

Synopsis of *The Taming of the Shrew*

Lucentio, a young man from Mantua, arrives in Padua to study at the city's great university. Lucentio glimpses Bianca, the young daughter of a merchant, and immediately falls in love.

Bianca's father, Baptista, has two daughters. The older daughter, Katherine, is outspoken and has a violent temper. People call her "Katherine the Shrew." Her younger sister, Bianca, appears sweet and docile. In addition to Lucentio, two other men want to marry Bianca—Hortensio and Gremio. Baptista, orders that the younger daughter cannot wed before the older daughter. He asks the men to search for a husband for Katherine and to find tutors for both daughters.

Lucentio determines to use Baptista's request for tutors to gain access to Bianca. Lucentio changes clothes with his servant, Tranio, and presents himself as a Latin tutor. His servant, now dressed in his master's elegant clothes, goes to speak to Baptista. Dressed as Lucentio, he convinces the merchant that Lucentio is wealthier than Bianca's other suitors.

Another newcomer arrives in Padua: Petruchio, looking for a wealthy bride is steered by Bianca's suitors to Baptista's house. Petruchio tells the merchant that everyone has sung the praises of his eldest daughter and asks for her hand. Baptista, thinking Petruchio not well informed about Katherine's true nature, promises to pay Petruchio 20,000 crowns if he will marry Katherine. Petruchio meets Katherine, whom he calls Kate. She hurls insults at him, but he turns everything she says into a term of endearment. Petruchio tells Kate that they will be married on Sunday. Baptista is thrilled. Kate, curiously, says nothing.

On their wedding day, Petruchio arrives so late that Katherine feels at first humiliated and then relieved. But Petruchio is dressed like a clown. He tells Kate that she is marrying him, not his clothes. After the ceremony, he carries Kate off on an old horse before she can enjoy the wedding feast. Once home, Petruchio does not allow his new wife to eat, though she is hungry, or to sleep, though she is tired. His plan is to break her of her shrewishness through deprivation.

Back in Padua, Bianca is being wooed by her suitors—Hortensio pretends to be a music teacher while Gremio discovers a Latin "tutor" for her who is actually the disguised Lucentio. Bianca falls in love with him, and Hortensio and Gremio see them kissing. The men declare they will never marry a woman so fickle. Hortensio instead marries a wealthy widow. Lucentio and Tranio persuade an old man from Mantua to be Lucentio's father to negotiate the marriage of his "son" to Bianca. Baptista agrees to give Bianca's hand in



Photo by Carol Rosegg.

The ensemble of the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 1995 production of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

marriage to Lucentio—or to Lucentio's servant, who is still disguised as his master.

Kate is excited to return home for her sister's wedding. Petruchio orders Kate a new hat and dress for the wedding. Though Kate is pleased with both Petruchio rips them to pieces. He and his wife will go as they are to Padua. Worn down, Kate agrees to everything her husband says. If Petruchio says the sun is the moon, then it is so. On the journey to Padua, they see an old man. Petruchio greets the man as if he was a young woman, and Kate does, too. Then Petruchio says the traveler is actually an old man, and Kate agrees. The man, bewildered, joins them: he is Vincentio, the real father of Lucentio, traveling to Padua to see his son.

Vincentio is nearly arrested as an imposter when he is accused of deception by the man impersonating him. Bianca and Lucentio arrive, having been secretly married, and reveal all.

At the wedding feast, Petruchio is teased about his shrewish wife. Petruchio bets the other recently married men that his wife is the most obedient. First, Lucentio sends for Bianca. She refuses to come. Then Hortensio sends for his wife. She refuses as well. Finally, Petruchio sends for Kate who comes immediately. He tells her to fetch the two other women, which she does. Petruchio orders her to instruct women about their duties of obedience. Kate delivers a speech that amazes everyone. The play ends with Lucentio vowing to tame his wife, Bianca, if he can. **S**

English Stereotypes of Italy and Italians

Italy and Italians dominate so many of Shakespeare's plays that it's clear that Shakespeare, together with many English people in his day, loved Italy—or what they thought was Italy. Some scholars think that Italy represented everything that England was not: a warm, easygoing place, where discipline was lax and people ate, drank and were merry all day. Italy, then, was a stage where anything could happen.

