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Feminism Meets Folk Song in Dame Ethel Smyth's Opera, *The Boatswain's Mate*

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Paper

This paper will explore the intersection of two great cultural trends in Edwardian England; the enthusiasm for folk music and the drive for women's rights. These trends came together in *The Boatswain's Mate*, a short comic opera by Dame Ethel Smyth, OBE.

The fourth of eight children of Major-General J. H. Smyth, Ethel was raised in an upper middle class Victorian household. She eschewed the usual path of a woman of this period and class, choosing a career as a composer. Her output included six operas, a Mass, string quartets, solo sonatas, a double concerto and many songs. Prejudice against women composers kept her works from receiving wide recognition or performance. She was granted two honorary doctorates and made a Dame of the British Empire but died in relative obscurity, her compositions having never reached canonical status, but with national renown for her leadership and advocacy of women's suffrage.²

Smyth embarked on the writing of *The Boatswain's Mate*³ after a two-year hiatus from composition during which she devoted her full energies to the suffragette cause. She had already composed three operas and believed that a lighter, shorter work would complement them and increase the chances of her works being performed.

¹ I would like to thank my Professor, Dr. Kevin Salfen, for his guidance and support during the conduct of the study. I would also like to recognize Ms. Valerie Langfield, Executive Producer of Retrospect Opera and Dr. Amanda Harris of the University of Sydney, Australia for their assistance in locating materials for the study. The University of the Incarnate Word Library staff were invaluable as well.

² Her 1944 obituary described her as "a public character" whose adventures "had included that of musical composition. McN, "Dame Ethel Smyth" (obituary), Musical Times 85, no. 1217 (July 1944), 207-208 + 211-212.

³ The title is a sly pun. A Boatswain's Mate is a Naval rating with responsibilities for maintenance, boat handling, rigging and small boats. The proper form of address for such a sailor is "Boatswain" (pronounced "Bosun"). Had Mrs. Waters succumbed to Harry Benn's blandishments, she would have become the "Boatswain's Mate" in the connubial sense. Benn also refers to Ned as "Mate."

The opera is written for a small cast, only five named roles plus a small chorus. The plot concerns “Mrs. Waters,” the widowed owner of “The Beehive,” a country pub, who is being pursued by “Harry Benn,” a retired Boatswain’s Mate who would love nothing better than to preside over the bar of his wife’s establishment. He encounters “Ned Travers,” an ex-soldier, and convinces Ned to go along with a fantastic scheme to drive Mrs. Waters into the old sailor’s arms. Ned is to burgle her house and when Mrs. Waters discovers it and shouts for help, Harry will rush in and save her. Mrs. Waters, who has been away while the two men were conspiring, returns and shoos them away. She sings of her youth and how it would be if she “were young again,” then closes Part I of the opera with the dismissive words: “Oh, the impertinence!” That night, Ned enters the house and, hearing someone approach, hides in a cupboard. It is Mrs. Waters--armed with a shotgun--who promptly locks the cupboard door with Ned inside. Ned reveals the plan, whereupon Mrs. Waters decides to turn the tables on them. She releases Ned, fires one barrel of the gun and then runs outside and into the arms of Harry. She tells him that she has killed a burglar and enlists Harry to dig a grave to hide the body. Once the grave is finished, she sends him away. Ned is tasked to fill in the hole. Before much can be done on that score, a policeman appears with Harry in tow! Harry has babbled some story about a murder at “The Beehive,” but that *he* was the culprit. When Ned is seen, quite unharmed, Harry is thrown into confusion, made worse by the policeman’s risible efforts to “get to the bottom of the case.” When Mrs. Waters finally has had enough, she tosses Harry and the policeman out, leaving herself alone with Ned. Over breakfast, Ned indicates his attraction to Mrs. Waters who seems to reciprocate his interest, at least to the point of allowing him to return in the evening for a drink. In the final scene, Mrs. Waters reprises her song from the Part I finale with new words: “Summer’s the time for love.” After her exit, the maid, Mary Ann is left on stage to wink with amusement at her employer’s change of heart. Curtain.

