The Taming of the Shrew: 'This is not a woman being crushed'

An exercise in misogyny – or a love story about a man liberating a woman? As the RSC stages The Taming of the Shrew, Maddy Costa asks actors and directors how they read the play

Maddy Costa
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A man acquires a rich but headstrong woman as his bride. At the wedding, he punches the priest and later refuses to attend the family party. He drags his bewildered wife through the mud to his country house, where he starves her, deprives her of sleep and contradicts every word she says. By the time they return to her father's home, the woman is meek and submissive.

When you strip The Taming of the Shrew of its comic sub-plot, in which a bevy of lovers in disguise woo a beauty, and focus on the bare bones of the story of wildcat Katherine and her "tamer" Petruchio, Shakespeare's early play looks like a nasty piece of work. Indeed, critics and academics have spent much of the past century denouncing it as barbarous, offensive and misogynistic. Yet Shrew is remarkably popular with audiences: the production opening in Stratford-upon-Avon this week is the Royal Shakespeare Company's third (fourth, if you count last year's for young audiences) in less than a decade. Either theatre-goers are secret sadists, who like nothing better than watching a spot of wife-bashing, or there's more to Shrew than meets the eye.
Over the past two decades, productions have divided into two camps. On one side, performances emphasise the brutality of Kate and Petruchio’s relationship. In this interpretation, Shrew can be considered, in director Edward Hall’s words, "theatre of cruelty". His all-male production in 2007, he says, "followed the text through to its bitterest conclusion. Look at what Shakespeare has written: Kate is starved of sleep, beaten, and refused food." Too often, he argues, this abuse is played for laughs, when what should be being communicated is Kate's suffering.

Hall doesn't think Shakespeare was being misogynistic in portraying female subjugation, but questioning the values of society. "He's challenging an audience's expectations of how a woman is supposed to behave. What if, as a human being, she doesn't want to roll over, as was expected in Shakespeare's day? I actually think he's championing the woman's rights."

The other, less stomach-churning interpretation is that this is a curiously misunderstood love story. Lucy Bailey, who is directing the new RSC show, believes their attraction is instant, and what unfolds is "all foreplay to one event, which is to get these two people into bed". For this to work, Bailey says, Petruchio must never appear to be superior to Kate. "In rehearsals, the play quickly becomes odd if Petruchio starts to lecture, becomes the educator, or takes any moral position. It becomes punitive, and you start to think, 'This is dead and ghastly.' It is a fantastic battle of the sexes: it's because they won't allow each other to win that the game continues."

The trouble with the love-at-first-sight version is that it's hard to understand why Petruchio should mistreat Kate so. Gregory Doran, who directed the play for the RSC in 2003, suggests that Petruchio doesn't know how to handle their relationship because he is as much of an outcast as Katherine. He points out
that both characters are frequently described as mad: "Madness is a way that society can label you. That's what Kate and Petruchio are struggling against. I don't think it's describing an ideal relationship, but it is a real relationship."

Director David Farr, whose 2002 staging shifted the setting to 1950s America, believes Shakespeare offers a key to Petruchio's mental imbalance by telling us his father has recently died. "Here is a man in grief," says Farr, "who takes out his disaffection and anger on other people almost as an experiment." That idea of experimenting is crucial to David Caves, playing Petruchio in Bailey's production. He sees Petruchio as a man whose pride is piqued by encountering a woman capable of outwitting him. "If he dishes something out to her, she dishes it back to him twice as bad. He's constantly having to improvise."

Nichola McAuliffe, who has played Katherine twice, believes we misread Petruchio's actions because we don't understand his references to falconry. When Petruchio says he will deny Katherine sleep and food, he is describing the way birds of prey are socialised, with owner and animal enduring the same deprivations. "If you know anything about falconry," she argues, "you would know that you have to go through this with the bird: if it's cruel, it's cruel to yourself, too." Sure enough, Shakespeare gives the impression that it is Petruchio keeping Katherine awake – and when she doesn't eat, he doesn't either.

There remains a difficulty in these "torture" scenes: Katherine barely speaks, whereas Petruchio never shuts up. According to Lisa Dillon, playing Katherine in Bailey's production, this contrasts with Katherine's long final speech (in which she advises wives to be gentle to their husbands), showing how much she has changed. "If you look at the language she uses, all the way into the
second half, it's odd," says Dillon. "The verse is staccato, there's lots of saying 'What?' and 'Why?' You get the feeling nobody ever listens to her. Petruchio gives her the power of speech and language: he gives her freedom to speak. That is not a woman being crushed."

What's so appealing about the love interpretation is that Shrew becomes, not a soppy romance, but a subtle critique of society's attitudes to women, already changing in Shakespeare's time. Bailey and Dillon argue that Katherine is rescued by Petruchio: if she didn't marry him, says Dillon, "she would go from shrew to witch and end her days as a madwoman".

Kathryn Hunter, who played Katherine at the Globe in 2003, remembers how rankled she felt that "her father was going to marry her off after a single interview". For McAuliffe, too, it is the bartering of daughters that looks really misogynistic. In accordance with custom of the day, Katherine's father, Baptista, promises his two daughters to the men who have the most to offer financially. And, as a portrait of womanhood, spirited Katherine is preferable to her flirty, wily sister Bianca. "Bianca gives women a very bad name," says Michelle Gomez, who played Katherine for the RSC in 2008. "She is the manipulative, backstabbing, awful version of what women are, fluttering her eyelids to get what she wants."

One of the tenets of 20th-century feminism was that the personal is political. Perhaps what's so difficult for modern feminists is accepting that, in Shrew, the personal is just personal. Bailey says that Katherine's final speech, in which she declares herself ready to put her hand beneath her husband's foot, "is a love gift. Kate wouldn't behave like this if she were married to anyone else. It's wrong to mix it up with a weird sexual political statement: it's a personal statement."
McAuliffe adds: "That's basically what I say to my husband: I will put my hand under your foot if you want – but I trust you not to ask me to." Shrew, she says, is a warts-and-all portrait of a marriage: "You make room for each other, you fit their holes and they fit yours. Yes, they drive you potty – but that's between you two. You are a united front. That's what Kate and Petruchio learn. They are one person by the end."

Feminist Themes in and Critiques of Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew

Erin Furstnau

Shakespeare’s plays open themselves up to a world of interpretation. Whether in discourse, historical context, symbolism, or intentions to leave the audience in conflict with themselves, there is no dispute about his plays lending themselves to every reader’s response. My response to reading “The Taming of the Shrew” was a strange one. I understand that this play is meant to be one of Shakespeare’s comedies, and one of his most popular ones at that; however, there seemed to me to be an awkward seriousness in Petruchio’s treatment of Katherine that bordered on something darkly misogynistic rather than comedic. In that response, it seems as though I’m not alone. “The Taming of the Shrew” has faced many feminist critiques assessing patriarchy, misogyny, woman as commodity, and subordination of woman’s story within a larger, more “serious” frame of class.

Regarding the interpretation of Petruchio’s treatment of Katherine, questions are raised as to whether his behavior is a mirror to hers, simply reflecting back her own demeanour so that, in turn, she understands how she’s treated others, or if his actions towards her are much more misogynistic and cruel, and his intentions to “tame” her a reflection of patriarchy instead. In “Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in The Taming of the Shrew,” John C. Bean argues:

What we should emphasized in The Taming of the Shrew is the emergence of a humanized heroine against the background of depersonalizing farce… If we can appreciate the liberal element of Kate’s last speech--the speech that strikes modern sensibilities as advocating male tyranny--we can perhaps see that Kate is tamed not in the automatic manner of behavioural psychology but in the spontaneous manner
of the later romantic comedies where characters lose themselves in chaos and emerge, as if from a dream, liberated into the bonds of love. (66)

He goes on to explain:

Since farce treats persons as if they lacked the sensitivities of an inward self, that genre is appropriate to a view of marriage in which the wife is mainly the husband's chattel. But Shakespeare's romantic comedy is concerned with the discovery of the inward self, with love as personal, and hence with the relationship of lovers who face together the problem of reconciling liberty and commitment in marriage. (66)

However, Dorothea Kehler presents a different perspective in “Echoes of the Induction in The Taming of the Shrew,” stating:

The explicit and implicit subjects of this play--arranged marriages, the authority of fathers and husbands, the obedience expected from daughters and wives, the economic helplessness of most women--were issues and experiences that touched the lives of everyone in Shakespeare’s audience. While modern interpreters may see Shrew as a high-spirited comedy about role-playing of game-playing, they suppress the knowledge that men, not only on stage, but off, wrote the play and assigned the roles, chose the game and made the rules. (31)

George Bernard Shaw also had a striking opinion and criticisms of the play according to Lise Pederson in her essay “Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew VS. Shaw’s Pygmalion.” She explains that Shaw's Pygmalion is a similar story to The Taming of the Shrew, as "in both plays a man accepts the task of transforming a woman from one kind of person to another, radically different kind." (15), but that the treatment is drastically different.

