

A LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE

The Taming of the Shrew
By William Shakespeare

Concise text guide

H472/01

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Overview

The play

The play is generally thought to be one of Shakespeare's earliest, probably written between 1590 and 1592, and combines rare use of a rural Warwickshire setting in the Induction, incorporating place names just a few miles from Shakespeare's Stratford, while the inset play proper uses a fashionable Italian setting.

Shakespeare offers three narrative strands. In the first, the Induction, a drunken Warwickshire tinker named Christopher Sly is discovered asleep by a lord who is out hunting. The lord and his entourage undertake an elaborate hoax whereby the comatose Sly is dressed in fine clothes, moved to luxurious surroundings and even presented with a wife in the form of a pageboy dressed up as a woman. Sly is led to believe that he is in fact a lord who has woken from a long dream of being a tinker. His immediate impulse is to bed his 'wife', but he is persuaded instead to sit down to an entertainment from travelling players who perform the story of the play proper, *The Taming of the Shrew*. The main play involves two stories, a main plot and a sub-plot. The main plot is the story of the taming itself, where Petruchio marries and then apparently brings under his control the notoriously shrewish Katherina. The sub-plot involves the romantic life of Katherina's sister, Bianca, whose competing suitors involve themselves in a complicated series of deceptions and disguises; she is eventually married to Lucentio. These two plots are linked by a patriarchal dictum that the younger sister, Bianca, cannot marry before the older sister, Katherina, so both explore aspects of the contemporary marriage market. What Sly makes of what he sees of the main play is one of the text's great challenges, maybe mysteries.

At this time Shakespeare more-or-less created the multiplot romantic comedy on the English stage. His other early comedies (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*) all end with joyful weddings. This one is different. Katherina and Petruchio are married offstage during Act 3, though with elaborate eyewitness accounts to the audience, and the 'taming' (and in some productions therefore the romantic part of their comedy) follows their wedding. Lucentio and Bianca are married, also offstage, early in Act 5, by which time Hortensio (a former suitor to Bianca) has also married a wealthy widow, so the cascade of wedding celebrations familiar from *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not occur. This sets the stage for the unexpected and highly unromantic final scene of the wager. Katherina's reputation for shrewishness becomes a subject for banter at the wedding feast, Hortensio's widow being particularly outspoken, so that Petruchio suggests the men should compete in summoning their wives. The winner will be the husband whose wife is quickest to appear, and he will receive 100 crowns from the other two. The wives of Lucentio and Hortensio respond with smart answers and keep their husbands waiting. Katherina is obedient, making Petruchio victorious and leaving the others astonished and envious at the compliance of this once 'curst' character. The play's final move, and its best-known and longest speech, is a paeon to the patriarchy, Katherina enjoining other women to follow her example and find the true happiness which is only to be enjoyed in obedience to a husband.

Sources

The Induction does not seem to have any specific literary source, but scholars identify a range of stories where a commoner is duped to believe himself a lord, such as a tale from *Arabian Nights* where Harun al-Rashid plays such a trick on a man he finds sleeping. The story of a headstrong wife being tamed is similarly to be found across Europe as part of folk tale or oral tradition. Various elements of Katherina and Petruchio's story appear in different versions of the narrative, such as the pair riding on one horse together and the wife's 'education'; in Shakespeare, she learns to call the moon the sun, whereas in various folk tales she has to accomplish other similar tasks like transposing the names of familiar animals (Shakespeare's version is better adapted to the stage). The last strand of the story, the sub-plot, has a clear literary source in the form of George Gascoigne's *Supposes*, an English prose translation from the Italian of Ariosto's poem *I Suppositi*. This text provides the Italian setting for Shakespeare's play and includes figures corresponding to Baptista, Bianca, Lucentio, Tranio, Gremio and Vincentio. The theme of 'supposing', where characters variously make assumptions and set out to deceive others, can be seen throughout *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The Characters

The Induction

Christopher Sly – a drunken tinker, made to believe he is a lord before settling down to watch the play.

Lord – he leads the plot to fool Christopher Sly, using his servants to help him – including the pageboy Bartholomew who poses as Sly's wife.

The Taming Plot

Baptista Minola – the father of Katherina and Bianca. His role comes out of folk tales, and his pledge that the older daughter must be married first seems to emerge from that world. He seems helpless to manage his daughters. His true enthusiasm in life comes out in the sub-plot, where he can make bargains with Gremio and Tranio (posing as Lucentio) for Bianca's hand in marriage. He has regarded the difficult Katherina as a burden but is excited to make what he can from the more popular Bianca, who is a more valuable commodity.

Katherina – the older daughter of Baptista, known for her shrewish temper.

Petruchio – the 'mad-brained rudesby' (Katherina's description) who settles that he will marry Kate, sight unseen, and proceeds to marry her and tame her, thus winning the wager at the end of the play.

Grumio – servant to Petruchio. This is a clown's role and much of Grumio's dialogue is humorous.

The sub-plot

Bianca – Baptista Minola's younger daughter. Bianca is reputedly an ideal woman, offering beauty and gentleness in comparison with her shrewish sister. During the play, Bianca's character emerges as competitive and self-willed. She has more self-control than Katherina and can play situations to her own advantage.

Gremio – Gremio is an old man seeking a young wife, a figure that has often attracted ridicule in drama. His character corresponds to the 'pantaloon', a stock character of the 16th-century Italian *commedia dell'arte* known for his love of money. In the second half of the play he seems to abandon his amatory desires and become a caustic, but often entertaining, onlooker.

Hortensio – Hortensio is one of Bianca's suitors and forms a serviceable part of this drama, helping to develop and explain the plot to the audience. He lacks strong motivation, however, tending to be very obviously controlled by Petruchio. He soon gives up his suit to Bianca in the face of competition, marries a wealthy widow and develops unrealistic expectations of his powers to control her.

Lucentio – Lucentio is the sub-plot's juvenile lead, and is often the target of Shakespeare's satirical writing, especially in the Petrarchan hyperbole he bestows on Bianca early in the play. He strikes attitudes as a lover and pursues his courtship of Bianca through deception and disguise. He and Bianca are married as a result of lies and stratagems, but according to Lucentio the outcome is an unaccountable blessing: 'Love wrought these miracles'. He is disappointed at the finale when Bianca's disobedience causes him to lose the wager.

Tranio – Lucentio's servant, seeming to delight in the disguise and deception to help his master's marriage.

Biondello – another servant to Lucentio, of lower status than Tranio. Biondello seems to be a particular type of fast-talking clown, a role found in all of Shakespeare's early comedies. He is chiefly known for his set-piece speech in Act 3, Scene 2 describing Petruchio and his broken-down old horse.

