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Holding a Mirror up to Nature? Adapting *The Taming of the Shrew* for Teenagers and Pedagogy

Introduction: *The Taming of the Shrew* as a Problem(atic) Play

Next to *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's *The Taming of The Shrew* is probably one of the hardest plays to stage/film in the 21st century due to its misogynist content dressed up in the form of a comedy. Comparing how the recent production in the Stefan Jaracz Theatre (2007-2013), Łódź, Poland, and a Hollywood off-shoot *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) update the play's gender wars for a specifically teenage audience will show how misguided the Polish production was compared to its Hollywood counterpart. The analysis of critical and audience responses to the two modernisations of the play will further illuminate the discrepancies between Shakespeare criticism, critical reception and audience readings, proving how continually problematic and controversial the play and its theatrical/cinematic incarnations may be.

In his Introduction to the play, G.R. Hibbard (1996, 40) notices, as many others before and after him, "*The Taming of the Shrew*, like *The Merchant of Venice*, is one of those plays by Shakespeare that some critics rather wish wasn't by him. Most books on the play record varying degrees of discomfort with what seems to be its rambunctious sexism." To pinpoint that the theme of gendered inequality at the heart of the play is too heavy and serious for the world of comedy, Charles Marowitz's appropriation of the play—*The Shrew*, 1973, shows Petruchio raping Kate before she delivers her final declaration of submission. The idea of dissonance between subject-matter and genre seems to be further supported by a remark by Ann Thompson (2003, 21), who considers it is more appropriate to talk about *The Taming* as a modern problem play in the light of divided opinions it has generated and continues to generate. When it comes to performance, some contemporary actresses also express their "problem" with the play, finding Katherina's part especially challenging. For instance, Josie Lawrence (qtd. in O'Connor 276), Kate in the RSC

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production in 1995, describes Petruchio's treatment of his wife upon their arrival to his house in plain terms as "abuse" and "physical and mental torture".

Furthermore, *The Taming of the Shrew* seems to have a bad press amongst some contemporary writers. Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, Anne Tyler, commissioned to rewrite the play by the publishing house Hogarth, claims she has always loathed it. Turning it into a novel is supposed to offer her a chance to solve "the problem" of Kate's, and Shakespeare's, motivation (Tobar). Finally, in his review of Michael Bogdanov's RSC production in 1978, *The Guardian's* theatre critic, Michael Billington (qtd. in Thompson 17), famously wondered "whether there is any reason to revive a play which seems totally offensive to our age and society". The question should be especially addressed if the play is revived with a teenage audience in mind.

Shakespeare, Feminism and Pedagogy

There is a great chasm between Shakespeare's times with their attitudes to women and marriage and those of the early 21st century. However, comparing the definition of the word "shrew" from the 1960s edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* where its first meaning represents a scolding woman and the second a small mouse-like animal to its current edition which reverses that order proves that there is a huge gap separating us even from our immediate ancestors (qtd. in O'Connor 258). It also explains why it was possible for Elizabeth Taylor to deliberately deliver Kate's final speech of wifely submission in earnest in the 1966 adaptation by Franco Zeffirelli—a risqué choice for any contemporary stage or film actress.

The gap that separates us from the 1960s is even more discernible in the modern classroom. In his practical guide *Teaching Shakespeare*, Rex Gibson (30) claims that, "Feminism is the fastest-growing and most widespread of all recent approaches to Shakespeare. Is it also the new perspective most obviously present in schools and colleges. For many of today's students, it is a familiar viewpoint". This was not the case when their teachers went to school a few decades earlier. Gibson (31) presents three most familiar feminist approaches to interpreting Shakespeare. The first one sees his plays as "sympathetic to feminism, genuinely alert to female experience, and actively subversive of male dominance". Conversely, the second one looks at Shakespeare's works as "supportive of patriarchy" and as "a key instrument in sustaining male domination". Finally, the third middle way positioned somewhere between these two extremes is exemplified by these critics for whom the plays express "the realities on the limited power and lower status of women in Elizabethan-Jacobean England" but also show "the potential for female emancipation: the possibility of free and

equal choice of lifestyle”. As Gibson (31) concludes, faced with such competing readings, each teacher and student will have to make up their own mind whether Shakespeare criticises, praises or merely describes the status-quo.

