

Shakespeare and Berryman: Sonnet #129 and Dream Song #1

Kit Fryatt

John Berryman was a dedicated and distinguished commentator on Shakespeare, but this essay has nothing to say about his Shakespeare scholarship. It does not seek to prove the influence of sonnet 129 on the first Dream Song, nor does it suggest that Berryman's poem definitely alludes to Shakespeare's (I believe it does, but I cannot prove it). Rather, it is a reading which, as Deborah Madsen comments of the Jewish hermeneutic tradition known as midrash, "not only revives [...] meanings but seeks out all semantic properties of the proof text[s]."¹

My title alludes to the essay "William Shakespeare and E.E. Cummings" [*sic*], by Robert Graves and Laura Riding, which was later revised by Graves and reprinted as "A Study in Original Spelling and Punctuation".² This "exercise in irresponsible editorial restraint"³ applies much misplaced ingenuity to sonnet 129 in defence of the proposition that the punctuation and spelling of the 1609 Quarto should be retained by modern editors as most conducive to comprehension by "the plain reader".⁴ Like practitioners of certain kinds of midrash, Riding and Graves put forward interpretations that are "often very free and sometimes obviously fictional".⁵ While they are not always to be trusted as scholars, there is something very engaging about their sprightly certainty on such dubious matters as how Shakespeare might have said "extreme" (rhymes with "lame"), how seventeenth-century readers heavily inured to printerly error and idiosyncrasy read punctuation (astonishingly, like over-ingenious modernist poet-critics) and most overwhelmingly, what is good for us "plain readers". While scholars deplore Graves and Riding's choice of a poem already plentiful in linguistic crises and ambiguity for further complication, it is also true that there is something peculiarly appropriate in their determined over-reading of a poem that is actually *about* perversity and self-delusion. Riding and Graves respond to sonnet 129 at a level beneath analysis and scholarship, reproducing the poem's excessiveness and illogicality, giving us an insight into its power in a way denied more responsible approaches.

I want to argue here that Berryman's first Dream Song shares its mood of perversion and illogic, and some of its erotic anger, with sonnet 129; but further, that it is capable of being (over-)read in a way which reveals, and indeed enacts, those qualities. Its alliterative opening line, "Huffy Henry hid the day", immediately recalls the sonnet's sour imitation of lovers panting in sexual excitement, "Had, having and in quest to have, extreme" (l.10), suggesting an erotic context to Henry's sulk. This anticipates both the "departure" from lovers'

¹ Deborah L. Madsen, *Re-reading Allegory: a Narrative Approach to Genre* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 37.

² Robert Graves, "A Study in Original Punctuation and Spelling", in *The Common Asphodel* (

³ Stephen Booth (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977, repr. 2001) 447.

⁴ Graves pno

⁵ Madsen 37

complicity with “[a]ll the world” in ll.7-9 and the Song’s final images of a scouring sea and a sterile bed.

The semantic plenitude of the first line of the sonnet also finds a fainter echo in Berryman’s first line. “Th’expense of spirit” has both a general sense of “expenditure of energy” and a specifically sexual connotation of “ejaculation”. Still richer, “a waste of shame” might signify “an absence of modesty”, (ungrammatically, but still powerfully) “a shameful waste” and “a wasteful shame”, “an unworthy squandering of honour or of instructive shame”, a *paysage moralisé* containing a waste[land] called Shame, or even a pun on “waist” (there is some support in *Hamlet* II.ii [ll. 231-5] for the anatomical imprecision). Some of these meanings are contradictory – it’s hard to see how a whole landscape of shame could appear in the utter absence of modesty, for example. In a similar vein, “Huffy Henry hid the day” might mean “Henry hid himself for the whole day in a huff”, “Henry concealed the day’s activities from his own or others’ memories with his sulk”, or “Henry obscured the daylight with the blackness of his mood”. That the first of these is the most likely does not become apparent until l.6, and even then, since “come out” might be a synonym for “talked”, (as in “come out with it”) it’s not certain that it is *himself* that Henry hides. Later in the Song, though possibly earlier in the sequence of events it describes, Henry becomes public property, an anatomical specimen: “I don’t see how Henry, pried / open for all the world to see, survived” (ll.11-12). This gives support both to a reading which sees Henry hiding himself and one which sees Henry hiding the day: he might be prompted to conceal himself after humiliating exposure, or the sight of a body “pried/ open for all the world to see” might be enough to obscure its surroundings. Very much depends on how we read the extended spacing of “hid the day”. It may be a lacuna or a hesitation, a missing rhythmic unit mediating the change from trochees (“Huffy Henry”) to an iamb (“the day”), or simply a waste, a waste of space or breath.

