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THE TAMING  
OF THE SHREW

EDITED BY JONATHAN BATE  
AND ERIC RASMUSSEN

# THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

## The RSC Shakespeare

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The RSC Shakespeare

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

# THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

Edited by  
Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen

Introduced by Jonathan Bate

**Macmillan**

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE 'TAMING' AND THE 'SHREW'

*The Taming of the Shrew*: is Kate (or should we call her Katherina?) really a 'shrew' and is she really 'tamed'?

The novelist Vladimir Nabokov once wrote that 'reality' is a word that only has meaning when it is placed between quotation marks. The physicist's 'reality' is not the same as the biochemist's, the secular humanist's as the religious fundamentalist's. Dare one say that woman's is not the same as man's? In a culture where the conception of inherent sexual difference is regarded as a mere prejudice, as a forbidden thought (regardless of the 'reality' revealed by molecular biology and neuroanatomy), *The Taming of the Shrew* is not likely to be one of Shakespeare's most admired plays. Its presentation of female subordination presents the same kind of awkwardness for liberal sensibilities that the representation of Shylock does in the post-Holocaust world. At face value, the play proposes that desirable women are quiet and submissive, whereas women with spirit must be 'tamed' through a combination of physical and mental abuse. Necessary tools may include starvation, sense deprivation and the kind of distortion of 'reality' that is practised in totalitarian regimes.

Thus O'Brien to Winston Smith in George Orwell's 1984: 'How many fingers am I holding up?' In this 'reality' the correct answer is not the actual number but the number that the torturer says he is holding up. There is a precise analogy on the road back to Padua, after Kate has undergone her taming in the secluded country house where no neighbour will hear her cries:

**PETRUCHIO** I say it is the moon.

**KATE** I know it is the moon.

**PETRUCHIO** Nay, then you lie. It is the blessed sun.

KATE Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun.

But sun it is not, when you say it is not,

And the moon changes even as your mind.

What you will have it named, even that it is,

And so it shall be so for Katherine.

HORTENSIO Petruchio, go thy ways, the field is won.

She has been bent to her husband's will. She is now ready to demonstrate that she is prepared to love, serve and obey him. She knows her place: 'Such duty as the subject owes the prince / Even such a woman oweth to her husband.' She offers to place her hand beneath her husband's foot. The shrew is tamed.

The younger dramatist John Fletcher, who was Shakespeare's collaborator in his final years, clearly thought that this harsh ending needed a riposte. He wrote a sequel, *The Woman's Prize; or, The Tamer Tamed*, in which Kate has died and Petruchio remarried, only to find his new wife giving him a taste of his own medicine by means of the time-honoured device of refusing to sleep with him until he submits to her will. Kate's sister Bianca plays the role of colonel in a war between the sexes which the women win, thus proving that it was an act of folly for Petruchio to tyrannize over his first wife in Shakespeare's play.

In Shakespeare's time, it was absolutely orthodox to believe that a man was head of the household, as the monarch was head of state and God was head of the cosmos. 'My foot my tutor?' says Prospero in *The Tempest* when his daughter Miranda presumes to speak out of turn: if the man was the head, the girl-child was the foot, just as in *Coriolanus* a plebeian is nothing more than the 'big toe' of the commonwealth. Kate's readying of her hand to be trodden upon turns the analogy between social and bodily hierarchy into a stage image. But she is going much further than she should: the wife was not supposed to be beneath the foot, she was supposed to be the heart of the household. Instead of crowing in his triumph, Petruchio says 'kiss me, Kate' for the third time, giving Cole Porter a title for his reimagining of the story in the cheerful mode of a musical.

Nabokov placed the word 'reality' in quotation marks not because he was a cultural relativist, but because he was an aesthete. That is to

say, he did not believe that art was merely a reflection, a mirror, of a pre-existent 'reality'. Art shapes the way in which we perceive ourselves and the world. 'Falling in love' is not only the work of molecular change in the brain, but also a set of behaviours learned from the romantic fictions of page, stage – now screen – and cultural memory. One of the tricks of great art is to draw attention to its own artificiality and in so doing paradoxically assert that its 'reality' is as real as anything in the quotidian world of its audience. Shakespeare's taste for plays-within-the-play and allusions to the theatricality of the world, Mozart's witty quotations of the clichés of operatic convention and Nabokov's magical wordplay all fulfil this function.

