"I Weep What's Left Away": Adriana's Complaint and the Poetry of Loss in *The Comedy of Errors*

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The Comedy of Errors, like most Shakespeare plays, includes far more male characters than female ones. Only sixteen percent of Shakespeare's 981 characters are female, and only thirteen percent of major roles (with more than 500 lines) are given to female characters.[1] This percentage is slightly higher in *The Comedy of Errors*, but still only five of eighteen named characters are women. Thus, the interaction between the male characters seems to largely drive the main events of the play. Egeon argues for his life and the two Antipholuses and Dromios continually misidentify each other until the Duke resolves the whole situation at the end. Though the low proportion of female characters might suggest that they play a less important role than their male counterparts, these five women not only add much of the psychological depth of the play, but they also introduce important topics related to gender and equality that Shakespeare will return to again and again in his subsequent plays.

All the women in *The Comedy of Errors* are worth exploring, especially since they embody different versions of femininity, but the sisters at the heart of the play provide an especially interesting case study of women's roles in Shakespeare and in Elizabethan England. Like the two sets of male twins, the two sisters–Adriana and Luciana–act as doubles and foils for each other. Their names are similar, they inhabit the same domestic sphere, and they serve

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as support and confidantes to each other throughout the play. They even finish each other's couplets, as do lovers in other plays like *Romeo and Juliet* or *Richard III*. The two sisters seem very similar to each other in their outspokenness. They share their opinions boldly and aren't timid about standing up to others. But like their male counterparts, the sisters are also different from each other in temperament and perspective. While Luciana, free from marital responsibility, believes in female submission and male freedom, the married Adriana comes across as more committed to female empowerment and fair treatment.

This difference of perspectives is perhaps most apparent in the sisters' conversation at the start of Act 2, the first time we meet them in the play. When Adriana complains that her husband isn't home for dinner despite her having sent Dromio to fetch him, Luciana offers excuses for his absence and encourages her sister not to worry:

> Good sister, let us dine, and never fret:
> A man is master of his liberty:
> Time is their master; and when they see time, They'll go
> or come: if so, be patient, sister. (2.1.6-9)[2]

Luciana's words of comfort seem partly focused on her sister's state of mind, as she encourages her to move on with her own dinner and to be patient. The reasons for the patience she urges, however, do not seem to comfort Adriana, who focuses on the inequality inherent in her excuse. Utilizing the concept of liberty, which Marjorie Garber suggests is "essential to the play's other ongoing conversation about domestic authority, the relationship between masters and servants,"[3] Adriana pushes back against her sister's claim by asking "Why should their liberty than ours be more?" (2.1.10). She asserts that Luciana only espouses this opinion because she has not yet been "bruised with adversity" through the actions of an "unkind mate" (2.1.34-41).

As evidenced by this conversation, Adriana champions women's equal treatment. Readers and viewers of the play often interpret her character as unusually outspoken for a Shakespearean woman, or indeed for an early modern woman in general. Her demands for equal liberty have led contemporary scholars to label her as "proto-feminist" and "the voice of the modern woman."[4] It is true that in comparison to Luciana's, Adriana's speeches seem

progressive. If we accept the common assumption that Luciana is the voice of the typical Elizabethan woman, then Adriana seems decidedly before her time in her feminist views.

But the reality of the situation is more complicated than this simple interpretation suggests. As Thomas Hennings asserts, the fair and kind treatment Adriana demands would not be surprising to Shakespeare's audience, since it was very much in line with the Anglican doctrine of companionate marriage being preached in Elizabethan England during the same time period: "Dismissing Luciana's appeal to a double moral standard, Adriana upholds the Anglican standard of conjugal unity, intimacy, and affection."[5] According to Hennings, Adriana's perspective is a more accurate reflection of Christian Elizabethan views about how wives should be treated than the "superficial and secular" opinion articulated by Luciana.[6] Hennings goes on to assert that "[Adriana] does not and never did seek social or political equality with her husband. Rather, she is content to rely on him" as the superior partner. "Thou art an elm, my husband, I a vine," says Adriana, taking Antipholus's arm in hers, "Whose weakness, married to thy state, / Makes me with thy strength to communicate" (2.2.174-76).[7] Her tirades and laments are therefore not a rebellion against societal norms so much as a desire to adhere to them.

