Beguiling the Old Pantaloon:

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In unfolding the story of Katharine and Petruchio, *The Taming of the Shrew* presents a complex commentary on power relationships in society. From the outset, whether it be Baptista insisting he will not give Bianca in marriage or Katharine threatening to "paint" Hortensio's face with her nails, almost every member of the Paduan community seeks to exercise power over someone else. This power finds its basis in a patriarchal hierarchy—symbolized in Lucentio's phrase "the old pantaloon" (III.i.34)—that is centered on the ever-elusive ideal of masculine superiority and wholeness. Being elusive, this ideal exists only within a system of differences (Derrida 496), the fundamental difference being the binary relationship of male/female, also expressible as Male/Other. Thus, the patriarchal ideal of power is inherently a phallocentric ideal, an indefinable "presence" that only takes shape in opposition to the symbolic "absence" of the female body; as Lacan puts it, "The fact that the phallus is a signifier means that it is in the place of the Other that the subject has access to it" (1308). Because of this very opposition, the ideal of masculine "presence" contains within itself discourses with the potential to subvert its own immanent social authority, for inherent to this system of difference are polyvalent "feminine" avenues that threaten its destabilization; as Foucault observes, avenues of subversion do not multiply "apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise" (Foucault 1657).

In the context of the play, such subversion is not to be confused with shrewishness. Shrewishness merely reinforces patriarchal authority lines through an empty promise of power, while authentically subversive discourse envisions the potential of shifting the center of authority

in radically new directions. Shrews accomplish little, for their appropriation of dominant, masculine discourse serves only to reinforce the phallocentric system. The destabilizing potential of authentic, feminine speech, on the other hand, creates spaces for entirely new conceptualizations of society. Such subversive discourse—labeled "feminine" primarily because of its potential to destabilize patriarchal authority—is not the exclusive domain of women, but rather is open to both women and men willing to think outside the system. Indeed, it is through the abandonment of futile, masculine "shrewishness" in favor of an authentic, feminine discourse that both Petruchio and Katharine overturn the established hierarchy to achieve social dominance. For, although neither Petruchio nor Katharine enjoys a position of power within the Paduan community at the outset of the play, they nevertheless leave the stage as social conquerors in the end: "Come Kate, we'll to bed. / We three are married, but you two are sped" (V.ii.188-189). In their struggle to earn social prestige and self-determination, Petruchio and Katharine discover a new form of discourse—based not on shrewish imitation, but on authentically original conceptions of cooperation—that, by destabilizing conventional forms of social order, opens up to them opportunities for both social achievement and marital harmony.

Within *The Taming of the Shrew*, the desire to maintain social order leads characters to attempt two primary forms of social dominance: physical and discursive. The application of physical dominance, which reveals itself in several different ways throughout the play, is grounded in the system of difference signified by the destabilizing "absence" of the female body. In psychoanalytic terms, the female body, in threatening to evoke castration anxiety, creates sadistic impulses within the power system: "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through

punishment or forgiveness" (Mulvey 2188). These sadistic impulses may lead to overt violence, such as the physical dominance that is evident throughout the play, from Petruchio's wringing of Grumio's ears (I.ii.17) to Katharine's slapping Petruchio during their first encounter (II.i.215).

These sadistic impulses may also lead to more subtle forms of physical domination, such as the power that the elder generation exercises over the younger. Interestingly, the play contains fifty-four references to 'father,' which is more than any other Shakespeare play except *King Lear* and *Henry VI, Part III* (Novy 21). Moreover, matriarchal figures are notably absent; none of the suitor's mothers contribute to the marriage arrangements, and Katharine stands alone as the only "Shakespearian female heroine without a female friend at any point in the play" (Novy 25). This inescapable feminine "absence," while helping reinforce the Paduan community's physically-dominant masculine atmosphere, at the same time interrogates the legitimacy of this dominance—a dichotomous system built on the active repression of the female signifier. For, although the patriarchal power of Baptista and Petruchio's father sets the plot in motion, this authority proves tenuous: on the road to Padua, Petruchio and Katharine are able to figuratively transform Vincentio into a young maiden (IV.v.27), Gremio finds himself bested by the younger suitors (V.ii.112-113), and Lucentio's deception in wooing Bianca makes fools of both Baptista and Vincentio (V.i.108-110). By the play's end, patriarchy's true authority appears more fragile than ever.

