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“WE COULD SING BETTER SONGS THAN THOSE”: DRINK IMAGES IN WILLY RUSSELL’S PLAYS

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Willy Russell (b. 1947) belongs to that puzzling category of writers who become household names, are cherished by readers and praised by critics, yet, paradoxically, seem to be ignored in terms of extensive scholarly analysis. A perfect example of a similarly neglected writer is Barry Hines, whose novel, *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968), was ‘immortalised’ by Ken Loach in the screen version titled *Kes* (1969). In Hines’s case, the critics finally took interest in the 2018 *Barry Hines: Kes, Threads and Beyond*, written by David Forrest and Sue Vice. The authors proudly emphasise that their study is “the first academic account of Barry Hines’s work, [some of whose novels] captured the imagination of millions and are now permanent fixtures in the national memory” (vii). The study was published two years after Hines’s death, so one might hope that likewise Russell will finally receive a critical dissection of his literary legacy, even if a posthumous one. Meanwhile, he usually appears in interviews and short entries in sundry publications. As far as the former are involved, apart from a multitude of press materials, there is John Gill’s *Willy Russell and His Plays* (1996), an extended interview with the playwright. Interviews with Russell can also be found in *Writing Liverpool: Essays and Interviews* (2007), edited by Michael Murphy and Deryn Rees-Jones, and in Barbara Baker’s *The Way We Write: Interviews with Award-winning Writers* (2006). Finally, there are fragmental references in publications such as Steven Gale’s *Encyclopedia of British Humorist* (1996), informative in nature and providing bibliographical data, but also enriched with general comments, such as the one hailing Russell “a gifted writer of dramatic comedy” (913).

Russell’s plays mirror his own working-class upbringing in Liverpool, including his not quite successful early schooling, “spent in the D stream”

[Chrisafis 2001]. His curriculum vitae begins in the working-class setting, one of his first professional engagements being a ladies' hairdresser before returning to college and commencing a writing career. Discussing the lexical choice in Russell's plays, William Demastes accentuates his having "an ear for working-class language" [1996, 425], but in fact Russell dramatises various class-related contexts, all of which reflect his own social background. Such contexts and themes are also of interest in this article, with the primary focus on the figurative and symbolical use of drink images Russell employs in order to convey the issues undertaken in his plays.

The title of this article borrows a line from Russell's iconic *Educating Rita* (1980), "we could sing better songs than those" [2004, 68], a line which encapsulates the problem of the social and cultural paradigms from which most of Russell's characters attempt to free themselves. A good example is *Breezblock Park* (1975), one of whose characters, Sandra, "wants to leave behind the world and the class inhabited by her parents" [Lawler 2000, 118], a move explained by Sandra's boyfriend, Tim, in terms of her "responding to things that [Sandra's family] don't particularly *want* to respond to..." (74). Sandra's drive to depart from the constraints of the inherited social setting is genuine, as are the plebeian tastes of her family, most conspicuous in the obsessive admiration of the newly purchased three-piece suite, or even more so in Sandra's disgust when her mother buys a false Christmas tree and sprays it with artificial scent, crowning the supposed improvement with her comment: "Pine essence, lovely" (5).

Whereas Sandra rejects conforming to cultural substitutes, the character of *One for the Road* (1976), Pauline, does the exact opposite. Pauline and Dennis have moved to a new housing estate, which she considers a 'prestigious' upgrade to "executive level" (48). This is persistently questioned by Dennis throughout the play. A good example is Pauline's insistence on calling the dish she is preparing for their guests as "Hachis au parmentier", which Dennis suspects is simply cottage pie and cannot understand her preference for French nomenclature [cf. 1990, 49]. In Pauline's version the 'singing of better songs' reflects her desperate need for upward mobility, though one based on false assumptions and thoroughly pretentious, best defined with by the oxymoronic phrase, "genuine reproduction" (76), which Pauline uses to refer to her Queen Anne bureau. This particular phrase tallies with Pauline's general attitude to the values outside of what she perceives as her newly 'achieved' status. This is most conspicuous in her rejection of Dennis's proposal not to spend their holiday in Spain their usual choice, Pauline's rationale here being that "everyone wants to go to Spain" (84). When Dennis suggests China as an optional destination, Pauline explains that this is unacceptable, for she "wouldn't like Chinese food in China" (84), paradoxically, preferring the 'genuine reproduction' in the form of Chinese food available in England.

