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## IN FAERY LANDS FORLORN: THE FANTASTIC NARRATIVE POETRY OF QUEEN'S EARLY LYRICS

### **Abstract**

Popular music lyrics and mainstream poetry share many similarities. They can both be analysed as poetry, using traditional theoretical tools of such interpretation. The paper focuses on early narrative songs by the band Queen, which all feature fantastic characters and seem to share the same setting. They can be interpreted as parts of the same story that takes place in Freddie Mercury's imaginary land of Rhye. This paper argues that the songs in question can be understood and analysed as narrative poetry, with the focus on narrative elements such as story, storytelling, narrative formulae, dynamic motion, or narrative intensity (Kenner). Furthermore, importance will be placed on the songs' intertextual elements, since they help place the songs within the larger literary canon and reinforce their status as poetry. Since music and lyrics create meaning together, special attention will, whenever necessary, also be given to the musical element of the songs.

**Key words:** fantasy, lyrics, narrative poetry, popular music, Queen, rock poetry

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## 1. Introduction: Reading Rock Poetry

Poetry reading is a liminal action, suspended between reason, knowledge, and emotion. Thorough explorations of poetry usually attempt to negotiate the shaky ground between the murky world of authors' intentions and the slightly less murky, though no less subjective, reflections of readers' inner and outer worlds, all the while trying to juggle theoretical concepts including, but not limited to, poetic genre, tone, style, language and imagery, as well as allusions to other literary works and any intertextual relations that might develop from there. Sometimes, it can be a sound strategy to try and forget about these notions, and use a more emotional method. Other times, it might be best to at least start with theory, and allow associations to form from there. In this paper, I will follow the latter approach, because the subject of my exploration is seemingly different from traditional written poetry, and a familiar starting point will serve as a grounding force in this enterprise.

It may seem redundant to vindicate the right of rock lyrics to be called poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when many studies have been written on the subject of popular music (see e.g. Frith, Straw and Street 2001, Eckstein 2010, or Shuker 2001); universities across the globe offer programmes in reading popular music, and even traditionalists have grudgingly recognised the legitimacy of lyrics as a poetic form, as evidenced by Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize. However, in spite of these advances in popular music studies, lyrics are still frequently ignored as a poetic form (Dylan is an exception, rather than a rule), and even when their poetic worth is acknowledged, there is still a gap between their acknowledgement as poetry in academia and their actual poetic analyses. The abovementioned studies mostly agree that the textual element of popular songs is a crucial part of the form, and some even call lyrics "the single most consistent element of pop songs" (Moore 2003: 42); nevertheless, they gloss over the actual literary analysis, as if the lyrics' acknowledgment as poetry is enough for them to be categorised as such, and focus instead mostly on sociological or cultural angle of text analysis. Some of these theorists, like Eckstein, even categorically state that "lyrics are not poetry" (2010: 23), while others, like Moore, say that they are only "*like* poetry" (2003: 42; emphasis original). Contrary to this, my view is that lyrics can absolutely be called poetry and analysed as such, which will be proven in the course of this article. Ironically, early research into popular music was dominated by textual analysis, "largely because

such an approach was grounded in a familiar research methodology” (Shuker 2001: 141), but even such analyses usually treated lyrics in too simple a matter, with the emphasis placed more on their sociological and cultural context, and less on their literary and poetic value. The result was that, even though lyrics have always been recognised as an important poetic element of popular songs, they have “persistently fallen through the nets of academic fishing” (Eckstein 2010: 14). Even the authors like Shuker (2001), who examine songs through textual analysis, mostly focus on the meaning and cultural context of lyrics, and do not pay much attention to their quintessentially poetic elements, such as rhyme scheme, figures of speech, or intertextual allusions. In light of that, the best way to build upon these studies and show that popular music lyrics are indeed poetry is to treat them as such – in other words, to analyse them as written poetry through a hermeneutic approach.<sup>1</sup>

To this end, similarities between poetry and lyrics need to be addressed. Firstly, poetry has always been a communal event, rather than solitary pursuit, as the long established orphic tradition indicates. The ivory tower version of poetry, with a scholar-poet painstakingly depositing his (and it is almost always *his*, as this version of the poet is usually male, privileged in terms of class, race, occupation, and age) impressively vast knowledge into meticulous verses may be an admirable academic endeavour, but hardly ever encourages that part of poetic reading that appeals to the emotional. However, even the cerebral High Modernists like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound recognized the undeniable connection between poetry and music, as can be seen in the *Four Quartets* and *The Cantos*, respectively. Poets whose influence is felt more strongly in contemporary poetry include precisely those authors who readily acknowledged the connection, like William Carlos Williams or Walt Whitman. That brings us to the second point: the concept of poetry is inseparable from the concept of music. This is evidenced in the works of scops, troubadours, Romantic balladeers, and all other poets who modelled themselves on the bardic tradition – from Whitman, to the “Chicago school” of poetry, to Allen Ginsberg and his Beats in the fifties, and even beyond, to today’s versions of performative lyricism, like slam. Poetry has always been linked to the idea of performance (see Oliver 1989; Gräbner and Casas 2011).

