

# The Errors of a Comedy: Shakespeare's Farce

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1988

It is becoming something of a critical commonplace that comedy should not properly be termed a genre at all.<sup>1</sup> We must contend, as Morton Gurewitch puts it, with “a plurality of impulses” (13). His mention of four such impulses—farce, humor, satire, and irony—is not exhaustive, but is sufficient to suggest the hazard of reducing comedy to a single, or even a dualistic motive (13). When we deal with Shakespeare, this danger is exaggerated for we all too easily cull from his plenitude a seeming unity of impulse, which, though in fact a mark of his limitations as a comic author, is often made to define the genre itself. Shakespeare's comic forte is the romance, replete with airy dangers, sprites, and fertile reconciliations. The study of Shakespeare's plays as paradigms of anthropological structures has proven extremely fruitful, as the work of Northrup Frye abundantly testifies. But this leaves untouched or slighted a vast range of what one might call “hard core” comedies, works such as the farces of Plautus that seem to be without redeeming metaphysical value.

Farce is perhaps the most anarchic form of comedy, subversive of all claims to a “higher seriousness” that critics in the Aristotelian tradition have sought in comic art. Its frenzied, wish-fulfilling plots blithely disregard the motivations and dynamics of the rational world. Maurice Charney has gone so far as to argue that “farce may be the purest, quintessential comedy, since it so rigorously excludes any sentiment at all, especially feelings of sympathy, compassion, or empathy for the characters. It is also unintellectual, unpsychological, and uncomplex” (97). It is not surprising that farce has proved an uncongenial form for those writers and critics who seek in comedy (perhaps by analogy with cathartic tragedy) a domesticable support for the mores and assumptions of society.

Consideration of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is quite interesting in this regard, as it is a play based on a pure farce and written by a man who was un-

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comfortable with the conditions of farce. This is not especially apparent to those Shakespearean critics who believe strongly in their master's Midas touch. In her introduction to *Comedy of Errors* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Anne Barton acts as the apologist for every Shakespearean deviation from the chief source, Plautus' *Menaechmi*. Plautus' play is rather patronizingly described as having no "object or concern other than to evoke the normal world upside down and to evoke laughter of a simple and unreflecting kind" (80). What Barton will not recognize is something that should be quite familiar in an age that has produced Ionesco and Stoppard. The object of evoking the "normal world upside down" has its own very serious meaning, even though it refuses the notions of seriousness common in a stable society. A farce like Plautus' licenses anarchic and subversive ideas about society and man's place in the universe, ideas much more common in our own day than Elizabethan times.

Shakespeare, of course, was not content to let Plautus' plot remain as he found it. One of the superficialities of *Menaechmi*, according to Barton, is that "death is never a serious possibility" (80). Thus Shakespeare, in his wisdom, has imported the figure of Egeon from a source more congenial than classical comedy, the story of Apollonius of Tyre in *Confessio Amantis*, a late fourteenth century poem by the man Chaucer called "the moral Gower". The Goweresque Egeon, however, cannot be easily fitted into the amoral Roman scheme that considered parents and wives "usually nothing but a nuisance, repressing and causing trouble for the young" (Barton 80). In contrast to the others, Egeon expresses real anguish, though as his speeches "delicately" suggest, he needn't really worry. Most of all

Egeon allowed Shakespeare to open the play under the shadow of death and to keep this threat alive in the background, like a sword that has been drawn and not sheathed, until it flashes into prominence again in Act V only to dissolve before the discoveries and accords of the final scene. (Barton 80)

That all this is gratuitous, that a comedy of errors such as *Menaechmi* does not need to be under the shadow of death, does not seem to have occurred to Barton. In the next paragraph, she goes on cheerfully to assert that Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* "revitalizes and gives new meaning to a seemingly outworn dramatic convention" (81).

There is more than a suggestion of a rather romantic belief that Shakespeare is somehow recapturing the complex spirit of a Greek original (in this case Menander) that was unavailable to the more prosaic, as it were, more bourgeois Roman author. "Menander's characters were psychologically more complex than their

Roman descendants" (Barton 81). This is, of course, rather difficult to maintain, as we have only the most rudimentary fragments of all but two of Menander's works (compared with twenty of Plautus'). One must have extraordinary confidence or imagination to make calm assertions about the relative merits of Menander and Plautus.

But the fact is that Shakespeare, far from revitalizing an outworn convention, is vitiating the conventions of farce with foreign elements drawn chiefly from romance, a kind of comedy which may be said to reduce farce in inverse proportion to its own increase. Egeon, for instance, is clearly a romance figure. There are many other imported romance elements in *Comedy of Errors*. In *Menaechmi* the role of the courtesan, Erotium, is of great importance to the plot. Many of the Roman play's "errors" are hinged upon her confusion of the two brothers, which causes her among other things to sleep accidentally with Menaechmus of Syracuse. The wife in *Menaechmi*, typically, is a shrew; we do not pity her on account of her husband's frank infidelity, or even his apparent intention at the close of the play to auction her off. Shakespeare, with a shyness and sense of rectitude proper to a different world—a world where romantic love and marriage are to be exalted—leaves his courtesan a minor, shadowy figure, and gives her strategic importance in the plot rather to the wife Adriana and a new, more socially presentable character, her sister Luciana. Shakespeare is concerned here also to prepare a good match for such an eligible bachelor as Antipholus of Syracuse. Romance is particularly comfortable with such pairs, suggesting as they do the formation of a new society with the potential for fertility. Indeed, Shakespeare invents the character of Aemilia to provide yet another couple, yet another reunion and reconciliation at the end of the play.

Luciana represents another element alien to the world of farce in that she is the bringer of "light," or reason, into what Antipholus perceives as a land of nightmare, a place where "none but witches do inhabit" (III.iii.56). But certainly the irrational, though perhaps stripped of the romantic and Freudian notions of the nightmare, is the suitable and proper realm of farce. As Charney points out, "the prevailing mood [in a farce] is one of a world gone mad" (97). There is in Shakespeare's play an inordinate need to rationalize and round off the occasion. Dispensing with Plautus' simple prologue, Shakespeare has Egeon in the first scene spin out a long explanatory tale ostensibly to make plausible the events that follow. In a true farce, where absurd conditions are understood to be the order of the day, no such explanation should be necessary. In fact, Egeon's wild tale serves only to make the story more remote, and perhaps less plausible for it. We are clearly being made to understand that all this is happening only because it is the

world of fairy tale, of romance. We needn't worry. We need only suspend our disbelief a few hours and then return to our un baffled lives.

All this suggests that Shakespeare was uncomfortable with the farcical nature of his source material in *Comedy of Errors*. Farce, as we perceive it in the plays of Plautus, has little to do with such humanistic values as Shakespeare was concerned to celebrate. It is rather a means of dealing with human aggression through absurd or surreal denial of the cause and effect of aggressive actions. In farce, our aggressive impulses are symbolically released and punished. Shakespeare's positive values, his celebrations of love, marriage, and fertility are not at home here. Faced with such conditions of farce as are discernible in Plautus, he was compelled to mitigate them with romance: a threatening condition to be overcome, rational if ingenuous explanations of the plot, love interest, a final reconciliation, the renewed vitalities of spring, a new society. Later, he would see in what direction to move: into the forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or onto the enchanted island of *The Tempest*. *The Comedy of Errors*, however, remains a hybrid work, a grafting of romance upon farce, and is completely successful perhaps as neither.

## **Works Cited**

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