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Quarreling Rhetoric in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and John Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed*

William Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew* and John Fletcher's response, *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed* have been widely evaluated by literary scholars for their differing depictions of gender roles in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries. Many critics believe Fletcher's play to be a feminist reply to a rather misogynistic play by Shakespeare. However, many aspects of *The Woman's Prize* detailing a less traditional view of societal relations are extensions of intimations already present within *The Taming of the Shrew*. Both plays also provide commentary on class distinctions of the time that mirror the gender discussion. Although the literary discourse between Shakespeare and Fletcher is mainly a discussion of gender distinctions, examining both social class and gender roles in conjunction reveals the permeability of both boundaries and the threats they present to the traditional hierarchy. Rather than taking a stance on either the social class or the gender conflict, the authors leave both issues unresolved, placing the responsibility of the outcome on their audience, and figuratively on society. Although an absolute interpretation does not exist for Shakespeare and Fletcher's lack of a fixed agenda and the speculated reasons behind this ambiguity vary, the playwrights effectively compel the reader to confront preconceived ideologies without regulating their thought process, thus allowing free thought.

Significant events during the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries led to an increased discussion of both social class and gender roles, although these issues would not see their climax until the late seventeenth century or beyond. The Elizabethan era saw considerable social mobility that alarmed the higher classes and led to unrest within the social order (Suzuki 31), which could not be doused easily. The upper class felt even more compelled to distinguish themselves from the classes below them, in such things as manner, speech, and appearance. Shakespeare demonstrates this in *The Taming of the Shrew* with Petruchio's wedding clothes. Petruchio clearly states his purpose in Padua: "I come to wive it wealthily in Padua, / If wealthily, then happily in Padua" (Shakespeare *TS* 1.2.72-73). However, he appears to forsake this desire for wealth when attending his own wedding in shabby clothes unsuitable for someone of his class and arriving on an old, extremely ill horse (*TS* 3.2). The horse may refer back to when Baptista called his daughter, Katherina, a hilding, which is "a vicious beast, usually used to refer to an unbroken or bad-tempered horse [...] to suggest that she will and should be ridden and tamed" (*TS* Radel 116n.3). In response to his clothing, Baptista tells Petruchio: "Fie, doff this habit, shame to your estate" (3.2.96) to which Petruchio replies: "To me she's married, not unto my clothes" (3.2.113). His reply suggests that appearing to be wealthy is not as important as financial security, which he has already professed to be crucial in his marriage. However, Petruchio's appearance is undoubtedly a taming method, as he is intent on embarrassing Katherina and showing her that he will make her life miserable if she does not obey him. It being a taming method undermines the sentiment and reveals it as a falsehood. Petruchio realizes the importance of an elite projection and the value Katherina places in it. Thus, he reduces Katherina to feeling like a beggar. She compares herself to the beggars who used to receive charity from

Baptista: “But I, who never knew how to entreat, / Nor never needed that I should entreat, / Am starved for meat, giddy for lack of sleep” (4.3.7-9). Women of upbringing could aspire to appear of the elite, but they could not achieve the same status and education as males within the constraints of the time period. Although the era saw the humanist movement which increasingly valued education for a wider body of people and celebrated the use of vernacular, access to a good education was still primarily reserved for upper class males. Women were educated at home and had a curriculum restricted to “modern languages, religion, music, and needlework” (Greenblatt et.al 353). The study of ancient languages and classical literature was reserved for males in order for them to master “the arts of rhetoric and warfare, [while] gentlewomen were expected to display the virtues of silence and good housekeeping” (359). The succession of Queen Elizabeth I to the throne stimulated more conversation on the extent to which women could play a role in society and if they should receive education to benefit their potential involvement. However, the discussion remained fixated on the idea that women were still inferior intellectually and that Queen Elizabeth served as an exception (359). Notable steps towards a more feminist society did not appear until the middle to late seventeenth century (Bruyn 23) and the idea that women should have the same educational opportunities as men, including in rhetoric skill, was still seen as radical. Both Shakespeare and Fletcher used the significant value placed on education and rhetoric by upper class males to introduce the threat of the intelligent lower of class and gender and their opportunity to potentially rise.

