



## *Shakespeare in the “Gangsta’s Paradise”. Akala and the empowering potential of the Bard’s poetry*

by Marco Canani

In 1995 Artis Leon Ivey Jr., the Afro-American rapper best known by his stage name Coolio, released one of his most popular hits, “Gangsta’s Paradise”. The song – which samples the chorus and instrumentation of Stevie Wonder’s “Pastime Paradise” (1976) – featured in the soundtrack of *Dangerous Minds* (1995), a motion picture based on Lou Anne Johnson’s autobiography, *My Posse Don’t Do Homework* (1992). Johnson, a former US Marine, played by Michelle Pfeiffer, lands a job as an English teacher in a school of unprivileged teenagers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Unfortunately, her tough experience in the Armed Forces does not come in handy as she struggles to keep a hold on the students, who are far busier coping with the hardship of poverty and exclusion – fighting in gangs, taking drugs, and hustling – than they are with their reading list. Just as she is about to lose hope and quit, Johnson devises the “Dylan/Dylan Contest”, a class competition that moves from a close-reading to an allegorical interpretation of such Bob Dylan’s songs as “Let Me Die in My Footsteps” (1963) and “Mr Tambourine Man” (1965), and Dylan Thomas’s poem “Do not go gentle into that good night” (1947). This teaching strategy proves successful in engaging her students, who eventually realize, to quote Bourdieu, that “ability or talent is itself the



product of an investment of time and cultural capital" ([1983] 1997: 48). Although the movie ends with a tragic incident, the teacher succeeds in making her class understand the value of learning as a means towards self-development and upward mobility.

The movie met with mixed reception in that it seemed unable to communicate with minority cultures in their own language. Even though her students are mostly Black and Latinos, Johnson/Pfeiffer only selects poetical and musical works belonging to the white nineteenth-century canon and, as critics pointed out, the most significant difference between the book and its screen adaptation lies precisely in this choice. Whereas the screen version of *Miss Johnson* exploits the symbolism of Bob Dylan's lines to get her students interested in poetry, the real Miss Johnson had accomplished that task by selecting a variety of rap songs, which she deemed closer to her audience. As Evert observed back in 1995, rap music

plays the same role today as Bob Dylan did in 1960, giving voice to the hopes and angers of a generation, and a lot of rap is powerful writing. What has happened in the book-to-movie transition of Lou Anne Johnson's book is revealing. The movie pretends to show poor black kids being bribed into literacy by Dylan and candy bars, but actually it is the crossover white audience that is being bribed with mind-candy in the form of safe words by the two Dylans. What are the chances this movie could have been made with Michelle Pfeiffer hooking the kids on the lyrics of Ice Cube or Snoop Doggy Dogg? (Ebert 1995)

In a way, the lyrics of "Gangsta's Paradise" bridge the gap between class and culture that reviewers pointed out as missing in *Dangerous Minds*. In the song, Coolio voices the difficulty for disadvantaged teenagers to achieve a better lifestyle by using the very same language of the culture he is addressing, that is, the beats and verses of rap. The first line of the song sets a scenario of spiritual desolation that curiously harks back to the Christian tradition. By quoting a line from Psalm 23:4, Coolio claims that he has been walking "through the valley of the shadow of death". Yet the eschatological hope of Christianity is at once denied by the rapper. While money is stressed as the only value left, Coolio emphasises the difficulty of getting a chance to be educated so as to improve one's social status and future potential:

They say I got to learn, but nobody's there to teach me.  
If they can't understand, how can they reach me.  
I guess they can't. I guess they won't. I guess they front.  
That's why I know my life is outta luck, Fool. (Coolio 1995)

Two decades after "Gangsta's Paradise" and *Dangerous Minds*, some crucial issues still need to be addressed concerning the role and function of literature, and its representation from the viewpoint of ethnicity, but also youth and mass culture. These aspects are especially relevant at present, as mainstream thinking and educational policies tend to write off humanities as unnecessary and expendable in comparison with technical and scientific training, which better satisfies short-term, profit-oriented



goals. Giving fresh strength to the Socratic tradition as well as to Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital", Nussbaum (2010) has stressed the crucial role that humanities play in fostering critical thinking. In Nussbaum's view, humanities and literature are fundamental in developing an active and aware engagement in citizenship, and in promoting the general well-being of societies beyond their mere economic growth.

