



William Shakespeare

The Taming of the Shrew

CONTEXT

The domineering or shrewish wife and the browbeaten or cuckolded husband were standard Elizabethan comic figures. Shakespeare has given us all the comedy of the shrewish wife with only a passing hint of a browbeaten husband, but he has portrayed their mutual predicament with a loving hand. He wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* within a tradition that treated the subject of the shrewish wife in two different veins. One depicted the husband as given to the use of physical force; the other as teaching his wife to accept his authority as he would tame a spirited colt or train a hawk to return to its master. Shakespeare obviously draws upon both, but his treatment is superior to either by bringing to his work a spirit that transforms them. Any careful reading of Petruchio will reveal at the heart of his pedagogies a spirit of wisdom, prudence, and patience. Ordinarily, pedagogies are thought to apply exclusively to knowledge or information. Here, they have no meaning apart from what Petruchio does with Katherine's will. The overarching theme of the whole work has to do with education (Sly's, Kate's, Bianca's, the Widow's, Lucentio's, Hortensio's), and the question buried at the heart of this theme is, is it possible through teaching to help a person become as good as he or she can be? Petruchio does not engage a receptive or gracious will. His first encounter with Kate shows her to be angry and in some ways apparently wounded. But Petruchio outdoes Kate at her own game. He is clearly aware of the governing ethos in Padua, people's love of outward beauty and wealth and their tendency to become slaves to the conventions that have grown up around this ethos. All he does with Kate shows a keen awareness of these conventions, and he never strikes her or belittles her. The stage direction that has him spanking Kate is a modern convention not found in traditional Shakespearean productions. Sadly, it does little credit to the genius of either Shakespeare or Petruchio.

SUMMARY

The Taming of the Shrew begins with an Induction, a short frame in which the play proper is set. The Induction opens in Warwickshire, England. Christopher Sly, a poor tinker, lies in

a drunken stupor at the door of an alehouse. A Lord, who has returned from a day of hunting, sees him and determines to have some fun with him. He orders his servants to carry Sly to his best rooms and when he wakes to treat him as a lord who has just recovered from a long illness in which he thought himself a beggar. They will put on a play for Sly's benefit; it is that play that makes up the play, *Taming of the Shrew*. Sly briefly insists on his true identity, but when he sees the wealth and comfort that surround him and the prospect of having his desires fulfilled, he is quickly persuaded that he is a wealthy lord. Unable to convince his "wife" to go to bed with him, he instead joins her to watch a play. The Induction concludes when they take their seats; we will return to it once more in the course of the play

The play is set in Padua, Italy. Lucentio, a wealthy young man raised in Florence but more recently from Pisa, has arrived in Padua with his servants, Tranio and Biondello, to take up his studies at the university. On his arrival, he chanced to see Baptista Minola, a successful business man of Padua, with his two daughters Bianca and Katherine. Lucentio's "thirst" for philosophy fades at the sight of Bianca, and all his thoughts are turned toward winning her. But Baptista has made it clear that no one may court Bianca until her older sister, Katherine—known for her shrewish temper—is wed. Lucentio will not allow his newly awakened love to be thwarted, and following the advice of Tranio, he presents himself as a Latin tutor for Bianca and charges Tranio to take on his identity and approach Baptista as a suitor for her hand.

Petruchio, a gentleman of Verona, arrives in search of a rich wife and stops first at the home of his friend Hortensio. Hortensio, who loves Bianca, tells him of "Katherine the curst" and asks for his help in presenting himself to Baptista as a music teacher for his beloved. Petruchio joins his friend's ruse while at the same time presenting himself to Baptista as a suitor for Katherine, determined to win her by being pleasantly contrary to all her displays of temper. They are introduced. Petruchio is immediately taken with her: "now by the world, it is a lusty wench" (II,I,161). Katherine does her best to insult him, but undaunted and determined to take nothing personally, Petruchio dubs her Kate and persistently calls her mild and courteous. After a verbal duel with her, he declares to Baptista—falsely—that she has agreed to marry him the following Sunday. The day arrives and when Petruchio finally does arrive, late, he is dressed in a wild costume, re-fuses to change his clothes, and insists the wedding take place immediately. The wedding over and every traditional convention overturned, he excuses himself and his new wife from the celebration, saying he must be off at once, and over the furious objections of Kate, they depart for Verona. Arriving home, Petruchio finds undeserved fault with his servants, the cooking, the bed, leaving Kate in the unaccustomed role of asking patience. Petruchio acknowledges privately that he will deny Kate every satisfaction till she learn obedience but "in reverent care of her" (IV,I,191).

