

HISTORY FIRST – WHAT DID SHAKESPEARE REALLY INTEND?

I prefer to approach teaching and directing Shakespeare's plays in their historical context when working with high school students that have never (or barely) performed his works. Like an artist learning to draw realistically at first, or musicians practicing scales and theory then developing their own personal style, students should understand the complex language and plot lines first. Going into a deeper understanding of what the play's issues would mean to Elizabethan audiences is next. With these elements discussed and rehearsed thoroughly there's little time to experiment with 'interpretations'. I'd rather the students walk away from a period piece with a better understanding of that culture. Wacky, 'fresh' takes on Shakespeare rarely work anyway, even in the adult world.

Taming is being produced from a strong feminist viewpoint nowadays. Petruchio is played as an abusive male chauvinist and ignored or justified is the *very bad* behavior of the 'Shrew', Kate. Recent productions of the play digress into all manner of 'creative' avenues in pursuit of a 'fresh perspective'. One production I researched switched the gender roles so that Kate, played by a male, gets her 'comeuppance' by Petruchio, played by a female. As a woman, I don't see anything cathartic in this. I find it unfair to both leading characters and belittling to the playwright, whom I doubt was a womanhater. After all (leaving aside theories that Shakespeare didn't write his plays), it was he that penned unforgettably powerful women like Rosalind, Portia, Beatrice, Viola and Helena, to name a few.

What clues are there that help us shine a light on the many lessons to be learned from *Taming* other than 'girls should rule, boys drool?' There is enough evidence from the play and history that, using it and some common sense, we can conclude that *Taming of the Shrew* is a tongue-in-cheek, slapstick poke on marriage and societal norms of the time, all wrapped up in Shakespeare's never-wavering theme that true love, in the end, should reign supreme.

COMMEDIA INFLUENCES AND CHARACTER CHOICES

Taming is one of Shakespeare's first plays, a comedy depending heavily on *Commedia del'Arte* which is a form of Italian, slapstick comedy (think Chuck Jones cartoons) that was rapidly spreading throughout Europe during the Renaissance. 'Stock' characters are one-dimensional and pursue particular 'appetites' or vices. The exaggerated, clownish characters parody those who go to excess. For instance, there are the *vecchi*, or old men. Baptista Minola is the greedy father of Kate and Bianca. The marriage of his daughters is a business deal and a way to obtain 'liberal dowries'. Gremio is the lecherous old man who desperately wants a young trophy wife. The *inamorati* (young lovers) Bianca and Lucentio are embroiled in the classic Commedia plot: they fall in love and wish to marry but the *vecchi* stand in the way. Lucentio uses his *zanni*

(clever servants) for help in eloping against the parents' wishes. Eventually all is forgiven, and the story ends on a (seemingly) happy note for them.

But Shakespeare departs from stock characters with Kate and Petruchio. They are complex intellectuals that engage in a battle of wits that foreshadow Beatrice and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing*. They are equal in social standing, both being outsiders in Padua that don't quite fit the mold: Kate, because she rails against the expectations of her gender and 'Mad Petruchio,' a nonconformist himself and a foreigner from Verona. Rather than being taken for rivals, they are *equals* and the audience will be given to sympathize more with the intricacies of their personalities and choices than with their frivolous, commedia counterparts. As Baptista proclaims when he sees that Petruchio is fit to marry his Kate, "God send you joy, Petruchio! 'Tis a match!"

ELIZABETHAN MARRIAGE

Marriage is a central theme in *Taming*. In Elizabethan England, the idea of marriage founded on two people loving each other is rare and parents' arranging spouses for their offspring was the norm. Shakespeare constructs his characters' view of marriage as society would: as a means of getting rich and increasing social status; as a means of gaining power over another; or as a way of escaping one's family. But Shakespeare doesn't seem settled that these are optimal choices because none of them are put in a positive light.

At first, Petruchio seeks marriage for wealth and as a means of gaining power over his 'Shrew'. The Elizabethan legal right of a husband to 'own' his wife is clear when immediately after his wedding Petruchio declares of Kate:

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 anything.
Act 3 Scene 2

Hortensio attempts to gain wealth and social status in a snap decision to marry the Widow after it becomes clear he will not win Bianca's love. It backfires and he becomes a cuckold. Head down, tail between his legs, he has given up his freedoms for material gain and perhaps ended up marrying a shrew himself.

Lucentio and Bianca's elopement is gained by manipulating and deceiving their parents in order to get what they want. In the final scene the 'control games' they play with each other hint at what the future holds for them.

