

Change within Gender Roles in *The Taming of the Shrew*

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William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, although beloved, reflects notions of gender roles common at that time.¹ Written in the late sixteenth century, it takes place in a world where men are the dominant figures in society, and women were expected to obey their husbands and fathers under every circumstance. Although it is not Shakespeare's most famous play, it has had its fair share of adaptations made, both on the stage and on the screen which demonstrates its prominence. The play focuses on the bold and fiery Katherina, who has not been able to marry due to her attitude, and her marriage to Petruchio, who has taken on the task of taming her and transforming her into a fit woman for society. Some will see Petruchio's treatment to be cruel, abusive, and unnecessary, and there are certainly times where his methods seem questionable. Alternatively, there are also those who will see how much Petruchio helped Kate become a better person. This help caused each of them to admire the other and allowed their love to blossom and take shape. Even though they took the long way around, Katharina and Petruchio were both better people by the end of the play, making their troubles worth it and despite there being questionable aspects of the play, the outcome and change of the two lovers is for the better.

The play was first published in the 1590s, during Queen Elizabeth I's reign, which lasted from 1558 to 1603; this fact is crucial to understanding the play because the show would have been performed before the Queen and was subject to her judgment. Additionally, readers must keep in mind the social norms of Elizabethan England. Queen Elizabeth did not have a husband, but instead ruled alone. This put her in a unique situation, as women were not typically seen to reign unaided by a man. The significance of Shakespeare portraying a fiery woman who did not want to get married can be found in looking at it through a lens that this is an artistic representation of the Queen. However, Shakespeare takes it a step further by having Katherina be tamed, wed, and in love by the end of the show, which is a typical ending for a Shakespeare comedy. Shakespeare was no stranger to women stepping

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publisher, 2006).

outside of the bounds of what society deemed as acceptable, as his own daughter, Suzanna, was able to sign her name even though girls were forbidden to go to school and therefore forbidden to read or write. This has given way to speculation that she could do just that, read and write, which was not common practice among women.

With a strong woman reigning England alone, the possibility of changes taking place disrupting the gender roles of the time might have been a subject that was explored by Elizabeth. This could have been a great gateway in taking steps towards equality and mobility for women, but nothing changed under Elizabeth's reign. The Queen was obviously pressured numerous times into choosing a husband, but that was a route she was determined to abstain from. Instead, she considered herself married to England, its subjects her children, and she even wore her Coronation ring as a symbol of this union.² Elizabeth knew that her position in power was being heavily watched and judged from all those around her, specifically those in parliament, and she gave them no reason to question her rule. Although she was an educated woman, she made no attempts to offer schooling for other women even though she was a supporter of universities and secondary schools.³ Allison Heisch elaborates on this by explaining that "one of the reasons why this process went so smoothly was that the Queen, having established herself as an exceptional woman, did nothing to upset or interfere with male notions of how the world was or should be organized."⁴ From this brief look into Queen Elizabeth I's reign, it is clear that changes for women were not going to happen under her leadership, but it must also be noted that her refusal to get married is still seen as bold and unusual for a woman in her time, especially as a Queen, and it is this rebellious side of the Queen that Shakespeare uses for inspiration.

The play begins with Katherina's younger sister, Bianca, having suitors who wanted to marry her. The problem with this was that their father, Baptista, forbid his younger daughter to marry before her older sister. Bianca longed for marriage, but her sister's unattractive qualities would not bring any man to want her in marriage. Hortensio was one of Bianca's suitors and enlisted the help of an old friend to move things along. Petruchio, a young man from Verona, was in search of a wife, but unlike

² Allison Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth I and the Persistence of Patriarchy" *Feminist Review* No. 4 (Spring, 1980): 50.

³ Heisch, 53.

⁴ Heisch, 53.

most men, he was not picky about what kind of a woman he would marry, nor did he require love. His only concern was that the woman he married should bring a lot of wealth to him through her dowry. And so, unafraid of a headstrong and rude wife, he took on the task of wooing and marrying Kate. His plan was to tame Kate out of her shrewish ways by starving her, being cruel to their servants, and by showing up to their wedding late and underdressed. Their relationship was very problematic from the start and at times even seen as worrisome. One should also acknowledge the use of the word “taming” throughout this play, as Petruchio’s actions were indeed used as a way of transforming Kate from a headstrong and rebellious girl, into a lady-like and respectable woman. Although some might find the use of this word to be offensive, it is the definition of what Petruchio was attempting to do and adequately defines what eventually happened, even if it seems like a degrading way to describe it.

