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Shakespearian Comedy in *The Comedy of Errors*

C. L. Barber

Mr. R. A. Foakes, in his excellent Arden edition of the *Comedy of Errors*, remarks that producers of the play have too often regarded it "as a short apprentice work in need of improvement, or as mere farce, 'shamelessly trivial' as one reviewer in *The Times* put it." Accordingly they have usually adapted it, added to it, fancied it up. But in its own right, as its stage popularity attests, it is a delightful play. Shakespeare outdoes Plautus in brilliant, hilarious complication. He makes the arbitrary reign of universal delusion the occasion for a dazzling display of his dramatic control of his characters' separate perspectives, keeping track for our benefit of just what each participant has experienced and the conclusions he or she draws from it. One must admit that the way the confusion is elaborated by wrangling with words is sometimes tedious, especially on the stage, where the eye cannot assist the ear in following the young poet's fascination with manipulating language. But most of the time one can enjoy the wonderful verbal energy with which he endows his characters as they severally struggle to put together and express their baffling encounters. There is a great deal of good fun in seeing how each distorts and simplifies, and sometimes lies a little, to make sense of the crazy situation (and often to draw a little advantage from it on the side).

The use Shakespeare makes of Plautine models does involve a real limitation, for the plot is in effect imposed on the characters from outside, an arbitrary circumstance. As a result, too many of the errors are not meaningful in the way that errors become in the later comedies. We miss, as Professor Bertram Evans has pointed out in his *Shakespeare's Comedies,* people within the play who share in our superior awareness from outside it. The plot does not permit anyone to contrive the errors, tailor them to the particular follies of the victims, and share with the audience the relish of the folly brought out by the "practice"—a method which Mr. Evans has shown to be standard in the later comedies.

But the play is much better, much more meaningful, than the arbitrariness of its plot would lead one to expect. Shakespeare feeds Elizabethan life into the mill of Roman farce, life realized with his distinctively generous creativity, very different from Plautus' tough, narrow, resinous genius. And, although the mill grinds a good deal of chaff as well as wheat, he frequently makes the errors reveal fundamental human nature, especially human nature under the stress and tug of marriage. The tensions of marriage dramatized through Antipholus of Ephesus and his wife he relates to the very different tensions in the romantic tale of Egeon and Emilia with which he frames the Ephesian mix-ups. In the combination he makes of Gower's narrative with Roman dramatic form, we can see Shakespeare's sense of life and art asserting itself through relatively uncongenial materials.

There is more of daily, ordinary life in *The Comedy of Errors* than in any other of the comedies except *The Merry*

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Wives of Windsor. A mere machinery of mistakes is never enough even for the most mechanical comedy; the dramatist must be able to present particular lives being caught up in mistakes and carrying them onward. Something must be going on already—Antipholus of Ephesus late for dinner again, his wife in her usual rage ("Fie, how impatience loureth in your face!"). Shakespeare is marvelous at conveying a sense of a world already there, with its routine tensions:

> The capon burns, the pig falls from the spit;
> The clock hath strucken twelve upon the bell:
> My mistress made it one upon my cheek:
> She is so hot because the meat is cold. . .

He also creates a prosperous commercial town outside the domestic world of the jealous wife's household: its merchant-citizens are going about their individual business, well known to one another and comfortably combining business with pleasure—until the errors catch up with them.

To keep farce going also requires that each person involved be shown making *some* sort of sense out of it, while failing to see through it as the audience can. It would be fatal for one twin to conclude, "Why, I must have been mistaken for my long-lost brother!" So the dramatist must show each of his people taking what happens according to his own bent, explaining to himself as best he can what occurs when, for example, one of the twin masters meets the wrong slave and finds the fellow denying that he ever heard instructions received by the other slave a few moments before. Too often, the master concludes simply that the slave is lazy or impudent, and beats him; this constant thumping of the Dromios grows tedious and is out of key—the one instance where Roman plot has not been adapted to Elizabethan manners.

