Transformation and Bliss: Between Personal Realities of Character and Readership in Frames and The Taming Of The/A Shrew
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“No ‘thesis’ on the pleasure of the text is possible; barely an inspection (an introspection) that falls short. Eppure si gaude! And yet, against and in spite of everything, the text gives me bliss.”

–Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text

“SLY:
Sim, gi’s some more wine. What’s, all the players gone?
Am not I a lord?”

–Uncertain authorship, The Taming Of A Shrew

Introduction:

Frame narratives have been a staple of literature across millennia and cultures, yet not a particularly popular one for analysis—William Nelles calls frame narrative analysis an “underdeveloped resource in literary theory” (339). But why? What about frames creates their idiosyncratic position in theoretical discourse, where to merely talk about frames all but requires a definition of what a frame even is? Eric Berlatsky claims “The central reason for this is the sheer quantity of concepts and ideas to which this singular appellation [of “frame narratives”] refers” (162). Marie-Laure Ryan chalks it up to “the frame family [having] become so deeply ingrained in our thinking about narrative that we tend to forget their metaphorical nature. Together with this nature, we also tend to forget their relativity, and we feel no need to look further for descriptive models” (366).1 There

1 In addition to Nelles, Berlatsky, and Ryan, other theorists who have talked about a lack of theorists talking about frames include Frow and Greenfield (though she specifically in context of the frame for The Taming of the Shrew and in 1954). It should also be noted that Ryan here is intentionally or unintentionally (she does not directly cite him) making an argument very similar to that made by Goffman’s Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, who also argues, in his own way and for his own purposes, that frames deserve more attention than they get.
is certainly truth to all of this; what exactly defines a “frame narrative” is not black and white, and there is a strange way in which frames are often flat-out ignored in literary adaptations and even otherwise-rigorous literary criticism without explanation. It may be impossible to say for sure what attracts critics to writing more about some aspects of literature and less for another, but the fact of the paucity of theory on frames opens opportunities to pinpoint some of the oddities of the genre of frame narratives. In this essay, I will seek to turn the observation that frame narratives seem to fit the shapes of our minds so well that they have a tendency to be forgotten, and provide an explanation rooted in theory: While most parts of a narrative (character, plot, beginnings, endings) are most naturally constructed of the makings of Barthesian pleasure, frame narratives are most native to being the makings of Barthesian bliss—using Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* as an example of the methods and usefulness of a bliss-based analysis of frames.

Barthesian pleasure (or simply “pleasure”, as I will continue to use the term) is the readerly response to reading material which gives them contentment, which promotes interconnectivity of thought and feeling, which brings them into the text “for a ride”, as the saying goes; Barthesian bliss (I will henceforth use “bliss”) is the readerly response to reading material which, rather than bringing the reader in, casts the reader out in one way or another, discontents them with a lack of connection either within the text, between the text and the reader, or different parts of the reader. Both pleasure and bliss are complex and, to various extents, subjective terms, and slippery, but just because a term introduces subjectivity as a prerequisite for its usage does not mean it may not be absolutely critical to a particular analysis: as I intend to demonstrate with frame narratives as the function of
this essay. This essay will first spend some time untangling the terms “bliss” and “pleasure”, then move from some key concepts of frames into Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* and its frame narrative, in this process, denoting in the specific the way in which a frame narrative incites bliss—often through the responses of readers who have become critics. In the process, this will show the potential usefulness of the approach for critics seeking to parse texts in a variety of ways; the arguments will work towards generalizations crafted ideally to demonstrate the utility and possibility of treating frame narratives as “texts of bliss.”

Part 1: Bliss and Pleasure

It would be irresponsible to speak about bliss and pleasure without first providing several caveats. First and foremost, the very text which introduced the terms, Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*, has this to say about the terms:

*Pleasure/Bliss:* terminologically, there is always a vacillation—I stumble, I err. In any case, there will always be a margin of indecision; the distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the meaning will be precarious, revocable, reversible, the discourse incomplete. (Barthes 4)

Worse yet, Barthes attempts to insist, and very vehemently, that “*criticism always deals with the texts of pleasure, never the texts of bliss*” (21). Those are his italics. This is clearly a provocative thing to say, since *The Pleasure of the Text* can almost certainly be described as a piece of criticism (if a slightly odd one) written about both the texts of pleasure and of bliss, though the latter mostly in the abstract. Bliss is necessarily subjective, but then, so is pleasure; the connections we speak of when we speak of that which causes pleasure are merely connections observed by a particular, ever-changing
reader within the texts, while the connections we speak of when we speak of what causes bliss are between the text and the particular, ever-changing reader. It is more than likely, however, that this vehemence, like the unorthodox organization of the book, is intended to provoke productive bliss, to inspire further generations to challenge their own assumptions and his. At least, that can be hoped, because it is a prerequisite of this essay.

Fortunately I am not alone in my belief that bliss can be spoken of critically. Elizabeth Weed, for example, pushes back against Barthes in multiple ways when she invokes possible simultaneity of bliss and pleasure as methods of extrapolating a quote from Barbara Johnson, referencing Derrida’s “Pharmakon”. She uses this to illustrate her own term, a “theoretical text”: “I’ll offer one illustration of the play of pleasure and bliss that, for me, separates the theoretical text from others…” (Weed 215). Quoting from Johnson, she is saying here that a “theoretical text” is one which contains an interplay of pleasure and bliss, for example: “‘remedy’ and ‘recipe’, ‘poison’ or antidote’, all being rooted, as described in Plato’s Phaedrus, in the same Greek root, “pharmakon” (Weed 216). Note that Weed cannot avoid using a clause in her first quote here (“for me”) to allow for a certain subjectivity, but her analysis remains entirely reasonable criticism, making use of bliss and pleasure.