Vincenzio – father to Lucentio. His appearance onstage in Act 5 makes the 'supposes' of the sub-plot impossible to sustain.

Merchant of Mantua – tricked into posing as Vincenzio so that he can give assurances to Baptista as to provision for Bianca in the event of Lucentio's early death (at this point, Lucentio is still being impersonated by Tranio).

Widow – First appears in Act 5, married to Hortensio. She refuses to obey his summons, thus losing him the wager.

Context

It's important to remember that the Assessment Objective for context (AO3) is not tested in answers on Shakespeare. This resource includes contextual material because it helps in understanding and discussion of the text, but contextual information should not be reproduced as a standalone part of exam answers.

The text

Compared with other Shakespeare plays set at A Level, *The Taming of the Shrew* offers some textual uncertainty. Most modern editions are taken from the first complete edition of Shakespeare's plays, the First Folio of 1623. This version of the play only includes two scenes involving Christopher Sly, plus a few brief comments from him once the main play has begun. It is quite likely that Shakespeare wrote more material featuring Sly, but that it has dropped out for some unknown reason. There is some more material in existence, including a scene where he reports on the play he has been watching. This comes from a Quarto text called *The Taming of a [rather than 'the'] Shrew* which was entered in the Stationers' Register in 1594. It is not known whether Shakespeare was directly involved in producing this text, but it seems likely that he was not, as there are few verbal parallels with his play. Critics suggest that it may have been used on a touring production, or even 'pirated' by actors from Shakespeare's company. The Quarto contains five additional Sly scenes, in the last of which Sly wakes 'under the alehouse side' and comments that he's had 'the best dreame/That ever I had in my life' and tells the tapster that now he knows 'how to tame a shrew'. This scene closes the frame of the Induction narrative, returning us from the play-within-a-play to the play proper. All modern editions reprint this scene, and many directors choose to include it in performance.

A complete text of *The Taming of a Shrew* can be found [here](#).

Centres may choose their own editions of *The Taming of the Shrew* but should be aware that OCR uses the Alexander text as its source for extracts on the A Level question paper. There is no requirement to study the text of *The Taming of a Shrew*.

The Tamer Tamed

There is a sequel in existence to *The Taming of the Shrew* entitled *The Tamer Tamed* and featuring some of the same characters. The play was written by John Fletcher and first performed in 1611. It is believed Shakespeare, soon to retire, was still in London at this time, and probably mentoring Fletcher, first as a collaborator and then as his successor. Gordon McMullan calls it 'a remarkable, irreverent and hugely entertaining response to *The Taming of the Shrew* which parodies and inverts the earlier play's gender politics.' In the play, Katherina has died and Petruchio marries again to a woman called Maria who knows his history and secretly vows to tame the notorious tamer. In the course of the play, she plays a series of tricks on him and coopts other women in a proto-feminist protest against the patriarchy. By the end of the play, he has been humiliated but learns his lesson and the two are reconciled. The value of the play to us in studying *The Taming of the Shrew* is to realise that the original play was controversial in its own time, and there was already a case to be made for the other side; we should not be too quick to insist on the absolute power of the patriarchy in Shakespeare's day.

Settings

Warwickshire

The play is firmly grounded via the Induction in rural England, specifically in Shakespeare's native Warwickshire. Some commentators suggest that it may even include some glimpses into Shakespeare's early life, a notoriously elusive subject. The Induction includes a reference to 'Wincot' which we can identify as Wilmcote, just three miles north of Stratford and home to the birthplace of Shakespeare's mother Mary Arden, now a Birthplace Trust property. Barton Heath is easily identified with Barton-on-the-Heath, a village ten miles south of Stratford where Shakespeare himself indulged in Sly-like drunkenness, at least in local traditions dating back to the later eighteenth century, one of which finds him so incapacitated in the village of Bidford that he had to be carried home. It is possible that there also other in-jokes in the text: the reference to 'Richard Conqueror' may be a compliment to the lead actor of Shakespeare's company, Richard Burbage. The great Shakespeare biographer Samuel Schoenbaum has pointed out that the play has some striking local allusions: for example, in 1578 Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, had mortgaged a house and fifty-six acres of his wife's land in Wilmcote to pay £40 to her brother-in-law Edward Lambert of Barton-on-the-Heath, giving us an intriguing personal link between these locations named in the Induction.

In any case, the Englishness of the Induction is beyond a doubt, with its vitality and earthiness, its constables, small ale and 'burst glasses'. Rural imagery with an English flavour makes its way into the main play too, where Biondello, despite his Italian name and background, uses a down-to-earth image in a joke about the merchant ('as much as an apple doth an oyster...') and memorably advises Lucentio to make haste in his marriage arrangements with Bianca ('I knew a wench married in an afternoon as she went to the garden for parsley to stuff a rabbit'). Verona, too, where Petruchio takes his bride to start her taming ordeal, feels cold, bare and very English, with servants named Nathaniel, Curtis, Joseph and Philip who greet their fellow servant Grumio when he brings his master and mistress home. Ann Thompson, in her introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play, suggests that the folk tale flavour of the play's central relationship, with its down-to-earth language in frequent use of bird and animal metaphors, offers 'a frank sensuality that is conspicuously lacking in the sub-plot; despite the Paduan setting, Petruchio and Katherina's marriage seems to take place in a world of country courtship practices and sports (hunting, falconry) readily comprehensible to a Warwickshire tinker'.

Italy

The Italian setting of the main play is designed to offer an English audience something exciting and different – even the famous place names (Padua, Verona, Venice) introduce an exotic flavour into the entertainment. In the 1590s (and beyond) Shakespeare seems particularly fixated on using Italian settings in his work. Verona appears three times: in *Two Gentlemen*, this play and, most famously, in *Romeo and Juliet*, probably written soon afterwards. Venice appears as a site of commerce and empire in *The Merchant of Venice* and the first act of *Othello*. It seems unlikely that Shakespeare ever visited Italy, though some still believe he did, during the nine-year silence between his marriage in 1582 and his first documented appearance in London. The evidence of the plays is that he probably absorbed the manners and morals of the Italian States better than their geography. In *Two Gentlemen* the characters notoriously travel from Verona to Milan by sea. There are a couple of geographical errors in *The Taming of the Shrew* which also tend to suggest a degree of ignorance. Shakespeare appears to suggest, mistakenly, in Act 1 that the inland Padua is a port ('If, Biondello, thou wert come ashore...') and then, when the sub-plot is unravelling in Act 5, makes a similar error about the inland city of Bergamo in Vincentio's denunciation of Tranio ('Thy father? O villain! He is a sailmaker in Bergamo').

