

# Form and Character in Duke Ellington's and Billy Strayhorn's *Such Sweet Thunder*

Stephen M. Buhler, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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## Abstract

Form and Character work not separately, but together, in the jazz suite entitled *Such Sweet Thunder*, and their interaction suggests ways in which we who study and teach Shakespeare might be influenced by Ellington's and Strayhorn's compositional practices. The suite consists of twelve instrumentals of various lengths, each linked by its title and by programmatic commentary to various Shakespearean characters and works. When *Such Sweet Thunder* has received critical notice, the focus has been on the success or failure of the individual songs' evocation either of character or of Shakespearean verse itself. Ellington, however, asserts a more complex objective, claiming that he and Strayhorn had endeavored to "parallel the vignettes of some of the Shakespearean characters": that is, they tried to present, in musical terms, the characters in scenes, in dramatic context. They succeed in conveying a sense of selected characters by crafting analogues both to specific elements of Shakespeare's stagecraft and to formal structures in his works.

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I begin by acknowledging what must strike many readers as an aggressively old-fashioned cast to the title of this essay.<sup>1</sup> A somewhat retro approach to these materials might indeed be appropriate, since "Form" and "Character," as separate terms, were as much a part of the New Critical project as "Irony" and "Ambiguity"; it would not be unreasonable, then, to discuss Duke Ellington's and Billy Strayhorn's musical responses to Shakespearean texts in 1956 and 1957 in terms of the newly dominant interpretive mode in literary criticism at that moment. Translations of literary texts into other media often reveal the strong influence of how those texts are studied and taught (Buhler 2002, 247; 2003, 119-20). But here I am less concerned with the impact of, say, critical close-reading on how Shakespeare was read in the 1950s than with the interplay of critical categories such as "Form" and "Character" with one another and across modes of creative expression; examining that interplay more closely can have an impact on critical strategies for understanding texts. "Form and Character" work not separately, but together, in the jazz suite entitled *Such Sweet Thunder*, and

their interaction suggests ways in which we who study and teach Shakespeare might be influenced by Ellington's and Strayhorn's compositional practices.

The suite consists of twelve jazz instrumentals, ranging in length from about one-and-a-half minutes to just over four, each linked by its title and by the programmatic commentary supplied on the album sleeve of its first recording to various Shakespearean characters and works. When *Such Sweet Thunder* has received critical notice, the focus has been on the success or failure of the individual songs' evocation either of character or of Shakespearean verse itself. Ellington, however, asserts a more complex and interesting objective. In the liner notes for the suite's original recording, he asserts that he and Strayhorn, his co-composer and orchestrator, had endeavored to "parallel the vignettes of some of the Shakespearean characters": that is, they tried to present, in musical terms, the characters in scenes, in dramatic context. They succeed in conveying a sense of selected characters not only impressionistically, but also by crafting analogues both to specific elements of Shakespeare's stagecraft and to formal structures in his works.

Before addressing those specifics, an account of the suite's genesis is in order. After two well-received concerts at the Stratford, Ontario Shakespeare Festival in 1956, Ellington elicited a request from Festival organizers to write a Shakespearean work. In an interview with Stanley Dance shortly before his death in 1966, Billy Strayhorn recalled that the entire process, which included reading "all of Shakespeare," took about six months (Dance 1970, 32). Carrying copies of the plays and the sonnets on tour and discussing Shakespeare with people "all over the U.S.," he and Ellington selected titles for which they could assume "the full burden of explaining" specific Shakespearean works "musically" (33). The musical process started earlier than even the composers themselves had realized: the first piece that was recorded, entitled "Half the Fun," had been produced under another title during a session on August 7, 1956, at the Columbia studios in New York City; it was subsequently renamed and added to the Shakespearean project, for which Irving Townsend served as producer. Sessions devoted to the suite first occurred on April 15 and 24, 1957; five more pieces completing the album, all of which will be discussed in this essay, were recorded on May 3. On April 28, shortly before the final session for *Such Sweet Thunder*, Ellington and his orchestra premiered most of the suite at a Music for Moderns concert at New York's Town Hall: they were the second half of an eclectic program that included a performance of Kurt Weill's twelve-tone Concerto for Violin and Wind Orchestra. I say that they premiered most of the suite, because Ellington — always dependent upon and struggling against deadlines — had not yet finished writing "Circle of Fourths," the concluding summary for the work. Somehow, it was completed and scored in time for the last recording session, just five days later. The live performance was a critical and popular success. Ross Parmenter, the reviewer for *The New York Times*, declared each selection

to be "an imaginative portrait in sound suggested by characters or scenes" in Shakespeare. He was impressed, but somewhat surprised by the title song, "Such Sweet Thunder," which he describes as having given the impression of "a powerful locomotive, *though* its program was Othello's speech to Desdemona" (emphasis mine). Parmenter's overall assessment is worth quoting in full: "The pieces were thoroughly winning, for none went on too long, and each sketch had sympathy as well as humor. And though the musical invention might have derived in part from other pieces of the 'Duke' it sounded fresh" (Parmenter 1957).