In a more abstract mode, Robert Miklitsch approached the problem of bliss and pleasure his own way, attempting to parse bliss and pleasure, but working with an axiom which Barthes is reluctant to directly state “a particular text is neither wholly a ‘text of pleasure’ nor a ‘text of bliss’: it is always already both.” (105). His italics. That said, he argues that a text of pleasure “gives the kind of pleasure traditionally associated with, and thus expected from, the kind of text it is (where ‘kind’ implies genre)” (Miklitsch 103)
and that the text of bliss “weans us and, therefore, repeats that original moment of loss by which we find ourselves (stade du miroir); it unsettles our presuppositions about culture, history, psychology…” (Miklitsch 104). This, like my own perception of these terms, is rooted in the passage in which Barthes comes closest to actually defining these terms properly, though he does not deem such a direct action the right approach; he, like Miklitsch, prefers to steer clear of the interactive phenomena directly, rather instead about theoretical texts rooted entirely in their respective reactions they incite:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria: the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes, 14)

This is the passage which I attempt to stay closest to with my uses of the terms, though of course others will prove useful.

Miklitsch handicaps himself, however, in working so hard to emphasize Barthes’ unwillingness to commit to all of his own uses of his terms. “There is absolutely no way to distinguish pleasure from bliss for descriptive purposes either on a linguistic or a structural level because there is no clear-cut distinction between them that would be valid all of the time; the difference between them is undecidable” (Miklitsch 105). Certainly Barthes went out of his way to allow the terms space to grow and adapt to various functions, but it would be a mistake to take Barthes’ smoke and mirrors to mean that for specific purposes, bliss and pleasure cannot be at the very least temporarily nailed down. These can be functional, critical, descriptive terms, whether Barthes or Miklitsch see them that way or not; again, this essay should demonstrate that in its work with frames.
It should further be noted that of course, Barthes wrote *The Pleasure of the Text* in French, and in French some of the meaning inevitably stays, but translation is nonetheless worthwhile. Richard Miller (the translator for the English version of *The Pleasure of the Text*) chose, probably uncontroversially, the term “pleasure” as a translation for the French “plaisir”; much less precisely (unavoidably so), he chose the term “bliss” as a translation for the French “jouissance” and “jouir” (Howard v). More literally they are closer to terms revolving around modern English “coming” or “orgasm”. If it can be said that at the moment of an orgasm, the subject’s focus changes from one action to another, it is this intensity, viscerality, exterior involuntary action emphasizing an interior experience, which Barthes chose in order to label this “more ravaging term” (Howard v).

I do not believe it would be wise to write this essay without providing at least working definitions for “bliss” and “pleasure”, so I have attempted, while consulting others who have commented upon these terms, to provide both the most faithful and useful definitions possible. Perhaps no usage of these terms can escape Barthes’ own condemnation of any claim to be using these terms perfectly as Barthes intended, but I can at least use them as precisely as I intend them, and so, informed as possible, this is the result, using pieces of various interpretations to build my own functional one. This essay will continue to provide reference points as necessary, but for now at least, the term pleasure will be used to mean “the feeling caused in the reader of a text by the text having drawn them in and made them content with a connection”, and bliss to mean “the feeling, good or ill, caused in a reader of a text by the text having pushed them away and made them discontent with a disconnection”. While it is possible to have a negative pleasure-reaction, like the car accident which disgusts and brings pain to the viewer, yet pulls the
viewer in, to have disconnected reactions akin to throwing books across the room should speak to bliss. More importantly, reactions which reach significantly outside the text, which only the specific reader could have, such as running off to show a passage to a specific friend, or writing specific alternate versions of stories (including “fanfiction”) speak to blissful reactions, rather than or on top of pleasurable ones.

Elena Oxman states that “We find this typology throughout Barthes's work after 1970; whether the "obtuse meaning," the "grain of the voice," the "text of bliss" or the punctum, Barthes defends the visibility, voice, or phrase that "eludes the peace of nominations" and that thus “will not submit to semiological analysis” (Oxman). Barthes pushes often the idea that there are subjects of literature which may be named but which cannot be analyzed, broken down for parts, applied. Far be it from me to state whether such a thing is true, but I do not believe bliss is it; I believe bliss is an extremely functional term within a segment of literary analysis which Barthes rightly names as infrequently touched, that of readerly reaction. Just as Ryan accuses the frame narrative of, bliss may be too familiar a notion to inspire the critical attention it deserves. Perhaps I misunderstand and bastardize Barthes’ intended meaning; I stumble, I err. But it is Barthes who wrote “The Death of the Author”. Bliss can illuminate frames with this interpretation of Barthes’ terminology. I will now attempt to do so.

Part 2: The Shape of the Frame

A frame, as Frow argues, “acts as a sign of a qualitative difference, a sign of the boundary between a marked and an unmarked space”, necessarily upsetting and inviting bliss into the art/viewerspace dichotomy by its very existence (334). Frow points out that
due to this blurry quality to frames, it should be considered as to whether the frame includes

the covers of a book or the lines enclosing a poem in a journal (or by a recitation or reading situation); of the title pages, specifying genre expectations and the expectations created by the date, by the author’s name, by dedicatory material, by the title, and perhaps by the publishing house. Texts which have a special legitimacy often display special framing effects such as that of a collected or standard edition, editorial exegesis (which may frame individual pages), an introduction stressing the canonic status of the text, or expensive binding… (Frow 334)

These printing measures, title, author’s name, title page, cover art, conventionally come before the contents of a text. One kind of logic might reasonably ask why convention has ended up putting so much in the way between a reader and their intended text, but the answer to that question lies also in this quote. We read those types of frames because we want them to contextualize the narrative in a way the narrative would not; in a sense, to recontextualize the narrative before the narrative even gets a chance to create its own context, but also to prepare us, to ease us down the rabbit hole, as it were. Derrida introduces a term for ambiguous frames: he calls them “parerga” (the plural of “parergon”), meaning items and contexts which frame the art at hand without necessarily being a “literary frame” (Derrida 354). “The frame fits badly”, Derrida insists, an interesting phrasing with broad implications that I will continue to expand upon and reference—but the point of which being, anything which seeks to contextualize anything else by definition does not fit the exact same tone and themes the central content does; otherwise it would not be contextualizing (356). Frow has similar, though possibly less developed and generalizable ideas: “By delineating aesthetic space as an ‘unreal’ space (an ‘imaginary garden with real toads in it’), the frame both neutralizes direct referentiality and calls attention to the concentration of meaning within this space: the
absence of immediate meaning creates an expectation of total meaning” (335). This harkens back to ideas that frames, in their inherent blissful orientation, do not necessarily detract from their central narratives, but they do challenge it, or place it potentially in an uncomfortable position, intentionally or not. Again, the most prominent and most of the more successful frames, then, necessarily do not merely add to or support a text, so much as entirely recontextualize it.

