FACULTY OF ARTS
AND PHILOSOPHY

"I will be free / even to the uttermost as I please in words”:
The Power of Language and the Battle of the Sexes in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*

Word count: 11,000

Cato Rooryck
Student number: 01716704

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Andrew Bricker

A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics and Literature, English and Dutch.

Academic year: 2020 – 2021

GHENT
UNIVERSITY

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Andrew Bricker, who was always quick to reply to whatever questions, concerns, or drafts I sent his way, with straightforward answers, suggestions and helpful feedback. He has guided and encouraged, as well as challenged, me throughout the thinking and writing process. I would also like to show my appreciation for my fellow student Catherine Arblaster, whose willingness to embark on Shakespeare-inspired walks and talks often cheered me up.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION 3

I.1 Argument 3

I.2 Primary Sources & Structure 7

II. POWER DYNAMICS IN SHAKESPEARE:

3 CASE STUDIES ON THE INTERSECTION OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER 9

II.1 Rhetorical Superiority vs. Male Authority in *The Taming of the Shrew* 9

II.1.1 Introduction

II.1.2 "Say as he says" (or else…): The Force of Male Authority

II.1.3 Conclusion

II.2 The Power of Language vs. the Language of Power in *Romeo and Juliet* 16

II.2.1 Introduction

II.2.2 "May not one speak?": The Limits of Female Verbal Power in the Patriarchal Order of Verona

II.2.3 Conclusion

II.3 Dynamics of Speech and Reputation in *Much Ado About Nothing* 24

II.3.1 Introduction

II.3.2 "[T]he lady is disloyal": Slander and the Male Prerogative of Power in Language

II.3.3 Conclusion

III. CONCLUSION 32

IV. Works Cited 38

The Power of Language and the Battle of the Sexes in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*

I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 Argument

Scholars have paid significant attention to language and gender in Shakespeare's plays. For most critics, questions of language and questions of gender are intimately linked. In readings addressing both, however, language is often seen as subordinate or subsidiary to gender. That is, in discussions of the power dynamics in Shakespeare's plays, the role of language appears at times to be overshadowed (and obscured) by theories of gender. The aim of this Bachelor Paper, therefore, is to disaggregate speech and gender in order to gain a better understanding of their role in the overall power dynamics in Shakespeare's plays. In what follows, I will address the entanglement of speech and gender in Shakespeare criticism through two central concepts: **the power of language and the battle of the sexes**.

In Shakespeare's plays, characters often use (and abuse) speech as a means to gain and assert control over each other. This sense of language as a source of power can be seen, for instance, in the way characters like Iago and Dohn John use speech to distort information and deceive other characters, in order to manipulate the behaviour of others and gain control over a situation. Also characteristic with regard to the sense of speech in Shakespeare's plays is the fact that key interactions are often staged as verbal confrontations or rhetorical contests, in which characters showcase their rhetorical talents as they try to outsmart each other through puns, word play, extended metaphors and similes, and double entendres. In this paper, I will focus on interactions between *male and female* speakers, because power dynamics in Shakespeare's plays are also fundamentally characterized by what is traditionally known as the battle of the sexes.

The battle of the sexes is defined by Penny Gay as "masculine and feminine genders in continual opposition" (1). This concept, Gay argues, is "the product of a patriarchal culture, that can *only* think in this way about relations between the sexes" (1). In Shakespeare criticism, interactions between male and female characters are often seen as part of this larger, overarching gender conflict. As a result, many scholars have looked at these interactions through the lens of clear-cut male/female binaries, in order to determine whether a play should be read as affirming patriarchal values, or, on the contrary, as asserting feminine (or proto-feminist) values. Implicit within such Shakespeare criticism is the assumption that gender dynamics are straightforwardly reflected in the dynamics of language.

Valerie Traub distinguishes between two strands of (feminist) criticism that subordinate language to gender. A first type of readings, by critics such as Juliet Dusinberre, Marilyn French, and Irene Dash, argues that Shakespeare can be appropriated to feminist ends.[1] These critics argue that the rhetorical superiority of certain female characters evinces the "victory of feminine over masculine values" (Traub 231). Conversely, a second group of critics, who argue that male characters in a play are rhetorically superior, often also argue that the play can be read as an affirmation of the dominant male order of the play's patriarchal society. This second strand of (feminist) critics, which includes Kathleen McLuskie and Carol Cook, rejects the idea of a "feminist Shakespeare" (Traub 231), as they question the presence and even possibility of "feminine values" in Shakespeare's plays. According to McLuskie, "Feminist criticism must subvert rather than assimilate the 'patriarchal Bard'" (qtd. in Traub 231).[2] In both strands of criticism, characters' rhetorical skills at times appear to be used as a straightforward tool to measure who (male or female) Shakespeare is putting forward as the winner of the overarching gender battle. Such readings thus seem to use rhetorical skill as a metonymy for power more generally, suggesting that a character's rhetorical superiority guarantees or justifies a position of power outside of the rhetorical arena.

---

[1] See, for instance, Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975), Marilyn French's *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* (1981), and Irene Dash's *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (1981), all referenced in Traub's article.

[2] For the original work by McLuskie, see "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*" (1985)

However, Shakespeare's interest in language often transcends these gendered binary oppositions. Therefore, instead of asking how language fits into the power dynamics of gender relations in the plays' patriarchal societies, my paper will reverse this question, by focusing on how gender affects the power dynamics of language in Shakespeare's plays. This paper, that is, will further investigate key interactions between male and female speakers, but will first look at language in its own right, before analysing how the use and effect of speech is affected by gender. In order to get a clearer view of the power dynamics in three of Shakespeare's plays (*The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*), I will separate individual rhetorical contests from more general structures of gender, in an attempt to disentangle speech and gender as conditions for or forms of power. Such an approach allows me to argue that it is useful to distinguish between the power of language and power attributed to men in the plays' patriarchal societies, because Shakespeare's plays at times celebrate the first (the power of language itself, used skilfully by both women and men) while problematizing the second (the power or authority of gender, which the patriarchal order only attributes to men). While his plays display a sense of language as a source of power, and at times seem to celebrate language for its flexibility and creative potential, Shakespeare also continually raises questions about the limitations of language in a patriarchal setting (where masculine authority often triumphs, regardless of rhetorical qualities), and the fact that speech can be abused for its potential to manipulate and deceive. For instance, when a female speaker successfully uses language to express herself and gain some sort of autonomy, this does not necessarily lead to a straightforward victory or celebration of feminine values in general. It seems that although his plays often celebrate language's potential (or the power of language), Shakespeare is also aware of its limitations, particularly in regard to larger societal forces, and especially the masculine authority within highly patriarchal societies. Gender is thus key to understanding (the role of) speech (in power dynamics), but gender status is not straightforwardly reflected in characters' rhetorical skills.

