PLAUTUS' MENAECHMI
as the basis for
SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDY
OF ERRORS

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THE MEANAECHEMI OF PLAUTUS

AS THE BASIS OF SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDY OF ERRORS.

A study of the Menaechmi of Plautus and Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors reveals a striking likeness in the plots and also a similarity in minor points. In each the story is founded on the whimsical mistakes and confusion arising from the perfect resemblance of two brothers. In each case the brothers are separated in their infancy, and the "errors" arise from the arrival of one of them in the city in which his lost brother resides. To illustrate these similarities more clearly we have given a short outline of the story of each.

The scene of the Menaechmi is laid in Epidamnum on the western coast of Illyria. The prologue gives us the previous information necessary for the understanding of the play. Moschus, a merchant of Syracuse, had twin sons, who exactly resembled each other. One of these whose name was Menaechmus, when a child of seven accompanied his father to Tarentum. There he was stolen and carried away to Epidamnum, by a wealthy, childless merchant of that city. In course of time he married a wealthy wife, and by the death of his foster father, soon after, he inherited a large fortune. Having disagreed with his wife, he formed an acquaintance with a courtesan, and was in the habit of presenting her with clothes and
jewels, which he had stolen from his wife. The original name of the other twin brother was Sosicles, but on the loss of Menaechmus, the latter's name, which was that of the grandfather also, was substituted for Sosicles, in memory of the lost child. Menaechmus Sosicles, on growing to manhood determined to seek his lost brother, and after wandering about for six years, arrives at Epidamnum, accompanied by his servant Messenio.

On the day in which the stranger Menaechmus arrives at Epidamnum, the citizen Menaechmus has fallen out with his wife, and determines to dine with the courtesan Erotium. He has pilfered a mantle from his wife, and is taking it as a present to his mistress, Peniculus, a parasite, who is coming to dine with him, overhears his remarks in regard to the stolen garment, and accosts him. The two then proceed to the home of Erotium, where Menaechmus presents the mantle, and orders dinner prepared for the three. Menaechmus and Peniculus go to the Forum, and Erotium orders Cylindrus, the cook, to buy and prepare the meal.

Menaechmus Sosicles and Messenio, now appear before the house of Erotium, and are met by Cylindrus, returning from the market. The cook mistakes the traveller for the citizen, and repairs within, to inform Erotium of the presence of her admirer. She comes out and is, in turn, deceived by the likeness of Sosicles to his brother. At first the stranger denies any knowledge of the woman, but when she calls him by name, and tells him the
name of his father and his birthplace, he accepts her invitation to dinner, and promises to carry the mantle to a furrier's and have it retrimmed. Messenio takes his ship's crew away to an inn, with the promise that he will return for his master later.

Peniculus, the parasite, angry at the loss of his dinner, appears upon the scene, returning from the Forum, where he has lost sight of Menaechmus of Epidamnum. He meets Menaechmus, the stranger, coming out of Erotium's house, with the mantle on, and a chaplet of flowers upon his head, and, mistaking him for his patron, chides him with having cheated him out of his breakfast. When Menaechmus denies all knowledge of him, he posts off to tell the citizen's wife all about the mantle. After he has gone Erotium's maid comes out of the house with a bracelet, which her mistress wishes Sosicles to have made over for her. He promises to have the work done, and goes away rejoicing on account of his good fortune. He throws his chaplet down on the left, in order that he may mislead anyone who wishes to follow him.

The jealous wife and Peniculus, who has informed her of the base actions of her husband, meet Menaechmus of Epidamnum, and accuse him with having taken the mantle and bracelet. He at first denies the deed, but when he is made certain that Peniculus has informed on him, he confesses and promises to return the mantle. When, however, he goes to Erotium's house to get it, he is met by her with the statement, that she has already given it to him.
On his denying this, she becomes very angry and goes into the house, shutting the door in his face. He goes away mystified, for of course he knows nothing either of the mantle or of the bracelet.

