

## Hair as Time in *The Comedy of Errors*

Eric Flora

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In this paper, Eric uses **close-reading** to analyze a seemingly throwaway exchange between two characters in Act II of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, revealing an unexpected equivalence between the physical feature of hair and the abstract concept of time. By using his close-reading as a **lens** through which to read other mentions of hair and baldness across the play, Eric gives us an example of **analysis** that builds on itself, taking us from hair, to time, to the play's central claims about agency.*

### *Excerpt*

Antipholus S.: Well, sir, learn to jest in good time: there's a time for all things.

Dromio S.: I durst have denied that, before you were so choleric.

Antipholus S.: By what rule, sir?

Dromio S.: Marry, sir, by a rule as plain as the plain bald pate of father Time himself.

Antipholus S.: Let's hear it.

Dromio S.: There's no time for a man to recover his hair that grows bald by nature.

Antipholus S.: May he not do it by fine and recovery?

Dromio S.: Yes, to pay a fine for a periwig and recover the lost hair of another man.

Antipholus S.: Why is Time such a niggard of hair, being, as it is, so plentiful an excrement?

Dromio S.: Because it is a blessing that he bestows on beasts; and what he hath scanted men in hair he hath given them in whit.

Antipholus S.: Why, but there's many a man hath more hair than wit.

Dromio S.: Not a man of those but he hath the wit to lose his hair.

Antipholus S.: Why, thou didst conclude hairy men plain dealers without wit.

Dromio S.: The plain dealer, the sooner lost: yet he loseth it in a kind of jollity.

Antipholus S.: For what reason?

Dromio S.: For two, and sound ones too. [...] The one, to save the money he spends in trimming; the other, that at dinner they should not drop in his porridge.

Antipholus S.: You would all this time have proved there is no time for all things.

Dromio S.: Marry, and did, sir; namely, no time to recover hair lost by nature.

Antipholus S.: But your reason was not substantial, why there is no time to recover.

Dromio S.: Thus I mend it: Time himself is bald and therefore to the world's end will have bald followers.

Antipholus of Syracuse: I knew 'twould be a bald conclusion (*Comedy of Errors* II.2.63-107)

This seemingly trivial, almost stichomythic, conversation enters the context of hair with Dromio's retort to Antipholus's notion that "there's a time for all things" (II.2.64): "Marry, sir, by a rule as plain as the plain bald pate of father Time himself (68-69) [...] There's no time for a man to recover his hair that grows bald by nature" (71-72). First, very superficially, the physical explanation we expect manifests itself in the personification of time; no longer is the concept abstract, but it is a physical being that is the solution to the confusion. Further, Time himself is

bald, which implies old age, and also weakness, from the secondary definitions of “bald” as “lame” or “meagre” (Oxford English Dictionary). This abstraction has not only been diminished to the physical, but further has been made physically lacking. More meaningfully, we hear that men grow old and that, with whatever amount of time they have, they cannot regrow their own hair. From this point on, the audience must acknowledge hair as a quantification of time, and especially of time lost. Antipholus refers to this quantification: “why is Time such a niggard of hair, being, as it is, so plentiful an excrement?” (76-77). Hair, and more so the loss of hair, represent a loss of time that explicitly cannot be regained. The description of hair as an “excrement” causes us to think about loss and waste while the question as a whole alludes to the limitations put upon us by time. Ultimately father Time limits our hair (or symbolically our time) to the extent that it stops growing altogether. Therefore, not only does this passage ground this connection of the physical and time through hair, but it also plants a presupposition of what baldness may represent within the play—the extreme of time’s limitation.

The only other explicit occurrence of baldness comes in the final act of the play, with the stage direction, “Enter the Duke of Ephesus, attended; and [Egeon] the Merchant of Syracuse, *bareheaded*, with the Headsman and other Officers” (V.1.129, emphasis added). In relation to the theme of wasting, or rather submitting to, temporal limits within the play, Egeon most clearly comes to mind, as he wasted years looking for Syracusean Antipholus and his Dromio and now waits for death. Even though he attempts to negotiate for more time, he only secures an extra day. In the passage discussed earlier, Dromio presents a revised reasoning for how time limits us: “Time himself is bald and therefore to the world’s end will have bald followers” (II.2.105-106). Egeon has been defined with this bareheadedness (which could simply mean without any headwear, yet more likely, contextually, means bald) as one of Time’s followers. Therefore, this newfound bareness points to a new lack of agency he has with respect to time. Egeon accepts his role as “bareheaded” both by accepting his lack of time left to live, as he does not resist the sentence from this entrance on, and by submitting to time’s limitations—specifically, he did not have enough time to do all things, as seven years was not enough time for him to find his son.

However, the most powerful reference to hair is delivered forty lines after this entrance by a messenger:

My master and his man are both broke loose  
 Beaten the maids a-row and bound the doctor  
 Whose beard they have singed off with brands of fire;  
 [...]  
 My master preaches patience to him and the while

His man with scissors nicks him like a fool (V.1.169-175).

Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus have finally overcome the physical irrationalities of the play by escaping from the doctor and maids and by discovering the truth about the situation; however, they do not simply escape. First, they remove the beard from this doctor with fire, a fairly aggressive method. Yet, simply removing beard hair (which more than other hair represents youth and virility) does not go far enough to correct their loss of time in the play, which was caused by the physical irrationalities that put them under this doctor's care in the first place. So, then, while Antipholus "preaches patience" to the doctor, a term invoking both the suffering he is enduring and the temporal aspect of wasting the doctor's time, Dromio cuts the doctor's hair to be like that of a fool. This artificial baldness, as opposed to the natural loss of hair that comes with old age, shows that Antipholus and Dromio go beyond taking the time of others, such as the bounded doctor or beaten maids. Further, they completely reject this abstract irrationality, time's limitation. As they cannot regain their own time, like they cannot regain their own hair, the duo takes as much agency from time as they can in the form of removing hair artificially.

