

Kiss Me Khatema: Kate's "Capitulation" in *The Taming of the Shrew* as Seen by Female Muslim University Students

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's plays, especially those that have a modern day resonance to the issues of the modern world, are indeed elastic in their ability to speak across generations and cultures. This paper provides a number of sample responses by young Emirati female students at United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) from courses taught by the author, who was in residence there as the Drama and Theatre specialist from 2005-2014. Over the course of several semesters, these female Muslim university students' verbatim comments reveal how Kate's final words moved them to respond in the varied ways they did. These responses demonstrate the emotional tightrope that the students seem to be navigating; one that originates in tradition while also clashing with modernity. The Taming of the Shrew, and the journey of Kate as she is confronted by the challenges of an arranged marriage within a patriarchal society, is one that speaks to these students. As a non-Muslim practitioner of theatre and drama, the challenge was to see which of these two personas would win out - a

Kate or a Khatema—which turns out to be the subject matter for a larger societal investigation of the roles of men and women in the United Arab Emirates.

Since the 1960s, if not before, Katherine's humbling of herself at the feet of Petruchio in the last scene of *The Taming of the Shrew* (5.2) has been a political embarrassment, a source of anxiety for critics, and a challenge to the assumption that great art transcends time and culture. "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper," Katherine tells the other women in the play:

Thy head, thy sovereign: one that cares for thee,
To painful labor both by sea and land.
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe,
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks, and true obedience –
Too little payment for great a debt
My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
My heart as great, my reason haply more,
To bandy word for word and frown for frown;
But now I see our lances are but straws,
Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,
That seeming to be most which we indeed least are.
Then vail your stomach, for it is no boot,
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. (Shakespeare, 5.2., 146-155; 170-79)

Kate's words may make most of us uncomfortable, but how would they sound to women in the Arabic world? Act five, scene two, of *The Taming of the Shrew* is a touchstone for testing social values across cultures.

Starting in 2005, as part of a new theatre initiative begun at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in Al-Ain, I included Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* in a course that surveyed theatre with an emphasis on strong female characters often in conflict

with their society's mores and traditions. As it pertained to an all-female student population of Emirati undergraduates, I was struck by the particular resonance that Kate held for young Arab women; especially in regard to such issues as arranged marriages, a female's status in society, marital obligations to a father's dictates and male patriarchy in the home and workplace. This article focuses on how these issues coalesce around Kate's final monologue, in which she apparently succumbs to Petruchio's will after resisting it for much of the play's action.

This apparent contradiction and sudden transformation in Kate's personality puzzled some of the students, while others accepted it with a surprising degree of resignation. These differing attitudes led me to collect the varied responses of my students to the monologue by posing three choices:

Comment on the closing monologue by Kate by choosing one of the following tasks: (1) rewrite the lines in a contemporary style that a young Emirati woman might say if she agreed with the lines, (2) imagine how an Emirati man might say these lines, or (3) rewrite the lines in a contemporary style that a young Emirati woman might say if she disagreed with the lines.

Of the approximately 300 interrogatives I have reduced the usable number to 75 covering the years 2006-2010. These responses can be divided into three dialectical categories according to (1) repetition versus revelation, (2) informational response versus inspirational response, and (3) compliance versus catharsis. In their responses one group of women merely narrated the content of the dialogue (repetition) or else gave evidence of being conflicted by Kate's words (revelation). Another group accepted the words (informational response) or else exhibited new thinking as to Kate's motives (inspirational response). A third group capitulated to the same constructs that Kate seems to accept (compliance) or else was moved by pity and fear (catharsis). The result of my investigation suggests both similarities and differences between sixteenth-century England and twenty-first-century life in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

THE ARABIC BACKGROUND

There are two Arabic sayings or axioms that provide a cultural framework for my investigation:

First marriage and then love.

First ride the camel and then pick the saddle.

As these relate to the UAE and the sample of students cited herein, these words mirror the dualistic and often confusing intent of Shakespeare's heroine Kate and the many plot turns that occur in the play. Thus, an overview of some of the critical context about this work is needed in order to better understand the responses of the women in this study.

Albert Hourani in his classic *History of the Arab Peoples* gives an important insight into the resiliency of these mores and norms some rooted in religion and others mere accretions that over time have been enhanced by custom, when noting the advent of Arab cultures in the modern age: "Even when laws changed, social customs did not change with them" (p. 441). This is an especially helpful starting point to understanding the mindset that the Emirati female students, whether consciously or unconsciously, possessed when confronted by Kate's monologue and the subsequent questions in the interrogative.

