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Chaucer and His Bastard Child: Social Disjunction and Metaliterariness in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

The Two Noble Kinsmen is a play whose history lies in the shadow of the issue of authorship. For many centuries the interest of critics and scholars in this work sprang almost entirely from Shakespeare's involvement in its creation and ended precisely at those moments in the text where the Bard's contribution shifted into what was seen as John Fletcher's mediocre postscript to Shakespeare's magnificent verse. Even nowadays the shadow of the question of authorship still looms on the horizon. Eugene M. Waith's recently reissued edition of the play, published originally in 1989 in the Oxford World's Classics series, still devotes the bulk of the introduction to the matter even if it aspires to move beyond this belaboured problem – more than to any other issue it raises and thus, significantly, more than to the actual interpretation of the play (cf. Waith 4-23, 62-66). In this article I want to challenge this traditional preoccupation by pointing towards a powerful intrinsic coherence of the text, a force to be reckoned with in any interpretation of the play regardless of the nature or technicalities of Shakespeare's and Fletcher's actual collaboration. It is high time that one once and for all abandoned the schizophrenic nineteenth-century approach to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* which posited it as a kind of a textual patchwork, with some passages evincing Shakespeare's genius in their "higher element of eloquence" (Richard Whateley qtd. in Waith 9) and others, stitched to them, betraying Fletcher's unmistakeably "slow and languid" touch in their sense of disunity (Charles Lamb qtd. in Waith 11). This may in fact be harder than it seems, for, as Waith (1) rightly notices, the play has so rarely been staged precisely due to its troubled provenance and its appreciation, both in terms of theatrical audiences and readership, must be measured against it; Amazon still markets one of the editions of the play as a work with one author only, with John Fletcher featuring merely as a "contributor," which obviously goes against the spirit of the original 1634 quarto edition, where Fletcher's name comes first.[1] Additionally, as I hope to show,

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[1] The edition in question is the reissue of Waith's 1989 text published in 1998. The imbalance between the two authors has now partly been rectified, and Amazon markets the 2010 edition of

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although the play itself raises the issue of authorship, it does so in a profoundly more abstract and theoretical sense than has traditionally been appreciated. Difficult as it may be, a move beyond the preoccupation with the nature of the two playwrights' collaboration is necessary to appreciate the way the unified text works, and this article strives to provide one.

The reading I offer presents the play as a manifestation of a strong belief in the unbridgeable character of social gulfs, as a work about social disjunction and differences in social stratification that simply cannot be overcome. This in itself is not particularly innovative, for the matter is more than ostensibly raised in the play through the unreciprocated love of the Jailer's Daughter towards the noble Palamon, but what the article lays particular stress on is the Chaucerian link and how it connects with this particular issue. Suggesting that the prologue, where Chaucer is praised and posited as an ideal beyond the reach of contemporary playwrights and actors, is more than just a conventional opening, I take a closer look at the contrast between Chaucer's original characters and those added in the subplot centred on the Jailer's Daughter with a view to presenting the difference between them as fundamentally ontological. This, in turn, has bearing on the uneasy relationship of the playwrights with Chaucer, and, as I argue, gives the entirety of the play a strong metaliterary overtone. Following the traces of the anxiety of influence voiced in the prologue and maintained throughout the text will take the reader of the present study back to the authorship issue, allowing them to perceive it in a novel light, at a remove from the prescriptive and biased concerns of early criticism.

To appreciate the sense of social disjunction which the play instils in its readers and audiences, a comparison of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* with its source—Chaucer's "Knight's Tale"—is in order. The biggest difference between the two works is the addition of a major subplot featuring the Jailer's Daughter and a host of other, equally nameless characters. Apart from the adventures, or misadventures, of Palamon and Arcite and their brotherly quarrel over who is going to wed the unsuspecting Emily, we thus have in the play a second love triangle featuring Palamon, the Jailer's Daughter—madly in love with him—and her Wooer. Alongside the Jailer's Daughter the playwrights introduced numerous other characters into the story. These include the Jailer, the Jailer's Brother, two different Friends of the Jailer, the Wooer, the Doctor and a few others. The namelessness of all these figures has not escaped critical attention (Wicher 127, 132-133), and its conspicuousness is further exacerbated by the fact that even minor characters associated with the aristocratic world of Athens, and thus with Chaucer, are known by name. Such is the case with Pirithous, a close friend of Theseus, or with Artesius, one of the soldiers whom Theseus addresses directly in

the same text as having two proper authors. Amazon's incoherent strategy repeats in an uncanny way the sort of schizophrenic attitudes towards the text that dominated its early criticism. The Arden Shakespeare edition (ed. Lois Potter), by contrast, puts Fletcher's name first.

