"A Thousand Marks": Language and Comic Violence In *The Comedy Of Errors* and Shakespeare's Plautus

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Violence is one of the few pervasive characteristics of human culture. What is more, the connection between violence and laughter—taking pleasure in the suffering of others—is almost equally pervasive. At the dawn of the Western literary tradition, Homer tells how the Achaeans "laugh merrily"[1] when Odysseus beats his comrade, Thersites, at an assembly. In Western drama, Old Comedy abounds in examples of comic violence on stage.[2] Comic violence is also a recurring motif in the comedies of Titus Maccius Plautus, written for a Roman audience in the third century before the common era.[3]

It is well known that *The Comedy of Errors* combines and transforms elements of two of Plautus's plays: *Menaechmi* and *Amphitryo*.[4] Although comic violence in Plautus has received attention from classicists such as Erich Segal and Holt Parker, neither Wolfgang Riehle's work, *Shakespeare, Plautus, and the Humanist Tradition*, nor Robert Miola's book, *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy*, makes study of comic violence, and to my knowledge there has been no comparative treatment of comic violence in Plautus and Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. This paper will compare the language of comic violence in *Comedy of Errors* with that in Plautus's *Amphitryo* and *Menaechmi*, and argue that while the language of comic violence in Plautus focuses on the body and the physically grotesque, metaphors pertaining to comic violence in *The Comedy of Errors* consistently compare the abuse of the body with money and debt. Barbara Freedman argues that *The Comedy of Errors* is "obsessed with confronting, punishing, and forgiving debts,"[5] yet Freedman does not discuss comic violence or its relation to the play's thematic emphasis on debt and redemption. The metaphors of comic violence in *Comedy of Errors* relate both to spiritual and

to mundane problems of credit, debt, and usury faced by Shakespeare's contemporaries in the 1590s.

In a Freudian reading of comic violence in Plautus, whose servile characters are often threatened with crucifixion, Holt Parker writes, "Crucifixion jokes . . . confirm the Roman audience in its sense of superiority and power. They serve to remind the audience of the servile nature of the characters, as well as the actors who perform them, and of the absolute and everyday nature of the power that the audience wields over them."[6]

It is worth adding that in the Plautine plays, the language of comic violence focuses, in a grotesque and exaggerated way, on the body and the physical.

In *Menaechmi*, for example, hyperbolic threats of physical violence are frequent. The plot turns on a case of mistaken identities: twin brothers, Menaechmus and Sosicles, travel with their father to Tarentum, where Menaechmus becomes lost. He is adopted and raised by a merchant of Epidamnus, while Sosicles's grieving parents rename him Menaechmus in memory of the missing boy. Having grown to adulthood, Sosicles goes in search of his long-lost twin. After he arrives in Epidamnus, several comic encounters follow between Sosicles and the mistress, wife, and father-in-law of Menaechmus, who all mistake Sosicles for his brother. At one point in the play Sosicles, who is beset by Menaechmus's wife and father-in-law because Menaechmus has stolen his wife's dress, pretends to be insane to frighten them off: "Behold! The word of Apollo commands me to burn her eyes out with torches blazing."[7]

"I'm done for, Daddy!" the wife of Menaechmus says. "He's threatening to barbecue my eyeballs!"[8] Sosicles orders the woman to avoid his sight. His threat simultaneously transforms, makes literal, and exaggerates his wish in a grotesque way: If she will not leave his sight, he will burn her eyes out. Sosicles's threats to the woman's father are equally physical and exaggerated: "So, you command me to make mincemeat of his members and bones and limbs,"[9] he says. Sosicles threatens to thoroughly pulverize the old man. He insults the father by mocking him as aged and decrepit, and threatens to pulverize the father-in-law's limbs with the walking-stick—a prop which identifies the father to the audience as a *senex*, or old man.[10] This is verbal cartoon violence that emphasizes the corporeal.

Later in the play, in another episode of comic violence onstage, the father-in-law sends a gang of slaves to subdue Menaechmus, whom the father-in-law believes to be insane and in need of a

doctor because of Sosicles's violent behavior. When the quack doctor and the gang of slaves attempt to abduct Menaechmus, he calls out for help. Sosicles's slave, Messenio, who happens to be close by, mistakes Menaechmus for his own master, and runs to Menaechmus's rescue. In the ensuing melee, the gang of slaves gets the worst of it:

Messenio: Gouge out his eye, Master—that one that's got you by the arm. I'll sow the seeds of a sound beating on *these* faces. You won't move him without a major mauling: let him go!
Menaechmus: I have this one's eyeball.
Messenio: Make a peep-hole in his head.[11]

In this play, the language of comic violence is brutal and physical, yet also comically overblown.

