

Self-loss, Madness, and Recognition: A Reading of *The Comedy of Errors*

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ABSTRACT: In Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, the confusion of mistaken identity leads to and throws into relief the problem of self-loss, and unfolds itself interwoven with the motif of madness.

Sentenced to death in the strange land of Ephesus, Egeon tells his life story, which centres on the separation of his family caused by shipwreck in the sea-storm. Having left Egeon behind in Syracuse to seek his mother and twin brother, Antipholus also calls at a port in Ephesus, only to find that he has lost himself "like a drop of water ... in the ocean".

The main characters are regarded as mad in the confusion due to the presence of two sets of twins who happen to be in the same city. Treated as husband by a strange woman, Antipholus of Syracuse feels himself mad, wondering if he was married to her in a dream. The play contrasts with Shakespeare's source, the *Menaechmi* of Plautus, in which a twin traveller never doubts his own sanity. Antipholus' wooing of Luciana seems mad to her, who believes him to be her sister's husband, but his words, "I am thee", convey his discovery of his true self in her. A mistake of identity leads Dromio to self-loss, and he wonders if he is really himself, which implies that his own being has become a mystery. As the confusion of mistaken identity grows intense, Antipholus of Syracuse feels sympathy with Dromio in his supposed madness. Subjected to exorcism, Antipholus of Ephesus insists on his sanity in vain.

At the peak of confusion, the twins have a providential encounter followed by the moment of recognition. The Abbess at Ephesus is discovered to be Egeon's wife, Emilia, while parents and children, and twin brothers, recognize each other's identity. Looking back over a distance of thirty-three years, Emilia invites everyone involved to a baptismal feast in celebration of symbolic birth or spiritual rebirth after long travails. The word "mirror" as well as the rhyming of "brother" with "another" that concludes the play resonates with the twins' recognition of the self in each other.

Keywords: *mistaken-identity, self-loss, madness, recognition, comedy*

Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* first appeared before the reading public as one of the plays in the First Folio published posthumously in 1623. As for early performance, we have the extant record of its staging as part of Christmastide festivities at Gray's Inn on 28 December 1594, which has it that "... a Comedy of Errors (like to Plautus his *Menechmus*) was played by the Players. So that night was begun, and continued to the end, in nothing but Confusion and Errors; whereupon, it was ever afterwards called, The Night of Errors."¹ So the play had been written until then, and, though we cannot precisely date its composition, it is one of his earliest comedies. As referred to in the record at Gray's Inn, *The Comedy of Errors* is based on *Menaechmi*, a Roman comedy centring on mistaken identity caused by

the presence of twins. By adding twin servants respectively to the twins who correspond to the protagonists of *Menaechmi*, Shakespeare amplifies "Confusion and Errors", so that the heroes of *The Comedy of Errors* are not only mistaken for the twin brother but they also mistake their servants' identity. This leads one of them to feel unsure of his perception, developing the theme of madness on a level deeper than that of the Plautine comedy.

A series of comic errors, moreover, is framed in Egeon's story, which gives tragic undertones to the play. Shakespeare used the tale of Apollonius of Tyre which may be traced back to a Greek romance as source material for the story. He could read the story either in a mediaeval verse romance, *Confessio Amantis* by John Gower, or in an Elizabethan prose romance, Lawrence Twine's *Pattern of Painful Adventures*, though, as Stanley Wells reminds us, "Romance elements are found

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... in classical comedy” including the separation and reunion of a family.²⁾ Gower himself will appear on stage and tell his story as the chorus to the audience in one of Shakespeare’s last plays, *Pericles*. In both plays, the dramatist follows the old story in sea-storm and the separation of family members, the discovery of the mother who has been abbess or priestess and family reunion in Ephesus. In this respect, the early play anticipates *Pericles* in his later years, both of which share a story in spite of their very different handling.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, owing to the coincidental presence of two pairs of twins in a town, the heroes are baffled by mysterious incidents, which give cause for considerable anxiety leading to self-loss.³⁾ The word “mad” occurs frequently on and after Act II, scene i as a result of misunderstanding. We also come across such words as “distract”, “rage”, “lunatic”, “ecstasy”, “possession”, “possess’d”, “mated”, and “besides myself” [beside myself], all synonymous with ‘mad’ or ‘madness’ with different shades of meaning. How are mistaken identity, self-loss, and madness related with each other?

The theme of self-loss is introduced as a keynote even before the occurrence of mistaken identity. In the opening scene, Egeon, the merchant of Syracuse, has already been arrested and sentenced to death for entering Ephesus according to the law unless he can provide bail because the two cities are hostile to each other. The play opens with Egeon’s words:

Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall,
And by the doom of death end woes and all.
(I.i.1-2)⁴⁾

While most of I.i is in blank verse, the opening and closing words of Egeon as well as his two lines in the middle of the scene exceptionally rhyme each other. In the above couplet, the rhyming of “fall” with “all”, along with the alliteration of the “d’s” in the second line, emphasizes his fate of death and casts a shadow on the world of the play.

The second couplet in I.i is also heard in Egeon’s speech:

Yet this my comfort; when your words are done,
My woes end likewise with the evening sun.
(I.i.26-27)

The word “done” (26) is linked to “end” in the next line, and reverberates in “the evening sun”. The image of

the setting sun at once shows the time of his execution and superimposes the end of a day on the end of his life.

