

Edward de Vere and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

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We can detect in early Elizabethan literary culture an apparent fad for dramatizing the initially “classical and then humanist theme of *amicitia*, the idealised male friendship celebrated in such key Renaissance pedagogical texts as Cicero’s *De amicitia* and *De officiis* and Seneca’s *De beneficiis*” (Stewart 58). What we cannot detect in early Elizabethan literary culture is an early Elizabethan literary culture—that is, before Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, who provided England with its long-awaited national, cultural, multi-disciplinary Renaissance.



Damon and Pythias

The tale of Damon and Pythias, whose story epitomized for centuries the ideal of male friendship in Western culture, showed up in a 1571 quarto, three copies of which are still extant. Further evidence points to a *Damon and Pithias* being performed before Queen Elizabeth during the 1564 Christmas season at Whitehall shortly after her severe bout with fever (White 6). The quarto edition, considered the first tragicomedy in English, ambiguously attributes the work to Richard Edwards (1524-1566), Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal during the last five years of his life.

In terms of Elizabethan theatrical history, most interesting, though, is this from the character Damon:

Pithagoras said, that this world was like a Stage,
Wheron many play their partes (348-349).

Shakespeare editors assure us that the famous conceit was well-worn by the time he used it in *As You Like It*. But one wonders if, as possibly with *Romeus and Juliet*, Shakespeare wasn't just drawing upon his own earlier work.

Richard Edwards is mixed up somehow in the Oxford authorship mystery. Poems attributed to Edwards in the poetic collection *The Paradise of Dainty Devices*, published in 1576, a decade after his death, are said to "strongly resemble de Vere's early poetry" (Anderson 33), and lines from one credited to Edwards, "In Commendation of Music," are twice referred to by minor characters in *Romeo and Juliet*:

When griping griefs the heart doth wound,
And doleful dumps the mind oppress,
Then music with her silver sound—

...Then music with her silver sound
With speedy help doth lend redress.

—*Romeo and Juliet* IV.v.126-128, 142-143

Richard Edwards was credited with another male-friendship play of the 1560s, apparently also dealing with Palamon and Arcite. Unfortunately, only single excerpt, "Emilia's Song," survives. Like *Romeus and Juliet* it is in poulter's measure (alternating lines of 12 and 14 syllables), an early Oxford predilection. Besides *Damon and Pithias*, these are the only surviving pieces attributed to Richard Edwards (White 4).



Palamon and Arcite

Palamon and Arcite comes most directly from Chaucer's version of a Boccaccio story, *The Knight's Tale*, the first of his *Canterbury Tales*. Shakespeare transforms it into *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, his "most direct and unquestionable use of a Chaucerian source" (Donaldson, *Swan* 50). The "Edwards" play was presented before Queen Elizabeth at the Oxford University ceremonies in 1566, when Edward de Vere graduated. Katherine Chiljan asks of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*:

Is it likely...that [Edwards] would write two consecutive plays [*Damon and Pithias* and *Palamon and Arcite*] on the similar theme of friendship between two young gentlemen from ancient Greece? (Chiljan, "Oxford").

Chiljan thus wants to credit Oxford with this early *Palamon and Arcite*. Yet an author might well write consecutive plays on the male-bonding theme, especially if he were inspired by classical literature: Damon and Pythias; Orestes and Pylades (from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*); Theseus and Hercules (from Euripides' *The Madness of Hercules*) and Titus and Gysippus (from Boccaccio, via Thomas Elyot's 1531 *The Boke named the Governour*).

There is also a lost revels play from 1576/77 that may have been turned into *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In Elyot's *Governour*, when Titus learns that his friend Gisippus is in love with his fiancée, he hands her over, as in the final scene of *Two Gentlemen* (Chiljan, *Shakespeare Suppressed* 65). Hamlet and Horatio are perhaps a later, more mature, incarnation of this *amicitia* theme. Either way, it is generally acknowledged that *Damon and Pythias* and probably the story of Titus and Gisippus influenced *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Barton 178). "The surviving excerpts of *Palamon and Arcite*, strongly resemble de Vere's early poetry" (Anderson 33), and "Shakespeare's voice is scarcely mistakable" (Ogburn 460).

Regarding the lost *Palamon and Arcite*, Chiljan concludes, and Farina affirms:

The close proximity of de Vere to this acknowledged precursor for *Two Noble Kinsmen* suggests that John Fletcher may have revised and updated an old piece of Shakespeare juvenilia or perhaps a surviving torso of an update that de Vere attempted late in life. (Farina 55)

I am convinced that this is exactly the case. Edwards would logically have been a mentor to the young Oxford, who maintained his interest in the story of the two young nobles enough to have later written *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. It makes sense too that Oxford is responsible for more of at least the original conception of this play. The Arden editor acknowledges that dating it is tricky, due to its "all-purpose epic language that might have been written twenty or thirty year earlier" (Potter 16). We have, then, the odd phenomenon of very early de Vere, partially (or half-heartedly) revised, but insufficiently so for the work to have been considered fully "Shakespeare" for the First Folio or even for the seventeenth-century stage. It needed supplementary material, presumably Fletcher's, after 1604.

John Fletcher

Fletcher had ridden Shakespeare's coattails before—as late as 1611 he wrote a sequel to *Taming of the Shrew* called *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed* (Chiljan, "Oxford"). *Henry VIII*, included in the First Folio perhaps to round out the history play category, and the lost *Cardenio*, are supposedly also Fletcher/Shakespeare collaborations. In an attempt to validate Shakespeare's partial authorship of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* despite the 1634 date of the quarto, Stanley Wells unintentionally undermines the rest of the Stratfordian construct of the

dating of the plays, assuring us that “plays of the time did not appear in print until long after they were written” (381).

At any rate, the joint authorship, if nothing else, makes this play a handy test case for indicating how well we can detect the style of Shakespeare/Oxford against another playwright of the era. This is a question I have been asked by many, including Oxfordians who feel they have insufficient grounding in the Elizabethan dramatic context. Indeed, the Oxfordian perspective resolves ambivalences in the traditional analysis of the play and provides sturdier reasons for attribution decisions that the Stratfordians got right.

The Two Noble Kinsmen

The Prologue

It may be difficult to argue that Shakespeare did not write the Prologue; but he didn't. The practice of having an actor serve as “Prologue” was stilted and antique, certainly by the time of what is usually thought to be a supremely late play. Only in *Romeo and Juliet* does a Shakespearean Prologue seem to be straightforward. One could point to the rousing presence of the Chorus in *Henry V*, but that voice is actually a much more deceptive cheerleader than most viewers and readers realize. It is even more so than the personified “Rumor” in the previous history play, *Henry IV, Part 2*, whose introductory report at the start is immediately revealed to be wrong! So is it likely that Shakespeare reverted to this artificial practice, or did he let stand, unrevised, his own early work, or is the Prologue a creation of a lesser playwright?

