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THE
Folger Library
GENERAL READER'S
Shakespeare

Edited by

LOUIS B. WRIGHT and VIRGINIA A. LAMAR

the
Comedy of Errors



with material in the Folger Library Collections

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The Folger Library General Reader's Shakespeare



THE COMEDY
OF ERRORS

By

WILLIAM

SHAKESPEARE



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THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

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LOUIS B. WRIGHT, General Editor. Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library from 1948 until his retirement in 1968, Dr. Wright has devoted over forty years to the study of the Shakespearean period. In 1926 he completed his doctoral thesis on "Vaudeville Elements in Elizabethan Drama" and subsequently published many articles on the stagecraft and theatre of Shakespeare's day. He is the author of *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (1935), *Religion and Empire* (1942), *The Elizabethans' America* (1965), and many other books and essays on the history and literature of the Tudor and Stuart periods, including *Shakespeare for Everyman* (1964). Dr. Wright has taught at the universities of North Carolina, California at Los Angeles, Michigan, Minnesota, and other American institutions. From 1932 to 1948 he was instrumental in developing the research program of the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery. During his tenure as Director, the Folger Shakespeare Library became one of the leading research institutions of the world for the study of the backgrounds of Anglo-American civilization.

VIRGINIA A. LaMAR, Assistant Editor. A member of the staff of the Folger Shakespeare Library from 1946 until her death in 1968, Miss LaMar served as research assistant to the Director and as Executive Secretary. Prior to 1946 Miss LaMar had been a secretary in the British Admiralty Delegation in Washington, D.C., receiving the King's Medal in 1945 for her services. She was coeditor of the *Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* by William Strachey, published by The Hakluyt Society in 1953, and author of *English Dress in the Age of Shakespeare* and *Travel and Roads in England* in the "Folger Booklets on Tudor and Stuart Civilization" series.

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GENERAL EDITOR

L O U I S B . W R I G H T

Director, Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948-1968



ASSISTANT EDITOR

V I R G I N I A A . L a M A R

Executive Secretary, Folger Shakespeare Library, 1946-1968

Preface

This edition of *The Comedy of Errors* is designed to make available a readable text of one of Shakespeare's early comedies. In the centuries since Shakespeare, many changes have occurred in the meanings of words, and some clarification of Shakespeare's vocabulary may be helpful. To provide the reader with necessary notes in the most accessible format, we have placed them on the pages facing the text that they explain. We have tried to make these notes as brief and simple as possible. Preliminary to the text we have also included a brief statement of essential information about Shakespeare and his stage. Readers desiring more detailed information should refer to the books suggested in the references, and if still further information is needed, the bibliographies in those books will provide the necessary clues to the literature of the subject.

The early texts of Shakespeare's plays provide only scattered stage directions and no indications of setting, and it is conventional for modern editors to add these to clarify the action. Such additions, and additions to entrances and exits, as well as many indications of act and scene division, are placed in square brackets.

All illustrations are from material in the Folger Library collections.

L. B. W.

V. A. L.

May 21, 1963

Apprentice Work in Farce

If Shakespeare had been a schoolmaster in the country before going up to London to make his fortune in the theatre—as one biographer thought he might have been—he could have chosen no more schoolmasterish play for his first endeavor in comedy than *The Comedy of Errors*. This play follows more closely the tradition of Roman comedy than any other drama attributed to Shakespeare, and is one of his earliest efforts in writing for the stage, perhaps the very earliest comedy from his pen. It was precisely the kind of play that would have appealed to a young man whose grammar school memories of Plautus and Terence were still fresh, the kind of play that schoolboys sometimes performed.

The Comedy of Errors probably dates from sometime between 1592 and 1594. A clear reference occurs in an account of a performance at Gray's Inn on December 28, 1594, when this play was part of a riotous celebration by the young lawyers of the Inn. Allusions to the French civil war between 1589 and 1593, when Henry of Navarre was trying to

The Comedy of Errors

establish his right to the French crown, suggest a date of composition before the settlement of the French dispute by the truce of July, 1593. Though the precise date and place of first performance are uncertain, it is early enough for us to be sure that *The Comedy of Errors* is apprentice work of its author.