Moreover, the form and content of Adriana's speeches actually connect her to a much older tradition, one very much alive during Shakespeare's time: the female literary complaint, a genre devoted to articulating the loss of love and fidelity that women often experience in relationships. Shakespeare's use of this literary mode shows that Adriana is not a character ahead of her time, but is instead a representation of the many early modern English women–real and fictional–who used the genre of female-voiced complaint as a vehicle to protest the losses they suffered and to attain better treatment for themselves and others.

According to Lauren Berlant, literary complaint is a textual form that addresses "personal, social, or institutional struggles witnessed by a powerful voice that aims to reveal (to the reading audience, and often to the recalcitrant or disappointing object of the invective) an injustice perpetrated against the speaker or something the speaker represents."[8] The complaint form dates at least as far back as ancient Rome, where writers used these texts

to call attention to religious or political misbehavior and to seek redress. But along with those public concerns, private relationship issues–whether real or fictional–also became the subject matter for complaint texts. This "major sub-category of complaint" became known as "the lover's complaint," and focused on "mak[ing] injustice in a private relationship a matter both of public record and public concern, often on behalf of all 'lovers.'"[9] Early modern English literature made generous use of the lover's complaint, both in elite court literature and in popular culture.[10] The inspiration for the genre came partly from medieval love poetry and partly from biblical "plaint" (like the Old Testament Psalms), but was probably most strongly influenced by the "widespread dissemination of Ovid's *Heroides*, a series of epistolary laments by abandoned women of the historical and mythical past to their absent lovers."[11]

Ovid wrote these poetic letters in elegiac couplets using the voices of heroines like Dido, Penelope, Phaedra, Ariadne, and Medea to create, as he asserted, a new genre of poetry.[12] In the poems, the women urge their partners to come home, to return their affections, to rescue them from danger, or at the very least to recognize the harm they have done to those they have left behind. George Turberville's 1567 English translation of Ovid's *Heroides* went through at least four editions in the second half of the sixteenth century and was, moreover, heavily used as a textbook in English schools for teaching rhetorical skills.[13] Shakespeare would surely have been familiar with the text and its characteristic way of giving voice to the sentiments of loss and betrayal experienced by the female characters. His rhetorical education thus prepared him to make heavy use of prosopopoeia, "a figure of speech in which an imaginary or absent person is represented as speaking or acting."[14] He seems to have tried his own hand at the complaint genre in "The Lover's Complaint" in 1609 (though authorship is disputed), but elements of the form also appear in earlier poems like "The Rape of Lucrece," which include the voices of both male and female characters involved in a social and legal dispute.[15] And Shakespeare was just one of dozens of Elizabethan writers who turned to the lover's complaint as a vehicle for their poetic expression. Rosalind Smith, Michelle O'Callaghan, and Sarah C. E. Ross argue that "complaint offered a widely used, emotionally charged, nuanced vehicle for expressing powerlessness or protest in response to loss

and grievance in the rapidly changing cultures of early modern England. As such, it is a crucial mode for the formation of the early modern political subject in ways that privilege irresolution, dilation and vulnerability rather than containment, control and mastery."[16] A wide range of authors from Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey to Edmund Spenser to Isabella Whitney used the complaint genre to explore emotions of loss and betrayal and share those emotions with readers.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the theatrical world brought complaint out of poetry books in the schoolroom and into the theater. The form plays a major role in Elizabethan drama, appearing frequently in plays by writers like Marlowe, Kyd, and Beaumont and Fletcher.[17] Emily Shortslef asserts that far from being a rarity on the stage, "complaint was the voice of early modern tragedy," and argues that "speeches of complaint gave external form to what characters suggested was inward and ineffable grief, making that anguish palpable, an almost physical presence on the stage.[18] With equal force they directed that grief outward, hurling it at someone else as a plea or accusation."[19] These characters, both male and female, ranging from Queen Margaret in *Richard III* to King Lear to Isabella in *Measure for Measure,* use complaint not only to influence other characters, but also to demand empathy from theatrical audiences.[20]

