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**Recipient of the West Award for 2023**

Jane Foster Woodruff

William Jewell College, Emerita
Writing near the end of a century-long ‘explosion’ of Tudor theatre, Shakespeare benefitted from a variety of influences, both sacral and secular. Among his literary influences were the works of classical dramatists (Sophocles, Seneca, Plautus, and the like), who had used their plays to editorialize on contemporary societal issues. To this same end, in his early historical play Richard III Shakespeare chose to address a multiplicity of problematic themes, the most obvious being that, although Richard’s ambition and his lethality had been sufficient to win him a crown, they were insufficient to preserve it: power gained is not power maintained. Shakespeare then reasserted this message to queen and country in his very next play, A Comedy of Errors, modeled closely on Plautus’ The Menaechmi. More briefly and pleasurably than in Richard III, here Shakespeare crafted his ‘re-dress’ to warn of specific threats to the stability and security of Tudor power and the commonwealth itself: the expansion of English trade networks, with concomitant surges of plague, piracy, and a power-hungry mercantile class; fanaticism and religious dissension (both Catholic-Protestant and within Protestantism); and his queen’s own gender-based vulnerabilities, while also offering potential means of mitigation.

Art critic Philip Kennicott’s review of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s recent exhibition, “The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England,” reminds us that visual and literary artworks—including the plays of William Shakespeare—can offer lessons relevant to the audiences of future times, as well as their own.1 Like earlier Tudor dramatists, Shakespeare was able to “absorb and refashion” a wide range of influences to effect “Tudor drama’s richness,” including topical politics, religion, and the market, medieval saints’ plays, moralities, and folk drama, classical tragedy and comedy, and many other sources besides.2 It was the ancient Greek and Roman playwrights who first demonstrated how to ‘re-dress’ well-known tales, legendary or historical, as a means of commenting on contentious societal issues. So, in Antigone the tragedian Sophocles put into the


2 Cartwright, Theatre and Humanism, 8-12; Agnew, Worlds Apart, 11.
mouth of her murderous uncle, King Creon, the views of Athenians’ elected ruler, Pericles, on ‘best practices’ for governing the masses. Comic playwrights like Aristophanes did the same: recall his devastating parody of sophistic educational methods in *The Clouds* (and the unfortunate and presumably unintended result for his friend Socrates). Shakespeare had precedent, and British history easily lent itself to a similar purpose. And so, in the early 1590s as London faced threats including a new onslaught of plague, riots in London’s ‘stews’ over food shortages and foreign wars, and a ruler approaching the fortieth year of her reign with no direct heir, Shakespeare wrote his historical play *Richard III.*

The tale of King Richard was familiar to Elizabethan audiences. This character brought to the Elizabethan stage a well-established reputation as “smoothly deceptive, endlessly shifting, self-serving, relentlessly ambitious and, despite his unending flow of verbal disguises, ruthlessly and single-mindedly cruel,” very suitable in Kenneth Muir’s estimation for the protagonist of this “most Senecan of Shakespeare’s plays.” Shakespeare further describes Richard as ill-shaped, unathletic, ill-proportioned, deformed, and lame—in character subtle, false, and treacherous. The bard’s depiction of ‘bloodie’ Richard likely crystallized audiences’ view of the man, then and now (in spite of the valiant efforts of the modern Richard III Society and the king’s March, 2023, reburial in Leicester). Nonetheless, Richard’s schemes and his lethality won him a kingdom, briefly, until his defeat on Bosworth Field by Richmond, later crowned as King Henry VII. This new king was Queen Elizabeth’s grandfather, and the reminder of his heroic role in the birth of the Tudor dynasty would surely have caught the queen’s attention. Although Shakespeare’s version of Richard’s story is long and complex, and any of its themes including justice, war, fate vs. free will, family, and so on might have been intended by Shakespeare as a

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commentary on contemporary societal issues, the theme most obviously directed toward his sovereign was power, and the challenges of hanging on to it. Power gained is not power maintained.

