

**Richmond Shakespeare**

Play Guide  
**THE TAMING OF  
THE  
SHREW**

By William Shakespeare

P.O. Box 27543  
Richmond, VA 23261-7543  
804-232-4000 voice  
804-232-4400 fax  
[www.richmondshakespeare.com](http://www.richmondshakespeare.com)

# Play Guide

## THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

By William Shakespeare

*Prepared by*

Encore! Educational Outreach

### Pre-performance

#### Sources and history for *The Taming of the Shrew*

The first record of a performance of *The Taming of a Shrew* by the Lord Chamberlain's Men (of which Shakespeare was a part) on June 11, 1594. Was this Shakespeare's play...with a misprint?

There are two lines of thought on this: a) that this is a version of an older play that Shakespeare based his upon or b) that it's a copy of his play that was either a copy from someone with a bad memory or a pirated version by a rival company. Most scholars today agree with the second theory. This would indicate that Shakespeare's play was in existence in the same time period, even though there was no official record of it. This is consistent with the general analysis of Shakespeare's text and plot. In comparison to his other plays, *The Taming of the Shrew* is most similar in style to his earlier works, making it written between 1592 and 1594.

*Shrew* contrasts two opposing points of view of the "battle of the sexes." The plot of the young [romantic] lovers, Lucentio and Bianca, is a standard one. Shakespeare is thought to have taken it from George Gascoigne's translation of *I Suppositi* (The Supposes, 1509.) This was in turn derived from Terence's *Eunuchus*, and Plautus' *Captivi*. In these, the young couple is breaking free of constricting parental authority (essentially selling the daughter to the highest bidder) and fleeing the clutches of an old pantaloon. (The pantaloon is a stock character in comedies: a lean and foolish old wooer of a young girl and wears pantaloons, slippers and spectacles. The young couple is fairly two dimensional in personality, though virtuous and sincere. They fall in love at first sight and have a superficial relationship in that they have been so caught up in the idea of love, that they have not really gotten to know each other before being married.. Shakespeare adds the character of Hortensio to give Lucentio a rival and to liven up the plot a bit.

The plot of Kate and Petruchio, on the other hand, seems more substantial, with more meaningful exchanges between the two. The device of "warring couples" has often been repeated in various forms. It was even the basis for episode of the 1980's television show, *Moonlighting*. Lucy and Ricky (*I Love Lucy*) and Ralph and Alice (*The Honeymooners*) are famous "bickerers" in twentieth-century popular culture. And Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor lived out these characters in their personal lives while making the movie of *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as its follow-up, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

The sources for Kate and Petruchio are more difficult to determine. Warring couples have always been popular. In the medieval mystery plays, Noah was saddled with a stubborn wife who would not board the Ark. Stories abounded with wives being put in their place. The ballad of "A Merry Jest of Shrewd and Curste Wyfe Lapped in Morelle's Skin" (1550) seems not so merry. In it, the husband tames a shrewish wife by beating her with birch rods and then wrapping her in the freshly salted skin of a plow horse. Three husbands wager on their wives' obedience in "The Book of the La-Tour-Landry" (1484).

*The Taming of the Shrew* also has an outside or framing plot, that makes it unusual from Shakespeare's other plays. This mini-plot, called The Induction, is the "pre-show" and seems to take place in Warwickshire. The play centers around a drunkard, named Christopher Sly, who has passed out cold and a lord and friends who are playing a trick on him. While Sly is unconscious, he is taken back to the lord's manor and dressed in the lord's clothing. When he wakes he is told that he is the lord of the manor, that he is married, and that a play is to be performed for him. That play is *The Taming of the Shrew*. Shakespeare introduces these characters, has them speak once again in the play, and then they disappear. (In *The Taming of a Shrew*, which has the same framing plot, Sly appears at the end in an

epilogue.) Whether this is deliberate or a missing piece of the script, it is uncertain. Most of the time in modern productions, it is left out and we go immediately to the *Shrew* play.

### **THEME or What's the main idea?**

The Induction does introduce the idea that nothing in this play is what it seems to be. It mirrors the theme that Puck iterates in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (written in nearly the same time period) : that what has been put before the audience is just an illusion- or dream.

Is this play merely instructing us in how to handle troublesome wives? Perhaps this too, is an illusion. This play is all about things not being what they seem: the young Lucentio disguises himself as a tutor so as to woo Bianca, the servant Tranio dresses as Lucentio in order to conduct negotiations with Bianca's father, a pedant plays the new "Lucentio's" father, "Vincentio," the real Vincentio is told he is a woman, Kate is told the sun is the moon and the whole thing is a play put on for a drunkard. Who's putting on the show? Perhaps we are being shown that outward appearances are not always to be believed or that you can't judge someone or something by first impressions.