The critic's views reflect concerns that had been raised for over a decade about Ellington's earlier "serious" works, such as *Black, Tan, and Beige: jazz*, many felt, was simply incompatible with longer compositional forms. The "vignettes" of *Such Sweet Thunder* deftly sidestep that perceived problem. It appears, in addition, that the critic recognized not only the reworking of familiar Ellington themes and textures, but also the incorporation into the suite of recently composed pieces, notably the aforementioned "Half the Fun," which began its existence as a tune called "Lately," and "The Star-Crossed Lovers," which was adapted from Billy Strayhorn's lovely ballad "Pretty Girl."

In subsequent decades, critical opinion toward *Such Sweet Thunder* became polarized. Considering the suite in his 1987 critical biography of Ellington, James Lincoln Collier describes it as "a collection of self-indulgent fragments that are tied to Shakespeare by great leaps of logic and that show very little understanding of what the plays are actually about." Collier summarily dismisses the work: "It does not seem to me that Ellington managed to really capture much of the flavor of Shakespeare's thick-textured verse or the nature of his characters" (Collier 1987, 285). By contrast, A. H. Lawrence, in his 2001 survey of Ellington's career, simply inverts Collier's dismissal, averring that in the suite, "Ellington and Strayhorn manage to capture the essence of Shakespeare's thick-textured verse" (Lawrence 2001, 345). Lawrence also attributes to Ellington himself the opinion of Stanley Dance, expressed in the interview with Strayhorn, that Richard III would have made an ideal subject for a blues piece in the suite (Lawrence 2001, 346; Dance 1970, 32). Artistic response has, in general, been more enlightened and enlightening. Alvin Ailey's *Pas de "Duke,"* a modern dance tribute to Ellington first performed in 1976, employs three selections from the suite. As artistic advisor for the Classical Jazz series at Lincoln Center in New York, Wynton Marsalis revived the work in its entirety in 1988, enlisting the aid of musicologist Bill Dobbins and critic Stanley Crouch (Tucker 1993, 440). Selections from the suite have been part of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra repertoire ever since, especially its showcase for trumpet, "Madness in Great Ones." For their part, the people at the Stratford Festival, to which the suite is dedicated, were sufficiently impressed with *Such Sweet Thunder* to commission from Ellington incidental

music for *Timon of Athens* in 1963. The scores from that production were reconstructed by Stanley Silverman for a revival at the Festival in 1991 and augmented with such familiar Ellington melodies as "The Mooche" and "Creole Love Call." *Timon* and the Duke, it appears, are now strongly linked together: the Royal Shakespeare Company used Ellington's music in Gregory Doran's production of the play in 1999-2000. In his review of the production, Benedict Nightingale found the Duke's "smoky music" fit well with the "posh leather chairs and sherry decanters" of the staging's blend of historical periods (Nightingale 2000); to Robert Smallwood's ears, Ellington's music had a "late-night, slightly sleazy style" that contributed a "satiric mood" suitable for commentary on "the rather decadent, superficial world presented in the first half of the play" (Smallwood 2000, 249-50).

Ellington, Strayhorn, and Shakespeare come together in *Such Sweet Thunder* and its negotiations of literary and dramatic form and character. One form that Ellington and Strayhorn clearly embrace in their evocations of character is the sonnet. Four selections are called sonnets: "Sonnet for Caesar," "Sonnet to Hank Cinq," and "Sonnet in Search of a Moor" (the latter two among Ellington's and Strayhorn's wittiest titles), along with "Sonnet for Sister Kate," from *The Taming of the Shrew*. All four compositions carefully replicate aspects of sonnet structure, centering on fourteen melodic phrases, each consisting of ten notes, often conforming to iambic rhythms. Partly in concession to a standard "ABA, Coda" song form, the sonnets of *Such Sweet Thunder* parallel the three quatrains and couplet of an English sonnet. Crouch asserts that Bill Dobbins discovered this fact while transcribing the pieces for the Lincoln Center revival (Tucker 1993, 441), but, as early as 1964, John Dankworth and Cleo Laine had recognized the formal possibilities in "Sonnet to Hank Cinq." On Laine's *Shakespeare — And All That Jazz* release (and reprised for *Wordsongs* 1978), arranger Dankworth and vocalist Laine apply the words of Sonnet 40, "Take all my loves," to Ellington's and Strayhorn's "Hank Cinq." Laine, of course, had and still possesses the vocal range to follow the fourteen phrases, compellingly played on the original track by Britt Woodman. Even those of us who do not have such range can still follow the form in "Hank Cinq" by intoning the words of a familiar sonnet — such as number 18 — along with Woodman's expressive trombone (track 1). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

