

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

THE TRAGEDY OF KATHERINE: AN EVALUATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW* FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

Dr. GRACE AONOK

Visiting Assistant Professor

Shillong College, Shillong.

Email: [graceaonok2@gmail.com](mailto:graceaonok2@gmail.com)



Dr. GRACE AONOK

Article Received: 22/10/2021  
Article Accepted: 18/11/2021  
Published online: 23/11/2021  
DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.4.168](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.4.168)

Abstract

This paper endeavors to present Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*, which has been classified a Comedy, as a Tragedy. This is done by evaluating the main plot of the play from the perspective of Katherine. As the title of the play itself testifies, the main plot of the play centers on Katherine and her fate as a woman in the Elizabethan society. Therefore it is only justified that one approaches the play from the perspective of the female character in the person of Katherine.

Katherine's tragic flaw is her outspoken nature and her quick-temper. It is this flaw that compels her towards her tragic end in the play. After enduring a struggle, which manifests itself in the form of her external conflict with Petruchio and an internal conflict for self-preservation, she surrenders. She finally accepts the fact that there is no room in the androcentric society of her time for her fiery, but forthright and honest spirit. Her final speech in the play, points towards the fact that she has finally accepted defeat and she must lay her feisty spirit to rest if she must survive in a society that is controlled by a hegemony of patriarchal ideals. Her final surrender may be viewed as the tragic waste that evokes a sense of catharsis in readers who choose to understand the play from her position.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Gender Studies, Tragedy

William Shakespeare, also famously known as the 'Bard of Avon' is one of the most highly regarded poet and playwright of all times. According to studies done by The Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare's play, *The Taming of the Shrew* was written at the beginning of his literary career, placing it around 1590-91. Versions of 'The Taming of the Shrew' already existed in innumerable folklore and mystery plays. Besides folklore and mystery plays, the account of the 'shrew' that is eventually 'tamed' by the husband, are also found in other forms of literature of the time. For instance, the ballad, A

*Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife*, written circa 1580, also tells the tale of a shrewd wife who is beaten with sharp rods to make her bleed and then "wrapped in salted horse skin" to intensify her physical pain. These punishments meted out on the wife are justified as an attempt by the husband to teach her "good behaviour" (Anon, 810-888).

The poem, as well as Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*, hinges on the androcentric narrative about the shrew- a dominating and loud wife, whom the husband sees it necessary to tame or to teach a lesson, often resorting to cruel and

harsh tactics. This narrative establishes the fact that society was mired in a hegemony of patriarchal concepts and ideals, especially on gender roles in the society and the household. Speaking about the society of the period, John Knox says that society followed the dictum that "woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man"(12). In the same vein, Conley Greer observes that "although ruled by a queen, Elizabethan England relied on the male notion of socially accepted norms. Shakespeare simply operated within the guidelines afforded him by the society (135)."

Shakespeare's play 'The Taming of the Shrew' has generated much discussions over the years since it was first written and performed. Over the years, the play has been interpreted and performed in different ways, which has presented varied and compelling insights into the play. In the article, "Power and Gender in The Taming of the Shrew", Rachel De Wachter cites a few examples of the mottled production history of the play. Gregory Doran's 2003 production presents Kate as a hero who desperately tries to rescue a "madman" she is in love with. Caroline Byrne's 2016 production chooses to depict the play as a tale of a dark and violent relationship between the two protagonists, the wife and the husband. Thus, the focus of the play itself shifts to their relationship. She also changes the setting of the play, lending a turbulent and violent political backdrop, with references to the Irish nationalism of 1916. To Caroline Bryne, this modification to the setting was perhaps necessary to bring into focus her core perception of the play- the turbulence and violence of the relationship between the husband and the wife.

These interpretations and narratives have no doubt given the modern-day audience new insights into the play. However, this paper hopes to present a fresh understanding of the play through a reading of the text. It may also be mentioned that this study limits itself only to a reading of the main plot of the play, leaving out the induction scene for future examination. An honest re-reading of the main plot from the female perspective is necessary to examine whether it is actually fair to still classify this particular play as a comedy. No doubt, there is a generous amount of humour and wit in the play.