Petruchio consistently plays the role of a bully in his relationship with Kate, and it is, indeed, the means by which he transforms her from a quarrelsome shrew to a sweet-tempered and obedient wife. Not only does he frustrate her every wish, but he subjects her to mental anguish in the humiliation brought upon her by his attire and behavior at their wedding and to physical abuse in causing her horse to dump her into the mud, in preventing her from sleeping night after night, and in keeping food from her with the declared intention of starving her into submission. (Pederson 15)

Pederson explains the parallels between The Taming and Pygmalion, but that one thing in particularly is drastically different--the “transformed” woman’s final speech. Shaw's character of Eliza Doolittle delivers a speech that “expresses a direct repudiation of the method by which Shakespeare allows Petruchio to ‘tame’ Kate, because it asserts that the example of bad-tempered, uncontrolled behavior can only bring about behavior of the same kind in the learner, not a change to sweet-tempered reasonableness such as Kate exhibits.” (19).
In both *The Taming* and *Pygmalion* there is a similar frame of a subordinate figure, the characters of Christopher Sly and Alfred Doolittle, who transcends his own social status. (Pederson 17). Such a frame, but in comparison to *The Rape of Lucrece* rather than *Pygmalion*, is explored by Annabel Patterson in her essay “Framing the Taming,” in which she invokes Ann Thompson’s introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew* in the Cambridge Edition, stating that, “Thompson emphasizes the complex meta-theatrical effect whereby the taming plot is mimetically and hence ontologically subordinated to the Sly plot, so that the woman’s story must be regarded as less ‘real’ than it seems.”(309). Patterson explains that in the framing of *Taming of the Shrew* there is a direct correlation between Sly’s superior/inferior, master/subject class distinction and that of the subordination of wife to husband, as delivered in Katherine’s final speech.

Patterson also touches upon Christopher Sly’s wordplay, as “in the quarto text, “comonty” is replaced, correctly, by ‘comoditie’—that is to say, goods, merchandise, a possession, or, in a more abstract sense, advantage, profit, self-interest.”(310). She continues, “This canny mistake of Sly’s is intensified by a second misunderstanding so that ‘stuff’ as abstract matter or content becomes, in Sly’s materialist thought, household ‘stuff’ or furnishings. Both terms, we soon learn, define Katherine’s marriage to Petruchio.”(310). Patterson observes, “Sly has somehow perceived, or made perceptible to others by unintentional wordplay, that the play he is about to see is not only ‘about’ the commodification of women but is itself a commodity.”(311). Similarly in “*The Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare’s Mirror of Marriage*” by Coppelia Kahn, she describes the ever-present attitude of women as commodities through the eyes of the merchant, and Kate’s father figure, Lord Baptista: “Baptista is determined not to marry the sought-after Bianca until he gets an offer for the unpopular Kate, not for the sake of conforming to the hierarchy of age as his opening words imply, but out of a merchant’s desire to sell all the goods in his warehouse.”(87).

Not only were women in the Renaissance something like “chattel” to use for a sort of bargaining between fathers and suitors, but the qualities that made them either desirable or undesirable as wives leads to the notion of a rightful patriarchal judgment of who a woman should and should not be, that men have a right to reject or “tame” qualities in a woman that they find unattractive. These unattractive qualities usually involve a dominant, mouthy woman such as Katherine. In “Misogyny is Everywhere,” Phyllis Rackin observes, “Reminders that women were expected to be chaste, silent, and obedient probably occur more frequently in recent scholarship than they did in the literature of Shakespeare’s time;” however, she explains, “the connections between female speech and female sexual transgression are retraced and the anxieties evoked by the possibility of female power are discovered in play after play.”(44). Rackin goes on to discuss the importance of history in literary studies, but that “the historical records of the past are often man-made and shaped by men’s anxieties, desires, and interests.”(47).

One such anxiety of man is the empowerment of women, thus to alleviate that, disempowerment must follow. As a mouthy, aggressive female character, Kate must be "tamed" to alleviate a collective
patriarchal anxiety. States Rackin, “Feminist Shakespeare criticism has been almost completely shaped by the scholarly consensus about the pervasiveness of masculine anxiety and women’s disempowerment in Shakespeare’s world.”(47). Revisiting “Shakespeare’s Mirror of Marriage” Kahn manages to turn that disempowerment around:

[critics] claim that [Petruchio] is Kate’s savior, the wise man who guides her to a better and truer self, or a clever doctor following homeopathic medicine. They have missed the greatest irony of the play. Unlike other misogynistic shrew literature, this play satirizes not woman herself in the person of the shrew, but male attitudes toward women. (86)

So should the whole of Taming of the Shrew be taken lightly as farce of with the weighty seriousness of Renaissance history and patriarchy? With so many interpretations no reader is required to focus too heavily on any one argument. There are a variety of arguments, speculations to be made of ambiguities, and a variety of confictions within oneself to appropriately place when reading any of Shakespeare’s plays. What feminist theorists, and all literary theorists ask, is that we the reader account for all the possibilities.

Works Cited


"You are come to me in happy time, / . . . for I have some sport in hand / Wherein your cunning can assist me much" says the Lord to the players in the Induction of The Taming of the Shrew. These seemingly simple words of welcome resonate, setting the context for the story about to unfold before us. We know that theatricality will be paramount to the story as the clever Induction pulls us into the drama through the story of Christopher Sly's duping. The Induction focuses our attention on the idea of appearances being deceiving, as well as on the importance of acting and role playing, but then it stops abruptly once The Taming of the Shrew proper begins. Why then take the time to introduce us to Sly and the merry jest of the Lord and his household? We can see the Induction as functioning in a number of ways (see the Induction commentary for more), but one of its most important purposes is to clue spectators into one of the play's main themes: role playing. In Shrew, Shakespeare provides disguises of all shapes and forms, from obvious physical disguises to more subtle psychological ones, and in the confines of a play within a play allows us to see a world which, not unlike our own, is teeming with role players.

The first and most obvious type of disguise employed in Shrew is the physical disguise. The notion of physical role playing is introduced at the very beginning of the play and continues throughout. When Christopher Sly falls asleep, the Lord decides to play a trick on him by having him carried to his manor and dressed as a nobleman. Lucentio, in Act I, Scene 1, assumes the role of Cambio, Bianca's tutor, while his servant, Tranio, disguises himself as Lucentio. Later, at the end of Act II, Scene 1, Tranio/Lucentio realizes he will need to present Vincentio, Lucentio's father, so he decides "suppos'd Lucentio/ Must get a father, call'd suppos'd Vincentio" (II.1, 407-408), and in Act IV, Scene 2, he finds a Pedant to play the part (72-121). We are introduced to yet another masquerader in Act III when Hortensio disguises himself as Litio, Bianca's music tutor. Aside from proper clothing, the only other thing these role players seem to need in order
to ensure their masquerades is someone to corroborate their stories. Certainly the ease with which these players enact their roles suggests that as spectators (both inside and outside the theater) we need to be aware that nothing is as it seems and that we are continually surrounded by people who may just be acting a part in order to obtain a desired outcome.

A bit less obvious than the physical disguises are the psychological disguises in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Both Kate and Petruchio assume psychological disguises. Kate becomes a shrew to compensate for the hurt she feels because of her father’s favoritism toward Bianca. In addition, she refuses to be saddled with an unworthy husband and so assumes the role of a shrew, insulating herself from the hurtful world around her, no matter how much she may secretly wish to join in the fun. Likewise, Petruchio assumes the role of shrew-tamer, exaggerating Kate’s bad behavior until she cannot help but see how infantile and childish her actions have been.

Bianca, too, assumes a psychological disguise, changing her perspectives drastically once she is safely married. Although she appears initially as a demure and pure soul, by play’s end we see that is not the case. As the play draws to a close, we see more and more of Bianca’s true disposition and learn that, ironically, it is Bianca, not Kate, who really is the shrew! In her case, her psychological disguise provided her the opportunity to appear better than she really was, suggesting again that we must be wary of the role playing going on around us. Physical disguises are fairly easy to detect and defuse, but psychological disguises are quite a different and more complicated matter.

Psychological and physical disguises, though, aren't the only ways to look at the role playing in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play is also, in many respects, self-reflective. It is metadramatic in the sense that it is self-reflexive, calling attention to the fact it is a play and the actors are all taking a part. Use of metadramatic devices is not unique to *Shrew*, however. Shakespeare often uses these devices in his plays to offer spectators inside jokes about the players, the drama, or the men playing the roles, as well as to draw attention to the artificiality of what we see before us and to urge us to recognize the elements of drama that permeate our daily lives. For instance,
in *Shrew*, the Induction provides a framework for the obvious performance we are about to witness. There must be no mistake about it: What we are about to see is not a mirror held up to life; rather, it is a fiction created by a troupe of actors (note, too, how calling attention to the play as a fiction rather than a slice-of-life lessens the seriousness of the play's message of male authority).

