The Comedy of Errors as Early Experimental Shakespeare

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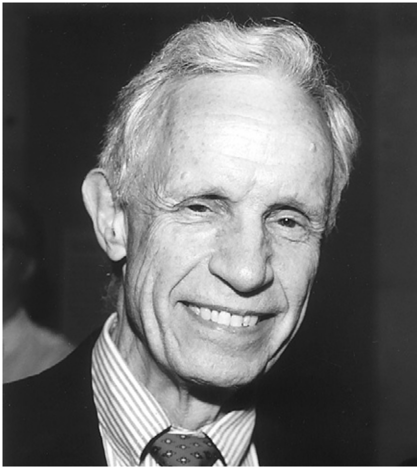
The Midwest Center held the 1862nd Stated Meeting of the Academy on October 26, 2002, at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Academy President Patricia Meyer Spacks (University of Virginia), Midwest Center Vice President Martin Dworkin (University of Minnesota), and Executive Officer Leslie C. Berlowitz welcomed several newly elected members from the region. Prior to the meeting, Fellows and their guests visited the Guthrie Theatre for a matinee performance of *The Comedy of Errors* and a backstage tour.

Speaker David Bevington is an authority on early English, Stuart, and Tudor drama. He is the author of *From "Mankind" to Marlowe* and *Action Is Eloquence: Shakespeare's Language of Gesture,* editor of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* and general editor of *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology.* His remarks follow.

Establishing the chronological place of *The Comedy of Errors* in Shakespeare's oeuvre has long been a challenge for scholars. We do know that Shakespeare was born in 1564, and that sometime around 1590 or 1591 he showed up in London. There, he was soon acclaimed for writing *Henry VI,* Part 1 (the first of his three Henry VI plays); indeed, the character Lord Talbot was greeted as something of a national hero. In the wake of the English victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588, the history play had really sprung into prominence, and Shakespeare was lauded as one of its original architects and designers. At about the same time, however, he started writing comedies as well, including *Love's Labor's Lost, The Comedy of Errors, The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* and *The Taming of the Shrew.*



Speaker David Bevington (University of Chicago)

It is unclear whether *The Comedy of Errors* was the first comedy Shakespeare wrote, or the second, or the third, but it certainly is early. Starting with *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* scholars are fairly certain about when Shakespeare's plays were written, for whom they were written, and by whom they were performed. As for the history plays and romantic comedies written before 1594, however, we know very little. In that year, after an outbreak of the plague, many of the acting companies dissolved or reconstituted themselves. There was a recombination of artistic talent in London, and out of this emerged the Lord Chamberlain's Company, of which Shakespeare was a member, along with Richard Burbage, John Heminges, Henry Condell, and John Lowin—actors with whom he went on to spend the rest of his professional career. Shakespeare's output as a playwright is fairly steady and clockable from that point onward.

It is notable that in his early writing, Shakespeare developed genres very carefully, as though he had a plan. He wrote one history play a year from about 1590 to about 1599, and then he stopped writing history plays. After completing *Henry V*—his culminating history play after *Richard II* and *Henry IV,* Parts 1 and 2—he did not write another history play (at least not about English history) until 1613, at the very end of his career, when he completed *Henry*

VIII. I believe that the same is true about his writing of comedies. He must have apprenticed himself to the task of writing one romantic comedy every year from 1590 to about 1599 or 1600. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appeared in 1594 or 1595, followed by *The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado About Nothing, As You Like It, The Merry Wives of Windsor,* and then *Twelfth Night,* which was written between 1600 and 1602. At about that time, Shakespeare was entering into the period of the great tragedies, writing *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* and going in a very different direction, exploring problems of sexual jealousy, high crimes, and murders. He had not written much tragedy during the earlier period. *Titus Andronicus* (recently adapted in the very interesting film directed by Julie Taymor) is dated around the time of *The Comedy of Errors* and has some of the marks of very early experimental Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet,* written in the middle of that decade, around 1595 or 1596, reads much like the romantic comedies he was writing during the same period, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But Shakespeare did not find his métier in tragedy until he reached about the middle of his career, starting with *Julius Caesar* and following, at one-year intervals, with *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear*, *Macbeth, Timon of Athens, Antony and Cleopatra,* and *Coriolanus*—an amazing achievement.