This paper argues that, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, speech and gender can be seen as separate forms of power, and will consider if and how they can be seen as conditions for power. In these plays, speech is often used as a means to an end, as both male and female characters attempt to control each other through language. However, language in itself is often insufficient to assert dominance. For instance, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio, who attempts to subdue Katherine through language, succeeds in this not by showing himself rhetorically superior, but by asserting his male authority. On the other hand, even though there are many instances in which female characters verbally overpower their male counterparts, in the overall power dynamics of male-female interaction, male dominance is hardly ever at stake. This suggests that male authority is a form of power in itself, which lies outside of language. Gender is therefore key to understanding the power dynamics in these interactions, but gender status is not an inherent part of what I have referred to as the power of language. Gender, that is, can serve as another condition for power and as a form of authority that at times contrasts with – and even ultimately overrides – the authority of the speaker's words. For instance, when Petruchio tells the other men about his first encounter with Katherine (the shrew), his version of events (that they are very much in love, and Katherine is very kind to him) is not necessarily more credible than Katherine's objections (that he is a lunatic, and she would see him hanged before marrying him), yet Katherine's father and the other men take his word for it, and not hers.

In other words, Shakespeare's plays do not consistently portray men as being rhetorically superior, on the contrary. However, they do suggest that a man's word may be valued more in the patriarchal societies of the plays, and that men can assert dominance simply on the basis of their manhood. By looking at how his plays differentiate between the (universal) power of language on the one hand and socially constructed values / gender-based authority on the other, I hope to gain a better understanding of Shakespeare's sense of language as a (sometimes problematic) source of power which transcends but is at the same time limited by the dominant social order.

I.2 Primary Sources & Structure

In this BA Paper, I study three plays by Shakespeare: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. All three of these plays contain many rhetorical battles between male and female characters, foreground issues of language in relation to the Shakespearean battle of the sexes, and have often been studied in a way that has made it hard to disaggregate the role of speech and gender with regard to power dynamics. Additionally, each play allows me to focus on a different element of power dynamics at the intersection of language and gender, while still applying the same perspective. This way, I hope to gain a more thorough understanding of the power dynamics in Shakespeare's plays.

The body of my paper is divided into three main sections, each focusing on a different play. In the first section (II.1), I will look at the sense of language as a source of power in *The Taming of the Shrew*. In order to better understand the overall power dynamics of the play, I will attempt to disaggregate speech and gender as important factors in these dynamics, by first looking at characters' use of rhetoric, before turning to the role and effect of gender in and on male/female interactions. Through my analysis of key interactions between Katherine and Petruchio, I will argue that rhetorical superiority does not equal dominance, whereas male authority does. In other words, when a character wins an individual rhetorical contest (as Katherine arguably does in her first encounter with Petruchio), this does not necessarily bring them closer to victory in the overarching battle of the sexes.

In the second section (II.2), I will look at power dynamics in *Romeo and Juliet* in the same way, focusing on the intersection of language and gender in key interactions between the main characters. I will investigate how the mechanics I have discussed in section II.1 operate in a different setting, by first analyzing Romeo and Juliet's dynamic, and then considering how this dynamic is reinforced or undermined by the patriarchal power structure of Verona. Through a close reading of Romeo and Juliet's first encounter and the balcony scene, I will look at how Juliet attempts to assert power through language. I will argue that she manages to do so in her relationship with Romeo, but only because Romeo's romantic attitude sets him apart from the masculine aggression and male dominance which typifies the play's patriarchal society. The exceptional dynamic of Romeo and Juliet's relationship is starkly contrasted with their position in the larger patriarchal order, and the play ends with an emphasis on the limits of female verbal power, as Juliet cannot overcome the other male authorities she is subject to.

In the third section (II.3), I will look at the dynamics of speech and reputation in *Much Ado About Nothing*. I will argue that, through (sexual) reputation, female verbal power can be undermined by slander. While the patriarchal order of these plays naturally grants men authority over the women they are in a close relation to, and speech is therefore less necessary as a source of power for men in a private context, public slander is a particularly effective tool to assert dominance over a woman in a broader context. The early modern association of female honour with chastity made female reputations particularly vulnerable to gossip about sexual (im)morality. I will argue that, in *Much Ado*, Claudio's public shaming of Hero (sparked by Don John's lies) does not only damage her reputation, but also successfully removes the authority of her words, leaving her powerless against false accusations she cannot effectively counter (as both confirming or denying them would only be taken as proof of guilt).

II. POWER DYNAMICS IN SHAKESPEARE: 3 CASE STUDIES ON THE INTERSECTION OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER

II.1 Rhetorical Superiority vs. Male Authority in *The Taming of the Shrew*

II.1.1 Introduction

In this section, I will use *The Taming of the Shrew* as a case study, to test my overarching argument that speech and gender can be seen as closely intertwined but separate forms of power. The play's engagement with the shrew-taming tradition, in which there is a heavy emphasis on the unruly tongue of the supposed shrews, already suggests a sense of language as a source of power. Speech, in this sense, can be used as a form of resistance, and therefore, if used skilfully by women, seen as a threat to the patriarchal order, in which male dominance is essential. It has been well documented that practices and punishments aimed at suppressing women's speech were common in early modern England. Lynda E. Boose writes of an early modern "crisis in gender" (179), referring to an upsurge of court accusations against women, and the "gendering" of punishments (179), mostly targeting women whose speech was seen as transgressive. Boose sees Katherine as "the archetypal scold whose crime against society is her refusal to accept the so-called natural order of patriarchal hierarchy," and the embodiment of "the unruly woman" who "exercise[es] either her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man" (180-181). Women's speech furthermore plays an important role in many depictions of marriage, which was then "widely represented […] as a struggle for dominance" (F.E. Dolan 165).

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the sense of language as a source of power is thus closely intertwined with the staging of gender relations as a struggle for control, in the battle of the sexes. Because of this, critics have often interpreted individual rhetorical confrontations between the main male and female characters in terms of the more general, overarching gender battle. That is, whoever ends up in the position of power or dominance in relation to their male/female counterpart, is often argued to have proven themselves rhetorically superior. This has resulted in many readings in which Petruchio is seen as rhetorically superior to Katherine, as he is the one who manages to come out on top in terms of the overall power dynamics of their relationship. Such readings run the risk of underemphasizing the more problematic aspects of Petruchio's taming techniques, in an attempt to justify his dominance over Katherine by arguing that it is merely the result of his persuasive tongue.[3]

In my discussion of the play, however, I will attempt to disaggregate speech and gender as conditions for or forms of power. Through my analysis of two key interactions between Petruchio and Katherine (their first encounter and the final scene, in which Katherine gives her wifely speech on obedience), I will argue that, throughout the play, language serves as a source of power, but in itself often proves insufficient to assert dominance. I argue, for instance, that Petruchio, who attempts to subdue Katherine through language, succeeds in this not by showing his rhetorical superiority, as many critics have argued, but by asserting his male authority. While, in their first encounter, Katherine verbally appears to overpower her male counterpart, male dominance

---

[3] See for instance T.F. Baumlin's article (1989): "Petruchio the Sophist and Language as Creation in *The Taming of the Shrew*" or (for a slightly more nuanced reading) M. Novy's (1979): "Patriarchy and Play in *The Taming of the Shrew*."

(outside of the rhetorical arena) is hardly ever at stake. This suggests that male authority is a form of power in itself, which lies outside of male speakers' words.

Gender is thus key to understanding the workings of speech and the power dynamics in these interactions, but male authority does not coincide with rhetorical superiority, just as female rhetorical superiority does not necessarily strengthen a woman's position in the power dynamics outside of language. Gender, therefore, can be seen as a condition for power and a form of authority that at times contrasts with – and ultimately overrides – the authority of the speaker's words.