Pauline's attitude is elucidated by Roger, who adds that "[t]hey don't have curry in Chinese chippies in China" (84).

The idea of 'singing better songs' pervades different contexts in Willy Russell's plays and is used to dramatise class or status escapism. One of the means of achieving this end is the use of drink images, sparingly, yet most effectively. It's worth noting here that Russell does not belong to the category of drink-dependent writers with experiential expertise in the field, writers who leave an imprint of their drinking on the pages of literary works, to mention such figures as Malcolm Lowry or Charles Jackson. Despite the fact that, as Russell reveals, his father was an alcoholic who equated the concept of having a good time with "a spit-and-sawdust saloon" (quoted in Levin 2012), he did not inherit such inclinations, as did, for instance, the playwright and novelist Patrick Hamilton, who followed in his alcoholic father's footsteps, and whose works are awash with alcohol. Neither is Russell interested in dramatising alcoholism in his plays, unlike, for instance, JP Miller in *Days of Wine and Roses* (1958). Admittedly, in *Breezblock Park* there is a mention of Tommy having "a severe drink problem", a claim Betty further exemplifies in the following manner:

BETTY Do you know what he's bought Vera for Christmas?

SYD No.

BETTY Well, I do. Six bottles of whisky.

SYD Vera doesn't drink whisky.

BETTY Exactly [1990: 7].

Similarly, in *Educating Rita* Frank tends to overdose himself with whisky and Guinness, but he is portrayed as a small-time tippler, rather than a full-time alcoholic. Frank's own explanation of the university authorities turning a blind eye to his drinking corresponds to Russell's treatment of the issue: "they told me to stop displaying the signs" [2004, 54]. This is exactly the case in Russell's plays, which do not 'display the signs' of heavy drinking, though it is occasionally implied, as in *Breezblock Park*.

Drink in Russell's plays has two functions, one being merely a convenient theatrical prop, the other an image with a more symbolic meaning. An example of the former is *Breezblock Park*, where whisky is used to demonstrate the alternative application of the Christmas present Tommy buys for Betty, which turns out to be a vibrator, a device she has never seen and whose function she does not understand:

BETTY What?

TOMMY (*spelling it out*) A vibrator?

BETTY (with a little laugh) Oh – of course. And what is it you use it for?

TOMMY (*realising that she really does not know*) What?

BETTY What do you use it for?

TOMMY What d' y' use it for?

BETTY Yes.

TOMMY (*uncomfortably*) Well, er, y' know, y' use it for – well, y' know like erm... Well, here (*He grabs it off her, grabs SYD's glass of whisky, inserts the vibrator into the whisky and switches on.*) Y' use it for mixin' drinks. It's a portable automatic drink mixer, a shake on a stick. Latest things these are, you know. Even our Reeny [Betty's sister] hasn't got one of these.

BETTY (*visibly brightening*). I'll bet she hasn't. Let's have a look, Tommy. (*She tries it.*) Ooooh. Now that's what I call a present, Tommy. You should do the Christmas shopping every year. Now where shall we put it? What about here? (*she puts it on the television set among the candles; stands back and admires it.*) (14-15)

The glass of whisky is just a handy prop to authenticate the impromptu 'portable automatic drink mixer' definition, but elsewhere in his plays Russell uses drink in a symbolic manner. In *One for the Road*, Pauline safeguards her new social status by keeping up appearances, which, among other things, applies to observing the drinking rules. Not only does she try to curb her husband's consumption by reminding him that he should adopt the style of drinking "in moderation", and consider drink "an aid to social interaction" [1990: 50], but, more significantly in the context, lectures him on the art of wine savouring, herself not in the least being an oenophilic:

PAULINE Dennis have you opened the wine yet?

