



SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

Shakespeare and Latinidad

Edited by Trevor Boffone and
Carla Della Gatta

EDINBURGH
University Press

Edinburgh University Press is one of the leading university presses in the UK. We publish academic books and journals in our selected subject areas across the humanities and social sciences, combining cutting-edge scholarship with high editorial and production values to produce academic works of lasting importance. For more information visit our website: edinburghuniversitypress.com

© editorial matter and organisation Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta, 2021
© the chapters their several authors, 2021

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12(2f) Jackson's Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in 10.5/13pt Bembo by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire,
and printed and bound in Great Britain.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 8848 8 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 8850 1 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 8851 8 (epub)

The right of Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta to be identified as the Editors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, and the Copyright and Related Rights Regulations 2003 (SI No. 2498).

‘Lleno de Tejanidad’: Staging a Bilingual *Comedy of Errors* in Central Texas

Joe Falocco

The Comedy of Errors has a reputation as a knockabout farce whose plot depends on the confusion arising from a series of improbable coincidences. In this play, two sets of twins (two masters and two servants) are separated at birth. One master and one servant grow up in Ephesus, while the other pair grows up in Syracuse. On a fateful day, the ‘boys from Syracuse’ arrive in Ephesus, and chaos ensues as everyone mistakes them for their counterparts. Yet this farcical play also seriously considers the nature of identity. Its characters find that their sense of self is not defined in monistic isolation. Instead, their identity is contingent on relationships to family members and community. Thus, Antipholus of Syracuse discovers that to know ‘Who he is’ he must first understand ‘Whose he is’, by re-establishing a connection with his long-lost mother and brother.

I had long suspected that these two attributes of *The Comedy of Errors* – its reliance on comedic confusion and its exploration of the quest for identity – would lend themselves to a bilingual adaptation in which the characters from the two cities spoke opposing languages. The resulting linguistic chaos would enhance the play’s farcical tone, while the theme of identity would hopefully resound with bilingual audiences, whose sense of self is often divided between two cultures and two languages. In 2014, I found myself teaching at Texas State University, a Hispanic-Serving Institution whose student body is roughly 40 per cent Latinx (a percentage that mirrors the population of Texas as a whole). It seemed the time had come to pursue this idea further.

My own knowledge of Spanish is imperfect and derives from my ability to speak, read and write Italian. As every speaker of both languages knows, the similarities between the two initially aid in comprehension but eventually cause more problems than they solve due to the high number of ‘false cognates’ – words that only appear to be identical but that in reality have divergent meanings. Since Spanish is much more prevalent than Italian in the

United States today – and given the population in San Marcos, where Texas State University is located – it made sense to use Spanish for this adaptation. I also see many (admittedly imperfect) parallels between the situation of Spanish-speaking immigrants today and my great-grandparents' generation, who came from southern Italy. Italian Americans, by and large, solved the riddle of assimilation by 'choosing sides' and wholeheartedly embracing their new American identity. But this is not the only answer to assimilation, and Latinx individuals need not make such a binary choice in the twenty-first century. They do not have to turn their back on Latinx language and culture in order to live in the United States. The characters in this adaptation, like many Latinx Americans today, find a way forward by uniting the English and Spanish sides of their identity.

Building the Script

To begin the process of adaptation, I found an uncredited public-domain Spanish-language version of the play online, which appeared to be a Castilian (as opposed to a Latin American) translation from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. I then set about cutting and pasting dialogue from this translation into Shakespeare's original text.¹ The first major decision was which language the characters of each city should speak. The play is set entirely in Ephesus, and this city's characters speak roughly 60 per cent of the play's dialogue. I wanted very much for our script to be more than 50 per cent Spanish in order to counter a prevalent trend among the 'bilingual theatre' currently offered in Central Texas. In most of these productions, the dialogue is overwhelmingly in English, with an occasional 'pues' or 'que no' thrown in for 'Latin flavour'. There is certainly nothing wrong with theatre that targets English-speaking Latinxs, but such an approach limits access for the area's large Spanish-dominant population.

