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# Palpable Hits: Popular Music Forms and Teaching Early Modern Poetry

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STEPHEN M. BUHLER

## Palpable Hits: Popular Music Forms and Teaching Early Modern Poetry

Recent pedagogical scholarship has engaged strenuously with the use of YouTube and other online platforms in the literature classroom. Stephen O'Neill, for one, champions video-sharing and similar media "in the interests of fostering various experiential, collaborative and peer-learning scenarios," especially in tandem with the "array of Shakespeare content, which can potentially illuminate and deepen [learners'] understanding of the text and its diverse contexts" (190). In this essay, I discuss the advantages of sharing for this purpose online materials that have been developed by artists, instructors, students, and others—specifically, materials with a musical orientation. Along the way, I shall explain my own strategies in developing particular types of "Shakespeare content" that students have found useful in coming to terms with aspects of Shakespeare's literary craft and that students have used as springboards for their own creative responses to his work. In describing this educational exchange, I make no claim about being "the only begetter" of student projects; as O'Neill notes, most of our students today are "digital natives," quite at home with such widespread online practices as video remix and mashup (190). However, I have observed that setting 16th- and 17th-century texts (including, of course, Shakespeare's) to popular music forms can elicit specifically musical responses from students and that an instructor's willingness to share materials online can encourage students to bring video-sharing and other digital practices more richly into an educational setting that might initially have seemed unfriendly to such interventions.

### Popular Culture and Shakespeare

Some educators have understandably urged caution when adopting pop-cultural approaches to earlier literatures. Charles Conaway has argued for the value of actively resisting recent re-readings of *Romeo and Juliet*, especially in music: "If we teach Shakespeare's play *against* its reception in modern popular culture, then we might show our students that at the same time that the play has been received and interpreted in ways that attempt to make it relevant to their lives, it has also been turned against them." Conaway takes particular issue with versions that shift "responsibility for the behaviors that lead to the play's tragic conclusion—that is Romeo and Juliet's courtship and marriage as well as the feud—from the

patriarchal culture that serves them up as rites of passage into adulthood in Shakespeare's play." Unfortunately, he goes further and attributes such a reading to a monolithic "modern popular culture" that leaves no room for tacit or explicit societal critique in pop music lyrics or sensibility. That judgment constitutes a recent variation on old "High Culture" attitudes (art is complex; pop culture is simplistic) that persist. In arguing for the use of popular culture "as a bridge to complex texts," educators Kristine Gritter, Kathryn Schoon-Tannis, and Matthew Althoff have somewhat internalized such attitudes, even as they challenge and resist them, reminding instructors that the effective use of pop culture materials depends much on their attitudes toward those materials (49–52). "No-Fear Shakespeare" editions can reinforce rather than assuage anxieties about reading the plays; "simply trust the text" in performance and in the classroom can be, in the memorable analogy offered by Holger Syme, the "acting equivalent of English people speaking English really slowly and loudly to non-English speakers. Because if you *really* speak the words, they suddenly acquire meaning." Such cautionary examples remind us that the use of popular music materials to explore Early Modern works requires awareness of difference/s as well as resonances.

To be sure, an important part of awareness is self-awareness: in my own case, several of my popular music examples are aging rapidly. Regardless, used both judiciously and fearlessly, any popular music examples and appropriations can also connect powerfully with the benefits of performance-based strategies in the classroom and can inspire students to continue their engagements on their own—and some of my students have continued them long after a given semester and extended them beyond literary studies proper. Performance strategies in teaching, in the words of Michael LoMonico, engage "students with [Shakespeare's] words in such a way that requires them to make informed decisions about the text" (24). That is certainly the case with in-class acting exercises, or "close reading on your feet" (24), but it can also be achieved by inviting students to rethink texts via classroom or digital performances and by making judicious use of previous examples of performances.