Sometimes, though, the opposite device is used: an artist puts quotation marks around a work in order to say 'Don't take this too seriously, don't mistake its feigning for "reality"'. *The Taming of the Shrew* is such a work: the opening scenes with Christopher Sly place the entire play within quotation marks. The 'induction' presents a series of wish-fulfilment fantasies to a drunken tinker: the fantasy that he is a lord, that he has a beautiful young wife, that scenes of erotic delight can be presented for his delectation, and that a company of professional plays will stage 'a kind of history' for his sole benefit, in order to frame his mind to 'mirth and merriment' while teaching him how to tame a shrewish wife. But Sly is not a lord and the 'wife' who watches with him is not a woman but a cross-dressed boy – which reminds us that in Shakespeare's working world the Kate who is humiliated by Petruchio was also not a woman but a cross-dressed boy-actor. The effect of the frame is to distance the action and so to suggest that it does not present the 'reality' of proper marital relations. If Sly is not a lord and the pageboy not a wife, then this is not how to tame a shrew.

In the surviving script of the play, Sly and the pageboy disappear after the first act, presumably because Shakespeare's acting company was not large enough to waste several members of the cast sitting in the gallery as spectators all the way through. But in an anonymously published play of 1594 called *The Taming of a Shrew*, which is a source, adaptation, reconstruction or variant version of Shakespeare's play, the Christopher Sly 'frame' is maintained

throughout the action by means of a series of brief interludes and an epilogue. This version ends with the tinker heading for home with the claim that the play has taught him how to tame a shrew and thus to handle his own wife. But the tapster knows better: 'your wife will course [thrash] you for dreaming here tonight'. The hungover Sly is in no position to tame anybody; he will return home and be soundly beaten by his wife. Kate's speech propounds the patriarchal ideal of marriage, but in *A Shrew* the union of Sly and his wife reveals this ideology's distance from 'reality'. Its implied resolution, with the woman on top, intimates that 'real' housewives are not silent and obedient, and plays cannot teach husbands to tame them into submission.

We do not need the epilogue of the anonymously published play to see that Shakespeare's ending is more complicated and ironic than first appears. Having been outwitted in his courtship of Bianca, Hortensio marries the widow for her money. The latter shows signs of frowardness and has to be lectured by Kate. The first half of Kate's famous submission speech is spoken in the singular, addressed specifically to the widow and not to womankind in general: '*Thy* husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee'. The contextual irony of this is not always appreciated: in contradistinction to Kate's prescriptions, in the particular marriage to which she is referring it will be the wife, the wealthy widow, who provides the 'maintenance'. Hortensio will be spared the labours of a breadwinner. According to Kate, all a husband asks from a wife is love, good looks, and obedience; these are said to be 'Too little payment for so great a debt'. But the audience knows that in this case the debt is all Hortensio's. Besides, he has said earlier that he is no longer interested in woman's traditional attribute of 'beauteous looks' – all he wants is the money. Kate's vision of obedience is made to look oddly irrelevant to the very marriage upon which she is offering advice.

Then there is Kate's sister. Petruchio's 'taming school' is played off against the attempts by Lucentio and Hortensio to gain access to Bianca by disguising themselves as schoolmasters. In the scene in which Lucentio courts her in the guise of a Latin tutor, the woman

gives as good as she gets. She is happy to flirt with her supposed teacher over Ovid's erotic manual *The Art of Love*. This relationship offers a model of courtship and marriage built on mutual desire and consent. Bianca escapes her class of sixteenth-century woman's usual fate of being married to a partner of the father's choice, such as rich old Gremio. If anything, Bianca is the dominant partner at the end. She is not read a lecture by Kate, as the widow is, and she gets the better of her husband in their final onstage exchange. Like Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, she more than matches her man in the art of wordplay. One almost wonders if she would not be better matched with the pretended rather than the 'real' Lucentio, that is to say the clever servant Tranio who oils the wheels of the plot and sometimes threatens to steal the show.

The double plot is a guarantee that, despite the subduing of Kate, the play is no uncomplicated apology for shrew-taming. But is Kate really subdued? Or is her submission all part of the game that she and Petruchio have been playing out? It is their marriage, not the other ones, that compels the theatre audience. A woman with Kate's energies would be bored by a conventional lover such as Lucentio. She and Petruchio are well matched because they are both of 'choleric' temperament. Their fierce tempers are what make them attractive to each other and charismatic to us. They seem to know they are born for each other from the moment in their first private encounter when they share a joke about oral sex ('with my tongue in your tail'). 'Where two raging fires meet together' there may not be an easy marriage, but there will certainly not be a dull match and a passive wife. In the twentieth century the roles seemed ready made for Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor.

## THE CRITICS DEBATE

What you have just read is *one* critical interpretation of the play. But there are many other possible answers to the awkward questions raised by its title, action, resolution and framing, so for the sake of balance the remainder of this introduction will offer an overview of some of them.