It is essential for such types of arguments to use examples, and one of the best generalizable examples is The 1001 Arabian Nights, one of the earliest and most convoluted frame narratives. It is an excellent example, despite, and actually partially because it “consumed”, or served somewhat as an aggregator for stories of all kinds (Beaumont 17). Some of those stories even carried their own frame narratives, creating nested, or “stack” frames (Ryan 373).² Aside from forming the basis of some of the best generalized frame analysis, this means The 1001 Arabian Nights’ stories, even the ones not originally carried in the same frame, are all recontextualized by the frame tale of Scheherezade; in that case, thereby acquiring perhaps an extra sense of urgency, even inviting the reader to judge for themselves whether the tale is indeed good enough to prevent the sultan from killing Scheherezade for another night. If a reader judges that a story is indeed good enough, the frame is flexible enough to serve in that moment as pleasure, but if a reader is uncertain, to any degree and for any length of time, whether

² On the subject of The 1001 Arabian Nights serving as a basis for strong frame theory, Frow also speaks of The 1001 Arabian Nights in relation to his criticism on frame narrative, and he has an interesting theory about the versions of the story wherein at the end, when Scheherezade asks if she may keep her life without telling stories, due to having run out, for their three children’s sake; the Sultan says that she was reprieved in his mind after just a few stories from her, meaning the threat of death was, unknown to the audience, only in Scheherezade’s head for multiple years of her life (Frow 342). This detail has obvious blissful implications.
they like one of the stories, it would not be much of a stretch to see the bliss of the frame as a kind of fallback source of enjoying the text; suddenly the very same boredom or displeasure with the inner narrative itself becomes a source of excitement, since it may become relevant to the frame narrative—if the story bores you, perhaps it bores the sultan, who may take dramatic action. An entirely pleasure-based reading, then, would literally have no need for the frame—the frame would (very literally in the case of Scheherezade, with her frame’s necessity of cutting out, for more frame narrative, at climactic moments in inner texts at least sometimes) interrupt and thus inherently reduce the pleasure of the text. That unnatural yanking the reader back a layer at a climactic moment is one of the more unambiguously blissful literary devices I know of, and the frame only works if the recontextualization the frame provides is valuable and interesting to readers, so the device of the story clearly has value.³

It may be a step too far to say that a good frame must entirely recontextualize the narrative it is attached to⁴, but in terms of the inherent function of frames and how they

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³ The frame narrative in Christine Love’s 2012 computer game narrative Analogue: A Hate Story demonstrates many of these principles, including a frame narrative serving to recontextualize multiple smaller, in the case of Analogue, epistolary stories—while also pointing out possibilities for the future of frame narratives which new forms provide the writer’s toolbox, such as not only yanking readers out of pleasurable inner narrative into blissful space but forcing them to make decisions which will have ramifications on their future readings and pleasure, including limiting their future readings and pleasure one way or another. Future study may find it of value to use Marie-Laure Ryan’s highly flexible frame-analysis generalized systems for exploring the bliss driving extremely complicated, even cutting-edge frame narratives such as Analogue.

⁴ There are exceptions to every rule, including that frames primarily function based on bliss, but specifically to this moment, in some cases a central narrative may serve to recontextualize the frame narrative, such as The Canterbury Tales, which is also a perfectly reasonable approach which nonetheless bolsters the connection between the space between frame and central narratives, and bliss. In The Canterbury Tales, of course, we are introduced to characters essentially as social types, and then as each character tells a story (often stories which the readers may already know in different
have historically been used, it may be said that it is a sign of a good frame when it does recontextualize and otherwise provide interesting and potentially discomfiting content.

Part 3: The (Other) Problem of *The Taming of the Shrew*

*The Taming of the Shrew* is a perfect text with which to dive into the uncertain qualities of frame narratives because it, like the concept of frame narratives on its own, itself has long had a problem (other than the obvious feminist discourse on it, which this essay will not much address, though some of the comparison between the frame narrative and the central narrative may be applicable): Why does the Christopher Sly frame in *The Shrew* end after a final snippet at the end of Act 1, Scene 1? Where’s the “rest”? “The problem of Sly’s disappearance has been discussed in many ways,” Yuko Suguira cautions, “but every theory is only a matter of conjecture” (64). This is very true; nonetheless, to try to fit the unknown into the known is the business of any who experience bliss, as well it should be: bliss implies an unsettling of a reader’s “historical, cultural, psychological assumptions” and thus more than likely worth at least attempting to plumb, if only for analysis of the reader and their surrounding society if truly defining the nature of the writing is off the table⁵ (Barthes 14).

In order to be able to address the question of *Shrew’s* frame fully, the best way to begin is to walk through the frame, and explain the connection with *The Taming of A Shrew*, a very similar play (which will always be differentiated from *The Shrew* as *The forms), in their own voice,* forcing the reader to reconcile the potential differences for themselves in a very blissful fashion, we process the story through what we know of the frame narrative and the character who is telling it; usually, as with the Wife of Bath, for example, the character is trying to make some sort of point with the story they tell, further distancing the narrative from a purely pleasurable, more objective experience.

⁵ See also Barthes’ *Death of the Author*. 
Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* opens not, as so many movie adaptations of the play do, with Lucentio and Tranio arriving, fresh-faced, iambic-pentameter-speaking, and idealistic in Padua, but with the crude and obnoxious Sly telling the hostess of the tavern he’s drinking in that he won’t pay her a cent of what he owes her. She goes to fetch a constable, and he falls asleep (Ind.1.6-11). A lord arrives on the scene with a company of huntsmen and, seeing Sly drunk, decides to play a joke on him, kidnapping him and making him believe it is he who is a lord (Ind.1.40-64). They then convince Sly that a male page is his lady and his wife, and to sit through a play, which will be the story of Petruchio, Katherine, Bianca, etc, that we know as *The Taming of the Shrew* (Ind.2.95-100). At the end of the narrative proper’s Act 1 Scene 1, a servingman asks Sly, still under the presumption he is a lord, whether he likes the play, as he appears to be falling asleep. He answers he likes it and is ready to see the rest of it, but he also says, perhaps ambiguously “Would ‘twere done!” (1.1.240-5.). And for what we can attribute clearly to Shakespeare, that is the last of Christopher Sly. He does not return at the end of Katherine and Petruchio’s story. He does not intercut again—unlike what occurs in *The Taming of A Shrew*.

