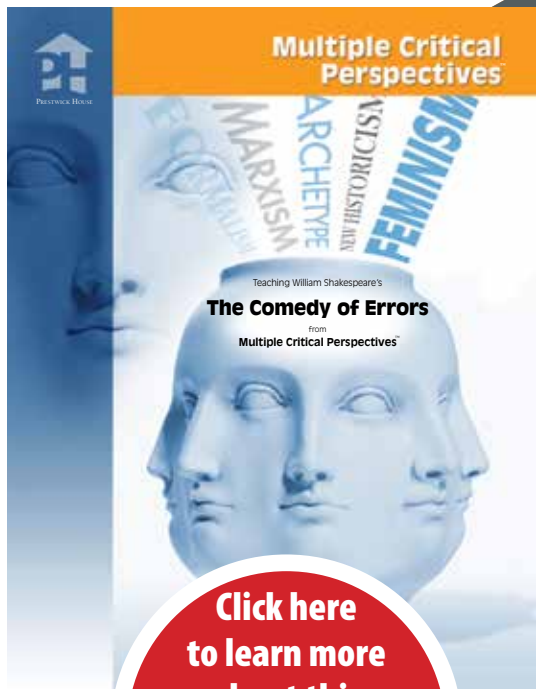




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Teaching William Shakespeare's

The Comedy of Errors

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Tom Zolper



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*

THE *COMEDY OF ERRORS* is possibly Shakespeare's earliest play, written some time between 1589 and 1594. It is his shortest play and one of his most farcical, with a major part of the humor coming from slapstick, mistaken identity, as well as puns and other wordplay.

The Comedy of Errors is a comedy—a farce—with a good deal of slapstick and bawdy humor. Its purpose is entertainment, and it is not socially or philosophically significant.

A farce is a comedy that entertains largely through unlikely, extravagant, and improbable situations; disguises and mistaken identity; verbal humor, which may include sexual innuendo; and a fast-paced plot. Farce is also characterized by slapstick or physical humor and the use of the absurd and the nonsensical.

Farce tends to depict human beings as vain, irrational, venal, infantile, and prone to automatic behavior. In that respect, farce is a natural companion of satire and is, in fact, often confused with satire.

True farce, however, need not have any “point” or theme. It ridicules, pokes fun at, and mocks, but does not claim to try to effect reform of the persons or traits it mocks.

The Comedy of Errors 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 the case with many Shakespearean comedies, *The Comedy of Errors* ends with reunion, reconciliation, and the promise of a future wedding.

Also typical of Shakespeare's plays, the situations in *The Comedy of Errors* 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 around the same time as the writing of *Comedy*.

Other elements, especially the twin servants and the scene in which Antipholus of Ephesus is locked out of his home, 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 Aegeon 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.

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.

Formalism Applied to The Comedy of Errors



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



7. Have each group select *at least* three of the passages that were identified in Step 3 and answer the following questions (on the handout) about each:

- What characters are involved in this passage?
- What is the overall mood of this passage?
- What is the primary dramatic purpose of this passage?
 - to reveal exposition?
 - to advance the plot?
 - inciting incident?
 - rising action?
 - reversal?
 - climax?
 - etc.
 - to develop character?
 - etc.
- What came *immediately prior* to this passage?
 - What was the tone of the prior passage?
 - What was occurring in the plot?
 - What characters were involved?
 - What was the dramatic purpose of the prior passage?
 - In what language convention was the prior passage (prose, blank verse, couplets)?
- What causes or motivates the language change that begins the current passage?
- What comes *immediately after* this passage?
 - What is the tone of the next passage?
 - What is occurring in the plot?
 - What characters are involved?
 - What is the dramatic purpose of the prior passage?
 - In what language convention is the prior passage (prose, blank verse, couplets)?
- What causes or motivates the language change that begins the *next* passage?

