

About shakespeare's play, the taming of the shrew



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Throughout time there has been the traditional rule that women must be submissive to their husbands and are expected to tend to the domestic responsibilities within the household. The Elizabethans had very clear expectations of what roles men and women had in society. Men were expected to be the head of the household and the breadwinners while women were expected to be housewives and mothers.

Women were regarded as “the weaker sex”, that they always needed someone to look after them and care for them. Before marriage, the father, brother or another male relative was expected to take care of them. After marriage however, the husband was expected to take on that role. As a group, English women have enjoyed fewer rights, fewer privileges, less wealth, less influence in spheres of power and less control over domestic affairs, than English men (1). While gender roles have been redefined and challenged over the course of the twentieth century, characters such as Katherine, portray the exceptions of feminine independence and superiority. Shakespeare portrays gender in interesting ways throughout his work; many of the characters he wrote had personalities that defied traditional gender roles. Women in his plays are portrayed as strong, bold, and rational. Their male counterparts, however, are often fearful and carried away by their emotions.

Shakespeare's play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, reinforces and challenges the class and gender roles of Elizabethan England. Issues related to gender are hugely important in this play as it centers around Petruchio and his “taming” of Katherine and forcing her into the traditionally submissive role of a wife. *The Taming of the Shrew* is filled with characters who fit and don't fit

traditional gender roles particularly the traditional Elizabethan ideal of the male as dominant and the female as submissive. From the beginning, Katherina is a more masterly, dominant, and familiar character than the others, she is portrayed as a quick-witted, frustrated young woman. She is not afraid to stand up to her father and criticize his willingness to give her off to a husband. Baptista even offers to let Gremio or Hortensio court her instead of Bianca. The two men tell Baptista that Katharine is too rough, but if she were gentler, she may be able to find a husband. (2). Katharine does not hesitate to defend herself. As Gremio and Hortensio discuss Katharine in front of her, she steps in and tells them they are fools and that she has no desire to be married; For Gremio and Hortensio, Katharine becomes the ideological figure of whose only function is to manifest the reality of their primary fantasy-the ideal of the female virtue associated with Bianca. Katharine's interaction in the open with her sister's suitors convinces Lucentio of Bianca's virtue, for he compares her response to this scene with Katharine's (5). Immediately, the contrast between Katharine and Bianca becomes clear.

Shakespeare writes Katharine and Bianca as opposites to demonstrate an extreme example of how women were expected to behave, and how men thought women who did not follow societal standards would act. While Bianca stays quiet and only speaks to convey her obedience to her father, Katharine does not stand by and allow men to talk about her and tell her what to do. Katharine is self-possessed, independent, and not afraid to show her intelligence. The men in her life consider her outspoken and difficult, the opposite of wife material, which is why she is described as a shrew. By

contrast, her younger sister, Bianca represents the ideal of what men look for in a wife: beautiful, gentle, and deferential to men. In the play, the men say that for a young woman to be called a shrew is the worst thing to happen to her as it damages her reputation among men looking for a wife; "Katherine the curst," A title for a maid of all titles the worst (1. 2. 130-131). Katherine's "pointed nose" or rather her sharp tongue, is her bone of contention; her foul and crude language is the problem which defines her as a shrew that must be tamed. As a woman, Katherine's does not fit into the typical patterns of society and the hierarchy within her family. Her language and actions are not that of the ideal woman; reasons enough for the patriarchal society to believe she must be tamed. At the beginning of Act 2, Katharine exhibits this behavior when she interrogates a bound Bianca and reacts with physical violence when Bianca asks her to free her. Katherine also responds to the instruction of the disguised Hortensio by breaking a lute over his head, refusing to be ruled by his advice, even in a field that requires training. Finally, when she meets Petruchio, their verbal sparring becomes physical when she "tries" his self-declared gentle status with blows. Katharine meets linguistic provocation with physical force. Her aggression arises from the category of shrew itself, because the behavior her sister displays can look desirable only in comparison to extreme displays of feminine aggression (5).

