“TAMING” FEMINISM: TRACING WOMEN AND CULTURE THROUGH ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT

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Shakespearean adaptation is not just about Shakespeare. Rather, Shakespearean adaptation tells us as much about the cultures that adapt the plays as it does about Shakespeare. My particular focus in this thesis is film adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* and the messages that these adaptations send about cultural responses to feminism. The staging of the play—and the nature of Kate and Petruchio’s relationship—acts as a barometer of sorts, measuring cultural attitudes about women’s proper societal position. Film adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* are especially notable for the ways they speak to cultural anxieties about women’s sexual and psychological autonomy. Their increased production during certain decades points to heightened cultural concern about the role of women at that time. I examine four different adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*, produced during four different cultural moments, and analyze how each adaptation reveals societal reactions to feminism. I look at the ways in which each adaptation speaks to its culture and reifies—or resists—the cultural ideologies of the time. By examining four different adaptations from four distinct cultural moments, I thus trace the trajectory of cultural responses to feminism from the early 1900s to the present moment. As I map out society’s reaction to feminism through my analysis of these four adaptations, I demonstrate the advances that feminism has made and the work that still remains to be done for feminists in the 21st century.
To Luca and Lauren, my “Dream Team” writing partners—and without whom this thesis would never have been finished
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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare and his plays might be the most studied subject in literature. With the plethora of essays, journal articles, conference papers, and books written on Shakespeare each year, some may well wonder what could possibly be said about Shakespeare that has not already been said before. Yet although Shakespeare lived and died hundreds of years ago, his plays continue to be dramatized and adapted today. These adaptations serve a twofold purpose: they are part of the official canon of Shakespeare, but they are also an integral part of their own time and place. Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Theory of Adaptation* that adaptations always exist in “a particular time and space in society” (144), and thus “context conditions meaning” (145). Each adaptation’s cultural context influences the meaning of that adaptation. In particular, as Hutcheon notes, adaptation can uncover changes in politics—especially racial and gender politics (143, 147). Indeed, adaptations “are revealing of the historical and political moments of their production” (Hutcheon 28). Alternatively, Margaret Jane Kidnie theorizes in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* that adaptations “suggest how the pasts we construct are shot through with the present” (70). Adaptations, then, have something to tell their viewers about the culture in which they were produced. They function as a valuable tool with which to gauge societal attitudes at the time of their production and as such, serve as rich objects of study. Shakespearean adaptation is not just about Shakespeare. Shakespearean adaptation tells us as much about the cultures that adapt the plays as it does about Shakespeare.

My particular focus in this thesis is film adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* and the messages that these adaptations send about cultural responses to feminism. But why study this particular play? What is it about *The Taming of the Shrew* that makes it relevant to follow the trajectory of different adaptations of the same play? The answer lies in the play’s production
history. *The Taming of the Shrew* is widely regarded as a “problem play” because of its ambiguous gender politics. The play can be alternately staged as extremely misogynistic, with Petruchio treating Kate downright cruelly, or comedic and farcical, with Kate and Petruchio genuinely enjoyed their verbal sparring before reaching a contented truce. *The Taming of the Shrew* has a long tradition of both methods of staging. While the harsh treatment of women labeled “shrews” was common in Elizabethan England, John Fletcher’s play *The Woman’s Prize, or the Tamer Tamed*, a 1611 “sequel” to Shakespeare’s play, “suggests that audiences enjoyed seeing a woman stand up to her husband” (Loftis 336). Thus, even from the play’s inception, productions labeling Kate as tamed or Kate as retaining independence have been common. For many years, David Garrick’s shorter play *Catherine and Petruchio* replaced *The Taming of the Shrew*; with just one exception, “Garrick’s play was the only version produced in England and America from 1754-1844” (Pearson 229). Productions of Garrick’s play led to a tradition of having Petruchio carry a whip, which lent overtones of violence to the play. Later adaptations generally tend to soften the play’s gender politics in order to appeal to modern sensibilities, portraying Kate and Petruchio’s relationship as based on “love at first sight” that gets expressed through verbal wordplay. Yet the text of Shakespeare’s play still remains ambiguous, and so the staging of each adaptation largely determines its politics. Since adaptations are always influenced by the culture in which they are produced, it only makes sense that adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* highlight the gender politics of the era that produces them. Thus, examining a range of adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* opens up an avenue to explore cultural reactions to gender politics.

The play has a tradition of making an “obsessive attempt to circumscribe woman’s ‘place’” (Hodgdon 538), and so the staging of the play—and the nature of Kate and Petruchio’s
relationship—acts as a barometer of sorts, measuring cultural attitudes about women’s proper societal position. So why choose this play as a cipher through which to read cultural reactions to feminism? The answer lies in the fact that its treatment of Kate speaks to larger cultural anxieties surrounding women and their societal roles. As Diana Henderson points out, *The Taming of the Shrew*’s obsessive return to the screen occurs “particularly during the decades of ‘backlash’ when advances in women’s political participation outside the home have prompted a response from those who perceive a threat” (149). Furthermore, film versions of the play seem to cluster during “those decades when feminism has induced conservative responses and when the media are actively encouraging women to find their pleasures in the home” (150). Although stage adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* also continue to proliferate, film adaptations are especially suited to act as a cultural barometer for a variety of reasons. First, film adaptations depend heavily on Kate’s character; in many films, the sub-plot of Bianca and Lucentio’s relationship is minimized in order to more fully develop Kate. Secondly, the camera “reinforces the tendency to view Kate as a spectacle” because the cinematic gaze heightens the film’s sexual and gender politics (Henderson 150). Finally, film adaptations generally have much more extensive distribution than stage performances. Since they are produced for a far wider audience, film adaptations serve as a more effective measure of cultural attitudes than less widely-seen stage adaptations. In short, film adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* are especially notable for the ways they speak to cultural anxieties about women’s sexual and psychological autonomy. Their increased prevalence during certain decades points to heightened cultural concern about the role of women at that time.

In this thesis, I will examine four different adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*, produced during four different cultural moments, and analyze how each adaptation reveals
societal reactions to feminism. The first chapter, “Taming the New Woman: Defending Gender Roles in *The Taming of the Shrew,*” focuses on 1929’s *The Taming of the Shrew,* directed by Sam Taylor. This adaptation addresses anxieties surrounding the figure of the New Woman: a new type of independent, outspoken, sexually liberated women who threatened masculinity by seeming to usurp men’s ability to speak. Additionally, many men were concerned that New Women would not settle down to marriage and motherhood. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Taylor’s adaptation attends to the cultural response to the New Woman and the societal threat that she represented. I argue that Taylor’s adaptation calls for a return to traditional gender roles by presenting Kate as a motherly figure in order to assuage fears raised by the New Woman.

In chapter two, I focus on a 1967 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* that also reinscribes women with traditional gender roles. This chapter, titled “Kate as Commodity: Reifying the Feminine Mystique,” focuses on Franco Zeffirelli’s version of *The Taming of the Shrew.* This adaptation speaks to cultural concerns about women leaving the home in the aftermath of Betty Friedan’s exposé of the myth of the feminine mystique, or the notion that women enjoyed giving up their career to stay at home and raise a family. Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique* led to a rise in feminist awareness and the threat that women might rebel against their traditional domestic role. In response to this cultural moment, Zeffirelli’s adaptation tropes on a very sexually-charged portrayal of Kate to speak to concerns about women leaving the household sphere. I explore how this adaptation addresses societal reactions to the myth of the feminine mystique and posit that the film upholds the idea of the happy housewife through its portrayal of Kate as finding happiness in the domestic sphere.
While the first two chapters focus on adaptations that are fairly farcical in nature, my third chapter explores an adaptation that is much more serious in tone. The third chapter, “‘I Will Be Angry’: The Taming of the Shrew and the Backlash against Feminism,” revolves around Jonathan Miller’s 1980 adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew. Miller’s adaptation was produced at the conclusion of the 1970s, a decade when feminism became a cultural force to be reckoned with, and represents the advent of the conservative backlash against feminism. The film reacts to the minor gains made by feminists and the increasing number of unmarried women in the workforce as the 1970s drew to a close. I analyze Miller’s film in light of its reaction against the radical feminism of the 1970s and the increased possibility that feminism might achieve some of its goals. I contend that this particular adaptation presents an extremely regressive message about the role of women in society through its harsh insistence that women remain subservient to men.

The final chapter returns to a lighter, more farcical adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew than Miller presented. In this chapter, “‘Up Yours, Weirdo!’ or, Channeling Aggression in The Taming of the Shrew,” I explore a 2005 adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew directed by David Richards. This adaptation participates in postfeminist discourse and brings up a discussion of women in the workplace. In particular, the film examines female aggression and its potential use or abuse in both the workplace and interpersonal relationships. I analyze the film according to postfeminist definitions of female aggression before evaluating the adaptation as a marker of supposed postfeminist gains. I argue that this adaptation, while appearing to be fairly progressive, subtly serves to reinforce heteronormativity and uphold heterosexual relationships as the means by which women can balance a domestic life and a working life.
In each chapter, my focus lies in the cultural work each adaptation performs. Rather than attempting to compare the adaptations to each other or judge them based on their fidelity to the “original” Shakespearean text, I look at the ways in which each adaptation speaks to its culture and reifies—or resists—the cultural ideologies of the time. By examining four different adaptations from four distinct cultural moments, I can thus trace the trajectory of cultural responses to feminism from the early 1900s to the present moment. In doing so, I seek to uncover the gains made by feminist activism from its beginnings in the suffrage movement to the widespread postfeminism of the millennium. As I analyze each adaptation individually and finally as part of a cultural trajectory, I ask: how has culture attempted to suppress feminist voices, and how do these attempts manifest themselves in adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*? What cultural gains have women managed to sustain, and what cultural gains still stand to be made by women? Ultimately, adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* reveal the cultural response to over 70 years of feminist activism. As I map out society’s reaction to feminism through my analysis of these four adaptations, I demonstrate the advances that feminism has made and the work that still remains to be done for feminists in the 21st century.
CHAPTER I. TAMING THE NEW WOMAN: DEFENDING GENDER ROLES IN THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

When *The Taming of the Shrew* was released on film in 1929, it represented a new era in Shakespearean adaptation. The American-made film, directed by Sam Taylor and starring Mary Pickford as Kate and Douglas Fairbanks as Petruchio, was the first cinematic adaptation of a Shakespearean play to be produced with sound. It received much cultural and critical attention, creating a sensation both because it was the first Shakespearean sound film and because it starred the married, highly-publicized, glamorous duo Pickford and Fairbanks. Current critical scholarship on the 1929 film version of *The Taming of the Shrew*1 is often focused on the two stars. Sonya Freeman Loftis focuses on Taylor’s film as a vehicle for Pickford’s attempt to “give her career a makeover” (331), while Barbara Hodgdon indicates that the film served as a vehicle for Pickford to change her on-screen image. Diana Henderson reads the on-screen action of *The Taming* as paralleling Pickford and Fairbanks’ increasingly stormy off-screen relationship.

However, the film is notable for more than just its two stars, as it also uncovers something about the cultural context of its time and provides viewers with a critical commentary on the nature of male-female relationships in the 1920s. As Linda Hutcheon notes in *A Theory of Adaptation*, “adaptations make alterations that reveal much about the larger concepts of reception and production” (28). *The Taming* functions not just as a Shakespearean adaptation, but also as a lens to the cultural climate of America in the 1920s.

*The Taming* could be read in light of many social and cultural changes, as the 1920s were a turbulent period in American history. Modern technology produced rapid changes in daily life and American citizens still felt the traumatizing impact of World War I. However, my analysis

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1 Hereafter referred to as ‘Taylor’s film’ or ‘*The Taming*’
here will focus on concerns about sexual deviance and shifts in gender roles that caused anxieties for bourgeois society. The growing women’s movement of the 1920s produced great cultural anxiety about potential shifts in gender roles. The New Woman, a figure that emerged on the social scene during the first third of the twentieth century, especially contributed to societal concerns about women’s roles. New Women who took on certain masculine attributes revealed that gender was perhaps more socially constructed than had been previously believed. As Rita Felski notes, “by appropriating…traditionally masculine discourses, women helped to reveal the potential instability of traditional gender divides” (22). For many men, a shifting or ambiguous definition of masculinity and femininity created a sense of anxiety because it threatened their societal dominance. Thus, discourses surrounding femininity became a source of concern for patriarchal society. Felski notes this phenomenon as she points out “images of femininity were to play a central role in prevailing anxieties, fears, and hopeful imaginings about the distinctive features of the ‘modern age’” (19). 1920s culture had trouble defining exactly what femininity meant: women had moved away from previous models of female behavior like the Cult of True Womanhood or the Victorian angel in the house, yet a clear alternative had not yet presented itself because the New Woman was not an accepted model of feminine behavior. Cultural discourse, then, often centered around notions of femininity and debated what acceptable female behavior should be. Taylor’s film, as I will show, clearly participates in such discourse.

The film’s portrayal of Kate as first a strong, fierce woman, then as a pitifully acquiescent woman, and finally as a clever ‘mother,’ reveals that in the 1920s, culture was unsure of where to place the New Woman. The Kate we see at the film’s beginning is a Kate who clearly wants to think for herself and make her own decisions—she is a solid representation of a New Woman. However, her initial strong presence as a New Woman is toned down and
eventually erased. I argue that Kate’s gradual transformation from a strong New Woman to a contented maternal figure serves to mitigate masculine anxieties about the figure of the New Woman. When women like Kate began to act as independent and outspoken as men, gender became unstable; the difference between masculinity and femininity was less clear than it had been in the past. Loftis identifies this phenomenon as present in Taylor’s film, insisting that Pickford’s Kate was “an ambiguous portrayal that created anxiety for the 1920s viewer” because of gender ambiguities (343). Similarly, Tracy J.R. Collins confirms the New Woman as a “source of anxieties over sexual anarchy” (311). I contend that Taylor’s film seeks to address and eventually assuage cultural anxieties surrounding the New Woman. The film does so by using Kate and Petruchio’s relationship to explore the impact of first-wave feminism and the rise of the New Woman on heterosexual relationships. I will begin by briefly contextualizing the feminist moment of the 1920s, outlining the main concerns and overarching strands of feminist thought of the time. Then, I will analyze the film in light of the cultural moment, focusing especially on the cultural implications of Kate’s portrayal as a New Woman and the way that the director chose to stage Kate and Petruchio’s notoriously ambiguous relationship. Finally, I will demonstrate the ways that The Taming responds to masculine anxieties about shifting gender roles by rejecting Kate as a New Woman as the film concludes. I argue that Kate’s re-inscription as a mother at the film’s end assuages concerns that New Women will not settle down to motherhood and urges the first-wave feminists to give up their independence in order to become wives and mothers.

First-wave feminism has sometimes been dismissed by later feminists because of its generally assumed fixation on white, middle-class women. As Marlene LeGates notes, “the issues generally associated with first wave-feminism reflect the importance of property and
status rather than racial struggle or bare economic survival” (201). The focus on property and status has led some later feminists to assume that first-wave feminism was solely a white, middle-class affair. However, the contributions of first-wave feminists to later generations cannot be underestimated, and it is important to remember that highlighting those issues did represent a radical shift in cultural thought of the time. The woman’s movement came to a watershed moment in 1920 as the dogged efforts of suffragettes culminated with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment and gave women the right to vote in all states for the first time in American history. Women like Margaret Sanger spoke out for women’s right to take charge of their bodies and their sexuality with birth control (Sanger 528). First wave feminism grew out of the early decades of the 20th century, and as Kristen Delegard notes, “women moved en masse into activism of all sorts during these years” (328). Prohibition, labor laws, sexual consent, municipal reform, progressive farming practices, union rights, and consumer leverage represent just a sampling of the issues tackled by the women’s movement. Socialist feminism, maternal feminism, and liberal feminism were all important cultural movements. Socialist feminists such as Emma Goldman advocated individual action as the means to an eventual revolution (Goldman 515), while maternal feminism addressed issues of motherhood, decisions affecting women’s bodies, and family relations. Liberal feminism championed the cause of equal rights for men and women (LeGates 245, 248-249). While these various movements had different ideologies, methods of spreading their message, and end goals, each strand of feminism worked to improve the lives of women in the way it thought was most effective. With the advent of first-wave feminism, the question of women’s rights and women’s role in society and culture came to the attention of the American public as never before.
As public attention began to turn to the growing women’s movement, the figure of the New Woman became one of the most emblematic representations of the “modern woman.” The New Woman was always distinguished from the “old woman”: the Victorian “angel in the house” (Ardis 13). The British magazine *Punch* is largely credited with “creating” the New Woman at the end of the 19th century through caricaturing modern women who acted, dressed, and spoke in ways that did not conform to traditional patriarchal models of femininity (Collins 310). This representation of the New Woman soon spread across the Atlantic to the United States, and the rhetoric of the New Woman continued to play an important societal role into the 1920s and 1930s. She is often, although not always, embodied as the flapper, whose short hair, particular manner of dress, and outspoken nature were easily identifiable. The New Woman is “nearly always cast as ambiguously gendered or as a mixture of feminine and masculine attributes” (Otto and Rocco 7), and her more masculine attributes were regularly viewed with suspicion. She “disrupted conventions of gender by refusing traditional performance of such feminine traits as passivity, aversion to public space, indifference to sexuality, and lack of creative genius” (Otto and Rocco 7). The New Woman was independent and assertive as well as sexually liberated (Stephens 185). Such a radical break from traditional femininity “often stirred up fears that women would poach men’s cultural and sexual authority and might even take their jobs” (Otto and Rocco 7). Furthermore, the New Woman “constituted a revolutionary demographic and political phenomenon” because she often did not marry, fought for economic and social reforms, and claimed her right to practice a profession (Smith-Rosenberg 245). Thus, the New Woman was a source of anxiety for many Americans, especially men, who feared the social change that might result from increasingly liberated women. Nevertheless, “the figure of the New Woman was to become a resonant symbol of emancipation, whose modernity signaled
not an endorsement of an existing present but rather a bold imagining of an alternative future” (Felski 14). Feminists could look to the figure of the New Woman as a sign of a future where women were able to define their own subjectivity.

