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Gender Issues in Modern Adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew*

There have been numerous movie interpretations of Shakespeare's comedy *Taming of the Shrew* over recent years. In this essay I will be exploring Gil Junger's adaptation, *10 Things I Hate About You*. Directed towards a teenage audience, the movie is set in a modern day high school in an attempt to offer a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's comedy. Junger along with writers Karen McCullan Lutz and Kirsten Smith (*10 Things*) present their audience with parallels to the original source but the majority of these parallels are only superficial in nature. Many of the major themes and issues addressed in Shakespeare's work are completely ignored, misrepresented, or underplayed in the teen movie. *10 Things* fails to express the issue of gender inequality and male supremacy that is present in *Taming* and is a major theme throughout the play.

To begin I will first start with the original source and explain how male supremacy and gender inequality are explored in the play. I will explore the relationship between Baptista and his daughters as well as the relationship between Petruchio and Katharine. I will also go into an analysis of Katharine's speech at the end of the play, detailing what that signifies according to my topic. I will then move on to analyze the adaptation and how it explores male supremacy and gender inequality, or fails to. I will also explore the father/daughter relationship in the movie in

addition to Kat and Patrick's relationship. I will then analyze the parallels between Kat's poem and Katharine's speech in the original source. I will explain why this theme is so important to the original source and what Shakespeare is trying to say to his audience through this theme. I will also explore how *10 Things* undermines the meaning of the theme in its' adaptation. Finally I will offer some possible alternatives that Junger could have explored when creating the movie to make the adaptation fit more closely with the original source and its' themes.

Male supremacy and gender inequality is not only represented in the relationships between the couples, but also in the father/daughter relationship between Baptista and his daughters, Katherine and Bianca, as well. The first glimpse of this type of male domination that Shakespeare furnishes his audience with is actually between Baptista, Gremio and Hortensio in the first scene of act one. Baptista is ordering the gentlemen suitors to refrain from wooing his youngest daughter Bianca until his oldest daughter is wed (1.1 48-50). Baptista displays his control over his daughters and their lives by making the decision who should wed first and who will be allowed to keep company with his daughters. There is no input from either daughter in this decision or many others throughout the play. Baptista continues to exhibit supremacy over his daughters through the various interactions with their wooers throughout the play. He talks of marriage and a dowry for Katharine before she even gets introduced to Petruchio (2.1.115-141). Then following their first encounter, Katharine voices her distaste for Petruchio to her father. However, after Petruchio talks over her with oaths of mutual love, Baptista ignores his daughter's objections and promises Katharine's hand to Petruchio (2.1. 283-319) even after Katharine states, "I'll see the hang'd on Sunday first" (299) in response to Petruchio's proposal of a wedding. This scene demonstrates the lack of control women had in their own lives, even before marriage. Katharine did not have a choice in any aspect of her wedding, her father and

Petruchio made all of the decisions for her regardless of what she wanted. Katharine tried to reason with her father one more time before the wedding to voice her distaste for the match:

KATHARINE. No shame but mine. I must forsooth be forc'd/ To give my hand oppos'd
against my heart/ Unto a mad-brain rudesby full of spleen,/ Who woo'd in haste, an
means to wed at leisure./ I told you, I, he was a frantic fool (3. 2. 8-12).

Her pleas were still met with no recognition from her father.

Baptista displayed his supremacy over Bianca as well. Similar to Katharine, he also arranges her marriage to "Lucentio" (Tranio) without her presence or contribution (2.1. 392-397). Whereas Katharine's broker of marriage was based on who would actually accept her as a wife, Bianca's broker was established around which suitor could provide her with the largest monetary inheritance (2.1. 332-335). In neither of these scenes of engagement is there a daughter present or even aware of these actions. Their interests or passion for a suitor is not a factor considered in these marital arrangements. I think that Shakespeare has constructed these scenes to demonstrate to his audience the lack of control that women contain in their lives and the supremacy that they undertake by their fathers.

