

The Mysterious and the Marginal: The Incubation of Poetry Within and About the Occult Writings of Sir John Grantner

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This article presents a sonnet in two parts recently discovered as marginalia in the Felbrigg Library copy of Sir John Grantner's *On Reason: 63 Paths to Logickal Obedience* (1558). The notes, in ink, appear to stem from the late sixteenth century, with the second verse added by a different and possibly much later hand than the first. A third verse in pencil, in limerick form, dated 1985, has since been removed, and has not yet been recovered.¹

The sonnet will be presented in full, with a translation and a 'modern rendering', as part of a discussion of this fascinating discovery in an equally fascinating occult text. It is hoped that this account will stimulate debate about the long overlooked work of Sir John Grantner, as well as raise interesting questions about the nature of poetry and its transmission.²

Man and Manuscript

Before entering the description and exploration of this charming marginalia, it may be useful to provide a very brief account of the life of Sir John Grantner and the particular manuscript in question, insofar as surviving records allow. For a fulsome

¹ M. Rose-Steel, *Errant Schoolboys: Recovering Lost Limericks* (London: Silverweasel Press, 2005).

² I am indebted to many colleagues who have commented on this paper and its associated projects. In particular, I would like to thank the inestimable Dr Jaime Robles, who alerted me to several intriguing connections between Grantner's work and his literary contemporaries. Her work on the recovery of marginalia from lost texts, *A Scribe in Time: An Overview of Lost Text Marginalia, 1428-1772* (San Francisco: Bay Area Press, 1984), has for many years been invaluable to all serious scholars in the field. Dr Alwyn Harrison also provided technical assistance in the use of quotations.

though occasionally speculative treatment of this topic, the reader is directed towards Samuel Flood's *Interview with a Hanged Man* (1999). The evocation therein of Elizabethan scholarly and mystical life is commendably rich, though the imagined conversation between Grantner and William Shakespeare (Chapter 7), particularly the connection between the god Hermes and Hamlet the Dane will be viewed, by the cautious reader, as compelling narrative rather than historical likelihood.³

Although he played a prominent role in London society in the mid-sixteenth century, taking up at various points commissions at the Royal Mint and Aleman's Board, alongside truncated forays into diplomacy (Ambassador to Niedersaxen 1541-1542) and academia (holding the St John's, Cambridge, Chair in Rhetorics vacated by Sir James Cobalt 1559-1561), Grantner was never able to sustain a secure and respectable position. He had a tendency to distrust all but a small inner circle, and was given to unpredictable explosions of rage, which cost him a number of modes of employment. According to Flood, he once trampled on the visiting Duchess of Kent's hat, after a 'particularly cruel mispronunciation of his name' (p. 72). My own research has found a story (sadly undocumented) still told in 'Black Boys Inn' of Aylsham, Norfolk, that Sir John once picked a fight with the local blacksmith, John Cromer. The knight was thrown into the village pond for his troubles.

In later years, Sir Grantner withdrew into the quieter environs of his various roles, though these continued to be to some extent temporary. He is recorded as staying at Blickling Hall (1562) and in rooms at Trinity (1567), where he kept chickens.⁴ He studied and wrote intensively in almost all his places of residence, placing great demands on the households for books, parchment, ink and what he calls

³ See also the discussion below on the revolutionary subtexts of Shakespeare's mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

⁴ S. Flood, *Interview with a Hanged Man* (Coventry: Hellbranch Press, 1999), p.92.

‘such Windews as mayke Suns fierce’.⁵ It has not been established at what point he began writing *On Reason*, though most scholars agree that it could have been no earlier than 1544,⁶ and the final manuscript was known to be in existence by 1558.

