



# SANTA CRUZ SHAKESPEARE EDUCATION PROGRAM

## THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

One of Shakespeare's early plays, *The Comedy of Errors* is a humorous situation comedy about mistaken identities and misadventures between two sets of identical twins! Below you will find resources to introduce this play to your students.



### Listen, Read, & Watch

The Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *The Comedy of Errors* is a free online source for you and your students to download and read. You can also listen to a free audio recording of this play from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which is their very first recorded production of *The Comedy of Errors*, done in 1950. Shakespeare's Globe has some great scenes from its production in 2014, which is also available to rent by clicking on the link below.

Listen: [youtu.be/QxURCTocP40](https://youtu.be/QxURCTocP40)

Read: [shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/the-comedy-of-errors](https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/the-comedy-of-errors)





[Click here for the rest!](#)

## Sources & Influences

The first recorded performance of *The Comedy of Errors* took place on December 28, 1594, before the law students of Gray's Inn during their Christmas festivities. The exact date of its composition is uncertain; current scholarship favors 1593-94, placing the play after Shakespeare's earliest comedies, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Until recent decades, *The Comedy of Errors* generally was dismissed as a simple farce. Yet, beneath its rollicking, tightly-paced surface, *The Comedy of Errors* is a play of substance that explores individual identity in the contexts of marriage and family.



Shakespeare's chief source for *The Comedy of Errors* was the Roman playwright Plautus' *Menaechmi*, a comedy about identical twin brothers, each of whom is mistaken for the other.

Shakespeare departed in significant ways from his Plautine model, adding a pair of twins, changing the play's setting to Ephesus, and introducing a serious exploration of the responsibilities of marriage. His addition of the identical twin Dromios as slaves to the main characters, the two Antipholuses, increases the opportunities for mistaken identity.

Shakespeare's setting, Ephesus, would have been familiar to its first audiences from its portrayal in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles, in which Ephesus' inhabitants are characterized as pagans preoccupied with the trading of luxury goods and the working of magic. The *New Testament* also forms the basis for Shakespeare's exploration of marriage. In his Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul pronounces that marriage is a state in which husband and wife are to become "one flesh" (Eph. 5:31). Although about marriage, Paul's pronouncement has relevance, by analogy, to various characters in their searches for completion through (re)unification with sibling, children, or spouse, and their simultaneous anxiety over the loss of a distinct self.

The Antipholuses experience acute threats to their individual senses of self. The wandering, empty Antipholus of Syracuse experiences being recognized as part of a community and falling in love, and is discomfited by this, while the confident merchant Antipholus of Ephesus experiences a denial of social identity, selfhood, and marital status. Ultimately, the play shows not just spouses, but two generations of a family coming together, if not as "one flesh," then nevertheless in a miraculous reunion worthy of Ephesus as a place renowned for magic.

~ Dramaturgy by Ashley Herum for Santa Cruz Shakespeare, 2019.



## Questions Before You Read

1. Have you ever been mistaken for someone else? Imagine you have an identical twin. What problems might arise when you're mistaken for another person?
2. Have you ever traveled somewhere you've never been? Would you be excited for adventure and invite new experiences, or would you be skeptical of meeting new people?
3. Several characters believe sorcery is responsible for the strange happenings in the play. Do you believe people today, like the characters in the play, mistakenly attribute inexplicable or strange events to supernatural causes?

4. In 2019, Santa Cruz Shakespeare did a version of *The Comedy of Errors* where we switched genders! The twins Antipholus were played as Antiphola and Dromio played as Dromia. What are some ideas on how you think the play might differ when traditionally male roles are switched to female roles?



## Contact Us

SCS Education Coordinator Alexi Carr

Phone: 831-460-6396 x5

Email: [education@santacruzshakespeare.org](mailto:education@santacruzshakespeare.org)

## Special Thanks

The California Arts Council  
Classic Stage Company  
Ashley Herum, SCS Dramaturg  
Idaho Shakespeare Festival  
Mike Ryan

SCS Dramaturg and Textual Consultant Michael Warren  
And all who support SCS's Educational Programming



SANTA CRUZ SHAKESPEARE  
500 Chestnut Street Suite 250  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060



THE GROVE AT DELAVEAGA PARK  
501 Upper Park Road  
Santa Cruz, CA 95065  
[santacruzshakespeare.org](http://santacruzshakespeare.org)

[Unsubscribe](#) | [View in browser](#)

500 Chestnut Street, Suite 250, Santa Cruz, CA 95060