

# Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*

November 2011

These study materials are produced for use with the Classic Players production of *The Comedy of Errors*.

# smart

SHARING MASTERWORKS OF ART

AN EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH OF BOB JONES UNIVERSITY



Micah Thompson as Antipholus of Ephesus, Justin Snyder as Antipholus of Syracuse and Greg Toler as Dromio of Ephesus, Ben Toler as Dromio of Syracuse in the 2011 Classic Players production of *The Comedy of Errors*

## *The Comedy of Errors:* From Pen to Stage

**T**he *Comedy of Errors* is Shakespeare's shortest play and very likely the first of his 18 comedies. Its earliest recorded performance was part of the Christmas festivities at Gray's Inn on December 28, 1594, but it may have been written as early as 1590.

In Shakespeare's day originality was not regarded as highly by creative artists as it is today. Shakespeare derived ideas for most of his plots from other works, both published and unpublished, rather than from his own imagination. Among the literature he turned to most often were Roman drama, Italian fiction and English narrative poetry, but he was also inspired by such non-literary sources as ballads and travel literature.

Shakespeare took the basic ideas for the twists and turns of *The Comedy* plot directly from two ancient Roman comedies by Plautus: *The Twin Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo*. In both these Latin plays, Plautus derives most of his laughs from the motif of mistaken identity. *Menaechmi* presents a series of absurd situations, boisterous physical humor and hilarious wordplay resulting from

the unexpected appearance of a long-lost twin in his brother's city. After being repeatedly mistaken for each other, the Menaechmi finally meet.

*Amphitryon* gave Shakespeare the idea of multiplying the number of comic errors in his plot by adding a second set of twins who are slaves to the first set. In Roman drama the stock slave character was the major recipient of slapstick, or a type of humor based on hilarious physical abuse. Like playgoers in ancient times, Shakespeare's audience must have relished the stage beatings the Dromios receive as their masters become increasingly more frustrated by their incongruous encounters. The Dromios respond to the pummeling with quibbles and sarcasm, also derived from Roman tradition, in this case that of the wise servant who can outsmart his master.

By synthesizing, enlarging and complicating the source plays, Shakespeare greatly surpasses Plautus' achievement. The improbable main plot of *The Comedy* features two sets of identical twins who, unbeknown to them, are repeatedly mistaken for each other by one another and the other characters in the plot. Shakespeare brilliantly constructs the sequence of events so that one master and one servant are brought together onstage repeatedly, but never two servants or two masters. Each mistake compounds the confusion and intensifies the slapstick humor.

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# Staging *The Comedy*: In and Out of the Renaissance

In Shakespeare's own day acting companies did not use stage sets, and their costumes were not coordinated to suggest a certain time or place. For the most part actors wore clothing that had been cast off by the nobility.

In the 18th century, Shakespearean actors wore contemporary dress. The result was that Prospero at times looked like Samuel Johnson, and King Lear, like George Washington. It was not until the 19th century that the practice of "authentic" Renaissance costuming for Shakespeare productions came into vogue along with ultra-realistic stage sets.

Modern producers employ not one but many conventions of costuming and production design for Shakespeare plays. Classic Players' production team is no exception. Harrell Whittington's set and costume designs for the 1964, 1971, and 1980 productions of *The Comedy of Errors* had the sunny look of a Renaissance Mediterranean seaport, with whimsical details in the features of the Ephesian houses and shops.

For the 1991 production, Whittington created a new set design and Beneth Jones designed new costumes. The period setting they chose provides audiences a fresh look at Shakespeare's hilarious script. The look suggests America in the 1920's and features a rotating, multi-story set. The 1991 designs will serve the 2011 production as well. 📖



▲ Harrell Whittington's sets and Beneth Jones's costumes for Classic Players' 1991, 2001 and 2011 productions of *The Comedy of Errors*



◀◀ Harrell Whittington's set and costumes for Classic Players' 1964, 1971, and 1980 productions of *The Comedy of Errors*