In the liner notes for the album, Ellington is quoted as saying that the piece's "changes of tempo have to do with the changes of pace and the map as a result of wars." We can also hear aural reflections of the king of "English Mercuries" (*Henry V*, 2. Prol. 7) in all his capacity for chameleon-like change, constantly responding and adapting to contexts and audiences. His geniality, his rhetorical and anti-rhetorical skills, and his flair for the grand gesture are captured expertly in this portrait. This, we recall, is a sonnet to Henry, both gleefully irreverent and painstakingly accurate.

Connecting with the *Sonnets* as a whole, "Hank Cinq" casts Henry V as the political equivalent of the physically and socially enchanting Fair Young Man.

Elsewhere in the suite, Ellington and Strayhorn take pains to present characters in some aspect of their dramatic contexts and origins. In his interview with Dance, Strayhorn contrasts the task involved in composing the suite with the later job of providing incidental music for *Timon of Athens*: "In *Such Sweet Thunder* we were doing the whole job, but in *Timon* you heard the actors and saw the action" (Dance 1970, 33). He and Ellington also recognize that we come to know Shakespearean characters not only in themselves, but also in how they are seen, heard, and described by other characters in the plays. The title track may draw its name from Hippolyta's description, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, of the howls of Spartan hunting dogs (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.1.112-18), but its music is applied to Othello's accounts of his own experiences (see *Othello* 1.3.128-45). Ellington and Strayhorn factor in how these adventures and the man who endured them might have sounded to Desdemona (track 2). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Their sense of Othello's self-assurance, tinged with melancholy, is unmistakable in the music; the *Times* critic might have not been expecting such power, but it registered with him nevertheless. Such a reading of *Othello* clearly connects with the character's serving increasingly at the time as figuring African and African American pride. This shift in symbolic resonance was both marked and precipitated by stage performances in the United States by black actors, including Paul Robeson in 1942 and 1943, Earle Hyman beginning in 1952 (Hill 1984, 135-40), William Marshall as early as 1953, and James Earl Jones in 1956 (Potter 2002, 157-61), the year in which Ellington and Strayhorn began work on the suite. The note of confidence also derives from the character with which the piece was first connected. The tune was originally entitled "Cleo" ; if its swagger had remained associated with Cleopatra, the piece would certainly register differently with most listeners. But Ellington realized that another piece, the recently recorded "Lately," could serve to evoke the allure of Cleopatra for her Antony. Renamed "Half the Fun" (as in "getting there is . . ."), this composition by Ellington alone provides a tonal equivalent to the famous description by Enobarbus of Antony's first encounter with Cleopatra on her barge (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2.190-226). Johnny Hodges, on alto sax, conveys the deliciously sensual details (track 3). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Summing up the piece and the meeting that Enobarbus describes, Ellington is quoted in the LP's liner notes as observing: "The generally accepted theory is that the mood was specific."

In other pieces of the suite, Ellington and Strayhorn more overtly use specific instruments to represent characters, although still firmly within dramatic contexts. "Madness in Great Ones" may

have initially been titled "Hamlet," but his name in isolation doesn't match the musical evocation of the character's "antic disposition" (*Hamlet* 1.5.172) and its intended audience. The next excerpt is that song's conclusion, vividly conveying an impression of Hamlet, represented by the trumpet of "Cat" Anderson, first running circles around his would-be handlers and then taking flight (track 4). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Similarly, "Up and Down, Up and Down (I Will Lead Them Up and Down)" came into being simply as "Puck." Here, too, the composition provides far more than a character sketch. Instead, we have the two unharmonious pairs of lovers from act 4, scene 1 — Helena suspicious of the newly ardent Demetrius, Hermia outraged by Lysander's alienation of affection — given expression by Jimmy Hamilton and Ray Nance, on clarinet and violin, and by Johnny Hodges and John Sanders, on alto saxophone and valve trombone. Clark Terry on trumpet is Puck, who misleads, guides, and comments on the lovers, concluding with his judgment on human folly (track 5). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

