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The Pervasive Ideals of How Girls Should Grow Up

The notion that men are superior to women has pervaded our society for centuries. In the 16th century, women grew up with the sole purpose of becoming wives and having children; they were the property of their fathers until they became the property of their husbands. While the 20th century brought significant changes to the lives of women, prevailing ideas of how women should look and act remain highly influenced by society. Even though women of the 20th century began to pursue greater ambitions than could be attributed to their beauty, it can be argued that still, “women are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. [They] feel compelled to pursue abstract notions of beauty, half realizing that such a pursuit is futile” (Mustafa). As seen in the media and modern culture, society’s expectation of women negatively impacts how young girls are growing up.

Stories reflect society, which is why Shakespeare’s *The Taming of The Shrew* is an example of how women have been and continue to be shaped by the opinions and expectations of men and the larger community. Kate and Petruchio share the title of “protagonist”. The story revolves around Kate, a bad-tempered and aggressively assertive woman, and her battle with Petruchio, as she transforms from a shrew into an obedient wife. Kate’s quarrelsome nature seems to be exacerbated by her father, Baptista’s treatment of her as compared to her younger sister Bianca. Sixteenth-century society expected women to be quiet and obedient towards men,

and when Kate refuses those ideals she is met with a father who publicly shames her and constantly reminds her that Bianca is the better daughter. Bianca is the favourite because she knows how to tell her father the things he wants to hear. After Bianca retires to her books, Baptista proudly shares, in front of Kate and Bianca's suitors, "And let it not displease thee, good Bianca, / For I will love thee ne'er the less, my girl." (1.1.76-77). Baptista's favouritism towards Bianca and his blatant demoralizing treatment of his eldest daughter is a significant cause for Kate's behaviour towards men, and one of the reasons it is hard for her father to find her a husband. Without a husband, Kate would have no one to support her when her father dies, leaving her destitute and scorned by society. When Petruchio decides he is to wed Kate, she has little choice in the matter. This was a common fate for women of her time.

In the 16th-century, marriage was the only way a woman could ensure her survival and secure her status in society. Women grew up with the expectation they would become wives and mothers. Virginia Woolf, a 20th-century writer quotes in her book, *A Room of One's Own*, "Betrothal often took place while one or both of the parties was in the cradle, and marriage when they were scarcely out of the nurses' charge." (Woolf). This was common among upper-class families of the 16th century. Kate understands this to be true when she accepts her purpose in life. She is ready to support her husband, "[her] hand is ready; may it do him ease" (5.2.191). Even in modern times, women are often the ones to interrupt their careers to stay home and raise children. This commonly leads to women giving up potential gains in the workplace (Explained). Their independence is compromised as they are forced to rely on the financial support of their husbands. A systematic taming of women by society and the media causes them to abandon their goals and desires, in order to "place [their] hands below [their] husband's foot"

(5.2.189). Women themselves often buy into this plan because they feel guilty about abandoning their families to pursue a lavish career. They begin to believe that their time is better spent at home caring for their children.

The development of the women's rights movement encouraged women to reject the stereotype that women are destined to be homemakers. In the '60s, girls began seeking higher education, leading them to more male-dominated professions (Women). Despite this change in women's ideals, mass media producers like *Cosmopolitan* magazine, even in the '90s, would not relinquish their obsession with marriage, "Getting married, staying married, how to be happily married, what to do if you're not happily married" (Farr). Now young girls are back to reading up on how to be the perfect wife instead of seeking a life that reflects what they truly want for themselves. This view of girls growing up to become housewives, while advantageous to men, is confusing and detrimental to girls who want to pursue other goals.

Women are conditioned and pressured to get married and serve their families. This ideal was widespread and unchallenged during the time Shakespeare wrote *The Taming of The Shrew*. After Kate's wedding with Petruchio, she insists on staying for the dinner. Petruchio disagrees saying they must leave immediately. Kate is forced to accompany him. In a long ruthless line, he claims, "I will be master of what is mine own. / She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house..." (3.2.224-225). Kate's evident shift to a seemingly obedient wife is due to the pressures of society, her father, and Petruchio's relentless manipulation. These words are key because they demonstrate how Petruchio objectifies his wife, viewing her as nothing more than another one of his possessions to put on display. This example of Kate's reduction to a prize to be paraded

about, reflects Naheed Mustafa's (author of *My Body is My Business*) opinion that young girls are taught to believe their worth is proportional to their beauty; that women are a man's property or in modern ideology, that they exist for the pleasure of men. In a male-dominated world, adolescent girls are influenced by the media to fit the male standard of beauty; a standard that is virtually impossible for most women to achieve. Women were not in control of their own bodies.

The '60s introduced a new view of women's bodies (Barbera), which at the beginning seemed like a positive thing for young girls. After the second wave of feminism, "many women felt they no longer needed to wear what their fathers or husbands deemed appropriate for them, so whether that meant miniskirts and go go boots or bell bottoms and paisley tunics, they didn't all conform to a man's standards" (Barbara). With the popularization of such fashions, women began expressing themselves freely showing more skin than people were used to at the time. This sense of freedom gave women power over their own bodies.

Unfortunately, this body image revolution was hijacked by media corporations. By the time we reached the '80s, we were seeing advertisements, magazines and music videos bursting with images of "the woman we all want to be" or more accurately, "the woman men *want*". Music videos became a popular accompaniment to newly released songs, in 1980 when MTV (Music Television) based its programming on this medium. There became a need for sexy imagery to help sell records. Women become once again objectified, because as the market has proven, sex sells. Music videos like *Cherry Pie* by Warrant have lyrics like "she's *my* cherry pie"; the use of the word "my" implying a notion that women are property. More recently, music videos like *Timber* by Pitbull feature women showing off their bodies for the sole purpose of

being eye candy while the few men in the video, Pitbull included, have almost no screen time. In both cases, women are objectified for male pleasure. This imagery of “desirable women” subliminally impacts youth, especially young girls who do not see themselves as pretty or sexually attractive.

Kate represents today’s woman, though she tries to reject society’s expectations of her she is forced into place by a man stronger than herself. She gives up everything to serve her husband, losing a part of who she is. Society feeds young girls unrealistic expectations at a rate that is almost impossible to escape from, just like it was impossible for Kate to escape from Petruchio’s abusive tactics. Women are influenced by messages from the media just like Kate is influenced by messages from her father and his peers. The unrealistic pressures society puts on young girls negatively impacts how they grow up and weakens their determination to live their own lives to their full potential.

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