Suguira describes *The Taming of A Shrew* as “an anonymous play…which has the structurally ‘complete’ Sly-frame—Induction, several interludes, and an epilogue—as well as the similar storyline to Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*” (65). Without yet getting into the true nature and origin of *A Shrew*, *A Shrew* continues *The Shrew’s* mysteriously “incomplete” frame: first, with a number of further interludes from the
central narrative back to the frame, which depict Sly falling asleep again and being carried out, back to the bar he was kidnapped from in the first place, re-dressed as what he was before (Shakespeare and Dolan 146)\textsuperscript{6}. A Tapster then wakes him, and, after a moment of discombobulation in which he still believes himself to be a Lord, Sly declares that he now knows “how to tame a shrew” from the “best dream/That I ever had in my life”, and declares he will do so with his own wife; the Tapster then helps him home (Shakespeare and Dolan 153-4).

The frame narrative may at first appear to have a simple moral: watch this play, and you, presumably a man married to a “shrew”, will learn how to “tame” her. However, in concert with either of the Shrews’ central narratives, the story quickly loses its simplicity. (The differences of the central narratives are of slightly less import to the topic at hand, so I will not walk through them; while there are interesting differences between the central narratives, they aren’t substantial enough to be worth differentiating here.) To start with, Sly is himself treated to a gaslighting undeniably similar to that which Petruchio (or Ferando, in A Shrew) forces Katherine through. Katherine is convinced to agree with whatever her “Lord”, Petruchio, dictates in Act IV Scene V, for example, that the sun is actually the moon, and then back again to the sun; then that an old man is a young girl, and back again to an old man (4.5.6-48). While the process takes more subtlety and much less time for Christopher Sly, he is himself convinced of much the same things: that time he thought he had spent awake (in the sun, perhaps) he actually

\textsuperscript{6} Since A Shrew’s authorship is uncertain, I will cite it by directing the reader to a text containing the relevant passages with the page number involved; in this case a The Taming of the Shrew “Texts and Contexts” book edited by Dolan—not to be confused with times when I use Dolan’s commentary, which I will also use elsewhere, cited as “(Dolan #)”.

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had spent in a coma, asleep (in mock nighttime, and moonlight)—and then back again, when he is reawakened back in the bar. He mistakenly calls the Hostess “boy” out of drunkenness at the beginning of his story (Ind.1.11). He then is convinced by the Lord that a man, the Page, is a woman—his wife, to be specific—and then in his moment of disillusionment, is awakened to see a man, the Tapster. Thus, the analogue for Sly in the central narrative is actually Katherine. He has learned how to be tamed, by the Lord, but at no point does he even learn that he has been tricked and “tamed”; he has learned nothing in his reality about how to tame at all—after all, in his reality, the central narrative was just a play, and was part of the trickery on him itself—a fantasy, not a reality, though how far that symbolism goes is arguable. A strong example of the blissful nature of the frame comes from a line from Sly as he awakens in A Shrew’s epilogue: “Sim, gi’s some more wine. What’s, all the players gone? Am not I a lord?” (Shakespeare and Dolan 153). This, if ever there was one, is a line depicting a blissful response, one which the audience, in their incentive to identify with Sly (Sly goes to an audience position for the duration of the central narrative, and the play is put on for them, as it is put up for Sly), is incentivized to sympathize with as well.

Harkening back to my concepts of recontextualization of central narratives by frames functioning through bliss, it is, obviously, essential to my argument regarding Shrew that Christopher Sly’s story substantially recontextualizes Katherine and Petruchio’s. Thelma Greenfield spoke of the idea that

In a few instances…the inductive material [framing material] becomes much more than a mere introduction which exists to say something explanatory. In these instances, the inductions create a distinct imaginative realm, sustained to provide a dramatically pointed contrast with the main play, and perhaps are more properly called frame plays. The Knight of the Burning Pestle and The Old Wives Tale are the most familiar examples here…Although ostensibly the main play is incidental
to the frame, actually, of course, the frame is usually incidental in meaning and interest to the play it embraces. However, the two are tied together by a sustained contrast in the imaginative levels presented: a homely, everyday world \textit{versus} the far away and long ago; naiveté contrasted with sophistication; realism against romanticism; bourgeois practicality and idealistic love. (Greenfield 37)

Since I have not established criteria for a truly valuable frame which does not recontextualize the central narrative it frames, which cannot be argued to be a true “frame play” as Greenfield puts it, it is further necessary that I establish that the Sly frame could not conceivably even serve any other purpose than to significantly recontextualize Katherine and Petruchio.

That said, while some of my arguments do somewhat imply less sexism on Shakespeare’s part for this play than he is usually given credit for, it would be a mistake to conflate recontextualization with modernization. Shakespeare’s time remains his time, and it is unlikely that he would bury a clear feminist narrative in \textit{Shrew} via the frame—only significantly complicate it, likely in no easily definable direction; as slippery as Shakespeare’s politics were, it seems more likely that his recontextualizing acts would have far more interest in seeking more possible points of view, rather than nailing down a particular one.

An excellent argument can be made, and Greenfield begins to make it, that if we see \textit{A Shrew} as a bad quarto we can assume that, while the Epilogue to \textit{A Shrew} would resemble the theoretical one from \textit{The Shrew} mostly, it could vary in content, quality, or both from Shakespeare’s, and we have no other source for that content if it existed other than that bad quarto. The implication is that while we can use \textit{A Shrew}’s content because we have no other, it would be wrong not to keep in mind that if we are making the argument for \textit{A Shrew}’s connection to \textit{The Shrew}, all quotes and even themes can be
taken with a grain of salt—but not the plot, characters or events, as while some events are compressed and some names are changed in A Shrew, the actual events and characters remain the same.

