

Depiction of adriana  
vs. wife in the  
comedy of errors and  
the brothers  
manacchmus...



The Comedy of Errors, written by William Shakespeare, is mirrored to a major extent by Plautus's play The Brothers Menaechmus, both of which deal with the issue of separated twins who find themselves in the same town and are mistaken for each other. However, although Shakespeare draws his work off of the basic plot structure of Plautus's ancient Roman text, it is evident that he takes liberties to further develop main characters and diverge from specific scenarios of the original comedy. Following close reading, a major disparity between the two evidently lies in the difference of depiction of the wives of the lost twins: Adriana in The Comedy of Errors and the Wife in The Brothers Menaechmus. Through analysis of the confused confrontation between ' husband' and wife, the intervening third-parties in the forms of the Abbess and the Old Man, and the verbal abuse they are subject to at times of their husband's madness, it is evident that Shakespeare molds the three-dimensional and likeable character of Adriana from that of the Wife, depicting her as sympathetic, rather than shrewish.

In both Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors and in Plautus's The Brothers Menaechmus, a foreign twin (Antipholus of Syracuse/Menaechmus II) is confusedly interrogated by his brother's wife, during which she accuses him of failing to recognize her, and chides his unfaithful behavior. However, it can be said that the two interactions deviate from each other as evident in the diction between man and wife presented in both texts. While Adriana does accuse her husband of neglect as does the wife of Menaechmus I, she offers herself up and reminds him of their vows as husband and wife. In this context, she addresses his suspected adultery when she meets him in the marketplace; ADRIANA I am possess'd with an adulterate blot; My blood is

mingled with the crime of lust: For if we too be one and thou play false, I do digest the poison of thy flesh, Being strumpeted by thy contagion. Keep then far league and truce with thy true bed; I live unstain'd, thou undishonoured.

(2. 2. 139-145) Adriana claims that her marriage to Antipholus has rendered them not two separate entities, but instead joined them in unity as an inseparable whole, evident when she asserts that “ we two be one”. In saying this, she suggests that their marital bond has melded their two bodies into one, using this analogy to demonstrate to Antipholus that would he become adulterous, her blood would too become “ mingled with the crime of lust”, “ an adulterate blot” on her purity a result of his wrongdoing. More literally, she implies that by sleeping with other women, namely the Courtesan, he will bring sexually transmitted diseases into their bedroom, proof of his “ adulterate blot” settling in her skin, and bringing shame upon her in society. She thus pleads to him to remain true to her so as to protect her reputation by “ keep[ing]...far league and truce with thy true bed”. She claims that that this will allow her to “ live unstain'd” and will preserve his own honor as well. Thus, in her appeal, Shakespeare leads the audience to sympathize with Adriana, who is forced to bear the brunt of both her husband’s adultery, which is translated as both emotional and societal shame, as well as physical disease. Shakespeare here alludes to the fact that the wives of adulterous men also became victims of disease spread from their husband’s affairs, an additional burden they were forced to carry. This is important because Adriana acknowledges this while pleading to Antipholus, and nonetheless vows to stay true to him.

However, in contrast to Adriana, the Wife uses far less amiable and noble language in speaking to her confused ' husband'. Even though she initially believes that he has come to return the dress stolen from her and given to Erotium, she calls him a " shameless, brazen, wicked man" (1. 713), and in anger, asks him how " You dare to mutter, you dare to speak a word to me?" (1. 711) when he asks for her identity. However, the key disparity between her behavior and that of her Shakespearean counterpart is highlighted when she responds to Menaechmus calling her a " female dog" (1. 718) after she accosts him: WIFE I simply can't endure all this disgracefulness- I'd even rather live my life.... a divorceé Than bear the brunt of this disgracefulness of yours. (1. 719-721) In saying that she would " rather live...life.... a divorceé" by ending her marriage to Menaechmus, her response is seminal here in that it strikes a stark contrast between that of Adriana. Unlike the Wife, who creates an easy escape for herself by resorting to divorce, Adriana reminds her husband of their marital vows and their resultant incorruptible bodily separation. Unlike the former, she does not verbally abuse or threaten to leave her husband because of his unfaithfulness, but instead pleads for him to return to her. This difference is important here in that in changing her response, she is characterized as loving and co-dependent, rather than shrewish and short-tempered, as Plautus depicts his female antagonist here. This is highlighted when the Wife implies that she would rather carry the societal shame of divorce " Than bear the brunt of this disgracefulness", in reference to Menaechmus' adulterous behavior. As a result, it can be said that Shakespeare's reflection and alteration of The Brothers Menaechmus forges an alternate depth of Plautus' Wife and paints her in a way that is more dependent and three-dimensional. Perhaps for this reason, readers do <https://assignbuster.com/depiction-of-adriana-vs-wife-in-the-comedy-of-errors-and-the-brothers-manaechmus/>