Menaechmus, the traveller, now appears with the mantle on, and encounters the citizen's wife, who mistakes him for her husband. When he denies that he knows her, she becomes furious, and sends for her father. The old gentleman comes to her assistance, and, at first, reproaches his daughter for her suspicions of her husband, but when the latter denies all knowledge of the woman, the father is angered and accuses him of being mad. Sosicles takes a clue from this and, by acting as a madman, gets rid of the woman and her father, the latter of whom goes for a physician, to cure his supposed son-in-law. The stranger escapes, begging the spectators not to tell which way he is going.

The father returns and is followed soon after by a physician. The two address the citizen, who just then enters. He is so angered by their accusations, that they are convinced of his madness, and the old gentleman goes out for assistance to bind him, while the physician returns home to prepare a reception for his patient.

Messenio, in the meantime, returns for his master, and, when the old man and his servants enter, and begin to bind the citizen, resists them and drives them away, thinking he is rescuing
his own master. The servant begs his supposed master for his own freedom, and after a vain effort to convince him of his error, it is granted. He joyfully returns to the inn, and the citizen goes to the house of the courtesan.

Messenio and his master return together. The slave affirms that he has been set free and the master denies it. During the heated argument which follows, Menaechmus, the citizen, comes out of Erotium's house. Mutual explanations follow, and by the aid of Messenio, who is freed as a reward of his services, the brothers are re-united. They decide to return to Sicily, and Messenio announces a sale of all the citizen's property, including his wife, "if anyone wishes to buy her". The play ends with an appeal by Messenio to the spectators, to give loud applause.

The scene of the English play is Ephesus. Aegeon, a merchant of Syracuse, has been condemned to death by the laws of Ephesus, which prohibit intercourse with the inhabitants of the former city. When questioned by the Duke of Ephesus, in regard to the cause of his coming thither, he tells the following story.

Born in Syracuse, he grew up there, married, and during the early part of his life was very prosperous. On the death of his employer he inherited great wealth, and was compelled to make a voyage to Epidamnum, to look after his interests there. His wife followed him thither, and soon after gave birth to two sons, exactly alike in appearance. At the same time a poor woman, staying at the same
inn, also bore two sons exactly alike. These latter Aegeon bought to wait upon his own sons when they grew up. As soon as the chil-
dren were old enough to stand the trip the homeward voyage was
begun. A few miles out of Epidamnum, they encountered a terrific
storm. The sailors left them to their fate on the fast sinking
ship. Aegeon bound his wife, Aemilia, with one son and a slave
boy to one end of a mast, and to the other end, himself and the
other babes. They were borne along by the current and at length
beheld two ships making toward them. Before the vessels reached
them, however, the mast was broken in twain by a rock, husband and
wife were separated, and picked up by different ships. Aegeon and
the two children with him, were carried home to Syracuse.

When Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, who bore the names
of the other boys, reached the age of eighteen, they set out in
search of their brothers. Aegeon himself at last grown tired of
waiting for their return, started out after them, and had wandered
to Ephesus. The Duke, moved to pity by the sorrowful tale, grants
Aegeon one day in which to raise the money for his ransom.

On this same day, Antipholus and Dromio, of Syracuse,
arrive in Ephesus in search of their brothers. The traveller sends
his servant to an inn, the Centaur, to await his coming. Dromio,
servant of the citizen Antipholus, mistaking the stranger for his
master, accosts him and summons him home to dinner. The Syra-
cusan, of course, does not understand him, and asks him for the
money that was intrusted to his keeping. The slave replies, in a jesting manner, and is sent away with a beating for his supposed impertinence. Antipholus goes to the inn to see if his money is safe.

Adriana, wife of the citizen Antipholus, grows weary of waiting for her husband, and begins to complain of his infidelity, to her sister Luciana. Luciana reasons with her and reproaches her for her jealousy of her husband. In the meantime Dromio, of Ephesus returns, and announces to his mistress that his master is mad and denies that he has a wife. Adriana sends him back again, and begins to berate her husband, and complain of his inconstancy.

