



M0056214NC

'THE HIGH WALL'

The Life of the artist, Richard Dadd

A Thesis Submitted to:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN AND  
COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

and

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

Department of Painting

by

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April 1985

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INTRODUCTION

Mention the name, Richard Dadd, and those who have heard of him will either remember him as the artist of 'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke', or, more probably, as the madman who murdered his father and was incarcerated in Bedlam and Broadmoor Hospitals for life. This essay will attempt to show a fuller side to Dadd, and amongst other things, that he was an artist of rare perception and skill, whose imaginative painting was possibly the strongest and most original of the Nineteenth Century. It is particularly this aspect that has drawn me to his work, and the fact that for the major part of his life, he was cut off from any external stimuli.

The first part of the work is devoted to Dadd's background and life. The second part deals with two paintings by the artist, one executed before hospitalization and the other after.



## CHAPTER I

### DADD'S LIFE

#### Early Life and Art College

Richard Dadd was born on the first of August 1817 in the Medway town of Chatham. His family had long been established there and were spread over a wide social spectrum. Robert Dadd, Richard's father, was a well-respected citizen, who was known throughout the community as a man of energy and intelligence. Sadly his wife died at a very early age. However, his household was a happy one. Richard and his brothers attended the grammar school at Rochester known as 'The King's School'. As far as encouragement and inspiration are concerned there is little evidence that the young Richard had much early training as an artist while in Chatham.

In 1843 the Dadd family moved to London. Robert Dadd changed his job and set up business as a bronzist and a water gilder. The family took up residence at 15 Suffolk Street, Pall Mall, above the business. It was not long before Dadd was studying at the British Museum. Here drawing from casts was looked upon as a preliminary training before entering the Royal Academy School, which at this stage was Dadd's ultimate goal. According to the 'Art Union':

*This exercise, being unsupervised was dangerous and wasteful: the idleness, the irrecoverable waste of time, and the fatal acquirement of a vicious or incorrect style of drawing is perfect ruin in later life.....*<sup>1</sup>

However in January 1837, Dadd was admitted to the Academy School.

The teachings in the school had not changed since the time of Sir Joshua Reynolds which shows how much influence he still had. The students had to become accomplished draughtsmen from the antique before being considered fit for life classes. During Dadd's

time, the tutors, all members of the Academy, included such people as Mulready, Etty, Stanfield and Maclise, the latter having the greatest influence.

### The Clique

In 1837, the two men who were to become Dadd's closest friends entered the school. They were John Phillip (who later married Dadd's youngest sister), and William Frith. Frith wrote forty years later in his autobiography:

*Dadd was my superior in all respects; he drew infinitely better than I did... I can truly say, from a thorough knowledge of Dadd's character, that a nobler being, and one more free from the common failings of humanity, never breathed. A man of genius that would assuredly have placed him high in the first rank of painters.... One of the noblest natures and brightest minds that ever existed.* <sup>2</sup>

To this group of three were added Augustus Egg, Henry O'Neill, and Alfred Elmore; these formed the nucleus of a closely knit group of young painters who started a sketching club known as 'The Clique'. They were drawn together by mutual liking as well as common aspirations and determination. They were antagonistic towards the more traditional Renaissance-type teaching of the Royal Academy. Their main objectives were to follow up their careers as artists in an atmosphere of high idealism and high spirits. Dadd's character of the time personified this idealism. He was an attentive student, a man of common sense and energy, and very popular due to his cheerful, intelligent conversation and generous nature. Indeed, if there were to be a central figure in the group it was he.

Weekly meetings were organised by Dadd in his rooms near Soho. These gatherings were lively and full of healthy criticism for each other's work. At each session a guest would be asked to judge the various sketches that had been done and frequently, Dadd's

were chosen. The main themes for the works were taken from the writings of Shakespeare and Byron, as was common in the kind of subject-painting popular in the day.

Another concern of 'The Clique' that was eagerly debated was their 'futures', a subject about which they never tired discussing. Indeed at that early age most of them had already determined the style on which they would concentrate. Phillips wanted to major in portraiture, Dadd proposed to devote himself purely to works of the imagination. Egg thought his strength would be in illustrating famous works of art, and Frith, who was to become the most famous of them all, intended to paint pictures from ordinary life. In their subsequent careers, they all managed a degree of success.

#### Early Progress and Travel

Dadd's skill as a draughtsman was obvious from an early age: during his time at the Academy he won three silver medals. These were awarded annually to students showing outstanding promise.

He began to exhibit in his first year as a student. His first painting to be exhibited was at the Society of British Artists in Suffolk Street. The work was titled, 'Head of Man', and was quickly followed by various landscapes from the Plymouth region. Gradually elements of fantasy began to enter his work, this probably being inspired by his reading of Shakespeare's more fanciful plays. He exhibited 'Titania Sleeping' (Plate No. 1) and 'Puck' (Plate No. 2) both of which were bought by the dealer, Henry Farrer. These two paintings were to establish Dadd's reputation as a painter of fairy subjects.

In both these works much of the effect depends on highly dramatic lighting. In 'Titania Sleeping', the composition is conceived of a spiral which arches round from the left-hand side of the cave's mouth and swirls across the foreground through the trail of toadstools scattered over the grass, until it meets up



with the dancing figures on the left. Dadd has undoubtedly used several different sources here for inspiration. The basic structure, with the main group framed in a central recess, is a device learned from Maclise who uses it often, and the framing arc of hobgoblins itself derives from the circle of putti in Maclise's 'Choice of Hercules', (Plate No. 3). For his conception of 'Puck', Dadd has taken from Reynold's version of the same subject (Plate No. 4).

In 1841, he received his first commission from Lord Foley to provide the decorations for a house in Grosvenor Square. These were based on Lord Byron's, *Manfred and Tassos' Jerusalem Delivered*. Unfortunately nothing remains of these works, and the house for which they were painted is now occupied by the American Embassy.

In 1842, it can be said, Dadd was starting out on what promised to be a most rewarding career, but also that year something took place which destroyed these prospects of success and indeed ruined his whole life.

