



Study Guide 2026

Oregon Shakespeare Festival



THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

Marriage Customs in Elizabethan England

Elizabethan weddings, like those celebrated today, came with plenty of customs. Below are some examples of people's expectations.

- With parental permission, boys could marry at age 14 and girls at age 12.
- For upper-class and noble couples, Crying the Banns was expected as a public announcement of the intention to marry. At three church services in a row, the intended husband would declare his intention to marry and support his wife. Listen for Petruchio's mention of the Banns.
- Most wedding dresses weren't white. Though common in many cultures today, wedding dresses came in many colors during Shakespeare's time.
- Women who didn't marry were thought to have failed at a key part of a their family responsibilities. Often ridiculed, the play refers to things unmarried women were expected to do at a younger sister's wedding reception, like dance barefoot.



About William Shakespeare
English playwright, poet, and actor. Born in 1564 in Stratford-Upon-Avon, died 1616

- Shakespeare wrote approximately 39 plays
- A play similar to the 1623 First Folio version of *The Taming of the Shrew* was published in 1594. At that time, people would watch plays and, by memory, write them to be sold. Scholars believe the version in 1594 was an imperfectly remembered version.
- It's believed that it was written around 1590-1591, placing it among Shakespeare's earliest works alongside *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.
- Works featuring husbands "taming" their wives were popular in the Tudor era and onward, presented as plays and in verse.

Love Match or Wrestling Match: Shakespeare and Hathaway

William Shakespeare wrote plays that featured love and marriage throughout his career. From his earliest works like *The Taming of the Shrew* to one of his last, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, he captured imaginations, writing sometimes funny and sometimes deeply romantic words about love and lovers. Shakespeare, like most other Elizabethan writers, depicted love in many forms—foolish puppy love, familial duty, lustful passion, deep friendships, devotion to country, etc. Despite all he wrote, we know surprisingly little about Shakespeare’s relationship with love.

**“Thy sweet love remembered such
wealth brings That then I scorn to
change my state with kings.”**

– Sonnet 29, William Shakespeare

Few people’s personal lives were chronicled during the Renaissance; personal letters and diaries were uncommon, especially for the middle class. Scholars have pieced together the lives of Will Shakespeare and his wife, Anne Hathaway, using legal documents, baptism records, marriage records, and wills. Both were the children of successful merchant-class families and grew up in towns close to one another. The couple wed in 1582. At 26, Anne was close to the average age of marriage at the time, which was 27. At 18, Will was unusually young. To be able to marry, Will had to have special permission from her father. He also petitioned to marry more quickly than normal because they were expecting a child. Shakespeare’s first love sonnets were written in the early years of his marriage, so perhaps theirs was a love match.

Will’s life in the theatre was centered in London, meaning that they probably lived separately for most of their marriage. As Shakespeare’s theatre success grew, his income enabled the acquisition of multiple properties and extensive farmland. In 1597, Shakespeare purchased a larger home for his family called New Place. It’s believed that his final plays, among them *The Tempest*, *Henry VIII*, and *The Winter’s Tale*, were written while living at New Place. Shakespeare was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. Anne outlived him by seven years and was then laid to rest next to her husband.

Drawing purporting to be Anne Hathaway. Wikimedia



The Shakespeare/Hathaway marriage was written about as early as the 18th century, and scholars continue to hunt for information. Recent analysis of a letter fragment found in 1978 was published in 2025, indicating that Anne may have lived in London with Shakespeare when the letter was written. Across 200+ years of scholarship about William Shakespeare’s life, a wide range of assumptions have been made about his marriage to Anne. Some described her as a hateful shrew, her attitude so unpleasant that she drove her husband to London. Others portrayed her as a supportive wife who encouraged his playwriting and managed their home life. The real dynamics of their relationship may never be known.

Why do scholars speculate about Anne? About Will? What might be inferred about their marriage from *The Taming of the Shrew*? What might be learned from other plays?”

What is a Shrew?

Calling a disagreeable person (usually a woman) a shrew comes from a misconception about this small mammal with a large nose. Once thought to have venomous bites, calling someone a shrew implies they are quick to anger and find fault; someone who complains a lot.

