

# To Count as a Girl: Misdirection in *10 Things I Hate About You*

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## Abstract

Critical readings of *10 Things I Hate About You* have primarily focused on whether, and to what extent, Kat has relinquished the feminist values she displays prior to her "taming" and usually claim that the film is conservative in its treatment of gender. This article complicates such readings. It focuses on the poem Kat reads and performs at the film's conclusion in order to argue that the strategy of misdirection is vital for understanding that ambiguity is key to the film's foregrounding and treatment of 1990s adolescent girlhood.

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I hate the way you talk to me and the way you cut your hair,  
I hate the way you drive my car, I hate it when you stare.  
I hate your big dumb combat boots and the way you read my mind.  
I hate you so much it makes me sick; it even makes me rhyme.  
I hate the way you're always right, I hate it when you lie,  
I hate it when you make me laugh, even worse when you make me cry.  
I hate it when you're not around and the fact that you didn't call.  
But mostly I hate the way I don't hate you, not even close.  
Not even a little bit, not even at all. (Junger 1999)

Critics have not been kind about the poem above, the composition of Katerina (Kat) Stratford (Julia Stiles), the lead female character in Gil Junger's romantic teen comedy *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), itself an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Her poem constitutes a class exercise, but Kat's performance, and the poem itself, are addressed to Patrick Verona (Heath Ledger), functioning to express her feelings for him and ultimately facilitating their reconciliation. Penny Gay says that "Kat's capitulation is her weepy public reading of her

not very good poem" (2008, 129), while Richard Burt offers an even harsher judgment, stating, in parenthesis, that the poem is "quite atrocious" (2002, 216). The poem, of course, constitutes a borrowing and adaptation. It has its corollary in the infamous speech concluding *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which the supposedly tamed shrew, Katherine, announces her subservience to her husband, Petruchio. Shakespeare's Katherine's final speech is ambiguous, but nonetheless crucial to readings of the play's problematic gender politics. Margaret-Jane Kidnie has outlined the central interpretive issues posed by *The Taming of the Shrew*, describing how "scholarly and theatrical approaches to the taming plot are dominated by three distinct readings of Katherine's notorious final monologue":

The first view is that Katherine's submission is entirely ironic and Petruchio, the gull, triumphantly takes as duty what is only a feigned deference to his will; the second line, more grim, is that Katherine's spirit is brutally and conclusively beaten down by Petruchio's taming methods; and the third is that Katherine willingly and happily enters into a theatrical game, initiated by Petruchio, that unites the two of them, the play's "mad-brained" outsiders, in a creative space able to free them both from oppressive social constructions [. . .] Textual support can be found for all views so performances can choose what to pick up. (2006, 82)

Another way of organizing these conflicting interpretations is to say that *The Taming of the Shrew* may demonstrate that Katherine has been tamed, or not. If Katherine is understood to be tamed, more ambiguities are generated; her final speech can be read as endorsing an abusive husband/wife relationship and the secondary status of women (with women constructed as, ideally, passive, obedient, and silent), or the speech may suggest that Katherine is complicit in and satisfied by her own taming and looks forward to a mutually fulfilling marriage in which both husband and wife have clearly differentiated roles. Such a reading is difficult to sustain, given the manner of Katherine's treatment by Petruchio, and the fact that this still seems predicated upon the acceptance of a woman's secondary role within marriage and society. Alternatively, Katherine may not be tamed at all, in which case her speech is an act of resistance. A public performance marked by rhetorical excess, the speech is so subservient, *so* contrary to what might be expected from Katherine prior to her taming that it achieves the reverse of what it purports to declare, constituting a discomfiting recitation of the strictures on women's behavior and one woman's refusal to abide by them, so that, as Kidnie remarks, the speech presents "a female voice that changes its tune but not its stridency" (2006, 160). Kidnie also notes the crucial role irony plays in facilitating both this kind of performance and reading of Katherine's speech (93).

It is a central contention of this article that critics have not examined Kat's poem in sufficient detail, and that close examination of the poem reveals that it is ambiguous in ways related to — but importantly, not identical with — the interpretative difficulties generated by Katherine's speech, as outlined above. As with Katherine's speech, Kat's poem can be understood as illustrating that Kat has been tamed, but may also illustrate her refusal to be tamed. If Kat *has* been tamed, the nature and consequences of that taming are unclear. Moreover, the fact that the poem's ambiguities have been insufficiently acknowledged has led to overly simplified readings of *10 Things I Hate About You*. Kim Edwards insightfully notes that through the poem, "the film becomes recursive, an illustration of its own argument" (2012, 111). However, as Kidnie's discussion reveals, the nature of that argument is unclear.

