

An Upstart Crow, An Heir, and a Spare

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In 1592, an irritable hack writer, Robert Greene, engaged in an early modern version of a social media call-out. Turning away from his regular beat describing London's criminal underworld, he surveyed all the writers working in London. Shakespeare, famously, was disparaged as a plagiarist, ironically in an insult that Greene borrowed from Homer: Shakespeare was "an upstart crow, beautified in our feathers."

Shakespeare and Dylan are brilliant thieves, stealing poetic lines with impunity, beautifying their crow's feathers with all manner of flourishes written by others. This paper looks at a cascading series of "thefts," beginning with Bob Dylan's use of Shakespeare characters in 1965's "Desolation Row," interwoven with a reference to a popular song, "You Belong to Me," published in 1952 and credited to Chilton Price, Pee Wee King, and Redd Stewart. I'm interested in the knock-on effect of embedding characters and song lines, in essence using them as shorthand in a lyrical argument. On one level, the thieving author leans on the cultural capital of, for example Christopher Marlowe, in Greene's assessment of Shakespeare. But on another, the stolen line can mark a turn, a pivot in the lyric itself that separates listeners with knowledge of the original song from those who don't even notice when the song line appears and disappears.

I'm also interested in a further development, in which Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits turned to Shakespeare for "Romeo and Juliet," but then borrowed the line of a popular song, "My Boyfriend's Back," a 1963 hit by the Angels to mark a turn in the lyrics. Knopfler played guitar on Dylan's album *Slow Train Coming* in 1979. He kept working with Dylan, appearing on tracks in 1983 and 1991, actually producing *Infidels* in '83. But crucially for my interests, Knopfler's "Romeo and Juliet" appeared in his 1980 album, *Making Money*, the year after he first performed with Dylan. (Incidentally, Dylan said that Mark Knopfler sounded more like Dylan than he did, and Dylan played "Desolation Row" in a 2011 Berlin concert for which Knopfler joined him in the first four songs.)

It's my contention that Knopfler most clearly shows Dylan's influence on his song-writing in the combination of a Shakespeare base line with incorporation of another popular song title. This paper will look closely at two Dylan songs, "Desolation Row" and "Po' Boy," before moving to Knopfler's "Romeo and Juliet."

Principals of Self-Portraiture in Bob Dylan, the Tate-LaBianca Murders, and Ophelia Iconography During the Late 1960s

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When Bob Dylan released *Self Portrait* in 1970, he characterized it as satire about the music scene; moreover, in a 1984 *Rolling Stone* interview he described some of the album's inspiration as his view that Woodstock was "the sum total of all this [music-industry-as-identity] bullshit." Not unlike Dylan's awakening of disgust with the social labels he was pressed to represent as "the [bardic] spokesman of a generation," the wholesome, soft world of mid-twentieth-century America was also experiencing an uncomfortable self-revelation. The timeframe Dylan references, that of the 1969 Woodstock festival, occurred exactly one week after the society-shocking Tate-LaBianca murders. Later, the trial prosecuting the so-called Manson family members for the murders revealed the motive as a bizarre interpretation of The Beatles' *White Album*. Like the way fans had applied meaning to Dylan's music so that they might integrate it into their label as hipsters, Charles Manson wore his haphazard mistranslations of The Beatles' songs, specifically "Helter Skelter," as an identity to influence and abuse others.

During these events in the late 1960s, Shakespeare, too, had a literal presence, such as the contemporaneous commercial success of Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, but I argue that the Bard is also present figuratively. While there were numerous victims in the Tate-LaBianca murders, Sharon Tate became a sort of crux for how gruesome the murders were, as she had been stabbed dozens of times while eight-months pregnant. Her death is the tragedy of the beautiful, young woman—in Shakespearean plays, a role iconically associated with Ophelia, her death scene one of the most appropriated images in literary-based visual arts, only out-paced by scenes from Greek mythology or the Bible. Tate's unfortunate legacy as a dead damsel parallels this Ophelia iconography, a bardic trope that continues retelling the story of humanity's flaws like the fall of Troy, not to share sad news but so we might find a way to remember our past and understand parts of ourselves we dislike, much like a self-portrait.