Clearly, then, the New Woman was an important cultural figure in the first several decades of the 20th century. As a product of its time, The Taming becomes significant for its treatment of the New Woman. Although The Taming is set in Renaissance Italy, Kate typifies the New Woman through her manner of dress. The film’s other characters are clothed in a manner suitable to Renaissance Italy. However, Kate’s clothing, “accentuated by a waist-length string of pearls, a hat with a feather…and gaudy jeweled pins makes Pickford’s Kate look more like a twenties flapper than an early modern shrew” (Loftis 333). Her wavy chin-length bob and heavily lipsticked mouth are also consistent with the “shorter hair [and] the use of cosmetics” associated with flappers (Freedman 378). Freedman notes that “in the late 1920s…bobbed hair [was] likely to be used as [a symbol] of emancipation” (382). Kate, with her short blonde curls, proudly displays her bob. In contrast, Bianca—the only other woman in the film—has shoulder-length hair styled very traditionally, something that is complemented by her Renaissance-appropriate garb. Thus, from the first scene Pickford’s Kate is clearly a product of her era; her appearance positions her as a New Woman in the guise of a Shakespearean shrew. Taylor’s film therefore serves as more than theatrical entertainment. The film also performs an important cultural function by dramatizing the societal struggle between patriarchal ideology and the rise of first-wave feminism, typified by the New Woman.

Indeed, Kate herself appears to clearly recognize the importance of her struggle to assert subjectivity. In a speech near the beginning of the film, after Kate meets Petruchio for the first time, she vows, “Katherine shall tame this haggard, for if she fails, I’ll tie up her tongue and pare
down her nails.” Kate’s masculinity in this scene and her defiance of Petruchio in this line initially seem to indicate that in this particular adaptation, Kate is a strong woman who will not be tamed despite Petruchio’s attempts to dominate her both verbally and physically. However, a closer inspection of this line gives a very different reading. Kate vows to tame Petruchio, but notes that if she fails, she will tie up her tongue and pare down her nails—indicating that if she does not successfully tame Petruchio, she will give up her outspokenness, assertiveness, and independence. Thus, Kate’s declaration here sets the stakes for a much higher battle: either she will claim her ability to break away from traditional gender roles and assert her subjectivity, or she will allow herself to be forced back into the traditional female role of the angel in the house. This scene indicates how easily gender identities could be manipulated and reminds viewers that Kate’s gender role can be socially constructed. Thus, Taylor’s film very clearly reminds viewers that Kate’s subject position at the end of the film has cultural implications, as it helps create a standard for the way women’s roles should be constructed.

The film begins by constructing Kate as a New Woman with a strong sense of autonomy. In addition to her flapper-like appearance, Kate’s character presents viewers with an assertive, outspoken sense of independence from the beginning of the film. It is obvious to viewers that Kate wants to do things her way, as she does not hesitate to throw a temper tantrum when something angers her. For example, Kate wastes no time expressing her displeasure with Hortensio’s music lessons. A huge crash and clatter is heard offscreen, and Hortensio comes tumbling down the stairs, landing at Baptista and Petruchio’s feet with a broken lute around his neck. As Kate demonstrates her disdain for traditional feminine activities like learning to play the lute, she acts in a way much more characteristic of the New Woman than the angel in the house. Her assertiveness was verbal as well as physical. As Loftis notes, “Katherina is a woman
whose words are wild and dangerous and who seizes power over men (like her father) who stand by helplessly while she ignores male-imposed orders” (338). Her ability to speak boldly and use language to express herself is indicative of a New Woman and also evokes the spirit of the suffragettes, who were able to use language to fight for political agency. In the film, Kate’s outspokenness clearly makes her father Baptista anxious. His nervousness in the face of her rages indicates an anxiety about the kind of femininity his daughter portrays, mimicking the cultural anxiety that New Women like Kate were causing to men.

*The Taming*’s portrayal of Kate includes one other notable feature that participates in culture’s anxiousness about the increasingly unclear division between men and women. One of Kate’s distinguishing features in the first few scenes where she is present is a long bullwhip, and she quickly demonstrates competence in using it. Kate’s whip calls attention to her ability to act powerfully and assertively, which are traits typically identified as masculine. Indeed, the whip has already been coded as masculine before Kate is even present. Petruchio makes his appearance first and viewers cannot help but notice the long whip that he carries as a visible assertion of his swaggering masculinity. However, since Kate carries a whip of her own when she finally appears, she starts to call the division between “masculine” and “feminine” into question as she creates “real male anxiety over the New Woman’s threat to traditional male sexual ascendance and political privilege” (Collins 311). Petruchio imbues his whip with a sort of phallic power, but Kate has a whip of her own and is able to make use of its phallic power as well. Like the first-wave feminists who fought for the right to vote and campaigned to change the place of women in society, Kate represents a strong force that appears to challenge male dominance. The combination of her flapper-like clothing, her raging words, and her uninhibited use of a bullwhip positions Kate as a threat at the start of the film. She represents the New
Woman’s ability to “[challenge] existing gender relations and the distribution of power” (Smith-Rosenberg 245). Thus, Kate’s character represents a challenge to heterosexual relationships and patriarchal ideology and forces audiences to confront their own unease and apprehension about the rise of the New Woman.

However, Taylor’s film quickly subverts Kate’s authority as a New Woman by making Kate’s outbursts seem ridiculous rather than powerful. Just as culture tried “to reduce the political actions of suffragettes to the irrational outbursts of a group of deranged and dangerous women” (Felski 3), Kate was also labeled as irrational in The Taming. When Gremio first brings her up to Petruchio, he asks Petruchio jokingly “[s]hall I then wish thee to a shrewd, ill-tempered wife?” Indeed, the idea of introducing Kate and Petruchio is conceived as a joke at first, as Gremio thinks of Kate as so shrewish that no man will ever consider marrying her. She quickly becomes more of a spoiled, petulant child rather than a force to be reckoned with. Her perfectly-executed pouts and overdramatic, huffy temper tantrums make Kate seem absurd and even downright silly. In Taylor’s film, the New Woman is thus forced into a position of ridicule and treated as childish and irrational. Any subversive power she may have had is quickly taken away. Viewers are encouraged to laugh at Kate, and in turn the New Woman, instead of feeling threatened by her. When Petruchio enters the scene, the film further supports this interpretation of Kate and the New Woman as a petulant child or a silly fool.

Although Kate initially appears to be positioned as masculine, due to her whip and her outspokenness, Petruchio’s entrance reveals that Kate is only able to play at being boyish. Petruchio’s physical vitality and swaggering demeanor signal to audiences that here is a “real man.” He manages to subdue Kate fairly quickly, thus indicating to audiences that her adoption of masculine traits is only temporary and can easily be quelled. When Kate raises her hand to
strike Petruchio with her whip in this scene, Petruchio grabs her into a firm embrace and pulls her down the stairs with him. Later, Petruchio holds her wrists to force Kate to stand and listen to him before pulling Kate into his lap. This becomes the most physically dominant part of the scene: Petruchio traps Kate’s legs under one of his and holds his hand over her mouth so that, from the back, Kate appears to be sitting quietly in his lap. She has been physically silenced and forced to assume a passive, traditionally feminine role. Her earlier masculinity has totally disappeared, showing audiences that Kate—and by extension the New Woman—was only play-acting at being a boy. Her earlier masculine traits, in fact, seem to become quite ridiculous in light of how easily Petruchio is able to bend Kate to his will. Thus, although Kate was clearly presented as a New Woman at the start of the film, Petruchio forces her back into a more traditionally feminine role at the end of the wooing scene. In this scene, Kate’s initial dominance and the threat to masculinity that her status as a New Woman represents are mitigated by Petruchio’s ability to take control. Traditional patriarchal power is momentarily reasserted as Petruchio physically overpowers Kate, thus reassuring male viewers that the New Woman was not an unstoppable force.

However, Petruchio’s ability to subdue Kate does not come without a few momentary interruptions. Instead, Taylor’s film continues to interrogate the contradictions and complexities surrounding the New Woman and her ability to form heterosexual relationships. The film reminds viewers that dealing with the New Woman was not as simple as merely using physical violence to force her to comply to heteronormative values. In the wooing scene and other subsequent scenes, Kate is not as submissive as Petruchio, or audiences, might wish. At various points in the wooing scene, she slaps Petruchio’s face—first after she tells him “[i]f I be waspish, best beware my sting!” and again later after she manages to get one wrist free from his grasp.
Kate becomes even more violent at the end of the scene. She stands behind Petruchio lashing him with her whip while he tells Baptista that they plan to wed on Sunday. With these actions, Kate, as a New Woman, clearly fights back against Petruchio and against traditional gender roles that paint her as submissive and passive.

Kate also struggles against Petruchio’s attempts to subdue her once they have arrived at Petruchio’s home after the wedding. They arrive at Petruchio’s home in the midst of a rainstorm and Petruchio disappears upstairs to divest his soaked clothing and put on a warm, dry robe while Kate shivers downstairs in her filthy, sodden garments and twitches her useless, mud-soaked whip forlornly. Once dinner has been served, Petruchio startles Kate into dropping her knife every time she is about to take a bite, then flings the food off the table before Kate has eaten anything. Petruchio is clearly trying to control Kate physically and emotionally in this scene by forcing her into a subservient position. However, Kate does manage to regain a bit of subjectivity as the scene progresses. After the failed dinner, Petruchio carries Kate upstairs; while she enters the bridal chamber to change out of her soaked clothing, Petruchio sneaks downstairs and hungrily gobbles the food he had flung across the room mere moments earlier. As he does so, he explains his taming strategy to his dog. Kate appears on the balcony outside the bridal chamber and, unobserved, silently watches Petruchio talk to the dog. Upon hearing his plans, Kate “smiles knowingly as she listens to Petruchio’s bluster, giving Kate’s character more insight and inwardness than she exhibits in Shakespeare’s play” (Willson 23). She begins to regain some of the self-determination that she demonstrated earlier in the film. At this point, Kate appears ready to fight back: “her knowing nods suggest the challenge that will wait for her husband in the bedroom” (Loftis 339). The pitiful waif in muddy clothes has transformed back into the cunning woman Petruchio encountered in the wooing scene. In this moment, as well as
in her earlier resistance to Petruchio’s strong-handed tactics, Kate reminds viewers of the New Woman’s power to resist cultural models of femininity.

Even as Taylor’s film brings up the New Woman’s deviance in several different scenes, however, it also offers viewers multiple moments where the threat of the New Woman is neutralized. Every time that Kate appears ready to once again seize her subjectivity, she is forced into a more passive and even maternal role. When Kate attempts to reclaim her voice by physically reacting to Petruchio in the wooing scene, she is characterized as dangerous and undesirable because of her resistance to traditional femininity. Kate comes across not as assertive, but as irrational and out of control when she repeatedly lashes Petruchio with her whip. Indeed, her excessive use of her whip, and Petruchio’s feigned ignorance of her lashings, turns Kate into a comic figure. The New Woman’s ability to stand up to men was acknowledged, but her potential for newfound societal importance was disavowed by the way the film characterizes her as perpetrator of an almost cartoonish violence. In this scene, *The Taming* appears to suggest that the New Woman—figured through Kate—was at best a questionable marriage partner and at worst so irrational as to be unmarriageable. Therefore, the film raises uncertainties about the possibility of finding a useful societal role for the New Woman. Instead, Kate’s independence is trivialized so that later in the film, she can easily be transformed from an outspoken New Woman into a woman who fulfills an acceptable social role.

Similarly, Taylor’s film also works to neutralize the small measure of agency that Kate claims when she learns of Petruchio’s taming plot. Kate immediately uses this knowledge to her advantage, leading her to reassert the sense of self that she demonstrated at the beginning of the film. When Petruchio enters the bedroom, Kate appears to be asleep; he sings loudly and tunelessly, and she applauds. He opens a window to let in blasts of frigid air, and she climbs out
of bed and opens another one. He rips the sheets off the bed, and she flings the entire mattress on the ground. As Loftis observes, “their farcical play in the bedroom suggests that anything he does, she can do more stubbornly and dramatically” (339). The events in this scene indicate Kate has attained a certain measure of agency as she matches Petruchio wit for wit. Eventually, Kate makes herself comfortable in the mattress on the floor. With her coy glances, she seems to suggest to Petruchio that he join her in their marital bed. His response is to snatch the pillow from behind her head and place it on his chair. A shoving match over the pillow ensues, and Kate grabs a stool and throws it at Petruchio’s head. It hits him squarely, and “downed and moaning…Petruchio appears to have lost the battle and a fair amount of consciousness” (Willson 25). It seems apparent here that Kate has finally succeeded in “taming” Petruchio and reclaiming for once and for all her position as a New Woman. However, to continue the film in this manner would demonstrate a relationship where the New Woman completely triumphed over patriarchal masculinity; the film would then become a radical message affirming the New Woman’s ascendancy in society. Such an ending would have contributed to culture’s anxieties about the New Woman rather than assuaging them. Thus, Taylor’s film does not allow Kate to claim her victory. Rather, the cultural anxieties informing this moment are alleviated. Instead of definitively asserting a sense of superiority over Petruchio, Kate reacts in a maternal way that reifies appropriate female gender roles.

With her reaction, Kate relinquishes any small measure of agency she may have been able to claim by knocking Petruchio down. Instead of asserting her superiority, Kate assumes a horrified expression, murmurs, “Oh Petruchio, beloved!” and runs to cradle his head against her bosom. In doing so, “Petruchio is reduced to the status of a child in [Kate’s] arms” (Loftis 340). Kate, rather than acting as a wife, acts as a mother to the injured Petruchio, who has instantly
become childlike because of his injury. She forgoes her “victory” in order to attend to Petruchio as a mother would attend to her small child. While she is nursing Petruchio, Kate discreetly picks up her whip and tosses it into the fire. Critics are divided on this gesture as “it isn’t clear whether she casts [the whip] aside because her husband has tamed her, reducing her to her proper ‘feminine’ role as nurturer, or because she has tamed him, teaching him that he needs her motherly comfort” (Loftis 340). These critical interpretations of the film, though, are so focused on Kate’s motivation for tossing the whip into the fire that they fail to consider the end result: whether Kate has been tamed or whether she is the tamer, the film still reinscribes her with a familiar feminine role, that of a source of nurturing motherly comfort. By forcing Kate into the role of nurturing mother, Taylor’s film removes her from the role of the New Woman and subtly places her into a traditional female role. Female domesticity and passivity are restored, thus mitigating patriarchal anxieties about Kate’s momentary triumph over Petruchio and the potential for the New Woman to break free from masculine dominance.

The film’s concluding scene, where Kate gives her famous obedience speech, only further serves to neutralize any threat that Kate as a New Woman may have once presented. Kate delivers her famous speech of obedience in a suitably pious manner but at the end of her speech, a close-up shows Kate winking broadly and deliberately at Bianca, who nods in realization. The way the wink is staged suggests that Kate realizes she must allow Petruchio to think he has successfully tamed her, thus preserving his male ego (Willson 25). There is a moment where viewers can consider Kate as returning to her independent, assertive ways as a New Woman now that she has gained the upper hand over Petruchio. However, while Kate may have made her final speech seem a bit tongue-in-cheek, The Taming’s ending communicates to

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2 Willson seems to support the latter, saying, “this Kate, unlike Shakespeare’s character, retains total control over her ‘domestication’” (25), while Hodgdon appears to support the former as she contends that Kate, with her motherly qualities, “only momentarily dismantles the call of Shakespeare’s patriarchal culture” (544).
viewers that Kate has happily taken on a motherly, passive, traditionally feminine role. Kate contentedly sits on Petruchio’s lap in the final shot of the film, thus reassuring viewers that she has accepted her maternal role and resigned herself to giving up her ability to speak for herself. The assertive New Woman pictured in the film’s earlier scenes has disappeared and been replaced with a model of traditional womanhood as the film draws to a close.

