Shrews, Jews, and Public Dues: The High Price of Rhetorical Savvy

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Shrews, Jews, and Public Dues: The High Price of Rhetorical Savvy

by

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Shrews, Jews, and Public Dues: The High Price of Rhetorical Savvy

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For my grandmother, who never had this opportunity.
Table of Contents

Abstract 1

Introduction 2

Chapter One: Social Parallels Between Katherina and Shylock 7

Chapter Two: Rhetorical Parallels in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* 22

Chapter Three: The Problem of Interpretation and Classification for the Modern Reader 39

Conclusion 54

Works Cited 55
Abstract

The role of the socially inferior Other is fulfilled in both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* via Katherina and Shylock, respectively. The way in which these two characters are received by the modern reader in comparison to the way they would have been received by Shakespeare’s contemporaries is a major focus of this thesis. It contains sections on the social parallels between Katherina and Shylock, rhetorical parallels between the two plays, and the problem of interpretation and classification as comedy for the modern reader. It also takes into account the plays’ settings, especially *Merchant*, as it traverses a complex set of boundaries in relation to re-assimilation of Jews in Venice, and it acknowledges the conscience of the modern day reader who may find the treatment of Shylock to be tragic as opposed to comedic, and who may feel a sense of regret for Katherina’s transformation into a socially accepted model of womanhood as defined by the patriarchal boundaries of the time. However, it leaves space for debate, as both the writer and the text are suspect under the light of analysis.
William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* must both be examined on two levels under a tent of suspicion—the first level being suspect of the writer himself, as Shakespeare has so filled the texts with ambiguities it is difficult to make concrete conclusions, and the second level being suspect of the reader, who must not only deal with the texts’ ambiguities, but must also sort out the difficulties associated with a then-versus-now understanding as it applies to social context. With centuries between Shakespeare’s original sixteenth century audience and the modern reader who attempts to analyze his works, it is important that the modern reader take several factors into consideration.

*The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most studied of Shakespeare’s plays. It is also an uncomfortable play for a modern reader, as Shylock is commonly pitied as a victim of bigotry. Today, Jewish and non-Jewish readers alike undoubtedly feel pangs of sympathy for the harsh treatment Shylock receives. In the introduction to the play, Ann Barton says, “[because he is] treated as something inhuman, a ‘dog’ or ‘cur,’ Shylock not unnaturally responds, when the opportunity presents itself, with tooth and claw” (285). Modern readers must overcome, or at least take into consideration, the internal conflict caused by Shylock’s treatment. Conditioned by the equality-driven United States constitution that ensures equal treatment under the law regardless of qualities relating to race, religion, and gender, it is unnerving to
believe another human being could be discriminated against based solely on his
religion and the stereotypes that accompany it.

*The Taming of the Shrew,* while popular for its comedic slapstick-like scenes
between Katherina and Petruchio, is often avoided by critics. Today, the text is met
with different interpretations from the way it would have been received on stage late
in the sixteenth century, as stated in Barton’s introduction: “Attitudes and turns of
phrase that seem archaic, or even brutal, on the printed page, have a way of becoming
entirely acceptable as soon as Katherina and Petruchio are actually speaking [on-
stage]” (*Shrew* 138). But since the text is what the modern reader has left to interpret,
the problem with this text, claims Dennis Huston, is that “criticism is built on text,
and [*The Taming of the Shrew*] is so suspect” (73). In other words, the fact that
Katherina’s final speech may be seen as either her conformity or her rhetorical
success, as will be discussed in chapter 3, makes it difficult for a reader to fully
interpret the play to mean positively one thing or another. To do so leaves many
unanswered questions, therefore creating suspicion of this pliable text. Such
ambiguity within the text may turn some critics off because it is difficult, if not
impossible, to take just one stance regarding the text and support it without leaving
faulty gaps in the argument. These same gaps exist in *The Merchant of Venice*;
therefore, it is essential to take a three-dimensional view of both texts, examining
them from multiple angles, since by *not* doing so, they cannot be fairly scrutinized.

The topical differences between these two works are obvious; Katherina
utilizes the rhetoric of sexual politics in the battle of the genders, and Shylock uses
the rhetoric of legal politics to illuminate the stereotypes associated with Jews, as anti-Semitism was strong at the time The Merchant of Venice was written. So what about these two works links them so closely? Both The Taming of the Shrew and The Merchant of Venice depict socially defined roles in relation to gender—via Katherina—and religion—via Shylock. Based on their assigned roles, Katherina and Shylock, though repressed differently, must each struggle because of repression within their respective settings. Though choosing Padua for a setting may have been inconsequential, since gender was such a decisive factor in determining social positioning that the play could have been set anywhere, the choice to set Merchant in Venice is an important one. Since Jews were expelled from England in 1290, and continued to be exiled throughout Shakespeare’s lifetime, he had to set the play in Venice—the only place Jews were accepted—as they were slowly re-assimilated to help boost the Venetian economy.

The sixteenth century was a time of great change in Venice. Jutta Gisela Sperling writes that around 1525 “the Venetian government went through a major period of renovatio (renewal)” (76). With this renewal came a desire to set the ruling class apart from others and led to the start of elitist trends and competition for prestige and high status. It also led to the decline of equality that once characterized the republic formerly seen as a utopian mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Changes in government ultimately led to modifications in other areas as well. As Sperling states, “by 1562 values had changed” (77). As a result, the
treatment of Jews in Venice would also have gone through transitions. Written in 1597, Shakespeare showcases some of these changes in *The Merchant of Venice.*

Jews, exiled from England in the 1200s, now played a valuable role in commerce. Likewise, shrews, also called scolds, who were once tortured and publicly humiliated, now escaped such ridicule in *The Taming of the Shrew.* The Jews’ re-entry and the shrews’ escape did not come without a cost, however. It is important for the modern reader to remember that since Jews had been expelled from Shakespeare’s England, his notion of the Jew would have been based only on stereotypes established by a faction that had a history of hatred for them. Though Shylock is a man of wealth, his money affords him no security in a Christian-dominated society. As Jack Spiro notes, Shylock is “agonizingly, and then intolerably alone, rejected, maligned, [and] dehumanized” (33). Whether or not his fate is justified by his character, which will be examined later, he is nevertheless treated as “the Jew” as opposed to “a person.” According to Spiro, “everyone is an outsider who is not included in, or who differs from, the category of White Protestant ‘Englishness’” (36). And though Katherina is surrounded by wealth, her gender affords her no security, as the wealth could never belong to her; she is controlled in a male-dominated society. As both characters vie for self-preservation and pride, it is their social inferiority that controls the process in which each must participate to meet those ends. Though both of these characters seek revenge for the public wrongs inflicted on them, their social statuses play a large role in how their schemes play out.
Despite victory or defeat, characters like Katherina and Shylock inevitably personify the suffering that social class distinction inflicts on private lives.
Chapter One:
Social Parallels Between Katherina and Shylock

_The Taming of the Shrew_ and _The Merchant of Venice_ were both written at a time when changes in government, as well as social values, were on the rise, and the Renaissance period was born. The fact that Shakespeare allows his characters to deviate from the social norms of the time can account for the fact that society was in a stage of transition. What he shows us becomes as important as that which is left out. Socially-defined roles and institutions which control the social realm present many problems for the non-conformist. Viewed as defective or substandard, the socially inferior Other is subject to mistreatment, ridicule, shame, and even dehumanization. According to Irene Dash, "compliance, self-sacrifice for a male, dependence, nurturance, and emotionalism [were] the expected norms" for women in Renaissance England (1).

Of course, such norms serve only to provide boundaries which characters like Katherina openly cross, thus becoming labeled, in her case, a shrew. Seen as a threat to her male counterparts' positions over her in society, the historical shrew/scold was severely punished. Apart from a brief reference to carting in _The Taming of the Shrew_, Shakespeare gives the reader no account of the torture and public humiliation endured by women accused as scolds or shrews. Though rarely documented, there is evidence that bridling scolds was a practice used throughout Europe. _The Taming of the Shrew_ departs from the norm of traditional shrew-taming narratives in which,
according to Natasha Korda, “the shrew is characteristically represented as a threat to the symbolic order of language” (115). The traditional shrew/scold did not threaten the order of things as her evolving housewife role would suggest. She threatened language, particularly male-dominated language, and faced the punishment of bridling as a result. Although Katherina is subjected to Petruchio’s wild antics and to his shaming of her in order to tame her, she escapes the degree of humiliation and torture faced by women of her day.