Although Shortslef's argument confines the role of complaint to early modern tragedy, many of her arguments apply to Shakespearean comedy as well. Despite typically happy endings, comedy gives voice to serious concerns and laments. Most important for my argument, female-voiced complaint provides a familiar vehicle for drawing public attention to the concerns of Elizabethan women and arguing for their fair and kind treatment. Indeed, building on Lynn Enterline's claim that characters like Marlowe's Dido participate in "skeptical imitations of epic that undercut normative, end-driven representations of nationhood and masculinity,"[21] I argue that reading Adriana's speeches–especially her lament in Act 2 Scene 2–within the tradition of female-voiced complaint helps us understand how they undercut the farcical male-dominated world of Antipholuses and Dromios to communicate much more serious messages of loss and the necessity of redress.

By the time Adriana confronts her supposed husband Antipholus in Act 2 Scene 2, she has had plenty of time and reason for her anger to develop. His absence is at the heart of a much deeper concern, especially within a Christian context: "his eye doth homage otherwhere" (2.1.103). Antipholus's wandering and betrayal causes Adriana to doubt her own beauty and desirability, fearing that they have been "ruined" by his unkindness. She feels like her only recourse is to "weep what's left [of her beauty] away, and weeping die" (2.1.114).

With this emotional prelude, the meeting between Adriana and Antipholus of Syracuse in the next scene makes sense to us as viewers in a way that it does not to Antipholus. Adriana's speech to him is the longest in the play, apart from Egeon's backstory in the first scene and Antipholus of Ephesus's recap of his woes at the end. Unlike their externally-oriented speeches, hers is focused on feeling instead of on events.

Adriana begins her complaint by asserting that Antipholus's neglect and infidelity have stripped her of her identity and betrayed his past promises to her:

> Ay, ay, Antipholus, look strange and frown:
> Some other mistress hath thy sweet aspects;
> I am not Adriana nor thy wife.
> The time was once when thou unurged wouldst vow
> That never words were music to thine ear,
> That never object pleasing in thine eye, That
> never touch well welcome to thy hand, That
> never meat sweet-savor'd in thy taste,
> Unless I spake, or look'd, or touch'd, or carved to thee.
> (2.2.110-118)

The "ay, ay" that begins the speech is a sound of ironic assent, but it also communicates surprise, regret, and sorrow, like the cry of someone in pain. And Adriana is in pain; her role has been usurped by "some other mistress," who receives the "sweet aspects" due to Antipholus's wife. Indeed, it is these loving looks–in contrast to the frowns and strange expressions she currently is receiving–that create her identity as Adriana, Antipholus's wife. As Martine Van Elk explains,

> The speech formulates what it means to say "I am Adriana," which is synonymous with saying "I am Antipholus's

> wife." Female subjectivity is covered by marital status and represented as a continued process of exchange: the wife provides pleasure to all the husband's senses, for which he rewards her by praise. If this exchange is necessary to enable Adriana to call herself Adriana, then her name and the label of wife are not permanent.[22]

Adriana's use of anaphora in the repetition of "that never" drives home the absolute nature of his promised love to her, but also reinforces the distance from that "time [that] once." She catalogues the senses to highlight the completeness of her role in his life, as speech, sight, touch, and taste were all bound up in their relationship to each other.

