, and the delayed revelation of Petruchio's and Grumio's bare-buttocked wedding costumes was splendid, as was the wonderful enunciation of Liam O'Brien's disguised Tranio. Special mention should go too to John Dougall's Gremio, who, like his Sir Andrew, achieves real pathos, and to Joseph Chance's scene-stealing Curtis the cook. The dominant note, though, was not one of comedy, but of challenging the audience to ask themselves how funny they are really prepared to find a play like this one.