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Shakespearean Names in *The Taming of the Shrew*

by Mary K. Meier

(Honors English 228)

The Assignment: Write a formal essay that will demonstrate your understanding of and acculturation to Shakespeare up to this point of the quarter by heightening your aesthetic and critical interest in certain aspects of his plays.

Throughout each of Shakespeare's plays, he uses an extensive array of names with just as many different meanings. Shakespeare's ability to take the time and choose so wisely for each character's name enhances his quality as a writer. Each of these names was chosen very meticulously to either reflect the character's personality or make a statement about the character itself. In his play *The Taming of the Shrew*, he utilizes this ability throughout the entire play, including its Induction.

In the Induction that sets the reader up for the idea of characters being able to change clothing in order to change their identities, the only character with a name is Christopher Sly. Many theories say that Shakespeare actually knew someone by the name of Christopher Sly. In my opinion, there's a great possibility he knew someone similar to the character named Christopher. That choice of a simple, common name places the characters in England and contrasts the Induction from the play-within-the-play. The last name "Sly", however, seems to have been a direct ironic statement about the nature of Sly's character. The word sly means crafty or cunning, while Sly himself is the exact opposite. He is easily fooled into believing he had amnesia for years and was really a lord. He is also very gullible in believing the lord's page is a woman. Even his naming of this small character allows the reader to differentiate between the name and reality. It is obvious that Sly is far from being sly. This way, if the readers are aware of the meaning of the names used in the play-within-the-play, they will realize the incongruence between appearance and reality that the entire play is based on.

The first character in the play-within-the-play that is presented to the reader is Lucentio, but before the reader gets to know him, Shakespeare characteristically presents Lucentio's father Vincentio, whose name derives from the more common Vincent with the Italian flare, ending in "io," which implies masculinity in the Italian language. Vincent means conqueror or victor. This is consistent with Shakespeare's portrayal of Vincentio being a "merchant of great traffic through the world" (1.1.12). Lucentio's esteem for his father reveals Vincentio's worth. Lucentio vows to "deck his fortune with his virtuous deeds," allowing for him to make his father even more the conqueror (1.1.16). Later in the play, Vincentio is the conqueror of the conspiracy of everyone's disguises because he shows up unexpectedly. Although at first, he is ignored, he is victorious in the end because he was right all along. When Baptista realizes the plot, he is infuriated that Lucentio did not receive consent from him to marry his daughter, Bianca. Vincentio, sure of his ability for victory, says, "Fear not, Baptista, we will content you," implying that he is undefeatable (5.2.138).

The next character I have chosen to study is Katherine, the titled shrew. She "is so curst and shrewd" that her father refuses to let anyone woo Bianca while Katherine remains a spinster (1.1.183). The name Katherine means pure and virginal, two characteristics expected of any lady at that time that had not yet wed. Despite her shrewdness, she remains a virgin until her marriage to Petruchio. The cleverness in the choice of her name weighs mostly on the shortened version that Petruchio refers to her as—Kate. Through the use of this name, Petruchio is able to make a vast number of puns on her name and her temperament. During their first meeting, Petruchio is able to make puns on her name that demonstrate both the shrewd woman she is and the way he plans to make her tame. At their meeting, Petruchio refers to her as his "super-dainty Kate (For dainties are all Kates)," with dainties, or food

delicacies, also being known as cates (2.1.196-7). Later during their banter, he says he is born to “bring [her] from a wild Kate,” which is a pun on calling her a wildcat, describing her temperament as cat-like (2.1.292). During this first meeting, he calls her Kate approximately twenty five times and calls her Katherine only twice. When he refers to her as Katherine the first time, he says, “sweet Katherine, in thy bed,” displaying the importance of her virginity, the meaning of her name, in bed (2.1.282). The second time he refers to her as Katherine, he is addressing her father, who might be appalled at his casual shortening of her name. After their marriage, he expresses his taming methods in a soliloquy, using an extended metaphor, comparing Katherine to a falcon. He calls the tamed falcon a “kite,” which is also a pun on the name Kate.

