

# The Comedy of Errors

Critical Essays



Edited by Robert S. Miola

*THE COMEDY OF  
ERRORS*



Figure 1. (Frontispiece). *The street before the Priory (5.1)*. From *The Boydell Gallery (London: Bickers and Son, 1874)*, painted by J.F. Rigaud, engraved by C.G. Playter. Used with the permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

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*ERRORS*  
CRITICAL ESSAYS

EDITED BY  
ROBERT S. MIOLA

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
New York London

First paperback edition published in 2001 by  
Routledge  
29 West 35th Street  
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by  
Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane  
London EC4P 4EE

This edition published 2012 by Routledge

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
711 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10017

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
2 Park Square, Milton Park  
Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.*

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Previously published in hardback as vol. 1897 in the Garland Reference Library of the Humanities.

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

The comedy of errors : critical essays / edited by Robert S. Miola.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8153-1997-5 (alk. paper)

ISBN 0-8153-3889-9 (pbk.)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. Comedy of errors. 2. Comedy.

I. Miola, Robert S. II. Series: Garland reference library of the humanities; vol. 1897. III. Series: Garland reference library of the humanities. Shakespeare criticism ; v. 18.

PR2804.C66 1997

822.3'3-dc21

97-11299

CIP

For Steve

*mi germane, gemine frater*

—Plautus (*Menaechmi*, 1125)

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The continuing goal of the Garland Shakespeare Criticism series is to provide the most influential historical criticism, the most significant contemporary interpretations, and reviews of the most influential productions. Each volume in the series, devoted to a Shakespearean play or poem (e.g., the sonnets, *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*), includes the most essential criticism and reviews of Shakespeare's work from the seventeenth century to the present. The series thus provides, through individual volumes, a representative gathering of critical opinion of how a play or poem has been interpreted over the centuries.

A major feature of each volume in the series is the editor's introduction. Each volume editor provides a substantial essay identifying the main critical issues and problems the play (or poem) has raised, charting the critical trends in looking at the work over the centuries, and assessing the critical discourses that have linked the play or poem to various ideological concerns. In addition to examining the critical commentary in light of important historical and theatrical events, each introduction functions as a discursive bibliographic essay that cites and evaluates significant critical works—essays, journal articles, dissertations, books, theatre documents—and gives readers a guide to the research on a particular play or poem.

After the introduction, each volume is organized chronologically, by date of publication of selections, into two sections: critical essays and theatre reviews/documents. The first section includes previously published journal articles and book chapters as well as original essays written for the collection. In selecting essays, editors have chosen works that are representative of a given age and critical approach. Striving for accurate historical representation, editors include earlier as well as contemporary criticism. Their goal is to include the widest possible range of critical approaches to the

play or poem, demonstrating the multiplicity and complexity of critical response. In most instances, essays have been reprinted in their entirety, not butchered into snippets. The editors have also commissioned original essays (sometimes as many as five to ten) by leading Shakespearean scholars, thus offering the most contemporary, theoretically attentive analyses. Reflecting some recent critical approaches in Shakespearean studies, these new essays approach the play or poem from many perspectives, including feminist, Marxist, new historical, semiotic, mythic, performance/staging, cultural, and/or a combination of these and other methodologies. Some volumes in the series even include bibliographic analyses that have significant implications for criticism.

The second section of each volume in the series is devoted to the play in performance and, again, is organized chronologically by publication date, beginning with some of the earliest and most significant productions and proceeding to the most recent. This section, which ultimately provides a theatre history of the play, should not be regarded as different from or rigidly isolated from the critical essays in the first section. Shakespearean criticism has often been informed by or has significantly influenced productions. Shakespearean criticism over the last twenty years or so has usefully been labeled the "Age of Performance." Readers will find information in this section on major foreign productions of Shakespeare's plays as well as landmark productions in English. Consisting of more than reviews of specific productions, this section also contains a variety of theatre documents, including interpretations written for the particular volume by notable directors whose comments might be titled "The Director's Choice," histories of seminal productions (e.g., Peter Brook's *Titus Andronicus* in 1955), and even interviews with directors and/or actors. Editors have also included photographs from productions around the world to help readers see and further appreciate the way a Shakespearean play has taken shape in the theatre.

Each volume in the Garland Shakespeare Criticism series strives to give readers a balanced, representative collection of

the best that has been thought and said about a Shakespearean text. In essence, each volume supplies a careful survey of essential materials in the history of criticism for a Shakespearean text. In offering readers complete, fulfilling, and in some instances very hard to locate materials, volume editors have made conveniently accessible the literary and theatrical criticism of Shakespeare's greatest legacy, his work.

Philip C. Kolin  
University of Mississippi

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Philip C. Kolin for offering me the opportunity to edit this volume, and to Phyllis Korper, Senior Editor at Garland, for assistance throughout; to Yoshiko Kawachi and Gunnar Sorelius, who located items for me in Tokyo and Stockholm respectively; to the journals, presses, newspapers, libraries, photographers, directors, actors, and scholars who granted permission to reprint.

Loyola College has been a loyal benefactor, supplying various kinds of support. The Dean and Humanities Center gave material aid; the English Department secretary, Genevieve Rafferty, researched the highways and byways of various copyrights and ordered the jumble of correspondence with skill and efficiency; Marion Wielgosz put her expertise to the daunting task of providing camera-ready copy; the students kept fresh my encounters with the play, as did the Country Drama players.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to the authors represented here, who have greatly enriched our understanding of *The Comedy of Errors*. Some replied to queries and read proofs; some answered, with generosity and learning, my invitation to write on a specific topic: Peter Milward, S.J., Brennan O'Donnell, Günter Walch, Laurie Maguire, and David Bevington. These last two also favored me with detailed and acute commentary on my critical history review. Other friends in the scholarly world offered timely information, encouragement, or conversation: Gail Paster, Charles Whitworth, Standish Henning, Michael Magoulias, George Walton Williams, and Barbara Freedman.

My children—Rose, Rachel, and especially the twins, Daniel and Christine—taught me to appreciate this play of familial confusion, sorrow, and joy. They well continued my instruction in these mysteries, already begun, of course, by my own parents and fraternal twin, Steve, to whom I dedicate this book: *ego illum scio quam cordi sit carus meo*.

R.S.M.

I THE CRITICAL HISTORY OF  
*THE COMEDY OF ERRORS*

# The Play and the Critics

Robert S. Miola

## 1. PROLOGUE

I can't understand who planned all of this overnight fame,  
It's a game, it's a game, it's a shame but it must be a game!  
Every step that I take, every move that I make,  
Every place that I've been, every sight that I've seen,  
I've already been there.  
Do I know me?

Pleasantly bewildered, Roger Rees's Antipholus of Syracuse sings and dances the above verse in Trevor Nunn's sprightly musical adaptation (1976). Unlike him, early critics and audiences easily identify the original planner of the game—Plautus, whose *Menaechmi* furnishes Shakespeare with the main confusion of identical twins and the outlines of plot. Witness the first recorded notice, an account of a performance at Gray's Inn in 1594: "a Comedy of Errors (like to Plautus his *Menechmus*) was played by the players" (*Gesta Grayorum* pub. 1688; 1914, 22). Francis Meres does not note the source directly in *Palladis Tamia* (1598), that commonplace book lifted from Erasmus, Ravisius Textor, and many others, but he cites *Errors* among other works by Shakespeare to praise him for being "accounted the best for comedy" among the English, as Plautus was "among the Latins" (ed. Munro, 1: 46). Meres then recalls the tag line about the Muses speaking with Plautus's tongue if they would speak Latin, and declares that they would "speak with Shakespeare's fine filed phrase, if they would speak English." For him, clearly, *Errors* testifies to Shakespeare's Plautine abilities in comic playmaking and rhetoric.

Recording miscellaneous observations, aphorisms, and recollections, John Manningham, a law student in the Middle

Temple, again makes the Plautine association while watching a performance of *Twelfth Night* (2 February 1602), “much like the *Comedy of Errors*, or *Menechmi* in Plautus but most like and near to that in Italian called *Inganni*” (ed. Munro, 1: 98). In passing, Manningham here anticipates two important critical developments: the treatment of *Errors* as a seminal Shakespearean comedy, the tracing of Italian backgrounds and analogues. His casual reference to the play may signal its popularity; certainly the phrase, “comedy of errors,” quickly becomes a common expression, appearing with other reminiscences of the play in the works of Dekker (3 times), Middleton, Burton, and other seventeenth-century writers (ed. Munro, 1: 46, 66, 84, 107, 109, 141, 181, 262, 282, 499; 2: 35, 230). Gerard Langbaine (1691, 455), England’s first theater-historian, also identifies the source and comments on the play’s superiority to William Warner’s contemporary English translation: “This play is founded on Plautus his *Menaechmi*: and if it be not a just translation, ’tis at least a paraphrase: and I think far beyond the translation, called *Menechmus*, which was printed 4o. Lond. 1595.”

## 2. SMALL LATIN?

The nature of Shakespeare’s debt to Plautus has always occupied editors and critics of *The Comedy of Errors*. Early on, commentators debate Shakespeare’s ability to read Latin. Charles Gildon (1710, 300), for example, author of the first extended critical commentary on all of the works of Shakespeare, argues that Shakespeare read Plautus in Latin:

This comedy is an undeniable proof that Shakespeare was not so ignorant of the Latin tongue as some would fain make him.... Shakespeare did understand Latin enough to read him, and knew so much of him as to be able to form a design out of that of the Roman poet; and which he has improved very much in my opinion.

