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# Who Is the Shrew?

Irony as deconstruction in *The Taming of the Shrew*

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## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	1
How language and gender connect in literature	2
Language and gender in <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	4
Deconstruction	9
Irony in this Shakespearean comedy	11
The significance of the Induction	14
Katherina's submission (?) and the final speech	16
Conclusion	21
Works Cited	24

## Introduction

In late sixteenth-century England, there was a tradition of tales on the shrew-taming theme, narrations that mainly describe the process of making an unruly wife subject to her husband. One example of the genre is the poem “A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife”, from about 1550, that “features a disobedient wife beaten unconscious in a cellar and wrapped in a salted horsehide” (Kidnie xlv). However, William Shakespeare’s comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*, written in 1590-1591 (Chronology of Shakespeare’s Works xvii), was not completely uncontroversial even to a contemporary audience. Shakespeare himself softens the theme by not letting the tamer, Petruchio, use physical violence, as is common in shrew-taming narrations of the time. John Fletcher wrote, already in 1611, a sequel to Shakespeare’s play, and called it *The Woman’s Prize or Tamer Tamed*. In this play the gender roles are reversed. Like many subsequent readers/spectators Fletcher seems to disagree with the harsh treatment of Katherina (Kidnie xliii). There is more than one critic who has suggested that Shakespeare’s play and its questionable message should be put away and forgotten. George Bernhard Shaw, for example, said about the play that “no man with any decency of feeling can sit it out in the company of a woman without being extremely ashamed of the lord-of-creation moral implied in the wager and the speech put into the woman’s own mouth” (quoted in Boose 1).

There are many different perspectives regarding Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, especially concerning Katherina’s speech in the closing scene, but in brief, there are three main interpretations: either you assume that true love has awoken between the two protagonists or you assume that Petruchio really succeeded in taming Katherina,

which implies that male supremacy over female submission is celebrated, an ending which seems to arouse dislike or even repugnance in many critics (Kidnie xlii, lxiv and lxvi). A third possible way to interpret this drama is to assume that Katherina's final speech is ironic – that the joke is on the people of Padua who made fun of her headstrong behavior, and perhaps on her husband. This interpretation, as opposed to the second interpretation, questions the gender roles and the benefits of female submission. In this thesis the play will be analyzed from a feminist perspective, and the thesis will investigate how female characters are constructed through male language use. It will be argued that the female characters Katherina and Bianca are mainly constructed through language expressed by male characters as the binary oppositions “woman seen as monster” and “woman seen as saint” (Lynn 195), however by an act of deconstruction within the play, these images, or constructed representations, are adjusted and somewhat reversed in the end. Furthermore, it will be argued that this reading strengthens and favors an ironic interpretation of the play, including Katherina's final speech (V.2.135-178). In addition, it will be shown how the Induction, an introductory part of the play, adds aspects of construction and deconstruction, which supports an ironic reading and a questioning of the constructed gender roles within the play.

### **How language and gender connect in literature**

Today it is argued by many that gender characteristics are socially constructed, in contemporary terms as well as in the Renaissance culture of Shakespeare's time, since gender is “ultimately about people and the social significance, performance, and marking of gender” and the “meaning of gender can change whether a person is elderly, disabled,

a child or an infant, a woman or man, or a member of any other chosen social category” (Frink, Shepard and Reinhardt 3). Moreover, “the past no doubt contains the same degree of diversity the present holds” (Frink, Shepard and Reinhardt 3). As Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* “one is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman” (quoted in Barry 125). A concern for feminist criticism is, according to Steven Lynn, to investigate “how women have been written” and to examine “the image of women in literature” (198). According to Lynn, de Beauvoir points out that “females have been depicted in literature and culture as either Mary or Eve” – either by the misogynic representation of “woman seen as monster” or by the idealization of “woman seen as saint” (198-199).

