



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**To Kill a Wife with Kindness:**

Early modern marriage in  
Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

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Háskóli Íslands  
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## **Abstract**

This essay examines Shakespeare's portrayal of marital issues in his play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, particularly in light of the significant changes in attitudes towards marriage brought about by the Reformation. Old and brutal methods of wife-disciplining began to be frowned upon and replaced by new ideas presumably more suited to a marriage of equals. These newfangled methods are demonstrated in the play by Petruccio, a boisterous gentleman who purports to know how to "kill a wife with kindness". The fundamental question is whether the play condones or criticizes his methods. The essay also examines the way in which his wife, Katherine, is treated as a commodity, sold to the first bidder who comes along in what was still a largely patriarchal society, despite the fact that it was ruled by a female monarch. The concept of the shrew will also be discussed alongside the notion that a harmonious and violence free household was dependent on a woman's submission to the husband. Lastly, this essay looks for signs of violence and maltreatment within Petruccio's seemingly gentle treatment, primarily by comparing the couple's often erratic conduct to the psychological behaviour pattern known as Stockholm Syndrome.

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## Introduction

The principal duty of the wife is first to be subject to her husband.

To be chaste and shamefast, modest and silent, godly and discreet.<sup>1</sup>

For over four hundred years, critics and audiences alike have been intrigued, appalled and entertained by Katherine's sudden transformation from an incorrigible shrew to the obedient wife of boisterous gentleman Petruccio. Some scholars see *The Taming of the Shrew* as a romantic comedy in which a benevolent husband teaches his wife to feel compassion and find happiness as he 'rescues' her from her traditionally-minded father. Others believe that it displays, if not condones, domestic psychological violence, claiming that Shakespeare's play represents an early modern way of wifely subordination, a legitimisation of domination as long as it is not physical.<sup>2</sup> This controversial play, which has gender relations as its principal theme, has been staged worldwide, and its popularity is demonstrated by the fact that it has been adapted to the screen more times than any other play by Shakespeare, outside the major tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*).<sup>3</sup>

*The Taming of the Shrew* is among William Shakespeare's early comedies, produced about 1593 and ultimately printed in the Folio of 1623.<sup>4</sup> The play is an open-ended narrative: including a two-scene induction, where a Lord plays a trick on one Christopher Sly, a tinker recovering from a drinking binge, convincing him that he is a nobleman. The play he stages for Sly's entertainment depicts the volatile relationship of Petruccio and Katherine. After having wooed her successfully, thus acquiring her

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<sup>1</sup> A quote from a sermon by Puritan preacher Robert Cleaver, first published in 1598. In *A Godly Form, in Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance: An Annotated Edition of Contemporary Documents* (208).

<sup>2</sup> Emily Detmer, "Civilizing Subordination: Domestic Violence and The Taming of the Shrew" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.3 (Fall 1997): 273-294.

<sup>3</sup> Diana E. Henderson, "A Shrew for the Times" in *Shakespeare the Movie: popularizing the plays on film, tv and video* (148).

<sup>4</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopaedia of Literature* (1091).

sizable dowry, Petruccio proceeds to subdue Katherine's legendary temper, depriving her of necessities such as food, sleep and clothing, while feigning kindness and gallantry. His successful wife-taming earns him admiration by his peers and even wins him a wager, as at the end of the play when Katherine gives a speech extolling the virtues of wifely subservience in the closing scene of the play.

The purpose of this essay is to analyse gender relations and signs of domestic abuse in *The Taming of the Shrew*, particularly in light of the new world view emerging during the period: Reformation. This religious movement, which rejected the old doctrines and practises of the Roman Catholic Church, spread through Europe and, in England, leading to the foundation of the Anglican Church. In theory, this was a significant move towards women's liberation, with marriage now regarded a partnership of equals. It frowned upon domestic violence and abolished shaming rituals, until then deemed necessary for suppressing shrews and scolds.

This essay also aims to identify the newfangled "wife-taming" methods, applied by Petruccio to Katherine. How are they different from the old methods, and are they an improvement for the wife or simply more convenient for the husband? The essay will also explore manifestations of patriarchy within the play as well as the concept of the shrew, in terms of Katherine. Lastly, signs of domestic abuse in Petruccio and Katherine's hurly burly relationship will be investigated, paralleling their often bizarre behaviour in particular to a psychological condition known as Stockholm Syndrome. First, however, the sources for the shrew-taming plot will be briefly discussed. When crafting his plays, Shakespeare often turned to legends, historical facts or literature for a setting and plot. Then, he subtly incorporated into them a poignant statement regarding contemporary issues.

## Sources and *The Taming of a Shrew*

The play's shrew-taming plot originates from European folk tale tradition, according to scholar Jan Harold Brunvald, who collected 35 literary and 383 oral versions from 30 countries and national groups in the late 1950s.<sup>5</sup> This so-called "shrew-taming complex" has at heart the assumption that a shrew can be properly tamed through violence. Often, this violence is displaced by the husband/shrew-tamer onto an animal which is presented with an unreasonable request, for example ordering a dog to fetch water. When the uncomprehending animal inevitably fails, the tamer kills it. "The message for the terrorized bride is that her new husband can be astonishingly unreasonable and violent" (Miller 14). Shakespeare then cleverly transferred this medieval tale from its rural setting onto a modern urban couple, thus making it easier for the audience to relate to the play and consequently grasp its message.