Many disagree. John Dennis declares that he could “never believe” Shakespeare capable of reading Plautus “without pain and difficulty” and “vehemently” suspects that *Errors* derives

from a lost translation or manuscript, or the assistance of a "stranger" or "some learned friend" (1712, 2: 13–14). Charlotte Lennox (1753–4, 2: 219, 239) pronounces Shakespeare "wholly unacquainted with the Latin tongue" and indebted to Warner's translation, opining dourly that "each error is produced by an absurdity." Dr. Johnson thinks it more than coincidence that Shakespeare chose to copy the only play of Plautus then in English (1765, 1: C2<sup>v</sup>–C3). So too Richard Farmer (1767), that scornful Cambridge don who highhandedly confounds proponents of Shakespeare's learning by demonstrating his general reliance on translations and intermediaries.

The relation between Warner's translation and Shakespeare's play has always been a matter for controversy. Early on, error about the date of the translation confuses the discussion; Theobald, Gildon, and others think it 1515 instead of 1595, and therefore available to Shakespeare during the composition of *Errors*, usually dated in the early 1590s. Knowledge of the correct date weakens the case for influence. The purported parallels between the translation and play, in any case, have always been inconclusive, both the verbal (e.g., the translation of *spinter*, "bracelet," as "chain" in both texts) and the thematic (e.g., a general emphasis on Fortune). Shakespeare may or may not have seen the translation or its manuscript; the influence, if any there be, could have gone either way; there is simply no proof that Shakespeare used Warner for this play.

Skepticism about Shakespeare's Latin leads some to deny his authorship and to depreciate the play. Joseph Ritson and George Steevens think *Errors* the work of some inferior playwright who had enough Latin to read Plautus in the original (ed. Vickers, 6: 47). Steevens (ed. 1773, 2: 221) delivers this summary verdict, often reprinted:

In this play we find more intricacy of plot than distinction of character; and our attention is less forcibly engaged, because we can guess in great measure how it will conclude. Yet the poet seems unwilling to part with his subject, even in this last and unnecessary scene, where the same mistakes are continued, till they have lost the power of affording any entertainment at all.

Judgment about Shakespeare's Latinity affects critical appraisal of the play, extending here to depreciation of the ending, generally singled out for praise by later generations.

At stake in this controversy over *Errors* are cherished conceptions about Shakespeare and the nature of art, conceptions central to the larger "small Latin" debate of the eighteenth century. On the one side, advocates of Shakespeare's learning point to his knowledge of Latin in general and of *Menaechmi* in particular to show how Nature and Art conjoined to produce greatness. On the other, the powerful myth of Shakespeare as unlearned genius contradicts the very notion of a lettered bard; this myth begins with Ben Jonson's famous description of Shakespeare's "small Latin and less Greek," and echoes in Leonard Digges' commendatory verses celebrating a poet wholly innocent of art (1640; ed. Vickers, 1: 27), in John Milton's praise of "Fancy's child," warbling "his native wood-notes wild" (*L'Allegro*, 133-4), in John Dryden's revealing assertion, "had he had more learning, perhaps he might have been less a poet" (1696, ed. Vickers, 1: 13).

Responding to Dennis, Farmer, and other skeptics of Shakespeare's learning, T.W. Baldwin (1944) demonstrates the centrality of Latin training to the Elizabethan grammar-school curriculum and to Shakespeare's education. Baldwin (1947, 605-718) goes on to examine the influence of *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo* on *Errors*, furnishing minute analysis of words, ideas, and scenes. He observes also the presence of other sources including Lambinus' commentary on Plautus (for Shakespeare's conception of "errors" as belief in what is not and failure to believe what is) and the *Aeneid* (for the words and wanderings of Egeon). Baldwin discerns in *Errors* the principles of five-act construction derived from Renaissance commentaries on Terence. Arguing for Shakespeare's originality and sole authorship, Baldwin in 1965 publishes an exhaustive account of sources and influences, political allusions, dramatic and social contexts (including exorcism), the names and geography of the play, the Apollonian frame from Gower, the echoes of phrases from other plays. The conclusion is reprinted below.

Baldwin's monumental labors end a certain phase of the "small Latin" debate by demonstrating that Shakespeare's

grammar-school training equipped him to read Latin. Baldwin also demonstrates how diverse texts coalesced in Shakespeare's imagination to form new creations in *Errors*. But many rightly balk at his positivistic, relentlessly verbal approach, Foakes (ed. 1962, xxviii), for example, criticizes him as "determined to find a source for everything in Shakespeare." At times the detailed and minute demonstrations veer into pedantry or self-parody, as, for example, when the mere mention of Menaphon (5.1.369) sets off a run to Marlowe's *1 Tamburlaine*, where the name appears, to Cooper, Stephanus, and Ovid, where it does not, to Greene's *Menaphon*, conjoined, in due course, by Plautus' *Menaechmi*, Gascoigne's *Supposes*, and the New Testament (1947, 670ff.). Such an approach, founded largely on verbal echo, tends finally to undermine itself, as the sheer multiplicity of sources overwhelms the significance of the individual originating instance.

After Baldwin, critics do not concern themselves much with Shakespeare's ability in Latin but rather with the use he makes of sources, here, his transformation of Plautus and other texts. Erma Gill (1925, 1930) previously tried this approach in two detailed analyses of *Errors* and *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo*—one treating character, the other plot. Scattered throughout her laborious enumeration of comparisons and contrasts is notice of some interesting transferences: Luciana takes over the old man's championing of the husband's liberty; she and Adriana, his chiding of the wife; Antipholus of Syracuse expresses the wonder of the citizen twin at the strange happenings; Antipholus of Ephesus expresses the travelling twin's violence when accused of madness; The Duke plays the slave's role in solving the puzzle. Most modern editions and discussions, including the standard treatments of Bullough (1957) and Muir (1978), likewise focus on the changes: the switch in setting from Epidamnus to Ephesus, the doubling of the twins, the emphasis on the traveller not the citizen, the expansion of the wife into the complex Adriana, the invention of Luciana, Pinch, and others, the elimination of the parasite and the wife's father, the addition of the Egeon-Emilia frame, the lyrical poetry and love plot, the deepening of seriousness in parts, the Christian overtones.

Aside from concentrating on Shakespeare's use of sources, our century reformulates the "small Latin" debate in another

way: Plautus is now defined as tradition as well as text. This means that critics view Plautus (together with Terence) generally as a source of New Comedic plots, plot construction (prologue, epitasis [high point of tension], anagnorisis, [discovery or recognition]), stock character types (the tricky slave, doting old man, helpless adolescent, wily courtesan), rhetorical and theatrical conventions. It means also that critics attend to Renaissance understanding of Plautus, as evidenced by commentaries in editions, performances, translations, and adaptations, including especially those in Italy and France.

A pioneer of this approach, Cornelia Coulter (1920), taking as her subject "the Plautine tradition" in Shakespeare, notes in *Errors* Shakespeare's flexible adaptation of the standard classical setting (the street with adjoining house doors), his transformation of the prologue into Egeon's speech, his use of the *seruus currens*, or running servant, and the familiar New Comedic restoration of the lost son or daughter, as well as Italian analogues. In a learned study that rewards rereading, Madeleine Doran (1954, 152, 171ff.) suggests the possible influence of Plautine verse variation "on the motives of variation from blank verse to riming couplets or to stanza patterns, and from the pentameter line to different meters" in Shakespeare. Using Jonson's *The Case Is Altered*, illustrations in early editions of Terence, De Nores' *Poetica* (1588), and Italian comedy, she also argues that Renaissance readers discerned romance elements in New Comedy, and, therefore, that the marvelous recognition and reunion of Egeon, Emilia, and the family is essentially Plautine. Northrop Frye (1965, 87ff.) remarks the contrast with the usual New Comedic structure, in that the central theme is reunion not of the twins but of their father and mother; he also notes the relevance of the ass and metamorphic motifs of the play, which limn the descent into illusion and emergence into recognition (106–7). Frye (175) perceives the cook as a descendant of the cook in Greek comedy, and (1965, 57) the opening speech as a "sophisticated, if sympathetic, treatment of a structural cliché," the expository prologue.

Shifts in understanding of Shakespeare's relation to Plautus have made for more positive general assessments of *Errors* itself. Instead of classifying the play as the work of an inferior

playwright, a bookish exercise, or an apprentice piece, critics now see it as a sophisticated imitation. Leo Salinger (1974, 324) thinks that Shakespeare in this play is the first to realize “fully the potentialities of adapting Plautus for the sake of rapid and coherent action” and for “a continuous dramatic image of changing aspects of personality and the ironies of Fortune.” *Errors* is, then, “no less a landmark” than *Henry VI* or *Love’s Labor’s Lost*. Joel B. Altman (1978, 165–74) argues that *Errors* differs from other Latinate plays like *Supposes* and *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* in that it contains no motivating intrigue. Shakespeare here turns the Plautine play into an exercise in defining the self. Not mere mechanical mistakes, the errors in *Errors* reveal the essential egotism of the characters and take on the meaning of moral shortcomings: each twin can’t recognize the other’s traces; the wife preaches mutuality but shows jealousy; the husband lightly substitutes courtesan for wife; the spinster lectures on marriage.