In her article “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds,” Lynda Boose identifies a shrew/scold according to William Sheppard’s 1675 legal summary: “[a] scold in a legal sense is a troublesome and angry woman, who by her brawling and wrangling amongst her Neighbours, doth break the publick Peace, and beget, cherish and increase publick Discord” (186). Boose also notes that charged scolds were almost exclusively female and that “one can speculate that a ‘scold’ was, in essence, any woman who verbally resisted or flouted authority publicly and stubbornly enough to challenge the underlying dictum of male rule” (189). As gender relations became more troubled as the sixteenth century progressed, it became increasingly popular for men to control women by maintaining control over their language. The problem of the scold became the problem “that society must control” (Boose 204). As the social order began to break down in early modern England, an upsurge in accusations against women increased.

To be labeled a shrew or scold would have been among the worst offenses a woman could commit. Since by definition a shrew/scold committed a crime against
"male rule," crimes became gender-based. Except in rare cases, males were not capable of committing such offenses. Boose explains the increase in crimes identified as strictly female:

As the forms of punishment and the assumptions about what officially constituted "crime" became progressively polarized by gender, there emerged a corresponding significant increase in instances of crime defined as exclusively female: "scolding", "witchcraft," and "whoring." But what is striking is that the punishments meted out to women are much more frequently targeted at suppressing women's speech than they are at controlling their sexual transgressions. In terms of available court records that document the lives of the "middling sort" in England's towns and larger villages, the chief social offenses seem to have been "scolding," "brawling," and dominating one's husband. The veritable prototype of the female offender of this era seems to be, in fact, the woman marked out as a "scold" or a "shrew." (185)

Since the offense of the scold is one of verbal proportions, the punishment was as well. The act of bridling served to reform the shrew/scold in two ways. The first was by making it physically impossible for her to speak while in the bridle; the second was to humiliate her in such a way that she ideally would refrain from such behavior in the future, and thereby return her to her obedient and subservient role in a male dominated society.
The acts of bridling women served to physically and emotionally ridicule them in the most humiliating ways possible. Once fitted with the bridle, “the gag could easily have slammed into their teeth with every pull, smashing their jawbones and breaking out their teeth, until finally the offending shrew would be tied up and made to stand in the town square, an object to be pissed on and further ridiculed at will” (Boose 205). The bridle was undoubtedly a shaming device effectively used to curb verbal rebellions by strong-willed women who posed a threat to the male dominated rule of the time. Controlling women’s speech would have been seen as protecting male control over social institutions and would therefore have been viewed as not only justified, but necessary.

If such harsh, immediate consequences were imposed on the shrew/scold of the late sixteenth century, then what would cause Shakespeare to write *The Taming of the Shrew* as a comedy in which Katherina’s verbal outbursts are remedied by the gentle reshaping of Petruchio’s master plan? Though Katherina plainly threatens language with her sharp tongue and quick wit, Petruchio never seeks to punish her for that offense; rather, he seeks to tame her. Since his methods are not forceful, especially in comparison to actual punishment faced by scolds, it seems the “taming strategy marks a departure from traditional shrew-taming tales” (Korda 109). As roles for housewives were changing, so was the shrew-taming narrative. Perhaps, as Boose suggests, Shakespeare’s objective was to “conscientiously model a series of humane but effective methods for behavioral modification” (198). Though Petruchio accuses Katherina of acting shrewishly, Shakespeare deliberately excludes her harsh
punishment in exchange for a gentler method of reform (200). This is not to say that shaming rituals do not exist in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Katherina is certainly subjected to much shaming, but the sincerity of her transformation is suspect, as I argue later.

In the first two acts of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina displays violent behaviors on three occasions. First, she binds Bianca’s hands and then strikes her in retaliation for Bianca’s earlier accusation that Katherina is jealous of her and for indicating that Katherina is incapable of attracting a suitor on her own. She also breaks the lute over Hortensio’s head when he implies she cannot be taught, and she hits Petruchio for his forwardness and indiscreetness in their first meeting. On each occasion, Katherina’s violent outbursts are a result of frustration due to indecent treatment. She becomes involved in a vicious cycle; she wishes to not be labeled a shrew, yet her being labeled so causes her to act the part. She has yet to learn how to balance her determination to exhibit free will with fitting into her socially defined niche within society. In contrast to Bianca, who is referred to as a goddess, Kate is seen as a “fiend of hell” (1.1.88), an insult which goes unanswered by Baptista, and as a “hilding of a devlish spirit” (2.1.26) by her own sister. Comparisons between Katherina and the devil continue throughout the first half of the play until Katherina’s transformation, at least on the surface, begins.

In order to more fully understand the connection between these two works, it is important to consider not only the historical context of *The Taming of the Shrew* as it applies to the treatment of women, particularly those who challenge societal
boundaries, but also to consider the historical context of *The Merchant of Venice* and the role Jews played in Venice at the time the play was written. Like shrews, the recently re-assimilated Jews in Venice were seen as a threat. Though largely lost in modern interpretations, in the 1590s *The Merchant of Venice* would have served to paint Shylock as the devil to which he is so often compared.

Having been exiled from England in the thirteenth century, Jews were beginning to re-assimilate by the start of the sixteenth century, and while this may have seemed a step in the right direction, it seems as though Venetians were merely motivated by money. Financially drained following the invasion by the League of Cambrai, the Venetians, according to Benjamin Ravid, “recognized the value of the Jews as a source of revenue for the treasury” (274). However, much in the same way as Jews were pushed into ghettos and forced to wear a yellow star throughout Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Venetians also forced their financial saviors to wear a yellow cap and move into ghettos. It is this similarity that allows a modern reader to feel sympathy or even guilt with respect to Shylock’s treatment.

Throughout the sixteenth century, Jews assumed a significant role in Venetian society and commerce, and by 1541 “an improvement in the status of these visiting Jewish merchants took place” (Ravid 275). By 1589 Jews had received the privilege of long-term residency, which would be unsuccessfully challenged by native Venetian merchants. For them, Jews posed a plausible danger; according to James Shapiro they seemed a potential threat to the English who were facing “social, religious, and political turbulence” (3). The English had many fears of this religious
Other, and they had many unanswered questions about the Jews. Were Jews racially and physically different? Where they murderous of Christian victims? Most importantly, viewed as “landless vagabonds” (Shapiro 7), should Jews be allowed to assimilate into English culture? The Merchant of Venice seems to answer each of these questions in a manner that puts not just Shylock, but all Jews, under a critical lens.

Like Katherina, Shylock is also dehumanized until he reaches the point of transformation (conversion) in the trial scene. In the first two acts, he is also referred to as a devil. Antonio says, “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” (1.3.97), and Launcelot Gobbo refers to him as “the very devil incarnation” (2.2.27). Since Katherina’s transformation begins earlier within the structure of the play—in Act 3, as opposed to the start of Shylock’s transformation in Act 4—she endures fewer dehumanizing insults. Shylock continues to be pelted with criticism throughout two additional acts, moving from devil references to those of savage beasts.

The change in imagery begins timidly with Salerio in Act 3: “Never did I know / A creature that did bear the shape of man / So keen and greedy to confound a man” (3.2.274-76) and increases to savage levels during the trial scene when Gratiano likens Shylock to a series of animal images:

O, be thou damn’d, inexecrable dog!

And for thy life let justice be accus’d.

Thou almost mak’st me waver in my faith

To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
Govern'd a wolf, who hang'd for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infus'd itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolvish, bloody, starv'd, and ravenous. (4.1.128-138)

The images increase in vulgarity as Gratiano dehumanizes Shylock, and the animal references serve to take the place of Shylock’s human soul. The stereotypes anchored in fear are perpetuated by Shakespeare, as it was often feared that Jews murdered Christians for their blood. Although Shylock endures much more abusive insults than Katherina, the parallel exists in that both characters endure name-calling with devil and animal references.

Another parallel between *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* is that Katherina and Shylock are both shamed in the public realms of socially established institutions; therefore, in each play there is a theme of being bound. Katherina is shamed once bound in the institution of marriage and Shylock is shamed in the courtroom during the trial in which he insists on Antonio’s flesh when Antonio forfeits their bond.

In Katherina’s marriage bond, Petruchio moves up in social status, while she ironically moves down. She is shamed throughout the entire wedding scene, beginning with Petruchio’s late arrival and continuing throughout the ceremony as he
verbally and physically abuses the priest while shabbily clothed, and finally afterwards when he announces that they will not be staying for the wedding feast.

