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Is *Bridgerton* Season 2 a Feminist Adaptation of the Shakespearean Character of the Shrew?

Abstract: William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1590-1591), categorized as a comedy, foregrounds the place of women in an utterly patriarchal society by depicting the character of Kate, labelled as a shrew, as starved and deprived of sleep by her new husband Petruccio. The play generally proves discomforting to a contemporary audience. Yet, *Bridgerton*, season 2 (2022), broadcast on Netflix, borrows from Shakespeare's comedy and revives its shrew. Originally adapted from a series of books by Julia Quinn, the series shows Kate (Simone Ashley) come to London to have her younger sister Edwina (Charithra Chandran) married. The series shares several features with the original playtext of *The Taming of the Shrew*: a dichotomy between two opposite sisters, an enemy-to-lover trope, and a form of final redemption. This article explores whether Netflix's Kate may be considered as a feminist version of Shakespeare's shrew by examining the discrepancy between seemingly feminist strategies and what can be identified as feminist-baiting elements.

Keywords: *Shakespeare*, The Taming of the Shrew, *adaptation*, Bridgerton, *feminism*, *Netflix*, *series*

1. Introduction

In 2017, Heather Mitchell adapted the novel *Still Star-Crossed* by Melinda Taub into a TV series aired on ABC. The plot is a sequel to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and focuses on the characters of Rosaline and Benvolio. Although ABC quickly cancelled the show, it was produced by Shonda Rhimes, revealing the producer's taste for period series and Shakespearean adaptations. Indeed, she is also one of the main executive producers of the Netflix series *Bridgerton* (2022), which appears to borrow from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. *Bridgerton* is adapted from a series of books written between 2008 and 2016 by Julia Quinn. Set in a fantasized Regency era, the series focuses on the Bridgerton family, and each season revolves around one of its children's love stories.

In season 2,[1] Viscount Anthony (Jonathan Bailey), the eldest son, under pressure from his mother to wed, wishes to marry the epitome of perfection, the lady named diamond of the social season by the Queen. The latter chooses Edwina Sharma (Charithra Chandran), a young girl just arrived in London from India with her mother Mary (Shelley Conn) and her elder sister Kate (Simone Ashley). Anthony repeatedly clashes with Kate, who confronts him for voicing misogynist comments. Yet, the more the viscount courts the youngest sister, the more he falls in love with the eldest, who is renowned for her quick temper. Meanwhile, Lady Whistledown, a merciless columnist whose identity remains unknown to the other characters, comments upon social events. The writer actually is Penelope Featherington (Nicola Coughlan), a discreet girl who is the confident of Eloise Bridgerton (Claudia Jessie).

Despite the suppression of the subplots – such as the induction with Christopher Sly or Tranio's courting of Bianca – numerous parallels may be drawn between Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Bridgerton*. Shakespeare's play focuses on Kate whom no one wishes to marry because of her scolding tongue while every man in Padua wishes to seduce her little sister Bianca. Their father Baptista therefore decides not to let Bianca get engaged before her sister Kate is married. Bianca's suitors find a

[1] *Bridgerton* Season 2, created by Chris Van Dusen (Shondaland, 2022).

solution in Petruccio, who decides to marry Kate for her money, and then undertakes to tame her. He prevents her from eating and sleeping until she finally abides by every single thing he says and demands. We may ponder over the fact that *The Taming of the Shrew* is often adapted in romantic comedies,[2] despite its original plot revolving around the violence a husband imposes towards his wife. Yet, Julia Quinn herself claims to be feminist[3] and commentators in the popular media often celebrate the feminist stance of the series.[4] Through a comparison between *Bridgerton* season 2 and *The Taming of the Shrew*, I offer further reflections on this reinvention of the Shakespearean shrew. I consider whether Kate's representation may be viewed as a feminist adaptation of this typical character or be perceived as feminist baiting. In order to better understand and analyse the evolution of the figure of the shrew from Shakespeare to Netflix, I shall first focus on the elements that the series borrows from Shakespeare before turning my attention to the feminist rewriting of the play. I shall finally delve into the notion of feminist baiting and the underlying violence behind a seemingly feminist plot.

