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“With a Lute, Disguised”

Music as a Theatrical Tool in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Taming of the Shrew*

This panel has an interest in the idea of influence. This can be a heady concept with many potential iterations when thinking about the relationship between Marlowe and Shakespeare. This paper will examine some of the ideas about music in the social world that have influenced both dramatists. In considering the close connection between two musical performances in which the musician engages in several levels of performativity, an inevitable question will be raised. Which employment of the disguised musician device is older? Which text is the chicken and which the egg? Of course, even if we could assign some form of poultry-as-chronology identity to each play, we are still left without substantive evidence to that age old question of which came first?

Theatre history narratives tell us that Marlowe’s composition of the Jew of Malta occurred sometime between 1588 and early 1590.¹ If Ann Thompson is correct in dating the composition of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* after 1591, then that places Shakespeare’s text significantly later in chronological appearance.² We certainly know that *The Jew of Malta* was being performed as early as 1592 with Alleyn in the title role, during his time with the Lord Strange’s Men. We have no such early records of the first performances of *The Taming of the Shrew*. There is the intriguing possibility that the two plays were presented together by their respective

¹ Dates of composition based on Martin Wiggins, Catherine Richardson, and Mark Merry, *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

² She argues that some of the Italian dialogue in the play is derived from John Florio’s *First Fruits* (1578) and *Second Fruits* (1591).

companies, “begininge at Newington my Lord Admeralle men and my Lorde Chamberlen men” in 1594.³ Unfortunately, like the chicken and the egg, the uncertain nature of surviving evidence does not allow a means of establishing a linear movement of influence from one dramatist to the other. But when it comes to influence, it is certainly true that both writers lived and worked in a world in where ideas about music, about its affective powers, its dangers, its pleasures and its many uses, exerted a demonstrable influence in the ways that music was used in the theatre.

Music was thought to be a particularly powerful means by which to lead women down the exciting and potentially dangerous road to romantic and sexual union. Robert Greene begs the question,

Shall I say that Music was only invented by love, yea truly, for either it mittigateth the passions wherewith men are perplexed, or else augmenteht their pleasure so that daily they invent diverse kinds of instruments, as Lutes, Citrons, Viols, Flutes, Cornets, Bandoras, whereon they play Madrigals, Sonnets, Pavans, Measures, Galiards, and all these in remembrance of Love.⁴

The author of *Politeuphuia, Wit's Commonwealth*, claims that “Love maketh a man that is naturally addicted to vice, to be endowed with virtue, forcing him to apply himself to all laudable excercise; that thereby he may obtain his lovers favour...to excel in music, that by his melody he many entice her.”⁵ Thomas Morley, certainly the most cited of the music theorists of the period, offers advice in the voice of the master in his *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*. He warns that those who compose madrigals and canzonets for love ought to be eschewed in favor of those musicians who dedicated themselves to the grave and godly style of the

³ R.A. Foakes, ed. *Henslowe's Diary*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 21.

⁴ Robert Green, *Greene's Card of Fancy* (London: Humphrey Lownes for Mathewe Lownes, 1608) sig. K4^{r-v}.

⁵ N.L. [Nicholas Ling?], *Politeuphuia Wit's Commonwealth* (London: J. Roberts for Nicholas Ling, 1598) sig. D3^f.

motet.⁶ Though ironically disapproving, this advice indicates not only the presence of music in the practices and rituals of courtship, but also what type of music was deemed suitable for such performances. The proper musical genre for courting is also alluded to by Robert Burton, who cautions young men not to be “some light inamorato, some idle phantasticke, who capers in conceit all day long, and thinks of nothing else, but how to make Gigges, Sonnets, Madrigals in commendation of his Mistresse.”⁷ The autobiography of Thomas Whythorne provides a fascinating look at a professional tutor and musician who was in a position to know and court a wide range of Elizabethan gentlewomen. Through the course of his somewhat tumultuous career, Whythorne romanced the women he encountered through his musical gifts. Believing that “a giant heart never got fair lady,” Whythorne offers this description of the ways in which courtship could be enacted through musical means:

At this time I had gotten two or three pretty ditties made of love, the which, because I durst not deliver to her in writing for fear of afterclaps, I would sing them oftentimes unto her on the virginals or lute; by the which I made my first entrance into my suit unto her... Then, instead of giving rich gifts, I did supply the want of the same.⁸

So if we consider the presentation of music as part of the ritual gift giving associated with courtship, we must then recognize the social and spatial framework in which those practices were set.

Courtship, according to Bell, was very often a game with many players, a mediated and delegated joint effort.⁹ Yet despite the employment of intermediaries

⁶ Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (London: Peter Short, 1597) sig. V4^v.

⁷ Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford: John Lichfield and James Short for Henry Cripps, 1621) sig. Aa4^v-Aa5^f.

⁸ James M. Osborn, ed., *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) 64-5.

