

An exploration of the way Shakespeare presents the characters and relationships of Kate and Petruchio in The Taming of the Shrew.

The relationship between Kate and Petruchio is central to the development of The Taming of the Shrew, as both characters clearly represent and are centrally involved in the main theme of the play, the taming of the “shrew”, Kate.

The audience is first introduced to Kate by other characters’ opinions of her, such rather than from Kate herself. Language such as Gremio’s, ‘she’s too rough for me,’ and Hortensio’s, ‘Unless you were of gentler milder mould,’ gives Kate her reputation as a “shrewish” character. When Kate first speaks, she speaks rudely, threatening to hurt Hortensio by, ‘combing his noddle with a three legged stool.’

The fact that Kate is described as different and nonconformist before she even gets a chance to speak gives the audience preconceptions of her character, perhaps unfairly, and immediately paints her as a shrew. Much is heard about Kate when she is not around to defend herself, which gives the audience the impression that Kate is perhaps being portrayed unfairly. The audience may feel that Kate has a reason for being upset with her father and men in general, as her father appears to prefer Bianca to Kate. ‘A pretty peat....’ Shows Kate’s jealousy towards her sister, as she is the one who gets all her father’s attention. Kate’s exclamation, ‘Ha!’ followed by her storming out again demonstrates her anger towards her father and men, which is central to her character early in the play.

Both Kate and Petruchio speak in verse almost exclusively throughout the play, immediately marking them as important characters in the play. Kate and Petruchio both speak in verse, which also makes them seem a fair match for each other, reflecting their characters and actions in the play. Kate is equal to Petruchio linguistically which also displays an aspect of her character, that she feels that she is easily the equal of any man.

During their first exchange, Petruchio immediately sets about Kate, that he will, ‘woo her with some spirit when she comes,’ and that he will describe her as the opposite of everything she is in order to confuse her and break her down. In Petruchio’s first exchange with Kate, it is clearly he who comes off better, immediately setting about her with short witty lines, and puns, ‘for dainties are all Kates.’ This gives the effect of making Petruchio seem very confident and sure of himself, if he begins his taming with such good humour and interest. In contrast to this, Kate is very angry and frustrated by the Petruchio, and immediately becomes “shrewish,” resorting to insults, ‘A joint stool,’ and violence. This gives the effect of Kate being much less in control of what is going on, and perhaps reflects the direction their relationship is going to take, that Petruchio will be the one in charge, and Kate will not have any control. This could however also demonstrate Kate’s intelligence and wit, that she is able to keep up and match Petruchio’s wordplay. However Kate feels the need to resort to violence, again demonstrating Petruchio’s intelligent wordplay and calm attitude, as he does not react violently towards Kate, but simply restrains her and continues with his wooing. Shakespeare also uses puns such as, ‘moveable,’ and, ‘bear,’ to add excitement and comedy to the play, as these puns would have provided humour for Elizabethan audiences. This is a good dramatic device to be used on stage, and adds interest for the audience. Shakespeare also uses alliteration such as, ‘crest,’ ‘coxcomb,’ and, ‘craven,’ to again draw attention to the important dialogue between Kate and Petruchio, which is integral to the play, and another dramatic

technique which again draws the viewers attention on the stage. This alliteration also keeps the dialogue running at a pace, reflecting both Kate and Petruchio's character.

This first exchange between Kate and Petruchio is also carefully structured for maximum effect. The fact that Petruchio outlines his taming strategy before he even meets Kate both demonstrates that this is the foremost thing on his mind, implying that it will be significant in the play, and that he has other reasons for this than care for Kate, as he plans to tame her before he has even met her. This again gives the reader the impression that Petruchio is again more interested in the dowry he can acquire by taming Kate than in Kate herself, 'if wealthily, then happily in Padua.' The exchange between Kate and Petruchio, while still written mostly in iambic pentameter, often only gives one character half a line, which is then finished by the other character. This keeps the dialogue running at a fast pace, which reflects the nature of the relationship itself, 'woo her, wed her, bed her and rid the house of her.' This also adds excitement on the stage and keeps the audience interested and is a useful dramatic device. Petruchio's dialogue contains many imperatives such as, 'must marry no other man but me,' which demonstrates Petruchio's attitude towards women, that they are there to be controlled, and that he must be in charge. When Petruchio marries Kate without her consent this also demonstrates this aspect of his character.