“But for my bonny Kate, she must with me. / Nay, look not big, nor stamp, nor stare, nor fret, / I will be master of what is mine own” (3.2.227-29). Petruchio’s speech, in which he refers to Katherina as his property, “presents the status of woman in marriage as degrading in the extreme, plainly declaring her a subhuman being who exists solely for the purposes of her husband” (Kahn 47). Katherina is silenced for the first time following Petruchio’s speech, and she has seemingly gone from cursed to crushed. Once entered into the institution of marriage, however, Katherina’s words and actions become ambiguous. For some scholars, it is difficult to accept that she has changed, and to argue otherwise requires reading outside of the textual boundaries.

Not only does Petruchio succeed in shaming the shameless, but as the newlyweds move from Padua to the groom’s home in Verona, he appears to take on her characteristics. His erratic behavior and dominance of all decision-making for household matters causes the servants to comment that he is more shrewish than the shrew. By marrying, “class privileges that Kate acquired through birth are now, ironically, privileges to which she has access only through her husband” (Boose 65). Petruchio controls every aspect of the marriage, from what and when they will eat, to when they will sleep, and even what they will wear.

For the first time, Katherina’s behavior is rational. The more irrational Petruchio’s behavior becomes the more Katherina takes over the voice of reason.
Whether this is a result of authentic change or part of a larger plan is for a later discussion. What is known for certain is that she is given reason to feel shamed, and this shame becomes the agent of change leading to her later transformation. She falls ever so softly into a new role within society that, at least publicly, indicates a miraculous change.

The hurts inflicted on Katherina and Shylock due to their social statuses are far-reaching. Not only are both successfully shamed by the no-holds-barred antics of the social elite, but both attempt to bring attention to their plights. Initially shamed by Petruchio, Katherina not only speaks out for her own shame, but for others who may be placed in similar circumstances:

He’ll woo a thousand, ’point the day of marriage,
Make friends, invite, and proclaim the banes,
Yet never means to wed where he hath woo’d.
Now must the world point at poor Katherine,
And say, “Lo, there is mad Petruchio’s wife,
If it would please him come and marry her!” (3.2.15-20)

Though he eventually shows for the wedding, Katherina speaks on behalf of all Petruchio’s possible victims, present and future, who may also be duped into accepting a marriage proposal and then be left to the mercy of piteous whispers.

For Shylock, his own design is turned topsy-turvy in the trial scene and the result is his ultimate shaming. Shylock’s incessant demand that Antonio repay the bond with a pound of his flesh thrusts him into the social institution of Venetian law,
which is developed on a lose-lose paradox for Shylock within the context of the play. That context is “to promise equal treatment to aliens in strengthening the economy and building foreign trade and to restrict that freedom when social policy deemed it necessary to do so” (Shapiro 189). Using his own bond against him, Portia can convict Shylock on the grounds of being an alien and can then force his conversion because he is a Jew. He is treated as both alien and Jew because he could not have, under Venetian law, been convicted as a Jew. Venetian law makes it impossible for Shylock to excel in an institution established by a society that only seeks to dominate him.

Shylock also makes a plea for the treatment of himself and his fellow Jews in Act 3. He asks his critics to treat him as they would anyone else, since his Jewishness makes him no different:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, Dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with The same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject To the same diseases, heal’d by the same means, Warm’d and cool’d by the same winter and summer, As a Christian is? (3.1.59-64).

The desperation in Shylock’s speech is evident, and perhaps serves as its motivation. Desperate to exact revenge on Antonio, he would likely say anything to that end. To compare himself to that which he so despises can be seen as a distraught, last-minute attempt at gaining favor or as a sincerely motivated opportunity to prove he does not
hate Christians, but he does hate being treated as substandard in comparison. Despite
the ambiguities aforementioned, these two speeches can be seen as whimpers from
the lower rungs of the social ladder.

Within the social institutions of marriage and the courthouse, Katherina and
Shylock share yet another parallel. Each becomes a metaphorical puppet, arranged
into an acceptable model to represent their lots within those institutions. In the hours
and days immediately following her wedding, Katherina is ignored and even
neglected by Petruchio until she conforms to his expectations. She is denied food,
sleep, and even appropriate clothing in which to attend Bianca’s wedding. Likewise,
Shylock’s pleas to receive the debt which is owed to him are denied over and over
again by the Duke and later Portia. Both are controlled by bonds as part of the larger
design of socially defined institutions. Katherina realizes her position as pawn when
she declares, “Belike you mean to make a puppet of me” (4.3.103) after
approximately forty lines of erratic behavior from Petruchio in which he berates his
servants, the tailor, and the haberdasher. Petruchio bounces from decision to
decision, constantly changing his mind while Katherina is manipulated. From one
moment to the next she doesn’t know whether she’ll be fed or clothed or allowed to
sleep. Shylock is also manipulated; throughout the trial scene Portia listens intently
to his claims and clarifies his position before using that position against him.

The puppet metaphors serve a larger purpose, however. Petruchio’s volatile
behavior forces Katherina to recognize his puppet-like control over her to the point
where she is able to recognize similar control from others and ultimately is able to
escape it. Petruchio arguably has mercy for Katherina, who is initially treated like a social deviant, and aims to free her from the shackles of social banishment. Shylock does not have the liberty of bouncing back from his position of the socially inferior Other because unlike Katherina, his classification is based on unchangeable characteristics of Jewishness, whereas hers is behavior-based. Once her behavior changes, she is treated differently.

Once the puppet masters have completed their work, Katherina and Shylock are set in motion to make their transformations. Since these transformations occur within social realms, a wedding reception and the Venetian courthouse, it is possible that they are valid only on the surface. Privately, Katherina may see herself as the victor, and though Shylock is forced to convert, the fact that he never returns to the play following the trial scene may indicate that the conversion is never enforced, and therefore, at least in private, he remains true to his Jewish faith. Again, these ambiguities will be discussed later, but for now the parallel remains that both Katherina and Shylock go through a transformation.

For Katherina, the transformation is from that of shrew to lady. Much removed from the ranting shrew Katherina is earlier in the play, she now shows tenderness and emits a sense of calm amidst the confusion Petruchio causes as he barks orders to servants. "I pray you, husband, be not so disquiet" (4.1.169). This is not the first time that Katherina has spoken on behalf of the berated servants. Earlier in the same scene, Grumio tells Curtis the story of how she wades through the mud, even after falling from her horse, to protect him from an angry master. Through his
wild antics, Petruchio helps to integrate Katherina into a society that once isolated her. Katherina’s figurative transformation means that same society will now embrace her new, conforming, gentler identity.

For Shylock, transformation comes in the form of a forced conversion, ironically the result of the case he so adamantly fights to win. On the contrary, Portia completely foils him, since as an alien he is subject to death for seeking the life of a Christian man. She uses the terms of his own bond against him, and to avoid death he must not only turn over his wealth upon his death, but he must also convert to Christianity. His transformation, or conversion, is therefore literal. The sentence leaves him virtually speechless for the first time, and once he exits the courtroom, he ceases to exist for the remainder of the play.

The fact that these two characters, based on their placement in their respective societies, have enough in common to establish parallels does not change the fact that even as social outcasts, Katherina outranks Shylock. Katherina’s contemporaries would have likely seen her transformation as favorable, as it corrects her behavior in the public’s eye and brings her within accepted boundaries for her station. Shylock would likely have been viewed unfavorably due to the accepted belief that Jews were physically and racially inferior to Christians, regardless of their station.

Labeled shrew or Jew respectively, characters like Katherina and Shylock challenge boundaries within which they are confined by society. Though the circumstances surrounding their positions of the socially inferior Other differ, the common experience they share as that Other unites them. The numerous parallels
between Katherina and Shylock speak to the greater struggle of the socially inferior as a faction within the greater societal structure. Those seen as Other are often dehumanized, as is seen with both characters.

It is imperative, though, to consider that the modern reader would have a different view from that of their Renaissance equivalents. Today, Katherina may be seen unfavorably if it is believed that she lets down her fellow woman in the struggle for equality. Conversely, modern readers may see Shylock in a favorable light due to a sense of pity due to the fact that Jews in our society are treated differently from those in Shakespeare's. As will be seen in the next chapter, rhetorical parallels, as part of the individuals' realm, help to further establish our understanding of these characters within the larger context of both plays.
Chapter Two:
Rhetorical Parallels in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice*

Both Katherina and Shylock fight a rhetorical battle in which they attempt to use language as a weapon to rebel against the Christian, male-dominated societies in which they exist. Katherina, who fights conformity and initially refuses to be subservient to her male counterpart, manipulates her use of language as the play progresses in order to suit her needs of the moment. Katherina first seeks acceptance from her father and later seeks consideration from Petruchio, though by her gender alone, she is entitled to neither. However, in her attempt to gain acceptance, and even love, from the men in her life, she fluctuates between angry tirades and pleas for acceptance until she becomes a master of her language to get what she wants.