An ambitious attempt at reevaluation appears in Wolfgang Riehle’s book-length study of the play, *Shakespeare, Plautus and the Humanist Tradition* (1990). Riehle helpfully reconstructs the Elizabethan reception of Plautus before attempting a comprehensive discussion of characterization, structure, game-playing, dramatic language, and meter. He contributes good insights throughout, on modern misreadings of Plautus, e.g., on classical word play in Shakespeare, on “error” as possibly meaning “a deficiency in a character’s behaviour” (103), on the sharing of lines by several characters in Plautus and Shakespeare (159ff.). Riehle claims *Amphitruo* as a major underappreciated source, attacks Baldwin’s analysis of five-act structure, considers context and practical staging effects, and concludes with praise of the play as a “most accomplished achievement” and a document of Shakespeare’s “inexhaustible richness” (209, 211). But the book is thesis-ridden in its insistence on Plautus against Terence (it is often not necessary or possible to choose between the two), in its hostility toward non-Plautine sources—classical, medieval, native, and Christian—and in its reliance on generic or thematic generalization (e.g., the chapter on Lucianic traditions).

Reviewing Plautus and Terence in light of their Greek antecedents and Renaissance reception, Robert S. Miola likewise

sees *Errors* as a sophisticated recension of classical and Italian elements. Pinch, for example, is a Plautine *senex* and *medicus*, as well as schoolmaster, conjurer, and Italian *pedante*. The lock-out of *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo* gets replayed in Adriana's lock-out from the Priory, as the Plautine comedy of doors becomes a Shakespearean "comedy of thresholds, of entranceways into new understandings and acceptances" (1994, 38).

### 3. NON-PLAUTINE ORIGINS

Recognition of non-Plautine sources spurs more debate on the form, meaning, and achievement of *Errors*.

#### a) The Bible

Since an early editor, Charles Knight (ed. 1842, 1: 161), first glossed Ephesus with reference to Saint Paul, the Bible—particularly the epistle to the Ephesians and Acts—has gained attention as a source or context of the play. Calling Dromio of Syracuse "the principal exponent of Scripture," Richmond Noble (1935, 106–9) furnishes a list of references, including the portrait of an occult Ephesus in Acts 19, and several passages from the Anglican liturgy on matrimony. T.W. Baldwin (1947, 675ff.) notes Pauline presences: the transformed temple of Diana, the portrait of a magical Ephesus, the derivation of Shakespearean geography from Paul's travels as represented by a map illustrating Acts. Naseeb Shaheen (1993, 7–9, 49ff.) lists parallel passages, unpersuasively disputing the assertion that the Ephesian setting and exorcism originally derive from Acts, claiming that the first comes from other sources, the second from the Gospels; he admits, however, that Acts contributes to the play's concern with sorcery and witchcraft, and so, ultimately, makes a distinction without much of a difference. The other echoes, principally from the Geneva and Bishops' Bibles and the Prayer Book, appear to be proverbial or matters of common parlance rather than specific references. We are left with the probable, if intermediated, presence of Genesis and the Pauline materials in the play.

Recognition of Biblical materials as a source of *Errors* complicates response to the play and sometimes encourages moral or explicitly Christian readings. Noting echoes of *Psalm* 8

and *Ephesians* 5 in Adriana's speeches, Peter Milward (1973) argues that Scriptural echoes illuminate a prominent theme—the ideal relations between husband and wife. James L. Sanderson (1975) reviews Paul's exhortation to mercy and forgiveness, patristic traditions, and reformist writings to delineate the theme of patience in *Errors*, which, he argues, joins both plots and unifies the play. R. Chris Hassel (1979, 37ff.) turns attention to the liturgical year, specifically to the dramatic celebrations and Scriptural readings for Holy Innocents' Day; he notes their emphasis on errors and forgiveness, on the dispersal and reunion of families. Patricia Parker (1983) observes an allusion to Jacob and Esau in Egeon's opening speech, Paul's notice in *Ephesians* of the cross as reconciler between Gentiles and Jews, and other scattered Biblical allusions in the final acts. These appropriately gloss the play's movement from hostile rivalry to reconciliation and to its "New Testamental recognition scene" (327).

Notice of Biblical echoes has produced for these critics a comedy with serious thematic content. Others have noted Biblical influence on form as well. Evoking *Genesis*, the Pauline material, and *Revelations*, Glyn Austen (1987) reads the play as a redemptive comedy which shows the workings of grace, from the fall in the first scene, to the redemption in the last. Less allegorically and more persuasively, Arthur F. Kinney (1988), relates the Biblical background to the staging on Holy Innocents' day (twice), to medieval dramatic traditions, Elizabethan homilies, and the church year: all move the play from a mechanical farce "toward a sense of comedy such as that conceived by Dante in his great *Commedia* as providential confusion when wandering and bafflement invite man to contemplate wonder and grace—and achieve, through a kind of rebirth, a baptizing or godparenting" (1988, 33). The essay well argues that this varied background exploits the potential of dramatic form and genre; it is reprinted here.

The moral readings of this century, we should note, variously belong to a long and venerable tradition that flourished in the late eighteenth century. Unlike Milward, Sanderson, or Kinney, who ground themselves in Biblical echo and allusion and exhibit literary sophistication, earlier readers simply interpret character and plot according to broad moral categories of virtue and vice.

Elizabeth Griffith (1775, 141–6), for example, quotes approvingly Luciana’s speech on man’s pre-eminence; moreover, she continues, Balthazar’s plea for Antipholus’ forbearance illustrates that “a respect to decency, and the opinion of the world, is an excellent bulwark to our virtues”; another excellent document for wives is the “venom clamours of a jealous woman” speech. Francis Gentleman, well representative of eighteenth-century attitudes, allows that the play does not very obviously illustrate a moral, but he deduces one from it anyway:

that Providence can happily regulate the most perplexed and unpromising circumstances, and change a temporary apparent evil, into a real and lasting good. Patience and submission are herein justly and properly inculcated. (Bell’s edn., 1773–4, 8: 81)

The emphasis on patience here directly anticipates Sanderson’s thorough explication of this theme in the play.

In his popular adaptation, *The Twins* (1762), Thomas Hull succinctly points another moral and adorns the tale:

Joys past the reach of hope!—our lesson this,  
That misery past endears our present bliss;  
Wherein we read with wonder and delight,  
This sacred truth, “Whatever is is right.” (1793, 51)

It is hard for moderns to imagine purposes that such vapid didacticism could legitimately serve; but this may be our myopia, as the tradition of such reading is widely pervasive for this and for other comedies where the apologia always seem out of tune with boisterous laughs and knockabout action. W. Woods’ adaptation, *The Twins; or, Which Is Which* (1780), likewise has Emilia conclude the play by suggesting that the story might be “worth a serious hearing”:

’Twill prove, the virtuous never should despair;  
For oft the troubles, which we call amiss,  
Serve to improve the taste of future bliss.

The time for that “serious hearing” seems to have arrived. Recent studies, grounding themselves in Scripture, discern both moral and spiritual aspects to the comedy. But more on this topic remains to be done. A detailed and scholarly examination of Pauline materials, cognizant of the original Greek, early modern translations, exegetic and homiletic traditions, and reformist controversies, is yet a desideratum, especially in view of easy and prevailing assumptions regarding “Catholic” and “Protestant” theologies and views on marriage. One caveat should be entered however: serious hearings ever run the risk of overreading and of wandering far from the theatrical experience of this bright and lively play.

## b) Italian and English Drama

John Manningham’s reference to “Inganni,” surely to the popular *Gl’ingannati* of the Sieneese Accademia degli Intronati, performed in 1531 and printed in 1537, turns out to be prophetic. Another origin for *Errors*, broadly understood as subtext rather than specific generator, is Italian drama, learned and popular. The search for specific filiations having proven fruitless, critics now recognize family resemblances between *Errors* and Italian drama, a shared European vocabulary of scene, character, and action. Kathleen M. Lea (1934, 1: 199) notes that Shakespeare’s play features the mixing of genres characteristic of the *commedia dell’arte*, and that *L’hospite amoroise*, for example, has just the same display of farce against a tragi-comic background; she observes that a summary of the play’s action bears remarkable resemblances to the scenari in Locatelli’s miscellany, both featuring the amplification of action in a doubles play by “denials, beatings, jeerings, defiances, jealousies and apologies” (2: 438), and the typical conclusion in a family reunion. She also notes resemblances to stock Italian episodes and characters: the Dromios, e.g., to the servants, Adriana to the suspicious *prima donna*, Luciana to the second lady. Richard Hosley (1966), surveying Elizabethan productions and adaptations of Plautus and Terence, notes in passing the Italian intermediaries, specifically the courtesan and the *pedante*. Leo Salingar (1974, 208) calls attention to Italian traditions in Shakespearean comedy: the Italian principle of the double plot, the *zanni* of the *commedia*

*dell'arte*, the “bustle of citizen characters and criss-crossing of the action”; the result is a comedy “as much Italian as Roman in spirit.” Moving the study of sources into the broader, more capacious realms of intertextuality, Louise George Clubb (1989) establishes Cinquecento theater as a significant context for Elizabethan drama; in an essay reprinted below, she compares *Errors* to the *commedia grave*—plays by Bernardino Pino, Girolamo Bargagli, Giambattista Della Porta, and others, featuring elements of pathos and tragedy, domestic situations with wives, and complicated patterns of errors leading to marvelous reunions.

Contemporary English drama provides another context for the shaping of *Errors*. Early commentators, anachronistically depreciating the play in light of Shakespeare’s later development, tend to ignore such drama or dismiss it. They invoke the barbarity of the age and stage to explain perceived flaws in this early neoclassical comedy, just as they do for its companion, that early neoclassical tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*.

