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Helen Plevka

Discordant Desire:
Morley's Polyphony in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

From Orsino's opening line, "If music be the food of love, play on," to Feste's concluding song of solitude, William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* is relentlessly full of music, whether explicitly calling for sound or indirectly invoking references to musical ideas (1.1.1). Shakespeare utilizes music not only to entertain the listeners of his plays but also to employ its inane ability to enhance and empower human speech. The musicality of this play, first performed at a feast on February 2, 1602, would have been understood and appreciated by its original audience as Elizabethan England experienced a golden age of music and literature. While music was an essential part of any young, upper-class boy's schooling, the accessibility to musical education materials was highly limited in the early half of the sixteenth century. Learning was primarily accomplished through listening and remembering tunes such as church hymns, ballads on the streets, and processional ceremony sounds. However, the latter half of the century underwent exponential progress as the music printing industry emerged, allowing musicians' compositions and theories to become available to the public. As these musical concepts became widespread knowledge, Shakespeare incorporated several theories in accordance with the contemporary philosophical understanding of music into *Twelfth Night*; the concept of polyphony and its consequent affecting powers upon individuals represents how the play conceptualizes desire as ultimately insatiable.

Since verbal language has existed, there have been attempts to define the more elusive language of music. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest recorded use of the word "musike" in Middle English appeared in 1250 to denote "the art or science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds to produce beauty of form, harmony, melody, rhythm, expressive

content, etc.” (“music” I.1.a). This simple definition does not focus solely on the phenomenon of creating audible sounds, but already it is concerned with the affective beauty and expressiveness of music that philosophers contemporary to Shakespeare likewise attempted to describe. John Case, in his 1586 work *The Praise of Music*, details the divine and celestial connections created by music. He claims that all forms of music “hath a certain divine influence into the souls of men, whereby our cogitations and thought...are brought into a celestial acknowledging of their natures” (Smith 176). Case proposes that it is through this celestial relationship that harmony exists in the senses and souls of human beings. Similarly, Francis Bacon’s *Natural History*, published posthumously around 1626, conceptualizes harmony and its effects on the senses. He asserts that sound reaches the senses, or the “spirits” as he posits, quicker than any other sensations (Bacon 389). Music, then, was understood to enter the body effortlessly and have immense affecting powers upon an individual’s soul.

Two additional philosophers provided further speculation into a bodily and gendered understanding of music. The 1597 book *The Problems of Aristotle, with Other Philosophers and Physicians* is a translation of Aristotle’s fundamental philosophies and a product of the Elizabethan period’s booming publishing industry. Thus, Shakespeare and his contemporaries were enabled to read Aristotle’s ideas, including his conceptualization of music. Aristotle focuses on the physicality of vocalists and the differences in sound based on gender. His explanation follows the existing Galenic belief about the heat of men and coolness of women as he proposes that “in women, because the passage of the voice is formed, is made narrow and strait, by reason of cold, because it is the nature of cold to bind,” women have higher-pitched voices; in contrast, “in men that passage is open and wider through heat, because of the property of heat to open and dissolve,” so their voices sound lower (Smith 161-162). Two years later,

Anthony Gibson builds upon this gender ideology in music and states that women's voices are inherently gentler and more articulate than the roughness of men's voices, which explains why "[woman's] very voice is naturally a harmony" (Smith 165). Gibson also references Caesar's proposition that while men's singing is influenced by worldly, natural sounds such as birdsongs, women's voices come directly from the gods. This worldly and celestial dichotomy demonstrates how music held deep associations with gender differences to the Elizabethans.

Looking at the society and its music from a removed perspective, Christopher R. Wilson and Michela Calore's 2005 book *Music in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* seeks to provide definitions to all Shakespeare's uses of music terms in his plays through technical, literary, and societal perspectives. The entry on "music" itself is extensive and provides an overview of the Elizabethan's multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon. Wilson and Calore divide their various definitions into three categories: practical music, speculative music, and affective music. Practical music entails vocal and instrumental performances where musicians were physically creating music for realistic purposes such as church choirs and royal ceremonies (289). Speculative music focuses on the methodical physics of sound creation. From this perspective, "a musician is not so much a performer as a thinker both about music and the 'science' of making music" (291). The third division, affective music, refers to how music was heard and perceived by Elizabethan listeners, which is impacted by the effects of consonance and dissonance. Thus, whether through explicit practical music or less distinct spiritual renderings of sound, the combination of these three aspects form a cohesive and far-reaching understanding of music's affective power.

