

The Taming of the Shrew

by Shakespeare

Background

Scholars consider this to be one of Shakespeare's earlier plays. A play called *The Taming of a Shrew* was published in 1594 (the 1594 Quarto), and if this is assumed to be a version of Shakespeare's play rather than a source for it, then his play probably pre-dates 1592; from that year onwards theatres in London closed for long periods because of the plague. However, some scholars have suggested that the 1594 version of the *Shrew* is a badly printed text of an older play that formed Shakespeare's source: it includes the duping of Christopher Sly, the 'taming' of Kate, and a variation on the Bianca sub-plot. There is no firm evidence for a more precise date for the play, but the version you study was first published in 1623 (the 1623 Folio) and seems to have been set straight from a manuscript copy, perhaps a transcript by a scribe that retained some marks of Shakespeare's working manuscript.

Inn yard theatres

Before the major theatre-building programme in the late sixteenth century in England, plays were often performed in the courtyards of inns. The architecture of Elizabethan theatres owed much to these origins, with their balconies and central open space for performance. Some inn yards were converted into permanent theatres and existed alongside the larger, more established playhouses. Even high-profile companies used inn yards — for example, the Queen's Men performed at both the Bell Inn and the Bel Savage Inn. The use of scenery and artificial lighting in such theatres was rare.

Elizabethan theatres in London

The theatres that staged Shakespeare's plays were probably like the Swan Theatre in 1596 (see below).

The stage area of an Elizabethan theatre was covered by a canopy and supported by columns. The wall at the back of the stage would have had a number of openings — probably three — with a prominent entrance for royal or high-ranking characters in the middle. The structure at the back of the stage (the equivalent of the *skene* in Greek theatre) was known as the 'tiring house' and was where costumes and props were stored and where actors dressed themselves

before a performance. The ceiling of the stage was often referred to as 'the heavens' and sometimes decorated with stars.

Seating surrounded the stage in tiered galleries, while the area in front of the stage housed the 'groundlings' — poorer audience members who would pay an entrance fee of one penny. Richer patrons would sit in the covered galleries, paying as much as half a crown for their seats. It is supposed that nobles sat on the stage, nearer to the actors. It seems, therefore, that audience composition was representative of London society. Although the early theatres had part of the stage covered, they were still reliant on good weather and natural light if the audience were to enjoy the performance to the full. However, fully indoor theatres did exist at this time; the boys' company of St Paul's performed in a private theatre — seating only about 200 people — within the precincts of St Paul's Cathedral.

Johannes de Witt's sketch of the interior of the Swan Theatre, 1596



Elizabethan theatre companies

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, two major theatre companies emerged in London: the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the Admiral's Men. The former company was housed initially at a theatre in Shoreditch, then the Curtain Theatre, and later in the Globe, while the Admiral's Men performed in the Rose. Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men as both an actor and a playwright.

It was common for the actors in a theatre company also to part-own it — underwriting the costs and sharing the profits. As the number of theatres increased, so the competition between the companies intensified, and the need to find a playwright with the ability to write a successful drama was essential. *The Taming of the Shrew* would have needed to attract an audience, and its ostensible theme may have been chosen to draw people in.

Elizabethan actors

In *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* (ed. J. R. Brown, 2001), Peter Thomson suggests that the number of players needed to perform in a play during the late sixteenth century rose from around 12 to 16 people. Even so, this would indicate that some doubling of roles was commonplace throughout the century, especially in those theatres where finances were under strain.

In the Elizabethan era, a number of leading actors emerged. Edward Alleyn (1566–1626) was arguably the greatest actor in Elizabethan England, rivalled only by Richard Burbage. Alleyn dominated the London theatre during the 1590s with his performances of Marlowe's great roles. A number of Marlowe's plays such as *Doctor Faustus* (1592), *Tamburlaine* (1587) and *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1590) feature a strong principal character who is central to most of the action and appears in nearly every scene. However, although Shakespeare's plays often have a single leading character, many of his plays also contain a number of other pivotal characters. In *Julius Caesar*, for example, Caesar, Brutus, Cassius and Antony are all, arguably, leading roles. This feature is connected with the ethos of the Elizabethan theatre company and the ways in which the group of actors would have grown and matured in their work together. This requirement for group work is evident in the construction of *The Taming of the Shrew*, where there is more than one 'leading' character, and the supporting roles are given a considerable degree of individuality and influence.