Back in Padua, Hortensio as music teacher and Lucentio as Latin tutor compete for Bianca. Hortensio confides in Tranio (still disguised as Lucentio) that the Latin tutor has won her heart and vows to marry instead a certain wealthy widow who has been pursuing him. Tranio engages an old schoolmaster to pose as Lucentio's father, Vincentio, to pledge assurance for the large sum of money he has promised to Baptista in return for Bianca's hand in marriage. With the marriage agreed to, the priest is told to stand ready and while Tranio and the schoolmaster celebrate the agreement with Baptista, Lucentio and Bianca go quietly to the priest and are married.

In the meantime, Hortensio has gone to visit Petruchio and his new wife. He is amazed to watch Petruchio teach Katherine how to behave toward her husband. The lessons continue as the three of them set out to visit Baptista in Padua—a long awaited visit for Kate. Petruchio threatens to turn back anytime Kate does not conform her will to his. He says the sun is the moon, and when she begins to quarrel—it is in fact broad daylight—and he starts his turn home, she finally agrees it is the moon and they go on. As they continue on their way, they meet Vincentio, who is traveling to Padua to visit his son. Petruchio hails the old man as a young virgin and Kate demonstrates that she has learned her lessons by addressing Vincentio as a young woman and then correcting herself immediately when Petruchio scolds her for insulting a venerable old man.

They arrive in Padua where Vincentio is outraged to find Tranio impersonating his son and the schoolmaster impersonating himself. Baptista is bewildered. It is only when Lucentio and Bianca arrive and reveal their marriage that all the confusion of identities is straightened out. At the banquet set to celebrate the marriage, Hortensio's widow, now his wife, jabs at Petruchio for having married a shrew; Kate responds and Bianca enters the banter. The women withdraw, but the banter over Kate's shrewishness continues among the men until Petruchio makes a wager with them to see which of the three wives will be most obedient to her husband. They test their headship by summoning their wives. Bianca and the widow each send messages back declining to come, but Kate comes immediately and graciously. To the amazement of all, Kate delivers a soliloquy on the duty of a wife to her husband and retires with Petruchio. The play ends with Hortensio and Lucentio commenting in wonder and appreciation on Petruchio's taming of his shrew.



Things to Think About

1. Be mindful of the story's form: the opening situation, the conflict it entails, the complication, the climax, the denouement, and the resolution.
2. Notice that with respect to the play's comic form, Shakespeare uses a play-within-a-play and that each has a different setting. The play takes place in Warwickshire, England and involves a character named Christopher Sly. The Lord of the manor who discovers Sly puts on the play involving Petruchio and Kate, and that play is set in Padua, the "nursery of arts." Education is the central theme of the play. Reflect on the importance of Italy in educating England here.
3. Be aware of the "ethos" of each setting. How is England different from Italy? We don't know much about Sly, but what we do see is telling. And note, his name, Christopher (Christo = Christ; and pheros = bearer: Christ bearer) means a sly Christ bearer.
4. Be aware of appearances—those that are the result of a character seeming to be what he/she is not, and those that are consciously adopted with a particular end in mind. Don't overlook the more subtle examples. The men are active suitors; their disguises are explicit. The women are wooed; theirs are subtle and often left veiled and unexplored.

5. Be aware of the animal nature of man, all that Machiavelli makes explicit in the Prince—the drunkenness of Christopher Sly, Kate's hunger; eros everywhere (Sly's wanting to go to bed with the woman he does not know but who is sup-posed to be his wife; the men's desires for Bianca, the widow, and Kate); desire for things (hats, gowns). The Lord who educates or rather tries to educate Sly knows his dogs; and Petruchio knows his hawks. They both know the animal in man. Set off in contrast to this appetitive side to man is his love of beauty and art—the formal arts of music, literature, Latin, and the informal “arts” of the lord in the Induction and Petruchio—to correct nature and help it realize itself. And by extension, the contrast between the carnal and the beautiful is analogous to the conflict between the material and the spiritual, or between vice and virtue.

