THE TAMING OF THE SHREW
CHARACTERS

Meet the Cast

KATHERINE MINOLA

Character Analysis

Kate is the title character (the "Shrew") of the play. The eldest and unmarried daughter of Baptista Minola, no man wants anything to do with her because she's got a hot temper, slaps people around when they make her mad, and shreds men to bits with her razor sharp tongue. Her knack for verbal repartee and ability to call it like she sees it reveals her incredible wit and intelligence, which we can't help but appreciate.

Who Are You Callin' a Shrew?

What? You want more specifics? OK. Kate yells at her father in public, ties up and beats on her little sister Bianca, throws tantrums and claims her dad doesn't love her, breaks a musical instrument over the head of Hortensio, and insults everyone she meets.

Her behavior is obnoxious, to be sure, but we need to think about why Kate acts the way she does. Her dad seems to think she's just innately nasty. When she weeps and rails because she thinks Petruchio has stood her up at the altar, Baptista says something to the effect that he can't blame Kate for being angry – she's an impatient shrew, after all (3.2). It never occurs to Baptista that Kate might be upset because she's being publicly humiliated and feels hurt.

In fact, the play invites us to see Kate from the point of view of men who see only a monstrous stereotype. Our first look at Kate is through the eyes of Lucentio and Vincentio, who says, "That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward" (1.1.70). At the beginning of the play especially, we often hear more about Kate than we hear from her (though we certainly do hear from Kate). Her reputation as "curst," "shrewd and froward," "a devil," and a "mad" wench circulates among Bianca's suitors, who are happy to pass along the information to Petruchio before he even meets Kate. This colors his impression (and to some extent ours) of Kate before Petruchio ever lays eyes on her.
Mean Girl? Or Misunderstood?

So, why does our girl act like such a shrew? Is it because she's just inherently obnoxious like her dad says? We know Baptista doesn't know the first thing about his girls – he thinks Bianca is an angel for Pete's sake – so let's not take his word for it. How about this: Kate is a really smart woman with a mind of her own. She doesn't fit neatly into the social role prescribed for upper-middle class women in the 16th century (silent, obedient, baby-making, husband-pleasing machines), which makes her a social outcast and drives her violent and surly behavior.

Our evidence? Well, to start, the first time Kate speaks (or shouts) in the play is when she objects to her father's behavior when he breaks the news that Bianca can't get married. Get a load of this:

If either of you both love Katharine,
Because I know you well and love you well,
Leave shall you have to court her at your pleasure. (1.1.52-54)

Translation: "Hey, guys, my youngest girl isn't on the market right now. But, I like both of you guys a whole lot so, if either one of you thinks my oldest girl is hot, feel free to have a go at her. I'm sure we can work out a deal." Who can blame Katherine for not wanting to be treated like a piece of meat, a mere commodity to be traded?

Does this mean Kate is opposed to marriage altogether? Not necessarily. It's true she claims she's not interested in getting hitched when she threatens to bloody Hortensio's face with a chair (1.1). But this may be a defense mechanism to protect herself from Hortensio's claim that she will never land a guy because everybody hates her. It's also her way of saying she's not interested in marrying a clown like Hortensio. Later, though, it seems plausible that Kate is interested in love when we consider why she ties up and slaps Bianca.

Of all thy suitors here I charge thee tell
Whom thou lov'st best. See thou dissemble not. (2.1.8-9)

Here, Kate just wants to gossip with her little sister about Bianca's boyfriends. It also seems that she wants to live vicariously through Bianca and is far more interested in marriage than she lets on. When the passive aggressive Bianca implies Kate is an old maid and condescendingly offers to let her have any one of her suitors, Kate responds in the only way she knows how – with physical violence.

Shut Your Mouth

We know that Kate's bad behavior involves lots of slapping, foot stomping, and hog-tying annoying siblings. But, the play suggests the biggest problem is Kate's mouth. She just won't keep it shut and, when she speaks, nothing nice comes out of it. This is a big no-no for any girl living in 16th century. This is why the largest part of Petruchio's task to "tame" Kate is to control what does and does not come out of Kate's mouth – her speech.

