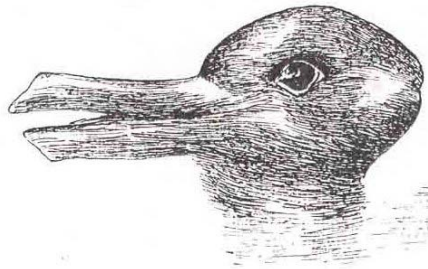


Kay Stanton*

Intersections of Politics, Culture, Class, and Gender in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merchant of Venice*



Let me open with a question: what does this drawing represent? Whichever way you first saw it, direct your vision to the opposite angle and try to see it as the other representation now. After you have recognized both images and have switched back and forth between them a few times, you may then understand the drawing as the ambiguous rabbit-duck illusion. This drawing, by an unattributed artist, first appeared in the 23 October 1892 issue of *Fliegende Blätter* (147), a German humor magazine. Its caption was “Welche Thiere gleichen einander am meisten?” (“Which animals are most like each other?”), with “Kaninchen und Ente” (“Rabbit and Duck”) written underneath. A simplified version of the image¹ was made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, first published in 1953, in which he (165-71) utilized it as a means of describing two different ways of seeing: “seeing that” and “seeing as”. In his analysis, a person can view something in a straightforward manner and see *that* this image is of a rabbit. However, in another instance, one may notice

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¹ Wittgenstein (165) credits American psychologist Joseph Jastrow for the image, as used in his *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (1900), but Jastrow based his simplified version on a cartoon in the 19 November 1892 edition of *Harper's Weekly* (1114), which was itself based on the drawing published about four weeks earlier in *Fliegende Blätter*.

a particular aspect—seeing it *as* something, a duck. To Wittgenstein, when one looks at the rabbit-duck and sees a rabbit, one is not *interpreting* the picture as a rabbit, but rather *reporting* what one sees: the picture as a rabbit. But what about the case when one sees it first as a duck, then as a rabbit (as, by the way, I did)? Apparently, Wittgenstein was not sure, except that he did believe that it could not be the case that the external world stays the same while an “internal” cognitive change happens. Since then, the image (as well as other similarly ambiguous figures) has received much additional analysis, notably by gestalt psychologists, who find a correspondence between the interpretations of ambiguous representations and the subjects’ mode of perceiving reality.

Although the rabbit-duck drawing and its interpretations were unavailable to Shakespeare, it can, I believe, be helpful as we ponder the topic of this volume, particularly in regard to Shakespeare’s treatments of diversity and homogeneity relating to the issues it raises. In his 1977 article “Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*,” Norman Rabkin made a landmark contribution to scholarship on *Henry V* by his use of this gestalt figure of the rabbit-duck to explain why to some readers and audiences and in some points in time, the play and its eponymous king are heroic, and to others and in other points in time, the king is monstrous and the play a scathing indictment of him. Better support for his argument can hardly be found than through comparison of Laurence Olivier’s post-World War II film of the play and Kenneth Branagh’s post-Falklands War treatments on stage and film—though in the film Branagh allows himself in the second half to be swept up into militaristic celebration. New historicist and cultural materialist criticism, notably by Stephen Greenblatt in “Invisible Bullets” and Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in “History and Ideology: The Instance of *Henry V*,” suggests duality of vision in the play as well, but in terms of a subversion-containment model, through which the play presents instances of subversive acts that are ultimately contained and controlled by the dominant ideology through its fount, the king—and with Shakespeare, according to Greenblatt (64), in “underlying complicity” with King Harry, a view with which I strongly disagree, by the way, but recognize as possible by means of Greenblatt’s perspective. I agree more whole-heartedly with Rabkin’s conclusion that Shakespeare deliberately constructed the play, and its title character, such that they may be read as a rabbit-duck.

Rabkin does not venture beyond *Henry V* for evidence elsewhere in Shakespeare’s canon dealing with optical illusion like that of the rabbit-duck, but it exists, almost plentifully. The closest analogue is found in *Twelfth Night*. Upon seeing Sebastian enter and looking at him and at Viola in disguise as Cesario, Orsino says, “One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not!” (5:1:215-16).²

² All quotations of Shakespeare are taken from David Bevington’s edition.

