

# The Misogynistic Mirror in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

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In Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, we can find images that are in common with the myth of Perseus and Medusa. These common images are as follows:

- (1) The image of the intrinsic womanhood of the heroine
- (2) The image of fighting a witch using a mirror
- (3) The image of the subjugation of women by men and the fortune brought about by subjugated women

I would like to begin with a synopsis of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Baptista, a prosperous merchant from Padua, has two daughters. His elder daughter Katherina is known as a hopeless 'shrew', while his younger daughter Bianca is well-known for her 'beauteous modesty' and is the subject of a succession of marriage proposals. However, as their father has sworn not to allow anyone to approach his younger daughter until a husband has been found for his elder daughter, Bianca's suitors endeavour to marry off Katherina as soon as possible, although their search proves unfruitful.

Katherina I'faith, sir, you shall never need to fear.

Iwis it is not halfway to her heart—

But if it were, doubt not her care should be

To comb your noddle with a three-legged stool

And paint your face and use you like a fool.

HORTENSIO From all such devils, good Lord deliver us!

GREMIO And me too, good Lord!

TRANIO [Aside to Lucentio] But in the other's silence do I see

Maid's mild behaviour and sobriety.

Pease, Tranio.

(I. i. 61–71)<sup>i</sup>

Finally, Petruchio, an ambitious and whimsical young man from Verona, takes an interest in her huge dowry, is adept at 'taming' her and transforms her into a dutiful wife.

While there is no incontrovertible theory as to the source of this simple story, the image of a shrew and strong-willed woman and her disciplining can be found in a range of works. Such women include Socrates' wife Xanthippe, Noah's wife in mediaeval English miracle plays and the wife of Bath in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Further, we can clearly trace the origins of the theme of hard-to-handle women back to the myth of Perseus and Medusa in Greek Mythology.

### (1) Image of the intrinsic womanhood of the heroine

*The Taming of the Shrew* is generally considered to have been composed by Shakespeare sometime between 1593 and 1594. This coincides with a period of history in which social sanction against witches (witch hunts) in England was peaking<sup>ii</sup>. Witches in continental Europe received harsher persecution and punishment when compared with those in England, where the concept of witches had slightly different connotations to begin with.

The word 'shrew' was widely used in the mediaeval period, including the time when this play was written. It was used to describe incorrigible women who were defiant and on occasions resorted to violence, as opposed to the type of woman envisaged by patriarchal society who, like Ophelia, obeyed her father or husband. Of note is the fact that 'shrew' was widely used as a synonym for 'scold' in renaissance England. While this word did not originally refer only to women, it was women who were for the most part referred as scolds. These women deviated from the image of the ideal woman as set forth by society. In patriarchal societies, women who were 'scolds'—seen as being stubborn, having a penchant for nagging and not obeying their fathers or husbands—were deemed a major social menace that warranted their suppression as 'shrews'. In the scenes appearing in the first

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i Quotations from Shakespeare's works are all from *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*.

ii Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Longman, 1987)

half of the play, which lead up to her marriage with Petrucio, Katherina is literally reviled as a devil, incurring such labels as 'devil(s)', 'fiend of hell', 'devilish spirit' and 'devil's dame'. At the same time, she is 'curst', 'shrewd' and 'froward', and she is also described as follows: 'Her name is Katherina Minora, /Renown'd in Padua for her scolding tongue' (I. ii. 95–96) and 'the one as famous for a scolding tongue'. (I. ii. 247)

Here, Katherina is depicted no less than as an English witch.

In contrast, her younger sister Bianca is imparted with an extremely neat and clean image and is described as 'a pretty peat'.

BAPTISTA Why, how now, dame! Whence grows this insolence?

Bianca, stand aside. Poor girl, she weeps.

[He unites her hands.]

Go, ply thy needle; meddle not with her.

For shame, thou hilding of a devilish spirit!

Why dost thou wrong her that did ne'er wrong thee?

When did she cross thee with a bitter word?

(II. i. 23–28)

Meanwhile it is undeniable that Katherina, who is depicted as 'thou hilding of a devilish spirit', repeatedly engages in aggressive language and behaviour. I believe that it is not that she particularly acts erratically; she is only labelled a shrew through other people's comparison of her with Bianca.

KATHERINA 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.

(II. i. 31–36)

In the above lines, we can hear the painful cry of her heart, 'Why will nobody understand me?'

Until around 1871, there was a widespread custom in Dorset, whereby an elder sister whose younger sister got married before her had to dance bare-foot at her wedding. Although Katherina is aggressive in her conduct, she is aware of the social circumstances in which she finds herself and makes the right remarks, thus demonstrating her sagacity. She struggles while looking at her 'self' that is being projected through the implied words of those around her, and thus she experiences anguish. In the above lines, we see an extremely faithful depiction of the grief involved in the formation of her identity.

