Shakespeare, the Musical and Political Humour in *Kiss Me, Kate* Revived

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Abstract:
The present study focuses on Michael Blakemore's turn-of-the-millennium revival for Broadway and the London stage of the 1948 musical comedy Kiss Me, Kate *by Cole Porter (music and lyrics) and Bella and Samuel Spewack (book). The metatheatrical structure of Blakemore's revival of this famous adaptation of Shakespeare's* Taming of the Shrew *impresses, among other things, by the multiplication of intertextual links as it projects Porter and the Spewacks' as well as Shakespeare's 'battles of the sexes' against the realistically 'painted' background of a world populated by actors, gangsters and, as an element of novelty, politically-involved US army representatives. Thus, Blakemore's directorial perspective on the text(s) in performance turns out to be thought-provoking, drawing the present-day audience's attention to a wider range of gender, culture and power-related forms of conflict, and making excellent use of subversive humour, the mechanisms of which this study will explore, to subtly comment on history-shaping political 'games'.*

Keywords: adaptation, intertextuality, performance, humour, gender, politics

Introduction

Though often evaluated in negative terms as a second-rate, inferior cultural practice, adaptation is one of the basic manifestations of intertextual dialogue and a more or less controversial mechanism of creation within and/or across artistic genres and media. Interpreted from a prejudiced perspective as "minor and subsidiary and certainly never as good as the 'original'" (Hutcheon 2006: xii), adaptation – the product and/or the process – may yet reveal, on closer scrutiny, a very interesting and challenging object of study which requires, for a fair assessment,

> [an] exploration of what can happen when stories "travel" – when an adapted text migrates from its context of creation to the adaptation's context of reception. Because adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting. And with change come corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of stories (Hutcheon 2006: xvi).

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Adaptations of William Shakespeare's plays have not been an exception from this general principle. Plays, operas, ballet performances, paintings, children's fairytales or films which adapted and updated Shakespeare's texts in different media for different audiences in different cultural contexts have systematically 're-mediated' the meanings of the Bard's heritage in the larger context of culture dynamics. The musical comedy *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* by Cole Porter (music and lyrics) and Bella and Samuel Spewack (book), is a relevant case in point. It provides fruitful ground for the discussion of the art of adaptation, of the intertextuality or rather transtextuality that characterises it (Genette 1997), as well as of the changes that the Shakespearean hypotext undergoes when recycled, elaborated upon or extended in new directions in hypertexts that simultaneously foreground issues of interest for the context of reception. With its wonderful mélange of sparklingly witty dialogues, various music styles, songs and dancing, *Kiss Me, Kate* has the merit of updating the Shakespearean representation of the battle of the sexes while adapting it to the tastes of the mid-twentieth-century lowbrow American audiences. The metatheatrical framework in which a performance of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is skilfully embedded is used as a pretext to cast new light on gender relations, with a focus on women's "dilemma of marriage versus career" (Dash, 2010: 49), while their re-contextualization in a world of actors, gangsters and politicians serves both to project a much expected illusion of reality and to make a political stand (more subtly when it comes to racial emancipation[1], more overtly with regard to power games at the top of the American society[2]). It is precisely on the political dimension illustrative, at the same time, of gender policies and of the race for power that opposed the Democratic Party to the Republicans on the year of one of the greatest upsets in American political history that the turn-of-the-millennium revival of the musical for Broadway and for the London stage focuses upon. Michael Blakemore's staging of *Kiss Me, Kate* (filmed for television and released on DVD in 2003) boldly adds, through its performing style and slight modification of the original script, prominent polemical touches to the representation of political competition in the 1948 musical. Its critical look at American political life provides the researcher interested in the study of the mechanisms of political humour a wealth of examples in which the skilful play upon the public and the private contributes to enriching the original (Shakespearean) investigation of the clash between appearances and reality. Thus, setting the discussion of the revival of *Kiss Me, Kate* against the larger background of Shakespearean adaptations for the musical theatre stage, the present study aims at exploring, through close analysis, the intertwining of gender differences and political 'games' in dialogue instances that carry a significant political dimension. It hopes, hence, to reveal how the comic strategies of the play gain in complexity in the process of re-interpretation to the point that the political, initially a rather marginal aspect, emerges as a central source of humour, next to the gender

conflicts that dominate the offstage/onstage (i.e., framework/ Shakespeare-based play-within-the-play) dynamic.

Shakespeare and the Musical

Many present-day studies on Shakespearean texts in performance regard the process of proliferation of Shakespeare-based productions, which has eventually brought about the globalisation of the Bard's cultural influence, as essentially resulting from two paradigmatic shifts. One of them is related to the "dramatic changes in the organization of production and social relations" (Burnett 2006: 133) that implicitly favoured the development of cultural divisions and the competition between highbrow and lowbrow cultural practices. The other concerns translation, understood as cross-linguistic and cross-cultural transfer of meaning, but also, to use Jakobson's terms (1959), as intersemiotic transposition, which particularly gained ground over the last century with the rise of film industry.

From this perspective, the early decades of the twentieth century represented, for the American cultural space, a turning point that, according to Lawrence Levine, Shakespearean drama in performance was a relevant symptom of. Throughout the early part of the nineteenth century, "Shakespeare *was* popular entertainment (…) presented [to the American theatregoers] as part of the same milieu inhabited by magicians, dancers, singers, acrobats, minstrels, and comics" (Levine 1990: 21, 23). Yet, during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the gradual emergence of a more rigid cultural hierarchy caused Shakespeare to be regarded "as an elite, classic dramatist, to whose plays the bulk of the populace [did] not or [could] not relate" (Levine 1990: 34), since they reacted only to "unsophisticated" action and oratory, and could not fully appreciate 'sophisticated' dramatic and poetic artistry, which, therefore, appealed only to the "small refined element" (Levine 1990: 34-5). About the same time, the newly-rising art of cinema, which instantly turned to Shakespeare for inspiration[3], posed a serious challenge to the stage. What contributed to maintaining live theatrical performance in competition with the increasingly popular film industry and to fighting back the impending crisis of the theatre, intrinsically related to the general opinion that this institution had grown too elitist for the masses to get access to it or to understand it, was the successful re-fashioning of live musical theatre. Combining popular music styles and songs, dancing and dialogue in more and more carefully thought-out plots, musical plays became the 'living proof' that theatre, owing to its diversity of practices, could appeal to different levels of response and could be re-integrated in the lowbrow, popular culture with which it seemed to have lost its connection. Under the circumstances, American mass audiences were invited to re-discover Shakespeare in musicals which 're-loaded' his plays in innovative ways.