Kate and Petruchio next appear on their wedding day. The fact that Petruchio has not arrived on time reflects the arrogance of his character, that he feels he can arrive whenever he pleases. This is also the beginning of his taming of Kate, which is essential to the development of the play. The juxtaposition of Kate's description of Petruchio as a, 'frantic fool,' and Tranio's description of him as, 'honest' draws the audiences attention, and raises questions as to Petruchio's real character and motives. Kate exits weeping, demonstrating to the audience that she does have a heart, and may make the audience feel some sympathy towards Kate, that she is being treated so badly by Petruchio. This sympathy towards Kate continues when Petruchio is described as coming in strange clothes such as an, 'old hat,' and, 'a pair of old breeches, thrice turned.' This makes the audience feel sympathy towards Kate as Petruchio has forced Kate into marrying him, and now does not respect Kate enough to come and marry her in decent clothes. This can also be seen as another aspect of Petruchio's taming strategy, and again important to the play. Petruchio seems to ignore the criticism he receives from Baptista and others, 'an eyesore to our solemn festival,' and continues to press on with his "mission", the taming of Kate. 'The morning wears, 'tis time we were at church,' demonstrates that Petruchio is restless in his pursuit of Kate, and uncaring of any criticism he receives. Tranio states that, 'he has some meaning in his mad attire,' again reminding the reader that the, 'mad attire,' is part of Petruchio's submission of Kate. When Petruchio states, 'I can change these mad accoutrements,' this can have a double meaning, both that Petruchio's clothes are poor, and can be changed, but perhaps that his wife is also seen as poor as a person, and he intends to change that. When Gremio returns from the church, both Petruchio and Kate are described as devils, again demonstrating that they seem to be a fair match for each other. Gremio describes Petruchio's behavior, that he swore loudly during the service, and 'cuffed' the priest. This shows another aspect of Petruchio's character, that he is capable of anger, and often rages seemingly uncontrollably, which later becomes evident as an important part of Petruchio's plan. When the marriage party returns, Petruchio again tries to assert his dominance over Kate

almost immediately, stating that, 'they must go today,' giving Kate no choice, and not allowing her to enjoy her marriage dinner. This again is a key part of his plan, because as the audience finds out later she must not be allowed to eat or sleep until she obeys Petruchio. At this point in the play, Kate still has not been tamed, and the audience is reminded of this with her outburst, 'Do what thou canst,' after not speaking since the start of Act. 3 Sc. 2. This again paints Kate as a strong willed character, who, 'will not be gone,' until she is ready. Petruchio again seems unaffected by what Kate has to say, and continues with his wordplay, telling everyone to, 'Go to the feast, revel and domineer,' however Kate, 'must with him.' Petruchio's next speech demonstrates both his attitude towards women, and his determination to get his own way. He lists possessions such as his, 'field,' and his, 'ox,' comparing Kate to these things, as an object, something he can own and control, rather than something with free will. This also reflects the attitude towards women in society at the time, that women were seen as something to be owned by a man, and simply another possession. Petruchio then grabs Kate, again giving her no control over the situation, and sweeps out to the shock of the gathered party.

Grumio again describes Petruchio and Kate upon his return to Petruchio's house, telling the audience of the journey from Padua. This again demonstrates Petruchio's control over Kate, that when the horse stumbles, he, 'leaves her with the horse upon her,' rather than attempting to help her. 'He's more shrew than she,' spoken by Curtis, may be an attempt to make the audience understand Petruchio, that he is also being "shrewish" in an attempt to demonstrate to Kate that this is not the way to act. When Petruchio enters, he again begins to argue, finding fault with the meat, 'What's this? Mutton?' again meaning Kate has nothing to eat, continuing his 'teaching' of her. After both Kate and Petruchio leave, Petruchio's methods are summed up by Peter, 'He kills her in her own humour,' which again demonstrates that Petruchio is taming Kate by acting as she does, and thereby showing her that it is not an acceptable way to behave.

In Act 4 Sc.1, Petruchio finally outlines his taming strategy in a short soliloquy. This has been carefully structured, to allow the reader to discover and wonder about this throughout the play, with Petruchio finally revealing it towards the end of the play. Kate is also compared to an animal, a, 'falcon,' which is similar to her comparison to an, 'ox,' in the previous scene and again portrays Kate as an animal, something that can be owned, and something that can be tamed. The use of the word, 'keeper's,' demonstrates that Petruchio again feels that Kate is his possession, rather than an individual person. Petruchio's first victory over Kate comes when he brings her some food, making her thank him. This demonstrates to the audience the beginning of the change of Kate towards the end of the play. This is important as it develops the gradual change in Kate over two acts, rather than an instant taming, which would seem unlikely. After this small victory, Petruchio and Kate then disagree over the garments brought by the tailor and haberdasher. This acts as a reminder for the audience, that although Petruchio has won a small victory, Kate is certainly not completely tamed.

Petruchio continues his taming in Act. 4 Sc. 5, deliberately naming the sun as the moon and forcing Kate into agreement. 'What you will have it named, even that it is,' seems a great victory for Petruchio, as Kate seems tamed and, 'the field is won.' Kate seems subdued and completely tamed in this section, agreeing with Petruchio both about the sun, and greeting Vincentio as a, 'budding virgin.' This can also be seen not as a reflection of Kate as tamed, but as simply agreeing so that they may continue on their

journey. 'Say as he says, or we shall never go.' Kate's final speech can be seen as a summing up of the main theme of the play, the changing of Kate, and how successful that has been. This final speech can be interpreted as truthful and credible, that Kate has indeed been tamed and accepts Petruchio as her, 'lord.' Kate states that she now sees, 'our lances are but straws,' demonstrating the effect Petruchio has had, that now, instead of her previous feeling of dominance, she now sees herself as 'soft' and 'weak.' Kate's final speech can also be seen as ironic, that throughout the play, Kate was seen as the 'froward' and unfit sister, whereas now it is Bianca who is described as a, 'froward and unable worm. This represents the change in Kate by the end of the play, almost from one extreme to the other. This however can also be seen as somewhat sarcastic or untruthful, something Kate does simply because it is easier for her to do so. This relationship and exchanges between Kate and Petruchio are essential to the play, and their many varied exchanges provide a fast moving and interesting dramatic text.

Bibliography

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