

'Errors' and the Play of Identity

In Shakespeare's time, 'error' referred to wandering as well as mistaking. The 'knight-errant' is a wandering knight, one who travels in quest of adventure. Though its tone is one of farce more than romance, *The Comedy of Errors* is full of wanderings. Whether its characters are in quest of long-lost family members or are simply barred from home by mistake and forced to roam the city, their wanderings turn them into outsiders, and their quests quickly sound like a search for identity.

But here, as in other Shakespearean comedies, finding oneself entails losing oneself. On his arrival in Ephesus, the Syracusan Antipholus declares, 'I will go lose myself / And wander up and down to view the city.' In his search for his twin brother, he claims that 'I to the world am like a drop of water / That in the ocean seeks another drop' and so 'confounds himself'.

Shakespeare fills the play with this language of confounded selves. Adriana uses the same water imagery when she tells the wrong Antipholus that as husband and wife, they two are one – 'undividable, incorporate' – and that to deny her is no more possible than to let fall a single 'drop of water in the breaking gulf, and take unmingled thence the drop again.' Of course, this Antipholus is actually not her husband. But he is perfectly willing to fall in love with her sister instead and to speak the same language of love, confounding self and beloved – calling Luciana 'mine own self's better part' and insisting to her that 'I am thee.'

Alongside the wish to identify self and other, however, the play shows us the opposite tendency too – an all-too-easy rejection of the other as an outsider. Shakespeare plays powerfully with this theme, in part because he twists it so. In his plot, instead of meeting their twins in Ephesus, the wandering Antipholus and Dromio are mistaken for them. As a result, the strangers are treated as family, and the family are treated as strangers. The resulting questions of identity and belonging are full of paradox, and so are the answers. This is early Shakespeare, but he's already onto something important – we can be strangers in our own homes at times, and on the other hand, we can sometimes find ourselves most intimately when we're farthest from home.

Not all the strangers in this play are mistakenly welcomed. At the start, Egeon represents an exaggerated version of the outsider – a case in which being a stranger is fatal. By a law that even those enforcing it seem to regret, he is doomed to die for his particular outsider status. Totally alone, he has till the end of the day to find a friend who can ransom him.

While that death sentence is pending, the play dilates the confusion of identities, allowing a series of absurd snapshots of what that process is and means. In this world, your identity seems to be determined primarily by your social context – it's a question not so much of who you are inwardly, but of who knows you. And that social context can seem to trump your own sense of identity. Adriana seeming to know Antipholus of Syracuse makes him feel he's either mad or dreaming: 'Sleeping or waking? Mad or well advised? / Known unto these, and to myself disguised!' Deciding to go along with things 'at all adventures', he reaches a point where he's forced to question 'if that I am I.'

And his Dromio, similarly claimed by a woman he doesn't know from Adam, is also thrown into a crisis of identity – 'Do you know me, sir? Am I Dromio? And I your man? Am I myself?' His master decides, 'if everyone knows us, and we know none, / 'Tis time, I think, to trudge, pack, and be gone.' Misrecognition by others is so thoroughly disorientating that the place can only be understood as one of sinister magic – 'There's none but witches do inhabit here.'

As the confusion and terror mount, the object at the centre of the crazy play of identity is – perhaps not coincidentally – a chain. Not just a socioeconomic expression of relations between husband and wife, merchant and customer, servant and master, the chain is a constant point of reference, and one that for better or worse signifies connection. Owned at various points by no fewer than six different characters, the chain is both a cause and a cure of all the mistaken identities. When the stranger Antipholus exclaims 'here we wander in illusions' and begs that 'some blessed power deliver us from hence!' his prayer is answered by the entrance of the courtesan, misrecognising him and demanding – what else? – the chain.

In the end it's both the wanderings and the illusions that bring us to the little miracle at the close – the part after all the major revelations of the twins' and their parents' identities, when the two Dromios are left onstage to negotiate their own new relationship. Not knowing who as elder should go first, they decide to call themselves equal: 'We came into the world like brother and brother / And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another.'

After all the wandering, we've arrived at an 'other' that means sameness rather than difference.

Shakespeare's play moves from the 'other' as stranger who has to be killed, to the other who is part of oneself.

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