Besides the Induction and the obvious physical disguises (costumes, if you will), we can also see Shakespeare calling attention to his play as just that, a play, through the characters of Kate and Petruchio. Rather than seeing them as the shrew and the tamer, we can also see them as analogous to an actor and a director. In very literal terms, the character of Kate is created by a young man playing a woman who creates a shrewish persona for herself so she can more easily deal with the world around her (largely through avoiding it). When her disguise is no longer useful to her (or when the director, Petruchio, has finally convinced her to abandon the disguise) she assumes another role — this time the dutiful wife (thinking of Kate as an actress also helps with interpreting her speech in Act V, Scene 2).

Petruchio is the director who orchestrates the production we see before us. He theorizes on how to get Kate to do what he wishes and begins planning his performance early. Although the staging of Petruchio's performance starts at the wedding when he assumes the costume of a wild man, he stages his largest production when he vows to kill his wife with kindness. In helping Katherine to a more mature state of being, Petruchio dictates all the particulars, just as a director dictates a production. He runs the show, so to speak, governing when his wife will enter and exit, when she will eat and sleep, when the action will advance and when it will repeat itself, and even attempts to oversee time itself. He very carefully sets up the elaborate production at hand, helping move his shrewish wife into desirable mate.

Disguising and role playing of all sorts fill the scenes of *The Taming of the Shrew*. In addition to advancing the general plot, the pervasive disguising and metadramatic nature of the play suggest that role players abound and that, as wary spectators, we
must be like Petruchio, careful not to take things at face value because we are surrounded by duplicitousness.

Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew": An Analysis of a Tamed Kate

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The Globe Theatre that Shakespeare created has been performing Taming of the Shrew since its early days. | Source

Taming of the Shrew Essay

In The Taming of the Shrew, Kate goes through an amazing transformation from a harsh spitfire to a spirited yet submissive wife. This transformation is due to Petruchio’s over-the-top kindness towards
Kate and cruelty towards all others. Although her development is very evident from an outward perspective, she is essentially the same person after Petruchio’s taming as she is before. The true difference between the Kate that Gremio refers to as a “fiend of hell” (I.i.89), to the Kate that Baptista gives “another dowry to” (V.ii.120) is that she has learned to look beyond herself and begins to express love. It’s Kate’s desire for love with Petruchio’s help that leads her to expressing love and empathy without losing her feisty attitude.

Taming of the Shrew: Petruchio and Kate

Kate’s Desire for Love

Kate desires love, regardless of how unloving and unlovable she begins. In Act Two, Scene One, when Kate ties her sister’s hands, she questions Bianca of all the suitors that are after Bianca. Bianca recognizes this cruel act as jealousy and a desire to be loved when she states, “Is it for [Gremio] you do envy me so?” (VII.i.18). It is not Gremio or any other suitor that Kate feels jealousy towards; she feels jealous of Bianca and how everyone, even their father, views her as the preferred sister. Kate voices these feelings when she snaps at her father as he comes to Bianca’s defense by saying, “[Bianca] is your treasure” (II.i.32). This reflects Kate’s belief that her father views Bianca as someone valuable, whereas Kate does not believe that he feels the same way towards her.

Then when Petruchio arrives, Kate finally finds someone who gives her compliments. His sincerity may be in question, because he plans to “woo her with some spirit when she comes” (II.i.170) and to praise her with the opposite of her actions. Regardless, this is the first time she hears such flatteries.
as being called as “sweet as springtime flowers” (II.i.247) or being told “thy beauty that doth make me like thee well” (II.i.275) then eventually requesting her hand in marriage. Although she states that she’d “rather see thee hanged…” (II.i.300) than get married to him, she does in fact show up to the wedding, and further feels grieved when he does not arrive on time. If she had not wanted to marry him, she would have thrown the same kind of fit as she was accustomed to prior. She did not, which shows Petruchio’s effect on her.

Despite his flattery, she still seeks to find love from him, although she seeks it in juvenile ways. For instance, once the marriage ceremony ends, she desires to stay for the reception, whereas Petruchio wants to leave. She argues her case through a childish plea stating, “Now if you love me, stay” (III.i.204). This question is much like what a child would ask their mother or best friend. The immaturity of this act reflects her lacking of the basic necessity of being nurtured and feeling cared for. Because of this, she seeks for it through childish means such as petty questions and fighting.

**Petruchio: The Worst Shrew:**

> Petruchio was able to out-shrew Kate, and cause her to be alarmed. | Source

**Who Is Petruchio?**

Her quarrelsome behavior is not entirely due to her lack of being loved, but also her self-absorption. For the first time in Kate’s life, she sees others being verbally abused by someone other than
herself, as Petruchio presents himself as an even worse shrew than herself. A turning point in her selfishness occurs when the servants bring out the “burnt” meat (IV.i.151). Despite Petruchio’s rebuke of the meat, she insists that it is okay. Due to his harsh words towards the servants, Kate tries to reason with him by stating, “I pray you, ‘tis a fault unwilling” (IV.i.153). In one sense, she is hungry and will say anything to be allowed to eat the meat, regardless of its state. On the other hand, she does not refer to her own need of hunger, but defends the cook’s mistake. This willingness to step outside of herself in order to defend someone else reflects her ability to empathize.

As her awareness of others grows, so does her ability to show love. One example of this emergent love is seen as Petruchio and Kate first arrive at her father’s home. Petruchio beckons a kiss. When she refuses the first time, he asks if it’s because she is embarrassed of him. She responds with, “But no sir, God forbid, but ashamed to kiss,” (V.i.137) which signifies more the feelings towards public displays of affection during this time period rather than her feelings of kissing Petruchio. Her initial resistance may also be because she is not used to showing affection, due to the lack of love she has felt previously.

This statement is also significant because it expresses her sincerity towards Petruchio as a husband. She uses the expression “God forbid” which emphasizes her feelings against being ashamed of him. Through her word choices, one can see that she has truly fallen in love with Petruchio. In the next line, she again proves her growing love for him. Petruchio playfully hints that since she won’t kiss him in public, they should go home. Her response is, “nay I will give thee a kiss. Now pray thee, love, stay” (V.ii.139). Kate’s willingness to kiss Petruchio is more than just a desire to stay at her father’s house; her word choice proves this. This is seen because she calls him “love,” before she kisses him. This affectionate term further signifies that she has fallen in love with Petruchio.

Taming the Shrew

Just as the word “love” is chosen, her word choices in the final speech prove she is truly in love with Petruchio and sincere in what she says to the two women. As she describes a husband to Bianca and the widow, she states “thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / thy head thy sovereign, one that cares for thee” (V.ii.153). The first three things reflect the views of a marriage in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The last part of her description shows the sincerity in what she is saying. The, “one that cares for thee,” indicates her acknowledgment, despite Petruchio’s crazy antics, that he truly cares for her. If she had meant it to be sarcastic, this admission of being cared for would seem out of place and misguided.
Not only has her love for Petruchio completely blossomed, but her ability to empathize has as well, which again is seen through her word choices. In the last scene as she gives her speech to Bianca and the widow, this emergent compassion is again revealed. During this scene, she begins chiding the two women about their childish behavior towards their husbands. She reveals this by explaining this behavior through a husband’s eyes. Kate recognizes that her husband is working hard in order for her to have food on the table and a safe home. This admission goes further than just recognition of a husband’s willingness to work hard and to provide for his wife; she also claims that her willingness to be submissive and loving is “too little payment for so great a debt” (V.ii.160).

**Petruchio Having Fun at Kate’s Expense**

With her new understanding, Kate’s actions and words begin to change, but not her personality. She may have stopped her temper tantrums and her cruelty towards others, but she is still feisty. This is proven in several scenes. One of the best scenes to reflect this would be prior to Kate’s arrival at her father’s house as Petruchio and her are on their walk. He tries to make the point that she should be in submission to him as he refers to the sun as the moon and the moon as the sun. She recognizes his argumentativeness as playfulness, and she reacts with a similar elaborate rant of her own. This
speech addresses his absurdity by saying, “But sun it is not when you say it is not, / And the moon changes even as your mind” (V.i.20-21). If she had been completely broken of spirit, she would have simply agreed without an elaborate speech. But instead, she made a show of the nonsensicalness. If this is not evidence enough, you see her still argumentative nature when she says, “And so it shall be still for Katherine” (V.i.22). By not accepting the nickname Petruchio has given to her, she proves that she still is independent of him. She is capable of being a submissive wife, but be her own person as well.