Shakespeare’s seriousness about this message is confirmed in the very next play (according to the timeline worked out by the Royal Shakespeare Company) that he chose to write, *A Comedy of Errors*. *Errors* was first performed in 1594 at ‘Gray’s Inn Christmas festivities for the legal profession’, and was modeled closely on *The Menaechmi*, written some 1800 years earlier by the Roman comic playwright Plautus. The comedies of Plautus and his younger contemporary Terence, along with the tragedies of Seneca, were widely known to Englishmen through grammar-school studies, as well as public performances attended by both elites and commoners. *The Menaechmi* itself is the first identifiable classical script known to have been performed in England, by Wolsey’s men, in 1526. In this popular play, seven-year-old identical twins Menaechmus and Sosicles, sons of a Syracusan merchant, are separated when Menaechmus is kidnapped by a wealthy Epidamnian who makes the boy, once grown, his heir. The remaining twin, now renamed Menaechmus to honor the lost boy, has spent six years searching for his brother along Mediterranean Sea trade routes, accompanied by his faithful slave Messenio. The travelers’ arrival in Epidamnum, where they are ‘recognized’ by residents including the local Menaechmus’ wife, mistress, father-in-law, and various business associates, leads not to quick understanding and joy but to confusion and concern over both twins’ behavior and sanity. The Syracusan Menaechmus enjoys feasting and dalliance with his brother’s mistress and terrifies his brother’s wife by pretending to be violently ‘possessed’. The Epidamnian Menaechmus takes money belonging to his brother and suffers the ‘treatments’ of an arrogant but incompetent doctor. Both brothers find themselves alone, rejected by their closest companions, until finally Messenio sees the twins together. He is then able to offer a rational explanation for everyone’s ‘errors’ and a way for-

5 Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy*, 21, n.5.
ward for the reunited family. *The Menaechmi* and other of Plautus’ plays, in the half-century before *Errors* was written, were performed seventeen times at Oxford and twenty times at Cambridge. These productions were seen not as mere entertainment but as, at least potentially, “morally edifying” and capable of imposing “didactic messages on the text while magnifying the spectacle.” Tudor imitators of classical plays, too, “significantly accommodated classical texts to contemporary concerns.”

Plautus’ appeal to Shakespeare might also be due to the later playwright’s sense of some ‘kinship’. Just as Shakespeare was an actor-poet whose personal experiences and understanding of his time informed his writing, Plautus was believed by the Romans to have been a provincial Italian who found work in a theatre in Rome, first making and then losing a fortune while speculating in foreign commerce. The financial loss reduced him to doing manual labor in a flour mill, during which time he began to write plays. Whatever his early life truly was like, Plautus’ work, like Shakespeare’s, was clearly a product of its own time. Although the precise date of its composition is not settled, *The Menaechmi* fits most comfortably at the very end of the third century BCE and was likely first performed at public ‘Games’ in 201 or 200 BCE, when the Romans were celebrating their utter defeat of Hannibal and African Carthage in the Second Punic War. Yet their joy was already being tempered by new, post-war concerns; they found themselves for the first time with overseas *provinciae* which had to be governed, taxed, and defended, with ships and a Mediterranean trade network which had to be regulated and protected, with a wider exposure to water-borne threats like piracy and disease which had to be minimized, with a large influx of foreigners, slaves and immigrants, which had to be


7 Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy*, 4-8.

8 Riehle, *Shakespeare, Plautus and the Humanist Tradition*, 23; Moseley and Hammond, *T. Macci Plauti Menaechmi*, 11. Even if Plautus’ life story was fictionalized, his name suggests a theatrical background—‘Titus the Flatfooted Clown’ is a highly unlikely birth-name.

9 Woodruff, “The ‘Staff of Rome’” (presentation).
assimilated, and with the introduction of truly alien cultural and religious practices which had to be integrated with established traditions. All would soon prove to be threats to the safety and the stability of imperium Romanum (‘Roman power’). But now in The Menaechmi they provided Plautus with the plot and character ‘shell’ of his play. So, too, they provided Shakespeare with the opportunity to address, and to suggest redress for, similar threats to his own society: a powerful mercantile class engaged in global trading with insufficient regard for political repercussions, religious dissension and fanaticism, and a vulnerable ruler unable, unwilling, or unsure how to respond to these and other threats.

