

The Taming of The Shrew

Love and marriage are the concerns of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play offers us some strikingly different models of the process of attracting and choosing a mate and then coming to terms with the mate one has chosen. Some of these models may still seem attractive to us, some not.

Lucentio's courtship of and marriage to Bianca are prompted by his idealized love of an apparently ideal woman. When she first appears, Bianca is silent and perfectly obedient to her father. Lucentio then speaks of her as if she were a goddess come to earth. Because her father denies all men the opportunity openly to court Bianca, Lucentio spontaneously throws off his social status as a gentleman in order to disguise himself as a lowly tutor, the only kind of man that Bianca's father, Baptista, will let near her. All that matters to Lucentio is winning Bianca's heart. To marry her—even in secret and in shared defiance of her father—is surely, he believes, to be happy.

An alternative style of wooing adopted by Petruchio in quest of Katherine is notably free of idealism. Petruchio is concerned with money. He takes money from all Bianca's suitors for wooing her older sister, Katherine, who, Baptista has dictated, must be married before Bianca. When Petruchio comes to see Katherine, he first arranges with her father the dowry to be acquired by marrying her. Assured of the money, Petruchio is ready to marry Katherine even against her will. Katherine is the shrew named in the play's title; and, according to all the men but Petruchio, her bad temper denies her the status of "ideal woman" accorded Bianca by Lucentio. Yet by the end of the play, Katherine, whether she has been tamed or not, certainly acts much changed. Petruchio then claims to have the more successful marriage. But is the marriage of Petruchio and Katherine a superior match—have they truly learned to love each other?—or is it based on terror and deception?

This question about Katherine and Petruchio is only one of the questions this play raises for us. How are we to respond to Kate's speech at the end of the play, with its celebration of the wife's subordinate position? What does it mean that Bianca, the "ideal" woman, at the end seems unpleasant and bad-tempered, now that she is married? How should we respond to the process by which Petruchio "tames" Kate? As with so many of Shakespeare's plays, how one answers these questions has a lot to do with one's own basic beliefs—here, one's beliefs about men and women, about love and marriage.

The dating of *The Taming of the Shrew* is complicated by the play's ambiguous relationship to a play entitled *The Taming of a Shrew*, printed and performed in 1594, which may have been an early version, or a reported version, of *The Shrew*, which was printed in the 1623 First Folio. Shakespeare's sources for the plot include other contemporary works on the same theme.

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