

Gender Roles and Religion in *Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice*
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In *Taming of the Shrew*, Katherine's reputation throughout Padua as an angry ballbuster precedes her. She does not hold her tongue for anyone, proves violent if provoked enough, and demonstrates wit, independence, and intelligence in a time when women, considered mere extension of their husbands, were expected to be subservient and docile. For someone unfamiliar with Elizabethan England's cultural and social history, Katherine is a woman ahead of her time. Meanwhile, Petruchio is every bit the male chauvinist. In the first Act, he makes clear his intention to Hortensio "...to wive it wealthily in Padua" (*Taming of the Shrew* 1.2.72). That is, his mission is to marry a wealthy woman, regardless of if she is "old as Sibyl," (1.2.67) "curst and shrewd," (1.2.67) or "as rough / As are the swelling Adriatic seas" (1.2.71-72). By all accounts you have an honorable albeit mean and angry woman. While her personality may leave something to desire, she is, at least honest. She will not play according to society's rules. She refuses to feign ignorance, obey her father when his wishes go against her core convictions, humor any suitors who dare to look her way, or marry simply to clear the way for her sister to take a husband. Her autonomy is rooted in the fact that she would remain a single "shrew" for the right reasons than a married woman for the wrong ones. A twenty-first-century student would find that an admirable quality—one worth preserving at all costs.

So, for Petruchio to not only arrogantly tell Katherine "...I am he am born to tame you, Kate. / And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate / Comfortable as other household Kates" (2.1.168-170), but also to actually succeed in doing so, a student might conclude that Shakespeare has aligned himself with Petruchio and advocates the notion that strong women must have their spirits broken by stronger men.

In the *Merchant of Venice*, I would imagine that a twenty-first-century student might find Shakespeare's storyline to be antisemitic. Shylock, cast as the antagonist, is very much an offensive stereotype of a Jewish businessman. Old, miserly, usurious, cunning, and inflexible. And, Antonio, cast as the protagonist, verbally abuses Shylock and his religion with seemingly no consequence. In Act 1, Scene 3, Shylock reminds Antonio of his misdeeds: "You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog. / And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine" (*Merchant of Venice* 1.2.120-122). Even Shylock's daughter Jessica, who elopes with Lorenzo and converts to Christianity is ridiculed. Launcelot says, "This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs" (3.5.22-23).

At the play's end, Antonio suffers no consequences. He is not made to pay back his debt to Shylock with his life—or pound of flesh—despite agreeing to those terms. He never apologizes or shows an iota of remorse for his behavior toward Shylock, and his ships do not, in fact, sink. Shylock, on the other hand, loses his daughter, loses part of his estate as a penalty for trying to collect on the bond, and he must convert to Christianity?! One might conclude that because Shakespeare writes Antonio a conspicuously happier ending than Shylock with whom he deals rather heavy-handedly, that Shakespeare's personal beliefs align with the prejudiced underpinnings of the play.

Works Cited

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Shakespeare, William. "The Taming of the Shrew." *The Necessary Shakespeare*, edited by David M. Bevington, Pearson Education, 2017, pp. 5–41