



“Mark the music”: Shakespearean female characters in contemporary rock music

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1. INTRODUCTION: STATE OF THE ART AND OBJECTIVES

On October 13th, Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel prize in literature “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” (The Nobel Prize in Literature 2017). This honor obliges even the most purist intellectuals to redefine the boundaries of literature, because it assimilates the lyrics of a singer-songwriter to the works of the most celebrated Nobel writers, such as Thomas Mann (1929), Luigi Pirandello (1934), T. S. Eliot (1948), Ernest Miller Hemingway (1954), and Samuel Beckett (1969). This fact helps to introduce my paper, which offers an analysis of offshoots of Shakespearean women characters in classical rock songs, in order to show how these figures are used and reshaped in the lyrics and to examine how these musical products can affect the study of Shakespeare’s reception.

The surprise choice of the Swedish academy was welcomed with skepticism, apparently by the winner himself, who did not attend the traditional December Nobel ceremony to accept the prize, but sent a thankful banquet speech.¹ Significantly

¹ Bob Dylan once said: “I consider myself a poet first and a musician second” (cited in Ricks 2004: ix); but it is at least odd that Bob Dylan did not attend the Nobel ceremony to accept the prize because of pre-existing commitments.



enough for the purpose of this paper, in his message Bob Dylan called in Shakespeare while incredulously wondering how music can be considered literature. He wrote:

I was out on the road when I received this surprising news, and it took me more than a few minutes to properly process it. I began to think about William Shakespeare, the great literary figure. I would reckon he thought of himself as a dramatist. 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?" "Do I really want to set this in Denmark?" His creative vision and ambitions were no doubt at the forefront of his mind, but 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?" [...] Like Shakespeare, I too am often occupied with the pursuit of my creative endeavors and dealing with all aspects of life's mundane matters. (Dylan 2016)²

After more than three months, Bob Dylan finally accepted the prize at a private ceremony in Stockholm and gave his Nobel lecture. Again, he reflected upon the nature of songs and literature, and concluded mentioning Shakespeare together with Homer:

Our songs are alive in the land of the living. But songs are unlike literature. They're meant to be sung, not read. The words in Shakespeare's plays were meant to be acted on the stage. Just as lyrics in songs are meant to be sung, not read on a page. [...] I return once again to Homer, who says, 'Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story'. (Dylan 2017)

All this further legitimizes a study of popular rock music adaptations of Shakespeare's women, which in fact needs no justification at the present time academically speaking – neither for studying musical products nor for considering a subject belonging to popular culture in relation to Shakespeare.

Time has passed and things have changed since the 1930s, when Cecil Arthur Lewis, one of the BBC's co-founders, used Shakespeare as a symbol of elitism to denigrate popular music and praise classical music, instead, asserting: "The music doesn't wear. It cannot be repeated, whereas good music lasts, mellows and gains fresh beauties at every hearing. It stands, like Shakespeare, through the centuries. No passing craze can shake it" (Lewis, cited in Hansen 2011: 219). More recently, popular music has been approached as a text in the field of cultural studies (see, Bennett, Shank and Toynbee (eds.) 2006), and radical, influential literary critics have provided the academy with inclusive research into the Shakespeare myth and into popular culture adaptations of Shakespeare's words and characters, including musical ones.

² This correlation between the means of production and consumption of Shakespeare's and Bob Dylan's works is also highlighted by Ricks (2003: 149).



In 2014 Graham Holderness recalled the development of Shakespeare studies in his book *Tales from Shakespeare. Creative Collisions*, acknowledging the work that has been done so far (by himself first of all, see, Holderness 2001) to eliminate or at least reduce the drastic distinction between academic and popular Shakespeare, two dimensions that exist in a continuum, and must be considered as a whole to examine the Shakespeare phenomenon effectively. Holderness actually opened up the way for a new critical approach, according to which “criticism [meets] creative work on its own ground” (2014: 138), taking the form of creative writing.

