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‘Plucking a Crow’ in *The Comedy of Errors*

Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*’<sup>1</sup> first recorded performance on 28 December 1594 at Gray’s Inn Hall formed one element in a series of revels or ‘law-sports’ held intermittently between 20 December and Shrove Tuesday. The proceedings of those festivities have been preserved in the *Gesta Grayorum*, first published in 1688.<sup>2</sup> In referring to the *Gesta*, scholars usually mention the ‘tumult’ that forced part of the original entertainments for the second ‘Grand Night’ of the law sports to be abandoned, although, we are told, Shakespeare’s play was performed that night as planned. Apparently, a great crowd of people tried to squeeze into Gray’s Inn Hall causing the ambassador from the Inner Temple and his retinue, the ‘Templarians’, to leave in disgust, mollified a few days later by the presentation of the *Masque of Amity*.<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly little attention has been given to the *Gesta* as a dramatic piece in itself (editions and anthologies usually excerpt only the part relating to the performance of *Errors*).<sup>4</sup> This is a pity because when we look at the play against the backdrop of the full *Gesta*, taking into account the revels’ purposes (including a celebration of the relationship with its brother law school) and prevailing temper (often satirical and topical), we see that the play takes colour from its frame and reveals much of the immediacy of the moment. We also see the way that Shakespeare adapts his chief sources (*The Menaechmi* and *Amphitryo* by Plautus and the *Apollonius of Tyre* story) to fit the occasion, enhancing the chosen themes of ‘twinning’, for example. He has been asked to provide a play that contributes to Gray’s Inn revels. But he has also been identified – most publicly in Robert Greene’s ‘upstart crow’ slur – as one of those under-educated non-university dramatists ‘beautified with [the] feathers’ of their betters, and the Gray’s Inn men belong to that class of ‘betters’ and themselves aspire to literary and dramatic expertise. How might a highly intelligent and creative person like Shakespeare respond in that circumstance? Quite possibly he would use the occasion to assert himself and defend his reputation. He does it, I think, by producing an engaging and thematically appropriate play, but also indirectly by using the law-sports’ tradition of local,

satirical, and topical reference to respond, with humor of course, to Robert Greene's attack.

One reason that the *Gesta* has received so little attention perhaps lies in scholars' differing views on *Errors*' date of composition. The *Gesta*'s perceived significance as a 'frame', and that frame's impact on Shakespeare's play, depends largely on whether the Gray's Inn men commissioned it for the 1594 performance, or whether it was a pre-existing play simply inserted into the festivities. Several scholars have dated it earlier than 1594 and have assumed that it was not written specifically for the occasion. Others have argued that the internal evidence of the play suggests that it was written or adapted for the 1594 performance – a point of view with which I agree;<sup>5</sup> the play conforms closely enough to its context that it is unlikely to have been completely ready-made and merely 'dropped in' to the Gray's Inn revels without adaptation or collaboration.

The 1594 Gray's Inn revels, like others of their kind, took the form of an elaborate game of 'let's pretend'. In this one, the 'principality' of Gray's Inn had its own ruler, laws and traditions, overseen by counsellors and other officers. The appointed ruler, in this case the 'Prince of Purpoole', a Mr. Henry Helmes of Norfolk, invited the 'Ambassador' of its close neighbour, the Inner Temple (the inn with which Gray's enjoyed a particularly close and long-standing relationship), to participate in the planning of events and to be honoured, with his retinue, once the revels began. The prince, like any other monarch, made edicts and issued pardons, listened to sage advice from his counsellors, received ambassadors from foreign lands, and went on progress. The make-believe of the event went beyond the confines of the inn when, on Shrove Tuesday, the prince and his followers undertook a progress which included calling on Queen Elizabeth and presenting a masque for her amusement: Francis Davison's *The Masque of Proteus*.

An important function of the revels was the cementing and celebrating of the relationship between Gray's Inn and the Inner Temple. In the preamble to the *Gesta* the Gray's Inn men request the attendance of an 'Ambassador' from the Inner Temple because, they say, 'we have ever had great Cause, by the Warrant of Experience, to assure our selves of your unfeigned Love and Amity'.<sup>6</sup> The Templarians accede to this request as an appropriate response to the Grayarians' 'Kindness, and [as] the Bond of our ancient Amity and League requireth and deserveth'.<sup>7</sup> This 'twinning' of the two inns is still visually apparent today: each inn carries the emblem of the other on its buildings (the Inner Temple displays the Gray's Inn griffin, and Gray's Inn the Pegasus of the Inner Temple). Such an insistence on their closeness and

