

# Country Matters: Shakespeare and Music in the American South

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## Abstract

While paradoxical, the connection between country music and Shakespeare can help us to understand the role of a "highbrow" signifier in an allegedly "lowbrow" genre of art. This essay examines cultural citations, biographical mythmaking, and parodic performances and concludes that although Shakespeare is used to validate country music as an art form, Shakespearean references are also used ironically to claim a separate ethos for country and its performers and perhaps to encourage a more democratic participation in artistic culture.

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Let's begin with a quick quiz. Which of the word groups does not fit in the following list: battered pick-up trucks, blue-tick hounds, Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, and the Bard of Avon. Most folks would pick the playwright, of course. Yet what appears to be the anomaly in this list may not prove to be so. Drawing on Lawrence Levine's work in *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988) and Michael Bristol's *Big-Time Shakespeare* (1996), I will extend and expand their work by examining the numerous references, allusions, and uses of "Shakespeare" in music of the American South. Both Levine and Bristol generally ignore the South. While Levine devotes extensive research to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, he only mentions one southern city, New Orleans, and only in relation to opera; Bristol's book also concentrates on the northeast.<sup>1</sup> By failing to consider the southern region of the United States, both critics fall into the cultural trap against which their books warn, that is, the viewing of "culture" in a stereotypical manner by making assumptions about regional sources of entertainment, both elite and popular. Although perhaps paradoxical, the connection between Shakespeare and country music seen in songs from this region may help us to understand the role of "Shakespeare" as a signifier even in an allegedly "lowbrow" genre of music.<sup>2</sup>

While difficult to define, country music encompasses everything from Appalachian folk ballads to cowboy tunes, from traditional southern gospel to Ozark hillbilly songs, from honky-tonk

specials to black spirituals. Above all, the music is distinctly American and "rural-oriented," calling to mind the red clay roads and plentiful pine fields of the southern landscape (Price 1974, 16). The origins of country music are debated, but most scholars agree that the first recordings occurred in the 1920s. In 1922, two fiddlers fresh from a Confederate reunion in Richmond, Virginia headed for New York and camped on the doorstep of RCA Victor's studio door until they were admitted for a formal recording. Five years later, the famous Bristol Sessions took place in a remodeled hat factory in Bristol, Virginia (about twenty miles from my current university). Often referred to as the Big Bang of country music, these sessions first captured on tape country greats such as Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter family.

By putting Shakespeare side-by-side with country music and by not privileging one over the other, perhaps we may come to a better understanding of both. As Levine reminds us, it is often arbitrary to draw lines between popular culture and more elite entertainment. By removing the binaries that make us "see culture on a vertical plane" (Levine 1988, 30) and therefore separate country music from Shakespearean poetry and drama, I will look instead at their potential for dynamic interchange, dividing my investigation into three parts. The first section will consider allusions to Shakespeare's plays in country songs. These cultural citations, particularly to *Romeo and Juliet*, function as a type of cultural capital. As Bristol argues, "Shakespeare is fully negotiable in all financial markets," including the mammoth music industry; but to "convert a limited stock of cultural capital into a generous cash flow," as these songs do, "requires complicated forms of leverage" (Bristol 1996, 91). The second section moves beyond the plays to show how Shakespeare's name has also become a commodity, serving as an extra-textual signifier that may confer prestige and authority on the recipient. Again, Bristol helps our understanding of this concept when he claims that "Shakespeare" is a term that now refers to a large output of "cultural products and services, almost like a trademark or corporate brand name" (x). In this section, I will show how the media have used this "brand name" in descriptions of Hank Williams's music and explanations of his appeal, even though Williams himself resisted such a categorization. The final section moves beyond the binaries of high and low by examining country artists who perform Shakespeare or Shakespearean parodies, complicating the use of "Shakespeare" as a trademark. These performances show potential for disruption, and I will argue that instead of reinforcing sedimented social divisions, these parodic instances may instead "widen and enhance democratic participation in our public culture" (xii).

## Romeo and Juliet

The Shakespearean connection found most often in country songs should come as no surprise, as allusions to the love affair between Romeo and Juliet have been a staple of pop and rock music lyrics for years. Cynthia Marshall, for example, discusses the ways in which song versions of the star-crossed lovers can be used in the classroom. According to Marshall, this is "the one play by Shakespeare that virtually every student has read before college," so that the "characters and plot are already familiar" (Marshall 2000, 98). It makes sense that one of the best known Shakespeare plays would also be referred to often in country music. This type of appropriation, one that I have characterized as a "seizure often without permission" (Sawyer 2003, 16), may bother more traditional critics of the Bard; I would agree with Hans Robert Jauss, however, who argues that texts can only "continue to have an effect" if there are other artists who want "to imitate, outdo, or refute" the original work (Jauss 1989, 1201). In these cultural citations to *Romeo and Juliet*, we see just such instances of appropriation.

