

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

A Comedy of Errors. 1588 Shakespeare

Overview. *The Comedy of Errors* is Shakespeare's first staged play, and has remained one of his most popular, taking its impulse from mistaken identity, and slapstick humor which has assured it a place of popular attention not only on stage but on television and film.

Distinctiveness. From the literary standpoint, this play is one of two Shakespearian plays—the other being *The Tempest*—which follows the prescription of Aristotle's *Poetics*, that the well made play should cover events occupying no more than twenty four clock hours. As a result, Shakespeare creates here a tightly packaged and conceptually compassed series of events, with a single focus and a single resolution. (Joyce's *Ulysses*, hundreds of pages long, pulls off the same trick, concentrating on a single day in one character's life, as Shakespeare concentrates on a single day in the life of Aegeon, a merchant of Syracuse—and all the rest of the characters. It might be added that within that tight compass Shakespeare plays early riffs on his most inventive theme—cf. the work out in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—of the interchangeability of character types, the dissolution of the individual in the universal. This rich perspective lies deeply in those Shakespearian tragedies, like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, which deploy characters of such great human viability that they seem at their most significant universal and not individual.

Characters

Aegeon, a merchant from Syracuse
Solinus, duke of Ephesus

Twin brothers, and sons of Aegeon and Aemilia

Antipholus of Ephesus
Antipholus of Syracuse,

Twin brothers, and servants of the two Antipholuses

Dromio of Ephesus
Dromio of Syracuse

Balthazar, a merchant
Angelo, a goldsmith

Aemilia, wife of Aegeon, an abbess in Ephesus
Adriana, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus
Luciana, her sister

STORY

A Syracusan merchant, violating the law which forbids Syracusans entry into Ephesus—and vice versa, on penalty of death—finds himself brought before the Duke of Ephesus, and charged with breaking this fatal law. To explain himself, Aegeon launches into the tale of his life, and the reason why he has infringed the law—he is seeking to find his wife, and his two twin sons, whom he lost long ago in a shipwreck, which separated him (and his son Antipholus) from his wife (Aemilia) and his other son, Antipholus (now of Ephesus). Antipholus (of Syracuse) explains that he is on the quest to find the other part of his family; having searched remote parts of Greece, for several years, he is now extending his inquiry into this coastal city of Ephesus, on the coast of Asia Minor. Touched by the elder man's story, the Duke agrees to give Aegeon one day to assemble the 1000 marks fine for infringement of the law; then the execution will take place.

Slapstick. The play, dear reader, is going to work out happily. The shipwrecked family is going to be reunited. But the comedy of errors, which lies between quest and finding, will devour the heart of the play. Once you see how it starts you will get the inherent logic: as Aegeon is in tense negotiations with the Duke, Antipholus of Syracuse is arriving, with his servant Dromio, to look for his twin brother—a major personal longing for this long separated twin.

Quest. Accompanied by his servant, Dromio, Antipholus checks in at a local inn, splits from Dromio, briefly, then goes out to walk around the town. In a few minutes, though, Antipholus meets Dromio again, and comments on the surprising fact that Dromio is returning so quickly to the inn. At this point the game is on. The servant Antipholus meets, so shortly after leaving his servant at the inn, is in fact the twin brother of his servant Dromio, the Dromio who currently lives in Ephesus, with his master, the twin brother of Antipholus. From this point on the confusion of twins and masters—two Antipholuses, two Dromios—will lead quickly into a comedy of errors. In the present, initial instance, Antipholus of Syracuse will demand to know, from Dromio of Ephesus, what Dromio has done with the money Antipholus has given him to deposit, while Dromio, correctly expressing his confusion, responds with the observation that Antiphalus' wife has dinner ready and is waiting for him.

Wrap-up. To make matters brief, Dromio of Ephesus returns to his mistress, reporting that her husband refuses to return for dinner, and that he pretended not even to know her. This shocking news kindles Adriana's suspicions about her husband's wandering eye, and she urgently tracks him down to assure him of her love for him. Antiphalus of Syracuse and Dromio of Syracuse go home with Adriana, at her invitation; one of them to dine, the other to watch the gate. When the real husband, Antiphalus of Ephesus, returns to his home, he finds himself locked out. The war between the sexes, exponentially multiplied by mistaken identities, leads up to a finale in which the Abbess, who turns out to be Aegeon's lost wife, identifies her husband, who is on his way to the gallows, saves him and explains the twins' identities, and brings a blissful family reunion into a tense and nearly fatal situation.

THEMES

Loss. A dramatic shipwreck heralds in the complete break between the two members of a couple, and their twinned sons and twinned servants. Each unit is rescued but loses the other—though in the end it turns out that the loss is temporary, and will be explained away. Shakespeare's comedies typically center around seeming loss, which is just unclarity or uncompletedness of information.

