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IMPROVISATION, RHETORIC AND WORD-COLOUR  
IN 17TH CENTURY ENGLISH SONG

by ANTHONY ROOLEY

What is said or sung, and how it is said or sung constitutes the greater part of the practical art of Rhetoric. There is, of course, Rhetoric as a theory, and many, many manuals from Ancient Greece, Rome, Arabic writers, Mediaeval Scholastics, Renaissance Grammarians, Enlightenment Neo-classicists and Victorian Pedants that have contributed to literally thousands of tomes atomizing rhetoric, eloquence, utterance – for the use in Church, Court and Theatre. The Figures of Speech have been so thoroughly dissected, named, categorized, and defined that under the weight of this learning, the very subject of „rhetoric“ has suffered severe body-blows that have left it maimed, bruised and bewildered. Indeed, cultured people of today speak of „empty rhetoric“ – rhetoric puffed up, false, misleading – and we turn to point the finger of suspicion for the creation of vapid speech to our leaders, our very politicians, as examples of rhetoricians spouting hot air!

So the very subject falls into disrepute, becomes neglected and forgotten; the contribution of coherent learning applied to Rhetoric in the last 50 years has fallen to a miserable, dejected shadow of its former glory. A thin waif of a subject now struggles for breath, where formerly it thundered in impressive billows of resounding glory ... A sad, depleted figure – a fitting image of our distracted times perhaps?

And yet, in this short introduction I have already used 17 rhetorical figures that may be found in „The Garden of Eloquence“, by Henry Peacham the Elder, 1577, and it is beyond doubt that every person speaking at this Conference will employ numerous defined tropes in their delivery – more or less consciously. Consciousness is the thing – tired metaphors used ignorantly carry only a fraction of the power of freshly minted images that leap off the page in animated fashion, or are „improvised“, seemingly, by a person „with a gift“ for off-the-cuff delivery.

There is no such thing as pure „improvisation“, only a well-rehearsed, seemingly free *sprezzatura*-like performance that leaves the audience gasping in wonder at how an artist can take such risks. That is „noble negligence“, a stance adopted by the higher levels of society (in the Renaissance period) and then imitated by the lower echelons – the merchant, the priest, the lawyer. Lower than this, beneath the level of education into classical *mores*, tropes and traditions there is merely „negligence“ – a scruffy, unruly bunch of actions and speech of little worth.

I have chosen two quite contrasting examples of the art of rhetoric in song, where the required delivery has to appear wholly improvised, but the original performers (quite as well as my colleagues and myself in latter-day performances) expected they should be thoroughly well-prepared through the application

of every tedious aspect of „decoro“ in the work prior to actual performance. The very manuscripts, that were working tools for the 17th Century singers, reflect the degree of attention to every detail.

1. Oberon or „The madman's song“

The first example is, by a small margin the latest – the 19th of March, 1632 to be exact. A performance prepared especially for the King and Queen visiting the university town of Cambridge. The entertainment specially written was a „comedy“, *The Rival Friends* by one Peter Hausted, and it contained a number of musical items specially composed for the occasion. In Act 5 a diversion from the main plot was introduced: a madman from Bedlam (the hospital called Bethlehem, shortened to „Bedlam“, became the name for all mad people – male and female alike). The representation of insanity on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage was a well-established device for bizarre entertainment, and this curious English taste continued to develop throughout the 17th Century, culminating in the „mad songs“ of Henry Purcell, John Eccles, and other theatre composers of around 1700. The audiences loved it, especially if their favourite actress was required to „go mad“ on stage.