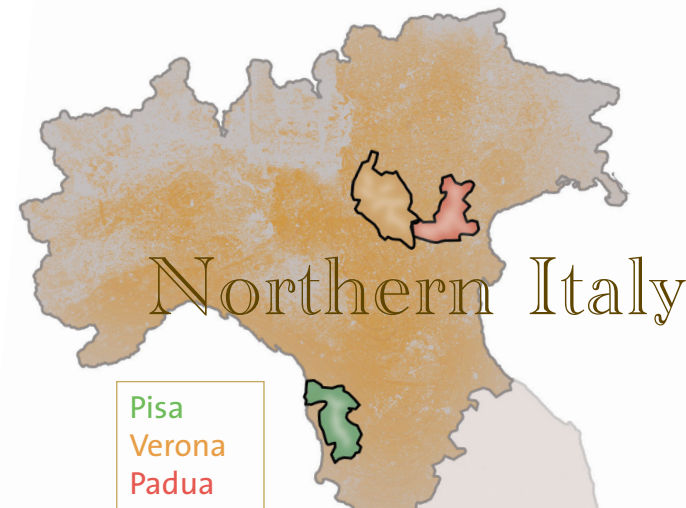


SONNET 117 IS THIS AN APOLOGY TO A WIFE?

Accuse me thus: that I have scanted all
Wherein your great deserts repay,
Forgot upon your dearest love to call,
Whereto all bonds do tie me day by day;
That I have frequent been with unknown minds,
And given to time your own dear-purchased right;
That I have hoisted sail to all the winds
Which should transport me farthest from your sight.
Book both my wilfulness and errors down,
And on just proof surmise accumulate;
Bring me within the level of your frown,
But shoot not at me in your waken’d hate,
Since my appeal says I did strive to prove
The constancy and virtue of your love.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Look up the word “shrew.” Look up the word “tame.” What do you expect from the play based on its title? This and other websites provide information: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shrew> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tame>
2. *The Taming of the Shrew* takes place in Padua, Italy, renowned for the University of Padua. What was the role of education in Padua? These and other websites provide information: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Padua> <https://800anniunipd.it/en/history/>
3. Locate the following Italian cities mentioned in the play on a map of Northern Italy: Padua, Pisa, and Verona. What is the distance between the cities? These and other websites provide information: <https://discovernorthernitaly.com/map-of-northern-italy/> <https://www.Distancefromto.net>



4. Research Elizabethan wedding customs. In what ways were weddings a business transaction, especially among the middle and upper classes? What were the financial and social advantages of marriage in this society? How could individuals raise or lower their social status through marriage? These and other websites provide information: <http://www.william-shakespeare.info/elizabethan-wedding-customs.htm> <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/folger-story/woeing-and-wedding-courtship-and-marriage-in-early-modern-england/>
5. Research “dowry” or “marriage portion” during the Elizabethan era. Research “jointure.” These and other websites provide information: <https://tudortimes.co.uk/daily-life/dowries-marriage-settlements/dowry> <https://shakespearehenriad.weebly.com/marriage-in-elizabethan-england.html> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jointure>

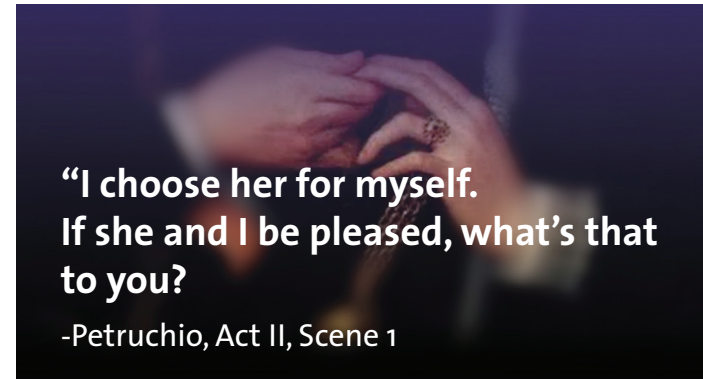
6. Research expectations of women in the Elizabethan era. What was the function of a wife? How was she expected to behave? What were the options for unmarried women? These and other websites provide information: <https://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-women.htm> <http://www.elizabethi.org/us/women/> <https://www.william-shakespeare.info/elizabethan-women.htm>
7. What laws and traditions governed how money and property were passed down to children and grandchildren in Elizabethan England? If a man had several daughters and sons, who would inherit his money and property? If a man had several daughters and no sons, who would inherit? What laws and traditions governed the rights of women to possess money and property? These and other websites provide information: <http://elizabethan.org/compendium/41.html> <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/learning/medievalwomen/theme2/inheritance.aspx>
8. What is the art of falconry? What are the steps in “manning” a falcon? What is the ideal partnership between the human and the falcon? What is the goal of manning a falcon? These and other websites provide information: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falconry> <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/birds-of-shakespeare-peregrine-falcon/>



