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Tragedy and Resolution

Domestic Violence in *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew*

Cassidy Crosby

For years, critics have discussed domestic violence in *Othello*—violence so obvious and explicit that sometimes, critics do not feel the need to dissect it (Schawb; Smith 388–404; Deats 79–94). Much of the scholarship surrounding *Othello* deals instead with the troubling racial implications present in the play, or with other aspects of the play’s plot and language. There is especially very little scholarship specifically about Emilia, despite the significant, albeit sometimes passive, role she plays in several pivotal points of the play (Schawb). Emilia is the one, after all, who takes Desdemona’s handkerchief and gives it to Iago, allowing him to convince Othello once and for all of Desdemona’s infidelity. She is the one, too, who ultimately foils her husband’s plot, explaining Iago’s subterfuge to Othello and giving Othello reason to doubt. She is the one in whose name Iago’s plot is carried out: Iago’s proffered justification for hating Othello is his conviction that Emilia had an affair with him. Despite Emilia’s arguably central role in

Othello's plot developments, she does not appear on stage or speak often, and so she is, perhaps, doomed to a lack of scholarly interest.

Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* certainly does not suffer from a lack of scholarship; her struggle is different. Unlike *Othello*, where the existence of domestic violence (by definition, violence between two members of the same household) can never be in question, lively debates surround *The Taming of the Shrew* and the relationship between Katherine and Petruchio—specifically, whether or not this relationship can be considered an example of domestic violence (Detmer 273–93; Daniell 71–83; Deer 63–78). Upon careful examination of the play's language, audiences today generally feel some discomfort with Katherine and Petruchio's relationship; some may assert that the relationship is indeed an abusive one because Petruchio frequently commits (albeit indirectly) violence against Katherine. However, the argument usually revolves around the play's historical context, and whether one can truly consider the relationship abusive if, in early modern England, perceptions of spousal abuse, or spousal violence, outside the physical did not yet exist.

Although there are conversations about domestic violence in both *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, scholars have largely neglected to consider them in tandem and further consider them in conversation with each other. However, doing so can provide valuable insight as one considers the difference in the portrayals of domestic violence. In *Othello*, domestic violence is an obvious vehicle of tragedy: Iago's toxic relationship with Emilia arguably sets the stage for the plot as a whole, and the tragedy is ultimately carried out through domestic violence. This representation of domestic violence is preceded by the more farcical representation present in *The Taming of the Shrew*. These two plays, written nearly a decade apart, illustrate an evolution in Shakespeare's treatment of themes of domestic violence. The evolution in the treatment and portrayal of domestic violence in Shakespeare—from a simple plot device to the terror that it truly is—exposes our flawed attempts to historicize domestic violence in Shakespeare's work.

Although some critics argue that Petruchio and Katherine's relationship cannot be considered violent because Shakespearean conceptions of domestic violence were different than modern conceptions, this argument illustrates a misconception about early modern ideas of domestic violence. Literary critic Emily Detmer points out that during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when *The Taming of the Shrew* was written, English attitudes about

spousal relationships shifted. Husbands were still expected to control their wives, but physical violence was a less acceptable method of control, and there was an emphasis on other methods of controlling “unruly” wives (279). In accordance with this, Petruchio never physically abuses Katherine in his attempts to gain control over her. This lack of physical violence provides evidence, for some scholars, that their relationship cannot be considered violent through a historical lens.