It should be said before the bliss-oriented reasonings for A Shrew’s attachment to The Shrew that the historical truth of the matter probably rests more firmly in the historical evidence rather than the literary evidence, and my intention is actually not to say definitively that A Shrew is indeed a bad quarto for The Shrew based on the argument of this essay—there are reams of historical evidence in all possible directions, such as the requirement of a leading comic actor for Sly’s part (implying a larger part for Sly makes more sense (Greenfield 34)) and that Katherine’s final speeches in the two plays differs not only in phrasing but in moralizing content (implying that Shakespeare was more interested in interpersonal relationships of dominance and submission, where A Shrew’s writer was a more religiously-inclined thinker (Dolan 145)). Rather my intention falls more firmly in demonstrating the intricacies and uses of the relationship between frames and bliss with an interest in showing the breadth and limits of the possibilities of that relationship, so my arguments will revolve more around conceptual integrity of the ideas of the texts.

Probably the most important difference is that without the frame, it is less clear that Katherine should be perceived as a pitiable agent in a complicated situation. This may seem odd given the moral Christopher Sly walks away with in A Shrew’s Epilogue (“I know now how to tame a shrew”), but the message is very much not in Sly’s mouth, in both the definitely-Shakespearean Induction and the uncertain Epilogue; after all, where else does Sly speak what the audience should believe? The reader may sympathize
with Sly’s predicaments (drunkenness, mistreatment by upper classes, a bad marriage) but is not supposed to read his words as an oracle of wisdom. In *The Shrew*’s Induction, Sly is “by birth a peddler, by education a cardmaker, by transmutation a bearherd, and now by present profession a tinker” (Ind.2.16-7). No professions here discount the possibility of intelligence by any means, but also none implying any kind of education or worldly wisdom, and the hopping from one to another may imply a certain amount of amateurishness. The Hostess threatens Sly with a constable (a “thirdborough”), and Sly answers “Third, or Fourth, or Fifth borough, I’ll answer him by law. I’ll not budge an inch, boy” (Ind.1.10-1). Sly in this passage not only mistakes a clearly marked female Hostess for a “boy” (presumably out of drunkenness), he also “shows his ignorance; the “third” in “thirdborough” derives from the Old English word *frith*, ‘peace’” (Dolan 42). He mistakes the end of the first scene of the play for the end of the whole thing, and his “lady”, the Lord’s page, must inform him “My lord, ‘tis but begun” (1.1.243). This is not a man who can be expected to be a font of worldly wisdom. It could be said that Sly’s part is only to make mistakes in judgment, always needing to be corrected by those around him (a penchant which the Lord, arguably comedically, abuses with his kidnapping). This pattern continues all the way through the Epilogue; first when he awakens and mixes up his realities until the Tapster corrects him. The very last line of the *A Shrew* incarnation of the play comes after Sly’s claim that he will now go home and tame his wife, the Tapster chiding Sly, “Nay, tarry, Sly, for I’ll go home with thee/And hear the rest that thou hast dreamed tonight” (Shakespeare and Dolan 154). While it is a friendly remark, on another level the implication is that the Tapster finds Sly drunk and a little bit crazy, and thinks he should help his friend home, so he, once again, corrects
Sly’s judgments with a “Nay, tarry, Sly”. Sly’s story is not particularly depicted as one in which the fool learns something, repents his evil and stupid ways, and reapproaches life; surely if this were supposed to be some kind of moral narrative, Sly might at least question his drinking habits, perhaps be shown to have some sort of success with his wife, but almost definitely the play would not end on a note condescending towards him.

Whether the intent is to say that Sly’s certainty of his ability to tame his wife is misguided because the methods are themselves suspect in either cause or effect, because they would only work for some men, or that they would only work on some women, or any other possibility—it seems unlikely that the audience walks away from Sly’s frame narrative believing that Sly is now a certified shrew-tamer at all, and nor should they. For reasons discussed earlier, it is much more fruitful to view Sly as an analogue to Katherine than to her “tamer”. Already the audience is invited to consider Katherine’s “taming” from another, not entirely matching perspective.

On that note, that the gaslighting and manipulative tactics used by both the Lord and Petruchio/Ferando perform something closer to a “transformation” than a “taming” is an important concept in demonstrating the correlations of these texts. Greenfield, also arguing for an importance of connection between the frame and central narrative of *The Shrew*, writes

Shakespeare’s particular emphasis brings his Induction into an organic relationship with the main play...The contrast between the literal world of Sly and the world of dramatic poetry is emphatic and meaningful. He is introduced in a condition of drunken quarrelsomeness and is soon sleeping like a swine or a dead man. The world to which Sly is brought is a world of fine living, and more important, a world of art—music, painting, and finally dramatic poetry. His literal-mindedness and his incongruity in his surroundings are rather suggestive of Bottom among the fairies; and Bottom, too, although more actively, becomes concerned with the art of the drama. As far as we are permitted to see Christopher, he accepts his new life with reluctant resignation. It is not imagination but the
very lack of it that leads him to accept the evidence of his senses. But since we see him only as far as Act I, scene I, we cannot guess what the final result was to be. Whether the following night found him again sleeping like a swine in the street is, unfortunately, unanswerable (Greenfield 41).

Greenfield is, unlike this paper, arguing that while we do not have certainty of the ending of the frame of *The Shrew*, it would go too far to say *The Shrew*’s ending frame resembled that of *A Shrew*, where this essay has argued and will continue to argue that *A Shrew*’s epilogue likely much resembled, at least in events and general characters if not necessarily specific lines, the closing frame of *The Shrew*. Other than that, however, the views line up. Of particular use is the analogue to Bottom, from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In that play, Shakespeare had no objection to returning Bottom to his regular life, to see his own escapade in higher places later as an inspirational dream. This brings up a very interesting question about the gaslighters of *Shrew*: if Bottom can be returned to his natural environment and quickly reorient, if a little off-kilter, why should we doubt that Sly can, as he does in *A Shrew*? Further, on an admittedly hypothetical level—should we doubt that Katherine can? If we view these gaslightings, these cognitive and visceral sanity pressures, as incentives to transform, a term implying a possible two-way street, rather than “taming”, a word which, while making perfect sense to be used in a purely sexist context presuming unidirectionality, may obfuscate a larger pattern worth interest, one which ties the central and frame narratives of *Shrew* together. Perhaps Katherine never had a state of equilibrium to be yanked from in quite the same way as Bottom and Sly did, but it seems unlikely there’s nowhere for Katherine to feel safe pre-“taming”. It seems even more unlikely she could not easily assimilate to a different reality at a moment’s notice if she liked it more, transforming again.
Part 4: Shrews and the Finishing Imperative

