

7-17-2013

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Pollack-Pelzner, Daniel, "Summer of Shrew, Part 1: A Tale of Two Cities" (2013). *Faculty Publications*. Published Version. Submission 62.

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Summer of Shrew, Part 1: a tale of two cities

In Ashland and Portland, Shakespeare's battle of the sexes takes center stage. What's up with that?

July 17, 2013 // [THEATER](#) // [Oregon ArtsWatch](#)

By DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER

In Oregon, it's the summer of Shrew.

Shakespeare's dangerously entertaining, endlessly controversial comedy "The Taming of the Shrew" boasts two high-concept professional productions this season.

Down south, the [Oregon Shakespeare Festival](#) sets Kate and Petruchio—those sparring, witty, violent, stubborn, possibly loving combatants—on a rockabilly boardwalk, strutting and fretting beneath neon signs while their snappy supporting cast wonders whether these tattooed soulmates will ever sing a duet.



Lucentio (Wayne T. Carr), Tranio (John Tufts), Oregon Shakespeare Festival.
Photo: Jenny Graham

And up north, the [Portland Shakespeare Project](#) opened its "Taming of the Shrew" last Friday, decked in the candy colors of a '60s TV comedy, with Petruchio and Kate perhaps the only sane people in a farcical entertainment ordered as a prank on a drunk guy in the front row.



Portland Shakes: From left, Kate (Maureen Porter), Baptista (Gary Powell), Petruchio (James Farmer), Lucentio (Peter Platt), Bianca (Foss Curtis), Gremio (David Heath). Photo: David Kinder.

For Bardophiles, it's a rare chance to compare two fun, smart, thought-provoking takes on a popular play. For Shakespeare scholars, it's [wunderbar!](#)

Full disclosure: I'm one of those scholars. This dubious distinction comes with a title, in fact: I'm the [Scholar-in-Residence](#) at the Portland Shakespeare Project, and I was a [visiting scholar](#) last month at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Thanks to a grant from the Linfield Center for the Northwest, my students and I consulted on the Portland Shakes production, and I'm giving talks to Ashland and Portland audiences about the play. So it's certainly my summer of Shrew. But I hope it's more than mine.

You don't have to spend weeks researching Shrew, comparing textual variants, reading academic criticism, discussing the play with actors and directors, and screening film versions to find it a great occasion for thinking about the definition of marriage, the nature of comedy, and the place that Shakespeare holds in our culture.

Since that's how I've been spending my summer, though, I can start the conversation by posing some central questions that scholars often raise about the play. And I'll share how seeing Shrew in rehearsal and performance has challenged me to reconsider the answers I thought I'd found.

So tune in to the next few installments to find out: Is Shakespeare's shrew really tamed? Does Shakespeare's play have a lost ending that changes its meaning? Why have we forgotten about a sequel to Shrew that turns its gender roles upside down? And why do we care whether Shakespeare agrees with our social views at all?

Maybe this will become your summer of Shrew, too. As the Portland Shakes banner promises, it's anything but tame.

NOTES:

- For a rich, lively introduction to the play's language and central concerns, I always start with the relevant chapter in Marjorie Garber's [Shakespeare After All](#). Yes, she was my dissertation adviser, but I'm not the only who likes her book.
- If you're in the car or on a run, you can listen to an accessible overview of the play's critical controversies in Emma Smith's [podcast](#) on Shrew for her invaluable Oxford series, "Approaching Shakespeare."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Daniel Pollack-Pelzner is Assistant Professor of English at Linfield College and scholar in residence at the Portland Shakespeare Project. He will lead a pre-show discussion about "*The Taming of the Shrew*" at 6:30 tonight (Wednesday, July 17) at Artists Rep.

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[TOMORROW](#): Who does the taming, and who's getting tamed?

[FRIDAY](#): A Sly figure and an alternate text shift the balance of the play.

[SATURDAY](#): In our final installment, a long-forgotten sequel further tames the men.