



2022

## Fun with Palamon and Arcite: Rationale and Strategies for Teaching The Two Noble Kinsmen as the Culmination of the Shakespearean Canon

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### Recommended Citation

Gates, Joanne E. "Fun with Palamon and Arcite: Rationale and Strategies for Teaching The Two Noble Kinsmen as the Culmination of the Shakespearean Canon." Presentation at the PCAS / ACAS Conference Popular/American Culture of the South. Jacksonville FL, September 29, 2007.

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Fun with Palamon and Arcite:  
Rationale and Strategies for Teaching *The Two Noble Kinsmen* as the  
Culmination of the Shakespearean Canon

Joanne E. Gates, Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville AL  
PCAS ACAS Conference 2007. September 29.

[Update notes: Since presenting this paper at PCAS/ACAS, I have enjoyed continuing to teach the play, having committed to a philosophy of making sure students appreciated Shakespeare by knowing his sources and studying how he transformed them (an approach developed as a graduate student with Professor Arthur F. Kinney at U Mass Amherst). I also had the privilege of reviewing the 2011 production of the play at Atlanta's New American Shakespeare Tavern. The review is on line and is considered with the other plays the Tavern staged to complete their canon, <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/16-1/revtav.htm>

As Shakespeare studies and online availability of texts has evolved, note that Folger Library's website and The *Internet Shakespeare Archive* now include this text. Unfortunately, ShakespearesWords.com has moved their Shakespeare texts behind a paywall. Students should now be able to locate full productions on YouTube. My most recent sharing of this material was in the Summer 2020 on line version of the Graduate Studies in Shakespeare, EH 562]

**Text of the presentation:**

Hardly noticed in the reception of Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* several years ago was his hint that not *The Tempest*

but *The Two Noble Kinsmen* makes an appropriate final accomplishment.

Bloom does not add real insight beyond speculating that Theseus' final speech is Shakespeare's own farewell: "Let us be thankful / For that which Is . . . . Let's go off / And bear us like the time" (5.5.134-7). He suggests that Theseus more or less embraces the topsy-turvy world of Fate, that he, "seems to be aware of the absurdity of it all, thus merging himself with Shakespeare" (Bloom 712, 713). On one level, the play is merely a stage adaptation of Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, with a rather crude couple of subplots thrown in, perhaps to please the commoners. In an undergraduate forum, I am less inclined to evaluate Fletcher's contribution as distinct from Shakespeare, but I do think the play important for how it is representative of many of the co-authored English Renaissance plays in the first few decades of the seventeenth century. I will argue that close study of what Shakespeare (and Shakespeare and Fletcher) did to their sources merits more appreciation as a fuller strategy for teaching Shakespeare. When we study how transformative Shakespeare was in adapting Boccaccio, Cinthio, Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene, we ask the right questions about how these plays achieve their goals. The added-to-Chaucer subplots in *Two Noble Kinsmen* contain, as David Bevington points out, echoes of a mad Ophelia, a

pedantic schoolmaster, almost a carbon copy of the Holofernes of *Love's Labour's Lost*, a newly wedded Theseus and Hippolyta, rehearsals conducted in the Athenian woods, and the mismatched triangles of unrequited love typical of other Shakespearean comic plotting. In addition, just how drastically Shakespeare changed Chaucer's tone and time frame give us a whole different take on how passion becomes manipulated by higher powers. A few creative exercises, especially those asking students to write in the voices of characters who are arguing that they are the creations most original to Shakespeare can be engaging for students stuck in today's jaded mentality of what is meaningful and lasting.

But whether in a course that looks at just the latter half of the canon or in a course that revisits Shakespeare's other Athenian play, his Elizabethan court celebratory play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there are reasons to include it amongst the better-known tales of "the great Bard," as the newly exposed to Shakespeare will insist on naming him.

Shakespearean scholars, but not really Shakespeare students, have the awareness of Shakespeare as apprentice playwright early in his career, passing on his skills to the younger apprentice, Fletcher, at the end. Yes, we

may still be jaded by a Victorian stodginess of: It's not Shakespeare if it does not measure up to A. C. Bradley's formula for tragic drama.

