

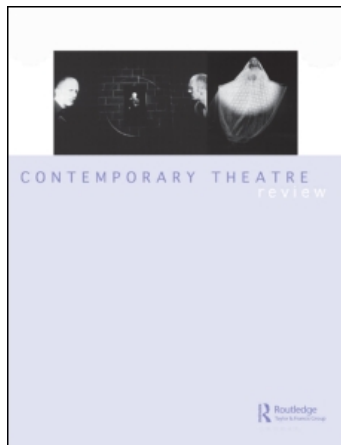
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‘No Theatre Guild Attraction Are We’: *Kiss Me, Kate* and the Politics of the Integrated Musical

Dan Rebellato

The politics of the musical is a subject of much debate. The musical has undoubtedly been a mainstay of the commercial theatre and film industries for a century and deeply implicated in its economic logic. Yet, as Barry Langford has pointed out, in its form it resembles some of the more radical experiments of the modernist avant-garde.¹ Over its history, the musical has been a vehicle for taboo-breaking and political challenge – think *Show Boat* (1927), *Pins and Needles* (1937), *Finian’s Rainbow* (1947), and many others – while all too often also relying on stereotypes and conservative moral codes. It is not wholly satisfactory to see the politics of the musical as a question to be answered with reference to its contents: if I were to mention a piece of theatre that concerned itself with pornography, rape, violence, death, and drug use, you would be forgiven for thinking I was discussing one of the British ‘In Yer Face’ plays of the 1990s, though the show I’m thinking of is *Oklahoma!* Musicals are rarely well described in terms of their contents. The form of the musical, it is widely understood, must be key to any discussion of its politics.

In this article, I shall review and assess one particular political criticism of the musical before going on to consider *Kiss Me, Kate* as a problem case for this position, a case that sheds light on the history, politics and pleasures of the musical. It seems to me that key to understanding the musical and its politics is a consideration of the pleasures it offers.

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1. Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 94. Although he is discussing film musicals, his comments apply equally well to their theatre counterparts.

2. Martin Sutton, 'Patterns of Meaning in the Musical', in *Genre – the Musical*, ed. by Rick Altman, BFI Readers in Film Studies (London: BFI, 1981), pp. 190–96.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

Martin Sutton, in his short essay 'Patterns of Meaning in the Musical',² notes, uncontroversially, that musicals are made up of two components, the narrative and the numbers. His argument begins from his observation that these two components have quite separate functions, and are expressive of firmly opposed values: the numbers – the songs, the dance routines – represent 'energy, freedom and optimism'. Social norms are flouted, the voice and body are freed from utility to be louder and grander, massively expressive. The narrative, on the other hand, stands for 'inhibition and repression'.³ The plots of musicals, he suggests, tend towards the conventional, ending in weddings either literally (*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* [film 1954, stage 1982], *Calamity Jane* [film 1953, stage 1961], *Annie Get Your Gun* [1946]) or metaphorically in the uniting of formerly opposed forces – like the farmers and the cowmen of *Oklahoma!* In Sutton's view, this structural division is thematised: 'the musical is essentially a genre that concerns itself with the romantic/rogue imagination and its daily battle with a restraining "realistic", social order'.⁴

This battle is usually won by the narrative. The plot 'surrounds, regulates and keeps in check the voluptuous, non-realist excesses of the number'.⁵ He gives an excellent example of this mechanism at work in the famous sequence where Gene Kelly performs the title song to *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). The song expresses his freedom from social norms which we can also feel in his physicality, his playfulness, his exuberance. Distinctions between street and road, wet and dry, seriousness and frivolity are abandoned. But at the very end of the sequence, the forces of law appear in the shape of a policeman. Gene Kelly stops, caught. He steps back onto the pavement (where he *should* be), he shakes the water from his shoes (suddenly he feels the wet again), and the song comes to an end. 'The musical,' says Sutton, 'finally turns its wayward dreamers into conformists. The plot overtakes the numbers'.⁶

The theoretical foundation of Sutton's argument, to which I will return, is psychoanalysis. His notion of freedom in battle with restraint is expressed in psychoanalytic terms. 'Plot [...] takes the part of "super-ego" to the unruly "id" of the number'.⁷ Gene Kelly's dancing is, in a certain sense, libidinal, certainly childlike, and when he is 'caught', the camera angle diminishes the (actually rather tall) Kelly, who looks up at the policeman like a naughty boy before the stern disciplinarian father.

The Integrated Musical

The dominance of the narrative over the numbers is not just Sutton's view; it is a motif that dominates most of the standard accounts of musical theatre history. This history pivots around 1943, the date of the opening of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* The significance of *Oklahoma!* lay in its highly sophisticated level of integration; the music, the lyrics, the dances, the costumes, the characters, the

structure are there to serve the narrative. Famously, the musical rejects the standard strong opening of a chorus number; instead we begin with ‘Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’’, a song for a single voice that starts with the main character still offstage, accompanied by orchestrations so undemonstrative they seem to blend into the diegetic sounds of the open prairie before us. The songs in *Oklahoma!* explore character, they move the story on, they express territorial disputes, they are vehicles for debate and dramatic action. The dance interludes of the 1930s were rendered old-fashioned by Agnes De Mille’s Dream Ballet that closes the first half. Laurey is uncertain who she wants to take her to the box social and, inhaling the vapours from an elixir bottle, her unconscious plays out before her desires and fears in a wordless, 10-minute dance sequence.