Nevertheless, this argument ultimately rests upon the idea that early modern people did not recognize violence outside of physical violence, which is simply untrue. Historian Susan Amussen argues that in early modern England, “violence” described behavior society considered inappropriate or illegitimate (“Punishment” 3). It is true that not everything a modern audience defines as domestic violence would also have been defined as violence in early modern England; people accepted some level of physical “correction” directed from husbands to wives (“Punishment” 13). There were, however, important caveats to this acceptance: correction should parallel the offense, that is, the punishment should fit the crime; and any violence should be in response to some transgression. Punishment without a transgression and excessive punishment, for early modern English people, crossed the line from acceptable husband-wife relations to violence (“Punishment” 14). Community policing played a vital role in preventing and limiting domestic violence; neighbors frequently eavesdropped on each other and would often attempt to mediate in cases of domestic violence (“Unquietness” 78). Removing one’s wife from the community, therefore, bordered on violence, particularly where the husband already demonstrated a predisposition towards such, since it kept the community from playing its role in limiting violence (“Unquietness” 81). Additionally, the community played an important role in defining when some particular action crossed into violence; usually, if an action disturbed public peace or disrupted the community’s social life, it was classified as violence (“Unquietness” 77). Since providing for his wife was an important husbandly duty, the failure to provide could also be considered violence. Failure to provide was defined as denying a wife access to the reasonable physical comfort she had a right to expect based upon her husband’s situation. In certain cases, courts considered failure to provide reason enough to grant a petitioning wife legal separation (“Punishment” 13). Denying a wife food, thus, also could be considered domestic violence, because it fell under the category of failing to provide.

It is, therefore, obvious that early modern audiences understood domestic violence existed outside of physical abuse, but in order to attempt to parse domestic violence's existence in *The Taming of the Shrew*, we must consider whether Petruchio's actions cross the line from "correcting" Kate to acting violently against her. The play's events themselves may support reading Petruchio as violent: Petruchio's actions at the wedding disrupt social order as he proceeds to take Katherine away from the community and isolate her, and then deprive her of the physical wellness he is able to provide by denying her food and sleep and ruining her clothing. Disrupting social order as Petruchio did at the wedding and isolating Kate thereafter may have made an early modern audience uncomfortable, but in order to decide whether these and his other actions could have been perceived as violent, we still must consider whether these actions were either unwarranted, or an exaggerated response to Kate's perceived offense. At the beginning of their relationship, his actions may seem quite reasonable to an early modern audience: Katherine is shrewish, and her husband must correct her. However, on the road to Padua, Katherine seems quite sufficiently tamed, agreeing with Petruchio over the evidence of her own eyes that it is night, then day, as Petruchio wills. Still, Petruchio continues to make Katherine prove her taming, telling her to greet the old man as a young virgin; else, the implicit threat hangs over her head, they will return to Petruchio's house, and not to her father's house after all. Perhaps for some in an early modern English audience, this crossed a line; it disrupted the social order by involving someone outside their household. This public humiliation punished Kate for a crime she had not committed as well as the idea of Petruchio isolating Kate—through threats—may not have sat well with some members of that audience. Indeed, Susan Amussen says explicitly that "Petruchio's behavior is similar to behavior that women cite when complaining of a violent spouse . . . so [an early modern audience] would not have found the behavior appropriate" ("Re: Domestic Violence").

However, the play downplays Petruchio's potentially violent actions because those actions are central to the plot and genre requirements of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play is a comedy, and comedies as a genre usually involve presenting a challenge to the community that is then resolved, typically through marriage. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the challenge to the community is Katherine's refusal to get married. When Petruchio says he plans to marry Kate, Tranio responds that he will be grateful if Petruchio breaks "the ice, and do this feat,/ Achieve the elder, set the younger free/

For our access" (1.4.257–259). The issue for the community is that Katherine will not marry, thus Bianca cannot marry. As a result, the whole social system grinds to a halt. Not only will Katherine not marry, but her behavior makes it so that no one really wants to marry her. Her behavior, which is also a social problem—as demonstrated through her treatment of her father—must therefore also be solved (Detmer 278). Petruchio's violence towards Katherine is what allows the story to achieve resolution: Katherine is no longer a shrew at the end of the play, and Bianca is free to marry. This has two consequences: first, domestic violence is clearly used as a plot device to resolve the challenge Katherine presents; and it is therefore necessary for the audience to accept Petruchio's behavior in order for the play to be a comedy, and for the audience to feel content with its resolution. Without such resolution, the play cannot be a true comedy.

