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The Influence of Dramatic Conventions on the Audience's Perception of the Fictional Time in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*

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Certainly, *The Comedy of Errors* belongs to this part of the Shakespeare canon in which time plays a considerable role. In this paper, I would like to examine the influence of dramatic conventions creating the picture of the speaker talking to oneself (soliloquies, asides, and monologues) on the perception of the fictional time of the play on the part of the spectators. Hence, I will follow the methodology of Jerzy Limon who argues that "time in performance becomes split: it is the real present of the performer (the same as the time of the spectator), and the created fictional present time of the figure" (99). With the aid of this methodology, I make an attempt to define the temporal characteristics of different modes of speech employed in the dramatic text of the play in order to determine their influence on the perception of the passing of the fictional time.

Among natural dialogic exchanges, Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* contains many instances of the five characters speaking to themselves: Antipholus S.¹ (9 times), Dromio S. (3 times), the Courtesan (once), Egeon (once) and Angelo (once). For this reason, we have to categorize these speeches as soliloquies, asides, or monologues in order to determine the influence of these theatrical conventions on the fictional time of the play.

In his book *The Chemistry of Theatre*, Jerzy Limon argues that the soliloquy is "a conventional stage device, in which the speaking figure does not 'step out of itself' but addresses (verbally) the imagined audience (or him/herself), directly or indirectly," while remaining the same fictional character (171). It should be noted that if the figure speaking to oneself utters his or her words in such a way that they can be heard in the fictional reality of the play, then the audience can hear a monologue, that is, a sign of actual speech, whereas a true soliloquy tends to be a sign of mental processes occurring in the mind of the fictional figure. As Limon explains, "if the signalled fictional time is relatively the same as needed for a given speech to be uttered in 'real life,' then we may (but do not have to) treat the soliloquy as a sign of actual speech; if the signalled fictional time is conspicuously different from the time needed for the utterance (as in the final soliloquy by Marlowe's Faustus), then we should treat it as a sign of mental processes rather than actual speech" (171). In other words, the fictional time flows at the same pace as the rest of the stage action in the case of a monologue, but it is "suspended

1 For the sake of convenience, I will use the following abbreviations of the twins' names: Antipholus S. (of Syracuse), Antipholus E. (of Ephesus), Dromio S. (of Syracuse), and Dromio E. (of Ephesus).

(or altered)” in the case of a soliloquy which as a sign of the inner thoughts of a figure may indicate the passage of hours, a day, or even takes place in a time gap (Limon 177). At the same time, we have to keep in mind that a monologue is usually “a part of larger verbal unit, such as a dialogic sequence,” since then “time is shared by more than one figure,” which may be exemplified by the speeches of Malvolio (*Twelfth Night* 2.5) and Enobarbus (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.9), who can be, in fact, overheard by other figures remaining on the stage (Limon 177).

If a figure signals his/her awareness of the presence of the audience and therefore directly addresses his/her words to the spectators, we observe an instance of an aside which “always marks a break in what has been a continuous flow of verbal exchanges” (Limon 180). As a matter of fact, the speaker of an aside as if steps out of him/herself, which means that his/her *deixis* (his/her “I”) seems to change into that of the actor. For this reason, “the temporal dimensions of the actor and the enacted figure, hitherto distinct, seem to merge. Hence the effect or even the illusion of the actor and figure being one and the same being, speaking to us as if for him/herself [. . .] and thus seemingly sharing the time and space with the spectators” (Limon 180). In contrast to the soliloquy, which occurs in one of the temporal streams of fictional reality, the aside should be placed as if beyond the natural flow of the fictional time, which implies its seeming overlapping with the real time of the audience and that of the actor. Additionally, the *true* aside, which is always a speech directly addressed to the spectators, should be distinguished from the *false* aside, which is any speech addressed to other characters, “with the condition being that at least one of the other fictional figures on the stage cannot hear what is being said” (172).

With the above definitions presented, we can interpret different theatrical conventions employed in Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*. Most of the characters speaking to themselves in the play remain alone on the stage, which suggests that all these speeches are soliloquies proper.² Indeed, none of these fictional figures changes his/her deictic axis (his/her “I”) and none of them seems to signal the awareness of the presence of the spectators, except for Antipholus S.’s single aside “*See, here he comes*” uttered to the audience directly in order to draw their attention to Dromio S. approaching his master (2.2.6, my emphasis). Although soliloquies, as signs of mental processes, should offer the spectators insight into the deep psychology of the characters, the soliloquies in *The Comedy of Errors* primarily focus on the figures’ involvement in the events which precede and follow the speeches in the stage action. The speakers often give accounts of what they saw or heard off the stage or refer to what has been already or will be presented in front of the audience. For instance, Antipholus S. admits to hearing rumours about the town of Ephesus to be “full of cozenage,” with the citizens reputed as witches, sorcerers and quack-doctors (1.2.97–102), whereas Dromio mentions the place where “Dowsabel did claim [him] for her husband” (4.1.109–111, cf. 3.2.72–130; for other examples of soliloquies which are the accounts of what characters saw or heard off the stage cf. 2.2.1–4, 4.3.1–9). It should be

