

Thematic Chauvinism: A Common Element

The American Western film is the gun toting, womanizing, Indian-hunting shoot'em up tribute to everything masculine in the conservative tradition of the United States' media. Revolving around the idea that the Western frontier can be "won" using a dangerous combination of horseback riding, brown liquor, and saloon girls, the genre has taken any overblown, stereotypical notion of a "real man" and applied it to the only situation in which such a creature could survive - a fictional sort. The Western cowboy is in his element when surrounded by vapid, squawking women, saddled horses, and impending conflicts with hostile "savages," but John Wayne's "McIntock!" somehow muster the stamina to argue convincingly for the possibility of the same stereotypical manhood even within a family of "shrews." Loosely based on William Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew," Wayne's film stars Maureen O'Hara as the fiery Kate while implicating her daughter, Becky, in the would-be role of Bianca Minola in the original play from the late 1500s. In a twist on the relational dynamics of Shakespeare's comedy, John Wayne's character George Washington (G.W.) McIntock, a modern day Petruccio, is already married to Kate. The tension of the film becomes apparent as G.W. is forced to address Kate's want of a divorce while at the same time dousing the sparking hints of a shrew in the actions of his daughter, whose return to the town occasions the return of Kate from her new home back East. Although G.W. is influential and well-liked in the territorial settlement, named "McIntock" after its leading citizen, this reputation quickly becomes an obvious hindrance, as it forces the cattle barren to address the unrest in his household, caused by its inhabitation by two such unruly women, in order to save face.

By lending itself to the creation of the same gender-related tension that is manipulated throughout “The Taming of the Shrew,” “McIntock!” revives a long-standing, unresolved inventory of questions relating to masculine dominance while situating those queries in the implication-riddled context of the social revolution of liberal America in the 1960s. The ironic portrayal of such blatantly sexist masculinity, as seen in the role of Shakespeare’s Petruccio, within a film that is claimed as part of the conservative counterrevolution, makes the effectiveness of such a statement suspect at best. One must ask whether or not “McIntock!” successfully combines the skills of its actors, the genre of Western film, and the plot’s intentional parallels to Shakespeare’s 16th century play in such a way as to convince the audience of its validity as a conservative statement. If so, the film may be justifiable given its purpose as a satirical jab against stereotypical criticisms of conservative American masculinity that were under constant scrutiny during the period.

Of course, in order to solidify the irony of G.W. McIntock’s approach to the “taming” of his women, it must be agreed upon that Shakespeare constructed the character parallel of Petruccio as gender-biased and inappropriate in his approach to marital conflict, despite the frustrations of his undeniably difficult wife. In this course of “The Taming of the Shrew,” Petruccio attempts to subdue Kate’s temper by starving her, refusing her sleep, and forcing her to combat his own staged rage against the servants with gentle logic, as she pleads for “[p]atience, I pray you, ‘twas a fault unwilling” (4.1.136). Stephen Greenblatt, editor of The Norton Shakespeare, discusses the reception of Petruccio’s character and makes a connection between it and English masculinity (despite Petruccio’s Italian heritage), stating that “the true Englishman defines his manhood through the firm and, if necessary, cruel mastery of wife and servant” (162). He goes on to explain that within the context of Shakespeare’s lifetime, it was not uncommon for

women to be reprimanded simply for speaking excessively. “Shrews” were generally defined as women with “wagging tongue[s]” (Greenblatt 164) and were punished using cucking stools and scold’s bridles, both of which amounted to little less than humiliating torture devices and were intended to curb a woman’s need for self-expression. So, an audience in Elizabethan England would not have been surprised by Petruccio’s “taming” of Katherine or by her eventual, complete submission, despite its propensity for offending modern readers. Given that its reception has been suspect within a modern context and that “McLintock!” is very much intended as a modern twist on the original play, however, it becomes important to read this unforgivable parallel as unnecessary and sexist in Wayne’s Western. Given, Kate’s “taming” has been altered in such a way as to recreate it as a humorous scene of public humiliation and spanking. Even with this good-natured take on the situation, the mere fact that both G.W. McIntock and his daughter’s beau, Devon, take their respective women across their knees to administer what they deem to be a much-needed, much-deserved punishment so mimics the Shakespearean overtones of male ownership that they are strikingly out of place in a film released during the height of first-wave Feminism. Thus, the reader must consider the purpose of “McLintock!” in depicting the conservative values it has been heralded as protecting as overtly stereotypical, chauvinist, and unreasonable.

