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A Rhetoric of Dissonance: Music in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Music, a significant presence in so many of Shakespeare's dramas,[1] has long been seen to play a central role in *The Merchant of Venice.* Two principal sections are involved: the song "Tell me where is fancy bred" and surrounding dialogue in Act 3, scene 2, and the first half of the concluding scene, with Lorenzo's invitation to Jessica to "let the sounds of music / Creep in our ears"

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[1]Particularly in the years from the 1930s through the 1960s, scholars were busy tracing sources of the songs in the plays, identifying the appropriate contemporary performance practice for instrumental music called for in the text, and commenting on the contributions of music and musical references to dramatic situation. The best studies from that period are John H. Long, *Shakespeare's Use of Music: A Study of the Music and Its Performance in the Original Production of Seven Comedies* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1955); *Shakespeare in Music: Essays by John Stevens, Charles Cudworth, Winton Dean, Roger Fiske, with a Catalogue of Musical Works* [1964], ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966); and Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), the latter surveying critical commentary from the 1880s on. Each of these makes substantial reference to *The Merchant of Venice.* Recent studies include *A Shakespeare Music Catalogue*, ed. B. N. S. Gooch and D. Thatcher, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), and my review of that work in *RQ* 46 (1993): 416-19; Howell Chickering, "Hearing Ariel's Songs," *JMRS* 24.1 (Winter 1994): 131-72; and Christopher R. Wilson et al., "Shakespeare," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove, 2001), XXIII, 192-98. I am grateful to Richard Peterson for various suggestions.

(5.1.55-56).[2] These scenes call upon differing musical traditions, what Shakespeare's contemporaries called "practical music" and "speculative music" respectively.[3] Standard readings have seen the musical references as affirming the play's themes in the comic genre. John Long asserts: "In both episodes the effect is the same: music calms the emotions and changes the nature of them—from fear and uncertainty to happiness in the first instance, and from sadness and hate to joy and love in the second."[4] Harry Levin writes eloquently about Act 5:

> The intensive lyricism of this act, composed wholly in verse, with sound effects and an orchestral nocturne, makes it an appropriate sounding board for Shakespeare's tribute to "the sweet power of music" (79). Jessica's confession, "I am never merry when I hear sweet music," contributes to the bittersweet mood of the play (69). And Lorenzo's ensuing eulogy draws upon both Orphic and Pythagorean traditions to affirm the civilizing functions of harmony and to portend a harmonious resolution.[5]

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[2] *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), pp. 303, 314. All Shakespeare references follow this edition.

[3] For the distinction see, e.g., Thomas Morley, *A Plain and Easy Introduction to Practical Music* [1597], ed. R. Alec Harman (New York: Norton, 1952; repr. 1966). Morley says speculative music is "content with the only contemplation of the art," whereas practical music "is that which teacheth all that may be known in songs, either for the understanding of other men's or making of one's own" (p. 101).

[4] *Shakespeare's Use of Music*, p. 118. Similarly, John Stevens says, in approving of Long's description: "the moonlight, the lovers sitting on the bank, the music, the light 'burning in my hall,' all combine to make Portia's homecoming romantically serene" ("Music of the English Stage," in *Shakespeare in Music*, ed. Hartnoll, p. 30).

[5] "A Garden in Belmont: *The Merchant of Venice*, 5.1," in *Shakespeare and Dramatic Tradition: Essays in Honor of S. F. Johnson*, ed. W. R. Elton and W. B. Long (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), p. 24. On the positive "ethical and political connotations" of Lorenzo's speech see also John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500-1700* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961; reprt. New York: Norton, 1970), p. 152.

Some readings, however, have introduced doubts. David Bevington, for example, in his introduction to the play says that "all appears to be in harmony in Belmont," but acknowledges the "incompleteness" experienced by the lovers as they contemplate this heavenly music; for though "[t]he tranquil joy found in Belmont is attuned to the music of the spheres, the singing of the 'young-ey'd cherubin,'" the lovers "can only reach toward the bliss of eternity through music and the perfect friendship of true love."[6] Anne Barton in her introduction similarly acknowledges that such harmony is unattainable. "There is . . . a consciousness," she says, "that while the music of the spheres, the flawless, immutable harmony of a world better than this, exists and may even be sensed on clear nights as an influence, it remains fundamentally inaudible"; and she concludes, "Under circumstances like these, the best one can do is to accept and rejoice in the music of earth, transitory and imperfect though it is."[7]

I would go further and argue that these same musical images, along with the practical music of Act 3, scene 2, if read more forcefully, create what might be called a rhetoric of dissonance, signaling not harmony but "jarring sounds" (in the words of a well-known Dowland ayre, "In darknesse let mee dwell"). In doing so these images sustain an uneasy undercurrent to the comic theme of love and marriage and set up the climactic dialogue in the last half of 5.1 as the locus of the troubled irresolution that some in the 1980s and 1990s and on into this new, less generous century have found here.[8] My own reading will include musical texts and musical lore from Shakespeare's era that suggest disruption in apparent harmony and lead to a more complicated understanding of the play—one perhaps more "modern" for twenty-first century readers but also, I think, not untenable for an Elizabethan audience as well.

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[6]David Bevington, ed. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), pp. 181-82.

[7]*Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 287.

[8]See, e.g., Karen Newman, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38 (1987): 19-33; Lynda E. Boose, "The Comic Contract and Portia's Golden Ring," *Shak Studies* 20 (1988): 241-54; and David Lucking, "Standing for Sacrifice: The Casket and Trial Scenes in *The Merchant of Venice*," *UTQ* 58.4 (Summer 1989): 355-75. Boose begins her article: "Most of us find *The Merchant of Venice* a very disturbing play."

