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The Starving of the Shrew

by JOSEPH CANDIDO

...it is clear that newly caught shrews always eat about their own weight of food daily... What is astonishing is that the shrew should require so much food of such high energy content... their physiology is adjusted for a rapid turnover of energy, and when supplied with excess food, they are unable to 'change gear', but continue to burn up energy as they did when it was necessary to search for food. Whenever awake they will be either feeding, burrowing, or rushing about poking their noses into everything.1

There is a lot of eating and drinking in The Taming of the Shrew. One may be justly accused of rhetorical impertinence for saying that the play is marbled with such concerns; yet the fact remains that everywhere we look someone is either talking about food or getting ready to eat or drink. Rabbits stuffed with parsley (IV.iv.100), doughy cake (I.i.108; V.i.132), sweet hazelnuts (II.i.252), porridge bowls (IV.iii.64)—these and other such commonplace allusions dot the rhetorical landscape of Shakespeare's Padua and, as so much else in the play proper, direct us back to the English countryside of the Induction and the person of Christopher Sly.2

I

"I SMELL sweet savors, and I feel soft things" (Ind.ii.71), exclaims Sly, relishing at once his new identity as lord and the ensuing company of his beautiful and neglected lady. The remark is more pertinent than it may at first appear, underscoring as it does Sly's blunt and shameless hedonism. Here is a country mechanical rudely possessed of what may be called a thoroughly material


2. The determination to find connections between the play proper and the Induction has produced some of the liveliest and most controversial criticism on The Taming of the Shrew. One of the most provocative statements is that of Sears Jayne, "The Dreaming of the Shrew," Shakespeare Quarterly, 17 (1966), 41–56, who identifies Sly with Petruchio, arguing that after I.i Sly should take the part of Petruchio in the play proper, thus acting out in a dream sequence his own wish-fulfillment fantasy about how a wife should be trained to submit to her husband. On the other side of the issue is H. J. Oliver, who, in his edition of the play for The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), expresses scepticism about thematic readings that link ideas of personality or identity found in the Induction with action in the play proper. He sees the Sly scenes as distancing us from the action of the play proper, enabling us to see it as a "nose-too-serious comedy put on to divert a drunken tinker" (p. 42). But see also Morris, who argues that "Shakespeare clearly intended the comic incidents of the Induction to throw a forward light on the main play's concern with the development of love in marriage" (p. 138).
imagination, capable of seeing things, when he sees them at all, only through a
glass of small ale darkly. Sly’s strategy for letting “the world slide” involves no
fanciful or imaginative play of mind; instead he simply slips groundward and
into sleep simultaneously, adorned with few words (“paucas pallabris”) and
even fewer thoughts (Ind.i.5). Seldom in Shakespeare do we find ourselves in a
physical or intellectual environment so obstinately steeped in sense as that of the
Induction, yet this atmosphere is by no means attributable solely to the presence
of Sly. Into this world of broken glasses and dozing rustics step the Lord and his
retinue, bringing with them a far more cultivated habit of mind than Sly’s, yet one
oddly analogous to it, grounded just as surely as Sly’s, if more luxuriously, in
material reality. It is worth noting how the Lord’s briskly concocted program for
altering Sly’s intellectual perception assaults the drunkard—with a sort of
methodical deliberateness—through each of his five senses:

What think you, if he were convey’d to bed,
Wrapp’d in sweet clothes, rings put upon his fingers,
A most delicious banquet by his bed,
And brave attendants near him when he wakes,
Would not the beggar then forget himself?

Carry him gently to my fairest chamber
And hang it round with all my wanton pictures.
Balm his foul head in warm distilled waters
And burn sweet wood to make the lodging sweet.
Procure me music ready when he wakes,
To make a dulcet and a heavenly sound.
And if he chance to speak, be ready straight
And with a low submissive reverence
Say “What is it your honor will command?”
Let one attend him with a silver basin
Full of rose-water and bestrew’d with flowers,
Another bear the ewer, the third a diaper,
And say “Will’t please your lordship cool your hands?” (Ind.i.36–57)

With the exception perhaps of Cleopatra’s Egypt, no Shakespearean setting is so
perfectly rooted in day-to-day material sense as that of the Lord’s great house.
Here the buttery stands endlessly open, pouring forth its store of sack and delicate
conserves both for playfulness’ sake and the sake of the visiting players
(Ind.i.101–03). And amidst it all is Christopher Sly, at once the butt and focal
point of a materialist fantasy that, in more respects than one, shows the way to
Shakespeare’s Padua.

