

The Taming of the Shrew and Motherhood

When I was a little girl, I had a collection of dolls that I played with. These dolls were gifts from my parents or other family members, and almost all of them were modelled after babies. What does a small child do with a baby doll? They pretend to be its mother. We have photos of my sister, as a toddler, carrying around a little baby doll in the weeks after I was born. She used the doll to mimic all the things that my mom would do with me, mainly pretending to feed the “baby” with a fake bottle and carrying it around in a little backpack. Already, at the age of two, she was acting “motherly.”

This is not a bad thing, but it is very common; young girls pretending to be mothers just because their parents handed them baby dolls, parents laughing about what “a good mom” their daughter will be just because she has a younger sibling, and eldest daughters being expected to take on responsibilities in caring for younger siblings are all times when young girls are already placed under the expectation of motherhood. The problem in these scenarios is that young boys do not have these same expectations. They are not handed baby dolls, and they are not called upon to take care of younger siblings either. In our society, girls and women are supposed to be the ones to take care of the children.

These expectations are not new. In fact, they are centuries, possibly even millennia, old, and can be found in several places, including some specific writings from over four hundred years ago, and in the history of feminism.

The play *Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare, is, to our modern sensibilities, controversial. The plot revolves around an outspoken and angry woman, often referred to as a “shrew”, and the man who marries and “tames” her into a submissive wife. This “taming” is intense, and in our eyes, not necessary. But in the late 16th century, the audience would have viewed the “taming” as necessary, as their society disliked the idea of an outspoken woman. Women had to fit into a box; they had to be quiet and submissive, and above all, do what men told them. A woman married the man her father chose for her, and had his children.

Though the play was written a long time ago, there are several themes in the *Taming of the Shrew* that can be found in our modern society. One of these is women attempting to resist oppression, but ultimately failing. In Act 3 of the play, Kate, the “shrew”, says “I see a woman may be made a fool if she had not the spirit to resist,” (3.2.215). She begins the play angry. She is angry at her father, for trying to marry her off, at the world, for forcing her to be married. This line can be interpreted as her description of resisting oppression. Through her eyes, and through ours, she is fighting back against what society wants her to be. However, she does not win this fight. By the end of the play, she is “tamed” by her husband, Petruchio, into a

submissive wife. As it turns out, she does not have the “spirit to resist”, and she is “made a fool” many times over, as Petruchio forces her to believe things that are not true and trust him even when he is wrong.

Another theme present in the *Taming of the Shrew* is the idea that women must have children, and must take care of the children alone. In a conversation with her father, Kate describes how she must “lead apes in hell,” (2.1.34), which is a phrase from the time the play was written, and explains how a woman who dies with no children will have no one to lead her into heaven. This shows how much their society wants women to have children; having children is the end goal of a marriage, and a woman’s life.

When Kate first meets her future husband, Petruchio, he claims that “women are made to bear, and so [is she],” (2.1.201), which shows how he only sees her as a mother to children, and not her own person. This statement also reflects society’s view on women. Every time marriage is discussed in relation to women, it is something they need to do. They need to be married, they need to have children, they are “made to bear” them, after all. When marriage is discussed in relation to men, it is a want, and it is a choice that they make. They have the choice of who to marry, which women do not have.

Kate, like so many other women, was unable to break out of what society wanted her to be: a wife and mother above anything else. She was raised in a society that believed her only worth was in marriage and childbirth, and she would have grown up from a very young age knowing that her future was one with a husband and babies. Despite her best efforts, this is the future she receives.

It has been a long time since the *Taming of the Shrew* was written, so what has changed for women since then? What have women done to make change over time, and how did their actions affect the world?

In the mid-19th century, women across the world began campaigning for the right to vote. These women were the first suffragettes, and their campaigns drew worldwide attention to their cause. In the US and Britain, suffragettes held hunger strikes and created civil unrest to draw attention to their cause. In Canada, suffragettes were more diplomatic, petitioning the government and holding mock parliaments. It took a long time for this work to pay off. Many politicians thought the idea of women’s suffrage was laughable, and many men would publicly debate suffragettes. A common rebuttal to their points was “When the woman goes to vote, who will take care of the children?” (Thielmann, et. al). The same question has never been, and could never be, asked about a man. This is when the stereotype of women being mothers and the sole caretakers of children is no longer “sweet”, but harmful. Children, it seemed, were more important than women having legal rights, and by extension, equality.

In 1918, women were given the right to vote in Canada. This was a great achievement, as it was something the suffragettes had worked towards for decades. However, it did not immediately change the world. Even today, women are underrepresented in government positions. Only 29 percent of the Members of Parliament in our current federal government are women (Lao, Britneff). We can see that even though this specific legal right has been given to women, actual change towards equality has not been achieved.