The protean subject area of Shakespeare and popular culture has been widely explored and theorized by Douglas Lanier, through different kinds of studies (investigations into Shakespearean advertisements, films, tourism and musical adaptations). His main theories on this issue can be found in a monograph published in 2002, which provides crucial reflections upon the type of terminology and the methodologies of analysis to be used in such an intricate field of research. Perfectly in tune with the purpose of this paper is his 2005 essay entitled “Minstrelsy / Jazz / Rap: Shakespearean Legitimation and African-American Culture”, which specifically focuses on the role of the Bard in ennobling and inspiring African American Music. Lanier brilliantly emphasizes the relevance of the interplay between these two elements, which can be seen as tokens of two poles apart (although, on closer analysis, this might not be the case): white vs black culture, highbrow vs lowbrow art, colonizing vs colonized traditions, thoughtfully literary vs improvisational creative products. “[I]n such exchanges” – Lanier reminds the reader – “Shakespeare is often as much the object as agent of legitimation, particularly from the perspective of popular culture, within which Shakespeare so often serves as its ambivalent high-cultural Other” (Lanier 2005: 2; on this topic see also Hansen 2010: 22-23).

Julie Sanders (2006) has devoted several studies to the topic of adaptation (mainly in reference to Shakespeare). In 2007 she published *Shakespeare and Music: Afterlives and Borrowings*, in which she analyses “the reception and interpretation of Shakespeare’s work by later ages and cultures, and [...] the wholesale reimagining of that work in a musical idiom and context” (Sanders 2007: 1). Her research ranges across different genres, and considers proper adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in the form of operas, film scores, Broadway musicals and ballets, but also musical products in which the Renaissance playwright and his literature are simply alluded to. The last chapter of Sanders’s book expressly deals with contemporary popular music, providing an outline of the influence Shakespeare has exerted, through his sonnets and characters, in this kind of song.

A good number of essays and chapters on the interlinks between Shakespeare and contemporary songs and on the didactic potential of such an appealing topic can be enumerated (See, Marshall 2000; Folkerth 2002a, 2002b, 2006; and Ko 2006). Of particular importance is Stephen M. Buhler’s research into the topic (2002, 2007, 2016), which highlights the multiple intertextual nature of these appropriations: songs which rewrite Shakespeare do not simply rework a Renaissance play, but an individual play as it has been received and re-mediated in all kinds of mass-media till that moment in history.



An entire volume on *Shakespeare and Popular Music* was written by Adam Hansen in 2010. It is a book which – starting from a fruitful reflection upon Shakespeare’s own use of early modern popular music – examines the issue from different perspectives. It goes on to investigate the reception of Shakespeare’s literature in contemporary songs, but also into the consequences of this act of appropriation for both popular music and dramatic literature. In Hansen’s own words, the book studies

how Shakespeare exists and becomes popular music, [and also challenges] a few myths and misconceptions about Shakespeare, popular music, and how they may relate, [... addressing] several questions. How have Shakespearean characters, words, texts and images been represented in popular music? Do all types of popular music represent Shakespeare in the same ways? If not, why? And how do the links between Shakespeare and popular music alter what we think we know about Shakespeare, and what we think we know about popular music? (2010: 1-2)

The Shakespearean references in the work of singer-songwriters are of different kinds and involve different types of music. Whatever the genre of the song and the extent of the intertextual relation are, these offshoots have been recently considered worth analyzing and ‘legitimate’ anyway. Critics have drawn an interesting parallelism between the interactive reception of a Shakespearean work and the creative reading of lead sheets in jazz, where a player finds just one stave of music with the melody, it is then up to him or her to add chord extensions and alterations (See Bristol 1996: 23, Hawkes 1986). Moreover, some scholars have underlined the dialogic possibilities of the union of the Shakespearean semantic field with popular music. Their research is grounded in cultural studies theories that identify the dialogic nature of the interlink between historical memory and commercial culture (thus also popular music). As George Lipsitz states: “Popular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word” (see Lipsitz 1990: 99).

