

Taming of the Shrew Act Summaries

Summary: Act I, scene i

A young man named Lucentio arrives in Padua with his manservant, Tranio. Lucentio was educated in Pisa and Florence and has come to Padua to further his studies at its famous university. As he announces to Tranio, he is young and eager to learn new things. Tranio pleads that they should not forget the pleasures of life in their academic pursuits. The noisy entrance of a crowd interrupts their discussion.

The crowd is composed of Baptista Minola; his daughters, Katherine and Bianca; and Bianca's two suitors, older men named Hortensio and Gremio. Most of the noise comes from Katherine, who seems to be caught up in a rage, screaming and cursing at everyone present. When Baptista informs the suitors that they are free to court Katherine, but that he will not allow Bianca to marry before Katherine does, they respond that no one would ever marry a devil like her. Katherine threatens them with violence in return. Amid all the noise, though, Lucentio takes particular notice of Bianca, who behaves much more mildly than her sister. After Baptista leaves with his daughters, Hortensio and Gremio agree that they have but one option: to look for someone to wed Katherine. However, they are not optimistic about their chances of finding a willing man. In the meantime, they say, they will also look for a schoolmaster for Bianca—Baptista had mentioned that he was looking for one, and they hope to earn favor with Bianca's father by helping him.

The old men walk away, and Lucentio gushes to Tranio that he has fallen in love with Bianca and is determined to court her. Knowing that he cannot do so publicly, given Baptista's forbiddance, he resolves to woo her in secret. He suddenly recalls that Hortensio and Gremio mentioned procuring a schoolmaster, and he decides to disguise himself as a teacher in the hope that by tutoring Bianca he will be able to declare his love for her and win her heart. Tranio, for his part, will pretend to be Lucentio and study at the university. Biondello, Lucentio's other servant, arrives in a timely fashion and agrees to help with the deception.

At this point, the main story—which is being presented as a play for Christopher Sly—fades for a moment, and Sly reemerges. He declares briefly that he is enjoying this entertainment, but he implies that he would prefer to be left alone with his wife.

Summary: Act I, scene ii

A brash young man named Petruchio, newly arrived in Padua, goes with his servant Grumio to see Hortensio, whom he knows from Verona. Grumio and Petruchio become embroiled in a comic misunderstanding at the door, but eventually Hortensio comes down to greet Petruchio and ask why he is in Padua. Petruchio responds that, upon his father's death, he set out to look for a wife, hoping to marry a rich man's daughter and thereby augment his family fortune. Hortensio, determined to find a potential suitor for Katherine so that he himself may marry Bianca, recognizes his opportunity and decides to convince Petruchio to marry the shrew. Being a friend, he first tries to offer a warning about her, but Petruchio does not care about her behavior. He pays attention to one thing only—the fact that she has a rich father. Full of confidence, he tells Hortensio to lead him to the shrew. Hortensio, for his part, plans to disguise himself as a schoolmaster so that he can court Bianca secretly.

Gremio and Lucentio enter on their way to Baptista's house, interrupting Hortensio and Petruchio. Lucentio has already disguised himself as a schoolmaster and has presented himself to Gremio, who gladly agrees to have him tutor Bianca. Gremio brags to Hortensio that he has found a schoolmaster for Bianca, unaware of the fact that

Lucentio will be courting the girl himself. Hortensio then tells Gremio the good news—that Petruchio wishes to woo Katherine. Gremio can hardly believe it, but Petruchio confidently claims that he will be victorious.

At this point, Tranio enters, disguised as Lucentio, with Biondello as his servant. He very conspicuously asks the suitors to direct him to the house of Baptista Minola, vaguely implying that he might be interested in one of the women there. Hortensio and Gremio have a hard time restraining their anger, for now there will be three competing suitors for Bianca. Lucentio, of course, has arranged for Tranio to make this entrance in order to distract Hortensio and Gremio and give him more time for his own wooing. Tranio persuades the suitors that they can all be friends while they compete for Bianca, and he wins their good graces by offering to buy them a drink. The whole company considers this an excellent suggestion, and they all depart together.