The primary criticism of the Western film genre as a whole has been its alleged dependence on stereotypical masculinity, conjured using images of shoot-outs, men in Stetsons seemingly bonded to leather saddles on the backs of horses, and the antithetical additions of two archetypal female characters – fun-loving female entertainers sporting decadent red feathers and low-cut sequined bodices and nagging, judgmental housewives. Understanding that these archetypes emerged in a medium and genre that only first appeared hundreds of years after

Shakespeare's death, the professed ideal of the perfect woman that emerged was extremely similar to the "chaste, silent, and obedient" (Greenblatt 164) female that would have been preferred in England around the turn of the 16th century. Even so, the "man's woman" who so often captures the heart of the gruff hero in Western film seems to be a rough, enticingly unavailable stand-in for the same volatile shrew that too often dominates the domestic space in the frontier home. The allure and ability of Maureen O'Hara's acting style as it contributes to her role as Kate McLintock seems to grow from a captivating combination of the endearing sort of non-marital shrewishness with the bullying sort that allows her to look alarmingly natural with a disapproving scowl set firmly beneath her flaming red hairline. In Shakespeare in the Movies: From the Silent Era to *Shakespeare in Love*, Douglas Brode comments on the chemistry between O'Hara and John Wayne as it gives the couple the same allure of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in their adaptation of "The Taming of the Shrew" (25). Like Taylor and Burton, O'Hara and Wayne lent the same aptitude for portrayal of a couple in love, which does its best to be anything but, to a number of other films. Brode also notes, however, his opinion that the film "proved only intermittently effective" as a result of the missing trademark touches of director John Ford, substituted by the absent skills of Andrew V. McLaglen (25).

In addition to his seemingly easy show of a couple fighting affection alongside Maureen O'Hara, John Wayne contributes his own unique repertoire of skills to "McLintock!" Perhaps even more important and worthwhile than his impressive list of appearances in Westerns is the reputation for noble masculinity that he accrued during the span of his acting career. In the article "John Wayne: How He Won the West," Fred Cavinder sums up the star's acting persona, claiming that in a Wayne Western, "pride is part of the American way, toughness is part of manhood, gentleness toward women is a mandate, fear is something one has only for God, and a

hero of the Great Southwest must be true to his word and his kin and fast with his gun” (58).

The implication is that Wayne’s well-known animosity toward ungentlemanly conduct is precisely what excuses him from responsibility for the infamous spanking scenes. Instead, the audience is asked to interpret the unorthodox taming technique as humorous and has no alternative but to chuckle at the scenes of Kate’s humiliation that would otherwise leave it stumped with incredulity.

Although the banter in which Katherine Minola and Petruccio engage during the taming process in “The Taming of the Shrew” offers the audience a number of humorous outlets by which tension might be relieved, the overall tone of the relationship between the two individuals and its reception by an Elizabeth audience seems to imply an understanding of such treatment as a necessary evil. Greenblatt implies in his introduction to the play that Petruccio’s behavior in response to Katherine’s is necessary to “[reinforce] the hierarchical principle upon which the entire Elizabeth social order was premised” (164). This support of the status quo, as it called for traditional class and gender hierarchy, is precisely what aligns “The Taming of the Shrew” with conservatism. Although the witty dialogue and ambiguous affection in the Kate and Petruccio’s relationship is at times charming, it is simply a clever gloss laid by Shakespeare over the play’s examination of themes of dominance and social structure. No where is this emphasis on domination exhibited more clearly than in Act IV, Scene VI, wherein Petruccio indicates that Katherine’s duty as an obedient wife precludes her ability to have individual thought. What’s more, she is asked to ignore that which she knows to be truth in order to comply with the thinking of Petruccio, who is superior to her in social hierarchy as a man and as her husband. She submits and despite knowing full well that “it is the sun that shines so bright” (4.6.5), she vows to call it “moon or sun or what [Petruccio pleases]” (4.6.13). With his wife’s submission

solidified and social order restored, Petruccio concludes the play by taking stock of his winnings. The benefits (a docile wife and a monetary reward) of maintaining the status quo vastly outweigh those presented by challenging social structure in “The Taming of the Shrew.”

As Penny Gay notes in her discussion of “farce” as it applies to Shakespeare’s early comedies, “it is necessarily late in the action when the protagonists discover that complicity is possible and rewarding” (17). As she defines “farce” as a piece in which “characters are shown making a series of ad hoc assertions of self against the dominant process of social events” (Gay 16), it makes sense that the drawn out nature of Kate’s struggle against society would only add a sense of relief to her resolution through complicity. The favorable conclusion of the taming process that Kate undergoes is indicative of a belief, perhaps Shakespeare’s, that the end justifies the means. Although it was most likely considered as a regrettable part of life in Elizabethan England, that women had to be dealt with in such a way, the prevention of the fragmentation and complete destruction of social order was a terrifying alternative. Gender hierarchy prevailed both in Shakespeare’s England and in “The Taming of the Shrew,” and Petruccio’s unrestrained hyper-masculinity symbolizes the embrace of this order. Without the context of a sympathetic time period from which an audience would view such sexist, exaggerated forms of masculine dominance, Western films (and “McLintock!” specifically) were forced to find some way to depict a similar ratio of dominance between gender roles without such overtly misogynistic behavior.