Before diving into this complex relationship, the root of all this trouble must be addressed: Kate would never have married Petruchio if her father had not insisted on her needing a husband before Bianca. Diane Elizabeth Dreher illuminates just how much charge fathers had over daughters and how it was not unusual to hear of fathers arranging marriages for their children during the Elizabethan era. Therefore, Baptista’s push of matrimony on Kate was not a surprise, and although Kate did her best to resist, a father’s word was law.

Although some fathers might have arranged these matches out of love, the blatant control of another person’s life is hard to comprehend for the modern reader. Katherina’s marriage to a man she despised was unfortunate for her but not an uncommon practice. These arranged marriages could happen for various reasons, from a father simply wanting his daughter to be married as soon as possible, to in more extreme cases, the family’s being in need of money and a wealthy match could save them. Whatever the reason, marriage was looked upon with favor and was a position that all women were supposed to desire. Husbands were often picked for the daughters and a good match, according to the men, was mostly based on what would be most advantageous to the family and there was not much thought into what kind of a man he was. Men in Elizabethan times were seen as authoritative figures, as is shown in the characters of Baptista and Petruchio, and they ran much of what went on in society. When arranging the wedding, Petruchio lied to Baptista and said that Katherina had agreed to marry him, putting things quickly into motion. While

Petruchio had a strong hand in the outcome of Katherina's future, her father played a large role in it as well. Both men only took into consideration what was best for them. When discussing the reasons for these two men's desire for Katherina's marriage to Petruchio, Natasha Korda explains that:

The nuptial bond between the two families promises a mutual beneficial exchange of values for the domestic economies of each: Petruchio hopes to obtain surplus capital (a dowry of 'twenty thousand crowns'), and Baptista, the status or symbolic capital that comes with land (the jointure Petruchio offers in return [2.1 125]). Kate's commodification as a marriage-market cate thus proves beneficial to both her father's and her future husband's household.⁵

When speaking about the relationships between several of Shakespeare's father and daughter characters, author Marianne Novy argues that "...the fathers object to their daughter's wishes, real or apparent, to love men other than their father or their father's choices."⁶ A daughter's concerns or requests were not taken seriously. The only men daughters were expected to love were their fathers and the men that their fathers chose for them to wed. Daughters went from one controlling man, her father, right into the hands of another, her husband, and both of these kinds of men are shown in *The Taming of the Shrew*, as Kate's desires are overruled and her future decided for her.

As stated above, Kate did everything in her power to avoid this marriage. Unfortunately for her, both her father and Petruchio were determined to make it so. Petruchio even told Katherina exactly what he planned to do: "Thou must be married to no man but me; / For I am he am born to tame you Kate, / And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate / Conformable as other household Kates." [2.1.267-270] He meant to marry her and turn her into the kind of wife that a man would expect to find in a woman, a woman that is well kept and accepted by society. Rachel De Wachter described the way Elizabethan men pursued women; comparing it to going on a hunt

⁵ Natasha Korda, "Household Kates: Domesticating Commodities in *The Taming of the Shrew*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer, 1996): 120.

⁶ Marianne Novy, "Shakespeare and Emotional Distance in the Elizabethan Family" *Theatre Journal* Vol. 33, No. 3 (October, 1981): 324.

and gaining a wife was the hunting prize.⁷ A woman was no more than a hunters trophy for men to flaunt, and while distracted by their shiny prize, they take no notice of the human being behind the gleaming shiny title of wife. Using Kate in this way was merely means for Petruchio to earn money quickly and while he was doing a great service to a friend, this was inconsequential to him.

Petruchio was anything but kind to Katherina; he starved her, would not allow her new clothes, and acted aggressive towards his servants, who were also Kate's by marriage. Emily Detmer gives a clear argument of why the action Petruchio took against Kate can be seen as domestic abuse by today's standards, but how this was also seen as merely expressing the breadth of manhood in the past.⁸ Detmer brings up the point of how no physical action is taken against Kate and because of this, some people may not see the possible domestic violence in this relationship. However, even if he had never raised a hand to Katherina, it was mental abuse he put her through that condemns him.

Although strange by today's standards, during the Elizabethan era this was seen as anything but cruel or odd; Kate was a woman out of control and a husband was all that was needed to tame her. As Detmer makes a point of stating, however, domestic violence can come in many different shapes and forms, such as intimidation, isolation, threats, and emotional abuse.⁹ There are more than a few of these traits that can be blatantly seen in Kate and Petruchio's marriage.

