AMIRREZA HAMDI[1]

# SOLDIER KATE, DISABLED IN A FLAWED LOGIC OF RELATIONS

ABSTRACT

This article examines Katherine's portrayal in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594) through the lens of disability studies, highlighting the intersection of disability, gender, and societal norms in early modern England. By reading Katherine's limping as a literal disability and her shrewishness as a metaphorical and humoral form of behavioral excess, the paper situates her within complex relational dynamics shaped by early modern medical, economic, and patriarchal logics. Drawing on Galenic humoral theory—particularly the associations between choler, emotional volatility, and bodily imbalance—the analysis shows how Katherine's conduct is rendered legible as a condition requiring regulation rather than resistance. Engaging theoretical frameworks such as Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic logic, Lennard J. Davis's narrative prosthesis and dismodernism, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theories of staring and extraordinary bodies, and Gail Kern Paster's humoralism, the article demonstrates how Shakespeare mobilizes disability as both a narrative device and a mechanism of normalization. The study further critiques Petruchio's role in reinforcing these norms, reading his disciplinary tactics as quasi-therapeutic practices aligned with humoral regimes of correction, while also exposing his dependence on economic exchange and external validation. Ultimately, the paper argues that Katherine's apparent transformation into compliance reflects the operation of patriarchal and ableist structures that medicalize gendered deviance, even as her moments of resistance reveal the unstable foundations of early modern norms of embodiment, authority, and order.

KEY WORDS: *The Taming of the Shrew,* disability, ableism, relational dynamics, humoralism, assemblage, proto-clinical.

[1] Amirreza Hamdi is PhD candidate in English Literature. He holds a Master's degree in Language and English Literature from Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, and a Bachelor's degree in the same majors from Kharazmi University, Tehran.

## INTRODUCTION

Disability studies, encompassing a wide range of historical, artistic, philosophical, and sociological perspectives, seek to illuminate forms of bodily and behavioral difference that have often remained invisible or ineligible within dominant cultural narratives. As scholars such as Lennard J. Davis,[2] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson,[3] David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder,[4] and Tobin Siebers[5] argue in their works, disability should be understood not as an individual deficit but as a socially and culturally produced category shaped by norms of productivity, legibility, and value. Central to this field is the ethical imperative to foreground disabled experience itself, rather than privileging those who merely observe, manage, or narrate it. Interestingly, although disability studies is a relatively recent field, its critical frameworks have been productively applied to early modern texts to illuminate how bodily difference, deviance, and social value were historically constructed rather than biologically given, following David Houston Wood's[6] approach. Such an approach does not impose anachronistic categories on Renaissance literature broadly; rather, it clarifies the mechanisms through which early modern societies regulated bodies and behaviors in ways that continue to resonate. Therefore bodily difference, by never being neutral or only physical in early modern England, shaped how subjects were valued, disciplined, and remembered. As David Houston Wood observes, disability in Shakespeare's drama operates at the intersection of oppression and subject formation:

> In Shakespeare's work, such discourses tend to function politically in situating disability at the nexus of the particularities of oppression and the construction of the subject, in that they often derive from classical concepts of the aesthetic; medieval concepts of the marvelous; theological concepts involving the radical reordering of personhood wrought by the Reformation; and medical concepts of pathology hinging on the supple explanatory system of humoral theory.[7]

Disability in the period encompassing far more than visible physical impairment included lameness, speech and mobility differences, excessive affect, verbal aggression, and gendered deviations in conduct that humoral medicine, legal custom, and social convention read as signs of imbalance or disorder. Disability could therefore manifest as corporeal irregularity or as socially legible deviance in temperament and comportment. Furthermore, during the sixteenth and seventeenth

2 Lennard J Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2006).

3 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1996).

4 David T. Mitchell, and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (University of Michigan Press, 2000).

5 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

6 David Houston Wood, "Shakespeare and Disability Studies," *Literature Compass* 8, no. 5 (May 2011).

7 Ibid., 280.

centuries, as Natasha Korda[8] and Wiesner-Hanks[9] state, domestic tasks traditionally performed by women increasingly became commercialized and professionalized within male-dominated trades. Women who failed—or were perceived as unable—to perform these tasks risked entering what may be understood as disabling relational economies, in which bodily difference was measured against productivity. For women with disabilities, this shift imposed a double burden: their social worth depended not only on gender conformity but also on their capacity to contribute to production rather than consumption. Accordingly, Lena Cowen Orlin[10] notes, a woman with a visible impairment, such as a limp, might still be deemed valuable if she could perform domestic labor efficiently. This logic reveals the entanglement of ableism, economic utility, and gendered exploitation where its dynamics were intensified by early modern medical discourse, particularly humoral theory as discussed by Gail Kern Paster,[11] inherited from classical medicine and widely accepted throughout the period. Human temperament was believed to arise from the balance of the four humors—blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile—each associated with specific qualities and affects. Consequently, deviations in conduct, including irritability, verbal volatility, or aggression, were commonly interpreted as signs of humoral imbalance rather than purely moral failure. Noteworthy, these humors were also gendered: women were associated with coldness and moisture, while heat and dryness were coded as masculine, rendering female excess especially suspect.

