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Epic Tradition

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The Art of Humor

When one reads the introduction to William Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors, she might realize that the famous playwright took his idea from Roman author Titus Maccius Plautus. She might be dismayed that the bard did not use an original story. The reader might even put down the book if she had already read Plautus' The Brothers Menaechmus, wondering if reading the same story twice was even worth the time. If she simply abandons the book at this point, she would miss out on an excellent piece of literature. The pair of comedies are not too similar to simply ignore one and read the other. One may wonder how the same plot could be interesting and funny twice. By flipping through the pages of these great works, one can find the answer. The techniques the artists use in their plays are different enough to make the reader laugh at every joke. Plautus' great piece may be a hard act to follow, with his creative word choice and abundance of jokes, but the way Shakespeare crafted his work makes it unique. Since Shakespeare used Plautus' plot for The Comedy of Errors, one might predict that the humor in it and The Brothers Menaechmus is the same, but the authors use the details of the plot, the personalities of the characters, and clever use of language to draw laughs. The playwrights sometimes use similar techniques, but the way they arrive at a joke and even the object of the joke itself shows their different styles of comedy.

One way the playwrights introduce humor is through the plot. Plautus uses abusive marital relationships as a laughable subject. A main part of the story line includes Menaechmus I

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cheating on his wife. Plautus points out how Menaechmus I stealing a dress from his wife to give to his prostitute Erotium can be funny. Menaechmus II has a relationship with Erotium that Plautus jokes about as well. The play even closes with Menaechmus I's plan to have an auction, and Messenio, Menaechmus II's slave, adds that if anyone wants her "—his wife will go" (Plautus 1160). Plautus also uses Menaechmus I's wife in a different way. When she initially meets his brother, she believes he is her husband and "declare[s] that [he is] raving mad" (831). Plautus uses this twist in the plot to build the humor as she calls her father and slaves to help. This scene not only advances the plot to lead to the twins meeting but also lets the audience laugh a few more times before the end. Plautus uses the story not only to make the play interesting but also simply to make the audience laugh.

The playgoers chuckle at similar circumstances in Shakespeare's plot. His comedy includes what appears to be a bad marital relationship. Adriana believes her husband is cheating on her when, in reality, her slave, Dromio of Ephesus, has called the wrong twin to dinner. When Antipholus of Syracuse arrives for dinner, confusion causes even more laughs when he wishes to court Adriana's sister Luciana. She is appalled by his unfaithfulness. Even though the marriage is stable in the end, Shakespeare uses the thought of disloyalty to produce humor. Like in Plautus' work, identity confusion causes the question of sanity to arise. Adriana believes her husband is mad because his stories do not line up. When a courtesan asks her if Antipholus is insane, she replies by saying that "his incivility confirms no less" (Shakespeare IV.4.47). Adriana also furthers the plot when she tells the police, who tie up Antipholus and Dromio, suspecting that they have gone mad. When they escape they are reunited with their brothers. These scenes advance the plot while never letting a smile leave the audience member's faces.

While both authors use the plot as a template for the humor, they use it in different ways.

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Plautus adds many jokes to the simple plot. His characters are confused about the same problem until the end of the play so that he can apply the same jokes again and again. Shakespeare, on the other hand, introduces new scenes to make the humor new. People misidentify the twins at the market, Antipholus' house, the jail, and even at an abbey to provide different angles. The playwrights both use the idea of different characters mistaking a stranger for a friend, but Shakespeare provides a larger difference in scenery.

Characters are also an important part of creating a comedy. One key character Plautus uses in *Peniculus*. His job description prepares the audience for the hilarity of his character. *Peniculus* is *Menaechmus I*'s parasite, meaning that *Menaechmus I* pays him in meals to lavish compliments on his master. His name even means "the sponge" because he soaks up every piece of food he can. In a few instances *Peniculus* is instrumental to the plot, but his commentary adds to the humor. For instance, he opens the play with a monologue about his love of food, which has little to do with the story. He makes the audience laugh as he discusses how "[y]ou ought to chain [a] man with lots of food and drink" rather than actual chains because food is more effective (Plautus 88). Throughout the play he points out jokes and expands them to be funnier than they would be otherwise. Ironically, he is the character who tattles to *Menaechmus I*'s wife about *Menaechmus I*'s infidelity, despite his role of professional flatterer. While he moves the plot along by telling on his master, the way he eggs them on to fight and cheers for his friend's wife is more notable. His teasing of *Menaechmus* and his encouragement of the wife with phrases like "That's it!" and "Attack again!" and "Let him have it!" make the audience laugh much more than the situation itself (607, 11, 28). As an amusing character, *Peniculus*' words are much more significant than his actions.

