

# Kaitlyn Downs's

English 1102 Barnett essay is a traditional literary analysis that explores a particular theme throughout a literary work, in this case William Shakespeare's

*The Taming of the Shrew*. She supports her argument with evidence from the primary text (in this case, summary, paraphrase, and quotation) and from secondary sources (in this case, literary criticism). What make Kaitlyn's essay particularly striking are: the way in which the author leads the reader carefully through the stages of her argument, almost as though they were discussing the issue together; the complexity of the essay's thesis, which concludes not only that appearance and reality are indistinguishable, but also the larger truth that believing in false appearances can create real changes in a person; and, as her instructor puts it, the surprising way Kaitlyn's essay "hones in on a character that is usually overlooked."

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ENGL1102

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## Character Identity in *The Taming of the Shrew*

If something walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and acts like a duck, is it a duck? Probably, but what if this "duck" is really just a confused chicken? At this point, the question of identity comes into play. Is the chicken then considered a duck because its actions all point towards that of the distinctive aquatic bird? Or does the chicken's actual reality as a chicken, its feathery DNA, matter more in this discussion? Identity in *The Taming of the Shrew* acts the same way. Highlighting the nature of identity, Shakespeare uses the story of Christopher Sly's taming and its counterpart, Kate's taming, to show that appearance becomes reality. Ultimately, the characters in *The Taming of the Shrew* blur the lines between reality and illusion, making them one and the same.

In the beginning of the play, the small part of dialogue concerning Christopher Sly shows the phenomenon of illusion becoming reality. A rich lord abducts Sly, a drunken beggar, and plays a trick on him: "What think you, if he were . . . wrapped in sweet clothes, rings put upon his fingers, a most delicious banquet by his bed . . . Would not the beggar then forget himself?" (Shakespeare, *Taming of the Shrew*, Ind. 1.33-37). When Sly awakens in an unfamiliar setting, he questions the truth of his predicament, but eventually, he wholeheartedly accepts the illusion that "[he is] a lord indeed, and not a tinker nor Christopher Sly" (Ind. 2.68-69). Because Sly sees that he possesses all the characteristics of a lord — fine clothes, dedicated servants, a noble "wife" — he immediately accepts the façade.

When he accepts his pseudo-nobility, Sly's paradigm of his own reality shifts completely. He notices that he possesses all the characteristics of a lord and adjusts his own identity accordingly: he becomes the lord. Initially, the changes in Sly are merely superficial; he gains obedient servants, nice clothes, and delicious food. Nothing about his personality should change, but it does. Not only does Sly state his belief in his nobility, but he also exhibits changes in his language, demonstrating the sincerity of his personality change. Critic Joseph Tate cites the fact that Sly's form of speaking changes from prose, indicating a peasant, to blank verse, traditionally a form of speech used by poets and playwrights for aristocratic speech (106). Christopher Sly's "[rise] to verse and into nobility" indicates that a real change occurs in Sly's perception of himself and, therefore, in his actual identity (106).

Still the question remains: is Sly a true lord or just an overdressed, indulged peasant tricked by a cruel, bored aristocrat? Shakespeare's treatment of Sly's story makes it seem as though he remains a lord. Introduced to Sly at the start, the audience naturally waits for his storyline to be continued, but Shakespeare never finishes it. Sly appears for the final time at the end of the first scene of act 1, and in this appearance, he merely complements the play itself (1.1.243-44). This unfinished plot device serves as a purposeful reminder that illusion has become reality — that Sly's illusory nobility becomes actual nobility. Supporting this claim, Tate points out that while the play's plot implies that characters assume and shed disguises easily, "the induction's incompleteness proposes the opposite" (Tate 107). Sly never "return[s] to a world of stable identities" and stays eternally as a lord (107). The implication that Christopher Sly becomes a lord and stays one indelibly within the play supports the idea that his identity changes permanently on the basis of appearance; the chicken has evolved into a duck.

