Shakespeariana
ISSN 2283-8759
DOI 10.13133/2283-8759/14507
pp. 103-117 (2018)

Anti-Comedy in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

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Critical discussion of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* has shifted significantly since the last century. It used to be suggested that the play is best understood as a political allegory, since its plot bears some resemblance to two events which occurred shortly before its composition: the death in November 1612 of Prince Henry, James's elder son, and the marriage of the king's daughter Princess Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine the following February, after its postponement because of the death. The play, too, features bereavement and postponed nuptials: it opens with three widowed queens who confront Theseus and induce him to break off his wedding with Hippolyta until the funerals of their husbands can take place; and, as it ends, another period of mourning, for the dead Arcite, is about to take place, alongside a much-delayed betrothal,

since Princess Emilia is finally able to accept the hand of the one surviving kinsman. In addition, Henry's projection of himself as "the epitome of militant Protestant chivalry"[1] offers a separate point of contact, as Shakespeare and Fletcher's play is much concerned with knightly etiquette, and it is possible to read it on a non-allegorical level as an "exploration of the tension between chivalric idealism and painful emotional reality"[2].

One hears less these days of this kind of approach, with good reason: it is a critical dead end. Its adherents assure us that the real-life events in question "exercised a powerful influence on the nature of the play"[3]; that it "took its being" from them[4]; that the action "must surely have been for its first audience quite saturated in current relevance"[5]; even that the play's characters are real people (Theseus and Hippolyta, for example, are James and Queen Anne)[6]. But beyond vague claims that Shakespeare and Fletcher are 'responding' or 'alluding' to these historical parallels, no commentator demonstrates what the dramatists might have expected to gain by doing so, or how awareness of the parallels benefits interpretation of the play.

A more plausible reading, at least at first glance, has also lost ground. This rests on the view that the play, despite dark moments, is at heart a comedy: typically of the genre, it guides its characters to a life-affirming conclusion, bringing harmony, personal and social, out of discord and contention. According to Philip Edwards, the play dramatises "the unavoidable process of growth" which is the "growth into experience", a movement from "youth, in which the spontaneous passion of friendship is dominant", to "riper age

1 William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, ed. Eugene M. Waith, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 30.

2 Margaret Shewring, "*The Two Noble Kinsmen* Revived: Chivalric Romance and Modern Performance Images", in *Le Roman de Chevalerie au Temps de la Renaissance*, ed. M. T. Jones-Davies, Paris, Touzot, 1987, pp. 107-32: 125.

3 Waith, ed., p. 30.

4 Glynne Wickham, "*The Two Noble Kinsmen* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Part II*?", in *The Elizabethan Theatre VII*, ed. G. R. Hibbard, London-Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1980, pp. 167-96: 181.

5 J. R. Mulryne, "Shakespeare's *Knight's Tale*: *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and the Tradition of Chivalry", in Jones-Davies, ed., pp. 75-105: 99.

6 See Wickham, p. 178.

[…] leading to marriage"[7]. For Brownlow, the conclusion offers a satisfying resolution which sees "the gods themselves subdued to the order of a large design" and leaves us with impressions of "civility and graciousness, of irregularity tamed by ceremony and justice, of Providence acknowledged"[8]. Critics of this persuasion tend to value the play for being morally uplifting. It instils in us "gratitude for life"[9] and "wonder at the transcendent power of good"[10].

For more recent critics, such comments impute an optimistic and restorative strategy to the play which it does not pursue. They describe a much darker, more sceptical, more ironic work, more inclined to subject its characters to criticism, and sometimes ridicule, than to praise, and closer in tone and outlook to *Troilus and Cressida* or *Timon of Athens* than to *As You Like It*. Far from moving purposefully to a festive destination, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is haunted by "the futility of doing", "the impossibility of moving freely from intention to achievement", and its characters experience the world as "a disorientating labyrinth that mocks direction"[11]. And while love in Shakespearean comedy promotes unity and renewal, here it is "a potentially tragic fantasy", either "a form of solipsism"[12] or proof of "the tendency of desire to separate people from themselves"[13]. The result is not a comic vision of mental and emotional enlargement, but "a representation of neurotic suffering"[14].

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7 "On the Design of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*", *Review of English Literature*, 5 (1964), pp. 89-105: 103-4.

8 F. W. Brownlow, *Two Shakespearean Sequences:* Henry VI *to* Richard II *and* Pericles *to* Timon of Athens, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977, p. 215.