Whereas in *Romeo and Juliet* and in the *Henry* plays Chorus and Rumor simply “Enter,” *The Two Noble Kinsmen* begins with a “Flourish,” a self-aggrandizing trumpet fanfare. The Prologue to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* itself is “jaunty, bawdy, and colloquial,” according to Marjorie Garber (890). More accurately, it leers:

New plays and maidenheads are near akin—
Much follow'd both, for both much money gi'n.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Prologue 1-2

Several more lines of this would-be metaphysical-poetic conceit follow. Yes, Shakespeare is often bawdy, but never, except through his most vile characters such as Iago, vulgar and offensive.

Beyond the commodification of both theater and sex here—and consider Faulconbridge's bitter speech in *King John* for an understanding of Shakespeare's actual disdainful attitude towards “Commodity” (II.i.561ff)—there's a not-too-subtle consciousness about cash throughout the Prologue. Its last line notes that if the play stinks, “Our losses fall so thick we must needs leave” (Prologue 32). Stanley Wells and orthodox critics generally speculate that “losses” alludes to the

burning of the Globe theater in June 1613 (Wells 382, Potter 35), but all take it in the financial sense, Chiljan believes that the reference to “losses” regards the collapsing stairway that killed several people at a 1566 performance (*Shakespeare Suppressed* 63). Whither the typical Shakespearean aristocratic disgust at the crassness of the commercially-minded?

According to the Prologue, the play

has a noble breeder and a pure,
A learned ...

Chaucer (of all admir'd) the story gives—

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Prologue 10-13

Chaucer does influence the Shakespeare canon, almost as pervasively as Ovid; but unlike the *Metamorphoses*, which even appears physically on stage in *Titus Andronicus*, neither Chaucer nor his work are ever overtly cited or mentioned. This, despite Feste's unnecessary adoption of the persona Sir Topas, despite the fact that Prince Hal's merry band rob pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, and despite allusions to his work in *Richard II*.

Shakespeare's honoring Ovid never strikes a toady tone. Isaac Asimov wonders whether his evocations of *The Metamorphoses* and Chaucer are not

a sign of a certain insecurity on the part of the playwright. Uncertain as to the worth of the play, does he call on the name of a revered ancient as a shield against criticism? (Asimov 53).

The Prologue expresses concern about diluting Chaucer's work, fearing that he'll cry out from his grave:

This is the fear we bring;
For to say truth, it were an endless thing,
And too ambitious, to aspire to him,
Weak as we are, and almost breathless swim
In this deep water. Do but you hold out
Your helping hands, and we shall tack about
And something do to save us. You shall hear
Scenes, though below his art, may yet appear
Worth two hours' travail. To his sweet bones sleep!

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Prologue 21-29

Yes, the Prologue in *Romeo and Juliet* refers to “the two hours' traffic of our stage” (Prologue 12), and yes, Puck and Prospero and Rosalind all solicit approval from the audience. Yet their addresses never sound as obsequious—always more cheeky than insincere. They do not disown the plays in which they appear. Here the self-consciousness about timing may suggest that Fletcher, or another play-

wright—Malim thinks Jonson (“Ben Jonson and the Drummond ‘Informations’”)—was working with too short a text for the public stage and his supplemental material needed to flesh out to the span of the two-hour expectation.

One also wonders if the inferiority complex expressed might apply to the play as it now stands not *vis-à-vis* Chaucer but another now dead writer “under ground” whose “fam’d works” are made lighter with the coming fare: especially the scenes “below his art” that have been “tack[ed]” on to salvage what would otherwise have been lost “Shakespeare” material.

Act I Scene I

The play proper begins with a processional, another stilted practice, featuring the marriage god Hymen, a Boy singing and strewing flowers, a Nymph, Theseus, Hippolyta, Emilia, and others. Fletcher is usually credited with, or blamed for, the song, but it begins with “Primrose, first-born child of Ver” (I.i.7). I shall address this portion of the play in a separate article.

Shakespeare is credited with most or all the rest of Act I, and the scene continues its “hieratical” action (Garber 890), with Theseus (“Duke,” as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Chaucer), in procession with his conquest/fiancée Hippolyta and her sister Emilia. This last is “a character who does not belong to classical mythology at all, but to medieval fiction” (Asimov 56). These identities have to be deduced until provided by the Second Queen at line 77 (Potter 26).

As in Euripides’ *The Suppliant Women*, Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*, and milder in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus’ wedding to the Queen of the Amazons is delayed. This starts “a pattern of disrupted rituals” (Potter 2), although the scene actually manifests an expansion of the source material instead of the usual contraction. Oxford identifies with Theseus’ frustration at this repetitious literary curse, especially so if the private ceremony dramatized in *Twelfth Night* between Lady Olivia and Sebastian replicated an autobiographical event.

Three veiled queens in black interrupt the Athenian proceedings by falling at the feet of Theseus, Hippolyta, and Emilia with a request. The first queen says, “For pity’s sake and true gentility’s/Hear and respect me” (I.i.25-26; cp. *Knight’s Tale*, 920). The second queen invokes Hippolyta’s mother and the “fair ones” of her womb (I.i.26-27). The third queen, to Emilia, contradictorily invokes the idea of the man who will share her bed, and her virginity.

This good deed
Shall raze you out o’ th’ book of trespasses
All you are set down there.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.32-34

—this erasure of all past sins being a promise in exchange for the coming military commission.

A Shakesperean Style

Note the Shakesperean style, creating a single iambic pentameter distributed among the three speakers:

Theseus: Sad lady, rise.
Hippolyta: Stand up.
Emilia: No knees to me.
 —*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.35

As we will see, this stately moment will become a gimmicky imitation in the hands of Fletcher.

The queens' dead husbands are the victims of "The wrath of cruel Creon" (I.i.40), king of Thebes. The appearance of *urn* and *chapel* as a verbs—

To urn their ashes
 —*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.44

that we may chapel them
 —*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.50

—appear to be authentic Shakespeare. Theseus is moved, and his courteous response is another characteristic Shakesperean personification:

Pray you kneel not;
 I was transported with your speech, and suffer'd
 Your knees to wrong themselves.
 —*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.54-56

Harold Bloom notes:

The Queens' supplicating laments are ritualistic, essentially baroque in their elaborations. The luxuriance, not so much of grief, but of outrage dominates. Outrageousness is the rhetorical tonality of Shakespeare's final mode, where most voices carry the burden of having been outraged: by injustice, by time, by eros, by death. (Bloom 699)

This characterizes not just Shakespeare's later tone, but is the mode of the last years of Oxford too: navigation through the concepts of justice and mercy.

Amid the queens' pleadings at this point, Theseus recalls the beauty of one of them:

O grief and time,
 Fearful consumers, you will all devour!
 —*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.69-70

The second queen appeals to Hippolyta, using the nonce word “soldieress” (I.i.85) and adding a gruesome bit of courtesy:

Lend us a knee;
But touch the ground for us no longer time
Than a dove’s motion when the head’s plucked off.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.96-98

All this too seems genuinely Shakespearean, The references to Hippolyta may signal Elizabeth, especially her slaying of a boar with her “white arm.” Is the gruesome and again startlingly inappropriate image of the decapitated dove an indirect evocation of Essex’s execution, the kind of ending Southampton too narrowly evaded?