Adriana next elaborates on the interconnectedness she feels with her husband, borrowing the language of Anglican teachings on affectionate marriage:[23]

> How comes it now, my husband, O, how comes it,
> That thou art thus estranged from thyself?
> Thyself I call it, being strange to me,
> That, undividable, incorporate,
> Am better than thy dear self's better part. Ah, do
> not tear away thyself from me!
> For know, my love, as easy mayest thou fall
> A drop of water in the breaking gulf,
> And take unmingled that same drop again,
> Without addition or diminishing,
> As take from me thyself and not me too. (2.2.119-129)

She uses the same metaphor her listener, Antipholus of Syracuse, uses earlier to describe his quest for his mother and brother–that of a drop of water in the ocean–to describe the unity she feels and desires in her marriage. In tearing himself away from her, both physically by pulling back from her in this moment and figuratively by spending his time away from home, her husband is trying to violently divide an "undividable, incorporate" body into pieces. Adriana suggests that such an attempt is ultimately impossible, since it necessarily pulls her along with him.

Finally, Adriana extends her criticism of her husband's mistreatment to the double standard he (and society) might apply if she were guilty of the same crimes:

> How dearly would it touch me to the quick,
> Shouldst thou but hear I were licentious And

> that this body, consecrate to thee,
> By ruffian lust should be contaminate? Wouldst
> thou not spit at me and spurn at me, And hurl the
> name of husband in my face, And tear the
> stain'd skin off my harlot-brow, And from my
> false hand cut the wedding-ring, And break it
> with a deep-divorcing vow?
> I know thou canst; and therefore see thou do it! I am
> possess'd with an adulterate blot;
> My blood is mingled with the crime of lust:
> For if we two 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. (2.2.130-146)

Again, the use of anaphora with the word "and" drives home the extent and extremeness of her husband's imagined response to even the rumor or her infidelity, a prediction that seems accurate based on his threats later in the play (4.4.96-99 and 5.1.183-84) to "pluck out [her] false eyes" (4.4.98) and "scorch [her] face and disfigure [her]." Using the language of plague and venereal disease, Adriana begs her husband to act on his passionate emotions to avoid spreading "contagion" to her by returning home to his "true bed" where the two of them can live in unity and purity together.

Adriana's reasons for being upset in this speech differ greatly from those of her counterpart in Shakespeare's source text, Plautus's *Menaechmi*.[24] Matrona, the wife in Plautus's comedy, who doesn't even get a proper name of her own, spends much of the Roman play complaining, but her list of grievances looks quite different from Adriana's. Matrona's concerns seem to be largely economic: she complains about her husband taking her clothes and jewelry from the house to give to his mistress. Her rants have none of the emotional depth of Adriana's, but instead focus on the material losses she has suffered. The redress she seeks seems to be a return of her property, not of her husband, and she repeatedly states her preference for divorce or widowhood over the current state of her marriage.

Shakespeare's Adriana, on the contrary, uses language and sentiments much closer to Ovid's *Heroides* and early modern lover's complaint literature. Her concerns are emotional rather

than material, and although her greatest wish is for a happier marriage, she freely admits her powerlessness to amend the situation through her own efforts. Her speech exemplifies the "compassionate emotion, irresolution and lack of control" that Smith, O'Callaghan, and Ross describe as typical of Elizabethan female-voiced complaint.[25] Like Ovid's Penelope or Dido, Adriana documents her suffering before an audience, including those within the play: Dromio, Luciana, and the other Antipholus, as well as those people watching in the theater. As Berlant explains,

> The female complaint is thus an aesthetic "witnessing" of injury. Situated precisely in the space between a sexual politics that threatens structures of patriarchal authority and a sentimentality that confirms the inevitability of the speaker's powerlessness, the female complaint registers the speaker's frustration, rage, abjection, and heroic self-sacrifice.[26]

Adriana's speech, therefore, gives public airtime to her private concerns, calling on her listeners' empathy for her suffering, but also drawing attention to the plight of other women like herself. Her plea to Antipholus is not an assertion of dominance or desire for control; on the contrary, it is a recognition of how limited her options are. Like Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, who laments "I cannot be a man / with wishing; therefore I will die a woman with / grieving" (4.1.336-338), Adriana accepts that language is her only recourse.[27] Like other women of Shakespeare's time (both real and fictional), she sees complaint as an effective tool for speaking out in response to her mistreatment–an allowed form of protest against her powerless state.