Beyond rethinking past stage or film performances, teaching strategies can make effective use of non-dramatic materials. Trevor Nunn, among other Royal Shakespeare Company directors, long encouraged his actors to treat Shakespeare's sonnets as dramatic monologues, as soliloquies. The results can be beneficial not only for actors but also for anyone listening to them. In the first installment of what became the London Weekend Television series *Playing Shakespeare*, Nunn guides a young David Suchet through Sonnet 138. Making use of the immediate situation—there is a studio audience in attendance, as well as the television viewers, all interested in learning about Shakespearean performance—Nunn suggests that Suchet present the sonnet in the role of a university lecturer who provides his class

with examples of how fluid the distinctions between truth and falsehood can be. In response to this suggestion and some stop-and-start coaching from Nunn, Suchet quickly crafts a supremely articulate take on the poem that charms the studio audience (not to mention Nunn) and highlights the work's wryness and ironic wit.

But, these are not the only qualities a reader or performer can discover in the poem, nor is dramatic monologue the only way of performing a sonnet or any form of Early Modern verse. Poems can be performed as popular songs and pop music hath charms—less to soothe the savage sensibility and more to engage the complacent or dismissive breast. Overcoming senses of distance and deference, the formal characteristics and thematic conventions of popular music, especially from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century on (and especially in the Anglo-American mass market) can be effective tools in teaching Early Modern poetry. Students who find strict stanzaic organization or standard structures such as the sonnet discouragingly distant or artificial, as opposed to the flexibility and freedom found in contemporary poetry, can nevertheless understand parallels between older forms and pop music formulas. Similarly, recognizing the affective associations of today's music genres can aid in understanding the influence of literary tradition on Early Modern works and highlight occasions when writers strategically resisted specific conventions. When such recognitions combine with one's own musical interests or skills, the result can lead to the student's own creative reframing and interpretation of texts.

### **Popular Music and Shakespeare**

Popular music has frequently and successfully been used, by teachers and scholars and students and actors and directors, to explore Shakespeare's characters, themes, and, more generally, place on the cultural scene. Nona Paula Fienberg has written about future elementary and secondary level teachers doing group work on Ophelia's songs in *Hamlet*, often identifying then-current popular songs that retell the character's story or speak to her situation. Fienberg notes that group members have related Ophelia's "songs of rebellion to cuts they play for us of Tori Amos, or Sarah McLachlan, or Jewel; she also reports how one of her students "composed her own melodies for Ophelia's lyrics" (156). Some of my own research, too, has traced the shifting conceptions of the characters of Romeo and Juliet as seen in pop music references to the characters and deployment of Shakespearean references in pop music lyrics in addressing present-day feminist concerns (Buhler 2002, 2007); Robert Shaughnessy has provided an overview of the play as it was performed as an expression of "Youth Culture" in the second half of the 20th century. A similar approach is taken by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., in his essay "'Are You Shakespearienced?': Rock Music and the Production of Shakespeare." The pervasiveness of Shakespeare is evident in Wes Folkerth's expansive discography of pop

music engagements with the Bard for the reference work *Shakespeares After Shakespeare*. Especially in stage and screen performance, pop music can play a major role. From its earliest stagings, the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express — the foundation for the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia — regularly employed pop songs as introductions to performances of Shakespeare's plays and commentary on the action. An inspired rewrite of the Gershwins' "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" opened the company's 1994 touring production of *Much Ado About Nothing*: audience members familiar with the premise of film musicals starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were immediately prepared for the wrangling between Benedick and Beatrice, and an adapted verse given to Dogberry that began "You say vigilant, but I say vigitant" similarly served to prepare hearers for the character's uneasy relation with words. Elsewhere, Georgia Shakespeare's 2000 production of *Twelfth Night* deftly replaced many of Sir Toby's quotations from Early Modern songs with musical references more immediately accessible to the company's immediate audiences: strains from "We Three Kings of Orient Are," "She's a Lady" (as popularized decades ago by Tom Jones), and "Every Time We Say Goodbye" (the Cole Porter standard) were heard in place of the play's original invocations of "Three Merry Men Be We," "There Dwelt a Man in Babylon (Lady, Lady)," and "Farewell, Dear Heart" (Hartley 146). Many stage and screen productions, notably Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film *Romeo + Juliet*, have also relied extensively on popular music. Even the briefest of allusions can resonate strongly, as with the snippet from Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" sung by the Gravedigger in Michael Almereyda's film *Hamlet*. (See Marina Gerzic's recent essay.)