Hourani also allows us to reference how the Padua of the text was not so different from the customs of the Arab *Maghrib* (North-west Africa). Thereby the "Arabic" social roles of the characters in the play are called to mind when he observes:

According to *shari'a*, every woman should have a male guardian—her father, brother or some other member of her family. A woman's marriage was a civil contract between the bridegroom and her guardian. A father as guardian could give his daughter in marriage without her consent, if she had not reached the age of puberty. The marriage contract provided for a dowry (*mahr*) to be given to the bridegroom to the bride; this was her property, and whatever she owned or inherited also remained her property. (pp. 120-121)

It is a single line in Hourani that is most telling as to what might explain

the culturally pre-conceived thinking of the Emirati female students to the character of Kate: “The wife owed her husband obedience,” even though this obligation carried with it the implicit exchange in the manner of a return by the man, “suitable clothes, lodging and maintenance, and . . . sexual intercourse” (p. 121). Ultimately, Hourani indicates that the deck is indeed stacked against the woman, historically in Arab society:

The inequality was shown too in the laws of inheritance, also derived by the *shari’a* from the words of the Qu’ran. ...The provision that daughters would receive only half as much as sons echoes another stipulation of the *shari’a*: in a legal case, the testimony of a woman would have only half the weight of that of a man. (pp. 121-122)

MARRIAGE CHANGES EVERYTHING

Kate’s monologue thus addresses the cultural conditions of the Emirati students and the similar conditions represented in Shakespeare’s play and opens up both to critical scrutiny. About the role that Kate seems to adopt, H. J. Oliver wonders, “Does she in fact ever assume one? Perhaps she merely learns that in certain circumstances certain kinds of behavior do not work” (p. 38). Oliver’s observation brings to mind the way some of the Emirati female students identified with Kate’s stratagems, first by dealing with her father Baptista’s demands and then the psychological battle of wits with Petruchio, her patriarch’s choice for her hand. As one female Linguistics student put it:

After marriage, everything changes. And, when I am married, I am finally left alone and no longer have deal with the constraints of many males in the family: father, brothers, uncles, etc. and now only have one male authority figure to contend with – my husband.

Sadly, the most recent statistics about marriage and divorce in the UAE seem to contradict the efficaciousness of such an approach. As the *Khaleej Times* reported, the 2005 divorce rate in the UAE stood at 46% compared to Qatar at 38%, 35% in Kuwait, and 34% in Bahrain (*Khaleej Times*, September 16, 2005).

The question of the dowry must have also been in the background

or perhaps forefront in these female students minds when father (Baptista) and arranged husband (Petruchio) begin their negotiations. Not lost upon them might have been the speed by which Katherina's price is settled. As Brian Morris has noted: "Petruchio and Baptista... begin the second contest, a brisk bargaining about Katherina's dowry they are like merchants chaffering over a parcel of goods" (Morris, p. 105). As a contrast to this observation I gave the students in my class an article from the *Khaleej Times* that noted that the price of an Emirati wedding in 2006 was approaching 300,000 AED (\$81,566):

The average cost of a wedding in the UAE now stands at 300,000 AED, according to a leading exhibition company. The survey carried out at this year's Bride Show in Dubai shows that 43% of respondents who were planning a wedding proposed to spend more than 100,000 AED (\$27,158) on their nuptials with 12% planning to shell out 500,000 AED (\$135,943) or more. (*Khaleej Times*, October, 27, 2006)

The article concludes with an almost direct comparison to Morris' critique of Baptista and Petruchio: "Other parents regard their daughters as merchandise, on which they have spent a lot of money and are therefore reasonable in their profligate demand."

KATE AND THE QU'RAN

A non-Muslim theater practitioner and teacher, constantly immersed in a classroom populated by Muslim women and using dramatic texts from mainly a Judeo-Christianity canon, can easily forget both the overt and subtle frames of reference that religion exerts over the lives of the female Emirati students in this study. Classroom discussions of *The Taming of the Shrew* were refracted through the principles of the Holy Qu'ran, which has much to say about the rights and roles of men and women in society. If we line up sections of Kate's monologue from Act Five, scene two, with sayings from the Qu'ran we discover some surprising similarities. An attempt to do so might look like this:

Katherina: Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper... (5.2.147)

Qu'ran: Men are practitioners and maintainers of women... (4:34)

Katherina: And for thy maintenance; commits his body... (5.2.149)

