

Powering Petruchio: Building a Case for
Personality Disorder in *The Taming of the Shrew*

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Abstract

Under the advances of modern psychology, readers can examine famous literature in new ways. Using diagnostic criteria from the DSM 5, this paper explores the presence of a personality disorder in Shakespeare's Petruchio from *The Taming of the Shrew*. Through a combination of personal, social, and historical factors, Petruchio displays the prevalence of multiple personality disorders across diagnostic clusters.

Key words: personality disorder, Petruchio, antisocial, schizotypal, psychology, Shakespeare, Elizabethan

Psychology represents a relatively new field of study. Recently established near the end of the 1800s, psychology brought the motives, flaws, and personalities of the human condition to the forefront of discussion. From this fascination stemmed psychoanalytic criticism, which applied a new dimension of research to literature. While academics have only recently recognized the more definitive terms of what constitutes degrees and types of psychology, the desire to understand human behavior and thought predates Shakespeare's era by centuries. By the Renaissance, the awareness of a greater force affecting a person's mental and temperamental being had permeated Elizabethan society. Readily accepted in the late 1500s, the idea of the Four Humors—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm¹—came from the physicians of ancient Greece, who “attributed individual differences in personality to imbalances of bodily fluids” (Adshead & Sarkar, 2012, p. 3). Shakespeare applied to his writing this early modern scientific approach to understanding people; he toyed with the idea of a person with imbal-

anced temperament in *The Taming of the Shrew* through his characterization of Petruchio. While Shakespeare perhaps dismisses his irritable and rash dominant male character as merely being of excess yellow bile, a modern psychological approach allows readers to understand who Petruchio really is: a man with a psychological disorder.

Shakespeare depicts Petruchio as having a variety of negative and potentially harmful characteristics, but these traits accumulate to create the overwhelming problem of a personality disorder. A personality, according to Adshead and Sarkar (2012), is “a regulation of biopsychosocial factors in the service of good-quality survival of the individual within the particular constraints of their habitat and environment” (p. 3). Therefore, a person's personality enables him or her to survive, adapt, and thrive in a certain environment; however, when people repeatedly come into conflict with themselves and their environment, psychologists examine the personality for abnormalities that could suggest the existence of a personality disorder.

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines a personality disorder as “an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates marked-

¹ For a full discussion see: Jouanna, J. (2012). *Greek medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected papers*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

ly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment" (p. 645). Psychologists examine these categories to create a picture of how personality disorder impairs functioning. In Shakespeare's time, a personality disorder would have been grossly misunderstood as a flaw and attributed as the fault of the person and his or her humors. Today, however, psychologists understand personality disorders sufficiently to attest that "approximately 15% of U.S. adults have at least one" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 646). Growing research in this field further categorizes personality disorders into the three Clusters of A, B, and C. Of the two Clusters on which this paper focuses—Clusters A and B—Cluster A includes paranoid, schizoid, and schizotypal personality disorders that are classified by "odd or eccentric" behavior, while Cluster B covers antisocial, borderline, histrionic, and narcissistic personality disorders that involve "dramatic, emotional, or erratic" traits (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 646). A psychoanalytic reading of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* reveals more depth both to the primary character, Petruchio, and to the plot. This criticism not only provides insight to Shakespeare's own depictions about the period in which he was writing, but it also helps readers understand the consistencies of human nature across time. Investigating Petruchio as a candidate for personality disorder uncovers his motives, feelings, and fears, as well as the social constructs within which he lives.

To begin, one must examine and establish the basis of Petruchio's abnormal psychology. *Taming* is a highly controversial play for modern audiences because of the gender issues and the oppressive patriarchal actions of the male characters, but Petruchio demonstrates more than just learned societal privilege. When Petruchio first arrives in Padua, he tells Hortensio that his father "is deceased," and that he has "thrust [himself] into this maze, / . . . to wive and thrive as best [he] may" (Shakespeare, 1623/2014, 1.2.53-55). For an adolescent or a person in early adulthood, the death of a family member would most certainly qualify as a traumatic event. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) states that a "personality disorder may be exacerbated following the loss of significant supporting persons . . . or previously stabilizing social situations" (p. 648). Therefore, the initial incident that brings Petruchio to Padua is vital not

