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HER MAJESTY'S SHAKESPEARE: SHAKESPEAREAN ECHOES IN SONGS BY QUEEN

Filip Krajník

OUTSIDE the fandom, the popular image of Queen is nowadays largely linked with the band's mid-1980s music and visual style. Most of the tribute bands present Queen as if they have just fallen off their 1986 Magic Tour – which, as it transpired, was the last opportunity to see the band's original members playing live together – with occasional glimpses into the band's earlier and later repertory. Following the 2018 biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*, some of Queen's earlier material returned to the consciousness of casual listeners, as well as on the set list of the band's latest Rhapsody Tour. Still, it would be difficult to argue that pieces such as "Keep Yourself Alive," "Doing All Right" or "Death on Two Legs" resonate with the masses today as much as the iconic "Under Pressure," "Radio Ga Ga" or, let us say, "One Vision" (which, of course, does not necessarily say much about the actual quality of the songs).

Especially Queen's earlier period (roughly up until their 1977 album *News of the World*) was famously marked by experimentation and eclecticism, both in the band's music and lyrics. The rich, multi-layered arrangement of the early- and mid-1970s' Queen songs frequently accompanied stories full of (false) prophets ("The Prophet Song" from *Queen II*), direct references to the Bible ("Jesus" from *Queen*), Tolkien-esque landscapes (Mercury's cycle of "Rhye" songs in *Queen*, *Queen II* and *Sheer Heart Attack*), direct quotations from Victorian poetry (Robert Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* in "My Fairy King" from *Queen*), subtle gestures towards American classics (E. A. Poe in "Nevermore" from *Queen II*) or playful responses to operatic icons such as Monteverdi, Purcell or Mozart ("Bohemian Rhapsody" from *A Night at the Opera*; see McLeod 2001, 194). While literary and cultural references are to be found in Queen's later works as well ("The Invisible Man" from the 1989 album *The Miracle*, for instance, inspired by the same-named novel by H. G. Wells), it was in their early period that the band seems to have been particularly open to such impulses.

In his volume *Shakespeare and Popular Music* (2010), Adam Hansen devotes several chapters to the importance of Shakespeare for (especially British) music of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s; not a single time, however, does he mention Queen or any of its individual members. While it could be argued that Queen never strove

to employ Shakespearean motifs or images to represent Shakespeare, his stories or his characters *per se* (no more than the aforementioned "My Fairy King" represents Browning or "Nevermore" represents Poe), it would be false to assume that Shakespeare did not leave his visible mark on Queen's works.

When Queen entered the British popular music scene in the early 1970s, Shakespeare was one of its staples and his influence could hardly be avoided. As Hansen argues, The Beatles – regarded by Queen as their "Bible, all along, in so many ways" (Doyle 2021, 67) – who in the early 1960s "represented a new form of peculiarly *national* popular-cultural identity" (Hansen 2010, 84; italics original), in various forms "engaged with and changed an icon of national identity – Shakespeare" throughout their career (85) (most notably when performing in the 1964 TV spoof of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; see Hansen 2010, 87–94). Several years later, "Shakespeare came to figure heavily in popular psychedelic and counter-cultural musics of the late 1960s and early 1970s" (Hansen 2010, 94), being referred to by Pink Floyd, The Byrds, David Bowie and others (94–98).

It is a testimony to Queen's eclectic approach to song-writing that their most overtly Shakespearean song was inspired by Shakespeare only indirectly – and not even through a work of literature. In a 2013 interview, the band's drummer, Roger Taylor, recalled that while Freddie Mercury "had this very sharp brain," he (Taylor) "never once saw Freddie with a book." Taylor, however, continues that "he [Mercury] had all these words about this painting" (Blake 2021, 70). The painting Taylor referred to was Richard Dadd's mid-19th-century *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* and the "words" were Mercury's song of the same title, released in 1974 on the band's second album *Queen II*.

