

Melancholic sounds: singing madness in Restoration Drama

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ABSTRACT

The featuring of mad characters on the English stage can be traced as far back as the first dramatic performances in the Elizabethan Age, and more predominantly throughout the seventeenth century. Theatrical insanity reflects the Renaissance attraction and interest in melancholy and mental illnesses, and becomes an arena where tortured psyches interact and express themselves. Madness seems somehow related to music in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as part of this more generalised interest, but the reformed Restoration stage is to recall this tradition and develop it into a completely new musical achievement: the mad song. This paper analyses Restoration mad songs as a landmark in the evolution of the conception of madness, in terms of its relationship to music as an expressive means. On the basis of early-seventeenth century dramatic performances and contemporary treatises on melancholy (Burton), the analysis will focus on Restoration madness as a climatic receptor of this tradition and the ways it transforms it.

The attraction that Early Modern England held for melancholy and madness, at times synonymous terms, is now widely recognised. In particular, the period from 1580 to 1640 witnesses the heyday of this fascination. In those decades madness was all pervasive, and the interest in the topic can be traced in various cultural instances: medical treatises, like those of Burton or Bright; in the recurrent references to Bethlehem Hospital, Bedlam; or in the mad characters in the plays of Kyd, Shakespeare, Fletcher, Dekker, Middleton and Webster.

Among the latter, two Shakespearean characters function as the main exponents of acted madness, and they both respond to the two different, gendered stereotypes associated to it: a wild, more active, potentially aggressive, even intellectual male madness, and a passive, sexually provocative female one. Hamlet and Ophelia become the very names of human madness, but they are accompanied by a long train of disturbed minds: Lady Macbeth, King Lear or the Gaoler's daughter. In this way,

theatrical insanity reflects the Renaissance attraction and interest in melancholy and mental illnesses, and becomes an arena where tortured psyches interact and express themselves. As Carol Thomas Neely (1991:23) puts it “Shakespeare, prefiguring Foucault’s analysis, dramatises madness primarily through a peculiar language more often than through physiological symptoms, stereotyped behavior, or iconographic conventions.”

Madness, then, is mainly expressed through a determined textual discourse characterised by fragmentation, repetition and, most importantly, by quotation (Neely 1991:323). Quoting implies the use of a language which is not the verbalisation of a particular individual or psyche, but rather a common language, drawn from a universal stock which belongs to nobody. In this sense, the language of madness is highly conventional. Nevertheless, there exists a certain interconnection between actual speeches of mad people and their previous, pre-mad identity and history, their social context and psychological stresses (Neely 1991:323).

Quoting from others, or from lost moments of sanity, depicts the idiosyncratic nature of mad characters and becomes their mode of expression and identification. But, at least in the two Shakespearean characters who will constitute the subsequent models for eighteenth and nineteenth-century rewritings, Ophelia and Hamlet, quotation always involves spoken speeches. Only Ophelia discovers once her deranged mind singing fragments of popular songs.

Singing is, nevertheless, used elsewhere and stands out as an interesting phenomenon, since madness is somehow related to music in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period; Burton, for instance, prescribes it as one of its possible cures. But even if not used therapeutically, culturally and socially decontextualised songs, like those of Ophelia, or descriptive songs, like the one performed by madmen in *The Duchess of Malfi*, belong to the array of conventional modes of expressing madness through discourse. The reformed Restoration stage is to recall this tradition and develop it into a completely new musical achievement: the mad song. The aim of this paper is to analyse Restoration mad songs as a landmark in the evolution of the conception of madness, in terms of its relationship to music as an expressive means.

