

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* Compared with the Expectations of Elizabethan Marriage

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The year was 1623 and England was still enjoying a glowing Renaissance. It was during this time that the theatre flourished and playwrights, including William Shakespeare, enjoyed relative prosperity from their controversial plays, such as *The Taming of the Shrew*. At this play's end, the main character, Kate, exhibits a subservient attitude to her husband, which would be consistent with the belief in that era that the husband was superior to the wife. However, the audience is made to realize that this is a deliberate ploy adopted by Kate as a compromise in order to achieve equality with her husband. Although Elizabethan marriages were male dominated, Shakespeare's *Taming* demonstrated that it was still possible for men and women to view each other as equals.

Marriage Negotiations

The apparent sexism of the marriage arrangement would be apparent as the protagonists begin the courtship to marriage process. Petruchio decides to court the shrew, Kate, in order to obtain her large dowry. In describing his initial actions he states the widely accepted ideal of marriage being a means of obtaining sizable goods and land.

Few words suffice; and therefore, if thou know
One rich enough to be Petruchio's wife,
As wealth is burden of my wooing dance

...

I come to wive it wealthily in Padua;
If wealthily, then happily in Padua (1.2.63-73)

These lines could be read as uncaring and unfeeling towards women; however, Petruchio is merely referring to the common practice of both families of the bride and groom to contribute goods to the engaged couple before the wedding.

The dowry, also called the "portion," was money, property, or sometimes goods provided by the family of the bride to the groom. The jointure, lands or income provided by the groom or the groom's family, was intended to support the wife after her husband's death. Both families thus contributed funds or property needed for the couple's independence and future security. Along with negotiating the dowry and jointure, the families would also appoint the day of marriage, usually at least two or three weeks away so that preparations could be made. (Young 38)

In order to obtain both the dowry and the jointure which would secure his financial future, Petruchio knows that he needs to secure Kate's acceptance of a marriage proposal. Although not necessary to make a marriage legal, Baptista will only give his father's blessing if his daughter does not object to the suitor. Kate knows that her unpleasant reputation and undesirability among the gentlemen of Padua means that any potential suitors would only court her for her dowry. She is also aware that her father, Baptista, has declared that Kate must be wed before he will give his permission for Bianca to marry in order to ensure the happiness of both his daughters. Thus Petruchio's only option for a richer future is to win over Kate because the marriage will not take place without her first agreeing to the marriage.

The form of the exchange between Kate and Petruchio reveals an equality that is otherwise not present in the marriage negotiations. She begins by taking his declaration, “Myself am moved to woo thee for my wife” and declares him movable in addition to a proverbial idiot (2.1.195-200). This witty banter back and forth otherwise known as stichomythia is only able to occur because both parties are at the same level of education or intelligence. Petruchio begins the banter with:

Come, come, you wasp, i’faith you are too angry.

KATE. If I be waspish, best beware my sting.

PETRUCHIO. My remedy is then to pluck it out.

KATE. Ay, if the fool could find it where it lies.

PETRUCHIO. Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting?

In his tail.

KATE. In his tongue.

PETRUCHIO. Whose tongue?

KATE. Yours, if you talk of tales,
and so farewell.

PETRUCHIO. What, with my tongue in your tail? Nay, come again,
Good Kate, I am a gentleman.

KATE. That I’ll try. (2.1.204-15)

Their balanced wit and ability to wield caustic parrying remarks, further proves the equality present between Kate and Petruchio. If one were below the other in intelligence, wit, or knowledge the battle would come to an awkward halt with one individual obviously superior. However, the verbal barrage only slows when Baptista, Gremio and Tranio enter the room. This conversation reveals to Kate that she has finally met someone who not only understands her caustic wit, but who also is able to quickly and cleverly retort. It is this realization, not the common belief that Petruchio has tamed Kate that silences her when her father asks for any objections to a marriage with Petruchio. As seen earlier in the play Kate has no objections to making her point known and loudly heard regardless of the opinions of the spectators. Kate responds with silence and decides to wed Petruchio because she sees in him, a man that is her equal, one with characteristics such as intelligence and humor, ones that bring the best chance of happiness in marriage and thus make for her, a good husband. “Shakespeare’s contemporaries often talked of both the man and the woman choosing a spouse. For both, the proper grounds were commonly said to be affection coupled with being well-matched in rank, age, temperament, and religious conviction” (Young 37-38). She makes the decision to remain silent and wed Petruchio because she sees a peer equal in intelligence and humor which would bring the best chance of happiness in marriage.

Typical Elizabethan Marriages

Traditional Elizabethan marriages were often formed with the foundation of love; however, there were varying opinions on the position of each partner in the household after settling down into daily life.

The idea that men were superior to women was certainly one view but was not the only one current in the period. Among other models was the view that men and women are complementary, that ideal virtue is a combination of typical male and female characteristics. Another view, sometimes presented by men, was that women are actually superior to men, especially in certain moral virtues. A third view emphasized the essential equality of men and women: some argued, for

instance, that women and men are essentially the same in mind and soul. (Young 42)

Playwrights included these beliefs into their plays because Shakespearean audiences would have been familiar with this social commentary. Audiences would have enjoyed seeing Petruchio portray the common conception of masculinity in an Elizabethan marriage, as he does when he arrives late to the wedding ceremony clad in inappropriate clothing and then demanding that they leave before the bridal dinner. That particular celebration is where Kate would have been honored as the newlywed bride. Kate believes that “marriage was thus intended to mark the founding of a family and the beginning of an enduring and mutually beneficial relationship between the man and woman” and pleads with her husband, as his equal, to be allowed to remain (Young 40-41). Petruchio denies his wife’s request on the grounds that other men would steal her.