Within this framework, Katherine's characterization in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594) becomes legible as a form of embodied irregularity. Her sharp speech, intensity, and forcefulness align with an excess of choler—the hot, dry humor associated with quick temper and unruly expression. Reading Katherine through humoral theory positions her behavior not as mere comic exaggeration or moral obstinacy, but as a recognizable bodily and emotional disequilibrium to Shakespeare's contemporaries, intersecting with early modern notions of disability. Modern disability studies further sharpen this reading, and concepts such as Mitchell and Snyder's[12] "narrative prosthesis" help explain how bodily or behavioral difference propels plot and character formation, while Garland-Thomson's work[13] on "staring" and legibility illuminates how characters like Katherine are rendered readable, visible, and correctable on stage. These frameworks clarify how Renaissance drama mobilizes disability as a narrative and ideological tool rather than a purely medical condition.

8 Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 51–54.

9 Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 87-90.

10 Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

11 Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean* Stage (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

12 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis.*

13 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

*The Taming of the Shrew* stages this logic through two interwoven plotlines: the competition among Bianca's suitors and Petruchio's aggressive courtship of Katherine. The play dramatizes marriage as a form of social policing. Petruchio's tactics—deprivation, contradiction, and public correction—function as disciplinary strategies aimed at normalizing Katherine's perceived deviance. Her limping, verbal aggression, and resistance to gendered expectations mark her as unruly, while the play frames their correction as both comic resolution and social necessity. In what follows, I analyze Petruchio's taming strategies and Katherine's comportment through the combined lenses of humoral theory and disability studies, demonstrating how the play medicalizes, disciplines, and narrativizes deviance—and how Katherine's behavior becomes legible as a form of early modern disability rather than merely a personal flaw.

## THE LIMPING SHREW: RETHINKING KATHERINE'S IDENTITY

Previously, scholarship has chiefly debated whether Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* should be read as disabled. This article redirects that debate away from classificatory diagnosis and toward the cultural, humoral, and relational implications of Katherine's limping. Rather than asking whether she fits a modern disability category, I examine how her limp functions narratively and interpersonally—sometimes invoked, sometimes elided, and frequently neutralized through her theatrical performance of reckless defiance. In short, Katherine's imprudent behavior often operates to overshadow—and thereby regulate—the bodily difference her limp signals. It should be emphasized that "disability" in the early modern period does not correspond neatly to contemporary classificatory models. The accounts of bodily difference routinely fused moral, social, and religious judgment with medical explanation rather than isolating functional impairment as a discrete condition discussed by Wood[14] and Orlin.[15] Within Shakespearean drama, bodily and behavioral deviations function as deliberate dramaturgical strategies, generating not only comic effect but also sustained social tension and unease.

Alongside Wood and Orlin, scholars such as Katharine A. Craik and Tanya Pollard[16] have explored disability in Shakespeare's comedies, demonstrating how physical difference is frequently mobilized to structure character relations and reinforce social hierarchies. Taken together, these approaches highlight how disability can profoundly shape representation and understanding in the minds of readers and viewers, serving as a foundation for revealing deeper truths about Katherine's life and character. Her difference becomes a cornerstone of the play's ability to challenge gendered expectations of the Renaissance period and foster

14 David Houston Wood, "Shakespeare and Disability Studies."

15 Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England*.

16 Katharine A Craik, and Tanya Pollard, eds. *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

meaningful insights.

These accounts collectively suggest that "disability" is produced less through anatomy alone than through repeated acts of social interpretation. Katherine's difference in *The Taming of the Shrew,* therefore, takes shape not simply in her body but within the play's performative economy, where she is persistently positioned as a figure of behavioral excess and social disruption. Her quick temper, verbal aggression, and physical retaliation—striking Bianca, her younger sister, breaking instruments, shouting down suitors—mark her as a woman who violates early modern expectations of silence, modesty, and obedience, rendering her socially "abnormal." Characters label her "devil," "hilding," "fiend of hell," and "shrew," demonstrating that her conduct is read not merely as unpleasant but as categorically outside the bounds of normative femininity. In a culture that demanded female docility, Katherine's refusal to accept courtship scripts, her resistance to male authority, and her unwillingness to perform submissive gestures render her socially illegible and publicly atypical.