John Michael Montgomery, a native of Danville, Kentucky, has written two songs with allusions to Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers: "Ain't Got Nothin' on Us" (1996) and "I Can Love You Like That" (1995). In the first of these two songs, the speaker compares his love to other wonders of the world, both natural and literary. The song begins with Montgomery's admission that "the Grand Canyon is a sight to see" but, he continues, "it's just a big ditch next to you and me," followed by the refrain: "Ooo baby ain't got nothin' on us." In the third verse, Montgomery turns his attention to the lovers of Shakespeare:

Well I've read about Romeo and Juliet  
 Wish I could tell Shakespeare I ain't impressed  
 Ooo baby ain't got nothin' on us  
 I'm telling you baby  
 Ain't got nothing on us.

Interestingly, Montgomery does not claim that he actually has read Shakespeare, but perhaps, like many in his audience, merely "read about" the lovers. Yet, even this second-hand knowledge is enough for the speaker to feel that his love is superior to that of Shakespeare's pair, so much so that he wants to tell the Bard to his face.

Another Montgomery song, "I Can Love You Like That," details the hopes and dreams of the singer's female beloved, who has romantic notions based on the great lovers of literature and fairy tales. In the opening stanza, Montgomery sings,

They read you Cinderella  
 You hoped it would come true

That one day your Prince Charming  
 Would come rescue you.

The song goes on to catalogue the woman's fantasies about other great lovers until the list reaches Shakespeare's pair, with an allusion to a cinematic *Romeo and Juliet* (track 1):

You like romantic movies  
 You never will forget  
 The way you felt when Romeo kissed Juliet  
 All this time that you've been waiting  
 You don't have to wait no more  
 I can love you like that.

*(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

Both of Montgomery's songs consider "Romeo and Juliet" as a barometer of superior love, but also as a benchmark that the songwriter's lovers can surpass. But is this the only comparison being made? Montgomery the songwriter may also be playing one-upmanship with Shakespeare the poet, another writer who gave voice to the hopes and dreams of young lovers.

Dolly Parton, who has been "dubbed the Mae West of Country and the Marilyn Monroe of the mountains" (Tichi 1994, 17), began her career in East Tennessee, in the shadow of the Smoky Mountains; now she is an international star of music, movies, and media. Although Parton's early, semi-autobiographical songs, such as "My Tennessee Mountain Home" and "Appalachian Memories," appealed to a regional audience, her fame and presence now have spread so much that in 1993 she sold out Carnegie Hall for a concert entitled "Country Takes Manhattan."

The same year as the Carnegie Hall concert, Parton released the song "Romeo" (1993), co-written with a number of other artists, including Mary Chapin Carpenter, and performed with Billy Ray Cyrus. Not only did the song reach the Top Ten on the Country charts, but it also (perhaps regrettably) inspired a line dance bearing the same name. Detailing Romeo's good looks and sexual swagger, the first verse focuses on his entrance into a local juke joint:

A cross between a movie star  
 And a hero in a book  
 Romeo comes struttin' in  
 And everybody looks  
 'Cause he's just got that special thang  
 That everybody needs

And everybody wants him  
But not as bad as me.

Conflating celluloid stars and literary heroes, the song goes on to depict a slightly deep-fried Romeo. In the second verse, the singer alludes to the lover of Shakespeare's drama and also incorporates fragments of the play's language (track 2):

Hey, Romeo, *where art thou*  
Get out here on the floor  
I want to dance [with] you darlin'  
'Till you forget *wherefore*  
Let's two step to a new step  
We'll keep it all in line  
And we'll call this the Romeo  
'Cause you so mighty fine. (*italics mine*)

*(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

Bits of archaic language — the "thou" and "wherefore" — provide the listener with just enough dissonance to suggest Elizabethan language, and, therefore, vaguely to echo the Shakespeare learned in school. Parton concludes the song with her hopes for getting the boy: "Romeo, Romeo, / I just know I'll get you yet / Romeo, Romeo," and Billy Ray replies, "Won't you be my Juliet." As the song fades out, we hear female voices commenting on Romeo's physical features: he is called a "sexy little thing" with a "magic wand," and one voice claims that "Shakespeare would roll over in his grave" if he saw such sexuality. I would suggest that these comments not only purposely reverse the standard objectification of women by men, but may also call to mind Parton's own proto-feminist endeavors, which include managing her own business affairs and selecting her own songs.