An interesting case in the promotion of humanities among disadvantaged young people is represented by the work of The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company, founded in 2009 by the British rapper Kingslee James Daley, best known by his stage name "Akala", a Buddhist word meaning "the immovable". Grounded more in the framework of literary theory and sociology than in performance studies, this article focuses on the work of Akala and The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company to explore the forms in which Shakespeare's poetry and drama can be made to communicate to audiences that would not otherwise be likely to experience, enjoy, and eventually benefit from the Bard. In this regard, Akala's workshop at the Juvenile Detention Centre "Cesare Beccaria" in Milan – organised in the autumn of 2016 as part of the events for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death – is discussed as a relevant case study. At the same time, the essay aims at re-contextualising – rather than re-defining – what classical literature is, and the way it may communicate in the present. In so doing, it purports to examine the ways in which literature – and particularly Shakespeare's work and language – can still be meaningful in contemporary society.

### 1. IS RAP 21<sup>ST</sup>-CENTURY POETRY? AKALA, "THE BLACK SHAKESPEARE"

Born in London in 1983 to a family of mixed Afro-Caribbean origins, Akala grew up in Kentish Town, where he was exposed to the culture and tradition of his family background, but also to drama. He attended the Winnie Mandela School, a Pan-African Saturday school in Camden, and his stepfather worked as the stage director of the Hackney Empire, an early twentieth-century music hall that had re-opened as a theatre in 1984 (Williams 2016: 3). As a teenager, Akala developed a fascination with hip-hop and rap, and later acknowledged his explicit debt to the Afro-American rappers of the 1990s, namely Notorius BIG, Ice MC and, above all, the Wu-Tang Clan, whom he defined as his "black CNN" (Collin 2013; Goldstein 2013).

Akala debuted as a musician in 2003, when he founded his own independent music label – Illa State Record – and released his first album, *It's Not a Rumour*, in 2006. The album marked a significant change in his career, and not only because he was awarded a MOBO for Best Hip Hop Act the same year.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the official launch of *It's Not a Rumour* was preceded by a single hit entitled "Shakespeare", in which the singer addressed a quite paradoxical plea to his audience, "Don't ever compare me to rappers". Almost distancing himself from the hip-hop tradition his work is rooted in,

---

<sup>1</sup>The "MOBO", or Music of Black Origin Awards, were established in the United Kingdom in 1996 to promote black music, regardless of the nationality, ethnicity or skin colour of the performers. The awards feature various music genres such as Gospel, Jazz, RnB, Soul, Reggae and Hip-Hop.



Akala defined himself “like Shakespeare with a little twist”, and, even more provocatively, as “Shakespeare, reincarnated”. The song also includes a stanza – a concept that I deliberately intend in its formal, poetic meaning, since most rap songs are modelled on the traditional four-line ballad stanza – that forestalls what would be Akala’s relationship with the Bard in the late 2000s:

I’m similar to William but a little different  
I do it for kids that’s illiterate, not Elizabeth  
Stuck on the road, faces screwed up  
Feel like the world spat ‘em out and they chewed up. (Akala 2006)

I suggest that the irregular metre of these couplets provides a kind of artistic manifesto, one where Akala states his beliefs on the educational and inspiring function of his art while identifying the audience he envisages for his music. Rap should not be seen uniquely as a lowbrow form of art, although it may be profitably exploited to reach audiences endowed with little cultural capital. In other words, Akala’s “Shakespeare” suggests that the musical quality intrinsic to the Bard’s poetry and plays might be enhanced in order to stress their empowering potential.

Indeed, Shakespeare’s works have often been plundered by the entertainment industry in the light of their potential, with hip-hop and rap being only the latest in the long history of appropriation. Showing a general preference for female characters, opera, melodrama, and burlesque all thrived on Shakespeare’s works and themes throughout the nineteenth century, often challenging “the assumptions of the literary and Shakespearean canon when selecting texts for adaptation” (Sanders 2007: 97). Likewise, the twentieth century offers a whole range of highbrow and lowbrow Shakespearean productions, spanning from radio adaptations to shows, musicals, movies, comics and graphic novels, computer games, and even the porn industry (cf. Lanier 2002; Cavecchi e Soncini 2002; Buhler 2007; Grandi 2007; Hansen 2010).

Hip-hop appropriations of Shakespeare, however, are still in need of a thorough critical examination. Rap and hip-hop artists first turned to the Shakespearean canon in the late 1990s, exploiting its potential in the form of the teenage rebellion against traditional values such as parental authority, and the idea of financial progress as the cornerstone of social progress. Unlike cinema and theatre adaptations, rap and hip-hop music “appropriates Shakespeare and reinscribes both the man and the culture in [its own] world”, with the Bard operating as an iconic presence that can be manipulated to serve the artist’s purposes (Wetmore, Jr. 2006: 154; cf. also Lanier 2002: 72-73).