The challenge with making Ephesus the Spanish-speaking city, however, is that the government of this city is portrayed in Shakespeare's play as brutal and repressive. I therefore considered 'flipping the script' and making the characters from Syracuse undocumented Latinx immigrants in a hostile anglophone Ephesus that would resemble contemporary Texas. Such a concept would be even more tempting in 2020 than it had been in 2014, but this approach is not amenable to comedy. Nor, unfortunately, are there many alternative settings that could be drawn from the long, sad history of Anglo–Latinx relations in Texas to justify a farcical tone. That is why, for its next project, our creative team hopes to mount a bilingual *Romeo and Juliet* set in Texas in the 1850s, in which the Capulets will be long-time, Spanish-speaking Tejano residents and the Montagues will be English-speaking newcomers. For *The Comedy of Errors*, however, my desire to maximise the adaptation's Spanish content,

and to avoid references to painful events in Texas's past and present, led me to adopt Cuba as the setting. This setting made sense – in part, because Shakespeare's play describes two nations that have been involved for many years in a low-level conflict with trade forbidden and families separated, a scenario that mirrors the situation that existed until very recently between the United States and Cuba.

In light of Duke Solinus's harsh and capricious policies, I chose to costume him as a guerrilla turned 'caudillo', or military strongman. Though somewhat of a cliché, this imagery has some historical justification across the Latin American political spectrum: from Noriega in Panama and Trujillo in the Dominican Republic to the Ortegas in Nicaragua and the Castros in Cuba. Dressed in combat fatigues and a red beret, our Duke Solinus resembled, more than anyone else, a young Hugo Chavez. This design choice was well received in both of our San Marcos productions (2015 and 2017). It remains to be seen, however, how this play would land if we succeed in taking this show to Florida, since that state has a significant Cuban and Venezuelan population that may not see the caudillo archetype as appropriate comic material. In Texas, because most of our performers spoke with Mexican accents, the play's setting served our purpose of remaining firmly Latinx while avoiding visual references to Tejano culture.

Once the linguistic preferences of each character had been determined, I cobbled together a rough draft of the script and sent it to my colleague David Navarro, in Texas State's Department of Modern Languages. David was kind enough to smooth over the rough edges created by my juxtaposition of English and Spanish dialogue, and also to 'Americanise' the script by removing the 'vosotros' form of address and other locutions not common to American Spanish. We staged a public reading of this draft in October 2014, using Spanish-speaking students and faculty along with a few volunteer actors from Austin. While readings of this kind are common for any new work, it was an especially important step for this bilingual adaptation since we needed to gauge the ability of both Spanish-dominant and English-dominant audience members to understand the text. Response to this reading was quite positive.

Navigating the Language Divide

In order to stage a full production in summer 2015, I applied for and received an Equity and Access Grant from the university. Crucially, the grant allowed us to access a larger pool of bilingual actors and to *pay* these actors rather than asking them to volunteer their time. With the money, we hired four bilingual actors from Austin and also built the production. To fill out our cast, David then set up a special topics course in the Department of Modern Languages,

through which Spanish majors were able to earn academic credit by playing smaller roles.

As we looked forward to this summertime staging, however, several issues needed to be addressed. With any production of *The Comedy of Errors*, one must decide whether to use four actors for the two sets of twins (two Dromios and two Antipholi) or to have one actor play both servants and another to play both masters.² In the final scene, all four characters must appear onstage together, which leads many companies to use four actors the whole time. In my own career, however, I have found that having two actors play four characters better serves the play, since it prevents the audience from getting ahead of the production. ‘Doubles’ – typically student interns – can then be brought on for the play’s final scene, by which point the audience has, hopefully, suspended its disbelief.

We therefore chose to have one performer play both Dromios and another play both Antipholi. This choice had the advantage of reinforcing our thematic desire to explore the division of identity through linguistic code-switching. The challenge was that we needed to cast two actors who were not only bilingual but who had an equal command of English and Spanish. Fortunately, in both 2015 and 2017, Austin-based actor Julio Mella was available to play the Antipholi. A native of Mexico City, Julio has lived in the United States for decades and speaks English with only a trace of an accent. Our Dromios (Eva McQuade in 2015 and Sergio Alvarado in 2017) were both more comfortable in English, but they were able to compensate for any deficiencies in their Spanish through the use of broad comic mime.