Critical readings of the film have focused primarily on whether, and to what extent, Kat has relinquished the feminist values she displays prior to her "taming" (values that, problematically, implicitly seem to make her deserving of the label "shrew"). Michael J. Friedman's and Jennifer Clement's articles represent two of the most divergent readings. Friedman argues that the film's "presentation of feminism is not conservative but progressive." According to Friedman's assessment, "Kat evolves from a second-wave feminist, a follower of the old-school feminism of the 1970s, to a third-wave feminist, one who embraces the contradictions and personal empowerment fostered by the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s" (Friedman 2004, 46). Clement, by contrast, argues that the film "employ[s] media stereotypes of second and third-wave feminism, playing one against the other to support essentialist views of gender and identity, and to suggest that late 1990s and early 2000s America is, indeed, a postfeminist society" (Clement 2008, 18). Yet even these readings are not as different as they appear. Clement notes, correctly, that the critical consensus has been to regard the film as offering a "conservative treatment of gender and identity" (3), and it is true that Friedman's claim of the film's "progressive" presentation of feminism can be easily challenged by noting that the third-wave feminist principles Kat displays reflect the discourse of Girl Power, a more mainstream, diluted version of the Riot Grrrl politics that inspired it. Indeed, of Kat's poem, Elizabeth A. Deichman states disparagingly that "[Kat's] words may say Riot Grrrl, but the performance is all Girl Power" (2005, 403).

The general agreement about the conservative treatment of gender politics in the film is both caused by and also prompts a related consensus that the film is more tame than the play; critics tend to make claims similar to L. Monique Pittman's argument that the film "glosses over the complex of gender and power dynamics the rougher edges of Shakespeare's drama leave exposed" (2004, 144). This article aims to demonstrate that critics have glossed over the complexities of the film, and overlooking the importance of Kat's poem is one example of this. This glossing over is likely

due to a set of unexamined assumptions. Shakespeare's cultural authority is privileged in ways that foreclose closer examination of *10 Things I Hate About You*. Friedman's definition of the "teen film adaptation," which "borrows the basic plotline, characters, and thematic issues from a particular play, but employs the contemporary vernacular almost exclusively in its dialogue (brief quotations from the source play are, however, common)" (2008, 3), is also illuminating. He makes little mention of what might be teen-specific in relation to these films or their acts of adaptation, the exception being the implicit point that such films' use of the "contemporary vernacular" is designed to appeal to a young audience. It is likely that the use of the contemporary vernacular, as manifested in Kat's word choice in her poem, might also account for the lack of close attention, and negative judgment, it receives. The likely critical assumption has been that the characters in Shakespeare's play are more complex than the teenagers in Junger's film.

*10 Things I Hate About You* adapts key plot details and thematic issues in *The Taming of The Shrew* by focusing on a group of American teenagers in Padua High School. The film foregrounds the lives of the two Stratford sisters, Kat and Bianca. Kat the shrew is tamed not by marriage but by dating. The film prioritizes female adolescent development. This is a significant departure from Shakespeare's play, in which the mercenary interests of Katherine's father are a prime motivator of the taming plot. Of course, in the early modern culture in which Shakespeare wrote, the concept of adolescence did not exist as it has been understood in Western cultures since its construction in the late nineteenth century — but this is not to say that girlhood and coming of age were not conceived of in early modern culture. Jennifer Higginbotham notes that "given the enormous elasticity of girlhood as both a term and conceptual category, it can be quite difficult to pin down a concrete definition, but Shakespeare himself seems to have been aware of this and dramatized this conceptual ambiguity in *Love's Labours Lost*" (2013, 191).<sup>1</sup> This "enormous elasticity" is both present in and absent from Junger's film.

In *10 Things I Hate About You*, Kat must be made to date so that her sister Bianca can. Bianca wants to date but cannot, because of her father's house rules. Her father eventually modifies this rule, stating that Bianca can date when Kat does. The taming plot, which comprises a convoluted series of arrangements among a group of adolescent male characters, is thus predicated upon the desires (and desirability) of an adolescent girl (Bianca). Bianca repeatedly articulates her desire for "normalcy" and "typical adolescence," which she feels are denied her. To achieve these desires, a plot is put in place to manipulate the actions of another adolescent girl (Kat). This article argues that *10 Things I Hate About You* is more open and unstable (and therefore, less conservative) than critical readings suggest and that the ambiguities of *10 Things I Hate About You* constitute an

exploration of American girlhood in the late twentieth century. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to explain the film's focus on American girlhood, outlining some of the cultural contexts and theoretical debates informing its portrayal of female adolescence, before offering a reading of *10 Things I Hate About You* that aims to show how the film grapples with the difficulties raised by these debates. Kat's poem is central to this reading.

