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The Comedy of Errors

SAMPLE



Shakespeare in Three Steps

by Rebekah Shafer

*An enjoyable and simple approach to
some of the greatest literature ever written—
the plays of William Shakespeare!*

Now you can help your students become familiar with Shakespeare's imaginative stories, memorable characters, and brilliant lines in **three simple steps: read the story, hear the script, and watch the play.**

Shakespeare in Three Steps provides everything you need:

- **A well-written story version of the play** by E. Nesbit or Charles and Mary Lamb—classic narratives that have been providing a wonderful introduction to Shakespeare's plays for decades;
- **The complete script of the play** with helpful notes to explain unusual terms or add to your understanding of Shakespeare's stories, characters, and lines;
- **An outlined plan for walking through the script**, divided into manageable portions with quick recaps, scene introductions, and summaries that will guide you each step of the way;
- **Script highlights**, featuring well-known or just ponder-worthy lines, that will gently introduce the Bard's genius and cultivate an appreciation for his wonderful way with words;
- **Parental advisories** to give you a heads-up on scenes that may contain material inappropriate for children;
- **Helpful lists** of the characters in the scenes and the number of lines each one speaks, so you can assign parts knowledgeably for reading sessions or acting roles;
- **Candid reviews** of several video recordings of the play to save you time previewing and help you select a suitable presentation for your students to watch and enjoy.

“To become intimate with Shakespeare in this way is a great enrichment of mind and instruction of conscience”—Charlotte Mason

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Shakespeare in Three Steps
The Comedy of Errors

by Rebekah Shafer

Recommended for Grades 2–12

Comedy

Summary: This is the story of identical twins separated at birth. The two grew up in different cities, unaware of each other's existence, until one day one of the brothers decided to travel and happened to arrive in the other's town. Mistaken for each other, the two brothers and their servants barely survive the ensuing confusion.

Shakespeare in Three Steps: The Comedy of Errors
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Cover Design: John Shafer and Sarah Shafer

ISBN 978-1-61634-461-0 printed
ISBN 978-1-61634-462-7 electronic download

Published by
Simply Charlotte Mason, LLC
930 New Hope Road #11-892
Lawrenceville, Georgia 30045
simplycharlottesmason.com

Printed by PrintLogic, Inc.
Monroe, Georgia, USA

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Shakespeare in Three Steps

Understand and enjoy Shakespeare's plays by following these three steps.

Step 1: Read the story.

Read aloud the story version of the play to get familiar with the main characters and plot.

Step 2: Hear the script.

Listen to each scene on the audio dramatization and follow along in the script, or assign students to read aloud the various characters' lines themselves.

Step 3: Watch the play.

Enjoy a live or recorded presentation of the play.

Step 1: Read the story.

Ask students if they have ever encountered anyone who looked very much like another person, or if they have ever mistaken someone to be someone else. Explain that this story deals with that difficulty in an extreme form, because not only are the two brothers twins, but their servants are identical twins as well.

On a historical note, this story is set in Ephesus, a Greek city, but mentions Syracuse, which was a Roman city. You can see from some of the play how Shakespeare's time and culture perceived ancient Greece and Rome and their rivalry.

Read aloud the story version of *The Comedy of Errors* below to get familiar with the main characters and plot. Feel free to divide the story in half, reading half now and the rest next time, or even smaller sections. If desired, help the students create a list of the main characters with a brief description of who each one is to help them keep everybody straight in their minds as you go along.

The Comedy of Errors

(from *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb)

The states of Syracuse and Ephesus being at variance, there was a cruel law made at Ephesus, ordaining that if any merchant of Syracuse was seen in the city of Ephesus, he was to be put to death, unless he could pay a thousand marks for the ransom of his life.

Ægeon, an old merchant of Syracuse, was discovered in the streets of Ephesus, and brought before the duke, either to pay this heavy fine, or to receive sentence of death.

Ægeon had no money to pay the fine, and the duke, before he pronounced the sentence of death upon him, desired him to relate the history of his life, and to tell for what cause he had ventured to come to the city of Ephesus, which it was death for any Syracusan merchant to enter.