Though he feels it difficult “to speak my griefs unspeakable” (I.i.32), Egeon, urged by the Duke, begins to tell his story of himself and his family in order to explain how things came to this pass. Death and fortune are evoked more than once in his story against the background of sea-storm. He also refers to “what ... must come” (71) which he calls “tragic” (64). Behind the tragic events Egeon sees the workings of “the gods” (98), whom he regards as “merciless” (99). A voyage and shipwreck, family separation, the growth of the younger son and his departure to seek his family, and the latest voyage to follow the track of his son—all shape his past, and to narrate it means to identify himself at present.

Egeon has lost not only his wife and elder son in the shipwreck but also his younger son who set off to search for his family, and Egeon himself is about to lose his life. Parts of himself having been torn off, standing alone in a far-off land, Egeon is in a state of extreme solitude and self-loss, for which he finds a remedy in nothing but his imminent death which would put an end to his sorrow.

While the pathetic figure of Egeon goes out of sight for a while, we can see his image in his younger son, Antipholus of Syracuse (referred to as S. Antipholus hereafter), who left him five years ago. His search for his brother has been repeated by his father, who, searching for his son, entered the port of Ephesus. The opening narration and the main action, while creating different atmospheres, are linked with each other through the presence of S. Antipholus.

In the four scenes out of six where he appears in the play, S. Antipholus is given six soliloquies and four asides, through which the audience hears his inner voice. As for other characters, only S. Dromio and Courtesan have just one soliloquy, and Angelo speaks in an aside only once. Antipholus of Ephesus (referred to as E. Antipholus hereafter) is given neither soliloquy nor aside.

S. Antipholus the traveller reveals his present state of mind in his first soliloquy induced by the parting words of a merchant:

First Mer. Sir, I commend you to your own
content. *Exit.*
Syr. Ant. He that commends me to mine own
content
Commends me to the thing I cannot get.
I to the world am like a drop of water

That in the ocean seeks another drop,
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
(Unseen, inquisitive) confounds himself.
So I, to find a mother and a brother,
In quest of them, unhappy, lose myself.
(I.ii.32-40)

From the soliloquy, we find that his soul is not satisfied, and that he feels something is missing. It was mainly to fill a void in his soul that he started on a voyage in the search for his family. Instead, his voyage has deepened his sense of self-loss as conveyed in the image of himself as a drop of water confounded and dissolved in the ocean. Shakespeare thus invites the audience to glimpse at the mystery of being, which forms an undercurrent of the play.

As seen in the above soliloquy, the existence of S. Antipholus is associated with the image of water which is not only destructive but life-giving. It permeates the play from Egeon's depiction of sea-storm and shipwreck through the image of drowning in S. Antipholus's courtship of Luciana (III.ii.45-52) to the symbolic baptism as spiritual rebirth at the end of the play.

Soon after the exit of S. Dromio, S. Antipholus meets E. Dromio, and the first "error" in identification occurs in the play: E. Dromio supposes S. Antipholus to be his master and a citizen in Ephesus, while the latter mistakes the former for his servant. As Dromio insists on his ignorance of his master's money, and mentions his errand for his mistress to fetch his master home to dinner, mistaken identity on both sides increases confusion. Left alone on the stage, S. Antipholus utters his anxiety in his second soliloquy:

... 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: ...
(I.ii.97-102)

According to R. A. Foakes, Elizabethan audience associated Ephesus with magic through *Acts*, xix.⁵⁾ Shakespeare's change of the play's *locale* from Epidamnium to Ephesus has been attributed to its association with magic, which has a biblical basis. As soon as S. Antipholus arrives in Ephesus, mistaken identity arises, and he not only fears that his servant was defrauded of his gold but even feels that an uncanny air

over the city threatens his body and soul.

In addition to this sense of insecurity, mistaken identity furnishes us with an occasion to consider madness. Mistaking S. Antipholus for E. Antipholus, E. Dromio believes that his master has gone mad, unaware that he himself has been mistaken for his twin brother. When he reports it to Adriana, his use of the word "horn-mad" (II.i.57) offends her. Though he simply means "furious like horned animals", she associates it with the "horns" which cuckolds are said to wear. He hastily corrects himself by saying that he meant "stark mad" (59), not "cuckold mad" (58). The word "mad" as well as synonyms for it will repeat itself after this in relation to the mistake of identity.

Ironically, however, in the ensuing dialogue between the sisters, Luciana diagnoses as mad the jealousy of Adriana who stands in fear of her husband's unfaithfulness. To her suspicions that her "homely age" (89) has deprived her cheek of its charm, and that the supposed mistresses bait her husband with their gorgeous dresses, her sister gives a diagnosis, calling the symptom "self-harming jealousy" (102). *OED* gives a precise definition for "jealousy" as used in this context: "4. The state of mind arising from the suspicion, apprehension, or knowledge of rivalry: a. in love, etc.: Fear of being supplanted in the affection, or distrust of the fidelity, of a beloved person, esp. a wife, husband, or lover." The scene concludes with Luciana's thoughts, "How many fond fools serve mad jealousy?" (II.i.116) While references to madness in the play mostly come from mistakes of identity without any substance whatever, a real self-destructive emotion is related to madness from Luciana's point of view.

In II.ii, when he meets his own servant (S. Dromio) again, S. Antipholus refers to the confused exchange of words with E. Dromio a moment ago, and regards the other person's words and deeds as a "jest" (II.ii.8) made in "merry humour" (7). However, he soon ascribes them to madness: "Wast thou mad / That thus so madly thou didst answer me?" (11-12) Just as E. Dromio regarded S. Antipholus as mad, mistaking the latter for his master, so does S. Antipholus consider E. Dromio to have been mad in the mistaken belief that the latter was his servant. At the moment they do not harbour a doubt as to their own sanity.