#### Travel

Dadd's new patron was to be Sir Thomas Phillips who had been Mayor of Newport and was a solicitor by profession. At the age of forty-one he had intended making a grand tour before settling down in London to become a barrister. He was eagerly looking for someone keen, young, and talented to record and document his journey. Today, this job would have gone to a photographer, but obviously in the Nineteenth Century such work was done by an artist. Dadd was recommended by a certain David Roberts, whom he had met through Frith.

On the sixteenth of July 1842, the two men departed for Ostend on the start of a journey that only the most fit would survive. They were making their way to Italy and, in particular, to Venice. Here Dadd was especially impressed by the colour and execution of the paintings of Tintoretto. Perhaps the most detailed



account of their journey appears in letters he wrote home. These letters, as many of Dadd's paintings and poems, ranged from the very ordinary and sometimes confused to the brilliant.

His only surviving sketchbook begins in Greece, and in the drawings of the figures and heads in particular, there can be seen something of the exhilaration with which he responded throughout the journey to every new spectacle. Delacroix must have had similar experiences on his trip to Algiers, and the overwhelming colours and light are very evident in his sketches of Arabic scenes. In a letter to Roberts, he describes the sort of experience that gave him the most satisfaction:

*It seemed a large assortment, or menagerie, of pompous ruffians, splendid savages, grubby finery, wild costume.. I never saw such an assemblage of deliciously villainous faces: They grinned, glowered and exhibited every variety of curiosity. Oh, such expressions! Oh, such heads! Enough to turn the brain of any artist.* <sup>3</sup>

After Beirut the journey became physically and mentally more demanding: their main form of transport being horses and mules. The stages were long and the pace unrelenting. This new mode of transport infuriated Dadd who was now finding it harder to work as he could not very well sketch on horseback. By the time they had reached Egypt even Phillips' constitution was failing, and so they hired a boat and travelled in luxury up the Nile to Thebes. Dadd sketched and his patron shot crocodiles.

It was in Egypt that the first true symptoms of his illness were experienced. At first, sunstroke was diagnosed, and indeed it may have been this that triggered off his madness. In a letter to Frith he wrote,

*I often lay down at night with my head so full of wild vagaries that I have really and truly doubted my own sanity.* <sup>4</sup>

On the return journey, Dadd increasingly suffered from delusions of being pursued by spirits. These appear in people

that he met on his travels and, at one stage, he thought Phillips to be the Devil himself. While in Rome he visited the studios of some of the Nazarene painters. Also, he was overtaken by an irrational impulse (of a sort which was to dominate the rest of his life) to attack the Pope on one of his public appearances. Phillips tried to persuade him to seek medical advice in Paris, but Dadd, suspecting that was a trap, fled home to London.

#### Murder and Subsequent Incarceration

Back home, it was soon clear to his friends that Dadd was not the same person they had known. He soon started to show the first signs of insanity with very aggressive behaviour. At one stage, while being visited by some people he waved a sharp knife under the door, then he proceeded to remove a birthmark from his forehead which he claimed had been placed there by the Devil.

On Monday, the twenty-eight of August 1843, Dadd promised to 'unburden his mind' to his father on a weekend visit to the village of Cobham. He had avoided being seen during the previous few days and had managed to buy a cut-throat razor and a large knife. On arrival at an inn they arranged for beds for themselves. Dadd was reported by the innkeeper, Mr. Adams, to be restless and persuaded his father to accompany him on a short walk in the direction of Paddock Hole. It was here that he attacked and murdered his father with the implements he had bought. His task fulfilled, he now decided to flee the country. The next morning the body was found and a massive murder hunt got under way.

By this time, Dadd was on his way to France with his passport which suggests that the whole sorry operation had indeed been ruthlessly pre-meditated. It was not long before his murdering tendencies were to emerge again. Eventually he was arrested in Fontainebleau while trying to stab a fellow passenger. The police discovered a long list of Dadd's intended victims, his father's name was at the top, others included the Emperor of Austria.

### Incarceration

For a full year after the murder it is known that Dadd did no work. The French authorities did not treat their criminally insane as well as the English. During the day his major pre-occupation was to stand in the courtyard with upturned eyes looking at the sun, which he called his father.

In 1844, Dadd was extradited to England to face court proceedings. He appeared before magistrates in Rochester who soon decided that he should not have to stand trial due to his condition. He spent a very short time in gaol at Maidstone and then on the twenty-second of August, 1844, Dadd was admitted to the criminal lunatic department of Bethlem Hospital, the place that resulted in the word 'Bedlam' being introduced into the English language. At this stage, however, attempts were being made to provide more occupation and entertainment for its patients. Workshops and libraries had been set up by the government.

The male criminal wing consisted of a basement and three stories all with the same layout: a gallery about a hundred feet long, lit only by small windows at each end, covered with heavy iron bars, served as a day room (Plate No. 5). Within a year, despite the crude unfriendly surroundings, Dadd had started to paint again. The works he undertook were of remarkable delicacy and beauty and may have been done as a method of escaping his predicament. This determination to paint shows his great commitment, a commitment as necessary to his own survival, as to his painting. Never on the evidence of his work, did he undertake to paint in order to pass the time, and there seems to be little doubt that for the rest of his life he lived and worked as a dedicated artist, who had never abandoned his profession.

Perhaps the best thing to happen at Bethlem while Dadd was there was the appointment of Dr. Wood, who totally reformed the hospital, devoting his full time and attention to every aspect of the patients' welfare. Dadd was given more freedom than ever, though



his behaviour was always somewhat eccentric and often unpleasant. This relaxing of scrutiny resulted in some truly brilliant fantasy watercolours. What makes them so remarkable is that at this stage he had been confined within the walls for thirteen years. The attention to detail in such works as 'Fantaisie de l'Hareme Egyptienne' (Plate No. 6), which was painted in 1865, justifies Dadd as one of the best imaginative painters of the Nineteenth Century. To be able to conjure up this scene with the minimum of notes and sketches requires considerable skill. The exotic atmosphere of this work is added to by the rich garments of the figures. Within the painting various different cultural influences are apparent: the Moorish arches, the Arabic mosaic, and even the ringlets in the hair of the girl at the left-hand side of the painting, a style that was popular in Victorian fashion.

