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The Comedy of Errors and *Twelfth Night*
Edited by Beatrice Righetti and Roberta Zanoni

S K E N È *Texts and Studies.* Studies I

Shakespeare and the Mediterranean

This series collects selected contributions to the International Summer School annually organised by the Skenè Research Centre, Verona University (https://skene.dlls.univr.it/en/), as well as articles related to its activities.

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Contributors

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Introduction

Beatrice Righetti and Roberta Zanoni

> And what should I do in Illyria?
> My brother he is in Elysium.
> (*TN*, 1.2.2-3)

Washed by the Mediterranean Sea, Illyria is paralleled by Viola, immediately after the shipwreck, with "Elysium", a "non-place" that merges reality with a mythical past, thereby materialising paganism and classical myth on the Renaissance stage. As Lisa Hopkins remarks, Shakespeare's portrayal of the settings stands for a "Greece of the Mind", a "reflection of [the character's] inner state" (2000, 228), rather than an accurate representation of the classical or contemporary places involved. In *Twelfth Night* and *The Comedy of Errors*, two plays deeply rooted in the search for identity, the liminality of the places that form the setting of the events is also due to their proximity to the Mediterranean.

An ancient and mysterious sea in its mythical past and early modern multiculturalism, the Mediterranean carries a transformative power that affects everything it touches. Not only do the territories it washes lose their geographical and cultural identity, but the characters who themselves encounter it emerge renewed. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Ephesus takes on the contours of a vast open-air market that gradually becomes a gloomy fairyland inhabited by the fears of Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, embodied by the evil spirits that – according to them – hold them captive in that non-place. Yet, as the drama unfolds, they themselves – victims of a shipwreck – undergo multiple metamorphoses, repeatedly

assuming the roles of their Ephesian counterparts. Similarly, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola – the play's most protean character – emerges from the sea's turmoil to explore and reflect the complexities of love, identity, and human passions. As the drama unfolds, she comes to embody both masculine and feminine identities, appearing as a man to Olivia, who falls in love with her disguise, and revealing a more traditionally feminine emotional depth in her bond with Orsino. Her brother Sebastian follows "this accident and flood of fortune" (4.3.11) and is tossed into a new identity – first as a lover and then as a husband – within a few lines. The sea captain Antonio is cast ashore on an inhospitable land, branded an outlaw because of his sea fight against Orsino's fleet. However, by saving Sebastian from the sea, he secures his pardon and finds atonement in the very waters that once threatened them both.

It may be argued that the processes of transformation that characters and places undergo in the two plays reflect Van Gennep's three-step process in passage rites, consisting of "separation, margin (*limen*, signifying 'threshold' in Latin), and aggregation" (Turner 1969, 94; Van Gennep 1909). In both plays, all these crucial passages are mediated by the sea as it first disrupts families and identities, then confines characters to liminal (e.g., Ephesus or Illyria), and is eventually recalled in the anagorisis scenes, where references to prior maritime tribulations are recalled and solved, gradually leading to the final reconciliation. The Mediterranean Sea becomes "an inbetween space, separating cultures, beliefs, and territories, but also serving as a fluid passageway that enables the commingling of these elements" (O'Neil 2023, 10). In fact, in both plays, geographical liminality is highlighted in the enmeshing of references to East and West, past and present, Christianity and paganism. As Paul A. Cantor observes, "the importance of the Mediterranean for Shakespeare points not just to East-West hybridity in Renaissance culture, but to ancient-modern hybridity as well, which is to say classical-Christian hybridity" (2006, 909).

In *The Comedy of Errors*, the sea's incursion onto the land meets no resistance, as there are no enclosed spaces where the characters can regroup and reconcile their fragmented identities. The dramatic action takes place in an Orientalised open-air market that exposes characters to any kind of unexpected event, such as the arrival

of Syracusan merchants in the midts of an intestine war. Despite the presence of domestic walls that often protect characters, the protean influence of the Mediterranean resonates in *Twelfth Night* too, reverberating in their split and liminal identites, such as Viola's before entering Orsino's court, and Sebastian's and Antonio's before entering the city. The geography of both dramas exists as a "'poetic geography' of layered frames of historical references and figurative meanings" (Cartwright 2016, 49-50) that directly speaks of the characters' confused sense of identity. A representative of the eternal forces of nature as well as of the magic and ineffability stemming from it, the Mediterranean Sea emerges as a fundamental underlying force in both plays that brings to the surface the hidden identity struggles consuming its characters.