In the English commonwealth of Shakespeare’s time, much of that wealth came from trade. This is not surprising—the British Isles, situated in the North Atlantic, are unable to provide everything needed or wanted by residents. Long-distance trade and its related businesses—ship-building and the like—had been in Englishmen’s blood for centuries, but only in the sixteenth century, after years of expansion and differentiation, did trade-based capitalism become the first genuine global ‘world-system’. Trade—the family business of Shakespeare’s Antipholi and the Roman Plautus’ Menaechmi—is by its nature inclusive, and can bind society together, providing a foundation for rulers’ “claim to authority, legitimacy, and justice” in a way satisfying to their subjects, “in order to survive.”10 But trade can instead be exclusive, even if still satisfying, potentially to the point of death—remember Egeon—when officially championed and enforced by ruler and citizenry alike. Earlier in the sixteenth century, England had experienced disruptive conflicts with the Scots and the Irish over mercantile issues. In the 1560s, Queen Elizabeth herself authorized incursions by English maritime ‘entrepreneurs’ like John Hawkins into the West Indies; these English traders were profiting in spite of the strict embargo imposed by the Spanish crown, and official Spanish protests.11 Compounding this, as Jane Degenhardt


11 Williams, The Later Tudors, 253-4.
notes, in the 1590s, just at the time Shakespeare was writing his comedy, England began struggling to join the international trading network based in the Mediterranean, thus further enhancing English merchants’ wealth and power, international sensibilities be damned, through the acquisition of prized goods from Africa and the Middle East. That some in the English public were ambivalent about the benefits of such global trading is reflected in Comedy of Errors: recall the Syracusan Dromio’s description of the kitchen maid Nell who is pursuing him sexually (3.2.116-44): her body, he reports, is like a globe, its ‘topography’ tracing the maritime commercial connections of the period and the desirable goods to be acquired (“rubies, carbuncles, sapphires”—on her nose!), yet Dromio feels compelled to avoid the pleasures her voluptuous body offers, because of its presumably pungent, greasy sweat and grime (3.2.101-8). Ambivalence.

On the local level too individual merchants, goldsmiths like Angelo in Comedy of Errors, for example, developed ‘chains’ of exchange relationships, and disruption of these was problematic as illustrated comically in Errors through the confusing events surrounding the mishandling of the gold catena commissioned by Antipholus of Ephesus, first promised as a gift for his wife (2.1.105) and then as part of a business transaction with a local courtesan (4.3.48). But his payment to the goldsmith is given to the wrong Dromio for delivery, leaving everyone involved to proclaim themselves the victim of bad business practices, with threats of arrest and the loss of future creditworthiness following until, at the play’s end, “the mercantile


14 That Antipholus called on the courtesan at what appears to be a brothel (Kinney, “Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors and the Nature of Kinds,” 43) suggests that she was owed payment for her ‘services’. However, since Antipholus departed the Porpentine with the courtesan’s diamond ring (4.3.70), their relationship perhaps consisted only, or primarily, of property exchange/trade.
and the salvific converge in the talismanic power of gold to effect . . . redemption.”

The characters and settings of both *Comedy of Errors* and its Roman model are grounded in trade. Syracuse in Sicily, ‘Epidamnium’ in Albania, and Ephesus in Turkey are all coastal cities, and the families of both plays’ protagonists are firmly ensconced in the business of trade. As well, trading ventures had actually *caused* the specific familial woes explicated early in both plays: shipwrecks, the families’ separations, the death of father Menaechmus, the apparent loss of mother Antipholus, and so on. Sixteenth-century Englishmen surely wondered whether, with an economy so supported and enriched by trade that even its government was inextricably involved—in Shakespeare’s play, the Duke has been compelled by the actions of Syracusan officials and the insistence of local merchants to proclaim and enforce a ban against foreign ones (1.1.5-22), even the harmless Egeon—it was even possible for that kind of economic system to be inclusive, yet still profitable, and non-threatening to the power of its rulers. Egeon’s perilous situation, described so starkly both here at the play’s beginning and again near its end, ‘surrounds’ the older plot, suggests David Bevington, “to deepen the seriousness in the play, to give the story a context of life and death.”

