

Characteranalysis of „Katharina“ from *Taming of the Shrew* by
William Shakespeare

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1. Introduction

In the majority of William Shakespeare's plays one could say that every character and may he be just a page or messenger, has a function and sustains an important role within the play. It might be that at the first sight this function cannot be seen but when taking a closer look, it becomes quite obvious and the plays would be or end different without this characters.

In the following pages we will concentrate our main focus on „Katharina“, one of the main characters of *Taming of the Shrew*, a comedy by William Shakespeare. How does she speak, what does she think and what are her main concerns? And how can her behavior be interpreted in connection with the role women played in Shakespeare's time and how women are seen today.

2. Women during Shakespeare's times

To be able to understand the attitude and the behavior of Katharina and of the other characters in the play better, a short introduction and explanation of the role of women in Shakespeare's time will be needed.

Women had hardly any rights and after marriage they lost the few rights they had, because they now belonged to their husband. Even Queen Elizabeth would have lost the rights she had, if she had married. The society in Elizabethan times was based on a strict hierachy within the family as well as within the structure of the state. The oldest living male member was head of the family and every

female member had to obey him.

A theme that often occurs in Shakespeare's plays is *love at first sight*, but women were not *allowed* to fall in love. They had to marry whom their fathers thought was the best match. Even if the future husband were an old man and thirty years or more older than the girl. Women were like cattle on the market if it came to the marriage negotiations. The man with the most riches and lands was likely to become the husband of the daughter and love did not play any role in this.

One of the duties that were expected from women was the giving birth to children. It was seen as a great honor because people thought that children were gifts from God and women who refused to give birth to children were seen as women who refused to receive messages from God himself. That is why women who did not want to get married were seen as suspicious and suffered from being an outsider in their society and later on were also suspected of being witches.

3. Katharina's social background

Katharina is the oldest daughter of Baptista Minola, a rich gentleman of Padua, and sister of Bianca. Her mother is not mentioned in the play, which leads to the assumption that she is either dead or has no important function for the ongoing of the play.

Despite the fact that Katharina is called a *shrew* and other names, she is an interesting woman to marry. Her father has no male heir which means that all his riches and lands will fall to his daughters after his death. Normally women did not inherit their fathers riches and names, but in the lack of a male heir, they could. Furthermore she is also beautiful, like her sister, but her beauty cannot counterbalance her shrewishness and that is why men are not

willing to deal with her as their wife.

Katharina, as well as her sister Bianca, had enjoyed a good education, in speech, writing and music, which is also seen in the play, when Baptista is looking for a music and Latin teacher for his daughters (Act I, Scene I, verse 95). It can be seen in the way she speaks and has a quick tongue and knows how to defend herself with words (but also with violence). She knows how to counter Petruchio in their verbal battles.

„PETRUCHIO: Come, come, you wasp; i'faith you are too angry.

KATHARINA: If I be waspish, best beware my sting.“ (Act II, Scene I, verse 217-218).

Her name, Katharina, can be interpreted from two points of view. The Roman one: the name is connected to the Latin word *katharos* which means pure. The other one would be the Greek meaning: from the Greek word *aikaterine*, which is connected to Hekate, the Goddess of wilderness (www.wikipedia.org). According to the Roman interpretation, Katharina does not give consideration to the meaning of the word, because she is not seen as a pure woman. She is rather seen as a witch or shrew, and that can easily be seen in the Greek interpretation. It cannot be said exactly that Shakespeare knew about the two meanings of the name, but with so many other telling names he used in his plays, it will not be totally abstract to assume that he did know.

4. Katharina's Character traits

Katharina, her behavior and her perspective do not fit into the way a woman was supposed to behave in Shakespeare's time. She is too stubborn, pert and speaks her mind, even if she is not asked to do so.

„KATHARINA: Why, and I trust I may go too, may I not? What shall I be appointed hours; as though,

belike, I knew not what to take and what to leave, ha?" (Act I, Scene I, verse 103 -105).

She does not obey her father, as her sister does, because she feels misunderstood and mistreated by him. She also knows that Baptista prefers Bianca as a daughter because she does not show such a shrewish behavior. She takes every opportunity to tell him that she knows it and uses it indirect as an excuse for her behavior.

„KATHARINA: What, will you not suffer me? Nay, now I see she is your treasure, she must have a husband; I must dance bare-foot on her wedding day and for your love to her lead apes in hell. Talk not to me: I will go sit and weep till I can find occasion of revenge." (Act II, Scene I, verse 33 - 38).

She is offended and hurt by her father's feelings and it would explain why she behaves like a shrew and does not want to please him, because she knows that she never could because she is not like her sister.

