

Changing roles



Shakespeare's comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*, focuses a great deal on the character of Kate, the "shrew" of the story, and her transition from an unlovable, temperamental harridan into the picture of a perfect wife.

Surrounding this tale of Petruchio and Kate are the comic antics of Hortensio and Lucentio as they scheme to win Bianca. Beyond this, one follows Tranio's efforts to pass himself off as a noble and continue furthering Lucentio's plots by engaging the help of a wandering merchant. Even further than this, outside of the plot entirely, is the rather odd introduction to the play in which a lord plays a prank on Sly, a worthless beggar, and makes him think he is a nobleman. All of these stories have one very strong, common theme underlying them. Almost all of the main characters engage in the changing of roles, whether by their own will or because of the actions of others.

However, when all is accomplished, there is one character who has well and truly changed into a new person. All the switching of roles for schemes or jests simply emphasizes the genuine change of character in Kate. The first change of roles, which gives a taste of what is to come in the main story, is the odd introduction of Christopher Sly. An unnamed lord finds him asleep and happens upon the brilliant idea of making Sly believe that he has only been imagining he was a beggar. The lord changes roles and becomes a servant and the beggar is transformed into a lord. This jest is indicative of the very first changing of roles found in the actual story in which Lucentio becomes a humble schoolmaster and his servant, Tranio, takes on Lucentio's position. However, the unnamed lord's changing of roles, while temporary like Lucentio's and Tranio's, is simply a jest for his own enjoyment. Sly is willing to step right into his new role as lord and assume it permanently: "Upon my life, I am a lord indeed, / And not a tinker nor Chistophero Sly"

(Taming of the Shrew Ind 2. 70-71), but he is the object of ridicule, not part of the scheme. The story of Kate, Petruchio, Lucentio, Bianca, and the others is enacted for Sly. This is possibly yet another jest on the part of the lord, attempting to show Sly a play about switching roles to give him a hint of what has happened to him. Whether or not Sly picks up on the joke is never discovered. The beginning of the main story introduces Lucentio and Tranio, the first characters in the play within the play to change roles. Lucentio does so, however, as a plot to gain the love of fair Bianca: " Let me be a slave, t'achieve that maid" (1. 1. 216). His servant Tranio is not at all against it and does, in fact, admit to having the same idea: " Master, for my hand, / Both our inventions meet and jump in one" (1. 1. 186-187). However, the hindrance remains in the form of Kate, who must be wed before Bianca may be. Kate is portrayed very much in her true form at the beginning the play. She is overbearing and nothing short of terrifying. Her transformation will not be sudden, like the role changing around her, but takes time and effort on the part of Petruchio. Shakespeare makes it very clear that any change in her is nothing short of miraculous: " Think'st thou, Hortensio, though / her father be very rich, any man is so very a fool to be / married to hell?" (1. 1. 122-124) She, rather like Sly, will never be part of the schemes or jests, but unlike Sly, her change will be permanent and for the better. Hortensio and Lucentio appear in their altered roles as tutors for Bianca at the same time that Petruchio is to be introduced to Kate. Ironically, while Hortensio and Lucentio are both pretending to be tutors in order to woo Bianca for themselves, Petruchio becomes rather like a real tutor to Kate in the ways of gentle womanly virtue. Hortensio's change in role does not end successfully. While he attempts to write poetry as Litio the tutor and plead the case of

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Hortensio the suitor, Lucentio has exposed himself to Bianca as not Cambio, but Lucentio. Hortensio recognizes that Bianca is growing more fond of his rival Cambio/Lucentio, and makes plans: " If once I find thee ranging, / Hortensio will be quite with thee by changing" (3. 1. 89-90). If Bianca does not seem favorable to his suit, he plans to simply move on to another woman, a widow who wants his favor Thus, Hortensio prepares to change roles once more, leaving his position as tutor behind him. Lucentio and Tranio realize that in order to complete their scheme, they need a character to play the role of Lucentio's father Vincentio. Tranio, through humorous trickery, convinces a willing merchant, known in the play as a pedant, to take on that role. The pedant does not mind since he is moving up in the world from simple pedant to wealthy, prestigious merchant: " In all these circumstances I'll instruct you. / Go with me to clothe you as becomes you" (4. 2. 120-121). Thus, the next role is assumed. The entire scheme must end when Vincentio himself appears. However, rather like Sly's situation with the lord, everyone except Vincentio himself insists upon an alternate truth from what Vincentio knows is true. No matter how much he insists that he is Vincentio, the characters of Tranio, the pedant, Gremio, Baptista, and Biondello are against him: " Deny him, / forswear him, or else we are all undone" (5. 1. 98-99). However, Lucentio and Bianca emerge and settle the matter by confessing all. Petruchio and Kate, deserving of more study, are left for last. Much of their drama is paralleled by the actions of the other characters, specifically in the roles taken on by the other characters. When Petruchio enters the scene, he is immediately marked as a good match for the troublesome Kate. Petruchio is confrontational, demonstrative, and headstrong. He sees Kate in the beginning as a means to obtain wealth: " I

