

# Un-taming the Shrew: A Modern Take on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

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## Abstract

This article discusses the adaptation film, *Shakespeare Retold: The Taming of the Shrew*, as compared to original play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, by Shakespeare by highlighting the different modern perspective of the film. Likely to be interpreted as a valuable addition to the play with the ending it proposes and the way it handles the issue of taming, the film brings the play to the attention of the modern audience by clarifying the vague details and contextualising it in the modern English. In this respect, the article aims to bring the film and the play into focus by introducing a fresh and lively re-interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew* to the Shakespearean drama studies.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, adaptation, film, modern interpretation, feminism

Planned as a remaking of Shakespeare's romantic comedy play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, the film, *Shakespeare Retold: The Taming of the Shrew*, is produced by "Shakespeare Retold Series" of BBC in 2005 and is directed by David Richards, written by Sally Wainwright and starred by Shirley Henderson in the role of Kate and Rufus Sewell as Petruchio (IMDb "ShakespeaRe-Told"). Reflecting a very modern, innovative and entertaining version of the original play along with a modern language preserving the general frame of the key dialogues in the play, the film presents some distinct changes as well as new perspectives to the play. Clarifying the originally ambiguous end of the play or imagining what may have happened in Kate and Petruchio's marriage afterwards, which seem to satisfy or even tingle the expectations of the modern audience, the film keeps the most crucial details such as names, places and the general plotline as they are in the original source, which possibly serves to preserve its credibility as a Shakespearean adaptation.

*The Taming of the Shrew* can be considered a distinct play when compared to Shakespeare's other plays. It is known as the "most adapted" play but which also cannot be performed "straight" due to the ambiguities in the "wife-taming plot" (Stevens 491) and the mysterious silence of the female protagonist, which are interestingly unearthed if not completely dissolved in the film version. With this perspective, the film has a nice touch for presenting alternatives to the audience and clarifying ambiguities. There are certain alterations in the film as a modern re-telling of the play.

To begin with, the story takes place in London instead of Padua and Katharina Minola, or rather, Kate, is an MP who feels she is forced to change her lifestyle and get married to be able present herself as a more sympathetic politician to the public and to become a candidate to the position of Prime Minister. On the other hand, also diverging from the original source, Bianca is a super model who is adored by a lot of men, which nevertheless keeps the difference of sisters alive as in the original source. Furthermore, Kate and Bianca have a mother, Mrs. Minola, who is not oppressive and arrogant towards Kate as Baptista Minola of the play, who speaks of getting rid of Kate with Bianca's suitors as seen in Gremio's words:

I am agreed, and would I had given him the  
best horse in Padua to begin his wooing that would  
thoroughly woo her, wed her, and bed her, and rid  
the house of her. Come on. (I. i. 144-7)

In contrast with the father figure, Mr. Minola of the film is a modern, open-minded and a more affectionate parent figure towards Kate. Another different point in the film is that Lucentio, whom Bianca meets on the plane, is a handsome Italian youth much younger than Bianca and seemingly naïve, but who indeed has the

ulterior motive to get her money through marriage. Also being different from the play, Bianca does not marry Lucentio as when she asks for a marriage contract, he pretends to be offended despite his materialistic pursuits. Thus, their romantic affair ends abruptly. Finally, Hortensio, who is named Harry in the film, is both Bianca's manager and suitor offering Petruchio to marry Kate, which partially complies with the original text. However, at the end of the film, he marries Mrs. Minola, which is quite a twisty addition to the original source.

