Fractured song lyrics

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Abstract

Why are new lyrics to old songs so often a source of inspiration and fun? This article explores how poems that rewrite popular song lyrics belong on the continuum between parody and burlesque. The parodist pays homage to the author of the source, but at the same time skewers the author by appropriating his distinctive style and using it to poke fun at him. The burlesque writer trades on the familiarity of the source material and uses it for commentary. New words for old songs give pleasure because they engage more of the senses than simply reading them. The reader "hears" the poem while reading it. The humor in the poem is enhanced for those who know the original melodies, keeping the song alive through the humor the parodist evokes.

Keywords: Humor; lyrics, parody; poetry; song.

In the summer of 2006, the editors of *Poetry* magazine published thirty-six funny poems in an issue devoted to humor. Many of their selections made me smile or nod in bemused appreciation. One of them made me laugh out loud and got me thinking about why new lyrics for old songs can be inspiring and a source of so much fun.

In *More Foolish Things Remind Me of You* (2006), X. J. Kennedy puts new lyrics to Eric Maschwitz's 1936 torch song "These Foolish Things (Remind Me of You)."

The Maschwitz song (music by Harry Link and Jack Strachey) is an all-time favorite; it's the kind of song one plays over and over at the end of a love affair to refresh and extend the torment of having loved and lost. Right now I am listening to Rosemary Clooney's version from *For the*

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Duration, her 1991 recording of WWII-era favorites. It is heartbreaking. Her voice is well past its prime — it's deepened and there's less control in the higher and lower registers — but she compensates with the interpretive skill that comes with age. Clooney's version might be my favorite interpretation, but for maximum melancholy find any Billie Holiday recording. Here is a sample of the lyrics:

A cigarette that bears a lipstick's traces,
An airline ticket to romantic places,
And still my heart has wings,
These foolish things
Remind me of you. (Link et al. 1936)

The lyric describes a romance in its particulars and universalities. Each of the lovers' shared experiences — "The park at evening when the bell has sounded / The *Ile de France* with all the gulls around it" — is followed by an observation of the commonplace ("The beauty that is spring's") so that anyone listening to the song can locate his or her own memories in it. The lyric also says that when a romance ends, *everything* is a reminder. And, the song is the opposite of funny. It is bittersweet, nostalgic: "Oh, how the ghost of you clings!"

Kennedy mocks Maschwitz's paradigmatic love affair by having the loved one remind the narrator of all things grotesque. Here are Kennedy's new lyrics:

Theses on archetypes in rapsters' lyrics,
Menus describing hash in panegyrics,
Cheap vases aping Mings —
Pretentious things
Remind me of you.
Loud slurping noises from the next apartment,
A critics' lecture on what Hitler's art meant,
Dead snakes the tomcat brings —
Disquieting things
Remind me of you.

You came, swell dame, swooped down on me.
Like Visigoths you looted me,
You burnt me down, then booted me.

Lines sliced to little bits by deconstruction,
Loose gobs of fat removed by liposuction,

Toys after children's play—
Sheer disarray
Reminds me of you.
A sculpted Discobolus with penis missing,
Forgotten novelists, Surtees or Gissing,
Leftovers growing mold—
Everything old
Reminds me of you.

By God, how odd, to call to mind
Those tortures that you tried on me,
How, least of all, you lied to me.

Cheeseburgers gussied up with shrimps and chili,
Victorian bathing gowns, a gilded lily,
Fingers with monster rings—
Overdressed things
Remind me of you.
Fallacious arguments, a dozen doughnuts,
Car windows shot to hell when policemen go nuts,
Suburban lawns with moles,
Things full of holes
Remind me of you. (Kennedy 2006: 283)

Kennedy's poem belongs on the continuum between parody and burlesque, as defined by Dwight Macdonald in his great anthology *Parodies: An Anthology from Chaucer to Beerbohm*: "If burlesque is pouring new wine into old bottles, parody is making a new wine that tastes like the old but has a slightly lethal effect" (1960: 559). The parodist simultaneously pays homage to and skewers the author of his source material by appropriating the author's distinctive style and using it to poke fun at him. The burlesque writer trades on the familiarity of the source material and uses it for commentary. Kennedy's poem provokes laughs, because the spurned lover puts aside the usual love-affair-gone-bad niceties ("we still respect each other and will remain friends") and trashes the ex with obvious relish. It succeeds because there is rue beneath the humor, as expressed in the bridge stanzas ("You came, swell dame, swooped down on me"). The narrator is still in love and does not fool anybody.

New words for old songs give pleasure, because they engage more of the senses than simply reading them. The reader "hears" the poem while reading it. Just as a descriptive poem can make a reader see steep and

lofty cliffs or taste a cold plum, the song lyric poem awakens the mind's ear.

