


Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew and the Tradition of Screwball Comedy

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**Mei Zhu,**

**"Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and the Tradition of Screwball Comedy"**

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and the Tradition of Screwball Comedy," Mei Zhu argues that Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* is controversial owing to the subtlety and complexity of the text as well as its subject matter. Franco Zeffirelli's 1967 film version seems to follow the narrative structure of the original play closely while its effect is different. Through a detailed analysis and comparison of Shakespeare's play and Zeffirelli's adaptation, Mei argues that Zeffirelli's *Taming* is based on the Hollywood genre of screwball comedy. Rooted in mid-1930s USA during the Great Depression, such films feature a comic battle of the sexes, with the males generally losing. Zhu also notes that Shakespeare influenced Chinese films during the early twentieth century, although his influence was indirect.

**Mei ZHU**

### **Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and the Tradition of Screwball Comedy**

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* is extremely controversial owing to the subtlety and complexity of the text, especially its ending. The history of the play's reception is particularly contentious. Critics have long engaged in heated debates about how to interpret this play. As Deborah Cartmell points out, "The play's sexual politics are far too complex and problematic for a cinema audience at the end of the twentieth century" (214; for an overview of the *Shrew* theme in European literature and film, see Vasvári <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss1/3/>>). Although the theme of the play is how to rule a wild wife and Zeffirelli's 1967 film version seems to follow closely the narrative structure of the original play, its effect is not contentious, mainly because Zeffirelli adopts the mode of Hollywood screwball comedy. Screwball comedy is a term one finds in filming contexts of all sorts and not unfamiliar to mass audience. However, no unanimously agreed definition can be found for it, neither among critics nor within the work of a single critic. As Wes Gehring observes, "Despite screwball comedy's significance in film and comedy history, its nature remains something of a mystery" (1986, 10). Nevertheless, some general characteristics as well as a few screwball comedy classics are not difficult to identify. In Gehring's terms, screwball comedy is essentially "an eccentrically comic battle of the sexes, with the male generally losing." It is rooted in a chaotic world, in mid-1930s America: "In a world that seems more irrational every day, the antihero (the male) is fated to be forever frustrated. His frustration is the result of his attempt to create order ... in a world where order is impossible. The commonsense platitudes of any updated cracker-barrel philosopher are inadequate in today's crises. ... The vanishing of rigidity ... is the goal of all good screwball comedies" (Gehring 1986, 11-14).

Zeffirelli's *Taming* is an early and substantial example of a marriage between Hollywood screwball comedy and Shakespearean comedy that would influence later filmmakers like Kenneth Branagh. Samuel Crowl argues that Branagh, in films like *Much Ado about Nothing*, reaches beyond even Zeffirelli in his willingness "to marry Shakespeare and Hollywood" and that "Branagh's greatest achievement is to link ideas in Shakespeare's play with the witty Hollywood comedies of the 1930s that have come to be labeled as 'screwball'" (Crowl 111-12). I became interested in the topic because screwball comedy actually existed in Chinese culture, although it has never been widely recognized as a distinct film genre. In the 1940s, Shanghai was a universal metropolis and "New Woman" movements spread widely throughout China. A legendary Shanghai writer, Eileen Chang, was enchanted by Hollywood movies and wrote screenplays as well as popular fictions. Leo Ou-Fan Lee explored both the literary aspects of her screenplays and the cinematic aspects of her fiction, with particular attention to the screwball comedies, including her most famous story, "Love in the Fallen City" in *Shanghai Modern*, published in 1999. Generally speaking, Zeffirelli's version is more compatible with Chang's film conventions than Shakespeare's original play because it is always the ungrateful or picky husband (the male protagonist) who is eventually tamed in Chang's films. Most importantly, the wives are more intelligent and independent than the husbands.

To frame Branagh's achievement adequately, it will help analyze exactly how Zeffirelli created the precedent of using screwball comedy to present Shakespeare's most popular comedy. As his film opens, Zeffirelli invokes a festive atmosphere that prepares the way for the battle of the sexes, an integral part of screwball comedy. He shows Lucentio and his servant Tranio riding through a summer rain into idyllic Padua bathed in the golden and rose-colored light of a rainbow. They enter the beautiful city and then watch a solemn cathedral service in which everyone dresses decently and the music and prayers are handled properly. Suddenly, a book is burned and there is an explosion of color, music, masks, and costumes: a celebration of some kind. People carry the "corpse" of a sick man who refuses to remain still. Masks represent a king and a queen. The camera moves from the legs to the top part of a giant body to reveal a mountain of flesh. There is much chivalry. At the end of the procession, as the camera is positioned behind Lucentio and fixed on the veiled Bianca, a figure in a beaked mask lowers a hook to lift her veil while many young men surround her singing a licentious song. Everything at Padua seems fresh, funny, and crazy.

