

Rocking the Canon  
If Dylan Can Stand With Shakespeare, Who's Next?  
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July 20, 2004— What do a Victoria's Secret pitchman and Shakespeare have in common?

Bob Dylan sings "Knocking on Heaven's Door" for Pope John Paul II during a 1997 concert in honor of the pontiff in Bologna, Italy.  
Gianni Schicchi/AP Photo

If you ask Christopher Ricks, one of the pre-eminent scholars of English literature, both are great poets. That is, if the man in the women's underwear ads you're talking about is Bob Dylan, who seemed to speak for a generation when he burst on the folk music scene in the 1960s and continues to be an enduring icon, despite repeatedly transforming himself for four decades.

Ricks is no stranger to such monster muses. A professor of English and director of the Editorial Institute at Boston University and a former professor of English at the universities of Bristol and Cambridge in England, he has written masterful studies of such superstars from earlier eras as John Milton, John Keats, T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett — all firmly entrenched in the literary canon.

Now he has added a 500-page study of the nasal-voiced folk singer, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, published by Ecco. The close reading of Dylan's songs explores his examinations of sins, virtues and graces, and unapologetically places him in the company of the masters of English poetry, like Shakespeare.

Well, maybe, but he still had to wait his turn. When Ricks was ready to start the Dylan book, T.S. Eliot's widow asked him to edit a selection of previously unpublished poems by her husband. The folk singer was put on hold.

"I just think when the widow of T.S. Eliot asks you to do something, you do it, don't you?" he said.

Still, Ricks said he sees no contradiction between writing great poetry and selling one of those poems — in this case along with the music — to be used to sell dainty underthings. It may not be so different from Shakespeare's approach.

"I think Shakespeare sought the widest possible constituency," Ricks said. "One reason I keep mentioning Shakespeare is not because I think Dylan is a genius, which I do, but

because I think that like Shakespeare he sought the widest possible constituency."

In other words, Shakespeare didn't have any problem with his work being popular — indeed, that's just what he sought, mixing the vulgar and scandalous with the sophisticated and psychologically complex.

### Blurring the Lines

So if Shakespeare — not to mention Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and the Bronte sisters, just to name a few — all wanted their work to be popular and wrote for as wide an audience as possible, then is there any real difference between Shakespeare and Dylan, between Milton and Bruce Springsteen, between Tennyson and Eminem or Emily Dickinson and Christina Aguilera?

The question of whether there can be any blurring of the line between popular and serious seemed to be at the heart of the controversy when Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* was chosen for Oprah's Book Club, and the author then got uncomfortable with the celebrity status the selection would give him, at first agreeing to go on her television show, then at the last minute pulling out. Finally, he agreed.

"It's complicated," Franzen said in an interview with *The Independent* newspaper of London. "I don't have anything against her. She, from her side of the great gulf created by television between kinds of reading audiences in the U.S., was reaching out towards me, and I wish I'd reached out more towards her. But I was having to accustom myself to success, after 20 years of reconciling myself never to having it. There was a delay of some weeks while I was still imprisoned in old attitudes of resentment and doubt."

Those "kinds of reading audiences" could be crudely described as people who read the classics and those who read self-help books, inspirational novels and thrillers.

But one generation's potboiler is the next generation's classic. When Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and Dashiell Hammett were writing in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, they were pulp novelists, but now they are considered chroniclers of the dark underbelly of American culture. Dostoevsky ripped his plots of murder and revolutionaries out of the headlines, but now his books are read for their explorations of the human soul.

"Our oldest classics, Greek tragedy, were popular culture in their time, vehemently criticized by Plato and others," said Richard Shusterman, a professor of philosophy at Temple University who has written about popular music from rap to country. "The behavior at the performances of these plays was at least as vehement as at rock concerts or sporting events."

Dylan — the Victoria's Secret ad he did this year, aside — has never seemed to be a particularly popularity-hungry singer, but his connections to folk and rock music have made him a suspect subject for academic study, and several critics have questioned whether he is

really worth 500 pages of Ricks' and the reader's time.

For Ricks, though, the questions that he needed to ask when he was deciding whether to turn his attention from the likes of Eliot, Shakespeare and Keats to Dylan had nothing to do with popularity or style of music. They were about whether Dylan was as good as the academically accepted poets.

"Are his good qualities as good as their good qualities? And is his quality anything like their good quality?" Ricks said. "Well, I think I've made the case for that."

### A Songwriter's Challenge

Dylan may be a special case among pop singer-songwriters, because he has always spoken of his interest in poetry and poets. The likes of French poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud and Americans Eliot and Ezra Pound have made appearances in his songs.

But there is still the issue of what happens when words are combined with music, and Dylan has always been cagey about how he worked — putting words to music, music to words or some combination of the two. Is it fair to pull the two apart and look at one without the other?

But that is what most literary scholars are forced to do if they want to consider the work of singer-songwriters, rock stars or rappers, because few have enough knowledge of music to talk competently about it, even for those who do not accept that there is any line between so-called high and low culture.

"If your specialty is English, it's very difficult to do anything musicological," said Neil Nehring, a professor of English at the University of Texas who has written on rock, rap and other popular music in America going back to colonial times. "If you're going to write about it, you really should somehow replicate in your language, in your own writing, how the music feels. That's hard to do in academic work, which is supposed to be somewhat rigorous."

But if that need for rigor might have worked to keep scholars from turning their attention to popular music, other factors have increasingly drawn them to it over the past few decades.

One of the most compelling of those factors has been social relevance. Dylan benefited from that as much as anyone, breaking into the music world as a "protest" singer in the folk scene of New York City in the 1960s, even though he soon bristled at that label.

That kind of interest in popular music as an expression of counterculture attitudes or protests about social injustice make rap interesting to some scholars.

"I think you're going to find that through the growing power and growing strength of people interested in the African-American culture, you're going to find some rap MC's looked at

seriously," Shusterman said.

Though Shusterman, when challenged by fellow scholars to turn his attention to something more mainstream, wrote a book on country music, said he believed "it will probably take longer" for a country singer to get the kind of close, serious reading that Ricks has given Dylan.

"Academia sees itself as a kind of counterculture world," he said. "Country singers are seen as more mainstream."

But Ricks didn't talk about any of that when he was asked why he wrote this book, making room for Dylan alongside Eliot and Shakespeare.

"I resist the idea that I have some kind of monomania," he said. "But I've listened to him for 35 years and nobody else comes home with the same poignancy."