



**collected
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The Comedy of Errors

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Misdemeanor Witchcraft



*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,
Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,
And many such-like liberties of sin.*



Cozenage (n., first ref. 1574)

the crime of preying on people's superstitions to cheat them out of goods and money

Medieval law treated fraud as witchcraft.

Manipulating reality was an act of sorcery, whether to steal a purse or a soul. According to Erasmus, the Church persecuted fortune-tellers to keep people from noticing that its own ritual was smoke and mirrors too.

By the late 16th Century, English law began to distinguish between heresy and misdemeanor *cozenage*. Tudor law was lenient to cozenage scams, because they usually exploited their targets' own sins: greed, lechery or belief in magic.



The crime was rarely prosecuted. The victim could not report being cozened without admitting that he was a superstitious fool.



Cozenage was technically a type of fraud, but the perpetrators often escaped with relatively light punishments. Unlike many other frauds where the unsuspecting victim did nothing to deserve the loss, cozenage of people who believed in fairies often showed greed on the part of people hoping to earn the fairies' favor as well as those who preyed on them.

Thomas Willard, *Pimping for the Fairy Queen:
Some Cozeners in Shakespeare's England*



A few months before *The Comedy of Errors* first staged in 1594, a popular pamphlet circulated in London titled:

The brideling, sadling and ryding, of a rich churle in Hampshire, by the subtill practise of one Iudeth Philips, a professed cunning woman, or fortune teller whom she with her conferates, likewise cosoned: for which fact, shee was at the Sessions house without New-gate arraigned, where she confessed the same, the 14. of February, 1594.

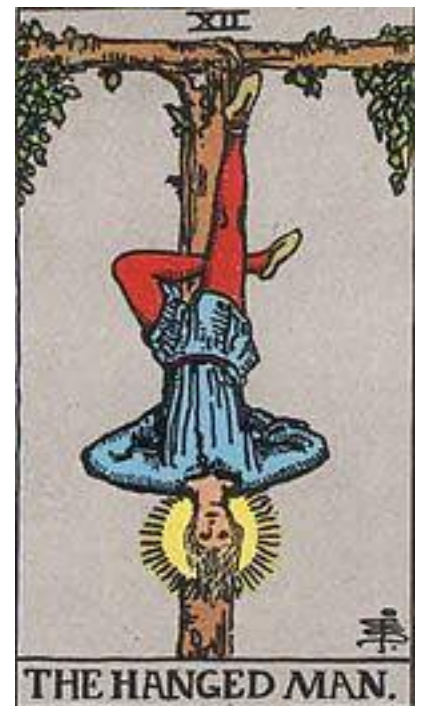
Judith Philips worked herself into the confidence of a “rich Churle in Hampshire,” through sexual favors, occult readings, or both. She pretended to see the marks



of good fortune in his face, and led him to “discover” a small sum of money she had buried. She said she was “familiarily acquainted with the Queen of Faeries” who would “bestew great summes of gold” on the man, provided he kept perfect secrecy and followed the fairies’ magical instructions for finding the rest of the treasure.

The Hampshire man had to let her saddle him up and ride him around a tree behind his house. He then had to wait while she met inside with the Queen of the Fairies. Judith disappeared, taking his best candlesticks and silverware.

She was arrested in London, after his family discovered him on his hands and knees, saddled and bridled, patiently waiting for the Fairy Queen.



Elizabethan Confidence Tricks



Identification is a crucial measure of the social order. When it becomes impossible to tell who someone is, the mechanisms that keep people in their rightful place have broken down.

*Martine van Elk, Urban Misidentification in
The Comedy of Errors and the Cony-Catching Pamphlets*



The Spanish Prisoner

The “Spanish Prisoner” con was first recorded in 1588. The mark was typically a young country gentleman visiting London. Two well-dressed men approach him. They lament that their uncle, a wealthy English marquis, has been imprisoned in Spain by Philip II. They are desperate to raise a £1000 ransom. They introduce the marquis’ beautiful daughter, who tearfully promises that her father will repay ten times the ransom, and give the young man her hand in marriage.