In the same line, despite being true to the main plotline, the production does not always remain compatible with the text. It mostly appeals to the taste of the twenty-first century audience with Petruchio's "turbulent childhood experiences" and the domination of the issues such as the twenty-first-century politics and gender roles ("The Taming" par. 6). What is more, the film presents characters, especially the protagonists, in a distinctly dramatic manner. Despite following the original source, Kate is reflected as an extremely aggressive person in the film. She insults people and says "swivel" whenever she is mad at them and even slaps her assistance in the first scene of the film. Furthermore, she topples tables at a restaurant because a couple ask for an autograph from Bianca and she smashes the guitar on one of Bianca's guests in one of her house parties, which points out that Kate's aggression. In fact, the scenes of violence seem a bit excessive in the production, probably for encouraging the comic effect on the modern audience as a comedy film. The actress in the film, Shirley Henderson, in that respect becomes "a magnificent shrew who manages to make her pretty face utterly shrewish through a kind of tense gurning which is as funny as it is effective while shouting 'swivel'" ("A Review" par. 4). With this in mind, whenever Kate feels trapped in language to express her [reaction, she applies to physical force as "[h]er aggression arises from the category of shrew itself, because the behaviour her sister displays can look desirable only in comparison to extreme displays of feminine aggression [in Kate]" (Crocker 148). In other words, she is made as such shrewish a character in the play and the film--with the latter emphasising her aggression-- that she is presented in a sharp contrast with her feminine sister, Bianca. From another perspective, through her anger, bitter tongue and physical force "Shakespeare molds her to the needs of farce"(Coppélia 88), which creates the comic relief through her extremely aggressive physical reactions.

On the other hand, Petruchio is depicted as slightly different from the original character. He, who wants to warn off his wife-to-be, Kate, about his real character and to tame the shrew, appears in transgender clothes on their wedding day. Despite being explained in the play that Petruchio is in cross dress, his appearance and behaviours in those clothes are exaggerated for its comic effect once again, for which role the actor, Rufus Sewell, gets nominated for the best actor by the BAFTA Television Awards ("A Review" par. 4). Petruchio in the

film is in the complete costume with the make-up, nail polish and fishnet socks in full contrast with the masculine way he walks and talks. He shocks the crowd mostly including Kate's family, acquaintances, colleagues and politicians with his appearance and violent behaviours. Through an alternative point of view, he may be showing Kate that he is an extraordinary man, so she should at once realise his difference from the other men and act as such. In other words, "Petruccio is more afraid of looking conventional than queer or weird [...] in unusual and ridiculous clothes at the wedding [...] so as to suggest that just as Katherine can be feminine in being aggressive and shrewish, Petruccio can be masculine in dressing as a woman" (Villano 279-280). In that respect Kate and Petruccio emerge to be an extraordinary couple both transgressing the gender codes and managing to preserve their roles in marriage although they switch the roles in the film as a modern couple after they have children. So, both Rufus Sewell and Shirley Henderson bring about "multidimensionality" to the original characters "as they vacillate between vulnerability and toughness, but it is their mutual respect which wins the day" ("A Review" par. 4).

Likewise, Petruccio and Kate's relationship as reflected in the film starts at a party, which can be regarded the epitome of the modern popular culture. They meet at Bianca's party upon Hortensio's plan and soon they get stuck in the elevator. As in the original play, Petruccio starts taming Kate right at the first moment they meet, calls her Kate insistently despite her aggression that he should call her Katharina or Ms. Minola, which is quite similar in the original source:

PETRUCHIO. You lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate,  
 And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst.  
 But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,  
 Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate  
 (For dainties are all Kates)—and therefore, Kate. (II. i. 193-7)

In the same vein, with Petruccio's method of calling Katharina as Kate, it is convenient to dwell on the word "cate" for it means commodity, something to be bought and sold, which is Kate's case especially in the play as her father wants to give her like a commodity to anyone who wants to take her. So, Petruccio "likenes Kate's planned domestication to a domestication of the emergent commodity form itself, whose name parallels the naming of the shrew" (Korda 109) which is also observed in the following lines:

PETRUCHIO. She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,  
 My household stuff, my field, my barn,  
 My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything. (III. ii. 236-8)

Upon the naming incident in the film as followed by the taming process, Petruchio even more daringly tells Kate that he wants to sleep with her right then and there. He says he likes everything about her, which drives her extremely mad and breaks her will one step at a time, which reflects Petruchio's sexist attitude towards Kate in the film. Then again, in one of the funny scenes, Petruchio acts like a mad man in the street and yells at people when he is with Kate as a method to tame her. Likewise, as previously stated, he wears woman's clothes at their wedding to embarrass and tame her even better and thus emerges as Kate-the-politician's trans-gender husband in public.