Later in the same scene, the playfulness is further shown as they approach Lucentia’s father. She does not need to say anything when Petruchio makes the ridiculous claim that the man is really a woman. Instead, she plays the game with Petruchio by calling the man a “young budding virgin, fair and fresh and sweet” (V.i.36). The fact that she is willing to go along with his outlandish remarks and humiliate a man she has never met proves she has not lost her spunk.

The Play Taming of the Shrew
Taming of the Shrew has been read and reread, performed, and reperformed. It has lasted many years, and is still as great as the original. | Source

Kate's Strength

Few women, now and especially during Shakespeare's time, would be willing to risk humiliation for themselves or others, unless they have a strong personality. Then again in her final speech, Kate talks at length with a strong presence that captivates her audience, further proving she is still the feisty woman she had been at the very beginning but with new understanding. She recognizes
marriage as a partnership. While in this society a woman is asked to be obedient, it is not without men serving woman as well. She demonstrates this when she states,

And for thy maintenance; commits his body,
To painful labor both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou li'st warm at home, secure and safe;
(V.ii.154-157)

This refers to what men of this time had to do for their wives. When she expresses her feelings towards a woman’s obedience it is not only a representation of what is expected of a woman, but what men are expected to do for their wives as well.

This same spunk is reflected other times in the same speech, despite its strong patriarchal message. At the beginning of her monologue, she begins with the strong rebuke, “Fie, fie, unknit that threat'ning unkind brow” (V.ii.142). The fact that neither her sister nor the widow immediately argue back is a reflection of Kate’s continuing authoritative demeanor. Later she uses further piercing words, such as “foul contending rebel” and “graceless traitor,” which again are not met with an immediate challenge (V.ii.165-166). Also, the speech’s length is further proof that she is as full of strength as she is in the beginning, if not more. She is talking amongst both men and women, yet all listen. She rebukes, yet no one interrupts. The speech is long, and does not end until she has decided to finish speaking. The fact that she decides when the speech is finished is emphasized by the couplets in which end her speech. Only someone who could demand such authority would have been able to give such a strong lengthy speech.

Despite Kate’s apparent anti-feminist talk, Kate has not become a completely broken weak-willed woman. She still has the passion and energy she began with, but with a realization that her actions affect others. She also has learned how to love by being loved. Though she evolves in her ideas and actions, her personality is essentially the same as it is in the beginning but shaped by empathy and love. She still is able and willing to fight which is reflected in her monologue. However, she does it with tact and poise, which is no longer met with dispute. Though it is Petruchio who helped her along the journey, if she hadn't desired for love in the beginning, her transformation would not have occurred.

© 2010 Angela Michelle Schultz
Does *The Taming of the Shrew* advocate sexual inequality or does it show and critique men’s attempts to subordinate women? Rachel De Wachter discusses how we should think about relations between the sexes in the play, and examines how writers, directors and actors have explored this question over the past four centuries.

How should we interpret the dynamics between men and women in *The Taming of the Shrew*? This question has echoed around the play since it was first performed. We need only look at its incredibly varied production history to see that directors have convincingly interpreted the play in many different, even contradictory, ways. The play’s nebulous quality makes it difficult to pin down, and just a few examples of productions reveal the interesting scope it offers to directors. Gregory Doran’s 2003 production showed ‘Kate trying to rescue a madman she genuinely loves’. Phyllida Lloyd has has cast only women in her 2016 production to caricature the brutality of men enabling the actors ‘to throw the behavior of the men into a particular relief, and be playful [with that aspect of the play in a] larger than life way’. Caroline Byrne’s 2016 Globe Theatre production presents a darkly violent relationship between the protagonists set against a desperate and brutal political backdrop, with references to the 1916 Easter rising suggesting a common cause between feminism and Irish nationalism. While these different ways of presenting the play offer different insights into its meaning, one fundamental question haunts every interpretation: is this a play that advocates sexual inequality or does it show and critique men’s attempts to subordinate women?

Many responses to the play are critical of the apparent inequalities it presents. This includes the earliest substantial response – John Fletcher’s *The Woman’s Prize, or the Tamer Tamed* (c. 1611) – which concludes with the lesson that men ‘should not reign as Tyrants o’er their wives’ (Epilogue, l. 4). Indeed Fletcher’s play aims ‘to teach both Sexes due equality / And as they stand bound, to love mutually (Epilogue, ll. 7-8).’ Interpreting the power dynamics between men and women, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, an in particular the central couple Katherina and Petruchio, is a problem from the outset. Whether you see the relationships in the play as harmlessly boisterous and knockabout or tragically violent and oppressive, Shakespeare is clearly offering us his take on that perennial trope in both comedy and tragedy: the battle of the sexes. Before readers even consider critical or
directorial interpretations, they face a perplexing text whose meaning, perhaps more than many of Shakespeare’s plays, seems to shift depending on the approach taken. These ambiguities can usefully be scrutinised by focusing on the language and structure.

The language of the play: hunting

The language of hunting is a recurring motif in the play and warrants consideration as a larger metaphor beyond its role as a mere social backdrop to the action. In the framing Induction, the Lord arrives at the alehouse with his huntsmen. Their conversation about the hunt seamlessly becomes a conversation about Christopher Sly lying drunk and dead to the world in front of them. The Lord describes him in a dehumanising way, calling him a ‘monstrous beast’ and comparing him to a ‘swine’. Thus Sly seems to become ‘fair game’ for a different kind of trap than those the Lord might use in hunting, though it is no less cruel. The Lord tricks Sly into believing he is also a nobleman, a fiction which the audience recognise as unsustainable.

While there is no conclusion to the frame in The Taming of the Shrew, an alternative, possibly even a source version of the play – The Taming of a Shrew – does conclude with Sly being unceremoniously dumped outside the alehouse, his lowly status reinstated. Though the Lord’s cruel treatment of Sly is based on class rather than gender hierarchies of privilege, it nevertheless sets up a dynamic of inequality and possibly even of abuse. As this is the most obvious thing to link the frame story and the main play it suggests that these kinds of power dynamics are a key concern for Shakespeare in the play. Katherina is similarly dehumanised 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 untameable, but perhaps also that in some ways he fears her. Later on, having married Katherina, 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)

By describing her in this way, whether he is in jest or in madness, Petruchio deliberately positions her alongside animal and inanimate household positions. It seems that he is trying to endow her with all the characteristics of things which might be desirable to him: voicelessness, obedience, usefulness.

In one of the central soliloquies of the play, Petruchio sets out how he intends to tame Katherina. His language is rich with imagery related to falconry. Hunting with falcons is thought to have been a
pursuit of the upper classes. Petruchio’s close knowledge of it is a mark of his social standing, as well as the source of his confidence that he can tame nature. Both his social status and his knowledge seem to underpin the patriarchal dominance which he intends to assert over Katherina. Petruchio makes an explicit analogy between his method of domesticating his wife and the methods used by falconers. He will ‘man [his] haggard’ (4.1.193) or tame his wild female hawk. As a model for marriage, this seems a disturbing metaphor based on the falconer curtailing the natural freedom of a powerful bird. Shakespeare seems to be highlighting the inequality of the relationship in which the rational, free man subjugates the woman who, like a wild animal, has her access to food and sleep controlled. Petruchio intends ‘to make her come and know her keeper’s call’ suggesting that Katherina will be obedient and understand her position of subservience to her ‘keeper’. Both Sly and Katherina are on the receiving end of patriarchal dominance in relation to class and gender respectively. Blood sports resurface again in the final scene in the witty jokes between guests at the celebration banquet. These exchanges seem to harbour a certain tension which culminates in Petruchio’s desire to prove Katherina is now the most obedient wife. Petruchio mocks Tranio for having hunted but missed his quarry (as he was wooing Bianca on his master’s behalf). He refers to Bianca as ‘this bird you aimed at, though you hit her not’. This punning reminds readers again that, in this play, men perceive wooing as a hunt; one which, with luck, will result in trapping a wife. Tranio then teases Petruchio, suggesting his wife has not yet really been trapped: ‘Tis thought your deer does hold you at bay’. This prompts Petruchio to assert his dominance by challenging the other new husbands to prove which of the three wives is most obedient.

The hunting-related diction which Shakespeare uses throughout the play suggests that he is drawing our attention to an uncomfortable correlation which his male characters make between hunting and the treatment of their social inferiors either due to their class or gender. This apparent caricaturing of these attitudes suggests a critique of patriarchal attitudes rather than an advocacy of the methods used by the Lord and Petruchio.