The idea that the mistakes must be sorcery goes much better. The travelling brothers have heard that Ephesus is full of "Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind." (The town was identified with sorcerers by Saint Paul's reference to their "curious arts" in his *Epistle to the Ephesians*, one reason perhaps for Shakespeare's choice of the town as a locale, as Geoffry Bullough has suggested in his *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare.)* The visitors decide that "This is the fairy land. O spite of spites!/We talk with goblins, owls and sprites." As the errors are wound up tighter and tighter, the wife and sister conclude that husband and slave must be mad, and bring on a real live exorcist, the absurd Dr. Pinch in a huge red wig and beard, to conjure the devil out of them. By the end, Adriana is calling on the whole company to witness that her husband "is born about invisible." We relish the elaboration of these factitious notions of magic to explain events that do indeed seem to "change the mind"; at the same time we enjoy the final return of all hands to the level of fact, where we have been situated all along. The end of the delusions is heralded by Dr. Pinch's being all but burned up by his outraged "patients." The Ephesian husband stubbornly hangs onto his senses and his sense of outrage; he sets fire to the "doctor" as a comic effigy on whom to take vengeance for the notions of madness and magic to which almost everyone has given away:

> O mistress, mistress, shift and save yourself!
> My master and his man are both broke loose,
> Beaten the maids a-row, and bound the doctor,
> Whose beard they have singed off with brands of fire,
> And ever, as it blaz'd, they threw on him
> Great pails of puddled mire to quench the hair:

My master preaches patience to him
and the while
His man with scissors nicks him like
a fool. . .

The most interesting misinterpretations of the mistakes about identity are of course those where error feeds already existing passions—Adriana's jealousy, her husband's irritation—and leads finally to a kind of rhapsody exploding just before the final resolution. Adriana's self-defeating rage at her husband is particularly finely treated, especially in the moment when the travelling brother seems to provide her with the ultimate provocation, by making love to her sister. (Shakespeare added the charming, sensible sister, not in Plautus, as a foil and confidant for the shrewish wife.) After a frenzy of railing, the sister brings the wife up short by asking why she cares about her husband if he is so despicable, and she answers "Ah, but I think him better than I say, . . . My heart prays for him, though my tongue do curse." She is brought up short again, in a final tableau, when the Abbess traps her into betraying how she has made her husband's life miserable. The older woman delivers a splendid, formal rebuke:

Adriana. Still did I tell him it was
vile and bad.
Abbess. And therefore came it that the
man was mad.
The venom clamors of a jealous woman
Poisons more deadly than a mad dog's
tooth. . . .

Adriana is chastened: "She doth betray me to my own reproof." But her domineering bent is still there: she goes on insisting on her rights to manage her own husband's madness: "I will attend my husband, be his nurse,/ Diet his sickness, for it is my office,/ And will have no attorney but myself; . . ."

We can see a revealing contrast with Plautus in the handling of the Ephesian couple's relations. Shakespeare's husband and wife are more complex; they are also more decent. In *Menaechmi* the husband, at the opening of the play, is making off with a fine cloak of his wife's to give it to Erotium, the courtesan; he has already stolen for her a gold chain of his wife's. Shakespeare's Antipholus only decides to go elsewhere to dine in response to the incomprehensibly outrageous behavior of his wife in locking the doors (while *she* thinks she has at last got him home). It is in revenge for this that he decides to give the young "hostess" the necklace originally ordered for his wife. His eye has strayed, to be sure—"I know a wench of excellent discourse,/ Pretty and witty; wild, and yet, too, gentle; . . . My wife . . . Has oftentimes upbraided me withal." In Plautus there is no ambiguity and no mixture of attitudes: from the outset it is "To hell with my wife, I'm going to have my fun." When in Plautus the visiting twin comes along, he has his unknown brother's good time with Erotium, gets the cloak and chain, and rejoices that it was all free. Shakespeare's twin, by contrast, falls romantically in love with the modest sister Shakespeare has provided, speaking some lovely poetry as he does so.

The difference reflects the difference in the two cultures, Roman and Elizabethan. It also reflects the different form of comedy which Shakespeare was beginning to work out, a comedy appropriate to the fullest potentialities of his culture. Roman comedy functioned as a special field-day for outrageousness; by and large, it fitted Aristotle's formula that comedy deals with characters who are worse than we are. Though there are some conventional, stock heroes and heroines, most of the stage people are meant to be fractions of human nature on its aggressive, libidinal side. The central characters in Shakespeare's comedies, on the other hand, are presented as total, not fractional: whatever their faults, they are conceived as whole people. His comedy dramatizes outrageousness, but usually it is presented as the product of special circumstances, or at least it is

abetted by circumstances. Often the occasion is festivity, or a special situation like a holiday, a moment felt as a saturnalian exception to ordinary life, as I have stressed in writing about *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*. Here the mistakes of identity bring the husband and wife to extremities on a day which is otherwise very much an "every day." Shakespeare however does frame the release of the animal or natural or foolish side of man by presentations of the normal and the ideal. Of course Roman comedy had its recognized place in the whole of life, its accepted fescennine function; but this was something implicit, understood by author, actors and audience. Shakespeare even in this early play makes the *placing* of the comic extremes part of the comedy itself.