All standard histories of the musical divide around this date. It was, writes David Ewen breathlessly, ‘in every way a revolutionary event in the musical theatre’.⁸ Ann Sears⁹ notes: *Oklahoma!* was a ‘milestone, so that later historians writing about important moments in twentieth-century musical theatre would begin to identify eras according to their relationship to *Oklahoma!*, for example “Act I: Before Rodgers and Hammerstein” and “Act II: The Broadway Musical after *Oklahoma!*”’.¹⁰

This organises the history into before and after. Musicals before 1943 were either precursors – like the Princess Shows, Viennese Operetta, or *Show Boat* (1927) – fellow-travellers on the long march to *Oklahoma!*, or they are retrospectively dismissed in the harsh light of what was to come. Mark Grant in *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* asserts that, in the pre-integrated age, ‘it was accepted by theatre professionals that the script would be a slapdash, jerry-built mess’.¹¹

Thinking back to Sutton’s psychoanalytic account of the relations between narrative and number, it is unsurprising to see critics playing the role of daddy themselves. Grant also describes those pre-integrated musicals as ‘infantile dadaism’ and ‘arrested in development’, until *Oklahoma!* made possible a ‘mature musical theatre’.¹² Richard Kislán echoes the theme when he states that ‘The Rodgers and Hammerstein collaboration brought about the maturation of the American musical’.¹³ In fact, the history of musical theatre is, like the musical itself according to Sutton, a taming narrative.

After that premiere, musicals are forced into line. ‘It is no exaggeration,’ writes John Bush Jones, ‘to call 1943 to 1959 “The Rodgers and Hammerstein Years”’.¹⁴ Ethan Mordden writes with characteristic irony:

History is written by the victors, and it was the Hammerstein generation who wrote the musical comedy histories. In the wake of *Oklahoma!* [...] the official line held that a great musical was well-made, diversely and impeccably joined, and if possible well-meaning. By hindsight, a hit show that wasn’t integrated or solemn had to be a fluke.¹⁵

8. David Ewen, *The Story of America’s Musical Theater*, rev. edn (Philadelphia and London: Chilton, 1968), p. 183.

9. Ann Sears, ‘The Coming of the Musical Play: Rodgers and Hammerstein’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. by William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 120–36 (p. 124).

10. ‘The musical play is the most significant of all developments in the American musical’ (Ethan Mordden, *Broadway Babies: The People Who Made the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 142); ‘the notion of the book as a well-constructed drama is itself the single greatest innovation in the history of the Broadway musical’ (Mark N. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), p. 56); ‘audiences had to wait until 1943 for *Oklahoma!* to finally establish the integrated

musical as the norm for musical theatre writing and production in America' (John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003), p. 77); 'the show that most notably changed America's thinking about the nature of musical theatre was almost certainly Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Oklahoma!*' (Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Comedy from Adonis to Dreamgirls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 159). These comments are typical.

11. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*, p. 58.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 54–56.
13. Richard Kislán, *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theatre* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 141.
14. Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, p. 140.
15. Mordden, *Broadway Babies*, p. 58.
16. Max Wilk, *OK! The Story of Oklahoma!* (New York: Grove, 1993), pp. 118, 156–57.
17. Carter, Tim. *Oklahoma! The Making of an American Musical* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 79–136.
18. Kislán, *The Musical*, p. 123.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

One result of this consensus has been perhaps to overstate the integratedness of *Oklahoma!* itself, which only quite late in its development was divested of some of its more conventional trappings, including a big Act One finale, and speciality acts like lassoists and performing pigeons.¹⁶ The final show has certainly not eradicated these traces, with its thigh-slapping closing number which does not wholly follow from what else we've seen, and the awkward inclusion of the old Vaudeville stereotype of the Persian peddler, Ali Hakim, whose song 'It's a Scandal, It's an Outrage' is an out-front specialty number from the world of musical comedy. Tim Carter's recent close examination of the archive has shown convincingly that the retrospective impression Rodgers and Hammerstein liked to give of their working method, seamless unity heading single-mindedly towards perfect integration, is a significant misrepresentation.¹⁷

None the less, the significance of *Oklahoma!* was quickly appreciated; it seemed to have raised the bar for musical theatre makers, reshaping the landscape on which musical theatre-makers worked. Cole Porter – one of the key figures in musical theatre in the 20 years before *Oklahoma!* – was once asked what the most significant change in musical theatre had been in his lifetime and is reputed to have answered, 'Rodgers and Hammerstein'.¹⁸