Shakespeare and Fletcher present the characters of Sly, Tranio, and Grumio to demonstrate that members of the lower class can be just as, or even more intelligent and perceptive as the upper class as seen through their masterly imitation of elite rhetoric. Although

subtle, *The Taming of the Shrew* begins with an intimation of the threats to the social hierarchy in the play's induction, which portrays Sly, a low-class tinker, assuming the role and the speech of a lord. An actual lord finds Sly drunk and unconscious and decides it would be entertaining to treat Sly as a member of the upper class and trick him into believing he had been ill the last fifteen years. To consolidate his role as a lord, Sly witnesses a play, which Shakespeare presents to his audience as a "play within a play." According to an anonymous play *The Taming of a Shrew* printed in 1594, this production he sees of Petruchio and Katherina serves as a "how-to" lesson, as in an added epilogue, Sly claims, "I know now how to tame a shrew" (*TS* Appendix 16). The indication that Sly, a man at the bottom of the social hierarchy is learning from the higher class reveals the narrowing boundaries between social classes. Within the play-within-the-play, Tranio refers to a "taming school" in which "Petruchio is the master" (4.2.55-59). Attending school was a privilege for the upper classes, and a person of lower class with high rhetoric skill could possibly pass as one of the elite, representing a threat to the social hierarchy that the people of the time were much aware of (Lundin). The fact that Sly understands and can employ Petruchio's methods of taming Katherina suggests that the intelligence between the two social classes are not that distinct from one another and that there was opportunity to rise between classes. Tranio and Grumio are also seen seamlessly emulating their upper class masters, again signifying the intelligent lower. Tranio is perhaps cleverer than his master and is shown to imitate Lucentio without a flaw. No one suspected Tranio of duplicity while he was impersonating his master and he served as a vital catalyst in Lucentio's winning of Bianca. His role as a protagonist in their elaborate plan to win Bianca's hand and his demonstrations of initiative dismantles the traditional view of the inferior servant without the ability to act without

specific instructions. Although Grumio does not play as big of a role as Tranio in the character's elaborate acts of deception, Petruchio trusts him to implement his plans to tame Katherina when he is not available. Grumio almost serves as an extension of Petruchio, withholding food from Katherina (4.3.1-35) and making his specific instructions for a ripped gown seem like the tailor's blunders in order to embarrass Katherina and delay their trip to Baptista's (4.3.114-157). Sly, Grumio, and Tranio represent intelligent lower class men who can emulate the educated upper class although they themselves have not received an education, particularly an education meant to improve rhetoric. These seemingly intellectually inferior men are able to speak just as well as their masters or as the upper class men they are disguised as. Significantly, when convinced of his identity as a lord, Sly alters his speech from prose to blank verse (Petzold n.5), which was thought to be more elite at the time, thus elevating his status. The power of words was already displayed, as "language is powerful enough to make Sly believe that he is a Lord [...] the words uttered by powerful men can alter 'reality'" (Petzold 161).

Despite this apparent elevation through assuming a lord's role and speech, Sly does not maintain this honor for the entirety of the play. In the first folio Shakespeare wrote, Sly is last mentioned in Act One, scene one, leaving his storyline unresolved. Shakespeare refuses to fully confront the issue of social class; leaving it to the audience to imagine their own endings. In the anonymous 1594 *The Taming of a Shrew*, Sly is shown to assume his former role as a drunk tinker and believes his masquerade as a Lord was nothing but a dream. Editors often add this conclusion to Shakespeare's plays (Radel *TS* 293). Although Sly is degraded back to his lower class position, he is bestowed with new knowledge that he then teaches to his fellow members of the lower class, revealing the widespread fear of the failing social hierarchy. However, although

he returns to his former life as a poor tinker with a sort of enlightenment, he still suffers the degradation. The hope of rising through the social classes does not seem to have occurred to Sly, and his intimation is rather small. He gains the knowledge of how to tame women, but the superiority over a woman is presented as a man's right, not a privilege of the upper classes.

