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PETRUCCIO

Who is Petruccio?

- Petruccio, a gentleman of Verona, is a friend of Hortensio, and has come to Padua looking for a rich wife. He is persuaded to marry Katherina.
- Once married, he takes Katherina to his house, where he bullies the servants and ensures she gets no food.
- When she finally agrees to be ruled by him, he lays a bet on her obedience.

Study focus: A role for a star

It is easy to appreciate that Petruccio is a spectacular role for a charismatic actor. However, for anyone watching and reading the play today, there is a problem: we are enormously entertained by Petruccio, but often repelled by what he says and does. His theatricality is engaging – he is aware of himself as a performer, and clearly enjoys showing off. Sometimes his acts are **farcical** (the wedding ceremony, his behaviour with the tailor and the haberdasher) and sometimes he is the source of **slapstick** comedy. Occasionally, he bursts into song.

He is also gifted with language. His speeches in Act I Scene 2 are full of macho boastfulness, but also witty, as if he does not take himself seriously. At times his language is surprisingly poetic (like his descriptions of Katherina at their first meeting). This verbal dexterity does not necessarily make us like him, but we can enjoy the theatrical skill with which he presents himself. How exactly the audience responds to Petruccio depends on whether the actor emphasises the character's sinister and violent aspects as well as his energy and playfulness. There are elements of all these qualities in his characterisation.

A02

KEY INTERPRETATION

A05

A stage tradition of Petruccio brandishing a whip began in the eighteenth century. It features in the 1953 film of the musical adaptation *Kiss me, Kate*, where Petruccio uses it to lasso Katherina.

KEY CONNECTION

A01

In 1611 John Fletcher wrote a sequel to the play, *The Tamer Tamed*, in which the gender roles are reversed. Petruccio, now a widower, marries Maria. She loves him but is determined to end his bullying ways. As Fletcher's use of the character indicates, Petruccio has always appealed to the imagination – but his conduct evidently troubled some of Shakespeare's own younger contemporaries.

The fortune hunter

Within moments of his arrival on stage, Petruccio announces that he is seeking a wealthy wife. Taming Katherina is certainly financially rewarding. Petruccio's expenses are paid by Bianca's suitors, anxious to get Katherina out of the way. Not only does he win the wager in the final scene, but Baptista, impressed by the transformation of his daughter, offers a second dowry. The male characters generally behave as if Petruccio is performing a public service for which he deserves a fee. However, his unashamed interest in money is honest; the suitors of Bianca never really acknowledge that they are trying to buy her.

Swagger or cunning?

Petruccio's presumption leaves Katherina and the audience dumbfounded. He storms in like a pirate to claim his bride. Although his wild clothing and strange antics at the wedding make the audience laugh, this **protagonist** is preparing us for the resolute rule he outlines to the wedding guests in Act III Scene 2 (see lines 223–40). We can never doubt that Petruccio intends to be master of what he owns, and is prepared to take on a role and work hard to achieve his aims. He is extremely single-minded, never once admitting that Katherina has her own point of view.

Petruccio's aims

What does Petruccio really want? The ambitions he describes are quite ordinary. They are, **ironically**, at odds with the swashbuckling persona he assumes. He says that he wants domestic peace and harmony. All the noise and chaos he causes are intended to secure a quiet life at home. So how does he ensure he achieves it? Mainly by sheer will: he doggedly and persistently asserts that everything is the opposite of what it seems, leaving Katherina baffled. But also, perhaps, through play. His insistence that Katherina greets Vincentio as a sweet young girl, for instance, seems an invitation to have fun – if Katherina can suppress her instinct to say no to everything.

Teacher or bully?



The other male characters evidently approve of his taming strategy: all are willing to assist this most masculine and dominant male. For of course, as a man, Petruccio's eccentric behaviour is socially permissible, while Katherina's is not. His **soliloquy** in Act IV suggests he sees himself as teacher and educator. His use of **imagery** from hawking implies he has skill and patience. But it also suggests his concern with his reputation as a man who can exert full control.

His behaviour implies a masculine brute force and desire to dominate. He directs a good deal of violence at his subordinates. Some of this is pretence, in which they all join, to mirror to Katherina her own disorderly behaviour. But it also reminds her what he can do, if he chooses. If Petruccio does not beat his

wife, she certainly suffers physically. The neglect and insults of her father's house are replaced by deprivation: no food, no sleep, no new clothes.

Is Petruccio happy with his success?