### Impossible Subjects? Discourses of Girlhood in 1990s American Culture

Kidnie contends that it is important to account for the fact that *The Taming of the Shrew* continues to be staged and to examine the ways performances and adaptations deal with its troublesome content (2006, 118-19). Karen Newman suggests that the play enjoys renewed interest in "the decades of 'backlash' when advances in women's political participation outside the home have prompted a response from those who perceive a threat" (2001, 227-28). *10 Things I Hate About You* was produced in American culture in the late 1990s, a period when a great deal of anxiety was focused on the figure of the adolescent girl, following publication of several reports and studies which found that girls' education was marginalized.<sup>2</sup> This was seen as indicative of a bigger cultural problem, that of a society failing its girls. As a consequence, girls received much scholarly and media attention. This attention took the form of registering anxiety about girls and investigating ways in which they could be saved (tamed?). Two dominant perceptions of adolescent girls emerged in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Girls were regarded as vulnerable, in crisis, in need of rescuing, with Shakespeare's Ophelia functioning as a powerful symbol of this phenomenon (Gonick 2006, 11, Driscoll 2002, 25-27). Simultaneously, however, girls arguably became more visible and empowered, as exemplified by the discourse of Girl Power. Both the formulation of the problem of adolescent girls and solutions to that problem were constructed by adults, so that the adolescent girl (embodied, or as theoretical category) functioned as Kat does, as an instrument in the plots of others.

Although the 1990s were a period in which special efforts were made to ensure how girls could become visible and empowered, this could not be understood strictly as furthering feminist goals of equality for women and girls. Angela McRobbie, by contrast, singles out the 1990s as the period marking the emergence of postfeminism. She argues: "To count as a girl today appears to require [a] kind of ritualistic denunciation [of feminism], which in turn suggests that one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes its being historicised and generationalized, and thus easily rendered out-of-date" (McRobbie 2004, 7). McRobbie also describes this denunciation as a process by which "feminism is aged and made to seem redundant" (3) and argues that the denunciation requires complex strategies in which "[feminism] is taken into account but only to be shown

to be no longer necessary" (8). Recent scholars of Girls' Studies have noted the contradictions marking constructions and representations of late twentieth and early twenty-first century girls. These girls are to be found, in Anita Harris's terms, "standing at the corner of feminism and neoliberalism" (2004, xvii). At this corner, girls (more properly, constructions and representations of girls) signify the possibilities and limitations of the neoliberal subject. Indeed, if adolescent girls were perceived to be in need of taming or saving, this would be in pursuit of the goal of constructing them as successful (or simply normative) neoliberal subjects. To combine McRobbie's and Harris's terms, to count as a girl, one should not linger at the corner of feminism and neoliberalism. One must move on (become adult, and in socially sanctioned ways). Girl subjects at this corner are presented with unprecedented opportunities for freedom, choice, and empowerment and thus are often figured as a "metaphor for social change" (McRobbie 2004, 11). But the neoliberal subject also has opportunities to fail (or few opportunities at all), so that the girl is also figured, in Christine Griffin's terms, as an "impossible subject" or an "impossible project":

Dominant constructions of girlhood are constituted through a series of contradictions that operate to render the girl herself as an impossible subject. Girls and young women are generally represented as having (or being) too little or too much; too fat or too thin, too clever or too stupid, too free or too restricted. The desiring subject is also a dissatisfied subject (Bauman 2001) and in the case of femininity, the primary focus of that dissatisfaction is the self. Contemporary girlhood appears to be an impossible project, caught between competing forces, in a permanent state of dissatisfaction or desire, surrounded by idealised representations of itself, and simultaneously invisible. And yet, of course, the lives of young women frequently belie the pessimism of such representations. (Griffin 2004, 42)

Griffin's discussion makes it clear that not all girl subjects are offered the same opportunities. The concern with adolescent girls in the 1990s has been faulted for largely focusing on the development of white, middle-class girls, a focus that is also present in *10 Things I Hate About You*. This exposes a crucial point: unlike early modern culture, discourses about girlhood in late twentieth-century America did not tolerate "enormous elasticity" in meanings of girlhood; rather, scholarship and representations of girlhood were often invested in restricting its meanings. *10 Things I Hate About You* both reflects and resists this trend. As adolescent girls in the late twentieth century, both Kat and Bianca are positioned at the corner of feminism and neoliberalism, and *10 Things I Hate About You* explores how they negotiate space for themselves within American culture at a time when adolescent girls are both idealized subjects and impossible projects. Kat's delivery of her poem

denotes an important event in her adolescent development. It is the culmination of a series of important events (the machinations of the taming plot, its consequences, and exposure) that have called into question the attitudes that have dictated her behavior in adolescence. As such, the poem might be expected to document the ways in which she has changed and offer some clues about the kind of girl she has, or will, become. But it resists providing such a narrative. Indeed, the poem does not really present a narrative at all. Nevertheless, this marks a crucial moment in which Kat tests the elasticity of her culture's meanings of girlhood.