Some common features of Shakespearean comedy such as farce, disguise, mistaken identity and confusion has been introduced to lighten the play and invoke laughter in the audience and the readers. These elements somehow softens the dark brutality and harshness that goes into the task of 'taming' Katherine. However, it would do well to remind ourselves that Shakespeare is known to often inject comic scenes to his tragedies as well. In her essay, "The Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage", Coppelia Kahn suggests that giving a simplistic categorization of the play as a comedy would mean that the readers and the audience has missed the "greatest irony of the play." According to her "unlike other misogynistic shrew literature, this play satirizes not women herself in the person of the shrew, but male attitudes towards women."

Jamal Subhi Ismail Nafi, in the essay, "Art and Artifice of Shakespearean Tragedy: A Critical Approach", has noted that " a Shakespearean tragedy is primarily a tragedy of a character"(49). Hence a reading of the play from Katherine's viewpoint reveals that the play in question may very well belong to one of Shakespeare's tragedies . This consideration is required because, as the title itself suggests, Katherine is at the centre of the play and the main plot of the play undeniable revolves around her. This perspective gives a new understanding to the dynamics within the play and our perception of it.

The story of the spirited Katherine is indeed a tragic one, considering everything that she has to undergo only because she is frank and outspoken by nature. It may be an interesting point to note that right from the beginning of the play we are introduced to two contrasting ideals of female characters: Bianca, the fair, gentle and beautiful sister who represent the androcentric ideal of what a women should be, and Katherine, who is the misogynistic stereotype of the loud and ill-tempered "shrew". Society labels her a shrew and describes her as 'curst'. This, one has to admit, is not entirely unjustified. Instances of her fiery temper can be seen when, during her interaction with Hortensio, she threatens to hit him on the head with a stool and beat up his face till it bleeds (1.1.64-65). Such a challenge from a woman was unheard of in the

patriarchal society of the time and so the tag of a 'shrew' which she receives is somewhat understandable. However, on a closer examination, one has to realise that such reactions from her come when she is provoked. Instances of provocation are interspersed throughout the play. In Act 1 Scene 1 itself, Gremio and Hortensio purposely taunt her, knowing that she is short-tempered. In this scene, Baptista tells them that he does not intend to give his younger daughter, Bianca, in marriage until Katherine is married first, and asks if any of the two men are interested in taking Katherine for a wife. To this Gremio replies that he would "cart her rather" and Hortensio says that unless Katherine transforms herself into "gentler, milder mold" it would be more like taking a husband than a wife (1.1. 50-60). This exchange about her, in front of her, no doubt is enough to annoy the fiery Katherine.

Similarly, Hortensio is assigned by Baptista to instruct Katherine on music and how to play the lute. However, very soon, Hortensio reports back to Baptista and says that she would make a better soldier than a musician. According to Hortensio's account, when he attempts to teach Katherine, she misunderstands him and instead of following instructions, loses her temper and breaks the lute on his head. In this instance too, it is likely that Hortensio purposely teases Katherine with the word "frets", which means to press down with the fingers of one hand the strings on the neck of the instrument. Katherine understands that Hortensio is taunting her about her 'frets' or her tantrums, which causes her to lose her temper again (2.1.145-159).

Another instance where Katherine exhibits her fiery temper is when she beats up Grumio, a servant. However, in this occasion too, the situation she is in explains the extremity of her behavior. A very sleep deprived and starved Katherine requests Grumio to bring her some food, but instead of complying with her, like Petruchio, Grumio also resorts to taunting her. He describes different food items that he could possibly bring for the hungry Katherine but after a detailed description, he concludes that he cannot do so (4.3.2-35).

These instances confirm the fiery temperament that Katherine possesses and it may

well be considered the tragic flaw in her character. It is this tragic flaw that famously gives her the reputation of the most ill-tempered shrew in Padua. It is also this flaw in her character which seals her fate and condemns her to a life with a husband like Petruchio. The real motive for his intention to marry Katherine is evident when he asks Baptista, Katherine's father, on their very first meeting;

Petruchio: "Then tell me, if I get your daughter's love

What dowry shall I have with her to wife?"(2.1.119-120)

Despite this tragic flaw in Katherine, a closer examination may reveal that in fact, she might very well possess a milder disposition than the reputation she has earned. This is established by the fact that she dutifully complies by her father's wish and marries Petruchio, despite her initial resistance. It is evident that she has no desire to marry Petruchio as she pleads with her father;

Kate: "You have showed a tender fatherly regard

To wish me wed to one half a lunatic.

A madcap ruffian and a swearing Jack

That thinks with oaths to face the matter out."

