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*Turbulenta Prima, Tranquilla Ultima:*

**Shakespeare's Progression as a Comedic Playwright**

**David Penner – December 2005**

“How use doth breed a habit in a man,” and with time he came to write great plays (Shakespeare, TGV 5.4.1). Shakespeare's development as a comedic playwright becomes clear when we compare plays with similar characteristics. The Comedy of Errors, written in as early as 1589, follows other comedic works about identity, such as “Jack Juggler, the anonymous adaptation of Amphitruo,” and, “Robert Greene's cony-catching pamphlets,” literature about trickery (Van Elk 323).<sup>1</sup> Twelfth Night, written around 1600, focuses, as well, on identity, and represents Shakespeare's last comedy before he turns “from the sunlit side of the garden to the other” (Wilson qtd. Crane, *Critics* 70). Improvements in plot and thematization, and exploitation of the comic genre distinguish Shakespeare's evolution from “Shakes-scene,” to “the greatest spirit which ever spoke our tongue” (Greenblatt 52; Wilson qtd. in Crane, *Critics* 70).

Shakespeare palimpsests the plot of Roman playwright Plautus' adaptation, The Menaechmi Brothers, to create The Comedy of Errors: an uncomplicated story with predictable characters and themes regarding freedom, identity, gender equality, and debt. After Aegeon receives a death sentence from the Duke, and Antipholus of Syracuse and

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Asimov surmises that The Comedy of Errors was written between 1589 and 1593 because of S. Dromio's description of the kitchen wench in lines 3.2.121-122: “[France is in] her forehead, arm'd and reverted, making war against her heir.” When Protestant Henry IV succeeded Catholic Henry III as King of France, France waged war “against her heir” (176).

his servant, Dromio, arrive in Ephesus to look for their twins, a string of incidents, where everybody confuses one twin for the other play out until, not only the Abbess, as *deus ex machina*, causes both sets of twins to unite, and turns out to be Aegeon's wife, but the Duke forgives Aegeon as well, so the characters can walk, happily off the stage together. This type of play appeals to audiences because it leads viewers "from confusion about identity – [their] own... as well as the protagonist's – to security" in forms, such as marriage or family reunification (MacCary 529).<sup>2</sup> Throughout the play, the Antipholus twins experience either freedom or binding - figuratively and literally. After they are "fast'ned... to either mast," they become separated (1.1.86). Roaming free for five years, S. Antipholus, "like a drop of water / That in the ocean seeks another drop," yearns to unite his family, thereby gaining his true identity (1.2.36-37). Antipholus of Ephesus, the "bridle of [Adriana's] will," however, wishes to unbridle himself, and lose his identity with a courtesan (2.2.13). Rather than becoming freer, Antonio figuratively binds him to a contract, then the police officer literally binds him, and finally, his wife and Dr. Pinch bind him, literally and figuratively. After everybody reunites, E. Antipholus separates his bond with the courtesan by giving back her ring - his offer of "much thanks for [his] good cheer" shows his willing, but melancholy farewell to the freedom she provides (5.1.391). Concerning gender equality, Luciana (*luce*) who believes women are "their males' subjects," represents a contrastive view to Adriana (*atro*), who, as the "seminal model for the heroines of Shakespeare's romantic comedies," asks, "Why should [men's] liberty... be more?" (MacCary 526; Err\_ 2.2.19; Kehler 231; Err\_ 2.2.10). At the end of the play, however, Adriana modifies her view toward Luciana's, as she concedes to the

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<sup>2</sup> How to preserve identity became an important issue during the Elizabethan era's "unprecedented rate" of growth (Van Elk 325).

Abbess that her “jealous fits / hath scar’d [her] husband,” and she refers to him as “lord” of her (5.1.85-86; 5.1.137). A theme about the consequences of debt runs throughout the play. As Aegeon belongs to an unacceptable group, he must pay with his life; as E.