After the success of the suffragette movement, there was no mainstream feminist movement until the 1960s and 1970s. The second-wave feminist movement began in the early 1960s, after the introduction of birth control. Birth control meant that women could choose when to have children, and with this new freedom of choice they began to want to have other choices too. Women began to speak up against oppression, and use their voices to create what is known as the “second-wave” feminist movement (“The Second...”). The idea of feminism became popular; *Cosmopolitan* magazine ran articles about Gloria Steinem, a popular feminist icon, at the same time as articles about the importance of looking “like a fashion model” (Farr).

The goals of the second-wave movement were far more complex than those of suffragettes. In the 1960s, women had less freedom than men. Most of this was due to the culture of the workplace. It was completely acceptable to pay women less than their male coworkers, sexually harass them, or fire them for being pregnant (McLaughlin). The second wave feminists wanted equal pay for men and women, an end to sexual harassment and domestic violence, and true equality, both in the workplace and in the home, where women usually took on the majority of the responsibilities.

Something that the second-wave feminist movement fought hard to achieve was the Equal Rights Amendment. The Equal Rights Amendment, or ERA, was first written in 1923, and was an amendment that would have added protections against the discrimination of women to the US Constitution. It was passed in 1972, with a seven year deadline to be ratified by the states. Despite the considerable efforts of the movement, it failed to be ratified by that deadline (“The Equal...”).

The ERA is just one example of something that could have drastically changed our culture to make women equal to men, but failed. Even the other goals that the second-wave feminist movement laid out have still not been achieved. The gender pay gap, while slightly smaller, still exists. Domestic violence and sexual harassment are still enormous issues. Women are still expected to take on the responsibilities of raising children, cooking, and cleaning. In fact, women being the main caretakers of children is a key factor in the gender pay gap; women often work less or take time off so they can take care of children, while men advance far beyond them (Graf, et. al). This is another instance in which the ideal of women

being mothers prevents them from succeeding. Even though women were no longer forced into marriages, their futures were still controlled by children, just as Kate's was in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Feminism is far from finished, as women are still fighting for their voices to be heard and listened to. In 2017, the Me Too movement became mainstream. The Me Too movement is a way for women to speak up and share their experiences with sexual assault. It was started in 2006, with the goal of allowing a safe space for primarily women of colour to share their experiences (“#MeToo...”). The support of others helped women to use their voices, and to hold those who had assaulted them accountable for their actions.

Women might feel safer speaking up against abusers and rapists now, but not enough has changed. Less than 1% of rapists are convicted (Van Dam), and men who are accused of sexual assault are still allowed to remain in positions of power. Even though women are supporting each other, victims can face backlash from people who do not believe them or blame them for the incident entirely. Though women are using their voices, virtually nothing happens to the majority of men who sexually assault women. Overall, this “rebellion” has not succeeded yet.

Despite legal victories for women throughout the 20th century, the patriarchal ideal of women as mothers that has existed for centuries still exists and still keeps women confined in one role in society. In her essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf described women from the Elizabethan era as being “forced to [this ideal] by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom” (Woolf). Though this quote refers to women from Shakespeare's time four hundred years ago, women today are still held to this ideal. They are taught since childhood that they will be mothers someday, through indirect actions such as giving young girls baby dolls, and through direct actions such as telling girls how good mothers they will be.

The ideal of women being mothers is present throughout the *Taming of the Shrew*, as it is a main motivating factor for the marriage of every female character, and the idea of not being married or not having children is seen as disgraceful. Kate's “shrewishness” stems from her rebellion against this ideal. We do not know who she wants to marry, but she does not want it to be a stranger her father chooses. She wants to make her own choices, refusing to follow orders “till [she] pleases [herself]” (3.2.205). Making a choice is a rebellion to Kate, as it was to the suffragettes who fought for the choice to vote, the second-wave feminists who fought to dictate their own lives, and every woman who has chosen to step outside the stereotype of only being a mother, and has decided to live their lives for them, instead of what society wants them to be.

Though they were rebelling against it, this ideal also ultimately prevented many feminist movements from succeeding. Suffragettes and women were turned away from voting and

politics for decades with responses telling them to go home and take care of their children. Women being forced to take on sole responsibility for children directly contributes to the wage gap, as they have to take time off or work less overtime, which makes their male coworkers advance farther than them. This is what the second-wave feminist movement was trying to change, but over fifty years later we still have not achieved this.

In our society, this stereotype of women as mothers is still present. It can be found in every failure of the feminist movement, every change that has not been made, and every fight we are still fighting today. We cannot achieve true equality until our society does not place pressure on women to have children, and until the women who do have children are able to have the same opportunities to succeed as men, because the responsibilities of raising those children are shared equally.

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