Notably, there also exists a similar play entitled *The Taming of a Shrew*, presumably sharing the other play's origin. Written in the same period, its author has not been identified. Neither has it been ascertained which play was written first. In his introduction, Stephen Roy Miller explains that structurally, *The Taming of a Shrew* is quite similar to *The Taming of the Shrew* with three plot strands: the main plot of the taming of Katherine, the shrew, the subplot of the wooing of her sister(s) and a separate framing plot of a trick played by a Lord on the drunkard, Christopher Sly. However, there are many striking differences:

*A Shrew* is just over half the length, about sixty per cent that of *The Shrew*, and except for Kate and Sly, all the characters have different names. *A Shrew* is set in Greece, not Italy, it has a conclusion to the Sly frame tale not found in *The*

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<sup>5</sup> Miller describes this in his introduction to *The Taming of a Shrew*. See Jan Harold Brunvald, 'The Taming of the Shrew': *A Comparative Study of Oral and Literary Versions* (London, 1991); also, Jan Harold Brunvald, 'The Folktale Origin of The Taming of the Shrew', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17 (1966), 345-59.

*Shrew*, and its subplot differs in many particulars from *The Shrew*, most notably in giving Kate two sisters instead of one. (Miller 3)

### **My goods, my chattels: the wife as a commodity**

For the average Elizabethan woman, marriage signified a rather different change of status than is common today (at least in the west) that involved a transfer from the power and responsibility of the father to that of the husband.<sup>6</sup> Women did not generally choose their husbands like Juliet and Desdemona, who notably paid the ultimate price for challenging patriarchal law. In her book, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the age of Shakespeare*, Lisa Jardine goes as far as declaring that “the wife was a passive object of a commercial transaction in marriage” (Jardine 42). This is demonstrated in Petruccio’s blunt statement:

setting all this chat aside,  
Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented  
That you shall be my wife your dowry ‘greed on;  
And will you, nill you, I will marry you.  
(II.i.260-63)<sup>7</sup>

Baptista, the patriarch, is keen on finding wealthy husbands for his daughters: Katherine, famous for her “scolding tongue” (I.ii.250), and Bianca, renowned for her “beauteous modesty” (I.ii.251). He must begin with Katherine, who is, as feminist scholar Coppélia Kahn explains:

that piece of goods which Petruccio declares her to be after the wedding.

Baptista is determined not to marry the sought-after Bianca until he gets an

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<sup>6</sup> Liza Picard, *Elizabeth’s London* (194).

<sup>7</sup> All references to *The Taming of the Shrew* are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed Stephen Greenblatt, 1997.

offer for the unpopular Kate [...] out of a merchant's desire to sell all the goods in his warehouse. His marketing technique is clever: make the sale of the less popular item the prerequisite of purchasing the desirable one. (Kahn 90)

Baptista's strategy leads to the assistance of one of Bianca's suitors. Hortensio turns to his friend Petruccio, inviting him to woo Katherine if "her dowry please" (I.ii.179), knowing about his overt intentions to marry for money. When he warns that she would prove a "shrewd, ill-favoured wife" (I.ii.57) but is on the other hand "very rich" (I.ii.60) Petruccio replies: "I come to wive it wealthily in Padua; / If wealthily, then happily in Padua." (I.ii.72-73). When Grumio says that he would not marry such a shrew for "a mine of gold" (I.ii.88) Petruccio responds: "Thou know'st not gold's effect" (I.ii.89). Thus, when he discovers the size of Katherine's dowry, he wants the marriage contract drawn as soon as possible. Baptista thus has "rid his hands" (I.i.175) of the "stale" (I.i.58) Katherine and expresses some doubts: "now I play a merchant's part / And venture madly on a desperate mart" (II.i.318-19), but gets reassured by the other men present: "'Twas a commodity lay fretting by you" (II.i.320).

Petruccio shows up late to his own wedding ceremony, dressed in outrageous clothing, purposely mocking the solemnity of the event. His behaviour underscores, according to Coppélia Kahn, that the procedure is to him nothing but a business deal.

[He is merely] completing the legal arrangements whereby he acquires Kate as he would acquire a piece of property. When he declares he'll "seal the title with a lovely kiss," he refers not just to Kate's new title as a wife, but also to the title-deed which, sealed with wax, passed to the purchaser in a property transaction". (Kahn 94)

He then confirms once and for all that Katherine is his legal property as he, feigning gallantry, whisks her away, alluding at the same time to the Tenth Commandment which concerns itself with property.<sup>8</sup>

I will be master of what is mine own-  
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,  
(III.iii.100-103)

On a final note, Shakespeare's use of economic terms further underscores how a daughter was bargained for by her father and suitors, almost as any other trading good.<sup>9</sup> Petruccio insists on calling his fiancée Kate, to her great dismay.