Summary: Act II, scene i

Chaos rules at Baptista's house the next morning as Katherine chases Bianca, cursing at her in a fury. Katherine has tied Bianca's hands together and is trying to beat her sister because Bianca will not tell her which of the suitors she prefers. When Baptista comes in to try to break up the fight, he only angers Katherine more by showing that he favors Bianca. Both sisters leave in a huff, just before a group of visitors enters to see Baptista.

The group is composed of the gentlemen who were on their way to the pub at the end of the last scene: Gremio with Lucentio (dressed as a schoolmaster), Petruchio with Hortensio (likewise dressed as a schoolmaster), and Tranio (dressed as Lucentio) with Biondello (dressed as his servant). The introductions begin in a whirlwind of deception. Petruchio starts off, bluntly as always, by asking Baptista for the opportunity to see Katherine. In exchange, he offers a music instructor for her, the disguised Hortensio, whom he introduces as Litio. Baptista accepts the present and intends to tell Petruchio as kindly as possible that Petruchio must be crazy to want to see Katherine, when Gremio, who cannot stand being upstaged, interrupts him. Gremio presents his own schoolmaster, the disguised Lucentio, whom he calls Cambio, a master of classical languages. Baptista accepts the gift and then hears from Tranio, who, pretending to be Lucentio, presents his own gift of books and a lute, in exchange for the permission to see and woo Bianca.

The two phony schoolmasters leave to ply their trades on Bianca, while Petruchio presses Baptista further for information about Katherine. After confirming that a substantial dowry will accompany his successful wooing of Katherine, Petruchio assures Baptista of his abilities. Hortensio cuts him off by returning, his head now bleeding—apparently, when Hortensio attempted to teach Katherine how to play the lute, she promptly took the instrument and smashed it over his head. Undaunted, Petruchio waits for Baptista to send Katherine out to see him. He decides to adopt the tactic of calling her “Kate” and good-naturedly contradicting everything she says.

Abrasive as always, Katherine tears into Petruchio from the moment he sets foot in her room. Petruchio's quick wit, though, proves equal to hers, and Katherine, used to skewering the slower-witted men by whom she is surrounded, finds his aptitude for sparring highly frustrating. They engage in a lengthy verbal duel with elaborate puns, each one constructing a new metaphor from the other's comments—Kate's puns generally insult or threaten, but Petruchio twists them into sexual innuendo. Eventually, she becomes so enraged that she hits him, but he continues the game just the same, saying that he will marry her whether or not she is willing: “will you, nill you, I will marry you” (II.i.263).

When Baptista, Gremio, and Tranio enter to check on Petruchio's progress, he claims that they have already agreed upon Sunday as the wedding day. Kate, shocked, contradicts him, but he ignores her objections and insists to the other men that Katherine cannot keep her hands off him. Strangely, Kate remains silent after this remark, and when Petruchio again claims that they will marry on Sunday, she says nothing, and they both leave.

After recovering from the shock of the hasty arrangement they have just witnessed, Gremio and Tranio immediately move to the matter of Bianca, who suddenly will be available after Sunday. Baptista says that whichever of the suitors can best ensure that Bianca will be provided for when she is a widow—in other words, whichever has the greatest wealth—may have her hand. Having assumed the false, unknown identity of Lucentio, Tranio is able to claim that he has limitless funding and simply guarantees ten times whatever Gremio offers. Baptista agrees to award Bianca to Lucentio as soon as his father can guarantee the wealth that he has claimed. Tranio, confident of his ability to play the part of Lucentio, believes he can produce Lucentio's father as well.

Summary: Act III, scene i

It is now Saturday, the day before Katherine is scheduled to wed Petruchio. Lucentio and Hortensio, in their respective disguises as Cambio and Litio, are “instructing” Bianca somewhere in Baptista's house, and the scene begins with the two of them battling for her exclusive attention. Bianca clearly has begun to form a preference, and she ends the dispute by declaring that she will hear her Latin lesson from Lucentio first, while Hortensio tunes his instrument.

During the Latin lesson, with Hortensio out of hearing range, Lucentio conveys his true intentions to Bianca through a mock translation of a Latin paragraph. She replies to him, in the same way, that she distrusts him, and yet she does not hide the fact that she is taken with her young suitor. Hortensio tries to break in at intervals, but Bianca sends him off to tune again until she has finished her conversation with Lucentio.

