

Spring 5-2-2019

Power, Performativity, and Gender in Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew

Clara Sigmon

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sigmon, Clara, "Power, Performativity, and Gender in Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew" (2019). *Student Research Submissions*. 279.

https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/279

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Submissions by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact archives@umw.edu.

Professor Richard Finkelstein

English 447P

April 24, 2019

Power, Performativity, and Gender in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

In William Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*, both Petruchio and Katherine Minola fail to represent themselves according to socially constructed gender roles. While Petruchio never ceases to move freely in and out of prescribed masculine behavior due to the security afforded to him by class and gender, Kate is bestialized and oppressed in a representation of anxieties surrounding strong, intelligent women in society. Kate's final speech has been interpreted as an indication that the initially unruly "shrew" is successfully tamed by Petruchio in a declaration of absolute, patriarchal values. On the contrary, I will focus on language and performativity throughout *The Taming of the Shrew* in order to demonstrate the ways in which Kate learns to subversively express her desire and gain power. I will discuss the aspects of *The Shrew* which problematize patriarchal constructs, both for the characters within the play and for the audience. Amy Smith examines the play through the theoretical framework of performativity in her article *Performing Marriage with a Difference: Wooing, Wedding and Bedding in The Taming of the Shrew*. I will contrast Smith's interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew* with the conservative interpretation that Theresa Kemp provides in her book *Women in the Age of Shakespeare*.

In Elizabethan England, social constructs of gender upheld that women were, by natural law or divine will, physically weak, mentally enfeebled, subdued, obedient, chaste, beautiful, gracious, and domestic, while men were encouraged to be active and competitive, to move through the world with a sort of sexual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and economic

dominance by which they could both produce a male heir and provide for their household.¹ Laws, too, reflected patriarchal authority, and forbade women from participating as actors in stage performances, as such expression was thought to be unbecoming, immoral and lewd. Kate's command of language is what makes her the shrew of this play. Her sister, Bianca, is immediately deemed more desirable by Lucentio and Tranio:

Luc: But in the other's silence do I see

Maids' mild behavior and sobriety.

Peace, Tranio.

Tranio: Well said, master. Mum, and gaze your fill.

Lucentio communicates the patriarchal expectations of femininity in these lines, implying that Kate resists constructs of female behavior; Kate's character is overtly masculine *because* she talks back. Bianca is not only more appealing to the males within the play because of her silence, but also because of the way she submits to objectification, allowing her suitors to gaze upon her beauty and performed graces without care for whether or not they will acknowledge her inner life, her psychological existence. Unlike the men in the play, Kate sees Bianca's silence as problematic, to say the least, and beats her later in the play when she refuses to express her emotional and sexual desires openly (2.1.22). For much of the play, Kate is not yet performing, but honestly expressing her intellect, emotions, sexual awareness, and her desire for power. Despite Kate's association with the devil and moral bankruptcy throughout the play, her refusal to act is very much in cooperation with English law and socioreligious values. Kate's violence against Bianca could be interpreted as an indicator of the mental and emotional toll of Petruchio's abusive actions, but it is more probable that Kate wants to encourage her sister to make a

¹ See Hull 207-254 for further information on the role of women during the English Renaissance.

connection with the suitor of her liking through the expression of her sexual and emotional desires. Kate's human desires prevent her from fulfilling superficial, oppressive, and abstract ideals of femininity. Kate's violence towards those who seek to silence her reveals her interiority; Kate rages against a society which normalizes the objectification and oppression of women.

Despite Kate's initial refusal to act, the play explicitly brings attention to performative identities from the start, even before Bianca is introduced. Smith draws parallels between Kate and Christopher Sly in the play's Induction, arguing that this scene is critical in framing the audience's understanding of performativity within the play. Sly's transformation from impoverished drunk to lord and husband draws attention to the duality of the interior and exterior identities as Sly self-consciously transcends socioeconomic barriers through performance. Like Sly, Kate learns to perform later in the play, as submissive wife and tamed shrew, in order to transcend her gender and exercise patriarchal authority. Smith says, "Indeed, the Induction's emphasis on performance can serve to remind us that the roles of husband/lord and wife always consist of a series of performances rather than fixed entities; and as such, they leave room for a series of power negotiations" (296). Furthermore, the Induction serves as a sort of creation myth for the ways in which social constructs are established and normalized. In the Induction, a lord finds Sly in a drunken sleep, and orders that his servants take Sly, dress him with fine clothing, adorn his fingers with rings, convince him that he is their lord, and convince him that he is married to Bartholomew, the lord's page boy, in disguise as a woman. A huntsman says, "My lord, I warrant you we will play our part/As he shall think by our true diligence/He is no less than we say he is" (Ind.1.69-71). Shakespeare illuminates the fact that sex and class do not inherently give rise to an absolute characterization of an individual or their abilities by divine or natural

