

“Turning Witch”: the beginning, middle and end of Christianity allegorized in *The Comedy of Errors*

Marianne Kimura

Shakespeare scholars have attempted to discern an intentional religious message in *The Comedy of Errors*, a play which has many implied or direct allusions to both paganism and Christianity. On the one hand, Grace Tiffany sees the play as conveying a Christian message: “Shakespeare’s comedies and romances associate the worship of Diana with the Catholic ideal of religious celibacy, and ultimately repudiate the Diana figure or transform her into a ‘Christian’ spokeswoman who encourages and facilitates marriage and child-bearing”.¹ On the other hand, Patricia Parker, remarking on the play’s “disjunction of [pagan and Christian] contexts and discourses” sees the play as “post-Christian” (Parker 66), noting that “the culture contemporary with Shakespeare was a notorious assimilator—or appropriator—of other texts and contexts” (67), and shrewdly gathers that Shakespeare was borrowing from texts that had not yet been identified:

What a critic needs to do is, first, to recognize the complex workings of such networks [of different texts and discourses]—an interpretive labor which requires summoning all of the resources of this “great code” —but

1 Grace Tiffany, “Paganism and Reform in Shakespeare’s Plays,” *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 7. Article no. 214. (Jul. 2018). <https://doi:10.3390/rel9070214>

then, as a second interpretive moment, or divergent critical path, to examine what is being done both through this structure and beyond it (67).

Parker's comment, made back in 1993, was prescient and now, almost 30 years later, it is possible to answer her and say that the hidden discourses, the texts hiding in the shadows of many of Shakespeare's works, including *The Comedy of Errors*, were written by Giordano Bruno, who was executed for heresy by the Roman Inquisition in Rome on February 17, 1600.

However, in the centuries that followed Bruno's terrible death, as Hilary Gatti notes, Bruno's name and achievements have been shrouded by "silences created around him", in an effort "to eliminate him from collective memory" (Gatti 117). It is no surprise that convincing evidence showing that Shakespeare appropriated a text of Giordano Bruno was in a work by Hilary Gatti, a scholar primarily of Bruno, not of Shakespeare. It was her book *The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge* (1987) that pointed to the startling similarities between the book Hamlet is reading and one important passage of Bruno's *Lo spaccio della besta trionfante (The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast)* (142).

I will start by examining how *The Comedy of Errors* appropriates Bruno's *Gli Eroici Furori (The Heroic Enthusiasts)*, which in turn contains Bruno's own appropriation of Ovid's "Actaeon and Diana" myth. In Bruno's *Gli Eroici Furori* Actaeon's cruel fate is a metaphor for the heroic intellect apprehending the Divine through and within the material world:

... But yet, to no one does it seem possible to see the sun, the universal Apollo, the absolute light through supreme and most excellent species; but only its shadow, its Diana, the world, the universe, nature, which is in things, light which is in the opacity of matter, that is to say, so far as it shines in the darkness.

Many of them wander amongst the aforesaid paths of this deserted wood, very few are those who find the fountain of Diana. Many are content to hunt for wild beasts and things less elevated, and the greater number do not understand why, having spread their nets to the wind, they find their hands full of flies. Rare, I say, are the Actaeons to whom fate has granted the power of contemplating the nude Diana and who, entranced with the beautiful disposition of the body of nature, and led by those two lights, the twin splendor of Divine goodness and beauty become transformed into stags; for they are no longer hunters but become that which is hunted.

For the ultimate and final end of this sport, is to arrive at the acquisition of that fugitive and wild body, so that the thief becomes the thing stolen, the hunter becomes the thing hunted; in all other kinds of sport, for special things, the hunter possesses himself of those things, absorbing them with the mouth of his own intelligence; but in that Divine and universal one, he comes to understand to such an extent that he becomes of necessity included, absorbed, united.

Whence from common, ordinary, civil, and popular, he becomes wild, like a stag, an inhabitant of the woods; he lives god-like under that grandeur of the forest; he lives in the simple chambers of the cavernous mountains, whence he beholds the great rivers.....Thus the dogs—thoughts of Divine things—devour Actaeon, making him dead to the vulgar and the crowd, loosened from the knots of perturbation from the senses, free from the fleshly prison of matter, whence they no longer see their Diana as through a hole or window, but having thrown down the walls to the earth, the eye opens to a view of the whole horizon. So that he sees all as one
(Giordano Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 66-7). (my emphasis)

Actaeon, devoured by his dogs, is absorbed into the material universe and with this

the western dualisms such as “spirit/matter”, “god/nature”, “mind/body”, “heaven/earth”, “man”/“nature” dissolve, revealed to be false: “so that he sees all as one”. Actaeon realizes that he is matter and all matter is divine. He awakes to his own entangled, enmeshed material existence, inseparable from the divine material world.