Midwest Center Vice President Martin Dworkin (University of Minnesota), George Schatz (Northwestern University), and Academy President Patricia Meyer Spacks (University of Virginia)

The chronology of Shakespeare's plays was not worked out satisfactorily until the middle of the nineteenth century, when German philological scholars, along with some imitators in Britain, determined the probable dates of composition (which have by and large held to this day). At that point one could start to talk about the shape of Shakespeare's career as a writer. In 1875 Edward Dowden wrote a book (*Shakspere: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*) in which he postulated that Shakespeare's career consisted of four periods. The first was "in the workshop," or what we are talking about tonight: the period in which he wrote his experimental early plays. This was followed by the second period, in the late 1590s, when Shakespeare hit his stride as an author of history plays and romantic comedies, and then by the third period, in which he penned the tragedies. The prevailing theory of the late nineteenth century was that the shift to tragedies must have had a biographical origin—that something terrible must have happened in Shakespeare's life. His only son, Hamnet, died in 1596, but that is a little too early to fit the theory, because the tragic period did not start until 1599 or 1600, and lasted until about 1607. According to Dowden's analysis, Shakespeare's career reached a new plateau in the fourth period, during which he wrote the late romances, including *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*—the last plays that brought him to his retirement. In that final phase, Shakespeare experienced the serenity of looking back over his career, and his approach to comedy reflected the deepening influence of the tragic period. A great many scholars have embraced Dowden's analysis. Others have attempted to explain Shakespeare's career in terms of Zeitgeist, citing the shift from Elizabethan optimism to Jacobean pessimism when Elizabeth I died in 1603 and James I ascended the throne.

It may be more interesting, however, to think about Shakespeare's career in terms of development of genre. Perhaps Shakespeare worked on romantic comedy and history plays until he felt he had perfected them, ending with *Henry V* on the one hand and *Twelfth Night* on the other at about the same time. Then he may have decided to attempt some-

thing truly experimental and avant-garde with *Troilus and Cressida*, which is a type of black comedy, very hard to define generically. Next he moved into tragedy. At that turning point, he speculated, for example, about infidelity in women—something he had dealt with in his comedies, such as *Much Ado*, as a product of the male diseased imagination: accusing women of untrue things and then having to be forgiven for lack of loyalty and faith. *Much Ado* demonstrates this configuration. Subsequently, however—as in *Troilus and Cressida, Hamlet*, and some of the sonnets—a deep misogyny surfaces through portrayals of situations in which women really are frail and problems of sexual jealousy are deepening.

Then Shakespeare went on to write *King Lear.* It is tempting to think about the phenomenon of Shakespeare's own aging as he crafted this play about an aging father faced with the question of whether his daughters will continue to love him. When composing *The Tempest*—again, about a father with a daughter—Shakespeare was nearing the point of retirement. Indeed, throughout his career, Shakespeare's choices of genres and subjects may be seen as reflecting his own development as a human being, moving from the young man falling in love to the young man being ambitious and coming to terms with his father, then addressing issues of sexual jealousy, marriage, and midlife crisis (as in *Antony and Cleopatra*), and, finally, confronting aging and retirement. The pattern makes for a very attractive understanding of Shakespeare.

I say all this by way of prelude to some further remarks about the beginning of Shakespeare's evolution as a playwright, as reflected in *The Comedy of Errors*—one of the earliest two or three of his plays. One thing that is characteristically early about this play is its heavy reliance on sources. *The Comedy of Errors* is based largely on an ancient comedy entitled *Menaechmi* (*The Twins*), by Plautus, a Roman dramatist who was much read in the schools during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. (As I will mention later, *The Comedy of Errors* also incorporates elements of other Roman sources.) Shakespeare was

Councilor Gerald Early (University of Washington at St. Louis) and Executive Officer Leslie C. Berlowitz

doing something that he never did again to the same extent: writing a neoclassical comedy. He simplified the original story, elaborated on it, and moralized it in certain ways.

