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# Ten Things I Hate About Atomic Shakespeare

## A look at two adaptations of “Taming of the Shrew”

“Taming of the Shrew” by William Shakespeare has become a canonical source for the Romantic Comedy, (RomCom) genre in movies and television. The tropes introduced centuries ago by this play provide fodder for the entire genre. The “overbearing woman” (Katarina) who must be tamed by either love, (in the more modern adaptations) or a firm hand, (in the original.) The quiet woman, seen as the more desirable type, even though overshadowed by her overbearing sibling, (Bianca). The “Bad Boy with a Heart of Gold” rough on the outside, with a heart capable of genuine feeling. The “Nice Quiet Guy” who pines for the quiet sister, working desperately to make himself noticed amongst the throngs of other suitors. The Best Friend, working tirelessly to help the Nice Quiet Guy win his lady fair, (the Suitors: Petruchio/Lucentio/Hortensio.)

These themes, or in more modern terms, *tropes*, permeate the RomCom genre across the board. “Better Off Dead”, “When Harry Met Sally”, “High Fidelity”, with almost any work in the genre, you will find these tropes. For the purposes of this assignment, I’m leaving off an analysis of the original play. For my purposes, it suffices as a source node, an inspiration far

more than as a work to be looked at. Instead, I'm going to look at two different adaptations of "Taming of The Shrew". First: "Ten Things I Hate About You"<sup>1</sup>, a popular "Turn of the Century" (literally, the movie was released in March of 1999) RomCom starring Julia Stiles, Larisa Oleynik, Heath Ledger, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Katerina, Bianca, Petruchio, and Lucentio respectively. The second work is "Atomic Shakespeare"<sup>2</sup>, Episode 7 of the third season of "Moonlighting", original air date November 25th, 1986. This version had Cybil Shepard, Allyce Beasley, Bruce Willis, and Curtis Armstrong in the respective roles of Katarina, Bianca, Petruchio, and Lucentio.

I chose these two works because while both are based on the same source, they approach the material in different ways, due in the major part to fundamental media type differences, (movie vs. television series), time period differences, ("Ten Things I Hate About You" was released in 1999, "Atomic Shakespeare premiered in 1986), and target audiences, ("Ten Things I Hate About You" is aimed at the teen romantic comedy audience, while the target audience for "Moonlighting" was adults in the 25-40 demographic.) In this essay, I'm going to look less at how they adapt the original material and more how each approaches a trope that permeate RomComs, for good or ill: the strong woman who "just needs a man", and the differences between the two works in how they function within the genre itself.

"Ten Things I Hate About You" is the least serious of the two with almost more comedy than romance. Fans of early 1980s teen movies will recognize a running homage to "Better Off

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<sup>1</sup> *Ten Things I Hate About You*. Dir. Gil Junger. Touchstone Pictures, 1999. iTunes. Web. 13 September 2017. <<https://itunes.apple.com/us/movie/10-things-i-hate-about-you/id188765138>>

<sup>2</sup> "Atomic Shakespeare." *Moonlighting*. ABC. 25 Nov. 1986. Television

Dead”<sup>3</sup>, itself a source node for teen movie tropes. (Prototypical bullyboy Johnny Lawrence from “Karate Kid” is a short, straight line from evil ski-bro Roy Stalın.) Within that absurdist framework, the basic story of “Taming of the Shrew” is used lightly, but reasonably faithfully. The second work, “Atomic Shakespeare” is a more faithful adaptation of the original, with an approach more suited for an older audience. The dialogue is much changed from the original in line with the show’s comedic style, but the entire episode is done in iambic pentameter, (touched upon at the end of the episode) and the costumes are reasonably period-accurate for 16th/17th century Europe. (The “BMW” logo on Petruchio’s horse notwithstanding.)