Likewise, when Antipholus of Syracuse divulges his passion for Luciana to her in Act 3, scene 2 of *The Comedy of Errors*, he uses the metaphor of a mortal wandering in “an unknown field” who comes across a “god” who can “teach” him “how to think and speak”. Note that as he speaks to her, he first uses religious and philosophical terms plus the word “conceit”, before switching to supernatural words (mermaid, siren):

S.Antipholus: 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.
Teach me, dear creature, how to think and speak;
 Lay open to my earthy-gross conceit,
 Smother'd in errors, feeble, shallow, weak,
The folded meaning of your words' deceit.
 Against my soul's pure truth why labour you
To make it wander in an unknown field?
Are you a god? Would you create me new?
Transform me then, and to your power I'll yield.
 But if that I am I, then well I know
 Your weeping sister is no wife of mine,
 Nor to her bed no homage do I owe

Far more, far more to you do I decline.
O, train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note,
To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears:
Sing, siren, for thyself and I will dote;
Spread o'er the silver waves thy golden hairs,
And as a bed I'll take them and there lie,
And in that glorious supposition think
He gains by death that hath such means to die:
Let Love, being light, be drowned if she sink!

(3.2.29-52)

The word “conceit” means “understanding” here but should also be taken seriously here to subtly hint that a hidden “extended metaphor” is present. The question is an extended metaphor for what? “Teach me, dear creature, how to think and speak”, says S. Antipholus, using other words related to philosophy such as “errors”. Shakespeare, in a few lines, therefore sets up S. Antipholus as a philosopher searching for the truth, much like Bruno’s Actaeon.

S. Antipholus continues: “Against my soul's pure truth why labour you/ To make it wander in an unknown field?” These lines recall Bruno’s Heroic Lover in a natural spot where he will suddenly glimpse the naked Goddess Diana, a nature goddess. Arriving at that magical moment, S. Antipholus asks: “Are you a god? Would you create me new?”, inserting the idea as a sudden thought, corresponding both to Actaeon’s instantaneous glimpse and Diana’s quick reaction. “Transform me then, and to your pow’r I’ll yield” captures this idea further.

In *Gli Eroici Furori*, the passage describing the Heroic Lover/Actaeon contemplating the nude Diana follows directly after Bruno’s critical examination of monotheism:

Theologians there are, who nourished in certain sects, seek the truth of nature in all her specific natural forms in which they see the eternal essence, the specific substantial perpetuator of the eternal generation and mutation of things, which are called after their founders and builders and above them presides the ††† God of gods...††††† This truth is sought as a thing inaccessible, as an object not to be objectized, incomprehensible” (Giordano Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 65).

These theologians are regarded by Bruno as *a priori* unsuccessful in their pursuit of the divine because their job to access this deity depends on that they should not actually find it (and be out of a job). Bruno doesn’t identify these “certain sects” ; however, given that Bruno’s works contain many instances of his “long-standing anti-Christian polemic” (Gatti, *Essays on Giordano Bruno*, 256), it is probable, based on the word “founders” that here he intends to target the revealed religions, particularly Christianity. Bruno then contrasts Actaeon’s (the Heroic Lover’s) successful materialist approach with the unsuccessful approach of the religions which do not have material or nature as their deity. The ideas of contemporary scholar Grace Jantzen, who argues for pantheism (as Bruno did) can make us more deeply understand the structural relationships involved here and one reason why the goddess Diana, a female deity, was chosen by Bruno to symbolize the material world:

Beginning in the late 1990s, Jantzen began to attribute all the oppressive dualisms structuring Western philosophy to the binary opposition between a disembodied God and ‘the physical universe’. As she reminds us, the ontological distinction between God and creation does not merely separate the two terms; rather, it establishes the absolute supremacy of the former over the latter. In turn, this logic of mastery secures the rule of

everything associated with this God over everything associated with the material world. Again then, spirit, masculinity, reason, light, and humanity become unconditionally privileged over matter, femininity, passion, darkness, and animal-vegetal-minerality (Rubenstein 10).

Actaeon’s transformation is above all, a satisfying plunge into religious and spiritual materiality after living without material spirituality. As I shall show, *The Comedy of Errors* is also about recovering from various religious errors.

Most importantly and significantly, three female characters in *The Comedy of Errors*, recalling the Goddess Diana, are chosen to subtly represent what I shall call “the Divine Feminine”, the material counterpoint to the “disembodied God” of western culture. S. Antipholus’s speech hints at this pantheistic idea with the phrase “earth divine”. Luciana, whose name means “light” recalls the moonlight moment when the Goddess Diana is spotted in *Gli Eroici Furori*. Neither Luciana’s character nor her name are found in the main source material, Plautus’ *Menaechmi*, so Shakespeare intentionally invented her.

