

RICHARD HENZE'S "THE COMEDY OF ERRORS: A FREELY BINDING CHAIN":

CRITICAL COMMENTS

By

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In his essay "The Comedy of Errors: A Freely Binding Chain,"¹ Richard Henze refutes a theory espoused by T. W. Baldwin in his book On the Compositional Genetics of "The Comedy of Errors".² Professor Henze hinges his brief but perceptive criticism on Baldwin's assertion that the gold chain, purchased by Antipholus of Ephesus for Adriana, is merely a "simple but effective bit of stage property" (p.35). Henze, as I shall attempt to show in this paper, considers Baldwin's belief an oversimplification of a major symbol in the play. Professor Henze's insights do, however, warrant their own critical assessment, < thus a focus I shall give equal importance. > *Danfing.*

According to Henze, the chain is the key element in The Comedy of Errors since it "becomes a complex symbol of the recommended norm in the play, the bridling of headstrong freedom and wandering individuality" (p.35). Henze then

proceeds to restate this "norm" as the play's major themes--
 "the finding of one's self by losing one's self and the
 freeing of one's self by binding one's self" (p.35). Much to
 his credit, Henze cites the play often, and here, to buttress
 his argument, he refers the reader to the ocean metaphor
 uttered first by Antipholus of Syracuse:

I to the world am like a drop of water
 That in the ocean seeks another drop,
 Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
 (Unseen, inquisitive), confounds himself.
 So I, to find a mother and a brother,
 In quest of them (unhappy) lose myself.³

and echoed by Adriana:

Ah, do not tear away thyself from me!
 For know, my love, as easy mayst thou fall
 A drop of water in the breaking gulf
 And take unmingled thence that drop again
 Without addition or diminishing,
 As take from me thyself, and not me too.(II.ii.120-5)

Henze, at this early point in his essay, becomes as
 guilty of being overly complex as he claims Baldwin is in
 being overly simple. Few critics would argue against the idea
 that The Comedy of Errors focuses on people's foolish and vain
 attempts to free themselves from society's gravitational pull;
 the play is, after all, a comedy. It is for this reason, then,
 that Professor Henze leans too heavily on theme, an element
 he employs inexhaustibly in his thesis. Henze is undoubtedly
 aware that The Comedy of Errors is, if not Shakespeare's

first, certainly one of his earliest attempts at drama. Shakespeare's drawing so much from Plautus' Menaechmi, an acknowledgement Henze himself makes, paints a more accurate picture of the then inexperienced and unsophisticated playwright than does a play designed to be dripping with theme. Shakespeare, as Henze must also realize, gradually grew to the eventual level of complexity that a play such as Twelfth Night evinces. Since Shakespeare wrote for an Elizabethan audience spending hard-earned money, and not twentieth century critics and their never-ending search for essences, one can easily perceive a young dramatist treading both lightly and cautiously. Baldwin, according to Henze, calls The Comedy of Errors "'a play of fate'"(p.36). Henze would be wise to listen.

Similarly preponderant are the references to plot, although here Henze is indeed more convincing. He skillfully weaves a thread through the two couples; Antipholus E. and Adriana, Antipholus S. and Luciana, thus showing how the characters, no matter how far apart the course of events renders them, are eventually destined to be bound harmoniously together in marriage. Antipholus E., unlike his brother, is already married as the play begins, but, due to a series of misunderstandings, is not allowed in his own home which, at that time,

is unwittingly occupied by his look-alike twin. Bemused, Antipholus E. "wants to be master of more liberty than social peace permits. He would like to be free to dine with a friendly prostitute (although, as he says, he actually has no mistress) without asking his wife's consent. Instead of freedom from all bonds, however, he gets freedom from no bonds at all and is finally symbolically tied in the bonds of marriage and society even as he is actually bound by ropes"(p.36). We see the same reaction to the confusion, says Henze, in Adriana. She, too, "would like unbridled liberty: 'Why should their liberty than ours be more?'(II.i.10). But Luciana warns her that 'headstrong liberty is lashed with woe.' All things have their bounds, 'in earth, in sea, in sky.' The bounds for females are their masters 'and their lords'"(II. i.15-24). (p.36) Henze concludes this part of his essay with his own image of these characters who are bound to be bound. "Bridling is necessary, but the team needs to be bridled together lest they be asses alone, lashed with woe"(p.37). One might be tempted to ask Professor Henze if the couples, eventually a team thus bridled together, are better off, then, being gregarious asses.

Still, however, it is the gold chain which "reinforces

the movement of plot and theme from unsocial or romantic to eminently social, and the chain quickly acquires its significance as a symbol of the social norm"(p.37). Henze continues, suggesting that the chain is a dynamic force which "draws Antipholus S. into society and marriage, never gets into the prostitute's hands, and finally helps rejuvenate Antipholus' and Adriana's marriage"(p.38). The idea for the chain, as both Baldwin and Henze concur, is Shakespeare's own and not Plautus'. In his Menaechmi, Plautus uses a mantle and a bracelet as pivotal objects in the story's development. Shakespeare's choice of the chain, on the other hand, is richly symbolic, according to Henze, and he again criticizes Baldwin for making what is to be interpreted as another oversimplification. "According to Baldwin, Shakespeare simply 'needed a more stagey device than a bracelet.' Shakespeare has more than just a device, however, when he gets through. Shakespeare's effective chains are more comprehensive...the more one stretches them, the tighter they get"(p.38).

Introduce all quotes!

Henze concludes his essay by showing just how tightly the chain indeed does bind the two temporarily wayward couples. Adriana observes:

I see the jewel best enamelled
 Will lose his beauty; yet the gold bides still
 That others touch, and often touching will
 Wear gold; and no man that hath a name,
 By falsehood and corruption doth it shame.(II.i.109-13)

avoid!

This most prophetic speech, says Henze, shows the true power of gold and the fact that "the play indicates in addition, even if the man be willing to shame the gold, it will escape the shame and make the man a man in spite of himself"(p.39).

This, then, according to Henze, explains the foolish behavior of both Antipholuses (Henze would, I am sure, assert that they make asses of themselves.), and though "the chain is an image of the golden bonds; the misplacement of the chain and weakening of the bonds bring distrust, confusion, loss of social stability"(p.40). Obviously, this can not be, and, like ⁱⁿall of Shakespeare's comedies, society is the winner and order is restored. "Humanity requires society; society requires social restraints. Each Antipholus attempts to reject the bonds, but each only succeeds in getting himself more securely bound. With both bridled, the teams are soon together"(p.41).

Thus Professor Henze offers what most assuredly is a cogent, if not enlightening, view of the gold chain. There is, however, if the reader will pardon the pun, a missing

link. Not once while he brands his "society says" argument into the reader's hide does he mention the significance of what to any critic (and certainly to the Elizabethans) would be an equally obvious reality--The Great Chain of Being.

Just as important to the Shakespearean audience as was society's code of ethics was man's place in the cosmos. Perhaps, then, Henze's continued reference to man being yoked bears the burden of being too "down to earth." Or, perhaps, Professor Henze does not see the obvious. If that is so, he would be wise to think of King Lear who, too, does not see what is right in front of him and errs accordingly. It might interest Henze to be reminded of the particular image painted of Lear:

thou
bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt.(I.iv.150-1)

It is something any perfect fool could see.

An excellent, well-written study.

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NOTES

- name of author?

¹Shakespeare Quarterly, 22(Winter, 1971), 35-41.

²Urbana, Ill., 1965.

?? Full footnote!

³All Shakespeare quotations are from The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. George Lyman Kittredge and Irving Ribner (Lexington, Mass.).

