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.

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.)

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.

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.
Besides his interest in having Kate’s dowry, Petruchio has a plan to bring his new wife under control. He enacts a series of tests to subvert Kate’s every want, need, and expectation. In the ensuing scenes, he succeeds in breaking his wild bride by denying her food, drink, nice clothing, and even sex. As Kate is forced into submission with each new challenge, she calms down and learns a few lessons about how her behavior affects others.

Before you get indignant over the sexist and inhumane overtones of what’s happening here, keep the Elizabethan context in mind (and keep on reading). In our modern era, we’ve lost the ability to pick up on the play’s artful connections between taming
a wild hawk and taming Kate. Elizabethan audiences would have readily picked up on this and laughed aloud at these nuances. Shakespeare also knew his audience would laugh at centuries of folk tales about the shrewish wife. She was a stock character, the longstanding butt of centuries of jokes. (And don’t forget that Shakespeare was writing for a cross section of playgoers who also got their kicks out of seeing bears baited by dogs until they bled profusely.)

But wait a minute, you're saying—this Petruchio guy is a real jerk and his behavior is inexcusable! No woman deserves to be treated that way. But think about old and recent TV comedies beloved by many for their rough sight gags. Shows like *Laurel and Hardy*, *The Simpsons*, and Saturday morning cartoons. These shows are literally brutal, but many of us laugh at them anyway. There’s brutality throughout the tradition of English and American farce that’s hard to deny.

### The Subplot—Rival Suitors Plot to Win Bianca

While Petruchio is busy taming his new wife, Bianca’s suitors embroil themselves in silly tricks and disguises to get close to her and gain her favor. Old Gremio has designs on Bianca, and Hortensio and young Lucentio also vie to win her love. The carefully laid plans of all three men make for an entertaining subplot.

In developing this angle of the story, Shakespearean plays up the zany device of masquerade, which allows for a series of mistaken identities. Here are a few examples.

To secure entrance into Baptista’s house to see Bianca, the suitor Hortensio pretends to be a music teacher. In another twist, Lucentio falsely represents himself to Baptista as a tutor as well, by taking the identity of someone named Cambio. (To extend this masquerade, Lucentio even orders his servant Tranio to assume his own identity!) Other similar impersonations keep this subplot lively and interesting.

### The Wager

Both the taming plot and the subplot dovetail nicely after Lucentio marries Bianca and Hortensio marries a rich widow. At a feast celebrating all three marriages, the husbands agree to an interesting wager after the wives have left the room. Petruchio bets the others that if Kate is summoned to return, she’ll return without giving him any lip. Confident that their new brides are more obedient than Kate, Lucentio and Hortensio eagerly accept the bet.
When summoned by their husbands, the widow and Bianca are surprisingly obstinate, and flout their new husbands’ authority. But when Kate is summoned, she returns unexpectedly and without delay. Here’s an excerpt from her famous, or should I say now-infamous, “submission” speech.

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee
And for thy maintenance; commits his body
To painful labor both by sea and land;
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks, and true obedience—
Too little payment for so great a debt.
Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband;
And when she is forward, peevish, sullen, sour,
And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she but a foul contending rebel,
And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
(I.5.146-160)

I know what you’re thinking. So, Petruchio has won his precious bet, but how could Kate say such a thing? How could any woman subordinate herself to a man in this fashion? Indeed, you haven’t been alone over the past three centuries. This speech, along with Petruchio’s jovial reply—“Come on and kiss me, Kate”—have provoked a raft of hostility, surprise, and critical second-guessing about the significance of Kate’s expression and what Shakespeare meant by it.

“Words, Words, Words”

In Shrew and other early comedies, Shakespeare’s verse took the form of couplets in which the last two syllables rhymed with one another. The play’s final couplet gives us a clue about how differently Elizabethans pronounced words that we still use. During the 1590s, the word shrew most likely was pronounced like shrow.

Hortensio: Now, go thy ways, thou hast tamed a curst shrow.
Lucentio: ’Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tam’d so.
(V.2.188-189)
Making Sense of the Shrew and Bully Farce

Though *Shrew* is an engaging, classic farce, many theatergoers still regard Petruchio’s taming of Kate as highly sexist. Today directors and scholars find the play very difficult to stage and interpret in ways that satisfy audiences and students. Without forgetting that Shakespeare wrote the play to entertain us, let’s look at precisely why this play deserves to be studied and appreciated.

Not Your Stereotypical Shrew

First of all, Shakespeare’s audiences would have recognized Kate’s shrewish temperament from folktale and medieval mystery drama. The wife of the biblical Noah and Chaucer’s wife of Bath from *The Canterbury Tales* were similar overbearing types. But Shakespeare doesn’t simply take these sources and ham up Kate’s stereotypical antics to get a few cheap laughs onstage. He goes beyond his literary predecessors. He artfully introduces Kate to a sophisticated suitor who shows her, subtly and not so subtly, a better way to act.

Shakespeare makes Petruchio out to be more than just a money-hungry suitor. His motives are altruistic—he wants to ensure that Kate has a promising future and a better life. So contrary to what the Petruchio-haters say, his (and Shakespeare’s) strategy is benevolent and psychologically astute.

In turn, Kate passes Petruchio’s tests and learns how to love and accommodate him within the confines of Elizabethan marital conventions. In the next section, one prominent Shakespearean director suggests another way to make sense of the interactions between Kate and Petruchio.

