A PELICAN BOOK

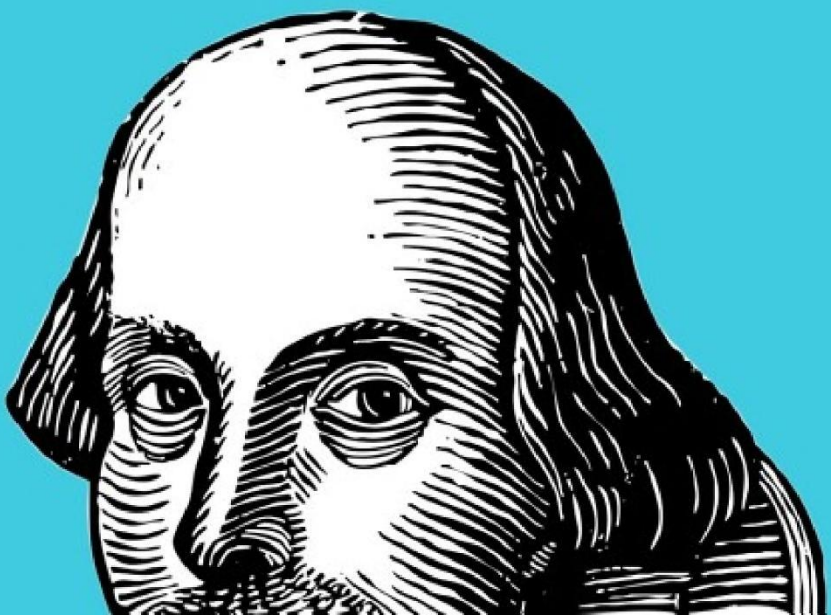
This is Shakespeare

How to Read the World's Greatest Playwright

Emma Smith

'The best introduction to the plays I've read, perhaps the best book on Shakespeare, full stop'

ALEX PRESTON, *OBSERVER*



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About the Author

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For Elizabeth Macfarlane

INTRODUCTION

Why should you read a book about Shakespeare?

Because he is a literary genius and prophet whose works speak to – more, they encapsulate – the human condition. Because he presents timeless values of tolerance and humanity. Because his writing is technically brilliant and endlessly verbally inventive. Because he put it all so much better than anyone else.

Nope.

That's not why; not at all. Sure, that's what we always say about Shakespeare, but it doesn't really get to the truth about the value of these works for the twenty-first century. The Shakespeare in this book is more questioning and ambiguous, more specific to the historical circumstances of his own time, more unexpectedly relevant to ours. Lots of what we trot out about Shakespeare and iambic pentameter and the divine right of kings and 'Merrie England' and his enormous vocabulary blah blah blah is just not true, and just not important. They are the critical equivalent of 'dead-catting' in a meeting or negotiation (placing a dead cat on the table to divert attention from more tricky or substantive issues). They deflect us from investigating the artistic and ideological implications of Shakespeare's silences, inconsistencies and, above all, the sheer and permissive gappiness of his drama.

That gappy quality is so crucial to my approach that I want to outline it here. Shakespeare's plays are incomplete, woven of what's said and what's unsaid, with holes in between. This is true at the most mundane level: what do Hamlet, or Viola, or Brutus look like? A novelist would probably tell us; Shakespeare the

dramatist does not. That means that the clues to personality that we might expect from a novel, or from a film, are not there. If *The Taming of the Shrew*'s Katherine looks vulnerable, or ballsy, or beautiful, that makes a difference to our interpretation of this most ambiguous of plays, and if her imposed husband Petruchio is attractive, or boorish, or nervous, that too has an impact. Fantasy casting – where you imagine a particular modern actor in a role – is a very interesting game to play with Shakespeare's plays: if you cast action-guy Mel Gibson as Hamlet (as Franco Zeffirelli did in 1990), you immediately produce a particular take on the play, which is quite different from casting Michelle Terry (at Shakespeare's Globe in London in 2018), or Benedict Cumberbatch (directed by Lyndsey Turner, 2015). That we don't know what characters look like is one symptom of the absence of larger narration and commentary in a play. No authorial or narrative voice tells us more than the speeches of the characters themselves. Stage directions are relatively sparse and almost never tell us how a given action was performed: does Richard II give over his crown, orb and sceptre in Act 4 of his play to Bolingbroke sadly, gleefully, manically, or in fact not at all? The play's choreography is not spelled out for us, leaving this scene typically open to directorial and readerly imaginations. Shakespeare's construction of his plays tends to imply rather than state; he often shows, rather than tells; most characters and encounters are susceptible to multiple interpretations. It's because we have to fill in the gaps that Shakespeare is so vital.

