

Thomas Edison's Poetry Machine

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Fig. 1: Edison's tinfoil phonograph, *Cassell's Family Magazine*, June 1878, p. 441.

Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1877 immediately impressed spectators with its ability to preserve human speech (*Fig. 1*). As John Munro, author of several books on electricity, declared, 'the words of our lips, which formerly wasted themselves in air and were lost for ever, may now be treasured up and recalled for our pleasure.'¹ Munro was among the first to hear the phonograph exhibited to the Society of Telegraph Engineers in London. He recalled the audience sitting in absolute silence when the mechanical device on the table before them began to speak: 'The phonograph presents his compliments to the audience' (p. 443). After a burst of applause, the phonograph went on to recite poetry, sing, cough, laugh, and hurrah, all with a startling degree of accuracy for an audience who had never before heard the human voice mechani-

¹ John Munro, 'The Phonograph', *Cassell's Family Magazine*, June 1878, pp. 441-44, (p. 441).

cally reproduced. The performance ended with a flourish as the phonograph's national anthem brought the audience to its feet.

Munro came away from the demonstration full of ideas about how sound-recording technology would transform everyday life: London shops would catch people's attention with recorded advertisements such as 'Two cents for a shave'; clocks would awaken labourers with advice on the virtues of early rising; Madame Tussaud's wax figures would speak. He foresaw recorded speech having a similar impact on public transport, courtroom trials, and all aspects of commerce. But, above all, the phonograph promised to transform entertainment. In the era of recorded sound, a reader would no longer need to read for himself: 'he can hear the phonograph recite to him, with all the arts of elocution, some masterpieces of poetry and drama' (Munro, p. 444). Munro joined the growing chorus of those who recognized the talking machine's usefulness as a poetry machine.²

The spoken word played a prominent role at phonograph demonstrations taking place throughout America and Europe. Shortly after its invention, Edison displayed the tinfoil phonograph to the editors of *Scientific American* in New York (*Fig. 2*).³ The prototype consisted of a grooved metal cylinder mounted on a long shaft. A sheet of tinfoil wrapped around the cylinder supplied a recording surface on which to catch vibrations emitted by speaking into the instrument's funnel-shaped mouthpiece. Turning the crank at the appropriate speed made it possible to replay speech and other sounds from the tinfoil's indentations. (The tinfoil was supposed to be reproducible but, in practice, quickly wore out or became unintelligible.) On this occasion, a pre-recorded message bid the spectators good evening.

² The phonograph came to be known as a 'talking machine' following a headline in a Buffalo newspaper. The headline read 'A Great Discovery: A Talking Machine by Professor Edison', as reported in Edward H. Johnson, 'The Origin of the Phonograph', *Engineer*, 29 March 1890, p. 80; and 'Edison's Phonograph, Its History and Development', *Scientific American Supplement*, 743 (1890), 11,872-73 (p. 11,872).

³ On the phonograph's development, see Oliver Read and Walter L. Welch, *From Tin Foil to Stereo: Evolution of the Phonograph*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Sams, 1976); and Paul Israel, *Edison: A Life of Invention* (New York: Wiley, 1998). The phonograph's invention is extensively documented by the Digital Edition of the *Thomas A. Edison Papers Project* <<http://edison.rutgers.edu>> [accessed 23 April 2014].

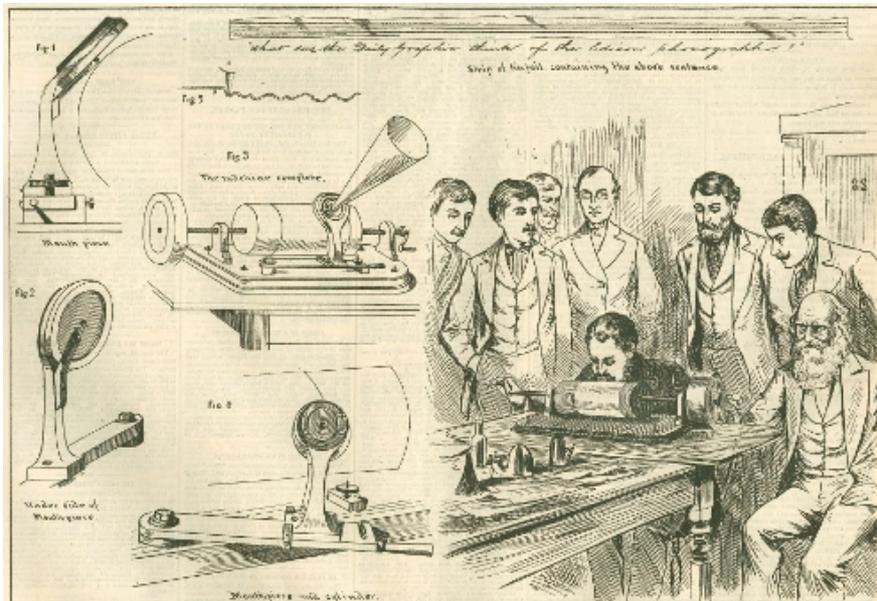


Fig. 2: 'Edison's Speaking Phonograph. Exhibiting the machine at the office of the Telephone Company in the Tribune Building', *Daily Graphic* [New York], 15 March 1878, p. 1. The Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

Britain's first exhibition took place at the Royal Institution in London on 1 February 1878. The lecture started out on the telephone until a disappointing connection shifted the spotlight to the talking machine. Alfred Tennyson, who was among the audience, described the sounds of a bugle played over the line from Southampton as 'little explosions and an enormous buzzing'.⁴ The General Post Office's chief engineer, William Preece, introduced the phonograph by explaining how difficult it was figuring out what to say, then reciting 'Hey Diddle Diddle, the Cat and the Fiddle', dutifully replayed by the machine in a faint voice. The physicist John Tyndall followed with a recital of the Tennyson quotation 'Come into the garden, Maud' (Fig. 3).⁵ The recital has long fascinated literary critics since Tennyson was in the audience to hear his own verse repeated

⁴ Newspaper clippings from the Digital Edition of the *Thomas A. Edison Papers Project* will be cited in the following form: TAED, followed by the alphanumeric identification number. The item cited here is 'Scientific', *Australasian and American Home News* [New York], 9 March 1878, MBSB10395X.