Attention to theatrical and dramatic environment, however, reveals other shaping influences on the play. Gascoigne’s *Supposes*, from Ariosto’s *I suppositi* and acted at Gray’s Inn, 1566, later at Oxford and Cambridge and published in 1575, is a source for *Shrew* that might have been in Shakespeare’s mind during the composition of *Errors* (Dorsch, ed. 1988, 9). The plot turns on a mistaken series of errors in identification, or “supposes.” Shakespeare might well have looked to playwrights like Robert Greene, who exhibits some skill in the art of connecting two intrigues, juxtaposes comic and more serious materials, and also tries the shipwreck device. Or to John Lyly, who presents plots based on improbability, multiple story lines, a character cataloguing his beloved’s points, scenes of lyrical courtship, the name Dromio, the new style of wit-cracking clown exemplified in Dromio of Syracuse, and Italianate complications. In an essay written for this volume, David Bevington reexamines the theatrical context, noting Shakespeare’s indebtedness to contemporaries for the romantic plotting of the frame, anglicizing moralization, the emphasis on marriage, the conception of character as defined by social role, the rhetoric—particularly Lylyan argumentation and word play—and the fluid staging. Drawing on a wide range of Elizabethan plays and authors,

Bevington shows that Shakespeare, in modifying Plautus, responds creatively to various aspects of his immediate theatrical environment.

Bevington's work and that of the others on Italian context enable us to look forward to *Errors* instead of simply backward on it. Consequently, a new *Errors* begins to emerge. Not simply the first efforts of a classically trained neophyte, or the juvenile exercise that anticipates later, more complex Shakespearean plays, *Errors* now appears as a sophisticated mix of native and neoclassical traditions. It takes its rightful place in the vital community of European theater during a period of creative experimentation; it is culmination as well as commencement.

### c) "Apollonius of Tyre"

The Egeon-Emilia story derives from John Gower's "Apollonius of Tyre," a source for *Pericles*. Even before Paul Wislicenus (1879) first identified the source of the frame plot, readers had noted its differences from the Plautine material. The chief critical issue that has emerged, subsequently, is not the nature or extent of Shakespeare's indebtedness to Gower, but the form and function of the Apollonian material, i.e., the frame plot.

A.W. Schlegel (1846, 381), Shakespeare's chief German translator, who postulates a theory of organic as opposed to mechanical form, appreciates the blending of diverse elements in *Errors*; he praises Egeon's opening narration as "masterly" and "affecting" and admires the "greater solemnity" given to the discovery, "from the Prince presiding, and from the reunion of the long separated parents." Similarly Nathan Drake (1817, 2: 288) declares that Egeon's portrait throws "a solemn, dignified, and impressive tone of colouring over this part of the fable." John Boydell, whose collection of Shakespeare illustrations reappears throughout the nineteenth century, commissions a representation of the Priory scene that reflects contemporary appreciation for pathos in the play: bound and barechested, an anguished Egeon waits for deliverance next to a saintly abbess; two turbaned, tasselled, and mustachioed twins express amazement (Frontispiece). C.H. Herford (ed. 1899, 1: 126) judges Egeon to be too pathetic and moving for the rest of the play.

Herford's comment signals the emergence of modern

attitudes and an aesthetic based on unified form rather than on the appreciation of pathos; the new aesthetic generates more pointed analyses of the frame plot and its relation to the errors plot. Allison Gaw (1926, 628–9), for example, notes five related functions: the provision of organic exposition, the promotion of plot unity, the elevation of tone, the increase in happiness at the end, and the element of surprise. The critical imperative to discover structural and thematic unity in drama, dominant throughout this century until just recently, inspires many readings of Egeon's story as coherently relational to that of his sons. In an influential essay Gāmini Salgādo (1972) well contrasts the orderly and sequential sense of time in Egeon's opening speech with the crazy, random clockwork of Ephesian time in the play; the reunion of the family appropriately restores the natural, sequential rhythm of time, reestablishing cause and effect and individual identity. Vincent F. Petronella (1974) notes the structural pattern of separation and union; the images of binding and releasing, manifest in the language as well as in Egeon's bonds and Angelo's chain, produce a clear-sighted comedy that takes "an occasional sojourn into farce" (487). K. Tetzeli von Rosador (1984) finds unity in plot structure, in the repeated threat and evasion of danger, and in the various tightenings and loosening of tension.

Like her counterpart Lucina in the Apollonius tale, Emilia is a mother lost at sea and found at play's end as a religious figure in Ephesus. Bertrand Evans (1960) notes that *Errors* exploits to the maximum the single gap in awareness between characters and the audience—namely, the knowledge that both sets of twins are present in Ephesus. Shakespeare, however, withholds until the very end a crucial plot element, Emilia's identity; this surprise finds a parallel only in *The Winter's Tale*, again featuring the magical reappearance of a wife and mother. Others remark Emilia's association with the abbey and with Christian symbolism: she says that she has waited 33 years for the birth, not the 23 the play seems to call for, perhaps an echo of the number of years of Christ's life; she invites all to a gossips' feast at the end of the play, i.e., a christening. These lines, spoken by a nun, we imagine, in full habit, encourage those various Christianized readings we have already seen and sort well with

her function as a counsellor against nagging and jealousy. A.P. Riemer (1980, 31–3, 113–17) sees other supernatural aspects to Emilia: her role and vocabulary suggest the benevolent, magical medicine of Renaissance Platonism.

Emilia has also figured importantly in feminist revaluations of *Errors* (see below, 26–7). Marilyn French (1981, 76ff.) thinks that the play begins with the feminine as “outlaw, connected with sorcery and rebellion”; later, Luciana and the Abbess symbolize “the superhuman (divine) inlaw feminine principle,” connected with voluntary subordination of self and the renunciation of worldly and sexual power. The women, like the men, must find their proper roles. Dorothea Kehler (1991) discusses Shakespearean Emilias, thinking this one a licensed shrew and female patriarch; Emilia renounces sexual power over men and chooses 33 years of celibacy in holy orders; so doing, she assumes the authority of the patriarchal institution that shelters her and takes center stage as the restorer of family and community.

#### 4. GENRE

The Folio title of the play, *The Comedy of Errors*, unique in its use of “comedy,” would seem to settle decisively the question of genre. Contemporaries of Shakespeare, following Aristotle, define “comedy” by contrast with tragedy, as an imitation of action that arouses ridicule, performed by common and low characters. The first modern editor of Shakespeare, Nicholas Rowe (1709, xvii), reflects this understanding, praising *Errors*, along with *Wives* and *Shrew*, as “pure” comedy, i.e., comedy unmixed with tragedy. Rowe here appreciates the stageworthy jest and zest of the play; he also expresses a neoclassical preference for integrated plots that have clarity and consistency of purpose. Not coincidentally, *Errors*, along with *Wives* and *The Tempest*, often wins praise in the eighteenth century for observing the unities of time, place, and action.

The traditional reading of this play as simple or pure comedy directly opposes more recent evaluations, particularly those in the modern era which perceive in *Errors* dark and disturbing elements. G.R. Elliott (1939) writes an impressionistic, but nonetheless important, essay on the “weirdness” of the play, which he

thinks “penetrated by the comic horror” of its subject; he points to the strangeness of the events and the underlying concern with witchcraft and sorcery. Harold F. Brooks (1961, 60ff.) thinks that the lines about Ephesus seize the audience at the deep level where the ancient dread about losing the self or soul is very much alive; that metamorphosis appears here in hostile aspect also, in confusions, lock-outs, and broken feasts. Brooks also anticipates other developments in the critical history of the play: he notes the artistry in construction, romance possibilities, eclectic mix of sources, and thematic coherences. Gwyn Williams’ essay, “*The Comedy of Errors* Rescued from Tragedy” (1964), argues that the play’s concern with adultery, jealousy, violence, and loss of identity move it toward tragedy (he compares *Errors* to *Othello* and *Lear*); the presence of the Dromios, however, rescues the play and reclaims it as comedy. Sensitive to the comedic traditions and to the various textures in the play, Harry Levin (1966) deftly explores the darker potentials implicit in the loss of self; invoking *Rashomon*, he discerns in *Errors* a Brechtian sense of alienation and a distinctly modern “shudder of estrangement” (ed. 1965, xxxviii). Gail Kern Paster (1985) thinks that the play reveals the deep ambiguities of personal and civic identity and suggests the fragility of normal social life. The essays of Elliott, Brooks, and Levin are reprinted below.

Nicholas Rowe and Gwyn Williams stand for two extremes in the critical debate on the genre of *Errors*. There is a third generic possibility, one that mediates between comedy and tragedy, variously identified with each—farce. Samuel Taylor Coleridge considers *Errors* remarkable as “the only specimen of poetical farce in our language, that is intentionally such” (ed. Raysor, 1: 213). He writes that farce, like comedy, produces “strange and laughable situations”; farce differs from comedy, however, in “the license allowed, and even required” to these ends. A comedy “would scarcely allow even the two Antipholuses.... But farce dares add the two Dromios.” Coleridge’s comments, reprinted below, concur with the views of many later writers.

But is *Errors* a farce? Edward Dowden (1903, 650) considers it a farce *manqué*, explaining that Shakespeare tries his hand here at a comedy of incident, but that his imagination can “not rest

satisfied with a farce"; he adds lyrical poetry in the love episode and a romantic and pathetic framework; the play opens with grief and impending doom and closes "after a cry of true pathos." Stanley Wells (ed. 1972, 8–9) notes that the play has the characteristics of farce: "absurdities of plot, stylization of action, subordination of character to plot, and a dissociation of response in which violence evokes laughter rather than pity." But, he observes, the play also has "many humanizing episodes" which turn it into something else.