1. Eastern Mediterranean

Connected to power, wealth, the Orient, and paganism, the Eastern Mediterranean stood as one of the core interests of Elizabeth's geopolitical ventures and of Elizabethans' fantasy of a distant Other. England had established a flourishing commercial relationship with the Eastern Mediterranean region since the Tudor period, and only a brief halt between 1550 and the early 1570s was experienced due to the growth of Turkish maritime power. The cooperation with the Turks, although precarious due to their differing religion, was pivotal for Elizabeth in her attempts to prevent Catholic Spain from gaining further maritime power. The growth of Anglo-Ottoman commerce was driven by careful diplomatic and economic manoeuvres. First, William Harborne, a notable merchant and diplomat dispatched as an agent to Constantinople, secured a direct exchange of letters between Queen Elizabeth I and Sultan Murad III, leading to safe trading rights for English merchants and the establishment of consulates in 1580 (Chew 1965, 152). Founded almost ten years after the merging of the Venice and the Turkey Companies, the Levant Company further propelled this burgeoning trade by first importing goods such as kerseys, lead, and tin. In the 1590s, broadcloths largely superseded kerseys, dramatically expanding England's reach into Mediterranean markets (Davis 1961, 118–20).

These markets experienced their most flourishing period from the 1580s through the 1620s and ultimately proved more profitable than any other foreign commercial endeavour (Andrews 1984, 97).

Beyond their commercial significance, maritime routes were often interpreted through a mythological lens, casting early modern merchants as classical heroes daring to challenge the gods of the sea. This blend of ancient and contemporary perspectives is reflected in Abraham Ortelius's *Parergon* (1579) and *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570). These works included not only the routes of ancient legendary voyagers but also a contemporary depiction of the world, accompanied by descriptions of modern countries richly infused with references to classical authors. For example, when detailing Italy's geographical features, Ortelius recalls Ptolemey, who "describeth it [Italy] in the forme of an Isthmos or Peninsula, which the sea incloseth on three sides, the other is walled by the Alpes. The ancient writers doe liken it vnto an Oke-leafe" (1570, 71; Mihara 2018, 21). In *The Comedy of Errors* as much as in *Twelfth Night*, geography functions as both "a metaphor and a 'palimpsest of perspectives owned by more than one culture' to a degree greater than in Shakespeare's other early comedies" (Arden 49-50). This intermingling is facilitated by the plays' unstable, ambiguous borders, that merge one city –and its distinct history and culture – with another. This expansive quality allows the setting to transcend specific locales and to almost become an archetype of place.

Illyria itself, the setting of both plays, was an elusive geographical place for early modern audiences. As Goran Stanivukovic notes, the confusion permeating Pliny the Elder's and Ptolemy's descriptions of the region similarly affects its representations in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century geographical maps, where "Illyria" was used as "a relatively flexible term" (2004, 402). While Illyria could be still "refer[red] to part of the Adriatic coast – roughly Dalmatia – at the time under the dominion of the Venetian republic", it also bore such classical echoes that boxed it into a "scarcely familiar territory, more significant, perhaps, for its evocation of like-sounding exotics" (Marcus 1988, 161). An ancient region of the Balkan peninsula, Illyria suggested an Orientalised setting enmeshed with Roman and Slavic influences. Originally a Roman province in 168 BC and later a Slavic territory from the sixth century AC, it eventually

gained prominence as a proto-capitalistic centre in the commercial charts of Venice, frequently putting it at odds with Hungary. The confusion surrounding geographical borders was reflected in the early modern perception of Illyria as a territory in "a perpetual state of identity crisis, at least from the point of view of those looking on from the Western Mediterranean and England" (Moore 2018, 162). As such, it naturally serves as the ideal setting for two plays exploring the loss of clear identity boundaries.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, the first geographical reference comes from Egeon as he recounts his family's tragic history: "our wealth increased by prosperous voyages I often made to Epidamium, till my factor's death, and the great care of goods at random left, drew me from kind embracements of my spouse" (1.1.41-4; emphasis added). Situated in the classical territory of Illyria, Epidamnus lends the play a vaguely Hellenistic atmosphere that lingers from its opening lines. As scholars have noted, however, no classical city named "Epidamium" existed (Cartwright 2016, 49-50). Its appearance alongside well-known commercial centres – Ephesus, Syracuse, Epidaurus, and Corinth – suggests that it is a "misremembered form of the real city-name, Epidamnus, or of a variant in Plautus' *Menaechmi*", the play's primary source (Cartwright 2016, 303), where the name is linked to the uncanny and to misfortune: "propterea huic urbi nomen Epidamno inditum est, / quia nemo ferme huc sine damno deuortitur" ("no one can stay in Epidamnus without being damned"; ibidem). Located in what is now Albania, Epidamnus became known as Durazzo in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and was a key hub for trade routes leading into Macedonia and Constantinople. Controlled by the Venetians from 1392 to 1501, it was under Ottoman rule during Shakespeare's lifetime.

The lingering sense of geographical confusion is heightened by Egeon's harrowing account of the shipwreck that shattered his family, in which he names two cities – one echoing Epidamnus: "and we discovered two ships from far, making amain to us: of Corinth that, of Epidaurus this" (1.1.91-3; emphasis added). Editors generally agree that the "Epidaurus" mentioned here refers to the classical city located on the Illyrian shore of the Adriatic, which, during the Middle Ages, was often mistaken for nearby Ragusa

– now Dubrovnik, in modern Croatia, just north of Epidamnus. They also point out that this Adriatic Epidaurus had a namesake in the Aegean: a more famous city on the Peloponnesian peninsula, best known as the birthplace of Aesculapius, the god of medicine. Confusion between the two cities appears to have arisen as early as classical antiquity. Julius Solinus Polyhistor – to whom *The Comedy of Errors* may indirectly allude – mentions the temple of Aesculapius and the occult dreams of the sick (1587, I4*r*), yet also misidentifies this Epidaurus with Ragusa/Dubrovnik in the marginal note (Cartwright 2016, 304).