In 1864, the majority of the inmates were moved to Broadmoor (Plate No. 7) which was to be Dadd's final resting place. Broadmoor had been deliberately designed to allow much more freedom and movement to its patients. It must have seemed like a palace after Bethlem. Dadd was described by the 'Art Union' as painting,

*with all the poetry of imagination and frenzy of  
insanity.*<sup>5</sup>

Sadly, he never recovered his sanity so his painting cannot be said accurately to have been therapeutic. However, from time to time it was possible to have intellectual conversations with him.

By 1885, it was obvious that he was dangerously ill with consumption. The only person to be informed of his illness and subsequent death was Elizabeth Langley, a friend of his youth, whose sister had married Dadd's brother, Robert. Dadd died on the eighth of January, 1886 and was buried at Broadmoor.

Footnotes to Chapter I

- 1     *Art Union*, October 1843, p.267.
2.     W.P. Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences*, 1888.
- 3     Catalogue of the sale by Castiglione and Scott of the contents of Ruxley lodge, Claygate, Surrey, 14 October 1919.
- 4     W.P. Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences*, 1888.  
This quotation was taken from a letter from Dadd to Frith, written on board the 'Hecate' man-of-war steamer lying off Jaffa, 26th November 1842.
- 5     *Art Union*, February 1848, p.66.

## CHAPTER II

### DADD'S POSITION IN A 19TH CENTURY ARTISTIC CONTEXT AND HIS WORK

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Being an artist in the Nineteenth Century must have been exciting. This is mainly due to the fact that there seems to have been a large variety of styles and traditions being practised. There was a conglomeration of many differing artistic methods and beliefs. In a survey of this period, art critic, Lytton Strachey said,

*One is often compelled to row out over the great ocean of material and lower down into it here and there a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen from those far depths; to be examined with careful curiosity.<sup>1</sup>*

Perhaps the main reason for this tremendous variety was the establishment of 'The Royal Academy'. Most progressive movements protested against the highly traditional and conservative attitude that the Academy adopted, and thus were seeking to escape its authority. However, obviously the majority of artists followed its policies. The English 'Neo-Classical' painters who emerged towards the second half of the Nineteenth Century would certainly have been looked upon favourably by the Academy, as would the majority of 'Historical' painters, the monumental scale and subject matter being a reflection of Britain's strength at the time, with the continuous expansion of its empire. However, to many, this art must have seemed out of touch and very untopical. This is not to say that artists of this movement, such as Leighton, Palmer and Almatadema did not make a living.

With the Industrial Revolution well under way, came the expansion of the middle classes. This increased the art market considerably and also prompted a change in subject matter for the artists. This probably goes some way to explain the diversity of subject matter at this time. The increase in private patronage gave a great boost to the market; men such as Robert Vernon and John Sheepshanks accumulated great numbers of paintings. In



general, the artist enjoyed more respect and was more prosperous than in any previous time in British painting.

The two most popular schools of painting were the 'Genre' school and the 'Pre-Raphaelite' movement. The leader of the former was Sir David Wilkie, and also included Mulneady, Roberts and Frith, Dadd's former fellow students. These men derived inspiration partly from Seventeenth Century Flemish and Dutch painters such as Teniers and Jan Steen. The subject matter was typically homely and their main appeal was their simple charm.

The 'Pre-Raphaelite' movement, which began in the Eighteen Forties, was an attempt to bring a new seriousness and higher, more exacting standards into the practice of painting. It was a reaction, partly against the Eighteenth Century and partly against its own time. It was bitterly opposed to the 'Renaissance-like' teachings of Sir Joshua Reynolds. To this extent it adopted the prejudices of Blake. It was also opposed to the homely 'Genre' school and its trivialities, its main exponents being Rossetti, Hunt and Millais.

The movement deliberately sought fresh inspiration from the Middle Ages. They were 'anti' specialisation and the emergence of such things as the division of labour, which turned the individual into a single function of commercial and industrial machinery.

Dadd was a 'polymathic' artist, in that he could have fitted into many of the movements of the Nineteenth Century. However, 'Fairy' painting is perhaps the school that was most popular with him because it involved so much fantasy.

The Victorians had a strong passion for things supernatural and macabre, and this explains their deep love of 'Fairy' paintings. During this era, which lasted from approximately 1848 to the turn of the century, it was fashionable to have 'Tea and Table-turning' sessions. Even Queen Victoria was said to have participated. Generally these activities were looked upon

with amusement.

It has been said that,

*Fairy painting was very close to what the Victorians  
thought about life.*<sup>2</sup>

It represented escapism, a liberalisation towards sex, a passion for the unseen, an enemy of the machine. Subsequently, fantasy painting flourished.

The painters of fairy pictures owed a great debt to the writers of fairy stories, both for supplying them with their themes and for making these recognisable to the public. Of the English writers, Lewis Carroll is probably most famous. There was strong foreign influence as well. The German Brothers Grimm had their *Kinder - und Hausmärchen* published in England in 1842. Later they were followed by the Danish writer Hans Christian Anderson but perhaps the most popular source of inspiration were Shakespeare's plays, *A Mid-summer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*.

The principal artists of this movement were Dadd, Maclise, Fitzgerald and Doyle. It is significant that Irish artists with their strong literary or story-telling background took to this genre so well. Maclise's link with 'Fairy' painting is very tenuous and he was not as committed as the other artists, probably because he could adjust to many of the previously mentioned movements as well. He was particularly fond of framing the main characters in his work with an oval shape of putti and foliage. The strong Germanic element in his work may have been the reason why Queen Victoria chose to purchase one of his works, 'Her Majesty, the Queen', for her husband, Prince Albert.

