A Magnus Amator *in Illyria: Shakespeare and the Memory of Plautus*

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It is well known that Shakespeare based his comedies about twins, *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, on Plautus's *Menaechmi*. The link between the two is often understood as structural, and there is little doubt that the comic possibilities of (re)production that so animate the Roman play form the backbone of both of Shakespeare's comedies based on the idea of twins. In this essay, however, I take a different perspective, arguing that Shakespeare was indebted to the Plautine play at a linguistic level as well as a thematic one. In particular, I suggest that the word "great" or "magnus" carries demonstrable lineage between the two plays, and that this points to an important dimension of the comedy of disorder.

Keywords: *Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, Plautus's *Menaechmi*, comedy of disorder, Shakespeare's language

One of Shakespeare's first plays was *Comedy of Errors*, which is an exercise in *imitatio*, based on a play that he probably knew from grammar school (Shakespeare 2002, 17). Roughly a decade later, Shakespeare returned to the premise of a comedy centered on twins who bear identical faces for his more comprehensively nuanced and ambitious second such play, *Twelfth Night*. The present essay considers some of the layers of memory that operate in Shakespeare's creative path through these three works. I offer an expansion of our understanding of how texts are remembered, and this more expansive perspective offers suggestive insight for a renewed examination of what qualifies as an echo, and how such reverberations can productively cross linguistic lines.

Source study is typically framed in linear ways, asking such questions as which texts were primary, secondary and analogous sources for any Shakespearean composition, and looking for what changes

Shakespeare made to them. Such demarcations are understandable, as the potential field of material that informed Shakespeare's authorship is vast and variegated, including everything from people he knew to sermons he attended. However, these categories necessarily enforce some limitations on our understanding of creativity. According to this model, an author receives a text, reimagines it, and creates a new work through intentional modification, but that idea of linear inheritance is not the only way to see how creativity happens[1]. Another set of questions is, what texts were on the table when Shakespeare was writing? What texts were plausibly operating in his recent or distant memory? On what levels was a text recalled: by words, plot, thematic structure, or some other aspect of its verbal life? If one source text affected more than one Shakespearean text, was the first act of poetic recollection part of the memorial experience that was the basis of the creation of the second? That is to say, was the remembering remembered? What if texts by Shakespeare and by others were so proximate to each other that recollection could not clearly separate them? In what ways might memory be an experience of immediacy, a 'flashback', so to speak, rather than a record of the past? We tend to discuss such emergent recollections in relation to trauma, but the recollection of many structures, textual, linguistic, auditory or conceptual, can be just as immediate in the experience of recollection as they were in initial experience. In particular, I suggest that one of the most pivotal lines in *Twelfth Night* hearkens to a gap between a Latin play he experienced as a child and its English translatability.

This exploration of the productive interplay between languages is an extension of the concept that I have called *interlinguicity*, a term I have offered as a way to understand the cohabitation of multiple languages within a conversation, a sentence, or a creative work. The concept has two stages: the first is to acknowledge that the notion of

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1   As Sergio Costola has suggested, "Models of linear descent, such as from Plautus to commedia dell'arte, might be valid, but should not claim legitimacy solely on the basis that they validate the texts that we already have. In contrast, studies of the dramatic construction of the plays of Elizabethan dramatists, as Michele Marrapodi points out, have more recently profited from a comparative approach which has examined the theatrical ancestry of the plays outside positivistic source studies that are primarily focused on the form of influence of source material" (2023, 244).

linguistic integrity is drastically overstated by structures such as dictionaries, nations, university departments, and similar demarcations. Cities, people, and texts have always been hybridized and subdivided in ways that elude or confound traditional linguistic categorization, particularly in their more subtle and meaningful registers. The second stage in the concept is that such overlapping and motive contact between linguistic systems is not just a large element of the social life of communication but also a generative force for poetic creation. Languages have never been separate, and poetic creation has often drawn energy from the gaps and confusions that interlinguistic contact generates (Saenger 2015a, 2015b). We are taught to see languages as separate things that occasionally mix; interlinguicity asks us to focus on, and to put higher value upon, their interpermeation and promiscuity.

In the traditional account of a source, the author is viewed as a unitary agent who shapes previous texts into new creations, and the most conscious decision any author makes is the plot. According to this logic, Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is based on *Menaechmi*, and *Twelfth Night* is based on *Gl'Ingannati*, a kinship that was initially recorded by a contemporary attendee at a performance of the later play, John Manningham (Shakespeare 2021, 1337)[2]. But the truth is that any textual relationship must have been complicated, mediated and hybridized, as the plot in question was so common in the fabric of ancient comedy. The version of misidentified twins portrayed in *Twelfth Night* includes a factor of gender, thus joining the issue of physical confusion of identity to the social performance of gender. Viola notoriously offers no explanation for her desire to play the part of a eunuch, and in that lacuna, they unwittingly construct a resemblance to their brother Sebastian, through a combination of facial resemblance and the performed embodiment of class and gender expectations[3]. Catherine Scott Burriss has argued for a

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2   Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Shakespeare are taken from this Arden edition.

