

FICTION IN
REVIEW



G R E G J O H N S O N

The Taming of the Shrew is one of the most controversial of William Shakespeare's comedies. Derived, as usual with the Bard, from a far-flung variety of sources, the play is at once artistically unified and thematically problematic: critics of the past century and earlier have argued over its central plot element, the alleged transformation of its heroine, Kate, from the titular "shrew" into a conventional, mild-spoken wife and helpmeet. In her famous long speech late in the play, in which she disavows her rebellious ways and argues that women's duty in marriage is to "serve, love, and obey," is she simply being true to Western social and religious norms of the time? Or is her speech ironic, as our modern temperament would prefer? How could the venom-spewing harridan of the first act so rapidly have become the virtuous wife of the fifth?

George Bernard Shaw, as early as 1897, decried Kate's transformation: "The last scene," he wrote, "is altogether disgusting to the modern sensibility." But almost seventy-five years later, Germaine

Vinegar Girl, by Anne Tyler (Hogarth, 237 pages, \$25)

Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1971) argued that “Kate’s speech at the close of the play is the greatest defense of Christian monogamy ever written. It rests upon the role of a husband as protector and friend, and it is valid because Kate has a man who is capable of being both.”

Film adaptations of the play have been likewise equivocal. Mary Pickford, in the 1929 version, gives the controversial speech dutifully and then turns to the other women present and offers them a sardonic wink. Yet in Franco Zeffirelli’s brawling, boisterous 1967 film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, Taylor delivers the lines “straight”: by this point in the story, her Kate has fallen deeply in love with Burton’s Petruchio, drawn by his virility and confidence. If Shaw had lived to see the film, he might well have disdained the scene, but one cannot seriously argue that it doesn’t convey the general tone and spirit of the play.

When the newly revived Hogarth Press began in 2015 a publishing program in which various well-known authors – Jeannette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, and others – were invited to compose a contemporary take on one of Shakespeare’s plays, the best-selling Baltimore novelist Anne Tyler was given first choice. Her pick of *The Taming of the Shrew* is an unexpected one. The play’s broad, sexually charged humor and its outlandish characterizations would seem to be distinctly opposed to the elements of most Tyler novels, which feature troubled but essentially loving families and marriages, and which have none of the violent conflict or vitriolic language to be found in this comedy.

Tyler hews close to the play, at least, in the naming of her characters: Shakespeare’s Kate (portrayed at the beginning of Zeffirelli’s film as a madwoman in the attic, her hair disheveled and her voice screeching) is also Kate in *Vinegar Girl*, albeit a more restrained and quietly dissatisfied one, a preschool teacher who “hates” some of her charges and who is described as “dark-skinned and big-boned and gawky.” The original Kate’s wealthy father, Baptista, becomes Dr. Battista, a Johns Hopkins scientist, and her comely younger sister, Bianca, is transformed into a pretty but rather unlikable teenager named “Bunny” (nicknamed, unfortunately, “Bun-Buns”). The male suitor-figure from the play, Petruchio, is here called Pyotr, a Russian lab assistant to Dr. Battista

who has become indispensable to the older scientist's lifelong scientific project.

In the play, of course, Petruchio is encouraged to marry Kate so that Bianca can be married to one of her many suitors: Baptista has decreed that he will not allow anyone to wed Bianca until the elder sister, Kate, is off his hands. In the novel, Pyotr needs a green card, which he can obtain if he marries Kate. But Kate, portrayed at first (like her namesake) as somewhat ill-tempered, not only has no interest in this scheme; she sharply rebukes her father for even making such a suggestion: "You've been hinting at this for days, haven't you?" she asked. . . . 'You've been throwing him at me all along and I was too dumb to see it. I guess I just couldn't believe my own father would conceive of such a thing.'"

Outside of the characters' names and the general marriage plot, *Vinegar Girl* bears little resemblance to Shakespeare, however, for the novel is an Anne Tyler production through and through. Like *Celestial Navigation* (1974) and her masterly *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), it deals with a quirky and dissatisfied protagonist adrift in an incomprehensible world; like *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1983) and *Saint Maybe* (1991), it offers a patiently and fully characterized family which, for all its emotional bumps and bruises, comes together in times of sorrow; and like her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Breathing Lessons* (1988), it dramatizes the transformation of a woman from a lonely "I" to part of a satisfying "we." Though Tyler cannot resist adding a pinch of saccharine to her novels, which is a polite way of saying that the narratives are occasionally marred by sentimentality and the author's too-ardent fondness for her characters, we should remember that such a towering novelist as Charles Dickens, for example, exhibited the same tendencies, and admit that the occasionally excessive sweetness of Tyler's stories (as seen in *Digging to America* [2006], one of her weaker efforts) does not much harm her stature as a serious and accomplished contemporary novelist.

Vinegar Girl, the author's twenty-first novel, neither enhances nor detracts from her considerable reputation. In reviews the book has gotten so far, including this one, possibly too much attention has been paid to the Shakespearean source and not enough to the thinness of the plot and the generally plain, unadorned language.

As suggested above, one could review this novel, which is scarcely half the length of a typical Tyler offering, without even mentioning Shakespeare, and little would be lost. And although it surely isn't fair to compare any writer's use of language with Shakespeare's (as Sylvia Plath once told an interviewer, "It's presumptuous to say one has been influenced by Shakespeare; one simply reads Shakespeare"), in *The Taming of the Shrew* the Bard's lyrical speeches, his inspired badinage, and his use of sexual double entendre seem even richer when set beside the deliberate homeliness of Tyler's prose.

That said, the novel has its virtues. Tyler's Kate, like Shakespeare's, is a spirited and ultimately likable heroine, mellowing as the novel proceeds from an ill-tempered monad into a congenial family member and romantic partner. Like many of Tyler's protagonists, she exhibits a fairness in her dealings with others that contrasts notably here with her father's self-centeredness and her sister's repellent shallowness and vanity. If Pyotr seems a bit cerebral as a modern-day epigone of the loud, lusty Petruchio, Kate's romantic antagonist is nonetheless a decent, fair-minded fellow, neither taking advantage of Dr. Battista's patronage nor pressing himself upon Kate in any selfish or obnoxious way. Describing him, Tyler shows her gift for original description and simile: "Even his posture was foreign; he walked in a foreign way that was more upright, shorter in stride. He had the foreigner's tendency toward bald, obvious compliments, dropping them with a thud at her feet like a cat presenting her with a dead mouse."

The story unspools as if effortlessly, in short, fast-paced chapters, displaying to advantage Tyler's considerable narrative gifts. In particular, she possesses the knack for engaging the reader, no doubt the reason almost all her novels have become *New York Times* best sellers. She is one of those writers whose work on the whole actually deserves its success and its almost uniformly laudatory reviews. When Tyler missteps, it's usually because she assays narrative experimentation instead of staying with her more characteristic family and romantic chronicles; for example, the early *Earthly Possessions* (1977) described a woman's experiences after being kidnapped by a bank robber. But *Vinegar Girl* draws on her strengths as a writer: her complex presentation of her characters,

her compassionate portrayal of human loneliness, her gentle humor, and her sheer storytelling ability. Possessing such virtues, *Vinegar Girl* (like so many of her previous novels) undoubtedly will please Tyler's enormous readership.