

# A Midsummer Night's Dream Songs

## Introductory Essay:

Although, strictly speaking, a term which refers to the translation of 'the arrested *visual image* into the fluid movement of words' (Scott, xi, my italics), ekphrasis represents an intriguing entry-point into an analysis of the merits of creating any sort of art about art, of attempting to set up a dialogue between two (or more) pieces of art in the hope that doing so may *reveal* something new, something invigorating. Because a figure like John Keats – a man whose 'best poetry is composed largely of representations of representations, meditations "on" objects or texts that are themselves reflections of other artists' creative acts' (Scott, xi) and an artist, then, who will forever be associated with that ancient, esoteric word – inevitably inspires, in the idealistic poet, painter or dramatist, a utopian vision of a world without essay and criticism, a cultural climate populated with vast swathes of new truth brought to light by art addressing art inspiring art rewriting art attacking art expanding art and so on and so forth. And although it goes without saying that such romanticised notions are as flawed as Gonzalo's commonwealth of which 'he would be king' (2:1 146) in *The Tempest* – who, after all, has the right to suggest that a work of criticism isn't in itself a work of art – the only justification, surely, for what ultimately constitutes the *using* of another's genius in one's own creative endeavours *has to be* a belief that doing so can and will bring to light, and go some way towards making sense of, hitherto uninterrogated textures and points of interest in that genius: textures and points of interest that conventional academic analysis may not be capable of exploring. Otherwise it's just plagiaristic.

That Shakespeare has inspired arguably the greatest number and variety of such enterprises (ranging from the worthy – Müller's *Hamlet Machine*, for example – to the disastrous – see the number of American teen movies of the last twenty years inspired by the likes of *Twelfth Night*<sup>1</sup> and *The Taming of the Shrew*<sup>2</sup>) is, I would suggest, down to two principle factors. The sheer density, ambiguity, depth and sustained complexity of

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<sup>1</sup> *She's the Man* (2006) – Dir. Andy Fickman

<sup>2</sup> *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999) – Dir. by Gil Junger

the worlds he sculpts – worlds in which an unnamed provost can become the fulcrum of a play (*Measure for Measure*), in which 16 years can pass in 32 lines (*The Winter's Tale*) – means that there is quite simply more of him – more, that is, of him *unexplored* – to go around. But even more significant than this is the actual nature of Shakespeare's texts themselves. It's become a cliché to emphasise, as Michael Boyd does in his foreword to the RSC's *Complete Works*, that Shakespeare's plays are 'scripts, blueprints for performance to a live audience and parts for actors to learn and embody. There's an extent to which you shouldn't "read" this book at all' (64). And yet the significance of this fact to the logistics of interpreting, examining and making sense of Shakespeare's achievements cannot be overstated. Can, with 'blueprints of performance', an argument that hinges entirely upon the literally two-dimensional tools of theory and textual studies ever be considered genuinely valid – or is Robert Weimann right to suggest that 'interest in Shakespeare as a poet *in the theater* involves a welcome advance beyond the limitations inherent in exclusively verbal or psychological approaches' (xi, my italics)? Is *performance* not a more innate aspect of the 'creative' than it is of the 'critical'? And is there not, in fact, a case to be made that Shakespeare's dramatic adaptations of, say, Plutarch's *Lives of the Most Noble Grecians and Romanes* are evidence of his own belief in the magic of ekphrasis?

The fact that I went about attempting to compose *A Midsummer Night's Dream Songs* is, of course, testament to my belief that when it comes to a creator of *living* texts like Shakespeare, there is *always* going to be material worth exploring that simply cannot *be* sufficiently explored without a distinctly creative approach. In the specific case of the eight poems which follow, that 'material' is *Othello's* Rodorigo – I have little doubt, however, that Shakespeare's other vividly tangential characters could reward similar creative analysis. That a significant portion of Shakespeare's genius manifested itself in his ability to weave together central plot and subplot, simultaneously realising both with an extraordinary elegance, is, of course, indisputable<sup>3</sup>. I would argue, however, that the success of a character like Rodorigo's peripheral tragicomedy – its ability, that is, both to

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Weimann argues that Shakespeare's successes in this area represent the most important facet of his structural originality: 'interlude and subplot became part of a multiple plot structure in which the significance of the conventions of speech and action associated with the *platea* [were] considerably diminished by more self-contained [and therefore innovative] modes of dramatic composition' (241).

complement central plot and represent an engaging sub-story in its own right – hinges, in significant part, upon the *implied*. And it is this concept which is at the very heart of why I'd suggest successful analysis of Rodorigo et al positively *requires* a creative angle: 'creativity' quite simply provides an opportunity for a certain amount of freedom and panoramic scope in the exploration of these characters' tantalisingly hinted-at and yet frustratingly undeveloped facets. Conventional criticism, on the other hand, is prepared only to stare intently at Rodorigo's 59 speeches<sup>4</sup>, utterly unwilling to look elsewhere, beyond.

