Many Sorts of Music: Plautus’ *Menaechmi* and William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*

Among our first records of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* is a diary entry by one John Manningham: “At our feast we had a play called *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will.* Much like *The Comedy of Errors* or *Menaechmi* in Plautus, but most like and near to that in Italian called *Inganni.*”[[1]](#footnote-1) Following Manningham’s observation, scholars have focused on *Twelfth Night*’s adaptation of Italian sources rather than on Plautus’ influence. However, there is a closer connection between *Twelfth Night* and its Plautine ancestor than critics have yet acknowledged. Beyond merely anglicizing a popular Italian plot, Shakespeare reinvigorated that plot by drawing from its Roman source, the *Menaechmi*, which he had read in grammar school and which inspired *The Comedy of Errors*.

In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare foregrounded the themes of wonder and madness

that were prominent in the Menaechmi, added Feste as a manipulator of words and action

in the tradition of Pseudolus, and molded the opportunistic Menaechmus of Syracuse into

the innocent Sebastian. But the *Menaechmi* influenced not only the content and themes of

*Twelfth Night*, but also its poetic forms. In 1920, Cornelia Coulter first suggested that there was some correspondence between Plautus’ varied meters and Shakespeare’s alternation between blank verse, couplets, prose, and song. By juxtaposing *Twelfth Night* and the *Menaechmi*, we can perceive how Shakespeare adapted English verse to effect the modulations in tone and character accomplished by Plautus’ iambs, trochees, and *cantica*. In this play about music’s role in festivity and love, Shakespeare paid particular attention to the musicality of his language, experimenting with the ways song could shape a scene’s action and the way rhythm could reveal emotion and character.

In this paper I will focus on three instances where Plautus’ work especially influenced Shakespeare’s. Sebastian’s monologue in 4.3, which is a revision and combination of two speeches in the *Menaechmi*, shows Shakespeare striving to achieve in blank verse what Plautus did in trochaic septenarii. The drunken revelry of 2.3 includes both song and musically accompanied physical comedy, emulating Plautus’ use of *cantica* in action scenes. Finally, Malvolio’s imprisonment and taunting, found nowhere in Shakespeare’s other sources, clearly derives from the scene in the *Menaechmi* when the protagonist is proclaimed mad and nearly hauled off for treatment. Both scenes hint at the horror of being diagnosed insane, and as counterpoint both combine song and spoken wordplay in order to maintain a comedic tone.

*Twelfth Night* testifies to Shakespeare’s effort to create an English comedic poetics as versatile and emotive as Plautus’ while exploring themes borrowed from the Latin poet. Moreover, by investigating Shakespeare’s adaptation of Plautus’ themes, characters, and forms into English, we can better understand the ancient Roman playwright’s poetic techniques, emotional nuances, and humor.

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1. qtd. in Bullough, Geoffery. 1957. *The Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)