In contrast, Shakespeare also presents us with characters such as Petruchio, Lucentio, Gremio, and Hortensio, who are able to determine who they are wooing and would like to marry without having to get approval from anyone. These men are free to choose who they will marry as long as the father of the woman agrees to the union. I think that these scenes are there to show the audience the inequality that exists among the genders.

Shakespeare also presents the relationship between Petruchio and Katharine to show his audience gender inequality and male supremacy in a marital relationship. Petruchio's first act of dominance over Katherine occurs almost immediately upon their first meeting when he renames her Kate (2.1. 182-193). I think that this scene is important because it signifies the acts of supremacy that are to follow throughout the play. In that same act Petruchio informs Katharine that they are to be married (2.1. 269-278). He does not ask her to marry him, he simply informs her that she is going to, thus signifying that she does not have any control or say in the matter. Later on in the same scene when they are talking to Baptista he talks over Katharine's pleas to not marry him and speaks for her, thus already removing Katharine's voice from matters and making decisions for her (2.1. 269-317).

The significant acts of control over Katharine occur after the ceremony in acts three and four. Directly after the wedding Petruchio makes his intentions to govern Katharine according to his will well known when he refuses to stay for the celebration dinner completely disregarding her requests to stay (3.2. 184-204). After Katharine demands that she will stay without him he puts his foot down and proclaims her as his property, thus under his rule:

PETRUCHIO: But for my bonny Kate, she must with me,/ Nay, look not big, nor stamp,
nor stare, nor fret,/ I will be master of what is mine own." (3.2. 227-229).

In this scene Petruchio is exerting his supremacy over Katharine by dragging her off with him and not allowing her to attend the marital dinner. He is demonstrating to Katharine that she is just another one of his possessions that he has complete control over. Petruchio drags Katharine away from her friends, family, and home to an isolated cabin. He removes every liberty from her including what to eat and wear as well as when to sleep. Throughout act four Petruchio slowly

removes every liberty that Katharine has in order to rule her completely. He does this “to make her come, and know her keeper’s call” (4.1. 194). Petruchio is trying to make a “puppet” of her so that she will bend to his every wish. This is readily demonstrated when they are arguing about the time of day and Petruchio refuses to leave for her father’s because she will not agree with him (4.3. 187-195). In this scene, like many others, Petruchio refuses to give Katharine what she desires until she agrees with him. He is trying to demonstrate to her that in order for her to get what she wants she must appease him like a dutiful wife that is being governed by her husband. Petruchio further demonstrates his sense of control when he forces Katharine to agree with him on the time of day during the famous sun/moon argument in order for them to travel to her father’s (4.5.2-22). This scene is very important in the play because this is the turning point when Petruchio finally has control over Katharine’s voice. In this scene Katharine finally understands that she must give into her husband’s will or else she will never get anything that she wants. Although Katharine may still have her own thoughts that may not coincide with his, Petruchio still has control over her because she is unable to give voice to them. He persists in this manner throughout the play threatening her until she gives into his will in order to condition her to obey him like a servant.

The last domineering act of the play is when Petruchio orders Kate to “tell the head strong women/ What duty they do owe their lords and husbands” (5.2.130-131). Kate goes on to give a speech to the other wives explaining their proper duties as a wife. The speech signifies Petruchio’s victory over Katherine’s taming. Katharine is admitting that the wives have no power against their husband’s dominance:

KATHARINE. Come, come, you forward and unable worms!/ My mind hath been as big as one of yours,/ My heart as great, my reason haply more,/ To bandy word for word and

frown for frown;/ But now I see our lances are but straws, / Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,/ That seeming to be most which indeed we least are. (5.2.169-175)

The speech is very significant because although I believe that Katharine does not mean the things she says, she still pronounces them to the wives. Even though she may not believe in them, the fact that she is giving voice to these “duties” speaks volumes in regard to Petruchio’s control over Katharine.