(2.1. 279-283)

Katherine, who is supposedly strong-willed and hot-tempered, goes along with the plans that have been agreed upon by the two male figures, her father, Baptista, and her prospective husband Petruchio. She marries Petruchio but she is deprived of any celebratory merry-making of her marriage by her husband Petruchio. He insists that they should immediately leave without even eating at the wedding feast. Perhaps, this inability to celebrate her wedding rightly serves as a portentous foreboding to the darkness that lay ahead of her. Katherine's struggle has only just begun, as she was now married to a man who claims;

Petruchio: "I will be master of what is mine own.

She is my goods, my chattles; she is my house,

My household stuff, my field, my barn,

My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything."

(3.1. 230-232)

After being tormented and humiliated on her wedding day, she begins a journey into a marriage where she is faced with a series of challenges; to her these challenges are conflicts she must withstand for her self-preservation. On the other hand, her aggressor, in the person of her husband Petruchio, regards these challenges as ordeals that will "tame" Katharine. He exclaims; "I am born to tame you, Kate." (2.1.269)

The ordeal of taming Katherine that begins on the wedding day, leads up to a series of atrocities that are inflicted upon her, both physically and in spirit. She is starved of food and drink, taunted and teased, not only by Petruchio but also by his servant, Grumio, who presumably, has been granted permission to taunt and vex the mistress by the master himself. James Daybell in the essay, "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters" observes that historians have noted that though women were considered subservient to men in the patriarchal society of the time, women, as mistresses of the household were empowered to direct male servants (58). This fact establishes the degree of ignominy and degradation that Katherine as a new bride, was subject to in Petruchio's household.

The fact that Katherine endures the sequential humiliation and atrocities inflicted upon her prove that the label of "shrew" with which she has been tagged is unwarranted. Thus, if, in fact she is not a shrew, than the challenge that Petruchio undertakes to "tame" her is invalid and meaningless. This means that Katherine's suffering is unwarranted and sacrificial in nature, endured to only satisfy the whims of her husband Petruchio. On this point, it is worth noting that though Petruchio points out that he loves Katherine, he shows no sign to prove this through his actions. If Petruchio truly loved Katherine, would he not have realised that the tag of "shrew" has been unfairly adjusted on Katherine?

How could he fail to see the person that Katherine really was, and blindly take up the challenge to "tame" her and yet claim to love her too? Katherine attempts to explain herself to Petruchio;

Kate: Why, sir, I trust I may have leave to speak,

Your betters have endured me say my mind,

And if you cannot, best you stop your ears.

My tongue will tell anger of my heart,

Or else my heart, concealing it, will break,

And rather than it shall I will be free

Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words.

(4.3.73-85)

This establishes Katherine as a victim of a patriarchal society, which will simply not tolerate a woman who speaks her mind. Katherine, as she reveals in this speech, is a person who is straight-speaking and honest; one who is honest and candid. If she is guilty of any fault, it is her honesty and forthrightness. It is tragic that even after this revelation Petruchio remains unaffected, another indication that compounds the fact that he views Katherine only as a conquest and a means of acquiring a handsome dowry. He has no other feelings of love or sympathy for her. The fact that Katherine is placed in a situation such as this is indeed tragic; where she is thrown into a loveless marriage by her father, acquired by her husband for a handsome dowry, and who further exposes her to a series of merciless humiliations and cruelties on the pretext of "taming" her. She is now doomed to suffer her life with a callous and egocentric husband like Petruchio.

In order to survive this condemned life into which she has been thrust by the patriarchal authorities in her life, she must ensure that she dies and is reborn as a submissive and docile model of a woman who meets the expectations of the male imagination. Her opinions, her thoughts and her feelings have no place in this world which is governed by male expectations. In Act 4 Scene 5, Kate and Petruchio sets out to Baptista Minola's house in Padua, accompanied by Hortensio. Though,

it is midday, Petruchio looks up and declares that the moon is shining brightly. When Kate contests his claim, correcting him by pointing out that it is the sun which shines, Petruchio insists that "It shall be moon, or star, or what I list / Or ere I journey to your father's house... " (7-8). It is at this moment that Katherine realises that there is no room for two persons in her marriage; there is no room for her opinions, feelings or views. The tragic death of her spirit is established when she says;

Kate: "And be it moon or sun or what you please.

And if you please to call it a rush-candle,

Henceforth, I vow it shall be so for me."