Identity. Personal identity is constantly being mistaken in this play. The result of systematic error, which exists because the principal players are identical twins, is that we are reduced to thinking of identity as inherently questionable. As readers of Shakespeare we are used to the plays of disguise, and the horseplay depersonalizations which permeate this theatrical opus. In the present play we are reminded

that one person can in many cases simply be a replacement for another, rather than exemplification of the noble concept of 'personality.'

Time. The interlocked family, which reassembles by the end of this play, has by the end brought itself up against the sharp realization of the changes time wreaks. In Act Five, scene 1, ll. 110-120, Aegeus makes this change especially vivid, in addressing 'Time's extremity,' which in seven years has made his voice unrecognizable to his son. 'Yet hath my night of life some memory,' he says to himself, as a consolatory thought. His 'dull deaf ears' can penetrate the haze of time, which has all taken away all sharpness and clarity from his senses.

Resolution. With unique adroitness Shakespeare draws together the confused strands of this compact play. Much happens in the course of a day, to drown the participants in identity confusion, but it is as if this intricate sorting out process, slapstick in nature, is required before the assembled participants can 'find their groove again.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Aegeon

Character Shakespeare's comedy and problem plays, which *The Comedy of Errors* is, tend to avoid the 'main character' approach. A comedy, as we have seen since the time of Aristophanes, is a conservative type of play, in which the dramatist satirizes a social situation or behavior, with his emphasis on comic foibles, or, as in the play before us, on the intricate follies of the human condition, that 'human absurdity' Puck was out to perceive, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For all that, though, Aegeon is central in the play: it is he who presents the frame story to the Duke of Ephesus, at the beginning, and he who leads the way to group recognition at the end, and under pressure at that—for he is on his way to the gallows, when he sees Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus—his son and manservant—and the plot begins to break wide open.

Parallels Odysseus, in Homer's *Odyssey*, is twenty years away at the war, and on returning to his home island of Ithaca he has to pass through the kind of shock of recognition which is required for Aegeon, when he sees his son and servant—the Ephesus clan—as he is being led off to execution. Odysseus has to be sure who is who—his father, his son—and in fact his wife, Penelope, has to be sure of him, before she will plot with him to kill the suitors. It is as though a mist of half remembrance has to clear from his mind. Do you remember, then, when Rip van Winkle awakes in Washington Irving's *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*? After a long sleep he is suddenly—but also gradually—brought around to seeing the new world (he missed the American Revolution) that has replaced what is now the 'old world' in which he went to sleep. A variant on this kind of historical double take is Antonio Fogazzaro's pair of novels, *Piccolo Mondo Moderno* (1901), and *Piccolo Mondo Antico* (1895). In these fictions he plays past off against present, and one set of values against another.

Illustrative moments

Narrator. Caught illegally in Ephesus, Aegeon is sentenced to die that very day. The Duke of Ephesus, who pronounces sentence on him, gives him one day to collect his fine money, but while passing sentence gets caught up in Aegeon's story of shipwreck and family dispersal.

Paternal. It is not until his youngest boy questions the family history, and intensely wishes to find his brother, that Aegeon sets out on the years' long quest to find his remaining family.

Despairing. At the end of his initial interview with the Duke, Aegeon feels 'hopeless and helpless.' He has no idea where to turn, to acquire the necessary one thousand marks, to free himself from his sentence.

Perceptive. As he nears the end of his twenty four hour stay in Ephesus, Aegeon perceives a familiar face. He asks the Duke for permission to speak with what turns out to be Antipholus of Ephesus, his son.

Saddened. Inevitably, Aegeon is saddened to discover, at first, that his son does not recognize him. It is only when his wife the abbess identifies him that he is confident that all will work out.

Discussion questions

Does Shakespeare invest his emotions in *The Comedy of Errors*? Is he simply recreating a play by Plautus, whose *Menaechmi* establishes a similar plot, or is he making multiple points about *human nature, the coherence of the family, and the place of coincidence in human life*? You might pull apart these subtle issues.

Issue 1. There is something of Puck's flippant 'what fools these mortals be' in Shakespeare's attitude, especially in his comedies, toward 'what human nature is.'

Issue 2. The family sticks together, for sure, come hell or high water. Is it only Aegeon who has promoted the search for lost family? Or have other family members been part of the search? Is Aegeon driven by the desire of his son to find his brother, or is he following a personal need, to find out what has happened since the shipwreck took place? If any figure in the play represents intention it is Aegeon, while everyone else is snapshotted in the middle of daily life.

Issue 3. The place of coincidence in human life is naturally magnified by the extravagant place played by misunderstanding in the present play. (In a world where appearances do not deceive, what takes place seems firmly inscribed in the nature of things.) In *The Comedy of Errors* coincidence does not seem organically tied to the outcome of the play. It was not essential for Antipholus of Syracuse to be invited in as husband to the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus for the precise resolution to take place at play's end. Yet this confusion among the two Antipholuses is one way in which it is possible for the two halves of the family to have at least an erroneous sense of oneness with one another at the end. In this sense, the place of coincidence can be deeply constitutive to the course of human events.