"Tell me where is fancy bred" is sung in the critical scene in which Bassanio, unlike his two unsuccessful predecessors, chooses the correct casket to win Portia's hand. Portia summons her household musicians, bringing practical music into one of the play's crucial moments. Her speech is rich with significance for the song's role:

> Let music sound while he doth make his choice;
> Then if he lose he makes a swan-like end,
> Fading in music. That the comparison
> May stand more proper, my eye shall be the stream
> And wat'ry death-bed for him. He may win,
> And what is music then? Then music is
> Even as the flourish when true subjects bow
> To a new-crowned monarch; such it is
> As are those dulcet sounds in break of day
> That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear,
> And summon him to marriage. (3.2.43-53)

Portia's comments argue generally for the role of music in life's important stages and the rituals associated with them. Referring obliquely to traditional beliefs that music affects the passions, her call for music would be understood as providing an atmosphere conducive to Bassanio's choosing and supportive of her own emotional condition during this tense moment. She also suggests other, more specific purposes for the presence of music at this point. First, she proposes music as appropriate in case Bassanio should fail. Invoking the age-old myth of the dying swan, "Fading in music," Portia romanticizes his potential fall. Significantly, the music that follows reflects that position; the song is a dirge with its ominous funeral knell, "Ding, dong, bell" (71-72). Second, she argues in this speech that if Bassanio should win, the music will perform the dual functions of "flourish" to his ascendancy as lord of her household and the "dulcet sounds" of a dawn song calling them to their bridal bed. That the dirge form of the song is not appropriate to either of these festive functions goes unmentioned, but her noting these happy outcomes as reasons for summoning music to this tense moment gives ironic significance to the song when it is sung.

Portia's comments, however, provide only one perspective on this song's place in the play. The text does not tell us whether Portia has selected the song herself. It may simply be what her musicians picked;

indeed, that she describes two extreme emotional contexts would suggest that she has not chosen the specific song. But Shakespeare clearly did select it—perhaps he even wrote it. Turning to the song itself, then, we need to look at its dramatic audience, its form and potential musical context, and its subject in order to gain a fuller impression of its significance. In the play, the text of the song appears as follows, prefaced by the stage direction, "*A song, the whilst Bassanio comments on the caskets to himself*":

> Tell me where is fancy bred,
> Or in the heart or in the head?
> How begot, how nourished?
> [*All.*] Reply, reply.
> It is engend'red in the [eyes],
> With gazing fed, and fancy dies
> In the cradle where it lies.
> Let us all ring fancy's knell.
> I'll begin it. Ding, dong, bell.
> *All.* Ding, dong, bell. (3.2.63-72)

The song itself, its musical characteristics and even the potential arrangement of its performers provide further insight into its function in the scene. No setting survives; it might have been soothing or uplifting, if the song was intended to help Bassanio concentrate, but given this text, it was unlikely to have been so. Its closest parallel among surviving songs is perhaps Shakespeare's own later "Full fadom five thy father lies," from *The Tempest*, acted 1611 (1.2.397-405). That text appears in a seventeenth-century manuscript setting, which is plausibly attributed there to the composer Robert Johnson (1580s?-1634?), and which was probably the one used in early performances (Ex. 1):[9]

