

## The Taming of the (Post)Modern Shrew in Literature and on Stage

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**Abstract:** The present paper aims to analyse the postmodern Shakespearean shrew from Anne Tyler's bestseller *Vinegar Girl* and this year's staging at the Athenaeum in Iasi, Romania. The former is a modern adaptation, while the latter preserves the Italian setting with music and dance inserts from our time. Testifying to the imagination of the novelist/stage director, the texts show once more the immortality of Great Will's genius and the need to update his plays for contemporary audiences.

**Key words:** postmodern adaptation, Shakespeare, readers/ spectators.

### Introduction

Shakespeare's eleventh comedy, *The Taming of the/ a Shrew* (1623), rendered in Romanian as *Îmblânzirea îndrăznei/ unei îndrăzne*, comes in two versions with the same content, and, in classic Romanian criticism, the latter is considered "much more inferior from an artistic viewpoint, it has no leading thread, takes many lines from Marlowe"<sup>1</sup>. Containing elements of medieval epic poetry, mocking contemporaries (Thomas Kyd) and drawing on *One Thousand and One Nights*, the plot was thought to have been one of Great Will's inventions despite the confrontation between the couple, Petruchio and Katerina, "a common place in the folklore of many peoples"<sup>2</sup>. The play distinguishes itself through the intelligence of the main characters, which sets them apart from those in other comedies (*The Comedy of Errors*), "the taming is a harlequinade of courtly love, whereas the role of Petruchio-Lord as

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<sup>1</sup> L. Levițchi, „Îmblânzirea îndrăznei”, comments on “The Taming of the Shrew”, translation by Dan A. Lăzărescu, *Shakespeare. Opere complete/ Shakespeare. Complete Works*, vol. 2, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1983, p. 253, translation ours.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, translation ours.

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directors finds fulfilment in the opposition/antonymy ‘good teacher’ (Petruccio) – ‘caricature teacher’ (Hortensio, Lucentio).”<sup>3</sup> Although the detractors of the play did not understand why the play was still staged and qualified it as ‘ugly’, a ‘barbaric thing’, ‘very confusing, prosaic and boring’<sup>4</sup>, Romanian commentators suggested for the negative qualifying adjectives to be replaced by their antonyms, more suitable for the reception of the play at all levels<sup>5</sup>. The play still arouses controversy according to Romanian specialists in drama and performance: “How should we understand *The Taming of the Shrew* closer to the time we live in but also in line with the 16<sup>th</sup> century it portrays? Is the discussion about the strongly misogynistic imprint of the text or the polemic related to the barbaric accents of the characters effective? And, in the end, is it a valid comedy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or should it be best avoided so as not to reveal Shakespeare in the narrow-mindedness of his age?”<sup>6</sup>

Problematic in its essence, *The Taming of the Shrew* neither supports, nor condemns ‘inherent sexism’, challenging patriarchal constructs through the complex shaping of gender and the treatment of various tensions that have endangered society in the modern period<sup>7</sup>. Gender and marriage were discussed in the play in the context of patriarchal norms and their misogyny; if Kate is overly submissive, Bianca’s femininity and Petruccio’s dominance

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<sup>3</sup> L. Levițchi, *op. cit.*, p. 256, translation ours.

<sup>4</sup> John Bailey *apud*. L. Levițchi, *idem*, p. 261, *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> L. Levițchi, *ibidem*. In recent research, it was underlined that the edition of Shakespeare’s complete works published by Univers during the communist period is superior to the previous ones due to the extended comments on style, themes, motifs, lack of opinions to suit totalitarian ideology and its propaganda and the openness towards international interpretations including controversial ones as mentioned above. Cf. Iulia Milică, “William Shakespeare in Communist Romania: Freedom and Limitation in Romanian Editions”, *Tradução em Revista* 12, 2012/1, p. 36, <https://www.maxwell.vrac.puc-rio.br/19731/19731.PDF>. Retrieved on Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Ioana Petcu, „Îmblânzirea scorpiei – spectacolul subtextului”/ “*The Taming of the Shrew* – A Performance of the Subtext”, *William Shakespeare*, Performantica, Iași, 2022, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Amanda Fawcett, “‘I Warrant You We Will Play Our Parts’: The Role of Performance in *The Taming of the Shrew*.” *SUURJ: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal*, vol. 3, article 13, 2019, pp. 67-68, <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/suurj/vol3/iss1/13>. Retrieved on Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

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reveal the instability of gender roles and hierarchies. Kate's submission maintains her power through irony and farce, while Bianca will subvert her father's authority as obedient daughter only to conform to patriarchal marriage norms. Petruchio, through his dominant character, opposes patriarchy, undermining his position in the social world of Padua. If gender structures and behaviours are not naturalized, social instability ensues, with the inefficiency of traditional structures and flaws conforming to the generic structure of comedy through humour.<sup>8</sup>

If the traditional interpretations saw Kate's (un)taming as a 'barometer in the cultural code of domestic love'<sup>9</sup>, various cultural contexts opted for their own readings following the *opera aperta* principle if we were to consider the transmediation from literature to films and their posters. The flexibility given by film transmediation brings back to the public the interest in Shakespeare and his story where the love battle of the sexes, also present in Boccaccio and Chaucer before him<sup>10</sup>, is closer to the play in the older adaptations (1967) and more distant, through modern retelling in the newer ones (2005).

