THE ALIENATING POWER OF THE URBAN SPACE IN THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

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ABSTRACT

Concomitant with the sense of an impending chaos inside the urban space in The Comedy of Errors is the problem of alienated selfhood in its struggle for recognition. It seems that Shakespeare has precociously investigated the modern issue of alienation inside the chaotic metropolis of Ephesus.

The action of the play is initiated within a hegemonic social order which compels an inspection of the repressive power of the city as a unanimously acknowledged source of truth. I am taking the word truth the way Nietzsche derides it in his book Thus Spoke Zarathustra.

Nietzsche departs from the monumental sense of truth embodied in such social institutions as the church, the court, etc. into truth as an exclusive property of the self. He aims at a rehabilitation of the individual away from the populace –rabble, he calls it—thanks to the critical energy of the dissenting mind:

> Could you conceive a God? - But let this mean Will to Truth to you, that everything be transformed into the humanly conceivable, the humanly visible, the humanly sensible! Your own discernment shall you follow out to the end! (*Zarathustra*, 70)

Contrary to its first impression as a matter of laughter, Shakespeare's comedy can be acknowledged as a dramatic pretext for the implementation of such revolutionary hypotheses as of the self against his society. Even though the revolution is never a full-fledged process in The *Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare manages to accentuate his philosophical tribute of self-will as man's only savior from the hegemonic rites and customs of Ephesus whose civic and stately authority hardly extends beyond its Christian history.

KEYWORDS: City, ritualization, ideology, coercion, monumental history, historical sense, self-will

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his introduction to *William Shakespeare's Comedies* (2009), Harold Bloom recognizes The Comedy of Errors immediately as a farce (1). However, in an article entitled "*The Comedy of Errors*," from Shakespeare: *The Invention of the Human* (1998), Harold Bloom quotes Martine Van Elke who admits to an extant "competition" between two distinct energies within the Comedy of Errors –namely the farce and the romance—a competition which ultimately tilts the balance (in Van Elke's optic) in favor of the romance. Here is Harold Bloom accounting for Martine Van Elke:

> The result of this competition with the play is that a Christianized version of romance ultimately prevails by suppressing the absurdities, confusions, and errors of farce. (Bloom, *The Comedy of Errors*, 199)

Van Elke conceives of the Christian identity of the city of Ephesus as a subtext to the regain of the lost identities of the twin brothers and their respective servants. In this sense, Martin Van Elke seems to consider Christianity in *The Comedy of Errors* as a redeemer to an otherwise senseless plot. The limitedness of her point of view lies in that it hardly allows for a reflection on the subjectivity of the characters outside the Christian context of the city of Ephesus.

My counter-argument is that the farce is nothing but Shakespeare's deliberate derision of the divine. I am hypothesizing that the plot of confused identities in The Comedy of Errors is Shakespeare's expedient to transmit his negative attitude towards religion. Shakespeare is telling us that the identity of Ephesus as a Christian metropolis is at the very origin of the dubious atmosphere –full of confusion, mutual incrimination, mistrust, and ignorance— governing its social relationships. This is the idea of Richard Dutton as it occurs in his article "The Comedy of Errors and The Calumny of Apelles: An Exercise in Source Study" (qtd. in Bloom, The Comedy of Errors, 201) where he observes religion as the other facet of sorcery, slander, etc. within the city of Ephesus.

This article is illuminated by my realization of the very limitedness of an interpretation of The Comedy of Errors which does not heed the disfiguring power of the city of Ephesus. To find a way out of the maze of the urban space as an ideological construct is the very concern of this paper. I hereby attempt to deconstruct the "reality" of the city of Ephesus into a prefiguration of the Nietzschean "will to power" against the malaise accompanying the ritualization of city life.

Research Objectives

My investigation begins as a sharp criticism of the built-in "truth" constructed inside the urban space to end up acknowledging the more comforting territory of self-will. The Comedy of Errors stages the tug of war between two antagonistic forces: that of the oppressive city order on the one hand and the alienated self on the other. This duel will be revealed in my article as a miniature of the larger quarrel between the repressive forces of monumental history which erase the originality of the self by legitimating their authority as the truth (on the one hand) and self-will as the impetus to counter the

tide which has hitherto shaped the individual as nothing more than an obeying and faceless subject (on the other).