◀ Clockwise: Mark Tilghman as Dromio of Ephesus, Kristin Waite Smith as Adriana, Ben Evans as Antipholus of Ephesus, Stephen Jones as Antipholus of Syracuse, Sarah Reid Hudson as Luciana, and Birch Champeon as Dromio of Syracuse in the 1991 Classic Players production of *The Comedy of Errors*



◀◀◀ Bill Apelian as Egeon and Joseph Bartosch as Solinus in the 2001 Classic Players production of *The Comedy of Errors*

◀◀ Paul Keew as Dromio of Syracuse and David Schwingle as Antipholus of Syracuse and in the 2001 Classic Players production of *The Comedy of Errors*

◀ Eldon Nickson as Antipholus of Syracuse and Linda Pierce St. John as Adriana in the 1964 Classic Players production of *The Comedy of Errors*

## FROM PEN TO PAGE, *continued*

He adds to the cast the unmarried sister-in-law of Antipholus of Ephesus, who also becomes the object of his twin brother's romantic interests. This character allows Shakespeare to include in his story two romantic couples who undergo seemingly irreconcilable conflicts. Antipholus of Ephesus' marital problems with Adriana parallel the obstacles his brother faces in his attempts to court Adriana's sister, Luciana.

In Plautus the characters corresponding to *The Comedy's* Antipholus of Ephesus and Adriana are both unfaithful marriage partners. Shakespeare creates instead a frustrated husband, who determines to give his jealous wife something to be jealous about. He thus replaces the illicit love in his source with a resolvable marital misunderstanding and an innocent courtship. Such modification of source material for the purpose of creating an upright moral tone is called "expurgation."

Another way in which Shakespeare modifies Plautus' generally cynical attitude toward life is by placing the plot's farcical misadventures in a serious framework tale taken from John Gower, a medieval English poet who derived the story from a classical source. Shakespeare adapts Gower's version of the Apollonius of Tyre story to create a potentially touching account of an old father whose life is endangered as he searches for his lost family. This domestic story, played out in the first and last scenes of *The Comedy*, allows the playwright to bring elements of character into a play that focuses primarily on plot. Its portrayal of husband/wife and parent/child relationships also adds an emotional dimension to the play.

Shakespeare's title for *The Comedy of Errors* captures well his priority in this early work: delighting the audience with comic confusion

and foolishness. But even so, *The Comedy* is a hybrid form, a play fashioned from two very different types of sources. It combines pure farce ("a dramatic work ... which has for its sole object to incite laughter" *Oxford English Dictionary*) with a type of literature known as "romance," meaning a strange and marvelous adventure story, used as a framework. *The Comedy* also offers elements of romantic comedy. All these strands of plot and genre come together successfully in a wonder-filled ending that includes providential reunion, reconciliation, happiness and harmony for a long-estranged family. Throughout his comedies Shakespeare is the master of the mixed mode.

Another significant change Shakespeare made in his source materials for *The Comedy* is also consistent with his interest in family relationships throughout his writings. Rather than Epidamnum, Shakespeare's play is set in Ephesus, an ancient city his audiences would have known well through the apostle Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians.

The New Testament portrays Ephesus as a center of paganism and witchcraft. After Paul preached there, many who "used curious arts" burned their books of necromancy (Acts 19:19). Ephesus is thus an appropriately menacing setting for the development of Shakespeare's main character, Antipholus of Syracuse. As a lonely outsider in a city of sorcery, he is repeatedly confronted with strange events that make him believe he is either dreaming or bewitched. Thus Shakespeare makes good comic use of Ephesus' notoriety for witchcraft without actually depicting the occult in his play.

Geoffrey Bullough sets forth a second plausible reason for the locale Shakespeare chose for *The Comedy*: "The Epistle to the Ephesians includes earnest exhortations to domestic unity." Having resided in Ephesus for two years, Paul admonishes Ephesian husbands and

wives, parents and children, masters and servants to exercise love, forbearance and submission. What more apt setting might the playwright have chosen for "a play of wonders in which every loose end should finally be tied up"?

After Shakespeare had penned *The Comedy of Errors* manuscript, he probably gave it to a scribe, who prepared a clean transcript, or "fair copy," to be used by an acting company. It is likely that he sold the play before the copying and retained no rights to it as his property. Shakespeare apparently had no aspirations to publish his works. He was a practical theater man who wrote scripts to be enacted onstage by the company in which he was a shareholder, not to be read from the printed page.

