# Unbiassed Remarks

on

# Shakspeare's Taming of the Shrew.

By

**Charles Graeser.**

> "He that cannot endure to strive against the wind shall hardly attain the port which he purposeth to recover." Raleigh, Hist. of the World.

> Let us take the poet for what he is, and not impute to him matters of which he had never thought. —

THE writer of these remarks cannot hope for the approval of Shakspeare's unconditional worshippers. He may even be suspected of setting up as a rival to the memorable Thomas Rymer. *) Although he feels perfectly innocent of any such offence, he is quite prepared to be condemned by those who will not hear of Shakspeare having occasionally given in to the low taste of his audience. To examine how far this may have been the case in writing his *Taming of the Shrew*, and what was the nature of the public to whom he let himself down, is certainly a ticklish business, but it ought not to be regarded by unbiassed readers in a worse light than an assertion that the sun is not so bright when he shines through a fog.

Commentators on Shakspeare, both in Germany and in England, have taken great pains to discover the originals of the poet's dramas and to elucidate their difficulties. Hence we possess the most exact genealogy of the pieces, we know whence the original story was derived, what former English writers had already worked it up, when they were first performed and so on. These investigations are very instructive. They testify to the unwearied diligence of scholars who for more than a century have laboured at the study of Shakspeare, and have traced the his-

*) Thomas Rymer wrote in 1678: "The Tragedies of the last age considered and examined," and 15 years afterwards: "A short view of Tragedy, its original excellency and corruption." — In the Leipzig Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung, (1851, No. 33) the present writer has given an account of the judgment which Rymer passed on Shakspeare in these works.



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torical edifice of Shakspeare's poems to the very foundation. The value of these labours, which leave little to be desired, and of the philological attempts to explain the obscurities of Shakspeare's language, cannot be overrated. They are a positive merit and a real gain. But besides these we have *esthetical* interpretations. These may be also valuable, if they will only take the poet for what he is, and not impute to him matters of which he had never thought. They would become of less and less importance, the more they wandered into the cloudy sea of abstractions and barren school wisdom, the more they endeavoured to prove that the Swan of Avon was everywhere in accord with the rules of esthetic and philosophic text-books. This direction of inquiry is at present much in vogue in Germany. A kind of priesthood has been established which battles with the most intolerant and exaggerated zeal for the one saving faith of the Shakspeare Church. Were Shakspeare living, he would doubtless laugh heartily, at the fantastic contortions with which those dervishes spin round his altar, and at the anatomical professors who laboriously dissect every cerebral molecule of the great master, in order to squeeze out the quintessence of his genius, to bring it to market, diluted with huge portions of their own spirit, in ponderous tomes which would fill a library. We will leave these interpreters their own triumphs, and not destroy the enjoyment of the public which feeds on their sublime wisdom. Our task is different. It is far less ambitious, and less assuming, but more useful. We wish to exhibit Shakspeare's statue, not in a glory of red fire and rockets, but by the pure light of common sense, by taking an unprejudiced survey of the above-named comedy.

It is well known that Shakspeare borrowed his plot and incidents, with a sketch of almost every scene from: "A pleasaunt conceited Historie called the Taming of a Shrew, as it has beene sundry Times acted by the right Honourable the Earle of Pembrooke his servants." — We need hardly say that Shakspeare's imitation or rather re-construction, bears about the same relation to the original as silver to pewter, but the matter remains the same, and what an indifferent writer formerly made of it, cannot serve as a justification for a successor like Shakspeare. The former existence of the piece will not suffice to lay its monstrosities to the charge of the original author. They are the more strikingly due to Shakspeare, the more his genius towered over his predecessor's. Hence in our present observations on the *Taming of the Shrew* we have nothing to do with the piece performed by Lord Pembroke's troop, but wholly and solely with Shakspeare, who must stand good for himself, and requires no external assistance. (We shall only cite two passages from the older piece, the one in order to give a little specimen of the original, the other, because it establishes a point in favour of its mediocre author, by assigning a cause for an important action for which Shakspeare has not given the slightest indication of a motive.)

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To proceed at once to the pith of the matter, let us ask:

**For whom and for what purpose did the poet write his Taming of the Shrew?**

The answer to this question, *which is indispensable to a proper appreciation of the piece*, is so clear, that it is difficult to understand how Shakspearian interpreters in investigating the contents and signification of this drama have contrived to avoid it by fanciful speculations and tortuous circuits, instead of at once taking the straight path which Shakspeare himself pointed out. By pursuing this path step by step, and relying upon the poet's own words interpreted in no unnatural sense, we hope to contribute somewhat towards the right comprehension of *this* comedy (and may be of several other productions of the same author).