2. Borrowing from Shakespeare's Play

Various writers in the popular media have underlined similarities between *Bridgerton* and literary works like Jane Austen's novels and Shakespeare's plays, more particularly *The Taming of the Shrew*.[5] Most only quote Lady Whistledown's criticism of Kate in episode 2: "any suitor wishing to gain an audience with Miss Edwina Sharma must first tame the rather prickly spinster of a beast otherwise known as her sister" (S02, E02, 0:43). This represents a drastic change compared to Julia Quinn's book, in which Kate is described as "well liked",[6] and likens Netflix's Kate to Shakespeare's. The figure of the shrew is central to the plot of the romantic comedy in this series, presenting two opposed sisters, one being rather unruly and short-tempered while the other is submissive and delicate, just as Baptista's daughters are. Similarly to her Shakespearean counterpart who systematically questions orders ("What, shall I be appointed hours, as though, belike, / I knew not what to take and what to leave? Ha!" [1.1.103-104]),[7] *Bridgerton*'s Kate often rejects commands: "I require no instruction" (S02, E04, 20:03). Resuscitating Shakespeare's character, who refuses to be instructed to learn music in Act 2 Scene 1, Kate Sharma insolently insists that Lady Danbury should not hire any instructor for her sister and her (S02, E01, 20:00). At Lady Danbury's mansion, two men compare the two sisters and complain about the unruly character of the eldest ("The younger one would do, if the eldest just got out of the way", says one; "The sister is dreadful", rejoins the other [S02, E01, 43:53]) just as Tranio and Lucentio do in Shakespeare's play:

[2] See Monty Banks, *You Made Me Love You* (1933), Paul Bogart, *Kiss Me Kate* (1968), P. Madhavan, *Pattikada Pattanama* (1972), M.S. Rajashekar, *Nanjundi Kalyana* (1989), Gil Junger, *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), Dennus Carvalho and Walter Avancini, *O Cravo e a Rosa* (2000-2001), Gary Hardwick, *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003), David Richards, *ShakespeaRe-Told*: *The Taming of the Shrew,* (2005), Lim-Won-kook, *Frivolous Wife*, 2008, Vidhi Kasliwal, *Isi Life Mein…!* (2010).

[3] Julia Quinn (@juliaquinnauthor), "Historical romance author. Science geek. Feminist. Author of the Bridgerton series—Streaming now on Netflix!", *Instagram* (11 April 2023), www.instagram.com.

[4] Maria Fontoura, "'Bridgerton': What If Shondaland, but Balls and Corsets", *RollingStone*, 24 December 2020, www.rollingstone.com; Anna Merlo, "How 'Bridgerton' Season 2 Caters To The Female Gaze", *Study Breaks*, 4 May 2022, studybreaks.com; Debiparna Chakraborty, "Bridgerton Season 2: How the Women Reclaim Agency in a Patriarchal World", *MovieWeb*, 5 April 2022, movieweb.com.

[5] Safia Khanam, "Does Bridgerton Season 2 Have a Shakespearean Connection? Find Out", *Netflix Junkie*, 12 March 2022, www.netflixjunkie.com; Victoria Edel, "'Bridgerton' Season 2 References Jane Austen and Shakespeare in Creative Ways", *Pop Sugar*, 25 March 2022, www.popsugar.co.uk; Thomas Bacon, "Bridgerton Season 2 Easter Eggs & Jane Austen References Explained", *Screen Rant*, 29 March 2022, screenrant.com; Madeleine Brand, "'Bridgerton' Season 2 Borrows from 'Taming of the Shrew'", *KCRW*, 29 March 2022, www.kcrw.com.

[6] Julia Quinn, *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (London: Piatkus, 2006), 36.

[7] William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. by Barbara Hodgdon (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

TRANIO
That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward.
LUCENTIO
But in the other's silence do I see
Maids' mild behaviour and sobriety. (1.1.69-71)

In the very first episode of the season, Kate joins her stepmother, her sister and Lady Danbury in the latter's sitting room. While the place is entirely decorated in pink, and the three other characters all wear pink dresses, Kate stands out wearing turquoise. This contrast immediately signals her non-conformity to gender stereotypes.