Following the introduction to Katherine’s outspokenness, the reader views the opposite in her younger sister Bianca. Her name means white in Italian. The implications from the idea of “white” are those of purity and serenity. The ideal of whiteness goes back to the ancient days of Europe. In the Celtic belief structure, white animals or beings were thought of as being able to pass between the physical world and that of the afterlife, similar to Christian angels, which are also most commonly pictured adorning white. Any men that came across these white animals chased them. These men were ultimately fooled and stuck between the physical world and the afterlife. Bianca is described using an extensive amount of praising words spoken by various characters. Lucentio is hooked on Bianca and says he sees “mild behavior and sobriety” in her (1.1.72). Her father refers to her as “good Bianca,” expressing that even he has been suckered in by Bianca’s perfection. I brought up the Celtic beliefs because Bianca is very similar to the white animals in that Lucentio, Hortensio, and Gremio are all pursuing here relentlessly. She is viewed as angelic and perfect. In the end, the name “Bianca” turns into a fantastic pun on Petruchio’s part. Bianca’s obedience ultimately falls short of her sister’s, causing what was thought about them both to be completely the opposite. Petruchio says to Lucentio, “’Twas I who won the wager, though you hit the white” (5.2.202) This is a fantastic pun because although Lucentio achieved the hand of the lady most sought after, or the bulls eye, Petruchio ended up with the loving, obedient wife that men truly desired. I also found this to be a clever pun because modern day interpretation could allow it to be translated as a sexual comment referring to Bianca as “the white.”

During the first act, we also learn of Lucentio’s character through his observation of others and his dialogue with Tranio. His name, coming from the word *lucent*, means luminous or clear. This reflects his personality in that he is transparent. From the very beginning it is obvious that he has fallen in love because of appearance. To me, his “love at first sight” despite Tranio’s warning that he may not have seen what was really there makes it completely obvious that his weakness lies in his love of appearance. Even after he spends some time with Bianca, who is not as mild as she first appeared, he is completely blind to her faults. Despite her refusal to be “tied to hours, nor ‘pointed times,” Lucentio continues to do the clear thing—continue to “love” her because of that first impression (3.1.19). Lucentio is transparent because the reader knows he is going to fall for Bianca’s tricks right away, even after the reader realizes Bianca’s temperament appears different than reality. Any Shakespeare reader would expect that when he so commonly write about appearance being incongruent with reality.

Last, but certainly not least, Petruchio’s unusual name brought two different ideas into my head. Originally, I completely based Petruchio on Petrarch, the fourteenth century sonnet-writer that I am sure Shakespeare must have idolized at one point. I thought of Petruchio as a poet because of his fantastic puns on words, as well as his ability to go on and on, using language of love in order to kill Katherine with kindness. His cleverness baffles Katherine, and I believe that characteristic is what attracts her to him. The other idea I got from the name Petruchio was its similarity to the word “patriarch”. A patriarch is the male leader of a group, whether it is a country, a village, or a family. Petruchio is a patriarch that dominates his family by taming his wife into obedience. He is also obviously dominant during his abuse of Grumio, whose name, as a side note, comes from the word “grum”, meaning morose, sour, and guttural—a good description of a “villainous” servant. I am unsure whether Shakespeare was making either connection when he made up Petruchio’s name, but both symbols arose in my head at the time of reading the play.

All in all, Shakespeare was magnificent at choosing carefully each name for every character, even

those as seemingly insignificant as Vincentio and Grumio, who have very small parts to fill in the play. This play is merely one example of the plays in which Shakespeare uses names to enhance understanding of the characters or just play on a pun on their personalities. Without Katherine and Bianca being named as such, Petruchio's cleverness that links him to a poet would not be present in the plot. The importance of names ranks high in order for a reader or a viewer to understand the play, especially in one full of disguises, such as in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, Williams. The Taming of the Shrew. The New Folger Library Shakespeare. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Westine. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.