law. On the contrary, we see that gender and class constructs are merely performative behaviors dictated and reinforced by men. In the Induction, Shakespeare establishes the play as a critical deconstruction of class and gender roles within society and disrupts normalizing judgment. With that said, it's significant that Sly's narrative receives no resolution at the end of the play. Kemp writes, " While the opening induction calls attention to the performativity of social roles, including gender and class, the absence of a closing frame at the end of the play proper (just after Katherine gives her final speech) potentially naturalizes our sense of Katherine's taming by allowing us to forget that we are, along with Christopher Sly, watching a play" (77). Sly's absence at the play's end problematizes Kemp's argument; even if the audience reads Kate's final speech as indicative of a true submission, an absolute reestablishment of social norms, Sly's subversive performance of lordship remaining unresolved is disruptive, unsettling the hierarchal vision.

Bartholomew transcends the gender binary and explores the fluidity of gender by convincingly performing the part of Sly's wife. In the Induction, the audience sees that social constructs of class and gender are not determined by God or by one's sex, but in fact are determined and manipulated by society's wealthiest men as a means of inducing favorable socioeconomic performances and perpetuating male authority. The Induction is critical in understanding Kate's agency in the play, according to Smith, because it invalidates critics like Kemp who suggest that Kate is "forced either to accept or to escape [the very institutions which are] instead critiqued". The Induction thus serves to establish an alternative narrative by drawing attention to the power of performance, which allows Kate's submission at the end of the play (rather, the play within the play) to be understood as a mere performance of submission in which she actually wields more "masculine", patriarchal authority, and more effectively, than she does

at any other time in the play, just as the powerless drunkard becomes the lord. It's worth noting that Bartholomew, disguised as Sly's wife, is the character who successfully convinces Sly to perform as lord. Shakespeare plays on the idea that woman can validate, or invalidate, a man's sense of identity and power. Smith links this aspect of the Induction to the ways in which Kate invalidates and manipulates Petruchio's performance of masculinity later in the play (297), drawing out the fact that men are not naturally or completely dominant over women, because their sense of dominance depends on whether or not women validate their sense of dominance by submitting to them. Though men determine and reinforce patriarchal constructs, the Induction immediately indicates the power of women must perform submission while simultaneously manipulating the identities and behaviors which men associate with masculinity, much through the same reward-or-punishment system which Petruchio uses in his attempt to dominate Kate. Although Bartholomew is not truly a female character, it is nonetheless significant that Shakespeare bestows Bartholomew's feminine alter ego with the power and influence to change Sly's identity, introducing the possibility, at the very start of the play, that the tamer, Petruchio, could in fact be the one to be tamed by Kate.

Many characters within the play wish to see Kate tamed, and alienate her for challenging the patriarchal structure. In his own limited way, Petruchio is the first and only character to acknowledge the possibility that Kate is not innately evil, but simply in need of validation. Kemp describes Kate as "a character full of words that no one hears" (78). While this accurately describes *most* responses to Kate's "unruly" speech, including her own father, it does not consider Petruchio's ability to both hear and engage with Kate. Kate's command of language is arguably her defining quality (and certainly most important in establishing Kate as a shrew), and Smith notes that Kate's sexual and witty banter is quite appealing to Petruchio, even though it

disrupts his initial vision of her conquest (299). Petruchio's attitudes towards Kate are obviously changed as they unsuccessfully seek to dominate one another. Kate refuses to merely be an object to be desired and pursued by Petruchio and insists upon her active vocal participation in courtship in a taboo preservation of her autonomy and sexual desire.