T.A. Fitzgerald's style of painting was more imaginative and dream-like than Maclise's. His work normally depicted a sleeping man or woman surrounded by goblins and strange beings, and there is a somewhat erotic atmosphere about them. The

striking colours tend to cover up the fact that he was not a very good draughtsman.

Richard Doyle was more of an illustrator than a painter. Most of his early income came from illustrations in the magazine, 'Punch' which he joined in 1843. His fairy painting tends to be less real and more humorous and would have been aimed towards children rather than adults.

#### The Work of Richard Dadd

*Art is thus his mistress still.... it is to his beloved brush that he clings, and wield continuously, with that enthusiasm and unwearying ardour the true painter alone can know. Many works will live after him, the product of these thirty-odd years of absolute seclusion - melancholy monuments of a genius so early shipwrecked but which never went actually to ruin.* <sup>3</sup>

Richard Dadd was the complete Victorian; but so far as most of his work is concerned he stands outside this period, completely untouched by any major developments in the second half of the century. From 1843, until his death, he produced variations, increasingly disturbing, on themes that he had already dealt with. Being cut off from the outside world he had to dig deeply into his inner resources for stimuli. This produced some of the most imaginative paintings of the Nineteenth Century.

Dadd started to paint while Victoria was queen and Constable had just died. Initially, his work was conventional enough, even boring. He had tried his hand at everything from portraiture to historical painting. His work varied from outstanding to very poor. One of the first portraits was of Elizabeth Langley and was painted in watercolour in 1832 (Plate No. 8). The strongest feature in the work is the treatment of landscape which is brightly lit up and framed between the overhanging branch of the tree and the girl's arm. It is suggested



that the background may be part of Cobham Park.

The likeness between some of his work and that of the 'Pre-Raphaelites' suggests that he might have had some affinity with them if circumstances had been different. They both shared the equal importance given to alndscape and the figures within it. There might even be evidence of a 'Nazarene' influence upon his work. We already know that he visited the studios of the Nazarenes, German artists working in Rome in They were particularly interested in the use of light, clear colours and taut contours. All these qualities are found in a painting Dadd did in 1860 called 'Mother and Child' (Plate No. 9). In relation to late-flowering neo-classicism his own interest in classical subjects is more concerned with the illustrative tradition of his youth, than with classicism from the Greek and Roman world.

Throughout his life, with a few early exceptions, Dadd worked in a closely-wrought miniaturist's style, with a strong emphasis on form and line. The main ingredients in his work are precise, sharp focussed observations, invention and detail:

*For Dadd 'Fairy' painting was a serious business, an act of the most intensely personal creation. It had nothing to do with the whimsy - despite his ability to charm and please. 'Fairy' painting was also a way of exploring nature, as his landscape painting became.* <sup>4</sup>

Every detail was given with marvellous minuteness and finish which was probably attained with the use of a magnifying glass. We know that later, when he was visited by people in Broadmoor, Dadd used to present them with one for examining his work. If his paintings were not varnished his oils often looked as though they painted in tempera. The sensitive use of an unusual range of clear soft colours, is one of his hallmarks.

Another characteristic of his paintings is the atmosphere of 'trancelike' stillness as if time and motion had been frozen.

This did not appear in his early work but later and particularly in the painting 'Caravan Halted by the Seashore' (Plate No. 10) all these qualities prevail. It is to be remembered that he did this at a time when he was regarded as insane. The design is most elegant, with an elaborately contained pyramidal group following the line of the shore. The soft colours also help achieve a pervasive air of calm.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Dadd was a fine draughtsman, indeed there are some who would argue that his paintings were more drawing than anything else. Because of his predicament, however, he was not forced into misdirecting his skill into styles that did not suit him. In the seclusion of Bethlem and Broadmoor he could devote his time exclusively to pushing his own particular style to the limits of its potential. He worked not only with a miniaturist's finish, but on a scale appropriate to it. Dadd only very occasionally would let his discipline slip and even in works that are full of the most imaginative and fertile subject matter, a high degree of order and restraint is evident. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in 'Oberon and Titania' (Plate No. 11). This was one of many paintings done for the physician, Dr. Hood. The scene represents the quarrel of Oberon and Titania over Titania's refusal to give up her Indian slave boy to Oberon to be his page. The surface pattern is so elaborately painted that it appears more like a tapestry than a canvas, each layer of composition standing out in sharp relief against the layer behind.

Landscape and shipping provided the most enduring link with childhood and youth beside the Medway. His love for and fascination with these subjects was deep enough to survive many years of the most complete deprivation imaginable. It must have been very hard on a man to whom the countryside and sea had once been so important. Indeed, after his incarceration in Bethlem the only countryside he saw would have been that seen while on the train from Bethlem to Broadmoor. He even went so far as to describe himself as a romantic with regards to landscape: but little of this painting survives, which suggests that he never

really had an allegiance to the Romantic tradition. Luckily for us, however, many of his seascapes did survive and of these the most beautiful is 'Port Stagglin' (Plate No. 12). This painting was done in watercolour, a medium Dadd used apparently for private meditation. The painting, although very detailed, is fragile and somewhat mournful. This work is perhaps the most intensely visionary of all his watercolours. The vast solid expanse of rock and castle dominate a cluster of tiny houses and a masted ship. The whole scene is bathed in a yellow luminous haze. It is very easy to think that this painting symbolises a desire for freedom, the sea representing that, and the fortress on the rock, the asylum.

The main series that he did while in hospital was the 'Passion' series. The majority of these were also in watercolour and are very reminiscent of the type of work that was done in sketching clubs, on which 'The Clique' had been modelled. There is little doubt that Dadd would have been commissioned to do these. The idea for each work normally came from one word, e.g. 'Vanity' or 'Madness'. Some are striking but most are a little monotonous. They contain fine drawing and crisp clear outline. The colour is very low key and there is far less attention to detail than normal.

