

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Comedy of Errors

by William Shakespeare

Written by Tom Zolper

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The Comedy of Errors

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define the terms “comedy” and “farce” and identify the elements of farce that distinguish it as a sub-genre of comedy
2. analyze the use of flat, static, and stock characters in farce
3. analyze the use of certain comic elements in the play
 - implausible premise
 - coincidence
 - mistaken identity
 - scatological humor/sexual innuendo
 - physical humor/slapstick
4. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam
5. respond to free-response questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam
6. offer a close reading of *The Comedy of Errors* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel

The Comedy of Errors

Introductory Lecture

Note on the Play

The Comedy of Errors is one of Shakespeare's early plays—possibly his *first*—written probably between 1592 and 1594. It is his shortest play and his most farcical. Its emphasis on slapstick and physical comedy over the wordplay and verbal humor that are characteristic of his later comedies, has led many critics to call *The Comedy of Errors* Shakespeare's “apprentice comedy.”

The play is based on mistaken identities and the improbable coincidence of two sets of twins—separated in their infancy and each twin bearing his brother's name—being in the same town unaware of each other's presence.

As is typical of Shakespeare, the situations of the play are borrowed from classical sources. The story of the mistaken identity between identical twins with the same name comes from *Menaechmi* by the ancient Roman playwright Plautus. The first widely available English translation of this Latin comedy was published in 1595, and some critics assert that Shakespeare may have had a hand in composing the English verse.

Other elements, especially the twin servants and the scene in which Antipholus of Ephesus is locked out of his home and barred from his dinner, is borrowed from *Amphitruo*, in which a master is kept out of his own house while his wife dines with an imposter.

The frame story of Ægeon and Aemilia is derived from *Apollonius of Tyre*, a popular ancient tale about a man who loses both his wife and his daughter and believes them dead. A series of unlikely events and the intercession of the gods results in his eventual reunion with his family.

As the definition of comedy specifies, the primary goal of *The Comedy of Errors* is entertainment. Still, there are strong suggestions of theme, especially appearance versus reality, questions of identity, and shades of insanity.

The Comedy of Errors and *The Tempest* are Shakespeare's only plays to observe the classical unities: Unity of Time, Unity of Place, and Unity of Action.

Elements of Comedy

A **comedy** is a literary work the primary intent of which is to provoke laughter. Unlike tragedy, which seeks to elicit an intense emotional response, comedy strives to chiefly entertain through criticism and ridicule of human frailties or foibles and the imperfectness of human

The Comedy of Errors

Act I, Scene I

A Hall in the Duke's Palace

1. Why is Ægeon, the merchant of Syracuse, condemned to die?

2. Why did Ægeon set out from Syracuse to Ephesus, knowing of the feud between the cities?

3. How does Ægeon respond to the Duke when he asks, "Do me the favor to dilate at full/ What hath befallen of them and thee till now?"

4. What offer does the Duke make to Ægeon?

5. Why is the Duke's offer to Ægeon important to the play's structure?

6. Why does Shakespeare open the play with long speeches by Ægeon?

Act II, Scene I

The House of Antipholus of Ephesus

1. What is the conversation between Adriana and her sister about? Why is it humorous?

2. Explain the puns that become the basis of much of this scene's humor.

3. How are the sisters different?

4. How does Luciana defend her view of marriage and a wife's role?

5. Why is Luciana not married?

6. What plot development is most likely being foreshadowed in this scene?

7. Explain the pun Dromio makes when he enters.

Act III, Scene I

Before the House of Antipholus of Ephesus

1. What two motifs that were introduced earlier are developed further in this scene?

2. How does Antipholus verify the audience's initial impressions of Adriana? As what comic stock character is she being established?

3. Explain the different types of language used in this scene. How does language reflect what is happening in this scene?

4. Explain how the scene at the door to Antipholus of Ephesus' house is an example of "low humor."

5. What near-climax does this scene reach?

6. Explain the insulting pun with which Dromio responds to Antipholus' request for a crowbar.

Act IV, Scene I**A Public Place**

1. How are the stakes being raised as the plot nears its climax?

2. What does Antipholus of Ephesus say when he sees the goldsmith?

3. Summarize the situation with the gold chain.

4. Of what does the fact that the Second Merchant is hoping to leave immediately on a trading journey remind the audience?

5. What element does the merchant's needing to leave immediately add to this scene?

6. Who is arrested in this scene, and who presses the charges?

Act V, Scene I**A Street Before a Priory**

1. Why would Dromio counsel his master to run into a priory?

2. How does the situation escalate even further from the previous scene?

3. What new character is introduced in this scene? What should we suspect about the introduction of a new character this late in the play?

4. How does Aemelia contribute to the comedy in this scene?

5. What structural purpose does the Duke's arrival serve?

6. What is the first clue that the confusion of identities is both reaching its peak and about to be resolved?