Antipholus ignores his debt to his wife, he risks losing everything; and as he does not pay for the chain, he loses his friendship with Angelo. Finally, however, as the Duke becomes swayed by the family’s reunion, he forgives Aegeon’s debt, and thereby places humanity above pecuniary concerns. To Plautus’ ancient drama, Shakespeare adds much; however, some areas remain problematic. The play lacks an antagonist to make the confusion purposeful. The audience, vicariously through the protagonist, has no way to ponder how to protect against the chaos. The ending also disappoints in that even though the entire play builds up to the brothers’ reunion, they have no lines to express their joy. Not giving the audience time to revel seems unfair. Despite these problems, the straightforward plot suitably addresses ideas about freedom, identity, gender equality and debt, and moves “toward [an] achievable and... normal” ending (Hubler 63).

Twelfth Night, an intertextualization of the early Italian comedy, Gl’Ingannati, involves a stunningly complicated web of plots and themes regarding the capriciousness of love and the effects of passion (Kaufman 271). As a result of Olivia’s love for Cesario, the plot about Orsino’s unrequited love for Olivia dissolves, and a new plot about how Viola gets out of her predicament, while simultaneously assisting and pursuing Orsino, winds through an array of subplots, including Maria and Toby’s gulling of Malvolio, Toby’s attempt to keep Sir Andrew at Olivia’s house, Toby and Maria’s romance, Antonio’s pursuit of Sebastian, Sir Andrew’s challenge to Cesario, and Sebastian and Viola’s reunification. In Twelfth Night, Shakespeare shows the arbitrariness of love.

Orsino pines for Olivia throughout the whole play, but in the end, he takes Viola as his mistress. Olivia shows that love does not even depend on gender. As with Sebastian and Olivia's marriage, love may come about more because of an accident than by any other way. Another theme considers the dangers of passion. By following their desires, all of the characters get deceived by another character and are "forced to recognize... the imposition that has been practiced upon [them]" (Crane, *Twelfth* 7). Malvolio, meaning "the opposite of Benvolio," hopes to elevate his status and purify the recusants, but his dream does not materialize as his "confusion of ambition with love and his denial of harmless pleasures marks him as insane" to the other characters (Asimov 579; Kehler 235). By comically punishing Malvolio's conceited virtuousness, Shakespeare attacks Puritanism as an "extreme of excessive austerity" (Tilly 551). Unlike the frolicsome barbing of Dr. Pinch, the Catholic exorcist, Shakespeare's assaillment serves a personal purpose, as the Puritans view theatre going as hedonistic (551). When Sebastian and Antonio arrive in Illyria, similarities between A Comedy of Errors and Twelfth Night arise, but the repercussions in the latter play are more tragic: while the Dromios just receive beatings, Toby and Sir Andrew receive "bloody coxcomb[s]"; while E. Antipholus gets bound, Malvolio gets thrown into darkness; and while Adriana's misidentification causes conjugal aggravation, Olivia's causes her to wed someone less soft and self-effacing than Cesario (5.1.170). In Twelfth Night's satisfyingly longer denouement, Antonio plays the function of the Abbess, but since he establishes himself early in the play, him bringing everybody together seems more plausible. Shakespeare's masterful intertwining and untangling of a host of nectared plots shows the arbitrariness of love, and allows the characters to find appropriate objects to channel their passions.