For musical sources, Smyth used two of her “feminist” works; “March of the Women” and “1910,” in the overture and five British folk songs in the opera itself. The overture is unusual for at least two reasons: it is melodically distinct from the opera and is written in sonata form, using the two suffragette melodies as themes.

A recurring feature of criticism of *Boatswain* is Smyth’s decision to make the two parts of the opera so completely different. Part I is British ballad opera; a mix of songs, choruses, and spoken dialogue, which relies in part on folk tunes. Part II is so different as to seem another work entirely. It is sung throughout and lacks musical allusions except for a quotation of Beethoven’s Fifth at the moment that the policeman arrives. Critics have split on whether this was a blunder or a brilliant artistic and subliminal revolutionary stratagem.⁴ Others suggest that she was attempting to bridge the gap between the aesthetics--and audiences--of the music hall and those of the opera house.

⁴ The significance of this work, however, has attracted some interesting comments including one in the Grove Encyclopedia of the Opera that *Boatswain’s Mate* forms “an important if unacknowledged link between Romantic music drama and the realism of Peter Grimes.”

Smyth's original plan for a March 1915 premier in Frankfurt was upset by the onset of World War I. The work finally premiered January 28, 1916 at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, performed by the Beecham Opera Company.⁵

Most contemporaneous critics focused on the gender of *Boatswain's* creator and either dismissed the work for having been written by a woman or panned it because it didn't sound "feminine" enough.⁶

Turning now to the issue of the folk songs used in *Boatswain*: Smyth could choose from literally thousands of tunes. Based on their texts and tunes, her choices can be interpreted in a variety of ways. This paper will consider some of these alternatives and will present statistical data upon which to base inferences. Before delving into Smyth's possible reasons for choosing particular folk song melodies, let us consider what sorts of effects the use of identifiable melodies might conceivably produce. It is well known that attaching melody to text greatly improves one's ability to remember both--witness how many popular songs or hymns the average person can sing or recognize from either melody or text. As to which of the two is the more important, Vaughan Williams states flatly that "the tune is merely... a vehicle for the words"⁷. It has also been observed that a group, hearing a melody, even when others are singing it to unfamiliar words, will recall the lyrics with which they are most familiar and will even sing them--to the exclusion of the less familiar text. This phenomenon was observed centuries ago around a tune called "*L'homme armé*" which most people knew as a secular song. When composers used it as a *cantus firmus* for a Mass, the congregations often sang the words they knew; which "were often... not for edification". This led to a Papal ban on the use of secular songs as bases for religious works.⁸

With this understanding of the linkage in folk songs between tune and text, consider some alternative motives that may have been in Smyth's mind when she made her selections. First, given how fashionable such uses were becoming, she may have been following a trend. Against that possibility is the fact that she was writing in 1913-14 and many concert works using folk song themes came later. For example, Vaughan Williams's *English Folk Song Suite* was composed in 1923, Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy* was published in 1940.

Smyth may have intended these tunes to "place" the work in a rural locale. Given the origins of folk music and the remote places where it was being collected, there would be an aesthetic reason for these tunes to reinforce *Boatswain's* setting in a country inn. However, if either of the first

⁵ The lead role was sung by the prominent New Zealand-born soprano, Rosina Buckman. A second production under Beecham's baton took place at Drury Lane in March 1919. It was performed multiple times at Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells and in theatres outside London in the 1920's and has had the most performances of any of her operas. Sadly, it fell into obscurity until its revival by the group Retrospect Opera which recorded it in 2015.

⁶ For a fuller, more modern discussion of critical views of Smyth's works, the reader may benefit from reading two articles by Eugene Gates. "Damned if You Do and Damned if You Don't: Sexual Aesthetics and the Music of Dame Ethel Smyth," Kapralova Society Journal 4 Issue 1 (Spring 2006) and "Dame Ethel Smyth: Pioneer of English Opera," Kapralova Society Journal 11, Issue 1 (Spring 2013).