As Fienberg argues, the most instructive (in all senses) moments can emerge when students themselves find and share examples of direct literary influence or thematic and affective parallels. One of my students, Natasha Luepke, once compiled a haunting collection of songs inspired by Ophelia's story; these included "Touch Me Fall" by the Indigo Girls, "Dig Ophelia" by Rasputina, and Natalie Merchant's well-known "Ophelia." In responding to other Medieval and Renaissance texts, another student compiled a soundscape using a range of popular songs in order to reflect the conflicted (and sometimes conflicting) views held by Chaucer's Wife of Bath; yet another used a recording of Eric Clapton's song "Tears In Heaven" to reinforce the messages of Ben Jonson's poignant "On My First Son," to consider the role of understood autobiography in audience response, and also to distinguish Jonson's parental persona from the one adopted by Clapton. In such projects, students can vividly demonstrate and enhance understanding of the contributions of cultural materials (and moments) in both the construction and interpretation of a dramatic character or literary persona.

### From the Plays to the Sonnets

Beyond the plays, it has been the case that sonnets—by Shakespeare or his contemporaries—have not often been directly appropriated into pop music. Folkerth's discography lists only two general references to the sonnets: an approving one in Cole Porter's "You're the Top" and a disparaging one in "My Bird Performs" by Colin Moulding of the British band XTC. Folkerth also finds two specific, but somewhat misguided, borrowings by Sting: "Sister Moon," which uses the phrase "nothing like the sun" from Sonnet 130 (the phrase also becomes the title of the album on which the song first appears), and "Consider Me Gone," which rewrites Sonnet 35 so that the speaker can no longer excuse the beloved's behavior (Folkerth 1.401–02). Jazz was already moving away from its status as popular music when Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn composed three works titled "Sonnets" for the 1957 Ellington Orchestra album *Such Sweet Thunder* (Buhler 2005); they famously left out words altogether, although the pieces are so carefully crafted that the words of a Shakespearean sonnet can match the notes perfectly—as when Cleo Laine recorded "Take All My Loves," composer John Dankworth's combination of Sonnet 40 with Ellington and Strayhorn's "Sonnet for Hank Cinq." Intriguingly and compellingly, Delfeayo Marsalis's 2011 reworking of the Ellington-Strayhorn suite, which is redubbed *Sweet Thunder: Duke and Shak*, adds an explosive improvisational section to "Hank Cinq" after the eighth melodic line, exactly where the volta would appear in a Petrarchan sonnet.

The relative neglect of the sonnet is somewhat surprising because the basic architecture of an English sonnet lends itself well to the standard organization of a popular song. Starting with three separate quatrains and a couplet, parallels can be established with verses and a refrain or chorus. As seen in the Delfeayo Marsalis reinterpretation of "Hank Cinq," with the overlay of the older Italian structure, further connections can be made with popular song: the volta finds its equivalent in the bridge—a separate melodic or chordal passage separating the verses and, possibly, the chorus—or even in something as basic as a change of key. When a setting rearranges lines, such adjustments can tell us something about a particular sonnet, about how it was crafted and about how form and content work together. Finally, the choice of melody and chord progression provides an interpretation of the sonnet's content and affective power, even if the music adopts a detached or ironic stance toward the text.

A small sampling of the results from a YouTube search for, say, settings of Sonnet 18— "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day"—can demonstrate the principles I have been describing. The California-based folk duo Of Wheel and Water (Dylan Rodrigue and Marina Sanford) approach Sonnet 130 in a straightforward manner, with each of the first two quatrains treated as song verses. The third quatrain introduces a bridge section; the words