The three plays on which I will focus—*Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merchant of Venice*—can, just as easily as *Henry V* and *Twelfth Night*'s Sebastian/Cesario, be seen as rabbit-ducks. *The Merchant of Venice* provides the clearest instance. For many readers and audiences from Christian cultures over the centuries, Shylock was the evil Jew unreasonably demanding the pound of flesh from good Christian Antonio, with Portia's speech on mercy articulating Christian values at their most pure. With cultural diversity increasing over the last century such that Jewish readers, audiences, directors, and actors could view the play from their cultural perspective, and highlight it for those in a Christian culture, the play's perspective on Shylock began to shift, with his humanity being powerfully asserted in the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech (3:1:55-69) and in his misery at the end of the courtroom scene (4:1). For those of a Christian culture, the play was a "rabbit," and for those of a Jewish culture, it was a "duck." For both cultures, though, the focus was the problem of Christianity's attitude toward Judaism.

The Taming of the Shrew provides a similar example, this time from the alternate perspectives not of religious traditions but of genders, with men and women regarding the play quite differently, even in recent times. I recall a few years ago leaving a production of the play after its conclusion and walking through the exit behind a male-female couple. I heard the man ask the woman if she had "learned anything" from Katharine's last speech (5:2:140-83) on wifely duty, and the woman merely replied, "I felt sorry for Katharine." Indeed, in Shirley Nelson Garner's essay on the play, published after feminist criticism of it was available and known to her, she asserted that the language of the play was so upsettingly misogynistic that she had vowed never to teach it again, thereby to spare her female students the insults of its language and what she believed was its sexist stance. Although commentary on the play in recent years has presented more nuanced readings, in her recent book *Shakespeare and Women*, Phyllis Rackin (62) complains that the play has called forth much more criticism, had many more productions, and is taught much more frequently than *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a play in which women are presented as strong, intelligent, and capable throughout, and she calls for more attention to *Merry Wives* specifically as a counterbalance to *Shrew*. The primary focus, then, for *Shrew*, is social attitude toward the unruly woman, as "rabbit" or "duck".

The case of *Titus Andronicus* is somewhat different. This play for a long period of its critical history was less a rabbit-duck than what the British might call an "odd duck" only, as critics from the Victorian era up until late into the twentieth century were so embarrassed by its gruesome violence that they either refused to believe that it was by Shakespeare or did credit him with authorship but excused him for it, though ashamedly, because of the popularity in the period of its composition of blood tragedies such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and because of what they argued was the comparative bloodthirstiness

of Shakespeare's audience, and the play was absent from the English stage for three hundred years, not returning until 1923, in a production at The Old Vic. Though that production was successful, to widespread surprise, directors mostly stayed away from it and critics continued in their shunning of it. However, Polish director and critic Jan Kott (345-46) was a strong defender of it, arguing that "*Titus Andronicus* is by no means the most brutal of Shakespeare's plays. More people die in *Richard III*. *King Lear* is a much more cruel play". Though he (347) stated that "In reading, the cruelties of *Titus*" can seem "ridiculous," he added that, seeing it on stage, he "found it a moving experience," because in "Watching *Titus Andronicus* we come to understand—perhaps more than by looking at any other Shakespeare play—the nature of his genius: he gave an inner awareness to passions; cruelty ceased to be merely physical".

The director who is perhaps due the most credit for re-evaluation of this play, however, is Julie Taymor, who staged an off-broadway production of it in 1994 and directed a film version in 1999. In commentary for the DVD of the film, she reported being drawn to the play because she found it to be the most "relevant of Shakespeare's plays for the modern era." As she believes ours to be the most violent period in history, Taymor holds that the play has acquired more relevance for us than it had for the Victorians, stating that "it seems like a play written for today; it reeks of now."

