

Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*
and Jonson's *Epicoene: The Women in the Stocks*

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Petruchio. Katharine, I charge thee, tell these head-strong women
What duty they do owe their lords and husbands.
(Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*)¹

By some kind of devious poetic justice, although males in the Elizabethan-Jacobean period have definitely played the dominant role in every area of public affairs (a female monarch had just been a necessary evil), no matter how hard they tried or how much pain they inflicted, they could never fully control the women in their households, let alone anywhere else. Fathers might impose their will on daughters, restrain their movements, deny them their right to a proper education, arrange their marriages, punish them pitilessly if they refused to obey; husbands could do with their wives as they pleased, curb their spirit by any means at their disposal, forbid their access to any pleasant activity, curtail under false accusations what little freedom was considered their due; sons and brothers could bully their mothers and sisters into anything if that promoted their positions economically and socially. However, in the long run, short of actually murdering the whole female lot around them or having them killed, males would somehow or other 'pay' for their misdemeanours, since women whenever the opportunity arose and at their own peril would give as good as they got. In fact, some lenient God or, more probably, the Goddess of their 'foremothers' (forefathers would not apply under the circumstances) had given them a powerful weapon always there at their disposal –the clever and liberal use of their voices or rather tongues.

And even the most hardened soldier would go to any lengths to avoid such a battle. Actually, the uneasy fear of female verbosity was so ingrained in men that books were written on the subject trying to encourage a more comely behaviour in women. Drama, too, handled the matter frequently with the deliberate aim of amusing and correcting as *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Epicoene* bear witness, since both plays concern themselves with the relative merits and demerits of speech and silence in a woman.

¹ All the quotations from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Jonson's *Epicoene* are taken from the Craig (1965) and Herford and Simpson (1965) editions respectively.

In Shakespeare's comedy, Kate's marriage prospects are severely hampered by her refusal to abide by the rules of traditional male/female courtship. Instead of pretending to be meek like her sister Bianca, she insults her intended suitors in such a way that Travis, recently arrived in Padua as Lucentio's servant, cannot but comment on her reasons to do so: "*Tra[vis]*. Hush, master! here is some good pastime toward: / That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward" (I. i. 68-69).

This defiant attitude is extensive to her father and even though she has to comply with his choice of a husband, she does so against her better judgement always rebuking Baptista for his hasty decision:

Kath[erine]. Call you me daughter? now, I promise you
 You have show'd a tender fatherly regard, 280
 To wish me wed to one half lunatic;
 A mad-cap ruffian and a swearing Jack,
 That thinks with oaths to face the matter out.
 (II. i. 279-283)

Bianca was also a favourite target for her taunts. Kate seemed to see through her sister's apparent blandness and relished prodding her as if she expected the younger woman to lash out suddenly and prove her right. However, Bianca was always humble and obedient even when subjected by Kate to some form or other of physical violence:

Bian[ca]. Good sister, wrong me not, nor wrong yourself,
 To make a bondmaid and a slave of me;
 That I disdain: but for these other gawds,
 Unbind my hands, I'll pull them off myself, 5
 Yea, all my raiment, to my petticoat;
 Or what you will command me will I do,
 So well I know my duty to my elders.
 (II. i. 1-7)

Thus Baptista's favourite child never loses her feminine composure: she rarely complains and just weeps without uttering a single word which infuriates Kate still more: "*Katherine*. Her silence flouts me, and I'll be reveng'd" (II. i. 29).

On the contrary, an analysis of Kate's behaviour reveals that her words and deeds would be more fitting in a male firstborn entitled to the family inheritance: she does not dissemble her true feelings, faking the 'patient Griselda's' qualities she was not born with, and she certainly does not spend the whole time praying for a man to be lured by her more than tempting dowry. So, Baptista's 'mean' daughter seems to pose a real threat by daring to venture into what might be deemed as territory foreign to her gender and must be stopped for the sake of preserving the health and order of the social structure.

Thus, since Baptista does not seem inclined to have Kate committed to a convent, Petruchio, the soldier of fortune that Bianca's suitors have hired to marry her elder sister, is a godsend. His ways may be weird, his language crude, his motives ambiguous, but he is willing to take his chances with the Shrew and try to tame her:

Pet[ruchio]. Hortensio, peace! thou know'st not gold's effect:
 Tell me her father's name, and 'tis enough; 95
 For I will board her, though she chide as loud
 As thunder when the clouds in autumn crack.
 (I. ii. 94-97)

He starts with a sham courtship, refusing to be sidetracked by her insulting remarks and twisting everything to his advantage:

Pet[ruchio]. Father, 'tis thus: yourself and all the world,
That talk'd of her, have talk'd amiss of her: 285
If she be curst, it is for policy,
For she's not froward, but modest as the dove;
She is not hot, but temperate as the morn;

(...)

