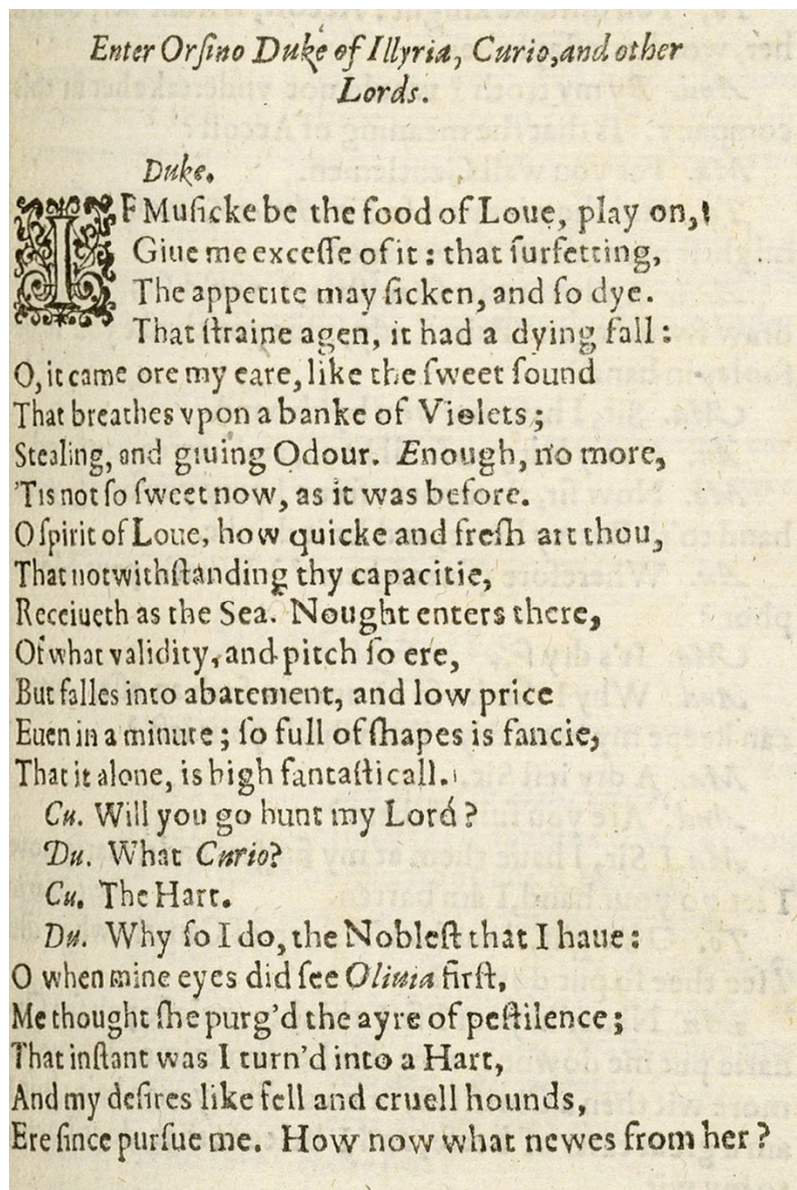


If Music Be the Food of Love

Twelfth Night, Act I, sc. 1, lines 1–15.

Duke Orsino's monologue, at the very beginning of *Twelfth Night*, Act I, sc.1, lines 1–15. There is no Quarto of the play, so the only version we have is that of the First Folio (left, from p. 255). The text on the right is taken from the online Folger edition. I have included the brief dialogue with Curio, a gentleman serving the Duke, although it is not directly relevant to the monologue.



Enter Orsino, Duke of Illyria, Curio, and other Lords

Duke.