On Reason’s reception in London’s more esoteric societies was mixed, as far as can be ascertained from the scant records of such communities available. Lord Eden’s coded diaries, only recently transcribed,⁷ dismiss it as ‘more Norfolkish muck’, but records of the Worshipful Company of Gazetteers and Jakes⁸ show that the text was enthusiastically debated, including at a specially arranged session at the Liberty of the Clink, in 1564. After an uncertain history, the copy of the manuscript which this article addresses was bought for the Felbrigg collection in 1965, where it now resides. A partial history of ownership has been established by Harper Brown⁹ though some of the connections made remain debatable, and in one instance, they are profoundly disturbing. The manuscript itself is a magnificent, and certainly unique example of Elizabethan occult writing, produced not only with exceptionally clean copy, but also handsomely decorated, as discussed below.

The copy is slightly damaged, showing possible burn marks in the bottom right corner, and a tear running from the top of page 83, through a picture of St Anthony plucking holly,¹⁰ but as nothing has been exacted, this damage is presumed

⁵ Norfolk, Felbrigg Library, MS J. Grantner, *On Reason: 63 Paths to Logickal Obedyience* (1558(?)), p.52. All subsequent references are to this manuscript edition incorporated in the text with pagination in parentheses.

⁶ The evidence for this is fairly complex, but rests on the then fashionably ‘Tractarian’ flourishes of Grantner’s penmanship, and a letter to John Fenley of that year bemoaning his inability to ‘fynd each Word each Truth declares’. For a better discussion of this dating process, see *The Proceedings of the Grantner Research Society 1979* (published 1980), ed. by James Instagram.

⁷ See Paul Amyth, *Lord Eden’s Diaries Transcribed* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter, 2004).

⁸ This (now defunct) society was a front for banned esoteric gatherings, and counted a number of prominent men, such as John (Lord) Ducksford, William of Maryland and John Dee amongst its sometime members. The archive of their proceedings is now held at Royal Holloway.

⁹ H. Brown, *Unusual Histories of Unusual Books* (Bedford: Clarendon Street Press, 1972), pp. 377-451.

¹⁰ This illustration has been the subject of much discussion, since it is more usually Joseph of Arimathea, who is depicted in this context (See, for example, Drummond of Hawthornden’s vastly

accidental. The further damage – the interpolation of the sonnets here discussed – may by some be taken as an act of gross vandalism, though I maintain, in the company of a good many historians, that the perpetrators have in the end contributed to the lasting intrigue and value of the original text.

The Sonnet(s)

The terminology of the duo-sonnet is exceedingly complex, reflecting the high-Elizabethan style of Grantner's text as a whole, suggesting that the author of the graffiti was familiar with its content. Speculation that the first verse may have been written by Grantner himself has been supported by the numerological analysis undertaken by S. Henderson¹¹ but lacks external evidence. The version presented here uses the standardised spelling given by Esterhaus,¹² rather than the more archaic original, since several parts of the text are difficult to decipher, and on two occasions employ symbols rather than words (here rendered as *amaritic* and *icarian*, following Esterhaus's glossary).¹³

I have provided a literal translation of the original, see below, also drawing on Esterhaus for appropriate understanding of Grantner's often eccentric vocabulary and specialist uses of alchemical terms, where it is clear that the poem's intended meaning correlates with the terms' use in the wider text.

under-appreciated epic poem 'Bending o'er Joseph's Flowryng Rood'). However, the muscular build and indications of flesh wounds make St Anthony unmistakable in this instance.

¹¹ S. Henderson, *Counting Rows: Sir John Grantner's Self-Scribing as Intertext* (London: Silverweasel Press, 2002), pp. 13-117.

¹² J. Esterhaus, *Sir John Grantner's Deep Obscurity of Logick* (London: Silverweasel Press, 1987).

¹³ See J. Esterhaus, pp. 443-45.

Any effort to render clear and definite that which is written with deep ambiguity may seem rather at odds with the manuscript within which the poem is found and, equally, with the limited biographical information we have on Sir John's life. He was devoted in all ways to invocations of the mystic and, during his brief tenure at Cambridge was a provocatively contradictory presence, said to have drawn confusion, admiration and bile in equal measure from students and masters. However, I trust that such material will nonetheless be helpful to the modern reader, since the obscurities of intended meaning are now further blurred by the obscurities of time. In addition, questions over the authorship and intent of the poem remain open for the time being, so it may be wise to refrain from connecting the marginal writing too intimately with a known author, irrespective of the strongly influential context of its preservation.