Once an acting company had obtained a new play, members submitted it for licensing to a public official called the Master of the Revels. He and his staff had the authority to require the company to make changes before producing the script. The purpose of such censorship was to protect the interests of the Crown against seditious or immoral elements in public entertainment.

We know little about what happened to a Shakespearean play between the time it left the writer's pen and its first performance. Most textual authorities believe that some scripts were altered during the rehearsal process by actors in collaboration with each other and with the playwright. There were no stage directors in Shakespeare's day.

We also know that the rehearsal period for a new production was quite short by modern standards. Actors learned their parts very quickly, usually in about a week. Those with long roles had the ability to memorize up to 800 lines a day. Since the three longest roles in *The Comedy* are each only about 265 lines long,

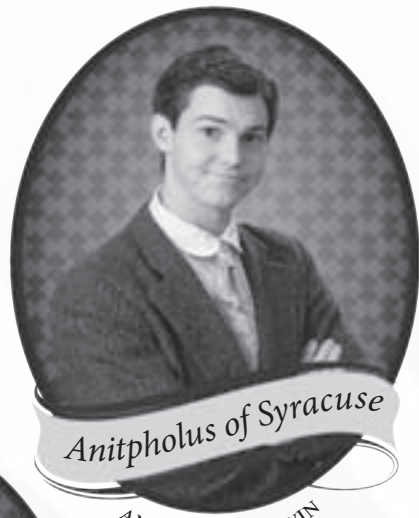
Shakespeare's company must have made short work of preparing for the opening performance.

We can only imagine how Shakespeare's contemporary audiences received *The Comedy of Errors*. The only two performances we have record of during Shakespeare's lifetime were both private entertainments for learned audiences and were both held during the Christmas season: 1594 at a London law school and 1604 at King James I's court. For audiences who had read Latin comedy since grammar school, Shakespeare's command of its techniques must have been impressive. We can also be sure that his fast-paced plot, clever dialogue and slapstick humor brought many laughs. But perhaps the script's depiction of several basic human concerns also struck some deeper chords of sympathy and compassion.

Thus although Shakespeare used Roman farce as a starting point, by the time *The Comedy* reached the stage, it had been transformed into a work of art with a very different tone from his models. As Charles Boyce explains, "Shakespeare, even as a young man at the beginning of his career, felt that a happy ending should not be divorced from an awareness of mortality and human frailty. In this he utterly transcends the genre of farce."

While 95 percent of *The Comedy of Errors* makes the audience laugh at the characters' human capacity for error, in the finale these same silly, confused creatures achieve understanding, forgiveness and happiness. In the words of Russ McDonald, "Shakespeare is the master of the combined response. All his comedies are ... complicated mixtures of farce and romance, sunshine and shadow, absurdity and profundity." Shakespeare's original audiences may well have appreciated the play's humanity as well as its hilarity. 📖

## PEOPLE FROM SYRACUSE



Anitpholus of Syracuse

ANTIPHOLUS'S TWIN



Dromio of Syracuse

DROMIO'S TWIN



Egeon

EMILIA'S HUSBAND



Emilia

WIFE OF EGEON

# THE

### BEFORE THE ACTION OF THE PLAY BEGINS:

*Some 23 years ago Emilia, wife of Egeon, gave birth to twin boys while the parents were on a business trip to Epidamnnum. At the same time a poor woman in the city also had twin sons, and Egeon purchased them to become servants to his own sons.*

*As the new-made family of six was sailing home to Syracuse, their ship sank in a storm. In the confusion that followed, they boarded two different rescue ships. As a result, Egeon along with one son and one servant was taken to Epidaurus. Emilia with the other pair of infants sailed off in the direction of Corinth. Neither trio knew of the fate of the other.*

*At the age of 18, the son and servant whom Egeon reared—Antipholus of Syracuse and Dromio of Syracuse—embarked on a quest for their lost brothers. After the pair had been gone for a time, Egeon set out searching for them. Some five years later his search has brought him to Ephesus.*

### THE PLAY BEGINS...

Shortly after his arrival in Ephesus, the Syracusan merchant Egeon is arrested as an enemy of the city because Ephesus and Syracuse are embroiled in a trade war. Duke Solinus of Ephesus declares that unless Egeon pays 1000 marks by nightfall, he will be executed.