Hierarchies and humiliation: the Induction and the main play

An interesting connection emerges when considering the play in the context of the Induction – both might be seen as portraying attempts to escape from the expectations of social convention as dictated by the dominant hierarchies. Sly is encouraged to think that he is of a higher social class – and indeed he falls relatively easily into the cruel trap set for him by the Lord. It seems cruel because, in fact, Sly cannot escape his lowliness. And Katherina might be read as trying to avoid the trap of marriage from the outset, only to find that she cannot but comply with the demands of society. The wedding scene, though not represented in the play, is shown in Franco Zeffirelli’s 1967 film.
Waiting for the wedding ceremony to be completed, the entire city of Padua collectively holds its breath. The groom, father of the bride, suitors of the bride’s sister, priest and menfolk of the town are complicit in forcing the bride to comply with their expectations. This culminates in the slapstick joke in which Petruchio ‘seals the deal’ with a judiciously placed kiss at the appropriate moment in Katherina’s screeched ‘I will not!’ Her response to the question ‘Wilt thou take Petruchio to be thy lawful wedded husband?’ is turned against her, cutting it off just at the right moment, changing it from dissent to assent. The male hierarchy has prevailed and forced her to fit in with its vision of a woman’s role.

It could be argued that much of Petruchio’s power stems from his willingness to socially humiliate Katherina. In a sense, he uses society’s hierarchy to oppress her. Public humiliation is in the language of the play from the outset. In Act 1, Gremio’s response to Baptista’s offer that he might ‘court [Katherina] at [his] pleasure’ is instructive. ‘To cart her rather’ (1.1.54–55) refers to the practice of publicly humiliating women by making them walk through the streets behind a cart. Continuing in a similar vein, he says he would rather take Katherina’s dowry without the wife but instead be ‘whipt at the high cross every morning’ (1.1.132). This is a reference to a form of public humiliation in which wrongdoers would be punished by the cross in the market square. So Katherina is worthy of punishment and a publicly humiliating punishment at that. The scold’s bridle graphically illustrates the reality of the public punishments that women were subjected to. However, it is clear that Katherina does not lack a sense of shame. Indeed, she is powerfully shamed in front of the whole town when Petruchio is first late and then inappropriately dressed for the wedding. Her choking anger, expressed by the caesura at 3.2.8–10, does not prevent her expressing her outrage and embarrassment. Katherina reminds Baptista that there is:

No shame but mine. I must, forsooth, be forced
To give my hand, opposed against my heart,
Unto a mad-brain rudesby…

It seems strange to modern audiences that the wedding then goes ahead. It is one of the questions of interpretation which a director must decide on. Is she strong armed into it by her father, Petruchio, or both? Is she shamed into it by the public nature of the position she finds herself in: an unmarried woman, and one who seems destined to remain so, in a society that does not value such women?

Another moment of humiliation occurs at the end of the play when Katherina, having won Petruchio’s wager for him by being the first wife to obey and having also fetched the more wayward wives, is asked by Petruchio to throw a favoured hat on the ground and step on it. The outspoken Widow, interestingly, does not approve of Katherina’s behaviour, calling Katherina’s blind obedience ‘a silly
pass’. Even the supposedly simpering (yet, when you look closely at her exchanges with men throughout the play, much more successfully assertive) Bianca agrees, criticising and questioning her: ‘Fie, what a foolish duty call you this?’ The Widow and Bianca see this is an unacceptable way to treat your wife and that Katherina is foolish to tolerate it.

Although the frame play is concluded at the end of the previously mentioned *Taming of a Shrew*, Shakespeare’s own play does not return to the Induction leaving open the question of what happens to Sly. Structurally, this is interesting and it is worth asking whether this sheds any light on the ending of the play within the play. Are we to consider Katherina’s final speech as similarly inconclusive? Is there room, in fact, for interpretations in which both Sly and Katherina escape subjugation?

Shakespeare seems to set up a tension between, on the one hand, a desire for escape from social conventions, and, on the other, humiliation as a method to suppress these desires in social subordinates, prompting us again to view male oppression as a subject for criticism rather than emulation.

**Final speech – humiliated, tamed or free-thinking?**

The narrative question which is set up at the outset of this play is who will win this particular battle of the sexes? Katherina’s closing speech seems to offer an answer, though it can be interpreted in a variety of ways. On the face of it, she seems to have been successfully ‘tamed’ by Petruchio, using language from the field of government to explain the power dynamics of husband and wife. She describes the husband as ‘lord’, ‘king’, ‘governor’ and ‘sovereign’, and explains that

\[
\text{Such duty as the subject owes the prince,}
\]
\[
\text{Even such a woman oweth to her husband. (5.2.155–56)}
\]

This analogy seems strangely cold and generalised. Has she really been tamed or is she simply parroting a socially acceptable, yet totally impersonal, catalogue of honours a wife owes her husband? But this very coldness puts the success of Petruchio’s taming into question. Perhaps Katherina is merely saying what she knows he wants to hear for a quiet life?

So the text itself draws the audience’s attention to an ironic gap between what Katherina seems to be saying in her speech and the sincerity of what she says. As Emma Smith points out, modern productions of the play virtually never show an unequivocally tamed Katherina. The gender politics which inform our contemporary readings simply do not allow for success in Petruchio’s stated
enterprise. Caroline Byrne’s 2016 Globe Theatre production powerfully addressed the complexities of this final speech. A kneeling, seemingly cowed Katherina, who has suffered deeply in this more dark than funny production, pulls Petruchio down to her level just at the point where he seems to be about to raise her up. This elevating gesture is used in the Zeffirelli production to suggest that Katherina has finally risen to the status of a socially acceptable wife. In Byrne’s production, however, the message seems to be that Petruchio’s cruelty throughout the play is unedifying for everyone, and merely lowers him morally and literally, leaving them both on their knees.

Not only modern productions of the play, but the text itself suggests that Shakespeare is critical of Petruchio rather than intent on holding him up as a paragon of woman-taming. It can be argued that, even in the language itself, Katherina’s final speech simply does not ring true.

A problematic play

Undeniably, The Taming of the Shrew is a problematic play and not only in the context of modern gender politics. The difficulties raised by the very idea of a battle of the sexes are inherent in the text itself. George Bernard Shaw, perhaps pointedly taking on a female pseudonym, wrote to the Pall Mall Gazette in 1888 to express his outrage at the dishonesty of Petruchio’s performance in David Garricks’ adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew. For Shaw, the play could not be a comedy: Petruchio ‘does what he can to persuade the audience that he is not in earnest … but in spite of … [his] winks and smirks when Katharine is not looking, he cannot make the spectacle of a man cracking a heavy whip at a starving woman otherwise than disgusting and unmanly’. It does seem, then, that Shakespeare is asking us to respond to these contradictions and question the entire project of ‘taming’ another human being, to see it as nothing better than ridiculous and barbaric.

While it presents misogyny as well as abuse of power in both gender and class relations, The Taming of the Shrew seems to do this in an ironic way, with all the dangers of misinterpretation that irony always brings with it. And it might be argued that this critique of the oppressing behaviours of those in the play who hold power is inherent in the text and that productions will inevitably stand or fall on their ability to convey this to their audiences.

Footnotes

Sexuality and gender relations in Shakespeare's England - Analysis of the play taming of the Shrew

Seminar Paper, 1999
18 Pages, Grade: 2,0 (B)

Introduction

This work deals with sex and sexuality in Shakespeare’s England. Shakespeare’s England is on the one hand to be understood as the society as it were at the time when Shakespeare lived. It could be therefore also called sixteenth-century, Elizabethan or Renaissance England. On the other hand it is to be understood as the „world“, Shakespeare created and described in his plays.

I compare the actual understanding of sexuality and its associated areas that was dominant at that time to the understanding that is discernible in Shakespeare’s plays.

In the first part, I give an overview of the meaning and reputation of sexuality in Sixteenth-Century England. I go into the role of marriage in general and the role of the married women and men in particular. Furthermore, I mention adultery and its consequences. The last chapter of the first part deals with homosexuality.

In the second part, I examine one of Shakespeare’s plays. A play offers insight into a created society with its own power structures, gender relations and social interactions. These structures must be influenced by those, existing in real life. In a play they can be either adopted, ironically criticised or portrayed in a completely different way but all depictions have to be comprehended within an actual social context. I chose The Taming of the Shrew[1]. Because its content perfectly corresponds with my aim[2]. Out of the play, I try to filter the pictures, Shakespeare draws of the role allocation of men and women in general and within marriage. Besides, I pay special attention to hints, Shakespeare gives through his figures on
sexuality. Through this I try to find out in how far the actual views are confirmed or rejected in Shakespeare´s play.

**Sexuality and Gender Relations in Shakespeare´s Days**

By choosing to write about sexuality in Shakespeare´s England I chose to write about a period of time in which attitudes towards sexuality were significantly changing. It was „a time when sex as a moral preoccupation was changing into sex as a subject for self-reflection and intellectual discourse“ (Bruce R. Smith, 1991, p.10). Sex was no longer only an abstract „something“, one ought not to speak about or think about too much. On the contrary, by rising discourses about it, Sexuality gained new value as a topic of not only private but public concern.