The intangible consequences of these affecting sonorities were being conceptualized and explained in emerging treatises by theorists such as Thomas Morley. One significant result of the

aforementioned expanding printing industry was the publication of Morley's 1597 book *A Plain and Easy Introduction to Practical Music*, which sought to explain the essential principles of music to a beginner via the dramatic characterizations of a master and his two pupils. According to the biographical entry on Morley in the Oxford Music Online and Grove Music Online database, his publication is "the most famous musical treatise in the English language" (Brett and Murray). The entry explains how the book inevitably necessitated immense research and time investment to write such innovative ideas that defy several of the previously accepted music ideologies. The book begins with explanations of the most basic concepts about isolated sounds and rhythms creating single-line melodies then progresses towards more in-depth and inventive ideas about polyphony—the simultaneous sounding of multiple tones—as well as the harmony and discord entailed. His theories are synthesized through his revolutionary guidelines for writing polyphonic compositions, which he refers to as "counterpoint." These contrapuntal rules and the entirety of the book were intended to be understood by any Elizabethans because of the simple dramatic style of writing.

Some scholars claim that Morley played a similar role as his fictionalized master in the musical education of Shakespeare, and there has been a continual debate over the legitimacy of a relationship between the two men on both personal and professional levels. It is documented that Morley and Shakespeare simultaneously resided in St. Helen's, Bishopgate, for an indeterminable period of time between 1596 and 1599, and some scholars argue that their relationship extended beyond just neighborly cordiality. Supporters of a legitimate relationship point to specific moments in Shakespeare's plays where Morley's theories are evident. For example, in the 1950 article "Shakespeare and Thomas Morley," John H. Long explains that during Hortensio's music lesson to Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Hortensio utilizes the

same six-tone gamut, or scale, that Morley documents at the onset of *A Plain and Easy Introduction*. In fact, the dialogue of Act 3, Scene 1 of that play is the only time the term “gamut” appears in any of Shakespeare’s works. Hortensio applies Morley’s “Ut-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La” scale accurately (Morley 11), which Long proposes indicates “some degree of technical knowledge” (Long 18). Furthermore, Long continues to assert that any other musical allusions in Shakespeare’s canon demonstrate only a broad and shallow understanding of music, so this reference had to come from an external source such as “some music instruction book or from a musical acquaintance” (18). However, Long’s claim demonstrates the faulty tendency of scholars from the 1930s through ‘50s to read Shakespeare’s plays strictly autobiographically, picking out simple evidence in the texts to support ideas about his life. Thus, these arguments supporting a professional relationship are merely speculative and provide no fully justifiable evidence.

Another argument that offers a similarly enticing possibility but is likewise inconclusive and ultimately inconsequential to the play is the case of “O Mistress Mine,” a piece sung by Feste in Act 2, Scene 3 of *Twelfth Night*. This tune may have a distinct connection to one of Morley’s compositions that seemingly matches—to an extent—in rhythm and duration. A song of the same title is found in Morley’s 1599 book of instrumental pieces, *Consort Lessons*. Feste’s lyrics fit perfectly with the notes of the composition for the first line of the song: “O mistress mine, where are you roaming?” (2.3.32), but after that point, the connection becomes less cohesive as the lyrics deviate from a probable rhythm. Thus, the piece also functions as a source of evidence for scholars in disbelief of a collaborative relationship between Shakespeare and Morley—like Philip Gordon, who dispels the inaccuracies of attributing Feste’s “O Mistress Mine” to Morley in his 1847 article “The Morley-Shakespeare Myth.” He asserts, “Obviously the lyric and music are structurally incompatible. Editors have done their worst, trying to make

the verses fit one version or the other of the music, but all the pulling and hauling in the world will not make the structural divisions of the song correspond with those of the music” (Gordon 124). It is interesting that Gordon states the words and tune are entirely “structurally incompatible” when the first line does fit perfectly, and his claim also ignores the possibility that Shakespeare could have deviated from Morley’s original tune on purpose. As evidenced by its multiple and various contemporary definitions, music was not always strictly guided, and Shakespeare could have drawn inspiration from the song or intentionally chosen to alter Morley’s tune to fit his own tonal needs. Regardless, these arguments of a legitimate relationship between Morley and Shakespeare are ultimately insignificant because they do not provide any of the substantial thematic relevancies possible upon further, more thorough analyses of *A Plain and Easy Introduction* working alongside Shakespeare’s plays. *Twelfth Night* especially reflects Morley’s understanding and theorization of music.