3   Brian Cummings has suggested that Viola's capacity for self-erasure and radical instability is counterpoised by the "Captain [who] attempts to impose his fragmentary memories of a place he has sailed to and from in the past onto Viola's bewildering sense of disturbance and displacement" (Cummings 2023, 51). It is reasonable to infer that Viola seeks to cross-dress in order to get a job and to avoid unwanted advances as a woman travelling nearly alone. In *As You Like*

reading of *Gl'Ingannati* that embraces its queer and ludic framing, and indeed there is no real separation possible between that Italian play and the Plautine tradition[4].

At this stage, a more traditional account of the relationship of these three plays must be laid out[5]. Plautus's Latin comedy *Menaechmi* offers two identical twins separated by fate at the age of seven, who have unwittingly ended up in the same city later in life. This ironic coexistence is the pretext for a series of scenes wherein comedy is built on misrecognition and the complications it generates. In the *Menaechmi*, the basic outline of the plot is as follows: a merchant from Syracuse has twins, and takes one with him on a voyage to Tarentum, who for his entire life bears the name Menaechmus (I will call this brother simply Menaechmus here). That son is stolen by a family from Epidamnum who want a child, which prompts the father to die of grief. The grandfather takes care of the remaining boy, who had originally been named Sosicles, and out of grief renames him Menaechmus, after his brother, who is presumed dead. I will call this brother Menaechmus (S), as a reference to his original name.

In *Comedy of Errors*, the symmetries involved with identical twins are multiplied. They are identically named, but without a clear expla-

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It, Rosalind offers safety as the reason for her decision to adopt a male persona (I.iii.106-08), as does Julia when she plots to become Sebastian in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (II.vii.40-41), and Innogen when she agrees to dress as Fidele in *Cymbeline* (III.iv.150-53). It is therefore notable that Viola's motivation, by contrast, is not clearly articulated in the play.

4   Scott Burriss suggests, "*Gl'Ingannati* leaves its audience with no firm ground to stand on regarding the performance of gender; in the end, one young man's performance of a girl who plays a boy and of a boy who does not play a girl but is mistaken for a girl playing a boy, insistently asks: what belongs to masculinity, what to femininity, what to both, what to neither?" (Scott Burriss 2013, 77). For example Scott Burris notes that the Prologue flaunts the expectation of a cohesive plot, and along with it, stable gender norms: "'Oh! Or ch'io mi ricordo: non v'aspettate altro argomento perché quello che ve lo aveva a fare non è in punto.' ('Oh yeah! I just remembered: don't expect to hear the argument of the play, because the guy who was assigned to do it isn't ready')" (Scott Burriss 2013, 69).

5   For a more comprehensive account of the influence of Plautus on *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, in terms of plot, incident, and characterization, see Robert Miola 1994, 19-61. The present essay differs from Miola's work in its focus on metalinguistic poetry in Shakespeare, and a fuller exploration of thematic networks, including service, erotic networks and confusion and reconstitution of the self.

nation of how that happened, thus making them more similar even in terms of Shakespeare's plot. Each has a slave, and those two slaves are also identical to each other in face and name, creating a nearly geometric parallelogram of identity duplication. Neither the *Menaechmi* nor *Twelfth Night* are as symmetrical in their structure as *Comedy of Errors*. In Plautus's play, Menaechmus (the one who always had that name) has a parasite, named Peniculus. His brother, Menaechmus (S), misses Menaechmus, and goes to search for him across the Mediterranean. He finds himself quite accidentally in Epidamnum, where his brother happens to live, and he is confused to find that people there seem to know his name. In this way he meets the social identity of his brother for most of the play, only encountering his actual brother in person at the end.

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare revisits the basic plot structure of two dislocated twins who cohabit the same social world, but alters a number of the elements in the model. There are two obvious differences. First, both of the twins are foreign to the city in which the play takes place, making almost all the social bonds we see them experience a product of improvisation for both of them, and secondly, one of the twins, Viola, is female, though this difference is diminished when she dresses as a man and assumes the name of Cesario. Further, a number of other characters wander into the framework, most notably Malvolio. But certain aspects are remarkably similar. The characters in all three plays are focused on outcomes: successfully obtaining a meal, avoiding a strange woman who claims rights to them, and avoiding a debt that they do not understand. The audience is detached from these outcomes, and the primary pleasure that the plays offer is laughter. The audience are laughing because their position as external observers enables them to have information about the disjunction at the root of the misrecognitions: they know that the two siblings are different people, and so each situation that is frustrating, confusing or painful to the characters onstage is humorous for the audience because their superior knowledge tips strife into silliness, and gaps of recognition into levity and play.

Thematically, they diverge. Plautus holds urban identity up for satire, both in terms of psychology, social customs and characterization. Psychologically, the Latin play implicitly asks, if you had a sibling with the same name and face wandering around in your social world, as both

Menaechmus characters do, what choices would they make? Would that be your experience, or theirs? On a societal level, how would your perception of status and community be destabilized if people either gave or took things in a way that you could not reconcile with your memory of interactions, or if those people referred to conversations that you did not have? Lastly, who would you be, and who would you perceive others to be? Characterization, especially in Roman comedy, is heavily connected to set roles, the kind of position that we now call a stereotype. Would you recognize who people were if they did not come with a pre-existing history? Could a wife exist without a husband, and vice versa? And what kind of desire would you have?