When the duke asks Egeon why he has come to Ephesus, the merchant tells the story of his fragmented family. As he is taken into custody, Egeon believes that his doom is sealed because he cannot pay the ransom money Ephesus requires of him.

Antipholus of Syracuse, having searched for his lost twin for seven years, also arrives in Ephesus, a city notorious for sorcery and witchcraft. His fears are confirmed when a man whom he believes to be Dromio of Syracuse, his servant from birth, does not even recognize him.

At the same time the townspeople, who are complete strangers to him, seem to know him quite well, and a woman (Adriana) accuses him of deserting her.

Worst of all, Antipholus of Syracuse unwittingly falls in love with Luciana (Adriana's sister), who rejects his advances, believing him to be her brother-in-law, Antipholus of Ephesus. At the same time Dromio of Syracuse is pursued by Luce (also called Nell), an unkempt kitchen maid who wants a husband.

# PLOT

## The Short of It

After a series of mystifying adventures, Antipholus of Syracuse is convinced that he is the victim of witchcraft. When Adriana tries to have him and his servant bound and taken to her house, the two men run away and hide in an abbey. There the abbess promises to protect them.

Antipholus of Ephesus serves as a soldier under the patronage of Duke Solinus. He arrives home for dinner with his slave, Dromio of Ephesus, and two friends—Angelo the goldsmith and Balthazar the merchant. They are unable to enter the house, however, because the door is barred. Enraged and confused, Antipholus of Ephesus decides to dine at the inn of the Hostess, a woman whom he knows to be the object of his wife Adriana's jealousy.

Still frustrated by his inability to enter his own house, Antipholus of Ephesus resolves to give the Hostess a gold chain he has ordered as a gift for Adriana. He sends Angelo the goldsmith to get the chain, which eventually is given by mistake to his twin brother, a man entirely unknown to Antipholus of Ephesus.

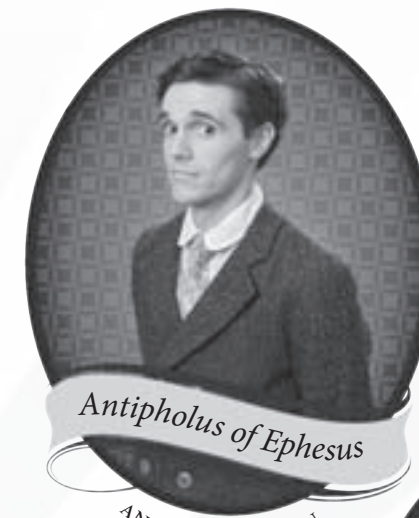
Just when Antipholus of Ephesus believes that his entire world has gone mad, he is arrested for failure to pay for the gold chain he has never received. He sends a servant to fetch money for his bail, but Dromio of Ephesus fails to return.

Adriana, Luciana and the Hostess arrive with one Dr. Pinch to declare Antipholus of Ephesus insane, based on his seemingly erratic behavior. When the enraged Antipholus of Ephesus attempts to strike his wife, both he and his servant are tied up and led away to be locked up at home.

Later in the streets Adriana, accompanied by Luciana and the Hostess, appeals to the abbess for advice about her husband's madness. At about the same time Duke Solinus and his retinue appear en route to Egeon's beheading.

