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"Always True to You (In My Fashion)": Female Agency in Musicalized Shakespeare

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"Brushing Up Your Shakespeare":

An Overview of Shakespeare and the American Musical Theater

The American musical is a specific genre that developed from a long history of opera, drama, minstrel shows, and various other art forms. Denny Flinn provides a definition: "The American book musical, then, is a drama – or tragedy, comedy, or farce – presented through the elements of dialogue, lyrics, and dance all woven together to create the seamless presentation of a story" (xiv). The most important element of this description is the word seamless. The incorporation of song, dance, and scenes to form a cohesive, integrated whole is what established the true advent of the American musical in 1927, with Hammerstein and Kern's *Showboat*. From *Showboat* through the 60s, the Golden Age musical was the most common form on Broadway. In considering this distinct style of musicals, it is noteworthy how many are inspired by existing works, such as operas, plays, and novels. Many of those which are prized for being exemplars of the form of the American musical, such as *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, *Hello Dolly!*, and *My Fair Lady*, are all founded on novels or plays (Flinn 16-33).

Before examining the process by which another work is transformed into a musical, one must be familiar with how the American musical evolved into the Golden Age musical which those listed above exemplify. The American musical drew its inspiration from many different art forms. Operas and operettas from Europe were performed in America before there was any sign of a similar American equivalent. The first American musical was the minstrel show, created a few decades before the Civil War. It consisted of white men blacking their faces and putting on song and dance shows which generally mocked or patronized African-Americans. They "…had no plot.

They were instead a collection of songs, dances, jokes, topical gags, and skits, all performed within a fairly tight framing structure in three sections" (Patinkin 36). This collection of small pieces into a whole led to the creation of variety/vaudeville. Vaudeville had a structure of two sections with twelve or more completely distinct acts (39). In 1866, *The Black Crook* became what many refer to as the first musical. It was not, however, a musical as we know it, but rather an extravaganza. William Wheatley, a producer, was putting on a play of *The Black Crook*, but found out after he had bought it that it was a bad show. He decided to add dances and songs to liven it up, and it became a highly successful production, running "475 performances in a time when shows seldom ran more than 75" (41). After *The Black Crook*, musicals continued to be either extravaganzas or glorified variety shows until around 1915, when Jerome Kern and Guy Bolton began to give musical comedy some semblance of structure. Plot began to factor into musical comedies with Kern and Bolton's Princess Theater musicals (early musicals performed at the Princess Theater), which allowed Kern to apply his knowledge of European operetta to the American musical comedy. This led to *Show Boat*, the first integrated musical in 1927 (101). As time went on, more and more composer/lyricist teams embraced the idea of integrated musicals, and thus the American musical was truly born.

Although the advent of the Golden Age musical introduced a standard set of guidelines, there is more than one way to create a successful musical. Every musical is unique, just as every novel is different. Critics of modern American musical theater frequently complain about the lack of original musicals. Even Stephen Sondheim, one of the most prolific musical theater writers of our time is quoted as saying "You have

two kinds of shows on Broadway – revivals and the same kind of musicals over and over again, all spectacles" (Rich 38-40). Few musicals are truly new or original on Broadway these days; it is mostly revivals of older musicals to appeal to people's nostalgia and new shows based entirely on shock value. One new, original musical, *[title of show]*, even has a whole song about the lack of original musicals on Broadway called "Original Musical." The weakness of this argument is that even the first integrated show, *Show Boat*, was based on a book. Subsequently, so were some of the most popular musicals of all time, from *My Fair Lady* and *Oklahoma!* (both based on plays) to newer musicals such as *Les Miserables* and *Wicked*. While some people complain about the derivative nature of the movie musical and the jukebox musical, the American musical theater has always drawn its inspiration from other popular genres. When plays were in fashion, Broadway was full of musical adaptations of them, such as *Hello, Dolly!* and *My Fair Lady*. Then popular comic strips begat *Lil' Abner*, and *Annie*. Now, the American musical is capitalizing on the newer forms of American pop culture, predominantly the film industry, with creations such as *Legally Blonde the Musical,* and *Ghost: the Musical*. Broadway is also taking advantage of the nostalgia that has become prevalent in American culture, with jukebox musicals featuring the tunes of ABBA (*Mamma Mia*), the Four Seasons (*Jersey Boys*), and Billy Joel (*Movin' Out*). These musicals may not technically be original, but the adaptation process is equally difficult, if not more so in some ways, than it was in the Golden Age. Trying to take an iconic film and translate it to the stage and to the tenets of musical theater is no small feat, and not all attempts are successful. Due to the varying levels of success, one can see that adaptation is not just an easy way to make money, but can actually be considered an art.

Musical collaborators learned early on that adapting other properties to fit the musical theater was a good way to create successful shows. Many shows are based on a play, novel, or film. There is not a set of hard and fast rules when adapting an established work into a new form. The musical, while it has some intrinsic traits, is not easily assembled from a strict set of directions. Every source is different and every writing team is different, thus every musical is unique. As Lehman Engel, teacher of the BMI Workshop, writes, "The practice of adapting librettos … is not an evil one, nor is it new. The only 'trick'… is to recognize what properties contain the germs of useful ideas and then what needs to be accomplished in conversion. That is all, but it is a mighty all" (284). Engel legitimizes the use of source materials by maintaining that the adaptors must still have the skill to do it artfully and such that the resulting product is a work that can stand alone. He also declares it acceptable for adaptations to stray from the original; adapting involves isolating the useful aspects of a property and building upon them. According to Tom Jones, the librettist of *The Fantasticks*, "One of the most important things to look for when searching for a musical source is a subject that lends itself to poetry as much or more than it does to prose … language that is colorful in some way, and expressive" (98). While Jones' words are not difficult to interpret, they point to one reason why people would select Shakespeare as the source text for a musical. The poetry inherent in Shakespeare's works lends itself wonderfully to song, and although not all musical adaptations of Shakespeare use his words as written, there is a lyrical quality to the plays themselves that helps them translate to the world of the American musical.

In fact, Jones also writes: "If you want to really learn something about form and construction for the musical theater, take a couple of Shakespeare's plays and really study them" (184). He is not necessarily saying that Shakespeare should be a source for musicals, or that Shakespeare is the father of the American musical theater. He is merely pointing out that the construction of a musical in some ways mimics that of Shakespeare's plays, thus making Shakespeare an excellent source author. Engel also writes about the similarities in form between Shakespearean plays and musicals, claiming that, "Shakespeare alone among playwrights worked in the 'libretto style,' which is to say that he usually announced a theme… and what followed enhanced and proved the theme by way of a plot…" (34). This "libretto style" accurately describes the way most musicals work, particularly Golden Age musicals, which adhere to the traditional format of the American musical rather than challenging it. Although Engel's point is understandable, it would be doing Shakespeare's contemporaries a disservice not to take some issue with it. Many playwrights during Shakespeare's time, and after, were using the exact same format as Shakespeare. It is a matter of opinion as to whether they did it better or worse than he, but he was absolutely not "alone" in his "libretto style." While Shakespeare may not necessarily be alone in this style of playwriting, he certainly exemplified it. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet* the theme of the negative effects of the feud on future generations is put forth in the prologue, and is then expanded upon and addressed further throughout the action of the play.

Similarity of form is not the only comparative point between Shakespeare plays and the American musicals, however. One can also compare soliloquies and songs. Engel writes, "Since the Shakespearean soliloquy is closely akin to the musical's

song and the opera's aria, the Bard used this device in every play to reveal character, what the character plans to do, and what he is like" (19). Again, Engel references only Shakespeare's soliloquies, which seems simplistic, as the Bard's contemporaries were writing soliloquies as well. Engel's insistence on Shakespeare's prowess upholds Marjorie Garber's claim that we as a culture have fetishized Shakespeare. She writes, "That Shakespeare *is* the dream-space of nostalgia for the aging undergraduate (that is to say, just about everyone) seems self-evidently true, and, to tell the truth, not all bad" (243). Not only do we as a culture expect Shakespeare to be presented the way that we learned it and for references to him to reinforce our nostalgia, she also intimates that our agnostic culture may even look to Shakespeare as our God of literature. Perhaps this fetishization of Shakespeare is what gives Engel permission to ignore all Shakespeare's talented (and less talented) contemporaries, but regardless, Engel cites Shakespeare's soliloquies as the inspiration for the American musical's character introduction songs, thus linking Shakespeare and musicals inextricably.