"Lord, what fools these mortals be," waggishly announces Terry, at least on this take, which was featured on the 1957 LP and on the Sony/Columbia Special Products CD version, produced in France by Henri Renaud and issued in the 1990s. On the beautifully remastered 1999 re-release, produced by Phil Schaap, an alternate take was unwittingly used — even though the original liner notes and new commentary by longtime Ellington sideman Bill Berry both call attention to Terry's musical quotation of Puck's line. The alternate version has no direct textual referent (track 6). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Although the loss of the quotation mars the newer reissue, the different take reveals the flexibility with which Ellington and Strayhorn handled the orchestra's soloists: sometimes their parts, along with everyone else's, were carefully scored all the way through; at other times, however, the artists were given freer improvisational rein.

In "Up and Down," Ellington and Strayhorn place characters from the same play in relationship to one another; the same dynamic is present in "The Star-Crossed Lovers," in which Juliet (voiced by Johnny Hodges's alto sax) rightly dominates — as in Shakespeare's playtext — every scene she shares with Romeo (portrayed by Paul Gonsalves's tenor). In contrast, "The Telecasters" brings together characters from the very different plays, *Macbeth* and *Othello*, the better to underscore the similarly seductive, destructive messages conveyed by the Witches and by Iago. *Such Sweet Thunder* concludes with "Circle of Fourths," the hastily completed piece missing from the debut concert. "Circle" progresses through all twelve major keys in fourths (the key of C major gives way to F major, and then to B-flat major, and so on), adding a flat to the scale, or subtracting a sharp, at each step. The piece's canny exploration of the harmonic relationship of musical keys via fourths

serves to dramatize the interconnections among the four genres in which Shakespeare composed — comedy, history, tragedy, and the poems — and among the works that participate in each genre. Tying all this together is the fluid phrasing of Paul Gonsalves's tenor sax (track 7). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

These selections indicate Duke Ellington's and Billy Strayhorn's understanding of a range of literary and dramatic forms, as well as their empathetic grasp of character. Some of this understanding grew out of theatrical as well as musical experience: Ellington, alone or with collaborators, produced a remarkable amount of music for the stage, contributing original material to over fifty reviews, plays, and musicals (Franceschina 2001, 191-201). Ellington and Strayhorn, though, valued textuality, as well as performativity. In his appreciation of "Hank Cinq," Terence Hawkes reminds us that

It's been suggested many times that black music, such as jazz, with its commitment to the improvised reworking of the chord structure of original melodies, has always represented a major American challenge to the European idea of an author's or composer's (or, *mutatis mutandis*, a king's) authority, unity and coherence . . . music's quintessential, non-discursive nature immediately project[s] "Hank Cinq" beyond the reach of one kind of textuality, just as jazz music's ultimate independence of any "written" requirement makes performativity so fundamental a factor. (Hawkes 2002, 124-25)

That challenge to an idea of authority is complicated, however, by Ellington's insistence on carefully orchestrated parts for the majority of his players in any one composition, and in some, even for his soloists. "Hank Cinq," along with the rest of *Such Sweet Thunder*, aims at its own kind of textuality, as Ellington's and Strayhorn's approach to jazz incorporates one "written" requirement after another. Perhaps it is no accident that Ellington embraced the aristocratic sobriquet "Duke." The challenge to authority is confirmed, however, by the intensely collaborative nature of Ellington's work with Strayhorn: as Bill Berry observes in his comments for the liner notes supplied with the 1999 re-release, "It is as hard to pin down which of these two individuals created specific words or phrases as it is to figure out which one wrote which musical notes."

In addition, the composers occasionally allowed their instrumentalists improvisational independence and always tailored their orchestrations to the distinctive talents of the ensemble's members. John Edward Hasse has drawn a persuasive analogy between Shakespeare's theatrical troupe and Ellington's "own repertory company": Ellington "wrote exclusively for its players — Hodges, Nanton, and Bigard, and the others" (Hasse 1993, 332). Ellington's and Strayhorn's compositional practices, then, can help to shed light on the dynamics at work in the Shakespearean

playtext itself and in its realization in performance. The plays posit a productive tension between collaboration and control. In the interplay between Shakespeare's words and the actors for whom he wrote them, between his works and their not-so-purely musical translations, and between jazz orchestrations and improvisations, we may perceive a kind of balance through an oscillation, otherwise known as swing, that negotiates between the different, but overlapping demands, insights, and liberations of both text and performance. As Bubber Miley, the magnificent trumpeter in Ellington's early bands, is credited with saying first: "It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing" (Lambert 1999, 52).

### Notes

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