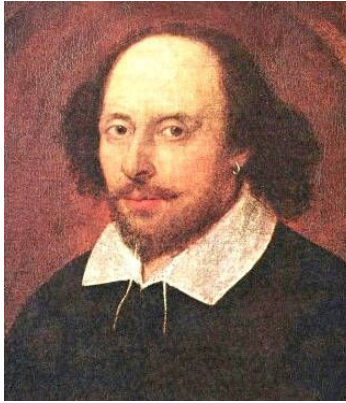


THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

by William Shakespeare



THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

The Comedy of Errors, based on the *Menaechmi* of Plautus, is a pure comedy of action, unadulterated with social criticism or character development. The slapstick physical comedy and witty badinage supply most of the humor for the audience. The play is one of Shakespeare's early comedies, though the first recorded performance was not until 1594. The references to the Spanish Armada and the war of France against her heir would suggest a date of initial composition as early as 1589, though no evidence exists for performance at such an early date. This must thus compete with other candidates for the honor of being Shakespeare's first dramatic effort.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Solinus - The Duke of Ephesus, he sentences Egeon to death, but gives him a day to raise the necessary ransom.
- Egeon - A merchant of Syracuse, father of the Antipholus twins, sentenced to death during a feud between Ephesus and Syracuse.
- Emilia - Wife of Egeon and mother of the twins who is now an Abbess in Ephesus.
- Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse - Twin brothers who are sons of Egeon but were separated in infancy by a shipwreck.
- Adriana - Wife of Antipholus of Ephesus.
- Luciana - Adriana's sister, she is beloved of Antipholus of Syracuse.
- Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse - Twin brothers who are servants of the Antipholus twins, likewise separated in infancy.
- Luce - Also known as Nell, she is the obese kitchen maid of Adriana who is the wife of Dromio of Ephesus.
- Angelo - A goldsmith in Ephesus, he makes a gold chain for Antipholus of Ephesus to give to his wife.
- Pinch - A schoolmaster who attempts an exorcism on the befuddled

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“He that commends me to mine own content
Commends me to the thing I cannot get.” (Antipholus of Syracuse, Iii, 33-34)

“Was there ever any man thus beaten out of season,
When in the why and the wherefore is neither rime nor reason?” (Dromio of Syracuse,
Iiii, 47-48)

“As from a bear a man would run for life,
So fly I from her that would be my wife.” (Dromio of Syracuse, IIIii, 152-153)

NOTES

Act I, scene 1 - When the play begins, the cities of Ephesus and Syracuse are feuding, and both have passed laws that any citizen of one city caught in the other will suffer death unless he pays a ransom of a thousand marks. Egeon, a merchant of Syracuse, has fallen afoul of this law, and,

lacking the requisite ransom, is sentenced to death by Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus. Egeon then tells his story - he had a prosperous merchant concern in Syracuse, but found it necessary to travel abroad to seek business. His pregnant wife followed him, and soon gave birth to twin boys. In the same inn on the same night, a poor woman also gave birth to twins, who were purchased by Egeon to be servants to his sons. They were caught in a storm while sailing for home, and he took one of each set of twins and his wife the other, lashing them to pieces of the mast. Each group was picked up by a different ship. When the boys reached the age of eighteen, they begged permission to seek their brothers, a task in which Egeon has been engaged for the last five years apart from them (and was thus unaware of the feud between the cities). Solinus takes pity on him and gives him until sunset to raise the necessary funds before executing sentence.

Act I, scene 2 - Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse are warned by a merchant to say they are from Epidamnum because of the feud. Antipholus gives Dromio a thousand gold marks to make arrangements at an inn called the Centaur, and tells the merchant he will meet him at five o'clock that evening. He begins to walk around the town, and soon encounters Dromio of Ephesus, mistaking him for his own servant. Dromio, who mistakes Antipholus of Syracuse for his master, tells him to hurry home for dinner because his wife is getting angrier by the minute. Antipholus demands of him the gold he had given him to pay the innkeeper, but Dromio denies all knowledge of it. Antipholus, of course, knows nothing of a wife. He beats Dromio for playing tricks on him, and the confused servant runs off to the Phoenix, his master's home, while Antipholus heads for the Centaur to try to solve the mystery of the thousand marks.

Act II, scene 1 - At the Phoenix, Adriana is complaining that her husband is late for dinner. Luciana, her sister, tells her to relax, that wives are always subject to the whims of their husbands. Adriana rebukes her for such a servile attitude and claims that is why she has never married, but Luciana insists that the real problem is the trouble associated with the marriage bed and argues that she would be patient if she had a husband. Adriana retorts that anyone can talk a good game who has never been married. Dromio of Ephesus then enters and reports that he had been beaten by his master, relating their strange conversation. When Adriana sends him back to fetch his master, he is reluctant to go lest he be beaten again, but she threatens to beat him if he *doesn't* go. Adriana now frets that her husband is seeking his pleasures elsewhere, and complains that if she has lost her good looks, her husband is responsible for making it so.

