theories and methodologies

Shakespeare's Notation: Writing Sound in *Much Ado about Nothing*

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IN ACT 5 OF *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*, SHAKESPEARE DRAMATIZES TWO CONSECUTIVE EPISODES IN WHICH WRITING POETRY IS MIXED suggestively with singing, recalling, or imitating music. The first comes when Benedick sings or speaks several lines from the popular ballad "The God of Love."[1] The second is Claudio's musical rite of contrition for slandering Hero and (he believes) causing her death. In both cases, poetry is produced through writing practices that are interwoven with song. Indeed, Shakespeare yokes literacy and aurality together in the same keyword, *noting*, which referred both to writing and to musical notes, and which (as scholars have long observed) is how *nothing* was pronounced in early modern English. Benedick seeks poetic inspiration from the notes of balladry, then bemoans his inability to versify in rhyme. Claudio not only sees that his epitaph is notated, read aloud, and hung on the tomb; he calls for a corresponding hymn to be sung. Taken together, the scenes attune us to forms of poetic making that are irreducible to writing or language—those overdetermined categories in literary studies that have enabled our neglect of the role that nonverbal sound has played in poetic composition.

In recent years, literary scholars have devoted considerable attention to the acoustic effects that writing prompts or inspires (Bernstein; Perloff and Dworkin; Richards; Rubery; Wheeler). Yet we have often overlooked literature that is, to borrow a term from our digital lexicon, "born musical." Here I do not mean texts on the performative side of a tiresome opposition to literary culture. I mean writing processes deeply entwined with musical performance and imagination—texts that are coextensive with sound. A fuller appreciation of musico-poetic composition requires forgoing the assumption that sound and writing are separate domains. Literary scholars tend to treat writing as though it comes first, as script that gives rise to acoustic performances ranging from musical settings to audiobooks. Sound studies offers a helpful model in which written texts act as acoustic records—transcriptions, imitations, or "earwitnesses,"

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a term for representing or recalling sound (Schafer 8). By using literary culture to understand the history of sound, scholars including Bruce R. Smith have focused due attention on the ways in which aurality conditions and transforms literacy. But even sound studies has retained an inclination to separate literary and acoustic worlds. As a result, literary scholars continue to relegate music to background, context, result, or adaptation.[2]

Enabling this tendency has been the received wisdom that, as J. W. Johnson puts it, "the lyric since the Renaissance has remained a verbal rather than a musical discipline, and the traces of its melodic origin have become largely vestigial" (720). This standard historiography is parochial, rooted in the assumption of a monolithic literary culture, and misleading for poets ranging from Burns to Tagore. It is also flatly teleological, overlooking musico-poetic movements and resurgences from early modern declamatory song to modern jazz. As Virginia Jackson has argued, the lyric genre is already a modern projection on earlier periods—invented, in hindsight, from the vantage point of literary criticism (*Dickinson's Misery*, "Lyric"). Stipulating a historical separation from musical performance only makes the lyric genre less coherent, and more misleading for earlier periods.

Shakespeare offers a notable example of the shaping influence of music in what we assume to be written or spoken poetry. In what follows, I seek to expand our sense of the musico-poetic compositional practices available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, focusing on the metapoetic dimensions of *Much Ado about Nothing*. In so doing, I work against the tendency to isolate writing as an independent or autonomous feature in the work of early modern poets and dramatists who integrated bibliographic texts with other, complementary media. If Shakespeare was a "literary dramatist" (Erne) full of self-reflexiveness about writing in his sonnet sequence and elsewhere (S. Booth; Vendler), he was also an actor and songwriter who undertook intermedia practices of composition in ways that complicate his appropriation as an icon of canonical anglophone writing. Again, I am not advocating a throwback notion of performance culture in which Shakespeare is an emblematic man of the theater. Instead, I am building on the insights of performance studies concerning what William B. Worthen calls the "dual" and "entwined" identities of performative and written art forms (xv, xii), and on what I have elsewhere called "an expanded sense of media history" that takes account of the "intermedia proclivities of early modern poetic culture" (*Unwritten Poetry* 10, 7).[3] During the early modern period and beyond, writing, speech, dance, musical composition, acoustic performance, and visual art were widely understood to be overlapping and compatible media. We require a more versatile lexicon for describing Shakespeare's and other poets' compositional tool kits—a lexicon that encompasses practices central to what we consider literature yet irreducible to bibliographic transmission.

