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KATHARINA'S *VOLTE-FACE*
Self-discovery in Shakespeare's
The Taming of the Shrew

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To God - my Rock, my Deliverer, my Fortress, my Strength - my gratitude, loyalty and love are Yours forever.

ABSTRACT

At first glance, Shakespeare's controversial battle-of-the-sexes play *The Taming of the Shrew* appears to be the story of a vile-tempered woman who is taken on as a challenge by a man who then 'tames' her into becoming a docile wife by subjecting her to a number of harsh experiences. In actual fact, however, the play is more than a simple far-fetched farce or comedy despite the undeniable fact that it is both funny as well as farcical. Although exceedingly entertaining in terms of both slapstick humour and witty repartee, the play has depths of meaning not at once apparent to the casual reader or playgoer. It chronicles a remarkable woman's spasmodic journey into the mysterious realms of her own womanhood, culminating in the discovery and final establishment of her own sexual identity.

The play must be examined closely from a number of aspects in order to provide a clear picture of Kate the shrew and Petruchio the tamer. When one wades through the enormous amount of literary criticism centred upon the relationship between the two protagonists, one is made aware of many discrepancies and differences of opinion regarding key issues pertaining to it. Is the play serious or not? Who is Katharina and why is she shrewish? Why should she suddenly accept Petruchio's mastery in the final act?

The pivotal point of the play is irrefutably Kate's final speech. This dissertation aims to uncover Kate's individual journey of self-discovery through Petruchio's eventful courtship, thereby showing that the notorious 'taming' of the shrew is actually a forceful wooing. The famous speech is shown to be made with a genuine sincerity, highlighted with touches of ironic humour that do not in

any way undermine its gravity but serve instead to accentuate the serious message behind it. Kate's shrewishness, donned as a necessity in a stifling male-dominated environment, becomes a habit with her until she encounters a man who shows her exactly what she is like and, at the same time, shows her that here at last is a worthy man whom she can safely respect and love. Once Kate realizes this, she no longer needs her shrew-like manner to act as a barrier between herself and an unacceptable life, and she throws it off as if it were a cloak. All this happens in an atmosphere of deliberate farce which is a contrastive parallel reflecting the struggle within an intelligent, emotional and altogether straightforward woman to find her personal reality in an artificial world.

In order to facilitate the uncovering of Kate's selfhood, I have examined some of the most commonly expounded views on *The Taming of the Shrew* and many different interpretations of Kate's climactic capitulation in order to offer a holistic understanding of the various possible psychological implications of the play through a detailed critical analysis of current literary opinion. I have then examined Kate from the point of view of gender – what it means to be inherently female – to shed a measure of light upon the struggles of womanhood that cause her to reject the world and retire into the refuge of shrewishness. Finally, I have detailed how Petruchio shocks her out of her furious and hopeless rebellion, and demonstrates his masculine worth for her hand and heart while simultaneously breaking the back of her shrewishness by providing her with a new realization of the desires of her true self as a woman, which eventually leads to mutual satisfaction and fulfillment.

ABSTRAK

Jika dipandang sepintas lalu, drama Shakespeare yang bertajuk *The Taming of the Shrew* mungkin dilihat sebagai cerita ringkas yang mengisahkan seorang wanita bengis yang dikahwini oleh seorang lelaki yang menganggapnya sebagai satu cabaran. Lantas, lelaki itu pun ‘menjinakkan’ perempuan ini selepas menderakannya. Sebenarnya, drama ini adalah lebih daripada suatu jenaka lucu walaupun tidak boleh dinafikan bahawa ianya lucu. Walaupun menghiburkan hati dari segi adegan dan dialog, drama ini mempunyai maksud tersirat yang mungkin kurang mudah dikesani oleh penonton umum. Ia adalah kisah perjalanan jiwa seorang wanita yang unggul ke dalam dunia kewanitaannya sendiri. Ia berakhir apabila dia menemui identiti dirinya sendiri sebagai seorang wanita.

Lakonan ini mestilah diteliti dari beberapa aspek untuk mengenali Kate – iaitu wanita yang diibaratkan sebagai tikus kasturi kerana mulutnya yang celupah – dan Petruchio, ‘penjinak’nya. Bila kita meneliti kritikan tentang perhubungan mereka berdua ini, kita pasti sedar bahawa ada banyak pertelingkahan dan percanggahan pendapat mengenai isu-isu utama dalam lakonan ini. Adakah lakonan ini serius ataupun lucu semata-mata? Kenapakah Katharina bersikap bengis? Kenapakah dia akur kepada Petruchio di dalam adegan terakhir?

