

The Taming of the Shrew (c. 1590-1592)

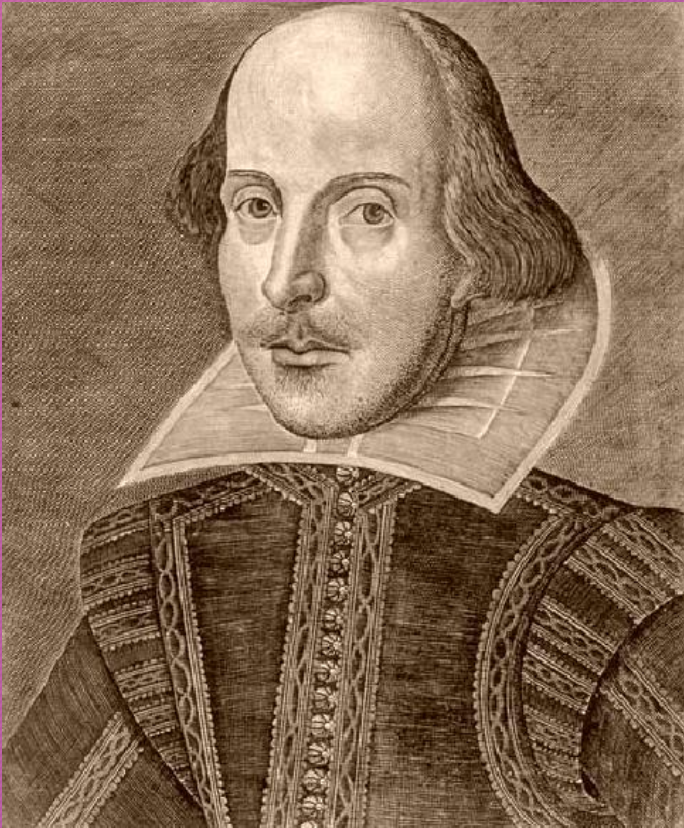
By William Shakespeare
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Genre: Comedy

- “Comedies head towards marriage. This is a useful place to start thinking about the typical shape of comedies. Marriages conventionally represent the achievement of happiness and the promise of regeneration. So important to Shakespeare is the symbolic power of marriage that some end in more than one marriage.”
- “For the most part, Shakespeare’s comedies rely on benign misunderstanding and deception. They therefore put a premium on dramatic irony, where we know better than the perplexed lovers.”

Source: <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-shakespeares-comedy>

Who was Shakespeare?



- Born: 1554
- Died: 1616 at age 52
- Regarded as the greatest English playwright in History
- Born in Stratford-upon-Avon
- Little is known about his life because record keeping wasn't done as carefully then as it is now
- Married 26-year-old Anne Hathaway when he was 18
- He had three children: Suzanna, and twins, Hamnet and Judith
- Hamnet died at age 11 (1596)
- Shakespeare is known to have been writing plays for the stage in London in 1592
- In his will he left his wife his 'second-best-bed'

Act 1: the framing narrative

- The play starts with a framing narrative about Christopher Sly who is deceived to think that he is a lord; this is a cruel and funny practical joke
- The frame is generally left out of most modern productions because it implicitly poses the question of whether the noble class is naturally superior by birth or whether money, fine clothes and fine company confer nobility
- For modern audiences this is a non-question (of course wealth confers status) but for Renaissance audiences it was a very real question because the King (or Queen) was believed to be appointed by God
- The frame also sets up the notion of 'nature versus nurture' as a theme that will later apply to Katherina's shrewish behaviour in the main play

Act I: exposition



BAPTISTA:

Gentlemen, importune me no farther,
For how I firmly am resolv'd you know;
That is, not to bestow my youngest daughter
Before I have a husband for the elder.
If either of you both love Katherine,
Because I know you well and love you well,
Leave shall you have to court her at your pleasure

Bianca has many suitors and is clearly Baptista's favourite daughter. He tells Bianca's suitors, Gremio and Hortensio, that Bianca may not marry until her elder sister Katherine is married. Katherine's temper is established in the first act but we are also given reason to infer that her bad behaviour is a response to her father's favouritism. Act 1 is punctuated with an interlude featuring Christopher Sly (who wants a moment alone with his 'wife').

Act I: exposition



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.

Petruchio makes it plain that he wants to marry for money and doesn't care how awful the woman he marries might be. He doesn't expect that he might ever actually fall in love with the woman he woos.

Act II: courting Kate

KATHERINA:

Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing:

They call me Katherine that do talk of me.

PETRUCHIO:

You lie, in faith, for you are call'd plain Kate,
And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst;
But, Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,
Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate,
For dainties are all Kates, and therefore,
Kate, Take this of me, Kate of my consolation;
Hearing thy mildness prais'd in every town,
Thy virtues spoke of, and thy beauty sounded,—
Yet not so deeply as to thee belongs,—
Myself am mov'd to woo thee for my wife.