Like some of the films which they competed against, several 'Golden Age' Broadway musicals (produced between the 1920s and the 1960s[4]) resorted to

Shakespeare for inspiration. Thus, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet* got back in the top of lowbrow American theatregoers' preferences re-shaped as *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) and *West Side Story* (1957). However, by the late 1960s, it had already become obvious that cinema had won the race against live musical theatre in many respects and, in particular, in re-embedding Shakespeare in the popular culture.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, the interest in Shakespeare as a cultural icon and in his cultural capital seemed to drop in both rivalling performance arts, i.e., musical theatre and cinema (though it did not entirely die out[5]). Yet, if, after this pause, it seemed inevitable that "Shakespeare should gravitate again to Hollywood, and vice versa" (Burnett 2007: 3), hence the rising tide of Hollywood/ Hollywood-inspired turn-of-the-millennium productions aimed at capturing Shakespeare on film, in the world of the American musical theatre, which started suffering from the anxiety of recession, there was no return to Shakespeare. Production costs for glamorous productions on Broadway increased, style began to prevail over substance and audiences shrank. Musical producers and directors either turned to film for inspiration or came to "depend more on [Broadway's] past glories" (Everett and Laird 2008: xl)[6]. Therefore, some of the above mentioned Shakespearean adaptations were revived in an attempt at keeping alive the memory of the 'good days' of the musical as an iconic form of entertainment in the American popular culture. By far the most successful, the only Tony Award Winner for the Best Revival (in 2000), was Michael Blakemore's revival of Porter and the Spewacks' *Kiss Me, Kate*. Throughout two impressively long series of successful performances – first on Broadway (Martin Beck Theatre 1999-2001) and then, across the Atlantic Ocean, at West End (Victoria Palace Theatre – 2001-2002) – it managed to bring musical and Shakespeare lovers back into the auditoria. Moreover, its broadcasting on television (*PBS – Great Performances*) and its release on DVD (2003) served not only strictly consumerist purposes, but also encouraged the reconsideration of "Shakespeare as a performative property" (Burnett 2007: 9) as well as that of the cultural heritage of the musical theatre tradition, in the larger context of the constantly re-negotiated relationship between the local and the global, high and low culture, mass-media technologies and live theatrical performance.

Kiss Me, Kate: A Case Study

With an impressive record of 1,077 performances over the nineteen months that followed its premiere on Broadway in December 1948, *Kiss Me, Kate* confirmed Cole Porter as one of the leaders of a Golden Age of the musical and marked his triumph in the competition with other great names of the moment, like Rodgers and Hammerstein (*Oklahoma!*, 1943). Its "tuneful, varied score, wonderful book, and lively dances" made it "one of the best integrated musical plays of the period" (Everett and Laird 2008: 175). Taking their inspiration from Shakespeare and the contemporary world of the theatre[7], the

book writers Bella and Sam Spewack created lively, realistic characters, while Porter's outstanding skill in combining "the vaudeville, jazz, operatic lyricism, and comic patter" provided the perfect binding for the two parallel worlds which were thus united in "a tumult of theatrical invention and irresistible, energetic fizz" (Coveney 2003), appreciated by theatregoers and, after 1953, by cinemagoers as well[8].

Most likely, audiences and critics reacted, first of all, to the foregrounded story of old and new love relationships in the world of entertainment. Their 'stars' are: the vain self-complacent actor and musical director Fred Graham; the 'shrewish' film and musical actress, Fred's ex-wife Lilli Vanessi; the promising, yet gambling-addicted actor Bill Calhoun; and the sexy, though not very talented starlet Lois Lane. The love triangles they get entangled in comically overlap: Fred flirts with Lois, while he is secretly still in love with Lilli; Lilli brags about her influential fiancé Harrison Howell to make Fred jealous; and Lois flirts shamelessly with Fred because she hopes he will help her become a star, but she is romantically interested in Bill. Misunderstandings and funny coincidences further contribute to complicating this level of the plot: Lilli believes the bouquet she receives from Fred is a proof of his still having feelings for her, but she discovers in the middle of the show that it was actually meant for Lois; Fred is threatened by a pair of gangsters who come to collect a gambling debt, an IOU actually signed in his name by Bill Calhoun, and decides to use them to prevent Lilli from leaving him and the show. All these unmistakably stir laughter while inviting a more serious meditation on gender roles and other issues of interest in the American society of the 1940s. Thus, the appeal of the show must have been enhanced by an already increasing curiosity of the public at large about the private lives of VIPs, including actors and politicians, while the introduction of gangsters as characters must have added to its illusion of reality at a time when underground economy flourished, with organised crime syndicates expanding their operations and transforming 'sinful pleasures' like gambling into their illegal monopoly (Barker and Britz 2000: 29-40).

However, it seems that both audiences and critics tended to disregard the fact that this musical in which the battle of the sexes is skilfully knit into an intricate pattern of power 'struggles' goes far beyond the mere exploitation of tempestuous relationships which eventually come to a happy end. The choice of a double-layered structure with a play-within-a-play embedded in a more general frame, that parallels that of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the adaptation of the Shakespearean original in a musical version reminiscent of the once popular performances animated by actors, dancers and singers, are indicative of the dialogue that *Kiss Me, Kate* engages with the Shakespearean hypotext in an attempt at addressing "a preoccupation with a distant and unmanageable Bard" and at deconstructing the myth of his "works' impenetrability" (Burnett 2007: 12). *Kiss Me, Kate* is at once meant to remind the American audiences that

"Shakespeare was not a highbrow" (Dover Wilson qtd. in Leavis 2006: 17) and, as such, should be re-integrated into the lowbrow American culture, as well as to draw attention to the theatre as an art form. Thus, the curtain rises to reveal an entire world of directors and stage managers, leading and supporting actors, dancers and singers who daily participate in a collaborative effort meant to ensure the success of the live theatrical performance on stage[9].

When the musical was revived at the turn of the millennium, in a context in which the crisis of the theatre worsened to the point that "the place of the stage has been compromised, with plays and players, in Baz Kershaw's formulation, having become a 'marginal commodity in the capitalist… marketplace'" (Burnett 2007: 9), *Kiss Me, Kate* was regarded as a cultural product to be re-examined, the expression of a past that could be used to make sense of the present. Though he remained largely faithful to Porter and the Spewacks' original, making rather minor script changes and musical insertions, Michael Blakemore approached the play from the perspective of the adapter who hoped to cast new light on a former musical blockbuster while addressing issues relevant to the postmodern audiences. The 'old' rivalry between cultural phenomena in which Shakespeare's and the musical's heritage seems to have remained trapped, as well as gender relations evolving out of the clash of patriarchy and feminine emancipation, still provide the core thematic pillars of this revival. But the director's choice of transforming the character of Harrison Howell into an army general with political ambitions favours a shift in its topicality, allowing him to simultaneously re-visit one of the most controversial moments in American political history, the 1948 presidential elections, and scrutinise, through the comic lens, the ethics–politics connection which lies at the heart of present-day political debates as well.

Political Humour in *Kiss Me, Kate* Revived

Throughout the introductory part of Act I (scenes 1 and 2 in the revised script, henceforth cited as KIR – Prompt Book 2000), stress seems to be mostly laid on the battle of the sexes and the world of the theatre. However, the first encounter in private between the Shakespearean performance protagonists and former spouses Lilli Vanessi and Fred Graham (Act I, scene 3 – KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 18-29) reveals, besides the existence of love triangles that both Lilli and Fred can hardly cope with, subtle connections between the world of public entertainment (theatre/cinema) and the political circles of the time. Relying initially on the visual humour stirred by the two actors' 'war' of noises made by things flung down on the table (which Lilli loses to her disappointment), the resumed argument over Lilli insulting Fred in front of the whole cast causes the latter to eventually cross the boundary between their private spaces and attack the former on her own territory. Though Lilli desperately tries not to pay attention to Fred and continues to nervously powder her face, Fred makes his first 'stingy' move when he ironically raises a very sensitive issue for

Lilli's career, namely her moderate success as a Hollywood actress: "So much for a Hollywood name. Your fans must have heard you were appearing in person" (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 19/ 0:16:25-30). Uttered from a position of superiority, made visually obvious by his standing whereas Lilli sits on a chair, Fred's sarcastic remark could be interpreted as illustrative for two aspects that lie at the heart of *Kiss Me, Kate*: gender relations and the theatre/cinema competition. Thus, Fred simultaneously voices his sense of superiority as a man and a live performance actor (while very conveniently casting all the blame for a potential failure of the current performance on Lilli). His tendentious, cynical statements may, to some extent, be indicative of his envying Lilli for her Hollywood career. (Blakemore takes care to stress that out by having one of the walls in Lilli's dressing room dominated by the poster of *The Winged Lady* in which she starred together with Robert Newton.) On the other hand, they could also point to his belief in the theatre as a 'school' for really talented actors. As a matter of fact, Fred praises several times in the play the ephemeral and sometimes not very profitable theatrical performance over Hollywood film, since acting live on the stage implies not only a demonstration of artistic skills, but also requires spontaneity and the ability to improvise on which the success of a show may occasionally depend. And he proves indeed a well-accomplished and versatile performer who most ingeniously manages to save face in front of the audiences under different circumstances. (e.g. when the too temperamental Lilli, deeply hurt by the discovery that the bouquet was not addressed to her but to her younger rival Lois, can no longer refrain and bursts out in rage on the stage; or, when, in his desperate attempts at preventing Lilli from leaving the show, Fred plays the 'master puppeteer' and manipulates both the two gangsters disguised as pages and his 'shrewish' ex-wife, without ruining the performance.)