⁷ Vaughan Williams, English folk-songs, p. 10.

⁸ Vaughan Williams, National Music, p. 44.

two possibilities pertain, one should expect to see no topical trends in terms of issues in the text. Specifically, there should not be an over-representation of feminist topics in her chosen songs.

A final proposed reason for Smyth to choose particular folk songs was to reinforce the basic message of the work regarding women's rights. In order to support this as a credible argument, one first would have to show that these tunes and texts were widely known by the audiences that she was seeking to attract and entertain. To that point, Gerald Abraham, in his Foreword to A Guide to English Folk Song Collections, cites several folk song collectors in the late nineteenth century for their effects "not only among their personal circle of cultivated men and women, but among the public at large. The songs were widely sung, and many were issued separately in the usual manner of songs in the days when 'to bring music' was an expected part of social intercourse."⁹

The second essential of this argument is to make a case for folk song texts having identifiable issues related to women's rights.¹⁰ By way of demonstration, consider the first stanza of "Wagoner's Lad".¹¹

Oh, hard is the fortune of all woman kind.
She's always controlled, she's always confined.
Controlled by her parents until she's a wife.
A slave to her husband the rest of her life.

At least two issues are clearly present, related to a woman's autonomy within the nuclear family and marriage. Later stanzas present issues regarding the woman's right to seek a marriage partner of her own choosing.

Contrast this with "Rothesay-O", a Scottish ballad about men roistering through a seacoast town, getting drunk, crashing in a flea-infested flophouse and being run out of town by the police.

One Hogmany at Glesca Fair,
There was me, mysel' and sev'ral mair,
We a' went off to hae a tear
An' spend the nicht in Rothesay, O,
We wandered thro' the Broomielaw,
Thro' wind an' rain an' sleet an' snaw,
And at forty minutes after twa,
We got the length o' Rothesay, O.

⁹ A Guide to English Folk Song Collections, Margaret Dean-Smith, ed., Liverpool Letterpress Limited, Liverpool, 1954. p. 18.

¹⁰ I will use the term "feminist issues" in the balance of the paper to refer to a range of complaints and concerns women have with inequality, unfairness and discrimination based on their sex. This use of the term is not meant to be dismissive of the validity of these complaints and concerns, only to give a name to the range of issues that Smyth, a noted Suffragette and early feminist could have had in mind in 1913.

¹¹ This song was collected by Cecil Sharp in the United States and published in Wyman and Brockway, Lonesome Tunes, W. H. Gray & Co. New York, 1916. It is an American song and thus not found in indices of English Folk Songs.

Chorus:

A dirrum a doo a dum a day,
A dirrum a doo a daddy O,
A dirrum a doo a dum a day,
The day we went to Rothesay, O.

One will search hard for women's rights themes in this song without success.

In order to identify feminist themes in a reproducible, quantifiable fashion, I developed a scoring system to evaluate folk song texts. This nosology reflects what is now termed first wave and second wave feminism with the emphasis on the primary concerns of women at the time of *Boatswain's* composition.

In an attempt to discover evidence of Smyth's motives, I chose a statistical approach based on the number of identifiable feminist themes in the texts of the five songs she used in *Boatswain*. I studied the texts of those songs in comparison to a representative sample of folk songs that had been collected and published prior to 1913. In the absence of direct evidence from her extensive writings I elected to search for the presence of what is termed "association" in inferential statistical studies. In such analyses, the initial step is to identify a "null hypothesis" which posits the *absence* of an association; in this case that Smyth's choice of songs bore no relation to feminist themes. The test of the null hypothesis is to find the probability of the difference between two populations having occurred by random chance. If the probability of the observed difference is less than one chance in twenty (0.05), the convention is to declare the null hypothesis as rejected. (This probability is referred to as the "p-value.") However, it is not correct to conclude that any alternate hypothesis has been *proved*. We could not infer that Smyth knowingly chose these songs because of their textual associations with feminist issues, only that the frequency of such issues is greater than would be expected if she had chosen them without such bias.

