

2014 Study Guide for *The Comedy of Errors* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Look up the origins of the word error. What is the original meaning of this word? Considering the definitions of the word error, what do you expect from a play called *The Comedy of Errors*? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.brainyquote.com/words/er/error161402.html>
2. Shakespeare observes the three classical unities in *The Comedy of Errors*. What are the three unities? What are the benefits of confining the play within these three unities? These and other websites provide information:
<http://goo.gl/EP2ewR>
<http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Unities>
3. Shakespeare's play is an adaptation of an ancient Roman play by Plautus, *The Menaechmi* or *The Twin Brothers*. Read a synopsis of *The Menaechmi*. Read a synopsis of *The Comedy of Errors*. How are these two plays similar? Different? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.theatredatabase.com/ancient/menaechmi.html>
<http://pages.pomona.edu/~cmc24747/sources/menaechmi.htm>
<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/errors/summary.html>
4. What are the elements of Roman Comedy? What source material did Plautus adapt for his plays? How does Roman Comedy rely on stock characters, comic business, physicality and improvisation? How are these elements used in comedy today, including plays, movies and sitcoms? These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_ancient_Rome
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/464334/Plautus/5775/Approach-to-drama>

5. Research the Elizabethan views on women and marriage. What was the commonly accepted role for women in the areas of business, politics and family? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.phillyshakespeare.org/uploads/elizabethan%20women.pdf>
<http://goo.gl/cfuBlc>

6. Director Kent Gash has set this production of *The Comedy of Errors* in the cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance that spanned from 1919 to the mid-1930s. What is a Renaissance? Why is the cultural movement in Harlem called a Renaissance in the same vein as the Italian Renaissance? What artistic legends are associated with this period in U.S. history? What myths about African Americans were being challenged and debunked? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/255397/Harlem-Renaissance>
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/41837/Richard-Powell-cocurator-of-the-exhibition-Rhapsodies-in-Black-Art>
<http://exhibitions.nypl.org/harlem/>

7. Research the historical timeline of Harlem from the 1900s to the 1940s. What was Harlem known for? What were the political and philosophical views of this time period? What influenced them? What were the social norms deemed acceptable for men? How was it different for women in politics, business and family life? This and other websites provide information.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem>

8. Research the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South to the North during the early part of the 20th century. What catalysts led African-Americans to leave the South? For what were they searching? What were they escaping? What were they leaving behind? These and other websites provide information:
http://www.pbs.org/jazz/places/faces_migration.htm
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Migration_\(African_American\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Migration_(African_American))

9. Research culturally specific productions of Shakespeare's plays. How are the themes and ideas of the play illuminated through a culturally specific lens? In what ways does changing the setting make a Shakespeare play more accessible to a contemporary

audience? These and other websites provide information.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/ftsmthoo.html>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XagMjfr5foY>

<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/asia/#>

<http://ybglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Press-Release-for-Youth-Bridge-Global.pdf>

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to the definitions of the word error. How is this a play about wandering? How is the play about false notions and mistakes in law or fact? How is it about a deed or event that has not been corrected?
2. Shakespeare observes the three classical unities in *The Comedy of Errors*. How is each expressed in the play? What positive elements does adhering to the unities contribute to the play?
3. Refer to your research about the elements of Roman Comedy. What elements of Roman Comedy were utilized by Shakespeare? How does this play incorporate stock characters, comic business, physicality and improvisation?
4. *The Menaechmi* by Plautus, Shakespeare's source for *The Comedy of Errors*, contains only one set of twins. Shakespeare added a second set of twins. How does this enhance the plot and comic possibilities?

5. Refer to your research on Harlem. Director Kent Gash sets this production during the Harlem Renaissance, in what ways is this an appropriate setting for this story? How are the themes of the play enhanced by this choice?
6. Refer to your research on the Great Migration. Which characters in this production are connected to this movement? What were the repercussions of Egeon's migration, and what does Louisiana (Syracuse) represent to him? How does this inform how Egeon and the other characters in the play feel about Harlemtown (Ephesus) as compared to Louisiana (Syracuse)?
7. Egeon's encounter with the Duke upon arriving in town sets up the possibility that the play could be serious and have a tragic ending. What other serious situations are contained in the play? How does this threat of tragedy impact the humor of the play?
8. What motivates Antipholus of Louisiana to leave Louisiana (Syracuse)? He states, "He that commends me to mine own content/Commends me to the thing I cannot get" (Act I, scene ii). Refer to your research on the Great Migration. What does migrating to Harlemtown represent to him? Why is it important for him to reunite with his lost family?
9. Read through the play and identify all the references to trading and money. What do these tell you about the characters' world and what they value?
10. Find references in the play to enchantment, magic, the supernatural, witches and sorcerers. What events are blamed on enchantment? How is the characters' willingness to believe in magical explanations responsible for some of the events that happen? What are the references to madness in the play and what events are blamed on madness?
11. Discuss the theme of subjugation vs. freedom in the play. Find references to being in servitude in the play. Who is obligated to serve? Who is bound by the law? By marriage? By their gender? By their socio-economic status? Who achieves freedom by the end of the play?

12. Explore the theme of identity in the play. Whose identity is questioned? Whose identity is mistaken? Who doubts their own identity? How are identities restored at the end of the play?
13. Describe the relationship between Antipholus and Dromio of Louisiana (Syracuse). Describe the relationship between Antipholus and Dromio of Harlemtown (Ephesus). How are the two servant-master relationships similar? How are they different? What do these relationships reveal about the individuals? What do they reveal about the society in which they live?
14. Referring to the text, what are your impressions of Antipholus of Louisiana (Syracuse) and Antipholus of Harlemtown (Ephesus)? Write down quotations that reveal something about each of them. What are the differences in their life circumstance and of their emotional lives? What do the brothers have in common? How does the production emphasize the sameness and differences? Repeat the same exercise for the Dromio brothers.
15. Refer to your research on Elizabethan views on women and the views on women in Harlem in the 1920s. Compare and contrast the way women in this production are portrayed to that of Elizabethan views. How does Adriana fit into these views? In what ways is she a forward thinker? In what ways does she defy or break the rules? How about Luciana? Emilia? How does the time period and setting (Harlem) influence the social expectations placed on the women in the play?
16. What contrasting points of view do Adriana and Luciana express about marriage and duty? What are Luciana's views on marriage? To what extent are they influenced by her lack of experience? What are Adriana's views on marriage? To what extent are they influenced by her experience of being married to Antipholus of Harlemtown (Ephesus)? What are Emilia's views on marriage? What experiences have influenced Emilia's views? To what extent do you agree and disagree with each?
17. The characters in *The Comedy of Errors* are driven by the need to reunite and restore family bonds, especially between siblings. If you are also seeing *The Tempest* and/or *A Wrinkle in Time*, compare the journey of Prospero and Antonio or of the Murray family

to that of the Antipholi and Dromios. What are the similarities between these characters? What are the differences?

18. Refer to your research on culturally specific productions of Shakespeare's plays. How does the multicultural casting of this production reflect the philosophical and artistic legacy of Harlem? How are the themes and ideas of the play illuminated through this culturally specific lens? In what ways does setting this production during the Harlem Renaissance make this production more accessible to a contemporary audience?

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