Jorgens says that, "Zeffirelli's major emphasis is upon farce (71)," but it is not slapstick so much as the particular romantic farce that we associate with Hollywood's screwball comedy. According to Leo McCarey, a key director of the genre, the point of these films is not to attack social problems but to entertain: "The way I look at it, it's larceny to remind people how lousy things are and call it entertainment" (qtd. in Gehring 1983, 48). This fantastic opening of Zeffirelli's film turns out to be much more than a mere opening. It sets an entertaining mood for a movie in which Petruchio and Kate turn reason inside out and stand the everyday on its head.

Petruchio's role as an anti-hero perhaps prompted Zeffirelli to construct his film as a screwball comedy. Gehring summarizes five key elements of the comic antihero -- his abundant leisure time, his childlike naïve, his life in the city, his apolitical nature and his frustration (1986, 10) -- but one element missing is the class difference between the heroine and the hero that makes the male protagonist an antihero. Many screwball comedy classics, such as *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *My Man Godfrey* (1936), feature male whose social rank is beneath that of the heroine. The screwball comedy classics are usually romances between a selfish, spoiled, rich girl and a brash, out-of-work or lower-class man. Such films not only mock the pretensions and vanity of high society but also demonstrate that rich girls are often much better off with plebeians. In Shakespeare's original play, Petruchio is a gentleman with estates and servants. He is witty and kind. Although he is not the problem-solving cracker-barrel figure of traditional American humor, he is dominant and assertive, a gentleman (even a philosopher) who implements his strategic plan -- "killing Kate with kindness." Radically different than other gentleman in the play, Petruchio in Zeffirelli's film is vulgar and not just greedy, as in Shakespeare's play, but almost impoverished. His friend Hortensio first sees him hitting his servant Grumio and is only willing to greet him when Petruchio recognizes him. After Petruchio is admitted into Hortensio's house, he behaves exactly like the tinker Christopher Sly in the Induction of the original play. He gets drunk and falls into bed still dressed. Next morning he recoils from a basin of rose-water brought by a servant, as unused to washing as Sly is unfamiliar with the "warm distilled waters" and "rose-water and bestrew'd with flowers" (1.143) that greet him when he wakes. Zeffirelli's substitution of Sly's identity for Petruchio's changes Petruchio's social status. In his conversation with Hortensio, Petruchio does not ask about Katherina's father, as if he is unaware of the upper class's codes of marriage. Moreover, in his later negotiation with Baptista, he directly asks, "If I got her love, what the dowry would be?" He lacks the politeness and sophistication of Petruchio in the play. After he declares that "Petruchio is my name, Antonio's son, a man well known throughout all Italy," Baptista says nothing but distractedly shakes his head, implying that Petruchio is mad or a fortune hunter.

So far, we see a major difference between the play and the film. In the play, there is no class difference between Petruchio and Katherina. But the film boldly infuses class difference with gender difference. For Petruchio, the wooing is nothing but a game played for money. He even attempts to abandon Katherina on their journey to his house because he has never seriously thought about a married life up to that point. In many senses, this Petruchio is much more naïve than the character in the play, since he does not have a complete plan to deal with or tame Katherina. He plays the wooing game very well only because he is desperate and determined to get Baptista's money. He behaves horribly in the wedding ceremony and the wedding feast because he is an outsider, too brash and coarse to conform to genteel manners, or he simply does not care. His only plan is to leave Padua as soon as he gets his money. He is daffier than Shakespeare's character, and fits the model of a Hollywood antihero. Further, in a surprising twist that in part accounts for the brilliance of his film, Zeffirelli follows clues in Shakespeare's play and reverses the hero and heroine in the tradition of screwball comedy by making Petruchio more shrewish than Katherine. According to Fran Dolan, an important characteristic of a shrew in Shakespeare's day was "talking too much, or too loudly and publicly, or too crossly for a woman. Lacking other means to express anger to redress grievances, a shrew depended on her tongue (9). Katherina in Shakespeare's play has a scolding, shrewish tongue that she uses as a weapon. Baptista warns Petruchio that he must be "armed for some unhappy words" (2.1.153) before he goes to see her. However, Katherina does not really talk more than many of the other characters; in the first scene she has only thirteen lines, all of them in response to provocation. In fact, at several crucial moments she

