

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW
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Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY

From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the story-line and what happens to the characters. It is important, therefore, that before you start the following work you will have read the play. At the very least, you should have read the synopsis and character sketches that precede this section.

I try never to be dictatorial in the practical work. There is no version that is more right or more wrong than another. What the following work hopes to encourage is the habit of experiment. Too often, when you read a line it is the first meaning that becomes fixed in the mind. Often this could be just the most obvious and other subtler interpretations might add richness to the character.

It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do. When experimenting with a character this is especially important. At the end you will need to go through all your work on each character, on the setting and on design ideas once more, checking that your decisions make sense.

I apologise that the exercises often refer to students as 'he'. This is for ease only - I recognise that the majority of students may be female. Should you or they take offence, I have taken as my own justification the fact that nowadays the word 'actor' has become applicable to both genders.

THE INDUCTION

SCENE ONE

The play opens with a bang as the drunkard Christopher Sly gets thrown out of the pub by the Hostess. He falls asleep outside and is found by a Lord out hunting with his servants. As Sly continues to sleep, the Lord gives instructions to his servants for a bit of fun at Sly's expense. Sly will be tucked up in a grand bed at the Lord's home where, when he wakes, everyone will conspire together to convince him he is a nobleman who has lost his mind for the last fifteen years and has now come to his senses.

The induction may seem like an unnecessary addition to the real play of the Shrew, which follows, but it introduces many of the themes of the main play. Not for nothing does 'Induction' mean 'A Leading Into.' Chief amongst these themes is a favourite of Shakespeare's throughout his life: that nothing is what it seems. Disguisings are the commonest feature of the play and in the induction, where Sly is convinced he is other than who he thought he was, the idea is introduced.

Allied with this theme is that of deception, sometimes cruel, sometimes arising out of love. Pranks of this kind were very popular themes of the period, often finding their source in the Commedia dell'Arte.

In addition, the Hostess with her sharp tongue is perhaps a prototype Shrew. She is set against the boy who will be sent as a disguised lady, to pretend to be Sly's wife. The boy's soft voice and loving words set an example of the perfect wife, a yardstick to measure Katherina by. The fact that this 'wife' is not a wife at all, but a pretend woman perhaps tells us the level at which the whole play should be taken - as an elaborate hoax in which nothing, not even Katherina's bending to her lord's will, is what it seems.

In Shakespeare's day, of course, there would have been no scenery. The set up of the Globe would have sufficed: two doors at the back in between which was a curtained off

recess, sometimes used as an inner stage, and a balcony, or minstrel's gallery above, stretching along above the inner stage. All settings were indicated by word or by the occasional prop or piece of furniture.

We will discuss how you would want to do a setting for the play at the end, once the different scenes have been explored. For the present, make sure you make a note of all the places indicated. Here we have the outside of a tavern [a public house], giving on to a cobbled or, more likely, rutted and muddy street. Perhaps, there is a bench outside the door of the pub, on which Sly could settle himself to sleep. This would annoy the Hostess and perhaps provoke her to fetch the law to sort him out.

Try out the very beginning of the scene now. Make sure it is as explosive and audience-catching as possible. Try the following suggestions:

the Hostess pushing Sly from behind, his heels dug in and sliding through the 'mud'. With a final shove, he falls flat on his face. She hurls his cloak or jacket after him and gives him another kick for good measure

Sly carried off and dumped by a couple of bruisers, the Hostess standing hands on hips in her doorway

starting off with a whole mini scene: Sly gets up from sitting at a table with his two cronies on one side of the stage which represents the interior. He sways, knocking against the table. He tries to demand more drink from the Hostess who is carrying a tray of drinks for a customer. She denies him, saying he's had too much already. He grabs the tray from her and throws it to the ground. Whereupon she either shoves him out herself or gets others to do so as above. All of this done with enough noise to make recognisable speech unnecessary - just the drunken rowdy sounds of a crowded pub. Other drinkers all, following his expulsion, line up and laugh at Sly, especially when he claims to be of noble birth...

Contrast the command of language that the Hostess has with Sly's drunken slurring. Acting drunk is one of the hardest things to do well. Make sure that every word is still audible, whilst giving the impression of not being in command of tongue and lips. Gestures should be too big and wild, somewhat disconnected.

The audience won't know the word 'feeze' but it doesn't matter - it's intention is clear. 'F' is a good sound to draw out and sound venomous with. 'I'll 'fix' you,' he says and she replies by threatening him with the stocks, where ne'er-d-wells were placed for punishment, shackled by the ankles in wooden gaiters in the town square. Fixed in a sitting position and unable to move, people threw their rotten vegetables and the contents of their piss-pots onto those punished in this way.