Much Ado about Notation

Music is everywhere in *Much Ado about Nothing*. As was customary in the early modern theater, the play would have begun and ended with music, and songs bubble to the surface when the musician Balthazar is onstage and in Beatrice's and Benedick's quotations of popular balladry. This music is associated with the presentational environment of the theater—the structures and conventions that enable the fiction onstage (Lin 23–37)—but it is also at the core of the play's fictional world. Indeed, many of Shakespeare's most musical characters move fluidly in and out of the fiction, including Balthazar, who has no clear place in Messina's social world and little dramatic role except to sing.[4] This is reflected in a stage direction in the 1623 folio referring to him as "*Iacke Wilson*," the musician who played the

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role in an early production by the King's Men (2.3.34sd).[5] Wilson and other musicians wrote tunes that Shakespeare later incorporated into his plays, set Shakespeare's verse to music, and altered lines in extempore performance. Like the clown Will Kemp, these musicians were effectively Shakespeare's collaborators—co-composing the "Shakespeare" that has been recorded and remembered.[6]

Acoustic, collaborative compositional practices also show up within the fiction of *Much Ado*, which is highly self-reflexive about writing, hearing, and music making. The play continually stages episodes in which characters seek to gather significance from sound. Its main narrative derives from performative ruses, including the schemes to defame Hero, to dissemble her death, and to convince Beatrice and Benedick of their affection for each other. Characters respond to this deceptive atmosphere by eavesdropping, gleaning, representing, and recording what they hear. The play's preferred term for these actions is *noting*, which could mean noticing or denoting in a variety of senses. The term suggests notating, or writing down, including supplying musical notation. But it also involved a broader series of actions irrespective of writing, such as forming knowledge and making music: "to note" could mean simply "to sing" ("Note," sec. III). For Shakespeare, *noting* is both an action and a response to an action. It connotes observation (listening, noticing, acknowledging) and also representation (recording, communicating, performing). It is not necessarily bibliographic, it does not imply a division between writing and sound, and it often involves collective action.

Noting is thus a versatile keyword for the intermedia practices of observation and representation on display in *Much Ado*. And the play does not allow us to forget it. Perhaps no other Shakespearean play hangs so much on its title, repeatedly drawing attention to the link between *noting* and *nothing*—another suggestive keyword whose early modern meanings included absence, sex organs, and insignificant sounds. Take the exchange of witticisms between Balthazar and Don Pedro after the musician has playfully resisted requests for a song:

> DON PEDRO. Nay, pray thee, come,
> Or if thou wilt hold longer argument,
> Do it in notes.
> BALTHAZAR. Note this before my notes:
> There's not a note of mine that's worth the noting.
> DON PEDRO. Why, these are very crotchets that he speaks.
> Note notes forsooth, and nothing! (2.3.50–55)

Productions often cut these lines (perhaps avoiding a collective groan from the audience).[7] These lines, however, underscore just how invested the play is in tethering "noting," including musical performance, to "nothing," including insignificance. The homonym becomes a way of dwelling on representational vanishing points—hearing and noticing what is absent or elusive. Balthazar and Don Pedro's shared joke is that music amounts to representation without semantic content. The punch line "Note notes forsooth, and nothing" carries the double meaning "Make music, and nothing else" and "Make music, which is of no significance." Shakespeare's larger joke is that "nothings" of this intermedia kind are indispensable to a comedic social world.

