

**A Guide to
THE COMEDY OF ERRORS**

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *The Comedy of Errors* in or around 1594, when he was about thirty years old. He had arrived in the London theatre world relatively recently, probably in the late 1580s, as a novice actor; however, while continuing to play smaller roles, he soon turned to writing, and quickly made his mark as a dramatist. His fame was such that, in 1592, a fellow playwright scathingly described the provincial newcomer, who lacked a university education, as ‘an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers’.

The Comedy of Errors is fast-paced and tightly constructed; it is Shakespeare’s shortest play, and the action takes place in the course of a single frantic afternoon. It seems to have been an immediate success, and the phrase ‘a comedy of errors’ soon became proverbial for any series of mistakes and misunderstandings.

Over the years, however, the play fell out of favour. Many critics considered the plot – which involves two sets of identical twins – too farcical and lightweight to merit serious attention. Numerous adaptations were created, in which the play was variously rewritten, reordered, abridged, and set to music, but the original play was not performed again for over two hundred years after the author’s death.

It was not until the twentieth century that the play was recognised as a brilliant, complex comedy, the work of an accomplished playwright who, even at the start of his career, had adapted material from classical and biblical origins and given it his own distinctive stamp:

“The Comedy of Errors is an exceptionally skilful composition, wrought from a variety of dramatic and nondramatic sources, judiciously selected and blended ... The radical mix of romance, farce and domestic comedy into such a coherent whole is unique not only among Shakespeare’s works, but in the dramatic literature of his age.”

Charles Whitworth, Introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare edition of *The Comedy of Errors*, 2002

An enigma

A stranger has arrived in the city of Ephesus. Coming originally from Syracuse, hundreds of miles away, he has been travelling for many years.

The visitor has only been in Ephesus for a short time, but now finds himself in grave danger; indeed, he faces a possible death sentence. As the play begins, the man is being questioned sternly by the Duke of Ephesus, who makes it clear that he has no intention of showing leniency.

The captive, however, seems strangely resigned to his fate. Who is this man, and what is his crime? What, or who, has he been searching for on his long, thankless voyage? And why is he so ready to accept the duke's fatal verdict?

Curtain up

An unwelcome stranger

I, i

Egeon, a merchant from Syracuse, is in serious trouble. He has been arrested in the city of Ephesus, far from his homeland, and brought before the authorities.

Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus, is addressing the captive solemnly, and is about to hand down his sentence. Egeon, however, seems unafraid. If he suffers the ultimate punishment, he says, it will bring his worries to an end:

Egeon: Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall,¹
And by the doom² of death end woes and all.

¹ *bring about my downfall*

² *sentence, penalty*

Egeon's crime, it emerges, is simply that he, a Syracusan, has set foot in Ephesus. Following the recent execution of a number of innocent Ephesian merchants in Syracuse, the duke tells him, relations between the two cities have become extremely hostile. The duke is not disposed to show any mercy:

Duke: ... I am not partial to infringe¹ our laws.
The enmity and discord which of late
Sprang from the rancorous outrage of your duke
To merchants, our well-dealing countrymen,²
Who, wanting guilders to redeem their lives,
Have sealed his rigorous statutes with their bloods,³
Excludes all pity from our threatening looks ...

¹ *I am not inclined to go against*

² *the malicious cruelty shown by the Duke of Syracuse towards honest traders from Ephesus*

³ *who, lacking the money to pay their ransom, have lost their lives under the duke's merciless laws*

Trade between the two cities has been banned; even visiting the opposing city is punishable with a substantial fine. It is clear that Egeon does not have the means to pay, but he seems unconcerned when the duke spells out the consequences:

Duke: ... if any Syracusan born
Come to the Bay of Ephesus, he dies,
His goods confiscate to the Duke's dispose,¹
Unless a thousand marks be levied
To quit² the penalty and ransom him.
Thy substance,³ valued at the highest rate,
Cannot amount unto a hundred marks:
Therefore, by law thou art condemned to die.

Egeon: Yet this my comfort: when your words are done,
My woes end likewise with the evening sun.

¹ *surrendered to the duke to use as he wishes*

² *cancel*

³ *wealth, assets*

The duke now gives Egeon a chance to explain himself: why, despite the prohibition, has he risked his life by coming to Ephesus?

Shakespeare wrote *The Comedy of Errors* at an early stage in his career as a playwright. However, although the play's basic plot was taken from a Roman comedy, familiar to most of the audience of his time, he was already adapting his source material in radical ways, mingling comic and tragic forms:

"These scarcely are the accents of comedy, let alone the knockabout farce soon to engulf us. But Shakespeare, who was to become the subtlest of all dramatists, already is very ambiguous in The Comedy of Errors."

Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 1998

A tale of woe

Egeon, weighed down with grief, can hardly bring himself to describe his circumstances. Nevertheless, he is determined to make it clear that the unhappy state he is now in was brought about by events beyond his control.

He confirms that he is from Syracuse, and married to a Syracusan woman. Their marriage was very happy: they were a prosperous couple, too, thanks to his regular trading voyages to the city of Epidamium. One day, however, his representative in Epidamium died, and Egeon had to travel to the city urgently to attend to his unguarded merchandise.

Some months later, Egeon's wife, heavily pregnant, came to join him in the foreign city. Soon afterwards, she gave birth to identical twin boys; and, by a bizarre coincidence, the same thing happened to another woman staying at the same lodgings. As she was a poor woman, Egeon offered to adopt her boys as servants to his own sons:

Egeon: That very hour, and in the self-same inn,
A meaner¹ woman was delivered
Of such a burden,² male twins, both alike.
Those, for³ their parents were exceeding poor,
I bought, and brought up to attend my sons.

¹ *lowlier, poorer*

² *also gave birth to two children*

³ *since*

Before long, at his wife's request, Egeon agreed to sail back to Syracuse with her and the four children, even though he was anxious about the voyage. His fears were realised when a storm arose soon after they had left Epidamium. As the sky darkened and the wind strengthened, the passengers grew more and more terrified. Finding that the crew had abandoned ship, Egeon and his wife, in desperation, tied themselves and their children to a long wooden beam. As the ship broke up in the storm, the beam floated away on the current with its precious cargo.

Finally the storm subsided and Egeon, to his relief, sighted two ships in the distance heading their way. However, his joy was short-lived. He cannot bring himself to say what happened next, but the duke urges him to continue. He is not unsympathetic to the merchant's plight:

Egeon: ... ere they came – O, let me say no more!
Gather the sequel by that went before.¹

Duke: Nay, forward, old man; do not break off so,
For we may pity, though not pardon thee.

Egeon: O, had the gods done so, I had not now
Worthily termed them merciless to us² ...

¹ *as you can imagine, what happened next was as disastrous as what had come before*

² *if only the gods had pitied us, I would not now be accusing them, justly, of cruelty*

Before their rescuers arrived, the beam carrying Egeon and his family crashed into a huge rock, and was violently split in two. Egeon watched in horror as his wife was swept away, along with one of their sons and one of their adopted boys, all clinging desperately to their piece of timber.

Eventually, both groups were picked up by the approaching ships. However, the two ships were headed for different destinations, and Egeon's rescuers, who were in a much slower vessel, did not attempt to catch up with the other ship, which sailed off into the distance. Eventually Egeon returned to Syracuse, with his one remaining son and one adopted boy. Since that fateful day, more than twenty years ago, Egeon has not seen his wife or the two boys that were with her.

The duke is curious to know what has happened in the intervening years. Egeon explains that as his son grew up he wanted to know more about his missing twin, and at the age of eighteen he set off with his servant, the adopted boy, who was equally keen to find his own lost brother. Both young men, he mentions, have taken the same name as their respective twins, wanting to keep the memory of their missing brothers alive.

Time passed, and Egeon heard no news of his son or the outcome of his voyage. Eventually, alone and bereft, Egeon decided to set out in search of his lost son. He has travelled far and wide, and was on his way back to his homeland of Syracuse when he decided to call at Ephesus:

Egeon: Five summers have I spent in farthest Greece,
Roaming clean through the bounds of Asia,¹
And coasting homeward came to Ephesus,
Hopeless to find, yet loath to leave unsought
Or that or any place that harbours men.²
But here must end the story of my life ...

¹ *wandering along the entire coastline of Asia Minor*

² *with no hope of finding my son, but unwilling to leave Ephesus or any other inhabited places unexplored*

The duke is adamant: the law must be respected, and Egeon's sentence cannot be changed. Despite this, he feels great compassion towards the unfortunate merchant, and declares that Egeon has the rest of the day to raise the funds necessary to save him from execution. Egeon, weary and despondent, does not expect to avoid his fate:

Duke: ... Yet will I favour thee in what I can.
Therefore, merchant, I'll limit thee this day
To seek thy hope by beneficial help.¹
Try all the friends thou hast in Ephesus;
Beg thou or borrow to make up the sum,
And live. If no, then thou art doomed to die.

