

## News, Notes and Queries

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### RICHARD DADD (1817–1886): PAINTER AND PATIENT\*

THE nineteenth-century artist Richard Dadd, who spent most of his working life confined in the Criminal Lunatic Asylums at Bethlem and Broadmoor, is quite well known, and ever increasingly so, to the art world; his name is less well known, perhaps, in the sphere of psychiatric history.

Dadd was born at Chatham in 1817, the third son and fourth child of Robert Dadd, who owned a chemist's business in the High Street, and his wife Mary Ann (née Martin). His paternal grandfather had been timber-master at the dockyard. He was educated at Rochester Grammar School, and is said to have begun drawing at the age of about thirteen; though what sort of early artistic training he received, if any, is unknown. When the family moved to London in 1837 Richard Dadd entered the Academy Schools, where he gained three medals and was regarded as a student of great promise and exceptional industry. His contemporaries, including Frith, Egg, O'Neil, and John 'Spanish' Phillip (who married Dadd's sister), thought highly of his talents as an artist, and his qualities as an agreeable and lively companion. He exhibited works at the Academy and the Suffolk Street Galleries, sold some, and received one or two commissions including a series of woodcuts to illustrate the *Book of British Ballads*. His work from this period is mainly imaginative, and he had a special liking, which was to remain with him, for subjects from Shakespeare and those which included fairies.

In 1842, when he was nearly twenty-five, Dadd was introduced to Sir Thomas Phillips, who had recently attracted attention and a knighthood for his part in putting down the Chartist riots during his mayoralty of Newport. Phillips was planning a protracted tour of the Middle East on which he wished to take an artist to make sketches, and Dadd's inclusion was at the recommendation of their mutual friend David Roberts, R.A. It was towards the end of this journey that Dadd first began to show alarming symptoms which, at the time, his friends put down to the effects of sunstroke. Details of his behaviour have not been recorded, but later he was to show an intense dislike for Sir Thomas and probably this, amongst other things, was already expressing itself. It is also clear from later evidence that he had begun to feel himself haunted by the spirits, or fiends as he then saw them, which subsequently came to dominate his actions. Early in 1843 in Paris, when Phillips had finally decided to seek medical advice, Dadd left the party abruptly and posted home to London.

Here the news soon circulated amongst his close friends that he had 'returned home—Mad' (in the words of W. P. Frith), though some found it difficult to believe when in conversation with him. He became increasingly reserved and suspicious, and 'flighty' in his manner, spoke to a few intimates of the fiends which he felt to be about him, and gave way to occasional outbursts of violence; but for much of the time his behaviour appeared normal to the casual observer, and he continued working with enthusiasm. One of the eccentricities recorded from the later stages of his illness was the decision to live on new-laid eggs and ale, and vast quantities of eggs and ale were found in his lodgings after he had left.

\* Based on a paper read to the Osler Club of London, 16 October 1969.

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Robert Dadd clung persistently to the belief that his son was suffering from sunstroke and overwork, although at the same time he had another son developing symptoms of insanity; and even after Dr. Sutherland (physician to St. Luke's Asylum), had given the opinion that Richard could no longer be considered responsible for his actions, could not accept that the situation was beyond his control. The ties between them had always been close and affectionate, and it would appear that Robert Dadd had never witnessed any signs of violence, or had cause to suspect that his son's attitude towards himself might change. On 28 August 1843, at Richard's own request, he accompanied his father to Cobham in Kent, where he had spent much time sketching in childhood. They engaged rooms for the night and went out together for a walk in Cobham Park between nine and ten p.m., in the course of which Richard Dadd stabbed his father to death with a spring knife. The attack was brutal and determined and there was evidence of a considerable struggle on the ground around, and also in bruises and cuts on the body. Subsequently Dadd admitted freely to his action, but seems never to have recognized that he had killed his father, believing the object of his attack to have been a fiend sent to persecute him.

After the murder Dadd made his way to France without attracting attention, but within a week or so was arrested near Fontainebleau after attempting to kill a fellow-passenger in a carriage. After ten months in an asylum at Clermont he was brought back to England, the Home Secretary making arrangements for his arrival at the last possible moment before the hearing of the case, to avoid his long detention in prison. At the end of July and the beginning of August 1844 the remand and committal proceedings took place before the Rochester magistrates, the result being a foregone conclusion. Application was made under the Act 3 and 4 Victoria cap. 54 for the Home Secretary's authority for his removal to an asylum, and he was admitted to the Criminal Lunatic Department of Bethlem Hospital on 22 August 1844.

