Who's Being Tamed Now?

Traditionally the theatre has been a place for men. During Shakespeare's time, all the actors were men. The female roles were given to young boys whose voices hadn't changed yet and they would don dresses and put on a show. The titles of the plays were after men, *Othello, Macbeth, Henry V*. Or if they contain a woman's name too, it comes after the man's name: *Romeo and Juliet and Troilus and Cressida.* There is nothing quite like seeing a Shakespeare performance. A brightly lit stage and colorful costumes only enhance the depth of the lines and the timelessness of the themes. And while the spectacle goes on, the overt themes and connections float away to reveal the true meaning of the play. The disguises do not matter and the hidden nuances are discovered and interpreted. Within his plays Shakespeare layered themes and messages.

The Taming of the Shrew is a play within a play. A performance within a performance and with this overt invitation Shakespeare invites his audience to look past the obvious at the obscure. In the opening act Shakespeare shows a drunken peasant who passes out from too much ale. He is found by a lord who decides to pull a joke on the old man. He sets up the peasant, Sly, within one of his chambers and sends in his servants to entertain Sly and convince him that he is indeed a lord. The skilled servants

Convince Sly that he is a lord and put on a performance for him, *The Taming of the Shrew*. This is Shakespeare's clue that what is scene in the play is covering up or obscuring more than what meets the eye. As Sly is not in actuality a lord, just a man dressed up to be one. The play within a play factors into many dimensions within the play. They will be unfolded throughout this paper along with one of Shakespeare's more covert themes is explicated. While Shakespeare gives the majority of the lines in his plays to men, he gives the power to the women. This paper focuses mainly on Katherina in *The*

Taming of the Shrew, but includes

examples from many of Shakespeare's plays. Katherina who doesn't hold the majority of the lines, but her stage presence and her role, as scripted by Shakespeare, give her more power than Petruchio. She is intelligent and spiteful in the beginning and she transforms in the end. But as she changes Petruchio also changes.

The play within a play, that Shakespeare sets up in the beginning, foreshadows an important concept for the play. Shakespeare chose to present each of his characters following this particular fashion. They are each presented as comical characters with stereotypical personalities. He starts off with Lucentio, a love-struck boy. Next there is Baptista, a rich old man who loves his daughters dearly. Then Katherina the shrew, with her spiteful and poisonous tongue, and sweet loving Bianca appear on the stage. But as the show progresses they each reveal their masked identities. Lucentio is really vain, and Baptista cares only for the money. Katherina is a kind spirited girl and Bianca the shrew. These characteristics are hidden beneath the comical layer for appeal. All that appears on the surface is not true. The masking hides the undercurrent of the play. No one is who they seem and the power is not where it usually lies.

Men held the majority of the power during the Renaissance. They held professions and kept their women in line. If their wives were disobedient they would beat them into submission. There are two earlier recorded plays about shrewish wives and the beatings/tamings they suffered under their husbands. (insert quote from scholarly source here) There are no beatings in Shakespeare's version. In his version Petruchio gives Kate the atmosphere for her to decide to make the change on her own. When he takes her to his home after the wedding he props up his feet and says, "This is the way to kill a wife with kindness" (act IV scene II). He is a brash character from the beginning, beating around his servant Grumio, but

he doesn't continue those actions with Kate. He is kind with her and feels that he can get her to change that way. Shakespeare must have had great respect for women, because an easy way to tame her would be to beat her. Historically the Queen funded a lot of Shakespeare's plays to entertain England and being an effective female ruler must have marked him. He seems to greatly respect the woman and give her a lot of power and sway just because of her nature. Although Shakespeare isn't writing about a ruling queen in this play, he does give Kate power within her social circle. Queen Elizabeth was ruling during the time that Shakespeare was writing, but he wrote his historical plays on rulers who have departed. It could be in part a tribute to her as well as the female sex to give his women so much sway within their homes. Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* is the driving force that convinces the weak Macbeth to kill the king. She is the strong force, the power that gives the play its story. (more examples to expound on…Hecate and the witches in Macbeth, Queen C. who tries to convince her son not to betray his country, Portia in the Merchant of Venice)