A parallel to de Beauvoir’s notion of gender as constructed is the structuralist view of language, as language does not “just reflect or record the world: rather it shapes it” (Barry 59). According to Peter Barry, Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theory, which is fundamental to structuralism as theory, consists of three major ideas: firstly, meaning is arbitrary, that is the meanings we give words are not given, only maintained by convention. Secondly meaning is relational, as it is only possible to define in relation to other words, e.g. male/female which only contains a sufficient meaning in relation to the other. Thirdly meaning is “*attributed* to the object or idea by the human mind, and constructed by and expressed through language” (Barry 40-42). This implies that through language we create reality or how we choose to perceive the world around us. Through language use, different representations are created. Accepting these notions of gender and language, it follows that language does not describe gender, as an entity existing

independent of language, but creates or shapes our perception and apprehension of gender. From a feminist perspective it would be to “recognise the role of language in

making what is social and constructed seem transparent and ‘natural’” (Barry 128). Since gender “can be seen as a pattern constructed in society which in turn influences our views” and since literature “is one of many forms of cultural representation”, literary texts “can both reinforce gender stereotypes and create newer, more liberating representations of gender” (Goodman 2). This implies that language use, not only in life but in literature as well, constructs representations of gender and affects our perceptions of gender and gender identity.

### **Language and gender in *The Taming of the Shrew***

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina and her sister Bianca are represented through the words of male characters in the beginning of the play. It is as if the female characters are constructed through male language-use and from a male perspective. Already in the first scene of act one, Gremio, one of Bianca’s suitors refers to Katherina in negative and insulting ways when Baptista, Katherina’s and Bianca’s father, declares that no one can marry Bianca before her older sister is courted and married (I.I. 48-54). Gremio’s statement: “To cart her rather. She’s too rough for me” (I.I. 55) alludes to the custom of whipping women who were dragged through the streets behind a cart as a punishment for unruly behavior (Kidnie xlii). Furthermore, it is a considerably derogative and intimidating comment not only to the daughter of a wealthy and highly respectable man but to any woman since it is also “a punishment for prostitutes” (Kahn 90). To such an insult, her answer, asking her father if his intention is “[t]o make a stale of [her] amongst

these mates” might seem quite accurate (I.I. 5-58), “stale” here referring to both a laughing-stock and a harlot and “mate” referring to contemptible fellows as well as husbands (Hibbard 144). Hortensio, another of Bianca’s suitors, reassures Katherina that there will be “[n]o mate for you [u]nless you were of gentler, milder mould” (I.I.59-60). She rejects the mere thought of having any of them as a husband by promising to “comb [his] noddle with a three-legged stool” (I.I.64). This is conceivably a justifiable contestation of their condescending attitude towards her, which promotes a stream of epithets whereby Katherina’s character is constructed by different male characters’ use of language. In addition to the initial allusion to shrews and prostitutes, she is for example referred to or likened to: devils, a wench, stark mad, froward and fiend of hell (I.I. 66, 69, 88, 105).

Katherina does not state anything about herself except as a response or defense to what other characters say about or to her in the first act. An additional noteworthy detail is the amount of speech. As Coppelia Kahn points out, Katherina speaks 207 lines, less than half of Petruchio’s 564 lines (101). Nonetheless, Katherina is perceived to be the talkative shrew. This indicates a power imbalance concerning who is allowed to talk and how much verbal space women and men are supposed to occupy. “Throughout the play, this kind of disparity between the extent and nature of Kate’s ‘shrewish’ behavior and the male characters’ perceptions of it focuses our attention on masculine behavior and attitudes which stereotype women as either submissive and desirable or rebellious and shrewish” (Kahn 92).

Katherina is arguably an example of “woman seen as monster” and Bianca of “woman seen as saint”. Bianca is, albeit still through male language use, constructed in a

fundamentally contrasting manner and represented in a range of positive terms. The initial information about Bianca is conveyed by Lucentio, a young nobleman visiting Padua; in her “silence [does he] see maid’s mild behavior and sobriety” (I.I. 70-71). She is then referred to as good, sweet, young, modest, a sweet beauty and sacred by her father Baptista, Lucentio and the other suitors (I.I. 76, 137, 153, 164, 173). She is so divinely constructed that even “with her breath she did perfume the air” (I.I. 172). In addition, after Baptista has declared that Bianca cannot be married before her sister, he commands her to stay at home and occupy herself with music and poetry (I.I. 75-77, 91-93). When she concludes that “to [his] pleasure humbly [she] subscribe[s]” (I.I. 81), she incarnates the female virtues of Shakespeare’s time since women as “feminine represented the following virtues which, importantly, have their meaning in relationship to the male: obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy, and patience” (Gerlach, Almasy and Daniel). Notwithstanding, Katherina’s outburst to her sister as a “pretty peat” who should put “finger in her eye, an she knew why” (I.I. 78-79) suggests that Bianca might not be so perfect and that Katherina knows something about her that her father does not, and admittedly that Katherina herself feels unjustly treated.