⁹ Iona Bell, *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 33-53.

and “go-betweens” in the pragmatic playing out of the drama of courtship, the act of gift giving was essentially a private one. The presenter (whether in their own person, or via a messenger of some sort – a relative, a servant, perhaps even a musician as we shall see) was generally the male party, with the receptor equally often being female. The gifts from pursuer to pursued were offered up in a particularly domestic space. The presentation of romantic gifts in courtship in the form of rings, lace, household goods, poetry, or music, was not a spectacle meant for public consumption. It was an intimate act of communication generally fully contained within the domestic sphere of the woman who was positioned as the object of the courtship.

The monumental work of Lawrence Stone has indicated the importance of ritual exchange in the courtship practices of the nobility.¹⁰ Loreen L. Giese’s thorough study of the London Consistory Court records have demonstrated that in London at least, the practices of gift exchange occurred in the courtship rituals of a wide socioeconomic spectrum.¹¹ The use of music specifically as a courtship gift is not regularly recorded in these records, which are more concerned with the materiality of physical gift objects.¹² But Andrew Copley includes this humorous anecdote of musicians being employed in courtship:

A Portugez had hir'd a Musition to play and sing for him at his Maistresse window: The Musition did so, and sung her a sonnet, whereof part went thus:
Faire maistresse, hether am I come for you: Wherefore vouchsafe to pity me

¹⁰ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); also see Diana O’Hara. *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Loreen L. Giese, *Courtships, Marriage Customs, and Shakespeare’s Comedies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 81-97.

¹² The reticence to record music as a courtship gift is echoed by modern scholarship on the matter. Giese, in her reading of gift exchange in Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, makes reference to the song Thurio’s musicians offer to Sylvia on his behalf, and notes that “the main courtship presents are love letters, songs and sonnets.” However, she devotes no time to considering the non-material gift of the performed song itself.

now. &c. The Portugez wax'd jealous heerat, and all to bombasted the poore fellow, saying: What (villaine) thou come for her? and she to pitie thee? I marie shall she, goe hang thee thou errand knaue.¹³

Gentlemen are noted by Copley to have performed for purposes of seduction (though the nature of his treatise presents the musical romantic failure of the gentleman in a comic light):

A Gentleman that plaid verie well vpon the Bandore, and had but a bad voyce, plaid and song in an Euening vnder his Maistresse window, and when he had done, ask'd her how she liked his musicke: She answered: You haue plaid very well, and you haue sung to[o].¹⁴

As players in the ritualized game of courthips then, musicians were granted access to the most intimate and private spaces in the social world – the lady's chamber. Such unique access allows the employment of such a musician on the stage to help create a very particular locale in which the dramatic action can unfold. But there are other ways in which such musical performances can be used as theatrical tools.

When Barabas enters Bellamira's house "with a lute" in *The Jew of Malta*, his musical performance grants him the access he needs to carry out his villainous plan to kill the company with a poisoned posy (H4^r, IV.iv.32.1).¹⁵ Within the dramatic world Barabas' display of lute skills enhances his disguise as a French musician as much as the staged accent he adopts when speaking about his instrument. He must "tuna [his] lute for sound" (H4^r, IV.iv.34) and protests about his instrument in faux French "pardona moy, be no in tune yet" (H4^v, IV.iv.50). The accent, in combination with his employment of music serve to create a peripheral position for him. By performing the signifiers of otherness, Barabas cleverly positions himself outside of the social

¹³ Anthony Copley, *Wits Fits and Fancies* (London: Richard Jones, 1595) sig. I3^r.

¹⁴ Ibid. sig. I4^r.

¹⁵ Christopher Marlowe, *The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta* (London: John Beale for Nicholas Vavasour, 1633); Roma Gill, ed., *The Jew of Malta* Vol. 4 *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

context in which his true identity might be known. His adoption of the guise of a musician is particularly apt, as this trade identity as a professional lutenist allows him access to the private domestic space of Bellamira's house.

Within the dramatic action of the play as a whole, the most important function of this musical performance is to get Barabas into a position from which to poison Ithamore, Bellamira and Pilia-Borza. But more locally within this particular scene, the music serves to locate the dramatic action in the particular space of Bellamira's home. The previous action leading up to this exchange occurs in a somewhat ambiguous location. Though Pilia-Borza is not given an explicit exit in the text, his re-entrance with Bellamira and Ithamore in the following exchange make it clear that the stage was empty for a brief time (H1^r, IV.iv.0.1). The nature of the dialogue that follows that entrance suggests that this is a private space, meant for romantic ventures. Social custom in the world outside the theatre suggests that such courtship practices were expected to be enacted in the domestic sphere. Ithamore's calling forth of a musician (Barabas in disguise) to play for his romantic interest mimics the ritual gift-giving of courtship rites. By engaging mimetically with these non-dramatic practices, the customs represented on the stage serve to locate this musical performance in the interior of Bellamira's home.

