

# Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

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These study materials are produced by Bob Jones University  
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SHARING MASTERWORKS OF ART

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David Burke as Petruchio and Charlotte Burke as Katherine, Classic Players 2006

## The Taming of the Shrew and Comic Tradition

*The Taming of the Shrew* dates from the period of Shakespeare's early comedies, perhaps 1593 or 1594. In terms of the influences and sources that shaped the play, *Shrew* is a typical Elizabethan comedy, a work that draws from multiple literary and folk traditions. Its lively, exuberant tone and expansive structure, for example, associate it with medieval English comedy like the mystery plays attributed to the Wakefield Master.

The main plot of *Shrew*—the story of a husband's "taming" a shrewish wife—existed in many different oral and printed versions in 16th-century England and Europe. Writings in the humanist tradition as well as hundreds of folktales about mastery in marriage circulated in Shakespeare's day, providing rich and varied materials for the playwright's fertile imagination.

One such work published in English was a colloquy by Erasmus

entitled *A Mery Dialogue, Declaringe the Propertyes of Shrowd Shrewes, and Honest Wyves* (1557). It features a female character named Xantippa, who was Socrates' wife and the traditional prototype of all literary shrews. The colloquy portrays her shrewishness as a defensive response to her husband's bad character and behavior. Xantippa's friend, an older wife named Eulalia, counsels her to amend her own ways in an effort to reform her husband. In general, *Shrew* shows more kinship with such humanist works than with the folktale tradition in which wives were, more often than not, beaten into submission.

Kate's wit and facility with words also distinguish her from the stock shrew from earlier literature. Shakespeare sketches her character with a depth the typical shrew lacks. She is aggressive and belligerent, but she recognizes her own repulsiveness and ultimately responds positively to love.

Shakespeare is, in fact, unique among writers of his own age in eliminating physical abuse from the husband's repertory of wife-taming techniques. In *Shrew* no character directs violence against the shrewish Katherina. It is she who assaults Bianca and Petruchio. The only other violence in the play occurs in the form of slapstick directed by masters against their servants in the humorous manner of Roman comedy.

In the words of Richard Hosley, "Petruchio 'tames' Kate not by beating her but by bringing her to an awareness of her shrewishness and thus inducing her to mend her ways."

The only literary source Shakespeare is known to have drawn from directly for *Shrew* is George Gascoigne's English play entitled *Supposes* (1566), an adaptation of Ariosto's Italian comedy *I Suppositi* (1509), which has its roots in both the Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence and the Greek comedy of Menander. Echoes of *Supposes* appear in many details of Shakespeare's subplot, the story of gentle Bianca and the suitors who compete for her hand in marriage. The subplot also bears the marks of a more academic sort of romantic comedy played by amateurs during the Italian Renaissance.

The element of intrigue in the subplot—underhanded scheming by rivals for Bianca's love—is derived from Italian Renaissance *commedia dell'arte*, a type of drama frequently performed by Italian traveling troupes in England during the 1570s and 1580s. Among the stock characters from *commedia* who appear in the cast are a beautiful young woman who is sought after by many men (Bianca); the young man she loves (Lucentio); a rich, foolish old man who pursues her (Gremio the pantalone); a pair

of old fathers; and three different types of comic servants (Tranio the blunt and clever zanni, Grumio the harlequin or buffoon, and Biondello the bungling clown).

Shakespeare's early comedies are, like *Shrew*, more robust in tone than his later comedies. The early comedy *The Comedy of Errors* and the late comedy *Twelfth Night* exemplify this contrast. The early comedies also incorporate more elements of "low" comedy than the late ones. In *Shrew* Shakespeare incorporates coarse wit, horseplay, slapstick, jokes, gags and clowning. But he offers audiences intellectual humor as well as low comedy.

Shakespeare derived ideas for the plot and characters of *Shrew* from multiple sources and traditions, yet he blends them together in brilliant unity. With its well-developed characters in the main plot of Petruchio and Kate, the elaborate interplay and thematic unity between the main plot and subplot, and its thoughtfully unfolded themes, *The Taming of the Shrew* is a remarkable achievement from the young playwright William Shakespeare.