Morley’s theories are guided by how music is received physically and the consequent effects upon the listener. Throughout the book, he frequently comments on the affecting power of music to incite both pleasurable and dissatisfying feelings upon the body; in an explanation of the effects of discords, Morley explains, “Music was devised to content and not offend the ear” (Morley 160). By referencing the ear, Morley shows music having a direct effect on a physical body part rather than an intangible feeling or disposition. He also calls “the ear the most just judge of all music” to explain why discordant sonorities are unpleasantly received by an individual, connecting the physicality of music to the affective, emotional sense (166). The fundamental properties of concords and discords are necessary to understanding how Morley posits polyphonic music. When two or more tones sound simultaneously, their perception as consonant or dissonant depends on the distance between the tones—unisons, thirds, fifths, sixths,

and octaves are concordant, while dissonances are created by any other intervals, such as seconds, fourths, and sevenths. To define discord, Morley says, “It is a mixed sound compact of divers sounds naturally offending the ear and therefore commonly excluded from music” (141). However, Morley’s theories actually encourage the use of dissonant sonorities when used in the correct context. He posits that “when a discord is taken it is to cause the note following be the more pleasing to the ear” (147). This idea is central to his detailed rules that follow, which essentially explain when dissonances can be employed in compositions and how to handle them accordingly in order to best please the listener.

The concept that music would not be so pleasantly enjoyed without discord to contrast concord is also strongly emblematic of how desire is presented in *Twelfth Night*. Orsino’s opening lines present music through polyphonic relationships, and this understanding is sustained for the entirety of *Twelfth Night*. If Shakespeare were to present music as an entirely individual experience, Orsino could have begun the play creating his own solo music without the assistance of others. Instead, he is shown utilizing music to assert the power from his elevated social position as Duke upon other individuals. Wilson and Calore explain that “when music is mentioned in the Shakespeare canon in a non-specific way, instrumental music is generally implied,” so explicit calls for music were intended for practical music and directed at actual musicians, not an ethereal source of sound (290). Thus, Orsino’s command to “play on” calls on individuals below him in status and is intended to control their actions to fulfill his personal desires (1.1.1). Orsino craves to hear music, so he involves others who are subject to obey without regard for their own desires. This phenomenon relates to Morley’s theories of polyphony because instead of a single voice, there are multiple characters working in relation to each other’s respective power and desires, or lack thereof, to produce music.

Orsino's desire is further demonstrated by the consequent affective power of music. In simple terms, his opening line compares music to food to be consumed in order to satisfy his appetite for love. However, not only does Orsino want to be satisfied but he also calls for an "excess of it, that surfeiting,/The appetite may sicken and so die," which demonstrates the affecting and potentially harmful capabilities music can have upon an individual's physical self (1.1.2-3). This theme likewise speaks to Morley's presentation of music as something that can content or offend the ear depending on how it is received. Just as composers are allowed a degree of power when writing music to decide how consonances and dissonances will be received by listeners, Orsino's commands also voice a limited sense of self-control over his desires. Although he initially calls for the excess of music to overwhelm him, he suddenly decides, "Enough; no more./'Tis not so sweet now as it was before" (1.1.7-8). He continues to comment that essentially, continually indulging one's cravings and having overwhelming excess destroys the ability to enjoy that desire.

This view of desire as polyphonic through the affecting power of music is represented by the development of various relationships throughout the play. *Twelfth Night* is driven by the pursuits of individuals to join with another character and form harmonious, concordant, and conclusive couples. In her article, "'Many Sorts of Music: Musical Genre in *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*," Lin Kelsey proposes that these characters' developing relationships symbolically form a "chest of viols," which is a string ensemble likely to have been present at Elizabethan performances of *Twelfth Night* (Kelsey 144). She explains that the ensemble contained three different voices, or six with both parts doubled, and she assigns the parts as "Viola/Olivia (treble), Cesario/Feste (alto/tenor), and Orsino/Sebastian (bass), with Malvolio and Andrew as the odd men respectively out of tune and out of time" (144). While Kelsey's conjecture nicely

complements the components of the traditional viol ensemble, she provides no further support to bolster her decisions. Simply disregarding Malvolio and Andrew as “respectively out of tune” devalues their substantial contributions to the play’s progression; furthermore, Kelsey gives no justification for why characters are matched as treble, alto, tenor, or bass, unless assumed to be upon traditional gender assignments. Even then, she splits Viola/Cesario into two distinct players rather than acknowledging and exploring the complex gender duality of that singular role. Her reading merely posits the characters’ relationships and progressions as polyphonic without explaining the important affecting powers characters have upon each other’s desires within these constructs.