equality shows in the way that their joint ventures were advertised. Reginald Fletcher points out that the *Masque of Flowers*, performed before the king and queen in 1612, was printed as *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn, Gray's Inn and the Inner Temple*, 'The dedication ... carefully framed to avoid a suggestion of inequality in the two inns'.<sup>8</sup> We see Shakespeare emphasizing this important theme of brotherhood as he adapts his main source, the *Menaechmi*, by adding a second set of twins, the Dromios, who say in their final exit of the play: 'We came into the world like brother and brother, / And now let's go hand in hand, not one before the other' (5.1.424–5). No doubt Shakespeare took a hint for this second set of twins from his sources (particularly the *Amphitryo* where Antipholus' wife produces twins fathered by both her husband and Jupiter, masquerading as her husband), but he foregrounds them, makes them fully functioning characters and in so doing reiterates the overriding theme of the revels: the twinning of these two law schools.

This is but one example of Shakespeare's adapting the play to the governing design of the revels. We see his ability to make other more subtle connections between the frame and the play when we compare the first two Grand Nights. In reading the *Gesta's* account of the first Grand Night, on 20 December, one is immediately struck by how little the essential elements of a 'Men's night' have changed; in its tone and content it is comparable to a bachelor party held before a wedding. Bawdy and satirical, the fictions allow the participants to congratulate themselves on their sexual prowess. After the opening ceremonial flourishes, those who hold tenure from the prince are named and their fees and obligations noted. Quickly the ribald tone of the proceedings becomes clear; the first 'homager' is required to 'right and relieve all Wants and Wrongs of all Ladies, Matrons and Maids'<sup>9</sup> within his jurisdiction, the sexual innuendo becoming progressively more explicit as the homagers' obligations are named. The fee for 'Bawdine de Islington' who 'holdeth the Town of Islington of the Prince of Purpoole' is 'for every Maid in Islington, continuing a Virgin after the Age of Fourteen Years, one hundred thousand Millions, Sterling'. More obviously salacious is reference to the tenure of 'Jordano Sartano de Kentish-Town' who holds his lands 'in Tail-general ... as of his Mannor of Deep-Inn, in his Province of Islington by the Veirge, according to the custom of the said Mannor'.<sup>10</sup> One of Jordano's obligations is to

provide for a Mess of the Yeomen of the Guard, or any of the Black-Guard, or such like inferior Officers so coming, eight Loins of Mutton, which are sound, well fed, and not infectious; and for every Gentleman-Pensioner, or other of good Quality, Coneys, Pidgeons, Chickens, or such dainty Morsels.<sup>11</sup>

Following these recognitions of homagers the prince gives a ‘general and free Pardon’<sup>12</sup> to a long list of offences that seems, at first glance, to cover every possible contingency. Immediately afterwards, though, he reads the exceptions to the pardon – five times longer than the pardon itself – which completely nullify it. The content of this first ‘Grand Night’ is both ribald and self-parodying. As Finkelpearl says, ‘The convention was to assume a society of merry devils whose main occupation was frequenting the stews’.<sup>13</sup> The duties of the homagers, mostly in providing sexual pleasures for the prince and his entourage or exacting fines for omissions in those responsibilities show just what ‘merry devils’ they were; the pardon and its exceptions make fun of the legalese, the inns’ daily fare, which obfuscates and bamboozles.<sup>14</sup>

On the second ‘Grand Night’ (the night of *The Comedy of Errors*’ performance) the tone changes, perhaps because of the ‘great Presence of Lords, Ladies, and worshipful Personages’.<sup>15</sup> Here we see a variation on the themes already explored in the festivities of the first Grand Night. The impossible pardons issued by the Prince on the first night have parallels on the second night in the Duke’s conditional pardoning of Egeon – a pardon that seems similarly impossible but which, against all odds, is implemented by the reuniting of Egeon with his sons and wife. Where the first night’s revelry stressed promiscuity, *The Comedy of Errors*, it seems, contemplates married love, and de-emphasizes the role of the courtesan prominent in the *Menaechmi*. The play’s setting in Ephesus, another of Shakespeare’s changes, suggests a biblical cast to events. Paul’s letters to the Ephesians advising them of the right conduct of women in relation to their husbands (‘Wives be subject to your husbands’)<sup>16</sup> also notes the dangerous wizardry endemic in Ephesus. Wizardry had been referred to in the pardon on the first Grand Night when it was commanded that ‘all and every publick Person and Persons, whether they be Strangers or Naturals, [shall be] excused, suspended and discharged from all, and all manner of . . . Errors, Misprisions, Mistakings’ and also ‘all manner of Sorceries, Inchantments, Conjurations, Spells or Charms’.<sup>17</sup> On the second Grand Night such wizardry is tamed by its proximity to the tacit presence of St. Paul symbolized by the Antipholus brothers’ Abbess Mother – or so it seems. Such ‘taming’ proves ambiguous, though, as the Gray’s Inn men in the audience would recall another ‘Abbess’, one of the homagers on the first Grand Night, ‘Lucy Negro, Abbess de Clerkenwell’ who holds her privileges ‘by Night-Service in Cauda,’ a ‘Madam’ commanded to ‘find a Choir of Nuns, with burning Lamps, to chaunt Placebo to the Gentlemen of the Prince’s Privy Chamber’.<sup>18</sup> (Lucy Negro is the nickname of Lucy Morgan, a local brothel-keeper).