Although *The Comedy of Errors* is not a slavish imitation of Plautus, it follows very closely the plot outline of his *Menaechmi*. The scene in which the husband is locked out of his own house may have been suggested by a similar situation in Plautus' *Amphitruo*. To complicate the plot even more than in Plautus' *Menaechmi*, Shakespeare added a pair of servants who were twins. He also introduced the Abbess, who delivered a sermon to Adriana on the consequences of a jealous wife's railings, a passage delivered with such fervent sincerity that some critics have thought that it reflects Shakespeare's unhappy experience with Anne Hathaway. Sir Edmund Chambers, in discounting this view, comments: "Poor Anne Hathaway, of whom after all we know nothing but that she had a honeysuckle name, and was some years older than Shakespeare, and was kind to him before marriage, and received a legacy of his second-best bed." The jealous wife was so common a convention in Elizabethan literature that no biographical significance need attach to the theme. Indeed, with the exception of the Abbess' lecture, Adriana's jealousy is largely expressed in her own speeches, which are too laden with genuine

The Comedy of Errors

distress to be comic. If Shakespeare was inspired by a personal marital experience, he did not make the most of an opportunity to champion husbands against the jealousy of their wives.

Since the main source of the play is Plautus' *Menaechmi*, scholars have wondered whether Shakespeare's Latin was sufficient for him to have read the original. It probably was. But he could easily have had the plot related to him by any one of a host of good Latinists who were familiar with the play. Both Plautus and Terence were known to most grammar school students. It has been argued that Shakespeare may have had an older adaptation of Plautus in English to work from, but, if he had, all records of such an original play in English have disappeared. William Warner published a translation of the *Menaechmi* in 1595, and it is possible that Shakespeare could have seen the translation in manuscript, which, the preface indicates, circulated "for the use and delight of his [the translator's] private friends." The most reasonable view of Shakespeare's use of the source play is that he read the *Menaechmi* in the Latin.

On the stage, *The Comedy of Errors* has proved an effective piece of entertainment, whatever one may think of it as drama. It cannot be called a notable contribution to English comedy, and it is a far cry indeed from Shakespeare's own great comedies. It is essentially a farce, with a fair amount of slapstick buffoonery as the plot of mistaken identity unfolds and the two Dromios receive the beatings

that were characteristic of Roman comedy. The dialogue is full of wordplay that was a convention of both Roman comedy and tragedy. Such wordplay was also a favorite device of Elizabethan drama, particularly in the 1590's.

Literal-minded playgoers will find the mistaken identity theme totally absurd and so unrealistic as to make the play unbelievable. But many dramas require the spectator to grant the illusion of possibility before they can be relished. In the theatre one must surrender one's notions of actuality and accept the conventions of the piece, whatever it is, and then enjoy the working-out of the plot. If one should insist upon a criterion of reasonableness, most operas would be unacceptable. The acceptance of a set of absurd situations is essential in farce, and that is what Shakespeare requires of the spectator in *The Comedy of Errors*. With reasonably competent actors, audiences find such acceptance easy, and *The Comedy of Errors* has provided amusement from Shakespeare's time until now.