On the face of it Sly’s experience in the Induction contains some of the key
features of Shakespearean romantic comedy. As the drunken tinker moves from
the country alehouse to the Lord’s estate, he crosses from one distinct physical
and psychological environment into another. A beggar in one locale, a Lord in
the next, Sly, like so many of Shakespeare’s comic heroes and heroines, appears
to lose himself in the mysterious wonder of a heightened world and a new
identity. There is at times something almost formulaically *de rigueur* in the
rhetoric of Sly’s comic amazement:
Am I a lord? And have I such a lady?
Or do I dream? Or have I dream'd till now?
I do not sleep: I see, I hear, I speak,
I smell sweet savors, and I feel soft things.
Upon my life, I am a lord indeed,
And not a tinker nor Christopher Sly. (Ind.i.ii.68–73)

But is there any more to this than just romantic rhetoric? What gives the comic transformations that occur in Arden, Illyria, or Prospero’s island such emotional validity is that they are in fact transformations; they do not merely alter one’s sensory perceptions for a time (as is the case, for example, with Bottom’s “Dream”), but actually help effect a permanent and salutary reformation of the self. The young lovers of A Midsummer Night’s Dream or Ferdinand and Miranda are not only made to feel different at play’s end, they are different. Their exclamations of amazement wield emotional force because they reflect the new—if tentative—stirrings of genuinely altered and reformed personalities. The same cannot be said of Sly. The tinker’s neo-Ovidian “dream” of transformation is merely the trumped-up linchpin of a colossal practical joke that produces good fun but poor comedy. This is perhaps too obvious a point to make, yet it is one frequently overlooked by those who see the Sly scenes and the play proper as linked by the theme of “illusion” and the related idea of the acquisition of a new identity. Sly’s “illusion” leads to no self-knowledge and he acquires no new identity, unless putting on another man’s clothes and falling into self-delusion implies such authentic psychological changes. The drunkard’s repeated calls for a pot of small ale and his unseemly yet happily deferred request to his “wife” to “undress you now and come to bed” (ii.114) indicate how far from real comic transformation poor Sly really is. And this, of course, is just the point. All Sly experiences as a result of the Lord’s joke is an abrupt dislocation of sensibility that ends in mere sense, carries no hope of sexual consummation, and dissolves with the beginning of a play. He slips, to use his own word, into a world of fruitless self-deception. And there we leave him, full of drink, nestling closer to his “wife,” captured in a wondrous material dead end, as The Taming of the Shrew begins.3

II

The Padua that opens to Sly and to us is above all else a place of material pleasure, a “pleasant garden” to use Lucentio’s term for it, where eating, drinking, and ostentatious hospitality are serious and daily preoccupations. Part of the ease with which Lucentio and Tranio blend into their new environment is no doubt attributable to the fact that they enter the city with a distinctly “Paduan” habit of thought. There is something overtly material about Lucentio’s notion of learning

3. I say “leave him” advisedly. It is true that Sly does intrude very briefly into the action of the play proper at ii.248–54, but this can hardly be considered a significant appearance (at least not in the sense that it alters in any way our view of Sly). For the possibilities that the Sly “frame” was completed in some earlier version of The Taming of the Shrew, see Morris (pp. 39–45); Oliver (pp. 28–29); G. R. Hibbard, The Taming of the Shrew (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 40–44; and Karl P. Wentersdorf, “The Original Ending of The Taming of the Shrew: A Reconsideration,” SEL, 18 (1978), 201–16.
that seems psychologically appropriate to a world with its mind set on pleasure:

And therefore, Tranio, for the time I study,
Virtue and that part of philosophy
Will I apply that treats of happiness
By virtue specially to be achiev’d.
Tell me thy mind, for I have Pisa left
And am to Padua come, as he that leaves
A shallow plash to plunge him in the deep
And with satiety seeks to quench his thirst. (1.i.17–24)

The young scholar who sees philosophical speculation as a sort of voluptuary liquid immersion is perhaps not as psychologically removed from the drunken tinker as his father, grave Vincentio “come of the Bentivolii,” would wish him (1.i.13). But the youth fits Padua like a glove. Armed with the consenting wisdom of Tranio (“No profit grows where is no pleasure ta’en”), Lucentio stands ready to “suck the sweets of sweet philosophy” on his own terms, rhetorical and psychological (1.i.39, 28). Few prospective university students seem so well-equipped emotionally as Lucentio to abandon a course of study at the earliest opportunity—a fact that invests his later disguise as a school master with a wry appropriateness. He is in every sense a whimsical youth impersonating a serious lover of learning.

The cultural environment that so quickly deflects Lucentio from scholarship to wooing is, among other things, a world where the mind repeatedly fashions images of culinary sense. We may smile condescendingly at Sly’s echoing requests for small ale; but listen to some of the casual talk in Italy’s great nursery of arts: “we . . . fast it fairly out. Out cake’s dough on both sides” (1.i.107–08); “There’s small choice in rotten apples” (1.i.134); “I would I were as sure of a good dinner” (1.i.215); “my super-dainty Kate, /For dainties are all Kates” (1.i.188–89); “What, have I chok’d you with an argosy?” (1.i.373); “A custard-coffin, a bauble, a silken pie” (IV.iii.82). These commonplace and often proverbial expressions may seem insignificant enough in isolation, yet taken collectively (the play is peppered with them) they help create a picture of a whole society emotionally absorbed, at more than just a metaphorical level, with the integral and powerfully denotative significance of food and drink. But what does food—and hospitality, its inseparable social counterpart—actually denote in Padua?