"The woman is not reckoned the more worshipful among men when she presumes to have mastery over her husband: but the more foolish and the more worthy to be mocked: yea and more than that, cursed and unhappy: the which turneth backward the laws of nature, like as though a soldier would rule his captain or the moon would stand above the sun or the arm above the head.

For in wedlock the man resembleth the reason, and the woman the body. Now reason ought to rule and the body to obey if a man will live. Also saint Paul sayeth, 'The head of the woman is the man.'

... But on the other part, if you [a wife] by virtuous living and [compliance] give [your husband] cause to love thee, thou shalt be mistress in a merry house, thou shalt rejoice, thou shalt be glad, thou shalt bless the day when thou were married unto him, and all them that were helping thereunto. *The wise sentence sayeth: A good woman by lowly obeisance ruleth her husband.*

—Juan Luis Vives,

*A Very Fruitful and Pleasant Book Called the Instruction of a Christian Woman*, trans. Richard Hyrde, c. 1529

Laura Pratt as Katherina, *Classic Players* 1951



David Burke as Petruchio and Charlotte Burke as Katherina, *Classic Players* 2006

## Love's Labour's Won: Mastery in Marriage in *The Taming of the Shrew*

In a 1598 listing of Shakespeare's works, Francis Meres includes among the comedies the titles *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Love's Labour's Won*. Since Meres' list does not mention *The Taming of the Shrew*, some scholars have suggested that *Love's Labour's Won* was an early title for *Shrew*. Certainly the contrasting comic endings of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Taming of the Shrew* might suggest that these two plays generally believed to date from the same period of Shakespeare's writing could at one time have been considered companion plays.

Audiences in the early 21st century are so far removed from assumptions about marriage and the family in Shakespeare's day that they may view *The Taming of the Shrew* as a defense of a man's right to tyrannize over his wife. But the traditional view of the Church of England, based on the teachings of the New Testament, is that a wife should submit her will to her husband's leadership. The husband's God-given duty, as stated by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5, is, by most estimates, an even taller order than the wife's: he must put aside all self-interests to love and care for his wife as Christ did for His bride, the Church. By this standard neither husband nor wife was liberated in the modern sense of the word in Shakespeare's day. Instead, the two were bound together by love and solemn mutual responsibilities. Both were called upon to submit.

Although Shakespeare did not set out to make this point in *The Taming of the Shrew*, he does take for granted as a normative backdrop to the play the prevailing view of marriage as taught by the Elizabethan church. Shakespeare's audiences would have been well familiar with this view from the homilies, catechism and prayer book of the Church of England, which includes the text of the marriage service. In the play's final scene Kate clearly states the orthodox view of marriage. She identifies the husband as the head of a family, its protector and provider. She refers to his authority over the wife as natural and reasonable, given the physical differences between men and women. She suggests that women who do not willingly follow their husband's leadership are foolish.

With its emphasis on love and submission, the view of marriage taught by the church stood in stark contrast to the growing tendency in a mercantile world to see marriageable women as marketable commodities. After Petruchio and Baptista have discussed Kate's dowry, Baptista



*Classic Players* 1990

cautions Petruchio that the match will not be valid until "the special thing is well obtain'd" by Petruchio, "That is, her love; for that is all in all" (II.i.128-29). Baptista not only guards against giving Kate to a mere fortune hunter; in a positive sense he recognizes love as the basis of a happy marriage and emotional stability as more important than financial security.

Having gotten the father's approval to court Kate, Petruchio sets out to woo and win her, quickly formulating a set of motives and methods that





allow him to “tame the shrew.” At the couple’s first meeting Petruchio learns just how high-spirited Kate is as she verbally attacks every person and premise that come her way. Unlike her father and sister, Petruchio is not intimidated by Kate’s fury or threats of violence against him. He not only holds his own in their witty sparring; he also manages to apply a sort of reverse psychology to their relationship. After every fiery outburst of anger from Kate, Petruchio commends her for being a beautiful, sensible, kind and quiet woman.

Another principle of Petruchio’s strategy is that he never allows Kate to have the loudest or last word. When she behaves boisterously against

him, Petruchio throws tantrums even louder than hers. In fact, he exaggerates every feature of her shrewish behavior as a means of showing her just how repugnant she appears to other people. He also reveals to Kate the shallowness of certain values she shares with her society, including her attachment to fashion.

