

# Comedy of Errors

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## INTRODUCTION

ON the night of 28 December 1594, the Christmas revels at Gray's Inn±one of London's law schools±±became so uproarious that one performance planned for the occasion had to be abandoned. Eventually `it was thought good not to offer anything of account saving dancing and revelling with gentlewomen; and after such sports a comedy of errors (like to Plautus his *Menaechmus*) was played by the players. So that night was begun, and continued to the end, in nothing but confusion and errors; whereupon it was ever afterwards called 'The Night of Errors'.

This sounds like a reference to Shakespeare's play, first printed in the 1623 Folio, which is certainly based in large part on the Roman dramatist Plautus' comedy *Menaechmi*. As Shakespeare's shortest play, it would have been especially suited to late-night performance; there is no evidence that it was written for the occasion, but it may well have been new in 1594.

The comedy in *Menaechmi* derives from the embarrassment experienced by a man in search of his long-lost twin brother when various people intimately acquainted with that twin±±including his wife, his mistress, and his father±±mistake the one for the other. Shakespeare greatly increases the possibilities of comic confusion by giving the brothers (both called Antipholus) servants (both called Dromio) who themselves are long-separated twins. An added episode in which Antipholus of Ephesus' wife, Adriana, bars him from his own house in which she is entertaining his brother is based on another play by Plautus, *Amphitruo*. Shakespeare sets the comic action within a more serious framework, opening with a scene in which the twin masters' old father, Egeon, who has arrived at Ephesus in search of them, is shown under imminent sentence of death unless he finds someone to redeem him. This strand of the plot, as well as the surprising revelation that brings about the resolution of the action, is based on the story of Apollonius of Tyre which Shakespeare was to use again, many years later, in *Pericles*.

*The Comedy of Errors* is a kind of diploma piece, as if Shakespeare

were displaying his ability to outshine both his classical progenitors and their English imitators. Along with *The Tempest*, it is his most classically constructed play: all the action takes place within a few hours and in a single place. Moreover, it seems to make use of the conventionalized arcade setting of academic drama, with three 'houses'—the Phoenix, the Porcupine, and the Priory—represented by doors and signs on stage. The working out of the complexities inherent in the basic situation represents a considerable intellectual feat. But the comedy is humanized by the interweaving of romantic elements, such as Egeon's initial plight, the love between the visiting Antipholus and his twin brother's sister, Luciana, and the entirely serious portrayal of Egeon's suffering when his own son fails to recognize him at the moment of his greatest need. From time to time the comic tension is relaxed by the presence of discursive set pieces, none more memorable than Dromio of Syracuse's description of Nell, the kitchen wench who is 'spherical, like a globe'.