And there are larger conceptual and ethical gaps too: the intellectual climate of the late sixteenth century made some things newly thinkable (that religion is 'but a childish toy', as Shakespeare's contemporary Christopher Marlowe had one of his characters claim), and overlaid old certainties with new doubts. Shakespeare lived and wrote in a world that was on the move, and in which new technologies transformed perceptions of that world. The microscope, for example, made a new tiny world visible, as Robert Hooke uncovered in his book *Micrographia* (1665), illustrated with hugely detailed pictures including fleas as big as cats. The telescope, in the work of Galileo and other astronomers, brought the in-effably distant into the span of human comprehension, and theatre tried to process the cultural implications of these changes. Sometimes, Shakespeare's plays register the gap between older visions of a world run by divine

fiat, and more contemporary ideas about the centrality of human agency to causality, or they propose adjacent worldviews that are fundamentally incompatible. These gaps are conceptual or ethical, and they open up space to think differently about the world and experience it from another point of view.

Gappiness is Shakespeare's dominant and defining characteristic. And ambiguity is the oxygen of these works, making them alive in unpredictable and changing ways. It's we, and our varied engagement, that makes Shakespeare: it's not for nothing that the first collected edition of his plays in the seventeenth century addressed itself 'to the great variety of readers'.

His works hold our attention because they are fundamentally incomplete and unstable: they need us, in all our idiosyncratic diversity and with the perspective of our post-Shakespearean world, to make sense. 'Shakespeare' is here less an inert noun than an active verb: 'to Shakespeare' might be defined as the activity of posing questions, unsettling certainties, challenging orthodoxies, opening out endings. I wanted to write a book about Shakespeare for grown-ups who don't want textbook or schoolroom platitudes. Not a biography (there's nothing more to say about the facts of Shakespeare's own life, and vitality is a property of the works, not their long-dead author); not an exam crib (Shakespeare's works ask, rather than answer, questions, making them wonderfully unsuited to the exam system); not a Shakespeare-made-simple (Shakespeare is complex, like living, not technically and crackably difficult, like crosswords or changing the time on the cooker): I wanted to write something for readers, theatregoers, students and all those who feel they missed out on Shakespeare at some earlier point and are willing to have another pop at these extraordinary works.

We all know Shakespeare occupies a paradoxical place in contemporary culture. On the one hand his work is revered: quoted, performed, graded, subsidized, parodied. Shakespeare! On the other hand – cue yawns and eye rolls, or fear of personal intellectual failure – Shakespeare can be an obligation, a set text, inducing a terrible and particular weariness that can strike us sitting in the theatre at around 9.30 p.m., when we are becalmed in Act 4 and there's still an hour to go (admit it – we've all been there). Shakespeare is a cultural gatekeeper,

politely honoured rather than robustly challenged. Does anyone actually like reading this stuff?

Yes: and I hope this book will give some indications how. It is not an attempt to cut Shakespeare down to size, but I do hope that it might open out to you a less dogmatic, less complete, more enjoyable Shakespeare. This is a Shakespeare you could have a drink and a good conversation with, rather than one you have to bow before. I don't have a grand theory of Shakespeare to inculcate, still less do I think I have access to what Shakespeare meant. (Confession: I don't really care what he might have meant, and nor should you.) I want to explore the ways in which Shakespeare's plays are spacious texts to think with – about agency, celebrity, economics, friendship, sex, politics, privacy, laughter, suffering, about a tonne of topics, including art itself. Each chapter in the book, on a specific play, takes a different approach. I've picked plays I like and find stimulating. Some of these are famous, so you'd be annoyed to buy a book on Shakespeare that didn't mention them; some are more marginal, but I wanted to say something about how interesting they are (*The Comedy of Errors* anyone?). I've tried to give a sense of Shakespeare's range across his career, and the plays are discussed in chronological order so that you can see how his writing moves across genres and concerns. But I've also tried to keep the individual chapters self-contained, so that you could read one before going to the theatre, for example, or start at the end if that's where your interest lies.

