

A Comedy of Errors, or Double Trouble

R.L. Fowler

Some things never change, and one of them is what makes people laugh. Certain devices have been standard stock-in-trade for comedians since the days of ancient Greece and Rome -- for instance, such stand-bys as mistaken identity, misapprehended situations, clever intrigues, and stock characters like young lovers and rascally servants. One play of this description by Plautus, the Menaechmi, is especially famous because it served as the model for Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors.

Long before the play begins, twin brothers had been separated in childhood. Their names were Menaechmus and Sosicles; but their grandfather renamed Sosicles "Menaechmus" in memory of the lost brother. When Sosicles (now Menaechmus) grew up, he refused to believe that his brother was dead, and so set sail to find him. He searched all the ports of the world until he came at last to Epidamnus in Greece, where (unknown to him) his brother was in fact living an ordinary life.

At this point the play begins. (The previous situation is explained in a prologue which serves the same purpose as programme notes might serve today.) With two look-alikes both named Menaechmus in Epidamnus the stage is set for some classic comic confusion as first one brother, then the other stumbles into a situation not of his own making. The playwright will milk this formula for all it's worth, until everyone is totally deluded and at odds with everyone else -- a situation later Latin commentators were to call an elegans perturbatio, and what Oliver Hardy would call "another fine mess". The play can end at any moment of the playwright's choosing; he merely has to arrange for the players with the right pieces of information (in the case of the Menaechmi, the two twins) to be on stage at the same time.

In the first scene we see Menaechmus of Epidamnus in company with a hanger-on or parasite (a stock character found in many ancient and modern comedies). Menaechmus is having an affair with a woman next door (the two houses are visible on stage) and is in the process

of giving one of his wife's gowns to his mistress. The gift is delivered, and the two men depart for some business in the forum while a banquet is being prepared. Enter the other Menaechmus, whom we shall continue to call Sosicles for convenience. Of course he is mistaken for the resident Menaechmus and invited in for the banquet! He can't believe his good fortune, and is not about to pass up such a chance for a party and pleasant company, though his honest slave tries to prevent him. The parasite returns in time to see Sosicles leaving the house, and assumes that Menaechmus has doubled back and enjoyed himself in his absence. Enraged at being cheated of a meal, he vows to tell Menaechmus' wife all that he's been up to, as Sosicles departs with the dress to have it altered. The real Menaechmus enters just in time to be confronted by his wife and the parasite; of course he has no idea why the parasite has taken this extraordinary step, and is hard put to explain himself to his wife. He promises to fetch the dress back; but when he asks his mistress for it, she replies that she's already given it to him for alterations -- and if this is the way he's going to treat her, giving her a gift and asking for it back, then he can go elsewhere. Locked out of both houses, Menaechmus slinks off to town.

Enter Sosicles, still with the gown (he had been intending to abscond with it, but had failed to find his slave); re-enter Menaechmus' wife, who thinks she will now get her dress back. Sosicles, who has never laid eyes on her before, treats her like a mad person, and she departs with a vow to fetch her father for divorce proceedings. When the father confronts Sosicles, the latter decides that the best way to scare off these pests with their peculiar behaviour is to pretend madness himself; he acts the part most convincingly, and the father and wife flee before his threats of violence. They fetch a doctor, but by the time he is found the false Menaechmus has departed and the real one, who knows nothing of all this, has returned. They attempt to haul him away to a sanatorium, but Sosicles' slave arrives in the nick of time to rescue a man he takes to be his master. After the doctor and his helpers depart, the slave interprets Menaechmus' remark "you're no slave of mine" (meaning "I've never seen you before") as "I give you your freedom". The poor slave is to learn in the very next scene, when the two brothers finally collide on stage, that he is still a slave after all -- at least, until Sosicles, overjoyed at finding his brother at last, also grants him his freedom.

You would think that if you were Sosicles, having travelled the world in search of a twin brother, when you finally arrived in a city where people started mistaking you for somebody else, you would conclude that your brother was close at hand. The thought never occurs to Sosicles in Plautus' play, and when the twins are finally brought face to face it takes some effort on the slave's part to persuade them of the

truth. But such realistic expectations are out of place in comedy. If Plautus made Sosicles behave in a believable manner and realize in the first scene that his brother was in Epidamnus, there could be no comedy. The comedy depends on both brothers failing to realize the other's presence. The audience is not really bothered by such unrealistic features; they are too involved in enjoying the fun.

The principle that it is more important to raise a laugh than to construct believable plots is basic to all comedy. Shakespeare understood this well enough when he adapted Plautus' play; indeed, he doubled the trouble by giving the twin brothers a pair of twin slaves. It is still understood today, when the descendants of Plautus' clever slaves, lovers, stern fathers and cheating husbands are to be seen every night on television situation comedies.