Detik yang paling penting dalam lakonan ini adalah tatkala ucapan terakhir Kate. Disertasi ini bertujuan untuk mengikut pengembaraan peribadi Kate melalui lamaran kasar Petruchio yang penuh bercabaran, dan dengan ini

menunjukkan bahawa 'penjinakan' perempuan bengis ini adalah sebenarnya suatu lamaran penuh romantis walaupun tegas. Ucapan Kate yang masyhur itu akan didedahkan sebagai suatu ucapan yang tulus ikhlas, dengan beberapa unsur ironi yang sama sekali tidak mengancam keikhlasan ucapannya itu tetapi sebaliknya menguatkan mesejnya.

Kebengisan Kate telah diambilnya sebagai perlindungan daripada persekitaran buatan kaum lelaki yang menindasnya, tetapi ia telah menjadi suatu tabiat buruk yang merosakkan jiwanya. Petruchio telah menunjukkan Kate kehodohan sikapnya, dan pada masa yang sama, dia mendemonstrasikan kepada isterinya itu bahawa dia boleh menyayangi dan menghormatinya dengan ikhlas kerana dialah satu-satunya lelaki yang boleh dipercayainya. Apabila Kate sedar akan hal ini, dia menyingkirkan kebengisannya serta reputasi sebagai 'perempuan tikus kasturi' dengan serta merta.

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INTRODUCTION

The Taming of the Shrew is one of William Shakespeare's earliest comedies, written sometime between the late 1580's and the early 1590's. Derived from a variety of sources, the play is an exceptionally ingenious one. It is often compared to *Much Ado About Nothing*, which appeared about 10 years later, in terms of a similar quality of wit and a similar lively pair of unconventional protagonists despite featuring a marked dissimilarity in plot. *The Taming of the Shrew* takes on a red-hot topic, for it debates the nature of women and presents arguments concerning their specific role in marriage. It addresses social issues very relevant to modern life - for men and women remain intrinsically the same whether in the 16th century or the 21st - but which are nonetheless potentially controversial, especially in today's modern society.

The play itself is framed by a device known as an Induction, which serves as a showcase for the real story of a shrew and the man who attempts to tame her. Shakespeare not only subtly interlinks themes significant to the main play itself within the Induction, but also weaves another plot concerning her sister in parallel to the shrew's tale in order to cleverly highlight the points he wishes to draw attention to. Shakespeare's extraordinary creativity with plot and astounding skill with character development clearly manifests itself in this early play. As Maurer observes, *The Taming of the Shrew* 'shows us a dramatist who is sophisticated in his characterization and his ability to deal with multiple plots, as

well as to address socially relevant topics, bringing them to the forefront for our consideration and discussion' (2001:5).

Before the key issues addressed in the play can be fully examined and its message extracted as accurately as possible, it is necessary to first gain a clear idea of the sequence of events in it as well as the characters that animate it.

***The Taming of The Shrew* by William Shakespeare**

Plot Summary

In the Induction, a drunken tinker called Christopher Sly is made the butt of an elaborate joke. Having fallen asleep in front of a Lord's house, he is found there and the Lord immediately formulates a plan to convince the drunkard that he is a nobleman. He orders Sly to be taken into the house, bathed and put in the finest bed, with the servants waiting upon him as if the tinker were in fact the Lord. As these plans are carried out, a group of actors arrive and are promptly engaged for a performance that evening.

When Sly wakes, he is confused at first, but soon falls headlong into the trap and sincerely believes himself to be a great nobleman, much to the secret delight of the Lord. Unaware that everyone is laughing up their sleeves at his gullibility, Sly asks for his wife to join him in bed (being first informed that he actually has one), but is told that sexual activity may cause harm to his health,

and so he agrees to defer his physical pleasure until later, deciding instead to enjoy the play put on by the actors.

The Taming of the Shrew now begins. In Act 1, a young man called Lucentio, who has travelled to Padua from Florence with his servant Tranio, secretly witnesses a scene that changes the course of his life. A man called Baptista Minola, who is accompanied by his daughters Katharina and Bianca, and two men named Gremio and Hortensio who both wish to formally court Bianca, tells them in no uncertain terms that no one will be allowed to woo the younger girl until her older sister is married off first. These two men remark that Katharina the shrew, famous for her wild temper and froward ways, is most unlikely to find a husband. Baptista reiterates firmly that he will allow only tutors but no suitors for gentle Bianca until Kate is safely wed. When Minola and his entourage leave, Lucentio declares that he has fallen in love with Bianca. Because of her father's stipulation, however, he decides to disguise himself as a tutor to gain entrance to her home and so court her in secret. He tells Tranio to assume his identity since he is expected in Padua and to also put in a formal suit for Bianca's hand together with the other two suitors.

