

The Taming of the Shrew

Joanne Danford-Cordingley

This essay shall examine the treatment of women in **The Taming of the Shrew**. Opposing opinions abound as to whether the men of the play get the better of the women or vice versa. Are the women victims of a brutal male order, or are the men the unknowing dupes of wily women's cunning? We shall closely scrutinize the words *sly*, *shrew*, *stale*, *haggard* and *mew*, in the hope of allowing Shakespeare's text to speak for his depiction of women instead of imposing a preconceived contemporary viewpoint on that portrayal.

Shakespeare's treatment of women in **The Taming of the Shrew** is, dare one say it, sly. The original meaning of sly was "able to strike." Of people specifically, it indicates "adept or skilful in artifice or craft; using cunning or insidious means or methods; deceitful, guileful, wily, or underhand." Of words, it signals "full of duplicity or wile; subtle, disingenuous." It can also mean "playfully mischievous or malicious; roguish, waggish" and "to move, go etc. in a sly or stealthy manner" (OED:2875-6).

The character Sly *seems* to be the least sly amongst the various characters of the play (although he may, of course, be pretending to be convinced of his new found role), with the Lord and Petruchio heading the list of those who most overtly exemplify slyness, in all of its various qualities. The Lord, upon spying the "monstrous beast" (1.1.34), Sly, decides upon a plan to convince him he is a lord, in order to pay an elaborate practical joke on him:

I will practice on this drunken man.

*What think you, if he were conveyed to bed,
Wrapped in sweet clothes, rings put upon his fingers,
A most delicious banquet by his bed,
And brave attendants near him when he wakes –
Would not the beggar then forget himself? (1.1.36-41)*

Petruchio will also ‘practice’ on Kate, in the play presented to Sly, albeit with opposite tactics:

*She eat no meat today, nor none shall eat.
Last night she slept not, not tonight 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
. . . thus I'll curb her mad and headstrong humor. (4.1.191-203).*

The Lord and Petruchio apply all of their powers of artifice and cunning to bring about a transformation in the objects of their attention: Sly in the former case, from a drunk of low birth to a lord, and Kate in the latter case, from an obnoxious shrew to an obedient wife.

Kate is portrayed as the quintessential shrew, “a person, (now only) a woman given to railing or scolding or other perverse or malignant behaviour” (OED:2806), therefore one must ask, why the parallel with Sly the miscreant? The term shrew was once used for men and specifically those categorized as villains or rascals (OED: 2806), of which Sly is clearly one. Kate, the shrew, can also be sly; in the oldest sense of sly, she is definitely physically ‘able to strike’ the other characters. Sly can be said to exemplify an antique meaning of shrew, and Kate an ancient meaning of sly.

The characterization of Petruchio, of whom Grumio states: “he is more shrew than she” (4.1.81), adds another masculine dimension to shrew. Yet, by the play’s conclusion, Kate manages Petruchio, instead of Petruchio managing her (“Petruchio is

Kated”(3.2.245)), in much the same skilful and obsequious fashion by which the Lord conceives the tricking of Sly:

*And if he chance to speak, be ready straight
And with a low submissive reverence
Say, “What is it your honor will command?”
. . . And say, “Will’t please your lordship cool your hands?”
. . . As he shall think by our true diligence
He is no less than what we say he is. (Ind.1.52-71)*

Like Sly, Kate *seems* to have accepted her new role in life, when she advises a similar subservient, kid-gloves treatment of husbands to the newly found-out shrews Bianca and the Widow, who both slyly hid their shrewishness from their husbands-to-be:

*That seeming to be most which we indeed least are.
Then veil your stomachs, for it is no boot,
And place your hands below your husband’s foot,
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready, may it do him ease. (5.2.176-79)*

Just as we cannot be certain of what Sly really believes and if he stands truly transformed, we cannot know whether or not Kate has relinquished her shrewish nature for that of a good Elizabethan wife, or merely mastered it for a time in favour of her sly side.

Therefore, one can see, from a close examination of the words ‘sly’ and ‘shrew’ in Shakespeare’s text, that they apply to, overlap, and even fuse in, more than one of Shakespeare’s characters, and more than one gender. Thus, the distinctions between characters and their gender roles are blurred to create ambiguity, confusion, and complexity, for already we have noted five shrews, two of them male, and all of them very sly. The characters can thus be read in very different ways, giving rise to myriad interpretations of them, male or female.

Scrutiny of the words *stale*, *haggard* and *mew* provide us with more insight into Shakespeare's treatment of these characters, and his treatment of women.

Kate's first utterance in the play is : " I pray you, sir, is it your will To make a stale of me amongst these mates?"(1.1.57-8). Gremio has only just alluded to 'carting' Kate, a punishment for prostitutes. Stale in fact does mean "a prostitute of the lowest class employed as a decoy among thieves" (OED: 3008), but decoy is the truly operative word in this context, as one can read the line as Kate asking her father Baptista if he means to make her a decoy to find a husband for her sister Bianca. He has only just set the terms of the play's problem: "That is, not to bestow my youngest daughter Before I have a husband for the elder" (1.1.50-1).

