Western Michigan University
ScholarWorks at WMU

Honors Theses

Lee Honors College

4-20-2023

Could Musical Theatre Be Worthy of Literary Analysis? (Or, An Attempt at Dismantling the Cultural Hierarchy)

Sarah Meierdirks
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation

Meierdirks, Sarah, "Could Musical Theatre Be Worthy of Literary Analysis? (Or, An Attempt at Dismantling the Cultural Hierarchy)" (2023). *Honors Theses*. 3711.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/3711

This Honors Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

Could Musical Theatre be Worthy of Literary Analysis?

(Or, An Attempt at Dismantling the Cultural Hierarchy)

Sarah Meierdirks
Lee Honors College
Western Michigan University
Spring 2023 Senior Thesis

Committee
Dr. Lofton Durham (Thesis Chair)
Dr. Ilana Nash

The Beginnings of the Cultural Hierarchy and Popular Culture

In 1949, *LIFE Magazine* published an image entitled, "Everyday Tastes From High-brow to Low-Brow Are Classified on Chart." The chart was created by Russel Lynes, who was interested in detailing exactly which forms of art and lifestyle choices are partial to "High-brow" people, or those who enjoy intellectualism and the finer things in life, and "Low-brow" people, those whose interests focus on pleasure. The chart includes categories such as clothes, entertainment, reading, drinks, games, and even salads, neatly stacking the examples from each category in a hierarchy. This chart, representative of American society's newfound obsession with organizing culture based on its worth, appeared just decades after the United States had spent most of the nineteenth century in a cultural state that, although still included divisions, was much more diverse and unified, with fewer boundaries, than contemporary culture is perceived to be. Prior to the twentieth century, most of the lines established in Lynes's chart had been blurred, and "Americans… shared a public culture less hierarchically organized, less fragmented into relatively rigid adjectival boxes than their descendants were to experience a century later" (Levine 9). The cultural hierarchy as we know it today was born out of sudden panic about this state and what it would entail for American culture as a whole.

Many cultural elitists near the end of the nineteenth century worried about the implications of the masses having access to their "pure" art. "The masses" included a large influx of new people into what was considered American society: European immigrants, freed black people and their descendants, and a growing middle class with more time and wealth on their hands, all with the ability to access high art if they desired. This highest level of art was thought to have come from the divine, however, and if the common people could not appreciate it in this quasi-religious way, then, it was thought, they should not appreciate it at all. Thus began the

sacralization of high arts such as opera, symphonic music, literature. The process of sacralizing these forms of art, permanently etching their place into the top of the cultural hierarchy, included both the raising up of the artforms themselves and the putting down of anything deemed low culture or popular culture. The higher forms of art were considered so not necessarily because they were inherently more beautiful and artistic, but because they were inaccessible to the general public, both physically and intellectually. High art was something only the most educated and refined people could enjoy and, even more so, create. "More and more it was asserted that it was only the highly trained professional, who had the knowledge, the skill, and the will to understand and carry out the intentions of the creators of the divine art" (Levine 139) and ideas like this propagated thought that there must be gap between high and low art. At the same time as the intellectualism of high art was being put on a pedestal, cultural elitists responded to new popular forms of art such as jazz and band music by doing the exact opposite. "The urge to deprecate popular musical genres was an important element in the process of sacralization. If symphonic music was… divine, then it followed that other genres must occupy a lesser region" (Levine 136). This emphasis on high art as being "divine," was accompanied by the idea that any other kind of art was wicked, sinful, and devilish, attributing moral value to aspects of culture.

Those that were judged to be less intellectual and still participated in high art by attending operas or museums were also put down by cultural elitists, separating not just the high and the low but those that are associated with either high or low art as well. Prior to the development that certain kinds of art were only for certain kinds of people, seeing an opera or Shakespearean play was common and popular entertainment among both lower and upper classes. The upper classes, however, soon began to take issue with "the tendency for

undisciplined audiences to treat theaters, concert halls, opera houses, even lecture halls, not as sacred precincts but as places of entertainment where they could act naturally" (Levine 179). This caused theaters to crack down on the behavior of its patrons, even prohibiting those that they assumed would act rowdily from entering. It is said that "the primary debate was less over who should enter the precincts in the art museum, the symphony hall, the opera house as over what they should experience once they did enter" (Levine 167). The assumption that the lower classes were incapable of experiencing "what they should experience" when participating in high art, however, very much turned the cultural hierarchy into an issue of which kinds of people were fit for certain kinds of art, and vice versa. Those that were allowed to experience high art were coerced into keeping their feelings to themselves, reacting rationally and intellectually. By the turn of the twentieth century, increasingly "art was becoming a one-way process: the artist communicating and the audience receiving" (Levine 195).

Barred from accessing high art, the people deemed to be "too low" simply created their own new artforms, fragmenting the forms of culture even more and filling up the category of low art. The idea that all the rowdiest, least educated people would be creating and participating art in the same place created worry amongst the upper classes. This was a sign of the degradation of the country, a threat to culture itself. Thus, the idea that "maintaining and disseminating pure art, music, literature, and drama would create a force for moral order and help to halt the chaos threatening to envelop the nation" (Levine 200), came into play, and many organizations were formed to preserve high culture as it was and share it with those less educated on it. The issue with attempting to popularize high art at this point was that cultural elitists had spent decades engraining the idea into Americans that anything popular and widely accessible could not be considered pure art. The more popular high art becomes, the lower it would fall on the cultural

hierarchy, and this paradox of preservation led cultural elitists to "on the one hand insulate themselves from the masses in order to promote and preserve pure culture, and on the other to reach out to the masses and sow the seeds of culture among them in order to ensure civilized order" (Levine 206). Stuck now with this high "culture that could be used as a force with which to proselytize among the people or as an oasis of refuge from and a barrier against them" (Levine 207), the cultural hierarchy, was never really able to collapse again, becoming more fragmented throughout the twentieth century until it became the current hierarchy as we know it.

Before providing a more in-depth analysis of what our cultural hierarchy looks like today, it is important to note the origins of the language being used to describe the different categories within it. In his book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Lawrence W. Levine points out how the terms highbrow and lowbrow "were derived from the phrenological terms "highbrowed" and "lowbrowed," which were prominently featured in the nineteenth-century practice of determining racial type in intelligence by measuring cranial shapes and capacities" (Levine 222). Those with higher brows were considered more intelligent and thus more culturally sensitive than those with lower brows. Of course, the entire pseudoscience of phrenology is rooted in an incredibly racist form of thought aiming to prove Caucasian people are the superior race. It is no surprise then, that many of the forms of art considered "lowbrow" or removed from culture completely were those created by African, Asian, and Native American ethnic groups.

Not only was non-white art considered inherently primitive and uncivilized, but any non-white person was assumed to be incapable of appreciating culture. Levine points out how white Americans even assumed Native Americans did not have culture prior to their arrival, stating that, "American nature became worthy of consideration only after it was filtered through European sensibilities… Before the European explorers and colonists had come to the New

World, the beauty of the New Hampshire mountains was nonexistent" (Levine 145). The chart categorizing highbrow and lowbrow tastes mentioned earlier includes exaggerated drawings of what "high-brow," "upper middle-brow," "lower middle-brow," and "low-brow" faces look like, with the foreheads getting smaller, the noses getting bigger, and the faces getting flatter the further down one goes. The racism inherent in this terminology is clear and objectively disgusting, and for the purposes of this essay the words "highbrow" and "lowbrow" will not be used in the discussion of cultural hierarchy unless being quoted.

With the emergence of a cultural hierarchy at the end of the nineteenth century came a sect of culture dubbed "popular culture," which essentially encapsulated everything that could not be considered high art. There are many definitions of what exactly is included within popular culture, and the original use of the term differs from the way we use it today. Most of the original definitions of popular culture, however, were created by arbiters of high art, who wanted to give a name to the kinds of works they wished to exclude from the category of "pure" art or culture. This would include any art perceived to have been created for the purpose of gaining popularity, and not for art's sake. At its inception, using the term "popular culture," or sometimes "mass culture," was intended to be derogatory toward the very art it encapsulated. In fact, many qualities associated with works of popular culture "were imagined by cultural elites who did not always understand the objects they were writing about" (McKee). Nowadays, the definition of popular culture has changed, and we often use it to refer to works created for and by the people, not necessarily for academic or artistic merit but for entertainment.

While the modern definition of popular culture is much nicer to the art within the category, in the twenty-first century there still exists the notion that just because a piece of art was created for entertainment it cannot be seriously studied or analyzed. In fact, in looking at the

cultural hierarchy without the context of how it was created, it may seem as if what categorizes a work as high or low is whether the work is capable of being studied or not, especially since the American education system tends to focus on the hierarchy's upper parts. These notions create two assumptions about culture: first, that entertainment and academic purposes in art are exclusive, and second, that art cannot possibly be considered high culture if it does not fulfil some kind of higher academic or artistic purpose. This has not only led to pop culture media appearing much less frequently in academic settings, and a gap between the amount of analysis on high culture and popular culture, but also to many people believing they are simply not allowed to study popular culture seriously. Most of the studying of popular culture that had been done throughout the twentieth century was performed by academics who tended to prefer high art, and therefore regarded any popular art with scorn, whether intentional or not. There are very few examples of the actual consumers of popular culture studying it and having their studies be taken seriously.

This pattern can be partly accounted for by noting how, when it does come to the possibility of popular culture being analyzed, most of the discussion has to do with whether the art is authentic and therefore worthy of analysis. That in itself is an interesting discussion, but only thinking about popular culture in this way excludes the possibility that maybe a piece of media does not have to be considered "authentic" in order to be considered worthy. There are countless posts on the website Tumblr in which ordinary consumers of popular culture analyze their favorite cartoons, YA fantasy novels, or Dungeons & Dragons campaigns, displaying the vigor and critical thinking with which a Shakespeare scholar might analyze *Macbeth*. But these analyses are often considered to be "for fun" rather than counting as serious academic literature. And really, they are for fun, but one can seriously write critiques about a piece of media they

enjoy and have a good time doing it. The entertainment aspect both of the media itself and the process of analyzing it does not necessarily negate either's academic merit. To many cultural elites whose definition of popular culture does not involve this, however, it does. This rigid image of specific kinds of artforms, where we weigh artistic value in for whom and why the art is made, is a direct result of the cultural hierarchy. Although it is less critical than it might have been when the term was first created, our view of popular culture today is still "a relatively coarse and static picture of 'the market,' assuming a nested hierarchical structure that is more or less agreed-upon by market actors" (Askin and Mauskapf). And when we, as Levine says, live in a "world in which things cannot be truly compared because they were so rarely laid out horizontally, next one another, but we're always positioned above or below each other on infinite vertical scale" (Levine 3), it is difficult to do any proper analysis on culture as a whole.

