

“Dear Abby” Letter, from the point of view of Hortensio

Dear Abby,

A gentleman of my acquaintance has a beautiful daughter, “Belle,” well-behaved and charming. There are many of us who would like to woo her, but as the youngest and best-looking of all her potential suitors (not to mention being most accomplished on the lute), there can be no doubt that, given the choice, she would choose me.

The problem is her older sister, “Kathy,” who is the worst shrew you can imagine. Her father, in order to rid himself of her, has decreed that “Kate” must be married off before any of us can even court “Belle.” Indeed, so desirous is he to rid himself of her that none of us can even talk to “Belle” (or “Kathy,” though none of us really want to — she knocked down a midget, a part of some traveling minstrel show, in the square just the other day). The only people her father will let be near to Belle are tutors, hired to teach her music, Greek, Latin, and the like.

As fortune has favored us, we have found a fool to woo the elder sister, and now they are to be wed. To get in good with “Belle,” I disguised myself as a music tutor to spend time with her, so that she may get to know me and to fall in love with me.

Alas, there is another tutor—his real name is Cambio, if any of your readers are so inclined as to dispatch him—who professes to be a tutor of classics, though, judging from his recent lesson, I know *far* more of the lute than he does of the classics. (I strained to overhear him, and though my own Latin is shaky, it did not seem to me that his pronunciation was proper. As for his meaning, well, who can tell?)

I fear that through his own false pretenses, my beautiful Bianca, I mean “Belle,” may be falling to his false charms. I doubt he is in reality a tutor, and it would be a shame if Belle fell for the sham that he is, rather than who he really is (and no doubt he is a low-life, a rogue, the son of

a greengrocer, or an insurance salesman; someone of no wealth or standing). Her affections would be much better satisfied by my attentions, who despite my taking on the appearance of a mean and lowly tutor, has a love which is true.

So, should I expose this man as a fraud to her father, who would dispatch him forthwith? Then, wrenched by such deceitful betrayal, she could find comfort in my own true arms. I wonder, though, if this is the wiser of two choices, since if she has already fallen in love with him, no doubt she would dislike me for exposing him and could possibly run off to elope (though I doubt such a woman would bring such shame down on her family — she has her sister for that). Would her father be angry with me if I delay too long in telling him, so that if they do elope, he might hold me in some way responsible (and here I mean, financially).

To top things off, I know of a rich widow (I have known for some time), who has always desired to marry me. She is not as young as Bianca—I mean, Belle, nor is she is good looking, but considering how much her father must spend on a dowry to marry off Kathy, doubtless Belle’s will be smaller, and it may be the wiser move to marry my dear widow, who, longing so long for the comfort of marriage, will be docile and make an exemplary wife, not to mention a considerable inheritance.

I’m so confused—sometimes it seems like we’re all just characters in a play and I should just wait to see how it turns out in the end? What do you think?

“Litio in Padua”

Dear “Litio,”

First, you must kill your uncle to avenge your father’s death. Oh, sorry—my assistant has mixed things up again. That was what I meant to tell some guy who calls himself “Hamlet.”

(What a silly name! It's almost as bad as some guy who wrote to me last month who called himself "Hortensio.")

First, your immediate problem. It's good that you've found a fool to marry "Kate." Knowing your objective is the first step to solving your problem, to paraphrase a famous twelve-step program. (But pity this fool, all the same — he'll probably wind up far worse than you. No doubt she'll end up wearing the pants in *that* family.)

But let me get this right: you can choose between a wealthy widow whom you don't really love, or a beautiful maiden whom you *might* love (and how could you know, if you've never really talked to her as yourself?). It seems you have to decide where your heart lies: with money or with love.

If it's money you're after, then make the widow your bride. You will be comfortable, although you cannot hang your head as high in the pub if she, rather than Bianca — sorry, "Belle" (you really are transparent) — is your wife. Although, after some good strong wine, who knows? But do yourself a favor, and find out what her first husband died of. If it's food poisoning (or poisoning of any sort) you may want to eat your meals out.

But if it's love you're after, perhaps neither is your choice. You do not love the widow, only her money. As for loving "Belle," how could you know if you do if you've only spoken to her under false pretenses? How could she love you back? Are you hoping that once you've revealed your disguise, she will fall madly in love with you, grateful for the lengths you have gone to get her? In my experience, most women don't feel this way. They want a man who is honest with them from the beginning, and you certainly haven't been. What you should have done during your lesson is to lean in close to her, whisper to her who you really are, and reveal your love to her. Then, she could accept you on open and honest terms, and *that*, my friend, is

the basis of a real and lasting relationship.

As for the other tutor, I wouldn't worry a whit about him. I haven't received a letter from such a "Cambio" (again, what a name — his parents should just have tattooed "Throw Volleyball Here" on his forehead at birth), and if he does write me, I won't give him the same advice. No doubt he is a fool and an idiot, if he can't properly pronounce Latin in this day and age.

As for being a character in a play, I can't really answer that. I suppose that at times we've all felt that way (although *I* never have). If you feel like one, you probably are one (and your language certainly makes it seem like you are). If so, why are you writing to me? Don't waste my time with such petty concerns. I have real people who need my help.

I wish I had the time to tell you more, but I'm off to see a new play. I don't much about it, but it's gotten some excellent reviews. It starts off with a drunken rogue, on whom a Lord plays a trick, making the sot believe that *he* is a lord. I don't know the rest, but the playwright has some repute, so I'm sure it's good.