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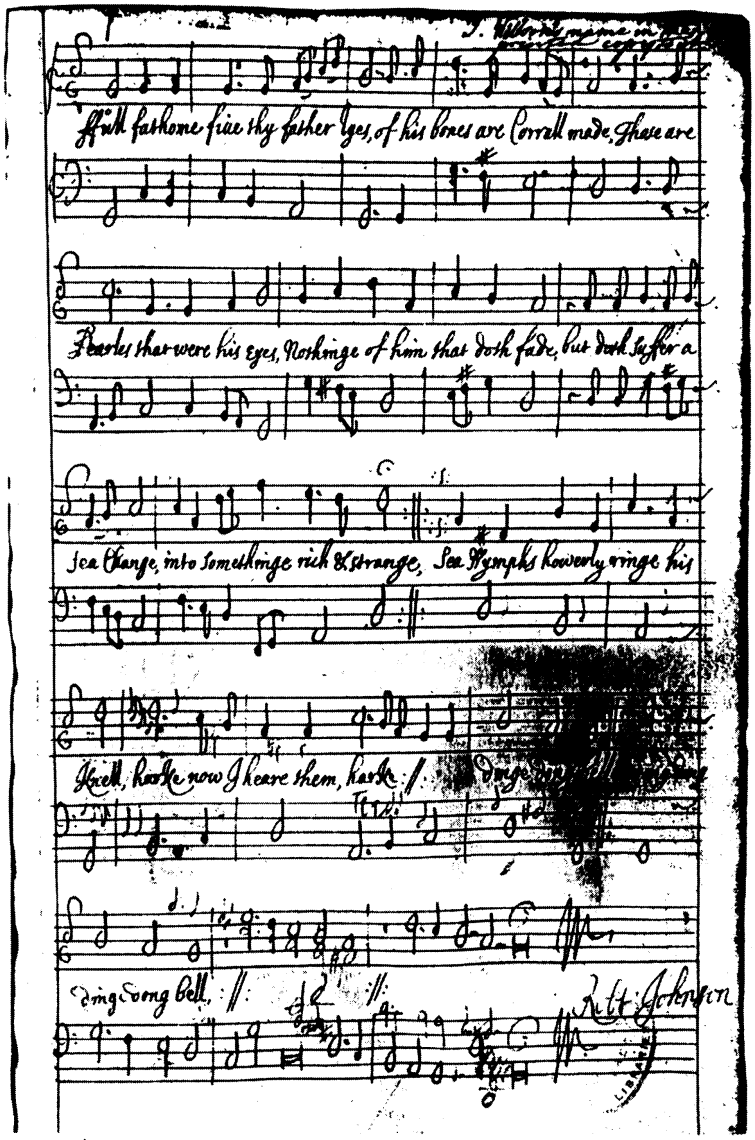
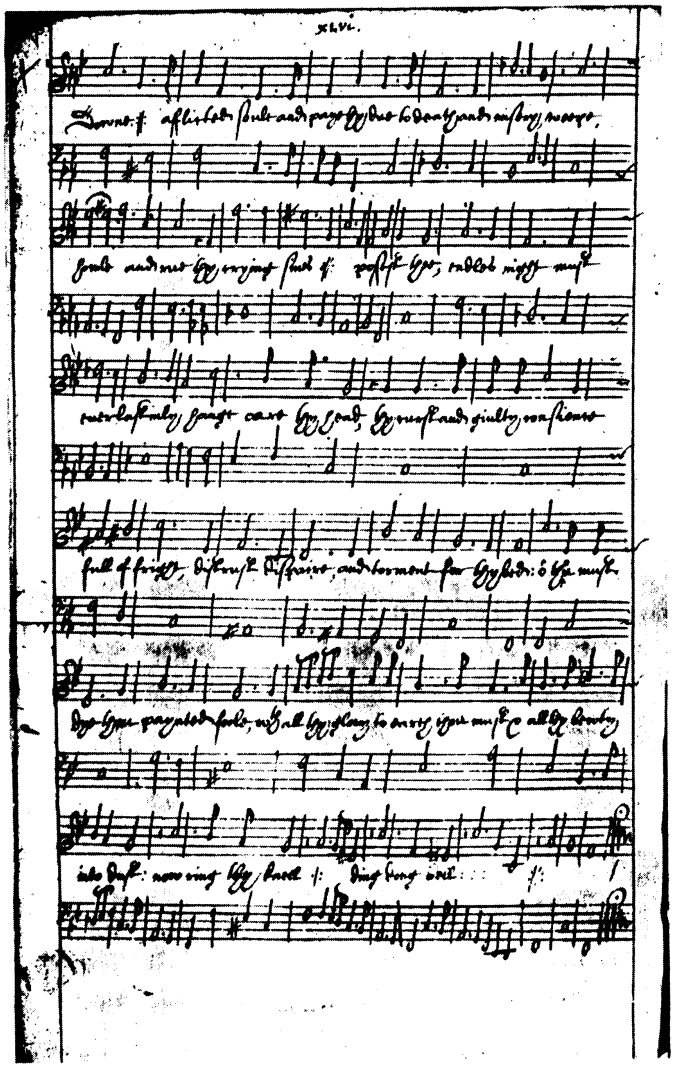
[9] *English Song 1600-1675: Facsimiles of Twenty-Six Manuscripts and an Edition of the Texts*, ed. Elise Bickford Jorgens, 12 vols. (New York: Garland, 1986-89), VIII, no. 44 (reproduced by permission). From Birmingham Central Library Ms. 57316, p. 87. The manuscript, which identifies Johnson as the composer, was probably compiled during the 1660s and is in the hand of Edward Lowe, organist at the Chapel Royal from 1661 to 1682; the annotation at top right of this page, attributing it rather to Dr. John Wilson, in whose



Example 1. "Full fathome fiue."

Cheerful Ayres of 1660 it appeared, is in a nineteenth-century hand (see introduction to VIII, p. v). On Johnson as the composer, with further references, see XII, 361, and Seng, *Vocal Songs*, pp. 256-57. See also the entry on Johnson by David Lumsden and others in *New Grove Dictionary*, 2nd ed., XIII, 165-67, tracing his court connections from 1596 on; and Catherine A. Henze, "How Music Matters: Some Songs of Robert Johnson in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher," *CompD* 34 (2000): 1-32.

Note the dirge-like refrain, "dinge, dong bell," repeated to a drooping, descending scale. An anonymous song from a manuscript of *c.* 1620-30, "Downe, afflicted soule," likewise matches a repeated "ding dong bell" refrain to a melancholy descending phrase, here as the conclusion to a suicidal lament for a guilty conscience (Ex. 2):[10]



Example 2. "Downe, afflicted soule."

[10] *English Song*, XI, no. 44 (reproduced by permission). Item xlvi in New York Public Library Drexel Ms. 4175, "Ann Twice her booke" (see XI, vii-viii). A modernized text appears in XII, 60. Another version is found in BL Ms. 29481, fol. 16 (see XII, 402).

These examples are both set as solo songs with *basso continuo*, a bass line to be played on a viola da gamba, and harmony improvised on another instrument, most likely a lute. A third related manuscript song, in a comparable style but with a fully notated lute accompaniment more characteristic of the late 1590s when *Merchant* was written,[11] is the anonymous "O death, rock me asleep," the lament of a "weary, giltles" spirit condemned to death. It begins crying "Toll on, thou passing bell / Ring out my doleful knell" (5-6), and concludes with a mournful repeated "I dye, I dye" (Ex. 3).[12]

Yet despite similarities to these songs, "Tell me where is fancy bred" has some significant differences. First, if it is a dirge it is obviously a mocking one, memorializing not a person but a state of mind, and a frivolous one at that (see my reading of "fancy" below). At the same time, it would surely have mimicked the musical style of the examples I have cited, if only in order to make its ironic point the more palpable. Recognition of its *mock* seriousness, however, would undermine the song's suitability to accompany Bassanio's potential failure. Second, "Tell me where is fancy bred" is a dialogue rather than a solo song. The most important outcome of that distinction may be in the sheer number of performers on stage (the stage direction "All" implies at least three or four singers, and there would also have been one or more accompanying instrumentalists), and in their power to command attention. Dialogue songs were relatively common in the period, and they often have the mock-serious didactic tone of this one, particularly in matters of love and courtship. The dialogic form allows for the lesson to be presented as a small catechism, as it is in this one. Dramatically, the question-and-answer form and the presence of several singers on stage effectively sideline Bassanio for the duration of the song, as it is much harder to stage such a dialogue as background music than it would be if it were a single performer singing a simple lyric.

