

The Comedy of Errors (Summer 2005)

The Comedy of Errors is not one of Shakespeare's better reads. A good production of it is fast, whereas readers have time to ask questions. Elaborately constructed farces don't often respond well to questions—certainly not this farce, which requires characters repeatedly to forget what has brought them onstage. Ephesus must be a fairyland indeed to the boys from Syracuse, who profess to be seeking their long-lost sons or twins; yet each time father and son or twin and twin cross paths, the seeker attributes the ensuing, bewildering sequence of events to everything but the fact that he's found what he's looking for!

Of course, this isn't very fair to the play, which does the only thing it sets out to do—entertain us—with spirit and ingenuity. Still, it contains enough dead weight—including some of the most dreadful verse Shakespeare wrote—to weary even enthusiastic readers. The amount of doggerel—ranging from the awkward (“You spurn me hence, and he will spurn me hither: / If I last in this service, you must case me in leather” [II.i.84–85]) to the embarrassing (“If thou hadst been Dromio today in my place, / Thou wouldst have changed thy face for a name, or thy name for an ass” [III.i.46–47])—is enough to convince me this is Shakespeare's first play. He seems not yet to have realized the (literally) laughable superiority, for comic writing, of prose to verse. Similarly early clowns such as Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Costard in *Love's Labors Lost* take full advantage of prose's suppleness. By contrast, the comedy in *The Comedy of Errors* is almost entirely situational, dependent on shtick and stage business tacked on by actors and directors.

Still, Shakespeare provides a sturdy frame, efficiently weaving together the bits in

ways never dreamed of by Plautus, whose *Menaechmi* served as *Comedy*'s primary source. Critics tend to praise two key changes Shakespeare made to his Roman predecessor's comedy of mistaken identity: his doubling of the twins and his grafting onto the main story the tragicomic romance of Egeon.

Egeon and family

Even without his tragedy at sea, Egeon might have earned a spot in the *dramatis personae*. If two sets of twins produce twice the confusion, imagine the chaos from adding to the mix their father/master. Surely Shakespeare could have milked from this scenario every conceivable laugh. Instead, the play opens with the Duke of Ephesus threatening to execute Egeon, a Syracusan merchant, for violating the ban on traffic between their feuding cities.

Shakespeare's writing is never without its ironies—not even in a matter so apparently straightforward as the exposition. Egeon is no stoic, nor is he content simply to summarize for the Duke (and audience) the play's backstory. “A heavier task could not have been imposed / Than I to speak my griefs unspeakable,” he begins [I.i.31–32] . . . then speaks the longest speech in the play—104 lines if one ignores the Duke's incidental interjections. As Egeon reminisces, he reveals details that strangely color his portrait of himself as devastated patriarch. Many years ago, Egeon allowed business to carry him away from his pregnant wife, Emilia, who finally “made provision” and tracked him down in a foreign land [I.i.41–48]. There, Emilia gave birth to twin sons, “the one so like the other / As could not be distinguished but by names” [I.i.51–52]. (Naturally the twins were given the same name!) Emilia then wished to return home. “Unwilling I agreed,” he tells the Duke [I.i.60], then admits to something more puzzling:

A league from Epidamnum had we sailed
 Before the always wind-obeying deep
 Gave any tragic instance of our harm.
 But longer did we not retain much hope;
 For what obscured light the heavens did grant
 Did but convey unto our fearful minds
 A doubtful warrant of immediate death;
 Which, though myself would gladly have embraced,
 Yet the incessant weepings of my wife,
 Weeping before for what she saw must come,
 And piteous plainings of the pretty babes,
 That mourned for fashion, ignorant what to fear,
 Forced me to seek delays for them and me.

[I.i.62-74]

This is not the only time Egeon seems to long for death; an old man who has suffered more than his share of misery, he has abandoned hope that Fortune's wheel shall turn back in his favor. Yet here he claims he "would gladly have embraced" death *even before* he lost his wife and children. Let me be clear: I do not wish to burden anyone in this play with psychology; *The Comedy of Errors* is not improved by speculating about a barely suppressed death wish. Yet even at the climax, when everyone at last is reunited, Egeon shows no apparent signs of joy. In this respect he most resembles his sons. Emilia, now an Abbess in Ephesus, has been separated from her family for 33 years [V.i.403–405],¹ and she likens their reunion to the nativity of Christ [V.i.409]: a miraculous rebirth. Meanwhile, Egeon and the two Antipholuses speak barely a word, leaving us to wonder how long it shall be before the sea again parts the Syracusan and Ephesian branches of the family tree.

Only the Dromios—neither of whom will have a say in whether their respective masters keep in touch—seem pleased at the prospect of brotherhood:

¹ Emilia's conception of time seems to differ from her husband's. In several statements, Egeon suggests it has been at most 25 years since the shipwreck [I.i.124–139 & V.i.321–322].

Dromio S.: There is a fat friend at your master's house,
 That kitchened me for you today at dinner;
 She now shall be my sister, not my wife.
Dromio E.: Methinks you are my glass, and not my brother.
 I see by you I am a sweet-faced youth.
 Will you walk in to see their gossiping?
Dromio S.: Not I, sir; you are my elder.
Dromio E.: That's a question; how shall we try it?
Dromio S.: We'll draw cuts for the senior; till then lead thou first.
Dromio E.: Nay, then, thus:
 We came into the world like brother and brother;
 And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another.
 [V.i.417–428]

Their affection is a charming contrast to the coldness of their social betters. (Even Emilia addresses her children only glancingly.) If we may tease one serious theme from *The Comedy of Errors*, perhaps it is that at the dawn of his career Shakespeare already seemed ambivalent toward family life and skeptical of its pleasures. In later plays, culminating in the great tragedies, he would push these emotions past their limit. With regard to *Comedy*, it is enough to suggest that for men in the public sphere, a wife and children can be encumbering.