Indeed, even the knowing wink that Kate sends to Bianca at the end of her speech seems to turn Petruchio into a “braggart boy with a knowing mother” (Hodgdon 544). The prominent bandage on Petruchio’s head recalls viewers to the earlier scene in the bedroom, when Kate tended to his injury with motherly comfort, and conveys to viewers that “[j]ust as Petruchio is a son playacting the role of husband, Kate is a mother who plays a wife” (Hodgdon 244). Thus, although Kate’s speech was cast as a bit tongue-in-cheek, it was done so because Kate has been positioned as a motherly figure who knows better than Petruchio, her braggart boy. Kate’s flippant speech does not free her to embrace her independence and assertiveness, but rather further confines her to a nurturing, motherly role. She has resigned herself to being Petruchio’s “mother,” and in doing so has also accepted a feminine role that is socially acceptable and unthreatening to patriarchal ideologies. The Taming gives a resounding seal of approval to this shift in Kate’s character in the film’s final moments. As soon as Kate finishes her speech—and her wink—Petruchio pulls her onto his lap for a kiss as the camera slowly zooms out to show a merry wedding party in “full social harmony” (Hodgdon 544). This final kiss seems to reinforce Petruchio’s power and allay “any anxiety the film prompts about Kate’s momentary ‘triumph’” (Hodgdon 544). The traditional patriarchal order is restored, giving viewers a final image of Kate as a happy wife/mother who has accepted her new social role.
The sudden revelation of Kate’s maternal nature indicates that ultimately, a woman’s true role was supposed to be motherhood. Taylor’s film intimates that Kate’s earlier refusal to accept a passive, motherly role was merely a stage or a juvenile fit that has now passed. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg identifies a “political campaign against the New Woman” (280) that took place in American society during the first decades of the twentieth century, and as the film draws to a close it becomes clear that Taylor’s film participates in this political campaign. Although Kate spoke boldly at the beginning of the film, she was trivialized and made ridiculous. As Smith-Rosenberg points out, “the woman who would be a man emerged as a sterile and ludicrous hermaphrodite” (287), and this exactly how Kate was painted at the start of the film. Once this ludicrous woman was confronted with “powerful, gender-confident men…her power would fade” (Smith-Rosenberg 287). In Taylor’s film, Petruchio is characterized as the epitome of swaggering masculinity and forces Kate to accept what viewers were supposed to see as her “true maternal nature.” He thus took away any power Kate possessed at the start of the film. Taylor’s film asserts masculine control over Kate in order to reassert traditional gender roles and behavioral codes as it de-legitimates women who attempted to maintain control over their own lives.

*The Taming*, therefore, becomes a film that not only adapts Shakespeare’s play for the screen, but also actively participates in cultural discourse about the role of women. At a time when shifting societal attitudes raised questions about gender roles, *The Taming of the Shrew* emerged as a play that could be adapted to address cultural concerns by demonstrating for viewers just what “correct” gender roles should be. Taylor’s restaging of Kate as a New Woman who ultimately is returned to the role of mother indicates to viewers that while culture could consider a woman who was strong, outspoken, and assertive, she needed to be forced back into a
traditional feminine role because her presence was otherwise threatening. The New Woman produced cultural anxieties about the relationships between men and women and the traditional construction of the patriarchal family. Indeed, as Marlene LeGates notes, “contemporaries worried about whether the ‘flappers’ would settle down to domestic responsibilities—in other words, motherhood” (289). In *The Taming*, this anxiety is ameliorated through Kate’s transformation from a defiant, outspoken New Woman to a knowing “mother” by the end of the film. The initial threat to masculine dominance that Kate represented at the beginning of the film is thus mitigated as Kate’s energy is rechanneled into a traditional motherly role. What the film seems to reveal is that although culture could consider the way the New Woman transcended traditional gender roles, it could not acknowledge her as a suitable alternative to the Victorian angel in the house. The New Woman, as figured by Kate, was ultimately rejected as an appropriate female role because she represented a vision of femininity that was threatening to patriarchal culture. While society might have begun to think of women in new ways as a result of the efforts emerging from first-wave feminism, ultimately *The Taming* shows viewers that 1920s culture was not ready to accept discourse that challenged traditional patriarchal conceptions of true femininity.
CHAPTER II. KATE AS COMMODITY: REIFYING THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

Franco Zeffirelli’s version of *The Taming of the Shrew*,[^3] filmed in 1967 and starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, is hailed as one of the most visually rich cinematic versions of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Zeffirelli’s *Taming* retains the original setting, Renaissance Italy, and uses a bright, lush, richly colored vision of Padua to full advantage. Yet despite its traditional setting, the film’s message is a clear product of the culture in which it was produced. The 1960s were a turbulent decade in American history, with the civil rights movement coming to the fore and rock and roll culture becoming increasingly prevalent. While Zeffirelli’s film could be analyzed in light of a myriad of cultural factors, the film speaks especially strongly to the growing women’s movement. Women began to speak out in increasing numbers as dissatisfaction with domestic duties grew. For many women, the role of housewife was unsatisfying and unfulfilling; they questioned the notion that women should be confined to the domestic sphere. As a result, second-wave feminism began to take hold in society. Douglas Brode argues that “Zeffirelli’s version was fashioned even as the modern women’s movement emerged in the public consciousness; women were challenging the necessity and wisdom of subscribing to such wifely virtues” (24). Thus, any analysis of the film loses an important element without a careful consideration of the connection between the women’s movement and the film’s cultural message.

Zeffirelli’s *Taming*, which stars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, relies on Taylor’s famous beauty and Burton’s tempestuous screen presence, as well as Zeffirelli’s unique directorial style, to create a film whose “appeal is largely sensual rather than cerebral” (Cartmell 212). Taylor and Burton, the most famous couple of their day both onscreen and off, were an

[^3]: Hereafter referred to as Zeffirelli’s *Taming* or *The Taming*
obvious choice to play the roles of Kate and Petruchio because they were “in the habit of presenting to the media an image of domestic life similar to the relationship of Katherina and Petruchio” (Holderness 145). Many analyses of Zeffirelli’s film center around Burton and Taylor’s often stormy real-life relationship and the way their relationship impacted the film’s reception. However, Deborah Cartmell points out that Zeffirelli’s films each “clearly appropriate] a particular cultural moment” (212). Thus, this particular version of The Taming is notable for more than just its two stars. Indeed, as Graham Holderness argues, “the sexual politics of the film can only be interpreted in terms of its own cultural context and historical moment” (150). Part of the cultural context for Zeffirelli’s film involved Betty Friedan’s 1963 book The Feminine Mystique, which acted as a catalyst for suburban housewives to begin voicing their dissatisfaction with their domestic role.

Using Friedan’s concept of the feminine mystique as a starting point and drawing on Luce Irigaray’s essay “Women on the Market,” I contend that Zeffirelli’s film tropes on Elizabeth Taylor’s stunning beauty to commodify Kate as an object for use by men. Zeffirelli’s film sets up a patriarchal economy of exchange where women have worth only insofar as they can be circulated between men, going from daughters to wives and finally to mothers. This masculine economy of exchange reinforces the domestic ideology of the 1960s where women were expected to move from their father to their husband and assume the role of housewife, a position that had value as an indicator of their husband’s social status and standing in the community. The Taming, with its emphasis on women as a commodity, works to uphold a patriarchal, heteronormative society during a decade that threatened to undermine this kind of ideology. Thus, Zeffirelli’s Taming, although aesthetically pleasing, serves as a reification of the
feminine mystique and implies that women who spoke out against patriarchal ideologies were in some way flawed or unfeminine.

Although the suffragettes and other first-wave feminists laid the groundwork for today’s feminist movement during the first decades of the twentieth century, the roots of the modern women’s movement emerged in the 1960s. When Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, she exposed the myth of the happy domestic housewife and revealed the desperation, depression, and lack of fulfillment felt by many suburban women who had given up the promise of a career in order to stay home and raise a family. As Friedan pointed out, for decades American women “learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for” (16). A woman who found herself unhappy in her role as housewife “knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself” (Friedan 19). But many women shared this same sense of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment, or what Friedan termed “the problem that has no name.” In response to the widespread problem with no name, Friedan proclaimed that “we can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’” (32). Her book became a national best-seller, and thousands of women across America found words to express their dissatisfaction with their domestic role.

Friedan’s work gave women a voice with which to express their unhappiness. This newfound avenue of expression, coupled with governmental approval of the birth control pill in 1960, set the stage for the rise of the sexual revolution. As Ruth Rosen notes, “unmarried women began to stake out their right to enjoy sex for pleasure rather than for procreation” (55). The Equal Pay Act and the Presidential Commission on Women, coupled with the publication of
The Feminine Mystique, helped make 1963 “a banner year” (Rosen 70). The National Organization for Women, or NOW, was founded in 1966 and “publicly acknowledged that liberal political culture was inadequate to address the reality of women’s lives” (Rosen 75). During the 1960s, the feminist movement became increasingly active in American society. Yet this increase in activity did not come without an accompanying backlash. After all, “America depends rather heavily on women’s passive dependence, their femininity” (Friedan 205). Since they depended so heavily on women’s acceptance of a housewifely role, challenges to widespread acceptance of the feminine mystique were particularly threatening to many men. As the cinema could be employed to reinforce domestic ideology, film was one mechanism of containing challenges to traditional domestic life. Zeffirelli’s production of The Taming of the Shrew serves as a particular example of the way film could reinforce masculine control in order to maintain patriarchal structures. As I will show, the film denies Kate a strong, independent voice and instead portrays her as domesticated and eventually even passive, allowing her to be easily controlled. Zeffirelli’s film manages to turn Kate into a sex object so that she might be made to fit neatly within the myth of the happy housewife. In doing so, the film addresses cultural concerns that the growing feminist movement would undermine the heteronormative infrastructure of American family life. I argue that ultimately, Zeffirelli’s Taming reinforces heterosexual relationships and heteronormativity in order to assuage viewers’ fears about the women’s movement and the growing number of sexually autonomous and assertive women.

Zeffirelli’s Taming emphasizes heteronormativity first and foremost through control of Kate’s body. In her essay “Women on the Market,” Luce Irigaray claims that “women’s bodies—through their use, consumption, and circulation—provide for the condition making social life and culture possible…the exploitation of the matter that has been socialized female is
so integral a part of our sociocultural horizon that there is no way to interpret it except through this horizon” (171). As Irigaray notes, society could not function without extreme dependence on the female body, yet this exploitation has been so much a part of western culture for so long that it cannot be considered outside of patriarchal ideology. She points out that “wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men” (172). Thus women are valued not for themselves, but for the benefit that they may bring to relationships between men. This is exactly what happens to Kate in Zeffirelli’s film. From start to finish, Kate is treated as a commodity in the film, and thus she can be controlled. Her value is contingent upon the money that Petruchio gains for marrying her. Early in the film, Petruchio loudly and insistently informs Hortensio that he has come “to wive it wealthily in Padua. And happily, if wealthily, in Padua.” While the film’s focus on wealth in this line is consistent with Shakespeare’s source text, Zeffirelli’s film later breaks away from the Shakespearean text to greatly heighten Petruchio’s interest in the wealth he will gain in exchange for marrying Kate. The first thing that Petruchio does in Baptista’s house is to examine a silver tea-set, clearly appraising its value. He asks Baptista, “if I get your daughter’s love, what dowry shall I have with her as wife?” Their entire exchange is predicated on Kate’s worth—what Petruchio will receive as her dowry, and what Kate will receive if she is widowed. As Jack Jorgens notes, “though [Petruchio’s] motives may change…commerce never entirely disappears” (Jorgens 67). Baptista and Petruchio arrange the marriage strictly on the basis of money, and Kate is only valued insofar as she can be passed between Baptista and Petruchio. Her personal voice is denied and she is treated like nothing more than a commodity.

A total denial of Kate’s subjectivity only becomes more apparent in later scenes, where Kate is openly traded between Petruchio and Baptista. She does not want to get married,
beginning to scream “I WILL NEVER” in response to the marriage vows until the “NEVER” is stopped short by Petruchio grabbing her face for a kiss. As soon as the ceremony is complete, Kate is crushed in a sea of well-wishers. She reaches for Baptista, crying “Father, no!” but is quickly brushed off by Baptista and drowned out by the crowd. Kate’s voice and wishes are denied so that the trade between Baptista and Petruchio can be completed. As the church scene dissolves into a celebration at Baptista’s house, Kate peers around a corner and sees Baptista and Petruchio completing their transaction. Petruchio walks out of a small room with a chest that is revealed to be full of gold coins. Baptista exits the room right behind Petruchio, and Grumio takes the chest and leaves the party. After watching this exchange, Kate’s dismayed facial expression suggests her awareness of what has occurred. She realizes that in this masculine economy, she is simply an object that has been circulated from Baptista to Petruchio. As Irigaray points out, in patriarchal society “men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves” (170), and this is exactly what has just happened to Kate. She is totally ignored, and after watching Baptista merrily introduce Petruchio to various Paduans, Kate turns and slips away. She is not treated as a person or given the chance to make her voice heard, scream and rage as she may. Rather, her value depends on her exchange between men and her usefulness to men.

The beginning of the wedding scene presents viewers with an excellent metaphor for Kate as a commodity. As people begin to gather in the entrance to Baptista’s home, a wicker cage holding a large parrot is unveiled. The cage is opened, and the parrot sits on its perch squawking loudly as the townsfolk laugh. The bird is beautiful, but held captive and treated as a curiosity and thus a commodity by the townsfolk. Kate receives similar treatment when she appears. The crowd gasps at her arrival and she immediately becomes the center of attention.
They are obviously not used to seeing Kate look so beautiful or so serene, and she becomes a curiosity and a spectacle. Kate as a person is ignored and Kate as a spectacle is celebrated. As Kate begins to glance over the table holding her wedding presents, she comes face to face with the parrot, who squawks “A shrew!” The crowd bursts into laughter, and Kate angrily rushes away from the table. Just as the parrot is held captive, so is Kate. She is constrained to the whims of the men in her life—first Baptista, and later Petruchio—and treated as a spectacle to be viewed and then exchanged. Indeed, the entire wedding sequence is about viewing and exchanging; Kate is first made a spectacle to be viewed, both at Baptista’s house and at the church, and then is literally exchanged for a chest containing twenty thousand crowns. She is never accepted as a part of society nor treated as a person and a subject. Like the parrot, Kate may be beautiful, but she is still nothing more than an object.

Kate’s status as a commodity also contributes to her sexualization. She is viewed as a source of voyeuristic pleasure as she becomes the object of the camera’s gaze. Zeffirelli’s film takes full advantage of Elizabeth Taylor’s famous violet eyes in order to create a Kate who is sexually appealing. Viewers’ very first glimpse of Kate is a close-up of one of Taylor’s huge violet eyes, troping on Taylor’s fame to establish Kate as physically desirable from the start. Kate is sexualized throughout the wooing sequence as well. When Petruchio enters the room where Kate is smashing a music stand, her heaving cleavage figures prominently. After she slips away from Petruchio, Kate ends up in what is evidently a storeroom, where she grabs an apple and flings herself into a large pile of wool. For the next several moments, viewers see Kate laughing and rolling in the wool. It is a moment that does not figure at all in the film’s plot but

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4 For a full discussion on the relationship between the female body and the cinematic gaze, see Laura Mulvey’s classic article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” where she argues that the woman displayed on-screen “has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (61).
instead serves simply to give readers a voyeuristic glimpse of Kate as a sexual being. The scene is shot from above and the camera angle seems almost to suggest Kate rolling around on a giant white bed in the throes of passion with her back arched and her head thrown back in pleasure. She finally stops rolling and lays satisfied, taking a bite of her apple—an action that also brings to mind a vision of Eve in the garden of Eden. Once Petruchio has finally caught up to her, a farcical chase scene ensues in which Kate is constantly panting as her generous cleavage heaves. Indeed, Kate’s bosom figures prominently in Zeffirelli’s *Taming*. Critics such as Douglas Brode have noted that although Taylor’s vocal cords were sometimes disappointing, “her breasts performed beautifully” (23). The film’s focus on Kate’s physical attributes objectifies Kate, which also subtly helps to maintain the feminine mystique. As Friedan observed, actresses underwent a change in the years after the World Wars, turning from “complex [individuals] of fiery temper, inner depth, and a mysterious blend of spirit and sexuality, to [sexual objects], a babyface bride, or a housewife” (53). Since Kate is treated as a sexual object rather than an individual with depth, she can be traded between Baptista and Petruchio with no regard to her own thoughts and feelings. Kate is reduced an object of men’s erotic pleasure and her own subjectivity is elided, thus reminding audiences that women can be subjugated and treated as sexual objects despite any claims to the contrary made by proponents of the sexual revolution.

