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Teaching William Shakespeare's

The Taming of the Shrew

from

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by

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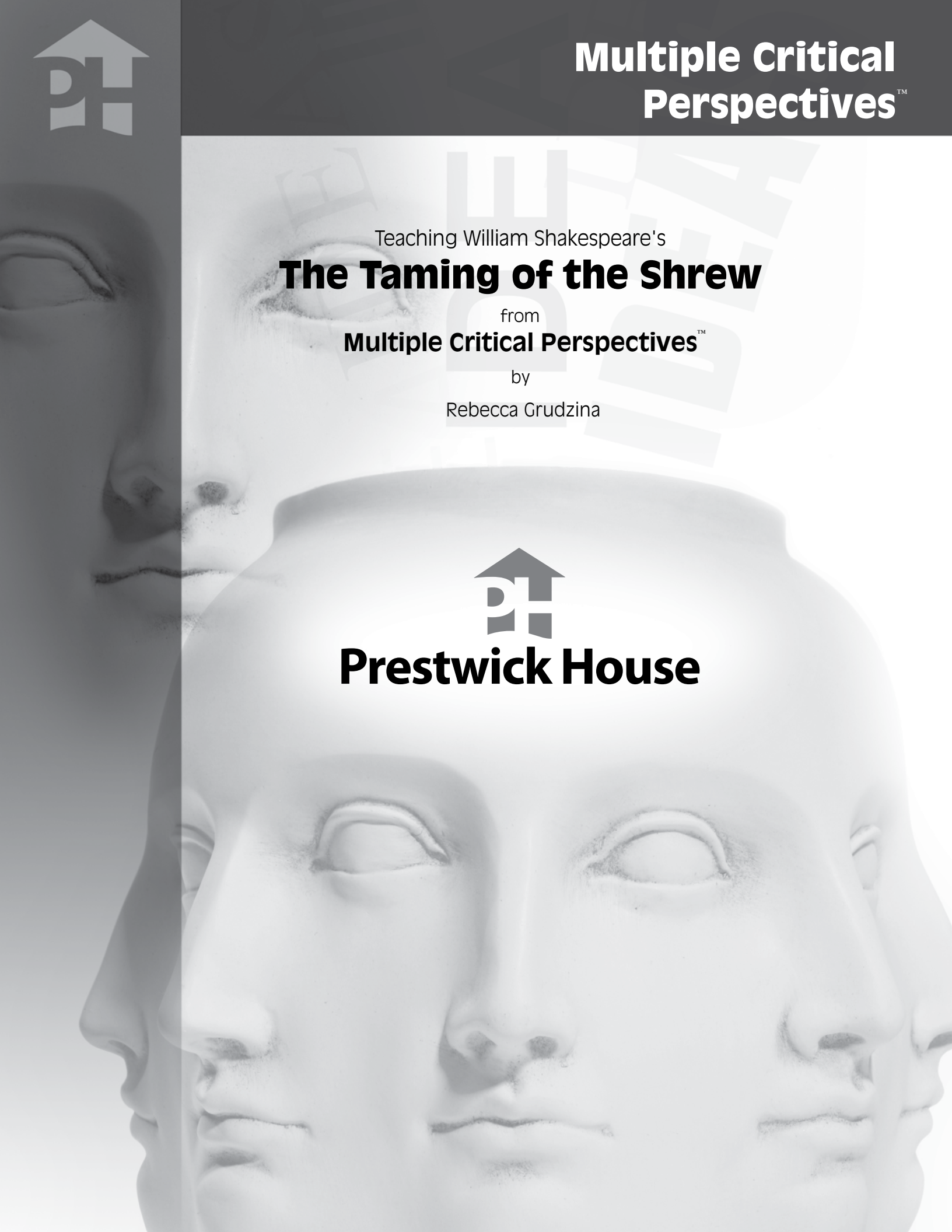

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew*

The Taming of the Shrew is a comedy, largely a farce, with strong elements of satire. A **farce** is a comedy that entertains the audience through exaggerated and improbable situations, disguise and mistaken identity, verbal humor of varying degrees of sophistication—which usually include sexual innuendo and word play—and a fast-paced plot that often ends in an elaborate chase scene. Farce is also characterized by physical humor, the use of deliberate absurdity or nonsense, and broadly stylized performances.

