

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The Taming of the Shrew*, presented by the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival at
Boscobel House and Gardens, Garrison, New York, June 15-August 24, 2018.**

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Directed by Shana Cooper. Scenic consulting by Sandra Goldmark. Costume design by Ásta Hostetter. Lighting design by Jiyoung Chang. Sound Design by Broken Chord. Choreography by Erika Chong Shuch. With Mark Bedard (Hortensio/Biondello/Pedant), Biko Eisen-Martin (Petruchio), Ralph Adriel Johnson (Lucentio/Tailor), Kurt Rhoads (Baptista/Grumio), Triney Sandoval (Gremio/Vincentio), Britney Simpson (Bianca), Nance Williamson (Tranio/Widow), and Liz Wisan (Kate).

Changes to Shakespeare's texts are hardly unusual. Aside from differences resulting from textual variants, cuts, additions, and alterations all show up fairly often in performances. Sometimes small substitutions clarify antiquated vocabulary. For example, I noticed that a recent production of *Hamlet* by the American Shakespeare Center (reviewed for *EMLS* 20.1) changed the Player's evocation of Hecuba's 'bisson rheum' to 'blinding tears' (2.2.486).¹ While to my ear the latter lacks poetry, if it helps the audience understand better, I don't mind.

Other changes are more substantial and, to me at least, less welcome. At the end of the Hudson Valley Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, key words in Kate's famous final speech were replaced, as indicated below [original text bracketed]:

Even such a woman oweth to her husband;
And when he [she] is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
And not obedient to her [his] honest will,

¹ Act, scene and line references refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd edition, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2008).

What is he [she] but a foul contending rebel...
I am ashamed that people [women] are so simple...
And place your hands below your lover's [husband's] foot.
(5.2.160-163, 165, 181)

At the risk of stating the obvious, these changes reverse and generalize gender references. Now Kate is indicting men, not women, for inappropriate attitude, and suggesting that *all* people, regardless of gender identification, should submit themselves to their partners' wills. Obviously, this message is far from, if not the complete opposite of the meaning of the original words, at least on the textual surface. I find these changes problematic, if not unjustifiable.

In an online interview, actress Liz Wisan, who played Kate, explains the rationale: 'We're looking at it as, not that it's a woman being tamed, but it's a woman speaking to compromise, and how both parties have to compromise... So we have changed a couple pronouns'.² Although more than 'a couple pronouns' have been changed, Wisan's explanation is a helpful insight into the reasoning behind the decision, and it makes sense that a modern approach to the play would attempt to invest the female character with significant agency, providing the resulting relationship with a foundation for romantic success. (It is a fair guess that an audience may not enjoy – or attend – a production that celebrates spousal abuse, as a stricter reading of the text tends to indicate.) However, these changes were not acknowledged in the program or other curated materials immediately available to audience members, at least as far as I could find, so there was a possibility, even a likelihood, that audience members would not be aware of them. In that case, audience members might be under the mistaken impression that the changed words that they were hearing were Shakespeare's. Instead, director Shana Cooper's program note presents a provocative thesis that apparently guided her interpretation, and the decision that led to Wisan's performance: 'In Kate and Petruchio, Shakespeare gifts us two radical souls who possess the courage to fight for a new kind of love that flies in the face of (and plants seeds to transform) the status quo'.

While I certainly acknowledge this statement as a possible interpretation of the play, the idea of Shakespeare deliberately 'gifting' us anything is simply not supported by changing crucial words in the speech that constitutes the climax of the narrative. Instead, it becomes Cooper who is gifting, as it were, a vision of 'Kate and Petruchio

² Sarah Rebell, 'Julia Coffey and Liz Wisan on Performing Shakespeare in 2018', *The Interval*, 19 June, 2018. <http://www.theintervalny.com/interviews/2018/06/julia-coffey-and-liz-wisan-on-performing-shakespeare-in-2018/> [accessed 15 August, 2018].