Poet James Reiss's "The Nightshade Arias" (2003) uses beloved patriotic anthems and Christmas carols as a means to comment on our national blood lust:

Oh, Brits and Yanks, heroic guys
Who cause civilians pain,
Who listen to their dying cries
And say, "Hi!" like John Wayne:
United States, United States,
Shoot quick and watch with glee
How politics
Excludes all pricks
From Maine to East Chinee.

Oh, senators and congressmen
Who vote to fund a war,
Who give the nod again—again!—
To deficits galore:
United States, United States,
Spend more than you take in
So that our kids
Will hit the skids
From Bangor to West Linn.

Oh, President, George W.
Who changes a regime
Who says, "Hot damn, I'll trouble you
To root for our home team":
United States, United States,
Take aim with Abrams tanks,
And kill or maim
In Jesus' name
With our sincerest thanks.
(United States, Tune: "America the Beautiful") (Reiss 2003: 151)

Like Kennedy's take on "These Foolish Things," Reiss's series of poems exposes the dark side of the original material's subject matter. Both are poems about betrayal of love and country. Reiss's poems are overtly political, yet by using humor and sarcasm he avoids the usual pitfalls

that can easily make political poems read like the work of self-righteous ideologues.

George Bernard Shaw famously remarked that if you're going to tell the truth, "you better make people laugh, otherwise, they'll kill you" (2009). James Cummins' "I Am Critick" (unpublished) with new words put to Helen Reddy's 1970's feminist rallying cry "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar"[1] is a hilarious attack on academia. Unlike the Reiss and Kennedy poems, Cummins' subject matter is on its surface quite different from that of the song that inspired him. The similarity is in the high seriousness of the speakers in each lyric. In one sense, the poem is about an academic literary critic, and in another sense it could as easily be about a feminist spokesperson. Anyone reading Cummins' poem that knows the Reddy song will recognize the similarities between the earnest feminist of Reddy's lyric and the self-regarding "critick" of his. And it does not exhaust the poem's meaning to say that by metaphorical implication the pompous critical theorist and the humorless feminist speechmaker are variants of the same person. Though Cummins' poem is filled with insider jokes, one need not have done time in an institution, academic or otherwise, to recognize the target of his extraordinary wit.

I Am Critick
I am Critick, hear me roar,
in dudgeon too high to ignore;
and I know too much to go back to South Bend!
Oh, I've slept with Tweedledee;
now I've got my Ph.D—
no one's ever making me go down again!
O-oh, *yes*, I am wise—
see the letters by my name!
But oh, I've paid a price,
and I know just who[m] to blame.
If I have to, I can read *anything*!
I am strong, I'm not invisible,
I am Crii-tiick.

You should hear me rave and rant;
I get every travel grant;
there's no conference in the world that's out of reach!
I can deconstruct a poem;
give my cats a happy home—

and in meetings I'm respected when I preach!
O-oh, *yes*, I am wise—
all my students tell me so!
But oh, I've paid a price:
I've had to study Stowe.
If I have to, I can teach *anything*!
I am strong, I'm not invisible,
I am Crii-tiick.

When The Conversation's done,
they'll see I am "Number One"—
I've been cited in a work on Benjamin!
I get calls out the wazoo;
I call Susan Sontag "Sue"—
that I never got to meet her is so mean!
O-oh, *yes*, I am wise—
my book jacket claims the moon!
But oh, I've paid a price:
I've lunched with Harold Bloom!
If I have to, I can fake *anything*!
I am strong, I'm not invisible,
I am Crii-tiick. (CITATION)

Cummins' poem, with its exclamatory statements and emphatic double entendres ("no one's ever making me go down again!") provokes a "can he really say that?" reaction. The more sacred the slain cow, the tastier the feast.[2]

Inspired by X. J. Kennedy and Cummins, I decided to write new lyrics to Cole Porter's "You're the Top!" (1934). Ethel Merman's eardrum-shattering version is on my MP3 play list, and after listening to it for several weeks while watching myself in the mirrors opposite the treadmill, the word's "You're a Flop!" began to supplant Porter's. Here is what I came up with:

You're a flop! You're a fallen soufflé,
You're a flop! You're a Martins' ballet,
You're a free throw by the Heat's Shaquille O'Neal,
You're the Geo Dome, interest-only loans,
You're Pepsi Clear.
You're the worst, you're an Enron pension,
You've been cursed, like the Knicks post-season,

Just one look at you and I'm glad for what I've got,
Cause if honey I'm no bargain,
You're a flop!

You're a flop, you're a hanging chad,
You're a flop, Darryl S's rehab,
You're the definition Clinton tried to fake,
You're fat in Big Macs, Bush in Iraq,
You're Heaven's Gate!
You're no good, you're your mother's cooking,
Understood, you're also bad looking
If you come around my 'hood I'll call the cops,
Cause if honey I'm no bargain,
You're a flop!