Lucentio concludes and Hortensio returns to try his own hand at wooing Bianca. He gives her a sheet with a “gamut,” or scale, of notes on it, with romantic words cleverly inserted to indicate his true intention. Hortensio's words take a different tone, though. While Lucentio was confident and coy, Hortensio pleads almost pitifully: “show pity, or I die” (III.i.76). Bianca resists his attempt more directly, failing to give the playful glimmer of hope she afforded Lucentio. Before Hortensio can respond, a servant enters, calling upon Bianca to prepare for her sister's wedding the next day.

Lucentio also leaves, and Hortensio, alone, considers the signals he received from Bianca. He sees clearly that Lucentio is infatuated with Bianca. But he does not yet know what her intentions are, and he suspects that his own chances might be slim. Preparing for the possibility of rejection, his former enthusiasm dwindles, and he tells himself that he will simply find another wife if Bianca proves unwilling.

Summary: Act III, scene ii

On Sunday, outside Baptista's house, everyone has gathered for the wedding of Kate and Petruchio. The groom, however, is late, and Baptista has begun to worry. Kate frets that Petruchio habitually woos women only to leave them standing at the altar, and she runs off in tears. Just then, Biondello rushes in to announce that the groom is on his way, dressed in a ridiculous, mismatched, and shabby costume, riding up the street on an old, broken-down horse riddled with diseases. Grumio rides at his side, similarly attired. When Petruchio finally arrives, the crowd, horrified, sees that Biondello's description was accurate. Baptista begs him to change into a more fashionable outfit before marrying Kate, in order to avoid further public humiliation. Petruchio says he will do no such thing and rides off to find Kate at the church. Most of the crowd follows in a kind of horrified fascination.

Summary: Act III, scene iii

Tranio and Lucentio stay behind, alone. They briefly discuss the status of their plan to win Bianca. Tranio informs his master that they must find a father for him, and Lucentio suggests that the simplest solution may be for them to

elope. They do not speak for long before Gremio returns to tell the story of what happened at the marriage. Apparently, Petruchio swore at the altar, struck the priest, threw food, and, in general, proved such an embarrassment that Gremio felt compelled to leave early. The marriage has been completed nonetheless, and the rest of the company soon arrives. However, before they can even begin the wedding feast, Petruchio announces that he must leave at once and take Kate with him, not even giving her time to receive congratulations from her friends and family. At this ridiculous suggestion, Kate tries to draw the line, saying she will leave only when she wishes, but Petruchio remains as persistent as ever. He says that since she is now his wife, he claims her as his property, and, pretending to defend her from jealous thieves, exits quickly with her and Grumio. The rest of the party can only watch in amazement and laugh at the day's events, wondering how two such people could ever put up with one another. They resume the wedding feast, and Baptista moves to discuss the marriage of Bianca to Lucentio.

Summary: Act IV, scene i

Petruchio and Kate are about to arrive at Petruchio's country house. Grumio arrives first, however, complaining that he has been sent ahead to ensure that the servants prepare for the arrival of their master and his new wife. Curtis, another servant, greets him and hears his tale of the journey from Padua—Kate fell into the mud, Petruchio flew into a rage, and the horses ran away. Grumio then orders Curtis to assemble all the other servants, properly attired and on good behavior. Curtis calls for them, and a few arrive just as Petruchio and Kate return.

Petruchio immediately becomes enraged, claiming that his servants fail to attend him properly. They do their best, but clearly he is not pleased by anything. He demands dinner, and they prepare it as quickly as possible, but he claims that the meat is burned and pushes the whole meal off the table. In the meantime, Kate, visibly tired and hungry, pleads with him to be more patient with the servants. Petruchio cheerfully tells her that he demands much of them for her benefit—his new bride will receive nothing short of perfection, he says, pretending to ignore the fact that his new bride simply needs a hot meal. After taking her off to bed without food, Petruchio returns to the stage alone and announces his intentions. All his actions have been calculated to aggravate Kate and to keep her wanting, for he refers to her as a wild falcon that he must train to obey his call. He intends to prevent her from sleeping by making a fuss about the way the bed is made, just as he did with the food. This, he says, is the best way to “curb her mad and headstrong humour” (IV.i.190).