[...] for you are call'd plain Kate,  
And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst;  
But, Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,  
Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate,  
For dainties are all Kates,  
(II.i.183-187)

He also states that he will make her "Conformable as other household Kates" (II.i.270).

This is no coincidence. The word "cate," a homophone of Kate, means property.

Similarly, Petruccio's enthusiastic: "O, how I long to have some chat with her!"

(II.i.160) might refer to his desire to share her goods in marriage. The words chattel, cate and chat are all of the same root, in addition to achat, the French word for purchase.

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<sup>8</sup> Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's" (Ex. 20:17).

<sup>9</sup> See Natasha Korda, "Household Kates: Domesticating Commodities in *The Taming of the Shrew*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47.2 (Summer 1996): 109-131.

### **Katherine: the veriest shrew of all**

Stains of womankind, blemishes of their sex, monsters in nature, botches of the family, rude, shameless, graceless, next to harlots if not the same with them, let such words leave a blister behind them, and let the canker<sup>10</sup> eat out such tongues.

So prescribes Puritan preacher William Whately, referring to the ever-threatening shrew in sermon entitled *A Bride-Bush* which expounds on the duties of husbands and wives.<sup>11</sup> According to Oxford English Dictionary, a shrew is a small insectivorous animal, much resembling mice. Due to superstitions regarding its malignant influence, a shrew in the 13<sup>th</sup> century came to be a term for wickedness”. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the shrew began to be female by definition, a woman given to railing, scolding or other perverse or malignant behaviour; usually a scolding or turbulent wife.<sup>12</sup>

The very title of the play declares Katherine a shrew, and in it, she is labelled a shrew by six of its characters: Tranio, Hortensio, Petruccio, Baptista, Curtis and the Widow. Also, she is repeatedly linked with the devil: “From all such devils, good Lord deliver us” (I.i.66). She is also for instance called “a fiend of hell” (I.i.88) whom her father must make bear “the penance of her tongue” (I.i.89). She should “go to the devil’s dam” (I.i.105), is a “hilding of a devilish spirit” (II.i.26), “intolerable curst, / And shrewd and forward so beyond all measure” (I.ii.85-86).

Apparently, one of the hallmarks of the shrew was a loud and raucous voice, although some might see that as a woman’s only weapon. If she could not change her situation, she could at least voice her dissatisfaction. In order to suppress a shrew, considered a grave threat to the patriarchal order, one had to subject her to punishments

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<sup>10</sup> Cancer.

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd Davis (ed), *Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance* (262).

<sup>12</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* XV (369).

and shaming rituals in accordance with a special set of instructions and devices. Interestingly, society correlated chastity and silence, the virtuous wife was being “chaste, obedient, dutiful and silent”, as opposed to those who were “lusty, headstrong and talkative” (Jardine 107). Even husbands risked punishment if failing to control their wives.<sup>13</sup> Various shaming devices were applied, such as the scold’s bridle, a cage for the head preventing speech and causing both pain and humiliation, its design echoing the chastity belt. Also, the cucking stool and the cart were commonly used. An unfortunate woman in the town of Norfolk for example had to: “ryde on a cart, with a paper in her hand, and [be] tynkled with a bason, and so at one o’clock, be led to the cokyng stool and ducked in the water.” This is reverberated in the play, as Gremio says he would rather “cart” (I.i.55) Katherine than court her.

Eager to acquire Katherine’s dowry, undaunted Petruccio declares that he is man enough to manage a shrew:

Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,<sup>14</sup>  
 As old as Sibyl<sup>15</sup>, and as curst and shrewd  
 As Socrates' Xanthippe<sup>16</sup> or a worse -  
 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.ii.65-71)

Boasting that he is “as peremptory as she proud minded” (II.i.129) Petruccio exemplifies society’s double standards. His thunderous character commands attention,

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<sup>13</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare* (137).

<sup>14</sup> Florent, the knight in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, who had to marry the ugly old woman who had saved his life by answering a riddle he had been commanded to solve.

<sup>15</sup> The Cumaean Sibyl, a prophetess in classical myth, had immortality without eternal youth.

<sup>16</sup> Xanthippe, the reputedly ill-tempered wife of Socrates, whose name has become synonymous with the shrew.

awe and respect – the very characteristics that make Katherine undesirable and subject to ridicule. As his servant Grumio puts it when his master and new mistress are on their way to the house: “he is more shrew than she” (IV.i.71).

What is it that makes Katherine a shrew? The answer could be that she speaks her mind, loudly objecting to the patriarchal system. She harasses Bianca, binding her hands and striking her, and furthermore assaults Hortensio, Petruccio and Grumio. Then again, what these acts of violence have in common is occurring after provocation. When her words get her nowhere, she feels compelled to take physical action to be noticed. And in Bianca’s case, it appears as if Katherine resorts to binding her hands in an attempt to make her sister physically feel the constraints which society places on her. Unlike other Shakespearian heroines, Katherine has no female friends to turn to. In fact, she has no friends at all.

