

Women's Language in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

Elvan Mutlu

Research Assistant Dr., Department of Western Languages and Literature, Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, 15030, Burdur, Turkey. elvanmtl@gmail.com

Abstract: *The purpose of this essay is to examine William Shakespeare's women characters in the light of Simone de Beauvoir's famous quote: 'To say that women is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances'. The character mainly discussed in this paper is Katherine who challenges everyday norms in Shakespeare's play, The Taming of Shrew. What this essay suggests is that within the storyline of the play, the female language is not understood in the patriarchal society and the powerful female figures like Katherine are seen as hidden behind the veil.*

Keywords: women's language, Shakespeare, Elizabethan society, de Beauvoir, The Taming of the Shrew.

Introduction

'To say that women is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances', so said noted feminist Simone de Beauvoir' (de Beauvoir 271). This essay aims to review Shakespeare's women in the light of Beauvoir's words. The character this essay will discuss is Katherine from *The Taming of the Shrew* (1623). What this female character and the play itself show that the female language is not understood in the

patriarchal society, as can be seen in the main character's final speech. A. Wayne Rebhorn suggests that the Elizabethans would have seen the act of speech itself as being masculine and patriarchal:

Thus in Hercules the Renaissance found a perfect figure for the rhetor, one which focused on force and made it both masculine and political at the same time... if the orator is the supremely masculine Hercules, it is a simple matter to imagine his audience in feminine terms. That is precisely what all the

imagery of entering and possessing, violating and raping accomplishes, thereby validating Renaissance men's vision of the "proper" order of the universe in which men ruled and women obeyed, whether they wanted to or not (311).

In the context that Rebhorn suggests, women are seen inferior to men in Elizabethan era and they are to obey to their men. In public, the men are the speakers and women are the listeners. To speak in public is seen masculine so women are to be silent and listen what the men say. When women speak, they are subject to being 'hidden behind veils' and so their language is not understood. Their language itself must be veiled.

Shakespeare has given his readers many characters –some bewitching, some cruel; some that make the readers cry and some that make them wince in pain. He carves many of his female characters with finesse and beauty and, as many critics have noted, with intelligence and witty nature (Traub 129). His female characters display a range of intriguing qualities: from Juliet's courage to Katherine's 'shrewdness'; and from Cleopatra's attractiveness to Rosalind's cleverness. Almost all his women deserve an in-depth

analysis which throws a different light on their actions and words.

Material and Methods

The Taming of the Shrew is similar to other comedies of Shakespeare. It narrates the tale of two sisters: Bianca, the delicate and dainty, and Katherine, the shrew. The suitors seeking Bianca's hand meet their father's decision that Katherine will be married first. Lucentio, Bianca's suitor tricks Petruchio into marrying Katherine, who in turn is 'tamed' after marriage. The question which arises here is whether she really tamed? The notorious last speech of Katherine evokes a lot of doubt and confusion amongst readers and more so in feminists.

John C. Bean in his essay 'Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*' says that,

Much recent criticism of '*The Taming of the Shrew*' can be divided into two camps –the revisionists and the anti-revisionists. The revisionists have argued that Kate's notorious last speech is delivered ironically and that Kate... remains untamed... The anti-revisionists on the other hand ... have argued that Kate is tamed through the reductive

procedures of rollicking, old-fashioned farce (Bean p. 65).

However, this essay misses some aspects regarding Katherine's last speech about the need of wives to be obedient. Her final speech speaks of relatively contemporary ideas and not of some medieval rehearsal of the duties of wives. Bean does not mention Shakespeare's projection of social hierarchies in the speech. In Act III, Scene 2, Petruchio says, that he 'will be master of what is mine own' and also that Katherine is 'my good, my chattels; she is my house'; she is also his 'household stuff, my field, my barn' and 'horse, my ox, my ass, my anything' (William Act III, Scene 2, 218-221). At the very outset, these words spoken by Petruchio make him a haughty tyrant of a husband. But the play wavers between the depiction of Petruchio as a dark chauvinist or otherwise a man actually capable of loving Kate and his efforts to tame her as a means to survive their marriage. Shakespeare puts this mask of Petruchio at the wedding to make his audience realize that he is invested with the power of taming Kate (Bean 72). He goes to various lengths to tame her –from not giving her food to being extremely strict with her. The play suggests that he does all this because he loves her and that in his mind he wants to change her from

what she was in Padua. He does all this in an extremely sweet behaviour and more so because he wants Katherine to wilfully adapt to her social status and the duties and responsibilities which come along with it. But, does Kate want all of this?

