

Aspects of comedy: Text overview – *The Taming of the Shrew*

What follows is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of comedy. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of the genre. There are some brief comments on how some elements of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. Not all of the texts on the set texts list contain every element of the genre and that is reflected in this commentary. It is hoped this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

The Taming of the Shrew is a problem play in terms of the comedic genre. It is labelled as a comedy and true to the genre is about ordinary people (unlike tragedy which focuses on kings and nobles). It also has elements, such as disguise, marriage and slap-stick humour which place it clearly within the comedic genre and it can be performed simply to make audiences laugh. However, it also seems to promote the idea that women should be subservient to men and if they are not they should be tamed, by physical force if necessary. This can make the play very difficult for a modern audience (and many feminist critics see the play as an outrageous attack on women). The play was not always palatable with audiences in former times either (John Fletcher, perhaps offering a creative critical response to the play wrote a sequel in 1611, *The Woman's Prize or The Tamer Tamed* in which Petruchio gets his comeuppance in a second marriage; and in the early twentieth century Shaw thought Shakespeare's play was 'disgusting to modern sensibilities'. There is clearly no single way of responding to *The Taming of the Shrew* and different performances make decisions about the ambiguities that the play sets up. But any performance is only an interpretation and at A-level we are dealing with the printed version of the text and so students will need to spend time debating a range of different ideas about it.

Context

One way to potentially open up some ways of reading the play is to consider its context. It was written at a time when the Elizabethan church clearly stated that women should be subservient to men and that a husband was the head of his wife as Christ was the head of the church. It also is part of a well-established

and long standing tradition of literature about shrewish wives. Such 'shrew literature' involved the wife being tamed, often by the most horrifically violent means. In comparison to many of his counterparts Petruchio is actually a model of restraint. None of these points are made to excuse or condone the events of the play but they might help illuminate different ways of thinking about it. It is also important to note that by the time Shakespeare was writing, ideas about societal roles were starting to change. Romantically formed marriages were beginning to challenge the old ideas of arranged unions and different ideas about marriage and the treatment and behaviour of women and men are certainly reflected in the play.

Plots and sub-plots

There are essentially two plots in the play, although there is also potentially a third if one considers the role of Christopher Sly and the frame that his story provides.

The main plot line, though, surrounds Petruchio, who has come to Padua to marry a rich wife. On meeting Kate he is faced with a challenge and a potential prize. She is rebellious, headstrong and non-compliant. He decides that he will have her and her wealth and sets about taming her. By the end of the play he appears to have succeeded in his quest and he has an obedient wife, one who publically declares that a wife's duty is to her lord, her life and her keeper and that if she is disobedient to his 'honest will' she is a 'graceless traitor'.

The sub-plot involves Bianca and her suitors. Most of the disguise and intrigue in the play occur in the sub-plot. Suitors disguise themselves as tutors and scheme to win the hand of Bianca, Kate's apparently docile and more desirable younger sister. In amongst all of this, servants play the part of their masters and strangers take the part of fathers so that at one point it seems everyone is playing a part and no one's identity is certain. In the end all is revealed and Bianca marries Lucentio, who soon discovers in a neat ironic twist, that his wife is not as biddable as he thought.

Induction

At the start of the play Sly, a poor drunken tinker, is tricked into thinking he is a lord who has a wife, the disguised Page (whose disguise is so convincing that Sly wants to bed him). The tricking of Sly is the first example of disguise and deceit in the play. For his entertainment a troupe of players put on a play for him, that play being *The Taming of the Shrew*. In a later play, *A Shrew* (not by Shakespeare), Sly remains on stage throughout and returns to his lowly station at the end but in Shakespeare's play he disappears after the first act, though he does say he is enjoying the play. Critics are divided over whether the rest of the frame is missing or if Shakespeare deliberately crafted the play without it. For some, the frame is a way of making the content of *Shrew* more acceptable, in that it is a play designed to delight the stupid drunken Sly and so its content is essentially a reflection of his character. Some productions reinstate the frame

and make it clear that *The Taming of the Shrew* has only been performed to entertain him, a bawdy low life tinker, which in turn entertains the Lord and his huntsmen who set up the trick. Some productions that reinstate the frame have the same actor playing Sly and Petruchio and so when the character is thrown out onto the streets at the end (sometimes by the same actress playing Kate) it seems to distance us from the action of the actual play and somewhat redress any discomfort felt by the audience. Despite this poetic license in stage performances, students of the play need to respond to *The Taming of the Shrew* as it exists in printed form. However, there should still be much fruitful discussion about the role of the frame. Many comedic aspects appear in the frame that connect to the main story, for example the importance of identity, the concept of practicing and the joy and cruelty of game playing.

Disguise, intrigue and inversions, mistaken identity

These are all common aspects of comedy and they abound in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Characters disguise themselves and in doing so the social order is also inverted. Lucentio adopts the role of the tutor, Cambio. 'Tranio is changed into Lucentio' and so takes the part of his master; Hortensio becomes Litio; a pedant plays the role of Vincentio, so when the real Vincentio arrives he is accused of "flat knavery" in trying to take on another man's name and is driven almost to distraction by the deceit of those around him. Students will be able to find many examples of role reversal and disguise throughout the play.

The use of disguises by characters in the play is interesting, offering freedom to the disguiser but also at times revealing a playful wickedness. Disguise allows servants to become masters and masters to become servants. Sly even becomes a lord. As a theatrical device it is used by Shakespeare in the play's plotting, for example to enable Lucentio to have access to Bianca and to find an acquiescent father to agree to the marriage of Lucentio and Bianca. Shakespeare also uses it for laughter, for example the disguise of the page as a woman and the disguise of the lowly Pedant for the noble Vincentio.