Katherine reacts violently to (disguised as a teacher) Hortensio’s attempts to “break her to the lute” (II.i.145) as Baptista has commanded him to do:

I did but tell her she mistook her frets,  
And bow'd her hand to teach her fingering,  
When, with a most impatient devilish spirit,  
'Frets, call you these?' quoth she 'I'll fume with them.'

(II.i.147-50)<sup>17</sup>

Notably, when Hortensio later attempts to teach Bianca to play the lute, her reactions are the exact opposite of her older sister: “Old fashions please me best; / I am

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<sup>17</sup> Herein lies a pun, since frets can mean both chords and annoyances. Katherine believes that Hortensio is telling her she has no reason to complain. Also, the Reformation emphasized women’s education, not to empower them but to keep them from forming ideas of their own and making them a more valuable trading commodity for their fathers, according to Lisa Jardine in her book, *Still Harping on Daughters*, chapter 2.

not so nice<sup>18</sup> / To change true rules for odd inventions “(III.i.78-9). In other words, she states that she does not care for the modern ideas emerging, regarding equality and women’s liberation. She does not mind being kept out of her marriage arrangements. Of course, manipulative Bianca, whose name literally means “white”, suggesting her virtue and purity, is only pretending. This becomes clear as she cunningly outwits the system, eloping with unwitting Lucentio. Then, at her wedding, she shows her true colours as the real shrew of the play. Therefore, evidently both sisters realise that they live in a society in which marriage is undeniably a coveted social status. They choose not to be ridiculed as spinsters. As Katherine complains to her father, who obviously favours Bianca: “I must dance barefoot on her wedding day, / and for your love to her lead apes in hell” (II.i.33-4). And despite their polar opposite methods, they both want to choose their mate.

### **Petruccio: the benevolent shrew-tamer**

According to many, Petruccio is a bona fide prince charming who rescues Katherine from her father who does not appreciate her. He has been hailed as a “sympathetic hero”, “a figure to whom all academic critics can warm” (Thompson 32), and an “honest and masterly picture of a real man” (Shaw 180). These scholars see in the couple’s relationship an “attractive mutuality and vitality” citing their first encounter, in which they “engage in a verbal sparring match dazzling in its complexity and speed” which has “erotic intensity”.<sup>19</sup> Katherine has the “uncommon good fortune to find Petruccio who is man enough to know what he wants and how to get it”. He “wants her spirit and her energy because he wants a wife worth keeping” (Greer 208).

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<sup>18</sup> Capricious.

<sup>19</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare* (138).

Harold Bloom writes that their relationship is ideal since “Petruccio gets to swagger, and Kate will rule him and the household perpetually acting her role as the reformed shrew”. Their “mutual roughness” has a “primal appeal and yet the humour of their relationship is highly sophisticated” (Bloom 29). Petruccio certainly is boisterous and fiery “but while he storms and raves among servants and tailors, showing off for her benefit, to her his speech remains courteous and restrained – well restrained and, with its ironical excess, elaborately courteous (Quiller-Couch xxv).

Lynda E. Boose notices the absence of the scold’s bridle or other cruel methods of punishment, coming to the conclusion that Shakespeare was:

conscientiously modelling a series of humane but effective methods for behavioural modification [which] determinedly excluded the more brutal patriarchal practices that were circulating within popular jokes, village rituals, and in such ballads as *A Merry Jest of a Shrewde and Curste Wyfe, Lapped in Morrelles Skin, for Her Good Behavyyour*. (Boose 198)

Ann Barton, referring to the same brutal ballad, essentially a cautionary tale for wives, sums it up well: “By comparison with the husband who binds his erring spouse, beats her, bleeds her into a state of debility or incarcerates her inside the salted skin of a dead horse ... Petruccio – although no Romeo – is almost a model of intelligence and humanity (Barton in Thompson 28).

The key to this reading of the play is the presumption that Katherine needs to change. She needs a benevolent ‘tamer’ like Petruccio to show her how to feel compassion as well as the advantages of outwardly conforming to society’s expectations so that she can have the husband, the home, and the social approval she

surely must crave.<sup>20</sup> Cecil C. Seroncy calls Petruccio's methods a "steady unfolding of her really fine qualities: patience, practical good sense, a capacity for humour, and finally obedience, all of which she comes gradually to manifest in a spirit chastened but not subdued" (Seroncy 19). Playwright George Bernard Shaw also approves "because the selfishness of the man is healthily goodhumored and untainted by wanton cruelty, and it is good for the shrew to encounter a force like that and be brought to her senses" (Shaw 180).

In short, according to these critics, kind-hearted Petruccio brings Katherine out of her shell by showing her patience and goodwill instead of the disrespect she received in her own home. This nonetheless raises questions regarding Petruccio's reasons for this seemingly gentle treatment, as well as the conditions upon which it is contingent as far as Katherine is concerned. After all, nothing comes without a price.

