

Rap me well, or I'll knock your knave's pate. (*The Taming of the Shrew*)

I was teaching a class on Shakespearean language. In a desperate attempt to instill a love of Shakespearean poetry in the college-aged, class after class I ecstatically described how language *worked*. Especially rhetoric; I loved rhetoric. Chiasmus! Antanaclasis! Anaphora! Epistrophe! Aren't these cool? (If you don't know what these words mean, you're in good company. I'll explain in a moment.)

Two students approached me after class: Evan and Michael. Good kids, but entirely wrapped up in contemporary culture. They wore baggy pants, put their hats on askew, and had cultivated a contemporary speaking pattern lifted straight from hip-hop culture. ("What up, yo?") Both of them were as earnest as a Sunday Sermon, and sweet. As I say, they approached.

"We put together this mix tape for you."

This was in ancient days, just after William the Conqueror.

"A mix tape?" I said. "Interesting." *Interesting* is my go-to response when I don't know what to say, but want to sound like I have a superior opinion.

"Yeah, um, we thought you'd really enjoy it. You *have* to listen to it. It's a bunch of different hip-hop. You know, rap?"

"I know what hip-hop is," I said. I'd read an article in *The Atlantic*.

"Yeah, well, it has a ton of that stuff you keep talking about. The language structure stuff."

"Rhetoric?"

"Yeah. *Tons* of it. You *have* to listen to it."

"Interesting."

So when I got to my car, I popped it into my cassette player. And my world grew exponentially.

If you ask anyone why they like Shakespeare, nine out of ten of them are going to give you a variation on, “The *language*. The way he uses language is just so . . . beautiful.” They’ll usually be able to give you an example of their favorite Shakespeare verse. One of mine is

“My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep. The more I give to you,
The more I have, for both are infinite.” (*Romeo and Juliet*)

As the brilliant Cass Morris might point out, the lines above are teeming with what we in the Shakespeare biz call “rhetorical devices.” You’ve got your *alliteration*:

“Bounty is as boundless”

Your *anaphora* (repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of phrases) and *isocolon* (clauses or phrases of equal length, providing balance):

“The more I give to you/the more I have”

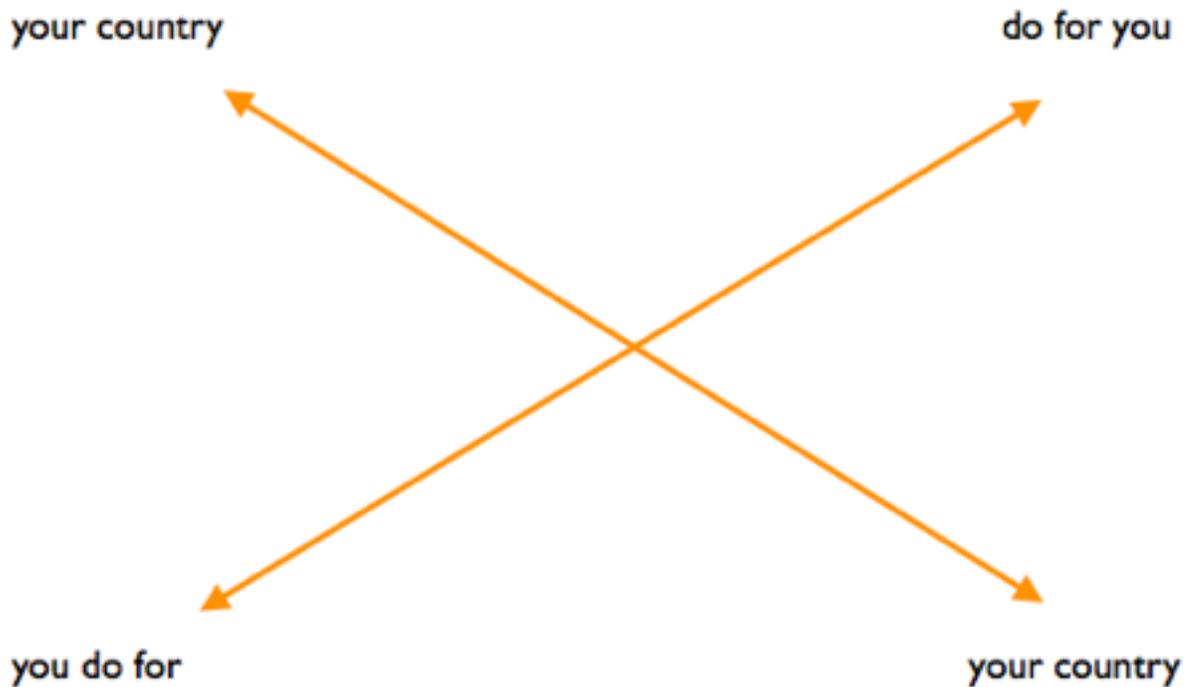
Your *simile* (comparison using *like* or *as*), along with something called *zeugma*, using one verb to apply to more than one adjective:

“My bounty is as boundless as the sea / my love as deep”

And so on. A rhetorical device is a *way* to speak, a *how* - and the *how* is considered to be part of the persuasive argument. Consider this famous bit:

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

That’s what’s called a *chiasmus*, named after the Greek letter X (*chi*), because the diagram of the device creates an “X” pattern:



Imagine if Kennedy had just said, “People should be asking how they can help their country, not the other way around.” Would the phrase be famous? Or even quotable? Using a rhetorical device in this case gives the statement gravity, evenness, grandeur, and perhaps most importantly, memorability. My basketball coach used a chiasmus:

“If you *play*, you’re not *hurt*. If you’re *hurt*, you don’t *play*.” (Coach Callow)

Shakespeare used them:

“Since every *Jack* became a *gentleman*
There’s many a *gentleman* become a *Jack*.” (Richard III)

And Snoop Doggy Dog uses it in his 1995 top ten hit *Gin and Juice*:

“With my *mind* on my *money*, and my *money* on my *mind*.”

Which brings me back to my story.

If you’d asked me back in my post-William the Conqueror days whether I liked or listened to hip-hop music, I would have emphatically said “Not for your fairy kingdom.” But when my students handed me that mix tape, they challenged my notions about what hip-hop was, and

about why I thought I didn't like it. When I listened to it on the ride home, I realized that I'd been missing out on some of the greatest language artistry in the English language. What I loved about Shakespeare, I could love about hip-hop music. Someone could (and probably has) written a dissertation on rhetoric in Shakespeare and hip-hop, but here are just a few examples of how deeply connected Our Greatest Poet is to our greatest hip-hop artists:

Antanaclasis: the use of the same word in different senses.

Shakespeare:

"Put out the light, and then put out the light." (*Othello*)

Jay-Z:

"And I'm from the murder capital, where they murder for capital." (*Murder to Excellence*)

Anaphora: repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses.

Shakespeare:

"So many hours must I tend my flock,
So many hours must I take my rest,
So many hours must I contemplate
So many hours must I sport myself" (*Richard II*)

Zion I:

"How many times have you watched the sun rise?
How many times have you looked deep into your lover's eyes?
How many times have we spit phat rhymes?
How many times?
How many times?" (*How Many*)

Epistrophe: the repetition of words or phrases at the end of successive clauses:

Shakespeare:

"If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
If you did know for whom I gave the ring
And would conceive for what I gave the ring
And how unwillingly I left the ring,
When nought would be accepted but the ring,
You would abate the strength of your displeasure." (*Merchant of Venice*)

Ab Liva:

“Yeah I get bitter wit it
Make a wrong sign, hitter wit it
I get acquitted wit it
Waistline perfect gotta fit her wit it
I send your soul to the Lord when I fiddle wit it
Yeah I riddle wit it.” (*Untitled*)

If you're like I was, you've never really listened to hip-hop, not the good stuff. Maybe the reason was that it came from people who didn't look like me, or talk like me, or act like me. But I'm here to tell you, in a society where our collective vocabulary has dwindled to about 7,000 words (Shakespeare used 15,000 distinct words), we *need* hip-hop. The one place where language is burgeoning, the one place where words are being invented at a rapid-fire pace, the one place where language is being twisted, turned, stretched, exploded, inverted, devised, contrived, conjured up and jostled around in a way that would make Shakespeare stand up and take notice, is in the hip-hop culture. If you have a problem with the violence in hip-hop, you probably shouldn't be going to Shakespeare plays, where roughly two people per play die in gruesome ways. If you don't like the vulgarity in hip-hop, well, please, please don't read anything Shakespeare wrote, 'cause you will definitely get offended when Pistol's cock is up (*Henry V*), or when Cloten asks the musicians to penetrate Imogen with their fingering, and then to “try with tongue too.” (*Cymbeline*)

But if you love language, really love it, love how it can surprise you, titillate you, thrill you, move you, expand you and enrapture you, then you might listen to a little rap music on the way home from your next Shakespeare play. What you hear might surprise you.