The infamous Victorian painter Richard Dadd (1817–1886) was particularly popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an imagined "heroic Victorian counter-cultural ancestor" – an interest that waned after 1974, when the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain) for the first time exhibited all Dadd's available works with more factual (and less fantastical) commentary (Tromans 2011, 6). The aforementioned *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* did capture Mercury's imagination during one of his visits to the gallery (as Clerc argues, Mercury at the time "deepened his taste for high culture" by drawing inspiration from classic artists; Clerc 2020, 72), and the singer subsequently showed it to the rest of the group, considering the piece's atmosphere a perfect contribution to the "phantasmagorical universe that Mercury and May wanted to develop on the album [*Queen II*]" (Clerc 2020, 72).

The story behind the painting (which Mercury undoubtedly knew) is at least as fascinating as the work itself. In 1843, Dadd, who had previously suffered from mental issues, stabbed his father to death, believing that "some such sacrifice was demanded

by the gods & spirits above" (Tromans 2011, 61). Dadd subsequently spent the rest of his life in several psychiatric institutions. Before these events, Dadd had established himself as a painter of (besides other themes) Shakespearean scenes and motifs: at the Royal Academy of Arts exhibition in 1840, he presented his take on the closet scene from *Hamlet* (showing the then star actors Charles Kean as Hamlet and Ellen Tree as Gertrude), as well as scenes from *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice* (both untraced today); in 1841, he painted his *Young Lady Holding a Rose*, which strongly evokes Ophelia, while, at the exhibitions of 1841–1842, he presented the trio of fairy paintings, now known as *Titania*, *Puck* and *Come Unto These Yellow Sands* (inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, respectively; Tromans 2011, 21–35). During his years in Bethlehem Hospital in Lambeth, Dadd was allowed to continue painting and created two of his most famous Shakespearean artworks: *Contradiction: Oberon and Titania* (1854–1858) and, of course, *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* (ca 1855–1864).

While both of the pictures share many stylistic similarities, it is not difficult to understand why it was the latter that particularly attracted Mercury's attention. The painting depicts a single moment when a fairy feller is swinging his axe with which he is about to split a nut for Queen Mab's new chariot. Around him, in the middle of a forest, is gathered a diverse assemblage of mythological creatures, some distinctively Shakespearean (Oberon and Titania, who are not fighting this time, but look like a reconciled couple, with Titania resting on Oberon's shoulder), some not (Cupid and Psyche). That the motif of fairies was close to Mercury can be seen even in the band's crest that the singer designed in the early 1970s and in which he represented himself by a pair of fairies (referring to his astrological sign, Virgo).

"The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke" is the second song on the "Black Side" of the *Queen II* album, following another pseudo-mythological piece by Mercury, entitled "Ogre Battle." Written in a much lighter style than its antecedent, the rhythm and arrangement of "The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke" neatly represents the commotion of dozens of fairies and the overall chaotic atmosphere of Dadd's picture, while giving the song a distinctively old-fashioned air (instead of the piano, Mercury plays the harpsichord in throughout the track). For the lyrics, Mercury drew directly from Dadd's poem describing his artwork that he wrote at Broadmoor Hospital in January 1865.[1] The "vocabulary from another age" resonating throughout Mercury's

[1] The poem, entitled *Elimination of a Picture & its subject – called The Feller's Master Stroke*, is largely a catalogue of the painting's characters in rhyme. The full text is printed as an appendix in Tromans 2011 (pp. 186–93) or in the only stand-alone edition so far, published by the independent Hiding Press (Dadd 2020).

song that Clerc mentions (72) is thus, in fact, largely Dadd's. It is, however, interesting to observe how Mercury, in order to make Dadd's words fit the musical piece, plays with the Shakespearean landscape.

Figure 1: Richard Dadd: *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke.* (Public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons.)