6. Be aware of the parallel plot lines—the wooing of Bianca and the wooing and winning of Kate—and the ways that they comment on each other. Insofar as these plot lines and even the one about Sly are about education, they offer wonderful examples of good and bad pedagogies. Why are some of the “teachers” successful and others not? Do we ever discover whether the Lord's efforts with Sly take? If not, give some thought to the reasons why. And notice, too, the education in each case has less to do directly with the intellect than with the will, with love and virtue. Which do you think would be harder, educating the mind or the will, and why?



Study Questions

1. Identify the place in which the “Induction” takes place.
2. Identify the regime or city in which the Lord's “play” takes place?
3. In the Induction scene, what had the Lord been doing just before he came home and discovered Sly, and what had Sly been doing?
4. What is it that convinces Christopher Sly that he is a lord (Induction, ii)?
5. Who says, “Let the world slide,” and what is the significance of the words as they bear upon the play?
6. When we first meet Kate, she is fighting with her sister. Bianca appears to be “white” and innocent. Is she? On the surface Kate seems to be the shrew. At the end of the play, however, she's the one who obeys her husband; the other wives are the “shrews.” Are there any buried reasons that might justify Kate's anger at her sister?
7. In the opening exchange between Petruchio and Kate, Kate finally becomes angry to the point of hitting Petruchio. What is Petruchio's response? Why does he make it? Does he mean it?
8. Identify: Gremio, Cambrio, and Litio.

9. Who is Baptista and how would you characterize him?
10. Two forms of love take shape in the play, one that is very practical: Petruchio has come to Padua to find a wealthy wife; the other "romantic." In which case are the lovers less taken in by appearances, especially of beauty? Lucentio came to Padua to become educated. What kind of a commentary does his marriage make on his education?
11. Who says and with what significance when seen from the perspective of the play as a whole? "I'll not be tied to hours not 'pointed times, but learn my lessons as I please myself" (II,I,18)?
12. Why do you think that Petruchio keeps Katherine waiting at the church and then arrives for the wedding in such wild attire? Recall his words, "To me she's married, not unto my clothes" (III,ii,113).
13. Identify the context for the following quote and speak to its significance: "A new hat and an old jerkin; a pair of old breeches thrice turned; a pair of boots that have been candle-cases, one buckled, another laced; an old rusty sword ta'en out of the town armory....his horse hipped—with an old mothy saddle and stirrups of no kindred...."
14. Petruchio begins Katherine's education in earnest immediately following the wedding. List the things Petruchio deprives Kate of as a part of her "taming" and give some sense of what his reasons are from what he says, both publicly and privately.
15. Tranio tricks Hortensio into believing Bianca is a loose woman. That trick clears the field of a rival for Lucentio and leaves him free to woo Bianca alone. Are there any ironies to the trick and its exposure?
16. Identify the marriages at the end of the play:
17. What does Petruchio ask of Kate after they witness the revelation of all the false identities involved in wooing Bianca and what is her response to him (V, i)? What is wrong with her response?
18. What is the wager, the bet, Petruchio makes at the end of the play and who wins?
19. After the outcome of the wager, Baptista tells Petruchio he will add twenty thousand crowns to what he has won from Hortensio and Lucentio, "another dowry to another daughter, for she has changed as she has never been." Is Baptista right? Is Kate no longer Kate? How do you know?
20. Appearances and identity are major themes in the play; people appear to be something that they are not or pretend to be someone other than who they are. Examine the various disguises in the play—why are they adopted? Are they successful (pay special attention to Bianca, Petruchio, and Kate)? Are they what they appear to be? If not, what is their true identity? Defend your positions.

21. Who says and when?

*"Pardon, old father, my mistaking eyes
That have been so bedazzled with the sun....
Now I perceive thou art a reverend father.
Pardon, I pray thee, for my mad mistaking"?*

22. Who says and when?

*"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...
I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace...."?*

23. The Biblical injunction is that wives should obey their husbands and husbands should love and serve their wives as Christ loved the Church. Kate has learned obedience; has Petruchio served her as Christ intended? Defend your answer.