The first part of S. Antipholus’ speech concerns dry philosophical themes like errors and teachings, but in the second part a sensuous material, water, appears. Shakespeare tries here to mirror the transformative effects of Diana’s splashing of Actaeon with water by having the poetry also participate in transformation. Suddenly we see romantic and evocative phrases such as “sweet mermaid”, “drown me”, “flood of tears”, “siren”, “silver waves” and “be drowned if she sink”. “Mermaid” and “siren” are both female supernatural creatures associated with water. These female supernatural figures link to the word “god” in “Are you a god?” and create a locus of magical female occult power, corresponding to the Goddess Diana, who was also associated with natural bodies of fresh water such as lakes. The result of S. Antipholus succumbing to this irresistible and beautiful natural force is, like the result of Actaeon’s being devoured

and coming to “understand to such an extent that he becomes of necessity included, absorbed, united”, a totally positive thing: “he gains by death that hath such means to die”.

It is worth noting, as well, that S. Antipholus is seen at the end of Act 2, to be already losing his way, so to speak, like Actaeon in the forest. S. Antipholus’ last lines before his important “Are you a god?” speech dramatize and set up his air of wandering in a “mist” (a watery image). And with words like “heaven” and “hell” it recalls spiritual or religious confusion:

S. Antipholus: Am I in earth, in heaven, or in hell?
 Sleeping or waking, mad or well advis’d?
 Known unto these, and to myself disguis’d?
 I’ll say as they say, and persevere so,
 And in this mist at all adventures go. (2.2.212-214)

In fact, even already in Act 1, S. Antipholus uses a reference to water (“I to the world am like a drop of water, that in the ocean seeks another drop” (I.ii.35-6)) that can be seen, in hindsight, as a foreshadowing of his ‘transformation’ by Luciana.

S. Antipholus has declared his love for Luciana, but it is not until the end of the play that he can declare to her: “What I told you then I hope I shall have leisure to make good, if this be not a dream I see and hear” (5.1.375-7), implying marriage or union. Their romantic love is a metaphor for an eventual or future human spiritual bond with nature and the material world.

However, Syracuse Antipholus and Luciana are not the only happy couples at the end of the play. In the recognition scene, Aemelia and Egeon find each other again and Adriana and Ephesus Antipholus are reunited. All three couples participate symbolically in the same idea — the rebirth of pantheism or paganism —

and their reunions secretly demonstrate humans bonding spiritually again with nature after a long absence of treating nature as though humans are separate from it. Like Actaeon’s transformation, this both symbolizes and prophesizes the end of western dualistic thought.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, the Divine Feminine is symbolized by all the major female characters (Adriana, Luciana, Aemelia) in the play. Moreover, the other two female characters, the Courtesan and the servant Luce, also participate in Shakespeare’s dramatic project to consider, characterize and defend the Divine Feminine and to show her return to the world.

If Luciana represents the future of the Divine Feminine, then Adriana represents the historical Divine Feminine, neglected and forgotten during the Christian era:

Adriana: ... Whilst I at home starve for a merry look:

Hath homely age th’alluring beauty took

From my poor cheek? Then he hath wasted it.

Are my discourses dull? Barren my wit?...

My decayed fair

A sunny look of his would soon repair.

But, too unruly deer, he breaks the pale,

And feeds from home

I know his eye doth homage elsewhere (2.1.88-91, 98-100, 104) (my emphasis)

A “sunny look” is a reference to sun worship and pagan religion. Elizabeth Brunner speculates that Adriana’s question “Hath homely age th’alluring beauty took/ From my poor cheek?” “can also refer to Diana’s Temple, known as the Artemision, reduced to one remaining column by Shakespeare’s age”, and sees

“Barren my wit?” as a reference to “the preemption of female fertility by the Judeo-Christian God who creates without a partner”.² The “unruly deer” refers in general to the fact that deer were sacred to Diana and accompanied her in the forest. Adriana’s husband is like a lost deer who does “homage” (worships) elsewhere.

A little later, Adriana continues in the same vein, this time, however, addressing Syracuse Antipholus, whom she believes to be her husband:

Adriana:

The time was once when thou unurged wouldst vow
That never words were music to thine ear,
That never object pleasing in thine eye,
That never touch well welcome to thy hand,
That never meat sweet-savor'd in thy taste,
Unless I spake, or look'd, or touch'd, or carved to thee.
How comes it now, my husband, O, how comes it,
That thou art thus estranged from thyself?
Thyself I call it, being strange to me,
That, undividable, incorporate,
Am better than thy dear self's better part.
Ah, do not tear away thyself from me!
For know, my love, as easy mayest thou fall
A drop of water in the breaking gulf,
And take unmingled that same drop again,

2 Elizabeth Brunner, “Restoring Goddess Diana: Subtexts of Jealousy in Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*”. Written by Elizabeth Howell Brunner at Cal Poly, 1997, for English 431: Shakespeare Seminar, taught by Professor Steven Marx. Posted online December 1999. <https://elizbrunner.tripod.com/Scholar/GoddessDiana.htm>, 6.