of line nine in this sonnet, however, do not indicate a very strong volta. The couplet, which does offer a different perspective, receives a separate melodic line altogether and is repeated overall, concluding with an additional repetition of "with false compare." David Gilmour of Pink Floyd has been widely seen online performing a hymn-like Sonnet 18; this version, available on the DVD *David Gilmour in Concert*, is based on a setting of the poem by the late film composer Michael Kamen, which was first performed by Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music for Kamen's *When Love Speaks* project, a benefit album supporting the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Here the first quatrain serves as a verse, but the second quatrain serves as a responsorial, before the third quatrain introduces a bridge. The couplet ("So long as men can breathe") repeats elements from the bridge section, with a lengthy rest after the clause, "So long lives this. . . ." The original composition was part of Kamen's desire to produce, commission, or gather recordings of nearly 50 Shakespearean sonnets as an aural monument to Shakespeare; Gilmour performed the piece at the album's gala launch event in 2002. Over the years, Rufus Wainwright has crafted several settings of Shakespeare; he is especially interested in exploring the romantic and sexual dynamics of the Fair Young Man sonnets. One live performance of his Sonnet 10 available online focuses sharply on Wainwright's face and voice, along with the piano flourishes of his accompanist. This setting takes the text slowly, with the first two lines treated as a separate melodic component, the next two lines repeating that melody with slight variation, and the second quatrain establishing a different set of motifs. The third quatrain returns to the original structure while the concluding couplet borrows from portions of the "B" section. Shakespeare's sonnets have maintained their hold on Wainwright's imagination: 2016 has witnessed the release of *Take All My Loves: Nine Shakespeare Sonnets*, an album that includes reworkings of three previous settings, spoken-voice readings of the sonnets by various actors, and one particularly gorgeous pop version of Sonnet 29 ("When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes") voiced primarily not by Wainwright but by Florence Welch of the group Florence and the Machine.

In many of the latter cases, however, the settings involve pop music figures (Kamen had famously worked with a wide range of rock musicians, including the group Metallica), but not exactly pop music. The approach taken toward Shakespeare's texts here is reminiscent of a church anthem and an art song, respectively. Such tendencies were even more evident in *Shakespeare and the Sonnets*, settings composed and recorded in observance of the Cultural Olympiad of 2012, which was held in conjunction with the Summer Olympic Games in London: all the settings were performed by accomplished musicians, but none of the settings pays much heed to the popular music of either Shakespeare's era or its own. While often lovely and admirable, such settings may reinforce the kind of overly reverential attitude toward Shakespearean materials that inhibits active engagement

with them and discovery through them. If nothing else, my own experiments with pop music settings for Shakespeare's sonnets could hardly be accused of undue reverence. What follows is the kind of rationale I offer to my students when I perform them in class or discuss them after letting students listen (or watch) on their own beforehand. (My recorded audio and video performances are available online under the names of two bands, Tupelo Springfield and Sweet Will & the Saucy Jacks, as well as under the name Steve Buhler.)

### Performing the Sonnets

In the setting for Sonnet 18, I follow the practice of Ellington and Strayhorn by treating the first two quatrains as verses. The explicit volta in this sonnet ("But thy eternal summer shall not fade") invites a bridge, and my setting shifts from the key of G to the key of C. The melody of the verse alternates between accentuating the iambic rhythms—"But *thy e - ter - nal sum - mer*"—and playing with them. I have stretched out "temperate" and "dimmed" in the second lines of each verse to suggest extra syllables: "tem - per - a - ate" and "di - immed" (or, occasionally, "dimmed," which requires singing "untrimmed" as trisyllabic); in so doing, I pay tribute to the long tradition in country music, the mode that I have adopted here, of celebrating the deliciousness of diphthongs in many Southern dialects. In performance, I often treat the couplet as a kind of problem, by singing it as the beginning of another verse—"So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this and this gives life to thee . . ."—and then stopping as I run out of words to match the verse structure. The solution is simply to repeat the couplet in order to finish the verse. Along with the comic effect, the pause helps to point out the strategic "imbalance" of the English couplet, especially as it aims toward the effect of a second volta in this sonnet and a first volta in Sonnet 30 (as the couplet begins "But thy sweet love remembered"). As suggested above, the specific genre selected for this setting is Country Ballad: the melody is vaguely indebted to "Me and Bobby McGee"—written by Kris Kristofferson—and allows for some Johnny Cash-style shifts in register, swooping low for "sometimes declines." The effect on students and other listeners has often been startling: surprise, amusement, and increased acceptance of interpretive openness. A familiar text has been presented in an unfamiliar way; a familiar musical style has been linked to an unaccustomed text. In performance, the structure of a sonnet resonates, literally, with the patterns of popular music.