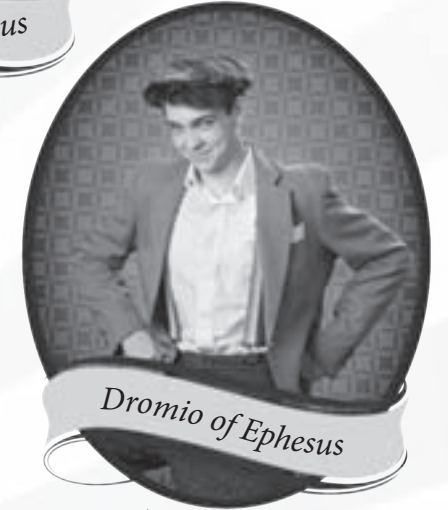
When Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus also arrive, charges and countercharges fly between them and Angelo, the Hostess, and Adriana. Entirely confused, the duke sends for the abbess, who stays at the fray long enough to hear Egeon's claim that Antipholus of Ephesus is his son and then exits. When she reappears with Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, the astonished crowd puts together the pieces of the puzzle to create one of Shakespeare's happiest comic endings. 🍷

## PEOPLE FROM EPHEBUS



Antipholus of Ephesus

ANTIPHOLUS'S TWIN



Dromio of Ephesus

DROMIO'S TWIN



Adriana

WIFE OF ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHEBUS



Luciana

ADRIANA'S SISTER

# Doubles with a Difference: Twins in Shakespeare's Plays

Much of the delight we take in seeing *The Comedy of Errors* (1590-94) comes from the two sets of twins who drive its plot: the brothers Antipholus and the brothers Dromio. Several years later Shakespeare again used twin characters to complicate the plot of *Twelfth Night* (1601-02), a romantic comedy with melancholy overtones. This third set of twins is comprised of a brother and sister, Sebastian and Viola. When Viola takes on the disguise of a male servant, comic mistakes of identity similar to those in *The Comedy* ensue.

Shakespeare was himself the father of twins, a girl named Judith and a boy named Hamnet, born in 1585. Although Shakespeare's plays are not autobiographical, it is hard to imagine that his experiences as the father of twins did not give him special interest in the twin relationship. He must also have been influenced by the death of Hamnet in 1596, an event that occurred between the writing of his two plays that feature twins.

Shakespeare's choice of source material for *The Comedy of Errors* may have grown out of his interest in twins. Whereas in ancient myth twins were considered unnatural and frightful, around the year 200 B. C. Plautus wrote the first work in which twins appear as normal protagonists, *Menaechmi*. This comedy of mistaken identity is Shakespeare's major source for *The Comedy*. From another play by Plautus, *Amphitruo*, Shakespeare took the cue to provide twin servants for the twin protagonists.

In this way Shakespeare created an ingenious set of characters for a comedy based on mistaken identity, a motif that he employed throughout his career. The twin masters and twin servants in *The Comedy* are often played as mirror images of each other, at least in appearance. The script even gives them the same names: Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus; Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus. Why? No one would mistake them for each other if they answered to two different names. The only plausible explanation for this unrealistic touch, which is necessary to the working of the plot, is that Egeon believed his older son, Antipholus of Ephesus, to be dead along with his servant; therefore he re-named the younger son and his servant for their deceased siblings.

Although *The Comedy* is slight on thematic content, one major idea that emerges from the script and converges with the twin characters in the plot is the tension between illusion and reality. We refer to the difference between what a person appears to be and what he in reality is as the appearance versus reality theme. This theme is at the grassroots level of all comedy. When a person mistakes appearance for reality, conflict and disorder follow. The endings of both *The Comedy* and *Twelfth Night* suggest that society can be stable only when illusions are overturned. Again and again

Shakespeare's plays imply that we must be careful about drawing false conclusions about almost any person or situation, or, in other words, making judgments based on outward appearance.

Although Shakespeare did not strain to create lifelike characters, he sometimes achieves a degree of psychological realism in his characterization in spite of his usual preoccupation with plot. For example, as the plot of *The Comedy* unfolds, he goes beyond the stereotype of twins as indistinguishable and introduces differences alongside the similarities between the twin brothers. Dromio of Ephesus is more obtuse and clownish than Dromio of Syracuse, a clever prankster who talks more. In the end the twin servants argue about which twin is older and should exit first, but finally they decide to go out together.

The differences between the two Antipholuses are more marked. Antipholus of Syracuse is a romantic wanderer, traveling in a strange land because he yearns after his long-lost brother and mother. The playwright endows him with a more sensitive, introspective nature than his brother's and an eagerness to fall in love. Antipholus of Ephesus is a hot-headed businessman, smug



Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse

and self-satisfied. His impetuous responses keep the conflict around him raging until he is at last perceived to be insane.