9 Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare as Collaborator*, London, Methuen, 1960, p. 145.

10 Waith, ed., p. 61.

11 Paula S. Berggren, "'For What We Lack, / We Laugh': Incompletion and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*", *Modern Language Studies*, 14:4 (1984), pp. 3-17: 3, 5, 10.

12 Julia Briggs, "Tears at the Wedding: Shakespeare's Last Phase", in *Shakespeare's Late Plays: New Readings*, eds Jennifer Richards and James Knowles, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 210-27: 224.

13 Marcus Nordlund, "Divisive Desires in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*", in *Pangs of Love and Longing: Configurations of Desire in Premodern Literature*, eds Anders Cullhed *et al*., Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2013, pp. 130-43: 137.

14 Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 224.

It seems to me that this last approach makes much better sense of the play. Jacobean in terms of its date, it emerges as a very 'Jacobean' work in style and outlook: pessimistic in its view of the capacity of human beings to think or act consistently, and anxious to present a world which gives assurance of a larger design while constantly asserting the opposite; Jacobean, too, in its readiness to expose the arbitrariness of the conventions of dramatic plotting and characterisation through which an idea of life as intelligible and ordered is maintained. The present essay expands on this view of the *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, noting effects which critics have overlooked.

The first scenes and what follows introduce concerns which are the stock-in-trade of early modern comedy: love, marriage, and the obstacles they face, including the self-imposed solitariness of the heroine (with Emilia's initial desire to stay single, compare Olivia's in *Twelfth Night*) and the hero's attachment to a male friend (Palamon and Arcite look back to Bassanio and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Leantio and Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale*). Theseus is about to seal his union with Hippolyta, an event which he anticipates will be decisive and transforming. It is "This grand act of our life, this daring deed / Of fate in wedlock" (I.i.164-65)[15]. The wedding has to be delayed – death, grief, and time making their customary brief appearance in the opening movement of comedy – when three queens ask Theseus to help them recover the bodies of their husbands, killed in battle outside Thebes. He agrees, seeing this as a test not only of his "manhood", to which the women had originally appealed (I.i.72), but of his right to be regarded as human, since he must follow the call of honour in preference to the lower one of sexual pleasure:

> As we are men,
> Thus should we do; being sensually subdued,
> We lose our human title. (I.i.231-33)

Theseus leaves his friend Pirithous, to whom he is joined in an unbreakable "knot of love" (I.iii.41), to be his stand-in at the

[15] All quotations from the play refer to William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, ed. Lois Potter, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 1997.

ceremony, although Hippolyta remains confident that "we, more than his Pirithous, possess / The high throne in his heart" (I.iii.95-96). The theme of friendship is widened by Emilia, Hippolyta's sister, who argues on the basis of her own childhood that "the true love 'tween maid and maid may be / More" than that between men and women (I.iii.81-82); and by the arrival of the cousins Arcite and Palamon, Theseus's Theban captives, who look forward to a lifetime in a prison cell together because the close bond between them will grow even closer. Their attitude changes when they see and fall in love with Emilia and become rivals for the right to claim her, Palamon's case resting on his insistence that "I saw her first" (II.ii.160). Since Emilia cannot choose between them, Theseus decrees that the two kinsmen must decide the question for her by combat: the winner will marry her, the loser will be executed. Arcite overcomes his opponent but dies in a riding accident before he can claim his bride, whereupon Theseus reprieves Palamon from the scaffold and ends the play by giving Emilia to him. Amatory obstacles also occupy the subplot, in the form of the Jailer's Daughter whose unrequited passion for Palamon makes her spurn her Wooer and descend into madness. On the advice of the Doctor treating her, the Wooer pretends to be Palamon, and, on this basis, she accepts him. Two substitute bridegrooms thus supply the means by which the play can end with marriages, always comedy's chief symbol of the unity and self-understanding which it wishes to convince us its characters have achieved.