When we teach Shakespeare in a class devoted exclusively to his plays, we have the luxury of examining the development of Shakespeare's craft. For instance, we can see how *Titus Andronicus* is the crude precursor to more mature revenge tragedies. We can examine the *Henry VI* plays for patterns of development that culminate in *Richard III*.

We might have the chance to look around and bring in Marlowe's *Faustus* as an analogy, or consider *The Spanish Tragedy* as necessary information to the composition of *Hamlet*. Most of us rarely teach the non-Shakespearean Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic literature, except to a class of majors every couple of years or so. Then: let us use *Kinsmen* to remind them that collaboration in playwriting was more common than rare. Ben Jonson got his start that way. Fletcher co-wrote with other besides Beaumont and Shakespeare. *The Changeling* brilliantly interweaves its plots, presumably assigned to different authors, and *The Witch of Edmonton* is a *tour de force* of joint authorship. In addition, we can stress that the slapstick farce of *The Comedy of Errors* or *The Taming of the Shrew* turns

into more refined romantic comedy with the witticisms of *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. (I like to stress that the casting of the fool made much of the difference in these plays, that when Robert Armin replaced Will Kempe, Shakespeare took a couple of plays to discover Armin's true talents, gave Feste more songs than Touchstone, refined wordplay and made it more dominant than the dimwit humor we see in a Grumio or a Dogberry.

*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, not in the First Folio, yet presumed co-authored by young John Fletcher and the already retired Shakespeare is rarely considered worthy of inclusion at the undergraduate level. Is there "room" for *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in a class devoted to Shakespeare's plays? In my graduate studies in Shakespeare, I have the opportunity to pair a late play with an early play--*Othello* with *The Winter's Tale*, or *Macbeth* as a replacement for the earlier *Richard III*—I take the occasion to contrast the celebratory and magical marriage coupling of *Midsummer Night's Dream* with the sobering and sudden substitution of promised spouses that are dominant in *Kinsmen*.

The play points to earlier plays in ways that are almost consciously a tribute to recognizing stage precedent. We have a strained attitude towards

heterosexual romance, divine interventions, parental controls, and hardly a redemptive, restorative celebration that matches the other late romances. Must we merely dismiss the not so Shakespearean parts of the play as Fletcher's domination over the accomplished writer. Or is Bloom onto something, that the jarring tones are more truly Shakespearean than anything he wrote?

My culminating exercise in my undergraduate course, where we study just the late plays in one of the two courses offered at the 400-level, drives home the importance of noticing how Shakespeare altered his sources. In the last several cycles of teaching the course, I have found a creative exercise particularly rewarding. Here's one version of the assignment:

You are the moderator of a panel discussion that includes characters from Shakespeare's plays who are considered his most original creations, those he invented and by doing so transformed the story from the sources he consulted. Without repeating yourself in your critical paper, select four or more total characters across at least three of the four plays we've most recently read (*Pericles*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) which in various ways demonstrate Shakespeare's dramatic composition. You are not expected to know more about the difference between the source

and Shakespeare except what is stated in *Riverside* and that the characters make an important difference in how Shakespeare transforms his source.

I briefly list out which characters make which difference, thus providing a short list of available characters and, by implication, possible arguments:

If you choose *The Winter's Tale*, select from: Paulina and Autolycus are acknowledged as the most original components of *The Winter's Tale*. In addition, Antigonus has no specific personality in the source: his function is only as one of several unnamed Lords. *Time* as chorus is unique to Shakespeare's version of this story, though he has used a choric speaker elsewhere.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, use the fact that Enobarbus is an invented character to organize the historical material of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

In *Pericles*, Bawd, Bolt, Pander, and to some degree, the use of Gower as presenter are original to Shakespeare's version of *Apollonius (Pericles) of Tyre*.

In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, select any of the characters from the Jailer's Daughter subplot and the Morris Dancers rehearsal and performance. Any of them might discuss how significant

his or her role is to flavor differently the events at Theseus' court involving a previously well-known tale of Emilia, Palamon, Arcite.

