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Women Versus The Male Gaze

Wonder Woman should have been wearing pants to fight all those Nazis, but alas, women must fight with their thighs and boobs in plain sight or else the male audience may be upset. The sexualization and objectification of women in media is not only uncomfortably common and normalized in Western society, but it is also nothing new. Throughout history the male gaze has changed in its presentation but not its core ideals, bringing with it expectations for women that influence the way they are perceived by themselves and others.

The male gaze is the expectations and ideals put on women by men. It is not *just* “...the sexual politics of the gaze,” (Miller) but also a “...way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women”. These expectations are usually surrounding women’s looks, behaviour, and place in the world, which are often shared to them via tradition, media, or ideals planted in the heads of young girls. Although fashion, behavioural expectations, and a woman’s place in the world have changed throughout history, it is quite easy to see the presence of the male gaze and the way it has influenced that change. From the 1500’s to now, there is not a single moment in which women have not been influenced by the male gaze in some aspect of their life.

These days, a lot of the male gaze is based around beauty standards: “Woman are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. We feel compelled to pursue abstract notions of beauty, half realizing that such a pursuit is futile. When women reject this form of oppression, they face ridicule and contempt” (Mustafa). It is not difficult to see how

young women are taught that their beauty is what makes them desirable to the world. People give young girls dolls that are predominantly white with blonde hair and blue eyes that teach them what the default of prettiness is. There are television shows and movies that show how a man will save them from the darkness of the outside world (ie. Cinderella, Rapunzel, Snow White, etc). Parents put little bows and dresses on their daughters and teach them good etiquette hidden under the guise of tea party games. If a young girl does stray from the norm and expectations put on them for being female, well, they are told they'll just grow out of it. When a young girl says "Ew! I don't like boys," it is not uncommon for the response to be a vague and simple "You'll change your mind when you're older. They are all you'll think about." These examples fall into the ideals of beauty put on women by men that has continued from history into the modern world, even if it looks a bit different from the way it did centuries ago.

One of the main standards of beauty for women throughout history has been not only based on the aesthetic of their face and waist, as it often is assumed, but on their behaviour as well. This can be seen clearly in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. If a woman was polite, quiet, and submissive, she was a proper woman and good wife material. If she was loud, rude, dominant, and disobedient, she was a shrew, a "fiend of hell" (I, i, 88-90) and she "...may go to the devil's dam." (I, i, 106) That is to say, she was undesirable, and very difficult to marry off. Marriage at that time in history was a business exchange, a woman was an object to be sold from under the ownership of her father to the ownership of her husband, and she was expected to behave and be obedient to both. In the play you can see this comparison in the sisterly differences between Kate and Bianca. Even as quickly as the first act of the play, you can see the differences in the way that society treats these two women by the way they conform to male expectations. It can be seen clearly when comparing Kate's first line, "I pray you sir, is it your

will / To make stale of me amongst these mates?" (I, i, 56) in which she yells at her father and his friends who tell her she is a terrible person to Bianca's first line, "Sister, content you in my discontent. / Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe. / My books and instruments shall be my company, on them to look and practice by myself," (I, i, 80) in which she shows respect and compassion towards her father and everyone fawns over her. The examples show the clear difference in which these two women have reacted to the male gaze. Kate has seen it as something to reject, and in return she is rejected. Bianca has followed it, becoming seen as the desirable and proper sister. This allows for perspective into how in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the male gaze was aimed at making women perceive themselves as weak, obedient, and an object. Men would marry women for their dowry and would "...take her with all faults and money good enough" (I, i, 128). Women were treated as objects to trade, and as a result, they often found themselves dependant on their husbands to survive.