The factitiousness of the ending is a sign that *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is treating the traditions of comedy in a very disengaged way. There are many others. Comic lovers and husbands-to-be tend to start with attitudes to women and to marriage that come across as being in various ways misguided, and then learn to change them. Theseus should be a candidate for such reform, since he declares in the speech quoted above that as a "man" he should seek "honours" on the battlefield, and choosing instead to continue with his wedding would mean he was "sensually subdued" and not fully human. The logic here is that sex with women is bestial. However, there is little improvement on this view even at the end of the play, where his references to Emilia are insistently reductive: she is a "star" (V.iii.20), "the victor's meed, the prize and garland" (V.iii.16), a "garland" that must be worn (V.iii.130), a "prize"

(V.iii.135), a "stolen jewel" (V.iv.119), "the treasure" that "must needs be by / To give the service pay" (that is, to reward the efforts of whichever man wins the combat; V.iii.31-32). The kinsmen echo this prejudice. Women are "the enemy" (II.ii.197), and marriage to one of them would entail loss or depletion of one's identity. In loving Emilia, Palamon fears he will "lose himself", and his love for her makes Arcite feel shackled (II.ii.156-58). To them, too, Emilia is a "jewel" (III.i.9), a "garland" or a "prize" (V.i.42-45), and, like Theseus, they regard honour and sex with women as mutually incompatible: "women", Arcite decides, will "woo us to wander from […] the ways of honour" (II.ii.73-76), and Palamon, marrying Emilia but saying not a word to her, dedicates his wedding-day "to honour", meaning to honouring his dead cousin (V.iv.98).

A comedy might cope with even this degree of misogynistic male bias if its heroine, taking her cue from Rosalind or Portia, were a source of resistance to it. Emilia, however, not only acquiesces in the men's devaluation of women, she gives it explicit support. Abruptly dropping her determination to have no dealings with men, she is overwhelmed by the excellence of her suitors and, incapable of choosing between them, passes into a state of mental paralysis in which she becomes first "lost […] Utterly lost" (IV.ii.34, 46) and then a "flower […] alone, unplucked" (V.i.167-68), the utterly passive object of male imaginings. She announces finally, "I am extinct" (V.iii.20). Self-abnegation of this order is sabotaging enough to the play's connection to the traditions of comedy, but Emilia has more damage to inflict. She not only relegates herself, she insists, against all the evidence, on the immeasurable superiority of either kinsman to women generally. At first, the comparison is with any female individual ("There were no woman / Worth so composed a man", V.iii.85-86), then we learn that just one of the men exceeds the value of the entire female sex. In parting from Palamon, Arcite "cuts away / A life more worthy from him than all women" (V.iii.142-43).

This is not the only way in which the play's version of gender relations runs counter to standard comic practice. Bonds between men are everywhere in Shakespeare, and often very resistant to

attempts to break or loosen them[16]. In comedy, this poses a particular difficulty, since heterosexual coupling, ratified by marriage, is the destination of the plot and the main sign of social renewal. The hero must turn his attention fully to his female future partner, and the male friend must be detached from the hero, or accept his subordinate place in the traditional sexual hierarchy. In *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare addresses the problem by creating a "plot-convenient second female"[17], so the friend, too, can marry and be despatched into a heterosexual future. Where he does not adopt this tactic, as happens in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Winter's Tale*, the hero's attachment to his wife has to be vigorously asserted, though it is possible to feel that the vigour of the assertion itself measures the risk to the hero's heterosexual loyalties that the unattached friend still poses. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* seems to implement a particularly decisive solution to the problem: it ejects the friend from the play by killing him. "Bear this hence", Theseus says of the corpse (V.iv.109), as though, cleared from view, the dead friend will no longer exert his disruptive pull on the direction of the hero's affections. The play, however, engineers exactly the opposite impression. Ignoring his wife-to-be, as he has done all along, Palamon addresses his final speech to the dead body:

> Oh, cousin!
> 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! (V.iv.109-12)

Waith finds these lines "a moving reassertion of the bond of friendship"[18], but he misses their implications. The finales of Shakespeare's comedies strive, albeit with varying degrees of

[16] For a survey of Shakespearean examples, see Roger Holdsworth, "Trouble in Paradise: Friendship and Masculine Identity in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*", in *Le ultime opere di Shakespeare. Da* Pericles *al caso* Cardenio, eds Clara Mucci, Chiara Magni and Laura Tommaso, Napoli, Liguori, 2009, pp. 185-208.

[17] William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. William C. Carroll, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 2004, p. 33.

[18] Eugene M. Waith, "Shakespeare and Fletcher on Love and Friendship", *Shakespeare Studies*, 18 (1986), pp. 235-50: 248.

success, to rank male-male intimacy below the male-female intimacy which the hero and heroine can now expect. Palamon's closing speech is a refusal of this manoeuvre. As Belsey notes, "heterosexual passion and homosocial friendship are defined in exactly the same terms: both are dear love; both are desire"[19].