These condemnatory responses are further authorized and intensified by early modern humoral medicine during what Gail Kern Paster[17] describes as early modern England's proto-scientific engagement with humoral physiology. Early modern audiences would likely have understood Katherine's volatility through the framework of humoral imbalance, particularly an excess of choler—the hot and dry humor associated with anger, verbal aggression, and impulsive behavior. As Paster explains, humoral theory did not merely describe bodily states but operated as a cultural system for interpreting emotion, morality, and social conduct on the stage. Within Galenic medicine, women were conventionally imagined as physiologically colder and moister than men, a constitution believed to render them especially vulnerable to emotional excess, instability, and forms of behavioral disorder often glossed as "madness." Paster emphasizes that such beliefs authorized the interpretation of women's unruly speech and affect as symptoms of bodily malfunction rather than rational response.[18] As she explains, the humoral body was understood as porous and reactive—continually shaped by emotion, environment, and social interaction—so that emotional excess appeared as evidence of imbalance rather than conscious dissent. In this framework, Katherine's "shrewishness" becomes legible as a symptom of choleric overflow, a condition that demands regulation rather than dialogue. Her anger is thus medicalized, transformed from a meaningful response to familial coercion into a bodily fault requiring correction.

This humoral reading also helps explain the urgency with which male characters seek to contain Katherine's behavior. Because humoral imbalance was believed to threaten not only the individual body but the social body as a whole, Katherine's volatility registers as a contagious risk to domestic and civic order. As

17 Paster, *Humoring the Body,* 17–36.

18 Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Paster notes,[19] early modern drama frequently stages shame, discipline, and correction as necessary responses to bodily excess, particularly in women whose conduct disrupts normative hierarchies. Petruchio's interventions—regulating Katherine's diet, sleep, and emotional expression—closely resemble contemporary humoral practices aimed at restoring balance through environmental control and habitual discipline rather than by addressing underlying injustice.

While humoral medicine provides a proto-clinical vocabulary for condemning Katherine's difference, it cannot fully explain the relational processes through which her bodily and behavioral irregularities acquire meaning. To understand how Katherine becomes legible as "disabled," it is necessary to examine the social assemblages through which early modern bodies were interpreted, delimited, and governed. Katherine's condition does not exist in isolation; it is produced through the perceptions, placements, and responses of those around her. Drawing on relational and disciplinary frameworks developed by Michel Foucault,[20] Deleuze and Guattari,[21] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson,[22] Mitchell and Snyder,[23] and Lennard J. Davis,[24] this section treats disability as an effect of social organization rather than an intrinsic bodily state. From these perspectives, Katherine's deviation from expected feminine behavior marks her as a figure to be disciplined, corrected, or excluded. Her loud voice, physical assertiveness, and refusal to conform make her a "problem body"—one whose perceived irregularity justifies the narrative machinery of correction. Within this framework, Katherine's behavior functions as a socially constructed disability rather than an intrinsic defect.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's concept of *narrative prosthesis*, alongside Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's insights into legibility through *staring*[25] provide a helpful methodology for reading the play. These theorists show how non-normative embodiments are mobilized narratively, displacing other forms of meaning so that disability becomes an engine for plot and characterization—at once disruptive and instrumental. In this light, Katherine's "shrewishness" functions metaphorically as a disability that authorizes corrective social practices. Davis's account of the "antinational physical type" further clarifies how, in modernity, normative bodies come into being through exclusion; applied historically, this framework highlights how early modern norms similarly produce their own oppositional types. Davis's claim that "Ableism is not the result of prejudiced people but rather an effect of

19 Ibid., 28–31.

20 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).

21 Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

22 Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies.*

23 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis.*

24 Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2006).

25 David T. Mitchell, and Sharon L. Snyder, "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor," *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 15–30.

modernity itself,"[26] clarifies how Katherine comes to represent the abnormal, deviant, or undesirable opposite of the idealized "national" body in early modern England, a figure imagined as requiring correction through ableist logics, metaphorical rather than literal.

Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari's[27] rhizomatic model of subjectivity offers a useful vocabulary for understanding corrective social practices as relationally produced rather than centrally imposed. Throughout the play, Katherine's sense of self becomes entangled with the social relations around her—her father, her sister, and most significantly Petruchio—such that her identity appears less as an autonomous essence than as a node within an assemblage shaped by economic, familial, and legal logics. Broadly, Katherine's onstage interactions generate the meanings by which she is judged, as spectatorship, law, economy, and humoral diagnosis converge to interpret her body and speech. Domestically, Katherine's father Baptista's treatment of her is crucial to understanding the familial enforcement of societal norms. For instance, when Kate rages because Petruchio does not arrive on time for the wedding, and though she exits weeping, her father's sympathy turns the moment into an involuntary joke against her: "Go, girl. I cannot blame thee now to weep / For such an injury would vex a very saint, / Much more a shrew of thy impatient humor" (3.1.27–29). Her anger and tears are thus reinterpreted by others as proof of a defective temperament rather than signs of injury or legitimate grievance. This logic further explains why Katherine's limp functions not merely as a bodily feature but as a relational marker: it is activated, amplified, or minimized according to the interpretive needs of others. Even before the wedding scene, when Petruchio insists that they leave without a wedding feast, Katherine refuses to go; her language stages both resistance and comic exposure:

> KATHERINE. Nay then,
> Do what thou canst, I will not go today!
> No, nor tomorrow—not till I please myself.
> The door is open, sir, there lies your way;
> You may be jogging whiles your boots are green.
> For me, I'll not be gone till I please myself.
> 'Tis like you'll prove a jolly surly groom
> That take it on you at the first so roundly.
> PETRUCHIO. O Kate, content thee; prithee be not angry.
> KATHERINE. I will be angry. What hast thou to do?—Father, be quiet. He shall stay my leisure (3.2.196–206).