Wells says about the second queen’s long address to Hippolyta, I.i.77-101:

The complex rhetoric of the speech, with its sixteen-line first sentence, tortuous in construction, piling subordinate clauses one on top of another, some in apposition, some subordinate to others, with its qualifying and parenthetical clauses, its figurative language, its mixture of concrete and abstract expressions, its coined compounds (“scythe-tusked” and, later, “blood-sized”), its invented words (“soldieress”, not previously recorded), its inversions and ellipses and elisions, its run-on verse lines and feminine endings, and the grotesque imagery of the concluding lines, amounts almost to a parody of Shakespeare’s late style, making no concessions to either the speaker of the hearer.... (Wells 383-384)

The third queen addresses Emilia:

my petition was
Set down in ice, which by hot grief uncandied
Melts into drops

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.106-108

“Uncandied” is similar to “discandied,” a word and image Shakespeare used in *Antony and Cleopatra* (IV.xii.22). Another nonce word, “meditance” (I.i.136), also appears in this scene.

Theseus agrees to lead an army against Creon, and the queens urge immediacy:

Now you may take him
Drunk with his victory.
And his army *full*
Of bread and sloth

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.157-159

These ideas and wordings echo *Hamlet*, III.iii.80. The first queen then compliments Theseus with an anatomical and metonymic image on the basis of (as *Othello*'s Cassio would say) reputation, reputation, reputation: "Thus dost thou still make good / The tongue o' th' world" (I.i.226-227), again all quintessentially Shakespearean. Theseus furthers the theme encountered in *Othello* and elsewhere:

As we are men
Thus should we do, being sensually subdu'd
We lose our human title

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.i.231-233

The first scene ends as a stately, mature, even melancholic, and ultimately ill-fitting introduction to the central plot begun at last in the next scene.

Scene II

Palamon and Arcite are cousins, "creations introduced strictly of the medieval romances" (Asimov 60) with "somewhat priggish moral characters" and "no personality" (Bloom 701). They are the kind of characters who appear in the suspected Oxford juvenilia and even early canonical plays such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Palamon and Arcite have been "dismissed as virtually interchangeable emblems of Platonic love and chivalric courtesy" (Wickham 168); and as lovers: "The difficult thing to accept is its intellectual shallowness..." (Loomis 183). "The inward-looking love of Palamon and Arcite for each other may be a kind of narcissus-like self-love" (39), perhaps a relic of its earliest version.

Arcite proposes they leave Thebes and its temptations. Note the Shakespearean imagery:

before we further
Sully our gloss of youth:
And here to keep in abstinence we shame
As in incontinence; for not to swim
I' th' aid o' th' current were almost to sink,
At least to frustrate striving, and to follow
The common stream, 'twould bring us to an eddy
Where we should turn or drown; if labor through,
Our gain but life and weakness.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.ii.4-12

Palamon frets over being expected to follow others' manners of gait, speech, fashion (I.ii.42-62). He and Arcite seem to feel that "Affectations of style, speech, and dress have overtaken the court of Creon" (Garber 893). They thus sound more fed up with the Elizabethan court than with ancient Thebes:

Our uncle Creon—
He,

A most unbounded tyrant...

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.ii.61-63

These two nephews of Creon distance themselves morally from him:

Let

The blood of mine that's sib to him be suck'd
From me with leeches! let them break and fall
Off me with that corruption!

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.ii.71-74

Arcite says they cannot be “his kinsmen/In blood unless in quality” if they stay. “Nothing truer” responds Palamon (I.ii.79), using a portion of the de Vere family motto. Yet when Valerius calls upon them in the name of the king, they agree to fight for the sake of Thebes. Like Essex and Southampton, they are not traitors but simply disgruntled.

Scene III

Hippolyta and Emilia send their best wishes to Theseus through Pirithous. The scene includes a “grotesque vision” that creates an “alienation effect” (Bloom 702) from Hippolyta’s reference to wartime scenes of

babes broach'd on the lance, [and] women
That have sod [boiled] their infants in...
The brine they wept at killing 'em.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.iii.20-22

Shakespeare here extends a Chaucerian image from the chaotic wartime scenes described in *The Knight's Tale*: “The sowe fretten [eats] the child right in the cradel” (2019). Hippolyta also displays an “uncanny dispassionateness” (Bloom 702) in her description of Theseus and Pirithous’ army experiences, ending with the thought that “Theseus cannot be umpire to himself,

Cleaving his conscience into twain and doing
Each side like justice, which he loves best

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* I.iii.45-47

Emilia defends Theseus and Pirithous’ closeness, telling Hippolyta that she could never love any man, only another maiden such as her youthful chum Flavina. They were so much in tune that if she put a flower between her breasts, Flavina would whimper until she had one to place between her own. “The contrast between this union of serenities and the murderous violence of the Palamon-Arcite strife for Emilia could not be more persuasive,” says Bloom (704). If Hippolyta believed a word of this she’d be so upset she’d have to consider

breaking up with Theseus, but she's sure the silly girl doesn't know what she's saying.

Scene IV

Theseus triumphs in the big war so the queens are pleased. Among the prisoners-of-war, Palamon and Arcite are near death but have impressed Theseus greatly:

I fix'd my note
Constantly on them; for they were a mark
Worth a god's view.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.iv.19-21

and

The very lees of such (millions of rates)
Exceed the wine of others"

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.iv.29-30

He sends for doctors. "Theseus' last speech in this act [I] (the summing up of the situation and circumstances) reminds us of Hamlet's monologue, 'The whips and scorns of life, the oppressors' wrongs' &c, and Ulysses' beauty, wit, high birth, &c.'" (Brandes 607).

Since I have known frights, fury, friends' behests,
Love's provocations, zeal, a mistress' task,
Desire of liberty, a fever, madness,
Hath set a mark which nature could not reach to
Without some imposition, sickness in will
O'er-wrestling strength in reason.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.iv.40-45

Scene IV

The queens' escort hearses with their dead husbands to a dirge. The third queen ends the act:

This world's a city full of straying streets,
And death's the market-place, where each one meets

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I.v.15-16

This is an echo of an especially pointed couplet in *The Knight's Tale*:

This world nys but a thughfare ful of wo,
And we been pilgrymes, passing to and fro.
Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore.

—*The Knight's Tale* 2847-49

Here again, Shakespeare, as reviser of his own works, overlays the world-weary end-of-life perspective onto a play originally about youthful impulsiveness.