The critical debate about *The Taming of the Shrew* begins at the end: is Kate's notorious last speech delivered ironically? Is she genuinely tamed or is she playing a game of her own, retaining her psychological independence? A related question concerns the play's style. Is it a farce, a form in which we are not encouraged to take it very seriously when people are slapped around? Or is it a sophisticated social comedy, the ironic texture of which directs our attention to what one critic calls the social illness of a materialistic patriarchy?

Historically-attuned commentators have related the play to contemporaneous debates about the nature and role of the sexes, and the disruption caused to society by unruly, 'shrewish' or 'scolding' women. In early modern England there was a criminalization of female unruliness. As Sir William Blackstone later explained in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*,

A common scold, *communis rixatrix*, (for our law-Latin confines it to the feminine gender) is a public nuisance to her neighbourhood. For which offence she may be indicted; and, if convicted, shall be sentenced to be placed in a certain engine of correction called the trebucket, castigatory, or cucking stool, which in the Saxon language signifies the scolding stool; though now it is frequently corrupted into ducking stool, because the residue of the judgement is, that, when she is so placed therein, she shall be plunged in the water for her punishment.<sup>1</sup>

The equivalent punishment in Scotland was the 'scold's bridle', a form of muzzle designed to stop the foul, gossipy or malicious mouth of the woman. What is striking in this context, feminist critic Lynda Boose suggests, 'is that the punishments meted out to women are much more frequently targeted at suppressing women's speech than they are at controlling their sexual transgressions': 'the chief social offences seem to have been "scolding," "brawling," and dominating one's husband. The veritable prototype of the female offender of this era seems to be . . . the woman marked out as a "scold" or "shrew"'.<sup>2</sup> Public humiliation as much as physical discomfort was the purpose of the 'cucking'/'ducking' stool and the 'scold's bridle'. They were

shaming devices: "The cucking of scolds was turned into a carnival experience, one that literally placed the woman's body at the center of a mocking parade. Whenever local practicalities made it possible, her experience seems to have involved being ridden or carted through town."<sup>3</sup> The Skimmington Ride in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1884) is a late example of this practice.

The question, though, is how to relate the play to such customs. In one sense, a drama performed on the public stage is close kin to a mocking parade. In another sense, it is very different, since we know that it is only a game and that the female victim is only an actor. And within the world of the play, the humiliation of Kate is more private than public. Furthermore, Petruchio's actions are intended to be pre-emptive: unlike many of the women who were ritually punished for their behaviour, she is not an unruly wife.

The starting point of the modern female spectator's response to the play is likely to be Kate's own emotion: rage. Why should a daughter submit to her father's will? Why should women accept the way they are treated by men? In an influential feminist reading of Shakespeare, the critic Coppélia Kahn has no doubt about the play's historical authenticity:

The overt force Petruchio wields over Kate by marrying her against her will in the first place and then by denying her every wish and comfort, by stamping, shouting, reducing her to exhaustion, etc., is but a farcical representation of the psychological realities of marriage in Elizabethan England, in which the husband's will constantly, silently, and invisibly, through custom and conformity, suppressed the wife's.<sup>4</sup>

Yet at the same time, she credits Shakespeare with the intelligence to see the irrationality of such behaviour:

Shakespeare does not rest with showing that male supremacy in marriage denies woman's humanity. In the most brilliant comic scene of the play [4.3], he goes on to demonstrate how it defies reason. Petruchio demands that Kate agree that the sun is the moon in order to force a final showdown. Having exhausted and

humiliated her to the limit of his invention, he now wants her to know that he would go to any extreme to get the obedience he craves. Shakespeare implies here that male supremacy is ultimately based on such absurdities, for it insists that whatever a man says is right because he is a man, even if he happens to be wrong.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of theatre is not usually to endorse or to dissent from a moral position or a sociological phenomenon. It is to show – comically, tragically, farcically, thoughtfully – how human beings interact with each other. Shakespeare's greatest resource is his language and what attracts him to Katherine as a character for realization on the stage is what attracts Petruchio to her: her lively language. How would his original audience have responded to that language? First and foremost, they would have enjoyed it and laughed with it. If they began to reflect upon it, they would have been pulled in contradictory directions. There may well have been an element perhaps of fear and loathing: 'From the outset of Shakespeare's play, Katherine's threat to male authority is posed through language; it is perceived as such by others and is linked to a claim larger than shrewishness – witchcraft – through the constant allusions to Katherine's kinship with the devil.'<sup>6</sup> But equally, among the more sophisticated, there could have been a relish in the subversion of norms. Translating this into the language of modern feminist criticism,