Together, the chapters cover aspects of performance, contemporary and original. They sometimes think about historical context and sometimes ignore it completely. They look sometimes at Shakespeare's sources or the influences from his culture, and sometimes at the reception his works have generated in later worlds including our own. They present a Shakespeare who is an Elizabethan and Jacobean writer concerned both with classical literature and the problems of political succession, as well as with more modern themes of identity and scepticism. This Shakespeare knows about intersectionality as much as about Ovid. He is fluent in our contemporary concerns, but he is not simply a mirror for our own solipsistic age. Above all, these plays prompt questions rather than answers. This is what gives them their edge and provocation; this is what forever implicates us in their meanings;

and this is why they need your attention. I've called the book *This Is Shakespeare* not to convey a monolith – quite the opposite. Shakespeare takes shape through our interpretations. It's here, in our engagement with the works, that they take flight. This – reading, thinking, questioning, interpreting, animating – this really is Shakespeare.

CHAPTER 1

The Taming of the Shrew

The Taming of the Shrew is one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, and one of his most controversial. Everything, from the name of its heroine to its ideology of gender relations, is contested, to the extent that it's impossible even to begin with a neutral synopsis of the play. Here's why it's impossible.

The Taming of the Shrew centres on the courtships of the two daughters of the Paduan merchant Baptista: Katherine and Bianca. The elder, Katherine, is apparently the shrew of the title, a woman who, depending on how you look at it, is feisty and independent, lonely and misunderstood, or strident and antisocial. Her father – who, depending on how you look at it, is either a worried widower or a patriarchal tyrant – has decreed that Bianca – who, depending on how you look at it, is either beautiful, gentle and agreeable, or exactly the kind of annoyingly insipid, simpering arm candy who you, like her sister, would want to slap – cannot marry until her older sister gets hitched. The stage is set for the entrance of Petruchio, who, depending on how you look at it, is a quirky and unorthodox guy who knows his own mind and wants a woman who knows hers, or a psychopathic bounty hunter with sadistic and misogynistic tendencies. So Katherine and Petruchio are paired off against

Katherine's will in a relationship which, depending on how you look at it, is crackling with mutual sexual tension along with a touch of shared S&M domination fantasy, or is cynical, loveless and enforced by a violently patriarchal society. He treats her in a way which – depending on how you look at it – uses distinctly unfunny torture techniques including sleep deprivation, brainwashing and starvation to bend her to his will, or is a zany courtship showing their mutual determination not to yield as an underlying equality beneath their revolutionary union. So, at the end of the play, Katherine is, depending on how you look at it, broken-spirited, parroting patriarchal ideology and utterly submissive, offering to put her hand under her husband's foot, or ironically and unabashedly vocal, preaching the interdependence of husband and wife to earn herself half of a fat wager placed by her husband.

What's more, this whole story is placed as a play within a play, so that a prefatory induction scene sets up this Petruchio and Katherine plot as a play performed for a drunken tinker, Christopher Sly. Sly is being tricked into believing he is a lord, and that a page dressed up as a woman is his wife, by some Bullingdon Club types who are having their bit of cruel fun. So, depending how you look at it, the whole story is framed so as to be obviously implausible and fictional, with even the women as men in amateurish disguise, or as a play which radically aligns the lower classes and women as joint victims of a self-serving male establishment. And yes, the names are contentious as well. We used to call the play's female lead Kate until feminist editors pointed out that this is not neutral either. When Petruchio meets for the first time the woman he has determined to marry, he greets her: 'Good morrow, Kate, for that's your name, I hear' (2.1.182). Her reply is clear: 'Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing. They call me Katherine that do talk of me' (2.1.183–4). Calling her Kate against her will is one of Petruchio's (depending how you look at it) lovable gestures of proprietorial intimacy or a misogynistic microaggression. So, depending how you look at it, the title *The Taming of the Shrew* is a plot synopsis, a how-to guide, a raised eyebrow, or a satirical joke.