Early modern travel literature reflects a similar blending of the two sites. In *An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Trauell through the Twelue Dominions* (1617), Fynes Moryson describes the Adriatic Epidaurus as "seated betweene the very iawes of the two powerfull States of the great Turke and Venetians, to one of which all other neere Townes Ilands and Countries are subiect" (Z3*r*). Yet, the Aegean Epidaurus also appears in accounts of Turkish military activity: in Samuel Purchas's *Purchas His Pilgrimage* (1613), the city is besieged by the army of Suleiman (Y1*v*), while Robert Johnson's *The Travellers Breviat* (1601) – an English translation of Giovanni Botero's global history – includes Epidaurus in a chapter titled "The Great Turk" (Mihara 2018, 17). Ultimately, both cities appear side by side in Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), a cartographic reflection of the same geographical ambiguity that permeates Shakespeare's play.

The emphasis on geographical duplicity in *The Comedy of Errors* is further reinforced through the figures of the Duke of Ephesus and Egeon, a "Merchant of Syracusa" (1.1.3), both of whom are closely identified with their places of origin. Their exchange, centred on the "mortal and intestine jars" between their cities (11), reflects the tensions of divided polities. When Shakespeare wrote the play, Syracuse – then ruled by Spain – was a key commercial port and a departure point in Sicily for Spanish naval operations against the Ottoman Empire. Its mention thus reinforces the play's attention to trade and highlights an implicit contrast between West and East (Cartwright 2016, 52).

Culturally and historically, Syracuse was regarded as one of the prominent commercial city-states of the classical Mediterranean

world. Thomas Cooper's *Thesaurus* (1565) describes it as "in the olde tyme of a meruailous renowme in strength and rychesse" (Q3*r*). Situated on the opposing shore, Ephesus was a thriving commercial and naval hub in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), strategically placed to command trade routes flowing both eastward and westward. Despite their physical separation, the two cities are presented in the play as part of the same geo-political landscape – rivals locked in a symbolic 'intestine' conflict.

This sense of internal division is also embedded in Ephesus's dual cultural identity. Known in antiquity for its wealth and for being home to one of the Seven Wonders of the World – the great temple of Diana (Artemis) – Ephesus was associated with both paganism and mercantile prosperity. At the same time, it carried significant Christian associations for early modern audiences. The city is frequently mentioned in the New Testament as a destination of Saint Paul's missionary journeys in the first century AD. In the Geneva Bible (1560), Ephesus is further identified as the site of the Virgin Mary's Assumption and as the home of Saint John the Evangelist, traditionally credited with writing the Book of Revelation. These religious connections were visually reinforced in early modern cartography. Ephesus is prominently featured in Ortelius's *Parergon* – originally an appendix to his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* – as well as in religious maps such as the one included in the Geneva Bible. As Charles Whitworth notes, this map "describes the places related to the Acts of the Apostles. The western end of the map is a part of Italy, and Ephesus is situated at the centre of the map" (2002, 39).

Marked by both mercantile ambition and pagan sorcery, yet embedded within a Christian framework, Ephesus emerges as a city defined by dualism. Most intriguingly, it hosted the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, a decisive moment in Church history that repudiated Nestorianism – the doctrine asserting that Christ is composed of two distinct persons. As Cartwright observes, this theological controversy serves as "a witting or unwitting association for *Errors*" (2016, 51), reinforcing the play's central concern with mistaken identity and divided selves.

In *Twelfth Night*, Illyria serves as the sole geographical marker guiding characters who, inevitably, struggle to orient themselves in a land that evokes both Greek and Turkish elements, yet subtly

recalls early modern London (Elam 2008, 75-6). Within the play, Illyria takes on multiple connotations. To some characters, it appears "rough and unhospitable" (3.3.11), since

> [c]aptivity, slavery, enforced religious conversion, and, for women, enforced marriage (or worse) face the survivors of piracy and shipwreck; and *Twelfth Night*'s setting, Illyria, promises all of these seafaring dangers for an early modern audience. The less-traveled Eastern Mediterranean, unlike the popular Western Mediterranean, remained more myth than reality for many early modern English seafarers, due to a long-standing cultural tradition of poorly established boundaries, warring factions, barbarians, and the encroaching Ottoman Empire. (Moore 2018, 161)

At the same time, Illyria is described as full of "relics" (3.3.20), "memorials and things of fame" (24), which entice characters to explore both its public and private spaces. These echoes of a long-lost past momentarily transform Illyria into what Moore calls "a kind of aristocratic pastoral landscape [which] . . . lacks shepherds, but . . . contains love-sick suitors, songs, games, and of course lost, wandering, aristocratic daughters and sons" (Moore 2018, 161). In this protean region, characters are simultaneously displaced and granted refuge.

