

Katherine's Rebellion, Repression and Resistance:
Feminist Perspective of *The Taming of the Shrew*

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The Taming of the Shrew by William Shakespeare is a controversial play that arouses a debate over the role of Katherine. Some people regard Katherine as an anti-feminist protagonist. However, in fact, if we delve into it, adopting feminist interpretation, there are many clues, indicating Katherine is a woman who is intelligent, and is not afraid to assert her views under any given situation.

“Katherine's temper is notorious, and extremely volatile, and it is thought that no man can control her, and no man would ever wish to marry her. On the other hand, her younger sister Bianca is nubile and much sought after by the nobles.”

(Wikipedia) This portrayal is commonly seen and widely accepted by everyone. People use “notorious temper” to describe rebellious Katherine; on the contrary, the obeying Bianca conforms to the customs of society and people's gender stereotype.

The two female protagonists Katherina in the play "*The Taming of the Shrew*" and Lilli in the musical "*Kiss Me, Kate*" belong to the avant-guard feminists at their time. Contrary to the beautiful and docile ideal image represented by Bianca whom men desire, Katherina in Shakespeare's play and Lilli in the show-within-a-show are strong and independent figures to show their idiosyncrasy to subvert the ideology institutionalized by the patriarchy. (Iris Hsin-chun Tuan)

In Iris Hsin-chun Tuan's essay, comparing different versions of this play, she points out that Bianca is desired by men because of her docility and beauty. We may infer that Bianca's subjectivity and identity is based on being suited by men or having a relationship with men; therefore, she still lives under male domination. As for Katherine, she is a modern woman at that time and independent of men. We witness

an indescribable naivety and a sheer straightforwardness in Katherine though such innocent integrity brings her notorious reputation, for it often irritates people.

Katherine is described as a shrew because of her sharp tongue and harsh language to those around her, often causing offence, for example, “’Tis it is not halfway to her heart. /But if it were, doubt not her care should be/ To comb your noodle with a three-legged stool, /And paint your face and use you like a fool” (1.1.61-65). However, in my point of view, Katherine is just being true to herself. In a way, it can be seen as a form of *écriture féminine*.

Hélène Cixous first uses *écriture féminine* in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), in which she asserts, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.” *Écriture féminine* doesn’t literally mean “women’s writing.” Sometimes, it can be widely applied to any kind of form, referring to women’s self-awareness. Hence, I regard Katherine’s spontaneous flow of her feelings as a kind of *écriture féminine*.

However, in Act 4, Scene 5, Katherine changes drastically, when she is forced to switch the words *moon* and *sun*, and she realizes she has to agree with whatever Petruchio says regardless of its absurdity. “And be it the 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../Sun it is not, when you say it is not, / And the moon changes even as your mind:/ What you will have it named, even that it is, /And so it shall be so for Katherine” (ll.12-15; ll.19-22). From this point, instead of defying and challenging Petruchio, Katherine has yielded herself to Petruchio and succumbed to his rhetoric. Most readers would conclude that Katherine is tamed finally. But in feminist perspective, Iris Hsin-chun Tuan observes:

... that the relationship between Petruchio and Katherine in "*The Taming of the Shrew*" and Fred and Lilli in "*Kiss Me, Kate*" is not like the literal meaning for the readers or spectators to interpret the women as submissive and compliant wives, but the smart women who use the ideology of the patriarchy but playfully deconstruct and undermine it within its structure. It's not as the men think the shrew women to be tamed, but the arrogant men to be tamed by those intelligent women who skillfully play on the Phallogocentric language to get rid of the Lacanian notion of the "Lack." Furthermore, woman would rather become the subject to express her own ideas and learn how to deal with men to gain her equal status than being tamed as the object. (Iris Hsin-chun Tuan)

In Iris Hsin-chun Tuan's opinion, Katherine pretends to comply with Petruchio so as to get what she wants. She knows she has no choice but to yield seemingly because it is the only way to deal with Petruchio. In a sense, compared to Katherine, Petruchio is more ignorant. In the end, on the surface, Katherine addresses her speech to show her faithfulness to her husband saying "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, /Thy head, thy sovereign." In a way, that is her strategy by obeying the order of her husband to kiss him in public and say those words which the male like to listen in order to get, in fact, what she wants at home and in the society.

Works cited

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