Fmusic be the food of love, play on.
 Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
 The appetite may sicken and so die.
 That strain again! It had a dying fall.
 O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound 5
 That breathes upon a bank of violets,
 Stealing and giving odor. Enough; no more.
 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.
 O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou,
 That, notwithstanding thy capacity 10
 Receiveth as the sea, naught enters there,
 Of what validity and pitch so'er,
 But falls into abatement and low price
 Even in a minute. So full of shapes is fancy
 That it alone is high fantastical. 15

Cu. Will you go hunt, my lord?
Du. What, Curio?
Cu. The hart.
Du. Why, so I do, the noblest that I have.
 O when mine eyes did see Olivia first,
 Methought she purged the air of pestilence.
 That instant was I turned into a hart,
 And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
 E'er since pursue me.

Although the monologue seems to complete a single, closed chain of reasoning, the text is quite disjointed. That could well be a reflection of the Duke's state of mind, because he is afflicted by love-sickness and his reasoning faculties seem somewhat impaired. But I am not so sure. Let's categorize the various thoughts first:

1. play more music, and play it to excess (lines 1–3).
2. that tune had the quality of dying (line 4).
3. it floated over my ear like a bag of mixed metaphors (lines 5–7).
4. but it's no longer sweet now, so stop it (lines 7–8).
5. O love, how fast you can turn things into trash (lines 9–14).
6. only fancy is high fantastical, because it's full of shapes (lines 15–16).

Now it is for us to find out how these individual thoughts make sense, at least in Orsino's mind.

Before we start reading, there's one practical thing we should do: ● go to the OED and look up the words that might well have been understood differently in the Elizabethan period. What is high fantastical? What does it mean, to purge the air? Purge, how? What is fancy, and how can it be full of shapes? How can sweet sound steal and give odor? What is the spirit of love, if not love itself? So let's call in the help of lexicographers first. Here's a link to the quotations from *Twelfth Night* in the OED: tinyurl.com/Twelfth-Night-OED-Quotes.

Now some questions about lines 1–15, to help you along. Everything in these lines is either about music or based on Orsino's experience of music. So there is a point about music being made here. We'll have to find it.

- There is a turning point in the monologue. Find it. What changes in Orsino's mind at that point?
- Who is Orsino talking to (including, possibly, himself) and at what point?
- For what purpose does Orsino need music in lines 1–3? To judge from his words he does not seem to be after entertainment, or at least not per se.

An important point, about the idea of sweet sound *breathing* upon a bank of violets, stealing and giving odor. The metaphors are not actually as mixed as I just made it appear:

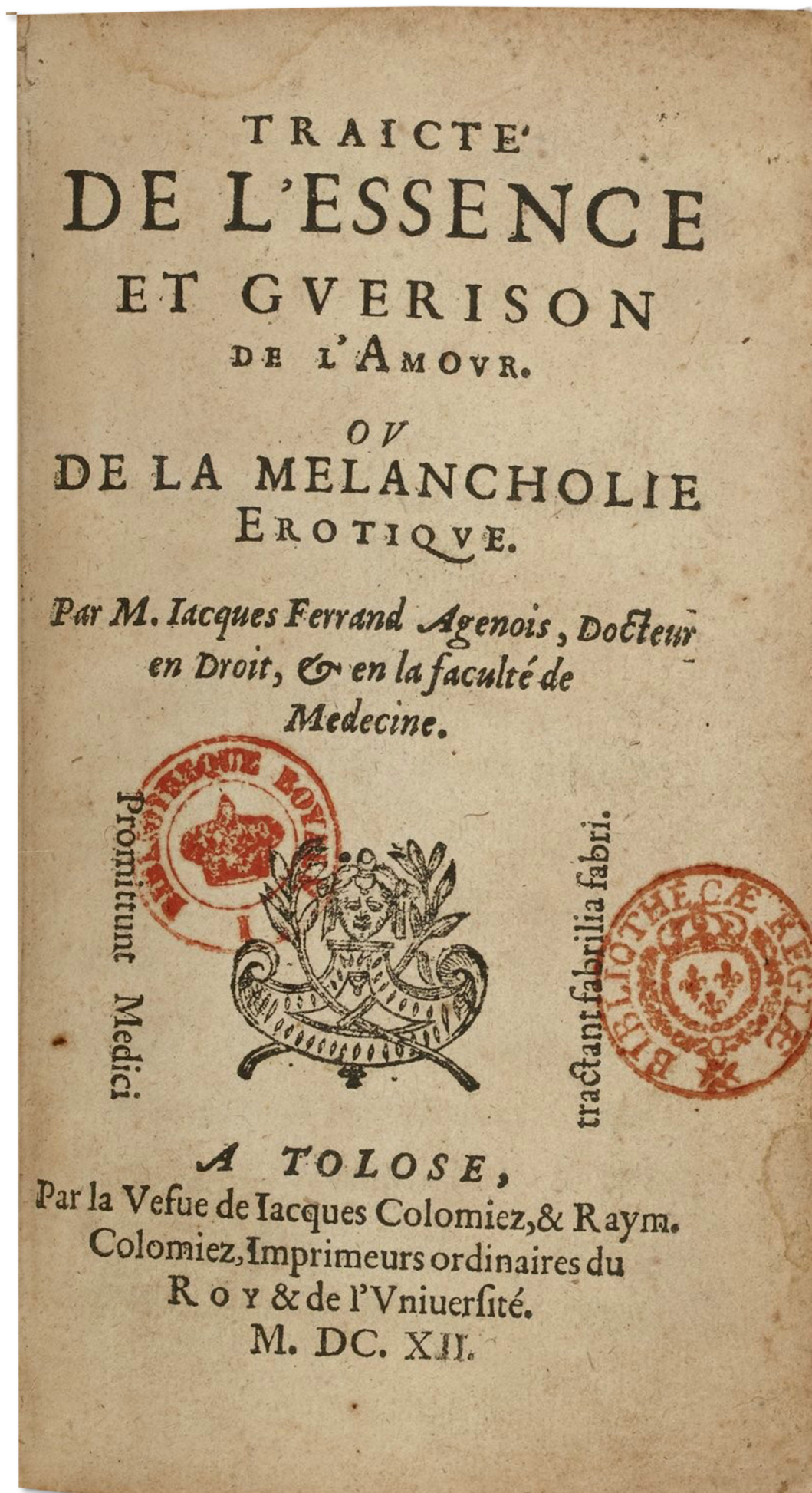
First, melody as *breath* is a metaphor that goes back to Antiquity. Words for breath could be synonymous with four things, the first being breath itself. Then the soul, the breath of life, Then musical sound, which is a kind of harmony just like the soul.

Finally, life. Examples in Latin: *anima*, *spiritus*, *pneuma*, still recognizable in spirit, to expire, animal, to animate, and the musical notes called neumes. This also explains why it's significant that instruments are dead, or indeed inanimate. How can music breathe with life when there is no life to inspire it? Words for air became synonymous with musical tunes as well, as in *ayre* or Italian *aria*. *Spirit* is a word with even richer resonances, including musical ones. We will deal with that in *The Tempest*.

Second, the two things that violets were known for were the color violet, and the fragrance. I don't know if Orsino means to compare his ear with some sort of flower-bank, but there is no mixing of metaphors between "a bank of violets," and "stealing and giving odor." To breathing upon might conceivably mean: to endow with life. And it is true that Orsino spoke a moment earlier about "and so die" and "a dying fall"—though that may be coincidental.

But I can't recall whether words like odor or fragrance were ever used as a synonym for soul, melody, life, or breath.

You're welcome to look this up in the commentaries to editions, or even secondary literature. My experience is that Shakespeare scholars are not especially eager to comment on musical questions. But that may be just a musicologist's prejudice.



A Treatise on Love-Sickness:

Jacques Ferrand, *Traicté de l'essence et guerison de l'Amour our de la melancholie erotique* (Toulouse: Jacques and Raymond Colomiez, 1612).