

## Discussion of the use of violence in "The Taming of the Shrew"

"The Taming of the Shrew" may not immediately be described as a violent play. However if we look closer we can see that Shakespeare uses violence throughout the play, which can sometimes go unnoticed due to its subtlety. He uses physical, emotional, verbal and psychological forms of violence skilfully depending on the desired effect. Violence is important to the characterisation, plot and humour of the play.

The fundamental storyline of the play is violent, enforced by Petruchio's character. Out-Shrewing Katherina is part of Petruchio's taming plan, but the violence that he uses to ensure this is already there in his character, not just formulated for Katherina's taming. We see Petruchio's potential for violence early on in the play when Petruchio "wrings him (Grumio) by the ears" for no other reason than his misunderstanding of the context of the word "knock". This behaviour seems rather extremist, considering the nature of Grumio's fault. From the outset we are presented with the aggressive nature of Petruchio's character. This shows that Shakespeare wanted the audience to see this as a very important part of Petruchio's character. The incident is also very visually humorous due to its slapstick. We see a master and servant relationship, later to be mimicked with Katherina. Petruchio has a need to be dominant.

The same can be said of Katherina, that violence is a natural part of her character. Katherina is willing to use violence, as in act 2, scene 1, where Bianca enters "with her hands tied". Katherina's overriding jealousy has led her to behave in this manner towards her sister. Shakespeare uses violence here to increase our curiosity, and therefore our interest in the subplot, over which of her suitors Bianca likes the best. Katherina takes this action, as she likes the fact that she already has control over Bianca, who cannot marry until she does. This incident just increases Katherina's control. Katherina hits Bianca after she says:

"Is it for him that you envy me so?"

This suggests to me that Bianca's words have angered Katherina, probably because of their truth. It is clear that Katherina is jealous of Bianca and this incident shows Katherina's desire to be married herself. The difference between how Katherina needs to feel control over Bianca and her submission to Petruchio is that she knows Bianca won't fight back if she ever wants to be married.

The general attitude that the play presents is not so much misogynistic as chauvinistic. The men don't hate women, but realise they can be manipulated for best use. Women were commodities for business ventures. Petruchio tries to increase Katherina's prospects on the marriage market through education. Katherina clearly objects to this strongly. Her tutor Hortensio (as Litio) enters "with his head broke" as a result of Katherina beating him with his lute. Katherina uses violence to vehemently express herself. To see women as a business venture undermines feelings and love, which is only mentioned by Baptista as an afterthought. However, we must not forget that "The Taming of the Shrew" is primarily a comedy written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, so we cannot take these views too seriously today.

Prior to Petruchio's and Katherina's first meeting Petruchio constructs a violent and powerful metaphor. He compares Katherina to a "fire" and himself to the

“wind” which will help the fire to grow “great”. It is shown here, through Shakespeare’s use of figurative language, that two violent natures will ultimately settle each other, a metaphor that proves correct. The audience now eagerly anticipate the first meeting of Petruchio and Katherine.

Petruchio’s tone changes quite dramatically. When talking with Baptista he is courtly and polite and speaks mainly in blank verse. His wooing of Katherine however follows the pattern of aggressive banter, mainly in single lines. This creates a charged atmosphere between the two, making for a very fast paced, comic and exciting interaction that allows us to see both characters at their most explosive. Petruchio deliberately provokes Katherine by repeatedly calling her “Kate”. He even goes as far as to assume possession of her:

“Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate”

In this one line Petruchio has abused Katherine’s name three times. He is also abusing her character as almost everything he says of his initial words to Katherine implies a meek and modest character. The wooing scene contains violent sexual imagery for two characters that have only just met.

The pair uses much animal imagery. The most powerful of these is the “buzzard”, a motif that continues through the play. With this metaphor Petruchio is saying that Katherine is inferior, the hawk to be tamed. Just as the falconer has the skill to tame the hawk, Petruchio has the skill to tame Katherine. Petruchio is psychologically trying to win Katherine. He is trying to break down her defences so that she will have no other choice than to obey him. The scene quickly turns to physical violence when “she strikes him”. I think Kate does this because she cannot think of anything to say to defend herself from his rough wooing, she feels powerless. Petruchio’s immediate reply to this is:

“I swear I’ll cuff you if you strike again”

Petruchio is happy to threaten Kate. His intention to restrain her physically symbolises the nature of his taming plan. Violence in women is not tolerated, but the violent nature of Katherine’s taming by Petruchio largely is.

Petruchio’s tactical words and ironic talk of Katherine’s virtuous qualities eventually silences her in this scene. Unlike Katherine Petruchio is not afraid to bring down the pretence, when he tells her “in plain terms” that she shall be his wife. In this speech he is very definite about his intentions. He eloquently expresses with the force and assurance of his language that “he must and will have Katherine” as his wife. It is significant here that Petruchio has changed the form of Katherine’s name from “Kate” to “Katherine”. I think he has realised the strength of Katherine’s character and perhaps he is thinking that his conquest might not be so easy. The changing of her name is probably a tactical move. He is giving into her just a little, addressing her by her preferred name, in order that she will succumb to him.