However, a remarkable change takes place in the same scene. The two asides of S. Antipholus in II.ii reflect transition in his mind. Called by name by a strange woman, spoken to as her husband, and invited to dinner, S. Antipholus says in an aside:

What, was I married to her in my dreams?
 Or sleep I now, and think I hear all this?
 What error drives our eyes and ears amiss?
 (II.ii.182-184)

Unable to believe his own eyes or ears, and uncertain whether he is awake or dreaming, he decides to accept the situation until he knows the truth of the matter (185-6). In the second aside, he begins to wonder if he hasn't gone mad.

Am I in earth, in heaven, or in hell?
 Sleeping or waking, mad or well advis'd?
 Known unto these, and to myself disguis'd,
 I'll say as they say, and persevere so,
 And in this mist at all adventures go.
 (II.ii.212-216)

Having lost the boundary between dream and reality, sanity and madness, he becomes unable to know who he is, and refers to the world where he is lost as "mist".

In Plautus' *Menaechmi*, while others mistake the traveller Menaechmus for the citizen Menaechmus and suppose he has gone mad, he himself does not doubt his own sanity. On the contrary, he believes that other persons who misidentify him are mad. Perceiving that the wife of the citizen Menaechmus and her father consider him to be mad, the traveller Menaechmus feigns madness (V.ii). Though his inspired performance frightens them as he intended, he is not distracted, nor does he regard himself as mad. By contrast, Shakespeare's traveller is afraid that he has gone mad, and cannot tell the difference between dream and reality.

Though not a protagonist, even in *Menaechmi*, a servant hints at anxiety over self-loss which anticipates that uttered by S. Antipholus through his aside (I.ii.33-40, esp., 39-40). The following is a quotation from William Warner's Elizabethan translation of the play (1595):

... I hold it verie needful to be drawing homeward,
 lest in looking [for] your brother, we quite lose ourselves.
 ... (*Menaechmi*, Act II, Scene i)⁶⁾

And yet to "lose ourselves" as mentioned in the above speech contextually refers to bankruptcy by running through their fortune or being defrauded of their money, and does not indicate mental self-loss.

Among the romance elements which Shakespeare

added to the Plautine comedy, we have S. Antipholus' wooing of Luciana as well as Egeon's tragic framing story. Though it remains an episode and does not constitute the main plot, here is a germ of the theme of love on which variations will be developed in Shakespeare's comedies. In the very scene of courtship, there is an undercurrent of self-loss and madness.

It is remarkable that S. Antipholus wishes for new life and metamorphosis in his words to Luciana, "... would you create me new? / Transform me then, ..." (III.ii.39-40)⁷⁾ His wish for rebirth and transformation leads to a further wish for drowning as he changes the way he addresses his love from "a god" (III.ii.39) to "sweet mermaid" (45). At first he is wary of self-loss, appealing to Luciana who speaks for her sister, "O, train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note / To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears" (45-46). "Mermaid" calls to mind "siren" (47) or a sea nymph in Greek mythology, whose song is said to have enticed sailors into shipwreck, while the image of waves is superimposed over that of wavy hairs, and so he wishes to drown himself on his sweetheart as his deathbed:

Sing, siren, for thyself, and I will dote;
 Spread o'er the silver waves thy golden hairs,
 And as a bed I'll take thee, and there lie,
 And in that glorious supposition think
 He gains by death that hath such means to die;
 Let love, being light, be drowned if she sink.
 (III.ii.47-52)

While his use of "death" and "die" (l. 51), not to mention the rhyming of "lie" (l.49) with "die", has a sexual connotation, it further suggests a spiritual ecstasy. From Luciana's point of view, it verges on madness: "What, are you mad that you do reason so?" (53-53) In her eyes he looks enraptured and beside himself.

In spite of Luciana's plea for her sister and the marriage bond, S. Antipholus continues his wooing:

It is thyself, mine own self's better part,
 Mine eye's clear eye, my dear heart's dearer heart,
 ...
 Call thyself sister, sweet, for I am thee; ...
 (III.ii.61-62, 66)

He regards Luciana as his better self, or his soul. As epitomized by the climactic "I am thee", he identifies himself with her, wishing in ecstasy to be transformed and united with her. Having set out on a journey to

seek for his another self, he has found one in Luciana.

Anxiety about self-loss uttered by S. Antipholus in his first soliloquy is given a comic variation in the dialogue about S. Dromio's predicament:

Syr. Dro. Do you know me sir? Am I Dromio?
Am I your man? Am I myself?
Syr. Ant. Thou art Dromio, thou art my man, thou
art thyself.
Syr. Dro. I am an ass, I am a woman's man, and
besides myself.

(III.ii.72ff.)

He is unsure of who he is because, mistaken for E. Dromio, he is claimed and pursued as husband by a spherically fat kitchen maid, a complete stranger to him. Due to the shaking of his self-identity, he is now aware of his probable madness, with the implication that his own being has become a mystery.

Transformation into an ass referred to by Dromio is a negative image of S. Antipholus' wish for metamorphosis uttered to Luciana in III.ii. Transformation is an obsession with S. Dromio. A sense of anxiety about his transformation has swirled through his mind: "I am transformed, master, am I not?" (II.ii.195).