Hierarchy Within the Hierarchy

While the cultural hierarchy as a whole contains the various forms of media with which people express themselves, each individual medium also has its own sub-hierarchy of what is considered high and low art. This subcategorization was already being done within the world of literature near the end of the nineteenth century. In addition to certain magazines or journals using their articles to propagate the cultural hierarchy and theories about "lowbrowed" people, such as when "in 1877 the *Atlantic Monthly* distinguished between 'false culture' and 'real culture' and reminded its readers that not everyone has the capacity to acquire culture" (Levine 218), there were debates about what kinds of reading are authentic and intellectual. Within the world of journalism, many newspapers and academic journals viewed the increasingly popularity of magazines as a threat to their readership and to high literature as a whole. Magazines

discussing fashion, furniture, pop culture, or other "trivial" subjects were considered lowest of all, and "in 1895 the *Independent* urged its fellow 'quality magazines' not to compete with such periodicals as *Cosmopolitan*, which had just reduced its price to ten cents, but instead to maintain their 'higher, purer' literary standards" (Levine 218). Again, we see this thought process that just because a kind of media is popular, that it is selling out for economic gain and therefore should be considered lesser art.

The derision of lower forms of literature only become more severe when we move into the realm of novels and fiction-writing. The more serious, realistic or thought-provoking a novel is, the higher up it is in the hierarchy, and with this standard it is impossible for any literature written for fun or amusement to move out of the low art category. In the nineteenth century, "the equation of high art and high seriousness made it difficult for some to consider an irreverent humorist like Mark Twain a cultured writer" (Levine 212), which today seems silly because many of Twain's works have become staples in English classrooms. While the opinions on certain authors and genres of fiction can change over time, today there still exists, as Peter Swirski puts it, the "grand myth that we can ignore popular literature" (Swirski 2). In fact, almost all fiction being published today can be categorized as popular literature, which has led many scholars of literature to believe that the novel is dying because no one is publishing high art in novel form anymore. Sinclair Lewis even believed that true literature is something that is dead and cannot be created in the present (Levine 144). Quite the opposite is true, however, with book sales being just as successful as ever and more novels being published in a day than would have been possible to publish in a year a few centuries ago. Nearly all of these are ignored by scholars (with a few exceptions) under the assumption that a novel written for fun or mass enjoyment must be bad. Swirski, however, makes the point that "a scientist who declares a compound

worthless just because it smells funny is as misguided as a literary scholar who a priori limits himself/herself to the study of what other scholars study, while ignoring what the rest of society depends on for its daily cultural bread" (Swirski 3). The perception that popular fiction is awash with bad prose is false, not because all popular fiction is masterfully written, but because there being more popular fiction than high fiction, of course there is going to be more bad prose in the popular than in the high category.

Regardless of the sheer amount of popular fiction being published and the fact that most readers mostly consume popular fiction, the idea that popular, contemporary novels are inferior to the classics still pervades society today, even amongst those who are reading the popular fiction. Myths that high literature enthusiasts have created about popular literature, such as that these novels are only written for money, steal readership from high literature, psychologically harm readers with their low and gratifying subjects, or lower the cultural intellect of society as a whole are still passively thought to be true. Additionally, just as critics of popular culture as a whole claim pop culture cannot be studied academically, many people make the same claims about popular fiction, even if they are not criticizing it. Genres such as fantasy, science fiction, horror, and romance are fun, but they stop at that. The works of Ernest Hemingway or Herman Melville challenge the reader intellectually and can be analyzed to no end. This thought process however, once again equates entertainment with lacking intellectualism. A book can be fun and still offer plenty of content to analyze, but even if it did not, why should a great and entertaining novel's simplicity result in it hastily being place amongst the lowest ranks of the cultural hierarchy?

Throughout the nineteenth century and even stretching to today, cultural elites have nearly unanimously agreed that opera is the highest form of music, closely followed by

symphonic pieces. This thinking partly originated from the fact that opera was a European art, and nineteenth-century Americans, finding any art they created inferior to what came before, valued European art and artists above everything. Despite the high status opera held in the nineteenth century, the artform was enjoyed by both "people who derived great pleasure from it and experienced it in the context of the normal every day culture, and by smaller socially and economically elite groups who derived both pleasure and social confirmation from it" (Levine 86). (Notice again the implication that art is considered higher when consumed for more than just pleasure.) Eventually, as mentioned earlier, the presence of lower class people within opera houses and music halls became too unbearable for the upper classes. The thought that people who did not and could not understand opera were enjoying was too much, and "opera… was too important, too exalted an art form to present itself to an uninformed, eclectic audience, many of whom cared more for the performers than the art being performed" (Levine 103). Along with common people being economically and socially barred from attending opera, the world of high music shifted even further so that one the most highly trained and traditional musicians could create music. In the eyes of cultural elites, modern men were not qualified to participate in the art of high music.

The division of audiences resulted in the creation of new musical forms, ones based off of opera but that appealed to the masses and allowed more freedom in how one responds to it. This is why musical comedy (and eventually musical theater) and vaudeville were formed, as well as the new musical styles jazz, swing, and eventually rock that encouraged people to dance along. Being derived from a higher form of art, of course, created the implication that the derivations of opera must be inferior to it, and the people who enjoyed them must be inferior to high art intellectuals as well.

Throughout the past century, it has also become an increasingly common trend to target the most popular musical genre or musician, as well as their fans, as being the arbiter of trashy music. A notable example of this is during the "Beatlemania" era of the 1960s, in which the Beatles gained huge popularity, especially among young women, in a short time. Because of this popularity, it became a trend for music critics to hate on the Beatles, claiming that their songs were either too simple and written for marketability or too confusing and meaningless. Additionally, any fan of the Beatles was "young, female, hysterical, incoherent, ignorant, naïve, undiscriminating and conformist" (Collins) and therefore incapable of perceiving their music intelligently. When the Beatles stopped producing music together, this sentiment did not go away; it simply found another target with a large fanbase, and this trend has continued to this very day. It is not uncommon to see people claim that "all pop music today is trash" or that "they don't make songs like they used to," placing fun, pop, danceable music lower on the cultural hierarchy under the claim that it lacks complexity. Again, we see the association of entertainment with lower art and the idea that the less thought it takes to enjoy something, the "worse" it is. Objectively, however, it cannot be the case that all "Top 40" songs are trash; otherwise, they would not be called "Top 40."

Another more recent trend within music's sub-hierarchy is the rising popularity of K-pop, followed by rising criticism of the genre as well. Much of this criticism resembles what was said about the Beatles: that the songs are meaningless, focus too much on aesthetics and marketability, and groups are only popular because they find the members cute. Some of the criticism, however, stems from xenophobia instead, claiming that Korean music should not be entering Western entertainment and writing the music off simply because it is in a language they do not understand. This kind of xenophobia can be seen in every category of the cultural

hierarchy, with people tending to prefer Eurocentric art over anything else. It seems especially pertinent with the popularity of K-pop, however, because critics of the genre are not understanding why so many people are becoming fans of it. Many K-pop artists use music to talk about personal topics that are less common in Western music, such as mental health, self-love, or the realities of entering adulthood. Additionally, many K-pop artists are very interactive with their fanbases, and it can be comforting to get to know the people behind the music so well. This is what leads to the assumption that K-pop is not actually about the music. Just like the critics of the Beatles were consumers of high culture who felt threatened by the sheer popularity and influence the band had on culture (Collins), however, critics of K-pop today feel as if the genre is a threat to the Western world's dominance of the music industry and place nearer to the top of the cultural hierarchy.

The desire for control and authority of what is considered pure art can especially be seen within the artform of adaptation. Adaptation on its own does not really have a place on the cultural hierarchy without looking at individual works, but within the medium there is another sub-hierarchy that deems some adaptations more authentic and legit than others. An example of this can be seen in regards to fanfiction. Fanfiction includes any story created with characters or a universe that already exist in another work, usually by someone who is a fan of that existing work. Although it is often derided, fanfiction is a medium that allows fans to interact with their favorite pieces of media on a deeper level and even create stories they wish to see with the characters they already love. It is essentially a form of adaptation.

If a fanfiction becomes popular enough, it can sometimes reach the creators of the original work, to mixed reactions. This happened with BBC's *Sherlock*, a television show with a huge fanbase. Many fans of *Sherlock* desired its two main characters, Sherlock Holmes and John

Watson, to be in a relationship together, with there being "over 40,000 works on archiveofourown.org that feature the relationship" (Michaud Wild), and the show often hinted at the possibility of that happening to keep people watching. *Sherlock* never made it a reality, however, with Steven Moffat, the showrunner, even having "repeatedly stated in the press that the main characters are not going to be canonically together in a relationship" (Michaud Wild) before the show even ended. At a convention in which the actors and crew of the show got to interact with fans, "journalist Caitlin Moran 'ambushed' the BBC's *Sherlock* actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman at a press event and had them read aloud erotic fanfiction without telling them what they would be reading beforehand" (Michaud Wild), which had clearly been done to make fun of the fans who enjoyed the idea of the characters in a relationship and the medium of fanfiction in general. One might say that this was all done in good fun, that it is "only fanfiction" and not that serious, but as Nickie Michaud Wild points out, "Mockery is one kind of symbolic violence; Moran was aligning herself with the dominant ideology that people, especially women, who are 'too' invested in a fictional narrative, are socially inept and lonely." The *Sherlock* team's response to the situation only supported this narrative, with "both Cumberbatch and creator Steven Moffat have gone on record as saying that the idea of John and Sherlock having a romantic relationship on the show is more or less absurd. Their protests come despite the fact that in the show itself, the idea of their being a couple is a recurring theme that gets brought up jokingly at various points and seriously at several others" (Romano). Not only do Cumberbatch and Moffat not condemn the reporter that may have made people uncomfortable, but they purposefully dismiss the very group of people meant to support the show, a group of people that *Sherlock* has cultivated through its intentional portrayal of the relationship between Holmes and Watson. What is even more ironic in this situation is that Moffat's show, *Sherlock*,

is not even an original story but an adaption (or even a fanfiction, if you will) of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories. Some of material used in the fanfictions had not even been adopted into the BBC show, but was from the original source. Fans claimed a double standard was being set for "official" adaptations made for commercial purposes and unofficial ones done for pure entertainment. In reality, it is unclear whether Moffat's *Sherlock* would have been supported by the story's original creator, but in Moffat's case, that approval was unnecessary for the adaptation to have been created. Being another form of adaptation, fanfiction should receive the same response, and it often does. In this case and many others, however, fanfiction is deemed a lower form of adaptation, simply because it is created by people who have less authority and influence about the direction of the story. This is just one example of how people participating in artforms that are considered higher up on the hierarchy can exercise control over those participating in lower artforms, sometimes at the expense of those people.