Farce has had a long history as entertainment, dating from the classical world and lasting until our time, and slapstick has probably provided amusement in the theatre since theatres have existed. Although Shakespeare's indebtedness to Roman drama is obvious in his adaptation from Plautus, he had behind him a native tradition of farce which gave to the buffoonery of *The Comedy of Errors* a familiarity that added to its theatrical effectiveness. Even the mystery and morality plays had consistent-

The Comedy of Errors

ly inserted farcical scenes for the delectation of their audiences. Noah and his wife in the Wakefield Shipwrights' play had engaged in a boisterous quarrel and fight; Mak, the rascally shepherd in the same cycle, gets himself tossed in a blanket. Herod traditionally roared, ranted, and pretended to capture small boys in the audience. The devils and the vices beat each other in comic encounters much like those still employed by circus clowns. For much of their comic entertainment, native plays before Shakespeare's time depended upon farcical situations that were as old as the human race. Consequently, Shakespeare's audience was already conditioned to farce and was ready to enjoy a play with the situations that *The Comedy of Errors* furnished.

Although we are not certain for what occasion Shakespeare wrote *The Comedy of Errors*, we do know that it provided acceptable entertainment at court as late as 1604, and it may have been presented at court on earlier occasions. Some allusions suggest that it may have been presented before Queen Elizabeth at Greenwich on December 28, 1594, preceding its performance at Gray's Inn for the reveling lawyers. The records show no revival during the Restoration, and there is no documentary evidence of performances again until Charles Macklin's production at Drury Lane in 1741. The play appeared at intervals during the second half of the eighteenth century and was revived frequently in the nineteenth century, often in altered versions.

Although this is the shortest of Shakespeare's plays, most alterations made it even briefer.

Frederic Reynolds produced at Covent Garden in 1819 a musical version of *The Comedy of Errors* which was a hodgepodge of songs from other Shakespearean plays. Shakespeare's play was also used as a point of departure for a free adaptation called *The Boys from Syracuse*, a musical production that proved popular on the American stage in 1938-39. A revival in 1963 proved a smash hit.

Although varied adaptations have kept the play alive over the centuries, Shakespeare's own version has not been unknown on the stage. In 1855, Samuel Phelps revived an unaltered version at Sadler's Wells in London, and since that time numerous performances of the play have kept it before the public. In 1963, productions of the play were scheduled by two of the leading Shakespearean companies on the North American continent. On the stage it proves amusing and acts far better than one would suspect. Like many of Shakespeare's other plays, it shows that the dramatist had a keen sense of the theatre very early in his career.

The only text is that of the First Folio, for *The Comedy of Errors* had no known quarto printing. The Folio version is reasonably free of errors but it shows some evidence of cutting. Since it is Shakespeare's shortest play, running to only 1,777 lines, a few critics have maintained that it survives in a version cut for production on tour, but this view is not generally accepted. One or two passages appear to

The Comedy of Errors

have been garbled in printing and are difficult to explain.

THE AUTHOR

As early as 1598 Shakespeare was so well known as a literary and dramatic craftsman that Francis Meres, in his *Palladis Tamia: Wits Treasury*, referred in flattering terms to him as "mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare," famous for his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, and "his sugared sonnets," which were circulating "among his private friends." Meres observes further that "as Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage," and he mentions a dozen plays that had made a name for Shakespeare. He concludes with the remark that "the Muses would speak with Shakespeare's fine filed phrase if they would speak English."

To those acquainted with the history of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, it is incredible that anyone should be so naïve or ignorant as to doubt the reality of Shakespeare as the author of the plays that bear his name. Yet so much nonsense has been written about other "candidates" for the plays that it is well to remind readers that no credible evidence that would stand up in a court of law has ever been adduced to prove either that Shakespeare did not write his plays or that anyone else wrote

them. All the theories offered for the authorship of Francis Bacon, the Earl of Derby, the Earl of Oxford, the Earl of Hertford, Christopher Marlowe, and a score of other candidates are mere conjectures spun from the active imaginations of persons who confuse hypothesis and conjecture with evidence.

As Meres's statement of 1598 indicates, Shakespeare was already a popular playwright whose name carried weight at the box office. The obvious reputation of Shakespeare as early as 1598 makes the effort to prove him a myth one of the most absurd in the history of human perversity.

