



## TWO PLAYS... MANY MEANINGS

One of my jobs at the Globe is to help actors understand why Shakespeare writes in the way he does. Very occasionally Shakespeare will write a play written throughout in what we call verse – 'Richard II' is one example – but most of his plays mix verse and prose together. The difference between the two is quite marked, but both are simply designed to sound perfectly natural, but different ways of speaking. Here's some lines of verse that Lucentio says to his servant Tranio as he make his first entrance into the play: Lucentio:

**Tranio, since** for the **great desire** I **had**  
To **see** fair **Padua**, **nursery** of **arts**,  
**I** am **arrived** for **fruitful Lombardy**,  
The **pleasant garden** of **great Italy**,

This verse is not a special language for special occasions, it is simply the way playwrights of this period captured speech fitting the nature of their stories. They write in lines of this length because this is how much people tend to say on one breath. And the syllables I've marked in bold, pointing out the underlying rhythm in these lines, mimic our own heartbeat.

The five stresses in each line should be gently observed and all should sound natural and easily comprehensible. See if you can find the five stresses in the next two lines that Lucentio speaks:

And by my father's love and leave am armed  
With his good will, and thy good company.

One effect of any speech that mimics our pulse and our breathing patterns is that it sounds sincere, as if the characters are meaning what they say.

Sometimes though characters are not interested in sincerity. They wish to make jokes, or conceal their intentions, and then Shakespeare uses prose. Prose is created not in our bodies like verse, but in our ever-inventive heads. Here is Grumio, one of the many comic servants in this play, who while he may now, be sincerely upset, he still wants to entertain us at the same time:

Grumio: Fie, fie on all tired jades, on all mad masters,  
and all foul ways: was ever man so beaten?  
was ever man so weary? I am sent before to  
make a fire, and they are coming after to  
warm them: now were I not a little pot, and  
soon hot; my very lips might freeze to my  
teeth, my tongue to the roof of my mouth,  
my heart in my belly, ere I should come by a  
fire to thaw me.

You can see that prose is not written in 'lines' like verse, but simply fills the breadth of the page.

The play you are going to see today is one of Shakespeare's earliest and it is a comedy. That doesn't

mean it is funny all through, though it does mean that no character is going to be killed off!

There are darker moments as when Katherine, the 'shrew' of the story – which means an angry and bitter woman – who has been hastily married to a stranger, is carried off by him against her will, before she has even had time to enjoy the wedding feast at her father's house. So along with the comedy, you will find other more disturbing incidents. Also there are some things about this play that are simply very strange. To begin with this is not one play but two. And the title 'The Taming of the Shrew' only refers to the second play, and not the first. The first play has no title and is very short. A man called Sly lurches onto the stage bad mouthing a barmaid who is turning him out of her pub into the street. He is drunk and violent, but soon falls into a stupor – unconscious. Then some huntsmen come by and think what fun it would be if they could convince this beggar, that he was actually a nobleman who had lost his memory. Their plan seems to work, and then they suggest to the bemused Sly, that because some touring actors have arrived with a play to perform that he should stay to see it.

Sly agrees and it is this play that gets the title 'The Taming of the Shrew'. But once it begins we'll forget all about Sly.

So, strange – first one play then another. But might these two plays be connected in some way? Well maybe, as one deals with a violent drunk (Sly) and the other with a violent woman (Katherine). Both of them certainly being extremely anti-social.

But in storytelling terms are not both these tales somewhat improbable? That a beggar might come to believe himself to be a lord? And the second play suggests that Katherine might be 'tamed' into becoming the 'perfect wife'. Are they not both extremely far-fetched?

And then another thing: generally in Shakespeare's plays characters find ways to tell us what they are feeling and thinking. It's the way we understand why a character chooses to do what they do; it's the way we follow their path through the play. This barely happens at all in 'The Taming of the Shrew'. Rather characters tend simply to tell us who they are and what they have done and what they intend to do, just like those lines of Lucentio's that I quoted above, but how they feel about what is happening to them is missing.

It's especially so when we are watching Katherine – does she want to marry Petruchio or not? Does she grow to love him or not? Has she been tamed or not?

At the very end of the play after Petruchio and Katherine's final exit, two other characters deliver the final words by commenting on what has happened in lines that are rhythmically jokey (a four beat rhythm here, not five) and also rhyme in a catchy way:

Hortensio: **Now** go thy **ways**, thou hast **tamed** a curst **shrow**.

Lucentio: Tis a **wonder**, by your **leave**, she **will** be tamed **so**.

What Lucentio seems to be saying is 'can this really be true?' That is, he disagrees with Hortensio's possibly naïve assessment. Who is right?

I believe it's up to you to decide what you think has happened; and if you all have slightly, or very different ideas from one another that's maybe exactly how Shakespeare wants it. He wants, I think, for his play to provoke a discussion. Because any real discussion of this old story should hopefully lead to a mature consideration of how men and women might live equally together, side by side.

'The Taming of the Shrew' tells an improbable story; the characters, wonderful as they are, are rather two-dimensional, fixed in some old folk tale. But the play's power lies in what it releases in us, after it is all over.

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