Immediately after Sly's final line, Petruchio bursts on stage, establishing his identity as a bossy, violent, and outgoing young man. Although Petruchio never disguises his personality or intentions, his act of taming Kate contributes an additional example of how illusion and appearance becomes the reality of a situation. Petruchio, in an effort to tame Kate, devises a scheme in which he describes her behavior contradictory to what she actually does. For instance, "Say that she rail, why then [he would tell] her plain she sings as sweetly as a nightingale. Say that she frown, [he would say] she looks as clear as morning roses" (2.1.166-69). His ruse transforms Kate's identity from the shrewish spinster seen at the beginning into the dutiful wife whose speech at the end of the play indicates her "new-built virtue and obedience" (5.2.122). She is even respectful to her husband, to the point of calling him "sir" (5.2.105). Cecil C. Seronsy proposes that "Petruchio's method [of taming] is to suppose or assume qualities in [Kate] that no one else . . . suspects. What he assumes as apparently false turns out to be startlingly true" (19). Therefore, Kate eventually becomes what Petruchio presents her as. Although at first Petruchio's descriptions of Kate seem only like his way to "kill [her] with kindness" (4.1.181), "his 'treatment' [steadily unfolds to show] her really fine qualities: patience, practical good sense, a capacity for humor, and finally obedience, all of which she comes gradually to manifest in a spirit" (Seronsy 19). In the end, Kate turns into the "modest . . . dove" Petruchio claims her to be, demonstrating again that illusion has become reality (2.1.289).

Kate, the shrew and eponymous character of the play, raises the most questions about the reality of appearance. The most obvious question about Kate is whether she is truly tamed at the very end of the play. A less common, but equally interesting question is whether Kate is, in reality, a shrew. Are her bad attitude and violent tendencies only armor that Kate dons to protect herself from vulnerability and rejection? Perhaps. Several instances in the play imply that Kate is, in fact, gentler than she initially appears: the fact that Kate cries when Petruchio is late to the wedding; her allowance of her marriage to Petruchio in the first place; and her sometimes reasonable pleas to Petruchio at the beginning of their marriage. These subtle details, however, become lost within the prominent examples of Kate's fiery temper: yelling at her suitor; tying up her sister Bianca; and smashing an instrument over her tutor's head, to name a few. Does it matter if her shrewish nature is merely armor? If everyone that has ever met Kate agrees that she is a shrew, even calling her "Katherine the curst," then it does not really make a difference if it is a charade (1.2.121). Therefore, Kate's relatives and neighbors define her identity, instead of Kate defining herself by how she feels. By "believing that Katherine is a shrew [her community] makes her one, because that is the only subject position [they allow] her" (Crocker 145). Because of the unpleasant outward appearance she gives off, Kate's armor becomes a reality, regardless of what she feels inside.

The last question of appearance versus reality is probably the most critical and common question of the play: is Kate really tamed? Well, she appears to be. At the end of the play in act 5, she obeys Petruchio, responding to his summons, unlike the other two wives. Her father seems to genuinely believe that "she is changed as she had never been" (5.2.119). She even gives a seemingly scolding speech to the other two wives, preaching the belief that "thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign" (5.2.150-51). Although no critic and certainly no undergraduate dabbler in Shakespeare can say for sure the sincerity of Kate's taming, I believe that many elements of the play combine to give a clearer perspective on this question. Christopher Sly's story, a parallel in both situation and location within the play, paves the way for Kate's reversal of personality. Sly's identity transformation not only exhibits the nature of appearance becoming reality, but also leads the way for Kate's complete reversal of identity from headstrong shrew to obedient wife in the final act of the play. By creating perfectly parallel circumstances, not only in situation, but also in location within the play, Shakespeare draws attention to the theme of illusion becoming reality, and perhaps even prepares the audience for the legitimacy of Kate's transformation.

Shakespeare manages to answer the question of the duck. If something has all the characteristics of something else, it actually becomes, in all practical ways, that something else. He says that appearance is reality, or at least, it is the only reality that matters. Because of the analysis of Shakespeare's use of Christopher Sly, Petruchio's deception in taming, and Kate's actual nature as a shrew, the dominant question of the play grows clearer: whether or not Kate truly alters her thinking and personality to become "tamed." Because of Shakespeare's treatment of the rest of the play, it *becomes evident* that Kate's illusion becomes the reality of her situation, and she, in all practical sense of the word, is tamed.

## Works Cited

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