As a part of this survival, women in *The Taming of the Shrew* established themselves needing to conform to the expectations of the male gaze if they wanted to live long enough to have a fulfilling life. At the end of the play Kate says "...Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee..." (V, ii, 158) which shows not only the way that Kate had been changed to conform to the male expectations for her by the end of the play, but that it was what she had to do to survive. Women were seen as an object to look after, to gain money from, and to make a family with, and women saw themselves as only able to live a fulfilling life if they did just that. It was the expectation put on them from a young age, passed on by tradition and drilled into their minds until they became the best wife they could be. And a husband? Well he could practically do whatever he wanted and he would still make a good husband, as seen on Kate and Petruchio's wedding day "To me she's married, not unto my

clothes,” (III, ii, 110) when he shows up to the wedding in a state of complete disarray and is still married within the hour. After the wedding Petruchio decided he and Kate would not attend their own wedding dinner, but that they would leave and go home to Petruchio’s house in Verona. Kate and her family asked him to let them stay for dinner at least, but he said that they would not, claiming that Kate was “my goods, my chattels; she is my house, / My household stuff, my field, my barn, / My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything” (III, ii, 225) and that he would fight anyone who tried to steal his property, which was Kate, his wife. This kind of treatment was not unusual or unsavoury at the time, and so Petruchio got to go home with his goods.

This kind of objectifying and obedience-centred form of the male gaze did not disappear after the turn of even the 19th and 20th centuries, it followed through, although it looks a bit different now. The expectations for women did not really change at all until later in the 20th century, and even then the changes were made under the control of men. In the 19th century and early 20th century it was still expected of women to be a wife, a mother, and a caretaker; not a worker, and certainly not an independent person: “If married, they stayed at home to look after the children while their husband worked and brought in a weekly wage... young women were simply expected to get married and have children” (Trueman). If they dared to defy these expectations, they were reminded it was not their place to be alone in the world but to be by the side of their husband by men, “Should he abandon you, solitude, anxiety and tears, must be your unhappy lot... You must either languish in bitterness, or learn to compose your feelings, by stoical indifference” (Jennings). This was how the male gaze affected women up until the mid 20th century: they had to stick with a man who could look after them lest they die, because women could not work, and they had no way to support themselves without a man.

In the 1960's, things started to change. Women were beginning to work, "out of the 10 million workers expected to join the workforce by 1965, half would be women," (Burjek, Bell) and birth control was introduced into the world which suddenly allowed women to have sex without getting pregnant. Suddenly, the male gaze wasn't just about behaviour and "attractive qualities", it was about sex too, and the sexualization of women bloomed. In the 1980's MTV aired on television for the first time, "...bringing together two cultural forms which have notoriously promulgated female objectification — rock music and televisual imagery" (Lewis). This was what men wanted to see, and unsurprisingly became what women wanted to be, because catering to men's expectations and enjoyment was still the number one most important thing. It is a man's world. The sexualization of women in television and music videos has gotten worse and worse, from "Grease Lightning" from the hit musical Grease to "Timber" by Pitbull featuring Ke\$ha it is clear that the male gaze is not slowing down nor going anywhere. Both men and women alike have been exposed to the male gaze in media clear as day for decades with little change.

The male gaze in the late 20th century and 21st century is the same as it always was: A woman is to be submissive to a man, she is to be attractive, and that makes her worthy. Those three things have not changed despite the time that has. In *The Taming of the Shrew* women were trained to be a good wife by being taught how to respect, bring honour to, and take care of her husband, that continued until the 1980s. However the male gaze certainly did not dissipate in the '80s. Young girls are still taught how to be respectable: how to sit with their legs crossed, how to drink correctly and eat properly, how to be polite and quiet and keep their opinions to themselves. The male gaze still to this day defines how women see themselves, with television shows showing strong women always having big boobs, long hair, and respect for the men that

they are supposed to respect. They make toys to help young girls become proper young ladies, and parents tell them that they will profit from “...securing happiness in the married state,” (Jennings) before they even understand what a relationship really is. They lean teenage girls into art related topics in school rather than the more “masculine” STEM topics, and pay adult women less than men for doing the same job. It is all in an effort to keep women in check with how the male species was them to react: with dignity, grace, respect, and submission. Really, the main thing that has changed is that the male gaze is a lot more sexual now, it is disgusting. And as we enter the new decade, it is pretty clear that women are tired of it.

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