Typical of the genre of the comedy is how it suspends skepticism (at least for a while) by keeping us on the lookout for a merry conclusion to its plot. Conventionally, the closure of the comedy is staged within the family as the most socially-sanctified picture of human concord. However, I deliberately intend to drift off my interpretation of The Comedy of Errors from the soucis of social order into a metaphor of the aesthetic power of the text as a vehicle to the deeper philosophical commitment of the dramatist. In so doing, Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors will be possibly read as a wry grin to the mainstream conception of the comic into the more empowering energy of self-will.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is an attempt to answer the following questions:
1- What relationship is there between urban hegemony and a monumental sense of history in The Comedy of Errors?
2- To what extent has Shakespeare departed from the category of farce in The Comedy of Errors?
3- What cultural performance –if any—motivates the overlay of The Comedy of Errors as a plot of mistaken identities?

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Religious mapping of selfhood

Before setting up the malentendu about the mistaken identities of the Antipholi, the play opens with the grim portrait of Egeon: the merchant who finds himself victim of a political crisis between the two cities of Ephesus and Syracuse. Egeon has unwittingly trespassed on the maritime frontiers between the two Roman cities and will have to suffer the ensuing coercion of the city of Ephesus. We gradually come to grips with the power of the city as what purports to impose order while it creates nothing but chaos. It is precisely the chaos accompanying the crippling of people's freedom of choice (precisely the freedom of travel and trade). "Merchant of Syracuse, plead no more. / I am not partial to infringe our laws": these are the terms wherewith Solinus, the Ephesian clerk, stigmatizes Egeon as an outcast: also as a criminal. The nominal group "Merchant of Syracuse" is an instance of the discriminating power wielded by the city of Ephesus in how it pushes to its very margins anyone exterior to its territorial division, casting them out as "seditious countrymen".

The first act in the play is also much telling about the monumental aspect of city life in Ephesus. In one of his Unfashionable Meditations entitled: On the Use and Abuse of History for Life (1873), Nietzsche illuminates us on how society has its idiosyncratic methods of subduing the populace to its authority. Among those methods we find customs and traditions which are fossilized in history in order

to persist: that is to outlive their own subjects. Nietzsche uses irony to lay out the monumental facet of culture in its very remoteness from the things that seem vital to its subjects:

> There is a degree of insomnia, of rumination, of the historical sense, through which living comes to harm and finally is destroyed, whether it is a person or a people or a culture. (*Use and Abuse,* 4)

Nietzsche speaks of forgetting (ibid) as a necessary paradox to regenerate culture: that is by saving it from the grips of conformism. According to him, forgetting is what enables man to destroy for the sake of rebuilding. Forgetting is thus a blissful phase where man achieves liberation from the burden of the past as an oppressive legacy. This is the major step towards what Nietzsche describes as the "historical sense" (Use, 5) or Wirkliche Historie. By the last-mentioned notion, Nietzsche refers to history as that part of man's conscience which deliberately takes leave of the past and treats it beyond the habit of obedience and reverence.

The same is uncannily true of The Comedy of Errors which unfolds since its very beginning a tension between the individual (Egeon) and his unwelcoming neighbor city: Ephesus. To be more accurate, one can establish a comparison between Ephesus and Syracuse on the grounds that the former takes its renown from its religious spirit –the legend of Saint Paul—while the other is confined within the earthly boundaries of commerce. We thus approach the alienating power of the city of Ephesus in its religious fetishism. Christianity is not merely a credo which binds together people of the same nation. The regional law of the city of Ephesus has the power of transforming religion into an expedient for the exclusion of the Other as alien, seditious and barbaric: also – and more alarmingly—into a pretext to exterminate them at once: "Therefore by law thou are condemned to die."