Are these lyrics funny? Perhaps, though I didn't have to stretch as much as Kennedy, Reiss, and Cummins to write them. Porter's lines and buoyant melody are lighthearted and funny to begin with. Trying to express a melancholy sentiment with Porter's template would be like trying to write a sad limerick. And the decision to compare the lyric's object to contemporary flops opened an endless supply of material albeit with built-in obsolescence as the so-called "flops" become obsolete in the collective memory.

If the deliberate subversion of song lyrics can be a source of humor, so too can the accidental. The rise of pop and heavy metal music in the latter half of the twentieth century brought with it a decline in the singers' desire — or ability — to enunciate clearly and an increase in *mondegreens*, or misheard song lyrics. The exact nature of the mondegreen can be psychologically revealing: Imagine what's really on the mind of the young man who mishears the refrain "I'm your Venus / I'm your fire / at your desire" from the 1970s hit by Shocking Blue, as "I'm your penis. . . ." A young woman learning to drive hears "Take the Last Right Turn" instead of the Beatles "Paper Back Writer," and a Filipino-American poet believes that Johnny Rivers is singing about a secret "Asian" man, not the "agent man" of the 1960s hit television series *Secret Agent*. Once he understood the lyrics as written, poet Nick Carbo observed that he'd happened upon a perfect "metaphor for the Asian-American male. A lot of times, he's invisible in this American culture" (Carbo 2004). He was inspired to write "Secret Asian Man," the title poem of his second poetry collection:

Secret Asian Man
He's given a number,
he's given a new name,
he's given an automatic pistol,
he's given a license to kill.

He could be Chinese, Nepalese,
Cambodian, Timorese, Laotian,
Indonesian, Burmese, or Thai.

He can kick higher than Jackie Chan,
he can be as devious as Dr. Fu Man Chu,
he can speak better English than Charlie Chan,
and he can even make a great pot of Moo Goo Gai Pan.

He could be Korean, Japanese,
Singaporean, Malaysian, Tibetan,
Vietnamese, or from Brunei.

He'll torture you with drops of water between the eyes,
shove bamboo strips under your nails, then dip them in iodine.
He'll torture you by tying you up in a wicker chair,
make you watch endless reruns of Kung Fu with David Carradine.

He's given a number,
he's given a new name,
he's given an automatic pistol,
he's given a license to kill. (Carbo 2000)

Carbo doesn't adhere to the rhythm and syntax of the original song. He doesn't need to. The "Secret Agent" of the Rivers' song and the TV series is an idealized male: he fights for good; uses brains, wit, and charm instead of guns to get the job done; has trouble with authority; and is the epitome of 1960s cool. Carbo's is essentially a list poem in which he piles on the pop-culture cliché's of the Asian man. The humor is in the timing. The second and fourth stanzas, with their lists of possible countries-of-origin are reminders of how one Asian is indistinguishable from another to those who accept as truth pop culture stereotypes. The third stanza names the pop culture figures that perpetuate these stereotypes along with a reference to the restaurant dish that for decades defined Chinese food for most Americans. The fifth stanza follows the same paradigm as the third. While the poem has an overall recognizable form, its humor is

attained in the third and fifth stanzas where Carbo creates a structure—the first three lines of "serious" references—that he breaks with a punchline, the funny reference of the fourth line.

Would any of these poems be as entertaining to readers unfamiliar with the original tunes and lyrics? Probably not. The humor in the poem is enhanced for those who know the original melodies. They might even sing along as they read. The anthems and Christmas carols of Reiss's poems are likely familiar to most readers, and Helen Reddy's song has been kept alive by a Burger King commercial ("I Am Man") that enjoys a steady audience on *YouTube*. But what about "These Foolish Things," the Strachey/Link/Maschwitz song that inspired Kennedy's hilarious homage? It belongs in the great American songbook that seems to be fading from popular culture. Pity the poor readers who don't know its glories. They exist without those magnificent sad songs to comfort, entertain, and inspire them. And that is not funny.

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Notes

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1. If in the 1980s you ever rode a bus from, say, Albany, New York, to Washington, D.C. to join the March for Women's Lives, with your "A Woman Without a Man is Like a Fish Without a Bicycle" poster rolled under your seat, and your "Meet a Woman Who Has Had an Abortion" button affixed to your tie-die t-shirt there was a point, most likely as you approached Delaware, when you and your comrades sang "I Am Woman..." like campers after a hike singing "One Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall."
2. The pop performer Weird Al Yankovic knew this when he recorded his hits "Like a Surgeon" (1985) and "Eat It!" (1984) to the Madonna and Michael Jackson tunes "Like a Virgin" (1984) and "Beat It!" (1984). Although neither of these two pop icons are known for their senses of humor—least of all about themselves—the fact that they granted Yankovic permission to use their songs illustrates their business savvy.

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