Other critics, such as Julie Sanders, have discussed the importance of these musical offshoots because they are new cultural items, with their own significance. Again borrowing concepts from jazz music, Julie Sanders affirms:

if [...] the models of ‘riff’, quotation, or ‘signifying’ in jazz music are redeployed to think about Shakespearean musical afterlives, we begin to release more of the potential for innovative and experimental creativity that I want to argue is frequently the inherent cultural agency of these supposedly ‘referential’ or secondary works. [...] These works might come after Shakespeare in one regard, in that they find their creative impulse or impetus in his works – and there is undoubtedly much to be said about the choice of plays, or specific characters, in the process of understanding, historicizing, or contextualizing that impulse – but in many other regards they are works of art that stand alone as producers of meaning, often complex and plural meanings. (Sanders 2007: 10)



Scholars who deal with the theme of the interaction between Shakespeare and popular songs often try to outline the causes of this phenomenon. Quoting the great English playwright may be a way of dignifying popular music, considered by many an inferior art form, an attitude which was widespread in the past, as I previously said (Lanier 2005, Hansen 2010 and 2011). On the contrary, the Bard may be used as a foil to connote the song as something new, contemporary and up-to-date in opposition to the associative meanings of Shakespeare's literature, that is something traditional, belonging to the past and old-fashioned. Moreover, many critics call attention to Shakespeare's fascination for music as the origin of this particular kind of reception (Sanders 2007). He himself borrowed tunes from popular music and there are numerous references to music in his works; suffice it to mention that the word *music* occurs as many as 220 times in his canon, and music imagery is rich and thought provoking in both his poetic and dramatic production, as Wilson has widely demonstrated in his study (2011).

Buhler stretches the point further, suggesting that Ophelia may be interpreted as the prototype of the socially active singer-songwriter, such as Bob Dylan, namely the musical artist who uses folk style to comment on topical themes and events. That is also why, as the same scholar has highlighted, many female singer-songwriters have written songs about Ophelia from her female perspective (Buhler 2007). Besides, it is possible to see Shakespeare and his contemporaries as forerunners of contemporary pop singers. As Julie Sanders points out, one of the main themes in Shakespeare is love (2007). Shakespeare wrote about love and passion in his sonnets – the most common genre to deal with these themes in Renaissance literature –, but also in his plays, where he mentions young people 'pinning sonnets' for their beloved ones. The present-day counterpart of this 'stereotypical image' would be young people writing songs, with a guitar in their hands. One may say, in effect, that the song lyrics somehow substitute the sonnet as a medium for expressing, reflecting upon or even declaring one's love.

Through an investigation grounded on the theoretical and methodological guidelines provided by women's studies and reader response theories, this paper aims to consider the ways in which Shakespearean female characters are used and refashioned in the lyrics of rock songs written in English by male singer-songwriters, between the 1960s and the 1990s.³ Given the amplitude of the topic and the ungraspable nature of such a field as popular culture – which becomes even more unaccountable when one speaks about 'pop-Shakespeare', also because of its global nature –, this essay does not (and cannot) aim to be exhaustive, but rather addresses the issue by selecting four characters. The musical alter egos of Juliet, Ophelia, Cordelia, and Lady Macbeth will be analysed by the close reading of a selection of songs – written and sung by rock singer-songwriters – chosen for their representativeness and their popularity. The analysis will try and answer the following questions: which aspects of the dramatic characters are highlighted or, on the contrary, omitted in the songs? What is the function of this musical use of Shakespeare's work? Through their musical 'identity', do these female characters

³ On the lyrics written by female singer-songwriters see Buhler 2002 and 2007.



reinforce or undermine the socio-cultural and psychological oppression of women characteristic of a patriarchal culture? What can the role of these musical offshoots be in the study of Shakespeare's reception?

