

Mad for Madrigalism:  
Text painting in the Bedlam songs of Purcell and Coprario

Mad songs of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are delightful and fanciful works of art. As we will see, they offer rich texts and wild melodies that are not only entertaining, but also enlightening of the musical and psychological habits of the time. For example, by looking at what was considered abnormal, we may attempt by contrast to gain insight into a society's standards of normality. In the seventeenth century England there was a fascination with the abnormal, particularly with lunacy and the occupants of insane asylums such as Bethlem Royal Hospital (Bedlam). Mad songs capitalized on this public enthrallment and the association catapulted them into popularity both in the streets and on the stage. To entice crowds further, composers amplified the vivid images of the texts, and the music they created for it followed suite. To convey the madness associated with Bedlam more dramatically, vocal melodies became tightly associated with accompanying texts, as reflected in John Coprario's *Tom of Bedlam* and Henry Purcell's *Bess of Bedlam*.

The mad songs that developed out of the English Restoration have received less attention than perhaps they deserve. Musicologist Craig Timberlake suggests "there is no neglected repertoire more powerful in its potential to arouse the creative imagination of the English-speaking singer than the 'mad songs.'"<sup>1</sup> Although some conservative musicians claim these pieces are too fanciful for serious musical consideration, musical editor Timothy Roberts praises them saying "the mad songs' extreme, colourful texts inspired Henry Purcell and his leading contemporaries to some of their most intense and dramatic settings."<sup>2</sup> In exploring this understudied genre, it is important to define its bounds by identifying observational tools used to characterize mad songs of this era. Musicologist and soprano Rebecca Lister, points out "mad songs have a definite poetic, dramatic, and musically

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Timberlake, "Practica Musicae: Mad Songs and Englishmen," *Journal of Singing - the Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 52, no. 3 (01/00; January-February 1996, 1996), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Roberts and others, *Thirteen Mad Songs* (London: Voicebox; 1999), 3.

common features, and in this way, could be considered a type of sub-genre in the English song repertoire.”<sup>3</sup> These characteristics can be defined by exploring the programmatic elements of the pieces that help convey extra musical meaning in the works and by explaining how, without explicitly relying on the text in vocal music, the composers use pitch, tempo, dynamics, etc. to elicit the emotional impact of the words. By these means, we gain a greater understanding of the mad songs’ historical context and importance in modern performance.

Our understanding of mad songs must be informed by the general public’s experience with madness at the time these pieces were written. There was at the time, I believe, a fixation on madness and an obsession with those who were deemed to suffer from lunacy. This popular fascination is most acutely demonstrated with the plight of mentally ill patients at Bethlem Royal Hospital, formerly known as Bedlam.<sup>4</sup> This facility was famous for mistreating its patients, including allowing visitors to poke and pester the institutionalized for a small fee. This form of entertainment grew in its popularity, adding to the appeal of songs portraying such madness.

Composers, recognizing the marketing potential of this madness fad, exploited the phenomenon by incorporating its themes in various permutations throughout their work. As songs of madness gained popularity, the musical techniques they used to express madness grew more intricate. In order to contrast the ballads of the insane with those of 'normal' beings, mad music became more ornate and deviated more intensely from musical conventions of the time. Lister observes that composers “used jarring harmonies, disjunct melodic leaps, rhetorical repetition, and sudden changes in tempo and key”<sup>5</sup> to set mad songs apart. There was also a sharp increase in the use of text painting in these works as compared to other secular solo songs of the time. Thus composers tailored their music to convey madness.

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Crow Lister, ""Wild Thro' the Woods I'Le Fly" Female Mad Songs in Seventeenth-Century English Drama" ), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam : Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 323.

<sup>5</sup> Lister, "*Wild Thro' the Woods I'Le Fly*" *Female Mad Songs in Seventeenth-Century English Drama*, 167.

The idea of text painting was not new to Restoration composers and in fact stems from a rich renaissance tradition of madrigalism. From this heritage sprung an understanding of how music could be used to express a text and certain precedents were developed to convey extra-musical meaning. For example, geographical elevation became closely associated with pitch, such that many heavenly references and objects found in the sky were set to higher degrees on the scale. Likewise, hell and death became intertwined with lower melodies. Such customs proliferated and become common associations.