Shakespeare's inclusion of a nun or abbess could have been prompted by another of his sources, the Apollonius of Tyre story which, Whitworth suggests, he probably read in Lawrence Twine's *Pattern of Painful Adventures*.<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare seems to have taken elements of that account as a frame for his play, particularly the shipwreck, the wife's establishment in a religious order in Ephesus and the family's eventual reunion. In Twine's account 'Lucina', the Emilia equivalent, is a priestess in the temple of Diana.<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare's movement of thought from Lucina, priestess at the Temple of Diana, to Lucy Negro, high priestess, abbess of the nuns of Clerkenwell, is a short but very productive one for his purposes.<sup>21</sup> What David Bevington calls the 'anglicizing moralization' of Shakespeare's adaptation of sources<sup>22</sup> offers a Christian counterbalance to the ribaldry of the first night, and subverts that counterbalance too. The men in attendance on the first night, who laughed at mention of Lucy Negro, Abbess of Clerkenwell, will have a more complex and stratified view of the abbess in *Errors*, especially perhaps when she says in her exit speech: 'Go keep us company, / And we shall make full satisfaction' (5.1.398–9).

When we bear in mind that Plautus' *Menaechmi* was one of the best known plays of the period,<sup>23</sup> and surely well-known to the men of the inns of court, those devotees of playgoing, Shakespeare's minimizing of the role of the courtesan and the insertion of an abbess is already a fine joke: the 'Abbess' with whom these men are familiar is the uber-courtesan Lucy Negro. So even though *Errors* does act as counterweight to the bawdy tone of the first Grand Night we also see Shakespeare's creative ambiguity as he appeals, in this substitution, to at least two distinct elements of the audience: the 'worthy personages' attending the revels on the second Grand Night approving a 'cleaned up' version of the *Menaechmi* and the 'merry devils' who were also present on the previous Grand Night – a coterie audience enjoying an evening's entertainment made richer by inclusion of such private jokes as the abbess figure.

As Finkelpearl says in relation to later Middle Temple revels, 'a large amount of the humor was inevitably based on intramural jokes and local personalities'.<sup>24</sup> How natural it would be, then, for Shakespeare, already adapting or devising the themes and reference of his play to interweave with those of the revels, and always adept at the play of double senses<sup>25</sup> (achieved with so much finesse in the figure of the abbess) would take the opportunity to insert some 'intramural jokes' of his own into the play, perhaps as a way of defending his reputation from recent assaults upon it and adding to the general mirth. Robert Greene's insult, posthumously published in *Greene's*

*Groatsworth of Wit* (1592) would be a likely choice for such a reference at this time and in this milieu. As we know, Greene speaks of

an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, [who] supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a cuntry.<sup>26</sup>

Whether this attack suggests primarily that Shakespeare's 'guilt' lies in plagiarism or presumption continues as a subject for debate, but we do know that Greene's views on Shakespeare and his actor contemporaries had caused a flurry of controversy,<sup>27</sup> and such a slur on Shakespeare's abilities would have been generally known as the worlds of the actors and the inns of courts men closely intersected each other.<sup>28</sup> Inns of court men were renowned for their addiction to play-going and close relationships with players. As Finkelppearl points out, 'lawyers and law students were, next to courtiers, the most important patrons and benefactors of contemporary writing'.<sup>29</sup> And, notably, Henry Wriothesley, Shakespeare's patron and the dedicatee of *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *Rape of Lucrece* (1594) was a member of the Inn during this period.<sup>30</sup>

By the time of the Gray's Inn Revels of 1594, Greene had been dead for over two years, but as the theatres were closed from the June 1592 until May 1594 because of plague, few opportunities to address publicly or to answer such a charge would have presented themselves.<sup>31</sup> Chettle, who published *Greene's Groatsworth's of Wit* shortly after Greene's death (1592), quickly issued an apology for the affronts offered there, and particularly apologized to Shakespeare, one of the two targets who took the pamphlet 'offensively':<sup>32</sup> Chettle says:

my selfe haue seene his demeanor no lesse ciuill than he exelent in the qualitie he professes: Besides, diuers of worship haue reported, his vprightnes of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that aprooues his Art.<sup>33</sup>