After Kate marries Petruchio, her only means of expressing her anger and frustration over her limited social role is through language. (Once married, women basically lost all legal rights and had no identity
of their own. This is why Petruchio refers to Kate as his "goods" and his "chattels" after their marriage ceremony.) Observe:

*Why, sir, I trust I may have leave to speak,*  
*And speak I will. I am no child, no babe.*  
*Your betters have endured me say my mind,*  
*And if you cannot, best you stop your ears.*  
*My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,*  
*Or else my heart concealing it will break,*  
*And rather than it shall, I will be free*  
*Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words.*  
(4.3.78-85)

When Petruchio refuses to let Kate choose her own clothing and tells her to pipe down about it, Kate objects to his attempts to shut her down. Here, Kate suggests the act of speech can alleviate one's pain and suffering. She also says that her heart "will break" if she is silenced and unable to express her frustration about her lack of power and control over even her own wardrobe. Rather than endure such suffering (here, she implies that it causes a kind of *physical* pain that will literally destroy her on the inside), Kate refuses to keep her mouth shut.

So, what the heck happens between this moment and Kate's final and most puzzling speech at the wedding banquet (5.2)? Well, we know that Kate finally breaks, or gives in to Petruchio's haranguing on the road to Padua (4.5). It seems pretty clear that Kate decides then and there to *play along* with Petruchio's antics. Critics often point out that this is the moment Katherine becomes an *actor* – a woman capable of role playing (she pretends the sun is really the "moon" and then pretends that an old man is really a "budding virgin" to make Petruchio happy).

This lends itself to the idea that Kate's last speech, where she calls Petruchio her king, is also just an *act* that ensures some kind of domestic tranquility. This is a far more appealing option than the idea that Kate is merely a broken-down, brain-washed woman at the play's end. Still, it's important to remember that Kate is never given any other choice. Like Bartholomew in the Induction, Katherine is ordered by her "master" to act the part of "good wife."

**PETRUCHIO**

**Character Analysis**

Petruchio is a wealthy bachelor who is on the prowl for a rich wife. When he hears about Katherine Minola, he agrees to marry her despite (or, perhaps because of) her reputation as a shrew. You see, Petruchio sees himself as the ultimate shrew taming champion – he even tutors other men on how to get their wives in line. (Elizabethans were really worked up about all the shrewish wives running around making their husbands look like wimps. They came up with sermons about how women should be silent and obedient, and tons of little gadgets to keep overly talkative women quiet – ever heard of a scold's bridle?)
The Man Loves Money

Petruchio's not a hard one to figure out – in fact, he's pretty honest throughout the play. He's the only guy who unabashedly admits that he loves money more than anything else.

Signior Hortensio, 'twixt such friends as we
Few words suffice. And therefore, if thou know
One rich enough to be Petruchio's wife
(As wealth is burden of my wooing dance),
Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,
As old as Sibyl and as curst and shrewd
As Socrates' Xanthippe, or a worse,
She moves me not, or not removes at least
Affection's edge in me, were she as rough
As are the swelling Adriatic seas.
I come to wive it wealthily in Padua;
If wealthily, then happily in Padua. (1.2.66-77)

This is a long speech but stay with us – it pretty much sums up Petruchio as a character. Here, he says he doesn't care if a woman is ugly, old, or shrewish – as long as she's got a big bank account, he'll marry her because money makes him happy. (His references to Florentine, Sibyl, and Xanthippe also tell us he's well read and educated, just like the other upper-middle class characters in the play.)

This is also a great example of how Petruchio loves to use figures of speech. Even if Kate's as "rough" as the "seas," he's unfazed. This makes him an adventurer, a guy who's "man enough" to face a violent force of nature. (Elsewhere, he compares himself to a strong gust of wind that will blow out Kate's "fire.") What does Petruchio's little simile say about him? Well, he's full of bravado and he really likes to use language to convey his dominance and masculinity.

Petruchio and Saucy Women

Being a big fan of language, it's no surprise that Kate's acid tongue and wit are appealing to Petruchio (he gets all hot and bothered when Kate cracks Hortensio over the head with a lute and there's a ton of sexual tension when they first meet and argue in Act 2, Scene 1). Still, Petruchio sees himself as a "manly man." As such, he always wants to appear in the dominant role, especially in public. Even after Petruchio has "tamed" Kate, he still enjoys her ability to slice and dice her opponents with her witty speech. Our evidence? We're glad you asked. When Kate argues with the Widow at the wedding banquet in Act 5, Scene 2, Petruchio says, "To her, Kate!" He likes Kate's temper and her acid tongue, just not when it's directed at him.

