

Can't Be Tamed: How the Induction Informs Katherine's Character in *The Taming of the Shrew*

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Ronda Arab's English 203 course *Early Modern Literature*. The assignment asked students to write an essay about the effect of the introductory scenes (induction) in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. The paper uses MLA citation style.

In analyses of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* there has always been contentious debate as to whether Katherine has or has not been successfully tamed by Petruchio. However, the induction provides a crucial framework with which to interpret Katherine's character arc. The induction parallels the main play in that the lord attempts to tame Sly into performing the role of lord just as Petruchio attempts to tame Katherine into performing the role of submissive wife. Both the lord and Petruchio attempt to tame the person they control by constructing their reality, the lord by controlling Sly's external environment and Petruchio by contradicting Katherine's identity and experiences. However, the induction makes it clear that despite the lord's attempt to make Sly believe in his environment and play the role of lord, he is not able to change Sly's nature and make him truly *become* a lord. This provides a framework to understand the effect of Petruchio's taming on Katherine. Thus, the purpose of the induction is to provide a framework to understand Petruchio and Katherine's relationship, so we may ultimately understand that although Katherine outwardly plays the role of submissive wife her fierce nature has been undisrupted.

First, it is necessary to establish the parallel between the lord and Petruchio in how they use their positions of power to dictate the realities of Sly and Katherine respectively. This narrative similarity is the first major indicator that the induction functions to frame Petruchio and Katherine's dynamic. In the

induction, the lord is positioned as the tamer because of his high social status in respect to Sly. When the lord first notices Sly passed out on the ground, he contemptuously observes, “Oh monstrous beast, how like a swine he lies. / Grim death, how foul and loathsome is thine image” (1.1.31-32). The juxtaposition of the lord looking down at Sly supine in the dirt establishes a visual hierarchy with Sly definitively below the lord. Additionally, as humans are the masters and owners of animals, comparisons to a “beast” and a “swine” foreshadow that the lord believes he is the master of Sly and thus can tame him. Sly has no dialogue while his fate is being decided, making him physically present but without agency. Petruchio also has this type of power, but in his case it is a function of his gender. This can be seen as the men make marriage arrangements on behalf of Katherine without her consent. When Petruchio announces to Baptista, “. . .we have ‘greed so well together / That upon Sunday is the wedding day,” Katherine protests, “I’ll see thee hanged on Sunday first” (2.1.301-303). By using such harsh language, Katherine unambiguously rejects the marriage. However, Baptista does not respond to Katherine’s protests and she receives no further dialogue while the wedding plans continue. Just like Sly while the lord plotted his trick, Katherine is physically present in the scene while her fate is being determined but her lack of dialogue shows she has no power to stop it. Extending from this, both Sly and Katherine then have their reality reconstructed for them in a similar way. As the lord plots his trick he wonders, “Would the beggar then forget himself?” to which his servant replies, “Believe me, lord, I think he cannot choose” (1.1.38-39). This same sentiment is echoed several lines later when the lord and his men decide, “[Sly] is no less than what we say he is” (1.1.68). This is functionally the same as how Petruchio believes he can make Katherine “forget” her own identity, such as when Katherine tells Petruchio “They call me Katherine that do talk of me” and Petruchio replies, “You lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate, / And sometimes Kate the curst” (2.1.184-186). In both cases, the lord and Petruchio imply they believe they control the *identities* of Sly and Katherine. Though their methods of achieving this goal are superficially different, there is an explicit functional similarity that communicates that the two storylines should inform each other.

Using the power of social status the lord successfully gets Sly to play at lordship but he is not able to change Sly’s nature. This detachment is best seen when Sly transitions from maintaining his identity as a tinker to embracing his role as a lord. In the beginning Sly fights to affirm his identity as a lower class tinker and explicitly denies titles holding power, stating, “I am Christophero Sly; call not

me 'honor' nor 'lordship'" (1.2.5). The simple assertion of his name and his denial of lofty titles shows that Sly's true nature does not connect with wealth and power. The lord attempts to convince Sly with many lavish proposals, an important one being, "We'll have thee to a couch softer and sweeter than the lustful bed" (1.2.35). Implicit in this statement is that the life of nobility, which contains the soft and sweet couch, is loftier than the "lustful bed", or the degenerate world Sly has been plucked out of. The lord is acknowledging a dogma of the early modern period, which was that physical desire was base compared to other conceptions of love. This becomes important when we learn that Sly only embraces his new role after being told, "Thou hast a lady far more beautiful / Than any woman in this waning age" (1.2.60-61). Physical desire makes Sly question his convictions about his identity and he wonders, "Am I a lord, and have a such a lady?" ... Upon my life I am a lord indeed, and not a tinker, nor Christopher Sly" (1.2.68, 70-71). Sly communicates he is willing to be a lord because of its implication of having a lady, so lowly physical desire is a strong force within him. While it could be argued that Sly does not relish having a wife just for base desire, there are merely eighteen lines of dialogue before Sly instructs the page posing as his wife, "Madame, undress you, and come now to bed" (1.2.115). Further, it is important that in this passage of dialogue Sly changes the meter of his speech to blank verse. In Shakespearean times blank verse was reserved for noble characters, so this is Sly's attempt to be a proper lord. However Sly's attempt at lordliness is overshadowed as he ends his dialogue with, "And once again, a pot o'th' smallest ale", which is a cheap drink that is indicative of Sly's true unrefined nature (1.2.73). By making Sly the butt of the joke, it is clear that though he plays the role, Sly's nature has in no way been changed to that of a lord.