As well as literal disguises there are also characters who, it could be argued, act in a way that disguises their true nature. Bianca, it becomes apparent at the end, is not the sweet and compliant woman that Lucentio takes her for and there is more to Kate than the term 'shrew' implies. At the start of the play, it could be argued, that she is playing a role because she is unhappy at the way she is treated by society, not least her father, or she indeed could be of a violent disposition, hysterical and out of control. Students might also like to discuss whether Petruchio is an aggressive bully or a man who sees the inherent worth of Kate in terms other than financial, and wants her to learn some self-control and respect. Perhaps he is both of these things, though he could be something else entirely.

Farce and slap-stick

Slap-stick is a type of comedy characterised by absurdity, physical cruelty, ridiculous situations, confusions and sexual innuendoes. (A slapstick was a paddle comprising two pieces of wood that 'slapped' together to produce a noisy slap when it struck someone.) Unlike many of Shakespeare's later comedies *The Taming of the Shrew* has many aspects of farce and slapstick, which can be very funny in performance (although they sometimes don't appear obviously so when the play is read). Servants are bashed and slapped; musical instruments are broken on the heads of tutors; Petruchio arrives at his wedding in ridiculous garb and Kate herself doesn't shy away from being very physical with her younger sister or with many of the male characters. The physical taming of Kate could be played as part of the slapstick too. Depending on how it is performed the audience may have different reactions. For students to understand the comedic possibilities they need to be able to visualise how the play might appear.

Illusion, theatricality, comedy drawing attention to its own artifice and game playing

Shakespeare's use of the induction draws attention to the play's artifice. On one level the inner play is simply a play to entertain the drunken and duped tinker. It could also be argued that it reminds the audience not to take events too seriously. This is a key aspect of dramatic comedy; it is constantly reminding us that we are watching a play which has been constructed, a play for an audience. Petruchio also reminds the audience that he is playing a part and the disguises of Lucentio and Hortensio can also be read in this light. There are also many references to sport and games (Petruchio talks of his taming of Kate through using the extended metaphor of falconry). The focus on games and theatricality therefore could explain the last speech of Kate's. It could be a performance for her sister, the Widow and their complacent husbands.

Love and learning; marriage and resolution

'love wrought these miracles'

Love is central to comedic texts and there are two key love interests in the play: Lucentio and Bianca and Petruchio and Kate. Lucentio says he has come to Padua to study philosophy, but he ends up learning love, changing Aristotle and Ethics for Ovid, Metamorphosis and love. He becomes a teacher of Love and shows he understands courtly conventions. His disguise as Cambio allows him access to Bianca to whom he can declare his love. But whether he finally profits by love is debatable. When Bianca disobeys him at the end of the play it suggests that marriage will not be blissful, an idea echoed by Hortensio's marriage to the wealthy widow. Petruchio, in contrast claims that he comes to Padua to 'wive and thrive' as best he may. He takes joy in taming Kate and in claiming her dowry. For much of the play Kate and Petruchio are embattled and although he

seems to enjoy himself, Kate certainly does not. However, it could be argued that their sparring leads to Kate and Petruchio's falling in love.

Marriage and resolution

The play ends with three marriages and it sees all the suitors, with the exception of Gremio, matched with a partner. There is a finely balanced symmetry and coordination of action in the final scene but as in many Shakespearean comedies the resolution isn't entirely easy nor the 'happy ending' entirely happy. Petruchio declares that 'Hortensio fears his widow' and to the horror of both Hortensio and Lucentio neither of their wives will do as they are asked. Kate however is completely obedient and 'is chang'd, as she had never been', a fact which the men set great store by but about which an audience may well feel ambivalent. The ending of *The Taming of the Shrew* can certainly be seen as unsettling. Her final speech may be evidence of her oppression, but it could be that she has learned to play a game with her husband and that theirs is the truly happy marriage.

For those who see the ending as uncomfortable - or even disgusting, much can be said about the dark edge of comedy. Some find it completely unacceptable to modern sensibilities and are disappointed that Shakespeare could write such a play, which endorses the view that wives should be subservient to their husbands. Some readers feel that the play is a product of its time and a slapstick comedy in the tradition of shrew literature and should be read as such. Some readers might feel the message of the final speech is correct and condone it. Some productions have Kate make her final speech about being an obedient wife as a broken character, as if she is only saying it because she has to but not suggesting that she believes it. Others have her deliver her lines with sarcasm and a knowing wink to the audience, suggesting she isn't tamed at all but is playing along as and when it suits her. Kate can appear to be in cahoots with Petruchio to win the bet or very much in love in with him and so happy to make him happy. Some critics have suggested it is another way for her to taunt Bianca, to play act the obedient wife and keep her husband happy while Bianca's is so discontented. Other critics argue strongly that it should be played 'straight'; that Kate believes what she says and has found peace and happiness in accepting her proper role within her marriage. Some productions suggest there is strong sexual attraction between the two characters and that Kate will do what Petruchio wants in order to get what she wants from him in bed. Students may well have other ideas.

When companies put on a production of the play they have to decide on one interpretation, but English Literature students can accept that all of these ways of reading are valid, interesting and can co-exist alongside each other. *The Taming of the Shrew* certainly provides plenty to debate in relation to different ways of reading comedy.