Here the „bedlamite“ is male, a role taken by the acclaimed bass singer, John Holmes but we know little about him today – just one of the many shadowy figures that populated the stage and the musical circles around. He was an organist as well as a singer, and has left a handful of compositions too, mostly of a light, entertaining nature – drinking and convivial songs in three parts. But this song is quite something else – as one can see from its very appearance in the manuscript, the only source of the piece. Clearly a „working“ manuscript, almost certainly in John Holmes' own hand, where the „plain“ version of the song is literally surrounded by no fewer than 9 important „fragments“ showing ornaments for specific words. One set, along the left hand margin, has been cropped by an over-assiduous binder in later times, but it is possible to make a studied guess at what was intended. These jottings represent the singer's own additions as the work was developed in rehearsal; as the bizarre character and appropriately bizarre characterisation developed, so did the flurry of ornaments increase. It is the equivalent of an artist's sketch-book, where rapid lines capture brief glimpses, awaiting fully working up into finished drawings or paintings at a later date.

Oberon, or y<sup>e</sup> Madmans  
Songs

Sung in a Comedie  
Cambridge before y<sup>e</sup>  
King & Quene  
by y<sup>e</sup> Author.

Newly from a Poacht Toad & a broyle Vipier, King of Fayry  
Land, & Obion doe arise, & to see, to see, to see  
what mortall fortune heere hath tyd: unto my Sacred Tree  
best y<sup>e</sup> ruder then was ev<sup>e</sup> y<sup>e</sup> halfe Exscriments of a Biant  
or ruder then y<sup>e</sup> Northern wind, Comst y<sup>e</sup> of some Satires  
kind, But what so ever thou canst bee, soe thou shalt  
re-mains for mee. But what so ever y<sup>e</sup> canst bee,  
Soe thou shalt remayne for mee.

Mr. Thomas Helmes.

Fig. 1: „Newly from a poacht toad“; London, British Library, Add.11068, f.18.  
© The British Library Board

It is not easy for anyone, other than Mr Holmes himself, presumably, to make sense of these scribbles. But I had a go, because the piece was exactly what I was looking for in a new context of a new programme, called „The deep abyss of hell“, where I needed a suitably zany buffo bass song for our bass, Simon Grant to „go mad“ in. *Oberon, or „The Madman’s Song“: Newly from a Poatch Toad* promised to be the perfect vehicle, if only I could find all the right places for these last minute emendations and decorations to fit.

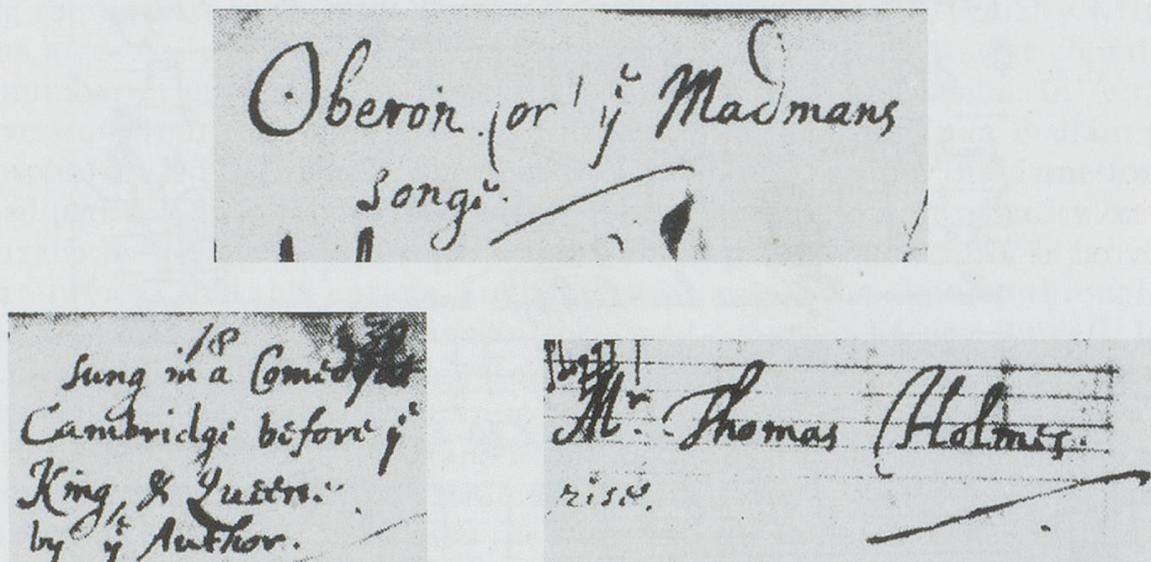


Fig. 2: Fragments from the title page.