"Desire" does not limit the possibilities of male-male relationship to the merely homosocial, however; nor should it, since another way in which the play deliberately separates itself from the conventions of romantic comedy is to treat both gender and sexual orientation as unfixed, and subject to casual alteration rather than being deeply expressive of the self. Of course, the cross-dressing heroines of Shakespeare's other comedies bring these questions into play, and the theatre's use of boys for female roles assisted a complex exploration of them; but we always know that the character is a woman pretending to be a man and has only to change her clothes – to switch, in Orsino's wonderfully punning phrase, to "other habits"[20] – to appear again as the woman she never ceased to be. By this means, the heterosexual nature of the coupling and marriage which comedy puts in place can be interrogated but reaffirmed.

In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, there is no cross-gender disguise. There are instead constant, bewildering shifts of self-presentation which imply that the characters of this play, insofar as they are capable of self-inspection at all, have no firm idea of their sexual identities or the nature of their desires. A striking case of this is Emilia's eroticised memory of her childhood relationship with Flavina, which makes her certain she will never "Love any that's called man" (I.iii.49-85); a certainty succeeded by her clamorous yearning for the two kinsmen, by either of whom she longs to be "plucked". Similar redefinitions of self and motive abound. Arcite makes Theseus wish "I were a woman" (II.vi.63), while Arcite thinks Palamon "More than a mistress" (III.vi.26). In a bizarre sequence of thought, Palamon imagines Emilia being so impressed by his manly deeds that she will become a man herself and subject him to homosexual assault: "this lady, / This blushing virgin,

19 Catherine Belsey, "Love in Venice", *Shakespeare Survey*, 44 (1992), pp. 41-53: 53.

20 William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. Keir Elam, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 2008, V.i.380.

should take manhood to her / And seek to ravish me" (II.ii.26-28). In their prison the kinsmen not only belong to each other, they change sex, marry, and procreate:

> We are an endless mine to one another;
> We are one another's wife, ever begetting
> New births of love. (II.ii.79-81)

Emilia contributes further to these indeterminacies of gender by finding Arcite's face to be that of "a wondrous handsome woman" but "his body / And fiery mind" to be male (II.v.20-22), and by comparing him to Ganymede, Juno, and Pelops in a single speech (IV.ii.15-21).

Sometimes these ambiguities challenge our own responses. One of the knights supporting Palamon appears at least partly female: "his face" is that of a "warlike maid […] Pure red and white […] His red lips, after fights, are fit for ladies" (IV.ii.105-11). Does this mean that the lips might be ladies' lips, or that they are fit to kiss ladies? And if the latter, is this because they are manly lips, or because, on the contrary, they are womanly lips, which are the lips ladies prefer to be kissed by? The play's most striking example of the play challenging our receptiveness to cross-gender innuendo is the Jailer's Daughter's cry as she declares her longing for Palamon: "Oh, for a prick now" (III.iv.25), perhaps the most startling pun in the canon. Does she want to be equipped with a penis or penetrated by one? The full passage is "Oh, for a prick now, like a nightingale, / To put my breast against" (III.iv.25-26), so the primary reference is to the myth of Philomel, who was metamorphosed into the bird and thrust her breast against a thorn so she would stay awake and keep singing; but the comma after "now" invites the actor to pause to allow the pun to be registered. Ovid's myth returns in yet another regendering of the kinsmen. They are "Two emulous Philomels" (V.iii.124), engaged in a singing contest.

Nothing in the play is left untouched by this emphasis on sexual indeterminacy. When the Countrymen's Bavian, a clown in a baboon's costume, is warned "My friend, carry your tail without offence" (III.v.35), the joke seems to be that this is, in coarsened form, what one of the main-plot friends might say to the other; but "tail" in Jacobean bawdy means "vagina" as well as "penis", and

are we sure of the sex of the baboon? In a later reference, he/she becomes hermaphroditic: "The Bavian with long tail and eke long tool" (III.v.131). Palamon's stallion, on the other hand, is bisexual and can be ridden by all comers: "come cut and long tail to him, / He turns ye like a top" (V.ii.49-50).