Going back to the basics, bliss is necessarily subjective, however there are certain things that can be pointed to which are likely to cause it, specifically, disconnections; taking things that are expected to connect, to please, to be simple to process, and not allowing them to be so. All that is left to embody bliss is for those disconnects to cause some sort of discomfort, a double-take, an inspiration, a confusion. One obvious disconnection of this kind, and this is very central to my thesis, is that frame narrative necessarily take the central narrative, whose suspension of disbelief we expect to be as unchallenged as possible, and almost universally, challenges it by contextualizing it, forcing it another step away from the experience of readership.\(^7\)

To be clear: Christopher Sly’s story is presented very much comedically, so I do not mean to overstate the presumed emotional impact on any given reader. However, looking at Christopher Sly’s story in comparison with the central narrative, its themes and the central narrative’s themes line up in extremely blissful ways for them both.

But what is this strange source for the end of Christopher Sly’s story? *A Pleasant Conceited History, Called The Taming of a Shrew*, as is its full title, “has been variously

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\(^7\) I use “reader” and “readership” throughout this piece to refer to any recipient of the experience of an artistic object or act; “viewer” seems too general, and to apply the term “reading” to the experience of watching a play highlights some aspects of viewing a play that will be essential to my arguments. This does somewhat aggressively conflate narrative theory and dramatic theory: to wade into the precise range of what those two fields have in common and what they do not is an enormous subject which it would be counterproductive to spend much time on in this essay, however, for the sake of rigor, I cite Weimann and Bruster’s *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in the Elizabethan Theatre*: “…it could be possible today to demonstrate, as Lukas Erne suggests, that ‘the stage and the printed page did not necessarily present two rival forms of publication’ and that the dramatist ‘could afford to write plays for the stage and the page’” (Weimann and Bruster 12). This is a large part of Weimann and Bruster’s thesis, as well as, as they say, Erne’s. Their work justifies at the very least treating Shakespeare’s plays with narrative theory.
described as an earlier version of *The Shrew* that Shakespeare used and revised as a source; or as an unauthorized edition of *The Shrew*, reconstructed from actors’ (faulty) memories of a production of Shakespeare’s play, perhaps with the assistance of a writer” (Dolan 144). These are the most common theories, but there are others, such as that *A Shrew* should not be seen as a necessarily inferior work to *The Shrew* but as a simply very similar but unique play with its own strengths and weaknesses (Dolan 144). Another theory is that “Both *A Shrew* and *The Shrew* derive from a lost play, *Ur-Shrew*” (Suguir 65). The historical source of *A Shrew* is not a primary focus of this paper. I am taking Hosley’s lead here when he says “In fact for practical purposes the question usually resolves itself into one of aesthetics: In the critic’s judgment would *The Shrew* be a better play if it had a dramatic epilogue?” (19). However, the uncertain context of its authorship is extremely important for one reason: uncertainty in history begets uncertainty in the historian, and uncertainty begets bliss. One of the certain symptoms of bliss is what I will call the “finishing imperative”: the feeling, upon blissful dissatisfaction with a work, of feeling such pleasure with some parts and such displeasure with others as to desire to “finish” the work of the author, to make the unpleasurable pieces as pleasant to the next reader as you wish it had been. The parallel lives and incredible closeness of *The Shrew* and *A Shrew* give a possibly uniquely powerful opportunity for the finishing imperative to demonstrate itself. Many readers of *The Shrew* feel that the Sly portion is confusing, unfinished, or out of place (this is a blissful experience). It is even more of a blissful experience if that reader then chooses to “headcanon”, to believe in one’s own head that

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8 See also Richard Hosley’s “Was There A ‘Dramatic Epilogue’ to The Taming of the Shrew?” and Karl Wentersdorf’s “The Original Ending of The Taming of the Shrew: A Reconsideration.”
something on the page is not as it was “meant” to be. With these definitions, the finishing imperative would fall into the umbrella category of headcanon. Possibly the greatest possible act of bliss, though, (possibly even more than writing fanfiction, which requires the creation of original material of one’s own as well as applying headcanon, which muddies the waters) is to put up onstage that headcanon—in the case of A Shrew/The Shrew, either putting in a “completed” frame from A Shrew onto the end of The Shrew, as many productions have done, or, as is even more common, simply cutting out the whole existence of Christopher Sly and his frame entirely. It could be argued that there is a distinction between choices of cutting/altering Shakespeare’s work for time and other logistical reasons, versus altering Shakespeare’s work to fit a headcanon, a choice made on principle, even though the effect on the resultant audience might functionally be the same, the experience from the directorial standpoint is extremely different; once again, bliss is in an individual recipient, even an actor or a director, not in the text itself. It could further be argued that directoral cutting made from a decision of

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9 While this term (headcanon) derives from the world of lowbrow internet fanfiction, its powerful usefulness for reader response theory has made it begin to creep into scholarly work, such as Megan B. Abrahamson’s excellent “J.R.R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and “The Freedom of The Reader”: “Headcanon (as opposed to ‘canon,’ the concrete facts given in a text) is a term for one’s personal interpretation of something not explicitly stated (6)--which describes most of ‘the Silmarillion’ material” (Abrahamson).

10 The list of play directors, movie directors, and theorists who could be cited as having applied headcanon to The Taming of the Shrew in one way or another is enormous; whether by cutting or advocating the cutting of the Sly frame (Bloom, Zeffirelli, arguably Zhu), merging or advocating some kind of merging of A Shrew’s frame with The Shrew’s frame (Greenfield, Suguira, Wentersdorf), preferring to interpret material such to significantly change the general takeaway about Katherine (Bloom, Raspa, Zhu), or cutting out or cutting down characters deemed unimportant (Zeffirelli, arguably Hosley), almost anyone who has talked about or presented the play in any form within recorded history could probably be argued to have applied headcanon. By this I mean to demonstrate not only other perspectives on the topics, but also that headcanon/applied bliss is not disrespect for the text or failure as an artist or theorist; it is what it means to read a text of bliss as suc
bliss actually unintentionally seeks to rob an uninitiated audience of the experience of bliss (though an audience member of such a production who does know Shakespeare’s *The Shrew* well may actually experience even more bliss), which is even further arguable as a good or a bad thing.

