The Discord that “Maketh a Comely Concordance”—An Analysis of the Closing Scene of *The Merchant of Venice*

Li-hua HUANG

School of Foreign Languages, Guangdong Peizheng College, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China
77412276@qq.com

**Keywords:** *The Merchant of Venice*; The closing scene; Discord; Concord

**Abstract.** The closing scene of *The Merchant of Venice* which is full of discord and disharmony is often considered to be problematic and unwanted. However, it is indispensable to both the previous scenes and the development of the whole play due to its dramatic function and significance and in that the seeming discord in it makes the concord to the play as a whole.

**Introduction**

After the trial scene of Act Four, the fifth act or the closing scene of *The Merchant of Venice* is switched to Belmont, which opens with the peaceful night scene of Lorenzo and Jessica talking affectionately in the moonlight about mythologies of tragic lovers at the garden in front of Portia’s house. Then Stephano and Lorenzo break in successively to inform the coming of their mistress and master. After all the lovers and Antonio are brought together, a mock quarrel scene is performed by Portia and Nerissa to tease and scold their husbands for their missing wedding rings. Then the play ends with Portia revealing the real identity of the lawyer and his clerk and the truth of the trick about the rings and announcing the news that three of Antonio’s argosies have safely come to port. The last act is often considered to be much debatable and problematic. D. J. Palmer thinks that after the trial scene, “The main action of the play is now over, and what remains is like an epilogue, in which there is no more to do but ‘converse and waste the time together’”[1]. John Russell Brown comments that “The merriment of the fifth act at Belmont often seems detached and irrelevant after the drama of the fourth[…]”, and he quite appreciates the way Michael Langham deals with it, who gives proper meaning and form to it by emphasizing a theme, that of friendship[2]. There are also some other cases, as Stephen Orgel says “many productions, over the years, have simply ended the play with the trial scene”, with the concept that “the play has been, as far back as our records take us, a play about Shylock”[3] so it may as well end with the exit of Shylock. Harry Levin regards the trial scene as the climax of the play, so he argues that “anything that followed ran the danger of anticlimax[…]and there have been productions wherein the fifth act was drastically curtailed or else omitted altogether […]”[4]. Moreover, D. J. Palmer and K. Ryan and John Russell Brown all point out the discord and disharmony in the last scene such as the mythological tragic lovers, the memory of Shylock and the quarrel about the missing rings, etc. All in all, the closing scene of *The Merchant of Venice* which is full of discord and disharmony is often considered to be problematic and unwanted. However, it is indispensable to both the previous scenes and the development of the whole play due to its dramatic function and significance and in that the seeming discord in it makes the concord to the play as a whole.

**Dramatic Function and Significance of the Closing Scene**

The last act is not at all unwanted, but actually the necessary continuance and complement to the development of the plots and themes of the previous scenes. Although the double main plots of the play have been fulfilled, i.e. the bond story between Shylock and Antonio ends with danger vanished and Shylock legally punished, and the casket story or the courtship story between Bassanio and Portia ends with their happy marriage. However, there is still business unsettled and themes not fully fulfilled, i.e. the story of the ring and Antonio’s ships, and the themes of friendship, love and marriage. According to Harry Levin, “the predicated business has virtually terminated with
the courtroom scene,” but Shakespeare “employs a brief aftermath to plant his motivation for the sub-subplot of the last act, the displacement and replacement of the rings. Without this contrivance there would be no action left” [4]. That is to say, in bringing out the new ring plot, Shakespeare creates a new sort of tension in the trial scene which cries to be slackened and relieved further. So it is quite self-evident that the “sub-subplot” needs to be brought into full play in the next act. On the other hand, generally speaking, a comedy will end with a happy marriage or at least bring a happy ending to the protagonists. However, if Antonio’s ships really “have all miscarried” [5], it will be great distress or even tragedy to him, the merchant as well as the protagonist; if the missing rings make the two couples break up, which is quite likely as both of their marriage is materially based and rather hastily made, it will also add to the tragedy of the play. Just as what Snyder says “Since all plots involve threats and dangers, the assumption is that while in tragedies these threats are fulfilled, in comedies they may be evaded”[6]. Furthermore, according to Angela Pitt the characteristics of Shakespeare’s tradition of dramatic comedy is that a comedy consequently moves towards reconciliation and a restoration of order with problems solved and sorrows overcome at last[7]. Therefore, one more act is indispensable to follow rather than violate the traditions either universal or Shakespearian comedy.