At the time of Dadd's admission case notes were not very systematically kept at Bethlem, and the large and imposing case books often contain, for any individual patient, little more than a rudimentary admission sheet, and a hastily-concocted note made on discharge or death. No notes were made for Dadd, therefore, beyond the details of his arrival, until he had been in the hospital for ten years. By this time there had been an official inquiry into treatment, the appointment of the first resident Physician Superintendent (Sir Charles Hood) in 1852, and a new rule enjoining the proper keeping of medical records. Hood's notes are here given in full:

*March 21st 1854.* For some years after his admission he was considered a violent and dangerous patient, for he would jump up and strike a violent blow without any aggravation, and then beg pardon for the deed. This arose from some vague idea that filled his mind and still does so to a certain extent that certain spirits have the power of possessing a man's body and compelling him to adopt a particular course whether he will or no. When he talks on this subject and on any other at all associated with the motives that influenced him to commit the crime for which he is confined here, he frequently becomes excited in his manner of speaking, and soon rambles from the subject and becomes quite unintelligible. He is very eccentric and glories that he is not influenced by motives that other men pride themselves in possessing—thus he pays no sort of attention to decency in his acts or words, if he feels the least inclination to be otherwise; he is perfectly a sensual being, a thorough animal, he will gorge himself with food till he actually vomits, and then again return to the meal. With all these disgusting points in his conduct he can be a very sensible and agreeable companion, and shew in conversation, a mind once well educated and thoroughly informed in all the particulars of his profession in which he still shines

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and would it is thought have pre-eminently excelled had circumstances not opposed. He killed his father in Cobham Park without any discoverable reason, and escaped to France with the intention he has said of killing the Emperor of Austria; but whilst on a Diligence the temptation came on him strongly to commence operations on a fellow passenger and he attacked him with a knife or razor and seriously wounded him but was prevented actually destroying life. For this crime he was confined 12 months in France and on his release was taken in charge by English authority and subsequently brought to this Hospital. He has said that he once when he was in a public place in Rome with the Pope, felt a strong inclination to assault him, but that on second thoughts the Pope was so well protected that he felt he should come off second best, and therefore he overcame the desire. After he killed his father, his rooms were searched and a portfolio was found containing likenesses of many of his friends all with their throats cut. He had been travelling in the East and was abroad at the time his peculiarities were first noticed.

The remainder of the notes, made at approximately monthly intervals in approximate conformity with the rule, all read 'No change'; until the need to begin a new book suggested an opportunity for further comment:

*1860 Jany. 10.* No alteration in this man's symptoms have occurred since the last note was made in the No. 1 Case Book. He still employs himself daily with his brush, but he is slower in completing any work he takes in hand. He associates very little with other patients, but is generally civil and well behaved to them. His mind is full of delusions.<sup>1</sup>

And again, 'No change' until the final note of his removal to Broadmoor on 23 July 1864, where he died of consumption on 8 January 1886.

It is interesting to note that the newly formulated McNaughton rules were never applied to Dadd's case, presumably because, as one journal put it, 'no doubt can remain in the mind of anyone . . . that the unfortunate young man is altogether irresponsible for his acts.' Had his state of mind been less obvious, had the rules been applied, and had they been interpreted by such a judge as Sir George Bramwell, one wonders what the result might have been. Sir George's interpretation, as offered to the Capital Punishment Commission of 1864,<sup>2</sup> was that insanity provided an 'excuse' in two cases only: where the state of mind was such that the person was not aware of the nature and consequences of his act, for example if he did not know that to cut off a man's head would kill him: and where there was a delusion of such a nature that, if it had happened to be true, the act would have been justified, for example where a person believed that he was being attacked with a murderous weapon; (and very few people, he thought, were so mad as this). Dadd certainly did not fall into the first category; for he knew that stabbing was liable to kill, and, having stabbed, he knew that he had killed. Whether or not 'persecution' by a fiend would have justified killing it, is no doubt a matter which would have had to be considered on its own merits. Moreover Sir George believed that in cases of insanity a stronger deterrent was necessary than that required for a person able to reason, and that many men who declared themselves to be under an uncontrollable impulse, found the impulse controlled when a policeman was at hand. According to the case notes this is precisely the situation in which Dadd had found himself, when he decided not to attack the Pope.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. D. L. Davies of the Maudsley Hospital, who has known Dadd's work for far longer than I and has studied his case history, had kindly given me leave to quote his opinion that 'from the diagnostic point of view Richard Dadd was indisputably schizophrenic'.