I have intimated in several ways that critics do not, as a whole, like to talk about bliss, and have theorized some as to why this is. However, it is exceedingly important to note that while they do not usually write about it, they are not immune to it; indeed, critics are arguably uniquely likely to experience it frequently, since they have exposed themselves to so much literature and have cultivated the art of producing opinions about them.\(^{11}\) It is simply that they historically are more likely to express their blissful opinions in the language of pleasure, explaining how a text creates, fulfills, works against, or contradicts a whole, united argument of the critic, attempting to *convince* their readers, rather than, more likely for bliss, attempting to *inspire* or *discomfit* their readers (Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* itself is a notable exception; failing to define its primary terms, and the extremely unusual, non-linear structure, reads as though Barthes were trying to create something he argued against the existence of, a “text of bliss”. The number of critics who have written about that text attempting to put it in a variety of types of boxes would seem to support this theory). Using what I have said thus far as contextualization, I will frame the rest of my analysis utilizing *The Taming of the Shrew* through a counterexample to most everything that I am arguing, and also a wonderful example of a blissful reaction of a critic: Harold Bloom. Bloom says in his massive, useful, and always interesting (if not always consistent) text *The Invention of the Human* that the frame

\(^{11}\) See Chartier’s *Forms and Meanings* for an effective depiction of both the history and readerly process of how this came to be and continues to come to be.
narrative “does not seem at all appropriate to its representational effect upon an audience.

Though skillfully written, the Induction would serve half a dozen other comedies by
Shakespeare as well or as badly as it coheres with the *Shrew*” (28). He goes on to
attribute any claims to correlations between Christopher Sly’s situation and Katherine’s
to “critical ingenuity”, yet also claims

And yet Shakespeare had some dramatic purpose in his Induction, even if we have
not yet surmised it. Sly is not brought back at the conclusion of Shakespeare’s
Shrew, perhaps because his disenchantment necessarily would be cruel, and
would disturb the mutual triumph of Kate and Petruchio, who rather clearly are
going to be the happiest married couple in Shakespeare (short of the Macbeths,
who end separately but each badly). Two points can be accepted as generally
cogent about the Induction: it somewhat distances us from the performance of the
*Shrew*, and it also hints that social dislocation is a form of madness. (Bloom 28)

I will return to this rather fantastical claim on Bloom’s part regarding a choice not
to disturb the “peace” of Kate and Petruchio, but the crux of his argument is yet to come:

“It may be that Shakespeare, endlessly subtle, hints at an analogy between Christopher
Sly and the happily married couple, each in a dream of its own from which we will not
see Sly wake, and which Kate and Petruchio need never abandon” (Bloom 29). While
Bloom apparently saw no need to speak directly on the subject of *A Shrew* at this juncture,
he does in this moment fit into arguments made by Yuko Suguira: “…the unfinished Sly
story in *The Shrew* makes this matter more ambiguous, because we do not see Sly return
to his lowly world, or, even if he does, we do not know whether he accepts his world
soon or not. By contrast, Sly in *A Shrew* accepts his new role/identity as a lord rapidly,
and he can also clearly distinguish his dream from reality when he wakes up in the
epilogue” (69). Suguira’s argument here is less than convincing. Sly cannot clearly
distinguish his dream from reality when he wakes up in the epilogue: he muddles all three
of the worlds together in the epilogue, first by asking Simon (presumably the Tapster’s
name) to get him some more wine as a part of his expectations of what he can request as a lord, then at the end of the epilogue he asserts that now he knows how to tame a shrew, and thus that the play-within-a-play applies to his current reality. Suguira questions whether identity is at issue in the frame of A Shrew as it is in the frame of The Shrew, and it clearly is; not only does Sly fancy himself a lord far too easily and for longer than he should, he fancies himself Petruchio/Ferando at the end. Suguira’s claim that The Shrew’s frame opening is ambiguous about whether Sly accepts his frame or not is similarly lacking; just because he initially experience some identity disassociation as would be expected of even a half-asleep drunkard in the same situation, does not at all imply that his later enthusiasm for his new role is halfhearted. It is possible to recognize tastes of Katherine’s exuberance in recognizing the sun as the moon and back again in Sly at such a point as this:

First Servingman:
   …Sometimes you would call out for Cicely Hacket.
Sly:
   Ay, the woman’s maid of the house.
First Servingman:
   Why, sir, you know no house, nor no such maid,
   Nor no such men as you have reckoned up,
   …which never were, nor no man ever saw.
Sly:
   Now Lord be thanked for my good amends! (Ind.2.84-92)

The argument that it is more artistically contiguous for Sly to never be seen to return to his lowly beginnings is also contingent on the idea that both Sly’s situation carries no scent of ominousness or non-earnestness about it—which it undeniably does, unless anybody thinks the Lord is content to act as a servingman to a dumb drunk for the rest of his life—or that he thinks Sly won’t notice if not soon returned to his origins that his “wife”, whom Sly clearly presumes to be female-bodied, is in fact male-bodied.
Bloom said “each in a dream of its own from which we will not see Sly wake, and which Kate and Petruchio need never abandon”—but we do not need to see Sly wake necessarily in order to know that he will indeed wake from it. It would be the height of dramatic inconsistency to create such a sloppy frame as one which would not so much contrast the central narrative as actively undermine it. Of course, the substance of that quote is as problematic as its metaphor. Bloom goes to great efforts to defend Kate and Petruchio as the happiest married couple in all of Shakespeare, essentially on the claim that Kate and Petruchio’s bickering subtly depicts a far more equal power balance than any other theorist I could find has ever claimed for any reason. “From this moment on [the moon and sun scene], Kate firmly rules while endlessly protesting her obedience to the delighted Petruchio, a marvelous Shakespearean reversal of Petruchio’s earlier strategy of proclaiming Kate’s mildness even as she raged on,” as evidence, submitting this “charming” conversation towards the latter end of the play (Bloom 32).

