

Helon Dobbins

ENG 534

Dr. Fox

February 23, 2025

“Girl, So Confusing”: Debating Female Agency in Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*

William Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*, often categorized as a comedy in compilations of his plays, is anything but. Though some lines in the play have a comedic flair, at its heart *Taming* is a tragedy loosely masquerading as a comedy as it revolves around the suppression of a female lead to mold her into a woman palatable to Elizabethan society. Falling in line with the popular subgenre of ‘taming’ comedies of the Elizabethan stage, Shakespeare’s entry into this genre lends itself just as much to a crossover into a tragedy and, perhaps, a cautionary tale to modern audiences. Kate’s inherently strong-willed nature’s demonization by the men in her life eventually leads her to yield to their desires for her survival and concludes her arc in becoming unrecognizable to the feisty heroine she was at the beginning. By entering the play’s conflict around the goal of reshaping ‘unconventional’ women to fit the acceptable ‘feminine’ role of Elizabethan society, Shakespeare presents *Taming* as one of his least identifiable plays to modern theatergoers. Thus, to continue to present itself as a cultural relevance, *Taming* relies on modernized adaptations or changes to the story to stage a revisionist idea of Shakespeare’s original commentary on female empowerment while retaining the core story actively warning against such strong women.

When *Taming* was first performed, it became a part of a common subgenre of Elizabethan comedies. In the initial 1623 printing of the *First Folio*, *Taming* is grouped with comedies in the

table of contents. However, the subgenre of so-called ‘taming’ plays predated Shakespeare and were steeples of Elizabethan comedy. These plays were structured around the supposed ‘taming’ of an unconventional female lead character who, by the end of them, becomes a woman in line with the Elizabethan ideals of womanhood. Shakespeare’s *Taming* focuses on the story of Katherine who, as the ‘shrew’ of the title’s suggestion, does not fit into her society that stresses upon her the importance of marriage. Katherine has her own identity outside of the men in her life who seek to change that to use her for their purposes, the first being her father, Baptista typing Bianca’s future marriage to his hopes for Katherine to settle down. In Act I Scene 1, Baptista says to the visiting Gremio and Hortensio, “For how firmly I am resolved you know / That is not to bestow my youngest daughter / Before I have a husband for the elder.” (Shakespeare, 1, 1, 48-50) From the first scene of the play, Katherine’s desired role is that of a bargaining tool. Baptista knows that it will be a task for him to marry her off due to her temperament, so chaining her future marriage to Bianca’s prospects sets her storyline up as one of destruction of her true self in favor of a more conventional womanly identity. Katherine does not take to her father’s wishes well, understandably, and instead of staying silent, calls him on it. She demands of him if he wants to see her as the pawn of these men she doesn’t like as they compete to marry her so that her more desirable sister can be married off as to fulfill Baptista’s requirements. Katherine calls her potential suitors ‘mates’ to which Baptista chastises her for speaking so low of them. He is the first to voice a wish that Kate was of a ‘gentler, milder, mold’ (Shakespeare, 1, 1, 61) and makes it clear that at present her temperament is hindering the family from moving forward in any sense. She’s treated as an obstacle to overcome rather than a woman wanting to decide her fate for herself.

This hold that the patriarchal ideal of womanhood has on her society tightens on Katherine as the play progresses. Her relationship with Percutio particularly sees her change as he “woos” her to win the bet with Hortensio and it wears her down by no fault of her own but by the design of the men who see her strength of character as the enemy. This desire to mold her into an acceptable woman through a twisted game has cruel consequences that lend themselves heavily to abuse. In Act IV, Kate is being starved by Petruchio and Grumio who use withholding food as a tool to get her to agree to his demands. Petruchio goes so far as to chide Katherine’s wish for the cap by reminding her that she can’t have one until she is ‘gentle.’ (Shakespeare, 4, 3, 75-76) Even this late into the play, under torture, Katherine still has her opinions and wit, but there are marked changes in her brought on by her treatment by the man claiming that he’s doing this out of ‘love’ for her. Later in Act IV she realizes that for her survival she must agree with everything Petruchio says. As they go to Baptista’s, Petruchio tests how willing she is to obey him by having her repeat simple statements to him in the exact manner he said them. This is, once again, Petruchio exercising his power over Kate by questioning her sanity at one point during this exchange. Though intended in a joking way, this line comes off as furthering the fact that he enjoys having her submit herself to him rather than realizing that if she had gone mad he would be the culprit. Act IV especially comes across as an examination of how harmful it is when the autonomy of women is treated as something to get rid of so that they become a demure shell of themselves to please the men around them.