The end of the wooing scene further reinforces the film’s message that Kate, and by implication other women, were valuable through their ability to generate erotic pleasure. At the end of the scene, Kate and Petruchio fall through the roof and land in the bed of wool where Kate was previously seen rolling about with joy. Petruchio lands on top of Kate and lies on top of her, pinning her down. Kate struggles against his hold and tries to make her escape, but Petruchio grabs her wrist and regains his position on top of her. During this entire sequence, the camera
angles showcase Kate’s generous bosom to great effect. One particularly lengthy overhead shot shows Kate panting and writhing as her cleavage threatens to escape the top of her dress, while Petruchio utters the lines “Marry, so I mean to warm thee in my bed.” The underlying insinuation is that the pit of wool prefigures their marriage bed, where Kate will enjoy being physically dominated by Petruchio’s masculine power. Furthermore, this scene communicates a message of women as an erotic plaything; although Kate seems desperate to escape Petruchio—earlier in the scene, she had gone so far as to climb out a window and run along the rooftop to get away from him—her subjectivity is always subjugated to Petruchio’s desires. Kate becomes the eroticized, sexualized object of both Petruchio and the camera’s gaze as Petruchio pins her down. Her value is now understood in terms of both Baptista’s wealth and her own sexual appeal, thus helping to uphold patriarchal conceptions of a woman’s worth. Irigaray argues that patriarchal ideology “requires that woman maintain in her own body the material substratum of the object of desire, but that she herself never have access to desire” (188). While Kate functions as a material object of desire in this scene, she herself is not portrayed as desiring. The film indulges masculine desire but fails to demonstrate a scene where female desire is present. Instead, Zeffirelli’s film revolves around the use of women as objects of masculine sexual desire.

There are moments in the film, however, where Kate rebels against Petruchio’s desire and tries to claim a small measure of agency by rejecting his sexual advances. Once they have reached Petruchio’s home and endured the chaos of the dinner scene, Petruchio carries Kate up to the bedroom. Neither Kate nor Petruchio seem to know what to do when they first reach the bridal chamber. Petruchio finally turns to wash his hands, and Kate slowly undresses. She takes off her cape and outer skirt before letting her hair down. Petruchio watches in amazement; the camera angle shifts to place the audience in Petruchio’s vantage point, and viewers are invited to
share Petruchio’s appreciation. For a moment, the cinematic gaze again makes Kate into an object of visual pleasure, as the camera follows Kate’s outer skirt slowly slipping to the floor and captures Petruchio’s awestruck expression. Petruchio steps over to Kate and starts to push her hair back, then kisses her shoulder. He is obviously attracted to Kate, and her expression is difficult to read: at some moments, she appears frightened and closed off, while at other moments she seems, however tentatively, to enjoy his advances. Due to the scene’s staging and the well-known offscreen relationship between Burton and Taylor, viewers are led to believe that Petruchio’s sexual desire will be fulfilled. Kate, though, has other ideas. When Petruchio reaches to take off her corset after kissing Kate’s shoulder, she gasps and runs over to the bed. She reaches behind her back and slyly pulls the warming-pan out from beneath the bedsheets before smiling invitingly. At this point, Petruchio overcomes his hesitation and attempts to join Kate on the bed. Suddenly, Kate grimaces and whacks him over the head with the warming-pan. Petruchio ends up sleeping on some sort of table, while Kate spends the night alone in bed. She has won this small battle and succeeded in rebuffing Petruchio’s sexual advances, thus staking a claim to her sense of self and reminding viewers that she is more than a sexual object.

While this scene taken alone might be read as indicative of a progressive film that celebrated women’s right to control who has access to their bodies, other scenes in the film complicate such a reading. In light of the rest of the film, as well as the cultural context of the time, Kate’s actions in this scene also bring up the issue of frigidity. As Betty Friedan outlined in *The Feminine Mystique*, women were accused of frigidity when they failed to respond to their husbands’ sexual advances. Women were expected to be available to satisfy their husbands’ desire at any point, but no regard was given to their own desire—or lack thereof. If a woman made herself unavailable to satisfy her husband’s erotic energy, she was labeled frigid and seen
as having a problem. Thus, frigidity was viewed as a real social problem during the time when Zeffirelli’s film was released. When the film’s bedroom scene is read in conjunction with other scenes where Kate rejects any kind of physical advance from Petruchio, The Taming appears to present Kate as frigid. She denies Petruchio the chance for any sort of intimacy, from her rejection of his advances in the bedroom to a later scene when she quickly and chastely pecks the tip of his nose when he presses her to give him a kiss. Kate treats all of the household servants with warmth and acceptance, but goes cold as soon as Petruchio enters the house. She is totally dismissive of his presence, further cementing her frigidity. By portraying Kate as frigid, Zeffirelli’s film allows her to be labeled as problematic. She does not conform to the patriarchal ideology that decrees a woman should be available for her husband’s (erotic) use, and thus can be labeled as aberrant or deviant. Therefore, any momentary anxieties created when Kate seized agency to kick Petruchio out of the bedroom can be allayed and explained away: rather than embodying a strong feminist stance that encourages women to exert subjectivity, Kate’s actions are a result of her frigidity. She can be labeled as a problem or a failure of a woman, becoming an example for what women should avoid rather than an example of how women could fight for higher social standing.

The film also subtly portrays Kate as failing to live up to appropriate standards of femininity through her social isolation, particularly on the day of her wedding. Indeed, Diana E. Henderson has identified a whole sequence of moments where Kate is isolated in the wedding scenes—including the crowd’s laughter at her reaction to the parrot, Baptista’s indifference as she is crushed by the crowd, and Kate’s glimpse of Baptista selling her to Petruchio—and argues that this sequence of isolating moments “highlights the culture’s traffic in women” (“A Shrew for the Times” 159). Henderson points out that “the unexpected subtext of this farcical film
reveals female silencing and isolation” (“A Shrew for the Times” 149). Any time that Kate does not act in accordance with Paduan values—values which mirrored the heteronormative cultural standards that dominated Western society at the time of the film’s release—she is scorned, laughed at, and generally made to feel abnormal and inferior. Although she screeches loudly during the first few scenes where she is onscreen, her voice is effectively silenced through her characterization as unstable and abnormal. Anything that she has to say is ignored, and it is clear that there are social consequences for women who try to speak out. The film thus reifies the patriarchal ideology that positions women as passively silent by problematizing Kate for daring to adopt an attitude that is anything but passive. In this way, Zeffirelli’s film upholds the feminine mystique and encourages women to conform to social norms in order to avoid the silencing isolation that Kate initially experiences.

The Taming further reifies the feminine mystique and encourages viewers to uphold a patriarchal social order through its portrayal of Kate as a housewife. After the disastrous encounter between Kate and Petruchio on their wedding night, which ends with Petruchio ripping down the bedpost and flinging the sheets about, Kate throws herself down on the bed and sobs uncontrollably. Suddenly, however, her sobbing stops and Kate smiles as she looks around and realizes where she can make her mark on the household: by changing the home’s dirty, dingy state into orderly domestic bliss. When Petruchio wakes up after the wedding night, he finds his household in a flurry of domestic activity. He is awakened by light streaming in through a newly-washed window and opens a door to see some of his servants lowering the chandelier to be dusted while others sweep the floor. Kate is directing the whole operation and appears as a model housewife, complete with her hair tied up in a kerchief and a feather-duster in her hand. She ignores Petruchio when he appears and tries to make conversation, instead simply
carrying on with her vigorous cleaning. Two scenes later, after a brief cut to Bianca and Lucentio, the camera cuts back to Petruchio’s home where he finds his boots polished and placed neatly by the door, his dog being groomed, and his servants in bright new outfits. Kate is busy giving all the servants colorful hats, although she again becomes cold and expressionless when Petruchio greets her. Nevertheless, the servants are laughing cheerfully as a fire crackles in the grate, and the entire scene is one of domestic bliss. The home is clean and brightly lit, the table is neatly set, and it is clear that Kate has imposed domestic order upon the entire household. As Cartmell puts it, “[her] transformation of Petruchio’s home tells it all: she becomes the ideal 1960s besotted housewife, complete with headscarf, having the time of her life tidying up and feminizing a long neglected male domain” (213-214). Zeffirelli’s film has succeeded in transforming Kate from a deviant, outspoken woman who defies social norms to a woman who clearly upholds the feminine mystique.

The scenes that show Kate cleaning house further serve to reinscribe patriarchal cultural standards by suggesting that a women can and should find her sense of self through completing domestic activities. Henderson argues that Kate’s domesticity allows her to seize “new authority and control…even in the lion’s den” (Collaborations 191), thus serving to create “a new social order in which she appears benignly assured and [Petruchio] feels excluded” (Collaborations 192). In Henderson’s eyes, this allows Zeffirelli’s film to rewrite The Taming of the Shrew in terms of social realignment rather than gender subordination; however, I argue that the film still focuses on gender subordination by upholding the feminine mystique. If Kate’s only available means to find happiness is through participating in a socially-accepted domestic order, then societal expectations that position women as passive and subservient to men are upheld as a normative construct. The feminine mystique is celebrated, and Kate is seen in a positive light.
only when she embraces traditional feminine values and transforms herself into a domestic goddess. Any earlier indications that the film may have been trying to present a strong feminist position are negated in favor of a vision that embodies patriarchal ideologies.

*The Taming*’s final scenes, including Kate’s famous speech of obedience, continue to endorse the feminine mystique. Kate’s final speech is framed within a context of showing up the other women present. While everyone is eating and drinking at Bianca and Lucentio’s wedding feast, the widow—Hortensio’s new wife—makes an extremely rude comment directly to Kate, calling her a shrew and making sure that Kate has heard and understood her meaning. Although Petruchio urges Kate forward onto the widow, Kate remains passive. Everyone else begins to laugh and joke, but Kate stays silent. She then simply stands up to suggest that the ladies withdraw. Once Petruchio has made the bet with Lucentio and Hortensio, wagering 4,000 crowns on whose wife will obey their call most quickly, the widow and Bianca refuse to come just as they do in Shakespeare’s play. But in Zeffirelli’s film, Kate does not only return to Petruchio—she returns dragging the widow and Bianca with her. Kate delivers her speech of obedience sincerely rather than ironically, which is how the speech is staged in many other filmic versions of the play; in Zeffirelli’s *Taming*, the entire speech functions as a condemnation of the widow and Bianca’s disobedience. She pushes the other two women into chairs and speaks vehemently, hands on hips, as the men sink back into their chairs in amazement. Indeed, Kate almost appears to be holding court during this speech: while everyone else is seated around the perimeter of the room, Kate stands regally in the center of the room and is the only one who moves during the speech. At one point, she grasps the widow and Bianca by their sleeves and actually forces them to kneel in front of their husbands before dropping to her own knees and offering her hand to place under Petruchio’s foot. The entire room bursts into applause and
Petruchio takes Kate’s outstretched hand and pulls her to her feet. The overall message is clear. Kate has accepted her wifely role and agreed to conform to Petruchio’s masculine control.

The framing of the final speech serves to temper the film’s ideological message in a way that seems acceptable to women as well as to men. Since the speech is framed as a way for Kate to make fools of the widow and Bianca—in effect, paying them back for the years of ridicule and social isolation she experienced prior to this point—its straight delivery seems natural. Kate appears almost heroic rather than tamed. By speaking out against the women who had treated her badly, Kate is able to play the role of the good wife but couch this role in a socially acceptable manner. Thus, The Taming carefully works to avoid offending its female viewers while at the same time subtly reifying the societal structures that kept women in a passive, subordinate position. While Kate appears strong and in control during this speech, ironically enough the speech serves to position her as under the control of her husband. Indeed, Henderson points out “the paradoxical nature of Zeffirelli’s film, in which Katherina is presented far more empathetically and with greater agency than in most video versions, yet employs that agency to naturalize a traditional sex-gender system all the more doggedly” (“A Shrew for the Times” 156). The film contains moments where Kate appears to have some agency and ability to facilitate the breakdown of patriarchal ideology, but those moments are always turned into moments that serve to uphold the existing social order.

Furthermore, Kate’s final speech continues to position women as a commodity in addition to solidifying her acceptance of feminine mystique. She uses the language of exchange to describe what wives owe their husbands, uttering phrases like “fair looks and true obedience, too little payment for so great a debt” and “such duty the subject owes the prince, even such a women oweth to her husband.” By speaking of what women owe to their husbands, Kate firmly
establishes the female body as a commodity to be given in payment for a husband’s duty to protect his wife. Although Zeffirelli’s film does give Kate one chance to speak and to serve as the center of attention, her speech is not radical in any way; rather, it re-affirms societal norms that cast the female body as an object of exchange. In her discussion of women as commodities, Irigaray alludes to moments like this where women do get the chance to make their voice heard. She states, “[s]o commodities speak…the important thing is that they be preoccupied with their respective values, that their remarks confirm the exchangers’ plans for them” (Irigaray 179, emphasis in original). Thus, while Kate as a commodity can and does speak in this scene, her focus is on her value to Petruchio. Her words confirm patriarchal ideology by indicating that she plans to conform to socially accepted notions of passive femininity.

Kate’s actions following her famous speech further serve to solidify her acquiescence to patriarchal ideology. Petruchio pulls Kate to her feet, and the two of them kiss passionately as the entire room bursts into applause. Kate’s earlier frigidity has disappeared and she now appears to have made herself totally available to her husband. In both word and action, she has totally assumed the role of the happy housewife, ready to fulfill her husband’s every desire. Yet Zeffirelli’s film does not end with this long-awaited kiss; the film’s ending introduces a slight complication into the narrative that reminds viewers of Kate’s status as a commodity. Petruchio turns back to the other men in order to claim his victory and bid them farewell. Meanwhile, Kate slips through the crowd of women and leaves without Petruchio. He turns around just in time to catch Kate slipping away and must fight his way after her, through throngs of women who laughingly bar his way. Cartmell argues that the film’s ending gives viewers a Kate who “loves the chase, and is begging for even more abuse” (214). However, in light of my analysis of Kate’s status as a commodity throughout the film, I contend that the ending serves to remind
Petruchio—and viewers—that Kate, like other commodities, must be continually re-acquired. Just as other commodities are exhausted and must be replenished, Petruchio cannot simply claim Kate for once and for all. Rather, the process of acquisition will be lifelong. Her disappearance at the wedding banquet is simply a literal reminder of the continual process of re-acquiring and re-establishing ownership of commodities.

Taken as a whole, Zeffirelli’s *Taming* demonstrates the process by which women are circulated among men as commodities and objectified as products with sexual value. The film mitigates the threat of an outspoken woman like Kate who refuses a traditional domestic role by transforming her into an object who fits neatly within the ideology of the feminine mystique. If, as Irigaray notes, “[t]he circulation of women among men is what establishes the operations of society, at least of patriarchal society” (184), then Zeffirelli’s film reifies these societal operations as it addresses anxieties about women who try to remove themselves from circulation. Although Kate’s wild words and violent manner effectively excluded her from exchange between men at the film’s beginning, Petruchio’s arrival—and obvious need for money—put Kate back into circulation. In doing so, the film also speaks to larger cultural anxieties. The myth of the feminine mystique helped keep women in circulation by implicitly encouraging them to remain in the home and conform to traditional gender roles. But after Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique* became a national success, women began to question the ideology that forced them to remain in the home and under the control of their husbands. Zeffirelli’s *Taming*, then, serves to reinforce traditional gender roles and strengthen patriarchal ideologies that kept women passively confined to the home. As Diana Henderson puts it, “Zeffirelli’s feature film for the swinging sixties retained this emphasis on domesticity” (“A Shrew for the Times” 149). At a time when shifting cultural norms threatened to undermine men’s dominance and the
structure of the family unit, *The Taming* worked to ensure that heterosexual relationships remained normative and that women understood their place in such relationships.

Ultimately, Zeffirelli’s *Taming* serves to refocus audience attention on the basis of American family life: the heterosexual marriage. Diana Henderson argues that Zeffirelli’s film “[reorients] the narrative not by ignoring its gendered power plays but by reevaluating the bases for a strong wedded bond” (*Collaborations* 193). The film’s focus on the factors that create a strong marriage is very topical to those who felt threatened by Friedan’s exposure of the feminine mystique and the rising awareness of the women’s movement. In this particular adaptation, Kate and Petruchio’s interactions communicate to viewers that a strong marriage can and should be upheld by the feminine mystique. From Kate’s happiness in cleaning Petruchio’s house to her willingness to place her foot under his hand, Kate is effectively tamed and forced to accept her place in the home. Audiences could leave satisfied, knowing that the fundamental basis of American family life had been reinforced. Thus, while Zeffirelli’s film may be visually pleasing, it is ideologically regressive. The small measure of agency ostensibly offered to women turns out to be no agency at all; the film encourages women to seek agency through keeping house but fails to acknowledge that housekeeping was one of the very things women sought to escape. In the end, Zeffirelli’s film only serves as a masterful visual reminder that in a patriarchal culture of exchange, women can be kept contained through a commodification of their bodies and actions.
CHAPTER III. “I WILL BE ANGRY”: THE TAMING OF THE SHREW AND THE BACKLASH AGAINST FEMINISM

From hippies to drug culture to the sex wars to rock and roll, the 70s were a ten-year period that transformed people’s way of thinking by encouraging liberalism in many aspects of daily life. But as the 70s drew to a close, a conservative backlash began to (re)gain hegemonic status. Ronald Reagan’s 1980 election to the Oval Office and Jerry Falwell’s founding of the Moral Majority ushered in a conservative ideology that would pervade American thinking for the next ten years as the New Right took control of the political arena and the media. In the midst of such a dramatic shift in the dominant ideology, the BBC released a series of made-for-TV movie adaptations of Shakespearean plays. Jonathan Miller directed the BBC’s adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew, which was released in 1980—just as the liberalism of the 70s came under serious attack and the conservatism that would characterize the 80s began to gain ground. Although produced under the umbrella of the British Broadcasting Corporation, the film was funded largely by American corporate sponsors (Miller 196). The film was produced in Britain, but the strong American influence allows Miller’s adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew to serve as a cipher through which to examine American culture at the turn of the decade. What, exactly, were the concerns that conservative backlash reacted against? How did cultural productions serve to uphold or undermine standards of behavior in a time of rapid ideological shift?