Crucial to the understanding of how language use is connected to gender, is also the absence of language use, that is, silence. According to Dale Spender, language works in favor of men and “women have known for centuries that men have been the undeservedly dominant sex, and that their dominance is reflected and reinforced in the language and by language use” (xii). She claims that women have “known about this form of dominance, and argued (persuasively) against it”. She also argues that men “have used their power in the past to censor women’s challenge” and that “they continue to use it in the present”;



simply put, men have the power to silence women (xii). However, complete female silence would be quite inconvenient and “the compromise – constructed by males – has been to allow women to express themselves, but only in male terms” (12). This notion of the workings of language use is discernible in the examples previously mentioned: Katherina’s challenges are effectively silenced by scorn and insults, while Bianca’s speech is praised since it conforms to the male norm.

However, it is possible to argue that Katherina’s protest against the idea of having either Gremio or Hortensio as a husband would be relatively understandable to Shakespeare’s contemporary audience. When the financial circumstances surrounding the weddings are negotiated, we learn that Katherina’s dowry is “one half of [her father’s] land” after his death and “in possession twenty thousand crowns” (II.I. 122-122). When Lucentio and Gremio quarrel over Bianca, it is revealed that Gremio’s whole estate is not worth two thousand ducats all in all (II.I 365-366). Since a ducat would be approximately equal to two crowns (Hibbard 166, 167), Katherina’s dowry, in ready money, exceeds Gremio’s entire estate by five times, which consequently might be a sufficient reason for her to consider him beneath her social and financial position. Hortensio then, is even less well-off than Gremio (II.I 13-17). Once again we have the “disparity between the extent and nature of Kate’s ‘shrewish’ behavior and the male characters’ perceptions of it” (Kahn 92). As Phyllis Rackin argues: “the fact that male superiority was taken for granted does not mean that every woman was subordinate in every way to every man or that many women did not occupy positions of authority” (27). She also draws attention to numerous examples of women in Shakespeare’s family controlling “considerable property both in land and in money” and even functioning as executors of wills and as active subjects in

order to “further their financial interests” (Rackin 33). This enables us to conclude that Shakespeare did not lack contact with strong and active women. Furthermore, it stresses the discrepancy between the prescribed ideal female virtues and reality. With this background, it seems strange that Katherina’s behavior is consistently perceived by some critics as shrewish. Robert K. Heilman for example states that the “fact that she is truly a shrew does not mean that she cannot have hurt feelings” (53). Katherina’s behavior is provocative not only because she is shrewish, but because she highlights Gremio’s and Hortensio’s inferior positions, and is conceivably an expression of defensible self-esteem. The underlying premises for the construction of Katherina as a shrew is arguably such circumstances as Gremio’s and Hortensio’s inferior position from a social and economic point of view which contrasts their gendered right of male supremacy over any woman. Katherina’s protests are silenced by ridicule not because her feelings are hurt but due to their hurt feelings. If she will not be literally silenced, her credibility is undermined by ascribing to her far more shrewish traits than she actually possesses.

When Petruchio conveniently turns up as wooer/tamer, determined to find a wealthy wife, he offers the solution Bianca’s suitors are looking for. If he marries Katherina, one of them can marry Bianca. Supported by Gremio, Hortensio and Lucentio, Petruchio presents himself to Baptista in act two, asking his permission to woo Katherina. A legitimate question, especially for a contemporary reader, is why Katherina agrees to marry Petruchio. The answer is that she does not. Katherina protests wildly, stating that she would rather see him hanged than marry him (II.I 292). Nevertheless, by lying, supported by false liaison from Bianca’s suitors, Petruchio manages to convince Baptista that Katherina has agreed to marry him. He asserts that she by “oath on oath . . . won

[him] to her love” (II.I 302-303). As Margaret Jane Kidney points out, “betrothals in early modern England could be nearly as binding as actual marriage” and by a promise “sworn with an oath, and without mutual consent on both sides to annul the contract, each party was legally compelled to marry the other” (xxxvi). The suitors’ reassurance that they “will be witnesses” makes the contract binding (II.I 313). Before she is married, Katherina is legally subordinated to her father and as a married woman she is dependent on her husband. This is due to the fact that if women married “their legal identities would be absorbed by that of their husbands” (Eales 1). Katherina is trapped in a situation conditioned by the constructed gender role of her time and sex, forced by her father’s approval of the wedding, into a marriage where she is exposed to Petruchio’s preferences and requirements.