The musical theater characteristic of the introductory, "I want" song derives in part from Shakespeare's soliloquies. Many musicals feature a song introducing the main character, and what he or she wants. In *South Pacific*, Nellie Forbush's first song is "Cock-Eyed Optimist," which alerts the audience to her sunny nature and positive outlook on life, but also to her simplicity. These songs are more than just "I want" songs; they introduce the character's personality by detailing what the character is striving for, how he/she intends to obtain it. Elphaba's song in *Wicked*, "The Wizard and I" not only introduces the audience to her as a character, but demonstrates her plans

for the future and expressly details what she wants. These songs allow audiences to get to know a character without heavy exposition, and also serve as clues to the plot.

With all these similarities, and recommendations of Shakespeare as a good source for musicals, it is fascinating to realize how few musicals are based on Shakespeare plays, and how few of them achieved commercial success. The most successful musicals both use Shakespeare for his cultural capital and hide their dependence on him. Douglas Lanier writes that Shakespeare's association with a piece of popular culture creates a system of

> reciprocal legitimation, whereby Shakespeare's association with a mass-cultural product...lends that item a moiety of highbrow depth, 'universality,' authority, continuity with established tradition, or seriousness of purpose, while at the same time the association with mass culture lends Shakespeare street credibility, broad intelligibility, and celebrity. (Lanier 104)

The use of Shakespeare could be seen as adding legitimacy to a more popular art form; the implementation of Shakespeare in the musical may be able to give the genre more respectability. Even as they use Shakespeare to legitimate their art, producers of musical theater also tend to distance themselves from his name. One reason for this could be the general accessibility of the musical. The musical is part of popular culture, and by bringing the high culture aspect of Shakespeare into an art form that appeals to all classes of people, creators of musical theater risk alienating a large portion of their audience. *Kiss Me, Kate* presents an example of both using and denying Shakespeare. It incorporates Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* as its source text and relies heavily on Shakespearean plot and language, but it also includes the number "Brush Up Your Shakespeare," in which Shakespearean language is used as a means for two gangsters to get lucky with the ladies. Shakespeare is used both as a serious inspiration and a

humorous distraction. The musical draws its plot, characters, and much of its language from the play, thus aligning itself with the Bard; it also uses him in a series of sexual jokes, which serves to lower him from his high culture pedestal and make him relevant to a more wide-spread audience. The mere name of Shakespeare also works as a cover for the salient cultural issue that *Kiss Me, Kate* addresses. As Frances Teague posits, "Under the cover of Shakespeare's beard, they can then… cast doubt on conventional ideas about marriage (*Kiss Me Kate*) [or] play with politics (*West Side Story*)" (98). Being attached to the name "Shakespeare" automatically makes any work seem more intellectual, as he is known to be one of the most important figures in the history of theater. This allows the creators to broach subjects that would not otherwise be considered appropriate for a musical. The process of adapting Shakespeare into musicals does not end there, however. Throughout it, adaptors must make many difficult decisions due to some of the intrinsic characteristics of the Golden Age musical.

There are many important qualities of Golden Age musicals, the first of which being that they must be integrated. In his book, *The Great American Book Musical*, Flinn writes that, "the dialogue [should] be realistic … and that the songs and dances should help forward the plot, sound native to the time and place of the setting, and derive from the psychology of the characters" (xiii). Although to musical lovers these days, this definition seems to go without saying, musicals were once isolated songs and scenes strung together in variety shows. The goal was not to tell a story or to develop characters, but simply to entertain, which stopped being enough once audiences had experienced the integrated musical. In the above quote, the term "realistic" refers to dialogue that the character could feasibly say and that makes them more relatable.

Musical theater may be seen as an unrealistic art form, but if the characters are not relatable, audiences would not be drawn into the show in the same way.

In his book on how to write musicals, Engel asserts that "In musicals of all periods, including the present, the avoidance of romance has not occurred" (107). This is one of the most important aspects of the American musical. It is rare, almost impossible, to find a musical that completely ignores romance, and most of them feature it as the primary plot element. Golden Age musicals in particular tend to use romance, as it allows both a male and female lead. Although the American musical theater often features female leads over male leads, we as a culture are accustomed to the foregrounding of heterosexual relationships (Wolf 16). While eventually the musical theater was able to push past conservatism, highlight female characters, and feature more homosexual relationships and characters, during the Golden Age America's pop culture was too conservative to stray from the heterosexual norms of the time, and Broadway was no exception. Even if the female character was featured, Golden Age musicals almost all centered on a heterosexual romantic plot. For every female, audiences have come to expect a male. Romantic plots allow for there to be two leads, in a pair, regardless of which is the stronger presence in the show.

This dependence on heterosexual romance is now sometimes seen as misogynistic, in fact, as heterosexual romance tends to show males in a dominant role with females as the subordinate. Many musicals, particularly those of the Golden Age, focus on a girl trying to fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after. What must be taken into account, however, is the presence of strong female characters in most musicals. The lead female character in *Annie Get Your Gun*, for instance, Annie Oakley,

does not need a man to take care of her. Although she chooses to marry, it is for love, not for protection. There are more examples, and to lay the blanket term of misogyny over all musicals is problematic.

While one can argue that romance is a typically feminine concern, the musical often takes women's concerns one step further, such as in *Kiss Me, Kate*'s discussion of marital roles, or in *West Side Story*'s examination of racism and its effect on love. Stacy Wolf's book, *Changed for Good*, examines the way the musical, "…explores social issues of the day, including women's rights and changing roles in U.S. culture, sometimes directly and sometimes obliquely" (12). This focus on women is not necessarily the goal of every writing team, and Wolf seems to think that it may not even be intentional, but it has become a defining feature of the American musical theater over time. The foregrounding of strong female characters and female-female relationships in musicals fights against the potentially misogynistic interpretation. Female musical theater performers have been more popular than their male counterparts since Ethel Merman and Mary Martin, and as the musical moved beyond its Golden Age roots, more shows focused on female protagonists. Shows also began to address more female concerns, even going so far as to touch on lesbian relationships (*The Color Purple*). However, in the Golden Age, females were still pushing toward the dominant position in the American musical theater.

There are two typical female archetypes in musicals, the "ingénue/girl-next-door [as] the soprano romantic lead" and the "temptress." One frequently used device is to play the two against each other while highlighting the positive relationships they can have despite their different personalities and/or lifestyles (Wolf 16). Julie and Magnolia

in *Showboat*, Laurey and Ado Annie in *Oklahoma!*, Lilli and Lois in *Kiss Me, Kate*, and Maria and Anita in *West Side Story* are all examples of the duality of female relationships in the American musical, and they had to be expanded from the relationships in the original source materials.

Another important tenet of the American musical theater is the subplot. Particularly when adapting from Shakespeare, it is important that musicals have a secondary plotline. This is partly for practical reasons: performers need to do costume changes and rest every so often. As Engel so clearly states, however, it is also used in "filling out a show and sustaining the audience's interest; a single plot line is usually too thin, too quickly told, especially in a musical, to be able to take on the responsibility of sustaining an audience's interest for a full evening" (73). This characteristic of the American musical is in direct conflict with Aristotle's *Poetics*. He writes that "A well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain" (http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.2.2.html). This points to plays with only one plot, which led to some theater that worked, and some that was less popular. Theater has moved past Aristotle's original premise, with the American musical especially flouting unity of action with the institution of the subplot.

The subplot can be of a romantic bent, but its other primary purpose is to add comedy. For instance, in *Kiss Me, Kate*, the subplot of Bianca and the suitors is beefed up substantially from the original Shakespeare. In the Shakespeare, much of that plot happens off stage, while Bianca and her suitors have a whole musical number in the musical. There is also another, smaller comedic subplot involving the gangsters, which adds comedy without romance. In *West Side Story*, the subplot revolves around Anita

and Bernardo's romance. Its focus is not to add comedy, but *West Side Story* is also more of a musical tragedy than a musical comedy.