26 Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (Verso, 2002).

27 Gilles, Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Similarly, Petruchio's condemnation of Katherine's behavior can be illuminated through Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon,[28] a model of disciplinary power in which individuals internalize surveillance and regulate themselves accordingly. This framework is useful here because the play dramatizes a form of early modern patriarchal surveillance in which Katherine is placed under constant observation, her nonconformity marked as a threat to domestic order. When Hortensio, a suitor of Bianca, who later abandons romantic pursuit in favor of a wealthy widow—exclaims, "For shame, thou hilding of a devilish spirit, / Why dost thou wrong her that did ne'er wrong thee?" (2.1), he condemns Katherine's behavior and positions her as an outsider within her family and community. Using Foucault's panoptic model—in which power is both visible and unverifiable, omnipresent yet elusive—we can argue that Petruchio, Baptista, Hortensio, and the male spectators collectively position Katherine at the center of scrutiny, exercising control to refine and reshape her in their image.[29] For instance, when Hortensio reveals that he has been injured and "his head broke," Baptista responds with a question: "What, will my daughter prove a good musician?" Hortensio humorously retorts, "I think she'll sooner prove a soldier!" (2.1.68-70). This remark suggests that society has, in effect, "made" Katherine into a soldier, forcing her to adopt a combative stance in order to survive within a world that persistently reads her as the *other*. Perhaps she should abandon her self-identity and conform to the role of a soldier, one who fights back against the constraints placed on her, regardless of her legs being of different lengths. This broader economy of surveillance finds its most concentrated form within Petruchio's household, which operates as a disciplinary space rather than merely a theatrical setting. There, Petruchio converts observation into regimen: he withholds food and sleep, isolates Katherine from allies, stages public tests of obedience, and contradicts her perceptions to unsettle her bodily rhythms and cognitive certainty. These practices anticipate later institutional logics in which deprivation and regulation were justified as corrective techniques. Petruchio's domestic order thus functions as a proto-clinical regime, treating Katherine's behavior as a condition to be managed and normalized, and allowing him to assert authority by staging her "reform."

This tension between conformity and deviance is further articulated through the contrast between Katherine and Bianca, who embody opposing ideals of femininity in the early modern period—one marked as unruly and in need of correction, the other idealized as passive, marriageable, and thus economically and socially valuable. According to Mendelson and Crawford,[30] in the sixteenth century, such ideals were often tied to the regulation of female speech, chastity, and household obedience, with shrewishness representing a breach of both social harmony and

28 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.*

29 Ibid., 195–228.

30 Sara Mendelson, and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 24–28.

patriarchal inheritance structures. Katherine's assertiveness and defiance thus render her socially "disabled" within the very structures that idealize Bianca. Bianca, in contrast, reflects the emerging hegemonic image of the "normative" female: compliant, sexually desirable, and positioned for reproductive futurity. Her compliance with these norms, coupled with her role as the submissive, marriageable woman, places her in direct alignment with the hegemonic human ideal: the rational animal endowed with language. Katherine, by resisting this role, embodies what Sylvia Wynter calls the "unbearable wrongness of being,"[31] a metaphorical disability that must be corrected to restore social order. Her final speech in Act 5, Scene 2, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper" (5.2), signals the resolution of her difference; whether sincere obedience or strategic performance, it indicates the cost of becoming legible as an acceptable wife within patriarchal parameters: bodily irregularity and unruly speech must be suppressed or reinterpreted. The play's resolution thus stages a normalization achieved through coercive means.

All these moments are doubly legible: they reveal Katherine's agency, however fleeting, while simultaneously functioning as public evidence of her deviance. The laughter these moments provoke, among characters and spectators alike, is not neutral; it actively contributes to the production of normalcy by marking Katherine as the primary target of correction. Accordingly, Ann Blake[32] argues that despite the play's long history of popularity and adaptation, its critical standing has often remained uneasy, largely because of its proximity to farce. This unease is especially evident in scenes such as Petruchio's behavior in his country house, where his attempts to "tame" Katherine are staged through exaggerated antics: dishes of food are brought only to be whisked away, water is spilled, and servants are beaten. These moments underscore the play's farcical surface even as they expose the violence that underwrites its comedy. Blake contends that there is little ethical space to laugh at Katherine, given the troubling nature of her treatment, which includes physical coercion, public humiliation, and the ethically fraught "rape"[33] scene. Such moments, she suggests, are frequently experienced as tragic rather than comic, raising the possibility that the play's violence ultimately overwhelms its comedic framework.