When the reader first meets Katherina in Act 2 she is in a violent rage. She has Bianca’s hands tied, verbally bullies her, and even strikes her. When she is later introduced to Petruchio in the wooing scene, she is again abusive, though this time her abuse is entirely verbal. One explanation for this behavior is the embarrassment and jealousy with which she is faced, compliments of Baptista and Bianca. In spite of her tough exterior, Katherina gives us a glimpse into her pain on several occasions. Being reprimanded by her father, the dialogue between the two shows that Katherina feels inferior to Bianca, as Baptista admonishes the former while comforting the latter:
Why, how now, dame, whence grows this insolence?

Bianca, stand aside. Poor girl, she weeps.

Go ply thy needle, meddle not with her.

For shame, thou hilding of a devlish spirit,

Why dost thou wrong her that did ne’er wrong thee?

When did she cross thee with a bitter word? (2.1.23-28)

Baptista makes no qualms about shaming Katherina and singling her out as a “devlish spirit” who wrongs an innocent victim. Bianca’s taunting at the start of the scene, in which she insults her sister’s age and points out her probable jealousy, go unnoticed by Baptista, causing Katherina to plead for his sympathy and acceptance as an equally valued daughter: “Now I see / She is your treasure, she must have a husband; / I must dance barefoot on her wedding-day, / And for your love to her lead apes in hell” (2.1.31-34). Her criticism of Baptista not only contains the pleas of a daughter desperate for a father’s love; it also contains a sense of disappointment that she is mistreated by Baptista, Bianca, and others who dread her shrewish behavior, which is a likely cover for the pain she feels as a result of being the second-choice daughter and unlikely selection of any eligible bachelor. Baptista dotes on Bianca, a symbol of purity, while Katherina is left in the shadows, undefended by her father even when referred to as a “fiend of hell” (1.1.88).

Katherina is again shamed when Petruchio fails to arrive on time for their wedding. Like her father, Petruchio shows no consideration for her feelings and she again provides clues of the hurt and self pity she truly feels: “I told you, I, he was a
frantic fool, /Hiding his bitter jests in blunt behavior” (3.2.8-13). Katherina’s reference to his “bitter jest” indicates her belief that he is acting out of spite, which causes her to feel shamed and likely embarrassed. She is saddened that he would make such a mockery of her on such an important day. Again she is treated unjustly due to helplessness within this public, male-dominated realm, in which she has little power. As the play progresses, however, so does Katherina’s demeanor, and as will be discussed later, she debatably uses language to fight a rhetorical battle, though she shifts from active mode to passive mode in doing so.

Likewise, Shylock seeks just treatment in the Christian, male-dominated realm of the trial scene. For Shylock, the manipulation of the bonds’ terms is evident in Act 1 when he knowingly, or at least wishfully, creates a situation in which he will hold control over Antonio’s life. He demands equal treatment and for the terms of his bond to be upheld and Antonio forced to pay the pound of flesh. In his “hath not a Jew eyes” speech, Shylock pleads for all Jews:

If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. (3.1.66-71)

Shylock makes the mistake Katherina makes; he pleads his case in a realm in which he is seen as inferior. Both stand up against unfair and unequal treatment; however,
this does not detract from the fact that he and Katherina attempt to use rhetorical methods of drawing attention to their plights, even though the end result of those methods plays out differently.

Katherina and Shylock share one thing—the desire to be avenged for wrongs inflicted on them. Both are at the bottom of their respective social ladders—Katherina, at least for a time, for her shrewishness and Shylock for his Jewishness. The latter is suffered to fail in his scheme to gain revenge, while the former is arguably allowed victory, unlike Shylock who, in the end, is left alone, defeated, and figuratively killed via forced conversion. In contrast, Katherina’s position allows her to re-enter society.

In order for Katherina’s and Shylock’s rhetorical battles to occur, each must have an opponent, Petruchio and Portia respectively, and the victor is arguably determined by the character that has the final word. As Katherina and Shylock stand judged by others in their final scenes, has the rhetorical wit displayed throughout each play paid off, or are they merely laughing stocks?

The parallel between Katherina and Shylock exists because each one seeks fair treatment at a time during which shrews and Jews are socially inferior. In fact, Katherina could have expected to be formally charged, rather than just accused and gossiped about, as well as confined to the bridle. And though Shylock is indeed entitled to protection under the law that he does not receive, it is important to remember that amidst disguises, with Portia at the helm, Venice’s interest would be protected and he would never get a fair chance at trial.
Portia has the opportunity to display her intelligence via savvy legal rhetoric, which she uses to turn the tables on Shylock in order to free Antonio from the bond. Shylock’s plan to lend Antonio the money in the hopes he will be able to repay crumbles in the courtroom. Portia’s success in the social realm of the court hinges on two factors: that she would possess the aptitude to bring her plan full circle and that Shylock, like Petruchio, will give up on rhetorical competition and engage rather in personal agendas. Shylock’s obsession with exacting revenge on Antonio blinds him to the web Portia so cleverly weaves around him.

Wayne Rebhorn defines rhetoric as “the art of persuading others to do one’s bidding by means of words” (295) and the implied context of those words. During the trial scene, Portia combines demonstrative rhetoric with legal rhetoric. She first attempts to appeal to Shylock’s sense of mercy, and when that does not work, she moves forward with her plan to destroy him. Harold Goddard states, “She is subjected to the same test to which she has [earlier] submitted her suitors. Can she detect hidden gold under a leaden exterior?” (100). Ironically, she is incapable of showing Shylock mercy twice, which is proven by the sentence she imposes on him. Passing sentence on Shylock requires her to disregard her earlier speech about mercy and trade morality for victory.

Portia sets the stage to allow herself to move in for the final kill. She entreats the Jew’s sense of humanity, which, in Renaissance England would have been much like an oxymoron:
Therefore, Jew,

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,

That in the course of justice, none of us

Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,

And that same prayer doth teach us all to render

The deeds of mercy. (4.1.197-202)

Portia seems to incorporate dual messages within her address that are nearly
guaranteed to end in Shylock’s refusal to show mercy and allow her to carry out her
scheme. Though she asks for mercy, she also tells him to consider that salvation (for
Antonio) should not be intertwined with the seeking of justice. Of course, Shylock is
interested only in justice as a means for revenge, a scheme of his own in which mercy
has no place. Portia uses Shylock’s bond against him by enforcing it to the letter, as
he fatefully insists upon earlier. Shylock’s attempts to manipulate the terms of his
bond backfire and leave him defeated.

Following her victory, Portia says, “So doth the greater glory dim the less”
(5.1.93). What she means is that although she does have to make a sacrifice, the glory
of the win outshines and is worth it. What she sacrifices is her self-respect, since
when she is given the opportunity to show mercy on Shylock she refuses. Her
hypocrisy, though, seems of little importance to her given that her adversary is, after
all, a Jew in sixteenth century Venice; Shylock is facing re-entry into a society that
has excluded him for the better part of two hundred years.
Katherina and Portia share an intellectual ability to give significant speeches based on the social institutions in which each is fighting for rhetorical victory. They are capable of taking the idea of a bond—for Katherina that bond is marriage, and for Portia it is the case being tried—and turning it around on its creator to fashion success in these male-dominated realms. Katherina’s speech on marriage in Act 5 shows that she can bridge the gap between what she feels and what she reveals. Portia’s speech on mercy during the trial scene plays an important role in securing Shylock’s fate since she knowingly distracts him from his purpose, which under no circumstance would allow him to show mercy. She uses Shylock’s refusal to show mercy as a reason to deny him that same mercy later.

Though the presentations of their critical methods differ, Portia shares Katherina’s quick wit and discerning taste. Portia is similarly critical of the suitors who attempt to choose correctly from the three caskets. Her lack of interest is much more sincere, whereas there is room in Katherina’s banter with Petruchio to allow for her mental and even physical stimulation. The understated disinterest Portia reveals to Nerissa provides a different approach from Katherina’s bravado, though it is no less critical. She haughtily makes her feelings known about each of the six suitors Nerissa mentions in 1.2. She refers to the first as a colt for doing little else than speak of his horses, labels the second as a future “weeping philosopher...being so/full of unmannerly sadness in his youth” (49-50), says the third lacks any distinctive characteristics, and the fourth she refers to as “a dumb show” (73) meaning that he
looks the part but has no intelligence to speak of. She finishes off the final two with
equal haste, unwilling to consider any suitor other than Bassanio.

