



## The Taming of the Shrews

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### **Makrancos hölgyek megzabolázása.**

**Absztrakt:** A *makrancos hölgy* központi kérdése – avagy hogyan, illetve milyen eszközökkel szelídíthető meg egy féktelen, éles nyelvű nő, aki mindenkinek ellentmond – férfiak ezreit foglalkoztatja immáron évszázadok óta. Ezért e tanulmány középpontjában a rakoncátlan hölgyek megszelídítésének összehasonlítása áll, amihez Shakespeare híres színdarabját, *A makrancos hölgyet*, illetve annak népszerű filmadaptációját, Gil Junger *10 dolog, amit utálok benned* című alkotását elemzem. A dolgozatban górcső alá veszem, hogyan próbálták a férfiak a kora újkorban, majd a modern világban engedelmességre készíteni a nőket. Emellett bemutatom, hogyan vélekedtek felvilágosult feminista gondolkodók a sokat emlegetett, úgynevezett szelídítési módszerekről, amiket a férfi főszereplők alkalmaznak a két műben.

### **Abstract**

The important question of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* – or how and with what means one can tame an unbridled, sharp-tongued woman who contradicts every word one utters – has been keeping thousands of men occupied for centuries now. Hence, the main topic of this study will be based on an in-depth comparison of shrew taming in Shakespeare's famous play *The Taming of the Shrew* and its adaptation, Gil Junger's successful film, *10 Things I Hate About You*. In this study, I will scrutinize how the early modern and modern man tried to make a woman obey, besides, how advanced feminist thinkers judged these so-called taming methods used by the male protagonists.

From a 21<sup>st</sup> century advanced social perspective, the taming of Katherine Minola from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is a fairly controversial topic. Nonetheless, the tools used to tame Kat Stratford in Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You* are widely regarded (especially among feminists) almost as questionable as the methods utilized in the aforementioned early modern English comedy. The reason why I chose this play and this particular adaptation of the play is that both of them are fascinating to analyse for a person (especially a woman) living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who have been socialized according to different social norms than in the early modern era when the play was written. Shakespeare's play in itself is a very interesting and complex piece, particularly if we approach it from a feminist perspective. My main reason to analyse the play together with the film, however, is that although the film was made centuries later, in a completely different era, its main theme still happens to be shrew taming. Even though the shrew taming may not have as drastic an outcome as in the play, the tools used to tame the female protagonists are similarly questionable, which may raise some questions from a moral point of view.

## The Taming of Katherine

Unruly women were a great “concern” for men in the Elizabethan era (Detmer, 1997, 273). Therefore, all gentlemen of the time, like Petruchio, would have agreed that every shrew has to be tamed. Petruchio, in the hope of a (financially) profitable marriage, is determined to tame Katherine; he tortures the woman using a number of methods, which would by no means be acceptable in most cultures today. Nevertheless, in early modern English society, the verbal or physical disciplining of unruly women was not uncommon, in fact, it was considered necessary (Detmer, 1997, 275-76), and the taming of such shrewish women was a popular topic of literary works as well. That is why Shakespeare’s play was a popular, well-received comedy in its own era.

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, *The Taming of the Shrew* has received a considerable amount of criticism. Although it is obvious in the play that Kate suffers during the taming procedure, in early modern times it did not cause public outrage. Nonetheless, modern feminist thinkers offer fairly different interpretations of Shakespeare’s play.

Petruchio never hits Katherine, nevertheless, he is a confident user of verbal abuse and humiliation. Although he does not use physical force to tame his wife, sleep and food deprivation can still be considered forms of physical abuse. According to Jochen Petzold, Petruchio uses both the “power of language” and physical power to tame Kate (2006, 161-162). However, physical abuse proved to be more effective than verbal, especially at the beginning of the play. As Petzold writes, Petruchio’s first plan is to win Kate by “verbally changing her identity”, by intentionally interpreting every word Kate utters in a way that it would not sound shrewish and provocative but as if she were a nice and gentle woman, who has every intention of marrying Petruchio (2006, 161). Hard though Petruchio tries to convince Kate to marry him with sweet-sounding words, he does not succeed. Hence, he realises he has to change tactics; Petruchio persuades Katherine to marry him by lying to her, saying that Baptista (Katherine’s father) has already given his blessing to the wedding, thus everything is arranged, so that the heroine has no other choice but to cooperate (Petzold, 2006, 162). Petruchio’s tactics are so well-planned that neither Kate nor Baptista questions the other’s decision, so this can be read as the first step of the taming procedure.