It is, therefore, inevitable to think of textual content set to music as poetry. It might be a specific kind of poetry, granted, but it is poetry nonetheless. It might have its own particular rules, and sometimes (even

often), the lyrical element is secondary to the musical one, but traditional, written poetry has its idiosyncrasies too – sometimes, typography is part of the meaning, like in the works of e. e. cummings, sometimes, there is a musical element there as well, like with Anne Carson’s “tangoes” in *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001), and many a time, sound is more important than meaning, like in Hart Crane’s “Voyages” (1926) or Dr. Seuss’s children’s verses. The best way of approaching the analysis of popular music lyrics, then, is to use the exact same tools one would use when analysing mainstream poetry – to think of the tone, atmosphere, figures of speech, thematic elements, while paying special attention to the sound of the verses; both the sound of the words themselves, as in traditional poetry, and the sound of the melody, which contributes to the overall effect. This theoretical approach is closely linked with literary hermeneutics, whose starting point is that texts have meanings, and that those meanings are established not only by the authors, but by the readers and interpreters as well. Hermeneutics, which has “gain[ed] new energy from the ‘against theory’ movement” (Szondi 1995: xi), can thus be seen as the art of interpretation which places the text itself in the centre of analysis, and is both “practical and genre-specific” (Szondi 1995: xv). This is the approach I will use in my analysis of Queen’s early fantasy lyrics. The praxis of this hermeneutic reading will be traditional literary analysis through close reading, while the genre explored will be that of narrative poetry.

Why Queen? Usually, poetic analyses of popular lyrics centre on the authors who style themselves on the balladeer tradition, like Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen (cf. Frith, Straw and Street 2001). In their works, music itself is usually not particularly ambitious in terms of composition; production, even when elaborate, is made to sound as simple as possible, and the vocal quality is rather modest; all for the lyrical content to take centre-stage. Queen, on the other hand, are more famous for their grandiose musical compositions, lavish production style that deliberately calls attention to itself, and lead singer Freddie Mercury’s impressive vocal range, while the textual element is a less important part of the whole. These two types of rock music are merely different versions of what theorist Keir Keightley calls “authenticity”, dubbing the first style “Romantic authenticity”, and the second “Modernist” (see Frith, Straw and Street 2001: 109–142). According to Keightley, Romantic authenticity tends to be found in folk, blues, country, and rock’n’roll styles of popular music, which emphasise “natural” sounds

by hiding musical technology, and which appeal to a sense of community via sincerity, directness, and continuity with natural roots. Modernist authenticity, on the other hand, tends to be found in classical, art music, soul and pop styles, which celebrate technology and experimentation, pride themselves on “shocking” sounds, emphasise their avant-garde elitism, and adopt stances such as irony, sarcasm or obliqueness. “Many rock fans,” Keightley states, “will reject those performers or genres who highlight Modernist authenticity as being somehow ‘artificial’, while other fans might dismiss Romantic rock as being simplistic or compromised by its populism.” (Frith, Straw and Street 2001: 137) However, the two styles are simply different modes of expression, with neither being qualitatively better than the other. Still, most studies of popular lyrics tend to focus on those poet-singers who create in the style of Romantic authenticity; therefore, it is more challenging to concentrate on a band like Queen whose sensibility is undoubtedly Modernist, and to analyse precisely those texts which are usually seen as somehow less prominent than the musical element in the overall compositions.

In this article, I will focus on a particular set of Queen’s early songs<sup>2</sup>, which tell a story of a fantasy land inhabited by fairies, kings, queens, and ogres. I will illustrate how this mythical world functions as poetry, in particular, narrative poetry, and establish how the individual songs might function as a consistent narrative whole. The performative elements discussed will therefore be strictly narratively important – while an analysis into Queen’s musical performance and Mercury’s androgynous image would be an undoubtedly relevant, even central, part of a sociological study of the band, it would be completely superfluous here, as my goal is to show that Queen’s early fantasy lyrics can be seen as narrative poetry, and not to delve into the performance studies analysis of glam rock and its queer undertones as politics of identity, or into a study of theatricality and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> For the same reason, I will not be widening the scope of analysis into the songs created much later in Queen’s career – while there may be some similarities between their early songs and some of their later works,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Mercury-penned poem from the *Innuendo* (1991) album, “I’m Going Slightly Mad” may seem to share some elements with the band’s early lyrics, but those comparisons are tentative and present only when the analysis is widened to include visual media (i.e. the music video for the song in question), while ignoring poetic and textual elements, as can be evidenced by Lesley-Ann Jones’ view of Mercury’s appearance in the video as a “crazed lord Byron” (Jones 1998: 411) – this comparison is entirely superficial, as nothing in the song (music, lyrics, or video) suggests any connection to

