



Early Modern Studies Journal

Volume 6: Women's Writing/Women's Work in Early Modernity/2014
 English Department/University of Texas, Arlington

Performance Review

Uncomplicated Desire: Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, Cincinnati, OH
 Performance Date: May 3, 2014

For their twentieth anniversary season, the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company performed William Shakespeare and John Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsmen* from May 2 – May 25, 2014. With this production, the company became one of only five theaters in the United States to have performed all 38 plays by Shakespeare, and this achievement was heralded with much deserved local and national attention. The theater and stage are very narrow, and when I first arrived at my seat, the space seemed claustrophobic and inadequate. The company made good use of the available space, however, designing sets that create the illusion of distance and utilizing the aisles and the area in front of the stage. Once the lights went down, the theater was intimate and inviting.

One of the strongest aspects of this production was the subplot involving the country characters and the Gaoler's Daughter. Director Brian Isaac Phillips chose to

foreground broad humor in all of the scenes featuring the country characters, who were portrayed as inebriated hillbillies by way of Greece. For example, during the Morris dance, one of the dancers had his tooth knocked out as a result of his fellow dancer's drunkenness and poor skill with his sticks. Miranda McGee highlighted the intimacy of the theater space through her strong performance as the Gaoler's Daughter. She delivered her early soliloquys in front of the stage, physically distancing herself from the more noble characters and aligning herself with the audience. McGee's interpretation of the Daughter was broadly comic from the start, which made her later descent into madness delightfully funny as well.

In a session earlier in the day at a conference, "*The Two Noble Kinsmen: Text, Sources, Performance, and Pedagogy*," organized by Dr. Niamh O'Leary, members of Cincinnati Shakespeare Company explained that Phillips was focused on showing the audience the story of the play rather than simply telling it. In line with this philosophy, Phillips made a significant departure from the play and staged much of the offstage action, from the war with Creon to the final fight between Palamon and Arcite. The actresses who played Hippolyta (Kelly Mengelkoch) and Emilia (Sara Clarke) donned armor over their dresses and fought in the war against Creon at the beginning of the play. (Drew Faucher was responsible for the excellent fight choreography throughout the play.) While the actors claimed in a post-show question and answer session that the audience was not supposed to think that the Amazons have actually gone back to war, their appearance nonetheless seemed like a nod to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and its discussion of Theseus' recent conquest of Hippolyta. The three widowed queens, played by Miranda McGee, Caitlin McWethy,

and Maggie Lou Rader with clear references to *Macbeth's* weird sisters, also joined the battle, further emphasizing the martial role of women in the play.

The final fight between Palamon and Arcite was staged as a one-on-one wrestling match on a rotating platform, which created a greater sense of movement on the small stage and highlighted the depth of Faucher's fight choreography. Sound designer Douglas J. Borntrager incorporated crowd noises into this scene, which emphasized the spectacle of the cousin's combat. The entire scene was designed to foreground the onstage and offstage audience's delight in the entertainment of the combat. Rather than placing all responsibility for the outcome onto Emilia (and her beauty) or Theseus (and his sense of honor) or even Palamon and Arcite (and their blind devotion to love), this staging suggested that our desire for spectacle was equally implicated in Arcite's eventual death.

Not all of the staged action was quite as effective as the two battles. When Theseus and Hippolyta appeared onstage after hunting with attendants carrying a stuffed deer carcass, the result was bit more ridiculous than was perhaps intended. In addition, the scene where Arcite, Palamon, and Emilia each prayed before Mars, Venus, and Diana did not quite work. The gods were each portrayed as living statues responding to the petitions of each of the characters, and the presentation was visually stunning. Unfortunately, the audience, primed with all the humor up to this point, was not prepared for the generic switch from comedy to tragedy and giggled at these tableaux.

