

## Shakespearean Adaptation: *Kiss Me, Kate*'s Gender Political Discourse

*Kiss Me, Kate* was performed during post-war America--a time when women who had recently joined the workforce were being asked to return to the home. This conflict had begun a new discourse concerning the "re-domestication" of women. Considering that Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is about the domestication of a woman, creating an adaptation of the play provided the perfect vehicle for this discourse. Furthermore, both *Kiss Me, Kate* and *The Taming of the Shrew* are in direct conversation with the literature concerning gender politics of their times. *Kiss Me, Kate* makes direct reference to recent "studies" such as *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947). The musical, which opened in 1948, had an audience that was, at the very least, aware of this theory which viewed "modern, career-focused women, inflicted with penis-envy, as one of the causes of contemporary worldwide unhappiness" (Severn, 177). Similarly, *The Taming of the Shrew* was written during a time that biblically based mandates such as *An Homily of the State of Matrimony* (1563) were being used to demand separate duties for husbands and wives as means for social control (McDonald, 285). While Shakespeare's play doesn't seem to be challenging these roles, he at least calls attention to them. And while *Kiss Me, Kate* doesn't seem to challenge the parallel discourse of its own time, it at least questions the notion of what it means to be domesticated.

As Severn discusses in his article, the changes made when *Kiss Me, Kate* moved from Broadway to Hollywood reveal several places that the musical actually tried to push boundaries in its own way. The most insightful example seems to be the treatment of one of the final scenes of *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Kate lectures the other wives about their duties. In the

musical, Kate begins singing Shakespeare's original speech word for word until bar eighteen where the song not only breaks from Shakespeare's words, but also changes pitch, tempo, and style to suggest that "Kate is adopting a show of outward conformity, while testing the freedom available" (Severn, 181). However in the film version, the entire song is cut and Kate simply speaks the lines. The implied difference here is that the play makes an effort show that even though Kate had been "domesticated," it is more of an outward show for approval--a pragmatic move on her part, so that she could still remain inwardly true to herself. This solution, to simply outwardly give in to the pressures to return to the home while inwardly remaining independent, is definitely still problematic. However, it's better than the film's version of Kate's solution which simply advertises that once women give in to being "re-domesticated," they will feel emotionally fulfilled.

*The Taming of the Shrew* provides the general storyline used in both versions of its adaptation. Shakespeare's play itself was framed as a play within a play, so the fact that *Kiss Me, Kate* is a story about actors who perform the main story is a way of following suit. Even though there is a separate backstage storyline going on, the tale of Kate and Petruchio remains basically fully told. The backstage story is in dialogue with the onstage one. In a way the backstage story tells a parallel story, using a different (but still pretty similar) gender-political context. Kate's story takes place in a time when the women's place in the domestic realm was taken for granted (and mandated by religious institutions) while Lilli's story takes place during a time where many women worked, but were now being pressured to return to the home. This difference is what complicates Lilli's story and prevents it from being a just simple echo of Kate. Instead of quitting her job and marrying her new fiance, Lilli continues her acting career and

reunites (or at least we are led to assume she reunites) with Fred, her ex-husband. In a way, the fact that Lilli made the choice to remain acting recalls the notion that a woman can be domesticated and still be true to herself. The ending of the film coincides with the ending of the play within the film, creating an interesting tension between the onstage resolution and the backstage resolution. Kate has been tamed, but Lilli, who plays Kate, is remaining with her career (but we can assume she has been tamed by Fred). *Kiss Me, Kate* definitely does not usurp any of the ideas that women are most happy in the home, but it seems to provide, or at least hint at, other possibilities while still conform to the hegemonic structure. While both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Kiss Me, Kate* are in dialogue with the gender politics of their times, neither of them ultimately propose a conversation that breaks free from their society's hegemonic order.

## Works Cited

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