

# The untamed shrew



William Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew* is set in Padua, where Katherine, the stubborn "shrew" the title refers to, is pursued by a bachelor named Petruchio who is in search of a wealthy wife. Katherine is known as the most ill-tempered woman in all of Padua, but Petruchio is not unnerved by this and makes it his aim to tame Katherine and turn her into the perfect submissive wife. At the end of the play, Katherine gives a speech that seemingly supports Petruchio's idealistic values on women which may lead some readers to believe she has successfully been tamed. However, Katherine is not truly tamed, instead she has become a smarter version of herself and recognizes when and where she needs to pretend to conform to society's standards in order to get what she wants, whereas before she would blurt out whatever came into her mind and often got in trouble for it. In addition, *The Taming of the Shrew* is a comedy and during her speech, Katherine uses irony to support her arguments, hinting that Shakespeare intended for it to be taken comically.

At the start of the play, Katherine's bold personality and unwillingness to back down is distinct, but as the story progresses she learns to control herself and choose her battles wisely, which some may mistake as her mindset being completely changed. Throughout the play, she is constantly switching between acting obedient and being her usual witty self, alluding that her actual character is not changed by the influence of Petruchio at all, she has simply learned how to deal under circumstances. An example of this is when Petruchio starves and deprives Katherine of sleep for days as a method for taming her. As time goes by, Katherine begins to pick up on his plan and instead of encouraging Petruchio's temper to rise by fighting back

as she would have before, she uses phrases like “ I pray you, husband” (IV. i. 168), showing her grown maturity to situations like these. This scene takes place in front of Grumio and the servants, so Katherine decides to play the role of the desirable wife in their eyes in order to make herself look better. By begging Petruchio and calling him “ husband”, she makes herself seem like she is finally submitting to him and gives Petruchio the twisted belief that he has authority over her. This gives Petruchio less reason to lash out and Katherine recognizes that in the future she will gain from these actions, which ultimately does happen when Petruchio no longer prevents Katherine from eating and sleeping. There are also other instances where Katherine rejects Petruchio’s values, knowing that it will not hurt her significantly in the long run. Not long after Katherine pleads with Petruchio, she stands up for herself when she wants a cap that he refuses to get for her. Petruchio tells her that she is not deserving enough to have the cap, to which she responds “ Why, sir, I trust I may have leave to speak, / And speak I will. I am no child, no babe” (IV. iii. 78-79). After Petruchio ignores her, she firmly announces “ Love me, or love me not, I like the cap, / And it I will have, or I will have none” (IV. iii. 89-90), reflecting her beliefs that women should not be restricted by men. Katherine and Petruchio are alone with only the haberdasher, who is not of great importance in their society, as a witness to this harsh conversation. When in an almost private setting, Katherine is free to express what is really on her mind and does not need to act like she is submissive to Petruchio. She knows that at this very moment, fighting back with Petruchio will not do her much harm, and therefore uses the opportunity to voice her opinions. Although at first Katherine could not restrict herself vocally, her growing maturity and undeniable intelligence shines throughout

the play when she manages to deceive people into thinking she truly has changed.

This intelligence is seen time and time again when Katherine uses her docile act to keep her reputation with the public in place and to gain some power in society. When Petruchio announces he is going to leave the wedding reception, Katherine fights back in front of all the guests saying “ Do what thou canst, I will not go today, no, nor tomorrow, not till I please myself. The door is open, sir. There lies your way” (III. ii. 214-216). In Shakespearean times, this exchange is seen as public humiliation for both Petruchio and Katherine. Katherine’s sharp tongue and Petruchio’s unablensess to tame her shows the public what a disastrous couple they are. As their bond strengthens, Katherine and Petruchio come to realize that while they might never completely agree on anything, they are in an unspoken partnership together against the public. In a way, they are the outcasts in their community because of the one thing they share in common- their headstrong and stubborn personalities. They understand the importance of their presentation to their families, and therefore know how to manipulate people into thinking that they are a stable couple. All of a sudden, Petruchio is so confident that Katherine will obey him when he calls for her that when Lucentio proposes twenty crowns for whoever’s wife comes, he replies “ Twenty crowns? / I’ll venture so much of a hawk or hound, / But twenty times so much upon my wife (V. ii. 74-76). This unexpected change of attitude towards Katherine displays how much the couple’s private and public life differs. In the safety of their own home, Katherine would never follow Petruchio’s lead, but in this scene Petruchio knows Katherine will assume her

submissive wife identity because they are surrounded by other people and need to uphold a good reputation in front of them. By being the only woman who went to her husband when called for, she is given a position of power over the other women, something which she never would have had at the beginning of the play. She then uses this power to give a speech on the importance of women pleasing their husbands and includes many ironic references in it, suggesting that she does not believe there is any truth behind her words.

Katherine's ironic wording of her speech indicates that Shakespeare aimed for it to be a mockery of the idealistic marriage at that time because she uses phrases and terms that are exaggerated and do not reflect her encounter with marriage. She states " And for thy maintenance commits his body / To painful labor both sea and land, / To watch the night in storms, the day in cold, / Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe" (V. ii. 164-167). Here, she describes how husbands work endlessly in pain for the benefit of their wives while their wives are safe at home, their only requirement being to obey their husbands. Katherine's own experience is much different from this since Petruchio lives off Katherine's money and does not do any work. At one point, her home wasn't safe or secure either because Petruchio starved her and deprived her of sleep. Both these points she makes completely oppose her experience and add some comedic value to the speech, proving she is not being literal with her speech.

As Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* progresses, Katherine's character develops from an uncontrollable shrew to a clever woman. She is deceptive in her ways and chooses when to fight and when to back down as

it suits her. Her speech at the end does not reveal that she is tamed, it demonstrates her newfound maturity as she has the ability to handle compromising situations that go against her beliefs calmly. Furthermore, The Taming of the Shrew is a comedy and many of the themes in it such as Katherine's speech are meant to be taken humorously instead of literally. This is another indication that by the end of the play, Katherine is not tamed, she is simply wiser.