The play is an "odd duck" not only in its violence and relative lack of popularity, but also in that it is a Roman play, but, unlike Shakespeare's other Roman plays—*Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, each of which is based on actual historical events and personages—it is fictional rather than historical, with even its time setting not clearly representing an identifiable era. Grace Starry West (74) states that "the Rome of *Titus Andronicus* is Rome after Brutus, after Caesar, and after Ovid," which, she says, we know "because the emperor is routinely called Caesar; because the characters are constantly alluding to Tarquin, Lucretia, and Brutus, suggesting that they learned about Brutus' new founding of Rome from the same literary sources we do, Livy and Plutarch". I most agree with T. J. B. Spencer (32), who states that "the play does not assume a political situation known to Roman history; it is rather a summary of Roman politics. It is not so much that any particular set of political institutions is assumed in *Titus*, but rather that it includes *all* the political institutions that Rome ever had" (Spencer's emphasis). If we agree that the play incorporates all of the Roman Empire's political institutions, then we may see it as a cautionary tale about the Roman ideology that typified the empire, which for a time included England, as well as the ideology of any culture that asserts its militaristic, imperialistic hegemony.

If it may be granted that *Titus Andronicus* may be understood as a rabbit-duck in terms of Roman ideology in a way parallel to the deliberate ambiguity of the English militaristic ideology of *Henry V*, then the "rabbit"

would be the endorsement of Roman “honor” and the “duck” the critique of it. The critique of the Roman code is articulated primarily by Tamora, conquered Queen of the Goths, her sons Chiron and Demetrius, and Aaron, a Moor who is Tamora’s lover and assistant, who also becomes an advisor and surrogate father-figure to Chiron and Demetrius. The Goths and Aaron are both “other” to the Romans, politically and culturally, and Aaron, though politically aligned with the Goths, is “other” to them racially.

Although Titus Andronicus himself over the course of the play commits multiple acts of atrocity, many of those critics who have bothered to analyze the play still tend to side more with him than with Tamora, her sons Chiron and Demetrius, and her lover Aaron, who do indeed themselves commit egregiously horrific acts. Though I certainly do not wish to be their defender over their atrocities, I would, however, suggest that their actions proceed from their own perspective, as outsiders and critics of the Roman ideology advocated by Titus, and had he given their perspective some credence, much of the grotesque violence that ensues might have been prevented. The problem for Titus, however, is that he is so blindly faithful to the ideal of Roman honor that he cannot see any other perspective. He wishes to believe that Romans, particularly high-ranking males, are superior in every way to those of any other culture, even when presented with evidence otherwise.

Titus is introduced by a captain calling him “The good Andronicus, / Patron of virtue, Rome’s best champion,” who “With honor” has returned “And brought to yoke the enemies of Rome” (1:1:64-69). He had had twenty-five sons, but he lost twenty-one of them in battle. One of his four remaining sons, Lucius, says, “Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths, / That we may hew his limbs, and on a pile” “sacrifice his flesh / Before the earthly prison of their [Titus’ dead sons’] bones” (1:1:96-99). This prisoner, Alarbus, happens to be the eldest son of Tamora, the captured Queen of the Goths, who complains,

Gracious conqueror,
Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,
A mother’s tears in passion for her son;
And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,
O, think my son to be as dear to me! (1:1:104-08)

She continues to appeal to him as a fellow parent:

Sufficeth not that we are brought to Rome
To beautify thy triumphs, and return
Captive to thee and to thy Roman yoke,
But must my sons be slaughtered in the streets
For valiant doings in their country’s cause?
O, if to fight for king and commonweal

Were piety in thine, it is in these.
 Andronicus, stain not thy tomb with blood!
 Wilt thou draw near the nature of the gods?
 Draw near them then in being merciful.
 Sweet mercy is nobility's true badge.
 Thrice noble Titus, spare my firstborn son. (1:1:109-20)

But Tamora is a Goth, not a Roman, a woman, not a man; Titus cannot or will not attempt to share her perspective. He orders the dismembering and burning of Alarbus, and Tamora calls it “cruel, irreligious piety” (1:1:130).