In an article entitled "Shakespeare's idea of history", A. L. Morton alludes to the malign purpose of Renaissance chronicles in their "tacit acknowledgement that history has lessons also for the people – if only at the lowest level—to be content and to avoid sedition and tumult" (Morton, 4). Renaissance chronicles persisted by hypnotizing the people into blind reverence of their past as the essence of national identity. A shrieking example of how the city hypnotizes its people (and strangers alike) is its reliance on the occult. The prevalence of magic in Ephesus reveals the way city life has been ritualized according to an agreed set of rules and customs. In an article entitled "Language, Magic, the Dromios, and The Comedy of Errors", Kent Cartwright speaks of the appearance of Dr. Pinch beyond a theatrical expedient into something of an ideological artifact:

> He carries onto the stage, an aura slightly disturbing, […] emanat[ing] not from his gaunt frame or "saffron face"; it derives, rather, from the way that Dr. Pinch becomes the physical manifestation of an idea, an anxiety, and an obsession (IV. iv). In him, the play's imaginings of demonic possession have finally called forth their bizarre material counterpart. Dr. Pinch thus enters the action from a realm more of fantasy than of

narrative, and he stands for the fear that what one utters—by its own mere agency—might just turn into reality.
(qtd. in Bloom, *William Shakespeare: Comedies*, 127)

The way Pinch is described itemizes the gruesome and menacing profile typical of figures of authority in the city of Ephesus: "A living dead man," and "a conjurer" (V. i). Cartwright argues that the element of magic in The Comedy of Errors is legitimized by the authority of the city of Ephesus which gives a vesture of truth to what is elsewhere deemed as sorcery, charlatanry, etc:

> The play delves beyond its own overt empiricism toward a substructure of fantasy and enchantment that conveys, paradoxically, a sense of the "real." (ibid, 128)

Cartwright speaks of "sympathetic agency" (ibid, 129) as the transfer of the same obsession with witchcraft which has had its bearing on the minds and souls of the townsmen of Ephesus as of strangers. Sympathetic agency is felt among them in how they share the same affliction with witchcraft. This is the thought shared by the couple of strangers –Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse—whose "sympathetic agency" compels them to rush towards the hypothesis of witchcraft as the most probable interpretation to their current plight which made them "wander in illusions" (IV, 3).

However, Cartwright also portrays the city of Ephesus in terms of two energies contending for power: reason on the one hand and the prevailing charlatanry on the other. He quotes Egeon's last declaration that his eyes and ears "cannot err" (V, 1) (128). Egeon's recourse to his sense perception –therefore to empiricism as a reliable source of truth—is a counterforce to the orphic truths typical of the city of Ephesus. We are growingly aware of an extant crisis between reality and truth within the city of Ephesus: also between the occult (as a tool of monumental history) and empiricism as the reflection of the skeptic mind.

Against the ritualization of history through sacred texts, Morton relates to the Nietzschean summon of the individual who should have the stunt of thrusting himself into the foreground of history as "something more than sermons on the duty of obedience" (Morton, 4). This historical stunt will be inextricably bound up with tension as much as the joy of daring to question the religious overlay of history. Tension and joy are therefore the twin poles between which historical reflection keeps moving. Solinus' decision that Egeon shall be executed is the symbolic culmination of a monumental sense of history which conditions the life of men according to a pre-established socio-political system only to let them disappear from history –without resistance—as nothing beyond their own bodies.

Beyond the comic
In *The Theater and its Double*, Antonin Artaud helps us realize Shakespeare's most revolutionary idea that theater should be edified according to a regular movement of dialectics, denying the archaic

Christian thought of one origin (qtd. in Auslander, 19). Shakespeare knew this perfectly well and explicitly made his comedy depart from the tradition by extending it into an explanatory trope for the essentially divided nature of mankind:

> When tension remains very high, when death and comedy, violence and derision, anxiety and its resolution are present at the same time because of inner and simultaneous contradictions or because of constant shifting between them, one has the very distinctive pleasure of the grotesque […] The skillful portrayer of the grotesque is the one who knows how to project simultaneously the signs of danger and of derision. The pleasure of the spectator is, then, the result of a sometimes-painful tension. (qtd. in Auslander, 245)

The comic effect transpiring from The Comedy of Errors is far from what Aristotle berates as the imitation of "characters of a lower type" (Poetics, V. 4, 21). What we feel instead is absurdism in embryo through the confused identities of the Antipholus brothers. Shakespeare did not seek, for example, to arouse laughter in us by emulating the imperfections in the sight of a man from the laity only in his alienation from the city of Ephesus. Behind the locomotion of the body on the scene (in its visible alienation), Shakespeare invites us to an exploration of a hinterland of human unrest which has an independent life on its own. This hinterland is human thought as what actually underlies the world of action.