Without addition or diminishing,
As take from me thyself and not me too.
How dearly would it touch thee to the quick,
Shouldst thou but hear I were licentious,
And that this body, consecrate to thee,
By ruffian lust should be contaminate?
....I am possessed of an adulterate blot;
My blood is mingled with the crime of lust:
For if we two play one, and thou play false,
I do digest the poison of thy flesh,
Being strumpeted by thy contagion (2.2.113-133, 140-144)

The words “vow” and “music” and “meat” recall temple rites and ceremonies in the temple of Diana, now in ruins. “Estranged from thyself” represents monotheism’s schism from the material world, so one’s own body and physical existence become an issue. The “drop of water in a breaking gulf” is a reference to Diana, the goddess of lakes and rivers. Finally, the idea of “lust” and the image of a “strumpet” is a reference to the cheapened and exploited natural world under the Christian regime. Bruno uses similar language in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* when he criticizes Christianity for giving people “to understand that.....Nature is a whorish prostitute, that natural law is ribaldry, that Nature and Divinity cannot concur in one and the same good end” (Bruno 255).

The Artemision, the famous Temple of Artemis, was located in Ephesus, the city which is the setting of *The Comedy of Errors*. However, Plautus’ *Menaechmi*, the source material, is set in Epidamnus. Shakespeare therefore deliberately moved the setting, and his appropriation of Bruno’s Actaeon/Diana philosophical anecdote suggests that the Artemision, the Temple of Diana/Artemis, is likely one symbolic reason.

This Temple of Artemis lies in ruins today, but the area was a *temenos* (a sacred domain) dedicated to a local deity who later became associated with Artemis, dating back to the Bronze Age (3300 BCE-1200 BCE). Archaeological records show that a peripteral temple with a clay floor was constructed in the 8th century BCE. After this temple was destroyed by a flood in the 7th century BCE, a larger and more magnificent temple was built. This temple was destroyed by a fire in 356 BCE, and rebuilt starting around 323 BCE. The new temple was slightly smaller than its predecessor though more imposing because it was placed on a higher base. This reconstruction survived for 600 years and appears multiple times in early Christian accounts of Ephesus.

Chapter 19 of the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible is one such “early Christian account of Ephesus”, and one that helps to further reveal Shakespeare’s intentions when he set *The Comedy of Errors* in Ephesus. Ephesus was chosen by the apostle Paul as one of the places where he converted pagan people to Christianity. He stayed in Ephesus from 53-56 AD and wrote The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians there. However, the process of converting the Ephesians was not entirely smooth and 19 Acts tells of a riot that arose in Ephesus when a silversmith named Demetrius became worried about his livelihood making silver shrines for the goddess Diana. He gathered people engaged in making similar temple-related crafts to protest and demonstrate in the streets, with the result that Paul’s safety became threatened:

²³ About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. ²⁴ A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. ²⁵ He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: “You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. ²⁶ And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods

made by human hands are no gods at all. ²⁷ There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

²⁸ When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹ Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together. ³⁰ Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. ³¹ Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.

³² The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. ³³ The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. ³⁴ But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

³⁵ The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? ³⁶ Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. ³⁷ You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. ³⁸ If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. ³⁹ If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. ⁴⁰ As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened

today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.”⁴¹ After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.³

In *The Comedy of Errors* a character named Angelo is a goldsmith, who, like Demetrius, is worried about getting paid for his work. In Angelo’s case, of course, his worry is due to confusion surrounding the mistaken identities of the twins, but underneath, similar issues are at stake: the presence of the Goddess (togetherness of the couples) or not. Demetrius makes silver shrines, but Angelo has crafted a gold chain, which is round and golden like the sun and can also be considered a sort of religious shrine (secretively) as it symbolizes the sun. Angelo does, in fact, end up getting paid, reversing the fate of Demetrius, who does not get any satisfaction from the “city clerk” who “dismissed the assembly”.

There are so many other specific elements in 19 Acts that are echoed but reversed or overturned in *The Comedy of Errors*, that it is probable that Shakespeare adopted these elements with an audacious and specific purpose in mind: to dismiss Christianity, invite back the Goddess Diana, and symbolically nullify Paul’s missionary efforts. For example, Shakespeare’s play echoes the “confusion” and “uproar” described in verses 29 and 32, but the confusion in the play is resolved when the Goddess (Aemilia) returns. Also, in 19 Acts of the Apostles 11-20, various exorcisms of “evil spirits” are performed:

¹¹ God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

¹³ Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the

3 <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2019&version=NIV>

name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.”¹⁴ Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.

¹⁵ One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?”¹⁶ Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

¹⁷ When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.¹⁸ Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done.¹⁹ A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.²⁰ In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.⁴

As if to satirize Paul’s biblical exorcisms, in *The Comedy of Errors* a low comic character described as “a conjuring schoolmaster” (a comic foil for “apostle”) named Doctor Pinch (whose name, like Paul’s, also starts with a P) performs a slapstick “exorcism”:

Pinch: Give me your hand and let me feel your pulse.