Finally, a 'modern rendering' is given, my own composition that emerged from the 2008 Colloquium of Cornish Poets and Composers (held at Callington Community College) at which a major theme of discussion was the art and challenge of 'modernising' poetry in minority and historical dialects (particularly Cornish in the case of this seminar) for the modern reader. The ambition was to increase access to marginalised voices or forgotten verse, without merely replicating – or worse, obscuring – the original. For this reason my own verse is presented only in parallel with its literary progenitor, and should not be analysed or enjoyed other than within this context.

It is hoped that this inter-textual presentation of three poems will prove useful both to scholars of mid-Elizabethan occult poetry, and in the construction of illuminating parallels and contrasts regarding teacher-pupil (poet-poem; author-commentator) relations, with and around a specific historical setting. After a brief discussion of some of Grantner's key occult concepts, this article concludes by

drawing out some of the connections within Grantner's thought that encourage us to make a holistic reading of his output, presenting as an illustration Grantner's own poetry at the end of *On Reason*, the famous 'Oh Scholar verdis' quatrain, and the 'official' position it is able to occupy within the parent text.

Original¹⁴

i)

*This loresman, earsore errorist so altiloquent
Chubbs up the knowing binotonously,
Makes amaritic, anxiferous, discontent
His own quizcuss metromanic alienist,
His icarian student. Gilravage plots meant
To absterge the lothly loresman's slink-vealed pride
Abound. Plots to deosculate the logos ferment
And higgle in joinhand, turantulating dreams.*

ii)

*But plotter, what callifudge flexanimous
Might do? What dejectile but the Big Jump might have
Baskwatherly results he holds desiderous?
Oh what itch, to disenliven rambling tonger!
But ... changing words to extradictions ... this thought-pent
Coward, declines, to wallow in his safe lament.*

¹⁴ First verse (i), (possibly by Grantner), written in brown ink in the right-hand margin of p. 178 (I am using Esterhaus's folio pagination here and elsewhere); second verse (ii), entered immediately below in black ink.

Literal Translation:

This teacher, lofty in tone, tough on the ears and often wrong

Locks up knowledge with his boring voice,

And makes bitter, anguished and discontent

His high-flying student. Wild plots meant

To wash away the loathsome teacher's foul pride

Abound. Plots to excitedly kiss knowledge ferment

And slowly develop in writing, exciting dreams as if through music.

But plotter, what hoax or trick with the power to change minds

Might do? What but death could be thrown down to have

The withering results he thinks are desirable?

Oh how he itches to kill the rambling speaker!

But ... turning his words into realities ... this person trapped in thought,

A coward, declines, so as to wallow safely in his lament.

Modern Rendering:

Teacher and Student

He is up there, somewhere, a-scattering
like blessings his flawed fragmented knowing
strung obscurely, like those silver rings
conjoined in Christmas crackers' jaws.

I, who listen, eyebrows furrowing clouds,
can not escape the tree-tops – he too proud
to share the trick. So my cherubic brow
daydreams of schemes, of plucking wings.

Here, see my notebook, all cobwebs and scrawl
of diabolical design, and all
these anchors latched to ankles hook and haul
this puffing dodo back to ground.

(You know, those magic rings you can't undo.)

Complain and doodle; what else is there to do?

Although this modern rendering was written more as a response to the original poem(s) than as a ‘new version’, continuity is preserved in two ways. Firstly, the sonnet form employed here relies on the unusual Illyrian form (three relatively distinct quatrains and a summarising couplet, with an AAAB rhyme-scheme), which is specifically recommended by Grantner in his chapter on efficacious poetry for various purposes, such as ‘bawldery’, ‘gaming luck’, ‘the ricking of certaine animalls’ and ‘delving Love of the rightest sort’ (pp. 69-88). The fact that the marginalian sonnet quoted above does not obey this form, but takes the much freer Sicilian form (one end-rhyme repeated to begin each couplet, leaving alternate lines unrhymed) is usually taken as evidence that Grantner is not the author, especially since he remarked unfavourably on the form’s ‘lymping gait, a Man in one yron boot’ in a letter to his business partner and fellow writer John Fenley¹⁵. However, as the concluding discussion will touch upon, this discontinuity may not be quite so straightforward, if we determine to provide a holistic reading of Grantner’s output.