This might have mollified Shakespeare, but, as Carroll points out, Greene's comments should be seen as

part of a general attack ... against players and playwrights. This attack, properly understood, in turn belongs to an ongoing conflict at the time, first, between the University Wits (Greene, Nashe, Peele, and others) and the actors and,

second, between the wits and the new, uneducated, professional playwrights (Shakespeare, Munday, Kyd, and others).<sup>34</sup>

Bearing in mind this dynamic – that Shakespeare has been both vindicated by Chettle's apology but has now written and is acting in a play before the aspiring 'university wits' of Gray's Inn – Shakespeare could ignore Greene's attack, ignore the 'elephant in the room', or could take the opportunity to refer to the insult in such a way that he could defend himself through laughter, even laughter directed at himself.

The comic focus of the play, as critical attention suggests, is the exchange in the 'lockout scene' (act 3, scene 1) where the Ephesian Antipholus and Dromio try to gain admittance to their house. The banter between Antipholus and Dromio in that scene has as its dominant image the 'crow', Shakespeare's invention and a likely reference to Greene's attack.<sup>35</sup> Act 3, scene 1 as a whole contains a notable and self-proclaiming gallimaufry of poetic styles, and thus invites special attention. As Foakes says:

The scene moves from blank verse, the normal medium of serious action, into a stylized, rhymed discussion on whether a hearty welcome is more important than good food, thence into tumbling verse, which keeps the quarrel at the door within the bounds of the farce, and finally returns to blank verse, and a more serious note, emphasizing the real anger of Antipholus, even though he is persuaded at last to speak of the business as a 'jest'.<sup>36</sup>

Greene, we remember, says that Shakespeare 'supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of [them]'. Certainly in this part of the play Shakespeare, in what seems almost a journeyman's demonstration of the range of his skills, shows his ability to move from one mode to another with perfect ease. As Whitworth suggests, *Errors*

is a kind of writer's showcase in the dramatic mode; a newly-established playwright showing off somewhat in this, perhaps the first piece to be commissioned from him and his new colleagues [the Lord Chamberlain's Men], for a special occasion. The rising poet, like the new company of players, was on show.<sup>37</sup>

As early as the eighteenth century, critics observed that the verse of the lockout scene was, as O'Donnell puts it, 'startlingly different from the rest of the play'. He explains that what has been dismissed as the 'doggerel' of 3.1 is 'actually a kind of accentual or strong-stress verse, probably derived from the native

English alliterative line' which 'tend[s] to enforce a metronomic movement from stress to equivalent stress'<sup>38</sup> resulting, presumably, in the sing-song meter that we know as 'doggerel'. When we hear such verse we automatically assume that something particularly funny is imminent; the inns of court men, because of their rigorous rhetorical training would have been particularly attuned to such signals. We can perhaps assume then that this 'tumbling verse' would clearly indicate a comic interlude inserted in the main stream of the dramatic action, just as a modern audience knows that when a player says 'hello, hello, hello?' or 'knock, knock', a comic routine discontinuous from the main dramatic action is imminent.

In the lock-out scene itself the Syracusan Dromio, speaking from indoors, roundly abuses his counterpart, Dromio of Ephesus, who tries to help his master, Antipholus of Ephesus, gain admittance to his own house. Dromio of Ephesus articulates the theme of the scene, stealing what rightfully belongs to another, when, standing outside the door he shouts to Dromio of Syracuse: 'O villain, thou hast stol'n both mine office and my name; / The one ne'er got me credit, the other mickle blame' (3.1.44–5). As the requests to enter and the denials of those requests come to a climax, Dromio of Syracuse says that he will admit the party outside the door 'when fowls have no feathers, and fish have no fin' (3.1.79),<sup>39</sup> or, in modern parlance, 'when pigs can fly'. Antipholus of Ephesus, losing patience, then asks for a 'crow' [a crowbar]. 'A crow without feather; master mean you so?' his servant asks, adding, presumably to the Syracusan Dromio within: 'For a fish without a fin, there's a fowl without a feather; / If a crow help us in, sirrah, we'll pluck a crow together' (3.1.81–3);<sup>40</sup> proverbially, 'if we have to break down the door, the crow[bar] will settle our quarrel'.