Though, as Dr. Amussen points out, an early modern audience could very possibly have read Petruchio's behavior as violent, that is not the only potential reading for audiences then, or for audiences now. For today's audiences, who often try to view *The Taming of the Shrew* in what they perceive as its historical context, the way the actors and directors choose to stage the play is paramount to whether the audience interprets the play as comedy or tragedy (in the way these terms are popularly used today). The 1981 New York Shakespeare in the Park's production of *The Taming of the Shrew* starring Meryl Streep and Raul Julia is perhaps the most effective at translating the play into a comedy for a twentieth- or twenty-first-century audience. The production transforms Katherine's speech at the end of the play, which is often very disquieting to modern readers, into a tender, almost romantic scene. Streep's Katherine bows herself down to the ground, holding out her hand and inviting her husband to step on it, if he so chooses. Julia's Petruchio kneels down beside her, takes her hand, and kisses it before he raises her to her feet alongside him. He proceeds to brag to his friends about his shrew-taming abilities—but as he does so, his Katherine tugs on his hand, eager to spend time alone with her husband, and clearly still unafraid to exhibit her indomitable spirit. These acting choices give the audience a sense that this couple truly cares about each other, and that Petruchio did not break Kate's spirit, but rather, only softened it. However, not every production portrays their relationship this way. The 2012 Globe production, starring Samantha Spiro and Simon Paisley Day depicts a far more threatening Petruchio, and a far more worn and wearied Katherine. When Day's Petruchio tells Spiro's

Kate, “Will you, nill you, I will marry you” (2.1.262–63), he moves atop Kate, who is lying on her back, pinning her in place. The threat and his disregard for Katherine’s feelings are clear. By the time Katherine gives her infamous speech, she is tired and beaten. She says the words listlessly, without much real emotion. For audiences today, who so frequently attempt to historicize the play and excuse Petruchio’s textual behavior based on that attempt, the play’s interpretation depends on the actors. Given the very real possibility an early modern audience could have seen Petruchio as violent, it is only logical that this could have held true for them as well. Whether *The Taming of the Shrew* is an effective comedy therefore relies heavily upon acting and directing choices.

Domestic violence in *Othello*, on the other hand, exhibits itself with almost startling explicitness, and therefore functions as a plot device quite differently than it does in *The Taming of the Shrew*. There is no need for anyone to wonder whether an early modern audience would have found Othello’s behavior leading up to Desdemona’s murder violent. Desdemona commits no error to prompt his “correction,” if I may term it as such; and his behavior exceeds punishment that would fit the crime—quite uncomfortably so. Even though Othello remains unaware of Desdemona’s innocence for the majority of the play, his actions are still violent because murder was never an acceptable action for a husband to take (“Unquietness” 79). For early modern and current audiences, Othello fits the role of an abuser. Nonetheless, scholars do not frequently examine Iago through this same lens, though his behavior toward Emilia clearly qualifies as abuse as well. As critic Roxane Schwab points out, Iago certainly abuses Emilia mentally and emotionally before he murders her. Furthermore, Schwab analyzes Iago’s behavior, and concludes that he possesses many characteristics common to abusers. It should not surprise the audience that Iago’s first words to his wife in the play are cruel, aimed at “publicly humiliating, and thus controlling, her.” Emilia’s monologue when she discovers Desdemona’s handkerchief further supports Iago as abusive. She calls him “wayward” (3.3.300), perhaps indicating that Iago’s moods are unpredictable—as are the moods of most abusive partners, so their significant others can never quite predict when they will next turn violent. Iago’s reaction to Emilia’s possession of the handkerchief may further illustrate this, particularly in certain stagings of the play. In one scene, for example, Iago’s hand clenches Emilia’s jaw. The fear in her eyes

and the malice in his are both quite obvious, underlining the violence of their relationship.

Desdemona's conversation with Emilia, however, after Othello hits her publicly, provides perhaps the best illustration of Emilia as a victim of abuse. She tells Desdemona that it takes a year, maybe two, to really know one's husband, echoing the fact that abuse almost always begins within the first year of marriage, and perhaps indicating that this was the case for her (Schwab). Emilia continues by deriding male jealousy, indicating that the jealousy Iago expresses a few times throughout the play—first of Othello, then of Cassio—is well known to her, and she has attempted to deny it by telling her husband of her fidelity, but he will not listen because he is “not ever jealous for the cause,/ But jealous for [he's] jealous” (3.4.160–61). This jealousy that Emilia so disparages began the tragedy's events in the first place. Iago tells the audience he “hate[s] the Moor” (1.3.357) because of his certainty that “twixt my sheets/ he has done my office” (1.3.358–59). Despite Emilia's assertions otherwise, Iago chooses to act as though Othello has “done [his] office,” even though he admits to the audience he does not know if the rumor is true (1.3.359). Consequently, the tragedy in *Othello* results from Iago's abusive relationship with Emilia and his refusal to trust or listen to his wife.