One source of this tragic pressure, I argue, lies in Katherine's disability—her limping and her shrewishness—which Shakespeare briefly but pointedly introduces without sustained elaboration. The spareness of this reference does not diminish its force; rather, it heightens Katherine's vulnerability and sharpens the social stakes of her treatment, signaling an awareness of how bodily difference shapes perception, ridicule, and control. For instance, when Katherine leads her sister Bianca onto the

31 Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for Our Territory, and Re-Imprisoned," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2006): 114.

32 A. Blake, "The Taming of the Shrew: Making Fun of Katherine," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Sept. 2002): 237–52.

33 The term "rape" here follows critical interpretations of the scene, indicating Petruchio's coercive treatment and enforced marital authority over Katherine, as understood in early modern contexts.

stage with her hands tied and then strikes her, the audience laughs. Katherine's fury is turned into a spectacle, with her temper becoming the subject of ridicule. This reflects a broader societal tendency to perpetuate Katherine's shrewishness as part of the logic of relations within the play. Even the audience, as a collective interpretive body, contributes to this cycle by laughing at her behavior, reinforcing the structures that define her as deviant. This understated acknowledgment complicates the play's farcical surface, exposing how laughter repeatedly masks physical and psychological violence and how patriarchal norms convert vulnerability into spectacle. In this sense, Blake's critique is central: the uneasy convergence of comedy and cruelty renders the play's treatment of Katherine ethically fraught, forcing readers and audiences to confront the cost of farce when it is built upon bodily and gendered difference.

Furthermore, Susan Anderson[34] examines how early modern theatre reframes disability as both metaphor and performance, blending rhetorical concepts such as "lame verses" with embodied representations of lameness on stage. Drawing on Tobin Siebers's disability theory,[35] which conceptualizes disability through "complex embodiment" as simultaneously material and socially constructed, Anderson argues that textual reference and corporeal enactment must be read together in order to grasp the full significance of lameness in early modern drama. Her analysis identifies multiple categories of lameness and demonstrates that, although "lame" typically carries negative connotations in relation to both bodily movement and poetic form, these associations do not operate uniformly in theatrical contexts. Instead, staged lameness often functions variably and relationally, inviting interpretation while simultaneously resisting fixed classification. Anderson's emphasis on variability—an approach that moves beyond a rigid ability/disability binary—illuminates how certain characters appear both marked by lameness and yet not wholly defined by it. Reading through the entanglement of bodily difference with social constraint and contingent agency, this framework clarifies Katherine's limping as neither purely intrinsic nor purely symbolic. Rather, her limp is produced and activated within a network of familial, marital, and social relations that continually interpret, exaggerate, or suppress it. Katherine's lameness thus operates not simply as a bodily defect but as a socially legible sign—one that her family, suitors, and husband mobilize for particular narrative and disciplinary ends.

While some scholars argue that Katherine's limp plays a central role in her character's development, other critics, such as Jeffrey R. Wilson,[36] challenge the tendency to read disability into characters where it may not be explicitly necessary. Wilson rejects the idea that Katherine should be read as disabled. He emphasizes that

34 Susan Anderson, "Limping and Lameness on the Early Modern Stage," in *Performing Disability in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Leslie C. Dunn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 185–207.

35 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory,* 25.

36 Jeffrey R Wilson, "The Trouble with Disability in Shakespeare Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1 June 2017).

the interpretation of Katherine as disabled reflects a broader trend in disability studies of projecting disability onto characters unnecessarily.[37] He argues that such readings reduce characters to their disabilities, distort the broader narrative of the play, and perpetuate the very stigmatization they aim to critique. However, this position risks prematurely foreclosing disability as a meaningful analytic category, effectively marginalizing bodily difference as an insignificant aspect of identity. By suggesting that Katherine's potential disability should not shape our reading of *The Taming of the Shrew* because it represents only a small part of the play, he perpetuates a reductive view of disability. He treats it as a minor inconvenience rather than a central, lived experience that profoundly influences Katherine's character and the dynamics of the play.

In sum, reading Katherine through an integrated gender-and-disability framework reveals that her limping, speech, anger and resistance are mutually constitutive: the play repeatedly assembles her as a "problem" to be disciplined—whether framed through humoral pathology (as choleric excess) or through gendered expectations of femininity—even as moments of the text grant her legitimate grievance and tactical agency. Positioning her against Bianca, the compliant one in the family, further clarifies how normalcy is produced through contrast rather than natural essence.

