

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

Written by William Shakespeare between 1590-1594

Discussion Notes by Prof Emeritus Lowell Johnson

The Taming of the Shrew was first published in 1623 (seven years after Shakespeare's death) in the collection known as the "First Folio" which printed 36 of his plays. Most critics date *The Shrew* as one of his earliest written comedies, calculating his earliest plays from about 1590. The play was thought by some to have been acted either by a company of actors known as "Pembroke's Men" or by one known as "Lord Strange's Men" during the period 1592-94. In 1594, "The Taming of a Shrew" was published, note the "a" versus "the" in the title. This play raises several questions because of its similarity to Shakespeare's. Is it a source for Shakespeare? is it a pirated version of Shakespeare's play? is it an early version of his play? is it unrelated, other than both plays may have a common, unknown ancestor? Most significantly for our consideration is that this other play contains the completed Induction or Sly plot, the conclusion of which is missing from the printed Shakespeare play, but it also gives some insight into how the "Shrew plot" can be handled differently.

As is characteristic of Shakespeare's plays and those of his contemporaries, this play is structured with several plots, in this case, three. The play opens with what is called "The Induction," a pre-play or framing device, starring Christopher Sly and the Lord. The plot is a farcical joke and apparently incomplete. Sly, a drunken tinker, is the subject/object of a trick by the unnamed Lord involving changing identities. The Induction raises a number of interesting questions: 1) why is the plot incomplete, if it is so? (intentionally? publisher's mistake? authorial forgetfulness?) 2) what purpose does the Induction serve? (reality insulation? thematic--dream and self-deception? cruel manipulation? worlds-within-worlds?) 3) should the entire Induction be omitted in production? should the final scene from "The Taming of a Shrew" be added? 4) How is Sly treated as an outsider, i. e., one who does not belong to the social group? what can we learn from the Induction that will help us understand the main plot?

The Bianca Plot is the romantic story drawing upon traditional comic action of intrigue, disguises, misapprehension, impersonation, and deception. The main action for all its complications is boy meets girl, boy outwits competition, boy gets girl. Bianca is the conventionally desirable English beauty, "Miss Padua 1592"; Lucentio is the eager, young, handsome suitor; they are the "ideal lovers." The other suitors are old, slow-witted, or impostors; the father is biased and insensitive. Shakespeare invariably favors the young over the old in matters of love and romance. The object of all his romantic comedies is marriage, either occurring or promised; this plot ends with the marriage celebration. Some questions to consider are: 1) what is the true character of Bianca (dutiful? deceptive?) 2) how does the father Baptista's favoritism affect his daughters? 3) what kind of relationship have Bianca and Lucentio established for their marriage? should such a psychological question be asked about a comedy? 4) is Lucentio a better lover than Petruchio? 5) Can we label the other suitors "outsiders"?

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The "Shrew plot" is the main plot, the one that gives the play both its notoriety and its longevity. What is there about this plot that sustains the drama more than 400 years after it was written? Kate is the shrew, the outsider; Kate is the problem, the social threat; Kate is independent, aggressive; Kate is feared, scorned, rejected. She begins fiercely and ends quietly; what happened? what caused the change, if it is, indeed, a change? Petruchio, the shrew-tamer, is loud, intimidating, a fortune-hunter. He is anti-romantic, cruel, scheming, and victorious. What is there to celebrate at the play's conclusion? Have they negotiated a relationship or has he beaten her into submission?

Shrews, mostly women, had sharp tongues, uncivil behavior, and anti-social attitudes. They want to be dominant in all relationships and have full self-control--"mastery"; they were often man-haters. Shakespeare could draw upon shrew plots, characters, and attitudes from a long history of anti-feminist tales, jest books, Roman and Italian comedies, and medieval religious perspectives. Whatever the source for his imagination, Shakespeare wrote a memorable plot featuring his first strongly defined woman character, giving her personality, good lines, central action, and memorability. Kate, first performed by a boy actor, is a role that for over three centuries continues to be desired by fine actresses.

Because of the ambiguity of the plot action, the uncertainty of the play's conclusion, and the equivocalness of Kate's transformation, readers, playgoers, and critics alike are drawn into heated discussions of the play's interpretation. Some condemn *The Shrew* as anti-feminist and conclude Shakespeare is anti-feminine, others say the play is a farce and one should not put too heavy an interpretation on it, others say the play is ironic either because it is ultimately romantic or is contrary to its apparent conclusion, others argue the theme of appearance vs. reality in identity requires special reading, lastly, but not finally, others argue Shakespeare is radically subverting the status quo.

A significant aspect of Kate's role (and later Shylock's) is that of the social outsider. How is Kate an outsider? why can't Kate remain as she is? Why must she be tamed? why not change Petruchio? what kind of society would allow outsiders to remain as such and still be welcomed? why is Kate victorious over Bianca, the romantic heroine, at play's end? what images of woman are praised and dispraised? what kind of marital relationship is honored?

Kate's final speech raises numerous questions that pertain to her role as an outsider and to the society to which she is welcomed. Her father says "she is chang'd, as she had never been." Is she changed? if so, what brought about the change? is her will broken? is she defeated? is she still rebellious but more cleverly so? by outside force or inner knowledge? is she made one with all the other women? is her final speech honest? deceptive? humorous? submissive? parodic? ironic? what is the relationship between her and Petruchio at the play's conclusion? is the conflict between them resolved? or repressed? If you were playing the role of Kate, how would you deliver the final speech?