Similarly, Tranio is reduced back to a servant at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew* and despite a significant elevation in Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize* to an independent gentleman, he is still addressed as a servant at the end. At the conclusion of Shakespeare's play, Tranio is degraded from his assumed role as his master, Lucentio, and back into his role as a servant, but participates in the banter between the men of the higher classes and treated almost as an equal. Petruchio addresses him as "Signior Tranio" (*TS* 5.2.50) and jokes: "This bird you aimed at, though you hit her not" (5.2.51), suggesting that Tranio had an equal chance to obtain Bianca's hand as Lucentio did. Fletcher furthers this elevation of status and dismantling of the social hierarchy by writing Tranio in as a gentleman and friend to Petruchio rather than a servant. Although some critics disregard this as simply an inconsistency between the two plays, there would be no reason behind including a character of the same name if not for a commentary on the social situation of the time. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, with Tranio masquerading as an additional wooer of Bianca, there existed the possibility that Tranio might win Bianca's affections or at least would become close to Bianca. She addresses him with a familiar tone when alone with him and Lucentio: "Tranio, you jest. But have you both forsworn me?" (4.2.48). According to Margaret Maurer, this familiarity may suggest a closer relationship between Bianca and Tranio than what is appropriate and the tension this may cause, "would hardly be dispelled when Tranio resumes his role as servant in Lucentio's house" (Maurer 195). However, in

Fletcher's continuation, Tranio is no longer a servant of Lucentio, and is seen consulting closely with Bianca throughout *The Woman's Prize* as Bianca attempts to save Livia from marrying the undesirable Moroso. However one interprets Bianca and Tranio's relationship, the fact of Tranio rising through the ranks of the social ladder remains; Fletcher realizing the threat Tranio represented in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Nevertheless, like Sly, Tranio's elevation does not seem to be absolute despite Fletcher's intimations of an ascending lower class man to a gentleman. In *The Woman's Prize*, Bianca occasionally addresses Tranio as she might a servant. She gives orders such as, "About your business; goe" (Fletcher *WP* 4.2.19), which Tranio immediately obeys. Although Tranio is a gentleman which would suggest an equal partnership between Tranio and Bianca, Tranio seems to be the inferior of the two; taking orders as a servant would.

Both Shakespeare and Fletcher intimate through their discussion of Sly, Tranio, and Grumio that any elevation of social class is only temporary and a guaranteed continuation of status does not exist. Sly and Tranio are reduced to their previous servant status despite their immaculate portrayal and rhetoric of upper class men. Grumio was never given the opportunity to rise through social class, even temporarily. These two authors also deliver the message of temporary elevation through their discussion of female independence or dominance.

Shakespeare and Fletcher's plays explore women overthrowing male power through rhetoric, as Maria in *The Woman's Prize* is widely perceived to be more successful at maintaining her relative independence than Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* in large part because of the effective nature of her words. Petruchio admits defeat after Maria proclaims her distaste for his life and her lack of grief over his death: "...his life, / His poor unmanly, wretched, foolish life, / Is that my full eyes pity, there's my mourning" (*WP* 5.4.20-21). Immediately

afterwards, Petruchio surrenders and pledges to never attempt to tame Maria, thus making it appear as though Maria was more successful than Katherine. However, after Maria claims that their personal battle of the sexes is over, she refers to herself as a servant twice: “I have tam’d ye, / And now am, vow’d your servant” (*WP* 5.4.45-46) and “since you make such free profession, / I dedicate in service to your pleasure” (*WP* 5.4.56-57). She could be asserting that they are in equal service to each other, however different their individual roles may be.