## THE TAMING GAME: PETRUCHIO'S DISABILIZING NEED FOR VALIDATION

Petruchio is not alone in being prone to rages and physical violence; Katherine is also a volatile figure. However, their behaviors differ significantly in how they are perceived. Petruchio's actions, though exaggerated, seem to stem from a recognizable impatience that his servants understand as part of his usual demeanor. Right from the beginning of the play, Petruchio openly declares to Katherine that he was "born to tame you, Kate, / And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate / Conformable as other household Kates" (2.1.269–71). This assertion seems crudely patronizing, especially when considered alongside Natasha Korda's analysis[38] which highlights how Petruchio likens Kate to "household cates"—a term that refers to luxury provisions derived from the Old French *achat*, meaning "purchase," and thus signifying exchange-values rather than products of the home. As Korda explains, "cates" are inherently exchange-values—commodities in the strict economic sense—rather than mere use-values or objects of home production.[39] This reshapes the idea of taming into one of commodification and symbolic manipulation. Kate's limp intensifies this effect—not only is it a physical manifestation of her oppression, but it also underscores societal expectations for women to conform to standards of beauty and behavior to be

37 Ibid., 67.

38 Natasha Korda, "Household Kates: Domesticating Commodities in the Taming of the Shrew," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1996), 109, https://doi.org/10.2307/2871098. Accessed 15 May 2020.

39 Ibid., 52.

productive. Petruchio's manipulation appears to "tame" her, but beneath the surface rituals lies a struggle for selfhood and Katherine's compliance highlights her complex negotiation with a consumer-driven, patriarchal society. This is a milieu where, as Rachel E. Hile[40] analyses, becomes crucial to understand the intersection of disability and gender in order to survive characters like Petruchio who functions as a "subtle Dr. Petruchio," exacerbating Kate's "perceived disability" and positioning himself as the one capable of "curing" or "taming" her. Thus, viewed from the perspective of early modern regimes of knowledge and control, Petruchio functions like a proto-clinician: his rhetoric and practices enact an observer's authority that declares a subject to be "out of order" and then prescribes corrective regimens. Naming Katherine's behavior in diagnostic terms—"mad," "headstrong," "humor," he claims the interpretive right to define her condition. The techniques Petruchio employs should be viewed as regulative practices rather than mere theatrical antics. He withholds food, curtails Katherine's sleep, isolates her from allies, contradicts and gaslights her perceptions, and stages public tests of obedience—interventions that systematically destabilize her bodily rhythms and cognitive certainty. In doing so, he assumes the role of an experimenter, diagnosing and manipulating her conditions to test how deprivation, contradiction, and humiliation alter her comportment.

These actions mirror strategies later used in correctional houses and early-modern institutions, where physical deprivation and psychological pressure were seen as legitimate means of reform. Petruchio's domestic regime thus functions like an experimental clinic: by controlling Katherine's alimentation, rest, social contacts, and sensory environment, Petruchio seeks to reshape her temperament, treating her as an ill subject in need of cure, while defining himself as "abled" by stepping outside the conventional role. This aligns with Lennard J. Davis's concept of *dismodernism,*[41] which challenges the binary of able/disabled. He defines *dismodernism* as a post-identity condition where difference becomes universally shared, with individuals shaped by interdependence, rendering everyone "disabled" in some manner.[42] From this framework, Petruchio's assertion that he was "born to tame" his wife is not only an expression of patriarchal control but also a performance of ability-seeking that is destabilized by his dependence on societal norms and validation—implying that he too is "disabled" if he fails to perform his role. While *dismodernism* explains Petruchio's relational dependence, a humoral reading, alike Katherine's case, further clarifies how his energetic comportment and theatrical authority were culturally authorized on the early modern stage.

Interestingly, Petruchio's energetic swagger and theatrical dominance can be situated within early modern humoral discourse through the predominance of blood as the sanguine humor, associated with warmth, moisture, and an outward-directed sociability that early modern audiences would have read as a mark of spirited

40 Rachel Hile, "Disability and the Characterization of Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Fall 2009).

41 Lennard J Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York University Press, 2002).

42 Ibid., 26.

engagement rather than pathology. In the humoral paradigm that informed Elizabethan medical and theatrical understandings, blood was one of the four cardinal humors that shaped temperament, and a sanguine disposition was thought to produce vivacity, optimism, and social aptitude—qualities culturally legible as masculine virtues on the early modern stage. Such humoral logic did not simply label emotions but provided a materialized language of embodied affect, in which the relative abundance of blood, choler, phlegm, or black bile made individual comportment intelligible to contemporary spectators.[43] In this framework, Petruchio's performative assertions of authority, his playful rhetorical maneuvers, and his command of social interaction align with sanguine comportment, allowing his forceful behavior to function as an authorized emotional register rather than as disorder. Read in this light, Petruchio's humoral constitution reinforces rather than contradicts his role as disciplinarian and social arbiter: while Katherine's choleric temperament is pathologized and regulated, Petruchio's sanguine vitality legitimates his disciplinary practices and positions him—paradoxically and relationally—as the very agent tasked with normalizing Katherine within the play's social order.