Cole Porter and the Non-integrated Musical

Porter was one of the most successful lyricists and composers of the 1930s. He wrote a string of huge Broadway successes, including *Gay Divorce* (1932), *Nymph Errant* (1933), *Anything Goes* (1934), *Jubilee* (1935), *Leave it to Me* (1938), *DuBarry was a Lady* (1939). However, the idea that 'the song was the servant of the play'¹⁹ was not one of his key principles. Porter's songs were regularly written without any particular show in mind. In 1931, Porter wrote a series of songs for a putative musical called *Star Dust*, when the financing fell through, he recycled the songs in a number of subsequent musicals, retitling 'But He Never Says He Loves Me' (which had been cut out of town from *The New Yorkers* 1930) as 'The Physician' for *Nymph Errant*, 'I Still Love the Red, White and Blue' and two other songs made their way into *Gay Divorce*, and a song called 'I Get a Kick Out of You' was reworked for *Anything Goes*.²⁰

Even when the songs eventually found a home, it did not seem a priority to rework the book. Porter's songs were often topical, throwaway numbers. *Let's Face It* (1941) is a light musical comedy about three married women planning to have a fling with three servicemen on weekend passes. Around the same time, there had been a short-lived fad in celebrity circles of buying a piece of land in the country and extolling the virtue of life close to the soil. Cole Porter, always keen to gently satirise the eccentricities of fashionable society, wrote a song about it, called 'Farming': 'Fannie Hurst is haulin'

20. Robert Kimball, 'Cole Porter', *You're the Top: Cole Porter in the 1930s*, Cole Porter Centennial Collection (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1992), 1–15 (p. 5); see also Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy: The Story of the American Musical Stage as Told through the Careers of Its Foremost Composers and Lyricists*, 3rd edn (London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1974), pp. 187–88, for the stumbling genesis of *Anything Goes*.
21. Cole Porter, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter* (New York: Da Capo, 1983), pp. 301–02.
22. Quoted in Green, *The World of Musical Comedy*, p. 197.
23. Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 180.
24. Ethan Mordden is somewhat more cautious in his estimation: 'he was apparently trying to write his version of a Rodgers and Hammerstein show', he writes, making a number of important qualifications to the claim (Ethan Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin': The Broadway Musical in the 1940s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 252). In an earlier book he argued that at the high point of integration 'old hands despaired of keeping up or labored to outdo themselves, as Cole Porter did on *Kiss Me, Kate*' (Mordden, *Broadway Babies*,

logs, / Fanny Brice is feedin' hogs, / Garbo-Peep has led her sheep all astray' is typical.²¹ It is not particularly in character for these servicemen to have such a detailed knowledge of society life, nor is there any very good reason for them to comment on it, but because the song has been written, the libretto makes an obedient body swerve to get us onto the subject and once the song and its applause (this was Porter's most successful musical so far) are over, the plot continues from where it left off.

Porter recognised the gauntlet thrown down by *Oklahoma!*'s writers: 'The librettos are much better [...] and the scores are much closer to the librettos than they used to be. Those two made it harder for everybody else'.²² As a result, according to the main body of critical opinion, when he came to write *Kiss Me, Kate* 'Porter attempted his first integrated musical'.²³ In fact Block goes further down the disciplinary route, subtitling his chapter on that musical, 'The Taming of Cole Porter'.²⁴

The same critical consensus argues that Porter succeeded in what he had achieved. *Kiss Me, Kate* is both a musical adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* and a musical about the company of actors in Baltimore putting that adaptation on. Fred and Lilli are a divorced husband-and-wife team reuniting reluctantly to play Petruccio and Katharine.²⁵ Briefly it seems that Fred and Lilli will get back together, but when she discovers a note from Fred to another actress, she threatens to leave. At this point gangsters get involved in the plot and finally Lilli is persuaded to stay in the show and it looks like her future is with Fred. The show flits between backstage sequence and onstage portions of *The Shrew* complete, of course, with songs. Gerald Bordman's assessment is typical: 'Porter's music and lyrics moved deftly and gracefully between the show's two worlds, not merely decorating the story, but commenting on it and moving it along'.²⁶ Given Sutton's persuasion that the integrated musical domesticates the wild independence of its heroes and heroines, it is worth looking at how a tamed Porter musicalises perhaps the most famous taming narrative in western literature.

I would like to test the integration of *Kiss Me, Kate*. The adaptation of *The Shrew* is announced by its opening number, titled 'We Open in Venice'. The stage direction tells us:

Before the curtain, a lovely confection of yellow and pink purporting to be a map of Italy with its principal towns.