Grumio,
Draw forth thy weapon, we are beset with thieves;
Rescue thy mistress, if thou be a man.
Fear not, sweet wench, they shall not touch thee, Kate:
I'll buckler thee against a million. (3.2.233-236)

He uses his position as newlywed husband to forcefully remove her from their celebratory wedding feast which successfully demonstrates the common expectation of masculinity within marriage at that time.

Role Expectations within Elizabethan Marriages

However as Kate does not support his decision to leave the festivities, she refuses to fit into the expected role of a subservient Elizabethan wife which brings forth discussion from the wedding guests. Young describes how Kate exhibits these qualities and shows a compromise between the man and women in marriage. “By exaggerating husbandly dominance, for example, Petruchio's performance draws our attention not to the power inherent in such dominance but rather to its inefficacy. Thereby a conception of marriage that expects hierarchy and mutuality to coincide effortlessly is questioned” (Smith 299). Although Kate is forcibly removed from the wedding festivities, Kate refuses to be placed in the role of inferior wife and thus gains some equality in the relationship.

Kate and Petruchio’s Marriage

As both Petruchio and Kate challenge the common Elizabethan hierarchy of marriage they learn that the equalities in marriage are based on negotiation. Petruchio desires masculine supremacy and Kate wishes for agency to do as she pleases. While returning to Padua for Bianca’s marriage feast Kate explicitly plays to Petruchio’s masculinity by confirming the truth of everything he says is true regardless of the actual verity of the statement. Petruchio begins by saying, “Nay, then you lie: it is the blessed sun.” Kate responds:

Then, God be bless'd, it is the blessed sun:
But sun it is not, when you say it is not;
And the moon changes even as your mind.
What you will have it named, even that it is;
And so it shall be so for Katherine. (4.5.19-23)

The benefit of her actions is that she is able to celebrate her sister’s marriage as a wedded woman in Padua. She knows that in order to achieve her desires she must cater to Petruchio’s desires to be considered as masculine or superior simply because he is the husband.

The relationship between Petruchio and Kate can be described through an analogy which “compar[es] Kate to a hawk, and Petruchio as her trainer. The trainer goes through as much work as the hawk, needing to stay with it at all times. You could argue that Petruchio is the same way, in that he forgoes food and sleep when he deprives Kate of it, and he is just as humiliated as she is”(Monson). His humiliation continues as he instructs his wife to embrace the male traveler on the road. Both individuals know that the traveler is male even though Petruchio initially claims that he is a “Fair lovely maid” (4.5.35). This scene demonstrates that “despite the acknowledged capacities of women, most of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, following biblical authority, accepted the idea that the husband is the “head” of the wife. Some pushed the husband’s prerogatives even further, regarding his relation with his wife as one of supremacy or even ownership” (Young 42). Although other viewpoints contradicted this belief it was widely accepted because of the common concepts of Christianity shared by the Catholic and Protestant religions of the time.

The battles for superiority between the Catholics and Protestants are similar to the conflicts that shape Kate and Petruchio’s relationship. They “dramatize a marriage that leaves Kate and Petruchio negotiating not only gender hierarchies but also love, sexuality, and parental demands. The Taming’s particular reiteration of marriage enacts a series of negotiations for power, none of which results in a marriage based on simple domination and submission or perfect egalitarianism” (Smith 315). These characteristics are showcased within the final scene and the climax of *Taming of the Shrew*. At the feast the final revision of gender roles within marriage occurs, and Kate proves that rather than being tamed she has chosen to shape her marriage with her wit and agency. At face value, Kate’s speech could be considered her final submission to the men but when interpreted with a careful eye it also reads as women having equal authority and place within the home.

“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” (5.2.146-8). These lines would initially indicate servitude or submission but then she continues on with images of equality “My mind hath been as big as one of yours, / My heart as great, my reason haply more, / To bandy word for word and frown for frown” (5.2.170-2).

Without winking at the audience, Katharine shows that female submission must be a performance, because her autonomy derives from redirecting agency through the guise of passivity (311).

Once Kate realizes that she can obtain what she desires by playing to the demands of her husband’s masculinity, she gains more equality within the relationship. She believes in the less commonly held belief that marriage should be equal and that’s why she remained silent after Petruchio wooed her. She saw qualities that he possessed mirrored in her own character. This would lead to a potentially equal and happy marriage as was less commonly desired during the Elizabethan time period. Thus by beginning to read Kate’s actions as a performance rather than submission we gain insight into her true intentions.

“Kate emphasizes the room marriage leaves for maneuverability by enacting one that incorporates her wit and sexuality into her very performances of submission. Thus by thinking of marriage (and the female subjection it requires) as performative, we can read Kate’s agency through her reiteration of the role of wife—a reiteration that stresses her reshaping of Petruchio and their marriage.” (Smith)

Kate and Petruchio as Equals

Arguably in the end of the play Petruchio realizes that they both become equals when they are united as a couple in marriage, beliefs, and all other aspects. "Kate is invited into male space by Petruchio, she is invited to speak (a masculine act), and in the end Petruchio is left speechless . . . In the end of the play they are equals" (Monson). Petruchio by this point realizes that when he pushes his authority as the male figure in the household it isn't as effective as he originally thought. However when treated with respect and equality Kate responds favorably and both receive what they desire.

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* would have challenged the chauvinistic Elizabethan marriage that we might expect. Most would have considered the male to be the primary figure of the household with the women holding an inferior position. Kate challenges this perception by choosing to submit to Petruchio in order to gain a more equal standing. Petruchio demonstrates his understanding of this equality by allowing her the masculine act of speech in a public setting, and then leaving together rather than forcibly dragging her away as seen earlier in the play. In the end Shakespeare depicts both Kate and Petruchio as being able to see each other as equals and confidently place their trust in each other regardless of their living in male-dominated Elizabethan times.

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