only concerning his motives, but also for understanding his mental state. Throughout the play, Petruchio exhibits a variety of maladaptive psychological characteristics as seen in his cruelty, lack of empathy, and aggression. Petruchio displays these characteristics when he excessively drinks alcohol, rapidly switches emotions, and emotionally abuses other characters. He masks these potentially dangerous qualities under "a glib, superficial charm" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 660), but when that disguise fails, the readers see a man who is searching for stability and control over his own life and loss. The translation of these negative personality traits into destructive behavior makes Petruchio a candidate for personality disorder. A diagnosis of personality disorder explains Petruchio's more negative qualities and behaviors, as "[p]atients . . . often have further personality disorders and other dysfunctional personality traits and mental health problems" that factor into the severity of the disorder depending on the combination of disorders from the different clusters (Banerjee, Gibbon, & Huband, 2009, p. 394). Outside the abnormal psychology of personality disorder, Petruchio exhibits maladaptive behavior. Examples include his alcohol abuse when he first enters the stage, his unpredictable moodiness in certain social settings, and his symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder from his time as a war veteran in "pitchèd battle" (Shakespeare, 1623/2014, 1.2.203). Critics should consider these traits when building a case for personality disorder.

Again, to be consistent with a personality disorder, one must exhibit behavior and personal experiences that come into conflict with the individual's culture or are abnormal for his or her societal standards, show this behavior in both social and personal situations, have significant distress in areas of functioning, and prove the behavior to be stable and persistent over time from its onset in adolescence. For the first criterion, diverging from the societal grain, one's behavior must permeate "interpersonal functioning," "cognition," "affectivity," and "impulse control" in at least two areas (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 646). Petruchio shows opposition to his culture's expectations of him in the first three areas: interpersonal functioning, cognition, and affectivity. In Elizabethan society, Petruchio is a member of the gentry. Being a gentleman makes him a person with wealth and prestige even if he is not aristocratic. Those of the upper class are characteristically responsible for being kind and charitable to those below their

social class (McDonald, 1996, pp. 270-271). Petruchio violates this standard by acting violently towards his servants, whom “[h]e wrings” (Shakespeare, 1623/2014, 1.2.17-18 stage directions); menacingly towards Katharina, whom he threatens to “cuff” (2.1.220); and basely towards those he should respect, like the priest at whom he “swore” and “cuff[ed]” (3.2.160, 163) and the sexton at whom he “threw the sops” (3.2.173). These actions bring Petruchio into interpersonal conflict and display a grossly inappropriate emotional response to those who serve him, those he is supposed to love, and those he should respect if he is a proper man of the church.

Similarly, Gouge (1622/1996) notes that in Petruchio and Shakespeare’s time it was customary to let a public magistrate handle the disciplining of a wife (p. 227). This fact raises the question as to why Petruchio takes it upon himself to “kill [his] wife with kindness; / And . . . curb her mad and headstrong humor” (4.2.196-97). His own need for dominance and control strays from the legal regulations of a husband and depicts Petruchio as having a skewed self-concept. That need suggests that Petruchio feels entitled to his wife and views himself as more capable of dominating her than a court of law or her own will. While the whole of Elizabethan society was predominantly patriarchal, Shakespeare implies that Petruchio oversteps his bounds in society, as “[a] husband is not such a supreme Lord over his wife” (Gouge, 1622/1996, p. 227) and abuse of withholding “meat” and sleep (4.2.185-186) is not permissible. Since Petruchio does, in fact, make himself the controller of these necessities in Katharina’s life despite societal regulations, the reader can see how his entitlement and domination deviate from cultural norms and control his cognition. In fact, his taming game goes beyond law; it morally violates the honor code by which Elizabethan men live because “honorable treatment of women is for the sake of men’s honor” (Detmer, 1997, p. 279). When Petruchio arrives late to his own wedding as “[a]n eyesore to [their] solemn festival” (3.2.101), society shames him for disrespecting his wife and his own commitments. His fellow men even go as far as calling him a “shrew” (4.1.76) and a “devil” (3.2.155) to express their dislike of him. Petruchio’s violent and dishonorable behavior deviates from the expectations of a gentleman. It displays a personality disorder in his interpersonal functioning, personal cognition, and psychological affectivity.

Additionally, Petruchio’s personality clashes with his surroundings in a variety of social and personal settings.