These uncertainties and unsticking of expected associations are part of a larger intention to deny the traditional reassurances of comedy. An important target is the conventional comic plot, the phased arrangement which shepherds us from breakdown through conflict to harmony. No such structure is evident in Shakespeare and Fletcher's play. The plot (the term is inappropriate in its suggestion of something which has the appearance of being planned) is kept in motion by a series of unconnected and unpredictable events, inserted as each one is required. They include Pirithous's unexplained freeing of Arcite, at the very point that separation of the cousins is needed (II.ii.247); Emilia's abrupt onset of passion for both of them (she simply announces that "My virgin's faith has fled me", IV.ii.46); the Jailer's Daughter's unaccountable obsession with Palamon – it is "beyond reason" (II.vi.11), she accurately remarks; the starting of Arcite's horse, killing its rider; and Theseus's decision not to execute Palamon but to marry him to Emilia, a change of mind which did not follow from Arcite's accident. Critics' detection, in the belief that they are complimenting the play, of the supervising presence of Providence in all of this does not seem sensible. A more helpful approach to the accretion of chance happenings is to view it as not botched but deliberate, as mobilising a conscious rejection of Aristotelian theory. Aristotle insists on connectivity. Peripeteia – sudden turns of event – "should develop out of the very structure of the fable, so that they fit what has gone before, either necessarily or probably. To happen after something is by no means the same as to happen because of it"[21].

Exiled from the purpose-laden plot of comedy, the characters of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* inhabit a starker, darker universe, the universe

[21] Aristotle, *Aristotle on the Art of Fiction: An English Translation of Aristotle's* Poetics *with an Introductory Essay and Explanatory Notes*, ed. L. J. Potts, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 31.

of "One damn thing after another", where only "the event" (meaning the outcome), "That never-erring arbitrator", supplies a kind of certainty (I.ii.113-14). Here drift replaces direction, and Arcite, sounding suddenly like Estragon counselling Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, gives the only possible advice: "let us follow / The becking of our chance" (I.ii.115-16). Jonson was clearly struck by this aspect of the play. In *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), two friends, pursuing a woman who regards the question of which of them has her with complete indifference, select fictitious names for themselves and invite a madman to choose. The name the madman selects is 'Palamon'.

Rejecting comic structure, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* also rejects the idea of human potential this structure was designed to serve: the capacity to know oneself and to open oneself to, and to love, others. In place of interaction, the play is full of relationship by proxy, substituted or indirect contact, or its outright avoidance. The plot is launched by Theseus's deferring his presence at his own wedding and electing his friend to stand in for him at the ceremony, "the pretended celebration" ("intended", but also simulated, fake; I.i.210). The impression of a willed remoteness from others then extends to every other character, many of whom are seen entering "*alone*", or engaging in solitary speaking even when others are present[22]. The idea of self-absorption this indicates is picked up in two references to Narcissus (II.ii.119, IV.ii.32), the youth who fell in love with his own image; a third is implied when Arcite tells Palamon he is better off looking at and talking to himself than trying to communicate with him:

> Kinsman, you might as well
> Speak this and act it in your glass as to
> His ear which now disdains you. (III.i.69-71)

Palamon responds in kind when he speaks not to Arcite but to his corpse at the end of the play.

[22] This element of the play's staging is identified by Nordlund, pp. 136-38, who notes that it sets it apart from "most other Shakespeare plays".

Love begins and flourishes in comedy through the direct exchange of feelings and words. The lovers of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* opt for second-hand contact. Instead of asking Emilia why he is inspired to love her, Arcite asks Theseus to ask her:

> ask that lady
> Why she is fair, and why her eyes command me
> Stay here to love her. (III.vi.168-70)

Emilia speaks movingly to both kinsmen for 50 lines ("On my knees, / I ask thy pardon, Palamon"; "Lie there, Arcite", IV.ii.36-37, 43), except that she is not speaking to the names' owners but to images of them, as a stage direction emphasises: "*Enter* EMILIA *alone, with two pictures*" (IV.ii.1-54). Similarly, Palamon addresses not Emilia, but the wall of her house: "Farewell, kind window. / May rude winds never hurt thee" (II.ii.277-78), not an easy speech for an actor who wants to avoid audience laughter.

At the centre of all these departures from the conventions of comedy is a refusal to take as anything more than fraudulent and self-induced the exalted idea of 'love' that the form is committed to celebrating. "'Tis in our power […] to / Be masters of our manners", Palomon assures his friend. He is, however, in a play where human beings do not control their emotions or desires but are creatures of the moment and are driven, often self-destructively, by impulses they cannot restrain or understand. "Why should I love this gentleman?" (II.iv.1), the Jailer's Daughter demands of her fixation on Palamon, the full force of which emerges if we take her to be emphasising "this": why should she love *this* gentleman, as opposed to any other? She remains mystified and never appears with Palamon, though she does give reports of encounters with him, which may or may not be true. She concludes her part happily coupled with a fake Palamon, whom she takes to be the real one – which has been the actual state of affairs all along.