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Capital Punishment Commission; together with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendix . . .*, 1866.

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Indeed it is almost impossible that any jury confronted with Dadd's case would have found in accordance with these views, and equally unlikely that any judge would have so directed, whatever his theories. But the fact that his case never came to trial leaves it as an interesting precedent manqué, against which might have been tested some of the theories which were being bandied about in the mid-nineteenth-century debates on capital punishment and criminal responsibility.

Richard Dadd continued drawing and painting during the whole of his confinement at Bethlem, and his works from this period are now to be found in various public, as well as private, collections. Thirteen watercolours are in the possession of the Bethlem Royal Hospital. His first drawings were chiefly landscapes, worked from memory and from a sketch book which he had with him; but, inevitably when one considers his circumstances, most of the drawings from Bethlem are works of imagination, in which figures play a prominent part. They include an enigmatic series called *Sketch to Illustrate the Passions*, drawn mostly around 1853 and 1854: enigmatic chiefly for the motives which prompted him to undertake the exercise, but also for the rather tortuous means by which some of the subjects are fitted into the series. From the bits of landscape and other details in some of the later drawings it can be seen that Dadd's remarkable visual memory remained unimpaired, for it was not refreshed by any excursion outside the exercise yard of the Hospital during the whole of his twenty years there.

Before coming to any comment on Dadd's work in relation to his illness, it must be made quite clear that on artistic grounds alone much of it rates very high. Hood's view that he would have 'pre-eminently excelled' in his profession was no idle regret. But even were this the place to discuss them, the merits of his work need to be seen to be appreciated; and the attraction which it holds for those who do know it must, for present purposes, be taken on trust.

Many of Dadd's drawings made after 1843 show no sign at all of being the product of a disordered mind, and the same might be said of others when they are seen in isolation. Even where some peculiarity is observable, it is likely to be so deliberately and skilfully executed that one tends to search for an explanation within the context of the picture, before considering the artist's state of mind. Nevertheless there are certain features which recur throughout his work, which can be recognized as characteristic aberrations. The eyes which he gave to so many of his faces are the commonest of these features; elongated, sometimes slanting, with light almost transparent irises, they often contain an expression of burning intensity which is either quite inappropriate to the subject, or greatly exaggerated. Dadd himself had light blue eyes, and there is something of this same look about them in a photograph of him in the Bethlem archives; (though before speculating too wildly on this coincidence, it might be well to remember that the processes of early photography have bequeathed to many of us ancestors with an apparently rather passionate outlook on life).

The other main departure from normality is an occasional, quite deliberate distortion of the human form. This consists chiefly in grotesquely-neckless heads which are set directly on to shoulders, and legs (sometimes mis-shapen) which taper to tiny feet. These are to be seen particularly in *The Fairy Feller's Master-stroke* (1855–1864),<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Now in the Tate Gallery.

and to a lesser extent in the other major oil painting *Contradiction. Oberon and Titania* (1854–1858). These two oils, perhaps the most fascinating of Dadd's work, might be seen at one level as perfect examples of that tendency to fill every corner of the canvas with a proliferation of tiny detail, which is sometimes to be found in the art of psychotic patients; but the brilliance with which it is executed has made this feature seem peculiarly his own, and it is in any case well suited to the imaginative concept of both paintings. Tendrils swirl, bulrushes wave, leaves and flowers grow in impossible places and improbable sizes, while hosts of minute and exquisitely-drawn figures march, watch, lurk, menace, dance, or just carry on with their own business, amongst the foliage: and yet no sense of incongruity or irrelevance is created.