Comparing each play's comedic value, The Comedy of Errors displays Shakespeare's compliant adherence to a conventional stock of strategies with its use of farcical unbelievability, switching from pathos to humour, and wordplay. To the synchronous delight and frustration of audiences, Shakespeare distends the suspension of disbelief throughout the play to create enormous farce about misidentification: S. Antipholus never inquires into the identity of the "Syracusan merchant... apprehended for arrival"; both sets of twins have the same name, and wear the same clothing; S. Antipholus does not suspect anything after he realizes the implausibility of Dromio returning so quickly after dropping off the gold at the Centaur; and finally, even though S. Antipholus comes to Ephesus to search for his brother, he suspects only witchcraft when strangers recognize him (1.1.4; 2.2.4-6; 1.2.96-103). Among these farcicalities, Shakespeare swings the play from pathos to humour. For example, Aegeon's sadness stems not from being separated from his family or threatened with execution, but from having survived all his troubles: "And happy were I in my untimely death, / Could all my travels warrant me they live" (1.1.139-140). The duke responds by bringing wordplay into play: "Hapless Aegeon, whom the fates have mark'd / to bear the extremity of dire mishap!" (1.1.141-142). Asteism often perpetuates the laughter that arises from low, physical comedy:

S. Antipholus Where is the thousand marks thou hadst of me?  
 E. Dromio I have some marks of yours upon my pate,  
 Some of my mistress' marks upon my shoulders,  
 But not a thousand marks between you both (1.2.81-84).

Bawdy "tendency wit" impudently amuses (Freud qtd. in M. H. Abrams 330):

S. Antipholus Where have you left the money that I gave you?  
 E. Dromio O – sixpence that I had a Wednesday last  
 To pay the saddler for my mistress' crupper?" (1.2.55-56),

and:

S. Antipholus Where stood Belgia, the Netherlands?  
S. Dromio O, sir, I did not look so low (3.2.137-138).

This type of humour directs the laughter at a particular person or idea. Shakespeare's portrayal of Dr. Pinch as a zany Catholic exorcist politicizes the humour: "I conjure thee by all the saints in heaven!" (4.4.55). Repartee with parallelism and synonyma also entertain:

E. Antipholus And did not she herself revile me there?  
E. Dromio Sans fable, she herself revil'd you there.  
E. Antipholus Did not her kitchen-maid rail, taunt and scorn me?  
E. Dromio Certes, she did; the kitchen-vestal scorned you.  
E. Antipholus And did not I in rage depart from there?  
E. Dromio In verity, you did. My bones bear witness (4.4.67-74).

The beauty of Shakespeare's language springs forth in lofty exaggeration:

S. Antipholus They say this town is full of cozenage,  
As nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,  
Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,  
Soul-killing witches that deform the body,  
Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,  
And many such-like liberties of sin (1.2.97-102).

Good natured to the end, E. Dromio typifies himself and his brother with his use of defeated expectation – what Sigmund Freud calls "harmless wit" (Abrams 330):

E. Dromio Methinks you are my glass, and not my brother:  
I see by you I am a sweet-fac'd youth (5.1.417-418).

The Comedy of Errors tightly conforms to genre expectations, and the abundant comedic strategies serve their function properly. Only after, when Shakespeare breaks free from genre conventions, does the comedy begin to serve greater purposes.

Twelfth Night pushes comedic genre boundaries with lighter use of the twins to create farcical confusion, and more poignant use of wordplay and characters. "The best

comedies,” reports Milton Crane, “deal with serious themes, and consequently may well introduce scenes that border on the tragic” (Critics 67). Opposite to the clowns in Othello who provide comic relief, the “sobering suggestions of [Feste’s] good understanding” (Austen 24; pt. 2. ch. 2) supply “serious... relief” (Crane, Critics 67). Like Jaques in As You Like It, Feste can “suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs” (2.5.11-12):

But when I come unto my beds,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
With tosspots still had drunken heads,  
For the rain it raineth every day (TN. 5.1.390-393).