The Romanian reception includes frequent stage productions: "by Gelu Colceag at the Comedy Theater (2016), with Dorina Chiriac (Catarina) and Alexandru Bogdan (Petruchio), the performance directed by Alina Hiristea, in 2019 at the Reduta Cultural Center, with Patricia Ionescu (Katarina) and Mihai Nițu (Petruchio) or the 2018 staging by Mihai Constantin Ranin at the Ariel Municipal Theater, with Andreea Tănase and Liviu Cheloiu (...) the performance at the Bulandra Theater from 2000 directed by Mihai Mănuțiu with Oana Pellea in the role of Catarina and Marian Râlea as Petruchio's partner (...), the production from the Bucharest National Theatre from 1975, directed by Mihai Berechet, where Coca Andronescu and Mihai Fotino played the Catarina-Petruchio couple."<sup>11</sup>

More recent stagings bring postmodern reconfigurations/rewritings to the classic love story between Petruchio and Katerina; the play becomes a

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<sup>8</sup> Amanda Fawcett, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Mihaela Ursa, "Lovers and Tamers: Transmediations of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew to Visual Culture*", *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 2.2, December 2016, p. 8, <https://www.metacriticjournal.com/article/49/lovers-and-tamers-transmediations-of-shakespeares-taming-of-the-shrew-to-visual-culture>. Retrieved on Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Mihaela Ursa, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Ioana Petcu, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.

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pretext for a confrontation between classic and modern, conservative and progressive ideas, the taming (of men, women, the public) is questioned since it can involve the taming of the weaker gender in the era of its emancipation<sup>12</sup>.

### **The taming of the shrew in the novel**

In her more than twenty novels, contemporary American author Anne Tyler has consistently dealt with the American family in a humorous way, with a controlled style and a gift for bringing to life eccentric, fearful characters eager to be understood and to leave their mark. The favourite topic is ordinary families going through hard times, the need for intimacy and how a chance encounter can change a destiny, especially where the greatest fulfillment can be found in taking responsibility for others<sup>13</sup>. Among her influences, the following are listed: Quaker parents, formative years in ‘blessed communities’, schooling, major in Russian, marriage to an Iranian psychiatrist for children and a novelist, reading, *genius loci* sensibility and concern for small things of great overlooked significance as tackled by Eudora Welty in her writings<sup>14</sup>. The first three novels focused on the North Carolina experience and influenced her later works<sup>15</sup>. In relation to feminism, just as the movement was becoming more visible, Tyler spoke out against it in the 1970s, stating that she hated novels about free women. She never retracted the statement but toned it down in her personal correspondence in the late 1980s: she did not loathe them as much, she considered herself a freewoman, though she could not imagine what liberation needed someone who had never been imprisoned. A novelist holding such feelings would enjoy the opportunities created by

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Scorpio neîmblânzită/ The Untamed Shrew*, directed by Leta Popescu, National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca, 2022-2023, <https://theatrum.ro/spectacol/imblanzirea-scorpiei-3/>. Retrieved on Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Dale Salwak (ed.), *Anne Tyler As Novelist*, University of Iowa Press, 1994, p. ix.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Evans, “Early Years and Influences”. In Dale Salwak (ed.), *Anne Tyler As Novelist*, University of Iowa Press, 1994, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Stella Nesanovich, “The Early Novels. A Reconsideration”. In Dale Salwak (ed.), *Anne Tyler As Novelist*, University of Iowa Press, 1994, p. 15.

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feminists in the era for women writers, in remembrance of the hard-won ground for them and future generations<sup>16</sup>.