Then why switch to Belmont? As is well known, the action of the play mainly takes place in two cities: Venice and Belmont, both of which are endowed with symbolic meanings. Mark W. Scott claims that Venice represents the realistic, civilized world prevalent of hypocrisy, revenge, and commercial exploitation and dominated by law and justice, while Belmont represents a fairy-tail idealistic world permeated with flourishing happiness and love dominated by Christian charity and forgiveness, and he further points out that Shakespeare emphasizes the love, joy, and forgiveness that thrives in Belmont by providing a happy ending [8]. So the double plots of the play, the bond story concerning law, justice, revenge etc, and the courtship story concerning love, joy, forgiveness and so on run parallel to the contrast of these two cities. Nevertheless, according to Auden, it is very difficult not to blur the contrast between them thus much more difficult to preserve a unity as these two cities are so different in character. That is to say, “If the spirit of Belmont is made too predominant, then Antonio and Shylock will seem irrelevant, and vice versa”[9]. But Burckhardt dismisses the doubt by arguing that Venice and Belmont seem to be quite separate and discontinuous realms, but actually they are quite inseparable and interdependent as “the bond makes possible the transfer of the action to Belmont, which then re-acts upon Venice. The public order is saved from the deadly logic of its own constitution by having been transposed, temporarily, to the private sphere ”[10]. And we feel even more relieved and gratified as Midgley observes Shakespeare’s “working out a remarkably steady alteration of scene between Venice and Belmont” by “giving the whole of Act IV to Venice and the trial scene, and the whole of Act V to Belmont”, as “Shylock has been allowed to become far too imposing a figure in the previous four acts of the play, and the fifth act is a desperate attempt to redress a lost balance” [11]. Consequently, the themes of friendship, love and marriage of Belmont which are so closely related to the courtship story but not yet fully fulfilled will have to be resumed to oppose with an equal weight in contrast to the almost overstated and overelaborated themes of Venice.

There is also a necessity to carry on the subplot of the play into the final act, that is, Jessica’s elopement with Lorenzo in that on one hand, it sets off the villainy, hideousness and wickedness of the antagonist Shylock and on the other unlike Shylock who is forced to converse from Judaism to Christianity, Jessica’s conversion is absolutely out of her free will for the sake of love of Lorenzo which stresses one of the themes of the play: the power of love; one third reason is that according to Auden, Venice is often considered to be a money-making place emphasizing on material wealth, whereas Belmont the romantic fairy-story world emphasizing on love’s wealth[9], so there seems to be no soil for their love in Venice which also well grounds the shift of their story to Belmont. And in the last act, the act of reconciliation, “Lorenzo and Jessica, Jew and Christian, Old Law and New, united in love; and their talk if of music, Shakespeare’s recurrent symbol of harmony”[11]. “[…] just as some critics maintain that the drama is fundamentally allegorical addressing such themes as the triumph of mercy over justice, New Testament forgiveness over Old Testament law, and love
over material wealth” [8]. In this sense, the further deployment of the subplot of the love between Lorenzo and Jessica not only helps strengthen the themes of the play but also adds to the concord and harmony of the heavenly fairy land of Belmont.

The Discord that “Maketh a comely concordance”

Hence, after the discord and tension of Venice we arrive at the concord and heavenly harmony of Belmont just as Palmer puts it: “This opening duet performed by Lorenzo and Jessica turns the bitter conflict and equivocations of the trial scene into sweet harmony and tranquility. We have entered a world of poetic beauty […]”[1]. Nonetheless, as is mentioned above, there also exists some discord and disharmony in the last scene such as the mythological tragic lovers, the memory of Shylock and the quarrel about the missing rings, etc. to which the following comments of some critics offer various possible explanations.

Ryan thinks that “Lorenzo and Jessica’s hymning of their love is infected by a rash of sinister allusions to tragically doomed lovers”[13]. Brown doesn’t see any disharmony in their talk of mythological lovers until it comes to do with the quarrel over the ring of gold when they talk about unfaithfulness, adultery, and cuckoldry and so on[14]. Palmer holds that “although the mythological lovers invoked are all tragic, their griefs are distanced by being framed in art and overlaid by lyric charm”[1]. Orgel regards Lorenzo and Jessica’s talk about the tragic lovers as a way to celebrate their victory as they “are finally free, and together, and rich; and they have the support of the most powerful people in their world” [3]. In contrast to the mythological tragic lovers, they are most possibly celebrating their victory, their happiness and their freedom, but the lovers they talk about are not completely irrelevant to themselves. As Scott puts Jessica and Lorenzo’s courtship as a romantic love “linked to the great lovers of myth, particularly in the illicitness of their elopement and defies social traditions because their aspiration to get married causes them to step out of the bounds of the accepted rules of society” [8].

The past mythologies, to some extent also allude to the past of their own when they are still in Belmont, Jessica still in Shylock’s house. For instance, the Trojan walls that separate Troilus from Cressida are just like the walls of Shylock’s house that separate Lorenzo and Jessica, and the loin that scared Thisbe away may refer to Shylock who will not allow her to approach a Christian, while Medea who has once been alluded to Portia by Bassanio fits in well with the case of Jessica who is caught in “Medea-like conflict between loyalty to her father and the natural desire to choose her own husband”, but finally “betray her father by marrying a stranger”[1] and the figure of Dido who is deserted but still waiting for the coming back of her lover may also be related to Jessica who, if not helped out of Shylock’s house will possibly live a life of a deserted and brokenhearted lover. Following this we can tell that actually their love is full of dangers and tragic elements, and it might have been a tragic one like any one of the above mentioned. However, it is not totally the case at all when they turn to tease about each other. Their teasing shows us that they feel really lucky and providential because all at last Jessica gets away from the hellish house and has been brought into the heavenly fairyland. With Jessica helped out of Venice, all the tragic elements avoided and removed. In this sense their celebrating of the victory of their love, their freedom and the happiness of their marriage also clings tightly to the themes of the play, so it is in no way in discordance or disharmony to the closing scene or to the whole play.