Shakespeare also shows insight into the inseparable bond between twins in his characterization of Antipholus of Syracuse, whose physical separation from his twin is tantamount to psychic separation. He describes himself as having lost part of his identity: "I to the world am like a drop of water/That in the ocean seeks another drop." In searching for his brother, he searches for the other part of himself, for his past and his parentage, at the risk of his very life.

Shakespeare parallels the bond between twins to the bond of marriage when Adriana uses the same image of a divided drop of water in describing herself as having lost part of her identity because she has lost the love of her husband, Antipholus of Ephesus. Marriage partners, like twins, should be inseparable, indivisible.

Two conventions of the climax of Shakespearean comedy are the revelation of true identity and the resolution of any romantic conflicts remaining in the plot. This sort of ending implies that right relationships among human beings must begin from a



Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse

position of truth about their own individual identities. When mistaken identity has been an issue, Shakespeare's comic resolutions work out very quickly in the play's final scene. In *The Comedy*, for example, once the abbess brings together the two long-separated sets of twins, all identities become clear, and reunion and restoration follow. In the romantic resolution the Antipholus twins are not only reunited as brothers; they are set to become brothers-in-law as well.

*The Comedy* is the first of Shakespeare's plays that use comic absurdities to explore profound human values and concerns. It is, above all, a play about identity, about knowing oneself in order to have satisfying relationships with others. "Who am I?" and "What is reality?" are universal themes in both tragic and comic drama. Shakespeare would return to these ideas and materials again and again in his works. 📖

“What **ERROR**  
drives our eyes & ears  
**AMISS?**”

*The Comedy of Errors* develops these  
**4 separate but related plots:**

1. Egeon's arrest and scheduled execution
2. Numerous misunderstandings between the Antipholus brothers and the Dromio brothers and those characters who interact with them
3. The estrangement and later reconciliation of a husband and wife
4. The wooing of a maid

(source: Blaze Bonazza)

# The Sequence of Errors in the Plot of *A Comedy of Errors*

- 1 Antipholus of Syracuse gives money to Dromio of Syracuse to deposit for safekeeping.
- 2 Dromio of Ephesus calls Antipholus of Syracuse to dinner.
- 3 Antipholus of Syracuse questions Dromio of Ephesus about the deposit of his money.
- 4 Dromio of Syracuse refuses to allow Antipholus of Ephesus into his own house for dinner.
- 5 Antipholus of Syracuse woos Luciana, who believes him to be her brother-in-law, Antipholus of Ephesus.
- 6 Dromio of Syracuse reports that Luce, the kitchen wench, has mistaken him for Dromio of Ephesus, the man she wants to marry.
- 7 Antipholus of Syracuse sends Dromio of Syracuse to secure places on a ship departing Ephesus that night.
- 8 Antipholus of Syracuse receives a gold chain ordered by Antipholus of Ephesus.
- 9 Antipholus of Ephesus sends Dromio of Ephesus for a rope.
- 10 Antipholus of Ephesus is arrested for failure to pay for the gold chain he never received.
- 11 Dromio of Syracuse gives word that he has hired a ship to Antipholus of Ephesus, who expects a rope instead.
- 12 Antipholus of Ephesus sends Dromio of Syracuse for a purse of ducats he can use as bail money.
- 13 Dromio of Syracuse delivers Antipholus of Ephesus' purse to Antipholus of Syracuse.
- 14 The Hostess tries to reclaim her ring from Antipholus of Syracuse rather than Antipholus of Ephesus, who has taken it.
- 15 Dromio of Ephesus delivers a rope to Antipholus of Ephesus, who expects to receive his purse.

— KEY —

● : From Syracuse

■ : From Ephesus



Luciana and Adriana

Comedy moves from confusion to order, from ignorance to understanding, from law to liberty, from unhappiness to satisfaction, from separation to union, from barrenness to fertility, from singleness to marriage, from two to one.

Russ McDonald

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