



# Taming a Shrew with Semantics

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*The author analyzes Shakespeare's use of the personal pronouns you and thou to develop the relationship of characters Petruchio and Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew. The author discusses how you is used among equals, and how thou is used by those of higher rank addressing those of lower rank or to show intimacy. The author finds that Petruchio systematically switches between you and thou in his process of taming Katherine, while Katherine stubbornly holds to using the formal you until the very end, when she uses thou to signify her tamed attitude.*

Who can read the following lines without imagining the fiery tête-à-tête between one of Shakespeare's wittiest couples, Petruchio and Katherine? Exemplifying the fierce nature of their relationship, Petruchio says, "Thou hast hit it: come, sit on me. / Asses are made to bear, and so are you. / Women are made to bear, and so are you" (2.1.198–199). *The Taming of the Shrew* is marked by its clever word play; however, embedded within the clash of words, Shakespeare expresses Katherine and Petruchio's unconventional relationship through second-person pronouns, the more formal *you* and the more familiar *thou*. As shown from the quote above, Petruchio more frequently transitions between the second-person pronouns while Katherine maintains the distant *you*, until the end when she returns Petruchio's love. I argue that Petruchio's taming of Katherine is paralleled in the adjusted semantics, which eventually changes their relationship from passionate indignation to mutual adoration.

## Introduction

Today, we look at the *thou* usage as an archaic form of the second-person pronoun; however, before and during the late fifteenth century, there was a distinction of formality between *thou* and *you*. In Old and Middle English, *thou* was the singular second-person pronoun and *ye* was the plural form. Originally, the change between these two pronouns only represented a shift in the singular or the plural. According to J. M. Pressley, this changed after the Norman Conquest in 1066, when the English lexicon was altered by association with French (Pressley). The introduction of the French *tu/vous* morphed the usage of *thou/you* to show a distinction of formality. While we no longer use this distinction in spoken or written English, Shakespeare was keenly aware of the difference and used it to emphasize his characters' relationships. In the article "Thou and You: A Quantitative Analysis," Ulrich Busse explains that, while it was far more prevalent

in Shakespeare's history plays, there are key moments in his earlier comedies that reveal the true nature of relationships through the second-person pronoun (Busse 2002).

## Development

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio's abidance with and divergence from the *thou/you* rule works in tandem with his taming of Katherine. As previously mentioned, there was a formal distinction between *thou* and *you*. In most cases, those of higher social standing would use *thou* to address someone beneath them (Busse 2002). For example, Baptista addresses Katherine in Act 2, Scene 1 in the *thou* form because he is her father. When Katherine responds with *you*, she admits her subservience to her father. This subtly distinguishes between the social superior and social inferior. According to Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, authors of "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity," the second-person pronouns can be broken down into two meanings: power or solidarity (Brown and Gilman 1960). For example, a king would address his nobles or subjects in the *thou* form to express his power and social superiority. However, depending on the context of the sentence, the informal *thou* form can also represent solidarity or a feeling of intimacy, which breaks down the rules of social hierarchy.

During his first meeting with Katherine in Act 2, Petruchio uses the *thou* form to express his power. Initially, he addresses her with the formal *you* form: "Good morrow, Kate; for that's your name, I hear" (2.1.182). As both Petruchio and Katherine come from the same social class, the *you* form is an appropriate use of the second-person pronoun. However, when Petruchio brings up the subject of their marriage, he shifts from the formal *you* to the informal *thou* form. He bluntly states, "Marry, so I mean, sweet Katherine, in thy bed . . . Thou must be married to no man but me" (2.1.264–272). In the context of this sentence, Petruchio stakes his claim as Katherine's future husband. The *thou*

serves to remind Katherine that her husband would have power and authority over her, according to the patriarchal model of the Elizabethan society. This is illustrated in his mention of her bed, suggesting the duties of a wife to her husband. Petruchio administers this reminder during what should be a time used for wooing Katherine. This shift in semantics is part of Petruchio's unorthodox taming process. The familiar *thou* form is a reminder of her role to him as a spouse. As expressed in the example with her father, Petruchio is not the first man who attempts to tame Katherine with semantics; however, his method is successful because he also utilizes the rule of solidarity when addressing Katherine.

While Petruchio utilizes the *thou* form to express an unspoken hierarchy, he also uses it to express a feeling of familiarity or solidarity. According to Brown and Gilman, the *thou* usage not only marks power but also solidarity when used in the correct social context. When characters are addressing someone from their same class, they can use *thou* to express familiarity and intimacy. Brown and Gilman argue that "breaking the norms of solidarity generally means that the speaker temporarily thinks of the other as an outsider or as an intimate; it means that sympathy is extended or withdrawn" (Brown and Gilman 1960, 275). Petruchio breaks the set pattern of solidarity in his first conversation with Katherine to force a feeling of intimacy. In doing so, Petruchio sets himself apart from other men in the play who tried and failed to tame Katherine. Referring back to their first encounter, Petruchio declares, "You are call'd plain Kate / And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst . . ." (2.1. 185–194). This is Petruchio and Katherine's initial meeting, which makes them strangers. For this reason, he originally maintains the distant and unfamiliar *you*. Notably, Petruchio uses the *you* form while summarizing the names other characters call Katherine as if to imply that all other characters in the play view her as an outsider. Yet in the next line, Petruchio transitions into the intimate *thou* form when he says, "Thy virtues spoke of, and thy beauties sounded / Yet not so deeply as to thee belongs / Myself

am mov'd to woo thee for my wife" (2.1. 192–194). Here and throughout the rest of this conversation, Petruchio breaks the rule of solidarity in order to express a deep sense of intimacy that is not established from any previous acquaintance or feelings of mutual affection from Katherine, who instead maintains the distant *you*. In this context, Petruchio uses the *thou* form as a lover.