The mark sends home for the money. Once he turns over the £1000, the “gentlemen” and “daughter” vanish.

Vincent's Law

The playwright Robert Greene wrote a series of pamphlets from 1585-1592 on “cony-catching” (literally, rabbit-trapping). These were tabloid accounts of confidence games targeting naïve country gentry in London. One scam known as Vincent's Law is described in Greene's *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage* (1591).

A “setter” approaches the mark and calls him by the wrong name. By pressing him, the setter elicits the mark's true name and personal details. Days later, a second man, the “verser,” armed with this knowledge, greets the mark by his true name. The verser claims to know the mark, saying he is a neighbor who has often been a guest in his country home. The mark is embarrassed and apologizes for not recognizing the stranger, which the verser exploits by asking for a loan secured by his (fictitious) kinsmen.



The setter saith "Sir, god save you, you are welcome to London! How doth all our good friends in the country? I hope they be all in health?"

The countryman, seeing a man so courteous he knows not, perhaps makes him this answer: "Sir, all our friends in the country are well, thanks be to God; but truly I know you not. You must pardon me."



"Why, sir," saith the setter, guessing his county by his tongue, "are you not such a countryman? In good sooth, sir, I know you by your face and have been in your company before. I pray you, if without offense, let me crave your name and place of your abode." The countryman answers with his name and home shewing all Christian courtesy. "Forgive me sir," saith the setter, "I am much mistaken. God fare you well."

[T]hen away goes the setter and discourseth to the verser the name of the man, the parish he dwells in, and what gentlemen are his near neighbours. With that, away the verser goes, and, crossing the man at some turning, meets him full in the face and greets him thus:

“What, Goodman Barton, You are well met. What, Goodman Barton, have you forgot me? Why I am such a man’s kinsman, your neighbour not far off in Norfolk? Good Lord, that I should be out of remembrance! I have been at your house divers times.” “Indeed, sir,” saith the cony, “I have clean forgot you, but I know the gentleman well, he is my very good neighbour.”



“And for his sake,” saith the verser, “we’ll drink afore we part.” In the publick house, the verser warrants that £500 or such like Is necessary to finish a

matter of business. He promiseth that such a sum shall be repaid at their next meeting in Norfolk, and pledgeth that his kinsmen shall secure the bond.

Greene admired the cony-catchers' daring. He accused lawyers and judges of committing far worse frauds:

You decipher poor cony-catchers, that perhaps with a trick at cards win forty shillings from a churl that can spare it, and never talk of those caterpillars that undo the poor, ruin whole lordships, infect the commonwealth, and delight in nothing but in wrongful extorting and purloining of pelf, when as such be the greatest cony-catchers of all.



Shakespeare as Con Artist

Martine van Elk argues that *The Comedy of Errors* is “a dialogue with Greene’s cony-catching pamphlets.” Greene himself accused Shakespeare of stealing his work. Greene wrote the first known review of Shakespeare – a scathing attack, calling Shakespeare a theatrical con artist:

*for there is an up-start Crow,
beautified with our feathers, that
with his Tygers hart wrapt in a
Players hyde, supposes he is as well
able to bombast out a blanke verse
as the best of you: and being an
absolute Johannes fac totum, is in
his owne conceit the onely Shake-
scene in a countrey.*



The Comedy of Errors definitely exploited its audience’s fascination with the London cozenage rackets. Much of the play was lifted straight from Greene’s pamphlets. Antipholus of Syracuse gives an exact description of the “Vincent’s Law” scam:

*There's not a man I meet but doth salute me
As if I were their well-acquainted friend;
And every one doth call me by my name.
Some tender money to me; some invite me;
Some other give me thanks for kindnesses;
Some offer me commodities to buy:
Even now a tailor call'd me in his shop
And show'd me silks that he had bought for me,
And therewithal took measure of my body.
Sure, these are but imaginary wiles
And Lapland sorcerers inhabit here.*



Cony-catchers undermined the Elizabethan class system by infiltrating it:

The gentleman is presumed to act in certain ways; the limiting corollary is that only a gentleman can act in those ways. As the cony-catchers immersed themselves in their roles, they demonstrated an astonishing mastery of the codes of social performance, in a certain sense 'becoming' gentlemen.