Dadd's love of nature is always in evidence and no more so than in his fairy painting. Dr. Jerrold Moore said that:

*The Fairy painters achieved an intensification of the landscape experience by the use of these sub-human miniature creatures who live entirely in the landscape, and whose consciousness represents therefore only a sensible extension of the landscape.*<sup>5</sup>

A consistent feature of the early fairy pictures is the link between landscape and figures. They were inseparable parts of the overall painting.



Footnotes to Chapter II

- 1 Lytton Strachey, *Victorian Painters*, p.13.
- 2 Jeremy Mass, *Victorian Painters*, p.148
- 3 *The World*, Author is unidentified, but seems to have been an art journalist and acquainted with Frith, 26 December 1877.
- 4 Patricia Allderidge, *Richard Dadd*, p.33
- 5 Jeremy Mass, *Victorian Painters*, (1969) p.150

### CHAPTER III

#### DISCUSSION OF TWO FAIRY PAINTINGS BY DADD, ONE DONE BEFORE HOSPITALIZATION, THE OTHER AFTER

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##### *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*

##### A Painting Done Before Hospitalization

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The work itself ( Plate No. 13) is 21 x 30 inches. It is painted in oils on canvas and is signed and dated in the bottom left corner: 'R. Dadd, 1842'. This painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy untitled but with the quotations in the catalogue of Ariel's song from *The Tempest*:

*Come unto these yellow sands,  
And then take hands;  
Court'sied when you have, and kiss'd, -  
The wild waves whist, -  
Foot it featly here and there;  
And, sweet sprites, the burthen bear.*<sup>1</sup>

Later on when exhibited at Liverpool it was titled, 'Fairies holding their revels on the seashore at night', but carried the same above quotation. The 'Art Union's' reviewer felt that it,

*approaches more nearly to the essence of a poet than  
any other illustrations we have seen.....  
The picture is fraught with that part of painting  
which cannot be taught - in short, the artist must be  
some kind of a cousin to the muse, Thalia.*<sup>2</sup>

Dadd shows great fluency and control in handling a very artificial design. In no way does he become fraught with symmetry. There is no deliberate attempt to counter-balance that flow of rock coming out from the left hand side of the canvas. Having said this, however, and despite his great

inventiveness, his compositions are nearly always based along academic principles. An example is 'Caravan halted by the Seashore' (Plate No. 10). He frequently borrowed other artists' ideas and adapted them in a personal way to suit his work. The structure of the composition is basically pyramidal and is very carefully worked out. It is based on a series of interlocking ellipses and circles. The figures, themselves form a linear arabesque across the surface of the picture, broken by the small triangle of people perched on the top of the rock which is exactly central. The sense of scale is handled with ease giving an epic quality which belies the actual size of the work. There is a strong theatrical effect that one gets when looking at this work. It could almost be a backdrop for a play. This is due to various effects; the arched top of the work is stage-like in shape, there is also a sense of strong theatrical lighting which comes from the left hand side of the canvas. Dadd uses this lighting to great effect in another earlier work, 'Puck' (Plate NO. 2).

The colouring in this picture is very strong and has a certain luminous quality about it. This is helped by the fact that the figures are painting predominantly in pink and oranges, which clash with the bluish background. These colours did not entirely please the reviewer who warned Dadd against the prevalence of the colour of the figures. But I think it plays an important part in creating a mysterious atmosphere that is unique in most of his fairy paintings.

The critics of his early work often observed that,

*the eye longs for repose in the restless confusion  
of his canvasses.*<sup>3</sup>

Not so in 'Come unto these yellow sands'. The abandoned spirit of the dancers within this highly controlled environment amounts to heightened elation even frenzy, but a controlled frenzy. This, incidentally, was the last work to be done by Dadd before departing on his ill-fated tour. It is tempting to see in it some evidence of an over-fevered imagination.



Much of the inspiration for Dadd's fairy painting came from Daniel Maclise. For such an important artist there is not much known about him and he remains a bit of an enigma. Like Dadd, even more so, he was , as already mentioned, particularly gifted in various schools, similarly he seems to have had many faces and personalities. His early work was slated by the critics as the product of an over-exuberant imagination. Maclise's main objective seems to have been to search for a grander and more serious style of painting. This sounds remarkably similar to the Pre-Raphaelites' objectives. Dadd must have been observing Maclise's work very closely, in particular the painting, 'The Choice of Hercules' (Plate No. 3) which was painted in 1881 and which earned him a gold medal from the Royal Academy. The swirling figures that surround Vice (represented by the figure on the extreme right) are similar to the fairies falling out of the sky in Dadd's work.

The group of three standing figures at the top of 'Come Unto these yellow sands' brings the composition to a climax. The large standing figure is suggestive of a Madonna with her attendants. It is, however, more likely to be Queen Mab summoning her children back before sunrise, or whatever it is that determines when fairies should return home.

*The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*

A Painting Done by Dadd During Hospitalization

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*The late Richard Dadd. Alas! We must so preface  
the name of a youth of genius that promised to do  
honour to the world; for although the grave has  
not actually closed over him, he must be classed  
among the dead!* <sup>4</sup>

The writer of these words in 1843 seems very foolish to us now, but if he had to revise them during the rest of Dadd's life he would not have needed to make any alterations. After the murder of his father, few in the outside world took any interest in him and even less in his art. During his own lifetime he became a creature of another world, to be seen and commented on as a curiosity, but scarcely to be spoken to as a serious artist.

But he lived on and painted some of his best paintings under circumstances that were hardly conducive to work. 'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke' (Plate No. 14) is oil on canvas and measures 21 x 15 inches. It was painted for Dr. Hayden and took Dadd nine years to complete. In subject matter there is little change in his repertoire after 1843, and he still painted fairy scenes which showed his commitment to this school.

