

3: Saying it Slant

A. Shakespeare with a Twist

1. Class title 1 (*La fille mal gardée*)
2. Section title A (Shakespeare transform)
3. — still from the above

William Shakespeare (1564–1616): again? Yes, because even though he was a master at straight declarations of love, he also created some of the most iconic characters who, in Emily Dickinson’s phrase, **say it slant**. How about the famous *Sonnet 130*, “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”? Here are three readings of it, all in audio only. Let’s compare them, less in terms of which voice you like best (I’m pretty sure I know the answer), but what mood each establishes.

4. Comparisons of *Sonnet 130*

So what did you think? This is certainly a love song, but is it meant to sound that way from the beginning? I think what Shakespeare does is make it sound like a series of insults—but then to turn it around. **Speaker A (Alan Rickman)** has by far the sexiest voice, but you know it is a love song from the beginning; if he were whispering that in your ear, you’d be melting by the time he got to the fourth line! **Speaker B** (a South African actor called **David Bailie**) makes it seem like an insult from the start. The main reason I included **Speaker C** (someone I don’t know called **Ben Smith**), is because he is one of the only two among the fourteen I heard to get the last line right: listen:

5. Comparisons of final couplet

However, the one that interested me most is not by a man at all; it may not even be by a professional actor, but a young woman who posts under the handle **christine4771**. I know of no one who makes the series of compliments sound so left-handed, or who handles the transition into the final couplet better—even though she totally mangles Shakespeare’s lines, adding three extra words and making no verbal sense whatever!

6. Shakespeare: *Sonnet 130* (**christine4771**)
7. DVD covers

There are two Shakespeare plays that famously contain couples who express their interest in each other through quarreling. The least ambiguous of them is *Much Ado about Nothing*, whose protagonists Beatrice and Benedick quarrel from the beginning of the play until almost the end, until Benedick’s friends fool him into believing that Beatrice is really in love with him (as in fact she is, but will not admit it). A similar situation in *The Taming of the Shrew* is complicated by the fact that Petruchio is clearly motivated to woo the termagant Katharina both to prove his *machismo* and because he wants her

dowry—but the play turns into a saga of abuse and domination unless you show that, whatever their original motives, Petruchio and Kate realize that they have found a match in each other, and genuinely fall in love. **Kenneth Branagh** made a wonderful film of *Much Ado* in 1993 with his then-wife **Emma Thompson**. The marriage did not last, but the chemistry is palpable. Here is their first quarrel.

8. Shakespeare: *Much Ado about Nothing* (Branagh 1993), first meeting

9. Paul Appleby and Stéphanie d'Oustrac in *Béatrice et Bénédict* (Glyndebourne 2016)

Hector Berlioz (1803–69) had his own Shakespearean love/hate relationship. He fell passionately in love with the Irish actress **Harriet Smithson**, a frequent performer in Paris. He pursued her, poured out music to impress her, and married her in 1833; the marriage lasted as a functional entity for less than a week. Although his setting of *Much Ado* came much later (1862), he must surely have identified with the quarrelsome couple. The only stage production relatively available is this one by **Laurent Pelly** for Glyndebourne. For some reason, given an artist normally known for his visual charm, he decided to do it all in shades of grey. It is stylish, certainly, but hardly ideal for this kind of comedy. The music is appropriately sparkling, but what makes this scene work for me—the end of the opera—is the dialogue and the acting.

10. Berlioz: *Béatrice et Bénédict*, ending

11. Simon Paisley Day and Samantha Spiro in *The Taming of the Shrew* (Globe 2012)

Here is the first encounter between **Petruchio** and **Katharina** in *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Globe in 2012. I find the peeling paint on the set rather depressing, and neither **Simon Paisley Day** nor **Samantha Spiro** to have much charisma, but they certainly make the dialogue sparkle; this is just the start.

12. Shakespeare: *The Taming of the Shrew* (Globe 2012), first meeting

13. Brent Barrett and Rachel York in *Kiss Me Kate* (London 1999)

When **Cole Porter** (1893–1964) adapted the play as *Kiss Me, Kate* in 1948, he and his collaborators had the often-dangerous-but-in-this-case-brilliant idea of adding several layers to the story. We are watching a touring company opening a musical version of the play as a try-out in Baltimore. The wrinkle is that the leading roles are played by a formally married couple, **Fred Graham** and **Lili Vanessi**. They have split a while back and now appear to hate one another, but we get signs that the old spark is still there, waiting to be fanned into flame. The advantage is that both the love and the hate are in the mix from the beginning. But this is a course about Love Songs, not love scenes, so I am going to play a number for Fred/Petruchio, “Were thine that special face,” that is the epitome of a love-song-slant. He sings it with ostensible irony just after he meets Kate, and before launching into the dialogue we have just heard. Note that the musical cuts Shakespeare’s wonderful dirty line! **Brent Barrett** and **Rachel York**.