2 These soliloquies include eight out of fifteen instances of speaking to oneself in the play: Antipholus S.’s six out of nine (1.2.33–40, 95–105, 2.2.1–6, 3.2.140–148, 3.2.163–169, 4.3.1–11), Dromio S.’s one of three (4.1.109–113) and Courtesan’s only one (4.3.73–88).

noted that the characters also state their intentions, but more often than not they simply indicate the destinations of their journeys through the streets of Ephesus, while declaring to carry out a number of actions. For example, Antipholus S. is going to seek his servant at the Centaur and search for the supposedly lost money (1.2.104–105), whereas the Courtesan intends to go to Adriana's house in order to deceitfully ruin Antipholus E's reputation and regain her valuable ring (4.3.84–88; see 3.2.141, 148, 168–169, 4.1.109–110, 112). Additionally, the speakers express their personal opinions on other characters or particular situations as exemplified by Antipholus S.'s conclusion that Ephesus's citizens are nothing but witches and sorcerers (3.2.140, 4.3.10–11) or the Courtesan's statement of Antipholus E's madness (4.3.73–74, 78–83; see 3.2.142–146, 163–167, 4.1.112–113). However, a large part of the information revealed in the "inner" thoughts of the characters' soliloquies actually overlaps with the information we can obtain while watching the rest of the performance. There are very few exceptions to this statement. In fact, whenever the soliloquies uttered by the figures when alone exclusively reveal details of the action, most of what we can learn from them is not a single detail of the characters' emotions. It is the factual information about their off-the-scene activities, for example, Antipholus S.'s presence at the Centaur when examining the safety of his money (1.2.104–105, 2.2.1–2) and his detailed description of the citizens greeting him as an old friend (4.3.1–9). Interestingly enough, we do not have to rely on the Courtesan's soliloquy to learn about her intention to lie to Adriana, which can be easily deduced when comparing her words at 4.3.60–62, 69–70 and 4.4.131–132, while keeping in mind Antipholus E's description of his relationship with this "wild, and yet too gentle" woman at 3.1.109–114.

In fact, Antipholus S.'s first soliloquy is the only instance of the speaker revealing his true state of mind, sharing with the audience the knowledge of what can hardly be deduced from the rest of the play. He creates a picture of himself as "a drop of water / That . . . seeks another drop," and by implication loses himself in the vast depth of the ocean, which implies loss of or at least uncertainty about his own identity (1.2.35–40). This beautiful soliloquy might be the prime example of a sign of mental processes which every soliloquy proper should be. Yet, this speech seems to be uttered neither in an undefined space, nor in timelessness, which would emphasize Antipholus S.'s detachment from the main stream of the stage action. For one thing, the character presumably still stands somewhere in one of the streets in Ephesus shortly after he parts with the first merchant at 1.2.32, and then in his soliloquy he conveys his tourist-like impression of the vastness of the unknown, while comparing the town to "the world" and "the ocean" (1.2.35–36). Still, the speaker implicitly signals his awareness of his whereabouts when mentioning his aim at "find[ing] a mother and a brother," which inevitably links his thoughts with the place of his temporary residence (1.2.39). What is more, the soliloquy hardly appears in a time gap or suggests the passage of more time than needed to utter it in reality. As a matter of fact, the period of time which elapses during the delivering of this 8-line-long soliloquy (1.2.33–40) depends on the measuring of the interval between Antipholus S.'s statement that "Within this hour it will be dinner-time" (1.2.11) and Dromio E.'s assertion that "The clock hath stricken twelve upon the bell" (1.2.45). Egeon's son from Syracuse indicates that the dinner-time will be "before the end of, after not more than" one hour (*OED*, "within," B., *prep.*, 6a). As William Harrison suggests in his *Description of England*