2. JULIET, OPHELIA, CORDELIA, AND LADY MACBETH THROUGH (ROCK) MALE GLASSES

Shakespeare's characters are extremely rich and thought-provoking, because they embody multi-faceted identities, which are difficult to pin down. His female characters are particularly fascinating in that although they belong to an historical context that corroborates women's oppression, they often challenge this narrative, to the point that they have been seen as role models for women's emancipation (Rackin 2005: 72). Nevertheless, reception processes tend to erase their complexity. As Phyllis Rackin points out in a study on Shakespeare and women,

[f]or over four hundred years, the roles of Shakespeare's female characters have been repeatedly updated to make them comprehensible in terms of new conceptions of women's nature and women's roles in the world. [...] Paradoxically, however, this implication of Shakespeare's female characters in the process of historical change has tended to occlude their own historicity, as they served, and continue to serve, in ever-changing guises as models of an unchanged, universal female nature. Our own experience of Shakespeare's women is conditioned not only by the accumulated tradition of Shakespeare scholarship and reception but also by the present history of the world in which we live: both of these histories help to shape our experience of the plays [...]. Both of these histories will need feminist intervention in the twenty-first century. (Rackin 2005: 5-6)

This holds true also for appropriations in popular music. The most frequent Shakespearean female character in popular music is without doubt Juliet, a figure who swings between shyness and boldness, and in some way represents an unconventional female role, expressing and fighting for self-determination. *Romeo and Juliet* is, in effect, the most quoted play in many other fields pertaining to popular culture (See Lanier 2002). As Buhler has demonstrated (2002), this fact, as well as the ways in which the play has been referred to and interpreted in the field of pop music since the second half of the 1950s, is mainly due to the famous musical and film versions, which had (and still have) a huge impact, both culturally and economically, on teenage audiences. Clearly influenced by *West Side Story* (1957), are both songs chosen as case studies for this paper: "Romeo and Juliet" (1980, from the album *Making Movies*) by the British rock band Dire Straits, written by Mark Knopfler the band's singer and lead guitarist; and "Romeo Had Juliette" (which belongs to the overtly conceptual album *New York*, released in 1989) by the American eccentric singer and songwriter Lou Reed. The influence is mostly clear because of the urban setting of the story told in the first case, and in the second one also because of the implied interracial relationship between the two lovers.



Notably, the former song revolves around the broken love story of the two title characters, who are alien from the Renaissance ones, but distinctly informed by the contemporary reception of them in movies, musicals and songs. Indeed, in this song the dialogic nature of popular music, discussed among others by George Lipsitz, is made particularly evident by two factors: the direct citation of other songs ("Somewhere" from *West Side Story*, "A Time For Us" from Zeffirelli's 1968 film *Romeo and Juliet*, and "My Boyfriend's Back", a hit song by the American girl group The Angels), and the story told, which offers a sort of sequel of the Bard's work, imagining what would have happened if the two protagonists hadn't died. The multimedial 'hypertext' which informs the lyrics is underlined by the beautiful official video of the song, which refers to the theatre, presenting a contemporary version of a balcony scene setting, but also to the cinema, showing young people watching a film version of *Romeo and Juliet* on a big screen,⁴ and finally to music, parading young people with 1980s-style clothing dancing while walking.

The failed romance at the heart of the story told in Dire Straits' *Romeo and Juliet* is presented *in medias res*, showing "a lovestruck Romeo" who serenades an annoyed Juliet. She feels nagged at and reacts indifferently to his declarations of love, exclaiming:

Hey it's Romeo. You nearly gimme a heart attack.

[...]

Hey, la, my boyfriend's back.⁵

You shouldn't come around here singing up at people like that.

Reading Juliet's lines from a feminist perspective, one may say that they appreciably balance the power relationship between the man and the woman of the story, showing a girl who is not just passive and submissive. The fact that classical gender issues are probably meant to be challenged in the song is also hinted at by a detail in the video, where the usual colours for boys and girls are inverted: Juliet, who's unmannerly chewing a gum and blowing bubbles, is dressed in light blue, whereas Romeo appears in pink.

Nonetheless, a masculine perspective permeates the lyrics: only a few lines are allotted to Juliet in the whole song, with the exception of few others spoken by Romeo, by means of reported speech, when he complains about her attitude towards him. Furthermore, stereotypical male and female roles are not defied but reinforced by the characters' actions, which are amplified by the dramatic way in which the sequence of events is described and by the sweet arpeggios and melody of the introduction, which could be the perfect soundscape of a classic, idealistic love story. Romeo serenades Juliet as the passionate protagonist of an archetypal courtship story (it is a pretty common situation, from Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* to Broadway musicals and Hollywood films), and again as the main character of a contemporary romantic movie,

⁴ The film actually features the same protagonists of the video.