remains silent. We don't have access to her psychological depth, and it is questionable what she actually thinks at those points. After her first fight with Petruchio Katherina declares that she wishes Petruchio be hanged rather than marrying her (2.1.155). Immediately after that announcement, Petruchio boasts about their love and a marriage date is scheduled. Surprisingly, Katherina says nothing. When Petruchio disturbs the wedding ceremony, Katherina only trembles (3.2.158). After Katherina enters Petruchio's house, she speaks even less. In fact, Katherina is more marked by her physical violence than a sharp tongue: she ties up Bianca and whips her in act 1, scene 1. She breaks Hortensio's head with a musical instrument, and she strikes Petruchio not long after she meets him. Even in Petruchio's house, she beats Grumio because he refuses to feed her. She is also more frequently addressed as "mad" than "shrew" by almost everybody around her, including her father. Hortensio calls her a devil (1.1 147) and a "fiend of hell"; Gremio sees her as "the devil's dam" (1.1.147); her father accuses her "hiding of a devilish spirit" and confesses that she is an ill match for Petruchio - "She is not for your turn." (2.1.152). The men of Padua generally agree that Kate is unmarriageable "unless [she] were of gentler, milder mold" (1.1.147). Gremio concludes that "she's too rough" for him (1.1 147). In Shakespeare's play, her physical actions add to the farce.

By contrast, Katherina in Zeffirelli's film is very intelligent, sophisticated, and active, a much more fully developed character than in the play. In the film, it is more than clear that Katherina begins to change after she is tricked into believing that Petruchio really wants her. To reveal Kate's psyche, Zeffirelli first shoots Kate in profile over a stained window so that we see things through her perspective. We see Petruchio is announcing that he will buy beautiful clothes and make serious preparations for the wedding ceremony. Then we see a troubled and thinking Kate. Eventually we see a gentle and sweet smile on her face, a smile that humanizes her. This long take can also be viewed as the epiphany moment because Kate starts intentionally and affectionately to tame herself according to genteel codes of manner. Actually, much subtlety of this film comes from moments like this. In the original play, Kate is never seen alone. Every time she appears, she is with her father, sister, Petruchio, or servants. She is depicted, viewed, or commented on by others, who regard her as nothing but a crazy woman or a child. In Zeffirelli's film, audiences constantly see occasions when Katherina is alone. She is more sober (or less crazy) and intelligent than in the play.

Katherine's first major scene, Petruchio's wooing game, continues the inexhaustible Dionysian energies and comically accelerated actions of the opening entertainment. Katherina's dress is extravagantly colorful and exaggerated. Her bosom is huge, symbolic of her shrewish energy. Petruchio's costume is like tarnished armor, partially revealing his strong muscles and hairy chest. His appearance resembles neither the effeminate Hortensio nor other lesser men. As soon as we set eyes on the heroine and hero, we know that they are perfect matches for each other. As a matter of fact, typical Hollywood techniques such as shot-reverse-shot, soft focus (on Katherina's face), and a frozen frame all demonstrate that Katherina loves Petruchio when she first sees him. However, I doubt that Zeffirelli's Petruchio falls in love at exactly the same moment, because Zeffirelli makes him behave cruelly toward Katherina in both the wooing scene and the journey to his house. In the wooing scene, Petruchio twists Katherina's by the wrist and hand. It would seem she is in severe pain were it not that the film is a farce. The wooing can be regarded as a game of chase game during which Petruchio pretends to be a great lover and Katherina plays hard to get. Petruchio participates in the action while engaging in witty dialogue, quarreling, cursing, and nagging Katherina. From the beginning to the end, this game lasts almost thirty minutes. Notably little of Shakespeare's witty dialogue is cut during this sequence, although Zeffirelli cut about seventy percent of the rest of the play. Thus Zeffirelli's film reaches one of its finest moments where the verbal flood in Shakespeare finds a visual equivalent in shots full of motion, sound, and color. Screwball comedies use a similar combination of physical action and witty dialogue because they developed at the same time as the talkie: "Appropriately, only the picture-plus-sound could adequately showcase the marriage of slapstick to witty dialogue, which was screwball comedy's method of portraying of the antihero" (Gehring 1986, 10).