At the turn of the millennium, the first mainstream connection between rap and Shakespeare had been suggested by Jay-Z’s song “Renegade” (2001), in which Eminem claims, “See, I’m a poet to some, a regular modern day Shakespeare” (Jay-Z 2001). Rather than simplistically resorting to the traditional value attached to Shakespeare’s characters and themes, exploiting their potential as cultural commodities, I argue that with “Shakespeare” Akala purports to narrow the gap between highbrow and lowbrow culture by establishing a direct connection between



traditional poets and rappers. Such an argument might sound at odds with the singer's plea not to be compared with rappers, yet Akala's remarks on hip-hop and its founding concepts expose his provocation, legitimating the association of poetry and rap. In a TED Talk in 2011, Akala discussed the pillars of hip-hop, first codified by its "Founding Fathers" in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The five pivotal elements of this music genre, he explains, are deejaying, MC-ing (i.e., singing), break-dancing, graffiti art, and knowledge (Akala 2011). Just as poetry played a crucial role in the construction and preservation of cultural memory before literacy, becoming the collective repository of shared values, ideas, and beliefs, hip-hop and rap become in Akala's "Shakespeare" a powerful site where art can develop a critical social consciousness:

It's a matrix, I try and explain it  
But on a real thoe still ready blaze 'em  
No contradiction just face it  
They so enslaved, they are worse than a' agent. (Akala 2006)<sup>2</sup>

Predictably, Akala's self-proclaimed status as "the Black Shakespeare" soon attracted the attention of the music industry, which demanded justification for this alluring and desecrating comparison. The association between Shakespeare and Akala – or, in more general terms, between the canonical, authoritative poet and the contemporary rapper – finds its legitimation on gnoseological grounds. They both serve as custodians of the knowledge, traditions, and customs that they perpetuate in cultural and collective memory.

In addition, there is another interesting element that should be taken into consideration in discussing rap as a contemporary poetic form. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2009, Akala explained that his identification with Shakespeare should be seen from the viewpoint of the fluidity of poetic genres, and defined hip-hop as the performance of "a modern-day minstrel". In so doing, he stressed two crucial issues that have been the object of extensive critical debate over the past few decades. Akala's statements should be examined by bearing in mind what literary theorists have been discussing concerning the questionable status of literary genres as unchangeable forms. His claim challenges the idea of poetry as the literary genre that is most deeply indebted to canonical or codified forms, and thus as one that vehemently resists experimentation. Akala posits in fact the existence of

a genuine relationship between poetry of all forms and that song ["Shakespeare"] made me ask – if Shakespeare was alive today, would he have been a rapper? [...] Rap gets a hard time based on this new school of MCs from America who only rap about tits and arse and jewellery. But if you look at real hip-hop [...] it's poetry, it's social commentary, it's documenting history. And in three or 400 years, people will probably look upon it as such. There were those who frowned upon Shakespeare's work in his time, but it was a reflection of reality. (Emery 2009)

---

<sup>2</sup>On Akala's identification with Shakespeare cf. also O'Neill 2016: 251-252.



The connections between music and early modern drama have received much critical attention. As provocative as they may sound, Akala's statements on the nature of poetry and the performativity of literary genres are consistent with some recurring features of Shakespearean drama, in which music is often incorporated in the text to fulfil both intermedial and metadiegetic functions (Fischlin 2014: 264). In addition, recent scholarship has pinpointed the relationship between Shakespeare's works and "soundscape", that is, the concept of a culturally-determined perception and interpretation of sounds. In this regard, Folkerth (2002: 43) argues that Shakespeare's plays disclose a conscious engagement with "the public ear", suggesting that the Bard crafted his language bearing in mind both the receptivity of contemporary audiences as well as the full expressive potentiality of the linguistic and extralinguistic soundscape. Suffice it to think of the famous soliloquy at the end of *Richard II*. Imprisoned by Bolingbroke, the king fills the void of his cell at Pomfret Castle with his own thoughts, as if they were his companions in the real world. As Richard is questioning his own identity, his maddening visions are only momentarily interrupted by the sound of music:

[...] But whate'er I be,  
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd  
With being nothing.

[*The music plays.*]

Music do I hear?  
Ha, ha! keep time – how sour sweet music is,  
When time is broke and no proportion kept!  
So is it in the music of men's lives.  
And here have I the daintiness of ear  
To cheque time broke in a disorder'd string; (Richard II, V, v, 38-46)

Be it real or imaginary – as in the case of the storm that accompanies Lear's rage and consequent epiphanic experience –, the music that Richard hears in the solitude of his prison is not only functional to the staging of the scene. In fact, it also fulfils a fundamental metadiegetic role, proving that music and script form an essential bond in the play. This, in turn, backs Akala's reflections concerning Shakespeare's language, rap, and the plasticity of literary genres. Interestingly, this last concept was further explored by Akala in 2007, when a DJ challenged him on Radio 1 Extra to come up with a freestyle piece that would include as many titles of Shakespeare's plays as he could.<sup>3</sup> The result was the song "Comedy Tragedy History", which Akala released in its first version in the album *Free Lasso* (2007), and then completed with a second part in 2008. From the viewpoint of literary criticism, the final piece is a *pastiche* in which the titles of twenty-seven plays by Shakespeare are interspersed with sixteen quotes from the Bard's works. Although only in the final verse does Akala claim to be "the black

---

<sup>3</sup>In rapping, *freestyle* is a composition technique based on verbal improvisation and the free association of ideas and words connected with a given theme. See Bennett 2004: 196.