Some indication of the social and psychological attitudes inherent in hospitable behavior appears in the actions of Tranio and his Paduan acquaintances just after the young servant (disguised now as Lucentio) announces his intention to vie for Bianca’s hand. The pursuit of Bianca brings with it certain financial obligations, not the least of which is remuneration to Petruchio for clearing a way to the younger sister for her anxious admirers by first marrying the elder. Tranio understands his role in compliance with the male code here, particularly after

4. Like Lucentio here, Sly also insists upon his aristocratic heritage. As he points out to the Hostess, “The Slys are no rogues. Look in the chronicles; we came in with Richard Conqueror” (lnd.i.3–4). An interesting sidelight to the emphasis on excessive drinking in the play is the fact that drunkenness increased everywhere in the sixteenth century and became a major social problem. See Fernand Braudel, The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible, tr. Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 226–39.
Hortensio clarifies for him precisely what it means to enter the wooing club: “You must, as we do, gratify this gentleman, / To whom we all rest generally beholding” (II.i.270–71). Thus fully alerted to his financial and social obligations, Tranio demonstrates how easily a Pisan visitor can move with the rhythms of Paduan life:

Sir, I shall not be slack, in sign whereof,
Please ye we may contrive this afternoon
And quaff carouses to our mistress’ health,
And do as adversaries do in law,
Strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends. (II.i.272–76)

And off they go, rivals and accomplices, for a celebratory feast in anticipation of marital success. The scene is a minor one, easily ignored or forgotten; yet so often in Shakespeare it is just this sort of casual action that enables us to view the whole in a delicately altered light. Here the act of eating and drinking together becomes more than just an occasion for simple comradery; it also forms the psychological core of a compulsory and ostentatious act of self-fashioning by which one establishes a respected place in male society. In this context friendships can sidestep romantic squabbles by a sheer act of robust magnanimity even when the game is being played for stakes as high as Bianca. Little wonder, then, that few activities in Padua, social or otherwise, are effected with more self-conscious care or more rigidly codified than the proper entertainment of one’s male friends. Nothing else is likely to make a host more proud—or more nervous—than the quality and extent of his social ostentation in welcoming another. It is with glee that Hortensio (himself an unaccountable guest in Petruchio’s house later in the play) explains to his old friend before the ensuing meal, “Petruchio, I shall be your ben venuto” (II.i.279). In Padua warm and showy welcome is a social ceremony that one is careful to observe, and one for which a generous host requires vocal and public credit.

The common chatter of Padua is full of such concerns, and were it not for its unusual frequency, this is just the sort of thing that might slip obscurely into the play’s dim rhetorical background. But Shakespeare will not let it drop. At one moment there is Petruchio inviting himself to Baptista’s house, then receiving the old man’s warm invitation to dinner (II.i.51, 61, 112). At another there is the newly arrived Vincentio, expecting a hearty welcome at his son’s lodging, and immediately entreating Petruchio, “You shall not choose but drink before you go. / I think I shall command your welcome here, / And, by all likelihood, some cheer is toward” (IV.v.11–13). Most revealingly of all there is Tranio (still disguised as Lucentio) inviting Baptista to his lodging on short notice for the formal approval of the marriage agreement. The young imposter’s remarks to

5. Oliver, in his discussion of the relation of The Taming of a Shrew to The Taming of the Shrew (pp. 22–29), argues that Hortensio’s presence at Petruchio’s house may be accounted for on textual grounds. Building on the work of G. I. Duthie, Oliver argues that A Shrew is likely a reported version of an earlier, Shakespearean, form of The Shrew “in which Hortensio was not disguised as Lucentio” (p. 27). In this version of the play Hortensio “remained in open, undisguised, competition with Gremio for the hand of Bianca” (p. 23). His presence late in The Shrew at Petruchio’s house is thus a remnant of this earlier stage of the text unsatisfactorily integrated by Shakespeare into his later version of the play. Morris, however, finds no inconsistencies in Hortensio’s role in The Shrew. See his discussion of the matter (pp. 37–39).
Baptista are both disarmingly natural and absolutely transparent; there is little else like them in the play for the unobstructed glimpse they provide into the ethical heart of Padua. Tranio is caught off guard by a sudden change of plans; for once his statements are spontaneous, completely without forethought or guile, and all the more instructive on that account:

The worst is this, that at so slender warning
You are like to have a thin and slender pittance.

Welcome! One mess is like to be your cheer.
Come, sir, we will better it in Pisa. (IV.ii.60–61; 70–71)

In Padua, where personal worth is linked to opulent board, it is a ticklish and embarrassing business to be caught unawares with only meager fare to offer an important guest. Old Gremio, surely the most seasoned materialist in the play, takes us metaphorically to the heart of the matter when he expresses disbelief to Tranio that his (i.e., Lucentio’s) father would have already promised his son enough wealth to outbid the older man for Bianca:

Sirrah young gamester, your father were a fool
To give thee all, and in his waning age
Set foot under thy table. (II.i.397–99, emphasis added)

To be sure, Gremio is no ordinary Paduan; even in this avidly materialistic landscape he stands out as a moral grotesque. Yet his barb (and the thinly disguised fear beneath it) is rooted firmly enough in the metaphorical and literal reality of his world. Straining his ancient wits to imagine the ultimate disintegration of a male personality, he envisions the moment that the old father (victimized by his own sort of Learian folly) must seek food at his son’s table. In this psychological context, where a man’s social and personal worth is measured quite literally by his relationship to the table, ostentatious hospitality (particularly eating and drinking) touches the moral nerve center of a whole world. Such is the emotional and physical space Petruchio invades unannounced, seeking welcome at the home of an old friend, to begin his “wooing dance” (II.ii.67).