Kate's self-consciousness about the power of language, her punning and irony, and her techniques of linguistic masquerade, are strategies of italics ... Instead of figuring an essentialized woman's speech, they deform language by subverting it, that is, by turning it inside out so that metaphors, puns, and other forms of wordplay manifest their veiled equivalences: the meaning of woman as treasure, of wooing as a civilized and acceptable disguise for sexual exploitation, of the objectification and exchange of women.<sup>7</sup>

Mastery of language was an extremely important idea in Shakespeare's time. The pedagogy of Renaissance humanism was

fundamentally concerned with the cultivation of the powers of speech and argument as the means of realizing our potential as rational beings. Within the play, Petruchio's subduing and refinement of Kate operates in parallel to the purported efforts of the supposed tutors to teach the sisters classical literature and the art of the lute. 'By learning to speak the pedagogue's language of social and familial order, Kate shows herself to be a better student of standard humanist doctrine than her sister.'<sup>8</sup>

Paradoxically, there is a sense in which Petruchio liberates Kate from her own demons:

Petruchio directs Kate to the dark center of her psyche and dramatizes her fears so that she may recognize them. He shows her what she has become, not only by killing her in her own humour but also by presenting her with a dramatic image of her own emotional condition: he acts out for her the drama of her true self held in bondage by her tyrannical, violent self. What is internal . . . Petruchio makes external.<sup>9</sup>

Petruchio's method is to suppose (and he is correct) or assume qualities in Katherina that no one else, possibly even the shrew herself, ever suspects. What he assumes as apparently false turns out to be startlingly true. His 'treatment' is a steady unfolding of her really fine qualities: patience, practical good sense, a capacity for humor, and finally obedience, all of which she comes gradually to manifest in a spirit chastened but not subdued.<sup>10</sup>

The suggestion, then, is that beneath the surface of the brutal sex farce is a different story in which two intelligent but temperamental people learn how to live together. A variant on such an interpretation is to suggest that Petruchio's 'taming' may be an elaborate game:

The audience's realization that Petruchio is game-playing, that he is posing behind the mask of a disorderly male shrew and is having considerable fun exploiting his role, is the key to a romantic reading of the play. Thus Kate is tamed not by Petruchio's whip but by the discovery of her own imagination,

for when she learns to recognize the sun for the moon and the moon for the dazzling sun she is discovering the liberating power of laughter and play.<sup>11</sup>

As a wife she submits, but as a player in the game she is now a full and skilful partner. Most important, she is helping to create her own role as an obedient spouse, and the process of creation gives her pleasure. Her obedience is not meekly accepted, but embraced and enjoyed.<sup>12</sup>

Like a good humanist husband, he has been his wife's teacher; and like an actor, he has taught her to assume a new role. When Kate learns to mimic as well as he, these two easily transcend the roles and hierarchies that govern their world.<sup>13</sup>

By this account, Petruchio injects a dose of realism into the romantic ideas about love that comedy habitually perpetuates. It has been said that he

drags love out of heaven, and brings it down to earth. To the chivalrous, love is a state of worship; to him, it is a problem of wiving. Its object is not primarily a search for spiritual bliss in the contemplation of the beloved. It seeks merely a guarantee of domestic comfort . . . A condition of this is, naturally, that he must be master of what is his own. Courtship is merely incidental to the attainment of this ease and settlement.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps Kate, too, participates willingly and actively in the game. The submission speech has often been read in the light of this possibility:

Far from reiterating old platitudes about the inferiority of women, however, what Kate actually says reflects a number of humanist assumptions about an ideal marriage popularized by Tudor matrimonial reformers. If we wish to see a real vision of subjugated woman, we should turn to the parallel speech of Kate in the anonymous *A Shrew* . . . [who] recites a medieval argument about women's moral inferiority . . . Shakespeare makes no reference to moral inferiority in women. His emphasis

instead is on reciprocity of duties in marriage, based on the complementary natures of man and woman.<sup>15</sup>

We cannot really take that speech at face value. Much of this comedy is an unspoken dialogue between Katherina and Petruchio; and we have to take her speech in the context of the whole play, not as a set-piece on the woman's place. We should read Katherina's final speech as the parallel, and answer, to Petruchio's rhetoric. The mode of speech adopted by each is hyperbole.<sup>16</sup>

Kate's 'act' at the end is, therefore, far more ethical than Bianca's 'act' throughout the play, although both women pretend to be good. They do not simply exchange roles, for then Kate would appear as false as Bianca has been. Through the use of parodic speech, Shakespeare makes Kate shatter the façade of female hypocrisy that . . . Bianca put into practice.<sup>17</sup>