In this argument about rights of ownership and admittance to the 'household', Antipholus' calling for the 'crow' to force an entry would likely evoke laughter from an audience who knew of Greene's attack on Shakespeare as an 'upstart crow', especially if delivered with the equivalent of a knowing wink. Calling for an 'iron crow' he could visually and verbally declare that he isn't an *upstart* crow, but pretty handy in handling an *iron* one if provoked; with that iron one he'll 'pluck a crow' (we might say 'pick a bone') with his adversary. The underlying suggestion – that just like Antipholus, Shakespeare has an absolute right to be inside his 'house' (the company of dramatists), a right that is both questioned and denied by those who have no authority to keep him out – can be delivered glancingly, with humor. Yet the serious aspect of this statement can be inferred from the change in tone and poetic form as the now angry Antipholus of Ephesus receives counsel from the character of

Balthazar (an invention of Shakespeare's) who urges self-control.<sup>41</sup> In trying to beat down the door by force, Balthazar tells him, you 'war against your reputation' (3.1.85). He continues:

Be rul'ed by me, depart in patience,  
And let us to the Tyger all to dinner,  
And about evening, come yourself alone  
To know the reason of this strange restraint. (3.1.94–7)

Finally, he gives his reasons for advising such a course:

If by strong hand you offer to break in  
Now in the stirring passage of the day,  
A vulgar comment will be made of it;  
And that supposed by the common rout  
Against your yet ungalled estimation,  
That may with foul intrusion enter in,  
And dwell upon your grave when you are dead;  
For slander lives upon succession,  
For e'er hous'd where it gets possession. (3.1.98–106)

Antipholus concedes the point, saying 'I will depart in quiet, / And in despite of mirth mean to be merry' (3.1.107–8), a change of tone and form that, Foakes says, suggests that Antipholus shows 'difficulty in overcoming his anger' (3.1.108n.).<sup>42</sup> In simulating the squabble, presenting himself as the rightful householder 'locked out' of his own property, Shakespeare through Antipholus of Ephesus could suggest the injustice of the case: if he complains too much, or makes it too public a squabble, he will be even worse off, for, as Balthazar says, 'slander lives upon succession': better to repair the damage behind the scenes. If Shakespeare played the part of Antipholus of Ephesus he could have delivered these lines with a wry and knowing look to the audience, briefly interleaving the fictional world of the play with a reference to Greene's attack on him. Antipholus' last comment of the scene, 'this jest shall cost me some expense' (3.1.123), becomes nicely ambiguous. Ostensibly he refers to the 'jest' that has locked him out of his own house at Ephesus, yet also acknowledges the reference to the personal 'jest', the response to Greene's insult that he has inserted into the play,<sup>43</sup> and lightly and wryly apologizes for it. As Miola reminds us, Alexander Pope's edition of the play (1723)

relegates passages deficient in judgment and taste to smaller type at the bottom of the page; these include trivial conceits, like the dialogue about time and hair

(2.2.35–108), ribaldries, the ‘doggerel’ verse (14-syllable lines in couplets) of the lock-out scene (3.1) and anything else he doesn’t like.<sup>44</sup>

Pope believed that such deficiencies pointed to a ‘non-Shakespearean origin’.<sup>45</sup> Quite possibly, though, what Pope considered ‘trivial conceits’ signals topical and satirical content.

In one part of *Errors* particularly noted by Pope – the exchange about ‘time and hair’ (2.2.63–109) – we might see comic reference to Greene occurring even before that of the lock-out scene. There the Syracusan Antipholus and Dromio engage in banter which suggests that bald men have more wit than the hirsute, an exchange based on the proverb: ‘Bush natural, more hair than wit’,<sup>46</sup> a jab at Greene, perhaps, whose own very long hair and beard were his trademarks. Henry Chettle, Greene’s friend and publisher, in a favorable description of his appearance, says that ‘his attire [was] after the habite of a schollerlike Gentelman, onely his haire was somewhat long’ while Harvey, attacking Greene, refers to his ‘ruffianly hair, unseemely apparell’. Nashe describes Greene’s beard as a ‘iolly long red peake, like the spire of a steeple’ which ‘hee cherisht continually without cutting, wher eat a man might hang a Jewell, it was so sharpe and pendant’.<sup>47</sup>

This discussion of time and hair begins with Antipholus reproving what he considers his servant’s untimely jesting, telling him ‘there’s a time for all things’ (2.2.63–4). Dromio contradicts him, arguing that there certainly is *no* time in which a bald man can ‘recover his hair that grows bald by nature’, a conclusion that Antipholus invites him to explain. The repartee that ensues considers the relative merits of hairy and balding men, suggesting first that hairy men lack intelligence and ending with the conclusion that lack of hair might be a sign not so much of intelligence but too much ‘jollity’ (sexual activity) that causes syphilis, the treatment of which leads to hair loss. Answering Antipholus’ question, ‘Why is Time such a niggard of hair, being as it so plentiful an excrement?’ Dromio replies: ‘Because it is a blessing that he bestows on beasts, and what he hath scanted men in hair, he hath given them in wit’; Antipholus agrees wryly, ‘there’s many a man hath more hair than wit’, perhaps an acerbic reflection on Greene’s abilities.<sup>48</sup> Deflecting that insinuation, Dromio says: ‘Not a man of those but he hath the wit to lose his hair’; in other words, even those who have hair and are therefore none too bright are smart enough to lose it (through sexual encounters). Antipholus, taking up Dromio’s words and reverting to his previous point, says: ‘Why, thou didst conclude hairy men plain dealers without wit’; in other words, hairy men might be ‘plain dealers’, although none too clever. Greene, of

