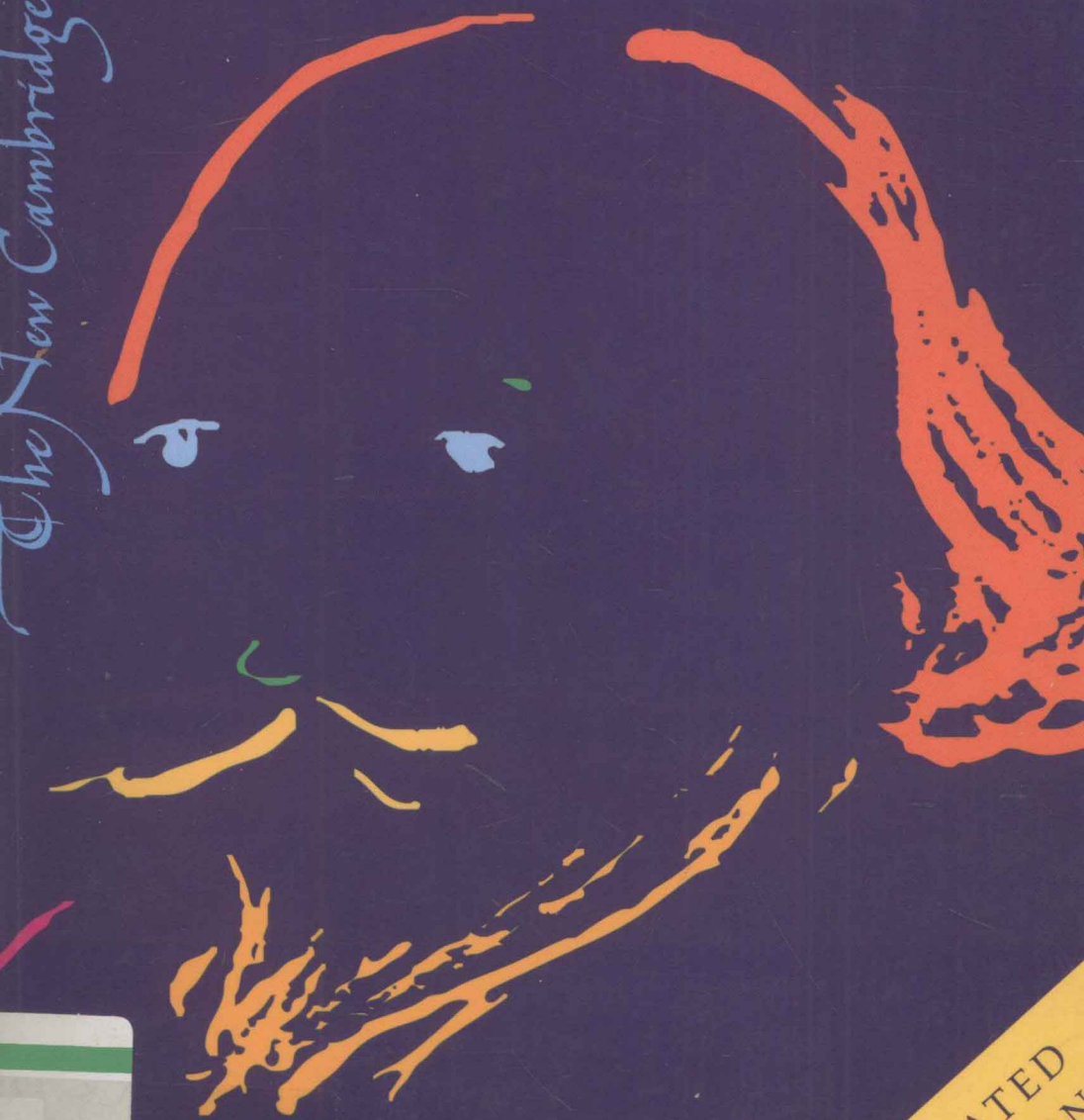
The New Cambridge Shakespeare

The Comedy of Errors

Edited by T. S. Dorsch



UPDATED
DITION

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

Updated edition

Edited by

T. S. DORSCH

Formerly Professor of English
University of Durham

Revised and with a new Introduction by

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PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

We all learn from those who came before us. How can an editor of today adequately express his indebtedness to the prodigious labours of such scholars as Chambers, Greg, and Bullough? I hope that, when I have drawn upon the work of earlier editors and critics, I have never neglected to acknowledge my debt.