Those of us who are neither Roman nor Goth may see the logic of Tamora's argument, but the perspective trick that Titus employs to discredit it is operant even in regard to fellow Romans. Titus returns to Rome at a crucial point; the previous emperor has died, and his two sons are vying for the position. Titus supports Saturninus apparently *only* because of his faith in primogeniture, even though the younger son, Bassianus, is clearly a wiser, more mentally stable choice. In addition, Bassianus is engaged to Titus's only daughter, Lavinia, but when Saturninus states his wish to marry her, Titus is honored and plights her to him. When Bassianus flees with Lavinia and Titus stabs his own youngest son, Mutius, for barring his way to retrieve Lavinia, Lucius informs Titus that Mutius is dead: “My lord, you are unjust; and more than so, / In wrongful quarrel you have slain your son” (1:1:293-94). Titus replies, “Nor thou nor he are any sons of mine / My sons would never so dishonor me” (1:1:295-96). However, he has killed his son needlessly, as Saturninus says to let Lavinia go; he chooses Tamora instead, which Titus regards as dishonor to him as well. In the meantime, Tamora vows revenge on the Andronici, pledging to “find a day to massacre them all” (1:1:451).

What Shakespeare does in *Titus Andronicus*, I believe, is in effect to utilize the “other” to construct a “rabbit” alternative to Titus's Roman “duck” for readers and audiences with minds capable of processing ambiguity, as Titus is not. Patriarchy and primogeniture are plainly shown to be hollow, uninformed means for maintaining societal order. Shakespeare is rendering diversity of political and cultural belief while simultaneously attempting to indicate where homogeneity—such as in love for and protection of one's offspring—can be of value rather than as harm or stultification.

That Titus cannot see a point of homogeneity between himself and Tamora comes largely because of their gender difference, which, as Shakespeare notes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, leads men and women to process events differently. After reporting to the Duke on the change that has come over his affections following the four young people's eventful night in the forest, Demetrius says, “These things seem small and indistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turnèd into clouds,” but Hermia then says, “Methinks I see these things with parted eye, / When everything seems double,” and Helena concurs

with her perspective: "So methinks; / And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, / Mine own and not mine own" (4:1:186-91). But Hermia and Helena only ultimately, not always, share the same perspective, and although Lavinia will try, she will fail to win Tamora to her perspective as a woman.

Because of what happens to Lavinia—being raped and mutilated by Tamora's sons—is so horrific, one hesitates to say anything against her, but it can be acknowledged that Lavinia adheres to the "Romans-are-better-than-Goths" and "Roman-women-are-chaste-and-virtuous-and-Goth-women-are-sluts" mentality. On the hunt, in the morning after his wedding to Tamora and his brother's to Lavinia, Saturninus says that it is "Somewhat too early for new-married ladies" (2:2:15), with Lavinia's response being rather priggish: "I have been broad awake two hours and more" (2:2:17), and when Tamora and Aaron's privacy is interrupted by Bassianus and Lavinia, Lavinia makes the snide remark to Tamora that "'Tis thought you have a goodly gift in horning, / And to be doubted that your Moor and you / Are singled forth to try experiments" (2:3:67-69), adding that they should leave "And let her joy her raven-colored love; / This valley fits the purpose passing well" (2:2:83-84).

Although it is true that the newly married empress Tamora was indeed amorously dallying with her lover Aaron, she resents Lavinia's remarks and never fails to bring up Titus's refusal to save her son. As Demetrius stabs Lavinia's husband, Bassianus, and Chiron states their plan to "make his dead trunk a pillow to [their] lust" (2:3:130) while they rape her, Lavinia attempts to relate to Tamora as a woman, crying, "O Tamora! Thou bearest a woman's face—" (2:3:136), and adding, "For my father's sake, / That gave thee life when well he might have slain thee, / Be not obdurate; open thy deaf ears" (2:3:158-60). But Tamora replies,