course, had struck just such a 'plain dealer' pose in his advice to friends in the *Groatsworth of Wit*, an attitude consistent with the usual meaning of 'plain dealer' as 'one who is straightforward and candid in his relation with others' (*OED*). Foakes points out the possibility that by 'plain dealer' Antipholus means 'dealer with women'.<sup>49</sup> Dromio certainly seems to pick up on this latter meaning when he replies: 'The plainer dealer, the sooner lost; yet he loseth it in a kind of jollity'. This statement of Dromio's moves the comedy away from the intellectual shortcomings of hairy men such as Greene and suggests obliquely that those who have little hair, perhaps a balding actor playing Antipholus, lost it because of that same 'plain dealing' and 'jollity'. If the audience understood this exchange as a reference to Greene they might silently augment it with the proverb: 'Plain dealing is a jewel but they that use it die beggars', first noted in 1583 and, as Dent says, 'frequently condensed',<sup>50</sup> as it is here. The desperate poverty in which Greene lived and died was well known among his friends and published abroad through his *Groatsworth of Wit*. But 'plain dealing' with women could also lead to an untimely end and so the joke is on the actor playing Antipholus, too.

Such jesting in the spirit of the *Gesta* would seem appropriately self-deprecating and take any sting out of reference to the reputed debauchery, appearance, and lack of wit of a deceased man. The joke is inflated and then deflated, said and taken back. If Shakespeare played the parts of one or both of the Antipholus twins and had already begun to bald, that joke, of course, would be even funnier.

We know from the experience of watching university reviews, 'roasts', and other entertainments to coterie audiences that personal reference, including insults and counter-insults, remains the constant and essential ingredient of that type of performance. How tempting and how natural for Shakespeare to use the occasion to acknowledge Greene's insult and lightly but firmly dispose of it. When *The Comedy of Errors* is reinserted into the frame of the *Gesta* we see the way Shakespeare responds to and works with a group of people who consider themselves cognoscenti. He cooperates with the framers of the revels – writing his play to make it consistent with the governing design both in obvious ways as in, for example, his addition of the Dromios to emphasize the theme of twinning, and in more cryptic ways – in de-emphasizing Plautus' courtesan only to introduce an 'Abbess' in order to play on local and ribald associations. In the latter instance he appeals to the audience's pleasure in the private joke and in so doing allies himself with them, a tacit expression of his 'right' to the household from which his detractors would like to exclude him. His reference to the 'upstart crow' attack, both humorous and self-deprecat-

ing, reminds the audience of Greene's shortcomings and, in some ways, of his own. But the play itself serves as demonstration that Shakespeare can hold his own with any of the university wits, that he can blend, select, and improve upon his classical sources to produce a play that is, as Whitworth says, 'extraordinarily well-plotted ... [a] model of classical-style, five-act structure'<sup>51</sup> one that, moreover, meshes neatly with the themes of the context and includes a few good jokes into the bargain. Desmond Bland says that the '*Gesta Grayorum* was no ordinary university rag. Though this element is not absent, the revels were also intended as a training-ground in "all the manners that are learned by the nobility"'.<sup>52</sup> Shakespeare, by class and profession excluded from membership in the noble audience he addresses, seems nevertheless to have used the occasion as a training ground of his own, in the fine art of self-justification and verbal self-defence.

## Notes

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- 1 All references to the play are from R.A. Foakes (ed), William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, Arden edition (London, 1962).
- 2 Desmond Bland (ed), *Gesta Grayorum or the History of the High and Mighty Prince Henry Prince of Purpoole, Anno Domini 1594*, English Reprints Series (Liverpool, 1968).
- 3 Leslie Hotson, *Mr. W. H.* (New York, 1964), argues that the pandemonium was 'written in' to the proceedings to emphasize the theme of division and reunion. He points to a similar, later, event at the Middle Temple where another such fracas occurred and a 'simulated "falling out of faithful friends" formed a necessary prologue to the renewing of love between the two societies' (50).
- 4 Much critical attention has been given to the themes of union and reunion in the play which might have led scholars to consider the context and its themes. Separate studies by Vincent Petronella, 'Structure and Theme Through Separation and Union in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*', *Modern Language Review* 69 (1974): 481–8, and Patricia Parker, 'Elder and Younger: The Opening Scene of *The Comedy of Errors*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 34 (1983), 325–7, for instance, discuss these issues, yet neither mention Shakespeare's possible debt to the *Gesta Grayorum*. In Robert Miola's invaluable anthology *The Comedy of Errors: Critical Essays*, (New York, 1997) only the article by Margaret Knapp and Michael Kobialka, 'Shakespeare and the Prince of Purpoole: The 1594 Production of *The Comedy of Errors* at Gray's Inn Hall'