Shakespeare's chief interest in Italy was its role in the culture of the age, the seat of the High Renaissance, a place to visit exalted art and architecture, and all this under the aegis of a Catholic Church increasingly detested in England, but still venerated in some English families including Shakespeare's own. A foreign setting also has the advantage that the behaviour of the characters can be put down to their foreignness, so that any objections to plausibility or any sense that the story is offensive (say, in its implied criticism of wealthy fathers bargaining with the lives of their daughters), can be ascribed to the customs of another place. Italy was not at this time a unified country, so each city state and its Duke can be presented as an independent culture. Thus in this play Mantua is a city whose inhabitants may not visit Padua. In *Romeo and Juliet* Mantua is locked down by plague, but Verona is not.

Literary analysis and discussion

The Induction

The Induction is remarkable for its local colour (see discussion of the Warwickshire setting above) and for its metatheatrical effects, and there is a strong case for including it in performance to add to the interest of the play. It provides a huge opportunity to show how much this is a play about playing games with theatre. The main plot and the sub-plot, set in Padua and Verona, are effectively plays within Sly's story. In a conventional production (see 'Stratford, Ontario' in screen versions below) Sly can watch the action from the Upper Stage ('enter the drunkard aloft with attendants'); alternatively he might take up a seat in the audience or watch from the apron of the stage. Any of these methods will provide what Brecht would call a simple 'alienation' device, a clear reminder that the inner play is just a play, and possibly soften the toughness of the gender politics being played out.

The Induction also presents some difficulties, however. An audience would expect a resolution for Sly (when does he realise that he is being tricked? Does he learn any lessons from watching the *Taming* play?) but none comes, and instead there is the curious ending of the wager, which is unlike a conventional comic ending. As a result, productions tend either to cut the Induction or to extend it, by using material from *A Shrew* (see discussion of the text above), or by writing extra material of their own. There are various advantages to making a return to the Induction at the end. Its effect is to lighten the tone of the play. It returns us to the frame device, serving as a screen between the audience and the husbands of Padua. It foregrounds the effects of the play, like those in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as 'all a dream', despite their apparent realism. It also shows the drunken Christopher Sly completely failing to understand the lesson of the play concerning wife-training, doing no better than the gentlemen of Padua who have just lost their bets on their wives' obedience in the notoriously offensive wager scene. This double defeat of the chauvinist characters, both in the Induction and in the main play, also eases the audience into a comic finish, mitigating some of the play's sexist overtones. Many modern productions choose to end on a dark tone in order to challenge the apparent values of the play, and a return to the Induction may not help in this endeavour.

The other challenge in reading the Induction is to work out how we can relate it to the main play thematically. One way might be the notion of unkindness and bullying which runs throughout the play. The practical joke played on Sly is arguably cruel, like all practical jokes. The idea of taking a poor man, dressing him in fine clothes and laughing at him is hardly edifying – the joke only works if the lord and his entourage really think they are better than he is. The cruelty of this treatment could be reflected in Kate's cruelty to Bianca (tying her hands) and Hortensio (attacking him with the lute); in Padua's treatment of Katherina (name-calling and ridiculing); and in Petruchio's taming project (mistreating his wife to bring her to heel). Other readings have suggested that the theme of transformation might bring the stories together: Sly is transformed into a lord, Kate into a wife who is 'conformable'. There is also a sense in which both stories set out to present contradictions – confounding our expectations, as the source *Supposes* might suggest. In the Induction, a tinker becomes a lord. In the main play, Katherina and Petruchio both defy the expectations of polite behaviour: she is rude and violent, where a young lady should be biddable and pleasant. He is breathtakingly open about seeking wealth in marriage, where a young man is expected to dress up his approach with talk about love and indulge in conventional wooing behaviour. His behaviour at the wedding is shocking to all. But then, in the final set of contradictions, the unpromising and difficult couple come off best, where those who behave according to convention with their pleasant behaviour (Bianca) and lover-like talk (Lucentio) find their relationship wanting.

Deception and Disguise

Shakespeare's comedies frequently deal in deception and disguise. *The Taming of the Shrew* involves these elements immediately in the Induction, where Sly is deceived to think himself a lord and is given a disguise of fine clothes; his 'wife', the pageboy Bartholomew, is also in disguise as a woman. That a boy actor playing a woman should turn out to be a boy all along is not unprecedented in English Early Modern theatre. There is a similar unmasking in Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*, making clear how games with gender come naturally to the all-male theatre of this time. The purpose of the tricksters is the fun of playing a practical joke; their motive also plays into the dramatic purpose of the Induction which is to provide energy and humour at the start of the play and to get one of the clowns (Sly) onstage at the start. The use of trickery and disguise – essentially, forms of dishonesty – also creates a thematic link with the main play, where the sub-plot (based on a text entitled *Supposes*) is almost entirely composed of such tricks. The main plot, comprising Petruchio, Katherina and the very downright Grumio, is notable for characters who tell it like it is, even at the risk of causing offence. It is the more conventionally romantic sub-plot where characters have an eye on appearances and are prepared if necessary to use deception and disguise to get

them where they want to be. The dressing up and impersonating is done by Lucentio and Hortensio, the fake schoolmasters, Tranio, the resourceful and sometimes overbearing servant who pretends to be his master Lucentio, and the poor Mantuan merchant, who is persuaded to pose as Vincentio. Faking it proves too much trouble for Hortensio, who cuts his losses and marries his widow. Lucentio sustains his dishonest efforts, deceiving both his father and his father-in-law and wriggling out of trouble after his secret wedding. He offers a summary of what has gone on ('Love wrought these miracles') which would fit *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* very well, but here seems at best complacent and at worst dripping with irony. He is well-matched with Bianca, who is skilled at playing the ideal heroine; demure, beautiful, biddable, because this is what the gentlemen like to see. The contrast between herself and her sister emphasises the gulf between them; men are queuing up to marry Bianca but are amused and horrified by the thought of Kate as a wife. In the first scene Bianca advertises her marriageability with a public display of obedience to her father: 'Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe'. At the start of Act 3 when she is in a private setting, a more assertive quality emerges: 'I'll not be tied to hours nor 'pointed times / But learn my lessons as I please myself'. Her flirtatious behaviour with Lucentio ('I know you not... I trust you not... take heed he hear us not... presume not... despair not') is inclined to belie her supposed innocence. She happily joins in the plot to deceive her father and marry Lucentio and is reproached by her new husband at the end of the play for losing him the bet, at which her response is (perhaps quite reasonably) 'The more fool you for laying on my duty'.