The Plautus play is about twins who are separated by a storm. Accompanied by servants, they spend years apart. The pattern of wandering and separation that we see in *The Comedy of Errors* is a plot that derives from classical Greece, during the years of the diaspora around the Aegean and the Mediterranean in the third and second centuries B.C. One of the hallmarks of these stories is that there is eventually a happy, romantic reunion: people are recognized by birthmarks, and other miraculous events of that sort occur. This is just what happens at the end of *The Comedy of Errors*.

Shakespeare's handling of sexual morality in this early play can be seen in the way he transforms the materials of his source, presumably in order to satisfy the expectations of his Elizabethan audience. The chief female figure in the Plautus play is a courtesan, whereas Shakespeare's play features a sister and a wife. The debate between these two women about marriage and how women should comport themselves with men—very much an Elizabethan English, moralized, middle-class dis-

cussion of those topics—is something that is absent from the *Menaechmi.* Still, Shakespeare did take from Plautus the important skeletal outline of a story about separation, wandering, and reunion, and especially the farcical comedy that arises out of situations involving the twins and mistaken identities. From this material, Shakespeare created a parade of wonderful comic situations. There is a sense of something magical going on—some kind of nightmare or crazy vision—in *The Comedy of Errors.* For all of that, Shakespeare's debt to Plautus is certainly considerable.

The Comedy of Errors is explicitly neoclassical in that it is modeled on works by ancient Roman writers, such as Plautus and Terence—not on works by Greek writers. That is because the Romans were the ones who were read in schools throughout Western Europe. Shakespeare was very much a person of his time in being educated in the basics of a Latin classical curriculum.

We know a fair amount about Shakespeare's education, even though the records have not survived the years. His father became the equivalent of mayor in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon when Shakespeare was young, which suggests that he had been reasonably prosperous. The father did fall on hard times, but he had a very substantial house, and as mayor he would undoubtedly have sent his son to the local King Edward VI grammar school—one of the new schools that the English Reformation was sponsoring and creating all over England. An educational revolution was going on, and much of it was tailored for just the likes of a bright son of a prominent alderman-citizen.

In the 1940s and 1950s, T. W. Baldwin of the University of Illinois wrote lengthy learned treatises about exactly how the long school day would have been spent in the England of Shakespeare's youth (see, for example, his *Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke,* 1944). Whipping was very common; corporal punishment was considered a way of getting children to learn faster. Shakespeare gives us an amused picture of this in *The Merry Wives of Windsor.* In one charming little scene, quite detached from the rest of

the play, one of the wives is accompanied by her son when they meet the schoolmaster. He puts the boy through his declensions and then threatens him with spanking if he does not give the right answer to a question. Schoolmasters of this sort insisted on a great deal of rote memory, learning declensions and conjugations, all in Latin. Students did not read English literary texts at school at all; they did not read them at Oxford or Cambridge, either. Education was designed to teach students Latin and, perhaps, a little Greek.

After Shakespeare died, his plays were published in that sumptuous First Folio volume of 1623, edited by two of his colleagues. The plays were preceded by a commendatory poem by Ben Jonson, one of Shakespeare's brightest and best-known contemporaries. In it, Jonson said that Shakespeare was the best writer of comedy ever, and that he was no slouch about writing tragedy, either. At the same time, Jonson noted that Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek." Jonson himself was very much a classicist—both his Greek and his Latin were exemplary—and he looked down his nose at Shakespeare for being more of a popular writer. In chiding Shakespeare, he was thinking about plays like *Henry V* and *The Tempest*. He deplored the fact that Shakespeare transported his characters from one country to another instead of locating his

G. David Tilman, Vernon Ruttan, and Hans Weinberger (all, University of Minnesota)

scenes in one place, or showed that an infant can grow into a child and then an adult (as in *The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline,* and a number of other plays, including *The Tempest,* in which that transformation is described through recollection). Jonson's characterization of Shakespeare as a writer is consistent with the profile of one who had just six years of Latin and was thus no great classicist, and who was disinclined to follow the classical rules. Jonson's view seems to have been that if Shakespeare, with his incredible genius, had had the benefit of Jonson's own education and had possessed Jonson's refined sensibilities as a classicist, he might have written extraordinary plays.

