

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82794-2 - The Comedy of Errors: Updated Edition

Edited by T. S. Dorsch

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

BY ROS KING

*The Comedy of Errors* has provoked some wildly different responses. Frequently described – and sometimes dismissed – throughout its history as a farcical romp, the last forty years have seen some notable productions that have explored a more serious side, focusing on the phenomenon and psychology of twindom, and drawing out a connection between the play’s language of witchcraft and the theatricality of illusion.

The play is part of a long literary tradition. Shakespeare found its main storylines in two comedies by the Roman playwright Plautus, but in putting them together he achieved a virtuoso increase in the number of ‘errors’ in the plot.<sup>1</sup> Despite the pagan setting, he also incorporated some sixty direct biblical quotations, with others taken from the Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies, and inlaid the text with countless incidental puns on Christian religious meanings.<sup>2</sup> But the theme of lost children and mistaken identity is more ancient: as old as the love and the rivalry that humans feel for their siblings or their children, and the atavistic fear and fascination that we have for the double.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, of course, had a personal interest and knowledge, being himself the father of twins: Judith and Hamnet, born in 1585.

These serious elements, and the potential tragedy of the opening scene, all indicate that there is indeed more to the play than farce, although any production or critical account that ignores its hilariously dextrous presentation of the story will not have done it justice. The play is riven with contradictions: religion and superstition, identity and confusion, morality and excess, while its knockabout humour is achieved through precise control of language. The challenge to any critic and to any theatre director is therefore twofold: to understand its innovative and experimental yet traditional form; and to hold its utter hilarity and disturbing seriousness in balance.

## Derivations

*Shakespeare’s main source: Plautus’s Menaechmi*

Plautus’s comedy *Menaechmi* is the primary source for Shakespeare’s play in more ways than just the storyline. It begins with a Prologue, which plays a game with the audience on the nature of drama, raising a number of important theoretical issues that any dramatist needs to think about. It problematises the idea of the author (‘I bring

<sup>1</sup> Miola, *Comedy*, p. 22 (citing W. H. D. Rouse (ed.), *Menaechmi*), suggests fifty errors as opposed to Plautus’s seventeen.

<sup>2</sup> This density of religious reference occurs in a play that occupies just 1918 lines in the Folio, a line count that also includes stage directions. The other comedies occupy upwards of 2,500 lines each. See Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Comedies*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> See W. Thomas MacCarey, ‘*The Comedy of Errors*: a different kind of comedy’, *New Literary History*, x1, 3, (Spring 1978), 525–36.

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you Plautus, orally, not corporally'), questions the Prologue's authority as a narrator, since he cannot confirm how alike the children were ('I myself have not seen them, and none of you is to suppose I have') and confronts the disturbing ability of theatre to change place and time while staying still ('Now I must foot it back to Epidamnus so as to clarify the situation . . . without stirring a step').<sup>1</sup> Greek and Roman comedy was written to be performed in theatres which had a permanent architectural *frons scenae* or back wall to the stage with, usually, three sets of doors that could be considered as representing separate houses assigned to specific characters in the action. There were also two side entrances, conceived as being the way to the port or the market-place or perhaps the countryside. These locations were fixed for the duration of the performance but of course the same onstage place represented different geographical places in different plays. As Plautus's Prologue provocatively states, challenging those that find the make-believe of theatre morally disturbing, 'It is quite like the way in which families, too, are wont to change their homes: now a pimp lives here, now a young gentleman.'

The Prologue also fills us in with the back-story of the play. There was once an old merchant of Syracuse who had twin sons so alike that not even their mother could tell them apart. When the boys were about seven years old, he took one of them with him on business to Tarentum where there was a festival. The boy got lost in the crowd and was found by a merchant from Epidamnus, who took him away, brought him up and ultimately left him his fortune. The boy's father returned to Syracuse where he died of grief. The remaining twin was brought up by their grandfather who changed his name (which as we will discover was Sosicles) to that of the lost boy, Menaechmus.