These scenes demonstrate the supremacy Petruchio has over Katharine and that he is training his wife to be his servant. Zachary Lamm illuminated on this subject in his article saying, “[Women] serve as...decorations, acting in all obedience with their husbands’ wishes” (3). There is a clear system of hierarchy present within the marriage, with Petruchio at the top. The scenes between Petruchio and Katharine demonstrate the punishment-oriented disciplinary system that was present at the time to help regulate female behavior. This type of system presumes submissive femininity is not natural to a woman and uses objectification as the key manner of enforcement (Lamm 7). These scenes also serve as a representation of the inequality present within their relationship. Petruchio is the controlling force that makes decisions. If Katharine is to say anything, it must be in agreement with Petruchio.

Unlike the original play, *10 Things* modernization does not address many of the aforementioned issues in depth. Actually, the dynamics between the relationships appear much different. The issues appear in the film, but are often blurred over with romance and teenage humor.

The relationship between father and daughters in the modernized adaptation barely compares to the one in the original source. The first thing you notice is that Walter Stratford (Baptista) actually wants his daughters *not* to date. Instead of their father trying to find a proper boyfriend or “suitor” the daughters’, friends are trying to find one. After Mr. Stratford comes up with the new “rules” on dating, Kat (Katherine) is essentially in charge of both her and her sister’s love life, at least in terms of *when* they can date. Mr. Stratford does not try to control who their daughters are dating nor does he even stress meeting the young men. The main tension between Kat and Mr. Stratford’s relationship comes from her desire to go to an East coast school, particularly Sarah Lawrence, when her father wants her to stay at home and go to school. This ensues into many fights and disagreements throughout the film. At one point in the movie Kat demands that her father stop trying to make her decisions for her and he responds with that is his “right” as a father. Kat then protests that what she wants doesn’t matter to him. In this scene the audience gets a glimpse that there might be a consistency between the supremacy that exists with the father in the father/daughter relationship presented in the source material and the one in the film. However, that is quickly diminished when Walter reveals that he is proud of Bianca for acting shrewishly like her older sister at the prom and then lets Kat go to Sarah Lawrence. What little supremacy her father did have over his daughters was extinguished in this scene. The film portrays the daughters as being much more independent from their father.

Unlike the father/daughter relationships in the film, the love relationships do contain indications of male dominance and gender inequality. At times the romantic relationships between teens in the film appear to be equal; upon closer analysis they contain hints of supremacy and inequality but are distorted with romance and teen humor. I think that audiences focus on aspects of the film such as: Kat playing hard to get, Patrick embarrassing himself to

match Kat's embarrassment, and Kat meeting Patrick at the prom instead of him picking her up, to justify the analysis that the relationship is equal when in fact it is not. "Packaged in the appealing visual language of teenage America, Junger's film glosses over the complex of gender and power dynamics that the rougher edges of Shakespeare's drama leave exposed" (Pittman 145). One act of control that can be noted throughout the film is that neither Joey (Gremio) nor Patrick (Petruchio) ever asks Bianca or Kat out, they simply make statements implying that they do not value their opinion or response. This parallels with Petruchio telling Katharine that they are getting married in act two of *Taming*. Another operate of male supremacy is Joey breaking up with Kat because she did not want to have sex with him again. This is another action that shows that the man is in control of the relationship and decides what is going to happen. Similar to Petruchio's treatment of Katharine in the play, Joey does not give Kat what she wants (to keep dating but not have sex) because she will not give him what he wants (to have sex).