At some points throughout history, artists have used the cultural hierarchy to their advantage, purposely creating art that blurred the lines between categories to attract the most number of viewers possible. Cheryl Crawford did this in 1941 when she decided to revive *Porgy and Bess*, an opera by George Gershwin. The original production was decently successful, debuting in 1935 and running for 124 performances. Crawford believed, however, that it had not attracted the full audience it could have, specifically because it was marketed as an opera. At this point in the twentieth century, opera had been cemented in people's minds as existing at the very top of the cultural hierarchy. It is possible that some people who might have been interested in the story or music of *Porgy and Bess* had been turned off by the label "opera." On the other hand, Crawford did not want to rewrite *Porgy and Bess* into a musical comedy and advertise it as such, because that would create the possibility of alienating consumers of higher culture. Instead,

after revising the libretto to include less operatic material and reducing the size of the orchestra, the 1941 production of *Porgy and Bess* was advertised with vague labels. “A publicity flyer advertised the work as unlike traditional opera,” and at the same time “billed the show as “George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*,” which suggested to potential audiences that it honored the composer's intentions” (Lynch). The marketing indicated that this revised version of the show was not an opera anymore, and yet used Gershwin’s name to give the production a sense of legitimacy and preservation of the composer’s work as it should be. This dual wording “allowed those who liked opera to see the revised work as a new kind of opera… On the other hand, the flyer also allowed readers who did not care for the genre to assume that the new *Porgy and Bess* was…more of a traditional Broadway entertainment” (Lynch). Essentially, people could draw their own conclusions about the show that aligned with their own values and interests. Thus, Crawford’s revival managed to pull audiences from both high and low culture, effectively using her knowledge of the way people interpret cultural hierarchy to her advantage.

Theater appears to have acted as a bridge between high and low culture for a long time. Even during the Renaissance, Shakespeare’s plays appealed to people of multiple classes, essentially attracting what we would perceive today as both a “high” and “low” audience. In modern times, the form of art that seems to have taken on this role of attracting high and low audiences is musical theatre. Even within theatre’s sub-hierarchy, musical theater sits in a weird middle place, not quite having the prestige opera does but remaining slightly too inaccessible to truly become popular culture. What is unique about theatre is the fact that it is live, but this means that in order to participate in it, one must pay to enter, and that is often not possible for the people that might enjoy the more pop culture aspects of it. Musical theater as we know it today, however, is also a specifically American art form, which automatically places it lower on the

cultural hierarchy than artforms adopted from Europe. With the rise of the internet, musical theatre has reached a wider audience as people can now listen to soundtracks and watch pro-shots of shows without having to pay to enter the theater. This has allowed musical theatre to step further into the realm of popular culture while still retaining the aspects of liveness and formality that make people who do not participate in it see it as a high art.

Despite this impression many people have that musical theatre is a higher form of culture, I have rarely seen people interact with the medium the same way with which cultural elites interact with opera or classic literature. Interacting with musicals is not considered academic unless theatre is one's area of study, and even then the focus tends to be on the performance aspect of musicals and not on their literary nature. At this point it is important to admit that I love musical theatre. As a writer, good storylines in general interest me, but the way musicals combine music with words, spoken text with singing, and utilize visuals such as dancing, sets, and costumes all to tell one cohesive story is fascinating. It appears to me that it is worth much more literary merit than it has been given, at least in my experience. And they're *fun*. Levine asks, "Is the idea of a serious comparison of American musicals and opera really so outrageous? Are we certain we can learn so little about opera, musicals, and our own culture for making it?" (Levine 2), and I would like to ask this same question about American musicals and classic literature. Furthermore, what if I not only made the serious comparison, but gave them the same academic treatment, performing the exact same literary analysis on musicals as I would on any acclaimed novel I've been assigned to read throughout my four years as an English major.

Problems With the Hierarchy

Before delving deeper into making the comparison, however, we must discuss why one would choose to make it in the first place. Why upend the cultural hierarchy? What do we have to gain from it? In order to answer that question, one must first acknowledge what we have to lose from constraining ourselves to the idea that high and low art must exist in separate spaces. It has been mentioned briefly prior to now, but one of the reasons the cultural hierarchy might actually be harmful to culture as a whole is because the organization of it is majorly based in misogynistic, racist, and classist ideals.

In an ideal world, there's nothing inherently wrong with forms of art existing in a hierarchy. Of course, not everything can be considered "high art" without serious consideration of its artistic or academic merit. The problem with this system occurs, however, when the kinds of art placed on the lower end of the hierarchy happen to be those that, whether it be in consuming them or creating them, appeal to oppressed groups of people. There appears to be a connection with which art is considered "lower" and the audience that very art was created for. Take novels, for example. We established earlier that genre fiction, or popular fiction, is considered lower and therefore inferior to classic novels about serious topics. Within genre fiction, however, there is another sub-hierarchy of the genres themselves. Fantasy, science fiction, horror, etc. all shift around, unfixed in their position. There is one genre, however, that is almost universally agreed upon to sit at the bottom of this hierarchy, and that is romance. The genre of romance, where, according to the Romance Writers of America, 82% of its readers are women, is set at the bottom because it deals with frivolous, unserious stories about love, and the people who read these stories are considered sad and lonely.

Films of this same genre are often called “chick flics,” a name that simultaneously derides the genre as a whole and attributes it to girls. Musicians such as One Direction, NSYNC, or even the Beatles were often not taken seriously not only because of the pop music they created but also because a majority of their fanbases were female. These musical groups were, and still are, said to produce trashy pop music, manufactured for a consumerist market—that market being women. *Every single* form of art that has become a popular interest for women, and especially young women, since we defined the term popular culture has been mocked, ridiculed, and laughed out of even the possibility of entering the world of “high art.” *Twilight*, Taylor Swift, boy bands, fanfiction, makeup, soap operas, romcoms, fashion magazines, any fandom with a presence on Tumblr; these things have been berated so much that they might never rise above their “low art” categorization, and the one thing they have in common is that they all appeal mostly to women.

This is not to say that all of the pieces of media mentioned prior should be considered high art. But is it not concerning that so much art is automatically categorized low on the hierarchy simply because they are enjoyed by women? One of the biggest criticisms of female fanbases is the “extreme” reactions they have to their favorite media. Fans of boy bands are called hysterical and delusional if they like a band member. Fanfiction writers and readers are considered weird and delusional for liking a piece of media enough to engage in alternate versions of it. The list could go on forever, but this kind of “extreme” reaction is not limited to women engaging with the things they like. Sports fans, which happen to be mostly men, could be said to have “extreme” and “hysterical” reactions if the team they are cheering for wins or loses, and yet they don’t garner nearly as much criticism as women who simply like things. Creating a strong, uncontrolled reaction within consumers is often considered a sign of something being

“low culture” in general, yet the main group of people who are harmed by this (and whose art is harmed in turn) is women.

Misogyny is not the only problem that can be found in the cultural hierarchy, however. Within the hierarchy, there is also a pattern of assuming any form of art created for or by people of color should be placed lower as well. One of the places this is particularly prevalent is in music. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when jazz music began to take off, it was particularly unpopular among musical elitists and traditionalists. They saw this new, modern form of music as dirty and out of control in comparison to the centuries of strict music theory that had preceded it. Jazz, of course, originated among black people as a way for them to express themselves and create their own form of culture in a country that had deprived them of doing so for hundreds of years. One might be able to argue that the reason the traditionalists were against jazz was simply because it was so different, and that they were not used to the rules being broken like this. These kinds of criticisms did not last long, however, because soon jazz made its way up the cultural hierarchy. Alan McKee points out that “It is perhaps not coincidental that in order to be institutionalized as art, jazz had to be appropriated from its original racial and class context – that is to say, when educated middle-class white men began to enjoy jazz, it was in a position to be assimilated into the academy.” It should not shock one to learn that the second jazz became appreciated, and in McKee’s words, *appropriated* by white men, it soared to the higher echelons of the cultural hierarchy. To this day, many people see jazz as a fancy, hoity-toity genre of music, played in elevators and lounges and fancy nightclubs. That kind of perspective on jazz music would have been impossible at the beginnings of the musical genre, when it was being created by and performed for black people.

The rise of jazz to high art does not signal an end to the racism that exists within the assumptions that come along with the cultural hierarchy. The current musical genre that has taken the place of jazz is rap and hip-hop. These genres originated in the 1990s, again by black people who were just trying to find a way to express themselves. Rap differs from most modern music in that its lyrics are spoken in rhythm, and it places emphasis on telling stories and creating wordplay. It's an incredibly diverse and fascinating medium, and performing rap is a whole different feat in itself, especially when one considers the subcategory of freestyle rap, which is made up on the spot. Improvisation is a key element of jazz as well, but is more appreciated in the musical genre that has been largely co-opted by white artists than the one that largely remains in the hands of black artists. Despite the clear value in rap music, both for the world of music and for the people who relate to and find solace in it, it is often today to be considered one of the lowest forms of music. Musical elitists of the twenty-first century say the exact same things that were said of jazz in the twentieth century: rap is trashy and it's not real music. But will the same "educated middle-class white men" switch it up again once they find a way to turn rap into something "respectable?" Why are these forms of art only looked down upon when they are performed by black people, telling black stories, and speaking up for groups of people that don't have a voice? What does this tell us about our society, that we allow a hierarchy that inherently suppresses the voices of already oppressed people to rule over the way we view culture?

Given the ways in which the cultural hierarchy can isolate people viewed as "lower" into the low art categories, "there can be a little doubt that the creation of the institutions and criteria of high culture was a primary means of social, intellectual, and aesthetic separation and selection" (Levine 229). Despite the clear ways in which the cultural hierarchy can be harmful,

little has been done to challenge it. At its inception, "to challenge the reasoning behind the hierarchy's parameters, was translated almost inevitably into an attack on the idea of culture itself" (Levine 7), and now the parameters of the hierarchy are almost universally accepted as the way things have always been. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that the concepts of high and low culture, pure and popular art, were invented by cultural elitists, and "what was invented was the illusion that the aesthetic products of high culture were originally created to be appreciated in precisely the manner late nineteenth-century Americans were taught to observe: with reverent, informed, disciplined seriousness" (Levine 229). Not only were the labels of high and low invented, but also the "proper" way in which one is supposed to appreciate high art if they want to be considered an intellectual. We are taught to believe that all high art must be treated with the utmost respect, that *only* high art is capable of being treated with this kind of respect, and "that *this* was the way Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Greek sculpture were meant to be experienced and in fact *had* been experienced always by those of culture and discernment" (Levine 231).

Levine points out that, despite this blanket of cultural hierarchy being thrown over all art, creators of art forms that were considered lower did not buy into the hierarchy at all. Much of the "low art" of the nineteenth century was taken just as seriously by its consumers as the "high art" was, but with the exception that the art could also be entertaining without devaluing its worth. As the gap between high and low widened and the subsets of culture became more fragmented, more and more art came from, "the blues, jazz or jazz-derived music, musical comedy, photography, comic strips, movies, radio, popular comedians, all of which, though relegated to the nether world culturally, in fact frequently contained much that was fresh, exciting, innovative, intellectually challenging, and highly imaginative" (Levine 232). Levine also captures what is

lost when one inherently views certain kinds of art as being less worthy or respect or appreciation, stating:

> If there is a tragedy in this development, it is… that the rigid, cultural categories, once they were in place, made it so difficult for so long for so many to understand the value and importance of the popular art forms that were all around them. Too many of those who considered themselves educated and cultured lost for a significant period—and many still have not regained—their ability to discriminate independently, to sort things out for themselves and understand that *simply because a form of expressive culture was widely accessible and highly popular it was not therefore necessarily devoid of any redeeming value or artistic merit*." (Levine 232-3)

In order to attempt to undo the effects of this "tragedy," it seems as if upending certain aspects of what we consider high and low culture would be a good start. Thus, for the rest of this thesis, I will be taking what is generally considered a lower art form and treating it with all the respect and seriousness a self-proclaimed cultural elite might treat the highest of high art. The medium I have chosen to do this subversion with is musical theatre, which already exists in a weird lower-middle section of the hierarchy. As mentioned earlier, musicals are also an artform I love and find very entertaining, and I believe it is important to showcase that in treating a work of art with respect one does not need to be as critical and contrarian as possible. One can acknowledge the entertainment and enjoyment values of an artform, and it does not mean that the art is worthless, simply because it is fun. With the following essays, I would like to experiment with how art and culture might be analyzed, appreciated, and respected more thoroughly when one disregards what the cultural hierarchy has taught us about which art is valuable and which is not—when one leads with the perspective that *all* art *can* have artistic or academic merit.