### Turning to Misdirection in *10 Things I Hate About You*

Kat's tears and fragile, unhappy emotional state in delivering her poem might suggest that she is a girl in crisis, an Ophelia figure. Yet her poem is clearly angry. Reiterations of the phrase "I hate" suggest that Kat can also be read as emblematic of Girl Power, in that she is vocal, confident, and earnest — hardly the sort of girl Carol Gilligan and other psychologists worried about in the 1990s, one who has gone "underground" and given up on expressing her true feelings.<sup>3</sup> Conceivably, Kat occupies both roles — the girl in crisis and the empowered girl — as is illustrated by Scott Dixon's description of the poem as a "heart-wrenching poem of loss, hurt, and betrayal," one nonetheless comprising a "rare glance inside her guarded heart as she offers Patrick another chance at love, but on her terms" (2008, 149). This would also support Marnina Gonick's argument that the discourses of the girl in crisis and the empowered girl do not represent mutually exclusive ways of being a girl, but rather "function together to articulate a complex of fiction and fantasy, regulation, and persuasion through which young women's relationships to new forms of subjectivity are being formed" (2006, 2). But as Gonick notes, the two discourses *are* constructed as oppositional in order to position girls as both the ideal representative of the neoliberal order and as a threat to it — another way of saying that girls are both a metaphor for social change and impossible subjects.

Readings of *10 Things I Hate About You* that attempt to determine whether and how Kat relinquishes her feminist values serve to illustrate the necessity, in American culture, of containing girls, of deciding what kind of girls they are and, hence, what kinds of taming they may require. Kat's poem can be read as showing that she is constructing herself as a postfeminist, neoliberal subject (in line with Clement's reading), but also it could be read as confirming that she is a resisting feminist subject (corresponding more closely to Burt's argument). The fact that Kat's poem refuses to be read as positioning her clearly (describing what kind of girl she is or might become) only leads to more ambiguities because while this represents a strategic evasion of the pressures facing girls at the corner of feminism and neoliberalism, the evasion could mark Kat as either a resisting or a vulnerable subject, one who is failing to respond to those pressures.

At first glance, the poem narrates a change of heart, or shift in stance. Its recitation of things Kat "hates" about the poem's "you," Patrick, shifts with its declaration of attachment in line 13 — "I hate it when you're not around" — making way for its final retraction: "But mostly I hate the way I don't hate you." The poem enacts turns, reversals, and contradictions, incorporating and generating interpretive tensions and ambiguities. For example, it is indebted to Kat's fondness for Sylvia Plath's poems — particularly "Daddy" (Hughes, ed. 1981, 222-24) — the reference to "combat boots" being reminiscent of Plath's poem's "boot in the face." "Daddy" constitutes a "ritualistic denunciation" of a patriarchal authority figure, if an ambiguous one. Kat's references to this poem foreground the film's emphasis on girlhood in American culture and suggest that both poem and film are engaged in exploring various forms of patriarchal authority (that is, artistic as well as experiential). Such a reading is further substantiated by references to Kat's hatred of the "stare" (being rendered an object of the male gaze, something arguably enacted in her delivery of the poem itself), the all-seeing power of the "you" ("I hate the way you read my mind"), and the self-legitimizing authority of a patriarchy which will brook no opposition ("you're always right"). The poem could signal Kat's capitulation to this version of male authority (a version of Plath's "Every woman adores a Fascist"), and complicity in positioning of herself as victim within her relationship with Patrick. Conversely, the poem could be read as articulating a shift from the itemizing of petty annoyances ("I hate the way you cut your hair") towards a more mature and complex appreciation of the fact that Patrick has valuable qualities, corresponding with the admission that the word "hate" is misapplied ("But mostly I hate the way I don't hate you"). Alternatively (or additionally), the poem might function as an act of resistance, revenge, and shaming, given that it takes the form of a public critique of Patrick's shortcomings. Central to the poem's ambiguities is the line "But mostly I hate the way I don't hate you" — Kat's declaration of feeling for Patrick is attended by the announcement that she hates her own (non-hateful) feelings. Shifting the object of hate from Patrick to Kat herself leaves unresolved why Kat hates those feelings.

The poem also suggests that Kat remains true to her own values. In keeping with her often abrasive attitude, she refuses explicitly sentimental or romantic language. Patrick's first approach to Kat fails because he uses clichéd "lines," and she recognizes these as insincere statements indicating no real interest in her. It makes sense that an opportunity to adapt the Shakespeare sonnet, which itself refuses the thematic conventions of the sonnet form, would appeal to Kat; and in a neat illustration of the difficulties in interpreting Kat, her earnest desire to participate in this task is misunderstood by her teacher, who mistakes her sincerity for sarcasm and excludes her from the classroom. But what are Kat's values? In direct contrast to Bianca, who desires a "typical adolescence" (primarily involving heterosexual dating), Kat's central desire is to assert herself as



an individual, a non-conformist (another reason why the discovery that she has been a dupe in the schemes of others is so wounding). But in the immediate aftermath of performing her poem, Kat reconciles with Patrick, thus becoming located within the conventions of romantic comedy; this, too, supports critical insistence on the film's conservative gender politics.