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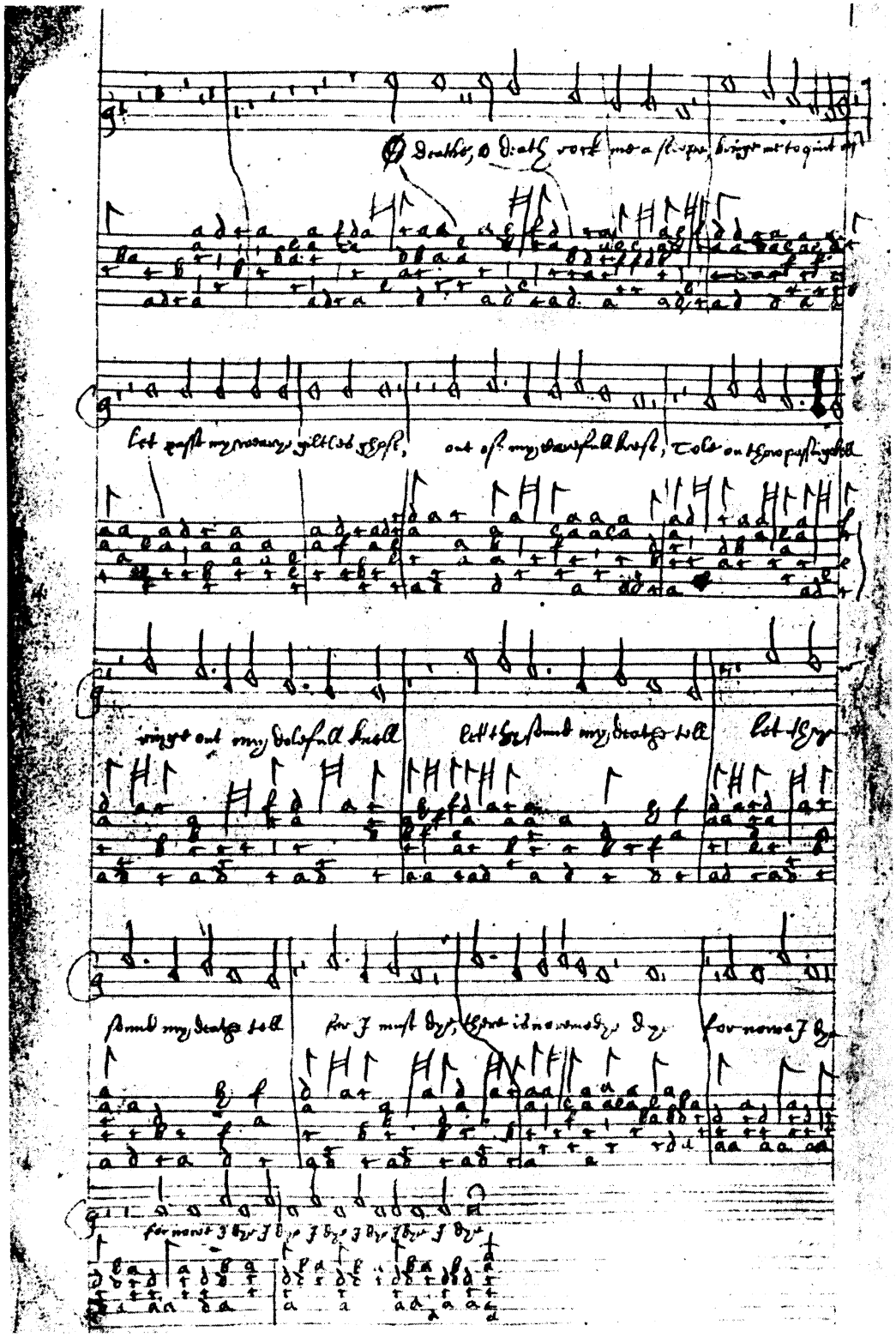
[11]On the date of composition in the later 1590s, see *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. Evans and Tobin, p. 51.

[12]*English Song*, I, no. 3 (reproduced by permission). From BL Ms. Add. 15117, fol. 3v; a modernized text is found in XII, 175. The manuscript dates from *c.* 1615, but most of the songs in it are from the two decades preceding (I, v). The text has sometimes been attributed to Anne Boleyn; see John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (London: Methuen, 1961; rprt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 449.



Example 3. "O Deathe, rock me asleepe."

The question of audience is puzzling. Who is listening to this song? If we take the word "whilst" in the stage direction literally, we might conclude that the music is going on during Bassanio's musing on the options before him. Commentators have speculated that the song provides clues for Bassanio's choice. Some have noted that the song's moral—that fancy, born in the eye and dying "In the cradle where it lies," that is, when the engendering sight has been removed—leads very directly to Bassanio's conclusion that the gold and silver caskets are misleading in their outward beauty. Certainly his following speech on "ornament" (74) makes it clear that he has reached that conclusion. Others have suggested that the rhymes "bred" / "head" and the internal consonance of "engend'red" and "fed" are auditory cues to him to select the missing rhyme, "lead." There has even been a speculation that the dirge-like form of the song leads Bassanio to think of a lead casket.[13]

All interpretations of the song as directing Bassanio toward the correct casket reinforce a sense that Bassanio and Portia represent the force of true love that will win out in this play. And all such interpretations are potentially operative here, especially if one assumes that Bassanio does not begin his outward musing until the song is concluded or that he is actually listening to the song while, according to the stage direction, he "*comments on the caskets to Himself.*" However, since the first possibility—that Bassanio waits until the song is over to speak—is belied by the stage direction, and the second presumes that he is muttering to himself during the singing, it seems unlikely that he is the song's intended audience, at least at the level of its directly providing him clues to help in the task he is about to undertake. Some commentators doubt that he hears the song at all.[14]

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[13]That the song provides clues was early suggested by H. N. Hudson (1880-81), and A. H. Fox-Strangeways early proposed that the rhymes themselves are clues (1923); see Seng, *Songs*, pp. 36-43 on these and other readings.