More than a dozen of Shakespeare's 37 plays take place in Italy, including: *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Winter's Tale*. Many scholars believe that Shakespeare may have visited Italy in 1591, when the plague swept through London. The Black Death was so terrible that theatres were ordered closed to stop the spread of the disease. While some members of Shakespeare's acting company went to Italy, there is no firm evidence that Shakespeare himself ever did. These plays, however, are full of vivid detail and knowledge of Italian cities, names and customs, as if written by one who had spent a great deal of time there.

Much of what English people "knew" about Italy was based on exaggerated travelers' tales and stories. Many people from England traveled to Italy to see the ruins of ancient times and to enjoy warm weather and good food and wine. So even if Shakespeare never left his home country, Italian characters, culture and literature were a strong presence in the literature and drama of the day.

Within his theatre and in his works, Shakespeare makes great use of Italian architecture. He sets some of his plays in walled cities, within which characters assume different identities, or from which someone could be banished. Intimate scenes frequently take place in lush gardens that allow privacy. Marketplaces and large, open piazzas were natural gathering places where people could gather in a play to establish a mood, gossip about a character's reputation, or to discuss the latest events.

As in Shakespeare's England, Italian ports and cities attracted travelers from around the world, and many people—including Shakespeare himself—were drawn to the great cities to seek their fortunes, a spouse, money or higher learning.



A painting of Mezzetin, the amorous valet, suffering unrequited love. Oil on canvas by Jean-Antoine Watteau, 1717-19.

During Shakespeare's time a style of Italian comedy called "commedia dell'arte," meaning "comedy of art" or "comedy of the profession," was very popular. The conflict in a commedia plot revolved around disguises, mistaken identities, and misunderstandings that are happily resolved in the end. Traveling groups of actors, or players, would perform in public places, and frequently add juggling, acrobatics, physical ("slapstick") humor and improvised actions—called "lazzis." The commedia plots almost always involved love and jealousy; difficulties between men and women; servants and masters; and overcoming obstacles to love and marriage, such as money, class or a father's opposition.

Commedia included stock characters that were easily recognizable. There was usually a miserly merchant (*Pantalone*); an old man or woman (*La Ruffinana*) who blocks the love of a young couple; *Il Dottore* (the doctor), a pompous caricature of an educated man; the two young people themselves (the *Inamorato* and *Inamorata*); a mischievous servant (*Arlecchino*) who often had to masquerade as his

master; and a man who would do anything for money (*Brighella*). Masks, disguises and elaborate costumes were common. The characters were beloved by, and familiar to, Shakespeare's audiences.

In addition to a fascination with Italy, there was another good reason for Shakespeare to set his plays abroad. Censorship was strong in England during his lifetime, and theatres whose works offended the queen could be shut down. It was safer to set the stories in Italy—a symbol to the English of corruption and lost ancient glory. Audiences could both admire Italy's classical foundations, its economic energy and cultural richness, and also hold the people in contempt for their hypocritical behaviors. By setting his plays abroad, Shakespeare could write more freely about what he thought of class differences, hypocrisy, religion and politics in his own country since his barbs were not directly aimed at his country or queen. By setting his plays in a very different country, Shakespeare gives his audience distance, both literally and figuratively, to reflect on its own society's ills.



Pantalone, one of the Commedia Dell'Arte characters, print by Maurice Sand, 1862.



A typical lover in Commedia Dell'Arte, print by Maurice Sand, 1867.

Background on Padua

Why did Shakespeare set *The Taming of the Shrew* in Padua? To the Elizabethan audiences, cities in Italy were associated with certain attributes, or characteristics: Florence was thought to be a center of old-fashioned courts and manners; Rome was a false paradise; Venice (where Petruchio goes to buy his wedding clothes) was the center of fashion. Padua, in the north of Italy near Venice, was known as a great center of learning. Its university is among the oldest in Europe. A group of students and professors from the University of Bologna broke away in 1222 to establish the University of Padua, to study in greater academic freedom. The city, which enjoyed the protection of Venice, was considerably freer than other parts of Italy. The University of Padua adopted a Latin motto: *Universa universis patavina libertas* (The freedom of Padua is universal and for all).