TWO BOYS carrying *Taming of the Shrew* banner start a parade of DANCERS and SINGERS, followed by KATHARINE, PETRUCHIO, BIANCA, LUCENTIO.²⁷

The song explains that they are a troupe of strolling players travelling around Italy, and that they open in Venice, touring then to Verona, Cremona, Parma and so on. The song cycles around those towns, each time adding more and more unflattering interjections about the conviviality of these tour dates.

p. 145). It is worth noting that none of Porter's public statements about the importance of Rodgers and Hammerstein suggest definitively that he approved of their influence and wanted to ape it. Indeed, his remark that their musicals 'are, let us say, more musicianly' may be a queenly put-down (quoted in Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, p. 373).

25. The idea came from the producer's involvement in the Lunts' 1940 revival tour of their production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. By comparing prompt books with the text, Elizabeth Schafer has demonstrated just how close the onstage business in *Kiss Me, Kate* is to the production decisions in the Lunts' version (Elizabeth Schafer, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare in Production (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 32).
26. Bordman, *American Musical Comedy*, p. 171.
27. Cole Porter, Samuel Spewack, and Bella Spewack. *Kiss Me, Kate. Ten Great Musicals of the American Theatre*, ed. by Stanley Richards (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton, 1973), pp. 213–77 (p. 228).
28. The song does fit comfortably in the experience of *Kiss Me, Kate* because it engages in a kind of dialogue with the more upbeat 'Another Op'nin', Another Show' while sharing its motif of

What *is* this song about? *Who* is opening in Venice? The company of actors are opening their show in Baltimore. The action of the play opens in Padua. Perhaps this is a metatheatrical device in the adapted version of the play, a framing device to replace the Christopher Sly sequence from the original. The notion is that this is a group of renaissance players touring Italy. But if so, why is this device never so much as mentioned again, and why do these Renaissance players mention Louis B. Mayer, head of MGM in the 1930s? 'We Open in Venice' is a delightful and perky number, but it does not integrate well with its narrative. In fact it adds levels of unwanted complication to an already complicated story: we are already having to negotiate three frames to the theatregoing experience; if they wanted to take this song seriously, the original audience for *Kiss Me, Kate* would have had to understand that they were watching Alfred Drake playing Fred Graham playing a strolling player playing Petruchio, which is surely two or three thoughts too many.²⁸

These interlocking frames are not precisely observed. In the song 'I Hate Men', which distinguished US critic Brooks Atkinson bizarrely called 'the perfect musical sublimation of Shakespeare's evil-tempered Kate',²⁹ Katharine is enumerating the various types of men that she hates:

Of all the types I've ever met within our democracy,
I hate the most, the athlete, with his manner bold and brassy,
He may have hair upon his chest but, sister, so does Lassie,
Oh, I hate men!³⁰

What is Katharine from *The Taming of the Shrew* doing singing about Lassie? What is she doing even *knowing* about Lassie? What this moment – and others, *Kiss Me, Kate* scatters anachronistic references like confetti – perhaps suggests is that the company on stage are simply doing a non-musical adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* and all the songs are there because they are in *Kiss Me, Kate*, not *The Taming of the Shrew*. There is very little in the script to decide it for the audience; in fact, one stage direction does state clearly that the first scene takes place backstage after a 'run-through rehearsal of the musical version of *The Taming of the Shrew*'.³¹ But this is not visible to the audience. The opening of the libretto has Fred Graham walk down the centre of the auditorium and approve a cut he has heard in the overture. As Mordden points out,³² straight plays tend not to have overtures, so this is probably a musical. But it does not decide it – this could be some incidental music he is listening to. For the audience then, it is unclear whether we are watching a musical about a musical or a musical about a play. David Ewen and Charles Schwartz appear to think it is the latter,³³ Block the former,³⁴ and Mordden, as we have seen, gives up.

Puzzles abound. When the backstage Bill sings a love song to his girl, why does he address her as 'Bianca', the part she is playing?³⁵ This reaches a fever pitch of unintelligibility when the gangsters, attempting to leave the theatre, blunder accidentally onto the stage. As soon as they

exhaustion. A similar, though more satirical, celebration of theatre comes in 'Wunderbar' (*Kiss Me, Kate*, pp. 223–24), an affectionate pastiche of Viennese Operetta, with deliberately nonsensical Ruritanian lyrics. Other musical theatre references are mentioned elsewhere but we shouldn't forget the lines from 'I Sing of Love', 'I won't waste a note of my patters / On socially significant matters' (p. 247); this refers to the surprise Trade-Union-sponsored Broadway hit *Pins and Needles* (1937) and its opening number, 'Sing Me a Song of Social Significance'. The joys of showbusiness are therefore already thematised by the time Fred tries to woo Lilli by evoking the whirl of applause and first-night parties (*Kiss Me, Kate*, p. 266).