E. Antipholus: There is my hand and let it feel your ear. [*strikes Pinch*]
(4.4.52-54)

Moreover, 19 Acts 19 explains that those who “practiced sorcery” gave it up and burned their magical books after their conversion by Paul. Correspondingly, *The Comedy of Errors* contains a number of references to “witches”. In fact, the

4 <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2019&version=NIV>

word “witch” appears six times, and the word “sorcerer” appears four times, though there are neither actual witches nor sorcerers in the play. When the male characters are confused by the mistaken identity issues, they blame and suspect witches:

S. Antipholus: They say this town is full of cozenage,
As, nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,
Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,
Soul-killing witches that deform the body ... (1,3.97-100)

S. Dromio: ..that I, amaz'd, ran from her as a witch. (3.2.143)

S. Antipholus: There's none but witches do inhabit here (3.2.156)

The final occasion of the word “witch” at the very end of Act 4 reveals a new and positive attitude toward witches since it occurs in the phrase “turn witch”, foreshadowing the conversion or “turn” back to material spirituality (the return of the Divine Feminine) which is to come in Act 5:

S. Dromio: Faith, stay here this night; they will surely do us no harm: you saw they speak us fair, give us gold: methinks they are such a gentle nation that, but for the mountain of mad flesh that claims marriage of me, I could find in my heart to stay here still and turn witch. (4.4.151-6)

To sum up, witches, exorcism, confusion and a ‘metalsmith worried about getting paid’ are all found in both 19 Acts and *The Comedy of Errors*. It is hard not to conclude that Shakespeare systematically drew these four major elements from 19 Acts and made artistic efforts to systematically overturn, reverse or show

each one in a different light in a creative attempt to counter the Christian conversions undertaken by Paul. In addition, the two inns in the play are called “The Centaur” and “The Phoenix”, creating a supernatural and mythical atmosphere, heralding the return of pagan creatures and ideas, as these two words are repeated twelve times in all. The goddess Diana, merged with Hecate (the Greek goddess of witchcraft), was also the goddess of witches. Diana is therefore strongly associated with witches.

In sum, Shakespeare’s efforts on behalf of paganism are completely sincere, and therefore Grace Tiffany’s convoluted and contorted idea that *The Comedy of Errors* conveys a “Christian message” must be rejected.

Aemelia’s splitting off from Egeon represents the historical loss of the Divine Feminine in the west. In Act 1, Egeon is recounting the story about how he and one twin Antipholus and one twin Dromio were separated from Aemilia and the other twins (when a rock splits the ship they are all traveling on). The Duke urges him to continue his story: “do not break off so, for we may pity, though not pardon thee” (1.1.96-7), and Egeon responds: “O had the gods done so, I had not now worthily term’d them merciless to us!” (1.1.98-9). By using the phrase “the gods” Shakespeare here inserts the suggestion of a vague pagan past (when the Divine Feminine was present). These “gods”, as the word is uttered in Egeon’s clearly Christian era, are not supposed to be taken literally; it is a figurative expression roughly conveying “fate”, but yet it would deliver an “ancient era” aura.

Egeon continues to tell his story:

Egeon: Our helpful ship was splitted in the midst;
So that, in this unjust divorce of us
And in our sight they three were taken up
By fishermen of Corinth, as we thought.
At length, another ship had seiz’d on us,

And knowing whom it was their hap to save,
 Gave healthful welcome to their shipwrack'd guests,
 And would have reft the fishers of their prey,
 Had not their bark been very slow of sail(1.1.103-4,110-116)

The “fishermen of Corinth” symbolize the Christians converting the pagans (Jesus used the phrase “fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19)). These fishermen seize the Divine Feminine (Aemilia) and remove her from humans (Egeon). Corinth is associated with Christianity due to the two letters of Saint Paul in the New Testament, First and Second Corinthians, and is also mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. By using the word “prey”, Shakespeare hints at Christianity as a sort of “predator” religion, virally eliminating the others through its claim to be ‘the one true faith’, whereby converts force other groups to either join the religion or be treated mercilessly as infidels.

Other spiritual words are found in Egeon’s speech: “Her part, poor soul!” (1.1.107); “....sever’d from my bliss” (1.1.118). A bit later, a merchant says to Syracuse Dromio: This very day a Syracusan merchant.../ According to the statute of the town/ Dies ere the sun set in the west (1.2.3-7). This phrase, “the sun set in the west”, is a code for ‘the end of pagan (sun-inspired, nature-inspired) religion in the west’.