Critics have largely acknowledged Miller’s film to be quite conservative. As such, the film speaks to concerns of traditionalists who felt threatened by the liberalism of the 1970s. Diana Henderson points out that “Miller’s putatively historicist and undeniably sober

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5 Hereafter referred to as “Miller's film” or The Taming
“Shrew...was the perfect production to usher in the neo-conservative 1980s” (“A Shrew for the Times” 150). With such a sober approach, the film could be analyzed as a reaction to any number of cultural factors; however, I propose to focus solely on the film as a reaction against the feminist movement, which had picked up speed in the 1970s. Susan Faludi identified the 70s as a decade where many feminist films were produced while the 80s in turn saw a legion of films that worked against a feminist standpoint (124-125). Miller’s 1980 film seems to function as part of the turning point; although not as anti-woman as films like *Fatal Attraction*, which Faludi discusses, *The Taming* represents the advent of cultural backlash against 1980s feminism. As Henderson notes, Miller set his production in opposition to what he perceived as “‘American’ ‘feminist’ versions less true to Shakespeare’s text” (150). Miller effectively silences Kate throughout the film so as to minimize opportunities for her to act in a manner that could be read as feminist.

While many adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* foreground Kate and Petruchio’s narrative while minimizing Bianca and Lucentio’s storyline, Miller’s film gives almost equal screen time to both sisters’ developing romances. The film participates in a divide and conquer strategy that sets Kate and Bianca at odds, thus creating a mild sense of “woman on woman” combat—the kind of combat that Faludi claims was the only combat against women recognized by the mass media during the 80s (82). Furthermore, Miller’s film attempts to pathologize singlehood so as to make marriage seem the only viable option for a woman to attain happiness. The film’s staging suggests that Kate secretly desired to be married by indicating that her outbursts resulted from jealousy over Bianca’s suitors. The combination of these two elements, as well as the film’s emphasis on male-to-male interactions, effectively shuts down Kate’s perspective. I argue that Miller’s film deliberately silences Kate’s voice as a reaction against...
growing awareness that women’s perspectives had a message to contribute. By focusing on male-to-male interactions instead of Kate’s storyline, the film foregrounds male voices and insinuates that women have nothing to add to the conversation. I contend that the film’s elision of Kate effectively undermines women’s voices to (re)inscribe masculinity with greater authority and return women to a subordinate, pre-1970s position. I claim that Miller tries to pass off the film’s final scene as a historical link to Puritanism in an attempt to veil its overt message of embracing patriarchal social control. Ultimately, I show that the film disguises its politics in the guise of being “historical” and “nonpolitical” so as to convey its ideological message without censor. The women’s movement of the 1970s still had quite a bit of momentum at the turn of the decade, and Miller’s film reacts against women’s quest for equal rights in a way that prefigured the strong backlash against radical feminism that characterized the rest of the 1980s.

In the 1970s, radical feminists began to succeed in making their voices heard to a substantial degree. They sought to break the link between sex and gender in order to demonstrate that sexuality has facilitated women’s domination by men (Nicholson 148). Radical feminists believed that “‘man-made’ interpretations of sex differences secure male dominance over women” (McCann and Kim 14). While not all feminists subscribed to such a revolutionary view, the sexual revolution of the 1970s pushed woman’s bodies and female sexuality into the national spotlight. Books like Our Bodies, Ourselves, Dialectics of Sex, and Sexual Politics transformed the way many women thought about their sexuality, including the idea of valuing sexual intercourse for pleasure rather than for procreation and heterosexual commitment (Rosen xxii, 176). Women were less expected to marry in the 1970s than they had been in previous decades. Faludi references one article from the 1970s that concluded the “women’s movement, apparently, is catching on” and confirmed that happy single women were a new trend (95). In
contrast, married life “acquired a sour and claustrophobic reputation in the early ‘70s press” (Faludi 95-96). In addition, no-fault divorce laws passed in the 1970s made it easier—and less stigmatizing—for women to divorce their husbands (Faludi 19). The Equal Rights Amendment, which sought equality between men and women in every facet of public life, passed both houses of Congress in 1972 for the first time since its inception in 1923 (Rosen xxiv, 27). With such legal and personal gains, women rapidly became more outspoken and more independent than ever before as feminism spread throughout the American populace.

Yet as the New Right started to become active in politics in 1978, backlash against the women’s movement also gained momentum. Some men felt threatened by indications that women may achieve their goals, or as Faludi puts it, “the antifeminist backlash has been set off not by women’s achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it” (xx). Beginning with Jerry Falwell’s statement against the ERA in 1980, the 1980s brought “a powerful counterassault on women’s rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women” (Faludi xviii). The year 1980, then, marked something of a turning point: with Reagan’s 1980 election, the New Right effectively took over the political sphere and sparked an ideological shift away from cultural sympathy towards feminism and towards cultural backlash against feminism. Miller’s 1980 film was released just as this ideological shift began. Because the film effectively silences Kate, it clearly participates in the beginning of the backlash against feminism. The film’s staging prefigures many of the ideological positions that conservative backlash would later use as weapons against the women’s movement.

One of the most effective ways that the New Right undermined feminism was through a divide-and-conquer strategy where women were pitted against each other. If the gains of the
1970s resulted from diverse groups of women working towards some of the same goals—including passage of the ERA, widespread access to the birth control pill, and increased awareness of sexual violence against women—then the conservative backlash tried to divide women in order to deprive them of the power that comes through solidarity. Patriarchal ideology made women into each other’s enemies in order to divert focus away from the ways men tried to control women. Miller’s film participates in this divide-and-conquer strategy through its staging of Kate and Bianca’s relationship. From the moment when Kate and Bianca first appear onscreen, they are set up as rivals. Baptista sweeps through the crowd of men clamoring for Bianca’s attention to take her under his arm. Kate, who stands on Baptista’s other side, is noticeably positioned away from her father. He motions in her direction without ever bringing her into closer proximity. The underlying intimation is strongly sibling rivalry: Bianca emerges as their father’s clear favorite while Kate is forced to remain on the outskirts of Bianca and Baptista’s relationship.

The men are obviously unkind to Kate in this scene—Hortensio disparagingly remarks “No mates for you,” indicating that Kate will never be accepted by society—but when she attempts to defend herself by going after Hortensio, Baptista comforts Hortensio rather than Kate. He sends Bianca inside, assuring her that he will love her no less, while totally ignoring Kate. Bianca is to have books and tutors, but no mention is made of giving Kate similar scholarly pursuits. As Baptista is explaining his care of Bianca to Gremio and Hortensio, Kate stands in the foreground with a wounded look on her face; indeed, she appears to be almost fighting back tears. Baptista enters the house after entreatying Kate, “you may stay, for I have more to commune with Bianca.” She almost begs to join the two of them inside, but is answered by silence. This initial scene clearly pits Kate against Bianca. The two sisters are forced to fight
for their father’s attention and Bianca has emerged as the clear winner. Instead of joining forces, Kate channels her anger against Bianca more than against anyone else. By dividing Kate and Bianca into opposing forces, Baptista ensures his control over both of them: Bianca seeks to remain in his favor by demonstrating obedience, while Kate rages in an attempt to get her father’s attention. Thus a divide-and-conquer strategy is present as a mechanism of control from the very first scenes of Miller’s film, just as the backlash of the 1980s sought to control women by dividing them into opposing factions.

The rivalry between Kate and Bianca does not end with this early scene, either. The two sisters continue to fight for much of the film; they direct much of their anger against each other rather than against the men who control them. Once viewers are finally taken inside Baptista’s house, a maid is seen sweeping the floors while sounds of fighting are heard. High-pitched grunts and shrieks indicate some kind of physical confrontation between the sisters. The maid looks up as the sisters finally appear on-screen: Kate drags Bianca through an archway by a rope tied around Bianca’s wrists and charges Bianca to reveal which suitor that she likes best. When Bianca disavows feeling any affection for her suitors, the two sisters begin hitting at each other, at which point Baptista appears to break up the fight. Both sisters scream and cry as they break apart, but Baptista comforts only Bianca. Kate is scolded, then screams “her silence flouts me and I’ll be revenged!” as she lunges towards Bianca again. Although Bianca begins to slap at Kate again, then makes a rude gesture at Kate as Baptista bodily removes Kate from Bianca’s proximity, she is not rebuked. Kate laments, “now I see. She is your treasure…I shall dance barefoot on her wedding day, and for your love to her lead apes in hell!” But rather than staging these lines as evidence of Kate’s anger against Baptista, Miller’s film portrays Kate as despondent. She begins to cry as she says these lines and when Baptista tries to comfort her,
starts sobbing uncontrollably. Kate’s overdramatic sobs at this point indicate both the women’s rivalry and the significance of what they fight over: male attention. Both sisters seek to gain Baptista’s attention at the expense of the other sister. The women fight for Baptista’s favor rather than joining forces to fight against his control, which gives Baptista power to control his daughters through the attention that he gives them. By setting Kate and Bianca up as enemies, *The Taming* foregrounds women-on-women combat and minimizes female antagonism towards men. Similarly, the conservative backlash against feminism pitted women against other women in order to indirectly allow men to assert their control. Miller’s film normalizes such a strategy in order to demonstrate that by dividing women, patriarchal hegemony could again be made dominant. Thus, male ascendancy was made to seem inevitable and desirable in order to neutralize the threat of women uniting together to make societal gain.

In addition to revealing the divide-and-conquer scheme practiced against the women’s movement, this scene of sibling rivalry also demonstrates another of the film’s major themes: Kate’s desire for marriage. Miller’s film attempts to pathologize singlehood and claim that all women desire marriage in order to change cultural standards that saw marriage as less desirable in the 1970s. The film uses this scene to indicate that Kate genuinely wants to be married, thus setting up marriage as the one normal desire that all women should have. When Kate begins interrogating Bianca about her suitors Hortensio and Gremio, Bianca asks Kate, “is it for him that you do envy me so?” Kate is indirectly exposed as jealous of Bianca’s marriage prospects; the insinuation is that Kate wishes she had suitors too. Kate’s later lamentation that Baptista will see her “dance barefoot” on Bianca’s wedding day also intimates a desire for marriage and an anxiety that Bianca will be married first, thus shaming Kate. Her loud, uncontrollable sobbing after bringing up Bianca’s wedding day makes Kate appear overwhelmed by the prospect of not
finding a husband. The entire scene sets up marriage as the natural goal of a woman’s life; Kate’s sobs reflect her dismay at being unmarriageable and thus ‘unnatural.’ Miller’s film thereby presents marriage as the one and only option for women. The film reacts against the more lax views of marriage that were popular during the 1970s, where marriage was seen as just one of several options for women. Instead, marriage again becomes normative in Miller’s film as unmarried women like Kate were presented as inadequate in some way. The film participates in a media strategy common during the 1980s that attempted to “[make] single and childless women feel like circus freaks” (Faludi xxiii). Viewers are reassured that single women who fought for their rights in the 1970s will come to see the “error of their ways” and begin to embrace marriage and heteronormativity in the coming decade.

Kate necessarily resists Petruchio’s marriage proposal because to do otherwise would widely diverge from Shakespeare’s original script—Miller notably retained much more of Shakespeare’s dialogue than previous film adaptations had done. But the scene’s staging serves to indirectly uphold the idea that all women want to be married. Kate’s offscreen sobs punctuate the dialogue between Baptista and Petruchio as they discuss the details of Kate’s dowry, reminding viewers of Kate’s earlier inconsolable demeanor as she spoke of Bianca’s prospects of marriage and her shame at remaining unmarried. When Kate appears onscreen, she stands in the doorway while Petruchio soliloquizes about the name “Kate” and puns on various pronunciations of the word. Kate’s responses to his puns are biting, but they are cold and deliberate rather than full of comical rage. Miller’s film does not make use of the outraged cries that many other adaptations employ to indicate Kate’s displeasure while Petruchio is talking. In fact, Kate is fairly stationary during most of the scene. She stands silently while Petruchio talks and her own responses are given in soft, low tones rather than being shouted or screeched. The staging
suggests that while Kate is dismissive of Petruchio, she does so reluctantly or as part of her public persona rather than because she is genuinely offended by his decision to woo her. Their verbal wordplay seems to be a test whereby Kate gauges whether Petruchio truly means to marry her or is merely mocking her like the other Paduan men. His soft, deliberate response to her slap—“I’ll cuff you if you strike again” followed by a long look where they evaluate each other—functions as a sort of turning point. Although Kate continues the verbal wordplay, it lacks the underlying bite of her earlier responses as she appears to realize that she may indeed be able to get married.

After a bit of sexual wordplay, Petruchio seizes Kate’s wrist and uses his physical strength to control her movements. He pulls her into the next room, yet she remains silent the entire time—a marked contrast to her screeches during her fight with Bianca. The underlying message is that Kate’s silence is part of the normal order and is a prerequisite for her marriage. In order for Kate—and by extension other women—to attain their desired goal, marriage, their protests against masculine control must be stopped. While she still verbally reacts to Petruchio, he has the power to speak in long stretches while her lines are short and spaced out. She never interrupts his lines or disrupts them with noises of dissent, but listens passively to what he has to say. Furthermore, when Petruchio puts his hands on Kate’s shoulders as he speaks of keeping her warm in bed, she seems to relax into his grasp. He brings up marriage and she remains silent, merely looking at him; after a moment she begins to speak, but falls silent again as soon as Petruchio grabs her hand. Her desire for marriage apparently overrides her desire for subjectivity in Miller’s film. Once Baptista re-enters the room, Kate accuses him of wishing her wed to “one half-lunatic,” but her actions speak in marked contrast to her words. While she refuses to kiss Petruchio, she does allow him to embrace her from behind. The staging implies
that even if Kate does not feel strong affection for Petruchio, she is willing to silence herself in order to attain marriage. She does not even protest when Petruchio claims that she is only cursed in company, having “hung about his neck” and “won him to her love” when they were alone. Her face shows her shock at his outrageous claims, yet she remains silent—and her silence serves as assent. Women, Miller’s film implies, should put up with whatever outrageous statements men may make if the end result is marriage. By communicating to viewers that even an unhappy and unequal marriage was still greatly preferable to singlehood, the film attempts to undo all of the work done in the 1970s to legitimate a woman’s right to remain single. Instead, *The Taming* problematizes singlehood in an attempt to return to the domestic ideology that the women’s movement began to overturn in the 1970s.

Miller’s film further pathologizes singlehood by staging Kate’s problems as created through her own faults. If 80s media “maintained…that single women’s troubles were all self-generated” (Faludi 98), *The Taming* was an early participant in this trend because it indicated that Kate’s failure to be accepted in Paduan society occurred as a result of her own shortcomings. Kate surprisingly remains silent much of the time, but Hortensio and Gremio make fun of her anyway. When Kate responds to their ridicule, speaking up in an attempt to defend herself, then men immediately label her shrewish. Kate is thus caught in a double bind: she can stay silent and allow herself to be harassed, or she can defend herself and further entrench her label as a “shrew.” Either way, she finds herself humiliated by the men. Yet Miller’s film tries to make their humiliation seem like it is Kate’s fault. The juxtaposition of her silence and her temper is so marked that it appears as though she deliberately enjoys provoking the men. She stands silent while everyone else speaks, then erupts. The staging makes her temper seem like a choice—as though she deliberately assumes a temperamental persona—and insinuates that the men’s
classification of Kate as “shrew” is only natural. The indication, then, is that Hortensio and Gremio only ridicule Kate because of the singular nature of her temper. Miller’s film tries to make Kate’s societal position appear to be her own fault; the film endeavors to intimate that Kate is treated with derision simply because of her own actions. This functions as a further marker that single women are a problem to be dealt with by men. Yet by doing so, the film elides Kate’s own voice. She eventually even allows Petruchio to speak for her, thereby giving up her voice entirely in an attempt to be accepted by society. In effect, Miller’s film communicates to viewers that women create their own problems, but must rely on men to rescue them. Thus, the film becomes a treatise on the “naturalness” of masculine control.