Mary Beth Rose identifies two modes in which Eros and marriage were conceptualised:

„A dualistic sensibility, in which sexual love is idealized beyond physical existence on the one hand or derided as lust on the other, and which views marriage as a necessary evil; and a more realistic, multifaceted sensibility, which, while retaining much of the skepticism about erotic love contained in the first view, nevertheless begins to conceive of affectionate marriage with great respect as the basis of an ordered society.” (Mary Beth Rose, 1988, p.13)

Furthermore, she states, „that in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, the second sensibility was gaining ground over the first." (Mary Beth Rose, 1988, p.13).

The understanding of sexuality was different to our´s and it would be misleading to transfer our twentieth century point of view to the past. Sixteenth-century sexuality existed and is to be understood within a certain sixteenth-century context. Therefore, it is important to grasp that „sixteenth-century structures of power and sixteenth-century structures of knowledge shaped sixteenth-century images of sexual desire“ (Bruce R. Smith, 1991, p.6).

By looking at sexuality in Renaissance England one has to use two different points of view. On the one hand there is sexuality as defined by theologists: They understood sexuality merely as a means for procreation, only to be performed within marriage. This understanding was closely connected with ron. It is very clear that he wants to fulfil his marital duties. It may not sound romantic but it does not sound as if the topic was tainted with a taboo, either. Although the page/ „his wife“ finds an excuse for not sleeping with him, Sly cannot stop himself from commenting his state. His remark „Ay, it stands so that I may hardly tarry so long“(scene II, line 126; my italics) shows clearly that he is sexually aroused, for „it stands“unmistakably refers to an erect penis. The conversation between Sly and his behaviour. Lawrence Stone says: „There is some evidence to suggest that throughout the Early Modern period, English attitudes to sensuality were more free than they were in most areas of Europe." (Lawrence Stone, 1979, p. 519). He refers to an extremely high number of persons who were provably accused of sexual offences and to a very high level of extra-marital sex.

In the upper-class society, extra-marital sex often took place within one´s own house: „Very many cases of fornication were between maidservants and either fellow-servants (...) or their masters. (...) Some masters were quite frank about the services they expected, like the man who offered a girl 40s to serve him by day and 40s to lay with him on nights.“ (Lawrence Stone, 1979, p.519).
All this, he points out, „suggests a society which was (...) sexually very lax“ (Lawrence Stone, 1979, p. 519). Evidently, English people lived on double standards: In theory they knew how they were expected to act and would not hesitate to institute legal proceedings against persons who did not behave accordingly. It was not unlikely, however, that the persons who accused others of sexual offences or having extra-marital sex, could see themselves confronted with accusations for the very same reasons. I assume, that a very high percentage of people lived out their sexuality if not regardless of the theological doctrines but by trying to cut them out. They probably made more of an effort in trying to not getting caught than in restraining themselves.

Marriage

By writing about sexuality in Shakespeare´s Days I have to write about marriage as well. In those days, dominated by religious thinking, marriage was the one and only „institution“ in which sexuality officially should take place.

At the time when Shakespeare lived, significant changes of the meaning of marriage had taken place. Before, in „the upper classes, marriages revolved around questions of property and (in) royalty, around international relations as well.‟ (ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson, 1991, p.ix). That means, marriages were arranged for rather monetary than emotional reasons. However, „the Protestant Reformation encouraged a new perspective on marriage as more than a property transaction, as a relationship demanding both mutual respect and companionship.“ (ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson, 1991, p.ix). That lead so far that by the time around 1590, it was common place to express „distaste for arranged marriages that did not take into account the preferences of the marriage partners“ (ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson, 1991, p.ix) in literary works.

The reading of several extracts of Marital Conduct Books (ed. Kate Aughterson, 1995, pp.79ff)[3], which then were available to the public, leaves no doubt about the role allocation within marriage: The husband is the head; he is his wife´s teacher and comforter. The wife is the heart; she is her husband´s yoke-fellow, helper and comforter, too. Besides, she has to be a good housewife. The husband had to „provide for his wife and her housekeeping, according to his ability“ (ed. Kate Aughterson, 1995, p.97)[4]. In return she had to be obedient, submissive and silent; and she had to accept that she was subject to him. It was not required but demanded that the wife „observe(d) the servants lesson, not answering again (...) and hold her peace to keep the peace“ (ed. Kate Aughterson, 1995, p.83)[5]. Obviously, the balance of power within marriage was one-sidedly structured to the disadvantage of the woman. The Renaissance world is to be understood as a man´s world, and in this, women were, in mental as well as in physical respect, not thought fit enough to live on their own capability.

That leads to the conclusion, that a woman could be a complete member of society solely by becoming a husband´s wife, one who would guide her and to whom she could look up and submit to. These assumption is confirmed in a comment made by Carol Thomas Neely:

„By theology then, and by law as well, women are defined and contained through their place in the marriage paradigm - as maids, wives, or widows. These roles are in turn defined by the mode of sexuality appropriate to them: virginity for maids, marital chastity for wives and abstinence for widows. “ (ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson, 1991, p.5)[6]
This quotation makes very clear that „female sexuality is necessary for men to satisfy their desires and to fulfill their gender role requirements appropriately - to marry, procreate, and pass on money and property to their children. “ (ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson, 1991, p.4, my italics)[7].

The man, therefore, needed the woman in so far as legal marriage (as a union bound by God) represented the only institution in which procreation should take place. For procreation is, of course, closely related to sexuality, marriage functioned „as a means of controlling human sexuality“ (ed. Kate Aughterson, 1995, p.103).

It has to be added, that in Puritanism, women were looked at not from a completely but slightly different angle than discussed earlier in this chapter:

„While insisting on the obedience and subordination of women, the Puritans simultaneously stressed woman´s importance, both as a companion to her husband and as supervisor of the new exalted household. Furthermore, the fact that Puritan doctrine give woman´s soul full equality to man´s in the sight of God grants woman an undeniable dignity. “ (Mary Beth Rose, 1988, p.31, my italics)

Women and men were acknowledged to be of equal sexual activity. This sexual activity and the sexual pleasure that accompanies it, however, were eminent only for the already mentioned procreation.

The following quotation proves this statement: The Puritan „perception that sex in the context of marriage - when practiced with moderation, of course, and as a solemn religious duty - is a holy and undefiled action does grant consummated erotic love a distinct prestige.“ (Mary Beth Rose, 1988, p.31, my italics). The fact, that sexuality should be practiced „as a solemn religious duty“ explicitly denies sexual pleasure.

„The link between sexual pleasure, conception and legal marriage is maintained through the dominant ideological modes and laws of the time“ (ed. Kate Aughterson, 1995, p.104).

Adultery

To make clear what adultery meant to the religious people of Renaissance England I sum up the content of an official sermon on this topic. The preachers were required to read those official sermons in the church so we can assume that most people knew them.

Adultery was looked at as one vice next to others such as whoredom, fornication and uncleannness. The sermon criticised that „this vice is grown unto such an height that in a manner among many it is counted no sin at all, but rather a pastime (...) not punished, but laughed at. Wherefore it is necessary at this present to entreat of the sin of whoredom and fornication, declaring unto the greatness of this sin, and how odious, hateful and abominable it is (...) before God and all good men“ (ed. Kate Aughterson, 1995, pp.20-1)[8]. This quotation leads to the assumption that adultery was rather the rule but the exception. Before God it made no difference who committed the sin of adultery. In a real life situation, however, there was a sharp distinction between women and men: Women were more likely to be accused of committing a crime by betraying their husbands or behaving whorishly, so was whoredom for example the one and only reason that could lead to a divorce. In contrast, the same behaviour of a man was, if not accepted but tolerated.

Often it was not adultery itself that was punished, but its consequences. Above all, for less moral than monetary reasons because „the production of a bastard child was likely to drain on the financial recources of a parish and was, therefore, treated with exceptional severity“ (Lawrence Stone, 1979, p.520). The
common punishment of parents of an illegitimate child was public exposure: „Both mother and father were often stripped naked to the waist and whipped though the streets at a cart`s tail.“ (Lawrence Stone, 1979, p.520).

It is one of the ten commandments of God that thou shalt not commit adultery and in the sermon`s sense, adultery is not just „the unlawful commixture or joining together of a married man with any woman beside his wife, or of a wife with any man beside her husband, yet thereby is signified also all unlawful use of those parts which be ordained for generation“ (ed. Kate Aughterson, 1995, p.21). Thus, it was not only forbidden to betray one`s wife or husband but to take part in any sexual activities not destined to produce offspring. It must therefore include homosexual acts and masturbation, too.

**Sexuality and Gender Relations in The Taming of the Shrew**

After describing the attitudes towards sexuality and its associated areas that were typical of Renaissance England, I try to depict in how far they are reflected in contemporary drama. To achieve this, I closely examine William Shakespeare`s The Taming of the Shrew[9], first published in 1623.