In the same scene a little later, we see Syracuse Antipholus involved in a humorous exchange where only the audience knows that the Dromio here is the wrong one. S. Antipholus becomes progressively more and more irate and frustrated. Passing almost unnoticed is his rhetorical, unremarkable interjection: “Now, as I am a Christian”. In its overt context this phrase, like the modern equivalent (also Christian) religious expletive “darn it all” (hinting at the Christian concept of everlasting damnation), has little to do with Christianity and serves instead to mark Syracuse Antipholus’ high level of frustration:

Ephesus Dromio: My charge was but to fetch you from the mart
Home to your house, the Phoenix, sir, to dinner;
My mistress and her sister stays for you.
Syracuse Antipholus: Now, as I am a Christian, answer me,
In what safe place you have bestow'd my money;
Or I shall break that merry scone of yours
That stands on tricks when I am undispos'd:
Where is the thousand marks thou hadst of me? (I.ii.77)

But, besides the overt context, there is also a covert context (the underlying and hidden allegory about the historical loss of pagan religions and the Divine Feminine), and this is the space where “Now as I am a Christian” symbolizes that the historical process of conversion to Christianity is complete. Christianity has become a consolidated powerful political and cultural force and is taken completely for granted. Moreover, S. Antipholus here demonstrates self-righteousness and conviction, although he is of course not discussing everlasting salvation. The dialogue can even be read as Shakespeare’s commentary on the process of Christians converting the Ephesian pagans: the monotheists were haughty and totally sure that they are correct, while the people in Ephesus, who had done nothing wrong, were bewildered and confused.

The idea of a symbolic confrontation between two different religious points of view occurs again when Aemilia appears in Act 5, scene 1, and has become an Abbess. The word “Abbess” implies that Aemilia is a Christian cleric, which, though probably technically true is only a surface plot necessity, and the language, dogma and themes associated with actual Christianity are not to be found in her lines. Symbolically important is that she occupies an elite religious position and commands much power. The first thing we see her do is give shelter in her prio-

ry to S. Antipholus and S. Dromio. Adriana quickly arrives, saying she will “fetch my poor distracted husband hence” (5.1.39) but instead she is thoroughly upbraided by Aemilia for having treated her husband, E. Antipholus, badly:

And thereof came it that the man was mad,
 The venom clamors of a jealous woman
 Poisons more deadly than a mad dog's tooth.
 It seems his sleeps were hindered by thy railing,
 And thereof comes it that his head is light.
 Thou say'st his meat was sauc'd with thy upbraidings:
 Unquiet meals make ill digestions,
 Thereof the raging fire of fever bred,
 And what's a fever but a fit of madness?
 Thou say'st his sports were hind'ed by thy brawls:
 Sweet recreation barr'd, what doth ensue
 But moody and dull melancholy,
 Kinsman to grim and comfortless despair,
 And at her heels a huge infectious troop
 Of pale distemperatures and foes to life? (5.1.68-82)

It's a very interesting moment, especially since both Aemilia and Adriana are associated with the Divine Feminine. (Aemilia also represents an associated wisdom people will gain, enabling them to reflect and learn from history.) The covert message is Shakespeare's critique of the old pagan religions for cruelties such as human sacrifice; “his meat was sauc'd with thy upbraidings”.⁵ Also, old pagan religions intentionally intimidated people by deploying massive statues and temples: “at her heels a huge infectious troop”. Shakespeare therefore criticizes not only Christianity but also large-scale organized institutional paganism, (for example,

the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus), that may have caused a social and political atmosphere of strife, intimidation, corruption and alienation, that not only led to Christianity but also did not differ from it in some crucial (and lamentable) ways. The “errors” in the title of the play refers not only to Christianity but also to the institutional/politically-connected paganism preceding Christianity which was responsible for abuses that alienated people.

And Shakespeare seeks, or proposes, a third way, which is revealed when Aemilia, the wisdom of reflection, brings S. Antipholus and S. Dromio out to greet their identical twins:

Aemilia: Most mighty Duke, behold a man much wrong'd.

Adriana: I see two husbands, or my eyes deceive me.

Duke: One of these men is genius to the other: And so of these, which is the natural man, and which the spirit? Who deciphers them?

S. Dromio: I, sir, am Dromio, command him away.

E. Dromio: I, sir, am Dromio, pray let me stay.

S. Antipholus: Egeon art thou not? Or else his ghost?

S. Dromio: O my old master, who hath bound him here?

Aemilia: Whoever bound him, I will loose his bonds,
And gain a husband by his liberty ... (V.i.331-341)

Numinous words like “genius” (attendant spirit), “pray”, “ghost” and “spirit” show the direction of the new spirituality that Shakespeare proposes. Aemilia’s promise “I will loose his bonds” seems to symbolically indicate an

5 The topic of human sacrifice comes up in various classical works which Shakespeare would have had access to. See Farron, S. “AENEAS’ HUMAN SACRIFICE.” *Acta Classica*, vol. 28, Classical Association of South Africa, 1985, pp. 21-33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24591887>.

atmosphere of new spiritual freedom.

Aemilia's words "gain a husband", recombining the original masculine (Egeon) and original feminine (Aemilia), shows the return of the Divine Feminine, which is the inclusion of other-than-human materials, animals, plants, nature, the planet, stars, sun, moon, and so on, in the spiritual world, together with humans. The Duke soon pardons Egeon, further symbolizing mankind's new liberty.