⁵ This is the quotation of the song "My Boyfriend's Back".



he “finds a streetlight, steps out of the shade” and addresses Juliet saying “You and me babe – how ‘bout it?”. “Babe” is notably a patronizing word of endearment,⁶ and it is exactly this line, repeated twice, which closes the song. It seems interesting to mention the fact that the same patronizing attitude towards Juliet is implied by Bob Dylan’s quick reference to Romeo in “Desolation Row” (*Highway 61 Revisited*, 1965), which can be considered the *Waste Land* of popular music,⁷ where the iconic male lover accosts Cinderella and moans “You Belong to me I believe”. No mention is made of Juliet.⁸ The song gives voice to a “someone” who tells Romeo: “You’re in the wrong place, my friend / You better leave”.⁹ After this line the tragic ending of the love story is given through the depiction, by means of words, of a dreadful acoustic scenario: there are ambulance sirens and, afterwards, absolute silence, only broken by the feeble noise made by a miserable Cinderella, who is “sweeping up / On Desolation Row”.

This Shakespearean reference is by no means a unique case in Bob Dylan’s production. As hinted at in the introduction, there is an interesting interconnection between the American singer-songwriter and Shakespeare. Not only was this relationship emphasized by critics to position Bob Dylan in a literary tradition (Hansen 2010: 40), but it was also stressed by the contemporary artist himself. Besides quoting the English playwright in his Nobel talks, comparing his own way of producing art to his, it is indubitable that Bob Dylan has drawn inspiration from Shakespeare since the beginning of his career. Christopher Ricks (2003)¹⁰ identified more than forty references to Shakespeare – including a mention to him as a character –, and pinpointed “semantic and acoustic continuities” (Hansen 2010: 40) between the two artists’ works. Furthermore, in Dylan’s production, Buhler noticed “more than a hint of Shakespeare’s status as a forbidding cultural authority, one who discourages new expression” (2007: 166). Indeed, when Bob Dylan uses Ophelia as an archetype of singer song-writers he depicts her as a “frustrated songstress” (Buhler 2007: 166); this allusion will be further discussed later on.

Knopfler’s Romeo in “Romeo and Juliet” also describes his beloved as arrogant and pitiless, similar to Homer’s Circe: an enchantress, a dangerously charming woman who exploits her men. He states: “How can you look at me as if I was just another one of your deals?”, and also “You promised me everything, you promised me thick and thin”. This exegetic line finds some general reinforcement in the video – in which Juliet acts like a *femme fatale* and where, near the end, the legs of a seminude woman in high heels are shown seizing, as it were, a television showing Romeo –, but also in the fact that, apparently, Mark Knopfler wrote this song in reaction to his unsuccessful relationship with the singer Holly Beth Vincent (head of the band Holly and the Italians). The lead singer and songwriter of the Dire Straits implied that he believed she

⁶ On the gender discrimination implied by words of endearment, particularly when used on women by strangers see Hill (1986: 86).

⁷ According to Donald Brown “Desolation Row” seems both a promise and a threat, a source of despair though at times perhaps an escape from it” (2014: 48).

⁸ In later works, Bob Dylan gives Juliet more importance (Hansen 2010: 37).

⁹ This “someone” may be linked to one of Juliet’s family members in the Shakespearean play.

¹⁰ *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*.



was using him to further her career. Rumor has it that the song's line "Now you just say, oh Romeo, yeah, you know I used to have a scene with him" refers to an authentic pronouncement made by Holly Vincent in an interview released after they broke up. She said: "What happened was that I had a scene with Mark Knopfler and it got to the point where he couldn't handle it and we split up".¹¹ Hence, Shakespeare is used by the singer to speak about a personal intimate experience and elaborate it, as it were, while distancing himself from it by means of the legendary couple from Verona, who are unorthodoxly refashioned to question commonplace ideas about love usually associated with this play, especially in popular culture.