Can we read in this dramatic anxiety a corresponding anxiety in the young dramatist, struggling to balance the responsibilities of a husband and father with the opportunities of London? Let us remember this question as we turn to the play's two main female characters:

Adriana and Luciana

Adriana, wife of the Ephesian Antipholus, and her sister, Luciana, establish in their first lines the dichotomies of husband and wife, of public sphere and private:

Adriana: Neither my husband nor the slave returned,
 That in such haste I sent to seek his master?
 Sure, Luciana, it is two o'clock.
Luciana: Perhaps some merchant hath invited him,

And from the mart he's somewhere gone to dinner.
 Good sister, let us dine and never fret.
 A man is master of his liberty:
 Time is their master, and when they see time,
 They'll go or come; if so, be patient, sister.
Adriana: Why should their liberty than ours be more?
Luciana: Because their business still lies out o' door.
Adriana: Look, when I serve him so, he takes it ill.
Luciana: O, know he is the bridle of your will.
Adriana: There's none but asses will be bridled so.
Luciana: Why, headstrong liberty is lashed with woe.

[II.i.1–15]

To modern ears, Adriana is the voice of reason; to most of the play's characters, and chiefly her husband, she is a jealous nag. "My wife is shrewish when I keep not hours," Antipholus of Ephesus complains [III.i.2]; according to Adriana, he keeps but few:

It was the copy of our conference.
 In bed, he slept not for my urging it;
 At board, he fed not for my urging it;
 Alone, it was the subject of my theme;
 In company I often glanced it.
 Still did I tell him it was vile and bad.

[V.i.62–67]

Adriana says this to the Abbess (without realizing she is venting to her mother-in-law). The Abbess's reply is one of the strangest in the play, as *The Comedy of Errors* morphs into an Elizabethan marriage tract:

The venom clamors of a jealous woman
 Poisons more deadly than a mad dog's tooth.
 It seems his sleeps were hindered by thy railing,
 And thereof comes it that his head is light.
 Thou say'st his meat was sauced with thy upbraidings;
 Unquiet meals make ill digestions;
 Thereof the raging fire of fever bred.
 And what's a fever but a fit of madness?
 Thou sayest his sports were hindered by thy brawls.
 Sweet recreation barred, what doth ensue
 But moody and dull melancholy,

Kinsman to grim and comfortless despair,
 And at her heels a huge infectious troop
 Of pale distemperatures and foes to life?
 In food, in sport, and life-preserving rest
 To be disturbed, would mad or man or beast.
 The consequence is, then, thy jealous fits
 Hath scared thy husband from the use of wits.

[V.i.69–86]

Both Adriana and her husband are obsessed with the possibility that the other might be unfaithful. Adriana’s suspicions are seemingly confirmed when Antipholus (of Syracuse) begins to woo Luciana, yet even before this turn Adriana is sensitive to perceived slanders. “Why, mistress, sure my master is horn-mad,” announces Dromio of Ephesus, playing on the standard equation of horns with cuckoldry, and her reply (“Horn-mad, thou villain!” [II.i.57–58]) is more indignant than one might expect—what Shakespearean clown misses the cue for a cuckold joke?

Meanwhile, Luciana—who has undoubtedly witnessed some rows at her sister’s home—asserts that “troubles of the marriage bed” keep her unattached [II.i.27]. Her protests against the unwanted advances of the Syracusan Antipholus (whom she believes is her brother-in-law) are hardly endorsements of married life:

If you did wed my sister for her wealth,
 Then for her wealth’s sake use her with more kindness:
 Or if you like elsewhere, do it by stealth;
 Muffle your false love with some show of blindness:
 Let not my sister read it in your eye;
 Be not thy tongue thy own shame’s orator;
 Look sweet, speak fair, become disloyalty;
 Bear a fair presence, though your heart be tainted;
 Teach sin the carriage of a holy saint;
 Be secret-false: what need she be acquainted?

[III.ii.5–15]

When at last the confusion is resolved, Antipholus of Syracuse again proposes marriage [V.i.377–379]. Luciana remains silent, anticipating Isabella’s non-response to Duke

Vincentio's proposal in the notoriously unromantic *Measure for Measure*.

As for Emilia, what motivates her lecture—delivered to a woman she has never before met—on the perils of shrewishness? I think we may fairly assume Emilia has not studied many couples, happy or otherwise, during her decades in the abbey. Might her present advice be founded on her past experience as a jealous wife? Might we discern in her mature rejection of jealousy the seeds of young Egeon's desire to leave home? The questions multiply in a play without answers.

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However it is with Emilia, Egeon, and their children, Shakespeare is rarely more ambivalent than when he pursues the themes (not always related) of love and marriage. His romantic comedies adhere faithfully to structural conventions, each culminating in a march to the altar, yet his tone seems increasingly frustrated by the genre's inability to reconcile the requisite happy ending with the realities of married life. *The Comedy of Errors* may be “only” a farce—it may well be Shakespeare's first play—yet it lays the foundation upon which Shakespeare shall build monument after cracked monument to love.

Works Cited

- Shakespeare, William. *The Comedy of Errors*. Ed. Frances E. Dolan. New York: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.