And to conclude, we have 'greed so well together,
That upon Sunday is the wedding-day.
(II. i. 284-292)

But it is at the wedding ceremony that the real battle of wills begins. Petruchio not only usurps the bride's prerogative of arriving late, making Kate endure sneers and taunts, but also her privilege to dress in such a way as to call everybody's attention, with the disastrous results that Biondello describes:

Bion[dello]. Why, Petruchio is coming, in a new
hat and an old jerkin ; a pair of old breeches 45
thrice turned ; a pair of boots that have been
candle-cases, one buckled, another laced;
(III. ii. 44-47)

Once the ceremony is over (and what a ceremony Petruchio turned it into) the bridegroom evokes his rights as a husband to drag Kate away even before the bridal feast begins, remaining deaf to everybody's pleas and meeting his wife's hostile protests with arguments that no one can refute: "*Petruchio*. But for my bonny Kate, she must with me. / Nay, look not big, nor stamp, nor stare, nor fret; / I will be master of what is mine own" (III. ii. 230-232).

From this moment onwards, Kate is at the mercy of her tamer. Always pretending to be quite concerned about her wellbeing and to have her best interests at heart, Petruchio will force her to endure hunger in the presence of food, sleepless nights on the grounds that the bedclothes are dirty, homiletic speeches about chastity on her wedding night, the discomfort of wearing soiled clothes because the tailor, supposedly, does not know how to use his skills.

And so Petruchio breaks Kate in body and spirit as if she were the falcon he had the grace to compare her to. To get rid of the nightmarish ordeal her husband is driving her through, Kate is ready to comply with his every wish and whim, no matter how absurd and preposterous they might be:

Kath[erine]. Husband, let's follow, to see the end of this ado.

Pet[ruchio]. First kiss me, Kate, and we will. 150

Kath[erine]. What! in the midst of the street ?

Pet[ruchio]. What! art thou ashamed of me ?

Kath[erine]. No, sir, God forbid; but ashamed to kiss.

Pet[ruchio]. Why, then let's home again. Come, sirrah, let's away.

Kath[erine]. Nay, I will give thee a kiss: now pray thee, love, stay.
(V. i. 149-155)

However, Petruchio's crown of glory –the public recognition of his success as the tamer of the shrew– is yet to come. This takes place at the end of the play, when the couple return to Baptista's house in Padua. Petruchio is, then, capable of showing to all those who had known Kate before that she has become a different woman. So, and to everybody's amazement, Katherine displays such blind obedience towards her husband that she accomplishes two no mean feats: on the one hand she disgusts the women who witness her actions; on the other, she gains the praise and admiration of the men who see their ideal wife materialize before their eyes:

Pet[ruchio]. Katherine that cap of yours becomes you not:
Off with that bauble, throw it under foot.

[KATHARINA *pulls of her cap, and throws it down.*]

Wid[ow]. Lord! let me never have a cause to sigh,
Till I be brought to such a silly pass! 125

Bian[ca]. Fie! what a foolish duty call you this?

Luc[entio]. I would your duty were as foolish too :
The wisdom of your duty, fair Bianca,
Hath cost me an hundred crowns since supper-time.
(V. ii. 122-129)

But there is more to inflate Petruchio's ego. At his express command, Kate is going to utter a speech in which she voices all the conventional precepts that ruled the male/female code of behaviour within the marriage bond, thus restoring the order that her previous rebellious ways had temporarily threatened:

Kath[erine]. Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign ; one that cares for thee
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labour both by sea and land, 150
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks, and true obedience;
(V. ii. 147-154)

In *Epicoene*, Jonson seems to have picked up where Shakespeare had left off, cleverly allowing not only for the differences that the two decades separating these plays inevitably wrought in the atmosphere pervading both, but also for the changes undergone by the characters as they 'mature'. Thus, gone is from the Jacobean *Epicoene* the type of 'they-lived-happily-ever-after' feeling brought about within a predetermined plan devised by a merciful God for the benefit of humanity and which was still present in the Elizabethan *The Taming of the Shrew*. Jonson's play is suffused by the uncomfortable, sometimes dreadful awareness of a world in swift mutation where the old, tested values had become worthless and the new ones seemed pathetically futile and inadequate.

The female characters also altered accordingly. They became older; one of them, Mrs. Haughty is past youth, probably even past her prime, and her efforts to elude the flow of the years by artificial

means gives rise to the first serious argument in the play between two of the male characters who can be counted among Jonson's many satirists –Clerimont and Truewit:

CLER[IMONT]. A poxe of her autumnall face, her peec'd beautie: there's no man can bee admitted till shee be ready, now adaies, till shee has painted, and perfum'd, and wash'd, and scour'd (...).