Responses to this contradictory play have themselves always been contradictory. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, the playwright George Bernard Shaw urged men and women to boycott it: 'No man with any decency of feeling can sit

it out in the company of a woman without being extremely ashamed of the lord-of-creation moral implied in the wager and the speech put into the woman's own mouth.' But perhaps unexpectedly, Germaine Greer praised the play in her feminist classic *The Female Eunuch*, suggesting that Katherine has 'the uncommon good fortune to find [a husband] who is man enough to know what he wants and how to get it' and further, that 'the submission of a woman like Kate is genuine and exciting because she has something to lay down, her virgin pride and individuality.' Perhaps Greer had been watching Franco Zeffirelli's film version of 1967 which shares this interpretation. Zeffirelli drew on the well-publicized and tempestuous off-screen relationship of lovers Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton as Katherine and Petruchio to imply that this was a passionate relationship in which pots and pans, but also underwear, would fly.

But however much theatrical production and critical interpretation strive to settle the play's ambiguities, I want to stress something different here. *The Taming of the Shrew prompts* questions rather than answers them. The question of how to interpret the play is hard-wired into its very structure and amplified in its ongoing reception. Shakespeare's talent for interrogation and scepticism is on display here in this early play, and its history has exemplified one of our most persistent and inevitable recourses when reading Shakespeare. We make his work mean what we want it to mean. Whether Katherine is indeed tamed by the end of the play thus becomes a sharper interpretative parable: how to read Shakespeare?

Crucial to Katherine's contested role in the play is an extended speech she gives at its conclusion. It's long, but I want to quote it in full, not least because its length is part of the point. She addresses her fellow women on stage, admonishing them for being disagreeable to their menfolk:

> Fie, fie, unknit that threat'ning, 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.
> A woman moved is like a fountain troubled,
> Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty,

And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty
Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it.
Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labour both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe,
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks, and true obedience,
Too little payment for so great a debt.
Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband,
And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she but a foul contending rebel,
And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway
When they are bound to serve, love, and obey.
Why are our bodies soft, and weak, and smooth,
Unapt to toil and trouble in the world,
But that our soft conditions and our hearts
Should well agree with our external parts?
Come, come, you froward and unable worms,
My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
My heart as great, my reason haply more,
To bandy word for word and frown for frown;
But now I see our lances are but straws,
Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,
That seeming to be most which we indeed least are.
Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,
And place your hands below your husband's foot,
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready, may it do him ease.

(5.2.141–84)

The tone of this is wonderfully ambiguous. Is she cowed, brought low, reduced, broken-spirited? In some ways the language of 'our weakness past compare' suggests so, but on the other hand, the very fact of holding forth on stage for an uninterrupted forty-four lines, the longest speech of anyone in the play by far, counteracts this. Is she sarcastically rehearsing a prepared patriarchal conduct piece? Do the increasing rhymes of the

speech – sway/obey, hearts/parts, yours/more, boot/foot, please/ease – suggest the harmony of a settled view, or the singsong of a speech learned off pat? Her condemnation of her sex is so long that perhaps it becomes satirical or sarcastic through repetition, undermining its ostensible meaning. And surely calling women 'worms' is deliberately excessive? Could this be a plot with Petruchio to win the wager? We have not seen them together in the play for several scenes, so it is impossible to know how, or whether, this set-piece might have been set up in advance. Is Katherine brought to proper wifely conduct and educated away from the anti-social behaviour of her earlier life? She seems to say so in this long account of women's obligations to their husbands. Or has she had her spirit crushed?

These large-scale interpretations are made up of the details of particular points in performance. What do the rest of the cast do on stage during this long speech? Are they attentive, amused, uncomfortable? What about Petruchio? When Katherine states that her hand is ready to be placed under her husband's foot, it's a quite different declaration with a quite different meaning if, for example, she is kneeling down in front of him with her hand on the floor, or if she is standing up, arms folded, daring him to request it of her. Clearly the questions don't stop here. Petruchio's response is a single line: 'Why, there's a wench! Come on, and kiss me, Kate' (5.2.185) (he still hasn't got her name). As is quite usual in the early texts of Shakespeare (it is printed for the first time in 1623, as part of the posthumous collected dramatic works known as the First Folio), there is no explanatory stage direction at this point. Shakespeare's plays are very short on stage directions explaining what is happening, and descriptive directions that say *how* action is conducted – angrily, happily, quickly – are virtually non-existent: the action of the plays is thus up for grabs by actors, directors, and readers too. Sometimes modern editors usurp this freedom, inserting their own stage directions to clarify what they think is happening. Here, at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the most common interpolated stage direction is the obliging, mutual and perhaps rose-tinted instruction 'they kiss'. Editors assume, that's to say, that Katherine accepts Petruchio's abrupt invitation or that she obeys his brusque command. But there are other staging possibilities here: an unreciprocated or unwelcome kiss, an

awkward silence and no kiss at all, a chasm between the couple, or a mistrustful standoff between the sexes.

