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## Female Subordination In “Hamlet” And “The Taming Of The Shrew”

Throughout the early modern period, the importance of gender roles were unmistakable in many of Shakespeare's plays, including “The Taming of the Shrew” and “Hamlet” as both make clear convictions about the attitudes towards women during the period. “The Taming of the Shrew” is concerned with the contrast between two sisters- Bianca and Katharine. Socially acceptable Bianca is unable to wed any of her suitors, until a man deems the ill-tempered Kate, marriageable. Kate is eventually tamed through a process of ritual humiliation and tactics by Petruchio. The contrast between the two sisters is sufficient in maintaining convictions of female subordination due to the focus on manipulation of female behaviour. Similarly, in “Hamlet,” the only two female characters-Queen Gertrude, and Ophelia, advisor to the King's daughter, hold a strong symbolic nature of the attitudes towards women as both characters are presented as entirely oppressed by their male counterparts. Within both plays, there is a clear sense that women are only presented as subordinate to male characters.

Although the idea of female subordination to men is undoubtedly prevalent throughout the Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare is successful in upholding these patriarchal ideas. More specifically, throughout the early modern period, physical violence against women was often used as both a public and private method of control, Shakespeare plays with this theme of ritual humiliation through the idea of Kate initially being presented as a problematic burden to her father:

“To cart her, rather. She's too rough for me.—

There, there, Hortensio, will you any wife.” (1.1.55-56)

Shakespeare is effective in depicting the idea of patriarchal assertion and the difficulty within Kate's character through the metaphorical lexis of “cart.” Shakespeare expertly makes a reference towards patriarchal acts in reference to the subordination of women. It alludes to the act of ritual humiliation of women who were considered loud mouthed and inclined to gossip. Punishments were administered such as the “Scold's Bridle,” which entailed that a woman was muzzled and forced to wear when in public. The term “Scold” also can be used to describe as “Shrew” as this has connotations of an unruly wife. Furthermore, it can be argued that the patriarchal ideas are presented at the beginning, with the ridicule of the drunk tinker-Sly, with the concept of a servant being dressed up as a woman, this infers the idea of how men think women are supposed to act. Additionally, as it is depicted as a male servant acting as a woman, not only does it act as a model for female behaviour, it conveys the idea that women are considered below due to it being acted out by a servant.

Furthering this idea of female inferiority, Shakespeare references the idea that the way in which women should be subjected to male control is through this recurrent theme of ritual humiliation in the play. More specifically, Shakespeare conveys this through the climax of the play, the wedding scene. Petruchio makes a conscious effort to humiliate and belittle Kate as part of his methods in taming her into a disciplined wife:

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“She is my good, my chattels, she is my house,

My household stuff, my field, my barn,

My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything;” (3.2.223–25)

By metaphorically comparing Kate to both inanimate objects and animals, it is effective in reinforcing the concept of subordination, as it infers the idea of what qualities Petruchio aspires for Kate to have once she has been wifed-an object of usefulness but powerless. Additionally, it can be argued that seeing Kate’s attitude as animalistic furthers the idea of ritual humiliation as it is an inherently degrading comparison. In addition, it is evident that the wedding is used as not only a symbol of ritual humiliation but also as an observation on the discourse of marriage within the period, as marriage was often perceived as either an economic trade or a fixation for romance. Furthering this, the element of public and private ordeals is focused on through Petruchio’s methods as he aims to publicise Kate’s behaviour in a negative manner. Expanding on the idea of methods of female control, the overall symbolism of animalistic characteristics is continued with cultural reference to the act of hawking or falconry. In the elizabethan period, falconry was an example of an upper class sport and Petruchio’s detailed references towards the sport infers his social standing. Furthermore, Elizabethan men were often proud of their falconry skills and ability to tame a wild animal, not only is Petruchio confident in his ability to tame Kate as he compares it to his falconry skills, it cements the patriarchal dominance present, that he is confident he can assert over Kate.

The focus of the play is predominantly on Kate’s openly bad behaviour. However, it can be argued that Kate’s sister, Bianca, is not only in direct antithesis of Kate’s character but the relationship between the two characters is significant to the idea of female supervision. Bianca initially is portrayed as a role model for the behaviour of Elizabethan women. However, as the play progresses, it becomes evident that Bianca’s outwardly perfect attitude is a hoax and is subsequently damned as an unsustainable wife:

“Never to marry with her, though she would entreat.

Fie on her! See how beastly she doth court him!” (4.2.33-34)

Within this dialogue between Tranio and Hortensio, through Hortensio’s powerful lexical choice, it is clear there is a change in attitudes from audience and the characters perception of Bianca, as it she goes from being an object of desire, to that of one deserving of social exclusion. Bianca, throughout the play is perceived as a symbol of vanity and sexuality in contrast to Kate. Moreover, the subject of music which Hortensio tutors Bianca in is one of the subjects Kate initially rejected for herself, furthering the symbolic contrast in between the two sisters. In addition to this, much as Bianca is seen as a symbol of sexuality, which is similar to the symbolic nature of the music she is to be tutored in. However, as both tutors were there as a pretence in order to court her, it soon becomes evident that Bianca’s outward expression of perfection is false, and that Hortensio has come to the realisation that she is shallow and superficial. As the play concludes it can be seen that Kate eventually complies to the ideals of marriage and subsequently forms a domesticated unit with Petruchio, whereas Bianca is stigmatised for not only being superficial but also inappropriate as a result of her relations with her tutors. This demonstrates that not only does Kate become the socially adhering daughter, that Bianca’s “shrewishness” was internalised from the offset. Although Kate’s shrewishness