Egeon: ... Hopeless and helpless doth Egeon wend,²
But to procrastinate his lifeless end.³

¹ *I'll allow you the rest of this day to find the ransom money with help from other people*

² *set out, wander*

³ *merely to postpone his inevitable death*

A strange coincidence

I, ii

In a street in Ephesus, two merchants are talking. One of them, a young man from Syracuse named Antipholus, has just arrived. His companion tells him that he must not mention his home city; earlier today, he warns, a merchant from Syracuse was sentenced to death, and will be executed this evening if he cannot pay his ransom.

The local merchant has been safeguarding a purse full of money belonging to Antipholus. He now returns it to the Syracusan, who in turn hands it to his servant Dromio, instructing him to take it to the Centaur, the inn where they are staying while in Ephesus.

Dromio hurries off to the Centaur. It is midday, and Antipholus asks his friend if he wishes to come to the inn for lunch. The merchant has another appointment, but promises to meet Antipholus in the marketplace later in the afternoon.

Antipholus tells his companion that he intends to do some sightseeing in Ephesus before lunch. However, when the merchant leaves it emerges that Antipholus has a different reason for wishing to explore the city:

Antipholus of Syracuse: I will go lose myself,
And wander up and down to view the city.

Merchant: Sir, I commend you to your own content.¹ [*Exit.*]

Antipholus of Syracuse: He that commends me to mine
own content

Commends me to the thing I cannot get:
I to the world am like a drop of water
That in the ocean seeks another drop;
Who, failing there to find his fellow forth,
Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.²
So³ I, to find a mother and a brother,
In quest of them, unhappy, lose myself.

¹ *I will leave you to do as you please*

² *who, failing to find what he is looking for, disappears in confusion, his quest unfulfilled*

³ *in the same way*

The Ephesus of the play was a Greek city-state in Asia Minor (now Turkey), a trading port famous for its wealth. It was the site of the magnificent Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Shakespeare's audience would have been familiar with the name, and would have associated it with paganism and witchcraft: several passages in the Bible describe Saint Paul's encounters with sorcerers and exorcists there, as well as traders selling images of the goddess Artemis. This mixture of money, business, sorcery and trickery pervades the atmosphere of *The Comedy of Errors*.

It now becomes clear: Antipholus is none other than Egeon's son, who left Syracuse many years ago, at the age of eighteen, in search of his twin brother and his mother.

Like Egeon, he is longing to find the rest of his family, from whom he was separated in the cruel shipwreck when he was still a baby: and his search has brought him, like Egeon, to Ephesus.

The plot thickens

Antipholus's servant Dromio, who lost his twin brother in the same shipwreck, was born on the same day as Antipholus. Seeing him often reminds Antipholus of the circumstances of his own birth. He is surprised to see Dromio return now, despite his instruction to wait at the Centaur and guard the money entrusted to him:

Antipholus of Syracuse: Here comes the almanac of my true date.¹
– What now? How chance thou art returned so soon?

¹ *the man who, like a calendar, reveals my age and date of birth*

Dromio is baffled by the question. Instead of answering, he scolds his master for his lateness; lunch is ready and waiting.

The lady of the house is in a terrible temper, and she has taken her anger out on her servant:

Dromio of Ephesus: ... The clock hath stricken twelve upon the bell;
My mistress made it one¹ upon my cheek.
She is so hot because the meat is cold;
The meat is cold because you come not home ...

¹ *has struck me once*

Antipholus is equally baffled. He is in no mood for Dromio's eccentric prattling, and demands to know why he has abandoned his master's precious purse at the Centaur:

Antipholus of Syracuse: I am not in a sportive¹ humour now;
Tell me, and dally not:² where is the money?
We being strangers here, how dar'st thou trust
So great a charge from thine own custody?³

¹ *playful, light-hearted*

² *don't waste time*

³ *how dare you leave such a large sum of money unguarded?*

Dromio repeats his request: his master is late for lunch, and everyone in his household is waiting impatiently for his return. Antipholus, who has only just arrived in Ephesus, is irritated by his servant's nonsensical claims:

Antipholus of Syracuse: Come, Dromio, come, these jests are out of season;

Reserve them till a merrier hour than this.

Where is the gold I gave in charge to thee?

Dromio of Ephesus: To me, sir? Why, you gave no gold to me!

Antipholus of Syracuse: Come on, sir knave, have done your foolishness,

And tell me how thou hast disposed thy charge.¹

Dromio of Ephesus: My charge was but to fetch you from the mart²

Home to your house, the Phoenix, sir, to dinner;

My mistress and her sister stays for you.