Petruccio does not use the word 'love' – although the word is arguably trivialised by some of the other characters. By the end of the play he is clearly satisfied with the wife he has moulded. He seems to seek kisses for their own sake, rather than using them to humiliate her, as at the wedding, or to test her. In the final scene he speaks not just of her obedience but of her '**new-built virtue**' (line 124). This suggests that he values more than her willingness to follow commands. Perhaps he realises that she understands his concern to see through externals like clothes and polite manners, unlike the other new husbands and wives.

Key quotations: Petruccio

A01

When Petruccio first sees his old friend Hortensio, he says, '**I come to wive it wealthy in Padua**' (I.2.74). This is an aim from which he never swerves. His final words are, '**And being a winner, God give you good night**.' (V.2.193)

'Winner' sums up Petruccio, who at no point seems vulnerable. This can alienate the audience. If at any point his own happiness was at stake, the possibility of a genuine partnership within this marriage would seem more real to us.

A05 KEY INTERPRETATION

Petruccio's bizarre horse in Act III Scene 2 is an offstage accessory to his eccentric wedding outfit. It has also been interpreted as an image of his own inflated and eccentric character, or of Katherina as an exhausted animal. There is a very detailed analysis of its significance in Peter Heaney's article 'Petruchio's Horse: Equine and Household Mismanagement in *The Taming of the Shrew*', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 4.1 (May, 1998).

A04 KEY CONNECTION

Shakespeare's later comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*, has sometimes been seen as an attempt to revisit and modernise *The Taming of the Shrew*. Rather than forcing a woman into conformity, the Petruccio-like hero Benedick risks his reputation and his male friendships out of love for the fiery Beatrice. He ranges himself on the side of the women against his male companions, who have condemned the innocent lady Hero for unchastity – an extraordinary action for an early modern male.

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

Five key areas

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. The structure of your answer/essay

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follows up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow. Aim to present an overall argument or conceptual response to the task, not a series of unconnected points.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

Aiming high: Effective opening paragraphs

Let's imagine you have been asked the following question:

'Comedy is about the correction of ordinary, flawed characters.' To what extent is this true of Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*?

Here's an example of a successful opening paragraph:

Gets straight to the point

Early in the play this idea seems to be borne out by Hortensio when, hoping Petruccio will marry Katherina and free Bianca to marry him, he explains that Katherina's 'only fault' is that she is 'intolerable curst'. However, Hortensio is arguably the worst judge of character in the play, idolising Bianca, then hating her and rushing into marriage with the Widow who shows no sign of the 'kindness' he professes to value in women. While Katherina does change in the play, I would argue that to see it as the story of her comic 'correction' is to read it far too simplistically. All kinds of false ideas and false personas are demolished in *The Taming of the Shrew* and it is important to understand how the story of her 'taming' relates to them.

Sets up some interesting ideas that will be tackled in subsequent paragraphs

2. Use of titles, names, etc.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with quotation marks and capitals as appropriate. For example, *In Act II of 'The Taming of the Shrew'...*
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' or 'play', rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

3. Effective quotations

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant and not too long (you are going to have to memorise them, so that will help you select shorter ones!)
- Integrated into your argument/sentence
- Linked to effect and implications

Aiming high: Effective use of quotations

Here is an example of an effective use of a quotation about Katherina's shrewishness in the play.

short, relevant quotation, embedded in sentence

Describing Katherina to Petruccio, Hortensio says he 'would not wed her for a mine of gold'. This demonstrates the dislike for Katherina shown by all the Paduan men in the play. But it also alerts us to the way money shapes the destinies of women, and the effect of this on their behaviour.

explicit meaning

inferred meaning

Remember – quotations can be one or two single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

4. Techniques and terminology

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions, critical theories or people (for example, 'paradox', 'metatheatrical', 'feminism' or 'Aristotle') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly

5. General writing skills

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view ('Katherina is an angry person'), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

Note the professional approach here in the choice of vocabulary and awareness of the effect on the reader:

Katherina's first appearance shows her hurling insults and making threats at those around her, but we also have some sense of her motivation: her father has made a 'stale' of her, holding her up to ridicule in front of the men who are there in order to court her sister.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Answer the question set, not the question you'd like to have been asked. Examiners say that often students will be set a question on one character (for example, Katherina) but end up writing almost as much about another (such as Petruccio). Or they write about one aspect of the question (for example, 'correction') but ignore another (such as 'comedy'). **Stick to the question, and answer all parts of it.**

EXAMINER'S TIP

It's important to remember that *The Taming of the Shrew* is a text created by Shakespeare – thinking about the choices Shakespeare makes with language and plotting will not only alert you to his methods as a playwright but also his intentions, i.e. the effect he seeks to create.