#### **Strong women just need a man to gentle them up<sup>4</sup>**

The central theme to both works is how they approach the “Strong Woman Just Need A Man” trope. The basics of this trope are explained in “Defrosting Ice Queen”:

“She is the Ice Queen: cool, reserved, and giving nothing away. She may want love as ardently as anyone, but she masks her soft heart behind a wall of ice. It is up to her Love Interest to soften her cold demeanor and win her love.”<sup>5</sup>

In “Ten Things”, this trope is initially played true to form. Julia Stiles’ Katerina is young, strident, the ultimate feminist who doesn’t care what anyone thinks. She mocks those who do, especially her sister but it doesn’t take long to see that everyone else on the planet are targets for her opinions. (A running theme with this is her tearing down every prom poster she sees, complete with the frustrated “HEY!” from the poor student trying to put them up around campus.) Kat knows something about everything, she insults everyone who doesn’t live up to her un-named, yet high standards, and every action she takes, from physical assault to ramming the

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<sup>3</sup> *Better Off Dead*. Dir “Savage” Steve Holland. Warner Bros, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> *Kill Bill Vol 2*. Dir Quentin Tarantino. Miramax Films, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> “Defrosting Ice Queen.” [TVTropes.org](http://TVTropes.org). TV Tropes. 13 Sept. 2017

pretty boy's car is chalked off to her being, in the words of her school counselor, a "heinous bitch". Predictably, the source of this is that she once dated the pretty boy, Joey Donner, aka "Chachi", slept with him once, because "everyone else was doing it" and then when she decided against a repeat performance, he dumped her, teaching her the evils of doing things because "everyone else is".

Where "Ten Things" makes this trope interesting is in how they approach the "defrosting"; it never happens. There is no "magic moment" where she sees the error of her ways, admitting that like every other woman, she pines for the love of a strong man, and the Heinous Bitch, (HB) was a shell put up to keep the cruelty of a world that doesn't understand her at bay. Instead, the relationship between her and Heath Ledger is shown as a compromise of equals. Kat isn't against love, or men (as a minor point: in the world of "Ten Things", LGBTQ folks don't exist. Not as punchlines, caricatures, nothing. They Do Not Exist in that world. The goodness or badness of it is left up to the individual viewer, however, at least the movie does avoid the tired, even offensive tropes about The Gay Friend.) Kat has made the decisions over her behavior for her, for her reasons. Instead of the tough, fragile front, it's who she is. If anything, it is selfish, not fraudulent.

While Kat has indeed accepted her feelings for Patrick, and their depth by the end of the movie, she never "reverts" to her "true self". There is no romantic moment where Kat confesses that her toughness, her attitude was all a front, and that deep down, she's really more like her sister. Kat is a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) person. She *does* love feminist literature, poetry, playing soccer as rough as she can, etc. She doesn't go looking for trouble, but she absolutely will not shy away from it. The cause of her personality change from popular girl

to HB is predictable within the genre, but how she uses that revelation is a nice orthogonal turn from the typical Ice Queen. The revelation occurs during a conversation with her sister, where Kat's trying to explain why she is the way she is. The relationship with Chachi is explained as an impetus, not an excuse. She does not ask her sister to forgive all her trespasses because of the incident. Rather, she wants Bianca to know that there is more thought than just "I want to be the biggest bitch on the campus" behind her actions. (In a nice change of pace, the Big Talk doesn't instantly patch up all the issues between Kat and Bianca.)

Kat doesn't fall for Patrick because he plays head games with her, gaslights her ala the original "Taming of the Shrew". He's not a faux nice guy who really only cares about getting into her pants. Patrick, as much as Kat is who he is. The characters do change across the movie, but it's the kind of normal change that any two highly independent people would go through in the process of discovering deep feelings for each other. It's a change born of caring and respect, not jejune trickery, and given the genre, a rather nice change of pace. It's an expansion more than a turning away. The process is believable in how it plays out, a rarity for teen movies. The age of the actors helps, (most of the "high school" aged cast were actually of high school age, or just past it) as does the direction and film editing. Kat's "big reveal" at the end of the film "feels" right for a senior in high school, in that there is a lot of sincerity, drama, and tears. One of the issues with "teen" romantic comedies is that often, it feels like the script writer and/or the director has forgotten how kids in high school really behave. "Ten Things" manages to avoid that, and one is never yanked from the moment by a "seventeen year old" suddenly approaching romance as though they were almost thirty.