⁵ Preece's demonstration is reported in 'The Phonograph at the Royal Institution', *Graphic*, 16 March 1878, pp. 259, 262, 268.

by the phonograph. As a witness to the London demonstrations remarked, ‘the voices seemed to come struggling up from the under world’ — a comment appropriate both to the uncanny nature of the technology and to a poem that ends with an allusion to soldiers slaughtered during the Crimean War.⁶

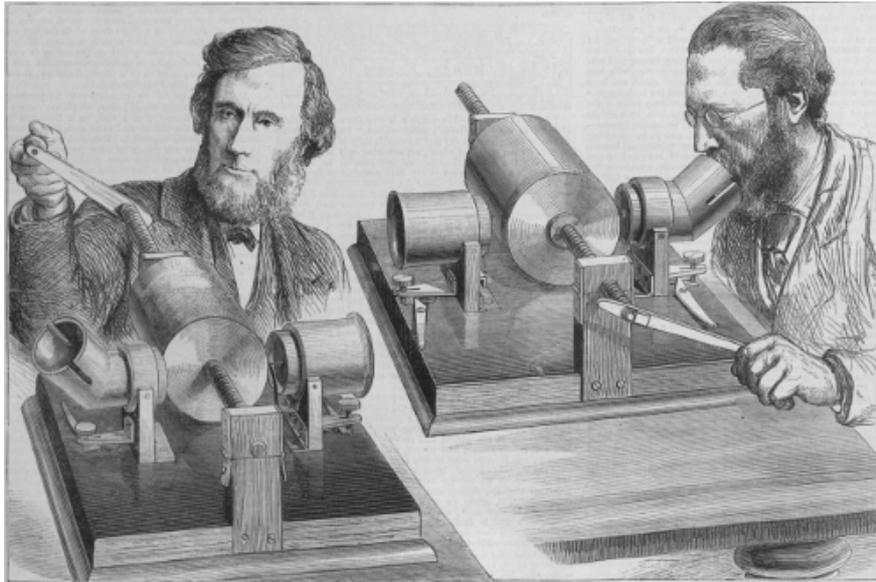


Fig. 3: ‘The Phonograph: The phonograph speaking to Professor Tyndall / Mr. W. H. Preece speaking into the phonograph’, *Graphic*, 16 March 1878, p. 268.

Public demonstrations in the United States began in New York. In January 1878, Edward H. Johnson’s state tour advertised ‘Recitations’, among other material, and in March audience members heard ‘the story of Mary’s little lamb’ during Professor J. W. S. Arnold’s recital at Chickering Hall.⁷ Edison himself promoted the talking machine at his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey, where he regularly recited to tour groups his

⁶ [Edward King], ‘The Phonograph in England’, *Lowell Daily Citizen* [Lowell, MA], 5 March 1878, p. 1. The exhibition is described in ‘Notes’, *Telegraphic Journal*, 15 March 1878, p. 113; and in Frank Andrews, *The Edison Phonograph: The British Connection* (London: City of London Phonograph and Gramophone Society, 1986), p. xii.

⁷ Edward Johnson, prospectus, 18 February 1878, *The Papers of Thomas Alva Edison* (Digital Edition) <<http://edison.rutgers.edu>>, D7838J1; ‘The Phonograph Exhibited’, *New York Times*, 24 March 1878, p. 2.

favourite poems by Thomas Gray, Caroline Norton, Edgar Allan Poe, Shakespeare, and, of course, Mother Goose. In the months to come, agents for the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company exhibited the talking machine in various parts of the country for an admission price of 25 cents (later reduced to 10 cents). Newspaper reports enable us to reconstruct what happened at these exhibitions despite the fact that few phonograph recordings of them have survived.⁸ As is so often the case, the best account of one medium turns out to be supplied by a rival medium.⁹

The tradition of spoken-word recording began simultaneously with Edison's invention of the phonograph. Hence, this article makes the case that 1878 is a more important year to the history of literature than has yet been recognized for its experiments with verse and sound-recording technology. Although the tinfoil phonograph's first decade has been well documented by media historians, literary critics have singled out 1888 as the noteworthy year since that is when Edison's improved phonograph made it possible to record prominent figures including Tennyson and Robert Browning.¹⁰ Yet in their haste to get to the marquee names, such accounts too quickly gloss over the previous decade's experiments with recorded sound. Taking Edison's original tinfoil phonograph as an alternative starting point reveals how the 1878 demonstrations, despite technological limitations, undertook their own acoustic experiments, enabling audiences to discern new forms of meaning, pleasure, and pathos in even the most well-known material. In other words, the phonograph invited new ways of thinking about verse as well as voice.

⁸ The 1878 'St. Louis' tinfoil includes recitations of 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' and 'Old Mother Hubbard'. This recording was digitally restored in 2012 by the University of California's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and the Library of Congress and is available online at <<https://soundcloud.com/dailycal/thomas-edison-tinfoil-record>> [accessed 7 May 2014].

⁹ Lisa Gitelman provides a detailed account of the 1878 phonograph demonstrations in 'Souvenir Foils: On the Status of Print at the Origin of Recorded Sound', in *New Media, 1740–1915*, ed. by Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 157–73; and *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 25–44. Patrick Feaster also describes the demonstrations in "'The Following Record": Making Sense of Phonographic Performance, 1877–1908' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 2007), pp. 70–131 <<http://www.phonozoic.net/following-record.pdf>> [accessed 23 April 2014].

¹⁰ For example, see John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 110–45.

The phonograph recitals cited in the pages to follow challenge the notion that audiences naively responded to spoken-word recordings as a means of putting them in touch directly with the author — what *Scientific American* called ‘the illusion of real presence’.¹¹ The fantasy of unmediated access to literature by way of the author’s voice, as opposed to the printed page, was indeed a seductive one, as other studies have shown.¹² Yet this ideal existed alongside an equally fervent enthusiasm towards the formal experimentation made possible by sound-recording technology. The approach taken here considers both aspects of early phonograph recordings — the author’s voice and the machine’s sound effects — by examining recordings of ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ as well as scripts by Poe, Tennyson, Shakespeare, and others. Such recitals illustrate the extent to which the talking machine influenced the reception of spoken texts while at the same time giving rise to verbal performances unheard of in previous oral cultures.

The talking machine funny

The phonograph’s first words are well known. Less familiar is the story of how phonograph exhibitions taking place throughout America and Britain in 1878 experimented with ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ to entertain audiences. The phonograph made it possible to manipulate speech in unprecedented ways by mixing scripts, varying play speeds, adding sound effects, superimposing voices, and even playing recordings backwards.¹³ Such manipulation suggests that audiences had a complex relationship to phonograph recordings. Audiences certainly did crave a reading experience that would bring them into intimate communion with the book’s author. The phonograph seemed to present an opportunity to do so by bypassing the printed page altogether in favour of the author’s voice. Yet numerous renditions of ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ played at the initial

¹¹ ‘The Talking Phonograph’, *Scientific American*, 37 (1877), 384–85 (p. 385).