A useful illustration of this concept can be found in just about any example of contemporary Shakespearean performance – itself arguably a manifestation of something akin to ekphrasis in terms of the way that it incorporates cuts, movement, dance, set, rewrites, costume etc. all responding *to*, and yet in no way dictated *by* Shakespeare's original text: itself the coming together, then, of a whole spectrum of art about art. To take a microcosmic example, see Rodorigo's (Robert Coote) hair in the following still from Orson Welles' seminal 1952 film:



Long, foppish and more than slightly effeminate, it is a visual (and, indeed, literal) extrapolation of the hysterical non-masculinity implied by the outburst ('I will incontinently drown myself' (1:3 323), cowardice ('I may miscarry in't' (5:1 6)) and

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Shakespeare, William. *Complete Works*. Ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen. Hampshire: Macmillan, 2007.

Shakespearean wordplay ('find myself fopped in it' (4:2 207) that peppers Rodorigo's speeches in *Othello*. And it brings a new visual texture to performance that builds upon and adorns the explicit characterising factors Shakespeare prescribes (Rodorigo's wealth, for example). And yet the sentence 'Rodorigo has long hair' couldn't possibly appear in work of criticism (except, perhaps, in something written by Harold Bloom).

It is to the *implied*, then, that I turned when attempting to put together my *Midsummer Night's Dream Songs*. It had to be, frankly: ignoring for a moment the fact that *Othello* contains absolutely no references to Rodorigo's being a poet or, indeed, remotely creative, that all but 77 represent depictions of scenes from a past that there is no *explicit* evidence of in the entire play (except, perhaps, Rodorigo's 'haunting' of Brabantio's house) demonstrates my project's *absolute* reliance upon conjecture. Conjecture, however, that I would argue constitutes projection that is only ever *rational*. Some arbitrary examples:

- In my attempts to three-dimensionally realise Rodorigo's general history, I drew upon the life of *Twelfth Night's* Andrew Aguecheek (see the first stanza of 26 and the second of 30). The similarities between the two characters are self-evident<sup>5</sup>, and so I felt it was utterly reasonable to assume that events and turns of phrase in Andrew's history could just as well be used to buttress Rodorigo's.
- In my attempts to three-dimensionally realise Rodorigo's relationship with money (explored most directly in 14 and 30), I took two features that I'd argue Shakespeare explicitly uses to characterise Rodorigo throughout *Othello* – absolute naivety (see his consistent belief that Iago is 'fast to my hopes' (1:3 360)) and a willingness to throw his wealth around ('I'll sell all my land' (1:3 371)) – and interpreted the combination as being implicit evidence of a financially mollycoddled youth. I then slightly extrapolated that concept with the suggestion that Rodorigo *resents* the manner in which money has softened him – an idea which carries with it fascinating implications for the interpretation of his behaviour throughout the play.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Honigmann's suggestion that 'The casting requirements of the two plays [*Twelfth Night* and *Othello*] are remarkably alike... Sir Andrew Aguecheek-Rodorigo ([to be played by] a comedian who played foolish young gentlemen who are lovers and cowards' (346).

- Rodorigo as poet is, for obvious reasons, something of a conceptual stretch. Yes, in terms of literary (and, indeed, biographical) precedent, his behavioural stupidity, his crippling lack of vocal eloquence, his rather Goethe-esque melodramatics and, of course, the leisured, inert, silent, politically insignificant and unrecognised existence he lives thanks to his (we can only assume inherited) wealth could all be interpreted as *evidence* of a poetic calling – as the French Surrealist Jean Cocteau put it, ‘There are poets, and there are grownups’. And yes, in 5:2 we discover that his pockets are stuffed full of incriminating letters and ‘discontented paper’ (354). But my real justification for reinventing Rodorigo as a Beat/Confessional poet is, of course, the tool that exists *in* Beat/Confessional poetry for the exploration, the *mapping* of a fractured, fragmenting mind – the mapping of tragedy.

John Berryman’s *77 Dream Songs* is, I would argue, a tool as deserving of use in academic analysis as, say, Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* or Marx’s *Capital*. In its investigation of ‘I...as part of *we*’ (Bryan, 150), its charting of an individual human breakdown through a remarkable array of dreamscapes, scenes and characters, it represents a ‘creative’ investigation into an infinite topic with an attention to detail that one would expect to find in a work criticism or science – and in its manifest poeticism, it positively encourages a reader to write *like* it, rather than *about* it. The perfect intellectual ballast, then, to frame a fragment of ekphrasis – art about art *through* a lens of almost perfect art seems to me an altogether more justifiable academic expression than mere creative response. And the *Dream Songs* also address themes that it is impossible to separate from both *Othello* the play, and Rodorigo the individual character: race, loneliness, male companionship, madness, the crumbling of self, the multi-faceted nature of identity. Indeed, Berryman could be ‘used’ to spectacular in a psychological analysis of Iago and Othello – neither character exactly *needs* the freedom of creative interpretation in the same manner that the underdeveloped Rodorigo does, however. It’s also worth noting that placing the *77 Dream Songs* alongside Shakespeare’s script provides a wealth of opportunity for the updating and redefining of notions of what a 16<sup>th</sup> Century dramatist’s achievements still have the potential to represent in our altogether