“Atomic Shakespeare” approaches the trope with a bit more blunt-force trauma and maturity. This is due to the show itself (“Moonlighting” was never subtle), time limitations, (Sans commercials, the episode is just under 50 minutes long) and target audience age. (“Moonlighting’s target audience was in the 25-40 range.) Cybil Shepard’s Katerina is initially over the top in every way. We’re introduced to her not via blasting Joan Jett’s “Bad Reputation” as she drives to school, but by the sight of three suitors being flung, literally, out the door, then chased around the town square by a spear-wielding Katerina. The “Three Stooges” homage here and throughout the episode is not subtle; Katerina has a wall unit labeled “Throwing Vases” full of those very things. (A *very* young, pre-Star Trek Colm Meany makes an appearance as “the middle suitor” in the opening sequence.) Her anger though is driven by a different cause: she is all too aware that both her sister and her father regard her as a “problem” more than a loved family member. She is aware of her status as a bargaining chip to her sister and an asset to be bargained away by her father in the hope of some later gain through “marrying up”, which hews closer to “Taming of the Shrew”. This approach only works because of the age of the actors and the target audience. It’s a more subtle set of reasons, rather than one “big moment” that changed Katerina’s life as with “Ten Things”. Instead, Shepard’s Katerina is the result of years of microaggressions, slowly grinding away at her.

Kat’s resulting frustration and sadness at her treatment drives her anger and her refusal both be married or to pretend to her family that everything is fine. “GOEST THOU TO HELL” is her favorite phrase in the first part of the episode, and the the targets are chosen well. The “Defrosting” starts out fairly faithful to the original, but takes a bit of a turn during a dinner conversation between Katerina and Petruchio. As a response to his blatant chauvinism, she tells

her husband that they have both changed, that she has become more kind and caring towards him as a response to him being kind and caring towards her. But what she wants is respect. Katerina wants to be thought of as a person in her own right, not chattel, not a possession. To stand with him, not beneath or behind him. She wants to know that he cares about her as a person, not a convenience, that she is a person, not property. That her value comes from who she is, not what she is worth or what her marriage can do for her sister and father. It's a genuinely touching, heartfelt scene that is less of a defrosting than a more gentle version of the pleas she has made to her father and sister.

The tone of the scene is soft and quiet. No swelling music, just two people opening up to each other. This approach is, aside from the early slapstick comedy of the episode, the first, and most notable divergence from the original play. Katerina's plea works in the episode, and Petruchio softens his approach towards her, unlike the original where his tactics would be considered mental and emotional abuse by modern standards.

It's a scene that wouldn't have worked in "Ten Things" just as having Katerina be the way she is because she slept with a suitor who later threw her over wouldn't have worked here. Kat's age and situation would be wrong for this approach. Her and Patrick aren't married, they're not living together, and they're very obviously high school students. This is an approach for adults, just as Katerina being affected by the actions of a teenaged suitor half her life ago would have felt unnatural for her age and station in life. Each work's approach gets the characters to the same results, but in ways that work best for their respective differences.

In the final scene of "Atomic Shakespeare", the "if I say the sun be the moon, then thou shalt agree" bit is turned on its head rather nicely. Katerina doesn't play along, rather she

contradicts Petruchio gently, non-confrontationally. Katerina gives him the chance to be to her in public as he is in private. He does, of course, complete with the “big speech”. He views Katerina as an equal, as a mate that he loves, not as property or a servant. He informs her father that the dowry he would get if he’d truly tamed his wife is of no importance compared to her knowing that he does view her and feel towards her as a person worthy of love, not a valuable tract of land. Given the differences in setting, this approach would have seemed wildly awkward for “Ten Things” (given that Kat and Patrick were not even thinking about marriage), but for this cast and audience, it feels right. It’s an adult’s approach to an adult’s problem with an adult’s resolution. Both works get to the same place, but in appropriately different ways. As a final point, this scene is completely different from the final scenes in the original play, where Petruchio has no problem showing that he has completely dominated Katerina.

Each adaptation takes one of the most truly tooth-grinding tropes in the genre and turns it on its head. The “tough women just need a man” trope is done away differently in each work, but in each case, the overall “feel” is sustained. Neither woman is pretending at strength. Their initial stridency is a bit stronger than normal, but both women have good reasons for that stridency, and it is less fakery than amplification. Julia Stiles’ Kat, suitable for her age in “Ten Things” has seen what lays beneath being popular in high school. She’s seen the level of compromise it requires and it’s not something she can live with, so she rejects it wholesale. She does nothing just because other people think she should. Her embracing of third-wave feminism is not a fascia, it’s how she’s finding her place in a world that is rather hostile to women who don’t play along. She’s not heartless, indeed, she is willing to do things she normally wouldn’t so that her sister can have her own good time. She is frustrated with her father, but recognizes that he does love



her, he's just the most emotionally clumsy man who ever lived. She doesn't change her dreams or her life for Patrick. Rather, she expands her life for him, and he for her.