Shakespeare”, at the beginning of the song he establishes once more the connection with the Bard’s language and poetry and the distance from other rappers he had expounded in “Shakespeare”. And in so doing, he further dispels the customary difference between high and low culture:

Dat boy Akala’s a diamond fella  
All you little boys are a *Comedy of Errors*  
You bellow but you fellows get played like  
The cello, I’m doing my ting  
You’re jealous like *Othello*  
Who you? what you gonna do?  
All you little boys get *Tamed like the Shrew*  
You’re *mid-summer dreamin’*  
Your tunes ain’t appealing  
I’m *Capulet*, you’re *Montague*, I ain’t feeling  
I am the *Julius Caesar* hear me  
*The Merchant of Venice* couldn’t sell your CD  
As for me, *All’s Well That Ends Well*  
Your boy’s like *Macbeth*, you’re going to Hell  
*Measure for Measure*, I am the best here  
You’re *Merry Wives of Windsor* not *King Lear*  
I don’t know about *Timon*  
I know he was in Athens  
When I come back like *Hamlet* you pay for your action. (Akala 2007)

In addition, the title “Comedy Tragedy History” includes another interesting allusion to Shakespeare. As they are waiting for the actors that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have met on their way to Elsinore, Polonius praises the ability of the company to perform any kind of plays, from tragedy to comedy, from pastoral to historical drama:

*Polonius*  
The best actors in the world, either for tragedy,  
comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, his-  
torical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-  
historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem un-  
limited: Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too  
light. For the law of writ and the liberty, these are  
the only men. (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 392-398)

By refashioning Polonius’s lines, Akala hides in the title of his freestyle piece a further allusion to *Hamlet*, one which operates as an instance of *double-coding* that discloses itself only to “the more intertextually aware readers” (Eco 2004: 220). The rapper’s manipulation of Shakespeare’s language, and his appropriation of Shakespearean titles, characters, lines and themes, regardless of the genre they belong to, might again be discussed within the broader framework of literary theory. Todorov,



for instance, forcefully rejected the idea of poetic language as a crystallised form, and the notion of poetics as unchangeable systems. As the critic maintained in *Genres in Discourse* (1978), to

persist in paying attention to genres might seem to be a vain if not anachronistic pastime today. We all know that genres used to exist: in the good old days of classicism there were ballads, odes, sonnets, tragedies, and comedies; but do these exist today? Even the genres of the nineteenth-century, poetry or novel (and these are no longer quite genres in our eyes), seem to be coming undone, at least in the literature “that counts”. (Todorov [1978] 1990: 13)<sup>4</sup>

The absence of punctuation in “Comedy Tragedy History” suggests viewing Shakespeare’s entire corpus as Akala’s source of inspiration. At the same time, it points to the dissolution of traditional concepts of literary genres, hinting at the impossibility to draw a watertight separation between high and low genres and to rely on canonical hierarchies. This argument is consistent with Shakespearean criticism as it has developed since at least the eighteenth century. As Voltaire put it in his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), “Shakespeare avait un génie plein de force et de fécondité, de naturel et de sublime, sans la moindre étincelle de bon goût, et sans la moindre connaissance des règles” (Voltaire [1734] 1964: 128). A short while later, Samuel Johnson was to stress in his “Preface” to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765) the Bard’s excellent ability to read “human sentiments in human language” over the critical commonplace that “His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to any of their laws” (Johnson 1968: 65, 75). What one should look for in reading and enjoying Shakespeare’s works is the Bard’s effect, rather than their form, which might change, determined as it is by social and historical contingencies.

## 2. PROMOTING A CULTURE OF CRITICAL THINKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY: THE HIP-HOP SHAKESPEARE COMPANY AT THE I. P. M. “CESARE BECCARIA” IN MILAN

Having established his connection with the Bard, Akala moved on to his next project, grounded in the idea that Shakespeare’s works might be meaningful to the audience he had addressed in his breakthrough single, provided that they be appropriated and refashioned into contemporary discourse and art forms. With the support of Sir Ian McKellen, he founded The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company in London in 2009, which stages Shakespearean productions that popularise the original texts by incorporating acting alongside other performing arts, from rapping to freestyling and dancing. Through performances, workshops, seminars and lectures specifically devised for teenagers, and touching upon relevant themes and issues as various as black history and globalisation, the company has a dual entertaining and educational mission. By exploring “the social, cultural and linguistic parallels between the works of William

---

<sup>4</sup>For a different view on the same issue, cf. Segre [1985] 1988: 245-247.