¹² Jason Camlot, ‘Early Talking Books: Spoken Recordings and Recitation Anthologies, 1880–1920’, *Book History*, 6 (2003), 147–73. Lisa Gitelman considers phonograph recordings in relation to print conventions in *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 62–96.

¹³ For a survey of the techniques used to manipulate sounds, see Patrick Feaster, ‘“A Compass of Extraordinary Range”: The Forgotten Origins of Phonomanipulation’, *ARSC Journal*, 42 (2011), 163–203.

phonograph demonstrations tell another side of the story. They show how audiences who wished to get beyond the printed page at the same time revelled in the mechanical reproduction of prose and verse. Far from disguising the fact of mediation, demonstrations flaunted it.

'Mary Had a Little Lamb' quickly became an exhibition standard after its debut in Edison's lab. The lines have since taken on an almost mythical aura as the first words to be mechanically reproduced by the phonograph. Edison's curious choice with which to usher in recorded sound raises the question: why these particular words? The original lines recorded by Edison went like this:

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow,
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go. (quoted in Read and Welch, p. 17)

One explanation is mechanical: Edison had roughly ten seconds to make the recording, and the self-contained stanza fitted neatly within the machine's time constraints. A speaker's natural impulse is to repeat speech that has been repeated many times before — the way an amateur will mindlessly repeat 'testing, testing, one, two, three' when placed in front of a microphone. The recording engineer Fred Gaisberg attributed the phonograph's failure as a correspondence tool to the fact that 'the average person is virtually dumb when asked to record'.¹⁴ There is no way of knowing whether Edison thought about the rhyme in advance of the experiment or whether it simply popped into his head on the spot. (In *L'Ève future* (1886), French writer Villiers de l'Isle-Adam imagines Edison hearing his daughter sing children's songs in front of the laboratory.)¹⁵ Edison and his associates may even have used the opening line as a set phrase in previous experiments with the telephone.¹⁶

Memory was another factor. The ease of repeating nursery rhymes (along with quotations from the Bible, Shakespeare, and folklore) made them likely candidates for speaking into a machine that would itself re-

¹⁴ F. W. Gaisberg, *The Music Goes Round* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), p. 261.

¹⁵ Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Tomorrow's Eve*, trans. by Robert Martin Adams (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 17. This detail is cited in Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 232.

¹⁶ Raymond Wile, 'The Edison Invention of the Phonograph', *ARSC Journal*, 14 (1982), 19–32 (p. 21, n. 5).

peat them back to the speaker. After all, nursery rhymes were largely oral forms of expression that flourished off the page through word of mouth. Mnemonic rhymes were easily remembered and passed on from one generation to the next, as poems had been for centuries through an oral tradition predating the written word. The cadence, rhyme scheme, and brevity of ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ ensured its transmission among adults and children alike. In this sense, the nursery rhyme was itself mechanically (or at least unthinkingly) reproducible prior to its mechanical reproduction by the phonograph.

It was equally important for the words to be widely recognizable. Knowing the exact wording in advance helped audiences to determine whether or not the recording was a faithful reproduction. In many cases, audiences needed to hear the words being spoken into the phonograph in order to make sense of them during playback. Simply asking an audience to identify a cylinder’s contents without this foreknowledge led to confusion. A conventional nursery rhyme aided the process of legibility (or audibility, in this case). For this reason, Emile Berliner’s first gramophone records included the Lord’s Prayer since it was known by ninety-nine out of every hundred people.¹⁷

The lyric’s American roots are relevant, too, since newspaper accounts heralded the phonograph’s invention as an example of Yankee ingenuity.¹⁸ ‘Mary’s Lamb’ first appeared in Sarah Josepha Hale’s *Poems for Our Children* (1830), issued by the Boston publishing house Marsh, Capen & Lyon and widely reprinted in the series of McGuffey Readers used in schools.¹⁹ In other words, the earliest recorded speech not only took place in America but was itself American. At a time when it sought to establish itself on the world stage, this was a triumphant assertion of the fact that America now spoke for itself — even if the words unwittingly

¹⁷ Gaisberg, p. 11. On the use of conventionalized language in early sound recording, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 246–56.

¹⁸ Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 17.

¹⁹ Richard L. Venezky and Carl F. Kaestle, ‘From McGuffey to Dick and Jane: Reading Textbooks’, in *A History of the Book in America*, ed. by David D. Hall, 5 vols (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000–10), IV: *Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880–1940*, ed. by Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway (2009), pp. 415–30. On verse recitation in schools, see Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

drew attention to the nation's youth. The rhyme's association with childhood should not be overlooked. The phonograph invited childish forms of speech from its inception despite Edison's ambition to preserve the speeches of esteemed public figures in the tradition of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and William Gladstone (Gitelman, *Always Already New*, p. 35). One was far more likely to encounter low humour than lofty sentiments at the demonstrations. Edison himself amused audiences by recording over biblical verse with the exclamations 'Oh, shut up!' and 'Help! Police! Police!'²⁰

Despite the conventional association between technological experimentation and the twentieth century, verse recordings were technological experiments from the very first words spoken into the phonograph.²¹ The 1878 phonograph exhibitions treated verse as the raw material for improvisatory performance rather than as scripts for faithful reproduction. The actual content made little difference since the nursery rhyme was merely an illustration of sound reproduction. In this sense, the words 'Mary had a little lamb' were no more significant than the words 'How do you like the phonograph?' (a pre-recorded question played to the editors of *Scientific American*). Yet the performances were nevertheless meaningful in manipulating verse. As Friedrich Kittler has shown, the capacity to capture, store, and retrieve voice that recording devices such as the phonograph (and later film) made possible from the 1870s onwards enabled their operators to break down language into its constituent elements in ways not previously possible outside the imagination. One result was to shift the focus from the meanings of words to their sounds.²²

The phonograph's early days were in many ways its most artistically daring since there were not yet any conventions in place to inhibit experimentation. Exhibitors were free to do whatever they liked with the phonograph owing to the fact that, despite a number of ingenious sugges-

²⁰ Neil Baldwin, *Edison: Inventing the Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 90.