Nevertheless, as Petzold further explains, “the actual ‘taming’ is not primarily achieved through words” (2006, 162), suggesting that the man’s physical superiority made a more significant impact. Namely, the most outstanding effect of the taming process is achieved by “withholding food and sleep”, which physically weakens Katherine (Petzold, 2006, 162). According to Wayne Rebhorn, “in order to tame his shrew once he has married her, Petruchio essentially turns away from rhetoric and relies on another traditionally male weapon, physical force” (1995, 318). This statement again refers to the era’s traditionally accepted disciplinary tools. The success of physical taming is best demonstrated in the scenes when “the emphasis is again placed on language” (Petzold, 2006, 162). After days without food and sleep, when the married

couple are on their way to Padua (to Bianca's wedding), Petruchio puts Katherine to the test, claiming the sun is the moon and the old Vincentio is a young woman. As Petzold also points out, Katherine is hardly convinced by her husband's impossible statements, but she is too exhausted and powerless to resist anymore; "she gives in because Petruchio has the (physical) power to defer the journey to Padua indefinitely" (2006, 162). Michael Shapiro concludes Petruchio's tactics the following way: "At the verbal level, he is treating her as if she were an ideal gentlewoman, while at the physical level he is trying to terrify her with displays of violence and break her spirit by weakening her body" (1993, 159). Thus, this usage of contradiction is proved to be the key to his success in breaking Katherine.

### *The Taming of Katherine – From the Perspective of Feminist Critics*

As I mentioned previously, *The Taming of the Shrew* has been the subject of a considerable amount of criticism, especially from a feminist point of view. Even though we are aware of the social background of the time and the fact that the genre of the play is a comedy, yet, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century reading, it is inevitable that the empathy we feel for the main character (Kate) influences our overall opinion of the Shakespearean play.

On the other hand, according to Ann Blake, if we see this play as a comedy, knowing that what we see is fiction, we can give ourselves the permission to laugh; she explains that comedies let the audience react to certain situations "less seriously" and "less responsibly" than they would do "in real life" (2002, 244). At the same time, Blake acknowledges that there are many people who find it impossible to laugh at the act of shrew-taming, and they rather find the whole procedure "offensive", cruel and "distasteful" (2002, 242). Furthermore, Blake offers more examples when the play became a symbol to "protest against the oppression of women, and human cruelty" (2002, 243). Blake explains that some critics, among them Charles Marowitz saw the play as "brutal, sadistic, and the process of taming as a horrifying anticipation of the modern technique for brainwashing" (2002, 243). Additionally, Blake quotes Michael Billington's question whether it is necessary to make new productions of the play which is so harmful and irreconcilable "to our age and society" (2002, 243). Billington states that *The Taming of the Shrew* is a "barbaric and disgusting play", which should not ever be presented because the "sheer brutality" it depicts is "almost unbearable" (qtd. in Blake, 2002, 243). As Blake writes, the taming plot in the play is commonly "aligned" with domestic violence and misogyny by feminist critics; but she also draws attention to the fact that these studies are "historically influenced", and we should make a comparison "between historical records and literary narratives" when analysing this play (2002, 244). In other words, this statement tries to highlight that our existing historical knowledge can greatly influence our understanding of a literary work.

Another feminist critic who dissects the play from a feminist perspective is Emily Detmer. Detmer argues in her essay that even though Petruchio applies a so-called

“civilized dominance” for “subordinating” Kate, “without resorting to the common man’s brute strength”, Petruchio’s methods should still be regarded as “domestic violence” (1997, 274). The critic emphasizes that although Petruchio never hits Kate, it does not mean that his actions towards and treatment of the woman can be understood as “less oppressive” or even appreciated (1997, 275). As Detmer writes, when early modern “wife-beating reforms” were introduced around the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they ostensibly benefited women and reduced physical abuse, but in fact, enhanced men’s power to subordinate women (1997, 279). She also explains that wife-beating reformers would have been proud of Petruchio’s taming methods, as they lack actual physical abuse, e.g. beating or striking the woman’s body (279). Instead Petruchio chose a method that “worked better” (Detmer, 1997, 279). In Act 4, Scene 1 of the play Petruchio describes his method of taming; he “makes Kate ‘stoop’ not by beating her but by ‘alluring’ her in the same way that he would train a falcon” (Detmer, 1997, 278). Petruchio explains that he will “kill a wife [Katherine] with kindness” (4.2.208), meaning he is going to act kindly and speak gently with Katherine, while actually, he will break her by neither letting her sleep nor eat. Thus, by taking away the most important things that are essential for human existence (sleep and food) while acting generous and kind, he manages to achieve a more radical result in taming than simply using his physical strength to discipline his wife. Therefore, despite the fact that Kate’s body was not visibly injured during the taming, the methods used were still violent and oppressive; so it can be considered domestic violence according to today’s norms (Detmer, 1997, 294).