### **Deconstruction**

In this essay the concept of “deconstruction” is vital to the analysis, and Penelope Deutscher’s notion serves to justify the use of it when she states that deconstruction “has been crucial to the formulation of feminisms of sexual difference, and to the rejection by some of essentialism and identity politics”, and “has been seen as a methodology for destabilising dichotomous oppositions, for decentring masculinity in relation to an ‘othered’ femininity” (42). As already shown, the characters of Katherina and Bianca are constructed through male language use in the play as binary oppositions, similarly to how gender roles in general are socially constructed through language use. If the characters, as well as gender roles, are constructed they might just as well be de-constructed. Sean McEvoy points out in his *Shakespeare: The Basics* that “[m]any critics and directors have

sought to interpret the play as ironic, making its suggested deeper meaning (implicit rejection of the way Katherina is treated) much more significant than its surface meaning (women must learn to obey men no matter what)” and that “[t]his may stem from a refusal to admit that Shakespeare could write a play as sexist as this appears to be” since “other outspoken female characters are treated with far more sympathy” in his other plays (131). He also states that “feminist critics who wish to argue that the play is no simple story of just male triumph over a foolishly rebellious woman have much work to do”. He also suggests that Katherina’s final “speech is so unambiguous a statement of women’s subservience” (131). Consequently, an ironic interpretation of Katherina’s speech is therefore unlikely according to McEvoy.

However, although concepts like gender and deconstruction were invented long after the Elizabethan era, they are still applicable to any text, since deconstruction is “reading against the grain or reading against the text itself” and “uncovers the unconscious rather than the conscious dimensions of the text” (Barry 68). Thus, we can read this play without seeking for the message consciously intended by the author, allowing the reader to search for underlying and contradictory messages within the text itself. Moreover, irony as “witty language used to convey insults or scorn” and “incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs” (Princeton University) is used throughout the play, as will be shown below. Irony in the latter sense could be related to the idea of deconstruction. According to J. A. Cuddon in deconstruction “a text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying” (quoted in Barry 69), which brings us very close to the “incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs” that signifies irony. The process of deconstruction can therefore be

viewed as analogous to the workings of irony. Barbara Johnson, in addition, states that “deconstruction of a text . . . proceed[s] . . . by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text” which implies some sort of incongruity between a seemingly unproblematic surface and the underlying contradictory meanings that actually occur with a closer reading (quoted in Barry 69). Accepting Cuddon’s and Johnson’s notions of deconstruction, a reading from a feminist perspective of *The Taming of the Shrew* does not demand the vast amount of work suggested by McEcoy. On the contrary, such a reading supports an ironic interpretation of the play and destabilizes the binary opposition “woman seen as monster” and “woman seen as saint”. Pursuing this further, it might be argued that this reading even questions the benefits of the “woman seen as saint” ideal and therefore reverses the binary opposition between Bianca and Katherina.

### **Irony in this Shakespearean comedy**

Petruchio’s quest is to tame Katherina; his method is not to use physical violence but to distort her protests into consent and to deny her food and rest and every basic need under the pretence that it is for her own good. Already when wooing Katherina, Petruchio declares: “Say that she rail, why then I’ll tell her plain [s]he sings as sweetly as a nightingale” and “if she deny to wed, I’ll crave the day [w]hen I shall ask the banns, and when be married” (II-I 170-171, 179-180). He thus constructs a twisted version of reality, arguably using “witty language . . . to convey insults or scorn” creating an “incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs” (Princeton University). As newlywed, Katherina yields after a week of harsh treatment without food and rest at Petruchio’s estate. On the journey back to Padua and her sister’s wedding, Katherina

reverses her previous perspective and finally submits to Petruchio's claim to be in the right of naming and renaming the world as he pleases (IV.5). When Petruchio exclaims "how bright and goodly shines the moon" in the middle of the day, Katherina at first protests (IV.5 2-5). However, at Petruchio's threat that they will return to his estate instead of going to Padua, she quickly changes, as she has learned her lesson, asserting: "Forward, I pray, since we have come so far, And be it the moon, or sun, or what you please" (IV.5 12-13).