deals with the *Gesta* in any detail, and then only in terms of staging rather than any thematic connections between the two. A recent article by Chris Hassel, 'The Comedy of Errors in Context and Performance', *The Upstart Crow* 17 (1997), 23–39, mentions it only in passing.

- 5 Even a cursory examination of the full text of the *Gesta Grayorum* shows how closely linked, thematically and visually, these two dramatic pieces are, a connection overlooked because a consensus of scholarly opinion settled on an earlier date for the play. Foakes in his 1962 Arden edition says: 'Although some features of the play, its shortness, its classical background, its staging, and its nature as the least romantic of Shakespeare's comedies, might support the view that it was written for a special occasion and an educated audience, most scholars have rejected the idea that it was commissioned as late as the year 1594 (xvii). Not all scholars agreed: Sidney Thomas ('The Date of *The Comedy of Errors*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 7 (1956), 337–84) made a strong case for the Gray's Inn performance as the first. Charles Whitworth (ed), William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors* (Oxford, 2002) comes to a similar conclusion. Drawing on statistical analysis in addition to other factors, he says that 'considerable internal as well as external evidence points to the later half of the year 1594 as the time of composition of *The Comedy of Errors*' (9).
- 6 *Gesta*, 9.
- 7 *Gesta*, 10.
- 8 Reginald Fletcher (ed), *The Pension Book of Gray's Inn*, vol 1 (London, 1901), 201.
- 9 *Gesta*, 17.
- 10 *Gesta*, 18.
- 11 *Gesta*, 19; all of these 'provisions', of course, are slang terms for women.
- 12 *Gesta*, 21.
- 13 Philip J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple: An Elizabethan Dramatist in His Social Setting* (Cambridge, 1969), 42.
- 14 Finkelpearl says: 'Members of the Inns seem to have made a deep, if unconscious, connection between reveling and the study of the law' (33).
- 15 *Gesta*, 29.
- 16 Eph 5:22.
- 17 *Gesta*, 22.
- 18 *Gesta*, 17.
- 19 Entered in the Stationer's Register in 1576; published in 1594. Whitworth, 27–37.

- 20 In Gower's account of the story in *Confessio Amantis* he uses the word 'Abbess' for the same character.
- 21 Bland suggests that Lucy Negro is embedded in *Errors* as Luce, the kitchen maid (*Gesta*, 94–5). Why such a proliferation of Luc-prefixed characters (Luce, Luciana), or suggested characters (Emilia prompted by the character of Lucina and suggesting Lucy Negro), occurs in the play might be attributable to Shakespeare's quirks of composition. As the name prefix applies to very different kind of women, though, perhaps Shakespeare subconsciously considers them all worthy of the label 'light' for one reason or another.
- 22 David Bevington, 'The Comedy of Errors in the Context of the Late 1580s and Early 1590s', in Robert Miola, 340.
- 23 Foakes notes that there were several editions of the *Menaechmi* in the sixteenth century and that Shakespeare had enough Latin to read them in the original (xxiv).
- 24 Finkelppearl, 52. That such local and topical satire formed a potent strand of such proceedings is exemplified by an incident that occurred as a result of the Middle Temple revels of 1597–8. John Davies attacked Richard Martin partly, Finkelppearl suggests, because Martin had been elected master of the revels, a position Davies coveted, but also because he had been satirized in the revels as 'Stradilax' and subject to much personal ridicule (54).
- 25 A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Play of Double Senses* (New York, 1975; 1990), a title he adapts from book 3, canto 4, stanza 28 of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.
- 26 Cited in D. Allen Carroll, 'Greene's "Upstart Crow" Passage: A Survey of Commentary', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 28 (1985), 111.
- 27 Recent but separate investigations by D. Allen Carroll and Warren B. Austin (the latter a computer study) suggest that Chettle, not Greene, was responsible for *A Groatsworth of Wit*. Whatever the case, the insult was published and attributed to Greene. For an excellent review of this quarrel, see D. Allen Carroll, 'Greene's "Upstart Crow" Passage: A Survey of Commentary'.
- 28 If it seems unlikely that Shakespeare would still be smarting from Greene's slur nearly two years from its 1592 publication, we might note that in the plays called *The Return from Parnassus* (1599 and 1601), staged by Cambridge University students, Shakespeare's reputation is still a point of discussion and focus of detraction. As Jonathan Bate notes, a character in the plays named Gullio prefers a work fashioned in the style of Shakespeare to those based on the styles of Chaucer and Spenser. This choice, as Bate says, 'carries the clear implication that from the play's "university" point of view the vogue for Shakespeare has grown severely out of proportion. The *Parnassus* plays were a

