

Sisters are Doing it for Each Other: Sisterhood in Shakespeare's *The Taming of Shrew* and Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You*

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Abstract

Shakespeare's play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, has faced harsh criticism for its sexist portrayal of women and depictions of abuse. Yet, modern adaptations of the play continue to be produced. Gil Junger's 1999 teen romantic comedy adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, titled *10 Things I Hate About You*, appears to challenge the play's problematic themes by developing the relationship between sisters Katherine and Bianca beyond the play's strict, sexist notion that the ideal woman should be obedient and submissive to their husband. In doing so, the film enfranchises the sisters beyond the play's binary characterization of women as good or bad. Instead turning them into more complex and human characters. Though the film also introduces Kat and Bianca as rebellious and obedient respectively, scenes in which the sisters discuss their romantic relationships as well as address and resolve their own conflicts allow them complex character development as both women and sisters. As such, the film subverts the play's gender binaries by prioritizing the development of a loving relationship between sisters in favour of heterosexual romance, thus suggesting that sisterhood is a theme worth contemplation and exploration. The characterizations of Kat and Bianca in *10 Things I Hate About You* encourages its audience to reject sexist and limiting understandings of women as depicted in *The Taming of the Shrew* by illustrating the complexities of young women and idealizing the support and love found within sisterhood.

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Shakespeare remains one of the most significant writers in English literature. However, as society has changed over time, certain themes within his plays have come to be regarded as problematic. In modern times, Shakespeare's late 16th century play *The Taming of the Shrew* has come under harsh scrutiny for its sexist rhetoric and justification of spousal abuse. The polarized characterization of the play's two lead female characters, sisters Bianca and Katherine, often sparks controversy as they appear to represent patriarchal ideas of women, Bianca represents the idealized, submissive woman while Katherine depicts the disobedient shrew in need of taming. Yet, like many Shakespearean plays, modern performances and adaptations of the play are still produced. As such, said adaptations may try to change or exclude the play's problematic elements to appeal to more contemporary ideas regarding gender. Gil Junger's 1999 teen romantic comedy *10 Things I Hate About You*, a loose, contemporary cinematic adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, seems to combat some of the play's controversial themes by shifting the plot from the notion of taming women to focusing on the protagonists trying to survive high school and teen romance. While the film may struggle to fully empower audiences due to its conservative understanding of feminism, Junger appears to reject the sexist binaries of the play by emphasizing the complex importance of female solidarity between Bianca and Kat, the film's counterparts of Shakespeare's Bianca and Katherine. In particular, the time and character development allotted to Bianca, a figure often disregarded as one-dimensional, aids in the film's complication of sexist binaries established in *The Taming of the Shrew*. *10 Things I Hate About You* appears to challenge the play's problematic, sexist themes by developing the relationship between Katherine and Bianca, which in turn enfranchises the sisters as more complex, and therefore human, characters.

While both the play and film present the sisters as being at odds, the complicated relationship established in the film between Kat and Bianca treats them as sympathetic figures. During their first dialogue scene together in Shakespeare's play, the dynamic between Katherine and Bianca is presented as volatile and aggressive; Katherine has tied Bianca's hands and is beating her out of apparent frustration regarding her sister's suitors: "Of all thy suitors here I charge thee tell / Whom thou lov'st best" (2.1.8-9). This scene introduces the sisters within a strict, sexist dichotomy, which categorizes women as either "good" or "bad." Due to her seemingly unwarranted aggression, Katherine appears as the epitome of a wild or undesirable woman, in turn directing the audience's sympathy primarily to Bianca, an innocent victim of Katherine's shrewish anger. Furthermore, Shakespeare's characterization of the tensions between Katherine and Bianca reaffirms ideals of the "perfect" woman of the time, suggesting that to be good, a woman must be like Bianca, not Katherine. This is a notion reinforced

by the sisters' father Baptista who identifies Bianca as a "poor girl" and Katherine as a "devilish spirit" (2.1.25-27). Thus, rather than provide insight into the dynamics of a sisterly relationship, Bianca appears to serve as a means simply to underscore the necessity of Katherine's eventual taming by Petruchio.