Just like Sly, at first Katherine appears to accept her role and be tamed by Petruchio as she begins to agree with his contradictions and obey him. However, while it is not as obvious as Sly's bumbling comedic errors, the induction allows us to understand that Katherine retains her fierce nature while playing a submissive wife. The critical moment is when Katherine transitions from behaving like a shrew to obeying Petruchio, which occurs during her conversation with Petruchio about the moon and the sun. As Petruchio claims, "I say it is the moon that shines so bright", Katherine attempts to affirm reality by correcting him, "I know it is the sun that shines so bright" (4.4.4-5). Her explicit replacement of "say" with "know" communicates that she clearly understands how Petruchio manipulates her, and is confident in her reality. However, after Petruchio

maintains, “It shall be moon or star or what I list”, Katherine finally seems to acknowledge Petruchio’s contradictory reality and relents, “And if you please to call it a rush-candle, henceforth I vow it shall be so for me” (4.4.7,14-15). While the content of this line now agrees with Petruchio, because of the sharp turn from her defiance in line eleven her agreement seems like a decision to play Petruchio’s game rather than submission. By starting her promise to obey with, “Henceforth I vow” Katherine explicitly names that she is making a decision, which makes submission an active process. Further, the sarcastic tone implied by “And if you please” seems as though she is pandering to a capricious child rather than surrendering to Petruchio. Katherine proceeds to flaunt her spirit under the guise of playing submissive wife as she tells Petruchio, “And the moon changes even as your mind” (4.4.21). This is both consistent with her apparent submission and also a jibe at Petruchio’s fickleness and inconstancy. Further, when Petruchio pretends that Vincentio is a “fair lovely maid”, Katherine ornately addresses Vincentio, “Young budding virgin, fair and fresh and sweet... happy the parents of so fair a child; happier the man whom favourable stars allots thee for his lovely bedfellow” (4.4.34, 37, 39-41). Here, Katherine retains her linguistic prowess and fierce spirit by agreeing with language so passionate and elaborate that it mocks Petruchio’s absurdity. She repeats this when she is told Vincentio is an old man, mocking, “Pardon, old father, my mistaking eyes, which have been so bedazzled with the sun... Pardon, I pray thee, for my mad mistaking” (4.4.45-46, 49). Katherine further mocks Petruchio with her verbosity and demonstrates wit by punning on the word “sun” in reference to Petruchio’s earlier statement, “Now by my mother’s son, and that’s myself” (4.4.6). She also cleverly calls back Petruchio’s accusation of “I hope thou art not mad” by sarcastically apologizing for her “mad mistaking” (4.4.42). Just as the lord failed to truly turn Sly into a lord, Petruchio failed to truly make Katherine a submissive wife. Katherine remains fierce and in control of her identity.

Finally, given the perspective the induction allows us into Katherine’s character we can view her controversial final speech as a performance where she acts like a tamed wife while retaining her spirited nature. Just as there were comedic juxtapositions in Sly’s dialogue, such as his use of blank verse while lustfully yearning for a woman and demanding cheap ale, Katherine has similar contradictions in her speech. She espouses that, “Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign” while women “... are bound to serve, love and obey” (5.1.158-159, 176). This is a regurgitation of misogynistic dogma, which implies that the role of women is to be quiet and defer to their husbands.

However, Katherine dominates the scene with the longest passage of speech in the entire play. There are also a few quips disguised in the speech. When Katherine says the husband “commits his body to painful labour both by sea and land... whilst [women] lies warm at home, secure and safe,” it is difficult not to view this comforting imagery as a direct and bitterly satirical reference to the brutal treatment that Katherine was receiving at home (5.1.160-161, 163). Deprived of food and sleep, Katherine’s home was anything but secure and safe. Further, Katherine notes, “My mind hath been as big as one of yours, my heart as great, my reason haply more” (5.1.182-183). Here, Katherine acknowledges that intellect, heart and reason define her. While she speaks of possessing these qualities in the past tense, there is no doubt she is aware of how she dazzles the room with her linguistic power and captivating presence. Even if she truly meant it in the past tense, she is not expressing shame about her former shrewish behaviour but rather associates it with positive traits. The final line of the play sums it up beautifully as Lucentio says, “’Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so” (5.1.201). By explicitly constructing the statement as “she will be tamed so” it suggests that Katherine actively decided to change her behaviour. This means she is still fierce, powerful, and has not had her nature altered by Petruchio.

As I have demonstrated, the induction provides a crucial framework that informs how Katherine’s character should be perceived. Without this perspective, it is easy to view Katherine as breaking under the pressure of Petruchio’s manipulation and losing all essence of her own agency. However, because of the careful parallel between Sly and Katherine, the play moves from a misogynistic tale of a woman being beaten into submission to a careful contemplation on how behaviour and identity both intersect and diverge. Katherine remains a powerful figure, and a compelling example of Shakespeare’s complex characterization.

References

Shakespeare, William. “The Taming of the Shrew.” *Three Shrew Plays*, edited by Barry Gaines and Margaret Maurer. Hackett Publishing Company, 2010, pp. 53-133. Print.

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