The wooing game is but the first of several games that Petruchio and Katherina play. Hapgood notes eight distinct phrases of Katherina and Petruchio's witty battle and their progressions (91). What I see are two kinds of games in Zeffirelli's narrative. One of them is the game of pretension. The other kind can be roughly defined as a competition of courtesy between the married couple. The game of pretension starts with Petruchio's wooing and continues as Katherina sees Petruchio packing her father's money after the wedding ceremony. Once again, this shot-reverse-shot of Katherina gives her the prominence of an intense subject. Now that she knows that Petruchio's real interest is not her, she has to make a big decision. After being carried into a heavy rain and put on a horse, Katherina looks back again and again, struggling about whether to follow her husband or return to her father. Twice she chooses Petruchio. So far, she has been continuing the game of pretension invented by Petruchio -- she has tried her best to keep her composure in public.

After Katherina enters Petruchio's moth-beaten, all-male household, a subtle tension in the air can be sensed. Petruchio is startled by Katherina's courageous action at first. Then as if threatened by an intruding, shrewish, and higher-class wife, Petruchio defends his masculinity spontaneously by manipulating a disastrous dinner, as in the play. After the dinner, however, when he sees Katherina's ruined wedding dress, he is so moved by her courage that he cannot help kissing her and wanting her. He does not have a pre-mediated plan to tear up their bed. At this moment, as the film shies away from the possibility of marital rape, Katherina takes action by hitting Petruchio on the head by a pan. Enraged and embarrassed, Petruchio then improvises a plan to treat her as she treats him and tears up their bed. Unlike the play, Petruchio ends up spending his wedding night on a bench while Katherina lies on the bed, not unlike a scene from *It Happened One Night*. No different from antiheroes in the screwball comedies, Petruchio is the one who loses the battle of the sexes (on aspects of the shrew and society, see also Heffernan).

In a further domestic turn, a weeping then smiling Katherina not only greatly undermines the cruelty in the original play but also sheds some light on her indefatigable spirit -- she loves the silly Petruchio and is determined to win his love and do something for their marriage. The next morning, she is seen confidently ordering the servants around, cheerfully cleaning up the house, and completely in charge. At first, Petruchio is happy and satisfied. He greets Kate, "Good morning, Kate." Receiving not a single word from Katherina, he continues to greet her enthusiastically, "How is my fair queen?" This time one word, "ill," is squeezed out of Katherina's teeth with a grin. Then another shot-reverse-shot shows us that Katherina is busily befriending all the servants and Petruchio is angrily watching her taking control of his household. Later on, to revenge this humiliation, Petruchio invents a fashion show and destroys all the beautiful dresses in front of Katherina to establish his authority, as in the play. But the contest is reciprocal, not a plot by Petruchio. Zeffirelli elevates the film to the level of screwball comedy, a more sophisticated form than physical slapstick and farce.

Portrayed in an extremely subtle manner, Petruchio's anxiety and uneasiness evolve through two stages. Petruchio prefers a bachelor's life, and when he returns home to what is more or less a gangsters' house, he is so happy that he throws all the money to his servants. Still, in the film he sings "where is my life ... that once I lived. ... It's gone, it's gone," for he realizes his life will be changed. When Petruchio carries Katherina into his bed chamber, Grumio is singing the same song in a sad and sorrowful tone because Petruchio's marriage threatens their male bonding. Interestingly, with Petruchio's gradually growing interest and love of Katherina, his uneasiness about a marriage is gradually transformed into concerns about married life. He is rigid, anxious, and uneasy because he is not sure about Katherina's love. Then he starts to test, observe, and compete with Katherina. The film's series of competitions, the dominating female character, the anxiety of the hero and his attempt to create order can all be linked to screwball comedies.

Zeffirelli's Petruchio is no less compromising than Cary Grant: The night before Petruchio and Katherine return to her father's house, Petruchio goes to Katherine's chamber and tells her they will wear fashionable and expensive clothes on this trip. As in *Bringing Up Baby*, where Cary Grant's brontosaurus collapses, a symbolic metaphor for the softening of Grant's rigidity and new appreciation for Katherine Hepburn, Petruchio's promise is a confession of his love for this earlier

Katherine. After his promise of a return home, she stops competing because she has won. Later on, in the "Sun" and "Moon" scene and wager scene, she repeatedly reassures the worrying Petruchio by "obeying" him or surprising him with rather unexpected performances. Rather than codes of submission, these behaviors are actually codes of love. Zeffirelli's Katherina, by assuming control of Petruchio's domestic sphere, alleviates Petruchio's anxiety about marriage and leads him out of his bachelor's world.