Therefore, Shakespeare has used an extended joke, a seemingly uninteresting or irrelevant section of text, superficially about baldness, within the context of a complex play, in order to set up a symbol of hair that can be used to think about other major themes, such as time, rationality, and—in the end—agency. By setting up this background for the diverging connotations of baldness early on in the play, and returning to it in the final act, Shakespeare expertly plants the terminology in our ears, and we are not surprised, but are rather intrigued, by the use of this language when it returns.

*Author Commentary*

Eric Flora

This excerpt is from my essay “Hair as Time in *The Comedy of Errors*, which was written for Bradin Cormack’s “Shakespeare I” class. In such a physical play as *The Comedy of Errors*, it can sometimes be difficult for a reader to find evidence to support more global frameworks of thinking within the play. In the essay, I take note of the use of hair — or the lack thereof — in disparate scenes of the play in order to ultimately comment on the concepts of time and agency.

In my experience with Shakespeare more generally, I’ve found that even the plays that are seemingly less-nuanced and lesser-known (in this case, earlier written) can be important sites for analyzing how Shakespeare uses specific language to motivate larger themes. I try to focus my shorter papers, like this five-page midterm assignment, on close-reading a text; the process for me typically goes one of two ways—I either read through the text and hone in on one significant passage, or I take note of anything mentioned multiple times in a work that is not clearly motivated. In this case, my experience was the latter, as I noticed the use of language concerning hair in multiple scenes without reading a clear motive for their use or an obvious connection between them.

The most crucial thing I learned about close-reading from writing this paper is the importance of the shift from observation to analysis. It’s not difficult to notice that something like hair recurs in the play, purely as an observation. However, it can be hard to understand how it might represent something else, like time. It’s even harder to theorize *how* that representation operates in the play (as I argue here, through agency). A less developed version of this paper gets the reader to see hair as a physical representation of time, but stops there.

*Editor Commentary*

Annabel Barry

In this paper written for “Shakespeare I”—a course which I was privileged to take alongside Eric—Eric demonstrates skill in close-reading, as he works to uncover an unexpected equivalence between the abstract concept of time and the physical feature of hair that is implied in a seemingly throwaway exchange between two characters in Act II of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*. Eric supports his analysis of a relatively small section of text by closely tracking the progression of its argument, identifying its literary techniques (stichomythia and personification) and considering multiple definitions of its key words, especially the word “bald.”

What is most impressive is not only the connection Eric reveals within the scene, but the way in which he uses this connection to analyze other mentions of hair and baldness across the play, revealing, in his own words, that the symbol of hair “can be used to think about other major themes, such as time, rationality, and—in the end—agency.” Eric’s paper is truly one where the analysis builds on itself, taking him from a relatively mundane symbol (hair) to a more abstract concept (time) and finally to the play’s central claims about the possibility of agency. This is the goal of a close-reading paper.

*The Comedy of Errors* is often considered one of Shakespeare’s less serious plays, due to its focus on what Eric calls “physical irrationalities”: its plot is driven by the existence of two separate sets of identical twins, a fact which creates multiple episodes of mistaken identity that devolve into slapstick comedy. In this paper, Eric starts with the jokes and—with some humor of his own—shows that they point to themes more serious than a casual reader or audience member would anticipate.

*Professor Commentary*

Bradin Cormack, Professor of English

A title like "Hair as Time" makes everyone sit up and pay attention, but it isn't going to work if the essay fails to live up to the provocation. Here, happily, the title is a capping gesture in an argument that Eric, playfully and thoughtfully, has made from inside the connections made by the text itself. His essay does not set out to prove a thesis about how the play uses hair to conceptualize time (and time's measurement). Instead, it explores that connection by drawing together, in dialogue with his central passage, other moments in the text where hair and bare-headedness accrue semiotic value in relation to the temporality of time's passing. I am struck in particular by how the essay begins to theorize the temporal character of genre, whether in relation to Egeon's tragic plot, where time is running out, or in relation to a comic plot, in which time (like Antipholus's beard) might be redeemed.

Close-reading is only as good as the idea or experience it helps to elucidate. One pleasure I take in reading Eric's paper is noticing how he thickens his idea as he goes along. A good thesis often signals where the argument is headed, without predicting in advance where it will end up. Eric's essay flourishes, not because it avoids a thesis (always a mistake), but because he has waited a while in his reading and writing to discover a thesis adequate to the play's own speculative mode of analysis. Governed by that kind of thesis, Eric's essay remains open to its own discoveries, which is also why it is so suggestive of other avenues of enquiry, of other things that *might* be said.

## Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Comedy of Errors*. Ed. Frances E. Dolan. *William Shakespeare, The Complete*

*Works*. Ed. Stephen Orgel and A.R. Braunmuller. Pelican, 2002. 185-207. Print.  
Oxford English Dictionary. "Bald." OED Online.

## Bios

**Eric Flora '19** is from Fredon, New Jersey. He is concentrating in English and pursuing certificates in Neuroscience and Gender & Sexuality Studies. Outside of his studies, he is a Residential College Advisor (RCA) in Mathey College. He wrote this as a junior.

**Annabel Barry '19** is an English concentrator from Southport, Connecticut, pursuing certificates in Humanistic Studies, European Cultural Studies, and Theater. Outside of her work in the Writing Center, she is co-editor-in-chief of *The Nassau Literary Review* and a set designer for theatrical productions on campus. She wrote this as a junior.