

## ACTING IS ELOQUENCE: THE PERFORMANCES OF CLEMSON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL XII

by John R. Ford, Delta State University

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Shenandoah's performance of *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Colleen Kelly and Fred Nelson, was also a celebration and critique of the goals and methods of political theatre, this time regarding matters of domesticity rather than state. But if *Coriolanus* used these theatrical tactics to alienate its audience, *Shrew* used them to win us over, and at the same time to provide us with both distance from and critical perspective on the theatrical energies that both define and subvert the performance of gender. This production, taking its cue from the conventional names of some of the play's characters and from a long theatrical tradition, staged *Shrew* as *commedia dell'arte*, a form whose dependence on conventional caricatures, broad physical humor, and sheer energy kept us at a safe distance from the violence and misogyny that fuel Baptista's household and Paduan life.

Shenandoah, however, deliberately complicated its own conventions by infusing elements of American vaudeville into the Italian comic form. Gremio (James Konicek) and Hortensio (David McCallum) were both dressed in vaudevillian uniforms: Gremio wore a loud, checkered jacket, four or five sizes too large, with a phallic cane and a porkpie hat, while Hortensio sported bright yellow suspenders and a bright yellow tie that was not merely loud but hoarse. The dress, of course, made their romantic and social claims for Bianca ridiculous from the start. But the vaudeville hints also gave us something of that genre's broad satiric framework. As critics such as Alexander Leggatt have reminded us, some of the more frenzied scenes of this play are observed and enjoyed by other characters who seem merely to have wandered into the scene. For these characters, what they take in is not so much lived experience but a "pleasant comedy" (1 nd.2.130, Vol. XXIII Clemson University Digital Press Digital Facsimile *Clemson Shakespeare Festival XII* 115) or, as Tranio (Aaron Hochhalter) tells Lucentio (Tyrus Lemerande), "some show to welcome us to town" (1.1.47).

In this production these observers became something of the buffoon impressarios so familiar in burlesque, offering half-witty ripostes to the skits they observed. The double frame allowed us to see the sexual and social battles of this play as performances, and to critique them as such. Tranio, for instance, often stood downstage, miming frenzied cues and instructions given in vain to grossly incompetent "actors" like the Pedant (Kathleen Lake) or Lucentio. Petruchio (Michael Earnest Moore), too, presented himself to us as an apprentice actor, feeling his way into his self-confident role, with uncertain confidence. There were, of course, many instances in the play when Petruchio seemed to enjoy his performance of such a Petruchio, much to the delight of Christopher Sly and the several male audience members Petruchio addressed. But for all his confidence, there was a surprising hint of vulnerability to this Petruchio. His outrageous parodies of the materialistic and patriarchal codes beneath Paduan romantic conventions could also be seen as an outsider's attempts to imitate those conventions. That Petruchio was played by an African-American actor further suggested the characters' strategies of self-fashioning and the assimilation of alien social codes.

Often we were invited to see a space between Petruchio and the role he fashioned, much as we had earlier seen with Christopher Sly, whom at times this Petruchio ever so faintly resembled. That self-conscious performance anxiety was especially evident when Petruchio first encountered Katherine (Amy Mclaughlin). As she entered, Petruchio provided his own stage direction: "now, Petruchio, speak." Then

for several seconds, he stood perfectly mute, a victim of stage fright, until he recovered his opening lines: "Good morrow, Kate, for that's your name, I hear" (2.1.182). Thereafter, their mutual aggression channeled itself into high spirited play, somewhat more spirit, in fact, than Petruchio had anticipated. When this Petruchio announced that "thou must be married to no man but me," the bravado of the line was somewhat undermined by his faltering, almost plaintive, voice. But when he glimpsed his on-stage audience Baptista (Sasha Olinick), Gremio, and Tranio looking his way, Petruchio adjusted his gait into a manly strut: "How but well, sir? How but well?" (2.1.282).

Throughout the play Petruchio sought to command his role, often looking to the audience after particularly bold stratagems for our approval. His most blustery demonstrations of masculine authority would often punctuate moments of actorly unease. During the long wait for Katherine's return during the wager scene in Act V, Petruchio momentarily dropped his mask, revealing a hint of self-doubt. But when Katherine did appear, Bianca and the widow in tow, the bravado returned and Petruchio exuberantly roared, "Why, there's a wench! Come on, and kiss me, Kate" (5.2.180). She did, of course. Petruchio could not contain his pleasure. After all, the first time he had made that request, when he announced their wedding day, all he received was a punch in the solar plexus.

As Petruchio prepared to make his final exit with Katherine, he slapped her on the buttocks in a gesture of manly play. Perhaps the field might be won after all. But Katherine, too, had been perfecting a role, and with somewhat more assurance than her putative trainer. Even as early as the wedding scene in 3.2, there was a hint of performance. As the bride-to-be waited for her errant groom, humiliated and angry, we noticed that under her white bridal gown and veil was the bold, red dress she had been wearing since the beginning of the play. Her actor's confidence most fully displayed itself in the journey from Petruchio's house back to Baptista's. When Petruchio insisted on re-naming the sun and moon, Katherine's response became both a playful critique of Petruchio's fickleness and a ceremony of self-fashioning. Action was, indeed, eloquence. In an apparent gesture of submission to Petruchio's powers of naming, she reclaimed her own name and her role: Then God be blessed, it is the blessed sun, But sun it is not when you say it is not. And the moon changes even as your mind. What you will have it nam'd, even that it is, And so it shall be so for Katherine. (4.5.18-22) Katherine's self-possession was such that as she spoke these lines, she could afford to kneel, a gesture she would repeat at the end of the play.

This was not an overtly feminist Katherine, nor was her final speech delivered in the ironic tradition of Mary Pickford or some who followed her. Nevertheless, the effect of Katherine's voice, especially when heard through the filter of several on-stage auditors, was unexpectedly subversive. Inevitably, the presence of auditors gave her words a performative and rhetorical force, something Katherine further emphasized by directing particular lines to different female audience members, just as Petruchio had earlier in the play sought the men. Consequently, the audience found itself taking in, not just Katherine's words, but the effect of those words on her on- and off-stage listeners. It was impossible not to notice the vast distance between her idealized definition of a husband who "commits his body to painful labor, both by sea and land; To watch the night in storms, the day in cold., (5.2.148-50) and the somewhat less than heroic masculine bodies we saw on stage: Hortensia, Lucentio, Vincentia, Gremio, Baptista, the Pedant, Grumio, Biondello, and even Petruchio. When Katherine, wearing her gentlewomen's cap, urged her sister wives to look more favorably on -thy lord, thy king, thy governor- (5.2.138), the widow (Kathleen Lake) shot Hortensia a scornful glance. Hortensia, instinctively following the direction of that glance, turned around only to see neither lords nor kings behind him.