However, by changing the meaning back and forth, Petruchio removes the stable ground within language for any meaning. What he does is arguably an act of deconstruction, which Katherina can take advantage of. Here the reader does not have to deconstruct or read against the grain, as Petruchio deconstructs the meaning of language himself. If Petruchio constantly has to name and rename things in order to tame and rule over Katherina, he also removes the stable ground from where he rules. When claiming the right to name and rename the world, Petruchio indirectly admits that there is no necessity, no law by nature, that constitutes our perception of the world. The connection between the things he names and what he chooses to call them is completely arbitrary. He exceeds the limits of his own strategy making it absurd not only to Katherina but to everyone around him; they might applaud his taming of Katherina, but arguably everyone would not agree that he is entitled to this role as "lord of creation". This becomes evident during the encounter with Vincentio, Lucentio's elderly father. Petruchio calls him "[f]air lovely maid" and asks Katherina to "embrace her for her beauty's sake" (VI.5.33-34). By exaggerating, she escapes the impact of Petruchio's taming concluding: "Happier the man whom favourable stars [a]llots thee for his lovely bedfellow" (VI.5.40-41). Vincentio,

somewhat confused, answering her “you my merry mistress” puts further emphasis on the fact that Katherina is not abased but rather amused. The absurdity of Petruchio’s strategy, acknowledged by an independent observer such as Vincentio, allows Katherina to take advantage of Petruchio’s strategy. Admittedly she agrees to every claim made by Petruchio, but her unconditional concession undermines the value and meaning of whatever statement she agrees to. The expected female behavior, brought to the point of absurdity, becomes a means of questioning itself. Like Petruchio, Katherina can use irony to create discrepancy between what seems to be and what actually occurs and consequently convey scorn or disagreement. This prior scene allows the reader/spectator to assume that even Katherina’s final speech is to be interpreted as ironic.

Moreover, throughout the play word play, puns and irony are prominent features. Different characters use witty language to convey insults and scorn. As already mentioned, Gremio and Hortensio scorn Katherina in scene one. Another example occurs when Petruchio arrives at Padua and there is an ironic word play between him and his servant Grumio (I.II 1-43). Before wooing, Petruchio even states that his method for taming Katherina is to reverse the meaning of whatever Katherina says in protest, pretending that he understands her protests as agreement (II.I 169-181), thus creating the incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs that characterizes irony. Petruchio’s method is thus to use irony. Katherina in return, replies in a like manner asking where he studied “all this goodly speech”. When he answers that he learnt it “from his mother-wit”, she boldly concludes “[a] witty mother, witless else her son” (II.I 255-258) implying that he is rather useless on his own. She also compares him to a “jade” (II.I 201), that is “a horse . . . that soon tires” and by this “impugn[s] Petruchio’s

virility” (Hibbard 162). Like she earlier scornfully questioned Gremio’s and Hortensio’s male supremacy and right to scorn her, she now questions Petruchio with the same method, putting his sense and masculinity into question. This consequent use of irony and word play in *The Taming of the Shrew* makes an ironic interpretation of Katherina’s final speech rather plausible.

### **The significance of the Induction**

A complementary component of the play adding aspects of construction and deconstruction is the Induction. The Induction is an introductory act providing a frame story to the play, making the taming plot a play within the play. The Induction, also referred to as the Sly plot, begins with a drunken tinker called Sly, who falls asleep after an argument with a pub hostess. He is found by a lord and his hunting party, who decide to amuse themselves at Sly’s expense. The lord commands his servants to “[t]ake him up gently and to bed with him” (Induction I 70). “Wrapped in sweet clothes” and with “rings put upon his fingers” he is duped into believing that he is a wealthy gentleman who, due to a long illness, has lost his memory (Induction I 36). In the second scene a troupe of players perform the taming plot with Sly, the lord and his party as audience. The reader/spectator is aware of what is concealed to Sly: that he in his present state is a construction and his lovely wife, a page disguised as a woman, is a construction in a double sense. *She* is not his wife and, in addition, *she* is performed by a young man. The fact that all characters were performed by male actors adds yet another dimension as Michael Shapiro proposes:



the text itself, as originally performed by an all-male cast, generated deconstructive power of its own by creating a metatheatrical frame. Beginning with the Induction, the play flaunted its theatricality, principally by underscoring the use of male actors in female roles . . . As female roles taken by these male performers were either idealized married gentlewomen or their unruly antitypes, they appeared not only as theatrical constructions but also as female stereotypes as outlined in conduct books and marriage manuals. (211)