That domestic violence executes the play's tragedy, yet provides perhaps the most compelling evidence that it is the central tragedy in *Othello*. Domestic violence accomplishes or motivates every death in the play: Emilia and Desdemona are ultimately victims of domestic violence; Iago kills Roderigo to further his plan—a plan ultimately motivated by the idea of Emilia's infidelity, which itself further encourages domestic violence; and Othello's realization of what he has done to Desdemona as well as her innocence—an important factor in determining correction versus violence for early modern English people—causes him to commit suicide. *Othello* not only portrays domestic violence as tragic, rather it portrays domestic violence *as* the tragedy. Far from the resolving role such violence plays in *The Taming of the Shrew*, domestic violence in *Othello* is unambiguously tragic, with terrible ends for not only the victim, but also for the abuser. Importantly, Othello and Iago do not go unpunished for their abuses of their wives. Othello, obviously, commits suicide, but Iago, too, is unmasked at the end of the play, left to live with the crimes he has committed—and the audience may reasonably presume, the punishments given to him by Venetian society. Then, as a plot

device, domestic violence differs dramatically from *The Taming of the Shrew*: in that play, it was the means of resolving a community; in this play, it is the means of destroying one.

Othello and *The Taming of the Shrew* clearly deal with domestic violence in ways that could hardly be more different. The question, then, is why. What changed? Or, did anything change at all? To me, it seems the most significant change was time. *The Taming of the Shrew* was written in 1593 or 1594, at the beginning of Shakespeare's playwriting career. *Othello* was written in 1603 or 1604. Almost exactly a decade passed between the two plays' creations. The most likely explanation is that Shakespeare simply gained more life experience during this time, and somehow gained a more realistic view of domestic violence. As Sharon Hamilton points out in her discussion of abuse in *Othello*, "Long before the phrase 'spousal abuse' came into popular usage, Shakespeare understood its nature" (60). Moreover, Shakespeare does seem to understand something of domestic violence's nature, portraying realistically escalating violence as well as abusers and victims with psychologically accurate actions, reactions, and characteristics. Perhaps Shakespeare, ever the master of human portrayal, simply saw more domestic violence and felt the need to return to the subject in *Othello*, in order to truly show its darkness and its terror.

At around the same time that Shakespeare revisited the topic of domestic violence and wrote *Othello*, John Fletcher wrote *The Woman's Prize*, or *The Tamer Tamed*. This play responded to *The Taming of the Shrew*, as the title may suggest, and forced Petruchio to undergo his own taming at the hands of Maria, whom he courts after Katherine's death. This play's very existence demonstrates that early modern audiences were not entirely comfortable with Petruchio's behavior, and at least some of them thought he crossed a line and were unsatisfied with the play's original ending. Indeed, during later generations, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Woman's Prize* were sometimes performed in tandem, and Fletcher's play was extremely popular—more popular, actually, than *The Taming of the Shrew* (Amussen "Re: Domestic Violence"). Concurrently, Shakespeare wrote his own revision of domestic violence in *Othello*. It is also possible that attitudes about domestic violence underwent a slight shift at the turn of the century to more strongly emphasize peaceful and loving relationships between husbands and wives. Perhaps if *The Taming of the Shrew* were written later in Shakespeare's career, Petruchio's behavior would be different—less violent. It is impossible to be certain why,

exactly, domestic violence plays such different roles in *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Although this would require further study and historical archival work, more scholars should examine *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew* in conjunction with each other, as well as investigating other contemporary primary sources, in order to obtain a clearer picture of views on domestic violence in early modern England and how they may have changed.

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