different contemporary world – my attempts to make sense of this concept through the comparison of, say, Rodorigo and Edward Scissorhands, are precisely (if not, of course, specifically) what *performance texts* need to survive for 500 years. Hence the existence of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, for example.

This modernity had to be anchored, however, to avoid losing Shakespeare in a sea of popular culture reference and capricious punctuation choice. My anchor was Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, fragments of which litter all eight of my *Midsummer Night's Dream Songs*. The similarities between the 77 *Dream Songs* and the 154 *Sonnets* (note, exactly double) are self-evident, in everything from their complex non-linearity to the sentiments from which they draw their energy. Most striking of all, however, are the similarities between Berryman and Shakespeare's respective obsessions *with* and unquenchable belief *in* the power of literature, of writing. It would be a strange, passionless student who came away from the two sequences, drunk on dancing images of Henry and his 'mad books' (84) and Shakespeare's poet booming 'Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme', instilled with the desire to write *essays*!

## Works Cited:

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# A Midsummer Night's Dream Songs

'Your actions are my dreams'

*The Winter's Tale* (3:2 83)

Note:

John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* represents a seventy-seven-piece creative framework for the poetic mapping of a broken and breaking mind – a psychological jigsaw-puzzle, if you will, of extraordinary elegance, variety, symmetry and beauty. My attempts to explore Rodorigo's crumbling psyche through the utilisation of a mere tenth of Berryman's intricately nuanced model were always going to look crude and fat-fingered by comparison. That said, I have made every effort to ensure that my *Midsummer Night's Dream Songs* are both respectful of Berryman's achievements and, I pray, to some extent broadly representative of how Berryman's exquisite structural systems actually function – it's no exaggeration to suggest that their success, both as fragments of ekphrasis and as poems in their own right, depends almost entirely upon whether or not this is the case.

I say 'broadly representative' because these eight poems represent an attempt to compose a representative *sample*, as it were, of the elements that comprise Berryman's Dream Song 'technique'. This was my only option: arbitrariness would have been the undoing of any attempt to explore Rodorigo's hopes and dreams, fears and motivations through the lens of a study as fundamentally *balanced* as the *77 Dream Songs*. Most crucially of all, every 'species' of Song that I identified, from the start, as being prominent in the *77* is represented in my collection – observe the bracketed description that follows each 'number'. Similarly, in an effort to ensure that the peculiar sense of non-linearity evoked by Henry's 'journey' isn't totally lost in my translation, I have also tried to ensure that every ten Songs, numerically speaking, is equally accounted for (i.e. 4 represents 1-10, 14 11-20 etc.). Each *Midsummer Night's Dream Song* also takes its 'number' from the Song that it draws most heavily on for content and inspiration – to ensure that it is read as a seventy-seventh of an overall picture, rather than an eighth; that it can be *placed* within a *mental* seventy-seven-piece Rodorigo-jigsaw, even though that jigsaw doesn't actually – yet – exist. That said, several of my poems employ material taken from more than one of Berryman's Songs – 43, for example, is probably just as influenced by 22, *Of 1826* as it is by the Song which gives it its name and position – a fact which ensures, I hope, that they do more justice, represent even more of a tribute, to Berryman's collection *as a whole*.

And now I turn to Berryman's own words (slightly adapted, yes...) to introduce my work: *Many opinions and errors in the Songs are to be referred not to the character Rigo, still less to the author, but to the title of the work...The poem, then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Rigo, a white Venetian in his early twenties sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr Purse and variants thereof. Requiescant in pace.*

## 4 (a Scene Song)

Balustrading, porticoing in the faintly  
blue of the night-edge, she giggles at...  
inside.

–Friend Purse, veranded: despise me  
if she does not smile like the smile of *appetite*.

–O, only pride

(her father's) & a more general lack of vine  
prevents me from absaloming up to her,  
gasping:  
'All days are knights to sea till I see thee,  
& nights bright days when dreams do show you me,  
Fair Warrior!'

–You learnt that soft phrase somewhere, Purse?

Dat sound like de fick-lip lust.

–Rigo lets the day

blacken, unromanced: le's do a hoedown, boss;

let's go incontinently drown ourselves in sack.

I'll pay!

## 14 (a Speech Song)

Jewels, reverend signiors (if't be your pleasure  
& wise consent to hear) are boring.