In general, Shakespeare's female characters attain more open selves through disguises. According to the records of Philip Stubbes, it was not unusual for women in Shakespeare's period to wear pants and cut their hair short<sup>iii</sup>. In fact, for a period of ten years during the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, adopting such apparel was extremely commonplace not only at court but also amongst members of the general populace. In the play, no descriptions are provided to suggest that Katherina is wearing masculine clothing; although she demonstrates uncouth behaviour, she is depicted as a woman who is hurt by the judgements and slander made by those around her and cries alone. If Shakespeare had wanted to characterise Katherina as a wanton woman of a shrewish temperament in the true sense of the term, one would think that he would have actively employed the technique of disguise in some form or other, a technique for which he is well-known. The fact that Katherina does not have the appearance of a man despite her coarse and tempestuous behaviour shows clearly that her inner self is very much a woman.

Furthermore, according to William Barton, the transformation of Katherina into the woman with a feminine demeanour during the play's denouement shows that she is liberated from her prior role of a shrew through the ingenuity of Petrucio, which allows 'her own genuine nature' to emerge<sup>iv</sup>.

Although Katherina is gifted with sagacity as a lady, it is only through comparisons with her younger sister Bianca made by those around her that she is deemed a shrew, while she is, in essence, very much a woman.

Medusa, too, was a pretty maid, according to the legend. Thus, both of these characters have a common trait in this image of intrinsic womanhood<sup>v</sup>.

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iii Peter, Davidson. *The Anatomy of Abuses by Philip Stubbs*, Johnson reprint Corp., 1972)

iv Anne Barton. *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Chatto & Windus, 1962)

v Barbara G.Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myth and Secrets* (Harper & Row, 1983)

We see the images of this from Homer's *Odyssea* (11: 624).

## **(2) The image of fighting a witch using a mirror**

In the myth, heroes who had previously ventured to challenge Medusa were all turned into stone by looking directly at her. Perseus, however, was able to come up with an extremely novel way of defeating her, one that nobody else had conceived of. In short, the method he employed was to use his polished shield like a mirror so as not to look at Medusa directly and tread very carefully.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the method conceived by Petruchio, the only character to understand Katherina's true nature, is to confuse and remould her by exhibiting even more wanton behaviour than that exhibited by her. Petruchio's eccentric behaviour thus functions as a mirror through which Katherina is able to get a glimpse of her past behaviour.

Barton characterises this act of Petruchio as 'a masculine version of her own (past) unreasonable and arbitrary behaviour'<sup>vi</sup>. Following the wedding, unlike other men who have met with defeat by tackling Katherina's abusive language head on, Petruchio carefully tames her. He achieves this by making her experience how she has previously appeared to others as if she were looking in a mirror.

Thus, we are able to see a common image between the tactics employed by Petruchio and those by Perseus.

## **(3) The image of the subjugation of women by men and the fortune brought about by subjugated women**

We might be tempted to see in this process of Petruchio taming the shrew a new kind of perspective, in which a woman's cheerfulness is being elicited by her husband. However, given that the exchange of dialogue between the two characters is extremely animated, it is a mistake to perceive Petruchio in the same way as to perceive characters which hold feminist perspectives. Instead, the unchallenged source in this process of taming lies in power relations within a male-dominated society. These relations elevate Elizabethan husbands and fathers to a position of superiority. This fact changes our way

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vi Barton *op cit.*

of perceiving this work. What we must also not forget regarding this play is that, even if this battle of wits between Petruchio and Katherina is a superior one on an intellectual level, and even if Petruchio is a progressive man who has resolved to accept a wanton shrew as a wife, the image of him striving to change his wife is in fact inherently conservative.

Rather, this amounts to nothing more than him subduing Katherina so as to change her into a woman in conformity with patriarchal notions of the ideal woman and social norms. In this male-dominated play, the tamed shrew is subdued so as to fit within the framework of marriage which is the ideal of patriarchal society.

Such power relations within a male-dominated society can also be seen in Shakespeare's other plays. Rosalind in *As You Like it* suffers because she cannot remove her disguise and in the end gets married accompanied by Hymen, a god 'taller than [her] self'. Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, which was written a few years after *The Taming of the Shrew*, repeatedly utters the line 'If I were a man...' in vain. While the women in Shakespeare's plays are highly intelligent, all of them are ultimately brought back into a society deemed ideal in a patriarchal society, after having their selfhoods stolen.

Meanwhile, we get a glimpse of imagery akin to sexual suppression in acts such as Petruchio not allowing Katherina to eat, tearing up the clothing he has had tailored for her and not allowing her to sleep.

PETRUCHIO · · · · ·

Last night she slept not, nor tonight she shall not.  
As with the meat, some undeserved fault  
I'll find about the making of the bed,  
And here I'll fling the pillow, there the bolster,  
This way the coverlet, another way the sheets.  
Ay, and amid this hurly I intend  
That all is done in reverend care of her.  
And, in conclusion, she shall watch all night,  
And if she chance to nod I'll rail and brawl  
And with the clamour keep her still awake.

(IV. i. 167–178)

While this scene entails a sexual imagery of a wedding night in the form of the sheets and pillow flung forcefully on the bed, what seems to be expressed here to the utmost extent is the superiority of men, both physical and intellectual. For example, as evinced in the vulgar dialogue between Gregory and Samson in Act 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, death via beheading is also imbued with imagery of sexual repression. In Greek mythology as well, although Medusa dies when she is beheaded, it does not require a stretch of the imagination to view this act as simultaneously constituting an image of sexual repression by men.

