The Taming Of The Shrew: An Critique Essay, Research Paper

The Taming of the Shrew: An Critique

The Taming of the Shrew is one of the earliest comedies written by

sixteenth and seventeenth century English bard, William Shakespeare. Some

scholars believe it may have been his first work written for the stage as well

as his first comedy (Shakespearean 310). The earliest record of it being

performed on stage is in 1593 or 1594. It is thought by many to be one of

Shakespeare’s most immature plays (Cyclopedia 1106).

In The Taming of the Shrew, Petruchio was the only suitor willing to

court Kate, the more undesirable of Baptista’s two daughters. Kate was never

described as unattractive (Elizabeth Taylor played her role in one film of the

production), but was known for her shrewish behavior around all of Padua.

Bianca, on the other hand was very sweet and charming and beautiful; for these

reasons many suitors wooed her. Kate was presented to be much more intelligent

and witty than Bianca, but, ironically, she could not compete with Bianca

because of these witty comebacks and caustic remarks she made (Dash 830). All

of the men who desired Bianca needed somebody to marry Kate, as it was customary

for the older daughter to be married before the young one. Finally, Petruchio

came along to court Kate, saying he wanted to marry wealthily in Padua. It

appeared, though, as if Petruchio was the kind of man who needed an opposition

in life. The shrewish Kate, who was known to have a sharp tongue, very

adequately filled his need for another powerful character in a relationship

(Kahn 419). When Petruchio began to woo Kate, everybody was rather surprised,

but Signior Baptista agreed when Petruchio wanted marry her on Saturday of the

week he met her. Clearly, he was not opposed because he wanted to hurry and get

Kate married so she would not be in Bianca’s way anymore. Petruchio showed up

to the wedding late and in strange attire, but nevertheless they were married

that Saturday. Petruchio began his famous process of taming his bride.

From the beginning, Petruchio wanted to dominate a relationship of two

dominating personalities. He sought to tame her in a nonviolent but still

somewhat cruel fashion. Petruchio’s method of “taming” Kate featured depriving

her of the things she had taken for granted and been given all of her life, and

he sarcastically acted as if it was in her best interest (Leggatt 410). In the

name of love, Petruchio refused to let her eat, under the pretense that she

deserved better food than what was being given her (Nevo 262). Similarly,

Petruchio did not think that her bed was suitable for her to sleep in, so his

servants took turns keeping her awake and denying her the sleep that she so

desperately needed. When the tailor brought in what seemed to be a very pretty

cap, Petruchio refused to let Kate have it, despite her incessant pleas to keep

the cap (Legatt 410). Petruchio took the stance that Kate was his property, as

he pointed out in the second scene of act three:

I will be master of what is mine own.

230 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?.

Petruchio’s words left no doubt as to his belief in the patriarchal

marriage system that existed during Shakespeare’s time, perhaps presented in

somewhat of an exaggerated form (Kahn 414).

As tiredness, hunger, and frustration set in on Kate, her wildcat

personality began to weaken noticeably. Because of the helplessness of her

situation, she began to show submission to her husband. When Kate mentioned the

sun in a conversation, Petruchio absurdly disagreed with her and told her it was

the moon. Kate proceeded to agree with him, to which, of course, he changed his

mind back. Kate’s response was that it changes even as his mind, and this was

the first sign of her submission to Petruchio (Evans 32).

Petruchio’s actions were very extreme during the play, but as Kate caught

on to their role playing their relationship improved (Nevo 262). Many scholars

feel that, despite Kate’s submissiveness in the closing scene of the play, she

would continue to be a strong opposition for Petruchio. Her representation at

the end of the play, however, is very docile and submissive. There were several

points in the play during which she demonstrated her new found domesticated

personality. Firstly, she showcased it by saying what Petruchio wanted her to,

regardless of the absurdity of the statement. In addition to the already

mentioned sun-moon incident, Kate referred to the old and decrepit Vincentio as

a ?young budding virgin, fair and fresh and sweet’ (Evans 32). In effect,

Petruchio was demonstrating absurdity by being absurd, and Kate responded to his

preposterousness. Another point in the play where Kate displayed her

complaisance was when she came at Petruchio’s call. When one of the men

proposed a wa ger on whose wife will return first when they are all called,

Petruchio responded by raising the bet significantly. He reasoned that he would

wager that much on his hound, but his wife merited a much larger bet (Leggatt

413). Petruchio displayed complete trust in Kate in that situation, and she

came through for her man. Many critics have pointed out that the wager scene is

dominated by reversals: quiet Bianca talked back, while the shrewish Katherina

came across as an obedient wife (Kahn 418). Kate enjoyed winning the wager for

Petruchio just as Petruchio delighted in making (and raising) it (Leggatt 413).