TRV[WIT]. And I am, clearely, o' the other side: I loue a good dressing, before any beautie o' the world. O, a woman is, then, like a delicate garden ; nor, is there one kind of it : she may varie, euey houre; take often counsell of her glasse, and choose the best. (I. i. 85-88; 103-107)

Besides, as wives, they are hardened and seasoned. They may still depend on their husbands financially. (The opposite would almost be unheard of. Mrs. Otter is the only exception but then she belongs to a lower social stratum). However, they have fought tooth and nail for their quota of freedom and at least one of them is hailed by the others as a heroine, because her battle seems to have been more deadly: "HAV[GHTY]. Here's CENTAVRE has immortalized her selfe, with taming of her wilde male. *Mavis*. I, shee has done the miracle of the kingdome" (III. iii. 27-29).

They have, thus, become experts in the art of taming husbands, a knowledge that they are more than ready to share with the young 'blushing' bride so that she may nip in the bud any potentially dangerous ideas that her spouse, Morose, might have harboured in his heart of hearts about turning her into a humble, obedient wife:

MAV[IS]. Looke how you manage him at first, you shall haue him ever after.

CEN[TAVRE]. Let him allow you your coach, and four horses, your woman, your chamber-maid, your page, your gentle-man-vsher, your *french* cooke, and foure roomes.

HAV[GHTY]. And goe with vs, to *Bed'lem* to the *China* houses and to the *Exchange*. (III. iii. 19-25)

But to belong to this group of women, Epicoene has still more trades to learn. One of them goes against what was then deemed as one of the most sacred missions entrusted to a woman not only by the laws of men but, first and foremost, by the law of God as it can be perceived in the trusted words of the Holy Bible –the bearing of children. But Haughty, Centaure, Mavis and Mrs. Otter have ways of avoiding too many pregnancies and are prepared to instruct Epicoene on the matter, since she is more than willing to learn:

EPI[COENE]. And haue you those excellent receipts, madame, tokeepe your selues from bearing of children?

HAV[GHTY]. O yes, MOROSE. How should we maintayne our youth and beautie, else ? Many births of a woman make her old, as many crops make the earth barren. (III. iii. 57-61)

However, this ability to control procreation that at least some women were supposed to possess had other, both more immediate and far reaching, consequences. It meant that males were deprived of one

of the main weapons that they resorted to in order to exert their authority over female bodies and souls –the abuse of their biological function.

But the catalogue of the ‘sins’ that Haughty, Centaure, Mavis and Mrs. Otter are responsible for is not yet complete. Since they are secure financially and have time to spare, they use it to indulge themselves at various levels. And because Renaissance had, after all, made a difference, they long to be a reference within the educated London society. It is not for nothing that they are known as the Collegiates and Truewit characterizes them as follows:

TRV[WIT]. Why, is it not arriu’d there yet, the newes? A new foundation, sir, here i’ the towne, of ladies, that call themselues the Collegiates, an order betweene courtiers, and country-madames, that liue from their husbands; and giue entertainment to all the *Wits*, and *Braueries* o’ the time, as they call ’hem: crie downe, or vp, what they like, or dilslake in a braine, or a fashion, with most masculine, or rather *hermaphroditicall* authoritie: and, euery day, gaine to their colledge some new probationer. (I. i. 73-81)

Once again females intrude on male territory both intellectually and sexually, making men feel so threatened and uncomfortable that they react by accusing women of losing their feminine attributes and becoming promiscuous. However, the Collegiates’ ‘virility’ amounts to very little and can be summed up as follows: they call themselves by their surnames (their husbands’ surnames at that) and use their tongues not only to nag, as was the custom, but also to ‘brag’ about subjects which only men had engaged in before. It cannot be denied that they were sexually permissive (the Ladies themselves confirm that in no uncertain terms), but such emphasis was laid at the time on women’s chastity that it is no wonder that they should consider the transgression of this principle the main symbol of their ‘freedom’.

Just as it happens to Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Collegiates are also chastened at the end of *Epicoene*. But the public ridicule they undergo when they discover that they have been deceived by a boy and that their admirers are cowardly braggarts, though mortifying, is nothing compared to what Petruchio puts Katherina through. Besides, even if Truewit, who as chief satirist points out the moral of the story, addresses them directly, he does so in very ambiguous, contradictory terms, seeming to be encouraging what he should be correcting:

TRV[WIT]. (...) Madames, you are mute, vpon this new *metamorphosis*! but here stands shee, that has vindicated your fames. Take heed of such *insectoe* hereafter. And let it not trouble you that you haue discouer’d any mysteries to this yong gentleman. He is (a’most) of yeeres, & will make a good visitant within this twelue-month. In the meane time, wee’ll all vndertake for his secrecie, that can speake so well of his silence. (V. iiiii. 243-251)

The Collegiates may be temporarily speechless and feel the need to keep a low profile for some time but they will definitely start anew as before.

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