

Separation and unity
as themes that create
order in the comedy
of errors



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Shakespearian comedies often address the widely-accepted notion in Elizabethan England that suggested that order and balance should prevail both in the world and in performed representations of the world, even if the form of the plays often employed a sense of comic disorder. Social, noble, and spiritual hierarchies are described through language and events in nearly all of Shakespeare's work, although the methods by which he created structure in his plays differs. In many of the comedies, including *Twelfth Night* and *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare uses comedy caused by situations that are chaotic or confusing to reveal an underlying order within the universe. *The Comedy of Errors*, one of Shakespeare's earliest comedies, does exactly this in several ways. He establishes order not by the events (many of the scenes are confusing for both audience and characters), but by enforcing a structure in which themes are perfectly balanced. Specifically, this play uses a recurring balance between unity and separation to suggest that, even in a fictional world that is highly illogical, an underlying sense of order fuels the plot. References to unity and separation are constant from the play's beginning to end: the idea of unity is described through acts of or references to tying, fastening, confining, union, marriage, and binding while the idea of separation is described through untying, divorcing, releasing, freeing, losing, or cutting off.

A close analysis of *The Comedy of Errors* reveals that Shakespeare's choice of plot, character development, and language is used to create a direct balance between the recurring themes of unity and separation. The events of the play are fueled directly by separation and unity, with a lost father, Egeon, recalling the memory of a shipwreck that separated him from his twin

sons and his desire to be reunited with them. The twins' separation from one another and lack of knowledge about the other creates much of the tension within the play, and their uniting at the end leads to a regaining of order. In an essay exploring the specific symbols that suggest the motifs of binding and freeing, Richard Henze suggests that "this is a play of fate, and it is in the very special sense that fate is the gravitational pull of society that draws men together if they had once been separated," (36). It is this "fate" that creates order in the world the Shakespeare is portraying, and it is the reuniting of separated characters that creates a sense of satisfaction and structure. It is not only the overarching events of the play that are guided by the acts of uniting and separating, however: action on a very small scale follows this structure as well. For example, Vincent Petronella discusses in his essay, "Structure and Theme through Separation and Union in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*," how both of the Antipholus's are used to portray a balance of separation and reuniting. Antipholus of Ephesus complains about his husbandly bonds and his unity with his wife at the beginning of the play because, as he explains, he wishes to dine with a prostitute without having to ask his wife's consent. In Act III scene I, he finds himself physically locked out of his house, his wife having mistaken his twin brother, Antipholus of Syracuse, for him. He is suddenly helplessly separated from the bonds of marriage and the life that he had previously wished to be free from, (Petronella, 483). The freeing-binding theme continues with Antipholus of Ephesus when his wife, Adriana, orders him to be bound under the assumption that he has gone mad: "O, bind him, bind him, let him not come near me," (IV. iv. 106). This quote also offers a balance between separation and unity— she wishes him to be bound to keep him separate

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from herself. The balance of Egeon and his sons being separated and then reunited, restoring order, as well as Antipholus of Ephesus's wish to be released from the unity of marriage, his separation from his life, and his reuniting with his wife at the end describe a level of order that Shakespeare employed using the themes of separation and unity. Action and plot devices, however, are not the only references to the balance between separation and unity: Shakespeare also discusses these themes through symbols and direct language.

The Comedy of Errors has two specific symbols that seem to recur in the play, both in dialogue and action, almost to a point of absurdity: the chain and the rope. Several arguments can be made about the symbolism behind the objects, but according to Henze, the themes of separation and unity offer a solid option. He argues that both objects relate directly to unity and separation on several levels. The most obvious level of pattern between the chain and rope and the themes of unity and separation suggests that the physical use of both could be seen as an act of binding, restricting, or holding. The rope, Henze argues, represents the more physical aspect of unity while the chain, meant as a gift for Antipholus of Ephesus's wife, was meant to represent a stronger unity in their marriage and within the community. Henze suggests that the chain, while not necessarily a physical symbol, can be referred to as a "social" symbol. After being locked out of his house, however, Antipholus promises to give the chain to the hostess of the Porpentine: "That chain will I bestow/ (Be it for nothing but to spite my wife)/ Upon mine hostess there," (III. i. 117-119), which shows a breaking of unity in the marriage and a separation, emotionally, from his wife. The chain then

falls into many different hands throughout the course of the play, creating what Henze explains should be viewed as a type of union within the community. He writes that the chain can be viewed “ as a symbol of social bonds that consistently performs its symbolic function. It draws Antipholus S. into society and marriage, never gets into the prostitute’s (hostess’s) hands, and finally helps rejuvenate Antipholus’ and Adriana’s marriage,” (38).