More importantly, the animosity between Kate and Anthony can be compared to Petruccio and Kate's verbal jousting. In *Bridgerton*, the first time Kate hears him speak, Anthony lists all the qualities he wants in a wife among his friends and depreciates women while presenting himself as a heartbreaker. Kate overhears him and then confronts him:

KATE
Are the ladies of London so easily won by a pleasing smile and absolutely nothing more?
ANTHONY
So you find my smile pleasing.
KATE
I find your opinion of yourself entirely too high. Your character is as deficient as your horsemanship. I shall bid you goodnight. (S02, E01, 38:05)

Parallels between answers, repetitions, a masculine flirtatious tone and a feminine final farewell recall Act 2, Scene 1 of *The Taming of the Shrew*:

KATHERINA
If I be waspish, best beware my sting.
PETRUCCIO
My remedy is then to pluck it out.
KATHERINA
Ay, if the fool could find it where it lies.
PETRUCCIO
Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting?
In his tail.
KATHERINA
In his tongue.
PETRUCCIO
Whose tongue?
KATHERINA
Yours, if you talk of tails, and so farewell. (2.1.210-218)

In both occurrences of verbal jousting, Kate illustrates what Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin designates as "verbal cannibalism": "Verbal cannibalism is typical of men and women of wit who use the speech of the other as a support for their own insulting remarks. Insulters imitate and transform at leisure the words of the others".[8] Through this process, both *Bridgerton*'s and Shakespeare's Kates oppose and question a male character's authority while displaying their rhetorical skills and wit. The masculine characters play on such responses to create sexual tension, therefore transforming confrontation into a seduction

[8] Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, *The Anatomy of Insults in Shakespeare's World*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 54.

scheme. Such strategy waters down unruly women's rebellion and might possibly deter women from answering men. It tends to present an enemies-to-lovers trope that directly borrows from Shakespeare's plays. *Much Ado about Nothing* might be the most obvious example to illustrate such a scheme, as Benedick and Beatrice are constantly quarrelling in the first scenes. Beatrice's uncle, Leonato, indicates: "You must not, sir, mistake my niece; there is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them" (1.1.57-60).[9] They finally fall in love with each other after several scenes of verbal jousting between them. *Bridgerton* therefore imitates Shakespeare to build its romance, the shrew being particularly adequate for this genre, as underlined by Neal Wyatt et al.: "Female protagonists are apt to be somewhat rebellious, whether by nature or forced by circumstances – this is how authors enable them to behave in a manner somewhat more comfortable to today's reader".[10] The Shakespearean shrew is rebellious indeed and prone to refuse any form of command. In Act 2, scene 1, as Petruccio tries to seduce Kate, he asks her to walk in front of him: "O, let me see thee walk. Thou dost not halt" (2.1.258). Kate answers: "Go, fool, and whom thou keep'st command" (2.1.259). She systematically offers a dissenting answer. The rebellious shrew appeals to and is more appropriate to our modern tastes, in contrast to being mocked, as she commonly was in early modern England. Yet, do these numerous parallels between Shakespeare's shrew and the Netflix series enable us to see *Bridgerton* as "a more feminist version of the same"?[11] Major differences between the play and the series do bring more feminist features to the adaptation, leading us to think that the figure of the shrew is now used to voice feminist comments and to question patriarchal views.

3. A feminist Regency Shrew

1960s feminists saw Shakespeare's Kate as one of them,[12] establishing a parallel between the early modern typical character and modern-day feminism. *Bridgerton* seems to adapt the character accordingly. First of all, the series stages outspoken female characters,[13] while Shakespeare's Kate is rather silent, despite her fearful reputation, as several critics have noticed.[14] Anna Kamaralli underlines that Kate seldom speaks spontaneously but rather strikes back when male characters criticize her.[15] Kate Sharma could therefore rather be compared to Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, about whom Benedick declares: "She speaks poniards, and every word stabs" (2.1.226-227). However, when Kate Sharma voices women's protestation against misogynists, her words strangely echo Shakespeare's play, as if she were answering Petruccio more than Anthony. As she hears the latter listing the qualities he requires in his future wife, she confronts him: "I take issues with any man who views women merely as chattels and breeding stock" (S02, E01, 38:05). Such words bring Petruccio's tirade to mind:

> I will be the master of what is my own.
> She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,
> My household-stuff, my field, my barn,

[9] William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, ed. by Claire McEachern (London: The Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury, 2016).
[10] Neal Wyatt et al., "Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101", *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 47.2 (2007), 120-126, 122.
[11] Khanam, "Does Bridgerton Season 2 Have a Shakespearean Connection?"
[12] Leah S. Marcus, "The Shrew as Editor/Editing *Shrews*", in Graham Holderness and David Wootton, eds., *Gender and Power in Shrew-Taming Narratives, 1500-1700* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 86.
[13] ANU, "Does *Bridgerton* Fall Flat as a Feminist Hit?", *Australian National University* (2022), www.anu.edu.au.
[14] Anna Kamaralli, *Shakespeare and the Shrew: Performing the Defiant Female Voice* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan, 2012), 79; Larisa Kocic-Zámbó, "*The Taming of the Shrew*, from Inversion to Subversion" (conference paper, ESRA, "'Then fate o'erruled': Change in Shakespeare", Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, 7 July 2023).
[15] Kamaralli, *Shakespeare and the Shrew*, 90.