While in II.ii S. Antipholus wondered if he might have gone mad, in III.ii even S. Dromio becomes aware that he is beside himself (76-7). Since enigma extends to the servant and they are in a critical situation where "... everyone knows us and we know none, ..." (III.ii.151), the master feels they can no longer stay in the town, from which he decides to set sail. Alone on the stage he speaks his soliloquy beginning with "There's none but witches do inhabit here, ...". Already in I.ii, he associated witches with the ancient city of Ephesus. As his anxiety deepens, the obsession of witches begins to threaten his interior self. Let us hear S. Antipholus' soliloquy:

There's none but witches do inhabit here,
And therefore 'tis high time that I were hence;
She that doth call me husband, even my soul
Doth for a wife abhor. But her fair sister,
Possess'd with such a gentle sovereign grace,
Of such enchanting presence and discourse,
Hath almost made me traitor to myself;
But lest myself be guilty to self-wrong,
I'll stop mine ears against the mermaid's song.
(III.ii.155-163)

Here still lingers the image of love as death by drowning, but at the same time he distances himself from his inclination toward a union with the enchanting woman. Early in the same scene he identified himself with Luciana by exclaiming "I am thee" (66). But he now considers a fall into her temptation to be turning against himself. As Odysseus stopped his ears to Siren's song, so he decides to defend himself from Luciana's charm and to protect himself from spiritual shipwreck.

Before his next entrance in IV. iii, let us see what has befallen to his twin brother, E. Antipholus. When he first entered in III.i, he offered to entertain a merchant and Angelo the goldsmith at his home, but was turned away at the door of his own house because S. Antipholus had been mistaken for him and was treated to a dinner. In III.ii, Angelo mistakenly handed to S. Antipholus a golden chain necklace ordered by E. Antipholus. In IV.i, Angelo asks E. Antipholus to pay for the chain on the street, argues with him who hasn't received it, and ends up having a constable arrest him. E. Antipholus tells S. Dromio, who happens to come along, to bring bail from his home. In IV.iii, we have an encounter between S. Antipholus and S. Dromio who has brought bail for him.

Though already exposed to inexplicable events in Ephesus, when he hears that his servant has brought him bail, S. Antipholus is stirred by deep emotion:

This fellow is distract, and so am I,
And here we wander in illusion—
Some blessed power deliver us hence!
(IV.iii.40-42)

He sympathizes with S. Dromio in the respect that both of them are "distract". The world into which S. Antipholus strayed, which he called "dreams" (II.ii.181) and "mist" (II.ii.219), is now called "illusion", from which he prays to a divinity for deliverance.

Ironically, it is a courtesan who makes a sudden appearance as if responding to his invocation. Being poles apart from "some blessed power", the very word "Satan" is used by him to call to her (IV.iii.46). His desperate words, "Satan avoid, I charge thee tempt me not" (46), echoing Christ's command to the Tempter in a desert (*Mathew*, 4:10), are far removed from the daily speech of the courtesan, suggesting that the two persons live in different worlds.

A sense of strangeness in being in the town is ascribed by S. Antipholus to witchcraft. As conveyed in the soliloquy which opens the scene, Antipholus has felt awkward about Ephesian citizens greeting him,

calling him by name, and offering kindness for no reason, and has concluded that “Lapland sorcerers inhabit here” (11). He now changes “sorcerers” to its feminine form, and calls the courtesan “sorceress” (64). Changing further the terms of address, he goes off with “Avaunt, thou witch.” (76).

Antipholus is obsessed by a witch fantasy, and, to those who do not share his experience, seems to be abnormal. Left alone on the stage, the courtesan observes his madness in her soliloquy which concludes the scene: “Now out of doubt Antipholus is mad, ...” (IV.iii.78ff.) Toward the end of the soliloquy, she even uses the word “lunatic” (90).⁸⁾

Having heard that her husband has gone mad, Adriana turns up accompanied by Luciana, the courtesan (whose report has added another “error”), and Doctor Pinch. Instead of S. Antipholus, who called the courtesan Satan, it is E. Antipholus whom they see. However, with the courtesan who asks, “How say you now? Is not your husband mad?” (IV.iv.43), not only Adriana but also Luciana agrees, and they are caught up in the whirlpool of errors and confusion. Antipholus seems frantic to Luciana and the courtesan:

Luc. Alas, how fiery, and how sharp he looks.

Cour. Mark how he trembles in his ecstasy.

(IV.iv.48-49)

R.A. Foakes points out that to tremble is “a sign of possession by a spirit” (note to IV.iv.49 in his Arden edition of the play). “Ecstasy” is derived from Greek *ekstasis*, which indicates being in a state of trance and self-oblivion out of one’s senses.

Adriana’s attitude to her husband’s madness can be inferred from her words to Pinch: “Good Doctor Pinch, you are a conjurer; / Establish him in his true sense again, ...” (IV.iv.45-46). We could take “Doctor” (45) in the sense of a physician, but if the stage direction in the First Folio reflects Shakespeare’s intention, it rather refers to “a schoolmaster”.⁹⁾ A “conjurer” (45) signifies a magician who calls up spirits and demons by charms. Adriana asks Pinch to cure her husband because Latin is “necessary for the exorcism of spirits”.¹⁰⁾ Pinch attempts exorcism like a Catholic priest.

The cause of madness was considered in the age of Shakespeare to be either natural or supernatural, the latter being interpreted as demonic possession. However, according to Almond, no clear-cut distinction was made between the two, and some thought that the devil took part even in natural diseases. People

consulted a physician, but especially when no natural cause was found, they also sought the help of a magician, or a ‘cunning man’, ‘cunning’ being an obsolete word for magic.¹¹⁾

Exorcism was a ritual of medieval Catholic Church, but the Anglican Church since its establishment separated magic and religion as a Protestant Church, and was opposed to exorcism.¹²⁾ Ministers were no longer allowed to directly order the devil to depart, and the only course that was left for them was to solicit help from God through fasting and prayer.

