



## The Comedy of Errors

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*The Comedy of Errors* opens with the threat of death. Aegeon, an elderly merchant from Syracuse, is condemned to death by the Duke of Ephesus because of enmity between the two cities. He wins the duke's sympathy by telling the story of how he was separated from his wife and one of his twin sons in a shipwreck many years before. Shakespeare intensifies an already complex plot, one that he borrowed from Plautus' *Menaechmi*, by adding two twin slaves, each serving a master who is himself a twin.

In the first of many coincidences, the son whom Aegeon reared, Antipholus of Syracuse, arrives in Ephesus with his slave Dromio. He is astonished when he encounters merchants and tradesmen who hand him gold chains or bills. After a woman he has never met insists upon taking him to her house for dinner and treating him like her husband, he concludes that the inhabitants of Ephesus are mad or possessed by witches.

In the last act, Antipholus of Syracuse takes refuge in a priory. When disaster seems imminent, the confusion is resolved, and Aegeon discovers that the Lady Abbess is his wife. Antipholus of Syracuse also has begun to court Luciana, the unmarried sister of his brother's wife, Adriana.

Even though the play ends happily, there is a suffering as well as humor in the problems which arise from the confused identities. By making the potential for violence and unhappiness quite vivid, Shakespeare makes the audience rejoice in the happy ending.

### Bibliography:

Baldwin, Thomas Whitfield. *On the Compositional Genetics of "The Comedy of Errors."* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1965. Likens Shakespeare to the Dromios, awed by their change from the rural to the urban.

Berry, Ralph. *Shakespeare and the Awareness of the Audience.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. Discusses the "dark underside" of the play, which enriches and compliments the comedy. Argues that Aegeon may be more important to the plot structure than he seems to be.

Colie, Rosalie L. *Shakespeare's Living Art.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974. Colie sees the plays as experiments with the craft of writing plays. Discusses Shakespeare's improving on Plautus.

Dorsch, T. S., ed. *The Comedy of Errors*, by William Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. This edition features a comprehensive introductory essay, with a brief look at history, sources, characters, and plot.

Tillyard, E. M. W. *Shakespeare's Early Comedies.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1965. One of the most noted of Shakespeare's commentators points out that Shakespeare probably did not read the Roman original for the play; the commentator focuses on a translated manuscript.

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