29. Quoted in Richard M. Sudbalter, 'The Songs', *You're Sensational: Cole Porter in the '20s, '40s, & '50s*, Cole Porter Centennial Collection, vol. 2 (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1999), pp. 7–88 (p. 52).
30. Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate*, p. 238.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
32. Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin'*, p. 256.
33. Ewen, *The Story of America's Musical Theater*, p. 205; Charles Schwartz, *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York: Da Capo, 1979), p. 233.
34. Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, p. 184.

realise where they are, they go into 'Brush Up Your Shakespeare'. Ethan Mordden's view of this is worth quoting in full:

Now, wait a minute: are these two buffoons actually *singing a number onstage during a performance* of the *Shrew* musical with *orchestral accompaniment*? Who wrote the song? When did they learn it? When was it orchestrated?³⁶

The fact that they are each conveniently carrying a vaudevillian's straw hat³⁷ certainly suggests mysterious pre-planning.

Indeed much of the musical seems to stress its playfulness with these theatrical frames by placing several songs undecidably or liminally in the spaces between them. The overture is usually a pre-curtain introduction, but this overture is apparently the overture to *The Taming of the Shrew*, so is it part of the show or not?³⁸ The final reprise of 'Brush up Your Shakespeare' takes place in the curtain call.³⁹ 'Too Darn Hot' which opens the second half takes place, apparently, during the interval:

They are all in *Shrew* costumes, but the men have opened up their jackets, and the women have tucked their purple-and-cerise chiffon skirts into their waistbands as high as they'll go. They fan themselves with Woolworths fans and pieces of newspaper.⁴⁰

So they are both in and out of their costumes, betwixt and between the halves of the show, performing and not performing. The show seems to flaunt its undecidability, its resistance to integration between number and narrative. Perhaps this explains one of the many anachronisms, this one in 'We Open In Venice' when the company sing: 'Mere folk who give distraction are we, / No Theatre Guild attraction are we'.⁴¹ The Theatre Guild are the production company that in 1943 premiered *Oklahoma!*

A critical consensus maintains that this is a deeply integrated musical, cast in the mould prepared by Rodgers and Hammerstein. There is little to support this view, however. When Cole Porter's biographer asserts that songs like 'We Open in Venice', 'Tom, Dick or Harry' or 'I Hate Men' 'managed to convey the spirit of *The Taming of the Shrew*',⁴² one is entitled to wonder if he has ever seen *The Taming of the Shrew*. It seems to me much more pertinent to offer this musical as evidence of Cole Porter's theatrical resistance to the repressive integration happening all around him.

What the contemporary references in *Kiss Me, Kate* do, on one level, is draw our attention to Cole Porter. They advertise their author's wit and cleverness. Patricia Morison, *Kiss Me, Kate*'s first Lilli/Katharine, recalls that Porter would attend rehearsals 'with his cane, elegantly dressed, a boutonniere in his lapel, on the arm of a young man. He'd sit down, putting his bad leg up on a chair. He had a little gold whistle around his neck, and if he didn't hear a lyric he'd toot the little whistle'.⁴³

The lyrics were important to Oscar Hammerstein too, but they did not advertise their cleverness in the same way. His songs usually stay in character and, since none of the five big Rodgers and Hammerstein

35. Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate*, pp. 262–70.
36. Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin'*, p. 259.
37. Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate*, p. 271.
38. *Carousel* (1945) does the same thing, so perhaps here Porter is being genuinely Rodgers-and-Hammersteinian.
39. Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate*, p. 277.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
42. Schwartz, *Cole Porter*, p. 232.
43. Quoted in Sudhalter, 'The Songs', p. 52.
44. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Six Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 30.
45. William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. by G. R. Hibbard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 4.1, p. 121.
46. *Ibid.*, 4.1, p. 119.

musicals are set among metropolitan sophisticates, the lyrics follow suit. The rhymes are open and casual, rarely ingenious. On rare occasions the rhyme scheme is witty and self-advertising, as in Laurey's 'Many a New Day', where she protests that she does not need a man:

Many a light lad may kiss and fly,
A kiss gone by is bygone,
Never've I asked an August sky,
'Where has last July gone?'
Never've I wandered through the rye,
Wonderin' where has some guy gone –
Many a new day will dawn before I do!⁴⁴

Here the cleverness of the rhymes are indeed out of character but as such suggest, along with the nervy triplets that introduce every other line, that the lady doth protest too much. Cleverness is incorporated into character as a sign of insincerity.

But Porter's lyrics are not simply self-indulgence; they may have another function as well and they mark a more decisive complication of Martin Sutton's psychoanalytic reading. One of the deepest points of *The Taming of the Shrew's* misogyny comes in 4.1. Petruchio has returned home with Katharine as his wife and proceeds to discipline her by using sleep deprivation and malnourishment. 'Thus have I politicly begun my reign',⁴⁵ begins his lengthy and gloating soliloquy. With a short interpolation from *Shrew's* 4.3 and some general cutting back for clarity and brevity, the librettists Sam and Bella Spewack have kept the bones of this scene and its soliloquy. Cole Porter, for his part, has picked up a line – 'Where is the life that late I led'⁴⁶ – that Petruchio actually sings, presumably to goad Katharine, and expanded it into a full number, now performed in her absence. And it is important to understand that he is prompting his nostalgia with a little black book containing his ex-girlfriends' names.