The anti-Shakespeareans talk darkly about a plot of vested interests to maintain the authorship of Shakespeare. Nobody has any vested interest in Shakespeare, but every scholar is interested in the truth and in the quality of evidence advanced by special pleaders who set forth hypotheses in place of facts.

The anti-Shakespeareans base their arguments upon a few simple premises, all of them false. These false premises are that Shakespeare was an unlettered yokel without any schooling, that nothing is known about Shakespeare, and that only a noble lord or the equivalent in background could have written the plays. The facts are that more is known about Shakespeare than about most dramatists of his day, that he had a very good education, acquired in the Stratford Grammar School, that the plays show no evidence of profound book learn-

The Comedy of Errors

ing, and that the knowledge of kings and courts evident in the plays is no greater than any intelligent young man could have picked up at second hand. Most anti-Shakespeareans are naïve and betray an obvious snobbery. The author of their favorite plays, they imply, must have had a college diploma framed and hung on his study wall like the one in their dentist's office, and obviously so great a writer must have had a title or some equally significant evidence of exalted social background. They forget that genius has a way of cropping up in unexpected places and that none of the great creative writers of the world got his inspiration in a college or university course.

William Shakespeare was the son of John Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, a substantial citizen of that small but busy market town in the center of the rich agricultural county of Warwick. John Shakespeare kept a shop, what we would call a general store; he dealt in wool and other produce and gradually acquired property. As a youth, John Shakespeare had learned the trade of glover and leather worker. There is no contemporary evidence that the elder Shakespeare was a butcher, though the anti-Shakespeareans like to talk about the ignorant "butcher's boy of Stratford." Their only evidence is a statement by gossipy John Aubrey, more than a century after William Shakespeare's birth, that young William followed his father's trade, and when he killed a calf, "he would do it in a high style and make a speech." We would like to believe the

story true, but Aubrey is not a very credible witness.

John Shakespeare probably continued to operate a farm at Snitterfield that his father had leased. He married Mary Arden, daughter of his father's landlord, a man of some property. The third of their eight children was William, baptized on April 26, 1564, and probably born three days before. At least, it is conventional to celebrate April 23 as his birthday.

The Stratford records give considerable information about John Shakespeare. We know that he held several municipal offices including those of alderman and mayor. In 1580 he was in some sort of legal difficulty and was fined for neglecting a summons of the Court of Queen's Bench requiring him to appear at Westminster and be bound over to keep the peace.

As a citizen and alderman of Stratford, John Shakespeare was entitled to send his son to the grammar school free. Though the records are lost, there can be no reason to doubt that this is where young William received his education. As any student of the period knows, the grammar schools provided the basic education in Latin learning and literature. The Elizabethan grammar school is not to be confused with modern grammar schools. Many cultivated men of the day received all their formal education in the grammar schools. At the universities in this period a student would have received little training that would have inspired him to be a

The Comedy of Errors

creative writer. At Stratford young Shakespeare would have acquired a familiarity with Latin and some little knowledge of Greek. He would have read Latin authors and become acquainted with the plays of Plautus and Terence. Undoubtedly, in this period of his life he received that stimulation to read and explore for himself the world of ancient and modern history which he later utilized in his plays. The youngster who does not acquire this type of intellectual curiosity *before* college days rarely develops as a result of a college course the kind of mind Shakespeare demonstrated. His learning in books was anything but profound, but he clearly had the probing curiosity that sent him in search of information, and he had a keenness in the observation of nature and of humankind that finds reflection in his poetry.

There is little documentation for Shakespeare's boyhood. There is little reason why there should be. Nobody knew that he was going to be a dramatist about whom any scrap of information would be prized in the centuries to come. He was merely an active and vigorous youth of Stratford, perhaps assisting his father in his business, and no Boswell bothered to write down facts about him. The most important record that we have is a marriage license issued by the Bishop of Worcester on November 27, 1582, to permit William Shakespeare to marry Anne Hathaway, seven or eight years his senior; furthermore, the Bishop permitted the marriage after reading the banns only once instead of three