Secondly, the theme of the linked rings in the modern rendering, while transposed into the milieu of the British tradition of disappointing Christmas cracker prizes, has powerful associations for anyone familiar with Grantner’s work on astronomy. In the later chapters of *On Reason* the outlines of a theory of planetary motion are presented, in which the paths of the various ‘Heavensome Images’ (p. 172) correspond to a number of different moral paths the initiate may undertake to follow. Combining a perhaps unique concept of ‘moral geometry’, as Henderson’s excellent summary terms it¹⁶ with a more usual set of correspondences of powers, qualities and histories, Grantner shows that each planet is controlled not only by its own nature, but also by its relation to others, using the telling idea of ‘enringed souls, each lock’d in

¹⁵ E. Dee, *Sir John Grantner – Collected Letters* (London: Coward’s Way Press, 1965), p. 83. Letter dated 11 December 1549.

¹⁶ S. Henderson, *Counting Rows*, p. xxii.

each, to move against constraint and shackle, but only so may creep through Heaven’ (p. 172). Given that this description seems one of mutual, regularised *influence*, rather than mirroring the geography of the Ptolemaic system, some have seen this as a precursor of Newton’s theory of Gravity – it is known that Newton had a copy of Grantner’s seminal text in his Cambridge library, though no reference of it is found in his preserved notes.¹⁷ However, Grantner’s interest seems to me to bear more heavily on the human conscious world than on the physical. Although he does chart with accuracy appropriate to knowledge available at the time (See Linus Ogi’s contextualisation of Elizabethan occult knowledge in *Figuring the Golden Age*, 1981) the discussion in *On Reason* returns inexorably to the necessary human qualities and modes of thinking to ‘creep’ effectively through human society, rather than celestial space. The rings thus operate as versatile and powerful metaphors for Grantner’s philosophy, describing the power of social roles, themes of indebtedness and the resources available to a ‘truth-suckeld loresman’ to combat and exploit the ‘anulus yron’; these are explicitly shown to be ‘streng as oak’, yet also described as ‘a culd preparedness, a winter’ (pp. 177-79). In other words, the rings are extremely durable, but may yield under the right heat, being malleable to the initiate’s powers, just as winter thaws into spring. (The spelling ‘streng’ is of interest here, since ‘strong’ was by this time the commonly accepted spelling, if we take the meaning to be proverbial English expression ‘strong as oak’; my inclination is to suggest that ‘streng’ may thus be either a conflating pun on ‘strong’ and ‘stern’, or a Germanic import of the same meaning).¹⁸

¹⁷ See E. Dee’s summary of Grantner’s known circle of influence, *Collected Letters*, pp. 17-20.

¹⁸ If so, this would certainly push back the date of the naming and usage of portmanteaux, several centuries earlier than the invention normally attributed to Dodgson by Victorian scholar C.J.F. Catterwaul. I have defended this view against numerous attacks by supporters of Catterwaul, for whose august work I retain great respect, but which may now, I suggest, stand in need of revision, or at least a 150-year service.

The centrality of the ring theme, though it is called upon directly by only 13 of the 63 ‘paths’ (beginning at Path 38, *The Donkey’s Hoof*), is unquestionable in the overall work. Not only are the direct references made in the later, more developed stages of the text (here I concur with Henderson’s argument for a long, linear production of Grantner’s thought), but the manuscript itself takes on some telling characteristics. The relatively small size of the book (somewhat less than usual folio) is enhanced by an unusual circular illustration on the front cover, bearing motifs repeated at intervals in the text itself. Around a drawing of two hands, one placing three spread fingers onto the open palm of the other, circulate some of the symbols and beasts most often associated with writing in the occult milieu. However, it is notable that Grantner made a number of subtle amendments to these symbols, to better cohere to his theme. The Basilisk in the top right-hand corner is shown (uniquely, to my knowledge) to be hatching a perfectly round egg. The waves upon which the ship-of-Fate toils in the top left-hand corner are actually many overlapping circles (rings). The asp eating its own tail that makes up the third point of the triangle is not only a circle in itself, but also contains within its noose the face of a man. Even the page itself mimics a circular shape to some extent, having subtly rounded edges. This, combined with the browning of the pages over time, is likely what led Lord Felbrigg, on receiving the manuscript into his collection, to describe it as ‘much redolent of the potato’.¹⁹