The action of the play takes place in Epidamnus. Peniculus, Menaechmus's parasite or hanger-on, enters looking for an invitation to dinner. He is joined on stage by Menaechmus who has been having an argument with his wife. In order to punish her he has stolen one of her gowns, which he is wearing under his cloak, intending to give it to his mistress, Erotium, who now comes out of her house. She is delighted with the gown, and invites them both to dinner. They go to the forum while the cook, Cylindrus, is sent to buy provisions. In the second act, the other Menaechmus and his slave Messenio have just arrived by sea from Syracuse. They are looking for the lost twin but meet first Cylindrus and then Erotium. Menaechmus of Syracuse is astonished that she calls him by his name but eventually goes in to dinner with her, sending Messenio with all his money and belongings to the inn. Some time later, Peniculus returns, cross and hungry, having lost his Menaechmus, just in time to see Menaechmus of Syracuse leaving Erotium's house. She has asked him to take the gown away for alterations. Peniculus decides to pick a quarrel and threatens him that he will tell the wife that her gown has been given to a prostitute. Erotium's maid then enters with a gold armband (also once the wife's property) and asks Menaechmus to take it to the goldsmith's to have some more gold added to it. He intends to sell both gown and

<sup>1</sup> *Menaechmi*, tr. P. Nixon, in *Plautus*, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press and London: William Heinemann, 1977.

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armband. By Act 4 Peniculus has told the wife what he knows. She asks what she should do. He replies, ‘The same as always – make him miserable’ (cf. *Errors* 5.1.57–68, where a version of this advice is given by the Abbess). Menaechmus of Epidamnus now enters, complaining that he has had to spend the day speaking up in court for one of his protégés, a dishonest man, ‘every one of his crimes was sworn to by three witnesses’. His wife accosts him about his theft of the gown. They argue and she shuts him out of the house. He goes next door to his mistress to ask for the gown back but she, of course, is also angry and shuts him out. Menaechmus of Syracuse enters, still carrying the gown, and anxious about what Messenio has done with the money. The wife sees him and begins to berate him about the gown. When he fails to comprehend, she threatens divorce and sends for her father. Together they accuse him of insanity. They leave and he goes to find his ship. The father returns with a doctor and observes while Menaechmus of Epidamnus enters complaining that everything has gone wrong for him. The doctor then asks whether he drinks red or white wine. Menaechmus angrily replies, ‘Why don’t you inquire . . . whether I generally eat birds with scales, fish with feathers’, a line which is utilised and extended by Shakespeare for the argument between the two Dromios in the door scene (3.1.79–83). The Doctor declares that Menaechmus must be locked up and goes to make arrangements. Menaechmus is left alone. Messenio enters declaring that he is a responsible servant who looks after his master’s affairs without being supervised – after all it saves him a beating. The father re-enters with slaves who try to carry Menaechmus away. Messenio rescues him and asks for his liberty as reward. Menaechmus agrees to this, although of course he does not know who Messenio is, but when the slave says he will go and get his money from the inn, he becomes greedily interested. He exits into Erotium’s house. Messenio now returns with his real master who is cross that the slave is lying to him. The original Menaechmus then re-enters, identifications are made and Messenio is freed. Menaechmus decides to auction all his goods (including, as Messenio starts to announce, his wife, if anyone will have her). He intends to return to Syracuse with his brother, who now assumes his original name, Sosicles.

### *Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors and Plautus*

There are evident correspondences in plot between Plautus’s play and Shakespeare’s – and some equally obvious differences. Antipholus does not steal his wife’s gown, nor her armband; instead, he has commissioned a chain to give to her, although he promises this to the Courtesan after his wife locks him out. It is also his wife with whom his twin dines rather than the Courtesan whose role is thereby greatly diminished. Shakespeare’s play, indeed, asserts marital union. But if we simply indulge in spotting literary derivations without asking the question why *Errors* might have been put together in the way it has, we will neither understand it on its own terms nor be able to transpose it into modern productions that really work. This introduction will therefore take a dramaturgical approach to the play: trying to establish as far as possible the cultural climate in which it was written so as to judge how it might effectively speak to audiences today.

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Shakespeare's play opens not with a Prologue, as does *Menaechmi*, but with the Syracusan merchant, Egeon, in custody in Ephesus. His crime is simply that he has been found in the city. There is enmity between the two city-states of Syracuse and Ephesus, and travel between them is forbidden on penalty of death or the payment of a hefty ransom. Egeon has no money and unless someone can be found prepared to pay the ransom for him, he will be put to death at sunset that evening. Such is the terrible sorrow of his family history, however, that he almost welcomes death. The Duke invites him to tell his story. He says that he was Syracusan born and bred. He and his wife were very happily married and were becoming increasingly prosperous when his agent's death in Epidamnum caused him to undertake a journey there to see to his affairs. His wife, who was pregnant at the time, followed him and there gave birth to identical twin boys. At that very same time, a poor woman staying at the same inn also gave birth to twin sons. He bought these two boys in order to bring them up as servants to his own. Sailing back to Syracuse, however, the family's ship was wrecked. He and his wife managed to strap themselves to either end of a mast, he with the firstborn of both sets of twins and she with the younger pair, but the mast was broken in two on a rock. His wife and the two children with her were blown along at a faster rate and he saw them picked up by a fishing boat. He and the other boys were rescued by another vessel, but, unable to catch up with the fishermen, they turned for home. Eighteen years later these two boys announced their intention of going to seek for their lost twins.