Act II, Scene II

The beginning of this scene, which seems an addition (see below), is in prose. A Jailer speaks with his Daughter's "Wooper" over "the old business" (II.i.17)—his potential match with the Daughter. "The fact that these country characters have labels rather than names—not unusual in plays of the period—underscores their difference from the nobility," remarks Garber (903). But what about Shakespeare? It doesn't seem very Shakespearean for even relatively important characters such as Jailer's Daughter to have no real names. Or, how can we ignore the aristocratic perspective implied in this dismissiveness? The Daughter enters with "strewings," rushes for covering the floor of the kinsmen's prison. She is impressed with them: "I think fame but stammers 'em, they stand a grise above the reach of report" (II.i.26-27). She rhapsodizes about their classy behavior despite imprisonment. "I never saw 'em," remarks Wooper, anticlimactically. The Jailer points out Arcite in the window above, but his Daughter corrects him—it's Palamon. The Jailer wants to escape the gaze of the prisoner but the Daughter sighs, no doubt glancing with dismay at the obtuse Wooper, "It is a holiday to look on them. Lord, the diff'rence of men!" (II.i.53-54),

Act II, ii continues in verse. The two noble kinsmen greet each other despite the previous scene's indications of their interactions having progressed beyond the point of just regaining consciousness. This suggests that the Jailer's Daughter interaction was a later insertion. "Shakespeare wastes no art in rendering them at all distinct from each other; they seem, indeed, as inseparable cousins, to share the same high, somewhat priggish moral character, and to exhibit no personality whatsoever" (Bloom 701), like all early pairs of such *amicitia* characters.

In a spasm of the mournful "Ubi sunt" trope—"Where is Thebes now? where is our noble country? / Where are our friends and kindreds?" (II.ii.7-8)—Palamon waxes nostalgic over countless aspects of their former lives. Oddly, he emphasizes the loss of soldierly opportunity:

Our good swords now
(Better the red-ey'd god of war nev'r ware),
Ravish'd our sides, like age must run to rust"

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, II.ii.20-22

Arcite, also oddly, emphasizes love and family:

The sweet embraces of a loving wife,
Loaden with kisses, arm'd with thousand Cupids,
Shall never clasp our necks; no issue know us;
No figures of ourselves shall we ev'r see
To glad our age, and like young eagles teach 'em

Boldly to gaze against bright arms, and say,
 “Remember what your fathers were, and conquer!”

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, II.ii.30-36

Although this prison lament for sons “whose chief function will be to admire and imitate their fathers” may be narcissistic (Potter 100), it is again unclear how much perspective is appropriate when coming from a youth.

Palamon laments also the alienation from “our Theban hounds,/That shook the aged forest with their echoes” (II.ii.46-47). The kinsmen speak with patriotic nostalgia about their former court life, despite this being

at odds with their former condemnation of its faults” and in spite of their despair later (III.ii.) over the “moral laxity” of Thebes. (Wells 384.)

But soon the two adopt a Boethian *contemptus mundi* philosophy, as had their Chaucerian counterparts, about life imprisonment. At least “our fortunes / Were twin’d together” (II.ii.63-64). Arcite suggests: “Let’s think this prison holy sanctuary/To keep us from corruption of worse men” (II.ii.71-72).

We are one another’s wife, ever begetting
 New births of love; we are father, friends, acquaintance;
 We are, in one another, families:
 I am your heir, and you are mine.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* II.ii.80-83

They also rationalize:

Were we at liberty,
 A wife might part us lawfully, or business,
 Quarrels consume us, envy of ill men
 Crave our acquaintance.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* II.ii.88-91

Palamon adds: “What had we been, old in the court of Creon,/Where sin is justice, lust and ignorance / The virtues of the great ones?” (II.ii.105-107). They agree to think of prison as sanctuary from human corruption.

There is disagreement as to whether Shakespeare or Fletcher is responsible for the next scene. Emilia and her attendant, an unnamed “Woman,” stroll through the garden below, botanically identifying the narcissus. Emilia notes of Narcissus, “That was a fair boy certain, but a fool / To love himself. Were there not maids enough?” (II.ii.120-121). Brandes writes:

The passage in which Emilia speaks of the ardent and tender friendship that united her to her dead friend Flavina, which in England has been mistakenly admired as Shakespeare’s work, is in reality a poor copy of the passage in the *Midsommer*

To be one hour at liberty, and grasp
 Our good swords in our hands, I would quickly teach thee
 What 'twere to filch affection from another!

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* II.ii.208-210

As the Keeper approaches, Palamon warns, “I shall live/To knock thy brains out with my shackles” (II.ii.218-219).

Arcite is taken away, and it turns out that Prince Pirithous has liberated but banished him from the land. Palamon is jealous, since Arcite could raise an army in Thebes and impress Emilia:

Were I at liberty, I would do things
 Of such a virtuous greatness that this lady,
 This blushing virgin, should take manhood to her
 And seek to ravish me.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* II.ii.256-259

Palamon hears the “pelting scurvy news” (II.ii.266) that he is to be taken to a different cell without open windows. He threatens to harass the Keeper, but has no choice. “Farewell, kind window. / May rude wind never hurt thee!” (II.ii.274-275).

That the Jailer is called “Keeper” in the end of this scene argues for the segment being mostly Shakespeare's, that character's role having been expanded by Fletcher later on (Potter 26).

Scene III

Arcite is conversely envious of Palamon and paranoid about his banishment, sounding that inappropriate note of old-age again: “O, 'twas a studied punishment” (II.iii.4), “such a vengeance / That I were old and wicked, all my sins / Could never pluck upon me” (II.iii.5-7). He envies Palamon:

Twenty to one, he'll come to speak to her,
 And if she be as gentle as she's fair,
 I know she's his; he has a tongue will tame tempests,
 And make the wild rocks wanton.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* II.iii.14-17

Four country people stroll by with a garland. They discuss an upcoming fair, and Arcite resolves to attend in disguise and participate in the games. Perhaps he'll catch a glimpse of “her.”

Scene IV

The Jailer's Daughter in soliloquy reports that she has been affected by Palamon's politenesses and has decided that she's in love with him, futilely because of their

class differences:

To marry him is hopeless;
 To be his whore is witless. Out upon 't!
 What pushes are we wenches driven to
 When fifteen once has found us!

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* II.iv.4-7

As Palamon and Arcite have fallen in love at first sight with Emilia, so has the Daughter with Palamon; but whereas Emilia is determined (at first) to preserve her virginity, the Daughter “is desperate with desire to lose hers” (Wells 387). She resolves to help Palamon escape:

Say I ventur'd
 To set him free? What says the law then?
 Thus much for law or kindred! I will do it,
 And this night, or to-morrow, he shall love me.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* II.iv.30-33

It's interesting to consider this unwise resolve in light of the Theseus-frame of the play. Theseus was helped out of prison and instructed how to kill the Minotaur by a woman he jilted. (See the story of Ariadne in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*.)