This painting is the most completely fantastic of all his works, having no external narrative source unlike the rest of his fairy work. The difference in character between this work and 'Come unto these yellow sands' is staggering. Gone is the sense of freedom and fun. Instead it has been replaced by something more solid and considerably more unpleasant. There is no horizon in the picture, and there is a strong sense of claustrophobia. The figures are heavier and well defined, not spirits or vapours as in the former work. Its atmosphere is one of 'trance-like' intensity, which holds all the figures motionless and isolated, not only from each other, but from the spectator. Things have

become muddled and confused and the work contains very many visual puns. Because we, the spectators, do not fully understand what is going on, this painting becomes increasingly unnerving and macabre. If one is not familiar with this work and has only seen it in book illustration format, one imagines it to be a large work. One gets a shock when it is seen in the flesh. It is like a whole new world or universe that is being observed through the wrong end of a telescope, extra-ordinarily concentrated and miniature.

It is difficult to tell how Dadd started the painting. Haydon apparently had a friend who wrote fairy poetry and was looking for someone to illustrate some verses. Whether or not 'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke' is an actual illustration of a specific poem cannot be known but one thing is for sure, Dadd wrote a poem himself to accompany the painting. This is very long and incoherent in places. Even though the majority of the poem relates to the painting there are areas that seem to come from his sub-conscious and have been slipped in, perhaps as some mild protest against his predicament. The quality of the poetry is described as 'bad, rather than mad', and has a tendency to get out of control in certain passages. His fondness for punning and word play is again evident. Because of its length and the fact that certain verses are very tenuously related to the painting only a few of the more interesting passages will be included.

The opening of the poem is in a relatively straightforward style and describes when the work was started:

*Half twelve, that's six, 'tis more  
Perhaps, exact that's gone before  
Behoves not here to say,  
How many years away  
Have welled up and flowed on  
Slow passing till they're gone  
But some such time has fled*



*Since regular business led  
To where a canvas glowed  
With fays.....*

Probably the most informative part of the poem is his description of the characters and the biographical information about them. However, this does not help us in any way to understand the painting, they are purely entertaining and often satirical:

*The Politican next, with senatorial pipe  
For argument on his opine ripe.  
A first chap Englishman at the short of chaff,  
To hear him talk, lord! How't would make you laugh  
For fairy politics differ so very wide  
From human governments complete divide.  
He's pondering matters now as if his vote,  
Ought be given ere't 'is smote.*

*The Nun - I mean.*

The better parts of the poem occur towards the end where he is purely concerned with pictorial effect. He now gives us a description of the calligraphic swirls that are drawn across the surface of the picture:

*Turn to the Patriarch and behold  
long pendants from his crown are rolled,  
In winding figures circle round  
The grass and such upon the mound,  
They represent vagary wild  
And mental aberration styled.  
Now into nature clinging close  
Now windily out away and toss,  
like a cyclone uncontrolled  
Sweeping around the chance - born fold  
Unto the picture brings a grace  
which else was marking to its face  
But tied at length unto a stem  
Shews or should do finitum rem -*

The last verse of the poem is without doubt Dadd's genius at play: just as the reader is deciding that it has little real importance to the painting, Dadd turns about and says exactly the same,

*But whether it be or be not so  
You can afford to let this go  
For nought as nothing it  
Explains. And nothing from  
Nothing, nothing gains.*<sup>5</sup>

### Description of the Painting

The figure central to the work through not literally so, is the fairy woodman, (The Feller). He is clad from head to toe in leather and is brandishing an axe which he is going to use on a hazelnut. The rest of the characters, goblins, gnomes and elves, are gathered around in curiosity to see whether he will split the nut with one blow. Dadd regularly depicted sharp implements such as swords, daggers and axes in his paintings. Although it is tempting to associate this with his mental condition, one ought not to read too much into this seeming pre-occupation as such weapons were constant elements in Victorian art.

Above the nut, squatting on the ground is a white-bearded old man who squints out at us with an expression of sheet terror, which is accentuated by his large eyes, a characteristic in Dadd's work. In the centre is the magician, 'The Patriarch'. He commands the whole assembly. His golden crown is boat-like in shape and on it are perched fairy dancers in Spanish costume. This pre-occupation with costume obviously goes back to his travels. On the left of his crown is Queen Mab and her female centaurs. The magician has his right hand raised as if in a gesture that the contest might begin. In his left hand he holds a club, (another symbol of his authority which he uses for hitting small furies over the head, if they misbehave).

Below the Patriarch and to the left are two eaves-dropping elves, and to their right is the politician in his pink gown. There are three figures to the right of the Fairy Feller, an ostler with his hands on his knees, a dwarf monk and an indifferent spectator whose head is directly below the axe.

To the extreme left of the Patriarch are two ladies. One is holding a mirror and the other, a broom. They have bulging calves and huge breasts, not unlike the shape of the hazelnuts. This is a rare instance of eroticism in Dadd's work. The erotic element is further emphasised by the head of a satyr who is gazing



in wonder up their skirts. Below, and to the left, are two rustic lovers. Directly above the Patriarch are Oberon and Titania who are discussing something. They, in turn, are being watched by an old woman in a scarlet cloak. Above these figures are the tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggarman and thief.

Apparently Dadd is said to have started the painting simply by gazing at the canvas and thinking of nothing until pure fancy began to take form. Certainly there is a feeling that the characters emerge from the background and have not so much been invented as conjured up through sheer effort and concentration. Although it appears that the design and composition simply grew on the canvas, it is of course carefully and cleverly worked out. The flat decorative border used in 'Oberon and Titania' (Plate No. 11) and the other works has been replaced by a mesh of grasses which sweep across the surface and which frame the picture at the sides. We almost have to brush these grasses aside in order to get a better view of the scene.

The changes in perspective and scale give an excitement to the painting. Again this technique was used by Maclise who would often push certain figures to the foreground by setting them up as if on platforms. The differing scale the figures might be due to something as simple as the fact that Dadd could not know what scale fairies should be in relation to the hazelnut which is painted lifesize. Within the work many subsidiary compositions are linked into the overall design. In the lower half of the picture, the group around the nut is shaped into an oval. The figures at the top are linked by a chain of daisies that form an ellipse. They are something of a substitute for the putti of fairies in 'Come unto these yellow sands'. The brim of the Patriarch's hat acts to divide the top and the bottom halves of the painting. This boat-like shape carries the group of figures at the top. The maids and the gentlemen on either side act as counter-balances.