After this, Petruchio, a gentleman from Verona, appears on the scene with his servant Grumio, having come to seek his fortune by marrying a wealthy woman if there is one to be had. Hortensio, being a friend of his, tells him about Kate the shrew. Petruchio leaps at the idea, assuring Hortensio that he can easily handle a shrewish woman. Hortensio asks Petruchio to present him as a tutor to Baptista at the same time as he makes his suit for Kate's hand so that Hortensio can court Bianca privately. They meet Gremio on the way, he in turn about to present Lucentio, whom he thinks is a tutor called Cambio, to Baptista, hoping

this will win him points with the old man. Tranio, posing as Lucentio, now joins the group of Bianca's suitors.

In Act 2, Kate comes in dragging her bound sister, and her speech shows the cause of her anger and furious spite. Baptista favours Bianca, and Kate rightly resents this. Infuriated by her sister's meekness, she bullies her and is severely reprimanded by her father, who then orders Bianca to leave. After storming at her father, Kate too leaves. Petruchio's motley crew arrives, and everyone starts explaining his own purpose for the visit. Baptista accepts the tutors and bids them start work immediately. He talks to Petruchio about Kate's dowry, and promises him her hand if he can win her love.

The first meeting between Kate and Petruchio is a verbal battlefield of linguistic thrust-and-parry. Petruchio is unfazed by Kate's vituperative repudiation of his advances and insists that he will marry her on Sunday. He overrides all her protests by pretending to Baptista that there is a private agreement between him and Kate that she should be fond when they are alone together but publicly appear shrewish. Baptista, elated at the impending wedding of his elder daughter, tentatively accepts Tranio's suit (on Lucentio's behalf) for Bianca on condition that he can afford proof of the wealth he claims to have. Meanwhile, Hortensio and Lucentio carry on their secret wooing of Bianca while pretending to teach her. She demonstrates a preference for Lucentio although she is too cautious to discourage Hortensio completely.

On Kate's wedding day, the groom is nowhere to be seen. Kate is clearly upset and more disappointed than she would like to appear. When Petruchio finally arrives, he is dressed in a clown-like ensemble of mismatched garments, causing an uproar among the community. After an unconventional

wedding, he insists that he and his new bride travel back to Verona immediately, thus missing the wedding reception. The trip is fraught with disaster – the horse stumbles and Kate falls, Petruchio assaults his servant in purposely misplaced rage, and all are hungry, dirty, tired and cold. Upon arrival at their destination, however, Kate is deliberately denied food or sleep while Petruchio maintains that his deepest concern is for her welfare. Under the guise of taking special care of her, he declares that everything is substandard and so she is better off without it, leaving her hungry and exhausted.

Back in Padua, Hortensio realizes that Bianca favours Lucentio. Angrily, he declares his intention to marry a rich widow who has been signalling her interest in him for some time. To further speed along Lucentio's suit, Tranio, having assumed Lucentio's identity, needs a stand-in for the real Lucentio's father to assure Baptista that he is indeed wealthy. A Pedant is convinced to play the role of Vincentio, Lucentio's father. Baptista falls for the scheme, and Bianca and the real Lucentio arrange to marry secretly.

In Verona, Kate is confused and dismayed at her husband's wild and unpredictable behaviour. Petruchio prepares food for her but forces her to thank him for it, and prevents her from satisfying her appetite fully by quietly asking Hortensio, who has just arrived, to eat most of it. He declares that they will travel to Padua in gorgeous array, but when the haberdasher and tailor come in with a cap and gown they have been ordered to prepare for Kate, Petruchio again pretends that the articles are not good enough for his wife. In the end, they set out in their old clothes.

As the group prepares to leave, Petruchio predicts an unlikely time for their arrival in Padua, and when Kate corrects him, he delays the trip until such a

time as she unquestioningly agrees to all his statements. On the way, he declares that the sun is the moon, and demands Kate's agreement before they continue their journey. Hortensio tells her to agree with Petruchio's every word if she wants to reach Padua. After this, Kate goes out of her way to concur with everything her husband says, however foolish it may seem. Petruchio tests her several times to judge the extent of her new obedience, using the chance meeting of the real Vincentio on the road to provide the opportunity.