As the phone starts ringing, Fred challenges Lilli with the same condescending (and, at the same time, jealous) attitude to pick up the receiver. She eventually says hello in an angry voice only to immediately adopt a considerably honeyed tone, when she discovers that the interlocutor is her fiancé. It is this conversation over the phone with Lilli's "mysterious new admirer" that suddenly shakes Fred out of his aggressively humorous mood and first signals the connections, to be further developed in the play, with the world of highly influential politicians:

> *Lilli* (*into the phone*): Hello! Hello darling! I thought you'd be here by now. Oh you're still at the White House? (Upon hearing the last words, Fred freezes for a moment.)[10] He is? He's taking your advice? Well, of course. Who doesn't? What? The President wants to talk to me? To unimportant, little me - but what'll I say? Good evening, Mr. President!
> *Fred takes the phone from Lilli and speaks into it.*
> *Fred*: Is it true you've declared Baltimore a disaster area?[11]

> *Lilli* (*pulling the phone away*): Damn you! (She laughs nervously, while desperately trying to save face.) Mr. President! I apologise. Can you come to see my performance in Baltimore? Oh – security?
> *Fred* (shouting from his chair where he had been skimming through a magazine): You'll be perfectly safe. Miss Vanessi keeps the theatre empty.
> *Lilli* (looking at Fred in anger and trying again to save face): Ha, ha, ha! That was no one, Mr. President. Just an actor. Not a real man like you. Like him. He is wonderful, isn't he? (The President probably passes the receiver back to her fiancé.) Hello dearest! The President just said how wonderful you were. I miss you so much… I know you have no time to see my little performance in my little show, but when will I see you? You have big news? It's top secret? I can't wait… (pausing and getting serious) Yes, darling… no, darling. Yes, darling. No, no. Yes, love. I love you. I'm blowing you two kisses: mwa, mwa. (laughing) Yes, darling. I adore you…. (*She hangs up*.)
> *Fred*: I adore you. Who are you seeing? God? (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 19/ 0:16:40-0:18:08)

Fred's confidence in his superiority over Lilli is suddenly shaken by his hearing about his rival's connections at the White House. No hints are provided at this point regarding the identity of Lilli's fiancé, but his 'intimacy' with the president, who asks for his advice in state affairs and to whom he introduces his bride-to-be, suggests that he is an influential government official. Lilli's 'little performance' on the phone shows her, on the one hand, trying to comply with her position in the patriarchal system as an obedient wife-to-be, whose activities must be confined, provided her fiancé allows it, to the artistic environment, if not, to the domestic sphere. Her (alleged) conversation with the President is therefore reduced to small talk as Lilli is denied access to 'top-secret' state affairs. On the other hand, she puts on the exaggeratedly happy mask of the loving bride-to-be, who misses her fiancé and who is very proud of him, to make Fred jealous. Hence, instances of self-deprecating humour, like "The President wants to talk to me? To unimportant, little me –", acquire in the context of the performance quite opposite connotations. The same adjective, 'little', is later repeated in two noun-phrases ("my little performance in my little show") by means of which Lilli describes her current preoccupation, in which one can detect the same double-edged intention: she deliberately abases herself to satisfy the ego of her 'macho' fiancé and uses repetition as an instrument of persuasion, while, at the same time, stressing out for Fred, that this is *her* show, *she* is the real star, so, she is *not little* at all. The aggressive humorous attack, through which she vents her anger on Fred and which helps her face the unpleasant situation he created, without becoming overwhelmed by it, seems to function as a defence mechanism (Martin 1998: 19; Popa 2005: 81) and goes as far as questioning Fred's masculinity, when she remarks addressing the President: "That was no one, Mr. President. Just an actor. Not a real man like you. Like him." Here,

implicitly, political power and public notoriety are the features that define the ideal of masculinity, not the artistic talent.

Despite the fact that Lilli does most of the talking throughout this part of the scene, Fred's short interventions, which make up a bridge, in a broader sense of the term (Attardo 2001: 88), sustain much of its humour. Perhaps, partly not entirely convinced that Lilli is talking to the president himself, partly acting out of a natural inclination to disrespect for the authority, Fred addresses to the President the question: "Is it true you've declared Baltimore a disaster area?" The intensity of the statement's incongruity can be perceived only if the spectators take into account the larger context of the scene: since Fred systematically mocks at Lilli's talent as an actress, he anticipates that the performance might be a 'disaster' because of her. As a matter of fact, the audience might understand better the extent to which Fred exaggerates in envisaging the 'disaster' if they were familiar with the history of Baltimore City, to be more specific, with the Great Baltimore Fire which destroyed thousands of buildings during the first decade of the century (1904) and caused most of the city to be rebuilt (Rodgers 2005: 80-93). That Lilli does understand Fred's use of intertextual humour (Attardo 2001: 87) is proven by her angry response – she curses while pulling the phone away – and by her resorting to rather forced laughter to cover up her outburst of negative emotion. She will do the same when Fred puts her, a second time, in a difficult situation by his ironic comments ("You'll be perfectly safe. Miss Vanessi keeps the theatre empty."), which the President can hear over the phone and in which he mocks again at her talent and popularity as an actress.

Ultimately, in response to her attack on his masculinity which, she implies, must be defined by the features [+POWER], [+INFLUENCE], [+CONTROL], Fred resorts to an intentional pun (Simpson 2003: 17-29), drawing on the secular and religious meanings of the verb 'to adore', i.e., to love somebody very much and to worship the divinity. Thus, he proves to have understood her ambiguous reference to what makes a 'real man', and he preserves the semantic features [+POWER], [+INFLUENCE] and [+CONTROL] but chooses to go for a hyperbolic exaggeration of the target of Lilli's affection to pay her back for the prior insult.

Hattie's arrival with a bunch of roses for Lilli causes Fred to leave Lilli's dressing room in a hurry because he is allergic to roses. Lilli's irony-charged reaction – "Hattie, take these roses to Miss Lane's dressing room with my compliments." (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 19/0:18:13-17) – tells a lot about the reasons behind her hostility towards Fred and reinforces the idea that, in fact, both Lilli and Fred are caught between old and new loves.