Since I reached the charming age of puberty
And began to finger feminine curls,
Like a show that's typically Shuberty
I have always had a multitude of girls,
But now that a married man at last, am I,
How aware of my dear departed past am I.
Where is the life that late I led?
Where is it now? Totally dead.
Where is the fun I used to find?
Where has it gone? Gone with the wind.
A married life may all be well,
But raising an heir
Could never compare with raising a bit of hell.
So I repeat what first I said,
Where is the life that late I –
In dear Milano, where are you Momo,
Still selling those pictures of the scriptures in the Duomo?

And Carolina, where are you, Lina?
 Still peddling your pizza in the streets o' Taormina?
 And in Firenze, where are you Alice,
 Still there in your pretty, itty-bitty, Pitti Palace?
 And sweet Lucretia, so young and gay-ee?
 What scandalous doings in the ruins of Pompeii!⁴⁷

47. Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate*, pp. 260–61.

Several things in this song militate against its full integration into character and narrative. Firstly, we have the usual anachronistic references: the Shubert brothers were Broadway impresarios; and of course he is looking through a little black book, which presumably contains phone numbers. Secondly, we have the performance. In the clipped consonants of the first production's Petruccio, Alfred Drake, there is an unmistakable reference to Noël Coward.⁴⁸ The lyrics help that too – in the 1940s, who but Coward would have referred to 'the age of puberty' as 'charming'? Cole Porter had included a Noel Coward figure in a previous musical, *Jubilee*,⁴⁹ and, in any case, it is unlikely such an impersonation would have been lost on the show's director: John C. Wilson was Coward's manager and ex-lover. Thirdly, the song also moves somewhat undecidably between frames. A significant alteration to the book occurs just before the song at the climax of that misogynistic speech; Petruccio tries the door and discovers that it is locked and that Katharine has escaped. Since we know that Lilli is trying to escape the show at this point, the audience (especially if it is familiar with *The Shrew*) might assume that the backstage story has invaded Shakespeare (not for the first time; 1.5 and 1.9 hinge on this) and that it is Lilli who has escaped. In which case it is Fred Graham wondering whether his pursuit of Lilli is worth the candle.

48. There are two original cast recordings, one from 1949, recorded only a fortnight after the Broadway opening, and another in 1959 when, unusually, the cast reunited for a stereo recording of the original. Both recordings are currently available on CD.

49. Mordden, *Broadway Babies*, p. 100.

There is a fourth faultline in this song that I want to consider and to do so I want to return to the psychoanalytic ideas employed by Martin Sutton, but in their French feminist reincarnation.

Psychoanalysis and the Semiotic

Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva took Freud's account of the Oedipal entry into sexual and psychical maturity and, influenced by Jacques Lacan, applied it to language. Their accounts are different but, for the purposes of my argument here, probably not significantly, so I shall run them together.

Freud argues that a conventional navigation of the Oedipal phase involves repressing certain desires and thus pushing the libido into the new mental space of the unconscious. Under the father's imagined threat of castration, this act of repression severs the primal link with the mother, established from birth, and teaches the child that his or her desires must be tempered by respect for social norms. Libidinal energies can only be permitted to surface in sublimated forms to serve some social good.

The French Feminists retell this story as the story of language. The child's initial engagement with language is through what we call babbling, but it is continuous with the child's physical identification

50. Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 90–136.

51. Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1/4 (1976), 875–93.

52. Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate*, p. 261.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Porter, *The Complete Lyrics*, p. 302.

55. Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate*, p. 261.

with the mother's body. Babbling proceeds from actions like the infant's lips sucking at the mother's breast and so on. If this language is expressive, it is expressive purely of undifferentiated (polymorphous) pleasure, and indeed the production of sound becomes a source of pleasure in itself. But this cannot last, and the child is inducted into adulthood under the force of the father's authority. This linguistic pleasure (what Kristeva calls the 'Semiotic') is repressed and the pleasures of language are sublimated through the orderly use of language for social purposes (what Kristeva calls 'the Symbolic');⁵⁰ pleasure is out, grammar is in. According to Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa',⁵¹ one of the ways that this pleasure is released socially is through the literary and the poetic, where language's referential function is matched, even exceeded, by an intensity of experience of language itself.

This would also seem to apply to the narrative and the numbers. The narrative is representational, generally linear, organised; the numbers use non-representational aspects of language like rhyme, euphony, rhythm and so on. In the integrated musical these elements are strictly sublimated to serve character and narrative. In the non-integrated musical, however, these elements can have their day.

As Petruchio goes through his address book, he recalls a number of girls. The suspicion grows throughout the song that these girls' names have simply been chosen for Cole Porter to complete his rhyme scheme. Momo gives us the Duomo and Carolina makes possible Taormina. The very unItalian Alice makes just about acceptable a reference to the Pitti Palace. Later in the song, the rhymes become even more preposterous. Fedora is a wild Virago who inexplicably ushers in anachronistic reference to her 'gangster sister from Chicago'.⁵² And most scandalously, he gives us this couplet:

Where is Rebecca, my Becki-weckio
Could still she be cruising that amusing Ponte Vecchio?⁵³

In such moments the usual relations of language are reversed. The language precedes the referents, the memories are not represented but *created* by language. In place of representation we get sheer (childish) pleasure at the plasticity of language itself, its ability to erupt into nonsense, libidinal, autotelic joy.