In the Induction we see the drunken tinker *Sly* quarreling with the Hostess and refusing to pay for the glasses he has "burst." She threatens him with the constables, he sets them at nought, and straightway falls asleep. Hereupon follows the ludicrous transformation of the tinker, who is carried to a country-seat, finely dressed, and persuaded on awaking that he is really a lord.

"It will be pastime passing excellent," cries the nobleman who plans the trick, and finally has "a pleasant comedy" performed for the bewildered scamp. This introduction has no real connection with the following piece, but shows us the proper point of sight from which to regard the "Taming of the Shrew": — *a rogue, metamorphosed into a lord, and scarcely sober, sits in the boxes, to represent the public for whose amusement the piece is acted**. The induction is therefore by

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*) That a real lord and his attendants are also amused with the comedy, does not alter this view of the matter. — In the original, the players come out with "packs at their backs." Sander, one of them, who retains his name in the play and is the original of Grumio, says that the comedy "is a good lesson for us my L., for us that are married men." When the players are announced Sly asks: "is there not a foole in the plaie?", and tells the lord that "weele flowt the plaiers out of their coates." This Sander is the fool, after whom Sly asks, "When will the foole come againe," observing on his subsequent entrance, "Looke Sim" (his name for the lord), "the foole is come againe now." He however takes no interest in the comedy till the scene corresponding to Act 5, Sc. 1, where Vincentio is seized, and then protests: "I say weele have no sending to prison," and becomes almost eloquent on the theme, but being told they have run away, ends with: "Are they run away Sim? That's wel. Then gis [give us] some more drinke, and let them play againe." Whereupon "Slie drinkes and then fals asleepe." At the end, "enter two bearing of Slie in his owne apparrell againe, and leaves him where they found him, and then goes out." The Tapster comes in, finds him, wakes him, and he cries: "Sim, gives more wine; what all the Players gone?" The Tapster says: "you had best go home, for your wife will

no means supererogatory. It is quite necessary to explain why Shakspeare gave his Taming of the Shrew the peculiar character it exhibits. A rapid review will readily show how well the play was suited to its audience.

Putting aside the underplot of Lucentio, Gremio, Tranio, Vincentio &c., we have as the principal subject of the piece, Petruchio's wooing and subsequent conversion of Kate. Here we see the very quintessence of mutinous unwomanliness overpowered by brute force, the breaking of a neglected wild beast by the most reckless ill-treatment, — a mere professional trick, which a beast-tamer could manage neither better nor worse, but with this difference, that the latter would have to exert more sagacity, courage, and patience than Petruchio, and would not succeed so soon in letting himself be caressed by his lion or hyæna, but after the breaking in was over would have to keep his whip or loaded pistol at hand to guard against possible outbreaks; — whereas Petruchio's radical cure succeeds perfectly and with wonderful rapidity, and is crowned by that splendid sermon which Kate preaches against all shrews at the end of the play. — How did the fortunate Petruchio effect this, what moved him to undertake it, and to act in such a strange fashion? Did his immoderate severity spring from real love? did he set about his cruel experiments on Kate with a heavy heart? — There is not the slightest ground for such an assumption. Without knowing Kate, without ever having seen her, Petruchio resolves to woo her — provided she have money enough.

> "Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,
> As old as Sibyl, and as curst and shrewd
> As Socrates' Xantippe, or a worse,"

he cares not. His servant Grumio carries out this idea still further:

"Why, give him gold enough and marry him to a puppet or an aglet-baby; or an old trot with ne'er a tooth in her head, though she have as many diseases as two and fifty horses: why, nothing comes amiss, so money comes withal."

Of course such cynical expressions are not to be taken literally, but they make it at any rate quite clear that there was no idea of marrying for love or for any worthy motive. — The wooing proceeds. Smart sayings, and spiteful words, even abusive language abound. Kate gives her lover a blow, and he gallantly replies:

> "I swear I'll cuff you, if you strike again."

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course you for dreaming here tonight." Whereon Slie shows he has profited, for he replies:

> "Wil she? I know now how to tame a shrew,
> I dreamt upon it all this night till now,
> An thou hast wakt me out of the best dreame
> That ever I had in my life, but Ile to my wife presently
> And tame her too, if she angers me."

After a long dispute, interspersed with more or less elegant sallies of wit, Petruchio asserts plainly:

"Your father hath consented
That you shall be my wife; your dowry 'greed on;
And, will you, nill you, I will marry you."

Further on he says:

"We have 'greed so well together,
That upon Sunday is the wedding-day."

Whereupon Kate exclaims:

"I'll see thee hanged on Sunday first."