1. QUOTED SONGS

An outstanding occurrence of music as a symptom of madness is the interpolation of sung passages within a disordered conversation, or the use of singing in unexpected circumstances or unsuitable situations. As quoted above, Shakespeare’s Ophelia epitomises this mixed voice. Her speeches

involve fragmentary quoted discourse, as well as songs referring to love and its loss, but they are thematically coherent. Ophelia's attitude and language reflect accurately the type of mental pathology she is suffering and the causes that provoked it. At the onset of her illness most of the characters in the play think she is mad because of her father's death, as the Robin Good-fellow or true-love song seem to show. But Ophelia insists on dealing with love topics. Neely (1991:324) states that her songs "enact truncated rites of passage," and the Valentine's Song, dealing with the loss of virginity, becomes a pivotal issue in her discourse and madness. Regarding these quoted songs, this type of madness begins to be gender-specific.

Ophelia's symptoms coincide with those analysed in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. In the third section of the First Partition, the author deals with the Symptoms of Maids', Nuns', and Widows' Melancholy, which "is a particular species of melancholy distinct from the rest, for it much differs from that which commonly befalls men and other women" (Burton 2001:414). As Hippocrates defends, the main cause are the vicious vapours which come from menstruation and that "offend the midriff, heart and brain" (p.414).

Burton provides a detailed account of the many ordinary symptoms, which are here quoted in full:

a beating about the back, which is almost perpetual; the skin is many times rough, squalid, especially ... about the arms, knees, and knuckles. The midriff and heart-strings do burn and beat very fearfully, and when this vapour or fume is stirred, flieth upward, he heart itself beats, is sore grieved, and faints, like fits of the mother. They complain many times, saith Mercatus, of a great pain in their heads, about their hearts and hypochondries, and so like wise in their breasts, which are often sore; sometimes ready to swoon, their faces are inflamed and red, they are dry, thirsty, suddenly hot, much troubled with wind, cannot sleep, etc. And from hence proceed, a brutish kind of dotage, troublesome sleep, terrible dreams in the night, a foolish kind of bashfulness to some, perverse conceits and opinions, dejection of mind, much discontent, preposterous judgement. (p.415)

Apart from all these physical or physiological symptoms, the author also investigates the melancholic discourse of mad women, and the likely aftermath of the disease, death:

Many of them cannot tell how to express themselves in words, or how it holds them, what ails them; you cannot understand them, or well tell what to make of their sayings; so far gone sometimes, so stupified and distracted, they think themselves bewitched ... some of them will attempt to make away themselves. (p.416)

Shakespeare focuses on the discursive negotiations of Ophelia's madness, and does not provide detailed accounts of her physical symptoms; however, some of them can be easily discerned. Besides, and more importantly, those instances where her madness is enacted onstage bear obvious similarities to the stereotyped conventions Burton analyses. She is distracted, as Shakespeare himself writes in a stage direction when Ophelia appears in the fifth scene of act four; her discourse is senseless and, she commits suicide.

The character of Ophelia is an interesting example of the way madness is negotiated by music, which functions on stage as a representative means to help the audience distinguish madness from sanity. However, music serves madness as one of its textual modes of expression, but it does not directly verbalise insane psyches. Quoted songs recall popular music the lyrics of which might suit the feelings of the mad, but they are not their own discourses, generated individually.

2. SINGING MADNESS

John Webster introduces in his play *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) a different, more elaborate type, of sung madness. In the fourth act, a group of madmen enter to entertain the duchess, and one of them sings, to a dismal kind of music, this song:

O, let us howl some heavy note,
Some deadly dogged howl,
Sounding, as from the threatening throat
Of beasts and fatal fowl!
As ravens, screech-owls, bulls, and bears,
We'll bell, and bawl our parts,
Till irksome noise have cloy'd your ears,
And corrosiv'd your hearts.
At last, when as our quire wants breath,
Our bodies being blest,
We'll sing, like swans, to welcome death,
And die in love and rest.
(IV.2.61-72)