Anupam Basu, *Cony-Catching as Social Performance*



*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?*

Statutes of Apparel



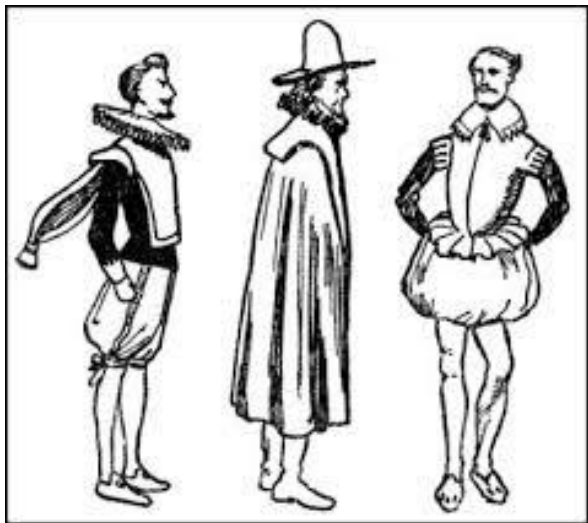
Italian and French fashion ca. 1590

Foreign trade added to the Elizabethan identity crisis. Imported fashions from France and Italy made it possible for commoners to dress like nobility. Silk, fine lace and gold embroidery were no longer reliable signs of social position - as the cony-catchers' victims found out.

Duke Solinus speaks of foreign traders as “seditious.” This was not merely a trade war between Syracuse and Ephesus. The traders of each town brought a deadly infection into the other’s social body:

*For, since the mortal and intestine jars
'Twixt thy seditious countrymen and us,
It hath in solemn synods been decreed
Both by the Syracusians and ourselves,
To admit no traffic to our adverse towns*

Early in Elizabeth’s reign, the Privy Council reinstated the medieval sumptuary laws. These were criminal laws of apparel that reserved specific kinds of clothing for the upper classes. This was supposedly a measure to protect the English clothing trade. The main purpose, however, was to stop identity fraud.



Elizabeth's Sumptuary Statute

Greenwich, 15 June 1574, 16 Elizabeth I

The excess of apparel and the superfluity of unnecessary foreign wares is grown by sufferance to such an extremity that the manifest decay of the whole realm is like to follow (by bringing into the realm such superfluities of silks, cloths of gold, silver, and other most vain devices of so great cost) but also particularly the wasting and undoing of a great number of young gentlemen, and others seeking by show of apparel to be esteemed as gentlemen, who cannot live out of danger of laws without attempting unlawful acts ,

Which great abuses, the Queen's majesty hath of her own princely wisdom commanded the same to be presently and speedily remedied.



No Englishman other than the son and heir apparent of a knight, or he that hath yearly revenues of £20 or is worth in goods £200, shall wear silk in or upon his hat, cap, night cap, girdles, scabbard, hose, shoes, or spur-leathers, upon forfeiture of £10 for every day, and imprisonment by three months.



If any, knowing his servant to offend, do not put him out of his service within 14 days; or so put out, retain him again within a year after such offense, he shall forfeit £100.

Cloth of gold, silver, tinsel satin, silk, or cloth embroidered with any gold or silver: except all degrees above viscounts, and viscounts, barons, and other persons of like degree,

Woolen cloth made out of the realm, but in caps only; except dukes, marquises, earls, and their children,

Satin, damask, silk, camlet, or taffeta in gown, coat, hose, or uppermost garments; fur whereof the kind groweth not in the Queen's dominions, except foins, grey genets, and budge: except the degrees and persons above mentioned, and men that may dispend £100 by the year, and so valued in the subsidy book.

Note also that the meaning of this order is not to prohibit a servant from wearing any cognizance of his master, or henchmen, heralds, pursuivants at arms; runners at jousts, tourneys, or such martial feats, and such as wear apparel given them by the Queen, and such as shall have license from the Queen for the same.





