

Claire Goode  
Writing Sample

### **It Is Fitting for a Gentlewoman: Clothing in *The Taming of the Shrew***

England has a long history of binding up identity with clothing, and so it is no accident that in *The Taming of the Shrew*, a play primarily about breaking down resistance and recreating identity, clothing plays a central role. Sumptuary laws and popular tales emphasized the connection between identity and clothing in the minds of early modern audiences. The fashions and customs of the time take on an integral importance within *The Taming of the Shrew*, as Petruchio schemes to shame Kate and transform her into a tamed shrew. Petruchio continually overlooks the customs pertaining to marriage and clothing, humiliating her with ridiculously out of date attire on their wedding day and refusing to give her a customary new wardrobe upon her entering his household. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare uses clothing to depict Kate's loss of identity within the broader framework of Elizabethan sumptuary laws.

Sumptuary laws were an attempt to visually stratify and hierarchically organize society. Signaling the various classes at a glance, they kept wealthy merchants from putting on airs and dressing their families and themselves beyond their station and denoted whether a doctor or lawyer was to be found on any given crowded street corner. It is not only the lawyers or doctors who would be visible but their families as well. As Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli states in her essay on sumptuary legislation, "The legislation allowed long trains and precious fabrics to the wives and daughters of knights, doctors, or merchants, who acted as indicators of the social position of their husbands and fathers" (600). The position of the entire family was therefore determined by the station of the patriarch, and clothing was used to instantly signal his position as well as that of his wives and daughters. While this appears as just another unyielding rule in a hierarchical, top-down society, the laws represent an active dialogue between the legislators and the people of the time. Muzzarelli goes on to say that "[t]he laws made restrictions, but they also show an awareness of people's reactions. Following a lively protest by the city's women about sumptuary restrictions, lawmakers in Orvieto rewrote the law limiting the height of heels to accommodate what the women wanted" (600). Such modifications suggest a public very much engaged in fashion, with their own appreciation and desire for it, crafting their own identity through, or in spite of, the laws.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the first sign of Petruchio's lack of care for custom and clothing occurs in the wedding scene when he purposefully wears revolting clothing to tame Kate. The servant runs up and describes his hodgepodge mix as making him "a very monster in apparel"(3.2.69). He appears

before the wedding guests in “a new hat and an old jerkin, a pair of old breeches thrice turned, a pair of boots...one buckled, another laced, an old rusty sword ta'en out of the town armory, with a broken hilt”(3.2.43-47). The emphasis placed on the age of the garments is telling. Of his clothing, most garments are old or ill fitting. The old breeches are too big, the sword looks to be stolen from a repository of out of date weaponry- and is broken at that; the jerkin is old, and his shoes are fastened in two different, highly noticeable ways. The hat is the one item that can be safely said to be the least offensive to his viewers. His appearance is calculated to displease, and it succeeds.

Baptista mentions, a little forlornly, that Petruchio is not known for the care he takes of his personal appearance, saying, “Oftentimes he goes but mean-apparell'd”(3.2.72). However, he is absolutely appalled at his imminent son-in-law’s attire on the day of his wedding. Upon viewing him, Baptista exclaims, “First were we sad, fearing you would not come/ Now sadder, that you come so unprovided/ Fie, doff this habit, shame to your estate/An eye-sore to our solemn festival!”(3.2.97-100). Issue is not taken with his seeming indifference to the etiquette of marriage or the feelings of Kate and her family; it is the financial statement that Petruchio’s outfit is making which is uppermost in Baptista’s thoughts. He suggests that such an outrageous display could effectively call off the marriage. To Baptista, this clothing signals an inability to provide financially for Kate. By suggesting the apparel shames his estate, Baptista is asserting that it makes him appear impoverished, his wealth seem much less secure, and his fortune less grand than Baptista had thought to be true. But Petruchio firmly asserts, “To me she's married, not unto my clothes”(3.2.116), setting off his abject disregard for custom and styles. It is Tranio who so aptly points out, “He hath some meaning in his mad attire”(3.2.123). And that meaning is beyond a doubt to humiliate Kate and begin his regime of oppression with the belief that abject disgrace will eventually blot out her shrewishness. The clothing becomes a taming strategy. He uses his degrading attire at the commencement of their union to degrade her in the hopes that her shame will finally suppress her shrewish tongue.