### **Thy lord, thy keeper: the harmonious household hierarchy**

Reformation, a movement that aimed at bringing reform to the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, swept through Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, leading to the foundation of the Anglican Church. This new and modernized ideology brought about significant changes in society, and especially within marriage, which became "at once a gracious symbol of the divine, a social unit of the earthly kingdom, and a solemn covenant with one's spouse [...] appointed by God as "a little commonwealth" to foster the mutual love, service, and security of husband and wife, parent and child (Witte). Many preachers now encouraged husbands to refrain from violence against their wives

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<sup>20</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare* (139).

and to treat them as spiritual equals. Marriage was no longer merely as an economic arrangement but an affective union demanding mutual affection and respect”.<sup>21</sup>

Petruccio is the epitome of the reformed master of the house, applying gentler and modernized methods in containing his wife. However, it must not be overlooked that the prerequisite for the harmonious household was the wife’s willing submission to her husband’s authority, as sermons from the period demonstrate. Whately was not the only preacher to sermonize on the subject of marriage and its essential hierarchy.

Robert Cleaver’s *Godly Form of Household Government* was for example published at the same time as *The Taming of the Shrew* and his words speak volumes:

The wife, her duty is in all reverence and humility to submit and subject herself to her husband [...] to obey his commandments in all things which he may command by the authority of a husband<sup>22</sup>

The husband thus remained “Prince of the household, the domestical King” (Whately in Davis 266). After all, the justification for this view came from the Holy Bible,<sup>23</sup> the story of how God created man before other creatures and bestowed upon him “universal sovereignty”, as Heale puts it in his discourse, *An Apology for Women*.<sup>24</sup>

This view is spelled out in Katherine’s pivotal speech<sup>25</sup> in which she shames other women present for their disobedience towards their husbands: “Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign [...] Such duty as the subject owes the prince, / Even such a woman oweth to her husband” she fervently preaches, urging them to seek “rule” and “supremacy” in their husbands.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare* (137).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Cleaver, *A Godly Form*, in *Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance* (194-5).

<sup>23</sup> Gen.1.28 and 2.20-23.

<sup>24</sup> In *Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance* (75).

<sup>25</sup> For the entire speech, see V.ii.145-183.

J.C. Bean celebrates the play as a sign of the incipient women's emancipation. He justifies this particular speech by society's obsession with the commonwealth government model as the ideal household format, also claiming that:

in its use of political analogies and its emphasis on woman's warmth and beauty rather than on her abject sinfulness, [it] is not a rehearsal of old, medieval ideas about wives, but of relatively contemporary ideas growing out of humanist reforms. Male tyranny, which characterizes earlier shrew-taming stories, gives way here to a non tyrannical hierarchy informed by mutual affection. (Bean cited in Jardine 59)<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Traversi emphasizes that Katherine does not perform the speech with a cowed spirit, but has simply realized that "it is in the nature of things, which society ignores or distorts at its peril, that the wife is bound to stand to her husband as the true subject to his prince" (Traversi 85). Even feminist pioneer Germaine Greer claims that the speech "rests upon the role of a husband as protector and friend, and it is valid [...] for Petruccio is both gentle and strong" (Greer 209).

Petruccio's ultimate demonstration of Katherine's "new-built virtue and obedience" (V.ii.122) is making her renounce her treasured cap: "Katherine, that cap of yours becomes you not. / Off with that bauble, throw it underfoot" (V.ii.125-6). His request correlates with a passage from Whately's *A Bride-Bush*:

The true touchstone of obedience is a thing commanded that crosseth her desires, for what praise can it be to do what he biddeth if she would have done it through he had never bidden, but this evinceth hearty and conscionable

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<sup>26</sup> See J.C. Bean, "Comic structure and the humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*", in C.R.S. Lenz, G. Greene and C.T. Neely (eds), *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. Urbana: 1980. 65-78.

subjection, when she crosseth her own desires to fulfill his and chooseth to do  
what herself would not because her husband wills it.<sup>27</sup>

Now that Petruccio has tamed his wife once and for all, things can change for the better:

“peace it bodes, and love, and quiet life, / An awful rule, and right supremacy”

(V.ii.112-13).

Notably, on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stage, Petruccio often carried a whip, symbolising his power over his wife and his servants with physical force.

Whether or not he literally carries a whip, his success at wife taming makes him a figure admired by many. He is a man whom other men wish to emulate.<sup>28</sup>

BIANCA The taming school – what, is there such a place?

TRANIO Ay mistress, and Petruccio is the master,

That teacheth tricks eleven-and-twenty long

To tame a shrew and charm her chattering tongue

(IV.ii.56-60)

It might now be concluded that peace within the household depends on disruptive Katherine’s willingness to be tamed by her husband who is, notwithstanding the new moral code of the Reformation, her superior. However, when looking under the surface, even darker aspects of this hierarchy might be uncovered.

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<sup>27</sup> *Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance* (267).

<sup>28</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare* (137).

### **Under name of perfect love: a silent suppression**

In the strictness of law for a husband to beat his wife is lawful, but it is inconvenient in the decency of manners.

This chilling passage again comes from Heale's *Apology for Women*.<sup>29</sup> Lloyd Davis explains that in prescribing a harmonious household hierarchy, "Heale recommends forms of discipline more moderate than beating: such as "admonition," a kind of gentle advice proceeding from the husband's patient love; and "reprehension," a more direct, verbal amendment of faults" (Davis 64).