However, Ruth Nevo pointed out that Kate did not only win the wager, but her

speech testifies a generosity worth far more than the two hundred crowns of the

wager (264). Another point that must be made concerning her speech is that she

delighted in reprimanding the other ladies for their unconventional behavior.

She especially enjoyed admonishing Bianca for her unseemly behavior (Dash 835).

A nother instant when Kate obeyed her husband’s outlandish demands came as

somewhat of a surprise after the wager scene. Kate returned with the hat

Petruchio had given her, and he instructed her to take off the hat, which Kate

actually liked. She once again complied in front of the surprised crowd. As if

all of these symbols of her obedience were not enough, Kate showed one more sign.

As she concluded the scene and the play, Kate prepared to put her hand beneath

her husband’s foot, and Elizabethan symbol of wifely obedience (Kahn 419). Kate

truly showed submission, obedience, and respect to her husband in the final

scene of the play, earning respect for herself in the process.

Many critics have observed and noted that Petruchio and Kate had a need for

each other, being the strong personalities that they are. They thrive off of

the intellectual games they play throughout The Taming of the Shrew. Both have

a witty intelligence that made them attracted to each other. Also, each of them

had something to prove: Petruchio needed to confirm his manhood, while Kate

needed to steer her demeanor toward the ladylike side of things. The whole plot

of the play drives toward these goals. It was Kate’s submission to Petruchio

which makes him a man, finally and indisputably (Kahn 419). Kate earned

bountiful respect from the other men in the closing scene, as she proved to fit

the mold of the conventional woman better than their wives did (Dash 835).

Petruchio did not break Kate’s wit and will, as some might perceive; he simply

used them to his advantage, as is quite noticeable in the wager scene. This

showed how Kate was actually a foil of Petruchio (Nevo 262). The acting done by

Kate and Petruchio lived up to the patriarchal ideals of their time, but yet

the reader is led to believe that in the future, there will still be opposition

in their relationship. Even in the final scene, Kate never showed signs of

being a weak character, but rather the ability to be strong in any way she needs

to be. In a sense, Kate and Petruchio had what one might call a symbiotic

relationship; that is, they both had a strong need for each other, which is

somewhat paradoxical, as both of them were fiercely independent characters.

The customs and standards of marriages during the Elizabethan Age that

Shakespeare wrote The Taming of the Shrew in are represented very accurately

throughout the text of the play. There are hints that the marriage of Petruchio

and Kate may not have exactly met these standards, but for acceptance they

attempted to make it look that way. In fact, neither of them were really

accepted until they did that. The marriages of the time were very male

dominated. This is why Petruchio’s form of violence was accepted; because he

was the master of his property and could do what he wanted with it. Kate was

not the conventional shrew, because most “shrews” were women that were already

married and dominated their husbands in their relationship. Kate’s violence was

very unacceptable in their society, because women just did not do that at that

time. Kate committed four physically violent acts on stage: she broke the lute

over the Hortensio’s head, tied and beat Bianca, and hit Petruchio and Grumio

(Kahn 415).

Petruchio, however, never once committed an act of physical violence, but he

did, in the name of love, deprive Kate of her needs until she bent to his will.

Because Petruchio was a male, though, his violence was more accepted by society

than was Kate’s (Kahn 414). Petruchio’s therapy for Kate has been compared to

holding up a mirror and letting the shrew see herself. Whenever Kate would

throw her tantrums, Petruchio would throw them right back, in perhaps even more

exaggerated form. These provided the comical aspect of the play, as well as

giving Kate a chance to look at her own image (Nevo 262). This exchange of

roles, which landed Kate on the receiving end of all of those hideous tantrums,

took her out of herself. This remedy appealed to the intelligent aspect of

Kate’s complex personality, and they brought about a change in her. This appeal

to her intelligence is why Kate’s will was not broken, but rather changed to

meet Petruchio’s mold to some extent (Nevo 263). The patriarchal styles that th

e marriages took on during the Elizabethan age are very well represented in

Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew.

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