Outline of the plot

Act 1

The play begins with a drunken tailor, Christopher Sly, being ejected from an alehouse on account of his rowdy behaviour. After he passes out, a group of noblemen decide to play a trick on him. They take him to one of their houses, dress him in finery and when he comes round pretend that he is a nobleman who has lost his memory. Utterly bewildered by his treatment, Sly begins to watch a play that has been provided for his amusement.

The play commences. Lucentio, a young noble, and his servant Tranio arrive in Padua from Florence. They witness an argument in the street between two sisters — Katherina (Kate) and Bianca Minola and their father, Baptista. The argument concerns two other noblemen, Hortensio and the aged Gremio, who are desperate to marry Bianca. However, Baptista makes it clear that no one may woo his younger daughter until his elder daughter is married. The problem is that his elder daughter, Kate, is regarded as a ‘shrew’ — hot tempered and unmanageable — and she has no obvious suitors. Baptista declares that he will allow no man but a tutor access to Bianca. Lucentio has by now fallen in love with Bianca and resolves to disguise himself as a teacher. His servant, Tranio, disguises himself as his master, as Lucentio is expected in Padua.

Petruchio arrives with his servant Grumio. He is looking for a wealthy wife and is encouraged by his friend, Hortensio, to pursue Kate. Hortensio warns Petruchio about Kate’s nature but that does not deter Petruchio. Hortensio persuades Petruchio to take him along to the Minola house where he too is introduced as a tutor. Gremio and Tranio — also in love with Bianca — join the group.

The plot of *The Taming of the Shrew* in context



Both the ‘beggar transported into luxury’ and the ‘shrewish wife’ are traditional elements of ballads and folk tales. They are also elements of Classical comedy: the Roman comedies of playwrights Plautus (c. 251–184 BC) and Terence (c. 190–158 BC) in turn influenced Italian Renaissance plays. Shakespeare’s treatment of the courtship of Bianca follows a pattern from one of these plays, Ludovico Ariosto’s *I Suppositi* (1509), which was translated into English by George Gascoigne as *Supposes* in 1566.

On the face of it, *The Taming of the Shrew* proposes that a desirable woman is quiet and submissive, and women who are spirited must be ‘tamed’ through physical and mental abuse. In Shakespeare’s time, it was commonly believed that a man was by right of natural order the head of his household,

and the laws of succession to the throne of England (which still exist) meant that a son would always assume the title ‘King’ over an older sister. Although at the time the play was written Elizabeth I was Queen of England (and therefore Head of State), her much younger brother Edward reigned as King Edward VI, before his early death opened the succession to his half sisters, Mary and Elizabeth. It is necessary to bear this in mind when investigating the themes of the play, because close study of the text suggests the possibility of a much more complicated and ironic interpretation of what is happening than first appears. Is Bianca actually the dominant partner in her relationship at the end? Is Kate really subdued or are she and Petruchio just playing a game with society’s expectations? Is it all ‘only a play’?

Act II

Bianca and Kate are fighting because Kate believes her sister to be the more favoured daughter. Baptista tells Petruchio that he is allowed to marry Kate once he wins her love. The various 'tutors' arrive and are allowed access to Bianca. Kate and Petruchio meet and exchange lively insults. However, Petruchio passes this off as her public behaviour. He assures everyone that she is loving and gentle in private and that they are going to get married on Sunday. Baptista is happy with this outcome and so turns his attention to the question of who will marry Bianca. Tranio — disguised as Lucentio — is his first choice provided he can produce proof of his wealth. However, Bianca clearly prefers the real Lucentio — disguised as a tutor called Cambio.



Vanessa Redgrave as Kate and Derek Godfrey as Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Aldwych Theatre, London, 1961

Act III

On Kate's wedding day Petruchio fails to arrive. When he eventually does appear, he is dressed inappropriately and behaves in an extreme and aggressive manner. Once married, he takes Kate away, not allowing her to attend her own wedding reception. They argue for the entire journey and when they arrive at Petruchio's house, Kate is exhausted and hungry. However, to prolong her suffering further, Petruchio refuses to allow her eat anything on the grounds that it is not good enough for her. Furthermore, he is dissatisfied with the state of the beds so she is not allowed to sleep either.