Cybil Shepard's Katerina is driven by a longer-term combination of frustration and sadness, more appropriate for the older version of the character she plays. Her family may say they care about her or even love her, but their actions never show it. To Bianca, Katerina is an albatross, a weight dragging her down. To her father, Katerina is a pest to be removed from the house as soon as possible. Katerina is aware that it is the size of her dowry driving her suitors so she refuses to be bought and sold. The slapstick of her wedding aside, the relationship between her and Bruce Willis' Petruchio is shown to be one of both people changing. She doesn't defrost as much as she trades. As Petruchio is kind, so is she. As he shows her affection, so does she. What she wants from him is respect and equality, and she's very clear that if he wishes entry into her garden, respect and equality are the price of entry. Katerina would rather not be alone, but there are limits on what she'll do to avoid that. Appropriate for both the time period of the episode and the age of the actors, Katerina here is more of a second-wave feminist:

“Katerina: But know thee this, you captured me not by dragging me to thy house, but by treating me with kindness once i was here. I saw thee try, and thus i tried also. I have changed as a result of your kindness. Now, i would ask that you change as a result of mine.

Petruchio: Change? But didst not thou sayeth that i do all the things for you a wife could want?

Katerina: All, save one. All, save respecting me.

Petruchio: Respecting thee?

Katerina: Respecting me. I ask that you hold me in higher esteem, both as thy wife and as thy partner. In short, i ask that you retreateth from your role as chauvinist and for my part, should that respect beginneth tonight, I shall share the same room as my mate.”<sup>6</sup>

In neither case does either Katerina “defrost”. At the end of the work, they are still who they were at the beginning. Kat is willing to make Patrick a part of her life, but it is still her life, and she is going to live it her way. Katerina wants to be with Petruchio, but he has to want to be with her, even if she publicly defies him. She knows what her defiance will cost him, but she needs to know that she, as a person, is worth more to him than gold. She makes him publicly decide: money or love. She has not been tamed or broken. The sun is still the sun.

In both cases, the destination is the same: neither woman becomes someone else just to suit the man they love. Indeed, it’s fairly obvious in both adaptations that being “tamed” is never an option. The approaches in each adaptation is different, with Stiles ardent about to be an independent woke college student at a university that is synonymous with feminism and activism, while Shepard simply wants to be thought of as a real human being. Both themes work for their timeframe and the ages of their respective actors. (Shepard was 36 at the time of “Atomic Shakespeare”, Stiles turned 18 three days before “Ten Things” was released, so was 17 during filming.) But the differences in time period (1986 vs. 1999) and actor ages (36 vs 17) and target audiences (teens/early 20-year-olds vs. 25-40 working adults) allow for two different approaches of subverting the trope. Each work allows the main characters to be true to the setting

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<sup>6</sup> “Atomic Shakespeare.” *Moonlighting*. ABC. 25 Nov. 1986. Television

and the audience. “Ten Things” is at all times a teen RomCom. The characters, the plot, the direction, the writing, all work together to keep the viewer in the moment that this is a movie about high school-aged kids. Even the more outré comedic scenes are still within the limits of a teen movie. “Atomic” blends the same basic elements, including the over the top comedy (and a rollicking performance of “Good Lovin”<sup>7</sup> by Bruce Willis), but does so in a way that is correct and comfortable for the setting and target audience.

Each character is a product of her times. Shepard’s Katerina is a solid second-wave feminist. She views the world through the lens of her own treatment. Patriarchy and other issues dealt with more directly in third-wave feminism are seen almost as “boiling the ocean” issues. Her goal is to be thought of as an equal. Storming society’s ramparts can wait until her husband and family stop treating her as property. Stiles’ Kat is, in a sense, standing on Katerina’s shoulders. Her own equality is assumed. Individual people may treat her poorly, but at no point is she assumed to be the property of either her father or her boyfriend. Her father’s overbearing nature is a symptom of his own fears of what happens to him when his daughters finally leave the nest, not imminent loss of ownership. For his part, Patrick assumes she’s a full human being. Since the individual issues of equality are mostly solved for her, Kat has the bandwidth to join the fight for feminism on a larger, societal scale. Each character allows for each adaptation to reach a similar destination even though the specific journey is different, and each, in its own way, shows that strength, even in a woman, is not a front, but an essential part of who they are, a trick more RomComs could stand to copy.

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<sup>7</sup> The Young Rascals. “Good Lovin”. 28 March 1966. The Young Rascals, 1966.