During the wedding scene it becomes clearer that her shrewish behavior is caused by pain and misunderstandings. Petruchio is not in time to his own wedding and although it is a forced wedding, Katharina is hurt by his behavior and feels ashamed. She blames her father again, that she was not allowed to marry out of love, but against her will and that she knew better than to take the first one who wants her.

„KATHARINA: No shame but mine: I must, forsooth, be forced to give my hand opposed against my heart unto a mad-brain rudesby full of spleen; who woo'd in haste and means to wed at leisure. I told you, I, he was a frantic fool [...] Now must the world point at poor Katharina, and say, 'Lo there is mad Petruchio's wife, if it would please him come and marry her!'" (Act III, Scene II, verse 9-21).

She also speaks in the third person about herself, probably to distance herself from the iniquity that befalls her. She might also be in some kind of shock, because she never expected someone to treat her like that. „KATHARINA: Would Katharina had never seen him thought!“ (Act III, Scene II, verse 27).

She regains her strength and *shrewishness* shortly after the wedding. She does not show weakness for long and tries to avoid to show it at all. She still has her own will and knows that Petruchio did what he had done, just to hurt her, but she will not let him break her, at least that is what she thinks.

„KATHARINA: Nay, then, do what thou canst, I will not go to-day; no, to-morrow, not till I please myself the door is open, sir; there lies your way; you may be jogging whiles your boots are green; for me, I'll not be gone till I please myself.“ (Act III, Scene II, verse 209-214).

Her will of resisting to become a real Shakespearean wife is proclaimed in one sentence, at the wedding dinner:

„KATHARINA: [...] I see a woman may be made a fool, if she had not a spirit to resist.“ (Act III, Scene II, verse 222-223). She was forced to marry Petruchio and would not like to give up her freedoms and rights, as it was normal for a woman after her wedding, but Petruchio makes it very clear that she has no rights anymore.

„PETRUCHIO: [...] I will be master of what is mine own: she is my goods, my cattels; she is my house, my household stuff, my field, my barn, my horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing. [...]" (Act III, Scene II, verse 213-234).

Katharina is an intelligent woman, which can be seen in the crosstalk she has with Petruchio, but her intelligence disappears slowly when he starts to tame her.

He takes away her perception and she no longer can trust her own senses. The servants prepared meat for the dinner, Petruchio does not want to eat it because he says that it is not good anymore, but Katharina contradicts him. She is right but Petruchio talks at her until she believes him (Act IV, Scene I, verse 150-169). Even when Petruchio denies her sleep and meals, she does not give up her will and is still violent towards the servants.

„KATHARINA: I [...] am starved for meat, giddy for the lack of sleep, with oath kept waking and with brawling fed, and that which spites me more than all these wants, he does it under name of perfect love; as who should say, if I should sleep or eat, 'twere deadly sickness or else present death. I prithee go and get me some repast, I care not what, so it be wholesome food.“ (Act IV, Scene III, verse 10-17).

For Katharina it is part of her personality to speak her mind. She has always done it and sees no reason in desist from it now because it had always been like that. She had to fight for her rights and the attention of her father and she knew she could get it from talking and behaving the way she did. It is also clear that she would not have the freedoms she had if she behaved differently, because her sister does not have the shrewishness in her.

„KATHARINA: [...] My tongue will tell the anger of my heart, or else my heart concealing it will break, and rather than it shall, I will be free even to the uttermost, as I please, in words.“
(Act IV, Scene III, verse 80-83).

Katharina's will is broken in act IV, scene V. She and Petruchio are walking down a public road and he exclaims that the moon is shining. At first she refuses to believe that because it is the sun that shines, but after a short discussion she believes him and praises the moonlight (Act

IV, Scene V, verse 4-25). She finally breaks when Petruchio tells her that an old man is a young virgin. He has confused her senses and she does not know what to believe anymore, so she believes the things her husband tells her, like a wife was supposed to.

In the end of the play, Katharina has become an exemplary woman and wife. She obeys her husband and does not show any kind of shrewish behavior anymore. Petruchio's plan worked out well and he was successful in taming her. She does not know that she is tamed. She is ignorant of the change that came over her. She holds a speech about how woman should behave and be towards their husbands or any other men, because she *realizes* now that a shrewish behavior is a female character flaw and she cannot understand how someone could not approve of the husband, her father had chosen. She sees that no one would want such a woman because she would not be a good woman.

„KATHARINA: [...] A woman moved is like a fountain troubled, muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty; and while it is so, none so dry or thirsty will deign to sip or touch a drop of it.“ (Act V, Scene II, verse 155-158).