Hortensio realises that Bianca favours Lucentio (as Cambio) over him and angrily declares his intention of marrying a wealthy widow. Tranio — still disguised as Lucentio — persuades a stranger to impersonate Lucentio's father, Vincentio. He needs his father to prove his wealth. Baptista is convinced by Vincentio's 'proof' and Bianca and the real Lucentio are married in secret.

Act IV

Petruchio's eccentric behaviour continues. He declares that they will return to Padua for Hortensio's wedding feast and that they will dress in finery. However, Petruchio finds fault with the tailor's work and throws all the new clothes away.

He then declares to Kate that they will return to Padua and will arrive at noon. When Kate contradicts him and says they will arrive at night he insists that she agree with him before they are allowed to leave. On the journey, he declares the sun to be the moon and will not allow the party to continue on its way until Kate agrees with him. Petruchio's mind control seems to have worked when they meet the real Vincentio (an old man) and he refers to him as a young woman. Kate does not attempt to contradict and agrees that he is, indeed, a young woman — much to the consternation on Vincentio and Hortensio.

Photostage



Sian Thomas as Kate and Alfred Molina as Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, RSC Regional Tour, 1985/86

Act V

When Vincentio arrives in Padua the various deceptions are discovered and the characters' true identities are recognised. A celebration is held for the three marriages: Petruchio and Kate, Lucentio and Bianca and Hortensio and the widow. At the end of the feast, the women withdraw and the men discuss the relative merits of an obedient wife. They bet each other that they have the most obedient wife and will prove it by each man sending for his wife. Bianca refuses to come, as does the widow. However, Kate arrives and speaks at some length on the importance of a woman being obedient and dutiful to her husband.

Considerations for the director

The Taming of the Shrew is a popular play today (and we might therefore assume that it would have been so for contemporary audiences). The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) claims — on the basis of its box office takings — that it is the second most popular of Shakespeare's plays.

This popularity could be explained partly because of the varied opportunities offered for interpretation. Just as with Greek tragedy, Shakespeare's work does not have to be set in the time of its original realisation. Michael Bogdanov's production in 1978 started with Christopher Sly in modern dress behaving like a drunk off the street who was determined to destroy the set. In 2003, Phyllida Lloyd directed an all-female production of the play starring Janet McTeer in the lead male role of Petruchio.

There are many examples of Shakespeare's plays being staged in different eras. An example is the 1995 film version of *Richard III* starring Ian McKellan, in which the character of Richard is reminiscent of a fascist leader and the production values clearly owe much to the pre-war years of the 1930s.

A director of *The Taming of the Shrew* therefore has a complex task. As discussed below, the play can be directed as an energetic farce — almost a sex comedy — or as a play about gender politics. However, a farcical interpretation does not prevent the production from making a statement about gender politics. Farce can help to highlight the ridiculousness of character and situation and, therefore, does not necessarily mean that the important issues of a play are diminished. The Italian playwright Dario Fo (born 1926) built a reputation as a farceur but was clearly a politically motivated playwright, writing controversial works such as *Accidental Death of An Anarchist* (1970) and *Can't Pay Won't Pay* (1974).



Kathryn Hunter as Kate and Janet McTeer as Petruchio, in the all-female production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Globe Theatre, London, 2003

Issues surrounding the 'taming'

Although the play is a comedy, the theme of a character, particularly a female character, being 'tamed' by a man is controversial today. Some may view the play as sexist or misogynistic, and any director presenting the play in a modern political and cultural context will be aware of the offence that it may cause. After studying the play, you will have your own views on its central theme. However, you should be aware that the decisions made regarding the production will affect an audience's interpretation of the play's themes: the label 'sexist' can be applied as much to the production as to the play itself.

It may be useful to reflect on the following points:

- ◆ The prologue in which Christopher Sly appears sets up the idea of the play itself being part of a delusion: Sly is duped into believing that he is a nobleman and the whole of the play that follows is shown as part of his delusion. By the end it is possible to have forgotten this, since Sly never reappears after the first scene. Could the director find a way to remind the audience members that they are actually watching a play within a play?