While the number of characters from the picture needed to be reduced for the purposes of a rock song (which is two minutes and forty-one seconds long), all the main Shakespearean elements remain. Queen Mab, the central character of the image's story, is mentioned only in passing: from the song, we never explicitly learn that the fairy feller is going to crack the nut to make the Queen a new chariot (which Dadd explicitly mentions in his *Elimination*); however, while Dadd mentions "King Oberon & his Queen" among the observers (20),[2] Mercury identifies Titania by her name, as known from Shakespeare's play. It is also noteworthy that the following line of the lyrics, "Mab is the queen and there's a good apothecary-man," links the apothecary with other well-known Shakespearean characters, while in Dadd's poem, apothecary is just one of a group of gathered characters from another part of the painting named by their professions: "soldier and sailor, tinker or tailor / Ploughboy, apothecary, thief" (21). The epithet "good," furthermore, might associate the figure with the character from *Romeo and Juliet*, bringing to mind the "true apothecary," as Romeo calls him upon drinking up the poison in Juliet's tomb (5.3.119).

Figure 2: Oberon and Titania.

Figure 3: Queen Mab's chariot.

While in "The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke," Shakespearean echoes do little more than populate the bigger picture (in this case literally) with neat little details, for his short (just one minute and forty-three seconds) lullaby "Lily of the Valley" from the *Sheer Heart Attack* album (1974), Mercury returned to Shakespeare in a more subtle and meaningful way. "Lily of the Valley" is a breather just before the middle of the album, following four energetic hard/glam/pop rock tracks and preceding pieces such as the hard rock/rock'n'roll "Now I'm Here" or the heavy/speed metal "Stone Cold Crazy." Although the lyrics of the piece are elusive, they clearly

[2] The quotations from *Elimination* are referred to by the pages of Dadd's original manuscript as given by Tromans. The Hiding Press edition does not give the line numbers and the pages of the slim volume are not even numbered.

describe an inner turmoil ("I am forever searching high and low / But why does everybody tell me no?") of a lover, who wishes to keep his confusion secret from his love, the eponymous "lily of the valley." The lyrics invoke mythological images, such as "Neptune of the seas" and a mention of the realm of Rhye, which Mercury previously (in the aforementioned 1973 track "My Fairy King" from *Queen*) described by means of Browning's fantasy land inside a mountain where the Piper of Hamelin has led all the town's children (except for one).

While the overall situation of the song – presenting the conflicted lover lying awake next to his sleeping lady ("I lie in wait with open eyes") – resembles Act 3, Scene 5 from *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Romeo knows that he should leave his Juliet, desperately wanting to stay at the same time, to describe his dilemma the lover invokes two other major Shakespearean characters. When expressing his confusion, the singer says, "I follow every course / My kingdom for a horse," which is, of course, a quotation from Shakespeare's *Richard III*, from the moment when King Richard is losing his battle and is desperately crying for help (5.4.7). At another point, the lover is imagining that he is addressing his love saying, "Serpent of the Nile / Relieve me for a while / And cast me from your spell and / Let me go." The image of the "Serpent of the Nile" comes from *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which Antony, who lives under Cleopatra's spell, calls his love "my serpent of old Nile" (1.5.26). Just like King Richard, Antony ultimately loses his battle, which costs him his life. Mercury's fictitious lover thus knows that if he stays with his "lily of the valley," it might lead to his destruction.

The band's guitarist, Brian May, in an interview stated that "Lily of the Valley" is, in fact, biographical and that Mercury (at the time still living with his girlfriend Mary Austin) in it expressed his confusion about his sexuality: "It's about looking at his girlfriend and realising that his body needed to be somewhere else" (Thomas 1999, 79). If May is correct, we can see that Mercury saw fit to describe his personal strife in Shakespearean terms. He did not, however, attempt to represent Shakespeare or enter a cultural dialogue with the Bard – instead, Mercury appropriates Shakespeare's language for his own original message.