Sly draws himself up with an attempt at dignity as he claims to be descended from Norman aristocracy. His ignorance is shown by his calling William the Conqueror, Richard. Try this out, with the Hostess and, if you are using them, the other onlookers, mocking his dignity and his words.

If his claim is received with laughter, there is something for Sly to react to when he says 'Therefore paucas pallabris, let the world slide. Sessa! It means: 'So, I'll use few words. Let the world go hang. Stop.' Try the sentence in the original:

with a very hoity-toity expression, nose in the air, implying that he'll use few words because he is too dignified to do other. The rest of the world - those mocking him - can disappear. he has no time for them all. Keep up the attempt at a posh voice throughout with a strong accent, as he has used so far in fact, keeping up the tone of defiant raging throughout

as if exhaustion is taking him over. He is going to expend few words because his mind is addled with drink and he can't find the words he wants to say. This version will slow, run down, become fuddled and as if not caring any more. Physically he will slide downwards to sitting, or leaning, as he lets the world slide

Which do you like best?

Whatever voice tones you use, Sly appears to turn his back on the Hostess. At least she fears she is losing his attention - and payment for the damage he has caused. **Try her: 'You will not pay...' and his 'No, not a denier...'**

with her hauling him to his feet, holding him by the collar and forcing him to look at her, his response blurry

him suddenly speaking clearly, defiantly, enjoying winding her up her shouting like a shrew

her speaking very slowly and clearly, eyes narrowed, calling on bystanders as witnesses - she means to have the law on him

him sliding down in one very slow seamless movement from 'let the world slide' to 'go to thy cold bed and warm thee'. His 'No, not a denier...' then sounds in the same tone, slurred with imminent sleep.

Experiment with all the above. The whole little sequence can be played as if both are alert, even though Sly is drunk, with him trying to give as good as he gets from her, or it can be played as if he is on the brink of passing out and she is trying to get heard before she loses him.

Whatever you decide, Sly lies down to sleep here - decide whether on the ground or on a bench by the inn door - or, even more irritating, across the door lintel itself, so that she has to step over him to fetch the law. [Your set probably won't have such details as a doorway, but the same effect can be produced by using the other drinkers as 'walls' of staring laughing faces and watching bodies, in front of which she has stood as if in a doorway. If he lays himself down in front of her, she will have no choice but to step over him.]

Sly's line 'Go by, Saint Jeronimy,' is a misquote from Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. This was one of the most popular plays of the period. It was played so often that, it is said, audiences knew whole sections of it by heart and would call out the lines. The actual line is 'Hieronimo, beware; go by, go by.' Hieronimo is an elderly revenger, plotting to avenge his dead son. Here he is telling himself to 'go by' which means to 'lay low', to remain unnoticed, so as not to attract attention to himself whilst he plots his vengeance.

In the same way Sly is telling himself to lay low - literally because he is going to sleep. He also wants to avoid more trouble with the Hostess: better to cop out then and allow sleep to overtake him.

For this reason he probably feigns sleep until after the Hostess has gone, before saying when she is out of earshot that he'll be happy to answer any member of the law by himself resorting to the law, if needs be. An idle threat, I'm sure, or he wouldn't wait till she was out of hearing.

Thirdborough is a local [Stratford] word for a constable.

The word 'boy' is a scornful form of address. The whole pair of lines needs to be spat out, using the 'b' sounds and the 'c' sounds to make him sound more defiant.

Try the whole little section now, first of all in your own words, and then following the decisions you made above, with the text. Take careful note of the movement of the scene, which should emerge from the improvised version.

I don't think it's too far-fetched to see in the extended hunting conversation the same care for hounds as a huntsman shows for that other creature of the hunt - the falcon. Katherina
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is likened to a wild falcon in the main play and Petruchio tames her much as a wild bird is tamed. Here the Lord and his Huntsmen are shown to be full of kindly concern for the welfare of their creatures but, more importantly, authoritative. The anonymous Lord knows what is best for the animals in his keeping as Petruchio is presumed to know what is best for his wife. Perhaps even his anonymity serves to make a link. The Lord likes a prank, as witness the joke he plays on Sly, just as Petruchio likes to play tricks, but when he comes to gentling someone under his care, he is a master, as is Petruchio.

