IDC INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

OPEN ACCESS

International Online Peer- Reviewed, Referred, Indexed Journal *May - July 2025* Volume: 12 Issue: 3

POSTMODERN THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELFHOOD IN *THE COMEDY OF ERRORS*

Ms. Damnu Josam*| Dr. Snehi**

**Research Scholar in Sikkim Professional University, Sikkim, India.*

***Research Supervisor in Sikkim Professional University, Sikkim, India.*

https://doi.org/10.47211/idcij.2025.v12i03.011

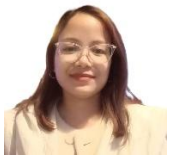
ABSTRACT

This article investigates the construction of selfhood in Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors through the lens of postmodern theory. By applying Jacques Derrida's concept of différance (Derrida, 1978), Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation (Baudrillard, 1994), Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny (Freud, 1919/1955), Judith Butler's idea of performativity (Butler, 1990), and additional perspectives from Jean-François Lyotard (1984), Michel Foucault (1978), Linda Hutcheon (1988), and Stephen Greenblatt (1980), the study reinterprets the play as an early dramatization of postmodern anxieties surrounding identity. Shakespeare's use of mistaken identities, twinship, and performative roles is read as a theatrical enactment of selfhood as fluid, deferred, and unstable rather than essential or fixed. The comic confusions of the play mirror postmodern concerns with the collapse of binaries such as real/fake, self/other, and truth/illusion. Act-wise examples—such as the uncanny recognition scenes, the performative domestic roles of Antipholus and Adriana, and the proliferation of mistaken doubles—illustrate how the play generates meaning through indeterminacy rather than resolution. Situating The Comedy of Errors within a broader postmodern critical discourse, the article argues that Shakespeare not only reflects early modern tensions about subjectivity but also anticipates theoretical frameworks that would emerge centuries later. The study concludes that the play demonstrates the impossibility of a stable, unified identity, offering fertile ground for postmodern literary criticism and contemporary cultural studies.

Keywords

Shakespeare, postmodern theory, différance, simulacra, uncanny, performativity, identity, subjectivity, doubling, deconstruction.

ABOUT AUTHORS:



Author, Ms. Damnu Josam is a Ph.D. Scholar in Sikkim Professional University, Sikkim, India.

Dr. Snehi is a research supervisor at Sikkim Professional University, Sikkim, India. She is an accomplished researcher and educationist who has actively participated in and organized various national and international conferences and seminars, contributing significantly to the academic community.

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INTRODUCTION: SHAKESPEARE AND THE QUESTION OF SELFHOOD

William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* (1594) is often considered a farce of mistaken identities, adapted from Plautus' *Menaechmi* (Miola, 1994). Yet its relentless doubling and misrecognition gesture toward a more profound exploration of subjectivity. What does it mean to be oneself when another can convincingly occupy one's place? Shakespeare poses this question centuries before postmodern thinkers challenged the idea of stable identity.

Where classical comedy often employed twinship merely as a source of comic confusion, Shakespeare transforms it into a sophisticated meditation on perception, recognition, and the very nature of representation. By introducing two sets of twins—the Antipholuses and the Dromios—he multiplies the potential for error, creating a cascading series of misunderstandings that destabilize conventional boundaries between self and other (Miola, 1994; Krier, 2013). Each mistaken identity is not just humorous but epistemologically destabilizing: the audience witnesses the fragility of recognition, the slippage between appearance and reality, and the instability of relational identity. In this way, the play stages identity as performative, contingent, and relational, anticipating central concerns of postmodern theory. Derrida's notion of différance underscores how meaning in the play is continually deferred and deferred again, never fully present or stable (Derrida, 1978). Similarly, Baudrillard's concept of simulacra illuminates how the twins' interchangeable roles collapse distinctions between the real and its representation, producing a hyperreal comedy where imitation and reality become inseparable (Baudrillard, 1994). Freud's idea of the uncanny further clarifies how the doubling of characters evokes both humor and subtle anxiety, as the familiar becomes strange and the self encounters its mirror-image in unsettling ways (Freud, 1919/1955). Butler's theory of performativity highlights how social and domestic roles, particularly in the interactions between Adriana and the Antipholuses, are enacted through repeated gestures, speech, and social expectations, rather than arising from an essential identity (Butler, 1990).

