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Madly Mated: Marital Fulfillment in *The Taming of the Shrew*

Kate and Petruchio's marriage within William Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*, first performed in 1623, lends itself to a rather bleak description if viewed from a negative lens: an oppressive hierarchy which exhibits a clear acceptance of domestic violence within marriage. From this perspective, Petruchio mistreats and publicly shames Kate, causing her to wither into a mere shell of her shrewish self. Rather than dismiss Petruchio's taming method as a playful game between marital partners, his patriarchal power must face exposure, as an, "insidiously cloaked in, brilliant but callous, farce," which highlights the humiliation of a woman (Shand 228). If only Kate's marriage could mirror her younger sister Bianca, who weds Lucentio: sweet, submissive, and sustainable, a pure and conventional relationship, standing the test of time. However, an analysis of the text through the lens of marital fulfillment reveals that Kate does not need any retribution, Petruchio should not face harassment for his actions, and Bianca and Lucentio's marriage will not end prosperously as the people of Padua thought. Kate and Petruchio's madly mated marriage fulfills them both, far more than Bianca and Lucentio's conventional marriage, because of their playful imagination and expressed marital roles produced through the taming process.

Kate and Petruchio's marriage features a vital aspect which, while seemingly unnecessary to Lucentio and Bianca, ultimately sets their marriage apart in its fulfillment: playful imagination. A marriage cannot reach maximum fulfillment without imagination, as two people

joining together must become a functional pair and create an entirely new world to inhabit. Especially with the critical gaze from the people of Padua, Kate and Petruchio must work as a team that creates a space for one another to live as their true and unfiltered selves. In their case, this new sphere would need to include playfully subverting conventional Elizabethan behavior to form a, “sort of magic circle, a space made for him and for her where they will play together...Their marriage will be an inside joke, their lives full of comradery” (Simon). However, the new order for the married couple did not come without having to build a strong foundation and overcome Kate’s individualism. Kate blinded herself from seeing the importance of co-creation within marriage at the beginning of her and Petruchio’s relationship because she could not imagine living unselfishly for the wellbeing of someone else. While Petruchio prepared himself to live in sacrificial, and yet playful, unity with his martial partner, the Kate at the beginning of play could not fathom such a union.

The possibility of marriage seems hopeless for Kate because of her aggressive personality and her biting language. Fiercely independent, Kate despises authority, and when her father dismisses her from the room so he can talk to Bianca, Kate sarcastically says, “Why, and I trust I may go too, may I not? What, shall I be appointed hours; as thought, belike, I knew not what to take, and what to leave? Ha!” (Shakespeare 1.1.102). Kate acts with violence and rage, and she lashes out at any instance that a man attempts to control her life. She confronts men over their easy assumption of power, even in small matters, bashing a lute over the suitor Hortensio’s head when he told her she made a mistake while playing. With the dismal manhood of Padua and her sister’s submissive perfection, an oppressive hierarchical relationship resulting in marriage defines Kate’s worst nightmare (Shand 233). Therefore, the idea that Petruchio could ever tame Kate and reveal to her the beauties of working alongside another in life seems impossible. With a

difficult task ahead, Petruchio incites the initial instance of his imagination and play as revealed when he and Kate first interact.

Petruchio's desire for an exclusive and gamesome marriage reveals itself within the couple's first interaction, which has been described as verbal swordplay. Instead of conforming to traditional methods of gentle and impersonal wooing, Petruchio makes known that he seeks an authentic marriage partner who can not only keep up in banter with him but who finds him sexually attractive and can express so publicly. However, he needs Kate to see all that he is offering her, which is currently unavailable because of her sharp tongue: a relationship not ruled by fierce language and brash actions but by mutual imagination, jest, and comedy. He and Kate begin their relationship with sexually charged power moves of jokes, invitations, and rejections, and these lingual strategies create a foundation of flirtatious and imaginative language, even if Kate initially denies her role (Smith 301). When Kate says, "Asses are made to bear, and so are you," to Petruchio's cheeky suggestion for her to come sit on his lap, he gleefully responds with, "Women are made to bear, and so are you," because he knows he has drawn Kate unknowingly into his game (Shakespeare 2.1.198-200, 218-20). In their witty banter, Petruchio begins his taming process, hoping Kate will see his honorable view of her and change her scolding behavior in response. Scholars fail if they cannot enter his world of game because their condemnation of Petruchio's language as inappropriate and unseemly for public courting behavior. Instead, the benefit of Petruchio's seemingly improper, and yet imaginative, game for Kate to join comes to fruition in Act 4 Scene 5.