Since the bond of womanhood between Katherina and Portia would be
stronger than that of Otherness between Katherina and Shylock, it seems appropriate
that the rhetorical parallels between Katherina and Portia would have more depth.
They are alike in two ways: both are overly critical, perhaps even spiteful, toward
potential suitors (a testament to their rhetorical know-how), and both give impressive
speeches in connection to the social institutions in which each is fighting for
rhetorical victory. As stated earlier, each meets her success within those
institutions—marriage and the court—by turning tables.

Though the act of public speaking is part of the male realm, rhetoric itself,
associated with the Greek goddess Peithos (Persuasion), is of the feminine realm. The
rhetorical success of the female heroines is rooted in the very definition of rhetoric as
stated earlier. If Katherina means to persuade Petruchio to stop acting like a madman,
she certainly does manipulate her language in order to give the semblance of having
become the shrew who is tamed. Portia is also rhetorically successful. Her aim is to
make Shylock admit that the bond must be followed to the letter. When she reveals
her strategy—that Shylock may take the flesh to which he is entitled, but taking a
single drop of blood will be cause for his arrest—she has persuaded everyone of
Antonio’s victory.

Neither Katherina nor Portia have the ability to supercede their male
counterparts in social realms. Katherina must wear a figurative mask, while Portia
must be disguised as a male just to be allowed to participate in the trial scene. Therefore, if they are to take any type of control within the social realm, they must do so via their manipulation of language, and since Petruchio aims to control Katherina by using his social status rather than rhetoric, and since Portia uses Shylock's inferiority to defeat him, the women are allowed to shine in the rhetorical arena.

According to Rebhorn, “If rhetoric is not the means for men to rule others...it turns out to be the means for women...to resist and even subvert men’s rule, thereby gaining a measure of control over those whose superior position is owed not to rhetoric, but to social traditions, laws, and physical force” (313). The success of Katherina’s rhetoric is reliant on two things. The first is her own ability to possess rhetorical prowess. She certainly establishes her worthiness as an opponent in her first meeting with Petruchio. The second is dependent on Petruchio’s failed rhetoric. Due to the fact that he relies on physical force and social traditions to control Katherina once they are married, he no longer uses language as a means of control because Katherina has already perceivably removed the cause of doing so; he has nothing to tame. Rebhorn notes that “her ‘conversion’ enables Katherine to do what she has really wanted...to play the role of orator” (323). Since she has apparently beaten him at the language game, he uses his social position, something with which Katherina has no chance of competing. She does, however, have the opportunity to learn from Petruchio, which once she does, she uses her new knowledge to her own benefit to seal the status of her rhetorical victory.
In her first meeting with Petruchio, Katherina establishes herself as a worthy opponent to his sharpness. The rhetorical battle between Katherina and Petruchio is recognized by Dash, who says, “Petruchio’s wooing of Katherina is a contest of wits... the swift retorts that Petruchio and Katherina throw at one another... set these two characters apart as worthy foils for one another and demonstrate the intelligence and quick wit of Katherina” (47). As the plot unfolds and the two are married, Katherina becomes less verbal, a trait she will later shed in Act 4 on the road back to Padua, and more observant. On the trip to Baptista’s, their first public outing since their own wedding, Katherina and Petruchio engage in a second round of banter, though this one is more playful and less aggressive than their first. The revelation Katherina makes through her dialogue is that she has acquired a more complete sense of how to rise above her social superior.

What she has learned from observing Petruchio’s earlier antics with the tailor and the haberdasher is that if she refuses to “crumple and become compliant... she has retained her sense of self” (Dash 56), but if she is compliant, she is able to foil his rantings and subsequently remove any rhetorical power he might have over her. This forces his control back to the public realm, where it is unavoidable and where it belongs. On the other hand, it also allows her success, since she is not only permitted, but encouraged, to engage in rhetorical exchange with Hortensio’s widow, and later her final speech that not only secures her position atop the rhetorical mountain, but also seals her rhetorical success. She has conquered both the social and individual realms. On one hand, her final speech can be seen as genuine, in which
case she has been tamed and is therefore primed for return into the public’s good graces. On the other hand, the speech can be seen as an equally over-the-top performance as was her first meeting with Petruchio where she undoubtedly proved herself capable of verbal equality. And just to sweeten the deal for her, this final speech not only paints her as an angel, but makes an obvious reversal of roles with Bianca, who is suddenly seen as the shrew. The introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew* in the Riverside edition notes that the “Katherina of Act 1 is not really dissimilar from Katherina of Act 5: at the beginning of the comedy she is persecuting her sister Bianca, and at the end she is engaged in precisely the same activity” (139). Arguably, to Katherina’s glory, she has found a method for attacking Bianca without facing the collective scowl of society.

To argue that Katherina achieves rhetorical success must require acknowledgement that this success comes at a very high price. Kahn states, “[The] only way of maintaining her inner freedom is by outwardly denying it” (48). A woman of pride, Katherina must make the sacrifice of reconciling her outside, public self with her inside, private self if she is to outwit Petruchio. What she gains in return, though, is the best of both worlds. One can assume that “if she will just fall in with her husband’s absurdist whim, accept his maddest perversion of the truth as truth, she can take the wind completely out of his sails, deprive his weapon of its power” (Goddard 52). Through this revelation she is accepted into society and she has gained expertise in exercising a new, socially approved language, which allows her to display her intelligence. However, the reader can not make an informed
assumption about Katherina’s private thoughts. She has no soliloquy in the entire
play, and since a soliloquy offers a glimpse into the innermost thoughts of a
characters’ mind, the reader misses this element in Katherina. We are forced to rely
solely on her social interactions with others in understanding her character.

Whether she is sincere or simply excited by the challenge Petruchio presents
for her, Katherina is nonetheless spiteful at their first meeting, proving her rhetorical
savvy. In 2.1.182-278 Katherina goes blow for blow with Petruchio and proves she
can sling insults just as easily as he can. Of these ninety-six lines, they are divided so
that Katherina occupies about one-third and Petruchio two-thirds; however, her sharp
tongue is evident here because despite the discrepancy in lines, she manages to volley
insults successfully with Petruchio. Katherina’s sharp tongue gets to the point with
quick comebacks like “No cock of mine, you crow too like a craven” (227), “If I be
waspish, best beware my sting” (210), and “A witty mother! Witless else her son”
(264). She makes a quick decision to put her sharp tongue into motion. In just three
lines she has minimized his effectiveness with language, threatened him with her
“sting,” and insulted his wit.

It is important to remember that rhetoric is defined as one person’s ability to
manipulate words and persuade another to do his bidding because it provides the one
standard that must be met in order to determine one’s success or failure. It is the use
of this standard by which Petruchio and Shylock are deemed rhetorical failures. By
Petruchio’s own admission, he aims to deprive Katherina of basic human needs until
she submits to his control. “My falcon now is sharp and passing empty, / And till she
stoop, she must not be full-gorg’d” (4.1.190-92). The falcon reference represents his intent to train her, as a falconer would a bird. He knows her hunger will eventually force her to submit, so though he may attain her due to swift rhetoric, he does not change her via the same means. “Once Petruchio has been identified as playing the role of rhetor in order to woo Katherine his success with her is not really due to rhetoric at all” (Rebhorn 295). In the wooing scene, his words are sharp, but his actions are not. In the scene in his country home the converse is true; his actions are sharp, but his words are not, especially when they are directed to her. Instead of relying on his clever rhetoric as he does in the wooing scene, he utilizes his position as social superior to control her.

Since he does not meet the criterion for rhetorical success—he does not convince Katherina to change her behavior using verbal persuasion—he must resort to physical persuasion. He has, essentially, forfeited. In his defense, Petruchio’s failure in rhetoric is based on the fact that he does not need it for the purpose for which it is initially designed. He does possess rhetorical savvy, which helps create that parallel between them (as will be discussed), but it does not dominate her.

