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Competitive Exams: William Shakespeare Overview of Comedy of Errors

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Likely the most influential writer in all of English literature and certainly the most important playwright of the English Renaissance, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. The son of a successful middle-class glove-maker, Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582, he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558 – 1603) and James I (ruled 1603 – 1625); he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by endowing them with the status of king's players. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, such luminaries as Ben Jonson hailed him as the apogee of Renaissance theatre.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare's life; but the paucity of surviving biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact that Shakespeare's plays in reality were written by someone else--Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates--but the evidence for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars.

In the absence of definitive proof to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the 37 plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture ever after:

The Comedy of Errors is generally assumed to be one of Shakespeare's early plays (perhaps even his very first), and its emphasis on slapstick over verbal humor (in

contrast with later comedies) has led many critics to term it an “apprentice comedy.” The exact date of composition is unknown: It was first performed on December 28, 1594, at the Gray’s Inn Christmas Revels, to an audience that would have been largely composed of lawyers and law students. Attempts have been made to date it by references to historical events mentioned in the text (notably in Act III Scene ii, when Dromio describes the fearsome Nell/Luce with references to European politics and geography) , but the references are so vague that any exact dating amounts to guesswork.

As with many of his plays, Shakespeare drew on classical sources for the plot of *The Comedy of Errors*. The bare bones of the story are drawn from the Roman comedy *Menaechmi*, written by the ancient dramatist Plautus (c. 254 – 184 B. C.) ; Shakespeare might have read the play either in the original Latin or in an English translation that was published in 1594 but may have circulated in manuscript form before that year. In any case, the English playwright made a number of changes to the original story, including the addition of a second set of identical twins (the Dromios) , the expansion of Adriana’s character and the creation of her sister, Luciana, and, finally, the creation of the back-story involving Egeon and Emilia. The play also draws on a number of other sources--the lock-out scene, where Antipholus of Ephesus is locked out of his home for dinner, resembles a scene in another Plautine work, *Amphitruo*, in which a master is kept out of his own house while the God Jupiter impersonates him. The general tone of *Comedy* is drawn from Italian comedy of the period, the shrewish wife is a characteristic figure in English comedy, and a number of the ideas about marriage are drawn from early humanists like Erasmus of Rotterdam. The play has always been very popular with audiences, if somewhat less so with critics, and in this century, the plot was borrowed by Rodgers and Hart for their musical, *The Boys from Syracuse*.

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