In Act V, Kate finds herself a shell of who she once was. In Act V Scene 2, Petruchio makes one last bet with his friends that Kate will be the most obedient of the wives if they all are in a room together. Demeaning Kate for the sake of his friends, who tease him about his choice of bride, is the final example of how he still sees her as this object to continually manipulate if

she goes against what he thinks a woman should be. The conversation Kate has with the widow is an important one to draw the comparison between the widow and who Katherine has become throughout the play. “Your husband being troubled with a shrew / Measures my husband’s sorrow by his woe / and now you know my meaning.” (Shakespeare, 5., 2, 29-31) The widow tells Kate that she has suffered the same fate as all women who enter relationships with men who seek to ‘tame’ their natures. These relationships only end with the woman worn down and in survival mode for the rest of their lives, married to these men. Even as different as she is, Kate will spend the rest of her married life knowing she will never meet Petruchio’s standards for an acceptable wife. Knowing that he’s capable of verbal and physical abuse, she must continue to please him to avoid those circumstances. Though the play ends, like all Shakespearean comedies, with a wedding, the ending is ironically a cruel joke. Kate ends the play figuratively caged by the men in her life, presenting that the ending for her is nothing short of a tragedy. Though *Taming* markets itself to modern audiences as a comedy, in the eyes of modern scholarship there arises great criticism of the treatment Kate endured throughout the play and why *Taming* has a divisive legacy in the academic and theatre world among Shakespearean comedies.

In the centuries since its premiere, *Taming*’s legacy is uniquely controversial in Shakespearean canon. With the emergence of feminist criticism in the last century, *Taming* has many differing views on Katherine’s character arc and Shakespeare’s views on women in general. In the Folger Shakespeare Library’s article “About Shakespeare’s *‘Taming of the Shrew’*” Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine suggest that “yet by the end of the play, Katherine, whether she has been tamed or not, certainly acts much changed.” (Mowat and Werstine) The analyses of Katherine’s change throughout the play vary in their readings of feminist or antifeminist but

come to a consensus that she is a dynamic character who does drastically change throughout. Author Jean Howard in her article “Feminist Criticism” emphasizes this change in Katherine as the framing for her argument. She argues that “a second moment of feminist historical work has turned away from ahistorical theory building (the quest, above all, for a single, transhistorical explanation for patriarchy) and away from the valorisation of essential female difference and has devoted itself to elaborating the variety of ways in which gender difference has been culturally and historically transmitted.” (Howard) While this argument is interestingly in the middle ground of the ‘feminist vs antifeminist’ debate, *Taming* analyses fit into, it identifies the way critics define a work as either ‘feminist’ or ‘antifeminist’ neglects putting that work into its historical context in a modern atmosphere. There is too much modernization of the arguments around *Taming*, in Howard’s opinion, to remember what it was at the time of its premiere. Though an interesting read, Howard fails in the argument to connect how crucial it is for modern audiences of Shakespeare to feel spoken to by these plays. The reason that other plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or even a comedy like *Much Ado About Nothing* remain popular is because there is a trace of something in each of these plays, everyone in the audience can relate to or find fascinating. *Taming*’s issue in the modern era is that the overall surface-level message presents itself as demeaning to an audience of modern women or people identifying with a female experience. Those who stage *Taming* in modern-day realize this unflattering perception so there, in response, have been multiple reframings and restagings to present the message of *Taming* as a more empowering lesson on retaining identity and staying true to oneself.