The secret was in the words, of course: Fragment 1 decorated „broyl’d“, indeed painted the word splendidly being a re-worked standard Renaissance „turn“ that gave the feeling of „broyling“ (a cooking term, here applied to a „viper“, a snake – an essential part of the magician’s potions made in a cauldron, with suitable charms and incantations made over it).

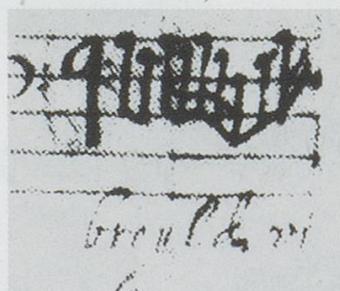


Fig. 3, frag. 1.

Next, Fragment 2 describes how the singer (thinking himself to be the King of Fairyland, Oberon) appears, indeed „arises“ – an amazing riff, covering almost the entire bass-buffo range vividly, and ludicrously manifests his mad appearance.

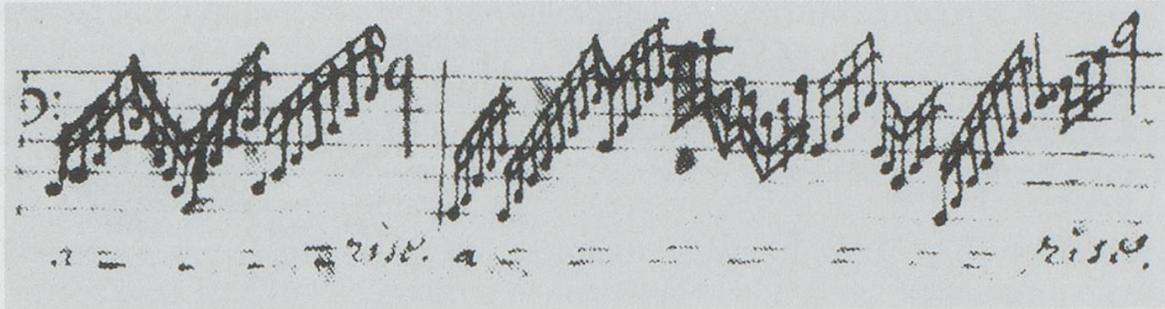


Fig. 4, frag. 2.

Fragment 3 takes the opposite turn, by descending, implying his „seeing“ is from on high, looking down at the mortal audience. The deranged magicians „Sacred Tree“ is the cause of his next outburst –

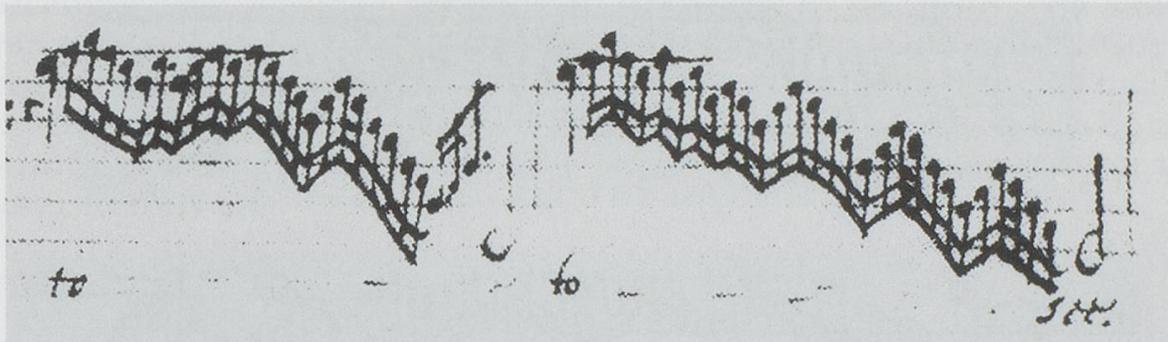


Fig. 5, frag. 3.