In addition to physical domination, discursive domination also plays an important role in attempts to maintain patriarchal order, as the establishment seeks to control subversive speech. In this, the relationship between Katharine, Bianca and the suitors serves as an example: because they represent the patriarchal establishment, the suitors possess the power to verbally ascribe

Bianca and Katharine's character, whether shrewish or sweet (I.i.66-69). Like physical domination, this discursive domination finds its basis in the male/female binary, as the phallocentric power structure seeks to suppress the subversive potential of all "absence"-centered discourse. In response, women search for a discourse powerful enough to challenge patriarchal suppression; a discourse of "impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (Cixous 2049). However, rather than discovering an authentic alternative to the phallocentric hierarchy, women such as Katharine—and later, Bianca and the widow—fall into the socially-impotent mimicry of the shrewish stereotype. Traditionally associated with "talking too much, or too loudly and publicly, or too crossly for a woman" (Dolan 9), the appellative "shrew," rather than signifying the repression of authentic feminine speech, instead condemns the appropriation by women of dominant, masculine forms of speech. In this sense, shrews are not women who have broken free of the phallocentric system; rather, because "the conceptual tie between the pair [Male/Other] leads directly to the need perpetually to reiterate and reclaim victory" (Prokhovnik 27), their actions serve only to reinforce masculine power.

At the play's outset, neither Katharine nor Petruchio's chances for navigating this repressive maze to achieve social dominance look especially promising. From the beginning, Katharine feels the weight of both physical and discursive domination, as the patriarchal establishment seeks to impress her body "with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity" (Bordo 2363). Trapped by these limited norms of behavior, Katharine lashes out by the only means available to her: words. For women in Katharine's position, "both gossiping and scolding give […] a semblance of power" (Qtd. in Dolan

9), yet this power is illusory, for it remains grounded in the phallocentric ideal. For this reason, the more Katharine asserts her right to self-determination, the more vociferously the community labels her "shrewish" and "curst." Petruchio also joins the party of verbal domineers; his strategy for wooing Katharine rests upon verbal contradiction, as he explains in his soliloquy: "Say that she rail, why then I'll tell her plain / She sings as sweetly as a nightingale" (II.i.166-167). In describing his wooing strategy, Petruchio uses the verb "say" five times, as well as eight other verbs that describe forms of speech (Dolan 19). Clearly, Katharine is outmatched in the arena of masculine discourse.

In addition to being mastered verbally, Katharine also suffers physical domination. In Act II, Baptista asserts mastery over her physical body through declaring his intention to marry her off, whether she desires it or not. After the wedding, Petruchio assumes the right of this physical command, announcing, "I will be master of what is mine own. / She is my goods, my chattels; […] my anything" (III.ii.218-219, 221). Although Katharine rages against this oppression, she knows of no language—and thus no way of thinking—that can offer an alternative to the phallocentric systems of her community.

Katharine, however, is not the only character straining against society's boundaries. Petruchio also experiences the pressure of patriarchal expectations; his dominant striving throughout the play results from the same patriarchal constraints that help define Katharine's shrewishness. Essential to the patriarchal ideal of phallocentric power is the concept of domestic mastery; for Petruchio and his contemporaries, marriage serves as a primary testing ground of masculinity, in which they can "assert dominance, raise their social status, and prove their manhood" (Dolan 33). As Kahn points out, "It was partly Petruchio's desire to show his peers

that he was more of a man than they which spurred him to take on the shrew in the first place" (49). Through much of the play, Petruchio styles himself as a "man's man," master of the dialects of physical and discursive dominance. For, although Petruchio never strikes Katharine, his violent behavior towards Grumio and other subordinates serves to remind Katharine "that she, too, is his subordinate and that he could beat her if he chose" (Dolan 19).

Yet, for all Petruchio's bluster and dominant speech, he nevertheless stands as foreign to the Paduan hierarchy through much of the play, the only possessions to commend him to the establishment being his father's wealth and reputation. For this reason, Petruchio's bizarre behavior—his actions at the wedding, his treatment of servants—should be viewed not as a confident power-player's eccentricities, but rather as an insecure outsider's confusion of notoriety with prestige. Petruchio masters the hierarchy's shrewish discourses to become the biggest shrew in Padua, yet his assault accomplishes little; Gremio considers him "a devil, a very fiend" (III.ii.145) and Katharine persists in "crossing" his authority (IV.iv.185). Like Katharine, Petruchio remains trapped within his relegated identity, unable to break free from the self-defeating discursive practices found at the bottom of the patriarchal hierarchy.