Shakespeare and that of modern day hip-hop artists”, The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company provides “bespoke education/social entrepreneurship development programmes offering young people a different view of the arts and ultimately, themselves”.<sup>5</sup>

Arguably, Shakespeare’s work is particularly well-suited for such aims, being an almost inexhaustible repository of universal meanings – a concept that is perhaps still best summarised in Johnson’s idea of Shakespeare as “the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life”, and whose characters are “the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply” (Johnson 1968: 62). The long history of adaptations, appropriations, and popularisation that Akala’s work revisits reveals Shakespeare’s iconic status, which perfectly fits Barthes’s notion of the modern myth as a semiological process that “lends itself to history in two ways: by its form, which is only relatively motivated; by its concept, the nature of which is historical” (Barthes 1972: 137). In other words, Shakespeare’s status as a myth – which accounts for the abundant plundering of his work through the centuries, and its recent proliferation across media – should be discussed as both a result of the universal repository of archetypal themes embedded in his work as well as a contingent, culturally-specific phenomenon.

In this regard, a case in point is The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company’s performance of *Richard II*, which was on at the South Bank Theatre in March 2014, and later led to the production of videos featuring the London rapper Ashley “Bashy” Thomas. Set in 2068, the ancestral fight for power is recast in the future, touching upon issues of ethnicity as well as globalisation. Royal residences are replaced by the modern and aseptic space of what looks like the headquarters of a multinational corporation. Richard, King and President of the United Nations of the African Continent, makes a video call to his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and the Ambassador of Namibia, Thomas Mowbray. The confrontation between Mowbray and Bolingbroke in the first scene of *Richard II* is represented through dialogues that intersperse original lines with quotations from Shakespeare’s play, as in Bolingbroke’s declaration that “With a foul traitor’s name stuff I thy throat,<sup>6</sup> / And wish – so please my sovereign – ere I move, / What my tongue speaks my right drawn sword may prove” (*Richard II*, I, i, 44-46). And when Richard summons the two “gentlemen” back to order, Mowbray and Bolingbroke engage in a rapped dialogic exchange, urging each other to “Draw for your sword”.

Together with the Performing Art Professional Lorianne Tika-Lemba, Akala ran a two-day workshop at the Juvenile Detention Centre “Cesare Beccaria” in Milan in November 2016. The workshop was organised by Margaret Rose and Mariacristina Cavecchi, lecturers in Theatre Studies at the Università degli Studi di Milano, with the financial support of the British Council. The no-profit young people’s theatre company

---

<sup>5</sup> See *The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company’s* official website <<http://www.hiphopshakespeare.com>> (21 August 2017).

<sup>6</sup>Modernised as “With a foul traitor’s name *do I stuff thy throat*” in The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company’s adaptation.



PuntoZero, founded in 1995 by director Giuseppe Scutellà and actress Lisa Mazoni, hosted the workshop. Participants included members of PuntoZero, some young inmates – who had already been working on a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that later debuted at Milan's Piccolo Teatro Studio Melato in February 2017 – and a group of undergraduate and graduate students. By working in small groups, participants were requested to produce and stage a short *pièce*, refashioning specific scenes from Shakespeare's *Dream*. The workshop was conducted in English, providing just a minimum of translation for those participants who could understand only Italian.<sup>7</sup>

From his songs and performances to his workshops, Akala's work is very significant from the viewpoint of literary studies, as the strategies he pursues to appropriate – and popularise – Shakespeare's language suggest. His activity at the Milan Juvenile Detention Centre might thus be considered as a litmus test for his approach to the poetic and dramatic text and its performance, an approach that stands on three main pillars: musicality, language and themes. Akala's focus on the musical quality of the Shakespearean text enables him to refashion the Bard's language according to the beat of hip-hop and its principles, while safeguarding the Elizabethan metre. A telling example is his interpretation of Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day", which he first introduced in a teenage seminar on poetry in London shortly after founding his company. The scores of hip-hop and freestyle music are mostly based on a simple and regular pattern that alternates a short combination of sounds. Following this binary system of beats, Akala manages to rap the sonnet reproducing the sound pattern of the iambic pentameter, which he discusses in his workshops as the basic rhythm of the human heartbeat. By beating a hand on his chest, Akala encouraged the participants in the Milan workshop to read out loud some of Shakespeare's lines by mimicking the sound pattern of their own systolic and diastolic contractions, avoiding the more complex concepts of accentual-syllabic metrics. His attention to the iambic pentameter should be seen as a homage not to classical metrics, but rather to a basic sound pattern intrinsic to many forms of music in the Western tradition (Akala 2001).