Patty Loveless, another queen of country, has also invoked the Romeo and Juliet story in her music. Born in Kentucky and now residing in Nashville, Loveless is an actual coal miner's daughter; she was even called on to replace Loretta Lynn when, in 1973, Lynn had stepped down as the lead vocalist for the Wilburn Brothers. Loveless's solo career bloomed in the mid-eighties: she has had seven number-one hits, and in 1996 was named "Female Vocalist of the Year" by the Academy of Country Music.

Loveless's song "I'm That Kind of Girl" (2001) has a speaker who talks about a lover outside "in a Stetson hat, howlin' like an alley cat / Sayin', 'Baby, put on something hot, meet me in the parking lot.'" His lack of romance, however, disturbs the singer, and she's "feelin' that he's never

read *Romeo and Juliet*." Tired of such lovers and "one night stands," the singer declares to the man, "if you wanna make a real romance / I'm that kind of girl," a cross between the "women in red" and the "girl next door." The last verse focuses on her longing for "sensitivity" and a "love-sick fool / The kind that carries all your books in school." The speaker's desired Romeo is, in many ways, the opposite of Parton's — all Keats and no Byron.

One of the cleverest allusions, however, is found in Diamond Rio's song, "This Romeo Ain't Got Julie Yet" (1992). After declaring his problems with his lover's parents — her "mamma," who thinks he's "lazy," and a "daddy" who "runs down" his name — the singer reminds his lover of her promise: "But you said you'd love me, / Come sunshine or come rain." He predicts better things ahead, and perhaps forgetting the conclusion to Shakespeare's play, he declares, "This story has a happy ending." He then leads into the chorus, which alludes to Shakespeare's tragic lovers, but also to Margaret Mitchell's famous pair (track 3):

This Romeo ain't got Julie yet  
I love you so and you can bet  
I'd follow you to Timbuktu  
Like Scarlett followed Rhett  
But this Romeo ain't got Julie yet.

*(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

Interestingly, the male speaker puts himself in the female position of Scarlett, reversing the stereotype in which the man is followed by a lovelorn female.<sup>3</sup> It seems that the speaker is also ignorant of the tragic consequences suffered by Mitchell's and Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers. Not unlike Bart Simpson's pal Milhouse, who described his brief fling with a girlfriend as a story that began like "Romeo and Juliet," but ended as a tragedy, this country pair ignores the last act of Shakespeare's play.

Less love-oriented and somewhat more literary references to Shakespeare can be found in alternative country music. In "Little Angel, Little Brother" (1992), for example, Lucinda Williams describes the love that she feels for her younger sibling. She chronicles the brother's affection for "R&B records" and "music books," but she also notes his "passion for Shakespeare and your paperbacks / Your chess pieces and your wisecracks." Although Williams's use of Shakespeare is less stereotyped than that of the writers mentioned previously, her juxtaposition of "Shakespeare" with "chess pieces" functions as a quick signifier of intelligence, cultural awareness, and literacy. Other alternative country performers include Steve Earle, who is working on producing a theater company in Nashville, tentatively entitled "Shakespeare for White Trash." In an interview, Earle

said, "the idea is you take all the seats out, sell hot dogs and beer. If you can't make the average person understand Shakespeare," according to Earle, "you're not staging it right" (Earle, 2000). Although purists might cringe at Earle's description, he is merely repeating a traditionalist claim that Shakespeare is a common possession of Western culture.

### Use of Shakespeare's Name: Hank and Willie

Shakespeare's name also serves as a cultural signifier in country music, just as it often does in more elite works. Hank Williams, Sr. was known as both the "Hillbilly Shakespeare" and "The Shakespeare of the Common Man." The comparison fuels the myth of Hank Williams by drawing on Shakespeare's well-established reputation. As Bristol reminds us, "Shakespeare is a term with extraordinary currency in a wide range of discursive practices as a complex symbol of cultural value," a value that often may "signify privilege, exclusion, and cultural pretension" (Bristol 1996, ix). Comparisons between Hank Williams and Shakespeare not only deconstruct the difference between high and low — hillbilly on the one hand, and Shakespeare on the other — but also serve as oxymoronic public relations tags. At the same time, the comparison between these two artists may actually have historical validity.

