



Shakespeare

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10 Things, 2 Elements a review by **Nancy Goodwin**



If, in a passion for Aristotelian analysis, a teacher would take a notion to separate *The Taming of the Shrew* into the elements of plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle, the current movie *10 Things I Hate about You* can be of great help to familiarize students with items one and two, but for the rest go straight to Shakespeare.

"Imagine," a teacher might say, "that two new male students move to our school. One immediately falls for a beautiful, delightful, but extremely protected young woman. He learns that her father, who is rich and influential, will not let her near a man until her older sister dates." (You notice I say "dates" instead of marries because, like the filmmakers, we are updating Shakespeare's plot.) "What," the teacher asks, "can the man do?"

Hands go up. Answers blurt out. "Find someone for the sister!"

"Ah," the teacher says, "but that is not so easy, for the sister is a man-hating shrew."

"Is she good looking?" the students inquire.

"Yes, but she is mean."

Eventually someone might suggest, "So pay some guy to go out with her. Anybody. What about that other new guy?"

And so the exchange continues until by the end of the class period the students get a modernized version of the *Shrew* plot and an introduction to the major characters.

The same ground can be gained by letting Karen McCullah Lutz (screenwriter), Kirsten Smith (screenwriter), and Gil Junger (director) do the imagining for us. Their film *10 Things I Hate About You* gives us a perfectly plausible and attractive teenage Kat (Julia Stiles); a likable but princesslike Bianca (Larisa Oleynik); an outrageous Petruchio, now called Patrick Verona (Heath Ledger); an earnest Lucientio, now called Cameron (Joseph Gordon-Levitt); a delightful scheming sidekick Tranio, now called Michael (David Krumholtz); a ridiculous Baptista, now called Walter Stratford (Larry Miller); and a super-confident rival suitor for Bianca called Joey Donner (Andrew Keegan).

They *sort of* go through some of the same maneuvers as Shakespeare's characters: the sisters fight, the father wrings his hands, Bianca's suitors pay the new guy to take Kat out, Kat is cruel to him, at first he pretends to be interested in

her interests but gets her attention when he blows her off, their relationship comes down to a crisis of trust. But I italicize the *sort of* because although Lutz, Smith, and Junger take swipes at Shakespeare's plot, they achieve a much weaker, tamer version. Like Petruchio, Patrick Verona has a mysterious, somewhat mythic background. He is rumored to have eaten a live duck, to have spent the last year in prison. And like Petruchio, he seems to know how to get to Kat, but whereas Petruchio lays out his motives from the start ("I come to wive it wealthily in Padua."), Verona's are not as clear. He takes Joey's money to woo Kat—he even bargains aggressively and seems to need cash—but in the end he hires a band to put in a guest appearance at the prom and buys Kat a Fender guitar. Where Shakespeare tells us from the start that Petruchio was raised in wealth but has come on hard times, Lutz leaves us wondering if Verona is feigning poverty while in truth has scads of cash and a tuxedo at his disposal. Patrick is never as desperate as Petruchio, never as boorish, never as on the edge. And Kat, though her fellow students call her scary, is never as trapped as Shakespeare's Kate. It's true that her social life is a disaster, but she enjoys music and intellectual pursuits, has a car and a credit card, and by mid-film she learns that she has been accepted to Sarah Lawrence.

But although the more sensitive, 90's-style Kat and Patrick don't produce the sparks that Kate and

Petruchio do, they have their moments. Their chemistry is high voltage, and when Ledger's Patrick makes his big play for Kat, he takes over the PA system at the athletic field where Kat is practicing soccer and bribes the school band to accompany him as he struts and sings "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You" in the stands, a performance every bit as outrageous as Petruchio's appearance as the "mad-brained bridegroom" who dressed like a clown, cuffed the priest, and carried off his bride. When Stile's Kat makes a public declaration of her submission to Patrick it is in a sonnet in which she catalogues the things she hates about her beloved, chief of which is the fact that he is with her no longer and she misses him. Delivered before her classmates, her poem is a teary surrender to emotions long repressed, and it is no less a concession than that of Shakespeare's Kate when she reveals she is ready to place her hand below her husband's foot.

Like the speeches of the two Katrinas, the difference in the two scripts is the language. In diction and in music they are miles apart. Every now and then Lutz and Smith throw in a phrase of what might be considered heightened prose ("The shit hath hitteth the fan...ith.") or witty repartee ("Why is everyone so hot for this girl? Has she got beer-flavored nipples?"), but for the most part the vocabulary is 90's high school and the rhythm is stunted. Even Kat's "sonnet" clunks—its four-beat lines and obvious rhyme fall short not only of what

Shakespeare would write, but also of what a senior student in an advanced English class would compose. To make up for the weak language, Junger underlaces the film with a pulsating array of music including live performances of two groups, Save Ferris and Letters To Cleo. The effect is pleasing—the guitars and drums move us along, and in many cases the lyrics suggest the subtext and gives clues to the plot better than the script does. And he gives us a splendid visual treat by going on location to the castle-like Stadium High School in Tacoma, WA to shoot the Padua High School scenes.

So how can a teacher make the most out of *10 Things I Hate about You*? Three strategies:

1. **As Prequel.** Let students sigh over the attractive teens and catch the beat of the music. Pick out the plot and characters and use them to introduce *Shrew*. Then get a Shakespeare script in their hands and let them act out key scenes—Kate and Bianca’s fight, Kate and Petruchio’s first meeting, an excerpt from 4.3 (Petruchio’s efforts at taming), the sun vs. the moon scene, and Kate’s last speech.
2. **As Intertextual Comparison.** Do *Shrew* first, then show *10 Things* and invite students to do a compare/contrast debate or paper.
3. **Sonnet Contest.** Ask students to assume they are Kate and write a sonnet to Petruchio. Or assume they are Petruchio and write to Kate.

But first look at one or more of Shakespeare's sonnets and also at Kat's. If all goes well, student comments will provide opportunities to discuss particulars such as enjambment, pentameter lines, internal rhyme, or conceits. And they will see that they can top Kat's effort.

Do you have other ideas? Send your comments and/or teaching strategies to Shakespeare through the [feedback](#) section of this website, and we will add them to the list. ►

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