Beyond these foundational postmodern and psychoanalytic readings, contemporary cultural theorists offer additional frameworks for understanding the play's engagement with identity. Lyotard's reflections on the fragmentation of grand narratives suggest that the play destabilizes overarching social and familial orders, replacing linear logic with episodic confusion and multiplicity (Lyotard, 1984). Foucault's insights into power and subject formation reveal how recognition, authority, and social control are negotiated through mistaken identity and interpersonal confusion, making identity a site of constant negotiation (Foucault, 1978). Hutcheon's work on historiographic metafiction further supports the reading of the play as self-conscious about its own theatricality, drawing attention to the constructedness of narrative, role, and social performance (Hutcheon, 1988). Finally, Greenblatt's concept of Renaissance self-fashioning emphasizes how early modern subjects actively shape and reshape their identities within socially and culturally mediated contexts, an idea vividly dramatized in the interchanging roles and misrecognitions of *The Comedy of Errors* (Greenblatt, 1980). Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate how Shakespeare's treatment of twinship is not simply a comedic device but a rich exploration of identity as fluid, relational, and historically situated.

Derrida and the Play of *Différance*

For Derrida, meaning is always deferred, never fully present but endlessly postponed through chains of signification (Derrida, 1978). *The Comedy of Errors* dramatizes this condition: each mistaken identity delays recognition, prolongs misunderstanding, and produces meaning through absence rather than presence.

In Act II, when Antipholus of Syracuse is mistaken for his brother, he is compelled to inhabit roles not his own (Krier, 2013). His "self" exists only in the *différance* between who he is and who others perceive him to be. Recognition becomes impossible, as identity itself is caught in an endless play of signs without origin or finality (Derrida, 1978). Shakespeare's comedy thus exemplifies Derrida's challenge to metaphysical presence—identity here is not given but deferred, unstable, and relational.

Baudrillard and the Logic of Simulation

Jean Baudrillard (1983, 1994) posits that in late modernity, signs no longer reflect reality but generate simulations that replace the real. In *The Comedy of Errors*, mistaken identities operate as theatrical simulations. Antipholus of Syracuse is "real" only insofar as others recognize him, but their recognition produces a *copy without an original* (Baudrillard, 1994).

Act III demonstrates this vividly when Adriana mistakes Antipholus of Syracuse for her husband and welcomes him into her home. The domestic space, supposedly anchored in authenticity, becomes a site of simulation: the wrong husband performs the role, the wrong Dromio obeys commands, and the family unit persists in a copy detached from its source (Baudrillard, 1994; Krier, 2013). The play thus mirrors Baudrillard's notion that identity, like the hyperreal, can be sustained entirely by appearances and performances.

Freud and the Uncanny Double

Freud's (1919/1955) concept of the uncanny emphasizes the unsettling effect of encountering a double. In Act IV, Antipholus of Ephesus begins to doubt his sanity as his world denies him recognition: his wife disowns him, his servant defies him, and strangers treat him as another (Freud, 1919/1955).

The twinship motif amplifies this psychoanalytic dimension. The double is not just a comic foil but an uncanny reminder of the fragility of selfhood, hinting at the dissolution of individuality into mirrored fragments (Rank, 1971; Freud, 1919/1955). Shakespeare's comedy thus treads on the border of horror, anticipating Freud's insights into doubling as both comic and unsettling.

Butler and the Performativity of Identity

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) argues that identity is not an essence but a performance repeated through social norms. In *The Comedy of Errors*, characters enact roles imposed upon them by mistaken recognition. Adriana demands that Antipholus (of Syracuse) behave as her husband; he, in turn, complies with the performance, sustaining the illusion (Butler, 1990; Dusinberre, 2003).

In this sense, identity is constructed not by truth but by performance. Shakespeare dramatizes Butler's idea centuries earlier: selfhood emerges through repetitive acts, enforced by social expectations, and stabilized only temporarily. Comic confusion lays bare the performative nature of all identity, destabilizing the boundary between authentic and artificial (Butler, 1990; Krier, 2013).