Shylock doesn’t so much forfeit as he loses focus. He is so driven by revenge, that the absolute language of the bond, which he insists entitles him to a pound of Antonio’s flesh, is flawlessly used to defeat him. By Act 4, Shylock is no longer consciously using the rhetorical plan he devises when the bond is first entered into in Act 1. His desperation causes him to boldly challenge the legal process, but as Bernard Grabanier states, Shylock “has nothing to say of the old charges of anti-
Semitism...because they were false” (231). Earlier he repeats his reasons for hating Antonio—that he has endured humiliation with patience. He reminds Antonio, “You call me disbeliever, cut-throat dog, / And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,” (1.3.111-12) revealing his source of hatred for Antonio as shame he’s been forced to endure by him based on his Jewishness. He is determined to collect the pound of flesh out of revenge he claims is based on humiliation. But in the courtroom, he abandons these reasons for others, which due to the time, would win him no sympathy in court. He is simply spewing anything he believes will suit his purpose in the moment, but to no avail. He fails to persuade the Duke or Portia to award him the pound of flesh in a way that will not leave him convicted of murder. Though Shylock is a rhetorical failure, so, arguably, is the socially dominant Petruchio; the two unlikely heroines, Katherina and Portia, however, prove to be rhetorical successes.

The foursome can be divided into male and female pairs. The women experience rhetorical success—Portia by convicting Shylock and freeing Antonio, and Katherina by conforming and thereby diffusing Petruchio’s madness—while the men experience rhetorical failure. The parallels between Katherina and Portia and between Petruchio and Shylock illustrate the differences in their rhetoric that allow for their respective successes and failures. It should be noted, however, that these are not only dependent on the characters’ own language, but also on how each uses language in their interactions with others. Although Katherina and Shylock share the common bond of being perceived as Other, Katherina has re-entered into society while Shylock has continuously been shunned from it. “[Kate] has found a way of
using language which reconciles her to her society” (Novy 23). She controls her language and molds it to fit neatly within her socially assigned role. Conversely, Shylock lacks all control and his focus on revenge blinds him as he falls prey to Portia’s legal rhetoric. Also, “[Katherina] is involved in a contest of verbal wit. Her words reveal new insights into the differences among human beings” (Dash 59). On this premise, although Katherina and Shylock do share rhetorical characteristics, in the end Katherina is more rhetorically savvy, while Shylock becomes a victim of that same quality in Portia.

Despite all the talk of ambiguity in Katherina’s speech, when it comes to Petruchio there is a completely different set of parameters in place by which to establish textual parallels. The rhetorical similarities that exist between the new husband-wife super team are based on a teamwork mentality and establish the couple as a joint force: Although they begin on opposite sides of the rhetorical boxing ring, they eventually find neutral ground where they can each bask in their new role within the marriage.

Upon their first meeting Petruchio acknowledges Katherina’s worthiness as an opponent, which later makes her an even worthier teammate. He tells Baptista, “They [Katherina] do consume the thing that feeds their fury” (2.1.133) meaning that one’s pride has been met with the other’s, and the two will cancel each other out, leaving them on equal footing. Before they can reach this point, however, they must strut around one another, displaying their confidence the way a peacock may attract its mate based on similar rituals. Despite the fact that Petruchio premeditates his routine,
and plans to talk in opposites to the end of maddening Katherina, his rhetoric is easily matched by hers and he sees something in her that no one else has yet to notice. He tells Baptista, “Father, ‘tis thus: yourself and all the world, That talk’d of her, have talk’d amiss of her. If she be curst, it is for policy” (2.1.290-92). He insists that her shrewishness is for show only and will not present a conflict once they are married.

Petruchio advances from the position of playing rhetorical games at the expense of Katherina to playing them along with her. Marianny Novy says, “The game context permits Petruchio and Katherine to modulate from antagonists to co-creators of a new world” (26). They are equally skilled in their comments on Vincentio’s disguise; a skill likely learned by Katherina from Petruchio’s earlier performance with the tailor and haberdasher. Also, their antics regarding the real and disguised Vincentio in the final act on the road to Padua solidify their coming together as equals, figuratively through their rhetoric, and literally as they entreat one another to engage in rhetoric for sport. “Prithee, Kate, let’s stand aside and see the end of this controversy” (5.1.61-62) is followed by scene’s end with, “Husband, let’s follow, to see the end of this ado” (5.1.142). Their coming together in jest is followed by their first moment of sincere affection with their public kiss. Although Petruchio kisses her at their wedding, it is sloppily done and resisted by Katherina. Here the kiss is mutual and serves to finally consummate the marriage.

To argue Petruchio’s triumph in the contest of the final scene is to ignore the mutual respect gained in the previous scene. After all, Katherina seems to jump at the opportunity to use her new skills to reverse the tables and paint Bianca and the widow
in shrewish light. She could just as easily have ignored the command to approach Petruchio and embarrassed him the way Hortensio and Lucentio were. The fact that she doesn’t shows that the rhetorical parallels of this wit-driven couple are the strongest of the three pairs.

Even so, there are many uncertainties within the rhetorical interaction that takes place between Katherina, Petruchio, Portia, and Shylock that must be examined through *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* as a means of meeting two final challenges: understanding the ambiguities as a result of modern interpretation, and reconsidering the classification problems faced by both plays due to the same issue of modern interpretation.
Chapter Three:

The Problem of Interpretation and Classification for the Modern Reader

How do the ambiguities contained within the interactions in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* challenge our interpretations of these works? Further, what are the problems that arise for each regarding their classifications as comedies? Certainly our views regarding these texts are skewed by modern perspective. Although we share similarities with the English Renaissance’s patriarchal structure, surely we have evolved over centuries, leaving interpretations of works more than four centuries removed from their original contexts somewhat skewed.

Did Shakespeare intend for his audience to sympathize with characters like Katherina and Shylock, or is sympathy a modern reader’s need? Many critics would agree that Shakespeare prompts his audience to question social traditions and established, accepted norms of society. Dash points out, “In contrast to [Bianca] was the dark, caustic-tongued, less ‘pretty’ woman, often characterized as the shrew...and although Shakespeare endows [Katherina] with the outer characteristics of a shrew, he reveals her worth, forcing his audience to question the Renaissance formula of worth being equivalent to beauty” (43), or as in Shylock’s case, the formula of religion being equivalent to worth. The problem, of course, is that social traditions and accepted norms change, and inevitably so do interpretations of his works.
By magnifying behaviors regarded as taboo, Shakespeare lays society out for dissection, and while vulnerably exposed to ever-judging eyes, the problem which results is the problem of current perspective as the only perspective. The problem with modern interpretations of the texts is that they are plagued by possibilities, due to the discrepancy between the context in which they were written and the context in which they are read, which makes it seemingly impossible to offer a fair criticism. Therefore, it is imperative for the modern reader to move away from the far reaches of black and white boundaries and allow the texts to be examined from a greyer middle ground.

To further complicate the task of the modern reader, the absence of soliloquies for either Katherina or Shylock means that we are offered no glimpse into their most private, inner thoughts. Since Shakespeare fails to provide the reader with this advantage, we can only consider what they say and do in their interactions with others, which blows holes in most criticisms of the texts because action and language are so often contradicted by the characters. Without the insight offered via soliloquy, there is much room available for multiple, equally valid interpretations to be made.

For Katherina, as will also be discussed later in relation to Shylock, the order of appearances and the possibility of audience sympathy within each of those appearances is significant in relation to criticism. In Act 1, when Katherina is first introduced, she is calm, yet seems hurt at her father's treatment of her as a business deal. Here we have two issues: one of the modern perspective that takes Katherina's side and views Baptista's negotiations of her as business-like, and another of the
Renaissance perspective which would have seen this as business-as-usual dealings. The former allows sympathy for Katherina and the latter would not.

The next time she is introduced is in Act 2; she is involved in a fit of rage against Bianca, in which she has tied her hands, has verbally berated her, and has even physically struck her. Her actions here only confirm earlier accusations of her shrewish, cursed behavior. This would likely be enough evidence, at this point in the play, for most any audience to lose sympathy for Katherina.

It is in a subsequent scene, however, where Renaissance and modern audiences will likely split again in their willingness to either sympathize with Katherina or to simply accept her treatment as par for the course. Her wedding scene in Act 3 would likely gain Katherina sympathy with the modern reader. She is undoubtedly shamed by Petruchio’s late arrival. She corrects Lucentio, saying that no one but she should feel shamed:

No shame but mine. I must forsooth be forc’d

To give my hand oppos’d against my heart

Unto a mad-brain rudesby full of spleen,

Who woo’d in haste, and means to wed at leisure. (3.2.8-11)

She gains sympathy from a modern reader because her language here is sincere, which leads to an interesting flaw—if she really is resistant to the marriage, as she earlier indicates, she would likely be relieved when he doesn’t show, not distraught. This discrepancy between language and action is the first of many which leaves a modern reader wondering if Katherina should be taken at her word, or if there is
cause to burrow further into her meaning. She creates a fog which never seems to reveal her true feelings, yet never seems to hide them either.