II.1.2 "Say as he says" (or else…): The Force of Male Authority

Although there are many readings in which it is Petruchio's rhetorical superiority that gives him the upper hand in his relationship with "Kate," there are instances in their first encounter (Shakespeare II.1) which support the idea that Katherine verbally beats Petruchio at a game he initiates. As in many Shakespearean (male-female) interactions, the scene plays out as a rhetorical contest, with Petruchio and Katherine showcasing their rhetorical tricks as they try to outsmart and overpower each other. The density of meaning and the competitive but arguably playful tone suggest that at this point in the play, language is still at the centre of their dynamic: they are worthy opponents, who are challenging each other in a back-and-forth of puns, double meaning and wordplay. While they both show quick wit and eloquence, it appears that Katherine supplies most of the puns, and Petruchio at times has trouble keeping up with her. For instance, when Katherine calls Petruchio "a movable", he asks "Why, what's a movable?" When she replies "A joint stool", he appears to give in: "Thou hast hit it. Come sit on me" (195-197). Whether Petruchio intends to surrender to her pun or not, his statement suggests that she is the one "on top". He appears to correct this in his next statement: "Women are made to bear, and so are you," but not before Katherine further exploits her metaphor, calling him an ass and a broken-down horse (198-200).

Another instance in which Petruchio appears to be outdone can be found following Katherine’s question: “What is your crest, a coxcomb?” (221). As the references to heraldry in the previous lines suggest, “crest” here means armorial insignia. It could, however, also refer to a decoration on a soldier’s helmet, as well as feathers or fur on an animal’s head, or, for example, the comb of a cock: a cockscomb. A “coxcomb,” on the other hand, is annotated as a fool’s hat, but can also refer to a man who is foolish and conceited. One could argue that there is a sense of submission in Petruchio’s answer, “A combless cock, so Kate will be my hen” (222), which is strengthened by Katherine’s subsequent remark that he crows “too like a craven” (223), suggesting that Petruchio has lost the fight. A combless cock, which in a literal sense is just a cock without a comb, is annotated as being one without aggression. On the one hand, the second part of Petruchio’s statement: “so Kate will be my hen”, could then mean that he will be less aggressive, in order to persuade Katherine to be his wife. On the other hand, if by “so” he means “if,” it could mean that his being less aggressive is contingent on her being his (obedient, submissive) wife. Even though this latter meaning fits in with his aggressive treatment of Katherine later in the play, it seems likely that he is still posing as a gentleman here (see for instance line 214: “Good Kate, I am a gentleman.”). Either way, by following up Petruchio’s comment with “No cock of mine. You crow too like a craven” (223), Katherine shifts the focus away from the subject of marriage, back to their rhetorical contest, and makes it clear that if it is up to her, she will not be his hen. Additionally, by changing the perspective, and saying that Petruchio is not her cock (instead of saying that she is not his hen), Katherine reformulates their relation, refusing to cast herself into the role of an object that can be possessed, and making it clear that, at least in the domain of language, she is in control. In this way, Petruchio's own comment backfires on him, leaving Katherine in charge of the conversation.

Although he fails to assert dominance through language alone, as he is verbally overpowered by Katherine, Petruchio still ends up taking control of the situation. This suggests that he is relying on another source of power or authority in order to (re)gain the upper hand. Petruchio and Katherine's back-and-forth dynamic is brought to an end when he says:

> setting all this chat aside,
> Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented
> That you shall be my wife; your dowry 'greed on,
> And will you, nill you, I will marry you. (II.1, 260-263)

Petruchio here finally uncovers his intentions, and makes it clear that Katherine does not have any say in the matter, invoking her father's authority over her by saying he has already consented. This changes the tone, as well as their dynamic, considerably, as Petruchio then adopts a more aggressive taming rhetoric: "I am he am borne to tame you, Kate […] Here comes your father. Never make denial, / I must, and will have Katherine to my wife" (268-272). When reporting what has supposedly taken place between him and Katherine, Petruchio shows a complete disregard for the truth, and dismisses Katherine's objections. It is as if Katherine's words are no longer of any value, as they are not allowed their full strength. Even though Katherine expresses her anger at her father, sarcastically thanking him for the "tender fatherly regard" he showed in arranging a wedding for her with "one half lunatic […] That thinks with oaths to face the matter out" (279-281), Petruchio manages to convince the other men that they very much love each other. He does so by claiming that Katherine's shrewdness is nothing but an act now, and she is much more agreeable when the two of them are left alone (ll 296-299). Petruchio's explanation is not necessarily more convincing or logical than Katherine's objections, on the contrary, and yet the other men take his word for it, and not hers. By referring to Katherine as "my Katherine" (309) he already casts himself in the role of husband, which allows him to speak on her behalf. It appears that Petruchio is relying on the authority that is only attributed to men in a patriarchal context, suggesting that gender politics here weigh heavier than – but do not coincide with – the power dynamics in language. From this point onwards, Katherine is left at a disadvantage, as Petruchio continues to rely on his male authority to assert dominance.

Critics who argue that Petruchio manages to subdue Katherine through language alone, often cite passages such as the sun/moon scene (IV.5), in which he proves himself a talented rhetorician.[4] However, even in such scenes, when Petruchio arguably verbally overpowers Katherine, his dominance appears to be the product of his male authority, as the authority of his words is tied to his status as a husband, rather than as a rhetorician. At first, when Petruchio calls the sun the moon, Katherine corrects him. However, Petruchio then threatens to end their journey to Katherine's father, unless she surrenders to his absurd fantasies. Hortensio, who is accompanying them, then tells Katherine to "Say as he says, or we shall never go" (11), which already makes explicit the fact that Petruchio does not win this battle through persuasion, but through manipulation and threats. This is emphasized by Katherine's statement: "Forward, I pray, since we have come so far, / And be it moon, or sun, or what you please […] Henceforth I vow it shall be so for me" (12-15). Katherine's submission then, appears to be the start of a forced blind obedience, out of necessity rather than conviction.

---

[4] See for instance Baumlin (1989, cf. supra, footnote 3), who argues that in this scene Petruchio's linguistic superiority and his use of Gorgian rhetoric allow him to create a more dynamic identity for his beloved Kate, with whom he is merely attempting to achieve "marital harmony".

Petruchio's male authority, which enables his "taming" of and "political reign" over Katherine, eventually leads to total submission, embodied by Katherine's speech in the final scene (Shakespeare V.2), and emphasized by a role reversal between Katherine and Bianca. If Katherine's earlier rhetorical stubbornness can be seen as "her refusal to accept the so-called natural order of patriarchal hierarchy," as she insists on exercising her tongue "under her own control rather than under the rule of a man" (Boose 180-181), the final scene represents the opposite. When Lucentio, Hortensio and Petruchio each bet that their wife is the most obedient – the essential quality of a "good wife" in their patriarchal value system – it is expected that Bianca and the widow will be far more compliant than Katherine, who is still seen as a stubborn "shrew" by the other men. Strikingly, however, Katherine is the only one who does as she is told. Bianca, on the other hand, supposedly the lovely and obedient one, disobeys her husband. This role reversal between "the fair Bianca," and Katherine, the shrew, underscores Katherine's transformation from someone who refuses to play the role she is expected to, to someone who seems to be nothing but that role, as both her actions and words show obedience and submission.