This declamatory song composed by Robert Johnson might as well be considered a mad song; it is sung by madmen, and the lyrics, rhetorically depicted by the melody, is self-descriptive of the actions and behaviour associated to madness. Here, the madmen's speech and attitude differs enormously from that of Ophelia. The madmen howl like threatening beasts,

they appear as aggressive and vehement, not passive and distracted as women. Unlike that of Ophelia, the song is not quoted, but original, and it fits the mad-scene, which, in the play, functions as a masque, or rather, because of its characters, an antimasque. Webster accommodates court festivities into his own play and imprints royalty, though theatrical, on stage for the sake of realism, but the antimasque allows him a new arena to develop other important issues in the play. It seems obvious that this song is composed after highly conventional and typically preposterous antimasque material. The howls and beastlike movements as well as the dismal music refer to the witches of Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (1609), and seem to be inscribed into the behaviour of devilish creatures. Even if madness is somehow related to evil, this song stands for an early, psychologically defining and defined, instance of the genre category of the mad song.

3. RESTORATION MAD SONG

In terms of the development of the genre, the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre encompass the early stages of the interaction between music and madness. The previous examples are significant in so far as they constitute gendered renderings of the cultural reception of madness in the period. They become the genesis of a complex artistic evolution which will last more than three centuries, as the fashion for madness in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England attests.

When surveying madness, Elaine Showalter reads Romantic and Victorian female insanity through Ophelia, but she, as some other scholars, seems to overlook the transformation of Elizabethan madness into a new sentimental language during the Restoration, which stands for a climatic receptor of this tradition.

Since Restoration drama is characterised, among other important factors, by its extensive use of music, it is not unexpected that the genuine mad song took shape in the mouths of its raving and melancholic heroes and heroines. It was, as Helen Small (1998:11) puts it "the musical or dramatic show-piece of a play, and an actress could make her name with it." This might be the reason why Restoration mad scenes and insane characters outnumber those of all previous stages, with an increase in the array of stereotypes. But the richness of mad production does not preclude from defining the now generalised and pervasive mad song as the expression and representation of mad psyches.

The main cause of Restoration madness continues to be lovesickness, but the outward symptoms are exaggerated and made more perceptible. There are meaningful differences, though, in the mad song depending on the

dramatic genre where it appears, tragedy or comedy, and, more importantly, on the gender of the mad character.

Each of the three parts of Thomas Durfey's *The Comical History of Don Quixote* (1694), contains a mad song performed by one of the main characters. In the first part Cardenio, a gentleman who fell mad when he was deprived of his mistress, sings one of the most famous of Henry Purcell's compositions, "Let the dreadful engines of eternal will." This is one of the few Restoration songs sung by a mad man, and it contrasts with the other two mad songs of the play performed by women: Purcell's "From rosy bowers," and "I burn, my brain consumes to ashes" by Thomas Eccles.

As it seems customary in Restoration mad songs, their lyrics are never quoted and reflect and verbalise the character's tortured psyche. They function like anachronistic streams of consciousness, but in a much more organised arrangement. The songs seem also to emphasise the symptoms of madness, so that the references to heat, pain and burning are continuous. Nevertheless, as madness is also apparently gendered, different attitudes are associated to men and women.

When Cardenio enters the stage, he is described as being in ragged clothes, and in a wild posture. This depiction is characteristic of male insanity, and it was an established convention at the end of the sixteenth century. The frontispiece of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* shows an illustration of the *maniacus*, of whom the author writes:

But see the Madman rage downright
With furious looks, a ghastly sight.
Naked in chains bound doth he lie,
And roars amain, he knows not why. (2001:8)

Male insanity is externalised by means of a spectacle of constant physical agitation. That is the way in which Cardenio begins his song, in a wild and threatening mood:

Let the dreadful Engines of eternal will,
The Thunder roar, and crooked Lightning kill;
My Rage is hot, as theirs, as fatal too,
And dares as horrid execution do.
Or let the Frozen North its rancour show,
Within my Breast far greater Tempests grow;
Despair's more cold than all the Winds can blow. (Durfey 1694, II:41)

The song then mixes lyrical stanzas, where he recalls the happy past moments with Lucinda, with present moments of complaint and suffering.