As the shrew, Katherina's saucy temper is quite well known. She does not hide her thoughts or feelings, but lashes out. "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 . . . til I can find occasion of revenge" (act II scene I).There are many critics who believe that Kate is simply jealous of Bianca's good looks and father's adoration and there is proof of that within the script. In reality there are probably many factors that contribute to her bad humor that fuel her fire against her family. Her whole family fears her and tries to comply with her irritable ways. This is one of the ways that Kate exercises her control over her family, through fear. It is not however very effective because beating on her sister and her father only makes their judgment of her worse. They fear her and they do not care to be around her. And since her behavior is so widely known there is little chance for her to find a husband. They will all be locked in an unhappy

dysfunctional family relationship.

Then Petruchio walks into her life. Shakespeare displays him as a man seeking good fortune in a wife. He is loud and brash, a veritable bachelor. He comes into a pub on the first night visiting Padua and declares “I’ve come to wife it wealthily in Padua”(act I scene II). He is overtly the typical bachelor and upon hearing that there is a woman with a lot of money waiting to marry, he accepts. There isn’t any deception in the match either. He is well informed that the woman who he will be wooing is a shrew. In knowing the situation from the start he feels he has the upper hand. The meeting between Kate and Petruchio is priceless. Some of Shakespeare’s best sparing language and witty humor is exposed in the exchange.

“Bee sting…tongue…” The exchange shows Shakespeare chooses to give both sexes equal opportunities in language. Neither or slow or loquacious in their language. Kate is incredibly haughty in this section and it is only towards the end that her anger seems to ebb. She has never encountered a man quite like Petruchio. He is not afraid or too abashed to vocally and physically make his thoughts known to her. They are both equally matched in their battle of wits. And while Kate has had the upper hand with her family for years, the same behavior does not work on Petruchio. Petruchio’s aim in this scene is to woo Kate and toy with her. If she “ask me to leave I will say thank you as if she bid me to stay”.

In the film version with Elizabeth Taylor, this scene is incredibly telling of the future. Petruchio has been chasing Kate around a wool storing barn and getting her all worked up. While she is in the room with him she is spiteful and catty, but when he returns her to her chamber she expresses new emotion. She is still irked over his behavior, but she is also intensely curious about the man who had treated her differently. She stands on a stool and peers through the glass window above her door at him as he speaks with her father. Her face, in this moment of solitude, betrays a little admiration and more than enough curiosity. This is the

first time anyone has stood up to her and she wonders about it. And though she tries to fight it when she is on stage, in her eyes and in her heart she is already falling for the only rough brawling man who can stand her.

It is after Kate and Petruchio's wedding that the transformation can be seen starting in Petruchio. It is not what Kate does to him, but who she is in relation to him that starts his transformation. The power of womanhood alone grants her small sphere of influence a powerful magnitude. Petruchio announces to the bridal party to attend the festivities, but he and his bride are leaving. He expresses himself with very important diction "But for my bonny Kate, she must with me. Nay, look not big, nor stamp, nor stare, nor fret . . . 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" (act III scene II). She, as his wife, means as much as "anything" he has or owns. While the relation to barn yard animals may not be incredibly appealing at first, the true meaning behind the clumsy words is there. He regards her as valuable and that is the reason he makes the effort to tame her.

The change for Kate doesn't begin until later in the play, but she does expose her true soul while being living with Petruchio. He starves her of food and sleep and pulls on her drawn out emotions. But she begins to display kindness and concern for the servants that Petruchio hurts in the process. "Patience, I pray you; 'twas a fault unwilling" (act IV scene I). A critic claims that this is not a sign of pity on her part, but of a cold hearted shrew trying to pounce on the opportunity for food. There is no evidence from Kate earlier in the play where tries to butter up or soften her true message, therefore, she most likely is genuinely taking pity on the individual who Petruchio is telling off. In the Elizabeth Taylor film version, she plays Kate as a tired and very genuine character at this point. She tries to remain in her usual state of pride, but the tinge of pleading hits her voice as she asks for acceptance on her husband's part. Petruchio does not

find this enough genuine contriteness to cease his plans to tame his wife.