A vertical line runs centrally down the picture from the tinker's grinder through Titania, to a fruit lying below the

Feller's left foot. There is a serpentine path that starts in the bottom right hand corner and goes backwards and forwards across the picture until it ends with the dragonfly's long bugle at the top left of the work.

The colouring is grey-green and a bit unnatural suggesting a world existing outside our own. However, some of the costumes are colourful, and the reds that appear are very bright.

Few of the characters are from other works, and overall this picture has no real precursors. Even the treatment of the paint is unfamiliar, particularly in the pebbled ground and in the fruits. Here these areas have been finished off with tiny individual lumps of paint which is most uncharacteristic as Dadd was always fond of smooth surfaces. Even though it took him nine years to do, the picture is still incomplete. Some of the nuts and swirling grasses have still only been sketched in. Interestingly, so has the axe, which might indicate a difficulty and fear of trying to recollect how sharp implements looked. We know from photographs that Dadd's method of working on complicated paintings was to do small sections at a time. This is clearly illustrated in (Plate No. 15) which shows him at work on 'Oberon and Titania'. Also of interest, is the fact that he has started to work in the bottom right-hand corner which is not the common practice for a right-handed artist.

Without any doubt, 'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke' was his masterpiece, but it should not be the only painting for which he is remembered.

Footnotes to Chapter III

- 1 *The Tempest*, Ariel's Song, Act I, Scene II.
- 2 *Art Union*, October 1841, p.171.
3. *Ibid*, October 1842, p.129.
- 4 *Ibid*, October 1843, p.267.
- 5 Poem explaining the action in 'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke', Richard Dadd, Broadmoor, January 1865



### CONCLUSION

The most fascinating aspect of Dadd's life is the connection of his two conditions, that of artist and madman. It is interesting to postulate what style he might have adopted if he had not been incarcerated. It is possible that he might have carried on in the same style in which he had been painting during his time with 'The Clique'. There is even the danger that his work could have fallen into some kind of petty formula calculated to please an ever growing market. Certainly, other Victorian painters fell into this trap, notably Millais, who towards the end of his illustrious career produced certain paintings such as his 'Bubbles' which were trivial, sentimental, and produced to meet a demand. Whether Dadd would have followed a similar path is pure conjecture.

To an extent, Dadd was in a strangely privileged position behind the walls of the various asylums. These walls proved to be a most effective barrier. Consequently, from the age of twenty-seven, he was isolated from normal human life. He was unaware of any changes in fashion within society, and he would have been little influenced by any previous artistic beliefs or friends. He no longer had to worry about the critics' judgements or consider if his paintings would sell. This very fact, and his determination to continue to paint, points out that he must have had tremendous motivation right up until the time of his death.

There is little doubt that Dadd suffered from severe schizophrenia, an illness that peak incidence occurs between the ages of twenty-five to thirty-five. This hypothesis is backed up by various facts that we know about him. Firstly, his family had a chronic history of mental disorder. His mother, brother and sister (who married John Phillip) all suffered similar illnesses. We know Dadd's symptoms were a confusion of thought and complete change in personality. Occasionally, it was possible to have

quite a rational conversation with him, at other times he was excitable and openly aggressive. This goes some way to suggest a split personality.

Perhaps the most important proof of his schizophrenia can be found in his work. I believe his work can be positively linked to his known disorder. The aggression conveyed in the figure compositions of the Eighteen Fifties seem to reflect his state of mind. This is most evident in 'The Flight out of Egypt' (Plate No. 16) which was painted in 1850. The scene is full of excitement, strange mad individuals wander around with evil grins on their faces. Note the exaggerated size of the eyes that conjure up an atmosphere of malevolence and suspicion.

However, it would be wrong solely to think of these features as characteristic of all his work. They only cover a comparatively short period of his life. The major part of his work depicted scenes that were more gentle, sad and wistful. There is much more emphasis on mood rather than on emotion. This adds a refreshing quality to his pictures in an age in which sentimentality was prevalent.

Shut away from all external stimuli, and with dependence upon his inner vision, Dadd's imaginative powers strengthened. Of course, other artists such as Blake and Fuseli had managed without any degree of mental alienation. It is impossible, but interesting, to speculate whether without his forced isolation he would be what he is today. One thing is certain, that his madness helped him to escape from the demands of the Victorian genre.