Ægeon said, that he did not fear to die, for sorrow had made him weary of his life, but that a heavier task could not have been imposed upon him, than to relate the events of his unfortunate life. He then began his own history in the following words.

"I was born at Syracuse, and brought up to the profession of a merchant. I married a lady with whom I lived very happily, but being obliged to go to Epidamnum, I was detained there by my business six months, and then, finding I should be obliged to stay some time longer, I sent for my wife, who, as soon as she arrived, was brought to bed of two sons, and what was very strange, they were both so exactly alike, that it was impossible to distinguish the one from the other. At the same time that my wife was brought to bed of these twin-boys, a poor woman in the inn where my wife lodged was brought to bed of two sons, and these twins were as much like each other as my two sons were. The parents of these children being exceeding poor, I bought the two boys, and brought them up to attend upon my sons.

Notes

This play is speculated to be one of Shakespeare's earlier works, and lacks much of the subtlety seen in some of his better known classics. The Comedy of Errors relies more on slapstick comedy than, say, As You Like It, but still has a thread of great word play running throughout.

Helpful name pronunciations:

Syracuse = SEER-a-keyoos

Ephesus = EH-feh-suss

Ægeon = eh-GEE-on

Epidamnum = Eh-pih-DAM-num

Antipholus = An-TIH-fo-lus

Dromio = DRO-mee-o

Step 2: Hear the script.

Make a copy of the script on pages 37–109 for each student who can read. Work your way through the script over several sittings, as outlined on the following pages. Each session will follow a sequence similar to the one below:

- Use the notes to introduce each scene. Highlight the featured lines if desired.
- Listen to the scene(s) on the audio dramatization and follow along in the script, or assign students to read aloud the various characters' lines themselves.
- Invite any questions or comments, then set it aside until next time.

Tip: You can cover more than one scene at a sitting, but try to keep the total time to about 20 minutes maximum.

Notes

*We recommend
The Arkangel
Shakespeare audio
dramatizations.*

Notes

Shakespeare wrote the lines of his plays in both prose (conversational speaking) and poetry.

PERSON: Prose lines will look like this.

*PERSON
Poetry lines will look like this.*

Act I, Scene 1

- ❑ Ask students what they recall from last time's reading of the story of *The Comedy of Errors*. Explain that the play divides the story into five parts, called Acts. Some of the acts are divided into smaller portions, called Scenes. Today they will listen to Act I, Scene 1. Read the scene summary to give students the context for the lines they will be hearing.

Scene Summary: Ægeon, a merchant from the town of Syracuse, has been captured in the town of Ephesus. His captor, the Duke of Ephesus, has sentenced him to death but first asks Ægeon to tell him why he came to Ephesus, since the two towns are openly hostile toward each other. Ægeon reluctantly agrees and tells the Duke the story of his life.

- ❑ Distribute a copy of the script to each student who can read.
- ❑ (Optional) Take a sneak peek at these lines from the script and enjoy Shakespeare's wording.

» Lines 31–35: Ægeon attempts to steel himself to tell his sad tale.

ÆGEON

A heavier task could not have been imposed
Than I to speak my griefs unspeakable;
Yet that the world may witness that my end
Was wrought by nature, not by vile offense,
I'll utter what my sorrow gives me leave.

- ❑ Listen to Act I, Scene 1, on the audio dramatization (approx. 10 minutes) and follow along in the script, or assign students to read aloud the various characters' lines themselves. If you are assigning students to read aloud, the following list might be helpful; it details the characters who speak and the approximate number of lines each one has in this scene.
 - Ægeon, the captured man (110 lines)
 - Duke Solinus (47 lines)
 - Jailer (1 line)

Step 3: Watch the play.

Now that you and your students are familiar with the story line and the script, you are ready for the best part of this study: watch a presentation of the play! Check for any local live performances that you could attend, or watch a video recording. (See video reviews below.)