(4.5.14-16)

This testifies to the fact that Katherine has surrendered her whole being and is now willing to become only what is expected of her by her husband. When her husband insists that the bright sun is the moon, she exclaims that it will be whatever he wishes it to be. She agrees that it is the moon and if he wishes it to be a candle, she would also gladly see it as a candle. She has finally conceded defeat in the conflict that began when Petruchio made the decision to "tame" her and to marry her. This complete relinquishment of her views, opinions and voice represents the death of her spirit. This death of an intelligent, forthright and honest spirit may be viewed as the tragic waste that presents itself at the end of the play, evoking a cathartic experience on those who empathise with the figure of the suffering Katherine.

The final speech of Katherine only compounds the defeat of good over evil. In the famous last scene of the play, Katherine addresses Bianca and the widow at the party, which has often been read as her address to all women in general. She says;

Kate: Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,

The head, thy sovveraign-one that cares for thee,

To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,

Whilst thou li'st warm 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.

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,

Even such a woman oweth to her husband,

And when she is forward, peevish, sullen, sour,

And not obedient to his honest will,

What is she but a foul contenting rebel

And graceless traitor to her loving lord?

(5.2.144-159)

"It is quite clear that in Shakespeare there is no poetic justice..." and this last speech by Katherine underscores the absence of poetic justice at the end of the play (Nafi, 50). It is evident that Katherine's real opinions and thoughts have been silenced and she is now resigned to a life where she has to parrot the opinions and views of her husband. Thus, the final scene serves as a final affirmation of the death of Katherine as we knew her and the renaissance of a new Katherine who is but a hallow shadow of her old self. She must now live, think and speak as her husband wills her to. Considering the place of women in general during the Elizabethan period, the defeat of the honest and good Katherine may be viewed as a representation of the defeat of all the women who must remain voiceless to survive in a society which is controlled by the patriarchal construct of what is good and accepted.

Therefore, a reading of the main plot from the position of Katherine reveals to us the possibilities of looking at the play from a new perspective. Reading Katherine's story from her lens reveals to us that she may have suffered unjustly at the hands of Petruchio on the one hand, and the society at large. Even her own father fails to understand her and value her for who she is. Though Katherine is intelligent, honest and outspoken, all characteristics which, today, are regarded as good and noble, she is afflicted with a tragic flaw, which is

her fiery temper. Her temperament, unfortunately could not be tolerated by a society that was imbued in the notion that “women were to be seen, and not heard” (37, Das). Her suffering and conflict is evident as the plot progresses, as she endeavors to preserve her self and identity. However, Katherine has no choice left but to submit to the male hegemony that has been thrust before her. Her final surrender may be viewed as the tragic waste that evokes a sense of catharsis in readers who choose to understand the play from her position.

#### Works cited

- Anon. "A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife". *Renascence Editions*, 2001. Web. <http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/jest.html>
- Brown, Carolyn E. "Katherine of The Taming of the Shrew: 'A Second Grissel.'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 37, no. 3, University of Texas Press, 1995, pp. 285–313, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40755075>.
- Das, Pragati. "Shakespeare's Representation of Women in his Tragedies." *Prime University Journal* ISSN, Vol.6, pp. 37-56, 1995, Web: 10 Nov. 2019
- Daybell, James. "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters." *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1, Sixteenth Century Journal, 2010, pp. 49–67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27867637>. (58)
- De Watchter, Rachel. "Power and Gender in The Taming of the Shrew." *British Library UK*, 2016. <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/power-and-gender-in-the-taming-of-the-shrew>.
- Greer, Conley. "To Be a Woman: Shakespeare's Patriarchal Viewpoint." *The Corinthian*, Vol5, no.14, Georgia College & State University, 2003, pp. 135-146, <https://kb.gcsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1198&context=thecorinthian>.
- Kahn, Coppélia. "The Taming of the Shrew': Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage." *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, Modern Language Studies, 1975, pp. 88–102, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3194204>.
- Kallen, Horace M. "The Essence of Tragedy." *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 22, no. 2, University of Chicago Press, 1912, pp. 179–202, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2376757>.
- Knox, John. *On Rebellion*. Ed. Roger A. Mason. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.
- Lewis, Sarah. *Time and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, pp. i-ii. Print.
- Nafi, Jamal Subhi Ismail. "Art and Artifice of Shakespearean Tragedy: A Critical Approach." *International Journal of Language and Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 1, American Research Institute for Policy Development, June, 2018, pp. 46-53. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. Reprint, Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly, 2017. Print.
- The Shakespeare Company. "Dates and Sources." 28 March 2020. Web. <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-taming-of-the-shrew/about-the-play/dates-and-sources>.