CHAPTER 10

BRUISED WITH ADVERSITY

reading race in The Comedy of Errors

PATRICIA AKHIMIE

In approaching Shakespeare's early comedy *The Comedy of Errors*, critics have sought to contextualize and theorize what G. R. Elliott in 1939 called simply 'the weirdness'—the atmosphere created by the play's central premise of two sets of identical twins, separated as young children into two pairs, each consisting of one master, called Antipholus, and one servant, called Dromio. Fate brings the entire foursome together, landing Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse at Ephesus, the hometown of the other Antipholus and the other Dromio. Once the twins come to inhabit the same geographical and social space, ever-proliferating confusions begin. No one imagines that the source of the confusion is the presence of two pairs of people who look alike but are not one and the same until they come to stand, at the end of Act 5, side by side. Even then, the potential for further confusion remains or increases since, as the Duke of Ephesus remarks with agitation, we 'know not which is which', and at any rate there are four twins and only two names to go round (5.1.365).

For many critics 'the weirdness' has led to the claim that *The Comedy of Errors* is concerned with, is about, identity in some fundamental way. Yet, among the many identities that they have investigated, critics have largely ignored race, since the play does not explicitly stage those practices, institutions, and events commonly associated with race: colour difference, encounter, conquest, colonization, or conversion. A broader definition of race has emerged in recent studies, however, and as we now acknowledge, 'race' is just one name for what was in fact a highly adaptive and varied system of social differentiation, the forms and features of 'race'. Here, I will examine the production of bodies and the mistreatment, not as analogous to one sort of the inhumane to the other.

Taking up the question of race, I will examine the way in which Shakespeare uses the play to conceive the possibility of ideological blindness which may help to relieve. The externality of 'race' is felt, and perhaps even feared, mistreatment, not as a kind of mistreatment, not as a kind of otherness, but as a kind of the inhumane.

To craft an event such as this, the play needs to be justified in the eyes of the audience. The specific character of race, and the location of meaning, are inextricably linked, not only natural but socially constructed, linked to ideology then also social, and the social linking possesses.

---

5. Collette Guill
and features of which remained in constant flux throughout the early modern period. Here, I will examine the role of the body, and of the somatic mark in particular, in the social production of both individual subjects and racial groups.

In The Comedy of Errors, two sets of twins experience the benefits as well as the pitfalls of mistaken identity, revealing the ease with which individuals may be grouped with others who merely share the same somatic markers, and the ease with which somatic markers may be stigmatized. Thus, I read not for race, precisely, but for the physical and epistemological violence that racial ideology effects. Adriana’s lament in Act 2, following a bitter debate with her sister, Luciana, over the double standard that exists for men and women, describes this sort of ‘adversity’.

 Adriana. A wretched soul, bruised with adversity,
    We bid be quiet when we hear it cry.
    But were we burdened with like weight of pain,
    As much or more we should ourselves complain. (2.1.34–7)

Articulating an insight about gender relations, Adriana describes the failure of people to perceive the pain of others as common and even casual. Existing, as it does, inside an ideological blind spot, such pain is difficult to see or hear, even more difficult to pity or relieve. The extended metaphor suggests, however, that the pain of others is a heavy burden felt, and perhaps made visible, as a ‘bruise’. If we can recognize that mark as the evidence of mistreatment, neglect, or misfortune, then it will be possible to recognize the pain of others as analogous to our own. More often, Adriana suggests, we perceive the ‘bruise’ as evidence of the insurmountable difference between our self and another.

Taking up the ‘bruise’ as an object of inquiry, I shift the focus from gender to race to examine the ways in which the perceived indelibility of such bodily markers can enable the use and abuse of devastating and sweeping generalizations about large groups of people. To craft an even more precise language, I read for evidence of pain or oppression that is justified in the eyes of a society by the presence of a stigmatized mark, located on the body. The specific characteristics of such marks are arbitrary, but are perceived to be meaningful, and the location of the mark on the body seems to confirm that both the mark and its social meanings are indelible and ‘natural’. Moreover, somatic markers were often understood as natural and indelible because they were bound up with the processes of reproduction, not only natural but hereditary, not only indelible but endowed at birth. The power of racialist ideology then allowed that the meanings associated with somatic marks were also inherited, linking possessors of such marks as related by some biological or blood tie.