As far as the Bard's language is concerned, one of the aims of The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company is to introduce young audiences to its evocative and visual force. Shakespeare's ability to communicate with young audiences is demonstrated by Akala's "Shakespeare or Hip-Hop Quiz", which consists of a set of quotes taken from the Bard's plays and hip-hop and rap lyrics. An interesting example can be found in the TED Talk that Akala delivered from Aldeburgh back in 2011. There, he had invited his audience to perform a close-reading activity of a number of quotes connected with various themes, such as love or money, in order to identify their source:

---

<sup>7</sup>See also Bolognini 2016, which includes Akala's video interview with the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica* after the first day of the Milan workshop.



- a. "To destroy the beauty from which one came"
- b. "I was not born under a rhyming planet"

By comparing the Bard's language with the language of rap, and the ways in which both Shakespeare and rappers express concerns and issues that are relevant to human nature, rather than being cultural-specific, Akala suggests that the difference between codes and genres – such as Elizabethan poetry and drama, and hip-hop and rap – is not always clear-cut. Indeed, the first quote does not come from Shakespeare, but is taken from Jay-Z's song "Can I live?" (1996). Taken from *Much Ado about Nothing*, instead the second quote can be considered a curious metapoetical inclusion in Akala's argument. As opposed to Beatrice – who had ironically observed that "[...] there / was a star danced, and under that was I born" (*Much Ado about Nothing*, II, i, 315-316) –, towards the end of the play Benedick blames his natal star for his inability to woo the girl with sweet words, concluding that "No, I was not born under a rhyming / planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms" (*ibid.*: V, ii, 39-40).

As far as the Milan workshop is concerned, the participants were involved in a creative-writing session, working in groups on specific scenes from *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, which the young actors from PuntoZero had already been rehearsing under the direction of Giuseppe Scutellà and Lisa Mazoni. Shakespeare's text was employed as a *canovaccio* for transposing the themes and issues tackled in the play into the cultural universe of the attendees. Any form of art could be deployed: acting, dancing, singing, or rapping, and no language restriction was imposed. The only principle guiding the activity was the need to establish an empathic connection with the text while producing the *pièce* that was staged on the second day at the I.P.M. "Cesare Beccaria" theatre. In the final performance, Hermia and Lysander's escape was delayed because the girl could not miss her favourite reality show, while Puck was cast as a naughty womaniser who tries to vent his voracious sexual appetite on Titania's fairies. Similarly, Oberon's order to Puck to "Fetch me that flower; the herb I shew'd thee once" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II, i, 169) became an allusion to the king's trusted drug-dealer, with the following havoc acquiring the symbolic meaning of the problems related to drug consumption.



A group working on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* during the workshop held at the I. P. M. Cesare Beccaria, Milan (November 14-15, 2016). Photograph by Davide Forti/Puntozero



A group rehearsing before the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* during the workshop held at the I. P. M. Cesare Beccaria, Milan (November 14-15, 2016). Photograph by Davide Forti/Puntozero



I suggest that Akala's appropriation of Shakespeare's plays ought to be discussed bearing in mind Fischlin's recent definition of the Shakespearean corpus as "an avatar". From this perspective, the Bard is a virtual image, a semiotic process that can perpetually find new virtual embodiments in its interaction with the social and historical contingency it is brought upon:

Shakespeare's adaptation into intermedial contexts associated with the power of popular song produces new contexts and resonances that sound Shakespeare's capacity to mutate, to remain endlessly protean, as the pressures of new media and new intertexts are brought to bear on his presence as an avatar of proliferative meaning. (Fischlin 2014: 260-261)

Several scholars have addressed phenomena as appropriation, re-writings, and adaptations of canonical works, providing different theoretical frameworks. In his discussion of Shakespearean films, Friedman (2008: 3) distinguishes between versions and adaptations, defining the former as the modernisation of Shakespeare's language, and the latter as the transformation of the Bard's plots into vernacular languages. Shifting her focus to popular music, instead, Sanders (2005: 26) argues that although Shakespeare's presence is pervasive in pop music, this phenomenon should not be read as a mere instance of adaptation. This approach, the critic maintains, seems reductionist when it comes to less conventional attempts at refashioning the Bard. Akala's work, I suggest, lies halfway between Friedman's and Sander's frameworks. His approach might be better identified by borrowing Bolter and Grusin's concept of "repurposing", or "the practice of adapting a property" from one medium to another (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 273). Typical of the entertainment industry, repurposing relies on the interconnection of different media – or, one could argue, different art forms – and it is influenced by cultural, social and economic forces. The result is a process of content-spreading in which the various media – or art forms – involved interact with one another and with the audience, reducing discontinuities to a minimum. These are indeed two of the bedrocks of Akala's work, from the modernisation of a codified form as the iambic pentameter to the proactive participation of teenagers in his workshop at the Juvenile Detention Centre "Cesare Beccaria" in Milan.

Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Paine, William Godwin, and Cesare Beccaria contributed to direct contemporary ideas on the correctional and re-educational aims of detention in addition to punishment. By transposing verse and drama into the beats of hip-hop and rap, and by introducing them into the educational activities of a Juvenile Detention Centre, Shakespeare's works may help develop abilities that are crucial to becoming responsible citizens in modern democratic societies. In his TED Talk, Akala concluded his argument on Shakespeare and rappers as custodians of collective knowledge with some remarks on the reasons why liberal arts still hold an invaluable role in our society, especially in the education of future generations:



What is the purpose of education today? What are we teaching young people? What are we training the next generation to do and for? Are we training each individual human being in a society where increasingly the success or failure of the society is gonna be dependent on the mind, the ideas of the people within that society? Are we training people to aspire to be the best they can be, to reach their full potential? [...] Education, who does it belong to, and who doesn't it belong to? (Akala 2011)

At present, the progress and achievements of societies, as Nussbaum argues in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), are far too often confused with economic growth in spite of disproportion and inequality. From the viewpoint of education, this also accounts for the widespread adoption of policies that downsize the role of humanities in the light of their allegedly scarce economic profitability. Through his well-known distinction of economic, cultural, and social capital, Bourdieu had already suggested that such "functionalist" conceptions of education would eventually perpetuate social immobility and largely ignore the convertible nature of the non-economic forms of capital. The transferable and spendable nature of cultural capital, instead, makes its circulation particularly "determinant in the reproduction of social structure" (Bourdieu [1983] 1997: 55).

The complex challenges of contemporary societies demand individuals endowed not only with factual knowledge, but also with such crucial "soft skills" as Socratic self-examination, critical thinking, and imaginative abilities. Humanities are indispensable in order to promote these capacities, which, albeit not easily convertible into economic capital in a short-term perspective, are essential to train individuals who are able "to think and argue for themselves, rather than defer to tradition and authority" (Nussbaum 2010: 48). Authority, of course, should be considered here not only in old patriarchal terms, but also in the form of political and economic power, the dangerous allure of micro-criminality and hustling for people from poor upbringing, or the harmful pressure of groups of peers. By consequence, a scrutinising attitude based on critical and Socratic thinking, Nussbaum adds, can foster a culture of accountability and mutual respect, raising individual awareness of one's own actions in – and contribution to – the society (54). Indeed, "The grand requirement for the reformation and improvement of the human species", Godwin noted in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), "seems to consist in the rousing of the mind" ([1793] 1842 II: 163). And these abilities seem all the more essential for young citizens who should acquire new awareness as they are about to step into the world, deserving a second chance.



WORKS CITED

Akala, "Hip-Hop & Shakespeare? Akala at TEDxAldeburgh", 7 December 2011 <<https://ed.ted.com/on/kg3xD9IP>> (8 July 2017).

Barthes R., 1972, "Myth Today", in Id., *Mythologies*, Noonday Press, New York, pp. 109-164.

Bennett A., 2004, "Hip-Hop am Main, Rappin' on the Tyne: Hip-Hop Culture as a Local Construct in Two European Cities", in M. Forman, M.A. Neal (eds.), *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York-Abingdon, pp. 177-200.

Bolognini L., "Milano, Shakespeare in hip hop per i ragazzi del Beccaria: il rapper londinese Akala va in carcere", *la Repubblica*, 15 novembre 2016, <[http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/11/15/news/milano\\_shakespeare\\_in\\_hip\\_hop\\_conquista\\_i\\_ragazzi\\_del\\_beccaria-152034209/?ref=search](http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/11/15/news/milano_shakespeare_in_hip_hop_conquista_i_ragazzi_del_beccaria-152034209/?ref=search)> (1 August 2017).

Bolter J.D. and R. Grusin, 1999, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA).

Bourdieu P., [1983] 1997, "The Forms of Capital", in A.H. Halsey et al. (eds.), *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, Oxford UP, Oxford, pp. 46-58.

Buhler S.M., 2007, "Musical Shakespeares: Attending to Ophelia, Juliet, and Desdemona", in R. Shaughnessy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, pp. 150-174.

Cavecchi M. e S. Soncini (a cura di), 2002, *Shakespeare graffiti: il cigno di Avon nella cultura di massa*, Unicopli, Milano.

Collin J., "Akala: 'Hip-Hop is a Modern Day Minstrel Show'", *New Statesman*, 6 August 2013, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/08/akala-hip-hop-modern-day-minstrel-show>> (12 March 2017).