This implies that the female characters are “both theatrically and culturally constructed” (Shapiro 211). When the lord is instructing his page how to perform the role of a gentlewoman married to Sly, he advocates the page use “a soft low tongue and lowly courtesy” and to ask what his “honour will command” so that his “humble wife [m]ay show her duty” (Induction I 112-115). Constructing an idealized female character like this, parallels the construction of Bianca seen “as woman as saint” by the wooers, as described above. Presumably such “meta-theatrical” devices enable awareness in the audience of the discrepancy between reality and this idealized construction. Furthermore, the play offers different “versions of femininity...which might reflect, refract or refute images most readily available to the culture” (Shapiro 213). It is not only Bianca and Sly’s supposed wife that are constructions. In addition, the hostess, depicted as anything but a gentlewoman and scorned by Sly who himself is seen as “a monstrous beast” and “a swine” by the lord, is a construction (Induction I 32), and Katherina is also constructed as

“woman seen as monster”. Sly’s offending and scornful attitude towards the hostess seems admittedly somewhat conceited and serves as a mirror to Gremio’s and Hortensio’s attitude towards Katherina, calling into question their right to judge her behavior. In addition, Sly’s conceited and quite preposterous attitude towards the page as his wife, somehow reflects Petruchio’s demand of being the man “born to tame...Kate” (II.I 269), and thus calls it into question.

In short, the deconstructive effect in *The Taming of the Shrew* concerning female stereotypes, is partly due to the general effect of having male actors performing female characters, as it highlights the constructedness of these female representations. “The deconstructive effect was even stronger . . . because Kate [sic] and Bianca may have been . . . understood to be, members of the troupe of players” performing the taming plot within the Sly plot (Shapiro 222). The illusion of these characters as representing real women, or different kinds of femininity, is not possible to maintain through this many layered theatrical construction. Moreover, the similarity between the constructed female characters and the idealized stereotypes described in conduct books and marriage manuals emphasizes the constructedness of gender roles in real life as well.

### **Katherina’s submission (?) and the final speech**

As previously mentioned, Katherina eventually submits to Petruchio’s proclaimed right to rule. However it is arguably the case that by “stepping into the role of submission, Katharine [sic] evades the categories that her passivity instates” and if “we read Katharine’s [sic] final performance of abjection as a response to Petruchio’s agency, then we miss the productive power that she ironically wields through the appearance of

passivity” (Crocker 156). When she no longer protests but willingly agrees to everything and anything, Petruchio has no longer a stable base to rule from. As he robbed her of the framework of reality when claiming that the sun is the moon and an old man is a fair virgin, she does the same to him by saying “be it the moon, or sun, or what you please” (IV.5.1-49). The “incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs” is, as earlier mentioned, exposed here. Admittedly Katherina agrees to every claim made by Petruchio, but her unconditional concession undermines the value and meaning of whatever statement she agrees to. The fixed power relation between the supreme husband and his subordinated wife is deconstructed. Once again, the expected female behavior, brought to the point of absurdity, becomes a means of questioning itself. Katherina’s extreme obedience seems to be her only instrument of protest. One might ask what Katherina can actually do, except use this silent resistance through irony, to escape what she does not want to be a part of, that is a society where women are subordinated to men. As a maid, she is subordinated to her father and as a married woman she is dependent on her husband’s good will. Obviously, she cannot escape. She is constrained to protest within the circumstances she so apparently wants to avoid.