For Shakespeare, it served to emphasize the threats of global mercantilism to the well-being—physical, financial, and spiritual—of ordinary people.

Among the profitable products traded globally (as both Plautus’ and Shakespeare’s audiences well knew) were slaves. Messenio, the enslaved travel companion of Syracusan Menaechmus, was presumably so-named due to his origin in Messenia in western Sicily, 15 Cartwright, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 44-5.

16 Bevington, “The *Comedy of Errors* as Early Experimental Shakespeare,” 13-25.

17 See the discussion of comic violence in relation to the problems of credit, debt, and usury faced by Shakespeare’s contemporaries in the 1590s in Dodson-Robinson, *A Thousand Marks*, 33-4 and 38-40. This was personal to Shakespeare, whose own father was both arrested as a debtor and prosecuted as a usurer, although Queen Elizabeth allowed loans at interest rates up to ten per cent.
reminding the Roman audience of the recently completed Second Punic War. Shakespeare introduces the twin Dromios (the ‘gofers’) when Egeon tells of their birth to a poverty-stricken woman in Epidamnium and his purchase of them there as servants, essentially slaves, for his own infant twin sons (1.1.53-7). There is a significant difference in this instance between Errors and the earlier comedy, both in the relationship between slaves and masters, and the status in which the Antipholus slaves and the Menaechmus slave end up—freed in the Roman play, but still Antipholus-family property in Errors. Due to the expansion of English traders, including slave traders, into the Mediterranean at the turn of the seventeenth century, many enslaved Africans and Asians, probably over a million in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries alone, were transported north and west across the Mediterranean. About the same number of Christian Europeans including British citizens were enslaved in the east due to piracy, which is referenced in both plays. Shakespeare may or may not have been commenting on this particular trade as a potential threat to his queen’s power but, if so, this could be one reason for his alteration of the outcome for his play’s slaves. At the end of The Menaechmi, Plautus has Messenio freed by the grateful Menaechmus twins, then allowed to establish his own place in their trade association by managing the sale of all the Epidamnian Menaechmus’ property—including his wife, if anyone was in the market for one—and then to return, profit in hand, to his homeland (5.148-60). In contrast, at the end of A Comedy of Errors, the twin Dromios are herded into the Abbey along with the rest of the Antipholi; they were part of the household, but only as property; they were free from the evil, ‘damning’ ways of their home city

18 Degenhardt and Turner, “Between Worlds,” 164. Cartwright suggests that Shakespeare’s audience would have recalled “vexatious Turkish acts of kidnapping and piracy and the ransoming of English seamen and travellers” (The Arden Shakespeare, 55). And, piracy had helped cause the dissolution of Egeon’s family (1.1.110-17).

19 It is not clear that Plautus divided his plays into acts, or even scenes, although the Roman poet Horace c. 200 years later advised a five-act division for all dramas (Moseley and Hammond, T. Macci Plauti Menaechmi, 20). Most modern text editions adhere to this practice.
Epidamnium, but in no other sense. Undoubtedly, in time, additional ‘marks’—a punishment for them, although currency for others—would appear on their bodies.

Another ‘product’ brought to English shores via global trade, although unintentionally, was disease, most horrifically bubonic plague. The threat that plague posed to the unity of the commonwealth, and to the security of its rulers, was very fresh in the minds of Shakespeare’s audience. In the two years prior to the Gray’s Inn performance of *Errors*, theatres had been closed due to plague (at times referred to as the ‘Black Death’), which had first appeared in England in 1348 and subsequently returned multiple times even before the ‘Great Plague’ hit London in the seventeenth century, always with significant short- and longer-term effects on English society, including a fear of immigrants, a “stranger-crisis” in Eric Griffin’s words.\(^2\) This is possibly part of the reason that Egeon, searching for his lost family far from home, found no assistance from the locals in Ephesus. Plague’s inexplicable cause(s) and recurrences, with no effective responses available from medical experts or anyone else, produced fear and resentment among the populace. Thus, supernatural forces—sorcery, demonic possession, and the like, which were also believed capable of spreading contagiously—were seen as the most likely causes of plague and other incurable illnesses.\(^2\) These truly threatened the unity and stability of the realm, and thus the queen’s power.