In 1545, the university established the Botanical Garden of Padua. The garden was the second botanical garden in the world. It is the oldest garden today standing on its original site.

Padua is considered the oldest city in northern Italy and among the most beautiful. It has many ancient, covered streets that open into large public squares, or piazzas. Many bridges cross the city's river. The nearby city of Venice, whose rulers protected Padua, built new walls for the city between 1507 and 1544 and several enormous gates. Shakespeare would have heard and known of these great structures, from stories of travelers and students.

Padua also was known for its successful industries. Businessmen, or merchants, made their fortunes in the city's cotton and candle works, as well as in corn and saw mills. **S**



The University of Padua's main building shown in a 1654 woodcut by Jacob Tomasini.

Men vs. Women ... Literally



Baptista's House: Petruchio, Katherine, Bianca, Hortensia, Baptista, Grumio and Tranio. Engraving by I.P. Simon after Francis Wheatley. Published January 1, 1793, by John & Josiah Boydell at the Shakespeare Gallery.

The role of women in society has been one of the most controversial and enjoyable topics in theatre and literature throughout the ages. *The Taming of the Shrew* fits squarely within the genre of courtship dramas that hinge on the societal expectations and the roles in marriage for men and women. At the center of this genre is the struggle to understand each other and live and love together.

In Shakespeare's time, it was common to hope for love or affection after marriage but to settle for comfort and respect. While many plays end with a marriage (and the unspoken words, "And they lived happily ever after"), *The Taming of the Shrew* is unusual, even for today's romantic comedies, because it continues the action beyond the couple's

wedding. It shows how the institution of marriage can change people and how living together can also change people.

A good marriage in Shakespeare's day was one between members of the same social class—thus not threatening the social order—where the families both approved of the match. Thus, every "good" marriage was an arranged marriage, since it was arranged by the families. A good marriage was also one that was financially sound: the woman's dowry was intended to support her and the household, and financial concerns were frequently paramount, particularly among nobility—that is, those with property and money to protect. Petruchio is honest about his goal in marriage: he wants a rich woman. ("I come to wive it wealthily in Padua; If wealthily, then happily in Padua." Act 1, scene 2.)

A Woman's Place in Shakespeare's Time

The most powerful person in England during Shakespeare's life was Queen Elizabeth. Elizabeth ruled England for more than 40 years and never married, perhaps because she did not want to share power with anyone nor be subservient to a husband. Elizabeth set an important example for the nobility in the field of education. The pursuit of knowledge, including math and classical subjects such as Latin, was appropriate for both noblemen and noble women. The Queen was highly educated.

Nonetheless, the status of women was quite low compared to men in the Elizabethan era. Women had to be educated by tutors, since only boys could go to school. Regardless of educational level or social status, women could not attend university. The "learned professions," such as law and medicine, were barred to women. Women could write and paint, and did so with great success, but the performing arts were considered inappropriate and immodest, so women were forbidden, by law, from performing on the stage in England, unlike other European countries. Women's roles on the stage were played by men or boys.

Most seriously, women could not inherit a title, such as duke or count. Title and (usually, but not always) property passed from father to son, or to the next male heir in the family. The only exception was, of course, the crown, which Queen Elizabeth inherited. Legally, women were the property of their fathers, and then their husbands.

Though women could, did and frequently had to work if they did not belong to the nobility, the burdens of childbearing took their toll: women on average gave birth to one child every two years. They were thus dependent on men for financial support and protection much of their lives. Marriage was idealized as the finest "occupation" for women and men, and unmarried women were regarded with a mix of pity and suspicion. Single women were sometimes regarded as witches by their neighbors, though prosecutions for witchcraft were rare in Elizabethan times, unlike in other countries.

In Shakespeare's day, a woman's place was in transition. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare participates in the ongoing debate on the natural role of a woman

in society, as daughter, wife and mother. The cultural ideal of femininity in Shakespeare's day was just as Kate pronounces it at the end of the play: to embody "love, fair looks, and true obedience" — first to her father, and then to her husband. When Petruchio carries Kate away from her wedding banquet, he states, "She is my goods, my chattels. She is my house, my household-stuff, my field, my barn, My horse, my ass, my anything." (Act 3, scene 3).