In all the plays examined here, *Menaechmi* (e.g., 880), *The Comedy of Errors* (e.g., IV.iv), and *Twelfth Night* (e.g., IV.ii), the idea of madness is invoked, quite understandably, in order to characterize a person whom we in the audience know to be sane, a person who is caught in a web of irreconcilable social cues by the twin plot. That invocation draws attention to how deeply contingent our social existence is, and it also tests the bounds of comedy. In more granular terms of mores and customary norms, the plays ask us to consider questions that structure and disrupt literary narrative: How is debt assigned, and how are favors granted? Are husbands and lovers interchangeable? What kind of normalized patterns create a bad marriage or a good one? How much of our daily reality could be rewritten with the silent arrival of a doppelganger? We tend to think of catfishing, deep fakes and identity theft as perils of the modern social network, but Plautus's play implies that such impersonations and duplicated selves are as old as society itself. Indeed the modern versions of this kind of impersonation are frequently associated with criminality and malintent, whereas the Roman playwright, more troublingly, shows us that such doublings can happen without any active agency; they can happen *on their own*. The social self and its detachability were born together, like the twins from Syracuse.

The Comedy of Errors elaborates the comic plotting, but if anything quells some of the more existential questions raised by Plautus. *Twelfth Night*, on the other hand, contains two key differences. In making one sibling, to speak in contemporary terms, gender fluid, Shakespeare puts less emphasis on sexual desire and more focus on the social implications of longing. Every instance of confusion in Plautus is thus

directed to the more fundamental confusions raised by human existence and the abstract agency of physical and social desire. The second major difference is that the social tensions of rank that are inherent in *Menaechmi* are given a personification in Malvolio[6]. In *Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare tamps down the restive energies of the slave and parasite of the *Menaechmi*. By contrast, in *Twelfth Night*, those energies are played out in scenes that are simultaneously ridiculously comic and poignantly pathetic. The gulled Malvolio is both a comic scapegoat for class ambition and a plaintive victim of extravagant cruelty.

The link between the three plays is often understood as structural, and there is little doubt that the comic possibilities of (re)production that so animate the Roman play form the backbone of both of Shakespeare's two comedies that were based on the idea of interchangeable siblings. In what follows, however, I take a different perspective, arguing that Shakespeare was indebted to the Plautine play at a linguistic level as well as levels of plot and theme. In particular, I suggest that the words 'big' and 'great' or 'magnus' bear a fascinating path in Shakespeare, and that this points to the productive space of interlinguicity, or the gap between languages.

The *poesis* through which Shakespeare created *Twelfth Night* was thus less like the kind of linear, and lineal, relationship between source and creation that traditional scholarship imagines, and more like a broadly based revision of earlier textual moods and thematic networks. Those earlier texts were not exactly assembled on his desk, so to speak, but rather in his memory, which means that an array of texts functioned in this role, beginning with Plautus, and also including his own previous play, *Comedy of Errors*, as well as intermediary versions of the story, such as *Gl'Ingannati* and the tale of Apolonius and Silla from *Rich his Farewell to Military Profession* (1581) by Barnabe Rich (Shakespeare 2021, 1337)[7]. One could pressure that array of texts into linear causality, but it is worth noting that all of the prominent

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6   Malvolio is also clearly linked with religious controversy, and various critics have read him as either more comical or more serious as a consequence of this link. Ian McAdam assesses recent scholarship on this topic usefully, and he reads the letter, and his subsequent humiliation, as allusions to "the illicit behaviour of subversive factions" (McAdam 2013, 81).

7   For a full account of the relationship of *Twelfth Night* to its sources, see Lothian and Craik 1975, xxxv-l.

characters in these stories endure misrecognition. As such, they construct and remake themselves by improvisational identity formation, which is to say that they adapt to, and navigate, an ever-shifting set of people and words, many of which do not make sense, internalizing phrases as they go. That literary experience of these characters, in which the present is characterized by detached and unrecognizable traces from a past that is both unfamiliar and uncannily known, might also be a useful way to conceive of Shakespeare's act of writing.

In all three plays, one of the siblings encounters a woman who has a connection to their brother, and that woman is not the brother's wife. In *Menaechmi*, Menaechmus (S) meets Menaechmus's favorite prostitute, Erotium. In *The Comedy of Errors* Antipholus of Syracuse meets Luciana, the sister of Antipholus of Ephesus's wife, and in *Twelfth Night*, Viola/Cesario encounters Olivia, the focus of Cesario's master's love, and later in the play, the wife of Viola's brother, Sebastian. When Olivia first meets Cesario, the dialog seems at first glance to be far from source text of Plautus, to speak in linear terms. The Menaechmus who wanders as a foreigner corresponds more to Viola than to Sebastian, in the sense that Viola is more fundamentally at odds with herself, experiencing a kind of angst that Sebastian never feels, and it is Viola who dresses up as a eunuch. Just as Menaechmus (S) is searching for his sibling (231), so Viola is searching for hers (I.ii.3-6), and Viola (as Cesario) interacts with Olivia in a way that is similar to how Menaechmus (S) interacts with his brother's lover, Erotium (350-430).