Additionally, in terms of economics, right from the outset, Petruchio declares, "I come to wive it wealthily in Padua; / If wealthily, then happily in Padua" (1.2.113–14), signaling that his marriage is also deeply rooted in economic necessity and reliant on Kate's father, Baptista, rather than originating from romance like Bianca's suitor, Hortensio. This exchange places the institution of marriage firmly in the realm of transaction, not personal choice—a dynamic established centuries earlier in early modern England.[44] Petruchio's identity as a self-assured "tamer" is thus paradoxical: his authority hence able-bodiedness and able-mindedness depend on economic structures and Katherine's compliance, making him, in a *dismodern* sense, "disabled" by the very systems he seeks to exploit. For instance, Petruchio's rhetoric in wooing Katherine is itself a tactic of epistemic domination and reveals his dependence on external validation to render himself "abled." During his speech, Hile[45] addresses the critical neglect of Katherine's alleged limp, which is mentioned repeatedly in Act 2, Scene 1 and how alternately he denies and affirms Katherine's supposed bodily defects and suggests that she is not physically deformed, but rather as wholesome as a country wench:

> 'Twas told me you were rough, and coy, and sullen,
> And now I find report a very liar,
> For thou art pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous,
> But slow in speech, yet sweet as spring-time flowers.
> Thou canst not frown. Thou canst not look askance,
> Nor bite the lip, as angry wenches will,

43 Paster, *Humoring the Body*.

44 Sara Mendelson, and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 24–28.

45 Hile, "Disability and the Characterization of Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*."

> Nor hast thou pleasure to be cross in talk,
> But thou with mildness entertain'st thy wooers,
> With gentle conference, soft, and affable.
> Why doth the world report that Kate doth limp?
> O sland'rous world! Kate, like the hazel twig,
> Is straight and slender, and as brown in hue
> As hazel-nuts and sweeter than the kernels.
> O let me see thee walk. Thou dost not halt. (2.1.242–55)

A few lines later he refers to her "princely gait" (2.1.252) and vows:

> For, by the light whereby I see thy beauty—
> Thy beauty that doth make me like thee well—
> Thou must be married to no man but me… (2.1.262–64)

Maybe he is following what Michel de Montaigne suggest, "He knows not the perfect pleasure of Venus, that hath not laine with a limping Woman."[46] His statement implies that true pleasure in love cannot be fully realized without experiencing the uniqueness and imperfection that a limping woman embodies. This perspective suggests that beauty and desire lie in individuality and imperfection. What is clear is that, Petruchio's contradictory statements about Katherine's appearance function as psychological manipulation: he both denies her defect and reproduces it, destabilizing Katherine's claim to embodied self-knowledge while asserting his own interpretive authority. This is gaslighting writ theatrical: Petruchio intentionally bamboozles Katherine with contradictions—insult disguised as compliment and praise instantly negated—thereby making her body and behavior governable by his interpretive framework. His suggestion that she is "slow in speech, yet sweet as spring-time flowers" is an insult disguised as a compliment, but it is immediately negated by her sharp, quick replies throughout the scene (2.1.242–245).

Interestingly, he admits his strategy in Act 4, Scene 1: "This is a way to kill a wife with kindness; / And thus I'll curb her mad and headstrong humor" (4.1.1–2). The moon/sun exchange, "It shall be moon, or star, or what I list" (4.5.1), is the most notorious instance of his epistemic domination. He insists that Katherine call the sun the moon, and when she calls an old man "young and fair," he mocks her for her "madness." Katherine, through her quick-witted response—acknowledging her "mistaking eyes" and blaming her confusion on the "sun"—reveals the absurdity of Petruchio's tactics. This moment, though humorous, is a critical turning point in the play. Katherine's playful nonsense demonstrates her subtle assertion of agency within Petruchio's manipulative framework, negotiating power while remaining physically constrained and socially circumscribed. Such acts of resistance illustrate how disabled or non-normative characters can assert agency even within oppressive

[46] Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Lame or Cripple," *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, translated by John Florio, 1603, edited by Israel Gollancz, 6 vols. (J. M. Dent, 1897), 161-62.

structures. Hile emphasizes that Katherine's shrewishness and limping function within relational and social frameworks, showing how her atypical embodiment shapes her interactions and asserts subtle power. In this regard, she examines Hortensio's description of Katherine in a single passage as both "ill-favoured" (1.2.57) and "beauteous,"[47] noting that these seemingly incompatible concepts are necessary to each other within the context of the play to let Hortensio win the game. As Hile argues, "shrewishness = ugly, but wealthy = beautiful."[48] This dynamic is further mirrored in his wedding-day disruptions too. "To me she's married, not unto my clothes" (3.2.46); and his defensive pronouncements, "I tell you, 'tis incredible to believe / How much she loves me: O, the kindest Kate!" (2.1.129–30). This reveals a performance aimed at securing external validation and his command at the end, "Come, Kate, and kiss me" (5.2.200)— is not a romantic reconciliation but functions as public affirmation of that method. These moments expose how, behind the bravado, Petruchio's authority is deeply insecure and reliant on Katherine's transformation and societal affirmation.