What we also spot perhaps in that couplet is the odd word 'cruising'. This was, in 1948, still a gay code word, like indeed the word 'gay' itself – which he uses in its subcultural sense in the song 'Farming' from *Let's Face It*.⁵⁴ There is no reason at all in this ostensibly heterosexual song why this word should take on that meaning, but the song's resistance to integration means that its linguistic pleasures are freed to work independent of the repressive logic of the narrative. It is a freedom that Alfred Drake's Noël Coward vocal styling enhances and suggests a quite a-narrative explanation for why a man might say of marriage that 'during the day / It's easy to play / But oh what a bore at night'.⁵⁵

The lyrics then do two things. First, they resist integration into the narrative by referring us both to the non-diegetic Cole Porter or indeed to the libidinality of language itself, that is itself a certain kind of

freedom. There is a backstage subplot in the on-off relationship between Lois Lane and Bill Calhoun; he is always off gambling, and she is always off with other men. She explains herself in her final number, 'Always True to you (In My Fashion)', where she admits that while she is true, she will always sleep with other men if there is some financial advantage to be had. Her libidinal freedom is tellingly expressed through a display of libidinal linguistic gymnastics.

56. Ibid., p. 265.
- Mister Gable, I mean Clark
Wants me on his boat to park
If the Gable boat
Mean a sable coat
Anchors aweigh!⁵⁶

And the indescribably ingenious:

57. Ibid., p. 264.
- Mr. Harris, plutocrat
Wants to give my cheek a pat
If the Harris pat
Means a Paris hat
Bé-bé
Oo-la-la.⁵⁷

The tumbling non-mimetic energy of the lyrics opens a space for the narratively scandalous sexual freedom she is claiming.

58. Ibid., pp. 254–55.
59. Ibid., p. 256.
60. Green, *The World of Musical Comedy*, p. 199.
61. Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate*, p. 234.
- Second, this structural position allows meaning to operate much more freely, releasing double meanings, non-narrative resonances, speaking the unspoken. That liminal and libidinal number, 'Too Darn Hot', makes a number of rather explicit (but of course also *not* explicit) references to sex. 'I'd be a flop with my baby tonight' suggests erection failure, 'I can't play ball with my baby tonight', 'get off my feet with my baby tonight',⁵⁸ and so on. And in the song's vamp before the climax they list a series of liaisons quashed by the heat that include not just 'a G.I. / For his cutie-pie' but also 'a marine / For his queen'.⁵⁹

In 'Tom, Dick or Harry' – a song straight-facedly described by Stanley Green as 'fit[ting] perfectly into the story and spirit of the ancient tale'⁶⁰ – Bianca duets with her three eponymous suitors. The song ends with a repeated refrain of, 'a dicka-dick'⁶¹ and if anyone is unsure whether we really have just ended that song on a knob gag, the music helpfully lets us know, with an enjoyably vulgar closing sting.

This affirmation of libidinal freedom serves as an effective counter to two taming narratives at work in *Kiss Me, Kate*. The first is the theatre historian's belief that in this music Cole Porter has been tamed by the rise of the musical play. He may have been moved to greater sophistication – or indeed greater outrage and daring – by the challenge of Rodgers and Hammerstein, but his show is more of a manifesto of resistance than a sign of someone placing their talents beneath the master's foot. Second, within the context of the musical itself, it is very hard to take seriously the idea that either Katharine or Lilli has been tamed by the end of the play. The undecidable frames placed in the way of the story, its advertisement

of language's plasticity, the insistence on polymorphous freedom that it releases thereby, all serve to defuse the seriousness of Petruchio's domination. Indeed, in the climactic moment of *The Shrew*, when Katharine sings 'I Am Ashamed That Women Are So Simple', Cole Porter's decision to set – with only one small rewrite – eleven lines of Shakespeare, could be seen as the final outrageous caprice of the show, a new song with what the stage direction (im)modestly describes as 'Shakespeare's lyrics and Porter's music'.⁶²

This is why it is finally irrelevant to worry about the anachronistic references or the problem we might have placing the songs precisely within one or other of the show's theatrical frames. When watching *Kiss Me, Kate*, these are not problems. Like Scott McMillin in his vexed analysis of 'People Will Say We're In Love', I am only pretending to complain.⁶³ They only become problems if one insists that the show is an integrated musical because then it has to obey rules that it blatantly is not obeying.⁶⁴ But if a show can break these rules and work it might give us pause before endorsing the historiographical structure that claims that the example of *Oklahoma!* 'elevated the popular musical stage from entertainment to art'.⁶⁵ There is a familiar condescension at work in these histories. When Mark Grant argues that 'Prior to *Show Boat*, librettos dispensed not only with the classical unities of time, place, and action, but with playwriting itself: logic, coherence, and narrative were optional',⁶⁶ he is simply taking the rules of his own preferred era and applying them retrospectively. In fact, librettos probably dispensed with the classical unities much in the same way that a Frenchman has dispensed with the Welsh language. Art may not be the point, and entertainment, by opening up a space for the vulgar, the double meaning, the libidinal semiotic, may offer more radical pleasures than those presented by its integrated cousin. And if they are not problems perhaps this tells us that the musical offers pleasures that are fundamentally independent of its narrative.