Miller’s film further naturalizes masculine control and dominance by the amount of screen time given to male-to-male interaction. While most adaptations center on Kate and Petruchio’s relationship, giving the vast majority of screen time to Kate and Petruchio, Miller’s film is divided almost equally between Kate and Petruchio, Bianca and Lucentio, and male-to-male conversation. Scenes where Petruchio and Grumio, Lucentio and Tranio, Hortensio and Gremio, or other groupings of men speak at length crop up repeatedly during the film. Even when Bianca and Lucentio are onscreen, they are repeatedly overwritten by masculine interaction: either they will be placed in the background while two men are speaking in the foreground of the scene, or Hortensio will disrupt their conversation to verbally spar with Lucentio. With such a heavy focus on the relationships between men, The Taming largely shuts down Kate’s perspective. Male-to-male interaction is held up as much more important than anything Kate wants to say, particularly after she reaches Petruchio’s house. Thus, Miller’s film underscores the importance of discourse between men while at the same time minimizing female voices. The Taming therefore stands as an ideological model for the conservative backlash of the
1980s that sought to undermine the radical feminist voices of the 1970s and replace them with the voices of the New Right. Like later political and media campaigns, Miller’s film neutralizes the impact of female voices by foregrounding conversations between men.

Miller’s film further dismisses Kate’s voice by turning her into a child who needs Petruchio to teach her how to behave. As Diana Henderson argues, “Miller certainly thought of Kate as a patient in a developmental narrative and justified Petruchio’s treatment of her through analogies with child therapy” (173). His ‘treatment’ begins at their wedding, where Petruchio is unapologetically late and arrives in a hat festooned with ridiculously long feathers and a faded jacket with an offensive, oversized orange flower on the lapel worn over a bare chest. Through his terrible behavior, Petruchio tries to mirror Kate’s own behavior in order to “teach” her how to behave. His outlandish costume and horrible behavior in the church—which viewers do not see, but rather hear about from Gremio—shock Kate into silence both before and after the wedding. As Petruchio drags Kate around by the hand and announces that they will not stay for the bridal feast, she finally finds her voice to scold Petruchio and scream “I WILL BE ANGRY!” But after sending the rest of the men into the feast, she again stands silent as Petruchio talks—thereby depriving her words of any subversive power. Henderson points out that Miller’s film stages Kate’s silence, and consequent obedience to Petruchio, as part of the process of Kate’s behavioral development “to make the taming of Kate seem something other than a simple replication or restoration of reactionary misogyny” (Collaborations 174). Thus Miller’s film superficially portrays Petruchio’s treatment of Kate as actually beneficial to her, as though he is doing her a favor by teaching her to behave properly. The paradox, however, is that the behaviors that are ostensibly in need of correction are the behaviors that give Kate any sort of subjective voice. Miller’s film attempts to cloak its true mission by treating Kate as a child who
needs taught proper behavior by Petruchio, but the subtext of the film is the restoration of patriarchal control.

Even when Kate finally regains her voice after being at Petruchio’s home for a few days, what she has to say is infantilized or dismissed. While in earlier scenes, Kate appeared haughty and even deliberately silent, she is suddenly and inexplicably portrayed as childish once she has reached Petruchio’s home. The servants line up to be inspected when Petruchio returns and Kate joins the line of servants instead of claiming her place at Petruchio’s side as his wife. As Petruchio blusters and swaggers and orders around the servants, she sits silently and watches in amazement. Her voice is not heard until several minutes into the scene, when she entreats Petruchio to have patience with the servants. The interaction between Petruchio and his male servants is staged as far more important than Kate’s perspective, especially because after her request she again falls silent for several minutes. She obeys Petruchio as a docile child would obey an unpredictable father—even to the point of removing a piece of mutton that she was about to eat from her mouth at Petruchio’s chiding “ah-ah!” In another scene, Kate throws a full-blown temper tantrum complete with wailing, screaming, and crying, and her overly large white nightgown and disheveled hair visually indicate her childish nature. She declares at one point, “why sir, I trust I may have leave to speak and speak I will! I am no child, no babe!” But the film’s staging presents readers with a far different visual picture. By so blatantly infantilizing Kate, Miller’s film dismisses anything that she has to say. *The Taming* seems to say that while women’s voices might have been taken seriously in the 1970s, giving women a prominent place in cultural discourse was a mistake.

Perhaps more troublingly, Miller’s solution to this “mistake” is to completely remove Kate’s subjectivity. She can only reach personhood when Petruchio grants it to her; as
Henderson puts it, “in this production where maturity and personhood are gifts from the male analyst to the female patient, any claim to distinctive subjectivity that Kate might be making through her disorderly behavior disappears” (*Collaborations* 178). Miller’s film thus allows men to redefine women, subtly indicating to audiences that the feminists of the 1970s needed to be taught proper behavior in order to be redefined as “acceptable” wives. The film encourages the conservative domestic ideologies of the New Right to take root and flourish while simultaneously disavowing any progress away from heteronormativity that 70s feminists had made. Instead, Miller’s film reinvests heteronormative behavior—white heterosexual marriage where the husband serves as clear head of household—with cultural power. Petruchio earns the respect of other men through his ability to tame Kate and force her into the position of a submissive wife. When Hortensio decides to marry a widow, he first goes to “the taming school,” otherwise known as Petruchio’s house. He respects Petruchio’s mastery over Kate and declares, when the group is on their way back to Baptista’s house and Kate has agreed to call the sun the moon according to Petruchio’s wishes, “Petruchio, go thy ways! The field is won!” Hortensio, Lucentio, and Baptista also demonstrate amazement at Petruchio’s victory after Kate’s speech of obedience. They congratulate Petruchio on his victory with lines like “tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so!” Petruchio has acquired a sort of mythic status because he has forced Kate into submission. In its treatment of Petruchio, Miller’s film celebrates the family structure of earlier decades and directs viewers’ attention to the supposed benefits of a patriarchal family. The film works against the 70s’ growing acceptance of single and divorced women and calls for a return to a patriarchal family structure where women were not given a subjective voice.
*The Taming* very clearly upholds Petruchio’s authoritative voice by celebrating his “triumph” over Kate through two soliloquies. Petruchio’s first soliloquy occurs right before he first meets Kate, while he is sitting in Baptista’s home waiting for her to enter the room. In this speech, he outlines his plot to tame Kate by contradicting everything that she says. The second soliloquy is given on their wedding night, after they have returned to Petruchio’s home. After escorting Kate off to bed, Petruchio returns to the cleared dining table, sits down, and with the line “thus have I politicly begun my reign” sketches out his plan to turn Kate into a docile wife by depriving her of food and rest. Both soliloquies are thoughtful and weighty: Petruchio speaks slowly and deliberately, as though he was thinking out loud. His gestures are also those of someone deep in thought, such as absently scratching his cheek, resting his chin in his hand, and rubbing his nose; no grandiose or overly theatrical air is present in either the gestures or the manner in which the lines are delivered. The soliloquies are clearly meant to represent Petruchio’s inner thoughts and are not deliberately performative.

Kate’s only notable soliloquy, in contrast, is extremely performative. Her soliloquy occurs at the film’s very end, when she gives her famous speech of obedience, and is directed at an entire group of people. The contrast between the two characters’ soliloquies is marked. Petruchio’s soliloquies paint him as clever and capable. He emerges as a serious man who knows how to get a job done and who is not afraid to risk looking ridiculous in the process—the perfect man to turn Kate into an acceptable wife. Kate’s soliloquy, however, solidifies her status as a puppet; she parrots everything she thinks Petruchio will want to hear about wifely obedience and the duty that women owe to their husbands. Her message of obedience is completely serious, with none of the tongue-in-cheek staging that many other adaptations rely on. If Petruchio’s soliloquies reinforced his strong subjectivity, then Kate’s soliloquy completely
removes any vestiges of subjectivity that she may have managed to retain. Because Petruchio’s
soliloquies thoughtfully establish his intelligence but Kate’s soliloquy is in service of obedience
to her husband, Miller’s film motions that Petruchio’s perspective is what is truly important. The
woman’s perspective is elided so that the masculine perspective can become dominant. Miller’s
film thus anticipates the project that 80s backlash cinema would undertake: “men redefining
women, men reclaiming women as their possessions and property” (Faludi 136). Petruchio
redefines Kate, taking her from a child to a wife, and reclaims her as his household property. In
doing so, he models the behavior that Miller’s film encourages male viewers to adopt—behavior
that quashes 70s radical feminist activism by removing women’s voices.

In short, Miller’s film presents viewers with an ideologically regressive message. The
film espouses the gender politics of early modern England and suggests that the highly controlled
patriarchal family should remain the familial model for modern society. This is most strongly
suggested through the image that viewers are left with: the entire cast at Bianca and Lucentio’s
wedding feast, singing a hymn that celebrates obedience. Tranio passes out sheet music, and
everyone bursts into the “spontaneous” song that states, among other things, “thy wives shall like
a fruitful vine at thy house sides be found.” The message of the song indicates that obedience
leads to a long, fruitful, and blessed life: the very message that the film wishes to send to the
outspoken women activists of the 70s. In order to present such a thesis, however, the film uses a
variety of tactics to make its message seem more appealing. Miller claims a historical link to
Puritanism as a means to explain the film’s somber look and feel, as well as the problematic final
scene. In an interview with Graham Holderness, Miller states, “I very strongly believe of that
play…that its spirit derives from Elizabethan Puritanism, from a post-Marian exile’s view of the
household as an orderly place in which the marriage is consecrated not in the church but in the
orderly procedure of domesticity; in which obedience is required…simply because this is how society should be arranged given we are the inheritors of this sin of naughtiness” (201). He explains the final hymn as “a sacramental view of the nature of marriage, whereby this couple had come to love each other by reconciling themselves to the demands of a society which saw obedience as a religious requirement” (201). Yet this supposed link to Puritanism, the means by which Miller tries to sidestep the misogyny of the final scene, was only made manifest in that final scene. As Henderson points out, “tellingly, this is the sole instance when Miller’s scholarly research on Puritanism directly intrudes” (Collaborations 177). Any discussion of Puritanism or the film’s use of religion to explain Kate’s obedience serves as a thin veil for the film’s true mission, de-legitimating the feminist activism of the 1970s.

Indeed, using historical tropes in an attempt to disguise The Taming’s ideological message fits in with the operating strategy of the 1980s conservative backlash. As Faludi argues, “a backlash against women’s rights succeeds to the degree that it appears not to be political, that it appears not to be a struggle at all. It is most powerful when it goes private” (xxii). Miller’s selective use of historicism in The Taming allows him to convey a political message while seeming to remain grounded in the past. Henderson insists that “Miller’s selective application of historicism appears more of a learned license or ‘cover’ for a psychoanalytic interpretation very much rooted in twentieth-century male subjectivity: it allows him to sustain his self-image as a ‘socialist liberal’ whose art avoids ‘politics’ even as he dramatizes a celebration of benign patriarchalism” (Collaborations 177). As Henderson makes clear, Miller’s film directly engages political discourse despite its stated desire to do otherwise. Because the film passes itself off as a nonpolitical entity, its message could successfully be disseminated more widely. Even the film’s opening sequence contributes to a supposedly nonpolitical production. The phrases
“Shakespeare” and “The Complete Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare” are emblazoned over images of such “official” markers of culture as medieval castles, gothic churches, and Roman ruins. The overtone is that this production is official, historical, and part of high culture—and as such, did not have any political message. But the film clearly speaks out against the gains made during the women’s movement and endorses a regressive message of patriarchal control: a project that was very much political. At a time when society was undergoing a rapid transformation from a liberal, more progressive ideology to backlash conservatism, Miller’s film inserts its voice into the cultural discourse in support of regressive, oppressive patriarchal ideology.

Ultimately, Miller’s film re-inscribes marriage as an acceptable site of gender inequity where men must control and speak on behalf of women. Scott McMillin calls the film “a straightforward piece of shrew-bashing” (80), and Graham Holderness identifies it as “advocating marital obedience” (182). The serious, moralizing tone of Kate’s final speech coupled with the fully-harmonized closing hymn leave viewers with an image of marriage that creates a strict hierarchy, with men holding firm control over their wives and the rest of the family. The film sends the message to viewers that this is what a truly happy marriage should look like. Kate, the self-possessed but temperamental and unhappy single woman, has been transformed into Kate, the docile and unthinking but happily married woman; the underlying message is that similarly, the outspoken radical feminists of the 70s ought to turn into the meek housewives of the 80s. Early in the film, Petruchio declares that his project is “to tame you Kate, and bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate comformable as other household Kates.” Miller takes on a similar taming project with his adaptation—but in his film, the word “feminist” may as well be substituted for “Kate.” The Taming attempts to tame not just Kate, but also the feminists of
the 70s, bringing them from wild feminists to feminists conformable with the household. The

gains made by 70s feminists, although small, were apparently threatening enough to necessitate a
strong reassertion of masculine dominance in the following decade. Miller’s *Taming*, with its
desire to control Kate by substituting male voices for her own, both participates in a reassertion
of gender inequity and paves the way for films made later in the 1980s to further suppress
women’s desire for equality.
CHAPTER IV. “UP YOURS, WEIRDO!” OR, CHANNELING AGGRESSION IN *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW*

In 2005, the BBC produced a mini-series entitled *ShakespeaRe-Told*, which “updated” four Shakespearean plays—including *The Taming of the Shrew*—by setting them in modern times. The BBC’s episode of “The Taming of the Shrew” featured, in the words of one reviewer, “a cross-dressing aristocrat” who “tames a shrew aiming to become the next Margaret Thatcher” (Stanley E1). In this adaptation, Kate is portrayed as a politician with grand ambitions and a violent temper, while Petruchio is turned into a penniless earl with an eccentric demeanor. The film’s trajectory and character development revolve largely around aggression: Kate’s aggression toward the world at large, Kate’s aggression toward Petruchio, Petruchio’s aggression toward Kate, and Kate’s aggression channeled into sexual energy. “The Taming” Re-Told, with such scenes of aggression recurring throughout the movie, both builds on the theatrical tradition that sometimes stages *The Taming of the Shrew* as a play about violence and also reflects its contemporary postfeminist moment. As Yvonne Tasker has argued, the postfeminist woman is one who can “have it all” (qtd. in Purse 188). Lisa Coulthard, too, argues that postfeminism revolves around a “have it all” discourse involving “individual, personal, erotic, and financial success” (172). By the end of “The Taming” Re-Told, Kate is represented as successful in all of these areas: she has a stable, happy personal life, continues to feel sexual desire towards her husband, and has advanced to the highest level professionally. By all accounts, at the end of the film Kate would appear to be a post-feminist heroine who validates the assumption that feminism is no longer necessary. However, a closer critical look at postfeminism and what Diane Negra calls its “widely-shared assumption that feminism is no longer desirable or viable” (para. 2)

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6 Hereafter referred to as “The Taming” Re-Told.
complicates this reading of Kate and “The Taming” Re-Told. Such assumptions about postfeminism are seen as problematic by many critics, who insist that feminism is still necessary in the modern day and age.

For Bronfen and Kayka, “[t]he most worrying definition of postfeminism…belongs to that group of mostly younger women…who believe that feminism has already done its work by achieving as much social equality for women in the home and workplace as one could hope or even wish for” (xi). This definition creates “a complicitous form of ‘postfeminism,’ in which women’s sense of empowerment is tied directly into what could be called old patriarchal institutions” (Bronfen and Kayka xi). Because postfeminism suggests that performing femininity is a means to agency, critics fear that postfeminism may become regressive at best and play into patriarchal tradition at worse. Genz and Brabon share this concern as they write, “[i]n this prescriptive sense, postfeminism acquires deadly and even murderous connotations as it proclaims the passing of feminism” (3). If postfeminism’s only goal is to achieve social and professional equality for women, then Kate’s final position as British Prime Minister in “The Taming” Re-Told appears to validate postfeminism and agree with the notion that feminism is dead. Yet the film’s ending, while corroborating this notion of postfeminism on the surface, quickly becomes complicated upon a closer reading. As Tasker and Negra argue, “postfeminist culture does not allow us to make straightforward distinctions between progressive and regressive texts” (22). Thus, it is necessary to consider “The Taming” Re-Told’s place within postfeminist discourse more critically; simply saying that Kate embodies a postfeminist woman does not allow for a truly nuanced critical reading.

Aggression has played a significant role in recent postfeminist discourse, often becoming a point of analysis within the current cultural moment. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra identify
“kick-ass, working out women” (21)—women who successfully find agency through aggression—as icons of postfeminism. Theories on female aggression and postfeminism often work side by side, as both sets of theory focus on strong and successful women. This has generally manifested itself through analyses of violent films like *Kill Bill* and *Monster*; postfeminist theorists Lisa Purse and Lisa Coulthard have both made aggression a key component in their analyses of these films. Indeed, aggression has been identified as a useful lens for postfeminist analysis of many films starring female action heroes.