Finally, engaging in witty repartee in a way that somewhat reminds of Katherina and Petruchio's exchanges in the Shakespearean hypotext, Lilli and Fred temporarily conclude their 'battle' before they start remembering their happy days as a couple and end up discovering they still have feelings for each other:

> (Lilli ostentatiously flashes her ring to make sure Fred notices it.)
> *Fred*: I see it! I see it! Is it real?
> *Lilli*: Oh, it's real.
> *Fred*: Is that the Hope Diamond? The one with the curse?
> *Lilli*: It was his mother's engagement ring. And now it's mine.
> *Fred*: His mother must have worn it on her big toe. Who is he? The Aga Khan?
> *Lilli*: No. But he is a jewel. Dear sweet man. He's very big.
> *Fred*: Fat?
> *Lilli*: Historically big.
> *Fred*: George Washington?
> *Lilli*: Does the phrase "Second World War" mean anything to you?
> *Fred*: You're dating Adolf Hitler? A match made in heaven. (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 19-20/0:18:18-45)

Always speaking from a power position, Fred manages to surprise and to embarrass Lilli with his jab lines (Attardo 2001: 82-3), the incongruity of which cannot be fully appreciated unless the spectator possesses thorough knowledge of the cultural and historical context in which the play was written. Of perfect quality and an impressive size, the blue Hope Diamond owes much of its fame, as Finlay (2006) points out, to the legend according to which a curse befell on it when it was stolen from India from the statue of a Hindu god(dess). Fred's reference to it and special stress on the curse seems to anticipate the end of Lilli's career and of her life as an independent woman once she marries her 'mystery man'. While Lilli seems more concerned about her fiancé's sense of family tradition, Fred cannot refrain from being critical about the opulence of the ring, in itself indicative of the taste for ostentation of the one who offered it, hence the reference to the Aga Khan, the leader of the Ismaili Imamat. Like Shakespeare's Petruchio, Fred will not refrain from retorting, taking up a word/phrase from Lilli's previous turn to 'recycle' it in a pun; hence, the play on the denotative and the connotative meanings of the epithet "big". Lilli's attempts at clarifying the meaning she attaches to the word seem futile and engender further humorous situations as Fred chooses to move between extremes: he first goes for the denotative ("big" as "fat"), but even when he veers to the connotative, he uses exemplification metonymically to obliquely hint at the man's megalomania and political ambition which cause him to aspire to the title of 'the father of the nation' (accounting for the reference to the first American President George Washington) or to equal, in his reckless race for power, Adolf Hitler himself. Fred's mean punch line (Attardo 2001: 83) – "a match made in heaven" – suddenly reveals Lilli as the butt of his joke, as he tries to preserve his position of superiority and ridicules Lilli for her ambition and tendency towards affectation.

Putting together hints provided by this dialogue, an alert spectator could already sketch out a profile of the character to which the political dimension of

the play is mostly related: egocentric, ambitious, with megalomaniac tendencies, a politician with direct access to the White House. This is, as Act II will show, Harrison Howell, Lilli's fiancé, a "depressingly dull, obtuse, and sedentary" (Dash 2010: 55) Republican millionaire in the original play metamorphosed into a caricature of General Douglas MacArthur in Blakemore's revival. Considering details provided by the play, like, for instance, Lilli's reference to World War II, Blakemore saw in Harrison Howell a potential source of intertextual humour. That implied rewriting certain lines of the original script, but also gave more depth to the political dimension of the text in accordance with the specificity of the political and historical context in which the play was written.

Given the significant role of contextual factors in shaping up humorous acts, a digression focusing on General Douglas MacArthur's personality, his tense relationship with President Harry Truman (which ultimately led to his dismissal from the position of a commander of the US/UN forces in North Korea) and, in particular, on the 1948 elections for presidency that opposed them on account of their different political affiliations (Truman was a Democrat, MacArthur a Republican) might be useful and shed more light on Blakemore's turning MacArthur into the target of parody in his revival.

Many documents of the time and witness testimonies by members of Douglas MacArthur's staff portray the general as a man of a strong but strange personality, who would not show, whether in public or in private, his "little human failures", prone to rapid mood changes from optimism to pessimism, which would justify, in Pearlman's terms, a 'diagnosis' of the "Dr. Jekyll – Mr. Hyde syndrome. […] Even when a Dr. Jekyll seemed present, a Mr. Hyde lurked behind MacArthur's curtain" (2008: 2-3). Though he occasionally appeared as an "epitome of courtesy, consideration and sympathetic understanding", there were moments when he could no longer control his temper and then he would burst into discharges of anger, "regular shouting tirades", as Dwight Eisenhower, who was for a while the general's chief of staff, put it (qtd. in Pearlman 2008: 2, 7).

It seems that Douglas MacArthur's behaviour was to a large extent motivated by his believing that he had a special destiny, just like other members of his family, namely his mother's brothers, officers in the Army of Northern Virginia, and his father Lieutenant General Arthur MacArthur. These models that the young Douglas MacArthur emulated as well as his mother's influence, "instilling goals befitting some kind of superman", definitely shaped up the future general's character and may be, in part, seen as "the root of [his] least admirable traits: hypersensitivity to criticism and hostility toward potential competitors" (Pearlman 2008: 3).

In many respects, Douglas MacArthur followed in his father's footsteps, clashing with civilian authorities and stubbornly clinging to the idea that the western Pacific area (here including the Philippines) was more important than Europe. Not even throughout World War II, when he was a

commander of the American troops in the Philippines, did this "Napoleon of Fuzon" (Pearlman 2008: 6) change his attitude towards Washington or the fellow officers who dared challenge or disagree with him. His egocentric nature surfaced in statements for the press in which issues of national security were presented in very personal terms as "the enemy and I [MacArthur]", whether the enemy was Japan or the Washington administration, which MacArthur thought, "would rather see [him] lose a battle than America win a war" (Pearlman 2008: 12). During Truman's presidency, he was systematically 'at war' with the Washington government, and many of his statements regarding the President himself were highly offensive[12]. That caused certain Washington politicians to advance the assumption that General MacArthur suffered from "an acute persecution complex at work", which earned him the nickname of "Mr. Prima Donna, Brass Hat Five Star MacArthur" (Pearlman 2008: 13).

Despite mutual animosity, Truman was less explicitly critical in his relationship with MacArthur, probably because of the personal experiences that moulded his personality over the years. In particular, his attitude towards the army seems to have been definitely shaped by his experience as an artillery captain in World War I which convinced him of "the virtue of the citizen soldier": "he never doubted the need for military power in a world that settled important issues by force" (Hamby 2000: 435). Furthermore, his readings in history taught him that "politicians have no business interfering with military operations"; hence, his more 'indulgent' attitude towards General MacArthur who mixed "ambition, apprehension, and calculation with self-absorbed bravado" (Pearlman 2008: xviii, 16).

1948, the year of the US President elections, found Truman and MacArthur in opposite political camps. In the contest for the Republican nomination, MacArthur was among the nominees. "He toured the nation, where he was met by enormous crowds cheering his every move", but "he was not popular enough to receive the party's presidential nod" (Grossman 2007: 207), and was eliminated from the presidential run. In the 1948 Republican Convention in Philadelphia, the majority voted for the Governor of New York, Thomas E. Dewey, whom political experts unanimously saw as almost certainly a winner over the rivalling Democrats.

The rates in the polls (e.g. the Gallup Poll) in favour of the Republican candidate actually reflected the public reaction to the tense relations within the Democratic Party. Faced with the challenge of his former secretary of commerce, Henry Wallace, who announced his candidacy for president as a member of the Progressive Party, Truman had to deal with the disagreement of the conservative, southern wing of his party with his policy of support for black civil rights. That caused the southern Democrats to form their own party, the States' Rights Party, with its own nominee for presidency, Governor Strom Thurmond. Nonetheless, Truman's strategy of "mobilizing key groups in the

Democratic coalition" (supporting organised labour as well as black civil rights) and his denunciation of the 80th Republican Congress ("which he accused of wanting to repeal the New Deal") eventually turned out successful (Hamby 2000: 444-447). At the end of a long campaign during which he toured the country, speaking to the people without hesitating to criticise his political opponents – unlike Dewey who "spoke in bland generalities" (Hamby 2000: 447) – with a bit of luck, Truman won the elections against all odds.