These musical conventions would have been familiar to composers of the Baroque era. Music and words grew in their relationship and Purcell even includes the following inscription above his name in the dedication of *Dioclesian* (1690) to the Duke of Somerset “Musik and Poetry have ever been acknowledged Sisters, which walking hand in hand, support each other. . . both of them may excel apart, but sure they are most excellent when they are joyn’d, because nothing is then wanting to either of their Perfections.”<sup>6</sup> Although this inscription is a quotation of English poet John Dryden, it is clear in his including it that Purcell held in high regard the relationship between music and words. From this foundation, sounds developed associations with certain moods. Minor modes were associated with sadness, and major modes came to be considered more light-hearted. Even this association has its roots in musical history in Ramos de Pareia’s *Musica Practica* (1482), which states that music’s four modes “produce the four humors. Thus the protus mode is phlegmatic, the deuterus is choleric, while the tritus is sanguine, and the terardus has a slow melancholy.”<sup>7</sup> This theoretical treatise is an early example of the intertwining of mood with musical characteristics from which the extreme emotional fluctuations of mad songs owe their development.

In addition to a musical heritage, mad songs also have a literary heritage for their dramatic elements. The precedence of madness in literature would have given composers a wealth of

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Luckett, liner notes from: Henry Purcell and others, *Songs & Airs, Songs & Airs*, 100201; (ViRU)100201; ()100201; ocm14390013, 1985 Editions de L'Oiseau-Lyre, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Enrique Alberto Arias, "Reflections from a Cracked Mirror: Madness and Theory of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: An Overview" In *Essays in Honor of John F. Ohl a Compendium of American Musicology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 134.

inspiration. Prime examples include Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote*, in which an old man goes heroically in his quest for honor and glory. Additionally, there are numerous works of Shakespeare that incorporate madness as a significant character trait including *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. Lister mentions, "it is interesting to note that the mad characters portrayed in plays frequently sang or hummed to themselves, a sure sign of a lapse in sanity."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, many of these works were transformed for the stage to include musical settings of their texts. At first, only certain characters were allowed to sing in theatrical productions on professional stages. For example, Lister mentions "supernatural beings, such as gods or ghosts, could sing because they were not of the mortal world . . . and so they communicated in an other worldly way."<sup>9</sup> She goes on to mention that the same standard applies to witches, fairies, and, most pertinently, lunatics. These characters were given music to set them apart from the characters common to everyday experience, and so too their music had to be different from common practice. Lister observes, "some of the compositional techniques which musically illustrate mad behavior are strident harmonies, frequently changing tempi and meters, unusual melodic leaps, and poetic repetition" thus demonstrating the distinctiveness of the mad song genre as it developed in the theatrical world.

On stage, these mad songs grew exponentially in their popularity. They allowed an opportunity to have wild women, deviant males, and an unending supply of ridiculous situations. Lister notes, "the presence of mad characters in plays did not guarantee the success of a play, but it did add vital emotional interest . . . . In a society dominated by Descartes's philosophy of rationalism and self control, mad characters were figures of fascination, spontaneity, disgust, and pity."<sup>10</sup> I believe mad characters served as an outlet for the audiences' inner fantasies and desires and offered a comedic release from daily struggles. Mad characters, because of their befuddled condition, were allowed to give voice to the unspeakable and constantly flew in the face of taboos and social norms. Lister notes "mad songs are direct expressions of the character's unbridled emotions,

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<sup>8</sup> Lister, "Wild Thro' the Woods I'Le Fly" *Female Mad Songs in Seventeenth-Century English Drama*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 52.

contrasting sharply with the balanced composure of the other characters.”<sup>11</sup> With no sanity to promote self-censuring, these characters were wild sources of entertainment.

Their ability to be entirely different from the norm gave mad characters their power and made them desirable. To emphasize this difference, composers chose to make the music intended for mad characters unique from the ballads given to proper maids and heroes. As we will see in the two example songs that follow, the contrast in the characters’ mental states is accented by a necessary contrast in its musical expression. Musicologist Enrique Arias concurs that mad songs had a “style sufficiently distinguished from the surrounding sections for the audience to identify the scene.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, mad songs became quite distinct, as well as beloved.