Viola is effectively the central character of *Twelfth Night* because she serves as the unifying element between characters’ worlds, and her relationships emblemize the desirous qualities that her music incites. In her initial appearance, she hears from the captain about Orsino and Olivia, and thus devises the plan:

Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him—
It may be worth thy pains—for I can sing,
And speak to him in many sorts of music
That will allow me to be very worth his service. (1.2.55-59)

She places herself into the same subservient role that formerly received Orsino’s assertive demands for music in order to become “worth his service.” Previous to stating this plan, she also exclaimed “O that I served that lady” in reference to Olivia, demonstrating that she desires relationships with both individuals (1.2.41). However, even though Viola claims “I can sing,” the play contains no staged moments where she actually creates music, and there are no mentions made of any performances she may have had off-stage either; the “many sorts of music” she speaks through must symbolize the way she communicates with other characters. Thus, her ability to create perfect harmony in accordance to Morley’s contrapuntal rules is not found in

explicit music but rather through her interactions. William M. McKim, in his article “Viola’s ‘Many Sorts of Music’ in *Twelfth Night*,” points out the musical associations to her name and how they relate to the play. Viols, he explains, “were not normally used as solo or virtuoso instruments but were played in consort or to accompany the voice” (McKim 23). Through this allusion, Viola is naturally drawn to these polyphonic relationships with others and serves as a natural complement and potential satisfier of their desires.

Viola’s relational concord reflects Gibson’s ideas of females’ innate ability to provide harmony; her womanhood—even when outwardly obscured by male attire—allows her to easily form strong relationships. Act 1, Scene 4 presents the immediate connection Orsino feels with his new servant. The scene opens with the observant perspective of Valentine explaining to Viola that “If the duke continue these favors towards you, Cesario, you are like to be much advanced; he hath known you but three days, and already you are no stranger” (1.4.1-3). Viola then questions the authenticity of Orsino’s respect, and Valentine confirms the rarity and legitimacy of this instant trusting relationship, which is further affirmed when Orsino enters and says, “Cesario,/Thou know’st no less but all: I have unclasped/To thee the book even of my secret soul” (1.4.11-13). It is evident that the immediacy of this confidence is abnormal for Orsino to display, but something about “Cesario” has caused him to crave a listening ear. Just as Morley proposed “the ear the most just judge of all music,” Viola’s astute listening to Orsino’s disclosure shows an understanding comparable to the ear receiving and interpreting music. Her innate female qualities affect Orsino to desire “Cesario’s” trusting friendship, just as Olivia likewise demonstrates an instant yearning for intimacy. Her first encounter with Viola results in the same immediate trust and perceived concordance; after Viola has exited, Olivia reflects upon their conversation:

Methinks I feel this youth's perfections
 With an invisible and subtle stealth
 To creep in at mine eyes. (1.5.250-252)

The subtleties Olivia references reflect Viola's natural harmonizing capabilities as a woman and the uncontrollable aspects of desire. Olivia is taken by the suavity of "Cesario's" words and mannerisms in contrast to the behavior of other males she has interacted with, and she willingly but effortlessly accepts his character, experiencing contentment, not offense, symbolic of Morley's dichotomy of how sonorities can be felt. Even when "Cesario" is revealed to be a female in disguise, Sebastian justifies Olivia's innocent desires for ultimately female-female intimacy by saying, "But nature to her bias drew in that" (5.1.244). He likewise references the innate female qualities that were strong enough to permeate through Viola's masculine exterior.