Methodology and Rationale for Chosen Musicals

After researching the cultural hierarchy of art and how it came to be, I am of the opinion that confining artforms to a cultural hierarchy prevents many works of art from getting the artistic appreciation they deserve. When one chooses to analyze only the most complex and academic of novels, one also ignores the fact that a vast majority of the novels that have ever been published are popular fiction. If one writes off Taylor Swift's music because they believe all she talks about is her exes, one also ignores the beautiful lyricism of some of her songs. Why can't a romance of fantasy novel be assigned, discussed, and written on in a college class without dedicating a whole different course to the genre? Why can't songwriters be as revered as poets? The art world would be a lot more interesting, and we might discover some true hidden gems, if we stopped gatekeeping what kinds of art we can respectably analyze. How is it that an essay I write on George Orwell's *1984* would most likely be thought of as "more academic" than an essay I write on the kids television show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* when both works thoughtfully criticize totalitarian governments and excessive nationalism?

This is not necessarily to say that every single piece of art ever created at every level of the cultural hierarchy *should* be equally appreciated for their artistic or academic merit. There will still be trashy songs and trashy novels which exist solely for fun (and there is nothing wrong with that). However, I also firmly believe that every work of art *could* be appreciated the same way we appreciate all "high" artforms if we gave them the chance—and we *should* give them that chance. Therefore, I would like to take the rest of this thesis as an opportunity to flip the cultural hierarchy upside down, maybe even fully dismantle it, by applying the techniques of literary analysis and academic essay writing I have learned over the years to an artform that tends to sit lower on the cultural hierarchy. It is an artform I adore, think is under appreciated, and

have never been given the chance to artistically and academically treat as high art: musical theatre.

Musical theatre sits at a very unstable place on the cultural hierarchy. It's theatre, first of all, which is nowadays often considered an artform "for the elite" because of how expensive and formal it is. Musicals also employ some elements of opera, which is generally believed to be high art. American musical theatre as we know it today, however, originated from vaudeville and minstrel shows, which in the 19th century were considered popular and fun forms of entertainment and therefore lower art. It would be interesting if I treated specific musicals with the same academic respect I might give to a classic novel I've been assigned for a class, perform literary analysis on them, and then write a formal essay for each. It is here that I propose the question, is musical theatre "worthy" of this kind of analysis?

When it came to choosing the musicals I would analyze, I gave myself certain criteria I would abide by. I wanted the musicals to be 1) original stories, 2) all from different eras, 3) varying in genre, and 4) varying in their sung-to-spoken text ratios. These criteria would help to guarantee a fairer analysis of musical theatre, which is a very wide-encompassing art form, and allow me to take note of which musical characteristics make literary analysis more or less difficult. Here is a further explanation of the criteria:

1) *Original Stories*

   It was important for me to view the musical as its own entity, to analyze it for what makes it a musical and nothing else. I worried that if I chose to analyze a musical that was based on a book, movie, the life of a real person, or other existing plotline, the original work might invade the analysis. The goal here is to truly contain any analysis to the musical itself, and the best way to do so would be to cut out all adaptational

musicals from my list of options. Additionally, adaptation is a medium of its own that exists in a different location on the cultural hierarchy from musical theater, and my methodology is based on choosing only one artform.

2) *Different Eras*

It is possible that one era of musical theater is more prone to creating works that resemble "high art," while others focus on making art that would be fun and popular. Trends come and go within musical theatre just like in any art form, and so in picking musicals from various eras I would get a broader scope of the medium as a whole. In this case the musicals I will be analyzing are from the 1930s, 80s, 90s, and 2010s.

3) *Different Genres*

In doing my research on cultural hierarchy and popular culture, I've noticed that within artforms, works that are considered less serious and more comedic tend to fall lower on that artform's sub-hierarchy. To give both drama and comedy a chance at being seriously analyzed, the musicals I have chosen fall on a spectrum of purely comedy to purely drama.

4) *Different Sung-to-Spoken Text Ratios*

Analyzing musicals would of course including analyzing the music within them as well, and what makes musical theatre so unique is that it gives writers the opportunity to convey stories through both song and text. The writer gets to decide what is more appropriate to be sung and what is more appropriate to be spoken, as well as when speech turns into song and vice versa. The song-to-spoken text ratio of a musical indicates something about what went into the process of creating it. Additionally, opera is sung-through, and is often considered to be higher art than musical theatre.

Some musicals are also sung-through, which might put them closer to opera on the cultural hierarchy. Just like with the third criterion, I believe it is important to give both parts of this possible sub-hierarchy a fair chance.

Based on these criteria, the musicals I have chosen to analyze are *Anything Goes, Into the Woods, Falsettos,* and *Something Rotten!* In regards to 1), all these musicals are original stories and not based on that existing plot. *Into the Woods* and *Something Rotten!* take inspiration from fairytales and history, respectively, but the plots of the musicals themselves are original enough to not consider them adaptations. In regards to 2), *Anything Goes* premiered on Broadway in 1934, *Into the Woods* in 1987, *Falsettos* in 1992, and *Something Rotten!* in 2015. In regards to 3) *Anything Goes* and *Something Rotten!* are lighthearted and comedic musicals, with emphasis on big production and dance numbers; *Into the Woods* and *Falsettos*, while both have some funny moments, are ultimately rather serious, dramatic and have dark endings. In regards to 4) *Falsettos* is completely sung-through, *Into the Woods* is mostly sung with a few spoken scenes, and *Anything Goes* and *Something Rotten!* are both about equal parts sung and spoken. With these four musicals offering a wide range of the kinds of stories musical theatre can produce, the literary analysis process could begin.

The Role of Dance in *Anything Goes*

With a score written by Cole Porter, *Anything Goes* is known within the world of theatre as a classic Broadway musical, one filled with exuberant dance numbers and jazzy music. The original book of *Anything Goes*, debuting on Broadway in 1934, was written by Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse. This version, however, has been heavily revised by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, who cut and added some songs, changed a few names, and switched around some plot points. The two versions at their basics resemble the same story: a man named Billy is in love with an engaged woman named Hope, and stows away on an ocean liner with the help of his friend Reno Sweeney and a gangster named Moonface Martin in order to win her over. There are multiple other versions of *Anything Goes* that have existed between the original and most current version, all with slightly different details. This essay will be referring to the most recent version used in the 1987 revival, with emphasis on the songs written by Cole Porter himself, which retain much of their original material from the 1930s.

Because its emphasis is on music and less on storytelling, as many musicals from the 30s and 40s were, *Anything Goes* utilizes strategically placed dance breaks within its score. It is often assumed that dancing within musicals is an unnecessary addition that adds entertainment value but not much else, and while it is true that some of the dance numbers in this musical are purely fun (not that there is anything wrong with that), many of them serve a specific purpose. *Anything Goes* is a great example of a show that knows how and when to use dance effectively, as well as when to let go and let the audience enjoy a ten-minute tap number. Within the musical, dance often serves either to build relationships between characters or tell a story, playing a significant role that would make the production incomplete were the dancing left out.

The first way *Anything Goes* uses dance purposefully is to build the more intangible aspects of relationships between characters. The musical features multiple couples who change over the course of the plot, the primary of which are Billy and Hope, and Reno and Evelyn Oakleigh. At the start of the show, Billy and Hope are in love, but have only seen each other once, one night in a taxi. Additionally, Hope is engaged to Evelyn, and so her feelings for Billy need to be shoved aside. Billy attempts to convince her otherwise, however, while singing the song "So Easy To Love," in which the two fantasize about the life they could have together. The verses of this song are interrupted by a long interlude break, in which Billy and Hope share a dance on the ship's deck. The dance is romantic but formal at first, resembling a foxtrot. The couple dances with all the proper form and etiquette one might see at a ballroom dancing contest. As the dance carries on though, the two grow closer, loosening up a bit and beginning to have more fun. It is clear that this dance serves as a way to both get the characters more comfortable with each other, and remind Hope of what exactly she liked about Billy the night in the taxi. It tells the audience that these two really are in love, because although Hope's words insist that she cannot have feelings for Billy and must marry Evelyn, her commitment to and enjoyment of the dance say otherwise. If Hope were to say here outright, "Billy, I love you, but I have to marry Evelyn," then that disparity between her words and actions would be lost, and it would make her arc as a character much less enticing. Here, dance performs a task which dialogue or music cannot, acting as a key turning point in Billy and Hope's relationship and emphasizing what is left unsaid between the two.

Dance also builds the relationship between Evelyn, Hope's fiancé, and Reno, Billy's friend and nightclub singer for the ship. As the two run into each other on the deck during one sleepless night, Evelyn realizes that he has developed feelings for Reno. He confesses these

feelings to her through a song called “The Gypsy in Me,” in which he explains how he has a wild side because part of his family is Romani. Song title and implications of the song’s content aside, this number also has an interlude in which Reno and Evelyn dance. Much like Billy and Hope’s, the purpose of a dance here is to showcase Reno and Evelyn falling in love. The energy of this dance is much different to that of the prior couple’s however. “The Gypsy in Me” is a more upbeat song, and so rather than a slow, romantic foxtrot, Evelyn and Reno perform a fiery and aggressive tango. The pure aggression in this dance differentiates this relationship with Billy and Hope’s because neither party here feels like they’re being held back by something the way Hope is. There is no hesitancy for Reno and Evelyn to interact with each other romantically. In addition to a tango being a more intense dance than the one Billy and Hope did, this specific tango highlights Reno and Evelyn’s personalities, and specifically how much they complement each other. At some points during this dancing, it gets awkward. The pair doesn’t quite get the groove of the music right and they are not the most graceful. Following each moment of awkwardness created by one character or the other, however, the opposite character responds with the same energy, showing that it is okay to be a little weird. Throughout this dance, Reno, Evelyn, and the audience realize how similar the two are, and how perfect they’d be together. By the end of the song, Reno is fully on board with Evelyn’s feelings for her, shown through how she never once backed down from the tango. The inclusion of dance in this song not only builds chemistry between Reno and Evelyn, but also allows the audience to come to an understanding of why Hope and Evelyn as a married couple will not work. Hope would not know what to do with Evelyn’s aggressive tango, and Evelyn might be bored by Hope’s simple yet romantic foxtrot. Once again, dance communicates something that would render the musical less effective were it not said at all or said with words instead of actions.