Though the songs examined below were never intended for the stage, they take their cues from the precedents set down in the theater. From the songs for the stage developed street ballads commonly known as “broadsheet ballads,” so called for the large sheets on which they were printed and sold in mass inexpensively.<sup>13</sup> The lyricists are mostly unknown or anonymous, but rarely would the composer write his own text. It is from this body of repertoire that John Coprario’s *Tom of Bedlam* developed. Though it can be found in deferent variations and under various titles, *Graves Inn* and *The Lordes Maske* among them, its central themes of madness as portrayed through text painting are common in all of them. Coprario’s piece portrays a character, Tom, whose madness exhibits the conventions of the stage.

John Coprario, an English composer, was born in the late 1570’s and is most noted for his composition of ‘instrumental madrigals.’ Born as John Cooper, he studied composition in Italy, at which point he changed his name to Giovanni Coperario.<sup>14</sup> Today, he is most commonly known as a confused combination of the two names, John Coprario. While in Italy, Coprario became well

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Arias, *Reflections from a Cracked Mirror: Madness and Theory of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: An Overview*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Purcell and others, *A Broadcast Recital of English Songs, and Arias by Purcell and Handel, A Broadcast Recital of English Songs, and Arias by Purcell and Handel*, 1968 .

<sup>14</sup> Jeremy Barlow. Liner notes from: Broadsheet Band, Jeremy Barlow and John Playford, *Airs Populaires Anglais Du XVIIe Siecle, Airs Populaires Anglais Du XVIIe Siecle*, 381915; ocm28174349, 1992 Harmonia Mundi France, 5.

acquainted with the Italian madrigal and the music techniques it employed to convey the meaning of the text.

Coprario's subject, Tom of Bedlam, would have been a well recognized character at the time and gives the piece its first title. This caricature was generally portrayed as a mad and drunk beggar, assumed to have escaped from Bethlem Royal Hospital.<sup>15</sup> The second popular title of the work, *Gray's Inn* stems from the piece's performance venue. Gray's Inn was a popular London landmark of the time and was often used for social gatherings in which mad songs, or masque tunes, were performed by amateurs.<sup>16</sup> Masque tunes, from which the third title, *The Lord's Masque*, is derived, were based largely on the outlandish stage works being performed in professional theaters. They included mythological creatures and insane men interacting in wild scenes designed to please the crowds. Although Coprario's composition is of a higher vocal quality than these ballads, the traditions from which it stems would have been clear to both performers and listeners.

From this history, Coprario composed *Tom of Bedlam* to draw revenue from an audience hungry for spectacle. Musicologist Joy Wiltenburg notes "assuming that a mad man would draw an audience of scoffers, the ballad treated him as a comic figure."<sup>17</sup> According to her, Tom of Bedlam was the "prototype of the early modern madman" and was presented as "a figure of fun, occupied with wild fantasies of adventures among the gods of classical mythology."<sup>18</sup> This characterization would have made the piece quite popular because of its distinctiveness.

To better please the audience, Coprario included musical games with words in his music. He illustrated the text with his melodies. For example, the opening few lines describe Tom as coming up out "from the deep abyss of hell."<sup>19</sup> Throughout the opening line, the melody progresses steadily upward from G2 to D4. After this point, the line crashes in a literal representation of "fears and cares oppress my soul." (Figure 1). Likewise, his "troublesome shackles" are also portrayed by such a fall,

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<sup>15</sup> MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam : Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*, 30.

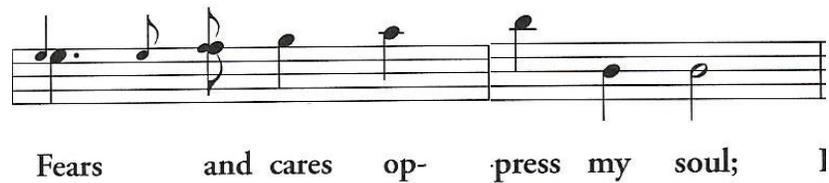
<sup>16</sup> Broadside Band, Barlow and Playford, *Airs Populaires Anglais Du XVIIe Siecle*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Wiltenburg J, "Madness and Society in the Street Ballads of Early Modern England." *Journal of Popular Culture* 21, no. 4 (1988), 117.