There are other interesting differences. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola has created a new character, who is at least liminally male, to act as a representative of Orsino. Viola, playing Cesario, has no apparent erotic interest in Olivia, and Olivia has an extravagant lack of interest in Orsino, in contrast with the businesslike engagement of her counterpart, Erotium. The comparable dynamic in *Comedy of Errors* occurs when Luciana asks Antipholus of Syracuse to go in to observe better decorum and at least feign fidelity to her sister (III.ii.1-28). Antipholus responds with rhapsodic poetry of love, but Luciana is very far from initiating that desire, and at least overtly, very far from reciprocating it. Thus, the situational parallel is there, but the erotic symmetries and parallels are really not aligned.

However, on a more thematic level, Shakespeare uses a remark by Olivia to allude to the Latin play. When Cesario asks Olivia to

remove her veil, she responds to them, "Have you any commission to negotiate with my face?" (I.v.227). She means this as a chess move, so to speak, challenging Cesario's wit in romantic repartée. However, the idea of negotiating with a face precisely matches the mechanics that are so central to the Plautine play. Each character in the ancient play is negotiating – with respect to money, marriage, theft or prostitution – not with a person, but rather with a face that functions as a detachable representation of identity. That detachability is what the twins reveal through their interchangeable social presence.

Shakespeare's Antipholus of Syracuse gives richly poetic voice to a kind of confusion that closely tracks that of his Roman counterpart. Early in the play, Antipholus compares his concept of his own boundaries to the integrity of a water drop:

> I to the world am like a water drop
> That in the ocean seeks another drop;
> Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
> Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.
> (*The Comedy of Errors*, I.ii.37-40)

The image of separation and reunion in water is apposite to the maritime plot, and the image also resonates with a broader concern for the limits of the self in a social world, which are both fundamental to human agency and always at risk of erasure. Similarly, one of the most transcendent moments in *Comedy of Errors* is when Luciana and Antipholus of Syracuse engage in a *pas de deux*, a scene which emerges from a much more quotidian moment in Plautus. When Menaechmus's lover, Erotium, approaches the wrong Menaechmus to invite Menaechmus (S) in to enjoy her attentions, her tone is practical and his response is confused:

> EROTIUM
> Our luncheon here has been seen to, as you ordered; you may go in and take your place when you like.
>
> MENAECHMUS (S)
> To whom is this woman talking? (364-69)[8]

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8   All English translations of Plautus are taken from Nixon 1959.

Shakespeare does not so much give Antipholus more depth, but rather simply more verbal diapason. Fittingly, when Shakespeare re-stages, or rememberingly recreates, the scene between Menaechmus (S) and Erotium, it becomes a scene between Antipholus of Syracuse and Adriana's sister Luciana. Plautus's courtezan has become, for Shakespeare, an innocent young woman, and both characters' words are sublime:

> Luciana
> Comfort my sister, cheer her, call her 'wife'.
> 'Tis holy sport to be a little vain
> When the sweet breath of flattery conquers strife.
>
> Antipholus of Syracuse
> Sweet mistress – what your name is else, I know not,
> Nor by what wonder you do hit of mine –
> Less in your knowledge and your grace you show not
> Than our earth's wonder, more than earth divine.
> (*The Comedy of Errors*, III.ii.26-32)

Luciana's *gradatio* is continued by Antipholus; "sweet breath […] conquers strife" just as earthly grace is transcended by its godly equivalent. Love conquers all – even marriage – but for Shakespeare the poetic stakes are higher and the moral risk is diminished. When Luciana asks what she believes to be her brother-in-law to call her sister wife, she means it as the formal fulfilment of his marital duty, but her phrasing draws attention to the radical instability of names in general, whether they are proper names or terms of relationship. If one personal name can refer to multiple people, then naming itself is revealed as contingent and seemingly random, and calling someone wife is both as arbitrary and legally valid as calling someone Antipholus. The accident of duplicate names in Plautus is just another aspect of the indifferent mechanics of civic life. In a telling sign of Shakespeare's transformative intent, that duplication becomes a site for numinous serendipity.