those similarities do not extend to the actual subject-matter of the lyrics, and thus there is no reason to extend the analysis to include them.

## 2. Narrative Poetry and Popular Music

Narrative poetry is not a genre usually associated with popular music. The majority of popular music lyrics could be classified as love poetry, or, as Paul McCartney called them in his famous eponymous song, “silly love songs”. This might be a reflection of the old adage that one should write about familiar things, and, as love is familiar to everyone, it is no wonder that it is the most palpable inspiration behind so many popular songs. It is consequently the easiest way for the poet-singer to establish common ground with the audience. Love poetry, whether taking the form of poems or songs, is the most popular poetic genre, as anyone who has ever read poetry or listened to popular music can confirm. It is not, however, the only kind of poetry that spills over into the rock text – there are many other genres that lyricists often explore, though they form a significantly smaller percentage of popular music. These other genres include, among others, reflexive poetry, socially engaged poetry, descriptive poetry, and narrative poetry.

Narrative poetry could be defined as storytelling in verse which centres upon an action – a story or an event whose main feature is dynamic motion; or in other words, poetry which can clearly show how an idea moves through the poem. Hugh Kenner (1966: 124) says that “nothing holds the attention like a story, as Homer’s listeners knew, and nothing is harder than to tell one without waste motion.” History of narrative poetry is linked to oral tradition, which may in turn link it to popular lyrics: even though music records are, of course, available to buy, most listeners are casual, because they only hear certain songs on the radio, see them on the television or the Internet, particularly in today’s world of Spotify and YouTube, and thus never possess a copy of an album; not to mention that physical records have all but disappeared, barring the re-emergence of

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the poetic elements of Romanticism. It could instead be argued that “I’m Going Slightly Mad” has elements of pseudo-Aestheticist comedy of manners, as the text is inspired by Noel Coward. This goes to show that visual elements do not play a big role in the construction of the *poetic* meaning of songs, and, as such, will not be given space in this article, since they are largely irrelevant to its topic.

vinyl among collectors. We could, therefore, conclude that popular lyrics reach their audiences in a way similar to the spread of traditional oral poetry. Still, there is some difference there, not least the fact that, even though popular lyrics are written specifically to be performed, they still do not spring into life at the moment of that performance,<sup>5</sup> but are instead thought out beforehand, like traditional written poetry, and only later is the element of performance added; therefore, the only true similarity between traditional oral poetry and popular songs is in the way they reach their audiences. Furthermore, traditionally speaking, narrative poetry includes both the epic and its many subgenres (heroic, religious, comic, etc.), and the shorter epic forms. There are also some hybrid forms, like the ballad, which is both lyric and epic, or literary poetic genres like verse novels or Romanticist “conversation poems”. What all of these forms have in common is the presence of a story, characters, formulaic expressions, fixed composition, and dynamic action. This shows that rock songs very rarely belong to true narrative poetry, given that, taking into account the traditional division into the three basic literary genres, rock songs could be said to have certain elements of the epic (e.g. a plot), as well as the dramatic form (since they are both written down *and* performed), but they are still mostly classified as belonging to the lyric form – according to their style, content and thematic approach. Still, these divisions do not need to be taken so rigidly – it can thus be said that there are popular songs whose main goal is not to express reflexions or emotions, but to tell a story, retell an event, or describe an imaginary character. Such songs, strictly speaking, most often contain only *some* features of narrative poetry (by using some of its formulae or simply alluding to the nature of narrative). Nevertheless, I will treat them as narrative poetry, because they have what Kenner (1966: 126) calls “narrative intensity”, given that the reader/listener is “able to imagine more than the writer can describe”, and because they have “the

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<sup>5</sup> Even though it seems that the traditional oral poems are handed down generation to generation, with the bards knowing them completely by heart, they are actually always composed at the moment of performance, based on a given formula: the bard is familiar with the basic story and plot, as well as with the usual poetic formulae, such as fixed stylistic features, models of versification, or common expressions and phrases. This is known as the Oral-Formulaic Theory, and was developed in the 1920s by the folklorists Parry and Lord, who conducted extensive studies of Serbian epic poetry, which was, at the time, one of the few surviving pseudo-Homeric styles of composition that could be observed, recorded and studied ethnographically (see Preminger and Brogan 1993).

combination, found in the best ballads, of high emotional potential and economical narrative” (Kenner 1966: 131).

