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Summer of Shrew, Part 3: a Sly conceit

How a drunken beggar and an earlier version of the script shift the brawling balances of the play

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By DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER

Is there another ending to “Shrew”? And who’s the real shrew in the play?

In the last installment, we looked at evidence from the script of “The Taming of the Shrew” to see if Kate might not be tamed after all, and we explored the many layers of irony that frame her final speech. There’s one more layer to consider: What if Kate’s story isn’t the play’s only reality? What if it’s a play within a play, or even a dream within a dream?

This isn’t just an Inception-fueled fantasy; this is actually what happens in the original “Shrew” script. The play that was printed in the 1623 First Folio begins not with the world of Kate and Petruchio, but with a drunken beggar named Christopher Sly getting kicked out of a tavern for failing to pay his tab and passing out on the floor. (Note the English name: we’re in Shakespeare’s contemporary world, not a fictional Italian setting.) Along comes a Lord on a hunting trip who decides to play a prank on Sly. He instructs his servants to dress the beggar in a lord’s attire and tell him he’s been suffering from madness until now, and he hires a troupe of traveling actors to put on a “comedy” for Sly’s entertainment. What’s the comedy? “The Taming of the Shrew.”

So the whole Kate-Petruchio business is not the play’s claim to nature; it’s an act that’s staged as a practical joke on a drunken beggar. What’s more, part of the Lord’s prank involves dressing one of his poor male pages in drag and presenting him/her to Sly as his wife, whom Sly eagerly greets and invites to bed. The play is a kind of diversion to defer that consummation (like the plot of any romantic comedy, which piles up obstacles to postpone the final union). We’re watching Sly, dressed as a lord, with a boy dressed as his wife, watching actors act out “The Taming of the Shrew,” a play about lords and wives. The Lord even suggests to his page that being a conventional lady is itself an act: he has to trot out “kind embracements” and “tempting kisses,” and if he can’t cry on command, a concealed onion held to his eye should do the trick. It’s über-meta. Before the main story has started, the Sly beginning primes us to note that all the power relations that the story relies on—husband/wife, father/child, master/servant—are just mutable roles that actors play. All you need is a costume change, and a beggar becomes a lord, or a boy becomes a wife, or a male actor from the traveling troupe becomes Kate.

Editors often quarantine the Sly scenes from the rest of the play, calling them an “Induction” (following an eighteenth-century tradition) and numbering them on a different system, reserving Act One, Scene One for the entrance of Lucentio and Tranio in Padua. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s snappy [production](#) this season excluded Sly for an understandable reason: he stretches out the running time.

But in the First Folio, [Actus Primus, Scoena Prima](#) opens with Sly’s drunken entrance. He’s the beginning of the play, and in fact there are no act or scene divisions when the players start their Italian show; they’re part of the Sly prank, too. Given Sly’s importance to the way we perceive the rest of the play, the [Portland Shakespeare Project](#) decided to keep him (with compensatory cuts later on), and the

result is quite remarkable. With Sly sitting in the front row of the audience, a reluctant cross-dressed page on his knee, you're always conscious that you're watching a (very funny) staged entertainment with actors taking on stereotypical social roles.



Bartholomew (Matthew Kerrigan), a page in drag, cozies up to Christopher Sly (Nathan Dunkin) at the Portland Shakespeare Project.
Photo: David Kinder

In the Folio, Sly just fades away once the Italian business gets going. He seems to fall asleep and tells his man-wife that he wishes the play were over—presumably so they could go to bed—and then we don't hear from him again. But here's the tricky part. There's another version of "The Taming of the Shrew" that was published anonymously in 1594, thirty years before the First Folio, called "[The Taming of a Shrew](#)." Scholars are still debating whether "The Shrew" was based on "A Shrew" or vice versa, or whether they both derive from some lost earlier "Shrew." Until the end of the eighteenth century, they were treated as variant scripts for the same play. Editors often conflated material from both texts, which Portland Shakes chose to do as well. Artistic Director Michael Mendelson and the production dramaturg, Linfield graduate Kate McMullan, interpolated scenes from "A Shrew" into "The Shrew" to infuse the contemporary world of Sly into the imaginary world of Padua.

In "A Shrew," Sly never vanishes; he keeps commenting on the play and at one point even interrupts the actors to protest a plot twist. The Lord has to remind Sly (still dressed in borrowed finery), "My lord, this is but the play. They're but in jest."



A stagehand (Rusty Tennant) looks on as Sly (Dunkin) interrupts the play at the Portland Shakes. Photo: David Kinder

That sense of a jest on Sly—both by the Lord and by the actors—continues in “A Shrew” through the end of Kate’s final speech. Sly has conked out again by this point, and after the actors depart, he is returned to his beggar’s clothes and woken up by the Tapster, the guy who keeps the keg at the tavern. Their concluding dialogue highlights the challenge of taking any easy moral away from the play.