The last example of Shakespearean influence on music by Queen comes from the band's album *Made in Heaven*, released in 1995 after Mercury's death. One of the few songs recorded after the *Innuendo* sessions (otherwise, *Made in Heaven* mostly contains pre-*Innuendo* material, either previously unreleased or newly remixed) is "A Winter's Tale" – in fact, it is the last song that Mercury finished.[3] Just

[3] The last recorded vocals of Mercury were for the ballad "Mother Love," written by himself and Brian May. However, "Mother Love" famously remained unfinished and May needed to supply his vocals for the song's last verse after Mercury's death. Mercury's handwritten lyrics for both

as Taylor's "The Invisible Man" from *The Miracle* (1989) has little to do with H. G. Wells's novel or May's "Brighton Rock" from *Sheer Heart Attack* (1974) shares almost nothing with the story of Graham Greene's work of the same title, so have the psychedelic sound and moody atmosphere of "A Winter's Tale" little in common with Shakespeare's late comedy *The Winter's Tale*. However, since its release, the song has become an example of life imitating art.

Figure 4: Irena Sedlecká's statue of Freddie Mercury in Montreux, Switzerland. (Photograph: Filip Krajník)

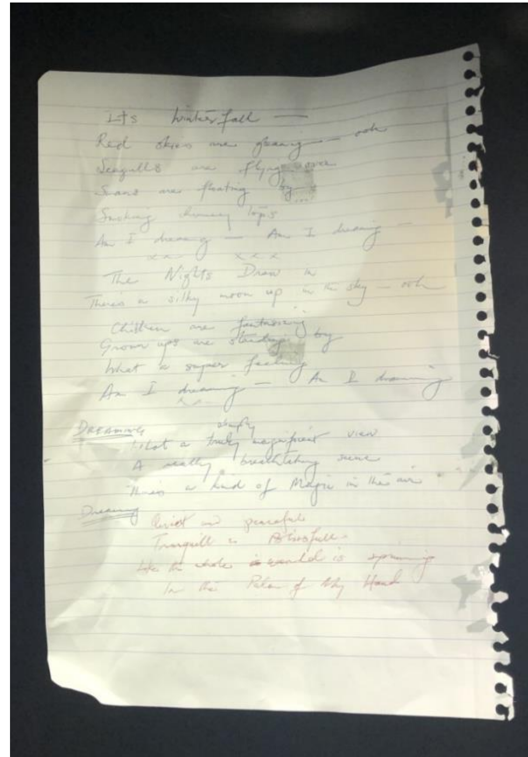

Figure 5: Lyrics of "A Winter's Tale," written by Freddie Mercury. (Photograph: Filip Krajník)

In the final scene of Shakespeare's play, the statue of the dead Queen Hermione comes to life to reunite with her husband, the Sicilian King Leontes, and her daughter, Perdita. In 1996, more than five years after the song had been recorded, the iconic three-meter bronze statue of Freddie Mercury by Irena Sedlecká (who was, quite appositely, a Bohemian, born in Pilsen) was erected at Lake Geneva in Montreux, not far from the Mountain Studios where Mercury's last songs were recorded. When in the Shakespeare play King Leontes first sees the statue of his wife, he exclaims,

"A Winter's Tale" and "Mother Love" are nowadays displayed at Queen's Mountain Studios in Montreux, Switzerland, where the band's last sessions with Mercury took place.

"O royal piece! / There's magic in thy majesty" (5.3.38–39). Mercury's statue, on the other hand, is immortalised in the opening lines of Queen's 1997 ballad "No One But You (Only the Good Die Young)": "A hand above the water / An angel reaching for the sky." If one of the themes of *The Winter's Tale* is overcoming death through the magic of art, the last Queen songs, including "A Winter's Tale," have surely contributed to the afterlife of both the band and its lead singer, whose work and legacy are still alive, even more than thirty years after his demise.

While the employment of Shakespearean motifs by Queen was rarer and less obvious than that of some of their contemporaries, the band was surely aware of Shakespeare's cultural significance and was able to work with it in a playful and creative way for their own unique ends and creations. Interestingly enough, of all the four members of Queen, the one who worked Shakespearean motifs into the band's songs was their lead singer, whom Taylor rather unflatteringly described as "not what you'd call a well-read man" (Blake 2021, 70).

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