However, it is this gender obstruction and confusion that effectively mars the perfect harmony of Viola's progression in *Twelfth Night*. While Viola emanates the naturally agreeable and satisfying qualities of a woman, she is still displaying the appearance of a male. Thus, her polyphonic relationships with Orsino and Olivia cannot constitute entirely perfect concordance because they are built upon false perceptions. Their desires for intimacy with "Cesario", whether cordial or romantic, are affected by the deceit of Viola's interactional music. In Act 3, Scene 1 after Olivia has expressed her obsessive longing for "Cesario," Viola recognizes the detrimental effect her disguise has had upon the lady by bluntly stating "I pity you" (3.1.108). Therefore, just as Olivia cannot reach the concordant ending she believes she craves with "Cesario," Viola cannot satisfy her own desire for Orsino until the disguise is removed, and initially, Orsino struggles to accept this realization. He still speaks as if she were "Cesario" when he says, "Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times/Thou never shouldst love a woman like to me" (5.1.252-253). By addressing Viola still as a male, he demonstrates how deeply affecting "Cesario's"

presence was because he cannot immediately alter his perception to reality. Viola's male image functioned to create polyphony Morley would define as discordant due to its offensive ramifications.

This complicated harmonic progression effectively mirrors Morley's innovative ideas about music, but the play's conclusion does not provide satisfying concordance. Morley asserts that all music is driven to end concordantly but is complicated and made interesting by discordant sonorities; he states, "Discords mingled with concords not only are tolerable but make the descant more pleasing" (Morley 145). However, the conclusion of this play does not provide this "pleasing" sense of full satisfaction. Shakespeare concludes the relationships of *Twelfth Night* by placing the characters into superficially concordant relationships, but their polyphonic complexities complicate its harmony. Even though Orsino eventually recognizes Viola's femininity and offers his hand in marriage, she is unable to change back into "thy woman's weeds" at his request (5.1.257). Thus, he exits paired with a visibly apparent male, which is discordant with society's male-female expectations. On the other hand, Olivia reaches a legitimate male-female partnership with Sebastian, but he cannot satisfy the qualities she desired in "Cesario". As previously explained, Olivia fell in love with "Cesario" for his disguised feminine behaviors, so as a male, Sebastian cannot naturally present the same harmonizing characteristics. Both pairs cannot be viewed as fully concordant or satisfying, which returns to Orsino's original presentation of desire as insatiable. When he states "'Tis not so sweet now as it was before" upon receiving excess upon his appetite for music, Orsino presents the truth that desires are elusive and perpetually demand further satisfaction.

These discordant endings seem to diverge from Morley's theories of satisfying, harmonious conclusions, but the play does not terminate with these couples—instead, Feste

remains on-stage singing alone. Feste represents a unique character in comparison to the polyphony the rest of the cast demonstrates. In addition to ending in solitude, Feste is also the only character who explicitly sings in the play, a noticeable difference compared to Viola's silence as a eunuch. Furthermore, Feste's final song comes not at the desirous request of another individual but rather is self-willed, asserting his individuality. This solitary song would seemingly require reference back to the Morley's initial, elementary explanations of single-tone melodies at the beginning of *A Plain and Easy Introduction* without involving his newer theories of polyphony. However, in response to another theorist's criticism of his treatise, Morley asserts that "any sound is perfect not compared to another, and though it were compared to another yet is the *sound* perfect, though it be not a perfect *consonant* to the other" (Morley 130). Therefore, individuals can still be perceived as perfect because they have no basis of comparison to create concord with or dissonance against.

This understanding is further represented upon analysis Feste's final song. His lyrics narrate the journey of an individual who begins as an innocent "little tiny boy" then progresses into a maturing man (5.1.366). The middle of his song shows the man seeking to satisfy his desires:

But when I came, alas, to wive,
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
 By swaggering could I never thrive,
 For the rain it raineth every day.

This stanza represents the relational discord imminent upon joining into polyphonic relationships; the success of the individual is no longer able to thrive after marriage to another individual. This idea emblemizes the unsatisfactory couples Shakespeare sets at the play's conclusion. However, the final two lines of his song frame the play into the ultimately pleasing harmony Morley emphasized: "But that's all one, our play is done,/And we'll strive to please

you every day” (5.1.384-385). The number “one” represents the interval of a unison where polyphonic tones are sounding at the same pitch and are thus concordant. By singing “that’s all one,” Feste is referring to the entire image of the world being unified “to please you every day.” This ending asserts that unsatisfied desires are an inevitable discordance framed within a larger context of natural harmony.

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