Finally, there is also the fact that at the root of it all Patrick is truly trying to change Kat into something he thinks she should be, just like Petruchio does to Katherine. However, in the film Kat is portrayed as someone who is unnaturally shrew-like and actually wants to be like Bianca and all the other girls. It is depicted in a way that inclines audiences to believe that Patrick is helping Kat by changing her and it is a mutually agreed decision. Lamm asserts, "the sense that Kat changes her behavior out of a feeling of mutual affection represents the teen comedy's romance of cultural and sexual equity" (11). He goes on to say, "...the feelings of equality and liberty with which Kat's transformation provides viewers, especially teens, puts under erasure all other concerns the film might raise, as any critique of it hits too close to home" (Lamm 11). These acts that appear to be mutual really undercut any of the major issues of gender inequality and supremacy that are presented in the film. Monique Pittman states, "...the socially

formed gender roles can be tolerated because the love relationship creates an illusion of equality” (Lamm 11).

Another operate that actually weakens the severity of the gender issues is Kat’s final speech at the end of the movie that is supposed to parallel with Katharine’s speech of obedience in the original source. Instead of professing her obedience to Patrick like Katharine does, Kat confesses her love for Patrick. The speech is meant to show that deep down she does have feelings, which only helps support the implication that her shrewish behavior was unnatural in nature and her change was a mutual decision. This speech leaves the audience to believe that underneath Kat’s tough exterior, the Kat that is being displayed at the end has been hiding all this time. The problem with this is that it completely undermines the supremacy that Patrick exerts towards Kat in the film, thus weakening the theme of gender issues that is presented throughout the film.

Gender inequality and male supremacy is an important theme in Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* because it enlightens the issues and brings them to the audience’s attention. Gender inequality and male supremacy was a major issue in the historical context of the play and can still be seen today. I believe that Shakespeare is drawing to these issues to bring them to his audience’s attention. I believe that Shakespeare want his audience to think about these serious issues and the effects that they have on the female race. I don’t think that anyone can conclude without further evidence and support what his direct message to his audience was regarding these issues.

The film adaptation *10 Things* undermines the meaning and seriousness of these themes in multiple ways. Pittman states, “*10 Things I Hate About You* works hard to soften the

obvious gender inequities of the original, but in many ways silences honest and serious debate over gender in the process” (146). As I’ve already mentioned, one of the ways that *10 Things* has weakened the meaning of these themes was by portraying Kat as a woman who desired to be manipulated and changed, thus making Patrick’s supremacy seem less serious and controlling. In addition to that the methods that are used in the movie provoke the audience to find humor in the gender issues, thus softening the patriarchy that is present in the film (Pittman 150). In addition, instead of exploring modernized notions of gender the film actually silences the gender issues and instead turns to the issue of sexuality that is explored through Kat’s table dancing and flashing of her breasts (Pittman 148). Sexuality was not a theme in the original source and has seemed to take the place of certain themes that were present originally that could have been built upon in the adaptation. Pittman asserts, “...by treating the gender question and the broader question of identity in ways that promote laughter and discourage thoughtful questions, the film fails to achieve the status of its Renaissance source” (150).

There are a few alternatives that I believe Junger and his team of writers could have thought about when creating his adaptation of the play that would have allowed for a modernized version of *Taming of the Shrew* while still being consistent with the themes from the original source. I believe that the film would have much more success keeping with the themes of the original had it been portrayed using marital relationships instead of high school love interests. In high school it is hard to see these domineering relationships because it is much easier to terminate this relationship than in a marriage (not saying that none in high school exist). I think that had the film been staged with slightly older characters that were newlyweds it would have drawn a much stronger parallel between the original source and its adaptation. I do have some alternatives that I think would have helped if adapted to the film as it is. First, I believe that if the

reasoning behind Kat's bitterness was removed then that would help harden the themes because the audience would be less inclined to believe that she deep down wanted to be changed. Second, Walter should have had more control over his daughters' relationships. He should have demanded to meet every gentleman caller that Kat and Bianca received before they were allowed to date him, to show his supremacy and control over his daughters. In addition they could have had minor characters that had a brothers that could date whoever without approval, but the females had to seek approval with their parents as well before they could date, thus bringing to light the issue of gender inequality. In addition if some of the romance had been cut out then the audience would have been able to focus on the larger issues but as it is the romance overpowers the issues that are being presented.

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