With the return of the newlywed couples Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano together with Antonio, new tension is aroused when the wives begin to quarrel about the missing rings of their husbands. Brown considers the quarrel scene to be “a fitting sequel to the discord of the trial scene where love and generosity confront hatred and possessiveness; it suggests the way in which love’s wealth may be enjoyed continually”[14]. Ryan holds that in their bantering conflict, “disquieting doubts are raised about the quality of the men’s love by their failure of the love-test in giving away their rings […] The sense of discord is amplified by Portia’s and Nerissa’s teasing threats of revenge through sexual infidelity […]”[13]. The most popular interpretations are as follows: Barbara Lewalski argues that “The ring episode is, in a sense, a
comic parody of the trial scene” [4] which is quite similar to the opinions of Ejner J. Jensen who looks on the ring scene as the mirror plot of the trial scene. Jensen further explains that once again, Portia, with Nerissa as the assistant, is the judge who goes about her task with the same greatest equanimity and specialty and traps those involved in the case, their husbands as traps Shylock and pushes them to plea for mercy. And as the trial scene reveals the truths about mercy and justice, the ring scene reveals the truth about love and fidelity[12]. The ring story is also a kind of intended test, the test of friendship, of love as well as marriage. And the result of the test is that all of them are firm and strong despite their material basis and the problem only lies in which one is of primacy. As far as the ending is concerned, it is of course marriage that is the one up. As Orgel says the fifth act is connected closely with the consequences of Portia’s ring trick in the trial scene [3]. ‘But the placing of Portia’s ring on Bassanio’s finger is more than the conclusion of the rivalry. The ring was first put on Bassanio’s finger in the Casket Scene, and its recurrence should bring to a conclusion not only the story of the bond but also the story of the three caskets ’[15]. So from this understanding, the ring story may serve as a conclusion to unite the double plots of the play as a whole and it is in this way that the seeming discord and disharmony in it makes the play a harmonious and concordant unity. Just as Lawrence Danson says “The Merchant of Venice is a play in which harmonies are discovered where only discord had seemed possible”[16]. That is to say, the discord does make the concord.

The play ends with Antonio surrounded by three newlywed couples. The sad and lonely figure of Antonio does create a kind of disharmony and discord. As for his sadness and loneliness, various interpretations have been provided since years ago. But the most often talked about is about his homosexual tendency towards Bassanio which Traub, Jensen and Midgley have all discussed in their essays. Both Levin and Danson claim that the play is about the rivalry or competition between Antonio and Portia for the love of Bassanio. Roma Gill and Valerie Traub also analyze in detail the historical background to justify their assumptions. The former says that “Some Elizabethans thought —as the Greeks and Romans did— that the friendship between two men was a more spiritual bond, and should be more highly esteemed, than the love between a man and a woman”[17] and the latter claims that “In fact, the division between homosexual and heterosexual was not evident in Renaissance England” [18].W. H. Auden holds that neither Shylock nor Antonio can enter the fairyland of Belmont, as neither of them is capable of enjoying the carefree happiness which Belmont stands. And Shakespeare portrays Antonio as so melancholic a character that he is incapable of loving a woman. And we can’t even find an equivalent character in the play who has that kind of self-sacrificing love that Antonio has displayed [9]. Whether these assumptions are right or wrong, it doesn’t seem to matter too much, as Palmer puts it “Among the happy lovers as they leave the stage, Antonio is the odd man out, the discord that ‘maketh a comely concordance’, for his part remains ‘a sad one’”[1]. So as his character makes him so, no matter he is in Venice or Belmont, his part will remain “a sad one”. What’s more, the play begins with his one-pound-flesh bond with Shylock that ensures the money for Bassanio’s courtship for Portia and ends with his bond again, and this time he offers to be bound to Portia with his soul upon the forfeit for to ensure Bassanio’s faith for Portia thus ensures their marriage [5]. Here it seems that the ending has become the beginning, and Antonio sacrifices both his body and soul for the love and friendship for Bassanio. Thereby, not only does the closing scene make the character of Antonio full and complete, it also makes the whole play a perfect circle and a most harmonious and concordant tune.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the closing scene of The Merchant of Venice not only helps bring the plots of the play into full play, but also helps highlight the major themes of the play. It is necessary continuance and complement to the previous scenes as well as a dispensable conclusion to these plots and themes. And all those seeming discord and disharmony adds to the comic effect of the play and contributes to the concord and unity of the play as a whole. Palmer holds that the structure of
Shakespearian comedy reflects a principle of Elizabethan aesthetics by Edmund Spenser that “oftentimes a dischorde in Musick maketh a comely concordance”.

References