Deception and disguise provide the play with a structural fulcrum when Vincentio comes onstage in Act 4 to become part of the game of pretence Petruchio is playing with Kate in order to tame her. At one moment the old man is transformed by love into a blooming virgin, at the next represents a withered image of time itself. But the man that is part of this extraordinary lovers' game is also arriving to unmask all the conspirators in the sub-plot who have pretended to be other than they are, and even, via the Merchant, have presented Vincentio himself in disguise. Where the conclusion of the play uses Vincentio, who is a kind of *deus ex machina*, to put the last touches to the love-game of Petruchio and Katherina, it also has him simultaneously unmask the ugly deceptions of the play's commercial sub-plot.

The Patriarchy

The main play takes place in what is evidently a patriarchal society. Baptista may appear helpless when it comes to managing his daughters on a day-to-day basis, but he is in a position to control their life opportunities and he is happy to use them as bargaining chips where he can. His decision to prevent Bianca's marriage until Kate has found a husband works out well for him; by the end of the play, economic forces have brought about a solution to his dilemma in the form of Petruchio, and both women are married – 'off his hands', as the archaic expression goes. Although his daughters may not always exhibit obedient behaviour, he controls the purse-strings and can deny them a dowry if he wants. Petruchio's declared motive for wooing Katherina is the money ('wealth is the burden of my wooing dance') and Grumio, who seems to be materialistic enough himself, endorses his position colourfully: 'Why, give him gold enough and marry him to a puppet or an aglet-baby or an old trot with ne'er a tooth in her head, though she have as many diseases as two and fifty horses. Why, nothing comes amiss, so money comes withal'.

Once Katherina is matched, Baptista goes into conference with Gremio, the old man, and Tranio, the servant posing as Lucentio. All three are intrigued by the risky bargain which has just been struck with Petruchio and are ready to see Kate in purely mercantile terms, like a product waiting for the market: "'Twas a commodity lay fretting by you./ 'Twill bring you gain, or perish on the seas.' They go on to discuss the business closer to their hearts, the bargain which will be struck for Bianca. Tranio (as Lucentio) starts by professing his love, but Gremio introduces the bottom line: 'thou canst not love so dear as I', with the word 'dear' implying both affection and monetary value. Baptista simplifies the matter by insisting that 'he of both/ That can assure my daughter greatest dower/ Shall have my Bianca's love'. Their competitive presentations are distasteful but humorous too, reduced at times almost to a playground squabble ('Have I choked you with an argosy?' 'My father hath no less/ Than three great argosies...'), made all the more ridiculous by the fact that Tranio is impersonating Lucentio and can invent any riches he pleases to win the argument. Gremio has to concede, 'I have no more,/ And she can have no more than all I have.' There is a chilling note in Baptista's one reservation, that if Lucentio's father should outlive him, Bianca may be left with nothing. This issue will offer comic value later in the play when the merchant is called on to impersonate Lucentio's father and give guarantees as to Bianca's future financial security.

Although Bianca is initially reckoned at a higher price, Katherina is also frequently viewed in terms of monetary value, even when it appears her marriage may be a love-match after all. In the final act of the play, Lucentio suggests a stake of twenty crowns for the wager, and Petruchio objects 'I'll venture so much of my hawk or hound,/ But twenty times so much upon my wife.' In the end, the stake is agreed at 100 crowns – five times a hawk or a hound. Baptista is so confident of Bianca he offers to go in on the bet with Lucentio, who refuses. When Petruchio wins, Baptista is visibly moved, but still sees Kate in terms of monetary value, as her changed character makes her more marketable: '...I will add/ Unto their losses twenty thousand crowns,/ Another dowry to another daughter,/ For she is changed, as she had never been.'

If Petruchio's final victory (not to forget Kate's part in it) is to shame the patriarchal insistence on the 'saleability' of women, for much of the play his coarse behaviour, homely metaphors and refusal to stand on ceremony or even recognise it, form a constant critique of the Paduan merchant class. He goes out of his way, from the opening fisticuffs with Grumio, to defy the expectations of polite society. His rhetoric is taken from the battlefield, the book of scolding wives and from kitchen furniture, rather than the 'coral lips' and 'sacred and sweet' girl's breath that so captivate Lucentio. His outrageous behaviour on his wedding day, including lateness and eccentric dress, seems to be designed to humiliate his bride but might also be seen as a satire of patriarchal expectations surrounding marriage, where goblets are quaffed to the girl's maidenhood. Baptista, who was happy to offload his unwilling daughter on to a man who openly stated he wanted her for her money, and who openly flouted her consent in public, is disquieted for the first time when Petruchio's outfit is not smart enough ('Fie, doff this habit, shame to your estate,/ An eyesore to our solemn festival'). Baptista evidently worries most about how things look. Petruchio's retort seems entirely reasonable: 'To me she's married, not unto my clothes'. When he insists they leave before the feast despite all objections he makes a key speech:

I will be master of what is mine own:
 She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,
 My household stuff, my field, my barn,
 My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything;
 And here she stands, touch her whoever dare;
 I'll bring mine action on the proudest he
 That stops my way in Padua.

Petruchio defeats them in argument by calling on their own values, echoing the Tenth Commandment about coveting your neighbour's wife and invoking the mercantile values of Padua, where everything can be bought and sold. It is hard to miss that for all his zany behaviour Petruchio is preaching a sermon here, not that man and wife may be one flesh, but a whole string of acquired commodities.

The question of consent

For a twenty-first century audience, the question of consent is ever present when we think about sexual relationships, especially as a current understanding of consent does not end with marriage agreements, as it seems to in the play. For this reason, the text of *The Taming of the Shrew* provides some uneasy moments, and past productions often even more.

The Induction introduces the issue of consent humorously when Sly is keen to take his 'wife', the pageboy Bartholomew, to bed; distraction (in the form of the main play) proves to be the solution. In the main play, Katherina's consent is mentioned as a condition by her father to Petruchio, who asks for her hand, and presumably her consent, before he meets her: 'Ay, when the special thing is well obtained,/ That is, her love, for that is all in all.' This is in contrast to the discussions he has later in the same scene with Tranio (as Lucentio) and Gremio about Bianca: 'he of both/ That can assure my daughter greatest dower/ Shall have my Bianca's love.' On Katherina's wedding day, however, it sounds as if the notion of her personal consent has been forgotten, almost as though it was an optional extra for Baptista, not a core part of the contract. Katherina sums up her position as one apparently coerced into matrimony: 'I must, forsooth, be forced/ To give my hand opposed against my heart', she says, when they are waiting for the delayed Petruchio to arrive. Maybe her father has found a way to force the issue, or perhaps she has conceded that even this marriage is better than being forced to dance barefoot at Bianca's wedding. The text of the play leaves us to speculate about the wedding service itself, with only old Gremio's excitable account to go on. Lavish film productions cannot resist showing the wedding, however, and the 1929 and 1967 films have their humorous ways of forcing consent out of Katherina as she stands at the altar (see discussion of screen versions below). In addition to his unacceptable behaviour during the service, many lively and popular productions show Petruchio subduing Katherina physically (picking her up and carrying her around, placing her on his knee, forcibly kissing her) as part of the great joke of coercing her into a relationship against her will. This is not in the text, however; the only physical confrontation between the two which is prescribed in stage directions happens at their first meeting, where 'She strikes him' and then 'He holds her', presumably to prevent more blows, and threatens 'I swear I'll cuff you if you strike again'. His controlling methods are not physical but verbal; at the entrance of the other men, he overcomes her objections with stratagem: "'Tis bargained 'twixt us twain, being alone,/ That she will still be curst in company'. This a clever move and seems to win over the assembled company (after all, everyone has an interest in seeing Katherina married), but a modern audience might be concerned that a woman's 'No' (in fact, Katherina says 'I'll see thee hanged on Sunday first!') can be so easily disregarded.