So much of the masculinity in any Western is a construct of the genre that the most telling and evocative aspects of masculinity in “McLintock!” are those that work without the net of cinematic tradition. To emphasize these subtle rewrites of the typical conventions in frontier stories, it is useful to consider the not-Western traits of the film. Most notably, given a curiosity

in conservatism and tradition is G.W. McLintock's stability and stationary existence within the boundaries of the settlement. For most heroic cowboys riding across the prairies of the West in the American film industry, a saddled horse symbolized the potential of the often-called-upon ability to cross into the unknown via an expansive, dangerous wilderness. Nature doubles as a man's space for masculine redefinition and nomadic cowboys seek to prove themselves in a fundamentally manly setting. Conversely and not surprisingly, the woman has been relegated to her role in the home, responsible for keeping the hearth warm and, although residing on the brink of the unknown that her male counterpart is charged with claiming, she is expected to domesticate his new territory, to tame it. Sue Matheson, author of "The West-Hardboiled: Adaptations of Film Noir Elements, Existentialism, and Ethics in John Wayne's Westerns" comes to the conclusion that "one finds that while ignoring wife and children, and at times, the law, Wayne's characters demonstrate their love of wife and children and regard the law with a respect that is 'deeper than the written word'" (889) and this statement supports the idea that Wayne's suspect behavior is generally scrutinized by critics in order for them to discern its redeeming qualities, often manifest in its outcome.

In "McLintock!" G.W. is forced to take on both roles, as Kate has been back East for some time, having returned to the safety of metropolitan civilization on the event of their separation. Perhaps in inhabiting a town named after him, McLintock is made into the dominant, masculine keeper of the various domestic spheres that encompass it. In any case, in opening the action of the film with such a situation, the audience is being asked to adjust its perception of traditional masculinity almost immediately, allowing the implied conservative stereotypes that characterize it to be subject to scrutiny as a major theme. Later, G.W. asserts himself through his reinstallation of Kate in her role as keeper of the home, as shown by his decision to chastise her

physically and publically. The ridiculous notion that this task was accomplished by means of a well-aimed series of spanks leaves no room for the possibility of anything but satire, considering the film's otherwise obviously conservative bias.

In his article "A Turning Point for Modern Conservatism," Patrick M. Garry provides readers with the context of the conservative existence at the time of the release of "McLintock!" as "the story of that long hiatus from popular embrace, which reached its peak in the 1960s... a story of dogged perseverance – a story of unrelenting commitment to a set of ideals rooted in three centuries of American history" (24). He speaks extensively on the marginalization of Republicans and reveals that in 1964, the year after the release of "McLintock!" self-professed Democrats outnumbered the right wing competition of more than two to one. The future must have seemed bleak for traditionalists who, advocating family and religious values as opposed to the liberating sexuality and self-expression being promoted, predicted the fragmentation and dramatic weakening of the fundamental social structure that had fused American ideals for so long. In stark contrast to the liberal values overturning traditional conventions, "which concentrated primarily on materialism and physical well-being, conservatism preached that the crisis of American life was more of a moral and cultural one than an economic one" (Garry 28).

With this in mind, the social statement made in "McLintock!" becomes even more striking as a purposeful deconstruction of the overt male chauvinism that colored both "The Taming of the Shrew" and the typical image of the Westward-bound American cowboy. Garry uses of the argument of conservative philosopher Leo Strauss, who believed that "the measure of a healthy society was not how much freedom people enjoyed, but how virtuous its citizens were" (29). "McLintock!" examined at face-value depicts a settlement in which spousal conflict is practically embraced as a natural means by which a couple can reaffirm the play of dominance

between husband and wife. Still, it's difficult to view the film from this cut-and-dry viewpoint without softening in regard to the volatile relationship between G.W. and Kate. This is the same chemistry that plays into the relational drama of Kate and Petruccio in "The Taming of the Shrew," and its favorable reception seems to suggest that these types of questionable marital dynamics result in a virtuous long-term marriage. Kate hitches a ride on the back of her reclaimed husband's carriage as he drive home, relegating herself to a cargo-like place in relation to G.W., and Katherine Minola concludes that she is "bound to serve, love, and obey" (5.2.168). The completion of each drama swiftly follows its respective concession, and social order is restored for the time being.

The battle between the conservative counterrevolution and the liberal movement that it opposed seems to have ended in a stalemate, with a give-and-take exchange that mimics the ideal compromise-based conflict resolution in a modern marriage. Garry's more biased perspective allows for his argument that "by the mid-seventies, the 'Me Decade' had already begun to expose the fault lines of liberalism" (26) and that indicators such as "urban decay," rioting, and an increasing number of "pornographic institutions" (27) imply the ultimate failure of the liberal revolt. Significantly, the period has historically been referred to as a liberal *revolution*, implying success, but family values and a national stigma associated with sexual promiscuity suggests that the result was not a total reform. Compromise is the operative word for describing the reasoning behind the introduction of films like "McLintock!" into mainstream media during the sixties. It also helps to explain the superficially chauvinistic dialogue and behavior of the protagonists. Although the film begins with a "man's world," with John Wayne's character securely in charge of his surroundings, it quickly begins to subvert itself with a series of plot points (like spanking) that beg to be analyzed with the implied understanding of their absurdity. These contributors to

what a modern audience reads as a foolish spectacle are the very aspects of Shakespeare's original "The Taming of the Shrew" that allowed it to resonate with the audience as a serious commentary on the regrettable necessity of "taming" intemperate women. It's one more example of the transcendent qualities of Shakespeare's themes that allow them to be applicable in whatever time, medium, or genre seeks to employ their use.

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