Mary of Burgundy, portrait by the circle of Master of the Legend of Saint Madeleine (Maître de la Légende de sainte Madeleine), Château de Gaasbeek, c. 1530–40. Wikipedia.

After seeing/reading the play

1. What is the significance of the title of the play?
2. Money is mentioned frequently in the play. Refer to your research on laws and traditions that governed how money and property were passed down to children and grandchildren in Elizabethan England. How does money influence the play's characters? How do they value their possessions?



3. Education is mentioned multiple times in the play. What is its value to the characters? Why does Baptista want his daughters to be educated? In what ways is learning a commodity? Which characters seek education? Why? Who refuses education when offered? Why?

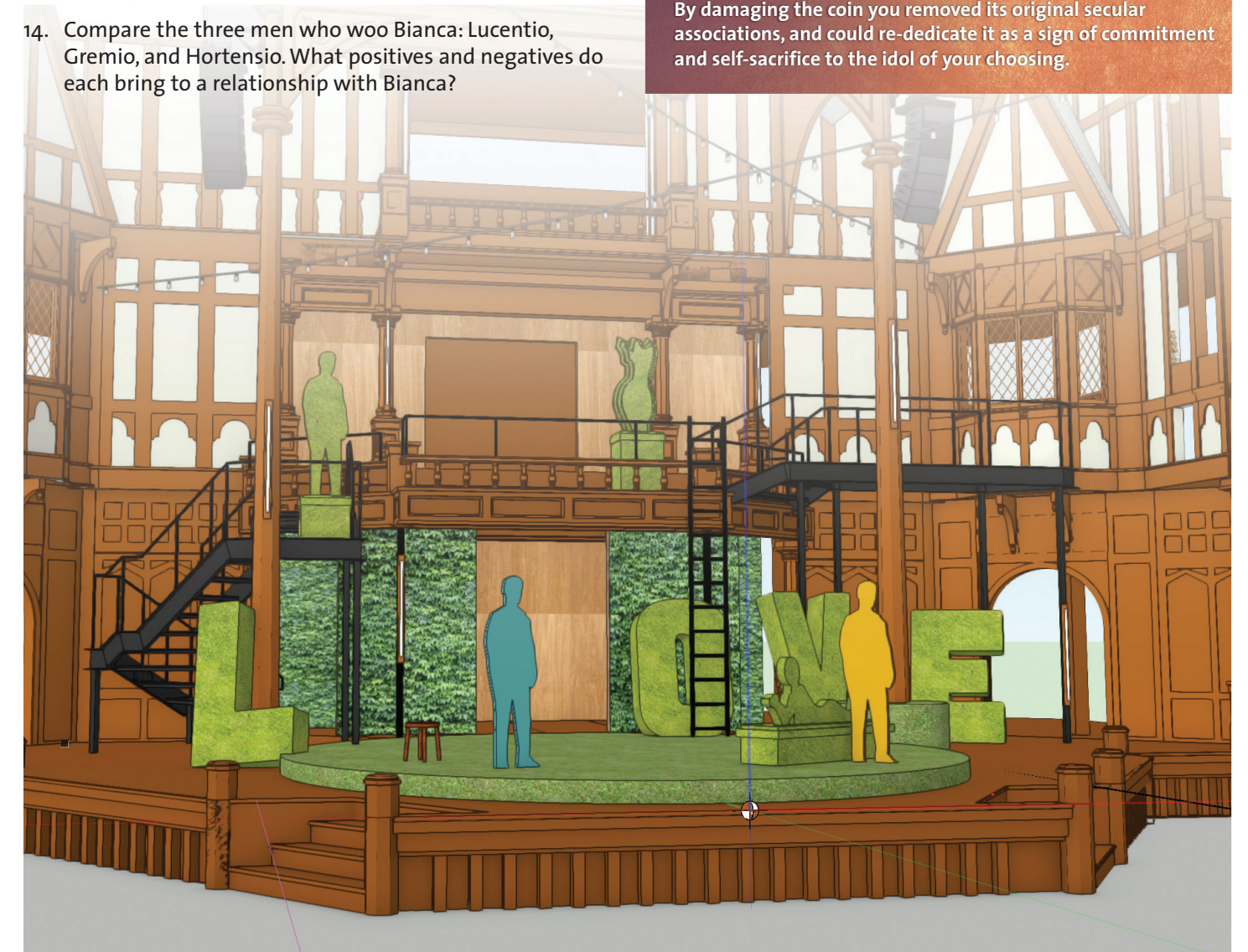


Costume rendering by Raquel Adorno.

4. In Act I, scene i, Tranio says to his studious master, Lucentio, "No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en:/ In brief, sir, study what you most affect." What kinds of learning, other than academic schooling, do characters find? What do they learn?
5. Find the references to women as possessions or merchandise in the play. What does the play say about the value of women?
6. Given your research on Elizabethan wedding customs and expectations of women, why would Baptista insist on Kate being married before Bianca? How would each sister be affected by Kate remaining unmarried? How would Baptista be affected?
7. Refer to your research on "dowry" and "jointure." In the play, Baptista promises Petruccio a dowry if he marries Katherine. Bianca has a dowry as well, but Gremio and Hortensio each promise a jointure to Baptista if they marry Bianca. What does this say about the difference between Katherine and Bianca? What did the size of a dowry indicate about a woman's worth? How are the discussions of marriage similar to business negotiations?