In this rare instance we are given a description in the dialogue of how the music performed here actually sounded. Barabas' lute playing is captured by Pilia-Borza when he comments that Barabas "fingers very well" and runs swiftly up and down the fret board (H4^r, IV.iv.55 and 57).¹⁶ Barabas employs music here in several ways to cover up his identity. Barabas needs to use every possible means of

¹⁶ Lindley points out that the nature of this musical performance is uncertain (*Shakespeare and Music* 101). But the usefulness of music in covering Barabas' asides (discussed below) suggests to the author that Barabas gets quite far in his musical performance.

personation at his disposal, in order to successfully achieve his dramatic goal of poisoning Ithamore, the courtesan, and her servant. In addition to the specific costume/prop demand of the poisoned nosegay, it seems probable that Barabas would have donned garments that allowed Bellamira to identify him as a “French musician” before he had even spoken (H4^r, IV.iv.33).¹⁷ Combining elements of costume, French dialogue, and faux-French accented English, Barabas the lutenist could have turned toward a recognizably French musical form to support and complete his disguise.

Hortensio’s disguised attempts at courtship via musical means in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* serves several of the same dramatic functions as Barabas’ similarly embedded performance. Both episodes are dependent upon ideas about music in the social world and the non-dramatic custom of using music as a part of ritual courtship. Both musical performances grant access to the respective lute players to the private realms of their female patrons, the objects of the courtships in question. The musicality of both moments reinforces the setting on the bare Elizabethan stage of the dramatic action in a particularly domestic locale. Both disguised performers depend on music as the marker of a particular cultural (and performed) identity. Both exchanges put the reputation of the lute as a supremely difficult instrument to keep in tune to work for humorous effect.¹⁸ Poor Hortensio’s inability to tune his lute correctly is called to attention by both Bianca and the disguised Lucentio, though no one suspects that Hortensio’s constant need to “spit in the hole, man, and tune again” (T4^v, 3.1.39) may have more to do with his

¹⁷ See Wiggins on the implications of disguise-specific costumes in Martin Wiggins, *Shakespeare and the Drama of His Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 88-9.

¹⁸ It was a trope of musical humour to admit that a good lutenist would spend as much time tuning the instrument as playing it.

performance of musicianship than the actual difficulty of the instrument!¹⁹ Both musical performances ostensibly entertain both the diegetic stage audience and the extra-diegetic playhouse audience simultaneously.²⁰ Finally, the employment of music allows each disguised lutenist the chance to address a particular audience secretly and directly, under the cover of sound.

But how do these embedded performances differ? Primarily, the differences lie in the effective use of music as a dramatic tool to draw the extra-diegetic audience into the dramatic action of the play before them. Hortensio employs the sound of his lute playing to cover the reason for his invented gamut, “to plead Hortensio’s passion” (T4^v, 3.2.72) from his rival Lucentio. Hortensio’s musical performance, such as it is, creates a fictive aural barrier between Bianca and Lucentio. The covering use to which music is put in Shakespeare’s scene anchors the dramatic action wholly within the diegetic world.

On the other hand, the self-conscious metatheatricality of Barabas’ performance allows the extra-diegetic audience to be addressed directly under the cover of sound. Barabas’ lute performance aligns the extra-diegetic audience with the stage audience by entertaining them all, even while Barabas addresses the playhouse patrons directly under the cover of his musical performance. Both musical performances share the ability to entertain both the stage audience and the theatre

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, *Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories, & tragedies* (London: Printed by Isaac Iaggard, and Ed. Blount, 1623); Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor eds. *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

²⁰ The type of entertainment provided might vary significantly – Barabas’ performance is celebrated as being technically impressive, whereas Hortensio’s ineptitude is highlighted by both Bianca and Lucentio. But the aesthetic pleasure of an accomplished performance and the humor of a less than brilliant one has an effect on both audiences, in both instances.

patrons. But where Hortensio uses his musical performance to mask an engagement with one of his fellow fictional figures, Barabas takes the opportunity to use the aural barrier created by his lute performance to address the playhouse audience directly. The quiet sounds of the lute in the large amphitheatre playhouses allow for the idea that the music prevents the stage audience from being aware of Barabas' comments to the playhouse patrons, while allowing those comments to be heard without difficulty by the audience to which they are addressed. By reaching out through verbal and musical means to the playhouse audience, Barabas' disguised performances highlights the shared position of both his diegetic and extra-diegetic listeners. By using the music as a means through which to engage that audience directly, Barabas literally employs his lute song to draw the audience into not just his own embedded performance of the French musician, but into an intense engagement with the dramatic action of the play itself.

This paper has considered the shared influence of the functions of music in the social world on both dramatists. Both seem to have arrived at the potential for using the disguised musician and the associated musical performance as a powerfully effective theatrical tool. I have my own theories about which of these episodes is a more compelling use of the device employed by both dramatists. But since the scope of this panel allows for so many interpretations of the multiple causes and effects of influence between these two dramatists, I hope that I have here provided enough material for you to come to your own conclusions about which dramatist employs music theory and practice as a more effective theatrical tool.