

Comedy, Mistaken Identity, and Abuse in *The Comedy of Errors*  
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*The Comedy of Errors* by William Shakespeare tracks the day when two sets of twins who have been separated since infancy come to be in the same town. First, I would like to provide a bit of context so as to minimize the confusion the play can stir. Aegeon and his wife, Emilia, had a set of twins while on a business trip. This set of twins is called Antipholus (when they grow older one will go by Antipholus of Syracuse, the other will go by Antipholus of Ephesus). On the same day a poor woman also had a set of twins at the same motel Aegeon and his family were staying at. These twins would go by the name Dromio. Aegeon bought the other set of twins to provide the mother some money and so that each Antipholus would essentially have a servant or playmate. However, the family is separated when a battle between ships causes their vessel to wreck. Aegeon is able to save one Antipholus and one Dromio and takes them to live with him in Syracuse while Emilia has the other Antipholus and Dromio and settles in Ephesus. The play starts up when Aegeon is arrested in Ephesus while trying to look for his family. His son Antipholus of Syracuse and servant Dromio of Syracuse had already left him to go on this same search for their respective brothers some time ago. While the set up of the play seems to be dramatic, you will see that Shakespeare is depending on comedy to tell this story of brothers trying to find each other. *The Comedy of Errors* is filled with mistaken identity and abuse, but is told in a way that makes the whole play seem so ridiculous that you cannot help but laugh.

The mistaken identities of the sets of twins could have been avoided had they been named properly. During Aegeon's explanation to Duke Solinus in Act 1, Scene 1 he states that his wife became "a joyful mother of two goodly sons,/And, which was strange, the one so like the other/As could not be distinguished but by names" (1.1.50-52). If this was true, then his boys should have been named differently, but instead they both grow up with the name Antipholus (for Aegeon's children) or Dromio (for the set that was bought). The only way people can tell them apart is from the locations they have been residing in since the shipwreck, which are Syracuse (the pair that wrecked with Aegeon) and Ephesus (the pair that wrecked with wife Emilia). These locations are added to their names. For example, Antipholus of Syracuse or Dromio of Ephesus. One has to wonder why Shakespeare, or anyone really, would choose to purposefully name twins the same thing when you would only be able to tell them apart by their name.

Shakespeare purposefully names them the same in order to make the audience laugh. The most hilarious scene in the play is probably when Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse are brought to the home of Adriana because she thinks Antipholus of Syracuse is her husband Antipholus of Ephesus. In this scene Antipholus of Ephesus goes home for dinner with his wife only to be told that he is not who he says he is and is turned away by his wife. The encounter goes as follows (3.1.62-74):

**Adriana**

(*within*) Who is that at the door that keeps all  
this noise?

<b>Dromio of Syracuse</b>	<i>(within)</i> By my troth, your town is troubled with unruly boys.
<b>Antipholus of Ephesus</b>	Are you there, wife? You might have come before.
<b>Adriana</b>	<i>(within)</i> Your wife, sir knave? Go, get you from the door.
<b>Dromio of Ephesus</b>	If you went in pain, master, this knave would go sore.
<b>Angelo</b>	Here is neither cheer, sir, nor welcome. We would fain have either.
<b>Balthasar</b>	In debating which was best, we shall part with neither.
<b>Dromio of Ephesus</b>	They stand at the door, master. Bid them welcome hither.
<b>Antipholus of Ephesus</b>	There is something in the wind, that we cannot get in.
<b>Dromio of Ephesus</b>	You would say so, master, if your garments were thin. Your cake there is warm within; you stand here in the cold. It would make a man mad as a buck to be so bought and sold.
<b>Antipholus of Ephesus</b>	Go, fetch me something: I'll break ope the gate.
<b>Dromio of Syracuse</b>	<i>(within)</i> Break any breaking here, and I'll break your knave's pate.