***The Taming of the Shrew* and the Director’s Dilemma**

Such choices are not merely made in the classroom but are part and parcel of directors’ work. One approach is to perform the play as ironic or possessing a deeper meaning by emphasising, if not overemphasising, the framing device, which helps delegate *The Taming of the Shrew* into the world of male fantasy, the wishful-thinking of a drunk. As Sean McEvoy (132) explains, this strategy allows us to see gender roles in society as constructs, roles played by men and women that do not reflect their true nature. A director can also choose grotesque and farce to tone down the offensive content by turning it into comic exuberance.

Thus, in the face of the controversies the play provokes, one needs to decide if, for example, the notoriously difficult final speech that Katherina delivers is to be spoken in earnest, as seems to be the case with Franco Zeffirelli’s film, angrily, tongue-in-cheek, or ironically. Despite many attempts to read the play as supportive of gender equality and sympathetic to women’s rights, the text as such does not seem to offer any ambiguity as to its message—a complete submission to the male domination or, as Sean McEvoy (131) describes it, “so unambiguous a statement of women’s subservience that feminist critics who wish to argue that the play is no simple story of just male triumph over a foolishly rebellious woman have much work to do.” Ann Thompson (18) agrees that “If played straight, with a minimum of interpretative direction, Shakespeare’s play contains no such indication of a comfortable, egalitarian compromise but rather leaves its audience with the impression that a woman’s role consists in graceful submission.”

The Production in the Stefan Jaracz Theatre, Łódź, Poland

The misgivings voiced by Billington in 1978 did not seem to plague the Łódź show (2007-2013) which did what Thompson warns against, namely played it straight. Omitting the Induction deprived the production of any distancing device, and the decision to cut out Katherina’s final submission speech was the only indication of discomfort with the play’s thorny issues of gender inequality and misogyny.

The play was in the repertoire for a few years. The name of the director did not feature anywhere. The artistic director had taken over the production to,

as rumour had it, save it from disaster. Still, as one of the more sympathetic reviewers, Olga Ptak, notices, *The Taming of the Shrew* was addressed primarily to high schools whose pupils had been regularly visiting the show and laughing at the eternal sex wars. Ptak further observes that even though it had nothing new to offer when it comes to Shakespeare's text, its main advantage was that it was extremely funny. The humour, as is further explained, lay in modernising the text to include a few contemporary references and jokes. Noticing, rather patronisingly, how a high school audience is the hardest to please due to their limited attention span, the reviewer praises the show for its almost farcical quality and over-the-top acting style, especially seen in the performance of Ireneusz Chop, whose Petruchio appeared to be a stand-in for a contemporary young boy who has his ways with women. The proof of the show's success, the review claims, could be seen in the fact that despite his abuse of Kate (Katarzyna Cynke), the young female members of the audience were uniformly smitten by him (Ptak).

Indeed, the production featured actors in modern dress and a few props connoting the modern era, such as take-away packaging or a motorbike—all to the sound of techno music that the producers believed represented youth and spoke to their sensibilities. It appears, however, that the translation of the play by Barańczak needed some modifications for the updating to be completed and not replete with such anachronisms like servants or horses. To appeal to their target audience, the production featured Katherina in a black baggy jumper, jeans, a black leather jacket and Dr Martens, all to visually signify her rebellion. Still, it did not seem to explain what the girl was really objecting to. Nor did it try to justify the reasons why that apparently modern-looking female rebel agreed to marry under her father's command. It appeared therefore that Kate's "shrewishness" was nothing more than a costume, a mask worn by a girl who was actually hoping someone was going to see through it and propose. Her reaction to Petruchio's abuse consisted of mostly silly faces. Impersonating Kate as a childish young woman whose flamboyant gestures, mannerisms and shrieky voice irritated rather than inspired sympathy, Katarzyna Cynke created the impression that she struggled with and felt uncomfortable in the role.

Petruchio's body language, on the other hand, was hard to read due to the fact that he appeared drunk or half-drunk during most of his stage time. It seemed that he stood in for a young man whose strategy of seduction consists of abuse to emphasise his alpha male's virility combined with an abundance of over-the-top complements to show his romantic nature underneath; unfortunately, the fact that the actor playing Petruchio was well over forty turned him into an embarrassing version of a man in a mid-life crisis.

The scenes of verbal and physical abuse were especially problematic. On the one hand, the audience heard a text whose cruel and primitive language is

hard to accept for a modern viewer. On the other hand, the acting was light and farcical, creating a huge dissonance between the aural and visual fields. The effect was extremely confusing especially for those who had not read the play.