[14]Those believing Bassanio does not hear the song include John Russell Brown, in the New Arden edition (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 80; Richard Horwich, "Riddle and Dilemma in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SEL* 12 (1977): 192-93; and Harry Berger, "Marriage and Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*: The Casket Scene Revisited," *SQ* 32 (1981): 157. Against these, Eric Rasmussen argues that since Bassanio "consciously or unconsciously" echoes two of the key rhyme words, "head" and "bred," in his subsequent comments (95-

Many commentators and editors gloss "fancy" in the song's first line as "love." But we might equally say that the song is about attraction which, unlike love, dies when its object is out of sight. Again, there is no way to know from the text whether we are to believe that Portia has selected this particular song, but supposing for the moment that she did, she may seem to be warning Bassanio that she does not trust his quick protestations of affection; or, if Bassanio is not listening, the song may be alerting the audience that this is not—or at least not yet—a love to be counted on; or it is conceivable that Portia has ordered up a song to remind herself of the dangers of the attraction she feels toward Bassanio.

Immediately prior to the singing of the song and the selection of the leaden casket, Portia has suggested that Bassanio remain with her "some month or two" (9) before he hazards all by choosing a casket. She says that she does not want to give up his company just yet, which she fears will be the outcome of his choosing. When he retorts that he is "upon the rack" in his impatience to try his fortune, she pursues the image of the rack, asking what "treason" is mingled with his love (25-27). He protests his love, but she comes back to the notion of treason, saying "I fear you speak upon the rack, / Where men enforced do speak any thing" (32-33). The audience knows—and Portia may suspect—that Bassanio may well have pursued her hand at least in part for her wealth; his first reference to her in the play calls her "a lady richly left" (I.i.161). Thus, when he has chosen successfully and they are rejoicing in their new-found union, both Bassanio's possibly dubious motive for pursuing Portia's hand and her possible fear of his "treason" are adduced in her speech acknowledging her submission to him:

> But now I was the lord
> Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
> Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
> This house, these servants, and this same myself
> Are yours—my lord's!—I give them with this ring,
> Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
> Let it presage the ruin of your love,
> And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (3.2.167-74)

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96), he "has, indeed, heard" the song and its clues (*Expl* 44.2 [Winter 1986]: 12-13).

Again, "Tell me where is fancy bred" is cast as a dirge, a funeral song for fancy, not a buoyant, optimistic love song. Far from providing an affirmative context for the triumph of true love, it emphasizes instead the fickleness of attraction and the folly of risking too much in its service, at the very moment when Portia is thinking she might better enjoy this mutual liking for a while rather than push onward to the more portentous consequences of Bassanio's choice. Even if it is Shakespeare, not Portia, who has chosen this song, messages like these have only a slightly different force and are no less present in the text.

We have, then, several layers of disruption associated with the apparently innocuous song, "Tell me where is fancy bred." Musically, it was likely to have been in a doleful style befitting its mock-dirge text but not well suited to the dramatic moment. Yet its dialogic form and the sheer number of performers required virtually demand that the action pause and attention be focused on the song, thus disturbing both the action and the mood. Textually, while it seems to herald Bassanio's speech on ornament and his consequent selection of the ugly leaden casket, it also intrudes a distinct warning, echoing Portia's uncertainties and fears about a love pursued through the peculiar course theirs has had to follow. That it can accomplish any of this only through what must have been perceived as a kind of musical joke further complicates the scene with what I have called rhetorical dissonance.

Let us now turn to the final scene (5.1), in which Jessica and Lorenzo, awaiting the return of Portia and Nerissa, contemplate the night to the accompaniment of music. This is one of many passages in which Shakespeare calls upon traditional or commonplace ideas about music to add richness and beauty to the setting. The references to music here are usually taken to be largely atmospheric, and optimistic.[15] The evocation of both heavenly and earthly music adds auditory fullness to the visual scene of the lovers, out of doors, on a starry evening. To read the passage in this evocative way is gratifying and pleasing, as the lyrical beauty of the moment is captured and the comedy seems to be wending its way to a

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[15]See quotations from Long and Levin above. A classic articulation of this view is C. L. Barber's, referring to the "harmony" of the last act: "no other final scene is so completely without irony about the joys it celebrates" (*Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; reprt. 1972], p. 187).

harmonious close. But if one traces more closely the specific references to musical lore, a more complex—and more interesting—pattern of influence appears, with more disruptive resonances.

The opening portion of V.i makes reference to several of the most commonplace, and most powerful, musical traditions extant in the English Renaissance. These include the notion of the music of the spheres, the Orphean myth about music's affective powers, the philosophical understanding of differences between *musica practica* (actual sounding music) and *musica speculativa* (the intellectual perception of music), and contemporary beliefs about music's moral efficacy and influence on human behavior. Most of these ideas were inherited from the Middle Ages but still occupied prominent places in the mythology of Elizabethans. Most are very familiar to anyone who reads Renaissance literature, and I shall try to avoid too much repetition of the obvious, but a few points about them are critical to my argument.

Through the Orphean myth we are introduced to the rhetorical power of music, which transcends speech in its capacity to go directly to the emotions of the hearer. Orpheus, the son of the muse Calliope or (some said) of Apollo himself, was able to charm animals, trees, and even stones with his music, and move humans to tears or laughter or love.[16] In the well-known story, when his wife Euridice died from the sting of a serpent, Orpheus followed her to the underworld and gained her release by charming Pluto with his singing, only to lose her again through his inability to trust that she was following him.