Shakespeare's play and Zeffirelli's film are two different stories coming from different roots or traditions. Shakespeare's play is mainly a play of manners and the leader of the game is undoubtedly Petruchio. Although the irony in Katherina's final speech implies an unbroken spirit, it only presents a potential for Katherina to be the real leader in the future. Zeffirelli's film, by contrast, is a love romance in which Katherina plays a dominating role, not least because films like to look at women, as Carol Rutter has argued, "Cinema is a 'looking' medium that writes its texts in visual language, and cinema has always been interested in looking at women" (241). The physical aspects of Zeffirelli's Katherina constantly exceed the specifications of Shakespeare's theater texts. In the play, no detailed descriptions about either Katherina's appearance or her age can be found. Both the 1980 BBC version and 1929 Sam Taylor's version portray Katherina as a blonde. Zeffirelli's Katherina is different because she is incarnated in Elizabeth Taylor whose dark hair and legendary violet (dark) eyes immediately bring an extra-text that is there to be read, a deeper contrast between her and other lesser women, symbolized by blondes such as Bianca and the widow. Moreover, Elizabeth Taylor makes Katherina a very strong subject. Her subjectivity not only comes from the shot-reverse-shots and her thinking moments but also from Taylor's aggressive acting. Elizabeth Taylor has occasionally played intelligent, dominating women in films such as *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). Her public image also enriches and alters Katherina's character. Almost everyone is aware of the off and on romance of Taylor and Richard Burton.

A final point on how Zeffirelli turned his Shakespearean source into a Hollywood film requires a look at the characters in what is actually the main plot of the play, the wooing of Bianca, although Zeffirelli makes it the subplot. Film writer Douglas Brode comments on the difficulty of filming *Taming*, "Also tricky is the balance of the Lucentio-Bianca plot, penned in the sophisticated style of Italian Renaissance comedy of intrigue, with the broad, burlesque-like Kate-Petruchio main plot" (18). Indeed, Zeffirelli's handling of the other plot is somewhat problematic and self-contradictory, as it steers between realism and fantasy. At the beginning of the movie, Lucentio and Tranio walk down the winding streets of Padua and see a series of outcasts or marginalized people: a drunkard locked in a cage, poor peasants, wandering men, an abandoned giant lady, and a grinning old woman. All these people imply that Padua is a rigid world with strict social norms. Anyone who does not follow the codes of the mainstream has been and will be abandoned as outcasts or treated with cruelty. It is a world of strict class distinctions. By juxtaposing the marginalized couple, poor Petruchio and crazy Katherina or the so-called "Lord and Lady of Misrule" with Lucentio and Bianca, the perfect genteel lovers, Zeffirelli puts the whole story in a big frame. At first he seems to be mocking the pretensions of high society. However, after Katherina determines to tame herself, she starts to imitate the manners of Bianca. She not only successfully tames herself but also tames Petruchio, who is usually unconcerned for society's rules. When the couple return to Padua, they are dressed up. Katherina behaves in a very careful way to avoid the disrespect.

Jack Jorgens interprets Katherina's departure from Bianca's banquet as a rebellion toward the old social order. He concludes that "For once the rebels in a comedy are not absorbed by society, but maintain their independence to the last" (155). Rather, I would argue that the irony in the ending does not lie in Katherina's speech. Instead, the film is ironic because both Katherina and Petruchio have unconsciously conformed to the values they are attacking or mocking. In this sense, Zeffirelli's film can be linked to screwball comedy again. Although screwball comedy tends to ridicule the stupidity, eccentricity, and sophistication of the upper class, and argues that a rich girl is much better off with a poor man, films like *My Man Godfrey* still end with compromise. In that movie, Godfrey eventually becomes a rich man and conforms to their manners. Petruchio and Katherina are compromised similarly.

In conclusion, Zeffirelli's film demonstrates an interesting marriage of Shakespeare and Hollywood. To me, this film is undeniably a screwball comedy. At first glance, it might be disappointing for Shakespearean scholars to see a Renaissance masterpiece "distorted" by popular culture. However, in turn it is arguable that the entire tradition of screwball comedy has roots in Shakespearean comedies such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, and *The Comedy of Errors*. Shakespeare gave these films the basic elements and stories. Most interestingly, Shakespeare's influence reached as far as China, although indirectly, by way of Hollywood. Overall, the fact that different cultures or eras interpret the stories differently only proves that Shakespeare's themes have indeterminate spaces. His plays are neither limited to one period nor one place, not for an age, but for all time.

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