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The Comedy of Errors

William Shakespeare · *c. 1594 · original English text*

A Syracusan merchant, under sentence in Ephesus, tells of a family split by shipwreck: two sons, two servants, all twins, lost years ago. The same day the lost sons walk the same streets, and every errand, payment, and marriage vow goes to the wrong man. Shakespeare's shortest play is a farce with a family at the bottom of it.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a comedy of mistaken persons finally restore, and what is a self if, like a drop of water, it cannot find its fellow?

"I to the world am like a drop of water That in the ocean seeks another drop,"

Antipholus of Syracuse · Act I, Scene II

The errors are mechanical—two Antipholuses, two Dromios, one gold chain, one wife, one courtesan, one abbess—and they run at increasing speed toward a beating, an arrest, and a supposed conjuring. Under the farce is Egeon's death-sentence and a long search for a mother and a brother. The abbess who ends the day is Emilia, the lost wife. 'After so long grief, such nativity' is the play's own name for the recognition. Identity, in this comedy, is recovered in a household, not in a soliloquy alone.

KEY CHARACTERS

Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus
Twin masters, one a searcher, one a citizen, mistaken for each other all day.

Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus
Twin servants whose beatings and jokes keep the pace of the farce.

Egeon
The father under sentence, whose story is the play's serious beginning.

Emilia, the Abbess
The lost mother, hidden in office until the last scene.

Adriana and Luciana
Wife and sister, drawn into the errors of love and jealousy.

A DROP OF WATER

> *"I to the world am like a drop of water That in the ocean seeks another drop,"*
> **Antipholus of Syracuse** · Act I

> *"After so long grief, such nativity."*
> Act V

Grades 6–8
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Sentence, and a Search

ACT I

Egeon, a Syracusan in Ephesus, is condemned and given a day to find ransom. His son Antipholus of Syracuse, already in the city with his Dromio, begins to feel lost in the world.

- The long opening tale is the serious frame the farce will have to pay.
- The drop-of-water speech is loneliness spoken before the first mix-up.
- Ephesus is a place of law, trade, and a reputation for sorcery.

> *"I to the world am like a drop of water That in the ocean seeks another drop,"*
> **Antipholus of Syracuse** · Act I, Scene II

02

The Wrong House

ACTS II–III

Adriana claims the Syracusan as her husband; the Ephesian is locked out of his own house and turns to a goldsmith and a courtesan. The chain is promised to two men.

- Adriana's jealousy has a real cause that is not the one she thinks.
- Luciana receives a courtship from a man she believes is her sister's husband.
- The Dromios are beaten for one another's errands.

03

Arrest, and a Conjuror

ACT IV

The goldsmith has the Ephesian arrested for the chain. Explanations make everything worse. Pinch is called as if the man were possessed.

- Law and medicine, badly applied, become part of the error.
- The Syracusan thinks the city is bewitched and prepares to flee.
- Farce here has a sting: a man can be bound in his own town.

04

The Abbey

ACT V, THE CONFRONTATION

Both pairs appear. Egeon thinks he has found his son and is not recognized. The Abbess takes in the Syracusan and will not yield him to Adriana or the Duke.

- The law that opened the play now meets a sanctuary.
- Two masters and two servants in one place are the first visible proof.
- Egeon's hour is almost out.

05

Such Nativity

ACT V, THE CLOSE

The Abbess reveals herself as Emilia, Egeon's wife. The family is named, the sentence lifted, and the Dromios go in together, still not quite sure who is the elder.

- 'After so long grief, such nativity' is the family word for the ending.
- The courtesan and the chain are tidied; the marriage questions are not all equally easy.
- The last joke of the two Dromios is courtesy, not another beating.

> *"After so long grief, such nativity."*
> Act V, the recognition

Identity · A Lost Family · Error and Law · Mercy · Recognition

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 6–8

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #1504, Shakespeare's shortest play, in five acts.
2. Exact: "I to the world am like a drop of water / That in the ocean seeks another drop," And, at the close: "After so long grief, such nativity."
3. The play is farce—beatings, a courtesan, a lock-out—and it is also a recognition drama about a family divided by shipwreck. Keep both in view.
4. Ephesus is a city of St. Paul's journeys as well as of Plautine comedy. The abbey and the lifted sentence belong to that moral geography.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1504, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-comedy-of-errors/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.