The art of adaptation, which these two musicals exhibit, was as prevalent in the Golden Age as it is now. The musical had many specific characteristics that audiences had come to expect, and thus the adaptation process required special skill. It was not necessarily easy to add subplots to properties that did not originally contain them, or find a way to make an existing subplot work within the tenets of the Golden Age musical. The cultural capital of Shakespeare may have influenced the creation of *Kiss Me, Kate*, but the success of the musical was not solely dependent on its source material. There are many failed adaptations based on successful works, just as there are many unsuccessful original musicals, but the commercial element is not the only reason to adapt established properties. There is also an artistic component to adapting the Bard's original work to a new format. Adaptations can be thought of as puzzles; the pieces have to be made to fit together into a cohesive whole, and the ingenuity required to achieve that is an art form unlike creating a plot that fits the tenets. *Kiss Me, Kate* and *West Side Story* are two adaptations of Shakespeare plays which exemplify the adaptation process and the tenets of the Golden Age musical.

However, the creators of these adaptations specifically needed to focus on re-envisioning their female leads. The female characters in Golden Age musicals are often the main protagonists, and both Katherine and Juliet can be viewed as weak. Katherine is "tamed" by her husband, while Juliet is an ingénue who commits suicide at the loss of her lover. These characters needed to be stronger for the musical theater stage, and so the writers imbued them with more "agency". The term "*agent* refers to one who acts or

has the capacity to act…" (Childers 6). While this is a general term, it has often been applied to feminist theory, specifically by Judith Butler. Amy Smith writes that "Butler's theories of performativity are most useful for their general notion that subjects need not escape the ideologies that form them to in some sense be agents" (317). This idea allows for the female protagonists of these Shakespeare-based musicals to have more agency: they are able to work within their societal position as women to affect change for themselves and others. Lilli is able to choose her future (marriage plus a career). Maria fights against the racism that killed her love. The tenets of the Golden Age musical foreground these women and their struggles rather than the men. The women are shown in romantic relationships, they are shown in female-female relationships, they are given introductory songs more frequently than their male counterparts; essentially, they are the stars. This foregrounding of strong female characters in Golden Age musical theater helps to give Lilli and Maria more agency than their Shakespearean counterparts.

"I Hate Men":

An Exploration of Female Agency in *Kiss Me, Kate*

Although *Show Boat* (1929) was the model for the Golden Age of the American musical theater, the new integrated format did not truly catch on until the 1940s. Rodgers and Hammerstein ushered it in with *Oklahoma!*, which was one of the first fully cohesive musicals – it used dance to further the story, even going so far as to feature a dream ballet which was used to explore Laurey's inner mind. *Oklahoma!* sparked a wave of creativity from composers and lyricists such as Irving Berlin, E.Y. Harburg, Burton Lane, and the team behind *Kiss Me, Kate*: Bella (and Sam) Spewack and Cole Porter. These minds created some of the most famous Golden Age musicals, such as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *South Pacific*, and *Kiss Me, Kate*. The Spewacks and Porter were able to successfully adapt a controversial Shakespeare play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, into a beloved Golden Age musical, which was popular enough in its own time to win the first ever Tony Award for Best Musical in 1949, and has continued to be performed across America.

Kiss Me, Kate works within a different framework than *Taming of the Shrew*. While *Taming* is framed with the Induction of Christopher Sly watching a play, the premise of *Kiss Me, Kate* is that a theater company is putting on a musical version of *Taming*, and that the relationships of the modern day characters act as a complement to those in the musical-within-the-musical. While both plays utilize a framing device, they are very different, as in *Kiss Me, Kate* the modern characters are foils for the characters of the inner musical, and the stories are enmeshed throughout the entire libretto. Shakespeare does not acknowledge Sly again after the Induction. The outer frame in

Kiss Me, Kate features actors and actresses who go after what they want, but their stories also follow those of the characters they portray. This not only introduced the strength and freedom of the modern day female characters, Lilli Vanessi and Lois Lane, but retroactively shed new light on the ultimate agency of Shakespeare's Katherine. *Kiss Me, Kate* not only highlights the agency of the female characters, but is also an adaptation that upholds the tenets of Golden Age musical theater.

Looking at *Kiss Me, Kate* as an adaptation of *Taming*, it is clear that the goal of the collaborators was not to simply recreate *Taming* with music. They wanted to create a new piece of theater, in the American musical tradition, which derived its main inspiration from Shakespeare's play. According to *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical*, they created a "brilliant libretto in which the modern story informs the Shakespearean one, and the other way around as well. Even more accomplished, one gets the sense of having seen the whole Shakespeare tale when in effect only a few scenes/songs were shown" (Hischak 401). Not only did the Spewacks successfully adapt Shakespeare into musical format, they used Shakespeare to inform their modern characters while maintaining the integrity of Shakespeare's original work. Lilli and Fred, the foils for Katherine and Petruchio, are engaged in a battle of wills that continues with them from backstage to center stage. Lilli and Fred are joined by Lois and Billy, who mirror Bianca and Lucentio. These are the important character foils, but there is also a second comedic subplot to *Kiss Me, Kate* enhance the humor. Although this gambling subplot is completely separate from Shakespeare's original work, the two main romantic plots are based on those in *Taming*.

Starting with the supporting female lead, Lois/Bianca, it is apparent that changes were made from Shakespeare's original character. In *Taming of the Shrew*, Bianca is referred to as "Sweet Bianca," "beautiful Bianca," and "modest" (Shakespeare 1.1.109, 1.1.150, 1.2.114). These descriptors point to her as the traditional ingénue role: the innocent, virtuous young girl whose main theatrical purpose is to fall in love. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ingénue as " An artless, innocent girl or young woman" (http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95765?redirectedFrom=ingenue#eid). As a typical ingénue, Bianca is content to let her father decide who she will marry, vowing, "Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe" (Shakespeare 1.1.81). Before she gets married and takes on her new role as wife she is every bit the loyal, virginal daughter, but upon her marriage, she takes on some of the shrewishness previously associated with her sister. Lois, on the other hand, does not have the same sweet innocence as Shakespeare's Bianca, and neither does the Spewack's version of Bianca in *Kiss Me, Kate*. As Block states, "Lois is a shameless and fickle (and equally endearing) flirt who, in the role of Bianca, will mate with any Tom, Dick, or Harry and, as herself, date any man who asks her out for 'something wet'" (187). In the scenario set forth in the musical, Lois's personality should not have sway over the character she is portraying, but the Spewacks created a Bianca who is much more like Lois than Shakespeare's Bianca.

It seems that the Bianca of musical theater cannot be just an ingénue. Audiences required something more, especially since this ingénue was relegated to the subplot. In the libretto, the Spewacks refer to their Bianca as "the little flirt" (41). She sings "Any Tom, Dick, or Harry," a song that exemplifies her lack of virtue. She will go with any

man who wants her, singing "I'm a maid mad to marry and will take double-quick any Tom, Dick, or Harry, any Tom, Harry, or Dick" (47). Although she is still focused on the ingénue's traditional goal of marriage, she doesn't seem to care about falling in love, which is usually the main characteristic of that goal. Shakespeare's Bianca does display a preference for Lucentio, and thus lives up to the ideal of the ingénue, but musical theater needs something more. There are only so many songs about an innocent girl falling in love that an audience will tolerate in an evening. In order to create a more interesting show for the audience, Bianca becomes a flirt, which gives her the capacity to sing far more interesting and varied songs.

Looking at the outer layer of the foil, at Lois, one sees a girl who is in love, but who also loves the game. She sings, "Won't you turn that new leaf over so your baby can be your slave?," implying that if Billy could only clean his act up, she would devote herself entirely to him (Spewack 16). Later in the musical, however, Lois sings a whole song entitled "Always True to You (In My Fashion)." She sings verses upon verses, each detailing the different sort of men whom she would (and perhaps already has) seduce(d), with the common refrain that she is always true to Billy, in her own way. She cannot leave behind her life of luxury, which she has achieved by her flirtations. Lois is definitely not the ingénue, but the experienced woman who knows how to get what she wants. Lois fits into the story because she got her part by wooing Fred, which adds a dimension of rivalry to the female-female relationship between Lois and Lilli.

The romantic subplot in *Kiss Me, Kate* is at least present in the original Shakespeare, unlike in many adapted musicals in which a subplot has to be fabricated or manipulated into the story. The subplot in Shakespeare's original play focuses more

around Bianca's suitors and less on Bianca, because, as an ingénue, she is relegated to the feminine sphere of the home, while the men discourse wherever they choose. Bianca's main purpose is to provide a point of comparison to Katherine, both before and after the taming, and, as such, her plot is not given as much attention by the Bard. For the musical theater audience, the plotline of Lilli and Fred's turbulent divorce would have been too serious to constitute an entire night's entertainment, and thus Lois' flippant attitude toward men is necessary to fulfill the inherent need for some comedy in Golden Age musicals.