Katherina proves to be the most clear-sighted of all the characters, especially about Bianca and her seemingly true and obedient behavior, and she manages, at least indirectly, to obtain redress in the end. In contrast to Katherina’s involuntary marriage to Petruchio, there are not only one, but two additional weddings celebrated in the final scene of this play. First we have the marriage between Bianca and Lucentio, a marriage that serves to illustrate and question the benefits of the dictated female gender role. Initially, Bianca seems to personify the very core virtues of a woman. However, at a

closer reading, Bianca proves to be as unruly as Katherina but in a more deceitful manner. She has secretly indulged in a courtship with Lucentio. Presumably Baptista reevaluates Katherina when realizing that Lucentio has married Bianca without his permission (V.I.121-122). Katherina has at least been protesting openly and is married off, admittedly under protest and to a questionable groom, but nevertheless in a more respectable manner than Bianca is. Bianca's initial reassurance to her father that "to your pleasure humbly I subscribe. My books and instruments shall be my company" is evidently not honestly meant (I.I. 81-82). Katherina's judgment on her as "pretty peat" (I.I.88) seems no longer unfair. Her protest and her questioning of Bianca's mild behavior are justified in the end.

The second marriage, between Bianca's former suitor Hortensio and a woman only identified as a widow, serves to question what women actually gained through marriage. The reader/spectator is provided with very scarce information about the widow. However we have some knowledge about widowhood in general. As "widows, women recovered the leases and lands they brought to marriage and had legal rights in their husbands lands during the remainder of their lives or widowhoods" (Erickson, 19). Furthermore as a widow, a woman "was legally free to manage her own finances and sexuality" and if marrying again her "inheritance would . . . pass to her second husband" (Kidnie li). By re-marrying, the widow is consequently denying herself autonomy in more than one respect. Bianca and the widow, so willing to engage in marriage, serve as very strong contrasts to Katherina's reluctance to submit to any male authority. They have by free will denied themselves the autonomy that she so stubbornly tried to achieve.

The irony is obvious when Katherina in her final speech lectures them. They who scorned her are now through disobedience making themselves as unattractive as she ever was since “to wound thy lord . . . blots thy beauty as frost do bite the meads” (V.2. 137-138) and she continues “[a] woman moved is like a fountain troubled, [m]uddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty” (V.2. 141-142). It is as if she wants to say that they are only conditionally loved, if they do not submit to male supremacy they will be scorned and unwanted as she used to be.

Furthermore Katherina highlights her marital rights to be supported by her husband. “Thy husband is thy lord . . . one that cares for thee, [a]nd for thy maintenance; commits his body to painful labour. . . [w]hilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe” (V.2.145-150). Now the target is Petruchio and husbands in general. The male supremacy entails duties which guarantee her implicit female rights and integrity.

Concerning a disobedient wife Katherina asks what “is she but a foul contending rebel” (V.2.158) and continues that she is “ashamed that women are so simple” (V.2.160). The message seems somewhat ambiguous when she concludes that her “heart has been as great” and her “reason haply more” indicating that she still considers her struggle fair and just. However, there is, which has already been shown, an “incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs” in Katherina’s speech. This incongruity enables the reader to read some sort of discrete resistance into what might occur as submission. She is not ashamed that her fellow sisters are disobedient and contentious but ashamed that their resistance is so blunt. The widow could have remained in widowhood free to decide over herself and her property. Bianca as her father’s favorite could have had better prospects if she had not given herself away for as superficial

reasons as she did. Furthermore, the deconstructive effect deriving from the Induction and the sun-and-moon scene supports a deconstructive reading of the final speech as well. Katherina's final speech is the longest in the play. By seemingly submitting to Petruchio's male supremacy, she is allowed this great space of utterance. "Though she pretends to speak earnestly on behalf of her own inferiority, she actually treats us to a pompous, wordy, holier-than-thou sermon which delicately mocks the sermons her husband has delivered to her and about her" (Kahn 98).

Yet another ironic effect is generated from the negotiation of dowries (II.1). Again we have an "incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs" in the end. Bianca is her father's favorite and he is not very eager to see her leave the home. To get rid of Katherina on the other hand, would be a relief. Consequently Baptista offers Petruchio "one half of [his] lands" after his death and "in possession twenty thousand crowns" (II.1.121-122). Due to Katherina's shrewish behavior he has to invest a major part of his property to marry her off, well aware that she is a challenge to any suitor. The desirable Bianca has many suitors and in her case the situation is reversed since he that "can assure [his] daughter greatest dower" shall have "Bianca's love" (II.1.334-338). It is a matter of supply and demand where "Katherina goes to the only bidder, while Bianca goes to the highest" (Kidnie xxvii), the result being that Katherina is rewarded for her shrewishness by a very high dowry while Bianca is not provided for at all by her father.