ILLUSTRATIONS





Plate 1      *Titania Sleeping*



Plate 2      *Puck*



*Plate 3*

*Choice of Hercules*



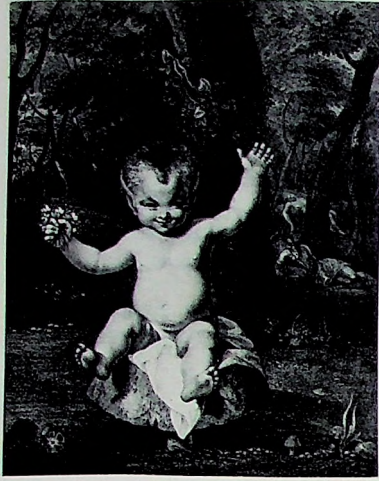


Plate 4

*Puck (by Reynolds)*

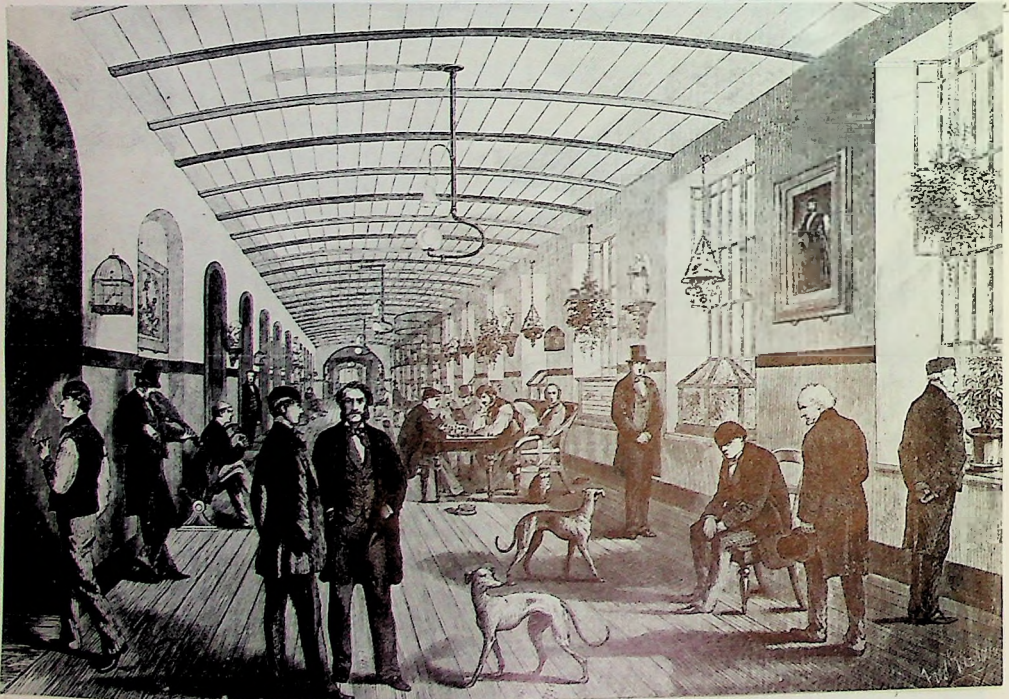


Plate 5

*Ward of Bethlem*





Plate 6      *Fantaisie de l'Hareme Egyptienne*



Plate 7      *Broadmoor Hospital*





Plate 8

*Elizabeth Langley*





Plate 9

*Mother and Child*



Plate 10

*Caravan Halted by the Seashore*





Plate 11

*Oberon and Titania*



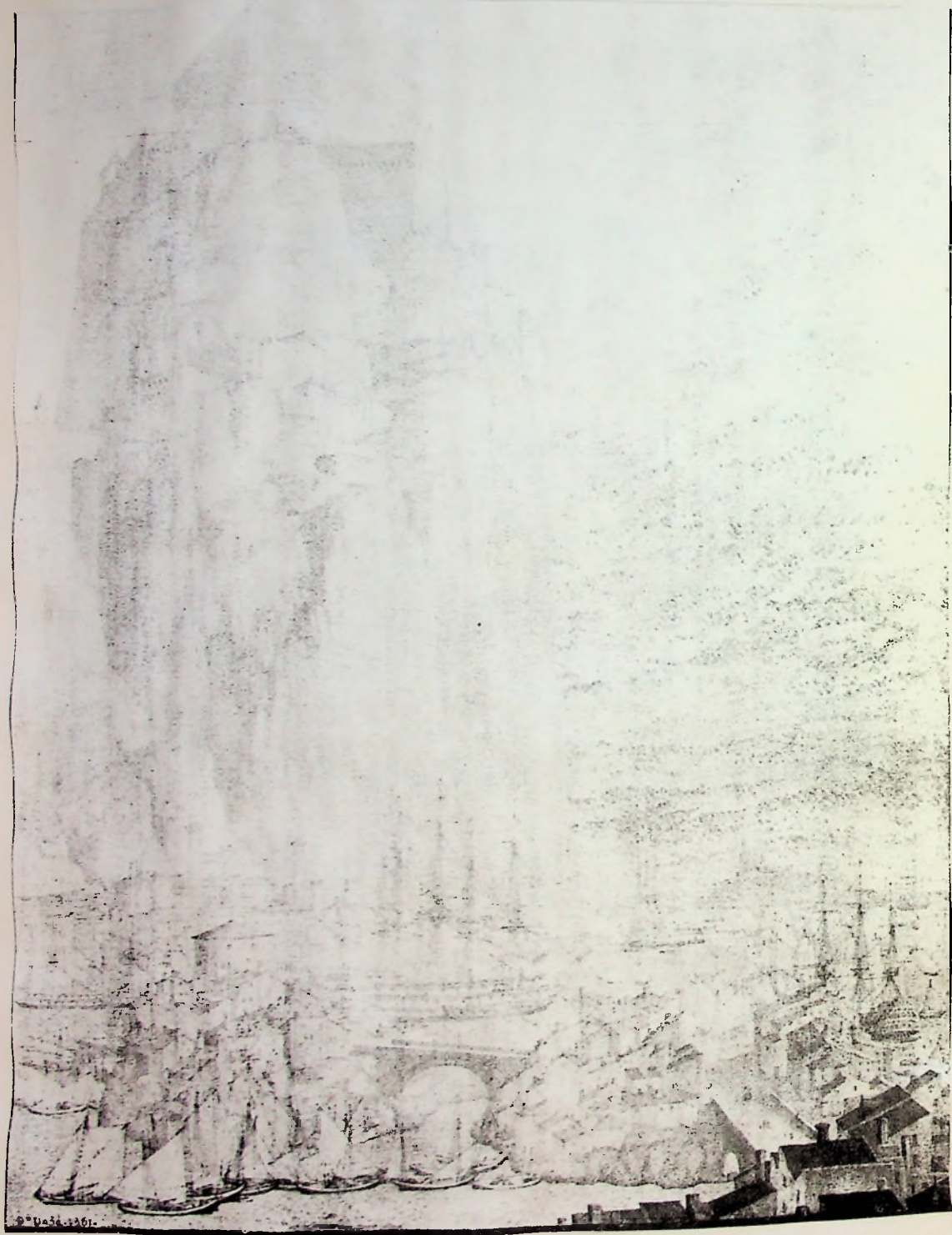


Plate 12

Port Staglin



Plate 13      *Come unto these Yellow Sands*





Plate 14

*The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*





Plate 15      *Dadd at work on Oberon and Titania*





Plate 16

*Flight out of Egypt*



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