Yet, it is possible to read Bianca as the stale or decoy for finding Kate a husband. The primary meaning of stale is " a decoy-bird, a living bird used to entice other birds of its own species, or birds of prey, into a snare or net" (OED: 3008). In the last act, when Bianca is revealed as a shrew, she asks Petruchio, "Am I your bird?" (5.2.46). Bianca may be revealing through her defensive, keen wit, so like Kate's at the beginning of the play, that it was she who was the greatest shrew all along, and therefore decoy to the better natured Kate. Consider that Lucentio, upon glimpsing both Kate and Bianca, comments of Bianca: "But in the other's silence do I see Maid's mild behavior and sobriety" (1.1.70-1), and that in the next act, Kate, enraged with Bianca, declares: "Her silence flouts me and I'll be revenged" (2.1.29). Is Bianca denying her own shrewish nature in a show of uncomplaining silence in order to trick a suitor into marrying her? Is this what so enrages Kate, that Bianca's sly pretense of good behaviour makes her look

very bad by comparison? Bianca's first words in act one are in the same obedient, self-denying tone that Kate uses in her final speech on marriage:

*Sister, content you in my discontent.
Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe.
My books and instruments shall be my company,
On them to look and practice by myself.* (1.1. 80-3)

Another clue which could be read as Bianca being the true shrew is their father's attitude toward the terms of their marriage. According to Baptista, Petruchio may only marry Kate after "the special thing is well obtained, That is, her love . . ." (2.1.128-9). For Bianca, Baptista's only consideration is that he "That can assure my daughter greatest dower Shall have my Bianca's love" (2.1.334-5). One can read his attitude as favouring either daughter: he esteems Kate so highly that he will have only a love match for her to which she agrees, and sells Bianca off to the highest bidder; or that money is the highest measure of his daughter, Bianca being worth the most, and Kate given away for love, not money.

The ambiguity continues. Not only is each sister is referred to as a decoy, but each is also referred to, in very unflattering terms, as a haggard: that is, "a wild (female) hawk caught while in her adult plumage", also "a wild and intractable person (at first, a female); one not to be captured", "a hag, a witch" (OED 1239), all meanings which support the idea of them as shrews. Of the various bird species, stale applies specifically to "a pigeon used to entice a hawk into the net" (OED 3008). Petruchio, married to Kate, and in the process of taming her, refers to : "Another way I have to man my haggard" (4.1.187) and Hortensio, upon watching Bianca and Lucentio courting, gives up his romantic pursuit of "this proud and disdainful haggard" (4.2.39). Shakespeare subtly and

masterfully confuses his audience as to who is truly the stale or the shrew, the pigeon or the hawk, the decoy or the prize. He obfuscates the matter more by having Hortensio refer to Bianca's other suitors as "every stale" (3.1.89), once again extending a metaphor used primarily for females in the play, to the male characters.

Gremio asks Baptista, regarding Bianca, "Why will you mew her up?" (1.1.87), and Tranio also comments on how "he closely mewed her up" (1.1.183). A mew is "a cage for hawks used while they are mewing or moulting." "In mew" means "in the process of moulting or in the process of transformation." Mew is a term used "of a hawk – to moult, shed or change its feathers" and generally means "to shed or change anything comparable to plumage, especially hair or clothes" (OED 1786). We are allowed a first look into Bianca's cage when her hands are tied by Kate. Bianca pleads, "But for these other gawds, Unbind my hands, I'll pull them off myself, Yea, all my raiment, to my petticoat . . ." (2.1.3-5). Shakespeare immediately suggests that Bianca will be transformed, by playing on the meaning of mewing, in this case Bianca shedding her clothes. When we next see Bianca, her agreeable nature has transmuted into something more approaching the scolding tone of a shrew:

*I am no breeching scholar in the schools
I'll not be tied to hours nor 'pointed times,
But learn my lessons as I please myself (3.1.18-20)*

Yet, we learn, it is not only Bianca who can moult, or change her covering in her mew or cage: Lucentio has changed into the "habit of a mean man" by the name of Cambio, Hortensio is disguised as a music teacher named Litio, and Tranio has assumed the identity and clothes of his master Lucentio. (2.1.stage directions between lines 38 and 39). They all appear in the same space (mew/cage) just exited by Kate and Bianca.

