

Introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*
by Elizabeth Nicol

Many years before our story begins, two sets of identical twins were born, one set to a wealthy merchant and one set to a poor family. The wealthy merchant bought the poor twins to raise them as servants to his sons. While the twins were still infants, they were separated in a shipwreck. The merchant returned home to Syracuse with one of his sons and one of the servant babies, and he renamed these boys after their brothers who were lost at sea, Antipholus and Dromio. When these boys grew up, the merchant left to travel to many Mediterranean seaports in hopes that perhaps the other boys had survived and he could find them.

On the day our play takes place, the merchant, Egeon, arrives in Ephesus. The missing boys did indeed survive and are living in Ephesus, but Ephesus is a disastrous place for him to be. The cities of Ephesus and Syracuse are not on good terms with each other, and a law has been passed in Ephesus that anyone entering their city from Syracuse will be put to death. The only way he can save himself is by paying the exorbitant sum of one thousand marks.

On the same day that Egeon arrived in Ephesus and was arrested, Antipholus of Syracuse and his servant Dromio also arrive in Ephesus. They are warned by a friendly merchant not to let anyone know they're from Syracuse. The merchant tells them a Syracusan merchant has been sentenced to death, but Antipholus has no idea that this doomed merchant is actually his father. Nor does he have an inkling that his father can be saved by a thousand marks, precisely the amount of money the friendly Ephesian merchant returns to Antipholus. Antipholus gives this money to his servant Dromio for safe-keeping, and Dromio takes it to the inn where they are staying.

A few minutes later, Dromio of Ephesus shows up, on an errand to find his master and bring him home to dinner. Dromio of Ephesus sees Antipholus of Syracuse and thinks he's his master. Antipholus sees Dromio and thinks he's his servant who surely has not had time to have completed his errand of taking the money to the inn. Why are you back soon? Antipholus asks Dromio. This makes no sense to Dromio. Returned so soon? he asks. No, you're late to dinner. Your wife sent me to fetch you. My wife? Antipholus wonders. I have no wife! And when Antipholus asks what Dromio did with the money he was supposed to take to the inn and Dromio denies that he was ever given the money, Antipholus is dreadfully upset with him.

Throughout all of this, while Dromio of Ephesus is entirely mystified and perhaps never would have imagined that both he and his master have doubles, surely Antipholus, who is precisely on a quest to find his twin and the twin of his servant, should recognize the confusion as clues that he is achieving his goal. But he has heard that Ephesus is a place of magic, of witchcraft and sorcery and deceit and cozenage, and it is to that that he attributes all the strange happenings.

And it continues. Dromio of Syracuse returns to his master, who chides him with denying he has the money and talking nonsense about a wife wanting him to come home to dinner. Dromio knows nothing of any of this; the last time he saw his master, it was to go faithfully on the errand of securing his money, which he did. His master must be joking nonsensically. But his master isn't joking and beats him instead. Poor, innocent Dromio! Then the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus enters, and she mistakes this Antipholus for her husband as she coaxes him home to dinner. When the real Antipholus of Ephesus returns home, he finds himself locked out of the house because his wife thinks he's already inside with her. And it continues, getting ever more tangled.

Historical Tidbit

In Shakespeare's time there was an English coin that pictured the archangel Michael slaying the dragon. This coin was commonly called an "angel". In this play, there is frequent mention of "angels" meaning these coins, but also suggesting angels in a spiritual sense.

Director's Notes

I thought I knew Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. A light-hearted farce, twins separated at birth, mistaken identities, an early play of Shakespeare's that experiments with a number of ideas and devices he uses again in later plays. And it is all that. What I didn't know until I studied it this time was how closely it is bound to the scripture and liturgy of the occasion on which it was first performed, Holy Innocents Day, during the Christmas season and beginning of the traditional Festival of Fools.

Shakespeare chose to set his play in Ephesus and modeled the city after its description in the New Testament book of *Acts*. Someone who knows *Ephesians* well and who listens carefully to the play might recognize many references to that epistle. A reading from *Jeremiah* on Holy Innocents Day tells of a family restored, a nation redeemed. Mourning will be turned to joy in a story that stretches back to an ancient history of twins separated into alienated nations. Caught up in the antics on stage, the audience might well overlook these biblical connections. But what you'll be sure to catch in the play is the portrayal of universal guilt and shared human absurdity. The ass is so apt a symbol of humility that sometimes an actual donkey was led up the aisle of a cathedral on the Feast of Fools; keep that in mind when hearing the many mentions of asses in the play. And error itself, error and confusion, was the very hallmark of traditional Innocents' celebrations.

Only the admission of folly gains pardon, as only the admission of sins gains forgiveness. . . . Exclusion is universal during the feast of fools unless common humanity be joyously acknowledged. Shakespeare comedy in general seems to have absorbed the essence of this festive spirit which celebrates the ultimate wisdom and joy of acknowledged human imperfection.

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