Petruchio and Katharine continue on in this unhappy state up until Act IV. There, on the road to Padua, the couple experiences an "epiphany" moment (Priest 37) in its search for an authentic, socially-powerful discourse. Up to this point, Katharine and Petruchio have been at odds, both of them striving to assert their authority through the leverage of dominant, masculine discourse, both seeking to win at the other's expense. These previous battles, in addition to being centered on masculine speech, have all taken place within the city square or the home, those symbolic realms of masculine authority. This pivotal scene, however, in taking place within

the natural world's sphere, represents a journey away from the "rational" masculine center into the "Otherness" of the female body (Gilbert 2027). As such, it provides the couple an opportunity to distance themselves from the hierarchy in which they have been unsuccessful participants. This transition into the natural world is not lost on the characters; Petruchio takes this opportunity to initiate a "lunatic, female, figurative" game (Fineman 99), in which he attempts a series of gender-based transformations:

> PETRUCHIO: Good Lord, how bright and goodly shines the moon!
>
> KATHARINA: The moon? The sun. It is not moonlight now.
>
> PETRUCHIO: I say it is the moon that shines so bright.
>
> KATHARINA: I know it is the sun that shines so bright.
>
> (IV.v.2-5)

As a shared experience of play, this game is central to the couple's discovery of socially powerful discourse; it creates a venue for experiencing "the feeling of mastery, the sense of being a cause, the assimilation of reality to the ego" (Novy 14). Up to this point, Katharine has resisted cooperating in Petruchio's word games, but this new type of play captures her imagination; taking place within the "Otherness" of the natural world, overflowing with the subversive connotations of renaming the sun, the game offers Katharine a tantalizing taste of social dominance. Moreover, it opens up a feminine alternative to the fruitless appropriation of masculine discourse; Petruchio's game, in setting the moon in place of the sun, draws the couple into the realm of Artemis, goddess of feminine cycles:

> It is important to remember that even in classical myth the sexual, maternal, and wild were all present in Artemis. As Gimbutas describes her, "Associated with

> ‘fertility,’ Artemis presided over births and everything having to do with women's biological seasons. […] [As] goddess of the waxing, full, and waning moon she embodies all aspects of women's life cycles.” (Pratt 289)

In representing the “sexual, maternal, and wild,”—so long absent from the play—Artemis signifies the subversive potential of authentic feminine discourse within the masculine hierarchy. Although coded as “absence” by the patriarchal hierarchy, her female body is nevertheless a “presence,” filled with polyvalent alternatives to established phallocentricism. In summoning Artemis, Petruchio’s game allows the couple to discursively investigate a mode of relating outside “the dominating force and homogenizing effect of the authority attributed to the dichotomous mode” (Prokhovnik 4); in the polyvalent space Artemis creates, the couple discovers an inclusive language that frees them from self-destructive, masculine assertiveness. It is over the body of Artemis that Katharine and Petruchio can finally come to agreement, as through their playful cooperation they tap into an authentic “subversive” alternative to dominant striving.

The power of this cooperation becomes evident when Petruchio and Katharine encounter Vincentio a short time later. Although, as an old man, Vincentio represents “the class at the top of the social order within a patriarchal society” (Novy 20), Katharine and Petruchio are nevertheless able to transform his identity through the power of their new-found cooperation:

> PETRUCHIO: [To Vincentio.] Good morrow, gentle mistress. Where away?—
>
> Tell me, sweet Kate, and tell me truly too,
>
> Hast thou beheld a fresher gentlewoman? […]
>
> HORTENSIO: ‘A will make the man mad, to make a woman of him.
>
> KATHARINA: Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet,

Whither away, or where is thy abode?

(IV.v.27-29, 35-37)

This transformation does not provoke from Vincentio the masculine defensiveness of Petruchio's earlier active assaults on Katharine's identity. Rather, the disruptive presence of Artemis in this "absence"-centered discourse—"Whither away? (37)"—strikes Vincentio speechless. In a moment, Katharine and Petruchio have turned his world upside-down, as they effect a figurative overturn of the patriarchal hierarchy. No longer in competition with one another, the couple is able to leverage a new discourse of cooperative social power, based not on binary opposition, but rather upon an "open-ended and non-dichotomous thinking [which allows] relational social practice" (Prokhovnik 4). Paradoxically, it is the inherent equality of their cooperative agreement that provides Katharine and Petruchio the potential of waging war against their social superiors; through cooperation, they have been able to effect, at least figuratively, the social authority that eluded them individually. Yet, in some ways, this is not surprising, for, as Kristeva points out, "the most intense revelation of God, which occurs in mysticism, is given only to a person who assumes himself as 'maternal'" (162). The "freedom with respect to the maternal territory" (162) which Petruchio evinces through his "lunatic" game becomes a source of power as the couple shares in this discourse together.

