

Welcome to Padua!

Located 25 miles from Venice in northern Italy, Padua in the 1590s was a college town. The famous University of Padua, where Galileo taught during Shakespeare's time, was renowned for its advances in natural philosophy and medicine. The university's botanical gardens, founded in 1545, are the oldest in Europe.

Shakespeare never visited Italy, but 13 of his plays are set there. Italian culture was considered the height of fashion at the time, so it's no wonder! *The Taming of the Shrew* mainly takes place in Padua, but we also see Petruccio's country house in Verona and characters talk about other Italian cities such as Mantua, Pisa, and Naples.

Send in the Clowns

Commedia dell'arte (literally "comedy of the art" in Italian) is a very physical form of theatre that uses masks, movement, and stock characters to tell its stories, which are improvised along a series of guidelines. It originated in northern Italy around 1540 and troupes toured to England as early as 1574, where they enjoyed immense popularity.

The influence of commedia and its characters is everywhere in *Shrew*. Gremio is described as a *pantalone*, a stock character known for being a greedy old man; Bianca and Lucentio are similar to the *innamorati*, ingénues in love with the idea of love; and characters like Biondello and Petruccio's servants have characteristics of the *zanni*, the bumbling, clownish servants.

To Shrew or Not to Shrew?

Some people think *The Taming of the Shrew* a subversive love story celebrating an equal partnership, while others think it is a sexist play that shouldn't be performed. Here are some thoughts from critics, practitioners, and scholars over the years:

Germaine Greer (feminist scholar, author of *The Female Eunuch* and *Shakespeare's Wife*): "[Petruccio] tames [Kate] like he might a hawk or a high-mettled horse and she rewards him with strong sexual love and fierce loyalty."

George Bernard Shaw (19th-century playwright and critic): "[*Taming of the Shrew*] is altogether disgusting to modern sensibility."

Gale Edwards (theatre director): "A woman directing *Taming of the Shrew*, whoever she is, might as well get a loaded shotgun and put it against her temple, because half the critics will be disappointed and will criticize it if the view of the play is not radical and feminist...then the other half will shoot you down in flames because you're doing a feminist, 'limited' view of a play...So you *cannot* possibly win."

Penny Gay (theatre historian and critic): “*The Shrew* has remained consistently popular because it reinforces a profoundly-held belief of its audiences...*The Taming of the Shrew* argues that the cruel treatment is for the victim’s good, to enable her to become a compliant member of patriarchal society.”

Elaine P. Pilkington (Shakespearean scholar): “[Petruccio and Kate] have formed a new, exclusive society, one that is better, more energetic than that which surrounds them, for each is now an ‘initiating yet cooperating center’ for the other (Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By*).”

- Olivia Ochoa, Literary Intern