It is evident that Katherine has to be inferior to Petruchio, for that's why women become wives in her society (Rebhorn 311). She understands the expectations which she needs to meet as she has become a wife now. However, she is intelligent and sensible. She embraces Petruchio's behaviour because she has nothing else to do. She is to obey her husband. However, Shakespeare does not force his characters to behave in a particular manner, he merely observes and writes. Elizabeth Kantor believes that the play is a farce and that:

It's the nature of a man to value a woman he wins only with difficulty... Whatever the "gender studies" folks may think, Shakespeare isn't trying to "domesticate women": he isn't making any kind of case for how they ought to be treated, or what sort of rights they ought to have. He's just noticing what men and women are really like, and creating fascinating and delightful drama

out of it. Shakespeare's celebration of the limits that define us –of our natures as men and women –upsets only those folks who find human nature itself upsetting ('The Politically Incorrect').

Of course, human nature is upsetting in certain ways. Kantor's description of 'what men and women are really like' can be inferred at one point as it is okay for Petruchio to torment Katherine, because that is a part of human nature. On the other hand, Katherine's responses to Petruchio's bad treatment suggest that he cannot do so as she speaks as a part of human nature. Thus, his bad treatment is challenged with her words, yet her language is not understood. A very clear understanding of Katherine's words will help the readers understand what society demands of women and how men aptly turn deaf to a woman's sensible words. The men believe that Katherine is tamed and has become a devoted wife but interestingly the hint of sarcasm and irony in her words allude to a different understanding altogether (Rebhorn 321). She is a mystery for many as her 'words are not understood'; her words are, in fact, veiled.

It is hard to challenge men in a male-dominated society, in which females are regarded merely as listeners. Thus,

Katherine loses to the patriarchal society not because she wants but because she does not have another choice. Katherine's last speech shows how she submits to Petruchio because she desires comfort and well-being instead of fighting harshly with words and still being misunderstood (Yachnin 1-31). Her final speech suggests that Katherine is a woman in love, or one who pretends to be in love, with her husband who appreciates the bond between them and envisions the family as a kingdom where the husband is the king and the wife is the subject who endures the rule not because of the king's will but because of her love for him (bean 69). For Kate, her husband after 'taming', becomes 'lord', 'governor', 'king', (5.1.146-147) and the shrewish wife is 'a graceless traitor to her loving lord,' (5.2.160) Kate says,

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,

Even such a woman oweth to her husband. (5.2.155-156)

Her final words lead Petruchio to believe that Kate is now tamed and best among the wives –or at least, this is what he and the other men choose to think. Kate is not tamed; but she is not a shrew either. She adopts the traits that make her a shrew only to make her withstand the misogynistic nature of the society and the

men around her. By presenting his characters' wishes vividly, Shakespeare gives his readers room to judge these characters and draw their own conclusions. Petruchio is a conniving and brutal man. The very fact that he marries because of money and later sugar coats his harsh behaviour to prove superiority in a marriage makes him an unsympathetic character. Petruchio is actually the 'shrew' in their marriage. Katherine understands this and accepts it and adjusts to his ways to protect her from further misogynistic problems (Baumlin 238). However, the other characters do not term him a shrew.

Bianca's character is also not considered 'shrewish' or overbearing. On the outside, she comes across as a sweet and delicate sister who is flooded with suitors and who is disturbed by her father's decision of getting her sister married first. However, the text raises suspicions of Bianca's nature. She is overtly submissive. The following lines make it clearer to understand Bianca:

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 (1.1.80-83).

Bianca cannot be discontented –she has an array of suitors, all the men including her father have expressed their adoration of her. Further, she mocks Katherine by saying that she should be happy as Bianca is now discontent. Nowhere in the text is there anything to support this statement of Bianca. While Bianca chooses her words carefully, Katherine is the one who bears it all –her dissatisfaction with society, men and marriages (Baumlin 238).

Katherine is at the very beginning shown to be abhorred by the men in her society. Grumio calls her, "'Katherine the curst"! A little title for a maid of all titles the worst' (1.2.123-124). This discontent is more because she is an equal to the men of the society. She defies the norms and rituals of her society and does not let a man control her (Yachnin 9). But marriage changes things drastically. Petruchio's harsh behaviour 'tames' her at the expense of losing the passionate and self-loving woman in her. She becomes more of a puppet in his hands (Crocker 148). She does it knowingly, though. She decides to choose this fate as she finds comfort in her husband and understands the society will not accept her individuality (Baumlin 238). She has to choose between Petruchio and

her nature, and she chooses Petruchio for she finds comfort (Bean 66).

However, she does not choose to leave behind her sensibility and wisdom. In the end, Petruchio asks Kate to educate the other wives how to obey their husbands and keep them happy. She does so wilfully and rather happily. She says,

But love, fair looks and true obedience;

Too little payment for so great a debt.

Such duty as the subject owes the prince

Even such a woman oweth to her husband;

And when she is forward, peevish, sullen, sour,

And not obedient to his honest will,

What is she but a foul contending rebel

And graceless traitor to her loving lord? (5.2.153-160).