According to the time, the male in the relationship was responsible for providing for his wife, while the wife’s duty was taking care of the household and the children. However, a wife’s role was also supervised by her husband, as the most valuable characteristic in a woman was her, “meek demeanor and an instinctive realization of her subservience to her husband” (Bruyn 20).

Furthermore, there is a noticeable lack of reciprocation on Petruchio’s side. He claims that Maria will never have the need to display such acts of trickery towards her husband, but he does not express the same sentiment of service. Instead, he only mentions the service Maria will deliver to him, in the form of motherhood. In the last speech of the play, he refers to Maria as a “Colt” (*WP* 5.4.88), and says “and now she carries”, a pun that means she will now bear him children as she is no longer practicing abstinence from her husband. Petruchio is also returning to referring to his wives as beasts rather than humans, as he often did in calling them a “wildcat” as a play off of Kate’s name (*TS* 2.1.270), “my horse, my ox, my ass” (3.2.228), and a falcon (4.1.175), each wild creatures needing to be tamed. A colt is gentler, less wild, and easier to control. Does Maria’s assumption that Petruchio is tamed serve as a taming of Maria in itself? In the Epilogue, Fletcher states that he wants, “to teach both Sexes due equality” (*WP* Epilogue 7). However, the placing of Maria back into a traditionally subservient role refutes his statement.

While Maria resumes her servility although she is widely perceived to be the more successful of the two plays' leading ladies, examining Katherina's rhetoric in *The Taming of the Shrew* refutes the idea that Katherina assumed her traditional role as obedient wife and suggests Petruchio's attempt at taming her was unsuccessful. During the process of Petruchio's taming, Katherina alters her speech to match his (mirroring Sly's speech alterations). While travelling back to Padua to see Katherina's father, Baptista, Petruchio insists that the moon is the sun. Katherina refutes him and claims the sun is in the sky. As a result of Katherina's disagreement, Petruchio tells the servants to take the horses back home, delaying their trip. Hortensio advises Katherina to, "Say as he says, or we shall never go" (*TS* 4.5.11). To appease her husband, Katherina lies and says that it is the moon in the sky and addresses the old gentleman, Vincentio, as if he was a young woman per Petruchio's will. She is made to repeat Petruchio's words as a sign of her submission to him, feigning agreement. However, this does not prove Katherina's permanent submission, and could be a temporary withdrawal to gather a defense. Despite this simple repetition of man's words she is forced to perform, Katherina later produces a speech that is entirely her own. This speech performed at the conclusion of the play may be her husband's sentiments, but she produces the words without a script given to her by Petruchio. In fact, Jochen Petzold and Juliet Dusingberre argue that Katherina's last speech, "steals the show" (Dusingberre 80). Petruchio's winning of his wager is dependent upon Katherina's words, as the play's impact on the audience is dependent upon the actor's delivery of Katherina's speech. Petzold asserts that, "By saying the words Petruchio wants her to say, Katherina is able to take centre stage and usurp the position of public orator" (Petzold 162), which is extremely rare for women. Many critics read Katherina's last speech as ironic, which is supported by the last line of the

play-within-the-play, orated by Lucentio: “‘Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so” (*TS* 5.2.199). This leaves the audience wondering if Katherina was actually tamed and whether she assumed her traditional role as a mild and compliant wife.