Petruchio is at first crassly obvious about his reasons for marrying: he wants money. Kate is "intolerable curst, shrewd and froward." But who wouldn't be, knowing that a younger, prettier sister is the father's darling and she (Kate) is being married off for the sake of convenience? [Petruchio and Kate seem to be precursors for Shakespeare's later argumentative couple, Beatrice and Benedick, in *Much Ado About Nothing*.] Petruchio becomes drawn to Kate for her spirit, while she has found a man who is her equal. In admiring Kate's inner qualities, Petruchio finds there is more to a good marriage than just money. She becomes milder and more likely to compromise. Who has tamed whom?

Kate's final speech appears troublesome. In it she states that women should be completely obedient and subservient to their husbands. George Bernard Shaw declared, "The last scene is altogether disgusting to modern sensibility." However, later the feminist Germaine Greer says, " Kate's speech at the close of the play is the greatest defense of Christian monogamy ever written." But as everything else in this play is not as it seems, maybe Shakespeare has Kate and Petruchio creating the largest joke of all-and it's on us! Perhaps it's more of a mutual "taming" of two people in response to each other.

### **What makes it great?**

Language. *The Taming of the Shrew* is a great example of why Shakespeare was such a great writer: his use of our the English language. No one has ever matched the way Shakespeare puts words together .

For Example:

PETRUCHIO

Signior Hortensio, 'twixt such friends as we  
Few words suffice; and therefore, if thou know  
One rich enough to be Petruchio's wife,  
As wealth is burden of my wooing dance,  
Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,  
As old as Sibyl and as curst and shrewd  
As Socrates' Xanthippe, or a worse,  
She moves me not, or not removes, at least,  
Affection's edge in me, were she as rough  
As are the swelling Adriatic seas:  
I come to wive it wealthily in Padua;  
If wealthily, then happily in Padua.

So what's the big deal? Well, first, do we need to know Sibyl, Xanthippe, Florentius, the Adriatic seas or even Socrates to understand this speech? Not really. We get the sense of what Petruchio's saying even if we don't know for sure. So, it sounds great to the ear, silly and boastful if we don't know who these people and places are, AND,

this speech also communicates a huge amount of information about Petruchio to those people who *do* know them. That's a lot for twelve lines!

It's also funny! The play is full of comedy: large, small, slapstick, romantic, verbal and visual. *The Taming of the Shrew* is more than 400 years old, and we still think it's hysterical! We love to laugh at how huge Petruchio's life seems, at least when he tells it.

But the main thing is that it's a **WHOLE** lot easier to understand if it's seen and heard, not read. Shakespeare wrote **PLAYS**, not books, so let's play ball!

## Synopsis

*The Induction* - Webster's dictionary describes induction as "...an introduction, a preface or prelude." (*The induction is not performed in this year's RSF production.*)

An English lord finds a drunken tinker, Christopher Sly, asleep in the street. The Lord decides to deceive Sly by telling him that he has had amnesia for 15 years and is really a Lord. Soon, travelling players just happen to arrive, and present to Sly an Italian comedy.

### Act I

Lucentio, with servants Tranio and Biondello, comes to Padua to study. At the same time, Baptista, a prominent merchant, is trying to marry off his daughters: the "shrewish" Kate, and the younger "fair" Bianca. Baptista declares to Hortensio and old Gremio, Bianca's suitors, that no one can marry Bianca until Kate is married. He also declares that Bianca needs tutors.

Meanwhile Lucentio has fallen madly in love with Bianca. To get close to her, he plans to disguise himself as a Latin instructor; Hortensio thinks to do the same by becoming a music instructor. Tranio becomes "Lucentio" to continue the official negotiations with Baptista and Biondello is confused.

Also at the same time, Petruchio has come to town in search of money. Hortensio tells him about Kate and he vows to marry her. Hortensio and old Gremio bicker about who is going to get Bianca when Tranio ("Lucentio") arrives and says he's going for Bianca as well. Much tension.

### Act II

Back at Baptista's, Kate is torturing Bianca. Baptista scolds her. The tutors and the suitors arrive and are presented to Baptista. Petruchio offers to take Kate off Baptista's hands and Kate is sent for. Everyone flees. After a stormy encounter, Petruchio announces that an agreement has been reached. Tranio ("Lucentio") outbids Gremio for Bianca's hand.

