

## *e-Luminations: The Taming of the Shrew*

### **Gender Roles in *Shrew***

*Notions of what constitutes a happy marriage have changed over time—as modern reactions to *Shrew* demonstrate.*

In the early modern period, marriage was not a result of romantic love or choice between the two parties. It was the product of a negotiation, generally between the parents, which was an integral part of a system of inheritance and economics. For Petruchio, this alliance will secure his family's legacy. The dowry Baptista gives with his daughters is a form of insurance, securing their future. Without a successful marriage, an unmarried daughter, as Katherina threatens to be, is a liability to her family, for after Baptista's death, his daughters cannot inherit any of his estate or monies.

In 16th-century marriages, the husband and wife were expected to fulfill certain roles, which stemmed from St. Paul: "Let women be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord; for the husband is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church." (Ephesians 5:22-23) William Gouge wrote that this hierarchy, based on the physical differences between men and women, was integral to the state because the family is a "school wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are to be learned." Once married, both Katherina and Petruchio must learn how to be members of an ideal 16th-century marriage. *The Homily on the State of Matrimony*, a sermon to be delivered at marriage services, elaborates on the specifics of these roles. The man was to "be the leader and author of love in cherishing and increasing concord which then shall take place if he will use [temperance] and not tyranny." The wife's duty was to "nourish concord...ready at hand at her husband's commandment, when she will apply herself to his will...and do him pleasure, when she will eschew all things that might offend him." When their marriage begins, neither Katherina nor Petruchio can serve this function for the other. But, by the end of the play, both have accepted their need to take on these roles to ensure a happy marriage. —Lezlie Cross

Source: *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, Ed. Russ McDonald, 2001

The article above was excerpted from OSF's 2007 *Illuminations*, a 64-page guide to the plays in the 2007 season. For more information or to buy the full *Illuminations* [click here](#). Members at the Patron level and above and teachers who bring school groups to OSF receive a free copy of *Illuminations*.