

*The Taming of the Shrew*

by William Shakespeare

Study Guide

Theatre Pro Rata

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## Contents

1. About the play and our production
2. *The Taming of the Shrew*: a synopsis
3. *The Taming of the Shrew*: production history
4. Some issues and questions to consider
5. Resources

## About the play and our production

*The Taming of the Shrew* is a very early Shakespearean comedy, probably written between 1590-94. Other plays written during this period include the three parts of *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Comedy of Errors*. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Romeo and Juliet* may also have been written at about the same time.

These early plays show Shakespeare drawing on a variety of sources—classical, historical, and contemporary—to explore a range of issues related to war and peace, power and powerlessness, men and woman, and more. In the case of this play, Shakespeare was probably drawing on a long tradition of similar tales that appear in medieval literature for the main plot. Another play, probably written either earlier or about the same time, *The Taming of a Shrew*, has similarities to Shakespeare's play, and some scholars think the latter may be a reworking of the former. The edition of the play edited by Frances Dolan (see the resources page) has a good discussion of this issue.

The subplot about the disguised Lucentio courting Bianca, however, is based on an Italian tale by Ludovico Ariosto. This combination of original and derivative work is a pattern Shakespeare follows throughout his career.

The play as written also includes a two-scene "induction," or preface, that is not part of this production. The induction introduces a tinker called Christopher Sly who is tricked by a Lord who finds him drunk at an alehouse. The Lord and his friends and servants plot to persuade Sly that he is a member of the nobility, with a long-suffering wife, who has been mad for a number of years. He "recovers," and part of his rehabilitation is the performance of the play that constitutes the remainder of the script as we have it. This framing device lacks final closure, though some of the issues it raises related to class differences and the pleasure of joyous comedy, resonate throughout the story.

A play about a strong-willed woman and an equally strong-willed man whose goal is to tame her raises interesting issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though the story of shrewish women stretches back to antiquity (the wife of Socrates, Xantippe, who is mentioned in the play, was an classical example), we live in a world that, for the most part, believes in equality between the sexes as an ideal. How then to explore, in a contemporary setting, the action of this play?

Our goal throughout the rehearsal process was to seek out the wide range of comic behaviors throughout the play: in addition to the Petrucio and Kate interchanges, we have Bianca's hapless suitors, Lucentio's passionate love-at-

first-site, the mockery and disbelief of servants like Grumio and Biondello, the play-acting of a number of the characters, and more.

Kate's shrewishness does not seem initially any more disturbing than Petruchio's treatment of Grumio when we first meet them. We also learn that Petruchio is interested in "wiving weathily," so unlike Lucentio's youthful passion, Petruchio has a more practical streak. He's a man of the world, free of familial bonds, who has apparently had his fair share of adventures and now want to take the next appropriate social step and marry (as long as his intended has a fortune).

The initial scene between Kate and Petruchio gives us a sense of two equals engaged in a very lively combat. Kate is not only wealthy, she is also attractive, and perhaps—as Grant Henderson, our Petruchio, noted—he recognizes in Kate's behavior something of his own history. In the traditional world from which the play emerges, a shrew need not be a woman: the first definition for the word as it pertains to a person in the Oxford English Dictionary is "A wicked, evil-disposed, or malignant man; a mischievous or vexatious person; a rascal, villain." In a 1609 play by Thomas Dekker, he refers to men "such as were shrewes to their wives."

So while some may think that this is a play about male dominance and female submission, we would challenge you to examine all the relationships in the play in light of their comic potential. This play, like other Shakespearean comedies, ends with multiple marriages; but ask yourself, as you observe the three couples in the final scene, whose marriage is likely to be the most fulfilling?

### ***The Taming of the Shrew: a synopsis***

Wealthy merchant Baptista Minola of Padua is the mother of two marriageable daughters: Katharina, the elder, has a reputation as a shrew and no man appears interesting in marrying her; the younger, Bianca, has two ardent suitors, Gremio, a wealthy older man and a neighbor of the family, and Hortensio, who is younger but not as rich. Baptista declares that he will not allow Bianca to be wooed until Katharina is married.