Antipholus, the stranger, returns from the inn to the market place, where he finds his servant, Dromio, searching for him. A warm argument ensues, in which the master beats his man, for denying having jested with him, in regard to the money. The follows a contest of "merry jests", in the midst of which Adriana and her sister appear. The wife chides her supposed husband for his inattention and his infidelity to her. Antipholus, of course, at first, denies all knowledge of her, but when she calls him by name, he decides to humor her delusion and goes in with her to dinner. Dromio of Syracuse is commanded to keep the gate, and under no conditions, to allow any one to enter.

Meanwhile, Antipholus, the citizen, returns with Dromio, Angelo, a goldsmith, and Belthazar, a merchant, and finds his doors
barred against him. When he demands entrance, he is mocked by Dromio of Ephesus, who is keeping the gate. He becomes angry and is prevented from making forcible entrance into his house, only by the calmer counsels of Belthazar. Prevailed upon finally to desist, he orders Angelo to bring to the Porpentane a chain, which he is having made for his wife, in order that he may bestow it upon the courtesan, with whom he expects to dine. He departs with Dromio and Belthazar, for the home of this woman.

Antipholus, the stranger, having finished his dinner, begins to make love to Luciana, who believing him to be her sister's husband, repels his advances, and chides him for his infidelity towards his wife. While she is gone to call Adriana, Dromio of Syracuse enters and informs his master that he, too, is a "woman's man". Master and servant decide to run away from this place, and embark for home that very night. On their way out they are met by Angelo, the goldsmith, who mistaking Antipholus, the traveller, for the citizen, gives him the chain. Antipholus sends Dromio to the wharf to prepare for departure.

Angelo, accompanied by a merchant, to whom he owes some money, and an officer of the law, meets Antipholus, the citizen, returning with his servant, from the courtesan's house, and demands of him payment for the chain. Antipholus - meanwhile having sent Dromio for a rope's end, with which to punish his wife, - of course denies the receipt of the chain, and is arrested at the
suit of Angelo, who has before been arrested at the instance of the merchant. Dromio of Ephesus returns from the wharf and, mis­taken by the citizen for his own servant, is sent to Adriana for bail money.

Luciana informs Adriana of the husband's wooing her, and during the conversation which follows, Dromio comes with news of the citizen's arrest. Adriana furnishes the money to Dromio who returns and gives it to his real master, whom he meets in the street. The courtesan, from whom the citizen has taken a ring, meets the stranger and demands it back again or the chain which he has promised to give her in return for it. The Syracusan naturally denies all knowledge of her or her ring and she goes away in a rage to tell Adriana that her husband is mad.

In the meantime Dromio of Ephesus returns to his master with the rope's end, which he was ordered to buy. The master de­mands of him the gold for which the other Dromio was sent, and beats him when he professes ignorance in regard to it.

Adriana, Luciana, and the courtesan now appear with Punch, a school-master, who is to conjure the madness out of Antipholus. The latter accuses his wife of having barred him out of doors and when she asserts that he dined at home, he vilely slanders her. His words and actions deepen the impression in his wife's mind that he is mad and she orders him to be bound and taken home. Sev­eral servants approach, bind him and carry him away. Adriana and the rest go to find the goldsmith and are met by Antipholus and
Dromio of Syracuse, who draw swords and put them to flight.

The scene of the last act is in a street before a priory. The merchant and Angelo encounter Antipholus of Syracuse and his servant Dromio before the priory and during the conversation that follows, in which the stranger declares he has never denied the receipt of the chain, the merchant challenges him to fight. The two draw swords, but are prevented from fighting by the arrival of Luciana and others with Adriana who declares that Antipholus is mad and orders him bound. He with his slave escapes to the priory for safety.