creat[ing] a unique game of life that they can play together'. I must stress that I do not reject out of hand a theatre-maker's option to change a playwright's text (with permission or when the material is in the public domain), but to do so without noticeably acknowledging that change, and in the service of such a bold interpretation seems at least disingenuous, if not outright deceitful. Also, in this case, it seems unnecessary. As strong a performer as Liz Wisan is, I doubt very much that she could not have played Kate's speech without changing Shakespeare's words and yet still conveyed Cooper's complex critique of gender roles. Indeed, Wisan had already begun to do so at the start of the speech, launching into it with what is currently called a 'dude-bro' demeanor, a masculine swagger and accent for 'Fie, fie! Unknit that threatening unkind brow' (5.2.140). Obviously putting on an exaggerated act, Wisan then abruptly dropped that posturing for a calm but intense sincerity on 'It blots thy beauty' (5.2.143) and continued with that tone throughout the rest of Kate's lines. I suspect even subtle emphases of or pauses around those key, gendered words, rather than just replacing them, could have imbued them with whatever effect wanted.

Instead, the speech sadly undid much of the excellent work done to that point. And there really was much excellence, many striking and meaningful moments. The acting was, almost without exception, remarkably good, especially from the members of the cast who did double or even triple duty, such as Triney Sandoval's vulgar and unrestrained Gremio, who contrasted sharply with his refined and controlled Vincentio, though both were given to bursts of loud indignation. Best of all was Mark Bedard, whose main role was the outlandishly attired Hortensio, but who in 5.1 also switched back and forth between the polo-shirted and baseball-capped Biondello and a stumbling drunk Pedant in a bathrobe and a bad toupee, shifting nimbly in and out of clothing, accents, and degrees of sobriety in full view and to no less general hilarity.

I even admired aspects of the direction and certainly of the spectacle. Although I've never yet attended a *Shrew* that presented the Christopher Sly Induction, I've also never attended one with no pre-narrative framing device. Cooper's take was certainly engaging. The cast, clad in black rehearsal clothes and carrying heart-shaped balloons, climbed over the gorgeous Hudson valley horizon in the background, crossed the perfectly manicured lawn to the main tent, and danced wackily to sound designer Broken Chord's alternating blend of brass band and techno. This sequence established, aggressively, the performative nature of (nearly) all that followed, which included blatantly Brechtian devices, such as the insertion of Erika Chong Shuch's choreography of Cole Porter's 'Tom, Dick, or Harry' lip-synched and danced by Bianca and her three suitors.

Much subtler but more poignant were shifts in Jiyoung Chang's lighting design, from neutral to warm orange or cool violet, which emphasized key moments in Kate and Petruchio's relationship, as when the two first saw each other and established an instant chemistry, laying the groundwork for a more-mutual-than-usual taming. Biko Eisen-Martin's solid Petruchio, while perhaps stronger on the boyish charm than on the poetic verse-speaking, was emotionally sensitive and quite sympathetic. Wisan was a similarly sympathetic Kate – hardly the reported harpy at all, except for an occasional slap or extended middle finger – and quite affectionate with her father and sister, for the most part. Overall, these character arcs consistently evidenced shared attraction and caring – again, a valid interpretation, even if it requires reaching beyond the text.

Yet my discomfort with the decision to change the text remains. More than a stretch, it was a cop-out, and a selling short of an otherwise brave argument. Others would disagree. Jesse Green, for example, named the production a *New York Times* Critic's Pick and explicitly endorsed 'an exhilarating new way to look at the comedy through modern eyes while remaining true to its language and, arguably, its intent', a quote the company placed prominently on its Facebook page.³ Given the extent and significance of the changes in that final speech, I cannot fathom how Green can justify a claim of fidelity to the language, repeated later in the review: 'the director has taken only a few textual liberties to get there, mostly at the end'. Green and I clearly do not share a definition of 'a few', but regardless of these semantics, I maintain that however you count them, director Cooper's 'liberties' did unfortunate and disturbing disservice to an otherwise compelling rendition of a difficult text.

³ Jesse Green, 'The Taming of the Shrew Under a Tent', *New York Times* 19 July, 2018
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/theater/taming-of-the-shrew-hudson-valley-shakespeare-review.html>