DENNIS What for? There's no-one here yet.

PAULINE Dennis what is wrong with you? Surely you've learnt by now that wine needs time to breath.

DENNIS Breathe? It's Italian plonk on special offer. That lot wouldn't breath if it was in an oxygen tent. (52)

JANE Roger! How many times have I told you that when drinking wine you have to leave room in the glass for the bouquet?

ROGER Ah. (*He swallows the drink in one.*) Done. (*He sniffs the glass.*) There. A lovely bouquet. (73)

While Pauline unquestioningly enjoys the social 'improvement', Dennis becomes more and more indifferent and regretful. The song he is listening to makes him realise that its lyrics encapsulate his own position. Richard's namesake in the song gets married to "a figure skater", buys her "a dishwasher and a coffee percolator" and, as the song has it in the closing line, "drinks at home now, mostly with the TV on" (53). When Dennis tells Pauline that the lyrics are about him, she fails to recognise the subtext:

DENNIS That's me.

PAULINE Who?

DENNIS Richard.

PAULINE But you're Dennis.

DENNIS And Richard. You're the figure skater.

PAULINE Well I hope I never have to prove it. I can't even stand up on roller skates. (53)

Dennis realises that there is a complete discord here, so he continues his interpretation of the song, engrossed in his own reflections:

it's about a feller who used to drink in the bars. ...And the feller, Richard, who used to drink in the bars with the crowd and talk and talk, about what him and the rest of them were going to do, where they were going to go, well ... he hasn't done any of it. He hasn't gone anywhere. ... He doesn't drink in the bars now. He just goes down the corner and gets a six pack and takes it back home. He drinks it with the telly flickering before him... . (54)

Further in the play, Dennis makes an attempt to free himself from the setting the song depicts and which happens to resemble his own, but he returns almost as soon as he has left. He might be considered Pauline's opposite, but if he is a nonconformist, he is a weak one, and in the final, symbolic scene, his drinking a can of lager and watching TV (cf. 106) only confirms it.

As Barbara Baker quite rightly observes, William Russell "is particularly good at portraying women, working-class struggles and a sense of hope in bleak circumstances" [2006, 163]. In *Educating Rita*, all the three are thematised. The 'sense of hope' for the eponymous Rita, a ladies' hairdresser, is the literary course for which she enrolls at the Open University. Frank, her tutor, is initially unhappy about teaching her, particularly that the course hours coincide with his pub sojourns, but he takes the extra teaching load "to pay for the drinks" [2004, 14], with which he is most familiar on an everyday basis. Frank has a stand-by bottle of whisky, which he keeps hidden behind the various volumes filling his bookcases. The initial letters of the books' authors are his clues for finding the bottles. As the volume behind which Frank finds his whisky bottle at the beginning of the play is one of Dickens's novels (cf. 13), himself the master of literary drinking scenes, this becomes an added value in terms of a peculiar drink intertextuality. Frank's drinking is conveniently used in the play to expound his indifference and half-heartedness. Much in the vein of Kingsley Amis's *Jim Dixon*, Frank lacks enthusiasm for his students, an attitude he defines by stating that "appalling teaching is quite in order for most of [his] appalling students" (25).¹ By the same token, much like for Dixon, the prospect of a pub visit rekindles Frank's passion: "Four pints of weak Guinness and I can be as witty as Wilde" (26).

¹ Cf. *Lucky Jim*, "They waste my time and I waste theirs" [2000, 214].