The political background of that election year which 'awarded' Truman one of the greatest comeback victories in American history is touched upon in the revival of *Kiss Me, Kate* with specific reference to General MacArthur's involvement with the 1948 political circles. In an attempt at raising questions with regard to the general's "ambiguous legacy" (Grossman 2007: 207), in Act II, scenes 4 and 5 (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 76-88) draw the spectators' attention to the general's personality while bringing to the foreground his participation in the contest for presidency.

From the first moment when General Harrison Howell, MacArthur's lampoon, appears on the stage, the striking similarity between this fictitious character and his real-life counterpart invites visual humour. He steps on the stage with the authoritarian attitude of the military leader who treats the theatre personnel, Fred included, as if they were his soldiers: "*General* (*taking off the sun-glasses*): And you're the civilian who assaulted my fiancée? […] I'll have you court-martialled, Graham. I'll have your guts for garters" (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 77/1:45:54-1:46.00). The threats that he professes in half military jargon, half slang, do not have, however, an intimidating effect on Fred, who instantly devises a strategy that will reveal the 'real man' behind the general's mask. Therefore, Fred tempers the two gangsters in disguise, who are ready to take action to defend his 'honour', and resorts to irony and innuendo. He mockingly flatters the general's ego: "The general is a very distinguished man" (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 77/1:46:12-14). Sensing that he deals with a proud traditionalist believer in the values of patriarchy that proclaim women as utterly inferior to men, he tries to trivialise what is otherwise a serious situation: Lilli is kept on stage under gunpoint by two thugs. He blames it on the whims of women who expect, at least before marriage, to be treated courteously and spoiled: "You fail to take into account the caprices of a woman of talent and beauty. She may even say to you tonight, 'General, darling, I am playing this show under duress. Call the FBI.'" (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 77/1:46:30-41). Fred proves to be a shrewd manipulator as he appeals simultaneously to the general's pride as a man, the 'owner' of a beautiful objectified woman, and as a military leader, by evoking the rival state security organisation, obliquely implying the FBI might be more efficient in ensuring Lilli's security than the whole US army; hence, the general's show of self-bravado and hostility towards his competitors: "Why the FBI? She has the entire US army at her disposal" (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 77/1:46:42-45).

Fooled by Fred's acting – "The fair sex, who can understand them?" (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 78/1:46:58-59) – the General actually fails to see in it an expression of hostility and comes to take his rival in love matters for a 'tough guy' like him. So he confides in him, appealing to Fred's sense of 'brotherhood' among men:

> *General* (*in confidence, man to man*): Now, see here Graham. You're a man of the world. We both know women need a firm hand from time to time. In fact, between you and me, they like it!
> *Fred*: "Women should be struck regularly like gongs?"
> *General*: Who said that?
> *Fred*: Noël Coward.
> *General*: There's a man I'd like to meet! A straight talker…
> *Fred*: Well, not exactly. (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 78/1:47:00-24)

Intertextual humour is used here to draw the spectators' attention to several 'deficiencies' of the General's character: his misogyny, as, despite his apparent courtesy, he thinks the use of physical violence on women is a must; his narrow-mindedness and lack of subtlety; and, last but not least, his illiteracy when it comes to drama and performance (otherwise, the very essence of his fiancée's profession). Fred's epigrammatic response actually reproduces a famous line – "Women should be struck regularly like gongs" – from Noël Coward's play *Private Lives* (1930). Howell's enthusiastic approval of the idea of 'disciplining' women and his wish to meet the wise man who advanced it emphasise that he stands for the traditional patriarchal type of 'real man' in whose mind woman is associated "with nature, the body, the physical, as matter to be tamed and domesticated" (Caufman-Blumenfeld 1998: 22). He looks upon women as if they were mere puppets that he could manipulate into obediently assuming the role of either wife (Lilli) or whore (Lois, whom he meets backstage by coincidence and with whom he would not hesitate to renew his affair only three months after his wedding with Lilli, as Act II, scene 4 suggests). This dialogue is a perfect illustration of the differential humour competence of the interlocutors (Raskin 1985: 58; Willis 2002). Since they do not actually belong to the same "identification group", contrary to the General's belief, they judge the "reference group" (Raju 1991 qtd. in Willis 2002) of women by different standards, which explains their different understanding and appreciation of the idea of subjecting women to violence. The incongruity between Fred's and the General's mental software and the General's lack of the necessary background knowledge regarding the original context of the sentence in question make the General laughable as he fails to understand Fred's ironic remark as well as his intentional pun on "coward": a. (capitalized) the English playwright Noël Coward, particularly appreciated for his wit and sophistication; b. a bully who harms those who he thinks are weaker than him.

The characters' next turns develop along the same lines, but they gain in their polyphonic structure owing to the juxtaposition of different social dialects like military jargon, electoral speech and patriarchal idiom:

> *General*: But chastising the little woman is the sacred privilege of a husband and no one else. You were out of line there, soldier.
> *Fred* (saluting): Yes sir, General!
> *General*: Restoring family discipline, Graham. Cherishing our women no matter what it takes. (He makes a punching gesture) That is my message to the American people. That is why I'm letting Miss Vanessi make her farewell appearance in this little show of yours. *The Taming of the Shrew*. I like the title and I like what it has to say.
> *Fred* (in soldier-like position, hands behind his back): The chain of command in family life.
> *General*: Right again, Graham. (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 78/1:47:27-1:48:01)

The dialogue is noteworthy from two different perspectives. On the one hand, it exposes the 'ugliness' of the General's Mr. Hyde-like misogynistic and violent nature hidden behind the mask of courtesy and consideration, the monstrous incongruity of the General transferring the rules of life in the army upon husband and wife relations, mimicked by Fred who ridicules him in his wisecracks. On the other hand, it satirises (again) the General's complete ignorance when it comes to drama: he knows nothing about the Shakespearean comedy and judges it simply by its title.

One particular sentence in the dialogue above discloses the incongruity between the General's and Lilli's perspectives on their relationship. Lilli assumes that she is appreciated by her fiancé for her talent as an actress and speaks of the performance, though somewhat egocentrically, in terms of "*my little* performance in *my little* show" (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 19/0:17:39-my emphasis). The General, though, boasts about his already having Lilli under control and stresses that her participation in a performance that must be man-centred anyway (it is Fred's "*little* show"[13]) is entirely determined by whether he gives her the permission to do so or not. That subtly suggests that Lilli and the General are not a good match, and anticipates their separation in the end of the play, as Lilli decides to return to Fred and to the stage. Furthermore, the hypocritical nature of his electoral message to the American people which apparently promotes love-based gender relations while subtly inviting the proliferation of domestic violence signals the inappropriateness of his political platform and anticipates his failure in the elections.