As far as modernizing the productions of *Taming* for the 21st-century stage, there are attempts made by theatre companies that range in success largely depending on how they stage the updated play. One notable recent reimagining by the Royal Shakespeare Company in

Stratford Upon Avon, staged in 2019 saw the story remain the same, albeit with every character gender-swapped. This production was set to tour but the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled tour plans before its intended tour dates in 2020. Writing in a review of this new production for *The Guardian*, Michael Billington gave this iteration three out of five stars, citing that, in his opinion, the play “did not go far enough” in terms of committing itself to the gender-swapping aspect. He wrote: “The problem is exacerbated by the fact that Joseph Arkley is an unusually mild and submissive Katherine.” Reading that quote in context to the full review, it leaves questions open to any efficacy of reimagining *Taming*. With a play so steeped in antiquated notions of gender roles and views that do not reflect those of a modern audience, it seems that swapping the gender of every character does no good if the goal is updating audiences’ views of the text. Billington concluded his review that “for all the care lavished on it, I came away more puzzled than enlightened by this production. It banishes the framing device, involving a drunken tinker, which plausibly suggests the entire action is a waking dream.” Though Shakespeare is meant to be performed, and many other plays have updated their stories through reimagining, why does *Taming* fall flat, especially in its most sincere efforts? Perhaps reasoning that the success of revising *Taming* for the modern stage is not solely dependent on one thing but rather would find the best success in considering *why* this play needs to present itself as a valid production for modern audiences to see. Answering that simple question is anything but simple, and an adequate answer involves every department if the goal lies in presenting a modernization successfully. *Taming’s* fight for its place in the minds of modern audiences is valid, certainly, but its opponent is the common association with antiquated characterizations at its heart. Modern productions that wish to keep the core of Shakespeare’s story cannot change the play so much

that the story is too unrecognizable is the pitfall that theater companies will face no matter which aspect of the play they choose to present in a new light.

The stage isn't the only place *Taming* sought to appeal to modern audiences. One of the modern most and well-known iterations of *Taming* is the 1999 romantic comedy high school set retelling *10 Things I Hate About You*. Directed by Gil Junger, it became an instant classic coming-of-age story in its own right. Though only structurally based on the play, like a few other notable Shakespearean-inspired rom-coms of this era of film, *10 Things* fundamentally alters the message it sends to its intended audience of, primarily, young women. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, many romantic comedies drew inspiration from works of classic literature intending to update the story and try to do something new with it, all with varying degrees of success. The filmmakers behind *10 Things* understood that producing a modernized version of the story would need altering if they wanted the target demographic to walk away from the film with the popular empowerment messages that this era of rom-coms knew the audience responded to. Here the "shrew" is Kat Stratford, a girl who doesn't fit in with the high school crowd, she's outspoken and doesn't care for the social hierarchy of the school. but it endears her to those who see her as a project like Patrick and Cameron. Both boys have their visions for what they wish Kat to become for their purpose of 'dating' her (whether for real or the purpose of a joke). In *10 Things*, the frame of an Elizabethan 'taming' play is mixed with the 2000s era focus on female empowerment through friendships and life outside of relationships with men. Kat is encouraged by Bianca to remain true to herself and not lose her uniqueness as she starts to navigate the teenage challenges of love and heartbreak. As a modern retelling, *10 Things* ends on this note of empowerment and emphasis that a woman can be both feminine and strong coincidentally. Kat Stratford, the 'not-so-shrewish' shrew became a cultural icon of this 2000s-era 'cool' girl who

had her own opinions and didn't stifle them to find love. The outdated idea presented in the original play needed to be scrapped in favor of something that would resonate and not leave the audience with a bad taste in the mouth. Though *10 Things* is a big-screen adaptation, it's likely how a demographic of today's teens and young women know of *Taming*, and that in itself might be a stretch if the person in question doesn't know that bit of movie trivia.