While Illyria offers spectators a tangible geographical reference, its boundaries are quickly destabilised by the mention of Elysium in the opening act, used in connection with Sebastian's presumed death. This reference shifts the audience into a symbolic or mythic non-place. From the very start, then, *Twelfth Night* blurs real and imagined geographies. Even Illyria – the play's only ostensibly real setting – has conceptual borders as unstable as its physical ones. Throughout the play, Illyria is steeped in allusions to a classical Greek past, with repeated invocations of Jove and references to Mercury and Diana. Yet some traces of its historical connection to Italy also persist, especially in the Italian-sounding names, which may hint at a contemporary Venetian "connection" (Elam 2008, 71). This is particularly evident in the name of Duke Orsino, which recalls the prominent Roman family of the Orsini – specifically the Dukes of Bracciano, one of whom was, at the time, serving as ambassador to Queen Elizabeth's court (Draper 1941, 460).

In Viola's dialogue with the captain, the mention of Illyria is accompanied by a striking comparison of Sebastian to "Arion on the dolphin's back" (1.2.14), a reference that may have evoked for Shakespeare's audience the city of Corinth – another Mediterranean site that also appears in *The Comedy of Errors*. In Ovid's *Fasti*, Arion is "a semi-legendary Greek poet and musician who, to escape being robbed and murdered by sailors, sang . . . to charm a dolphin that ultimately carries him safely to Corinth" (Elam 2008, 166n14). This allusion in *Twelfth Night* operates on multiple levels: it suggests a subtle intertextual link within the Shakespearean canon, connecting *Twelfth Night* to *The Comedy of Errors* through shared themes of separation, sea travel, and mistaken identity; and it reinforces the Mediterranean atmosphere of the play's setting.

Further references in *Twelfth Night* deepen the sense of a Mediterranean world shaped by both classical and early modern associations. Viola's intention to disguise herself as a "eunuch" (1.2.59, 65) and the captain's mention of a "mute" (65) evoke images of a southern Mediterranean culture, one "more Turkish than Dalmatian" (Elam 2008, 72). Additionally, allusions to the Sophy of Persia further conjure the early modern English imagination of the "Oriental world" (ibid.). For Shakespeare's contemporaries, Illyria represented a distant and obscure territory: "a closed world to outsiders, dismissed as barbarian in ancient times and remembered in more recent centuries only as an unexplored outpost of the Ottoman . . . empire" (Wallace 1998, 213). Within this context, situating the play in such a remote and culturally ambiguous setting "facilitates the experimentation with identity that is so central to the play's action" (Dadabhoy 2024, 178). As Ambereen Dadabhoy argues, "the Ottoman presence and its domestic spatial arrangements" in Shakespeare's Illyria work both to "defamiliarize" the stereotypical notion of the Orientalised Other and to exploit it as a framework through which the play's many transformations can be understood (178-9). In this way, *Twelfth Night* – like *The Comedy of Errors* – can be read as a "staged Mediterranean play", a subgenre of early modern English drama concerned with the movement, exchange, and fluid identities enabled by the region's shifting geography (179). In both plays, internal and external boundaries are so destabilised that cities and cultures blur into one another, and individual identities begin

to collapse. This permeability, this condition of liminality, can be exhilarating or terrifying – especially when the threat and allure of the unfamiliar Other are brought into close contact with the familiar, and when social norms and mores are not only questioned but also, ultimately, renegotiated and restored.

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare's Illyria oscillates between evoking the Mediterranean world and offering reassuringly local references for an early modern English audience. Despite its nominally foreign setting, Illyria often resembles aspects of Shakespeare's England. Antonio and Sebastian, for instance, plan to stay at "the Elephant" – a name that recalls a well-known brothel on London's Bankside (Elam 2008, 75-6) – and arrange to meet there after Sebastian visits "this city" (3.3.24), a curiously vague term that reinforces the setting's indeterminacy. Feste's reference to "the Myrmidons" (2.3.26) may similarly allude to the Mermaid Inn in Cheapside, a popular gathering place for writers and actors in Shakespeare's London (Elam 2008, 76). A comparable effect occurs in *The Comedy of Errors*, where the home of Antipholus of Ephesus is called "the Phoenix". This may reference a known London landmark: "a 'Phoenix in the Pelican's nest' was the sign for a Lombard Street shop" (Cartwright 2016, 161nn75, 88). As Draper notes, in *Twelfth Night*, "the local colour is not Illyrian, nor thoroughly English" (1941, 460). Instead, the setting maintains an intentional ambiguity that mirrors the fluid identities of its characters. This ambiguous spatial framework enables "further displacements of gender, rank, culture, and custom" (Dadabhoy 2024, 189), allowing the audience to navigate a liminal world where transformation is not only possible but expected.