A more vexing challenge came in the play’s first scene. For most of our adaptation, in any given scene some characters speak Spanish while others speak English. This practice mirrors a conversation pattern that is common in Central Texas, and the dialogue in our adaptation can be understood by anyone who speaks either language (and have special resonance for those who speak both). The first scene of *The Comedy of Errors*, however, contains a series of long speeches by Egeon that provide essential exposition. We needed all audience members, regardless of linguistic preference, to understand every word Egeon says. I therefore introduced the character of the ‘bilingual soldier’, who would translate everything Egeon says into Spanish.

In our October 2014 reading, this translation was done in a formal manner resembling what one would expect at a political summit or academic conference. Egeon spoke; the soldier translated. The result was dreadfully boring and caused the audience to tune out for most of this scene. For summer 2015, I therefore reverted to a strategy I had used in a production of *The Comedy of Errors* at the Shakespeare Festival of Arkansas in 2001. That production was set in postwar Italy during the time of the American occupation, when the US military ruled the south of the country in collaboration with organised crime.

Duke Solinus was a local Don, and an Italian American serviceman ‘translated’ Egeon’s speech for him. Since none of the actors (or audience) spoke Italian, this scene was an exercise in what Dario Fo calls ‘Grammelo’: the comic mixture of a few words of a foreign language with characteristic sounds and broad gestures.³ This approach had succeeded in 2001 in turning the tedious exposition of the first scene into a comic highlight of the production.

I decided to try something similar with our bilingual adaptation in Texas. Fortunately, I was able to rely on the comic talents of Jesus Valles as the bilingual soldier. Jesus is an Austin-based performer, who is skilful in clowning and fluent in both English and Spanish. Jesus wove a series of Latinx pop culture references into his recounting of Egeon’s saga. Transcription cannot do this performance justice: Jesus was sensational and a highlight of the production.⁴ Egeon’s description of his ‘wealth increased / By prosperous voyages I often made / To Epidamnum’ was rendered by Jesus as ‘Se volvió muy rico. Igual que el Chapo’.⁵ The phrase, ‘That by misfortunes was my life prolonged, / To tell sad stories of my own mishaps’, became ‘Así que le cuento un historia muy larga, como *La Rosa de Guadalupe*’.⁶ These interpolations were, by Jesus’s own description, ‘lleno de Tejanidad’ (‘full of Tejanidad’) and served to put our Central Texas audiences at ease through a series of shared cultural references. If we ever take the show to Florida, we will need find similar common denominators among that state’s more diverse Latinx population.

In preparation for our summer 2015 production, we did another public reading in January of that year, featuring the contracted professional actors along with student volunteers. We found that more work needed to be done to replace Castilian words with Latin American ones that were more accessible to our community. David Navarro’s efforts have been tireless in this regard, and the script has continued to evolve in each iteration, from our first reading in 2014 to the most recent staging in 2017. One small example must suffice. When Dromio complains that he has been transformed ‘both in mind and in my shape’, Luciana taunts him in the Shakespearean text with ‘If thou art changed to aught, ’tis to an ass’.⁷ The public domain translation rendered this line as, ‘Sí en algo te has convertido, es en asno’. The problem is that none of our actors had ever heard the word *asno*. David therefore changed it to *burro*, which even our anglophone audience members understood. While most theatrical works are composed in a collaborative manner, this project was even more dependent on this kind of shared authorship, since we were working from a variety of linguistic and cultural perspectives (David is a native of Spain; our actors were Latinx; and I am white). As we began rehearsals in summer 2015, we discovered that our student actors (almost all of whom were heritage speakers, having grown up speaking Spanish) found Shakespeare in translation as daunting as many English-speaking undergraduates find the Elizabethan original. ‘We just don’t use that many words when we speak

Spanish', was a common lament. Ultimately, however, the company rose to the occasion with the help of David's skilful coaching.