Dromio of Syracuse is manning the door that Dromio of Ephesus is supposed to be taking care of. Yet, everyone in the house believes that the Ephesus pair are inside when really it's the Syracuse pair. Here's the reason as to why the scene works comically. Adriana feels safe in her home, believing that she is eating with her husband and is annoyed by the fact that someone else is trying to get into her house claiming that it is his house. Dromio of Syracuse is manning the door as if it is his because he is following his master's orders who enjoys a free meal, because everyone likes a free meal. Dromio of Ephesus is terrified that he's going to get beaten again and is angry that someone else already has his job and is claiming to be him. Angelo and Balthasar are guests that are not being treated as such because of the entire mess, so they're left sad because they don't get a free meal. The only one who even remotely has an idea that something is wrong is Antipholus of Ephesus, but he is so angry that he cannot get into his house that he does not investigate further and threatens to break down the door. It is funny because it is ridiculous. If they had just opened the door, the rest of the play would not have needed to occur because they would have seen that there are two Antipholus' and two Dromio's. However, they do not because they believe they have no reason doubt that they are right in their individual assumptions (and because it gives us more things to laugh at).

Mistaken identity is so easy to come by in this play because there is no individuality not only in name, but presumably in costume as well due to the way the play is written. For

example, in Act 4, Scene 1 Antipholus of Ephesus has been arrested for not paying for a necklace he ordered because the merchant Angelo does not realize he had actually given the necklace to Antipholus of Syracuse. Considering the exchange of the necklace and the arrest happened within about an hour of each other, it is interesting that nobody noticed the mix up. If this were a play that was rooted in reality, then chances are the Antipholus twins would not be wearing the exact same thing because they are not babies for parents to dress up. They are grown adults so chances are they might be wearing the same kind of attire, but not the exact colors, trim, etc. because they would be their own people. However, the way Shakespeare has written it makes the reader or director perceive that even though the twins are two separate people, they are so alike they might as well be the same person. Nobody notices a change in wardrobe or attitude because there are presumably no differences between them. This idea can also be seen in the treatment of the Dromio twins since their masters can never tell them apart throughout the entire play.

The relationship of master and servant in the play is one that can be seen as abusive. There are two examples that I would like to explore. The first is from Act 1, Scene 2 when Antipholus of Syracuse believes he is talking to Dromio of Syracuse, whom he just gave a lot of money to, but is really talking to Dromio of Ephesus who has no idea about any money. Antipholus of Syracuse becomes enraged when there is confusion and instead of trying to figure out what is wrong, he beats Dromio in line 91. Later in the scene Dromio of Syracuse also gets beaten by Antipholus of Syracuse for not remembering the beating he supposedly received (the one Dromio of Ephesus actually got). The second example comes from Act 4, Scene 4 when Antipholus of Ephesus is in prison waiting for the money to pay for his release (the cost of the necklace Antipholus of Syracuse took by accident). He believed he sent Dromio of Ephesus, but really sent Dromio of Syracuse for the money, so when Dromio of Ephesus comes back with a rope to beat the people who would not let them into the house, Antipholus of Ephesus goes into a rage and beats Dromio of Ephesus with the rope in line 17. As you can see both abusive instances occur when there is confusion, which arguably is what the whole play pokes fun at.

The examples just stated above give an insight into the characterization of the two sets of twins (for more in depth information on characterization visit the [Character Analysis](#) page). For instance, the Antipholus twins are hot heads and generally mean people because they resort to violence to put the Dromio's in place. However, since the Dromio's are portrayed as sassy and sarcastic throughout the play some might argue that they deserve a bit of a slap in the face every once in a while because they can be annoying. It is why the beatings are seen as comic relief because they are being a bit ridiculous to begin with. Still, it is worth mentioning that an abusive relationship exists because in reality the kind of behavior the Antipholus twins are exhibiting can become toxic and unhealthy.

*The Comedy of Errors* touches upon the subjects of mistaken identity and abuse in a lighthearted manner so as to show the audience they should be able to laugh at every situation they are given, even if they seem to be outrageous. Shakespeare purposefully lacks individuality for the pairs of twins because it is what brings out the comedy of the play. If the Antipholus

twins had been drastically different from each other (or the Dromio twins different from each other) then the scope of reality would have been too clear and ruined the play because the differences would have been too obvious causing the audience to focus more on why nobody in the play notices instead of the comedy the play is trying to portray. The abusive relationships are also comical because it allows the audience to live through Antipholus. Everyone goes through moments when they want to slap another person for not getting what they are saying. Some people even want to slap themselves for not understanding in the first place. That is the feeling that Shakespeare captures. It is why such negative themes work as a comedy.