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# SINGING *HAMLET:* BOB DYLAN'S TAKE ON THE CLASSIC

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BOB Dylan has often been called the Shakespeare of popular music, be it "the Shakespeare of his generation" (see *Encyclopedia Britannica* n.d.) or "Shakespeare in crocodile slippers" (DER SPIEGEL 1997). Though the comparison between the folk/rock singer and the Bard might seem far-fetched, Dylan himself embraced it and put Shakespeare as a character into his song "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" (1966):

> Well, Shakespeare, he's in the alley
> With his pointed shoes and his bells
> Speaking to some French girl
> Who says she knows me well
> And I would send a message
> To find out if she's talked
> But the post office has been stolen
> And the mailbox is locked.

While pointing out the trickster aspect of Shakespeare by evoking his "pointed shoes and his bells," he introduces Shakespeare as a street artist rather than a distant classic on a pedestal. Dylan further contemplated their shared artistic concepts in his 2017 Nobel Prize acceptance speech.[1] As he noted, Shakespeare – considered a "literary classic" by modern scholarship – was in his own time primarily a dramatist, and his creative process and vision were not primarily a question of making "literature":

> 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. When he was writing Hamlet, I'm sure he was thinking about a lot of different things: "Who're the right actors for these roles?" "How should this be staged?" . . . [B]ut there were also more mundane matters to consider and deal with. "Is the financing in place?" "Are there enough good seats for my patrons?" "Where am I going to get a human skull?" I would bet that the farthest thing from Shakespeare's mind was the question "Is this *literature*?" ("Bob Dylan Banquet Speech" 2017)

[1] Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 for creating new poetic expressions.

A similar attitude is adopted by Dylan, who never considered himself to be creating "literature" but songs, and whose concerns also include practical arrangements:

> But, like Shakespeare, I too am often occupied with the pursuit of my creative endeavors and dealing with all aspects of life's mundane matters. "Who are the best musicians for these songs?" "Am I recording in the right studio?" "Is this song in the right key?" Some things never change, even in 400 years. Not once have I ever had the time to ask myself, "Are my songs *literature*?" ("Bob Dylan Banquet Speech" 2017)

Despite the original artistic visions and concerns of Shakespeare and Dylan, they are now both considered the classics of literary studies. Surprisingly, Dylan has become anthologized in poetry volumes since the early 1970s (for instance Erik Frykman, *A Book of English and American Verse: Shakespeare to Bob Dylan*, 1971) and his popularity has been steadily rising especially since the 2016 Nobel Prize award.

The affinities between Shakespeare and Dylan have already received considerable attention (for instance Andrew Muir's book-length study *Bob Dylan & William Shakespeare: The True Performing of It*, 2019). Current critical studies, however, focus predominantly on Shakespearean references in Dylan's work in general (Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Vision of Sin*, 2003) rather than exploring Dylan's use and re-interpretation and re-contextualization of individual Shakespeare's plays. Yet, there is one tragedy which strongly resonates in both Dylan's life and work: *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

The personal importance of the play for Dylan is manifested by the fact that he called his German poodle Hamlet – though he later gave him to Rick Danko, the founding member of the Band, because of the dog's immense size (Gray 2006, 188). The significance of *Hamlet* for the musician is further enhanced by the fact that Dylan was compared to the play's protagonist, especially after he was photographed at Elsinore Castle in 1966 (Muir 1970, 170). John Hughes observes that Dylan's work is based on "transitional subjectivity, in motion between the no longer and the not yet." The connection between Dylan's public persona and the young Hamlet became even further strengthened in the late 1960s. Hughes specifically mentions the "witty, barbed, enigmatic, fleet-footed, retaliatory, gnomic, unfathomable" comments Dylan made at press conferences or interviews (Hughes 2013, 7).