Sometimes we assume that what seem to us ambiguities in Shakespeare's plays – whether Henry V is a good king, or *Othello* a racist play, for example – are the result of different ethical frameworks then and now. So, this argument goes, scenarios which were quite unproblematic to early modern audiences have gained moral complexity because our attitudes to race, or military expediency, or, in the case of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the relationship between the sexes, have changed since Shakespeare's time. But actually it seems that *The Taming of the Shrew* was always ambiguous, right from the start – and two contemporaneous and related plays help make that visible.

In around 1610, almost two decades after *The Taming of the Shrew*, John Fletcher wrote a sequel called *The Tamer Tamed*. Fletcher was a playwright with the King's Men who would go on to collaborate with Shakespeare on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII*, and his riposte to Shakespeare's early comedy might be seen as a more distant kind of collaboration, or perhaps as a professional calling card. That Fletcher's play is written as a self-conscious riposte to *The Taming of the Shrew* is clear. Shakespeare's Petruchio, now a widower, returns as Fletcher's major protagonist. The play begins with wedding guests discussing his second marriage and reminding the audience of his first. Tranio reveals that Petruchio is still haunted by Katherine: 'yet the bare remembrance of his first wife [...] Will make him start in 's sleep, and very often / Cry out for Cudgels, Cowl-staves, any thing; / Hiding his Breeches, out of fear her Ghost / Should walk, and wear 'em yet'. This time around, Petruchio's friends assert, he will be in sole charge of breeches-wearing, as his new wife, Maria, already knows her place: 'She must do nothing of herself; not eat, / Drink, say "sir how do ye", make her ready, unready, / Unless he bid her.' The opening scene establishes a patriarchal second marriage with a forceful husband and submissive wife.

But this Petruchio is in for a shock. Fletcher reveals that his seemingly compliant bride has her own hidden agenda on behalf of all downtrodden wives, vowing to bend her new husband to her own will. To this end, she locks Petruchio out of her chamber on their wedding night and fortifies it against his invasion. She thus literalizes a common metaphor in male poetry of the period by turning her own virginity into a martial siege, in which she

holds the position of strength. Parleying with her husband from her 'barricaded' bedroom, Maria reminds him of his patriarchal reputation: 'You have been famous for a woman tamer, / And bear the feared name of a brave wife-breaker: / A woman now shall take those honours off, / And tame you.' As Bianca (a woke reboot of Shakespeare's ditsy kid sister) admiringly puts it: 'All the several wrongs / Done by imperious husbands to their wives / These thousand years and upwards, strengthen thee: / Thou hast a brave cause.'

Fletcher's witty, girls-on-top comeback to *The Taming of the Shrew* speaks to Shakespeare's intrinsic ambiguities. Fletcher's Petruchio and his friends recall, with horror, Katherine's untamed wildness, suggesting that she was never really submissive to him at the celebration scene which ends Shakespeare's play. But Maria and her friends also know Petruchio as an exemplary chauvinist who needs to be taught a lesson. Maybe it's significant that the men in the second play experience Katherine's unrepentant fury, whereas the women see her as a victim of a tyrannical husband. Fletcher's interpretation of the gender politics of Shakespeare's conclusion seems equivocal, and this contemporary response suggests that the questions the play has prompted for later audiences were always present. Fletcher hedges the issue about whether Katherine really is tamed into submission to her husband by the end of the play, thus identifying this uncertainty as a thoroughly contemporary view. His interpretation of that final speech shows both that Petruchio has, and hasn't, tamed his shrew, and the existence of his sequel suggests that *The Taming of the Shrew* is itself not quite complete, not quite stitched up: from the start it prompts and participates in arguments about gender relations, rather than adjudicating or settling them. As we'll see repeatedly in this book, Shakespeare's plays are questions rather than answers.