- ◆ There are many other examples from Shakespeare of female characters who are far from weak or malleable. For example, Lady Macbeth is much more concerned to fulfil the predictions of the witches and murder Duncan than Macbeth is. Lear's daughters — all of whom come into conflict with their father at different points of the play — are strong and determined characters. In view of the fact that Shakespeare created strong-minded female characters in his other plays, is it appropriate to label this particular work 'sexist'? On the other hand, this play is one of Shakespeare's earliest plays and many of his 'great' female roles had yet to be written.
- ◆ Is Bianca as sweet and innocent as her suitors believe her to be? If she is the model of a good wife, why does she not come when Lucentio sends for her at the end of the play?
- ◆ The play is unquestionably a comedy. The character of Kate displays a number of unreasonable and intemperate qualities, particularly in regard to her treatment of her sister. It could be argued that both she and Petruchio are extreme characters designed to serve comic functions, and thus are not meant to be taken seriously. A director could decide to play this comedy in such a way that its farcical construction is brought out.
- ◆ Although attitudes to women at the time the play was written were extremely different (no women would have acted in the play and few would have been in the audience) it should be borne in mind that there was a female Head of State (Elizabeth I) at the time of the play's original production. Given her support of the theatre, it seems unlikely that Shakespeare would have risked incurring her wrath by creating a play that ridiculed women and seriously advocated their 'taming'.
- ◆ The central character is often seen as the 'hero' of the play and it is expected that we, the audience, will sympathise with him to a certain extent, in spite of his weaknesses. This is certainly true of other flawed Shakespearean characters such as Hamlet, Lear, Hal/Henry V, or Falstaff. However, in *The Taming of the Shrew* there is no reason for the audience to identify or agree with the principal character, Petruchio. His behaviour is eccentric and extreme and, although we may feel he is pretending to be mad in order to 'tame' his wife, his motives in marrying her — at the outset of the play — seem to be largely commercial. He says to Hortensio:

[...] if thou know
One rich enough to be Petruchio's wife —
As wealth is burden of my wooing dance —
Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,
As old as Sibyl and as curst and shrewd

As Socrates' Xanthippe, or a worse,
 She moves me not, or not removes, at least,
 Affection's edge in me, were she as rough
 As are the swelling Adriatic seas.
 I come to wive it wealthily in Padua;
 If wealthily, then happily in Padua.

(William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*,
 ed. Bate and Rasmussen, Macmillan/RSC 2007, I.2.60–70)

Petruchio should not necessarily be seen as the 'hero' of the play. How he is presented by the director will influence how the sentiments of the play are communicated. A clownish, eccentric Petruchio will support the notion that his actions should not be taken seriously or be seen as a credible way to treat women.

- ◆ The final speech in which Kate discusses the importance of obedience does not have to be delivered 'straight'. It is an extreme evocation of female duty, particularly towards the end of the speech:

My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
 My heart as great, my reason haply more,
 To bandy word for word and frown for frown;
 But now I see our lances are but straws,
 Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,
 That seeming to be most which we indeed least are. (V.1.182–87)

Again, the director and actor could interpret this speech to demonstrate an irony in Kate's words — indicating that she realises what she is saying is ludicrously extravagant.

Whether or not *The Taming of the Shrew* is a sexist play is open to discussion, and anyone directing it needs to evaluate his or her own views on the subject. While *Antigone* is a play with political impact, it is debatable whether *The Taming of the Shrew* is about gender politics or simply a comical farce that uses a battle-of-the-sexes scenario to deliver slapstick entertainment.

Developing themes and ideas

In her production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at The Globe in 2003, Phyllida Lloyd used sixteenth-century costuming and staging (in the reconstructed Globe) — a simulation of the setting of the first performance. However, her use of an all-female company offered a far from traditional interpretation, as the *Daily Telegraph* reviewer noted:

Lloyd is a director with an infectious sense of fun, and the mere fact that all the men here are played by women highlights the absurdities of the male of the species without any need of overt editorialising.

(Daily Telegraph, 23 August 2003)

Context

The context of the production (the time in which the play is set) may assist in the development of ideas and themes. A production does not necessarily have to be set in a specific era. If the production is focused on the farcical elements of the play, a director may feel that a timeless quality may be appropriate and he or she may choose, for example, to concentrate on the physical aspects of the comedy.

Physical interpretation

There are a number of scenes that rely on physical interaction and where comic timing and physical skills are important.