The first time Dylan explicitly mentions *Hamlet* in his songs is in one of his most popular and critically acclaimed compositions, "Desolation Row" (*Highway 65 Revisited*, 1965), which was until 2020 his longest song (11:21). Though it is written as a classical ballad, it does not contain a linear narrative. Instead, it is comprised

of surrealistic vignettes, blending elements of classics and popular culture. Besides the naïve Romeo and the practical and worldly Cinderella, there is one verse devoted to Ophelia:

> Now Ophelia, she's 'neath the window
> For her I feel so afraid
> On her twenty-second birthday
> She already is an old maid. (Dylan 1965)

Ophelia is thus presented as a woman formed by her family and religious faith, who has given up on romance and life. Her lack of initiative and independent thinking, as well as her consequent suicide, then constitute her major sin – "lifelessness." She is protecting herself from disappointment and love by wearing "an iron vest," a sign of chastity:

> To her, death is quite romantic
> She wears an iron vest
> Her profession's her religion
> Her sin is her lifelessness. (Dylan 1965)

This "iron vest" can be further related to Hamlet's famous quote: "Get thee to a nunnery," which can be understood either as convent or a brothel.[2] The duality between temptation and obedience, between desire and submission, is then reflected in Dylan's lyrics, where Ophelia is torn between Noah's rainbow and the Desolation Row:

> And though her eyes are fixed upon
> Noah's great rainbow
> She spends her time peeking
> Into Desolation Row. (Dylan 1965)

Repressed by the iron vest of conventions, she is leaning to the promise of eternal life, as she does not have access to a fuller view of the world (she is positioned beneath the window). She is only daring to peek into the Desolation Row (or the world of experience) but she does not act on it – unlike the worldly and more practical

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[2] "nunnery, n.," The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., 1989, OED Online (Oxford UP), Accessed 24 June 2022 <http://www.oed.com/>. Hamlet's words could be construed as an accusation that Ophelia has been prostituted by her father Polonius, whom he calls a "fishmonger" or pimp (2.2.171; see Shakespeare 2006, 290 fn. 120).

Cinderella, who rejects the wooing of the naïve, lost Romeo and keeps sweeping the messy Desolation Row.

Another song in which Dylan draws on *Hamlet*, though without a direct reference to the play, is "Ain't Talking" (*Modern Times* 2006).[3] The opening stanza is introducing a garden, which was a place of crime:

> The wounded flowers were dangling from the vines
> I was passing by yon cool and crystal fountain
> Someone hit me from behind. (Dylan 2006)

This image, referring potentially both the Garden of Eden (the place of the first sin) and the garden of ugliness from Hamlet's first soliloquy (1.2.129–159), is then followed by a desire for revenge from the afterlife, as the murder was left unresolved and will have major consequences:

> Heart burnin', still yearnin'
> No one on earth would ever know. (Dylan 2006)

The perspective then shifts to (the unnamed) Hamlet, who addresses his mother and expresses his frustration over the evil lurking in everyone around him.[4] The speaker proclaims himself to be "worn down by weepin'" in a world that has stopped making sense:

> Well, the whole world is filled with speculation
> The whole wide world which people say is round. (Dylan 2006)

There is no detailed depiction of the murder, and even the ghost's testimony can be read as speculations. The presence of the ghost and its allegations change the speaker's perspective and affect his trust towards people around him. He realizes that his position in the court can become a limiting obstacle to his revenge plans:

> They will crush you with wealth and power
> Every waking moment you could crack
> I'll make the most of one last extra hour
> I'll avenge my father's death then I'll step back. (Dylan 2006)

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[3] Even though Thomas speculates that besides *Hamlet,* the song could refer to the killing of Julius Caesar (Thomas 2019, 67).

[4] So pray from the mother / In the human heart an evil spirit can dwell / I am a-tryin' to love my neighbor and do good unto others / But oh, mother, things ain't going well.

Before he executes his revenge, he is partially protected by "a dead man's shield," i.e., his father's name and legacy, while, at the same time, he is crushed by his own power and wealth, especially in his relationship to Ophelia or his former friends:

> The suffering is unending
> Every nook and cranny has its tears
> I'm not playing, I'm not pretending
> I'm not nursing any superfluous fears. (Dylan 2006)

His plan, however, does not cause his suffering only, but also the pain of others: be it Ophelia ("that gal I left behind") or, in Shakespeare's play, the accidental murder of Polonius, or the indirect murders of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Yet, as Dylan's Hamletian speaker proclaims, he is not playing a game, he only follows his plan and there is no way back and no mercy if the plan fails: "There'll be no mercy for you once you've lost."