Sonnet 129, like many of Shakespeare’s, employs a rhetorical grammar in which logical syntax is suspended. The adjectival description of lust in ll.3-4 refers grammatically to the quality of lust itself, and yet by extension also implicates the lustful person; from ll.5-12 the longer verbal and antithetical phrases may refer also to the person lusted after as well as one or both of the former, or all three. The lustful person and the object of his desire are grammatical ghosts, always implied but never made manifest as the subject of a sentence. The abstraction “lust” is concrete: those who give in to it waste themselves into syntactic shadows. “Hunted” (l.6) must refer to the object of desire, but once “had” she merges with lust itself, since both she and lust may be “possessed” by her desirer, with “hated” he is conflated with both of them, as he may hate himself, her, and lust as an abstraction. Our sense that the speaker of the poem is someone who has experienced lust and bitterly repudiates it must remain a conjecture implied by the perverse movement of its grammar. Force of expectation produces a lyric speaker, but there is no “I” in Shakespeare’s poem.

Berryman’s Song, by contrast, is spoken by a distinct persona, who appears in each stanza with a first-person statement. This figure at first seems quite separate from Henry, claiming to “see his point” (l.3) but assuming a rather

reproachful tone, “he should have come out and talked” (l.6). The speaker is again distinct from the group of people who have outraged Henry, but it is in discussing them that he begins to move towards *being* Henry, ventriloquising his exasperation in a shower of fricatives: “[i]t was the thought that they thought/ They could do it” (ll.4-5). In the second stanza the speaker’s ambiguously discrete status changes again. The first two lines, with their homely syntax and metaphor, “[a]ll the world like a woolen lover” (l.7), sound suspiciously like a rather self-pitying individual talking about himself in the third person. But then the speaker admits that he doesn’t “see” how Henry can have survived his humiliating exposure, “pried/ open for all the world to see”. This privileges the speaker even as it distinguishes him from Henry, bring him closer to the hero and away from the generality. For him, seeing is synonymous with understanding; for “all the world” it is simply an ocular function. However, the speaker achieves this distinction between himself and the world only at the expense of *not* seeing. Henry’s capacity for survival remains hidden. Shakespeare also deals with what is universally understood but not *seen*, that is, understood on the level of experience: “All this the world well knows, yet none knows well/ To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell” (ll.13-14). This concluding couplet combines an apology for hackneyed material with the psychological insight that it is difficult (perhaps impossible – “none knows well”) to learn from an occurrence of lust, the sin infinitely repeatable because it seems so heavenly at first. The repetitions of “all the world” and “see” in Berryman’s second stanza substantially replicate this experience of lust. “All the world”, which “like a woolen lover/ once did seem on Henry’s side” (there is perhaps a pun on “see” as well as “seam” there) becomes a gawping mob at his dismemberment; the speaker, not seeing how he could have survived unintentionally evokes the same hellish spectacle.

In the first and second stanzas, the speaker oscillates between being and not being Henry, so that Berryman’s protagonist appears to move into first-person visibility, only to hide again. It’s a process analogous in many ways to the grammatical fluidity of Sonnet 129, which conjures a pair of protagonists – a lustful lover and his object – only to have them dissolve back into an abstraction and a moralising conclusion. In the third stanza of Berryman’s Song, Henry and the speaker are decisively conflated:

What he has to now to say is a long
wonder the world can bear & be.
Once in a sycamore I was glad
all at the top, and I sang.
Hard on the land wears the strong sea
and empty grows every bed.⁶

⁶ The sycamore has a Shakespearean and erotic context too: it reminds us of Desdemona’s “Willow Song”, bizarrely transposed to a triumphant instead of tragic context. Instead of sitting singing *beside* a sycamore this character is atop it, a radical change in pastoral iconography. As the Arden edition of *Othello* reminds us, sycamores are not (unlike willows) associated with grief. Shakespeare’s choice of tree seems to be a macaronic pun (*sick-amour*), one he had used before, in *Romeo and Juliet*. The love-sickness that Henry suffers is not Desdemona’s or Romeo’s, though it perhaps shares their respective tragedies’ flirtation with the stereotypes of

The first person utterance here makes little sense unless it is spoken by Henry, but no conventions of direct speech, quotation marks, italics, even a preceding colon appear. And yet does Henry really speak, at any rate in this Song? We are told, possibly by Henry in the third person, possibly by a separate speaker, "What he has now to say is a long/ wonder the world can bear & be". What we get is not "a long wonder" (an extended fantasy or prolonged ponder) but an ambiguous memory and a brisk aphorism. The "long wonder" must refer to the *Dream Songs* as a whole, rather than these four closing lines, which opens the Song again to the possibility of multivocality, just when we thought that Henry was speaking to us plain.

This wider reference, of course, applies as much to Shakespeare's sonnets as to the *Dream Songs*. Our desire for narrative may produce protagonists in the individual sonnet or Song, who on closer inspection prove to be elusive; I hope I have made my case that both Shakespeare and Berryman use syntax to play on and with this narrative desire. But such play becomes serious when considered within the wider framework of the long poem or sequence. The personae of Shakespeare's sonnets have been the subject of exhaustive and sometimes exhausting debate; similarly, the identification of Henry with Berryman himself threatens a tedious reductionism. These poems show that in both cases, the poet anticipates and supersedes such criticism: the lyric and the dramatic are bound together in their agile grammar.

comedy. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. A.J. Honigmann (London: Thomson, 1999) 291. Benvolio finds Romeo in a sycamore grove in 1.1., l.121.