Egeon's line describing 'My youngest boy, and yet my eldest care' (1.1.124) is often interpreted (as in T. S. Dorsch's annotation to this edition) as an error by Shakespeare since Egeon had taken charge of the elder boys. But perhaps the word 'youngest' should instead be interpreted in *OED*'s second, 'rare' sense of 'most youthful in character'. If so, the line suggests the very real tug of emotions that many parents experience when a child leaves home: relief that the long period of responsibility for caring for the child is at an end, and overwhelming anxiety for someone who, one may feel, is still too young and vulnerable to make their way in the world alone. With the children for whom he was responsible now gone, Egeon himself has spent five years scouring Greece and the boundaries of Asia for the rest of his family. Crucially, Egeon has raised the two remaining boys under the names of their lost brothers. This attempt to deny appalling loss is not an uncommon action in families in which a child has died at birth. In this play, as in *Menaechmi*, this marker of terrible grief, which, by denying difference of identity, can sometimes do psychological damage to the surviving child, is the engine that drives the hilarious series of mistakes that now ensues. For, unbeknown to Egeon, not only have the twins from Syracuse now also arrived in Ephesus, but this is the town where, separated from their mother, the two lost twins have been brought up.

This outline of the opening situation gives us an inkling of the extraordinary interweaving of different types of story in this play. It is a mixture of loving domesticity and aspiring, upwardly mobile, middle-class family values in which economic adoptions are also a fact of life; of families split by natural disaster and war; of individuals disastrously caught up in political conflicts beyond their control. There is social resonance and psychological realism here with which we can still identify but it is combined with

romance quest, and elements of traditional fairy story. It is by turns terrifying, touching – and downright ludicrous. Indeed, ‘a general feature of *The Comedy of Errors*, one that orthodox critical and stage interpretation has not found easy to account for: [is] its paradoxical representation of events in simultaneous but contradictory terms, as both hilarious and spiritually serious’.<sup>1</sup>

*Shakespeare’s first tragicomedy*

Although Plautus’s *Menaechmi* supplies the main part of the story of one lost twin searching for another, Shakespeare, like most good writers, only ever retells a given story by refracting it through other stories. His second major source, which gave him some of the ideas for the slave twins, is another play by Plautus, *Amphitruo*. This tells how Jupiter, the libidinous ruler of the Greek gods, manages to have an adulterous relationship with a woman, Alcmena, by turning himself into a copy of her husband, Amphitruo, while Mercury, disguised as the family slave, Sosia, guards the door. Most of the humour derives from Sosia’s puzzlement and frustration at coming face to face with his double who bears his name and denies him access to his master’s house. This, of course, supplies the riotous scene in which Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus are denied entry to their house by Dromio of Syracuse. Much more important even than this plot element, however, is the *Amphitruo*’s exploration of a somewhat contentious approach to play construction, which Shakespeare was to draw on and develop for the rest of his working life.

The prologue to Plautus’s play not only contains the only classical usage of the term ‘tragicomedy’ but also a robust defence of that genre. Plautus uses the word to describe his play on the grounds that it contains both a god and a slave and therefore mixes characters that would normally be kept apart in tragedies and comedies respectively. This Prologue, spoken by Mercury – both messenger to the gods and, suitably, the god of traders – is a challenging, colloquial direct address to the audience. Mercury’s willingness to cater to the demands of the play’s customers suggests that Plautus is being satirical, both about audience expectations and about the rules governing playwriting. Having first described the play as a tragedy he asks:

What’s that? Are you disappointed  
 To find it’s a *tragedy*? Well, I can easily change it.  
 I’m a god, after all, I can easily make it a comedy,  
 And never alter a line. Is that what you’d like? . . .  
 But I was forgetting – stupid of me – of course,  
 Being a god, I know quite well what you’d like,  
 I know exactly what’s in your minds. Very well.  
 I’ll meet you half-way, and make it a tragi-comedy.  
 It can’t be an out-and-out comedy, I’m afraid,  
 With all these kings and gods in the cast. All right, then,  
 A tragi-comedy – at least it’s got one slave-part.