The men laud her after this and Petruchio is extremely happy for 'A hundred marks my Kate does put her down' (5.2.35). But all the men turn deaf to the real meaning of her words. Although Kate's speech implies obedience and agreement with Petruchio's ways, her sarcastic tone gives a different picture. Rebhorn says,

She has discovered that although her rhetorical skill with words cannot give her –perhaps cannot really give anyone –the power to command the world, it can at least allow her to mark off her independence from it by giving her a way to achieve a limited triumph over those whose rule is ensured by social traditions, legal structures, and physical force... In short, rhetoric gives Kate, if not the last laugh, at least the occasion for an ironic smile (Rebhorn 327).

Katherine achieves a limited power in the end, because she lives in a patriarchal world and all she can do is to obey. Her confessions on the duties of wives in marriage are understood quite well as they are the rules imposed by the surrounding society. Her earlier speeches, however, do not fit into male-dominated rhetoric and her language does not make any sense. Katherine paves the way for peace and agreement by burying her inherent nature and her individuality (Rebhorn, 321). She invokes the same in the other women. She seems to be giving them a hint that they should also become 'tame' for their shrewish nature (which in modern light can be easily termed as individuality and

voice of one's own) would be reprimanded and deal with harshly.

Discussion and Results

All in all, Katherine is a strong woman. She encompasses the virtues of a modern woman and she is a suitable example of someone who is born in the wrong society. In every Shakespearean comedy, the female character holds a lot of importance, be it Rosalind in *As You Like It* or Viola in *Twelfth Night*. It is very interesting to note that both Rosalind and Viola disguise themselves as men in the plays. What is interesting in *The Taming of the Shrew* is that though Katherine has no disguise, she speaks like a man –strong and carefree. While in the first half of the play, no one appreciates her because she is blunt and has a will of her own, the second half sees everyone in awe with her because she is 'tamed'. Very clearly, she belongs to a society which does not believe in any woman speaking for herself.

Petruchio has an important power over Katherine's speech as he always tries to change her words, 'even her silence will command a response from him' (Baumlin 241). 'Say she be mute, and will not peak a word, / Then I'll commend her volubility, / And she uttereth piercing eloque'(2.1.170-173). At some points, Katherine cannot bear Petruchio's ignorance towards her

speech and utters her words sharply, yet he still denies to understand her:

Why sir, I trust I may have leave to speak,

And speak I will. I am no child, no babe.

Your better have endur'd me say my mind,

And if you cannot, best stop your ears.

My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,

Or else my tongue concealing it will break,

And rather than it shall, I will be free

Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words (4.3.73-80).

Thus, Beauvoir's words are quite apt here and it can safely be assumed that Kate's words are true and sensible but men do not make any effort to understand the underlying sarcasm or irony in it. In her last speech, she clearly speaks of the so-called institution of marriage. Her speech supports Bean's claim that 'All versions of folk tale assume that man unconditionally rules woman' (Bean 67). Kate finds herself in the position of being ruled by a man. Her husband might not be brutal to her physically but he tortures her emotionally and tries to demolish her free spirit and

will. She understands that she has to lose if she needs to preserve her marriage, for she cannot forever remain miserable. However, she loses on purpose and actually lets everyone call her 'tame', but the speech she gives speaks of her agony and her bitterness. It dramatizes her loss to the patriarchal society.

Conclusion

Shakespeare constructs his female characters through his use of words. Many feminist critics have formed various views on Shakespeare's women. What is important is that it is understood why Shakespeare creates these women, but it is important to understand the resonances in creating these women's words. The speeches of Katherine offer an alternative context to the surrounding Elizabethan one as they speak instead of being silent and listeners. Recreating the characters like Katherine highlights the unbalanced nature of the Elizabethan society's construction of language as being defined by an expectation of only men speaking, and of only men being understood.

Works Cited

Baumlin, Tita French. "Petruccio the Sophist and Language as Creation in *The Taming of the Shrew*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 29, 1989, pp. 237-257.

Bean, John C.. "Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*." *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. Ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas. London: University of Illinois Press, 1980. pp. 65-78.

Crocker, Holly A.. "Affective Resistance: Performing Passivity and Playing a-Part in 'The Taming of the Shrew'." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 54, 2003, pp. 142-159.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M Parsley, London: David Campbell, 1993.

Kantor, Elizabeth. 'The Politically Incorrect Guide to English and American Literature', *Library of Congress*, Washington, 2006, http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=fNmRKIHr4fUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Politically+Incorrect+Guide+to+English+and+American+Literature&hl=en&ei=xWTKTeqlJYTE8QOLqpnBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCsQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false. Accessed 8 May, 2011.

Rebhorn, Wayne A.. "Petruccio's "Rope Tricks": "The Taming of the Shrew" and the Renaissance Discourse of Rhetoric." *Modern Philology*, vol. 92, 1995, pp. 294-327.

Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. Ed. Ann Thompson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Traub, Valerie. "Gender and sexuality in Shakespeare." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, Ed. Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. pp. 129-146.

Yachnin, Paul. 'Personations: *The Taming of the Shrew* and the Limits of Theoretical Criticism', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 2.1 1996, 2.1-31, <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/02-1/yachshak.html>. Accessed 30 March, 2011.