---


5 Collette Guillaumin, Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology (New York: Routledge, 2003), 140.
The structure of *The Comedy of Errors* isolates the personal experience of the wealthy brothers Antipholus, and the enslaved brothers Dromio, allowing each group time to contemplate and express the causes and effects of their misfortunes. This structure offers audiences the opportunity to see social difference in an unusual way by drawing eyes away from those external marks that would seem to indicate a coherent, socially meaningful difference and back towards the pain of oppression. This pain is voiced by Dromian of Ephesus and Dromian of Syracuse, who each complain that they are bruised and beaten not because they are bad but because they are unfortunate, marked from birth as subservient and thus defenceless against the abuse of power; and by Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse, who experience a sudden reversal of fortune, turning from men of 'reverend reputation' (5.1.5) to 'wretched soul[s], bruised with adversity' (2.1.34) in a matter of hours.

The play makes visible the flawed logic of a racialized system of differentiation, illustrating the process by which large numbers of people may be grouped together solely on the basis of shared somatic markers, and made subject to the sweeping generalizations of racial prejudice. We can trace this devastating force even in the critical tendency to refer to the brothers as 'Antophili' and 'Dromios'. This is an impulse we can now recognize as part of the genealogy of race-concepts: the impulse to reimagine identical twins who share the same name not as distinct individuals who happen to share some resemblances, but as members of a larger race. Antipholus, like Anthropophagi, become a race of men who share physical traits and customs, and who come from a particular geographical region. The impulse seems innocuous but is in fact very powerful, as it represents the strangely uncharted sideways move in the logic of racialism, the shift from understanding race as a kinship relation to understanding race as a distinction between large populations that share physical traits. In fact, it is the very slipperiness of the concept that makes oppression possible.

*The Comedy of Errors* utilizes a varied cast of characters placed under unusual pressures that lead them to question the logic of racialism, suggesting that social differentiation is not a biological but an ideological process. First, Dromian of Syracuse and Dromian of Ephesus voice a knowing critique of the class system, describing the difference between servants or slaves and their masters in terms of race, as a somatically marked difference rather than a matter of fate. For Dromian of Ephesus and Dromian of Syracuse subservience is visible as a stigmatized mark on the body, a 'bruise' that indicates both a moral and a social inferiority. Their critique of the class system demonstrates that the seemingly temporary bruise-mark is in fact experienced as an indelible somatic mark and that, finally, the indelibility of somatic markers is a social construct. Both Dromian of Syracuse and Dromian of Ephesus draw attention to the fact that their frequent bruising (a somatic mark inscribed by means of the beating hands of social superiors) has less to do with their own acts than with their status as slaves/teachers. Finally, the play demonstrates the effects of being marked by allowing two male identical twins, the well-to-do brothers Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus, to experience first the benefits and then the detriments of racial prejudice.