“So Who Tamed Who?” Sample Audience Reaction

The main problem with the production was that it only went as far as updating Shakespeare’s play visually by means of a few tokens representing the modern era. It did not try to address the play’s overt misogyny or think of appropriate ways of updating its gender wars theme so that it would fit rather than undermine its visually contemporary context. Its patronising attitude towards youth in the guise of education became apparent when we examine a sample of teenagers’ own reactions which prove that the show failed to resonate with them. Judging from the reviews placed on the website of one of the high-schools whose pupils saw the production as a double bill with Shelagh Stephenson’s *The Memory of Water*, the first noticeable thing is that only twelve out of eighteen reviews actually mention *The Taming of the Shrew*, some only in passing. Out of the twelve, two reviews notice chaos on stage, two claim to have left the theatre feeling embarrassed, two complain about the scenography, two mind the acting, one accuses the show of being boring and lacking in humour, one observes that the production made the content look trivial, and finally one student wonders if its message may really be that an obstinate woman could be turned into a mild lamb through male domination (Kopeć). Finally, in another online review “I kto tu kogo poskromił?” (So Who Tamed Who?) an anonymous teenager explains in more detail the problems with this update:

I think that the director’s idea to use graffiti as the main background combined with the archaic language and modern dress failed completely. On top of it, techno music in the background irritated me further and made me pity the director’s attitude towards youth. I think Mr Zawodziński [the artistic director] never carried out any audience research. Otherwise he would have known that graffiti and primitive and dirty jokes do not appeal to most youth. Watching the modern setting and costumes the audience could forget that the characters come from a play written at the times when women had nothing to say, which makes the production unbelievable and nonsensical. The director should have stuck to the 16th c. or updated the text. Unfortunately, the attempt to do both had a poor effect. (wikakoz2) [translation mine]

It seems then that going in the direction of farce did not appeal or salvage the play for modern young viewers. Dumbing it down did not find favour with them either. Perhaps if the production had kept the Induction, the dated presentation of

gender wars would then have been placed in inverted commas, making it more palatable. As it was, the production only reinforced the stereotypes of a silly submissive blonde and an aggressive male brute. Whereas such behaviour patterns may not characterise the reality of the modern Polish high school, these stereotypes are still not uncommon in society at large. If the production had challenged such representations of femininity and masculinity, it could still have produced laughter but of a reflective nature.

10 Things I Hate About You

Unlike the Stefan Jaracz's unsuccessful attempt to connect with the modern viewer, *10 Things I Hate About You* directed by Gil Junger succeeds despite many critical views to the contrary. One argument could be that it is easier to temper with Shakespeare's text in an offshoot where one is not constrained by the text of the play. Still, considering that the adapters, Karen McCullah and Kirsten Smith, had other constraints, such as teen comedy genre requirements, to work around on top of finding equivalents for Shakespeare's basic plot line and characters, *10 Things* fares quite well.

Most importantly, the adapters managed to complete all the loose threads in Shakespeare's play by giving them a clear and valid motivation. Thus, Kat's "bitchiness" is a rebellion against the pressures of popularity and the need to fit in at whatever cost. It springs from the fact that she fell for the wrong boy and spent the night with him on the day her mother left. When she decides not to sleep with him again, he loses interest. Her refusal to date is thus motivated by her unpleasant sexual experience and her attitude towards her younger sister is triggered by the need to protect her rather than by jealousy. Because Bianca cannot date until Kat does, the plot then repeats Shakespeare's motif of mercenary interest. For Bianca to become available, Patrick Verona (Petruchio) is paid by her admirers to take Kat out. Patrick is a wild boy with a reputation for violence and so he seems a perfect choice for "the heinous bitch." The greatest diversion from Shakespeare's play is that, as John O'Connor (296) observes, instead of taming her, Patrick tames himself. He not only quits smoking, but starts reading feminist literature, goes to girls' rock bands' concerts, and looks after Kat when she gets drunk at a party. The film finishes happily with both growing up from cartoonish farcical representations of a "bitch" and a "bad boy" to a couple that embraces their newly found love, appreciates and respects each other for who they are as well as possibly integrates more within the school context as a result.