The very fabric of Petruchio’s character—his personality traits—cause much of his own anguish. Personality traits appear across social and personal situations and are defined as “enduring patterns of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and oneself” that only become an issue when they are “inflexible and maladaptive and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 647). This distress and deviation from cultural standard is especially noticeable when examining William Gouge’s *Of Domestic Duties: Eight Treatises* (1622/1996). This work informs Elizabethan men that a master should act according to the societal standards expected of him so that he is “worthy of [his] place. . . . He [sh]ould not only put [his household] to [upholding standards], but he also [sh]ould do it” (p. 236). Petruchio’s violent temperament and inability to keep “cobwebs swept” (Shakespeare, 1623/2014, 4.1.41) in his own home reflects his inability to conform to cultural standards of a gentleman who keeps his household in order and sets a proper example; it elucidates the dissonance others create by failing to meet his expectations. Petruchio cannot see that his aggressive and inappropriate behavior naturally elicits negative reactions not only in his home, but also in social situations like his wedding and wedding feast. Because Petruchio cannot understand the source of people’s discontent with him, he begins to attribute the issue to people and situations. This defense affects how he perceives and reacts to people and situations.

For example, during Petruchio and Katharina’s first night in his house, he stuns her by being incredibly on edge with his “heedless jolt-heads and unmannered slaves” (4.1.154) who serve him meat that he claims is “burnt and dried away . . . [that he is] forbid to touch” (4.1.159). While this “meat was well” (4.1.157) to Katharina, Petruchio’s irrational anger interprets it as an insult and a threat from his servants. Adshead and Sarkar (2012) explain the effects of catecholamine, the body’s chemical reaction in situations of high stress, on ill-adapted people. This explanation applies to Petruchio as his incensed state could be a result of “the self-preservative fight/flight catecholamine coping response . . . [that] becomes the default response to a wide range of events, people and circumstances” (p. 12). This reaction applies to people with personality disorders—as opposed to well adapted people in merely stressful situations (p. 14). The fact that Petruchio feels constantly threatened by those around him in the safety

of his own home and with his friends shows distress in his defense mechanisms. Critics often interpret Petruchio's reaction as feigned distress that he uses to test Katharina. On the other hand, a literal reading of Petruchio's distress fits the previous argument as well as the criteria of personality disorder. Clearly, Petruchio's violent behavior toward a variety of social classes and irritable disposition within multiple social realms make him a man of impaired functioning within his cultural environment. He is consistently at odds with the larger world.

Furthermore, a third criterion that marks Petruchio as a candidate for personality disorder is the onset of these traits and behaviors in adolescence or early adulthood. The death of Petruchio's father is the inciting incident that brings him to Padua. As he is not yet married, and he is at the age in which he can reasonably lose a father, Petruchio appears to be in early adulthood or in his mid-to-late-twenties. While Shakespeare does not explicitly give details of Petruchio's childhood, modern psychology typically traces maladaptive behavior to one's early childhood experiences, which could thus make a case for instability in Petruchio's own childhood. As Petruchio had to wait until his father's death to "come abroad to see the world" (Shakespeare, 1623/2014, 1.2.57), one must question what kept a capable young man so confined to his home or so unable to experience life. Psychological research demonstrates the potential consequences of inherited irregular chemical functioning in the body, as "it has been shown that genetically determined low monoamine oxidase A (MAOA) activity . . . moderates the association between childhood maltreatment and later vulnerability to the effects of environmental stress, thus causing mental health problems" (Adshead & Sarkar, 2012, p. 12). Thus, Petruchio's genetics as well as his early childhood experiences could explain his susceptibility to personality disorder. Furthermore, Adshead and Sarkar (2012) state that "symptoms of personality disorder will be exacerbated during periods of stress, particularly if the stress is linked to relationships with partners, parents or dependents" (p. 14). So, the death of a father, whether he was loved or hated by Petruchio, would be enough to trigger the onset of the violent behavior and negative affect that characterizes Petruchio and personality disorder.

Likewise, as Petruchio deals with the stress of finding and handling a wife, he receives no relief for his symptoms. In fact, Hortensio reveals his surprise at