The uproar, caused by their escape, brings the abbess into the street. Adriana demands her supposed husband but is refused him by the abbess and appeals to the Duke, who is passing by on his way to Aegeon's execution. While she is pleading with the Duke, a servant comes running with the news that husband and slave have broken their bonds and are coming to avenge themselves. This report is substantiated by the arrival of Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus, themselves, upon the scene.

The citizen at once begins to revile his wife for having had him bound, and to accuse her of being false to him. The "errors" proceed in accusations and counter accusations until the Duke sends for the abbess to straighten out the tangle. Aegeon mistakes the citizen for his traveller son and is trying to convince him of the relationship when the abbess enters with Antipholu
and Dromio of Syracuse. Of course the appearance of the two pairs of twins on the scene at the same time explains all the errors. Aemilia is found to be the long lost wife of Aegeon and the Antipholi are their sons. The Duke pardons Aegeon, and the happy family retire with the rest to a "gossips' feast to hear discoursed at large, all their fortunes".

When we place the two plays side by side, we see that there are several characters that appear prominently in one and do not appear in the other at all. The Parasite, who takes such a prominent part in the Latin play is omitted altogether from the Comedy of Errors, as a character entirely foreign to English ideas. The most important addition to the English play is that of another pair of twins, as attendants upon the twin brothers. The introduction of these Dromios tends greatly to complicate the confusion out of which the fun of the farce arises. It is probable that they were added to the English play, to doubly supply the clown or buffoon, without which, in those times, a comedy was not a comedy. Another difference is the substitution of Luciana, the sister of Adriana for the Father in the Latin Comedy. In her relations with the stranger, Antipholus, another element is added to the English play which is entirely foreign to the Menaechmi.

One of the greatest changes in the development of the plot, is the introduction of Aegeon, the father of the twins, into the English play. He gives the information necessary for the
reader's understanding of the play, in a very sympathetic story, as opposed to the rather dry prologue of the Plautine play. The introduction of Aemilia, the abbess and mother of the twins, adds an element of sympathy which is lacking in the Latin play. The Duke of Shakespeare, Belthazar, the "sober sedate friend", of Antipholus of Ephesus, and Angelo, the goldsmith, clamorous for his money, are not found in the Menaechmi.

On the other hand, there are many similarities in minor details, as well as plot, which prove conclusively the Shakespeare was familiar with the Latin play. The twin brothers of the two plays, of course, are the characters that most closely connect the plots. The citizen Menaechmus is an unfaithful, sensuous husband, and his wife probably has just cause for scolding him. The citizen Antipholus, to be sure, does not visit the courtesan, until his own door has been shut in his face, and yet he cannot be called a man of high moral worth. On the other hand, his brother is a man of gentle nature and a high ideal of morals. Unlike Menaechmus Sosicles, he refuses to dine with the courtesan when invited to do so.

In both plays, the brothers are natives of Syracuse, and while Epidamnum is not the seat of action of the English play, it is mentioned in the development of the plot. In both, the resident brother is married to a scolding wife, who has brought him a large dowry. Menaechmus's wife probably has just cause for her
suspicions of her husband, and must not be censured too severely for her shrewish actions. On the other hand, Adriana seems, at first, to have little cause of complaint, and her suspicions probably arise from her too sensitive affection for him. She does not, however, deserve the foul names which he bestows upon her when he is arrested. In each play the husband seeks refuge from the jealous complaints of his wife at the table of a courtesan. To spite his wife, the husband desires to take a present to his mistress. In one case the stranger gets the present before, and in the other, after the courtesan receives it, but in either case it forms a means by which the wife is informed of her husband's actions. The theft of the mantle by her husband, arouses the wife in the Latin play, and the loss of the ring which was to be replaced by the chain, causes the courtesan to inform Adriana that her husband is mad.