In the Renaissance, musicians and poets alike applied the Orphean myth to music's ability to sway the passions. In Thomas Campion's *The Lords Maske*, for example, the second stanza of the song "Wooe her, and win her" describes the power of music to enhance a text's seductive eloquence:

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[16]See John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry 1500-1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961; reprt. 1970), pp. 162-76, "The Guises of Orpheus."

For a short account of selected ancient and modern literary and musical works on the subject, see Warren Anderson, Thomas J. Mathiesen, and Robert Anderson, "Orpheus,"*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 2001), XVIII, 752-53.

> Courtship and Musicke, suite with loue,
> They both are workes of passion,
> Happie is he whose words can moue
> Yet sweete notes helpe perswasion.
> Mixe your words with Musicke then,
> That they the more may enter;
> Bold assaults are fit for men,
> That on strange beauties venture. (9-16)[17]

George Puttenham, one of many theorists and apologists for poetry in the English Renaissance who referred to music as a kind of rhetoric, says:

> [S]peech it selfe is artificiall and made by man, and the more pleasing it is, the more it preuaileth to such purpose as it is intended for: but speech by meeter is a kind of vtterance, more cleanly couched and more delicate to the eare then prose is, because it is more currant and slipper vpon the tongue, and withal tunable and melodious, as a kind of Musicke. . . . which cannot but please the hearer very well.[18]

The force of the Orphean myth was so strong that in some quarters the power of music was actually feared because its persuasive ability was thought to be not only great but mysterious, less subject to rational explanation (and therefore to refutation) than the eloquence associated with words. Richard Mulcaster, for instance, in his *Positions* (1581) observed:

> *Musick* moueth great misliking to some men that waye, as to great a prouoker to vaine delites, still laying baite, to draw on pleasure: still opening the minde, to the entrie of lightnesse. And in matters of religion also, to some it seemes offensiue, bycause it carieth awaye the eare, with the sweetnesse of the

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[17] *The description, speeches, and songs, of the Lords Maske* (London, 1613), sig. D1v. Campion provides the music (to a slightly modified text) as an addendum to his next volume, *The Description of a Maske . . . At the Mariage of . . . the Earle of Somerset . . .* (London, 1614).

[18] George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589), ch. 5. A modified text appears in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1904; reprt. 1967), II, 8.

> melodie, and bewitcheth the minde with a *Syrenes* sounde, pulling it from that delite, wherin of duetie it ought to dwell, vnto harmonicall fantasies, and withdrawing it, from the best meditations, and most vertuous thoughtes to forreine conceites, and wandring deuises.[19]

References to these Orphean powers of music, whether literally or as a metaphor for any persuasive language, are common in Shakespeare and elsewhere. But the equally common and pervasive tradition of the music of the spheres offers a somewhat more complex image of rhetorical strategy. In the Ptolemaic, earth-centered vision of the universe, the moon, the planets, and the stars are said to rotate around the earth on invisible, hard, crystalline spheres. According to the tradition, these spheres as they rotate produce a heavenly music. Although ancient tradition held that each sphere had a singing siren on its upper surface, and a frequent Christian reinterpretation held that it was the angels who set the spheres in motion, the most frequent Renaissance understanding of their music posits that as the spheres rotate, they rub gently against each other, creating a musical harmony of greater purity than can be imagined because the mathematical proportions of the vibrations are so perfect.

Whatever the source of the sound, it was conventionally accepted that humans could not hear it. Some said that was because the music was such a constant presence that human ears had become habituated to it—like a kind of white noise. Others said that mortal grossness prevented humans from hearing the sound, a concept easily conflated with the notion that it was the sinful nature of human beings that prevented their hearing the music. Elizabethans *could* imagine a harmony purer than most of *us* have ever heard, since "equal temperament," which allowed playing in any key, had not yet come into use; the Pythagorean system, or "just intonation" by which instruments in Shakespeare's day were tuned, is based on mathematically "pure," acoustically correct intervals and

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[19] *Positions, wherein those primitive circumstances be examined, which are necessarie for the training vp of children* . . . (London, 1581), pt. 1, ch. 8, p. 38. Cited in part by Linda Phyllis Austern, "'Sing Againe Syren,': The Female Musician and Sexual Enchantment in Elizabethan Life and Literature," *RQ* 42 (Autumn 1989): 427.

produces a much more ringing harmony than that we customarily hear.[20] All the same, for many an important part of the conceit of the music of the spheres was that extremely precise mathematical proportions (the ratios of the rates of vibration of the independent spheres) made the heavenly harmonies pure and sweet—indeed, heavenly. The idea thus became associated with numerology (from the nine spheres and the eight tones) and it took on a metaphorical life as a representation of numerical perfection—in music—naturally unattainable by mortals.

Orpheus moved hearers by making music on his lyre (or, by extension, writing and singing verse); his act is intentional and its product is art, something made. By contrast, the music of the spheres is, as it were, an accident, a byproduct of the motion of the heavenly bodies as they rub against each other in their constant turning about the earth; its perfection thus resides in qualities inherent in the heavens themselves and cannot be duplicated by man or woman. It is not "art" in the Renaissance sense of "artifice" –something made or crafted—but a natural occurrence, a gift of God. Furthermore, as it is inaudible to humans, its rhetorical power lies, paradoxically, in silence.

These conventions will not be new to anyone who has studied Shakespeare in the context of literary history. Many of us learned of the music of the spheres from E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943); and we had similarly orthodox presentations of the story of Orpheus's musical powers. These gave us a vision of a set of ideas common to Renaissance thinking—ideas supportive of traditional understanding about religion, statecraft, even personal codes of behavior in the period. We could feel reassured, our scholarly credentials validated as we found the ideas referred to in the plays. Recent scholarship, however, has urged a somewhat different procedure.[21] It is no longer

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[20]See "Temperament," *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Willi Apel, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969), pp. 835-37. Equal temperament, which equalized the intervals of the scale by disturbing the frequency ratios of acoustically pure intervals in order to make possible performance in many different keys and to facilitate modulation, did not come into standard use until the nineteenth century.