24. The call of the Church is to reconcile love and faith with reason. This call is especially important for marriages because they are sacramental and yet central to the world and its ways. From a more pietistic perspective, what Petruchio does may seem cruel or harsh. Is it? Is what he does compatible with the Church's call to reconcile love and reason, to make of a man and woman "one flesh" or not? The opposite of reason is arbitrariness, lacking in reason or meaning, being unreasonable. Is Petruchio using both love and reason or is he just being willful and despotic, simply arbitrary? Is what he is doing against piety or nature? Defend your answers.

25. If virtue is a perfection of those faculties that make man fully human it follows that becoming prudent, just, gracious, courteous and loving are a sign of man attaining a perfection of his nature. One of the more famous axioms of the Church has it that "grace perfects nature." But grace is supernatural in origin, not natural. Two questions come to mind in this respect about the play: is what Petruchio does the result of merely natural virtues, directed by reason? Or is what he does the result of both his actions and some grace? Lucentio says of his love for Bianca "love wrought these miracles...." (V,i,112) Is what happens between him and Bianca a miracle or not? Following Katherine's final speech in which she expresses her obedience and her love of Petruchio, Lucentio says, "'Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so" (V,i,193). Is Lucentio's use of the word "miracle" an indication of a sentimental piety or is his love miraculous? Is there anything miraculous about either marriage, Lucentio's or Petruchio's, anything that would warrant the word "wonder"? If so, where and why? Could Petruchio have pulled off all he did on his own, showing what man is really capable of, or was a grace involved? Defend your position, but your position has to be supported by the text. You can't impose interpretations on the text that the text doesn't bear.



Questions on Language and Form

1. Identify the structure of the play: opening conflict, complication, crisis, denouement, and resolution.
2. The theme of appearance vs. reality is made explicit in the Induction: everything before Sly is unreal to him. He is told he is a lord and that all the wealthy furnishings and people that surround him are his. He knows none of this is so till he sees they can gratify his desires. Then he is convinced. Is it the gratification of our desires that makes a thing real or is something more than mere gratification necessary? What light does the action of the play throw on this question? Kate will have none of her desires fulfilled; Bianca, the Widow, the suitors and Baptista will do all they can to have theirs met. Is the marriage between Petruchio and Katherine more real than those between Lucentio and Bianca and Hortensio and the Widow or have they simply learned to "play the game" more completely than the others? Are Kate's actions at the end really virtuous or is she just going through motions? If virtue is real and not simply a name, do any of the characters realize virtue in a more complete way than others and if so how and why?
3. One of the ways of looking at the form of the play is to see the various proportions or relationships it expresses: from this perspective, Petruchio is to Kate as the Lord is to Sly, and as Shakespeare is to his reader or audience. Seen this way, the play is not only about the education of Sly or Kate; it's also about the education of the reader. It is interesting to note in this regard that we leave Sly one last time just as the "taming-play" is under way, nodding off and complaining, "would 'twere done" (I,I,245ff.). The outcome of Sly's education, like that of the reader, is left open-ended. Reflect on those things in the play that have affected you, things that you can point to that may be the source of possible changes in your life. What is Shakespeare doing to help us see and feel that might lead to improvements or changes in our lives, especially in our wills?
4. The form of the play has to do with the action of teachers. What is the difference between the pedagogies Hortensio and Lucentio use and those Petruchio uses? What is revealed about those pedagogies and the motives behind them from their outcomes?
5. Words: the men call themselves teachers when they are not; Petruchio calls the sun the moon when it's not. Lucentio pretends to be translating Latin when in fact he is using it to send covert love-messages to Bianca. Baptista says at the end that his daughter is a changed person and she is called Katherine, not Kate. On the surface, words don't seem to mean what they say. The play seems to offer itself as ratifying a kind of nominalism: words are only counters; they don't refer to anything in "reality" at all. If this is so, reality is only what one makes it, a game. Kate has learned to play the game and there is no more to it. How do we look at words and language in the play? Do they function the same way for Petruchio as they do for Hortensio and Lucentio, or are they different? Is there anything "real" in the play that words refer to or is everything just a game?