Taming School

So, what about this whole "taming" thing? How does it work, exactly? First, Petruchio acts like a "shrew" on his wedding day and throughout the honeymoon so that Kate can see what her bad behavior looks like in another person. This involves a lot of yelling, swearing, the abuse of hapless servants, and erratic and cruel behavior toward Kate. Basically, Petruchio deploys some tried and true torture techniques – starvation, sleep deprivation, psychological manipulation, and good old fashioned humiliation – to get
Kate to behave the way he wants.

One of the manipulative techniques Petruchio likes to use is a little game called "let's pretend everything I say is true, even when it's not." How does this work? Well, if the sun is shining in the middle of the afternoon and Petruchio says the moon is very pretty this evening, everybody has to agree that yes, the moon is very pretty indeed. Same goes for when Petruchio pretends an old man is really a "budding" virgin. What happens when Kate doesn't play along? Well, she's punished. Notice how getting his way involves controlling the names of things?

OK, so what do we make of this? Aside from the fact that Petruchio is a jerk, we should think about how his character speaks to the idea that social roles are performative – that is, the idea that getting along in the world requires one to do a lot of acting. Many critics point out that Petruchio teaches Kate how to play-act, to perform a role other than "shrew." This would make his "taming school" more of a nightmare theater boot camp than anything else. Are we letting Petruchio off the hook? Absolutely not. He's utterly abusive toward his wife and revels in his power over Kate.

At the same time that the play portrays domestic violence on stage, Big Willy Shakespeare leaves open the possibility that anyone who tries to follow Petruchio's advice and behavior is a total idiot. Hortensio, who spends a lot of his valuable time at Petruchio's so-called "taming school," winds up having absolutely no control over his wife, the Widow. In fact, she ends up humiliating him when she disses him in public and causes him to lose a bet. Also, while it appears that Kate has been tamed, her final speech is so over the top that we wonder if Petruchio has trained an obedient wife or just a woman who has learned how to pretend to be obedient. If the latter is true, is this what Petruchio intended?

Either way, we appreciate the way the characters' obsession with acting and performing allows the play to acknowledge that social stereotypes (shrews, good girls, manly men, etc.) are not innate characteristics and are perhaps best left on the stage.

CHRISTOPHER SLY

Character Analysis

Christopher Sly is a drunk and a beggar with a string of menial jobs and an appetite for cheap beer. He talks a lot of trash, likes bar brawls, and has no respect for women. He's also easily duped when the Lord tricks him into believing that he is not Sly "the beggar" but rather, a "mighty Lord" who has been in a deep sleep for the past fifteen years. He's attracted to a male servant dressed as a woman, misquotes famous lines from Elizabethan plays, and falls asleep during the performance of the five-act inset play that is supposedly staged for his viewing pleasure (it's really staged to entertain the Lord and make Sly look like an idiot). In many ways, this is Shakespeare's way of lovingly parodying the kinds of drunken theater-goers, the "groundlings," that sat in the cheap seats.

This makes for some raucous fun but it also opens up questions about the social disparity between the
lower-classes and the nobility – especially when we move from the tavern to the Lord's estate, where Sly is victimized by a nobleman with a lot of money and the power and resources to make Sly question his identity and sanity.

Sly's transformation from beggar to "mighty Lord" is also the first of many metamorphoses that take place on stage. His circumstances are especially useful if we compare Sly's humiliation and transformation to Kate's forced submission to Petruchio's will. Though we can't be sure of what happens to Sly after the end of Act 1, Scene 1, it seems unlikely that the guy has undergone any kind of realistic or permanent metamorphosis. Can the same be said of Kate?

Some editions of the play include extra scenes from another play (The Taming of a Shrew – believed to be a shoddy bootleg copy of Shakespeare's play). At the end of A Shrew, Sly wakes up in front of the tavern and thinks the Lord's prank has all been a dream. A bartender tells him to go home to his wife and Sly says he will go home, where he plans to tame his shrewish wife now that he knows how. There's no evidence that Shakespeare wrote any of this, but the scene raises some interesting questions about how seriously we should take Petruchio's "taming school."

**BIANCA**

**Character Analysis**

Bianca is the youngest and favorite daughter of Baptista Minola. When we first encounter her, she is surrounded by her doting dad, her jealous sister, and a group of suitors that can't wait to get their hands on her. Why? Men see her as the ideal 16th-century woman and the antithesis of her shrewish sister Katherine – Bianca appears to be chaste, obedient, and most importantly, silent. The only obstacle preventing her marriage to the highest bidder is her older sister, who must be married before Bianca is allowed to wed.