Is Kate tamed?

Ostensibly, the play's main subject concerns an ill-tempered difficult young woman whose rebellious nature makes herself and others unhappy. In the course of the play, she is frustrated and mistreated by her husband until she learns how to comply, as a result making herself and him much happier. So, is this an account of the successful taming of a shrewish woman? And is that really acceptable, especially in a play regularly revived in the twenty-first century?

The taming narrative is based on folk tales which are all about difficult women being brought into line. A thoughtful reading of the play, and any attempt to stage the play as written, demands some attention to psychological realism, however. Kate's anger and aggression in her early scenes are convincing enough, although often played for laughs with offstage smashes and screams. Her most violent behaviour at this stage is towards her sister, and the opening of the long and complex Act 2 Scene 1, where she has tied Bianca's hands, is interesting because it provides clear motivation for her fury. She questions Bianca about her suitors, demanding to know which one she loves best. It's clear that the shrewish Kate herself has no suitors, and her behaviour here suggests that this is a source of unhappiness (who would choose to be the unpopular sister?). There is something unpleasant about the way other characters speak about her, often as a social problem who inconveniences their wishes, betraying a vein of ridicule and bullying which runs throughout the play. Her own father, when Petruchio asks him whether he has a daughter 'called Katherina,/ Fair and virtuous?' answers him 'I have a daughter, sir, called Katherina' – cue for laughter. Baptista suggests that Petruchio, the only suitor so far to appear, save himself the trouble of getting to know her: 'She is not for your turn, the more my grief'. She is referred to commonly as 'curst Katherine', and Bianca's slavish suitors despair of finding a man for her.

Petruchio, having laid the mercenary groundwork for his courtship with Baptista ('...if I get your daughter's love,/ What dowry shall I have with her to wife?'), shares his plans with the audience in a soliloquy, where he says that he will proceed by contraries, for example by praising her talkativeness if she is silent, or thanking her for her hospitality if she throws him out. When she appears, he ignores her aggression and offers her compliments. This in itself might prove infuriating – but perhaps not so much as everyone else's insults. At least there is a psychological purpose behind it, and he means to get her out of her current unworkable predicament. The pair undertake verbal sparring (extended in the Zeffirelli film into an elaborate physical fight), which is often played to suggest that passions are being kindled between the two. Petruchio notices her and praises her most poetically in these lines: 'Kate like the hazel twig/ Is straight and slender, and as brown in hue/ As hazel-nuts and sweeter than the kernels.' For this romantic comedy to work, the two have to fall in love, and it may happen – or start to happen – during this scene, especially if Katherine picks up on Petruchio's quasi-lyrical subtext.

After the shocks delivered to Katherine, custom and the church on their wedding day, the relationship between the husband and wife develops in Verona where Petruchio begins 'taming' in earnest. Kate suffers deprivation of food, sleep and comfort, but all is apparently done in the name of care and consideration. Much as Petruchio is aggressive and even violent to servants and tradesmen, he is ostensibly attentive to his wife, refusing everything on her behalf because it is apparently not good enough for her. He has a soliloquy at the end of Act 4 Scene 1 where he explains his method to the audience, comparing it to training a falcon. The speech is packed with falconer's terms, suggesting Shakespeare himself knew the craft of hawk-mastery very well. Petruchio wants his wife, like his hawk, to be sharp set, 'passing empty', her belly starved of food. The only way of ensuring she 'stoops' to him (comes back to his fist) is to be sparing with her feeds. She must not be 'full gorged'. She is a wild hawk, a haggard, not yet fully trained, and so she must be 'manned', a notably sexist term suggesting she must become familiar with the male of the species. This 'wild' Kate gets into a 'bate' too easily (flapping her wings violently on glove or perch when she should keep them still). The falconer's other weapon is to 'watch' the bird. Watching here only partly has its modern meaning of observe. The primary meaning here is that neither bird nor falconer sleeps till one or the other gives in. They must 'watch' each other, a mutual sleep deprivation that becomes a battle of wills. A falconer 'loves' his hawk, arguably better than anything in the world, at least while he trains her. But he also subjects her to a 'taming' or 'manning' regime that would constitute systematic torture in the modern world. He finishes his speech with an appeal to the audience:

This is a way to kill a wife with kindness;
And thus I'll curb her mad and headstrong humour.
He that knows better how to tame a shrew,
Now let him speak: 'tis charity to show.

This is an important speech in any production and can be delivered in a variety of ways. A traditional, 'straight' delivery might have a triumphalist and self-satisfied manner – this a man who knows best and is confident of the outcome. In a feminist world, however, it has to be an uncomfortable moment. John Cleese's Petruchio in the BBC TV Shakespeare production seems almost depressed and certainly exhausted in this scene. He is apologetic ('What else can I do?') and also lonely, and in no way confident that the strategy will work. The final couplet of the soliloquy is delivered directly to the audience – a challenge to its male members to come up with something better (or worse).

The final phase of the 'taming' happens during the journey back to Padua for Bianca's wedding, and comically exploits the absurd consequences of absolute obedience to a husband. Kate is required by Petruchio to say that the sun is the moon, that day is night, and that an old man is a young woman. Initially mystified and inclined to contradict him, she works out that the key is to agree, and then both can be happy. Productions will vary when it comes to Kate's motivation; is she exhausted, resentful, and helpless to do otherwise? The text suggests in fact that she enters into the joke with Petruchio, embroidering and extending her address to the old man to add to the fun. The most positive reading is that both of them understand absolute obedience to be a ridiculous game that they can both enjoy. They arrive in Padua to see the sub-plot winding out, and Petruchio asks her for a kiss. At first reluctant to engage in a public display of affection, she complies, calls him 'love' and completes his rhyme, perhaps indicating that the taming is complete.