Douglas Lanier and later critics have recognized in the 'weirdness' of *The Comedy of Errors* more than a spectacle of sameness; they notice that it is not the display of signs but the misinterpretation of those signs that feeds the play's strange mechanisms, making it tick. Lanier's 1993 essay shifted the ongoing discussion of subject formation in the play by focusing on the possibility of theatrical performance and its role in constructing identity. *The Comedy of Errors* presents a complex, multi-layered narrative of identity—its construction, transformation, and disintegration—and the fragility of the self that is so easily formed and then fractured in a world of exchange for nothing. When, in confusion, Dromian warns the goldsmith, "nor money more; nor upon receipt from you to none; and an accidental exchanger's flaw in a social system," Lanier calls an 'anomalous' whereby people are 'meant' to draw particular 'signs', members of a high bodily 'marks' distribution, that rend the family and community of the play by focusing on the possibility of theatrical performance and its role in constructing identity. *The Comedy of Errors* presents a complex, multi-layered narrative of identity—its construction, transformation, and disintegration—and the fragility of the self that is so easily formed and then fractured in a world of exchange for nothing. When, in confusion, Dromian warns the goldsmith, "nor money more; nor upon receipt from you to none; and an accidental exchanger's flaw in a social system," Lanier calls an 'anomalous' whereby people are 'meant' to draw particular 'signs', members of a high bodily 'marks' distribution, that rend the family and community of the play by focusing on the possibility of theatrical performance and its role in constructing identity. *The Comedy of Errors* presents a complex, multi-layered narrative of identity—its construction, transformation, and disintegration—and the fragility of the self that is so easily formed and then fractured in a world of exchange for nothing. When, in confusion, Dromian warns the goldsmith, "nor money more; nor upon receipt from you to none; and an accidental exchanger's flaw in a social system," Lanier calls an 'anomalous' whereby people are 'meant' to draw particular 'signs', members of a high bodily 'marks' distribution, that rend the family and community of the play by focusing on the possibility of theatrical performance and its role in constructing identity.
play by focusing on the materiality of identity, unfolding the ways in which the materiality of theatrical performance, of embodying character in the Elizabethan theatre, overlaps and interacts with the debate over self-presentation in Elizabethan culture. The Comedy of Errors presents a 'limit case' in which the finite markers of identity could be duplicated exactly, undermining the 'logic of recognition' that governed society. Like Lanier, I am concerned with the materiality of identity and the epistemology or communal work that produces and adjudicates its material signs. I, too, am concerned with both the power of the communal gazing — which functions to confirm and always in some sense to construct identity — and the fragility of the social system that depends upon that confirming gaze, a gaze that is so easily fooled or faulty.

In this system, self-presentation is a kind of socio-economic currency (for example, you don’t need to carry cash around as long as you look and act like someone who has cash available). The presented self is a kind of promise of real wealth to follow and thus earns one credit. The marks of difference may then be mutable, as is often the case with sartorial displays of class status (since fanciful hats with long feathers may be donned or removed at any time); or they may be indelible. In the case of individual markers, such as those that indicate sex difference, the bodily sign is received as ‘natural’ and therefore permanent. While the meanings of somatic markers were in fact far from stable, as has been shown in a range of studies devoted to the malleability of identity by means of everything from sartorial to climatological change, such markers were nevertheless treated as stable and reliable, used to justify the ossification of great social advantage and disadvantage (thus women’s access to fanciful hats with long feathers was easily circumscribed by sumptuary laws that were both class-coded and sex-specific).

Antipholus of Syracuse, mistaken for his brother, finds himself the beneficiary of Antipholus of Ephesus’s excellent credit with his countrymen. Antipholus of Syracuse is offered everything from tailored silk, to gold chains, to dinner invitations, to cash in exchange for nothing but the promise of Antipholus’s good opinion and future patronage. When, in confusion, Antipholus of Syracuse accepts a chain commissioned by his brother he warns the goldsmith, Angelo, to ‘receive the money now, / For fear you ne’er see chain nor money more’ (3.2.174–5). Angelo laughs at the very suggestion of demanding payment upon receipt from Antipholus of Ephesus, a man he describes as ‘of credit infinite ... second to none’ and as one whose ‘word might bear my wealth at any time’ (5.1.6–8). These accidental exchanges, which Antipholus of Syracuse thoroughly enjoys, illustrate a crucial flaw in a socio-economic network that must take self-presentation at face value, what Lanier calls an ‘an ideological blind spot’ in the Elizabethan system of social differentiation whereby people ‘assume that distinct identities are manifest in distinct marks’. However, I will draw particular attention to the crucial difference between the carefully selected and displayed ‘signs’, offered by those who aim at presenting themselves as similar to other members of a high social rank, and therefore recognizable as members themselves, and the bodily ‘marks’ displayed (unwittingly or unwittingly) by the twin brothers of The Comedy of Errors that render them ‘recognizable’ even when that recognition is false.