The Roman economy depended on slave labor, and required a large population of slaves. As Holt Parker has argued, the Romans feared violence at the hands of their slaves, who revolted on more than one occasion. The scene in *Menaechmi*, in which a free citizen attacked by a gang of slaves violently defends himself, touches on Roman anxieties about their social order and on fantasies of securing personal safety through violent reprisals against rebellious the slaves. Such violent reprisals included mass public crucifixions and the summary execution of all slaves in a household if one slave killed his master.

Threats of violence against old men in Plautus, Parker argues, reflect fears of paternal authority. The *senex* or old man, was a stock character in Roman drama who is almost invariably what the wife of Menaechmus says. calls an a*gelast*, or "blocking character," who attempts to thwart the fun of the amorous adolescents and their clever slaves. According to Roman law, the *pater familias* or patriarch had power of life and death over all members of his family.

The language of comic violence is similarly physical, brutal, and absurd in *Amphitryo*, which, like *Menaechmi*, is a comedy of mistaken identities. The play dramatizes Zeus's seduction of Alcmena. Because Alcmena is steadfastly faithful to Amphitryo, Zeus takes Amphitryo's form and deceives Alcmena into sleeping with him while her husband is away. Zeus stations Mercury, who is disguised as a slave named Sosia, to guard the door. When Amphitryo returns to Thebes and sends the real Sosia from the harbor to the house to announce their return, Mercury denies him entry, insists that he is the true Sosia, and threatens to beat the

slave if he does not go away. Mercury tells his fists, "You filet every face you break."[12] In an aside to the audience, Sosia says, "He wants to filet me like an eel."[13] The metaphor makes Sosia's face—the unique features that identify him—a piece of meat, emphasizing the fragility of the slave's identity. When Sosia explains to Amphitryo what happened at the house, Amphitryo takes him for a liar and threatens to cut his tongue out.[14] Amphitryo's threat of violence is particularly dehumanizing because, if carried out, it would permanently deprive Sosia of speech.

Amphitryo and Mercury both threaten Sosia with violence that would destroy fundamental features of his identity: his speech and his face. Just as Amphitryo would destroy Sosia's capacity for human speech if he were to cut out his tongue, Mercury would transform Sosia from a human being into a butchered animal. The parallel between the two scenes emphasizes the absolute power masters hold over their slaves in ancient Rome by comparing it with that which a god such as Mercury wields over mortals. The slave, by virtue of the fact that he is subject to such threats, has no identity, but is merely a piece of property. In Plautus, violence and the threat of violence are grotesque reminders of real violence inscribed within the social order of Rome.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, the language of physical violence is witty rather than grotesque, and one of its recurring motifs is the comparison of violence with debt and money. An episode of slapstick violence and accompanying banter occurs in the second scene of act 1. Antipholus of Syracuse has given one thousand marks to Dromio of Syracuse, with instructions that he take it to an inn called the Centaur and see that it be kept safe. When Antipholus of Syracuse meets Dromio of Ephesus, he takes him for his own Dromio: "Where is the thousand marks thou hadst of me?" Antipholus of Syracuse demands (1.2.81).[15] Dromio says,

> I have some marks of yours upon my pate,
> Some of my mistress' marks upon my shoulders,
> But not a thousand marks between you both.
> If I should pay your worship those again,
> Perchance you will not bear them patiently. (1.2.82-86)

The comic misunderstanding continues, and Antipholus strikes Dromio. So in this scene, Dromio of Ephesus puns on the word *mark*, which can mean both "a bruise" and "a standard unit of currency equal to two thirds of a pound." Dromio's answer is simultaneously a complaint and a veiled threat. His message to Antipholus is, you've lent me a number of blows: do you want me

to make you a fair return?[16] The pun associates blows with currency, and comic violence with the creditor / debtor relationship: Dromio owes his master a beating.

Dromio also puns on the word *bear* in line 86, which emphasizes the ambiguity between currency and blows. *Bear* can be understood to mean "to carry," if Dromio is speaking of currency, or "to suffer or endure," if he is speaking of a beating. Dromio's words also have a potential religious significance, in that they suggest not only patiently bearing the oppressor's wrong—or turning the other cheek—but also Christ's patiently bearing the cross. Given the performance context of the play on Holy Innocents' Day of December 28, 1594 and 1604, and the comedy's Christian references, which Arthur F. Kinney calls, "consistent (and overt),"[17] such associations are thematically relevant and would have come easily to mind for early modern audiences.[18]

Another incident of comic violence occurs in act 2, scene 1, when Antipholus of Syracuse beats Dromio of Syracuse after Dromio denies that he denied attending to the gold. Dromio of Syracuse says, "Now your jest is earnest! / Upon what bargain do you give it me?" (2.1.21-25). The pun this time plays on the ambiguous meanings of *earnest* and *bargain*.[19] *Earnest* money is a payment made to demonstrate good faith of completing a transaction or *bargain*.