Scholarship on "noting" in *Much Ado* has tended to focus less on music than on language and speech (Dawson; Hunt; Kiefer) and on theatrical and performative illusion (Crunelle-Vanrigh; Dobranski; Greenblatt).[8] Patrick Cheney has offered something of an exception, arguing that Balthazar's "Sigh no more, ladies" amounts to a crucial turning point in the play, "a *lyric manifesto*, critiquing masculine *theater* for its deceptive agency and its unfaithful desire, and re-locating authority in a *feminine-based song*, in *music*, in *lyric poetry*" ("Halting Sonnets" 373). For Cheney, however, song is less about sound than about

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writing—part of an "allied discourse of songs and sonnets in *Much Ado*; the two forms are kinds of lyric, and both operate as separate or lyric spaces, important to distinguish from theatrical 'show'" (372). Grouping songs and sonnets into the catchall category of "lyric" allows Cheney to present Balthazar's song as evidence of a movement "from theater to poetry, transacting a succession from plays to sonnets, and thereby validating the art of the sonnet as an important cultural institution" (379). Cheney goes so far as to connect the play's valorization of "literary" poetry to Shakespeare's interest in print posterity: "In *Much Ado*, we might discover [Lukas] Erne's 'literary dramatist' at work: a playwright with a deep commitment to print culture" (376).

Cheney's discussion of the metapoetic dimensions of the play is insightful, in keeping with his broader revelations about authorial self-consciousness in early modern culture (*English Authorship*; *Shakespeare's Literary Authorship*). But his reading of *Much Ado* is symptomatic of the larger scholarly tendency to flatten the versatile modes of composition available to early modern poets. Take Balthazar's song "Sigh no more, ladies," which for Cheney is a turn away from theatricality, toward a literary "voice of lyric poetry" ("Halting Sonnets" 373). The first stanza asks ladies to "sigh no more" in response to male betrayal; the second (below) turns to singing:

> Sing no more ditties, sing no more,
> Of dumps so dull and heavy;
> The fraud of men was ever so,
> Since summer first was leavy.
> Then sigh not so, but let them go,
> And be you blithe and bonny,
> Converting all your sounds of woe
> Into "Hey, nonny, nonny." (2.3.68–75)

Are the imagined ladies supposed to sing "blithe and bonny" ditties instead of melancholy ones? To cease singing and sighing altogether? To utter sweet nothings and (in a bawdy subtext) make themselves sexually available to men? It is difficult to say, because the phrase "nonny, nonny" resists denotation; the relevant senses in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are the following: "A refrain, esp. one with no definite meaning"; "Something unimportant; a mere trifle" ("Nonny-no"); and "the vulva" ("Nonny-nonny"), all of which imply a connection to the play's keyword "nothing." Balthazar enjoins his addressees to convert their nonsemantic sounds (sighing, singing, "sounds of woe") into something palatable to men. Yet the ladies he addresses are not even present onstage, and his mysterious refrain calls not for silence but for the redistribution of women's acoustic responses to male deception.

Let us say, then, that Balthazar's song is about the recalcitrance of acoustic "nothings" and their vital role in the social and representational world of *Much Ado*. The song gives voice to sounds that exceed linguistic meaning, hinges on changing these sounds into something else, and imagines "converting" them into a refrain that resists semantic sense. In other words, Balthazar stages what Mladen Dolar calls the "presymbolic" and "postsymbolic" dimensions of voice—first, sighing as an apparently inarticulate sound preceding signification, and then, in the second stanza, singing as a "realm of the voice beyond language" expressing what cannot be articulated in words (29). For Dolar, sighing, singing, and other "non-voices" do not escape linguistic structure; on the contrary, "it is as if, by their very absence of articulation (or surplus-articulation in the case of singing), they were particularly apt to embody the [linguistic] structure as such, the structure at its minimal; or meaning as such, beyond the discernible meaning" (32). Understood in this way, Balthazar enacts a process of making meaning through a pre- or superlinguistic process that is nevertheless structured by language.