Scene V

The scene is misnumbered 4 in the quarto, no doubt because of the addition of the previous mini-scene. Theseus and his court have been impressed with Arcite's running and wrestling talents—“noble qualities” (II.v.10)—and suspect he is more noble than his clothes suggest: “Mark how his virtue, like a hidden sun,/Breaks through his baser garments” (II.v.23-24). Asked by Theseus why he has come to these parts, Arcite answers, “To purchase name, and do my ablest service” (II.v.26). Pirithous assigns him to serve Emilia, so he gets to kiss her hand. Theseus makes sure everyone has remembered that tomorrow is the day to make observance “To flow'ry May, in Dian's wood” (II.v.51).

Scene VI

In another soliloquy, the Jailer's Daughter reports that she has liberated Palamon and plans to join him, despite the inevitable jailhouse and paternal fall-out.

I love him beyond love and beyond reason,
 Or wit, or safety. I have made him know it.
 I care not, I am desperate”

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* II.vi.11-13

However, she adds: "Within this hour the whoobub / Will be all o'er the prison" (II.vi.35-36). "Whoobub"? This does not strike the ear as Shakespeare.

Act III, Scene I

Act III's first scene is sometimes considered Shakespeare's (Bloom 694), but Van Doren considers it "imitation," especially. III.i.4-11:

The lines are charming in their oddity rather than beautiful in their strength; the syntax is wrenched, the syllables are curled, for no discoverable reason. The quaint series of little triumphs grows tiresomely long. (Van Doren 292.)

During the "a-Maying," Arcite wonders if he's growing too pleased at the turn of events: "Tell me, O Lady Fortune / (Next after Emily my sovereign), how far / I may be proud" (15-17). His worship of Fortune is a typical error of Chaucerian characters. Palamon emerges out of the bushes, calling him "A very thief in love" (III.i.41; compare *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III.ii.283, the same phrase).

Palamon is still in chains:

But the whole week's not fair
If any day it rain. Their valiant temper
Men lose when they incline to treachery,
And then they fight like compell'd bears, would fly
Were they not tied.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.i.65-69

Another Essex allusion? The term "noble" is pushed, perhaps intentionally over the top (III.i.81, 90). Arcite is annoyingly courteous, promising to bring Palamon files, food, clothes, cologne (because of the prison stink), and weapons later, so they can settle it once and for all. Palamon wishes Arcite would "pour / This oil out of your language" (III.i.102-103). So most of the scene does seem Shakespearean.

Scene II

Yet another soliloquy from the Jailer's Daughter conveys to us that she cannot find Palamon, fretting that since he was unarmed and in chains the wolves probably ate him. "I'll set it down [take it as settled] / He's torn to pieces. She worries that her father will be hanged, and admits she has not eaten nor slept for days. The writing is poor and un-Shakespearean:

Dissolve, my life, let not my sense unsettle
Lest I should drown, or stab, or hang myself.
O state of nature, fail together in me,
Since thy best props are warp'd! So which way now?
The best way is, the next way to a grave;

Each errant step beside is torment.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.ii.29-34

Scene III

“Enter Arcite with meat, wine, and files.” Despite the darkness described in the previous scene, it’s light concurrently in this scene, a flaw due again to poor supplementation rather than “collaboration.” The kinsmen agree not to mention Emilia for the moment.

Drink a good hearty draught, it breeds good blood, man.
Do you not feel it thaw you?

Stay, I’ll tell you

After a draught or two more.

Spare it not,

The Duke has more, coz. Eat now.

Yes.

I am glad

You have so good a stomach.

I am gladder

I have so good meat to’t.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.iii.17-22

Although here again occur triply-distributed lines, they are forced, empty of purpose, and artificial.

What is this?

Venison.

’Tis a lusty meat.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.iii.27

Surely Fletcher tampered with this originally Shakespearean scene, turning the line distribution into a poetical gimmick. Similarly, as Palamon eats, he and Arcite engage in banter about their former conquests, such as the Lord Steward’s daughter (III.iii.28-29). It’s not in Chaucer, and it’s doubtful that Shakespeare was responsible for such vulgarity. At the mention of Emilia, Palamon is contentious again, and Arcite will return soon with arms.

Scene IV

The Jailer’s Daughter soliloquizes about random matters nautical, amphibious, and bawdy.

Where am I now?
Yonder’s the sea, and there’s a ship.
How’t tumbles!
And there’s a rock lies watching under water;

Now, now, it beats upon it—now, now, now!

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.iv.4-7

She continues:

. . . and tack about, boys!
 Good night, good night, y' are gone. I am very hungry:
 Would I could find a fine frog! he would tell me
 News from all part o' th' world. Then would I make
 A carreck of a cockleshell, and sail
 By east and north-east to the King of Pygmies,
 For he tells fortunes rarely.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.iv.10-16

. The Daughter expects that her father will be “truss'd up in a trice” (III.iv.17) the following morning. And she sings a “Hey nonny nonny” song too, recalling *Much Ado*. The mention of the nightingale in III.iv.25-26 refers to the belief that it leaned against a thorn at night so that the pain would keep it awake and singing (Asimov 64). The illogical infusion of sea chanties here and in the next scene assures us of Fletcher's hand

Scene V

The quarto labels this scene 6 and the subsequent scene (the real scene 6) as scene 7. The Jailer's Daughter's soliloquies indicate the need to separate main plot scenes (Potter 27) in the expansion. That Act II has two scenes numbered 4 and Act III scenes 5 and 6 are numbered 6 and 7, suggests that the soliloquies existed on inserted sheets (Potter 27). All critics recognize that the numeration was upset when Fletcher inserted his Jailer's Daughter scenes and this embarrassing one.

Gerrold, a pedantic schoolmaster, heads up a morris-dancing entertainment with inappropriately learned allusions, such as to Meleager, and the occasional Latin word or phrase. The participants are named: Timothy, Friz, Maudline, Nell Cicely, Arcas, probably for verisimilitude. They are short one woman, and so when the Jailer's Daughter comes by, inexplicably singing another sea chanty (III.v.59ff), a song entered in the Stationers' Register in 1611, she is enlisted for the performance despite her insanity. One countryman in fact rejoices: “A mad woman? We are made, boys!” (III.v.76). Apparently raving lunacy ensures commercial success, and we suffer another pointless triple-division (III.v.78).

Theseus and his entourage come by and submit to being entertained. The dance contains characters who appear in Beaumont's *Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn*, presented to an enthusiastic King James in 1613:

[A]nd it seems likely that his players—some of whom probably took part in the masque—decided to exploit its success by incorporating part of it in a play. (Wells 382.)

Theseus and his group all express their pleasure with the production and, before returning to the hunt, because this is clearly Fletcher's scene, reward the Schoolmaster with cash.