The comedy could also be headlined with „How to make an unruly woman a perfect wife“. Even this very rough description makes clear that it must contain information about what were considered an unruly woman, i.e. a shrew and what were considered a perfect wife. Within the text of The Taming of the Shrew one can find numerous remarks concerning sexuality. In addition, it is quite conceivable that the content of the words was even enhanced by appropriate gestures of the actors. Apart from this, the play offers views about the role of the married and the unmarried woman, about the role of the married and unmarried man, and about marriage and marriage arrangements.

In my work, I expound and interpret the views that are mentioned in the play and compare them to the actual views of that time. Beforehand, I may point out that the play is only one piece of the huge work of William Shakespeare and its views reflect his personal and subjective opinions.

**The Induction of The Taming of the Shrew**

I dedicate a separate chapter to the induction because to me it is to be seen as separate from the play itself. The text of the induction, however, gives important information concerning the role of the woman and the man within marriage, as it should be. I assume, these depictions function to a certain extent as a basis for the following play.

This hypothesis needs further explanation: I understand the woman as represented by the page as the personification of an archetype of an ideal or perfect wife. This ideal is probably not often to be met in reality. Nevertheless, it is the archetype of an ideal wife, Petruchio wants to make of Katherine by taming her and it is the perfect wife, all three suitors to Bianca (falsely) see in Bianca. Therefore, the page`s impersonation of a wife in the induction serves as a basis for the understanding of a wife within the play.

Next to my interpretation of the connection between induction and play exist, of course, other interpretations: Goddard, for instance, sees an analogy between Christopher Sly, who is persuaded to be a great lord and Petruchio, who „is likewise persuaded that he is a great lord - over his wife.“ (ed. Harold Bloom, 1988, p.2). In contrast, Garber points out, it „has been frequently suggested, the induction as it
stands provides a thematic parallel for the later action: Sly’s acceptance of a new personality (...) foreshadows Kate’s own.” (ed. Harold Bloom, 1988, p.6). I would rather support the latter interpretation, because the first takes it too much for granted, that the taming of Katherina is to be understood as an irony, i.e., that the tamed is rather the tamer and vice versa.

Already in the first scene of the induction of The Taming of the Shrew Shakespeare tells through the Lord’s words how an „ideal wife“ should behave. He gives order that his page Bartholomew has to impersonate Sly’s wife. To be most convincing, he should speak „with soft low tongue and lowly courtesy,/ And say „What is’t your honour will command,/ Wherein your lady and your humble wife/ May show her duty and make known her love?““ (Scene I, lines 112-15). These four lines give a very clear idea of what an „ideal wife“ is to Shakespeare. She is the one who receives and obeys orders from her husband and by doing so shows her love to him.

In the second scene of the induction, the page himself, dressed up like a lady, even emphasises this idea when he submissively introduces himself to Sly with the following words: „My husband and my lord, my lord and husband;/ I am your wife in all obedience.“ (Scene II, line 107-8) The concept of the role of the wife, revealed in these remarks, very well corresponds with the Renaissance ideal, I mentioned above.

That sexuality as part of married life was of certain importance becomes clear when the page (as his wife) tells Sly that the time of his disease seemed twice as long to him/her, for „being all this time abandon´d from your bed“ (scene II, line 116). Sly simply replies „Madam, undress you and come now to bed.“ (Scene II, line 118). This sentence leaves not much space for interpretation. It is very clear that he wants to fulfill his marital duties. It may not sound romantic but it does not sound as if the topic was tainted with a taboo, either. Although the page (as his wife) finds an excuse for not sleeping with him, Sly cannot stop himself from commenting his state. His remark „Ay, it stands so that I may hardly tarry so long“ (scene II, line 126; my italics) shows clearly that he is sexually aroused, for „it stands“ unmistakably refers to an erect penis.

The conversation between Sly and the page (as his wife) is characterised by a very casual understanding of sexuality within marriage and that was assumably the common opinion at that time.

The conversation between Sly and the page (as his wife) can furthermore be understood as full of homoerotic remarks made intentional by the page and unknowingly by Sly. As I mentioned in the chapter on Homosexuality, it was approved to depict homoerotic desire in arts. In this case, the homoerotic aspect in the conversation serves to emphasise the comic character of the situation. The audience can laugh at Sly who is taken in by the masquerade and tries to convince a man to make love with him; an act that could, if performed, lead to death sentence.

The role of the woman in The Taming of the Shrew

The three female characters of the play represent three different concepts of women. The two main characters, Katharina and Bianca, could hardly be more different. Katharina is the Shrew. She possesses character traits that were at that time considered not very adorable in women: she openly shows her self-confidence, has got a quick mind and an even quicker tongue and tends to be rather aggressive. Bianca, in comparison, appears to be all lovely woman: she seems to be obedient to her father, is silent, submissive and vulnerable. The widow is, in contrast to both Katharina and Bianca, no maid anymore but already used to be someone’s wife with all her duties.
Katharina is indirectly introduced in the first scene of act one by a remark made by Baptista, Katharina’s and Bianca’s father, with regard to the marriage arrangements he is planning for his daughters: „That is, not to bestow my youngest daughter / Before I have a husband for the elder.” (1.1.50-1). This points out, that it must be easier to find a husband for Bianca, his younger daughter than for his elder daughter, Katharina. The reason for that becomes obvious, when Gremio, one of three suitors to Bianca, says with regard to Katharina „She’s too rough for me.” (1.1.55). Katharina herself proves her „roughness” with her first remark in which she openly criticises her father’s plans to find a husband for her: „I pray you, sir, is it your will / To make a stale of me amongst these mates?” (1.1.57-8). In her second remark, already, she makes clear that she is not interested in marriage and gives an idea of her aggressiveness:

„I’faith, sir, you shall never need to fear. / Iwis it is half way to her heart. / But if it were, doubt not her care should be / To comb your noddle with a tree-legg’s stool, / And paint your face, and use you like a fool.” (1.1.61-5).

Not only Gremio but Hortensio and Tranio also give an estimation of Katharina. Hortensio says to her that she will not find someone who would marry her „Unless you were of gentler, milder mould.” (1.1.60). Tranio puts it slightly more drastic when he says „That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward.” (1.1.69) for this comment can by no means be mistaken for a flattering remark. The most drastic comment on Katharina is made in her absence by Gremio. He uses in line 125 the „hell” as a metaphor for her.

Bianca, in contrast, is introduced very politely by Lucentio’s words: „But in the other’s (Bianca’s) silence do I see / Maid’s mild behaviour and sobriety.” (1.1.70-1). Silence was, as already mentioned in the chapter on Marriage, considered a great virtue in women. That Bianca is, in fact, considered a virtuous woman is clearly perceptible because the male characters in the beginning often refer to her as „good Bianca” and „sweet Bianca”. Bianca herself shows her obedience towards her father when she accepts his plans that she will has to stay alone until a husband for Katherina is found: „Sir, to your pleasure I subscribe, / My books and instruments shall be my company, / On them to look and practice by myself.” (1.1. 81-3).

Furthermore, Bianca shows that she is also obedient towards her elder sister Katherina when she tells her „What you will command me will I do, / So well I know my duty to my elders.” (2.1.6-7). Afterwards, Bianca states that she would be more than willing to reject her suitors to the advantage of Katharina. This can be understood either as the behaviour of a loving sister or as a false promise because Bianca very well knows, none of the suitors to her would want to marry Katherina instead.

By comparing Katherina and Bianca, it has to be said that Katherina represents character traits that men fear in women and Bianca represents character traits, men prefer in women.

The third female character of the play is the widow. Her character is not described in detail because she appears for the first time in the very last scene. She appears to be quite serene concerning her behaviour towards men. In her conversation with Petruchio, she always has an answer ready to reply and when Lucentio sends for her to come over she choses not to obey his request. Her behaviour is comprehensible because she is, as a widow, already a woman of a certain status and she therefore does not need to behave over-submissively to gain further respect. The widow represents the picture of a woman who has reached and fulfills her place in society and can afford to be relaxed.

The Role of Men in The Taming of the Shrew
The main male character, Petruchio, is introduced in scene II of act one as likewise violent as Katherina. So does he wring his servant’s ears when he does not behave in the way Petruchio expects it (stage direction He wrings him by the ears, act one, scene II, between line 17-8). There is, however, one difference: His aggression is rather laughed at than condemned like Katherina’s.

Petruchio makes it very clear that he came to Padua to marry a woman, who would provide him with a huge dowdry, regardless of what kind of woman she is:

„One rich enough to be Petruchio’s wife - / As wealth is burden of my wooing dance - / Be she as foul as was Florentius’ love, / As old as Sibyl, and as curst and shrewd / ... / I come to wive it wealthily in Padua.“ (act one, scene II, line 66-74).