My settings for Sonnet 55 and Sonnet 94 take a very different approach, both structurally and melodically. Because the couplet in many of Shakespeare's sonnets serves not only as a conclusion or destination but as a kind of "moral" to the poem, it can function as a refrain for each of the verses provided by the three quatrains. For the setting of Sonnet 55, we hear "So till the judgment that yourself arise, / You live in this and dwell in



lovers' eyes." The speaker's bravado and implicit challenge of social hierarchy finds a parallel, the setting suggests, in Classic Rock: listeners who have detected the influence of Bachman-Turner Overdrive's "Takin' Care of Business" in the verses (if not the refrain) are not mistaken. In Sonnet 94, the refrain goes "For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds. / Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds." The speaker's doubts and ambivalence toward his beloved have been festering for some time, as well. The blues, then, seemed an appropriate genre for this sonnet; the chord changes hint at the speaker's temptation to despair in echoing Robert Johnson's "Love In Vain" as rearranged by the Rolling Stones.

Sonnet 116 is perhaps my most complex setting because the poem begins with a famous opening line and a half: the caesura after "Admit impediments" means that the melodic line most comfortably resolves at that point in the words. Later on in the poem, however, the lines are increasingly end-stopped. My compositional solution to this apparent problem was to stretch out the initial melody and accordingly adjust the chord changes to match the more expansive lines. In the first verse, the chord progression follows the initial line and a half; it is then repeated, reaching only the end of line three. The concluding chords receive a single measure only. Line four is treated as a refrain. I am then able to use the second quatrain as a bridge (as did, I later discovered, both Kamen and Wainwright). I have employed double measures for the chords at the end of the progression in verse two, the third quatrain, in order to bring in the four complete lines. The couplet becomes a coda, incorporating melodic and chord structures from both the verse and the bridge. The effect, I hope, is still simple overall, at least in its Neo-Folk directness.

The structure that I devised for Sonnet 138 is similar to the one employed for Sonnet 94, with the couplet providing a refrain for each four-line verse. So, immediately after each quatrain, we hear "Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be." Originally, the setting was an upbeat jump-blues, somewhere between a T-Bone Walker or Albert King original or a Stevie Ray Vaughn rock tribute to that style. The interpretation of the poem that guided that setting was doubtless influenced by David Suchet's humorously cynical reading for *Playing Shakespeare*. However, that did not seem entirely fair to the poem's richness, nor did it entirely work for the last (in the published sequence) of the sonnets that I have set—the last so far, anyway. I made a decision about a more appropriate musical setting: one that relies extensively on the chord of E minor. The new setting is also one that connects with the most recent of the subgenres with which I have engaged: Alternative. Singing the words as a rueful, self-aware Indie lament drastically changes the emotional effect of the sonnet and slightly intensifies its immediacy for many present-day students. And, an alternative Alternative Rock setting can be considered as illustration of the sonnets' own openness to a range

of interpretations: several listeners much prefer the wistful interpretation of Sonnet 138 presented by Grant Withington, also available on YouTube. I have enjoyed classroom discussions and online debates of what in the text and what in the reader-listener can prompt decisions as to which rendering is preferable (in such matters, it is best to set one's artistic ego at least slightly to one side).

I have been able to adopt these teaching strategies thanks to my own background (similar to Mr. Withington's) in club bands and musical theater ensembles. The esteemed Miltonist and superb harmonica player Christopher Grose, now Professor Emeritus at the University of California at Los Angeles, encouraged me with his own musical project, Bland John and the Miltones, including the ensemble's never-ending revision of Milton's greatest epic, "The Paradise Blues." I should also acknowledge the influence of pop musicians like the oft-maligned Sting and the oft-admired Mark Knopfler, both of whom have been described as recovering English teachers who have endeavored to bring their literary training to bear on their musical compositions. I encourage anyone with a basic level of musical ability (and of shamelessness) to exploit whatever talents you have to your students' benefit. As with any performance approach, if you are willing to perform, you can often motivate students to reciprocate creatively.