Kate and Petruchio are perfectly matched for one another in at least the one sense that their command of language is equal. Petruchio's inability to dominate Kate through language in their first interactions with one another demonstrates the unbridled woman's fully realized intellectual and sexual potential in a way that disrupts the idea that femininity is innate, as opposed to conditioned, behavior, and simultaneously complicating the idea that women must be submissive in order to be attractive and marriageable. Kate demonstrates both her command of language and her sexual awareness in the following exchange with Petruchio:

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

Pet. My remedy is then to pluck it out

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

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

In his tail.

Kath. In his tongue

Pet. Whose tongue?

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

Pet. What, with my tongue in your tail? (2.1.210-18)

Kate invalidates Petruchio's sense of masculinity by attacking his sexuality, cleverly suggesting that he could not possibly satisfy her sexual desires without explicitly saying so. This interaction further emphasizes the exchange of power which occurs as Kate and Petruchio engage with one another; Smith writes, "And the rapid-fire puns and sexual invitations and rejections combine to

form a scene in which there is no dear winner or loser but rather a series of sexually charged power plays between mutually desiring partners" (301). This is rather interesting, because Shakespeare explores the sexual, intellectual, and emotional appeal of the powerful, unruly woman while also depicting the social pressure upon men to subdue such women. Shakespeare reveals the ways in which constructs of masculinity can be just as problematic for men as constructs of femininity are for women. Although Petruchio was not expecting to meet his intellectual match, and Kate certainly seemed to desire no match whatsoever, they are arguably drawn to one another because of the power struggle that arises. Kate is not silent until Baptista and Petruchio make the final arrangements for Kate's wedding (2.1.320-328); Kate's silence is deliberate and willful silence, speaking volumes to her desire to marry Petruchio.

Kate and Petruchio have mastered their roles as dominant husband and submissive wife by the end of the play, and it's likely that they are merely performing these parts satirically. When questioned about the mismatched rags he wears to his own wedding, Petruchio admits to the duality of identity, the simultaneous existence of the public, external persona, and the private, internal persona, at work in his relationship with Kate. Petruchio says, "To me she's married, not unto my clothes" (3.2.116). Petruchio makes a mockery of the patriarchal institution of marriage at his own wedding (3.2.176-182). Though Shakespeare does not grant his audience access to Kate's inner thoughts about Petruchio's behaviors at the wedding, it's possible that Kate felt humiliated and ashamed, deprived of the "dream wedding" that women are expected to aspire to. It's unlikely that Kate was humiliated, and more likely that she was impressed; how much regard could Kate have for the institution of marriage, which objectifies women as property to be exchanged in a transaction between father and husband, when she rails against such objectification all throughout the play? None whatsoever.

Petruchio's elaborate performances seem to encourage Kate to perform as well, providing her with a means of subversively, but efficiently, gain power. After the wedding, Kate ceases to explicitly state her frustration with patriarchal values. Instead, Kate parodies the absurdity of masculine dominance and feminine subjection performatively when Petruchio insists that the moon is the sun:

Kath: Then God be blest, 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. (4.5.18-22)

Both Petruchio and Katherine go to such extremes in their perfect depictions of gendered behaviors that they seem, ironically, disruptive and nonsensical, problematizing social norms rather than defending them. Furthermore, this scene provides a framework through which we may interpret Kate's final speech as performative and subversive. Kemp says, "Katherine's final speech ventriloquizes the patriarchal party line on wifely submission, perfectly articulating the gender stereotypes justifying male dominance" (81). Kate is not submitting to and reinforcing patriarchal authority in her final speech as Kemp suggests, but in fact demonstrating her mastery of performativity, which we first observe in this scene. Furthermore, that scene echoes Petruchio's initial attempts to dominate Kate by presenting a false, idealized version of her, enforcing an alternative narrative upon her (2.1.167-179). Some critics, like Kemp, may be compelled to interpret Kate's statement, "Then God be blest, it [is] the blessed sun" to be an indication of her defeat, but it is actually an indication that she is performing strategically, just as Petruchio had. To interpret these lines otherwise disregards Kate's self-awareness and skillful command of language. Just as Petruchio seeks to dominate Kate and manipulate her behavior, it

is important to remember that Kate has the same goal in mind. Despite the words Kate speaks, or how one might imagine her to appear as she delivers these lines, Sly's self-awareness in the Induction reminds the audience that, like Sly and Petruchio, Kate is aware of her performance, and remains aware of how her performance simultaneously contradicts and mobilizes her agenda.