To add to the ambiguities, let's throw in another version of the play. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* was first printed in 1623. But there is another text, with the title *The Taming of a Shrew*, published, without authorial attribution, in 1594. *A Shrew* is a text whose relation to *The Shrew* is very difficult to ascertain. It has a similar plot, and a central character called Kate, who is a scold, and who is to be married to Ferando in order to help the suitors of her two, more popular, sisters. The play proceeds

pretty much as the Shakespeare version we are more familiar with, with scenes of taming involving food and sleep deprivation, but two points of comparison help us sharpen our appreciation of the more familiar Shakespearean text. The first is that problematic final speech. The Kate of *A Shrew* (in this play there doesn't seem to be any tension over abbreviating her name) gives quite different reasons why women should submit to their husbands' authority. In Kate's oration, women's intrinsic inferiority is biblically sanctioned from the get-go. In the Book of Genesis, she reports, from Adam 'A rib was taken, of which the Lord did make, / The woe of man so termed by Adam then, / Woman for that, by her came sin to us, / And for her sin was Adam doomed to die.' It's a hoary old story amplified by a false etymology beloved of early modern misogynists. The prefix 'wo' in 'woman' actually comes from 'wife', a word that came into Old English from Germanic, but it was a popular 'joke' to link it with 'woe', an expression of pity or grief. So Eve was 'woeman' – the notion of woman and of bringing sorrow to man were handily combined.

Seeing blatant anti-women sentiments in the final speech of *A Shrew* helps us to look again at the particular arguments Shakespeare gives his Katherine. She argues that men have particular obligations to women, and so women have reciprocal responsibilities in turn. This is the rhetoric of mutual obligation, something that has a distinct role in sixteenth-century debates about Protestant 'companionate marriage'. Marriage, while not a union of equals, nevertheless carried mutual responsibilities, in which each partner endured limits on their individual freedom within a bond of reciprocity. As the wife had responsibilities to the husband, so too he had responsibilities to her; the wife's subservient conduct is secured by the husband's generous protection of her. Katherine's speech draws on this understanding of marital reciprocity, arguing that the husband is 'one that cares for thee, / And for thy maintenance commits his body / To painful labour both by sea and land' (5.2.152–4). If we set aside the obvious objection – is Petruchio ever likely to commit *his* body to painful labour by anything, given that his whole aim was to 'wive it wealthily' (1.2.74)? – we can see that Katherine's speech implies a different marital relationship from the Garden of Eden scenario invoked by Kate, where the woman is an afterthought made of spare male matter, who then brings

sin and death into the world. And that speech in *A Shrew* ends with the stage direction 'she lays her hand under her husband's feet', thus providing the accompanying gesture of subordination that is not stated in Shakespeare's text, where the gestural gap allows for an alternative choreography.

So maybe *A Shrew* is clearer about its Kate's taming, as it incorporates her into outdated ideas of marriage that have been replaced by a more mutual ideology promulgated by Protestant advice books on companionate marriage, and by Katherine at the end of *The Shrew*. Perhaps. But here too there are questions. The second point of comparison between these sister plays is their treatment of the wider framing narrative. Shakespeare's play begins with a tavern landlady kicking out the drunken Christopher Sly, whereon he falls asleep. A hunting party of lords with dogs finds him and decides to enjoy 'a pastime passing excellent' (Induction 1.65): to take up Sly, wash him and dress him in fine clothes and pretend that he is a nobleman who has been 'lunatic' (Induction 1.61). Sly is persuaded by, or goes along with, this jest, accepting Bartholomew the page as his wife, and proclaiming 'I am a lord indeed' (Induction 2.71). The trick segues into a play, performed ostensibly as part of the 'lord's' recuperation: a 'pleasant comedy' will 'frame your mind to mirth and merriment' (Induction 2.131). That inset play, set in Padua, is our story of the suitors to the daughters of Baptista. The suggestion is that Sly and Bartholomew watch the entire play from the sidelines, although if that's the case, Shakespeare doesn't make much use of them: they have a moment of dialogue after the first scene, with Sly proclaiming this 'a very excellent piece of work' (1.1.251), and then no more. In reading the play, perhaps we don't notice this too much, but the structure is awkward on the stage.