Hadst thou in person ne'er offended me,
Even for his sake am I pitiless.
Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain
To save your brother from the sacrifice.
But fierce Andronicus would not relent.
Therefore away with her, and use her as you will—
The worse to her, the better loved of me. (2:3:161-67)

Aaron, for all of his gleeful eagerness to commit evil, seems to enjoy serving as counseling father-figure to Chiron and Demetrius, providing them with the plan for raping Lavinia, but he truly shines when he becomes a biological father. In 4:2, a nurse comes from Tamora to Aaron to show him the fruit of the couple's adulterous affair:

A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue!
Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad

Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime.
 The Empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal,
 And bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point. (4:2:67-71)

But he immediately leaps into protective mode, killing the nurse rather than the child. When Demetrius asks, "Wilt thou betray thy noble mistress thus?" (4:2:107), Aaron replies, "My mistress is my mistress, this myself, / The vigor and the picture of my youth. / This before all the world do I prefer" (4:2:108-10). Thus once again, Shakespeare renders the diversity of "otherness": although they are leagued together against the Romans and their ideology, Aaron chooses his son over his queen and lover, and, of all people, *he* proves to be the most devoted and self-sacrificing parent of the play.

As the Andronici are becoming more and more disillusioned by their countrymen's inadequacy to live up to "Roman-ness" to their satisfaction, one of them goes to the other side—and lo and behold, Goths apparently are not all bad! Titus's son Lucius, having been banished from Rome, becomes the general of the Goths; a Goth calls him "Brave slip, sprung from the great Andronicus, / Whose name was once our terror, now our comfort," yet "Whose high exploits and honorable deeds / Ingrateful Rome requites with foul contempt" (5:1:9-12). Aaron is caught by another Goth because his baby was crying. Lucius resolves to hang the child, so that Aaron would see it die, but Aaron begs for the child to be saved, promising to give Lucius useful information. When Aaron asks Lucius to swear him that he will spare the child in exchange for the information, Lucius asks, "What should I swear by? Thou believest no god. / That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?" (5:1:71-72), Aaron responds,

What if I do not? As, indeed, I do not.
 Yet, for I know thou art religious
 And hast a thing within thee called conscience,
 With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies
 Which I have seen thee careful to observe,
 Therefore I urge thy oath. For that I know
 An idiot holds his bauble for a god
 And keeps the oath which by that god he swears,
 To that I'll urge him. Therefore thou shalt vow
 By that same god, what god soe'er it be
 That thou adorest and hast in reverence,
 To save my boy, to nourish and bring him up,
 Or else I will discover naught to thee. (5:1:73-85)

Lucius answers, "Even by my god I swear to thee" (5:1:86), and the child is saved.

In the grotesque dinner at Titus's house, Titus kills Lavinia; after Tamora eats her sons, Titus kills her; Saturninus kills Titus; Lucius kills Saturninus. And

yet, in the wake of the mayhem, Titus's brother, Marcus, a tribune of the people, entreats the survivors, "O let me teach you how to knit again / This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf, / These broken limbs again into one body" (5:3:70-72). Rome is very much in need of healing, and its intersections with political, cultural, racial, and gendered others have highlighted its failures just under the surface of its supposed triumphs. For those who see perspectively, the answer lies in this speech on knitting one body, one sheath, from these broken limbs, achieving homogeneity of a new kind.

Although perspective in drawing had been known in part by some for centuries, and ignored for various reasons, in the Italian Renaissance, painters and architects did extensive study and experimentation with it, often involving mirrors, by which they discerned and utilized its principles. Their advances in perspective art quickly spread across Italy and throughout Europe, with Shakespeare quite obviously perceiving its principles, as evident not only in the previously quoted passages, but also because, in Sonnet 24, he specifically names "perspective" as "best painter's art" (l. 4) and, in the sonnet, the persona states that his "eye hath played the painter" (l. 1). In this image he invites the reader to regard him as a painter who has turned himself, by means of perspective tricks, into a painting of his beloved, its frame, a shop displaying the painting, and the sun gazing on the picture he has "stelled" (l. 1) of the beloved.