*Scorpio: Îmblânzirea scorpiei de William Shakespeare reimagineată* (2017), titled *Vinegar Girl* (2017) in the original edition is part of the Hogarth Shakespeare Project, an initiative by the British publisher to rewrite for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, by popular authors, the Bard's masterpieces 400 years after his death. The collection also includes *The Winter's Tale* by Jeanette Winterson, *The Merchant of Venice* by Howard Jacobson, *The Tempest* by Margaret Atwood, *Othello* by Tracy Chevalier, *King Lear* by Edward St. Aubin, *Macbeth* by Jo Nesbø, and *Hamlet* by Gillian Flynn. Regarding Tyler's rewriting, reviewers expressed their doubts about the novel's authenticity, despite the pleasure of rereading a classic through contemporary eyes; considered a simple failed marketing exercise (along with fictional reinterpretations of other classics such as Jane Austen's *Emma* by Alexander McCall Smith or *Pride and Prejudice* by Curtis Sittenfeld for Penguin) the pressure on great authors to write about an existing work and overcome the artificiality of the process has its say. However, leaving these shortcomings aside, the Shakespearean play is difficult to adapt for the 21<sup>st</sup> century if we consider a spinster who does not want to get married; certainly, she can go for a green card marriage if a greater good is at stake. Kate Battista, a preschool teacher, lives with her aging father, a member of the academic community, on the verge of making a great scientific discovery. But, at any moment, he can lose his young lab assistant, Piotr, whose visa is about to expire, hence a believable modern story with Shakespeare's plot at its core. However, it remains a successful experiment in form with well-defined characters: Piotr is very attractive, Kate Battista is held back by her anxieties, feels hopeless in life, caught in-between the whims of her father, the younger sister, Bunny (more unconvincing as a character through her veganism assumed out of empathy for animal cruelty) and problems at work, the kindergarten where she feels misunderstood. Readers of the American writer's works feel that the author could have created an original, a world of her own, without borrowing someone else's, through what was intended to be a tribute to an unmatched classic<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Alice Hall Petry, "Tyler and Feminism". In Dale Salwak (ed.), *Anne Tyler As Novelist*, University of Iowa Press, 1994, pp. 33-34.

<sup>17</sup> Viv Groskop, "Vinegar Girl by Anne Tyler review – skilled but pointless Shakespeare retread", *The Guardian*, June 12, 2016,

A plus given to the Romanian readers via the translation is the explicitation of the word ‘shrew’ in a footnote by ‘a small mouse’ (Ro. ‘chițcan’) and ‘a bitchy woman’, thus referring to the title of Shakespeare’s comedy<sup>18</sup>, hence the pun that cannot be rendered into the target text as such. In addition, Piotr’s English was translated by bad Romanian to suit an immigrant’s speech and preserve the same effect of the original. In the source text, the humour in the conversation between Kate and Piotr in which the latter excuses himself for trying to make her cheat the government testifies to the talent of the author who openly stated that she hated Shakespeare, in general and *The Taming of the Shrew*, in particular. She may have accepted to rewrite the play given the circumstances; furthermore, the reading public was assessed as predominantly female, middle-class and educated. The path chosen by the writer is not the opposition to the classic, but moderation and mediation of the problematic elements in the play with the aim of arousing empathy and understanding in the novel’s characters: the abusive Petruchio becomes the affectionately eccentric Piotr, whereas the shrew is turned into Kate Battista who is indifferent to social convention, yet a stiff and admirable person.<sup>19</sup> Through gentleness and humour, Tyler manages to produce the oxymoron that helps Shakespeare’s readers love him, avoiding the class conflicts and gender clashes in the play<sup>20</sup>.

### ***The Taming of the Shrew*<sup>21</sup> on stage**

A (post)modern performance with stage directions that involve the audience, on the set, where the same actress who will play the missing widow at the end (the rich one that Bianca’s rejected lover decides to marry, despite

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<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/12/anne-tyler-vinegar-girl-review-taming-shrew-update>. Retrieved on Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Tyler, *Scorpio: Îmblânzirea scorpiei de William Shakespeare reimaginată/ Vinegar Girl*, translation from English and notes by George Volceanov, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2017, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> Rivlin, Elizabeth, “Loving Shakespeare: Anne Tyler’s Vinegar Girl and the Hogarth Shakespeare Project”, *Critical Survey*, Oxford, vol. 33, Iss. 2, Jun 2021, p. 66, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2533159099?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

Retrieved on Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> We refer to *Îmblânzirea scorpiei/ The Taming of the Shrew* after William Shakespeare, directed by Răzvan Oprea, with Paul Ipate (as Petruchio) and Erica Moldovan (as Catarina), National Atheneum of Iași, 2023.

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his disguise as music teacher, whose instrument is broken by Catarina, the eldest sister of the beloved; luckily, Kate will be eventually tamed by her devil of a husband).