Reflection Questions

1. Shakespeare was raised in a classical Christian tradition which held that man's happiness depends upon his being good or virtuous. Man's nature is such that he is meant to be happy but he cannot attain happiness without dealing with his will. Man is good or bad in his will, not his intellect. Seen in this light, Taming may be an answer to the question Socrates raises in the Meno, can virtue be taught? According to Shakespeare, what is the answer? If the will can be formed, how important are personal relationships (the Lord to Sly, Petruchio to Kate, Shakespeare to his audience)? And what is the role of poetry in improving man's will, in teaching him to be virtuous (recall the play-within-the-play)? Notice that in a certain respect, each person in the play is a poet putting on a play. Which are the best poets? Which characters are the happiest at the end? And is their happiness artificial or the result of some improvement, some growth in virtue? Is Katherine's goodness or virtue at the end real or only put-on? Is she simply working the system or has she changed? How do we know?
2. How important is self-giving as a virtue essential to marriage in the play? Do people live entirely for outward conventions, conforming to them in order to satisfy their own self-interests or do they really learn to give?
3. There are four teachers in the play: the Lord, Hortensio, Lucentio, and Petruchio. Compare and contrast the Lord with those tutors set in Italy, and compare and contrast Petruchio with Bianca's tutors. How do their motives, methods, and ends differ? And how much are their methods and strategies determined by their pupils, the kinds of problems they present? Notice for example that the Lord surrounds Sly with wealth and luxury while Petruchio deprives Kate of every kind of wealth and luxury. Are the "means" that the Lord employs appropriate in his case while the opposite is true for Petruchio? How successful is the Lord in teaching Sly, compared with Petruchio's teaching of Kate? Does this comparison tell us anything about Shakespeare's larger purpose in the teaching of his audience? Keeping all this in mind, what finally determines the success of the "teachers"?
4. Taming of the Shrew has to do with the relationship of education to romantic love. Lucentio sets off for school, falls in love in the process, and apparently puts education and eros at odds with each other. Compare his method of teaching Latin (using it to make covert love) with Petruchio's "method" with Kate towards the end when they set off for Padua. When the two leave, they do so in broad daylight. They are under a sun whose light is so obvious that no one could dispute it, and yet Petruchio does, saying, "how bright and goodly shines the moon" (IV,v,1ff.). Why does he do this when he knows that it can't have any other effect but to rouse Kate's will? Is he being arbitrary? What does Petruchio stand to lose by not doing this? What does Kate stand to gain by honoring what Petruchio asks?

5. The following is the answer given to question #14 above: Petruchio's response to Kate's horse falling on the way home from Padua; the "overcooked" meal when they arrive; the "poorly made" bed; the "misshapen" hat and the "ruined" gown. In each case, his method is to outdo Kate in his displays of bad temper and unreasonableness toward others, all the while appearing loving and caring of her. By holding up a mirror of herself, he teaches her self-knowledge, patience, and more gentle ways. By denying her things—food, sleep, clothing—things that she has always taken for granted, he teaches her gratitude. But the use of pedagogy may point to deeper problems than just those of being spoiled. If so, the spirit behind Petruchio's actions is far more virtuous, far less "technical" than it seems.
6. Kate's upbringing has placed her in a tormented position. She has been spoiled by her father's wealth and so she is used to having things and her own way—unlike Sly, who is not used to having things—but she has also been treated like chattel. The social conventions of Padua have placed her in a position of inadvertent rivalry with her sister. Her sister cannot marry till she does. If she doesn't get married, she lets Bianca down and also becomes an object of ridicule and pity in Bianca's eyes and the eyes of others for her lack of suitors. Her anger is justified in some respects. She either plays the game and gets married or defies convention. The fact that she is angry suggests a deep-down integrity to her character. She revolts against Paduan ways without seeming to be conscious as to why. Petruchio offers help in more ways than one. If this analysis is correct, what deep-down spirit is required of Petruchio? Reflect on the ways in which buried torments lie in most people and the difficulty spouses have in helping to heal them. What do we learn from Petruchio on this score? Reflect on your awareness of similar problems and of appropriate pedagogies in addressing them.