In comparison with Frank, Rita is doubly ignorant, drink- and literature-wise. Her unintentional double entendres (Forster's "filthy" *Howard's End* and Maugham's "perverted" *Of Human Bondage*; cf. 17, 42) are as hilarious as her mistaking of William Butler Yeats for the homophonic Yates:

FRANK. Do you know Yeats?

RITA. The Wine lodge?

FRANK. Yeats the poet. (20)

On a more serious level, Rita's drink ignorance reflects her own cultural struggles. Her aspiration goes far beyond that of her working-class environment: "They'll tell y' they've got culture as they sit there drinking' their keg beer out of plastic glasses" (47). Yet, much as she wants to 'sing new songs', she herself finds it hard to fit culturally with the world Frank belongs to. Here again, Russell employs a drink image to explicate the problem. Invited by Frank to a small party, Rita finally fails to appear, her excuse being the bottle of wine she wanted to bring: "I'd bought the wrong sort of wine. When I was in the off licence I knew I was buyin' the wrong stuff. But I didn't know which was the right wine" (66).

If any of Russell's plays render a woman's quest for 'better songs to sing', *Educating Rita* is one, but *Shirley Valentine* (1986) as well as *Stags and Hens* (1978)² are equally exemplary cases. Shirley is a character who has experienced matrimonial fossilisation, as it were, from which she wants to be liberated, not by discarding her entire marital experience, but by acknowledging the fact that her life, much as that of her husband's, is facing a cul-de-sac, the alternatives being at hand, but requiring "jumpin' off [their] roof" (1990: 21), which Shirley finally does. Linda, the female character of *Stags and Hens*, is about to enter the path which in all likelihood will lead her to the very same point, once she marries Dave, quite aptly referred in the play as the "legless Dave" [1996, 196], for instead of enjoying his stag night, he is completely drunk, looked after by his mates in the toilet of the very same dance hall in which Linda and her female company coincidentally celebrate the hen party. The stag night turns into a toilet drama, for this is where the men spend their time, helping Dave in his drunken acts of vomiting, the result of the groom's impressive and rapid intake of various drinks, thoroughly justified though, for the men are superstitious in this respect: "bad luck if the groom's sober the night before he gets married" (220).

At the bride's end, Linda's companions are genuinely convinced that they are taking part in the 'birth' of a new Linda, one which will have, as Bernadette emphasises, her own "front room, [her] own Hoover, [her] own telly" (189). Linda, however, stands out from the female crowd in all sorts

²The film version, *Dancin' thru the Dark*, was premiered in 1990, following the earlier screenings of *Shirley Valentine* (1989) and *Educating Rita* (1983).

of manners – she does not fit the seemingly idyllic picture drawn by Bernadette, and neither is she as undemanding and easy to please as is Maureen, whose ultimate wish is to have “a feller” (194). Linda’s drinking choices are quite symbolic in differentiating her from the rest of the crowd. When she opts for having “a pint of bitter”, in the girls’ perception a most unsuitable drink, Bernadette reacts quite indignantly: “A joke’s a joke. I’ve seen you do that before love and we all think it’s a good laugh. But not tonight. It’s a hen night you’re on, not a stag night. Now come on, something a bit more lady-like” (215). The lady-like selection here is a choice between “Babychams” (193)³ and “Snowball” (215)⁴, both having rather puerile connotations, not only in lexical terms, but in the case of the former also the logo, featuring a leaping baby chamois with a blue ribbon around its neck. The extent to which these alcoholic drinks signify what might be called gender downgrading is further amplified in Robbie’s story, in which the insistence on the ‘proper’ choice of drink, reinforced with the deprecatory ‘tart’, used repeatedly to refer to Linda, is additionally demeaning:

ROBBIE. We went out on a foursome with Dave an’ his tart. I got the first round in, asked them what they were havin’. This girl I’m with she said er, a Babycham or a Pony or somethin’, y’ know, a proper tarts’ drink. Know what Dave’s tart asked for eh? A pint of bitter! That’s dead true that, she wasn’t jokin’. I was dead embarrassed. I’m out with this nice girl for the first time an’ Dave’s tart’s acting like a docker. ... The one I was with, she never came out with me again after that. I said to Dave after, fancy lettin’ your tart behave like that. ‘She’s always the same,’ he said. ‘But she’ll settle down when she’s married.’ (199)