One curiosity of the Sutton article allows us a further turn in the argument. Sutton makes it clear early on in his essay that he is only talking about the integrated musical, and he discounts the other kinds. But his characterisation of the way songs work in the integrated musical does not seem to resemble what is supposed to be going on in Rodgers and Hammerstein: 'the number functions as a narrative interruption, a fantastical tangent that at once surrounds, frustrates and releases the spectator'.⁶⁷ In the musical play, songs are precisely *not* narrative interruptions or fantastical tangents. They are carrying on the narrative but now through song or dance. His characterisation of the integrated musical paradoxically relies on non-integration – which makes it all the more curious that he is convinced that the narrative triumphs. In fact, compared to the standard psychoanalytic model, the musical is psychotic. It has an id and it has a superego, but it has no ego. And, of course, it cannot have one, because there is nothing but the narrative and the numbers; when they ain't talking they're singing and dancing, and when they ain't singing and dancing, they're talking.

There is, in other words, no mechanism in Sutton's scheme to reconcile or negotiate the relations between the two forces. So how does

62. Ibid., p. 275.

63. Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 40.

64. Ethan Mordden, usually one of the most reliable and intuitively accurate commentators on the musical, lists a series of problems with *Kiss Me, Kate's* construction that, for him, take it off the list of truly great musical theatre shows (*Beautiful Mornin'*, pp. 255–56). It may or may not be worthy of that list, but these faults of construction are only faults when seen from the perspective of integration.

65. Kislán, *The Musical*, p. 134.

66. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*, p. 63.

67. Sutton, 'Patterns of Meaning in the Musical', p. 191.

the narrative win out? Perhaps he would say it is through ‘sequence’ – Calamity Jane *begins* by singing on the Deadwood Stage but *ends* married to Wild Bill. Sutton appears to think so, because he gives no explanation why the endings of musical should impose themselves like this, except that they come at the end. The problem is that sequence is only part of the narrative logic; as Freud says, ‘The process of the [unconscious] are timeless, i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all. Reference to time is bound up, once again, with the work of the [conscious]’.⁶⁸ The id is no respecter of temporality, causality, or sequence, so there is no reason to suppose that it would submit to the logic of ‘the end’.

What this finally leaves us with is the thought that *all* musicals, integrated or otherwise, may be involved in a psychical libidinal battle between restraint and order and there can be no prior determination that the libidinal energy of the songs can be integrated neatly into the narrative. In Scott McMillin’s revisionist reading of the pleasures of the musical, he writes persuasively that ‘when a musical is working well, I feel the crackle of difference, not the smoothness of unity, even when the numbers dovetail with the book’.⁶⁹ D. A. Miller’s playful, Barthesian *Place for Us* explains the dissident appeal of the Broadway musical to gay subculture precisely in the libidinal spaces produced by its misfits between conventional book and outrageous number.⁷⁰ And this was indifferent to the official discourses around integration and the musical play.

One of the ironies of *Oklahoma!*’s success is that it gave Rodgers and Hammerstein sufficient clout to demand a full-score original cast album, probably the first in musical history. Richard Rodgers was fond of calling his most hummable numbers ‘take-home songs’.⁷¹ The advent of the Original Cast Album meant that the songs really could be taken home, detached from their context in the musical and enjoyed free of integration. On a personal note, as a boy I listened to the soundtrack recording of *Oklahoma!* some years before I saw the movie, and was surprised to find that my guesses about who was who, the story that might link them, indeed the vocal continuities between the songs, were completely inaccurate. This never troubled me when I watched the film and on some level I was able to hold in my head both versions of the musical, without feeling that one interfered with the other. It is a libidinal dream logic, perhaps, that allows that one thing can be two things simultaneously, and points perhaps to musical’s libidinal pleasures as the site for a revisionist assessment of its politics.⁷²

68. Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis – Beyond the Pleasure Principle, the Ego and the Id and Other Works*, Penguin Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 191.

69. McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, p. 2.

70. D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

71. Otis L. Guernsey Jr, *Broadway Song and Story: Playwrights/Lyricists/Composers Discuss Their Hits* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1985), p. 205.

72. I would like to record my thanks to Dominic Symonds, Maria Delgado and Colette Conroy for their help in developing this article.