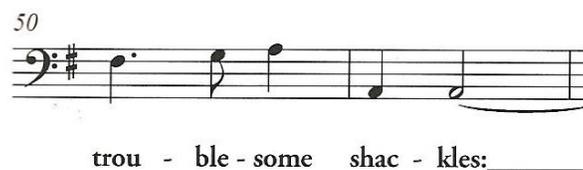
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Roberts and others, *Thirteen Mad Songs*, 34.

which I believe strongly associates them with the hell mentioned in the beginning (Figure 2). These gestures would have been appealing to the audience, but I feel such sudden shifts also would have set the music apart from the ‘rational’ melodies of normal characters that typically move in smooth progressions with few large leaps.



**Figure 1. John Coprario, *Tom of Bedlam*, m 9-10.**



**Figure 2. John Coprario, *Tom of Bedlam*, m 50-51.**

Another example of Coprario’s use of text painting to set mad songs apart is found in the melody accompanying the words “away he flies” and “I rend the skies” both of which use the same musical gesture (Figure 3). As mentioned above, early in musical tradition high pitches became associated with objects of the sky and this excerpt is an excellent example of such an association. In this piece, I feel it serves to show the limits of madness by stretching the bass voice to its own limits.



**Figure 3. John Coprario, *Tom of Bedlam*, m 29 and pick up.**

As mentioned above, mad songs often employed several centers of pitch, and indeed *Tom of Bedlam* uses three different key signatures over the course of the work, which itself is no more than sixty measures. These sections are further divided into smaller segments, giving the pieces an even more disjointed feel. This technique served to set apart mad songs from contemporary vocal works, which would not have varied mood so frequently. *Tom of Bedlam* also employs a large vocal range: G2-Eb4. The norm for the time would have been to remain within a single tesseratura. I feel each of these deviations from the norm serve to distinguish the text as something wild and unnatural, just as the state of insanity would have been perceived.

As far as the text painting is concerned, it is interesting to note that *Tom of Bedlam* is strophic. I feel this musical structure can make it difficult for a composer to tailor music for a text that changes against a constant melody. Although there are instances of text painting in both strophes, editor Timothy Roberts notes that “the second verse is not underlaid in the source,”<sup>20</sup> indicating that perhaps there might have been a change in melody or accompaniment to better tailor the music to the second set of words. I feel this situation hints upon the possibly large role of the continuo in shaping the expression of the text through its own text painting. Unfortunately, very little remains of the accompanying material beyond the figured bass and it may well have been up to the individual player as to whether the continuo might reflect the words being sung.

In his setting of the text, Coprario uses music to highlight many more images that eventually became Restoration mad song cliché. For example, Wiltenburg cites “burning and freezing, flying and drowning, and haunting by mythological characters whose antics may symbolize the victim’s frustrated desires” (a desire for liquor, as the case may be for our poor Tom). The performance of *Tom of Bedlam* lead to a standard by which later songs could be considered mad by means of a text painting precedent.

An example of a song that took its cues from *Tom of Bedlam* was its female counter part *Bess of Bedlam*, written some sixty years later by Henry Purcell. Purcell was known throughout his life for

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 37.

his English vocal music. He wrote many mad songs, including his first and most famous *Bess of Bedlam*, which narrates the developing madness of a girl scorned in love.<sup>21, 22</sup> Purcell used the example of *Tom of Bedlam* and added to it his own unique ideas and by doing so “established the format of the English mad song of the next twenty years.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the practices of Purcell in *Bess of Bedlam* are important for understanding mad songs as a genre.

Like *Tom of Bedlam*, *Bess of Bedlam* was not written for the stage, despite the fact that most of Purcell’s secular solo songs were for this purpose. *Bess of Bedlam* was among the ninety that were not for theater.<sup>24</sup> Both on and off the stage, Purcell was adept at setting texts and musicologist Robert King agrees “Purcell’s craftsmanship in setting his native language to music was supreme.”<sup>25</sup> In his introduction of *Orpheus Britannicus* (1706), John Playford mentions that Purcell was “admir’d for his Vocal music, having a peculiar Genius to express the Energy of English Words”<sup>26</sup> All of this praise suggests that Purcell would have been well positioned to make the most of the rich texts that mad songs provided.