Video Recording Reviews

- The BBC Television Shakespeare 1983 production stars Cyril Cusack, Michael Kitchen, Roger Daltrey, and Suzanne Bertish, and is directed by James Cellan Jones. Consistent with the other presentations in this series, the pace is slow and lines are delivered with British dignity, clear elocution, and a straight face. If the viewer did not know this was a comedy, the acting would not give any clue. This is an unabridged version and true to the original script. Characters often talk to the viewer. The recording is divided into two parts—Acts I, II, and III in the first part, and Acts IV and V in the second—and it sets the play in medieval times. Unfortunately, some of the women’s costumes have very low (almost plunging) necklines. The opening scene uses a large map to give viewers a visual of where Ephesus, Syracuse, Corinth, and Epidamnum are in relation to each other and the world. One man plays both Antipholuses’ roles and another man, both Dromios’ roles. Antipholus of Ephesus consistently strikes his Dromio, as part of establishing his character’s personality and demonstrating a way for the viewers to tell the two brothers apart. A few parental cautions: around six minutes in a troupe of actors extemporaneously play-act Ægeon’s description of his woes; however, their play-acting choreography for the “mean woman” giving birth to two sons line is unfortunate. At about the 41-minute mark, Dromio pats a lady servant’s behind as she peeks through the door. And the courtesan’s costume (first seen about one hour and eight minutes into the video) is scandalously immodest. (*Approx. 109 minutes*)
- The 1989 production of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Stratford Collection, is directed by Richard Monette and Norman Campbell and stars Nicholas Pennell, Lucy Peacock, Geordie Johnson, and Keith Dinicol. This version sets the play in the 1600s era of powdered wigs, lace, and silk coats. Some of the women’s costumes have low necklines, but definitely not as low as the BBC version mentioned above. This is an abbreviated version; some lines are omitted and some words changed, but the story stays intact. These actors intentionally play the scenes as a comedy, including more slapstick humor. The production was recorded before a live audience, who obviously enjoy the production and laugh throughout. The roles of the two Antipholuses are played by one actor, as are the roles of the two Dromios, with the exception of the final scene (since this is a live performance). Only one parental caution to mention. At the beginning, just about nine minutes in, the merchant who warns Antipholus to say he

Notes

Be sure to do your research to avoid any unpleasant surprises when watching Shakespeare productions. Unfortunately, some directors feel compelled to add unnecessary visual elaborations on the text. Preview any video presentation and check with someone who is directly involved with any live production to find out how it aligns with the original script and how appropriate it is for children.

The Comedy of Errors

Notes

Act I, Scene 1

Setting: A hall in Duke Solinus's palace in Ephesus.

Enter Duke Solinus (of Ephesus), Ægeon of Syracuse, Jailer, Officers, and other Attendants.

ÆGEON

Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall,
And by the doom of death end woes and all.

Solinus is pronounced So-LI-nus.

DUKE SOLINUS

Merchant of Syracuse, plead no more.
I am not partial to infringe our laws.
The enmity and discord which of late 5
Sprung from the rancorous outrage of your duke
To merchants, our well-dealing countrymen,
Who, wanting guilders to redeem their lives,
Have sealed his rigorous statutes with their bloods,
Excludes all pity from our threat'ning looks. 10
For since the mortal and intestine jars
'Twixt thy seditious countrymen and us,
It hath in solemn synods been decreed,
Both by the Syracusians and ourselves, 15
To admit no traffic to our adverse towns:
Nay more, if any born at Ephesus
Be seen at Syracusian marts and fairs;
Again, if any Syracusian born
Come to the bay of Ephesus, he dies, 20
His goods confiscate to the duke's dispose,
Unless a thousand marks be levied,
To quit the penalty and to ransom him.
Thy substance, valued at the highest rate,
Cannot amount unto a hundred marks;
Therefore, by law thou art condemned to die. 25

Guilders are Dutch coins.

"Intestine jars" means "internal conflict."

ÆGEON

Yet this my comfort: when your words are done,
My woes end likewise with the evening sun.

DUKE SOLINUS

Well, Syracusian, say in brief the cause