Of recent editions of *The Comedy of Errors* I have found most helpful those of Quiller-Couch (the New Shakespeare), R. A. Foakes (the Arden Shakespeare), Stanley Wells (the New Penguin Shakespeare), and G. Blakemore Evans (the *Riverside Shakespeare*).

I must give special thanks to Professor John W. Velz, of the University of Texas at Austin, with whom I have discussed aspects of the play. Mrs E. E. Morse, of Dove Cottage, read my introduction in manuscript and suggested some improvements. My son Alan Dorsch provided some helpful historical material. I owe much to students in universities in England, Australia, Germany, and America with whom I have, in tutorials and seminars, dissected the play; even more to colleagues in these universities who have put their knowledge of Shakespeare at my service.

I must also express my gratitude to Mrs K. Stenhouse, of the Department of French at Durham, and to Mrs Sue Jones, of Dove Nest, Windermere, who have triumphed over my difficult handwriting and produced an elegant typescript for the press. Miss Sarah Stanton, Miss Janet Coombes, and Mr Paul Chipchase, of the Cambridge University Press, have given me invaluable help in the shaping of this volume, especially Mr Chipchase as my copy-editor. They too have earned my warm thanks.

My greatest debt is to Philip Brockbank, in whom I, as a contributor to the series, have found everything that could be desired in a General Editor.

T.S.D.
1988

PREFACE TO UPDATED EDITION

I would like to thank Brian Gibbons for asking me to pay attention to this extraordinary play and for his extremely helpful comments, and Sarah Stanton at Cambridge University Press for her firm support. Sections of this introduction dealing with matters of religion were given as a paper at the Tudor Symposium conference 'Writing and reform in sixteenth-century England' organised by Mike Pincombe at the University of Newcastle, September 2002. I am immensely grateful to Susan Brock and the staff at the Shakespeare Centre Library, and those at the Theatre Museum, for their help in locating pictures and other archival material, as well as to Globe Research and Sara Wilbourne at Shakespeare Santa Cruz. Charles Edelman, Mike Edwards and Mike Jensen all answered queries, Nigel Alexander, as ever, read several drafts, while Fred Owens kept my nose to the grindstone. To all, much thanks.

Ros King
2003

ABBREVIATIONS AND CONVENTIONS

1. Shakespeare's plays

The abbreviated titles of Shakespeare's plays are those of the *Harvard Concordance*, a few of them modified by the General Editors. Other editions of Shakespeare are abbreviated under the editor's surname (Malone, Rann) unless they are the work of more than one editor. In such cases an abbreviated series name is used (NS, Var. 1778). Except where it has been necessary to quote from the Folio, quotations and line-references throughout this edition are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, 1974, on which the *Harvard Concordance* is based.

Ado	*Much Ado about Nothing*
Ant.	*Antony and Cleopatra*
AWW	*All's Well That Ends Well*
AYLI	*As You Like It*
Cor.	*Coriolanus*
Cym.	*Cymbeline*
Err.	*The Comedy of Errors*
Ham.	*Hamlet*
1H4	*The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*
2H4	*The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*
H5	*King Henry the Fifth*
1H6	*The First Part of King Henry the Sixth*
2H6	*The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth*
3H6	*The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth*
H8	*King Henry the Eighth*
JC	*Julius Caesar*
John	*King John*
LLL	*Love's Labour's Lost*
Lear	*King Lear*
Mac.	*Macbeth*
MM	*Measure for Measure*
MND	*A Midsummer Night's Dream*
MV	*The Merchant of Venice*
Oth.	*Othello*
Per.	*Pericles*
R2	*King Richard the Second*
R3	*King Richard the Third*
Rom.	*Romeo and Juliet*
Shr.	*The Taming of the Shrew*
STM	*Sir Thomas More*
Temp.	*The Tempest*
TGV	*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
Tim.	*Timon of Athens*
Tit.	*Titus Andronicus*