**Will the Real Bianca Please Stand Up?**

Bianca's name (meaning "white" in Italian) turns out to be as misleading as she is. We learn that she is deceptive, disobedient, and fully capable of talking dirty with the guys. Daddy's little princess merely pretends to be a goody two-shoes – she fools her dad into thinking that she's more interested in her studies than she is in boys, but her private tutoring sessions turn out to be opportunities to flirt with her admirers.

Bianca is also passive aggressive toward her sister – we see her taunt Kate for being an old maid without marriage prospects, which lands Kate in some hot water with her dad. Plus, it's quite telling that Bianca has no meaningful relationship with her sister, or any other woman for that matter. Female friendship just doesn't exist in this play. In fact, The Taming of the Shrew only ever portrays contentious female relationships.

Bianca eventually elopes with Lucentio and we don't really blame her. After all, her father treats her like
a commodity to be traded for profit and her marriage is negotiated and planned by a bunch of men who never think to consult with her. There's some poetic justice in the way Bianca and Lucentio dupe Baptista and run off without their parents' permission. (Young people screwing over their parents and elders to be together is a common theme in Shakespearean comedy.) But, dad's not the only one who is in for a surprise. At her wedding banquet, Bianca directs a crude joke at her brother-in-law and she turns out to be a disobedient wife when she refuses to respond to Lucentio's summons.

Bianca is proof that appearances and outward behavior can be deceiving. She's also proof that being a good actress who is willing to play an acceptable social role can be rewarding. Unfortunately, Bianca's fate also reveals how women's social roles were truly limited in scope. Bianca and her sister basically have two options to choose from: the silent and obedient "ideal" woman who is a feather in a husband's cap, or the "shrew" who makes her husband look like a chump.

**BARTHOLOMEW**

**Character Analysis**

Bart doesn't have many lines but he's an interesting figure. We only ever see him in character in the Induction (he dresses up as a woman and pretends to be Sly's wife as part of an elaborate practical joke). The thing is, Bart is really good at acting. With a little direction from the Lord, Bart manages to convince Sly that he is an obedient wife who is ready to serve Sly's every whim. He's a little too convincing, in fact, because Sly is so convinced and turned on that he expects his "wife" to get into bed with him.

Bart's role in the play alludes to the practice of using boy actors to play the roles of young women on the all-male Elizabethan stage. They were considered attractive or "pretty" enough to do the job and their voices were appealingly high-pitched because they had not yet hit puberty. In other plays such as *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare more fully explores the homoeroticism of Elizabethan theater. Here, however, the issue is not as fully developed.

*Taming of the Shrew* certainly raises the issue of the exploitation of boy actors. Bart is never really given a choice as to whether or not he wants to perform and the role is a bit dangerous given Sly's behavior. When the Lord sends one of his men to fetch Bart, the nobleman relies on the fact that Bart is his servant and owes him his allegiance and "love":

*Tell him from me, as he will win my love,*  
*He bear himself with honorable action,*  
*Such as he hath observed in noble ladies*  
*Unto their lords, by them accomplished:*  

(Induction.1.114-117)

Bart's convincing performance also does much to call into question the performative nature of
Katherine’s final speech. If being an obedient wife is so easy that even a male child can do it, we wonder if Kate isn’t playing a convincing role as well.

**BAPTISTA MINOLA**

Character Analysis

Baptista is the wheeling and dealing father in search of suitable husbands for his daughters, Bianca and Katherine. Baptista treats marriage negotiations like a business – his girls go to the highest bidders and he’s not above taking a bribe or two from any suitor looking to get on his good side. (Insofar as Baptista is willing to use his daughters for his own personal gain, Baptista is a bit like Ophelia’s father, Polonius, in *Hamlet*. Both of these guys are accused of acting like "pimps.") Baptista's business comes back to bite him when two of Bianca's suitors dress up like tutors and infiltrate his home. Bianca runs off and elopes with one of these characters, making dear old dad look like a chump. Baptista is also punished for favoring Bianca and failing to see that his little princess is not the good girl that she appears to be.

**LUCENTIO**

Character Analysis

Lucentio is a rich kid who travels to Padua to top off his education and "see the world." His plans to study and make his family proud are quickly abandoned when he spots Bianca and falls in love with her obedience to her father and her silence. Soon he forgets all about his studies and begins to gush about his burning passion for Bianca. He basically transforms into a giant cliché:

*Tranio, I burn, I pine, I perish, Tranio,*

*If I achieve not this young modest girl.* (1.1.156-157)

Hmm…this probably sounds a little familiar to anyone who ever felt like they would just "die" if they couldn't go out with the person they admired from across the school cafeteria.

