

Objectives: *How to filk, who to filk, when to filk, why to filk, and how to feel after you filk*

- Explain the historical context of contrafact, and the evolution of “filk” in modern culture
- Evaluate a contrafact or filk and appreciate the way it was crafted from its source work
- Consider a song you may want to filk for suitability to your intent
- Examine a song lyrically and structurally for how to filk it most effectively
- Determine venues and contexts in which a particular contrafact or filk would be most appropriate to the setting and the audience, and how to maximize positive impact
- Incorporate filk into your broader bardic toolkit

Introduction: What is “Filk”? (*What the Filk*)

- Contrafactum, or contrafact/contrefait: the practice of applying new words to an existing tune – a well-established, and overall period-appropriate, practice that has a place in the SCA
 - American patriotic music: “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” are both set to what were established tunes from other songs
 - Discussion of medieval contrafactum: <http://wpwt.soton.ac.uk/notes/contraf.htm>
 - “Greensleeves” (1580) quickly became the source tune for multiple broadside ballads: <https://earlymusicmuse.com/one-song-to-the-tune-of-another/>
- “Filk” is a more modern term with a complex history in fandom culture and the SCA
 - Originally “filk music” was a typo for “[folk music](#)” in a never-published essay on the influence of Science Fiction and Fantasy on folk music. Its first known deliberate use was by Karen Kruse Anderson in *Die Zeitschrift für Vollständigen Unsinn* (*The Journal for Utter Nonsense*) #774 (June 1953), for a song written by science-fiction author Poul Anderson. (<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/filk>)
 - Filk is its own worldwide subculture, older than the SCA, with its own conventions and annual award ceremonies (such as the Pegasus Awards)
 - NOTE: Not all filk music is derived from existing tunes, and not all song parody is considered filk
- Unsurprisingly, given the SCA’s deep historical ties to fantasy and science fiction authors among our founders (and to this day), the writing and sharing of filk and its attendant subculture have been part of the SCA since its inception
 - Many Scadian bards including Heather Dale, Efenwealt Wystle, and Michael Longcor (aka Moonwulf) are celebrated in the broader culture as filkers (including for their original music)
 - Filk culture and conventions often reference “bardic circles” and other performance circle styles common at SCA events
- These shared roots create friction with the SCA’s evolution as a historical and educational non-profit
 - Many research-oriented Scadians consider “filk” (and indeed “bards” and “bardic”) to be unpleasant reminders of modernity, of pop-culture fandom, and a lack of seriousness of intent
 - While the non-SCA filk community considers “filk” to be inclusive of original and derivative songs, many in our bardic community prefer that their original SCA songs not be called “filk”
- For this class, we will be use “filk” to describe derivative work from existing tunes, and “SCA Folk” (sometimes “music of the modern Middle Ages”) to refer to original bardic compositions

What is the value of filk—or a class about it? (*Why to Filk*)

- The SCA is built around recreation and research, but also *fun*
 - Schtick livens up long court (and filk can be part of that)
 - People appreciate a chance to take ourselves a little less seriously
- Filking is a useful subset of the songwriter's toolkit
 - Focus on lyric writing against a completed tune rather than having to do both
 - Good practice in analyzing lyrics, structure, rhymes, rhythm, word sense and meaning
 - Revising completed lyrics is a critical bardic skill
 - Humor and lightening the mood are underrated and challenging bardic skills
- *Anything worth doing is worth doing well*
 - The difference between memorable and disposable is about craft and effort
 - Commitment to delivering a silly performance builds stage presence and dynamism

Inspirations and selecting sources (*Who to Filk*)