Thus Petruchio and Kate progress from one stage of the taming process to the next, enduring varying degrees of discomfort together, until Kate clearly demonstrates that Petruchio’s “reverend care of her” has realized its goal of her own positive development. Petruchio and Kate have at last come to a tacit agreement about the unprofitability of her



“The direction of the play, for Katherine and Petruchio, is towards marriage as a rich, shared sanity. That means asserting and sharing all the facts about one’s identity, not suppressing large areas. . . . If [Kate] is a true Shakespearian heroine, in marriage she becomes herself only more so. . . . Marriage is addition, not subtraction: it is a sad let-down if the dazzling action of the play produces only a female wimp. But at the end of the play she shows that she shares with Petruchio an understood frame for both their lives. . . . Her final step is when she shows to Petruchio that they, the two of them, can contain violence and rebellion in their own mutual frame.”

—David Daniell, “The Good Marriage of Kate and Petruchio”

Betty Panosian as Katherine and Edward Panosian as Petruchio, *Classic Players* 1961



Bob Jones III as Petruchio, Stephen Jones as Tranio and Steve Eager as Hortensio, *Classic Players* 1990

perverse behavior, and she abandons it altogether in favor of spirited obedience to Petruchio's demands. Love's labors have been won. In the words of Anne Barton, "What Petruchio wants, and ends up with, is a Katherine of unbroken spirit and gaiety who has suffered only minor discomfort and who has learned the value of self-control and caring about someone other than herself."

Commenting on the relationship of Petruchio and Kate as husband and wife, Germaine Greer refers to Kate's final speech on the respective duties of marriage partners "the greatest defense of Christian monogamy ever written." Whether or not audiences appreciate the premises about marriage that Shakespeare appropriates and Kate gives authoritative voice to in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the play remains a popular piece of stage entertainment because of its witty treatment of a perennially favorite subject—mastery in marriage.

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## PETRUCHIO

Petruchio "thrust[s] upon himself the rude self-will which actually belongs to [Kate], so that she beholds what she now is in his mirror, and he (to quote his man Peter) 'kills her in her own humor.' [He also] thrust[s] on her the semblance of a modest, well-conducted young woman . . . so that she beholds in another mirror what she may become if she tries. . . . Petruchio's stratagem . . . reflects love's genuine creative power, which can on occasion make the loved one grow to match the dream."

—Maynard Mack,  
"Engagement and Detachment in Shakespeare's Plays"



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Christi Woodruff as Bianca and Philip Eoute as Lucentio, *Classic Players* 2006

## Romantic Excess Onstage

### Courtly Love in Shakespeare

During the 12th-century reign of Henry II of France, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie created a court in which clerics disputed the nature of love. Andreas Capellanus, court chaplain, summarizes the “rules” that issued from this court in a treatise entitled *The Art of Courtly Love*. Many of the conventions he records had already been sung about by 11th-century French troubadours. Others had been incorporated in the works of the Roman poet Ovid.

According to C. S. Lewis, the traditions of courtly love brought about significant changes in the way romantic love is depicted in literature and perhaps also set up new expectations for gender relationships in real life. In classical literature love is a trifle that might temporarily distract a man in the course of his heroic labors. In courtly love tradition, however, a man (the lover) becomes an abject slave, obeying every whim of the woman he loves (the mistress) to gain her favor. He serves her just as vassals in the Middle Ages served their lords and ladies. If she scorns him, he becomes physically ill.

The courtly love mistress takes precedence over all the lover’s other endeavors in life, even his occupation and his religion. Disdainful and unapproachable, she becomes a goddess whom the lover adores. He sends her gifts, sings to her and promises to obey and defend her forever. If after a long period of courtship, the mistress finally has mercy on the lover, they pledge to remain faithful to each other and keep their love secret.

Lewis suggests that courtly love conventions became the basis of modern courtship etiquette in which the woman always takes precedence over the man. He is the one who initiates social activity with her, but she determines the direction the relationship will take. Further, Lewis traces the modern notion that “happiness [is] grounded on successful romantic love” to courtly love tradition.