I cannot stress enough how well the assignment works as a capstone experience to the emphasis I give to the transformations Shakespeare made to his sources. Here's where the creativity of students' desperate attempt to pull things together meets up with the necessity of proving how well they know the plays. And it is required they display their knowledge of the plays. But these essays are a delight to read; they have some heart and some pizzazz. I have had students set up their dialogue like a Jerry Springer Show, like an Awards Banquet for the Most Shakespearean of Shakespeare's Characters. Some get a little off track and bring in extraneous elements: One took place in a beauty shop where two teacup sized canines named Romeo and Juliet nipped at some heels. A student who had not managed to write more than two pages in her critical papers --which were expected to be four or five pages each --produced a massive dialogue, complete, well grounded, an hour of these characters sitting down with Oprah.

On a graduate level, even when I am teaching a fast-paced summer term, every student usually is responsible for an in-depth report on changes Shakespeare made to his sources. Despite the reasonable length of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, there is a willing volunteer for that project. (This longest of the *Canterbury Tales* is still a shorter read than Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, or the prose of Sir Thomas More, Hall and Holinshed on *Richard III*.) One of my recent graduate students, once I had led her to the online edition at *CanterburyTales.org*, made herself a convenient booklet from the printout pages. Ideally, a serious full-term course at the upper level or graduate level could spend some time on a close study of Chaucer v. Shakespeare, just in "The Knight's Tale" sections of *Two Noble Kinsmen*. If not that, a study of the anonymous *True Tragical History of King Leir*, or of Robert Greene's *Pandosto, or the Triumph of Time*--the first much less a tragedy than Shakespeare's darkest, the latter title a bleaker, more un-redemptive saga than Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. *Leir*, *Pandosto*, the Gower tale, all of *Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, even the *Palace of Pleasure*, the relevant Plutarch: all are freely available on the Internet. In some of our young student's lives, that is a plus. We can resist

the burden of ever-increasing text book costs by making on-line supplemental reading a component of the course.

Here is where the real "fun" comes in, though: What to do with the subplot? Bevington's notes on the correspondences to other plays are a start. In his comments about the play's borrowings, he notes:

Jailer's Daughter resembles Ophelia. (Yet it is reported she is singing "Willow, Willow," Desdemona's song.)

The Doctor's treatment is somewhat resonant of a doctor observing his patient, Lady Macbeth.

The competitive games are like the contest to win a king's daughter in *Pericles*

The Schoolmaster who organizes and direct an entertainment is parallel to one in *Love's Labour's Lost*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows commoners interested in performing for the court. Closer analogues to the foolishness of a dancing baboon, are in Beaumont's *Masque of the Inner Temple*, but that appearance is only a conglomerated mess of amongst an ensemble that includes the entrance of a "He" baboon and a "She" baboon [Bevington A 57-8].

Wait! Start that again. The subplot is probably what made the Victorians uncomfortable and made the play explicitly Jacobean. There this

lady so crazed by sex. There are these Morris Dancers commenting on how bawdily they are going to corrupt their performance. The character in the baboon suit, for BLEEP's sake, is instructed to "carry your tale without offense / Or scandal to the ladies" (3.5. 34-5). I often start there, reminding students that here's a place where the phallic implications are blatant.

Hormones, Hormones, Hormones, gentlemen and ladies. There is something very basic here, and we should not overlook it. Emilia, Ice Queen extraordinaire, is complemented by this young woman who cannot get enough, who knows her desires are above her station, but cannot do otherwise than assist Palamon escape her father's prison. And steadily, slowly, her waiting and searching in the forest drives her mad. This is not a madness that pops up, like Ophelia's, a victim of her plot, but the playwrights creating her give this Jailer's daughter enough development--enough focus on a gradual disintegration--to make it a role any actress would die for. Palamon and Arcite, as distinct as their different orientations are, turn into petty playground tusslers once we frame their obsession with the wider diversity of Emilia, sadly resistant to any decision about a mate, and the contrasting Jailer's Daughter, defiantly so obsessed with Palamon she cannot be restrained.

