



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival

Study Guide

The Comedy of Errors

By William Shakespeare



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

- Born around April 23, 1564.
- Married Anne Hathaway at the age of 18. They had three children between 1583 and 1585.
- Became an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men when King James I was crowned in 1603. Wrote or collaborated on approximately 39 existing plays, 3 epic poems, and 154 sonnets over a 25-year career.
- Died in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616.
- Buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church.

Before seeing or 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 website provides some further perspectives on the word:
<https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/error>
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://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/drama/classical%20drama/unities.html>
<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/biography/Plautus>

5. Research 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/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/elizabethan-women.pdf>

<https://www.elizabethi.org/contents/women/>

6. 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://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/asia/#>

<http://ybglobal.org/media-press>



Duke and Luciana costume renderings designed by Kara Harmon.

After seeing or 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. 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?

6. What motivates Antipholus of Syracuse to leave Syracuse? He states, “He that commends me to mine own content/Commends me to the thing I cannot get” (Act I, scene ii). What does migrating to Ephesus represent to him? Why is it important for him to reunite with his lost family?

7. Read through the play and identify all the references to trading and money. What do these

Additional resources

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

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

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

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

tell you about the characters' world and what they value?

8. 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?

9. 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?

10. 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?

11. Describe the relationship between Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse. Describe the relationship between Antipholus and Dromio of 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?

12. Referring to the text, what are your impressions of Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of 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 and for Adriana and Luciana.

13. 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 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?

14. Refer to your research on Elizabethan women. How are the roles of women in that time period represented in the play? How does this production circumvent some of the outdated practices and ideals?

15. Refer to your research on culturally specific productions of Shakespeare. How do the cultural choices of this production impact the themes and ideas of the play? What effect does music have on the production?



Courtesan costume rendering designed by Kara Harmon.

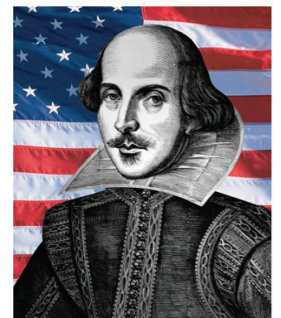


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