Women were taught to be (or to appear) submissive and obedient. Kate refuses to comply with this role, and society scorns her as a result. This scorn makes Kate angrier. Her sister Bianca, who in some scenes is just as stubborn and angry as Kate, is sweet and docile in public. By the end of the play, Kate has put aside her mask of a shrew, and Bianca has publicly disobeyed her husband and ridiculed Kate for obeying her husband's every whim, even when he orders her to throw her cap down on the floor. "Fie, what foolish duty call you this?" says Bianca. Her husband answers that he wishes Bianca's duty were as foolish, since her disobedience has cost him 100 crowns. "The more fool you," Bianca answers, and the two sisters' public roles have been reversed.

In Shakespeare's time, there were many books, sermons, pamphlets and plays published and performed about teaching a woman obedience to men. One can conclude from the popularity of this topic that many women were not obedient, and men did not know what to do about this.



Douglas Fairbanks as Petruchio and Mary Pickford as Katharina in the 1929 film *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The Roles of Husbands and

Wives

"Thy husband is ... one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labour both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks and true obedience;
Too little payment for so great a debt."
The Taming of the Shrew, Act 5 scene 2

The husband was the head of the household in Elizabethan times. At the end of the play, Kate articulates the Elizabethan ideal of the role of a wife. Men and women played different roles in

society, and each role was separately respected. A man was expected to provide for his wife, support her financially, and protect her, the children and their home from harm. A woman was expected to keep the home and raise the children, and to respect her husband.

These rules were laid out because love and affection, which are the foundation of most modern marriages, were secondary considerations in Elizabethan times. Marriages among the nobility were complicated financial affairs, much like business mergers today. Fathers arranged marriages, and the marriages themselves involved combining entire family fortunes, lands, money and other property, such as farm animals. A good marriage by one child could benefit the entire family for generations, in terms of status and wealth. A bad marriage to an "inferior" person could bring a family down. If love came after marriage, that was well and good. If not, each person was still expected to play his or her role in the marriage and thus preserve order in society.

But while the fathers arranged the marriage, the actual courtship was conducted by the couples themselves, and not by parents or guardians. Men and women each set out to attract the other and to capture the other's heart. Rituals of courtship were well-known and involved all the senses: romantic poetry, music, flowers, fine food and clothes were used to attract the opposite sex. Lucentio woos Bianca by reciting Latin poetry, impressing her (or thinking he impresses her) with his scholarship and appreciation for the finer things in life.

There was freedom, but sometimes not a great deal of guidance, in courtship. Both men and women play

games during romance, then and now, and Shakespeare delights in the deceptions people play on each other and on their families, in the name of love and attraction. Pride and personality can play important roles in the relationship between a couple, right up until the altar, and Shakespeare explores both in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Shakespeare the Feminist

The Taming of the Shrew is one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, from its first performance in 1594 through modern times. It has never fallen out of the repertory and was performed in royal courts as well as in modest theatres. While Shakespeare's plays are filled with strong women – from Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* to Paulina in *The Winter's Tale* – it is in *Shrew* that Shakespeare focuses on the contest of wills between a strong man and a head-strong woman.

Still, some modern scholars, artists and audience members are uncomfortable with the play, labeling it sexist or misogynistic. At least one "sequel" was written in the 1800s, where Katherine "tames" her husband. The text of the play begins with a rarely performed section, called an "induction," involving a wandering beggar named Christopher Sly who is deceived into thinking he is actually a nobleman. Actors entertain him and perform *The Taming of the Shrew*.

One recent production by the American Players' Theater used part of the induction and an added ending to avoid some of the controversy surrounding the "taming" or submission of Kate. In their version, the entire play is actually the wandering beggar's dream that he is Petruchio. He is awakened from his dream by his shrewish, real-life wife.



Photo by David Cooper

Robynn Rodriguez as Katherina, Jonathan Adams as Petruchio, and Thom Rivera as a servant in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 2000 production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Kenneth Albers.

What is a Shrew?

