

Me – A Woman!! Me – A Woman!!
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Sparked by the Women's Liberation Movement, there has recently been a great deal of discussion regarding the role of women in our society. The three words – me, a woman – have been stated assertively (me – a woman!!) and posed as a question (me – a woman?) by quite a few females who are alternately proud of and puzzled by their female roles. What, after all, is a woman? Is her traditional role as wife and mother open to examination? Has she been relegated to an inferior role in society? Does she need to be liberated? And, if she needs to be liberated, in what way does she need to be liberated? To liberate is defined by Webster as “to free from domination by a foreign power.” In terms of the Women's Liberation Movement, the foreign power is the male of the species, who has doomed women to lower paying jobs, who makes it virtually impossible for women to advance to positions of power and authority in society, and who continually tells women that their place is in the home. Granted that statistics alone will prove that, although not impossible, the probability of a woman's reaching a high position in society is rather remote. However, an examination of the reasons why women are not in positions of power and authority in our society tends to obscure rather than clarify the questions that really matter: What is a woman? And: If women need to be liberated, what form should this liberation take?

Although it may seem like a sneaky way to present a discussion of Shakespeare, Shakespeare does have many valid observations of women and the whole question of women's liberation which he presents in his comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*. Kate, the shrew of the title, is a woman clearly dissatisfied: she bristles when men are around, rails at and quarrels with them, and continually insists upon her own way always. When her father sends a music master to teach her to play an instrument and the music master corrects her, Kate breaks the instrument over his head! Kate is a comic character, a source of merriment for the audience; but her negative response to everything and everybody was driven Kate into a corner. Her life has become narrow and isolated because her harsh tongue and her violent actions have made people fear her.

Petruchio, however, comes on the scene and things begin to change. Petruchio wants to marry Kate – not because he loves her, since he decides to marry her even before he has met her, but because of the dowry she will bring with her. His reasons may not seem very noble or very romantic, but Petruchio, unlike the other men in the play, at least isn't afraid of approaching Kate. What Petruchio offers Kate is a way out of her narrow existence – not merely a change by marriage but a far wider change because he insists that Kate cannot continue being a shrew and be his wife. But Petruchio is far too wise and far too subtle to issue an ultimatum to Kate; after all, “no” is too easy a word for Kate to say. Instead, Petruchio does two things after arranging the marriage with Kate: first he pretends that Kate is the opposite of the shrew she is, and second, he presents a picture of her of what she is by acting just as she does – except more so. Petruchio dresses outrageously and behaves outrageously: he keeps Kate waiting at the church, he turns the

marriage ceremony into a circus, and he refuses to attend the wedding reception. Insisting that he and Kate must leave immediately for their new home, which is some distance away. He keeps Kate traveling all night without rest; and when they finally arrive at their home, he refuses to let Kate eat, saying the food is not good enough for her. Petruchio's behavior is so outrageous that Kate cannot imitate it, let alone top it. Slowly she learns, by negative example, how to get what she wants in life – not by shouting and violence, but by submission and kindness.

At the end of the play, Kate is a “perfect” wife and even criticizes those wives who make life unpleasant for their husbands by insisting on their own way. She argues that a man maintains his wife and the wife should show her appreciation by doing all she can to make her husband's life easier, even if it entails her assuming an inferior position. Appreciation for maintaining her may not sound like a very romantic concept of love, but to conclude that this is a very materialistic view of love is to miss the essential point of the mutuality of the relationship, the very real concern for the well-being and happiness of the other partner that is evident in Kate's speech. Although the Kate-Petruchio match may not have been based on love initially, it becomes increasingly clear through the course of the play that they do indeed, love each other and that there is no superior-inferior positions in real love. Kate's speech shows her willingness to do the humblest thing for her husband if it results in his comfort and his happiness. Petruchio is quick to reward Kate's generosity, for his comment when she finishes it: “Come on, and kiss me, Kate.”

To many, Kate's decision to be a submissive wife may seem to be the very opposite of liberation, but Kate has very definitely been liberated and she has liberated herself with Petruchio's help. As stated before, in the beginning, Kate is negative and isolated; however, when she enters into a relationship with Petruchio, she expands and grows out of her narrowness into the kind of woman she evidently wants to be since her new role seems to be the source of great joy to her. The important point is not only that Kate grows but also that she herself chooses to grow. At the end of the play she is happy because she feels her choice has been the right one.

This may all seem a rather abstract or irrelevant answer to the questions posed earlier. But if each person is a unique individual, no more specific answer is possible, for when one, from example, begins enumerating what qualities a woman must possess to be a woman, one is no longer defining but is actually dictating. To the question of “What is a woman?” Shakespeare answers: “She is a person.” Certainly nothing startling to that, but it is a point few people realize. Strangely enough, Shakespeare presents the same traits for his ideal wife as he presents for his ideal husband: generosity, concern, love, openness, lack of competition. Of course, Shakespeare takes a rather conventional view of women's role in society; but, after all, until the 20th century, marriage was the only choice women had, and the question was not so much if a woman should marry but how the marriage could be made into a happy one. But the essential point of the play is still a valid one, no matter what its particular application may be. What is necessary for happiness is expression of self. If you are dissatisfied, Shakespeare, repeatedly says, change to something more in keeping with your inner nature; grow and expand and change.

All of this is not to deny that the Women's Liberation Movement is quite right in its charges that women are held down in our society. Nor is this to deny that their methods of organizing women and forcing men to accept women in more responsible positions in business, government, and education are necessary. But these methods present only external freedom for women; it opens the choices women can make, but it in no way guarantees that choosing to be a "new, liberated woman" will make a woman happy with her life of herself. Real liberation must be done by each individual; the foreign domination that must be overcome is most often the domination by things foreign to one's own nature. Liberation can be achieved with the help of someone, but it cannot be done for someone. Each woman must know herself well enough to select a kind of life that is in keeping with her inner nature. A woman who chooses to make a full-time career of being a wife and mother can be just as happy as one who chooses to be a U.S. Senator. What matters is that it is her choice and in keeping with her nature.