Modernized and transformed are also Lou Reed's star-crossed lovers in his "Romeo had Juliette". As stated above, they exemplify an urban mixed race couple. Romeo is not a Montague but a Rodriguez, and Juliette is not a Capulet but a Bell. Romeo's looks and actions are given in detail and thus his ethnic otherness is accentuated: he has a "black pony-tale", through which he runs a comb, he wears a "leather vest" and, on his ear, a "diamond crucifix". He lives in a squalid flat, which is small and malodorous, and the society around him is one of poor immigrants, crack dealers and pitiless city gangsters. Analyzing the lyrics from a feminist perspective, one notices that most of the lines are devoted to Romeo, despite the title, which mentions both lovers. He is also the main subject of the action told, and it is to his feelings that the song gives voice. Juliette is here just an object.

The name of Juliette appears only after a 13-line description of Romeo (his problems, his appearance, his actions), and she is referred to as an objectified woman, described as the passive receiver of Romeo's sexual act:

Inside his pants he hides a mop
to clean the mess that he has dropped
into the life of lithesome Juliette Bell.

Although the refrain, with its straightforward rock and roll sound, shows a sort of reciprocity – it reads "And Romeo wanted Juliette and Juliette wanted Romeo", and is then duplicated through a sort of incremental repetition as "And Romeo had Juliette and Juliette had her Romeo"–, the rest of the lines is just focused on Romeo and on his entourage. Hints at Juliette's perfume and voice appear in lines 23-24 as a recollection of Romeo's memories, and finally in line 49, near the ending, Juliette's tights are mentioned, because Romeo holds tightly to them. Only indirectly does the woman feature in the song, that is as perceived and remembered by Romeo.

After *Romeo and Juliet*, the most mentioned Shakespearean play in the context of popular songs is *Hamlet*, and its most interesting female character is Ophelia. When she is reshaped in songs, she loses the force of the original dramatis persona, that is, her ability to be aware of the role being played by the people around her, her capacity to take decisions when needed, and her greatness in madness. She often appears as

¹¹ <<http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=5202>> (22 February 2017).



the frustrated, drowned female, unable to express and negotiate her desires. No voice is given to her by any of the male singers considered in this analysis.¹²

In his "Desolation Row", Bob Dylan depicts her as a 22-year-old woman beneath a window. Despite her age, she "already is an old maid" because she longs for death. On the other hand, she is evidently immature, given that the narrating voice states: "For her I feel so afraid". According to Stephen Buhler, she is a doomed symbol of singer song-writers, willful but powerless to play and sing. She is described as "eager but unable to give voice to her desires, to reach those would-be hearers at the window" (Buhler 2007: 166). This failure seems to be the cause of her suicide, which is defined by Dylan as "quite romantic" to her, as if she enjoyed envisaging her own death scene. The song reinforces this point offering a distressing image of Ophelia in an iron vest, which Buhler smartly interprets as a possible allusion to Grigori Kozintsev's filmic version of Ophelia (1964). In the film, titled *Hamlet*, when her father is murdered, the woman is obliged to wear a metal corset beneath her black mourning dress. As stated by Buhler,

Kozintsev's Ophelia, played by Anastasiya Vertinskaya, has the life pressed out of her by the weight of societal expectations; her release comes only at her death by drowning and is visually represented by the flight of a solitary bird. Dylan's Ophelia expects to be delivered from a watery fate by heavenly providence: "her eyes are fixed upon / Noah's great rainbow," the one that promised that God would never again send torrential rains to chastise humankind. [...] Nevertheless, the rainbow does not offer individual deliverance for Ophelia, who "spends her time peering / Into Desolation Row." (Buhler 2007: 166)

The very same melancholic mood appears in the 1975 song "Ophelia" by The Band (from the album *Northern Lights – Southern Cross*). The reconstruction of the character emerges here through a series of rhetorical questions, which provide an indirect description of a woman apparently overwhelmed by problems, named Ophelia, who has disappeared (the situation is no better specified, nor is the relationship between the woman and the narrating voice explained). The song is a sort of dramatic monologue addressed to Ophelia by means of a classical apostrophe, full of conventional *topoi*, expressed through pressing questions sung on an up-tempo melody, which contrasts with the nostalgic and sad content of the queries: "What went wrong?", "Why do the best things always disappear?", "Was it somethin' that somebody said?", "What would anybody leave so quickly for?". No real investigation into Ophelia's feelings is allowed by these banal questions, and, what is worse, it seems safe to state that they all assume the reason is to be found in Ophelia's poor attitude to the challenges of life. The narrating voice shows a paternalistic attitude towards her, repeating twice: "Honey, you know I'd die for you". Also worth highlighting is the presence of the word of endearment, "Honey", which is repeated three times to address this character.