The sumptuary laws were a failure. According to Greene's pamphlets, the criminal laws of apparel gave cony-catchers even more credibility with their marks.

Cony-catchers were already risking prison, so donning "forbidden" clothes for an hour did not add much to the risk. But the law made their fictitious identity more convincing, because they wore clothes that by law could only be worn by gentlemen. The more English law tried to enforce an aristocratic monopoly over appearances, the more power it gave to any cozening commoners brave enough to defy it.

Wives and Husbands

*Ay, ay, Antipholus, look strange and frown:
Some other mistress hath thy sweet aspects;
I am not Adriana nor thy wife.
How comes it now, my husband,
O, how comes it,
That thou art thus estranged from thyself?*



Identity confusion affected marriage as well. Elizabethan men complained that their wives were headstrong and unmanageable. Yet Elizabethan husbands had greater mobility, and more opportunity

to lead alternative lives - as Shakespeare himself did in London, leaving his wife and children in Stratford.



According to Greene, women were the most dangerous con-catchers. In *A Disputation Between a He Cony-Catcher and a She Cony-Catcher* (1592), a con-man and a con-woman argue “*whether a Theefe or a Whoore, is most hurtfull in Cousonage, to the Commonwealth.*” The male admits: “*you do it with more art than we men do, because of your painted flatteries and sugared words that you flourish rhetorically like nets to catch fools.*”

A male con-man only steals the mark’s purse, but:
if he fall into the company of a whore, she flatters him, she inveigles him, she bewitcheth him, that he spareth neither goods nor lands to content her. If he be married, he forsakes his wife, leaves his children, despiseth his friends, only to satisfy his lust with the love of a base whore, who, when he hath spent all upon her and he brought to beggary, beateth him out like the prodigal child, and for a small reward, brings him to beg, to the gallows, or at the last and worst, to the pox.

Syphilis, the new disease imported from the Americas, changed the significance of adultery. The pox mingled the identities of husband, mistress and wife:



*I am possess'd with an adulterate blot;
My blood is mingled with the crime of lust:
For if we too be one and thou play false,
I do digest the poison of thy flesh,
Being strumpeted by thy contagion.
Keep then far league
and truce with thy true bed;
I live unstain'd, thou undishonoured.*



Masters and Servants



Servants were charged with maintaining the social order on their masters' behalf:

Now, for the better execution of mine orders, I will that my Steward do reprehend the negligent and disordered persons: the riotous, contentious, and querulous persons of any degree, the privy mutineers, the frequenters of tabling, carding, and dicing, the haunters of alehouses or suspicious places out of my house. Moreover it is his part and shall well become him at all times and places to use himself towards my wife and to my children, submissively and with all reverence, as well to declare his own duty as to give example to others, what in their degrees they ought to do.

Viscount Montague's
Book of Orders and Rules (1594)