The film's romantic comedy resolution locates Kat within a genre that traditionally privileges heterosexual relationships (a reminder that not all neoliberal subjects have the same opportunities or can be rendered "typical"). The film implies that acquisition of such a relationship is what counts for adolescent girls and what brings them in line with normative, dominant models of development. All of this might suggest that Kat has indeed been tamed, and become more like Bianca, because she has accepted this importance of a relationship in her development, whether or not she perceives this as a "capitulation" (Gay 2008) or something achieved "on her terms" (Dixon 2008). When Kat declares, "But mostly I hate the way I don't hate you," this may be because she is very aware of what a relationship with Patrick might entail — in particular, the costs to her dearly-held sense of herself as a non-conformist. As Kidnie notes, *The Taming of the Shrew* has also been categorized as farce, troubling comedy, or light tragedy (2006, 66), options that would seem equally available as ways of understanding Kat's story. Indeed, the power of the poem and its performance are threatened by the realization that Patrick's gift of the guitar has been sitting in Kat's car all along; presumably, he always meant to try and make amends with her, whether Kat delivered her poem or not. What Kat says, then, does *not* count; the tone or assertiveness of her voice is immaterial, while the momentum of the plot is towards the happy ending of romantic comedy and Kat's incorporation within it. It is not surprising that critics have generally found the film to be conservative.

However, an alternative way of considering *10 Things I Hate About You* is enabled by a realization that the poem, like the film itself, is heavily invested in the strategy of "misdirection." Of the several definitions offered by the *OED*, perhaps the most useful are misdirection in the senses of "(An instance of) wrong or improper direction or guidance; the action of misdirecting or the condition of being misdirected; direction to a wrong address or destination" and "The distraction of a person's attention by a conjuror, thief, etc." Misdirection is discussed explicitly in an important scene in which, following his act of publicly serenading Kat on the school football field, Patrick is held in detention. Kat successfully distracts the teacher, enabling Patrick to leave the room. Misdirection constitutes both the strategy (action) Kat employs (she distracts the teacher by engaging him in a discussion of misdirection) and the effect (condition) of her strategy: the attention of the teacher, her audience, is occupied elsewhere. Kat relates, tortuously, a story about a new strategy the girls' team should employ — misdirection. Misdirection involves getting an opposing team to look the wrong way ("they look left, we go right"). When the teacher asks how

this is to be achieved, Kat replies "Like this!" raising her top. While the teacher looks the wrong way, at Kat, Patrick escapes out of the classroom window. Kat leaves the room, accompanied by applause, suggesting that her efforts, like her reading of the poem, are to be understood as spectacle and performance.

In the detention class, misdirection involves distraction. It involves the construction of a fiction and performance of actions to achieve aims other than their ostensible purpose. The taming plot is also dependent on misdirection, in that individuals' participation is often secured by distracting them as to its true purpose. That distraction is achieved by deluding people through such means as convincing them that participation is in their best interest (Cameron, Joey) or by disguising the fact that there is a plot at all (Kat). Misdirection is also operative in the occasion of Kat's poem; it is a classroom assignment, but its more important role is as a means for Kat to make her feelings clear to Patrick. Misdirection is apparent in the poem's content and effect; a poem about hatred may really be about its absence, and while Kat expresses her feelings, it is not actually clear what those feelings are, and so their causes or consequences are equally obscure (who is hating, what is being hated?). Misdirection is also apparent in the film's title, which alludes to the poem and its itemization of things that Kat hates. Critics have failed to observe that while the word "hate" appears ten times in the poem, the number of things Kat hates totals more than ten. If the qualities Kat hates are counted separately, then this totals fifteen things. Alternatively, the total is zero, if the final line underscores the fact that Kat does not hate Patrick. Then again, she does hate one thing (her own feelings for him). Misdirection may be founded upon miscalculation or mislabelling, rendering it a risky and even dangerous strategy; misdirection does, after all, have the potential to misguide, to gesture in the "wrong" direction, and because it is often dependent on fiction and performance (deception), it can function to displace the immediate, even the "real."