Although a number of regional radio stations broadcast the country sound in the 1930s and 1940s — specifically WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia — it was not until the aftermath of World War II that the music, epitomized by the lonesome wail of Hank Williams, swept across the country. Williams's plaintive songs echoed the zeitgeist of the disenfranchised, many of whom were not privy to the material rewards of the new and upwardly-mobile middle class. While the standard view depicts America in the 1950s as a place of buoyant optimism and halcyon happy days, his dark lyrics contradict such a rosy view. Of the fifty songs written by Williams, explains Kent Blaser, almost one-third involve desertion by a loved one, while others recount dissipated desire by both parties (11%) or "a failure to find love or unrequited love" (14%). There are also "evil woman" songs that "describe a love-hate relationship with a woman who treats the singer badly" (16%) (Blaser 1985, 23). While there are a few novelty songs and drinking songs, in sum, there are only three songs in the entire Williams oeuvre that "deal in a reasonably positive way with love and the prospects for future happiness" (23). One of Hank Williams's favorite sayings, which he used as a farewell phrase at many of his concert appearances as well as a line in one of his songs, was "don't worry about nothin', cause it ain't gonna be all right no how."

Part of this pessimism sprung from the historical milieu in which Williams wrote. According to Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, Williams's music "expressed the contradictions of his historical moment — post Second World War America — a time when diverse currents

of resistance to class, race and gender oppressions flowed together to form a contradictory, but nonetheless real, unity of opposites" (Leppert and Lipsitz 1993, 22). While his recording career only spanned about seven years (1946-1953), during this time Williams came to represent the tragic fatalism that would become a trademark of traditional country music. Williams wrote at a moment when older conceptions of the family, gender, and parental roles were being contested, just as they were in Shakespeare's time. These changes included many aftershocks from the Great Depression fifteen years earlier, particularly in rural areas of the South: debilitating poverty, scarcity of housing, lack of food, and unemployed fathers who deserted their children in search of a better life in a distant location were commonplace.

Biographies of Williams and a group of recent biographies on Shakespeare tell a surprisingly similar story about their social origins and emerging personalities. Both Hank and Shakespeare had problematic relationships with their fathers, who struggled painfully to make something of themselves in these emerging market economies. Although Hank's great-grandfather was a farmer, his daddy sought a different path. Poor and uneducated, Hank's father Lon was, in Chet Flippo's description, "tough Southern white trash, absolute bottom rung of the ladder" (Flippo 1985, 15). Dropping out of school after the sixth grade to become a water boy in the local lumber camps, Lon eventually "worked his way up to sawing logs and driving oxen, then to running the locomotives that haul the logs to the sawmills" (Williams 1981, 5). During this time he met Lillian Skipper, and in 1918, they were married. Although he was soon shipped off to World War I, when he returned to Alabama, Lon attempted to support the family by beginning a number of businesses, working intermittently in the local lumber yards, opening a store with Lillie, and even trying "the strawberry business on land burned out with cotton" (Koon 1983, 7).

Shakespeare's grandfather also worked the land — in his case it was in Snitterfield, just outside Stratford — and Will's father also turned from land to trade. Perhaps equally as uneducated as Lon Williams, John Shakespeare worked to establish himself in the local economy, first as a glover, then as a wool-dealer and money-lender. Unlike Lon, however, John was "ambitious in worldly ways" and "angled for office in the village corporation," rising from ale-taster to alderman, and finally, in 1568, to bailiff, the highest civic position in town (Fraser 1988, 19).

The most significant similarity between Hank and Willie, however, is that both their fathers experienced financial and emotional setbacks while their sons were still in their formative years. Lonnie had a nervous breakdown from "shell-shock" and in late 1929, when Hank was only seven years old, Lon was admitted to the first of many VA (Veterans Administration) Hospitals. It would be ten years before father and son saw each other, and one biographer argues that from the moment of his father's institutionalization, Hank became "virtually fatherless for the rest of his life" (Caress



1979, 10). Lon's "nervous" problem was exacerbated by his fondness for drinking; a jug of whisky, according to most biographers, was never far from his side. This disruption in the family would have an enormous impact on Hank's own life, as well as his art. Similarly, Shakespeare's father had a fall from economic grace that would have repercussions for his son. Around 1576, when Will was twelve, John Shakespeare began to miss council meetings, and in 1586 he was replaced on the council because "he doth not come to the halls when [he] be warned nor hath not done of a long time," according to local records; most critics attribute this behavior to the "crippling debt" he had accumulated (Duncan-Jones 2001, 14). He was also charged with being a Warwickshire recusant and was written up for failing to attend local church services, probably "for fear of process of debt" (Dobson and Wells 2001, 418). As the bills accumulated, John Shakespeare would have been forced to mortgage a number of family properties, "losing some of it for good" (Fraser 1988, 47). Drinking may have been a contributing factor in John's case, as well. By the late 1570s, Will was almost certainly removed from the local grammar school; Hank dropped out of Sidney Lanier High School in his sophomore year.