Neither Shakespeare nor Plautus, of course, incorporates actual plague or disease into his comic plays. Deadly diseases are rarely amusing, and even less so for an audience like Shakespeare’s which, in 1594, had so recently suffered through a plague outbreak or which, like Plautus’, had lost so many friends and relatives to the fighting, starvation, and disease of a nearly twenty-years-long war, fought

\(^2\) Quoted by Degenhardt and Turner, “Between Worlds,” 166. Also see Carvalho Homem, “Offshore Desires,” 38-40, for a discussion of similarities in the plights of Egeon, other Shakespearean migrants and refugees, and those in our own times.

mostly in Italy. *Metaphorical* disease, however, can be humorous, and this comic method was used at times in both *Menaechmi* and *Errors*. Medical motifs familiar to the audience could also elicit laughter: fallacious diagnostic methods (the self-important *Medicus* questioning Menaechmus as to the type of wine he drank, 5.914), ineffective ‘cure’ regimens (Pinch’s ‘exorcism’ of the ‘demon’ possessing Antipholus, 4.4.55-8), or the presumption or pretense of disease for a humorous purpose (the recurring ‘insanity’ of characters in both plays). Those situations are safely funny, because the audience is ‘in the know’, and because a rational actor—Messenio in *Menaechmi* and the Abbess in *Errors*—will appear just in time to offset the tricksters and offer a true cure.

Words as well as behaviors can threaten societal harmony, even those used in the service of religion, which was close to the queen’s heart. Her father’s violent break with Roman Catholicism, its rituals, its institutions, and so on, was not complete. There was still much Catholic sentiment in the realm and, even among Protestants—Presbyterians, Puritans, and others—there was dissension over the best way to organize and run the new English state church with the monarch at its head. Aspects of their ‘church’ and its pantheon of gods do appear comically in Plautus’ play; his characters commonly reference their gods’ names, “by Pollux,” “by Hercules,” and so on, with little concern as to the gods’ place of origin. The Romans had long been comfortable with an ever-enlarging pantheon of native

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22 For example, the Epidamnian Menaechmus wishes something deadly to befall everyone who keeps dutiful citizens like himself from spending quality time with their mistresses (4.595).

23 Kinney (“Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*,” 33) says that, unlike the Roman comedies, there is no trickster, no ‘deliberate intriguer’ in *Errors*. But, actually, the popular view was and is that merchants (‘salesmen’) as a group are tricksters, along with unbelievers, certain types of women, and other such ‘diabolic’ creatures.

24 Cartwright, *Theatre and Humanism*, 109, quoting John Brende: “In historyes it is appara[n]t how dau[n]gerous it is to begyn alteracions in a co[m]men wealth, how enuy and hatreds oft rising upo[n] small causes, haue ben the destruction of great kyngdomes.”
and ‘borrowed’ divinities, but cracks in this comfort were starting to show. During those terrible fifteen years when the Carthaginian general Hannibal was ravaging the fields and villages of Italy, and decimating the Romans’ and their allies’ armies sent against him, desperate measures were taken by the Roman Senate. These included the deliberate importation of foreign cults, one being that of the Phrygian goddess Cybele. The war was concluded successfully, and so Cybele (re-named *Magna Mater*, Great Mother) could not then be evicted. Her cult remained in Rome, even though its raucous and often violent rituals (including the public playing of loud, clanging instruments, and flagellation by the goddess’ self-castrated priests) were disturbing to Roman tradition. Another eastern cult brought to Rome not long after the war had ended, that of Dionysus (also called Bacchus or Bromius), also had violent aspects which the Senate tried to temper. But *The Menaechmi*’s audience must have understood the threat, perceived by his twin brother’s wife and father-in-law, when Syracusan Menaechmus pretended to ‘hear’ Bacchus, and then Apollo, ordering him to set Matrona’s eyes ablaze and to beat Senex with his own walking stick (5.835-41). Matrona and Senex flee in terror at this violent verbiage. Shakespeare also uses the words of religion, and of sixteenth-century English authors about religion, for much more than laughs. At times, events in *Comedy of Errors*, along with the characters’ words and actions, appear to support particular ‘best practices’ being advocated for the English church and in church-state politics, such as opposing divisive, absolutist positions on questions of religious conformity, obedience, and faithfulness.

