

Staging the play

The Taming of the Shrew has always been a popular play. It is not only very funny, but it also reflects contemporary discussion of marriage and the role of women. The play has therefore always had strong appeal for audiences: the intrigues and disguises of the Bianca plot; the potential for knockabout farce; its continuing relevance as a play about the relationship between the sexes.

Adaptations

Like other Shakespeare plays, it has inspired many adaptations. While Shakespeare was still alive, John Fletcher wrote *The Woman's Prize or The Tamer Tamed*, in which, as the title suggests, Katherina gets her own back. Some adaptations heightened the violence and brutality in the scenes between Petruchio and Katherina. Other dramatists were more concerned to change the end of the play to avoid any suggestion of Katherina's defeat. In the eighteenth century, David Garrick rewrote the final lines of the play so that Petruchio promised to calm (town and looked forward to 'one gentle stream/Of mutual love'. Garrick's version held the stage for a hundred years.

The twentieth century

The liberation of women from traditional roles in marriage and society created new opportunities for challenging interpretations. Modern audiences find some parts of the play distasteful, so directors have sought different solutions. One answer is to concentrate on the play's potential for farce. This type of humour, often with an element of violence, comes from a long tradition of drama going back to Roman plays by Plautus. Punch and Judy shows are a part of this tradition, as are some modern television comedies. The Richard Burton/Elizabeth Taylor film of the play directed by Franco Zeffirelli in 1966 contained much of this kind of lively action. Jonathan Miller's 1963 television production was very different. There is plenty of full and life, but his interpretation is based on the way in which Miller views marriage in Shakespeare's time. It ends with peace and harmony as the characters sing a psalm around the table.

In strong contrast, Michael Bogdanov's 1978 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company emphasised the violence and cruelty of the play. So too did Charles Marowitz in his version *The Shrew*, which opened with Bianca and Katherina fighting, and ended with a hysterical Kate. The action was interwoven with a modern parallel which provided little optimism or light relief. The Royal Shakespeare's Company's 1982 production avoided such a serious emphasis and included all kinds of jokes and comic effects (for example, the four-person bicycle on page 146).

Some directors have tried to avoid both light-hearted romps and unrelievedly bleak interpretations. For them, the play is about two misfits who find true contentment with each other. In such productions, a feminist argument is not central. Meryl Streep, Katherina in a 1978 New York production, said: 'What I'm saying is, I'll do anything for this man ... Why is selflessness wrong here? Service is the only thing that's important about love'.