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the first scene of the play. Artesius is a particularly interesting case, since he does not speak a single word throughout the play, and yet we know his name. It is indeed near impossible not to be tempted to divide the Dramatis Personae into two basic camps: those whom we might broadly refer to as the Chaucerians, even if some of them are not to be found in "The Knight's Tale"—the royalty, and their immediate henchmen—and the nameless low characters centred around the Jailer and his Daughter.

Given the plot of the play such a division of characters may seem, however, to be somewhat arbitrary, perhaps even counterintuitive, for *The Two Noble Kinsmen* presents Theseus and the two Thebans as mortal enemies from its very start. Nevertheless, even as the play begins, before any thought of possible reconciliation enters anyone's mind, Theseus recognizes both Theban captives as belonging to the same social plane of reality as himself:

> Then like men use 'em.
> […] All our surgeons
> Convent in their behoof; our richest balms,
> Rather than niggard, waste; their lives concern us
> Much more than Thebes is worth […]
> […] Bear 'em speedily
> From our kind air, to them unkind, and minister
> What man to man may do, for our sake […]
> […] For our love
> And great Apollo's mercy, all our best
> Their best skill tender. (1:4:28, 30-33, 37-39, 45-47)

They may be his enemies, but they are men just as much as he is, and Theseus acknowledges this, willing to go to some lengths to secure their well-being. Later, when the disguised Arcite engages Theseus in a conversation, the result is that Pirithous says of him that "All his words are worthy" (2:5:29) and Theseus sums up the Theban by telling him "You are perfect" (2:5:15). The scene proves that they all speak the same language and belong together, notwithstanding the legacy of the political conflict between Thebes and Athens.

By contrast, when the Jailer's Daughter looks at Palamon and Arcite, she can at first only exclaim: "It is a holiday to look on them. Lord, the difference of men!" (2:2:56-57). This is actually quite similar to the famous "brave new world" speech of Miranda in *The Tempest*. What is different is the focus on social disjunction rather than on amazement. What the Jailer's Daughter admits implicitly is what Miranda states explicitly: that the men she sets her eyes upon are excellent, better than anything she has ever seen. Unlike Miranda, however, the Jailer's Daughter does not succumb to momentary enthusiasm; she does not say anything as enthusiastic as "O brave new world that has such people in't" (5:1:184-185); instead, she succumbs to an awareness of the difference between

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herself and the noble kinsmen. That this difference is of an almost ontological character is clear from the interactions between the two Thebans and her father, the Jailer, who fails to tell them apart in the very same scene (2:2:50-55). His inability to distinguish Palamon from Arcite is quite similar to the apparent failure of the royal couple in *Hamlet* to tell the difference between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (2:2:33-34).[2] In both cases there is a huge social gulf between the two parties, but while the mistakes of Claudius and Gertrude may be easily explained away by arguing that they do not care about their subjects enough to appreciate their distinct identities, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* the lack of discernment on the Jailer's part works in the other direction—up the social ladder. It is almost as if the two Thebans belonged to a different race of men, with the Jailer being under the impression that all the men belonging to that race look the same. In this way the scene communicates an ontological rift between the nameless characters from the subplot and the noble "Chaucerians"—the "difference of men" which leaps at the readers and audiences from the Jailer's Daughter's emotional exclamation. That it leaps at them in a scene which depicts the gazes of the Jailer and his Daughter directed at the two Thebans is perhaps not accidental, for Alex Davis (180) notices that:

> In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the inferior status of the nongentle is manifested through the hungry, grasping quality of their vision (we hear of a tanner's daughter who "must see the Duke" [2.3.47]; characteristically, the enjoyment he might derive from seeing her is not openly discussed).

In his article Davis also points to instances where the pleasure of looking and being looked at among the Chaucerian characters is, by contrast, mutual (179). The Chaucerians enjoy ocular reciprocality, which the low characters can never join in. Their gazes can only communicate confusion, desire, or a powerful sense of ontological distinction and can never elicit a positive response.