KATHERINA:

Mov'd! in good time: let him that mov'd you hither
Remove you hence. I knew you at the first,
You were a moveable.

PETRUCHIO:

Why, what's a moveable?

KATHERINA:

A joint-stool.

PETRUCHIO:

Thou hast hit it: come, sit on me.

KATHERINA:

Asses are made to bear, and so are you.

PETRUCHIO:

Women are made to bear, and so are you.



Rapid-fire
exchanges
of wit and
wordplay

Act III: a marriage of true minds

The 'taming' of Katherine the shrew starts off cruelly. Her father more-or-less forces her to marry Petruchio, and if it weren't for her impatience at her new husband's lateness, we might be tempted to be fooled that she isn't at all pleased with the arrangement.

Then Petruchio shows up very late and dressed like a clown. Instead of allowing the new bride to enjoy her wedding reception, he forces her to embark on a long journey back to his home.

Kate is made into a laughing stock on a day that was supposed to be her triumph over her sister. All the wedding guests have a laugh at the couple's expense.

GREMIO:
Went they not quickly, I should die with laughing.

TRANIO:
Of all mad matches, never was the like.

LUCENTIO:
Mistress, what's your opinion of your sister?

BIANCA:
That, being mad herself, she's madly mated.

GREMIO:
I warrant him, Petruchio is Kated.



Act IV: taming Kate

We learn that the journey was a difficult one for Kate. Grumio recounts “how her horse fell, and she under her horse; thou shouldst have heard in how miry a place, how she was bemoiled; how he left her with the horse upon her; how he beat me because her horse stumbled; how she waded through the dirt to pluck him off me: how he swore; how she prayed, that never prayed before; how I cried; how the horses ran away; how her bridle was burst”

Petruchio then starves her and deprives her of sleep. He explains his treatment of his new wife, saying:

Thus have I politicly begun my reign,
And 'tis my hope to end successfully.
My falcon now is sharp and passing empty,
And till she stoop she must not be full-gorg'd,
For then she never looks upon her lure.
Another way I have to man my haggard,
To make her come, and know her keeper's call,
That is, to watch her, as we watch these kites

That bate and beat, and will not be obedient.
She eat no meat today, nor none shall eat;
Last night she slept not, nor tonight she shall not;
As with the meat, some undeserved fault
I'll find about the making of the bed;
And here I'll fling the pillow, there the bolster,
This way the coverlet, another way the sheets



Petruchio also pays a tailor to make beautiful clothes so he and Katherine can attend her sister's wedding. Petruchio pretends to fly into a rage and destroys the clothing in front of her. Kate is extremely disappointed, especially given the rivalry between Bianca and her.

Act V: reversal

During the journey home Petruchio makes a show of how he has “tamed” Kate. He makes her call the sun the moon and say that an old man is a young woman. Recent critics see this scene as a disturbing example of abuse and gaslighting (making someone accept their abuser’s lies as truth).

During Bianca’s wedding reception, Lucentio, Hortensio and Petruchio bet on whose wife will be more obedient when they are called. To everyone’s surprise, Kate is the only wife that comes when she is called. She gives a speech about how wives must submit to their husbands.

Act V: Katherina's speech on submission

KATHERINA:

Fie, fie! unknit that threatening unkind brow,
And dart not scornful glances from those eyes
To wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor:
It blots thy beauty as frosts do bite the meads,
Confounds thy fame as whirlwinds shake fair buds,
And in no sense is meet or amiable.
A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled,
Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty;
And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty
Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it.
Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; 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.
Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband;
And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she but a foul contending rebel
And graceless traitor to her loving lord?—
I am asham'd that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,
When they are bound to serve, love, and obey.
Why are our bodies soft and weak and smooth,
Unapt to toil and trouble in the world,

How seriously can we take this speech? Is the play still a comedy if Petruchio's bad treatment of Kate is vindicated by this speech?

The big question:

Is Kate is putting on a show to make it look as though her marriage is more successful than Bianca's? And if Kate is putting on a such a show, do you think it is possible that Petruchio would fall for it so that he is the one "tamed" by Katherina's playacting? Would such an interpretation rescue the play from being overtly misogynistic? Moreover, was reversing our expectation about who is being tamed by whom part of Shakespeare's original intention? Or is this reversal a dramatic adaptation instituted by subsequent directors and actresses in order to rescue the play?

Subplot: Lucentio's courtship of Bianca

Lucentio and his servant Tranio arrive in Padua with the intention of studying Philosophy. Lucentio falls in love with Bianca and decides to trade places with Tranio so that he will be hired as Bianca's tutor. He conceives of this ruse in order to spend time with Bianca.

