The mid-to-late 1990s was a resurgent time for the teen comedy, with films like Clueless (Amy Heckerling, 1995), Can't Hardly Wait (Deborah Kaplan and Harry Elfont, 1998) and American Pie (Paul Weitz, 1999) triumphing at the box office. These successes harkened back to the halcyon days of the John Hughes 1980s, when 'Save Ferris' was the rallying cry of the disaffected high school masses. 10 Things I Hate About You (Gil Junger, 1999) proved to be a fitting bookend to the 1990s, an adolescent Altamont, if you will.

The film might owe its success to the appeal of its lead actors Heath Ledger and Julia Stiles, but its origins and influences were drawn from two earlier works – one which was four years old, the other just over 400. 10 Things professes to be based on William Shakespeare's play The Taming of the Shrew, but in fact it plays fast and loose with its source material, using only when and if it sees fit. It is more indebted to Clueless, the Alicia Silverstone breakthrough hit that was itself a reworking of Jane Austen's Emma. Although 10 Things is drawn from superior stock, it is Clueless which more accurately captured the zeitgeist and remains to this day the more critically lauded film.

Plot-wise, 10 Things and Clueless are not all that different. At their core, both films are just a retread of the
age-old boy–girl romance, with some variation on the obstacles between them. The true disparity is in the characters. There is little depth – and even less affront – to the characters of *Clueless*, while the protagonists of *10 Things* ultimately exhibit personal growth and look beyond their limited, self-interested view of the world. Granted, that doesn’t make *10 Things*’ Kat Stratford (Stiles) the spiritual kin of Sylvia Plath or Betty Friedan, no matter how many shots we see of Kat holding a copy of Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*. Nor is Patrick Verona (Ledger) a modern James Dean, despite whatever designs he has on himself. But the film is a useful example when exploring elements of the teen comedy, as well as providing a useful introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, as much for its departure from the play when it comes to gender politics as for its similarities.

### The Taming of 10 Things

While Shakespeare set his original work in the Italian city of Padua, its cinematic descendent plays its story out in Seattle, Washington, with our main stage the knowingly named Padua High – one of a series of small, sometimes obscure nods to the film’s literary origins. It is asides like this that maintain some link with the source material, especially as the film’s narrative soon diverges from the play. The ‘hook’ of the story, what narrative theorist Joseph Campbell called ‘The Call to Adventure’, posits that the pretty and popular Bianca Stratford (surnamed from Shakespeare’s birthplace and played by Larisa Oleynik) can date only if and when her shrewish older sister Kat does. To Kat, this dating restriction means little. She has no interest in the opposite gender anyway. To pretty Bianca and her line of male admirers, however, it is a tragedy on a, well, Shakespearean scale. Lovestruck newcomer Cameron (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) enlists the help of resident rebel Patrick, orchestrating a scam in which the sleazy Joey (Andrew Keegan) will pay Patrick to date Kat.

In the original *Shrew*, the basic set-up is the same but the freedoms of the daughters are much more curtailed by their misogynistic father, Baptista. He is eager to marry off his daughters, but the popular Bianca can only be wed after the fiery Kate. Petruchio (i.e. Patrick), eager to marry a wealthy woman, sets his sights on Kate, and after a relieved Baptista gives her away, the new husband sets about ‘taming’ his bride.

However, what constitutes taming in the original play might lend itself closer to domestic abuse in today’s climate. Petruchio mercilessly taunts and – at least psychologically – tortures Kate until her spirit is broken and her verve lost. Hence, the shrew is tamed.

But if the original play and the film are so dissimilar, then the question arises of what educational value *10 Things* has as an introduction to *The Shrew*. The connotations of the play’s title should have been enough to indicate that it has, at its core, a dark and disquieting nature. While the play features a seething undercurrent of male dominance, a theme which might have been socially accepted during its initial run, it would prove to be cultural anathema if transplanted to a twentieth-century Hollywood rom-com. The concept of ‘taming a shrew’ – of the undesirability of an independent woman’s spirit and the need to contain it – certainly would not lift the hearts of many feminists, so a radical rewrite was in order for the film to be a more palatable and commercial enterprise.
So, gone is Petruccio’s cruelty towards Kate, as is his desire to beat her down. 10 Things’ Kat is still a strong-willed young woman with an acid tongue and fiery temper, but these are sources of appeal for Ledger’s Patrick. He isn’t scared off and he also doesn’t seek to tame her. He just wants to survive long enough to have her fall in love with him.

No longer is the story’s central message one of the importance of female subservience. This repellent concept is replaced with the more substantial validation of self-reliance and the need to be ‘true to yourself’, far more worthy and admirable traits that Kat expounds despite the social pariah it makes her.