> My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything,
> And here she stands. (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 3.2.230-234)

If the main characteristic of the shrew is her voice and willingness to confront men, we may say that *Bridgerton*'s creator, Chris Van Dusen, depicts a female character that is more vehement than Shakespeare's.

Unlike *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which part of Petruccio's strategy to domesticate Kate is to isolate her, the series also presents solidarity between women and more specifically between sisters. Both Kates exert some supervision over their little sisters' love affairs, but they do so for different reasons. While Netflix's Kate selects Edwina's suitors because she wants her to be happy, Shakespeare's Kate demands to know what man Bianca favours: "Of all thy suitors here I charge thee tell / Whom thou lov'st best. See thou dissemble not" (2.1.8-9). However, we may compare the first two scenes in which the sisters are represented on their own. Contrary to Baptista's daughters, who quarrel rather violently in Act 2, Scene 1, the Sharma sisters are represented as loving, supporting and taking care of each other (S02, E01, 25:00-27:19). Netflix's Kate is willing to give up her own happiness in order to protect her sister, while Shakespeare's Kate appears quite jealous of Bianca's opportunity, as she tells her father:

> She must have a husband,
> I must dance barefoot on her wedding day
> And, for your love to her, lead apes in hell.
> Talk not to me, I will go sit and weep
> Till I can find occasion for revenge. (*Taming*, 2.1.32-36)

The authority the Kates have over their younger siblings is thus used in drastically different ways. As a consequence, Shakespeare's Kate appears as quite obnoxious and hateful to the spectators, while Kate Sharma is protective and therefore more relatable. It turns her into an endearing character whose happiness we hope for. Her brashness is not interpreted as a form of selfishness but as a way of protecting a sister she loves. This creates proximity and attachment between the shrew character and the spectator.

Kate is also joined in her rebellion against social norms by characters like Eloise Bridgerton. Contrarian and reckless, Eloise reads pamphlets defending women, names Mary Wollstonecraft as a model figure and goes to debates about women's rights in Bloomsbury. As she does not know her best friend Penelope to be Lady Whistledown, she accidentally prompts her to express more feminist views in her column:

> Is the entire practice of naming a diamond not well, rather ridiculous? Should a woman not be valued for so much more than her dancing skills or her comportment? Should we not value a woman instead for her candor, her character, her true accomplishments? Perhaps if the queen abandoned this absurdity that is the diamond, we would all see that a woman can be so much more. (S02, E01, 1:05:43)

As Eloise dances with Lord Morrison, who compliments her for having read Locke but criticizes other girls for being unable to "even articulate a thought", she puts an end to their exchange and leaves him with a biting comment: "Next time you compliment a woman, at least try not to insult her entire sex in the process" (S02, E04, 33:39). Her permanent questions about women's positions also lead her to ask Kate about society's harsh judgement on single women:

> ELOISE
> Was it your choice you never married? … Everyone tells me it is fate worse than death to end up a spinster. But you seem perfectly content with your situation.

KATE
You must know it is hardly ideal. The world is not exactly welcoming to an unmarried woman. There seems to be no place in society for us, except at the edge of things.
ELOISE
That rather seems to be society's flaw, not a woman's.
KATE [*smiling*]
Indeed it does. (S02, E03, 44:46)

Such conversation underlines that the series passes the Bechdel-Wallace test as women talk together about another matter than a man,[16] which enables the spectators to hear about feminine experiences. The series thus introduces sorority while denouncing the harsh treatment single women receive. In *Bridgerton*, charismatic, united characters that do not qualify their judgement by the end of the season embody rebellion, while Shakespeare's shrew rather embodies division, teaching her sister and a widow the obedience a woman owes her husband in the final scene of the play. Contrary to her, Kate Sharma is a catalytic force that creates feminine solidarity, as she deeply cares about other women's well-being.