We gain a little bit of respect for Lucentio when he tones down the whole "I'll just die without her" bit. Lucentio appears to be very crafty as he disguises himself as a tutor ("Cambio") and gets into Baptista’s house where he has access to Bianca. Bianca and Lucentio eventually fall in love and elope. Game over. Lucentio wins, right? Not so fast. Bianca turns out to be a "shrew" and Lucentio has absolutely no control over his beautiful, young bride. This costs him his street cred with the fellas and a good chunk of change (he loses the bet about whose wife is the most obedient at the play's end).
HORTENSIO
Character Analysis
Hortensio is Petruchio's best friend and sort of his wingman. (He tells Petruchio about Kate and personally escorts his pal to Baptista's house to seal the deal.) Hortensio is also in love with Bianca and dresses up like a tutor ("Licio") to get closer to her. Poor Hortensio really doesn't stand a chance—it's pretty clear from the beginning that Bianca's interested in Lucentio. Still, Hortensio plays an important role. When he gets fed up with what he sees as Bianca's "loose" behavior, he decides to marry the Widow. To do this, he runs off to Petruchio's "taming school," where he hopes to learn how to keep his more experienced lady in line. Problem is, Hortensio really doesn't learn how to tame *anything* and the Widow ends up playing the dominant role in their relationship after they get married. The moral? It's a huge mistake for any man to leave the theater thinking he's going to go home and try to pull a Petruchio on his wife. Not going to happen. Ever.

GREMIO
Character Analysis
Gremio is an old man who actually thinks he has a chance with Bianca. He's referred to as a "Pantaloons," which is a figure from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* tradition of slapstick, improv theater. "Pantaloons" are stock figures—old men who are punished and made into laughing stocks for inappropriately going after sweet young things like Bianca. (They typically wear big, baggy pants like MC Hammer, hence the name "pantaloons.") In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Gremio is punished in a couple of ways. First, he loses the bidding war for Bianca's hand. Second, he's duped into paying Lucentio (who is disguised as "Cambio" the teacher) to "tutor" Bianca. Basically, he pays another guy to woo the girl he's after.

TRANIO
Character Analysis
Tranio is Lucentio's "trusty" servant. Unlike the other servants, Tranio is smart, loyal, and acts as a kind of surrogate father or mentor to Lucentio. He gives all kinds of advice like "Forget studying, you should really meet some girls while you're in Padua" and "Hey, why don't you impersonate a teacher so you can get close to Bianca?" Tranio is also really indulgent (sort of like Juliet's nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*) and agrees to traipse around town pretending to be Lucentio so that the real Lucentio can run around as the tutor "Cambio" while he pursues Bianca.
GRUMIO

Character Analysis

Grumio is Petruchio's old servant. He has a tendency to interpret his master's speeches and commands in the most literal and ridiculous way imaginable. His misinterpretations, however, are responsible for producing some of the most comedic and virtuosic verbal performances in the entire play. Grumio would have been played by an actor with mad rhetorical skills and comedic chops. (This quality aligns Grumio with Shakespeare's other "rustic clown" figures – like the Dromio twins in The Comedy of Errors, who are also characterized by their dim-witted, literal-minded interpretations and word play.) Despite appearing to be a fool, Grumio is astute. He recognizes Gremio the "Pantalo" for what he is – a silly old man who doesn't recognize when he's getting played. Grumio also reminds us that Petruchio is not really a lunatic when Petruchio begins his shrew-taming reign of terror.

BIONDELLO

Character Analysis

Biondello is another one of Lucentio's servants, though he's not as "trusty" or as interesting as Tranio. He's obedient to Lucentio and basically does what he's told when Lucentio orders him to pretend not to know that Tranio (disguised as Lucentio) is not his real master. Biondello's willingness to play along with Lucentio's scheme enables Tranio's sanctioned unruliness.

THE LORD

Character Analysis

You remember him, right? He's the jerk in the Induction scenes at the beginning of the play – he stumbles across a passed out Christopher Sly and decides to teach the drunken beggar a "lesson." When the Lord gives orders to have Sly dressed up like a nobleman and duped into believing that he's been sleeping for the past fifteen years, he acts a lot like a theater director. His interest in role playing and amateur directing reminds us of another guy who likes to act and write plays: Shakespeare. Is Big Willy having second thoughts about his career in the theater? Nah. He's just having a little fun with the audience while he points out that what passes for "entertainment" can be sort of sick and twisted.