While Shakespeare's play is called *The Taming of the Shrew* and the musical adaptation is called *Kiss Me, Kate*, both titles are referring to the same character, Katherine (or Kate in the musical). To differentiate these different versions of the shrew throughout this argument, Shakespeare's character is always called Katherine, while the musicalized version is always Kate. In discussing Kate, one must first address the problems implicit in the character of Katherine in Shakespeare's original text, as Kate is a musicalized, modernized version of the famed shrew.

From the first, Shakespeare depicts Katherine as a shrew, or "a person, *esp.* (now only) a woman given to railing or scolding or other perverse or malignant behaviour; freq. a scolding or turbulent wife" in comparison to Bianca's angelic portrayal (OED). In the first scene Gremio claims "she's too rough for me," and he and Hortensio plan to find a man to marry her who "is so very a fool to be married to hell" (Shakespeare 1.1.121-3). Only a fool would marry her, and even then, only because her father has money. In presenting her to Petruchio for the first time, Hortensio describes her by saying "she is intolerable curst/ And shrewd and froward" (Shakespeare

1.2.85-6). The audience is predisposed to view her actions as those of a shrew because they have been framed as such. Petruchio begins a game of wits to acquire Katherine as his wife. Their first banter proves them to be intellectual equals; she is able to throw his words back in his face.

> Petruchio: Good morrow, Kate, for that's your name, I hear.
> Kate: Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing.
> (Shakespeare 2.1.180-1)

By taking his words and changing their meaning to fit her own, Kate is shown to be both intelligent and strong, as she does not immediately bend to his will. Once they are married, Petruchio starves her and deprives her of comfort, claiming that he is doing it for her own good. She has trouble fighting back in her usual manner, as this torment is so different from the scorn and name-calling to which she is accustomed. He tells the audience "This is a way to kill a wife with kindness…," letting them in on the reasons behind his actions (4.1.188). Petruchio is in the position of power; he controls what goes into and on her body. Katherine's agency is taken away from her; she is incapable of fighting her husband's outrageous demands. She suffers many indignities before she finds a way to exist in this new relationship.

By humoring her husband, she uses her own cleverness to convince Petruchio that he has the power, when she has her own power in their dynamic. In the problematic final speech of the play, in which she lectures all women to obey their husbands, Katherine is actually reminding women of the power they have. According to Amy Smith, "While telling women to obey their husbands, she emphasizes not the husband's dominance but the wife's submission, and thereby she gives the power of future performances to the wives" (314). Without giving up her spirit and her fire, Katherine

performs the role of perfect wife within the game of wits that she and Petruchio established at the beginning of the play. This interpretation gives Katherine more agency than she was originally seen to have.

This play has long been considered a problem play because of the misogyny of Petruchio's taming. While in Shakespeare's comedy, Katherine hits him but he never lays a hand on her, different productions have portrayed the taming with different levels of violence. Some even endow Petruchio with a whip that he carries throughout, such as Griffith's 1908 film and Sam Taylor's 1929 film. Readers often view Katherine not as a woman who finds her freedom within a healthy, if difficult, relationship, but as a woman who has entirely lost her autonomy as a result of a long process of emotional and physical abuse. In this interpretation, Katherine deteriorates from a headstrong, independent woman into a subservient mouse of a woman who swears fealty to her husband and ends her speech by putting her hand beneath her husband's foot. We call this a problem play due to this discrepancy between the two Katherines, the Katherine who claims her power within the system, and the Katherine who lets the system destroy her power. The first version of Katherine, the more powerful one, is the one that seems to have inspired the Spewacks in their portrayal of *Taming*.

To inform the discussion of the Spewacks' adaptation of *Taming*, it is necessary to acknowledge that in the musical within *Kiss Me, Kate*, most of the spoken lines are directly lifted from the Bard's text. The songs of the internal musical are mostly in modern language, but Kate's final song, "I Am Ashamed That Women Are So Simple," uses parts of Katherine's final speech from the original play as its lyrics. The use of Shakespeare's potentially problematic text inextricably links the three female characters,

Katherine, Kate, and Lilli. Although it may seem that Lilli exists outside Shakespeare's language, she deliberately comes back to Fred through the use of the same words as Katherine and Kate. The Kate within the musical is based on Shakespeare's Katherine, but the musicalized shrew has more agency than her Shakespearean counterpart.

Although the Kate of the musical parallels Shakespeare's Katherine in many regards, she claims to hate men, even going so far as to sing an entire song about how much she hates them. The original shrew is never able to voice those feelings so directly, even if she has the same inclination. Both Shakespeare and the Spewacks have their Katherine (Kate) slap Petruchio during their first meeting, but Kate takes the physical violence further than her predecessor. While Katherine only manages one slap, Kate punches Petruchio in the stomach, bites his hand, and slaps him twice (Spewacks 65-66). While Petruchio manages to subdue her with violence in a way that Shakespeare's Petruchio does not, the fact that he is unable to silence her with words alone points to Kate being a fiercer, more empowered character. The Spewacks slightly altered the course of events, adding a major song, "Kiss Me, Kate," at a point where there is no kiss in Shakespeare's play. In *Taming*, the wedding is followed by a possessive speech by Petruchio and the departure of the couple, but in *Kiss Me, Kate*, Petruchio starts with Shakespeare's speech and then transitions into song, asking her to kiss him. Kate refuses, in song:

> Petruchio: So kiss me, Kate
> Kate: I'll crack your pate.
> Petruchio: Oh please don't pout.
> Kate: I'll knock you out.
> Petruchio: My priceless prize!
> Kate: I'll black your eyes.
> Petruchio: Oh kiss me quick!

Kate: Your rump I'll kick. (Spewack 88)

They continue in this fashion throughout the song, and Kate's final word is "never." The kiss does not occur, and Kate wins this battle. Although there is not a perfect comparison in Shakespeare's text, there is a scene in which Petruchio asks for a kiss and Katherine resists. Unlike Kate, Katherine succumbs to Petruchio, begging, "Nay, I will give thee a kiss: now pray thee, love, stay" (Shakespeare 5.1.128). Katherine is further along in the taming process than Kate when these two instances occur, but Kate is still portrayed as a stronger and more defiant woman due to her steadfast refusal. Not only does Kate refuse to kiss her husband, she goes so far as to lock him out of her bridal chamber. In both the musical and the play, Petruchio brings his new wife to her room. In Shakespeare's story, Katherine wails and cries, and Petruchio chooses to ignore her. In the Spewacks' version, however, Kate is able to use Petruchio's overconfidence against him, and locks him out while he pontificates about how much control he has over her (Spewack 105). While Petruchio is wrapped up in Shakespeare's beautiful words, Kate silently undermines him, giving herself a safe space.

The final speech (or song) is a crucial moment for both these characters. Shakespeare's Katherine has a long declaration in which she definitively states that women are meant to be subservient to men. Regardless of how this speech is interpreted, whether as serious proof that she has been tamed or as her playing within the confines of the game that Petruchio has set up, this speech undermines any agency she may have had. Kate, while still using Shakespeare's words, gives an extremely truncated version of the speech. Gone are references to husbands as "thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee" (Shakespeare 5.2.150-1).

Those titles immediately position women as subservient to their men, and as helpless without them. Also cut for the musical is the description of women when they have not done well by their men: "A woman moved is like a fountain troubled, Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty" (Shakespeare 5.2.146-7). The original speech makes it seem that a woman's entire well-being is directly related to her husband's mood and opinion of her, while the Spewacks' version removes some of that complete reliance on a man. Rather than degrading women in favor of men in this way, Kate's song works more as a plea for women to take advantage of their positive traits. Although the end result is still the same, with her putting her hand beneath Petruchio's foot and asking all other women to do the same, there are no references to women as "forward and unable worms" or as a "foul contending rebel and graceless traitor" (Shakespeare 5.2.173, 163-4). This could be seen as merely a simplification of Shakespeare's speech, and Kate could be seen as similarly trapped, and it is true that, technically, Kate and Katherine are both tamed by their respective Petruchios. However, Kate's speech is less accusatory, less deprecating, and easier to accept. By adding "So wife, hold your temper," the Spewacks are asking women not to be completely subservient to their men, but merely to humor them (145). They have softened the total subjugation of women from Shakespeare's original speech to Kate's more palatable plea for marital peace, which would have been a popular concept in the wake of World War II. Through her actions more than her words, and through the omission of much of the problematic final speech, Kate is shown to have more agency and independence than her Shakespearean counterpart.