### **Students into the Act**

Getting students into the act, inviting them either to set poems or to evaluate critically the settings performed by others, is crucial. Two examples from my experience, from 2008 alone, can illustrate the potential benefits of student composition. In my Introduction to Renaissance Literature course, one student brilliantly arranged and performed Sir Walter Raleigh's trenchant "The Lie" as a protest song. His Dylanesque snarl (and piercing harmonica) revealed the bitterness expressed by Raleigh's speaker; the associations of folk protest with comprehensive social critique highlighted the poem's methodical indictment of all estates in English Renaissance society. In a course devoted to Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, the latter writer's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" have been reborn as a pair of progressive-rock instrumentals, "Ignis Fatuis" and "The Bear at Dawn," by Alexander Houchin, recording as Scuff. This student's musical compositions took a programmatic approach in responding to selected passages from the companion poems; his ability to play and record all the instruments astutely mirrored the isolated wizardry of Milton's contemplative seer, Penseroso. But, one can get students into the act in other ways, too, simply inviting them to track down and share other extant settings or responses, sometimes with the help of YouTube. The results can be startling for all concerned, as with one recent student's discovery of the late Johnny Cash performing a traditional setting of Ben Jonson's "Song: To Celia (Drink

to Me Only).” Again, one’s own example can help greatly in encouraging students to explore, to discover, to share, and to discuss.

Christy Desmet has written persuasively about the efficacy of the YouTube parody in “honing students’ skills in critical reading and writing” (66)—that is, in the knowledgeable analysis of texts, Shakespearean and otherwise, and in the crafting of responses to those texts. Desmet is especially perceptive concerning the centrality of imitation, parody, and irony in the video mashup genre and enthusiastic about tapping into students’ considerable skills in such modes. Vivid demonstrations of such intermodal dexterity can be seen in what the students of Kristy Edgar (a former student of mine) have accomplished with *American History Music Videos*, which evince shrewd understandings of past events and present media through a series of historico-musico-pedagogical delights (to paraphrase Polonius). It is also worth considering how several elements of the mashup are central to the artistic, commercial, and critical success of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Broadway musical *Hamilton*, which somehow negotiates its way beyond the ironic mode and has helped to revive a more general practice of non-ironic appropriation. Miranda, not coincidentally, also taught high school English for a time. Interested teachers and students might also explore the importance of music—including popular music—in Early Modern England and in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Helpful sources include studies by Gina Bloom, Ross Duffin, David Lindley, Erin Minnear, Joseph M. Ortiz, and Bruce R. Smith. Additional insights into Shakespeare and the varieties of popular music are provided in works by Adam Hansen, Douglas Lanier, Julie Sanders, and Fran Teague. Educators and students alike can revel in the welcome return of Bardbox, Luke McKernan’s glorious website that compiles and archives examples of Shakespeare as adapted for online video. They can find specific musical inspiration through McKernan’s helpful categories, including mashups, pop music, rap music, and songs.

Bringing Shakespeare, with his contemporaries, together with popular music of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries can enhance students’ sense of the accessibility and immediacy to the past works. It can also assist them in acknowledging the artifice, the convention, in present-day art forms and entertainments. Not coincidentally, this performance-based approach provides a ready and easy way of communicating to students the idea of Shakespeare’s involvement with pleasure. Enjoyment, diversion, and just plain fun, after all, were essential starting points for Shakespeare’s earliest audiences: his company’s playgoers and his first readers. His works first lived—and can continue to come alive—through instant entertainment and the excitement of participating in creating something new out of familiar materials and conventions. One can imagine Londoners wondering: “O, so Shakespeare is tackling a revenge tragedy, eh? What will he do with the formula—and the old Amleth story, too? Will he riff on all the Danelaw

stuff in that play *Edmund Ironside*?" The result, of course, was a play text that inspired actors, audiences, and readers then and has done so for centuries; the result was a hit, a very palpable hit.

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