In the final scene Katherina, Bianca and the widow leave the stage and Petruchio makes a wager on which wife is the most obedient. Since this is after Katherina's previously mentioned turning point, she subsequently proves to be the most obedient and Petruchio wins the wager. Bianca, "who first appeared as a stereotypical dutiful daughter,

later became the object of Lucentio's romantic clichés and finally emerges as a disobedient wife", refuses to obey her husband as does the widow (Shapiro 226-227). Baptista is so impressed by Katherina's transformation that in addition, he voluntarily offers Petruchio another "dowry to another daughter" because "she is changed, as she had never been" (V.2.111-114). Accordingly, Katherina's shrewishness is the factor of financial success for her husband and in a longer perspective, herself. Like many women in Shakespeare's own family (Rackin 33), Katherina is an active subject, who furthers her financial interests, rather than a passive, obedient object. In this context, it is possible to argue that the benefit of female submission to male supremacy is strongly questioned through Katherina's speech.

## **Conclusion**

A Shakespearean comedy demands a happy ending since fundamentally "two forces set a Shakespeare comedy in motion" and the "result is a state of confusion with consequences which, ultimately, are benign" (Leggatt 84). The first force is some sort of conflict between law and justice which causes instability in a society or household. The second force is often the discontent or insecurity caused by an arriving stranger. Taking the play seriously and Katherina's speech as non-ironic, seems to have awoken dislike not only in Shakespeare's own time, but also more recently (Kidnie lxvi). If we see the first force as the discrepancy between Katherina's desire for autonomy and the suppressing conventions that force her into marriage and the other force as Petruchio, the wooer with taming intentions, it is consequently difficult to see Katherina's speech as the proof of her final act of subjection to her husband (female subjection to male supremacy) which it on

a superficial level seems to be. On the contrary, as Wayne A Rebhorn argues, Katherina's speech allows her "a measure of independence" and to "resist and even subvert to some degree the male authority which otherwise threatens to possess her totally" (296). By using witty language, she conveys insults and scorn. In other words, taking Katherina's speech literally does not allow the benign consequences that a Shakespearean comedy demands. However, as pointed out in the introduction, a possible interpretation of the play is to assume that true love has developed between Katherina and Petruchio. This alternative would provide a happy ending but is not supported by any textual evidence within the play itself (McEvoy 136-137). Thus an interpretation of her speech as ironic is more favorable since it is supported by textual evidence and corresponds to the criterion of a benign consequence which provides the reader/spectator with the happy ending.

This thesis has therefore shown that the female characters Katherina and Bianca, are mainly constructed through language expressed by male characters as the binary oppositions "woman seen as monster" and "woman seen as saint". From a feminist perspective the thesis investigates how and why male characters perceive and construct Katherina as a shrew, which points out a "disparity between the extent and nature of Kate's 'shrewish' behavior and the male characters' perceptions of it" (Kahn 92).

Furthermore examples have been discussed which illustrate the deconstructive power due to the use of male actors performing female characters and due to the metatheatrical framing of the taming plot encased in the Sly plot. The female stereotypes are thus deconstructed and the process of theatrical construction and deconstruction additionally stresses the constructedness of gender roles in real life as well. In addition, the patriarchal demand of male supremacy over female submission is called into question by the



construction of Sly as a gentleman. Above all, Petruchio's act of deconstruction, naming and renaming the world as he pleases in order to tame Katherina, results in the deconstruction of Katherina as "woman seen as monster". She takes advantage of Petruchio's method and uses it within the borders of a seemingly obedient wife. Through her final speech and the wager the binary opposition of Bianca as the obedient "woman seen as saint" and Katherina as the shrewish "woman seen as monster" is finally and entirely reversed.

Finally, this reading supports an ironic interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Firstly, the consequent use of puns and wordplay provide an overall impression of a humorous comedy. Secondly, the similarity between deconstruction and irony, as defined in this essay, allows the workings of deconstruction to be interpreted as irony. Moreover, an interpretation that singles out Katherina's final speech as the only non-ironic part of the entire play is arguably rather inconsistent. Thus a consistent reading and logical interpretation of the play, together with the theoretical perspectives cited in this essay allow for an ironic interpretation of the play, including Katherina's final speech. The reader/spectator who wants to assume that true love has awoken between the two protagonists has to imagine this by his/her own efforts, and is obliged to imagine a love story where traditional gender roles are called into question.

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