Ebert R., Review to *Dangerous Minds*, *The Chicago Sun Times*, 11 August 1995, <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dangerous-minds-1995>> (22 May 2017).

Eco U., 2004, "Intertextual Irony and Levels of Reading", in Id., *On Literature*, Harcourt Books, Orlando, pp. 212-235.

Emery A., "Shakespeare: How Do I Compare Thee to Hip-Hop?", *The Guardian*, 15 April 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/apr/15/shakespeare-hip-hip-rap>> (12 March 2017).

Fischlin D., 2014, "Sounding Shakespeare: Intermedial Adaptation and Popular Music", in D. Fischlin (ed.), *OuterSpeares: Shakespeare, Intermedia, and the Limits of Adaptation*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, pp. 257-289.

Folkert W., 2002, *The Sound of Shakespeare*, Routledge, Abingdon-New York.

Friedman M.D., 2008, "Introduction: 'To think o' t' teen that I have turned you to': The Scholarly Consideration of Teen Shakespeare Films", *Shakespeare Bulletin* 26:2, pp. 1-7.

Godwin W., [1793] 1842, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 2 vols., Watson, London.



Goldstein D., "Five Songs Which Shaped Hip Hop: London-born MC Akala Picks the Most Important Tracks in Rap History", *TimeOut*, 29 July 2013, <<https://www.timeout.com/london/music/akala-five-songs-which-shaped-hip-hop>> (12 March 2017).

Grandi R., 2007, "His-Tory and Their-Story: *Antony and Cleopatra* in tre burlesques ottocenteschi", *Tess* 7, pp. 87-108.

Hansen A., 2010, *Shakespeare and Popular Music*, Continuum, London-New York.

Johnson L., 1992, *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

Johnson S., 1968, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vol. 7 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. A. Sherbo, Yale UP, New Haven-London.

Lanier D., 2002, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Oxford UP, Oxford.

McLuskie, K. and K. Rumbold, 2014, *Cultural Value in Twenty-First-Century England: The Case of Shakespeare*, Manchester UP, Manchester.

Nussbaum M.C., 2010, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton UP, Princeton-Oxford.

O'Neill S., 2016, "'It's William Back from the Dead': Commemoration, Representation, and Race in Akala's Hip-Hop Shakespeare", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 16:2, pp. 246-256.

Sanders J., 2005, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Routledge, London.

Sanders J., 2007, *Shakespeare and Music: Afterlives and Borrowings*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Segre C., [1985] 1988, *Introduction to the Analysis of the Literary Text*, Indiana UP, Indiana-Bloomington.

Shakespeare W., 1991a, *King Richard II*, ed. P. Ure, The Arden Shakespeare, Routledge, London-New York.

Shakespeare W., 1991b, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. H.F. Brooks, The Arden Shakespeare, Routledge, London-New York.

Shakespeare W., 1994a, *Hamlet*, ed. H. Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare, Routledge, London-New York.

Shakespeare W., 1994b, *Much Ado about Nothing*, ed. A.R. Humphreys, The Arden Shakespeare, Routledge, London-New York.

Todorov T., [1978] 1990, *Genres in Discourse*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge.

Voltaire, [1734] 1964, *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. R. Naves, Garnier, Paris.

Wetmore Jr. K., 2006, "'Big Willie Style'. Staging Hip-Hop Shakespeare and Being Down with the Bard", in J. Hulbert, K. J. Wetmore Jr., R.L. York, *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 147-171.

Williams J.A., 2017, "Rapping Postcoloniality: Akala's 'The Thieves Banquet' and Neocolonial Critique", *Popular Music and Society* 40:1, pp. 89-101.





DISCOGRAPHY

- Akala, 2006, *It's Not a Rumour*, Illa State Records.  
Akala, 2007, *Freedom Lasso*, Illa State Records.  
Coolio, 1995, *Dangerous Minds*, MCA Soundtracks.  
Jay-Z, 2001, *The Blueprint*, Roc-A-Fella/The Island Def Jam Music Group.

FILMOGRAPHY

- SMITH JOHN N., 1995, *Dangerous Minds*, 35mm, 100'.

---

**Marco Canani** is Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in English Literature at the Università degli Studi di Milano. He received his Ph.D. with a dissertation on Vernon Lee and the Italian Renaissance, a study largely based on archival research at the University of Oxford (UK) and Colby College (USA). He is the author of *Ellenismi britannici. L'ellenismo nella poesia, nelle arti e nella cultura britannica, dagli augustei al Romanticismo* (2014), co-author of *Introduzione allo studio della letteratura inglese* (2017), and has published articles on John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, and A.J. Cronin. His research interests include Romantic poetry, Anglo-Italian studies, and gender studies.

[marco.canani@unimi.it](mailto:marco.canani@unimi.it)