Ultimately, it is not the garments, but the body underneath, that must be recognized by family and community as distinct from all other bodies, like a fingerprint or signature.

The play suggests that the body is in some way immutable: an identifiable and discreet object that indicates the presence of a distinct identity beneath the silk and gold window dressing. The body can then function as a record of one's honourable and good deeds, the grounds for good credit, and as surety or collateral for the promise of one's self-presentational strategies. It is this logic that leads Antipholus of Ephesus, as a last resort, to call upon the Duke for justice in return for the 'Service that long since I did thee / When I bestrid thee in the wars', taking 'deep scars to save thy life' (5.1.192–4). He knows he can display the scars that bear witness to past service, which has earned him present justice. By the same logic, the body of someone accountable for unpaid debts can be arrested, held, and punished. A fellow merchant threatens Angelo with just such an incarceration if he cannot repay the sum he owes, shouting, 'You know since Pentecost the sum is due', and warning Angelo that he must, 'Make present satisfaction, / Or I'll attach you by this officer' (4.1.1–6). Reputation (name) cleaves to a single, recognizable, and distinctive body. The meanings attached to that one body are the direct result of its owner's specific actions and choices as judged by the greater community.

Yet, for any one Antipholus's promises, deeds, or debts, there are two bodies that may be made to pay. By multiplying the body as marker, the play makes visible the suffering the system causes to anyone for whom meaning has attached to their body without their consent or knowledge, especially to any body that is indistinct in some way, vulnerable to generalizations.

Like Adriana, Dromio of Syracuse seems to understand the injustice faced by those who, 'bruised with adversity', cry out in pain and alarm. Knowing oneself to be wronged, hurt, disadvantaged, is no help at all; instead it is what others know and believe about you that matters, and that judgment takes place within an existing social hierarchy. Hurt and confused by a beating at the hands of his master, unaware that he is being punished for his brother's mistake, Dromio of Syracuse asks earnestly, 'But I pray, sir, why am I beaten?', and Antipholus of Syracuse asks in response, equally earnestly, 'Dost thou not know?' (2.2.39–40). Dromio of Syracuse answers not the asked question, which is about whether he understands, but a more complex version of the same question, which is about what he understands more generally. He answers simply that he knows, 'Nothing, sir, but that I am beaten', expressing his lack of access to both the voluntary display of signs and the communal process of adjudication of those signs (2.2.41).

Self-presentation enables individuals to construct themselves as singular subjects, and to suggest the ways they might fit (or prefer to fit) into established social categories. Dromio does not have access to such strategies and can display only bruises, the very evidence that his subservient position is deserved. What Dromio 'knows' is that what he knows does not matter—he will be judged and judged poorly by the bruises he displays continually and involuntarily. Dromio pressues Adriana's lament one step further, however, not only 'complaining' about the 'pain' of being 'bruised with adversity' but naming an aggressor—his own master is the source of the pain and of the very literal bruises on Dromio's body. While the bruise, at first glance, might seem temporary, Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse articulate the ways in which this mark is devastatingly permanent. They thus draw attention to the intersection between hereditary servitude—a class system—and somatic signs—a racialized system of identification.
Dromio of Ephesus delivers a key critique of the prevailing system of social differentiation by illustrating the arbitrariness of his situation. He makes clear that his 'bruises', the marks of servitude, are not natural fact but the result of his being apparently more recent and of a nature that have become a visible mark. He is mistreated by his master, Antipholus of Ephesus, because of the marks he bears upon his body. These marks are a visible reminder of his status as a servant, and they are considered by others as a sign of his inferiority.