The film similarly introduces the sisters through tumultuous conflict in the form of verbal arguing as opposed to physical violence. It depicts Kat as an anti-social rebel and Bianca as a spoiled, selfish brat, thereby distancing the sisters from their counterparts in the original play. This notion is reinforced by the sisters' categorization of each other: Kat says that Bianca is from planet "look at me, look at me" while Bianca claims her sister is from planet "loser" (Junger 15.05). The film adaptation of the introductory scene establishes the sisters' conflicting relationship, with Kat as the conservative sister and Bianca as both conceited and naïve. In their article "Taming '10 Things I Hate About You': Shakespeare and the Teenage Film Audience," L. Monique Pittman finds that the film "glosses over the complex of gender and power dynamics that the rougher edges of Shakespeare's drama leave exposed" (145). However, by presenting the sisters as imperfect figures, Junger rejects a polarized construction of the sisters. Thus, enfranchising both Bianca and Kat through multi-dimensional complexities that are missing from their characterizations in Shakespeare's play as limited examples of a "good" and a "bad" woman respectively. Also different from the play, Walter, who plays the Baptista figure, is presented as loving both of his daughters, affectionately calling Kat and Bianca "honey" and "precious" (Junger 13.30). Moreover, he equally restricts Kat's freedom as he does Bianca's, though he forbids the former from attending Sarah Lawrence College rather than prohibiting her from dating. As such, the film's conflict appears as based primarily on Walter's paternalistic nature rather than Kat's shrewish undesirability, which rejects the binary villainization of Katherine. By illustrating the father's controlling overprotectiveness along with the girls' imperfect characterizations, the film appears to encourage sympathy for both Kat and Bianca, positioning some of the source of their sisterly strife on their father's approaches to parenting.

10 Things I Hate About You further promotes the value of female complexity through its intricate complex characterization of Bianca. In their article "Rethinking Binaries by Recovering Bianca in *10 Things I Hate About You* and Zeffirelli's *The Taming of the Shrew*," Christopher Bertucci argues that "most scholars marginalize Bianca's importance" and "commonly write her off as one dimensional" (419). In the play, Bianca is characterized as a "young modest girl" who is "[s]acred and sweet" (1.1.158-178), making her appear as the emblematic good woman in contrast with her devilish sister. While the ending of the play may suggest that Bianca is not quite as obedient as she seems to begin with, she still appears as an objectified

symbol of her sister's successful taming. The play's ending, in turn, suggests that the once unruly Katherine has become more obedient than the idealized Bianca. As such, in the play, Bianca serves little purpose outside of being a tool utilized to illustrate the patriarchal, idealized woman, who is submissive to her husband. The film similarly presents Bianca, when Cameron, the film's Lucentio, claims that "she's totally pure" (Junger 10.08). However, unlike her Shakespearean counterpart, the film version of Bianca develops into a complex character when she rejects the idealized version of herself. This rejection is only possible since Bianca experiences the world outside of her own sheltered life.

A crucial scene regarding Bianca's character development occurs when Bianca and Kat go to Bogey Lowenstein's party and Bianca is finally able to spend significant time with Joey. However, while with Joey at the party, Bianca witnesses his basic nature as shallow and conceited. Bianca's newfound understanding of Joey's true character is reinforced when, after parting with Joey, Bianca wants to leave the party, saying to her friend Chastity, "Is it just me or does this party all of a sudden suck?" (Junger 47.02). Here, Bianca's statement reflects her realization that Joey is not the person she thought he was. This development enables Bianca to evolve from an obedient, if not spoiled, brat to a considerate, active character, which is a characteristic aspect not allotted to Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Rather than being allowed independence, her father and later her husband assert control over Bianca's life. Furthermore, the parallel scene in the film highlights how connected Bianca's freedom is to that of her sister; if Kat had not chosen to go to the party, Bianca would have been prohibited from attending. While an audience may interpret that Kat goes to the party because Patrick (the film's counterpart of Petruchio) invited her, Kat's surprise upon seeing him at her door reinforces the notion that she decides to go to the party primarily so that her sister can attend (Junger 40.43). As such, Bianca's character is closely linked to Kat's because, without her sister, Bianca may have lacked the experiences necessary for her to grasp Joey's limited nature or recognize her own vanity and selfishness. Junger allows Bianca complexity outside of her role as an objectified symbol of the patriarchal, idealized woman, in turn rejecting the instrumentalization of Bianca as an unimportant, one-dimensional character.

