



[The Comedy of Errors](#), by William Shakespeare

In A Nutshell

The Comedy of Errors is – you guessed it – a comedy by William Shakespeare written in 1594. The play is about two sets of identical twins separated as infants, and the absurdity surrounding their accidental reunion. Since this play appears early along Shakespeare's writing timeline, critics tend to dismiss it as his more juvenile work. It seems "textbook" in a way we're not really used to with Shakespeare – it draws from two earlier classical plays, and has a unity of time, place, and action that only appears once more in Shakespeare's entire portfolio. The play is definitely full of foolishness and frippery, and that lack of deep content, combined with its "by-the-book" writing, often leads critics to conclude there's nothing more to this play than Shakespeare working out a couple of his writing kinks as an amateur playwright.

To dismiss this play, however, is to fail to realize the importance of *The Comedy of Errors* in view of Shakespeare's other works. The play's first recorded performance takes place on December 28, 1594, as part of the raucous and disorderly Christmas festivities at Grey's Inn. Shakespeare and his company were still relatively new to the theater scene, and the fact that they were asked to play at Grey's Inn, one of the courtly venues, before a big-deal crowd, is pretty significant. Shakespeare's decision to draw on the erudite classics, and to preserve the three theatrical unities (time, space, and action), might be the playwright proving he could master the traditional form before altering it (as he does in his later plays). It's like how Picasso, revered for his abstraction art, was initially a classical portrait painter.

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It's also important that Shakespeare was trying to draw on his audience's knowledge of theater by combining two plays from antiquity in the plot of *The Comedy of Errors*. The story of separated twins comes from Plautus's *Menaechmi*, while the separated servants motif comes from another Plautus play called *Amphitruo*. Shakespeare didn't only borrow from these classical plays, he built them up, too – by taking out some of the more absurd and one-dimensional characters and replacing them with deeper, *feeling* players. In Plautus, the equivalent of E. Antipholus's wife has no name. Additionally, Egeon, instead of being portrayed as the stereotypical meddling parent, received a sympathetic "makeover" as a tragic and abandoned father by Shakespeare's pen.

With an eye to the classics, it's also important that the comedy isn't as farcical in its foundations as some would think. Critic Anne Barton points out that behind every Roman tragedy, there's a Greek one as a foundation. She notes that Greek comedy writers, like Menander and his contemporaries in 4 BC, would not think of children separated at birth as such a big stretch. In fact, those men were writing during the great Hellenistic wars, when "children were often 'lost' by parents too poor or too distracted to cope with them at the time of their birth, and where free citizens could become slaves overnight." Separation, unwanted children, and geographical transience were realities in the Greek world. That trope didn't survive as anything more than absurd in the later Roman interpretations of the play, but knowing that the Greek is at the root of the story makes Shakespeare's play a little less farcical and a little more poignant.

One last noteworthy aspect of this play is that the only other Shakespeare play to employ the three theatrical unities (time, place, and action) is actually *The Tempest*, which is thought to be Shakespeare's final play. In this way, his introduction to comedy writing, as well as his exit, become bookends, marking his playwriting career. That is to say, when he first needed to

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make a point of his entry, he used the classic form, and he also employed it for his profound farewell to playwriting.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Does *The Comedy of Errors* seem like the work of an amateur? How does this play differ from Shakespeare's other comedies? Does it seem like a sketch of any other play, like *Twelfth Night* or *Pericles*? What do you really think Shakespeare was trying to achieve with this work?
- 2 Why does S. Antipholus seem so content to abandon his father to go looking for his mother and brother? He seems to be leaving a sure family connection to chase after a slim chance. Is his journey really about finding his lost family members, or is there something greater or graver at work? Can S. Antipholus's self-proclaimed isolation be explained by anything beyond his lost family? Is there a sense that his isolation is over at the play's resolution?
- 3 What role do the Dromios play? They seem much abused by both Antipholuses, but they also provide camaraderie to the men. It's curious that Egeon and Aemilia chose to separate the boys during the shipwreck, rather than keep them in their biological pairs. Does Shakespeare just do it this way to keep the plot afloat, or can it be argued that the boys' attendants actually serve another important role in the play?

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