Shakespeare alludes to courtly love conventions in both his tragedies and his comedies, including *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In general he portrays the courtly lover as the ultimate fool, for even if he succeeds in winning the hand of the woman he pursues, misery is his lot.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Lucentio becomes the typical courtly lover after falling in love at first sight with Bianca. He describes himself as one who pines, cries and suffers miserably from the pangs of love. He extols the object of his love, Bianca, in conventional poetic terms as a goddess with coral lips and perfumed breath. In short, he tells Tranio, “Sacred and sweet was all I saw in her.” He declares that if he fails to win her love, he will “perish.” Shakespeare always makes light of such romantic excess.

To be near Bianca, whose father has forbidden any suitors to approach her, the enraptured Lucentio exchanges clothes with his servant Tranio, remarking that he is willing to become an abject slave to win this seemingly unattainable woman. He is employed as a Latin scholar by Gremio, another suitor to Bianca, with the agreement that he will woo her for the other man. Instead, he courts Bianca for himself and reveals his love to her by interpolating a text by Ovid. Thus having won Bianca through deceit, Lucentio marries her without parental knowledge or consent.

The outcome of the plot for Lucentio is not fully revealed until the closing moments of the play when Bianca’s true nature becomes apparent. For all his romantic lovesickness Lucentio has won a wife who proves the opposite of his expectations. By contrast, Petruchio, who has wooed his Kate in rough, unromantic style, takes home the real prize.

Shakespeare thus illustrates the hazards of judging by outward appearance as well as the reward of deceit.

Emily Anderson as Bianca, Laura Pratt as Katherine and Robert Wiebe as Baptista, *Classic Players* 1951





# THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

PADUA CITY, WYOMING  
AND SOMEWHERE ELSE

Lucentio with his servant Tranio arrives in Padua as a student.

On the street the two witness an encounter between the wealthy gentleman Baptista with his daughters Katherine and Bianca and two suitors to Bianca. Hortensio and Gremio vie for the hand of Baptista's younger daughter in marriage. But Baptista declares that Bianca cannot wed until he has a husband for her headstrong older sister, Katherine.



After Baptista and his daughters leave, Lucentio and Tranio overhear Hortensio and Gremio making plans to hire tutors for Bianca and to send her gifts in order to advance themselves favorably in her eyes and her father's. They also agree to find a husband for Katherine.



After Bianca's suitors leave, Lucentio reveals to Tranio that he has fallen in love at first sight with Bianca. Tranio schemes to help his master gain access to her and woo her. They agree that Lucentio will take on a disguise and secure a position as tutor to Bianca while Tranio becomes "Lucentio" and makes his master's suit for Bianca to her father.



Petruchio, a swaggering gentleman from Verona, arrives in Padua looking for a rich wife. His old friend Hortensio urges him to pursue Baptista's daughter Katherine but warns him that she is a shrew. Not to be intimidated by a woman, Petruchio agrees to speak to Baptista about Katherine immediately. When Petruchio and Kate meet, they appear to be a mismatch, but after an episode of fast, forthright talk, Petruchio sets the wedding date for Sunday.



SHAKESPEARE'S

# THE SHREW

PERFORMING, CIRCA 1880  
ALONG THE YUKON TRAIL



Posing as Lucentio, Tranio steps up the stakes with Baptista for Bianca's hand, outbidding the wealthy old Gremio. Meanwhile Lucentio, disguised as a Latin scholar named Cambio, presses his suit directly to Bianca and wins her promise of love.



Petruchio arrives late and ill-clothed for the wedding, which occurs offstage. Afterwards he announces that rather than staying for the wedding feast, he and Kate will leave immediately for his country house near Verona. Kate responds in fury, but Petruchio carries her off.

Once at home, Petruchio makes outrageous demands of his servants and contrives for Kate to be hungry, sleepless and frustrated until he has "tamed" her. The motive for his clever strategy is love. He endures the same hardships as she and carries out his taming plan in a manner that reveals his "reverend care for her."

Later as Petruchio and Kate journey back toward Baptista's house at Padua, Kate's presumed progress in wifely submissiveness is put to the extreme test. Once there, the couple meet family and friends at a banquet celebrating the recent marriages of three couples: Petruchio and Kate; Lucentio and Bianca, who have eloped; and Hortensio and the Widow. Petruchio challenges Kate to give a public lecture to Bianca and Hortensio's bride on a wife's duties toward her husband. In the end everyone present at the banquet marvels at Petruchio's taming of the shrew.