Tate's murder represents the consequences of the "[music-as-identity] bullshit" Dylan sought to avoid, the obsession of placing meaning on harmless words the very thing which galvanized him to make *Self Portrait*. Greil Marcus' unconventional 1970 *Rolling Stone* review of Dylan's album takes a break between the tracks of strange aesthetic and cover songs to say, "art comes in the period of decadence that precedes a revolution, or after the deluge," pointing to

the bardic power held by musicians whose work frequently reflects society's troubles, our interpretations helping us metaphorically paint self-portraits to look at ourselves and our role in history. My essay borrows concepts of self-portraiture—such as what motivates the manner in which artists depict themselves, and agency in self-depiction. Triangulating the connections among Bob Dylan's Self Portrait, Tate's murder, and Ophelia iconography highlights the bardic nature of these events to reveal where we've been, where we stand, and where we're going.

Hamlet Goes Electric: The Bob Dylan World Tour of 1966

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One of the most iconic photographs of Bob Dylan features the twenty-four year old musician standing in front of Kronborg Castle in Helsingør, Denmark—immortalized as Elsinore in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In the backdrop of the photo lies the impressive medieval fortress: a strategic maritime stronghold located in Northeast Zealand at the Øresund, or Sound. Taken on May 1, 1966, the monochrome picture captures in profile an image of a contemplative Dylan, dressed in black, hand on chin, and sporting dark sunglasses (photo: Jan Persson). Among devotees, the photograph (and others from the shoot) bears an informal but pointed title: “Dylan as Hamlet,” or “To Be or Not to Be.”ⁱ Many captions of the Dylan-as-Hamlet picture, moreover, specifically link the singer-songwriter to the dramatic setting itself: “Kronborg Castle, Denmark, the basis for Elsinore in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.”ⁱⁱ About the Elsinore photos, John Hughes even offers a personal recollection, recalling how the haunting images expressly conjured for him the figure of Hamlet, a character, who like Dylan, suffered “people’s intrusions and expectations.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The visit to Kronborg Castle roughly coincided with Dylan’s controversial, highly publicized move to “go electric” at the Newport Folk Festival of ‘65. During the Forest Hills Music Festival a few months later, Dylan remained poised and calm amid “booing and shouts of ‘we want the old Dylan.’” Some of the 15,000 unruly audience members there busted through roped-off grassed barriers and jumped onto the stage, demonstrating either their displeasure and/or childishness.^{iv} This example of artistic conflict (a modern day Hamlet’s slings-and-arrows of “intrusions and expectations”) hit hard during the 1966 World Tour. Dylan, the former King of Folk, performed with a five-member electric band, The Hawks, amid such jeers as “traitor,” “stuffed golliwog,” and “lower the mike”^v Amid this scandal was the infamous “Judas” heckle during the concert in Manchester at the Free Trade Hall. The second stop on the European leg of this frenetic and turbulent World Tour saw the group taking, curiously, a leisurely sight-seeing trip to—of all places—Kronborg Castle: Shakespeare’s Elsinore.

This essay will explore Dylan as a Hamlet figure during the World Tour. I argue that the setting of Elsinore becomes a metaphor for Dylan’s artistic transformation at this time.



ⁱ For use of these captions, see, for example, Harry Shapiro, *Bob Dylan: His Life in Pictures* (New York: Greene Media, 2019), 55; Andy Gill, *The Stories Behind the Songs, 1962-68* (London: Welbeck, 2021), 130.

ⁱⁱ Examples of this description occur, for instance, in a caption to the picture in Benjamin Hedin, ed., *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 144; and in Howard Sounes's depiction of the visit in *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (New York: Grove Press, 2021), 213.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Hughes, *Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960's* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 198.

^{iv} Shelton, Robert. "Bob Dylan: Forest Hills Stadium, Forest Hills Stadium NY". *The New York Times* (1965). Bob Dylan. Rock's Backpages. Accessed December 15, 2022. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com.cyrano.ucmo.edu/Library/Article/bob-dylan-forest-hills-stadium-forest-hills-stadium-ny>.

^v Writer, uncredited, "Bob Dylan & the Hawks: Adelphi Cinema, Dublin," *Disc and Music Echo* (1966). The Band, Bob Dylan. Rock's Backpages. Accessed December 13, 2022. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com.cyrano.ucmo.edu/Library/Article/bob-dylan--the-hawks-adelphi-cinema-dublin>.

Folk Traditions in Bob Dylan’s “Seven Curses” and William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*
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Taking various folk narratives into consideration, this essay will explore the many ways in which Shakespeare and Dylan alter or make selections from their source material to complicate and interrogate the usual or ordinary narrative.

