

# Tragedy averted: the role of social class in shakespeare's "comedy of errors"



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The mistaken identities of twins Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse, and their slaves Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse, facilitate the comedy upon which Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* pivots. A common feature of Shakespeare's later plays is a comedic sub-plot following lower-born characters; the action in this often reflecting or refracting the action in the main plot. However, because *The Comedy of Errors* follows Aristotle's classical unities, (of time, action, and space) the lower-born Dromios and the noble Antipholus brothers co-exist in the same plot, sharing the same predicament of being separated from their respective brothers. As pointed out by Foakes in his introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare's principal source material for the play was the *Menaechmi* of Plautus, yet he 'multiplied the twins' in his own play, as the *Menaechmi* only featured one set. By choosing to include two sets of twins seeking the exact same end together, Shakespeare makes ambiguous the social position of the Dromios, who are referred to interchangeably as 'attendants,' 'slaves,' and 'bondsmen.' The Dromios are separated from the Antipholus brothers purely by their status as commodities of them, and in a similar way, Shakespeare does not include the Dromios particularly as characters in their own right, for he would only be unnecessarily duplicating the experience of the Antipholus brothers. Rather, the Dromios exist functionally as comic relief; any frustrations or potential tragic elements in the play are deflected upon them, usually by beating. The relations between the low-born Dromios and the noble Antipholus therefore purposefully subvert social boundaries and contest the submissive slave-master convention both for comedic effect in itself, but also in order for them to be reprimanded, thus relieving tensions in the play.

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The first 'error' in result of mistaken identity occurs in act 1 scene 2 where Antipholus of Sycaruse sends away Dromios of Sycaruse to bear some money to the centaur, and it is Dromios of Ephesus who returns, clearly having no prior knowledge of any money. Prior to this scene, Shakespeare establishes the slave/master relationship as affectionate: 'a trusty villain [...] Lightens my humour with his merry jests,' creating an interesting dynamic when Antipholus believes him to be lying and concealing money. For instance, as scene 2 progresses, the audience sees Antipholus's patience fade fast, as he regresses from addressing Dromio as 'sir,' to 'sir knave,' then 'slave,' the latter just prior to beating him. Considering the importance attached to titles in Shakespeare's era, this reveals a volatile dynamic between the two men, where for the most part Antipholus is happy to 'jest' with Dromios and address him as 'sir,' yet when it is in his interest he is able to assert his social superiority over him and degrade him to simply 'slave.' Furthermore, for an early modern audience who existed within a rigid social hierarchy, the linguistic degradation of Dromio to 'slave' just prior to his beating enables the comedy in it, as the audience are prevented from seeing him as too human, but rather, a lowly slave.

Dromio's beating is also 'justified' as it were, by his overstepping of social boundary in this same scene. When asked for the 'thousand marks' by Antipholus, Dromio plays on the word 'marks' as referencing scars and injuries from his beatings, stating 'I have some marks of yours upon my pate,' then threatening 'If I should pay your worship those again, perchance you will not bear them patiently.' This last threat is particularly subversive as it jokingly threatens to 'pay' Antipholus a beating, a clear transgression of

the slave/master boundary, and similar 'sauciness' from the Dromios throughout the play towards Antipholus again attempts to present the beatings as deserving, as well as comical. Moreover, Dromio's light-hearted puns in allusion to his beatings retract any sincerity from the act and present it as commonplace. The audience's focus in consequence is drawn to the comedy of mistaken identity in the scene; the beating of Dromio becomes a kind of comical inevitability of the frustrations in the scene.

Act 3 Scene 1 explores another interesting dynamic between the high born Antipholus and low-born Dromio, where Dromio of Syracuse denies access to Antipholus of Ephesus, being under the command of Adriana to 'let none enter,' despite Antipholus of Ephesus being the rightful tenant of the house. The comedy of the scene rests on the staging, where both Antipholus of Ephesus and Dromios of Syracuse visible to the audience, but neither are visible to the other, allowing the irony of the scene to be apparent, and making visible the subversion of social position. Antipholus asserts his social superiority on the line: 'What art thou that keep'st me out from the house I owe,' and is answered 'the porter for this time, sir,' by Dromio. Particularly revealing here is Antipholus's use of 'what' rather than who, and Dromio's address of 'sir.' These terms of address indicate that the men remain aware of their social position, so it is not necessarily Dromio's language that is subversive, but the visual act of not letting Antipholus in, who the audience are aware is the rightful owner of the house. Unlike in previous scenes, Dromios of Syracuse cannot pay for this particular error, owing to the door standing between him and Antipholus, though Antipholus threatens, 'You'll cry for this, minion, if I beat the door down.' This violence is diverted by

Balthazar, who though as a goldsmith does not share as noble a status as Antipholus, can sway more command over him than Dromio of Ephesus could, as he insists 'be ruled by me, depart in patience.' In this case, unlike in Act 1 Scene 2, because there is a mediating character, the tension between the noble-born and low-born characters is relived.

One of the elements in The Comedy of Errors which holds the most potential to be tragic is Adriana and Antipholus's marriage, which is revealed to already be somewhat unstable, and thanks to mistaken identities, almost breaks down over the course of the play. It is the Dromios and their relations with Adriana who provide the comic relief to divert this. For instance, in Act 2 Scene 1 Adriana laments that her husband has not yet returned, complaining 'why should [men's]liberty than ours be more.' Upon Dromio's return, she bids him bring her husband back, threatening violence when he challenges her: 'Back, slave, or I will break thy pate across.' Again, the title 'slave' degrades Dromio to sub-human status and makes the beating, within the social hierarchy, appear more justified. In response, Dromio replies: 'You spurn me hence, and he will spurn me hither. If I last in this service, you must case me in leather.' The image here of Dromio yo-yoing between the couple with 'you spurn me hence, and he will spurn me hither' highlights his functionality; the couple can avoid directly confronting one another by releasing their frustrations upon him. Again, it is his jest about being 'cased in leather' which relieves the severity of this function and allows it to remain comical.

The low-born Dromios exist in The Comedy of Errors as comic relief; they pay for the various errors and mishaps (which often, they inadvertently cause)

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that occur throughout. Their social status does not remain fixed throughout the play, as they have grown with each respective Antipholus brother from infancy and share the same end goal of reuniting with their brothers, so have a greater degree of liberty to challenge each Antipholus's wit in scenes imbued with puns and mockery. However, this elasticity of position also works the other way, as when they are believed to be lying or intentionally overstep a boundary they are reprimanded by the noble-born characters, providing comic relief in the farcical nature of it, whilst also preventing any mishaps from becoming too tragic by bearing the brunt of them. The audience are never allowed, however, to feel too much pity towards them as Shakespeare intends them to be comic devices; the Dromio brothers are, after the Antipholus brothers, reunited at the end of the play, glossing over any violence endured in the previous action.