Furthermore, the series presents Anthony as being tamed rather than Kate. The viscount first voices clear misogynist comments, raging against Kate:

ANTHONY
I shall certainly not let some sister … keep me from getting what it is I want.
BENEDICT
Whom you want, you mean? (S02, E02, 27:41)

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, given his rather tempestuous temper, other characters within the play suggest that Petruccio might also be a shrew: "By this reck'ning, he is more shrew than she" (4.1.76). Such parallels exist in *Bridgerton* as well:

ANTHONY
She is pompous and arrogant and quite sure she knows best in every situation.
COLIN
She sounds like a terrible nuisance.
BENEDICT
Especially since *you* are the one who knows best in every situation. (S02, E02, 26:20)

Yet, Anthony changes his opinion, as he expresses when asking Kate to marry him in the last episode:

ANTHONY
I know that I am imperfect, but I will humble myself before you because I cannot imagine my life without you, and that is why I wish to marry you.
KATE
You do know there will never be a day when you do not vex me.
ANTHONY
Is that a promise, Kathani Sharma? (S02, E08, 1:01:54)

Bridgerton may thus be interpreted as a reversed plot of *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which the tamer is finally tamed[17] and apologizes for his redeemed past. While Shakespeare's Kate offers her hand to put under Petruccio's foot ("And place your hands below your husband's foot: / In token of which duty, if he please, / My hand is ready, may it do him ease" [5.2.183-185]), Anthony offers to "humble [himself]",

[16] Alison Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out for* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).
[17] This is how Chakraborty interprets the plot in "Bridgerton Season 2: How the Women Reclaim Agency".

adapting the plot for a post-#metoo audience that would most certainly be shocked by the violence Petruccio exerts on Kate. Moreover, Anthony voicing her full name enables us to discover that her nickname is a short for Kathani and not for Katherina, therefore adapting Shakespeare's character for multi-cultural Britain. Her name appears to pay homage to the vocality of unruly women as it means "words, utterance".[18] The series may thus be seen as a post-structuralist adaptation, borrowing from *The Taming of the Shrew* while re-writing its structure and its conclusion in order to make place both for cultural diversity and feminist thoughts. It therefore seems to adapt the character of the shrew, turning it from a despicable lady to an admirable character. Nonetheless, despite being inclusive, the feminism it displays appears to be a simplification of both past and present strands of feminism and of the struggles they support.

4. Sugar-coated Feminism

Bridgerton aims at intersectional feminism as, contrary to most historical romances, the cast is not exclusively white. The Sharma sisters both refer several times to their childhood in India, escape marginalisation or stereotypes, and numerous elements of Indian culture and traditions are represented: the Sharma sisters use Indian languages (Bangla and Hindi), Edwina enjoys the Haldi ceremony before her wedding, details of their jewels and clothes imitate Indian jewellery and saris. Payton Creamer yet draws attention to the series' incompleteness as race is "left as a confusing subplot",[19] especially in season 1. Indeed, the series shies away from questions of discrimination. Furthermore, although the Sharma sisters' social and financial status is quite precarious – hence the importance of marrying Edwina to a wealthy man – they still are part of an aristocratic world. *Bridgerton* only focuses on "the ton", neglecting people with a lower social status. Although Eloise quickly fancies a printer named Theo, she is finally compelled to forsake him and, should the series faithfully adapt Julia Quinn's book, she shall marry an aristocratic man, Sir Philip Crane. Just as the racial and the social questions are quite overlooked, *Bridgerton* also displays sugar-coated feminism. Men such as Anthony utter misogynist stances and are confronted by outspoken girls willing to defend their rights as when Kate confronts Anthony because she wants to go hunting with the men. Edwina tells Anthony that Kate is an excellent shooter, and when he responds that Kate would have trouble managing, Kate replies sharply:

> KATE
> Why would you assume I had any trouble managing at all, my lord?
> ANTHONY
> I only mean to say –
> KATE
> Because I am a woman?
> ANTHONY
> No – No. I did not say that.
> KATE
> But you thought it.
> ANTHONY
> Ladies do not hunt.
> KATE
> Do not or are not allowed to? (S02, E04, 8:40)

[18] Shabdkosh, "कथन (kathana) - Meaning in English", *Shabdkosh: English Hindi Dictionary*, www.shabdkosh.com.

[19] Payton Creamer, "An Intersectional Feminist Look at Bridgerton", *Student Research Submissions-University of Mary Washington*, 478 (2022), 9, scholar.umw.edu.