Another geographical reference – Viola and Sebastian's origin in "Messaline" (2.1.16) – adds to this uncertainty. The location of Messaline is unknown: "the town of Messaline, whence Viola and Sebastian come, is unknown to cartographers" (Draper 1941, 460). However, the name may echo *Menaechmi*, Plautus' Roman comedy and a key source for *The Comedy of Errors*, where it is linked to Illyria. This allusive naming continues the play's strategy of layering classical, Mediterranean, and English resonances to construct a theatrical space that is both foreign and familiar – both nowhere and everywhere:

> In *Men.*, II.i the slave asks Menaechmus of Syracuse how long
> he means to go on searching for his twin: "Istrians, Spaniards,
> Massilians, Illyrians (Massiliensis, Hilurios), the entire Adriatic,
> and foreign Greece and the whole coast of Italy-every section the
> sea washes-we've visited in our travels. . ." (Loeb, 235-8) . . . it seems
> almost certain that Shakespeare invented the name "Messaline",
> in connexion with Illyria, from a reminiscence of these lines of
> Plautus. (Salingar 1958, 138(c))

As Elam suggests, the name "Messaline" may derive from *Massilia*,
the Latin name for Marseille, or possibly allude to Messalina, the
notoriously licentious and corrupt wife of the Roman Emperor
Claudius (2008, 205-6n16). Although its precise origin remains
uncertain – whether French, Roman, or connected to Plautus – the
reference unmistakably points to a Mediterranean location. In this
way, Messaline in *Twelfth Night* functions similarly to Syracuse
in *The Comedy of Errors*: both are rival, coastal cities rooted in the
Mediterranean, culturally and geographically adjacent to Illyria, yet
distinctly foreign to an English audience. These cities mirror each
other not only as narrative foils but also as symbolic doubles – each
representing the duplicity central to their respective plots. Like the
twins in both plays, the cities are separated by the sea yet reflect
one another, embodying the mirroring structures that shape the
characters' journeys.

The geographical liminality of Ephesus and Illyria further
underscores their cultural and economic permeability. Both serve
as crossroads between Eastern and Western traditions, shaped
by centuries of conflict and exchange. As O'Neil observes, these
cities functioned as "'two-way' trade routes" – acting "both as
an entrance to Asia and a path to Rome" (2023, 13). This position
endowed them with "a natural liminality that lends itself to the
themes of dislocation, discovery, and metamorphoses" explored
in both comedies (13). Their fluid and unstable borders not only
reflect but also enable the identity transformations at the heart of
Shakespeare's Mediterranean plays.

2. Mirroring Across the Sea: Identity and Doubling

The link between *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* was recognised as early as 1602, the probable year of *Twelfth Night*'s first performance (Elam 2008, 3): "[a]t our feast wee had a play called "'Twelfth night, or what you will'; much like the commedy of errores, or Menechmi in Plautus" (Manningham 1976, 48). However brief, this quotation reveals how these two plays share a profound thematic connection that goes beyond their apparent focus on doubleness and identity. Their transformative narratives are deeply intertwined with the Mediterranean Sea, which consistently intervenes in the unfolding confusion and brings the plots to a meaningful resolution.

In both *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, the action is set in motion by a shipwreck in the Mediterranean. In *The Comedy of Errors*, this tragedy is vividly described by Egeon as he recounts his arrival in a foreign – and hostile – city: "helpful ship was splitted in the midst" (1.1.103). In contrast, *Twelfth Night* hints at the event more subtly through Viola's hope that her brother Sebastian is "not drowned" (1.2.4). The maritime setting is further confirmed by the arrival of the Captain and sailors who attest that the "ship did split" (4-10). Sebastian himself is closely linked to the Mediterranean, compared to Arion in a reference to the city of Corinth: "[t]o a strong mast that lived upon the sea / where, like Arion on the dolphin's back, / I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves" (12-18). When Sebastian finally reveals his identity to Antonio, he speaks of his "voyage" (2.1.10) and his origin from the Mediterranean city of Messaline.

In both plays, the sea's separating force acts as the catalyst not only for the unfolding action but also for the characters' journeys of self-fashioning and self-discovery. It is this very separation that ultimately enables the twins to recognise their true identities and reunite by the end. As O'Neil notes, "when the family is split apart, identities are fractured, and the way the characters describe their confusion is framed in terms of the sea, as if any perplexing situation must be traced back to the first tragedy that damaged their identities" (2023, 11). From the moment the audience learns of the twins' separation, their physical presence "materialises this identity

fragmentation and plays on the infinite possibilities of redoubling, converging, disappearing and reappearing again, although in a different shape" (Murray 2017, 151).

This is evident in *The Comedy of Errors*, where the newly arrived Antipholus of Syracuse famously describes his wanderings: "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" (1.2.35-8). This metaphor not only highlights the themes of twinship and doubleness but also portrays the disintegration of identity – and the resulting instability – when the self becomes diffused or unrecognised among identical others. Adriana, wife to Antipholus of Ephesus, later uses a similar image to describe marital bonds rather than familial ones: "[F]or 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" (2.2.131-4).