Finally, and not unrelatedly, the word ‘plot’ should be at the heart of our reception of the original sonnet octet, highlighted by its absence in the modern rendering here reproduced.²⁰ The multiple and significant meanings of ‘plot’ should

¹⁹ F. Clunus, *The Infinite Librarian: Edited Diaries of Lord Felbrigg* (London: Silverweasel Press, 1974), p. 317.

²⁰ This elliptical reference – a refusal to speak of what must remain unsaid – was said by one reviewer at the Colloquium of the poem’s original presentation to give them ‘a case of the Derridean shivers!’

not need extensive investigation, but a brief indication may be helpful. It may put us in mind of subterfuge and secret plans, allotted land, especially for agriculture or a place of commerce, mathematical patterning, as in a graph, and the events of a narrative. Grantner often makes use of these divergent meanings in the body of *On Reason*, for example on p. 32, where ‘therein plot t’ward the irrisistable ‘gainst the present’, may mean to plan (work against) or merely foresee independent events. The distinction is clearly very important to the understanding of the text, but remains so well balanced throughout the chapter that it must be considered a deliberate act of obfuscation. Ogi has noted this and a number of other examples, which he attributes to a sense of political unease in the author’s mind – it is after all one thing to simply predict the decay of the current world order (‘fel repose of castyles dark, and kynges’ (p. 12)) and another to urge one’s readership to conspire against it.²¹

Indeed, several additional meanings have been attributed to the word in the context of Grantner’s work, more than a few scholars detecting references to Pontius P(i)lot, weary trudging of the initiate burdened with knowledge (i.e. *plod*) or, more fancifully, a cryptogram involving anagram and homonymity to give a code for ‘topple’, as a further layer of revolutionary intent. For an extensive and often amusing exploration of the most persistent theories, see L. Ogi.²²

In fact, there is precious little evidence that Sir Grantner, whatever his troubles with authority (either with those holding power over him, or with retaining his own positions of rank) had any earthly ‘plot’ in mind in his writings. Even if we continue to assume Grantner’s authorship of the marginal sonnet(s), which kick against ignorance and intellectual pomposity, the appeal is to a mental and spiritual freedom, not a political rebellion. The want-a-way mood of the writing, which I have

²¹ L. Ogi, *A Pear inside the Cider* (London: Emu, 1983), pp. 73-101.

²² See in particular Chapter 4 in L. Ogi, *A Pear inside the Cider*.

attempted to replicate in the modern rendering, is of a piece with *On Reason*'s search for 'paths' – the geographical and travelling metaphor being omnipresent. Path 21 in particular, *The Upturned Ounce*, urges the initiate to seek forward momentum, 'counting ever on't Morro' (p 56). Images of flight are also regularly found, as targets for meditation as for example in *The Ousel-Cock* and *Rook Liver Stew* (pp. 32-40, 113-42).

The former of this pair is particularly interesting when considered alongside R.U.R.R. Benfeather's treatise on the revolutionary subtext of Shakespeare's 'The ousel cock so black of hue/ With orange-tawny bill',²³ with its extensive reference to colour codes used by anti-Mary Queen of Scots reformers during the mid-sixteenth century.²⁴ The contrast with the tradition of blue lip colouring for female characters in Shakespearean theatre should be obvious.²⁵

Quatrain and Conclusion

As mentioned above, *On Reason* concludes with what has become known as the 'Oh Scholar verdis' quatrain. This four-line verse is something of an oddity, as it appears to be the only rhymed verse in the text. (This fact has been used as evidence both for and against Grantner's authorship of at least the first verse of the marginal sonnets – see S. Henderson, *Counting Rows*, throughout). It also sits on a page of its own at the very end of the book, with no subsequent remarks or clear introductory flourishes. I have attempted to replicate this effect here, so the reader must remain a little patient before the quatrain's full text is given. Suffice to say, at present, that the little poem

²³ Act I, Scene iii, in William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*.