²¹ On experimentation during this period, see Joseph Phelan, *The Music of Verse: Metrical Experimentation in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Alan Marshall, *American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²² Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 232. Elsewhere in this study, Kittler discusses the phonograph's responsibility for 'the death of the author' since mechanical recording devices no longer privileged the voice over other sounds (p. 237).

tions, no one knew what purpose it would serve.²³ Here is a different version of the inaugural rhyme recited by Edison during a demonstration at Menlo Park:

Mary had a little lamb,
 Its fleece was white as snow,
 And everywhere that Mary went
 The lamb was sure to go — to go — to go —
 Ooh ooh ooh — ah!
 Cockadoodle doo-ah!
 Tuck — a — tuck — a — tuck
 Tuck — ah! tuck — ah!²⁴

The nursery rhyme is only one half of the phonographic text, the rest of which consists of sound effects having no counterpart in print (notwithstanding the journalist's best efforts to render them in free verse). It is in equal measures public recitation and private improvisation conventionally attributed to the techniques of the twentieth-century's avant-garde sound poets.²⁵ 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' is rendered into nonsensical sound as a result. The original poem's moralizing content melts into air as the repetition of 'to go' defers narrative closure, evolving instead into verse distinguished by its acoustics ('to go — to go — to go —' echoed by 'Ooh ooh ooh') over its content. The intrusive noises show off the phonograph's fidelity to the human voice while at the same time departing from the narrative expectations of the poem's next stanza: 'It followed her to school one day.' Mary's lamb never stood a chance against Edison's rooster.

Mixing together scripts exploited the talking machine's capacity to simulate speech. A demonstration in Providence, for example, impressed

²³ Emily Thompson, 'Machines, Music, and the Quest for Fidelity: Marketing the Edison Phonograph in America, 1877–1925', *Musical Quarterly*, 79 (1995), 131–71 (p. 137).

²⁴ 'A Marvellous Discovery', *New York Sun*, 22 February 1878, p. 1.

²⁵ Steve McCaffery, 'From Phonic to Sonic: The Emergence of the Audio-Poem', in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, ed. by Adalaide Morris (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 149–68; and the essays in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). Marjorie Perloff traces the historical roots of twentieth-century experimental poetry in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

audiences by combining well-known quotations with frivolous sound effects. Instead of reciting a straightforward nursery rhyme, Johnson sandwiched the rhyme in between playful noises in order to flaunt the machine's acoustic versatility:

How do you do, — —? How are the people in Providence?
Mary had a little lamb; it's [*sic*] fleece was white as snow, and
everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go. Ha! ha!
ha! (cough), (cough), (cough). Ha! ha! ha!²⁶

Empty sound, again. The words have little worth apart from their effect on the ear and derive their significance instead from being elements of a performance. 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' produced very different effects depending on whether it was recited as straightforward verse or mixed together with the theatre's ambient noise. Intentionally or not, performances raised questions about the talking machine's impact on the material: how did hearing the rhyme influence its reception? How did the superfluous speech and noises affect its sense? How closely did one pay attention to the meanings of the words themselves?

'The Talking Machine Funny' was one newspaper heading used to describe the phonograph's verse adaptations.²⁷ James Adams, a Scotsman who had been one of Edison's lab assistants for five years, opened an exhibition at the Philadelphia Local Telegraph Company with the nursery rhyme 'Jack and Jill'. Audience members found Adams's Scottish accent particularly amusing when replayed on the phonograph — the machine spoke in a Scottish accent! They responded as much to the delivery as to the words themselves.

Other unexpected combinations dramatically altered the audience's relation to the material. For instance, a reporter for the *New York Herald* described hearing Edison recite the following lines from Shakespeare's *Richard III*:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.²⁸

²⁶ 'Edison's Phonograph', *Evening Bulletin* [Providence, RI], 30 January 1878, TAED MBSB10342.

²⁷ 'Bottled Talk', *Philadelphia Times*, 9 March 1878, p. 2.

²⁸ 'Mr. Edison's Phonograph', *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, 4 January 1878, p. 2.

The stanza took on an entirely different meaning when followed by the exclamation: ‘Hip! Hip!! Hurrah!!! Three cheers for General Grant! Houp la! Ya hoo!’²⁹ With one stroke, the improvised line recontextualized Shakespeare amid the post-bellum United States at a moment when the country was recovering from one of the most contentious presidential elections in history.³⁰ Cheers for Ulysses S. Grant, a former president and military commander during the Civil War, encouraged the audience to rally around a symbol of unity. Such moments invited audiences to imagine themselves as part of a ‘recordable community’, to use Lisa Gitelman’s phrase, made up of individuals across the country taking part in similar demonstrations of American engineering (*Always Already New*, p. 34). Exhibitions drew on a repertoire of familiar texts with which audiences could collectively engage no matter what political divisions kept them apart outside the concert hall.

Mechanically manipulating the speaker’s voice was another way of directing attention to the recital’s sheer sound. Since pitch depends on the rate of vibration, demonstrators could speed up or slow down the speaker’s voice by turning the phonograph’s crank at varying speeds. During recitals of ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’, Johnson played the recording at three different speeds. The first time, he replayed the tinfoil cylinder at normal speed. He turned the crank much faster the second time, so that the words ‘rattled out with explosive rapidity’, the laughter was ‘hysterical’, and the cough ‘spasmodic’. Then Johnson played the recording a third time, turning the crank very slowly as the words ‘drawled out hoarsely’, the laughter was ‘very sad’, and the cough ‘lingering’.³¹ On another occasion, a witness described the fast and slow speeds used to replay ‘Mary’ as the difference between the voices of ‘an angry old woman’ and ‘a decrepid [*sic*] old man with his mouth full of water’.³²

Similar experiments with *Richard III* turned the tragedy into farce. One reporter described the king’s high-pitched voice while the crank was turned at a rapid pace ‘as though *Richard* was in a bad humor and did not care to play his part’.³³ The crank was turned so rapidly at another exhibi-

²⁹ Untitled, *Inter Ocean* [Chicago], 16 March 1878, p. 4.

³⁰ See Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

³¹ ‘Edison’s Phonograph’, *Lowell Daily Citizen*, 25 March 1878, pp. 1–2 (p. 1).

³² ‘The Phonograph Exhibited’, *New York Times*, 24 March 1878, p. 2.

³³ ‘Mr. Edison’s Phonograph’, *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, 4 January 1878, p. 2.

tion that words turned into ‘mere whistling’.³⁴ It was even possible to transfer recorded speech from one phonograph to another by holding the two mouthpieces together — a process described by Edison as ‘making the machines talk to each other’.³⁵ Even when the first phonograph played the words from *Richard III* at the fastest speed as a mere whistle, the second phonograph still reproduced the words as they had originally been spoken.