Lilli is the most independent of the three versions of this character. She is described by the librettists as being "short-tempered, selfish, lovable, and vulnerable," which is a more humanizing description than shrew (Spewacks). She is neither all shrew nor all saint, but a person with whom an audience can easily identify and empathize. Unlike Kate and Katherine, she fell in love with Fred (her Petruchio) of her own volition, without any taming, but their marriage ended badly. Lilli and Fred discuss the end wondering who caused it:

> Lilli: Whose fault was it?
> Fred: It could have been your temper.
> Lilli: Could have been your ego. (Spewack 27)

Both of them contributed to the end of their relationship, of course, but the audience is given more of a sense of Lilli's regrets for most of the show. She sings an "I want" song, as is typical of the female protagonists in musical theater, but her song is also a lament of the love that she has lost. Spewack captures this loss beautifully, writing "*A rather sad Lilli, a defenseless Lilli, finishes with:* So taunt me and hurt me, deceive me, desert me, I'm yours till I die, so in love, so in love, so in love with you, my love, am I" (33). She is not the prickly Kate that she portrays in the musical within the musical, but a forlorn woman who, through her strong will, lost the man she loved.

Lilli's luck seems to be changing when she finds flowers from Fred in her dressing room, but the audience knows that he meant to send them to Lois. The dramatic irony here is plain, and the audience anticipates the explosion that occurs during the inner musical: she reads the card off stage, and her anger and hurt manifest themselves in her inability to separate her own emotions with those of her character. The metatheatricality of Lilli breaking character in the musical within the musical adds

to the comedy of the moment, and allows the audience to sympathize with Lilli rather than disliking her for her strength. In this moment, she is hurt and vulnerable. Aligning herself with Kate, Lilli physically and verbally fights back against Fred. She becomes so angry that Fred reprimands her, hissing "[*Aside*] You keep on acting just the way you've been doing, Miss Vanessi, and I will give you the paddling of your life and right on stage," to which she responds "You wouldn't dare" (67). This back and forth is similar to the banter that their characters exchange in the scene, which is fitting as this interaction happens while they are actually onstage. In the inner frame, Kate hits Petruchio one time too many, although not in the same context as in the Shakespeare, at which point Fred is incensed and takes her over his knee. Although it is played off as being a part of the show, it is a real life Petruchio crossing the line that Shakespeare's character never would.

This startling action introduces the issue of domestic violence to *Taming* that some directors have added over the years. Lilli is finally subdued; she threatens to quit, and calls her politically powerful fiancé, Harrison. This would seem to suggest that she is weaker than Katherine, but who is to say that Katherine would not have done the same thing, given that opportunity? Although Lilli does have the chance to leave Fred and live with Harrison, life with Harrison would involve a life of horrible monotony: "Morning. Harrison rises - with the aid of a valet - … a brisk canter… breakfast …Harrison takes a nap… then lunch … and then a nice, soothing, refreshing nap" (Spewack 127-128). The description of the day continues in the same way, but the monotony of Fred's speech clearly illustrates the disappointingly empty life that Lilli has before her if she chooses Harrison. Lilli would spend the rest of her life being

Harrison's "little woman," and fulfilling the ideals of womanhood held by society (Spewack 123). Lilli is a fiercely independent woman; not only that, but she is a career woman. Her love for professional acting and the theater in general makes her loathe the thought of only being a wife and mother, and, as such, she does not give in to the temptation of a life of easy wealth.

Lilli returns to Fred in precisely the most problematic scene of *Taming*: the supplicant speech in the final moments of the play. Katherine has achieved freedom within her domestic confines, but she is still married to a man who tamed her. As Block writes, "…Lilli (and by extension, her *Shrew* counterpart, [Kate]), willingly joins Fred and Petruchio in the final scene" (193). One interpretation is that Katherine willingly comes to her husband, but that she is first mentally beaten into submission. Lilli, on the other hand, loved Fred before the action of the play started, and they could not make their marriage work due to temper problems on both sides. Throughout the play, Lilli has attempted to confront her issues with Fred, and "she will remain in the theatrical milieu she loves with the man she loves; but, more than that, he has asked her to stay" (73). In "So In Love (Reprise)," Lilli leaves Fred, and he reprises her love song to him from act one. He has figured out what he wants, and it's her. He lowers himself enough to ask her to stay:

> Fred: Lilli, you can't walk out on me now.
> Lilli: You walked out on me once.
> Fred: But I came back.
> [*Lilli hesitates*] (Spewack 137)

Knowing that he will sacrifice his ego enough to ask her to stay makes all the difference, although she cannot make the decision in the moment. She leaves, but then returns to a

relationship which is both romantically fulfilling and will allow her to continue in her career, which reflects the changing ideals of marriage and the woman's place in the 1940s.

By choosing between two lives, and choosing the harder one with the man she loves, Lilli has more agency than Katherine. Katherine's choices are to live in misery with Petruchio, live in happiness with Petruchio (if she could), or to run away. Although we can ascribe great cleverness to Katherine for turning Petruchio's game to her advantage, she still has to work within the confines of patriarchal society's pressure and her new husband's rules. Lilli, on the other hand, works outside the confines of acceptable social behavior. Although being married would help her reputation, choosing a profession over family life, or even choosing both, is not the behavior expected of women in the 1940s. Her reasons for choosing to stay with Fred may be romance-based; at the same time, she is defying the societal expectations of women, and making a statement about the power dynamics of marriage. Not only does she have more agency than Katherine (which may derive from the time periods in which the respective pieces are set), but she uses her speech and her choice to make a stronger statement for womankind.

The two modern female characters are both far more independent than their Shakespearean counterparts. Since highlighting the dichotomous relationship between female protagonists is a necessary aspect of the Golden Age musical, considering the female characters separately is not enough. In comparing them to their Shakespearean counterparts, Knapp writes that "Lilli is somewhat softer than Kate, distrusting more than hating men… whereas Bianca can't choose, Lois chooses much too often…" (275).

Although this does not completely explain these women and their differences, it illuminates one vital conflict: Lilli distrusts men in general, whereas Lois will go with any man who asks her. Neither woman perfectly fits the typical female musical archetypes; neither is the innocent ingénue, and both are the more experienced woman in some ways. The two women don't actually interact except as the sisters they portray in the inner musical, but both clearly have experience with men.

They have experience with two of the same men, in fact. Lois only has her part as Bianca because she is in the midst of a flirtation with Fred, who is, of course, Lilli's ex-husband. That automatically promotes not a friendly relationship as is often seen in Golden Age musicals, but a competitive one. Even more interesting, though, is the connection that both women have to the wealthy Harrison. Irene Dash brings up this link, writing that "Like Katherine and Bianca, Lois and Lilli are joined through their shared intimacy with an older man, although for them this man is not their father but rather Harrison/Harold" (55). While not sisters, both women have had a relationship of some sort with Harrison. Lois denies her history with him, in order to convince Bill of her love for him, claiming "[caught, therefore indignant] I assure you there was nothing between he and I. Just because a girl is goodhearted and normal – and wants to get along – with her fellow man!" (114-5). She protests her innocence, although it is clear that they have had some sort of give-and-take; that sort of relationship with a wealthy man aligns her with prostitutes, and she is trying to prove her innocence. Lilli, on the other hand, is engaged to Harrison. She is entering into a union with him, but does not love him, at least not as much as she loves Fred. Both women are connected to Harrison while they would rather not be, if only just for this moment. He wants to protect them

with his money and his power, but both women leave him to maintain their independent lifestyles. In this way, although Lois is a flirt and Lilli is "belligerent," both of the featured female characters in *Kiss Me, Kate* flout the cultural expectations for women, while both of Shakespeare's women end up supporting them (76). These are examples of the types of female characters that were prevalent in the Golden Age musical theater.