The argument between Petruchio and Kate, which dominates the middle of the first scene of Act II, is full of witty word-play and banter. The couple exchange a series of one-liners, each trying to outdo the other. As Petruchio's objective here is to woo Kate and her objective is to reject him, there is the potential for a 'chase' type of movement sequence.

Petruchio: Why, what's a moveable?

Katherina: A joint stool.

Petruchio: Thou hast hit it: come, sit on me.

Katherina: Asses are made to bear, and so are you.

Petruchio: Women are made to bear, and so are you.

Katherina: No such jade as you, if me you mean.

Petruchio: Alas! good Kate, I will not burden thee,
For knowing thee to be but young and light —

Katherina: Too light for such a swain as you to catch,
And yet as heavy as my weight should be.

(II.1.196–205)

This is a fiery and swift exchange, and a director will want to ensure that the physical movement matches the pace of the dialogue.

A moment later, in the middle of their argument, Kate actually strikes Petruchio:

Petruchio: What, with my tongue in your tail? Nay, come again.
Good Kate; I am a gentleman.

Katherina: That I'll try. [*She strikes him*]

Petruchio: I swear I'll cuff you, if you strike again. (II.1.218–21)

This moment in their exchange specifies a particular physical action — that of Kate striking Petruchio. Petruchio could mirror this action by physically threatening to strike her back as well as verbally doing so.

Using mistaken identity

This play — along with some other Shakespeare comedies, especially *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1594) and *Twelfth Night* (1601) — contains classic scenes of mistaken identity. However improbable this seems, by simply adding an extra garment, characters are mistakenly believed to be different people. We see this in the scenes where Bianca's suitors disguise themselves as tutors in order to pursue her. We also see it where a passing stranger is persuaded to disguise himself as Vincentio and where Tranio disguises himself as Lucentio. The rapid exchange of garments that takes place in order to affect these disguises emphasises the farcical nature of the play. This important element in the action needs to be addressed by the director.

Using ensemble acting

Despite being a very different type of play to *Antigone*, *The Taming of the Shrew* still requires a director to create a sense of ensemble acting (see Chapter 2 page 41). The scenes where many characters gather on stage, and where there is much movement, require careful direction and specific staging skills.

Using 'chase' routines

In Act V scene 1, where the cases of mistaken identity and the various plot twists are resolved, there are several instances of characters entering and exiting the stage quickly and from a variety of entrances. This kind of farcical chase routine is to be found in many other plays and types of comedy, including *commedia dell'arte*, a form of improvised comedy originating from Italy in the sixteenth century.

Using stereotyped characters

Commedia dell'arte was built around a series of well-known storylines and stereotyped characters (e.g. the fussy old pedant, and the resourceful servant who makes a fool of the master). Some of the characters in *The Taming of the Shrew*

echo these stereotypes (e.g. the character who is persuaded to disguise himself as Vincentio is called a ‘pedant’, and Tranio is a ‘resourceful servant’ character). Therefore, elements of traditional comedy craftsmanship can be found in this play, and the director should explore the possibilities they present.

The director’s task

A director must address a number of key issues connected with this controversial play. Is it appropriate for a twenty-first-century production to seem to support a ‘sexist’ philosophy? An audience may perceive a production as such unless it highlights the farcical nature of the play or finds ways of presenting an ironic interpretation. However, if a director becomes too ‘hidebound’ by the politics of the play, he or she may not focus sufficiently on the comic nature of the piece. The play is still popular precisely because it makes audiences laugh. A successful production will be one where the actors have been well rehearsed in developing the comic potential of their characters and their situations.

Discussion question

Make thorough notes on the points that arise from your consideration of the following question, either from discussion or your own observations.

What advice might you give to an actor playing Kate in the delivery of her final speech? Think especially about how you want an audience to respond to it.

Essay question

Describe how you might stage Act V, scene 1 of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Pay particular attention to the entrances and exits of characters, and explain their significance.

Considerations for the designer

This play takes place in a number of different areas — some of them indoors and others outdoors. Given that the play, in places, is a fast moving farce, the designer must ensure that there are no delays between scene changes.

Set design

In an original production, scene changes would have been minimal, suggested merely by the addition or removal of simple furniture. Today, the design needs to reflect the social and historical context in which the play is set.