Thus, we have a play where triangle relationships are worth enumerating. We have to get past the ceremonial formality of the opening: Three Queens beg to Theseus for retribution, as he is about to wed his Amazon Queen, Hippolyta. They want revenge on Creon of Thebes for killing their kings, and meanwhile, in Thebes, Creon's own nephews are ready to desert their tyrant uncle until they hear that Theseus is attacking. The play threatens to get bogged down in its opening act, until we get Palamon and Arcite arrested and in a position to witness from within their confines the beautiful Emilia. Palamon and Arcite both love Emilia. These three pray to their deities, Venus, Mars, Diana, respectively. Jailer's Daughter pines for Palamon but Wooer disguised as Palamon is her substitute lover. There will be three knights each, for Palamon, for Arcite, to be part of the "offstage" contest at the end, distinguished primarily because those of the defeated Palamon (slated to die because of the defeat of their master) offer to give their purses to the Jailer for his daughter.

When I first added *The Two Noble Kinsmen* to my syllabus, I looked for a way to make it engaging and had been experimenting with variations on "The One-Pager," an exercise I'd been exposed to in a workshop taught by Dr. Elaine Hill. I briefly summarize all the requirements in the graphic

depiction of a selected longer scene from *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Often, in a face-to-face class, I show sample student work, most designed around some kind of triptych representation.

*Two Noble Kinsmen* assignment for next week: This is a variation on the "One-Pager" exercise taught to me in a teaching workshop.

Use a single sheet of 8.5 by 11-inch paper, plain, not lined, if possible, in Landscape format.

Display visually / graphically three to five important quotations from the play (or specific scene assigned) that to you are memorable, or that are important to noting the theme and its resolutions. (I may make some we have already talked about "off limits.")

The page should consist of:

the quotations themselves, with accurate citation Act Scene lines.

Statement by you of the speaker, the context and the significance for each.

At least one drawing, stick figure, word art (short version of the text, graphically displayed), clip art or physical object glued or taped to the page, collage like, which underscores, counterpoints, or makes a contemporary reference to the moment. Suggestions: clippings from magazines, catalogs or newspapers where we would recognize the larger context

You are not expected to be artists, but do a couple of drafts of the page so that the layout of the space looks as if it is designed, not haphazard.

Creativity is paramount, I maintain. We can let imaginations go, even if they get a bit silly or it gets difficult to determine the appropriate grade.

One class groaned to me that this play was not in "SparkNotes Shakespeare."

"Yay," I thought. "Means you have to work at it." [Alas, this may no longer be the case; yet perhaps my argument for the viability of it as a "Shakespeare" text is now legitimate.] Nor is it available at the MIT website that includes the "Complete Shakespeare." It is not at Richard Bear's excellent, online *Renascence Editions*, which include so many finely produced original texts of the age--and all the rest of Shakespeare--at the University of Oregon. Though it is not among the plays available at [opensource-shakespeare.com](http://opensource-shakespeare.com), where students have quickly discovered they can turn to for all the lines spoken, by a single character, printed out with or without his cue lines. But the complete text is on line, at least at [Shakespeareswords](http://Shakespeareswords.com). [See update paragraph at top.]

No commercial film versions exist, though it has been recorded (in a college production) for YouTube. It's not part of *Time Life* BBC's Shakespeare now available through *Ambrose Video*. Yet it is one of the complete plays in the widely available CD and audiotape collection. That's where I learned to pronounce AR Ke Tay, to match the rhythm of PAL a mon. [The Librivox edition, which now streams on YouTube, uses the hard C sound but ArKite has two syllables.]