The exploration of gender is one of the fascinating parts of the American musical, particularly in terms of the different roles that female characters represent. For instance, Laurey (*Oklahoma!*) is a depiction of the innocent country girl gaining some modicum of independence. Annie (*Annie Get Your Gun*) exemplifies the advent of the tomboy post-World War II. At a glance, female characters in Golden Age musicals seem anti-feminist, or at least not particularly feminist. However, female characters in musicals have been known to push the boundaries of patriarchal society. Nellie Forbush (*South Pacific*), is not only an ensign in the war, but chooses to combat her own prejudices to take care of children who she believes are orphaned. While she can be seen as conforming to her proper role in the nuclear family, Nellie's independence and heart are by no means squashed. The three main sisters in *Fiddler on the Roof* all choose their own husbands in a society that dictated arranged marriages. They each convince their father to value love over traditional matchmaking, and whether those choices are best for them or not, they have the agency to make them. Lilli is an example of that departure from traditional female gender roles. Like many women after World War II, she is not content to sit at home and be a wife and mother. The man she chooses respects her fire and her talent, and will allow and encourage her to keep performing. She may come crawling back to him as Kate, but rather than crawling back as Lilli, too,

what if she is offering an olive branch? She is prepared to give up a little bit of her stubbornness and anger if Fred will meet her halfway, and that equitable marriage is something most feminists would approve of.

Taming of the Shrew and *Kiss Me, Kate* were, of course, produced during very different time periods, but the expectations for women's behavior were still similar. Women were generally supposed to fulfill the roles of the obedient wife and daughter. Katherine fights against the societal pressure with all her might, while Bianca acquiesces easily. However, partially due to the setting of the story, Katherine is only able to push against the prescribed gender roles from within the patriarchal system set up by Petruchio and supported by society at large. Lilli and Lois, on the other hand, have more freedom to be whatever kind of woman they want to be. Lilli chooses her career and love, which would not have been a common option, while Lois gets to have her fun with men and then (we assume) settle down with her love, Bill. All these women fought against the patriarchal society, but Lilli and Lois have more agency in the musical form than they might have otherwise. Because the Spewacks followed the tenets of the Golden Age musical, audiences are able to accept the agency of the female characters in *Kiss Me, Kate*.

"How do you fire this gun, Chino?":
Female Agency in *West Side Story*

The adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew* to *Kiss Me, Kate* was impressive due to its observation of Golden Age musical theater's form, but it was a relatively straightforward adaptation of a Shakespearean comedy to a musical comedy. Both forms of the story used comedy to make their points, which meant that the adaptation process was not as difficult as it could have been. The creators of *West Side Story*, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins, and Stephen Sondheim, faced a different set of challenges; not only were they adapting the Bard's famous tale of star-crossed love, but they were attempting to create the musical tragedy. They originally set their adaptation on the East Side and focused it on anti-Semitism, but switched to the West Side, as it was more culturally salient to focus on gang wars and the West Side's race issues. Bernstein and Robbins, "sought to extend the genre (musical comedies) to tragedy, although no example of a musical tragedy existed. Unlike musical comedy, the norms of tragedy mean creating a work that will evoke an emotional response of pity and fear" (Dash 78). Dash's quote describes catharsis, again hearkening back to Aristotle's ideas of what theater should be; the audience should leave after having an emotional release. To prevent themselves from alienating the typical Broadway audience with this new kind of show, however, the collaborators could not ignore the familiar format of the American musical.

To appease their audiences, the creative team observed some of the traditional characteristics of Golden age musicals, such as the romantic subplot and the relationship of opposition between the two main female characters. More than just sticking to the

established form of the American musical, the collaborators of *West Side Story* were hoping to create a musical that would act as an "out and out plea for racial tolerance" (Dash 121). Since people are much more likely to accept radical ideas when they are presented inside a framework with which they are comfortable, sticking to the general form of the traditional American musical was advantageous in terms of creating a commercially viable product. Any changes made to Juliet and the Nurse, the two primary female figures from the original script, were made to draw in the typical Broadway audience and to exemplify the typical format of musical theater. In making those changes, however, the collaborators created stronger female characters with more agency than their Shakespearean counterparts.

Looking at the characters of Juliet and Maria requires going back to *Romeo and Juliet* and seeing how Shakespeare's characters are portrayed. According to Carolyn Brown, "early criticism of the play [treated] Juliet as a subsidiary, underdeveloped character. [It was] often influenced by her young age of fourteen, reading her as little more than a child – naïve, immature, inexperienced, obedient to her parents' wishes, and uncomplicated" (333). This definition exemplifies the way Juliet is still thought of by many; she is an innocent young girl who falls hopelessly in love and dies for it. Juliet's youth is usually a point of discussion, as today, a girl that young is usually not considering marriage. The collaborators made the lovers of more appropriate ages so that their audiences would not be distracted by the issue of age, but instead focus on the racial tensions and the tragedy itself. Although age is not specified in the musical, Maria is definitely older than fourteen. She is beautiful, as her Shakespearean counterpart is, (one of her featured songs is "I Feel Pretty"), but Maria is a stronger version of Juliet.

The issue of agency is more complicated in *West Side Story* than in *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo and Juliet are trapped by their families' feud; there is no chance for their love to succeed. Rather than a family quarrel, the feud in *West Side Story* is based on racial prejudice. Because of this difference, the inherent amount of flexibility is skewed from the start. Juliet does not even need to be told that she cannot marry a Montague - that has been decided for her for generations. Maria, on the other hand, does not even live with her parents; she does not expect her choice to be dictated by anyone else. The collaborators removed all presence of mothers from their show; without that motherly influence, Maria and Tony have a different kind of freedom than Juliet and Romeo. They are not being smothered by motherly love, but they also do not have that example. Due to her lack of mothering, Maria believes that she can love whomever she wants, regardless of race or any other factors. Although Maria is quickly disabused of that particular notion of freedom, she proves that she still has more agency than Juliet through her interpretation of the "rumble" that occurs in *West Side Story*, a conflict that parallels one in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Juliet has far less general awareness of her situation than Maria. She is aware that her family and Romeo's are in a feud that has "thrice disturb'd the quiet of our streets," according to the Prince (Shakespeare 1.1.98). If this feud has already led to violence, one could conclude that Juliet would have some idea of how turbulent the families' relations are, and could know that her romance would lead to further conflict. She does have some idea of the feud, but is utterly shocked when she hears the news of the fight between Romeo and Tybalt.

Maria, however, knows that the rumble is going to occur because it is a formally

planned, mutually agreed upon fight (unlike in *Romeo and Juliet*, where it is spontaneous). With her prior knowledge, she begs Tony to stop the conflict; thanks to her idealistic nature, she thinks that he can solve all the hatred between their two gangs. While "Juliet hasn't the slightest inkling that a fatal combat has just taken place, Maria... idealistically believes that logic and reason can prevail and trusts in Tony's power to effect change" (Dash 108). Maria's initial reaction to the outcome of the rumble is anger, not shock. She shouts at Tony, because he did not live up to her idealistic hopes for him. She is, of course, upset at the death of her brother, but her love for Tony prevails just as Juliet's does for Romeo. The decision to change the Tybalt character from Juliet's cousin to Maria's brother intensifies the tragedy of the moment in *West Side Story*. This is only one of the many shifts from *Romeo and Juliet* to *West Side Story* that intensifies the tragedy.

One of the biggest changes between *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, in terms of both gender alterations and plot variations, is the death scene. In *Romeo and Juliet* both lovers die. Romeo thinks Juliet is dead and drinks the poison, at which point Juliet awakens and stabs herself with his dagger. Not only is it an action of great love, but it is one of impulsivity. When kissing his lips does not work, Juliet hears a noise, spots the dagger, and kills herself. Although it is unlikely that more time would have changed her course of action, the idea of being parted from her love for the rest of her life was so unimaginable to her that her only actions in this scene involve attempting to take her own life.