Another comparable moment occurs at a moment which follows this in the timeline of Plautus, and precedes it in that of Shakespeare. Menaechmus (S) has expressed puzzlement for some time about why a strange woman (Erotium) would invite him into her house. Finally, he decides that rational thought cannot explain the situation but he will shrug and go in anyway (415-20). He addresses Messenio:

Menaechmus (S)
See here now, you shut up. Things are going well. I'll assent to whatever the wench says, if I can come in for entertainment here. (*confidentially to Erotium, motioning Messenio back)* I kept contradicting you a while ago purposely, my girl; I was afraid of this fellow (*indicating Messenio*) – that he might inform my wife of the mantle and the luncheon. Now when you wish let's go inside. (416-22)

Antipholus of Syracuse finds himself in a similar position in *Comedy of Errors*, and makes a similar speech before going in:

To me she speaks; she moves me for her theme.
What, was I married to her in my dream?
Or sleep I now and think I hear all this?
What error drives our eyes and ears amiss?
Until I know this sure uncertainty,
I'll entertain the offer'd fallacy. (II.ii.189-94)

Part of the humor lies in the fact that there is no substantial aggrandizement in Shakespeare's version, only a more nuanced confusion. In *Twelfth Night*, this moment belongs to Sebastian[9], who similarly faces a choice of whether to enter a house into which Olivia is inviting him:

Sebastian
What relish is in this? How runs the stream?
Or I am mad or else this is a dream.
Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep:
If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep.

Olivia
Nay, come, I prithee, would thou'dst be ruled by me.

Sebastian
Madam, I will.
(*Twelfth Night*, IV.i.59-64)

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9   In her account of how the play distends erotic possibilities within the confines of comic form, Nancy Lindheim observes that "Sebastian is shaped to be both necessary transition (Cesario's double) and potential fulfilment (Sebastian himself)" (Lindheim 2007, 685).

Similar thematic threads of intertextuality cluster around Malvolio. Olivia's steward has no equivalent in *Comedy of Errors*, but he has suggestive resonances with a slave in Plautus, Messenio. A product of Shakespeare's mid-career fascination with tonal contrasts, he is a deeply serious character in a wildly fanciful play, a contrast writ large in the play that is figured in small form in the scene wherein he arrives to find Sir Toby and his inebriated companions singing catches, and tries to get them to be quiet (II.iii.85-123). After this, Maria leads an effort to deceive him, detailing her plans to take vengeance in the form of a kind of bivalent double-impersonation[10]. She will mimic the handwriting of her lady Olivia, in letters that command ridiculous behavior from Malvolio, and these letters will change the personality of her target; Malvolio will find himself "most feelingly personated" (II.iii.157). Though neither Maria nor Malvolio have any kin in Plautus, that idea does – the notion that a character onstage can feel socially articulated definitions of another person's identity, personal definitions that do not properly belong to him, and change his character, his facial affect, and his costume to suit a mismatched set of expectations. This idea of epistolary self-fashioning, if one may still use that term, is based on the idea of negotiating with a face. Two identical faces can cause a disruption in the system of legal recognition upon which the *polis* is based, and a consequent disruption in social order. That disorder reveals the fragile and contingent nature of other social cues, such as names, legal agreements, reputation, ambition, punishment and property.

But here too, there are differences; the letter causes a misrecognition that precisely inverts the misrecognition at the core of Plau-

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10   Thomas Embry has recently argued that the famous riddle that the faux Olivia offers to Malvolio, "M.O.A.I. doth sway my life" (II.v.109), would have been understood by its original audience as "a double riddle…furnished with clues that point simultaneously to two different solutions, only one of which is correct" (Embry 2020, 367). Embry suggests that in this case, the two interpretations of the letters are that Olivia loves him, and that he will be hung (metaphorically, that is, humiliated), and Embry links this double interpretation to the visual pun of a chain and a rope, which appears in *The Comedy of Errors*. An important consequence of his argument is the notion that doubling is not just a feature of the plots of these plays, but also an intrinsic motif in the processes by which the characters in the plays determine meaning.

tus's play. Menaechmus (S) encounters a world that seems to know someone who looks like him, and he defers judgment and embraces the benefits of what appears to be the capricious gifts of an irrational world. His face is his ticket to another life. By contrast, Malvolio's face is the copy of no one, but he receives Maria's engineered social cues (the text of the letter, its placement, its handwriting) and concludes that his 'value' has been underestimated. He transforms to embrace not the life of a duplicate, but rather a new way of seeing his current position, which is the notion that he has earned the erotic desire of Olivia, a person who is never misrecognized in the play, in the literal sense of the word. Either the core of identity, the face, or its externalities, tied to language and status, can be hijacked, and the effect on the inner qualities of desire or contentment can be very similar.

In *Comedy of Errors*, many of these broader Plautine references to social position survive; Antipholus of Ephesus struts his pride to the merchant in front of his own house, before finding himself locked out (III.i), for example. In addition, his wife Adriana, like her Plautine equivalent, bemoans her lack of power in her *domus*. In *Comedy of Errors*, dignity is much less emphasized as an emotionally important issue; it is merely an impediment to meeting one's needs. By contrast, the perception and sensation of status appears as a more powerful issue in *Twelfth Night*.