**SYR.ANT.** Where is the thousand marks thou hast of me?
**EPH.DRO.** 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. (1.2.81–6)

In Dromio of Ephesus's complaint, punning turns the thousand 'marks' (in currency) into bruises or other 'marks' from the beatings he has received on what seems to be a regular basis from both his mistress, Adriana, and his master, Antipholus of Ephesus. Both kinds of 'marks' can be imagined as 'paid' either as payment in return for goods and services received or as punishment for mistakes made by a misbehaving servant. The meanings are even more closely associated in their connotations since, from Dromio's perspective, his service, which has monetary value, includes only his obedience but also his humiliation and physical vulnerability. He reminds listeners, with some frustration, that the beatings he has received may seem justifiable to Adriana and Antipholus, but they are in fact arbitrary and difficult to bear. Like Adriana, who imagines what would happen to our complacency were we burdened with like weight of pain', Dromio of Ephesus suggests that Antipholus that, were were roles reversed and were Antipholus of Syracuse to receive the undesirable bruise 'mark' instead of the desirable cash 'mark', 'perchance you will not bear them patiently.' This comment comes close to real insubordination first by suggesting that a servant might use violence against a master, and second by stating so baldly the privilege enjoyed by wealthy local merchant Antipholus and his wife Adriana.

Later in the play, Dromio of Ephesus uses the sing-song couplets that Shakespeare employs so liberally in *The Comedy of Errors* to make the even more pointed accusation that the bruises he bears are the evidence of an abuse of power and of an epistemic injustice whereby Dromio's identity is easily overwrought by his master's will,

**EPH.DRO.** Say what you will, sir, but I know what I know–
That you beat me at the mart I have your hand to show.
If the skin were parchment, and the blows you gave were ink,
Your own handwriting would tell you what I think. (3.1.11–14)

According to Dromio, he is a man without access to interiority. Instead, Dromio is what Antipholus thinks. In this singular page, Dromio describes the process of appropriation that produces the stigmatized somatic mark as handwriting on parchment. His critique is devastating as he reinterprets the mark not as the sign of a natural subservience, but as evidence of a violent crime.
Dromio of Ephesus's easy verses are deceptively deft. He fulfills his role, adding comic relief as the recipient of slapstick violence on stage, but he also speaks and when he does so he does more than object. He juggles the accepted understanding of subservience as natural, a kind of birth-mark that comes with being born to parents of low rank, and the more revolutionary idea that the mark of subservience is not a natural trait but a mark produced and maintained through consistent, life-long ill treatment and disregard.

EPH.DRO. I have served him from the hour of my nativity to this instant, and have nothing at his hands for my service but blows. When I am cold, he heats me with beating. When I am warm, he cools me with beating. I am waked with it when I sleep, raised with it when I sit, driven out of doors with it when I go from home, welcomed home with it when I return. Nay, I bear it on my shoulders, as a beggar with his crutch, and I think when he hath lamed me I shall beg with it from door to door. (4.4.28-35)

Dromio of Ephesus seems to be aware of the fact that his subservience appeared at the moment of his birth, or rather just after it. Constantly bearing the marks of beatings dealt by his master and other social betters, Dromio says of his mark not only that he bears it on his shoulders, but that he bears it on his shoulders 'as a beggar with his crutch' or as a 'lame man bears his deformity, beg[ging] with it from door to door'. These analogies draw on the body, family, and heredity, coming very close to being simple autobiography and demonstrating again, adeptly, that the natural or hereditary mark is in fact caused or administered after the fact.

We can see the logic whereby an arbitrary mark is selected and invested with meaning in Egeon's first description of the enslaved twins at the start of the play. There, Egeon illustrates the conflation of subservience as an inherited social status and subservience as a market relation, the purchase of service for a finite period or for a lifetime. Having described the birth of his own twin sons, born free and to wealthy parents, he then describes another birth of another pair of twins, similar in every way but one: the wealth or status of the parents.

