

Did the Shrew Tame You?: An Exploration of Sexual Politics in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

The Taming of the Shrew brings a compilation of themes to the forefront, delving into the treatment and bondage of women. Shakespeare wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* within the genre of shrew literature, which was popular in medieval and Renaissance times. Shrews appeared in almost every form of literature. Shakespeare makes Katherine 'spirited' enough that she can be read as a shrew who is forced into submission by her husband, Petruccio (Brown). The entirety of the play revolves around him discovering new attempts to show Katherine the error of her ways and cultivate her into the proper form of a silent, subjugated housewife. Indubitably Petruccio's power seems to have turned Katherine into the perfectly submissive wife, which is evident in her concluding monologue; yet her words could be completely satiric and revitalize the meaning of the play, invoking the idea that Katherine is not the shrew tamed, but instead Petruccio has fallen into his own trap.

Katherine's character depicts the archetypal rebellious woman: she is strong-willed, independent and determined to voice her opinion no matter the cost. In comparison with her younger sister, Katherine's personality is abrasive and intimidating, causing all who are familiar or intimate with her to doubt her ever securing a husband due to her behavior. The first introduction of Katherine portrays her coarse character, further unveiling her resistance to the mandates of patriarchal society. A suitor—Hortensio—has the audacity to say Katherine would be better hauled in a cart as he concludes that "she's too rough" for him (I.i.55). Katherine makes readers and viewers simultaneously develop a resistant, yet adoring relationship to her. We want to dislike her because she is so critical and difficult, yet she is so bold and independent that it is impossible to not appreciate the strength and determination of her character.

When Petruccio arrives on the scene, he is ever confident that he will succeed in taming the shrew, demonstrating an aura that causes Katherine to buck against his persuasive attempts. He believes that all others have failed because they are weak willed and his personality and fervency exceeds them all. With Katherine and Petruccio's personalities both being extreme, Petruccio believes they will compliment each other and he will succeed in taming her:

And where two raging fires meet together
They do consume the thing that feeds their fury.
Though little fire grows great with little wind,
Yet extreme gusts will blow out fire and all.
So I to her, and so she yields to me,
For I am rough, and woo not like a babe. (II.i.130-135)

Knowing that his personality makes him bold and unwavering, Petruccio recognizes that he is most capable in suitably taming Katherine and shaping her into a proper woman. Examining Petruccio's excitement to tame Katherine raises many issues. He views her personality as one that will challenge him, but Petruccio's intents can be viewed primarily in two ways. If his only intentions are to tame her to force her into a life of domesticity, then his character becomes domineering and overbearing, signifying an imbalanced relationship where the man wants complete control. In contrast, if his purpose is to calm her and be her equal in marriage, his approach, while still perhaps shocking and disagreeable, might have motives that are more pure than the alternative.

Katherine's relationship with Petruccio starts off with some difficulty, but Katherine's resistance and constant rebuttals against Petruccio provide evidence that Katherine's behavior is a product of her society and generation. Although Katherine is brash and abrasive, several

scholars argue that Katherine's character eludes archetypal shrew behavior. Carolyn E. Brown states a shrew is "a loquacious, scolding, railing, irrationally violent, tricky woman," yet Shakespeare's Katherine does not fit all of those attributes (Web). While Katherine does not uphold the exact representation of a shrew, her behavior is still abnormal to that of a proper woman. Having been raised in the shadow of a well-behaved younger sister and realizing the expectations of women of her time; Katherine rebels against the demands of her father and the patriarchal society of her time. She masks her frustrations through loose-lipped anger and her strength of will, demonstrating that she is a product of her environment.

In comparison with Katherine's final speech, her transformation of character, which strictly contradicts other forms of shrew literature, portrays a woman who has the capability to keep her husband under foot, even while being subjected to his domineering authority. Having just escaped the bondage of a critical father and men who view her as a rambunctious, uncooperative object, Katherine melds herself into a proper housewife, discussing the tasks that accompany that role. Yet, examining her transformation by the end of the play, it can be questioned that her subjugation is merely a means of acting the part. Examining their relationship prior to their marriage, Katherine's behavior is starkly different.