The complex relationship between Kat and Bianca in the film creates emergent themes regarding the importance of sisterhood that are not apparent in the play. In particular, their often antagonistic relationship reaches a climax near the end of the film when Kat reveals her past relationship with Joey to Bianca. As well as expressing her guilt over her lack of high school enthusiasm, this impacts Bianca's freedom. This scene suggests that, in contrast with Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, whose primary interaction with her sister is abusive, Kat appears as a loving,

protective sister to Bianca. However, while Kat's protectiveness may have stemmed from sisterly love, it limits Bianca's freedom. By keeping her own secret regarding Joey and helping their father restrict Bianca's dating opportunities, Kat has kept Bianca from experiencing "anything for [herself]" (Junger 1.17.18). While the scene ends with Bianca still angry with Kat, it "begins to explore the possibility of a female solidarity" (Bertucci). This notion of female solidarity is reinforced when, following their discussion, Kat agrees to go to the prom so that Bianca can attend. Therefore, rather than evolve through experiencing the world outside of her sheltered life like Bianca, Kat's character development only occurs when she begins to make sacrifices for those she cares about, such as going to both Bogey Lowenstein's party, as well as the prom, for Bianca.

By allowing Kat and Bianca opportunities to resolve their conflict, the film suggests that their relationship is of intrinsic value and therefore deserves the time invested to produce intimate, familial complexity. This approach differs from the play, where the most interactive scene between the sisters occurs when Katherine beats Bianca. Rather than allowing for reconciliation, both sisters' stories are concluded through their respective idealized submission as women. By contrast, the film concludes with the traditional romantic comedy ending of a happy couple kissing, but it is an ending that would not have been achieved if it were not for the time and care allotted to the sisters' evolving relationship. Through her willingness to make personal sacrifices as well as the vulnerable disclosure of her past relationship with Joey, Kat enables Bianca to develop into an assertive, confident young woman who not only protects Cameron from Joey but stands up for both herself and her sister. Similarly, it is through Bianca confronting her sister's confining protectiveness that Kat can acknowledge her own selfishness and explore her feelings, enabling her reconciliation with Patrick. Thus, rather than "discourage thoughtful questions" (Pittman 150) regarding gender, the film rejects the original play's concept that sisterly relationships are unimportant and should be sidelined in favour of heterosexual romance, thereby suggesting that the sisters' bond with each other is fundamentally valuable. By introducing newfound themes associated with sisterhood to the characters of Kat and Bianca, the film appears to subvert the play's problematic gender binaries, which prioritizes the controlling dynamic between a woman and her husband over a relationship between sisters.

Through depicting the sisters Bianca and Kat as multi-layered characters, Junger's 1999 film *10 Things I Hate About You* challenges patriarchal gender binaries that relegate women to the socially scripted performance of obedient femininity. The film's source material, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, categorizes women through patriarchal, binary notions of good and bad through its version of Bianca and Katherine. As in Shakespeare's play, Kat and Bianca are initially introduced as a tempestuous

rebel and her innocent younger sister in the film. However, the film crucially challenges these initial characterizations. Kat appears as a protective sister, not wanting Bianca to be hurt by Joey. The time and character development allotted to Bianca aids in the film's complication of sexist binaries established in *The Taming of the Shrew*, emphasizing the importance of allowing Bianca to progress from her sheltered life and experience the real world. Moreover, unlike more problematic, heteronormative, and patriarchal themes in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, the film promotes the idea that, within relationships, be they romantic or familial, one makes sacrifices for those they love. Junger's characterization of Kat and Bianca in *10 Things I Hate About You* encourages its audience to reject reductive ideas about the scope of women's lives and interests, ultimately illustrating the value of prioritizing the multi-dimensional complexities of sisterly love.

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