The play repeatedly connects comic and tragicomic violence with money and debt. Angelo the goldsmith owes a debt of money to the Second Merchant, who confronts Angelo in the first scene of act 4. Angelo must either pay the debt or be arrested. Yet Antipholus of Ephesus owes Angelo for the gold chain, which Angelo mistakenly gave to Antipholus of Syracuse in act 3, scene 2. In other words, there is a "chain" of debt. Shakespeare verbally associates the golden chain with a rope used for beating. In act 3, scene 1, Antipholus of Ephesus, enraged that his wife has locked him out, sends Angelo for the golden chain. "That chain will I bestow / Be it for nothing but to spite my wife— / Upon mine hostess there" (3.1.118-20). In act 4, scene 1, Antipholus of Ephesus uses similar language about the rope with which he intends to beat his wife: "Buy a rope's end,"[24] he tells Dromio; "That will I bestow / Among my wife and her confederates / For locking me out of my doors by day" (4.1.16-18). Not only is the diction almost identical—"That chain will I bestow" (3.1.118) versus "That will I bestow" (4.1.16), but both phrases occur at the same metrical position, at line's end. Antipholus of Ephesus plans to "bestow" a rope—in other words a beating—in place of the golden chain.

This metaphor, which compares violence with giving, emphasizes the contrast between the two. Antipholus of Ephesus feels that he owes his wife a beating rather than a gift.

An implicit contrast appears here between gift and debt, which receives explicit emphasis later in the play. The beating rope is consistently associated with debt and money. Dromio of Ephesus compares the rope with currency in a pecuniary pun: "I buy a thousand pound a year, I buy a rope," he says (4.1.21). Here *pound* means both "a unit of currency" and "a blow." When Antipholus of Ephesus is arrested for his debt to Angelo, he sends Dromio of Syracuse to bring his bail (4.1.102-108). Yet it is the other Dromio, of course, who returns with the rope: "Here comes my man. I think he brings the money.— / How now, sir? Have you that I sent you for?" Antipholus of Ephesus says (4.4.8-9). "Here's that, I warrant you, will pay them all," Dromio answers (4.4.10), and gives him the rope, which Antipholus then uses to soundly beat Dromio. The rope is an instrument of violence associated with money and with debt and redemption.

Debt was a pressing problem—social, legal, and religious—in early modern England. Norman Jones writes, "The parameters of the credit market are hard to define, but, taking our cue from contemporaries, we can safely say that 'everyone' was involved in it. In 1570 Richard Porter defined it as a universal vice '[N]ot only money men, Merchant men, and Citizens, be usurers,' he wrote, 'but also Noblemen, Courtiers, Gentlemen, . . . Plowmen and Artificers, yea, I would the clergie were free.'"[20]

In fact, Robert Bearman has shown that Shakespeare's father, John, was himself in debt.[21] A writ of *distringas* was issued against him, but he had nothing of which he could be distrained, and in January 1587 he was actually arrested for the debt of his brother.[22] Shakespeare's father was also prosecuted twice for charging high interest.[23] The involvement of Shakespeare's father on both sides of the diffuse and murky credit market as both lender and borrower was probably not atypical. Marjorie McIntosh documents a similar pattern among people of substantial and of meager means during the late sixteenth century.[24] Joseph Matthews recounts that 13 Elizabeth, section 2, repealed 5 and 6 Edward VI, chapter 10, which had "completely outlawed any loan at interest,"[25] and re-enacted 37 Henry VIII, chapter 9, which, Matthews writes, "had been construed to give a license and sanction to all usury not exceeding 10 per cent."[26] In other words, 13 Elizabeth, section 2, reversed her brother's previous absolute prohibition of usury by allowing loans at interest rates up to 10 per cent.