¹ *carried out your task (of storing my money safely)*

² *marketplace*

There are plenty of gratuitous beatings in *The Comedy of Errors*. One critic suggests that Shakespeare – possibly against his will – included an element of knockabout, slapstick violence in his early plays to satisfy the demands of his audience:

“When the first regular theatres were built, they were used not only for the playing of interludes, but for all those activities which had previously been displayed either on raised scaffolds or within improvised spaces in the fields. The citizens delighted in exhibitions of juggling, tumbling, fencing, and wrestling; and these were also provided by the drama. Shakespeare is profuse in his concessions to the athletic interest ... The Comedy of Errors is noisy with beatings and the outcries of the victims. All these things were imposed upon Shakespeare by the tastes and habits of his patrons, and by the fashions of the primitive theatre. It was on this robust stock that his towering thought and his delicate fancy were grafted.”

Walter Raleigh, *Shakespeare*, 1957

Eventually, Antipholus strikes his servant in frustration, and Dromio runs off in fright. There can only be one explanation for Dromio’s bizarre behaviour, Antipholus believes. The rumours that he has heard about Ephesus must be true:

Antipholus of Syracuse: Upon my life, by some device¹ or other
The villain is o’er-raught of all my money.²
They say this town is full of cozenage³ –
As,⁴ nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,
Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,
Soul-killing witches that deform the body ...

¹ *trick, scheme*

² *someone has outwitted my servant, and fooled him into handing over all my gold*

³ *deception, fraud*

⁴ *such as*

Concerned for the security of his money, Antipholus hurries off to the Centaur.

Two views of marriage

II, i

The truth has not dawned on Antipholus. Unbeknown to him, his long-lost twin has settled here in Ephesus, along with his servant. The two men are named Antipholus and Dromio; it was from them, in fact, that the two Syracusans took their names, in honour of their missing brothers.

The puzzling encounter that Antipholus has just had was not with his own servant but with his identical twin, Dromio of Ephesus. This Dromio is now on his way back home, to the Phoenix, where the lady of the house, Adriana, is growing increasingly impatient; it is now two o'clock. She is discussing her husband's lack of punctuality with her sister Luciana.

Luciana takes a more tolerant view of her brother-in-law's negligence. Perhaps he has gone to lunch with one of his fellow merchants, she suggests. Men tend to come and go as they please:

Luciana: Good sister, let us dine, and never fret.
A man is master of his liberty;
Time is their master, and when they see time¹
They'll go or come: if so, be patient, sister.

¹ *when they feel the time is right*

Adriana is irritated by her sister's attitude. It is not right that one person in a marriage should be controlled by the other, she feels. Luciana insists that failure to conform to her husband's wishes will only lead to discontent:

Adriana: Why should their liberty than ours be more?

Luciana: Because their business still lies out o'door.¹

Adriana: Look when I serve him so, he takes it ill.²

Luciana: O, know³ he is the bridle of your will.

Adriana: There's none but asses will be bridled so.

Luciana: Why, headstrong liberty is lashed with woe.⁴

¹ *their business always takes them out and about*

² *when I act as I please, he takes offence*

³ *you must be aware*

⁴ *wilful disobedience results in unhappiness*

The dominance of males is part of the natural order of things, Luciana believes. Adriana argues that her sister's subservient attitude has prevented her from finding a husband. On the contrary, retorts Luciana, it is the discord that is evident in Adriana's marriage to Antipholus that has put her off. If Luciana were married, she would accept everything, she claims, even infidelity:

Adriana: This servitude makes you to keep unwed.

Luciana: Not this, but troubles of the marriage bed.

Adriana: But were you wedded, you would bear some sway.¹

Luciana: Ere² I learn love, I'll practise to obey.

Adriana: How if your husband start some otherwhere?³

Luciana: Till he come home again, I would forbear.⁴

¹ *wield some influence*

² *before*

³ *runs off in a different direction; is unfaithful*

⁴ *remain calm and patient*

Saint Paul's letter to the Church at Ephesus, one of the best known books of the New Testament, would certainly have been familiar to an audience of Shakespeare's day. It covered, among other subjects, the nature of domestic relationships.

Luciana's attitude reflects Saint Paul's teachings, but the scene as a whole paints a more nuanced picture:

"It was in his Letter to the Ephesians that Paul exhorted children to obey their parents, servants their masters, and wives their husbands. The action of the play seems to call these demands into question: how can you obey your parents when they are lost, or your master when he gives you contradictory orders? And should a woman obey her husband when he is unworthy of her?"

