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Katherine’s Arc

Shakespeare’s timeless plays change the way people view aspects of life. Most, if not all, of his stories can be looked at under several different lenses. It’s impossible to classify many of his plays under a certain genre and there is never just one theme per play. *The Taming of the Shrew* is a play that can have drastically different takeaways depending on who is reading it. Some might think it’s a depressing comedy while others might believe that it’s a transformational love story. How one views the play will change what they take away from it. All of Shakespeare’s plays have a deeper meaning and *The Taming of the Shrew* is no exception. It’s more than a comedy. It dives into the psychology of relationships and makes the audience wonder what a truly happy couple is. Petruchio put Kate through an intense learning experience but it turned out to be the best thing for her and through it all she became a much happier person. Their relationship becomes more meaningful and loving than the fake relationships of Bianca and the Widow. Despite his harsh treatment of Kate, Petruchio was still the best thing that happened to her.

To understand the good that Petruchio did for Kate, one first needs to understand Kate before Petruchio comes into her life. Kate was an ill-tempered, aggressive shrew that pushed men away and set out to torment anyone she came in contact with. The way she acted was a product of her unhappiness which comes from her relationship with her family. Her father, Baptista, clearly favored her sister, Bianca. When Kate freaked out and tied up Bianca, their father came in and started verbally attacking Kate to which she responded, “What, will you not suffer me? Nay, now I see / She is your treasure, she must have a husband, / I must dance barefoot on her wedding day / And, for your love to her, lead apes in hell. / Talk not to me. I will go sit and weep / Till I can find occasion of revenge.” (II.i.31-36). This outburst summarizes the relationship of their family. She tells him his love for Bianca outweighs his love for her. Kate lets them know that she will continue to be depressed until she finds a way to get back at her sister. Her inherent sadness comes out in anger. Kate’s sister and dad are the only people she has and she hates both of them which not only makes her unhappy but also makes her distrusting of others.

The effect Katherine’s family had on her led to her being a shrew which then made her undesirable. At this point in history, finding a suitor and getting married was very important, especially for wealthy families. She felt the pressure of this cultural stigma but whatever she did she couldn’t find a man that could tolerate her. Her unhappiness was circular; as she got angrier she became less virtuous which in turn made her angrier. Very few in the world would be able to break this circle and as it happens one man came into her life and changed everything.

Petruchio came into the story as a sexist man. He was on a quest to find a wealthy bride and proceed to marry her regardless of her say. When he gets to Padua he tells his friend, Hortensio, that he is looking for a rich wife and Hortensio tells him of one but warns him that she is a shrew. Petruchio responds, “She moves me not, or not removes at least / Affection’s edge in me, were she as rough / As are the swelling Adriatic seas. / I come to wive it wealthily in Padua; / If wealthily, then happily in Padua.” (I.ii.58-62). By this he means that it doesn’t matter how foul the girl is, if she is rich then he’ll be happy. He proves his persistence by comparing his potential wife to a worse scenario and making it seem like he can handle it. This is exactly the persistence one needed to reveal the good side of Kate. So far, everybody that had met Katherine didn’t have his determination and that is what led to their happiness.

Petruchio may have been searching for wealth at first but once he met Katherine, his outlook on the relationship changed. After a single conversation between the two of them, they knew that the other wasn’t like anybody else they have ever met. Kate is used to being quicker than the men she meets with her comebacks. She is always able to get rid of them with her shrewish behavior. When she and Petruchio first talk, they argue back and forth until she finds she is evenly matched. Kate’s comebacks are purely mean and insulting while Petruchio turns what she says around with a sexual overtone.

“Petruchio: Come, come, you wasp, i’faith you are too angry.

Katherine: If I be waspish, best beware my sting.

Petruchio: My remedy is then to pluck it out.

Katherine: Ay, if the fool could find where it lies.

Petruchio: Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting? In his tail.

Katherine: In his tongue.

Petruchio: Whose tongue?

Katherine: Yours, if you talk of tales, and so farewell.

Petruchio: What, with my tongue in your tail?” (II.i.207–214).

Going through these lines shows not only their intelligence but also their attraction. Petruchio first compares her to a wasp because she is nasty towards him. She quickly responds with a warning that he should watch out for her sting. Petruchio continues to play it cool in this scene by saying he will just pluck it out. This metaphor is saying that no matter how mean Kate is to him, Petruchio will recover and stay persistent. The second half of these lines becomes more sexual. Petruchio tells her a wasp’s stinger is in its tail but she believes it is in its tongue. By this Kate means that her sting comes from her words because what she says is why she identified as a shrew. By the end she tries to say goodbye but Petruchio keeps her engaged with another sexual innuendo. He infers that she is leaving his tongue in her tail which changes the whole meaning of this conversation. Having one’s tongue in a woman’s tail can only be a reference to sex. This is overpowering enough for Kate that she proceeds to strike him. There are two reasons she might have done this. One is that she couldn’t think of a comeback so she resorted to violence and two is she realized that he can play her game and win and that makes her very uncomfortable.

This interaction is full of puns, insults and innuendos and it proves to be the turning point of the play. This is when Petruchio begins to fall for Kate because she is different than any other woman. Her ability to quickly respond with insults proves to him that she is both intelligent and independent. Kate doesn’t bat her eyes and smile her way into marriage like her sister. She acts the way she is and Petruchio is bright enough to recognize that.