The Critic's Dilemma

Even though the 2013 list of top ten most successful Shakespeare derivatives compiled by *The Observer* critic, Philip French, praises the film as the funniest and cleverest update of the sex wars, the film does not have a very good reputation amongst numerous Shakespeare scholars. Richard Burt (206-207) believes that Shakespeare teen films are examples of “conservative feminism” that use “Shakespeare’s cultural authority to legitimate a rather oppressive notion of female intelligence” which “infantilizes rather than liberates teen girls.” Monique L. Pittman (100) observes that Kat, a supposed anti-establishment young woman, ends up as a hybrid of both “independent pop feminists and socially integrated, heteronormative high-school girls.” Diana E. Henderson (137) reads the film’s ending where in place of Kate’s submission speech Kat reads out a love poem addressed to Patrick entitled “Ten Things I Hate About You” as proof that love temporarily tames Kat’s intelligence and sarcasm “replacing them with emotional submission.” Finally, Deborah Cartmell (214) argues that the fact that the film does not “recreate Kate’s final speech, suggests that the play’s sexual politics are far too complex and problematic for a cinema audience at the end of the twentieth century.”

The vision of the film’s conservative, regressive and oppressive conceptions of gender are challenged by O’Connor (296), who claims that *10 Things I Hate About You* shows “a keen awareness of late 20th-century gender politics that is nonetheless never allowed to become preachy,” seeing the protagonists as two non-conformists who are too bright and too individual for society but yet find strength in their relationship and mutual appreciation. Catherine Driscoll (144) further observes that the film does not just show “[what] is often also attributed to Katherina in productions and commentary: that all girls want a boy at heart and that there is a boy for every girl. That Patrick learns the same lessons for himself makes all the difference.”

Teenagers Defend the Movie

These more affirmative critical readings mirror teenagers’ own reactions to the film whose score on IMDb.com is seven stars out of ten with the overwhelming majority of over five hundred reviews being positive. Aside from the obvious feel good factor element, it seems to speak to their real-life experience and offer more than just a good laugh. Unlike critical opinions voiced by adults, many young reviewers find Kat the coolest character in the teen movie history. They are impressed with her strength, intelligence and courage to express her opinions. As one reviewer confesses, “Julia Stiles has been my favorite actress since I saw

the film, she is a perfect inspiration for teenage girls. The role of Katarina Stratford showed me that a girl doesn't have to be what everyone wants, you should be an individual and wear and believe whatever you want" (Tanya). For another one, "This character is a particularly good role model as although she made mistakes she learnt from them and never let any 'guy', or anybody else take advantage of her again" (Emily). Numerous reviewers notice how the film relates to teenagers' lives and their high-school experience without treating them in a patronising fashion, seeing the film as a tasteful lesson on growing up and respecting difference. Quite a few could recognise themselves or their peers in the characters. Where the critics see problematic gender politics, they see equality and emphasise that "the boys [...] have to go through the same painful process and learn the same lessons" as the girls (Sara). Instead of insidious Hollywood ideologies advocating heteronormativity and conservative perception of femininity, they see the overriding message of the film as "Love, trust, and respect must be earned" (Sara).

Conclusion: "Doing it right..."

I wish to conclude by using Sara's words as they perfectly encapsulate why the Stefan Jaracz Theatre's update failed and *10 Things I Hate About You* worked:

Doing it right, you see, is not about putting the thing into modern dress and language or adding gimmicks you think will appeal to people who might otherwise expect themselves to be bored. Doing it right is about deconstructing something old until you get right down to the barest timeless truth of the thing [...], and then—and only then—reconstructing the story around that truth in the spirit of the original author, but dressing it according to your own zeitgeist.

Perhaps one last lesson that should be learned from both the Stefan Jaracz Theatre's failure with the young audience and its Hollywood counterpart's failure with critics is that our adult cynical view of the world may not correspond to the more positive readings that an update of *The Taming of the Shrew* might inspire and offer its teen audience. As Martha Tuck Rozett observes (17), "It may well be that student first readers do—an should—differ from their teachers as 'interpretive communities' and that those differences can become a positive element in the teaching-learning process, not merely obstacles to be overcome." Where we see oppressive ideologies, they find solace even if such interpretations seem naive or against the grain. In our pedagogical efforts to make Shakespeare connect, we allow our critical stance determine in advance the meaning of a given work; we often deconstruct the tales that they find

empowering. Learning about what they have to say about modern productions of this difficult play may serve as a valuable lesson for theatre practitioners, critics and teachers alike.

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