The differences in interpretation between the Arden Shakespeare Second Series of *Measure for Measure* first published in 1965¹ and the Arden Shakespeare Third Series edition of 2020² are striking. In reading Isabella’s refusal to participate in Angelo’s plot, J. W. Lever says this:

Twentieth-century critics have weighed [Isabella’s] intransigence by their own scales of values. They have either praised her for her spiritual integrity or condemned her for her lack of “feeling.” What would surely have been evident to an earlier age is the fact that her stance is occasioned by no true principle. . . .

[Even] the novice of a spiritual order might overcome the fear of disgrace in the world’s eyes and manifest true grace by a sacrifice made in self-oblivious charity. Chastity was essentially a condition of the spirit; to see it in merely physical terms was to reduce the concept to a mere pagan scruple.³

A. R. Braunmuller and Robert N. Watson read her response to the proposition this way:

Once Angelo thinks he has enjoyed Isabella’s body, he sends an order expediting Claudio’s beheading. Shakespeare makes this minor plot-point (probably from Thomas Lupton’s version of his source story . . . into an opportunity to shape a moral for his own story. For Isabella to yield only aggravates Claudio’s crime, and therefore accelerates his punishment. Modern audiences may not entirely sympathize with the hard spirit and cold reasoning of Isabella’s refusal to submit, any more than with Angelo’s harsh and chilly logic, but the story indicates that refusal is finally the right choice.⁴

The fifty-five years between editions has made a difference in the way critics generally respond to the play’s plot.

Braunmuller and Watson also point out that, “In most versions of the ‘monstrous ransom’ tale, the victim is the wife of the condemned man.”⁵ Shakespeare varies this by making the man the brother of the woman; Dylan varies it by making the woman the condemned man’s daughter:

Old Reilly's daughter got a message
That her father was goin' to hang
She rode by night and came by morning
With gold and silver in her hand⁶

Dylan's narrative differs from Shakespeare's in having the woman accept the terms of the "monstrous ransom"⁷ and in delineating seven curses she utters when she learns that the unjust judge had not upheld his side of the bargain.

This essay will explore the implications of these alterations to the basic tale in folklore, exploring the interpretative possibilities that are brought forward by the changes.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. J. W. Lever (Arden Shakespeare, Second Series, London: Methuen, 1965).

² William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller and Robert N. Watson (Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2020).

³ J. W. Lever, ed., *Measure for Measure* (Arden Shakespeare, Second Series, London: Methuen, 1965), lxxviii.

⁴ A. R. Braunmuller and Robert N. Watson, eds., *Measure for Measure* (Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2020), 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶ Bob Dylan, *Bob Dylan: The Lyrics 1961-2012* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 75. This printing of the song's lyrics has no punctuation (other than quotation marks).

⁷ Braunmuller and Robert N. Watson,

“The Freewheelin’ William Shakespeare: Early Works of the Bard and Bob Dylan”

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In Bob Dylan’s Nobel Banquet speech in 2016, delivered by Azita Raji, he articulates his surprise at having been awarded the Prize in Literature, voicing the discrepancy between his self-perception as a musician and the Committee’s perception of him as a literary writer. He mused that Shakespeare probably felt similarly. “I would reckon he thought of himself as a dramatist,” Dylan said. “The thought that he was writing literature couldn’t have entered his head. His words were written for the stage. Meant to be spoken not read. . . .” I would bet that the farthest thing from Shakespeare’s mind was the question “Is this *literature*?”

Yet Shakespeare’s reputation during his lifetime, at least his reputation in print, was tied to his poetry, specifically the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*. Katherine Duncan-Jones has pointed out that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the once highly popular work was “seen as a slightly embarrassing cul-de-sac in his *oeuvre*,” given the already “firmly established notion of Shakespeare as above all a dramatist.” To what degree Shakespeare or any of his contemporaries regarded their dramatic output as literature is debatable, but with *Venus and Adonis*, there is no doubt he was staking his claim as a poet. His first lines in the publication are a quotation from Ovid, *Vilia miretur vulgus; mihi flavus Apollo / Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua*, translated by fellow playwright Christopher Marlowe as “Let base-conceited wits admire vile things; Fair Phoebus lead me to the Muses’ springs.” The fountain referenced is the Castalian Spring, which was reputed by Roman poets to provide poetic inspiration. Wrote Seamus Heaney in a poem of the same title

This one thing I had vowed: to drink the waters

Of the Castalian Spring, to arrogate

That much to myself and be the poet

Under the god Apollo’s giddy cliff—

In his most popular printed work, then, and one of his earliest works to see the light of day, the thought that he was writing literature certainly entered Shakespeare’s head.