TN	*Twelfth Night*
TNK	*The Two Noble Kinsmen*
Tro.	*Troilus and Cressida*
Wiv.	*The Merry Wives of Windsor*
WT	*The Winter's Tale*

2. Editions and references

Abbott	E. A. Abbott, *A Shakespearian Grammar: An Attempt to Illustrate Some of the Differences between Elizabethan and Modern English*, 3rd edn, revised, 1876 (reference is to numbered paragraphs)
Alexander	*William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander, 1951
Baldwin	*The Comedy of Errors*, ed. T. W. Baldwin (Heath's American Arden Shakespeare) 1928
Barton	Anne Barton, introduction to *The Comedy of Errors* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1974
Brooks	Harold Brooks, 'Themes and structures in *The Comedy of Errors*', in *Early Shakespeare* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 3), 1961
Bullough, *Sources*	Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols., 1957–75
Cam.	*The Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. W. G. Clark, J. Glover, and W. A. Wright, 1863–6 (Cambridge Shakespeare)
Capell	*Mr William Shakespeare his Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*, ed. Edward Capell, 1768
Carroll	William Carroll, *The Metamorphoses of Shakespearean Comedy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985
Chamber Accounts	See E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols., 1923
Chambers, *Allusion-Book*	*The Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, re-ed. E. K. Chambers, 1932
Chambers, *WS*	E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols., 1930
Child	Harold Child, 'The stage-history of *The Comedy of Errors*', NS, pp. 115–19
Coleridge	*Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare*, ed. Terence Hawkes, 1959
Collier	*The Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. John Payne Collier, 1842–4
Compositional Genetics	T. W. Baldwin, *On the Compositional Genetics of 'The Comedy of Errors'*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965
conj.	conjecture
Cuningham	*The Comedy of Errors*, ed. Henry Cuningham (Arden Shakespeare), 1907, reprinted 1926
D&P	Richard Edwards, *Damon and Pythias*, 1571 (see King)
Dorsch	*The Comedy of Errors*, ed. T. S. Dorsch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988
DNB	*The Dictionary of National Biography*
Dowden	Edward Dowden, *Shakspere: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*, 8th edn, 1886
Dyce	*The Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Alexander Dyce, 1857
Eph.	Ephesians
ES	E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923
F	*Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, 1623 (First Folio)

F2	*Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, 1632 (Second Folio)
F3	*Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, 1664 (Third Folio)
F4	*Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, 1685 (Fourth Folio)
Ff	The four Folios
Five-Act	T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespere's Five-Act Structure: Shakspere's Early Plays on the Background of Renaissance Theories of Five-Act Structure from 1470*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1947, reprinted 1963
Foakes	*The Comedy of Errors*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 1962 (Arden Shakespeare)
Gen.	Genesis
Gesta	*Gesta Grayorum or the History of the High and Mighty Prince Henry Prince of Purpoole Anno Domini 1594*, (ed.) Desmond Bland, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1968
Greg, *Gesta*	*Gesta Grayorum: or the History of the High and Mighty Prince Henry, Prince of Purpoole . . . who Reigned and Died, A.D. 1594*, ed. W. W. Greg (Malone Soc. Reprints), 1914
Greg, *SF*	W. W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio: Its Bibliographical and Textual History*, 1955
Halliwell	*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. James O. Halliwell, 1853–65
Hamilton	Donna B. Hamilton, *Shakespeare and the Politics of Protestant England*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992
Hanmer	*The Works of Shakespear*, ed. Thomas Hanmer, 1744
Harvard Concordance	*The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare*, comp. Marvin Spevack, 1973
Hogan	C. B. Hogan, *Shakespeare in the Theatre, 1701–1800*, 2 vols., 1952
Index	*An Index of Characters in Early Modern English Drama: Printed Plays, 1500–1660*, Berger, Bradford, Sondergard (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998
Johnson	*The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. Samuel Johnson, 1765
Keightley	*The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. Thomas Keightley, 1864
King	Ros King, *The Works of Richard Edwards: Politics, Poetry and Performance in Sixteenth-Century England*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001
Kittredge	*The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. G. L. Kittredge, 1936, rev. Irving Ribner, 1971 (*The Kittredge Players Edition . . .*, 1958, has many photographs of productions)
Lewis and Short	*A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879 (impression 1951)
MacCulloch	Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1996
Malone	*The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, ed. Edmond Malone, 1790
Matt.	Matthew
Menaechmi	In *Plautus*, tr. Paul Nixon, 5 vols., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1977, vol 2.