When it comes to Queen, narrative poems are not as numerous in their oeuvre as the ones dealing with love. Still, at the very beginning of their career (see footnote 2), they created a number of narrative songs which can be said to inhabit an entire little fairy-tale-like world. It is this world that will be explored in the remainder of the paper.

### 3. Once Upon a Time, in the Land of Rhye

Queen’s narrative phase starts at the very beginning, with their debut album *Queen* (1973), reaches its peak with the second album, *Queen II* (1974), and concludes with the third album, *Sheer Heart Attack* (1974). Even though these albums contain some other narrative poems, such as “Killer Queen”, the songs that immediately draw the listener’s attention are an entire group of compositions, mostly Mercury’s, which seem to share a setting, an imaginary fantasy world which could be called “Rhye” – the name is taken from Queen’s first top-ten hit, “Seven Seas of Rhye”.

The first song that speaks of this world is called “My Fairy King” – it was penned by Mercury and can be found on the album *Queen*. Its opening lines set the scene:

In the land where horses born with eagle wings  
And honey bees have lost their stings  
They’re singing forever  
Lions den with fallow deer  
And rivers made from wines so clear  
Flow on and on forever  
Dragons fly like sparrows through the air  
And baby lambs where Samson dares  
To go on on on on on<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> All lyrics are taken from the official album jackets, i.e. CD booklets (see References for detail). For reasons of space and clarity (as the quotes are numerous), I will not be including referential identifications with each quote; instead, the reader can presume that they all came from the jackets of the exact album editions included in the reference list at the end of the paper. As each song is introduced in the analysis, the album it belongs to is also mentioned, which leaves no room for error with regard to the location of the lyrics.



Several interesting textual allusions can be noticed here, from the Bible (Samson), to fairy tales (“rivers made from wines”). However, the most important intertextual element is Robert Browning’s famous poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin”, based on the eponymous legend and published as part of his collection *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). In the poem, the town of Hamelin is plagued by rats, and its rulers are unable to deal with the threat, until a wandering piper offers his services, for a price. He uses his music to lure the rats into a river, but, when he requests his payment, the corrupt town authorities renege on the deal. The piper then enacts his revenge: he starts playing his music again, this time enchanting the town’s children, luring them to a portal through which they disappear, never to be seen again. Only one boy, whose disability prevented him from arriving to the portal in time, remains in the town, forever telling stories of the wondrous land the Piper’s music described. Mercury’s lyrics quote this description from the poem (in Browning 1961: 147):

And their dogs outran our fallow deer,  
And honey-bees have lost their stings,  
And horses were born with eagles’ wings

Even this quote is enough to create the image of the realm “My Fairy King” talks about: the boy from “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” spends the rest of his life longing for the wonderland the Piper promised him. The first few verses of Mercury’s song describe the atmosphere of a fairy land, and then they switch to describing the titular Fairy King, in two voices, as if only one was not enough to portray his power (“he rules the air and turns the tides, he guides the winds”), his insightfulness (“My Fairy King can see things that are not there for you and me”), and righteousness (“My Fairy King can do right and nothing wrong”). This utopia cannot last, but not because of inner turmoil – danger instead comes from the outside, and some “men [come] to savage in the night, to run like thieves and to kill like knives, to take away the power from the magic hand, to bring about the ruin to the promised land.” Frequent musical changes in the song contribute to its dynamic motion, and indicate different events in the story: thus, the description of the land is the lightest part of the song, sung in falsetto, whereas the second part, the one that describes the marauders, is more lively, and the vocal is in the regular register. Here, Mercury sings of the destruction of the fairy land (“they turn milk to sour”), of the people’s suffering (“fire burnin’ in hell with the cry of screaming pain”), of praying

in vain (“son of heaven set me free and let me go”), of pleas for help (“seasons fly, no helping hand”), and the poverty that takes over the kingdom (“teeth don’t shine like pearls for poor man’s eyes”). The last stanza, which is again slow and sung in falsetto, speaks of the Fairy King’s ruination:

Someone **someone** just **drained** the **colour** from **my** wings  
Broken **my** fairy circle ring  
And **shamed** the king in all his pride  
Changed the winds and **wronged** the tides  
**Mother Mercury**, look what they’ve **done** to **me**  
I **cannot** run, I **cannot** hide