Maria does not die in *West Side Story*. Tony believes Maria is dead, but then sees her on the street. They run to each other, but Chino, the *West Side Story* equivalent of

Paris, shoots Tony. Maria and Tony talk of getting away from their gangs, where they could love in peace. As is typical in musicals, when words fail to adequately express the emotions of the characters, Tony and Maria begin to sing. Maria sings, "Hold my hand and we're halfway there. Hold my hand and I'll take you there, someday, somehow," and although Tony tries to join her, his voice falters and he dies. The loss of his voice signals a power shift, because in musicals, the character who sings is always more powerful than the one who is silent. In that moment, Maria becomes a force to be reckoned with. Tony's gang members try to approach the body but she holds them off. The fact that her wishes become more important than those of his male friends shows how much power Maria has. She is the one whose needs are the most important, and the others respect that. She wrests the gun from Chino and holds it out wildly, giving a whole speech about the negative impact of hate:

> How do you fire this gun, Chino? Just by pulling this little trigger? How many bullets are left, Chino? Enough for you? And you? All of you? WE ALL KILLED HIM; and my brother and Riff. I, too. I CAN KILL NOW BECAUSE *I* HATE NOW. How many can I kill, Chino? How many- and still have one bullet left for me? (Laurents 223)

This outburst is not just a speech to express Maria's anger. It is an indictment of racism and hate, backed by a deadly weapon. Maria has a gun, and there are people all around her whom she could kill. Juliet never had the inclination or the opportunity to kill others before she killed herself. Her grief was completely internalized. Maria, on the other hand, has not only the context to attack racism in her speech, but also the agency of a gun. Lives hang on where she fires it, and she makes the choice not to continue the cycle of violence that killed Tony. Although she threatens to kill herself, she cannot

bring herself to do so. She throws away the gun, and gives Tony one final kiss. She unites the two gangs, allowing them to carry Tony's body offstage while she remains for a moment. Then she straightens up and follows the procession off, while the adults are left onstage, powerless.

People questioned why the creators of the musical did not have both lovers die, and Jerome Robbins famously said, "She is dead already, after all this happens to her" (Dash 121). This may be true, but it also has to do with the way musicals have always tended to work. Musicals have always been the "terrain of women and girls" (Wolf 6). Many musicals focus on the female lead over the male lead, such as Dolly in *Hello, Dolly!*, Annie in *Annie Get Your Gun*, and Nellie in *South Pacific*. Broadway fans tend to idolize female stars (Ethel Merman and Mary Martin, for example) over male stars. For both the lovers to die would have been too tragic for the musical theater audience, and since Juliet's death was only in reaction to Romeo's, it would not have made sense for just Juliet to die. But because of the female-centric nature of musicals, it makes sense to give the final words to the female protagonist, thus assuring her more character development. As Misha Berson said, "The ending also gave the show's final words of condemnation and woe to a new, changed, matured Maria-rather than to a more formal authority figure.... She's no longer the adorable sprite excited about attending her first dance.... She's become the living embodiment of society's failings" (141). Not only does the audience get to see the ingénue grow into a mature woman, but by giving her this speech about hatred, the creators ask the audience to examine their own racism and hatred. She speaks to both gangs, claiming, "We all killed him;" an intelligent audience would realize that she was not necessarily just talking about the characters in the play

(Laurents 223). The issues of *West Side Story* were current, and by making Maria realize how problematic they were, the creators were giving the audience a chance to do the same.

It is fascinating to consider that the collaborators, all of whom are male, wrote an ending in which Maria is the survivor. This surprisingly feminist ending depicts a woman who is not useless without her man, but uses his death to inspire change in the world. Although she weeps for Tony, the gangs are clearly united at the end of the play for his funeral procession, and no one can attribute that to any factor other than Maria's rousing speech. In the patriarchal Shakespearean play, Juliet dies out of love for her man, and while their deaths end the trouble between their families, they ultimately have little meaning on a larger scale. However, in this modern feminist retelling, Tony's death brings peace and an end to the feud between these two racial groups. Not only is this a more female-empowering version of the original story, it also shows audiences that there can be an end to racism.

Through the process of adapting Juliet to the musical comedy stage, the collaborators followed the typical idea of the ingénue. The excessive innocence of the ingénue archetype logically leads to a somewhat flat character arc. Traditionally, the ingénue's main goal is to end up with the male lead, and in most older musicals, that is what happens. What the creators of *West Side Story* did was to create an ingénue-type who grows into a mature woman by the end of the musical. They created a role with depth, within the confines of the musical format. As Misha Berson said, "the role of Maria can be easily underestimated and underplumbed, [but] she has moments of sharp insight and a code of righteous justice as well as a naiveté that furthers the tragedy" (47).

By turning Juliet into Maria, the creators not only followed the rules of the American musical, but they also pushed the boundaries and made a character that would make people think about their world and what could be changed for the better.

The only way in which the representation of the Juliet-figure in the musical is problematic is the lack of a character-introduction song, or an "I want" song for Maria. In *West Side Story*, the only song that could fit that category is "I Feel Pretty," which is the twelfth song in the show. For eleven songs, and the scenes between them, Maria is essentially just the object of Tony's affections. The audience doesn't really get to know her. And "I Feel Pretty" is less of an "I want" song and more of a "look how happy I am to be in love song." But Maria does have an "I want" song that is almost retroactive, as she has already achieved her want: she has found love. In her duet with Anita, Maria's part is called "I Have a Love," and she sings all about how happy she is to have found love. Since her want can be seen as anti-feminist, it is fascinating to look at the fact that when she is deprived of her love, she becomes more powerful in her grief. She is able to take her loss and use it to attack racism. In this roundabout way, the creators were able to alter Juliet to work in the Golden Age musical format.

In the same manner that they fitted Juliet to the American musical theater, the collaborators also altered the character of the Nurse. To look at the changes made to the Nurse in the adaptation process, we must again start with the original text, *Romeo and Juliet*. The Nurse is described as follows: "a typically low-comic character" (Ferguson, Yachnin 95). Even when looking at a much-simplified description of her character, it is easy to see that she is not the ingénue of the piece. She is vulgar, and her sexuality is described as earthy, giving the feeling that she is more experienced but also less

discerning about sexual partners than Juliet has the option to be. An important aspect of the Nurse, particularly in contrast to Juliet, is that she is older. She nursed Juliet when she was a child. She was essentially a second mother figure to Juliet, and her constant companion. So not only is she a vulgar, sexual being, she is also a major influence on Juliet, and her primary caretaker.

In the original conception of the adaptation, the role of the Nurse was going to be shifted only slightly to become a Jewish Juliet-figure's aunt, Tante. She would still have been that motherly figure to Juliet. When *East Side Story* became *West Side Story*, this changed again, but Anita was still an older female for the Juliet-figure to confide in. As Dash writes, "Anita had replaced Tante and morphed into Bernardo's girlfriend, yet she still remained a good deal older than he. Revealing his sense of theater, Robbins noted that an older Anita would resemble 'the typical downbeat blues torch-bearing 2nd character (Julie of SHOWBOAT, etc.) and falls into a terrible cliché...'" (90). Due to Robbins' critique, Laurents chose to make Anita a younger character, connected to Maria through her romantic relationship with Maria's brother Bernardo.

Both the Nurse and Anita have run-ins with members of the other family. The difference between their encounters is that, "Juliet's nurse is teased but not physically threatened on her mission to the Montague gang, but Anita is racially taunted and physically attacked by the Jets" (Berson 140). In *Romeo and Juliet*, scene 2.4, Juliet sends her Nurse to Romeo and his Montague friends. They tease and taunt her for her age and her bawdiness. Although disgruntled and insulted, she is not physically harmed by them, and she and Romeo go on to plan the lovers' secret meeting and subsequent marriage. She is able to fulfill her part of the relationship with Juliet; she insures that the

lovers can meet and marry in private.

Anita, on the other hand, cannot complete the task with which Maria charged her. She cannot tell Tony that Chino has a gun and that Maria will come to the drugstore so that they can go make a life together, away from the gang war. The Jets begin by lying to Anita about Tony's whereabouts, then follow-up with taunts and racial slurs. Anita is a spitfire, but she controls her anger out of her sense of duty to her friend. Laurents' stage direction reads: "*The taunting breaks into a wild, savage dance, with epithets hurled at Anita, who is encircled and driven by the whole pack. At the peak, she is shoved so that she falls in the corner...*" (Laurents 219). Musical theater scholars, such as Stacy Wolf, write that Anita is "almost raped" by the Jets, although that can depend on the staging. Regardless of how much a production chooses to show, she is clearly physically attacked by a gang of tough street fighters. As she makes her escape, she shouts that Maria is dead, which is the catalyst for Tony's death at the end, making Anita the "linchpin of the tragedy" (Dash 120).

One of the most crucial changes between *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story* is that the blame for the tragedy rests squarely on Anita's shoulders, due to her lie about Maria. Although the Nurse is by no means unnecessary to the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, Anita has enough power in *West Side* that the whole musical turns on her tragic flaw, her temper. Anita becomes a secondary plot line that did not even exist in Shakespeare's play. She is fiery and passionate, and although she is more sexually experienced than Maria, she is not earthy, nor bawdy, like Shakespeare's Nurse. Due to her race, a predominantly white audience would have expected her overt sexuality, which is also a comment on the audience's implicit racism. Making Anita a younger, more important

character than her Shakespearian counterpart fulfills musical theater's expectations of a strong friend for the ingénue, and the connection between the two also upholds that archetypal musical theater bond.