The film's reliance on misdirection might seem to indicate that its adaptation of the play favors the first and third interpretive options that Kidnie outlines. This is because the instances of misdirection in the poem are dependent upon feigning (Kat's performance in class, the reversals and contradictions occasioned by the multiple uses of the word "hate") and because they take the form of game-playing. This tends towards a reading of the film that encourages viewers to understand Kat as active, resistant, and not capitulating, suggesting that she has not relinquished her feminist values. After all, Kat's extravagant efforts in detention class are also part of a competitive dynamic that marks her relationship with Patrick. As such, her efforts at misdirection counter any sense that Kat is only, or entirely, an unwitting pawn in the plots of others; she schemes and manipulates, too. However, the situation is not so simple. The strategy of misdirection rivals Patrick's act of serenading. Patrick performed that act to, as Cameron puts it, "get on the same level" as Kat

following her humiliation at a house party. Patrick is advised that he needs to embarrass himself in order to appease Kat, lessening her shame with his greater one, a situation Kat again reverses and exceeds by her actions in the detention class. Describing these incidents variously as "taming" and "shaming," Pittman makes the troubling observation that Kat's shamings always involve her sexuality (2004 148). In the detention scene Kat is revealed as resourceful, but the resource is partly her body. Her objectification of herself is troubling.

Significantly, misdirection is not a strategy that is open to Kat alone; as illustrated, most of the film's adolescent characters use it and are victims of it; when Kat's teacher sends her out of the class after she expresses enthusiasm for the sonnet task, for instance, this exposes the fact that if an individual is known as someone who uses misdirection, people may find it difficult to determine when she is being sincere. Since misdirection is available to all the film's characters, it is also likely to be more powerful for some than others; that is, the success or failure of misdirection strategies may be reliant on the power already accruing to various individuals — hence, Kat's recourse to her own body.

Kat's attitude to misdirection may constitute part of her coming of age. While her behavior and attitudes are not explained until very near the end of the film, plenty of information is given about her personality and how she is perceived. Much of this information is provided in the scenes in Kat's English class, which, along with the taming plot, have an important role in her adolescence. English class is where Kat first talks and where a number of important discussions about identity politics take place, discussions that illuminate Kat's values and some of their limitations. Kat is first heard making a passionate denunciation — not of feminism but of Hemingway, whom she describes as an "abusive alcoholic misogynist" (at this, her teacher, Mr. Morgan, sighs in frustration). Her characterization prompts a judgment on herself; the class (and film's) villain, Joey, asks "As opposed to a bitter, self-righteous hag who has no friends?" Joey's response is greeted with a high-five from a male classmate, laughter, and murmurs that suggest his classmates approve of his characterization. Mr. Morgan reprimands Joey, while Kat, equating Joey and Hemingway, declares that "In this society, I guess being male and an asshole makes you worthy of our time." She suggests Sylvia Plath, Charlotte Bronte, and Simone de Beauvoir as writers she would prefer to study. At this juncture, Patrick, new to the school, enters the classroom. He asks "What did I miss?" When Kat informs him, "The oppressive patriarchal values that dictate our education," Patrick says "Good!" He turns and leaves. Mr. Morgan calls after Patrick, but focuses his attention on Kat, thanking her for her "point of view" before pointing out her own privilege: "I know how difficult it must be to overcome those years of upper middle-class suburban oppression." He then mocks the political aspirations of adolescent girls like Kat — "whatever it is you white girls complain about"

— and suggests that she ask the PTA why there are no texts by "a black man" in the curriculum. Then he orders Kat to leave the room.

There are several important points here. First, Kat's point about the "oppressive patriarchal values that dictate our education" is confirmed by the fact that she alone is excluded from the class. Joey, whom the teacher seems to find equally irritating, is allowed to remain despite his disruptive behavior and persistent goading of Kat. Patrick is permitted to leave the classroom without being called to account for his behavior, thus legitimating his belief that consideration of patriarchal structures is not worthy of his time. The classroom space is one in which Mr. Morgan endorses various competitive hierarchies. Some students annoy him more than others, some forms of victimhood are more important than others — exclusion of black male authors from the curriculum, for instance, is more important than oppression of women. That Kat and Joey have learned this lesson is confirmed in the ways in which they compare Hemingway antagonistically to each other (Joey's "as opposed to" underscores the fact that identities are constructed and understood competitively, and incur value judgments).

On being sent to the principal's office, Kat is told that the students perceive her as a "heinous bitch" and that "You might want to work on that." The principal, Ms. Perky, notes that Kat has been "terrorizing Mr. Morgan's class," to which Kat responds, "Expressing my opinion isn't a terrorist act." This interview, like the class's response to Kat's thoughts about Hemingway, makes it clear that Kat's "point of view" is something her classmates and teacher are familiar with. At best, she bores them; at worst, she is regarded a serious threat to order. While Kat is dismissive, ironically thanking the principal for her good advice, one subsidiary outcome of the taming plot is that Kat works on expressing her "point of view" (in terms of content and means of expression). Misdirection is one means by which Kat achieves this, her poem representing the culmination of her efforts.