While Dylan may have evinced surprise at being regarded as a writer of literature, critics as far back as 1963 noticed his poetic tendencies. An editorial from the *Decatur Herald* (Illinois)

on September 3rd of that year referred to him as the “new laureate” of folk music and another by *The Gazette Daily* (Pennsylvania) dubbed him “[o]ne of the country’s most creative folk poets.” in a review by Thayer Walker in the August 16th edition of *The North Adams Transcript* (Massachusetts), he was a “topical music-poet.” A syndicated article by the *Washington Post*’s Leroy F. Aarons noted that the musician had “been called both a great poet and a phony.”

My paper will look at the parallels between Shakespeare and Dylan’s development as poets and how their earliest popular works set the foundation for their later reputations as bards.

Shakespeare’s bardic reputation is most closely tied to his plays and his poems are usually considered only secondarily—and when they are, the sonnets take prominence. Less remembered is that his most popular printed work during his lifetime was the 1593 erotic narrative poem about the Goddess of Love and a boy-hunter disinterested in her sexual advances. Published during a tumultuous year in which the plague closed London theaters, the English were embroiled in the Anglo-Spanish war, and fellow dramatists Thomas Kyd and Marlowe were persecuted under suspicion of libel and heresy, the poem went through numerous reprints before his death. It was based on tales from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, though like his dramatic works in a considerably refigured form. The public devoured it, other writers referenced it, and the ‘young Upstart crow’ charged by Robert Greene with plagiarism and pretending established his renown.

Three hundred and seventy years later, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* was released. Like *Venus and Adonis*, it was a runaway success and marked the beginning of an illustrious bardic career. Likewise, it was conceived during a turbulent period in which death stalked not in the guise of the plague, but of nuclear war. Its writer also drew, magpie-like, from a variety of musical and lyrical antecedents, the spirituals of enslaved Blacks, Child Ballads, popular 1920s songs, and American folk standards like “Nottamun Town,” reimagined with lyrics timeless yet fresh.

The paper will explore the following questions:

- How did *Venus and Adonis* and *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* shape their respective writers’ reputations? How did they inform their subsequent works?
- How was the commercial success of these endeavors enabled by mechanical reproduction, print in Shakespeare’s case and hydraulic record presses in Dylan’s?

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- What are the common threads between Shakespeare and Dylan's influences for their respective works? How have these contributed to their eminence as bards?

“I hear it sing i’ the wind”: Appropriating Shakespeare in Bob Dylan’s *Tempest*

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In 2016, Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. This announcement left many, as Dylan himself put it in his Nobel lecture, “wondering exactly how [his] songs related to literature.” To answer this question during his award speech, Dylan positions himself alongside William Shakespeare—practically the personification of Literature—noting that songs and plays are written with performance in mind, unlike works such as *Moby Dick* and *The Odyssey*. Even before Dylan won the Nobel Prize, critics and interviewers, such as Sir Christopher Ricks, compared Dylan and Shakespeare, attempting to draw parallels between the lives of the two bards. Andrew Muir continues this investigation of parallels with a focus on performance in his 2019 work, *The True Performing of It: Bob Dylan & William Shakespeare*, and Anne Margaret Daniel’s essay from the same year emphasizes the similarities in sounds and rhyme patterns between Dylan and Shakespeare. With the 2017 publication of *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, Richard F. Thomas produced a thorough study of the intricate intertextual web that is Dylan’s oeuvre; however, he mainly draws from his expertise in the Greco-Roman Classics by focusing on Ovid, Homer, and Virgil among others to investigate Dylan’s “thefts.” Despite this increased attention and the well-established habit of tying Dylan to Shakespeare, literary scholars have neglected Dylan’s 2012 album *Tempest* because some believe the album and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* are “two individual works” with little in common aside from their shared references to *The Odyssey* and the Bible, as Andrew Muir suggests. When literary critics address the album, they eschew any mention that Dylan could be intentionally appropriating Shakespeare’s play. For example, just as Thomas touts the album’s title track as “the culmination of his songwriting” (16) and points to its layers—especially the Carter Family’s song “The Titanic” alongside the movie *Titanic*—he does not mention the song’s lyrics that recall Prospero in “wizard’s curse” or “brother rose up against brother.” When looking at the album alongside the play, there is no denying Dylan meant for his audience to hear Shakespeare. What, then, does it mean for Dylan to echo that “Dylanesque writer William Shakespeare” intentionally (Ricks 60)?