In addition to trying out different speeds, exhibitors experimented with superimposing recordings on top of one another. The result was a sonic montage or palimpsest that introduced potentially incongruous associations between texts. At Chickering Hall, an exhibitor shouted nonsensical phrases into the mouthpiece to be recorded over the tinfoil impression of ‘Mary’: ‘Mary had a little — oh shut up — lamb. Its fleece was white — give us a rest — as snow. And everywhere — go to bed — that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go — How’s that.’³⁶ Elsewhere in New York, a journalist attending Tillinghast’s Telephone Concert commented on the ‘reckless’ mixing together of ‘Mary’ and *Richard III*: ‘The astonished audience could conjecture what the result of the connection could be.’³⁷ The audience’s reaction indicates the potential novelty of mixing genres even for an audience accustomed to Shakespeare as popular entertainment.³⁸ The phonograph threatened to change not only the manner in which audiences received texts but also their understanding of them. Provocative differences between the spoken and printed script left audiences wanting to hear more than just nursery rhymes.

Sentimental verse, didactic sermons, and nursery rhymes alike sounded absurd when disrupted by a facetious voice-over. The resemblance of phonograph recordings to actual speech made them susceptible to interruption, or what might be thought of as phonographic heckling. No speech was safe from the phonograph’s high jinks. For example, Charles Batchelor concluded a demonstration at Menlo Park by reading a lecture from *Creed and Deed* (1878) by Felix Adler, founder of the Society of Ethical Culture. It was impossible to take seriously Adler’s lecture on the sanctity of the family, however, when interrupted by phrases such as

³⁴ ‘The Phonograph, Etc.’, *Daily Evening Traveller* [Boston, MA], 23 May 1878, TAED MBSB10620.

³⁵ ‘Edison and His Inventions’, *Boston Journal*, 25 May 1878, TAED MBSB10378.

³⁶ ‘The Phonograph Exhibited’, *New York Times*, 24 March 1878, p. 2.

³⁷ ‘The Funny Phonograph’, *Buffalo Sunday Morning News*, 14 March 1878, p. 2.

³⁸ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 13–81.

‘give us a rest’, ‘look at his nose’, ‘miaow, miaow’, ‘hur-r-r-r-oo-o-o’, and ‘fire! fire!! fire!!!’³⁹

As a final indignity to the poem, exhibitors rotated the tinfoil cylinder in reverse. The result was the nursery rhyme’s backward recitation, not to mention a triumph of sound over sense characteristic of the other demonstrations in 1878. Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels have argued that reading verse backwards can direct attention to the verbal artefact as a performance.⁴⁰ If so, it would be difficult to find more vivid examples of poetic deformation than those committed by Edison’s agents. The *New York Sun* graphically depicted one backward recital of ‘Mary’ as follows:

Go to sure was lamb the,
Went Mary that everywhere and,
Snow as white was fleece its,
Lamb little a had Mary.⁴¹

A witness humorously complained after hearing the recital that ‘Mary was lammed unmercifully in an attempt to pop out in her proper place’.⁴² Yet the *Sun* gets it wrong, reversing the order of the verse’s *words* rather than its *sounds*. The difference is noticeable to the eye if not the ear. By contrast, other journalists discerned the fault line between two incompatible models of sound. The *Daily Evening Traveller* pointed out that playing the first verse from Felicia Hemans’s ‘The Fall of D’Assas’ would not reverse the words:

Alone through gloomy forest shades
A soldier went by night, etc.

Instead, it would reverse their constituent vowels and consonants:

³⁹ [Frederick J. Garbit], ‘The Phonograph’, *New York Herald*, 22 April 1878, TAED MBSB10541X.

⁴⁰ McGann and Samuels discuss antithetical models of reading epitomized by Emily Dickinson reading poems backwards, in ‘Deformance and Interpretation’, in Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 105–35.

⁴¹ ‘A Marvellous Discovery’, *New York Sun*, 22 February 1878, p. 1.

⁴² ‘The Funny Phonograph’, *Buffalo Sunday Morning News*, 14 March 1878, p. 2.

thgin yb tnew reidlos a
sedahs tserof ymoolg hguorht enola.⁴³

The reversal turns Hemans's verse into gibberish while at the same time suggesting new possibilities for acoustic experimentation. Namely, phonograph technology made it possible to examine formerly imperceptible sounds in slow motion. We might describe this phenomenon as the 'acoustical unconscious', to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, illuminating aspects of the sonic world eluding the naked ear but capturable by mechanical recording devices.⁴⁴ In other words, phonograph recitations helped make audiences aware of sounds that were well-nigh impossible to discern without technology. The mistake by the *Sun* journalist, whose graphic representation of the backward recital reveals a flawed understanding, suggests listeners were being asked to reconceptualize sound in ways foreign to their own vocal practices since a backward poem made little sense in the context of the human voice. It made perfect sense in the context of a machine for recording sound, however. Once understood, the mechanics of speech reversal became apparent and even amusing to demonstrators. Precisely such logic lay behind Edison's irreverent prank of playing the following phrase in reverse: 'Mad dog! Mad dog! Mad dog!'⁴⁵

Phonographically cultivated

In July 1878, after a visit to Edison's laboratory at Menlo Park to see an improved model of the phonograph, a writer for *Scientific American* announced: 'One phonographically cultivated can no longer be satisfied with "Mary had a little lamb" and selections from Mother Goose, for now the phonograph can sing.'⁴⁶ There was no need for nursery rhymes now that the talking machine had grown up, so to speak, into a singing machine. Yet the spoken-word recordings that had been central to phono-

⁴³ 'The Phonograph, Etc.', *Daily Evening Traveller* [Boston, MA], 23 May 1878, TAED MBSB10620.

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin uses the term 'optical unconscious' in relation to photography in 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), II: 1927–1934, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others (1999), pp. 508–30 (p. 512).

⁴⁵ 'A Marvellous Discovery', *New York Sun*, 22 February 1878, p. 1.

⁴⁶ 'An Hour with Edison', *Scientific American*, 39 (1878), p. 17.

graph demonstrations from the outset continued to be a popular form of entertainment in the years ahead. The coming of print had not replaced spoken forms of narrative, as technologically deterministic narratives would have it.⁴⁷ Instead, there was already a tradition of oral literature, understood in its broadest sense as everything from nursery rhymes to epic poetry, on the tip of people's tongues when Edison's invention made it possible to capture the spoken word. From the very first trials, the phonograph responded to a demand not just for recorded speech but for privileged forms of speech such as verse, prose, and dramatic monologues.