For much of the film Kat does not, in fact, express her own opinion. Although the persona she cultivates at school and in her home life is that of an individual who is vocal, independent, and non-conformist, Kat initially expresses the opinions of others. Several critics have noted that while she has been influenced by her reading of feminist critics and authors, her views are often dogmatic and, arguably, dated. The circumstances of Kat's unhappy personal life have much to do with this reliance on feminist thinkers, but crucially, that reliance prohibits rather than enables Kat to express her own opinion. Kat's father is strict and attempts to keep close control over Kat and Bianca. This desire for control is manifested primarily as a desire to monitor and discipline (really, render non-existent) his daughters' sexual agency. His major fear is teen pregnancy, something which causes him to force Bianca to wear a costume depicting a pregnant body, "the belly," before she goes to

the prom, reminiscent of the scold's bridle to which "shrewish" women were sometimes subjected in early modern England.<sup>4</sup> This not only signifies that in 1990s America, female bodies are still subject to surveillance and discipline, but also suggests that it is Bianca's development, not Kat's, that causes her father the most anxiety. Another example of misdirection, perhaps this suggests that it is not Kat, but cultural constructions of "typical adolescence" with respect to girlhood that the film construes as problematic. The film's title, referencing Kat, may direct attention and concern to the "wrong" girl.

Kat's father also questions her choice of university, Sarah Lawrence, which appeals to Kat partly or even primarily because it would enable her to escape her current life. To the extent that he could thwart her ambitions, Kat feels trapped. Her mother has also left the family home — on one occasion, Kat accuses her father of punishing her (controlling her movements) because of their mother's departure. On discovering Bianca wearing her mother's pearls, Kat becomes very upset; this signals to her that her father may value Bianca more, and possibly that her family is moving on from her mother's departure, even forgetting her memory. Bianca is a further source of distress because she is growing close to Joey, whom Kat detests (she tells Patrick at one point, in an important non-ironic use of the word, "I hate him"). When her father modifies the house rules to dictate that Bianca can date when Kat does, this ties the sisters' romantic lives together and places a burden on Kat, making her the guarantor of her sister's freedom.

Near the end of the film, Kat and Bianca have a tense discussion in which Kat reveals that she dated Joey in ninth grade, for a month, and had sex with him. She tells Bianca that it happened after their mother had left, suggesting that this was the principal cause of Kat's emotional upset at the time. She explains her behavior: "Everyone was doing it, so — I did it." When Kat refused to have sex with him again, Joey ended things with her, and consequently, Kat made a pledge: "I swore that I would never do anything just because everyone else was doing it." This is why Kat values expressing her opinion, why she places so little value on the opinions of others, and why she is suspicious of consensus and tradition (she is opposed to attending the prom, for instance, and is depicted tearing down posters advertising it). Joey's behavior obviously explains the importance of feminist thought in Kat's development. However, Bianca offers an important corrective to Kat's attitude, expressing anger because she was not told this story and accusing Kat of not allowing her to experience anything for herself. Bianca's anger exposes the fact that while Kat's feminist principles, as she uses them, offer one way for her to follow her own rule — to refrain from doing anything simply because everyone else is doing it — they also foreclose dialogue and relationships with others. Kat not only uses (misapplies?) her feminist principles to

misdirect others (to disguise the hurt and anger she feels over Joey's behavior and her mother's abandonment), but despite proclaiming herself "a firm believer in doing something for your own reasons and not someone else's" and saying that she wants Bianca to make up her own mind about Joey, Kat does not extend Bianca the opportunity for the freedom of choice and thought that she champions; indeed, Bianca says of Kat's way of thinking, "I wish I had that luxury."

This leads to a further misdirection of Kat's development. Kat tells Bianca that she has managed to keep her pledge (of not doing anything because others are doing it) with one exception, the house party at which she got drunk and danced on a table. At the party, explaining to Patrick why she is drinking, Kat asks bitterly, "Isn't that what you're supposed to do?" Patrick, like Bianca, offers Kat a different perspective. He responds, "I say do what you want to do." On a later date, he is insightful enough to suggest that she is not doing what people expect because she does not want to disappoint them. Kat's desire for non-conformity, then, prevents her from discovering and following her desires, especially if those desires are conventional. Kat's emphasis on not doing what others do makes her a representative of what Robert C. Bulman, using Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, calls "expressive individualism." In his study of high schools in film, Bulman argues that this kind of individualism is seen most often in films about suburban schools. Expressive individualism "refers to that strain of American individualism that values not material achievements, but the discovery of one's unique identity and the freedom of individual self-expression" (2005, 20). Bulman notes that these films communicate the message that "you should follow your heart, regardless of what your friends, parents, or teachers advise" (17) and that the middle-class students in these films commonly "don't invent new goals. Rather, they travel their own path to achieve conventional ones" (97). Kat's discovery of her desire for a relationship with Patrick could be understood as prioritizing expressive individualism, showing how her class and race have an important role in determining how she negotiates her place at the intersection of neoliberalism and feminism. Reading Kat as unconventional in any way at all may be the film's greatest act of misdirection.