not root for the Wife, who lacks even a name other than a sign of her ownership by her husband, and is static in her continuous berating and scheming. On the other hand, it may be incorrect to judge her actions so crudely given that her qualms toward her husband are very material; she knows that he has stolen her dress and given it to his lover Erotium, something that her husband has outwardly lied about. In contrast, Adriana only suspects that Antipholus has missed dinner for the company of another woman, while in reality he was delayed by the Goldsmith, from whom he had ordered a necklace to be made for her. Although Antipholus is suggested to have had prior illicit relations with the Courtesan, his faults do not lie as deep as that of Menaechmus' do, who openly steals from the Wife. As a result, it can be said that the Wife differs in her relationship to her husband in that in response to the confusion, she threatens to leave him, while Adriana warns her husband of the societal shame of his adultery, and reasserts the bodily significance of their marriage.

Furthermore, upon trouble between ' husband' and wife in both *The Comedy of Errors* and in *The Brothers Menaechmus*, an intervening third-party appears to scorn the wife, either in the form of the Abbess, a nun in the town of Ephesus, or the Old Man, the father of the Wife. These meetings are paralleled in both texts in that outside characters accuse the respective wives of wrong-doing toward their husbands, effectively silencing them. In *The Comedy of Errors*, the Abbess attributes Antipholus' madness as a consequence of Adriana's nagging in regard to his evident adultery. She claims that: ABBESS The venom clamours of a jealous woman Poisons more deadly than a mad dog's tooth. It seems his sleeps were hinder'd by thy

railing, And therefore comes it that his head is light. (5. 1. 69-72) In accusing Adriana of making Antipholus' " head...light" with talk of wrongdoing, the Abbess suggests that his madness stems from the " venom" of Adriana's jealousy. She believes that this jealous " poison" has penetrated him as might a bite from a " mad dog's tooth", and prevented him from sleeping, thus explaining his strange behavior. In response to this, Adriana encroaches the Abbess to release her husband, softened by promises to care for him in his time of illness: ADRIANA I will attend my husband, be his nurse, Diet his sickness, for it is my office, And will have no attorney but myself; And therefore let me have him home with me. (5. 1. 98-101) She claims that as his " nurse", Adriana will make it her " office", or duty as wife, to see that Antipholus is cured of his madness. She comes to the Abbess not in complaint but to retrieve him into her own care, illustrating her desire to remain with Antipholus despite any his misbehavior, shedding light on the loyal and forgiving nature of her character. However, even though the Abbess is incorrect in her diagnosis of Antipholus, who hides in the monastery as a place of refuge from the quack Doctor Pinch, her attitude toward Adriana nonetheless is a reflection of the society that has shaped her views of the rights and wrongs of relations between men and women.

Furthermore, this scene is mirrored in the text of *The Brothers Menaechmus*, in which the Old Man, even before arriving to the scene of conflict, prophesies the cause of the trouble in saying that: OLD MAN Well, that's how it always is with big-dowry wives, They're fierce to their husbands, they order their lives. But then sometimes the man is...let's say...not so pure. There's limits to what a good wife can endure. (1. 766-769) With this song, he

implies the nagging behavior of his daughter toward her husband to be typical of rich women (“...that’s how it always is with big-dowry wives”), indicating that the Wife believes that her large dowry grants her the right to be demanding of her husband (“ They’re fierce to their husbands, they order their lives”). As with the Abbess, there is a note of blame here, but it is soothed by his acknowledgement that there are “ limits to what a good wife can endure”. This thus illustrates the different ways in which the respective societies of Shakespeare and Plautus treated the concept of marriage, in that for Adriana, her marital bond to Antipholus is all-consuming and eternal. In contrast, for the Wife, her bond to her husband is forged by monetary ties and can be easily severed, an idea reinforced by the Old Man in his speech. Approaching the couple, his daughter, the Wife, tells him of her husband’s expenditures, and her attempts to control his affairs and boozing, claiming that she wants to abandon her husband and return home to her family: WIFE I’ve done nothing wrong, dear Father, you can be assured of that But I simply can’t go on and live with him in any way. Consequently-take me home. (1. 779-782) In saying this, her behavior again marks a deep disparity between herself and Adriana; rather than caring for her sick and evidently mad ‘ husband’, she opts to drop him (“ Consequently-take me home”) and return to live in her father’s house, claiming that she is blameless in this situation as she has “ done nothing wrong”. While Adriana selflessly comes to the Abbess to return her husband to their home and care for him, the Wife her wants to be taken home herself, mirroring a disgruntled child, rather than a wife dealing with a difficult husband. For the Wife, marriage is not the unbreakable bond Adriana sees it to be, but instead a temporary

arrangement able to be severed at the presence of inconvenience. For her,  
<https://assignbuster.com/depiction-of-adriana-vs-wife-in-the-comedy-of-errors-and-the-brothers-manaechmus/>

she and Menaechmus I do not share a unified body and soul; it is evident that she feels his wrongdoing is exemplary of his poor character, and that alone, with no other reflection or blame in herself. By refusing to take responsibility for her husband's actions, the Wife can also be interpreted in a more feminist light; unlike the co-dependent Adriana, she is not willing to tolerate Menaechmus' abusive behavior. This disparity again sheds a divide between the two women, differing in their solutions to their fragmented relationships.