The Ending

The ending of a Shakespearean comedy is (generally) a celebration of love with an eye to future happiness. Characters come to their senses (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), villainy is resolved and dispatched (*Much Ado About Nothing*), disguises are dispensed with (*Twelfth Night*) and, above all, love triumphs. Some of this happens in Act 5, Scene 1 of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Vincentio appears, initially creating more confusion but ultimately helping to resolve the sub-plot. Tranio and Lucentio confess to their true identities. The two main couples appear happy, possibly blissful in their roles as newlyweds: Katherina consents to kiss her husband in the street; Lucentio claims that 'Love wrought these miracles' introducing the familiar Shakespearean comic theme of love's transformative power, best exemplified in Helena's lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'Things base and vile, holding no quantity, / Love can transpose to form and dignity.' With the appearance of Vincentio as *deus ex machina*, the consequent return of patriarchal authority and the clearing up of the chaotic 'Supposes', the play might end, but it does not. There is still Act 5, Scene 2 to come, involving the wager and Katherina's famous speech of subjection, this last with no parallel in any other Shakespearean comedy.

This scene immediately gives a more tarnished, less satisfying view of the three marriages which are being celebrated (Hortensio and the widow are now added to the mix). The widow offers a deliberate insult to Katherina, reminiscent of Padua's general unkindness to her in Act 1. Bianca chimes in with an unladylike burst of bawdy repartee, involving gags about cuckoldry, phallic arrows and even bushes. It is in this context, with the widow proving to be a shrew and the Petrarchan heroine a teller of blue jokes, that the wager follows. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the men start to bet on their wives as if they were horses or dogs; in any case, it does little credit to anyone. After Petruchio's surprising win, he goes even further, telling Katherina to throw her cap under foot. This might be read as a delicious joke the two are sharing or could appear as a distasteful exhibition where the husband treats the wife like a performing monkey. It certainly proves that the play's lead couple, whose progress to the altar has been the stormiest, have an understanding in public of what each needs the other to do. Katherina's long speech has always been recognised as a real challenge to both an actress and a production. As Ann Thompson points out in her New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, it is 'full of Elizabethan commonplaces' and in that sense nothing remarkable, but there is dramatic interest in allowing a woman to take centre stage and deliver the longest speech in the play when the subject is the submissiveness of wives. There have been many different approaches to this speech in the theatre (see 'The play in performance' below), but however it is done, the last lines of the play feel anti-climactic; Hortensio and Lucentio join in a couplet where they agree they are surprised as Katherina and Petruchio leave the stage. As Ann Thompson suggests, the sense of anticlimax as the baffled revellers leave the stage in silence means that 'it is attractive to assume that there was once another Sly scene after this.'

The play in performance

This has always been a very popular play, among the most frequently revived in the canon. Discussion of performances falls into two strands: one is the broad, sometimes raucous appeal of the play with its potential as a 'Battle of the Sexes' romp, and the other is the challenge of an apparently sexist drama which is hard to stage acceptably in a post-feminist age. These strands correspond to some extent with screen productions (often more popular in flavour and sometimes capitalising on gimmicks such as the casting of real-life married couples) and major stage productions (sometimes in receipt of public funding and attended in large part by liberal-leaning audiences). Many screen versions are heavily cut (the Induction is rarely included) and also quite substantially adapted for a mass audience. This discussion will give a brief overview of the issues for stage productions and a more detailed consideration of screen versions, most of which are still available to view.

Stage

Modern stagings of the play have first to decide what to do with the Induction. It can be cut, or played as it appears in the Folio, where Sly disappears after the Induction, or played in an extended way by using material from *A Shrew* and/or material which has been expressly written for the production. John Barton in 1960 built up the Sly material and explored metatheatrical possibilities by using a revolving stage and giving the impression that the audience could look in on preparations for the play-within-a-play (costume changes, line-learning etc). This production influenced Trevor Nunn's 1967 production with the RSC, which also featured additional Sly material, and Clifford Williams' version in 1973, also for the RSC, which developed a more elaborate story for the frame narrative and emphasised the contrast between the dark, rain-swept English countryside, where a group of travelling players find Sly, and the bright prosperous Italian setting of the play they perform for him.

The other big decision a director needs to make relates to Katherina's final speech: is it given straight or with irony? Are the couple now in complete understanding? And are we to understand that this provides a kind of happy ending, appropriate to a rom-com after all? The 1978 RSC production starring Jonathan Pryce and Paola Dionisotti offered a bleak ending, where she gave the final speech lifelessly and he collected his winnings but appeared ashamed of what he had done in making the wager. Gregory Doran in 2003 rescued a happy ending from the wager by having Petruchio empty out his bag of winnings and leave the stage with Katherina, abandoning the gold; this suggested that both husband and wife had learned a lesson. Jonathan Miller directed a number of productions, including the BBC TV Shakespeare version (see below), all of which posited an English Puritan view of marriage where the wife's obedience was customary and necessary, and implied that Petruchio is helping his wife adjust to this world and to live in it happily. Two American productions gave different takes: William Ball in 1976 showed an ironic Katherina winking at the audience ('We all know I don't really mean this, right?'), rather like the 1929 film (see below); Wilfred Leach in 1978, in a production starring Meryl Streep and Raul Julia, showed Katherina giving the speech straight but walking out of the hall alone, leaving her husband behind her. More recent productions have wrestled with the same issues, trying out all-male and all-female casts and a range of solutions to the Induction material (a problem or an opportunity?) and that final scene.

Screen

Sam Taylor (1929)

This movie starred Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, a Hollywood married couple popularly known respectively as 'Everybody's Hero' and 'America's Sweetheart'. *Taming* was their first 'talkie' and capitalised on their marriage to attract cinemagoers; however, the film was poorly received. Shakespeare's text and many of characters are heavily cut. Bianca is merely sketched in as a demure and biddable sister, and the *Supposes* plot is entirely dispensed with, along with the Induction. The film operates as a 'Battle of the Sexes' story, where Petruchio carries a bullwhip and Katherina smashes the furniture. Her consent in the wedding scene, which is dramatised, consists of her crying out when he stamps on her foot. His soliloquy in Act 4, where he reveals his taming plan to the audience, is given to his dog and overheard by Kate, who decides to tame him right back. There is no wager and her concluding speech is given tongue in cheek, with a stagey wink to Bianca in a message which says, 'these men need to think they're in charge, but we women will get our own way, never fear'.