This struggle is not one many other Shakespeare plays face. In addition to *Taming*, most notably *The Merchant of Venice* comes up as another contender for its problematic themes in modern eyes. Yet, *Merchant* does not go through the attempts *Taming* does to reinvent itself. Making Shakespeare's works into modern adaptations loosely based on the plays is quite straightforward, but *Taming*'s more complex dilemma shows that its modernization hopes to separate itself from its reputation. Usually with Shakespearean modernizations, some new twist is added for fun while the story is largely kept familiar. Other "modern" Shakespeare retelling examples include *The Lion King*'s take on *Hamlet* or *She's the Man*'s fun spin on the *Twelfth Night*. *Taming*, though, needs to present itself to modern audiences in new frames supporting the idea that not all Shakespeare's works retain modern relevance. By staging a story that relies on themes that alienate a portion of the audience, a production of *Taming* sets itself up for failure before the curtain rises or the opening title sequence. This is not to say that productions of *Taming* in modern Shakespeare playhouses are shelved altogether, in fact, quite the opposite as recent years prove. But in their performances, there needs to be consideration of why this production goes ahead in place of another comedy. To stage *Taming* in its original context, the actors and audience both need to go in with the understanding of the play's historical context and that the ideas Shakespeare presents are not intended as a reflection of modern views. While traditional stagings are most common, some playhouses tend to steer clear in favor of something

more modern and those iterations have varying degrees of success with audiences. Such attempts to modernize stagings of *Taming* include an all-female cast, staged reimaginations like the aforementioned 2019 Royal Shakespeare Company-led production, or some other combination of those things. On the Folger Shakespeare Library's page for *Taming*, the articles and essays to accompany the text heavily focus on these gender politics of the play as well as another modern retelling with the play *Kiss Me, Kate*. These specific emphases acknowledge the argument that *Taming* retains relevance through modern retelling and, although not unlike other Shakespeare entries that also have modernized adaptations, must continue to reinvent itself as a story that has more to say than just an incredibly misogynistic view on how women should behave themselves. Stressing this particular analysis is telling in the sense that the editors of the Folger consider the impact *Taming* has is more harmful than lighthearted as was intended for an Elizabethan audience. As times change and societal changes occur, some stories become outdated in their general appeal. *Taming* lends itself to the category. Now, women have more freedom to choose a life outside marriage and have their own opinions. Any modern production of *Taming*, in its original text or adaptation, thus must undertake the consideration of the scrutiny of modern audiences and how best to present the story as one with a different historical context that does not fit into modern ideas around women.

With a divisive legacy, *Taming of the Shrew* isn't a title that first comes to mind when discussing Shakespearean comedy. Though billed as one, the modern angles of analysis of the play often stress the elements of tragedy in the story. Katherine's descent from independence into subservience reads, in part, just as tragically as the tragedies or some of the histories, especially in the devastating character arc Kate undergoes to be 'tamed.' *Taming's* unique place in the Shakespearean canon and the debate it sparks in academic and theater circles is rooted in modern

controversy. Some analyses of the play seek to place that modern controversy in conversation with the play's historical context, while others focus more on the problematic messaging the play sends to a female audience. Though not a play many modern female audience members would walk away feeling empowered by, some modern adaptations (staged or on the big screen) of the story stress that *Taming* offers a chance to discuss how women should remain true to who they are and not tamper with their strong will for anyone, especially not to fit themselves into a society that caters to the male standard.

Works Cited

Billington, Michael. "The Taming of the Shrew Review – RSC's Battle of Reversed Sexes." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 19 Mar. 2019, www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/mar/19/the-taming-of-the-shrew-review-rsc-royal-shakespeare-theatre-stratford-upon-avon. Accessed 26 Feb. 2025.

Howard, Joan. *Feminisms and Early Modern Texts: Essays for Phyllis Rackin*, ed. Rebecca Ann Bach and Gwynne Kennedy (Selinsgrove: The Susquehanna University Press, 2010), pp. 13-24

Movat, Barbara, and Paul Werstine. "About Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew." *Folger Shakespeare Library*, www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/the-taming-of-the-shrew/about-shakespeares-the-taming-of-the-shrew/. Accessed 28 Jan. 2025.

Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. 1623