

Sly belongs to the same rural precincts in Warwickshire where Shakespeare himself was born and raised. When the beggar regains consciousness in the lord's mansion and is told that he owns the place, he insists that he's merely "old Sly's son of Burton-heath"; the village of Barton-on-the-Heath lies about sixteen miles south of Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon, and it was the home of Shakespeare's aunt Joan Lambert. Sly further swears that "Marian Hacket, the fat ale-wife of Wincot," can confirm his identity; the village now called Wilmcote, three miles north of Stratford, was the birthplace of Shakespeare's mother Mary, and surviving records show that Hackets were indeed living in Wilmcote around the time that Shakespeare wrote the *Shrew*. "Sly" itself was a Stratfordian name; a Stephen Sly resided there during Shakespeare's lifetime. Why would Shakespeare want to begin his Italian play by invoking his own provincial English roots? Perhaps his goal was to congratulate himself on having escaped Sly's shabby parochial world for the heady excitement of London and the accomplished theater company he joined there. The two young male protagonists of the *Shrew*'s Italian plot, Petruchio and Lucentio, similarly choose "to seek their fortunes farther than at home, / Where small experience grows"; Lucentio compares himself to one who "leaves / A shallow plash to plunge him in the deep." Or did Shakespeare begin his play in Warwickshire for the opposite reason, so that he would not "forget himself" as easily as Sly does? Perhaps Shakespeare worried that his success as an actor and playwright had been tempting him to embrace what the lord calls "a flattering dream or worthless fancy" about his own true social status. Throughout Shakespeare's lifetime,

theater people were often regarded with contempt; as one hostile contemporary maintained, they might play the parts of “Kings and Princes,” but they could never cast off their true identity as “stark and very beggars.”

I’ve chosen to highlight these opening twists and turns to *The Taming of the Shrew* because they help free us – and Shakespeare – from a profound misconception about his plays. We have been trained to think of Shakespeare as the supreme embodiment of high literary culture, and yet *The Taming of the Shrew* links him to the drunken, prostrate figure of Christopher Sly. Or rather, it links him *first* to Sly, then to the aristocrat who toys with him, and then to the actors who entertain them both. Which of these characters represent the real Shakespeare? It’s a question that he chose never to answer for the rest of his career. From his first plays to his last, Shakespeare treated his refusal to be tied to any one identity as the key to his art and indeed to Shakespeare himself.