In early modern culture, song was understood to be a paradigmatic instance of

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signification on the borders of language—alternately refusing and exceeding its words. Song had a reputation for receding from significance and (for that very reason) taking hold of listeners unexpectedly, in moving and surprising ways. These associations were emblematized in song's connection to Orpheus, as Benedick indicates immediately before "Sigh no more, ladies," while Balthazar plucks his lute in the background:[9] "Now, divine air! Now is his soul ravished! Is it not strange that sheep's guts should hale souls out of men's bodies? Well, a horn for my money, when all's done" (2.3.56–59). Benedick's mixture of admiration and scorn for string music (made from "sheep's guts") is conventional; music's reputed Orphic power to ravish souls coexisted with its reputation as an idle, effeminate endeavor (Dubrow 20–26). Thus Benedick belittles Balthazar's song as inferior to the masculine hunting horn and, at the same time, underscores its ominous significance—comparing Balthazar's voice to a howling dog and a "night-raven," a harbinger of disaster (2.3.83). As is the case in Shakespeare more generally, musical meaning is not self-evident or consistent; it becomes significant over time and in dynamic combination with writing and other media.

It is fitting, then, that Benedick should turn out to be both a balladeer and a sonneteer. He quotes a ballad fragment in the process of staging his failure as a versifier and then, despite his claim that he "was not born under a rhyming planet" (5.2.39–40), writes a sonnet to Beatrice, as Claudio reveals at the conclusion of the play: "I'll be sworn upon't that he loves her, / For here's a paper written in his hand, / A halting sonnet of his own pure brain" (5.4.85–87). Likewise, Beatrice has tried her hand at a sonnet, which Hero produces as evidence that her cousin's state of mind is fixed in writing. But neither Beatrice nor Benedick is pinned down by any one medium. Beatrice is a master of oral repartee who quotes ballads as readily as she pens sonnets.[10] And the same is true of Benedick, who is tellingly elusive when the sonnets are revealed: "A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts" (5.4.91–92). Benedick may refer here to pressing the hand to the heart, but, as Stephen Greenblatt has suggested, we should not overlook his implication that writing does *not* express what is in the heart (1400–01). Benedick proceeds to call for music and dancing before the wedding—"First . . . play, music!"—and again before dealing with Don John—"Think not on him till tomorrow . . . Strike up, pipers!" (5.4.119, 125–26). These musical invocations come in the final lines of the play, which is to say that Benedick never stops combining the linguistic instantiations of his "pure brain" with nonverbal performance.

Meanwhile, Claudio has produced a media assemblage of his own. Leonato instructs him to "invent" (compose or create) an epitaph as atonement for slandering Hero, hang it on her tomb, and "sing it to her bones" (5.1.273–75). Claudio accomplishes this task by parceling it out still further, in collaboration with two performers. He involves an attendant lord, instructing him to read the epitaph aloud and hang it on the tomb. He commissions an entirely different song of mourning to be performed, likely by Balthazar.[11] And he makes allowance for the lord to repeat this visual, spoken, and musical spectacle every year—"Now unto thy bones good night; / Yearly will I do this rite" (5.3.22–23).[12] The epitaph and the song are evocative, especially in combination. Both borrow from classical poetic conventions; the epitaph is an invocation of *fama*—"Death, in guerdon of her wrongs, / Gives her fame which never dies" (5.3.5–6)—and the song has the feeling of an exorcism mixed curiously with a resurrection:

> Pardon, goddess of the night,
> Those that slew thy virgin knight,
> For the which with songs of woe

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Round about her tomb they go.
Midnight, assist our moan,
Help us to sigh and groan,
Heavily, heavily.
Graves yawn and yield your dead,
Till death be uttered,
Heavily, heavily. (5.3.12–21)