By the final scene, Katherine's tongue falls under the rule of Petruchio. The speech that follows when her husband "charges" Katherine to tell the other women "what duty they do owe their lords and husbands" (77), almost seems to have been written by Petruchio himself. When she tells the widow that "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign," who "craves no other tribute at thy hands but love, fair looks, and true obedience […] such duty as the subject owes the prince" (78), it appears that Katherine has become the embodiment of what a "good wife" is expected to be in the play's patriarchal society. Katherine's transformation is so extreme that one might wonder if Shakespeare is exaggerating intentionally, to raise questions about the patriarchal values that come out most clearly in the final scene. If we do take the final scene as a critical exaggeration, it is possible to read the play as a warning against the potential risks of men asserting their male authority to the extent that power dynamics become wholly dependent on gender status.

II.1.3 Conclusion

In this section, I have investigated the interrelation between language and gender with regard to power dynamics in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Throughout the play, language serves as a source of power through which male and female characters attempt to gain the upper hand. Although Katherine initially seems to successfully use language as a means to stay in control of her own identity and resist the patriarchal order, both her speech and identity are eventually controlled by Petruchio. This way, the play raises questions about the limits of language in a patriarchal setting, where gender politics appear to be more deciding than the power dynamics of language.

II.2 The Power of Language vs. the Language of Power in *Romeo and Juliet*

II.2.1 Introduction

In early criticism of *Romeo and Juliet*, much attention has been paid to the character of Romeo, while Juliet was treated as a less important, underdeveloped character. However, under the impulse of feminist criticism, there has been a renewed attention for Shakespeare's female characters, and critics such as Carolyn E. Brown[5] have challenged the traditional view of Juliet as Romeo's passive beloved. Additionally, though the play's primary concern is often considered to be love, critics like Lynette Hunter have also established the play's preoccupation with language, even calling *Romeo and Juliet* "one of Shakespeare's most self-conscious explorations into language and how it signifies" (Hunter 259). Both Brown and Hunter offer insightful comments with regard to dynamics of language in the play, with particular attention to Juliet's use of speech. While Hunter argues, for instance, that Juliet's language in the balcony scene demonstrates her remarkable "confidence in making words mean what she wants them to mean" (261), Brown claims that Juliet's rhetoric is driven by a desire for control.

---

[5] See Brown's article 'Juliet's Taming of Romeo' (1996)

In this section, I will investigate Juliet's use of language as a source of power. First, I will look at the power dynamics in Romeo and Juliet's first conversation, by analyzing their use of figurative language. Then, I will discuss the intersection of language and gender in the balcony scene. Finally, I will look at how Romeo and Juliet's dynamic is reinforced and/or undermined by the larger patriarchal structure of Verona.

I will argue that Romeo and Juliet's relationship offers an exceptional situation, as Juliet arguably manages to gain control and assert dominance through language. However, even though, on the surface, Juliet appears to be the exceptional factor (in the sense that one might read her rhetorical superiority as evincing a triumph of feminine values), I will argue that it is Romeo's exceptional attitude which allows for Juliet's verbal overpowering of him. In contrast with a more typical Shakespearean male character like Mercutio, Romeo uses language for romantic purposes; to idolize Juliet, rather than assert his male authority over her. The exceptionality of Romeo and Juliet's interactions is emphasized by confrontations with the larger patriarchal order of Verona, and by the end of the play, Juliet realizes that she cannot overcome the male authorities she is subject to, at least not through language.

II.2.2 "May not one speak?": The Limits of Female Verbal Power in the Patriarchal Order of Verona

Romeo and Juliet's first conversation (Shakespeare I.4), which takes the form of a shared sonnet, can be read as a struggle for control over figurative meaning, in which Juliet gains the upper hand. As Romeo and Juliet's iconic heterosexual love story is set in a patriarchal society, and revolves around a thirteen year old girl and an older boy,[6] one would think that Romeo is in a position of power in relation to Juliet. Unlike Juliet, Romeo has the means and liberty to come and go whenever he pleases. According to Carolyn E. Brown, Shakespeare critics have sometimes viewed the play as being primarily about Romeo. Juliet, therefore, has often been treated as a subsidiary character, and read as an inexperienced teenage girl, or, in Brown's words: "little more than a child" (333).[7] Critics such as Irene Dash and Brown, however, have challenged this traditional view of Juliet, instead regarding her as "a courageous person attempting to fight her destiny as a woman" (Dash, qtd. in Brown 333). Even though Juliet, as a young girl in a patriarchal society, would typically not be in a position of power in relation to Romeo, throughout the play, there are moments where she tries to gain the upper hand. For example, in her first conversation with Romeo, Juliet renegotiates the figurative meaning of Romeo's language:

> ROMEO: If I profane with my unworthiest hand
> This holy shrine, […]
> My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
> To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.
> JULIET: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
> […]

---

[6] Although Romeo's age is never actually given, he is generally taken to be older than Juliet, and typically portrayed as being around the age of 16.

[7] See for instance E. C. Pettet's characterization of Juliet as a "spontaneous, passionate child of nature, whose speech and heart are always one." (qtd. in Brown 333).

> For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
> *And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.*
> ROMEO: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?
> JULIET: *Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.*
> (208-217, my italics)

In his proposal to kiss Juliet’s hand, Romeo uses a metaphor for his lips: “two blushing pilgrims” (210). In her response, however, Juliet uses the pilgrim metaphor to refer to Romeo as a whole (212), after which she casts herself in the role of saint (214). She then overturns Romeo’s metaphor, by changing his original “tender kiss” (211) into one which does not involve any lips: “holy palmers’ kiss” (215). Romeo realises that his original intent has been lost in Juliet’s version of the figurative language he used, so he tries to bring it back, by pointing out that saints and pilgrims have lips (216). However, Juliet again cleverly steers the conversation in her own direction, making the kiss Romeo is longing for redundant, as lips must be used in prayer (217). It seems that Juliet here initiates a negotiation over figurative language, in which she gains the upper hand. Eventually, Juliet does let Romeo kiss her, but not before giving him a hard time and making sure she can communicate on her own terms. When Romeo says “O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do” (218), he appears to accept Juliet’s control over figurative meaning.

In the balcony scene (Shakespeare II.1), Juliet’s confession being overheard by Romeo actually provides her with an opportunity to speak freely, allowing her to take control of the situation. The dominant reading of the balcony scene is that Juliet confesses her love for Romeo with no intention of it being overheard. One could argue that this puts Romeo in a position of power, as he could use this knowledge to his advantage. However, there is some ambivalence in Juliet’s reflections on her confession, which suggests that she uses it as an opportunity to assert power through language. One would expect an innocent and naïve teenage girl to react embarrassed, when she is overheard while making such an intimate confession. Juliet, however, does not seem all too genuinely ashamed. While she claims that she would like to “deny / What I have spoke” (130-31), she does not take it back. Instead, Juliet assures Romeo that she meant what she said, and will “prove more true / Than those that have the coying to be strange.” (140-41). And while Juliet states that she would gladly reflect on the dictates of correct moral behavior (“Fain would I dwell on form” [130]), she actually appears to seize the opportunity to not bother with polite convention (“but farewell, compliment.” [131]), as it allows her to take initiative and get right down to business, asking Romeo plainly: “Dost thou love me?” (132). The following lines further add to the sense that Juliet uses her overheard confession as an excuse to speak freely in a way a young woman typically could not, and be “pardoned” for that: “I should have been more strange, I must confess, / But that thou overheard'st, ere I was ware, / My true-love passion. Therefore pardon me” (144-146).