The series thus tackles issues prone to reach a consensus and yet shies away from burning issues such as consent,[20] gender identity or the right of a woman over her own body. Besides, though main female characters bond and unite, secondary characters, like Cressida Cowper and Prudence Featherington, re-enact the *topos* of competition between girls for men and are depicted as vain and half-brained. Feminine solidarity may also be questioned since Kate falls in love with her sister's suitor and thereby becomes a hidden rival of her. This love triangle does not exist in Julia Quinn's novel, and though Kate first resists her feelings in order to protect her sister, heterosexual love finally creates tension and conflicts between Kate and Edwina.

Although Anthony first woos Edwina, a strong similarity between the series and Shakespeare's play lies in his perceiving Kate as a challenge to overcome. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruccio boasts: "For I am rough and woo not like a babe" (2.1.136). As other male characters express their fear of Kate, he exclaims: "O, you are novices!" (2.1.315). Petruccio thus perceives Kate as an opportunity to prove his manhood and to display his power. While Anthony is rather moderate compared to Shakespeare's Petruccio, he is perceived as a strong-headed and stubborn man needing defiance from his partner:

> DAPHNE
> It is just that I've always imagined Anthony to be with someone more like him.
> VIOLET
> Sharp, quick, a little too exacting? …
> DAPHNE
> Anthony is a Bridgerton, isn't there something in all of us that requires a challenge? (S02, E04, 29:08)

The character of the shrew is therefore still perceived as a challenge just as she was in Shakespeare's play, therefore suggesting that unruly women might soften once they meet a man to match them.

Most singularly, despite an offer of more inclusive content, Payton Creamer notes as well the heavy "heteronormative lens where queer people are close to nonexistent and outcasted".[21] This might now be qualified, as the spin-off series on Queen Charlotte[22] displays Brimsley and Reynolds as a gay couple, and as Season 3 clearly presents Benedict and Francesca Bridgerton as queer characters, which was not the case in Julia Quinn's novels. We might, however, ponder the fact that the character of the shrew is part of a heterosexual love story. Just as in *The Taming of the Shrew*, romantic life is presented in the Netflix series as the only fulfilment and acceptable ending. Heterosexuality is rather encouraged and, more importantly, presented as the only desirable issue for Kate. This is to be expected in a romantic comedy, particularly one that evokes Regency England, but secondary characters might have offered counterpoints, yet they do not. Eloise falls in love with Theo, which is not the case in Julia Quinn's *The Viscount Who Loved Me*, and Penelope is deeply in love with Colin Bridgerton, so that there is no female character within Season 2 without a male love interest. Anthony and Kate are presented as doomed to woe should they not find love. Although Anthony is finally softer by the end of the series, he is first presented as a misogynist, and yet remains an important love-interest that every woman desires while Kate's shrewishness frightens men away, illustrating a double standard that is never questioned. In episode 2, Lady Danbury criticizes Kate's choice to remain single:

> LADY DANBURY
> You may not yet know, and that is all well and good. But I, for one, find it not only terribly disheartening but also an offense against truth to hear you say you wish to be alone at a mere six and twenty?
> KATE
> Perhaps you should not. I will be a governess. I will be content knowing my sister is taken care of.

[20] In season 1, episode 6, Daphne sexually assaults her husband.
[21] Creamer, "An Intersectional Feminist Look", 9.
[22] *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*, created by Shonda Rhimes, Netflix, 2023.

LADY DANBURY
Content?
KATE
Are you so miserable, my lady?
LADY DANBURY
I beg your pardon?
KATE
Are you not alone yourself? I watch you. I see you. You are more than content.
LADY DANBURY
Because I have lived a life. I am a widow. I have loved. I have lost. I have earned the right to do whatever I please, whenever I please, and however I please to do it. Child, you are not me. And if you continue down this road, you most certainly never will be. (S02, E02, 46:05)