English Catholics, however, did not abandon exorcism. Especially from 1585 to 86, exorcism started in recusant houses, where Catholic priests including a Jesuit father William Weston conducted rituals.¹³⁾ A polemical book by Samuel Harsnet on Catholic exorcism entitled *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* and published in 1603 is a source for a scene in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* where a character pretends to be possessed as Tom o’ Bedlam.¹⁴⁾

As the devil was considered to take part in some natural diseases, so a natural cause was also supposed in symptoms regarded as demoniac possession. Keith Thomas quotes a comment by a Puritan divine John Lane on exorcism carried out for a Chester girl in 1564: “no miracle, but a natural work; the maid perhaps being affected with the mother, or some such-like disease”.¹⁵⁾

In IV.iv, Pinch tries to take Antipholus’ pulse as if he were searching for the natural causes of his madness (50). However, meeting resistance, he moves on to exorcism, when the three voices of Pinch, Antipholus, and Adriana polyphonically vie with each other to strike a note of discord:

Pinch. I charge thee, Satan, hous’d within this man,

To yield possession to my holy prayers,

And to thy state of darkness high thee straight;

I conjure thee by all the saints in heaven.

Eph.Ant. Peace, doting wizard, peace; I am not mad.

Adr. O that thou wert not, poor distressed soul.

(IV.iv.52-55)

E. Antipholus cannot make himself understood even by his close kin, and appears to be cut off from the rest of the world. A discrepancy between the statements of those concerned leads Pinch to think that not only Antipholus but also Dromio is possessed and mad:

Mistress, both man and master is possess’d,

I know it by their pale and deadly looks;

They must be bound and laid in some dark room.
(Iv.iv.90-92)

According to Neely, confinement was only one of the ways to treat a person who had gone mad. It was either reluctantly adopted to protect the patient and the community from harm and danger or prescribed for the purpose of calming down the spirit.¹⁶⁾ In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio will be treated as a madman and confined in a dark room for a practical joke.

Mistaken identity continues to increase in IV.iv. People who saw exorcism a moment ago are totally convinced that E. Antipholus and E. Dromio have escaped from confinement with drawn swords. The confusion comes to a head in V.i. What the merchant and Angelo the goldsmith say about the chain contradicts what S. Antipholus says, who, branded as a liar, accepts a challenge from the merchant in order to clear his name. They have barely started a duel when Adriana steps in with others, calling out "Hold, hurt him not for God's sake, he is mad;" (V.i.33). When S. Antipholus and S. Dromio seek sanctuary in the priory, the play enters its final phase.

Words are exchanged on the care of the absent Antipholus between Adriana and the Abbess who has made her first appearance in the final scene. They go on to talk about the symptoms of Antipholus' madness:

Abbess. How long hath this possession held the
man?

Adr. This week he hath been heavy, sour, sad,
And much, much different from the man he was;
But till this afternoon his passion
Ne'er brake into extremity of rage.
(V.i.44-48)

Like Adriana, Abbess attributes his madness to "possession" by an evil spirit. Adriana's words recall "melancholy" prevalent in the Renaissance England.

In terms of the four humours, while S. Antipholus the traveller refers to his "melancholy" (I.ii.20) and sinks in a melancholic mood, E. Antipholus seems to be full of choler. In her discussion of Renaissance physiology, Lily B. Campbell rediscovered the difference between "natural melancholy" and "melancholy adust" as distinguished by Sir Thomas Elyot in his *Castle of Health* (1547). According to Elyot, as well as to Timothy Bright, from whose *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) she also quotes, we know that all of the four humours can become melancholy adust, which, when

heated, causes madness.¹⁷⁾

On the other hand, John Erskine Hankins refers to Acciaiolus' view of the "choleric-melancholic men" as expounded in his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. They are not suffering from melancholy adust but in natural humours, and Acciaiolus calls them "choleric-melancholic men" because they have "the equal mixture of yellow bile with black bile in their bodies".¹⁸⁾ In the case of E. Antipholus, though Adriana and Abbess think of melancholy adust, it is rather choleric melancholy that he suffers because he has not in fact gone mad.

Anyway, we cannot go too far in the diagnosis because, unlike S. Antipholus, E. Antipholus is given neither soliloquy nor aside to reveal his innermost thoughts, and his active life as a merchant in Ephesian society is in focus rather than his inner life as an individual. Besides, the symptoms in "this week" (45) mostly belong to the time before the play opens, to which the audience does not have direct access.

E. Antipholus' change referred to by Adriana in the above dialogue is in fact a recapitulation of her former view of her husband. Mistaking S. Antipholus for her husband in II. ii, she appealed to him:

How comes it now, my husband, O how comes it,
That thou art then estranged from thyself?—
(II.ii.119-120)

Elsewhere S. Antipholus is keenly aware of his own self-estrangement, but here she perceives it in the heart of E. Antipholus.

In a sense, she accidentally sees into the situation in which her husband is placed. Not only is he refused admittance to his own house, but he is arrested for what he has nothing to do with, and in the end confined in a dark room as a madman. While S. Antipholus finds himself in a dream world in a strange land, it is a nightmarish experience that E. Antipholus goes through, for a familiar town suddenly becomes strange to him, where he finds himself estranged and isolated.

However, her pathetic speech in II.ii extending over 37 lines was comically misdirected and did not make any sense to S. Antipholus. It brought out from him no more than a response, "Plead you fair dame? I know you not" (II.ii.147). While this in fact reflected his mystified embarrassment, it seemed to her that he was either scornfully counterfeiting or rejecting her as a stranger, not admitting her as his wife. Or else, his response would have also given her a reason to suppose

that, unless he lost his memory, he is mad.