However, reading postfeminism through aggression is certainly not limited to analyzing films centered around action heroes and graphic violence. Any film featuring a strong central female character lends itself readily to analysis using theories on aggression, including “The Taming” Re-Told. Maud Lavin offers us one useful way to think about aggression as a tool for analysis in her book *Push Comes to Shove: New Images of Aggressive Women*. For Lavin, aggression is not synonymous with violence; rather, aggression is “the use of force to create change” (3, emphasis Lavin’s). Critics who think of aggression as a force and a drive rather than as a violent behavior open up texts to allow for a more nuanced reading of aggressive characters and to create a space where films largely or completely devoid of graphic violence can still be read in terms of aggression. Furthermore, contextualizing aggression as a force for change allows us to link aggression and feminism, as both aggression and feminism are concerned with the ability to create change. Critics can thus analyze the way that aggression is used (or not used) in cultural texts as an avenue to analyze feminism in that cultural moment.

In order to read “The Taming” Re-Told as both an aggressive and a postfeminist text, I will begin by analyzing Kate’s character in “The Taming” Re-Told in relation to Lavin’s theories of aggression and violence, claiming that the film begins by presenting negative violence but
gradually shifts to present positive aggression. I will next argue that at the end of “The Taming” Re-Told, Kate is presented as a woman who has learned to channel aggression to attain her goals and create satisfying relationships, thus appearing to embody an ideal postfeminist woman. However, I conclude by demonstrating that even as the film tries to transform Kate into a postfeminist ideal, it actually forces us to reconsider the usefulness of certain strands of postfeminist thought. In order for Kate to appear as an ideal postfeminist hero, she also must conform to certain heteronormative expectations. Thus, Kate’s character pushes viewers to question postfeminism and perhaps re-consider current postfeminist goals, including the appropriate targets of female aggression.

While some critics have used violence as a lens to explore other adaptations of The Taming of the Shrew, Maud Lavin’s conception of aggression as a force for change is a much more productive means of reading “The Taming” Re-Told as a postfeminist text. Unlike violence, which is always negative, aggression can be used as a positive force at times; if we think about Kate as a character who can use aggression in both positive and negative ways, her character takes on more nuance than stereotypical conceptions of Kate as destructive and violent. Lavin and others are careful to distinguish between aggression and violence. Although violence and aggression have perhaps been historically linked, theories emerging in the past few decades have begun to separate the two. Aggression is now a much more nuanced concept, and most critics acknowledge that it may occur in a variety of forms. As Kaj Björkqvist and Pirkko Niemelä point out, “[p]hysical aggression is less and less considered to be the ‘true’ form of aggression” (6). For theorists like Lavin, violence occurs “when aggression boils over” and “is so excessive that another person is no longer recognized as an empathy-inducing subject but

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See, for example, Marvin Krims’ essay “Uncovering Hate in The Taming of the Shrew.” Sexuality and Culture 6.2 (Spring 2002): 49-64. ProQuest. Web. 30 July 2012.
instead an object to be destroyed” (Lavin 108). Aggression allows for interpersonal relationships, while violence merely destroys them. As Rene Denfeld defines it, violence “is used to describe destructive, pointless aggression,” or aggression in its most extreme form (7). While aggression serves useful purposes, such as “effecting messy but constructive change,” “representing and exploring sexuality,” and “asserting the self within social spaces,” violence is “destruction without boundaries” (Lavin 107). Aggression may create positive effects, but violence never will. So while aggression and violence may occupy positions along the same spectrum, so to speak, violence occurs only at the extreme end of the spectrum.

While violence is rarely a necessary occurrence, many theorists find aggression to be an indispensable part of daily life. Lavin contends “[w]omen need aggression and need to use it consciously” (9). Aggression should be a regular part of women’s lives, for as Burbank argues, “women’s overt aggression is, in some circumstances, a positive, enhancing act…when we deny women their aggressive possibilities, we potentially diminish their being” (1). Denfeld shows the potential negative or diminishing effects of denied aggression as she argues “a great deal of social and personal confusion, if not harm, results from ignoring women’s aggression” (10). Thus, aggression is both productive and necessary in women’s daily lives; it is not something to be ignored or taken lightly. “The Taming” Re-Told demonstrates just how necessary aggression can be for women. The aggressive moments in the film cannot be overlooked, as they are revelatory of both character evolution and the cultural moment: as Kate transforms from uncontrollably aggressive hellion to productively aggressive wife and mother, she also embodies postfeminist ideas and allows for a critical examination of postfeminism in the present moment.

In the beginning of “The Taming” Re-Told, Kate is snarling, disagreeable, unpredictable, and generally unlikeable. She slaps people, flips over tables, and verbally or physically abuses
almost everyone she comes into contact with. "The Taming" Re-Told's opening shot reveals Kate, an MP who is running for leader of the opposition party, quivering with rage before she violently slaps her assistant Tim for making her “look like a political pygmy” on Newsnight. Kate’s aggression at the beginning of the film is often out of control and seemingly unjustified. Kate has not yet learned to fuse her aggression with her libido, which Lavin defines as “life affirming energy” (89). Aggression and libido, once fused, combine to aid in “the accomplishment of goals, from access to a love object to inhabiting social space to personal safety” (Lavin 89). In this fusion, aggression can be channeled and used productively rather than destructively. Kate, however, has not accomplished this process. Instead, her aggression is defused, or acts “as a catalyst for increased chaos” (Lavin 87-88). Thus, Kate is not initially a sympathetic character because she is incredibly mean and creates bedlam everywhere she goes—she is not likeable.

Indeed, when Kate and Petruchio first meet, the viewer’s sympathies lie more easily with Petruchio. While he has already been painted as a rather eccentric character who comes to “wive it wealthily in Padua”—here playing with lines from Shakespeare’s original text—Petruchio seems to truly fall for Kate during their brief meeting in an elevator. His initial bluster softens and his expression changes almost to wonder as he realizes that he truly is attracted to Kate; Margaret Jane Kidnie, in Shakespeare and the Project of Adaptation, argues that Petruchio is “seduced from the first by Katherine’s outspoken belligerence” in “The Taming” Re-Told (108). However, it is not a mutual affection at this point; her parting words are “up yours, weirdo!” Nevertheless, Kate somewhat surprisingly meets Petruchio in the park for lunch the next day and is rather taken aback to see him yell at other people in the park. Kate regularly directs such hostility at others, yet seems startled to see Petruchio acting so aggressively. It is as if she has
never realized that other people may also express aggression. Nevertheless, she sits with him on a park bench and asks him about his background, then agrees to visit the house he has inherited that weekend. It is hard to state with any certainty that Kate is attracted to Petruchio’s aggressiveness, but she is certainly not repulsed by it. If anything, Kate seems intrigued by Petruchio’s behavior; he is the only person in her life who actually uses aggression as unabashedly and as often as she does. This intrigue, coupled with an earlier suggestion that she needs to get married in order to advance her political career, provide some motivation for Kate’s decision to get married.

Although viewer sympathies initially lie with Petruchio, “The Taming” Re-Told attempts to generate some sympathy for Kate when Petruchio is late to the church for their wedding. Viewers see Kate in her car crying with rage and frustration as she waits for Petruchio. Her silent fury and humiliation perhaps equal earlier scenes in their violent power, but create pity rather than alienation. Petruchio finally shows up drunk and dressed in women’s clothes, and Kate understandably reacts less than favorably. At this point, Petruchio’s own violent side becomes evident. He snarls at the priest and manhandles Kate down the aisle and out of the church. Upon their arrival at the airport, Kate is assertive enough as she informs Petruchio that she will be seeking a divorce. However, she also seems quite overwhelmed by the recent turn of events and we see a tear running down Kate’s cheek as she calls Tim and tells him to withdraw her name for the leader of the opposition. Petruchio only becomes more violent as he and Kate sit at the airport waiting to leave for their honeymoon in Italy. He calls his friend Harry, Bianca’s former manager, and asks Harry to join them in Italy; Petruchio then snarls, “She wants a bad marriage, I’ll give her one! And then I’m going to tame the bitch!” before slamming down the phone. The camerawork in this scene functions to evoke further viewer sympathy for Kate.
Kate, portrayed by the already petite Shirley Henderson, looks even smaller and more vulnerable because of her voluminous white satin wedding dress and position in front of an enormous white curtain. Her earlier aggression has all but disappeared and is instead replaced by Petruchio’s anger towards Kate.

As Kate and Petruchio continue on their honeymoon, aggression begins to degenerate into outright violence. When Kate slaps Petruchio for losing her things, he grabs her wrist and flicks her cheek. Kate is visibly shocked: it seems that no one has ever retaliated against her slaps. Here, aggression begins to degenerate into violence. As Kate and Petruchio become increasingly angry with each other, they start to lose any capacity they once had for empathizing with each other. Petruchio in particular, as he continues on his quest to “tame” Kate, has clearly crossed the line to treating her as an object. This becomes even more evident as Petruchio next decides to claim his rights to the marriage bed and becomes increasingly physically violent. As Kidnie describes, his earlier violent language “translates into physical abuse when an argument at the villa escalates into what looks set to be a rape, Petruchio throwing a protesting Katherine on the bed and claiming sexual relations with her as a husband’s right” (108). As Petruchio pins Kate to the bed, they scream at each other for a moment and Katherine tells him to just do it (just consummate the marriage). Viewers expect her to be scared at this point, yet Kate’s expression inexplicably changes to one of desire and she begins to arc her body towards Petruchio. Immediately, Petruchio steps away from the bed and voices his decision to have sex with her only when she is nice to him. Oddly enough, Kate is clearly disappointed rather than relieved; she burrows under the covers and curls up in a ball. In this scene, it suddenly becomes possible for viewers to see Kate as a woman with sexual drives and desires. Her coldness has largely disappeared and we instead realize that Kate is a more nuanced, complex character than she
Initially appeared to be. As Kate’s character takes on more depth, she starts moving closer
toward an ideal postfeminist heroine with both physical and sexual autonomy.

Later scenes in the film contribute to Kate’s classification as a postfeminist heroine
because her use of aggression continues to change, becoming productive rather than violent. As
the honeymoon continues, the film is able to develop a relationship between Kate and Petruchio
based on mutual affection rather than mutual anger. Petruchio’s friend Harry joins them at the
villa in Italy and has a conversation with Kate that changes the way she views Petruchio. Harry
reveals Petruchio’s emotional vulnerability and gives Kate the opportunity to admit that her
career is not more important than her marriage. After this conversation, Kate’s attitude toward
Petruchio changes. When he reappears and threatens to throw her suitcase into the pool, Kate
chooses to remain silent. She then walks over to Petruchio, kisses him, and walks back into the
villa. Her use of aggression in this particular scene takes a curious tack: Kate is staged as
actually choosing to remain passive and silent while Petruchio makes an outrageous threat,
thereby seizing agency through her pointed silence. Petruchio is acting in order to elicit a
response, and Kate refuses to continue to play his game. Her silence here represents her agency
as a woman with aggressive desire. As she moves towards Petruchio and reveals her erotic
energy in both her words and actions, Kate’s aggression, so explosive and uncontrolled earlier in
the film, is now portrayed as what Lavin would call “desire and movement toward an object of
desire” (97). As Denfeld explains, “[o]ur definitions of aggression, the actions directed toward
another, are close to our definitions of sexuality: the flush and demands of desire” (156). Thus,
desire and sexual energy are inextricably linked with aggression, and can serve as one avenue
where aggression can be released positively and productively. In this scene, Kate appears to
finally understand that her rages cannot control Petruchio. Blind fury has no effect because he
will merely respond in kind, as when she threatened him with divorce in the airport and he decided to “tame the bitch.” Instead, she has to learn to channel her aggression into a more productive avenue, here represented as erotic desire—something much more culturally acceptable than outright violence.

This scene represents the turning point for Kate: she began as a woman unable to control her aggressive energy, became a woman whose aggression was subsumed under Petruchio’s violence, and finally emerges here as a woman who has discovered the ability to fuse aggression and libidinal energy. In “The Taming” Re-Told, Kate appears to have finally learned to control her aggression by fusing it with libido and channeling it toward her erotic desires. She can direct her actions toward Petruchio into sexual energy rather than uncontained verbal or physical aggression. It should come as no surprise, then, that Petruchio responds to Kate’s comments and kiss first with shock and then by following Kate back to the villa. The film seems to show that Kate has discovered the secret to using her aggression in a way that ‘tames’ Petruchio and intrigues him both emotionally and sexually. As she does so, she models the ideal postfeminist who has learned to use her aggression to fuel her sexual desires and shape her husband’s behavior.

However, just because Kate has learned to control her temper does not mean that she has completely given up her verbal aggression and regressed into a voiceless woman. Viewers see Kate in Parliament after she and Petruchio have returned from their honeymoon; she storms and swears as much as she did in the beginning of the film, refusing to allow the male members of Parliament to silence her. While Maria Raha argues “the reaction of the media and politically opposed critics casts women who act independently or politically, or who speak their minds unapologetically in public, not only as ‘wrong’ but also as forces to be stopped” (151-52), Kate
uses her aggression to claim her right to speak. She makes her voice heard in Parliament despite the threat of being cast as ‘wrong.’ Since the film makes sure to show Kate speaking forcefully in her professional capacity, it makes clear that Kate’s silence in earlier scenes with Petruchio was indeed a choice. After the brief scene showing Kate speaking out in Parliament, she returns to her office, where Petruchio is waiting so they can go to Bianca’s wedding. The two of them share a joke as Petruchio calls Tim a “fresher gentlewomen” and Kate concurs with “a fairer-looking chicken I never saw.” The scene is staged so as to suggest that Petruchio thinks Tim is gay and Kate goes along with the joke. Thus Petruchio’s nonsense in this scene, which was meant to test Kate’s obedience in Shakespeare’s play, turns into a private joke that actually strengthens their relationship in “The Taming” Re-Told. The staging of the scene suggests a measure of equality in their relationship, which further points to the film’s adoption of a postfeminist message.

Kate’s speech of obedience, one of the most contentious parts of Shakespeare’s play, further indicates a certain level of equality in their relationship. Her speech is given after Bianca and Mrs. Minola bring up pre-nuptial agreements prior to Bianca’s wedding; Petruchio visibly flinches at the mention of a pre-nup, and Kate’s speech seems calculated to both soothe Petruchio’s ego and mock Bianca and Mrs. Minola. Indeed, Kidnie argues that “male insecurity likewise provides the context and motivation for Katherine’s final speech of wifely duty” (109) in “The Taming” Re-Told. Kate ends her speech by rubbing Petruchio’s neck lovingly while saying that, although she would put her hand under his foot if asked, he would never ask her to do such a thing any more than she would ask it from him. With this speech, she establishes herself and Petruchio as equals. Furthermore, Kate and Petruchio continue to show clear sexual desire for one another as the film moves to its resolution, from their lusty kiss in Kate’s office to
Petruchio’s suggestion that they shag in the elevator after he learns that Kate is pregnant. This continued evidence of desire reaffirms that both Kate and Petruchio’s aggressivity has been channeled into libidinal energy and used to create a productive, positive relationship based on mutual respect.

While Kate and Petruchio’s relationship is perhaps not traditional, it works for them and allows them both to maintain a sense of individuality while channeling aggression productively. Petruchio’s aggression manifests itself in the form of jokes and nonsense, which Kate reacts to in a way that shows she will not leave him. Kate fuses her formerly uncontrolled aggression with libidinal energy, which allows her to maintain an aggressive, outspoken presence in her professional life as an MP yet also channel her inner sexual energy. She is also aggressive in what she asks of Petruchio: Kate informs him at the end of the film that he will be looking after the triplets she is expecting. She states clearly “I’m not giving up my career.” The film portrays Kate as a woman who will not subsume her career goals under a traditional wifely role. Just before the credits roll, we see a series of snapshots revealing that Kate eventually becomes Prime Minister and the family happily moves into 10 Downing Street; Petruchio stays at home with the babies while Kate becomes the most powerful woman in the country. The conclusion of the film, then, gives viewers a Kate who has learned to control her aggression and channel it towards her goals and desires, both professional and personal.

Kate appears to be a modern heroine who has it all: she is an unflinchingly aggressive career woman who has attained the country’s highest political post while still managing to have a healthy and happy home life with her family. Her devoted husband manages the house and children so that she can remain dedicated to her career. In this reading, it would seem that Kate exemplifies a postfeminist woman whose channeled aggression enables both personal and
professional success. Furthermore, her overt sexuality and use of sexual energy also seem to characterize Kate as an ideal postfeminist woman. Lisa Purse notes that “[i]n a postfeminist cultural context, sexual display is often characterized as an active choice made by women who have already benefitted from second-wave feminism’s campaigns for gender equality” (188). In “The Taming” Re-Told, Kate certainly appears to choose sexuality: she initiates sex when she kisses Petruchio by the pool and kisses him in her office so passionately as to make viewers feel slightly uncomfortable. Kate seems to validate what Genz and Brabon call “those postfeminist strands…that embrace femininity/sexuality as an expression of female agency and self-determination” (12) because she was the agent who initiated the consummation of the marriage in the scene by the pool. In this scene and others that follow, Kate uses her sexuality to both claim agency and subjectivity, thus contributing to her idealization as a strong postfeminist woman.