No doubt most of us take the view that Shakespeare's genius was probably better left the way it was. Yet Jonson's perspective was very common, not only in the Renaissance but later as well. It was voiced by Milton, for example, who wrote that Shakespeare was "fancy's child," able to "warble his native woodnotes wild" ("L'Allegro," lines 133–4), and this view persisted throughout the eighteenth century. This is very interesting in light of the current art exhibit on "The American Sublime" here at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (on loan from the Tate Gallery in London). Shakespeare was an early example of the sublime in the sense of being a romantic and intuitive poet, a popular poet, and a popular dramatist—unlike Ben Jonson, who was a strict neoclassicist.

However, as we have noted, Shakespeare—despite his being the great romantic, popular native English dramatist—actually began as a neoclassical writer. He went back to the *Menaechmi* by Plautus, followed the plot very carefully, anglicized it, and moralized it a bit. Despite these modifications, it is set in one town, on the coast of the Aegean; it occupies twenty-four hours; the characters never leave town; and there is a single story throughout. Its unities of time, place, and action are things that Shakespeare seldom used elsewhere during his career. *Antony and Cleopatra,* for example, covers the course of about eleven years (41–30 B.C.) and goes all over the Mediterranean, from Rome to

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Greece to Egypt and back again. That is the way that Shakespeare normally preferred to write. Another example of geographic meandering occurs in *Henry V*, which crosses from England to France.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, as an apprentice, Shakespeare tried out the neoclassical style as a way to start. The play contains a lot of Latin jokes and a good deal of precious word play, which depend on the kind of knowledge of the Latin language that Shakespeare evidently possessed. Another neoclassical characteristic of the play—and this really is unique to *The Comedy of Errors*—is that it can be acted on a classical stage. Shakespeare's normal mode is presentational, with the characters rapidly entering and leaving an open platform with no scenery and telling us where they are; everything is conveyed through comic effects, costuming, gesture, and eloquent speech. *The Comedy of Errors* is an instructively contrastive model. It is usually produced on a set with several doors, one of which represents the house of Antipholus of Ephesus, where a great deal of the action takes place. This is the house in which his wife inveigles the visiting Antipholus of Syracuse, thinking that she is inviting her husband in. This plot, by the way, is borrowed from another Plautus play, the *Amphitryo,* in a characteristically neoclassical move: not to follow slavishly one classical model but to combine materials from different sources. In the *Amphitryo*—a play about Zeus as a seducer—a master and a ser-

vant, locked out of their own house, talk to their look-alikes and their opposites within the house.

I have never seen a production of *The Comedy of Errors* without a stage door of some sort visible throughout. That is the way it would have been done on the ancient Roman stage. Another door signifies a house for the courtesan; it is not as important a house, but it is still necessary. At the end of the play, another door usually represents the abbey, from which the abbess emerges in the final scene of recognition. A stage arranged in this fashion became so standard in neoclassical drama—especially in France and Italy, where neoclassical drama took a more vigorous, and indeed a rather doctrinaire, hold—because the whole play was supposed to be visually comprehensible as taking place in one location. The central requirement was to have the main stage be a street in front of visible houses. On such a set, actors can appear and disappear into one of the houses. They can go off to town (as the goldsmith has to do, for example) or down to the seaport through another exit that leads offstage in another direction. The entire play can be staged with identifiable, fixed, realizable stage locations creating the visual impression of Ephesus in a certain year at a particular time. Shakespeare never wrote another play so perfectly suited to the classical stage.