Petruchio too transforms his appearance. He arrives at his wedding:

in a new hat and an old jerkin; a pair of old breeches thrice turned; a pair of boots that have been candle-cases, one buckled, another laced, and old rusty sword ta'en out of the town armour, with a broken hilt and chapeless . . . (3.2.43-48)

This marks the beginning of his efforts to tame, or to out-shrew Kate. Just as he changes his colours/clothes/plumage, so will he build on that to tame Kate by becoming an exaggerated version of Kate as shrew. His actions in taming Kate qualify him as a shrew: because of these actions, he is by some interpreted as “a wicked, evil-disposed man” and by others more lightly as a “mischievous or vexatious person” – both other definitions of shrew (OED:2806). He takes her to his country house where he, in effect, mews her up, just as Baptista did Bianca. Once there, he frankly announces his intention to tame Kate as he would a hawk, using the techniques of falconry: “My falcon now is sharp and passing empty, And till she stoop, she must not be full gorged . . .” (4.1.185-6). The idea of Kate as a falcon also supports the idea of Bianca as the stale or decoy for the bird of prey instead of Kate. Shakespeare has Kate and Bianca exchange roles, dispositions and situations throughout his play.

Yet, before even reaching her new home, the ‘taming school’, Kate falls under her horse in the mud, leaving her clothes “bemoiled” (4.1.72), her plumage, her clothing despoiled. Petruchio promises Kate:

*Will we return unto thy father's house
And revel it as bravely as the best,
With silken coats and caps and golden rings,
With ruffs and cuffs and fardingales and things . . .* (4.3.53-6)

Yet, Petruchio ultimately insists that they go dressed very poorly:

We will unto your father's,

*Even in these honest habiliments.
Our purses shall be proud, our garments poor . . .
What, is the jay more precious than the lark
Because his feathers are more beautiful? . . .
Oh no, good Kate, neither art thou the worse
For all this poor furniture and mean array. (4.3.167-178)*

Kate's mewing up by Petruchio does indeed seem to result in her transformation from shrew to obedient, agreeable companion, as shown by her changed plumage, and evidenced in her conversation with Petruchio about the sun and the moon, and her final speech on marriage. And yet, we are never completely certain of her changed nature. Tranio tells Petruchio "'Tis thought your deer does hold you at bay" (5.2.56). By this he throws down the gauntlet to Petruchio to prove that his wife is not, as Baptista says, "the veriest shrew of all" (5.2.63), the inference being that Bianca and the Widow are now regarded openly as shrews. To return to the word stale, it was once used to allude in a now unknown sense to deer (OED: 3008), and to revisit the word mew, it is used of deer when they shed their horns or cast their heads (OED: 1786) - hence Tranio's choice of the word deer for Kate. Another meaning of stale is "a lover or mistress whose devotion is turned into ridicule for the amusement of a rival or rivals" (OED: 3008). This is in fact what Petruchio does to Kate when he asks her to "tell these head-strong women What duty they do owe their lords and husbands" (5.2.129-131). Kate's speech is ostensibly delivered with such selflessness and devotion to her husband that all witnesses are left in awe. As Lucentio concludes "'Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so" (5.2.190).

Kate's amusing performance is watched with disbelief by the other characters of the play and the audience. In this final scene, as we have seen, Kate is referred to as a shrew, a deer, and treated as a stale in the sense of laughingstock. Through skilfully

playing with the metaphors implied in the words we have examined: sly, shrew, stale, haggard, and mew, we see the complex web of allusion woven by Shakespeare. Throughout, Bianca keeps her fine clothes, signifying that she was not, after all, transformed. Lucentio, Tranio, and Hortensio all change their feathers and then return to themselves and their rank-appropriate apparel. Only Petruchio and Kate exhibit a change of plumage – and thus, transformation - at the end of the play. And of course the sartorial state of Sly, whom we never see again after the first act, is left up to our imaginations.

The fun and comedy of the play lies in the ambiguity and confusion created by erasing any sharp delineation of gender and role – hence making it very difficult to resolutely declare that the treatment of women is good or bad, fair or unfair, brutal or kind. All of the characters are sly in pursuing the object of their desires.. At least two of the men can be said to be shrewish like the women, and all have been decoys or stales of one sort or another to further the comedic action of the play. All of the above characters are mewed up in one way or another during the play. In this way, Shakespeare’s creations slide in and out of similar roles and characterizations, making their true natures difficult to pin down. However, haggard is applied only to Kate and Bianca, unambiguously declaring the wildness and intractability of both sisters, females not to be captured or tamed. It is this observation which leaves one wondering which shrews truly have been tamed – the untameable haggards, Kate and Bianca, or the miscreant and the opportunist, Sly and Petruchio respectively.

Perhaps Shakespeare did not reveal Sly’s fate because to do so he may have felt obligated to resolve Kate’s destiny and thereby disturb the masterful ambiguity of the

play and its riddle as to just who is tamed and who is not. Shakespeare leaves this central question unanswered through his expert and artful wordplay and his refusal to settle the Sly plot. Perhaps the most decisive conjecture we can make about his treatment of women in the play, keeping in mind that all of the roles would have been filled by men, is that it is but an hilarious mockery of the received truths on the nature of marriage and the proper place of women within it and Elizabethan society. Or is it, being that shrew is also merely a synonym for wife?

Bibliography

The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Volume I, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Volume II, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988

Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew* (ed. Sylvia Barnet), Toronto: Signet Classic 1987.