To exercise his ability with text setting, Purcell would have had to have been familiar with the social implications of a mad song such as *Bess of Bedlam*. Indeed, King notes “Purcell’s song texts were full of subtle references”<sup>27</sup> and so attention to such details must not be ignored by modern observers. Of the context of a singer’s lunacy, Soprano Rebecca Lister observes, “the insanity of a character could be induced by many things, such as societal rejection, uncontrollable grief, or a spiritual trance, but usually stemmed from the loss of a lover,”<sup>28</sup> the last of which was poor Bess’s plight after the sudden death of her love. Lister also notes that “far more mad songs were composed for female roles than for male roles.”<sup>29</sup> I believe these two observations are linked in a social

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<sup>21</sup> Margaret Laurie, "Purcell's Extended Solo Songs," *Musical Times* 125, no. 1691 (01/00; January 1984, 1984), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Timberlake, *Practica Musicae: Mad Songs and Englishmen*, 55.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Purcell and others, *The Secular Solo Songs of Henry Purcell, The Secular Solo Songs of Henry Purcell*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Laurie, "Purcell's Extended Solo Songs," *Musical Times* 125, no. 1691 (01/00; January 1984, 1984), 19.

<sup>25</sup> Purcell and others, *The Secular Solo Songs of Henry Purcell*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Lister, "Wild Thro' the Woods I'Le Fly" *Female Mad Songs in Seventeenth-Century English Drama*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

stereotype about women that was popular at the time. Women were often thought of as flighty, irrational, and prone to melodrama. To put a woman on stage was cause for attention and drew in curious audiences. This was especially true if such an actress were to portray a crazed, sex-deprived, lunatic that might say (or do) anything. Lister explains “the innocence and suffering of the virginal mad characters were commonly exploited in much of English drama. . . [and were] more likely to be dominated by their madness.”<sup>30</sup> In this context, *Bess of Bedlam* would have been received as an erotic show of female passion, a condition barley contained.

As Coprario does in *Tom of Bedlam*, Purcell uses contrast to highlight the disjointed mind of his main character. King feels “Purcell’s handling of the mood changes is masterly,”<sup>31</sup> especially over the impressive twelve changes in temperament. These sudden musical contrasts represent the bewildered way in which Bess bounces from idea to idea in her own mind. Arias feel that “by collecting scraps of simple melodies, Bess remembers former happiness through the mists of her confusion”<sup>32</sup> and so the various musical ideas that set the sections apart represent her effort to recall this happiness. Musicologist Peter Holman agrees, writing “in *Bess of Bedlam*, the illogical trains of thought of a deranged mind are portrayed by sudden changes of movement and mood, mixing declamatory passages with snatches of airs in duple and triple time.”<sup>33</sup> Purcell uses these unconventional gestures to act as metaphor for, and to match, Bess’s unconventional mind.

Despite all of the mania of Purcell’s setting, *Bess of Bedlam* does not constantly change keys as *Tom of Bedlam* does. Musicologist Margaret Laurie suggest that this conveys an “air of obsession through limited modulation,”<sup>34</sup> which, in my opinion, forces the listener to focus just as obsessively on the wild thoughts that Bess is conveying. Later songs move through series of keys, as if revealing the layers of the singer’s mind, but Bess remains fixed on one subject: the loss of her lover. This fixedness persists through the whole piece.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 52.

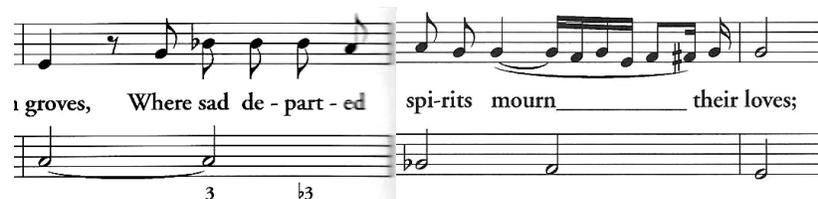
<sup>31</sup> Purcell and others, *The Secular Solo Songs of Henry Purcell*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Arias, *Reflections from a Cracked Mirror: Madness and Theory of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: An Overview*, 139.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Holman, *Henry Purcell* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 40.

<sup>34</sup> Laurie, *Purcell's Extended Solo Songs*, 25.