Whereas in *Stags and Hens* drink is flowing in great amounts, particularly in the stag night part of it (“pourin’ it down them like it’s goin’ out of fashion”; 193), *Shirley Valentine* begins and ends with a single glass of wine, a referential point, symbolising the eponymous Shirley’s dream to escape from her “unused life” [1990: 30]. The opening setting is Shirley’s Liverpool house, where she is preparing the evening meal for her husband, Joe. Shirley’s substitutive ‘interlocutor’ during the cooking is the kitchen wall, personified, as it were, for the purpose: “Y’know I like a glass of wine when I’m doin’ the cookin’. Don’t I wall? Don’t I like a glass of wine when I’m preparing the evenin’ meal. Chips an’ egg!” (1). The glass of wine stands in sharp contrast to the rather gourmet-less chips and egg, signalling the antagonisms which are further delineated in the play, all based on two conflicting perceptions represented by Joe and Shirley. They both have a working-class background, but while Joe fully accepts the cultural paradigm of his social status and feels perfectly at home with his professional and familial setting, Shirley remains dubious as to the finalities of their achievement. Joe is locally-insular (“Gets

³ Sparkling perry.

⁴ A mixture of Advocaat and lemonade.

culture shock if we go to Chester"; 4), and generally "likes everything to be as it's always been" (2), which is epitomised in the way he obstinately, if not absurdly, observes his meal rules: "on Thursday it has to be mince. It's the eleventh commandment" (6). By contrast, Shirley's repetitive "I used to be Shirley Valentine" (13) clearly indicates her disenchantment with the way her life has taken course.

During her kitchen manoeuvres Shirley has a glass of white wine, a novelty recently introduced to her by Millandra, her daughter (cf. 1). Shirley, though not exactly a wine connoisseur, genuinely savours the occasional sips of the wine: "Oh it's lovely that. It's not too dry" (3). However, much more important is the wine's symbolic relevance to Shirley's mundane existence, which is most evident in the following fragment:

It's nice. Wine. It's like it's been kissed by the sun. 'He' doesn't drink wine. 'He' says wine is nothing but a posh way of gettin' pissed. I suppose it is really. But it's nice. Know what I'd like to do, I'd like to drink a glass of wine in a country where the grape is grown. Sittin' by the sun. (4)

Seemingly insignificant in the play, this one drink reference has an underlying import. Joe's disregard for wine as a badge of middle- or upper-class status reveals his general perception of drink as a means of reaching stupefaction, rather than delivering gustatory pleasures. In contrast, for Shirley the wine she is drinking is a source of relish, but is also symbolic of her yearning for a change: "another bottle of Riesling I'll be able to pretend this is Greece" (15).

Shirley's kitchen musings over a glass of wine bring numerous reminiscences of the past: the way she was downtrodden in her school days, as in the headmistress's comment at the bottom of her final school report: "I confidently predict that Miss Valentine will not go far in life" (9); Shirley's accidental meeting with Marjorie Majors, her former schoolmate who "took elocution lessons [and] left school with just under four billion housepoints" (10), and whom Shirley believed to have become an air hostess on Concorde, but who frankly admits to travelling "widely", though in the capacity of "a hooker" (12); finally, marrying Joe and becoming "Bradshaw", yet still being "Shirley Valentine", even if only "for a while" (13). Her marriage to Joe turns out to be a disappointment, not immediately, for she has happy memories of her early days with Joe, but gradually, until it finally stalled. "Did somethin' happen or nothin' happened?" (13) is the question she confides in the unresponsive 'wall', and which propels her final decision to go to Greece, even though her Greek dream meets with a sobering thought that her daughter, Millandra, probably defines her mother's 'craze' as "a grab a granny fortnight" (20). Yet, uplifted by the unexpected support from Shirley's next-door neighbour, Gillian, she decides to go to Greece: "In Gillian's eyes I was no longer Shirley the neighbour, Shirley the middle-aged mother, Shirley Bradshaw. I had become Shirley The Sensational, The Brave, Shirley Valentine" (22).