Many modern productions have taken advantage of *A Shrew* because it supplies a more extensive, mock-chorus role for Sly as a commentator on the unfolding plot, and in particular because it has a final sequence that closes the parenthesis that the opening scenes established. *A Shrew* ends with Sly returning to the stage in his own clothes; he is woken by the tavern-keeper. Befuddled with drink and sleep, Sly grumbles: 'gi's some more wine. What, 's all the players gone? Am not I a lord?', and then announces 'I have had / The bravest dream tonight that ever thou / Heardest in all thy life.' 'You had best get you home,' is

the unimpressed reply, 'For your wife will curse you for dreaming here tonight.' Sly is unabashed: 'Will she? I know now how to tame a shrew ... I'll to my / Wife presently and tame her too, / An if she anger me.' So, *A Shrew* closes with Sly suggesting the play *he* has seen is a handbook to wife-taming that he will implement in his own household. Not only is the play about taming a shrew, but it is a manifesto and instruction guide for others to do the same. There's a similar moment in Shakespeare's play when Petruchio, alone on stage after he has sent the travel-wearied Katherine hungry to bed, declares: 'Thus have I politicly begun my reign' and tells the audience, 'He that knows better how to tame a shrew, / Now let him speak.' Tis charity to show' (4.1.174, 196–7).

Should we take Sly's promise seriously as an assessment of the play? Or does a plot summary from a drunken tinker immediately mark itself as preposterous and deluded? Is Sly a figure for the audience, or a pitiful patsy who doesn't understand the first thing about theatre, or wives for that matter? Does bringing back the frame device re-establish the Kate/Ferando plot as a self-conscious fiction, something that could only happen within these quotation marks that signal make-believe? And in any case, can this tell us anything about *The Shrew*, which only introduces but does not bring back Christopher Sly and in which this ending of the frame doesn't exist? Does the Katherine and Petruchio plot in Shakespeare's version retain those introductory elements of self-conscious fiction or does that fade away? Are we supposed to take this comedy seriously at all?

Answers to these questions can only be partial or contingent. What's more important is to acknowledge, from the first chapter of this book, how Shakespeare's works prompt questions rather than answering them. The ambiguity over whether Katherine is tamed at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew* is intrinsic to the play – it isn't a problem that arises because we do not now accept the kind of gender ideology that the Elizabethan audience would have supported, so it's not the problem of history. Rather, the early modern evidence of the *Taming of a Shrew*, that quarto version of the play from 1594, and of *The Tamer Tamed*, the Fletcher play in the Jacobean period – as well as the play's own structure and ambiguities – mean that the question was always present. Shakespeare's plays hold our attention because they

offer narratives through which we can shape our own contemporary concerns. A flick through the modern production history of *The Taming of the Shrew* is exemplary: the suffragettes, the post-war reiteration of gender conservatism, and second-wave feminism have all found the play hospitable and relevant to their concerns. If the twenty-first century iteration of the problems between the sexes looks different from its late sixteenth-century counterpart, the questions still remain.

CHAPTER 2

Richard III

Richard III's opening lines are also their most familiar: 'Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this son of York' (1.1.1–2). Their recognizability may obscure just how unusual they are. Richard is the only one of Shakespeare's major characters to begin his own play. You may recall – perhaps you've experienced this in the theatre – the bewilderingly oblique way Shakespeare tends to begin his plays, via marginal characters whom we struggle to place as they recount or anticipate some major narrative event in a conversation that begins in the middle, leaving us flailing (beginning Shakespeare's plays at their beginning is not always the easiest place to start). Not so in *Richard III*. The opening stage direction in the first printed edition is 'Enter Richard, Duke of Gloucester, *solus*' – meaning alone – making it absolutely clear that not only does he open the play, he does so, uniquely, in soliloquy. He begins, that's to say, by addressing the audience. From the outset, we are his creatures.