(*Amphitruo*, Prologue 50–60)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brian Gibbons, ‘Erring and straying like lost sheep’, *Shakespeare Survey* 50, 1997, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Tr. E. F. Watling, Plautus, *The Rope and Other Plays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.

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For many of Shakespeare's contemporaries, as well as later critics, the problem with tragicomedy is that it breaks the literary decorum set out by Aristotle in his *Art of Poetry* that forbade mixing the high style supposed to be appropriate to tragedy with the lowlife characters and bawdy humour of comedy. The Roman poet and critic Horace, writing his own *Ars Poetica* a hundred years after Plautus's death, cautiously refers to such a mixed form but he does not give it a name. Describing the history of the development of drama he suggests that 'someone competing in tragic song for a paltry goat stripped down his rustic satyrs, and in rough manner (but with some dignity intact) tried some jokes'. With this precedent in mind, he says it is sometimes 'appropriate . . . to relieve the serious with the playful'.<sup>1</sup> In the next few lines, however, he also says: 'Tragedy despises all chatter in light verses', although he later acknowledges that, when writing satyr plays, he would not favour restricting his vocabulary to plain words, or try to avoid a tragic tone if the character speaking required it. This indecisiveness and evident embarrassment fuelled the storm in Italian intellectual circles in the 1580s that greeted Guarini's pastoral tragicomedy, *Il Pastor Fido* (*The Faithful Shepherd*) and his subsequent lengthy written defences of it. Shakespeare himself was to send up such anxiety when he makes Polonius refer to 'tragical-comical-historical-pastoral' (*Hamlet* 2.2.393), but in fact all of his plays, with the possible exception of the very earliest histories, revel in breaking this Aristotelian rule. In plays from *King John* (c. 1591), via *Hamlet* itself and *Twelfth Night* (1599) to *Cymbeline* (1610), Shakespeare is indeed confident enough to mingle horror with humour, seriousness with foolery, and to find comedy in tragedy and vice versa – although again critics have not always been happy with this flouting of convention. But *The Comedy of Errors* is perhaps not completely assured in its treatment of the form. Its opening, potentially tragic, scene appears to be separated off from the main action of the play until connected by the dénouements at the very end. On the other hand, comedy and horror are mingled throughout in that we, the audience, find excruciatingly funny, situations that are excruciatingly painful for the characters – sometimes literally so, as in the case of the Dromios, who are repeatedly beaten while we laugh.

The word 'errors' in Shakespeare's title is perhaps partly an indication that he was aware that the structure of the play breaks conventional literary decorum by combining comedy and tragedy. Unusually for Shakespeare, and perhaps significantly in the circumstances, this play actually observes those other unnecessary rules of playwriting: the unity of time and of place (often, since the Renaissance, attributed inaccurately to Aristotle). The fact that it does so is perhaps an indication that its other flagrant flouting of the rules is a deliberate choice.

The significant change of tone between the first and second scenes is a problem that is exacerbated in any production that uses a representational set. Either as with Trevor Nunn's touristy Greek street scene (RSC 1976) we are faced with the anomaly of

<sup>1</sup> Ross S. Kilpatrick, *The Poetry of Criticism: Horace, Epistles II and Ars Poetica*, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1990, lines 220–5.

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1 Trevor Nunn's production, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1976; Dromio of Ephesus (Michael Williams), Antipholus of Ephesus (Mike Gwilym), Adriana (Judi Dench), Luciana (Francesca Annis)

formal court proceedings taking place in the public market-place, or the bare realist misery of prison walls has to give way to some almost magical realism for the errors part of the plot. The production that has perhaps come closest to achieving this by confronting the problem in exactly these terms was Tim Supple's co-production for the RSC and the Young Vic in 1996. This relied on lighting changes to wash the plain stone coloured walls and floor of a permanent set, and used continuous music to underscore and tie the story together. The music was devised with the musicians and composer as part of the rehearsal process and used Arabic idioms and instruments (zarb, balafon, kence and 'ud, among others). Critics generally found that much of the expected humour had been lost in the production's seriousness, although most found this refreshing. Antipholus of Syracuse's desire to find his missing twin had become, in Benedict Nightingale's words, 'an inner need verging on compulsion', and was reinforced in the programme with an extract from Penelope Farmer's book on the experience of having, and losing, a twin: 'My sister, side by side with me, told me who I was; and who I wasn't. So that even now she's dead, what she was shadows what I am.'<sup>1</sup> Alastair Macaulay noted the Janus-like tragicomic structure, 'the play, like a weather vane, keeps turning us its opposite aspect', while Nightingale promised that audiences would 'feel the magic and may even be moved' by the reconciliations at the

<sup>1</sup> Penelope Farmer, *Two, or, the Book of Twins and Doubles*, London: Virago, 1996.