This figurative social transformation, however, soon becomes literal. In the play's final scene, Petruchio and Katharine test the ability of their new-found agreement to destabilize hierarchical authority within the Paduan community. In proposing a wager concerning which wife is most obedient, Petruchio creates a game in which cooperation, rather than competition, takes the prize. The other wives refuse to play, thus precluding their victory from the outset by

aligning themselves with the competitive discourse of masculinity. Only Katharine comes when she is called, suspecting, no doubt, that Petruchio is creating an opportunity for the couple to assert social dominance through another kind of "lunatic" agreement. This he does: in giving Katharine the cue for her final speech, Petruchio invites an agreement that will win social standing for them both; Petruchio will demonstrate himself ablest of the suitors, while Katharine will turn both Bianca and the widow on their heads. In her speech, Katharine echoes the playfully excessive idiom of Vincentio's transformation:

> Fie, fie! Unknit that threatening, unkind brow,
> And dart not scornful glances from those eyes
> To wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor.
> It blots thy beauty as frosts do bite the meads,
> Confounds thy fame as whirlwinds shake fair buds,
> And in no sense is meet or amiable.
> (V.ii.140-145)

As in Vincentio's transformation, Katharine's speech is more performance than genuine sentiment. Indeed, the irony of "[Holding] the center stage while preaching humility" (Novy 24) could hardly escape being pointed out by her hearers, except that, like Vincentio earlier, they are struck speechless by the symbolic evoking of Artemis in this feminine discourse between wife and husband. At the end, when Katharine offers to place her hand beneath Petruchio's foot in a gesture of submission, Petruchio's response—"Why, there's a wench! Come on and kiss me, Kate" (V.ii.184)—communicates his delight in finding Katharine and he can play together so successfully. Against the odds, Petruchio and Katharine have maneuvered their way to positions

of power within the Paduan community, not by means of shrewish domination, but by beguiling the establishment with the threat of a new kind of society in which its hierarchical power is stripped away.

Thus, the "shrew" who has been tamed is not Katherine, but rather the very patriarchal hierarchy that labeled her a shrew in the first place. The old pantaloon has indeed been beguiled, shaken by the vision of a new kind of community, based not on the hierarchical ranking and homogenous binaries of patriarchal authority, but rather upon a horizontal, heterogeneous appreciation of difference that "encompasses a much wider scope of possible kinds of relations" (Prokhovnik 40). This vision, couched within Petruchio and Katharine's new-found cooperation, is a glimpse into the future of patriarchy's own demise. It will be taken up by cultural theorists such as Helene Cixous and W.E.B. Du Bois, who, building upon this idea of uncovering voices that have been marginalized by the traditional hierarchy, envision a new kind of society, where women and men of every race do not fear "any risk, any desire, any space still unexplored in themselves, among themselves and others or anywhere else" (Cixous 2044). It is a promise of beauty: "Its variety is infinite, its possibility is endless" (Du Bois 982).

To be sure, Katharine and Petruchio are no altruists, nor is their goal to create a new kind of society. Theirs is a struggle against various forms of social domination in order to win prestige as well as a voice in society. What makes this process so unsettling for audiences to <u>The Taming of the Shrew</u> is the awareness that the explicit explanation of the play's *denouement* does not suffice; like Hortensio, audiences cannot help but feel, "'Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so" (193). However, viewed through this lens of a patriarchal structure threatened by the imminence of a new social paradigm, based not on competition but on cooperation, the true

picture becomes clearer: Petruchio and Katharine find social harmony not as shrew-tamer and shrew, but as the vanguard of a new kind of social cooperation. In later centuries, the paradigm foreshadowed here will become the basis for new ways of thinking about race, ethnicity and gender. In this, the goal is not to invert existing hierarchical structures, creating merely a new kind of oppressive domination; rather, the goal is to discover ways of thinking that are dialogical rather than monological, inclusive rather than exclusive.

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