Act II, scene 2 - Antipholus of Syracuse has discovered that the gold he gave to his servant was brought safely to the Centaur and that Dromio has gone to seek him. When Dromio arrives, Antipholus rebukes him for his earlier denial of any knowledge of the money or the inn. Dromio, of course, denies having seen his master since he was sent to the inn earlier, and thinks he is joking. Antipholus responds by beating his servant. The two then exchange witty banter. Soon, Adriana and Luciana enter, and think they are seeing Adriana's husband and his servant. She accuses him of fooling around with another woman, and he swears he has never seen her before in his life, only having arrived in Ephesus two hours earlier. Luciana insists that Dromio had come to fetch him earlier and had been beaten for his pains, but Dromio denies all knowledge of such an incident. Antipholus, however, remembers the incident well and accuses Dromio of lying. Adriana charges Antipholus with cruelty for conspiring with his servant to play a joke on her, then takes Antipholus by the arm and begins to guide him home. Antipholus, thinking he must be

dreaming, decides to humor her. They go into the house for dinner, leaving Dromio to guard the gate.

Act III, scene 1 - Antipholus of Ephesus, with his servant, is arranging with Angelo the goldsmith to pick up the gold chain he had promised Adriana the next day. He meanwhile berates his servant for claiming that he had denied his home and family and beaten him over a thousand marks in gold. He then invites Angelo and Balthasar the merchant home for dinner, but finds the gate locked and tells Dromio to summon a servant to open the door. When Dromio calls for the servants, Dromio of Syracuse, who is guarding the gate from within, tells him to go away, and responds the same way when Antipholus demands entrance. When Dromio of Syracuse gives his name, Dromio of Ephesus accused him of identity theft. Luce, a servant, comes to the door and also denies entrance to her master; when Adriana comes to see what all the commotion is about, she does the same. Finally Antipholus threatens to break the door down, but Balthasar talks him out of it. Antipholus then decide to revenge him by having dinner at the Porpentine, the residence of a prostitute with whom his wife suspects him of being unfaithful. Furthermore, he tells Angelo to fetch the gold chain, intending to give it to the courtesan.

Act III, scene 2 - Meanwhile, Luciana is telling Antipholus of Syracuse that he ought to pay more attention to his wife, and that, if he must stray, at least do a better job of hiding it. She encourages him to make love to her sister, but he insists he has no wife, and begins to flirt with her, professing his love and causing her to think him mad. When he proposes marriage, she flees the room to fetch Adriana. Dromio then enters in a panic because Nell (also known as Luce), the fat, greasy kitchen maid, has been making amorous advances to him, claiming they were married and describing various hidden marks on his body. Antipholus then tells Dromio to go to the harbor and search out a ship so they can leave this madhouse of a town as quickly as possible. Angelo then enters and gives Antipholus of Syracuse the chain intended for Antipholus of Ephesus, telling him that he will return later for the payment.

Act IV, scene 1 - Another merchant approaches Angelo with a policeman, demanding payment that is overdue. Angelo promises that the exact sum will be paid him by Antipholus that evening in return for the gold chain. Antipholus of Ephesus and his servant then arrive from the Porpentine; he tells Dromio to go buy a rope, intending to beat his wife with it for locking him out of the house. Antipholus then berates Angelo for not bringing the chain to the Porpentine. Angelo presents him with the bill for the chain and tells him to pay the other merchant to whom he owes money. Antipholus says he doesn't have the money with him, but tells Angelo to take the chain to his house and get the money from his wife. Angelo protests that he has already given Antipholus the chain, but Antipholus denies ever having gotten it. Angelo then has the officer arrest Antipholus, swearing to bring the law down upon the head of the goldsmith. As the officer takes him away, Dromio of Syracuse arrives and tells Antipholus of Ephesus that a ship is waiting to take them hence. Antipholus says he made no such request, but told his servant to buy a rope. He then sends Dromio to Adriana to get money to bail him out of jail.

Act IV, scene 2 - Luciana has just told Adriana of the advances made to her by Antipholus of Syracuse, who she thought was her brother-in-law. Adriana asks for details, and Luciana admits she would have been convinced had the protestations of love been sincere. Adriana then speaks

all manner of evil against her husband, but admits she loves him just the same. Dromio of Syracuse then enters, demanding the purse to bail Antipholus of Ephesus out of jail.