This invocation of Diana is disjunctive at Hero's ostensibly Christian tomb, and the image of dead bodies emerging from graves until death is "uttered" is enigmatic. We might take "uttered" to mean "vanquished" and to refer to the Christian resurrection ("Utter, *V.*2"), especially if we accept the alternative reading of the final line in the folio text: "Heauenly, heauenly" (5.3.19–21n). But we are still left with a song full of nonlinguistic sounds—sighs, groans, yawns—that reinforce the more common meaning of "utter"—namely, "give voice to" ("Utter, *V.*1," sec. II). We cannot help recalling "Sigh no more, ladies," which is also replete with "sounds of woe" and which was likely performed by the same singer (2.3.74). Indeed, "Pardon, goddess of the night" functions as a reprise of Balthazar's earlier invocation of sounds without linguistic sense, echoing the words "sigh," "heavy," and "woe"—this time giving voice to death, another valence of "nothing" ("Nothing," sec. 5). We are left anticipating the future utterance of "death," in provocative juxtaposition to the monumental placement of the epitaph.

Intermedia Poesis

These episodes of sound and music making in *Much Ado* occur in dynamic combination with writing. Benedick's and Claudio's multifaceted attempts at wooing and elegy are emphatically inscribed and, at the same time, closely integrated with musical performance. If *noting* is the general keyword *Much Ado* supplies for this type of observing, representing, composing, and performing across a range of media, a more specific word for the play's rich amalgams of music and writing is simply *poetry*. Literary scholars have tended to subsume this word, from the Greek *poiesis* ("making"), into "writing" too early, too often, and too uniformly. *Much Ado* has a relatively low proportion of verse; more than two thirds of its lines are in prose (Vickers 433). Like many of Shakespeare's plays and poems, it is elaborately and self-consciously reflective about written inscription, from Leonato's concern that Hero's defamation "is printed in her blood" (4.1.122) to Dogberry's insistence that he is "writ down an ass" (4.2.88). Yet *Much Ado*'s attentiveness to writing and recording only fuels its corresponding intrigue with rumor, hearsay, performance, and song. In the intermedia environment of the theater, as in early modern culture more generally, literacy and aurality were not locked in a zero-sum game. Bibliographic and acoustic media were mutually constitutive, interacting subtly and reciprocally in newly imaginative ways.

Notes

1. Early modern playbooks often leave it ambiguous whether a character is speaking or singing, especially in quotations of balladry (Lindley 144–46). Benedick's fragment is adapted from the actor and ballad writer William Elderton, whom Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nash credited as the "father" of Elizabethan balladry (Goldring).

2. Exceptions include M. Booth; Ramazani and Tucker; Trudell, *Unwritten Poetry*; and Larson.

3. See also Chaganti's account of the "material collusion" between medieval poetry and dance (2). On the term *intermedia* and its relevance to literary study, see Trudell, Introduction.

4. Balthazar is onstage in act 1 for 63 lines without speaking (1.1.90sd), and he dances with Margaret at 2.1.97–100 (and possibly earlier; see 2.1.89, 92, 94n). Neither of these appearances clarifies his social role or status.

5. This could refer to John Wilson (1595–1674), an important songwriter for the King's Men, in which case the stage direction likely derived from a prompter's book revised sometime after the play's first production. Another possibility is Jack Wilson (ca. 1585–ca. 1641), a London popular musician. See Collington 34; Shakespeare 185n5.

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6. Kemp's name replaces that of Dogberry, the role he played, in a number of speech prefixes in both the quarto and the folio texts.

7. The lines are absent, for example, in Branagh's and Whedon's film adaptations.

8. Exceptions include Collington on balladry; Henze on song (90–99); and Nelson on musical allusion. See also Dugan on pronunciation and female desire; Henderson on sensation and gender.

9. In early productions of the play, Balthazar likely played the lute during these lines, before he began to sing, though there are other possibilities, including that other musicians were involved (Long 127–29).

10. See Beatrice's invocations of the ballad "Hey Ho, for a Husband" at 2.1.294 and 3.4.48.

11. Neither the quarto nor the folio text identifies the singer, but the actor-musician who played Balthazar would have been an obvious casting choice.

12. Editors often assign these lines to Claudio, but both the quarto and the folio texts are clear that they belong to the lord (Shakespeare 5.3.2n).

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