In any event, it is remarkable that some symptoms that tempt us to associate him with a melancholy type or a choleric-melancholic type are mentioned in relation to E. Antipholus by Adriana in the final act. Firstly, it points to the possibility of a common trait between S. Antipholus and E. Antipholus who tend to be regarded as contrasting with each other in character. Secondly, as seen in the Elizabethan proverb, “Melancholy is the pathway to madness” (Tilley, M866), melancholy was considered akin to madness. The relationship between melancholy and madness will be further explored in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where the melancholy prince’s feigned madness is sometimes indistinguishable from real madness.

Even if E. Antipholus has also changed as Adriana thinks he has, the attitudes of the two Antipholi to themselves are contrasted with each other. S. Antipholus is conscious of his change, asks himself if he has gone mad (II.ii.213), and realizes his own madness (IV.iii.40). On the other hand, E. Antipholus does not doubt his own sanity. When Pinch utters an incantation of exorcism, E. Antipholus flings out words: “Peace, doting wizard; I am not mad” (IV.iv.56). In the final act, he insists on his sanity despite a situation where he has good reason to go mad (V.i.214-217).

To return to the talk in front of the abbey, Abbess diagnoses that Adriana’s incessant carping at her husband’s affair is the cause of his madness, and points out how poisonous jealousy is (V.i.68-70). With the phrase “mad jealousy” (II.i.116), Luciana has already regarded Adriana’s jealousy itself as madness, but here her jealousy is interpreted to cause the madness not of herself but of her husband. Furthermore, Abbess emphasizes close relationships among melancholy, despair, and madness (V.i.75-85).

As the topic turns from diagnosis to cure, each of them insists on taking care of Antipholus (V.i.94-107). A method of treatment has shifted from supernatural exorcism performed by Pinch to natural “diet” (99) offered by Adriana and the combination of natural and supernatural means of “wholesome syrups, drugs and holy prayers” (104) proposed by Abbess. While Adriana has asked Pinch to treat possession attributable to a supernatural cause, she herself tries to concentrate on the realm of nature.

Confusion due to the presence of twins goes on in the final scene to excite wonder at the supernatural. Since Abbess has closed the gate without returning Antipholus to his wife, Luciana urges her to complain to the Duke.

Just then the clock points to five, when the Duke enters as announced at the play’s opening to be present at the execution of Egeon. Having granted Adriana’s complaint, he is about to see Abbess, when a messenger hurries to them. He reports that Antipholus has bound Pinch and is coming along with fury. The supposed fact that her husband, who ought to be in the abbey, appears outside astonishes Adriana. The supernatural event allows the words, “past thought of human reason” (V.i.189), to escape her. Seeing that Antipholus has come out of the abbey before he knows, the merchant cannot but mention “miracle” (265).

Since testimonies given by the persons concerned contradict among themselves, the Duke as an arbiter feels mystified and wonders if they are in their senses.

I think you all have drunk of Circe’s cup; ...
Why, this is strange: go, call the abbess hither.
I think you are all mated, or stark mad.

(V.i.271-282)

The image of “Circe’s cup” derived from Homer’s *Odyssee* (Book 10) symbolizes the situation of the play. Circe, a Greek goddess and the daughter of Helios, is said to have changed Odysseus’ men into swines by magical wine. As R. A. Foakes points out, “This line is the culmination of the images of transformation”.¹⁹⁾ Since intoxication leads to self-loss, the image also implies a transition from self-loss to madness.

Egeon, who narrated the story of family separation against the background of a sea-storm and shipwreck, steps into the sphere of action in the final act, with the result that another case of mistaken identity ensues. He speaks to E. Antipholus and E. Dromio, who naturally do not recognize him. He laments over his change by grief and by the passage of time:

O! grief hath chang’d me since you saw me last,
And careful hours with time’s deformed hand
Have written strange defeatures in my face;
But tell me yet, dost thou not know my voice?

(V.i.298-301)

“Time” personified as an old man is a familiar image in the age of Shakespeare and appears more than once in his *Sonnets*.²⁰⁾ Deep emotion toward the destructive power of time, or the sense of mutability, is a theme that runs through the poetry and drama of the English Renaissance. In *The Comedy of Errors*, S. Dromio refers to the personified figure of “Father Time” in II. ii

(69). The sense of time, which was intimately related with the impending death at the beginning of the play, has been indispensable to the representation of change and self-loss, and gives shading to the play as a whole.

Even his voice being unrecognized, Egeon complains to “time” of his grief in old age:

Egeon. Not know my voice? O time’s extremity,
Hast thou so crack’d and splitted my poor tongue
In seven short years, ... ?

...

Yet hath my night of life some memory;
My wasting lamps some fading glimmer left;
My dull deaf ears a little use to hear—
All these old witnesses, I cannot err,
Tell me thou art my son Antipholus.

Eph. Ant. I never saw my father in my life.
(V.i.307-319)

Mistaken identity entails not just comic confusion but tragic shading, and things have come to a head in the final act. It is then that Abbess appears with S. Antiphous and S. Dromio.

Adr. I see two husbands, or mine eyes deceive me.

Duke. One of these men is *genius* to the other;
And so of these, which is the natural man,
And which the spirit? Who deciphers them?
(V.i.331-334)

The presence of the two pairs of twins on the stage adds supernatural mystery to the play’s world. Our attention is drawn to “*genius*”, or a guardian spirit, which stands in marked contrast to “the natural man”. “Nature”, the noun form of “natural”, is derived from Latin *natura*, which etymologically means “to be born”. At the root of the drama lies the fact that they were born as twins and that S. Antipholus set out on a voyage to seek after another self, so one of the twins is “*genius* to the other”. Though the Duke’s line reflects his misunderstanding on the surface, it hits the mark unexpectedly. By the verb “decipher” he means “to distinguish”, but it literally means “to decode”, suggesting the riddle of the play.