Conversely, we can see that *The Comedy of Errors* looks forward as well as back. In interesting ways, this play anticipates *Twelfth Night*, for example—a fact that did not go unnoticed by contemporary observers. *Twelfth Night* is a play about twins who get separated at sea and, at the end of the story, eventually find each other. It is also about the sense of madness that arises when a comedy of errors occurs. We might call *Twelfth Night* a comedy of errors, as characters meet each other surprisingly and do not know each other's identities. For instance, Viola's twin brother and look-alike, Sebastian, is met on the street by a beautiful lady who has fallen in love with Viola (who has been dressing as a man); thinking that Sebastian is the object of her affection, the lady tells him that she

wants to marry him. It is a fantasy about a man meeting a beautiful woman on the street who tells him, "Please come into my house; I want you to marry me right now." With its farcical situations and its emphasis on both the madness and the wonderfulness of falling in love, *Twelfth Night* clearly echoes *The Comedy of Errors*.

Finally, I want to discuss some productions of *The Comedy of Errors* that I have seen recently. A number of years ago I saw one at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, featuring the juggling troupe known as the Flying Karamazov Brothers. Adriana, the wife, was portrayed by an actress who did a really superb baton-twirling act. During her disquisition with her sister about the nature of marriage and whether a woman should be patient or impatient with a wandering husband, the actress was throwing batons up in the air, catching them behind her back, and so forth. The baton twirling was brilliant, but it distracted the audience's attention from the serious issue at debate between the two sisters.

A happier production, in my opinion, was the one mounted by the Chicago Shakespeare Theater just two or three years ago, with Tim Gregory as Antipholus of Syracuse and Lisa Dodson playing the wife. This version was done in modern dress, more or less, and it was set along a seacoast on the Adriatic or somewhere in the Mediterranean. There were lights twinkling in the distance, and coffee tables were arranged on the stage to suggest a waterside café. It all made a great deal of sense. The café setting yielded comic capital during the scene in which Dodson did a real vamping act to tempt Gregory to come into the house. In keeping with the café theme, the set included some pastry-making equipment. As Gregory eagerly lunged toward Dodson, he stepped on the kind of device used for putting decorations on cakes, producing an "ejaculation" that spurted about fourteen feet across the stage. *The Comedy of Errors* seems to invite that sort of irreverence.

Despite its earliness, *The Comedy of Errors* resembles later Shakespeare plays in that the framing plot—that is, the story about Egeon and his long

narration—is disturbing. Egeon is under threat of execution within twenty-four hours if he cannot come up with the money needed for his ransom, and the situation seems hopeless. Why did Shakespeare surround his farce with a tragicomic plot? Presumably, he wanted to deepen the seriousness in the play, to give the story a context of life and death. He went to an entirely different source for this; neither Plautus's *Menaechmi* nor his *Amphitryo* has a surrounding plot involving a threat of death. A story about Apollonius of Tyre (which Shakespeare used again later, in *Pericles*) provided the tragicomic circumstance. If we look forward to the later plays, we can see that this combination of tragedy and comedy is very characteristic of Shakespeare. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, for example, he pairs the nonthreatening plot of Beatrice and Benedick, two attractive young people who have a misunderstanding and have trouble getting together, with the more serious plot about Hero and Claudio, in which Hero, accused of sexual infidelity on the night before her intended marriage, apparently dies of the terrible accusation; as it turns out, however, she really is not dead, and so she and Claudio can be reunited. That is a characteristic move in Shakespeare. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare combines a love plot with the extraordinarily serious theme of a Jewish moneylender threatening the life of a Christian whose debt is overdue.

Shakespeare, in comedy, often combines the tragicomic with the farcical and the romantic. Thus, *The Comedy of Errors*—as experimental, young, and unformed as it is—is unmistakably Shakespearean in ways that presage the shape of his entire career as a writer of comedy.

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