the apparently recent change of relationship between "ancient, trusty, pleasant servant Grumio" (1.2.46) and Petruchio as a "heavy chance" (1.2.45), which suggests a change in Petruchio's behavior since he was last seen. To take the issue one step further in speculation, if Petruchio had been sexually abused by his father or by someone in his past, Alaggia and Mishna (2014) reveal that he would be "at a greater risk for . . . depression, suicide, addictions, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, [and] personality disorders" (p. 42), which would stand as a basis for his drinking, irritability, and likelihood of having a personality disorder. Although the text does not offer direct evidence to indicate this possibility beyond speculation, the idea fits with and offers new insight to the previous argument for Petruchio's symptoms of personality disorder. According to Alaggia and Mishna (2014), a person develops a sense of self based on the attainment of the selfobject, or "the people or activities that complete the self," and if one repeatedly fails to attain the selfobject in childhood, one may fail to develop empathetic responses, which creates dependency or detachment out of anticipation of failure to have needs met (p. 43). This approach is significant for Petruchio because his father could have played a role in fulfilling his selfobject needs; therefore, his loss is an ultimate blow to Petruchio's cohesive self-identity as well as a reason for his lack of empathy. The effects of childhood trauma tend to reveal themselves later in life through the idea of "parent failures" (Alaggia & Mishna, 2014, p. 43) that elicit an adaptive or maladaptive response from the child. These responses can disturb the development of "internal psyche structures . . . [that] are needed for a person to regulate affect, have good self-esteem and to calm oneself" (p. 43). Petruchio's difficulty in several of these areas reinforces the possibility of a negative and unstable childhood. Therefore, the death of his father and the journey Petruchio embarks upon to gain back control of his life suggest an onset of these maladaptive personality traits in early adulthood and fulfill a major requirement for personality disorder.

Comparatively, the typical symptoms of the Cluster A schizotypal disorder also relate to Petruchio's behavior and further emphasize the possible case for a personality disorder. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) characterizes schizotypal personality disorder by the "acute discomfort with, and reduced capacity for, close relationships as well as by cognitive or perceptual distortions and eccentricities of behavior" (p. 656).

One of the three main distinctions of schizotypal is the presence of “[o]dd beliefs or magical thinking” (p. 655). Petruchio exhibits these perceptual distortions when he tells Katharina and his servants that “’tis now some seven o’clock” when it is really “almost two” (Shakespeare, 1623/2014, 4.3.183, 185). Similarly, he tells Katharina “how bright and goodly shines the moon” (4.5.2) even though it is the middle of the day. When his delusions are corrected, Petruchio becomes defensive and demands that the world “shall be what . . . [he] say[s] it is” (4.3.191). Although many critics regard these lines as potentially feigned by Petruchio to test Katharina’s obedience, no textual evidence directly confirms such deception. Readers have no obligation to see Petruchio as anything except literally delusional. Never does he correct himself as though he knew the truth to be real. In fact, Petruchio’s magical thinking brings him into conflict with his surroundings not only by proving him incapable of telling the time of day and being aware of the natural world, but by causing dissention between him and whoever tries to correct these thoughts.

A second distinction of schizotypal disorder is peculiar behavior or appearance. A prime example of Petruchio being eccentric is his arrival to his wedding. He is described, to the horror of all onlookers, as wearing:

a new hat and
 an old jerkin; a pair of old breeches thrice turned; a
 pair of boots that have been candle-cases, one
 buckled,
 another laced; and old rust sword ta’en out of the
 town
 armory, with a broken hilt, and chapless; with two
 broken points (3.2.43-48)

Not only is this attire far from appropriate wedding apparel, it is far from acceptable, normal, or fashionable clothing in any way. In this instance, Petruchio displays peculiarity by his “unkempt manner of dress that does not quite ‘fit together,’ and [by] inattention to the usual social conventions” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 656). Petruchio’s apparent lack of care or understanding of the social realms he inhabits contributes to his peculiarity.

Furthermore, inappropriate affect characterizes schizotypal disorder. Shean, Bell, and Cameron (2007) report that in one study “[a]dolescents with schizotypal personality characteristics had deficits in recognizing happy and angry expressions” (p. 282). The quick banter between Katharina and Petruchio presents ample

opportunity for Petruchio to misinterpret signals, which causes him to react threateningly enough that Katharina fears this “one half-lunatic, / a madcap ruffian and a swearing Jack” (2.1.284-285). Similarly, Petruchio shows an inhibited affinity for social situations when he commands Katharina to skip her wedding feast. Petruchio claims his “haste doth call [him] hence, / . . . to take [his] leave” (3.2.187-188), but this action is highly unusual for a groom and makes readers question his motivation. Petruchio becomes so desperate to exit the situation that he becomes aggressive and defensive, thus creating a delusional scenario in which he must “buckler [Katharina] against a million [thieves]” (3.2.239). Obviously, Petruchio’s mental state brings him into conflict with standard and jovial occasions and causes distress in others and aggression in himself. In this way, he lacks adaptive social cognition, which means he has lessened ability to discern and understand others’ emotions and intentions, a realistic self-concept, and appropriate social behavior (Shean, Bell, & Cameron, 2007, p. 282). Petruchio meets a number of the criteria necessary to build a case for schizotypal personality disorder through his delusions and difficulty reading people and interpreting social situations.