In writing *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare remembers Plautus, his own prior adaptation thereof, and other versions of the story in different ways, as evinced here by this divergence in the idea of dignity between the two Shakespearean plays that concern parallel siblings. Several characters in Plautus's play assert the power of their own social station, most of all Menaechmus, while the repeated pleas of Peniculus for food emphasize his degradation, and probably provide a hint for Malvolio's enclosure in a dark room. The jocular dynamics between Menaechmus (S) and his slave are counterpoised with the more indifferent and cold connection between Menaechmus and his parasite. At one point Menaechmus (S) takes his money back from his slave, Messenio. Messenio asks why:

> MENAECHMUS (S)
> iam aps te metuo de verbis tuis.
>
> MESSENIO
> quid metuis?

Menaechmus (S)
> ne mihi damnum in Epidamno duis.
tu magnus amator mulierum es, Messenio.
ego autem homo iracundus, animi perciti. (266-69)[11]

Menaechmus (S)
I have my fears of you now, from what you say.

Messenio
Fears of what?

Menaechmus (S)
> Of your doing me some damage in Epidamnus. You, Messenio,
are a great lover of the ladies, and I am a choleric man, of ungovernable
temper; so long as I hold the money I'll guard against both dangers – a slip
on your part, and resultant choler on my own.

In Plautus's play, the feeling of social rank plays out in odd ways.
Peniculus is truly subservient to his Menaechmus, whereas Messe-
nio, who is legally a slave, and Menaechmus (S) have more of a teas-
ing, familiar relationship. Here, part of the humor lies in the fact that
both men have a weakness for erotic desire, and Menaechmus (S) is
trying to put that problem on Messenio alone.

Of particular interest is Menaechmus (S)'s line, "tu magnus ama-
tor mulierum es, Messenio". Latin is one of many languages that uses
one word for both physical size – a large thing – and metaphorical
grandeur – a serious, important thing. It seems likely that a young
Shakespeare would notice this gap between Latin and English lexi-
cons, especially because it is an important part of the sentence. Me-
naechmus (S)'s primary meaning is that Messenio is metaphorically
expansive in his devotion to women, and thus cannot be trusted with
money, but that sentence cannot be translated into English without
deciding whether to call that devotion 'big' or 'great'. Indeed, there
is probably some ambiguity in the original Latin, in the sense that it
may be understood to imply either that Messenio likes women a lot,
or that he has a physically large ability to please them.

In context, the remark is particularly interesting because of the
subtle power relationship between the two. Messenio teases his

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11   All Latin quotes from Plautus are taken from Gratwick 1993.

master, as slaves in Roman drama often do, and at one point he needs to take the money back, because he has the same concern about Menaechmus wasting it (385). Thus the comment about being a *magnus amator*, and its position vis à vis English, raises interesting issues of rank and sexual levity, and the socially perceived importance of male devotion to women, with regard to the body, the mind, and the perceived social fabric. That final issue, of social connections, is particularly emphasized by the transfer of money here. Money only has value because of social perception of its worth, and that valuation can be fickle even in the best of times. In anything other than a perfectly safe city, money can always be stolen or otherwise extracted[12]. What value does Messenio have, and what are his vulnerabilities? Is he as fungible as the money he surrenders? Social rank marks master and slave as distinct, but in their bodies, and in their proclivities, it vanishes.

Some of these issues are detectible in other instances where Shakespeare uses words like 'big' and 'great'. When Fluellen and Gower in *Henry V* are discussing their king and his place in history, they compare him with an important Macedonian predecessor:

> FLUELLEN
> Ay, he was porn at Monmouth, Captain Gower. What
> call you the town's name where Alexander the Pig was born!
>
> GOWER
> Alexander the Great.
>
> FLUELLEN
> Why, I pray you, is not pig great? The pig, or the
> great, or the mighty, or the huge, or the
> magnanimous, are all one reckonings, save the phrase
> is a little variations.
>
> GOWER
> I think Alexander the Great was born in Macedon: his
> father was called Philip of Macedon, as I take it.

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12   Lothian and Craik (1975) highlight the change of tone when the farcical denial of financial debt by mistaken twin in Plautus is transformed into the more serious moment when Sebastian denies taking money from Antonio (Shakespeare 1975, xlviii).

Fluellen
I think it is in Macedon where Alexander is porn.
(*Henry V*, IV.vii.11-23)

Fluellen is comparing present kings to their past patterns, and his point here is about origin. Henry was born in Monmouth (Curry 2013, 28) and is associated with Wales, whereas Alexander was similarly associated with Macedon. The fact that each king came from one country and then ruled another gives them a claim to the kind of epithet that emperors would claim; history might call them great.

But Fluellen is a stage Welshman, so he has trouble making the *b* sound, which is why he comically says "Alexander the Pig", and says "porn" in place of "born". His confusion is phonetic, and it is also lexical. As English is his second language, he gets confused about the words "big" and "great". In fact, he is probably consciously translating Alexander Magnus from Latin to English, misplacing the target by calling the ancient king big, which in turn is further foreignized as his accent makes the word sound like the barnyard animal. Gower corrects him, and Fluellen does not seem to appreciate the difference between the two English alternatives, and in so doing he references "magnanimous", a cognate of the Latin word that he is struggling to place in English.