The view of the play as a farce mixed with other elements is prevalent today, *pace* Russ McDonald (1988), who spiritedly defends the play as simple farce. He criticizes those who, suspicious of this genre and eager to justify the bard, read *Errors* as a seedbed for ideas and methods that will flower later, or see in it Shakespeare "transcending" farce and addressing serious issues. McDonald believes that the play merits appreciation as a splendid achievement in an inherently limited mode:

Certain effects and values are missing from this kind of drama: there is no thorough examination of characters, no great variety of tones, no profound treatment of ideas, no deep emotional engagement. But farce gives us what other dramatic forms may lack: the production of ideas through rowdy action, the pleasures of "non-significant" wordplay, freedom from the limits of credibility, mental exercise induced by the rapid tempo of the action, unrestricted laughter—the satisfactions of various kinds of extravagance. (88)

"And yet," McDonald concedes, "the boisterous action does generate thematic issues" (88).

This concession opens the way for different understandings of farce, its nature and limits. In a series of essays (1980<sup>1</sup>, 1980<sup>2</sup>, 1991), the last of which is reprinted below, Barbara Freedman undertakes precisely this reevaluation. According to her,

farce is a type of comedy deriving laughter chiefly from the release and gratification of aggressive impulses, accomplished by the denial of the cause (through absurd

situations) and the effect (through a surrealist medium) of aggressive action upon an object, and functioning through the plot in a disguised punitive fashion. (1980<sup>2</sup>, 238)

"The key to farce," she writes (235), "is that we laugh at violence." It is committed to the discontinuous and the dysfunctional, and shares the qualities of nightmares and the uncanny.

There is also a fourth generic possibility—romance. This is the genre of the marvelous and fantastic, of long loss restored, of sorrow turned to joy, of providential rebirth. In his suggestive mythic taxonomy, Northrop Frye (1957, 166, 184-5) classifies *Errors* as a sea comedy in the company of *Twelfth Night* and the later romances, especially *Pericles* and *The Tempest*. In an essay reprinted below, Charles Whitworth expands this argument, noting the romance elements of form and matter in the play, particularly the narrated adventures of Egeon and his enacted story, the strange atmosphere of Ephesus, the water and sea imagery, the final spectacle of time going backwards and ending in a new beginning. Productions have variously and successfully staged *Errors* as romance. In Japan a translator and producer, Tetsuo Anzai, conveys in the resolution "a sense of deep wonder, almost miraculous" (below, 491); and in Stratford-upon-Avon Tim Supple's 1996 production astonishes audiences with its strange power and moving reunions (below, 34-5).

## 5. CHARACTERIZATION

Nineteenth-century reverence for characterization, understood as the depiction of figures possessing emotional depth, interiority, and a capacity for change, generates different critical readings of *Errors*. This trend begins in the late eighteenth century with the works of Maurice Morgann, Lord Kames, Thomas Whately, William Richardson, and William Jackson. Critics of *Errors* in this period distinguish between the identical twins. Charles Knight (ed. 1842, 1: 205ff.), for example, praises Shakespeare's "marvelous skill in the delineation of character." Antipholus of Syracuse is a melancholy wanderer, an enthusiast, a lover who beats his slave but is kind. Antipholus of Ephesus, a brave soldier, "decidedly inferior to his brother" in intellect and morals, shows himself to be spiteful, capable of furious passion,

and sensual in temperament. Dromio of Ephesus is precise and antithetical, a formal humorist; Dromio of Syracuse, high-spirited, voluble, impulsive. F.J. Furnivall (ed. 1877, xxv) believes the marriage here one of duty not of love; Antipholus is a brave soldier, but consorts with a courtesan; he is resourceful in confinement. His brother, capable of lyrical love, searching for his twin, "has a far higher nature" but also a violent streak; the Syracusan Dromio is better, more humorous—always merry and cool.

The character of Adriana attracts attention all through the nineteenth century. Mary Lamb (1807) notes the curing of her groundless jealousy and the "unlooked-for joy" of the reunion between Egeon and Emilia. William Hazlitt, in a work significantly titled *The Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), finds only one scene "of a Shakespearean cast" in *Errors*, "the one in which the Abbess, with admirable characteristic artifice, makes Adriana confess her own misconduct in driving her husband mad" (352). H.N. Hudson (1848, 1: 212–17) closely follows Hazlitt's appraisal; so too does Andrew Lang (1891), who expatiates on female jealousy, "too mean for tragedy, too hateful for comedy." These critics subordinate all other dramatic considerations—the creation of comedic scenes, the weaving together of multiple sources, the addition of darker and more serious overtones to a high-energy romp—to character, defined as a type of verisimilar representation, categorized as exclusively Shakespearean. The trend toward moralization that energizes the reactions of adaptors like Hull and Woods, and critics like Griffith and Gentleman, also appears here, but the interest now attaches not to the entire fable but to an individual's reformation or growth.

Not surprisingly, given such critical predispositions and the emphasis on character, nineteenth-century critics also begin to read the play autobiographically: Karl Elze (1901, 331–2), citing an earlier commentator, wonders if the birth of Shakespeare's own twins inspires *Errors*; Frank A. Marshall and Henry Irving (ed. 1888, 1: 77–8) suggest the inattentive Shakespeare and the nagging Anne Hathaway as models for Antipholus of Ephesus and Adriana. Frank Harris (1909, 168ff.) reshapes this autobiography by identifying Antipholus of Syracuse, "refined, melancholy, meditative, book-loving," with the young

Shakespeare, new come to London.

Character criticism treats fictional figures as if they are real people. So likewise its descendant, psychological criticism, which often attributes an extratextual life to characters or treats them as embodiments of human impulses and internal conflicts. The first psychological critic on *Errors*, Otto Rank, thinks that the play presents an Oedipal spectacle at the end—namely, the displaced father and the desired mother. Egeon appears old and debilitated; Adriana, however, becomes young, as though she has just given birth to her sons (Holland, 1964, 157). But this reading distorts the play beyond recognition, neglecting the dramatic fact of Egeon's reprieve from death at the end and portraying the Abbess, a celibate nun for decades, as youthful and fecund. Also perceiving an Oedipal conflict here, A. Bronson Feldman (1955) reads the play as evidence of the author's mental history: *Errors* reveals Shakespeare's attempt to avoid "melancholiac depression," to represent his own errors in matrimony (Luciana being the girl he wooed, Adriana the wife she became), and to express "anal malice" toward his mother as well as his search for her. Such fantasy tells us little about the play.

After these inauspicious beginnings, critics have proposed more plausible psychological readings. W. Thomas MacCary (1978) argues that the pursuit of a twin instead of a mate represents the pursuit of a complete and idealized self. *Errors* is thus a comedy of the pre-Oedipal period of human development, centered on the family and mother and on the person one would like to become. Later (1985) MacCary amplifies these ideas, noting the concentration on water, reflecting pre-Oedipal anxieties of separation, on binding and locking in or out, reflecting fears of sexual incompetence. For MacCary the searching Antipholus of Syracuse is the main character of the play, awakening in us memories of our own psychic development—the trauma of birth separation, the fear of the overwhelming mother, the yearning for individuation and integration. Barbara Freedman (1980<sup>1</sup>), likewise, sees the play as a psychological drama in which disassociated parts of the self become united; thus the Egeon frame is an integral part of the psychodrama which ends in redemption in its multiple senses, primarily financial and theological. Later (1991), rather than

apply psychoanalysis to Shakespearean comedy, or offer a single reading of the play, she offers multiple readings which in turn displace each other; she explores the notion of mistaken identity in this play as it illuminates Derridean models of reading and Lacan's notion of subjectivity. Ruth Nevo (1980) says that the characters find themselves *through* the farce; the play allows repressed libidinal material to surface; the confusions reveal latent selves and therapeutically work out "psychic material—the obsessions, compulsions, fantasies which, unresolved, unremedied, would represent catastrophe" (30). These readings illuminate family dynamics and show the resonant, subliminal power of symbol. The fictional characters here reflect common human aspirations, anxieties, repressions, and struggles. But once again, there is sometimes the unfortunate tendency to reduce action to a template, to read into character, to neglect theatrical tradition and convention, to separate analysis from the affective and performative aspects of the play.

## 6. LANGUAGE

Eighteenth-century editors and critics of *Errors* often object to its language, particularly the versification. Alexander Pope's first edition (1723) relegates passages deficient in judgment and taste to smaller type at the bottom of the page; these include trivial conceits, like the dialogue about time and hair (2.2.35–108), ribaldries, the "doggerel" verse (14-syllable lines in couplets) of the lock-out scene (3.1), and anything else he doesn't like. Such manifest deficiencies, Pope reasons, indicate a non-Shakespearean origin. Later, Pope (ed. 1728, 1: xxi–xxii) adds *Errors* to the list of those plays that have Shakespeare's hand in only some characters, single scenes, or a few passages. William Warburton (ed. 1747, 1: sigs. [d8<sup>v</sup>]-e) thinks *Errors*, along with *Shrew*, the three parts of *Henry VI*, and *Titus Andronicus*, "certainly not of Shakespeare," though the playwright perhaps here and there corrected the dialogue and added a scene. Hugh Blair (ed. 1753, 1: xlviii), the Scottish editor, follows Warburton. In our century J.M. Robertson (1923, 2: 126–57) takes up the disintegrationist arguments again, asserting that Shakespeare's share in the play after the opening scene is very limited, and proposing Marlowe

as author on the basis of versification and vocabulary.

Edmond Malone (ed. 1790, 1: Pt. 1, 288–90) delivers a learned account of the play, addressing various aspects including versification. He adduces examples of doggerel verse from early Elizabethan plays (2: 203f.); he finds examples of alternate rhymes and doggerel in other early works of Shakespeare, *Love's Labor's Lost* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; he explains the metrical irregularities as typical of an early Shakespeare play; he makes a strong case for Shakespeare's authorship. Malone considers the verse part of a complicated chain of evidence on date and authorship; he also pioneers the comparative study of verse as a component of style.