Looking Back on the Performance

The 2015 production was a great success. Admission was free and open to the public. We got the word out in part through the bulletin of the local Catholic church. The demographic in attendance differed significantly from a typical theatre audience, which tends to be predominantly white and over fifty. Our public, instead, was majority Latinx and represented a much broader age range. Many families brought their children, who appreciated the play's broad comedy and fast pace. It was especially rewarding to see several generations of a single family in attendance, with everyone able to appreciate the show despite their linguistic preference.

Due to budgetary restrictions, I played the role of Egeon myself in 2015. For me personally, the pay-off of this production came in the play's final scene. Egeon, sentenced to death for journeying to a forbidden country, is overjoyed when he sees his long-lost son. He does not realise, however, that the man he assumes is Antipholus of Syracuse is actually Antipholus of Ephesus, who does not recognise him. Although Egeon insists, 'But tell me yet, dost thou not know my voice?', his son still does not know him.⁸ Egeon then laments:

Not now my voice! O time's extremity,
Hast thou so cracked and splitted my poor tongue
In seven short years, that here my only son
Knows not my feeble key of untuned cares?⁹

In our production, this moment was all the more poignant because the father and son were, literally, speaking different languages. This exchange seemed to me to represent a sadly archetypal moment in the American experience, in which immigrant parents (and especially grandparents) are unable to speak to their descendants because they do not share a common language. I remember how my own father, whose parents had forbidden the speaking of Italian in their home because they wanted to become 'American', had been unable to communicate with his grandmother. My hope was that the resolution of this adaptation, in which the Spanish and English sides of the family are reunited in a new 'nativity' following decades of separation,¹⁰ might lead our students and younger audience members to realise that they do not have to make the same mistakes my family made. They do not have to forget Spanish in order to learn English. Instead, their identities can be fully realised through the union of these two languages.

When we staged our bilingual *Comedy of Errors* in 2015, the newly

announced DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans) programmes seemed to herald a breakthrough in immigration policy, and the Obama administration had recently announced steps towards rapprochement with Cuba. We believed our theatrical efforts to be on the right side of history. In early 2016, I therefore applied for an NEA Challenge America grant that would allow us to mount a better-funded version of our script in 2017. We got the grant, but, alas, when the time came to stage this second production the world seemed very different. Ever since the presidential election in November 2016, the Texas State campus has suffered a series of ugly incidents involving the distribution of racist propaganda. Immigration raids have swept up many people in Central Texas, and some of my students who previously felt safe under DACA now no longer know where they stand in terms of their immigration status. I debated cancelling our 2017 production, since I feared it might create a target-rich environment for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or for racist protestors. In the end, the show went on (as it must), but I can't help wondering whether our bilingual adaptation and its message of multi-cultural inclusion represents the shape of things to come, or whether I will instead look back on this staging as the failed harbinger for an age of tolerance that might have been. Perhaps this question will be answered if we are able to mount our bilingual *Romeo and Juliet* after the 2020 election, in a cultural moment that once again contains the potential for hope and change.

Notes

1. The phrase 'Shakespeare's original text' will no doubt outrage readers familiar with the history of textual transmission. Please note that I use it only as a term of convenience here.
2. In the production I directed for the Shakespeare Festival of Arkansas in 2001, I found a third option: one actor played both Dromios, while a set of actual identical twins played the two Antipholi. This strategy really kept the audience guessing.
3. Dario Fo, *The Tricks of the Trade*, trans. Joe Farrell (New York: Routledge, 1991), 34 and note.
4. A snippet of the performance can be viewed online; see 'Comedy of Errors – Texas State – Clip 1', YouTube video, 3:10, <https://youtu.be/bx3f6cLV5Aw> (uploaded 20 July 2017).
5. William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus and Gordon McMullan (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), I.i.39–41.
6. Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, I.i.119–20.

7. *The Comedy of Errors*, II.ii.198, 200.
8. *The Comedy of Errors*, V.i.300.
9. *The Comedy of Errors*, V.i.308–11.
10. *The Comedy of Errors*, V.i.406.