Patrick's advice is complicated, of course, by the fact that he wishes Kat to go to the prom at least partly because he is being paid to take her out. Encouraging her to go to the prom, he exploits her desire for non-conformity, telling her that "people won't expect you to go." Patrick's most compromised moment comes when Kat becomes suspicious and asks him, "What's in it for you?" He makes Kat feel guilty about and apologize for her suspicions, and it is only at the prom itself that the bribe is revealed. In the aftermath of these events, which comprise the undoing of the taming plot, Kat delivers her poem. The line "But mostly I hate the way I don't hate you, not even close" takes on crucial importance because it may signal a brief suspension of misdirection; Kat is finally saying what she feels and articulating her desires. It is also at the prom that Bianca

learns the importance of suspending misdirection. She attends the prom with Cameron, who points out her selfish and manipulative behavior, and punches Joey in retaliation for his behavior towards herself and Kat, showing that she, like Kat, can think for herself. Kat's sense that she doesn't hate Patrick (although she hates a number of things about him) speaks to a realization that identity might be something other than the sum total of one's actions and qualities (which could be performed), and that a view of identity as performance, like misdirection, suggests a masking of who one truly is. Misdirection is only briefly suspended, however; Kat does not relinquish it entirely, as the poem's unresolved ambiguities attest (perhaps, in the school universe she inhabits, she cannot). In McRobbie's terms, Kat's feminism is "aged," not in the sense of being rendered unnecessary, but in the sense that Kat has acquired a more mature feminism, one that is more tolerant of the views of others (which tolerates elasticity of meaning), and one that enables her to negotiate and articulate her development, rather than inhibiting it.

In *10 Things I Hate About You*, but particularly in Kat's development, misdirection constitutes a powerful, if ambivalent, strategy; it does indeed comprise, in Kidnie's terms, a "theatrical game" — it is not for nothing that Kat's discussion of misdirection focuses on sports. For Kat, misdirection opens up a "creative space" for play and empowerment. But Kat's willingness to exploit reductive constructions of female empowerment via the body and sexuality indicates that for girls, those possibilities may be circumscribed. As such, *10 Things I Hate About You* withholds any suggestion that the creative space opened by misdirection is able to free Kat "from oppressive social constructions," as Kidnie suggests some performances of *The Taming of the Shrew* do. This means that the film does not necessarily present an optimistic presentation of what it means to count as a girl; but neither is its view completely conservative. The film highlights some ways in which girls are oppressed by social constructions of gender but also shows that there may be ways of resisting and circumventing those oppressions. Misdirection is one means of resistance employed by both female and male adolescents in the film, but Kat also learns the importance of abandoning misdirection.

Edwards notes that Kat's poem "contains stumbling metre, refuses the sonnet form and poetic register, and lists the 'ten things' using clumsy related clauses rather than controlled ideas" (2012, 111). The structure of most of the lines is dependent on linking two ideas that may or may not relate to each other — for instance, "I hate your big dumb combat boots and the way you read my mind" invites viewers to question received ideas and relationships, so that Kat's clumsiness actually testifies to her desire to resist her culture's restrictive meanings of girlhood by reclaiming its elasticity. However, the poem does not relinquish the value of cliché and performance; the line "I hate the way you drive my car" fails to reference any event in the film; Kat insists on driving

Patrick's car to the house party, but he is never seen driving her car. The consensus regarding conservative gender politics in critical responses to the film suggests that critics, too, have fallen victim to some of the film's strategies of misdirection. Both Stratford sisters, by contrast, seem aware that misdirection offers ways to count as a girl — even if, put to multiple uses and effects by Kat, in particular, misdirection functions precisely to show how difficult it is to ascertain how she counts.

### Notes

1. Adolescence as it has been commonly understood since the early twentieth century (as a liminal, transitional time involving development of identity and a complex mixture of biological change and cultural influence) owes much to G. Stanley Hall's two-volume study of adolescence, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (1904). For useful histories of the construction of adolescence, see Joseph Kett's *Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (1977) and Grace Palladino's *Teenagers: An American History*, (1996). For a useful synthesis of scholarship regarding early modern constructions of girlhood and how these might contribute to Girls' Studies, see Higginbotham 2013.
2. Of these studies, the two most significant were probably the AAUW report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992) and Myra and David Sadker's *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (1994).
3. See Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan's *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (1992).
4. See Wynne-Davies, ed. 2001 for a useful history and discussions of the scold's bridle in early modern culture.



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