

# Shakespeare (the taming of the shrew) essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* was never published during his life. It was published posthumously in 1623. *The Taming of the Shrew* is one of Shakespeare's earliest comedies, and it shares many essential characteristics with his other romantic comedies, such as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

These characteristics include lighthearted and slapstick humor, disguises and deception, and a happy ending in which most of the characters come out satisfied. The lightheartedness of these romantic comedies contrasts sharply with the darker humor and deeper characterization of Shakespeare's later plays, both comic and tragic. The youthfulness of the playwright can be seen in the whimsical spirit of the early plays. Like the other romantic comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew* focuses on courtship and marriage, but, unlike most of them, it devotes a great deal of attention to married life after the wedding.

The other comedies usually conclude with the wedding ceremony itself. Another important idea of the play is the rivalry of a woman against the men and the system as the whole. The word feminism was not known in those times and women did not start to fight for their rights yet. The moral of that time was that woman must be submissive to man. However, among higher levels of society, aristocracy, women had more rights and more power.

Therefore, some of them were trying to fight against this injustice and inequality of rights. Which side did Shakespeare take? And how feminism is portrayed throughout the play? We are going to analyze these questions in in-depth analysis, which follows. A play focusing on the concerns of married

life would have seemed particularly relevant to English audiences of the Renaissance period. There was a society concerned with marriage in general, thanks in part to Henry VIII's separation of England from the Catholic Church in 1534 in order to secure a divorce that the pope had refused to grant him.

Henry's troubles highlight one important aspect of Elizabethan marriages among the upper class: they were most often arranged for money, land, or power, rather than for love. Moreover, unless you were the king of England, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries offered few ways out of an unhappy marriage. Thus, the resolution of marital disputes became an important topic in the popular literature of the era. Of particular worry to this society were "shrews" or "scolds" - that is, cantankerous or gossipy wives, who resisted or undermined the assumed authority of the husband within a marriage. A large number of sermons, plays, and pamphlets of the time address related topics: the taming of shrews by their husbands or the public punishment of scolds by, for example, repeatedly dunking them in a river. Part of this body of literature took a very diplomatic attitude toward women, although much of it was extremely misogynistic.

In some of this literature, it is difficult to distinguish between behavior that is being parodied and behavior that is presented as an ideal. This ambiguity may also be found in *The Taming of the Shrew*, which manages to lampoon chauvinistic behavior while simultaneously reaffirming its social validity. The play celebrates the quick wit and fiery spirit of its heroine even while reveling in her humiliation. Male supremacy is a matter of fathers as well as of husbands.

Here *The Shrew* is unusually realistic for Shakespeare. There is no casket lottery or disguised twin or rushing off to the forest. Baptista Minola, a wealthy merchant with two daughters, faces a situation quite familiar to the propertied classes in Shakespeare's audience. Such fathers were expected to get their daughters married and to provide a dowry with each daughter that would entice a suitable wooer.

The prospective husband, or his father, was expected to provide a corresponding sum, a dower or jointure, to support the wife should she be left a widow. Marriages in such classes were regularly matters of property, inheritance, family. This was the way in which the income for the new couple was provided. Such people did not earn salaries, as we now expect to do. Parents who failed to provide for their children, who left them unendowed or unbestowed, would be criticized by neighbors, and by the children themselves, for parental neglect, as we would now criticize middle-class parents who failed to provide a college education enabling their children to survive comfortably in the world. Shakespeare is not as anti-feminist as he can be made to sound.

The taming is less violent and abusive than it is in pre-Shakespearean shrew stories. In one of the sources, the husband beats his wife senseless and then wraps her bleeding body in the salted hide of a newly flayed horse. Further, Kate's speech justifies the submission of wives as a political arrangement, not as a theological tyranny. Husband and wife have distinctive roles in a cooperative and companionate union, whereas in the parallel place in *The Taming of a Shrew* (an anonymous play that is either a source or a rip-off of Shakespeare's *The Shrew*), Kate produces the medieval argument that

<https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-the-taming-of-the-shrew-essay/>

woman is the crooked rib, the source of evil to her husband, and thus to be ruled absolutely by him.

At least Shakespeare broke away from that oppressive piece of mythology. But all the learning and industry of admirable feminist critics in rescuing Shakespeare from the bleaker reaches of male chauvinist piggery cannot convincingly turn him into a proto-feminist. The feminist movements of the past two centuries, varied and sometimes contradictory, ultimately derive from the doctrine of natural rights propagated by philosophers of the Enlightenment, first put into halting practice in the American and French Revolutions. No such doctrine was available to earlier western history.

The ruling assumptions of Shakespeare's time were not egalitarian but hierarchical. St. Paul explicitly endorsed the authority of husbands, and it would have been hard for people who believed in the literal inspiration of the Bible to argue against that. The natural order on heaven, on earth, everywhere, was vertical: the wife called her husband " my lord.