In the fourth act, Lucentio realises that he will need someone to pretend to be Tranio's father so that they can assure Baptista that Lucentio is wealthy and noble enough to marry Bianca. He tricks a travelling pedant (teacher) into taking on the role by telling the pedant that it is death for anyone from Mantua to be found in Padua.

In Act Five, Lucentio's real father, Vincentio, appears in Padua. After some initial confusion and hilarity due to mistaken identity, Lucentio's real identity is revealed to Baptista. Vincentio and Baptista resume marriage negotiations and the marriage between Bianca and Lucentio goes ahead.

Characters

BAPTISTA MINOLA, a rich gentleman of Padua

VINCENTIO, an old gentleman of Pisa

LUCENTIO, son to Vincentio; in love with Bianca

PETRUCHIO, a gentleman of Verona; suitor to Katherina

Suitors to Bianca

GREMIO

HORTENSIO

Servants to Lucentio

TRANIO

BIONDELLO

Servants to Petruchio

GRUMIO

CURTIS

PEDANT, set up to personate Vincentio

Daughters to Baptista

KATHERINA, the shrew

BIANCA

WIDOW

Tailor, Haberdasher, and Servants attending on Baptista and Petruchio

Persons in the Induction:

A LORD

CHRISTOPHER SLY,
a tinker

HOSTESS

PAGE

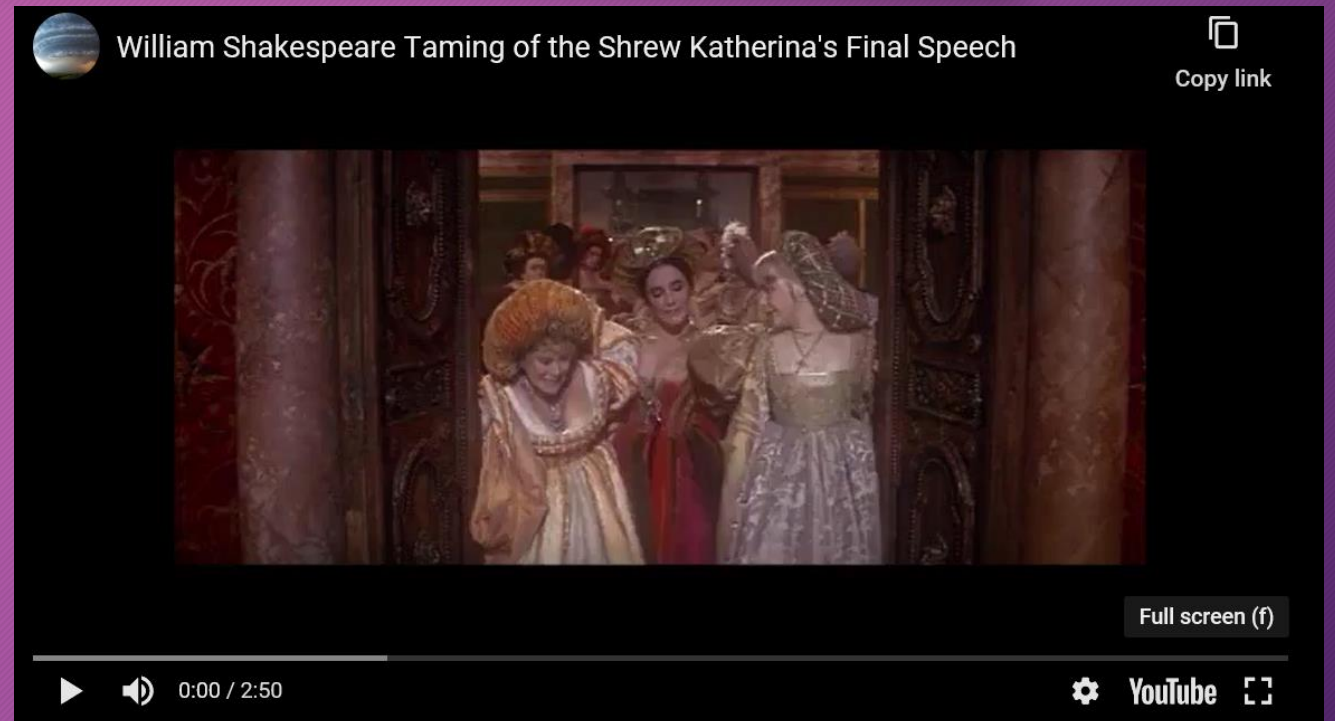
PLAYERS

HUNTSMEN

SERVANTS

Activity:

Is *The Taming of the Shrew* a misogynist play that celebrates Katherina's torture and eventual submission? Or is it a proto-feminist exploration of the ways women find resist and master their oppressors within a patriarchal society? Analyse Katherina's speech on submission (slide 11) and write a page in response to this question.



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