TAPSTER: Come, art thou drunken still?

SLY: Who’s this? Tapster? O lord, sirrah, I have had the bravest dream tonight that ever thou heard’st in all thy life.

TAPSTER: Ay, marry, but you had best get you home, for your wife will course you for dreaming here tonight.

SLY: Will she? I know now how to tame a shrew. I dreamt upon it all this night ’til now, and thou hast waked me out of the best dream that ever I had in my life. But I’ll to my wife presently and tame her, too, an if she anger me.

TAPSTER: Nay tarry, Sly, for I’ll go home with thee and hear the rest that thou hast dreamt tonight.

If this is the true ending to the play, then it offers a different attitude toward Kate’s taming. Sure, it might suggest that the play teaches men how to tame their wives. But for most viewers, the point is that only a drunken beggar would think that the play teaches men how to tame their wives. Such an interpretation is just a wish-fulfillment fantasy for a henpecked husband. That, at least, seems to be the tapster’s view, as he pulls Sly back from his shrew-taming ambitions.

What’s more, the entire Sly story raises the question of who the real shrew is in the play. If you look up the non-rodent sense of “shrew” in the Oxford English Dictionary, the first definition is: “A wicked, evil-disposed, or malignant man.” That’s right, a man—not a woman. The example the OED provides that’s closest in time to Shakespeare’s play comes from Thomas Dekker’s “Ravens Almanack”: “Such as were

shrewes to their wives”—the opposite of the gender roles we would typically imagine. Shakespeare draws on that definition midway through *Shrew* when one of Petruchio’s servants hears about his wild behavior toward Kate after their wedding and exclaims, “By this reckoning he is more shrew than she.” And if we think about the subsequent terms in the OED’s definition, “a mischievous or vexatious person,” and recall that the first mischievous, vexatious person we meet is the drunken, obstreperous Christopher Sly, he emerges as a shrew candidate as well.

There’s an interesting connection between the transformation Sly undergoes and the journeys Kate and Petruchio experience. To rise in status from a beggar to a lord, as Sly does in *jest*, was to become a gentleman. Renaissance England had a word for that ennobling process: “to gentle” (as when King Henry V tells each common soldier at the battle of Agincourt that “this day shall gentle his condition”). To become “gentle,” though, also had begun to acquire the sense it has for us today: to be kind and considerate, as befits a gentleman. The two senses converge in “*Shrew*” when Kate covets a cap that Petruchio has ordered and then dismissed. Kate protests that “gentlewomen wear such caps as these,” and Petruchio replies, “When you are gentle you shall have one too, / And not till then.” Kate has to become gentle in order to dress as a gentlewoman. Yet Petruchio’s gentle status is also in doubt. When he threatens to cuff Kate if she strikes him again, she warns him: “If you strike me you are no gentleman”—neither kind nor dignified. Petruchio, Kate, and Sly all have to learn how to behave gently, in both their rank and conduct.



Petruchio (Farmer) and Kate (Porter): ungente behavior. Photo: David Kinder

Petruchio (James Farmer) and Kate (Maureen Porter) demonstrate ungente behavior at the Portland Shakespeare Project. Photo by David Kinder.

Productions that show Petruchio being tamed as well as Kate are often seen as distorting the play, blunting the plot's apparently misogynist thrust to make it more palatable today. But after looking at the Christopher Sly frame and the Renaissance definition of a shrew, we can see that expanding the range of the titular "Shrew" to include male characters is actually a return to its original meaning. In the next installment, I'll explore how a long-forgotten Renaissance sequel to "Shrew" takes the taming of men even further.

NOTES:

- If you'd like to read the full script of "The Taming of a Shrew," Cambridge University Press offers a [scholarly edition](#) edited by Stephen Roy Miller. Hackett Publishing has also put out a convenient paperback called [Three Shrew Plays](#), edited by Barry Gaines and Margaret Maurer, that includes "The Taming of the Shrew," "The Taming of a Shrew," and "The Tamer Tamed."
- In a provocative essay, "[The Shakespearean Editor as Shrew-Tamer](#)," Leah Marcus argues that the editorial tradition of preferring "The Shrew" to "A Shrew" and cutting Sly's ending has made editors complicit in a patriarchal strategy to tame Kate.

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[WEDNESDAY](#): An introduction to the Portland and Ashland productions.

[THURSDAY](#): Who does the taming, and who's getting tamed?

[TOMORROW](#): In our final installment, a long-forgotten sequel further tames the men.