According to Heidi Quinn, author of *The Distribution of Pronoun Case Forms in English*, the *thou* form also carries a mood or tone that can change the historical semantics. While there is a historical semantic use of *thou/you*, many scholars have started analyzing the *thou/you* forms pragmatically. I argue, like Andreas H. Jucker in her article "Thou in the History of English: A Case for Historical Semantics or Pragmatics," that both must be used in order to understand the scope of Petruchio and Katherine's relationship (Jucker 2000, 155). Due to the inconsistency of the familiar *thou* usage, it is easy to view the tone or mood as mocking sincerity. While Petruchio mocks and teases Katherine throughout this scene and the rest of the play, the *thou* form conveys a sense of sincerity and love. In moments of exasperation, clarification, or witty repartee, Petruchio will drop the *thou* form and engage in verbal sparring with Katherine. For example, he states, "Come, come, you wasp; i' faith, you are too angry" (2.1.209). He keeps the rules of solidarity to respond to her cutting remark, but he always returns to the *thou* form when resuming his wooing, speaking in a lover's tone. Overall, Petruchio uses the rule of solidarity in his attempt to tame Katherine. Petruchio's abidance to the rule of power was effective in expressing his role as her future husband, but other characters failed in their attempt to tame Katherine because they only used that method. By breaking the rule of solidarity to express intimacy, Petruchio also took on the role of a lover and created a tone of sincerity through the usage of *thou*.

It seems contradictory that Petruchio subverts Katherine while also speaking to her intimately; however, these inversions appear not only in the second-person pronouns, but as a part of his character. Pe-

truchio brags to the audience that his method of taming “is a way to kill a wife with kindness” (4.1.196). The contradictory semantics mirror the fundamental contradictions of Petruchio himself like when he says, “Thy beauty, that doth make me like thee well / Thou must be married to no man but me / For I am he born to tame you, Kate” (2.2.271–273). Initially, he breaks the rule of solidarity to express his admiration of Katherine’s beauty; then, in the next line, he follows the rule of power by claiming his role as her husband and superior. However, both contradictions are done in the name of “taming,” as Petruchio states in the final line. In his article “Bewitching the Shrew,” Robert Schules claims that Petruchio uses “demonic inversions to mock, mirror, and thus cure Katherine’s witch-like contraventions of patriarchal norms” (Schules 2004, 388). These contradictions are seen not only in Petruchio’s wild character but also in his deployment of the second-person pronouns. It is only through these contradictions in both semantics and character that Petruchio is able to tame Katherine.

Katherine consistently and defiantly uses the formal *you* until the end of the play when she transitions from shrew to wife. Staying true to her character, Katherine maintains the distant *you* when addressing other characters, but especially when addressing Petruchio. Katherine is separated from the other characters not only by her outlandish behavior but also by her consistent use of the *you* form. In this sense, she treats everyone as an outsider. When arguing with Bianca at the beginning of Act 2, she uses the formal *you*, expressing her strained relationship with her sister. The same is true with Petruchio. While Petruchio transitions from the *you* and *thou* forms, Katherine maintains the formal distance of *you*, subsequently treating Petruchio as a stranger. Throughout the course of the play and Petruchio’s taming, Katherine eventually begins to mirror his usage of the second-person pronoun. In Act 4, Scene 5, Petruchio refers to the stars as the moon and a man as a gentlewoman. He baits Katherine by asking her, “Hast thou beheld a fresher gentlewoman?” to which Katherine replies, “Young budding virgin, fair and fresh and sweet / Whither away, or

where is thy abode?" This moment marks a transition in their relationship because Katherine follows the same second-person pronoun as Petruchio. Essentially, she expresses solidarity in the same manner as Petruchio, reciprocating his feelings. When they finally return to Baptista's house, Petruchio tells Katherine to kiss him. She hesitates but eventually states, "I will give thee a kiss; now pray thee, love, stay." Before this point, Marianne L. Novy explains that Katherine had been playing along with Petruchio's game of contradictions (Novy 1979). However, this is the first moment in the text where she addresses Petruchio with the intimate *thou* followed by the endearing term "love." While Katherine used the *thou* form earlier, this moment marks a significant change in the tone of the address. In this scene, Katherine and Petruchio show mutual adoration, which is apparent in the *thou* use.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, the historical semantics of the second-person pronouns *thou* and *you* address the transitions between power and solidarity in Petruchio's taming of Katherine. Through the semantic contradictions and Petruchio's unorthodox actions, Petruchio changes Katherine's indignation to adoration. Katherine's use of the intimate *thou* expresses not only her compliance with Petruchio's games, but also her feelings of sincere love towards Petruchio. The minor transitions in the second-person pronoun appear to be inconsequential but it shows a subtle change in the attitude and feelings of these two passionate characters.

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