[21]See, e. g., Leah S. Marcus, "Renaissance/Early Modern Studies," in *Redrawing the Boundaries; The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language

sufficient to recognize a tradition behind a reference. Today we ask too what is *not* present, or we look for ways in which cultural references may contradict—or at least confuse—what a text seems to say. A pattern of reference then emerges which is not orderly and comforting but complicated and conflicted. I believe it is a pattern that is intellectually and socially realistic, although it does not necessarily lead to a neat clarification of meaning. Rather, like Jessica and Lorenzo, we find ourselves awash in images and ideas and emotions that Shakespere's audience might have accepted unreflectively as commonplace but which meet our critical reflection with contradiction and confusion.

The two lines of thinking about the powers of music—the Orphean, intentional, rhetorically persuasive one and the inherent, passive, silent one represented by the music of the spheres—are conflated in *The Merchant of Venice.* Lorenzo articulates the doctrine of the music of the spheres:

> There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
> But in his motion like an angel sings,
> Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins;
> Such harmony is in immortal souls,
> But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
> Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. (5.1.60-65)

In the preceding lines, "Soft stillness and the night" literally "Become," or *turn into*, "the touches of sweet harmony" (56-57) as these two lovers contemplate the silence. (The usual editorial reading of "become" as "befit" does not, I think, do justice to the power of this image.) The silence of the night—which Lorenzo here interprets as music—draws from him a comparison of his own "muddy vesture of decay" with the purer condition of immortal souls. But earthly music is brought to the scene immediately after, as a troupe of real-life musicians enters (perhaps

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Association, 1992), p. 48: "Twenty-five years ago, Shakespeare was regularly read and taught as an upholder of state and religious orthodoxies—a proponent of order along the lines of E. M. W. Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture.* In newer critical work, Tillyard has become a standard whipping boy, and Shakespeare is interpreted as less comfortably orthodox, estranged from the elitist values of his own era or uneasily complicitous with Elizabethan doctrines of state. . . ."

the same ones who sang earlier for Portia and Bassanio). Lorenzo quickly changes his tune, calling upon these musicians to "wake Diana with a hymn" to "draw [Portia] home" with their playing (66-68)—and perhaps make Jessica herself more pliant in love. Lorenzo then turns to the Orphean legend, claiming that anyone incapable of being moved by music is unworthy of trust:

> Orpheus drew trees, stones, and floods;
> Since nought so stockish, hard, and full of rage,
> But music for the time doth change his nature.
> The man that hath no music in himself,
> Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
> Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
> The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
> And his affections dark as [Erebus]:
> Let no such man be trusted. (80-88)

The scene is all compounded of music and moonlight and of silence and darkness, not always clearly distinguishable, and the two traditions of Orpheus and the spheres become blurred as well. Furthermore, in the conflation, both traditions are compromised. Lorenzo at the start of the scene had declared that "In such a night as this, / When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees" (an intentional, persuasive act), "And they did make no noise" (that is, they were subdued by the wind's Orphean music into becoming the night's soft stillness), Troilus encountered Cressida (1-6)—ominously, an ill-fated love. There follows the banter about unfaithfulness, with Lorenzo suggesting Jessica might "slander her love" and Jessica claiming both that Lorenzo might be false and that she could "out-night" him (16-23)—that is, presumably, best him in the game of citing unromantic night stories. Despite the sweetness of the music of the spheres, the best this silence has been able to elicit from these lovers is contemplation of the nether side of human conduct. The eloquent nocturnal quiet bespeaks the "muddy vesture of decay" rather than the "harmony [that] is in immortal souls" (63-64).

When Lorenzo then breaks the silent music to contemplate more directly the rhetorical force of active music, he notes that one who does not respond to *this*—earthly—music (not the ethereal, perfect music of the spheres) cannot be trusted. While the positive connotations of music evoked by Lorenzo were current, equally pervasive in the period was the

contrary notion that music might move men to bestiality. Puritan attacks claimed that it was those who *did* respond to music, as to poetry and plays, that were wicked or untrustworthy. Stephen Gosson, in *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), warns that such "schooles" should be avoided, as corrupting even the good:

> You are no sooner entred, but libertie looseth the reynes, and geues you head, placing you with Poetrie in the lowest forme: when his skill is showne too make his Scholer as good as euer twanged, hee preferres you too Pyping, from Pyping to playing, from play to pleasure, from pleasure to slouth, from slouth too sleepe, from sleepe too sinne, from sinne to death, from death to the deuill, if you take your learning apace, and passe through euery forme without reuolting.[22]

Aspiring musicians should desist entirely: "If you will bee good Scholers, and profite well in the Arte of Musicke, shutte your Fidels in their cases, and looke up to heauen: the order of the Spheres, the unfallible motion of the Planets. . . ." (fol. 8) (As seen above, Mulcaster too, though no Puritan, was suspicious of religious and secular music alike.) Thus Lorenzo seems to be conjuring up a contention rather than repeating a commonplace; the persuasive force attributed to music by the myth he recalls is not, as his words would have us believe, unequivocally on the side of good governance.