Upon hearing the Wife's complaints, her the Old Man chides her, defending Menaechmus I in saying that her unhappiness with her husband's behavior will not change despite her qualms: " Thanks to all your diligence, I promise you, he'll love her more." (1. 791). He goes on to say that: OLD MAN ...Look, you're quite well dressed, well jeweled and well supplied with food and maids. Being well off, woman, why, be wise, leave well enough alone. (1. 801-802) These cautionary words strike a chord with the speech of the Abbess, as the Old Man here too advises the Wife to wean her jealous behavior and to let things be (" Being well off, woman, why, be wise, leave well enough alone"). Accusing her of " blaming blameless men" (1. 805), like the Abbess, he does not sympathize with the plights of the wronged woman, instead blaming Menaechmus' erratic behavior on her jealousy. Thus, both the Old Man and the Abbess ignore the pleas of the women, showcasing their mutual lack of compassion in regard to the men's adultery and abusive behavior.

Following these squabbles throughout both texts of *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Brothers Menaechmus*, another match between the two occurs <https://assignbuster.com/depiction-of-adriana-vs-wife-in-the-comedy-of-errors-and-the-brothers-manaechmus/>



during the fits of assumed madness seen with both Antipholus of Ephesus and Menaechmus II. Upon being held by Doctor Pinch, the speech of Antipholus aligns very closely with that of Menaechmus II, for whom the Old Man sends the Doctor following his crazed threats to kill those around him. Throughout these scenes, both men attack and blame their wives, as seen when Antipholus of Ephesus condemns Adriana for claiming that Dromio did not come to her for Antipholus' bail: ANTIPHOLUS Dissembling harlot, thou art false in all; And art confederate with a damned pack To make a loathsome abject scorn of me: But with these nails I'll pluck out these false eyes That would behold in me this shameful sport. (4. 4. 102-6) In his rage, he threatens to "pluck out these false eyes", which he feels so wrongfully accuse him of a wrongdoing he has not committed. Calling Adriana a lying "harlot", he places the fault of his promiscuity and of his arrest on her shoulders. Likewise, this is directly paralleled with the case of Menaechmus, who when confronted by the Old Man, begins to verbally abuse both father and daughter, calling the wife "a very rabid female dog" and her father "a goat who reeks of garlic": MANAECHEMUS II ...On the left I'm guarded by a very rabid female dog. Right behind her is a goat who reeks of garlic, and this goat has Countless times accused a blameless citizen with perjury. (1. 838-840) As in *The Comedy of Errors*, Menaechmus II threatens to "Take some hotly blazing torches, [and] set this woman's eyes on fire." (1. 841), using the promise of violence to rid himself of the Wife. Thus, it is clear that both he and Antipholus employ verbal abuse in treatment of their respective wives.

Overall, it is evident that in comparison to *The Brothers Menaechmus*, Shakespeare diverges from the given content to a major extent in *The Comedy of Errors*, employing Plautus's bare storyline to create more dynamic characters and to reflect upon key social issues. This is especially significant in the case of his *Adriana versus Plautus's Wife*, the former of which is read as more dependent and devoted to her marriage, as seen through her attempts to plead her husband's return and to retrieve him from the Abbess, caring for him in his time of 'madness'. However, although both *Antipholus* and *Menaechmus* verbally abuse the women when they are 'mad', and engage in adulterous behavior, the main disparity between the two lies in that *Adriana* willingly forgives her husband and is dedicated to the unity of her marriage, unlike the *Wife*, who demands divorce and begs for her father to take her home. This difference is important because it allows the reader to treat *Adriana* like a protagonist, despite retaining a certain aspect of shame at her anger toward her husband's behavior, as seen in the Abbess' chiding. Likewise, although we read the *Wife* as the villain, the play does to an extent justify the *Wife's* desire to leave her husband by depicting his stealing and adultery, but nonetheless portrays her as unlikeable. By developing these characters to such an extent, Shakespeare grants his leading woman a sense of humanity and likeability, which is especially significant in tracing the treatment of women in society over the course of the time period during the publication of the two plays.

Works Cited Plautus, Titus Maccius., and Erich Segal. *Four Comedies*. Oxford: Oxford U, 1996. Print. Shakespeare, William, and Frances E. Dolan. *The Comedy of Errors*. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.

<https://assignbuster.com/depiction-of-adriana-vs-wife-in-the-comedy-of-errors-and-the-brothers-manaechmus/>