The major interpretive decision made by the director and the actors was to simplify the sexual politics of the play. For example, the company made an interesting

choice in staging the sexual cure for the madness of the Gaoler's Daughter. The Doctor was played by a woman instead of a man (Maggie Lou Rader), so the instruction that the Wooer should pretend to be Palamon and trick the Daughter into sleeping with him seemed less like the imposition of male order upon unruly female desire and more like the winking advice from a woman who knows what can really scratch an unfulfilled itch for McGee's character. Furthermore, the Wooer, as played by Charlie Cromer, was an effeminate fool when he was not pretending to be Palamon. At a crucial point just before the Wooer-as-Palamon and the Gaoler's Daughter leave the stage to consummate the cure, she says to him, "but you shall not hurt me" (5.4.112).¹ Cromer deftly slipped out of his bombastic performance of Palamon, reverted to his gentle and almost cringing Wooer, and reassured the Daughter, "I will not, sweet" (5.4.113). With this momentary switch, the potential strangeness and difficulty of the bed trick was softened for the audience. The Gaoler's Daughter was not making a bad bargain and may not even have been entirely deceived by the ruse designed by the Doctor and her Father. Throughout the production, Phillips chose to simplify the sexual politics of the play, which was consistent if not always the best choice, in my opinion.

Phillips' interpretation extended to the primary plot of the play, the love triangle between Emilia, Palamon, and Arcite, but this aspect of his approach to the play was less successful. One of the key elements of Shakespeare and Fletcher's play is the conflict between same sex friendship and heterosexual desire. In Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's production, however, this theme was almost entirely eliminated. When Emilia discussed her dead childhood friend Flavina with Hippolyta,

it was a happy remembrance rather than a sad reflection on a lost bosom companion. In fact, Emilia seemed to have eyes for Prithius (Brent Vimtrup) at the beginning of the play, so her relationships with Hippolyta and Flavina were firmly platonic. A rather flirty conversation with her maid was the only exception. While Arcite (Zach Schute) and Palamon (Matt Lytle) may have begun the play in the intimacy of a bathhouse, their scene of comfort to each other in jail was played ironically. A lifetime of close male companionship was clearly a pale and inadequate compensation for the loss of the outside world. Furthermore, the scene where the two cousins arm each other before their fight in the woods was played with no hint of the homoeroticism contained in the play. Schute and Lytle made it clear in the post-show question and answer session that they consciously did not include any real suggestion of homoeroticism between the two men. The joys of male friendship and/or same sex desire did not figure much before Emilia's beauty came to disrupt such claims anyway. While this made the sexual politics of the play clearer and simpler for the audience, I longed for this central tension in the production.

Instead of preferring to remain a virgin devotee of Diana rather than marry one of two nearly indistinguishable men, Sara Clark's Emilia had a clear preference for Zach Schute's Arcite from the time he was presented to her as a servant. Rather than being a meditation on the vagaries of fate and the will of the gods, this production presented the love triangle as a case of frustrated true love. The final act ended with Emilia and Palamon embracing over Arcite's seated dead body, suggesting that he would haunt the remainder of their lives.

The genre of Shakespeare and Fletcher's play has always been a matter for debate. The play was not included in the 1623 First Folio with its three divisions: comedy, tragedy, and history. Sometimes classified along with Shakespeare's other late plays as a romance, the play has also been called an antiromance and a tragicomedy. The *Norton Shakespeare* classifies the play as a comedy – it does begin and end with the promise of marriage.² Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's staging of this play, particularly with the final tableau, emphasized the tragedy of the play. Simplifying the sexual politics also meant clarifying the generic questions of the text.

While I wish that the production had retained more of the complexity of the sexual relationships between characters, Cincinnati Shakespeare Company presented an effective and entertaining version of this not often performed play, and their willingness and skill in tackling the entirety of the canon is a vital contribution to American theater.

Erin K. Kelly
Ohio State University

Erin K. Kelly is a Senior Lecturer at Ohio State University. Her current book project examines on the use of hunting language in Tudor literature.

¹ William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008).

² Walter Cohen, Introduction to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008); Maurice Hunt, "Romance and Tragicomedy," in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 384-398.