Throughout the play, sea-related imagery marks pivotal moments when identities blur, transform, or come under scrutiny. For instance, in 3.2, Luciana, Adriana's sister, confronts Antipholus for neglecting his wife – mistaking him for the other twin – while the real Antipholus of Syracuse immediately falls in love with her. In this case of mistaken identity, love transforms Luciana into a siren, enchanting Antipholus entirely: "[O] train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note, / To draw me in thy sister's flood of tears: / Sing, siren, for thyself, and I will dote" (3.2.45-7). Here, Antipholus remains a liminal figure – both the Syracuse and Ephesus twin – while Luciana becomes a mythic creature in his eyes. This kind of transformation, which affects the observer's mind rather than the subject's body, is later alluded to by the Duke during the anagnorisis: "I think you all have drunk from Circe's cup" (5.1.271). The invocation of Circe – the archetypal early modern witch – is especially apt for a city "full of cozenage", where the natural and supernatural collide, blurring the line between dream and reality. It is precisely to escape such a bewitched place that Antipholus of Syracuse asks his servant to find a ship ready to sail from Ephesus. Throughout the play, the presence or impending departure of ships frames many episodes of misrecognition and identity confusion between the twins. For example, one of the most chaotic misunderstandings between

Antipholus of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse involves a sailing ship that Antipholus of Syracuse hopes to board in order to flee this Ephesian fairyland:

> Antipholus of Epheseus What ship of Epidamium stays for me?
> Dromio of Syracuse A ship you sent me to, to hire waftage.
> Antipholus of Epheseus Thou drunken slave, I sent thee for a rope,
> And told thee to what purpose and what end.
> Dromio of Syracuse You sent me for a rope's end as soon!
> (4.1.94-8)

This comic confusion is mirrored in the play's final moments, when – even after identities are clarified – Dromio of Syracuse continues to mistake Antipholus of Ephesus for his master, enacting the play's final case of mistaken identity:

> Dromio of Syracuse Master, shall I fetch your stuff from shipboard?
> Antipholus of Epheseus Dromio, what stuff of mine hast thou embarked?
> Dromio of Syracuse Your goods that lay ay host, sir, in the Centaur.
> Antipholus of Syracuse [*to* Antipholus of Epheseus] He speaks to me; – I am your master, Dromio.
> (5.1.408-11)

The Mediterranean Sea's presence as a dramatic force driving identity shifts is equally pivotal in *Twelfth Night*, where Viola's "Illyrian shipwreck transforms her gender, her shape, and ultimately her identity" (Moore 2018, 1). Disguised as Cesario, her identity becomes fluid: she is neither fully woman nor man – momentarily a eunuch, a woman loving a man who loves another woman, who in turn loves her in male guise. For Viola, only time can "untangle this knot . . . too hard" to "untie" (2.1.41), and this ambiguity shapes all her interactions while impersonating Cesario. In this context, Cesario and Feste serve as the sole "points of intersection between" the "dual courts of Orsino and Olivia," the former male-dominated, the latter female-led, making them the only "liminal border-crossing figures within the social hierarchy of Illyria" (Dadabhoy 2024, 179). Indeed, Illyria itself seems modelled on "the norms of Ottoman

spatial arrangements, like the same-sex locations established in spaces such as the imperial palace" (ibid.).

Beyond her geographical fluidity, Viola also occupies a liminal space within her brother Sebastian's mind throughout the play. Deeply connected to the sea himself, Sebastian echoes Viola's link between lost family and the deadly sea, though in darker tones: "for some hour before you took me from the breach of the sea was my sister drowned" (2.1.21-2). He reiterates this even upon learning she has survived: "I had a sister, / Whom the blind waves and surges have devoured" (5.1.224-5). His persistent drowning imagery suggests that Viola's true identity has seemed submerged from his perspective – perhaps beneath the very waters from which Cesario emerged. Thus, the Viola who faced the sea is not the same person Sebastian encounters on land; only after her metaphorical 'drowning' can her renewed identity – shaped by both masculine and feminine experiences, including aspects of sexual attraction, as well as her own grief and Olivia's – fully surface.

Mirroring Sebastian's persistent belief that Viola has "drowned," Viola in turn assumes he has long since gone to his "watery tomb" (245). This reciprocal echo of words and imagery –though often from opposing perspectives – culminates in Sebastian's symbolic rebirth at the play's conclusion, paralleling his sister's transformation, as he declares: "[a] spirit I am indeed; / But am in that dimension grossly clad / Which from the womb I did participate" (249-50). The "watery tomb" once thought to hold him is thus replaced by the metaphorical womb of his rebirth.