In both, the stranger sends his money to the inn by his slave. In both he is lectured for his infidelity to his supposed wife, in the Plautine play by the wife's father, and in the English, by the wife's sister. In either case, he is thought to be mad when he declares that he has no wife. In one case the wife sends for a conjurer to cure her husband, and in the other, she brings him herself. In each case the true husband is encountered, and his denials of what has gone before, confirms the impression of his madness in his wife's mind. In both cases the husband is ordered to be bound and carried away by force.
Another likeness is the disregard of both Plautus and Shakespeare, for inconsistencies in their plots. In the Roman play the scene is laid in a Greek town, with Greek surroundings, but the references to civic administration and household affairs, have a distinctly Roman colouring. Although Menaechmus Socicles is searching for his brother and this matter has had his undivided attention for many years, he never once thinks of his being in Epidamnum, and explaining the curious occurrences by this fact. In regard to this point Fowler, in his introduction to the Menaechmi, says: "It is worthy of remark that Shakespeare, like Plautus, disregards slight inconsistencies and improbabilities. So he makes Antipholus of Ephesus welcome his father and brother with great joy, and yet he has never attempted to find them, although he has known all along that they were probably in Syracuse. Again, Antipholus of Syracuse never once thinks of the possibility that his twin brother may be in Ephesus, and that the remarkable events of the day may be explained by that fact; and yet his brother had been sought for years, and was the chief object of his thought. Such inconsistencies (and there are others which affect rather certain details than the entire plot) strike the mind of the reader who can criticise at his leisure, with great force, but are hardly noticed by one who sees the play presented on the stage. As the Menaechmi was intended for scenic representation, not for private perusal, slight inconsistencies, do not
To further carry out this idea, White says, in his introduction to the "Comedy of Errors": "It is noteworthy, that in the first stage directions of the original (referring to the Comedy of Errors) one Antipholus is called "Erronis" and the other "Sereptus", - misprints, doubtless, for "Erraticus" and "Surreptus", - meaning "wandering" and "stolen". Now in the Comedy of Errors, the resident brother is not stolen, but in the Menaechmi, he is, and is designated as "Surreptus"; and the traveller, who is not called "Erraticus" in Plautus' Dramatis Personae, but Sosicles, is however called the "traveller" in the W.W. translation."

The likeness in the diction of the two plays is not very great. There are a few instances, however, in which there is a slight resemblance in Shakespeare, either to the original Latin or to the W.W. translation of the Menaechmi.

For instance, Antipholus of Syracuse describes Ephesus in much the same manner, in which Messenio describes Epidamnum Act II, Scene I, Menaechmi.

Messenio: - - - - -

in Epidamnuiis

voluptarii atque potatores maxumi
tum scophantae et palpatores plurumi

in urbe hac habitant: tum meretrices mulieres
nusquam perhibentur blandiores gentium
Messenio: - - - Among the men of Epidamnum there are debauchees
and very great drinkers; swindlers besides and many wheedlers
dwell in this city; and then the women in the harlot line are
said nowhere in the world to be more captivating.

W.W. thus translates the passage:
"For this assure yourself, this Towne Epidamnum, is a place of
outragioms expences, exceeding in all ryot and lasciviousnesse:
and ( I heare) as full of Ribaulds, Parasites, Drunkards, Catchpoles
Cony-catchers, and Sycophants, as it can hold: then for Curtizans,
why here's the currantest stamp of them in the world."

Act I, Scene II, Comedy of Errors.
Antipholus of Syracuse: - - They say this town is full of
gozenage,
As nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,
Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,
Soul-killing witches that deform the body,
Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,
And many such like liberties of sin;

Act V, Scene II Menaechmi.
Menaechmus' wife - ludibrio, pater, habeor.

In the W. W. translation this appears.
He makes me a stale and laughing stock to all the world.
Act II, Scene I, Comedy of Errors.

Adriana: - poor I am but his stale.

The similarity here lies in the use of the word "stale" in the English translation of the Latin play and in the Comedy of Errors.

Act V, Scene VII, Menaechmi.