The boldest interpreter cannot make an acceptance out of this amiable wish. Nevertheless the wedding does take place on Sunday, without the slightest attempt to make this evident impossibility probable. The assumption that Kate is compelled to take Petruchio by her father is untenable. The old man is as much under his daughter's tyranny as the rest of the family. He had certainly concluded the arrangement with Petruchio, but would have never been able to force such a daughter into a detested marriage. Nothing would remain but the rash conjecture, that the hard wit, sarcastic contempt, and impertinent manners of this extravagant wooer had exercised a magic controul over the savage nature of the little demon; that the rough behaviour of Petruchio, so far from disgusting Kate, had had a peculiar charm for her; that in consequence of her own excentricity she had been pleased with this "mad-cap ruffian," this "swearing Jack" as she styles him; in short, that she felt herself attracted to him by some peculiar sympathy, some spiritual relationship. Or — to attempt a pathological solution — was she affected with an insane sensuality, which threw her into the arms of any man that sought her? — There is not the least trace of it, or of any natural constraint or conflict in Kate's own mind, which resulted in an irresistible, even in a mere capricions inclination. None of these motives are indicated in the piece,* and we therefore cannot be but astonished that after the sudden breaking off of the wooing, the wedding so rapidly follows. — All the parties are present except the bridegroom. At last he arrives, clad in an "old jerkin, a pair of boots that have been candle-cases," on a broken

*) Here we find some words implying a *motive* in the older piece which Shakspeare used:

"Why father, what do you mean to do with me,
To give me thus unto this brainsicke man,
That in his mood cares not to murder me?
[*She turns aside and speaks,*
And yet I will consent and marry him,
For I me thinkes have liv'de too long a maide,
And match him too, or else his manhood's good."



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down hack, with a wonderful list of equine diseases, (probably the same on which Kate has to ride after the wedding). It were still time to send Petruchio about his business, but — Kate goes to church with him. The priest asks him "if Katherine should be his wife." "Ay, by gogs-wouns" quoth he, and as the frightened priest drops his book, he knocks him down, calls for wine, cries: "A health!" drinks "and throws the sops all in the sexton's face." When the ceremony is over, he carries off his wife by force, for he "will be master of what is his own, she is his goods, his chattels, his household stuff, his field, his barn, his horse, his ox, his ass, his anything." Every preparation is made for a pleasant journey. Kate falls into the mire with her horse on her. Petruchio leaves her in this dangerous and unsavoury predicament, because he has first to cudgel his servant. She picks herself up, wades through the filth, and arrives late at night at her new home, wet through, frozen and starved. She wants to wash off the dirt, the servant breaks the basin. She wants to eat, Petruchio throws meat and dish to the ground. She wants to sleep, he keeps her awake with storming and swearing. By these and like means he cows her mind and body. Terrified but not convinced, she gives in, till, at her husband's command she takes the sun for the moon, and old Vincentio for a "young budding virgin fair and fresh," — and the wildest, most mutinous of maids becomes the gentlest, most obedient of wives, bowing before her lord, and ready to put her hand under his foot, "if he please," and "ashamed" that women should

Seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,
When they are bound to serve, love, and obey."

This result is very pretty, and would probably be extremely agreeable to many husbands; but the means by which it is brought about, are so immeasurably harsh and savage, that they could only be admitted into the broadest farce. That Shakspeare should have written such a farce to tickle the palate of his public that watered after highly-seasoned dishes, would do no more injury to his reputation, than a grotesque caricature daubed on a wall would injure the reputation of a celebrated historical painter. Shakspeare wanted to write a burlesque, he *intended* to do so, and we have no right to blame him because he added to his many splendid and sublime creations a highly-spiced piece for the delectation of *Christopher Sly*, or, to express it generically and collectively, for "pedlars, card-makers, bear-herds, and tinkers" (Induction, Sc. 2.). And if besides the tinker and his kind, a better class of spectators have enjoyed and will enjoy this comedy, where 's the harm? Many highly educated and most respectable people frequent the theatre for no other purpose than to have a hearty laugh at low comedy and screaming farce, and the Taming of the Shrew will suit them to perfection. We should be satisfied with this and thank Shakspeare for his power to amuse, without going further, and endeavouring to dig out a deeply laid and artfully contrived plan, displaying physiological truth and delicate characterisation. — It is quite right to enjoy Shakspeare's

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beauties and meditate on his wisdom; but to lie in wait for deep philosophical tendencies, even in his slightest productions, and to make a fuss over the discovery of excellencies where Shakspeare was very far from excelling, is, to use the least offensive term, a critical whimsey, and is much more like critical humbug.

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We don't deny, who does? that Shakspeare was a magnificent poet, and England's first dramatist, but we as freely assert that he was also a play-wright, manager and "hack" in one, who wrote to draw houses, or to stop gaps, and hence often wrote hastily, furbishing up old novels, and even re-casting or simply re-editing old plays. He could not help improving on the old material of course, but he did not care or stop to obliterate every blemish, if he could produce his effect without trouble. — This is what the idealizing critics of the day will not see, and we have therefore endeavoured to force it on their attention by an actual instance and in the simplest manner, leaving it to the common sense of our readers to accept or condemn our conclusion.

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