The absurd arises from Shakespeare's very antagonism to Aristotle's theory about comedy as it occurs in these lines from The Poetics:

> Comedy is […] an imitation of characters of a lower type –not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain. (*Poetics*, V. 4, 21)

Aristotle clearly regarded as comic everything that stirs laughter while it spares pain both to the protagonist as much as the recipient. What is "ludicrous" about the Antipholus brothers is that the order of the city of Ephesus is actually "painful" and "destructive". In this context I can make reference to Henri Bergson who, in theorizing about laughter, finds one of its origins in the obstinacy of a character who persists in one single thought or principle. This, according to Bergson, is enough cause for an outburst of laughter to come out, especially that the obstinacy of a man is nothing milder than a negative force reducing him to the state of a machine or automaton. Applying an Aristotelian interpretation to the Dromios as comic characters is likely to obstruct our larger review of the very historical struggle beneath the surface level of the comic. I suggest that the confusion of identities

between masters and bondmen –that is, between the plebeian Dromio twins and the noble Antipholi— is nothing but a prefiguration of the obsessive effect of the comic in its Bergsonian sense:

> The comic character always errs through obstinacy of mind or of disposition, through absentmindedness, in short, through automatism. At the root of the comic there is a sort of rigidity which compels its victims to keep strictly to one path, to follow it straight along, to shut their ears and refuse to listen […] A CHARACTER FOLLOWING UP HIS ONE IDEA[1], and continually recurring to it in spite of incessant interruptions. (Bergson, 56 a-b)

Before I proceed any further, I have to make it clear that the same idea occurs in a book by Martin Puchner, titled *The Drama of Ideas*, wherein constant references to Bergson surprise us with the claim that the comic is a reflection of a deeper philosophical inquiry. Much of the singularity of Puchner's point lies in his idea about obsession with abstracts which drops the comedy headlong into the risible on account of the character's blind mania for reunion typical of the genre of the comedy:

> [Bergson] singled out as a surefire subject for comedy any character in the grip of an idea: comedy happens when a fixed idea determines a character's actions, turning complex individuals into puppets controlled by an abstract principle, thus making them incapable of reacting to changing circumstances. (Puchner, 16)

This is how Puchner accounts for the comic in light of man's transformation into a *cog* (I am borrowing the term from Jan Kott) due to his loss of thought for one single, self-induced idea. I may add that the stubbornness in a man's condition is another possibility for laughter away from the valence observed by Aristotle between the comic and the socially-disadvantageous. Man becomes laughable –in the Bergsonian logic—when he ceases to give us the distinct impression of a living soul: of one able (like a chameleon) to color himself according to the vicissitudes of life. It is particularly this lack of versatility which validates Bergson's philosophy about the comical aspect in the human condition. Bergson begins his treatise by telling us that the comic is essentially human: "The first point to which attention should be called", says Bergson, "is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN […] You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression" (Bergson, 4a).

The fixation in the comic genre on one single idea has been aptly prefigured in the confusion emanating from the quest for identity throughout Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. The comic is also found as what transcends the drama into the metaphysical fixation of the dramatis personae –consciously or unconsciously—on the power of the city in how it systematizes their psycho- behavioral map.

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[1] Bergson's emphasis: not mine.

From theatrical performance to philosophical performance

The religious overtone in *The Comedy of Errors* says much about the repressive power of the Renaissance urban space. Antipholus of Syracuse is estranged from the city of Ephesus precisely because it is Christian. He seems to have understood that anyone who does not belong to Ephesus will fall easy prey to the oppression of its inhabitants mainly on the ground of the city high-tempered religious passion. In these terms, we understand the coercive power of the Church in Ephesus which emphasizes the demarcation between self and other. However, notwithstanding its compelling Christian context, the play resists its interpretation as a legitimation of the religious hegemony.

The drama is shot through with religious symbols to allow for the engaging skepticism about religion allegedly as the sole reason to man's misfortune. Focusing on the urban space in its religious side alone is ironically a reiteration of the very repressive power of religion. I opine that Shakespeare's point behind the setting of the play in Ephesus bypasses the religious dimension of the city into something deeper.

I suggest that the comedy has the quality of a relentless attempt to rebuild what has been destroyed by the urban system. Part of the destructive impetus of the city lies in religion; however, the twin characters testify to other factors to their alienation beyond religion. The brothers, ignorant of each other's presence in the same town, do have the same appearance and the same name; they also share the very same plight of alienation. It is therefore the urban space (above all) that causes the trouble of conflating the two distinct identities of the twin brothers and of their respective servants.