The need for credit at higher rates, though, resulted in a pervasive under-the-table economy of shady deals contracted between small-time creditors and debtors. Norman Jones describes in detail some of the various ways of making such deals appear legal and of making them contractual. For example, usurers would advance cash to borrowers and receive in turn a bond that the lender would deliver commodities or merchandise that could then be sold for more than the amount of the loan.[27] Because the transactions were technically legal, those who could not pay their debts could be sued and distrained of their property. Those dispossessed of their property could become homeless, and vagrancy in early modern England was a crime punishable by whipping, by mutilation, or even by execution for repeat offenses, as Judith Koffler documents.[28] There is, then, a connection in late sixteenth-century law, which is both symbolic and real, between debt and violence, a connection evoked by the association of comic violence with money and credit in *The Comedy of Errors*.

The metaphor of violence as financial transaction, which is bilateral or reciprocal, emphasizes fantasies and anxieties about the opportunities and risks afforded by the rapidly changing early modern economy. Such risks and opportunities made the formerly inflexible social hierarchy increasingly labile. The rhetoric against usury in the late sixteenth century was particularly concerned with the downfall of members of the upper classes who ruined their fortunes by incurring excessive debts to the rising merchant class. In *Comedy of Errors*, Antipholus of Ephesus is, in Angelo's words, "of credit infinite" (5.1.5), yet finds himself violently "bound": arrested in the street for debt and tied up by Pinch and his assistants at his wife's orders. Dromio of Ephesus verbally calls attention to the double meaning of *bond*: "Master, I am here entered in bond for you" (4.4.126). A rope is again associated with debt, or a bond, and with the literal binding of Antipholus and Dromio. Dromio later makes a similar pun on his social position as "bondman" in the concluding act of the play (5.1.289-91).

Credit, debt, and usury were questions of both practical and spiritual concern in early modern England. In addition to decrying the ruinous financial consequences of borrowing at interest, a vast discourse condemned the immorality of usury and prescribed the principles of Christian charity that should govern lending. Mark Valeri writes,

> Preaching to Puritan immigrants as they prepared to depart England for Massachusetts Bay in 1630, John Winthrop labored to define the difference between a godly society

> and the one they were about to leave in England. . . . How were the godly to achieve the solidarity required by the law of love when God had embedded hierarchies of wealth and poverty in the order of creation itself? His answer was specific. The 'duty of mercy,' he instructed the immigrants, was 'exercised' in 'Giving' one's material possessions to those of lesser means, in 'lending' goods or money to those in need, and in 'forgiving' the debts of others.[29]

Winthrop's argument presents three components, each of which has a structural analogue in *The Comedy of Errors*: the gift, the loan, and forgiveness. Winthrop's discourse builds upon and reinterprets the extensive Western critique of usury, a tradition which extends through Thomas Aquinas back to Aristotle.[30] The early modern condemnation of usury was pervasive. Valeri notes, "Anti-usury moralists from staunch Puritans such as Miles Mosse and John Blaxton to moderate Anglicans such as Roger Fenton and secular theorists such as Thomas Wilson appropriated Calvin as an authority for their position."[31] He argues, "They feared that disregard for customary restraints on prices, wages, and the use of loans would elevate the individual over the body social and set loose the most vicious of human instincts."[32]

The association of violence with debt in *The Comedy of Errors* takes on religious significance in the context of the anti-usury discourse and of the play's tragicomic frame: Egeon, the father of the Antipholi, is bound by Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus, for execution if he does not pay the one thousand marks ransom. Yet, at the conclusion of the comedy, the Duke forgives Egeon's debt: it is the *anagnorisis*, the recognition of supposed enemy as kin, that delivers Egeon. While the Christian themes of the scene have surely been noted, we should also take notice of the programmatic contrast the play draws between the forgiveness of debt and the social violence of debt—which, this comedy suggests, has its roots in failing to recognize kinship with one's fellow human beings.

Notes

1. "*Þäù ãÝëáóóáí*," *Iliad*, 2.270. Unless noted otherwise, all translations are my own.

2. For example, in Aristophanes' comedies when Pisthetaeros beats Meton in *The Birds*; the old man beats the boy in *The Wasps*; the old women repulse the old men's raid on the Acropolis in *Lysistrata*, and so forth.

3. In addition to the examples discussed below, the infamous Ballio of the *Pseudolus* rules his slaves with an iron fist.