As the above lyrics show, the poem is quite mellifluous – there is a lot of rhyme (indicated via different types of underlining) and alliteration (the sounds /d/, /k/ and /m/, shown in bold), while the verbs have been carefully chosen to express the suffering of the king and his people (“drained”, “broken”, “shamed”, “wronged”). Another interesting point is that the song suddenly switches from third to first person narration, which, together with the seeming blurring of the line between the speaker and the author (“mother Mercury”), might mean that Mercury (who legally changed his name from Farrokh Bulsara to Freddie Mercury after he wrote this song) uses the metaphor of the destruction of the Fairy King to speak about some traumatic personal experience (“look what they’ve done to me”). The song “My Fairy King” is an effective introduction into Mercury’s fantasy world, with many elements of narrative poetry (characters, story, elements of the fantastic, narrative formulae), and with an intertextual connection to another, canonical narrative poem. In this way, links are established both between Mercury’s lyrics and traditional poetry, and between rock music and the narrative poetry genre.

The abovementioned fantasy world takes centre-stage on the band’s second album, *Queen II*, from its very concept (it did not have sides A and B, but a white side, which “belonged to” guitarist Brian May, and a black side, which “belonged to” Freddie Mercury), to the songs that explore it in great detail. The author of the majority of the songs is, again, Mercury, though May’s “White Queen (As It Began)” could also fit the overall atmosphere, particularly because it serves as a contrast to Mercury’s “The March of the Black Queen” and contributes to the overarching theme of the album, which is the fight between good and evil, the contrast between light and

dark. This song, which also contains elements of love poetry, starts with a vague description of the White Queen (“so sad her eyes, smiling dark eyes”), and then it moves onto narration:

On such a breathless night as this  
Upon my brow the lightest kiss  
I walked alone  
And all around the air did sway  
My lady soon will stir this way  
In sorrow known  
The White Queen walks and the night grows pale  
Stars of lovingness in her hair  
Needing – unheard  
Pleading – one word  
So sad my eyes  
She cannot see

Almost as if he is telling ghost stories around the fire, the speaker tells his audience that what he is describing happened on a night “just like this one”. This sets the atmosphere, inviting the listeners to participate in an almost Gothic story. The queen is never directly described, but her quiet presence, and the colour white, provide the tale with a note of mystery, even horror (“the White Queen walks and the night grows pale”), evoking Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859). The speaker calls her “the mother of the willow green”, which is a loaded image, since the willow is often used as a symbol of death and mourning, and can in particular be linked with forlorn lovers, especially maidens who die without love or children, as evidenced in Shakespeare, since Ophelia’s drowning in *Hamlet* begins with a willow, and Desdemona sings a song about a willow before she is murdered by her husband in *Othello* (see Ferber 1999: 233–234). The symbolism of the mourning maiden can also indicate Virgin Mary, and the beginning of the song, where the speaker calls the White Queen “my lady”, as well as its ending, where he addresses her as a divine being (“my goddess hear my darkest fear, I speak too late, it’s for evermore that I wait”) seem to support this interpretation. The power of the song is in its vagueness – we do not find out who the White Queen is, what the speaker’s darkest fear is, or what it is that he will spend eternity waiting for; we do not even know whose beginning and end the poem is about (“so sad it ends

as it began”). The melody is soft and gentle, and the narrative dynamic motion of the song is achieved by varying line lengths and playful rhyme.

Mercury’s song “The March of the Black Queen”, which, according to him, actually gave rise to the whole idea “of having white and black sides – reflecting white and black moods” (Brooks and Lupton 2008: 68) is contrasted to May’s “White Queen” – in terms of imagery, lyrics, and music. With regard to melody, the song is extremely complicated, polyrhythmic, and the vocals (both the lead vocals and the overdubbed choral accompaniment) cover a large range and include lots of different registers, which clearly indicates that this song is a musical precursor to the inimitable “Bohemian Rhapsody”, recorded shortly thereafter for the band’s fourth album, *A Night at the Opera* (1975). When it comes to the lyrical content of the “Black Queen”, it is more associative than truly narrative, though the central idea of the Black Queen as an evil, threatening figure (“I’m lord of all darkness, I’m Queen of the night”) is quite easy to discern. Hell and heaven feature in the song, though neither is a particularly comforting option (“you’ve never seen nothing like it, no, never in your life, like going up to heaven and then coming back alive” vs. “dance with the devil in beat with the band, to hell with all you, hand-in-hand”). Still, the images are simply piled up, with no identifiable connection, and the ominousness of the Black Queen is spoiled by some comical lines (“fi-fo the Black Queen tattoos all her pies, she boils and she bakes and she never dots her i’s”). Compared with May’s White Queen, Mercury’s Black Queen seems ridiculous and over-the-top; nevertheless, it is possible that his inspiration in creating the character was the Red Queen from Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), which might explain her cartoonish portrayal. As a caricature, she fits in well with other extravagantly hyperbolic characters from the land of Rhye, like the ogres from “Ogre Battle” or the nameless speaker from “Seven Seas of Rhye”.