- continuation of the battle between university and non-university writers,' Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London, 1997), 23.
- 29 Finkelppearl, 27–8.
- 30 Bate argues that 'there is strong evidence to suggest that in 1593 Shakespeare had a degree of intimacy with Southampton's household, and that he was building up his poetic portfolio by writing sonnets as well as narrative poems for the delectation of the young Earl' (19). Besides which, 'through his mother, Mary Arden, Shakespeare was a distant relative of Southampton' (47).
- 31 E.A.J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare's Impact on His Contemporaries* (London, 1982), 6–7 views this as a reference to an insult in Sonnet 112:
- Your love and pity doth th'impression fill  
Which vulgar scandal stamp'd upon my brow;  
For what care I who calls me well or ill  
So you o'ergreen my bad, my good allow?
- 32 Carroll assumes that the other person offended was Marlowe. Chettle says 'With neither of them that take offence was I acquainted, and with one of them I care not if I neuer be' (116).
- 33 Carroll, 116.
- 34 Carroll, 119.
- 35 Plautus' *Amphitryo*, the source for the 'lock-out' scene, has a gap in the manuscript at this point. Whitworth points out that the first English translation of the play, by Lawrence Echard, was not published until 1694. Shakespeare, like Echard after him, supplied his own version of the missing action.
- 36 Foakes, *Errors* 3.1.1n. Whitworth reiterates this point, 6–7.
- 37 Whitworth, 6–7.
- 38 Brennan O'Donnell, 'The Errors of Verse: Metrical Reading and Performance of *The Comedy of Errors*' in Miola, 403.
- 39 An echo of Plautus' 'avis squamosas, piscis pennatos' translated by Warner in his 1595 translation as 'birds with scales, fish with feathers' (cited in Foakes xxvi).
- 40 Foakes points out that this is proverbial for 'settling a quarrel'; he cites Tilley, who notes its use in Lyly's *Mother Bombie* (1589) in its variant form 'pulling a crow' (2.1.82). Lyly's play has been suggested as Shakespeare's source for the Dromio twins (see Foakes, xxi and Geoffery Bullough, (ed), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol 1 (London, 1957)).
- 41 Foakes says: 'Perhaps a London inn or brothel bore this sign' (3.1.95n.); whatever its derivation it provides another link to Greene's slur as Shakespeare as a 'Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde'.

- 42 Foakes, 3.1.108n.
- 43 Greene's contentious attitude towards Shakespeare, symbolized by these two brothers one either side of the door, neatly replicates the division of the Grayarians and the Templarians engineered earlier in the evening.
- 44 Robert Miola, 'The Play and the Critics' in Miola, 23.
- 45 Miola, 23.
- 46 Cited in Foakes, 2.2.81–2n; See R. W. Dent, *Proverbial Language in English Drama Exclusive of Shakespeare, 1495–1616* (Berkeley, 1984), 229.
- 47 Cited in Charles W. Crupi, *Robert Greene*, Twayne English Authors Series (Boston, 1986), 10–12. Greene's appearance would be remarked upon and censured in the inns of courts too. In the latter years of Henry VIII's reign the treasurer of the Inner Temple 'was directed to "confer with the other Treasurers of Court, for an uniform reformation in the length of beards"' (cited in William Ralph Douthwaite, *Gray's Inn: Its History and Associations* (London, 1886; rpt. 1987), 89). During the reign of Philip and Mary a list of stipulations regarding clothing suitable for inns of courts' men mandated that 'no one, under the degree of a Knight, being in Commons, do wear any Beard above three weeks' growing, upon pain of 40 s[hillings]' (Douthwaite, 90).
- 48 In *2 Henry 6* shortly after his followers want to 'kill all the lawyers', Cade asks the clerk who has been brought before him: 'Dost thou use to write thy name, or hast thou a mark to thyself, like an honest plain-dealing man (4.2.56). The clerk's assurance that he can write is enough for Cade to reply: 'hang him with his pen and ink-horn about his neck' (4.2.59). In this case Shakespeare uses the term 'plain-dealing man' to suggest the kind of illiterate, dim-witted rascal likely to be approved by Cade.
- 49 Foakes, 2.2.87n.
- 50 Dent, 583.
- 51 Whitworth, 6.
- 52 *Gesta*, xxiv.