Jonathan Bate, Introduction to the RSC Shakespeare edition of *The Comedy of Errors*, 2011

Adriana is scornful of her sister's naïve view of marriage. It is easy for her to talk of obedience and acceptance: if she marries, and finds herself troubled by her husband's unreliability, she will no doubt take a different view. One day, replies Luciana, she may give marriage a try, just to find out.

A heartfelt complaint

Dromio now returns to the Phoenix. Adriana demands to know why he has not brought her husband back with him, but his answers are ambiguous. He found Antipholus in the marketplace as instructed, but the encounter was confusing and painful:

Adriana: ... is your tardy¹ master now at hand?²

Dromio of Ephesus: Nay, he's at two hands with me, and that my two ears can witness.

Adriana: Say, didst thou speak with him? Knowst thou his mind?

Dromio of Ephesus: Ay, ay, he told his mind upon mine ear; Beshrew his hand, I scarce could understand it.³

¹ *late, unpunctual*

² *nearby, approaching*

³ *he made his feelings clear when he slapped my ears, but I still didn't know what he meant*

All that his master wanted to talk about was his gold, reports Dromio: he was not interested in his lunch, his wife or his house. Adriana orders Dromio to stop his foolery and go back to the marketplace to fetch Antipholus.

Dromio, fearful of another beating from Antipholus, begs Adriana to send some other messenger: however, the result is another beating, this time from the exasperated Adriana, and Dromio runs away indignantly.

Luciana cannot help noticing that her sister is in a particularly troubled frame of mind. The reason for Adriana's distress at her husband's lateness now becomes clear: she confesses that she suspects him of spending time with other women. She feels unloved, and believes that the lack of attention from her husband has made her duller and less attractive:

Adriana: His company must do his minions grace,¹
Whilst I at home starve for a merry look.
Hath homely age th'alluring beauty took
From my poor cheek? Then he hath wasted it.
Are my discourses² dull? Barren my wit?
If voluble and sharp discourse be marred,
Unkindness blunts it more than marble hard.³

¹ *he lavishes his attention on his darlings*

² *conversations*

³ *if my conversation is no longer fluent and quick-witted, it's because it has been blunted by his negligence*

Even her clothes, she complains, are not as eye-catching as those of her rivals; this too is her husband's fault, as he is in charge of their money. Above all, she wishes that he would be more considerate and loving towards her. Luciana rebukes her sister for her unfounded jealousy:

Adriana: My decayed fair¹
A sunny look of his would soon repair.
But, too-unruly deer, he breaks the pale²
And feeds from home;³ poor I am but his stale.⁴
Luciana: Self-harming jealousy! Fie, beat it hence.

¹ *my fading beauty*

² *fence, enclosure*

³ *gratifies his desires away from home*

⁴ *to him, I am nothing more than a worthless, worn-out mistress*

Adriana mentions that her husband has promised her a necklace. She would gladly do without it, she tells her sister, if Antipholus would instead treat her with more consideration.

His company must do his minions grace ...

At some point in the 1580s, William Shakespeare took the momentous decision to leave Stratford-upon-Avon and pursue a career in the rapidly growing but precarious world of London theatre. He was in his twenties, and already married with three children. He was living, with his new family, in his father John's house. In all probability he was providing much-needed help in his father's glove-making workshop; John Shakespeare's shady business dealings had by now brought him to the verge of bankruptcy.

One critic has speculated that Adriana's complaints may echo the sentiments that Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, would have expressed at her husband's reckless decision:

"Here was the eldest son and potential prop of the family of John Shakespeare, here a husband and father of three, abandoning his home, his work, his livelihood ... It is difficult to imagine Mistress Anne taking this resolve calmly. There would be little or no help from her now financially embarrassed father-in-law ... If Anne had a tongue, she had cause to use it now, when she saw him risking everything for a caprice or an ambition that seemed to her idle and absurd ... Some of his wife's bitterness against the new 'minions' who had lured him away to London may be heard, perhaps, in Adriana's cry."

Ivor Brown, *Shakespeare*, 1949

Another innocent victim

II, ii

Back in the marketplace, Antipholus of Syracuse is feeling relieved: he has been to the Centaur and found that his gold is safe and sound. He is puzzled, however, by his recent conversation with Dromio. How did his servant manage to take his purse back to the inn and reappear in front of him so quickly? Ephesus is a bewildering place.