May’s other contribution to the fantasy theme on *Queen II* can be found in the song “Some Day One Day”, where he is also the lead vocalist. The idea that what the audience is privy to might be a fairy tale can be found in the following lines:

Funny how pages turn  
And hold us in between  
A misty castle waits for you  
And you shall be a queen

The mythical, fairy-tale like atmosphere is achieved formally, through the use of the traditional ballad stanza, and content-wise, through the introduction of the idea that we might be imprisoned inside a book (“pages turn and hold us in between”; note the use of the communal *us*, which again indicates the narrative component of the song, though the storyteller’s identification with his audience), and the imagery of “a misty castle”, and a queen – which is not merely an auto-allusion to the songs about the White Queen and her black counterpart, but also to the name of the album, and the band itself, which intensifies the almost hermetic unity between the author and the text.

Despite frequent “Disneyfication”, fairy tales are not light-hearted stories, at least in their original iteration, when they were told by adults to adults, and served to bind preliterate societies together, as any communal narratives, including early narrative poetry, usually do. As such, the atmosphere of fairy tales is often nightmarish, and that is precisely the case with the song called “Ogre Battle”, a composition by Mercury, also to be found on *Queen II*, whose heavy metal sound depicts the scene of a battle even before any lyrics are heard. This song is the one that most faithfully follows the conventions of narrative poetry, not only due to its theme (i.e. battle), but also because it uses certain narrative formulae – it starts with the phrase “once upon a time”, and ends with the statement that “ogre battle lives for evermore”. We can also see the connection with the song “My Fairy King”, because at the beginning of “Ogre Battle”, the speaker mentions that “the piper is gone and the soup is cold on the table”, which places “Ogre Battle” into the same world that the other songs belong to, in exactly the way narrative poetry usually works: by alluding to certain ideas and events that the audience is already familiar with. An added narrative element can be found in the Russian doll structure: we are listening to a tale within a tale, as the speaker only relates something that he heard second-hand (“now once upon a time an old man told me a fable”), while the notion that the central story is “a fable” only intensifies the tone of oral storytelling. Some phrases from the song resemble legends or folk superstitions (“if the black crow flies to find a new destination, that is the sign”), and the invitation issued to the audience to come and witness the events from the story (“come tonight, come to the ogre sight, come to ogre-battle-fight”) lends directness to the action, and adds to the narrative performativity of the song. One of the central stanzas describes one of the titular ogres:

He gives a great big cry  
And he can swallow up the ocean  
With a mighty tongue he catches flies  
The palm of his hand incredible size  
One great big eye  
Has a focus in your direction

This description of the ogre owes a lot to myths and legends, and inserting listeners into the story (“one great big eye has a focus in *your* direction”) allows them to be participants in the action. What is peculiar is that the battle is never actually described – after its beginning is announced (“now the battle is on”) and the ogres’ battle positions are related (“the ogre-men are still inside the two-way mirror mountain, gotta keep down out of sight, you can’t see in but they can see out”), we are merely told that they are “running up behind and they’re coming all about”, and the text then gives way before music, which serves to describe the battle itself; fittingly, it is composed in the aggressively fast and heavy thrash metal style and features inarticulate vocalisation. The speaker then tells the listeners that the battle is over, but not for good (“ogre-men are going home, and the great big fight is over, bugle blow the trumpet cry, ogre-battle lives for evermore”), while reminding them that they can witness the battle again (“you can come along, come to ogre battle”). Whether that means that the ogres will never stop fighting, or, more fittingly to the genre of narrative poetry, that the story we are being told will ensure that the battle lasts forever in our minds, is left for the listener to decide.