8. Katherine is described in ways that seem harsh and sometimes cruel. What do these descriptions tell you about the speaker's attitude toward her? How might Katherine be affected by these unflattering descriptions? What is the effect on other characters? On the audience?

9. Baptista mentions love to Petruccio in Act II, scene i: "Ay, when the special thing is well obtained, / That is, her love, for that is all in all." He never mentions love to Bianca's suitors. What does this say about Baptista's expectations for his daughters' marriages? Why might love be of differing importance to Katherine and Bianca?
10. What is the difference between marriage and love in *The Taming of the Shrew*?
11. How does the play portray societal expectations for different genders? How are characters pressured to conform? Which characters push against conformity? Which accept it? What do they gain from conforming? What do they lose?
12. What is Petruccio's strategy for winning Katherine? Describe his behavior with Kate. How do his objectives change as he gets to know Katherine better? What does he learn while "taming" Katherine?
13. Consider the women in the play: Katherine, Bianca, and the Widow. In what ways are they different? How are they alike?
14. Compare the three men who woo Bianca: Lucentio, Gremio, and Hortensio. What positives and negatives do each bring to a relationship with Bianca?

15. Why does Bianca choose to elope with Lucentio? What rules of behavior does her elopement flout?
16. What is the role of disguise in the play? Which characters are someone or something other than what they seem? Who literally disguises themselves, who figuratively disguises themselves, and who does both? How do disguises benefit the individuals who employ them and how do they not?
17. Find references to clothing in the play. What role does clothing play in the show? What does Petruccio hope to gain by dressing so outlandishly at the wedding? What do clothes represent to Petruccio and Katherine when they argue about them? What does the cap represent?