Thus the confusion of the play created by the coincidental presence of the twins in Ephesus leads to the scene of supernatural wonder at the simultaneous presence of the two pairs of twins. It is with this overtone of wonder that the moment of recognition arrives.²¹⁾

Syr. Ant. Egeon art thou not? or else his ghost.

Syr. Dro. O, my old master, who hath bound him
here?

Abbess. Whoever bound him, I will loose his
bonds,

And gain a husband by his liberty.
Speak old Egeon, if thou be’st the man
That hadst a wife once call’d Emilia,
That bore thee at a burden two fair sons?
O, if thou be’st the same Egeon, speak—
And speak unto the same Emilia.

Duke. Why, here begins his morning story right:

These two Antipholus’, these two so like,
And these two Dromios, one in semblance,
Besides her urging of her wrack at sea.
These are the parents to these children,
Which accidentally are met together.

Egeon. If I dream not, thou art Emilia;
If thou art she, tell me, where is the son
That floated with thee on the fatal raft?

(V.i.337-354)

Egeon appeared in the opening scene as a solitary old man deprived of his family and sentenced to death in a foreign land. Now S. Antipholus recognizes Egeon and calls his name. S. Dromio also recognizes him. At this moment Abbess utters the word “husband”, calls him Egeon, and reveals her identity as “a wife once call’d Emilia”.

For the first time we hear that Abbess in Ephesus is none other than Egeon’s wife, and hear the name “Emilia” pronounced in the play. In the story told by Egeon at the play’s opening, he used such words as “a woman” (I.i.37), “her” (39), “herself” (45), “she” (49), “My wife” (58) “We” (61), “ourselves” (85), and “us” (104), but the name of his wife was not mentioned. The reunion of husband and wife is the very moment when the restoration of identity takes place not only for Egeon but also for Emilia.

Unrecognized by E. Antipholus a little while ago, Egeon was shocked to know that he had so much changed “in seven short years” (309). But now Emilia says, after far more years, that he is “the same Egeon” (344) and she is “the same Emilia” (345). Here is engendered a feeling, which anticipates Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* and last plays, that an essential thing does not change but goes beyond time.

Acting for the audience, the Duke fulfills the role reminiscent of a chorus in a Greek drama. His function is not just to explain the situation of the play. In this

play, against the background of the passage of years, the events of the day have been shown in front of the audience's eyes. With his words time flows backward, and the audience remembers the "morning story"(343) narrated by Egeon which they heard with the Duke. Egeon, who was plunged into the depths of despair a moment ago, is reunited with S. Antipholus and S. Dromio, and finally with Emilia. The Duke's words fill the time necessary for Egeon to take such a reversal of fortune to heart.

When S. Antipholus got involved in a mysterious situation through mistaken identity, he thought that it was a "dream" (II.ii.182), incapable of believing what unfolded before him. Egeon also mentions "dream" when a miraculous thing happens to him (V. i.352). "Dream" is also referred to later in the same scene when S. Antipholus says to Luciana, "... If this be not a dream I see and hear" (V.i.376). Running through Shakespeare's plays is a sense that the boundary between dream and reality is blurred. A view of life as a dream finds its dramatic expression in his middle and later periods, particularly in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, but we find its germ in the plays of his early period including *The Comedy of Errors*.

When "errors" (V.i.388) are recognized and Egeon's life is spared, Emilia looks back over the years, and invites all the persons present to "a gossips' feast" (405), that is, baptismal feast, in celebration of the symbolic "nativity" (404) or spiritual rebirth after thirty-three years of labour pains.

The story of family separation told by Egeon is concluded by Emilia from the viewpoint of a wife and a mother. "Fortune" mentioned in a tragic tone (I.i.105) is reversed through family reunion and transforms itself into "all our fortunes" (V.i.395) of a tragicomedy. A series of images about nativity such as "in travail" (400), "delivered" (402) and "a gossips' feast" (405) stands in a sharp contrast with the imagery of death that was dominant in the opening scene, and gives an impression of movement from death to resurrection. Emilia calls the twin Dromioes "the calendars of their nativity" (404). S. Antipholus also called Dromio "the almanac of my true date" (I.ii.41). Though the play is characterized by the artificial setting of the two sets of twins and allusions to supernatural phenomena including possession, it is fundamentally based on a natural cycle of life whose source is traced to the children's birth. It may not be amiss to mention here that Shakespeare's wife also gave birth to twins, not two boys but a boy and a girl, several years before he left Stratford for London.

Among the plays contained in the First Folio, which first classified Shakespeare's plays into three kinds, i.e., Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, it is only *The Comedy of Errors* that refers to "comedy" in the title among fourteen comedies. The "comedy" of *The Comedy of Errors* would refer to both its element and its form.

The comic element in the play is inseparable from misunderstandings which come from the confusion of "errors" or mistakes of identity. As Salinger points out, "errors" and "deceit" are the main components of comedy which Renaissance dramatists learned from ancient classical writers.²²⁾ Comedy in this context is almost synonymous with farce, which is defined by *OED* as "A dramatic work (usually short) which has for its sole object to excite laughter". The confusion of errors is funny to an onlooker like the theatre audience, but there is nothing funny about it to a person concerned. The audience can laugh at the situation in which E. Antipholus is involved from the outside, but he himself feels as if he were in a nightmare world. When Egeon finds himself unrecognized by S. Antipholus and S. Dromio immediately before the dénouement, the mistaken identity comes so close to the tragic that, unless it is hollow laughter, it would be difficult even for the audience to laugh at him; all the more so because many of the audience are emotionally engaged in his misfortune. With due regard to these cases, the "comedy" of *The Comedy of Errors* cannot be explained only in terms of a sense of fun.