25 Cybele is sometimes identified with Artemis, the patron deity of Ephesus. Among Cybele’s powers was the ability to delude humans into self-harm, which the Romans hoped could be directed against their enemies.

26 That the older divinity, Apollo, whose calm and rational nature was normally the opposite of Bacchus’, also ‘demanded’ violent behavior reflects the Romans’ religious uncertainty at this time.

The setting of *Errors* in Ephesus rather than Epidamnum may be significant here (although ‘Epidamnium’, as mentioned earlier, does appear in the play as the twin Dromios’ place of origin, giving Shakespeare, like Plautus, the opportunity to play on the town’s name—surely a place where evil, damnable things happen). Ephesus was significant in Christianity’s early history; it was closely connected to the preaching and church-planting of the apostle Paul (whom Elizabeth’s father, King Henry VIII, particularly favored, and whose life, according to Walter Travers’ *Book of Discipline*, demonstrated one desirable reform for the English church, since evangelists were clearly more useful than bishops). Ephesus had also been significant in pre-Christian times of course, famous as the site of the statue of the goddess Artemis that was one of the “seven wonders” of the ancient world. So, Ephesus was not a purely Christian city; it was neither devoid of dangerous old ideas and behaviors, nor was it free of dangerous new attractions like those offered by the expanding Ottoman Empire, the source of the luxurious ‘Turkish tapestry’ decorating Antipholus’ house in Ephesus (4.1.103-5) as well as the trading voyage to Persia from which Angelo the goldsmith expected to profit (4.1.31-3). Ephesus was a place where evils abounded, perhaps because ethnic and cultural diversity was the norm there, and diversity may lead to dissension, which can be societally disruptive if not carefully managed.

More directly, in *Errors* Shakespeare uses words/terms paralleled in Plautus’ play to address the threats that religious dissension was bringing to the English world. I earlier mentioned both playwrights’ comical inclusion of ‘insanity’—characters pretending to be mad or accusing others of being so—insanity, like plague, was inexplicable and incurable, after all. But Shakespeare’s characters liberally hurl other frightening charges and accusations at each other, in terms that duplicate those used by sixteenth-century religious factions against others’ views and practices. ‘Devil-possessed’, for example, was an


insult used by church officials to stigmatize those who resisted strict obedience. Other insults are less obvious to a modern reader than to the Elizabethans; references to Pinch as a ‘conjuror’ or a ‘juggler’ (e.g., 4.4.48) are an implicit criticism of Roman Catholic practices like exorcism.\textsuperscript{30} Martin Marprelate, castigating what he saw as the foolish desire to retain a hierarchy of bishops in the new Tudor-installed church, charged that bishops “maime, deform, vex, persecute, grieve, and wunde the church, [they are] not only the wounde but the very plague and pestilence of our Church” to protect their own power and prestige.\textsuperscript{31} All these potentially terrifying terms of insult are found in \textit{Comedy of Errors}. Matthew Sutcliffe opined that “puritans wrote with fistes” rather than with fingers.\textsuperscript{32} Real fisticuffs and other hurtful and divisive responses to disagreements actually happen in \textit{Comedy of Errors}. Recall the sometimes-brighter-than-he-looks-and-sounds Ephesian Dromio in Act III equating the body-blows inflicted on him by his master to the potentially harmful effects of [theologians’] writing: “Say what you will, Sir, but I know what I know; / that you beat me at the mart I have your hand to show. / If the skin were parchment and the blows you gave were ink, / your own hand-writing would tell you what I think” (3.1.11-14). Criticism of officialdom was not only expected but cultivated at the Gray’s Inn revels where \textit{Errors} was performed for an audience of ‘gentility’ and government ministers, all of whom might have the ear of the queen.\textsuperscript{33} Shakespeare seems clearly to be warning that words written with ink on parchment can deliver powerful, and possibly incurable, blows.