To illustrate how the choices of folk song melodies may have played a role in the opera as well as the artistic purpose each may have served, each song will be taken up along with its text and scored for feminist issues. The position of each in the libretto will be discussed for implications for Smyth's use at that point.

The first tune to appear, "The Keeper Did a-Hunting Go," occurs in Part I as an instrumental interlude.¹² This song concerns a groundskeeper who goes out hunting *does* (not, one notes, hunting *deer*) but who never seems to hit one. Since Harry Benn has already revealed his desire to be the Innkeeper of The Beehive, the parallel is clear as is the irony of the text describing another kind of "keeper" who can't bag the prey he has set out to pursue. However, the folk song text does not appear to present any of the feminist issues I identified. Thus, it was scored as 0, but is certainly ironic commentary.

"The Cruel Mother" appears in Scene IV sung by the ex-soldier, Ned Travers. He describes an episode in which he and a comrade attempted to pick up two young ladies. The men's planned allocation of girl to soldier goes awry when the ladies decline to be paired off in the way the soldiers preferred. The original text of the folk song itself is not nearly so light-hearted. Its

¹² This and subsequent page numbers in this section refer to the *Boatswain* vocal score published by Universal-Edition A. G., Wien, 1915 and copywritten in the US by Ethel Smyth. A facsimile of each referenced page will be found in Appendix C.

subject is an unwed mother, abandoned by her lover, a man of lower social position who either will not or cannot marry her. The mother murders her two babies and, after seven years of living with her parents as an unmarried spinster, encounters the ghosts of her two children who tell her “it’s hell for you.” Smyth’s purpose here could be to contrast the two girls’ assertiveness with the desperation of “The Cruel Mother” whose only option is to murder the babies and retreat to her parents’ domination. In terms of identifiable feminist themes, there are at least three.

“Lord Rendal,” a song about a dying nobleman whose sweetheart has poisoned him, appears in Scene VI of Part I as part of Mrs. Waters’ long soliloquy during which she begins to recognize her interest in having a relationship with a man (not Harry, of course!). The contrast between her words and the chilling text of the folk song is striking. Scoring this text against the issues is not as clear-cut as with others in *Boatswain*. We know little about the woman who poisoned Rendal. However, we can infer that, since she is his lover and *not* his wife, there must be some barrier to marriage between them, most likely social class, meeting the criterion of a woman’s freedom to marry as she chooses. The lover’s act of murder may well have been the only action in which she could exercise *any* agency, criminal though it was. There is a tantalizing hint in one of Smyth’s letters, written during the composition of Part I. She mentions Mrs. Waters’ soliloquy and comments about an inspiration she had for it. “I have got the words all right! and had a real inspiration for the funny part of her soliloquy, which might be called ‘contrariness.’”¹³ Could this contrariness be her decision to use a tune associated with a murderous lover for lyrics such as “What if I were young again?” If so, such use is also deeply ironic.

“Bushes and Briers” appears in the Intermezzo between Parts I and II. The folk song is sung by a woman who wants to tell her lover of her desire--as she puts it, “show to him my boldness” --but fears that such candor will cost her his love and respect. Scoring this text identifies at least one feminist issue: freedom to express her sexuality.¹⁴ Placing it in the interval between Parts I and II forms a bridge between them and carries forward the central character’s development from her dismissive last line of Part I to the growing warmth she feels toward Ned in Part II. It also precisely mirrors the dilemma that Mrs. Waters faces in feeling desire for this man but knowing that revealing it may make her seem promiscuous and unmarriedable.