¹² This is not the case in later songs, see Buhler 2007.



It must be specified that the Ophelia of the song does not apparently refer to the Shakespearean one (Hoskyns 2006); however, its reception is inevitably linked to the Shakespearean character, because she is so well known and features prominently in the minds of the listeners (of the Anglophone ones in particular). The Shakespearean associations implied by the name Ophelia make the song ripe with interpretative possibilities. Indeed, Shakespearean echoes have been detected by critics such as Buhler, in his study of Shakespeare in pop-music (2007: 171). Grounding his idea on the line "Honey, you know we broke the rule" as well as on the title of the album, he links this song with one of the main themes in *Othello*, that is racism, conjecturing that the woman spoken about by The Band may be a black woman with whom the narrating voice had a relationship, and who could not live anymore in a Southern town in the US, where people were intolerant of interracial relationships. From my point of view, there can be other links with the story told in *Hamlet*. The fact that in the song Ophelia is missing can be associated to Shakespeare Ophelia's premature death, indeed the set of questions which look into the reasons for the woman's decision are similar to the ones clearly linked with the play and written by the German poet Georg Heym in his poem "Ophelia" (1911), which was particularly inspired by Millais' famous painting of Ophelia's drowned body.¹³

Less common but still present in contemporary music are the references to *King Lear*, suffice it to mention John Cale's "Macbeth" and "King Nothing" by Metallica. Still less common is the musical occurrence of the play's female heroine: Cordelia. In 1991 the Canadian band The Tragically Hip published the album *Road Apples*, which included a song titled "Cordelia". It is an interesting case study for the case study of my argument because, despite the title, the song is actually about a man who sings of the perils of his life, of his existence as a risk-taker and of his difficult relationship with his father. The I-narrator of the lyrics is a 'bad boy' looking for challenges because of his sadness, which is due, one infers, to his non-affective and absent father. He identifies himself with a "tin can man", but then admits that "it takes all your power / to prove that you don't care", and in order to explain his proud strength against his father and his unwillingness to reconcile with him he repeats in the refrain four times: "I'm not Cordelia / I will not be there". Cordelia is thus not the protagonist of the lyrics, but a figure used as an epitome of blind patience: she is here assimilated to a kind of Penelope, with the difference that she is not waiting for her husband but for her father's recovery from madness.

The lead singer's strong rock voice, which is modulated as gravelly and gruff in the refrain, gives emphasis to the fact that the song's perspective is masculine. Cordelia loses the force she has in *King Lear*, all the firmness and greatness of her "love and be silent"¹⁴ with which she explains to the audience in an aside why she refuses to flatter her father (consequently losing her legacy) in the love test he has invented to decide how to divide his reign into three parts to give them to his three daughters. She

¹³"Warum sie starb? Warum sie so allein / Im Wasser treibt, das Farn und Kraut verwirrt?" (Heym 1911: ll. 7-8).

¹⁴*King Lear*, l.i.62.



becomes, instead, the archetype of a weak submissive and dutiful daughter. In this song Cordelia, despite being the title character, is not an example to follow, but a model to abhor. Indeed, the singer proudly shouts in the refrain: "I'm not Cordelia".