### Act III

The tutors (Hortensio and Lucentio) tutor Bianca, bicker between themselves, and try to woo Bianca all at the same time.

The wedding day. The groom is late. Kate is humiliated. Petruchio arrives in ridiculous clothing and insists on being married in them. As they are being married, Tranio and Lucentio meet to create a plan to get an old man to impersonate Lucentio's father. The wedding now done, Petruchio now refuses to stay for the reception and carries Kate off with him. Everyone is dumfounded.

### Act IV

Gremio gets to Petruchio's house to get it ready and tells the servants about Kate. Kate and Petruchio. Petruchio yells about things not being ready then takes Kate off to bed and the servants leave. Petruchio comes back to reveal his plan to tame her by refusing her sleep or food.

Back in Padua, Hortensio notes that Bianca seems to prefer Lucentio so he gives up. Lucentio, Bianca and Tranio rejoice. Biondello comes in with the fake father - "Vincenzio."

Back at Petruchio's Kate complains to Gremio that Petruchio won't let her eat or drink, then says he's doing it for her own good. Petruchio says they're now taking a trip to Baptista's.

"Lucentio" and "Vincentio" present themselves to Baptista and an agreement is struck to marry Bianca. Lucentio is sent to get her. Biondello tells Lucentio that Everything is ready at the church. Petruchio, Kate and Vincentio are on the road. She finally agrees to do what he wants. They run into the real Vincentio and invite him to come with them to Padua.

### **Act V**

Petruchio brings Vincentio (the real one) to Lucentio's house. "Vincentio" answers the door and an argument starts. A crowd gathers. Bianca and Lucentio arrive and confess that they are already married. At Lucentio's house, a small wedding celebration with Lucentio and Bianca, Kate and Petruchio, and Hortensio and.....The Widow. The wives leave. The husbands make a bet as to who has the best wife. Biondello is sent to order the wives back. Only Kate comes. Petruchio asks her to bring back the other wives, which she does, and then he asks her to tell them what women should be like...which she does. Kate and Petruchio leave. Everyone is dumbfounded.

### **The Elizabethan Playhouse**

The theater most associated with Shakespeare, The Globe, was not the only theater in London, but it is the most famous. Others include the Rose, the Curtain (both mentioned in *Shakespeare in Love*), and the Swan. The Blackfriars was an indoor theater used by Shakespeare's company, (known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, then later as the King's Men.) The others were all open to the sky (the reason being the need for light - no electricity!).

All of the open theatres had arena-type stages (seating on at least three sides), with the poorer audience members (the Groundlings) standing on the ground right up next to the stage, while the more wealthy sat in galleries in a circular fashion all around the "yard" (the open area where the Groundlings stood). The atmosphere was fairly raucous (more like Nascar or professional wrestling), with people constantly moving around, throwing hazelnut shells on the ground and talking - UNLESS they were intrigued by what was going on onstage. We think that with Shakespeare's plays the audience was pretty attentive. There were no intermissions, however, so patrons had to move sometimes. With Shakespeare's plays, they would probably hurry back!

Because the plays took place in the early afternoon and the players (actors) could see the audience and vice versa, it is thought by many scholars that Shakespeare intended for the audience to be involved in the play itself. An actor might refer to an audience member to poke fun at a character not on stage; pretty funny then AND now.

Finally - how long WERE these plays? They seem pretty long on the page. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue mentions "the two hours traffic of our stage...". If the actors really meant that, there would be a very fast pace: no long pauses or slow exits and entrances. This makes sense if you consider that the normal groundling had the attention span of today's 5 year-old and liked to throw things.

### **Post-performance**

#### **People/Happenings in the play**

#### **Multiple choice**

1. Who is the "shrew" in the play?

a) Bianca b) Grumio c) Kate d) Petruchio

2. Why does Lucentio disguise himself to become a tutor?

a) He wants to win Bianca's love, rather than just arranging it with her father.

- b) As a nobleman, he's not allowed to tutor.
- c) Baptista hates him, so he has to hide.
- d) Bianca is prejudiced against noblemen.

3. A "pantaloon" is:

- a) an old dottering fool in love with a young woman.
- b) someone who marries for money.
- c) a pair of Elizabethan pants
- d) a small vicious animal.

4. How does Petruchio plan to "tame" Kate.?

- a) by tying her up until she begs for mercy.
- b) by yelling at her every time she disagrees.
- c) by ignoring everything she does.
- d) by denying her food or drink, then acting like it's for her own good.

5..No one can marry Bianca until:

- a) they have enough money.
- b) they get her father's permission.
- c) Kate is married.
- d)all of the above.