A Renaissance audience, though, may fail to see cause for sympathy, as Petruchio acts in accordance with his rights. Coppelia Kahn notes, “The overt force Petruchio wields over Kate by marrying her [seemingly] against her will in the first place and then by denying her every wish and comfort, by stamping, shouting, reducing her to exhaustion, etc., is but farcical representation of the psychological realities of marriage in Elizabethan England” (45). In fact, some of the guests find much humor in his antics, as Biondillo takes great care to describe Petruchio’s appearance with excited detail in twenty itemized lines.

Even after the wedding and their subsequent move to Petruchio’s home in Verona, the Renaissance audience would likely view Petruchio’s treatment of his new wife as necessary to her taming, while a modern audience can see that his attempts to dominate Katherina are unnecessary and therefore feel sympathetic for the way she is treated. With spousal abuse being thrust into the spotlight in recent years by events such as the O.J. Simpson trial, it is difficult to read of Katherina’s deprivation of food and sleep without making a connection to abuse. For a Renaissance audience there might be a different awareness of what we deem abusive, making the problem of perspective a hurdle for the modern reader to overcome.

While some critics believe that Petruchio has succeeded in taming the shrew and securing not only her dowry but also her submission, others believe that Katherina has in fact emerged the victor and has succeeded in taming Petruchio in an
ironic twist. From their first meeting in the wooing scene of Act 2 to the final scene in Act 5, the banter between Katherina and Petruchio is teeming with dualities. In each of three significant scenes—the wooing scene, the scene at Petruchio’s home, and the final competition scene—evidence can be found to support both sides.

In the wooing scene Petruchio undoubtedly unleashes a blast of rhetorical insults Katherina’s way and she fires back skillfully:

PETRUCHIO. ‘Twas told me you were rough and coy and sullen,
And now I find report a very liar;
For thou art pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous,
But slow in speech, yet sweet as spring-time flowers. (2.1.243-246)

This seeming compliment is undone when Petruchio attacks her slowness in speech, as he attempts to downplay her quick wit. She, in turn, fires back, and the two continue the exchange of words:

KATHERINE. Where did you study all this goodly speech?

PETRUCHIO. It is extempore, from my mother-wit.

KATHERINE. A witty mother! witless else her son.

PETRUCHIO. Am I not wise?

KATHERINE. Yes, keep you warm. (2.1.262-265)

Although in Shakespeare’s England Katherina’s quick tongue would classify her as a shrew, from a modern perspective she is seen as witty and intelligent. She is undaunted by Petruchio’s position over her; in fact they recognize one another’s verbal skills and then use those strengths as points of attack. Petruchio does this first
when he implies that she is slow of speech, indicating that she is less witty than he. He tells her she is less of a challenge than expected and that she doesn’t live up to his expectations. Katherina is next when she asks him where he has studied his speech, implying that he must have practiced, as he seems incapable of improvisation.

Insofar as the debate between whether they experience an initial attraction to one another or if Katherina is just a shrew who will ultimately learn her place and submit to her husband, there is, of course, evidence to support both sides. Although she swears to see Petruchio hanged before she will see him on the wedding day he’s declared, something in earlier conversation with him indicates that she has admiration for him. In line 265, she indicates that Petruchio has shown enough wisdom to keep warm. The textual note says this is an allusion to the “proverbial ‘wit enough to keep oneself warm’ (cf. ‘sense enough to come in out of the rain’)” (Shrew 154). In this regard, the comment can be seen as a compliment to him.

However, to look more closely at the language used, it is possible to uncover more clues in the mystery as to whether or not she is being dominated or if both are willing participants in a battle of wits. At this first meeting, Petruchio insists on referring to her as “Kate,” and as Manuel Garcia points out, “[She] immediately shows her aversion to being addressed in this way, for it places her in an inferior position to that of Petruchio” (6). She immediately corrects him and insists that those who know her call her Katherine.

According to Manuel Garcia, there are three implications behind his use of “Kate” based on definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary. The name refers to: a
term of contempt for a human being, one who scratches, or a spiteful, backbiting woman; a prostitute; and a dialect name for several species of finches (6). The first two definitions are obviously unflattering, but Garcia’s explanation of the third shows how it, too, is a contemptuous attempt for Petruchio to intimidate Katherina. He explains that in Shakespeare’s day it was common to use bird names in European languages as a form of amorous address, but that “in context of a dialogue between virtual strangers, the use of such terms is inappropriate and therefore offensive to the woman addressed” (6). If one were to just consider that Petruchio refers to her as “Kate” twelve times in just eight lines (2.1.182-90), they may be so blinded by the exaggeration they may not notice the very important times when he refers to her as “Katherine.”

Evidence that Petruchio indeed has the utmost respect for Katherina and seriousness regarding the marriage can be found in the fact that he uses “Kate” in banter but “Katherine” regarding the issues of their marriage or sex.

Marry, so I mean, sweet Katherine, in thy bed;
And therefore setting all this chat aside,
Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented
That you shall be my wife; your dow’ry ‘greed on;
And will you, nill you, I will marry you. (2.1.266-71)

Though his proposal is not the most romantic, and though he eagerly goes back to using “Kate” in the very next line, his use of her full name with respect to the marriage indicates his attention to this important detail. It is likely that Katherina also
takes notice of this detail given her earlier insistence on being called by her full name. While modern readers may be swayed to see Petruchio as an unromantic buffoon, his contemporaries would have accepted his naming of the negotiations in the proposal, as marriage was essentially a bargain. It is the modern reader who wishes for Katherina to experience romance in association with marriage.

In the wooing scene one important thing happens: Petruchio and Katherina develop a level of respect for each other without leaving themselves vulnerable to the other. In many regards, that respect is carried over into the scene at Petruchio’s home following their wedding. Though Petruchio rants and raves at his servants, acts raucously, and controls her every move as part of his grand design, there is one thing he does not do; Petruchio does not claim his sexual right to his new wife and consummate the marriage, and “Petruchio’s respect for Kate’s right to ownership of her body...eventually becomes an important key in their relationship” (Dash 37). Petruchio may be stark raving mad on the surface, but there is a line that he never crosses, and it must be assumed that since his social position would allow him to cross without consequence, he chooses not to, therefore establishing respect.

Whether their relationship is one of equality or dominance still remains questionable, since on their wedding day Petruchio engages in a series of bizarre events beginning when he delivers a soliloquy revealing his plan to tame Katherina’s shrewish ways. However, the possibility is very real that she allows him to believe he has succeeded in his quest to tame her. Though she eventually does concede to him in exchange for a meal, by doing so she has stolen his power over her by giving him
nothing to tame. Her attitude, arguably, is that of “If I must be tamed, it will be of my own doing, and not his.”

What’s important to point out here is that by play’s end, Katherina still possesses some of the qualities that make her a shrew in earlier acts. According to Frances Dolan, one of the most important defining characteristics of a shrew is that she uses her tongue as a weapon (57). The difference between Katherina’s character early on and at the end is that she now utilizes that characteristic in a way that allows her a platform to use rhetoric to her advantage. Following Petruchio’s victory in the competition to determine who—the widow, Bianca, or she—will report to her husband when summoned, the speech she delivers in the final scene is the single most cited piece of evidence in both sides of the “has Kate been tamed” debate.

The question becomes, “Is [their spiritual intimacy] the result of Kate’s submission to Petruchio’s will, or does it grow from the mutual respect of two unconventional characters?” (Dash 35). On one side, she certainly is convincing! Gary Schneider examines the cycle by which Katherina is “publicized” and considers the relationship between marriage, social customs, public rituals, and shame. According to him, “for a woman to be publicized means to be confronted with the social role appropriate to her gender and class—one which is informed by patriarchy” (236). He maintains that Katherina is indeed publicized through her marriage to Petruchio.

Based on this theory, Schneider argues that it is not possible, like many critics believe, for Katherina and Petruchio to behave one way in public (appearing to
conform to social norms) and another way in private (Katherina asserting her independence). He gives two reasons: one is that the total taming process is comprised of both public and private shaming, and the other is that it relies on “reading outside the bounds of the play, imagining an extra-textual existence for Kate and Petruccio” (239). Instead, he suggests that in *The Taming of the Shrew*, marriage rituals are associated with shaming rituals, and that marriage rituals are both public (ceremony) and private (consummation). He goes on to say that the process of taming Katherina is intertwined with public shame (the wedding) and can be achieved through privacy (their movement to Petruchio’s country house). He also states what so many critics believe, that Katherina’s “punning verbal excess is neutralized and transformed into a rather dry, expansive, patriarchalized rhetoric” (257). It is at this point when the problem of interpretation is often recognized. To read the text on the flat page, surely it appears that Katherina has conformed. However, one must also wonder how this scene might play out on stage. The question then becomes how would her speech in the final act be perceived differently if she were shouting it? And with that consideration comes the possibility that Katherina does not conform, but in fact does use sarcasm and understatement as she presents herself as a devoted, loving, and tamed wife.