Finally, there is a creativity of my own to which I have to confess. I have toyed for over a decade with a novel of Shakespeare's life as told by the presumably no-good second daughter, surviving twin after Hamnet died, the REAL Judith Shakespeare. (Yes, long before Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet: A Novel of the Plague* and even before Grace Tiffany's *My Father Had a Daughter*.) Shortly after I had led a Spring semester class through the requirements for the essay, they had a week to plan and outline, I composed a short dialogue for my writer's group. It depicts Fletcher coming to Shakespeare just after the Globe has burned, pleading with him to take up his pen again. Only when Shakespeare hears the over-the-top ramblings in song of his unmarried daughter, is he convinced that a dramatization of the *Knight's Tale* can work for the stage: he needed a nudge of inspiration for the subplot where the Jailer's daughter impossible passion for Palamon becomes central.

In closing, I should remind my current audience that it may help to remind students how some of the great works of contemporary literature often get re-treatments, so to speak: *Little Women* has been rewritten from father March's point of view; *Huckleberry Finn* has now the complimentary Finn, telling another father's story. *Ahab's Wife* by Sena Jeter Naslund

dovetails a young woman's cross-dressing adventures into the plots of the Whaleship Essex and *Moby Dick*. I read while researching Naslund that she took off as a writer when her high school teacher complimented her on when she submitted a creative work that filled in from Portia's point of view how Portia was so left aside by Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Stephen Oates turned his passion and great teaching of biographical style into *The Approaching Fury: Voices from the Storm 1820-1860*, which is a series of monologues in the voices of those whose thinking and politics led to the Civil War. This 1997 volume was followed the next year by *The Whirlwind of War: Voices from the Storm, 1861-1865*. I realized only after my insights into creative work for Shakespeare studies that in a 1997 interview on C-SPAN's *Booknotes*, Oates told Brian Lamb that his own final exam exercises he assigned to his students were the inspiration for his "As-I-Lay-Dying" style monologues. Other academic work I have since presented on Shakespeare includes a study of the Philippa Gregory novels that intersect with Shakespeare's first tetralogy, the *White Queen. Red Queen, Kingmaker's Daughters and Lady of the Rivers* quartet. Indeed, we are in an age where novelized plays of Shakespeare, not merely those in the Hogarth series are flourishing. When I originally began my project to assign the

creative final exam essay, I had in mind being able to publish or self-publish the essays I dutifully collected permission statements and emails of those who offered to preserve their work this way. Without secretarial or editorial support, the project languished. Yet I hope I have been teacher of Shakespeare who can pass on to other students that creative approaches have their place. I generally warn students away from dramatizing good old Bill. The playwright as his own defender or self-doubter gets students away from proving they know the material in the play. But for my fellow teachers, I cannot help but closing with a bit of inspired creativity of my own. This piece will need a complete re-framing, I suspect, to be appropriate to the novel I have schemed. But here is "my take" at how *Two Noble Kinsmen* came to be, the conjectured dialogue of Fletcher coaxing Shakespeare out of retirement:

Dialogue of Fletcher and Shakespeare, Scheming *Two Noble Kinsmen*.

**John.** I've been delegated. As the head playmaker now among the shareholders. It's cinders, Will. All cinders. A few large beams we might salvage. We need a new something new to perform, William. Just as soon as we can.

**Will.** But I'm retired. I've written my last play.

**John.** We know. Prospero breaks his staff. Magic is done. The master has put down his pen. But the Globe is in ruins.

**Will.** No thanks to those gunpowder-crazed cannon loaders. Who would have thought a simple cue to herald the arrival of King Henry the Eighth would ruin us, John?

**John.** We'll rebuild. Most of the timbers are sound. The thatch is a total loss. But if we can keep the audiences coming to the Blackfriars all winter, we can have it rebuilt and be back to normal.

**Will.** You want a play specifically for that indoor place? Where the children's companies spoofed us for so long? That tiny stifled stage? A play from me?

**John.** Let's not think about it as a stop-gap drama for a miniaturized theatre. I know it seems like a toy theatre. But think grand. We can transfer it to the rebuilt Globe and re-advertise its new mounting with more elaborate costumes and draw a whole second wave of playgoers.

**Will.** Ever the calculating profiteer. I'm ready to make money a different way for the rest of my life, John. The rich squire of Stratford. Land. Crops. Grazing.