Aemilia then tells her side of the story about how she was separated from Egeon:

Aemilia: By men of Epidamium he and I,
And the twin Dromio, all were taken up;
But by and by rude fishermen of Corinth
By force took Dromio and my son from them ... (5.1.350-353)

Just as Egeon described "fishermen of Corinth", which is to say Christians, in a negative light in Act 1, Aemilia's calling them "rude fishermen of Corinth" underscores their aggressive tactics. But to really understand the "rude fishermen", we need to return to Aemilia's phrase "I will loose his bonds". What sort of bonds, exactly, is she talking about? Aemilia's critiques of both the "rude fishermen" and her earlier scolding of Adriana ("venom clamors of a jealous woman") mean that both Christian and pagan religion alike are put in the same basket: both were used to martial forces and increase centralized political power.⁶ Perhaps there is not much distinction between them in Shakespeare's eyes: both religions were handy political tools. If huge and expensive statues of a goddess, such as was seen in the Temple of Artemis, were used to make people cower and obey, then how much more efficiently, inexpensively (at first) and effectively an invisible god could be used for a similar purpose. The famous tale

“The Emperor’s New Clothes” develops the theme along secular lines.⁷

But yet Shakespeare insists that Egeon is a “man much wrong’d”. How can Shakespeare excuse Egeon, the original generation to start this harrowing cycle of escalating power-mongering, intimidation and the martialing of ever larger populations and the harnessing of spirituality by using ever more terrifying supernatural threats and myths in order to gain, establish and maintain legitimacy? Simply put, this is game theory, and the people, societies, leaders and so forth in this game are locked into competition or “bound” to use more consolidating strategies, until declining material circumstances release them, to finally experience spirituality that is not tied to the claims and needs of the powerful, whoever they may be.

In Act 2, the important speech of Luciana’s is often seen as evoking Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians 5:22-23 (“Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord./ For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the head of the Church”⁸). But, though undoubtedly Shakespeare was borrowing from Ephesians 5, Luciana’s speech is longer and more intricate and makes use of images from the natural world. In particular, she uses both the words “fish” and the word “bound”:

6 In *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (1988), Joseph Tainter writes: “Complex societies are focused on a centerthe symbolic source of the framework of societyThe center partakes of the nature of the sacred. In this sense, every complex society has an official religionthe sacred aura of the center never disappears, not even in contemporary secular governments. Astute politician have always exploited this fact. It is a critical element in the maintenance of legitimacy” (27-28). Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

7 The fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes” famously illustrates the principle of the power of the invisible and nonmaterial when combined by hierarchical social/political forces.

8 <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians%205%3A22-33&version=KJV>

Luciana: Why, headstrong liberty is lash'd with woe.
 There's nothing situate under heaven's eye
 But hath his bound, in earth, in sea, in sky:
 The beasts, the fishes, and the winged fowls,
 Are their males' subjects and at their controls:
 Men, more divine, the masters of all these,
 Lords of the wide world and wild watery seas,
 Indued with intellectual sense and souls,
 Of more preeminence than fish and fowls,
 Are masters to their females, and their lords:
 Then let your will attend on their accords. (2.1.15-25)

Although Luciana appears to be justifying the patriarchal hierarchical power structure, she is doing here so from a position which, partly through its resonance to Ephesians 5: 22-23 symbolizes the historical nadir of spiritual feminine power, and her speech reflects her weakness: “men, more divine, the masters”. The word “fish”/“fishes” appearing twice represents the popularity of Christianity at that point in time. Shakespeare’s play ambitiously enacts an arc of western history he envisions, from the past loss of the Divine Feminine to its future return, and Luciana’s speech here corresponds to Shakespeare’s own very Christian era. However, she also represents the ‘future’ of the Divine Feminine, and here, even before S. Antipholus asks her “Are you a god?” she has incipient power, indicated by her focus on the natural world, the goddess Diana’s sacred realm: “the beasts, the fishes and the winged fowls”, as Brunner points out (6). Moreover, “There’s nothing situate in heaven’s eye/ But hath his bound in earth, in sea, in sky” includes the word “bound” to mean “limits” which hints at the material limits of “earth” for humans. In Act Five, Aemilia, as we saw, asks “whoever bound him? I will loose his bonds”. The material limits (roughly corresponding to “plan-

etary boundaries”⁹ today) will be reached and the “bounds” (boundaries or limits) will have been found, so the “bonds” tying people together in patriarchal hierarchies would then be loosened, predicts Shakespeare.

Luce, Adriana’s servant and the Courtesan both also take on aspects of the material goddess. Luce is said by S. Dromio to be “spherical, like a globe” (3.2.114); “I could find countries in her” (3.2.115)..... France is “in her forehead, arm’dmaking war against her heir” (3.2.123-4). The material world itself is alive in the concept of the Divine Feminine.