This fact is always going to be the hardest one for modern women to swallow. The fact is that married women in Shakespeare's day were entirely in the keeping of their husbands. They were his property, just like his hound or horse. But any good owner will know that after firm training, the rules can be relaxed enough to allow the creature in his care freedom within those same rules. Just so is a falcon allowed to fly free, once she knows she must return to the gloved hand of her owner. She would not be happy if kept for ever in close captivity; the more obedient and cognisant of the rules she is, the more freedom she will be allowed. [This is something to bear in mind when we reach the end of the play. If Katherina keeps to her side of the marriage contract and is an obedient wife, she will be rewarded by trust and more freedom than she ever had in her father's house.]

The 'contract' between hound, or falcon and master is that in exchange for the creature's service, it will be groomed, well-fed, well-roofed and cared for. It is the same for a wife. The contract means that the husband will provide completely for the wife, and if he wants a happy and willing woman, he will not stint on these things. The problem comes in that women are not the same as hounds or falcons. They have brains. The freedoms they want might infringe on the 'rules' as the husband perceives them. That is the crux of this story. I can't help wondering if Shakespeare isn't positing a 'what-if' situation. What if, like a hound or falcon, a woman could be gentled and handled in the same way? Would it work for all women? What kind of a woman might it work for? And what kind might object? His working this through in his mind is the substance of the story, and it shouldn't be taken too seriously. Shakespeare is being outrageous, and I'm sure that he knows he is.

A rough paraphrase of the Lord's speech follows: 'Huntsman, please look after my hounds. Let poor Merriman have a break; he is frothing at the mouth. Pair up Clowder with the bitch with a deep voice; their voices will chime better together than the present coupling. Did you see how well Silver picked up the scent, even though it was cold? I wouldn't accept twenty pounds for that good dog, he's the best.'

The Huntsman, who is held in higher esteem than the servants, and probably of good family himself, replies on an equal note that he believes Belman to be as good, because he was able to pick up the scent when it seemed completely lost, twice.

The Lord doesn't like to be contradicted. Echo, he says, is better than Belman, though admittedly not quite as fast. Anyway, he continues, feed them and check they are all well, because he wants to hunt again the next day.

As I was pointing out above, the whole section shows the care a good Lord has for the creatures in his care. He knows them well, too - each individual - and takes an interest in making sure that they are helped, by thoughtful fine-tuning, to give of their best. It is important that you see that this whole idea is not an irrelevancy, but part of the whole scheme of the play.

As the Lord tweaks the pairing and the character of the hounds, so does he interfere with the nature of Sly. We first see him disgusted by the sight of drunken Sly asleep on his bench. He is likened to a beast, a pig. Sleep, like Death which it resembles, is shown here as 'foul and loathsome', when both should be seen as blessings, reliefs for tired humanity. In this way, Shakespeare tells us that Sly has sunk as low as a human being can sink. Perhaps the Lord, by 'tweaking' him, as he interferes and improves on the nature of his animals, might make him 'forget himself'. The idea is that by treating someone as a lord, by offering him the example of manners and courtesy, he will be dragged up from his natural sottish state to better himself. The Lord is not convinced the

experiment will work, but it is worth a try. In the same way, the play of *The Taming of the Shrew* can be seen as a similar experiment: take the worst form of womanhood and see if she can be raised to a higher state - the perfect wife.

It will be up to you as would-be directors to decide how far the experiment works with Sly and whether this is meant to back up the argument of the main play, or as a comic counter-side to it. Though Sly disappears very swiftly from the written plot, he shouldn't be forgotten. Throughout, I will be asking you to consider the different ways the Sly character can be used, and for what purpose. Discuss as a preliminary, how far the experiment is a sound one. It is a similar idea to that of *Pygmalion*, the Shaw version. Can a flower-girl be a duchess, if treated as a duchess? Can Sly be a lord if treated as one? Or does the treatment have to be coupled with 'training' of a firm, and sometimes harsh kind?

To help your discussion, try the following modernised improvisation:

a couple of rich young men in Chelsea find a tramp sleeping across their doorstep, meths bottle still grasped in grimy paw. They decide to take him indoors, wash and dress him in their finest cloths, and then convince him that he is their father, who has long been in a catatonic state, seemingly in a coma and dreaming no doubt strange dreams.

Play the idea first just for the laughs. The two young men want nothing more than to laugh at the tramp, to enjoy themselves at his expense. However, note that one says to treat him kindly - the laughter is for themselves to enjoy, but it will be all the funnier if the tramp genuinely starts to believe that all his memories of his life are passed off as dreams that happened when he was in his coma.

Secondly, try the idea with a different twist. This time, though one is happy to play along for the laughs alone, the other young man wants to see if the tramp can actually be improved by the experience. Will his voice become posher, talked to by those around him with an aristocratic voice? Will his manners improve, given the good example of how to behave?