Richard III is described as a 'tragedy' in its first publication, but the story of Richard's path to the throne, and of his eventual defeat in battle reads more like a modern criminal biopic. The details of the plot are less important than its overall shape of rise and fall. In large part Richard's success is due to his capacity for ruthless violence. The synopsis of the play that serves as a lurid blurb to potential buyers of the first print edition stresses

this aspect: 'Containing his treacherous plots against his brother Clarence, the pitiful murder of his most innocent nephews, his tyrannical usurpation, with the whole course of his detested life and most deserved death'. It's a compelling prospectus, but actually rather misleading: Richard's primary tactic in the play is seduction rather than elimination. And among Richard's many conquests during the play, from Lady Anne to Buckingham, from the Lord Mayor to his deluded brother King Edward, we – the audience – are the first, reeled in hook, line and sinker by this confiding, charismatic, funny opening speech. Richard strategically lays bare his own vulnerabilities, describing himself as 'not shaped for sportive tricks' (14), 'rudely stamped' (16) and unable to 'prove a lover' (28). He confesses, with some pride, that he is 'subtle false and treacherous' (37) and that he plans to set his brothers Clarence and Edward in 'deadly hate' (35). At that moment Clarence enters, and we are sworn to silence: 'Dive, thoughts, down to my soul' (41).

This apparent candour is utterly beguiling. Even though – perhaps because – we are in no doubt about his ruthless self-interest, Richard establishes an immediate alliance from the outset. This intimacy with the audience will be carefully managed through a stream of asides and sardonic remarks, where only we know his true meaning, keeping us from forming any real attachment to any other character. The very title of the play seems to have succumbed to his charms and to endorse his ambitions. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, doesn't actually become King Richard III until Act 4, but his play has no doubt he will get there: from the opening he is the king-in-waiting. And the very rhythm of that first soliloquy enacts the dominance he is going to exert over his play. I'm not a huge fan of that classroom staple of Shakespeare studies we identify triumphantly as iambic pentameter. It's not always clear to me what we actually know when we say that somehow Shakespeare's lines go 'de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum', other than that they don't therefore sound very interesting. But what *is* interesting about Shakespeare's use of rhythm is when it changes or surprises us, as here. 'Now is the winter of our discontent' begins decisively with an inverted rhythm – the stress is on 'Now', the first syllable, not, as regular iambic pentameter would have it, on the second. It calls us to order; it tells us who is boss.

Shakespeare writes *Richard III* as a final part of a historical story, written after a series of plays on the reign of Henry VI, the king whose corpse 'bleed[s] afresh' (1.2.56) as his murderer Richard comes to woo his daughter-in-law Lady Anne. We'll return to the notion of *Richard III* as a play in a series below, noting for now that Richard's dramatic dominance registers a new political and theatrical order. The contrast between the turbulent maelstrom of competing interests in the *Henry VI* plays is striking. Those previous historical dramas on the Wars of the Roses dramatize the absence of any authoritative leader by distributing the roles widely across the theatrical company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, originally formed in 1594 by a group of eight shareholders, including Shakespeare. The plays' historical politics and their dramaturgical politics are aligned: no single character is any more important than any other. By contrast, Richard registers his own ambition, seizing his own play by the scruff of the neck right from the start, and he doesn't let go: his hold on the politics of his country is matched by Shakespeare's fascist dramaturgy which is designed explicitly to showcase his charismatic authority.

Richard's role is huge. He speaks around a third of the play's lines, a proportion not far off that of Hamlet in his play. He is on stage for two-thirds of the play, around two-and-a-quarter demanding hours of stage time. The part is sometimes identified as Shakespeare's first major collaboration with the leading actor and fellow Chamberlain's Men shareholder, Richard Burbage; his first play that is a star-vehicle rather than an ensemble piece. This is the partnership that will bring us Othello and Lear and Macbeth and Prospero over the next two decades, and here, at its inception, it irresistibly elides the charisma of both Richards. Richard (III) is himself a consummate actor, so much so that we wonder if there is anything underneath. He performs his own role self-consciously: his cues to his loyal sidekick Buckingham in his appearance before the Lord Mayor and citizens, when he appears as a devout hermit between two bishops, are good examples of his actorly delight (he's the opposite, in a way, of the theatre-phobic Coriolanus, discussed in Chapter 18). The long history of the performances of this play, from Colley Cibber to David Garrick, and from Laurence Olivier to Antony Sher, demonstrates that it is almost impossible for Richard to overact: the histrionic quality of his deformed and manic self-


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