Kate also demonstrates an awareness of Petruchio's dependence upon her submission in order to feel that his masculinity is valid, and Kate arguable exploits that here. Smith writes that Kate is fully aware of the role that Petruchio wants her to play, and that she consciously plays that role in a deliberately subversive way. Smith writes, "By exaggerating the wife's mirroring response to her husband's every proclamation, Kate parodies wifely subjection. She not only repeats what Petruchio says, she tells him, the onstage audience of servants, and us that she is doing so ("The sun is not when you say it is not"), thereby exposing her wifely submission as a calculated performance" (308). This further problematizes women's education in a criticism that suggests that women know only how to perform submission and companionship as opposed to being able to genuinely connect with their husbands. Bianca is arguably one such example of a woman who only performed her own objectification and submission in order to accrue value within the marriage market.

In her final speech (5.2.142-185), Kate, like the lord in Sly's narrative, dictates to both men and women what their roles are in society, wielding all the power of the males in society as she had always desired, and does this so effectively that both the men and women in the play seem to become self-conscious and defensive of their own identities, just as Kate always was. Kate's final speech even draws out the shrew in Bianca, revealing a dissatisfaction with the gender hierarchy that she had previously concealed with her silent, *performed* submission

(5.2.131-135). Shakespeare suggests that even those who seem to give testament to the validity of gender constructs are merely performing, either because of social pressure or subversively, but certainly not by nature. Scholarly criticism suggesting that Kate's final speech establishes her successful indoctrination into dominant ideology neglects to account for the many layers of self-conscious performativity within the play, as well as the power which performance affords to the characters within the play. Kate's ability to perform submission without internalizing patriarchal values challenges the idea that "taming", or restoring a woman to a more natural or moral mode of femininity, is even possible, reflecting a social, internalized desire to rail against such restricting epistemologies. In other words, the play explores duality of interiority and exteriority not just within the play, but also within the larger social environment in Elizabethan England. "For taming in itself", Helga Ramsey-Kurz writes, "is a performance undertaken to coerce further performance. Any taming is meant to result in the enactment of a part not natural to the creature tamed. Taming, in other words, produces an artefact..." (263). Furthermore, it is significant that Kate's final speech is not only the longest in the play, but it is also the first time that Kate is heard and respected by all of the characters within the play, emphasizing the power which this her mastery of language and performance has afforded.

Kate becomes the woman-actor that society fears, while drawing attention to the fact that all women who seem to embody masculine ideals of femininity are, in fact, actors, both in the play and reality. Shakespeare does not conclude the play with a restoration of patriarchal structure, but in fact subverts it entirely, leaving both the characters within the play and his audience deliberately unsettled. Further emphasizing the power of performance, the audience may have very different interpretations of Shakespeare's ultimate intentions depending upon how an actor portrays Kate, and how the play is overall adapted to the stage; Kate may be depicted as

fatigued and depressed, or more powerful than ever before, depending upon how the director and actor interpret the play's strategically ambiguous language. *The Taming of the Shrew* is not a guide by which men may learn to dominate women, but a guide to subversive performativity, and a demonstration of the fluidity of gender which is entirely deconstructive and critical of those who perpetuate normalizing judgement.

Works Cited

- Hull, Suzanne W. "Female Roles." *Women According to Men: The World of Tudor-Stuart Women*. N.p.: AltaMira, 1996. 207-54. Print.
- Kemp, Theresa D. *Women in the Age of Shakespeare*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010. Print.
- Ramsey-Kurz, Helga. "Rising above the Bait: Kate's Transformation from Bear to Falcon." *English Studies*, vol. 88, no. 3, June 2007, pp. 262–281. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/00138380701270804.
- Smith, Amy L. "Performing Marriage with a Difference: Wooing, Wedding, and Bedding in The Taming of the Shrew." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 36, no. 3/4, Fall/Winter2002/2003 2002, p. 289. *EBSCOhost*, ezproxy.umw.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspxdirect=true&db=a9h&AN=10227684&site=ehost-live.