In Act 3, scene 1, Lucentio (Cambio) and Hortensio (Litio) argue over Bianca. This is violent because of the social standing of the characters. One would expect such courtly characters to behave with more dignity. The pair are locked in a verbal duel over who will win Bianca. It is as if they have descended a level of their status. It was strongly felt in Shakespeare’s time that people should not behave outside of their ranks. It is assumed that characters such as Hortensio and Lucentio would not find themselves being violent because of their education. We can also see how Sly

changes from pauper to lord, prose to blank verse, a form of speech reserved for courtly characters.

Petruchio's taming methods are particularly violent. At the wedding he clearly displays what married life will be like for Katherina. His behaviour has been atrocious and Gremio describes him as "a devil". Gremio's description leads us to visualise the ceremony as farcical. It is interesting that Shakespeare chooses not to show the ceremony, but presents it via Gremio's reportage. I think this is done to heighten the suspense. It makes the audience eager to observe the couple's relationship for themselves. Petruchio violates the code of conduct that is generally assumed will be in place for a wedding ceremony. He arrives at the ceremony in outrageous attire. Petruchio adopts Katherina's shrewish behaviour in an attempt to show her what it is like to be on the receiving end of these actions. He takes this demeanour to extraordinary lengths in order to silence Katherina. Petruchio swore at the priest and struck him. If indeed he is mirroring Katherina's shrewish nature, in order that she should identify this as a fault, then he is taking this action to extremes. Petruchio's behaviour, although not admired, is widely deemed acceptable, as it is presumed his actions will serve the purpose of taming Katherina. Yet if this scenario were to be turned around, then it is unacceptable for Katherina to be violent (for example, when she struck Petruchio) because she is a woman, and it is presumed that men need not to be tamed. Petruchio intends to "kill a wife with kindness". This is violent because he wants to destroy who she is. His ironic words show how strongly he feels. Petruchio shouts at, throws food at and physically abuses his servants because he wants to remind Katherina that she may be next in line.

The use of an induction can be viewed as violent. Is Shakespeare insulting the audience's intelligence by feeling he has to construct a mechanism to draw the audience into the play? Due to the complexity of the play, regarding the various disguises I doubt this is so. Some would say that the use of an induction implies that "The Taming of the Shrew" is a fantasy sequence, and not to be taken seriously. Much of the induction links to the main play, for example, the theme of role-playing and deception. The intention in the plot of the induction is to see whether Sly can be persuaded to believe that his transformation from poor to a lord is reality rather than a dream. The same could be said of Katherina's taming.

So, after all of Petruchio's violence, have his taming methods been successful? On the surface the answer would appear to be yes. Katherina agrees that everything Petruchio says is true:

"What you will have it named, even that it is,  
And so it shall be so for Katherine"

I think that Katherina has submitted to Petruchio because she is frustrated by his actions. For example, her frustration due to her deprivation of food and sleep leads her to beat Grumio. She quickly changes however, from physical violence to submission when she thanks Petruchio and addresses him as "sir" in order to be fed. Conversely, it can be said that Katherina has learned to love Petruchio:

"Nay, I will give thee a kiss. Now pray thee, love  
stay"

Affection between the two has grown. Petruchio responds by calling her “my sweet Kate”. He still assumes possession of her and abuses her name, but both characters have adopted a more caring tone and their feelings have grown into genuine affection. Ultimately, Shakespeare leaves it up to the audience to decide whether Katherina has been tamed or not. It depends whether we believe Hortensio’s closing line:

“thou hast tamed a curst shrew”

or Lucentio’s:

“’Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so”

Personally, I agree with Lucentio and believe that she has allowed herself to be tamed. I think that she married Petruchio in an attempt to stop any more public humiliation, she just wanted to leave the church as soon as possible. If Katherina objected to Petruchio so strongly, then she could have avoided him and just not turned up for the wedding. Her strength of character leads her to believe that she can handle Petruchio, she probably views him as a challenge as well as vica versa. I think she enjoys the ‘game’ by the way she participates in the wooing scene. She instantly takes a dislike to him and probably thinks that she can teach him a thing or two.

Shakespeare balances the violence to make “The Taming of the Shrew” more than just a wife- taming tale. He also shows that it is possible for women to defy their husbands, as Bianca and the widow, who refuse to come to their husbands when called.

The violence is sometimes over the top, but this is why it works so well on stage. Without violence there would be no ‘falconer’ or ‘hawk’, no tamer and no shrew, so we would be left with a very bland play indeed.