The play's principal relationship, that of the kinsmen with Emilia, is dogged by the same impressions of simulation and pretence. Palamon bases the priority of his claim to love her on four words: "I saw her first" (II.ii.160). He then expands a little: "I that first saw her […] took possession / First with mine eye of all those beauties" (II.ii.169-70).

Arcite counters by arguing that the intensity of his love is more important than who can claim the first sighting:

> You play the child extremely. I will love her;
> I must, I ought to do so and I dare. (II.ii.208-9)

The charge of childishness would be more effective if it were not followed by this childish outburst, which almost demands a foot to be stamped in accompaniment. Palamon tells Arcite he must not peer out of the window at Emilia any more, to which he retorts, "I'll throw my body out […] to anger thee" (II.ii.218-20). An impression starts to form that the two men are more interested in outfacing one another than in what they are arguing over.

If we dwell on the petulance of their exchanges, however, we are in danger of missing a far more fundamental objection to the kinsmen's right to be taken seriously. This is that their passion achieves its superheated state entirely independently of any knowledge of, or contact with, the woman they claim – after a moment's inspection – so truly and deeply and unshakably to love. Moreover, their relationship with her gets no further than this. Throughout the play, Arcite speaks only a few formal words to Emilia in a single scene (II.v), when he is anyway disguised as someone else, and a few more as he dies; and Palamon never speaks to her at all. This failure to go beyond remote observation creates an extraordinary effect. The "love" they persistently brandish at one another seems self-created and self-propelled, a case of what Bacon diagnoses as the tendency to "submit the shows of things to the desires of the mind"[23]. The protestations of devotion, the claims and counter-claims, the challenges and threats of suicide, all seem to be taking place several metres off the ground.

It will not do to invoke a 'love-at-first-sight' convention here, as critics sometimes do, in order to suppose that we should not be troubled[24]. When Shakespeare employs this device, as he does in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*, he ensures that the lover in question has plenty of opportunity to extend his knowledge of the loved object beyond that initially provided by sight. In *The Two*

[23] Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, London, 1605, II.iv.2.

[24] See, for example, Waith, ed., p. 45.

Noble Kinsmen, the lovers never have more than sight to base their feelings on, and this produces some very strained logic, as when Palamon tells Theseus (but not Emilia) that he loves

> the fair Emilia,
> Whose servant, if there be a right in seeing
> And first bequeathing of the soul to, justly I am. (III.vi.146-48)

Is there "a right in seeing"? Seeing something and granting oneself rights of ownership over what is seen are virtually identical concepts in this play, where all the characters share an obsession with the processes of sight, preferring to "judge by the outside" (IV.ii.74) than proceed beyond the act of observation. In the men, this easily translates into a view of women as valuable adornments, whom they have not only a right to look at but a right to possess. For Arcite, loving (or what he calls loving) Emilia bestows on him "the birthright of this beauty" (III.vi.31), as though a deed of ownership came with the emotion, and he envies Palamon because he is still in prison and able to spy on her from the window of his cell. Palamon will "see / Her bright eyes" (one pair of eyes looking at another) and "feed / Upon the sweetness of a noble beauty" (II.iii.8-12). Seeing an object is a means to ingest it. In the subplot, the Jailer's Daughter's compulsive desire for Palamon is said to be the result of an "intemperate surfeit of the eye", which "hath distempered the other senses" (IV.iii.69-70). As elsewhere, the subplot is guiding interpretation of the main plot by offering starker or simplified versions of what is occurring there.

The posturing in this play, the violent but empty gestures, generate moments of absurdity, but also a certain bleakness, even hopelessness. Addicted to superficies, its characters seem capable of strong feeling, but not of consistent thought, and incapable of doing more than react despairingly to the vagaries of chance. If we seek contemporary models for the play's methods and ideas, we are led not to the comedies of Shakespeare but to the recently staged tragedies of Webster, in which life is "a general mist of error"[25] and

[25] John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown, London, Methuen, 1964, IV.ii.188.

people are "driven [they] know not whither"[26]; and more especially to the *Essays* of Montaigne and their fascinated inspection of "the fits and fantasies of the soul"[27].

[26] John Webster, *The White Devil*, ed. John Russell Brown, London, Methuen, 1960, V.vi.249.

[27] Michel de Montaigne, "Of Virtue", in *Montaigne's Essays*, trans. John Florio, London, Dent, 1965, 3 vols, vol. II, p. 430.