Douglas L. Peterson tells us that—by contrast to the stressful conflict of identities of the Antipholi inside the urban space—we are perpetually given solace by the expectation of a happy ending, typical of the genre of the comedy:

> We are free as members of the audience to laugh at situations which the characters find utterly incomprehensible and even frustrating because we are in on the fun. The playmaker has taken us into his confidence, "distancing" us from those situations by sharing with us his perspective […] because we know they are only temporary and will be happily resolved for all. (Peterson, 184)

Peterson admits the comic effect created by conflated identities as a matter for laughter. I think that the repressing authority of the urban space is a deeper concern than laughter. In this sense, I align more with Harold Bloom than with Douglas L. Peterson as shall be elucidated right away.

Harold Bloom tells us that a typical paradox in *The Comedy of Errors* is that its Christian background hardly makes it a Christian parable. Harold Bloom therefore construes Christianity in *The Comedy of Errors* in its negative power: the journey of self-discovery by Antipholus of Syracuse is nothing but a sketch of perpetual losses with hardly any resolution. His very contemplation: "I will go lose myself,

/ And wander up and down to view the city" reveals the city essentially as a repressive force which hardly provides Antipholus with any answer to his quest for self-identity. Christianity is bereft of its alleged power of salvation and illumination: which strikes a bold note of Shakespeare's irony at religion as a so called source of self-knowledge. "Our earth's wonder, more than earth divine": these are the words wherewith Antipholus of Syracuse entreats Luciana –sister-in-law to his brother—at the end of the play, with an obvious yearning for self-knowledge beyond the religious subtext typical of city life:

> 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?

Antipholus' quest for self insists on denying the religious influence thanks to the more comforting presence of fellow humans. Antipholus is able to acknowledge his weaknesses with no need for a religious epiphany to relieve his doubt. We also notice in his entreaty of Luciana a clear revulsion from the address to the Christian deity. Antipholus of Syracuse is therefore able to find in Luciana –the female partner—a potential source of truth about his identity. Also, we discover something quite special in his sensitivity to the tears of women. The potential sexual rapport between Luciana and Antipholus –notwithstanding its socially forbidden implications—is another testimony to the need to reshape the idea of the human against the stifling will of its urban order which finds legitimation in religion more than anything else.

Conflation of identities occurs between the two brothers: namely Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus. Ignorant of the presence of each other in the same town, each of the two brothers undergoes the disconcerting experience of self-loss within the enclosed urban space. Antipholus of Syracuse is surrounded by a network of people who seem to have known him for years: he has a home and a wife, everyone knows his name, and people freely offer him merchandise. The trouble is that he is in Ephesus: a town he has never visited before. However, he finally agrees to abide by the rules of this new urban space and to play along: "I'll say as they say" (II. ii).

As to his twin brother (Antipholus of Ephesus), his home town –where he has a wife, friends and business associates—is suddenly transformed into a nightmare of alienation where he is shut out of his house, arrested for debt, and locked up as a madman. The urban space in his case becomes most distinguishable as a metaphor of socio-political hegemony. The rules of Ephesus which exclude strangers, compel the payment of fines (what Blommaert observes as the "ideational or cognitive component in ideologies" (Blommaert, 163)–added to its coercive institutions such as prison houses—

converge in the implementation of power relations. The room for the mad where Antipholus of Ephesus is imprisoned encapsulates the merciless power of the metropolis wherein family bonds are suddenly blurred and the whole is corroded by the defacing custody of urban laws.

The Comedy of Errors –for its fun and levity—is a helpless counterpoise to the repressive authority of urban life. The First Merchant, (serving as a kind of prologue), announces the setting in terms of the very coercive power typical of the city:

> Anon I'm sure the Duke himself in person
> Comes this way to the melancholy vale,
> The place of death and sorry execution,
> Behind the ditches of the abbey here.
> (V. i. 119–28)

Similarly, the sight of Egeon manacled and brought slowly into the square of the city to be executed is a counter-argument to the conception of comedy as a matter of joy and laughter. Douglas Peterson tells us that this scene puts into question the efficacy of the comic genre in the face of man's more compelling plight with death in the midst of an autocratic urban environment. However, Douglas' claim should not cancel out his very first interpretation: that the comic is an aesthetic attempt at least to alleviate –if not to prevent—the deep thoughtfulness about men's misery in town and elsewhere. One conclusion we can reach about the intersection of such opposites inside the same text is that the comedy is never aloof from man's existential preoccupation with such concerns as self and other, tyranny and justice, nature and culture, etc.