Method of Study	Desiderius Erasmus, *On the Method of Study*, in *Literary and Educational Writings 2*, Craig R. Thompson (ed.), *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 24, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978
Miola, *CofE*	*The Comedy of Errors: Critical Essays*, Robert Miola (ed.), New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997
Miola, *Comedy*	Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy: The Influence of Plautus and Terence*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994
Muir	Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources*, 1: *Comedies and Tragedies*, 1957
Nashe	*The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. R. B. McKerrow, 5 vols., 1904–10
Nelson	Alan H. Nelson, *Early Cambridge Theatres: College, University, and Town Stages, 1464-1720*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994
Noble	Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge*, 1935
NS	*The Comedy of Errors*, ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson, 1922
Odell	G. C. D. Odell, *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving*, 2 vols., 1920
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
Onions	C. T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*, rev. edn, 1919
Pelican	*The Comedy of Errors*, ed. Paul A. Jorgensen, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage, 1956, revised edn, 1969 (Pelican Shakespeare)
Pigman	G. W. Pigman III (ed.), George Gascoigne, *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000
Pope	*The Works of Shakespear*, ed. Alexander Pope, 1723–5
Rann	*The Dramatic Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Joseph Rann, 1786–94
Riehle	Wolfgang Riehle, *Shakespeare, Plautus and the Humanist Tradition*, Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991
Riverside	G. Blakemore Evans (ed.), *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1974
Rouse	*The Menaechmi: The Original of Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors": The Latin Text together with the Elizabethan Translation*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse, n.d.
Rowe	*The Works of Mr William Shakespear*, ed. Nicholas Rowe, 1709
Rowe^2	*The Works of Mr William Shakespear*, ed. Nicholas Rowe, 2nd edn, 1709
SD	stage direction
SH	speech heading
Singer	*The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. S. W. Singer, 1826
Sisson	C. J. Sisson, *New Readings in Shakespeare*, 2 vols., 1956
Stationers' Register	*A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers, 1554–1640*, ed. Edward Arber, 5 vols., 1875–94
Staunton	*The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. Howard Staunton, 1858–60
Steevens	*The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, 1773
subst.	substantively
Terence	*The Comedies*, tr. Betty Radice, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1965, reprinted 1976
Theobald	*The Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Lewis Theobald, 1733
Thirlby	Christopher Spencer and John Velz, 'Styan Thirlby: a forgotten

	"editor" of Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Studies* 6 (1970), 327–33
Tilley	*A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 1950
Var. 1778	*The Plays of William Shakespeare*, with the corrections and additions of various commentators, to which are added notes by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, 1778
Walker	William S. Walker, *A Critical Examination of the Text of Shakespeare*, 1860
Warburton	*The Works of Shakespeare*, ed. William Warburton, 1747
Wells	*The Comedy of Errors*, ed. Stanley Wells, 1972 (New Penguin Shakespeare)
Werstine	Paul Werstine, '"Foul papers" and "prompt-books": printer's copy for Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*', *Studies in Bibliography*, 41 (1988), 232–46
Wilson	F. P. Wilson, *The Plague in Shakespeare's London*, 1927
Wright	George T. Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1988

Biblical quotations are taken from the Geneva Bible, 1589

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ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION
BY ROS KING

The Comedy of Errors has provoked some wildly different responses. Frequently described – and sometimes dismissed – throughout its history as a farcical romp, the last forty years have seen some notable productions that have explored a more serious side, focusing on the phenomenon and psychology of twindom, and drawing out a connection between the play's language of witchcraft and the theatricality of illusion.

The play is part of a long literary tradition. Shakespeare found its main storylines in two comedies by the Roman playwright Plautus, but in putting them together he achieved a virtuoso increase in the number of 'errors' in the plot.[1] Despite the pagan setting, he also incorporated some sixty direct biblical quotations, with others taken from the Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies, and inlaid the text with countless incidental puns on Christian religious meanings.[2] But the theme of lost children and mistaken identity is more ancient: as old as the love and the rivalry that humans feel for their siblings or their children, and the atavistic fear and fascination that we have for the double.[3] Shakespeare, of course, had a personal interest and knowledge, being himself the father of twins: Judith and Hamnet, born in 1585.