“The Fairy Feller’s Master Stroke”, another song composed by Mercury for the *Queen II* album, has a slightly different focus. It describes a painting by the Victorian artist Richard Dadd, created in the notorious Bethlem Royal Hospital in London (commonly known as Bedlam), where Dadd was incarcerated after a psychotic break that ended in murder (he stabbed his father to death, apparently following the instructions of the Egyptian god Osiris). The painting is both one of the finest examples of the Victorian fairy art, and nothing at all like it – as Neil Gaiman (2016: 447) points out, Dadd’s fairy paintings before his madness were “quite pretty, and perfectly ordinary: forgettable chocolate-box-cover concoctions of fairy scenes from Shakespeare” that had “[n]othing special or magical about them. Nothing that would make them last. Nothing true.” The painting shows a scene from a mythical fairy land, with innumerable miniature

figures, and the central personage is the titular Fairy Feller, who is trying to cut a chestnut in half with an axe, so as to build a new carriage for Queen Mab. Apart from the Shakespearean characters, like Queen Mab, Oberon and Titania, all the other characters are the products of the artist's tortured imagination – they include a dragonfly trumpeter, a good apothecary man, an arch-magician, a pedagogue, a nymph in yellow, and many others. Dadd worked on the painting for years, so obsessively that the many layers of paint made it noticeably three-dimensional, trying to put his vision on canvas “with an intensity and single-mindedness that is, quite simply, scary” (Gaiman 2016: 447). He also explained his notion (or delusion) in a long, incoherent poem he called “Elimination of a Picture & its Subject – called The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke”. Mercury, who studied art and graphic design, frequently came to the Tate Gallery in order to admire the painting (Blake 2010: 131–132). As a result, he wrote the song in which he tried to explain what he saw in the painting, using Dadd's own text for the characters' names (e.g. “tatterdemalion and a junketer, there's a thief and a dragonfly trumpeter”). The song, thus, transforms visual content into something musical/lyrical, and turns a painting into a narrative. The melody is extremely fast, even frenetic, and it is mostly sung in falsetto, which all creates an atmosphere of urgency and even persecution, letting the listener experience Dadd's disjointed state of mind. Even though, strictly speaking, “The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke” is not part of Mercury's own fantasy songs, it still fits excellently into the mythological world of Rhye (it may have even inspired it) and the artistic concept of *Queen II*. Dadd's painting served as an inspiration to many authors, from Angela Carter to Terry Pratchett, and it is fitting to place Mercury in that group as well, once again proving that the boundaries between the worlds of popular music lyrics and purely literary genres are porous and blurred.

“The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke” shares its Victorian influence with “My Fairy King”. Neither is, however, particularly deeply indebted to it, as the primary focus of the influence is a mostly superficial intertextual interplay between Mercury, Browning and Dadd, and not a deep re-examination of Victorian legacy or an attempt to recontextualise Victorian genres, as is the case with some other musicians, like The Beatles.<sup>7</sup> This is another illustration of Queen's Modernist authenticity – certain lyrical elements are simply light-hearted allusions or an artistic pose, rather than social examinations of cultural legacy. The listener is invited to partake in

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this, see Vujin 2016.



the recreation of the Victorian aesthetic, without any scrutiny or critique of the past. The Victorian era is thus used merely as a backdrop for an aestheticist fantasy narrative.

Finally, we arrive at the song that introduces the term “Rhye” – “Seven Seas of Rhye”, Mercury’s composition which appeared as a short instrumental on Queen’s debut album. As a longer song, this time accompanied by lyrics, it closes the *Queen II* album and emphasises its mythical theme. The very title indicates a fantastic realm beyond “seven seas”. The song is spoken by an otherworldly being (“I descend upon your earth from the skies”), whose power is limitless (“I’ll defy the laws of nature and come out alive”), and who demands servility from “Lords and Lady preachers”, “peers and privy counsellors” and “shady senators”. If they fail to comply with his demands, he will punish them (“I will destroy any man who dares abuse my trust”). What he asks is for the Land of Rhye to be returned to him (“bring before me what is mine, the seven seas of Rhye”), and he promises those who obey him that he will “take [them] to the seven seas of Rhye”. Much remains unsaid – we do not know who the speaker is, or what (or where) the titular Rhye and its seven seas are; still, this vagueness allows the audience to imagine more than they have been told, which, according to Kenner, is one of the features of narrative poetry. The song ends with a snippet of old music-hall number, “I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside”, which might be a nod in the audience’s direction not to take the megalomaniacal statement by the song’s speaker too seriously, with the band once again eschewing social commentary and pointing to their Modernist authenticity.