EGEON. That very hour, and in the selfsame inn,
A mean-born woman was delivered
Of such a burden, male twins both alike.
Those, for their parents were exceeding poor,
I bought, and brought up to attend my sons. (1.1.53-7)

Upon their birth Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse are bought like any of the goods exchanged in The Comedy of Errors—the chain, the ring, the rope—goods that, perhaps not incidentally, all symbolize bondage in some way. This fact is not apparently voluntary or remediable; everyone in the world of the play, including Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse, seems to assume that they will remain slaves no matter what they do, how well they perform, or where they go. Despite this universal complicity, Dromio of Ephesus is verbose and free in his wondering about why his body is beaten, while Dromio of Syracuse is equally voluble, wondering why his body should be so well known, after he finds himself described in intimate detail by a strange kitchen maid in a strange town. Both mysteries are about recognition of and through the body; both are about a feeling of loss of control over one's identity that is related to a loss of control over the meanings of one's own body. Dromio of Ephesus is resigned, referring to the burden he bears as a bruise-mark, borne 'on his shoulders'; Dromio of Syracuse is astounded, referring to the literal 'mark

of [his] shoulder' through the symmetry of Syracuse, we begin to see the hereditary, caused I think in part after their birth as an infant.

This socio-economic treatment Dromio of Ephesus and his qualities, or in relation to Syracuse. They are not born into it '5.4.465', the very existence is a feature of Dromio of Syracuse by describing them, everyone knows, and everyone bear' (2.2.197). In the sense that the difference between the self-presentation.

SYR.DRO. I am the
SYR.ANT. I think
SYR.DRO. Nay, I
SYR.ANT. Thou
SYR.DRO. No, I
SYR.ANT. If thou
SYR.DRO. 'Tis true.
SYR.ANT. 'Tis so, but I

Having just been required to know him very well in his form like a provost, he is being only mimicry, it is not to copy others, what

The ass thus says, as always socially inferior because in which Dromio calls that I am beaten', Dromio of Ephesus puts it equated with such

EPH.DRO. I wo
EPH.ANT. Thou
EPH.DRO. I am

* William Shakespeare
Greenblatt et al. (N
of [his] shoulder'] that Nell describes in order to convince him that he is indeed her fiancé. Through the symmetrical but differential musings of Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse, we begin to see that the enslavement of these identical brothers is not in fact hereditary, caused by their having issued from the same womb, but arbitrary, happening after their birth as a convenience to Egeon and his family.

This socio-economic relation is underscored by the extent to which other characters treat Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse not as individuals with their own unique qualities, but in relation to the wealthy twins, Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse. They are the ‘almanac of [the twins’] true date’ (1.2.41), the ‘calendars of their nativity’ (5.1.406), the means of accurately dating the birth of the Antipholus twins. Their very existence is a service constituting the identities of others. Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse conceptualize this state of affairs in the most evocative language, describing themselves with wonder, disgust, and not a little angst as ‘asses’, since as everyone knows, and as Katherine proclaims in The Taming of the Shrew, ‘Asses are made to bear’ (2.1.197). In this exchange with Antipholus of Syracuse, Dromio of Syracuse suggests that the difference between ‘ass’ and ‘ape’ has to do with knowledge of self and control of self-presentation.

SYR.DRO. I am transformed, master, am I not?
SYR.ANT. I think thou art in mind, and so am I.
SYR.DRO. Nay, master, both in mind and in my shape.
SYR.ANT. Thou hast thy own form.
SYR.DRO. No, I am an ape.
SYR.ANT. If thou art changed to augst, 'tis to an ass.
SYR.DRO. 'Tis true she rides me, and I long for grass.
'Tis so, I am an ass; else it could never be but I should know her as well as she knows me. (2.2.195–202)

Having just been reprimanded by a complete stranger, a woman who nevertheless seems to know him very well, Dromio wonders whether he has transformed somehow, changing his form like a proverbial ‘ape’. When Antipholus of Syracuse suggests he is not an ape but an ass, he is being derogatory. Though an ape is not a grand animal, a creature capable of only mimicry, it is still more exalted than an ass, since apes ‘know’; apes are aware enough to copy others, while he, as an ass, is well known to others but is himself ignorant.