The idea is a variation of the old Nature v. Nurture argument. Are we who we are by nature, i.e. born that way, or can we be improved by nurture? How alterable is our nature? Discuss this whole theme fully. It is central to an understanding of the play.

The First Huntsman agrees with the Lord's idea that the beggar will 'forget himself' when he wakes to find himself surrounded by fine things. The Second Huntsman is perhaps not so sure. What do you think the Lord is saying on Line 40 'Even as a flatt'ring dream or worthless fancy'? It could be that he is agreeing with the Second Huntsman that the experiment can go two ways. Either Sly will 'forget himself' and 'become' a lord, or the whole experience of waking in such grand surroundings will seem like a pleasant but unlikely dream, something that might please him as a 'fancy' but is worthless because unreal. The two huntsmen thus show us there are two possible outcomes to the experiment, and the Lord is happy to go along with the idea and see which one wins. After all, he is only doing it for a 'jest.'

Look at this same long speech, from after 'Even as a flatt'ring dream or worthless fancy.' It begins 'Then take him up,...' Line 41, and ends 'For he is nothing but a mighty lord.' Line 61. **First of all read it, listing the ideas he puts forward to persuade Sly of his new state. Put them in your own words, and improvise the content of this speech.**

Then try the twenty lines of the actual text:

As an aristocratic 'complete' man - fond not just of hunting but of all the arts too. This man is a bit of a dreamer, carried along by the beauty of the words, creating a magical atmosphere to paint a picture aimed at seducing Sly into belief

As an enthusiastic young man, carried away with the fun of the joke -

each idea is plucked out of the air, followed by another - so it wouldn't flow, as the last version does. Ideas come along one by one.

An authoritative older man, intrigued by the idea of an experiment that might or might not work

Your decision will dictate how the last three lines of this speech are said. If you are a young man carried away by a 'merry jape', then you might have to remind yourself to be kind, applying the brakes rather late in the day. An older man, with considerable authority will have this idea of kindness from the start, but a dreamer might not realise how cruel the joke is until later; he too would have to bring himself up short.

In all three cases, how are the huntsmen and servants receiving the idea? Run through all three with a group of listeners, all servants under the lord. It may be that one or two of these getting carried away will serve to remind the lord of the need to be 'modest.'

Where is the stage depicting? In one scene, we have moved seamlessly from outside a country tavern to the Lord's house, though it may be that we are still outside, in the Lord's courtyard perhaps.

Have a think about the atmosphere you want to create here and what indication of place you might like to make. It is perhaps late in the afternoon. Sly has been drinking all day and passes out in full view. It is the end of a day's hunting with the prospect of another tomorrow. The Lord and his retinue all come in, tired but content with their day's sport.

It seems there are options:

You could have the stage roughly divided into two, one side depicting the outside of the tavern and the bench on which Sly sleeps, the other half being the courtyard or the hall of the Lord. If you decide on an interior like the Hall, it means that there is the possibility of a seat to vary positioning, but it is not necessary. A courtyard feel would do very well.

Both of these ideas seem to require the suggestion of buildings, or at least the exteriors:

a tavern - a sign, perhaps a doorway, perhaps a window...

the Lord's house, again perhaps a doorway, contrastingly larger

There is always the option of using no scenery at all, as in Shakespeare's day and allowing the action alone to tell us where we are. Nowadays, with lighting - a luxury that Shakespeare did not have - we can define areas somewhat with light.

Make a note of all ideas and all requirements, such as the bench. Note where we are for each scene. At the end of the play, you can piece all these together and come up with a design that serves all purposes.

Trumpets sound to show the Lord that he has visitors. Notice that he is equally happy, whether his visitor is a nobleman or, as it turns out, a group of travelling players. Shakespeare shows us that the Lord is a thoughtful and properly 'noble' gentleman. He takes care that everyone should be provided for - food, drink and a bed for the night. He is also careful that no one should be offended. Here, in his earlier instructions and at the end of the scene he is concerned that Sly should not feel himself to be the butt of a cruel joke. Laughter at him there may be, but it must be of the gentlest kind.

The Lord is established as a lover of the theatre. He has met this group of travelling players before, and commends one of them in particular. The theme of 'wooing' is introduced. The actor had 'wooed the gentlewoman so well...' just as Bianca and Katherina are wooed in a variety of ways.

He warns them of a guest in the house who might behave strangely, since he is unused to the theatre. Whatever he might do, the players must not laugh at him or stare. They should simply carry on as if nothing happens. This allows us, as would-be directors, to build in any amount of interruptions, if we wish, which will not be noticed by the actors, trained to carry on regardless.