The very nature of Kate's performance *as* performance suggests that she is offering herself to Petruchio not as his servant, as she claims, but as his equal in a select society . . . those who, because they know that man is an actor, freely choose and change their roles in order to avoid the narrow, imprisoning roles society would impose on them.<sup>18</sup>

The conclusion to be drawn from such a reading is that the very artfulness of game-playing – of theatre – offers a form of release from the pressures of patriarchal, mercantile society:

*The Taming of the Shrew* does not fully resolve the marital problems raised in the play, nor does it resolve the problems of patriarchy raised by the shrew character and the plot that conventionally tamed her. Instead, it reasserts marital hierarchy parodically at the end and allows the shrew and her husband to escape from their mercantile world through art.<sup>19</sup>

The danger of reading Petruchio's actions positively in this way is that one might find oneself glossing over the violence he threatens and performs. There is a long stage tradition of giving him a whip,

which – unless one starts becoming very Freudian – is hardly conducive to the idea that Kate is complicit in everything that happens to her.

The questions of performance and role-playing raised by Kate's final speech are often read in the light of the induction:

In *The Taming of a Shrew* . . . the Sly-narrative is not a prologue but an extended dramatic framework: Sly and his attendants are kept on stage more or less throughout, and are given several further comments on and interventions in the action of the play.<sup>20</sup>

The transformation of Christopher Sly from drunken lout to noble lord, a transformation only temporary and skin-deep, suggests that Kate's switch from independence to subjection may also be deceptive and prepares us for the irony of the dénouement.<sup>21</sup>

This emphasis on disguise and illusion is equally evident in the Bianca plot:

Bianca can play her role in a courtship, and her role in a business transaction, without revealing her true face. But the play . . . goes on for one scene after marriage, and Lucentio learns to his dismay what lay behind that romantic sweetness. On the other hand, Petruchio has been concerned with personality all along. The taming plot presents in a deeper, more psychological way ideas that are handled superficially and externally in the romantic plot. Education is one such idea . . . Petruchio . . . really does teach Kate, and teaches her that inner order of which the music and the mathematics offered to Bianca are only a reflection.<sup>22</sup>

But it is above all the Sly framework that establishes a self-referential theatricality in which the status of the shrew-play *as* a play is enforced. The female characters in the play are boy-actors assuming a role, parodied and highlighted by the page playing Sly's 'wife'. Thus 'in the induction, these relationships of power and gender, which in Elizabethan treatises, sermons, homilies, and behavioural handbooks

were figured as natural and divinely ordained, are subverted by the metatheatrical foregrounding of such roles and relations as culturally constructed'.<sup>23</sup> 'Katherina's mind is worked on by Petruchio as Sly's is by the Lord, producing a similar sense of dislocation . . . Finally she [too] acquires a new identity.'<sup>24</sup>

Every production of every Shakespeare play is different from every other. The very process of adaptation and reinterpretation is what keeps the work alive. Shakespeare's endurance is dependent on cultural evolution in the light of new circumstances, new beliefs and values. But perhaps of all the plays *The Taming of the Shrew* is the one in which almost everything hangs on a few essential director's and actor's decisions: what to do about the induction, how to play the two sisters and the two courtships off against each other, how playful to make the taming, how sincere to make the submission.

# ABOUT THE TEXT

Shakespeare endures through history. He illuminates later times as well as his own. He helps us to understand the human condition. But he cannot do this without a good text of the plays. Without editions there would be no Shakespeare. That is why every twenty years or so throughout the last three centuries there has been a major new edition of his complete works. One aspect of editing is the process of keeping the texts up to date – modernizing the spelling, punctuation and typography (though not, of course, the actual words), providing explanatory notes in the light of changing educational practices (a generation ago, most of Shakespeare's classical and biblical allusions could be assumed to be generally understood, but now they can't).

Because Shakespeare did not personally oversee the publication of his plays, with some plays there are major editorial difficulties. Decisions have to be made as to the relative authority of the early printed editions, the pocket format 'Quartos' published in Shakespeare's lifetime and the elaborately produced 'First Folio' text of 1623, the original 'Complete Works' prepared for the press after his death by Shakespeare's fellow-actors, the people who knew the plays better than anyone else. In the case of *The Taming of the Shrew*, there is no Quarto text, so all modern editions follow the Folio.

Scholars still debate the nature of the relationship between *A pleasant conceited historie, called The taming of a shrew As it was sundry times acted by the Right honorable the Earle of Pembrook his seruants* (1594) and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* as published in the First Folio. The main action shares a similar plot line with parallel but sometimes differently named characters (Sly and Kate are the only names shared by the two plays; in *A Shrew*, Kate has