Importantly, Petruccio's status as a gentleman, as well as his precious masculinity, is reflected in the way he manages his wife. "Under the guise of civility, the early modern reform movement made men's masculinity and status as gentlemen contingent on achieving and maintaining dominance without brutality" Emily Detmer explains, also pointing out that Petruccio adheres to a new model of manhood which locates his status as a gentleman in his restraint.<sup>30</sup> After a heated argument, in which Petruccio revels in making lewd puns, by no means fit for a lady, she strikes him.

PETRUCCIO Good Kate; I am a gentleman.

KATHERINE That I'll try. [She strikes him]

PETRUCCIO I swear I'll cuff you, if you strike again

KATHERINE So may you lose your arms.<sup>31</sup>

If you strike me, you are no gentleman;

(II.i.214-18)

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<sup>29</sup> *Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance* (84).

<sup>30</sup> Emily Detmer, "Civilizing Subordination: Domestic Violence and The Taming of the Shrew" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.3 (Fall 1997): 273-294.

<sup>31</sup> Katherine here suggests that by Petruccio's poor treatment of her, he will lose his claim to a coat of arms (a sign of noble status) while imploring him to loosen his grip on her.

Petruccio does not strike her back. However, he does threaten to return the blow should she slap him again. Then, he holds her down for the remainder of their conversation, as if holding her prisoner, while the pun on gentlemen's attributes, such as heralds and crests, continues.

After witnessing Petruccio physically hold his wife prisoner, it is perhaps not surprising that many critics insist that even if Katherine is not battered and bruised the play still exhibits some alarming instances of psychological violence. Kahn, for example, calls the play a "farcical representation of the psychological realities of marriage in Elizabethan England, in which the husband's will constantly, silently, and invisibly, through custom and conformity, suppressed the wife's" (Kahn 94). Detmer agrees: "Petruccio's method may be superior to wife-beating, but it is also more insidious and surely no less oppressive" she explains convinced that his method creates a coercive emotional bond based on fear and intimidation.

Detmer parallels the nature of their relationship with what is now called Stockholm Syndrome, a recognised psychological phenomenon, in which hostages identify and ally with their captors.<sup>32</sup> It is frequently used to identify and understand similar situations, including domestic abuse. These parallels are worth exploring, as they might explain Katherine's sudden change in behaviour. Stockholm Syndrome is known to occur when four conditions are in place: a perceived threat to physical or psychological survival, a perceived small kindnesses from the captor, a perceived inability to escape and, finally, isolation from other perspectives than that of the abuser.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The term was coined after strange occurrences in Stockholm in 1973, as two bank robbers held four hostages for five days. After their rescue they showed support for their captors and shielded them from the police. Afterwards, they refused to testify against them, raised money for their defence and even visited them in prison.

<sup>33</sup> Pat Wallace, "How can she still love him? Domestic Violence and the Stockholm Syndrome" (32-34).

Petruccio's treatment of Katherine appears to conform to all four conditions.

Firstly he indeed makes sure that Katherine constantly perceives a threat. He physically held her down, as already described, and he also terrorizes guests at the wedding ceremony, particularly his bride who "trembled and shook" (III.iii.40) as Petruccio attacks the vicar as if he meant to "cozen him"<sup>34</sup> and "stamped and swore" (III.iii.40). Once declared married, he takes her "about the neck" (III.iii.50) and kisses her with a "clamorous smack" (III.iii.51). On the journey to his house – his domain – he continues to unnerve her, as Grumio's anxious outpour of words demonstrates:

[...] her horse fell and she under her horse; thou shouldst have heard in how miry a place, how she was bemoiled, how he left her with the horse upon her, how he beat me because her horse stumbled, how she waded through the dirt to pluck him off me, how he swore, how she prayed that never prayed before, how I cried, how the horses ran away, how I cried, how her bridle was bust"  
(IV.i.62-68)

As soon as he arrives home, Petruccio invents excuses to scold, beat and kick his terrified servants, who secretly warn Katherine to always obey him or there will be dire consequences. Offstage, he "rails, and swears, and rates" in front of his wife, comically teaching her self control, as the servants whisper amongst themselves, mocking their master. He leaves her so bewildered that she "knows not which way to stand, to look, to speak, / and sits as one new risen from a dream" (IV.ii.164-67). Importantly, this is the only time he raises his voice directly at Katherine. He is ensuring that she realises what is to be expected should she prove to be anything but a quiet and meek wife. He never lays a hand on her; he uses her own weapon, language, to tame her. Interestingly,

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<sup>34</sup> Cheat him out of the legitimacy of the ceremony.

Grumio had been right earlier when describing Petruccio's methods to Hortensio:

"Should she try to stand up to him "he will throw a figure<sup>35</sup> in her face and so disfigure her with it that she shall have no more eyes to see withal than a cat" (I.ii.108-110).