When Petruchio tells her during the wedding dinner that she belongs to him and has no rights, it looks cruel from a modern point of view, but Katharina accepts these conditions herself, as she also said in her speech, not because she is forced to, but because it is part of what makes a woman a good wife and she wants to be a good wife. She also accepts that a woman has no need to have thoughts and a will of her own, because she has a husband who cares for her and does all he can to give her a nice life.

„KATHARINA: [...] Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee, and for thy maintenance commits his body to painful labor both by sea

and land, to watch the nights in storms, the day in cold, whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe; and craves no other tribute at thy hands but love, fair looks and true obedience; too little payment for such a great debt." (Act V, Scene II, verse 159-167).

After her taming, Katharina sees women as weak and simple and points out that this is the reason why they can be shrews, but as long as they are simple, men can tame them. That it one kind of help a husband gives to his wife. Katharina realizes that her alleged strength and power, was nothing but suppressed weakness and that she can be glad to have someone who cares to find out the truth behind it.

„KATHARINA: [...] But now I see our lances are but straws, our strength as weak, our weakness past compare, that seeming to be most which is indeed least are, then vail your stomachs, for it is not 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." (Act V, Scene II, verse 186-192).

5. Indirect Description from other Characters

Katharina is not only described through her behavior and her speech but also through what other characters in the play say about her. She is known as a shrew in Padua and no one wants to marry her because she does not represent the ideal wife. Hortensio tells her in the face that she will not marry until she changes her behavior and that she is unsupportable (Act I, Scene I, verse 59-60). He and the other suitors of Bianca are afraid of Katharina, because their luck lies in her hands and in her behavior towards everyone around her.

The other persons who have to deal with Katharina are afraid of her and treat her like a monster or the

personified devil. „HORTENSIO: From all such devils, good Lord, deliver us!“ (Act I, Scene I, verse 66). They do not know how to deal with a woman that does not obey their male superior and the only explanation they have is a supernatural reason. They think she is possessed and cursed and that is why they treat like a devil.

Petruchio calls her an „irksome brawling scold“ (Act II, Scene II, verse 186-187) and he is the only one who does not want to avoid her because he does not care about her character as long as she is rich, as Hortensio assters him.

People in Padua know Katharina as the one daughter of Baptista with the „scolding tongue“ (Act I, Scene II, verse 256) but also as one of the „fair daughters“ (Act I, Scene II, verse 222). The beauty she represents on the outside is contradictory to the bad behavior she shows. She has two different sides in her, which is also a attribute that refers to the devil or at least to witchcraft. She is not what she seems to be and people again cannot trust what they see.

Bianca, as her sister, does not say much that concerns Katharina. Even when she is tortured by her. She is the good angel that would never tell what her sister did wrong. Her love towards her is dearly and she pities her at the wedding. Baptista shows openly that Katharina is not her favorite daughter and he also calls her names like „devilish spirit“ (Act II, Scene I, verse 28) that describe her behavior towards other people. He as her father should know her, but he also just sees her as everybody else, as she shrew she presents on the outside. The only time in the play when he shows some kind of positive feeling for her, is when Petruchio is late for the wedding and she is desperate what should become of her.

Petruchio talks in the nicest ways about her, on the one hand because he does not know her and does not care and

on the other because it is his strategie to win her fathers approval. Petruchio belongs to the few people who are not scared of her and who still treat her as a human being. His punishment for her is a different matter, because he does it, as she says „under the name of perfect love“ (Act IV, Scene III, verse 13) and because he is the one who has to live with her, no matter if she is a shrew or a normal woman. He is the one who tames her and makes her to a social woman again. His methods are cruel, like forbidding her to sleep or eat, according to our knowledge but it is the only thing that really changes her and thanks to him she is no longer a shrew and has again a part in society. Apart from the fact that he abuses her, he treats her as if he did not know that she is known as a shrew. He does not care about her feelings or outbursts. He demands obedience from her and through his methods he gets what he wants: a wife and her riches.

6. Conclusion

Katharina is a woman that is ahead of her time. She does not submit into the social hierarchy until the end of the play. Her husband Petruchio tames her and changes her will. She is no longer her own master and cannot do what she wants as she did in the beginning of the play. She changes into a woman who she is expected to be, according to her social standard although she does not realize this transformation. Petruchio's abuse or taming has turned her into how men wanted to have women: obedient, good and without an own will. She is not scary anymore and will be a good wife to her husband, as she says herself in her final monologue, when she praises the way a good wife has to behave.

Her alteration is obvious and the strongest in the whole play. She changes into a completely new person, from

the feared personified devil into the angel of the house and has given up all of her former inner personality.

7. Bibliography

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