Kat’s eventual fate is at the other end of the spectrum from that of Shakespeare’s heroine, who among other rather un-shrewish sentiments concludes the play with ‘Thy husband is thy Lord, thy life, thy keeper’. These are hardly words Stiles’ Kat would ever utter. At the conclusion of 10 Things, she delivers a heart-wrenching poem of loss, hurt and betrayal before her classmates and, most importantly, Patrick. She is not asking for forgiveness or pleading her subservience to him. Her anger and pain at his duplicity shows how much she had truly cared for him. It is a rare glance inside her guarded heart, as she offers him another chance at love, but love on her terms. She asks for equality and honesty, two concepts alien to The Taming of The Shrew.

known of him except that this is his first day at a new school and his father has some kind of military background, hinting at a number of previous schools and a number of temporary friends.

In the mentor and sidekick role, that of empathizer and sharer of knowledge, is Michael (David Krumholtz). Krumholtz signals his character’s nebbish, unpopular traits with his nasally voice, bland dress sense and – gasp – educational aspirations.

Put upon Michael is the onerous task of delivering line after line of exposition throughout the story. An early sequence in which Michael tours Cameron through the many cliques of the school – his Beatrice through the Paduan Purgatory – owes much to a similar (heck, identical) scene in Clueless. The genders might have been swapped but the information conveyed is have it, with Cameron attempting to straddle the divide. Carefully staged in a series of tracking shots, Michael walks Cameron through the school grounds, passing the various cliques and clusters. With his clever exposition and concise summary of each group, this scene serves to not only explain the school’s inhabitants to Cameron, but to the audience as well.

Scenes like these are necessary in order to quickly and effectively establish the film’s themes. Director Junger, a twenty-year veteran of television, is clever enough to achieve this early on so that the audience can grasp the ‘world’ of 10 Things, then move on quickly to the plot.

Cameron and Michael drive the narrative and ensure the action gets underway. If Cameron doesn’t become immediately smitten by Bianca, then Patrick and Kat their grasps; love and acceptance, respectively. Their characters exist in broad strokes, caricatures necessary to drive the plot and instigate the relationship between the two main characters, Patrick and Kat, since neither of the two lovers are capable of self-action, too tied up in their own angst and isolation.

Kat, the eponymous hater, is independent, strong-willed and a high school outcast precisely because of these tendencies. Her sister, Bianca, two years younger and – apparently – decades removed in education and mental faculties is Miss Popular at Padua High. She shares less in common with her on-screen sister than she does with her spiritual sibling, Clueless’ Cher. They appear to have been cut from the same expensive designer cloth.

Just like her sister, Bianca experiences growth over the
course of the film. She is more of a realist than Kat, perhaps because she does not aspire to achieve as much as her more driven sister. When the veil finally falls from her eyes and she sees Joey as the narcissistic creep that he is, Cameron is there for her. In fact, he had always been there, she just hadn’t considered him as a potential suitor before.

So when Bianca has a chance to stand up for something, she doesn’t hesitate. In protecting Cameron from Joey during the prom scene towards the end of the film, she proves that not only is she a person of courage and ethics, but she is worthy of Cameron’s honest love for her. ‘That’s for making my date bleed, that’s for my sister, and that’s for me.’

She also proves that, like it or not, she really is Kat’s little sister.

Shrewd filmmaking

Where Clueless was so effective in its ability to play directly to its ideal demographic (13- to 19-year-old girls and drooling adolescent males), 10 Things feels torn between this and a desire to honour the prestige of its source material. For all its deficiencies, at least The Shrew knew what it stood for and set about achieving its goals. 10 Things’ attempts at this balancing act are admirable but occasionally unsuccessful.

Such conflicting intentions are best on show in a pivotal scene in which Kat briefly acts as someone with the best intentions of her little sister at heart. She reveals that as a high school freshman (making her fifteen at the time), she and Joey dated briefly, during which time they did It. You know, It. This is only phrased as such here to reflect how coyly the filmmakers deliver the information. Never is the word ‘sex’ actually used. After all, this movie might be rated M, but it’s no American Pie.

Perhaps as a nod to Shakespeare and his love of wordplay, the characters, Kat in particular, are exceptionally well-spoken and glib comments present her as something of a high school Dorothy Parker, needing only an Algonquin cafeteria table to be complete.

Yet even though such lines as ‘oppressive patriarchal values’ or ‘bitter, self-righteous hag’ might seem bizarre and out of place in a high school setting, there is some merit to a film that describes Ernest Hemingway as ‘an abusive alcoholic misogynist who squandered half his life hanging around Picasso, trying to nail his leftovers’. Now if only the target audience knew who Hemingway was, then maybe they would appreciate the gag.

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Endnote