Summary: Act IV, scene ii

Back in Padua, Tranio (still disguised as Lucentio) and Lucentio (still disguised as the schoolmaster) are trying to conclude their scheme to win Bianca for Lucentio. Hortensio, distraught at having lost Bianca to his rival schoolmaster, takes it upon himself to inform Lucentio that he too is out of luck in his pursuit of Bianca. Tranio plays along, feigning surprise when he sees the real Lucentio and Bianca courting each other during their “lesson.” He pretends to be so angry that he decides to forswear Bianca's charms, and he convinces Hortensio to do the same—thus cleverly removing the competition.

Tranio informs Bianca and Lucentio of these events after Hortensio leaves. Hortensio has decided to marry a wealthy widow instead of Bianca and is leaving to go to Petruchio's to attend “taming-school.” He wants to see how Petruchio handles Kate so that he can apply the lessons to his own marriage. Just as Tranio finishes the story, Biondello rushes into the scene with encouraging news: he has just seen a man entering Padua who would make a convincing fake father for Lucentio.

Tranio approaches the newcomer, learning that he is a pedant schoolmaster from Mantua. He then comes up with a story to put the old man in his debt: the dukes of Mantua and Padua, he says, are at odds with each other, and the duke of Padua has proclaimed that anyone from Mantua found in Padua shall be put to death. The pedant, frightened

out of his wits, promises a favor to Tranio in exchange for protection. Tranio says that, as it happens, he is in need of someone to act as his father (meaning Lucentio's father, Vincentio), and so they seal the agreement.

Summary: Act IV, scene iii

Back in Petruchio's house, Kate has had little food or sleep for several days now, and she entreats Grumio to get her something to eat. He refuses, and, like his master, claims that they are depriving her for her own benefit. Finally, Petruchio and Hortensio bring her a meal. (Hortensio has apparently arrived from Padua sometime in the last few days to educate himself at Petruchio's "taming-school.") Kate has little time to eat before Petruchio's tailor arrives. The tailor has prepared elegant and expensive clothes for their journey back to Baptista's house in Padua. Predictably, Petruchio finds fault with everything that Kate likes, from the cap to the gown, and he blames the tailor for poor craftsmanship. The tailor tries to deflect the blame onto Grumio, but Petruchio and Grumio indignantly force him to leave. Petruchio, however, secretly tells Hortensio to pull the tailor aside and tell him that he will be paid the following day, revealing that Petruchio's distasteful treatment of the tailor is in jest. Petruchio then tells Kate that they will leave at once for Padua in the clothes that they have on, planning to arrive at noon. But, when Kate tells Petruchio that noontime has already passed, he angrily responds that, yet again, she is contradicting him. He declares that they will not go that day, and that, when they do go, "[i]t shall be what o'clock I say it is" (IV.iii.189).

Summary: Act IV, scene iv

In Padua, Tranio has properly outfitted the pedant as Vincentio and rehearses his act with him to ensure that their stories match. When Baptista and Lucentio (still disguised as Cambio) enter, the pedant convinces Baptista that he is indeed Lucentio's father, and that he fully approves of the marriage between Bianca and his son. Baptista, the pedant, and Tranio then leave to find a private place where they can discuss the financial details of the marriage.

Summary: Act IV, scene v

Lucentio (disguised as Cambio) returns to the stage with Biondello, who informs him that Baptista has requested that Cambio bring Bianca to dinner. Biondello explains that he has personally arranged for a priest and witnesses to perform a hasty marriage in a church nearby. Lucentio agrees to the plan to elope, and they quickly leave to perform their respective tasks.

Summary: Act IV, scene vi

Petruchio, Kate, and Hortensio journey back to Padua. On the way, Petruchio continues his relentless attempts to coax Kate to submit to his authority as her husband. Though it is midday, Petruchio comments on how brightly the moon is shining, and when Kate responds that the sun is shining, he refuses to continue the journey until she admits that it is the moon. Having no more energy or patience to put up resistance and anxious to return to Padua, Kate concedes. Then, however, Petruchio reverses his claim and says that it is in fact the sun. Hortensio finally persuades Petruchio that he has tamed her, and they continue the journey.