Shakespeare also uses unique characters in his comedy. Unlike Plautus, Shakespeare uses

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two sets of twins to double the instances of mistaken identity. He uses every possible combination of mismatch to add to the confusion. The second set of twins, the Dromios, are like Peniculus in that they are simply funny characters. Since they are slaves, they cannot change the course of events, but they can comment on the situation. Other characters in this play are not particularly funny in themselves. People such as the goldsmith or other merchants do not have many lines, but they add to the plot. Angelo the goldsmith, for example, creates more confusion as to which Antipholus receives a chain from him and which one pays for it. His lines are not particularly funny, but he adds another humorous situation. In the same way, the playwright uses Adriana and Luciana for a side plot in which Antipholus is married and which one wants to court Luciana. Some characters are comedians while others add to the plot of the comedy.

One of the key ways that the authors use to crack a joke in both comedies is a pun. An English reader may miss some of Plautus' puns through the translation, but the translator turns several into English equivalents or explains them. In the introduction, Plautus mentions that Menaechmus I's foster father had no children before he kidnapped the boy but only had money. The translator explains that, in Greek, the word *tokos* means both money and children (59). Another place the translator comes up with a different pun where Plautus used one that was untranslatable. For example, he uses a pun on "no kin" and "bro-kin" to replace Plautus' *geminum*, "twin brother," and *gemes* "you'll groan" (257). In these situations both the translator and the playwright use the language to make the audience chuckle.

Shakespeare's comedy is filled with puns as well. Any place where he could use a pun, Shakespeare takes the opportunity. Sometimes Shakespeare draws out a pun for several lines; he extracts every possible meaning. Some puns Shakespeare uses several times with a little twist. His puns are always clever: the words have several applicable meanings. Shakespeare shows his

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cleverness with just a few words when Antipholus S. attempts to court Luciana, and asks if he is mad. He replies, “Not mad, but mated.” (Shakespeare III.2.54) The different meanings could show Antipholus to be amazed or confounded that she will not receive his flirtation and that she claims he is married or that her refusal has defeated him. Mated could also mean that he is married, which is the most ironic meaning since his brother is really Adriana’s husband. Shakespeare also plays with different puns that relate to Dromio’s beating. One such instance happens shortly before dinner. Dromio S. claims the food is in need of what he has received, basting (II.2.55-62). Shakespeare shows his cleverness in the abundance of different meanings that this words can have.

While some jokes do not rely on word play, the way the author has crafted his words and stry to make the audience laugh still matters. One of Plautus’ techniques is to draw as many jokes out of one situation as possible. Throughout his play the reader is amused by the mixed-up twins. Even when the brothers finally meet, Plautus cannot stop the fun yet. The brothers do not recognize each other until Messenio explains. When Plautus has exhausted his plethora of jokes, the play comes to an end.

While Shakespeare also draws every last laugh from a joke, he often does it in different ways. Once he introduces the initial situation of the twins, Shakespeare puts the joke into every possible situation to make it funny again. He starts simple, to pull the audience in, and then expands into absurd situations. Dromio E. is one of the first to wrongly recognize his master. Then, Adriana does the same with her husband. Eventually, the police chase Antipholus and Dromio S., thinking they are the other brothers. Like Plautus, when there is no situation left to put them in, the twins reunite and live happily ever after. Both authors reuse their joke several times.

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Some of the jokes can seem redundant, but throughout both plays each author draws humor from many different places as well. The humor often comes from identification problems. The twins are mixed up countless times in both works. Plautus and Shakespeare both use other jokes in their comedies as well. For example, Plautus makes many jokes relating to women and the relationships that the twins have with them. Menaechmus I is an unfaithful husband and often spends time with Erotium. Shakespeare also displays social standards in the way his characters treat their slaves. He makes many puns about Antipholus S. beating Dromio. Antipholus S. beats Dromio E. once after telling him not to “flout [him] thus to [his] face” by telling him his wife called him to dinner (Shakespeare I.2.91). Dromio E.’s innocent mistake of calling his master’s twin home earns him a beating and the audience a good laugh. They know that they are more informed than the dull-witted Dromio. Both plays often cause the audience to laugh at characters because they are more naïve than the playgoers. Both plays have many situations to laugh at other than just the twin confusion that they share.

Shakespeare does not merely copy Plautus’ plot line for his play, but they each craft their words into a work of art by using their characters and word choice to produce a comedic effect. The end result is two wonderful pieces of literature. One may think that the similar story lines would be redundant when reading both plays, but that is far from the truth. The way the authors use the plot is much more important than the plot itself. Instead of ignoring either of the works, one would benefit by appreciating each author’s ability to create a comedy. A storyline does add to the quality of a comedy, but the way the artisan crafts his words with the goal of making the audience laugh out loud is much more important.

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