A story which intimately links clothing and identity, familiar to Shakespeare’s audience is the story of Griselda, which is mentioned in passing in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Petruchio comments, “For patience she will prove a second Grissel”(2.1.288). In her essay on the concept of Griselda within *The Taming of the Shrew*, Margaret Rose Jaster outlines Boccaccio’s version of the tale. A marquis is persuaded to marry and to produce an heir on the condition he may make the choice of his wife. This condition granted, he picks Griselda, the daughter of the poorest man in his domain. He comes to her house with his entourage, informs her of her future, divests her of all her clothing, and redresses her in the habiliments of a noble woman (Jaster 95-96). His oddities and caprice aside, it was an early modern custom for the husband to provide new clothing for

his wife upon her joining his household. Jaster explains that “[b]y accepting her husband’s gift of wedding apparel, a bride assumes a new social identity, one that is, to a great extent, manipulated by her new spouse”(94). This tale was well known to Shakespeare’s audience, first penned by Boccaccio, then Petrarch, then Chaucer. It further justifies to a public familiar with sumptuary laws the link between clothing and identity by intimating the inherent status a garment bestows. The Marquis’s entourage is astonished at Griselda’s transformed appearance evidencing that her clothing was able to raise her from an undignified peasant to a worthy noblewoman. Jaster writes, “After [the Marquis] finishes her, we are told, everyone stood amazed—that their new mistress has been created from such course material?” (96). Griselda’s husband has total control over this operation, undressing her, smock and all, before his company. By accepting his clothing, she accepts his control over her identity, and this is the same control Petruchio boasts he will have over Kate.

This structure is mirrored within *The Taming of the Shrew*. In Act IV, Scene I, as Kate evidences her appreciation for the modern, ornamented clothes ordered from the tailor, Petruchio enforces austere servility. Though Kate would like an open dialogue about the clothing she is to wear, she is forced to remain silent as Petruchio dictates this portion of her identity much as he has refused her food, sleep, and even the use of her proper name, Katherine. Petruchio’s regime of humiliation begins as he informs her she will have “silken coats and caps and golden rings, with ruffs and cuffs and farthingales and things; with scarfs and fans and ... amber bracelets, beads and all this knavery”(4.1.55-58). All this ephemera he then goes on to reject while she is forced to stand by. Surrounding this discussion is the “fashion and the time” (4.1.95). He has requested the clothes be made up in the current way. The tailor, knowing his business and the economic status of his customer, makes gowns perfectly adapted to their position and in accordance with the law. Kate finds them very fashionable and desires to be allowed to wear them. Of the hat, she says “This doth fit the time/ And gentlewomen wear such caps as these”(4.1.69-70), and of the dress she comments, “I never saw a better-fashion’d gown/ More quaint, more pleasing, nor more commendable”(4.1.101-102). She would have an intimate knowledge of the clothing she was allowed, and this expression of admiration mirrors the popular discourse between legislators and those affected by the sumptuary laws. Kate, like her father, recognizes the link between clothing and status.

Yet Petruchio castigates them. He dislikes the slits in the sleeves and the loose fitting nature of the gown. Despite having already ordered the clothes and witnessing her stated desire for them, he does not give them to her. He ignores her and instead discusses them with the tailor and Grumio and rejects them all for minor deficiencies in discord with his own personal taste. He tells the tailor that though he bid him make it to the time; he “did not bid you mar it to the time”(4.1.97). He dictates what she puts on her body and, in this way, shapes her

identity. Kate recognizes this and says, “Belike you mean to make a puppet of me” (4.1.103). It is a method of exercising control. He is denying her the habiliments of a gentlewoman of her station and refusing her the customary new wardrobe upon her marriage. By denying her clothing that would fit her situation he, is teaching her the kind of housewife he wants her to be- one that does not consume- while taming her into a submissive wife. In her essay on *The Taming of the Shrew*, Natasha Korda writes, “With the decline of the family as an economic unit of production, however, the role of the housewife in late-sixteenth-century England was beginning to shift from that of skilled producer to savvy consumer”(111). Kate’s new role as a wedded woman gives her a certain economic power. As a housewife and therefore a consumer, she has the ability and the duty to procure the clothing of their station. Yet the only way for her to increase her family’s affluence is to save, rather than spend money. In this scene, Petruchio uses the very clothing he dismisses to show Kate that he wants her to be discerning with his money, not preoccupied with displaying their class with fine clothing.

Shakespeare wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* in a time very aware of clothing, its monetary value, its societal implications, its indication of status, and its hold on the popular imagination. Petruchio, too, is aware that clothing can be used to enforce Kate’s transformed identity. He extends its use to completely degrade Kate and break her shrewish streak, which has allowed her to proclaim her authority over herself. This degradation mirrors the sumptuary laws themselves. Kate’s interest in the fashionable clothing, which is her due, is overlooked, and instead Petruchio and Grumio discuss and decide with the tailor that she is to have none of it. This has the double advantage of impressing upon Kate the necessity of thrift in the changing economy of early modern England and with the exorbitant price of donning the apparel of the wealthy. Despite the societal implications of denying Kate her due, Petruchio does not relent. Though protesting that she, likewise, shall not relent, Kate does eventually submit to Petruchio’s regime. He wishes to tame her in this way so that she will primarily be a financial asset. Not only has she brought a great deal of money to the marriage, but he now seeks to preserve his increased wealth by enforcing upon her a total deference to his wishes and a strict economy to the point that their social position is masked. His greed far outweighs his considerations of status. He has no compunctions whatsoever about disregarding social conventions, as his attire to his own wedding demonstrates. His regime of humbling and subduing Kate through clothing physically illustrates the way he is reforming her identity.

## Works Cited

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