The menu takes us through bondage and discipline, dominance and submission rituals. Bianca is bound by her elder sister as punishment, and she feels cursed by fate for not being courted to marry before her sister who is a hopeless case in the matter. Cross-dressing plays an important role in the performance with feminist influences; during the break, Bianca, with the curtain drawn behind her, shows the audience a sign with 'Woman's Rights are Human Rights' and the assistant director is holding one that reads 'Viva la Vulva'. The music marks postmodernist times and we are taken to the end of the last century since Caterina sings soft rock from the 90s, Anouk's *Nobody's Wife*, in defiance, after Bianca's marriage. When the revelation of the real father, Lorenzo, takes place, we listen to *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* by Cindy Lauper (1983) and see actors dancing to it. The father from Pisa shows signs of conciliation after bragging about the frugality in which he lives in order to support his son at school in Padua. The old surrogate, in the manner of the absurd theatre, trembles like an Alzheimer patient, and to the delight of the audience, marvels us with his funny language that provokes in us the healthy laughter of classical comedy.

Bianca and her love, disguised as a Greek and Latin teacher to preach the art of love according to Ovid, dance and make out to the rhythms of *I Got You, Babe* (Sonny & Cher, 1965). Caterina's devilish suitor spent the fortune of his beloved father who would probably not rest in peace had he known what happened to his life's savings. The servant is beaten, mocked at, called names; yet, the pickpocket deserves his fate as he stole money that the rich in town had on them (Bianca's other suitors, including the neighbour's as old as hills and the fake music teacher's).

The shrew is tamed through re-education and starvation, her words are slurred, she is impoverished (of clothes and jewels), she is denied any food 'so as not to make her blood boil'; Kate's husband asks her to take the sun for the moon and vice versa, a girl for an old traveller and then she is taken away, enchained like a witch, with no magical thread to eventually release herself from as in *Stardust* (2007); on the contrary, it is a real yoke, a convict's in an inferno where the other (from an existentialist standpoint recalling Sartre's *Huis-Clos/ No Exit*) is a torturer and executioner. The cruel husband wears clothes below his rank, he is as dark as a vagabond or mocked knight (worn

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out hat, unmatched boots), parody of chivalric love or rewriting with dark humour insights.

The father proceeds to the marriage of his daughter on a Sunday, just to be able to find a husband to the other one who is already waiting. The audience is prepared before the show which is on camera, they are warned not to spoil anything, taught how to laugh and give proper rounds of applause, like the marionettes by a puppeteer playing them on a string; the assistant director sees a gentleman (from the audience) who has socialized inappropriately on a dating site, hears a phone ringing in the hall that disturbs others or is being used by the owner to distract both the actors and the audience when it should be switched off.

At the end, from the modern adaptation we go backstage to see the actors take off their clothes and put on other costumes they do not like: the men wear transparent gowns with black fur and red shoes as Dorothy's from the Wizard of Oz, they complain about excessive feminism and the celebrity of the actor who plays the devilish husband of Caterina (his Kate), the fact that he supposedly makes more money than them despite his willingness to lend others.

The director/manager of the theatre is criticized for her too avant-garde visions and free adaptation, the actresses have nothing against wearing men's clothes, some have already played men in the performance in question and they have nothing to complain about; the male characters/actors, however, feel effeminate, see themselves unjustifiably castrated by the end. The widow is eventually played by the assistant director; she will also discreetly make her presence felt in the play through the line of one character or another and is frowned upon by a gesture or line, 'Not you', the look of the actor in question condemning her appearance, her unjustified intervention, to be more precise. Sometimes she is called upon to replace elements of the set, hands out the instrument for music classes, the Greek and Latin books one at a time, in packages reminiscent of our schoolers' awards for good results.

As Bianca and the rich old widow disappear in the warm atmosphere of the fireplace and devote themselves to gossip, their husbands do not have enough authority to bring them back,. This is where Kate's devil of a husband steps in; apparently, he knows how to make his wife listen to him. Petruchio stays with her in the end, from the torturer he becomes the tortured, he is the one tamed, she ties him up, Caterina/Kate giving advice to girls and women on a lasting marriage.

Also worth noting is the battle of the new and the old, of the youth and the elderly in the duel involving the servant playing the master at the latter's



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command. This is because the father of the bride to be asked the suitors to present their riches. Disguised as Greek and Latin teacher for Bianca, the young man defeats the old and unsuitable (suitors).

### Conclusion

Through the two adaptations of the Shakespearean shrew discussed above, we have shown the need for updating a problematic story for contemporary audiences and innovative solutions offered for the stage and the novel, respectively. If a theatrical adaptation comes with modern musical inserts and dance, a novel completely rewrites the story without us knowing where it started from without being told as in the case of Anne Tyler's *Scorpio/Vinegar Girl*. In the writer's fiction, Catarina, Great Will's character, becomes the preschool teacher Kate Battista under pressure from her father for a green card marriage to save his Polish research assistant with an expiring visa. But on the other hand, the staging of the Athenaeum of Iași keeps the story in the performance except for the modern elements and the directions that bring it closer to our century. Last but not least, the spectators are asked to contribute to the performance at times, hence the respect of the principle of learning through interaction.

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