Fragment 4, where „sacred“ is twice decorated, as though transfixed by this emblem of his deluded power.

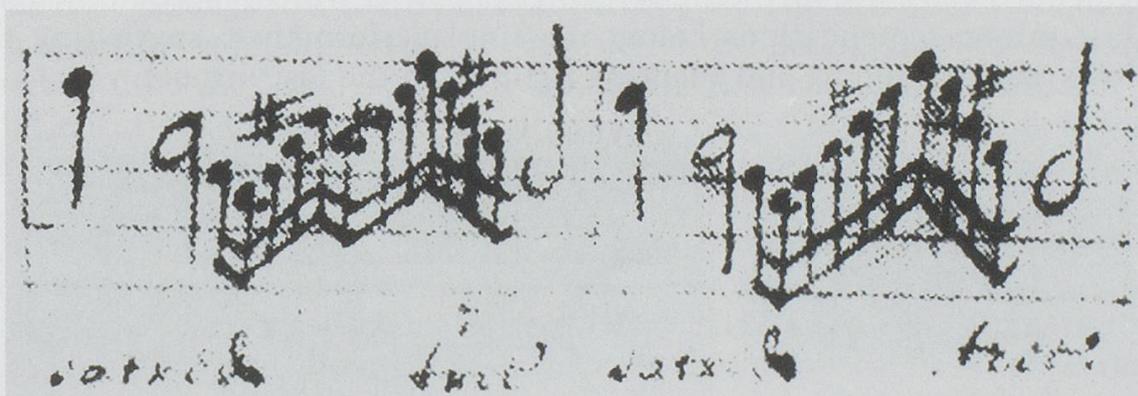


Fig. 6, frag. 4.

Fragment 5 suggests the denizen of the forest – Satyrs – as strange beings, and he implies that some in the audience maybe of that kind!

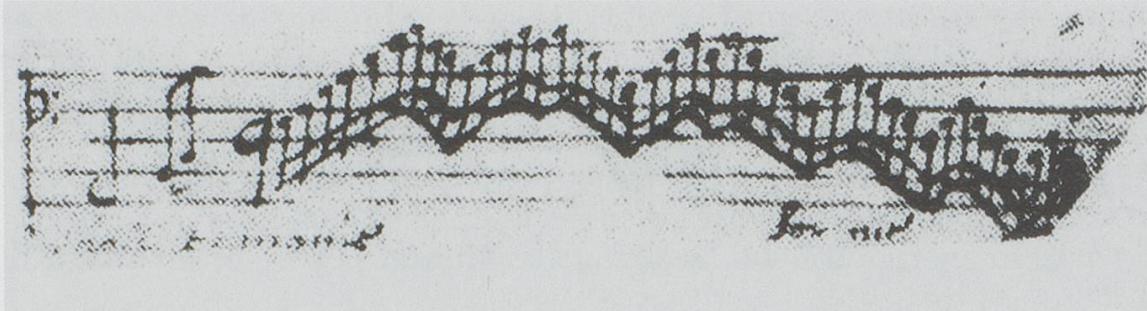


Fig. 7, frag. 5.

Fragments 6 and 7 decorate „remain for me“, the last part of his „spell“, his concluding burst of powerful magic, that takes him to the bottom „D“ for the final vocal thrill.