There are also multiple dance numbers in *Anything Goes* that, rather than serving to build a relationship between two characters, tell a secondary story that enhances the words being sung. One of these is "Friendship," sung by Reno and Moonface after they realize what a good team they make while trying to get Hope to marry Billy. The song doesn't really have a dance section within it, but rather the lyrics are accompanied by dance. At first the dancing matches the lyrics, which assert how the two will always be there for each other by giving examples like, "If you ever feel so happy your land in jail, I'm your bail" and "If you ever catch on fire, send a wire." The two happily dance around the deck of the ship, acting out the various scenarios as they go. As the song continues, however, Reno and Moonface's movements descend into fighting as they get in each other's way, step on each other's feet, and try to outdance each other. The lyrics, however, remain as goofily steadfast as before, with the scenarios getting crazier but the assertion that the two are always there for each other remaining the same. The dancing, in this song, tells a story of its own that completely differs from the one being told through music and words. The music itself here is also especially upbeat, so the aggressive bickering going on against it is especially contrasting. Listening to the song alone, one might never catch the underlying story being told throughout "Friendship," and the dancing serves to enhance the song beyond its simple and repetitive lyrics.

The song in which the dancing most intensely serves to tell a story is probably "Blow, Gabriel, Blow." This song is sung by Reno at the beginning of Act II. The premise of her performance is that she is an "Evangelist" who sings her sermons and "saves" people through music. The song itself lightheartedly talks about the end times, asking if you'll be ready to go whenever Gabriel blows his horn to signal the world is ending. The lyrics here, much like "Friendship," are rather simple and repetitive. The lines "I was low, Gabriel, low," "Once I was

headed for hell," and "'Cause I've been through brimstone and I've been through fire" are repeated multiple times throughout the song. The lyrics are essentially declaring that yes, the singer is ready for when Gabriel blows his horn, and not much beyond that. What makes this song so entertaining and one of the most famous numbers from *Anything Goes*, however, is the dancing that accompanies it. Reno eventually gets her whole audience to stand up and sing with her, leading to the big dance break. A lot of the choreography here resembles religious motifs, with the ensemble holding their hands together in prayer or lifting their arms up and looking to the sky like they're speaking to God. The dancing tells the story of a sinner repenting and ensuring they'll be ready to go to heaven when the times comes much more clearly than the lyrics alone do. This is one of those songs that is "just for fun," and does not really affect the plot in any way, but through the utilization of dance, "Blow, Gabriel, Blow" tells its own story within the scope of the musical, and the show as a whole is all the more entertaining and memorable for it.

Being a musical of the 1930s, when it was often the blueprint for musicals to include multiple numbers dedicated to dancing, *Anything Goes* is filled with all kinds of dance styles, from tap to ballroom. Dancing in musicals can often just be for entertainment purposes, such as in the title song of this musical, which is mostly instrumental to allow for a spectacular tap routine to be performed. *Anything Goes*, however, more often than not blends the dance in with other elements like music and dialogue in order to enhance the story being told. This is not to say that the dancing moves the plot along, although it sometimes does, but that including dance in multiple numbers creates a more in-depth view of characters such as Hope and Evelyn and allows us to see when a character's actions directly contrast with their words. Musical theatre is known for portraying an exaggerated version of life through the use of multiple art forms at the

same time. If music and singing begin when words are no longer enough, then dancing begins when actions are no longer enough, and the actions which the dancing in *Anything Goes* portrays are especially effective at enhancing the musical in ways no other art form could.

Subversion and Duality in *Into the Woods*

Inspired by fairytales like Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Jack and the Beanstalk, the musical *Into the Woods*, written by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, has many elements that most audience members would be familiar with before seeing the show. In addition to the actual characters and plot points being those that take place in the aforementioned fairytales, *Into the Woods* utilizes common fairytale elements like simple dualities, wishes being fulfilled, and clear morals and lessons. In the 1987 Broadway production, the opening set even looks like a page in a story book, placing three separate locations (Cinderella's house, Jack's farm, and a bakery) right next to each other. The sets are flat against the back of the stage, which is covered by another flat image of an illustrated forest. In these ways, *Into the Woods* sets itself up to be a retelling of centuries old stories, fun but still familiar. The first act especially works to set up specific expectations for the audience, playing heavily into the cheesy language and inexplicable magic that often happens in these stories. It's charming, and played mostly for laughs. It is this exact set up of expectations that makes the second act of *Into the Woods*, where fairytales don't always have happy endings and actions have extreme consequences, so shocking.

The second act of *Into the Woods* goes beyond even the most disturbing aspects of the original fairytales. There are parts of it that truly feel like horror, and while watching, it is difficult to believe that this is the same show you were laughing at just an hour ago. Morals become complicated, there's no clear right and wrong or good and evil, and most of the characters end up dying, crushed by a giant terrorizing the woods. In order to not make this transition so shocking that the acts feel like two separate musicals, however, *Into the Woods* starts planting seeds of the darkness lurking ahead early on, all while lulling the audience into a false sense of security with its amplified fairytale aspects. These two things happening at the

same time create multiple dualities where two opposite things exist at the same time, such as comedy and darkness, safety and danger, or simple and complex moral dilemmas. Using these dualities, *Into the Woods* subverts its own expectations.

One of the first expectations to be subverted is that of the musical's comedy. *Into the Woods* begins with a fast-paced prologue introducing all of its characters, each an exaggerated caricature. Cinderella's only real friends are birds, and Little Red steals a bunch of sweets from the bakery by saying they're for her Granny in the woods. The most exaggerated of all is the Witch, played by Bernadette Peters in the 1987 production. Peters plays almost all of the Witch's lines for laughs at the beginning of the musical, despite her character threatening to destroy the family tree of an innocent baker and his wife. The Witch becoming comedic relief while doing objectively harmful things is a pattern throughout this first act. Another notable moment is when she visits Rapunzel in the tower, who is trapped there by the Witch herself. The Witch asks for Rapunzel to let down her hair, which she does, and then the Witch proceeds to climb this rope up the ten foot tower set, all while Rapunzel is groaning in pain at her hair being pulled. It's not graceful at all, and it takes the story of this young girl trapped in a tower with barely any human contact and turns it into a joke. Thus, the first act of *Into the Woods* sets up the expectation that, even if things seem serious, the story is meant to be seen as ridiculous and laughed at. Amongst all this comedy, however, there are a few moments of darkness within the first act that, although also played for comedy, foreshadow the really serious events to come. For example, when Little Red is walking through the woods, she is cornered by a wolf, as one would expect. The wolf, however, at least in the 1987 production and many after that, is dressed rather scantily and has human abs. He sings the song "Hello, Little Girl" to Little Red, trying to convince her to leave the path so he can eat her. Just like previous jokes the show makes, the wolf looks so ridiculous

that the scene is funny. Beneath the comedy though, is the image of an all-too anthropomorphic predator stalking a young girl. Looking at this scene out of context, it's rather pedophilic, especially when listening to the way the wolf describes Little Red: "Look at that flesh, pink and plump… Tender and fresh, not one lump." Even during the last scene of the first act, which serves as a bridge between the light comedy and the serious drama, the dark moments of Cinderella's step-mother cutting off part of the step-sisters' feet to fit the slipper, and birds plucking all the villains' eyes out still plays as comedy. The disparity between the subject matter here and the comedy with which it is portrayed both foreshadows a further darkness to come and sets up the expectation that darkness is to be laughed at and not taken seriously.

The dark events of the second act, however, are hardly comedic. A seriousness falls upon the story as a female giant, whose husband was killed in the first act, climbs down from the clouds to seek revenge, crushing everything in her sight. She is looking for Jack, who cut down the original vine leading to the giants and is nowhere to be found. This leaves the characters with what happens to be the biggest moral dilemma of the second act: whether to turn Jack in to save themselves or risk all their lives to save one. This fantastical trolley problem is much more complex of an issue than the dilemmas faced by the characters in the first act, which essentially boiled down to "find this item" or "sell a cow." Sure the baker and his wife were compelled to deceive and steal in order to get the items needed to break their infertility curse, but the consequences of their actions back then were far less serious than the death of a young boy. In a few short moments, the musical that had been using moral dilemmas and evil characters for laughs loses its comedy. Adding to the sudden lack of comedy are the truly disturbing sound effects the 1987 production uses to portray the giant dropping the narrator from high in the air and stepping on Rapunzel, killing them both instantly. With this new tone, *Into the Woods* begins

to cover much more serious and realistic issues than it had prior, portraying the permanence of death, adultery committed by the baker's wife and Cinderella's prince, Rapunzel's PTSD, absent fathers, and what it really means to be nice rather than good. The lessons learned from the characters dealing with these experiences are much more complex and less clearcut than the ones from the first act, and they probably resonate more with the audience as well, completely subverting the first act's precedent that these characters are so ridiculous and detached from our own reality that they can only be laughed at.

The "woods" of *Into the Woods* is almost its own character, with a duality of its own and a personality that gets subverted going from the first act to the second. In Act I, going into the woods is risky and scary. One only does it when they absolutely have to. During the prologue, the various characters entering the woods comfort themselves by singing, "The way is clear. The light is good. I have no fear, nor no one should." Despite this affirmation, characters like the baker and his wife still fear the uncertainty that comes with entering the woods. Being away from home and not knowing if they'll make it back is uncomfortable, and throughout the first act, the biggest real danger each character faces is getting lost by straying from the path. This sets up the expectation that the woods are where the conflict takes place, and, in contrast, the villages (or civilized places) are havens. Once the characters return home, they are safe. This perception of the woods is flipped upside down in Act II, however, when most of the characters' homes are destroyed by a giant walking through the town. Fearing that their homes are no longer enough protection, the characters enter the woods once more, only this time with the idea that they will be safer there. Ironically, the danger lurking in the woods during Act II is much more serious than that of Act I, but it is during the first act that the woods are feared. Therefore, the woods have this duality of being perceived as both dangerous and a safe haven, but the musical

subverts which one they *actually* are to what one expects based on how the characters perceive them.

Into the Woods also subverts what the audience comes to expect of its main antagonist, the Witch, by creating a complex duality within her between the two acts as well. In the first act, she is the reason the baker and his wife need to go "into the woods" in the first place. And though it does appear that she is trying to help the couple have a child, we find out eventually that her ulterior motive in helping them was for her to regain her youth and beauty. The Act I Witch is a very stereotypical and simple villain, evil because she's, well, a witch. She's such an over-the-top caricature of what a witch should be that it is comedic. Her comedy paired with her inherent evilness sets up this expectation that she is just a villain and shouldn't really be listened to or taken seriously. This, as everything else is, gets completely subverted in Act II, when the problems at hand are no longer being caused by the Witch. She retains her attitude from before, but when faced with the huge dilemma of how to deal with a giant, she ends up becoming a voice of reason. She knows magic better than any other character, and she knows they cannot fight a giant. Their best bet, then, is to either give up or give in and hand Jack over. Neither ending represents what one would expect of a proper fairytale, but then again, this is no longer that kind of story. None of the characters know this better than the Witch. However, despite the knowledge she has, and despite her genuineness in trying to come up with a solution, none of the characters listen to her because she's, well, a *witch*.