These serious elements, and the potential tragedy of the opening scene, all indicate that there is indeed more to the play than farce, although any production or critical account that ignores its hilariously dextrous presentation of the story will not have done it justice. The play is riven with contradictions: religion and superstition, identity and confusion, morality and excess, while its knockabout humour is achieved through precise control of language. The challenge to any critic and to any theatre director is therefore twofold: to understand its innovative and experimental yet traditional form; and to hold its utter hilarity and disturbing seriousness in balance.

Derivations

Shakespeare's main source: Plautus's Menaechmi

Plautus's comedy *Menaechmi* is the primary source for Shakespeare's play in more ways than just the storyline. It begins with a Prologue, which plays a game with the audience on the nature of drama, raising a number of important theoretical issues that any dramatist needs to think about. It problematises the idea of the author ('I bring

[1] Miola, *Comedy*, p. 22 (citing W. H. D. Rouse (ed.), *Menaechmi*), suggests fifty errors as opposed to Plautus's seventeen.

[2] This density of religious reference occurs in a play that occupies just 1918 lines in the Folio, a line count that also includes stage directions. The other comedies occupy upwards of 2,500 lines each. See Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Comedies*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993.

[3] See W. Thomas MacCarey, '*The Comedy of Errors:* a different kind of comedy', *New Literary History*, XI, 3, (Spring 1978), 525–36.

you Plautus, orally, not corporally'), questions the Prologue's authority as a narrator, since he cannot confirm how alike the children were ('I myself have not seen them, and none of you is to suppose I have') and confronts the disturbing ability of theatre to change place and time while staying still ('Now I must foot it back to Epidamnus so as to clarify the situation . . . without stirring a step').[1] Greek and Roman comedy was written to be performed in theatres which had a permanent architectural *frons scenae* or back wall to the stage with, usually, three sets of doors that could be considered as representing separate houses assigned to specific characters in the action. There were also two side entrances, conceived as being the way to the port or the market-place or perhaps the countryside. These locations were fixed for the duration of the performance but of course the same onstage place represented different geographical places in different plays. As Plautus's Prologue provocatively states, challenging those that find the make-believe of theatre morally disturbing, 'It is quite like the way in which families, too, are wont to change their homes: now a pimp lives here, now a young gentleman.'

The Prologue also fills us in with the back-story of the play. There was once an old merchant of Syracuse who had twin sons so alike that not even their mother could tell them apart. When the boys were about seven years old, he took one of them with him on business to Tarentum where there was a festival. The boy got lost in the crowd and was found by a merchant from Epidamnus, who took him away, brought him up and ultimately left him his fortune. The boy's father returned to Syracuse where he died of grief. The remaining twin was brought up by their grandfather who changed his name (which as we will discover was Sosicles) to that of the lost boy, Menaechmus.

The action of the play takes place in Epidamnus. Peniculus, Menaechmus's parasite or hanger-on, enters looking for an invitation to dinner. He is joined on stage by Menaechmus who has been having an argument with his wife. In order to punish her he has stolen one of her gowns, which he is wearing under his cloak, intending to give it to his mistress, Erotium, who now comes out of her house. She is delighted with the gown, and invites them both to dinner. They go to the forum while the cook, Cylindrus, is sent to buy provisions. In the second act, the other Menaechmus and his slave Messenio have just arrived by sea from Syracuse. They are looking for the lost twin but meet first Cylindrus and then Erotium. Menaechmus of Syracuse is astonished that she calls him by his name but eventually goes in to dinner with her, sending Messenio with all his money and belongings to the inn. Some time later, Peniculus returns, cross and hungry, having lost his Menaechmus, just in time to see Menaechmus of Syracuse leaving Erotium's house. She has asked him to take the gown away for alterations. Peniculus decides to pick a quarrel and threatens him that he will tell the wife that her gown has been given to a prostitute. Erotium's maid then enters with a gold armband (also once the wife's property) and asks Menaechmus to take it to the goldsmith's to have some more gold added to it. He intends to sell both gown and