Scene VI

Palamon awaits Arcite, praising his honor and generosity and vowing to kill him. Arcite brings arms for Palamon and the two prepare to fight. Arcite admits,

Your person I am friends with,
And I could wish I had not said I lov'd her,
Though I had died; but loving such a lady
And justifying my love, I must not fly from't.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.vi.39-42

Palamon responds,

Arcite, thou art so brave an enemy
That no man but thy cousin's fit to kill thee.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.vi.43-44

As Arcite helps arm Palamon, he checks to make sure he hasn't accidentally pinched his friend, and that the armor isn't too heavy. Palamon asks, "How do I look?" (III.vi.66). They nostalgically recall their joint military exploits, make some final adjustments.

Is not this piece too strait?
No, no, 'tis well.
I would have nothing hurt thee but my sword,
A bruise would be dishonor
Is there aught else to say?

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.vi.86-88, 93

Some more pleasantries follow, but they finally, politely, fight. "Shakespeare juxtaposes their high rhetoric of chivalry with their mutually insane, regretful need to immolate one another" (Bloom 706). He does inherit this from Chaucer but could have even from the earliest version of the play.

Soon, though, they hear Theseus' hunting horns. Another chivalrous exchange ensues, and the two noble kinsmen are at it again, trying to kill each other. Theseus and court arrive, Theseus asking who are these unlicensed knights in battle. "By Castor, both shall die" (III.vi.136)—an odd curse since Castor never exists apart from his brother Pollux; he is one of a set of twins and would have been a contemporary of Theseus anyway—he's still alive (Asimov 66-67).

Palamon tattles on Arcite (III.vi.140), and the cause of their animosity comes out. If they are to die, Palamon requests,

Let's die together, at one instant, Duke.
 Only a little let him fall before me,
 That I may tell my soul he shall not have her.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.vi.177-179

Wells uses a passage from this scene, Arcite refusing to ask mercy from Theseus (III.vi.160-171), to illustrate Fletcher's "evenness of style, its relatively greater ease of comprehension, and its unforced eloquence" (Wells 384). He also acknowledges Charles Lamb's assessment, though, that Fletcher's

ideas moved slow; his versification, though sweet, is tedious, it stops every moment; he lays line upon line, making up one after the other, adding image to image so deliberately that we see where they join" (qtd. in Wells 382-383).

But Shakespeare's "collaborator" may be getting credit for too much if it includes a scene such as this where the youthful absurdity of the two young men is what I suspect prefigured that of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the original 1560s version of *Palamon and Arcite*.

Hippolyta and Emilia fall to their knees before Theseus, begging him to spare the princes. Pirithous decides, "Nay then I'll in too" (III.vi.201), and also falls to his knees. We have another tableau of begging women:

Next hear my prayers.
Last let me entreat, sir.
 For mercy.
 Mercy.
 Mercy on these princes.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.vi.209-211

But Theseus realizes that banishment won't work. Emilia worries about being remembered and scorned as the cause of such tragic deaths. Theseus makes the kinsmen swear to his conditions; he then asks Emilia,

If one of them were dead, as one must, are you
 Content to take th' other to your husband?
 They cannot both enjoy you.

— *The Two Noble Kinsmen* III.vi.273-275

Palamon romanticizes being spoken of by Emilia: "And lovers yet unborn shall bless my ashes" (III.vi.283), similar to Henry V when he speaks of revenging the insulting gift of French tennis balls (*Henry V* I.ii.287ff). But Emilia cannot choose: "they are both too excellent" (III.vi.286). So Theseus' resolution is that they return within the month with three knights each for a tournament. Theseus will "plant a pyramid" (III.vi.293) to which the winner must force his

imitation of Ophelia's madness...Shakespeare never repeated without excelling, and certainly never parodied himself in this fashion (Brandes 606).

Ever since Dyce's 1846 edition, critics have insisted that "Shakespeare would never have allowed Fletcher to degrade Ophelia by creating the Jailer's Daughter," etc., so Shakespeare must have taken up the lost *Palamon and Arcite* play and left it unfinished (Potter 24). In a spasm of Stratfordian insanity, "G. P. V. Akrigg traces the self-abnegation of the Jailer's Daughter to Shakespeare's ambivalent relationship with the Earl of Southampton (13).

Scene II

Emilia has decided to "choose, / And end their strife" (IV.ii.2-3). As for Arcite,

If wise Nature,
With all her best endowments, all those beauties
She sows into the births of noble bodies,
Were here a mortal woman, and had in her
The coy denials of young maids, yet doubtless
She would run mad for this man.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, IV.ii.7-12

He's a Ganymede with brow "Arch'd like the great-ey'd Juno" (IV.ii.20), actually often referred to not as "great-" but "ox-eyed." She has pictures of the two kinsmen and initially favors Arcite, but ultimately cannot decide who is more attractive: "Two fair gawds of equal sweetness, / Cannot distinguish, but must cry for both!" (IV.ii.34-36, 43-45, 53-54). Several pointless show-off triple-divisions appear in the scene (ll.57, 70, 71, 121).

A Gentleman announces the arrival of the knights, and Emilia complains to Diana that she'll be blamed for the "blood of princes" (IV.ii.60). Theseus and the others enter, and a Messenger describes the knights who will compete.

Scene III

The scene is entirely in prose. A Doctor is consulted about the madness of the Jailer's Daughter, whose latest themes are death and hell: "Alas, 'tis a sore life they have i' th' tother place, such burning, frying, boiling, hissing, howling, chatt'ring, cursing!" (IV.iii.31-33). Her reference to Dido (IV.iii.15) is, of course, anachronistic, while her exit at line 39 and re-entry one line later denotes an ill-handled interpolation.

The Doctor's diagnosis strikingly echoes *Macbeth*, "'Tis not an engraft'd madness, but a most thick and profound melancholy...I think she has a perturb'd mind, which I cannot minister to" (IV.iii.48-50, 59-60). The "surfeit of her eye" on Palamon has imbalanced her senses (IV.iii.70ff), and his learned recommendation is that the Wooer pretend to be Palamon: "It is falsehood she is in, which is with falsehoods to be combated" (IV.iii.93-94).

The best that can be said about this entire subplot is that the Jailer's Daughter's inability to tell "the difference between 'Palamon' and Palamon," reflects Emilia's inability to differentiate between the two noble kinsmen, and maybe ours (Garber 900).

Act V Scene I

Critical consensus holds that "The greater part of the first scene of the fifth act is undoubtedly Shakespeare's. Theseus' first speech is superb, and Arcite's address to the knights and invocation of Mars is delightful" (Brandes 608). But Fletcher has tampered with it too, as indicated noticeably by the preference for the second-person pronoun "ye" (V.i.10, 16).

Theseus calls in the combatants to "Tender their holy prayers" (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.i.2), and the kinsmen exchange honorable exclamations. Arcite admits,

I am in labor
To push your name, your ancient love, our kindred,
Out of my memory; and i' th' self-same place
To seat something I would confound.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.i.25-28

Arcite later perhaps echoes *Julius Caesar*: "Knights, kinsmen, lovers, yea, my sacrifices, / True worshippers of Mars" (V.i.34-35; cp. *Julius Caesar* III.ii.13), and *Macbeth*: "Thou mighty one, that with thy power hast turn'd / Green Neptune into purple" (V.i.50-51 cp. *Macbeth* II.ii.58f).