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come to wive it wealthily in Padua - / If wealthily, then happily in Padua" (1. 2. 73-74), but in the end obviously has discovered her better qualities and comes to truly love her. This is not so much a change in his character as it is in hers, however. Petruchio's change in roles comes upon meeting and understanding Kate's disposition and what is needed to deal with her. He does, in fact, take on two different characters before he finally reverts to his true self. Similarly, Kate must change from her original shrewish self, to a harrassed, embittered woman, to a contented, gentle wife. Petruchio's disposition toward Kate upon meeting her is entirely different than it is when he first marries her, as it is different once more when he has tamed her. When he first meets her, he refuses to be baited and treats every harsh word of hers as beautiful: " Thy virtues spoke of, and thy beauty sounded, / Yet not so deeply as to thee belongs, / Myself am moved to woo thee for my wife" (2. 1. 192-194). Perhaps attempting to unbalance her, he certainly succeeds in discombobulating her to the point that she cannot fight with him any longer. She is betrothed despite her attempts to protest. This is a humorous parallel to the saccharine wooing of Lucentio and Bianca: " I read that I profess, the Art of Love" (4. 2. 8). However, Lucentio is not role playing when he speaks to Bianco in this manner. Petruchio certainly is. His mockery sends Kate into rages, but also confuses her. She has met her match and does not know how to proceed. Having successfully won his wife, Petruchio begins the next part of his plan at the wedding. His appearance at the wedding is utterly ridiculous and confusing. He is dressed irreverantly and uncaring of traditions. His new role is one of tempestuous, impatient demeanor. He begins domineering Kate immediately, all under the guise of love: " This is a way to kill a wife with kindness, / And thus I'll curb her mad

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and headstrong humor" (4. 1. 195-196). He does not allow her to eat or sleep. He yells at his servants about little things. All of this is his role, one which is meant to show her how she herself behaves. He tells her that: "ourselves are choleric" (4. 1. 161), implying that he is like she is. She does not appreciate the comparison. Kate's transformation comes in several steps. At first, she is baffled and infuriated by Petruchio's actions. Her change is not instantaneous. She first becomes bitter and angered by his treatment of her: "The more my wrong, the more his spite appears / What, did he marry me to famish me?" (4. 3. 2-3). She reverts to beating servants out of despair at her circumstances. But, slowly she begins to react against his temper in a different manner. She shows good sense and forbearance. When he rails against a servant for dropping water, she entreats him: "Patience, I pray you, 'twas a fault unwilling" (4. 1. 140). She thanks him when he finally allows her to eat. He all but dangles new clothes in front of her and, in desperation, she begs for them. But he is very clear: "When you are gentle you shall have one too, / And not till then" (4. 3. 70-71), letting her know that she must behave properly. All the while, she is allowed to see him acting the role of the tempestuous, impossible to please character and sees herself in his actions. She begins to understand his desire and finds the humor in the situation. Petruchio lightens his angry outbursts and contrary arguments as he senses her character changing truly for the better. He argues about whether the sun or the moon is shining. At first Kate argues what she knows to be true: "I know it is the sun that shines so bright" (4. 5. 5). He complains that he is "Evermore crossed and crossed, nothing but crossed" (4. 5. 10). She finally gives in: "And be it moon or sun or what you please / An if you please to call it a rush-candle, / Henceforth I vow it shall be

so for me" (4. 5. 13-15). Kate has come to the point where she willingly submits to him even in the silly things and Petruchio sees that " the field is won" (4. 5. 23). He begins to play with her more, testing this new Kate. He plays a trick on her, making her think that an older gentleman, Lucentio's father no less, is a young lady. Kate's reaction, rather than anger at how foolish she has been made to look, is simply a good humored reply. Petruchio has succeeded. Thenceforth, he reverts to himself and Kate takes on her new and permanent role as a gentle and obedient wife with no regrets. They have even come to love each other, kissing one another in the middle of the street with words of sincere affection: " Nay, I will give thee a kiss. Now pray thee, love, stay" (5. 1. 136). Petruchio's wager with Lucentio and Hortensio demonstrates just how changed Kate is. She has, in a sense, switched places with Bianca as the fair, admirable wife. Her father, Baptista, is awed: " For she is changed as she had never been" (5. 2. 120). At the end of the play, all the roles the various characters have been playing are given up and the characters return to their true selves. The only person who maintains her new state is Kate. She has changed roles permanently. Works Cited Shakespeare, William. " The Taming of the Shrew." William Shakespeare: The Complete Works. Ed. Alfred Harbage. New York: Viking Press. 1969.