

Humanities Institute  
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## ***Two Noble Kinsmen*** 1613-14

William Shakespeare and John Fletcher

### **Overview**

**Final play.** *Two Noble Kinsmen* is a Jacobean tragi-comedy, jointly written—scholars have finally agreed to conclude—by Shakespeare and John Fletcher. The play seems to be Shakespeare's last, written three years before he left London for Stratford, and the last years of his life.

**Sources.** The story, as the prologue emphatically explains, is primarily indebted to Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale,' to the outline of which it adheres closely, thus diverging from Shakespeare's usual pattern of turning for his histories to Holinshed or perhaps Boccaccio, but uncommonly to great pieces of his own national literature. The result is a deft and felicitous work, merging with other later plays of the master—*The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—in its embrace of a magic realism which embeds itself, comfortably, in a soft historical environment, in this case the ancient Athens of the archaic King Theseus, as well as the palace strewn landscape and a kind of magic and dangerous forest which, for instance, we marvel at in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. While we are attempting to sum up this magical landscape of so much late Shakespeare, let's not forget a play like *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, which courts a soft eastern Mediterranean mediaeval land and sea scape, and works evocatively through this vagueness to develop discursive ideas about inheritance, family genetics, and amour.

**Collaboration.** In all of this evocative later stage dramaturgy, Shakespeare may well have found it comfortable to work collaboratively. In the instance of the present play, the same technical resources are employed as elsewhere (in the scholarly examination, for instance, of *Henry VIII*)—handwriting analysis, stylistic markers, substantive references—to sort out the contributions of each author. In the present instance Shakespeare himself has been credited with considerable chunks of each act but the fourth, and we must furthermore accept the likelihood that he took part in overall revisions of the play as it worked its way toward its conclusion.

### **Characters**

Theseus, Duke of Athens  
Hippolita, Wife of Theseus  
Emilia, Sister of Hippolita

Emilia's Woman  
Nymphs  
Three Queens  
Three valiant Knights  
Palamon, and  
Arcite, The two Noble Kinsmen, in love with fair Emilia  
Valerius  
Perithous  
A Herald  
A Gentleman  
A Messenger  
A Servant  
Wooer

Keeper  
 Jailer  
 His Daughter, in love with Palamon  
 His brother  
 A Doctor  
 Countrymen  
 Friends of the Jailer  
 3 Knights  
 Nel, and other  
 Wenches  
 A Taborer  
 Gerrold, A Schoolmaster

## Story

**Audience.** Shakespeare's audience will have included few learned classicists, though doubtless some were in attendance, and we will be easily convinced of the ample training that Shakespeare himself received in his Stratford grammar school. We incline to see the audience of such dramas as, say, among the learned and upper middle class; among such attendees it would have been easy to accept such mixtures as the pre-classical archaic ruler, Theseus, and the jousting of knights on horseback, in the oddly joyful conclusion of the play. The prologue, with its admiring references to Geoffrey Chaucer's work, two hundred years earlier, with its classical nymphs, and with its three stately queens, seems to be snipped from some pastiche of high culture, tweaked in a Renaissance sauce.

**Theseus.** The master figure of the play is the pre classical autochthonous Athenian ruler, Theseus, whose opposition to Creon in *Antigone* will have been the first portal into this figure, for most educated Elizabethans. (For the highbrow in the Renaissance audience, Theseus himself will also have been familiar from, say, Euripides' *Hippolytus*. We are today, though we forget it, in an age when the classics are little familiar on the streets, while in the Elizabethan period—with plenty of rustic and hillbilly banter in town—there was a not inconsiderable population of erudite and widely read intellectuals). Theseus is eager to prove his power over Creon, and it is into the conflict, between those two power figures, that we enter the frame of this play, which is soon to divert from the chatter of life at Theseus' court, and between his wife and her sister, in the direction of the two great heroes of the Thebans, Arcite and Palamon, who increasingly come to the foreground of the play; though appalled by the cruelty of Creon, they fight for him, are defeated as is his whole army, and end up in Athenian prison, condemned by Theseus to life behind bars.

**Prisoners.** The two noble kinsmen, Arcite and Palamon, find themselves locked up in prison, for all they know facing life sentences, and for a while, as it happens, playing mind games with one another about their backgrounds, during which they were intimate childhood friends, almost identical to one another. (Almost, or is it more than almost, lovers, like the two gentleman of Verona?) One day, however, their idyll is broken by their chance discovery, through the bars, of a beautiful feminine form—that of Princess Emilia, sister of Theseus' wife, Hippolyta—with whom both guys at once fall in love, in a new fantasy shift, which takes us to the brink of the third part of the narrative.

**Narrative.** From the narrator's viewpoint, at this stage, the challenge is to get Palamon and Arcite out of jail and onto a life playing field where future action can complete the drama. The first step in resolution occurs when Arcite is released by the aid of a bail-paying relative; the ex con is banished from the kingdom, but through some happy luck, for himself, he finds himself into a community of wrestlers, disguises himself as a wrestler, and back in the Athenian kingdom manages to wangle himself a job as Emilia's bodyguard. (One thinks, no?, of the important role of wrestling in *As You Like It*, where proficiency in the sport is a gateway to social success.)

**Escapes.** Meanwhile another lady, the pretty young daughter of the jailer, in the prison where the two men have been held, falls for Palamon, who is still incarcerated; she helps him to escape. He disappears

into the forest, where he can hide, but soon runs out of food and clothing, and has a slender hold on life. At that point, fortunately, he runs into Arcite, who is traveling the same forest, but unfortunately the two men fall back quickly into an old habit. of mutual jealousy. They see that their rival attractions to Emilia are going end in a fight, and, like gentlemen (two noble kinsmen) they decide they need to build Palamon up, until he is as strong as his friend; they then hold a tournament between them for the hand of Emilia.