Kiss Me Kate (1953)

This is a musical version of the play where the central couple, Fred and Lilli, are recently divorced and find themselves having to play Katherina and Petruchio on stage. The dramatic context allows for lively (and non-consensual) confrontations, including one where Lilli is soundly spanked on stage by her ex-husband. The couple are reconciled at the end of the film. The post-divorce romance was a popular genre in the 1950s, including such examples as *Grounds for Marriage* (1951), *Let's Do It Again* (1953) and *That Certain Feeling* (1956). In this film it is implied that Lilli was the discontented one of the pair, and it is she – like Katherina – who needs to learn to be satisfied with a life of domesticity and the love she is offered.

Franco Zeffirelli (1967)

This version is another which uses a real-life married couple, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Again the Induction is cut, as is much of the sub-plot, in favour of lengthy scenes involving the celebrated stars. The production offers a crowded and lavish set of an Italian city state in the Renaissance, packed with extras, churches, food and animals, and with a soaring symphonic soundtrack by Nino Rota. Michael York and Natasha Pyne make a beautiful Lucentio and Bianca, giving a 'Romeo and Juliet' (Zeffirelli's next filmed Shakespeare) frisson to their relationship, but their roles are much reduced. Burton's Petruchio tends towards drunkenness and roistering, where Taylor's Katherina is brooding and (given the role) self-determined. In the wedding scene, once again dramatised, she tries to respond to the 'Wilt thou...' question with an energetic 'I will not!'; but he stops her mouth with a (non-consensual) kiss before the 'not' can be uttered. In a post #MeToo age, this kind of scene is hard to watch as comedy. Katherina's final speech is powerfully delivered by Taylor which gives the scene a paradoxical energy, since she is apparently arguing for her own submission but is in complete control of the dramatic space; Burton's Petruchio watches on overcome, as if he never expected this. When she kneels and offers her hand to be placed 'under her husband's foot', he takes her hand instead and lifts her up.

BBC TV Shakespeare (1980)

This is part of the BBC's great project to film all Shakespeare's plays. It is directed by Jonathan Miller and stars Sarah Badel and John Cleese. The casting of Cleese as Petruchio, fresh from his triumphs in *Fawlty Towers* (1975-79) seems quite inspired, since so much of Petruchio's behaviour is contradictory and even absurd. His eccentricity and unexpected courtesy function to mystify Sarah Badel's Katherina, and he leads her successfully to what looks at the end like marital harmony, amidst the consternation of the losers of the wager. Miller left out the Induction because he felt it could not work on screen and concluded the play (which does end rather abruptly) with the cast joining in the singing of Psalm 128 ("Blessed is everyone that feareth the Lord"), which praises peaceful family life.

Stratford, Ontario (1982)

This is a theatrical production by Peter Dews from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario, directed for television by Norman Campbell and starring Sharry Flett and Len Cariou. This version is helpful for its fullness, since it offers the Induction, including material taken from *The Taming of a Shrew*, and gives a full account of the sub-plot as well as the main plot. It is done in traditional dress and performed very straight, with both principals offering loud and assertive performances. Petruchio seems quite self-satisfied and Katherina ultimately brow-beaten, perhaps because of a lack of chemistry between the two.

10 Things I Hate About You (1999)

This is a loose adaptation of the play in the form of a high school rom-com starring Heath Ledger and Julia Stiles, whose characters are called Patrick and Kat. Kat and her sister Bianca have an over-protective father who will not let Bianca date until Kat does. Kat, of course, is a spiky, difficult girl – something of a feminist – who has no wish to date. The film may help students thinking about the characters' inner lives and motivations, especially in relation to Kat, who has been mistreated in the past and is self-protective. She has a line in the film which might be interesting to apply to the original text: 'I don't like to do what people expect. Then they expect it all the time and they get disappointed when you change.' High school culture (just like Padua?) seems burdened with expectations, especially for the women, and maybe shrewish behaviour is a reasonable psychological defence.

Criticism

Criticism is useful in helping to fulfil the AO5 demand in the second part of the Shakespeare question; however, it should be remembered that published critics are not the only source of a range of views, and quotations from critics are not a quick route to success (see 'Approaching the Exam' below for more advice relating to AO5 in the exam). The following suggestions are designed to give a range of opinion, and more material on the play is widely available.

Ann Thompson's edition for the New Cambridge Shakespeare

There are many good editions of the play available; this one comes highly recommended for the A Level teacher. In her introduction, Thompson covers a range of contexts (the date, the theatrical context, the context of Shakespeare's other works, the sources) and looks at the play in performance and at critical approaches. Her footnotes throughout the text are admirable, identifying points of interest and offering thoughtful explanation. She writes accessibly and is open to a wide range of opinion, providing ample opportunity for debate; her view that the play has been relatively neglected in terms of academic criticism is especially thought-provoking given its life in the theatre. The degree of detail in the edition is more than sufficient for study at this level.

Cecil C Seronsy in "'Supposes' as the Unifying Theme in *The Taming of the Shrew*."

The Taming of the Shrew is widely acknowledged to demonstrate skill in construction, offering a three-stranded narrative where each element contributes to the whole. It can be difficult for students to understand how the three different elements (Induction, main plot, sub-plot) work together and inform each other, however. This essay takes the source for the sub-plot, George Gascoigne's *Supposes*, and explains how the idea of 'supposing' might hold the key to binding together these disparate materials. He introduces his argument with a discussion of the meaning of the word 'suppose', drawing a parallel with its meanings of guessing and imagining with Petruchio's tactical behaviour.

Coppelia Kahn in "*The Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage*."

This essay offers a feminist reading of the text, suggesting that Petruchio is a representative – Kahn uses the term 'puppet' – of patriarchal attitudes to women. This approach is highly discussible and might open up a debate in class as to how far Petruchio himself understands that he is playing a role, and how his motives might be understood. Kahn starts by pointing out that many critics see Kate's shrewishness as giving her a 'psychological and moral validity' whilst claiming that Petruchio is simultaneously seen as her 'saviour'. Kahn then argues that this approach misses the 'greatest irony' of the play: that what is being satirised is not womanhood or the shrew, but male attitudes toward women.

Germaine Greer in *Shakespeare*

Germaine Greer is a noted feminist voice and might be expected to condemn Petruchio, but interestingly the reverse is true. Elsewhere she has said that 'Kate has the uncommon good fortune to find [a husband] who is man enough to know what he wants and how to get it.'; in her book on Shakespeare for the Past Masters series she makes the following thought-provoking comment: '*The Taming of the Shrew* is not a knockabout farce of wife-battering, but the cunning adaptation of a folk-motif to show the forging of a partnership between equals.'