After a final embrace, Arcite prays to Mars and has his knights kneel before the god's altar. They hear military noises such as the clanging of armor, suggesting that he has heard them. Assumptions about dating the play as a late effort connect Shakespeare's apparent disgust with the London of James I (Bloom 707) rather than the earlier court:

O great corrector of enormous times,
Shaker of o'er-rank states, thou grand decider
Of dusty and old titles, that heal'st with blood
The earth when it is sick, and cur'st the world
O' th' plurisy of people! I do take
Thy signs auspiciously....

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.i.62-67

And this may be correct, or nearly correct timing, since the voice of the older Oxford imbues this act on several occasions.

Palamon and his knights pray to Venus: "Our argument is love" (V.i.70). A litany of her powers includes recognition that she

mayst force the king
 To be his subject's vassal, and induce
 Stale gravity to dance; the poll'd bachelor,
 Whose youth, like wanton boys through bonfires,
 Have skipp'd thy flame, at seventy thou canst catch,
 And make him, to the scorn of his hoarse throat,
 Abuse young lays of love.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.i.83-89

Again, the focus on the perspective of old-age. Palamon emphasizes age differentials between men and women as an extreme sign of Venus's influence. "I / Have never been foul-mouth'd against thy law, / Never reveal'd secret" (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.i.97-99).

I knew a man
 Of eighty winters—this I told them—who
 A lass of fourteen bridged.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.i.107-109

This address to Venus—"so painful and so personal"—has been considered "beyond irony" and, quoting Harold Bloom, "a negatively sublime coda to Shakespeare's quarter century of dramatic poetry." Bloom adds (710):

The terrible power of Venus is described here almost entirely in grotesque and catastrophic images, and yet Venus is being absolved of victimizing us, even as our wretchedness is so memorably portrayed.

Palamon is given music and doves for his divine response. But the passage offers a haunting application to Queen Elizabeth, and immediately after, Emilia prays to the virgin goddess Diana: "O sacred, shadowy, cold, and constant queen...sacred silver mistress, lend thine ear" (V.i.137, 146). The echo of *Julius Caesar* follows the poetic code for alluding to Queen Elizabeth. Unlike Chaucer's Emelye who wants to take a vow of chastity, Shakespeare's Emilia cringes at the loss of noble lives and asks that

He of the two pretenders that best loves me
 And has the truest title in't, let him
 Take off my wheaten garland,

or else, as an afterthought, that she be allowed to "Continue in thy band" (V.i.158-162). A hind disappears under the altar, and a rose tree grows bearing a single flower. Emilia takes this to mean she will be able to remain a virgin, "unpluck'd" (V.i.168). Then the rose falls off.

Scene II

Back among Fletcher's characters, the Doctor questions the Wooer about the Jailer's Daughter, who does seem to be falling for the Wooer's Palamon impersonation. The Doctor insists, even more sleazily, that the Wooer grant the Daughter all her love wishes: more kisses, and "Lie with her, if she ask you." "Ho there, doctor!" exclaims the Jailer (V.ii.18). The Doctor sneers at the Jailer's concern for her "honesty." The Daughter enters, ranting about horse-lovers and including several echoes of *Much Ado About Nothing*: "the tune of 'Light a' love'" (V.ii.54; cp. *Much Ado* III.iv.44), "She is horribly in love with him" (V.ii.62; cp. *Much Ado* II.iii.235), (cf. V.ii.43, 71)—essentially plagiarism of Shakespeare. The Daughter still expects her father to be hanged in the perpetual "to-morrow" (V.ii.80). Another vague *Much Ado* echo occurs when the Wooer dismisses the Daughter's fashion poverty: "That's all one, I will have you.... Yes, by this fair hand" (V.ii.85-86; cp. *Much Ado* V.iv.91-92). The Daughter cheers up at the prospect of her wedding with the *faux* Palamon. She asks if will there be kissing.

A hundred times.

And twenty?

Ay, and twenty.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.ii.109

Here and elsewhere in this scene appear more of these triply-divided lines, each one as pointless as the above (cf. V.ii.13, 31). A messenger announces glorious doings on the field. Off these commoners go, the Wooer and Daughter soon to marry.

Scene III

Going against the consensus, Van Doren again detects not Shakespeare but "imitation" (especially. .iii.4-6), as in the first scene of Act III (Van Doren 292). We may thus have here another scene originally Shakespeare's but tampered with by Fletcher. Emilia refuses to attend the tournament, even though Theseus explains that

You must be present,
You are the victor's meed, the price and garland
To crown the question's title

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.iii.15-17

He also calls her "The only star to shine," but she replies, "I am extinct" (V.iii.20). Theseus responds,

of this war,
You are the treasure, and must needs be by
To give the service pay

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.iii.30-32

But Emilia is adamant. She stays behind and, after reflecting on the two kinsmen's faces, receives updates on the tournament. "But Palamon's sadness is a kind of mirth" (V.iii.51), derived from *Antony and Cleopatra* (I.iii.3-5). She ruminates on the two kinsmen "metamorphis'd" into one (V.iii.84). Just as Palamon is winning, Arcite proves victorious. "The combat's consummation is proclaim'd / By the wind instruments" (V.iii.94-95)—two bassoons? The play's third victory procession brings yet more pageantry before Arcite presents his victorious self to Emilia:

To buy you I have lost what's dearest to me
Save what is bought, and yet I purchase cheaply,
As I do rate your value.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.iii.112-114

The mercenary is surely behind this utterance. Palamon and his knights of course must be imprisoned and executed. "Is this winning?" asks Emilia (V.iii.138). Hippolyta disapproves.

Scene IV

It's not as if forty years have passed since the last scene, so Palamon's prison soliloquy makes no intrinsic sense in context. But suddenly the authentic Shakespeare voice comes forth:

There's many a man alive that hath outliv'd
The love o' th' people, yea, i' th' self-same state
Stands many a father with his child. Some comfort
We have by so considering: we expire
And not without men's pity; to live still,
Have their good wishes; we prevent
The loathsome misery of age, beguile
The gout and rheum, that in lag hours attend
For grey approachers; we come towards the gods
Young and unwapper'd [unworn, undebilitated], not halting under crimes
Many and stale.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.iv.1-11

For many critics, the sense of melancholy suggests the passages were written by an older man (Potter 13). Shakspeare was only in his 40s but, reasons one Stratfordian, he did lose three younger brothers by early 1613 (Potter 13). Oxfordians are justified in slapping their heads in unison at this pitiful attempt to match the works with the wrong life. This autobiographical-sounding insertion actually, of course, suggests a legitimately older Oxford.