Similarly, props serve as a visual admonition against divisiveness: the previously mentioned \textit{catena}, produced by the goldsmith Angelo,

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Cartwright, \textit{The Arden Shakespeare}, 41.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Hamilton, \textit{Shakespeare and the Politics}, 76.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Hamilton, \textit{Shakespeare and the Politics}, 78.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Hamilton, \textit{Shakespeare and the Politics}, 62.
\end{enumerate}
was in dispute throughout the play until it was finally given as a gift, without payment. This likely reminded the audience of the “golden chain of man’s salvation,” a verbal image from William Perkins’ statement on predestination.\(^{34}\) (In Plautus’ play, too, a piece of arm jewelry, a bracelet, was first gifted by the Epidamnian Menaechmus to his wife, then pilfered from her and re-gifted to his mistress, from whom he then needed to retrieve it to re-gain admittance to his own house, and thus be \textit{salvus}, saved.)

As the queen watched or heard about Shakespeare’s new play, she surely understood the connections and the concerns that he was portraying in it. She also likely intuited his reflections of her, and her actions, in the various female characters of \textit{Errors}. In \textit{The Menaechmi} there are only four in total, two of them essential to the plot—the Epidamnian Menaechmus’ wife \textit{Matrona}, and his mistress the prostitute Erotium (“Lovelet”), who conveniently lives right next door. All four, including Erotium’s unnamed slave-maid and the twins’ widowed mother back home in Syracuse, Teuximarcha, have a clear connection to the market-based setting of Plautus’ play. \textit{Matrona} was willingly taken by the Epidamnian Menaechmus as his wife, because her large dowry was of benefit to his business interests and to his lifestyle (5.766-7).\(^{35}\) Erotium was in “the business of pleasure,” and apparently very successful at it.\(^{36}\) Her slave-maid had learned means of profiting from her, and apparently applied them in dealings with Erotium’s ‘clients’ (3.541-5). And Teuximarcha’s name (5.1131) may mean “market-acquisition”—presumably this is

\(^{34}\) Hamilton, \textit{Shakespeare and the Politics}, 84. Perkins’ \textit{Golden Chain} was printed at least nine times between 1590 and 1594, and so this image was likely familiar to Shakespeare and to his audience.

\(^{35}\) And presumably kept them together, though unhappily, since a divorce would have forced Menaechmus to return \textit{Matrona’s} dowry to her father \textit{Senex}, along with her. See Burrow, \textit{Shakespeare & Classical Antiquity}, Ch. 4, for discussion of this and other social practices in Plautus’ world, and their inexact equivalences in Shakespeare’s.

not coincidental. These characters are essentially two-dimensional comic stereotypes: greedy, scheming, nagging.

But three of Shakespeare’s female characters, besides the kitchen-maid Nell whose body symbolized both the attractions and potential dangers of global trade and the “businesswoman”/courtesan, are more than comic caricatures. These three, Antipholus’ wife Adriana, her unmarried sister Luciana, and the Abbess Emilia—among their other functions in the play—reflect, at times, the church itself (described in the Bible as female and the bride of Christ) or its head, Queen Elizabeth. Adriana is somewhat similar to The Menaechmi’s Matrona in that she apparently comes from a wealthy and important family; the Duke himself arranged her marriage to Antipholus. That her unmarried sister Luciana lives with her suggests that their parents are no longer alive, thus leaving her with limited emotional support. Now, Adriana is profoundly anxious about the faithfulness and loyalty of her marriage partner, and unsure what actions to take; she seeks advice. Disappointed and angered by Antipholus’ response to her fears, she locks him out of their house—an exclusionary tactic reminiscent of official Elizabethan rhetoric and policies identifying nonconformity as faithlessness. Adriana’s actions were a serious violation of the marital relationship, and they led to emotional pain for many of the play’s personae, physical pain for some (like Dromio) or, even worse, financial pain. Like Adriana, the queen had exacerbated problems within the church-family, by interpreting differing practices among church members, like the Presbyterians’ small-group meetings where they talked of church policies, as signs of unfaithfulness and deviance. Luciana, lighter-spirited and chaste (but confused by the attraction she now feels for the man she thinks is her brother-in-law), sympathizes with her sister, but—lest relationships be irreparably disrupted—she argues for tolerance, mercy, and open communication (in contrast to Queen Elizabeth’s refusal