6.Petruchio has come to Padua to:

- a) take over his father's business.
- b) go to the university.
- c) to hide from the police.
- d) to find a rich wife.

7. Hortensio wants Petruchio to marry Kate so:

- a) he can marry Bianca
- b) Petruchio can get the money he needs.
- c) the town will be rid of Kate.
- d) all of the above.

8. Petruchio will know Kate has been tamed when she:

- a) never speaks unless spoken to.
- b) says and does what he wants no matter what.
- c) is kind and courteous.
- d) agrees to marry him.

9. How many people are in disguise (using a different name) in this play?

- a) 4
- b) 5
- c) 2
- 4) 3

## Language

**Match the original lines with the modern meaning.**

- 1. "Trow you whither I am going?" \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. "Tranio, at once encase thee; take my coloured hat and cloak." \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. "I come to wive it wealthily in Padua." \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. " Master, for my hand, \_\_\_\_\_

- a) Now let me see if I can figure this out.
- b) What brings you to Padua?
- c) Did a wedding ever get arranged so quickly?
- d) Do you know where I'm going?

Both our inventions meet and jump in one."

5. "What happy gale blows you to Padua here from old Verona?" \_\_\_\_\_
6. "Why nothing comes amiss, so money comes withal" \_\_\_\_\_
7. "A title for a maid, of all titles the worst." \_\_\_\_\_
8. "Was ever match clapped up so suddenly?" \_\_\_\_\_
9. "'Now let me see if I can construe it.'" \_\_\_\_\_
10. "He hath some meaning in his mad attire" \_\_\_\_\_

- e) Tranio, take off your clothes and take mine"
- f) He's up to something with these weird clothes"
- g) I'm here to pick up a rich wife.
- h) Master, we've both got the same idea.
- i) Nothing can be wrong if money comes with it.
- j) The worst thing you could call a young lady.

**Match the example with the English usage they illustrate.**  
**alliteration simile metaphor irony**

- 1) "Myself am moved to woo thee for my wife."
- 2) "Thou art to me as secret and as dear as Anna to the Queen of Carthage."
- 3) "Lombardy, the garden of Italy."
- 4) "...suck the sweets of sweet philosophy"
- 5) "Which as a guise or step, may help these lovers"
- 6) "as curst and shrewd as Socrates' Xanthippe"
- 7) "hearing of her beauty and her wit,  
her affability and bashful modesty..."

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Matching (match the character with the line spoken by him/her/it)**

1. "I come to wive it wealthily in Padua." \_\_\_\_\_
2. "Sister, content you in your discontent" \_\_\_\_\_
3. "Tranio, I burn, I pine, I perish" \_\_\_\_\_
4. "For, how I am resolved you know.  
That is, not bestow my youngest daughter  
Before I have a husband for the elder "
5. "I am ashamed that women are so simple" \_\_\_\_\_
6. "Softly and swiftly sir, for the priest is ready" \_\_\_\_\_
7. "What you will have it named, even that it is" \_\_\_\_\_
8. "The more my wrong, the more his spite appears" \_\_\_\_\_
9. "He that knows better how to tame a shrew, Now let him speak" \_\_\_\_\_
10. " Youngling, thou canst not love so dear as I." \_\_\_\_\_
11. " Graybeard, thy love doth freeze." \_\_\_\_\_
12. "Help, masters, help! my master is mad." \_\_\_\_\_
13. "I can, Petruchio, help thee to a wife" \_\_\_\_\_
14. " Gentlemen, you do me double wrong,  
To strive for that which resteth in my choice."

- a) Bianca
- b) Baptista
- c) Lucentio
- d) Katherina
- e) Grumio
- f) Petruchio
- g) Biondello
- h) Gremio
- i) Tranio
- j) Hortensio

**Questions for thought.**

1. What is an actual shrew? Why is Katherina called this?
2. Why does Lucentio need to find a fake father?
3. Compare the marriages of Lucentio/Bianca and Kate/Petruchio? Which has the better chance of succeeding?

4. After Petruchio and Kate have their first meeting, Baptista comes back in and Petruchio says that he and Kate have a secret agreement: that she is going to pretend to hate him when anyone else is in the room. Is this smart? Why?
  
5. As with many of Shakespeare's plays, he seems to be "holding the mirror up to nature" and inviting the audience to examine some things about themselves. What was the traditional Elizabethan attitude toward how courtship/marriage was conducted? Do you think Shakespeare agreed? Do the people who practice those traditions in the play succeed in getting what they want? What might Shakespeare be encouraging us to see?