The interaction between the Jailer and Palamon (V.iv.23-36), is considered an interpolation. The Jailer announces his Daughter is fine and engaged to be

married. Palamon and his knights all donate money to her, and just as Palamon is resigned to being executed, comes a key towards understanding the evolution of this play: a dramatic moment is borrowed from *Damon and Pithias*. First a Messenger and then Pirithous enter, crying “Hold” (V.iv.40-41). Pirithous remarks,

Noble Palamon,
The gods will show their glory in a life
That thou art yet to lead.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* V.iv.44-44

Palamon responds, “Can that be / When Venus I have said is false?” (V.iv.45). Palamon has not berated the goddess Venus in this play, but, according to the summary of an eyewitness to the 1566 play *Palamon and Arcite*, Palamon “casts reproaches upon Venus” (Chiljan, *Shakespeare Suppressed* 63-64).

Pirithous wastes our time and ruins the dramatic moment with some irksomely humorous digressions concerning the ancient origins of music (V.iv.60f) and the market value of the black-and-white horse Arcite was riding: in cash terms, its coloring “some will say / Weakens his price, and many will not buy” (V.iv.51-52). But ultimately, Pirithous describes the freaked horse’s behavior that did “disseat” Arcite (V.iv.72)—surely an authentic Shakespearean verb—and threw him on his head. “He kept him ’tween his legs, on his hind hoofs / ... on end he stands, / That Arcite’s legs, being higher than his head, / Seem’d with strange art to hang” (V.iv.76-79).

Proud of his equestrian skill in battle, he succumbs to his failure to subdue the unruly spirit embodied in the horse of his Amazonian mistress. Whether the instigator is Venus or Diana is not so clear as in Chaucer. In effect the two have joined against Mars. Disruptive female forces have temporarily unsettled patriarchal order. (Roberts 143)

The Diana/Venus ambivalence sounds like a typical Shakespearean reference to Elizabeth (as in *Much Ado* IV.i.57-61).

Arcite is brought on stage for his last words: “Forgive me, cousin. / One kiss from fair Emilia.—’Tis done. / Take her. I die” (V.iv.93-95). Theseus eulogizes:

His part is play’d, and though it were too short,
He did it well....
The powerful Venus well hath grac’d her altar,
And given you your love. Our master Mars
Hath vouch’d his oracle, and to Arcite gave
The grace of the contention. So the deities
Have show’d due justice. Bear this hence.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* V.iv.103-109

“This” is the dead Arcite, carried out before Palamon’s final words:

That we should things desire which do cost us
The loss of our desire! that nought could buy
Dear love but loss of dear love!

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* V.iv.110-112

Theseus has the last speech, confirming that Arcite acknowledged Palamon’s right to Emilia, having seen her first (V.iv.117)! Palamon will wed Emilia.

Since Shakespeare has emphasized that the heroine’s heart is in the grave with the eleven-year-old Flavina, we hardly rejoice at this turn of fortune” (Bloom 712).

“A day or two / Let us look sadly” (V.iv.124-125), recommends Theseus, recalling Claudius. In a final passage (V.iv.131-137), “Theseus seems to have vanished, and Shakespeare himself says goodbye to us forever...Shakespeare’s part of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* might make us doubt that life is anything except sorrows” (Bloom 713, 699). “Let’s go off, / And bear us like the time” (V.iv.136-137).

Epilogue

“I would now ask ye how ye like the play” (Epilogue 1). It’s not Shakespeare asking, and if this is Fletcher, what an obsequious hack! Repeated use of “ye” (Epilogue 9, 10, 13, 14, 15) and the commercial concern again—worry about the disapproval of the play that could “kill / Our market” (Epilogue 8-9)—punctuates the experience with the worst of what has come before.

Money and market concerns begin and end the play (Potter 35). After some gratuitously flattering of the audience, we hear:

If the tale we have told
(For ’tis no other) any way content ye
(For to that honest purpose it was meant ye),
We have our end.

—*The Two Noble Kinsmen* Epilogue, 12-15

Would that the “real” Theseus from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.355-356) had been given the opportunity to say, “No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse.”

But clearly this play does need an excuse. Harold Bloom supplies one: we have here, he claims,

a new Shakespeare, who chose to abandon writing after touching, and transgressing, the limits of art, and perhaps also of thought....His purposes here are very enigmatic; he abandons his career-long concern with character and personality and presents a

darker, more remote or estranged vision of human life than ever before. Pageant, ritual, ceremony, whatever one choose to call it, Shakespeare's share in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is poetry astonishing even for him, but very difficult poetry, hardly suitable for the theater. (Bloom 694)

So the play is poor because it goes beyond the superb?

Oxford's Hand

Surely the reason we have what we do in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is that Oxford took up the plot of *The Knight's Tale* directly when he was young, in some early version of the play then known as *Palamon and Arcite*. The influence of Chaucer on him grows supremely subtle later on, and he does not borrow entire Chaucerian works (with *Troilus and Criseyde* being a special and extreme exception). Much later in life, at a time he was habitually revising his own earlier works—usually from court entertainments into plays for the public stage, as commissioned through his thousand-pound annuity—he could not have helped increasing the aspects of farce when these adolescent issues no longer held much interest for him. Traces of the same impulses can be seen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where the young lovers are flat and nearly indistinguishable characters given to rhyming couplets, but contained within a more mature and sophisticated framework. But perhaps even his revision interest was insufficient to turn the skimpy original play into something that would serve for the public stage. That the characters of the subplot in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* are given no names, and that there are various other stylistic inconsistencies, do suggest another hand, brought in posthumously probably in order to bulk up what was too short for the “two hours” self-consciously mentioned in the Prologue as an entertainment requirement. At best, the resulting play has been considered a “Collaboration” between two who did not have the opportunity to discuss it (Potter 25). But even early on, Swinburne asserted that Fletcher must have completed a play left unfinished at Shakespeare's death (Potter 25). Nothing suggests Shakespeare worked on Fletcher's material (Potter 32). Oxfordians Chiljan and Farina, and I, agree.

Part of the importance of the play, therefore, is that we can better track the creative evolution of the playwright: his early thematic interests, his intellectual and compositional re-visioning, his own creative arc with Chaucer as his native English origin and touchstone. The orthodox view, cramming the canonical works into the traditional time period of activity, is unable to appreciate the evolution of “Shake-speare” the artist, or his relationship with Chaucer in the context of English literature:

It is hard to compare their positions in society, for Chaucer was throughout his life attached to the court...and wrote for an aristocratic audience. (Loomis 169.)

The assumption that “Shake-speare” did not, at least originally, operate in identical circumstances—as a poet and creator of characters, supplying entertainments at the royal court—hobbles Shakespeare studies. As Charles Beauclerk asserts, “if you get Shakespeare wrong, you get his plays wrong; if you get Shakespeare wrong, you get the Elizabethan age wrong—its literature, its culture, its politics” (16).

I would add, if you get Shakespeare wrong, you get English literature wrong, and probably you get the very phenomenon of creativity wrong. Oxfordianism rights these and other wrongs.

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