(1587), in the Elizabethan period “the nobility, gentry and students [did] ordinarily go to dinner at *eleven* before noon” (qtd. in Wilson 282, my emphasis), which might be a hint that the arrival of Antipholus S. in Ephesus at the beginning of 1.2 occurs at 10 o’clock at the earliest, that is, not more than an hour before the character plans to dine. This, by implication, would lead to the conclusion that the lengthy period of more than an hour until twelve o’clock, which is, in fact, the time referred to by Dromio E., covers the duration of Antipholus S.’s soliloquy which undoubtedly would then appear as a true sign of mental processes occurring in the mind of the fictional figure. Yet, it should be noted that this line of reasoning seems to be inconsistent with the later statement of the wanderer that “in Ephesus [he is] but two hours old” (2.2.139), which happens shortly after the onstage appearance of Adriana who in the previous scene ascertained that the fictional time of the play is “two o’clock” (2.1.3). If we followed the above-presented hypothesis, then the period of Antipholus S.’s sojourn in the town would amount to 4 hours (from 10 o’clock in the morning to 2 o’clock in the afternoon), which directly contradicts the character’s mention of a two hours’ period. If at two o’clock the length of Antipholus S.’s stay in Ephesus amounts to two full hours, then this period of time should be measured from twelve o’clock to 2 o’clock in the afternoon. If so, Antipholus S.’s “within this hour” must come shortly before twelve o’clock, the time which Shakespeare chooses to be the dinner-time of *The Comedy of Errors*. This seems to be congruous with the contemporary proverb saying “My stomach (belly) has struck twelve (rung noon)” and with Antipholus’s statement that his supposed servant appears “so soon” after his absence on the stage being equal to 22 lines of the dramatic text which corresponds to about 1 minute of the scenic time³ (Tilley 633; *The Comedy of Errors* 1.2.42). Hence, Antipholus S.’s 8-line soliloquy, which appears in the 33-line interval between the two mentioned points of reference to the fictional time of the play (1.2.11, 45), hardly extends to more than an hour, but rather takes place in the time approximately equal to the time of its scenic realization, that is, not longer than an instant, which renders this soliloquy much more similar to a sign of speech rather than that of mental processes. The fact that the only soliloquy which truly offers insight into the character’s psyche appears both in “a specific space and [approximately] measured time” suggests that the soliloquies in *The Comedy of Errors* do not cause suspension or alteration in the time continuum of the stage action but rather make the impression of taking place in the same fictional stream of time as the rest of the play (Limon 177). Indeed, there is nothing in the text to imply that they appear in timelessness or that they take longer than they need to be uttered. On the contrary, instead of sharing truly inner thoughts, the speakers are usually preoccupied with the events which immediately precede and closely follow their soliloquies and they more often than not reveal the information which can be obtained while attentively watching the rest of the play. Moreover, the characters make frequent references to their “location in space” by using the following words and expressions: “this town” (1.2.97), “here” (3.2.140, 166; 4.3.11) and “hence” [i.e. “(away) from here, from this place,” *OED*, “hence,” *adv.*, I, 1a] (3.2.141).

3 In this paper, I assume that “the speed at which plays were delivered in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres,” as Alfred Hart accurately calculated, amounted to “about twenty lines per minute” (Hirrel 160).

In doing so, the speakers demonstrate that their soliloquies are delivered in defined spaces, which with the non-disruptive time continuum of the stage action results in the creating of the characters who in their soliloquies seem to think “out loud” in their fictional reality.

The above conclusion about the soliloquies uttered by the characters when alone on the stage seems to correspond with the presence of at least one monologue which appears in 2.2 of the play. During their first encounter with Adriana and Luciana, both wanderers from Syracuse begin to speak to themselves. What should be noted is that Luciana makes an interesting observation about Dromio S.'s behaviour: “Why *prat'st* thou to *thyself*, and answer'st not?” (2.2.184, my emphasis). This unique remark in the Shakespeare canon indicates that although Luciana can hardly hear what Dromio is actually saying at 2.2.179–183, she notices his act of speaking. Therefore, the servant's words are not a true soliloquy (a sign of his mental processes), but a monologue (a sign of speech). In the case of the latter, as Jerzy Limon suggests, “the time continuum of the stage action (time) [. . .] continues at its normal – within the fictional world – pace” (177). The presence of Luciana's remark in the passage where both Antipholus S. and his Dromio speak to themselves as many as two times each raises a question as to whether their speeches during this encounter are all, in fact, monologues proper. On the surface, Dromio's humorous comment on his transformation into “an ass” at 2.2.191–193 seems to be a true aside. Yet, he does not actually change his deictic axis (his “I”), but still remains Dromio S. who has never met Luciana before, and therefore his speech should be presumably treated as a short soliloquy. This seems also to be the case with Antipholus S.'s two acts of speaking to himself at 2.2.172–177 and at 2.2.203–207, where he addresses himself with a number of rhetorical questions, which demonstrates his state of utter confusion, and eventually declares twice his intention to “entertain the offered fallacy” (2.2.177, cf. 2.2.206–207). However, while taking into account Luciana's observation of Dromio's act of speaking to himself in the fictional reality of the play, the spectators are unlikely to avoid the impression that his behaviour is a habit rather than a single occurrence. Would Dromio S. once pretend to speak to himself in order to signal to Luciana only this particular sort of behaviour without revealing the words uttered, and then move to a soliloquy proper as a true sign of his mental processes? This seems to be highly unlikely, especially in the light of Adriana's complaint that “man and his master laughs [her] woes to scorn,” which would hardly be prompted only by the men's brief exchange on their sudden transformation, but rather would be provoked by their seemingly scornful comments which they might mutter to themselves about Adriana's behaviour (2.2.196). For this reason, the characters' soliloquies appear again more like acts of speech rather than those of mental processes.