After her confession, Juliet – who is visually on top (on the balcony) – continues to successfully assert dominance over Romeo through language. She asks Romeo to confess his love, but then interrupts him, because she does not like his use of figurative language:

> ROMEO: Lady, by yonder blessèd moon I vow,
> […]—
>
> JULIET: Oh, swear not by the moon, th’ inconstant moon,
> […]
> Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.
>
> (149-153)

After being told not to swear by the moon, Romeo appears to accept that Juliet is in charge of the conversation, as he asks her for directions: “What shall I swear by?” (154). Juliet then names her terms: “swear by thy gracious self, […] And I’ll believe thee.” (155-157). Romeo’s second poetic attempt, however, is again shut down by Juliet, who has changed her mind and calls off the exchange of vows because she has “no joy of this contract to-night” (159), causing a frustrated Romeo to call out: “O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?” (167). Juliet’s use of speech throughout the balcony scene can be read as an attempt to take control of her life, by arranging her own marriage, for instance, something which a young woman in a patriarchal society otherwise would not have been able to do. According to Brown, the falconry imagery in this scene points to a subtext in which Juliet, driven by a desire for control, rhetorically trains Romeo like falconers train their birds.

Arguably, it is Romeo’s romantic attitude, which sets him apart from his male peers and makes him less inclined to assert his male authority, that allows for Romeo and Juliet’s exceptional power dynamics. The male order of Verona, with prince Eschalus as the ultimate patriarch (followed by Lord Capulet and Lord Montague), is characterized by masculine aggression. This becomes clear from the continued feud between the two families, the public display of masculinity, the abundant use of phallic jokes etc. Romeo can be seen as a special case in this structure. Although he is the son of Lord Montague, he is not as invested in the spectacle of masculinity and aggression, and he does not really listen to his father or friends. For instance, when Tybalt challenges Romeo to a duel, Romeo refuses. Unlike Mercutio, he does not seem interested in fighting other men in the name of honour. Also unlike Mercutio is Romeo’s attitude towards women. From the beginning of the play, we get a sense that Romeo is in love with being in love. He is invested in a romantic mind set, which appears to come with a different kind of masculinity than that which leads Tybalt to challenge Romeo, or Mercutio to mock Juliet’s nurse. Rather than wanting to subdue a woman and using language to assert dominance, Romeo uses language to idolize the object of his affections (first Rosaline, then Juliet). Symbolically, one could argue, Romeo is a pilgrim, and he needs a saint. The fact that Romeo is less inclined to assert his male authority in his interactions with Juliet allows her to take control by using her rhetorical skills; rhetorical superiority is here not overruled by male authority.

While Juliet's use of language as a form of power allows her to assert dominance in her relationship with Romeo, her voice cannot overcome the male authorities she is subject to in the larger patriarchal structure of the play. As a young woman in a patriarchal society and household, Juliet does not have the same freedom as Romeo. Her father's authority over her manifests in his responses to Count Paris, who wants his consent to marry her. First, Lord Capulet tells Paris to woo her and win her heart, because Juliet – "the hopeful lady of [his] earth" (15) – also has a say in the matter: "My will to her consent is but a part; / An she agree, within her scope of choice / Lies my consent and fair according voice." (I.2 17-19). However, Capulet clearly changes his mind, as he later says: "Sir Paris, I will make a desperate tender / Of my child's love: I think she will be ruled / In all respects by me; nay, more, I doubt it not." (III.4 12-14). When Juliet makes it clear that she does not want to marry Paris, Capulet is infuriated, as he feels like his authority is being challenged. In the argument that follows, it becomes clear that female verbal power cannot compete with male authority:

> JULIET: Good father, I beseech you on my knees,
> Hear me with patience *but to speak a word.*
> CAPULET: […] *Speak not, reply not, do not answer me;*
> *My fingers itch.*
> CAPULET: […] An you be mine, *I'll give you to my friend;*
> An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets,
> (III.5 159-165, 193-194, my italics)

When Juliet begs her father for permission “but to speak a word,” she is denied the right to speak her mind, and Capulet responds with the threat of physical violence. Capulet’s statement that he will “give” Juliet to Paris suggests a strong sense of ownership, and can be seen as an expression of an already established dominance, the sort of power fathers are believed to have over their daughters in the patriarchal order. Unlike Juliet, Capulet does not use language as a means to gain power or control, or a form of power in itself. He does not need to. One could argue that what we see here is the language of power (rather than the power of language), which is simply the expression of the power that is attributed to men (whether they be husbands, fathers, brothers, kings…) in the patriarchal order. Gender here serves as a form of power or dominance which men have over their female relations, on the sole basis of their manhood/position/role/title. As a form of power only men can assert, gender also acts as a condition for power. Juliet, who can only rely on the strength of her words, is silenced by her father’s voice of male authority. Interestingly, this scene contains variations of speaking and not speaking, which emphasize the sense that female verbal power (or the power of language) cannot overcome the voice of male authority (the language of power). While the nurse calls out “May not one speak?” (174), Juliet’s mother rejects Juliet by choosing silence: “Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word.” (204). Additionally, Capulet’s “Speak not” (164) contrasts with Romeo’s “She speaks. / Oh, speak again” (67-68) when he first overhears Juliet in the balcony scene (II.1).

II.2.3 Conclusion

In this section, I have focused on Juliet’s use of language as a source of power, in order to get a better understanding of the role of speech and gender in the power dynamics in *Romeo and Juliet*. In her relationship with Romeo, Juliet manages to assert power through rhetoric, but within the larger patriarchal power structure of Verona, she cannot overcome the language of power or voice of male authority as embodied by her father. While Romeo does not assert his male authority over Juliet, which allows her to verbally overpower him, Lord Capulet speaks a rhetoric of absolute authority: if Juliet is "his," she is to be obedient, in silence. The authority of his words does not derive from the words themselves, but from the power invested in him as patriarch. Language is overruled by gender-based authority.

II.3 Dynamics of Speech and Reputation in *Much Ado About Nothing*

II.3.1 Introduction

Scholars have long noted *Much Ado About Nothing*'s preoccupation with language and appearance, and the fact that the play centres on what is traditionally known as the battle of the sexes.[8] Some critics, such as Barbara Everett and John Crick, have read the play as a struggle in which "inadequate masculine values" are ultimately superseded by "humane feminine values" (Cook 186). Other critics, however, such as Carol Cook and Valerie Traub, argue that whatever conversion or resolution the play offers to its central sexual conflict "is notably incomplete" (Cook 186). Both Traub and Cook combine their focus on gender-related issues with a strong interest in the dynamics of speech, by mapping gendered power dynamics onto modes of representation. Building on their insights into the mechanics of Shakespearean patriarchal speech and male strategies to contain "the threat of female erotic power" (Traub 216), I examine how characters use and abuse speech as a means to assert power over each other.