Beyond the metaphors for madness that appear over the course of the entire work, Purcell also highlighted key words and phrases with text painting. The piece moves from an opening in C Major to c minor on the words “sad departed spirits mourn”<sup>35</sup> (Figure 4), playing on the idea that minor keys are more sorrowful, a concept that would have been well established by this point. Additionally, it is at this moment in the music that Purcell introduces the first melisma in the piece, accentuating the word ‘mourn’ to turn it into a sort of wail in itself. Laurie also notices the piece’s peculiar beginning citing “the jagged, off-beat opening, irregular phrase-lengths and the quickening of movement in the bass to create a sense of climax at the end of the recitative.”<sup>36</sup> The musical emphasis on certain words and phrases seems out of place in the otherwise melodic opening and so from the beginning Purcell sets apart the piece as one that does not conform to normal standards.



**Figure 4. Henry Purcell, *Bess of Bedlam*, m 3-4.**

Purcell continues to emphasize words with his musical line throughout the piece. Laurie observes that he “shows a greater tendency to linger on key words and to link phrases by the use of weak cadences.”<sup>37</sup> Thus he unbalances the listener, just as Bess finds herself unbalanced. He continues this effort by painting specific phrases later in the piece. For example, as Bess sings “I’ll lay me down and die” Purcell gives her a descending line, which I believe represents death and burial, that dies as it decrescendos in its decent (Figure 5). To add greater emphasis, the line approaches this phrase with an octave leap from the word ‘groan.’ The depressing mood that this gesture elicits lures the listener into Bess’s plight using the melody to augment the words.

<sup>35</sup> Roberts and others, *Thirteen Mad Songs*, 25.

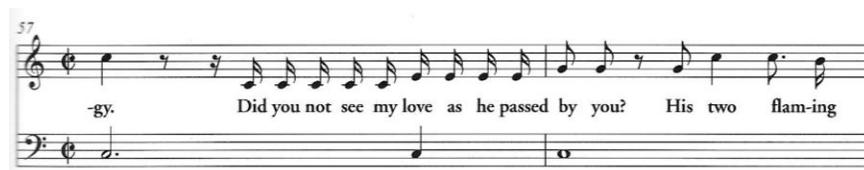
<sup>36</sup> Laurie, *Purcell's Extended Solo Songs*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 5. Henry Purcell, *Bess of Bedlam*, m 47-49.**

Purcell’s use of melody to supplement text continues as Bess once again changes moods. She cries out “Did you not see my love as he passed by you?”<sup>38</sup> This sighting is impossible as her lover is quite dead, but the music draws the listener into her frenzy and desperation in delusion with suddenly quick moving and syncopated notes (Figure 6). This gesture emphasizes her absurdity by giving her words that are too fast to have rational thoughts behind them. The rhythm at this point switches between short notes and longer dotted rhythms, suggesting Bess cannot come to terms with any one state of emotion. The musical gestures underlying the crazed words add evidence to show that she is truly mad.



**Figure 6. Henry Purcell, *Bess of Bedlam*, m 57-58.**

Purcell used many different tools to convey madness in Bess. He was famous for his agility with the words in his music and his mad songs offered great opportunities for him to display his talent. Laurie notes how he “strove to convey the anguish of an exaggeratedly pictorial text through spiky rhythms, wide-leaping melodies, and unconventionally used non-harmony notes.”<sup>39</sup> In *Bess of Bedlam*, we have seen examples of rhythmic variation, melodic painting of words, and harmonic text painting. In many ways these techniques are similar to those used by Coprario. Purcell simply takes

<sup>38</sup> Roberts and others, *Thirteen Mad Songs*, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Laurie, *Purcell's Extended Solo Songs*, 19.

them as step further and sets the stages for future deviations from the musical norm, like eventually the addition of fioratura, to emphasize the differences between sanity and madness.

The characteristics of mad songs that one finds in *Bess of Bedlam* and *Tom of Bedlam* act as a guide for musicians who wish to delve into this genre. They are helpful summaries of the important features to be emphasized in mad songs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Lister notes “the unbridled, fervent emotions revealed in mad characters’ irrational behavior and language contrast sharply with the predictable behavior of the heroic characters that surround them.”<sup>40</sup> By identifying the features that set them apart, we inform realizations of the music to reflect the text more clearly, and we learn to emphasize melodic segments that are textually important. Through studies of *Bess of Bedlam* and *Tom of Bedlam*, we see how the normal is contrasted with the abnormal through the musical setting of their texts to create an affect that is truly mad.

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<sup>40</sup> Lister, “Wild Thro’ the Woods I’Le Fly” *Female Mad Songs in Seventeenth-Century English Drama*, 165.

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