Feste’s high comedy stichomythia contains unconscious allusions in the form of equivoques: “Now, Jove, in his next commodity of hair, / send thee a beard!” (3.1.43-44). Subtle dramatic irony pervades Viola’s response: “By my troth, I’ll tell thee, I am almost sick / for one” (3.1.45-46). Viola shares her deception with the audience with her ensuing aside: “though I would not have it grow on / my chin” (3.1.46-47). Fabian further connects to the audience by helping them view the events on stage as real: “If this were played upon a stage now, I / could condemn it as an improbable fiction (3.4.118-119). Shakespeare also pushes genre boundaries by adding darker elements to traditional stock characters. This technique contradicts the conventional thought that “comedy [imitates] men... whose mistake or deformity does not cause pain to others, and may therefore be chastised and purged by laughter” (Aristotle qtd. in Markels 83). Sir Toby, as the master of revels, “bomolochos,” and buffoon, has a weakness for manipulating others (Frye 272). He takes his enjoyment too far when he unjustly imprisons Malvolio. Similar to Puck’s manipulation of Lysander and Demetrius in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Sir Toby also instigates Cesario and Sir Andrew’s duel, but instead of putting everybody to

sleep, he loses control and places the duellers in danger of each other. His chastisement comes not by laughter, but by a “bloody coxcomb” (Shakespeare, TN. 5.1.170). Sir Toby’s ensuing hurtful rebukes of the trusting Sir Andrew’s offer of assistance shows his refusal to be purged: outside of a humorous context, he calls him an “ass-head” (5.1.198). Therefore, Maria’s character comes into question as she chooses to marry Sir Toby. Perhaps she is just as power hungry as Malvolio, the *arriviste*, the “*alazon*,” and self-deceiving Puritan (Markels 80; Frye 272). Malvolio’s punishment aptly demonstrates how Shakespeare’s “comedies are in some ways not unlike tragedies, for in both genres Shakespeare consistently manoeuvres his central characters into positions of psychological isolation” (Berry qtd. in Kehler 231). In the end, Malvolio also does not accept purging, as he pledges his revenge “on the whole pack” (Shakespeare, TN. 5.1.367). Thankfully, one stock character whose actions are only for delight remains. Sir Andrew Aguecheek, as the “innocent comic,” the “*agroikos*,” and high burlesque “clodpole,” elicits only laughter, constantly strengthening his candidacy to be the stupidest character in the Shakespeare canon (Hoffman qtd. in Hubler 59; Frye 272; Shakespeare, TN. 3.4.177):

Methinks sometimes I have  
no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has;  
but I am a great eater of beef, and I believe  
that does harm to my wit” (1.3.76-79).

Sir Andrew’s quintessence of “sense – less[ness]” arrives with his hudibrastic, “vinegar and pepper” instilled challenge to Orsino (3.4.149; 3.4.135):

Youth, whatsoever  
thou art, thou art a scurvy fellow (3.4.138-139).  
Wonder not, nor admire not in  
thy mind, why I do call thee so, for I will show thee  
no reason for’t (3.4.141-143).

Thou killest me like a rogue and a villain (3.4.153-154).  
 God have  
 mercy upon one of our souls! He may have mercy  
 upon mine; but my hope is better, and so look to  
 thyself (3.4.154-157).

Unfortunately, as the consequences of stupidity are great, Sir Andrew also receives a “bloody coxcomb” (5.1.182). By adding allusive wordplay and darker characterization to the genre’s “profusion of incidents... and resolution through a happy catastrophe,” Shakespeare provides a more emotionally complex comedy with tragic elements (Coghill qtd. in Crane, TN. 3). With this type of comedy in mind, one must ask what Antipholus would do if he really became angry with Dromio.

Writers and artists of all kinds must master the rules before they can break them. Shakespeare’s airtight plot, apposite entertainment of themes, and appropriate adherence to the comedic genre in The Comedy of Errors, proves that he has indeed mastered the rules. In Twelfth Night, however, the breath-taking wonder that Shakespeare creates passes beyond those rules. By hybridizing genres, Shakespeare creates a darker comedy that allows him to entertain, celebrate, ridicule, and instruct. To understand his progress as a comedic writer further, we must analyse more of his plays, and further address his considerations of themes, “but that’s all one”(Shakespeare, TN. 5.1.396). His combination of comedy and tragedy creates a play that shows life in all its pathos, pleasure, and absurdity.

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