

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE.
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The Taming of the Shrew 1590-92

Shakespeare.

Overview. Shakespeare takes us back to ancient Greek writers, like Aristophanes and Herondas, or to moderns like Moliere, for sharpness of literary social critique. Shakespeare's comedies, as we call them today but with some doubt about how 'funny' they are, penetrate lasting marital, situational, or sociological—the knocking at the gate in Macbeth, rustic palaver—issues, and at their best—in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Moliere's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, or the play before us—can make us review our contemporary world and laugh, if we are lucky, at ourselves.

Comedies. The trick to analyzing older comedies, as lenses onto our own world, is to avoid simplification. In the modern western world, of our day, we are keenly aware of issues surrounding women's rights, and we are sensitive to the history of our deaf ears for the marginalized—whether silenced women or the handicapped. To understand the Intensity of our involvements in such social issues, is to understand our whole consciousness raising and guilt expulsive theme today, and while understanding our own setting, *Me Too* etc., helps us greatly to get Shakespeare's points—his satires of men's ridiculous social engineering of women—our own world is importantly different from the Elizabethan, which is more involved with the 'foibles of mankind,' in the Greco Roman tradition, than in the injustices of gender put down.

Characters

Katherina (Kate) Minola; the shrew
Bianca Minola; sister of Katherina
Baptista Minola; father of Katherina and Bianca
Petruccio; suitor of Katherina
Gremio; elderly suitor of Bianca
Lucentio; suitor of Bianca
Hortensio; suitor of Bianca and friend of Petruccio
Grumio; Petruccio's servant
Tranio; Lucentio's servant
Biondello; servant of Lucentio
Vincentio; father of Lucentio
Widow; wooed by Hortensio
Pedant; pretends to be Vincentio
Haberdasher
Tailor
Curtis; servant of Petruccio

Nathaniel; servant of Petruccio
Joseph; servant of Petruccio
Peter; servant of Petruccio
Nicholas; servant of Petruccio
Philip; servant of Petruccio
Officer

Characters appearing in the induction
Lord
Christopher Sly; a drunken tinker
Hostess of an alehouse

Lord; plays a prank on Sly
 Bartholomew; Lord's page
 Lord's huntsman
 Players
 Servingmen
 Messenger

Story.

Induction. The story opens with a frame introduction. A nobleman, entering an alehouse on the heath, after a day of hunting, joins a fellow hunter in preparing a trick for a drunken tinker, blotto with booze, who is lying on a bench where he has been drinking. The trick is to gull this boozer into thinking that he is himself a nobleman, who is about to be entertained by a fanciful tale. How is the trick pulled off? The tinker is given the finest quarters in the Inn, coddled by liveried servingmen, and induced, after a fabulous meal and a good sleep, to believe that he is in fact a noble, who is slowly recovering from a multi year coma, and who is up for just the kind of narrative entertainment that is about to transpire, the present play. And how does this induction open the present play? It gives it a setting. It makes it seem a treat and a delightful fantasy. It whets the audience appetite for a feast of wit and sass.

Padua. The flamboyant drama opens in a public place in the city of Padua, and brings together two visitors to the city, Lucentio and his servant, Tranio, who will be major players in the fray revolving around the two daughters of Baptista, a prosperous Paduan businessman, father of Bianca and Katharina. Joining these two suitors are Gremio and Hortensio, also making their case to Baptista.

Challenges. As a father in law to be, Baptista has two principal gameplans: to make as much money as possible off of the suitors' potential brideprices; to free himself of the more problematical of his two girls, Katharina. The play will develop as an intertwining of the Bianca marriage tale, with the tale concerning Katherina, and will flower out into the search for a proper mate for the latter rambunctious, un feminine, sharp witted—super sassy, elder sister. The marriage to be, involving both of the sisters, is foreseen for a couple of days into the future, and as we come onto the tale, Baptista is very far from having all his ducks in a row, particularly because of his specifications: he is determined that there will be no marriage for Bianca, the easy and charming candidate, until a husband is first found for Katherina.

Bianca. The comedy surrounding Bianca remains relatively gentle: the girl is a compliant, attractive, and independent young lady, nobody's fool, but circumspect in her observation of a sequence of suitors who vie to be, for instance, her dancing master, her philosophy or Latin teacher, and so on. From the larger perspective of the play, Bianca, and her drama, are there to show how the model middle class marriage should play out. Bianca is part of the House Beautiful version of Elizabethan marriage. The challenge facing Bianca's suitors is not only to beat out the rest of the pack, but to see to it that Katherina finds a mate, the precondition for the marriage of Bianca.

Katherina. Hortensio, a friend of Baptista, and a suitor of Bianca, turns to Petruchio, who is drawn to Katherina, to woo her and tame her, and if possible make her his wife, so the field can be cleared for the suitors of Bianca. After having looked over the situation, and discovered up close what a fiery, and seemingly untamable, candidate Katherina is, Petruchio throws himself into the Katherina challenge. Though by the end we find that Petruchio loves Katherina, we must view his initial taming of her as war. With the blessings of Baptista, Petruchio begins to tame the shrew.