Early depreciation of Shakespeare's verse in this play has given way to more positive appraisals. George Lyman Kittredge (ed. 1936, 134) thinks the remarkable metrical variety probably an attempt to imitate the variety of Plautus. Stanley Wells (ed. 1972, 12–13, 21) notices verse variations like the use of couplets in the sisters' disputation and the contrast between the Ephesian Dromio's blank verse with end-stopped lines, monosyllabic diction, rhythmic regularity, staccato sound effects, and the Ephesian Antipholus' blank verse lament, with its melancholy enjambments and long vowels. Kenneth Muir (1979) also observes the variety of verse forms: Egeon's formal style—end-stopped, eloquent, with stock epithets; Antipholus of Syracuse's lyrical style in rhymed quatrains; the absurd conceits; the rhymed stichomythia and doggerel. Discussing 3.2, T.S. Dorsch (ed. 1988, 20) calls the transitions in verse “from quatrains (interspersed with hypermetric rhymes) to couplets in stichomythia, to couplets sustained, to prose, and finally to blank verse...the speaking and theatrical equivalents” of Baroque concertos. In an essay written for this volume, Brennan O'Donnell (1997), contributes a precise description and comprehensive analysis of the metrical variety in this play. Answering the objections of earlier generations, he demonstrates in *Errors* “a virtuoso display of the phonetic resources of the language.” That objectionable doggerel in 3.1, for example, O'Donnell argues, transforms “distinct voices to its own tone.” “The presentation of homogenous voices creates an acoustic anarchy”; thus, “the gaggle of echoic repulses serves as an aural correlative to the baffling loss of identity” (below, 408).

Shakespeare's use of image and rhetoric in *Errors* has also undergone reevaluation in this century under the microscopes of professional literary critics. G. Wilson Knight (1932, 113ff.) notes the importance of the tempest-music contrast here and in other plays: Egeon's tempest is tragic, effecting separation and loss; the action of the play works toward harmonious reunion and recovery in a magical land of gold and riches. Effusive and emotive, sometimes tending to cut plays to grand preconceived patterns, Knight nonetheless shows acute sensitivity to poetry and uncovers surprising patterns of image. More analytical, but wholly invested in the biographical fallacy (the reconstructing of the author's life and personality from the works), Caroline Spurgeon (1935) discerns in *Errors* typically Shakespearean patterns of association: the greasy kitchen wench recalls Falstaff (in *Wives*) stewed in grease (118–9); the linking of eyes, death, tears, vault, and mouth in the description of Pinch (192) echoes, more seriously, in *King John*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *King Lear*.

After Knight and Spurgeon, critics have looked harder at images in the play and their significance. John Erskine Hankins (1953, 41ff.), associates Egeon's image of his eyes as "wasting lamps" (5.1.316) with passages from Scripture and the *Zodiacus Vitae*, a prescribed textbook, and also with Macbeth's brief candle, Othello's light, and other references. The image often appears in tragic contexts where death extinguishes the flame of life. R.A. Foakes (ed. 1962, xlv) notes that the Dromios complain of being beaten like asses; "the idea of being made a beast operates more generally in the play, reflecting the process of passion overcoming reason, as an animal rage, fear, or spite seizes on each of the main characters." According to Foakes the characters lie between the poles of Circean transformation and the restoration of order in the gossips' feast. Richard Henze (1971) explores the complex images of chains and the various bindings and loosings in the play: the original binding to the mast, the chain and rope as stage props, the various restraints of marriage and society. The characters attempt to get free but entangle themselves; the play shows that "with freedom comes binding, but with the binding, paradoxically, comes freedom—freedom of trust, of fellowship, of love" (37). These studies collectively expand earlier notions of Shakespearean style

to include concatenation of image and theme; they also disclose more serious possibilities in meaning.

Two other studies of language break new boundaries in understanding. Eamon Grennan (1980) explores nature and convention in *Errors*, observing linguistic and poetic elements: Egeon's opening *narratio*, the use of couplets, Luciana's quatrains, the Abbess's sermon, and Shakespeare's frequent use of the pun. The pun is particularly important: "The play is built on a double pun, the two sets of twins being no less than the incarnation of this linguistic phenomena" (158). Grennan goes on to show how the use of puns reflects intensifying chaos in action until the last act, almost devoid of puns, when language and meaning are restored. Reading Elizabethan documents on dining and on huswifery, Joseph Candido (1990) perceives the food and eating imagery and action in its own cultural context. He argues that Shakespeare transforms the Plautine emphasis on food into a metaphor for human longing; Adriana invites the wrong Antipholus to a feast that is symbolic of her marital union with her husband; the play ends in a gossips' feast of reconciliation. The essay is reprinted below.

## 7. FEMINIST AND NEW HISTORICIST APPROACHES

Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, precursors of feminist criticism of the play, produce an unfortunately neglected edition (1903) that praises the portrayals of women as evidence of a great genius who would "in the end portray, more fully, greater women"; Adriana and Luciana are "at once human and lovable," the Abbess, "a wise and artful dame" (xxxiii–xxxiv). Agnes Mackenzie (1924, 24–6), the first genuine feminist critic of *Errors*, notes the pairing of two contrasted sisters here and in *Shrew*: Luciana and Bianca, docile and submissive, represent a type "approved of in all ages by the bourgeois mind"; Adriana, a figure of wronged wifery, becomes almost tragically convincing and thus, "dramatically speaking, the most serious blemish on the play."

Mackenzie's sarcasm regarding the critical response to Luciana and her paradoxical appraisal of Adriana,

simultaneously quasi-tragic and a dramatic “blemish,” raise issues regarding wifely characters and roles that later feminists explore. Juliet Dusinberre (1975, 77–82), for example, notes Luciana’s articulation of the orthodox philosophical view regarding women’s subordination, and its conflict with theological views that regard men and women as equal in power and dignity. “Puritanism fostered a concern for the treatment of women which gave respectability to Adriana’s discontent” (82). Thomas P. Hennings (1986) follows this line of argument, contrasting Anglican exhortations to marital mutuality with what he terms “Erasmian Catholic advice” and the double standard. Lisa Jardine (1983, 46) sees the play as wittily portraying the “helplessness of the wife in a liberalised marriage which laid strong emphasis on dialogue between partners, but continued...to treat articulateness in women as unseemly and unreliable.” These critics have come a long way from Lamb, Hazlitt, and others in the nineteenth century, who simply applaud the curing of Adriana’s groundless jealousy; these view her instead in context of gender relations, marital anxieties, and cultural politics.

Feminist criticism has been diverse in its reevaluation of *Errors*. Coppélia Kahn, like some psychological critics, notably MacCary, views the play as concerned with the creation of individual identity, specifically a masculine self. For her, *Errors* recapitulates the adolescent process of mourning the loss of parents and of searching for a mate. The women in the play represent aspects of metamorphosis, both terrible and wonderful to the male seeker. Lorna Hutson (1994) thinks that the play rewrites traditions of Christian Terence by identifying women, rather than men, with the dramatic productivity of error. Adriana and Luciana play at being prodigal daughters and wives and, in so doing, translate the sexually and financially erring men into good husbands. In an essay written for this volume, Laurie Maguire explores the notion of duality as it appears in the portrayal of the Ephesian women and marriage. Reviewing the Ephesian background and recent dramatic productions, she argues that Adriana and Luciana variously embody conflicting types of Ephesian woman (pagan and Christian, independent and submissive, goddess and witch).

Feminist criticism of Shakespeare has principally concerned

itself with patriarchal power, the role of women, the construction of gender, family dynamics, and sexual anxieties. Though often in conflict with what has come to be known as New Historicism, a critical approach that focuses on political self-fashioning and the pervasive dynamic of suppression and subversion, feminist criticism and New Historicism share important similarities. Both see the text as a site for contemporary political, economic, and social struggles; both read literature in terms of social practice and cultural myth; both operate with overt political agendas aimed at exposing and overturning oppressive authorities. At their best these approaches reveal cultural tensions and suggest interesting production possibilities. At other times, ideology substitutes for perception and flattens out character and action.

Duncan Salkeld (1993) takes a New Historicist approach to argue that *Errors* represents madness as arising from endemic social contradictions. Egeon's death sentence opposes societal law and familial concord; the confusions of identity derive from a larger "network of confused economic relations" (69). Under-researched in primary sources and merely teasing in its implications, the essay does not distinguish adequately between social conditions and dramatic actions. More helpfully, Douglas Lanier (1993), in an essay reprinted below, shows that the play sketches the problematic of self-presentation in Elizabethan England; he notes the emphasis on external marks and rituals and on the various readings and misreadings of them. Jonathan Hall (1995) believes that Shakespeare here explores the ancient topos of losing oneself within a newly "monetarized" world where credit, reputation, and the ability to pay are central; the play transforms the quest narrative into metaphors of desire in a mercantile economy and shows how comic drama forms the subject in its generating nation state.

## 8. THE PLAY IN PERFORMANCE

The *Gesta Grayorum* account, reprinted below, suggests that Shakespeare's bold revision of Plautus particularly suited the Gray's Inn audience during Christmas Revels, 1594. The Inns of Court produced the first English adaptation of a Greek tragedy (*Jocasta*), and the first English prose comedy (*Supposes*), among

other firsts. The sophisticated audience of law students could easily recognize a replay of one of the standard, much imitated classical pieces; and they could easily appreciate the gentle havoc Shakespeare wreaks here with Ephesian law and certifying institutions—civic, domestic, medical/theological, ecclesiastical—and with the difficulties of establishing certitude, constructing identity, and finding the truth of perception and event.