The design can influence the comic impact of the piece: for example, a setting that uses garish colours and bright lighting could lend a sense of fun to the production. The set could contain a variety of entrances and exits to reflect the way the characters hurry on and off the stage in the tradition of a farce; indeed, the play contains references to different doors in Baptista's house and windows where certain characters are 'revealed'. Overall, the set must allow the audience to appreciate the full 'chase and final revelation' sequence that provides part of the climax to the play.

Costume and make-up

There is comic potential in the design of the costumes. This is particularly true with the 'disguises' the characters use. The suitors disguise themselves as music tutors, the pedant disguises himself as Vincentio, and Tranio disguises himself as Lucentio. The fact that the other characters in the play are convinced by the transformations while the audience is not could produce comic moments of dramatic irony. The disguises could be made to appear ridiculous to the audience, perhaps reflecting, for instance, the academic credentials of the 'tutors'.

Photostage



Bianca's suitors disguised as musicians in *The Taming of the Shrew*, RSC, Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2008. Sean Kearns (Hortensio), Amara Karan (Bianca) and Patrick Moy (Lucentio)

The costuming of Kate and Petruchio will depend — as with all the costumes — on the style and era of the production. However, there are specific requirements of both characters' appearances at particular moments. In Act III scene 2, when Petruchio enters to marry Kate, his dress has already been described by Biondello as:

[...] 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 [...] (III.2.40–41)

The impact of Petruchio's appearance in the wedding scene should be a comic and outlandish one. Therefore, whatever the historic setting of the production, due heed should be paid to the nature of Petruchio's costume in order for it to reinforce the outrageous nature of his behaviour.

Later in Act IV scene 1, Petruchio dismisses the tailor and haberdasher, who are supposed to provide the wedding garments for him and Kate as they prepare to attend Bianca's wedding. The implication is that he is forcing her to attend her sister's wedding in ragged and old clothes. As Petruchio says:

[...] We will unto your father's
Even in these honest mean habiliments:
Our purses shall be proud, our garments poor
[...] (IV.1.162–64)

It is important for the full impact of his statement to become clear that over the subsequent journey taken by Kate and Petruchio their clothes show a steady deterioration. This could be achieved by providing the actors playing Kate and Petruchio with two costumes each, one a ragged and soiled version of the other. This costuming will enable the actors to convey the inappropriateness of their dress for a wedding, as well as Petruchio's increasingly eccentric behaviour.

Technical features

Lighting

The action takes place in different locations and at varying times. The lighting should reflect the place and physical nature of the environment, and also influence the mood of the play by providing for a 'sunny' atmosphere or a darker moment.

Sound

Music is often used to accompany comic episodes in drama. You may wish to reflect on the relationship between comic chase sequences and music in early twentieth-century silent movies. Is there scope for music to be used in a similar

way here? Does there need to be a theme running through the production, or could characters have particular themes attached to them to punctuate their appearances or give the audience a sense of anticipation as they appear?

Live or recorded music could also be used to heighten the intensity of the romantic interludes in the play. The moment when Kate and Petruchio finally kiss may present an opportunity for the use of more romantic music, as may the moment when the conflict between them is finally resolved. Much depends on the director's interpretation of the final scene of the play, but romantic music might accompany Kate's final speech. However, such an accompaniment would perhaps be unsuitable if the director wished to present the speech as a piece of irony.

Essay questions

- 1 Describe the features needed on a set of *The Taming of the Shrew* to enable the comic potential of the play to be realised. Answer with reference to one scene specifically.
- 2 What opportunities might there be to use lighting in *The Taming of the Shrew* to move from one scene to another? Answer with reference to two scenes where the location and/or the time of day changes.
- 3 How might music enhance a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*? Where in particular might music help to articulate the mood or feeling of the play? Answer with reference to two particular moments in the play.

Considerations for an actor

The timing and delivery of the comedy in *The Taming of the Shrew* rely on the skills of the actor being employed to realise the director's vision. However, there are a number of important issues that the actors themselves need to address.

Petruchio

An actor playing the part of Petruchio faces many challenges. The character is neither essentially heroic nor downright villainous. While Petruchio is motivated by money and indulges in some extreme behaviour in his 'taming' of Kate, an actor cannot approach this role simply from the perspective that Petruchio is a 'bad' man. The actor must create a compelling relationship between Petruchio and Kate, time comedy well, and keep and focus the audience's attention.

