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The Two Noble Kinsmen

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Summary

posted Aug 9, 2013, 11:58 PM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 9, 2013, 11:59 PM]**

This is one of the apocryphal plays, although the Stationers' Register notes joint authorship: Shakespeare and John Fletcher. "There is no good reason to doubt this ascription: many plays of the time did not appear in print until long after they were written," says Stanley Wells (381), blind to the irony about the dating of Shakespeare plays. Three plays are now considered Shakespeare/Fletcher joint projects: this one, the lost *Cardenio*, and *Henry VIII* -- only this last included in the First Folio perhaps to round out the Histories sequence.

Like *Pericles*, this play became semi-canonical later on, published first in a 1634 quarto edition. "It is related in style and content to Shakespeare's romances and to tragicomedies written by Fletcher with Francis Beaumont" (Wells 382) -- presumably meaning that it contains "little action and minimal character portrayal" (Bloom 694). It dramatizes Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*: the rivalry between Palamon and Arcite for Emilia. Earlier in Elizabeth's reign, Richard Edwards was credited with a play titled *Palamon and Arcite* which was presented before the Queen at the Oxford University graduation ceremonies in 1566, when the 17th Earl of Oxford graduated. Some descriptions of this play may touch on matters that "strongly resemble de Vere's early poetry" (Anderson 33).

> 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)

"The play is deeply concerned with friendship, with love, with tensions resulting from the conflicting demands of friendship and love, and with marriage" (Wells 385). An additional component, the Jailor's daughter's infatuation with Palamon and going mad, is original. Otherwise the play is laborious -- heavy with rhetoric and formal masque-like pageantry that don't seem very Shakespearean.

PROLOGUE

The Prologue seems very un-Shakespearean. A conceit connecting "New plays and maidenheads" (Pro.1f) is followed by a source citing -- Chaucer (Pro.13) -- and a lot of faux-humble fretting that the play will encheesify his admirable work. But Shakespeare never otherwise mentions Chaucer, even where one could expect something, despite being more subtly influenced by "the father of English poetry" than has yet been recognized.

> You shall hear
> Scenes, though below his art, may yet appear
> Worth two hours' travail. To his bones sweet sleep!

Stanley Wells would like to think that the reference to "Our losses" (Pro.32) is an allusion to the burning of the Globe in June 1613 (Wells 382). The Prologue is "jaunty, bawdy, and colloquial" (Garber 890). But,

> one cannot help wondering if this sort of thing isn't 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)

Maybe an obsequious Fletcher (or whoever finished this play) does....

ACT I

SCENE i

The first Act is considered Shakespeare's, while most of the subsequent three acts are considered Fletcher's (Asimov 61). After a lot of formal pageantry signifying a wedding, we listen to a boy sing a song about flowers and birds. The first line, "Roses, their sharp spines being gone" (I.i.1), must allude to the motto of Queen Elizabeth's badge (the Tudor rose): "*Rosa sine Spina*" ("a rose without a thorn"). The "Daisies" (I.1.5), like *Twelfth Night*'s violets and key flowers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are "forget-me-nots." The second stanza begins with

TITUS ANDRONICUS

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

RECENT SITE ACTIVITY

"Primrose, first-born child of Ver" (I.i.7), an obsolete term for Spring (Asimov 56) among other things. If "her bells" (I.i.9) are "harebells" as editor Skeat suggested in 1875, then they signify submission. Next come "Oxlips" (I.i.10), "Marigolds" (I.i.11) for grief, and "Larks'-heels" (I.i.12). Flowers are strewn before a stanza-plus concerning birds. The reference to "bridehouse" (I.i.22) resurrects a handy medieval instance of metathesis of the 'r'.

Three veiled queens in black interrupt the proceedings at Athens by falling at the feet of Theseus (titled "Duke" here as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and, indeed, Chaucer), his bride Hippolyta, and her sister Emilia -- this last "a character who does not belong to classical mythology at all, but to medieval fiction" (Asimov 56). They have a request to make of Theseus, and "This good deed / Shall raze you out o' the' book of trespasses / All you are set down there" (I.i.32-34). Their dead husbands are the victims of "The wrath of cruel Creon" (I.i.40), king of Thebes.

> 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)

Theseus is courteous but also moved: "Pray you kneel not; / I was transported with your speech, and suffer'd / Your knees to wrong themselves" (I.i.54-56). Amid their superfluous pleadings, Theseus recalls the beauty of one of the queens: "O grief and time, / Fearful consumers, you will all devour!" (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" (I.i.96-98). Much here seems genuinely Shakespearean; and Wells says about the 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 to Emilia says, "my petition was / Set down in ice, which by hot grief uncandied / Melts into drops" (I.i.106-108).

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" (I.i.157-159). The first queen compliments Theseus on the basis of reputation: "Thus dost thou still make good / The tongue o' th' world" (I.i.226-227). Theseus furthers this Shakespearean theme: "As we are men / Thus should we do, being sensually subdu'd / We lose our human title" (I.i.231-233).

SCENE ii

Palamon and Arcite are cousins, "creations strictly of the medieval romances" (Asimov 60) with "somewhat priggish moral character" and "no personality" (Bloom 701). Arcite proposes they leave Thebes and its temptations "before we further / Sully our gloss of youth" (I.ii.4-5). Palamon frets extraneously over being expected (by whom?) to follow others' manners of gait, speech, fashion (I.ii.42-62). They seem to feel that "Affectations of style, speech, and dress have overtaken the court of Creon" (Garber 893). They sound more fed up with Elizabethan court than ancient Thebes. These two are also nephews of Creon, whom they acknowledge is "A most unbounded tyrant" (I.ii.63) and from whom they distance themselves morally: "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!" (I.ii.71-74). They cannot be "his kinsmen / In blood unless in quality" if they stay (I.ii.78-79).

Yet when Valerius calls upon them in the name of the King, they agree to fight for the sake of Thebes.

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) in Hippolyta's reference to wartime scenes of "babes broach'd on the lance, [and] women / That have sod their infants in ... / The brine they wept at killing 'em" (I.iii.20-22). 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" (I.iii.45-47).

Emilia defends Theseus and Pirithous' closeness, telling Hippolyta that she herself could never

love any man, only another maiden such as her youthful chum Flavina, with whom she was so much in tune that if she put a flower between her breasts then 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" (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 victims, 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" (I.iv.19-21). "The very lees of such (millions of rates) / Exceed the wine of others" (I.iv.29-30). He sends for doctors.

SCENE v

The queens escort hearses with their dead husbands to the tune of a snappy little dirge. The third queen ends the Act, remarking, "This world's a city full of straying streets, / And death's the market-place, where each one meets" (I.v.15-16).