The remaining three instances of speaking to oneself in *The Comedy of Errors* are the speeches of Antipholus S. at 4.3.35–37, Egeon at 5.1.195–196, and Angelo at 5.1.212–213. All the speakers distance themselves from their fictitious world by referring to the other characters in the third person singular (4.3.35, 5.1.196, 212–213). Undoubtedly, the first two do not change their *deixis* but remain themselves, and by implication their speeches should be treated as short soliloquies in which they share their inner thoughts about the fictional reality of the play: Antipholus S. expresses his conviction that both he and his servant are under the ubiquitous illusions of Ephesus, whereas his father shows uncertainty

as to whether he really sees the son he has been long searching for. In contrast, Angelo's speech might be considered both as a short soliloquy and a true aside since his comment bears no trace of his personal involvement as a fictional figure. In other words, while accusing both Luciana and Adriana of being "forsoven" and approving Antipholus E.'s version of events, Angelo can both speak to himself (soliloquy), and address his speech to the audience directly (a true aside). Still, it is conceivable that all the three soliloquies are, in fact, signs of speech in the same way as Dromio's speech at 2.2.179–183 certainly is, which seems the more convincing if we take into account the fact that "the signalled fictional time" of these speeches is "relatively the same as needed for [them] to be uttered in 'real life'" (Limon 171). Hence, the characters may think "out loud" or simply mutter to themselves no matter whether anybody notices his acts of speaking, or not.⁴

The above analysis has already suggested that most of the soliloquies in *The Comedy of Errors*, if not all of them, bear the characteristics of a monologue as a sign of speech rather than represent signs of mental processes occurring in the mind of the speakers. The soliloquies seem to be uttered in defined spaces and apparently imply the passage of not more fictional time than they need to be uttered by actors in reality. Apart from only one instance of a true aside at 2.2.6, which may easily escape the attention of the spectators, all the examples of the character speaking to oneself should be perhaps considered as different variants of a monologue, in which the speaker thinks "out loud" or simply mutters to oneself. By implication, the use of soliloquies as signs of speech rather than those of mental processes enhances the non-disruptive time continuum of the fictional time of the play and may have the audience entertain the illusion of its steady pace.

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4 *The Comedy of Errors* also contains three instances of so-called *false asides*, i.e. speeches addressed to other characters on condition that "at least one of the other fictional figures on the stage cannot hear what is being said" (Limon 172): (1) the words of the officer addressed to Angelo at 4.1.14 since both Antipholus E. and his Dromio cannot hear them; (2) the private conversation of Antipholus E. and his Dromio at 4.1.15–21, whose words certainly cannot be overheard by the second merchant, Angelo or the officer; and (3) a part of the dialogic exchange between Angelo and the second merchant at 5.1.9–12. In all these examples, the speeches are "a form of a dialogue," which means that they appear in the same fictional stream of time as the rest of the play (Limon 172).

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest wpływowi, jaki wywierają użyte przez Szekspira konwencje teatralne w *Komedii omyłek* na percepcję czasu fikcyjnego sztuki. W oparciu o metodologię prof. Jerzego Limona wyłożoną w jego książce *Chemia teatru*, autor dokonuje próby skategoryzowania poszczególnych przypadków mówienia postaci „do siebie” jako solilokwia, mówienie na stronie oraz monologi. Zwraca uwagę, iż zdecydowana większość solilokwiów wypowiedzianych przez osoby dramatu jest *de facto* nie znakami stanu umysłu mówiących, lecz znakami mowy kierowanej bezpośrednio do siebie, co łączy się z możliwością zauważenia takiego typu zachowania przez inne postaci.