14. Porter: *Kiss Me, Kate*, “Were thine that special face”

B. From Hate to Love

15. Section title B (Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen)

Those were **Keira Knightley** and **Matthew Macfadyen** in the 2005 film of *Pride and Prejudice*. I show it as another iconic literary example of hatred turning to love, but I don't intend to play a clip from the movie. Everything in this section will include either a literal *Love Song*, as promised, or a piece of communication in another medium so obviously crafted as to be the equivalent of a love song.

16. Heath Ledger and Julia Stiles in *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999)

I could have played the Zeffirelli film of *The Taming of the Shrew*, featuring the real-life quarreling couple Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, but the adaptation I like most is the freely-modernized high-school film, *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999), not least because **Heath Ledger** and **Julia Stiles** have such marvelous chemistry. And if we are looking for a slant love song, what could be better than the one that Kat writes and reads aloud in English class?

17. *Ten Things I Hate About You*, Kat's poem

18. Susanna Phillips as Musetta

One of the great slanted love songs in opera is **Musetta's Waltz** from *La bohème* (1896) by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924). The four students whom we met in the first act, go out in the second for a Christmas Eve dinner at a local café; the tenor Rodolfo brings along his new girlfriend Mimì (we will be seeing more of them after the break). Then who should appear on the arm of some elderly sugar-daddy but **Musetta**, the ex-girlfriend of the baritone **Marcello**. They have broken up, but she is determined to win him back. Hence her outrageous waltz song, “Quando me'en vo,” whose text is basically: “When I go out, I love feeling men undress me with their eyes. But *you*—looking at Marcello—you can eat your heart out!” This is **Susanna Phillips** in the Zeffirelli production at the Met.

19. Puccini: *La bohème*, Musetta's waltz

20. Doris Day as *Calamity Jane* (1953)

I don't know about you, but I grew up with the movies of **Doris Day**. Songs like “The Deadwood Stage” and “Once I had a Secret Love” from ***Calamity Jane*** (1953) were all over the pops. The movie was in fact a confection, another story about a tomboy heroine from the Wild West designed to tap into the craze for *Annie Get Your Gun* the previous year. Day of course had a handsome male co-star, **Howard Keel**, who plays **Wild Bill Hickock**, who gets under Jane's skin, leading to the song “I can do without you”; the music is by **Sammy Fain** (1902–89). In Hollywood fashion, Bill and Jane get married at the end (after she has learned how to act like a lady), so the hate-into-love transformation label would apply. But I just read an article that convincingly describes this as a coded LGBTQ+ story, so maybe not.

21. *Calamity Jane*, “I can do without you”

22. Scene from *Beauty and the Beast*

The fairytale “Beauty and the Beast” is the classic example of initial repulsion turning to love. Much of the success of the Disney 1992 movie had to do with the songs of **Alan Menken** (1949–). His song *Something There* perfectly captures that moment in the snow when the two fall in love.

23. Menken: “Something there” from *Beauty and the Beast*

24. Hailee Steinfeld

In real life, however, the shift from hate to love is not always a once-only thing with a happy-ever-after ending. Many couples maintain love-hate relationships for years. So to end the hour on a less prettified note, here is **Hailee Steinfeld** with *Rock Bottom*, a song that is entirely about such a relationship. She is performing with the band **DNCE**. The video was made in 2016 by **Malia James**.

25. Steinfeld: *Rock Bottom*

26. Class title 2 (still from the above)

C. Wordless Passion

27. Section title C (Neumeier: *Black pas-de-deux* from *La dame aux camélias*)

That was part of a *pas-de-deux* from *La dame aux camélias*, a full-length ballet by the American **John Neumeier** (1939–) based on the Dumas story from which Verdi’s *La traviata* was also taken; the music is by Chopin. I think there is little doubt about the underlying feeling when both movement and music are so passionate. But lacking words, dance is less good at the kind of shading of expression we have been dealing with so far. Here’s an experiment. Here is a very short clip from a successful ballet based on one of the subjects we encountered in the first hour. Can you guess which it is, and does it work?

28. Maillot: *The Taming of the Shrew*, excerpt

Did you guess? It is a version of *The Taming of the Shrew* by **Jean-Christophe Maillot** (1960–). Did it work? For me, no, because the “slant” element of this particular relationship involves having a normal pattern of behavior against which to act. Ballet is so full of men throwing women around, that this does not seem so very different. The few moments that almost worked for me were when Kate struck muscle poses—for though a ballerina must be as strong as an ox, the tradition is to have her conceal it and appear light as a feather. I also think the story needs a more realistic set.

29. Carlos Acosta and Marianela Nuñez in Ashton’s *La fille mal gardée*

How do dancers express love on the stage? There are certain kinds of movement that bear an obvious relationship to real life: kissing, for example. But dancers in a classical *pas-de-deux* regularly handle each other’s bodies in ways which might seem overtly intimate in any other context, and they could not coordinate as they do without being totally in synch. I’m no choreographer, but I think if I wanted to imply something special, I would look for oblique ways of showing affection: keeping them apart, for example, rather than plunging into the standard ballet vocabulary, playing games, or using metaphors.