In an essay (1984) reprinted below, Margaret Knapp and Michal Kobiálka cautiously examine the evidence regarding this first production, reviewing the playscript, the theatrical space of the Inn, and the eyewitness accounts. Their research sets the play more precisely in the original context of the revels and argues for staging on a scaffold erected in front of the dais; they conclude that adaptability and flexibility mark the productions of Elizabethan companies at the Inns of Court. In 1895 William Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society returned *Errors* to Gray's Inn, much to the delight of William Archer, who describes the play as "a sort of dramatic diagram, an essay in the pure mathematics of situation" (1896, 380). Also in attendance, George Bernard Shaw applauds the boldness of playing on the floor, "without proscenium or fittings of any kind...straight through in less than an hour and a half without any division into acts" (1895; rpt. 1948, 2: 275). His remarks are reprinted below.

During the seventeenth century the play survives only in occasional allusions; during the eighteenth century, largely in adaptations that cut the wordplay while increasing the sentiment and adding music. First there is the farce, *Every Body Mistaken* (1716); then a comedy in two acts taken from Plautus and Shakespeare, *See If You Like It, or, 'Tis All a Mistake* (1734). Harold Child (ed. Wilson, et al., 1922, 116) notes from 1741 on regular performances of *Errors* at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, observing, "It seems to have been a special favourite for benefit nights." Then follow the adaptations already noted above, Thomas Hull, *The Twins* (1762) and W. Woods' three-act farce entitled *The Twins; or, Which Is Which* (1780).

The adaptation that is so signal in this stage history occurs in a specific literary and theatrical context. Those in the neoclassical period, as we have seen, regularly apply prescriptive aesthetic criteria to questions concerning authorship, dating, style, and

general evaluation. The resulting conflicts increase rather than diminish the confidence and contentiousness of the disputants, each assuming authority over text and, indeed, author. This assumption of authority may partly account for the phenomenon of adaptation. Shakespeare's Restoration and early eighteenth-century readers do not merely point out obscurities in language, violations of the unities or poetic justice, and breaches in the decorum of action, social position, and genre; nor do they merely conjure up some inferior playwright to take the blame for such lapses. Instead, beginning with John Dryden and William D'Avenant, extending through Colley Cibber, David Garrick, Nahum Tate, and others, they adapt the plays wholesale, cutting, pasting, rewriting, inventing.

In 1819 Frederick Reynolds produces an operatic version of *Errors*, incorporating other Shakespearean songs and lyrics, music from Arne, Mozart, and others, and a climactic scene of drunkenness. The last scene of Act III is a hunting scene with a set of snow-covered mountains; Act IV ends in a Bacchanalian revel in Balthazar's house; Adriana here warbles Desdemona's willow song (Odell, 1920, 2: 132-5).

This tradition of adaptation, especially musical, continues on, well after the neoclassical heyday, into our century. Small wonder. Musical adaptation responds to the play's energetic artificiality, its formal patterning, its repetition with variation, its movement through dissonance to harmony. In 1923 the Ethiopian Art Theatre of Chicago stages a jazz version of *Errors* in New York; black actors, directed by Raymond O'Neil, perform the action in a circus tent, clowns change scenes, a whip-cracking ringmaster presides. There follows the musical comedy *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938); *A New Comedy of Errors, or Too Many Twins* (1940), a mix of Shakespeare, Plautus, and Molière; the 1954 BBC operetta production with music by Julian Slade; *O Brother* (1981); and the 1985 opera by Stephen Storace, *Komoedie der Irrungen*.

As in the O'Neil production above, circus settings often accompany musical adaptations. Robert Woodruff casts professional circus performers in the 1983 Goodman Theatre production in Chicago (revived 1987, in New York's Vivian Beaumont Theater). (Witness also Gerald Freedman's 2-ring version at Delacorte Theatre, New York, 1967; the 1976 Ashland,

Oregon production, with carnival midway, complete with ferris wheel and roller coaster.) In the Woodruff production, the narrator announces at the outset, "In Syracuse you dress in a tie / In Ephesus you juggle or you die." The play does not go on to exploit that contrast but instead becomes a frenetic display of gags and routines, interspersed with shouted verse lines. We see jugglers, tap-dancers, knife throwers, tumblers, singers, trapeze artists, unicyclists, clowns, baton twirlers, acrobats, a child-firing cannon, pies-in-the-face, and Shakespeare himself, on occasion. Joel G. Fink's review, reprinted below, generously recounts the action and aims of the production. But whatever its value as vaudeville or high-energy entertainment, the Woodruff *Errors* well illustrates the potential problems of circus adaptation: distrust of the script leads to the neglect of language and overall design; the play dwindles into a show, featuring all manner of noise and spectacle.

Theodore Komisarjevsky's bold 1938 Stratford *Errors* contrasts tellingly with such display in its intelligent use of music and spectacle. J.C. Trewin (1964, 179) describes the production as "an operatic, balletic diversion, the men wearing plumed pink bowler hats, the women in farthingales and carrying modern handbags, and the scamper established—to the sound of Handelian glees—in a town square with central grass plot, racing clock, and shuttered windows" (see Figure 5, p. 476). According to the review in *The Sheffield Telegraph*, reprinted below, the minor characters show individuality and verve and the audience always knows which twin is which. The reviewer in *The Birmingham Mail* praises the musical interludes, excellent casting and ensemble work in this, "the most audacious, stimulating, rare and entirely delightful production in Stratford's memory" (below, 474). The fast pace and innovative style—replete with gags, songs, and dances—along with the fluid use of stage space and time period set the prevailing trends for production in this century (ed. Leiter, 1986, 67).

Komisarjevsky recreates *Errors* as a merry, madcap play, a high-energy farce that delights audiences. In 1962 Clifford Williams offers a knockabout *commedia dell'arte* version, which, nevertheless, beautifully accommodates serious moments. Figure 6 (p. 480) illustrates the farcical aspect of the production, evident

in the exaggerated gestures of the officious Dr. Pinch and the pursed-lipped Adriana. Figure 4 (p. 392) illustrates the serious aspect, as yearning Antipholus of Syracuse lyrically woos the beautiful and tender Luciana. Williams begins with the actors changing into colorful costumes, thus emphasizing the self-conscious theatricality of the play; he relies on improvisation throughout, but trusts the verse implicitly; he writes that the play's true function is "the celebrating of the sacrament of marriage" (1969, 9). The free-wheeling merriment strikes a rare balance with seriousness of purpose, achieved again only in Tim Supple's 1996 version (see below, 34–5).

Reviewers of Williams' production frequently admire this balance. Robert Speaight writes, for example:

The merit of the production lay not only in its unflagging invention and verve, but in its refusal to allow the deeper implications of the farce—and nothing is more serious than farce—to become obscured for those who were ready to receive them. Aegeon's long recital of his misfortunes became, in Mr. James Welsh's deeply sincere treatment of it, something much more than a *récit de Théràmène*; we were genuinely concerned that he should escape the block. The Shakespearian themes of reconciliation and rediscovered identity announced, already, their later and more famous repetitions. The Abbess was an authentic *dea ex machina*—no mere figure of fun; it was not for nothing that Ephesus and Syracuse would henceforward exist in amity. (1963, 427–8)

Writing on a revival ten years later, Michael Billington discerns those darker elements that contemporary critics like Elliott, Williams, and Brooks also perceive: "but the production's ultimate success lies in its suggestion that behind the mistaken identities and manic confusions of farce there are often genuinely dark and disquieting forces at work" (1972, 8). The Williams production significantly influenced Royal Shakespeare Company style: Kenneth Tynan observes that this style is characterized "by solid Brechtian settings that emphasise wood and metal instead of paint and canvas; and by cogent, deliberate verse-speaking

that discards melodic cadenzas in favour of meaning and motivation" (ed. Leiter, 1986, 68).

The Trevor Nunn production (1976), currently available on videotape, is a marvelously fresh musical version that follows Williams' production in its inventive approach, its respect for poetry, and its delineation of character. Starring Roger Rees, Judi Dench, and Michael Gwilym, this production borrows from "the gag-routines of the circus, French farce, and the British music hall" (ed. Leiter, 1986, 78). Ephesus appears as a modern tourist trap, replete with garish shops and colorful minor characters (Figure 8, p. 520). "This disreputable town," writes Sally Emerson, "is very much the domain of the shady Antipholus, played with lean, gum-chewing sleaziness by Mike Gwilym" (1976, 37); and very much a dangerous foreign land to his innocent, youthful twin, played with appropriate comic confusion by Roger Rees. Writing on the play in an essay reprinted below, Rees observes the seriousness of the frame-plot, the potential for fright in farce, and the significance of the theme of searching; these elements, however, are muted in the Nunn production, which succeeds brilliantly as inventive and rollicking fun.

After Nunn, few productions claim serious notice. In 1983 Adrian Noble directs a production at Stratford, which features some brilliant comedy (the Dromios are Emmett Kelly-style clowns, the Antipholuses have bright blue faces) and a moment of pathos with the beaten Dromio of Syracuse. In the same year the BBC releases Cellan-Jones' production for television in the *commedia dell'arte* style, starring rock star Roger Daltrey as both the Dromios, a serious Cyril Cusack as Egeon. Reviewers appreciate the romantic aura and small-scale realism but find the play a bit solemn; students today find it a bore. In 1988 Danny Scheie directs at Santa Cruz a raucously successful version, set in a wooded glen (Figure 3, p. 226); gleefully emphasizing the artificialities and improbabilities of the play, Scheie has one actor play each set of twins. So does Ian Judge in his 1990 version at Stratford, enacted on a pop-art trompe-l'oeil set with a checkerboard floor and nine brightly colored doors to emphasize the instability of perspective (Figure 10, p. 568). Reviewers uniformly criticize this production for elevating style over substance.