Additionally, Petruchio appears to fit many of the criteria for the Cluster B antisocial personality disorder. This Cluster B disorder is notorious for “deceit and manipulation” through use of “repeated lying . . . or conning others for personal profit or pleasure” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 659). Petruchio exhibits quite a propensity for manipulation and gambling. As his first main interaction in Padua, Petruchio involves himself in a scheme to use his relations to secure wealth and a wife. He builds his relationships in Padua so he can later work against them for his own gain (Adshad & Sarkar, 2012, p. 7). In succeeding to manipulate and dominate Katharina, Tranio and Hortensio will “ingrate” and “gratify” (Shakespeare, 1623/2014, 1.2.267, 270) Petruchio, thus increasing his social status through his obedient wife and wealth. In addition to his bet about taming a shrew, Petruchio finds joy in making bets that “Kate [will] put [the widow] down” (5.2.35) and that his wife will be the “most obedient” (5.2.67). Petruchio uses Katharina to boast of his dominance and gain the respect of his fellows.

However, while he tries to gain societal approval, Petruchio also comes into conflict with social mores as he “abuses . . . power that his culture gives him as a man”

by “yell[ing] at and striking his servants” (Dolan, 1996, p. 18). This tendency for aggression and irritability is a key factor in antisocial personality disorder. Petruchio shows satisfaction in his oppressive “reign” (4.2.176) by directing his violence “at his subordinates . . . and remind[ing] Katharina that . . . he could beat her if he chose” (Dolan, 1996, p. 19). He finds power in this aggression and revels in his “peremptory” manner that has no trouble “consum[ing] the thing that feeds [its] fury” (2.1.131, 133). Not only is Petruchio violent to his servants, but he “wreaks havoc at the table and in the bed, the very places where husband and wife [are] supposed to foster their bond” (Dolan, 1996, p. 20). This violence shows no emotional regard for sacred and close relationships, which implies inappropriate affect. Similarly, the lack of remorse and “disregard for the wishes, rights, or feelings of others” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 660) permeates much of Petruchio’s daily life. Though Katharina never verbally agrees to his marriage proposal, Petruchio decides that “will” her and “nill” her, he “will marry” her (2.1.268). Not only does he force his demands on her, he blames her for his treatment because she is not “gentle” (4.3.71). The violence committed in the play is directly related to Petruchio’s lack of empathy. This lack appears in his flippant words, such as “Be mad and merry, or go hang yourselves” (3.2.226), and in his use of domestic violence. Detmer (1997) defines such violence as “any act of coercion that aims to nullify a person’s will or desire in order for the abuser to gain dominance” (p. 283). Petruchio’s domestic violence through taming manifests in “bondage and threats,” which he exhibits not by hitting Katharina, but by “physically hold[ing] her” (p. 282) and withholding vital resources to emphasize his power.

Additionally, the substance abuse that usually accompanies antisocial personality disorder intensifies Petruchio’s view of people as objects. In fact, in Elizabethan times, the “records of local courts teem[ed] with complaints against others for what amount to violations of the social order. Public drunkenness . . . [and] quarreling . . . involve[d] issues of status” (McDonald, 1996, p. 271). Petruchio’s antisocial tendency for being “two-and- / thirty, a pip out” (1.2.32-33) brings him into conflict with his societal standards and heightens his aggression. As Banerjee, Gibbon, and Huband (2009) state, “People with cluster B personality disorders are at a greater risk of criminal . . . and violent offending” (p. 395); so Petruchio’s societally unacceptable alcoholism,

irritability, and disregard for the well-being of others create conflict in his life and emphasize the case for his personality disorder.

All in all, examining Petruchio’s life and personality for exceptionalities reveals the depth of his character and the systems of the Elizabethan world. Petruchio’s actions that bring him into conflict with his society display a pervasive pattern of maladaptive behavior throughout his time in Padua and even in the realm of his own home. Readers see these problematic traits as a stressed Petruchio reinvents his life after his father’s death. The distress caused by this clashing of Petruchio’s desires and his strict social world shows that “[a]t the heart of violent and coercive behavior is the desire for control” (Detmer, 1997, p. 284). This desire manifests itself in several negative ways including cruel behavior, defiant social displays, and alcohol abuse. The presence of these symptoms presents a case for not only a general personality disorder, but also the specification of certain disorders within different clusters. Though he was a misunderstood man in his own time and by his own author, modern psychology allows for exploration into the depth of Petruchio’s character and gives valuable insight to what makes a man.

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