There are few completely irrelevant intrusions in Dadd's work at all, though a drawing in the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Sketch to Illustrate the Passions. Want, the Malingerer* (1856), contains a number of small symbols almost concealed in the gravel of the foreground, including a plus sign, the biological symbols for male and female, an asterisk, etc. In this drawing also, on the paper which one figure holds before his face, all the S's are written wrong way round. In *Sketch of a Curiosity Shop* (1854), in the British Museum, a man in conventional Victorian morning dress wears spurs.

Only a very little writing appears in the drawings. Where found, it does not take the 'writing-in' form which one might look for, and indeed can hardly be considered to be intrusive at all. A drawing in the Tate Gallery, *The Child's Problem. A Fancy Sketch* (1857), contains two pictures on the wall bearing legends which express anti-slavery sentiments, apparently unconnected with the subject of the drawing; but the subject itself defies interpretation, and these two political or humanitarian slogans might even be thought to be its most straightforward feature. In a contemporary account of a visit paid to Dadd at Bethlem in 1845, there is mention of some drawings bearing 'brief written descriptions (on the backs) in oddly-mingled French and English', and of another picture of a castle shattered by lightning underneath which was written 'the wrath of God': but without seeing these one cannot do more than note their existence.

Another drawing in the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Sketch to Illustrate the Passions. Patriotism* (1857), looking at first sight a little like a Gillray cartoon, consists almost entirely of writing, being a map of an imaginary battle area with a long description of the engagements fought over it. A prior knowledge of the artist's state of mind makes this drawing a pleasant subject for speculation, but to the superficial observer there is certainly no breakdown in its internal logic, nor even in the syntax of its lengthy text, and it contains wit as well as imagination.

Apart from the points mentioned, Dadd's work is fairly free from direct indications of his insanity: but it is as well when looking at it to bear in mind that the artist *was* insane, otherwise its very near-normality can sometimes lead one into profitless speculation about baffling, but apparently explicable, elements in it. Such speculation can, of course, deepen one's appreciation; but there comes a point in contemplating some of Dadd's drawings where it is best to opt for perpetual bafflement.

Richard Dadd's brother, George William, was admitted to Bethlem on 13 September

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1843, aged twenty, after being confined for a fortnight in Kensington House Asylum. He had been admitted with delusions that his bed was on fire, refusing to go to bed at night, and having on one occasion returned home naked. He had struck a keeper at Kensington House, but was normally tractable and good tempered. His attack was said to have begun six months previously, that is at about the same time as Richard's. He was transferred to the Incurable Establishment after a year, and thereafter no notes were made until 1853:

*Novr. 28th 1854.* Was formerly violent but not now for some years. He is dull, slow and indolent unless when urged to work and then when he once commences he will work like a horse; coal carrying is an employment he excels in. At times he is stubborn generally silent, but now and then converses with considerable acuteness. He plays draughts and cards very fairly. His friends seldom or never visit him. His brother is confined in the Criminal Establishment for the murder of his father, and another brother has a private attendant. [There is also mention of a sister 'similarly afflicted' on the admission sheet, a note probably added some time after admission.] He was a clever workman employed in the Chatham Dock Yard.

*28 Novr. 1854.* Sometimes he spouts Shakespeare and knows a great many plays by heart. His favourite book is the Old Curiosity Shop, and it is always somewhere about him, if he is not reading it. He has acquired the name of 'Tiger' from the voracious manner in which he eats his meals.

The next note, apart from 'No change', was made in February 1868, when he was 'decidedly more imbecile, and has aged very considerably, his hair getting grey, & he has become more feeble, however he still does a great deal of work.' From October of the same year he suffered several pulmonary haemorrhages, in the course of one of which he died, on 6 November. Details of the post-mortem examination are given.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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### THE 'BUBU'TU' LESION IN ANTIQUITY

MEDICAL knowledge in the Ancient Middle East was primitive, being based primarily on folk medicine associated with herbal remedies (Oppenheim, 1962). Although medical knowledge was rudimentary and the writings of the scribes were insufficiently detailed, we are fortunate insofar as the ancient records demonstrate a keen sense of observation for signs and symptoms, even if the interpretation of them is fallacious. As far as clinical medicine was concerned, the most important observations were made on the external surface of the body, and also on the lungs, heart and liver, similar anatomical areas to those used most commonly for divination in animals, especially sheep, goats and cattle.