[1] *Menaechmi*, tr. P. Nixon, in *Plautus*, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press and London: William Heinemann, 1977.

armband. By Act 4 Peniculus has told the wife what he knows. She asks what she should do. He replies, 'The same as always – make him miserable' (cf. *Errors* 5.1.57–68, where a version of this advice is given by the Abbess). Menaechmus of Epidamnus now enters, complaining that he has had to spend the day speaking up in court for one of his protégés, a dishonest man, 'every one of his crimes was sworn to by three witnesses'. His wife accosts him about his theft of the gown. They argue and she shuts him out of the house. He goes next door to his mistress to ask for the gown back but she, of course, is also angry and shuts him out. Menaechmus of Syracuse enters, still carrying the gown, and anxious about what Messenio has done with the money. The wife sees him and begins to berate him about the gown. When he fails to comprehend, she threatens divorce and sends for her father. Together they accuse him of insanity. They leave and he goes to find his ship. The father returns with a doctor and observes while Menaechmus of Epidamnus enters complaining that everything has gone wrong for him. The doctor then asks whether he drinks red or white wine. Menaechmus angrily replies, 'Why don't you inquire . . . whether I generally eat birds with scales, fish with feathers', a line which is utilised and extended by Shakespeare for the argument between the two Dromios in the door scene (3.1.79–83). The Doctor declares that Menaechmus must be locked up and goes to make arrangements. Menaechmus is left alone. Messenio enters declaring that he is a responsible servant who looks after his master's affairs without being supervised – after all it saves him a beating. The father re-enters with slaves who try to carry Menaechmus away. Messenio rescues him and asks for his liberty as reward. Menaechmus agrees to this, although of course he does not know who Messenio is, but when the slave says he will go and get his money from the inn, he becomes greedily interested. He exits into Erotium's house. Messenio now returns with his real master who is cross that the slave is lying to him. The original Menaechmus then re-enters, identifications are made and Messenio is freed. Menaechmus decides to auction all his goods (including, as Messenio starts to announce, his wife, if anyone will have her). He intends to return to Syracuse with his brother, who now assumes his original name, Sosicles.

Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors *and* Plautus

There are evident correspondences in plot between Plautus's play and Shakespeare's – and some equally obvious differences. Antipholus does not steal his wife's gown, nor her armband; instead, he has commissioned a chain to give to her, although he promises this to the Courtesan after his wife locks him out. It is also his wife with whom his twin dines rather than the Courtesan whose role is thereby greatly diminished. Shakespeare's play, indeed, asserts marital union. But if we simply indulge in spotting literary derivations without asking the question why *Errors* might have been put together in the way it has, we will neither understand it on its own terms nor be able to transpose it into modern productions that really work. This introduction will therefore take a dramaturgical approach to the play: trying to establish as far as possible the cultural climate in which it was written so as to judge how it might effectively speak to audiences today.

Shakespeare's play opens not with a Prologue, as does *Menaechmi*, but with the Syracusan merchant, Egeon, in custody in Ephesus. His crime is simply that he has been found in the city. There is enmity between the two city-states of Syracuse and Ephesus, and travel between them is forbidden on penalty of death or the payment of a hefty ransom. Egeon has no money and unless someone can be found prepared to pay the ransom for him, he will be put to death at sunset that evening. Such is the terrible sorrow of his family history, however, that he almost welcomes death. The Duke invites him to tell his story. He says that he was Syracusan born and bred. He and his wife were very happily married and were becoming increasingly prosperous when his agent's death in Epidamnum caused him to undertake a journey there to see to his affairs. His wife, who was pregnant at the time, followed him and there gave birth to identical twin boys. At that very same time, a poor woman staying at the same inn also gave birth to twin sons. He bought these two boys in order to bring them up as servants to his own. Sailing back to Syracuse, however, the family's ship was wrecked. He and his wife managed to strap themselves to either end of a mast, he with the firstborn of both sets of twins and she with the younger pair, but the mast was broken in two on a rock. His wife and the two children with her were blown along at a faster rate and he saw them picked up by a fishing boat. He and the other boys were rescued by another vessel, but, unable to catch up with the fishermen, they turned for home. Eighteen years later these two boys announced their intention of going to seek for their lost twins.