In this essay, I offer a closer reading of *Tempest* to illuminate how Dylan appropriates Shakespeare’s play in a multilayered intertext beginning with the first song, “Duquesne Whistle”—which stands in for the play’s opening storm—and ending with “Roll On, John,” Dylan’s farewell to John Lennon, who is fashioned into the album’s Ariel. Literary critics have missed how Dylan’s album invokes Shakespeare’s play right from the beginning. In the first

lines of *The Tempest*, the Boatswain shouts, “Yare! Yare! Take in the topsail. Tend to the master’s whistle! Blow till thou burst thy wind, if room enough” (1.1.6-8). The connection in “Duquesne Whistle” is apparent as the first two lines of that song—stamped out in a bluesy, swinging common time—are as follows: “Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowin’ / Blowin’ like it’s gonna sweep my world away.” While the album starts with a storm, it takes a circuitous path through songs that have more fragmentary echoes of Shakespeare until it arrives at “Tempest.” *Tempest* is not exactly *The Tempest*, which is why scholars avoid direct comparison, but Dylan’s appropriation of the play is a meditation on themes found in Shakespeare’s work—mortality, betrayal, class, and fate. By looking at *Tempest* as appropriation, I will uncover Shakespearean echoes that reveal the album’s important themes and the extent of Dylan’s investment in Shakespearean performance texts.

Bards on the Run: Dylan’s “Rolling Thunder Revue” and Provincial Touring by Elizabethan Acting Troupes

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In Act 2, scene 2 of *Hamlet*, the Prince asks the recently arrived Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about the current state of local acting companies, and he particularly wonders, “how chances it they travel” (1.321). Most scholars have taken Rosencrantz’s reply that their absence is due to the “inhibition” against public performances due to the recent disputes in the city caused by the Essex rebellion, but also to the innovation of the “Children of the Chapel,” who began to perform at Blackfriars theatre around 1600.

But even prior to that time, we now know that Provincial Touring became a mainstay as early as 1592, when an apprentices’ riot in Southwark, combined with the increasing endemic of the plague, caused the Privy Council to order “the restraint of plays” in June, while in mid-August almost all the playhouses were closed till the end of the year. At first, companies such as Lord Strange’s Men, for example, “raised some stout resistance about venturing into the provinces,” but they now were “forced to seek audiences outside the capital” (248). On 24 June, for example, they performed in the southeast port town near the Sussex-Kent border that could be reached on a direct, although difficult road, from London. In the middle of July, the company was playing the Court Hall in Canterbury, “and it seems probable that a cluster of payments in other Kentish towns in the same year is further evidence of a southeastern circuit at the outset of the tour” (Manley and Maclean 2014: 248).

Because distances were short between towns near Canterbury—Faversham, Maidstone, and the coastal town of Folkestone all record performances—and “the official rewards were relatively high,” using a circular route from London through eastern Sussex and Kent in June through mid-July made perfect sense, as they “did not want to stray far from [their] preferred base of operations”(248). Not unlike these early modern tours, the first leg of Bob Dylan’s “Rolling Thunder Revue” (“RTR”) in Fall of 1975 also focused on a tight geographical distance confined to the Northeast section of the US, making thirty one stops, starting in Plymouth Rock, before heading to New York to conclude the tour.

There were other similarities as well. The Elizabethan tour in the summer and fall of 1592 tour by Strange’s Men, and like Dylan playing earlier at venues such as Carnegie Hall, the Elizabethan troupe had been accustomed to playing in purpose-built theatres such as the Rose,

but were now forced to use most often the “guildhall” prominent in the center of each city on the tour stops. As Stanley Wells adds, however, plays took place not only in guildhalls, “but also in great and not-so-great houses, schoolrooms and even in churches,” so performances “had to be adjusted at short notice to suit the shifting circumstances” (2006: 21). This was equally true for the 1975 Dylan tour, when they played gymnasiums, local civic centers, and even the Mahjong Parlor in Falmouth, MA, where Alan Ginsburg was the warm-up act, reading aloud his poetry.

Using Henri Lefebvre’s theories of space, I want to consider how provincial tours by acting companies in the late 1500s resembled in striking ways what Dylan set out to do during the “RTR.” While focusing on the mobility of both early modern touring and Dylan’s pre-bicentennial excursion in New England, my essay considers other playing conditions while on the road, including collaboration, costuming, and accommodations.