By the same token, Petruchio forces Kate into a game of submission when he takes her to Verona for their honeymoon, where the taming shall be completed, and Kate is finally to be transformed into the submissive wife. He treats her arrogantly leaving her hungry, tired and sleepless while he constantly humiliates her. With the brutal attitude towards his shrewish wife, Petruchio succeeds "in fashioning Katharine to suit his pleasure" and thus leaves the "subjection of a wilful woman to the will of her husband" (Crocker 144). As he makes Kate change the flat tyre, chases her in the mansion where they stay for their honeymoon, threatens to rape her, shouts at her and finally throws her suitcase into the pool, the process of taming the shrew is in the last phase. Until the end of the third act, Kate resists the patriarchal oppression and arrogance of Petruchio as an opinionated young woman and prefers to see him hanged rather than marrying him. But she gets married and "tamed" soon as she eventually complies with whatever her husband says. She passes Petruchio's tests and learns how to love and accommodate him within the confines of Elizabethan [also the modern, since the film is set in a modern context] marital conventions (Greenwood 73). After they consummate their marriage, Petruchio keeps taming her and says "moon is shining" although it is the sun and Kate finally agrees with him, which is almost the same with the play: "Petruchio. Good Lord, how bright and goodly shines the moon! / Katherine. The moon? The sun! It is not moonlight now" (IV. v. 3-4). Moreover, Kate has turned from the sharp-tongued woman with principles into a wife kissing her husband in the office among her colleagues, which is the direct opposite of the scene in the play: "Petruchio. First kiss me, Kate, and we will. / Kate. What, in the midst of the street?" (V. ii. 147-8). Similarly, as the family has gathered before Bianca's wedding to discuss whether Bianca should have a marriage contract with Lucentio, Kate surprises everyone with her famous soliloquy about the need for a wife's submission to her husband's will. Thus, Petruchio has proven Kate's loyalty to him since she accepts whatever he says, holds his feet and kisses him as in the play: "Katherine. 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" (V. ii. 193-5).

Nevertheless, the ending of the film forges a great irony and introduces a valuable addition to the play along with the general plotline that exposes Petruchio's successful taming of shrewish Kate thoroughly. When Kate tells Petruchio that she is pregnant to triplets at the end of the film, she lays some conditions to him that she will not give up her career for kids and that he must raise them, which conveys her feminist stance to the modern audience as a young woman with a strong mind:

KATE: I'm pregnant.

PETRUCHIO: What? That's amazing!

KATE: However, you'll have to look after them because I'm not giving up my career.

PETRUCHIO: Yes! No, you can't.

Despite her previous unconditionally submissive behaviours, Kate stands her ground as a woman, a wife and a mother and eventually comes to an understanding with her husband. More surprisingly, despite his plan of taming Kate, Petruchio becomes the one sitting at home and taking care of children, cooking and doing the dishes in the end while Kate runs the country as the Prime Minister. Hence, from a feminist perspective, the ending of the film is somewhat satisfactory when compared to the original source. After all, Kate proves that she is not "as conformable as other household Kates" (II. i. 293). Yet, she "appears to be happily subdued, basking in the stability and love provided by her relationship with Petruchio" ("The Taming" par. 5) and the initially unfitting couple have morphed into a great happy family.

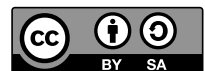
All in all, as a reproduction of the play, the film *ShakespeareRetold: Taming of the Shrew* is brilliantly interpreted, enriched and lightened with its humorous mood, lively music and modern-day characters. This version appears to be more appealing and mind-opening than the original source as the audience gets to see Kate and Petruchio after the original play ends, as a married couple with children and Kate as a strong woman, who achieves what she desires in her life whereas Petruchio emerges to be a kind, dedicated as well as funny husband and father as opposed to his representation as a misogynist and oppressive patriarchal figure in the play. In short, the film version is more life-like and the characters are more assailable in the end, which draws the attention of the modern audience.

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## Razveljavitev trmoglavkine ukrotitve: moderni pogled na Shakespea- rovo *Ukročeno trmoglavko*

Članek se ukvarja s filmsko adaptacijo *Shakespeare Retold: Taming of the Shrew* (2005) v primerjavi z izvirno igro in se osredinja na moderno perspektivo filma. Članek skuša v študije o Shakespearu vnesti nov focus pri interpretaciji filma in komedije *Ukročena trmoglavka*.

**Ključne besede:** Shakespeare, adaptacija, film, sodobna interpretacija, feminizem