III

At first glance Petruchio appears conformable enough to Padua and its values. He has, by his own admission, “friends” in the city, the “best beloved and approved” of which is Hortensio (I.ii.2–3), a point Shakespeare makes with deft clarity by casting the good friends’ initial greeting into a ceremonious Italian that isolates the moment linguistically from the regular idiom of the play. Not unexpectedly, the emphasis here is on a mannered and ostentatious welcome, yet one that by no means excludes sincerity:

PETRUCHIO
Con tutto il cuore, ben trovato, may I say.
HORTENSIO
Alla nostra casa ben venuto,
Molto honorato signor mio Petruchio. (I.ii. 24–26)
Clearly, Petruchio belongs in Padua; in a literal as well as metaphorical sense he speaks the language. And as chance would have it, he even knows Baptista, since Katherina’s father and his were old acquaintances (I.ii.100–01). Like Lucentio before him, this new visitor to the city seems psychologically at home in Padua; indeed, nothing could be more characteristic of the place than Petruchio’s unreservedly materialistic reasons for marriage: “I come to wive it wealthily in Padua; / If wealthily, then happily in Padua” (I.ii.74–75). The idiom is worthy of Gremio at his worst, and hardly bettered by Petruchio in his remarks to Katherina during the wooing episode. What could be more appropriate in a world with its mind fixed on dinner than to imagine, as Petruchio does, the object of his romantic interest as a tasty morsel? The easy pun on Kate’s name as a sweet confection or culinary delicacy reverberates through Petruchio’s wooing dance with metronomic regularity and, in fact, forms the rhetorical basis (much to Katherina’s vexation) of the newcomer’s brusque and immediate familiarity with her.

But as many actors and directors have seemed to recognize, something begins to happen to Petruchio and Katherina in the course of their noisy wooing. The marital bounty hunter who seems so ethically attuned to Padua upon first entering the city is not the same man who returns there on his wedding day after a brief shopping spree in Venice. Unforgivably late and ignominiously dressed, this changed Petruchio flouts every mannerly convention, capping his outrageous display of social indecorousness by whisking away his wife from the couple’s marriage feast before either has had anything to eat. Petruchio’s fantastically orchestrated return is, as many have noted, the first step in a deliberate and self-consciously didactic program in public theatrics that begins at the marriage ceremony. Gremio describes the scene:

> But after many ceremonies done,  
> He calls for wine. “A health!” quoth he, as if  
> He had been aboard, carousing to his mates  
> After a storm; quaff’d off the muscadel  
> And threw the sops all in the sexton’s face,  
> Having no other reason  
> But that his beard grew thin and hungerly  
> And seem’d to ask him sops as he was drinking. (III.ii.168–75)

Petruchio’s shocking treatment of the sacramental bread and wine surely represents the nadir of his social iconoclasm; but putting aside for a moment the admittedly large matter of blasphemous behavior, one notices how curiously Petruchio’s actions reflect the normal activities both of Sly’s alehouse and respectable Paduan society. Embedded, so to speak, in Petruchio’s anti-marriage (I shall return to this point later) are the drunken irresponsibility and loud male fellowship that mirror the material ugliness of two strangely joined worlds.

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drunken bridegroom embodies the characteristics of a Paduan gentleman and Sly simultaneously (he both carouses heartily to his friends and acts with antisocial relish towards others), limning out for all to see the busy moral vacuity of the life that late he led—and the life from which he and Katherina will soon quite literally flee.

This process of detachment begins with the couple’s arrival at the marriage feast. Petruchio’s first act after greeting the company is to announce that he and his bride will not partake of food:

I know you think to dine with me today, 
And have prepar’d great store of wedding cheer, 
But so it is, my haste doth call me hence, 
And therefore here I mean to take my leave.

Dine with my father. drink a health to me, 
For I must hence; and farewell to you all. (III.ii.184–96)

Katherina’s entreaty to her husband that they not leave without eating—in short, her attraction to the feast—is in part an attraction to the comforts of her Paduan world and the ostentatious hospitality it represents. The first marital spat between Katherina and Petruchio is, significantly, about their relationship to food; and behind this dissension lies a whole complex of social (and sexual) meanings implied by the couple’s participation at the wedding feast. The marriage banquet symbolically ratifies the social union just as the sexual act literally consummates the sacramental one, no doubt the reason that a key symbolic moment at gatherings of this kind occurred when the bride and groom ate together. Katherina’s determination at first to participate in the feasting with her husband can thus be seen as more than the mere avoidance of a social embarrassment; she rightly perceives the couple’s joint participation at the feast as a richly symbolic expression of their new social and sexual identities. When, however, she realizes that Petruchio will not stay even at her behest, she resolves—with a penchant for stagy impulsiveness reminiscent of Petruchio himself—to effect a sort of culinary divorce that underscores the emotional brittleness of the bond just forged in church: “The door is open, sir, there lies your way: / You may be jogging whiles your boots are green” (III.ii.209–10). But Petruchio has an altogether different culinary program in mind; appearing to consent to his wife’s wishes, he orders the company in to dinner, then with feigned gallantry forces Katherina from the feast and straight into the gastronomical rigors of his taming school:

They shall go forward, Kate, at thy command. 
Obev the bride, you that attend on her.