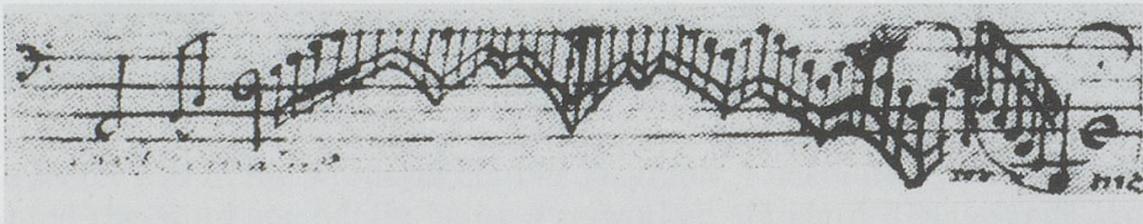
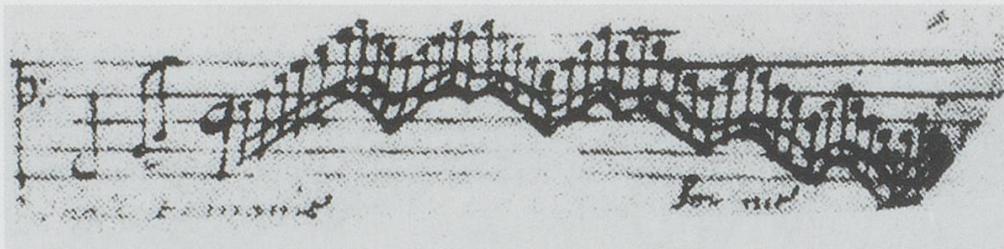


Fig. 8, frags. 6 and 7.

Fragments 8 and 9 are further re-workings of earlier words – second thoughts, or last minute emendations before the final performance, suggesting that Holmes was developing and adapting right up to the last minute.

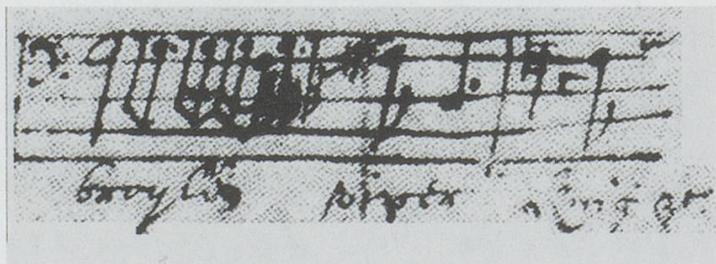


Fig. 9, frags. 8 and 9.

What was the purpose of all of these strange devices? The singer wanted to impress, literally to make an unforgettable impression (after all it is not everyday a singer has chance to present himself to Royalty). The whole was intended to

portray the character of a madman deluded into thinking he was the King of Fairyland, so every decoration developed that role, using ornamentation as a way of implying „incantation“, „magic“, and „strange other-worldliness“. But most of all, its prime purpose was to amuse – ever the buffo-bass function. How sad to have to report: it was said the King was very displeased with the performance, and was not amused!

The score shows my effort to „rationalize“ the manuscript jottings, with an added bass line in the manner of the style of the time, where unison with the singing bass was not avoided, and only diverges when harmonic sense requires it. And how does this strange little oddity sound? Well, you need a bass with an extended range with flexibility and be able to call on an diverse palate of vocal colours. He must have a personality that can play a theatrical role, and be prepared to be a fool – for this magician convinces no-one of his skills – he is a buffoon, all bluster. As an example of „music-theatre“, this piece is remarkably early, foreshadowing the great creations of Henry Purcell for John Bowman and Richard Leveridge, in the 1690s – by which time theatre music was full emancipated. Holmes' creation in the 1630s is altogether quite remarkable, and advanced. Apparently improvised, but totally worked out to the nth degree, and exploiting his own skills and technical abilities, this song amazes. The King might not have been amused, but we most certainly are.

## 2. „*You that have that dainty ear*“

My second example was probably notated about 10 years earlier, from the early 1620s, and both poetry and music are anonymous. The manuscript collection again suggests a personal gathering of a singer, but it is altogether clearer, more ordered and coherent than the previous one. Here the art of ornamentation is used for quite other purposes, yet „enchantment“ is still one of the effects intended, indeed the central one, as I hope to show.