" Occasionally the order might invert itself; the courtly Petrarchan lover professed himself the servant of his mistress and called her " my lady." The great marriage debate in Chaucer concerns which sex should hold the mastery - the Wife of Bath has it, Patient Griselda yields it - but no one suggested that marital mastery should be altogether abolished. One accepts this, or re-writes the play, or leaves it on the shelf. Some modern critics, feminist and otherwise, actually have deeper objections to the mode of the play's action: farce. Tranio exemplifies the disguise and trickery that Renaissance comedy inherited from ancient Roman farce.

Gremio and the Pedant are stock figures out of Italian commedia dell'arte. Petruchio and his servants display the physical knockabout that is characteristic of farce in all ages. The verbal wit of the play is often farcical. In contrast to the lyricism of *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, the wit of *The Shrew* comes near wisecracking. The funny speeches are quick retorts and grotesque catalogues. Above all, Kate is tamed by farcical means, by being carried off from her own wedding and having her clothes and food and bed thrown about, her words flatly contradicted or outrageously reinterpreted.

The psychoanalytic feminist Coppélia Kahn sees farce as the means of male autocracy in this play, the elaboration of a male fantasy of domination. This has been a graver problem in literary interpretation, where farce is often condemned as mechanical, than in the theatre, where the virtues celebrated by farce are more evident and more enjoyable. For farce does celebrate specific human virtues: energy, ingenuity, and resilience. Baptista's difficulties in marrying off his daughters have put Padua into stalemate, a condition of entropy. Energy is obvious in the male characters who arrive in Padua and take on problems the Paduans regard as hopeless.

Ingenuity - mental independence and resourcefulness - lies in the suitors' adoption of unconventional methods to gain their ends, notably in Petruchio's pretense of being a greater shrew than Kate, but also in the fertile inventiveness of Lucentio, Tranio, and Biondello. By resilience I mean a combination of stubbornness and adaptability. This virtue is often overlooked in farcical characters, ready as we are to describe farce as rigid and condemn farcical behavior as subhuman. The ability to initiate and endure repeated confrontations, pratfalls, and beatings can be testimony to

<https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-the-taming-of-the-shrew-essay/>

the determination of the characters, and the determination loses any mechanical quality when it is combined with the ready resourcefulness displayed by Petruchio in the taming and the variety of schemes adopted in the Bianca plot. In normal adult life, of course, we avoid the physical activities of farce, the shouting and the knockabout, but the energy, ingenuity, and resilience displayed in such activities are valuable qualities.

We do not honor lassitude, mental barrenness, and defeatism. Some modern critics, feminist and otherwise, actually have deeper objections to the mode of the play's action: farce. Tranio exemplifies the disguise and trickery that Renaissance comedy inherited from ancient Roman farce. Gremio and the Pedant are stock figures out of Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Petruchio and his servants display the physical knockabout that is characteristic of farce in all ages.

The verbal wit of the play is often farcical. In contrast to the lyricism of *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, the wit of *The Shrew* comes near wisecracking. The funny speeches are quick retorts and grotesque catalogues. Above all, Kate is tamed by farcical means, by being carried off from her own wedding and having her clothes and food and bed thrown about, her words flatly contradicted or outrageously reinterpreted. The psychoanalytic feminist Coppélia Kahn sees farce as the means of male autocracy in this play, the elaboration of a male fantasy of domination. Kate shares these virtues.

In her first scenes, her verbal and physical energy make her the interesting character she is. When she meets Petruchio, it is she who initiates both the

wit combat and the physical brawling. Here her behavior has a strain of compulsiveness not shared with the male farceurs. She has the energy, but her resilience is more stubborn than adaptable, and her ingenuity relies heavily on the use or threat of violence. Her liberation from raging shrewishness is marked precisely by her growth in farcical range.

She learns from Petruchio to play, which she had been too angry to do before. She plays the ingenious games of farce especially well in the scene in which Petruchio insists that the sun is the moon. She follows the new rules as quickly as he can change them, and even mocks him for his revisions (" And the moon changes even as your mind"). When they meet the old man whom Petruchio insists is a young woman, she tops him in invention.

He merely praises the supposed damsel in conventional Petrarchan terms, calling her eyes stars and referring to the red and white in her cheeks. Kate goes over the top: Young, budding virgin, fair and fresh and sweet, Whither away, or where is thy abode? Happy the parents of so fair a child, Happier the man whom favorable stars Allot thee for his lovely bedfellow. And when Petruchio corrects her by saying the damsel is actually a wrinkled old man, she brilliantly pulls the two kinds of pretense together by claiming that her eyes have been " bedazzled with the sun." The games release her from her compulsiveness, her anger at her father's favoritism, her misunderstanding of Petruchio's interest in her. Game or play has a cathartic effect.