4. See for example Robert Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy: The Influence of Plautus and Terence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 21; Wolfgang Riehle,

Shakespeare, Plautus, and the Humanist Tradition (Rochester, New York: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 2, 4; David Bevington, "*The Comedy of Errors* as Early Experimental Shakespeare," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 56, no. 3 (2003): 19; Louise George Clubb, "Italian Comedy and *The Comedy of Errors*," *Comparative Literature* 19, no. 3 (1967): 242; Thomas W. MacCary, "The Comedy of Errors: A Different Kind of Comedy," *New Literary History* 9, no. 3 (1978): 525-27; Erma Gill, "A Comparison of the Characters in *The Comedy of Errors* with Those in the *Menaechmi*," *Texas U Studies in English* 5 (1925); Erma Gill, "The Plot Structure of *The Comedy of Errors* in Relation to Its Sources," *Texas U Studies in English* 10 (1930); and Thomas Whitfield Baldwin, *Shakespeare's Five-Act Structure* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1947), 605-718. For the elements of medieval romance in the comedy, see C.L. Barber, "Shakespearian Comedy in *The Comedy of Errors*," *College English* 25, no. 7 (1964): 496.

5. Barbara Freedman, "Reading Errantly: Misrecognition and the Uncanny in *The Comedy of Errors*," in *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. Robert Miola (London: Routledge, 2001), 276.

6. Holt Parker, "Crucially Funny or Tranio on the Couch: The Servus Callidus and Jokes about Torture," *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974—)* 119 (1989): 240.

7. Plautus, *Menaechmi* "*ecce, Apollo mi ex oraclo imperat, / ut ego illi oculos exuram lampadibus ardentibus*," 841-842. References refer to line numbers.

8. Ibid., 843. "*perii, mi pater, minatur mihi oculos exurere*."

9. Ibid., 855-856. "*ita mihi imperas ut ego huius membra atque ossa atque artua / comminuam illo scipione quem ipse habet*."

10. Riehle, *Shakespeare, Plautus, and the Humanist Tradition*, 113. Sosicles might have jumped up on the altar during this scene in his affected madness, according to Riehle's interpretation.

11. Plautus, *Menaechmi*, 1010-14.

Messenio.	*eripe oculum isti, ab umero qui tenet, ere, te obsecro.*
	hisce ego iam sementem in ore faciam pugnosque obseram.
	maximo hodie malo hercle vostro istunc fertis, mittite.
Menaechmus.	*teneo ego huic oculum.*
Messenio.	*face ut oculi locus in capite appareat.*

12. Plautus, *Amphitryo*, 315. "*exossatum os esse oportet quem probe percusseris*."

13. Ibid., 316. "*mirum ni hic me quasi murenam exossare cogitat*."

14. Ibid., 556-57. "*quid est? quo modo? Iam quidem hercle ego tibi istam / scelestam, scelus, linguam abscidam*."

15. William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, in *The Norton Shakespeare,* ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). In-text references are to act, scene, and line.

16. Also see act 3, scene 1, line 15 and following, where Dromio threatens to kick Antipholus like an ass.

17. Arthur F. Kinney, "Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and the Nature of Kinds," *Studies in Philology* 85, no. 1 (1988): 31.

18. Also see Robert Miola, ed., *The Comedy of Errors* (London: Routledge, 2001), 10, on the Bible as a source for Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*.

19. Riehle, *Shakespeare, Plautus, and the Humanist Tradition*, 148. Riehle's extensive work on Shakespeare's reception of Plautus does not treat comic violence, but he does mention the scene in a discussion of puns: "Dromio tries to explain to himself the situation he is in and thus produces highly intellectual comedy."

20. Norman L. Jones, *God and the Moneylenders: Usury and the Law in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 67.

21. Robert Bearman, "Shakespeare: A Papist, or Just Penniless?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2005): 417-419.

22. Ibid., 419.

23. Donna Kish-Goodling, "Using *The Merchant of Venice* in Teaching Monetary Economics," *The Journal of Economic Education* 29, no. 4 (1998): 337.

24. Marjorie K. McIntosh, "Money Lending on the Periphery of London, 1300-1600," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 20, no. 4 (1988): 567-70.

25. Joseph Matthews, *The Law of Moneylending, Past and Present* (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1906), 15.

26. Ibid., 15-16. Also see Jones, *God and the Moneylenders*, 47-65, for a detailed history of sixteenth-century temporal statutes regarding usury.

27. Jones, *God and the Moneylenders*, 72-75.

28. Judith S. Koffler "Terror and Mutilation in the Golden Age," *Human Rights Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1983): 126.

29. Mark Valeri, "Religious Discipline and the Market: Puritans and the Issue of Usury," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 54, no. 4 (1997): 747.

30. John Draper, "Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Modern Philology* 33, no. 1 (1935): 42; Marc Shell, "The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*," *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, 1, no. 4 (1979): 67.

31. Valeri, "Religious Discipline and the Market," 747.

32. Ibid., 752.