Katherina: Husband, let’s follow, to see the end of this ado.
Petruchio: First kiss me, Kate, and we will.
Katherina: What, in the midst of the street?
Petruchio: What, art thou ashamed of me?
Katherina: No, sir, God forbid, but ashamed to kiss.
Petruchio: Why, then, let’s home again. Come, sirrah, let’s away.
Katherina: Nay, I will give thee a kiss. Now pray thee, love, stay.
Petruchio: Is not this well? Come, my sweet Kate,
Better once than never, for never too late. (5.1.114-124)

The power dynamics of this scene could not be less feminist. Bloom’s assertion that this is playful bickering depicting “a subtly exquisite music of marriage at its

On the other hand, for prominent work strongly on the other side of the argument in a variety of ways, see Lynda Booze’s “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member”, John Fletcher’s “The Woman’s Prize, or The Tamer Tamed”, and Kate McLuskie’s “Feminist Deconstruction: The Example of Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew.”
happiest” doesn’t just demonstrate Bloom’s deeply unfortunate inability to recognize domestic abuse when he sees it, but it also does not fit into the art of the play. I am not here to claim that Shakespeare himself was a feminist, writing this scene and those like it as horrific depictions of the patriarchy—*The Taming of the Shrew* was written as a comedy, not a tragedy. But Shakespeare’s story makes more sense in the reading that Katherine is not so much gliding smoothly and self-assuredly into marital bliss nearly so much as being gaslighted, emotionally extorted, and physically deprived until she accepts a new role. The difference between a feminist reading the play and an Elizabethan audience member is that the Elizabethan audience member would probably think those things as depicted were funny.¹³ Bloom misses the entire comedic intent of the play in his rush to romanticize *The Shrew*. One could even make the argument (and this part is not going to be tied in to my arguments on frames and bliss, but is peripheral) that Shakespeare’s genius shines through here not in depicting the true nature of marital bliss, but in depicting that, however a particular reader feels about the tactics involved, to actually change someone from an independent and rowdy personality to one more content to do as others suggest requires an enormous amount of labor and trickery. For what it’s worth, I doubt Shakespeare could have written such a successful comedy about abuse if he did not also understand at a deep level that Katherine was indeed suffering enormously and working hard to keep her feet under her in an impossible situation, though that is mere speculation. Just because Sly is moving up in the world financially in the fantasy thrust upon him by the lord and Katherine loses her freedom of action and expression (for

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¹³ See “The Taming of the Shrew: Inside or Outside the Joke?” by Shirley Nelson Garner, which suggest similarly but alternatively that the play was intended to inspire divided reactions, lighthearted approval from the men and discomfort and solemnity from the women.
whenever gains she arguably earns), does not mean that Sly actually gains any control—he loses it, being promised something to have it ripped away from him, and having to learn every “truth” of his fantasy world from the Lord and people the Lord has preloaded with lines. The truth is that Charlie Brown is not on top of the world as he runs optimistically at Lucy’s football—Sly is subjugated and oppressed by his class, because he thinks he is otherwise, and the exterior world is merely waiting to pull the football away. Just because the tactic differs slightly from Katherine, who is aware that she is being subjugated and seems to hate every second of it (at the very least up through the sun and moon scene) does not imply that Sly’s story is a depiction of dreams coming true, it is quite the opposite. It is of central importance that this reading comes not from pleasure, but from bliss: Shakespeare could have written a frame about another character who, like Katherine, is abused by gaslighting in comparable forms of physical deprivation and emotional duress. Instead we are faced with Sly, mostly sleeping, believing he’s literally a lord in a castle even as Katherine starves and suffers from lack of sleep on the stage beneath him (“Last night she slept not, nor tonight she shall not” (4.1.167)). Katherine ends her story entirely subdued, at least outwardly, and Sly walks away excited, believing that despite everything he’s actually gained something from the episode (“I know now how to tame a shrew…I’ll to my/Wife presently, and tame her too/And if she anger me”), that he had control over it when he had nothing of the sort and has actually just been an unconsenting source of an evening’s entertainment (Shakespeare and Dolan 152). This is a disconnect with a strange and powerful connection at its core, the stuff of bliss, and mediated through a blissful frame.
Conclusion:

“The frame fits badly”, as Derrida said. Depending on how the reader perceives the text, this axiom will more or less always be true, because the world of the reader, by definition, should fit the world of the frame better than the world of the central narrative, and the world of the central narrative should fit the frame better than it fits the world of the reader. The reader may feel the frame fits the world of the central narrative better than it fits their own reality, and be frustrated trying to reach it. The reader may feel the frame fits their own reality better than it fits the world of the central narrative, and feel tricked and stranded. The reader may resent the frame for pointing out, specifying, and naming the distance between themselves and the central narrative in which to exist. The frame, if it attempts to be a vessel of pleasure, can succeed—but it is more naturally suited for bliss. The frame is the mediation, the bridge, and what bridge is more stable than the landmasses it traverses? Nonetheless the act on the reader’s part of crossing that bridge towards the central narrative can be exciting in its instability. The frame can add an unforgettable and integral part to the experience of the text and the experience of readership. Frames which recognize this reality of readership and lean into bliss, such as that in *The Taming of the Shrew* (with some unintentional bliss thrown in for good measure in that case) can make excellent use of the form. Certainly while little has been written specifically on the theory of frames, relatively speaking, the frame for *The Taming of the Shrew* has no shortage of critics seeking to lay their stamp on it, either from historical, aesthetic, or dramatic points of view. Greenfield wants us to accept *The Shrew* and not *A Shrew*, look towards an ending, but not a specific one; Suguira wants us to see each play’s frames as equally worth investigation as complete as they are without
stealing from each other. Bloom believes Sly’s story is essentially disposable. Easy as it seems to dismiss Bloom, the most popular Hollywood takes on *The Taming of the Shrew* (Burton/Taylor’s adaptation of the same name and *10 Things I Hate About You*) seem to agree with him. I have my own opinions, which I have not tried to hide, but they are no more or less valid than any other theorist’s. These are all clear examples of the blissful “finishing directive”. What better evidence of the prominent presence and influence of bliss could there be?


<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?action=interpret&id=GALE%7CA350791915&v=2.1&u=have19984&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&authCount=1>.


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