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end, adding 'How often does *The Comedy of Errors* have the texture and clout to accomplish that?'<sup>1</sup>

In Mark Thompson's design for Ian Judge's production for the RSC the transition from first to second scene was achieved when the plain back wall of the prison flew up to reveal a set with nine doors (three on each of the three sides of the stage) overhung with an arc of three-dimensional, vaguely zodiacal figures depicting the names of the houses in the play: the Porpentine, the Phoenix and so on. Egeon shook his head and exited through one of these doors. Much of the action of the production consisted of repeated, often wild and sometimes false, exits and entrances through these doors prompting the question whether the play was indeed all in Egeon's head. Set and programme design were co-ordinated: black and white squares on both programme cover and stage floor were crossed and dislocated by a diagonal faultline, while lift-up flaps on the programme cover reflected the multiple doors of the set and hid the letters of the title. By contrast, Blaithan Sheerin's powerful and sinister design complete with steel cage lift to remove Egeon back down to the cells in Lynne Parker's production (RSC 2000) remained as a brooding presence throughout the performance. Although it was well capable of representing both inside and outside in some Mediterranean town, it sometimes seemed at odds with the production's vaudeville treatment of later scenes.

*Shakespeare's schooling and the construction of The Comedy of Errors*

The curriculum in a sixteenth-century grammar school, like the one in Stratford-upon-Avon that Shakespeare must have attended, was largely devoted to double translation of the standard works of classical authors from Latin (and some Greek) into English and from English back into as close an imitation of the original as possible.<sup>2</sup> Erasmus, however, like fellow humanist scholars in England, was adamant that teachers should make study enjoyable. He advocated varying this work with more creative practice, getting students to invent dialogues that go against the grain of well-worn stories:

Nor am I averse to that type of exercise which I see was employed by the ancients . . . For instance: Menelaus should reclaim Helen before the Trojan assembly: or Phoenix should persuade Achilles to return to the battle: or Ulysses should urge the Trojans to give back Helen rather than endure the war. Several rhetorical exercises of Libanius and Aristides exist along these lines.<sup>3</sup>

An imaginative schoolboy, exposed to such methods, might have become adept in manipulating texts and devising alternative versions.

Play performance by students of all ages was also widely regarded as an improving form of relaxation since it trains the memory, develops a sense of argument and instils confidence in public speaking. These were not only considered important

<sup>1</sup> Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times* 4.9.1997; Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*, 4.9.1997.

<sup>2</sup> See T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's Small Latin and Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966. <sup>3</sup> *Method of Study*, p. 681.

qualities for the development of educated people capable of undertaking public service, but essential prerequisites for study at the universities where progression through the degree levels was achieved in ‘disputations’: the formal staging of debates in which students were required to argue orally on one side or another of a given philosophical question.

Shakespeare’s schooling would also have left him acutely aware of the extent to which classical authors borrowed from and imitated their predecessors. He would have known that the Prologues with which the Roman playwright Terence (a rather younger contemporary of Plautus) prefaced his comedies invariably refer to these borrowings and confront the question of authenticity, challenging audiences to engage in textual criticism:

*Joined in Death* is a comedy by Diphilus [a Greek poet of the fourth century BC]: Plautus made a Latin play out of it with the same name. In the beginning of the Greek play there is a young man who abducts a girl from a slave-dealer. Plautus left out this incident altogether, so the present author took it for his *Brothers* and translated it word for word. This is the new play we are going to act; watch carefully and see if you think the scene is a plagiarism or the restoration of a passage which had been carelessly omitted.