In my discussion of *Much Ado,* as a case study on male and female verbal power and authority, I pay particular attention to the play's central theme of slander and its implications for the dynamics of reputation and speech. More specifically, I will look at the value of female reputation, its connection to female verbal power and authority, and its vulnerability to defamation. Scholars have long acknowledged that “considerations of honour, good name, and reputation were of central importance to [early modern English] society” (Sharpe 1). Just how seriously people took their reputations is clear in the eagerness of individuals to defend it, which, Jim Sharpe shows, led to an “explosion of litigation over defamation [...] from the mid sixteenth century onwards” (3). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that notions of honour and reputation were highly gendered. “Although,” as Alexandra Shepard remarks, “the extent to which this was gender-specific (as opposed to gender-related) has been considerably debated by historians, the centrality of sexual reputation to female status is irrefutable” (167). The association of female honour and reputation with chastity was a commonplace principle of social evaluation,[9] which meant that a woman’s reputation and status could be particularly damaged by defamation, whether in speech (slander) or in writing (libel). Moreover, Bernard Capp states that sexual insults were widely recognized as “by far the most effective weapon” against women, “even in quarrels about wholly different issues” (70).

---

[8] As mentioned in the introduction, Penny Gay defines 'the battle of the sexes' as "masculine and feminine genders in continual opposition," and stresses that this conceptualisation is "the product of a patriarchal culture, that can *only* think in this way about relations between the sexes" (1).

I will argue that *Much Ado About Nothing* explores how men can use slander as an effective tool to assert dominance over women. Due to the gendered notion of reputation (in the play’s patriarchal society as in Shakespeare’s England), female reputation is particularly vulnerable to sexual slander. In the case of Hero, this has almost fatal consequences. Claudio’s false accusation (sparked by Don John’s lies) successfully ruins her reputation and diminishes the authority of her words, leaving her powerless. Through its central theme of slander, and its preoccupation with language’s potential and limitations, *Much Ado About Nothing* points toward the risks and consequences that arise when too much power is attributed to the words of men, on the mere basis of their manhood. More broadly, the play thematizes and, arguably, problematizes, notions of authority and credibility that are central to female and male verbal power.

---

[9] See for instance J. Dod & R . Cleaver, *A Godlie Forme of Householde Government*, qtd. in Shepard 75

II.3.2 "[T]he lady is disloyal": Slander and the Male Prerogative of Power in Language

In the patriarchal society of *Much Ado*, language is often used for its potential to deceive and distort, and as a means to gain and assert power or control. Maurice Hunt argues that "Shakespearean patriarchal speech is designed to establish social dominance by twisting, dismissing, or oppressing the words and ideas of others" (166).[10] It appears that this sense of speech as a means to distort other people's identities goes together with an anxiety over language and (mis)representation. According to Carol Cook, the characters in *Much Ado* are "much concerned with self-concealment and the exposure of others" (186). As reputation is largely constructed through language, speech can be used as a means to affect other people through their reputation, by, for instance, deliberately misrepresenting them. The play's preoccupation with reputation and representation can be seen, for example, in Benedick's reaction after Beatrice insults him at the masked ball:

> that my Lady Beatrice may know me,
> and not know me! The prince's fool! Ha!
> […]
> I am not so reputed. It is the
> base (though bitter) disposition of Beatrice that puts
> the world into her person and so gives me out. (Shakespeare II.1, 193-198)

---

[10] Hunt argues that Shakespearean patriarchal speech "is not exclusively the property of men" (166), and that Beatrice's speech is more conventionally male than female. Cook also argues that aggressive wit and "phallic language may be appropriated by women," but it "remains nonetheless gendered as masculine" (190).

When Benedick, who thinks that Beatrice does not recognize him behind his mask (which, arguably, she does), asks her for a description of himself, Beatrice seizes the opportunity to teach him a lesson. Benedick, who is not too happy with the portrait she paints of him, comments on the irony of her "knowing" and "not knowing" him (193-94). This could allude to Beatrice not recognizing him behind his mask but also – more generally – not really knowing him past his appearance and outward behaviour (and his reputation of being a "tyrant" to the opposite sex) – which may also be a pose or a mask he uses to avoid being exposed. Benedick ultimately dismisses Beatrice's comments by saying that she ascribes her own feelings to the world, and her report was therefore a misrepresentation. In addition to a concern with social standing and reputation, Benedick here shows an awareness of subjectivity and potential misrepresentation or misinterpretation of one's appearance. It appears that Beatrice here used speech as a means to overpower Benedick (who could not respond without exposing his real identity). Benedick's statement that he "stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at [him]," and that Beatrice "speaks poniards" (233), further suggests a sense of speech as a source of power, particularly with regard to reputation.

In the orchard scenes, when the main characters attempt to bring together Benedick and Beatrice through hearsay, the play again explores questions of reputation and representation and especially the grounds upon which authority is attributed to speakers/words in the play's patriarchal society. For instance, although Benedick is reluctant to believe the gossip of the other men, he considers Leonato's age and standing sufficient proof of the truthfulness of his words: "I should think this is a gull but that the / white-bearded fellow speaks it. Knavery cannot, sure, / hide himself in such reverence" (II.3, 117-119). This suggests a strong association of social standing, status, and reputation, with authority and verbal power. Additionally, Benedick's comment “I hear how I am censured. They say I will / bear myself proudly […] I must not seem / proud.” (214-217) again shows a concern for reputation, and evinces his pridefulness. After Benedick has heard of Beatrice’s alleged love for him, he starts reading into her behaviour and appearance, thus projecting his own desires: “she’s a fair lady! I do / spy some marks of love in her” (232-233).

Similar dynamics are at the heart of Don John’s lies about Hero’s loyalty, in which he exploits language’s potential to deceive and distort, and manipulates Claudio and Don Pedro, whose obsession with honour makes them especially susceptible to his lies. As with most of the crucial information in the play, the scandal Hero is accused of is only communicated indirectly and relies entirely on appearance and misrepresentation. Don John’s ambiguous language after he accuses Hero (III.2, 93: “the lady is disloyal”) suggests an awareness of the power of this misrepresentation, which Hero can do nothing against: “I could say she were worse; think you of a worse title, / and I will fit her to it.” (99-100). And he is right: Hero’s reputation is entirely in his hands; he can fit her to any title he likes. It seems strange that Claudio and Don Pedro would believe Don John, who is known to have betrayed them in the past. Arguably, however, Claudio and Don Pedro are misguided by pride and the notion of honour, and they project their own male fears about female sexuality and erotic power onto Hero. Even before witnessing any proof of Hero’s guilt, they are determined to shame her publicly at the wedding, in revenge for her alleged betrayal. In this regard, Claudio and Don Pedro evince a larger fear that runs throughout the play—an “anxiety about women’s potential power over men” (187), as Carol Cook argues.

In *Much Ado*, male fears about female power lead men to use depersonalizing language, reducing women to voiceless images. Cook argues that, in the world of the play, the masculine gender is that of “speaking and reading subjects, of manipulators and interpreters of signs” (186), whereas women are forced into the role of “object, or referent, of language, a sign to be read and interpreted” (189). Male characters often link courtship to military language and ownership. According to Valerie Traub, Claudio’s statement about Hero at the beginning of the play (“Can the world buy such a jewel?” [I.1, 173]) is part of a strategy of containment, through which men neutralize the potential threat of female erotic power. Michael Friedman also notes the “combative nature of courtship” (356), which can be seen in Don Pedro’s comment that he will woo Hero on behalf of Claudio, and “take her hearing prisoner with the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale” (I.1, 308-309). Later on, he also says: “I will but teach them to sing and restore them to the owner” (II.1, 220-221), already referring to Hero as if she is Claudio’s possession, and has to be taught “how to sing.” Hero’s alleged infidelity, then, is a threat to male authority, and an embarrassment to Claudio, as it confirms his worst fear: a woman who refuses to be conquered or controlled. Claudio’s extreme reaction can be understood in light of this male anxiety over female power, and the rhetoric of ownership which works to sustain a male prerogative of power in language. Claudio’s public shaming of Hero is a very effective way to establish dominance over her, and to ensure that if he cannot own her, no one can. As Cook argues, *Much Ado*’s catastrophic church scene exposes “the potential for cruelty and violence in Messina’s masculine order” (197-198).