Greece opens a new vista for Shirley, in all respects, even the 'kitchen wall' has its substitute – "a Greek rock" (24) by the sea, not only a lexical change, for one could venture that the semantic impossibility connoted by 'wall' replaced by the 'rock' solidity is most meaningful here. For Shirley, Greece brings deliverance from all the constraints of her domestic and marital life, she regains her former self, the 'used-to-be Shirley Valentine' one. It is also an eye-opener, particularly in terms of the cultural ignorance of her compatriots, here represented by Jeanette and Dougie Walsh, a couple from Manchester whose disdainful attitudes Shirley resents and confronts: "Everything was wrong – the sun was too hot for them, the sea was too wet for them, Greece too Greek for them. They were that type, y' know, if they'd been at the last supper they would have asked for chips" (26). Shirley's 'better song to sing' appears in the figure of Costas, a tavern owner as well as Shirley's one-day fling. Costas is the very antithesis of her husband and personifies the specific ambience of the place. When asked by Shirley if he could move a table and chair because she has "this soft little dream about sittin' at a table by the sea", he does not challenge it: "A dream, a dream. We move this table to the edge of the sea, it make your dream come true?" (29). Costas brings the chair and table, but also a glass of wine, which travels, as it were, from the opening scene of the play to the closing passages. Shirley contemplates her life, concluding that she "didn't live fully" (30), and when Costas comes to collect the glass it turns out to be, quite symbolically, "still full" (30). Shirley has undergone a change which allows her to feel herself again. Awaiting Joe, who is coming to Greece in order to, as he puts it in a letter, take her "back home" (35), she envisages their meeting, and the way she will 'introduce' herself to Joe over a glass of wine: "Hello. I used to be the mother. I used to be your wife. But now, I'm Shirley Valentine again. Would you like to join me for a drink?" (36).

Conclusion

Willy Russell is one of those writers who draw inspiration from their own experience. As Jasper Rees observes, this fact allows him to be, "confident" when, for instance, he writes about women [cf. 2010], one of the reasons being his own professional episode as a ladies' hairdresser. Russell's experience and his social background are present in his plays because, as he states in an interview, his aim is to "talk about things that matter" (quoted in Levin 2012). These comprise issues related to his own life and the life of the community he identifies with. There are various literary means Russell uses to dramatise the themes he undertakes, but it seems that drink as an image is particularly well interwoven in his plays. It becomes an ersatz of her dream, as is the case with Shirley's wine, a badge of gender identification in *Stags and Hens*,

or a temporary means of dulling one's existential crisis, Dennis's can of lager in front of the TV being a prime example here. All in all, one can venture to say that drink is mainly used in the context of 'better songs to sing', even if, as is Frank's case, the achieved end is often rather illusory: "the great thing about the booze is that it makes one believe that under all the talk one is actually saying something" [2004: 54]. More importantly, though, every time drink appears in Russell's plays it has a significant role to play, despite the fact that it is not profusely used, and its presence is often more than marginal, as in *Shirley Valentine*. Russell is an excellent example of a writer who can utilise drink not necessarily in drunken contexts, but in a far more symbolic manner, which in his case is strongly correlated with class, social status, and personal aspirations.

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Summary

Willy Russell is an example of a writer whose popularity and critical reception is not extensively reflected in serious studies. There is a noticeable tendency to appraise rather than analyse Russell's work. The aim of the present article is to dissect the function of drink images in the context of class-related issues Russell thematises in his plays.

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