7. For the most lengthy and detailed examination of the connection between Sly and Petruchio, see the article by Sears Jayne cited above. See also Ruth Nevo, Comic Transformations in Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 39.

Go to the feast, revel and domineer,  
Carouse full measure to her maidenhead,  
Be mad and merry, or go hang yourselves.  
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 my own. (II.i.221–28)

Despite the broad slapstick here, the episode marks the beginning of a serious comic movement that continues until the end of the play. Not enough critical attention has been paid to the joint goings and comings of Petruchio and Katherina; for no less than the romantic couples of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, As You Like It, or even The Merchant of Venice, the “madly mated” pair (III.i.242) move from one distinct physical and psychological locale to another when they leave urban Padua for Petruchio’s house in the country. And like so many of Shakespeare’s other romantic lovers, they return to their point of origin altered forever, the source of admiration and amazement for those who remain behind. In the case of Petruchio and Katherina the journey outward and back has a neat circularity, the course of which is shaped by their presence at the two separate yet oddly joined wedding feasts that mark the tangible and metaphorical loci of their going and coming. Often overlooked in the bustling verbal competition between the pair is the fact that theirs is very much a joint progress. I cannot think of two lovers in Shakespeare so seldom apart or more frankly “present” to each other as Petruchio and Katherina. This latter point is an important one, for what happens at Petruchio’s taming school is by no means (as some critics want to see it) a trendy social compromise that results in a separate peace.9 Petruchio’s program for marital compatibility is a joint one, centered quite literally at times around the dinner table (that linchpin of Paduan society), by which both he and Katherina find terms to define their marriage as a relationship uniquely apart from those in the world they leave behind. To be sure, Petruchio’s country house is no idyllic Shakespearean green world; it is nonetheless a heightened world of altered perceptions where one discovers, through an abrupt psychological suspension of normal expectations, new possibilities for locating the other and the real self. The process begins when the couple arrives for supper.

IV

A common response to Petruchio’s harsh treatment of Katherina at their first meal together is to see his behavior as little more than an elemental assertion of

9. See, for example, Ralph Berry, Shakespeare’s Comedies: Explorations in Form (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 54–71. Permutations on this point of view, as well as a variety of other critical perspectives on the play, are treated by Tita French Baumlín, “Petruchio as Sophist and Language as Creation in The Taming of the Shrew,” SEL, 29 (1989), 237–57; see particularly pp. 253–57. One prominent approach to this problem, emphasizing Katherina’s playful detachment from Petruchio even as she appears to obey him, is part of both the stage history and critical tradition of the play. See, for example, Marianne L. Novy, “Patriarchy and Play in The Taming of the Shrew,” ELR, 9 (1979), 264–80, and Coppelia Kahn, Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), pp. 104–18. Also emphasizing the element of “play” in the Petruchio/Katherina relationship is Alexander Leggatt, Shakespeare’s Comedy of Love (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 41–62. Leggatt, however, does not see this playfulness as necessarily implying emotional separation; rather Kate at the end of the play is “simply enjoying herself” (p. 61). Sport and playacting in this context become “genuine sources of strength and enjoyment” (p. 61). This and related questions are treated briefly by Ann Thompson in her edition of the play (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 36–41.
male dominance, aptly located in a sort of Darwinian great house where the stronger animal always prevails.¹⁰ Brian Morris, who by no means takes so extreme a view of the matter as this, nonetheless clearly outlines the metaphorical structure on which such interpretations are based. He points out that the play evolves from two primal images, of the shrew and the hawk, and that these are “the basic raw material from which story, character and poetic structure are formed.”¹¹ There is a good deal of evidence in the play for seeing things in such elemental terms, particularly in light of Petruchio’s explicitly stated method for “manning” his wife:

My falcon now is sharp and passing empty,
And till she stoop she must not be full-gorg’d,
For then she never looks upon her lure.
Another way I have to man my haggard,
To make her come and know her keeper’s call:
That is, to watch her, as we watch these kites
That bate and beat and will not be obedient.
She eat no meat today, nor none shall eat. (IV.ii.178–85)

This is no easy statement in which to locate the seeds of romantic comedy; yet a good deal of the Petruchio-bashing that characterizes so much of the criticism of the play fails to take into account one important aspect of the tamer’s abusive program for ensuring marital harmony—the fact that he subjects himself to exactly the same physical deprivations he inflicts upon his wife.¹² Jan Harold Brunvald, who effectively traces the origin of Shakespeare’s taming plot to oral tradition, notes that in narrative folk tales on the taming of shrewish wives the husband customarily asserts his dominance by starving his wife while dining heartily himself. Brunvald reproduces a typical version of the basic source for the Petruchio-Katherina episodes, a subtype of a widely known Northern European folk tale, Tale Type 901:

When they [the husband and wife] arrived [home] they sat down to a beautifully set table and servants brought in a meal that smelled wonderful. The man took a hearty serving, for he was hungry and thirsty. His wife, however, received not a bite and not a sip of wine although she too was hungry and thirsty after that long trip. When the man finished eating he struck all of the utensils from the table to the floor with his hand. (Germany, No. 12)¹³