Similarly, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, there is a show of ancient worthies near the end of the play. A group of lower-ranked characters come onstage to present their embodiment of important characters from history, including Holofernes, Judas Maccabeus, and Hercules. Costard, the clown, presents Pompey the Great:

Costard
I Pompey am, Pompey surnamed the Big.

Dumain
The 'Great'.

Costard
It is 'Great', sir: Pompey surnamed the Great….
(*Love's Labour's Lost*, V.ii.546-48)

Once again, a lower class character gets confused about how to translate *magnus*, and he is corrected by an upper class character. In this

case, Costard does not resist the correction, perhaps because he is performing a memorized part and recognizes that he made an error.

Between these situations, it is clear that the word *magnus* itself, and its translation, is a focus of interest for Shakespeare, at least as much as an epithet, which is how Menaechmus (S) applies it to Messenio. In Shakespeare's second play about twins, he echoes this line in two fascinating instances. First, when Olivia is entranced by Cesario, she sends Malvolio off deliver a ring to them. When he leaves, she reflects on her own position,

> OLIVIA
> I do I know not what, and fear to find
> Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind.
> Fate, show thy force, ourselves we do not owe.
> (*Twelfth Night*, I.v.303-05)

In common with the quotation from Plautus, a thing of value is exchanged, and the word for "fear" immediately precedes the word "great". There is a general sense of trickery and desire, and a servant is being commanded in the context of a potential erotic entanglement. An *amator* is not precisely a flatterer, but the meanings are not that far apart, so "magnus amator" comes relatively close to "great flatterer"[13]. In both cases, the higher class character follows these reference to *magnus* by reflecting in a distinctively detached, one might say haughty, way about their own personality.

In the next act, Shakespeare gives that same servant a particular line that hovers around the idea of greatness. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio is associated with one of the most famous lines in the play, where he is given a line that reflects Shakespeare's persistent fascination

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13   Iolanda Plescia has explored the tension of Latinate and Germanic words in Shakespeare, and how the audible tension between those systems is linked not just to legitimacy and plebeian roughness, but also to ways of reading history and origins, particularly with regard to ambiguous figures within Britain's history, such as Cymbeline (Plescia 2022). Within this context, it is interesting that there are four characters examined in this essay who touch on the idea of greatness in an echo of Plautus: Costard, Fluellen, Malvolio and Olivia. Of all these, only Olivia uses the Germanic word 'great' to translate the Latin *magnus* without any risk of embarrassment at all, and of course she is the highest ranked of the four. The implication may be that navigating such gaps is a privilege of the social elite.

with grammatical alternatives and intricacies, in this case as a meditation on the relationship of various people to the idea of greatness. In a manner quite rare in Shakespeare, it operates as a kind of uber-text for the play, chiming like a leitmotif three distinct times, in its first instance audible for its invitation to pride, in its second instance for its gloriously misplaced eroticism, and in its final arrival as a form of poetic justice, which Feste calls a "whirligig" (V.i.371).

First, Malvolio reads a letter left for him by Maria, who has imitated her mistress's handwriting in order to deceive Malvolio into thinking that his superior is in love with him. He reads, with transparent arousal, "In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them" (II.v.142-45). I suggest that these lines are a poetic expansion or "tu magnus amator mulierum es" (*Menaechmi*, 268). The Latin line shares with Maria's letter notable similarities: familiarity from a superior, an ambiguous invocation of greatness, the anticipation of eros, an ambient sense of trickery, and the proximity of words for fear and large physical or metaphorical size.

In the first instance of the text that sparks Malvolio's romantic and social ambition, the discussion of greatness raises issues of arousal, and a double entendre that recalls Plautus. Like Messenio, he has an official relationship of subservience with his superior, and that relationship is being transgressed with innuendo[14]. For both Messenio and Malvolio, the superior is referencing the sexual arousal of the male inferior, and associating that arousal with an adjective connected to size. Part of the joke in *Twelfth Night* is the fact that these four references to a variant on the word "great" in one quotation operate in very different ways from each other. To fear greatness mainly alludes to the notion that Olivia is too high to be matched with him, though it probably also carries a hint of Malvolio's fear of his own tumescence. The second use of "great" is definitely metaphorical: no

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14   Urvashi Chakravarty has argued that Toby is more threatened by Malvolio than most readers assume, and that the competition between bonds of blood and bonds of service speaks to discursive shifts that are tied to the gradual institutionalization of chattel slavery. Chakravarty suggests that the message from Maria, as well as the behavior of Olivia herself when she sees her steward point to "problematic slippages between duty and dependency, insubordination and inseparability in early modern service" (Chakravarty 2022, 120).

baby is born large. To achieve greatness is very much ambiguous: babies get big, menial characters with ambition get important, and other things get larger as well. The final use offers a different kind of sexual humor. It could mean either that Malvolio has metaphorical importance presented suddenly to him, or it could mean that the high-ranking "great" Olivia could thrust herself upon him, a confusing image which bears unmistakable hints of homoeroticism. The very ambiguity and flexible quality of the text helps Maria to induce her general project of causing Malvolio to overstep his bounds and misread the entire situation in the house[15].