The Taming of the Shrew set rendering by Andrew Boyce

18. Find instances in the play when Bianca and Katherine remain silent. Why does each choose to do so – what prevents them from speaking in these moments?
19. Read Act IV, scene 5, where Petruchio and Katherine argue about the sun and the moon. What is Petruchio trying to accomplish in this scene? Why does Kate eventually go along with him? How does this scene show changes in their relationship? What does it tell us about their power dynamics?
20. What does Katherine's speech at the end of Act V, scene 2 say about the expected role of women in the Elizabethan era? Why does Katherine make this speech? In what ways has she decided to accept this role? In what ways is she rejecting it?
21. Early on in the play, it's clear that Kate is the shrew who is to be tamed. Is she a shrew? Discuss the ways her behavior might be described as "shrewish". Are there other ways to interpret her interactions with others? Are there other characters who behave shrewishly?
22. How would Kate's behavior be interpreted if she were alive today? What modern equivalents are there for the Elizabethan shrew?
23. If you are seeing *A Raisin in the Sun*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *You Are Cordially Invited...*, *King Hedley II*, or *Emma*, compare the relationship between love and marriage in the plays. How do the parents in these plays influence their children's marriages or relationships? How much agency do the children have in determining their partners? What attributes other than love do the parents value?



A mid-19th century watercolor of Katherine and Petruchio. Wikimedia Commons.

24. What role does idealism play in the choices characters make about their romantic relationships in *A Raisin in the Sun*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Emma*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*? What role does practicality play in their choices?
25. Consider the effect being away from home has on characters in *Come From Away*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. How is the behavior of the "plane people" in *Come From Away* different in Gander than at home? How does being in the forest affect the young lovers in *Midsummer*? How does Kate's "taming" become possible at Petruchio's house?



Left to right: Statue of Diana of Versailles, Louvre. Wikipedia. Statue of Europa, Vienna. Creative Commons. Etruscan Bronze Statuette of Athena or Minerva. Creative Commons.



Socrates Xanthippe, Wikimedia Commons.

At first glance, there are three women in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. We meet Katherine (Kate), Bianca, and eventually the Widow. However, both Lucentio (suitor to Bianca) and Petruchio (suitor to Kate) use a series of mythological/folkloric women as a sort of shorthand to infer "acceptable" and "unacceptable" kinds of women. In a play about "taming," it's worth considering the ways characters use comparisons to affect the people around them. To dig into the references from *The Taming of the Shrew*, read on.

Petruchio's list includes:

- **Florentius' love** - A character made famous in a John Gower poem, Florent was a knight forced to marry an ugly old woman after she saved his life by answering a riddle. The riddle? "What is it that all women most desire?" Her answer? Control over men's desires. Despite his misgivings, Florent marries the woman, and breaks a curse to reveal her true young and beautiful form.
- **Sibyl** - The sibyls were Ancient Greek priestesses, most often dedicated to Apollo, who were thought to have the power of prophecy. They were often depicted as advanced in age and frenzied in speech.
- **Socrates' Xanthippe** - Xanthippe was the much younger wife of Socrates and mother to their children. The description of her that endures is from Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates, who described her as is "the most difficult, harshest, painful, ill-tempered" wife.
- **Dian and her grove** - Also known as Diana, Dian was a hunting goddess connected with the countryside and nature, crossroads (an allusion to the underworld), the night, and the Moon. A hunter, Diana was frequently associated with woodlands or sacred groves.

Lucentio's list includes:

- **Minerva** - Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom, justice, law, and victory. Known as a virgin goddess, Minerva presided over a domain including music, poetry, and medicine, among others.
- **Anna** (sister to the Queen of Carthage) - It's likely that Shakespeare references Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas (the main character), meets Dido, the queen of the city. Encouraged by her sister Anna, Dido falls in love with Aeneas. When he leaves, Dido ends her life. Bereft, Anna leaves Carthage. She later becomes a goddess associated with long life, health, and plenty.
- **Europa daughter of Agenor** - A princess and daughter of Agenor, Europa was so beautiful that she attracted the attention of Zeus. Disguised as a bull, he took her to Crete and seduced her. Their union resulted in three children.

After learning more about the figures the suitors use in reference to Kate and Bianca, discuss ways these Comparisons could be used to control behavior. What do these comparisons tell us about Kate and Bianca? What do they tell us about Petruchio and Lucentio? How do they affect the other characters? None of the suitors are compared to men from history who might be used to typify "manly" behavior. What mythological or folk characters would you use to describe the suitors in the play? How are comparisons helpful? How are they harmful?



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Delphic Sibyl, Michelangelo. Public Domain