Furthermore, the Courtesan is a polite and well-mannered woman. However, S. Antipholus, obviously fearing female sexuality as it is filtered through Christianity (where Eve is tempted by Satan and then tempts Adam) accosts her immediately with the words, “Sathan, avoid, I charge thee, tempt me not” (4.2.48). Shakespeare here challenges his audience to question why female sexuality and body materiality are automatically singled out unfairly for special scrutiny and disapproval by Christians. Should morality really be based on defining woman, sexuality, the body, material and by implication “nature” as evil or corrupt and should women be ashamed, hide themselves out of what is called by paid clerics whose jobs are at stake “modesty”, and so forth? And if so, what happens to the world if the material nature is treated in such a ruthless and unbalanced manner?

In Act 5, truly puzzled by the mistaken identities, the Duke says, “I think you all have drunk from Circe’s cup” (5.1.271). Circe was, of course, a witch, so this can be read as another reference to sorcery. Yet it is also more specific because Circe famously used her cup to serve magical food and wine to men that turned them into animals. So the meaning here may have an echo of “transformation” of these human characters in *The Comedy of Errors* into something else, materi-

9 <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>

al beings with a new outlook, as Actaeon was turned into a stag by Diana. The characters in the play are about to realize their own radical transformation, meet those they haven't seen for a long time, get pardoned in the case of Egeon, and most of all, gain understanding about how all their problems came about. This understanding will radically transform them.

In the final lines of the play, Syracuse Dromio and Ephesus Dromio are debating about who should walk behind the other (each wants to show deference). E. Dromio then takes S. Dromio by the hand;

Ephesus Dromio: Nay then thus:

We came into the world like brother and brother;

And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another. (5.1.423-424)

At some point, privilege and power-mongering based on hierarchical patriarchal structures would disappear (due to declining material circumstances), and be replaced says Shakespeare, by new kinds of less coercive social relations in the face of common material difficulties (material issues arising from systemic ecological and environmental crises stemming from systemic lack of sensitive and caring attention to the material/natural world). These are problems which Bruno also predicts in allegorical forms, extrapolating from what he saw in Europe in the 1500s, in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* (Bruno 241). In fact, the main point of *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* is that Jove, symbolizing the material world of the west, has become aged, infirm, sickly and nearing death.

Such a new outlook constitutes a refutation of the claims of western dualism and therefore can be said to be a radically new reframing of reality, which, though it may be secular, can still be called the "Divine Feminine", the idea that the material world enjoys an *a priori* necessity, or is primary on some level, even simply scientifically speaking. (For example, plankton in the ocean are responsible for a

large percentage of our oxygen. If the oceans die from climate change and acidification, the plankton will cease to provide oxygen, causing great calamity for all oxygen-breathing creatures on our planet). *The Comedy of Errors* makes use of Bruno’s ideas by allegorically depicting female characters as elements of the historical past (Adriana) and the future (Luciana) of more general western material spirituality (Aemilia). The recognition scene is meant to parallel our own recognition of *The Comedy of Errors* as a depiction of ourselves and the return of our own newly wise Divine Feminine.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare, becoming here a sort of historian of religion, tries to view and portray (in allegory) western religious history and transitions with a sweeping and critical eye. And moreover, based on his vision, he proposes a future idea where we’ll all “turn witch”: we’ll live in spiritual harmony with material nature (because we must). He seems to imply that this might be partly the result of some sort of material shift, where resources become quite scarce and the material world is finally given its due.

References

Brunner, Elizabeth. “Restoring Goddess Diana: Subtexts of Jealousy in Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*”. Written by Elizabeth Howell Brunner at Cal Poly, 1997, for English 431: Shakespeare Seminar, taught by Professor Steven Marx. Posted online December 1999. <https://elizbrunner.tripod.com/Scholar/GoddessDiana.htm>

Bruno, Giordano. *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast, Translated and with an Introduction by Arthur D. Imerti*. Lincoln, NE and London: U. of Nebraska Press. 2004.

10 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-ocean-is-running-out-of-breath-scientists-warn/>

Bruno, Giordano. *The Heroic Enthusiasts*. London: Bernard Quaritch. 1889.

Translated by L. Williams. (Nabu Public Domain Reprints).

Evans, Levin et. al. eds. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1974.

Gatti, Hilary. *Essays on Giordano Bruno*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2011.

Gatti, Hilary. *The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge*. London and NY: Routledge. 1989.

Parker, Patricia. "Shakespeare and the Bible: 'The Comedy of Errors.'" *Recherches Semiotiques*, vol. 13. (1993). 47-72.

Rubenstein, Mary-Jane. *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds Monsters*. NY: Columbia University Press. 2018.

Tiffany, Grace. "Paganism and Reform in Shakespeare's Plays." *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 7. Article no. 214. (Jul. 2018). <https://doi:10.3390/rel9070214>.