Just as in Shakespeare's play, Kate cannot find contentment if she does not find love. Kate is presented as a delusional character for voicing her will to remain single ("an offense against truth to hear you say you wish to be alone at a mere six and twenty"). Having known love is equated with having "lived a life", implying that life without a man would have no value. The verb "to earn" induces an underlying duty behind any form of relationship. From music to clothes, the series neglects historical accuracy to please a contemporary audience. Feminist reflections certainly aimed at modernisation too, yet the show fails to tackle contemporary issues and to question stereotyped narratives. Kate, as a character, only briefly questions social injunctions and becomes more and more gentle as she falls in love with Anthony. Although she first planned to go back to India, expressing her unease in England, she finally stays in order to marry Anthony. At the end of the last episode, while having sex, the couple jokes about Kate being a dutiful viscountess. The very structure of romance is therefore not challenged but rather reinforced as Kate unwillingly betrays her sister, and only finds happiness and contentment through her marriage, maintaining a structuralist and traditionalist vision of the genre,[23] even though Kate remains quite headstrong. This is reminiscent of Shakespearean comedies, ending with united couples and softened shrews. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, as soon as she falls in love with Benedick, Beatrice declares:

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?
Contempt, farewell; and maiden pride, adieu;
No glory lives behind the back of such.
And Benedick, love on, I will requite thee,
Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.
If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee
To bind our loves up in a holy band.
For others say thou dost deserve, and I
Believe it better than reportingly. (3.2.107-116)

She expresses guilt for her defiant behaviour and offers not to be tamed, but rather to tame herself. She opposes "wild heart" and "loving hand", suggesting thereby that love brought her to be more docile. Love therefore appears as a transforming power that softens shrews and brings them to abide by conventions. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate never voices feelings for Petruccio, but she vows to obey

[23] *Bridgerton* also borrows from Jane Austen's novels, often perceived as "embodying feminist principles" and yet displaying women with reduced opportunities, "[having] to stay home and wait for an eligible bachelor to appear". See Sue Parrill, *Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptations* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2002), 7.

him: several critics say that she is in love with Petruccio[24] and that it brought her to qualify and to re-evaluate her contrarian attitudes.

However, in *Bridgerton* just as in Shakespeare's play, another character embodies the shrew when the initial one finally qualifies her judgement. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, although Kate finally delivers a monologue in which she professes her duty to her husband, her little sister Bianca proves quite disobedient despite first being presented as the ideal woman (5.2). Similarly, although *Bridgerton* Season 2 stresses the necessity for Edwina to get married, she is still single by the end of the season. In the final ball scene, instead of dancing with a man, she dances with her sister, thereby underlining the love she bears to her and the independence she has acquired as she claims not to care about anyone's opinion (S02, E08, 42:19). Edwina finally falls in love in Season 3, the season that displays Penelope and Colin's love story. Being Lady Whistledown, Penelope is also a social shrew and as she is often described as unattractive, she is quite marginalised. Yet, by the end of Season 3, she is both engaged to the man she loves and does not renounce her writing activities to please Colin.

To a certain extent, the series reproduces the same pattern as *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999). This movie adapts *The Taming of the Shrew* for an adolescent audience by setting the action in a high school while teenagers embody Shakespeare's characters. Both Gil Junger's movie and Chris Van Dusen's series adapt one of Shakespeare's most controversial plays to modern tastes. The movie and then the series may appeal to contemporary audiences more than the theatre does nowadays. By injecting Shakespeare in a Netflix series, spectators discover themes and characters the author used and have access to them on a familiar platform, illustrating the importance of transmedia storytelling in our daily lives.[25] However, despite this modernisation of his play, both the series and the movie fail at any reconfiguration of gender roles.[26] Of course, the plot is far less violent, as neither Patrick in *10 Things I Hate About You* nor Anthony in *Bridgerton* lock Kate away, starve her and keep her awake until she finally surrenders the way Petruccio does in Shakespeare's play. This does not mean the plot is emptied out of its brutality. *Bridgerton* Season 3 presents a sequestrated woman as Cressida's father locks her up. She is then sent away to live with a gloomy aunt as a punishment for boldly claiming that she's Lady Whistledown in order to try and escape an unwanted union with an old man. This is quite reminiscent of Kate being raptured after her wedding and brought to Petruccio's isolated house. In addition, the spin-off series on Queen Charlotte displays numerous scenes in which Lady Danbury is raped by her repulsive husband and the recurrence of these scenes leads the spectator to adopt a voyeuristic gaze just as Shakespeare's play does when Kate is reduced to begging food from her domestic Grumio who mocks her (4.3). Both occurrences are quite grotesque and are meant to arouse laughter more than pity despite displaying a suffering and humiliated woman.