Next, Petruccio reveals his taming strategy, comparing his bride to a falcon that needs taming. In order to make her "stoop" to him he will deprive her of basic needs, such as food, and sleep. Weak, and dependent on him, she will be easy to manage:

She ate no meat to-day, nor none shall eat;  
Last night she slept not, nor to-night she shall not;  
As with the meat, some undeserved fault  
I'll find about the making of the bed;  
And here I'll fling the pillow, there the bolster,  
This way the coverlet, another way the sheets;  
Ay, and amid this hurly I intend  
That all is done in reverend care of her-  
And, in conclusion, she shall watch all night;  
And if she chance to nod I'll rail and brawl  
And with the clamour keep her still awake.

(IV.i.178-188)

Continuing to entice and deprive his wife of necessities, Petruccio promises his wife a stylish return to Padua:

With silken coats, and caps, and golden rings,  
With ruffs, and cuffs, and farthingales, and things,  
With scarves, and fans, and double change of bravery.

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<sup>35</sup> A figure of speech.

With amber bracelets, beads, and all this knavery.

(IV.iii.51-8)

After painting this picture of elegance and glamour, Petruccio initiates a nonsensical argument with the Tailor and the Haberdasher, dismissing their goods, to Katherine's great disappointment. She will have to return to her father's house in her muddy wedding garments, by no means appropriate to her new status as a gentleman's wife. Susan Vincent, in her book *Dressing the Elite*, points out how in the period between 1550-1670, clothing had "an extremely overt and often acknowledged importance" and was in fact "fundamental to an individual's experience and creation of self, and mediated his or her relationships with others. As well as being commodities of utility and economic value, garments enjoyed a rich discursive life, participating in moral, religious and political debates" (Vincent 5). Further magnifying Katherine's hunger, Petruccio uses culinary terms for the clothing: "porringer", "velvet dish", "cockle", "walnut-shell" (IV.iii.64-66); "custard-coffin, a bauble, a silken pie" (IV.iii.82); "carved like an apple tart" (IV.iii.89).

Alarmingly, Petruccio's taming policy perfectly corresponds to the very cornerstone of Stockholm Syndrome: perception of kindness and hope. Examples of such small kindnesses are apologising after showing violence, bringing gifts and allowing the victim to visit family. Sensing this, the victim denies feelings of danger, terror or rage and commences bonding with the positive side of the abuser. Petruccio explicitly declares that his taming strategy is meant to "kill a wife with kindness" and thereby "curb her mad and headstrong humour" (IV.i.189-90). While beating and berating everyone else, he never lays a hand on her, instead exaggerating his feigned

benevolence with terms of endearment such as “good sweet Kate be merry” (IV.i.124), “welcome heartily” (IV.i.135), “my honey love” (IV.iii.52).

As has been demonstrated, Petruccio entices Katherine with food, sleep, clean clothing and other necessities, then just as quickly, pretending to have her best interest at heart. These techniques are undeniably akin to modern methods of torture and brainwashing.<sup>36</sup> Understandably she is confused and heartbroken, particularly by the fact that he does this “under name of perfect love” (IV.iii.12). Instead of leaving her bloody and bruised, he methodically strips away her identity and thereby her spirit. This approach secures his status as a modern gentleman, adhering to the new marriage model of the Reformation while avoiding getting his hands dirty.

As for the third aspect of Stockholm Syndrome, Katherine indeed perceives an inability to escape her situation, literally as well as figuratively. Petruccio steals her away from her own wedding, knowing that he will have better control over her once she enters his domain. Her father has virtually sold her to a stranger, whose house is remote and bleak, and besides, she has nowhere else to go. Another example of her isolation is the following exchange:

KATHERINE Husband, let's follow to see the end of this ado.

PETRUCCIO First kiss me, Kate, and we will.

KATHERINE What, in the midst of the street?

PETRUCCIO What, art thou ashamed of me?

KATHERINE No, sir; God forbid; but ashamed to kiss.

PETRUCCIO Why, then, let's home again. Come, sirrah, let's away.

KATHERINE Nay, I will give thee a kiss; now pray thee, love, stay.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare* (139).

[They kiss]

PETRUCCIO Is not this well? Come, my sweet Kate:

Better once than never for never too late.

(V.i.123-131)

To admirers of Petruccio, there is “no more charming a scene of married love in all Shakespeare [...] a subtly exquisite music of marriage at its happiest” (Bloom 33).

However, is Petruccio not threatening to take her back to isolation immediately, should she not obey him?

The fourth and final condition necessary for Stockholm Syndrome to develop is isolation from other perspectives than the oppressor’s. From the beginning, Petruccio makes it clear that he will control her every thought, always deliberately misunderstanding her and ignoring her wishes.

If she do bid me pack, I'll give her thanks,

As though she bid me stay by her a week;

If she deny to wed, I'll crave the day

When I shall ask the banns, and when be married.

(II.i.175-78)

When exasperated she cries out “My tongue will tell the anger of my heart / or else concealing it, it will break” (IV.iii.77-8) he pretends that she is referring to the Haberdasher’s cap: “I love thee well in that thou lik’st it not” (IV.iii.83).