Emma Smith in her podcast *The Taming of the Shrew*

This lecture is an excellent resource, offering an overview of the play and explaining the insights which we can garner from contextual material like the Quarto play *The Taming of a Shrew* and Fletcher's 'sequel', *The Tamer Tamed*. In her discussion, she models a very effective approach to AO5 by repeatedly using the expression 'depending on how you look at it'. She keeps front of mind that interpretation can be fluid and the impact of a drama text in particular will depend significantly on the interpretation presented in performance. She includes a range of critical voices including that of George Bernard Shaw, notable supporter of the Suffragette movement, who commented on the play late in the nineteenth century: 'No man with any feeling of decency can sit it out in the company of a woman without being extremely ashamed of the lord-of-creation moral implied in the wager and the speech put into the woman's own mouth.'

Laurie Maguire in her essay “Cultural Control in *The Taming of the Shrew*”

This essay is more detailed and is valuable in directing attention to the language of the text, which is the most important area of study for the A Level students. Maguire says that ‘taming can take many forms, and I want to argue that *The Taming of the Shrew* is imbued with three forms of cultural control: the hunt, music and marriage. These variations on a theme are linked subtly but crucially by the central image of music.’

Caroline Spurgeon in her book *Shakespeare’s Imagery*

This text takes each of Shakespeare’s plays and examines their use of imagery and is therefore a valuable resource for the consideration of AO2. The entry on *The Taming of the Shrew* is brief but telling in its appreciation of Petruchio’s language: ‘Petruchio...uses close on one half of all the images in the play (40 out of 92), for he is a young man of keen perceptions, and observation of nature, and, when he chooses, he speaks with a poet’s tongue.’

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Teaching for the assessment

Questions on Shakespeare appear in Section 1 of paper H472/01. Candidates answer one two-part question on their chosen play.

Question (a); the extract from the play

The first part involves analysis of an extract from the play (the exam is closed-book and the extract is printed on the question paper and is taken from the Alexander text). It will be roughly sixty lines in length depending on the balance of verse and prose in the extract. This question is always phrased in the same way, as follows:

Discuss the following passage from Act X Scene X, exploring Shakespeare's use of language and dramatic effects.

The Assessment Objectives for this part of the exam are AO1 and AO2; nominally, the weighting is 25% for AO1 and 75% for AO2. As with all parts of the exam these percentages are for guidance and the marking is holistic, but teachers and students should note the very heavy weighting of AO2. The candidates achieving the highest marks will be those who give a full and detailed reading of the text, analysing its AO2 effects.

Imagery

It follows that study of the Shakespeare play should focus in detail on close reading. Students should be thoroughly prepared in terms of studying the play's imagery: the play constantly references domestic and rural life, so extracts may feature images from nature, home and hunting (chestnuts crackling in a farmer's fire, apples and oysters, the backyard wisdom of a wench married in an afternoon as she went into the garden for parsley to stuff a rabbit'). There is also a focus on the world of business, inspired by the prosperous Italian setting and the status of a number of characters as merchants. This is most clear in scenes like the competition for Bianca's hand between Tranio (as Lucentio) and Gremio, students will find mercantile vocabulary ('fruitful land', 'two thousand ducats', 'three great argosies'), which is echoed elsewhere in the play, often in establishing the value of women as a kind of commodity.

Verse or Prose?

The play is notable for frequent changes between verse and prose. Broadly speaking, verse is used for elevated positions and prose for lower. This idea of 'high' and 'low' is demonstrated from the start of the play in relation to social class. The drunken tinker Sly is an obvious candidate for prose given his low status (see also the dialogue of Petruchio's servants in Act 4, Scene 1) and his low behaviour; the play opens with Sly and the hostess speaking prose. It moves instantly into verse when the lord and his entourage appear, and when the lord's servingmen start to converse with Sly in the second scene of the Induction they stick to verse while he remains in prose. Once he starts to believe their words, however, that he is in fact a lord, he stumbles into verse himself: 'Am I a lord, and have I such a lady? /Or do I dream, or have I dreamed till now?' From here, Sly slips in and out of verse, reflecting his sense of confusion. Once the play proper starts, Lucentio and Tranio are found speaking in verse, reflecting their higher status along with the peppering of Italian phrases ('*Mi perdonato*') which show the audience we are in a more exotic European location.

'Low' and 'high' style are not restricted to social class, however. In Act 1, scene 1, elevated feelings and high drama, such as Lucentio's immediate attraction to Bianca and Kate's furious public display of anger, are given expression in verse. After Kate's whirlwind exit, however, there is an opportunity to advance the plot through some explanation from Gremio and Hortensio. The two men decide to leave aside their rivalry for Bianca for the present, and to join in an effort to get Katherina a husband ('...by helping Baptista's eldest daughter to a husband we set his youngest free for a husband – and then have to't afresh'). This brief episode is expressed in prose, reflecting the lower emotional temperature and possibly the low motives of these two schemers. After they leave to execute their plot, Lucentio, the juvenile lead, is left to emote about his love at first sight, so inevitably the scene returns to verse; his high-flown speech here ('Tranio, I burn! I pine, I perish, Tranio') shows Shakespeare satirising the conventions of love poetry, something he quite frequently does.

Throughout the play, there are more such switches of style reflecting the social status of the characters, the subject matter under discussion or the mood of the scene. The question 'Verse or prose?' is a useful starting point for the analysis of any extract from the play.

Question (b); the mini essay

The second part of the question offers a statement about the play, which is related to the material in the extract, and requires the candidate to discuss the idea in relation to the play as a whole. The wording is generally as follows:

'Statement about the play.'

Using your knowledge of the play as a whole, show how far you agree with this view of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Remember to support your answer with reference to different interpretations.

The Assessment Objectives for this part of the exam are AO1 and AO5, and they are equally weighted. AO1 requires lucid argument, clearly expressed. For AO5, candidates need to think about different interpretations. These can be drawn from critics (there are some starting points provided in Criticism, above) but should emerge from the candidate's argument, so critics' quotations should not be forced in where they do not belong. The best AO5 is often to be found in the different interpretations provided in performances of the play, especially in a play like *The Taming of the Shrew* where interpretations can differ substantially. It is worth noting, especially since this resource includes a range of contextual material, that there are no marks given for AO3.

Teaching this play ought to involve watching a range of performances and debating in class what lies behind different speeches. The big moments of the play, such as Petruchio's 'taming' soliloquy and Katherina's final long speech, will come over very differently according to the decisions made in production, and these 'different interpretations' are likely to be very valuable in exam responses.

Candidates should also think about the instruction to consider 'the play as a whole' and should be ready to provide examples of any given theme from across the texts. As with the (a) part of the question, detailed knowledge of the text is the key to an excellent answer.

Need to get in touch?

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