Hank Williams's work includes at least three songs with troubling references to father figures; we will consider two. In "My Son Calls Another Man Daddy" (1950), the speaker laments how much he is hurting, as his wife "shares a new love" because "she couldn't stand" her husband's "disgrace"; the boy, meanwhile, "longs for the love" that the stand-in father "can't replace" (track 4): *(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

In an earlier song, "I'm a Long Gone Daddy" (1947), the speaker uses the image of a father deserting his child as a metaphor for a man leaving his quarrelsome lover: "I'm leaving you now / I'm a long gone daddy, I don't need you anyhow." While this song does not directly address parental desertion, the metaphor succinctly and perhaps unconsciously captures Williams's sentiment toward father figures in general. It is a commonplace that Shakespeare was also haunted by the specter of a failed father. As many writers have noted, the only fathers in Shakespeare, at least until *The Tempest*, are wrongheaded, weak, wicked, or dead.<sup>4</sup> We only need to think of the rashness of Titus Andronicus, the platitudinousness of Polonius, the overbearingness of Egeus, or the haunting ghost of King Hamlet to remind us of this point. Yet Shakespeare did not shy away from these parental portraits, for, as Lynda Boose notes, father-son relationships appear in twenty-three of the dramas (Boose 1982, 325).

Both Hank Williams and William Shakespeare also challenged standard definitions of masculinity in their art. Perhaps as a result of his relationship with his own mother, the overbearing but always available Lilly, Williams "remain[ed] in dialogue with all the significant women in his

life, and [this] led him away from the dominant 'heroic' image of masculinity" (Leppert and Lipsitz 1993, 30). In a psychoanalytical reading of Williams's life, Jay Caress argues that the singer never made the normal childhood transference from "*dependent* mother-love to assertive, *independent* (father-emulating) mother love" (Caress 1979, 12). While this Freudian reading is dated, it may help to explain Hank's love-hate relationship with both his mother and his first wife. In spite of the pain, both writers seem to have been drawn to women. Leppert and Lipsitz make this clear in a point that could also apply to Shakespeare: "In an age of resurgent patriarchy," Williams "lamented the schisms between men and women, resisted the dominant oedipal narrative and sought closer connections to women" (Leppert and Lipsitz 1993, 34). The interesting point here is that like Shakespeare's mother's family — the Ardens — the Skipper family held a higher social position in the community than did the Williams family, and biographers who have spent time in the area still encounter the same distinction: "A visitor asking about Hank Williams is invariably told, 'His mother was a Skipper,'" and they remain a fairly prominent family in the Georgiana, Alabama, area even today (Caress 1979, 6). Similarly, the Ardens were landed gentry, and while not as well off as some, certainly "better [off] than the Shakespeares" (Fraser 1988, 19). This awareness of matriarchal power could not have failed to have an impact on both boys and their future artistic endeavors.<sup>5</sup>

Hank Williams's songs tend to cross "gender lines into emotional ground more commonly occupied by women" (Leppert and Lipsitz 30; 32); when we think of the most popular songs by Williams, we think of ones about adultery and unrequited love. What we may forget is that at the time of their composition this topic was female territory, most often described in the plaintive voices of singers such as Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Bessie Smith. In "Your Cheatin' Heart" (1952), the best-known example, Williams's speaker not only admits that his wife has been deceitful, but also confesses that he shares her intense insomnia and debilitating pain: "You'll walk the floor, / The way I do / Your cheatin' heart will tell on you." The speaker's tears flow "like falling rain" in a display of sensitivity usually associated with women (track 5): (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

In "Cold, Cold Heart" (1950), Williams laments the agony of a love that is painfully one-sided. In this song, the singer describes a woman who is "shackled to a memory" of her former lover, one who made her "heart sad and blue." As a result, the speaker is "paying" for things he "didn't do." Ironically, the more his love grows for the woman, the more they "drift apart"; his desire to melt her "cold, cold heart" will never be realized (track 6): (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Titles of Hank Williams songs that echo similar concerns include "I Can't Get You Off My Mind" (1947), "Why Don't You Love Me?" (1950), and most famously, "I Can't Help It If I'm Still in Love With You" (1951).