Viewing Katherine and Petruccio's first meeting, their wit combating the others, we are provided with the basis of their relationship. Amongst fiery words and lingering innuendo, Petruccio reveals his plans to Katherine:

For I am he am born to tame you, Kate,
And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate
Comfortable as other household Kates.
Here comes your father. Never make denial.

I must and will have Katherine to my wife. (II.i.268-272)

Petruccio heavily implies his intentions to tame and shape her into a housewife. Katherine is none too pleased with these arrangements, only seeing her father's struggle to marry her off so that her sister may revel in her suitors. Not only is Katherine controlled by her familial circumstances, but Petruccio attempts to employ arrangements to bind her similar to what her father has already created for her.

After their nuptial, as Petruccio begins his process of taming Katherine, his behavior brings out a different side of her. If she immediately perceives Petruccio's evils to tame her, she then quells her fire, even if for a moment. The first incident of this is seen at the dinner table when Petruccio yells at a servant for dropping a container of water:

Petruccio: You whoreson villain, will you let it fall?

Katherine: Patience, I pray you, 'twas a fault unwilling. (IV.I.135-136)

Their roles seemed to have reversed; Petruccio's countenance has morphed into one that is an attempt to place Katherine under his feet, while it seems Katherine diminishes her past feelings and behaviors to abide peacefully with her new husband.

According to John C. Bean, "Kate is humanized by her husband and discovers love through the discovery of her own identity" (78). While it is possible that the union between Katherine and Petruccio brings clarity to Katherine, unveiling her identity, it is also unlikely that Petruccio's attempts at taming her bring her such clarity that she is transformed into an obedient housewife, completely foregoing her past nature. Elizabeth Hutcheon, vouching that Petruccio is attempting to educate Katherine suggests that she "is without a self-generated identity...Not only does Petruchio attempt to define Katherine, but he also controls how she is understood by those

around her” (Hutcheon). Katherine has been bound in a never-ending cycle of controlling men and her identity becomes muddled, which is why she speaks her mind so fervently.

Katherine’s behavior at the start of the play is a product of the patriarchal society’s influence and its expectation of her. To submit to Petruccio fully, she denies her own identity. In response to Bean’s argument, Angelina Avedano agrees that Katherine “is therefore able to ‘submit’ herself to Petruccio because she trusts him not to dominate her. It is her trust in Petruccio, not her submission to him, which elevates him to a more honorable and respectable position” (Avedano). If Katherine would maintain her shrew-like tendencies, her marriage to Petruccio would be a constant battle. Not wanting to continue into misery, Katherine abandons her old ways to succumb to Petruccio’s authority. Yet her submission to him allows Petruccio to believe that he was successful so that she can always have an upper hand, a sort of equal battle of wits in their partnership.

Petruccio claims that he will kill Katherine with kindness. His devices of starving her, keeping her awake, and complaining about her apparel and the state of their bedspread are all a part of his ploy.

This is a way to kill a wife with kindness,

And thus I’ll curb her mad and headstrong humour.

He that knows better how to tame a shrew,

Now let him speak. ‘Tis charity to show. (IV.i.188-191)

He finds nothing wrong with his approach to taming Katherine; he thinks that he can curb her old passionate ire. Yet he has some doubts that he will succeed and asks for assistance, noting that if there is another that has a better approach, he is open to suggestions. With no one correcting his tactic to tame Katherine, he continues forward, hoping he will be successful. Contemplating that

Petruccio asked for assistance and that he is not entirely sure if his plan will work, illuminates his slight doubt in taming her. When Petruccio is not present, Katherine vents her frustrations of maintaining a calm demeanor, saying: “The more my wrong, the more his spite appears” (IV.ii.2). At this point, she sees Petruccio’s actions as careless and abusive. When he tells her that she cannot have the hat she wants, Katherine defends her identity, defying his wishes:

Petruccio: When you are gentle you shall have one, too.

Katherine: Why, sir, I trust I may have leave to speak,

And speak I will. I am no child, no babe.

Your betters have endured me say my mind,

And if you cannot, best you stop your ears.