The sea is evoked from the very first lines spoken by Orsino, albeit metaphorically, as he describes the vastness of his love: "O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou / That . . . / Receiveth as the sea . . ." (1.1.9-11). Antonio's fate is also shaped by the Mediterranean: he arrives in Illyria –where he must face the "danger of an averse town" (5.1.80) – because he saved Sebastian from drowning. For Viola, Antonio represents a figure of hope, and she expresses his deep connection with the sea through a striking maritime paradox capturing her sudden optimism that her brother may have survived: "[t]empests are kind, and salt waves fresh in love" (3.4.404). Yet Antonio is unwelcome in Illyria, having once fought a sea battle against Orsino's fleet: "once in a sea-fight 'gainst the count his galleys

/ I did some service, of such note indeed / That were I ta'en here it would scarce be answered" (3.3.26-8). Both the rescue of Sebastian and the sea-fight link Antonio's destiny to the sea – initially causing him trouble but ultimately leading to his redemption.

When Antonio reappears at the end, the sea returns him restored – his identity renewed and transformed along with the others'. Reporting his actions – "[t]hat most ingrateful boy there by your side / From the rude sea's enraged and foamy mouth / Did I redeem" (5.1.73-5) – he is finally believed and freed. Both Antonio and the Captain serve as gatekeepers to the final revelations about the twins' identities, thanks to their wide knowledge of key locations – Orsino's court, Olivia's household, and the city – spaces where identity is redefined after being washed away by the sea.

Interestingly, in *Twelfth Night*, the Mediterranean's presence is also symbolised through the characters' clothing. The First Officer, for example, recognises Antonio despite the fact that "now you have no sea-cap on your head" (3.4.345). As Elam notes, garments play a crucial role in the construction of identity throughout the play (2008, 39-50); here, the sea-cap – a token of the maritime world – serves as a defining marker of Antonio's identity, which he may have deliberately concealed to avoid recognition. Likewise, Viola continues to link her sense of self to her attire even after her true identity is revealed: "[t]hat I am Viola: which to confirm, / I'll bring you to a captain in this town, / Where lie my maiden weeds; by whose gentle help / I was preserved to serve this noble count" (5.1.265-8). In this instance, identity is fully restored through the sea itself – represented by the captain who rescued her from drowning and now guards her clothing, thus safeguarding her true self.

Throughout both plays, the sea frames the narrative from beginning to end: it brings the separated twins to the stage and, following their physical and metaphorical journeys, returns them to their true identities and reunites them with their siblings. Moreover, Mediterranean references do not merely appear at the margins but resurface repeatedly, often accompanying the entrance of new characters.

Adrift in this sea of fluid identity, the characters drift until they encounter one another – and ultimately themselves. Sebastian captures this uncertainty when, after meeting Olivia, he asks, "how

runs the stream?" (4.1.63), as if still subject to the sea's enduring pull. Similarly, in *The Comedy of Errors*, the characters leave the harbor to enter the abbey and "gossip at this feast" (5.1.407), yet the Mediterranean Sea awaits them not only beyond these sacred walls but also within, ready to restore the memories of their "travail" (400). Only when each finds firm grounding can the sea return what it had taken – their full, authentic selves.

3. The Volume

Stanley Wells and Paul Edmondson offer a masterful exploration of genre, gender, desire, and identity in relation to *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* in the "Prologue" to this collection. They highlight how "travel, shipwreck, lost family, and reunions" (40) are hallmark themes of comic romances, a genre to which both plays belong. Shakespeare's talent for blending genres underpins their study, which focuses on the use of "twin-like, complementary, and mirrored elements" (ibid.). Edmondson and Wells set the stage for a discussion in which "the individual twins in both plays are metamorphosed into new beings when they find their long-lost siblings" (41), a theme further developed by other contributors in the volume. By surveying recent performances, they demonstrate Shakespeare's enduring adaptability to contemporary concerns, particularly those surrounding gender difference and desire, concluding perceptively that "love – when equally and fully reciprocated – can transcend any limits" regarding gender, sexuality, and cultural expectations (58).

The volume is organised into two main sections: "'The Sea of Identity': the other as half, double, and mirror" and "'Am I in earth, in heaven, or in hell?': Losing and Finding Oneself in Athens." Part 1 features three essays by Janice Valls-Russell, Natalia Paparelli, and Madeleine Caso, which examine how issues of identity are addressed in the plays, especially through contrasting yet sometimes complementary images. Janice Valls-Russell's essay investigates "the dynamics of separation, search, and reunion in the two plays against" the medieval and early modern trope of "children cast out or lost at sea" (61), employing the concept of error as "wandering". She argues

that the twins in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* function as errant figures in various ways. Using Aristotelian concepts of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, Valls-Russell shows how Shakespeare navigates themes of loss and reunion, emphasising that discourses around endangered and lost children were culturally significant in his time. She further demonstrates how "reunion . . . becomes a form of collective rebirth, a prerequisite for individual family members to move forward" (79-80). In particular, she highlights Mediterranean settings as spaces through which Aristotle's dramatic structure – reimagined via Plautine comedy and Greek romance – is enacted, engaging deeply with emotional and cognitive patterns accessible to audiences on both personal and communal levels.