One Director’s Perspective

Today, Shakespearean directors can’t ignore the play’s sexist overtones when they stage *The Taming of the Shrew*. Sidney Berger, the veteran producing director of the Houston Shakespeare Festival, says *Shrew* has become a real problem play for directors.

“Most people think the play is a lighthearted soufflé or a light romantic comedy, which isn’t true at all. I’ve done three productions of this play, and for the last two productions, I’ve been unable to solve the problem. That is, until recently, when Shakespeare himself gave me a way to solve the dilemma.

“One day I counted the syllables of each metric line in Kate’s final submission speech and discovered that every line in that speech has a feminine ending [i.e., a final weak
syllable indicating indecision or insecurity]—which would indirectly suggest to perceptive listeners that the speaker is equivocating in some way. After that discovery I reviewed the ideas of Shakespeare scholar and feminist Germaine Greer after hearing her speak on the UH campus.”

“Here’s a way to read that speech: When the tamed Kate submits to Petruchio in the end, these are two people making a deal with each other. When Kate submits in that final scene, she’s saying, ‘I will give you what you need to save face with your peers. The world is a tough place, so if you protect me, I’ll give you what you need.’ His reply—‘Come and kiss me, Kate’—acknowledges that they are essentially agreeing to an unspoken verbal contract to ensure a healthy marriage.

“Unfortunately, I still haven’t found a way to articulate this to an audience. People don’t just walk into the theatre knowing the information implied in Shakespeare’s verse. Whenever I direct the play, women in the audience start booing after Kate’s submission speech, while the men are cheering. I don’t believe in presenting the play like Zeffirelli’s charming film romance, nor do I agree with having Kate undercut her speech by winking at the audience, like many directors do.

“There’s an integrity to Petruchio. His hard lesson to Kate during their first meeting is simple—‘I don’t get hit. If you hit me, I hit you.’ Shakespeare’s whole point is to show how a wild animal must be tamed so she can contribute to society and be a vital part of human commerce. She’s gifted, Shakespeare is saying, and you want her to keep every gift she’s got.”

Consider the Context of Elizabethan Marriage

Consider the Elizabethan patriarchal context for a moment—audiences would have taken it for granted that a woman’s duty is to submit to her husband. This form of obedience was a given and challenging it was unheard of because it was part of the accepted social order. Also, such a norm conformed to the dictates of the Bible and would have been part of the Elizabethan cultural and social fabric. So try to make sense of the play that Shakespeare gave us within this very specific context, not our own modern context.

Today, practically anyone interested in Shakespeare can appreciate the feminist viewpoint. The idea of any man forcing a woman into submissive obedience today is repugnant. No question. But it is important to remember that our contemporary views of marriage are based on radically different laws and accepted social norms. If you interpret this play solely in a twentieth-century context, you’re making a big mistake.
Shakespeare's Artifice—Illusion and Irony

Shakespeare also enriches the play with multilayered illusion, offering persistent contrasts between appearances and reality. There are numerous, hilarious examples of mistaken identity. Bianca’s suitors disguise their real identities; a servant Tranio impersonates his master; several characters exploit a false connection with Vincentio, Lucentio’s father, to improve their standing with Baptista.

While Petruchio tames Kate in a wholly unconventional fashion, he ends up in a mutually satisfying match. How ironic is that? By contrast, you have multiple suitors who court Bianca according to the highly conventional norms of Paduan society. One of them wins out, of course; in this case, it’s Lucentio.

But in the end, which husband gets the better wife? Petruchio or Lucentio? Even though Lucentio plays by all of the social rules and courts his bride according to social expectations, Bianca flouts him at her first opportunity. She’s not the obedient wife Lucentio bargained for after all. Don’t lose sight of these ironies because they are part and parcel of this play’s wisdom and foresight. These are insights that Shakespeare artfully conveys through the play’s structure.

Let’s briefly carry the appearance/reality theme one step further. If you imagine for a moment that the entire drama is just a dream or a figment of Sly’s imagination, the whole play is an illusion.

The Taming of the Shrew—A Chronology of Notable Screen Productions

Despite the controversy that Shrew provokes among academics, the play remains one of Shakespeare’s most popular on the stage and screen. The following are noteworthy film and TV adaptations beginning with the 1929 silent movie.
Part 3: The Comedies

- 1929: Sam Taylor directed this United Artists/Pickford Corporation production, which starred Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks Sr.

- 1948: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s adaptation, known as Kiss Me, Kate, featured music and lyrics by Cole Porter. The show starred Kathryn Grayson and Howard Keel.


- 1967: Franco Zeffirelli’s version for Royal Films International is the best-known rendering of Shrew. This is largely because superstars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton perform the lead roles.

- 1980: Jonathan Miller’s well-regarded production for BBC/Time-Life Television stars Sarah Badel and John Cleese.

The Least You Need to Know

- On the stage, the play’s use of farce and ingenious punning and wordplay make it highly effective.

- Shakespeare frames the story of Petruchio and Kate within a tale of Christopher Sly to heighten his motif of illusion versus reality.

- Shakespeare inserts tricks of disguise and mistaken identity to enrich the sub-plot about three rival suitors.

- Sidney Berger and other modern directors have a devil of a time staging Shrew because its premise seems downright sexist, and audiences often react with hostility.

- Shrew is not a modern romantic comedy; it’s an Elizabethan farce and can be understood as Petruchio’s attempt to help Kate become a constructive member of society.