The character portrayed most consistently in both plays is Bianca, who is supposed to represent the opposite of Katherina’s shrew, but instead reveals through her rhetoric that she is neither what Petruchio would define as a “shrew” or the traditionally ideal wife. Bianca is spoken of as a model of the optimal woman and wife: mild, gentle, and obedient, but a deeper insurgence is made quite evident in her final speech in Shakespeare’s play as she exchanges banter with Petruchio. Once she joins in to the witty conversation taking place, she immediately claims that she will “sleep again,” (*TS* 5.2.44), intimating that she will wake. She does not want to further the conversation, but leaves the company of men with a statement that is rather provocative: “Am I your bird? I mean to shift my bush, / And then pursue me as you draw your bow. / - You are welcome all” (5.2.47-49). Furthermore, she does not come when her new husband Lucentio calls her, causing Petruchio to win the wager he made with the other men over who had the most obedient wife. Fletcher continues with the picture of Bianca as unsubmissive and unyielding, having her become the leader of the women’s rebellion in his play. According to Maurer, this leadership is represented in *The Taming of the Shrew* when Katherina and the widow follow Bianca away from the men in the last scene (Maurer 195). Even though in Shakespeare’s play she assumes a facade of compliance in order to provide a point of contrast for Katherina, exploring her rhetoric reveals her consistent desire for female independence and she stresses her rights as a woman till the end. Her last words in *The Woman’s Prize* is, “Yes Sir, we trickt ye” (5.4.72), noting her sense of triumph and resolve.

Despite the elevations the characters seem to undertake largely evidenced by their rhetoric, all paths seem to have their caveats, as neither the issues of class or gender are resolved. Perhaps with the exception of Grumio and Bianca, the audience is left wondering if the characters did indeed cross the social and gender boundaries present in sixteenth century England. Grumio and Bianca are the only two relatively consistent characters in their viewpoints and their status throughout their respective journeys. Grumio is a character only in *The Taming of the Shrew* and experiences a very slight elevation through the intimation of the intelligent lower-class male, but ultimately maintains a consistent status as a servant. There is no evidence of him rising through the social rank. In terms of gender roles, Bianca is arguably the most serious feminist out of the women portrayed in both plays, as she is concerned with the plights of all women, and not just her own. Some critics claim that Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew* and the Byancha in *The Woman's Prize* are not supposed to represent the same person, due to the inconsistencies between the two portrayals: the two different spellings of Bianca and Byancha and the absence of Lucentio in Fletcher's play. However, assuming that Bianca is the same in both plays reveals a character in *The Woman's Prize* who displays what happens when she "wakes," as she suggested she would in the final scene of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Along with Grumio, Bianca has a resolved conclusion, which the other characters in the play lack.

These problematic outcomes for the other characters of the play may be the result of an uncertainty or a limited imagination on the part of the authors, as they do not know a life without hierarchies and social restrictions. Or, the two men could be intentionally requiring the audience to ponder the necessity of the hierarchy for themselves without swaying them one way or the other. The unsettled conclusions seem more ominous and make the attentive audience

contemplate their nation's own uncertain future as they are ruminating over the plays' endings. To further agitate the unnerved audience, the unresolved nature of the endings make these boundary crossings seem more of a threat, as they are not perceived to be something easily crushed or settled. However, with the contradictions in each character's perceived threat and their endings, Shakespeare and Fletcher seem to intimate that even though a person may be elevated, that is not a guarantee of future or consistent elevation.

Leaving it to the audience's discretion refutes the idea of an authorial agenda, but supports the notion of the authors simply trying to stir up unrest in their audience. According to Clifford Leech, Fletcher "was no serious defender of women's rights, but rather a man who took some interest and pleasure in watching a fight between well-matched opponents" (Leech 53). Since Shakespeare had already provided the viewpoint of a superior male obligated and expected to control his wife, Fletcher wanted to even the playing field and provided the opposite viewpoint. Shakespeare's view on the role of the female is uncertain. The women he portrayed in his plays are subject to an abundance of literary discussion, but conclusive interpretation has not been achieved. Most of the women in his plays are subservient to males and they emphasize feminine values of purity and piety. Victorians found Shakespeare's women to be refreshing and celebratory, because he did not portray them as fragile beings easily corrupted, as was common of the time, especially when considering the belief in witchcraft and the faulty prosecution of many women for sorcery (Bruyn 20). However, this view of women as meek and mild was reflective of the time period and "even the Romantics, who exalted Shakespeare's women, did so in a way that diminished them" (Hankey 426). Shakespeare's views on whether the social hierarchy should be corrupted is also ambiguous. There is no factual evidence about

Shakespeare's youth, but his father was "a successful glovemaker, landowner, moneylender, and dealer in agricultural commodities [...] but later suffered financial and social reverses"

(Greenblatt et. al 535). The potential social mobility illustrated in his play *The Taming of the Shrew* could be a reflection of his own experience of social ascension and its impermanence.