While there is no mistaking the indecent way Petruchio treats Katherina, the standards of the time put Petruchio's own standing into question. Elizabeth Hutcheon introduces some rather interesting concepts on this within *The Taming of the Shrew*. She brings her reader's attention to the fact that shrew did not necessarily mean a shrewdly spoken woman; in fact, during the time of the play's publication, shrew also meant a middle-class male.¹⁰ By this understanding, the title of the play could be viewed as a taming of Petruchio, as well as Kate. This puts into question the reason why he could be acting this way. He is as much changed by the end of the play as

⁷ Rachel De Wachter, "Power and Gender in *The Taming of the Shrew*," British Library, November 15, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2022. <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/power-and-gender-in-the-taming-of-the-shrew?mobile=off>

⁸ Emily Detmer, *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

⁹ Detmer, *Shakespeare and Women*, 283.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Hutcheon, "From Shrew to Subject: Petruchio's Humanist Education of Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*" *Comparative Drama* Vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter, 2011): 315-337.

Kate, adding a double meaning to the title of the play. Hutcheon also brings up the concept that Kate's transformation can be looked at in an entirely different light: Petruchio taught Kate how to be a well-spoken lady, one who fit in with society and would not make people run away when they saw her coming. No one who reads the play could argue with the fact that Kate needed to change her attitude and treatment of others; she was wild and rude, even to her own father, sister, and on some occasions, get violent and attack anyone who was in her way.

In a scene with the two sisters, Kate and Bianca, Shakespeare inserted stage directions such as, [*Strikes her*] [2.1.22], and [*Flies after Bianca*] [2.2.29], when giving visuals of what Kate was doing to her younger sister. It is clear through how Kate's character was written that something did need to change in her demeanor, and the idea of Petruchio doing a service to Kate is certainly a fresh and different take on this relationship by modern standards.

Natasha Korda also has an interesting and similar take on this relationship when she discusses Petruchio's tactics on domesticating Kate.¹¹ She writes that in these times, household work was being passed on to servants which left less work for the lady of the home to do. That is why Petruchio was not attempting to teach Kate to cook, clean, etc., but rather to obey, be submissive to her husband, and learn how to run a household. He was attempting to teach her the necessary qualities of being a successful housewife that would have allowed her to thrive and rise in society. He could have demanded that she cooked and cleaned for him, which would have kept her out of the public eye, but he did not want Kate to be another servant waiting on him, but rather a woman whom he could be proud of to have by his side and call wife.

The final moment where everything fell into place was when Katherina, the newly wedded Bianca, and one other married woman, were all put to the test to see who would obey their husbands. The first two wives failed, and to everyone's great surprise, Kate came out triumphant when she answered Petruchio's summon. She astonished everyone further by delivering her famous speech on how wives should be thankful to their husbands for all of the sacrifices they perform for their wives, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee, / And for thy maintenance commits his body / To painful labour both by sea and land, / To watch the night in storms, the day in cold, / Whilst thou liest warm at

¹¹ Korda, "Household Kates," 109-131.

home, secure and / safe; / And craves no other tribute at thy hands / But love, fair looks, and true obedience—/ Too little payment for so great a debt.” [5.2.146-154]

It was only from Kate’s newfound admiration of Petruchio in his role of husband that he himself came to understand just how fortunate and blessed he was to have Kate as his wife. She had awakened a new side of him that brought about an elaborate change from within and made him realize that money was not the most important aspect of a marriage, but that having someone who loved and cared for you was the greatest gift one could receive. Petruchio then offered to take the next step within their marriage when he said, “Come, Kate, we’ll to bed,” [5.2.184] where they both finally agreed to consummate their marriage. This scene in the play, specifically, was where the troubled couple finally realized just how much they had grown to honor and respect each other. They realized love had become a part of their union, which was something no one saw coming, most especially themselves.

It would be incorrect to assume that Katherina was completely tamed out of all her wildness, but she had learned to play the game that Petruchio had introduced her to; in order to get what she wanted in this marriage, she would have to respect Petruchio. In a journal written by Marianne Navy, she argued that “Some of Shakespeare’s recent critics have seen Petruchio’s behavior in *The Taming of the Shrew* as an attempt to teach Kate to play, to draw her into his game. Kate’s final attitude, they suggest, is less passive submission than a playful cooperation.”¹² From this newfound balance of respect, the two of them would be able to live a happy life together where they no longer despised each other.

The Taming of the Shrew is a play that some may find offensive or insensitive, but the context, period, and histories of literature must always be kept in mind for anyone who encounters this comedy, or any relic of the past. The mistreatment and lack of respect for a woman’s desires can be seen, but Shakespeare intended this play to have a happy ending, and that is exactly what the audience gets. By the end of the play, Petruchio and Katherina were content. Everyone was able to have their happy ending, even after suffering many hardships. Although Katherina now had different and praiseworthy qualities, Petruchio was not without change

¹² Marianne Navy, “Patriarchy and Play in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 9, No. 2 (1979): 264.

either, as he had learned to respect and honor the woman he had married while moving away from material love. The two of them had grown into respectable and honorable people in their own right, and learned to love each other, while still remaining true to themselves.