News reports make it possible to assemble a list of texts used at least once at demonstrations and frequently as part of the standard repertoire. In addition to music and the other curious noises mentioned in the previous section, the typical demonstration featured spoken-word recordings. They included nursery rhymes ('Hickory Dickory Dock', 'Jack and Jill', 'Mary Had a Little Lamb', 'Old Mother Hubbard', 'Rub-a-Dub-Dub', 'Sing a Song of Sixpence', 'Three Blind Mice'); verse (Robert Burns, 'Tam o' Shanter'; Thomas Campbell, 'Hohenlinden'; Thomas Gray, 'Elegy'; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 'There Was a Little Girl' and 'Evangeline'; Caroline Norton, 'Bingen on the Rhine'; Edgar Allan Poe, 'Annabel Lee'; Alfred Tennyson, 'Break, Break, Break'; Theodore Tilton, 'The King's Ring'); and drama (Watts Phillips, 'The Dead Heart'; Shakespeare, *Richard III*). There are records of verse recited in foreign languages too, including Edison reading lines in Latin from Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Few scripts were read in full since tinfoil cylinders played for just over a minute.⁴⁸ Instead, exhibitors made do with the poem's opening lines or refrain, sometimes modifying the material in order to make it suitable for oral performance. The excerpt acted as a form of shorthand, evoking the entire poem through its utterance since most selections were already familiar to audiences. The scarcity of prose in the repertoire suggests a preference for mnemonic forms that would be easy to recite during a performance. Their value was apparent ten years later when Robert

⁴⁷ On the impact of print, see Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Walter Ong elaborates on the shift from oral to print culture in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982). See also *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, ed. by Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).

⁴⁸ 'Cylinder', in *Encyclopedia of Recorded Sound*, ed. by Frank Hoffmann, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 258–63.

Browning interrupted a recording with the apology: 'I'm most terribly sorry but I can't remember me own verses.'⁴⁹

The rationale behind the selections is not always apparent. Some were chosen for reasons of familiarity, others for personal taste (many were favourites of Edison long before the phonograph's invention). Still others were chosen for sound effects. All of the selections were widely available in print, recitation anthologies, and public oratory.⁵⁰ Whatever the reasoning behind the choices, they resonated with recording technology in unforeseen ways when read aloud. It has become a truism among book historians that the form of the literary artefact affects the meaning of its content.⁵¹ It is with this understanding of the medium's relation to the message that we can reconsider the reception of verse read aloud by the phonograph. Selections sometimes were chosen for their relevance to sound recording, and at other times resonated with the machinery in unexpected ways. The most obvious way in which a connection between the talking machine and the talk is apparent to us — and to the original exhibitors, I am convinced — is through the phonograph's capacity to present the voice of an absent person. Hence, it is fitting that so much of the verse used at demonstrations addresses separation, mourning, or loss — themes encapsulated by William Cowper's elegiac line 'Oh that those lips had language!' played for at least one audience.⁵²

Tennyson's 'Break, Break, Break' was chosen as an exhibition piece because of its relevance to the notion of a recorded voice. Tennyson wrote this brief elegy after the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam, to whom Tennyson dedicated *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850). Tennyson had intended 'Break, Break, Break' to be part of that long poem before deciding to publish it instead in the collection *Poems* (1842). The New York

⁴⁹ Robert Browning, 'How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix' (cylinder recording), in *The Spoken Word. Poets: Historic Recordings of Poets Born in the Nineteenth Century* (London: British Library Board, 2003) [on CD].

⁵⁰ On reading aloud, see Joan Shelley Rubin, *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵¹ See D. F. McKenzie's influential formulation of this concept during the Panizzi Lectures in 1985, in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: British Library, 1986), p. 4. Roger Chartier elaborates on the idea in *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 89–91.

⁵² This line from William Cowper's 'On Receipt of My Mother's Picture' (1798) is cited in William Preece, *The Phonograph; or, Speaking Machine, invented by T. A. Edison* (London: Chilworth, [1878]), p. 41.

Telephone Company's William Applebaugh presumably had the poem's association with loss in mind when putting together the programme for a demonstration held in March 1878. At this event, the phonograph called out names, counted, announced its address, and sang before concluding with the following lines from Tennyson's poem:

[But O for] the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still.⁵³

The poem's initial line of accented syllables was the obvious choice to read aloud if sound effects had been the goal. Clearly the third stanza was chosen instead for its thematic attention to voice during a demonstration of that very attribute.

The lines express the speaker's longing for sensory contact with a friend whom the speaker will never see again. If technology could do little to bring back the touch of the deceased ('a vanished hand'), it promised — at least for future generations — to preserve the voices of loved ones after their deaths. Tennyson's use of the phrase 'a voice that is still' evokes death through the figure of a voice no longer audible. A still voice makes no sound at all. He had no way of knowing how different the line's meaning would be for audiences after the introduction of sound-recording technology made it possible to play back a recording of the human voice. In this context, a 'voice that is still' is one waiting to be played on the phonograph's rotating cylinders — paused, we might say. The phonograph decouples the link between silence and death since it was capable, for the first time in history, of reproducing the human voice independently of the original speaker. Had the phonograph been invented earlier, the implication goes, Tennyson would now be able to console himself with Hallam's voice. He would never have asked the question with which *In Memoriam* began: 'Where is the voice I loved?'⁵⁴

Tennyson does not ask for the voice itself, only the sound of a voice. The distinction was not lost on contemporary observers. At least one journal credited Edison with having 'answered one half of the poet's aspiration' by making it possible to preserve the voices of the dead.⁵⁵ The

⁵³ 'The Phonograph', *Harper's Weekly*, 30 March 1878, pp. 249–50 (p. 250).

⁵⁴ Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, 2 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1897), I, 107.

⁵⁵ Richard A. Proctor, 'The Phonograph, or Voice-Recorder', *Gentleman's Magazine*, June 1878, pp. 688–705 (p. 705). Journalists continued to use Tennyson's poem as a benchmark for technological progress a decade later. *Chambers's Journal* an-

best way to illustrate the gains of the preserved voice, moreover, was through the inverse situation of a speaker longing for a voice never to be heard again. The lines turn out to be even more poignant, if that is possible, since the loss was unnecessary. The context of the phonograph demonstration renders the lines slightly archaic by promising to replace speech about a loved one with that loved one's speech. The very impulse to write a lyric in response to an absent loved one might no longer be necessary in an age of recorded sound (which at the same time generated its own poems about absent voices with titles such as 'Heaven's Phonograph', 'The Speaking Phonograph', and 'Viva Voce'). Edison himself had proposed using the phonograph to preserve the last words of family members.⁵⁶ It is no accident that Tennyson, the poet who grievously felt the loss of his friend's voice in 1833, would be among the first to record his voice for posterity in 1890.