In terms of the typical musical theater female-female relationships, one must consider bond of trust between the Juliet-figure and the Nurse-figure. Juliet trusts the Nurse implicitly, but when Romeo is banished, the Nurse suggests that Juliet marry her suitor, Paris. When it comes to murder and banishment, she would rather see Juliet safely married to someone she does not love than to see her in danger. Juliet is incapable of continuing her relationship with the Nurse, "The young woman can't believe that her beloved nurse could lose her moral compass to such a degree as to suggest bigamy" (Dash 120). Juliet makes the conscious choice to cut the Nurse out of any future planning, and she dies without reconciling with her only female companion. Complicating the relationship between Juliet and the Nurse even further is the fact they are not social equals. Juliet is the mistress and the Nurse is the servant. While Juliet goes to the Nurse for advice, she also orders her around easily. Their dynamic is unequal from the start, with the ingénue in the power position.

The exact opposite is true in *West Side*, however, as Anita has the power by being older and more experienced than Maria. Anita is moved by her friend's love. That is what makes the biggest difference between the main female-female relationships in these two works. Like Juliet, Maria begs her Nurse-figure to assist and comfort her when her Romeo-figure (Tony) kills her brother, Anita's lover. Anita lashes out, "and her reaction [to Bernardo's murder] is complex - molten anger, leavened with pity and empathy, then traumatized into vengeance" (Berson 47). The introduction of Anita's pain adds to the

drama of the piece; the Nurse had no lover who could die in the feud. When Anita's emotions cannot be expressed in words alone, she launches into a song, "A Boy Like That." The song tells Maria to forget about Tony and "stick to [her] own kind" (Sondheim 212). She perpetuates the racism that is causing all her pain, and enacting her role as the darker figure in their duo. Maria, however, pleads with her and tries to persuade her that love is the important thing, singing "Oh no, Anita, no - you should know better! You were in love - or so you said. You should know better" (Sondheim 213). She appeals to Anita's softer side, and unlike the Nurse, Anita begins to soften. Their musical phrases line up, and they sing in tandem "When love comes so strong, there is no right or wrong, your love is your life" (Sondheim 214). The fact that they come together for the last three lines unites them in purpose, and strengthens their almost sisterly bond. Even though Tony has killed Anita's lover, "Maria, the soprano and the naive 'virgin'-in-love who can see beyond skin color, persuades Anita, the alto and sexually experienced woman bound to her ethnicity, that love conquers all" (Wolf 46). Unlike the Nurse, Anita is compelled to help her younger friend in her quest for true love, and goes to tell Doc that Chino has a gun and that Maria is coming to meet Tony at the drugstore.

Anita's role in the tragedy beautifully complicates *West Side Story* in a way that the Nurse does not affect *Romeo and Juliet*. Maria's refusal to let her grief end her life, and her impassioned speech against hate show her to be a character with more agency than her Shakespearean counterpart. These female characters are not only stronger than their earlier counterparts, but they help *West Side Story* to use some of the foremost characteristics of the Golden Age musical, thus legitimizing it as an adaptation of

Shakespeare. Not only is it an adaptation of a Shakespeare play, but it is the first musical adaptation of one of the Bard's tragedies. Making a tragedy fit into the format of a traditional American musical comedy was a difficult undertaking, and these artists succeeded brilliantly. The collaborators' success was not just in making a commercially viable musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, however. They achieved their goal of promoting racial tolerance. They also laid the groundwork for a new kind of musical, with even stronger female characters. Ingénues no longer have to stay in their shells, and women can have agency and/or make powerful statements about the world. While it is true that Anita and Maria are stronger than Juliet and the Nurse, both individually and as a pair, they have also become the archetypes for a stronger type of female musical theater character, and that is what makes them so fascinating to study. The female characters in *West Side Story* have more agency than their Shakespearean counterparts, and have provided a new lens through which Juliet and the Nurse can be seen.

Success and Failure: Or Why Do These Musicals Work?

The adaptation of Shakespeare's plays into musicals did not stop with *West Side Story*. *Your Own Thing* and *Rockabye Hamlet* are examples of more modern Shakespeare adaptations, neither of which made a lasting impression on the face of the American musical. *Rockabye Hamlet* only ran for one week, and *Your Own Thing* died out soon after it was originally staged in 1968. What is so different about these adaptations than the Golden Age successes? *Your Own Thing*, a musical based on *Twelfth Night*, was never on Broadway. It was produced Off-Broadway in 1968, and was created as a reaction to the Vietnam War. It reiterated the rock and roll idea of making your own way and doing your own thing that was popular in the 60s. Rather than building up the female characters, the collaborators introduced a homosexual slant to Shakespeare's original tale of mistaken identities. As Dash writes, "the musical creatively misreads Shakespeare, emphasizing the positive possibilities of homosexual unions" (139). The adaptors did not want to push pop culture too far, however, and so they did not attempt definitive statements about homosexuality. *Your Own Thing* did address the idea of an older woman with a younger man, but that issue was not central to the main plot. Although the musical was well received by critics, the American musical audience was still shifting from the Golden Age generation to a more hip, young crowd. *Your Own Thing* was ahead of its time.

Rockabye Hamlet, based on Hamlet, was an attempt to jump on the bandwagon of the rock musical, which was popularized by *Hair* in the mid-60s. The show was directed by Gower Champion, a Broadway legend, but even he could not save the show. It was "almost-all-sung," and "Ophelia took her life by strangling herself with a mike

cord" (Mandelbaum 40). Researching *Rockabye Hamlet* is difficult; there is very little plot information about it. It is mentioned in Ken Mandelbaum's book, *Not Since Carrie*, which details Off-Broadway failures. Mandelbaum points out that the show lacked purpose: why do a rock version of *Hamlet*? This production was not so much a musical adaptation of the Bard's tragedy, but a rock concert inspired by it. While that is all well and good, it does not live up to its predecessors in terms of examining female agency, or in terms of box office success.

These two examples are failures, and although *The Boys from Syracuse* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* had more success, the former is pre-Golden Age and the latter is post. The two Golden Age Shakespeare musicals, *Kiss Me, Kate* and *West Side Story*, both have become part of the cultural context in which the American public understands Shakespeare. The popular nature of the American musical as an art form, and the fact that both these musicals were adapted for the screen after their success on the stage, mean that most Americans have at least a passing knowledge of these works. Some people may even have more familiarity with the musical versions than with the original texts. Reading the original in the aftermath of knowing the musical adaptation slants the way one interprets the play. Shakespeare's female characters can be seen to have more agency by comparing their actions in a positive way to those of their musicalized counterparts. The opposite could also easily be true. However, just as seeing Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* influences our collective understanding of the Bard's work, so too does watching or listening to *West Side Story*. We view Shakespeare through a series of layers, and one of those layers is musical adaptations.

The relationship also goes the other way, as these musicals are seen in relation to their Shakespearean backgrounds. *Kiss Me, Kate* and *West Side Story* were extremely popular in the Golden Age, and both are still produced frequently around the world. While their success is not necessarily due to their Shakespearean roots (look at *Rockabye Hamlet*, for example), these musicals have permeated the collective American culture in a way that not all musicals do. They are elevated by the fetishism of Shakespeare; the world has placed Shakespeare on such a pedestal that attaching his name to something lends credence to it. However, these musicals do not skate by on the name of Shakespeare alone. They are successful adaptations because they have molded the Bard to the American musical.

By working within the structure created in the Golden Age, the creators of these musicals were able to push Shakespeare's plays even further, make them relevant to the times, and empower the female characters. The adaptors followed traditional musical theater tenets: romantic relationships, female-female relationships, introductory songs, subplots, and foregrounding of the females. Those characteristics pushed Lilli and Maria to be stronger and have more freedom in their actions. They were able to act in ways that Shakespeare's female protagonists could not; Lilli was able to secure her relationship and her career and Maria was strong enough to choose to live. *Kiss Me, Kate* and *West Side Story* are not only successful as adaptations of Shakespeare to properly integrated musicals, they imbue the female characters with more agency than they had previously shown.

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