Here is a husband at a very large psychological remove from Petruchio; for in precisely the same situation Shakespeare’s wife-tamer not only acknowledges his emotional likeness to his wife, he also takes her cure. Implicit in Petruchio’s diagnosis of Katherina’s problem is the notion of a shared malady that requires shared treatment. His explanation for rejecting the hastily prepared supper could hardly state the point more clearly:

¹⁰. This is essentially the view, if not the rhetoric, of Robert Ornstein, Shakespeare’s Comedies: From Farce to Romantic Mystery (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1986), pp. 63–72, but particularly pp. 71–72.
¹¹. Morris, p. 119.
¹². Some critics, of course, do make the point, most notably Thompson (p. 28), Baumlinit (p. 246), and E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare’s Early Comedies (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), p. 82.
I tell thee, Kate, [the meat was] burnt and dried away,
And I expressly am forbid to touch it;
For it engenders choler, planteth anger,
And better 'twere that both of us did fast,
Since, of ourselves, ourselves are choleric,
Than feed it with such overroasted flesh.
Be patient. Tomorrow 't shall be mended,
And, for this night, we'll fast for company.
Come, I will bring thee to thy bridal chamber. (IV.i.158–66, my italics)

In a manner analogous to his behavior at the marriage ceremony, Petruchio here links the search for psychological common ground to the flouting, and ultimate rejection, of the conventional hospitality associated with Padua. The progress that ends with the newly married couple going fasting to the bridal chamber, where the husband will favor his wife with "a sermon of continency" (IV.i.171), originates literally in a cold house whose inhabitants violate every cardinal rule of Paduan welcome. Petruchio's reception at his own residence would hardly be believed in Padua:

Where be these knaves? What, no man at door
To hold my stirrup nor to take my horse?
Where is Nathaniel, Gregory, Philip?

What, no attendance? No regard? No duty?
Where is the foolish knave I sent before? (IV.i.108–15)

And so it continues, through the spilling of the water, the sloppy removal of the riding boots, the beating of the servants, all ending with the meat on the floor and the hungry couple's abstinence from sexual consummation.14

On the face of it nothing could seem more anti-comic (there are even disturbing elements here that take us back to the Sly scenes); yet it is important to see Petruchio's insistence on iconoclastic social behavior and the flouting of food as psychologically linked ideas vital to his program for the couple's emotional development. Both actions merge in his mind with a renunciation of Padua. In a place apart, on their own brash terms, Petruchio and Katherina participate in an orchestrated anti-Paduan fantasy through which the couple asserts its detachment from one life and a determination to embrace a new one founded on values other than those of the old city. Shakespeare's slapstick scenes in Petruchio's country house are much more than coarse comedy on the theme of "wife-taming"; they also dramatize a serious process of self-discovery (on the part of both Petruchio and Katherina) that links amorous growth and emotional maturity with the systematic renunciation of the material practice of a failed world. Like Hamlet, whose "Mousetrap" is both an outward public denunciation of Claudius and a desperate self-injunction, Petruchio orchestrates for Katherina and himself a fanciful dramatic exercise that objectifies, through creative play, an earnest journey inward to the self.

14. Most critics regard Petruchio and Katherina's marriage as unconsummated. In her gloss on "continency," Ann Thompson observes, "It is important that the marriage is not actually consummated until after the last scene of the play" (p. 117). See also her note on Petruchio's statement at V.ii.184, "Come, Kate, we'll to bed" (p. 153).
The key role of food and hospitality, symbolically and actually, in the working out of this process, can hardly be overemphasized. In a provocative study of the significance of food to women of the Middle Ages, Caroline Walker Bynum explores some of the powerful psychological meanings implicit in one’s relationship to eating and fasting. In addition to the more commonly recognized purposes of fasting (i.e., as a means of moderating lust, cleansing of mind and body, or preparing the soul for inspiration), Bynum demonstrates how refraining from food could acquire various meanings depending on the practitioner’s situation or intent. One of the most interesting of these for our purposes is the usefulness of fasting as a means for expressing one’s renunciation of the world; in this context it “was often specifically a response to guilt over the wealth and conspicuous consumption of merchant families.” Instructive also in this regard is the idea that the sin of Adam linked pride with gluttony, and thus by fasting the Christian joined with Christ, who, in His suffering, “kept the rule of abstinence that Adam had violated in paradise” (p. 35). My purpose in citing Bynum here is not to Christianize Petruchio’s program for the domestic education of his wife, but rather to emphasize with what systematic detail he seems to be working toward his own secular equivalent to the long-standing spiritual discipline that saw fasting as a means toward the reconstruction of a new personality through detachment from a self-indulgent and materialist world.

