



A Playgoer's Guide

Plot summary:

This story involves two sisters who live with their father, Bianca and Katharina. Bianca is known to be very sweet while Katharina is the opposite. Bianca wants to marry but can't until Katharina does. Lucentio wants to marry Bianca, so he plans to find someone to marry Katharina. He finds a man named Petruchio who wants to wed and agrees to marry Katharina because she is rich. While he "woos" her Lucentio switches clothes and becomes a servant to Bianca, living in her house as a tutor. Along the way Katharina and Petruchio get married and he tames her with a method he calls killing her with kindness. He does not let her do anything, whether it be sleep, eat or have nice clothes, all in the name of love. In the end she changes her nature and is docile. In the end she becomes docile. Lucentio's plot works and he marries Bianca but in the end Katharina is the most modest wife of all.

The play

It is said that William Shakespeare created *The Taming of the Shrew* between 1587 and 1592, thus making it one of his earlier works. In January of 1593, before the *Shrew* could make it to stage, the theatres of London were all closed on account of the plague. Much to Shakespeare's dismay, the theatres remained closed until the spring of 1594. In the meantime, he made many respectable social connections and worked on writing lyric poetry and sonnets.

The Taming of the Shrew was an experiment in comedy for Shakespeare; its sub-plots are based on an Italian comedy by George Gascoigne entitled *Supposes* (1566), a translation of *I Suppositi* (1509), by Ludovico Ariosto.

The controversy

The times of Shakespeare contrast a great deal with today. For this reason it is important that a modern audience be introduced to the society that he wrote for. It was a world in which arranged marriages and male dominance were commonly understood, and accepted. Shakespeare isn't attempting to portray an ideal world but is instead attempting to display the world he is part of and shaped by. The play mirrors societal attitudes of Shakespeare's time.

Getting to know the characters:

Baptista Minola:

Baptista is the father of Katharina and Bianca. They reside in Padua. He is the one who has made the decree that Katharina must be married before Bianca. This is to ensure Katharina does get married. He loves his children but at times is beyond himself as to what to do with them when they act as they do.

Katharina, the Shrew:

Katharina is the "shrew" of the title. She is the daughter of Baptista Minola, and lives with him in Padua. At the beginning of the play she is sharp-tongued, quick-tempered, and prone to violence, particularly against anyone who would try to see her married - to the great distress of her father. She does not resist Petruchio forever, though, and eventually subjugates herself to him, in spite of all her previous forswearing of marriage.

Bianca:

Bianca is the younger sister of the Shrew Katharina. A clear-cut contrast to her sister, Bianca is sweet, soft-spoken and clearly the favorite of the bachelors of Padua. When Katharina is “tamed” and marries Petruchio the true nature of Bianca, who manipulates her suitors and willingly deceives her father, is revealed. In the final act, Bianca herself proves to be the willful wife.

Petruchio:

Petruchio is a gentleman of Verona. He has come to Padua in search of a wife and becomes the aggressive suitor of obstinate Katharina. Their unconventional courtship is actually a stubborn battle of wills as Petruchio attempts to break Katharina’s vicious temper with his own outrageous behaviour. At the end of the play Petruchio proves to have tamed “Katharina”, transforming her into an obedient wife.

Hortensio:

Hortensio is a suitor to Bianca. He encourages his friend Petruchio to pursue Katharina. As a suitor to Bianca, he is ineffective, if not indifferent, and eventually marries a rich widow.

Grumio:

Grumio is a servant to Petruchio. He is a crude and punning servant. He gives a humorous recounting of the journey Petruchio and Katharina make from Padua to Petruchio’s country home.

Gremio:

Gremio is a suitor to Bianca as well. He is the oldest and most foolish of all Bianca’s suitors. His role in this play is largely comedy.

Lucentio:

Lucentio is a suitor and eventually husband to Bianca. A young student from a wealthy family, Lucentio is romantic, naive, and extremely dependent on his servant Tranio, who is much smarter than his master. Lucentio’s immaturity contrasts sharply against the confident and secure nature of Petruchio.

Tranio:

Tranio is a servant to Lucentio. He is much more intelligent than his employer, is largely responsible for Lucentio’s successful courting of Bianca. The quick-witted Tranio takes great pleasure in devising schemes and manipulating suitors so that Lucentio may marry Bianca.

– Adapted from the online *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

“We’ve got it wrong about the test of time. Time doesn’t test works of art and literature; it is those works that test the times.”

-- Robert Bethune, Middletown *Times Herald Record*, 1994.

“Literary critics and theatrical artists, when confronting something they dislike, often reinterpret it. For the past half-century, critics and directors have regularly attempted to revise the plain doctrine of Kate's final speech under the all-saving name of irony, claiming that Kate doesn't mean what she says. . . . The actress may undercut the sense of what she says -- either crudely, by winking at the audience, often over Petruchio's shoulder in the final embrace, or more elegantly, as Edith Evans once did, by playing the whole speech as if she were a heroine in Congreve or Wilde, going through a highly mannered performance, saying the things men want to hear, but making it clear to the audience by the stylized exaggeration that she doesn't mean a word of it.”

– Peter Saccio, Dartmouth College

“Simply causing the audience to realize that there is more than one perspective on the taming is enormously important; other perspectives stimulate the viewers to think about their own frameworks and perceptions of events in the play.”

-- Amy Meadows *The Tech* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

This guide was produced by the
Taming of the Shrew Task Force

<http://people.stthomasu.ca/~shrew/mainpage/htm>

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