

The Comedy of Errors abbreviated

Act 1, Scene 1

Grief

Situation: The law in Ephesus provided that “if any Syracusian born come to the bay of Ephesus, he dies, unless a thousand marks be levied to quit the penalty and to ransom him.” Egeon, an old man from Syracuse who had just arrived in Ephesus, is immediately called before the duke of Ephesus to explain “what cause thou cam’st to Ephesus.” We’re about to learn why Egeon came to Ephesus.

EGEON: Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall, and by the doom of death end woes and all.

DUKE: Merchant of Syracuse, plead no more. I am not partial to infringe our laws. If any born at Ephesus be seen at Syracusian marts and fairs; again, if any Syracusian born come to the bay of Ephesus, he dies, his goods confiscate to the Duke’s dispose, unless a thousand marks be levied to quit the penalty and to ransom him. Thy substance cannot amount unto a hundred marks; therefore by law thou art condemned to die.

EGEON: Yet this my comfort: when your words are done, my woes end likewise with the evening sun.

DUKE: Well, Syracusian, say in brief the cause why thou departedst from thy native home and for what cause thou cam’st to Ephesus.

Egeon to Duke, No. 1

In Syracuse was I born and there wed
Unto a woman happy, where we led
A life of joy. Markets took me away
From her for six months when she, almost at
Fainting, there did arrive where I did stay,
Safely, under pleasing punishment that
Women bear. Soon then she became with such
Joy the mother of two sons, one so much
Like the other. In that selfsame inn, not
A day sooner, a woman delivered
Alike male twins. The parents poor, I bought
And brought them up for to have attended
My sons. We, so very proud of these same
Boys, choose to go home. The problems then came.

DUKE: Nay, forward, old man. Do not break off so, for we may pity though not pardon thee.

Egeon to Duke, No. 2

The sailors sought for safety by our boat
When our ship sinking-ripe left us to float
A league from port. My wife, more careful for

The latter-born secured a twin and bound
Them whilst I like heed the other. We tore
Off a spare mast, tied them to it and found
Ourselves floating towards Corinth, we thought,
Each tied to a mast's end. A storm we fought
Split our ship in the midst in this unjust
Divorce when we six were violently borne
Upon a mighty rock. In hopeful trust
They three taken by fishermen but torn
From us, leading to my sad tales. At length
Saved, but severed from bliss and my life's strength.

DUKE: And for the sake of them thou sorrowest for, do me the favor to dilate at full what have befall'n of them and thee till now.

Egeon to Duke, No. 3

I bore the loss of whom I loved, when my
Youngest boy, reft of his brother who I
Labored of a love to see, asked if he,
Retaining his name, might search for him and
If his attendant bear him company
In the quest. Five summers roaming the land
Have I in search of my son who left to
Find his younger brother, at eighteen. Few
Ports missed when to Ephesus I did start
Home. Happy in my death in any way
If they but live. Since by the law thou art
Adjudging me to death, I'll seek this day
To beg or borrow up the sum, to try
All friends, and if no, I am doomed to die.

DUKE: Hapless, Egeon, now, trust me, were it not gainst our laws, my soul should sue as advocate for thee. But though thou art adjudged to the death, yet will I favor thee in what I can. Therefore, merchant, I'll limit thee this day to seek thy life by beneficial help. Try all the friends thou hast in Ephesus; beg thou, or borrow, to make up the sum, and live. If no, then thou art doomed to die. Jailer, take him to thy custody.

JAILER: I will, my lord.

EGEON: Hopeless and helpless doth Egeon wend, but to procrastinate his lifeless end.