As the story begins, some newcomers arrive in town: Lucentio, a young scholar who hopes to pursue his studies in Padua, which offers a richer environment than his home town of Florence or recent sojourn in Pisa; and his two servants Tranio and Biondella. Lucentio and Tranio come upon a conversation between the Minola family and Bianca's two suitors and eavesdrop. Lucentio is instantly smitten by Bianca, and in order to pursue his love, he disguises himself as a tutor (who is hired by Gremio to enhance Bianca's education), while Tranio takes on Lucentio's role as a young man about town, and yet another suitor to Bianca. Hortensio also disguises himself as a music teacher so that he will have access to Bianca.

In the next scene, Petruchio—a friend of Hortensio's—arrives in Padua from his home in Verona. With him is his servant Grumio. When Petruchio learns about Hortensio's plight, he vows that he will woo the "curst, shrewd, and froward" Katharina for her dowry, and thus free Bianca from her enforced single state.

Then the fireworks begin!

## ***The Taming of the Shrew: a production history***

From its probable first performance in the early 1590s, the play continued in the repertory through at least 1633 when it was performed at court before King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria. From 1649-1660, the theatres of England were silent as Puritan rule dominated the country. After the restoration, a number of adaptations of the play (see resource list) dominated the playhouse, and the original version of the play was rarely produced. It was not until 1844 that the full text was produced in London.

Since that time, the play has been a popular choice for companies large and small throughout the English-speaking world. Despite its designation as a comedy, some productions have approached the text from a much bleaker perspective—one in which Kate is truly defeated by the actions of Petruchio. While such interpretations have their place, and allow alternative possibilities to emerge from the script, we have chosen to accept it as comedy and to follow through with that approach.

We also chose to set the tale in the contemporary world, and thereby avoid the option of patting ourselves on the back by saying “Well, that’s just how things were then.” If we imagine Kate and Petruchio in a complex modern world, where gender presentation and sexual behavior encompass a wide spectrum of possibilities, what do we learn from their interactions? Who’s taming who, and what is the ultimate outcome of this battle of the sexes?

**Some issues and questions to consider**

## Resources

### Print

#### Texts

- The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. David Bevington (Pearson-Longman Complete Works; Bantam Classic paperback)  
*The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. G. Blakemore Evens and J.J.M. Tobin (Riverside Shakespeare)  
*The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Frances Doran (Bedford St. Martin's)  
*The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Barbara Hodgdon (Arden)  
*The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. H.J. Oliver (Oxford)  
*The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Ann Thompson (New Cambridge Shakespeare)

#### Production information

- Shakespeare in Performance: The Taming of the Shrew*, Graham Holderness  
*Shakespeare in Production: The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Elizabeth Schafer

#### Criticism

- Shakespeare and Gender*, ed. Barker and Kamps  
*Clamorous Voices: Shakespeare's Women Today*, ed. Faith Evans  
*Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, Marilyn French  
*Shakespeare After All*, Marjorie Garber  
*As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*, Penny Gay  
*The Woman's Part*, ed. Lenz, Greene, Neely  
*Shakespeare's Women*, Angela Pitt

#### Adaptations

- The Tamer Tamed, John Fletcher (1611)  
Sauny the Scot, John Lacy (1667)  
A Cure for a Scold, James Worsdale (1735)  
Catherine and Petrucio, David Garrick (1754)  
Kiss Me, Kate, Cole Porter (1958)  
The Shrew, Charles Marowitz (1975)  
Ten Things I Hate about You (1999)

### Web

Shakespeare On-Line

<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/>

Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>

Wikipedia entry (this includes lots of good information)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taming\\_of\\_the\\_Shrew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taming_of_the_Shrew)