²⁴ R.U.R.R. Benfeather, *Subtext and Public Sex: Shakespeare in Athens* (Didcot: Cider Press, 1993), pp.1-39.

²⁵ See [John Knox], *The First Blast of the Trvmpet Against the Monstrvovs Regiment of Women*, published anonymously in Geneva, 1558.

strikes a counter-note to the preceding lessons, and arguably has more in common with the marginal scribblings than with the main body of the text. Henderson has indeed argued that the quatrain should be seen as a later addition, and that the majority of *On Reason* was therefore completed no later than 1552. This would lend support to his own theory of Grantner's whereabouts at this time but has not been widely accepted, due to the violence this would do to the orthodox chronology of Grantner's life, and indeed, the Royal Mint.²⁶

A numerical study of both the marginalia and the quatrain has suggested that the numbers 4, 5 and 6 are of especial importance – Jaxson in his 2001 study *Elizabethan Numerology Complexes of Secondary Import* further insists on the number 6.54 – though no overall pattern of signification has yet been distinguished.²⁷

In my own research²⁸ I have noted the similarities of expression in the two pieces, but retain a cautious doubt over their joint authorship, given the scant text available for comparison. Certainly the quatrain is more easily understandable (yet less comprehensible) than the octet, and the references to Greek mythology, while superficially aligned, actually relate to very different themes: the tragic human hubris of Icarus, as opposed to the fearful ecstasy of the Dionysian festivals. Perhaps the essential point, however, is not continuity of authorship, but continuity of ideas, which these poems do in many ways indicate, lending, I would argue, support to the current project of translation and re-voicing poems, re-presenting them to new audiences and in still vital contexts.

Moreover, there is unquestionable value in considering the quatrain in conjunction with the sonnet(s), marking the key role that poetic expression appears to

²⁶ S. Henderson, *Counting Rows*. pp. 321-46.

²⁷ F. Jaxson, *Elizabethan Numerology Complexes of Secondary Import* (London: Silverweasel Press, 2001), pp. 456-654.

²⁸ See M. Rose-Steele, *The Tribble with Troubles: How Star Trek Can Elucidate Early Modern Poetry*, pp. 17-22.

have played for Grantner (and, likely, his acolytes). Throughout *On Reason*, the reader is advised that ‘the Poet admys the Sun’ and may ‘upbraid the Beare’ – i.e. has a clearer knowledge and greater authority than normal men. Poetry of all kinds is ‘grate of fruit’(p. 42) and ‘most wonderfull a stilling ayre’ (p. 111). Perhaps the possibilities of communication through obscurity that poetry provided (certainly in the forms adopted by Grantner’s contemporaries) became increasingly attractive to the author as his social circle shrank, and he became a recluse, spending more and more time with his books and his writing. Although very little is known about Sir Grantner’s end, the story that Flood gives of his being hanged for heresy at Bishopsgate is not only deeply moving but also plausible.²⁹ Further, since Grantner had often claimed the gift of prophecy, I am given occasion to wonder whether he had foreseen this sad outcome in his writing, knowing that, as he ascended the short ladder that would shortly be kicked out from under him, he had made his own statement, his own ‘best quill’d Dawn’ (p. 119). The dreams of the frustrated student may take wing, escaping the clutches of the *loresman’s slink-vealed pride*.

²⁹ S. Flood, *Hanged Man*, pp. 205-12.

*Oh Scholar verdi, understanding all here writ
and passing Dionysus yet for Witt
wilt ken, as only having seen maketh bare
all thou hast seen is Naught but Midden-ayre.*

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