At last, the song “Lily of the Valley”, from Queen’s third album *Sheer Heart Attack*, can be understood as an epilogue to the grandiose mythological theme of the band’s early career. The song is more introspective than narrative (May believes that the lyrics are about Mercury’s sexuality – see Thomas 1999). The speaker does not tell a story, but instead confides in the audience that he is looking for some answers, which fail to arrive (“I lie in wait with open eyes, I carry on through stormy skies”), which leads him to despair, illustrated by the allusion to Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (“I follow every course, my kingdom for a horse”). The connection with the worlds of fantasy and ancient past is achieved through allusion as well, via mythological (“Neptune of the seas”) and historical (“Serpent of the Nile”) figures, and the last stanza undoubtedly alludes to the song “Seven Seas of Rhye”:



Messenger from Seven Seas has flown  
To tell the King of Rhye he's lost his throne  
Wars will never cease  
Is there time enough for peace  
But the lily of the valley doesn't know

Here, the speaker is counting on the audience to already know the story of the seven seas of Rhye and its king, which is an interesting conundrum when one considers the fictional timeline: does "Lily of the Valley" describe the events that happened before those in "Seven Seas of Rhye", which is why the nameless speaker (might he be the king?) demands his land back, or is it another, new loss, which happened after the loss of his kingdom? Does he have any connection with My Fairy King from the eponymous song? What wars is he referencing, and is the fact that they will never cease connected to the never-ending battles between the ogres from "Ogre Battle"? These questions are numerous, but, as always in poetry, there are no definitive answers.

As can be seen from these songs, Queen weave a cyclical fantasy narrative that tells the story of a mythical land and its fantastic dwellers. The lyrics of the songs keep alluding to one another, thus creating a reciprocal connection, similar to how individual poems in collections of poetry function as a whole. By using elements such as dynamic motion, characters, plots, performative address, or poetic formulae, these songs prove that they can be considered narrative poetry, while the strictly poetic elements, like rhyme, stanzaic structure or figures of speech, cement their status as poetry which can be analysed in the same way as traditional written poetry.

Later on in their career, Queen abandoned such ambitious storytelling, concentrating instead on "silly love songs". They would return to narrative poetry from time to time, but never again would they attempt to create an entire world for their stories, nor would they so fully embrace the genre of fantasy to explore their creative imagination. Instead of being regrettable, that is a heartening notion – for one thing, it allowed them to progress and turn to other wells of inspiration as poets and musicians. For another, it let the early world of Rhye remain a unique, special part of their overall work, which can still "live for evermore" whenever one gives it a listen.

#### 4. Conclusion

“Lyrics are not poetry,” states Lars Eckstein in his study of popular lyrics, “and their study therefore requires a different set of analytical tools from that which is conventionally applied to poetry” (Eckstein 2010: 23). This view can, of course, be argued against. As was stated in the introductory part of this article, there are more similarities than differences between poetry and lyrics, and therefore, lyrics can indeed be analysed using the exact same analytical tools as those used for traditional poetic analysis. In this case, song lyrics were analysed as traditional narrative poetry, and the songs chosen for this endeavour were likened to poems in a traditional collection – they share the same poetic, generic and thematic elements, and the narrative they weave together can be seen as a single poetic entity.

Even though it is not as prevalent as the exploration of love, storytelling still has its place in rock poetry. Neither is fantasy storytelling a strange occurrence there, however unusual it might seem at first glance. Queen are certainly not unique in this respect, as anyone who has ever listened to Led Zeppelin and their Middle Earth-inspired songs can verify. It bears noticing that, when it comes to fantasy narratives, it is metal bands, such as Iron Maiden, who tend to gravitate towards such content (see Weinstein 2000). It is no wonder, then, that Queen’s own fantasy narrative remains confined to their earliest phase, when they were still a heavy metal band, before they turned firmly in the direction of mellower genres.

The world of Rhye and its inhabitants has a special place in Queen’s oeuvre. It is the only time that they tried to tell a whole story across several albums and songs, without outside prompting.<sup>8</sup> In order to better understand this compelling imaginary world, special attention was given to intertextual elements of the individual songs – this helped place them within a larger poetic context, thus reaffirming their status as poetry. Given the deliberately vague nature of the songs, it was sometimes difficult to position them confidently within Mercury’s overarching narrative. It is,

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<sup>8</sup> Any other such occasions were connected to outside circumstances – like with the album *A Kind of Magic* (1986), which does tell a story, but that story is based on the film *Highlander*, since the album served as the soundtrack for it; or with the album *Made in Heaven* (1995), which is a posthumous tribute to Mercury, and weaves a story of life, death, and rebirth, in an attempt to make the best out of a harrowing situation. Moreover, these later narratives do not span several albums.

however, precisely this vagueness, the negative capability contained in them that inspired the analysis – just like the melody of Keats's nightingale, these songs tell the stories of “faery lands forlorn”, influencing new generations of listeners, readers and theorists alike, many decades after their initial release. That is a true testament to their fantastic allure.

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