The Witch seems to have a deeper understanding of the role she's been playing within the story, as well as the complexity that has been growing inside her throughout it. She is also aware of the hypocrisy that exists within the other characters and makes good arguments about this to their faces. When Little Red insists that they can't just kill Jack by giving him to the giant, the

Witch points out that she killed and skinned a wolf earlier in this same story. Little Red replies, "A wolf's not the same" to which the Witch counters, "Ask a wolf's mother." This is a valid point, and it leads to one of the ultimate morals at the end of the musical, which is that the people you perceive as villains are only villains in your story, and not inherently so. The same goes for heroes. Real people are more complex than just good or bad, and so is the wolf, and so is the Witch. As all the "good" characters of the musical argue about who is to blame for them being in this situation in the first place, the Witch brings back the idea that nice and good are not the same thing by saying, "You're not good, you're not bad, you're just nice. I'm not good, I'm not nice, I'm just right." She is the first one that breaks out of this black and white fairytale mentality, giving the rest of the characters the dose of rationality they need to figure out how to defeat the giant. While the Witch had previously been one of the least seriously taken characters in *Into the Woods*, in the second act, the musical manages to subvert everything that is expected of her by making her both "bad" and "right." She is the one that should be taken the *most* seriously throughout the second act, which is hardly something one would expect based on the way she is introduced in Act I.

Even with the drastic tone shift in the middle, the two acts of *Into the Woods* still manage to create a cohesive story, with the second act subverting almost everything we have come to expect from the first. One of the reasons these subversions are so successful is the fact that, despite them being unexpected, traces of them are still present ahead of time. There is darkness in some of the funniest moments, and yet we don't see it because the musical tells us to laugh. The woods are dangerous and to be feared, but never as much as they should be when the characters actually enter them voluntarily. The Witch, who appears to become complex in the second act, really was complex all along, but our eyes are averted away from that complexity for

the sake of the fairytale. Individual dualities such as these mirror not only the dual nature of the musical itself, but also its message that everything and everyone has duality within themselves. Everyone is good, and everyone is bad. By setting up these dualities, *Into the Woods* succeeds in drastically shifting from comedy to tragedy in a way that's believable and subverting all the expectations it sets up for itself.

The Games They Play: Chess and Immaturity in *Falsettos*

Falsettos, a musical written in 1992 by William Finn and James Lapine, tells the story of a man named Marvin and his family in the late 70s and early 80s. Marvin, having recently realized he is gay and wanting to integrate his new boyfriend Whizzer into his life, struggles to balance the life he once had with a wife and kid, and the life he desires as an openly gay man. The characters spend most of the musical in an awkward middle ground between these two parts of Marvin, who "wants it all" but cannot realize how living like this is hurting everyone around him. While there are multiple other subplots and characters, at its core *Falsettos* is about Marvin, a grown man but not a matured one, experiencing his belated coming of age alongside his son Jason.

Along with this theme of maturity, or lack thereof, a motif that can be seen throughout *Falsettos* is playing games. There are multiple scenes that include chess-playing, Jason plays baseball, and Marvin and Whizzer play racquetball together. In many of these scenes, the playing of games is simultaneously used as a metaphor for the conflicts taking place between characters, such as the song "The Chess Game" using chess as a stand-in for the fights Marvin and Whizzer have. While each of these games individually have their separate places within the plot, the motif of games acts as a metaphor for the immaturity displayed by the grown men of *Falsettos*. Games are generally thought to be enjoyed mostly by children, The men of *Falsettos* not only enjoy games, but also specifically use them as a way to dance around their true feelings and interpret their experiences, both good and bad. Through both the literal and metaphorical games played in *Falsettos*, one can gain insight into the musical's theme of maturity, as well as the level of immaturity at which each character operates.

To delve further into how clear maturity and immaturity are as themes in *Falsettos*, one can pick apart the song for which the first act of the musical is named: "March of the Falsettos." This number is unique among musical theater, requiring all four male characters (Jason, Marvin, Whizzer, and Mendel) to sing entirely in the falsettos register. In the 2016 Broadway revival production, the men come out in T-shirts tucked into shorts, high socks, eye masks, gloves, and propeller hats, all of which glow in the dark as the lights are dimmed. The goal of the song is portray all of these men as children and therefore equals, with the falsetto singing resembling the voice of a young boy. Ironically, singing this way makes Jason's (the actual child) voice sound the lowest, indicating that although he is the youngest, he is more mature than his elders. As the men march around the stage, poking and prodding at each other, they sing about how "it's a goddamn surety we're lacking in maturity." The performance of "March of the Falsettos" is bookended by "Trina's Song" and "Trina's Song (Reprise)," with the march acting as a vision Trina has in regards to what she sings about prior. Trina is the ex-wife of Marvin, and is more than any other character subjected to the immaturity of the men around her. She speaks about this for the first time in Trina's Song, mentioning how "they grow—but don't mature." As the song continues, Trina points out it is these kinds of men that are in charge of the world, as well as how frightening it is that they are so immature and can't even see it for themselves. She's tired of it, and her opinions on the male characters in *Falsettos* get realized in the aforementioned "March of the Falsettos." This whole segment, breaking from the musical's linear timeline and generally grounded reality, is the most prominent example of immaturity as a theme in *Falsettos*.

Of all the games mentioned in *Falsettos*, chess comes up the most often. Chess appears to be a bonding activity for Jason and his father, Marvin. It acts as a mediator for Marvin to discuss serious topics with his son, such as love and manhood. The song "Marvin at the Psychiatrist"

implies that these kinds of discussions have taken place when Jason sings, “My father says that love is the most beautiful thing in the world… I think chess is the most beautiful thing, not love.” For a young boy, this love of games is not unusual, and Jason’s response to his father’s statement acts as an indicator for his youth and lack of maturity. Shortly after this scene, however, we see Jason playing chess by himself and not with Marvin. Given the previous usage of chess as a middleman for serious conversations, Jason playing alone signals that these conversations are not happening anymore, that Marvin might be struggling to connect with his son on an emotional level. Additionally, Jason seems angry at his father because of this, calling out what he sees as immaturity by saying, “My father’s no man, no man at all.” Marvin does, however, continue to play chess with Whizzer, dedicating his emotional energy to his boyfriend rather than his son and leaving Jason to play by himself.

Marvin and Whizzer’s chess games continue to act as shields for serious conversations, with an entire song, aptly named “The Chess Game,” turning a single game of chess into a metaphor for their relationship. The song begins with Marvin patronizing Whizzer’s ability to play a good game of chess, urging him to make move and, when he does not, asking “Do you want my help?” Whizzer, stubborn to understand chess, refuses the help and proceeds to make multiple moves that are not allowed at the start of a chess game. This infuriates Marvin, which in turn infuriates Whizzer, to the point where they both complain how “Life’s a sham and every move is wrong. Both men equate life to a game of chess, a game that Marvin only cares about winning and Whizzer does not really care about at all. These views on chess parallel the two characters’ views on life and their relationship, with Marvin seeing everything as something he can and must win at all costs, regardless of whether winning is even possible, and Whizzer not taking his relationship with Marvin seriously. In fact, nothing truly matters to Whizzer “except

sex… and money." Both these outlooks lack the maturity to focus on preserving their relationship, and this immaturity only becomes more prominent as Marvin and Whizzer continue their chess game.

Whizzer pesters Marvin to make his move quickly the same way Marvin did to him, and eventually the two's childish bickering turns into something more serious as Whizzer suggests, "Maybe we should call it quits," followed by Marvin saying, "This game shits." Here the line between life and games begins to blur, as it is unclear at first whether these lines refer to chess or their relationship. After this, however, Whizzer quickly changes the subject, demanding for Marvin to let him win and moving all the pieces of the chessboard around to give himself a checkmate. Marvin protests this and Whizzer ignores him, simply saying "Whizzer wins!" over and over again. This action is childish on Whizzer's part, as he is refusing to play properly and "use some brains" like Marvin asked him to. But Marvin, hating to lose under any circumstances, sees this as a challenge to his dominance in their relationship. He stands up, leaves the game, and comes back with a suitcase, signaling for Whizzer to pack his things and leave. The two then fight, mocking and hurling insults at each other, truly resembling two kids fighting over a game on the playground. Once again, the musical leaves it unclear whether this breakup happens over a real and singular chess game or if this game is just a metaphor for Marvin and Whizzer's rocky relationship. Through the medium of chess, however, we get a clear depiction of just how immature both characters are, in their own ways.

The presence of chess in *Falsettos* also aids in portraying character development in regards to maturity. Much later in the musical, when Whizzer is in the hospital, Jason brings him a chess set for them to play together. As they begin to play, Jason says, "I'll let you win, Whizzer" to which Whizzer responds, "Don't let me win." Although Whizzer never cared about

winning before, he enjoyed the process of defeating Marvin and acting a sore winner. This response to another opportunity to win at chess, coming two years after the last, drastically differs from Whizzer's first. The change represents the ways in which Whizzer has matured over the years. Jason, on the other hand, asserts once more that he wants to let Whizzer win, which contrasts his previous statement that chess is the most beautiful thing in the world. Perhaps Jason still believes this, but now he is willing to take a step back from something he loves in order to make some*one* he loves happy.

Falsettos furthers its metaphor of games through the song "The Games I Play," sung by Whizzer directly after his breakup with Marvin. The lyrics of the song detail the struggles he has had trying to create authentic relationships with men in the past, and how they have only continues with Marvin. He equates these struggles to playing games, meaning nothing he has found has ever been truly serious. One of the things he finds difficult about being with Marvin is the way Marvin insists on playing the traditional father and husband role he previously had while also playing the role of the openly gay man he desires to be. Whizzer says, "It's hard when part of him is off playing family charades," equating Marvin's indecision to a simple game of pretend. Despite Marvin wanting both his lives at the same time, that is simply not possible. Instead of acknowledging this and choosing one of the other, however, Marvin's immaturity, seen in how he demands, "I want it all" multiple times throughout the musical, prevents him from treating his responsibilities to either life as anything more than charades, and this hurts everyone around him. The comparison is made even more appropriate when considering the fact that Marvin is not very good at communicating, and the basis of charades is to inhibit communication by forcing the player to not speak. Whizzer acknowledges the immaturity of it all, and the part he has played in it, and yet he knows at this point in their lives neither Marvin

nor Whizzer have the ability to look beyond the façade of the game. Whizzer brings the song to an emotional ending, admonishing the games he's been playing and singing, "These are the *only* games I play." The emphasis on the word only may be an indicator that he is maturing some, realizing he cannot keep playing the games he has been, but has not completely developed to realize he cannot keep playing games *at all*.