What’s more, Katherina has already proven her rhetorical prowess earlier in the wooing scene, making it feasible that this final speech is an equally over-the-top performance as was her first in the wooing scene. What Petruchio has done is “gained her outward compliance in the form of public display, while her spirit
remains mischievously free” (Kahn 49). Of course, here the language has been glorified to elevate Petruchio, but then again it is important to consider that by doing so, she may sacrifice her own sense of pride, but she finds worth in the end. By appearing tamed here, she can revel in the opportunity to exact revenge on Bianca by turning the tables and making her out to be the shrewish one.

Also, in Petruchio’s explanation to the others who wonder at Katherina’s sudden obedience, he says, “Marry, peace it bodes, and love, and quiet life,/An aweful rule, and right supremacy;/And to be short, what not, that’s sweet and happy” (5.2.108-10). Petruchio’s explanation is brief but holds much importance in the play’s interpretation. Claiming her obedience brings them peace and love, he also says it brings “order commanding respect.” This can be translated to mean that it is the orderliness that can now be found within their home that commands the respect of others.

*The Merchant of Venice* also asks its contemporary audience to consider the way modern interpretations conflict with the original context of the play. John Brown reminds us that “Shylock is a Jew and therefore, for an Elizabethan audience, one of an exotic, fabulous race to whom cunning, malice, and cruelty were natural satisfactions; Jews lived obscurely...fit only to be reviled or mocked” (89). There is no stigma attached to the ways in which Shylock is treated by his Christian adversaries because in Shakespeare’s England, the Jew was viewed as the socially inferior Other. The modern reader’s desire to attach a stigma to the way Shylock is treated is what causes a conflict with the original context of the play.
If the play is read in the context of Renaissance England, the reader would find little cause to show sympathy towards Shylock. The modern reader, however, may view his character much differently. As with Katherina, there is significance in the appearances Shylock makes. As a credible human being he may warrant sympathy. After all, he does have a legitimate claim, albeit anomalous, against Antonio. Yet Shylock personifies irrational hatred, making it somewhat difficult to fully sympathize with his character. For example, in Act 3 Shylock divulges the truth behind his revenge. “He reveals that it is only matters of money which cause his hatred” (Grebanier 226), which has nothing to do with the Jew/Christian conflict he earlier attributes to his humiliation suffered at the hands of Antonio.

Speaking to the issue of modern perceptions blurring original contexts, Shapiro cites:

It is understandable that most of those who have written on the subject[of Jews in Elizabethan literature] have had the modern Jewish question in mind; but this has had an unfortunate effect on scholarship, for it has tended to push modern reactions to modern anti-Semitism into a past where they do not apply. (77)

Shapiro indicates that a reader’s entire lifetime of experience be ignored in relation to texts whose interpretations are so firmly planted on deep-rooted traditions. Since it is virtually impossible to separate the two contexts of past and present—for critical readers must not make the mistake of considering only their own understanding of the world in context to the work, but they must also consider the social context in which
the work was written—it seems most sensible to welcome multiple interpretations based on contexts then and now. After all, the beauty of good literature is not only its ability to spark debate, but its ability to do so while spanning the ages.

In James Shapiro’s *Shakespeare and the Jews*, he notes that even though Jews were not accepted in Renaissance England, they also were not brutalized, attacked, forced into conversion, forced into ghettos, and burned alive as they were in other parts of Europe (11). The problem for the modern reader is that the brutalization of Jews centuries later across Europe is so ingrained on the conscience that it is difficult, if not impossible, to read *The Merchant of Venice* and not take pity on Shylock. Evidence lies in the answer to the questions, “Would we also pity him if he were a different kind of victim? What if he were Christian?” Likely the response is no; Shylock is pitied by modern readers only because of his Jewishness. In his critical essay, J. Middleton Murray says, “The decency of an age...prevails over the design of an isolated bitterness” (40). This, in turn, makes it difficult to accept the play as a comedy, but if the twenty-first century perception of Jews’ treatment in history were removed from the reader’s conscience, it would be much easier to justify the play as a comedy.

Ambiguities and blurred lines are an unavoidable effect of reading with twenty-first century goggles. By accepting that a work such as *The Merchant of Venice* must be approached with a dual mentality, and that the equal rights mentality of modern interpretations will inevitably conflict with the original context, one is still
left with the problem of classification, since the challenge of these works is less of analysis and more of judgment.

The same problem of modern interpretations conflicting with the original context of the work arises with categorization. To allow for both then and now interpretations must also allow room to challenge their classification as comedies. If read strictly with a “then” perspective, each play certainly meets the description of comedy. But to read with a “now” perspective must also mean to challenge its classification.

In *The Merchant of Venice* one view is that Shakespeare portrays Shylock as vengeful and vindictive. If this is the case, “the play ends, pleasantly and with formality” (Granville-Barker 80). Shylock has received his just desserts and the happy ending ensues. Another view is that Shakespeare defends Jews by painting Shylock as deserving of sympathy. “The controlling viewpoint is not that of the eye of Heaven, but that of enlightened human feeling” (Brown 104), which supports the difficulty in categorizing the play as a comedy. Human feelings and emotions make it difficult for the modern reader to recognize the humor that Shakespeare’s contemporaries would have enjoyed.

Classifying *The Merchant of Venice* as a tragedy would help purge readers’ guilt regarding treatment of Jews throughout history. Like other tragic heroes of literature, Shylock elicits simultaneous contradictory judgments. According to Grebanier “it would be fair to say that few great comedies venture so precariously near the borderline of tragedy as does *The Merchant of Venice*” (202). Being forced
to convert is like a figurative death for Shylock, which would then move the play into the tragedy category.

Similar problems arise for *The Taming of the Shrew* in terms of categorization. Shakespeare toys with the traditional structure of a comedy by marrying his hero and heroine in Act 3. However, since Katherina and Petruchio do not initially consummate the marriage, they reserve the fulfillment of this requirement for later. In 5.1 their kiss is affectionate and intimate and "marks their new relationship" (Dash 60), leaving the structure of the comedy intact after all.

One must still be willing to consider re-categorization, though, since the play "just does not fit neatly into conventional modes of classification" (Huston 74). The qualities *The Taming of the Shrew* possesses are: physical violence; abrupt changes in motivation; confusion of time sequences, names, and places; strange comings and goings; and sudden and easy satisfaction of desires (Huston 77). These are hardly characteristic of Shakespeare’s other comedies with qualities such as tom-foolery, magic, and reconciliations in which everyone escapes virtually unscathed.

Marion Perret’s article "Petruchio: The Model Wife" addresses the ambiguity that remains at play’s end: “Only through the experience of obeying...does Kate discover that what [Petruchio] wants is not servile acquiescence, which would confine her, but co-operation, which will free them both” (230). Perhaps it’s not so much that Petruchio teaches Katherina a lesson as he frees her from misery, and, as Gremio suggests, her “Petruchio is Kated” (3.2.45).
Conclusion

With sixteenth century Venice as a backdrop for both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and placement within the societal hierarchy which faced many changes during this time largely based on factors such as gender or religion, it is intriguing to examine the role of the socially inferior Other, who resisted conformity and used language as an agent of change to traverse boundaries, though not always successfully.

Socially defined roles in relation to gender and religion are challenged by the savvy rhetoric contained in each play, and it is that rhetoric that leaves a modern reader unsatisfied with two things: whether these plays are truly comedies, and due to the suspicion of the texts, can a reader absolutely analyze them without leaving gaping holes in their position? Indeed, these works can only be analyzed from multiple angles. To look at either of them from a singular perspective not only cheats the text, but the reader is cheated, as well.

Confining either of these texts to the boundaries of comedy would require the complete disregard of the experiences a modern critic brings to the reading. Surely, Shakespeare’s audience, based on the social structure of the time, would have found more comedy in them than one may find in today’s culture, where equal treatment is promised to all people regardless of gender or religion. Also, ambiguities intertwined within each play are much too prominent to ignore, and combined with the interference of twenty-first century intellect, they must be incorporated into analyses.
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