Finally he seems to recover his sanity and exposes more sensible, though extremely sexist, ideas:

I glow, I glow, but 'tis with hate,
Why must I burn for this ingrate?
Cool, cool it then, and rail,
Since nothing will prevail.
When a Woman Love pretends, 'tis but till she gains her ends,
And for better, and for worse, is for Marrow of the Purse,
Where she 'filts you o'er and o'er, proves a Slattern or a Whore.
This hour will teize and vex,
And will Cuckold ye the next:
They were all contriv'd in spight,
To torment us, not delight,
But to scold, and scratch and bite,
And not one of them proves right,
But all are Witches by this light:
And so I fairly bid 'em, and the World Good-night. (Durfey 1694, I:41)

As we learn from the play, Cardenio's madness is comical and momentary; the song itself is controlled by reason at the end, so that it offers an alternative to insanity. Aggressiveness and control might characterise male madness, but both factors are mostly absent in madwomen. Madness does provoke a certain agitation in women, but they are seldom described as threatening against the others, especially men. Whenever these violent fits appear, they are repressed by the sheer impossibility of attaining love.

In this sense, the second part of *Don Quixote* presents one of the most famous Restoration mad scenes and songs performed by Anne Bricegirdle acting the character of Marcella. Durfey depicts her as a "young beautiful Shepherdess of Cordoua, extremely coy, and Averse to men at first, but afterwards passionately in love with Ambrosio" (1694:vii). Her unrequited love for Ambrosio, who hates all women, and her especially, provokes her madness which, in the play, is never cured. Again this is an interesting document in madness. Written in the first person, it is an extreme psychological record of a woman's love-sickness. Burton's symptoms are present, especially the heat and the consumption of the brain, around which the whole composition spins. This insistence on burning, with its clear association to female madness, is explicitly sexual.

I burn, I burn, my Brain consumes to Ashes;
Each Eye-ball too, like Lightning flashes:
Within my Breast, there glows a solid Fire,
Which in a Thousand Ages can't expire.
Blow, blow, the Wind's great Ruler;

Bring the Po and the Ganges hither,
'Tis sultry, sultry Weather;
Pour 'em all on my Soul,
It will hiss like a Coal,
But never be the cooler. (Durfey 1694, II:60)

The song's tragic, almost sentimental, expressiveness is ambiguously mixed with lust, so that the limits between the fictitious character and Anne Bricegirdle, herself a Restoration sex symbol, blur. Finally, Marcella also asks for weapons to commit suicide, the most likely prospects for her mental and physical state, since her early scorn for men has now become desire.

Bring, bring me Daggers, Poyson, Fire,
For Scorn is turn'd into Desire;
All Hell feels not the Rage which I, poor I, endure.
(Durfey 1694, II:60)

Although Durfey's trilogy of *Don Quixote* present more mad characters, both male and female, they all bear similarities determined on a gender(ed) difference basis. Helen Small considers that these potentially wild Restoration women coexisted with the conventional passivity and sexualised madness of Ophelia. Both within the fictional reality of the play, as well as on stage interaction with the audience, female insanity is distinguished from its male counterpart and undoubtedly shaped from a male dominating perspective.

Female madness becomes a fantasy of man's sexism and strategies of control, as Ambrosio, the woman hater, puts it in Durfey's play: "when once a Woman's mad, she's in perfection." This questionable perfection, will in turn develop into new female stereotypes common throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Late seventeenth-century sentimentalism and Augustan rationality create a new arena where a revived Ophelia will coexist with two Romantic auxiliary images: the harmless Crazy Kate and the violent Lucy.

The traditional view of female love's madness as materialised in the age of reason and Romanticism after Elizabethan models, disregards Restoration drama. However, this period is an essential stage, ideologically and culturally exuberant, from where the eighteenth-century stems.

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