The last song where Dylan refers to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is his last released piece "Murder Most Foul" (2020), which is not only his longest track to date (16:54), but, at the same time, it showcases Dylan's obsession with intertextuality and Shakespeare. The title is a direct quotation from the opening of *Hamlet* (Act 1, Scene 5), where the ghost, which claims to be Hamlet's father, comments on its death: "Murder most foul – as in the best it is – / But this most foul, strange and unnatural" (1.5.27–28). The opening of the song immediately establishes a connection between the murder of Hamlet's father and the assassination of President Kennedy:

> 'Twas a dark day in Dallas, November '63
> A day that will live on in infamy. (Dylan 2020)

Both murders happened in the daylight and the Shakespearean reference resonates throughout the song, as the song title is then employed as a refrain. While Hamlet's father was murdered by his brother while resting in the garden, as was his custom, President Kennedy was shot in Dallas, taking the traditional parade route:

> Shot down like a dog in broad daylight
> Was a matter of timing and the timing was right
> You got unpaid debts, we've come to collect
> We're gonna kill you with hatred, without any respect
> We'll mock you and shock you and we'll put it in your face
> We've already got someone here to take your place. (Dylan 2020)

What both murders share is their suddenness as well as disrespect towards the rulers. The murder of the king was "cleaner," in the sense that the murderer remained anonymous and did not shed his opponent's blood. As such, however, he did not demonstrate courage and heroism. Instead, the murder was premeditated, and Claudius betrayed not only his family, but also the divine and political order in the entire country (see Krajník 2022, 30–31). The same is true for the President's assassination, as Dylan sings:

> The day they blew out the brains of the king
> Thousands were watchin', no one saw a thing
> It happened so quickly, so quick, by surprise
> Right there in front of everyone's eyes
> Greatest magic trick ever under the sun
> Perfectly executed, skillfully done. (Dylan 2020)

The analogy between Hamlet's father and the President is already established in the first line, where Kennedy is called the king. While both rulers are killed and replaced, their legacy, or their soul/spirit did not die with them:

> They piled on the pain
> But his soul's not there where it was supposed to be at
> For the last fifty years they've been searchin' for that. (Dylan 2020)

Their ghost – or a spirit – just keeps reminding the living of the violation of the principles of honor, order, and democracy. Moreover, the method of execution of both murders can be in fact read as a desecration of morality, humanity, and faith:

> They killed him once and they killed him twice
> Killed him like a human sacrifice. (Dylan 2020)

When the ghost reveals to Hamlet the details of his death, Hamlet realizes that he underestimated the consequences of his father's death and the danger embodied by his uncle. As John Dover Wilson notes, the king had no time "to make his peace with Heaven. Claudius had seemed to Hamlet a satyr before this, now he knows him as something more deadly, a smiling, creeping, serpent – very venomous" (Wilson 1935: 44). The poison used to murder the king can be understood on a symbolical level as well, as a web of intrigues, lies and conspiracies, the beginning of a dark era for the country. Dylan even calls the times following Kennedy's death the "age of the Antichrist":

> The day that they killed him, someone said to me, “Son
> The age of the Antichrist has just only begun.” (Dylan 2020)

The rule of Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy’s vice president, was marked by the Cold War, expanded involvement in the Vietnam War, race riots, and an increased crime rate (Levy 2003, 89-90). Johnson thus became one of the most controversial presidents, whose secretive politics put in danger American values and integrity. Similarly, while Claudius at the beginning appears to be a competent monarch (see his handling of the conflict with Norway), his reign ultimately causes a disaster for the country, with an outsider taking the crown at the end. Dylan thus uses *Hamlet* to address pressing political and social issues, demonstrating the universality and timelessness of Shakespeare’s legacy as well as for his own personas.

The present study provides a brief outline and a starting point for more complex research dedicated to the roles and functions of individual Shakespeare’s plays in Dylan’s oeuvre, demonstrating the centrality of *Hamlet* in Dylan’s life and artistic production.

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