The sense of personal disequilibrium that inevitably results from such a program is apparent in Katherina after her first sleepless night in the taming school. When next we see her she is alone with Grumio, frustrated and famished, trying to persuade the reluctant servant to give her something to eat in violation of Petruchio’s orders. The episode is a virtual reprise of the earlier one at supper; again the focus is specifically on food, and again just below the surface lies an implicit contrast between the hospitality of Petruchio’s house and that of Padua:

What, did he marry me to famish me?
Beggars, that come unto my father’s door
Upon entreaty have present alms;
If not, elsewhere they meet with charity.
But I, who never knew how to entreat,
Nor never needed that I should entreat,
Am starv’d for meat, giddy for lack of sleep,
With oaths kept waking, and with brawling fed.
And that which spites me more than all these wants,
He does it under name of perfect love;
As who should say, if I should sleep or eat,
’Twere deadly sickness or else present death.
I prithee go and get me some repast,
I care not what, so it be wholesome food. (IV.iii.3–16)

The opinion of George Walton Williams regarding Petruchio’s regimen for

15. Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), p. 120. Subsequent references to Bynum’s study are noted parenthetically in the text.
16. An interesting sidelight to this matter that also has implications for the Petruchio/Katherina relationship is that joint fasting can be regarded as an expression of solidarity by which the members of the fasting group separate themselves from others. See Back (pp. 31–32).
Katherina’s “taming” is pertinent here. In an allusive and wide-ranging article on food, sport, and rest in Shakespeare (particularly as these reflect the playwright’s indebtedness to the influential Italian school of medicine at Salerno which endorsed moderate use of the three activities as keys to good health), Williams points out that because Katherina’s shrewishness is “an artificial condition,” her emotional disorder is “cured” by withholding the three medicatives rather than by administering them. There is much to recommend this view; and rather than attempting to refute it, I would like to modify it only slightly. In depriving Katherina of food Petruchio can also be seen as following, in some measure, a specific practice of The School of Salerno, particularly as this practice was reflected in some of the most popular medical handbooks of the day.

One essential aspect of the Salernian prescription for physical well-being was an insistence upon moderate diet. The most widely known and influential statement of Salernian medical practice was the rhyming poem *Regimen Sani­ tatis Salerni*, which appeared in over three hundred separate editions from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century, and was actually committed to memory by many medieval and Renaissance physicians. In keeping with The School of Salerno’s emphasis on dietary regulations and general restraint, the *Regimen* gives the following counsel to Robert, son of William the Conqueror, who was cured of a wound at Salerno in 1101:

If thou to health and vigor wouldst attain,  
Shun mighty cares, all anger deem profane;  
From heavy suppers and much wine abstain ...

Precisely this advice, or very slight variations of it, became a staple of the English medical handbooks of the sixteenth century. Thus it is hardly surprising to find Sir John Harington, in his often reprinted translation of the *Regimen* (1624 ed.), reaffirming a key element of the revered old treatise with prosy straightforwardness:

... take your meate in order, as is before said, and sometimes also intermit the use of meats for a whole day together, because through hunger, the faults of the stomacke which have beene taken eyther by much drinking or surfetting, or by any other meanes, may be depelled and removed.

Whatever moral dimension is implicit here becomes far more obvious in William Harrison’s *Description of England* (1577, 1587). In his enormously informative and entertaining chapter on food and diet, Harrison frequently criticizes his countrymen’s modern habit of “long and stately sitting at meat,” affirming repeatedly that this is better, both for one’s body and mind, to eat sparingly rather


than excessively. For Harrison the whole matter has a moral as well as physiological side to it:

In the scripture we read of many suppers [light evening meals] and few dinners [heavier afternoon meals], only for that dining was not greatly used in Christ’s time but taken as a thing lately sprung up, when pampering of the belly began to take hold, occasioned by idleness and great abundance of riches.

We are not very far from Padua here; indeed, Harrison’s rigorous pronouncement ties food to ostentatious materialism in a fashion very, analogous to that of Shakespeare’s play. The line that goes from Salerno to Harrison is clear enough, and it leads us directly back to Katherina’s suggestive question: “What, did he marry me to famish me?” (IV.iii.3).

The answer, of course, is an uneasy “yes”; yet despite our aversion to Petruchio’s methods, the complex of moral, psychological, and medical ideas that informs his program can shed fresh light on his blunt cruelty. The wife-tamer’s treatment of Katherina will seem no less offensive to moderns on that account (there is, incidentally, no real reason to assume that sensitive Elizabethans saw the matter much differently than we do); but even so unseemly a process as Petruchio’s may be modified somewhat by recognizing the deep-seated intellectual constructs that give it symbolic life. Viewed in this light it can be seen as an earnest attempt to locate emotional and moral health—the grounds of any authentic relationship—in a re-formed psychological landscape purged of old ills, yet nonetheless founded on old values. And it always remains an emphatically joint program. This point is made with unmistakable clarity just as Katherina and Petruchio prepare for their second attempt at dinner. Katherina’s entreaties to Grumio for food have brought only derisive taunts on her choler and its origins in tripe, beef, and mustard (IV.iii.17–31), but her ordeal seems to end happily when Petruchio and Hortensio enter with a platter of meat. What follows as the three get ready to dine together is a dramatic tableau that sharpens even further the moral and behavioral distinctions between Petruchio’s world and Padua. At his host’s request Hortensio devours the meat by himself (“Eat it up all, Hortensio, if thou lovest me” [IV.iii.50]), leaving Petruchio and Katherina separate and unfed, figuratively distanced from the behavior of a world they have already begun to leave behind. Petruchio’s graceless taunts (“Kate, eat apace”; “What, hast thou din’d?” [II.52,59]) are the last twists of a rhetorical knife that only heighten by contrast the other possible rhetorical self he presents to his famished wife as he imagines a joint re-entry to Padua reflective of two genuinely changed natures:

And now, my honey love,  
Will we return unto thy father’s house  
And revel it bravely as the best,

With silken coats and caps and golden rings,
With ruffs and cuffs and farthingales and things,
With scarves and fans and double change of brav’ry,
With amber bracelets, beads, and all this knav’ry. (IV.iii.52–58)

V

The revelry to which Petruchio and Katherina return is pure Padua. Before their arrival in the city they have already settled the business about the sun and the moon, the sex of Vincentio, and kissing in public. Now at last they seem ready to enjoy a meal together. They have spent a long day feasting at the wedding celebration of Lucentio and Bianca and followed the company to the bridegroom’s lodging for dessert, the ceremonial capstone to the day’s culinary exercises. In the best Paduan fashion, Lucentio welcomes his guests with mannered panache:

My fair Bianca, bid my father welcome,
While I with self-same kindness welcome thine.
Brother Petruchio, sister Katherina,
And thou, Hortensio, with thy loving widow,
Feast with the best, and welcome to my house.
My banquet is to close our stomachs up
After our great good cheer. Pray you, sit down,
For now we sit to chat as well to eat. (V.i.i.4–11)

The atmosphere is thick with studied graciousness, and Petruchio already is cloyed with it; his irritation finds terms that carry a moral dimension lost on his friends: “Nothing but sit and sit, and eat and eat” (V.i.i.12). Shakespeare makes the point with such delicacy that we almost miss it, too; even as Petruchio participates in the ordered conventionality of a world he sits uneasily in it, psychologically distanced from its most cherished values, skeptical of its terms for defining social and emotional bonds.

But the symbolism of the episode is broader than this. In returning to Padua for a wedding banquet Petruchio and Katherina reappear in the city, so to speak, in the same physical and psychological space where they left it. The point is emphasized not only by the obvious social similarities between the two celebrations but also by a curious detail regarding the wedding feast of Petruchio and Katherina often overlooked by critics. After the peremptory exit of the newly married couple, Baptista looks hurriedly for symbolic substitutes for the pair so that the party can continue. With characteristic Paduan unctuousness he simply inserts into the vacated places of Katherina and Petruchio the couple whose marriage he most earnestly desires:

BAPTISTA

Neighbors and friends, though bride and bridegroom wants,
For to supply the place at the table,

21. The vision is, of course, withdrawn after the episode with the tailor (IV.iii.165–77); but there is absolutely no evidence in the play that Petruchio and Katherina arrive in Padua with anything other than correct attire. We do not hear, for example, anything resembling Biondello’s description of Petruchio’s dress as he arrives for his wedding (III.i.43–70).
JOSEPH CANDIDO

You know there wants no junkets at the feast.
Lucentio [Tranio disguised], you shall supply the bridegroom’s place,
And let Bianca take her sister’s room.

TRANIO
Shall sweet Bianca practice how to bride it?

BAPTISTA
She shall, Lucentio. Come, gentlemen, let’s go. (III.ii.245–51)

In more than merely symbolic terms this marriage feast is Bianca’s and Lucentio’s, since Katherina’s and Petruchio’s places are usurped by stand-ins whose position of importance at the celebration represents a paternal wish-fulfillment fantasy of social and financial fruition. Part of the fault, of course, is Petruchio’s; his outrageous behavior in church, his failure to break bread with Katherina and her family, and his deliberate isolation from Paduan community all contribute to a sense of a frustrated anti-marriage. The couple leaves Padua unhoused, disappointed, unfed, while two willing substitutes (one of them, fittingly, an imposter) merrily take their place.

The details of the couple’s return, however, could hardly be more different. Although the wedding feast that brings Petruchio and Katherina back to Padua is not literally theirs, they usurp the places of the bride and groom here just as surely as theirs had been usurped at their own celebration. And in typically Petruchian fashion, they do it on their own terms, with an elaborate public ceremony of their own devising that figures forth the elements of real union. Fittingly, too, they choose for their ceremonial medium the chief vehicle of ostentatious display that Padua affords, an elaborate public feast. This is clearly the banquet at which, literally and figuratively, the couple is most “present”; for it is here that they fashion in the most psychologically immediate terms both the strength of their mutual trust and its location in an ideological world apart. Their behavior gives every indication how easily they can move in Padua, but also how detached they can remain from its ethical heart. In this context Katherina’s impressive rhetorical tour de force becomes no false public compromise or grandiloquent exercise in insincerity; it is her own ceremonial “amen” to a man and a process that has not tamed her hostility for Padua so much as given it an ideological base, thus redirecting it, along with Petruchio’s, into a mutual and meaningful detachment from an empty world.22 In this mutual detachment the pair find a sort of wise companionship that allows them to move jointly in the city without falling moral prey to it. We need only view the lovers with whom Petruchio and Katherina share the banquet table to see the full success of their joint program. Petruchio’s “Come, Kate, we’ll to bed” (V.ii.186) is his own triumphant “amen” to Katherina’s public assent. This time there will be no sermon on continency.