

The Comedy of Errors

This comedy is taken very much from the *Menaechmi* of Plautus, and is not an improvement on it. Shakespeare appears to have bestowed no great pains on it, and there are but a few passages which bear the decided stamp of his genius. He seems to have relied on his author, and on the interest arising out of the intricacy of the plot. The curiosity excited is certainly very considerable, though not of the most pleasing kind. We are teased as with a riddle, which notwithstanding we try to solve. In reading the play, from the sameness of the names of the two Antipholises and the two Dromios, as well from their being constantly taken for each other by those who see them, it is difficult, without a painful effort of attention, to keep the characters distinct in the mind. And again, on the stage, either the complete similarity of their persons and dress must produce the same perplexity whenever they first enter, or the identity of appearance which the story supposes will be destroyed. We still, however, having a clue to the difficulty, can tell which is which, merely from the practical contradictions which arise, as soon as the different parties begin to speak; and we are indemnified for the perplexity and blunders into which we are thrown by seeing others thrown into greater and almost inextricable ones.—This play (among other considerations) leads us not to feel much regret that Shakespeare was not what is called a classical scholar. We do not think his forte would ever have lain in imitating or improving on what others invented, so much as in inventing for himself, and perfecting what he invented,—not perhaps by the omission of faults, but by the addition of the highest excellences. His own genius was strong enough to bear him up, and he soared longest and best on unborrowed plumes.—The only passage of a very Shakespearian cast in this comedy is the one in which the Abbess, with admirable characteristic artifice, makes Adriana confess her own misconduct in driving her husband mad.

“ Abbess. How long hath this possession held the man?

Adriana. This week he hath been heavy, sour, sad,
And much, much different from the man he was;
But, till this afternoon, his passion
Ne'er brake into extremity of rage.

Abbess. Hath he not lost much wealth by wreck at sea?
Bury'd some dear friend? Hath not else his eye
Stray'd his affection in unlawful love?
A sin prevailing much in youthful men,
Who give their eyes the liberty of gazing.
Which of these sorrows is he subject to?

Adriana. To none of these, except it be the last:
Namely, some love, that drew him oft from home.

Abbess. You should for that have reprehended him.

Adriana. Why, so I did.

Abbess. But not rough enough.

Adriana. As roughly as my modesty would let me.

Abbess. Haply, in private.

Adriana. And in assemblies too.

Abbess. Aye, but not enough.

Adriana. It was the copy of our conference:
In bed, he slept not for my urging it;
At board, he fed not for my urging it;
Alone it was the subject of my theme;
In company, I often glanc'd at it;
Still did I tell him it was vile and bad.

Abbess. And therefore came it that the man was mad:
The venom'd clamours of a jealous woman
Poison 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.
Thou say'st his meat was sauc'd with thy upbraidings:
Unquiet meals make ill digestions,
Therefore the raging fire of fever bred;
And what's a fever but a fit of madness?
Thou say'st his sports were hinder'd by thy brawls;
Sweet recreation barr'd, what doth ensue,
But moody and dull melancholy,
Kinsman to grim and comfortless despair;
And, at her heels, a huge infectious troop
Of pale distemperatures, and foes to life?
In food, in sport, and life-preserving rest
To be disturb'd, would mad or man or beast;
The consequence is then, thy jealous fits
Have scar'd thy husband from the use of wits.

Luciana. She never reprehended him but mildly,
When he demeaned himself rough, rude, and wildly.—
Why bear you these rebukes, and answer not?

Adriana. She did betray me to my own reproof.

Pinch the conjurer is also an excrescence not to be found in Plautus. He is indeed a very formidable anachronism.

“ They brought one Pinch, a hungry lean-fac'd villain,
A meer anatomy, a mountebank,
A thread-bare juggler and a fortune-teller,
A needy, hollow-ey'd, sharp-looking wretch,
A living dead man.

This is exactly like some of the Puritanical portraits to be met with in Hogarth.

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