While waiting for Lilli in her dressing room, the General takes advantage of the time at his disposal to plan the events for the next day, calculating each step of the wedding ceremony as if it were a strategic move on the battlefield, and bursting in angry shouts at his major's least attempt at contradicting him:

> *General*: Major Rogers?... Change of plans, Major. The wedding's tomorrow... No buts, Major. Thinking on your feet, that's the essence of command. Now, take this down. Wedding party, mobilize at 1400 hours. Guests assemble at the Cathedral at 1430 hours. Over the top with the Bishop; 1500 hours. Press conference, 1530 hours; then onward to LaGuardia. Depart, 1630. Got that? Arrive Washington and advance on White House, 1745 hours. Give President decision and honeymoon with wife. (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 83/1:55:49-1:56:19)

The incongruous use of the condensation specific to the military jargon and his treatment of the wedding as if it were a military campaign stir the spectators' laughter, just like his stupidly refusing to see the evidence, that Lilli is the two gangsters' hostage. That shows him a pathetic dupe in his over-confidence in the 'brotherhood' of men and in their superiority over women. Seeing in their disagreement an opportunity to prove to Lilli who the General actually is, Fred suddenly changes strategy, to the amazement of his two gangster 'helpers':

> *Fred*: General, allow me. Lilli, you want to go? Very well then. Go! Leave the theatre. If that's what you want. And I can't say I blame you. After all, what is there to hold you here? What's ten percent of the gross compared to regular housekeeping and a dress allowance?
> *General*: A generous dress allowance, Graham. People respect a uniform.
> *Fred*: Hear that, Lilli? And all that meaningless excitement – the thundering applause of the crowd, the pictures in the papers, the parties, the adoration. I can't say I blame you for leaving all that, when you've got a chance for happiness – real happiness – under the General.
> *General*: Good thinking, Graham. I believe I know what it takes to make a woman happy.
> *Fred*: God bless you, sir. (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 84-85/1:57:51-1:58:26)

Lilli is offered the possibility of choosing between confining herself, for the rest of her life, to the domestic sphere, forced to fit into the stereotypical mould of the obedient housewife, entirely dependent on her husband, the object-woman the beauty of which the husband can boast about, and carrying on as a successful actress, a VIP, appreciated and loved by all her fans. Fred tries to subtly push Lilli into opting for the second variant by resorting to irony built on incremental repetition – "a chance for happiness – real happiness…" – with an emphatic stress on the variable (the epithet "real"), and on the double meaning of the pun – "under the General…" – which mingles sexual innuendo and an allusion to submissiveness. The humorous effect of the General's interventions results from two particular aspects: on the one hand, he is incapable of grasping the gist of Fred's argumentative strategy as, in his egocentric mind, the woman is naturally just a pretty ornament/accessory that can be successfully used to save the appearance of respectability and, therefore, coming in very handy for an election campaign. On the other hand, it is the larger co-text provided by the previous exchanges with Fred on the issue of how women should be treated by men,

concluded in an apology for domestic violence, that causes the General's remark "I believe I know what it takes to make a woman happy" to appear as totally incongruous and rightfully censured by Fred's 'bathtub placed' punch line (Attardo 2001: 91), in "God bless you, sir".

Unfortunately, Lilli is too angry with Fred to listen to anything he has to say. Besides, she lacks enough knowledge of her fiancé's 'real' personality. So she rashly decides to leave the theatre and hopes to begin a new and happy life by the General's side: "I never want to see the theatre again! Or you again. I've got a new life now with the most adorable man in the world!" (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 85/1:58:27-34). The spectators are most likely to laugh at her portrait of the General which, aware of the discrepancy between appearances and reality, they perceive, unlike Lilli, as ironically false.

It is precisely at this point that, overconfident in his ability of winning everybody on his side, the General discloses what should have been 'top secret':

> *General*: And the President of the United States agrees with you, dearest one. Truman has asked me to be his running mate in November.
> *Lilli*: Oh, darling! You said 'Yes'?
> *General*: Hold your horses. Dewey's also asked me to be his running mate.
> *Lilli*: Dewey or Truman! What a decision!
> *General*: I told Dewey 'Yes'. I know a winner when I see one. And I want you there on the campaign trail beside me, my little running mate.
> *Fred*: Running here, running there.
> *General*: Dewey will do one term. I'll do the next. Thank you, Graham. I think I can make the little woman happy. (He sings the introductory part of the song *From This Moment On*) Now that we are close, /No more nights morose,/ Now that we are one,/ The beguine has just begun./Now that we're side by side,/ The future looks so gay,/Now we are alibied/ When we say:/From this moment on,/ You for me, dear,/Only two for tea, dear,/ From this moment on./From this happy day,/ No more blue songs,/Only whoop-dee-doo songs,/From this moment on.
> *Lilli*: Darling, I can't wait. I think I'll probably do some work for the UN. (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 85-86/1:58:35-2:00:06)

Obviously, in his parodic intention, Blakemore had the historical truth slightly distorted: neither Truman nor Dewey asked General Douglas MacArthur to run for vice-president in the 1948 US Presidential elections. As a matter of fact, as a newspaper of the time (*St. Petersburg Times* 1947) claimed, both Dewey, MacArthur's Republican fellow, and Truman, the Democrat President, sought, prior to the 1948 elections, to keep MacArthur away in Asia since he was the best man for the "China job", actually to eliminate a potential candidate for presidency[14]. Even if MacArthur eventually took part in the election campaign of the Republican Party as one of the candidates for presidency to satisfy his ambition for supreme power in the state, as the dialogue in the play obliquely implies too, he was not successful enough to win. Neither was his Republican

rival, Thomas Dewey, despite all the favourable estimations of the election polls. Placed in this larger contextual frame, Harrison Howell's justification for his running on the Republican side – "I know a winner when I see one" – results in another case of incongruity stirring the audiences' laughter. Anyway, his political ambitions seem to be 'contagious' and Lilli herself hopes to get an important position in an international organisation like the UN. It is obvious, however, that both her words and her exaggerate gestures (that add visual humour to the verbal one) are a form of releasing the anger she feels for being humiliated by Fred and a tendentious way of aggressively getting back at him, proving that she has more significant chances to greatness than he has:

> *Fred*: For the first time I tremble for the world.
> *Lilli*: Sneer, Fred. I always knew I had a date with destiny. I thought for a foolish time it was the theatre. Then the cinema. But Harrison's given me a whole blazing new world. (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 86/2:00:07-21)

As Fred, unfortunately, finds no other way to deal with her anger but by ridiculing her in his conversational witticisms, she is determined to carry on with her plans of marrying an egomaniac who is incapable of loving anybody else but himself.

(General) Harrison Howell's ridiculous political ambitions acquire special comic overtones owing to the song *From This Moment On*, originally written by Cole Porter for the show *Out of This World*, then integrated in the 1953 filmic version of *Kiss Me, Kate* (Hischak 2009: 242) and preserved in Blakemore's revival of *Kiss Me, Kate*. This very romantic love song voicing hopes of happiness for the future actually becomes, when performed by the General and Lilli in the revival, a mad combination of military march, a ridiculous 'avalanche' of terms of endearment, onomatopoeia and violent embraces, all culminating with the General on top of the sofa posing as a glorious climber who has just conquered a great mountain peak and is ready to mark it with a flag that he grabs from one of the gangsters. Lilli holds his hand from her obviously lower position, indicative again of the patriarchal hierarchy that the General scrupulously believes in, and ends up with her face covered by the General's wavering flag, the corner of which she has to lift to finish her song with a rather desperate expression (1:59:14-2:02:00). The General's pose can also be given a second interpretation in the light of the propensity for tyranny of the historical figure here parodied, i.e., Douglas MacArthur. Taking into account that one of MacArthur's nicknames was "Napoleon of Fuzon", Blakemore might have thought of enhancing the visual humour of the performance by having Harrison Howell/Douglas MacArthur assume an attitude similar to Napoleon's as represented by Baron Antoine Jean Gros in his painting *Napoleon Bonaparte on Arcole Bridge*. All in all, the incongruity between the message of the song and the way in which it is performed betrays the intention of obliquely satirising

patriarchal attitudes and megalomaniac manifestations which are thus defamiliarised and revealed in all their gruesomeness.