In a pivotal scene within the play, Petruchio believes he bested Kate and wore down her shrewish ways with his unconventional, maddeningly public antics. After roughly kissing her at their wedding, throwing wine on the priest, and playing other ridiculous games with reality, he

hopes Kate realizes playing with him in public instead of against him provides far more enjoyment for her. On their way to Baptista's house for Lucentio and Bianca's marriage celebration, Petruchio begins to play with language again, as he says, "Good Lord, how bright and goodly shines the moon," which Kate and the audience know represents the sun in reality (Shakespeare 4.5.1-4). While scholars believe the scene shows Kate feigning submission and finally giving in by not seeking rule, supremacy, or sway in her marriage, Petruchio's final jest actually redefines the world around him and Kate, which Kate finally accepts wholeheartedly.

Kate truly understands her shrewish behavior toward her husband only hinders the amusement they can have, and she propels herself toward change because of the growing love she has for Petruchio (Carroll 49). When she finally agrees with Petruchio about the "moon," she begins believing her life and marriage will fulfill her much more if she acts as an accomplice instead of an adversary. The realization of Petruchio's admiration of her lingual prowess allows Kate to join their set-apart world where she can use her imagination, inciting verbal skills, wit, and creativity instead of anger and feisty fervor. She sees her husband's antics and taming process as a mutual, playful subversion of social and rational conventions, and the ridiculousness of Petruchio's declaration of the moon and sun, "allows Kate to...understand that play-acting can be used for constructive social ends" (Langis 51). Kate realizes that Petruchio is her friend and husband, and he sees her as a worthy wife and playmate. Toying with social conventions and reality while playing together as a team, Kate and Petruchio now begin manipulating those around them for their own enjoyment in their set-apart world, beginning with Vicentio.

In their new world of imagination and game, Kate realizes she can use the same biting verbal tactics to share a joke with her husband and fall more in love with him. Nonsense within language permits Petruchio to overthrow public behavioral conventions, and Kate too uses her

own nonsense to address others (Blake 241). Using Vicentio, Lucentio's father, as their first lingual victim, Kate and Petruchio attack, retort, and counter with each other instead of against one another, contrasting their initial scene together. Petruchio provides the opening twist of reality through his language. Even though he and Kate both know the elderly man Vicentio, Petruchio still says, "Tell me, sweet Kate, and tell me truly too, hast thou beheld a fresher gentlewoman?," and Kate replies, "Young budding virgin, fair and fresh and sweet...happier the man whom favorable stars allot thee for his lovely bedfellow!" (Shakespeare 4.5.29-30, 36-40). Petruchio introduces the jest, and Kate plays along while adding her own verbal digs, elevating their imaginative play. They use their marital roles of submission and command to, "skillfully modulate rhetoric and theatrics towards the aim of domestic flourishing," and the enjoyment they gain from playing their verbal game against others allows them to embrace the mutuality that marriage requires (Langis 48). Petruchio and Kate's marriage, filled with flirtatious energy and genuine interdependence, causes others to admire them and marvel at Kate's transformation. This change in Kate's character only comes from a willingness to submit in an equally contributing marriage where love transforms a person for the better.

Role dependency, another virtue of Kate and Petruchio's marriage built upon their imaginative partnership, makes their union even more fulfilling. While the submission of a wife usually becomes the solely highlighted virtue within early marriage, Kate reveals through her final speech at Baptista's house that in her marriage, vital responsibilities fall both on husband and wife. Through their relationship, Kate and Petruchio prove marital enjoyment is much more achievable when its participants act as equal companions, with both partners becoming charged with clear roles. In order to show the harmony of their assigned roles, Petruchio and Kate begin their second merriment together at Lucentio and Bianca's marriage celebration. Petruchio wins a

bet because Kate comes as called, which shocks the men of Padua. They believe Petruchio has finally tamed his wild wife and proven the most suitable order of marriage is found within maintaining Elizabethan marital conventions. Petruchio, the men of Padua assume, used his rightful patriarchal oppression to bash his unruly and misbehaving wife into subservieny. However, Petruchio has not beaten Kate down into submission, as her forceful and opinionated self continues to shine through (Blake 252). Instead, the two clearly define their roles within their new sphere of imagination, which allows Kate freedom in choosing submission, and she authentically continues with her speech about a wife's duty to humble herself within marriage.

Instead of defining a wife's role as menial and forced, Kate reveals the pleasure she takes in the important role of submitting in her marriage. Her submission to her husband, "is not something to be admitted with shame, or rationalized, but celebrated—particularly in the presence of women who have just failed the test she has so triumphantly passed" (Carroll 46). Because of her knowledge of her husband's respect of her and her contribution to their marriage, Kate truly means what she says to the other women at the celebration. She tells other women: "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," because she felt the required love and respect within her marriage to do so for Petruchio (Shakespeare 5.2.179-81). While Kate embodies her role within her playful marriage, she also reminds the party of Petruchio's role in their union, which exists as an essential part of their mutual dependency.