Shakespeare's sonnets to the dark lady also recount the anguish of disappointed love. David Bevington suggests that the poems often sound like "cries from the heart, voicing at times fears of rejection, self-hatred, and humiliation" (Shakespeare 2002, 854).<sup>6</sup> In Sonnet 147, for instance, the speaker claims that his "love is a fever, longing still / . . . feeding on that which doth preserve the ill" (1, 3). Like Williams, Shakespeare equates love with mortality, admitting he is now "past cure" and succumbing to the shocking realization that "Desire is death" (9, 8). Not unlike Williams's betrayed lover in "Your Cheatin' Heart," the speaker of Sonnet 151 considers the impact of woman's infidelity. Indeed, the lady is addressed as a "gentle cheater" (3) who has deceived the speaker; the speaker also chastises himself for allowing the deception and therefore "betray[ing his] nobler part" (5-6). Like Williams, Shakespeare seems preoccupied with the love-hate relationship between men and women.

Critics argue that part of Hank Williams's appeal lay in his ability to allow the "diverse currents" of his time to "flow through him" (Leppert and Lipsitz 1993, 22), a sense of selflessness that is also attributed to Shakespeare, specifically in Keats's famous formulation of his "negative capability." As Murray Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn have observed, as a "dramatist of opposites, gaps and identities," Shakespeare "seems to have made his identity of the question of identity, and so, paradoxically, he seems an absent author himself" (1980, xiv). Shakespeare alludes to the possibility of poetic annihilation in Sonnet 111: "And almost thence my nature is subdued / To what it works in, like the dyer's hand" (6-7), a metaphor invoked by W. H. Auden and others to characterize Shakespeare's art. Both Hank and Shakespeare, therefore, function metaphorically as conduits through which the tensions and contradictions of their times are channeled.

The images of Hank Williams and William Shakespeare described here have been carefully constructed to suggest that as artists, they have a power of empathy not found in ordinary mortals, as well as an ability to achieve a Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. A story often repeated in Williams's biographies will clarify this point. Jimmy Rule, a long-time Nashville songwriter claims to have been with Williams as he wrote the song, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" (1949). According to Rule, Hank initially "scribble[ed] the song on a piece of paper. He looked up, kind of in despair, and asked [Rule], 'D'you think people will understand what I'm tryin' to say?'" (quoted in Williams 1981, 105). Rule looked at the lines,

Hear that lonesome whippoorwill,

He sounds too blue to fly.  
The midnight train is whining low  
I'm so lonesome I could cry,

and assured Hank, "They'll understand." (105). As the song reaches the second stanza, the speaker looks at the suffering moon and identifies with the celestial object retreating "behind a cloud / To hide its face and cry." By the third stanza the singer asks, "Did you ever hear a robin weep / When leaves begin to die? / That means he's lost the will to live"; he concludes with the sentiment that he, like the robin, the whippoorwill, and the moon, is so lonely he "could cry."

Mitch Miller, the goateed composer who worked with Williams in the early 1950s, also participated in this image-shaping by ranking Williams's genius with that of Stephen Foster's. When asked to explain Hank's appeal, Miller offered this response: "He had a way of reaching your guts and your head at the same time. No matter who you were, a country person or a sophisticate, the language hit home. Nobody I knew could use basic English so effectively. Every song socks you in the gut" (quoted in Williams 1981, 106). In fact, Miller, who was head of popular music at Columbia Records, bought the rights to Hank's song "Cold, Cold Heart" in 1951 and placed the song with an unknown, but up and coming, pop singer named Tony Bennett; the song sold over a million copies, and Hank's place as a songwriter beyond the hillbilly genre was guaranteed.

Most biographers agree that Hank Williams would probably have resented being called a "poet." In fact, Hank himself associated poetry with difficult language and hard to decipher meanings. The story goes that whenever Hank heard or read lyrics he thought were too difficult, too wordy, or too haughty, he would claim that it sounded "like Shakespeare," and he would advise the writer to tone it down (Caress 1979, 85). What even Hank failed to realize, of course, is that Shakespeare's language was very accessible for his intended audience and that Shakespeare's words also had a way of reaching head and gut at the same time.