Act IV, scene 3 - Antipholus of Syracuse enters, amazed that everyone he meets in the street seems to know him and treats him with kindness and generosity. Dromio of Syracuse then enters with the purse from Adriana, and Antipholus denies sending him for it. Dromio, meanwhile, wonders how his master got out of jail. Antipholus asks about the ship, and is told that one is ready to embark. The courtesan then appears, asks if Antipholus has the chain he promised her or the ring he had taken from her in exchange earlier in the day, and invites him home to dinner. When he refuses, she decides to go to Adriana, tell her what happened that afternoon, and hopefully get her ring back.

Act IV, scene 4 - Antipholus of Ephesus assures the jailer that his wife will send him enough money to bail him out, but when Dromio of Ephesus arrives, he brings with him nothing but a rope, with which Antipholus beats him. Adriana, Luciana, the courtesan, and Pinch the schoolmaster then enter, and Adriana asks Pinch to perform an exorcism to return her husband to his right mind. When he tries, Antipholus strikes him and asks Adriana if this was the man who ate his dinner, but she insists that he had eaten his own dinner. He replies that he had been shut out of his own house, and Dromio confirms it. Antipholus accuses her of talking the goldsmith into having him arrested, and she insists that she had sent money to bail him out by the hand of Dromio, which he, of course, denies. Pinch accuses both master and servant of being demon-possessed, and both are bound by the police. Adriana then says that she will be responsible for them, and Pinch and some others take Antipholus and Dromio home while Adriana and Luciana seek out Angelo to pay the debt. Adriana claims she never saw the chain, while the courtesan was told of it, saw it in Antipholus of Syracuse's possession, but never received it. When they almost immediately encounter Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, they think the prisoners have escaped in their madness. When the women flee, Antipholus determines to leave town immediately, while Dromio argues that Ephesus isn't really such a bad place after all - except for one kitchen maid, of course.

Act V, scene 1 - Angelo and the other merchant are talking, amazed that one with so good a reputation as Antipholus should fail to pay a debt, when Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse enter, with Antipholus wearing the chain. Antipholus admits having received the chain, but the second merchant insists that he had earlier denied it, and the two draw swords, prepared to fight a duel. Adriana stops them, tells them Antipholus and Dromio are mad, and tells the men to bind them again. The two flee into a nearby priory. The Abbess meets Adriana at the door and asks the nature of her business. Adriana says her husband is mad because of love for another woman. The Abbess asks if she confronted him about it, and she says that she did so constantly. The Abbess responds that he was driven mad, not by unfaithfulness, but by her jealous nagging. Adriana wants to bring her husband home, but the Abbess insists on treating him herself, and will not allow anyone to enter the sanctuary of the priory. Adriana decides to appeal to the Duke for the release of her husband. As the clock strikes five, the Duke enters with Egeon, about to be beheaded for the offense with which the play began. Adriana tells the story of her husband's mad behavior and begs the Duke to secure his release. A messenger then enters and says that the prisoners have escaped and are abusing Pinch, burning his beard, putting out the fire by dumping

excrement on his head, and cutting his beard with scissors. Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus soon run toward them, confusing all those who know them to be hiding out in the priory. Egeon quickly recognizes his son and his servant. Antipholus accuses Adriana of shutting him out of his house, which she denies, supported by Luciana, while Angelo backs up Antipholus. The latter tells the Duke his story, but Angelo insists that Antipholus had received the chain, while Antipholus denies ever having drawn a sword on the second merchant. Egeon asks Antipholus if he recognizes him, which he does not; when Egeon tells him he is his father, Antipholus insists that he has never seen his father. The Abbess then brings out the other twins and the mystery is unraveled - even more so when the Abbess reveals herself as Egeon's long-lost wife. She tells him that the boys she had taken with her were captured by pirates during the voyage, and that she has no idea what became of them. The parents are reunited, the confusion is resolved, the merchants are paid, Antipholus of Syracuse is free to court Luciana, and Dromio of Syracuse is delivered from the attentions of the fat kitchen maid. The entire company retires to hear the telling of the tales of their long separation.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* contains three sets of siblings. Even though two sets are twins, each character is a distinct individual. Compare and contrast each set of siblings, giving special attention to the distinguishing character traits that separate the brothers and sisters.
2. Discuss the rationalizations the characters in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* give for the confusion enveloping their lives. What explanations do they advance? How credible are these explanations? What do they say about the culture that provides the context of Shakespeare's dramatic career?
3. Unlike Shakespeare's later comedies, the confusion in *The Comedy of Errors* does not result from someone in the cast pulling the strings - the play contains no Prospero, no Puck, no Iago. What is the effect of this seemingly-undirected chaos on the audience? Does it generate feelings of superiority, since they know what the characters in the play do not, or is Shakespeare saying that the confusion of our lives is ultimately undirected? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
4. Compare and contrast the use of mistaken identity as a comic device in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*. Consider both how the device is used and how it contributes to the plots and themes of the two plays.
5. Evaluate the view of marriage presented in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* from a biblical perspective. While the focus of your essay should be on the relationship between Antipholus of Ephesus and Adriana and the comments on that relationship made by Luciana, consider also the marriage of Egeon and Emilia.