Kate and Petruchio's relationship is constantly being tested but will eventually be transformed by love and understanding. As the play progresses, it becomes apparent that neither of them would be satisfied with marital status quo of the time – they are both too intelligent and too restless to take the narrow view. Petruchio gives Kate a taste of her own medicine and shows her the consequences of bad behavior. But he is also playful with her and admires her for her spunk and her wit. For Kate, Petruchio is the first man that finds her an attractive *individual* with a mind of her own. They inch toward an understanding by giving in, or waiting things out, or with reason and eventually by compassion. In Act 5, Scene 1, Kate willingly accepts Petruchio in *her* choice to kiss him through a newly found humility:

Petruchio: First kiss me, Kate...

Kate: What, in the midst of the street?

Petruchio: What, art thou ashamed of me?

Kate: No sir, - but ashamed to kiss.

Petruchio: Why then, let's home again...

Kate: Nay, I will give thee a kiss...now pray love, stay.

By the end of the play we see their marriage is better suited for the long-haul than the other couples'.

GENDER ROLES IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

Renaissance society was patriarchal, and Shakespeare explores the expectations of women in Bianca, who fits the female ideal. She appears to be humble and quiet, obedient and chaste. But the sudden indifference to her husband's wishes in the last scene show that the pursuit of the perfect woman is an unrealistic goal.

Kate shows the consequences of rebelling against those expectations. She has made herself the outsider by resorting to extreme behavior. But, considering that women had little control over their own lives, some of her anger may be justified. She is under her father's authority legally and financially, has little control over who she will marry, sees that her father favors her younger sister and is subjected to being present when suitors are engaged in painful conversations about her eligibility while rejecting her over her younger sister.

IF ANYONE KNOW BETTER HOW TO TAME A SHREW...

In Elizabethan England, a "Shrew" was a woman who was deemed unruly and bad-tempered which is the typical behavior we see in Kate. She has no respect for anyone, including her family or elders, is abrasive, scolding, bullying and uncontrollable both physically and verbally. She is referred to as a 'fiend of hell' and Gremio grieves that he would rather 'cart' her than court her. 'Carting' was a punishment for such behavior: one was carted through the streets

wearing a bridle that had a metal bit (sometimes with spikes!) which was inserted into the mouth to keep the victim from speaking; another punishment was subjection to a Cucking Stool, which was a form of public waterboarding. Sometimes the it all turned into a party-like parade and the woman was led through the town by fellow citizens who would mock her, beat pots and pans, and shout degrading remarks about her.

Did Shakespeare mean to make Kate an example to all women on the dangers of being too independent and outspoken? Considering the usual punishments for 'shrewish' behavior, does Petruchio's unconventional methods of 'taming' and the optimistic resolution to the play seem like a more 'reasonable' (by Elizabethan standards) solution?

THE BIBLE AND TRANSFORMATION

Shakespeare often weaves Christian ideals into his plays. Elizabethans were heavily influenced by the teachings of the faith and they would have made connections in Petruchio and Kate's relationship to certain passages of the Bible. One is reminded of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians in Kate's last speech:

WIVES AND HUSBANDS. Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her.

~Ephesians 5:21-25, NAB Revised.

Throughout history, Christians have believed that as Christ laid down his life on humanity's behalf, people are able to live their fullest potential by imitating him. Katherine's speech affirms that the Christian duty of spouses is to submit to caring for, loving and honoring each other:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance; commits his body
To painful labor both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Wilst thou li'st at home, secure and safe,
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks and true obedience –
Too little payment for so great a debt.
Act 5 Scene 2

I prefer to take an optimistic view at the ending of the play. The script suggests that, as the final curtain falls, Petruchio and Kate are in harmony with each other. The lesson learned is that a balanced partnership in marriage is preferable to one that manipulates or dominates. Kate hasn't given up anything other than anger and resentment and proves she is still as headstrong and intelligent as she was at the beginning of the play. But when she speaks her mind to the widow it is for the other's benefit – to teach that the easier road is the less prideful one. Shakespeare was living in a time of great government authoritarianism in religion and free speech. The Elizabethan audience would see the peace in Petruchio and Kate's marriage as a link to peace in the broader spectrum of English society¹. There's little reason to believe that Kate is only giving lip-service in her final speech.

I hope that our audiences will be less quick to judge the play if they understand that there is a logical transformation in Kate and Petruchio's relationship and valuable lessons can be learned in digging into it a little deeper. Looking at it through an Elizabethan lens might help us understand that, while treatment toward women in their society was not at all favorable (and things haven't improved much in some parts of the world), we should give Shakespeare a little credit for trying to correct some of the sins of his time.

¹ For a full understanding of this concept, see *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* by Claire Asquith. 2005, Public Affairs Books.