His attitude towards marriage was even considered old-fashioned and out-of-date at the time, the play was written. As already discussed in the chapter on Marriage, marriage as a means for property transaction was replaced by marriage, that, whilst not discarding the monetary aspect altogether, was based on mutual affection and respect.

Petruchio is not only interested in property in form of money and everything else that belongs to Katherina’s dowdry. In addition, he considers Katherina herself as his property, too:

„I will be master of what is mine own. / She is my goods, my chattels, she is my house, / My household stuff, my field, my barn, / My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing“ (scene II, act three, line 227-30)

He regards himself as master and thus as authority over Katharina. Patriarchally structured authorities play an important role within The Taming of the Shrew. A patriarchal social order can also be identified by observing the authority of Baptista over his daughters, and of the male characters over the female characters in the play.

Novy suggests, that there is a relation between „the games in The Taming of the Shrew, almost always initiated by Petruchio, ... (and ) the patriarchal traditions of the world of the Shrew and of its audience.“ (ed. Harold Bloom, 1988, p.13)[10]. I approve this suggestion, for I consider Petruchio’s tendency to play games with Katherina as a means of putting extra pressure on her. She did not choose to play games with him, she has to. She did not even choose him as her husband, she had to accept him because another authority, her father, arranged this marriage.

In the beginning of The Taming of the Shrew, Petruchio and Katherina start to play games but they are by no means equal playmates: It has to be said that Katherina is completely on her own while Petruchio has got the support of all the male characters in the play and in a figurative sense of all male persons who trust in patriarchy, too.

The patriarchal structure, as given in the play, is challenged two times: Vintentio, first, serves Petruchio and Katherina as a piece in one of their games. He is welcomed by Petruchio as „gentle mistress“ (4.5.27) and introduced to Katherina as „gentlewoman“ (4.5.29). When Katherina plays along and refers to Vintenio as „young, budding virgin“ (4.5.36), Vintenio, as a representative of „the class at the top of the social order within a patriarchal society“ (ed. Harold Bloom, 1988, p.20)[11], is „degraded“ from upper to lower class of the patriarchal system.
Secondly, the patriarchal or rather the social structure is challenged when Tranio disguised as Lucentio denies to know Vintentio, Lucentio’s father. Tranio, as Lucentio’s personal servant is subject to Vintentio, also. For a moment, however, the roles are interchanged: In his disguise as a man of certain respect, as Lucentio, he is able to show his (temporary) power over Vintentio, whose identity is still unrevealed by instructing an officer to „Carry this mad knave to the gaol.“ (5.1.84). Here again a „degrading“ of Vintentio is perceivable. At the same time, Tranio experiences an „upgrading“ from the lower classes of the social system to the upper. This interchange of roles is, however, suspended immediately after the true identities of both are unveiled. So it was no real shock to the system but rather a reappraisal of it because no one starts to ask why one should be master and another subject to him, it was just the way it was.

I agree with Novy, when she states that „Fathers are clearly important in the Shrew“ (ed. Harold Bloom, 1988, p.21). In the play, fathers are depicted or referred to as persons of special authority to whom their children owe special respect. The „children“, namely Katherina, Bianca, Lucentio, Hortensio and Petruchio, show their respect in different ways. Lucentio (or rather Gremio, disguised as Lucentio), Hortensio and Petruchio are proudly referring to their fathers when they ask Baptista for his daughters’ hands. Petruchio, for instance, states, when he introduces himself to Baptista „Petruchio is my name, Antonio’s son, / A man well known throughout all Italy.“ (2.1.68-9). Even Katherina is in so far obedient to her father, that she fulfills his request to marry Petruchio.

Marriage in The Taming of the Shrew

Marriage in The Taming of the Shrew is characterized by monetary transactions. As I stated in the chapter on Marriage, that was already in Shakespeare’s time an old-fashioned and much criticized motive for marriage arrangements. In The Taming of the Shrew, however, this motive is still alive: When Baptista wants to marry his daughter Katherina first, he is using what Kahn describes as a clever marketing technique: „make the sale of the less popular item the prerequisite of purchasing the desirable one.“ (ed. Harold Bloom, 1988, p.42). Baptista is very keen on marrying his daughters as quick as possible, for „both marriages (...) provide insurance against having to support his daughters in widowhood, promise grandsons to whom he may pass on the manegement and possession of his property, and impart to his household the prestige of marrying well“ (ed. Harold Bloom, 1988, p.42). Therefore it is no wonder that he accepts Petruchio’s offer regardless of what Katherina says. In his marriage arrangements for Bianca, Baptisto is likewise driven by financial interest because he promises his daughter to the one whose offer is the highest.

Marriage within the play is closely connected with changes of the female part involved. Katherina develops from former Shrew to a wife, behaving in the way that is expected from a proper wife. Bianca, however, changes from submissive and obedient daughter to a wife that is no longer willing to obey her husband’s demands. The final point of this change is the scene when all three husbands of the play bet on their wives obedience. They send for their wives to come and the man whose wife obeys this demand wins. Both, Bianca and the widow refuse to comply with their husband’s request. Katherina, against all expectations, appears promptly after she is called and asks as if it were the most natural thing in the world „What is your will, sir, that you send for me?“ (5.2.101). She has learned that she can lead a much more comfortable life by behaving accordingly to the existing role allocations. Kahn states in this context, that Katherina is to be understood as „outwardly compliant but inwardly independent“ (ed. Harold Bloom, 1988, p.50). That means, she publicly behaves in the way that is expected from a loving wife and will therefore neither offend nor be offended. Her spirit, however, remains untouched and her thoughts stay free and she herself realises that these are the most important things to possess when she says “I see a woman may be made a fool / If she had not a spirit to resist.” (3.2.218-9). This strategy must be considered as very clever because she shows
respect towards her husband Petruchio in so far that she does not, as Bianca and the widow do, make him an object of ridicule by open disobedience. At the same time, she can be sure that her cleverness and intelligence is highly valued by her husband because the play made clear, he is one who is very interested in witty conversations and his wife is in fact a perfect match for him.

Petruchio respects Katherina for her intelligence and cleverness and she respects him. The mutual respect of the couple represents the modern attitude towards marriage.

Sexuality in The Taming of the Shrew

In the whole text of The Taming of the Shrew there is no evidence that sexuality actually takes place. Only the last but second line of Petruchio „Come, Kate, we´ll to bed.“ (5.2.185) quite explicitly refers to forthcoming sexual activity.

Despite that, there are of course hints on sexuality within the play. So could the games, Katherina and Petruchio play be considered as a kind of „verbal foreplay“. The most obvious allusion to sexuality is to be found in a dialogue between Katherina and Petruchio that takes place shortly after they had met for the first time:

Both, Katherina and Petruchio by talking about tongues and tails play a word game that appears to be highly flirtatious and sexy in a rather cheeky way.

Another hint on sexuality is to be found in act IV, when Petruchio prevents Katherina from sleeping. He will not let her sleep in order to tame her and he will not consummate their marriage either. We learn from Curtis, Petruchio’s chief servant, that Petruchio is with Katherina in her bridal chamber but not to consummate the marriage as one would expect. Quite the reverse is true, because Petruchio is „Making a sermon on continency to her (Katherina)“ (4.1.170). This behaviour is rather contrary to the commonsensical opinion, dominant at that time. It was approved to consummate the marriage after the promise is given. Petruchio, however, withholds his sexuality from Katherina because he is not willing to give pleasure to her until she is tamed. In that sense, sexuality can be considered as a reward for Katherina’s behaviour. If understood in that way, sexuality gains a very high status that one has to earn.

Summary

It can be said that Shakespeare very well knows about the attitudes towards role allocations, marriage and sexuality, dominant at that time. Furthermore he knows how to draw a bead on these attitudes. So does he for instance parody marriage arrangements that are made for monetary reasons only.

There are numerous parallels between the actual opinions and the opinions, discernable in The Taming of the Shrew. The role allocation between men and women, depicted in the play and those in reality very well correspond: Renaissance England used to be a man’s world and so is the „world“ in The Taming of the Shrew.

The same virtues that are prefered in women in Renaissance England, i.e. silence, obedience and submission towards men, are the prefered virtues in women in The Taming of the Shrew.
This confirms my hypothesis that literature does not develop within a vacuum but in a certain social context of a certain time and one has to know about the actual circumstances to fully comprehend a piece of literature like The Taming of the Shrew.

**Bibliography**


[...]


[2] I neglect the fact that it is set in Italy for I understand the „exotic“ setting rather as a means of making it more attractive than actually describing Italian circumstances.

[3] Chapter on Marital Conduct Books


[7] ibid

[8] Text from: Certain sermons or homilies appointed to be read in churches, 1547. „A sermon of whoredom and uncleanness: against adultery“, 1547.


ibid

ibid