**Hides. Gloves. Leather breeches. Enclosing the public spaces and reclaiming the true value of these open fields.**

**John. You always made the best sense, remaking "mouldy tales" for current audiences.**

**Will. Hmm, yes. Who would have thought: Gower, the convenient presenter of that wild story of Apollonius of Tyre—which had to, of course, be given a name switch: Pericles? (That will keep them guessing!)f But I've gotten new interests. I'd like some time to dangle the new grandbaby from my knees. I'm hoping to marry off the other daughter, too. Such a trouble. And I can't do it from London. Susan, the first-born, bastard child, conceived before we performed the ceremony. Heh. She's the level-headed one. Married the town physician. But I need a grandSON.**

**John. You have the gift. Words. Cadences. Plot remakes.**

**Will. I don't see why you can't write it yourself. You proved your apprenticeship, on *Henry*. You've got a few plays of your own under your belt. What about Francis Beaumont? You and he have put things together quite swiftly, I hear.**

**John. He's taking a little sabbatical.**

**Will. Heh, a forced sabbatical, I bet. Shame on him for all that Grocer's spoofing.**

**John. All that pestle rattling! *They laugh. Pause.* We've thought of a different kind of Knight's drama, Will. More traditional. More familiar. Sure to pull them in. The ladies will like it, too!**

**Will.** Not another John Gower story. Not another Thomas Lodge or Robert Greene remake, please.

**John.** No, Will, this is straight out of the top shelf of poet's legends. Geoffrey Chaucer. The Knight's Tale, from Canterbury Tales.

**Will.** Ha! Palamon and Arcite! That would be something. Horse rearing up and pinning the brute. How are you going to put THAT into the Blackfriars? Not with a hobby horse!

**John.** It's reported, brought on to the stage by an eyewitness. We watch the reaction of Palamon and his dear Emily, who thinks the final choice is already made for her.

**Will.** Heart-stopping. Dramatic. But Arcite, wounded, dying, asks to be carried in so Emilia, let's call her, can kiss him. And he can give the woman he's won by defeating Palamon, who's ready to die, to his cousin.

**John.** Perfect.

**Will.** You'll need a subplot.

**John.** You're good at them.

**Will.** Something for the less bookish crowd. Something for the masses. Something like the drunken porter, the silly country wench. Not so classically courtly, but --

**John.** Lusty. Raucous. You do that with your eyes shut.

*Sounds of a rhythmic clop, clop. Clop, clop. And then the voice of a woman singing.*

*The men look above them at the ceiling.*

**Judith.** (*Singing*). Such are most women,

**That When they espy**

**Their lovers inflamed, with sorrows opprest,**

**They stand then with Cupid against their reply,**

**They taunt, and they vaunt, they smile when they view**

**How Cupid hath caught them under his train;**

**But warned discerned, the proof is most true,**

**That Lighty Love Ladies, amongst you doth reign –**

*(She coos, with fake pleasure.)*

**That Lighty Love Ladies, amongst you doth reign –**

**Will.** (*Sighs*.) My errant daughter. My damnation. My inspiration.

**John.** You've said so before. Why so suspicious of daughters? Of their choices?

**Will.** Choices! They take after their mothers! Their mother. My wife, who chased me down and bedded me in the hay. Sex crazed, this one especially. We shipped the brew mistress's son off to the Virginia colony, and now she's taken up with his younger brother. As if they are interchangeable. Expects he will give her a child.

**John.** That's it! Someone who sees herself locked into the laboring class. Someone who assists Palamon. Gets him unshackled. Smitten by the love goddess, if you will.

**Will. Daughter of his "Jailer." Someone as hot for Palamon as Emilia is cool. Driven as mad as Ophelia. Cured though, with the substitute wooer. Cannot replicate life too closely. Play needs closure. That's it, then, Jailer, Daughter, Wooer. Throw in a doctor or a brother to goad the wooer into treating her kindly. The wooer "pretends" he's Palamon! You've got it.**

**John. No, WE'VE got it.**

**Will. Yes. No. Let us see.**