(*Adelphoe* or *The Brothers*)<sup>1</sup>

#### *Pre-Shakespearean tragicomedy in England*

Twenty and more years before Guarini’s pastoral play, this type of education had already resulted in some plays in English that might have challenged Shakespeare to explore the immense possibilities in the contradictory nature of tragicomedy. Richard Edwards’s *Damon and Pythias*, written in 1564 for a performance at court by the schoolboys of the Chapel Royal, contains elements of both Plautus and Terence and describes itself as a ‘tragical comedy’ – the first English play known to do so. Published twice (1571 and 1581), it remained popular among later generations. There was probably a performance at Lincoln’s Inn in 1566 and it was being quoted in Oxford eighty years later.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Edwards is listed along with Shakespeare, Lyly, Greene and others by Francis Meres as ‘the best for Comedy amongst us’.<sup>3</sup> In this play, and probably also in his lost play *Palamon and Arcyte*, performed before the Queen at Oxford in 1566, for which two extensive eyewitness descriptions survive, Edwards had adopted and developed the classical *urban* (not pastoral) tragicomic form as an invaluable vehicle for dealing with sensitive contemporary political issues. Even earlier than *Damon and Pythias*, however, the mid-century English comedy *Jack Juggler* is clearly an adaptation of the *Amphitruo* in a recognisably English setting. It is likely that Edwards was also the author of that play since its varied metrical irregularity, humour, facility for wordplay, and ability to adapt classical literature to an English domestic situation bear a strong resemblance to his known work.<sup>4</sup> The play was evidently written to be performed at Christmas, since Jack’s opening speech calls on Christ, St Steven and St John (celebrated on 25, 26 and 27 December respectively), but its dark references to

<sup>1</sup> Terence, *The Comedies*, tr. Betty Radice, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> King, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, 1598.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Damon and Pythias*, 8.23n; 8.37n; 13.13n in King.

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hidden meanings, to four deaths seven years previously and to being ‘washed in warme blod’ (364–8) indicate that it is no mere seasonal romp.

Like *Damon and Pythias*, *Jack Juggler* is a play for schoolboys. Like *Damon* too, it begins with a disingenuous disclaimer. The author stresses that the present comedy is mere entertainment and that the content is ‘not worthe an oyster shel’. He repeats that the play will treat of ‘mattiers of non importaunce’ (54) and that no one should ‘looke to heare of mattiers substancyall / Nor mattiers of any gravitee’ since such things are not appropriate for ‘litle boyes handelings’ (73–6).<sup>1</sup> These protestations of inconsequentiality are necessary because its language will allow audiences to hear it as a metaphor for the most ‘substantial’ matter of the sixteenth century: the physical nature of the bread and wine at Holy Communion. Were they transubstantiated? Were they completely unchanged and a mere symbol of Christ’s body and blood? Or did they, as Luther taught and Thomas Cranmer came to believe, carry in their unchanged state the true body and blood to the faithful alone? As Cranmer said ‘the spiritual eating is with the heart not with the teeth’.<sup>2</sup>

In changing the story from ancient Rome to London, Jupiter and his adultery are discarded, Amphitruo’s character is renamed Master Boungrace, Mercury becomes Jack Juggler and a supper invitation becomes the focus of the play. The character Jack Juggler first appears in the reforming satire of the fifteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*, and the term ‘juggling’ was regularly used to attack Roman Catholic practices (particularly the belief in transubstantiation). In October 1551, Archbishop Cranmer himself cited Alcmena’s deception by Jupiter as an example of ‘an illusion of our senses, if our senses take for bread and wine that whiche is not so indeed’.<sup>3</sup> The play is vigorously Protestant and was most probably performed during the Christmas of 1550–1. It too was published twice during the 1560s presumably to reinforce religious conformity through entertainment.

**Jugglers and exorcists**

Shakespeare certainly knew Edwards’s acknowledged work and parodies it by quotation and imitation in a number of plays including *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry IV* and probably *Twelfth Night*. This frequency perhaps indicates that he felt himself to be directly in competition with the older dramatist. Whether or not he also knew *Jack Juggler*, the high level of biblical reference and religious punning indicates that *The Comedy of Errors* likewise turns Plautus’s *Amphitruo* into a tragicomedy of religious difference. But whereas in *Jack* the errors of mistaken identity in the plot are the result of deliberate deception and impersonation, the errors in Shakespeare’s play reflect a *separate* existence for each of the four individuals in the

<sup>1</sup> All references to Jack Juggler from *Three Tudor Classical Interludes: Thersites, Jacke Jugeler, Horestes*, Marie Axton (ed.), Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982.      <sup>2</sup> MacCulloch, pp. 179–83, 464.

<sup>3</sup> *An Answer of the most reverend . . . Thomas archebyshop of Canterburye . . . unto a crafty and sophisticall cavillation devised by Stephen Gardiner . . . late byshop of Winchester* (London 1551), cited *Five-Act*, p. 669.