When the audience first meets him, he has arrived in Padua with his servant. There is some confusion as Petruchio instructs his servant to 'knock' for his friend Hortensio:

Petruchio: Verona, for a while I take my leave,
To see my friends in Padua; but of all
My best beloved and approved friend,
Hortensio, and I trow this is his house.
Here, sirrah Grumio, knock, I say.

Grumio: Knock, sir! Whom should I knock? Is there any man has rebused your worship?

Petruchio: Villain, I say, knock me here soundly.

Grumio: Knock you here, sir! Why, sir, what am I, sir, that I should knock you here, sir?

Petruchio: Villain, I say, knock me at this gate
And rap me well, or I'll knock your knave's pate.

Grumio: My master is grown quarrelsome. I should knock you first,
And then I know after who comes by the worst.

Petruchio: Will it not be?

Faith, sirrah, an you'll not knock, I'll ring it;
I'll try how you can *sol-fa*, and sing it.

[He wrings him by the ears]

(1.2.1–17)

Comic violence in master–servant relationships



The relationship between Grumio and Petruchio, as shown above in the opening of Act I scene 2, is reminiscent of the relationship that John Cleese's Basil Fawlty has with his hapless servant Manuel in the 1970s BBC television series, *Fawlty Towers*. (Perhaps it is no coincidence that Cleese later played Petruchio in the BBC version of *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1980, directed by Jonathan Miller.)

Another master–servant relationship that includes comic violence is the one between Rowan Atkinson's Blackadder and his stupid but loyal servant Baldrick in the *Blackadder* television series.

In traditional Italian comedy or *commedia*, the servant character — Arlecchino or Pedrolino — may be similarly bullied, but he is usually given the ability to behave resourcefully and often outsmarts his tyrannical masters.

Thus, at an early stage in the play the audience understands that Petruchio can be violent, but that the impact of his violence will probably be comic. In approaching this scene, the actor must consider the likely impact his first appearance will have and the way in which he wishes to perform this early example of quite aggressive behaviour.

Although Petruchio's initial motives for choosing to woo Kate are ostensibly financial, the actor must ask himself whether those feelings change and whether, during the course of the play, he falls in love with her. The actor playing Kate must also ask the same question. Does Kate fall in love with Petruchio (we know by the end of the play she is obedient to him, assuming the final speech is played 'straight') and if so, at what point in the play does this happen? Can we be sure that a loving relationship exists between the two main characters by the end of the play? In Petruchio's final speech

at the end of Act III scene 3, there is a suggestion that his feelings towards Kate are becoming more tender. It is clear that his outrage at the apparent negligence of his servants is an act and all part of his technique to 'tame the shrew'. He says:

Ay, and amid this hurly I intend
That all is done in reverend care of her.
And in conclusion she shall watch all night,
And if she chance to nod I'll rail and brawl
And with the clamour keep her still awake.
This is a way to kill a wife with kindness

(III.3.166–71)

The statement that 'all is done in reverend care of her' indicates that his fondness for Kate is genuine. His belief that he set on a path to 'kill a wife with kindness' suggests that his motives may be 'kind' even if his practice is barbaric. If the actor decides that by the time Petruchio makes this speech he is already in love with Kate then it will clearly influence how the speech is delivered. It forms a contemplative, quiet conclusion to an otherwise violent scene in which Petruchio has made several aggressive outbursts towards his servants. The scene provides a rare moment when we see Petruchio in a reflective mood, unobserved by other characters. This challenges an actor to draw the audience's attention to a more complex interpretation of Petruchio's motives and feelings towards Kate.

Kate

For the actor playing Kate, the challenge is no less great but is of a different nature. If we accept that the character has an irrational and volatile temper, can we identify a reason for it? When we first meet Kate in Act I, her father is explaining to Bianca's would-be suitors that until Kate is married Bianca cannot be courted. He then invites either Hortensio or Gremio to court Kate instead. Gremio says, in an aside, that he would rather 'cart' her.

There is a sense of the public humiliation involved for Kate, as she is almost bartered by her father. Baptista then tells Bianca to go into the house and not to let his decision displease her because:

[...] I will love thee ne'er the less my girl.