After they have gone a short way, a similar incident occurs. They pass an old man on the same road to Padua, and Petruchio claims that, in fact, the old man is a young maid. Furthermore, he entreats Kate to embrace the maid. This time, Kate immediately obeys, but Petruchio then says she is mistaken, for the maid is really an old man. Kate continues to play along.

The old man turns out to be Vincentio, the true father of Lucentio. He tells the trio that he has come to visit his son in Padua. Petruchio happily tells him of the marriage expected between Bianca and Lucentio and realizes that this will make Vincentio Petruchio's father-in-law. A bit confused, they all continue their journey to Padua together in order to sort things out there.

Summary: Act V, scene i

Back in Padua, Biondello hurriedly takes Lucentio and Bianca to the church, where the priest is ready to marry them. Lucentio is no longer disguised as Cambio the schoolmaster. Just as they leave, Petruchio's party enters along with Vincentio, and they knock on the door of Lucentio's house, where Tranio and the pedant currently reside in their respective disguises. When the pedant answers, Vincentio says that he is Lucentio's father, but the pedant claims to be the true father and calls for the imposter's arrest. Just then, Biondello arrives, turning white when he sees his old master, Vincentio, who recognizes him. Biondello pretends not to notice Vincentio, as Baptista, Tranio, and the pedant come out of the house. Vincentio also recognizes Tranio in Lucentio's clothing, and he is further enraged when Tranio pretends not to know him.

The crowd turns against Vincentio and prepares to escort him to jail, when Lucentio and Bianca, newly married, arrive from the church. Biondello, Tranio, and the pedant take this moment of confusion to run away from the scene, knowing that the game is up. Lucentio can do nothing but beg his father's pardon and disclose the scheme to everyone present. He explains that his deception stemmed from his love for Bianca, which pacifies the two fathers somewhat. Nevertheless, they depart to seek some small revenge on the men who fooled them.

Kate and Petruchio stand in amazement at the proceedings. They follow the rest inside to see the conclusion, but not before Petruchio demands one more thing of his wife. He asks her to kiss him, there in the middle of the street. Initially, Kate refuses, saying she is ashamed to do so. But when Petruchio threatens to turn them around and return to his home, Kate kisses him. Petruchio finally seems satisfied with her, and they go in.

Summary: Act V, scene ii

Lucentio throws a banquet to celebrate the three recent marriages in Padua: Petruchio to Kate, Lucentio to Bianca, and Hortensio to the widow he had spoken of before. As they sit around the table eating and chatting, Petruchio and the widow engage in some jesting (mostly at Hortensio's expense). Kate joins in, and she begins to argue with the widow. The argument nearly turns to violence, with the men cheering them on to fight, but Bianca calms them, and the three wives go off together to talk.

Meanwhile, the men begin to chide Petruchio—Baptista, Lucentio, Tranio, and Hortensio still think that Petruchio has been stuck with a vicious shrew, and they give him some grief for it. Petruchio confidently suggests a test to see which of the three new husbands has the most obedient wife. Each of them will send for his wife, and the one whose wife obeys first will be the winner. After placing a significant amount of money on the wager, Lucentio sends Biondello to get Bianca, confident that she will obey at once. However, Biondello returns to tell them that she is busy and will not come. Hortensio receives a similar response from the widow. Finally, Grumio goes back to get Kate, and she returns at once, to the great surprise of all but Petruchio. Petruchio sends Kate back to bring in the other wives. Again, she obeys. Upon their return, Petruchio comments that he dislikes Kate's hat and tells her to throw it off. She obeys at once. Bianca and the widow, aghast at Kate's subservience, become even further shocked when, at Petruchio's request, Kate gives a speech on the duty that wives owe to their husbands.

In the speech, Kate reprimands them for their angry dispositions, saying that it does not become a woman to behave this way, especially toward her husband. A wife's duty to her husband, she says, mimics the duty that "the subject

owes the prince,” because the husband endures great pain and labor for her benefit (V.ii.159). She admits that once she was as haughty as Bianca and the widow are now, but that she has since changed her ways and most willingly gives her obedience to her husband. The other men admit complete defeat, and Petruchio leaves victorious—he and Kate go to bed happily, and Hortensio and Lucentio remain behind to wonder at this miraculous change of fates.