The ass thus symbolizes the frightening lack of control felt by those who are treated as socially inferior because they have been deemed naturally less than. Echoing the exchange in which Dromio of Syracuse calls himself an ass and admits that he knows ‘Nothing ... but that I am beaten’, Dromio of Ephesus, too, believes that he is ‘senseless’, or, as Antipholus of Ephesus puts it, ‘sensible in nothing but blows’, in this exchange in which the ‘ass’ is equated with such lack of self-knowledge:

EPH.DRO. I would I were senseless, sir, that I might not feel your blows.
EPH.ANT. Thou art sensible in nothing but blows, and so is an ass.
EPH.DRO. I am an ass indeed. You may prove it by my long ears. (4.4.23–8)

Dromio of Ephesus, like Dromio of Syracuse, is careful to maintain that his being subservient does not mean that he does not feel pain or know enough to desire fairer treatment. In this vein, even as they compare themselves to a proverbially subservient creature—beaten, ridden, unloved, associated with stupidity, stubbornness, and idleness—Dromio of Ephesus also draws out more subversive meanings attached to the 'ass', reminding listeners of the danger in an ass's 'heels': 'I should kick being kicked, and, beings that pass, you would keep from my heels, and beware of an ass' (3.1.17–18).

It is when the well-to-do brothers themselves, established local businessman Antipholus of Ephesus and moneyed merchant Antipholus of Syracuse, begin to experience the feeling described by Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse, the feeling that their bodies are not distinct, that the critique voiced in the play comes full circle. No one is really safe in a system that uses the body as collateral, as a 'real' self, because at any time identity may be overwritten and the body forfeit. Many critics have identified Antipholus of Syracuse's breaking point, the moment at which he realizes that the system of identification in which he has found himself is wholly arbitrary and therefore dangerous. Elliot calls Dromio of Syracuse's narration of his uncanny off-stage encounter with Nell the kitchen maid, his supposed fiancée, 'the last straw for Antipholus'. As he explains, 'The fun of the thing impresses this gentleman less than its weirdness.'

Syr. Dromo. To conclude, this drudge or diviner laid claim to me, called me Dromio, swore I was assured to her, told me what privy marks I had about me—as the mark of my shoulder, the mole in my neck, the great wart on my left arm—that I, amazed, ran from her as a witch. (3.2.137–42)

Nell has listed specific marks—birthmarks—that should identify Dromio by identifying his body. The marks make up a unique pattern like a fingerprint or signature that can authenticate (to be 'assured' or 'claimed' is to be 'engaged' but also 'verified'; OED) the identity of a single individual. Instead, Nell has listed those marks that identify not the one true Dromio, but all Dromios: shared traits that may now 'assure' a shared fate.

Antipholus of Syracuse has been enjoying the benefits of good credit, generous friends, and a devoted wife, benefits he knows he has not earned through his own actions. Gradually, he begins to feel that this may be a dangerous situation, as he realizes that, though pleasant, he is experiencing a loss of control and of understanding or self-knowledge. His expression, 'If everyone knows us, and we know none, 'Tis time, I think, to trudge, pack, and be gone', echoes Dromio of Syracuse's, that he knows 'nothing' but that he is beaten (3.2.150–1). Antipholus recognizes that this situation is undesirable, and it is at this moment that he plans to leave town, sending Dromio of Syracuse to seek out transport on any ship leaving port immediately. He does not understand that this position is not so easy to escape, as Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse have already demonstrated. Just as soon as he determines to leave Ephesus, things do become dangerous. Antipholus of Syracuse has enjoyed someone else's benefits and now Antipholus of Ephesus will take someone else's blame.