This shot that I used for my title slide is a lovely example of one such game-as-metaphor. It comes from *La fille mal gardée* (The Wayward Daughter), one of the oldest ballets in existence, memorably refreshed for the Royal Ballet by **Sir Frederick Ashton** (1904–88) in 1960 and a classic ever since. **Lise (Marianela Nuñez)** is forced by her widowed mother to do chores around the farm, but she steal time to be with her boyfriend **Colas (Carlos Acosta)**. In this scene, he interrupts her while she is churning butter, pulls out a ribbon, and begins to play a large-scale version of Cat’s Cradle. Watch.

30. Ashton: *La fille mal gardée, pas-de-ruban*

31. Scenes from *Play* and *Chroma*

The fact that ballet has no words to spell out a story has a paradoxical effect: we tend to read emotions into any interaction between two dancers, even when they may not be intended. So let’s try an experiment. I am going to play you two interactions between a male and a female dancer from modern ballets: *Play* by **Alexander Ekman** (1984–) and *Chroma* by **Wayne McGregor** (1970–). Neither of them could have gone into last week’s class: they are not straight declarations of love. But are they slant? Do either of them imply a relationship, and if so, of what kind?

32. Ekman: *Play*, girl on a cube

33. McGregor: *Chroma*, central pas-de-deux

34. Scenes from *Play* and *Chroma*

What did you think? There is definitely a relationship between the two dancers in *Play*, isn’t there? And, as the title suggests, it is definitely a playful relationship. It seems to be a teasing one. At first, I thought that she was teasing him, flirting, provoking. But the fact that each one of her moves is exactly matched to what he does with the microphone makes me think again. As does the fact that the whole thing needs a stagehand to move the cubes. So my first thought that this implied a story has faded somewhat. But the other has increased. At first I saw the movements as entirely abstract. But then I see the look on her face as she puts her foot in the small of his back, and I began to wonder. Not a conventional love relationship, for sure, but an abstraction of one of those love/hate ones...? Maybe.

D. Singing of Love

35. Section title D (Aida Garifullina, Musetta)

You know that piece, of course: *Musetta’s Waltz Song*, performed this time by **Aida Garifullina** making an entrance through the crowd at an open-air concert in Austria. I’ll be playing another scene with Musetta to end the hour, but first let’s return to Broadway with the masters of slanted love-lyrics, **Richard Rodgers** (1902–79) and **Otto Hammerstein II** (1895–1960). I put a clip of “People will say we’re in love” from *Oklahoma!* on the website syllabus, a love song that sounds like it’s not but really is.

36. Jessie Mueller and Joshua Henry in *Carousel*

Even more remarkable is the so-called “bench scene” in their next collaboration, *Carousel* (1945). Mill girl **Julie Jordan** has stayed out past her curfew at a fair; on a bench in the woods, she meets the footloose carnival barker **Billy Bigelow**, who has just lost his job. It is a long scene, containing dialogue plus music in different styles and tempos for each of the two singers, all coming down to that one glorious tune, “If I loved you,” sung first by her and then by him. It is a scene for two people, but not a duet: they talk together, they even sing the same music at different times, but never together. All the same, despite its entirely hypothetical nature, it absolutely is a love duet. **Steven Sondheim** called it a pivotal moment in the history of the Broadway musical; I’ll post an analysis by Leonard Maslow explaining why he’s right; it is well worth your time. Rather than show the rather dated film or a stage production, I’ll share part of a recording session with these two artists. **Jessie Mueller** and **Joshua Henry**. Despite the lack of action, or even of contact, I find her dialog in particular so wonderfully fresh and true, that it gives me an intimacy I rarely find in the theater. This is the first half of the long scene.

37. Rodgers and Hammerstein: *Carousel*, bench scene (first half)

38. Meanwhile in *La bohème*

My last clip is rather longer, the last 10 minutes of Act III of *La bohème*, in fact. Since we last saw them, **Musetta** and **Marcello** have made up, but their relationship is no more stable than before. He has got a job painting a mural in an inn on the outskirts of Paris; she is paid to take dancing partners—not the best occupation when her partner is so jealous. **Mimi** has moved in with **Rodolfo**, but is unhappy with his jealous moods, so she goes to Marcello for advice. She overhears when Rodolfo finally admits that he is at his wits’ end with his inability to take care of Mimi, who is becoming mortally ill. Revealing herself, she says she is leaving him. This is a very short aria, “Donde lieta uscì,” but an extraordinary one: a break-up song full of the tender memories of their time together, a love song in all but outcome. And even in that: they agree there’s no point parting in the middle of winter, and decide to wait until spring. Their duet, one of the loveliest Puccini ever wrote, is turned into a quartet by a further eruption of the fight between Musetta and Marcello, who call each other every name in the book! The couples are **Sonya Yoncheva** and **Michael Fabiano** as Mimi and Rodolfo, with **Susanna Phillips** and **Lucas Meachem** as Musetta and Marcello.

39. Puccini: *La bohème*, end of Act III

40. Class title 3