Another female character not commonly found in pop songs is Lady Macbeth. The protean English musician Elvis Costello devoted a song to her, titled "Miss Macbeth", as part of the album *Spike* (1989). Costello has drawn on Shakespeare since his first album in 1977 and has engaged with the playwright's work in different ways and with different aims. As Hansen points out: "Costello's allusions to Shakespeare allowed him to explore the boundaries of popular music, the personal or political issues that can be aired in it, and how" (2010: 118). In the song devoted to the power-thirsty Shakespearean character, Costello describes the private dimension of a cruel Miss Macbeth, who is at once characterized through children's reports; and that is why Folkerth (2006: 380) deduces that the key inspiration for this Shakespearean musical offshoot is Lady Macbeth's fantasized infanticide.

Miss Macbeth is portrayed as a harridan; as Perone ironically writes: she "seems to be an elderly spinster who torments young people, who was never successful in love and lives vicariously through love songs, and whom children of the neighborhood attribute any mysterious ill that has occurred" (2015: 86). From the very beginning she is depicted as a mysterious woman secretly peeped at by children, who looks like a witch or a legendary demon: she has black eyes, a bloodless face and a broom, she wears "a fishbone slide in her cobweb tresses", and her "fingers [sweat] india-ink and poison-pen letters". An attempt is made to save her, in fact the narrator wonders whether she is really evil or "only pantomime", but near the ending the answer is plainly provided in the following lines: "Sometimes people are just what they appear to be / With no redemption at all".

Investigating Costello's Shakespeare, Hansen perspicaciously implies that in the context of the album, which is populated by "social misfits" (Perone 2015: 86) politically loaded with meaning, this cruel and weird woman is linked to the singer's criticism of Thatcherism. Building on Hansen's interpretation allows one to understand some of the lines in the song, which are otherwise obscure, such as the image of the "puzzle where petrol will be poisoned by rain" – probably referring to Thatcher's England (since 1979) which had to face, among other problems, the consequences of the 1973 petrol crisis. Thanks to Hansen's interpretative suggestion, the link between Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth and Mrs Thatcher appears provocative. The former is read specifically for her fancy of killing a child nursing at her breast, and the latter is remembered as the infamously overbearing 'Thatcher milk snatcher': a nickname the politician gained in 1970, when she was Secretary of State for Education and Science under Edward Heath. At that time she took the notorious decision to end free school milk, because the government needed to cut expenses.



From the investigative perspective adopted in this paper, what is interesting is that Costello does not refer to Lady Macbeth's ambition and ability to control people, the features that most characterize her in Shakespeare's play and make of her a fascinating tragic heroine. In order to attack a powerful woman – however right his attack might be – he used the image of the witch and thus turned the proud aristocratic plotter of the Shakespearean play into a sorcerer. As is common in the history of literature and the arts, the image of the witch is used in relation to a case of female empowerment.

3. CONCLUSION

The presence of Shakespearean female characters in popular rock music implies a complex interplay, which cannot be written off as a simple quotation. The male singers of the songs analyzed here, written between the 1960s and the 1990s, use Shakespeare to demystify stereotypes about love, to exploit the immediacy supplied by the references to his characters – owing to the fact that they are now globally known icons of concepts and ideals –, and to convey political messages. The examples I have provided also show that the attitude of male singer-songwriters in interpreting and reconstructing Shakespearean female characters for their songs somehow reinforces a clichéd image of femininity, which does not correspond to the complex characterization female figures have in Shakespeare. This fact may mirror the attitude to gender issues in the rock music of the period under scrutiny, which has been defined as masculine, aggressive, arrogant and even misogynist by feminist scholars (Hawkins 2016); consequently it also shows that Shakespeare's reception is not based on the Bard's universal value, but rather on the creative reworking of his plays and characters, who are 're-historicized' again and again by new writers to appeal to new audiences and to express new meanings.

Notably, in *The Merchant of Venice* Lorenzo equates music to an investigative tool to detect whether a person is able to feel empathy and affection for others:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted.
Mark the music. (*The Merchant of Venice*, V.i.83-88)

To conclude this essay one may quote Lorenzo's words, "[m]ark the music", and state that music is also a useful investigative tool to study Shakespeare's reception and to reflect on women's position within a given culture. As the songs show, responses to Shakespeare's characters change according to many variables, but it is exactly this



change – just like metamorphosis in classical myths – which allows them the gift of eternity.

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