

The Taming of the Shrew

INTRODUCTION

The Taming of the Shrew was first published in the 1623 Folio, but a related play, shorter and simpler, with the title *The Taming of a Shrew*, had appeared in print in 1594. The exact relationship of these plays is disputed. *A Shrew* has sometimes been regarded as the source for *The Shrew*; some scholars have believed that both plays derive independently from an earlier play, now lost; it has even been suggested that Shakespeare wrote both plays. In our view Shakespeare's play was written first, not necessarily on the foundation of an earlier play, and *A Shrew* is an anonymous imitation, written in the hope of capitalizing on the success of Shakespeare's play. The difference between the titles is probably no more significant than the fact that *The Winter's Tale* is even now often loosely referred to as *A Winter's Tale*, or *The Comedy of Errors* as *A Comedy of Errors*.

The plot of *The Taming of the Shrew* has three main strands. First comes the Induction showing how a drunken tinker, Christopher Sly, is made to believe himself a lord for whose entertainment a play is to be presented. This resembles an episode in *The Arabian Nights*, in which Caliph Haroun al Raschid plays a similar trick on Abu Hassan. A Latin version of this story was known in Shakespeare's England; it may also have circulated by word of mouth. Second comes the principal plot of the play performed for Sly, in which the shrewish Katherine is wooed, won, and tamed by the fortune-hunting Petruccio. This is a popular narrative theme; Shakespeare may have known a ballad called 'A merry jest of a shrewd and curst wife lapped in morel's skin for her good behaviour', printed around 1550. The third strand of the play involves Lucentio, Gremio, and Hortensio, all of them suitors for the hand of Katherine's sister, Bianca. This is based on the first English prose comedy, George Gascoigne's *Supposes*, translated from Ludovico Ariosto's *I Suppositi* (1509), acted in 1566, and published in 1573. In *The Taming of the Shrew* as printed in the 1623 Folio Christopher Sly fades out after Act 1, Scene 1; in *A Shrew* he makes other appearances, and rounds off the play. These episodes may derive from a

version of Shakespeare's play different from that preserved in the Folio; we print them as Additional Passages.

The adapting of Shakespeare's play that seems to have occurred early in its career foreshadows its later history on the stage. Seven versions appeared during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, culminating in David Garrick's *Catharine and Petruchio*, first performed in 1754. This version, omitting Christopher Sly and concentrating on the taming story, held the stage almost unchallenged until late in the nineteenth century. In various incarnations *The Taming of the Shrew* has always been popular on the stage, but its reputation as a robust comedy verging on farce has often obscured its more subtle and imaginative aspects, brutalizing Petruccio and trivializing Kate. The Induction, finely written, establishes a fundamentally serious concern with the powers of persuasion to change not merely appearance but reality, and this theme is acted out at different levels in both strands of the subsequent action.