Further, Adriana actually orates that she views the chain as a representation of her husband’s truthfulness in their marriage. “ Where gold; and no man that hath a name,/ By falsehood and corruption doth it shame,” (II. i. 112-113). She is suggesting that a gift made of gold from a man translates into a clean relationship, because “ no man that hath a name” would bring corruption or shame to the precious gift (Henze, 39). There are numerous other, smaller symbols within *The Comedy of Errors* that arguably reinforce the balance between unity and separation, but of them, I believe that the rope and the chain are the most significant. Symbols and plot that suggest separation, unity, and the importance of the balance between them are not the only ways in which Shakespeare reinforced this point: in fact, the language of the dialogue could actually be considered to have the most extensive trace of separation and unity.

Nearly every major speech within the play uses imagery of binding, marriage, separation, loss, and freeing, especially during moments of major plot development. The explanation of the separation of the twins from their father is not only suggestive of the themes because of the plot, but also because of the language Egeon uses to describe the wreck. His wife and himself, he explained, “ Fast’ned ourselves at either end the mast/ And,

floating straight, obedient to the stream, / Were carried toward Corinth, as we thought," (I. i. 86-88). This idea of fastening, or tying themselves with ropes, to the masts of the broken ship, balances directly with the actual action, the separation of parents from children. Egeon further explains that, while the two boys were bound to different masts, each with one of the servants (both named Dromio). The boys and their father were separated, then, with each bound to another person. This balance is interesting and traceable throughout the rest of the play. For example, Dromio of Ephesus uses terms that reflect unity and binding of himself to his master, Antipholus of Ephesus, when Antipholus is accused of being possessed: " Master, I am here ent' red in bond for you," (IV. iv. 124). This theme of brotherly bond and unification can be considered a part of the balance between separation and unification. The Antipholuses and Dromios are open about their compassion for one another, having been companions since the shipwreck, Antipholus of Ephesus travels to Syracuse to try and regain his lost brother, while Egeon also found himself in Syracuse, trying to be reunited with his sons. The satisfaction created by the unification of the family (including the mother, Aemilia) is recognized in the last few lines of the play, spoken by Dromio of Ephesus: " Nay, then thus: / We came into the world like brother and brother; / And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another," (V. i. 424-426). The last lines of a Shakespearian play hold much significance, and I would argue that this follows that pattern directly. The themes of separation and reunion, which were constantly used in the plot development, symbols, and language of *The Comedy of Errors*, makes its final appearance here. The final unification of the brothers (" hand in hand") after an entire play fueled by separation and confusion, aligns with one of the conventions of <https://assignbuster.com/separation-and-unity-as-themes-that-create-order-in-the-comedy-of-errors/>

Shakespearian comedies: the idea that the end of the play will bring an ordered solution and reveal the balance of forces. By using the themes of separation and unity throughout the play, Shakespeare was able to use themes to create a sense of order and structure within a world that seemed to have none.

An essay of this length is incapable of discussing the vast number of references to the themes of unity and separation within the play, but I hope to have touched on some key evidence that suggests that Shakespeare's use of plot, symbols, and language work to express those themes. Further examples include the conversation between Luciana and Adriana addressing the role of the husband in a marriage and their ability to bind his wife to her duties: "O, know he is the bridle of your will... There's not but asses will be bridled so," (I. ii. 13-14), which suggests a type of bond and unity that Adriana wishes to be separated from, and Antipholus of Syracuse's announcement that he had decided to "lose himself," in his search for his family: "I to the world am like a drop of water/ That in the ocean seeks another drop," (I. ii. 35-36), which suggests that he is simultaneously separating himself from his life while uniting with the rest of society, or the rest of the drops in the ocean. This creates the balance between separation and unity that Shakespeare used as a mode to create an underlying structure in the play.

The movement of the plot, the recurring symbols within the physical stage directions and the dialogue, and the language used by the characters suggests a balance between unity and separation. The separation of the family at the beginning is remedied by the unification of the family at the <https://assignbuster.com/separation-and-unity-as-themes-that-create-order-in-the-comedy-of-errors/>

end, the attempt to break from bonds and be separated (from a marriage, from society, or from physical bonds) results in a desire for reuniting, and the language throughout the play at in the last lines suggests that a loss or a separation at the beginning has resulted in a reuniting of characters with their families, the society, and themselves. These balanced themes of separation and unity work to create an underlying order and structure that Shakespeare and his audiences believed existed, even in a play that appears to directly refuse order.

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