(I.1.77)

He expresses no such loving sentiments towards his elder daughter. The actor playing the role of Kate must consider the differences in Baptista's treatment of his two daughters and think about whether Kate behaves in an aggressive way to mask her vulnerability. Another interpretation is that Baptista may prefer

Bianca simply because he is exasperated by his elder daughter's continuous caustic and hostile behaviour. The actors and director must consider whether Kate's behaviour is a response to the favouritism of her father, or whether her father's favouritism is a response to Kate's behaviour. The answer to this question could lead to markedly different interpretations in the portrayal of the character.

Understanding Shakespeare's references



Actors in a production of *The Taming of the Shrew* (and indeed any play by Shakespeare) would be well-advised to use a text with authoritative footnotes which provide explanations of the significance or meaning of the language. The RSC always uses authoritative texts.

For instance:

Gremio: To cart her, rather. She's too rough for me. (I.1.55)

In Elizabethan times, a prostitute was punished by being dragged through the streets on a cart.

Kate: I pray you, sir, is it your will
To make a stale of me amongst these mates? (I.1.57–58)

The word 'stale' as used in Shakespeare's time meant bait, laughing stock or prostitute (and it also puns on the chess term 'stalemate').

Tranio: That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward. (I.1.69)

The phrase 'wonderful froward' means 'remarkably obstinate'.

(from *William Shakespeare, Complete Works*,
ed. Bate and Rasmussen, Macmillan/RSC 2007)

In Act 2 scene 1 the tension between the two sisters is expressed violently. Kate has tied Bianca's hands and is trying to get her to confess which of her two suitors (Gremio and Hortensio) she prefers. When Bianca says she has not seen any man she wants, Kate strikes her in frustration. The actors need to consider whether the conflict between the sisters is borne out of Kate's jealousy and resentment of Bianca (fuelled by the insults of men and her father's apparent lack of care) or is the result of Kate's violent and irrational disposition. While it is difficult to excuse Kate's extreme actions in this scene, it may be possible to find reasons for them. The actor must consider her motivations as part of the preparation for the role.

The moment when Petruchio and Kate feel mutual attraction for each other is open to interpretation. Although in their first meeting Petruchio's attempts to woo Kate are spurned by a barrage of insults, there is a sense that the word play

they engage in displays the couple's enjoyment of the situation. Shakespeare uses this device of a couple trading witticisms and insults in another of his comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing* (c. 1598). In this play, the characters Beatrice and Benedick tell themselves that they dislike one other intensely, but eventually realise they have fallen in love. The point at which there is a genuine attraction between Petruchio and Kate is important, since this will inform the actors' choices in later scenes. It will also influence the way Kate makes her final speech. Is it a genuine submission from a lovestruck and fulfilled young woman who has truly been 'tamed' or is it a piece of sarcasm, delivered with bitterness and irony?

Summary

- ◆ While a comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew* has a controversial theme and many judge it to be sexist. A director needs to consider this point when identifying a production concept. However, the comic (almost farcical) nature of the play means that the characters do not have to be taken seriously in their extreme antics.
- ◆ The play affords moments of physical humour which need careful choreographing or staging.
- ◆ The play can be set in any historical or social context — or, indeed, some design choices might give the play a timeless quality. Its non-naturalistic style allows the production to be flexible. However, the choices must be made with care and with due heed to the comic nature of the play.
- ◆ The language of the play may well provide a challenge for the actors. This should be addressed by the director early in rehearsals.



Discussion question

Make thorough notes on the points that arise from your consideration of the following question, either from discussion or your own observations.

If you were playing the part of Kate, what choices would you make vocally and physically in Act 2 scene 1, to demonstrate the character's feelings towards Petruchio?

Essay questions

- 1 There is much physical humour in *The Taming of the Shrew*. As an actor playing Petruchio, how would you meet the physical challenges of the role? Answer with reference to a specific scene in the play.
- 2 As a director, how would you deal with the potential accusation of sexism that might be expressed towards a production of the play by a contemporary audience?

- 3 As an actor playing Kate in Act II scene 1, how would you convey — both physically and vocally — the character's feelings towards Petruchio as the scene develops?
- 4 In Act III scene 1, explain how props and costumes might be used to enhance the comedy as the 'tutors' attempt to woo Bianca.