

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Comedy of Errors

by William Shakespeare

written by Ashlin Bray

Copyright © 2006 by Prestwick House Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593.
www.prestwickhouse.com Permission to copy this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her
personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale.

ISBN 978-1-60389-740-2

Item No. 301628

The Comedy of Errors

Notes on the Play

The Comedy of Errors is one of Shakespeare's early plays and scholars estimate that it was written between 1592 and 1593. The play is based on the comedy of confusion: it features twin brothers with the same name, Antipholus, who were separated at birth. The confusion is compounded by the fact their servants are also twins, both named Dromio, who were also separated at birth.

Unlike some of Shakespeare's later plays, *The Comedy of Errors* does not dwell on the political situation of the day or make moral judgments about England's leaders. It exists simply to be enjoyed.

Students who are not acquainted with Shakespeare may have difficulty sorting out the characters, which is certainly understandable because the play depends upon duplicate names and identity confusion. Reading aloud can increase understanding, as can role playing scenes with modern dialogue. Teachers should also encourage students to return to the Dramatis Personæ. Referring to this list of people in the play is a good way to keep track of the characters.

Shakespeare's use of the Latin form for some of the vowels in two characters' names may cause confusion. Teachers who wish to simplify spelling may use the modernized versions given in parentheses: Ægeon (Aegeon), Æmilia (Aemilia, pronounced Emilia).

Students will benefit from knowing that Shakespeare wrote during the reign of Elizabeth I, and theater of that period is usually referred to as Elizabethan, not Shakespearean. The period name reflects the fact that many playwrights were working at the time, and theatrical life was rich and varied during Elizabeth's reign.

While one character keeps a mistress and several allusions to venereal disease occur, the motivations and actions of the play are quite innocent. Its farcical nature may be especially appealing to young readers.

All references come from the Dover Thrift Editions of *The Comedy of Errors*, copyright 2002 Dover Publications, Inc.

The Comedy of Errors

Objectives

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

1. give a synopsis of the plot of the play.
2. discuss literary terms relating to plays.
3. cite characteristics of *The Comedy of Errors* that mark it as an early Shakespearean play.
4. define the terms “comedy” and “farce” and identify markers of farce as a subset of comedy.
5. evaluate how Shakespeare used stock characters to reinforce the farcical nature of the play.
6. discuss the dramatic uses of the monologue in this play.
7. discuss the range of roles for women in Ephesus based on the characters of Adriana, Luciana, the courtesan, and the abbess.
8. evaluate how a production of this play could be made easy to understand.
9. choose two scenes and show how they are pivotal to the plot of the play.
10. develop a character sketch of Adriana or Antipholus of Ephesus.
11. discuss the rule of law under the Duke.
12. show how the political tensions among Syracuse, Ephesus, Corinth, and Epidamnum are important to the play.
13. discuss the role and power of superstition in *The Comedy of Errors*.
14. evaluate the life and treatment of slaves in the play.
15. cite an incident or conversation and show what event it foreshadows.

The Comedy of Errors

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does Shakespeare depict differences in social class in the play?
2. How does the use of stock characters, such as the kitchen maid or the courtesan, make the play more interesting?
3. Identify Shakespeare's use of irony in the play. Explain how it contributes to the play.
4. Write a biography of the abbess, detailing her early life, explaining the choices she made, and evaluating her success.
5. Why does Shakespeare use so many physical beatings in this play?
6. How does the political system of the independent city state affect this play?
7. This play is called *The Comedy of Errors*. Discuss elements of comedy in the play, and then discuss the range of errors occurring.
8. The leading characters are twins who have grown up separately and with different kinds of lives. Make a table comparing the qualities and characteristics of Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse.
9. Two sisters are also featured in the play. Compare the lives, characters, and characteristics of Adriana and Luciana.
10. Discuss the life of a slave in this play, using both Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus as examples.
11. What is life like in the city of Ephesus under Duke Solinus?
12. What can you infer about the status and life of a courtesan at this time?
13. Choose one monologue from the play, and re-write its sentiments either in poetry of your own or in prose.

The Comedy of Errors

Act I, Scene I – A Hall in the Duke’s Palace

Vocabulary

adverse – opposing
burthen – burden, load
confiscate – taken away
dilate – to enlarge; tell more about
Exeunt. – Latin for “they exit.” The word is followed by a period because it is abbreviated from the phrase “*exeunt omnes*,” meaning “they all exit.”
factor – agent or business manager
Gaoler – a jailer or other law-enforcement officer
guilders – Dutch currency; Shakespeare’s audience would understand the term to mean money in general
hap – luck or fortune; chance or happenstance
importuned – begged
intestine jars – the jars used to store the intestines of the dead
league – a distance measured over water; 2-4 statute miles
meaner – lower in class, poorer
rancorous – mean-spirited, angry
reft – been bereft of, stripped of
seditious – traitorous
synods – the councils or committees that make policy
Syracusa – Syracuse, a commercial city on the east coast of Sicily

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?

8. When Antipholus of Ephesus decides to break open his own gate with a crowbar to see who his wife is entertaining, Balthazar argues against it. What does Balthazar say?

9. The men decide to go to the Tiger to eat, but Antipholus goes to the Porpentine, where he plans to give a gift to the courtesan. What is the gift, and why does he decide to give it to her?

10. What does Antipholus of Ephesus mean when he says, "This jest shall cost me some expense"?

11. Angelo and Balthazar are both stock characters, meaning that they do not grow or change during the course of the play. Why are they included?

4. How does Adriana describe her husband?

5. What happens when Dromio of Syracuse arrives and asks Adriana for the money to get her husband out of debtors' prison?