Characteristics of farce include lighthearted and slapstick humor and a happy ending in which most of the characters come out satisfied. Like Shakespeare's other comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew* focuses on courtship and marriage, but—unlike most of his comedies—it pays a considerable amount of attention to married life *after* the weddings. The other comedies—both romantic and festival comedies—end with the wedding ceremonies themselves.

Because plot is of primary importance in farce, many of the characters in these broad comedies are *stock* or *conventional* characters. Among the most popular comic stock characters of the day were "shrews" or "scolds"—and henpecked husbands, and the shrew's "taming" became a popular plot line. Thus, *The Taming of the Shrew*, is a part of a popular Elizabethan tradition, but it is also somewhat unique in that it does not end in the shrew's utter destruction but seems to celebrate Katharine's quick wit and fiery temper while leaving Petruchio's "mastery" over her thoroughly ambiguous.

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Taming of the Shrew*

Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the "modern woman."

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Examining the Play for Misogynistic Themes

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Taming of the Shrew:* Definition of Misogyny.

2. Discuss the handout with the class and have them generate a list of specific misogynistic behaviors.

NOTE: except in cases of strong disagreement, it is not necessary for the class to come to consensus. In cases where one or more students strongly object to a behavior's being listed (while others strongly insist that it be listed) note the behaviors and the objections.

3. Divide the class into four groups or a number of groups divisible by four.

4. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following characters:

   - Baptista
   - Lucentio
   - Petruchio
   - Hortensio

5. Have each group review the play and identify specific evidence (or lack thereof) of misogynic behaviors and attitudes displayed by its character, especially considering the following questions:

   - What relationship(s) does your character have with a woman or women in the play?

   - How would you describe that/those relationship(s)?

   - How does your character view marriage? What evidence is there to indicate this view?

     - Does your character believe in love?
     - What kind of love does the character believe in?
     - What reason(s) does the character offer for entering into a marriage?
     - How does your character talk about or act toward his wife?

   - How does/do the woman/women with whom your character has (a) relationship(s) act toward your character?

   - Would you consider your character to be misogynistic? Why or why not?

Formalism Applied to *The Taming of the Shrew*

Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called "New Critics," and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining Puns, Double Entendres and Other Word Play

1. Divide the class into six groups or a number of groups divisible by six.

2. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the five acts or the Induction.

3. Have each group examine its portion of the play and note all examples of intentional comic wordplay.

4. Have them categorize each example they note—for example: puns, malapropisms, double entendres.

   Have them also, if they can, assign each example to a sub-category: puns that insult persons or personal traits, ribald puns, etc.

5. Next, have the groups calculate or estimate the ratio or percentage of examples in each category and subcategory—for example: approximately ½ of all puns are sexual in nature, ¼ of all puns insult women, etc.

6. Have them calculate or estimate the ratio or percentage of wordplay to conventional language use in their portion of the text—for example: overall, puns account for nearly 50% of the text of the play, ½ of which are sexual in nature.

7. Have each group report to the class and have the class calculate totals for the entire play.

8. Allow students to suggest theses about Shakespeare's use of language and humor that would be supportable with the figures and examples they have collected.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The Taming of the Shrew*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS "PSYCHOLOGICAL," OR "PSYCHOANALYTICAL," or "Freudian Theory" seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.

- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining the Play for Oedipal Influences

1. Divide the class into an even number of groups.

2. Assign each, or allow each to choose, either Katharine or Petruchio.

3. Have the Katharine group(s) search the play for evidence of Katherina's relationship with her father, focusing especially on:

   • her father's insults early in Act I, Scene I and her responses to them

   • the role the planned trip to visit her father plays in her taming (beginning Act IV, Scene III)

   Have them discuss the extent to which Katharine's shrewishness might be the result of some unspecified and unresolved issues with her father.

4. Have the Petruchio group(s) also examine the play for evidence of Petruchio's relationship with his father (or other father-figure), considering especially:

   • What is the first bit of information Petruchio gives to Hortensio in Act I, Scene II regarding his reasons for being in Padua?

   • What might be the significance of the above prompting Petruchio's decision to travel and marry?

   • What does Petruchio begin to call Baptista almost as soon as they meet?

   • Why might this be significant?

   Have them discuss the extent to which it could be argued that Petruchio's quick decision to marry Katharine was motivated by a desire for a new authority or father-figure.

5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report.

6. Finally, discuss the extent to which one could argue an Oedipal interpretation of Katharine and Petruchio and their marriage.

7. Have students suggest potential theses that could be argued with evidence from the play.