The musical *Falsettos* places a huge emphasis on the theme of maturity, specifically in regards to its male characters, who all act rather immaturely in various ways. Ironically, for most of the musical, the most mature male character is Jason, the twelve-year-old son of Marvin and Trina. One way the musical displays the immaturity of these characters is through games, both literal and metaphorical. Marvin and Whizzer in particular compare their lives and their conflicts with each other to games, indicating a disconnect between what is serious and what is simply "play," and that disconnect is the crux of both characters' immaturity. While the depiction of these male characters is not entirely favorable, especially in the musical's first act, the purpose of *Falsettos* is to showcase their development into better people, even if their "growing up" phase happens far into their adult life. Marvin, who begins the musical with his "I want it all" mentality, who is not making the lives of his ex-wife, son, or boyfriend any easier, enters the second act with the line, "One day I'd like to be as mature as my son who is 12 and a half." This is the first time Marvin acknowledges that he is lacking in maturity, and that he needs to change, which he spends the rest of the second act attempting to do. These changes in maturity happen, once again, through even more games, as he gets back together with Whizzer at a baseball game and the two bond over playing racquetball together. The same way games provide insight into the level of immaturity of the characters in *Falsettos*, they provide insight into how and when they mature as well.

How *Something Rotten!* Successfully Depicts "Will's Power"

In the 21st century, we often consider Shakespeare's works to be the pinnacle of high art. His plays and sonnets are taught in almost every English class, and those less familiar with the Bard tend to equate the difficult language with which he often writes to intellectualism. If they don't understand it, it must be because they simply are not smart enough to get it. After all, Shakespeare enthusiasts study his works for years just to be able to read them as easily as any contemporary novel. Being hard to grasp, however, does not necessarily equate to being intellectual, and what a lot of people nowadays would be surprised to learn is that during the Renaissance and especially again when his works had a revival in the 19th century U.S., Shakespeare was considered popular culture. And this popularity did not just involve common people enjoying the odd sex joke every now and again; there were plenty of nineteenth century Americans who genuinely valued Shakespearean works for the good art that they were, while not relegating him to the highest category of art reserved only for intellectuals. To provide a modern equivalent, think of Shakespeare as being like Stephen King, who is widely thought of as a genuinely talented author but who mostly publishes genre fiction, something often considered to be lower form of literature because it's what the masses read. That's not to compare King to Shakespeare in any other way, but, as Lawrence W. Levine puts it in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, "Being the product of my own society in which Shakespeare is firmly entrenched in the pantheon of my culture, I was surprised, and fascinated, by the notion that his plays might have been popular culture in the 19th century, but initially I resisted the idea" (Levine 4). In order to fight against that resistance Levine and many others (myself included) likely felt about Shakespeare being popular culture, it may be helpful to have more contemporary comparisons to Shakespeare and his works that properly capture his popularity.

This is where the musical *Something Rotten!* comes into play. *Something Rotten!*, written by John O'Farrell, Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick, is a 2015 Broadway musical that takes place in 1595 London, during the Renaissance. It presents the story of brothers Nick and Nigel Bottom as they try to write the next hit play. The only problem standing in their way is that they're out of ideas, because whatever they try to write about, another playwright named William Shakespeare does better. Frustrated at his inability to compete with Shakespeare's immense celebrity, Nick goes to a soothsayer to look into the future and figure out what the next "big thing" in theatre will be, which happens to be musicals. Nick, determined to get ahead, decides he and his brother must create a musical in order to rise above the bard. Shenanigans ensue with plenty of Shakespeare and Broadway references that any classical or modern theatre-enjoyer would love, but what stands out most about this musical is its depiction of Shakespeare, encompassed in which is the character himself, his fans, and his critics. *Something Rotten!* manages to perfectly capture the celebrity and popularity Shakespeare attained during the Renaissance through the use of more modern references, painting him not as a high cultured intellectual but as a rockstar.

That is not an exaggeration. The Shakespeare of *Something Rotten!* is a literal rockstar, resembling modern rock icons along the lines of Mick Jagger, with his troupe acting as his posse. He's dressed in leather, parties hard, and whenever he walks into a room the entire cast sings "Shakespeare!" in four-part harmony as a throng of fans greet him. He travels London performing renditions of his most famous sonnets and monologues in a concert format, and it is at one of these concerts that he makes his first appearance in the musical, with all the grandeur that a rockstar would receive. The song itself is called "Will Power," and begins with drums beating as a crowd of Londoners chant, "We want Will! We want Will!" An announcer proceeds to identify Shakespeare through various nicknames (such as "the man who put the 'I am' in

iambic pentameter") before the bard bursts onto stage, greeting a screaming audience demanding performances of certain sonnets or confessing their love for him. Shakespeare proceeds to recite "Sonnet 18" and the first few lines of *Richard III* set to music, encouraging his audience to sing along. Shakespeare eventually brings the mood down to perform an emotional ballad using Romeo's "but soft! What light through yonder window breaks" monologue from *Romeo and Juliet*, which he sings directly to an audience member, who screams and passes out as he hits a particularly beautiful high note. From this song alone, it is more than obvious how, as Shakespeare puts it, "he is the will of the people." Portraying him as if he were a modern-day rockstar is both an effective and entertaining method of conveying just how popular Shakespeare was to an audience that may just know him as the stuffy playwright that only the highest of intellectuals can appreciate.

This comparison, additionally, becomes even more appropriate when one considers the role rockstars of the 20th century played in the cultural hierarchy. The article, "In Between the Brows: The Influx of Highbrow Literature in Popular Music" by Oana Ursulesku points out that, despite rock n' roll musicians' reputations for being rebels trying to fight against culture, many artists like The Rolling Stones, The Smiths, or Bob Dylan utilized references to higher literature or other kinds of high culture media in their popular music. By doing this, "rock 'n' roll culture, in the mid-twentieth century, created a bridge that made the two brows finally meet on the global cultural forehead, by performing for the masses…and yet, at the same time, showing a close connection to the artistic and cultural history preceding it" (Ursulesku 85). Shakespeare's works, in a similar manner, also acted as a bridge between high and low art during the Renaissance. His plays were written in the very formal iambic pentameter style, showcasing a strong understanding of literary techniques, and often told the stories of important upper class figures in

English history. At the same time, however, Shakespeare's oeuvre is awash with innuendo, sex jokes, and references to genitalia. This is something that *Something Rotten!* honors as well, such as in the song "I Love the Way," which implies reading a good poem is like having an orgasm. The musical masterfully integrates historical references with inappropriate jokes, the same way Shakespeare of the Renaissance would. His plays have properties that appeal to enjoyers of both high and low art, both the "intellectuals" and "the masses." Having this in common with rock musicians, it is only appropriate that *Something Rotten!*, in portraying Shakespeare as the pop culture figure that he was, would turn their version of the bard into a rock icon.

Something Rotten! does not just stop at the character of Shakespeare himself, however. In creating a modern comparison of his popularity, the musical also has its other characters react to him in ways they might be more familiar with. Just like any celebrity nowadays, the Shakespeare of *Something Rotten!* has critics, consisting mostly of Nick, and his fans, consisting of pretty much everyone else. The previous paragraphs already touched on the way his fans react to him, screaming and fainting in his very presence. Later on, during the song "Hard to Be the Bard," we hear Shakespeare discuss his experience with fans himself as he says, "I've got so many fans with so many demands I can hardly go take a piss… Be it theater-freak or the autograph-seeker they all want a piece of this." Much like many celebrities today, Shakespeare's fame is taking away his privacy and his free time, and while he may love it, he is not exempt from the odd superfan. Specifically, this kind of passionate following resembles the Beatlemania of the 1960s, in which the Beatles developed a large, outspoken fanbase consisting mostly of young women. This is the exact same kind of fanbase Shakespeare has in *Something Rotten!*, with the musical even emphasizing his majority female following by having girls literally follow him around. Whether or not this is the kind of fanbase Shakespeare would have actually had during the

Renaissance, this idea of a superfan is much more familiar to modern-day viewers, and thus helps to communicate the sheer popularity he held.

Just like the Beatles' passionate fanbase and presence in popular culture garnered them a large amount of criticism, the Shakespeare of *Something Rotten!* also faces critics, and these critics use the same exact talking points which those of the Beatles used in the 1960s. Those that considered themselves connoisseurs of music believed that the Beatles garnered too much attention, and this was in part due to their fans. And so, the Beatlemaniacs were attacked, effectively othered from the high music enjoyers, as critics spread the idea that "the Beatlemaniac was young, female, hysterical, incoherent, ignorant, naïve, undiscriminating and conformist; the archetypal critic was mature, male, composed, articulate, erudite, wise, discerning and independent" (Collins). The biggest Shakespeare critic in *Something Rotten!*, Nick Bottom, uses this exact same argument to belittle the bard's success. In the song "God, I Hate Shakespeare," where Nick explains exactly why that is, he says, "another thing I hate about Shakespeare, is all the twits who bloviate about Shakespeare." He makes fun of Shakespeare-enjoyers and how they apparently lack the ability to make insightful commentary about his work, saying, "And they're all 'ooh!' And he's all 'stop.' And they're all 'yay!' And I'm all 'EUGH!" He even targets Shakespeare's female fans who believe "'a rose by any other name' is such a clever line." With all these comments, Nick paints a Shakespeare fan as non-intellectual, foolish, ignorant to what art really is, and overdramatic. In contrast, Nick, who refuses to react this way to Shakespeare, is the "archetypal critic" mentioned before: intelligent, composed, and free-thinking. Of course, throughout this song, Nick is anything but composed, criticizing Shakespeare merely for *being* popular than for anything else. This, too, reflects the way people criticized the Beatles. "Such criticism went beyond mere disdain. In attacking the Beatles,

traditionalists were defending culture as they understood it" (Collins). Nick cannot possibly conceive neither that his art has to exist in tandem with Shakespeare's, nor that people could genuinely value Shakespeare's artistry. Accepting the artistry of popular culture would undermine what a critic considers to be high art, and so the criticisms of both Nick and Beatles-haters really only reflect their concerns that their preferred art might fade into the background when held up next to the popular art. Depicting the kind of criticism Shakespeare gets in *Something Rotten!* as the same kind of criticism many rockstars of the 20th century got from musical elitists only assists in furthering the audience's understanding of the role he played in popular culture during the Renaissance, especially when seen alongside a depiction of a modern fanbase as well.

For the unserious comedy *Something Rotten!* is most of the time, the musical also brings to the attention of modern audiences the fact that Shakespeare was once considered popular culture. When one reads the works of Shakespeare today, it may be clear how he was popular as an artist, otherwise we would not still be reading him today. It may be less clear, however, to discern that Shakespeare was not only popular for his artistry, but also played a significant role in Renaissance pop culture the same way we currently think of artists creating pop culture today. In order to translate for modern audiences Shakespeare's sheer popularity and the way he managed to bridge high and low art together, *Something Rotten!* uses the modern comparison of a rockstar to portray Shakespeare as the pop culture icon that he was. By integrating this rockstar personality into every aspect of Shakespeare's character, including his fans and his critics, *Something Rotten!* thoroughly and effectively communicates the bard's celebrity among his contemporaries and average Americans in the 19th century to an audience who has been engrained with the idea that Shakespeare is the highest of high art. What's important to note

here, though, is that just because a popular work of art is appreciated academically or artistically, does not necessarily mean it rises above its previous position in the cultural hierarchy to become high art. The same way Shakespeare was considered both high and low art and genuinely valued by all kinds of people who perceived him to belong to one category or the other, popular culture today can be genuinely good art and still remain popular culture. To define popular culture by a lacking in meaning or artistry is to exclude much of art from the opportunity of being truly perceived as *art*. Reintroducing Shakespeare as popular culture to modern audiences the way *Something Rotten!* does might help bridge the cultural gap between high and low art, allowing people to view other artforms with a new perspective as well.