On the other hand, comedy as a form not only explains the title of the play but also can be applied to the play as a whole. *The Comedy of Errors* can be seen as a comedy which represents the solemn story of the separation and reunion of a family with the confusion of mistaken identity in the middle. In his explanation of the reason why he calls his work *Divina Commedia*, Dante has stated that "... comedy begins with sundry adverse conditions, but ends happily, as appears from the comedies of Terence".²³⁾ In the light of this medieval idea of comedy, our play is a comedy not only in its farcical errors in the middle but also as a whole including the tragic story in the beginning and the miraculous recognition in the end.

On the stage remain the twin Antipholuses and the twin Dromios, the rest of those who gathered having entered the Abbey. At this final moment corresponding to a musical coda, the last mistake of identity is made and solved. Antipholuses make their exit, leaving Dromios on the stage. It is then that E. Dromio calls

his twin brother “my glass” (417). The two pairs of twins were led through the confusion of mistaken identity to the verge of self-loss, but the reunion of the two pairs of twins have brought about self-recognition as reflected in the mirror image.

The play has a memorable ending with E. Dromio’s couplet which lingers with resonance:

We came into the world like brother and brother,
And now let’s go hand in hand, not one before another.
(V.i.425-426)

The whole play ends with “brother” rhyming with “another”. The motive of the play’s action has been a brother’s voyage to seek after another self, the recognition of which is echoed by the rhyming couplet that concludes the play.

Notes

- 1) *Gesta Grayorum 1688*, ed. W. W. Greg, The Malone Society Reprints (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1915), p. 22.
- 2) Stanley Wells, “Shakespeare and Romance”, *Later Shakespeare*, ed. John Russell Brown & Bernard Harris (London: Arnold, 1966), p. 50. See also Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. I (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 10-11. A relevant passage from Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* is contained in the book, pp. 50-54
- 3) R. A. Foakes calls it “a serious concern for the personal identity of each of the main characters”. See his edition of *The Comedy of Errors*, The Arden Shakespeare (London, Methuen, 1962), Introduction, p. xliii. Similarly, Soellner perceives a movement from self-loss to self-recovery in the play. See Rolf Soellner, *Shakespeare’s Patterns of Self-Knowledge* (Ohio State Univ. Press, 1972), p. 63.
- 4) Unless otherwise specified, quotations from the play are from the above mentioned R. A. Foakes, ed., *The Comedy of Errors* [Arden Shakespeare] (London: Methuen, 1962).
- 5) See his note to *The Comedy of Errors*, I.ii.97-102.
- 6) See Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. I (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 17.
- 7) The implications of transformations in the play are explored in William C. Carroll’s *The Metamorphoses of Shakespearean Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1985), pp. 65-80.
- 8) The word is traced back to Latin *lunaticus*, which means “influenced by Luna”, based on the idea that moonlight makes

a man mad. According to *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Rev. Ed. by Ivor H. Evans), “The Romans believed that the mind was affected by the moon, and that lunatics grew more and more frenzied as the moon increased to its full (Lat. *luna*, moon).”

- 9) F1 gives the entrance of Adriana and others as follows: “Enter Adriana, Luciana, Courtizan, and a Schoole-master, call’d Pinch”.
- 10) Quoted from a commentary by Harold Jenkins in his edition of *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare, I.i.45n.
- 11) Philip C. Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2004), pp. 2-4.
- 12) Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (1971; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 32, 58, 60-61. However, there was no end to the cases of possession, and more records of possession after the Reformation are extant than those before it. See Keith Thomas, p. 571.
- 13) Keith Thomas, p. 582; Peter Milward, *Shakespeare’s Religious Background* (1975; rpt. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), pp. 52-53.
- 14) Peter Milward, pp. 53-54.
- 15) Keith Thomas, p.584. Here “the mother” refers to a disease equivalent to hysteria in our day.
- 16) Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2004), pp. 160-161.
- 17) Lyly B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes* (1930; rpt. London: Methuen, 1961), p. 75.
- 18) John Erskine Hankins, *Backgrounds of Shakespeare’s Thought* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978), p. 126.
- 19) R. A. Foakes’ note to V.i.271.
- 20) In Sonnet 19, the poet invokes the images of “Devouring Time”, “swift-footed Time”, and “old Time”, whom he addresses as “thou”, while in Sonnet 12, the poet mentions “Time’s scythe”, a scythe being the figure’s usual attribute. Erwin Panovsky devotes a chapter of his book to “Father Time” in visual arts in the Renaissance. See Ch. III in his *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939; rpt. New York and London: Harper & Row, 1962).
- 21) “Anagnorisis”, a concept in Aristotle’s view of drama, can be translated as either “recognition” or “discovery”. Butcher uses “recognition”, while Bywater “discovery”, in their respective translations of *Poetics*. Here is a relevant passage from Aristotle’s *Poetics* in Butcher’s translation: “A Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons

destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a reversal of fortune, as in the Oedipus.”

22) Leo Salinger, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 84ff.

23) Paget Toynbee, ed. *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae: The Letters of Dante* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), p. 200. See also *A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri*, tr. by A. G. F. Howell and P. H. Wicksteed (London: Dent, 1904), p. 349. *Comedy: Development in Criticism* ed. by D. J. Palmer (London: Methuen, 1980) contains an extract from Epistle to Can Grande, tr. by R. S. Haller.

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