A shrew is a derogatory term for a woman with a sharp tongue and a bad temper. A shrew was a common character in *Commedia* and in literature of Shakespeare's day. Elizabethans distinguished between a "shrew" and a "scold"—a scold was much worse than a shrew. A scold is a woman who offends public order through her speech. Unlike the shrew, who utters angry, nagging, mean-spirited words, a scold committed more slanderous acts, punishable under the law, such as gossiping, insulting and deliberately attempting to stir up trouble between neighbors. In Pilgrim times in America, there was a legal offense called the "common scold"—a woman who offended the Puritan elders. Her offenses were punished by dunking in the river, usually with much community participation. Believe it or not, this category of offense remained law until 1972 when the New Jersey case of *State v. Palandrano* buried the offense for good.

Appearance vs. Reality

A major theme of *The Taming of the Shrew* is the unmasking of false appearances to uncover the person's true nature. Clothing and disguises are critical to this play. Physical disguises are necessary to woo Bianca, because her father decrees that his daughters must have tutors, so the men—even the student Lucentio—present themselves as tutors. Petruchio is the only suitor who does not don a physical disguise, though he dresses up for his wedding so his wife will understand that "to me she's married, not unto my clothes." (Act 3, scene 2).

It's clear that people in Padua do judge one another by their outward appearances. Lucentio's servant, Tranio, is able to impersonate his master merely by changing clothes with him, though all the while remaining a servant. Tranio senses that Petruchio, when he appears as a ragged clown for his wedding, intends to teach his wife a lesson: he "hath some meaning in his mad attire" (act 3, scene 2). Petruchio tells Kate that in his house, "Our purses shall be proud, our garments poor, For 'tis the mind that makes the body rich; And as the sun breaks through the darkest clouds, So honor peereth in the meanest habit" (act 4, scene 3).

Shakespeare mocks superficial judgments in many ways in the play. Kate, who is regarded publicly as a shrew, is privately revealed to be a woman of wit and passion. Petruchio sees through her public façade and understands that he is a good match for her. By contrast, Bianca's suitors, who present themselves as steadfast and true, abandon her quickly. Perhaps the pinnacle of the deceptions occurs when Lucentio's father appears and presents himself honestly. But no one believes that he is who he says he is, and he is almost arrested for impersonating himself.

There are invisible, or psychological, disguises as well. Kate plays the role of a shrew because it keeps men, and thus rejection and hurt, away. Petruchio frankly explains to the audience what role he will play—he'll pretend that Kate has welcomed him kindly, in order to obtain her dowry. Bianca plays her role well, too, as does her Latin "tutor" who is actually a student. After marriage, though, each member of the couple must assume a new role: of husband and wife. These real roles might be more difficult to play than the pretend roles of courtship.

What Were Elizabethan Attitudes Toward Women?

The text of the play contains only one reference to a character striking another: Kate strikes Petruchio, and he says, "I swear I'll cuff you if you strike again." (act 2, scene 1). There is much verbal warfare between the couple, and much throwing of cutlery, food and furniture, but Shakespeare does not seem to show support for violence. Indeed, Shakespeare focuses the play on the courtship, marriage and ultimate love between Petruchio and Kate. Petruchio's main technique in "taming" or seducing Kate is based not on violence, but on wordplay and wit. His confidence as a man is another weapon: he tells her father that she has agreed to marry him, when she has not. He deprives her of food and sleep, but even then Kate speaks up: "I will be free, Even to the uttermost as I please in words" (act 4, scene 3).

Kate is used to having her words obeyed, not twisted or ignored, and she has never been in a situation where she has to be grateful for her food and sleep. In the end, Petruchio wins her respect (and a lot of money in a bet) because the couple operates as a team. Her status is raised in society after her speech—she is respected because she shows respect to her husband. Shakespeare's ultimate message is that respect is the foundation of a strong marriage and of a peaceful social order. 



Colleen Dewhurst as Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, 1956. Photo courtesy of George E. Joseph.

While there is no concrete evidence that Shakespeare was (or was not) a feminist, we can certainly see from his plays that, as a father of two daughters, the role of women in society and marriage was of great concern. He clearly wanted his audience to consider the role of love in marriage and the rights of all members of the household to be treated with respect and love—perhaps if only to avoid the label of "shrew."