6. In William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, the two leading female characters, Adriana and her sister Luciana, represent the before-and-after characteristics ascribed to Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Which of the two views of womanhood does the playwright favor? Consider both the speeches throughout the play and the ending in developing your essay.
7. Magic is often mentioned in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, not only in the incident involving the charlatan Pinch, but also in attempts to explain the bizarre occurrences that confuse the characters in the play. How does this idea contribute to the theme of the play, and what does it say about the worldview of Shakespeare's audience? Keep in mind that a biblically-literate audience would have remembered that the city of Ephesus in the book of Acts was a hotbed of sorcery.
8. While the setting of William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* is ancient Ephesus, the play is full of anachronisms. What is the function of these elements that are more part of Shakespeare's world than the world of antiquity? Choose three specific anachronisms found in the play and relate them to themes or main idea communicated by the playwright.
9. Discuss the significance of the frame story in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. Why did Shakespeare choose to place his raucous farce in the context of impending doom and potential tragedy? Would the play have been as meaningful had he simply let the confusion of mistaken identities move toward its inevitable conclusion but eliminated the threat to the life of Egeon? Why or why not?
10. William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* is full of comic violence, though no one is ever seriously hurt. Why does Shakespeare include them? Why is this violence funny? Evaluate biblically the response of the audience to acts of comic violence on stage, and support your assessment with specific incidents from the play.
11. During the course of William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, the visitors from Syracuse express widely varying opinions of the city of Ephesus. Are these varying assessments related more to the characters who express them or the developments of the plot? What do they communicate about the playwright's view of a worthy society?
12. The appearance of the Abbess at the end of William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* functions as a sort of *deus ex machina*, resolving all the conflicts through a totally unexpected and unpredictable plot element. In your opinion, does this detract from the ending of the play or make it more satisfying? Why? If you think it detracts, what ending do you think would have been more satisfactory?
13. Consider the staging required by William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. Ideally, the cast should include two sets of identical twins, but this is generally impractical. On the other hand, one actor cannot play both brothers in either set because they appear on stage together at the end. How, as a director, would you manage this casting problem in order to enable the audience most easily to grant a willing suspension of disbelief?

14. Discuss the issue of identity as it appears in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. The confusion created by the two sets of twins leads the four of them, as well as others in the play, to question who they really are, and in the process to question their own sanity. In your essay, consider the relationship between a person's identity and the way he is perceived by others, using specific incidents and quotations from the play to support your discussion.
15. According to Aristotle, the three basic unities of time, place, and action must be observed in a well-structured play. To what extent are these three unities observed in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*? How do these unities affect the audience's perception of and enjoyment of the play?
16. In William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, the audience enjoys something close to a third-person omniscient perspective, understanding far more than the characters what is really going on in the story. Suppose instead that such a perspective was lacking, and that the story was being told from the perspective of one of the Antipholus brothers (choose one for purpose of your essay). How would the narrative be different? Would the story be as funny? Why or why not?
17. William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* moves the central characters from a state of estrangement and alienation to one of harmony and community. What kinds of alienation does the play portray, and how do these forms of alienation damage both society and the individual? What does the play therefore suggest about the elements necessary for a harmonious society? What does the Bible teach about the importance of man being in a state of harmony with the society around him? Use specifics from the play and from Scripture to support your discussion.
18. William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* begins with and creates a whole series of broken relationships - between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children, and man and society. The play is set in Ephesus, and, ironically, it is in Paul's letter to the Ephesians that he gives instructions for creating and sustaining family and societal harmony. To what extent is Shakespeare's solution for the broken relationships in the story the same as that given by Paul? Do you see any significant differences?
19. Discuss the role of fate in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. To what extent are the characters in control of what happens to them, and to what extent are they the victims of circumstances beyond their control? What message do you think the playwright is communicating through his treatment of this theme? Evaluate his assessment of human life in the light of Scripture.
20. Discuss the use of the ideas of illusion and reality in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. To what extent does the inability to distinguish between illusion and reality provide the basis for the comic impact of the play? Compare this to the more-developed treatment of the same idea in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

21. Nineteenth-century critic Denton Snider, in his essay on William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, drew from it the serious point that true identity can only exist in relationship to society and in the context of an ethical universe. How does the play illustrate Snider's point? Support your discussion with specifics from the play and evaluate his idea from the Bible.