The lyric belongs to a genre I have identified as „The Fair Singer“ – eulogies for a beautiful woman, perfect in every delightful detail, and who also sings superbly. Like the „mad songs“, it is a genre that completely straddles the 17th Century and comes to a climax towards 1700. This early example seeks to express ecstasy, reflecting the effect that the „voice“ of this fair singer has on her listeners. How does this particular song reveal „ecstasy“? The first requirement is to be able to call on a singer who has the imagination that the voice, music, performance can carry another dimension, so that „you that have a dainty ear“ can be transported – and in this I call on the standard references common throughout the 16th Century that music carries that power to emancipate the „soul“, locked „in this muddy vesture of decay“ (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, V, 1). This song, with its carefully nuanced *fiorituri* aims to dislodge that inner essence from the gross body by the use of varied graces, varied emphasis, and shifting, fleeting energies, so that „the soul does not know which way it is going“ (see the Chamberlain's final speech in „Cupid and Death“, a masque set by Matthew Locke in the 1650s).

76

You hat you hat daint  
 dard z go  
 flintest part dardlyst of loved dard a hat you  
 durt but a proty Gid boyre to goerd it would  
 gumbly yo<sup>2</sup> prondost bno lund yo<sup>2</sup> gerd gark would  
 mdalt of it our felt hge sweet viol lound

IN THE  
 ©

77

spare the musick in your passions, quire with sweet & solemnly layes  
 and men maye see at my pleasinge times consoire in my do vines  
 mimesse voice theye still to prayse and singe the layes wch theye layes  
 play it loud to wange it soft ten thousand

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation on aged paper. The page is numbered '77' in the top right corner. It features six systems of music, each consisting of a vocal line and a lute line. The vocal lines are written in a cursive hand with various ornaments and flourishes. The lute lines are written in a more standard notation with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are written in a cursive hand below the vocal lines. The paper shows signs of age, including some staining and discoloration.

Fig. 10: „You that have a dainty ear“. Oxford, Christ Church Library, Ms. 439, p. 76.  
 © The Governing Body of Christ Church, Oxford, 2009

Ecstasy and madness, or „frenzy“, lie very close together but their essentially different energies are clearly delineated in these two examples: the first exploited the „other-worldly“, magical powers of music, enhanced by using comedy. The second expects the listener to tune in to a different, more sublime and elevated plane – imitating the singer's effect on the poet, reproduced in performance, enhanced by „improvisatory“ gestures that seem borne on the moment. Ravishment is here the medium of exchange, and I think in this, we might join with all adherents to the philosophy of performance that demands: PRESENT MOMENT AWARENESS; RESPONSE TO THE IMMEDIATE, THE TANGIBLE STUFF OF „NOW“, where no amount of preparation can stand in for what really happens in this, the new moment. In this philosophical position, there is only improvisation – response to the new moment.

In their very different ways, these two examples reflect how this was dealt with, 400 years ago – one in service to comedy and exaggeration, the other in service to awe and wonder, and exaggeration. The very thin line between exaggeration that delights, and exaggeration that dejects, is precisely where the performing artist has to discriminate, ever in the new moment. Nimble footwork has always been the essence of the successful performer.

## Annexe: Transcriptions\*

1. Thomas Holmes, *Oberon or The Madman's Song*, „Newly from a poach't toad“ (1632).

New - ly from a poach't Toad and a broil'd vi - - per King of Fay - ry

Land, I Ob' - ron doe a - - - rise, I

Ob' - ron doe a - - - rise, to see, to see, to see

what mor - tal for - tune heere hath t' yde un - to my Sa - cred Tree

\* With thanks to Doron Schleifer.

20

bee'st ye ru - der than was ere the half ex-cre-ments of a beare or ru - der

27

than the North - ern wind, Con'st yee of some

33

Sat - irs kind, Bee what so e - ver thou canst bee soe thou shalt re -

41

main for

42

me Bee what so e - ver yee canst bee so than shalt re -

49

main for me.



23

lence. Hear the mus-ses\_ in their hea-ven-ly choir

27

With sweet Phi-lo-me's lays And mer-maids all with pleas-ing

32

tunes con-spire In my de-vine nymph's voice their skill to

36

praise And while the air with her lips play It

39

loves to change it-self ten thou-

41

sand times.