

October 6, 2022

Hi Everyone:

Welcome to our seminar, “Shakespeare, Bob Dylan, and the Bardic Tradition.” We realize that the topic of our seminar deviates somewhat from the SAA norm, but we feel that that our discussion will raise several important issues and that there is considerable publishing potential. In this opening note, we’d like to outline some of the goals for the seminar and offer an agenda for the coming months.

First, here’s a fuller description of the topic than the highly abbreviated one you saw in the SAA bulletin:

A Dylan fan once proclaimed that “had Shakespeare never existed. . . then we would never have had Bob Dylan.” Two enduring cultural icons that have transcended their own time and culture, Shakespeare and Bob Dylan invite numerous lines of comparison and demand critical attention for reasons that go well beyond their artistic works. Both achieved notoriety by reinventing very public art forms; both began as popular artists whose work has permeated literary and academic discussions; both represent, comment on, and are enlisted in various rebellions, cultural revolutions, and protest movements; both are central to networks of fandom and celebrity culture; both are heralded as cultic and prophetic figures whose writings are often thought to have considerable purchase on the present and future; and perhaps most importantly, both are considered ‘bards’—individuals who purportedly channel both the wisdom of the past and the spirit of their age with remarkable and enduring clarity.

A native of Hibbing, Minnesota and a former student at the University of Minnesota, Dylan’s writings are saturated with complex allusions to Shakespeare that are clearly and self-consciously designed to insert the songwriter and Nobel laureate into a classical literary tradition best exemplified by the playwright. Placing these two writers in conversation allows for opportunities to reexamine literary topics concerning cultural transmission, longevity, and the anxiety of influence.

Comparing Dylan and Shakespeare also allows us to consider the broader cultural and political issues that have become so closely associated with both artists, how Dylan’s allusions to and appropriations of Shakespeare show the changing relationships between literature and political questions concerning performance, race, gender, and class as both figures have become indispensable to current conversations surrounding social justice. Our seminar seeks to explore the complex and intertwined legacy of these two figures renowned not just for their artistic achievements, but for their iconicity and the unique transferability of their immense cultural capital. It also offers an opportunity to reconsider both figures as secular prophets, and how this moniker has shaped their legacies—for better and for worse.

We’d also like to compile a bibliography of works on Dylan and / or the bardic tradition. Here are some suggestions to get things started.

Aidan Day, *Jokerman: Reading the Lyrics of Bob Dylan* (1988). The first ‘serious’ literary criticism on Dylan’s lyrics.

Kevin Dettmar, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* (2009).

Bob Dylan, *The Lyrics: 1961-2012* (2016). All the words to all the songs and poems
Sean Lathan, ed., *The World of Bob Dylan* (2021).
Andrew Muir, *The True Performing of It: Bob Dylan and William Shakespeare* (2019).
Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Vision of Sin* (2003). Noted literary critic turns his attention to
Dylan.
Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home* (1986). Long considered the definitive biography of Bob
Dylan—or at least the early part of his career.

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Between now and the conference in April, there are a number of tasks to accomplish. We will outline our timeline here so that you have plenty of notice of all deadlines. We're also attaching a list of participants.

NOW: Upon receipt of this email, please send your fellow seminarians a few sentences about yourselves and your research interests in addition to a few sentences about the topic of the paper you wish to write for this seminar. (Just "reply to all" on this email). Also let us know if you will have any A/V needs because we'll have to forward that on to the SAA offices.

December 9: 500 word abstracts due. Here we'd like you to circulate a fuller expression of the more specific arguments of your paper after you've had some time to think about how you will engage the topic.

February 8: Papers Due. This deadline is **firm** because this is also our deadline to inform the SAA office of the names of those who have completed the advance work for the seminar. Please limit your papers to 10 double spaced pages.

March: Once we have had the opportunity to read your papers, we'll assign each of you to comment on two of three of each other's papers. We'll also construct a rough agenda to help guide our discussion at the conference.

March 31 – April 1: Seminar in Minneapolis—we'll let you know the exact date and time once the program has been issued. We're looking forward to a lively discussion of our papers.

In the meantime, if you have any questions, comments, or sources on the topic that you'd like to recommend, please feel free to contact us.