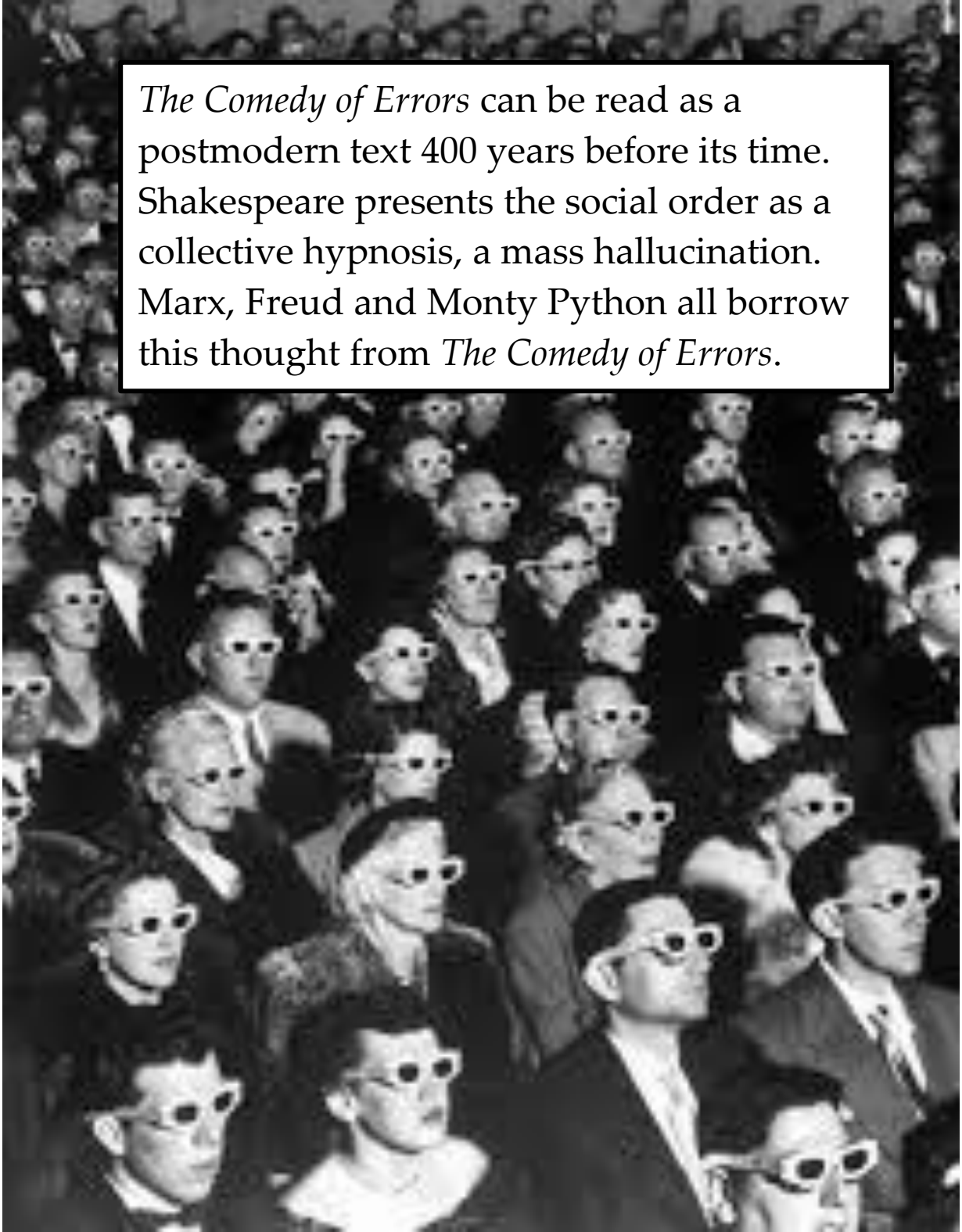
Servants themselves were subject to physical coercion, as part of their place in the social order. By beating up the lower classes, the steward was indirectly beating himself.

I have served him from the hour of my nativity to this instant, and have nothing at his hands for my service but blows. When I am cold, he heats me with beating; when I am warm, he cools me with beating; I am waked with it when I sleep; raised with it when I sit; driven out of doors with it when I go from home; welcomed home with it when I return; nay, I bear it on my shoulders, as a beggar wont her brat; and, I think when he hath lamed me, I shall beg with it from door to door.



Yet the servant is bound to think his master's thoughts:

*Thither I must, although against my will
For servants must their masters' minds fulfil.*



The Comedy of Errors can be read as a postmodern text 400 years before its time. Shakespeare presents the social order as a collective hypnosis, a mass hallucination. Marx, Freud and Monty Python all borrow this thought from *The Comedy of Errors*.

Only the masters' madness sets the servants free:

*Within this hour I was his bondman sir,
But he, I thank him, gnaw'd in two my cords:
Now am I Dromio and his man unbound.*



*We came into the world like brother and brother,
And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another.*

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Linda Woodbridge, *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English
Renaissance Literature*

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The **Gunpowder Plot**

lighting a fuse
under official theater