37 Hamilton, Shakespeare and the Politics, 80-1.

38 Hamilton, Shakespeare and the Politics, 81-2.
Shakespeare’s words here should have had broad appeal to people who were alarmed by the oppressive measures instituted by the government. Luciana’s calming words point to a positive way forward, employing patience, reasonableness, and decorum—suitable attributes for a queen of “fuller humanity.” And, finally, Emilia the Abbess arrives on stage, offering the final, best, and most hopeful redress: that Queen Elizabeth would come to represent in her own person both the English monarchy and the properly reformed English church. After remaining aloof for almost the entire play from the divisions and exclusions caused by an assortment of disagreements, misunderstandings and fears, and unsuccessfully leaving their resolution to the common sense of secular officials like the Duke, Emilia finally intervenes, recognizing that all the characters are one family and one community “under God.”

The Abbess, speaking “from levels of knowledge different from [the others’], intuiting the miracles of Christian providence, bespeaking a harmonizing of happenstance that looks very much like the action of grace,” presents a sort of “renewed catechism” for all Errors’ participants. Adriana admits the error of her words and actions, and reaffirms her partnership with Antipholus. The Duke brushes aside Ephesian law and accepts the superiority of mercy over mere justice. The Abbess brings an

39 Hamilton, *Shakespeare and the Politics*, 82.


41 Hamilton, *Shakespeare and the Politics*, 68.

42 The Duke has now reappeared on stage along with Egeon, whose wandering is about to end, although not in the way he expects; the need or lack perhaps symbolized by his name if it is derived from the Latin verb *ego* (Riehle, *Shakespeare, Plautus and the Humanist Tradition*, 177) is about to be filled.


44 Riehle, *Shakespeare, Plautus and the Humanist Tradition*, 176; Leggett, *Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors*, 17. I once saw a collegiate production of Errors in which the role of Duke was played by a female actor, as a Duchess. The face-to-face meeting and conversation of Duchess and Abbess addressed even more powerfully this tension between *clementia* and pietas.
end to the vilifications, the accusations, and the exclusions with a ‘natural’ remedy: She takes everyone with her inside the Abbey, though not all at once, for reflection and reconciliation. This is what the church can do, Shakespeare opines through her character, deflecting or compensating for societal threats and dangers, but only if it is a true church, and one with a legitimate, benevolent, necessary queen at its head.

In conclusion, Philip Kennicott’s review of the Metropolitan Museum’s exhibition on the Tudors asks (I paraphrase): Why is power in the past tense (Richard’s and Elizabeth’s, Roman and sixteenth-century English) so interesting and alluring? Why is art, visual and literary, so effective at washing away the gritty, noxious reality of human ambition and human error? It is dangerous, of course, to be moralistic about history, but art can do so usefully when moralistic is taken in its literal sense of behavioral. The Tudors, Kennicott reminds us, came to power after a long period of civil war and brought with them a kind of peace. They also brought Shakespeare, who effectively rewrote English history to make the Tudor monarchs seem inevitable, necessary, and legitimate so long as they could control and consolidate the essence of their power at the cultural and emotional level through the means at hand, a Christian abbess and a virgin queen. Comic plays, like tragic, historical, and blends of these types, have always shown audiences how to behave, and how power can elevate, while leaving everyone happier at the end, as comedy is always intended to do. A comedy “may still have some surprises” for us. Indeed.

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