In Unhae Langis’ article, *Marriage, the Violent Traverse from Two to One in The Taming of the Shrew and Othello*, she says, “Petruchio sees beneath Kate’s defensive shield of a sharp tongue into her true worth, and taming, transcending its offensiveness to modern sensibilities, is the process to unveil her hidden virtue.” (*Langis 47*). By this she means Petruchio is the only one that can view Kate as a smart person instead of simply a shrew. Also, Langis infers that Petruchio knows that he can make her into a better-rounded woman. This is also where Kate begins to change. She is so used to men running away that she is thrown off her game when a man argues and flirts with her simultaneously. This shock silences her for the first time of the play. She runs out of ways to get rid of him and adopts an, “if you can’t beat them, join them,” mindset.

After this scene, Petruchio goes through an intense effort to, “tame,” Katherine. Nobody can defend what Petruchio does but the underlying message is that the ends justify the means. He may have put her through hell and back but that is exactly what a person like Kate needed. He not only teaches her how to respect him but also how to come off as pleasant to other people. Petruchio was the only one who knew of Katherine’s potential. He knows that, with his help, she can be a person that people enjoy while still retaining her wit. Petruchio may embarrass, starve and nearly torture her but without this, she would have gone mad. He takes her in as an outcast and transforms her into a socially functional woman. The final result of Petruchio’s adjustments isn’t apparent until the last scene of the play.

The final scene of the play is where we see the purpose of Petruchio’s torment. Many assume it encompasses Kate’s defeat and her final speech is a symbol of Petruchio’s true dominance over her. However, I would suggest this scene shows how Kate has changed for the better. Elizabeth Hutcheon wrote a very interesting article on the education of Katherine called, *From Shrew to Subject: Petruchio’s Humanist Education of Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew.* She writes, “I seek to argue that thinking of The Taming of the Shrew in the context of humanist education allows us to move away from retracing this cycle of subversion and resistance. Katherine’s display of agency at the end of the play affirms the value of a humanist education, which allows her to become a fluent and comprehensible speaker.” (*Hutcheon 317*). Hutcheon would agree that the last scene shows Kate’s improvement and not her demise. It proves that Petruchio tames his shrew much like a parent teaches their child manners. He gives her the ability to be civil as well as gifted which ultimately makes her a happier person.

The final scene begins with disrespect from the widow. She says, “Your husband being troubled with a shrew Measures my husband’s sorrow by his woe. And now you know my meaning” (V.ii.29-31). This comment gives both Kate and Petruchio a reason to show the solidarity of their relationship. Petruchio also wants to prove that he has the best wife to the other men. This leads to their wager to see which wife is the most responsive. As the scene plays out, Bianca and the widow ignore their husbands’ demands and Kate obeys hers. Many who read this part would think of this moment as Kate bottoming out. However, if they look at her full arc then they would understand how far she has come. She started as a repulsive woman who everybody hated and came out the other side with a new attitude and a new husband. The bigger question is whether or not she is happy or simply submissive. Looking closer at her final speech truly shows how far she has come. She begins by saying, “Fie, fie! Unknit that threat'ning unkind brow And dart not scornful glances from those eyes To wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor. It blots thy beauty as frosts do bite the meads, Confounds thy fame as whirlwinds shake fair buds, And in no sense is meet or amiable. A woman moved is like a fountain troubled, Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty, And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it.” (V.ii.145-154). This line is her way of saying that the other woman will never achieve happiness if they don’t learn how to love their husbands. She declares them to be ungrateful and infers that they have become shrews. Her intelligence is once again brought forth with her elaborate metaphors. Kate has learned that resistance will lead to unhappiness and tells the women creating conflict with your husband will give you a bad life. She proves that a relationship without trust shouldn’t be a relationship at all for it will only bring discontent. Kate knows that trust and willingness to obey is what healthy marriages are made of and one has to be willing to surrender parts of their independence in order to achieve bliss.

This is what Shakespeare is bringing out with the relationship between Petruchio and Kate. It isn’t about sexism or about cruel humor to a beaten down woman. It’s about changing for one’s significant other. In this play that meant a woman changing for a man. However, if one were to interpret the message in the present then it would be a two way street. Shakespeare illustrated that marriage is a joining of two people into one and for that to happen both need to adapt. If both sides of a couple stayed independent and swam against the stream then that would lead to a life of unhappiness. He uses this theme to show that married people are supposed to be together until death and if they don’t get along then that entire time will be uncomfortable and insufferable. The biggest takeaway one should find in this play is that change is healthy if it is for someone they love. It takes conditional learning and experience with the other but the end result is better than not changing at all.

*The Taming of the Shrew* is another of Shakespeare’s masterpieces. More would regard this as one of his best if it wasn’t interpreted as a dark comedy. It is hard to interpret the events in this play as anything but sexist. However, if one was to remove the present day lens then they would see that Shakespeare isn’t telling a story about a woman’s submission. He is telling a story about change. Kate learned to live with her husband unlike her sister and the widow. The end result is Kate’s happiness. She hated her life before Petruchio came along and, while it was a painful process, she learned how to love another man. Kate, a person who seemed to be in a hopeless position, found happiness.

Works Cited

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