Collectively these productions raise an interesting question about the play, one that has been central to its staging from the beginning, namely, the casting. We do not know exactly how Shakespeare's company cast the first production, but we do know that Ben Jonson gave up the idea of making a Plautine doubles play because he could "never find two so like others that he could persuade the spectators they were one" (1: 144). Cellan-Jones, Scheie, and Judge solve Jonson's problem by cleverly using one actor for each set of twins, the BBC version additionally availing itself of the resources of film.

But has this solution merely created new problems? Peter Holland thinks so, incisively discussing Judge's production (in a review reprinted below):

We know how the play will end, in that moment when the Antipholuses and Dromios will all be on stage together, but along the way we end up nearly as confused as the characters. When both Dromios are played by the same actor the audience's ability to be confused, a confusion that, I am suggesting, the play wants us to undergo, is simply evaded, evaded because the audience comes to follow actor, not rôle, Graham Turner not Dromio.... When, finally, the character has to face his doppelgänger onstage for the last scene, we come to see not two Dromios but two actors, one whom we know and another whom we do not. The history of the characters is replaced by the history of the performance.

(1991, 176)

This is well said; but how seriously we are to take "the history of the characters" in this play remains an open question.

At this writing the Royal Shakespeare Company offers one intriguing answer to the question in Tim Supple's landmark production, *The Other Place*, 1996 (Figure 2, p. 54). This production breaks with recent theatrical history by taking the history of characters, particularly Egeon and Emilia, very seriously indeed. At the outset we see a glum, shackled old man, who eventually tells his woeful story without gimmickry or

distracting stage business, conveying real anguish at his losses and his plight. At the end Emilia appears as a serious woman who has suffered and found strength and peace in the spiritual life, instead of as the usual cartoon in a nun's costume. Their reunion is poetic and moving, though they forgo the customary joyful embrace, that easy solution yielding to the delicate and wary uncertainty of spouses who are now strangers. Uncertainty characterizes that other marital reunion as Adriana, seeing her fears confirmed in the presence of the Courtesan, must work toward acceptance of her (not her husband), under the direction of the Abbess's guiding hand. Husband and wife exit separately to the gossips' feast. Such restraint makes the reunions of brothers, and of children and parents, all the more joyful and affecting. To be sure, there is laughter enough in the production, the shaven-headed Dromios cavorting in high spirits, the brothers Antipholus wandering in amusing frustration and bewilderment, the red-dressed Courtesan making a dramatic entrance in response to the Syracusan Antipholus's plea, "Some blessed power deliver us from hence!" (4.4.44), the bit parts of Angelo (a cowardly Mafioso type) and Pinch (Leo Wringer using his native Jamaican accents and doubling, interestingly, as Duke Solinus), the intelligent and witty Luciana of Thusitha Jayasundera.

This production—so fresh, funny, and moving—disposes of much conventional critical and theatrical wisdom concerning the play: that *Errors* is essentially farce; that the frame is irrelevant to or incompatible with the main action; that the characters are merely caricatures; that the staging requires three doors (the set is an open courtyard with a ramp across the backdrop, which has in it a single door and windows); that Luciana must be a simpering contrast to the more complex Adriana; that the twins need to look alike (the individuals in both pairs are easily distinguishable); that the verse is unremarkable or immature (the rhymes and shifts in rhythm are surprising and delightful). A note of strangeness resounds through the entire production, created in part by the inspired choice of accompanying Turkish chants, sung Latin passages from Ovid and Lucretius, and the music of the 'ud (progenitor of the fretted lute), the *zarb* and *def* (percussive instruments), and *keman* (Turkish violin). *Errors* here

plays as romance, a marvelous tale of loss, laughter, and redemption.

*Errors* has enjoyed a lively production history outside of England and the United States. In an essay written for this volume, Günter Walch surveys *The Comedy of Errors* in Germany, beginning with G.F.W. Großmann's *Die Irrungen* (1777), an adaptation featuring the Reichard twins, the stammering Mauskopf the tailor, and in place of the courtesan, a nationalistic singer, Madame Hellsang. Hans Rothe's heavily cut and interpolated version, *Komödie der Irrungen*, attains popularity in the first half of this century, playing notably in Berlin at the Schauspielhaus am Gendarmenmarkt in April, 1934, early in the second year of Nazi rule in Germany. Walch notes sinister overtones in the critical response to the play:

The almost obsessive references to the vivacity and beauty of the young actors, and their young voices, shining faces, and flashing teeth reflect a cult of youth which had been evident in Germany for some time, ready to be exploited by the Third Reich once it had taken over. (below, 459–60)

That a production of Shakespeare's "pure comedy," to echo Rowe, should manifest qualities admired by the Nazi youth cult surely constitutes a bizarre chapter in the history of cultural appropriation. In 1978 Romanian director Sorana Coroama at the National Theater *Weimar* capitalizes on the darker potentialities of the play. According to Eva and Günter Walch, the company makes visible "through the turbulence of the stage-business the underlying insecurity and vulnerability of human existence" (1980, 409–10). A huge handless clock whose pendulum disappears in the beginning suggests temporal confusion; the antics in Ephesus become a desperate search for identity that pushes the twins to the brink of insanity.

In Japan, Peter Milward reports in an essay written for this volume, the Shakespeare Repertory Theatre first produces the play in 1951; Yoshiya Nemoto revives this production in 1969, complete with a prologue and explanatory puppet show. In 1980 Tetsuo Anzai, after having directed *Pericles*, emphasizes in *Errors*

“the overall structure as a play showing restoration of harmony through the confusion of mistaken identity” (below, 491). In 1979 and several times thereafter, Norio Deguchi has the characters play in masks until the dénouement. (Figure 7 [p. 484] gives some idea of the charm and magic made possible by the masks.) The moment of unmasking effectively identifies the comedy as indeed a play of recognition. Milward notes that *Errors* has fascinating resonances and points of appeal to the Japanese: the death penalty for a foreign merchant recalls the exclusion of foreigners in Tokugawa Japan; the stylization appeals to audiences brought up on Japanese *kyōgen*, a lighter form of Noh play; the weird, supernatural atmosphere accords with the Japanese occult in theater and folklore; the movement from misfortune to a happy end finds parallels in Japanese conceptions of fate, often presented in terms of a turning water-mill (or *meguru mizu-guruma*).

*Errors* has also undergone wondrous permutations in South Africa where it, according to Rohan Quince’s essay reprinted below, frequently embodies the spirit of Bakhtinian carnival in opposition to the ruling ideology and culture. In 1953 the exuberant improvised stage business by the all-black cast alarmed director Colin Romoff just as it delighted the audiences; Quince now reads as “a communal refusal to be bound by the rigid strictures of theatrical norms developed by white culture” (1990–1, 74). In South Africa the arrest of Egeon, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, reflects the daily realities of apartheid; and the sometimes violent relations between masters and servants allow “an interrogation, albeit fantastic, of class relations in South African society” (75); players and audience delight in the final overturning of harsh Ephesian law. André Brink’s Afrikaans adaptation, *Kinkels innie Kabel* (1970), irreverently gibes at police and politicians as well as at liberal anti-apartheid activists. Janice Honeyman’s 1985 production features black policemen arresting a white Egeon, a nameless and ignored black worker, whose bucket of paint the confused characters continually upset, without notice or apology.

## 9. EPILOGUE

The critical and theatrical history of *The Comedy of Errors* requires double vision. Rowe's "pure comedy" is Williams' near tragedy. Coleridge's perfect specimen of laughable farce is Freedman's farcical exploration of the uncanny and dysfunctional. The mechanical action of Plautine puppets, later received as a study in character, now reflects pre-Oedipal processes and anxieties. The frothy confusions disclose primal terrors—the loss of self, the doppelgänger. The sophomoric, apprentice piece of the eighteenth-century commentators, perhaps not Shakespeare's, becomes in this century a sophisticated culmination of classical, native, and continental traditions. The juvenile technique now appears as a skilful display of metrical art, imagery, and rhetoric. The bookish imitation of *Menaechmi* intimates to some Christian mysteries of redemption; to others it reveals contemporary gender politics or economic conflicts. The play speaks to various audiences across unfathomable cultural divides, to the youth movement in Nazi Germany, to patrons of the Japanese *kyōgen*, to oppressed Africans in townships.

This demand of double vision is perhaps the play's greatest gift to us. We can enjoy the laughs—the pratfalls, the slapstick merriment, Dromio's geographical catalogue, the eccentric Dr. Pinch (often a highlight in performance), the wrong Antipholus' response to the aggrieved Adriana, "Plead you to me, fair dame?" And we can also feel discomfort at the errors—the lock-out, the misidentifications, the loss of loved ones, the loss of one's very self. Both the laughter and discomfort are inseparable, we finally realize. There's not a long way between Bergsonian risibility and Kafkaesque nightmare, between the pagan Ephesus of witches and sorcerers and the Christian one of the Priory and Abbess. Being lost is not merely prelude to being found but an ongoing condition of being, a condition that enables the daily and mundane findings of self we experience in family and society. The waters of the sea wreck ships and drown voyagers, but they also carry travellers to undreamt shores and reappear in the cleansing initiation of baptism, the gossips' feast. Mundane and marvelous, frothy and serious, comic and tragic, *The Comedy of Errors* awakens our deepest fears and joys.

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