Qu'ran: ... because God has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means... (4:34)

Katherina: Such duty as the subject owes the prince,/ Even such a woman oweth her husband... (5.2.155-156)

Qu'ran: Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient... (4:34)

Katherina: And when she is forward, peevish, sullen, sour—and not obedient to his honest will... (5.2.157-158)

Qu'ran: As to those women whose part you see ill conduct... (4:34)

Katherina: What is she but a foul contending rebel... (5.2.159)

Qu'ran: ... admonish them. (4:34)

While by no means exhaustive, these parallels point up how women are regarded in the two cultures and how any glint of disobedience towards men is an affront to the King (Shakespeare) and Allah (Qu'ran). Rasha El-Haggan draws inferences from the words of the play that can be compared to surahs in the Holy Qu'ran; however, the intention is one of squaring Shakespeare's text with the correctness of Islam and the Holy Book. El-Haggan begins with a quotation from the Qu'ran which characteristically seems to contradict Petruchio's claim of male superiority while at the same time giving him, the man, the ultimate upper hand: "The wives' rights (with regards to their husbands) are equal to the (husbands') rights with regard to them, although men have a degree of advantage over them" (2:228).

El-Haggan immediately qualifies this surah by stating, "Although this verse from Surat Al-Baqaaia might sound discriminatory towards women at first glance, it is in fact full of hidden wisdom" (El-Haggan, p. 1). This "wisdom" turns out to be a parallelism to modern society, but one which El-Haggan seems to be stretching back in order to find a justification for her previous statement:

Every school has a principal, every city a mayor, every state a governor, and every country a president. Why should marriage be any different? In fact, as much as marriage is an important project,

the emphasis on leadership should be greater...The man has been given the right to be obeyed because he is the leader and not because he is superior" (pp. 1-2).

El-Haggan's emphasis upon the man as "the leader" mirrors the personal/political prism of obedience that joins both the home and state into one unit essential for the mutual survival of both institutions, which demands not only loyal citizens but also equally loyal wives; a dictum perhaps not unfamiliar to the female Emirati students who responded in differing ways.

WHAT A CONTEMPORARY EMIRATI WOMAN MIGHT SAY

In this selection of 45 versions of what a young Emirati woman might say if she agreed with Kate, there were examples of repetition which are all variants of Kate's opening line, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper" (Shakespeare, 5.2., 146):

Thy husband is the king.

Husband is everything in the life of the wife.

The husband is the head of the home; he is the keeper and can save his wife.

The husband is like the king, he can control . . . everything.

He is the soul of his wife.

The husband is a holy person for the wife.

In another response the reference to the husband switched to the personal:

My husband is my world, my life, my ideal, my sovereign; one that cares for me. My husband is my life, the man who provides me with everything.

In other student responses associated with this category, the variation

took on an explanatory tone as to why they found agreement with the stated ideas of Kate's last monologue. The following example harkens back, albeit in a more convoluted manner, to some of the explanations or justifications made, respectively, by Hourani (1991) and El-Haggan (1998):

As a young Emirati woman I agree with Katherine because in our religion and culture the women think they should respect their husbands, and they think if the wife is a slave for her husband there will be a reaction for this, and that the husband will be a slave for his wife. Also, in the Emirati religion whether the wife has a job or not the husband has the responsibility to give her money. In general, Emirati women think that their husbands are the half of their life and they need them and if they marry they complete the half of their religion.

This particular response moves us closer to seeing what degree of compliance came about in student responses that began as repetitions of Kate's words and then moved to a more explanatory mode. Because all the previous examples show acceptance of Kate's final words, they could be categorized as informational and evidentiary items for repetition and compliance and, as a window into their thinking about the roles of men and women in Emirati society. In the example below, one student captured the elements of the informational, repetition and compliance in personal and somewhat poetic terms:

I feel safety with you.
No one around my world can protect me like you...
You are all my life.

In the same vein, yet at an even greater intensity, another student declared what, as a woman, she is prepared to do for the man:

I swear that I will be faithful to you and to our love. I'll be your friend, mother, sister and lover... The first and most important reward is obeying you blindly... I am ready to kiss your head and be your soul forever, because you're my life, my keeper and my property. You are the Lord of our happiness kingdom.