Moreover, Richard Raspa also points out that it is quite hard to ignore the “feminist reading” of *The Taming of the Shrew* (2010, 103). Raspa also mentions the methods through which Petruchio controls Kate and humiliates her constantly (2010, 103). For example, one of the countless cases when Petruchio humiliates Katherine is their wedding day, to which Petruchio arrives late and wears mismatched clothes, then carries away Kate before their own wedding dinner (Raspa, 2010, 103). According to Raspa these displays of humiliation “are easily construed as forms of abuse at once confusing and exasperating Katherine” (2010, 103).

On the other hand, Raspa claims that the paradox that Petruchio uses against Katherine’s disobedient and tempestuous attitude (e.g. claiming the sun is the moon), is not “intended to drive her mad”, it is only a part of her “reframing” (2010, 107-8). In other words, its aim is to make Kate pay attention to her husband’s words, understand them, and never doubt them (Raspa, 2010, 108) because this is how an obedient wife behaves. Elizabeth Hutcheon thinks similarly, comparing the taming process to a learning process. Hutcheon regards Petruchio as a “schoolmaster” who educates the student (Katherine) on how to speak and behave appropriately (2011, 326), and most importantly, speak and behave the way Petruchio prefers. Consequently, “we should not think of Katherine’s subjugation as that of an exemplary female but instead as that of an exemplary student” (Hutcheon, 2011, 333).

Hence, the taming of Katherine Minola is a very complex process, and there are several factors that can influence our understanding of the play. Although Petruchio’s

methods can hardly be called gentle, knowing the historical background and the norms of the times can change our interpretation significantly.

### **The Taming of Kat**

Since *10 things I Hate About You* is a 1999 teen film adaptation, it approaches the topic of shrew-taming much more cautiously. As Laura Birkin explains, this film is a “reflection of the period in which it was written and produced, a period which post-dates several waves of the feminist movement”, therefore it would have been impossible to present the taming process the way Shakespeare’s play did, as it would have been irreconcilable with the “light-hearted tone” of the genre of the film (2017, para. 6). Hence, as Friedman writes, the producers had to reconsider the concept of “shrewishness” in late 20<sup>th</sup> century America, and rethink “what it would take to ‘tame’ such a woman” (2004, 46).

Accordingly, Kat has to be tamed by different methods than in the play, which in this case is the power of love. Nonetheless, Kat does not share the common features of the girls in her age, namely she is not interested in boys (seemingly) and has a fairly unpleasant nature. Hence, Kat has to go through a “general softening of her character” (and not a “violent subjugation”) by a man (Birkin, 2017, para. 9). Consequently, due to Kat’s difficult nature, her schoolmates believe that the only way to tame the girl is to hire someone who has the audacity to date Kat. Hence, Joey (or rather Cameron) hires Patrick to date Kat, so that he can date Bianca.

Although in *10 things I Hate About You* the taming procedure does not contain physical and verbal abuse from Patrick, a few similarities can still be discovered between the film and the play. For example, as Birkin points out, a certain “parallel” can be drawn between Patrick and Petruchio, in terms of their behaviour towards Kat and Katherine. Birkin compares the two male protagonists’ pretentious behaviours. Petruchio claiming that Katherine is a pleasant and courteous gentlewoman when, in fact, she acted quite the opposite, is similar to Patrick pretending that he is interested in Kat’s favourite bands and books (2017, para. 7). Another similarity is that Patrick also tends to speak with Kat in a very kind and subtle way, regardless of the fact that Kat does not reciprocate this at all. To put it another way, the two men are rather similar in their dishonest behaviour. Moreover, both Patrick’s and Petruchio’s main motivation for shrew-taming is money (Birkin, 2017, para. 7). Patrick is basically hired to date Kat, while Petruchio marries Katherine for financial reasons. One significant difference, however, is that after one date, as Patrick begins to (actually) like Kat, he seems to be “reluctant” and “anxious” about accepting money for dating the girl, so much so that at the end of the film, he returns the money to Kat by buying her a guitar as a compensation and apology (Birkin, 2017, para. 7).