Alternatively, Shakespeare and Fletcher could be exploring the extent to which service is beneficial to all parties and how a good relationship between master and servant can serve as a model for man and wife. Grumio, servant to Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, represents the witty and clever servant who knows the inner, private lives of his master, producing a type of closeness not achieved through associations with like society. Grumio is responsible for a significant part of the comedic lines in the play, as he intentionally misinterprets what people are saying in order to provide confusion for his enjoyment. He interrupts Petruchio often with ridiculous statements to frustrate him and speaks aside for the audience's benefit of what is truly going on in the play. The audience immediately sees upon the introduction of Petruchio and Grumio in the play their relationship that usually deteriorates into bickering and beating. On this first encounter, Hortensio interrupts their dispute and addresses them as "My old friend Grumio / and my good friend Petruchio" (*TS* 1.2.20-21). This implies that a gentlemen can be friends with servants, but they must not be as close or dear to them as friends that are of the same social status. Despite this compulsion to appear with those of the same class, Grumio suggests that the relationship between servant and master is actually much more intimate and revealing. Although Hortensio puts up the front that fellow gentlemen Petruchio is a dear friend, Grumio claims, "You know him not, sir" (1.2.112). Grumio claims he knows Petruchio's true nature, which is more volatile than Katherina, who is infamous in Padua for her shrewishness. Shakespeare also

dives deeper into Tranio's interactions with his master, Lucentio, and with the rest of their society believing he is Lucentio. In contrast to Petruchio and Grumio's relationship, Shakespeare portrays a genuine friendship between Lucentio and Tranio, Tranio even giving advice to his master about Lucentio's future: "No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en. / In brief, sir, study what you most affect" (*TS* 1.1.39-40). Lucentio does not believe this imprudent on Tranio's part, but rather thanks him for the advice. This intimacy between classes may prove dangerous to the traditional hierarchy, as the lower class know more about the inner lives of the upper class than the members of the elite themselves. However, both of these relationships are successful. Although Petruchio and Grumio constantly bicker, they have forged a type of friendship relatively similar to Lucentio and Tranio's. In contrast, Fletcher portrays Katherina's marriage to Petruchio as unsuccessful and harmful to both parties. Not coincidentally, Fletcher also interprets that Katherina remained a shrew at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew* and for the rest of her marriage. Petruchio and Katherina's marriage is not one of equal service, as Fletcher claims Petruchio and Maria's marriage to be. It has already been established within this essay that Maria was not as successful in her taming as Fletcher tries to make apparent, due to her return to a traditionally subservient role. However, within the constraints of the time period, this type of relationship may have seemed typical or even ideal.

Both plays, no matter what the author's intentions were, end with issues unresolved, or at least with an air of ambiguity surrounding them. Sly, Tranio, and Grumio represent a threat to the social hierarchy, but remain relatively stationary in their roles as belonging to the inferior classes. Katherine and Maria's husband, Petruchio, leave their status of shrews or compliant wives tentative pending his own return to a tyrant's behavior. Whether they truly cross the

gender and class boundaries of the time remain uncertain; its ambiguous nature causing the audience to imagine their own endings. Rather than trying to support their own belief systems, Shakespeare and Fletcher simply wanted to make the audience react to the social tensions outlined in the plays. This reaction is pure and unadulterated, as their thought process was only slightly guided by the playwrights without leading the audience to a specific conclusion.

Presenting two different potential scenarios for each character allows the audience member to evaluate his/her own belief system regarding social mobility and feminism within the constraints of a play, thus allowing a more objective realization of the overarching political atmosphere.

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