In order to set off to Padua for Bianca’s wedding, thus escaping isolation, Katherine must begin to see the world through Petruccio’s eye. First, he outrageously dictates the time of day and when Katherine naturally corrects him, he makes her realise that his offer only stands if she lets him rule: “I will not go today, and ere I do / It shall

be what o'clock I say it is" (IV.iii. 188-19). Then he continues on a similar note: "It shall be moon, or star, or what I list" (IV.vi.7) he declares and she has no choice but to accept: "And be it moon or sun or what you please, / And if you please to call it a rush-candle / Henceforth I vow it shall be so for me" (IV.vi.19-23). Thereby, she has surrendered her only weapon, her language. Petruccio's disturbing line: "evermore crossed and crossed, nothing but crossed" (IV.vi.10) further suggests dire consequences should she disobey her master.

When old Vincentio appears, Petruccio eyes an opportunity to brag about his dominance and humiliate his wife: "Tell me sweet Kate, and tell me truly too, / Hast thou beheld a fresher gentlewoman" (IV.vi.29). Katherine's response is typical for a Stockholm Syndrome sufferer under a perceived threat. She therefore delivers a hyperbole speech of the presumed maiden's beauty, repaid only with humiliation: "Why, how now, Kate, I hope thou art not mad / This is a man, old, wrinkled, faded, withered" (IV.vi.43-44). As Stockholm Syndrome therapist Pat Wallace points out: "Degrading remarks and manipulative comments such as: You are mad / stupid / useless may erode the woman experiencing abuse sense of self until she has little concept of her as independent being" (Wallace 33).

Upon Katherine's return to Padua, her altered personality appears to shock everyone. This change in character also concurs with symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome. She feels an overwhelming need to pacify her overpowering husband, avoiding aggravation at all costs, realising the consequences. Another indication is the refusal of help, as this might upset the victim's plan of survival. Therefore, when

Bianca and the Widow<sup>37</sup> loudly object to their husbands' oppression: "Fie, what a foolish duty call you this?" (V.ii.129), they expect Katherine to take their side:

PETRUCCIO Katherine, I charge thee tell these headstrong women

What duty they owe their lords and husbands.

WIDOW Come on, you're mocking. We will have no telling.

PETRUCCIO Come on, I say, and first begin with her.

WIDOW She shall not.

(V.ii.134-38)

Katherine proves the women wrong by delivering her final speech, leaving them bewildered. The tone of her speech echoes the last symptom: intense feelings of gratitude. She feels indebted to Petruccio because he has allowed her to live – nevertheless on his own terms. Katherine has been killed with kindness.

## **Conclusion**

It has now become evident how the wife's role within the household hardly changed at all, despite a seeming realignment of power between married couples in early modern England. Notwithstanding the prominent rhetoric of Protestant preachers and humanists, seeking spiritual and rational equality on behalf of women, legal reform was never actually promoted and the husband remained in control of both power and resources.<sup>38</sup> Also, the prerequisite for the harmonious household was still to show complete submission to the husband, to bow to him as a subject would bow to a prince. The taming methods might have changed, physical violence might have been mitigated

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<sup>37</sup> Hortensio's new wife.

<sup>38</sup> Emily Detmer, "Civilizing Subordination: Domestic Violence and The Taming of the Shrew".

but the coercion remained nonetheless, only moving under the surface and taking on different forms.

Correlations with the relationship of *The Taming of the Shrew's* protagonists and the Stockholm Syndrome are astonishing. Its very cornerstone, perceived kindness by the abuser, resonate perfectly with Petruccio's method: To kill his wife with kindness. With a broken spirit, Katherine takes the side of her abuser, extolling the virtues of wifely deference and turning against the women who try to point out that this is not right. She has been transformed from a wilful young woman to a robotic, obedient wife.

Was Shakespeare giving modern husbands a lesson in how to tame a wife without getting their hands dirty? Or, quite contrarily, was he compelling his audience to think, urging them to question and criticize society? At least, he chose to wrap this disturbing tale inside a comedy, as if to address such a delicate matter without resorting to an off-putting preacher's tone. True to comic form, he presents a story of love and conflict concluding in a wedding and a happily-ever-after. However, a darker thought lingers and one has to wonder what the future might hold for Katherine, as well as Bianca who might endure similar taming methods now that Lucentio has discovered her feisty nature.

Furthermore, by deviating from the medieval tradition of replacing the archetypical old and witch-like shrew with a young girl who is beautiful and notably chaste, it seems that Shakespeare was purposely reminding his audience that spousal abuse is a very real issue, not merely stuff of ballads and folktales. Some directors have chosen to downplay the extent of Katherine's submission or mitigate the linguistic coercion and physical cruelty of Petruccio's taming methods, for example by making

her deliver her last speech while signalling, by winks and gestures, that she does not really believe it.<sup>39</sup> Even if this might make for a more pleasant theatre experience, it has to be declared a senseless distortion of the play, and downright detrimental to the feminist cause. After all, the unsettling effect of Petruccio's full-blown treatment must have been Shakespeare's very goal. Therefore, *The Taming of the Shrew* – in its original form – has to be considered relevant in every civilized community because it leads to critical thinking, which in turn leads to discussion. And hopefully, discussion will lead to change.

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<sup>39</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare (136).*

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