We must not say  
so: how careful, when we take our way,  
*must* we be to thrust unused treasures  
under truest bars

&, moreover, mother's habit *was* to mutter  
'Give a man your horse or the cords  
of a purse  
and he'll ever let a matter slip.' I conclude,  
now, that I desire an end to lubricious matters,  
because

I find I am not treating myself justly.  
Venice bores me, cousins bore me, Rigo bores me  
with his abstract, all  
of his polite. I'll fill my purse with money &  
do...things? And O! For thou to whom my jewels  
are trifles: I'll sell all my land.

## 26 (a Conversation Song)

I was adored once.

–What happened then, Sir Purse? Now I see  
there's mettle in thee.

–Rigo, thin faced Rigo – donkey-punched  
from birth, remember, by Fortune's dearest spite –  
attempted, like

a decrepit father, o' de lusty coon,  
to *engraft* himself against the lady's softnesses  
under new moon.

In short, I came on too strong.

–What den, ram-Purse? You sound dis' resst.

–Then came song,

rhyme, verse, line which though outstrippt  
by every pen, was Rigo's pride  
in a life

extremely cudgelled, birth-crippled.

–And then, Mr Purse?

–I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died.

### 30 (a History/Context Song)

Soldiership: I would have liked to do that.

Rigo would have been Something in that  
shape.

Time tickt me into the little man who stews  
& stews but as a little *boy* I awoke to  
swipe shapes

out of birch & bracken, vinegar-and-peppering  
'Thou killst me like a rogue and a villain  
thou saucy fellow,  
thou!' at manikins. Ducats talkt my brain asleep,  
dream -dotage, -pencils, -an urge to *weep*  
tempering

the initiated, self-practical child.

Is there anybody in the audience  
with a bright sword?

Talk to me of cannibals, of most disastrous chances.

Here's wealth for thy company, for every word.

Talk with me a while.

## 43 (a Dream Song)

'Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!' Most potent, grave  
and reverent signiors, The Man Who Isn't There  
*is* there, before you, accused.

Tired with all these, from these he would  
be gone, see, but the bloody book of law holds  
that he split himself thus:

I am a common sort of market.

I am a self-addressed envelope.

I am utterly useful.

I am a lame horse that gallops.

I am an ass-head and a fool.

I am the target.

Be.

We warned him, your grace, on Midsummer Night:

consist, consist! Tired

with all this, for restful death he cried.

And then this: 'I am Rigo Scissorhands!

My fingers shine.'

## 54 (a Life/Death Song)

'We-er-er-think it's for the-awk-best,  
son. Think of it as a-sob!!-a rest,  
a *long* rest, a holiday.

Heaven, what *I* wouldn't give for a holiday!

\*DO NOT DISTURB\* I've hung a little sign  
of my own design

on the door, but the ink un-swims. Insulting,  
they've put bars behind the windows, like  
a cell. Operating  
from *nothing*, a dog after its tail, I think  
of brass & stone & boundless sea (canals)  
& how sad mortality

o'er-sways their power. They are shooting  
me full of sings. 'Write as short as you  
can, in order,  
what you see...Wha' mean, yo' sees nuffin?'  
How *could* summer's honey breath hold out?  
Death is our physician. Let go.

## 67 (a Poet's Song)

I don't operate often. When I do, *they*  
 don't take note: 'I have charged thee not  
 to haunt about  
 my doors, thou silly gentleman!' persons shout.  
 I've tendencied to disappear for entire days  
 at a time. And yet

methinks I have astronomy. –Mr Purse, I sight  
 that now; we will have more of this  
 tomorrow. Adieu.

–Stay! There is a further difficulty with the light:  
 when in disgrace with Fortune & men's eyes  
 & I all alone stew,

bewep my outcast state, then, *then*  
 my poor rude lines salvage fresh fire,  
 stop totterin. Friend,  
 take money if you'll my heart deceased keep.

–Purse, I warn: this could be to my advantage.

–Friend, I already

dead. Asleep.

## 77 (a Song)

Seedy Rigo sprouted shy the World  
(through him all things were made)  
& went to school & composted rich food  
there & can answer  
any questions you might have about old  
boats & singing & Ovid. But roses, sir,  
have thorns, & mud

cankers onto silver fountains, & Rigo's hair  
baffled around his earlobes while his scissor  
-fingers vegetated in kid gloves.  
Rigo likes Fall, because the civil war of summer  
& snow is quiet, & he can un-dead hover  
brown & gold & dry.

–Come away, Petal Purse. Follow thou the wars.

–Rigo *will* follow. Not the ruin-prone Venice  
mind, or his child's warlike bristle, but the airy  
& fierce  
occupations of unrealised love. He, with  
papers in his pockets & his eyes ancient-scary,  
Rigo's making ready to move on.