**Resolution.** A resolution is in the offing, with only one major string left unattached, the jailer's daughter, who has slowly gone mad in the forest, looking for her beloved Palamon, who shuns her, and eventually joins up with a hippy troupe of Morris dancers. In the end she is recovered by her father, whose loyalty brings her back to life. No such simplified solutions await the fate of the two noble kinsmen. Once again we are in the forest—one wants to say the 'magic forest,' in which people are transformed and fates reshaped. Theseus and Hippolyta are out hunting, when they come upon Palamon and Arcite, who are prepared for their life and death contest over Emilia. Theseus, in his usual tough manner, orders the two escaped convicts arrested, then killed, but Emilia, who is after all the goal of the young men's attention, will have none of it. She demands a properly staged contest, which, to one one's surprise, turns out exactly as she wants it.

**Finale.** Prior to the battle, three prayers are offered up. Arcite prays to Mars that he will win the battle. Palamon prays to Venus that he will marry Emilia. Emilia prays to Diana that she will be wed to the man who loves her most. All prayers are answered. Arcite wins two jousts, but then falls off his horse and dies. Palamon prays to Venus, that he may marry Emilia. Emilia prays to Diana that she will be wed to the man who loves her most.

## Themes

**Friendship** Both Hippolyta and Emilia, and Arcite and Palamon awaken long and happy memories of their childhoods. In particular the two men, who have ample time in prison to reflect on their common past, rejoice in thinking of times when, in play or sport or pure amity, they became as two children, almost one person. Their fond and also pugnacious relationship reminds the reader of the protagonists in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

**Desire** Romance or desire at first sight is a major driver in this play. At a mere glance the jailer's daughter falls in love with the guys in her father's prison, and with a single glance Palamon and Arcite are absorbed by the beauty of Emilia as seen from their prison window.

**Loyalty** A small but touching panel, of this play, concerns the jailer's devotion to his daughter, whose love for Palamon drives her mad—he is only interested in Emilia. With the help of her father's loyal love and healing, the jailer's daughter recovers her sanity and well being.

**Marriage** The ultimate goal of this play's action is a good marriage. Theseus and Hippolyta model such a marriage, and at the end Emilia and Palamon give promise of such a happiness. So strong is the evidence in their favor, in deed, that we barely notice the passing away of Arcite.

**War** Overarching the entire play is the war between Athens and Thebes. We see little of this struggle, and only hear a little, that Thebes has been defeated. This militant background, of the actions of love and romance, provides a tense counterpoint, and assures us of the high stakes of the battle for Emilia's love.

## Theseus

**Character.** Theseus is the main character. He is the ruler of the Athenian city state, which defeats Thebes, and takes prisoner the Thebans' most illustrious warriors. His response to these prisoners is that they should be jailed for life, as expressions of the evil politics of Creon, Theseus' opinion of whom Palamon and Arcite also share. Theseus, whom we see hunting with Hippolyta in the woods, just before coming on the escaped convicts, is once again on that occasion belligerent and bluff, and wants the men

to be imprisoned, then executed. Fortunately Theseus has a soft side, too, and when his wife's sister, Hippolita, insists on a milder resolution Theseus gives in at once.

**Parallels.** Achilles and Patroclus, in the *Iliad*, model a male-male friendship of the deepest order, and find their way, in the Greek milieu, to expressing that kind of 'no women allowed' atmosphere so palpable in Shakespeare himself, say in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where the male world seems full and complete, and without the requirement of women. One might cite another male bond cultural milieu, in the poetic *Kreis* of the nineteenth century German poet, Stefan George. The perspective of that sharply male milieu was on the whole militaristic male, and welcomed various versions of homosexuality.

### Illustrative moments

'I was transported with your speech, and suffered Your knees to wrong themselves.' Theseus addresses the first of the Queens to present to him their plea against the Thebans.

'I saw them in the war, like to a pair of lions, smeared with prey....' King Theseus on observing his old foes, Palamon and Arcite, whom he is sending to prison.

'You valiant and strong-hearted enemies, you royal German foes, that this day come to blow that furnace out...'. Theseus salutes the final battle between Palamon and Arcite, their quenching of their hostility.

'Fair Emily, the gods by their divine arbitrament have given you this knight...'. Theseus confirms the joining of Emily with Palamon, after the battle between the two suitors.

'Hippolita, I see one eye of yours conceive a tear, the which it will deliver...'. Theseus knows the pain his wife feels, to see one of the knights killed, as the price of conflict resolution.

### Discussion questions

What do you think of this Shakespearian version of Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale'? What kinds of tone do Shakespeare (and Fletcher) add to Chaucer's narrative of this particular story? On the level of the larger textual frame, what difference does it make that Shakespeare and Fletcher offer a free standing play, while Chaucer writes a tale attributed to one of a sequence of tale sellers who made their contributions to the entertainment at the Tabard Inn?

What do you see as the role of the forest in Shakespeare's plays? Is it part of the rustic world—with its rural merriment and country speech—and with its occasional recurrences back into archaic rite (as in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*)? Or is the forest in the present play more humanized than that, the kind of place where genial humanists like Jacques, in *As You Like It*, acquire license to reflect on the human condition?

Does a play, or a verse narrative, seem to you a more effective way to convey a narrative like *The Two Noble Kinsmen*? In the one instance, the narrative, you use your mind and hearing (inner or outer) to imagine out the skeins of events among which the narrator is guiding you. In the other you simulate, within yourself, the movements, and according passions, of events both imaginary and dream like.