A final entry from a student in this category was, ironically, one of the only examples of paraphrasing Kate's most submissive line, "And place your hands below your husband's foot" (Shakespeare, 5.2., 177). The student's version was, "I will put my hand under my husband's feet." Thus, whether any or all of the observations of repetition, compliance, and information are emblematic of Emirati society as a whole, or at least the status of women in that community, the material submitted in this first category are strongly indicative of what this homogeneous group of young Emirati women thought, felt, prescribed and believed were the proper attributes of a woman's role when it applied to men and marriage. That Kate's final monologue would produce such responses is compelling given that those same words would elicit differing reactions in the other two remaining categories.

WHAT A CONTEMPORARY EMIRATI MAN MIGHT SAY

For this question I initially assumed that I would find some of the same levels of repetition and compliance that were demonstrated in the first category. While there was evidence for that pre-conception there were also some fascinating takes on the content of the supposedly male speaker; being, as it was, written by a female student. One such compelling reversal was this submission:

The wife is like the lord, like life, like property. It is hard labor, labor working so hard in life to get what they want in the middle of all these difficult situations, while they only need a safe home and someone to take care of them. The truth is that too many work so hard and get...little salary.

While this may be wishful thinking on the part of the female author who would like to conceive of a man breaking ranks with his contemporaries, it nevertheless does approach the dialectical and moves us from mere repetition to some degree of revelation; from only the informational to some evidence of inspirational; and, from compliance to at least a nascent sense of catharsis.

Others, written by young Emirati women as if they were a man, followed a more traditional set of instructions that marked them as latter-day Petruchios:

The husband is the king... My wife, there is no fear from me, stand beside me forever, don't leave me alone; share everything with me and look after me as a little baby... Wives should respect and obey their husbands even if he is wrong.

However, three responses were the most conservative in their instructions to women. The first offered submission as a useful tactic for survival and even as an indirect way for women to become the true catalyst in the marriage: "Being weak sometimes is good, but you have to use this weakness to reach a goal indirectly."

The second response came in the form of a rationale by a man as if he was speaking to a group of fellow compatriots:

We are the men who provide the shelter for our women, feeding them, finding them a good shelter, being their protectors (and we work for them; so it would be a good thing if she obeys him (the husband) by being his servant... Putting their hands under their husbands' feet won't hurt them as long as they (the women) are living his (the man's) will.

The final example, in this last set of three, is perhaps the harshest version of how an Emirati man might say Kate's final words. That it also captures the logical extension of the Elizabethan understanding of marriage as well is not without its irony:

The wife is the servant... She should not show her beauty to other men and only in her house and with her husband. Men become weak when he sees his wife doing something wrong and he may kill her.

WHAT A CONTEMPORARY EMIRATI WOMAN WHO DISAGREES MIGHT SAY

This last category of seventeen responses was by far the most developed in terms of original ideas and showed the most variations as to inspiration, revelation and catharsis. This was due, in great part, because these were the young Emirati women who wrote in a contemporary style and disagreed with Kate's last monologue. As a consequence, the responses were not tethered as much by the

prevailing social, tribal and religious norms evident in many of the responses of the two previous categories. However, as a matter of degree, the interest lies in seeing how far these students strayed from comfortable and learned ways of thinking and ventured out, instead, into new critical areas of discourse. Three responses were particularly noteworthy.

One student emphatically established her independence from any version of a modern day Emirati Petruchio by declaring:

I can live without a special person. I can (take) care of myself without any help from anyone. I don't like the relationship between men and women. I can depend on myself. I can wake up in the morning for myself only.

Another student turned to her interpretation of Islam as a buffer against what men might use to obligate women to behavior that was contrary to the spirit of the Qu'ran: "Islam obligates wives to obey their husbands, but not all the time... [and] not.... bad opinions or actions which are against Islam."

The aforementioned submissions in this category represent the most revelatory insights as to Kate's reversal of philosophy at the end of the play; which in turn showed a more mature level of inspirational writing by the students which was instigated, in great part, by their ability to place themselves, their society, religion and customs into the matrix of contrast and comparison. In conclusion, I will quote one final entry from this category because I found it to be the most lucid and it suggested areas of reform after establishing the parallels that this student found in Emirati society and the world of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Whether it proves to be both past and prologue is unknown.

In fact, the story in *The Taming of the Shrew* is real and it is the same story which happens in UAE society, because our society is controlled by men. They are the ones who have the authority. Moreover, most leaders in our society are men and there are few women leaders. Also, I want to talk specifically about the idea of marriage. It is completely controlled by men. The father of the bride and the groom discuss and decide everything about the marriage, like the money and the place for the party as an example. So, it really shows that the power is in men's hands.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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