Messenio - - nunc ibo tabernam, vasa atque argentum tibi reperam,

W.W. translation:

I'll go straight to the Inn and deliver up my accounts and all your stuff.

Act IV, Scene IV, Comedy of Errors.

Antipholus of Syracuse - Come to the Centaur; fetch our stuff from thence.

Here again the similarity lies in the use of the same word, "stuff" to designate travelling equipment.

Menaechmi Act I, Scene III.

Menaechmus - - Quattuor minis ego istanc anno emi uxori meae.

I purchased that for my wife a year ago at the price of four minae.

W.W. translation: - I bought this same of late for my wife, it stood mee (I think) in some ten pound.

Comedy of Errors, Act III, Scene II.

Antipholus of Ephesus - - This jest shall cost me some expense.
Here the likeness lies in the fact that the admirer, in either case mentions that the present, which he is about to bestow upon his mistress, is expensive.

Menaechmi, Act I, Scene II.

Menaechmus - Nunc ad amicam deferetur hanc meretricem Erotium. Mihi, tibi atque illi jubebo jam adparari prandium.

Now it shall be taken to this mistress of mine, the courtesan Erotium: I'll order a dinner at once to be got ready for me, you, and her.

W.W. translation.

This same I mean to give to Erotium. There I mean to have a delicious dinner prepared for her and me.

Comedy of Errors Act III, Scene I.

Antipholus of Ephesus: -

That chain will I bestow -

Be it for nothing but to spite my wife -

Upon mine hostess there, Good Sir, make haste.

Since mine own doors refuse to entertain me,

I'll knock elsewhere to see if they'll disdain me.

The similitude here is in the announcement of each man's intention to give the present to his mistress and to dine with her.

The latter parts of the two plays differ greatly, owing to the different methods used to arrive at the denouement of the plots.
All Shakespearean critics seem to agree in regard to the part that the story of the Menaechmi plays in the Comedy of Errors. The following quotations substantiate the statement that the English play is based upon that of Plautus.

William J. Rolfe in "Comedy of Errors". Introduction.

"The general idea of this play', as Singer remarks, 'is taken from the Menaechmi of Plautus'."

Nathan Drake in "Shakespeare and his Times" in discussing the Comedy of Errors speaks of Shakespeare's "Plautine Model".

The Illustrated Shakespeare - G. C. Verplank.

"There are about ten or twelve plots of comic accident that have come down to our times from remote antiquity, among which is the story of the Menaechmi of Plautus. The subject became a favorite among the dramatists of the Continent at an early period of our modern literature. There are versions of the play in Italian, in Spanish, and in French. Such was the widespread popularity of this plot before and soon after Shakespeare's time, which I mention rather as a curious fact of literary history than as directly connected with Shakespeare's choice of a subject; for, indeed, there is no clear indication that he had recourse to any other original than the Latin of Plautus himself. The dramatist used the Latin comedy (whether in the original or a translation is immaterial on this occasion) employing the incidents only as the materials of his own invention."
"The Comedy of Errors is principally derived from the Menaechmi of Plautus; and Hazlitt says it is 'not an improvement upon it'. Both writers - Shakespeare and Moliere - have taken a comedy of Plautus; a comedy curiously alike in main particular - that of perfect resemblance of person in the pairs of heroes. Shakespeare took the Roman's comedy where the likeness between the twin-brothers Menaechmus forms the groundwork."

The Works of William Shakespeare - - - - White.

"That the author of 'The Comedy of Errors' knew the story of the Menaechmi needs, of course, no setting forth; but that he had studied it closely either in the original or in a translation, is evident from similarity in minor points between the plays. My own opinion is, that Shakespeare, at the very beginning of his dramatic career, wishing to supply his theatre with an amusing comedy to take the place of a rude imitation of the Menaechmi, already somewhat known to the public, read that play in the original as thoroughly as his "small Latin" enabled him to read it: that he also read W. W's. translation in manuscript; and then he wrote the Comedy of Errors."