### Playing With Shakespeare

While few country musicians have actually performed Shakespeare, two artists have participated in playful but important re-creations of the Bard: Jerry Lee Lewis in 1968 and Garth Brooks in 1996. Both of these performances call on Shakespeare's star status and both appeal to a diverse audience by blending Shakespeare with popular culture. As Bristol has argued, celebrity "big-time" only requires "striking and colorful forms of public visibility," adding that even a "small amount of Shakespeare" can be leveraged "into a generous cash flow" (Bristol 1996, 90-91). Larger audiences, in other words, almost always equal larger box-office receipts. Moreover, this "cross-

over" appeal, which combines popular and elite forms of culture, is not unique to the late twentieth century, for it has been articulately detected in the Elizabethan period by Robert Weimann, as well as by Levine in nineteenth-century America.<sup>7</sup>

Jerry Lee Lewis, a native of New Orleans, is best known as a rockabilly and country artist who moved back and forth between more traditional rock, with songs like "Great Balls of Fire," and country numbers, such as "Once More with Feeling." Most people do not know that in 1968, he also starred as Iago in a rock musical version of *Othello*, entitled *Catch My Soul*, at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles. Lewis stood through much of the show, playing his piano just as he normally did in concert. Lewis was also the only actor who had completely memorized his lines by the time of the first rehearsal; and when asked about the author of the play, he replied: "This Shakespeare was really somethin'. I wonder what he woulda thought about my records" (Tosches 1998, 200). Ultimately, Lewis left the cast when his first comeback hit on the country charts appeared the same year, the memorably titled, "What's Made Milwaukee Famous (Has Made a Loser Out of Me)."

Jerry Lee Lewis's challenge to canonical Shakespeare met with a conflicted response. Cecil Smith, a well-known West Coast theater critic, penned a mixed review of *Catch My Soul* that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on Thursday, March 7, 1968. Smith criticized the musical as a "pop music concert encircling a shredded edition of the great tragedy"; he proclaimed that the music of Lewis and the poetry of Shakespeare "are miles apart and never the twain do meet." Yet he went on to confess an "inescapable feeling" that what was occurring on stage was "interesting" because it went "beyond the routine shock" and tried to "do something." Ultimately, Smith concluded that the performance was "a creative effort" where "juices flow" and "there's life involved." Smith had nothing but praise for Jerry Lee's Iago, claiming that when the musician "tells a wiggling chorine" to "'Shake it and break it and wrap it up and take it,'" it fits the play better than "'O, mistress, villainy hath made mocks with love!'" At the end of the review, he praises the music, "notably the pounding blues that Lewis sang." He also admires the overall effect of Lewis's portrayal: "Lewis, clad in scarlet in the first act with a Mephistophelean beard from which his long cigar jutted and an evil grin to match, played Shakespeare's motiveless arch villain to mock the role and garble the lines with his southern drawl, which was exactly the intent" (Smith 1968). Later, according to a posting by Robert Cohen on the SHAKSPER listserv, Smith called the event one of the "most memorable things he had witnessed" (Cohen 1995).

Another article from 1995 tracing Lewis's career offered this comment on the production: "What may have been [Lewis's] finest hour never officially made it to record bins," when he played

Iago as "the slitheriest of the slithery, a sly, sex-obsessed, mutably vicious orderly in the Venetian army. . . . He ladled his oily cracker bonhomie over the Elizabethan verse and the made the show's trained actors sound like furniture" (Meyerowitz 1995, 2). Even *The Christian Science Monitor* praised Lewis as a "Louisiana-born genius" and a "unique Iago" (quoted in Tosches 1998, 200). *Catch My Soul* was also performed in London in 1971, and another SHAKSPER post recalls that this production, set in the Louisiana bayous, was a "fairly tatty production, with a dancing chorus woefully inadequate" (Scheeder 1995). In 1973, the play was made into a rock movie, with Ritchie Havens as Othello and Lance Le Gault replacing Lewis as Iago. The movie soundtrack also boasted a stellar cast, including Tony Joe White, as well as Bonnie and Delaney Bramlett, a duo who often performed with Eric Clapton. Both the stage version and film versions, which were produced by Jack Good, have been dismissed as a "kind of Shakespearean *Jesus Christ Superstar*" (Rockwell 1995).

More recent, and more aligned with new country music, is Garth Brooks's appearance on *The Muppets Tonight!* Parodies of Shakespeare may tell us as much, if not more, about Shakespeare's status in the second half of the twentieth century than do serious representations of his work.<sup>8</sup> More important, the Muppets sketch brings together the varieties of Shakespearean appropriation that I have been tracing throughout this essay: through its cultural citations of *Romeo and Juliet*, its use of Shakespeare as a trademark, and a parodic effect that complicates the distinction between high and popular culture.