Due to this, Katherine is dehumanized on several occasions. Early on, Bianca's elderly suitor, Gremio, refers to her as a 'wild-cat' (1. 2. 196), suggesting she is vicious and untamable. Everywhere she turns, Katharine is called "shrew," a designation that demonstrates the societal shunning and

disapproval applied to her in Padua. When Gremio refuses Baptista's invitation to court Katherine, claiming to cart her would be more appropriate to her unladylike (and therefore, unmarriageable) behavior, Katherine protests the accusation that she is a shrew and asserts she will not marry for she has no desire to. Due to her refusal to be ruled by male fantasy of femininity, the men in her life believe manipulation of her is necessary in order for her to gain esteem in Padua's patriarchal network. Even before Petruchio meets Katherine, he attempts to redefine the position Katherine supposedly occupies. When Petruchio approaches Baptista about his interest in marrying Katherine, he tells Baptista that he seeks "Katherine, fair and virtuous," a designation Baptista refuses to recognize, to which he replies, "I have a daughter, sir, called Katherine" (2. 1. 43-44). Petruchio then lists the traits he expects to find in a wife (modesty, mildness), traits that are so unlike Katherine, Baptista discourages Petruchio, believing that his daughter Katherine cannot gratify such wishes: "She is not for your turn, the more my grief" (1. 63). Petruchio's goal in speaking to Baptista is to not only get Baptista's permission to marry her, but to also woo Katherine. He reveals his plan to woo her in his soliloquy, Petruchio reveals his plan to woo Katharina in a short soliloquy; he reasons that no matter how badly she yells at him or treats him, he'll simply respond to her with kind compliments and praise. When Petruchio reveals this plan, he does so believing that all women are meant to be tamed by men, and as long as a man devises a cunning plan of action, he can possess any woman he chooses. Petruchio makes it clear that wooing a woman is simply a game in which men and women have roles; and if the players have enough patience and planning, they can ensure that each party plays these roles and gets married in the end. A defining characteristic

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of those in upper-class Elizabethan England was their view on marriage. As amongst the upper-class marriage meant financial stability, most men sought out wives who came from wealthy families.

A clear example of this, is Baptista, a gentleman of Padua, who finds it impossible to marry off his daughter Katharine on account of her outspoken independence. As it was in Elizabethan England, marriage was considered more of a financial transaction between a woman's father and her future husband rather than a mutual decision out of love. Women had very little say in the matter and were expected to behave sweetly and submissively in order to be more attractive to men. As Baptista is the sole authority of his family and it is his responsibility to marry off his daughters, he makes the decision that his younger, more desirable daughter Bianca, cannot marry until Katharine has a suitor. Baptista's rule that no one can marry Bianca, who is in high demand, until Katharine, who is not, gets married sets the action of the play in motion; To upper-class society men, a woman was viewed as a bargaining tool, meaning that when she was born, she belonged to her father, but once she got older, he would decide whom she would marry; this marriage was viewed as a tedious process in which a father could gain social and/or financial advancement, and the family which the daughter was married into, gained monetary rewards. Once a woman married a man, she became his property. Legally, during this time, a man and woman became one unified person; however, this person was the husband. Upon marrying his wife, the husband gained all control over his wife's personal property (2). Petruchio is the character who most blatantly expresses his desire to marry a woman for money. When Petruchio enters the play, he is a

young man from Verona visiting his friends in Padua. While he is there, he visits his friend Hortensio. Petruchio's visit comes as a surprise to Hortensio, who asks him what he is doing in Padua. Petruchio tells him that he wishes to seek his fortune because his father has died. He also adds, And I have thrust myself into this maze/ Happily to wive and thrive as best I may (1. 2. 54-55).

Upon hearing this, Hortensio tells Petruchio of Katharine, Baptista's shrewish daughter who must be married soon. He also assures Petruchio that if he does marry Katharine, he will get money and land from Baptista. Petruchio expresses that he does not care how foul a woman is; if she's rich enough, he will marry her; Thus hearing of Petruchio's aspirations, Hortensio introduces him to Katherine. He describes her as shrewd and forward so beyond measure, yet rich, very rich (1. ii. 89-92). Undaunted by the prospect of spending the rest of his life married to an intolerable scold, Petruchio retorts that know'st not gold's effect and that he will board her though she chide as loud. As thunder when the clouds in autumn crack (1. ii. 89. 92).