Caroline Norton's 'Bingen on the Rhine' (1846), one of Edison's favourite recitation pieces, raised questions about voice, speech, and presence similar to those raised by Tennyson's poem. The sentimental ballad depicts a mortally wounded soldier of the Foreign Legion in Algiers asking a comrade to relay his dying words back to Germany:

The dying Soldier faltered, as he took that comrade's hand,
And he said, 'I never more shall see my own, my native land;
Take a message, and a token, to some distant friends of mine,
For I was born at Bingen, — at Bingen on the Rhine.'⁵⁷

Once again, the emphasis is on touch (a token) and on voice (a message). In this case, the dying soldier is dependent on an intermediary to relay the words to his distant family ('Tell my brothers', 'Tell my mother', 'Tell my sister') since he will not be able to tell his 'mournful story' to them himself. It is the second soldier — along with the poem itself — who preserves the utterance. At the same time, the phonograph recording of the soldier's dying words cannot help but remind audiences that we cannot

nounced in 1888, 'We are now able, through the phonograph, to preserve the sounds of voices that are still' ('Hoarded Speech', *Chambers's Journal*, 29 September 1888, pp. 613–14 (p. 614)).

⁵⁶ Thomas A. Edison, 'The Phonograph and its Future', *North American Review*, May–June 1878, pp. 527–36 (p. 533).

⁵⁷ The poem was first published as 'Bingen' in Caroline Norton, *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-book* (London: Fisher, Son, 1846), pp. 12–13. It was widely reprinted afterwards in recitation anthologies.

hear the soldier speak. The voice's absence paradoxically brings out the poignancy of the soldier's dying words. The phonograph promised to preserve the speaker's voice, by contrast, acting as both message and token in one medium (a tinfoil cylinder, in this case), much the way the poem does. The phonograph recital figuratively goes a step further than the poem, though, by delivering the voice as well as the words of the dead soldier to Bingen.

The relevance of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Annabel Lee' (1849) is not as obvious as the previous examples. Yet this poem also features an absent voice brought back to life using technology. In other words, the shift in medium results in a corresponding shift in meaning by altering the context and circumstances of the verse.⁵⁸ Edison chose the poem's first four lines for recitals at Menlo Park:

It was many and many a year ago,
 In a kingdom by the sea,
 That a maiden there lived whom you may know
 By the name of ANNABEL LEE.⁵⁹

As the poem goes on to reveal, the speaker and Annabel Lee shared an intense love for one another as children until her premature death. The poem thus presents a conventional Romantic image of a beautiful young woman who tragically dies in her youth, to be preserved in the idealized memories of those who knew her. Annabel Lee is available to us only in the speaker's words, the poem, and, now, the phonograph recording. She is a ghostly presence suited to the uncanny technology of the phonograph, which struck contemporary audiences as a way to bring back the voices of the dead.⁶⁰ The lines recited by Edison call forth the departed, as do the lines by Tennyson, while simultaneously evoking an entire discourse of the uncanny associated with Poe's writing.

It was not uncommon for audience members to resort to Poe's gothic rhetoric in order to convey the unsettling sensation of listening to the phonograph's mechanical voice. For example, a journalist in Washington compared the experience of hearing the phonograph for the first time

⁵⁸ On the relationship between materiality and meaning, see N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 25.

⁵⁹ *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 4 vols (New York: Widdleton, 1871), II, 27.

⁶⁰ On the relations among sound-recording technology, spiritualism, and the posthumous voice, see Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 362–93; and Sterne, pp. 287–311.

to Poe's 'The Shadow', a short tale about the voices of the dead. The parable is a first-person account by an ancient Greek narrator named Oinos, who attends a mourning ceremony interrupted by a talking shadow on the chamber's brass door. From the shadow, according to the journalist's retelling, 'a multitude of voices fell duskily but distinctly on the startled ear in the well-remembered but far-off tones of many hundreds of departed friends'.⁶¹ The point of the comparison is that the phonograph could make any script, macabre or not, sound as if it were spoken from beyond the grave.

Recitals of Watts Phillips's *The Dead Heart* (1859) took full advantage of the link between death and phonography. An important source for Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Phillips's drama opened at the Adelphi Theatre in London in 1859 and became a hit in New York theatres in 1866 with Edwin Adams in the starring role. *The Dead Heart* is a melodramatic tale about the wrongful imprisonment of the sculptor Robert Landry by two aristocrats scheming to separate him from his fiancée Catherine Duval. Landry remained a prisoner for eighteen years in the Bastille until its fall during the French Revolution in 1789. Edison and other agents selected the following lines (singled out by reviewers as the play's most moving) for recital:

Nineteen years in the Bastile! [*sic*]
I scratched my name upon the wall
And that name was Robert Landr-y-y-y.⁶²

Until the dramatic moment of his release, Landry is presumed dead by fiancée and friends. No one has heard his voice in eighteen years. In this sense, his unexpected return from the Bastille is a resurrection. As Landry remarks, 'I've just risen from my grave.'⁶³ The staged scene is all the more remarkable for giving Landry the chance to pronounce the words scratched on the wall after nearly two decades of silence. The Abbé Latour announces: 'Robert Landry is not dead. This is an age of wonders.

⁶¹ 'Genius Before Science', *Washington Post and Union*, 19 April 1878, TAED MBSB10535X. Poe's 'Shadow. A Fable' first appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger* [Richmond, VA], September 1835, pp. 762–63. It was reprinted as 'Shadow. — A Parable' in numerous collections including the *Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, II, 292–94.

⁶² 'Bottled Talk', *Philadelphia Times*, 9 March 1878, p. 2.

⁶³ Watts Phillips, *The Dead Heart, A Story of the French Revolution*, rev. by Walter H. Pollock (New York: French, 1889), p. 33.

Robert Landry was dead to you, to the world, but they have brought him back to life from the dungeons of the Bastille!’ (p. 30). An age of wonders, indeed. The recording device on stage worked in an analogous manner to the Bastille by ‘imprisoning’ sounds from the air before eventually restoring them to life.⁶⁴

If the play figuratively resurrects Landry by releasing him from the Bastille, the phonograph might be said to resurrect Landry in a different sense. This is brought out through the elongated pronunciation of the name Landry (‘Landr-y-y-y’) in the news report. The ending both emphasizes the name’s ghostly nature and replicates the stuttering bewilderment characteristic of Landry’s speech after emerging from prison. Like the play, the phonograph dramatizes a moment of inscription (a name scratched on the wall) by allowing audiences to hear the words of Robert Landry spoken aloud. We might even read the scene as an allegory for the phonograph itself through its enactment of the mechanical process of amplifying sound ‘scratched’ or etched by a stylus onto the tinfoil cylinder.