- Scadians who write delightful filks (a tiny tiny sampling more links in Resources):
 - Bird the Bard (aka Juliana Byrd) – In Pennsic's World <https://youtu.be/jdJqgCjOd7k>
 - Ioseph of Locksley – I'll See Your Six! <https://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/susan/sf/filk/seeyrsix.htm>
 - Tom Smith – Pennsic (There is Mud) <https://tomsmith.bandcamp.com/track/pennsic-there-is-mud>
 - Amalie Reinhardt – You Might Be Mistaken & others: <https://apospirit.net/blog/other-arts/bardic-archive/>
 - Amnara the Savage – Reenactive <https://youtu.be/5wmqo-o4Jtg>
 - Non-Scadian Mya Gosling of [Good Tickle Brain](https://goodticklebrain.com/home/tag/song+parody) writes brilliant filks, mostly about Shakespeare: <https://goodticklebrain.com/home/tag/song+parody>
- What kinds of modern (or period) music excite you? What's fun to sing that you don't usually get to?
- Is there a summer bop, a musical, a movie, that is earworming everyone (including you?)
 - What is it about the song that makes it so catchy?
 - What can you do with the title? The hook? The concept?
 - Is there something that would be fun to apply your lived experience to? Or your research?

Applying songwriting principles to filk construction (*How to Filk*)

- *Note:* YMMV, and "rules" are made to be broken
- Most filks are intended to entertain through humor
- Humor comes from the familiarity and tension between the source work and your transformation
 - First laugh, sometimes best, will be the moment of recognition (don't spoil!)
 - The humor and play of *making* the piece SCA-relevant
- Should still be entertaining even for an audience who doesn't know the source work
- Build on the craft of the original songwriters
 - Pay close attention to all the rhyming patterns in the source, and honor them closely
 - Match the scansion (rhythm, syllable count, stresses) of the original wherever possible
 - Can your lines play off the meaning, intention, repetition, transitions of the original?
- Every line should have *something* changed – a word, or else the meaning of the line in context
- Process: When you're working to get the first draft done, start wherever the inspiration is and go outward
- A key element of skill and craft is knowing when something is inspired, and when it's not worth it

Appropriateness of Audience and Venue (*When to Filk*)

- Know your venue
 - More casual environments will be more receptive to humorous filk
 - It never hurts to ask: “Are people up for a silly filk?” *Listen* to the response for enthusiasm
- Taking a risk and stepping it up (formal environments)
 - *Consent* is key: Has a pointy-hat *asked* for filk, or are they known for enjoying or encouraging it?
 - Always best to offer a piece privately first, unless they have commissioned it
 - If you have been given permission by a royal, baroness, Peer being elevated, then go for it!

Using the experience to grow as a bard (*How to feel after you Filk*)

- Commit to the bit
 - Whatever you are performing—period, original, goofy filk—*bring it and sell it*
 - Connect to your audience—eye contact, casting people in roles in your story, playing off them
 - The ultimate goal of a bard is to immerse the audience and create a magical moment
- The opportunity in filking
 - Shows people you don’t take *yourself* too seriously
 - Can make you memorable, and approachable, to people who don’t think they’re “into bardic”
 - This may include some influential people who may offer opportunities for visibility
- The risk in filking
 - Getting pigeonholed: offset this by continuing to develop and perform other material
 - Being regularly offered new filk suggestions
 - Feel free to jot them down and decide later whether to do anything with them
 - If you are commissioned for a filk and it doesn’t spark joy, politely decline—it’s okay
 - Keep your own bardic goals in mind, and manage your time and attention accordingly
 - Irritating people who prefer you take recreation and research more seriously
 - This might be offset by the amount of craft and research you’ve invested
 - If you have a mentor/Peer, discuss this with them, and weigh their advice
 - Decide how much other people’s opinions are going to dictate your game

References:

- My own filk collection: <https://drakethebard.com/other/filks/>
- Lengthy discussion on SCA Bardic Arts on FB, with many many many examples worth checking out: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/bardicarts/permalink/2517048381762226/>
- Katriana’s Calontir Songbook: <http://www.calonsong.org/songbook.php>
- What is a *contrafactum*?: <http://wpwt.soton.ac.uk/notes/contraf.htm>
- One song to the tune of another, early music common practice: <https://earlymusicmuse.com/one-song-to-the-tune-of-another/>
- With apologies to George Carlin, whose monologue about use of the F-bomb I have filked in my subheadings (Content Warning, F-BOMBS): <https://youtu.be/qTWImPZnwmw?t=59>