The good fortune of Antipholus of Syracuse turns to uncomfortable accusations of infidelity, credit default, and finally madness for Antipholus of Ephesus. In quick succession,

* Elliot, 'Weirdness', 65.
first, Angelo has him arrested for refusing to pay for the gold chain; next Luciana reveals that her brother-in-law has made a pass at her; then, Antipholus of Ephesus’s mistress, having been rebuffed by Antipholus of Syracuse, approaches Adriana to demand the return of a ring; and finally, now believing that her husband must be mad or possessed, Adriana attempts to capture and confine Antipholus in the hopes of curing him. Antipholus of Ephesus is about to experience a complete loss of individualized identity and become, socially, for all intents and purposes, the same as another man who merely resembles him. This monstrous turn of events is prevented only when The Comedy of Errors re-solemnisizes the bonds of family by re-establishing household and community relations. The twins’ mother, now revealed, invites the Duke (and by extension the audience) to join her newly reconstituted family at a ‘gossips’ feast’, a gathering that, as critics have established, allows a family and community to acknowledge and celebrate a new birth, producing that person’s communally recognized identity (5.1.107).

In The Comedy of Errors the result of possessing a recognizable somatic mark is experienced first as windfall and then as misfortune. This swift turn is also experienced as arbitrary, owing nothing to the actions or wishes of the marked men. Antipholus of Syracuse arrives in a strange city, identified by name only (he has concealed his city of origin to avoid the standard punishment meted out to Syracusians found in Ephesus). He is identified and immediately accepted as a well-to-do and well-regarded native because of his bodily resemblance to another man, who happens to be his long-lost twin. Antipholus of Syracuse revels in Antipholus of Ephesus’s ready-made self-fashioning, silk cloth, gold chains, and well-appointed home. Soon, however, Antipholus of Syracuse’s body betrays him since, as The Comedy of Errors demonstrates, somatic marks are not subject to the logic of self-presentation, the voluntary art of display through ornamentation of body, speech, or gesture. The meanings attached to bodily markers, whether those meanings are positive or negative, adhere more permanently. Perceived as ‘natural’, these meanings can come to trump self-presentational strategies.

The stigmatized meanings attached to specific somatic markers appear to be determined a priori, by nature, when in fact they have been attached a fortiori as social constructs. The repercussions of societal prejudice triggered, and in a sense validated, by the ‘natural’ marks of somatic difference constitute material differences in the lived experience of individuals. Indeed, the stigmatized somatic mark can also be understood as the mark of continual appropriation of economic and cultural capital from disadvantaged groups. In the investigation of this type of ‘adversity’, The Comedy of Errors becomes particularly illustrative, revealing some of the ways in which the body figures in the framework that undergirds a system of social differentiation and suggesting that race may be understood as an iteration of the somatic component of a system of social differentiation that encompasses class as well. In such a system, the body itself functions as a sign of those aspects of identity that are understood as natural and therefore permanent, but are in fact the result of a society adopting different standards for different groups.

The Comedy of Errors examines the effect of such grouping, charting the appearance of stigmatized somatic difference, or racial difference, by imagining a world in which a ‘recognizable’ set of somatic marks are invested with meaning that is then applied to all those who share those ‘recognizable marks’. The magnitude of the perceived similarity between two or more individuals, from perfectly identical bodies to merely sharing a single somatic trait or feature, is immaterial. Racialist logic can rationally tie any somatic mark to any...
social meaning, even as complex a meaning as identity. Early modern racialism can perhaps then be understood in this way, as the belief in the existence and social significance of reproducible somatic signs that indicate indelible differences between groups of people.

The real 'weirdness' of The Comedy of Errors is not in the presence and interaction of doppelgängers. While the appearance of twins, especially dressed alike, on the early modern stage may have been spectacular, it is not multiple birth that is uncanny; rather it is the fact that multiple birth is not necessary for us to confute two or more human beings. The production of twins as two separate subjects who share the same physical features, but whose identities are distinct does not rely upon the fact of their confirmed consecutive parturition (the fact of their having issued, one at a time, from a womb). Instead, the production of two distinct subjectivities relies upon the general agreement of the larger community that their shared physical features will not share the same meanings, that they will not suffer an indelible mark that would detrimentally circumscribe their social status.

**Select Bibliography**


Elk, Martine van, "This sympathized one day's error": Genre, Representation, and Subjectivity in The Comedy of Errors, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60:1 (2009), 47–72.