The headlong day of errors is begun and ended by the story of Egeon, the bereft father of the twins, condemned to die in the morning, at evening pardoned and reunited with his long-lost wife and sons. It is a story of a very different tonality from the Plautine materials, derived as it is from Gower's Mediaeval handling of a late Greek romance. Shakespeare handled it again in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, where he realizes exquisitely the sense of life's mystery characteristic of the late romances, centering on precarious and sacred family relationships. In *The Comedy of Errors* the old tale is used only to sound a chord of grief at the outset (a somewhat blurred chord), then at the end a much fuller chord of joyful atonement. Yet the story of ocean voyages and long separations, so different from the busy, close-together bustle that comes between its exposition and conclusion, provides a meaningful finale.

That the ending does work, in spite of this difference and the utterly far-fetched coincidences involved, is largely thanks to Shakespeare's control of the rhythm of feeling. In the final farce scenes, feelings break loose, people are beside themselves; extras rush on the stage to bind struggling Antipholus and Dromio; a moment later the two are loose again, as it seems, with swords drawn, driving away all comers. Then suddenly, after this release of passion, the tone changes: the Abbess and the Duke, with aged Egeon, take over the stage, figures of authority and reverence. We hear poignant accents of family feeling in Egeon's:

> Not know my voice! O time's extremity,
> Hast thou so crack'd and splitted my poor tongue
> In seven short years, that here my only son
> Knows not my feeble key of untun'd cares?
> Though now this grained face of mine be hid
> In sap-consuming winter's drizzled snow,
> . . .
> Tell me thou art my son Antipholus.

A moment later the Syracusian Antipholus, who does know his father, comes on stage; the doubles are visible together at last, and the plot is unsprung. But instead of ending there, we are lifted into a curiously serious final moment. The Abbess, now discovered as the wife, speaks of the moment as a new birth of her children:

> Thirty-three years have I but gone in travail
> Of you, my sons, and till this present hour
> My heavy burthen ne'er delivered.

She invites all to "a gossips' feast"—a Christening party, "gossips" here being the old, Prayer-book word for godparents, "god-sibs," brothers and sisters in God of the parents. "After so long grief, such nativity!" the Abbess-wife exclaims. As all go out except the four brothers, the Duke sets his seal on the renewal of community, centered in the family: he uses the word gossip in both its ceremonial sense of "sponsor" and its ordinary, neighborly sense:

> With all my heart, I'll gossip at this feast.

One final goodhumored Error amongst masters and slaves, and the play ends gayly with the Dromios' joke about repeating *their* birth:

> We came into this world like brother and brother;
> And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another.

Shakespeare's sense of comedy as a moment in a larger cycle leads him to go out of his way, even in this early play, to frame farce with action which presents the weight of age and the threat of death, and to make the comic resolution a renewal of life, indeed explicitly a rebirth. One must admit, however, that he does rather go out of his way to do it: Egeon and Emilia are off-stage and almost entirely out of mind in all but the first and last scenes. We can notice, however, that the bonds of marriage, broken in their case by romantic accident, are also very much at issue in the intervening scenes, where marriage is subjected to the very unromantic strains of temperament grinding on temperament in the setting of daily life. Moreover, Adriana and her Antipholus are both *in* their marriage (as wooing couples are in love); its hold on them comes out under the special stress of the presence of the twin doubles. The seriousness of the marriage, however trying, appears in Adriana's long speech rebuking and pleading with her husband when he seems at last to have come home to dinner (it is, of course, the wrong brother):

> Ah, do not tear thyself away from me;
> For know, my love, as easy mayst thou fall
> A drop of water in the breaking gulf,
> And take unmingled thence that drop again, . . .
> As take from me thyself and not me too.
> How dearly would it touch thee to the quick,
> Shouldst thou but hear I were licentious. . .

That for her husband home and wife are really primary is made explicit even when he is most angry:

> Since mine own doors refuse to entertain me,
> I'll knock elsewhere, to see if they'll disdain me.

Shakespeare nowhere else deals with the daily substance of marriage, its irritations and its strong holding power (*The Merry Wives of Windsor* touches some of this, at a later stage of married life; the rest of the comedies are wooing and wedding). There *is* a deep logic, therefore, to merging, in the ending, the fulfillment of a long-stretched, romantic longing of husband and wife with the conclusion, in the household of Antipholus, of domestic peace after domestic frenzy. No doubt their peace is temporary, but for the moment all vexation is spent; and Adriana *may* have learned something from the Abbess' lecture, even though the Abbess turns out to be her mother-in-law!

How many fond fools serve mad jealousy!