Lilli's illusion of happiness is, nonetheless, short-lived and she is soon given a measure of the General's way of 'cherishing' her. When she carries on with her game of mimed pre-marital bliss, she counts on her fiancé to support her. Nonetheless, she is surprised to discover in him not a partner, but a 'master' who already imposes various constraints on her. Thus, her hopes for a romantic dinner by candle light are brutally dashed by the General's refusal sustained by another 'lesson' that the army taught him: "Lilli, if the War taught me anything, it was no rations after 2100 hours. Be good to your liver and your liver will be good to you." (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 88/ 2:02:25-32) The incongruity of this piece of epigrammatic wisdom, which puzzles Lilli and stirs the audience's laughter, confirms once again the General's inappropriate juxtaposition of the two frames of reference of gender relations and army organisation: convinced that all levels of life must be structured according to a very well established hierarchy, the General would engage in the battle of the sexes from the same commanding position which he assumed in the battles fought by his army during the War and expects to exert the same undisputed authority on his 'subordinates' (here on Lilli). His political ambitions make him even more demanding:

> *Lilli*: But I bought this enchanting little hat just to go out with you tonight. It's French.
> *General*: Lilli, fancy, foreign headwear? That's not what America expects to see on top of a future First Lady! […]
> *Lilli*: But darling, my entire wardrobe is Dior. And come November in Nebraska, I'm going to need my New Look mink.
> *General*: Forgive me, my dear, but what the voters will want to see you in is a good old Republican cloth coat. Now, let's get moving, dearest one. Tomorrow's our wedding day, and it's going to be a long, hard slog. (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 88/2:02:39-56, 2:03:08-31)

The General's concern with keeping up appearances and building up the profile of a 'true-born', honest American that would answer his Republican voters' expectations – reminiscent of the famous 1952 Checkers/Fund speech of the Republican candidate for vice-president, Richard Nixon (Ambrose 1988: 281) – causes him to dismiss all Lilli's attempts at pleasing him and satisfying her own vanity. It is not enough for the beauty of the objectified woman to flatter his ego, it must also be instrumental in manipulating the public opinion in the political game in creating an image of honesty and integrity. For Lilli, this is yet another warning which the play script constructs around the symbolism of the change of dress: her marriage with the General will reduce her to the status of a plain housewife and a useful 'accessory' in a future election campaign meant to distract the attention from the hypocritical nature of the politician who does not practice what he preaches, but who dreams of the presidential chair. Harrison

Howell conceives marriage not as a union of hearts to be candidly and romantically looked forward to, but, judging by his incongruous choice of informal, more like army-jargon, terms ("a long, hard slog"), as another step taken towards achieving his political goals. One might suspect, in this respect, a further departure from the parodic model provided by General Douglas MacArthur and the development of the intertextual reference to Richard Nixon, one of "the most controversial American political figure[s] since World War II" (Hoff 2000: 520): though he managed to successfully defend himself against the accusation of corruption in 1952 when he ran for vice-president, he ended his career as an American President resigning in disgrace in 1974 because of the Watergate scandal, accused of the cover-up of the "break-in and bugging at the Democratic National Committee headquarters", and of "related corrupt or criminal political activities" (Hoff 2000: 517).

Not only does this scene resort to intertextual humour to actually provide the audiences with food for thought regarding key moments in American political history, in particular, and the ethics – politics relation, in general, but it also serves to reinforce, in a quite unexpected but highly creative manner, the link between the Shakespearean hypotext and the musical hypertext at a discursive level. As in other previous cases, much of the humour of the scene lies with Fred ironically 'backing up' the General in everything he says. At this point, accompanied by the gangster 'choir', Fred launches his subtle satirical stings reciting offstage lines from the very play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which he performed on stage:

> *General*: Lilli, if the War taught me anything, it was no rations after 21.00 hours. Be good to your liver and your liver will be good to you.
> Fred: The General's right. "For it engenders choler, planteth anger,/ And better 'twere that both of you did fast."
> *Lilli*: But I bought this enchanting little hat just to go out with you tonight. It's French.
> *General*: Lilli, fancy, foreign headwear? That's not what America expects to see on top of a future First Lady.
> *Fred*: "Why, thou say'st true, it is a paltry cap./ I love thee well in that thou lik'st it not."
> *Second Man*: "'Tis lewd and filthy."
> *First Man*: "Begone, (trying to take Lilli's hat off) take it hence."
> *Lilli*: But darling, my entire wardrobe is Dior. And come November in Nebraska, I'm going to need my New Look mink.
> *General*: Forgive me, my dear, but what the voters will want to see you in is the good old Republican cloth coat. Now, let's get moving, dearest one. Tomorrow's our wedding day, and it's going to be a long, hard slog. (*The General exits.)*
> *Fred*: "He who knows better how to tame a shrew,/ Now let him speak."
> *Fred and the Two Men (to Lilli):* "'Tis charity to show." (KIR – Prompt Book 2000: 88/2:02:25-2:03:40)

The lines from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act IV, Scenes 1 and 3, that Fred and the gangsters selectively recite (with minor improvisations[15]) add to the oblique references to Nixon's speech to point to textual hyperdetermination (Attardo 2001: 100) resulting from the simultaneous presence of different sources of humour that intertextually sustain the main themes of the battle of the sexes and political competition. The comb (Attardo 2001: 87) that these displaced lines make up ends with a Petruchian punch line meant to proleptically announce Lilli's ultimate change of heart. She leaves the theatre and Fred to follow her "man of destiny", as Fred sarcastically calls the politician whom he has repeatedly exposed as being "as much of an actor as [he is]", or even worse, "a bad actor" (KIR –Prompt Book 2000: 92, 93/2:09:23; 2:10:26-30), but she reconsiders her decision and finally makes the right choice: she returns to the theatre, where she can continue to build her artistic career, and to Fred, in whom she finds a partner. Lilli/Katherina is Fred/Petruchio's equal in a "select society" whose members "freely choose and change their roles in order to avoid the narrow, imprisoning roles society would impose upon them" (Huston 1981 qtd. in Yachnin 1996: 2.22).

Concluding Remarks

Michael Blakemore's revival of *Kiss Me, Kate* was not intended as a fully-fledged adaptation of the 1948 original. Nevertheless, it could be said to have come halfway between mere presentation and adaptation: it did not aim at slavishly re-staging a now great classic of the American musical theatre, but at re-interpreting the message of the play in order to cast a fresh look on key issues – gender relations, political manoeuvres, art-form competition – specific to the period when it was produced and to simultaneously reveal something of the discourses in circulation at the moment of the revival.

The dialogue that the revival encouraged among the Shakespearean hypotext, Porter and the Spewacks' original hypertext and Blakemore's re-reading of it has allowed for the proliferation and diversification of humour-engendering mechanisms, chief among which intertextuality holds a very special place. Much of the combination of verbal and visual humour of the turn-of-the-millennium production relies on both the audiences' familiarity with Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and their knowledge of American civilisation, in general, and of the cultural and political background of the late 1940s and early 1950s, in particular.

With *Kiss Me, Kate* revived, a new niche has been created for the rediscovery of the cultural heritage of a more recent (the 'Golden Age' of the musical in the twentieth century) or distant (the 'Golden Age' of Elizabethan drama in the second half of the sixteenth century) past, for the critical re-investigation, through a comic lens, of American political history after World War II, for the dialogue between generations, as well as for the renegotiation of

the relationship between competing cultural phenomena in the contemporary context.