In *Much Ado*, slander – together with the male prerogative of power in language and the masculine imposition of silence on women – becomes a highly effective tool for men to assert dominance over women in the public sphere. While both male and female characters use language to deceive each other,[11] the play generally associates power and social dominance with male speech. With the exception of Beatrice,[12] who is called “Lady Tongue” (II.1, 260), the women in the play are typically associated with silence. Arguably, Hero’s silence and spotless reputation make her all the more fitting as a “target of unconscious [male] phantasies and fears” (Cook 189) and more vulnerable to the misrepresentations of men. According to early modern notions, Hero embodies the ideal bride. This ideal was based on three characteristics: “chastity, obedience, and silence” (Friedman 361). As a woman whose reputation depends on all three of these characteristics, Hero is put in an impossible situation by Claudio’s slander. As female reputation centres on chastity, and authority is presented in the play as being largely contingent on reputation, Claudio’s public attack on Hero’s chastity not only damages her reputation, but also takes away the source of authority of Hero’s words. One could argue that Hero needs language to restore her authority and defend her honour, but she needs authority for her language to have effect. Whatever she says will be interpreted as proof of guilt, as becomes clear from the following lines:

---

[11] In the orchard scenes, for instance, Hero and Ursula trick Beatrice in the same way the men manipulate Benedick.

> CLAUDIO
> What man was he talked with you yesternight,
> […] betwixt twelve and one?
> Now, if you are a maid, answer to this.
> HERO
> I talked with no man at that hour, my lord.
> CLAUDIO
> Why, then you are no maiden. (IV.1, 84-86)

---

[12] Both Hunt and Cook argue that Beatrice’s speech is more conventionally male than female, and Shakespearean patriarchal speech “is not exclusively the property of men” (Hunt 166). Cook also argues that, while aggressive wit and “phallic language may be appropriated by women,” it “remains nonetheless gendered as masculine” (190).

Paradoxically, Hero cannot defend her chastity and deny the accusations properly without also risking her silence and obedience. In the eyes of Don Pedro and Claudio, Hero has turned out to be different from what she seemed (loyal and chaste). In order to defend her honour, she would have to speak up against them, thus breaking her characteristic silence, which – in their eyes – would only prove them right and damage her reputation further. However, as her father commands her to answer Claudio's question, she does. But just like Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, "what [she is] to say must be but that which contradicts [her] accusation" (Shakespeare III.2, 21-22): words have become unreliable, as Hero's "maiden truth" (164) has been undone, and her voice cannot compete with the voices of male authority that belong to her accusers. By ruining Hero's reputation through slander, Claudio takes away her verbal power and authority, thus successfully asserting dominance through language.

II.3.3 Conclusion

Through its central theme of (mis)representation, *Much Ado* offers a case study on the dynamics of speech and reputation, and how these can work to reinforce power relations. In the play's patriarchal society, a rhetoric of male superiority or ownership over women (who are associated with silence) appears to sustain a male prerogative of power in language, which – together with the greater susceptibility of female honour to reputational harm – enables men to use slander as an effective tool to gain and assert dominance over women. Don John, who exploits language's potential to deceive, manipulates Claudio and Don Pedro by targeting their weak spots (their concern for their honour, and anxieties over female erotic power), leading them to believe that Hero has betrayed them. Subsequently, Claudio's public shaming of Hero does not only damage her (sexual) reputation, but with it everything she stands for, as well as her verbal power.

III. CONCLUSION

In this Bachelor Paper on the power dynamics in Shakespeare's plays, I have studied the intersection of language and gender in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. The **aim** of this paper was to show the interrelations and intimate interconnections between mechanics of speech and gender in relation to the overall power dynamics in these plays. I have done so by isolating individual rhetorical contests within these plays from the larger overarching gender conflict known as the battle of the sexes. In doing so, I have addressed the entanglement of speech and gender in Shakespeare criticism, and offered an alternative perspective to the one often applied by critics who subordinate language to gender. As outlined in the introduction (I.1), (feminist) criticism at times appears to have gotten itself in an either-/or-situation. Some critics, such as Juliet Dusinberre and Irene Dash, argue that Shakespeare can be appropriated to feminist ends. Others, however, such as Kathleen McLuskie, question the presence and even possibility of feminine values in the patriarchal worlds of Shakespeare's plays, arguing that feminist critics should strive to subvert rather than assimilate the "patriarchal Bard" (qtd. in Traub 231). Both camps of critics have often turned to rhetorical battles between male and female characters as sites to determine which gender is presented as winner of the more general battle of the sexes. Critics who argue that a play celebrates the patriarchal order it depicts, rather than the proto-feministic values of the women who rebel against that order, thus also argue for the rhetorical superiority of male characters. Since I believe this way of viewing male/female interactions to some degree fails to accurately represent the dynamics of speech and gender – two interrelated yet separable issues – in Shakespeare's plays, I have reinvestigated key (rhetorical) confrontations in my three primary sources, first focusing on language in itself, before looking at the effect of gender and the implications of the plays' larger gender conflict.

Broadly, I have argued that speech and gender can be studied as separate forms of power. In Shakespeare’s plays, gender features as the form of power men have over women in a patriarchal society, whereas language as a source of power takes the form of rhetorical skill. While they can be studied as separate forms of power, speech and gender can at times also be understood as conditions for power. Shakespeare’s characters often use speech as a means to gain and assert power (over each other). However, in the patriarchal worlds of the plays, the power of language often proves insufficient to assert dominance, particularly for women. As a form of power only men can assert, gender often acts as a condition for power. So, even when female characters verbally overpower their male counterparts, they are often dominated, because male characters can also assert their male authority – which often appears to be the most salient condition for power within the dominant masculine order of these plays. Female verbal superiority is thus overruled by a male/patriarchal/societal authority women cannot overcome.

In addition to functioning independently as a source of power, language can at times be seen as an extension or expression of masculine authority within these patriarchal societies. Arguably, gender is a latent form of power, in that male authority and masculine superiority are present but need to be expressed in some way or other in order to be asserted and have effect. Gender is mostly asserted through language. In Shakespeare’s plays, male authority/ masculine superiority expresses itself in phallic rhetoric and through the language of ownership male characters often use to refer to women. Perhaps the clearest example of this authority is Lord Capulet’s statement that he will “give” his daughter to his friend (Count Paris – another powerful male who would then have authority over her), which is indicative of the sense of ownership and power Shakespearean men ‘naturally’ have over the women they are in a close relation to.

Capulet does not need the power of language or a rhetorical victory to assert power over Juliet; speech, instead, is a symptom of a societal fact, rather than the tool itself that creates such male dominance.