In the end, Katherina is defeated, has her selfhood stolen all-too-easily and is completely suppressed. The beheaded Medusa is also subdued. In the play, it is often stated that women are appreciated more for their 'mild behaviour' than for anything else. At the end of the play, we are given a vivid depiction of a game which is designed to measure the skills of men in taming their wives. In this game, the men involved entrust their fortune/luck to their wives by betting on whose wife will respond most obediently to their summons: 'he whose wife is most obedient/To come at first when he doth send for her/Shall win the wager which we will propose' (V. ii. 67–69).

LUCENTIO Here is a wonder, if you talk of a wonder.

HORATIO And so it is. I wonder what it bodes.

PETRUCHIO Marry, Peace it bodes, and love, and quiet life,

An awful rule and right supremacy

And, to be short, what not that's sweet and happy.

BAPTISTA Now fair befall thee, good Petruchio!

The wager thou hast won, and I will add

Unto their losses twenty thousand crowns,

Another dowry to another daughter,

For she is changed, as she had never been.

PETRUCHIO Nay, I will win my wager better yet,

And show more sign of her obedience –

Her new-built virtue and obedience.

(V. ii. 106–118)

Katherina, who has become a good wife, is the one who wins, thus bringing fortune/

luck to Petruchio. Likewise, Perseus goes on to use Medusa's head to defeat an even stronger foe. The witch is killed symbolically, thus inviting peace. The shrew is returned to the confines of patriarchal society and calm is restored to the town. In this, we are able to see a common image of the subdued woman bringing about fortune/luck.

The three common images that I proposed earlier are all sufficiently reminiscent of the myth of Perseus and Medusa, and we are able to find images in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* that are in common with these images in the myth of Perseus and Medusa.

Incidentally, what type of image did Shakespeare have of mirrors?

Before Shakespeare was born, ancient mirrors were used as tools for magic and rituals. This was the case in both England and Japan, as well as other countries around the world.

During the Elizabethan period, revolutionary innovations led to the establishment of the mechanisms for industrial production. This meant that mirrors were produced in large quantities. In 1571, glass makers from Venice were greeted with jubilation by the people of London. A mirror became a much sought after item for elegant ladies, who subsequently became the subject of satire owing to their fondness for looking into their mirrors numerous times a day. The use of mirrors became rapidly commonplace amongst women at the time, mainly as cosmetic tools<sup>vii</sup>.

As a result of mass production, the function of mirrors changed from that of tools for ritualistic and holy purposes to that of cosmetic tools, and they gradually lost their sense of ritualism and mystique. With mirrors becoming increasingly thought of as practical and man-made items, they also took on strong connotations of femininity.

According to the history of literature, in Europe in the year 1500, over 350 books contained the word 'mirror' in some form in their title. Between 1550 and 1650, this figure rose to exponential levels. It was in Elizabethan England that this phenomenon was particularly marked. The word was used in works written for the purpose of highlighting morals which people were expected to follow, such as *The Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (1578) and *A Glass for Amorous Maydens to Look In* (1582). Mirrors and metaphors of mirrors assumed important roles in the plots of popular plays in sixteenth

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vii Mark Pendergrast. *Mirror, Mirror & A History Of The Human Love Affair With Reflection* (Basic Books, 2003)



century England.

According to Mark Pendergrast, a researcher on mirrors, descriptions relating to mirrors can be found in large numbers in Shakespeare's works written between 1589 and 1613<sup>viii</sup>. Good examples are mirrors featured clearly on stage, such as the scene where Hamlet uses the mirror in his mother's bedroom to remonstrate her to face up to reality, or the mirror that Richard II shatters on the ground. These mirrors form a key part of the plots in that, as well as showing identity and fantasy, they serve to show the ideal of humankind and the importance of accepting reality<sup>ix</sup>.

Shakespeare's mirrors reside within this period of transition in which the image of mirrors changed from being ritualistic and mysterious items to practical and man-made items with connotations of femininity. In this sense, we can say that the innovations that brought about this spread of mirrors to communities at the time were extremely revolutionary in that they effected major changes in the traditional images of mirrors.

Furthermore, in my opinion, it is precisely because of these changes to the nature of mirrors—their decreased use as ritualistic and mysterious items and an increased use as secular objects in the form of practical and man-made items—that *The Taming of the Shrew* was created as a play set amidst the familiar everyday lives of the citizens.

Shakespeare possessed an acute awareness of things that were completely new and of interest to people at the time. Thus, he was able to incorporate men coming up against witches and this process of the transformation of mirrors into his plays. I also believe that he included the well-known image of the mirror shield that Perseus used to slay Medusa as a novel and eccentric method of taming the shrew. From this perspective, and considering that mirrors were still expensive, with their decorative frames, I believe that it is no coincidence that this work uses the structure of a unique framing device in which Christopher Sly is being shown the play.

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viii Barton *op cit.*

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