Contrary to the fear of an imminent execution, we see in the story of Egeon a happy transition from the threat of death to the serenity of family union. The family emerges as an additional counter-force to the arbitrary and despotic laws of urban life. The comedy is what transforms the city from a "place of death and sorry execution" into a setting for a "new nativity", says Peterson (ibid). We may admit for a moment that the authenticity of the comedy lies in its ability to return to the family as a source of assurance. Actually, the family is what gives Egeon solace in time of despair and we see in his reunion with his wife and sons an image of human bliss and a proof on how man can possibly unmake the order of the city thanks to his attachment to more civilized forms of city life: namely the contract of marriage and the begetting of children which ultimately introduce order into the chaotic city life.

To push this logic an inch further, we can adduce the fact that man's plight with his social system can be always alleviated by the Nietzschean invitation to review anything preconceived as a fixity. The urban rule being one of such fixities: it propels us into a departure from conformism into the reflexive space of the critical mind of the individual. *The Comedy of Errors* ultimately purveys an instance of Shakespeare's aesthetic experimentation with social crises beyond the concern for laughter.

CONCLUSION

Beyond its in-built structure as a farce, *The Comedy of Errors* is a caricature of such social stigmas as *stranger*, *lost*, *mad*, etc. The dramatization of man's mishaps within the urban context is enough of a fulcrum for the examination of the worth of comedy away from the self-pleasure arisen by the sight of men's convolutions onstage. Indeed, body language –as it is insinuated in *The Comedy of Errors*— resists the grotesque for it immediately transcends the drama into the more ennobling philosophical inquiry about the age-long question of man's position in his world. Part of the originality of Shakespeare's stagecraft resides in the way he employs the confusion about the identity of the twin brothers to prefigure Nietzsche's scoff at the resemblance borne by men to one another. This scoff – as it is verbalized by Zarathustra—seems to find roots in Shakespeare's text whereby man needs no mask to hide his identity: actually, no mask will do the job better than man's own countenance:

> Truly, you could wear no better masks, you present-day men, than your own faces! Who could - recognise you! (*Zarathustra*, 97)

This is Zarathustra's invocation to all men who have lost their originality amidst the crowd. The defacing power of human society is the very target of deconstruction for Nietzsche and Shakespeare alike. Society –emblematized by the city—has this power of absorbing the self within the deafening cacophony of its rites and customs to the point that nothing connects the individual to his world any more except for the nostalgia for a collective past. Similarly, the repressive power of the city of Ephesus in *The Comedy of Errors* has the capacity to hash up the voice of its subjects by transforming it unmistakably into a unanimous nod.

Building on Nietzsche's philosophy of history, Michel Foucault speculates on the exercise of archeology –in its philosophical sense—as what can save man from the swamp of the past. Archeology has this promise of canceling out what has long been maintained as the interchangeability of past and present. Excavating a relic (or past belief) and putting it in the limelight is how a Foucauldian genealogist manages to dissect the cultural pathologies typical of monumental history as it transpires from his immediate social environment:

> Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of **oblivion**[2]; its task is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes […]; it is to discover that truth or

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[2] Emphasis mine. The word *oblivion* immediately calls to mind the Nietzschean sense of forgetting the way it occurs in his meditation: *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1873).

being lies not at the root of what we know and what we are but the exteriority of accidents. (Foucault, 374)

Faith in the creative possibilities of the intellect downgrades the monumental profile of Shakespeare's drama. The biggest irony about *The Comedy of Errors* is its merit of reshaping identity beyond family bonds. The play solicits the more attractive question about the autonomy of the individual in his ever-changing universe. "Mine own self's better part"—says Antipholus of Syracuse: prefiguring the Nietzschean *Overman*—is what is capable of generating such autonomy as a bold-faced response to the monumental obsession with the past which has long relegated the individual to the backstage of city life and of history *stricto sensu*.

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