Metacognitive Reflection

Writing these essays varied in difficulty. Whereas with the more recent musicals like *Falsettos* and *Something Rotten!* I had an abundance of ideas, the others came with a bit more difficulty. Part of that could be because I am much more familiar with the aforementioned two. I had actually thought through writing an academic essay on *Falsettos* prior to the conception of this project just because I love it so much, and the musical has so much more symbolism and important themes that I didn't even touch on in my essay. For example, I could have taken a historical direction and talked about the impact of *Falsettos* on the LGBTQ+ community, and particularly in regards to the AIDS crisis because the musical takes place during it and is written by William Finn, a gay man who lived through it. The most difficult musical to write about was definitely *Anything Goes*, and the biggest reason for this is because I wanted to focus on storytelling through the medium of musical theatre, and I was not all too impressed by the story of this musical. That's why I didn't discuss the actual plot of *Anything Goes* much in the essay. I've found that this is a pattern with older musicals; they focus more on spectacle and entertainment than telling a cohesive story, and they often focus on simple themes and characters. Modern musicals on the other hand, and especially in the *Into the Woods*/*Falsettos* era of the 1980s and 90s, are often very plot heavy, rarely letting a moment of music go without contributing to the story somehow. With those two musicals, I especially had a lot to talk about, almost to the point where I worried about not including enough information to be doing a full analysis. This feeling was the opposite with *Anything Goes*, and I felt like the musical almost did not give me enough to work with. When I felt lost in my discussion of *Anything Goes*, however, I reminded myself of my thesis, and how the goal here is to not judge the artistry of a work just

because it's simple and fun. I think, despite my initial reservations, I was still able to provide as in-depth an analysis of *Anything Goes* as the other musicals.

Ironically, analyzing *Anything Goes* gave me the most insight into the overarching premise of my thesis than any of the other musicals. I observed that when it comes to literature, we often perceive older novels to be more complex and heavy, and more literary because of it, whereas modern novels are perceived to be less serious and deep and more for fun. The idea that the novel is "dead" has come about from this perception, and the fact that we are assigned more older books than recent ones in academic settings does nothing to indicate that the case is otherwise. In all the literature classes I've taken, I've read one book published in 2021, and the next most recent book is from 1985. With literature, the works that are new are rarely given the chance to be regarded in the same light as those we consider to be classics. Musicals, on the other hand, seemed to operate in the complete opposite way. Older musicals are considered important to the history of musical theatre, but I've seen many other musical theatre enthusiasts (myself included) regard them as simple and less impressive because their focus is not on the plot. This observation was interesting in that it told me that the age of a work or the era it's from are less important than its perceived complexity. While the patterns of these two mediums seem to go in opposite directions, they are parallel to each other in the idea that "fun" equates to "worse."

Another issue I ran into with *Anything Goes* were the many out-of-date references in the musical. By this, I don't mean its references to events such as the Stock Market Crash of 1929, but how its treatment of non-white and female characters might be considered problematic nowadays. I mentioned in my essay the comments about Romani people, but the musical (even the revised version) also included some stereotypical portrayals of Chinese people and was

particularly unkind to Hope's mother, Evangeline, whose "hysteria" was often the butt of the joke. This is not to say that *Anything Goes* as a whole is problematic, or that the writers intended to harm anyone. In regards to my thesis, however, it does raise the question of how *much* harm a work has to cause in order to maybe have its equal opportunity to be considered high art taken away. Of course, this is a question that has been considered long before now, and it still does not have a satisfying answer. It does appear though, that there may be at least one limit to what we view with this lens that anything can be high art.

Overall, taking concrete actions like this to remove any influence the cultural hierarchy might have on my mind was a very valuable experience. There were many connections and academic observations I made about these musicals that I hadn't even thought of prior. For example, my essay about the recurrence of chess in *Falsettos* lead to even deeper thoughts about all the other kinds of games within the show. Baseball became a metaphor for personal growth, both in Jason growing older and Whizzer and Marvin becoming mature enough to start a relationship again. Racquetball was used to show the contrast before and after Whizzer contracts AIDS, effectively portraying his illness without even having to say the word. The same thing happened while I was writing about *Into the Woods*. *Into the Woods* challenged me not because I did not know what to write about, but because I had so much to say it was difficult to consolidate my thoughts into a coherent essay. I particularly got to thinking more about the Witch's role, and how interesting it is that the musical makes a point not just to redeem its villains but also to tell the audience not to judge them or any other villains for the role they play in stories. My appreciation for these musicals is greater than it has ever been before, and I would like to keep doing this kind of thing to art forms that are generally considered to be lower, just to keep disproving "low art" can't be analyzed the way high art is meant to be.

The idea for this thesis stemmed from the goal I set for myself when the pandemic first started, which was to attempt to repair my relationship with pop music. Starting in around seventh grade, I remember developing a huge distaste for all the music playing on the radio, as well as the artists who created that music. Part of that distaste was because my music taste did genuinely differ from those around me. I preferred music that told stories, and I found that in musical theatre. Another part of the distaste, however, came from a desire to not be interested in the things in which other girls my age were. I actively rebuked most pop music for the longest time after that, simply because I viewed it as girly and simple, and therefore a "lower" form of art. If I ever did find a pop song I liked, I would only listen to it on rare occasions and keep it a secret from everyone, because I didn't want anyone to think I had lowered my standards. It took me years to realize that the desire to not be like other girls was simply internalized misogyny, and so was my hatred of pop music by its association with that desire. That's when I started trying to listen to new albums coming out instead of ignoring them and going back to listen to pop music I had previously disregarded to see if I would enjoy it. Unsurprisingly, there was plenty of music I found enjoyable that the me of a few years prior would have refused to even listen to, let alone admit that it was good. I started thinking about what other media I may have previously disregarded and why that was, as well as why I was under the assumption that all the things marketed to women were objectively worse kinds of art. Eventually we ended up here, and this school year especially I've actively focused on trying to erase any concept of the cultural hierarchy from my mind when it comes to judging the artistic value of something.

Additionally, I've been purposefully trying to put high and low culture side by side as much as possible, even if it feels wrong to do, in an attempt to lessen the gap between them. I've taken multiple philosophy classes over the last year, and at multiple points I have connected our

class material (which feels *very* high) to things like *Lord of the Rings*, Taylor Swift's music, my favorite K-pop group, and the work of comedian Bo Burnham. At times, it felt almost sacrilegious to even mention any one of these things, but given the amount of effort elite white men of the late nineteenth century went to in order to make what they considered "pure art" to be sacred, the sacrilege i*s the point*. All of these things really do feel like they could be considered high art with tons of artistic merit if we simply did not have a predetermined concept of what high art is and is not supposed to be. In all likelihood, one could probably find value in most any kind of media that's been created with genuine care and effort.

Although the advantages of dismantling the cultural hierarchy's hold over how we perceive culture are clear, it is unlikely that we will fully be free of it, especially when cultural elites still have the power and money to sacralize whatever kind of art they want. The gap between high and low does seem to have gotten smaller since the end of the nineteenth century, with the internet allowing more accessibility than ever to all kinds of art. Many internet users even already use their platforms to have truly respectable academic discourse about pop culture. I've seen entire essays about the quality of the kids tv show *Bluey*, and I've watched documentary length YouTube videos detailing the rise and fall of YA dystopian novels. Those kinds of things also inspired me to talk about the things I love with as much seriousness as I use with the parts of culture I interact with for school, and I would really recommend that everyone try this with their favorite pieces of media. Not only is essay-writing more fun when you're talking about something you like, but also the more it's done, the more the perception that only the highest art can be treated as valuable and properly appreciated fades away. In reality, culture does not exist in a hierarchy of high to low, of good to bad, but more on a continuum of serious to unserious. One is created with the intention to be appreciated for its artistic and academic

merit, and the other is created with the intention of entertaining people. Some art would fall in the middle, but neither side is inherently more valuable than the other as a result of why or for whom the art was created. This seems to be the view of culture and art I've cultivated for myself throughout this project, and will continue cultivating, and to me this also seems to be the best way to guarantee that all culture and art will be equally respected. We may judge certain individuals works to be good or bad, but to assume some are inherently more worthy than others is to cut ourselves off from the possibility of discovering true gems created with "lower" forms of art.

Bibliography

"About the Romance Genre." *Romance Writers of America.* https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx.

Askin, Noah and Mauskapf, Michael. "What Makes Popular Culture Popular? Product Features and Optimal Differentiation in Music." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 82, no. 5, 2017, pp. 910-944. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122417728662.

Collins, Marcus. "'I Say High, You Say Low': The Beatles and Cultural Hierarchies in 1960s and 1970s Britain." *Popular Music*, vol. 39, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 401-419. *ProQuest*, https://libproxy.library.wmich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/i-say-high-you-low-beatles-cultural-hierarchies/docview/2502623071/se-2, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143020000458.

Hieftje, Kimberly D. "How a Korean Boy Band Saved My Daughter." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2022, pp. 376-377. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2022.02.022.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Harvard University Press, 1988.

Lynch, Christopher. "Cheryl Crawford's Porgy and Bess: Navigating Cultural Hierarchy in 1941." *Journal of the Society for American Music*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2016, pp. 331–363. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196316000237.

Lynes, Russell. "Reprint: 'Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow' (1949)." *The Wilson Quarterly (1976-)*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1976, pp. 146–58. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40255171.

Mckee, Alan. "'Popular culture' in popular culture: academic and vernacular usage." *Annals of International Communication Association*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2022, pp. 19-29. *Taylor & Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2022.2046127.

Michaud Wild, Nickie. "The active defense of fanfiction writing: Sherlock fans' metatextual response." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23 no. 2, 2020, pp. 244–260. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418790453.

Romano, Aja. "Why Fans Are Outraged at Sherlock and Watson Reading Sexy Fanfic." *The Daily Dot*, 31 May 2021, https://www.dailydot.com/news/sherlock-fanfic-caitlin-moran/.

Swirski, Peter. "Popular and Highbrow Literature: A Comparative View." *CLCWeb*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1999. *ProQuest*,

https://libproxy.library.wmich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/popular-highbrow-literature-comparative-view/docview/2272337476/se-2, https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1053.

"Tumblr's Greatest Conspiracy: The Story of TJLC." *YouTube*, uploaded by Sarah Z, 31 Oct. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZBP_0UTh5Q.

Ursulesku, Oana. "In between the 'Brows': The Influx of Highbrow Literature into Popular Music." *ELOPE; English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2016, pp. 81-95. *ProQuest*, https://libproxy.library.wmich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/between-brows-influx-highbrow-literature-into/docview/1892099434/se-2, https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.13.1.81-95.