Immediately following this interlude, Portia and Nerissa at their entrance bring the strains of earthly (sounding) music and heavenly (silent) music into even closer conjunction (89 ff.). Portia enters to the accompaniment of her own band of household musicians; "It is your music, madam, of the house," Nerissa says, using the word "music," as was common, to refer to musicians. Portia comments on the prominence assumed by a lantern when the moon is not shining and concludes of the music, "Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day." Nerissa points out that "Silence bestows [a] virtue" on earthly music, making it sweeter

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[22]Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London, 1579), fols. 6v-7. On the associations in this period between the power of music and erotic love or lust see Austern, "'Sing Againe Syren,'" 420-44, and her recent study, "'For, Love's a Good Musician': Performance, Audition, and Erotic Disorders in Early Modern Europe," *Musical Quarterly* 82.3-4 (Fall-Winter 1998): 614-53.

or purer than it seems when the sounds of daytime activity obscure it. For both, the point of these observations is bound up in Portia's "Nothing is good, I see, without respect" (89-101).

As the scene progresses, then, the silence of the evening loses its aura of perfect, complete, and natural harmony and becomes first the backdrop for recital of human failings; next a vacuum into which the dross of mortal music floods with its overtones of persuasion, for good or ill; and finally a foil which makes the sounds of earthly music sweeter—in effect, increasing their persuasive, or Orphean, power through a kind of artifice that betrays its accepted characteristics. What was inherently eloquent according to the tradition—because of the mathematical purity of the ratios of the spheres to each other—has become utilitarian, providing the conditions in which practical music-making can be eloquent. The perfect silence conjured up by the music of the spheres (earthly silence as a good in itself) yields to the practical value of silence as it renders music (or speech) more powerful (or persuasive) by contrast; the intellectual construct of *musica speculativa* has descended to the condition of *musica practica.* The Orphean image of music (poetry, speech) does not fare much better in this scene. It is first contradicted in the evocative power of silence as Lorenzo urges Jessica to sit with him and "let the sounds of music / Creep in our ears" (55-56), then reinvoked in mortal garb as the earthly musicians appear, and finally attenuated in Portia's relativistic claim that by day the nightingale would be "No better a musician than the wren," that "right praise and true perfection" are dependent upon "season" or situation (104-08). Orphean eloquence, in other words, is dependent upon external conditions for its power; the storied affective response to music as put forward in the legend cannot, on its own terms, be depended upon.

C. J. Gianakaris has pointed out in conversation that this scene, in its traditional interpretation, is peculiarly placed dramaturgically, for it is odd to introduce what appears to be a moment of quiet lyricism immediately before the rush to conclusion. My reading disrupts that lyricism itself, suggesting instead a turmoil of conflicting undercurrents that mirrors, in turn, the uneasy moral and ethical values that contemporary readers find in this play: the betrayal of obligations to family ties or the bonds of friendship, the grotesque inhumanity of the bond that Shylock demands, the insensitive treatment of Shylock in turn

by his own daughter and the society as a whole, the distasteful "ring trick" enacted by Portia and Nerissa, and so on.

The complication found above in these musical images assumes a new rightness in the context of the play as Portia, in the final scene, turns her own persuasive powers to the resolution of its complicated intrigues. The entire final scene might be seen as a movement from the passive eloquence of the music of the spheres (recalling Portia's role in the early part of the play, where she is unable to direct the choices of the suitors), to the active, Orphean agency of persuasion (her role as she dons magisterial robes to manipulate events in her own favor), to reasoning that even gross human music has a beauty and a persuasive power against the backdrop of a greater perfection—thereby justifying the deceptions she has engaged in and will continue to engage in until the matter of the rings is resolved.

But we must then also see that progression with the overlay of the compromised images. Though Portia rants privately to Nerissa that her dead father's will has forbidden her to choose her own mate (1.2.21-26), she accedes to his conditions and is at least figuratively silent in the company of her suitors. She is unable to use speech to influence her own destiny. Her very presence would seem to offer a silent persuasion to the suitors to continue their pursuit, but like the compromised image of the heavenly music, Portia's presence serves also as a kind of front for a less heavenly pursuit—that is, the pursuit of her wealth which motivates even Bassanio to seek her hand. The silent eloquence of the caskets likewise appeals to the greed of all contenders. When Portia *is* able to speak, it is not as a woman, not in her own voice, but in male disguise in an assumed role of authority. She shows then that she possesses great eloquence, but as she must engage in duplicity to exercise it, her own powers of speech are mitigated. Furthermore, as Elizabethan critics of the affective powers of music feared, her eloquence has the power to harm as well as to help, as Shylock's fate makes plain.

These strains bring us to the final part of the scene and the "ring trick," which seems needlessly cruel in the context of the play's events. Portia's preceding claim in musical terms that "things by season season'd are" seems an attempt to justify her coming betrayal of trust on the grounds that a greater harmony is at stake. Never mind that the ring trick puts Bassanio and Gratiano in the position of having to betray *another* trust which was real to them even though *we*, along with Portia

and Nerissa, know that it was itself a deception; and never mind that the two women use this deception up to the last twenty-five lines of the play to persuade their new husbands that they have been cuckolded even before they have brought their brides to bed. The penultimate scene, then, in taking us through the array of musical images and the contradictions brought on by their juxtaposition and context, rather than being a lyrical *caesura* before the conclusion, propels us to the uneasy finale of this difficult play.

The play that emerges through such conflicted readings is much deeper, more true to life's experience, and less subject to charges of hurtful superficiality. Portia exhibits fluctuations between infatuation and wariness, becoming someone *willing* to love—no doubt able to love—but not quite there yet. Jessica and Lorenzo shake off the fairy-tale obliviousness to the sordid world around them and become young lovers who are predictably confused by the emotions and events that have surrounded them. And while we learn nothing directly of Shylock through the musical references, he becomes less a malicious caricature in the presence of the shortcomings of Portia, Jessica, Lorenzo, and the others. Musical theorists throughout the centuries have often considered dissonance not a negative quality but a positive and necessary element in evoking musical substance and meaning. In this play, the dissonant chords struck through its musical references offer a rich and rewarding rhetorical texture.

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