However, while language can simply be the expression of an already established dominance (so not a condition), speech can also be an effective and even necessary or essential tool for men to gain power and assert dominance over women (in which case language can be understood as a condition for power). In the case of *Much Ado*, for instance, gender-based authority might give weight to men's words – Don John, merely by being a man, even one with a bad reputation, appears to have greater authority than Hero – and therefore helps gain and assert dominance, but it is the (ab)use of speech (or the power of language) which ultimately establishes the dominance here: Don John's slander indirectly reduces Hero's verbal power, as female authority is linked with sexual reputation, and therefore particularly vulnerable to defamation.

I have used ***The Taming of the Shrew, Romeo and Juliet,*** **and** ***Much Ado About Nothing***, to explore three different aspects of the dynamics of speech and gender. In my discussion of *The Taming of the Shrew* **(II.1)**, the aim was to disaggregate speech and gender as conditions for or forms of power. While both Petruchio and Katherine use their rhetorical skills as a means to gain the upper hand in their relationship, language alone fails to produce dominance. Petruchio, when faced with Katherine's verbal superiority, simply relies on his authority as both a man and then a husband to assert dominance over Katherine. Katherine's submission at the end of the play, therefore, is less the result of Petruchio's rhetorical superiority than a consequence of the force of male authority. *Taming* thus raises important questions about the limits of language in a patriarchal setting, where gender politics appear to be more decisive in determining power and authority than the dynamics of language itself.

Building on these findings, I have tried to further disentangle speech and gender in my analysis of *Romeo and Juliet* **(II.2)**. While Juliet's assertiveness has earned her praise in feminist criticism, I have argued that Juliet's arguable dominance in her relationship with Romeo is not so much a result of some exceptionality on her part, or a triumph of feminine values. Rather, it is the result of Romeo's exceptional (i.e. romantic, submissive) attitude, which sets him apart from his male peers (like Mercutio), and allows for Juliet to take control. Romeo and Juliet's dynamic therefore offers a rare example of when (female) rhetorical superiority is not overruled by (male) societal authority. Once again, though, the play's ending emphasizes the limits of female verbal power within the larger patriarchal structure of Veronese society, as Juliet cannot overcome the other male authorities she is subject to.

Finally, in my discussion of *Much Ado About Nothing* **(II.3)**, I have focused on the role reputation plays in the dynamics of gender and speech. More specifically, I have looked at the play's central theme of slander as an instance in which the power of language is (ab)used by men to assert dominance over women. I have argued that, by publicly shaming Hero, Claudio does not only damage her reputation, but also successfully removes the authority of her words (which depends on that very reputation), thus leaving her powerless. This way, the play raises questions about the gendered notions of authority and reputation which allow men to establish a male prerogative of power in language.

One of the **benefits** of such an approach is that it foregrounds both the interrelation between speech and gender while permitting us to disaggregate both aspects and thus gain a clearer picture of how speech and gender operate not only in cooperation but also independently or in isolation. This is important for our understanding of the power dynamics in Shakespeare's plays, because distinguishing between the power of language (which is universal) and power attributed to men in the plays' patriarchal societies (a societal force) allows us to see how the plays can celebrate the first (the power of language itself, used skillfully by both male and female characters) while problematizing the second (the power of gender, which the patriarchal order only attributes to men).

In the case of *Taming*, for instance, we can appreciate Petruchio's creative use of rhetoric, while also acknowledging that it is the assertion of his male authority which gave him dominance over Katherine. And while the play's ending emphasizes Katherine's submission, before male authority enters the rhetorical arena Katherine can be seen as a woman who gains autonomy through speech, by using her own voice. Katherine's situation is perhaps clearest in the ambiguity of her statement "I will be free / even to the uttermost as I please *in words*" (IV.3, 79-80 my italics): female characters like Katherine and Juliet successfully gain and express power verbally, but their power appears limited to the rhetorical arena. Within the larger patriarchal societies of Shakespeare's plays, they are often dominated – even silenced – by voices of male authority.

While Shakespeare's plays display a sense of speech as a source of power, they also show the corruption inherent in the patriarchal system, which allows men to extend their male authority to language. As many recurring themes in Shakespeare's plays involve the workings of speech and gender (eg. men wrongly accusing women of infidelity: *Much Ado*, *Othello*, *The Winter's Tale*), such an analysis suggests the need for not only more precise local understandings of speech and gender in individual plays, but also a reevaluation of the relationship between speech and gender in Shakespeare's plays as a whole.

Works Cited

Baumlin, Tita French. "Petruchio the Sophist and Language as Creation in *The Taming of the Shrew*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1989, pp. 237–257. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/450473. Accessed 25 Oct. 2020.

Boose, Lynda E. "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member." *The Taming of the Shrew*. Edited by Dympna Callaghan. W. W. Norton & Company, 2009, pp. 174-186.

Brown, Carolyn E. "Juliet's Taming of Romeo." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1996, pp. 333–355. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/450952. Accessed 17 Nov. 2020.

Capp, Bernard. "The Double Standard Revisited: Plebeian Women and Male Sexual Reputation in Early Modern England." *Past & Present*, no. 162, 1999, pp. 70–100. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/651065. Accessed 16 May 2021.

Cook, Carol. "'The Sign and Semblance of Her Honor': Reading Gender Difference in *Much Ado about Nothing*." *PMLA*, vol. 101, no. 2, 1986, pp. 186–202. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/462403. Accessed 7 Nov. 2020.

Dolan, Frances E. "Household Chastisements: Gender, Authority, and "Domestic Violence"." *The Taming of the Shrew*. Edited by Dympna Callaghan. W. W. Norton & Company, 2009, pp. 164-174.

Friedman, Michael D. "'Hush'd on Purpose to Grace Harmony': Wives and Silence in 'Much Ado about Nothing.'" *Theatre Journal*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1990, pp. 350–363. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3208080. Accessed 14 Nov. 2020.

Gay, Penny. *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*. Routledge, 2002.

Hunt, Maurice. "The Reclamation of Language in *Much Ado about Nothing*." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 97, no. 2, 2000, pp. 165–191. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4174665. Accessed 25 Oct. 2020.

Hunter, Lynette. "Echolocation, Figuration and Tellings: Rhetorical Strategies in *Romeo and Juliet*." *Language and Literature*, vol. 14, no. 3, Aug. 2005, pp. 259–278, doi:10.1177/0963947005054481.

Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado about Nothing*. Edited by Peter Holland. New York, Penguin Books, 2017.

---. *The Taming of the Shrew*. Edited by Dympna Callaghan. W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

---. *The Winter's Tale*. Edited by Frances E. Dolan. 4th edition. New York, Penguin Books, 2017.

---. *Romeo and Juliet*. Edited by Gordon McMullan. W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.

Sharpe, Jim A. *DEFAMATION AND SEXUAL SLANDER IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND: THE CHURCH COURTS AT YORK*. Borthwick Papers, vol. 58, Borthwick Institute for Archives York, York, 1980.

Shepard, Alexandra. "Manhood, Credit and Patriarchy in Early Modern England c. 1580-1640." *Past & Present*, no. 167, 2000, pp. 75–106. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/651254. Accessed 16 May 2021.

Traub, Valerie. "Jewels, Statues, and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare's Plays." *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 20, 1988, pp. 215. *ProQuest*, https://www.proquest.com/docview/740739385?accountid=11077. Accessed 7 Nov. 2020.