Bridgerton is also set in the Regency era, that is to say a moment of heightened attention to social conventions and reputation. Neal Wyatt et al. describe any romance set within this period as: "Graced with sparkling dialogue; intelligent, well-turned phrases; a glittering, though highly restrictive, social backdrop; and a preoccupation with the importance of social consequence and behaviour".[27] Adapting Shakespeare to the Regency era therefore seems quite adequate as the social pressure enhances the concept of self-fashioning that Stephen Greenblatt defined as such:

[24] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), chapter 2.
[25] Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling", *MIT Technology Review*, 15 January 2003, www.technologyreview.com; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York U.P., 2006).
[26] Monique L. Pittman, "Taming '10 Things I Hate About You': Shakespeare and the Teenage Film Audience", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 32.2 (2004), 147.
[27] Wyatt et al., "Romance Fiction 101", 121.

> As a term for the action or process of making, for particular features or appearance, for a distinct style or pattern, the word had long been in use, but it is in the sixteenth century that *fashion* seems to come into wide currency as a way of designating the forming of a self.[28]

This "forming of a self" helps us understand the appetence of a contemporary audience for Shakespeare,[29] especially at a time when traditional roles are questioned and when diversity is far more represented in popular media. *The Taming of the Shrew* is all the more appropriate for contemporary concerns as the plot revolves around a woman resisting, or not, social pressure and a man's reshaping of her personality. The success of such process is mitigated and depends on the interpretation we make of her final monologue[30] while no soliloquy enables us to have access to her thoughts. Monique L. Pittman, as she studies *10 Things I Hate About You*, notes that the movie is based on the same reflection as Shakespeare's play: "the individual still must negotiate desire for independent selfhood with the overwhelming pressures that make freedom nearly impossible".[31] Nonetheless, Monique L. Pittman underlines that adapting Shakespeare's comedy into a romantic comedy alleviates its inherent violence: "The contradictions stridently voiced by *Taming* are so normalized by the film and ornamented by the vocabulary of teenage love that they slip past the audience's notice".[32] *Bridgerton* repeats such a scheme by presenting love as an overwhelming power that refashions people. Romantic love is presented as a transforming yet pleasurable force and thus appears as an easy solution that softens, and even eradicates reflection about conformity and gender-related social pressure.

5. Conclusion

Bridgerton raises questions about our inheritance of the character of the shrew and offers a representation of significant changes and upcoming challenges in our contemporary society, more specifically in terms of inheritance of the play *The Taming of the Shrew* in a third-wave-feminist society. Must we adapt it in a more feminist version in order to follow social changes or should we rather reveal the patriarchal violence at stake within its original plot? Can characters such as early modern shrews become feminist embodiments? It appears that the series actually turns away from such reflection and rather tames the plot by adapting its borrowings into romantic comedy in which love acts as a redeeming power. The series only borrows from Shakespeare, as it does from other authors, but it appears quite significant that it should borrow from one of its most controversial, if not misogynist, plays in order to please a contemporary audience. Contrary to the early modern play, Netflix depicts Kate as a character who loves her sister and does not finally recite a long monologue on the necessary submission of women. We may celebrate social progress behind the fact that misogynist tamers are now tamed instead of shrews in Shakespeare's adaptations, yet concluding with the celebration of a couple insists on the idea that bliss cannot exist outside of heterosexual marriage and that feminist characters might qualify their statements once they find love, evolving from shrews to more conventional feminine love-interests. It also suggests that misogynistic men may undergo drastic changes out of love, which is a controversial message to be sent to the audience. Both Shakespeare's and Van Dusen's Kates question social norms and reject patriarchal expectations, and yet, they finally quite conform to them, although Shakespeare's Kate does so after having suffered violent taming while Van Dusen's Kate does not. The Netflix series most certainly adds feminist elements to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, celebrating female

[28] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2.
[29] José Ramón Díaz Fernández, "Teen Shakespeare Films: An Annotated Survey of Criticism", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 26.2 (2008), 89-133.
[30] Anna Kamaralli enumerates the different interpretations given to Kate's final monologue in Kamaralli, *Shakespeare and the Shrew*, 93-94.
[31] Pittman, "Taming '10 Things I Hate About You'", 147.
[32] Ibid., 148.

friendship and promoting outspoken female characters, but these are finally quite consensual if not tantamount to feminist baiting. If Shakespeare's shrew has evolved as she now appears in different media and different stories, she is still expected to qualify her judgement and radical stances as the plot unfolds.