If Shakespeare can claim these results for his persona's eyes working as a painter in perspective, then definitely as a playwright he is utilizing those principles, and he often does so regarding women. Two examples from the history plays demonstrate this case. In *Richard II*, when the Queen has just parted from King Richard, she tells Bushy of her foreboding, which will turn out to be correct:

methinks

Some unborn sorrow ripe in Fortune's womb
Is coming toward me, and my inward soul
With nothing trembles. At some thing it grieves
More than with parting from my lord the King. (2:2:9-13)

Bushy, however, replies,

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,
Which shows like grief itself but is not so;
For sorrow's eyes, glazed with blinding tears,
Divides one thing entire to many objects,
Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon
Show nothing but confusion, eyed awry
Distinguish form. (2:2:14-20)

Thus, he continues, as she is “Looking awry upon your lord’s departure,” she thereby can “Find shapes of grief more than himself to wail, / Which, looked on as it is, is naught but shadows / Of what it is not” as, he argues, is the case when one sees through “false sorrow’s eye, / Which for things true weeps things imaginary” (2:2:21-24, 26-27). This brilliant description of perspective art is used to persuade the queen to believe herself delusional.

In *Henry V*, after King Harry has gotten the French to sign the treaty and the French king to assure him of marriage to Katharine and kingship of France, the Frenchmen unite with Harry in bawdy humor at the expense of Katharine, to enjoy their new configuration of manliness defined against the female. Harry speaks of his love-blindness, “who cannot see many a fair French city for one fair French maid that stands in [his] way” (5:2:317-19). Yet, as the king of France reminds him, “you see them perspectively, the cities turned into a maid; for they are all girdled over with maiden walls that war hath never entered” (5:2:320-22). Through a perspective trick, the as yet unconquered French cities telescope into the French maiden; by entering her “breach,” he also enters theirs. By this perspective reference, Katharine of France is made into a bawdy joke on sexual and political possession.

Harry’s perspective vision, noted by the French king, asserts his conquering eye’s power to fix the female herself into a single object that contains multiplicity in male-controlled stasis. This male perspective vision trick denies the sexual independence, alternative vision, and interpretative motions of the female eye, and yet this male vision trick will be subverted. Katharine’s offspring with Harry, Henry VI, will subvert his father’s triumphant conquest of those French cities now seen as contained in her but soon released by another French maid, Joan of Arc.³ As Shakespeare has Harry joke also about the sun and moon in conversation with Katharine, perhaps *Henry V*’s Katharine and the use of her as a perspective trick sheds some light on Katharine of *Shrew*.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, as in *Titus Andronicus*, there are analogues in the forms of “others” that problematize the behavior of the principal characters. One such is Christopher Sly. In being a somewhat rowdy man, he is something like Petruchio; in being a victim of identity theft, he is like Katharine. But unlike them, he is of lower class. When he accepts the version of himself as a lord that others are trying to impose, he begins to speak verse, as if that acceptance had “gentle[d] his condition” (*Henry V*, 4:3:63). But he introduces thereby the intersection of class into the problem of identity—as does Tranio, who *is* quite successful, until Lucentio’s father shows up, at impersonating Lucentio. The reflection of Katharine’s situation in Sly adds perspective to both class and gender.

³ For more analysis on this point, see my essay on Joan, la Pucelle.

