

The Taming of the Shrew

In addition to the play's portrayal of gendered violence and power relations, I want to call attention to the pervasive heterosexism, classism, ableism and ageism in *Taming*; indeed, that depictions of gender overlap these categories.

Heterosexism

- The play reinforces the idea of 'compulsory heterosexuality': that marriage between men and women for the procreation of children is the ultimate societal goal, especially for women.
- Baptista wants to marry his daughters to (only) wealthy male suitors, reinforcing the idea that marriage is a transaction decided between men inextricably tied to economic gain, which is another version of reproduction (i.e., reproducing wealth).
- Performance of the servant 'boy' page as Sly's 'wife', a higher-class 'gentlewoman', is played for laughs, especially Sly's desire to bed her.
- The violence inherent in the 'taming' plot: Petruchio says: 'For I am rough and woo not like a babe'; undertow of sexual assault

Classism

- The non-elite Sly is represented as a drunk, crude, foolish, and utterly prankable by the elite. His transformation from a commoner to a 'lord' is treated as joke, suggesting that the non-elite can never truly embody the qualities of the nobility, even when placed in similar circumstances, and that social mobility is a fantasy.
- Role of servant characters primarily to serve and obey; Petruchio's physical abuse of his man Grumio
- Katharine's 'shrewish' behaviour is considered particularly unacceptable for a woman of her high status.

Ableism

- 'Mad' and its cognates (madness, madman, etc.) appear about 22 times in the play: Petruchio is 'mad', Katharine is 'mad', their marriage is 'mad', Christopher Sly is worried he's 'mad' too.
- Part of the reason we don't notice madness is because it's used in comedy and as a metaphor. We know that Katharine isn't 'really' mad.
- Katharine is described as mad in the sense that to be a strong woman is perceived as monstrous and socially disabling, meaning she's disadvantaged in the heteronormative marriage market.
- 'Lunatic' or 'lunacy' mentioned four times. Lunatics were believed to be influenced by the moon and to be 'mad' at certain times of the month.
- 'Monster' or 'monstrous' mentioned four times. Going back to the ancients, anomalous births were deemed monstrous and were given supernatural origins: evil spirits, demonic possession, God's curse or disfavour.
- 'Melancholy' mentioned once. Melancholic figures like Hamlet exhibited excessive or intense feeling that was understood to be a cause of madness, going well beyond grief or sadness.

- Terms related to disability appear about 30 times in the play, while 'love' and its cognates (beloved, lovely, etc.) appear about 60 times. In other words, disability is everywhere in the play but disproportionately absent in the commentary.
- In addition to key words related to disability, there's imagery/rhetoric related to disability:

Grumio says of Katharine and Petruchio:

[If] she stand him but a little, he will
throw a figure in her face and so disfigure her with it that
she shall have no more eyes to see withal than a cat.

Also Petruchio's allusion to Katherina having a limp:

Why does the world report that Kate doth limp?
Oh, sland'rous world! Kate, like the hazel twig,
Is straight and slender and as brown in hue
As hazelnuts, and sweeter than the kernels.
Oh, let me see thee walk: thou dost not halt.

Ageism

- The old vs young competition set up between suitors Gremio and Tranio
- Mocking reference to Gremio's old age and sexual undesirability. Tranio says 'Graybeard, thy love doth freeze'.
- Gremio tells Tranio that age superior to youth: 'Youngling, thou canst not love so dear as I'; 'tis age that nourisheth'.
- That Bianca is younger than Katharine is another point in her favour; the suggestion that Katharine is threatened with spinsterhood.

Colorism

- Dozens of uses of 'fair' to signify superiority, beauty and desirability, specifically in reference to Bianca, whose name means 'white'.