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was explicitly public, Bianca's was seemingly more subtle and private, specifically making occasional conceited remarks in response to her sister. It was not until Kate gained control, that Bianca's performance was exposed as false, resulting in her effective damning. Therefore, it can be inferred that female subordination is still effectively conveyed through the relationship between the sisters, as it is evident that damning of Bianca is in direct contrast of Kate's taming. By making both female characters symbols of shrewish behaviour in opposing ways, is effective in putting the focus on female behaviour and the desire to suppress behaviour that does not coincide with what is suggested as socially acceptable.

In contrast with the approach to the theme of female subordination it still remains present in Hamlet. Through the two female characters-Gertrude and Ophelia, who are imperative to the play and the theme as a whole. However, throughout the play, the two characters are presented as weak and irrational females, it can then be inferred that female subordination is especially present due to this representation. Furthermore, Gertrude is often perceived as a more passive character with a negative focus from Hamlet and the ghost on her seemingly overt sexuality. However, Gertrude is permitted from doing her own soliloquies and as a result, unable to express internal thoughts and feelings, making her role submissive and a reflection of the unbalanced gender roles:

"Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,...

So to seduce!--won to his shameful lust

The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen." (1.5.41-46)

Through Hamlet's description, it is effective in conveying his feelings of resentment and disdain towards his mother marrying his uncle, Claudius shortly after his father's death. It is evident that Hamlet not only perceives her as vain and self indulgent, but also as entirely an object of sexuality. Furthermore, due to Gertrude's lack of individual expression, the audience is only exposed to Hamlet and the ghost's opinion of her, effectively giving us the only perception of Gertrude's character. Additionally, in terms of social order, Gertrude is of a higher social ranking than Claudius's advisor-Polonius. However, it is evident that Gertrude is easily subjected to being controlled indirectly by the king's advisor. Polonius cannot actively go against the queen's word, however, he can persuade Claudius against Gertrude's statements, and subsequently subordinate the Queen. Throughout the play, Gertrude remains a morally ambiguous character due to the accusations of murder and adultery held against her. However, her conformity and passivity to Claudius are significant in entertaining her submission and through her death, she is portrayed as irrational and foolish for disobeying Claudius's order. Ultimately, reinforcing the subordination to men.

In comparison to Queen Gertrude, is the remaining female character, Polonius's daughter-Ophelia. During the play, Ophelia is portrayed as a hysteric female, driven mad by repressed sexual desire. Ophelia is then undoubtedly depicted as an entirely submissive and character throughout the play, with Polonius constantly attempting to control his daughter's actions:

"At such a time I'll loose my daughter to him.

Be you and I behind an arras then,

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Mark the encounter. If he love her not," (2.2.160-163)

This exchange in dialogue between Claudius and Polonius is alluding to the idea that Hamlet is mad as a result of his love for Ophelia. When she confronts Hamlet about the idea, Polonius plans to hide in the Queen's room behind a tapestry to listen in. The lexical choice of the word "looseness" is used in the context of describing the importance of the sexual reputation of women as it draws upon the contrast between the idea of being virtuous. Moreover, it conveys Polonius's willingness to diminish his daughter's reputation in order to gain information about Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship. This is a clear conviction of the subordination of Ophelia as it portrays, not only a sense of deception with complete disregard of trust for his daughter. It also alludes to Ophelia being completely out of control of her own actions concerning Hamlet, as Polonius's behaviour is motivated entirely by keeping her away from him. Furthermore, through Ophelia's repressed sexual desire towards Hamlet, makes her not only subordinate to her Father, but also with the Prince. Both Gertrude and Ophelia are presented as objects of sexuality and as a result are either resented or deemed irrational. The play upholds the convictions of female subordination as the two characters are forced into submission by their male counterparts, through Polonius's deceit by hiding behind an arras in Gertrude's bedroom. Showing disrespect for both Gertrude and Ophelia's privacy making the overreaching attitudes towards the female characters is inherently negative.

To conclude, in both "Hamlet" and "The Taming of the Shrew" are significant in upholding the concept of female subordination. In "The Taming of the Shrew," in order to gain control of Kate, she is subjected to a number of humiliating tactics by Petruchio. Petruchio makes a direct reference about his methods, to Falconry, through the dehumanizing comparisons and methods that force Kate into submission. In contrast, Bianca's behaviour towards the end of the play, results in her rejection as an appropriate wife, putting a significant focus on the scrutiny female behaviour received from men during the period. Similarly, in "Hamlet" the female characters are important to the play overall. However, are presented as irrational and manic. Shakespeare upholds the gender roles efficiently as he conveys Ophelia and Gertrude as completely under their male counterparts control and too weak to retaliate. Through both depictions, it can be argued that female subordination of the time is undoubtedly withheld through the perception of the female characters.