But the sun-moon argument and Katharine's long speech are probably the most complexly rendered perspective tricks in the play. In confronting the dilemma of being female in a patriarchal society, Katharine ultimately recognizes that "our lances are but straws, / Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare" (5:2:177-78). In Katharine's problem of dealing with a husband who declares the opposite of plain reality—Petruchio's "I say it is the moon that shines so bright" to Katharine's "I know it is the sun that shines so bright"—Petruchio wins the argument simply by virtue of his being a man: "Now by my mother's son, and that's myself, / It shall be moon, or star, or what I list" (4:5:4-7). As the page impersonating his supposed "wife" tells Christopher Sly, about the play to follow enacting the Katharine and Petruchio story, "It is a kind of history" (Induction:2:137). This comedy *is* in addition "a kind of history," the sexual-political history of male denial of the female to affirm her truth, a truth with more validity than ridiculous male assertions that refuse its credibility. The sun/moon argument may be read as a metaphor for all of the times in history that a truth as asserted by women has been negated by men who have tried to silence it while proclaiming their idea of innate male supremacy that supposedly entitles them to sole access to social, political, and sexual power. Katharine's famous speech near the end of the play (5:2:140-83) has called forth many and diverse interpretations: that she has been "tamed," that she has not but has learned how to "play the game" of seeming subservient in order to manipulate her husband and her society, that she is advocating a kind of mutuality in marriage based in compromise, etc. What seems most important, however, is that Shakespeare leaves each of these and other possibilities open for us to decide. It is up to us to unpack the perspective trick: what do we *want* to be the meaning of Katharine's speech—and, after she has at least erased the "shrew" name that had been inscribed upon her by her father and her society, what do we want to be the next stage of her (and other women's) "history," in political, social, and erotic forums?⁴

If *The Taming of the Shrew* obviously offers perspective drawing of deliberate ambiguities that Shakespeare leaves to the audience to decipher, so definitely does as well *The Merchant of Venice*. The rabbit-duck problem of Shylock blinded critics for centuries to the other issues in the play that both mirror it and complicate it, by intersections with other kinds of "others". For example, from his status as "other", Shylock can critique the hypocritical behavior of the so-called "Christians" in owning slaves: "You have among you many a purchased slave," that, "like your asses and your dogs and mules / You use in abject and in slavish parts, / Because you bought them" (4:1:90-93). But especially there is the unrepenting hatred and cruelty that Antonio regularly

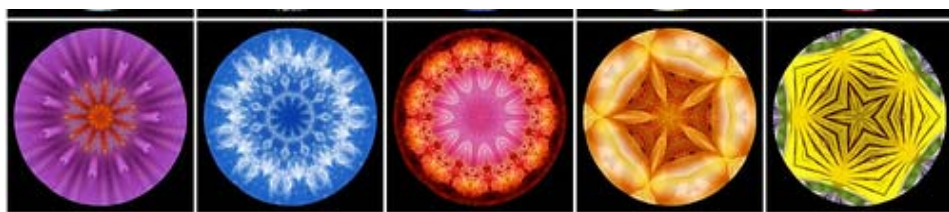
⁴ Much of the content of this paragraph, as well as a few other sentences, *passim*, in this essay, is based on material in my just-released book *Shakespeare's 'Whores': Erotics, Politics, and Poetics*.

bestows on Shylock. To one inclined to take the Shylock perspective over the Antonio perspective, like myself, Antonio seems more a venomous bully than the fine person that his friends insist on seeing—until we add another intersection of “otherness”: that quite probably Antonio is homosexual, has an unarticulated love for Bassanio, and behaves as he does to Shylock in order to cover his secret, which, if revealed, could make *him* the society’s reviled scapegoat. Although that perspective makes me more understanding of his behavior, the transference onto Shylock I still find deplorable. Yet Shylock has some unlovely qualities as well, which makes him a repressive father to Jessica. We can then accept her running away to marry Lorenzo—but not the robbing of her father, which seems gratuitous.

The fact that all three women of this play at some point cross-dress also indicates the intersection of gender into this cultural conflict. Portia seems to have a huge amount of wealth, but she does not have the society’s acceptance of the prospect of herself becoming a doctor of law in actuality. Feminists, myself among them, might wish that, after winning her case, Portia had, while still in the courtroom, stripped off her male legal garb to reveal that she was a woman, shown that a *woman* had found the solution to the problem that had stumped the best male legal minds around. We might also wish that, for all of her grand talk about “The quality of mercy” (4:1:182), she had dispensed a bit more of it in the direction of Shylock. But she does not do either. She is, though, bold, and less tainted (“Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?”, 4:1:172) by the kind of hypocritical Christianity that endorses anti-Semitism than are the Venetian “Christians”, but she is not brave enough or free enough of residual prejudices (seen in her description of suitors by cultural stereotypes and admission that “I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching,” 1:2:15-17) to take up nakedly the role of social messiah and probably be socially crucified for it.