My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,

Or else my heart concealing it will break,

And rather than it shall I will be free

Even to the uttermost as I please in words. (IV.iii. 71-79)

Upon Katherine sharing her opinion with Petruccio, it develops the idea that this scene marks a pivotal moment in her marriage and Katherine appears to win this round (Jaster). Petruccio informs her that until she abides by his demands, he will not give her the things she desires and his “play on Katherina’s words slights her social position and intimates that she thwarts her master with her supposed recalcitrance” (Jaster). Katherine realizes that she will have to play a game to gain what she wants. Her words seem to be a warning that she will play along with his game, that she will be “the puppet,” but that means that she is also capable of playing along to pull one over on him.

In act four, scene six, Petruccio and Katherine, debate over whether or not the sun is the moon, and Petruccio wins the endeavor. “Petruccio, go thy ways. The field is won” (IV.vi.24), Hortensio tells him. Not only does Petruccio win this round, but makes a fool of Katherine, coercing her into welcoming a man, but insisting on Katherine calling the man a woman. Katherine obeys him, but only after finally relenting after their first altercation:

Then God be blessed, it is the blessed sun,
But sun it is not when you say it is not,
And the moon changes even as your mind.
What you will have it named, even that it is,
And so it shall be still for Katherine. (IV.vi.19-23)

Coming to the point where she realizes that she will have to submit to him to win him over, she succumbs to abiding by his demands.

Near the end of the play Katherine has become tamed, so to speak, and follows her husband's order. The other two women are disobedient to their husbands and have taken up the vices Katherine had previously gripped so tightly. When Petruccio calls for Katherine, she rushes to his side. Petruccio then asks her to fetch the other two women and says: “Katherine, I charge thee tell these headstrong women / What duty they do owe their lords and husbands” (V.ii.134-135). Katherine once again obeys his commands and gives a very convincing portrayal of the wifely duties that are intended to be upheld in the institution of marriage where the husband is lord and the wife, servant. Examining Katherine's headstrong ways prior to their marriage and even on occasion during their marriage, it can be conceived that her speech is not a heartfelt truth but instead, all in jest.

Believing that Katherine and Petruccio are happily married is not far fetched, but believing that Katherine willingly decides to push away her shrew-like behavior and immediately be subjugate to not only her husband, but in turn the entire patriarchy, acknowledges the weakness of her character. If her final speech is read as satirical, it emphasizes her strength and determination to not only be her husband's equal, but have the ability to rule over him if necessary. Her speech to encourage her fellow female listeners represents her transformation to a proper woman, illuminating Bianca and the widow's faults as wives: "And when she is forward, peevish, sullen, sour, / And not obedient to his honest will, / What is she but a foul contending rebel, / And graceless traitor to her loving lord?" (V.ii161-164). Katherine's speech targets the disobedient women present, the men that believed she could not be tamed, and her husband that struggled to gain dominance over her.

Katherine then exemplifies her past actions in recollection:

My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
My heart as great, my reason haply more,
To bandy word for word and frown for frown;
But now I see our lances are but straws." (V.ii.174-177).

Katherine discusses her past actions as meaningless and a form of weakness that she can now shed as she turns to her husband for strength. But if Katherine is seriously tamed, she will live a life always putting her husband first and being in debt to him and his graciousness. Contrary to that, if her speech is only for show, then Katherine has proved that although she could be tamed, she will not allow her husband to be "her lord, her life, her keeper" (V.ii.150). Instead she has fooled Petruccio and all of the men present, portraying herself to be a proper, dignified woman

who has the ability to use the hand that she so conveniently places under her husband's foot to trip him up if necessary.

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Abstract

This paper explores the sexual politics present in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, examining the gender roles that influence the relationship between Katherine and Petruccio. By analyzing Petruccio's attempts at taming Katherine, in comparison to the ending of the play where she is supposedly tamed, I will emphasize Katherine's abilities to manipulate a patriarchal society's rule over women. While she seems to demonstrate acquiescing full sovereignty to her husband, my argument will pose that Katherine assumes the role of a proper wife to trick Petruccio, allowing her access to marital dominance. By examining the patriarchal society of the time period, this paper will elucidate the sexual politics dictated by the cultural era in relation to Katherine and Petruccio's relationship. Rather than supposing that Katherine is tamed under Petruccio's subterfuge, this paper will conclude that Katherine remains unchanged by patriarchal force, and instead uses manipulation and wiles to exude governance when necessary in their marriage, deceiving a fooled Petruccio.