- Reject the application of male standards to the female personality. Feminists believe that the female personality is a separate entity from the male personality, and if judged by the same measures, is judged incorrectly. The female personality must be judged independently from the male personality and vice versa.
- Examine, and possibly celebrate, the creative, life-giving role of femininity. Although women have traditionally been portrayed as dependent on men for everything, the fact is that men are dependent on women for the most basic necessity in the world—birthing children. A male’s relationship to his mother has always been portrayed as a very strong bond (whether in the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex or modern phrases such as “Mama’s boy”).
- Explore the concept that men and women are both incomplete without each other (women cannot conceive without men, etc.) not of feminine “incompleteness” alone (Adam’s rib, Freudian theories on sexuality, etc.). ■

Essential Questions for A Feminist Reading

1. What stereotypes of women are present? Are female characters oversimplified? Weak? Foolish? Excessively naive?
2. Do the female characters play major or minor roles in the action of the work? Are they supportive or independent? Powerless or strong? Subservient or in control?
3. If the female characters have any power, what kind is it? Political? Economic? Social? Psychological?
4. How do the male characters talk about the female characters?
5. How do the male characters treat the female characters?
6. How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
7. How do the female characters act toward each other?
8. Is the work, in general, sympathetic to female characters? Too sympathetic?
9. Are the female characters and situations in which they are placed oversimplified or presented fully and in detail?

- What evidence suggests this?

- What female stereotypes does your character challenge in the play?

- What evidence suggests this?

- To what extent does the fact that this play is a comedy—specifically, a farce—account for any stereotypical character development?

- What evidence suggests this?

- Overall, does your character support or refute a misogynistic interpretation of the play?

- What evidence suggests this?

6. As a class, discuss the key similarities and differences between the individual twins.

NOTE: If students start to speculate on the reasons for the differences, try to postpone the discussion, telling them that a psychological examination of the characters' motivations is the subject of the next activity.

The Comedy of Errors: Psychoanalytic Theory Activity One

The Doppelgänger as Superstition and Psychological Theory

Much Freudian and Jungian theory is rooted in cultural archetypes and various cultural and social myths, including the concept of the “Second Self.” Jung saw the self as comprising two personalities: the Number One personality (which he later called the Ego), and the Number Two personality (which he called the Shadow). Personality Number Two was the Double, the part of the self that contains the instincts and has the possession of the physical body.

Personality Number One was the soul—the balance between the higher, cosmic self and the Shadow.

Jung saw the Ego (Number One personality) as fragile, the light of consciousness that had to be guarded, protected and nurtured. A healthy Ego (i.e., a well-functioning “Soul”) balances the conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche. A weakened Ego leaves an individual “in the dark,” in danger of being overwhelmed and possibly destroyed by irrational thoughts and impulses.

The Shadow, the dark side, is not evil, but primitive. It comprises the energy or vitality of life. Its existence as a part of the self cannot be denied, and its contribution to the functioning of the total self must be appreciated in order to maintain mental health, a balanced personality.

The Ego and Shadow are typified by Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the classic “good-side-bad-side” tension in all humans. Mr. Hyde becomes a real danger to Dr. Jekyll’s psychic health only when the Ego fails to function effectively.

Jung, however, did not create this concept of a duality of human consciousness. The idea of a doppelgänger, or second self, is ancient and found in numerous cultures around the world.

Doppelgänger is a word taken directly from German and is most broadly used to mean any double, or look-alike, of a person. It comes from the German words *Doppel*, for double, and *Gänger*, for “goer.” Typically, in German and other European traditions, this “double-goer” is an ill omen, often presaging the death of the individual it resembles.

In Norse mythology, the *vardøger* is a ghostly double who walks before a living person and is seen performing all of that person’s actions in advance.

The Orcadians, from the Orkney Islands north of Scotland, believed that the appearance of one’s *ganfer* or *varde* predicted that person’s imminent death.

Some ancient cultures believed that everyone had a doppelgänger somewhere in the world. If the



Antipholus of Syracuse	Act(s) and Scene(s)	Antipholus of Ephesus	Act(s) and Scene(s)
Motivation		Motivation	
Relationship with Dromio		Relationship with Dromio	
Treatment of Adriana		Treatment of Adriana	
Response/reaction to confusing situation		Response/reaction to confusing situation	
Evidence of positive traits (loyalty, kindness, humor, etc.)		Evidence of positive traits (loyalty, kindness, humor, etc.)	