Egeon's line describing 'My youngest boy, and yet my eldest care' (1.1.124) is often interpreted (as in T. S. Dorsch's annotation to this edition) as an error by Shakespeare since Egeon had taken charge of the elder boys. But perhaps the word 'youngest' should instead be interpreted in *OED*'s second, 'rare' sense of 'most youthful in character'. If so, the line suggests the very real tug of emotions that many parents experience when a child leaves home: relief that the long period of responsibility for caring for the child is at an end, and overwhelming anxiety for someone who, one may feel, is still too young and vulnerable to make their way in the world alone. With the children for whom he was responsible now gone, Egeon himself has spent five years scouring Greece and the boundaries of Asia for the rest of his family. Crucially, Egeon has raised the two remaining boys under the names of their lost brothers. This attempt to deny appalling loss is not an uncommon action in families in which a child has died at birth. In this play, as in *Menaechmi*, this marker of terrible grief, which, by denying difference of identity, can sometimes do psychological damage to the surviving child, is the engine that drives the hilarious series of mistakes that now ensues. For, unbeknown to Egeon, not only have the twins from Syracuse now also arrived in Ephesus, but this is the town where, separated from their mother, the two lost twins have been brought up.

This outline of the opening situation gives us an inkling of the extraordinary interweaving of different types of story in this play. It is a mixture of loving domesticity and aspiring, upwardly mobile, middle-class family values in which economic adoptions are also a fact of life; of families split by natural disaster and war; of individuals disastrously caught up in political conflicts beyond their control. There is social resonance and psychological realism here with which we can still identify but it is combined with

romance quest, and elements of traditional fairy story. It is by turns terrifying, touching – and downright ludicrous. Indeed, 'a general feature of *The Comedy of Errors*, one that orthodox critical and stage interpretation has not found easy to account for: [is] its paradoxical representation of events in simultaneous but contradictory terms, as both hilarious and spiritually serious'.[1]

Shakespeare's first tragicomedy

Although Plautus's *Menaechmi* supplies the main part of the story of one lost twin searching for another, Shakespeare, like most good writers, only ever retells a given story by refracting it through other stories. His second major source, which gave him some of the ideas for the slave twins, is another play by Plautus, *Amphitruo*. This tells how Jupiter, the libidinous ruler of the Greek gods, manages to have an adulterous relationship with a woman, Alcmena, by turning himself into a copy of her husband, Amphitruo, while Mercury, disguised as the family slave, Sosia, guards the door. Most of the humour derives from Sosia's puzzlement and frustration at coming face to face with his double who bears his name and denies him access to his master's house. This, of course, supplies the riotous scene in which Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus are denied entry to their house by Dromio of Syracuse. Much more important even than this plot element, however, is the *Amphitruo*'s exploration of a somewhat contentious approach to play construction, which Shakespeare was to draw on and develop for the rest of his working life.

The prologue to Plautus's play not only contains the only classical usage of the term 'tragicomedy' but also a robust defence of that genre. Plautus uses the word to describe his play on the grounds that it contains both a god and a slave and therefore mixes characters that would normally be kept apart in tragedies and comedies respectively. This Prologue, spoken by Mercury – both messenger to the gods and, suitably, the god of traders – is a challenging, colloquial direct address to the audience. Mercury's willingness to cater to the demands of the play's customers suggests that Plautus is being satirical, both about audience expectations and about the rules governing playwriting. Having first described the play as a tragedy he asks:

> What's that? Are you disappointed
> To find it's a *tragedy*? Well, I can easily change it.
> I'm a god, after all, I can easily make it a comedy,
> And never alter a line. Is that what you'd like? . . .
> But I was forgetting – stupid of me – of course,
> Being a god, I know quite well what you'd like,
> I know exactly what's in your minds. Very well.
> I'll meet you half-way, and make it a tragi-comedy.
> It can't be an out-and-out comedy, I'm afraid,
> With all these kings and gods in the cast. All right, then,
> A tragi-comedy – at least it's got one slave-part. (*Amphitruo*, Prologue 50–60)[2]

[1] Brian Gibbons, 'Erring and straying like lost sheep', *Shakespeare Survey 50*, 1997, p. 116.
[2] Tr. E. F. Watling, Plautus, *The Rope and Other Plays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.