Lyotard and the Collapse of Grand Narratives

Jean-François Lyotard (1984) defined postmodernism as incredulity toward grand narratives. In *The Comedy of Errors*, the "grand narrative" of family unity and stable identity collapses under the weight of doubling. Egeon's story of loss in Act I sets up a myth of reunion and recognition, but the play undermines it through relentless fragmentation (Wells, 2002).

Even when recognition arrives in Act V, it is not the restoration of a grand narrative but a contingent and fragile reconciliation. Identity is momentarily stabilized, but the chaos that preceded it lingers, leaving audiences skeptical of any permanent resolution (Lyotard, 1984; Belsey, 1985).

Foucault and the Politics of Recognition

Michel Foucault (1978) emphasized how identity is shaped by discourse, power, and social institutions. In *The Comedy of Errors*, recognition is mediated through authority—law, marriage, and commerce. In Act IV, Antipholus of Ephesus is arrested, not because of his actions, but because mistaken identity subjects him to the machinery of law (Foucault, 1978; Krier, 2013).

Here, Shakespeare reveals the Foucauldian truth that identity is never neutral but always inscribed within relations of power. Who one "is" depends on how institutions name and treat them. Mistaken identity is not merely comic but exposes the precarious dependence of subjectivity on external validation (Foucault, 1978; Greenblatt, 1980).

Hutcheon and the Self-Reflexive Comedy

Linda Hutcheon (1988) emphasized the self-reflexivity of postmodern art, its tendency to foreground its own constructedness. *The Comedy of Errors* exemplifies this impulse. The audience, aware of the mistaken identities, participates in a game of recognition. The play's theatricality calls attention to itself: doubling on stage reminds viewers that all identity is performance, all roles are masks (Hutcheon, 1988; Bevington, 2002).

Shakespeare's comedy is thus metafictional avant la lettre—it dramatizes not only errors of identity but the very *possibility* of staging identity as error.

Greenblatt and Renaissance Self-Fashioning

Stephen Greenblatt (1980) famously argued that Renaissance individuals "fashioned" themselves through social scripts and cultural expectations. The Antipholuses and Dromios illustrate this process. Each must inhabit identities projected onto them, performing selfhood in ways that anticipate both Butler's performativity and Foucault's discourse of power (Greenblatt, 1980; Butler, 1990).

The Comedy of Errors thus exemplifies the Renaissance as a transitional moment in conceptions of identity—caught between humanist notions of individual essence and the postmodern recognition of subjectivity as constructed, relational, and unstable (Greenblatt, 1980; Belsey, 1985).

Act-Wise Postmodern Analysis

- **Act I**: Egeon's story frames identity as fragmented absence, anticipating Derrida's *différance* (Wells, 2002; Derrida, 1978).
- **Act II**: Mistaken roles produce simulacra detached from reality (Krier, 2013; Baudrillard, 1994).
- **Act III**: Domestic and gender roles highlight performativity (Dusinberre, 2003; Butler, 1990).
- **Act IV**: Uncanny doubling escalates into madness, aligning with Freud's uncanny (1919/1955).
- **Act V**: Recognition resolves confusion but only provisionally, echoing Lyotard's skepticism of closure (Belsey, 1985; Lyotard, 1984).

CONCLUSION

Far from being a mere farce, *The Comedy of Errors* offers a theatrical experiment in the instability of identity. Through its doubling, mistaken identities, and performative roles, the play anticipates theoretical debates that would later define postmodernism. Derrida's *différance* (1978), Baudrillard's simulacra (1994), Freud's uncanny (1919/1955), Butler's performativity (1990), Lyotard's skepticism (1984), Foucault's power-knowledge (1978), Hutcheon's metafiction (1988), and Greenblatt's self-fashioning (1980) all converge in Shakespeare's comedy.

The play demonstrates that identity is never fixed but always relational, constructed, and fragile. In laughing at comic errors, audiences confront the unsettling truth that the self is itself an error—an effect of language, performance, and recognition (Bloom, 1997; Garber, 2004). Shakespeare thus emerges not only as a dramatist of Renaissance humanism but as a precursor to postmodern thought.

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