*The Taming of Kat – Feminist Criticism*

Despite the fact that *10 things I Hate About You* does not apply the common early modern disciplinary tools to tame the female protagonist, some still find the teen film rather objectionable. For instance, as Birkin points out, the teen film “does not completely avoid the trappings of patriarchy and misogyny” (2017, para. 10). Birkin explains that since the genre of the film is a teen romantic comedy, “the heterosexual union as climax is inevitable” (2017, para.10); this conveys the idea that Kat “will not be complete until and unless a young man enables her self-discovery” (Balizet, 2004, 130) – which is a rather controversial idea at a time when the world was already beyond multiple feminist movements.

Furthermore, London Koffler regards Patrick’s taming methods as a “sinister” and “abusive” set of actions. She argues that Patrick appearing in random places where Kat goes, such as the concert, the guitar store, the bookstore, and the football pitch, counts as “stalking” rather than a romantic move (2019, para. 7). Indeed, these actions can be considered rather negative, since Patrick stalks Kat and pretends to be interested in things that Kat enjoys, because he is paid to do so.

Besides, many critics point out the continuous humiliation of Kat throughout the whole film. Pittman states that the first humiliation of Kat takes place in Bogey Lowenstein’s party, where she performs a drunk erotic table dance to everyone’s surprise (2004, 148). This scene reveals that Kat “deep down, when her inhibitions are diminished by alcohol”, is just like any other girl and she happily takes praise for her position “as sexualized object of desire” (Pittman, 2004, 148). After the party, Patrick takes Kat home, and when she tries to kiss him, the boy refuses Kat’s drunken kiss, which again humiliates the girl (Koffler, 2019, para. 7). This incident, however, can be viewed from a positive perspective as well, since the fact that Patrick does not “take advantage” of Kat’s “proffered kiss” does not mean he is not interested in the girl (Pittman, 2004, 148), in fact, it is an example of chivalric behaviour. Later, Kat seems to humiliate herself again by taking advantage of her own sexuality. When Patrick gets into detention, Kat helps him to sneak out by lifting her shirt and flashing her breasts to distract the supervising teacher with her feminine charms. According to Pittman, this time Kat humiliates herself in front of the whole detention class, by sexualizing her own body (2004, 148). Furthermore, the most degrading and cruel act towards Kat occurs when she finds out that Patrick was being paid to date her. Then, Kat’s last shameful experience happens when she confesses her love to Patrick by reading her poem in front of her classmates (Koffler, 2019, para. 7).

Pittman contrasts the humiliation of Kat and Patrick. She reveals that some of Kat’s humiliating scenes (e.g. table dancing) are related to her sexuality. In contrast, Patrick’s self-humiliating singing and dancing performance in the football stadium (although it is not something a traditional macho would do) “has almost nothing to do” with his gender, it is rather a comedic and romantic act to “signal” Kat that even though he refused her kiss, he is still interested in the girl (2004, 148). Having discussed these scenes, Pittman finds it fairly problematic that instead of “renovating Shakespeare’s play with updated and

enlightened notions of self and gender, *10 Things* silences questions on both topics” (2004, 148). Thus, the taming of Kat in *10 Things I Hate About You* is performed in a subtler way than in the play, nevertheless, the film still presents acts of cruelty and humiliation, which is regarded as a step backwards by feminist critics.

To conclude, having discussed the taming procedures in the case of both heroines, and presented some feminist evaluations of both works, we can state that the taming processes in both the play and the film are questionable from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective. The methods in *The Taming of the Shrew* are clearly considered to be cruel by feminist critics, and in *10 Things* we can also detect some acts of cruelty (even though the applied taming methods are much subtler than in the play). Although the taming of Katherine turned out to be a much more complex procedure than the taming of Kat (who was essentially tamed by the power of love), the film still contains several scenes when the heroine is humiliated, mistreated or objectified – which rightfully provide a reason for existence of many feminist criticisms.

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