Natalia Paparelli's essay employs the metaphors of the hourglass and the mirror to explore the fluidity of identity in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*. As recurring symbols in the plays, the hourglass and mirror "simultaneously reflect and distort self-perception" (87). Paparelli illustrates how character doubling exposes the fragility and instability of personal and social identities, showing how these constructs are vulnerable to disruption and redefinition, especially amid misrecognition. Through the hourglass metaphor, she emphasises the shaping influence of time on human experience, analysing how the tension between permanence and change informs characters' journeys of self-discovery and their negotiations towards reconciliation.

Madeleine Caso also investigates identity and its process of rediscovery, though through a distinct metaphor. For Caso, the plays reveal that identity is fundamentally relational: the twins are not mere mirror images but rather two halves of a whole. Until their final reconciliation, they remain incomplete, portrayed as "halves searching for their counterparts" (111). Their reunion thus signifies not only the restoration of familial ties but the achievement of personal wholeness. Shakespeare's use of twinning is reconceived as a dramaturgical strategy emphasising interdependence. For Caso, a relational understanding of existence – crucial to the formation of selfhood – emerges for these otherwise isolated individuals only through the establishment of familial and social networks. It is through these connections that the characters come to define themselves in relation to others.

The second section of the volume expands the theme of identity by moving beyond linguistic representations to examine the profound religious and supernatural dimensions embedded in the Mediterranean settings of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*. Charlotte Wilde opens this section by highlighting the crucial role of *antanaclasis* in *The Comedy of Errors*, arguing that it functions not only as a rhetorical device but as a core structural principle that shapes the play's engagement with language and meaning. Wilde maintains that the play's satirical energy, rooted in its Mediterranean context, deliberately fosters ambiguity, presenting identity not as an internal psychological essence but as a dynamic product of linguistic fluidity and "external structures such as plot mechanics, verbal wit, and symmetry" (132). Within this complex network of mistaken identities and miscommunications, personhood is likened to Derrida's conception of language – "having no essence, introducing difference as the condition for the presence of essence, opening up the possibility of the double, the copy, the imitation, the simulacrum" (141). The Mediterranean setting thus becomes a symbolically charged space where boundaries between perception and reality blur, and where perceived magic is enacted through language itself, ultimately embodying the "earth, heaven, or hell" of the characters' lived experience (144). Wilde's essay concludes that truth in *The Comedy of Errors* is inherently contingent and fluid, with both language and the world reflecting a shared slipperiness – much like the sea that simultaneously unites and divides the twins.

Building on Wilde's examination of identity in relation to the plays' Mediterranean settings, Pasquale Pagano offers a compelling Christological reading of *The Comedy of Errors*. By recalling Ephesus as the site of the Council of 431 AD, which declared Mary as *Theotokos* (Mother of God) and affirmed the theological doctrine of Christ's hypostatic union, Pagano highlights the play's subtle Christological echoes. He argues that the twins' separation into two identical beings – occupying distinct spaces yet embodying divergent wills or concepts – can be read as a humorous yet profound allegory of the theological "dilemma posed by the belief in Christ's double nature," ultimately raising questions about human identity and the nature of the self: "who is the subject?" (165). These theological tensions are further explored through the figure of the

Abbess/Emilia, depicted as a "cunning and revolutionary figure" whose dual status as mother and supposed virgin resonates not only with Marian dogma but also with the liminal role of Queen Elizabeth I (155).

Annadora Zuanel's essay concludes the volume's exploration of supernatural and otherworldly resonances by examining the Mediterranean as an apt setting for plays where "nothing that is so is so" (*TN* 4.1.8). Zuanel begins by establishing the cultural and intellectual context that made religious phenomena such as possession and exorcism prominent topics in early modern society and theatre. She then analyses these episodes—whether genuinely supernatural or misdiagnosed psychological conditions—demonstrating how they contribute to the plays' overarching aim of revealing human identity as an inherently unstable and precarious state. Acknowledging Shakespeare's satirical treatment of possession and exorcism, Zuanel emphasises their performative function in reflecting widespread societal anxieties about psychological and physical transformation, ultimately prompting audiences to confront the existential dilemma: "am I in Earth, in heaven, or in hell? / Sleeping or waking, mad or well-advised?" (*CoE* 2.2.25-6).

David Schalkwyk's Epilogue, "Theatrical twins? *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*", brings earlier discussions on twinship and identity full circle by exploring thematic and structural parallels and divergences between these early and later comedies. Both plays stage three intertwined levels of identity and identification that shape their plots: the physical, related to twinship; the familial, based on shared blood and genetics; and the social, dependent on recognition by others, especially through language. Schalkwyk suggests that the intense focus on social identity construction is what makes *The Comedy of Errors* one of Shakespeare's most philosophically profound comedies (226). A key contrast emerges in the treatment of "bondage": while it is more explicit in *Errors* – notably in the service-master relationship and the marital dynamics of the Ephesian couple – it pervades *Twelfth Night* more subtly through bonds of service, erotic attachment, emotional connection, and various lost, broken, or restored relationships that shape each character's actions. Finally, the exploration of pivotal themes such

as the Mediterranean Sea, madness, and the supernatural reveals variations in imagery and language that lead Schalkwyk to conclude that these two plays may be regarded as "twins – but they are not identical siblings" (222).

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