We may justly chastise Portia for these faults, but, before hurling the first stone at her, we should follow the advice of *Measure for Measure*’s Isabella: “Go to your bosom; / Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know / That’s like [our sister’s] fault” (2:2:141-43). I believe that, if not the even worse cases of a death’s head or a fool’s head, we might find there a scroll of Portia’s picture as a reflection of ourselves. Thus the three chests, I believe, are tests not just of the suitors but also are perspective tests for us as audiences and readers. What would we expect to be inside of each exterior? And is Portia’s picture the best that we can do?

If not, then it is up to us to find new perspectives from which to explore diversity, find homogeneity in relating to one another as human beings, and work toward acceptance and appreciation for all. Thus I propose one more perspective device to explain Shakespeare’s design in the visions of his plays: a kaleidoscope.



A kaleidoscope is a cylinder that utilizes mirrors and loose, colored objects, such as beads or bits of glass, to reflect light entering from one end into patterns viewed at the other. The device was developed between 1814-16, by Scottish inventor Sir David Brewster, who coined the name “kaleidoscope”, which is derived from the Greek words for “beautiful”, “form”, and “to see”; thus it is an “Optical Instrument for creating and exhibiting beautiful forms” (Brewster 1). Operating on the principle of multiple reflection, the kaleidoscope typically contains three or more mirrors, placed at an angle to one another, and the rotation of the tube then presents varying colors and arbitrary patterns in beautiful symmetry created by the mirrored reflections.

As mentioned above, Shakespeare understands and references the principles of perspective drawing, and he is also quite aware of the role of mirrors, one type of which is the rabbit-duck. I have argued that Shakespeare puts those categorized as “others” into positions whereby they may mirror other attitudes and characters, but in forms misperceived by those being mirrored. And yet, mirroring is one of our best options for self-knowledge and progress of society toward fuller equality. In *Julius Caesar*, Cassius asks, “Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?”, to which Brutus responds, “No Cassius, for the eye sees not itself but by reflection, by some other things” (1:2:51-53). Cassius, noting that “it is very much lamented” that Brutus has “no such mirrors as will turn / Your hidden worthiness into your eye, / That you may see your shadow,” takes it upon himself to become such: “since you know you cannot see yourself / So well as by reflection, I, your glass, / Will modestly discover to yourself” an image “which you yet know not of” (1:2:55-58, 67-70). Shakespeare, with his multiplicity and diversity of mirroring, does the same for us, teaching us self-knowledge and appreciation for one another’s humanity.

The kaleidoscope may be a particularly helpful image for this volume’s focus on diversity and homogeneity, particularly in regard to Shakespeare. Each play has its own integrity, yet its components arrange themselves into diverse patterns, the picture seen in each commentator’s vision and selected theme, yet we can rearrange our perspectives and view a completely different and equally valid picture in encountering a director’s or critic’s highlighting of various of these components, making us aware that the elements of these configurations are indeed constructed into the play, ready to be perceived through the mirrors that theatrical production and critical commentary provide.

Thus, I offer that from *my* perspective, the true inventor of the kaleidoscope, as well as the perfecter of its concepts, in verse and drama form, was William Shakespeare. By his perspective illusions created by the multiple “mirrors” in the intersections of characters representing diversity of politics, culture, class, and gender, he instructs us in the homogeneity of humanity. When we, as readers, audience members, and critics, rotate our perspective slightly to give credence to a character representing an “other”—a political opponent to a main character, a lower-class man or woman, etc.—the entire play shifts into another design: still artistically beautiful, but with different colors or positions highlighted. Attending to that “other” may lead us to listen more closely to still “other” even more suppressed but valid stances, and behold—the play moves into other configurations, each with its own beauties, for as Shakespeare asserts in Sonnet 24, “perspective” “is best painter’s art” (l. 4), and it could be ours as well.

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