Giving Katherine a limp (or repeatedly labeling her as limping) can thus be read as a theatrical technique that Shakespeare may be allowing Petruchio a more comprehensive sense of victory; ableing him to assure his upper position at the play's end, while deepening the ethical ambiguity surrounding his triumph. Eventually, Petruchio instantiates an incipient disciplinary regime: he makes Katherine visible to a surveillant male gaze, measures and tests her responses, and organizes practices intended to normalize her conduct. His household becomes a bounded site of observation in which deviance is converted into a problem for correction—a domestic micro-institution that medicalizes behavior under the guise of marital duty. If one draws a longer genealogy, the tactics on display in the play resonate with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century treatments of women deemed "hysterical" or ungovernable, where confinement, regimen, and moral correction were deployed as cures. While Shakespeare's stage predates modern psychiatry, the dramaturgy of Petruchio's control models a proto-clinical logic in which social power and disciplinary knowledge mutually reinforce one another.

## CONCLUSION

Katherine's trajectory—from her initial resistance to her final compliance—demonstrates that her limping and shrewishness are central to understanding her character. This study has shown that Katherine's non-normative behavior, her limping, and the reactions of the characters around her work together to construct her as deviant within an early modern framework that linked bodily difference to moral temperament and social order. By tracing how her behavior becomes pathologized—through humoral theory, proto-clinical surveillance, and the

47 Hile, "Disability and the Characterization of Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*," 82.
48 Ibid., 14.

disciplinary logic embodied by Petruchio—the analysis establishes that Kate's "taming" is inseparable from historical ideas of bodily regulation and gendered control. Rather than reducing her to a metaphor or an object of comedy, a disability studies-informed reading shows that her embodiment, relational positioning, and the societal gaze she endures are integral to both her narrative function and the broader critique of early modern patriarchal norms. This approach reveals that the play's comedic surface masks a deeper exploration of how societies define, enforce, and naturalize "normal" behavior. Reading the play through disability studies and early modern medicine exposes how Shakespeare dramatizes the creation of deviance itself—how female disobedience becomes construed as disorder, how physical difference becomes a pretext for discipline, and how normalization carries emotional, social, and ethical costs.

Ultimately, Katherine's story thus exemplifies the intricate intersections of disability, gender, and social expectation, highlighting how agency, identity, and compliance are continuously negotiated within both familial and societal frameworks. By combining early modern medical discourse with contemporary disability theory, this article contributes a new interdisciplinary account of Katherine's character—one that moves beyond debates about whether she is "truly" disabled and instead foregrounds the cultural production of disability within the play. This reading reframes *The Taming of the Shrew* as a text that not only enacts but interrogates the historical construction of gendered normalcy, offering a fresh perspective on Shakespeare's engagement with bodily difference and social regulation. ⊡

# BIBLIOGRAPHY


- Anderson, Susan. "Limping and Lameness on the Early Modern Stage." In *Performing Disability in Early Modern English Drama,* 185–207. Edited by Leslie C. Dunn. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

- Blake, A. "The Taming of the Shrew: Making Fun of Katherine." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Sept 2002): 237–52.

- Craik, Katharine A., and Tanya Pollard, eds. *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

- Davis, Lennard J. *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. New York University Press, 2002.

- Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body.* Verso, 2002.

- Davis, Lennard J. *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006.

- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 195–228. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995.

- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1996.

- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring*: Oxford University Press, 2009.

- Hile, Rachel. "Disability and the Characterization of Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Fall 2009).

- Korda, Natasha. *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies, Gender and Property in Early Modern England*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

- Korda, Natasha. "Household Kates: Domesticating Commodities in the Taming of the Shrew." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1996): 109-31.

- Mendelson, Sara and Crawford, Patricia. *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.

- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor." In *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, 15-30. Edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Modern Language Association of America, 2002.

- Montaigne, Michel de. "Of the Lame or Cripple." *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*. Translated by John Florio. Edited by Israel Gollancz. 6 vols., J. M. Dent, 1897.

- Orlin, Lena Cowen. 1994. *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Paster, Gail Kern. *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

- Paster, Gail Kern. *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

- Tobin Siebers. *Disability Theory.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

- Wilson, Jeffrey R. "The Trouble with Disability in Shakespeare Studies." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (June 2017).

- Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. 4th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

- Wood, David Houston. "Shakespeare and Disability Studies." *Literature Compass* 8, no. 5 (May 2011): 316–26.

- Wynter, Sylvia. "On How We Mistook the Map for Our Territory, and Re-Imprisoned." *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2006): 32-114.