

Chapter

7

The Taming of the Shrew

In This Chapter

- ◆ A reminder that *The Taming of the Shrew* is a farce
- ◆ A look at the play's main characters
- ◆ The framing plot, the taming plot, and the subplot
- ◆ Devices and disguises that make for lively diversions
- ◆ Is *The Taming of the Shrew* a sexist, brutal play?
- ◆ Why *The Taming of the Shrew* stumps modern directors

Despite its rip-roaring popularity in Shakespeare's day, *The Taming of the Shrew* is one of the most controversial plays in the canon. It's impossible to know for certain, but scholars believe Shakespeare wrote the play around 1593-94. Some say it was written earlier for an acting company known as the Queen's Men, but it remains one of Shakespeare's earliest comedies.

Having said that, you need to remember that *Shrew* is a farce. Simply put, farce is a form of stage entertainment that's as old as the ancient Romans. In *Shrew*, Shakespeare aimed to entertain his audiences with lots of horse-play and bawdy humor. Many directors and viewers believe some of the play's action borders on cruelty, which isn't softened by the end of the story. Is *Shrew* blatantly misogynistic? We'll address this question later. Alleged misogyny aside, *Shrew* is full of burlesque, wordplay, puns, and off-color jokes that are liable to fall flat on the page. *Shrew* has serious meaning, but you'll miss its comic effects if you deprive yourself of seeing a live performance.

The Characters

Baptista—A very rich man from Padua who has a real problem on his hands. He's got two daughters of marriageable age, but all the available suitors are after the younger one! Marrying the younger daughter off first just won't do. Remember, the Elizabethans were old-fashioned in this regard. So Baptista creates an incentive for Bianca's many suitors to find a husband for Katherina.



On Stage!

We can't be sure exactly when and where *Shrew* was first performed, but here is a clue about the size of the company that first performed it. By doubling up, or taking on more than one role, ten male actors and four boys could have covered the 20 or so main parts. The supernumeraries could cover the remaining minor roles.

Katherina—Baptista's oldest daughter, also called "Kate" and one of the star characters in this play. When the play opens, Katherina is miserable and utterly incorrigible. She scolds and strikes anyone who speaks to her or crosses her, including her own sister.

Bianca—Baptista's younger daughter. She's easy to sympathize with because her sister abuses her terribly. She's eligible to marry and is desired by three suitors who engage in trickery and deceit to win her hand in marriage.

Petruchio—A gentleman from Verona who is determined to marry to improve his financial situation. When he learns of Baptista's plan to find a husband for Katherina, he's intrigued. In a series of tests that are psychologically astute, Petruchio takes on the challenge of wooing a shrew as if he were taming a wild hawk. (Don't miss the metaphorical language to this effect.)

Other Characters in the Taming Plot

Grumio and Curtis—Servants of Petruchio.

A tailor, a haberdasher, and servants who wait on Baptista and Petruchio.

The Subplot

Gremio—An older citizen of Padua who is Bianca's suitor.

Hortensio—Another suitor of Bianca who pretends to be a music teacher.

Lucentio—A young man who loves Bianca, who pretends to be Cambio, a tutor; he is also Vincentio's son.

Tranio and Biondello—Lucentio's personal servants.

Vincentio—A rich, older gentleman from Pisa.

Merchant from Mantua—Pretends to be Vincentio.

Widow—A woman in love with Hortensio.

The Induction Scene

Christopher Sly—A tinker.

Lord

Alehouse hostess

Page

Players

Huntsmen

Servants

Setting: The town of Padua, Italy, and Petruchio's country home

Sly's Dream—the Play-Within-the-Play

Before Shakespeare begins his story, he introduces a brief vignette about Christopher Sly, a tinker who falls asleep in a drunken stupor. Meanwhile a lord and his huntsmen happen upon Sly inside a country alehouse and the aristocrat carries him into his home and treats him luxuriously. The nobleman tricks Sly into thinking Sly's really an aristocrat who's gone mad. The lord orders some vagabond actors to perform for Sly's entertainment, continuing the charade by having his own page parade as Sly's wife.

During the entertainment Sly falls asleep, which makes us wonder if *The Taming of the Shrew* is just a conceit that Sly has dreamed. In any case, this mini-plot is known as The Induction. Think of the main plot that I'm about to describe as entertainment for Sly, or the *play-within-the-play*.

The Main Plot—Wooing a “Wildcat”

Grumio: Katherine the curst!
A title for a maid of all titles the worst.
(I.2.129-130)

Baptista Minola has two daughters named Katherina and Bianca, and both are old enough to be married. But according to Renaissance tradition, Katherina has to marry first because she's the oldest. In the opening of the main plot (called the *taming plot*), Baptista finds himself in a tricky position. Two suitors have declared their interest in Bianca, and a third is in love with her.

Either girl would be a good catch for these gentlemen. After all, Baptista is a wealthy, respected citizen of Padua, but there's a problem, of course. Baptista insists that nobody can get close to Bianca until Katherina is married off. But poor Kate isn't likely to get much attention from any of these guys.

You're thinking she's a dog, right? No; she's ... difficult, shall we say. Seriously, she has a reputation as a royal shrew, a real bitch, if you will. She's a man-eater! Any man who gets near her runs shrieking to escape her scolding and beating fists. So you can see why Baptista is distraught. Predictably, the hungry suitors swarm around the lovely Bianca, leaving poor Kate in the cold.

Conquering Kate

Enter Petruchio, a Verona-based chap in search of a wife. He isn't deterred by the harsh reports about Kate's temperament. After all, Baptista is a wealthy man and his daughter would come with a hefty dowry! Here's an inkling of how he reacts to the scuttlebutt about Kate's awful temperament:

Petruchio: Think you a little din can daunt mine ears?
 Have I not in my time heard lions roar?
 Have I not heard the sea, puff'd up with winds,
 Rage like an angry boar chafed with sweat?
 Have I not heard great ordnance in the field,
 And heaven's artillery thunder in the skies?
 Have I not in a pitched battle heard
 Loud "larums, neighing steeds and trumpets"
 clang?
 And do you tell me of a woman's tongue,
 That gives not half so great a blow to hear
 As will a chestnut in a farmer's fire?
 Tush, tush, fear boys with bugs!
 (I.2.201-210)

You're not the only one who thinks this man is nuts. But Petruchio surprises everybody. It's obvious that Kate has met her match when Petruchio first lays eyes on her. He's not cowed like all the other men who've crossed her path. In fact, during this first meeting, this cheeky gentleman completely disarms her. Matching wits every step of the way, Petruchio and Kate parry and thrust in a rapid, ear-pleasing display of puns, poetry, and metaphor.

After this juicy exchange, Kate even strikes Petruchio, but, as you can imagine, she doesn't get very far with her fists. Bit by bit, Petruchio woos this wildcat with clever words before bluntly declaring that he intends to share her bed and be her husband. Things go according to plan, the shrewd suitor from Verona gets his way, and the couple get married. Petruchio displays some nerve when he shows up late for the wedding without wearing the appropriate clothing. At this point, things begin to get interesting.