The final folk song used in *Boatswain* is “O Dear, What Can the Matter Be?” The singer is a worried young girl wondering why her lover hasn’t come back from the fair with the presents he promised to buy her. There do not appear to be any relevant issues in the text--no indication that she has been coerced into the relationship or that roadblocks have been put up by law, social status, custom, parents, etc. Thus, it scored a 0 on the issues variable. That said, it is used at the point at which Mrs. Waters and Ned first become fully aware of their mutual attraction. This realization leaves both in a state of confusion and the lyric has each of them opening their comments with “O dear!” or “O Lord!” all to the tune of the folk song. This could be thought of as a kind of text-painting, but not with any feminist issues.

¹³ Smyth, *Beecham*, pp. 117-18.

¹⁴ The 1967 movie version of Thomas Hardy’s novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* uses “Bushes and Briers” to suggest Bathsheba Everdene’s sensuality. The looks on the men’s faces when she sings “If I show to him my boldness” would seem to be the screenwriter’s way of emphasizing her sensuality and highlighting the conflict between her two suitors, Gabriel Oak and Mr. Boldwood. However, in the novel Hardy uses “On the Banks of Allan Water” which is a song about a young girl seduced by a soldier and abandoned to her death. It clearly was meant to foreshadow the fate of Sergeant Troy’s fiancée, Fanny. “Bushes and Briers,” is about an entirely different subject, with entirely different implications.

The study found a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of feminist themes in the songs Smyth chose as compared to the representative sample of folk songs from A Guide to English Folk Song Collections. 60 per cent of the Smyth-selected songs have at least one such theme versus 18 per cent of the larger sample. The average number of feminist themes was 1 per song in the Smyth-selected group versus 0.20 in the larger sample. The probability (p-value) for the difference in proportions is 0.026. The same metric for the difference in averages is 0.0021. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Limitations of this study include the absence of a fully-accepted Canon of English folk songs. The representative sample was drawn from the English Folk Dance and Song Society Guide and may not be representative of the material available to Smyth and known to her audiences in 1914. Secondly, given how many versions there are of even the most obscure folk song, audiences did not necessarily know the texts that were known to Smyth and vice versa. Also, Smyth did not document her intentions in writing nor do others' recollections offer any directly relevant information. Finally, the scoring system is subjective and may be influenced by my 21st century understanding and may not reflect that of either Smyth or her audiences.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the data show with a high degree of probability that the differences between the two groups are *not* the result of random chance. There is an association between textual references to feminist issues and the likelihood of a particular song being selected by the composer. Since this association is positive--she selected songs significantly *more* likely to contain such issues--it is tempting to draw an inference of deliberate intent. Given that the heroine of the opera is an independent, assertive woman who is greatly affected by the prejudices of her time but who nevertheless achieves a significant victory over the limitations and conventions imposed on her sex, use of songs that would have suggested feminist ideas to the audience would be a reasonable artistic decision on Smyth's part. What cannot be answered definitively from this distance is whether Smyth's choices of songs to use in *Boatswain* were conscious. The statistical differences found do not speak to this point nor do any of her published writings or correspondence. A further question that cannot be answered is whether using these tunes had any particular effect on the audience other than perhaps the momentary recognition of a familiar melody.

As a potential for future research, one might consider looking at other women who collected, published and popularized folk music during this period and the role that they and their works may have played in giving women a greater voice, both politically and musically. I commend this idea to others who may wish to pursue it using both statistical as well as more conventional means.

In summary then, despite the fact that the evidence from the statistical analysis of these texts suggests an association, Smyth's reasons for selecting these five songs cannot be definitively determined. That said, given Smyth's lifelong dedication to the cause of women's rights, her recent incarceration and the dismissal of her works—based solely on her gender—she had every reason to choose folk songs whose texts would call to mind the frustrations and impatience with injustice that women faced in that era and still do today. Doing so would have reinforced the themes of *The Boatswain's Mate* and increased its topicality and popularity with audiences of that era.