In play, human beings can master their circumstances, can gain release from bondage to themselves and the scorn of others. For the final scene does not simply expound doctrine; it also demonstrates marriage as a cooperative



game. Petruchio may be the quarterback, calling the plays, but equally necessary to their success as a couple is Kate's able catching of the pass and running with the ball. Together they prove themselves better than the other newlyweds, and turn the jeers of the crowd into applause.

Of all characters (personae) of the play, only two represent bright, live well-designed characters - Katherine and Petruccio. And only with big reservations can we say the same about Bianca. All other characters of the play are no more than formal figures, stereotype grotesques, very close to Italian mask comedy. Good-natured and not very bright old father Baptista reminds very much the same fool fathers of Italian comedy, smart servant Tranio reminds Brigello, the aged man Gremio who tries to look young reminds playful Venetian Pantalonne etc. The action of the play has the same playful and farce character (different tricks, jokes, continuous laughter) without any lyricism, ideal feelings, and other deep emotions that are present in other Shakespearean plays. However, the play is not so simple.

It contains a hidden and deep problem embodied in the characters of Katherine and Petruccio. The researchers had many arguments as to its solution but this problem is the key for understanding the idea of the play. The conception of the play is quite clear. Spoilt and capricious Katherine is pacified by her smart and clever fiancé and then husband - Petruccio. The boastful, selfish, mercurial Petruccio is one of the most difficult characters in *The Taming of the Shrew*: his behavior is extremely difficult to decipher, and our interpretation of the play as a whole changes dramatically depending on how we interpret Petruccio's actions. If he is nothing more than a vain, uncaring, greedy chauvinist who treats marriage as an act of domination,

<https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-the-taming-of-the-shrew-essay/>

then the play becomes a dark comedy about the materialism and hunger for power that dictate marriages under the guise of courtly love.

If, on the other hand, Petruccio is actually capable of loving Kate and conceives of taming her merely as a means to realize a happy marriage, then the play becomes an examination of the psychology of relationships. A case can be made for either interpretation, but the truth about Petruccio probably lies somewhere in between: he is unabashedly selfish, materialistic, and determined to be his wife's lord and master, but he also loves her and realizes on some level that domestic harmony (on his terms, of course) would be better for her than her current life as a shrew in Padua. To this extent, Petruccio goes to alarming lengths to impose his mastery on Kate, keeping her tired and hungry for some time after their marriage, but he also insists on framing this treatment in a language of love, indicating his eagerness for Kate to adapt to her rightful, socially appointed place and his willingness to make their marriage a happy one. Above all, Petruccio is a comic figure, an exaggerated persona who continually makes the audience laugh. And though we laugh with Petruccio as he "tames" Kate, we also laugh at him, as we see him satirize the very gender inequalities that the plot of *The Taming of the Shrew* ultimately upholds. The results of his effort followed shortly - she turned into an ideal and well-behaved wife.

Near the play's final ending, when the kind of trial happens among wives, it turns out that Bianca who was shy and quiet before now became a shrewish and capricious, and Katherine became the example of lamblike and friendly nature. The play ends with her famous monologue in which she postulates the natural weakness of women and calls upon them to be obedient to their

husbands. Such moral does not reflect our idea about Shakespeare's love for freedom. He created the types of brave, initiative women who fight for their human rights and freedom of their feelings (Juliet, Desdemona, Hermia and many others).

Not only are we shocked by this moral but also some Shakespeare's contemporaries such as, for instance, dramatist Fletcher who wrote in contrast to it his comedy *The Tamed Tamer*, where woman gains her revenge. This play's main character whose name is also Petruccio falls in love with (probably after Katherine's death, it is not clear from the play) a young lady and decides to marry her. And this wife treats him the same way as Petruccio treated Katherine in Shakespeare's play. This play ends with words: "The tamer is tamed! But in such a way that no man has the right to complain, if he counts that no man can be a tyrant of a woman in this world. However, the women also will not be able to find here the reason for triumph and mockeries, since we now recognized the equality between man and woman, as it should be. We teach love only for the sake of love!" Many critics tried to "rehabilitate" Shakespeare, to whitewash his play with the help of different strained interpretations.

One of them was that Shakespeare took a ready plot and he had to preserve the original moral of it; that Katherine is not a voice of Shakespeare, that he saw this matter in a different light. Another suggestion was that Katherine and Petruccio fight with each other only for fun and that Katherine proclaims her famous monologue only to laugh at Hortensio and his spouse not believing herself in what she's saying. All these interpretations contradict the direct meaning of the text. Moreover, they do not respond to the historical

authenticity. Shakespeare, in spite of his geniality and progress of criticism of his contemporary society, was the son of his epoch and he could not even think about the complete legal and domestic emancipation of a woman.

Common people did not know this equality of sexes.

Some semblance of this equality was in higher levels of society, aristocracy, but even there it was more of epicure way and served for amoral purposes.

The prototype of Shakespearean moral in this play could be most probably the moral of a common people's family, which recognizes the inner equality between man and woman.