The running joke from *The Muppets Tonight!* episode is that Brooks wants to do something different from his usual riding-and-roping routine. After Muppet Clifford introduces the singer "as you've never seen him before," Brooks enters wearing a puffy shirt, tights, and loud bloomers. Deciding to do the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* with Miss Piggy, Brooks watches as she puts on her reading glasses; she still manages, however, to flub her lines. At this point, Andy and Randy Pig enter, clothed in vaguely Elizabethan garb and loudly introduce themselves as the "two gentlemen from Bologna." At the close of the scene, the balcony falls, and Statler says to Waldorf, "Shakespeare would have hated that," to which Waldorf replies, "You should know, you dated his sister." After much laughter, Statler concludes, "Boy, was she ugly." Brooks goes on to play in a science fiction parody and to sing "If I Were a Rich Man" while dressed as Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*. When the "Head of the Network" muppet complains that "I thought you said he was going to do a country song," Rizzo replies, "Yeah, but he didn't say what country." By referring to Shakespeare as well as to classic Broadway plays, Brooks begins to break down the stereotypes with which he has come to be associated; but by staging this act on a humorous

children's show, he also avoids alienating any of his core country audience. Like Jerry Lee Lewis, with his Shakespearean parody Garth Brooks accomplishes two things simultaneously: he gains cultural currency by showing knowledge of Shakespeare, but also may expand his audience by proving his versatility as an artist.

This overview of the connections between "Shakespeare" and the world of country music shows that popular culture often calls on "highbrow" signifiers to provide cultural capital for artists and the works they perform. Perhaps, as the tangible comparisons between William Shakespeare and Hank Williams suggest, the two worlds are not and have never been all that far apart. Like the barbed fences that separate the livestock from the farmland so often evoked in songs from the American South, arbitrary barriers between country music and Shakespeare are constantly being overrun, torn down, and rendered useless.

### Notes

1. Levine's work contains over fifty references to New York, thirteen to Boston, ten to Philadelphia, and seven to Baltimore. New Orleans, the only southern city mentioned in his book, is cited just five times. Bristol is even less concerned with the South, focusing on the northeastern United States and Canada.
2. For an introduction to the use of the "signifier," see David Richter, who explains that many poststructuralist theorists have attempted to see literature as the "free play of signifiers," with words often "detached" from their original uses (Richter 1989, 8). Instead of words or names "expressing the personality (or impersonality) of the author," they now function more as utterances with multiple meanings (8). As Michel Foucault has argued, writing today is "an interplay of signs" and signifiers, and writing "unfolds like a game . . . that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits" (Foucault 1989, 978). This playfulness is an important element of the use of "Shakespeare" in country music.
3. I want to thank Karen Cajka for this observation following a presentation of this paper at East Tennessee State University. I would also like to acknowledge the help of other ETSU colleagues and students on this project: Michael Cody, Ron Giles, Alan Holmes, Judy Slagle, Bridget Garland, Beth Steffey, Carol Fox and Jim Sledge (photo), and Luke Wade.
4. See, for example, the following works: *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare* by Diane Dreher (1986); "Fathers and Sons in *Hamlet*" by Eric Rasmussen (1984); and Lawrence Danson's "Shakespeare and the Misrecognition of Fathers and Sons" (1999).

5. Williams's many matriarchal songs include "I Heard My Mother Praying For Me" (1948), "I've Just Told Mama Goodbye" (1949), "Message to My Mother," and "Mother is Gone" (no recorded dates). On Shakespeare and mothers, see Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers* (1992).
6. Introduction to the *Sonnets*, in *The Necessary Shakespeare*, edited by David Bevington (Shakespeare 2002). All references to the *Sonnets* are from this edition. The homoeroticism of the poems is carefully examined by Richard Halpern's *Shakespeare's Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan* (2002) and Joseph Pequigney's *Such is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1985).
7. See both Weimann's *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (1978) and "Bifold Authority in Shakespeare's Theatre" (1988). In the latter article, Weimann claims that the space of the London theater was a "hodge-podge of social interests" combining aristocratic with popular traditions (Weimann 1988, 404).
8. Television parodies of Shakespeare include episodes of *Happy Days*, *Gilligan's Island*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *Moonlighting*. For parodies in the Victorian period, see Richard Schoch's *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (2002) and *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques* (2003).

### Online Resources

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