The second time these phrases appear, Malvolio is saying them to Olivia:

> MALVOLIO
> 'Be not afraid of greatness'--'twas well writ.
>
> OLIVIA
> What mean'st thou by that, Malvolio?
>
> MALVOLIO
> 'Some are born great' –
>
> OLIVIA
> Ha?
>
> MALVOLIO
> 'Some achieve greatness' –
>
> OLIVIA
> What sayest thou?
>
> MALVOLIO
> 'And some have greatness thrust upon them.'
> (*Twelfth Night*, III.iv.39-46)

In this scene, both people involved exist within complicated layers. Malvolio is himself, transformed physically and in personality, recit-

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15   As Nancy Lindheim point out, "for a play that is said to subscribe to or manifest so many 'class' attitudes, it is remarkably casual in conferring titles and status" (Lindheim 2007, 698); this apparent imprecision may function as a comic trap.

ing words back to Olivia that Olivia has never heard. He views his experience as a transformation based on a complete obedience to the will of Olivia: "I will do everything that thou wilt have me" (II.v.175).

He bases his performance on a text created by Maria in the guise of Olivia, and he thinks he is playing a private game of recognition with Olivia, whereas he is in fact playing a public game of his own humiliation, thanks to the view of the knowing observers, Maria and the offstage audience. Olivia responds with the kind of basic, functional questions that are so typical of Plautus and so uncommon in Shakespeare. The language and the emphasis on dignity are Plautine, but nowhere in the *Menaechmi* or in *The Comedy of Errors* do characters engineer misrecognition.

The third time these words are staged, they are uttered by Feste:

> Why, 'Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrown upon them.' I was one, sir, in this interlude, one Sir Topas, sir, but that's all one. 'By the Lord, fool, I am not mad.' But do you remember? 'Madam, why laugh you at such a barren rascal, an you smile not, he's gagged?' And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges. (V.ii.365-72)

Feste's small but not inconsequential edit, making 'thrust' into 'thrown', puts salt into the wound, by transforming a sexual innuendo to a raw physical insult. What Malvolio heard as an erotic invitation was, in the end, merely a physical casting off, a deflation of his pride. There was no thrusting, only throwing.

Would this echo have been audible to any in the audience? Almost certainly, no. But it was part of the textual fabric that Shakespeare navigated to create this play, and there is evidence that the effect of the gap between languages, evident in the word *magnus*, was a part of the larger dramatic project[16]. Though audience members had no particular reason to hear Latin behind Malvolio's lines, they certainly heard friction between Malvolio's lofty vanity and the crude insults of Sir Toby and Maria. To aspire to greatness inevitably involves the navigation of multiple dialects and linguistic registers as well as actual

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16   Laetitia Sansonetti and Rémi Vuillemin have argued that "plurilingual" readers of Shakespeare's time could hear multiple languages embedded in "apparently monolingual" texts, and thus gain fuller access to "the concentric communities the text creates around itself" (Sansonetti and Vuillemin 2022, 15).

linguistic difference. Though Malvolio's text itself is monolingual, it becomes part of a plural set of perspectives in the scenes in which it occurs, and something very similar happens to Fluellen, who is made to appear foolish because of his inability to bridge a gap between his status as a Welshman and his place under Henry, as well as a gap between his speech and English translations of *magnus*. At least in Fluellen's case, and in that of Costard as Pompey, the underlying word is audible to many audience members, as is the social risk of getting the word wrong. That risk characterizes Malvolio's situation as well.

Pompey and Alexander are long gone; Henry is alive in that play but not onstage in that scene. The figures who are, or might be, big or great are generally aloof from the characters who call them so. Those characters who speak of greatness are clearly at risk: Fluellen is mocked, Costard accepts correction. Malvolio differs from them, and resembles Olivia, in the fact that he speaks of greatness and also aims for it to apply to himself, which constitutes a level of narcissism pointedly absent in Plautus. And of course, Maria's trap has an omission that should be obvious if one is willing to see it. It may be true that some people begin with importance, like Menaechmus, and some attain it through labor, like Messenio, who is freed at his play's conclusion, while others stumble into good fortune by accident, like Menaechmus (S). But it is also true that the great majority of people never come anywhere close to grandeur. In Malvolio, Shakespeare captured the paradox of a character who, ultimately, is great only in his hilarious folly and his undercurrent of pathos, a tragic actor who has stumbled into a Plautine comic world. All of that is not fundamentally new; the understanding of Shakespeare as an artist who progressively built on his early encounters with pivotal texts, such as the Bible, Plautus, Ovid, Holinshed, Daniel and Marlowe, is a familiar tale. What is new in this analysis is the notion that the multilinguistic environment in which Shakespeare was steeped was not just a source of ideas and patterns but also a site of gaps and dissonances that were a source of creative energy as well as psychological and social interrogation. We have long known that Shakespeare was fascinated by the ways in which the meaning of a word changes from one utterance to the next. The gaps between languages, the ways in which words often do not fit their translations, were also a fundamental element of what inspired Shakespeare to see new possibilities in old books.

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