While Kate declares a wife's duties embody love, obedience, and service toward a husband, an equally important role belongs to the husband. Kate reveals to her audience that her and Petruchio's marriage exists far from the conventional marriage. Petruchio loves Kate, and he recognizes that he must complete his role within their marriage to fulfill his wife. Therefore, as

the husband, he acts as Kate's, "lord, [her] life, [her] keeper, [her] head, [her] sovereign; one that cares for [her] and for [her] maintenance" (Shakespeare 5.2.148-51). Petruchio provides for Kate physically, sexually, and in a playful way in which she feels appreciated for what she brings into their relationship. Equally charged to contribute to their marriage, Kate and Petruchio fulfill the requirements of their roles with joy. Their marriage reveals an affectionate contract, employing both individuals to meet each other's needs (Novy 276). However, the fulfillment Kate and Petruchio find within their marriage's playful imagination and mutual dependency contrasts strongly with the conventional and miserable marriage of Lucentio and Bianca.

While Bianca's relationship may seem more respectful and fulfilling than her sister's, her marriage with Lucentio disappoints both themselves and their audience when compared to the distinctions of Petruchio and Kate's marriage, which only become accessible to them because of their playfulness and recognition of the importance of marital roles. Lucentio and Bianca do not employ imagination and use impersonal language in their courtship and marriage. Kate only exists because Petruchio sees her as more than Padua's prickly shrew. However, because both Lucentio and Bianca act gently with one another as they speak sickeningly sweet, and yet empty, conventional words of love, they do not exist in each other's minds as anything more than an illusion. In one of their few interactions together before they are married, no banter, creativity, or even dialogue exists between the two. Lucentio says to Bianca: "I am Lucentio,... disguis'd thus to get your love," and, "happily I have arrived at last unto the wished haven of my bliss" after they secretly marry (Shakespeare 3.1.31-3, 5.1.119-20). The words "bliss" and "love" differ greatly from Kate and Petruchio's verbal swordplay and playful suggestions of sticking tongues in tails. While this language may seem inappropriate, Kate and Petruchio's openness and authenticity suggest sexual desire. Lacking any playfulness or substance, Bianca and Lucentio

contrast Kate and Petruchio in their flatness (White 54). Their dullness, while considered conventional behavior in the Elizabethan era, does not set the basis for a fulfilling and mutually responsible marriage because no foundation presents itself as needing fought for. Instead of wrestling with the difficulties of creating a new marriage world and establishing equal roles, Lucentio foolishly relies on Bianca's seemingly innate desire for submission, which ultimately causes their marriage to become a sham as Bianca becomes the "new shrew" at the end of the play (White 41).

Bianca and Lucentio's marriage portrays traditional gender roles, with Bianca acting gentle and submissive and Lucentio acting commanding and authoritative. However, while the domestication of sex roles may feel safe, "by its very predictability the behavior lends itself to manipulation and control, control which is wielded effectively by Bianca" (Simon). Since Bianca already displays submissive and chaste qualities in spiteful contrast to her sister, Lucentio assumes she will commit faithfully to the role of a demure wife. He does not test her character, understand her true self, and show her she coexists equally in their relationship as Petruchio did with Kate. Instead, relying on typical marital roles, Lucentio trusted Bianca to present herself as a delicate and submissive woman, which the men of Padua also assume of her. However, Bianca tricks Lucentio with her docile mannerisms, and when she is married, her true character reveals itself (Kaul 561).

During Petruchio's wager at Bianca and Lucentio's marriage celebration, Lucentio confidently calls out to Bianca because according to her marital role, she supposedly should submit herself to his every whim. However, Bianca refuses to come, and when asked by her husband why she did not perform her duty, she saucily replies, "The more fool you, for laying on my duty" (Shakespeare 5.2.131). Petruchio and Kate know the truth of Bianca and Lucentio's

marriage and can, therefore, continue to playfully manipulate those around them: Bianca does not truly embody the gentle character she depicts, and because Lucentio never pursues the person under the sweet and submissive mask, the couple realizes their marriage is an illusion of fulfillment rather than a reality.

The Taming of the Shrew portrays two completely different marriages. One marriage, “glimpses into early modern marriage, conveying the challenges, complexities, and joys that accompany the pursuit” of imagination and interdependence, and the other reveals the dangers of insincerity and assumptions in moving forward at only a surface level (Langis 62). While the taming methods of Petruchio may seem harsh to modern eyes, his dogged and comical pursuit to dismantle Kate’s shrewish behavior proves his knowledge of the benefits of their relationship. After Kate recognizes Petruchio’s respect for her and his desire to involve her in his convention-bending world, the two engage in their playful imaginations and set clear and accountable roles for each other. These values allow their marriage to flourish, and their evident love causes the people of Padua to ponder what a healthy marriage actually looks like. Shakespeare intended his play as a lighthearted comedy, and yet he did not explain the exact reasons why people, specifically Kate and Petruchio, fall in love with one another (Shand 243). Instead, he left the interpretation to the viewer, who can either choose to see suppression or freedom in love and become a Bianca or a Kate. Ultimately, the reader chooses how they will see the world around them, and only through a beautiful view can Kate and Petruchio reign comedically triumphant over Bianca and Lucentio with their playful banter and deep and mutual love for one another.

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