



## HOW TO TAME A SHREW

We'll stick with Katherine because that's the name she seems to prefer. The men around her have a range of things to say about Katherine. Petruchio calls her 'bonny Kate', 'the prettiest Kate in Christendom', 'Kate of Kate Hall' and even 'super dainty Kate'. But he and many others also call her 'cursed and shrewd'. In all, Katherine gets called a 'shrew' eight times in the course of the play.

But what did it mean to be 'shrewd', and what about Katherine is supposedly 'shrewish'? Early modern (sixteenth and seventeenth century) nature writers described the shrew as a 'little and light creature' resembling a mole, with a long snout, short tail, and lots of small teeth. But when it came to describing the little rodent one word pops up with surprising frequency: 'beast'. This might seem like a big word for such a small creature, but a shrew was thought to be much more dangerous than any old mouse or vole. This 'light creature' was considered a threat because it was thought to have a poisonous bite, one that was strong enough to seriously injure or even kill horses and cows. So if writers in Shakespeare's England saw the shrew as 'an ill beast', we can start to see why...

We can also begin to understand why a deeply misogynistic society like Shakespeare's England adopted 'shrew' as a metaphorical term for women who were considered to be wicked or badly behaved. In early modern dictionaries these two 'shrews' were almost inseparable. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't a label that women were particularly fond of (then or now), but it was an easy label to gain and a hard one to lose for women considered to be unruly, strong-minded, vocal, angry or bitter. A woman was supposed to be mousily quiet, unobtrusive, obedient and chaste. A woman who bit back was, like a shrew, an 'ill beast'.

The term didn't always apply to women. It could also refer to a villain, a wicked man, and in some cases even the devil. In all these cases, the word 'shrew' suggested a figure capable of causing harm, and who therefore posed a threat of some kind. For Shakespeare's early modern audience, a shrew, or a shrewish person, was someone who lacked self-control, or who posed a threat to others. Simply put, someone or something in need of taming.

This is the view we get of 'Katherine the curst' from the men who talk about her - we're told she is known throughout Padua for her 'scolding tongue'. Katherine is seen as 'cursed' because she is not afraid to curse (or scold) others. In this she stands in stark opposition to her sister, Bianca, who the play repeatedly presents as a model of ideal female virtue and behavior. She is beautiful, silent and obedient. Lucentio's servant Tranio makes their contrasting natures explicitly clear, explaining that Katherine is as famous for her sharp tongue 'as is the other [Bianca] for beauteous modesty'. When men describe Bianca they talk about her looks: 'sweet Bianca', 'fair Bianca', 'beautiful Bianca'. When they complain about Katherine, it's her sound they can't stand:

Mark'd you not how her sister  
Began to scold and raise up such a storm  
That mortal ears might hardly endure to din?

But Petruchio sees himself as a match for this 'curstest shrew' who is as 'loud as thunder':

Think you this little din can daunt mine ears?  
Have I not in my time heard lions roar?

Have I not heard the sea, puff'd up with winds,  
Rage like an angry boar chafed with sweat?  
Have I not heard great ordinance in the field,  
And heaven's artillery thunder in the skies?  
Have I not pitch'd battle heard  
Loud 'larums, neighing steeds, and trumpets' clang?  
And do you tell me of woman's tongue,  
That gives not half so great a blow to hear  
As will a chestnut in a farmer's fire?

Petruchio tries to diminish the impact of Katherine's voice and assert the superiority of male ears, capable of withstanding the thunderous noises of battle. This 'shrew' is no 'lion', no 'angry boar', he insists. In fact, the animals he associates with Katherine are much smaller: shrew, wasp, hen, dove, hawk. When Petruchio seeks to 'tame' his new wife, it is perhaps not surprising that he does so in the same way that he would one of these animals. Once he has started the process of submitting Katherine to his will, Petruchio makes it chillingly clear that he regards her as a wild animal:

Another way I have to man my haggard,  
To make her come, and know her keeper's call.

A 'haggard' is a wild female hawk, so Petruchio is claiming here that he plans to turn 'wild Kate' into 'conformable' Katherine by using the same methods he would employ in falconry (also known as hawking). This was an expensive sport mainly enjoyed by the upper classes which involved training a wild bird to soar, dive and hunt but still come back to its keeper's call. The main technique for this taming was to deprive the bird of both food ('she eat no meat today, nor none shall eat') and sleep ('last night she slept not, nor tonight she shall not'), making the bird more and more dependent on its trainer and so turning its wildness into obedience.

Inevitably, Katherine begins to grow weary when her husband withholds food and sleep, but Petruchio's falconry-inspired training doesn't work quite as he intends. On the journey back to Padua after their tempestuous wedding night at Petruchio's house, he tests Katherine's obedience by perversely insisting that the sun is the moon. But Katherine recognizes the game that is being played ('I know it is the sun that shines so bright' she scoffs) and it is only the exhausted plea of their friend Hortensio – 'Say as he says, or we shall never go' – that convinces her to humour her husband:

Forward, I pray, since we have come so far,  
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.'

This is not unthinking obedience, but tactical agreement in order to achieve what she wants. So has Katherine been 'tamed', and has Petruchio's technique succeeded? These questions raise other puzzles about this challenging play: does Shakespeare endorse Petruchio's cruel behaviour? Is Katherine's final speech ironic, or a sign that she has submitted to her husband's will? These are issues that need to be debated, but exploring the early modern context of shrews and hawk-taming can tell us a good deal about Renaissance attitudes towards women, and provoke us to think about sexual politics today.

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