The lines are all the more powerful since Landry’s ‘dead heart’ is brought back to life by a voice. Landry emerges from prison inured to all human feeling except the desire for revenge on his captors. Catherine Duval’s plea for mercy alone can bring his dead heart back to life. Echoing Tennyson, it is not the voice but the *memory* of her voice from their courtship (‘one sweet echo of the past’) that eventually reaches him. As Landry says, ‘A voice speaks to me from the grave’ (p. 54). The phonograph exploits its own voice from the grave in resurrecting Robert Landry for melodramatic effect. And yet, despite all of the rhetoric, the original voice remained lost forever. Performances did not bring back the voices of Arthur Hallam, Annabel Lee, Robert Landry, or the German soldier from Bingen. Absent voices and voiced absences: phonograph demonstrations could only advertise the need to preserve absent voices by recording those of the people who were physically present at them. The verses retain part of their force through speakers who continued to elude modern recording technology.

As the previous examples demonstrate, the phonograph influenced the reception of poetry and prose by foregrounding their acoustic properties or thematic resonance. The talking machine reinforced the poem’s

⁶⁴ This and other widely used terms for capturing fugitive sounds can be found, for instance, in ‘The Inventor of the Phonograph’, *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1 August 1878, p. 1. Edison describes the ‘captivity’ of fugitive sounds by the phonograph in ‘The Phonograph and its Future’, p. 530.

content, and this content likewise raised questions about the nature of the machine. Even a poem as straightforward as Theodore Tilton's 'The King's Ring' played on themes of permanence and loss relevant to sound-recording technology. Here is one journalist's rendering (abridged and slightly inaccurate) of the poem's first stanza:

Once in Persia lived a King,
Who upon his signet ring
Graved a maxim wise and true,
Which he ever kept in view,
And repeated day by day,
'Even this shall pass away.'⁶⁵

The poem's emphasis on the transience of worldly things accrues a different meaning in the context of the phonograph's permanent record. Here was a machine to preserve for all time that most fleeting phenomenon, the human voice. That was the promise, at least. In reality, the voice was difficult to hear and even more difficult to preserve on tinfoil, which was rendered useless once removed from the cylinder. 'Even this shall pass away' was a maxim equally applicable to the phonograph.

Conclusion

Audiences listened closely to the phonograph during the demonstrations of 1878. Despite buoyant optimism about the talking machine's potential, observers qualified their enthusiasm by pointing out that its voice was not heard with absolute clarity. In fact, the voice was faint and often drowned out by surface noise. A typical tinfoil cylinder recording included a mixture of perfectly audible words with ones that were difficult to make out. Journalists did their best to put the curious sound into words. *The Times* of London complained of 'a slight metallic or mechanical tone'.⁶⁶ The *New York Post* compared the phonograph's voice to that of 'a person talking in a loud voice in an adjoining room with the door closed'.⁶⁷ For the *New York Times*, 'the queer, piping tones' of the phonograph called to mind the

⁶⁵ 'The Speaking Phonograph', *New York Daily Graphic*, 12 March 1878, TAED MBSB10400X. The original is in Theodore Tilton, *The King's Ring* (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1867).

⁶⁶ 'The Phonograph', *The Times*, 17 January 1878, p. 4.

⁶⁷ 'The Phonograph', *Daily Evening Bulletin* [San Francisco], 1 April 1878, p. 1.

puppets of a Punch and Judy show.⁶⁸ And William Preece observed that the voice was not a human one at all but rather a ‘parody of the human voice’.⁶⁹ Although most witnesses were optimistic that the teething pains would be fixed, others remained sceptical. The *Congregationalist* was one of the few journals to ask whether anyone would actually be interested in listening to a recorded voice. It doubted that readers would ever use the phonograph to ‘grind out books’, a phrase invoking the irritating tradition of Italian organ grinders, not verse’s dulcet tones.⁷⁰ It remained to be seen whether the phonograph represented the aesthetic of the future or the latest entry in a long sequence of failed speech devices.⁷¹

Edison’s talking machine gave every indication of belonging to the failures. Once the novelty of hearing the human voice mechanically reproduced wore off, the public lost interest in the phonograph until the arrival of an improved talking machine ten years later. The original was dismissed as a scientific curiosity or even a toy. Edison himself moved on to other experiments. A news report published in the *New York World* in 1879 measured the gap between the high expectations and the disappointing reality. When a reporter asked a representative of the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company, ‘Has Edison ever finished the phonograph which was to have a disk capable of containing an entire sensational novel instead of a phonograph with a cylinder such as those you are making now?’, the employee replied, ‘No, I think he’s abandoned that idea.’⁷² The machine’s failure to record a novel is one reason why literary critics have given little attention to the early years of sound recording. Yet the tinfoil phonograph’s inability to meet the highest expectations should not distract us from its impressive range of acoustic experimentation. After all, the phonograph succeeded in changing the way audiences listened to the

⁶⁸ ‘An Evening with Edison’, *New York Times*, 4 June 1878, p. 5.

⁶⁹ W. H. Preece, ‘The Phonograph’, *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 26 (1878), 534–38 (p. 537).

⁷⁰ ‘The Phonograph’, *Congregationalist* [Boston, MA], 15 May 1878, p. 157. See Picker’s account of the legislation against street noise in response to the nuisance of Italian organ grinders in London, in *Victorian Soundscapes*, pp. 41–81.

⁷¹ A survey of artificial speaking devices preceding Edison’s phonograph can be found in Patrick Feaster, ‘Framing the Mechanical Voice: Generic Conventions of Early Phonograph Recordings’, *Folklore Forum*, 32 (2001), 57–102 (pp. 61–69).

⁷² ‘The Trade in Phonographs’, *New York World*, 5 September 1879, TAED SM030058b, quoted in Raymond R. Wile, ‘The Wonder of the Age — The Edison Invention of the Phonograph’, in *Phonographs & Gramophones*, comp. by Alistair G. Thomson (Edinburgh: Royal Scottish Museum, 1977), pp. 9–46 (p. 38).

verse played on it. 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' was never heard the same way again.

The phonograph demonstrations of 1878 did more than just repeat printed texts aloud. They raised a set of questions about the difference between printed and spoken texts that are still relevant to our understanding of recorded literature. The initial sonic experiments, as entertaining and amusing as they were, encouraged audiences to think about how the speaker's delivery affects what is spoken, how the medium shapes the message. Much has been made of the naive manner in which audiences responded to phonograph recordings of the author's voice. The exhibitions re-enacted here tell a different story, suggesting instead that observers responded to the phonographic text as an artefact shaped by that very technology. Such forms of mechanical manipulation expressed an interest in the plasticity of poetic form to be taken up with increasing seriousness and self-consciousness by writers in the next century, by which time the conventions of sound recording were firmly established and ripe for subversion.