Petruchio's statement has the effect of expressing not only that he has more concern for money than affection for any woman, but also that he haughtily considers Katherine's temper no more frightening than thunder (3). Even though Petruchio seems to be born of a wealthy family, he still thinks money is more important than finding a compatible wife. This further illustrates the fact that wealth was a major defining component of the upper-class.

Petruchio's attitude towards marriage is also a classic example of how marriage was viewed by men. Later, having married Katherine, Petruchio says She is my good, my chattels, she is my house, My household stuff, my field, my barn, My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything; (3. 2. 230-32).

Regardless of whether he means this in seriousness or in jest, Petruchio deliberately positions her alongside the rest of his possessions: The use of animal imagery by Petruchio to assert his rights over his wife reflects the place of a woman in the Elizabethan patriarchal world. Petruchio embarks upon a task of taming his wife in line with the patriarchal values of the time. He applies torture, keeps her hungry, and denies sleep to her, to break her into obedience to her keeper. This is nothing but inhuman and the violation of human rights, but patriarchy is hardly bothered about it. Finally, she is tamed, and her chattering tongue is charmed. She gives up her sense of identity, the independence of her mind, is reduced to a puppet and Petruchio wins his field, and right supremacy, to the applause of all (4).

It seems that he is trying to endow her with all the characteristics of which he finds desirable in a wife. Throughout many of Shakespeare's plays, there has been a reoccurring theme of change through appearance. His characters are depicted to change their outward appearance to make themselves and others believe they are of a different social class or even a different gender. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherine is the character who must relearn how to function in a society based on binary gender opposites – the man as the dominating figure and the woman as the submissive figure; if Petruchio were female, he would be known as a shrew and shunned accordingly by men. As a man, Petruchio is in a position that allows him to oppose the conventions of society without fear of penalty or ostracism, while Kate must face judgment because she is a woman and in a subordinate position. Petruchio may act shrewish because he is the husband and patriarch; thus he has almost a right to act as he pleases without fear of punishment.

Behavior desirable in a male prohibits that same behavior in a female, for woman must mold herself to be complementary to man, not competitive with him" (8). While both men and women in this play don't always behave in accordance with traditional gender roles, it is the women" particularly Katherine" who are punished for such behavior. Katherine's stubbornness and strong desire for independence cause her to be denigrated, insulted, and abused throughout the play. She is not as highly valued as a potential wife as her sister and she humiliated by various male characters, especially by her own husband Petruchio; It is shown that marriage is the ultimate destiny and the final standard of the success and triumph of a woman's life. A woman has no life outside the institution of marriage, a major postulate of patriarchy. For this to happen, a woman needs to accept her lesser and lower position with reference to her future husband. She needs to cultivate her image of a good girl. A good girl is absolutely obedient to her father, and she will be a subject and slave to her future husband (4) .

By showcasing Petruchio's abuses of Katherine for a comedic value, The Taming of the Shrew appears as sexist and misogynistic. However, while the play does contain much misogyny on-stage, it also seems to expose some of the fallacies of the traditional, oppressive gender role; Katherine objects to both her treatment and the guise under which her treatment is provided. Her unwillingness to be complicit in Petruchio's strategy highlights the absurd idea that by denying her food he is preserving her health. Refusing to enter the fictional space that Petruchio has constructed, she holds onto her experience of reality in the face of his presentation of it (7). By the closing act, is somewhat unclear whether Katherine is really tamed by Petruchio.

With its disguises and deceptive performances in the comedy, it is left ambiguous whether or not Katherine has really been tamed or if she is simply pretending to be obedient to him. If this is the case, the play seems to suggest that gender roles are just that: roles to be played, rather than natural, true identities. Despite this ambiguity, it is clear that the play depicts gender as the most important factor of what dictates where one stands in society, especially as the differences in gender roles vary throughout the different social classes. Men have always attempted to tame women who do not adhere to the traditional gender roles established by society. Thus, if one attempts to challenge or defy their traditional gender roles, others are quick to restore order. While the methods of taming unruly women change through time and culture, society will still attempt to reform women who do not act in accordance with their appropriate gender roles.