Upon arrival at Padua, Vincentio reveals the Pedant as an impostor, and all the subterfuge begins to be revealed. After the various disguises have been thrown off, everyone is invited to a wedding banquet hosted by Lucentio and his new bride, who have confessed their elopement to Baptista and gained his forgiveness. The three married couples – Kate and Petruchio, Lucentio and Bianca, and Hortensio and his newly wed widow - become the focal point of the gathering. The widow spitefully remarks on Kate's reputation as a shrew. As the feast nears an end, the women leave the men's company and retire to another room. The men begin to tease Petruchio about his wife, despite his protests that Kate is not a shrew. Petruchio then proposes a wager of a hundred crowns to be given to the man with the most obedient wife.

Subsequently, each man calls his wife, but to the astonishment of all, only Kate comes in response to her husband's summons. Petruchio tells her to bring the other two women to their husbands and teach them the rightful duty of a woman to her husband. She obeys him instantly, offering a long and involved speech on a woman's duty of obedience and love to her husband. The onlookers are stunned at this apparent transformation of the shrew into an ideal wife. Petruchio is unashamedly triumphant, and asks Kate for a kiss, which she

promptly gives him. The play ends with Kate and Petruchio leaving the banquet together while the others are left floundering in astonishment at such irrefutable evidence of a shrew tamed.

Kate's *Volte-Face*

'And to the wonder of all present, the reformed shrewish lady spoke as eloquently in praise of the wifelike duty of obedience, as she had practiced it implicitly in a ready submission to Petruchio's will. And Katharine once more became famous in Padua, not as heretofore, as Katharine the Shrew, but as Katharine the most obedient and duteous wife in Padua.'

Charles and Mary Lamb (1807:181)

Kate's final speech undeniably marks the pivotal point upon which any overall conclusions drawn about *The Taming of the Shrew* must ultimately rest. This is because the verisimilitude of this speech significantly affects the message ultimately derived from her sudden turnabout, or *volte-face*, from shrew to virtuous wife. Likewise, the actual content of the speech itself depends greatly on the demeanour of its speaker for its impact, so while *what* she says is important, *how* she says it is even more so. As Bevington puts it, 'inevitably, the critical point in a performance [of the play] is Kate's final speech. How are we to take her gesture of submission?' (1988:xxix).

To fully understand the meaning and message of the play, therefore, it is paramount that not only the speech itself is scrutinized, but that the context of it as well as all the events that lead up to it are examined closely in order to gain an objective and accurate assessment of the sincerity – or otherwise – of that all-important treatise on wifely submission. In order to be valid, therefore, any conclusions made must effectively hinge on whether Kate's grand finale is interpreted as sincere or insincere, since the speech is not just the culmination of

the whole play, but substantially reflects the measure of Kate's own personal development at the end of it.

In the chapters that follow, I have endeavoured to establish several important points regarding the play as a whole and the way it serves as a showcase of Kate's own journey of self-discovery, somewhat similar to the way the Induction provides a frame for the play itself. It is my purpose to prove that *The Taming of the Shrew* is about a sensitive and honest woman who has been so disappointed with the circumstances of her life that she finds refuge in perpetual intractability. The infamous 'taming' is not about a shrew wrongfully cowed into submission by an egoistic bully, but is instead the chronicle of a spirited woman who is forcefully wooed and won by an exceptional man in spite of the psychological barriers she has erected as a defence around herself.

Concurrently, it is my intention to demonstrate therefore that Kate's final speech is completely sincere, with admixtures of wry irony and humour in certain places that in no way allay the seriousness of her meaning, and that she ultimately finds resolution to her anger and gains peace within herself. In all this, Petruchio serves as initiator and catalyst to her personal metamorphosis, taking on the role of a harsh teacher at first and later on showing himself to be a worthwhile partner and a loyal ally. Despite appearances, Kate is not defeated or browbeaten into obedience. On the contrary, having full control over herself and her actions, she subtly puts Petruchio and his manhood to the test, and independently uses her indefatigable honesty to gain a clearer picture of herself as she is. Her decision to utilize her innate potential to effect a change within herself is stimulated by the fact that she finds Petruchio worthy of both love and respect, and thus, with the tantalizing prospect of marital joy within her reach,

she throws off her shrewish defence mechanism since it has outlived its purpose.

At the end of the play, the shrew is no longer a shrew simply because she has no need to remain one.