Notes

[1] It is worth noticing that, in the 1948 performance of Porter's and the Spewacks' *Kiss Me, Kate*, the musical number opening Act I ("Another Op'nin', Another Show") and the dancing number opening Act II ("Too Darn Hot") had a mixed cast in which the leading figures, Hattie (Lilli Vanessi's maid) and Paul (Fred Graham's assistant), with the three original dancers, were black performers. As Irene Dash puts it, that suggests that "*Kiss Me, Kate* was in the vanguard in its treatment not only of women but also of race. It reflects the optimistic years just after World War II (…). *Kiss Me, Kate* is one of the earliest examples of racial integration on the stage" (2010: 69).

[2] When adapted for the screen in 1953, the musical comedy underwent significant changes, chief among which the transformation of Lilli Vanessi's fiancé from a presidential adviser to a Texas cattle baron called Tex Calloway.

[3] As Russell Jackson points out, especially "before synchronised dialogue complicated the business of adapting poetic drama for the screen – there were more than 400 films on Shakespearean subjects", the success of which was ensured by their eliminating language barriers and their "providing an easily transportable rival to the pictorial, melodramatic mode of popular theatre" (2007: 2). For more details on silent films based on Shakespeare's plays, see also Brode (2000).

[4] A narrow definition of the so-called Golden Age of Broadway would limit the discussion to the musicals produced in the 1940s-1960s. However, as certain studies on musical theatre history suggest, a broader interpretation would be more appropriate taking into account that it was actually the merit of such great composers as George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart of having initiated, in the 1920s-1930s, an "unflagging campaign of rethinking, rebuilding, reinventing" the musical (Mordden 1983: 82), which paved the way for the musical theatre boom of the next decades.

[5] By the late 1960s and early 1970s, American musical aesthetic changed incorporating rock music and approaching sensitive issues like minority rights, homosexuality, the Vietnam War, and so forth. These thematic changes may account for the temporary reorientation towards sources of inspiration other than Shakespeare that followed such great productions as *Your Own Thing* (1968), an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* played off-Broadway, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1971), the Broadway adaptation of the Bard's early comedy of the same title. (See Everett and Laird 2008: 152, 294-5, 381-2) Over the next decades, attempts at adapting Shakespeare for the musical theatre were made mostly on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean and reference could be made, in this respect, to *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, a Jukebox musical based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, performed in various British playhouses in the 1980s.

[6] In an interview with Frank Rich, Stephen Sondheim, whom Rich calls "Broadway musical's last great artist", voices his disappointment with the turn-of-the-millennium trends in the evolution of musical theatre, i.e., "revivals and the same kind of musicals over and over again, all spectacles", hence, the feeling of "liv[ing] in a recycled culture" (2000: 1). Somewhat similar scepticism is voiced by John Kenrick who assesses the condition of the Broadway musical at the beginning of the twenty-first century as "uncertain", "after flourishing for more than a hundred and fifty years" (2008: 370).

[7] *Kiss Me, Kate* reveals its intrinsic intertextuality if one considers not only its being an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, but also its relationship to "one of its theatrical predecessors: the 1935 Alfred Lunt – Lynn Fontanne production of *The Taming of the Shrew*" (Dash 2010: 62). Tracing back the idea of *Kiss Me, Kate* as a play on relationships, Raymond Knapp attributes it the producer Arthur Saint-Subber, who was inspired by the tempestuous relationship, both on and off stage, of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. (Interestingly, Knapp remarks that the task of writing the script of the musical comedy was assumed by "Bella and Sam Spewack, a married writing team whose work on the show would bring them back together after a separation (in close parallel to the show's main action)") (2006: 274-275). Going beyond such trivia, Irene Dash makes a convincing demonstration of how the 1935 Lunt – Fontanne performance "set the pattern for *Kiss Me, Kate*" in terms of acting style, costumes, settings, and staging techniques (2010: 62-65).

[8] The quality and popularity of Porter's show, confirmed by its winning the Tony Award for the Best Musical in 1949, determined the MGM film producers to adapt it for the big screen in 1953.

[9] For an extensive analysis of how Cole Porter's songs, grouped in "a comprehensive set of 'doubles'", contribute to stressing out, through significant parallels or contrasts, the relationships between the central characters as well as between their onstage and offstage personalities, see Knapp 2006: 273-284.

[10] Given the indissoluble 'bond' between visual and verbal humour that seems essential for both the success of the performance and the understanding of Blakemore's interpretation of character development and interactions in *Kiss Me, Kate*, most of the samples selected for analysis from the play script are accompanied by (hopefully) relevant descriptions of the characters' actions and reactions as noticeable in the filmed version of the revival (2003). To distinguish between the stage directions as given in the prompt book of *Kiss Me, Kate* revised (2000) and extra-details provided on the basis of the 2003 filmed version, the former will be written in italics whereas the latter will be in regular font and always placed between round brackets.

[11] Irene Dash's comments on the original 1948 performance of *Kiss Me, Kate* reveal an interesting alteration operated in the revival script that is directly related to the representation of political life at the White House in the play. It seems that Fred's original line was: "Ask him [the President] if they serve borscht at the White House". According to Dash, "Harry Truman's informality and candour colour this exchange. Earlier drafts of this section mention Margaret Truman and her piano playing, but the collaborators must have decided that a reference to a Jewish soup would bring more laughs. The line also reflected Truman's liberalism, as well as his fame as the president of the first country to recognise Israel as a Jewish state at the United Nations" (2010: 58).

[12] To exemplify General MacArthur's virulent attacks on Washington politicians, Pearlman quotes some of his statements. For instance, in September 1945, the General is known to have told to one member of the executive branch: "I have absolutely no use for the people in Washington, including the [new] President." Moreover, referring to President Truman, MacArthur vented his rage claiming that: "We're even worse off with that Jew in the White House" (2008: 13).

[13] The interpretation of the possessive "your" as a reference to Fred alone rather than to Fred and Lilli as a couple of actors may be accounted for, on the one hand, by Fred's being not only the leading star but also the one who 'conceived, delivered and

directed' the production *The Taming of the Shrew. The Musical*, and, on the other hand, by Harrison Howell's typically patriarchal perspective on gender relations according to which men should control all activities circumscribed to the public sphere, even those which the General condescendingly treats as 'unimportant', like acting.

[14] In an article for *St. Petersburg Times*, dated 30 November 1947, Lowell Mellett commented on the following statement on American policy regarding China made by Thomas Dewey: "We need a man to run the job in China, who not only knows China but who has the broad economic, social and governmental training so essential to a task of this magnitude." The journalist speculated that the man Dewey had in mind for the "China job" was, most likely, General Douglas MacArthur, considering less the appropriateness of such a choice and more Dewey's interest (similar to Truman's, otherwise) in keeping at bay a potential rival for presidency: "MacArthur would be over there. He wouldn't be over here, getting into mischief – such as running for president."

[15] For comparison with the Shakespearean original, see Petruchio: "For it engenders choler, planteth anger,/ And better 'twere that both of us did fast." (4.1.159-60); "He that knows better how to tame a shrew/ Now let him speak: 't is charity to show." (4.1.197-8); "It's lewd and filthy." (4.3.65); "Why, thou say'st true. It is a paltry cap./ (…)/ I love thee well in that thou like'st it not." (4.3.81,83); "Go take it hence; be gone, and say no more" (4.3.162).

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