Taming. Prior to true hostilities, in this war, Petruchio has made it clear to Katherina that he wants her for his wife, and she, interestingly enough, has accepted the proposal. (She appreciates his gamey eye, and willingness to meet her challenges.) He invites her to his country house, where the true battle begins: pretending to like everything about her he sets about turning her into a replica of himself, agreeing—if he asserts it—that the moon is made of cheese, that if he says the time of day is midnight, even though it is noon, she will agree; and at the same time, in a kind of continuous torture, he controls her diet—offering her only foods she hates or microscopic portions of foods she likes—he sees to it that her sleep is

regularly interrupted by gross cacophony; he has her tailor cut her a splendid new fashion, which has her in ecstasy, and then he sends it back before she has a chance to try it on. After some time, when Katherine has been totally humbled, she finds that they make an excellent pair; and in fact, in a final confrontation of the three couples whose marriages emerge, from the big wedding day, it is clear that Kate and Petruchio are the most happy and well-adjusted pair.

Note. This play has been no favorite with feminists. It appears to suggest that a good marriage—not an insipid House Beautiful marriage—will require serious guy intervention; it needs to be clear, in a good marriage, who wears the pants in the family. (A formula that indicts itself for its datedness in the very notion of ‘the pants.’) Me Too buys no tickets to this show.

Themes

Bride prices. Baptista is eager to ‘get his two daughters married.’ He is at the same time quite particular about the kinds of bride price, or dowry, the competitors have to offer. Baptista is not a successful business person for nothing.

Culture. It is assumed that Bianca, as inheritor of an upper middle class upbringing, will be trained in the cultural arts of her time, and thus the competitors for her hand also make much of their qualifications for teaching her the arts of music or dance.

Domination. What did Shakespeare think about ‘domination’ in this play? Obviously Petruchio finds domination the only way to control Katherine, but what does Shakespeare feel about domination? This question is a theme in the play. Shakespeare would seem to enjoy making this question become thematic.

Submission. Katharina ultimately allows herself to be submissive, though that is far from her natural condition. Does submission ultimately suit her? Is Shakespeare giving us to believe that submission is the path to happiness in marriage?

Main Character. The main character is Katharina, for it is she who grows, changes, and on the whole reaps the happiness of learning. The Kate we first know is fascinating, for she is contrary to whatever is proposed to her, especially the cut and dried clichés of marital behavior. For all this we find her witty and constantly surprising; Bianca seems a bit of a bore by contrast. However, as the play advances we see that Kate changes for the better, not for accepting male clichés, but learning to strip down her own tantrums and in that way to enjoy her own life.

Parallels. Kate is a child, when we first know her. In the *Confessions*, Saint Augustine describes the child’s will as by nature disorganized and not aligned with the desires of God (or of the good.) The adult, he argues, has great trouble overcoming childish inclinations, and suffers throughout life from the difficulty of submitting. Christian moral thinkers like Saint Benedict or Ignatius Loyola develop into systems like monasteries or religious orders this same perception of the inherent disobedience of mankind, or, to put the point positively, the potential in mankind to put himself in alignment with the ‘higher purposes’ of human existence. Pauline Réage, in her wonderful *The Story of O*, transfers this wisdom into sexual terms, by fictionalizing the pleasures of being controlled sexually. She speaks directly to the mind and growth of Katharine.

Illustrative moments

Aggressive ‘to comb your noddle with a three legged stool...’ Kate tells Hortensio what she wants to do with him, if he pursues his role as Petruchio’s representative.

Bitter 'I must dance barefoot on her wedding day.' Kate has no desire to be a poor stepchild of the big wedding day.

Attack 'Asses are made to bear, and so are you,' says Kate to the Petruchio who is roughing her up in language.

Curses 'A mad cap ruffian and a swearing-jack.' One of the nicer expressions Kate uses to describe her initial impressions of Petruchio.

Protest 'What, did he marry me to famish me?' Kate begins to get the full point of the marital indoctrination Petruchio has prepared for her.

Discussion questions

What is Shakespeare's own attitude toward the shrewish side of Katharine? Does he share the view of Petruchio that the lady 'needs taming?' Or is he simply exaggerating Petruchio's attacks in order to show the dignity of Kate's position? Is he a crypto feminist?

What is the reason for the eventual understanding between Kate and Petruccio? Where is the turning point, in Kate, at which she realizes the unproductive nature of her purely resentful spirit? Is that turning point created by Petruchio, in his contemptuous ranting against her? Or does it come from some fatigue within herself? Does her sister, Bianca, undergo any similar self-processing? Is she in any sense a weak character, without resources of her own? Does Shakespeare excel as a judge of female character? In what plays does he seem to penetrate most deeply into that character?

Does the conflict between the macho and the feminist spirits, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, have its roots in Shakespeare's own time? Were there aspects of Shakespeare's own culture which promoted the awareness of this conflict? Was there a 'new woman,' in Shakespeare's time, who was expressing new 'early modern' desires and attitudes, equalities of a formerly unfamiliar sort? Did early modern capitalism play a role in opening the life pathway to female entrepreneurs? You notice that the power brokers in the present play are all business men, and that they tend to commodify the marital process. Have we evidence that women too begin at this time to scrutinize their dowry processes?