However, a closer examination of Kate’s character in “The Taming” Re-Told in light of cultural phenomena of the time generates certain questions about the film’s ostensibly “tidy” postfeminist ending. Diane Negra argues that “the 1990s/early 2000s have been characterized by heightened pressures to define women’s lives in terms of romance and marriage” (para. 3). Furthermore, Negra sees romance films as putting “emphasis on schooling women in the need to scale back their professionalism lest they lose their feminity” (para. 5). What influence might this have had on the film’s final scenes? How does this additionally complicate Kate’s decisions to get married and have children in “The Taming” Re-Told? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how does the film both idealize a “have it all” discourse while at the same time emphasizing “the unreality of their fictional lives” (Negra para. 20) that is responsible for Kate’s ability to have it all?
“The Taming” Re-Told, released in 2005, came at a cultural moment when books that Negra dubs “postfeminist scare literature” (para. 9), such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children, questioned a “have it all” mentality as too idealistic and suggested that women should find a husband and have children while they are young instead of dedicating themselves solely to their careers. Publications in mainstream women’s magazines like Cosmopolitan and Redbook also implicitly suggested that women’s new dreams tended toward the decidedly domestic (Negra para. 3 and 4). In light of such a cultural moment, which fostered the creation of movies, novels, and TV shows celebrating marriage and the family, “The Taming” Re-Told had ample motivation to frame Kate and Petruchio’s marriage as a smart political decision for Kate. The film suggested that Kate, an ambitious yet unmarried woman, was under political scrutiny as a man-hater or worse, a lesbian; thus, her decision to accept Petruchio’s marriage proposal made sense in this adaptation as a political move designed to allay such speculations and position her as a more likeable public figure with acceptable “family values.” With one stroke, “The Taming” Re-Told was able to both provide motivation for Kate’s hasty decision to marry Petruchio as well as present Kate as a normalized white, upper-class, heterosexual woman with fantasies of domestic family life. Her aggression is, over the course of the film’s plot trajectory, channeled into productive sexual energy so that her professional career is minimalized while her domestic life with Petruchio is foregrounded. Thus, while Kate’s choice to marry Petruchio and eventually have children can be read as part of her ability to have it all, this reading is somewhat complicated by the cultural moment and its renewed insistence on female domesticity.

A second, perhaps more interesting challenge to positioning Kate as an ideal postfeminist woman in “The Taming” Re-Told occurs in a closer look at what makes possible her ability to
have it all. The film’s ending idealizes Kate’s professional achievements and familial bliss through a series of still snapshots flashed on the screen just before the credits roll; this is significant in two ways. First, Kate’s life is presented in “The Taming” Re-Told only as a series of black and white snapshots, meaning that viewers see the only the best moments of her pregnancy, her life with triplets, and her political campaigns. This characterizes Kate’s life as ideal in both the domestic and professional sphere and glosses over any harsh day-to-day realities that real-life women struggling to balance a family and a career face. Viewers are lured in by an idealized view without seeing any accompanying difficulties. The ideal postfeminist heroine portrayed on the screen may be held up as a role model, but she embodies a role impossible for most women to actually adopt.

Secondly, the snapshots push the storyline along quickly enough that viewers have little to no time to evaluate the circumstances of Kate’s life realistically. While the film holds up a high level of personal and professional achievement as ideal, “The Taming” Re-Told positions Kate as mother to triplets, Prime Minister, and wife of an Earl in order to accomplish this goal. It appears that Kate’s pregnancy resulted from the amorous ending of their honeymoon; realistically, women conceive triplets only rarely without the aid of fertility treatments. Reaching the highest position in any company or organization is challenging enough, particularly for women. To become Prime Minister—a position that only one person in the country can hold at any given time—is a truly daunting task. Finally, while titled men are perhaps more common than triplets or Prime Ministers, most women do not marry nobility. For Kate to accomplish not one, but all three, of these fairly rare things is remarkable and highly unrealistic. “The Taming” Re-Told can create such a storyline because it is a fictional tale and thus does not have to be totally realistic, but even the movie’s creators seem to understand that dwelling on these three
points for any length of time may strain viewers’ sense of credibility to the breaking point. Thus, these elements of Kate’s life flash across the screen as quick snapshots so that viewers have little time to consider how unrealistic the plot becomes at the end of the movie. Kate does, in fact, have it all at the film’s end, but only in a highly fictionalized manner. Her position at the end of the film—mother of young triplets as well as Prime Minister and Countess—is simply inaccessible to the vast majority of women, even those who may desire a high level of both personal and professional success. Thus, while Kate is positioned as an ideal postfeminist woman at the end of “The Taming” Re-Told, her role as postfeminist heroine is dependant on both stylized cinematic techniques that gloss over daily realities as well as cinematic license to stretch the bounds of credibility. This further complicates a surface-level reading of the film’s ending as proof that postfeminism can be celebrated and feminism is dead.

As Lisa Purse points out how postfeminism reveals its white, middle-to-upper-class bias, she provides additional evidence that feminism remains relevant; such evidence is echoed in “The Taming” Re-Told. Purse argues that “only women in particular economic and social positions can afford the luxury of choice” (188), which implies women in marginalized positions have not made the same advances that more privileged women may be able to claim. Genz and Brabon echo Purse’s concerns as they assert “postfeminism has also been criticized for its exclusions in terms of class, age, race and (to some extent) sexuality, whereby the ideal postfeminist subject is seen to be a white, middle-class, heterosexual girl” (8). Kate is presented in “The Taming” Re-Told as an upper-class, white, heterosexual woman: she fulfills Genz and Brabon’s “ideal postfeminist subject” exactly. Furthermore, she is independently wealthy and occupies a high social status both through her political clout and her marriage to a title—Petruchio is the 16th Earl of Charlbury. Her social position is privileged and thus gives her the
luxury of choice. However, this is not representative of all women’s experiences. As Tasker and Negra note, “such a limited vision of gender equality as both achieved and yet still unsatisfactory underlines the class, age, and racial exclusions that define postfeminism and its characteristic assumption that the themes, pleasures, values, and lifestyles with which it is associated are somehow universally shared, and perhaps more significant, universally accessible” (2). “The Taming” Re-Told may present Kate as attaining equal footing with Petruchio, but this achievement is only possible because she is white and upper-class. Furthermore, Kate is only able to “have it all” after she gets married, tones down her aggression somewhat, and has children. Before Kate was married, her single status and her aggressive nature were a political liability as people wondered if she was a lesbian; her political career only really took off after her marriage and pregnancy. Therefore, “The Taming” Re-Told reifies heteronormativity and privileges the nuclear family.

This undermines some of the very assumptions that lead the media to declare feminism is dead and the current moment is postfeminist: is society really postfeminist if the only way women can achieve their goals is through participating in the nuclear family and channeling their aggression into a monogamous heterosexual relationship? Have feminism’s goals truly been attained if a woman must be heterosexual, white, and middle-to-upper-class to have it all? A critical reading of “The Taming” Re-Told seems to indicate the answer to both of these questions is a resounding no. “The Taming” Re-Told presents viewers with a Kate who is progressive in her ability to channel aggression into a forceful political career while still maintaining a happy marriage and home life. Yet she is still white, upper class, and constrained within the nuclear family. In many ways, Kate’s character reinscribes and privileges patriarchal ideologies surrounding sexuality and the family. Even though she is presented as a powerful political
figure, her success (and happiness) appear to depend on her ability to function as a wife and later a mother. All told, this indicates that society is not yet at a place where feminism can be dismissed; on the contrary, feminism is still relevant and vitally necessary in the 21st century.

“The Taming” Re-Told indicates that popular culture still has difficulty conceiving and representing powerful, aggressive women outside of a heteronormative family context. Instead, aggressive single women are portrayed as shrewish, outlandish, and sexually suspect; they must be “tamed” and domesticated so that their aggression can be channeled into a husband and family—what culture sees as a productive place for women. As Bronfen and Kavka assert, it appears that the postfeminist project of claiming aggression as a means to “have it all” is unwittingly a project that cunningly leads women to choose patriarchal ideologies under the guise of their own free will (xi). While “The Taming” Re-Told ostensibly uses channeled aggression to create the ideal postfeminist woman, the film makes it clear that the need for feminism is as great as ever. Bronfen and Kayka further remind us of this need as they argue “[t]o think, then, that feminism can be at an end because it has achieved its goal(s) is to open the door to complacency and the retrenchment of marginalizing power structures; it is, in other words, to forget that the ongoing history of doing/thinking feminism is precisely that which keeps the possibility of justice in place as a promise” (xxiv). Instead of attempting to aggressively claim women’s right to have it all, perhaps the true target of female aggression should be patriarchal power structures that emphasize heteronormativity and trick women into a complacent hope that marriage, a family, and an upwardly-mobile career are the only means to ‘having it all.’
CONCLUSION

What, then, have we gained by analyzing four different adaptations of the same Shakespearean text? I have placed each adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew within its specific cultural context and shown how that cultural context influenced the content of the adaptation. In each chapter, I have argued that certain scenes in each film bring cultural anxieties surrounding feminism at that time to light. By looking at the four very different responses to feminism as indicated by four different adaptations of The Taming of the Shrew, we can thus map out a trajectory to trace society’s reaction to feminism. I summarize here the implications of my analysis of each film, then explore cultural progress over time as indicated by the changing subtext of each adaptation. The four films in question indicate a measure of cultural progress and show, especially in the 21st century, a growing awareness of—and eventually an acceptance of—feminist goals. Yet these four films also heavily uphold heteronormative ideological constructs and thus demonstrate that feminism is still vitally necessary in the present day and age.

The four different adaptations of The Taming of the Shrew examined here give us four different moments where culture’s response to feminism is evident. The 1929 adaptation directed by Sam Taylor tell us that culture was not quite yet ready to carve out a space for outspoken, independent women to be accepted into mainstream society. In this particular moment, women were expected to become wives and more importantly mothers. First-wave feminists, represented by the figure of the New Woman in the film, were seen as anomalies; culture pushed them to give up their independence and return to the maternal role. The 1967 adaptation retains a similar focus on traditional domestic roles for women. This adaptation, directed by Franco Zeffirelli, indicates that society wanted women to remain in the role of the
happy housewife. Culture tried to control autonomous, independent women by turning them into sexual objects and treating them as commodities. In the midst of anxieties about the rise of second-wave feminism and its rejection of the myth of the feminine mystique, Zeffirelli’s film normalizes the idea of the happy housewife and encourages women to continue conforming to a traditional domestic role.

In the aftermath of second-wave feminist activism, Jonathan Miller’s 1980 adaptation insists that women must be returned to a subservient role. The film presents various ways of controlling women, including enforcing their silence and pitting women against each other, in order to return culture to patriarchal dominance. In this cultural moment, a woman with a strong personal voice was a threat to be neutralized and put back under the control of a husband. The 2005 adaptation, directed by David Richards, indicates an increased cultural tolerance for outspoken and autonomous women. In the present cultural moment, women in positions of power are generally more accepted and can maintain a life outside the home even after marriage. Yet this film also reifies heteronormativity by indicating that independent women are only socially acceptable if they conform to certain rigid characteristics: white, middle or upper class, heterosexual, and married.

What kind of cultural progress, then, have women made (or failed to make) since the rise of first-wave feminism? The four Shrew adaptations examined here present cultural views of a women’s place at various moments during the past 80 years. The 1929 adaptation marks a sort of starting point: the New Women had become outspoken enough to merit notice in a major cultural production. Yet their treatment in the film was not exactly progressive, as Taylor’s adaptation pushed women back into a traditional role. Thus, the film shows us that first-wave feminists had not made substantial enough gains to create societal acceptance of unmarried,
outspoken, politically motivated women. Second-wave feminists had goals similar to those of first-wave feminists, seeking to move women out of the domestic sphere and into the male-dominated working world. The 1967 adaptation addresses these goals through its focus on Kate and the domestic sphere. However, this adaption was not progressive either; the film ultimately forces Kate to find happiness playing the role of housewife. Zeffirelli’s adaptation, then, indicates that in the 1960s, society was still unable to accept autonomous single women and sought instead to push them into marriage and domestic duties.

By 1980, the year that Miller’s adaptation was produced, radical second-wave feminists had gained widespread attention for their work towards gender equality in the 1970s. But this adaptation indicates that any gains made during the 1970s were fleeting in nature, as Miller’s film is perhaps the most regressive of all the films I consider. This adaptation explicitly silences women and insists on marriage as inherently inequal, with women always in a position of subservience to their husbands. The 1980 adaptation clearly indicates that feminists still had an uphill battle to wage. However, Richards’ 2005 adaptation presents a more progressive view of women’s role in society. By 2005, society had clearly moved towards an acceptance of working women. Kate remains fairly autonomous throughout this adaptation and remains in a position of cultural power even at the end of the film. Yet despite the progress made by this adaptation, it is not entirely unproblematic. This adaptation impresses upon viewers that heteronormativity is the only accepted avenue for working women, thus foreclosing any other lifestyle for women.

With the exception of 1980’s incredibly regressive adaptation, it appears that feminism has gradually made cultural gains since first-wave feminists became active at the beginning of the 20th century. The 1929 adaptation at least considered an outspoken woman before pushing her back into a maternal role and the 1967 adaptation allowed a woman to lead a man on a long
chase before inscribing her as a housewife. By the time the 2005 adaptation was produced, culture had grown to accept a woman in the workforce and acknowledged that a woman was capable of holding positions of power. On the surface, then, feminism seems to have made enormous cultural gains. But a closer look at these adaptations and the supposed gains they reveal leads to a somewhat worrisome conclusion. Even as the adaptations become slightly more progressive on the surface, the mechanism by which each adaptation forces Kate into subservience becomes more and more subtle. In the 1929 adaptation, Kate is transformed into a maternal figure obviously and abruptly. In the 1967 adaptation, her transformation into a happy housewife is more gradual. The film sets it up so that Kate’s adoption of a domestic role is ostensibly her own personal choice. The 1980 adaptation casts Kate’s acceptance of her subservient position as a result of her realization that obedience to her husband is the only means to happiness. By the 2005 adaptation, the way that Kate upholds heteronormative ideology is so subtle as to almost go unnoticed. She is cast as a strong character throughout the film and her acceptance of domestic bliss seems to be an afterthought—even though her character only truly seems to find fulfillment after her marriage and the birth of her triplets. Thus, each adaptation casts an acceptance of traditional heterosexual marriage as increasingly Kate’s own choice. This, in turn, makes heteronormativity seem more and more natural.

As Kate’s acceptance of heteronormative relationships seems to increasingly be her personal choice, the adaptations slyly send a cultural message that strongly supports heterosexual, white, middle class relationships. With the earlier, more regressive adaptations, Kate’s reinscription into traditional female roles seems more forced and thus more equally identifiable. In the later adaptation, however, Kate’s acceptance of traditional female roles is harder to identify because the adaptation appears on the surface to be more progressive. Thus,
the adaptations indicate that as feminism has gained ground and started to see cultural results, it also faces a backlash that has grown increasingly subtle and hard to detect. The earlier adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* and their sexist treatment of Kate point to clear, easily identifiable cultural thought patterns for feminists to work against. The later adaptation, however, presents Kate as so progressive that it can almost dupe viewers into thinking feminism is unnecessary in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. Yet this thinking is extremely dangerous, as it fails to consider the factors that make it possible for Kate to hold a progressive position: her race, class, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, this ostensibly progressive adaptation also rests on one key plot point. Even in a ‘progressive’ era, the story involves a man and a woman who get married and stay married. Thus, all four adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* serve to naturalize heteronormative ideology—some bluntly and some more subtly.

Ultimately, the emphasis on heteronormativity and traditional heterosexual relationships indicates that feminists still have enormous cultural gains to make. A truly progressive adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* would mean an adaptation that does not necessarily include a man and women or end in marriage. Perhaps the next goal should be to create cultural acceptance for an adaptation where Kate rejects Petruchio’s marriage proposal and refuses to accompany him to the altar or an adaptation where Kate decides to return to her single status by divorcing Petruchio after the wedding. Even more daringly, maybe future adaptations will not center on Kate and Petruchio, but rather will focus on Kate and Petunia or Kevin and Petruchio as the story is recast to include same-sex relationships. Or *The Taming of the Shrew* could involve a mixed-race or working-class couple, breaking away from a fixation on white, middle and upper class lifestyles. Once an adaptation that breaks out of a heteronormative worldview has gained widespread cultural approval, perhaps then feminism will have truly achieved most of
its goals. In the meantime, our anger should be directed not at past adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* that indicate a lack of tolerance for feminist goals but at present cultural structures that prevent Kate—and women everywhere—from gaining autonomy in any way except submission to heteronormative ideology. Indeed, autonomy gained through such a means is merely a shell of the physical, psychological, and sexual autonomy that feminists are working so diligently to gain and that women everywhere so rightly deserve.
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