

Roman New Comedy itself, the way that it worked and the way that students/readers/audience members were taught to approach, understand, and learn from it. We know that in Ferrara, from 1486 onwards, and the performance of Plautus' *Menaechmi*, classical comedies, both in Latin and Italian translation, were performed regularly, alongside vernacular plays based on classical narratives. And so we might assume that many among Ariosto's original audience would appreciate and respond to the many sources at play.

We might equally assume that many among the audience at Gray's Inn would be similarly equipped to respond. In his study of *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, Colin Burrow makes a persuasive case for how Shakespeare shaped comedies written for Inns performances to first demonstrate awareness of, and secondly to develop, the shared anticipation of classical comedy among the audiences for *The Comedy of Errors* (Gray's Inn 1594) and *Twelfth Night* (Middle Temple in 1602). Acutely aware of the limits of his education among 'an audience of smartly Latinate young men',²³ Shakespeare explicitly demonstrates his knowledge of conventions in *Errors*, but was able to play more confidently with them by the time of *Twelfth Night*. Ironically, however, I would argue that it would not be quite the same case at Gray's Inn in the 1560s. Lorna Hutson envisages a similar audience to that which we might imagine watching *The Comedy of Errors*:

We need to recover the combination of knowingness and novelty and the sense of fun that would have greeted Gascoigne's play when it was first performed to an audience as well-versed in Latin comedy as the lawyers of the Inns.²⁴

I have written elsewhere, however, about the way that many of the literary figures that we associate with the Inns, men such as Gascoigne, were exceptional among their peers through their level of education, particularly the earlier we go backwards through the sixteenth century.²⁵ It is entirely likely that 'smartly Latinate young men' would actually have been in the minority, even at festive celebrations when the Inns would be visited by former members and connections. And while we have known, at least since Lisa Jardine's work on University

23. Burrow *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* 143.

24. Hutson 'The evidential plot' 247.

25. James McBain "'Attentive Mindes and Serious Wits": Legal Training and Early Drama' in *The Oxford Handbook of English Law and Literature, 1500–1700* edited Lorna Hutson (Oxford UP, 2017) 80–96.

curricula, that a decent level of Latin was a prerequisite for entry, there were no such requirements at the Inns.²⁶ It has previously been argued that the REED editors had, perfectly reasonably, made different assumptions about language dependent on location: that a lost ‘roman comedy’ at the Inns of Court is assumed to have been in English while the example of Peter Heylyn’s ‘English tragedy’ at Oxford is assumed to have been in Latin.²⁷ The possibility was raised that Heylyn’s work, and others, might well have been in English instead. But it is important to state that the argument does not work the other way around because there is simply no evidence of a tradition of Latin plays at the Inns.²⁸ Indeed, while there are interludes, plays, masques, revels, and disguisings, Gascoigne’s play is the earliest example of a formal comedy that we know of at one of the Inns, which obviously contrasts markedly with the Universities, with a tradition of regular comedies from the late 1520s onwards at Oxford and from 1510 at Cambridge.

I am not claiming that comedy would have been entirely new to the assembled audience at Gray’s Inn in 1566, of course, but I think that it would be fair to make the slightly more modest claim that the average law student would have far less experience of both Latin and vernacular learned comedy than the average student at one of the Universities. And, in case we are thinking that there would be too much of an overlap, it is worth recalling figures provided by Rosemary O’Day that in 1561, only 13% of men gaining admittance to one of the Inns had previously spent time at one of the Universities (the figure rises to 46% for 1581) and that a minority within the group had stayed long enough to have completed degrees.²⁹ We think of the Inns as being a particularly

26. See, for example, Lisa Jardine ‘Humanism and the Sixteenth Century Cambridge Arts Course’ *History of Education 4: 1* (1975) 16–31.
27. Stephanie Allen, Elisabeth Dutton, and James McBain ‘Rehabilitating Academic Drama’ in *The Routledge Research Companion to Early Drama and Performance* edited Pamela King (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017) 221–36.
28. In summarising plays known to have been performed at the Early Modern Inns, in the introduction to *REED: Inns of Court*, Alan Nelson states that ‘Inns of Court comedy is [now] represented uniquely by *Supposes*’, 1 xxi. Nelson then refers to the extant cast-list for the lost ‘roman comedy’, which suggests a hybrid performance in its combination of recognisable types (old man, parasite, courtesan), political figures (Clodius and Cato, for example), and the figure of ‘Melancholy’. The play, if it was ever produced, presumably did not rely on familiarity with authentic Latin models and was therefore very different from *Supposes*.
29. Rosemary O’Day *The Professions in Early Modern England, 1450–1800* (Harlow: Longman, 2000) 129.