So what happens when we read Adriana's speeches as complaint? First, this reading lends weight and seriousness to her character. By aligning Adriana with the epic heroines of the *Heroides* and the protagonists of lover's complaint poems, we better understand the pathos of her situation and its broad relevance. She is not just an individual angry wife railing against her wayward husband; instead, she is part of a larger community of wronged women whose laments call attention to societal patterns of mistreatment.

Second, seeing complaint in Adriana's lines complicates the genre of the play. *The Comedy of Errors* is generally recognized as one of Shakespeare's earliest plays and therefore is sometimes characterized as lacking depth. The play is often categorized as

farce or as an uneasy mixture between farce and romance, with Adriana trying to play the role of a romance heroine in a farcical world.[28] Van Elk argues that Adriana's tendency toward romance is ultimately ineffective and that she ends up succumbing to the power of farce: "Adriana's self-presentation is undermined because her words are misdirected, spoken in the wrong setting, or misinterpreted. Due to her role within farce, her subjectivity lacks the deeper relevance she herself perceives, and her marital problems are never truly resolved."[29] But reading Adriana's speeches as complaint suggests that this lack of resolution is to be expected and the deeper relevance remains, regardless of the outcome. The protagonist in a complaint does not have to convince her beloved to change or even have his attention in order for her words to have value. They have value because they bear witness to her suffering and make it public. In Shortslef's words, theatrical complaints like Adriana's "helped to articulate the theater's social value as a site of affective community where very different people, positioned very differently in the social structure, were invited to grieve together for the same things–for figures who complain."[30] In this sense, Adriana's choice of the "wrong" listener or setting actually increases the emotional effect of her complaint on the audience, since we know that the Antipholus she speaks to cannot give her any satisfaction for her grievances. By adding the genre of complaint to the farce and romance already at work in the comedy, we can see that there is more complexity to the play than might initially be apparent.

Third, recognizing the function of complaint within *The Comedy of Errors* helps to firmly situate Adriana's opinions and speeches within Elizabethan culture. It shows that a woman arguing against mistreatment and speaking out in favor of affectionate marriage was not an anomaly, but a common occurrence. By normalizing Adriana's behavior instead of characterizing it as "proto-feminist" or "ahead of its time," we not only get a better understanding of the rich and varied culture of Elizabethan England, but also of the way in which Shakespeare wrote for and from that culture. Recognizing Adriana's speeches as part of a larger genre of early-modern complaint literature helps readers and viewers see that she is not an exception, but one of many voices arguing for the

importance of hearing about women's experiences and valuing their perspectives.

Finally, reading Adriana's speeches as complaints seeking redress helps to explain why the ending of *The Comedy of Errors* differs so markedly from that of Plautus's *Menaechmi*. In the Roman play, the two brothers leave town together, abandoning Matrona and all the other unwanted responsibilities of life there. The resolution of the play comes from embracing the fraternal relationship but rejecting all the other relationships, especially marriage. In fact, Menaechmus of Epidamnus includes his wife in the possessions he plans to auction off. In contrast, the ending of *The Comedy of Errors* shows a reconciliation, not only between Adriana and her Antipholus, but also between Egeon and Emeilia, Luciana and the other Antipholus, and the two Dromios. Emilia's final speech celebrates the long-awaited reunion of the family, a larger-scale fulfillment of the wish both Antipholus of Syracuse and Adriana articulated in their comments about drops of water in the ocean. Instead of clinging only to each other, as Plautus's twins do, Shakespeare's Antipholuses are re-integrated into a larger family structure built on bonds between siblings, but also between spouses. Adriana gains additional reinforcement in her argument for the importance of family and marriage, since now her husband is connected not only to her, but also to father, mother, brother, and (presumably) sister-in-law. She may have gained allies in her cause who can reinforce her claims on her husband, while also helping her to see her own responsibilities as a wife. The play suggests that the bonds of family are lasting and resilient, so Adriana's complaints may have done their work, since they have ultimately led her from loss to gain, regaining not only her husband, but his whole family.

Notes

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12. Perhaps Shakespeare's inspiration for the couplets in this play?

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