This profound sense of social disjunction is prefigured in the song which opens the play. After beginning with an enumeration of the products of nature amenable to human aesthetic taste, which are all said to be at the feet of the bride and bridegroom, the Boy who sings the piece concludes it with a curious reference to a number of various birds:

> Not an angel of the air,

[2] Although this interpretation of the lines in question is by no means unproblematic, it is strongly suggested by their structural parallelism: "*King*: Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern. / *Queen*: Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz." Numerous productions portray the royal couple as confused with regard to the respective identities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; such is, for instance, the case in the Royal Shakespeare Company's TV movie *Hamlet* starring David Tennant (2009).

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> Bird melodious or bird fair,
> Is absent hence.
> The crow, the sland'rous cuckoo, nor
> The boding raven, nor chough hoar,
> Nor chatt'ring 'pie,
> May on our bride-house perch or sing,
> Or with them any discord bring,
> But from it fly. (1:1:16-24)

The song makes it clear that nothing can compromise the bridal happiness of the Chaucerians, and while the prospective newlyweds in question are obviously Theseus and Hippolyta, with hindsight the Boy's pronouncement can easily be extended to the future wedding of Palamon and Emily. No meagre raven or cuckoo, among whom one can metaphorically place the Jailer and his nameless associates, can hope to disrupt the festivities of the Chaucerians, and with this the fate of the Jailer's Daughter is sealed before the play even begins.

Although *The Two Noble Kinsmen* stresses time and again that the two groups are not to be reconciled, there is a moment which, nonetheless, does bring them together. When Theseus and his courtiers watch a masque featuring a morris dance performed by a group of countrymen and the Jailer's Daughter, both social groups seem to enjoy the pastime. A closer look at the scene will reveal, however, that this is only illusory and quite different from the analogous performance of the Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. First of all, the choice of the morris dance is not without its significance. A prominent part of the popular culture of late medieval and early modern England, the morris may be seen as an epitome of what is sometimes referred to as Merry Old England.[3] Mary Ellen Lamb notes, however, that on the whole the plight of the people involved in such festive activities in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was quite difficult and far from merry. Puritan pressure was strong and Lamb (73) argues that:

> Losing sponsorship of established institutions, morris dancers became fellow travelers with dragons, hobby-horses, and festive figures linked with May games. They mingled together not only as common expressions of festivity, but also, alternatively and even simultaneously, as common expressions of insubordination to those who would shut them down. […] Classed as appropriate to the low, the morris reflected disparate meanings attributed to the lower sorts[.]

Lamb's point is that the morris is something that distinguishes the lower classes from the upper ones, an activity through which the lower classes embrace their

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[3] This particular morris originates from another work of Fletcher, a masque of his originally presented before King James in 1613, which was partly integrated into the play; one may notice in the Jacobean period something of a revival of interest in activities such as morris dancing, which had earlier been under pressure from the Puritans for some time (Potter 356).

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sense of difference and opposition to those who wish to have their festivities stopped. The choice of the morris for the performance may thus be quite ironic. Undermining the potentially carnivalesque quality of the interactions between the Chaucerians and the low characters in this scene, the morris may actually have been seen as reinforcing the sense of social divisions.

In this context it is interesting to note the order in which the pageant-master introduces his dancers: Lamb notes that he begins with characters known as the Lord and Lady of May, then mentions their Chambermaid and Serving Man, next a Host (presumably of a tavern) and his Spouse, then the clown, next the fool, and finally the Bavian—the baboon. This is clearly an enumeration that goes down the social scale, reinforcing the awareness of class divisions in the audience (cf. Iyengar 93). The presence of the baboon may, however, suggest some degree of transgression across social boundaries. The very presence of the Bavian is unusual—ordinarily one would expect here the hobby-horse (Potter 357), but, as Lois Potter (357) notes, "both roles involve animal impersonation and wild, indecent gestures," so the Bavian is quite an orthodox replacement. There is, nevertheless, a new quality that the presence of the baboon introduces. In the early modern period baboons were believed to cross species divisions (Iyengar 95-96). The sounds the Bavian makes are referred to as "barking" in the play, which one would expect of a dog rather than a baboon, but, as we learn from Edward Topsell's bestiary from the period—*The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents*—baboons were known to be "dog-headed" and "resembled men with dog's heads" (Iyengar 95).

The sense in which baboons crossed species boundaries in the popular imagination may be compared to the attempts of the Jailer's Daughter to transgress social boundaries in her love for Palamon, but, on the other hand, the actor playing the Bavian in the morris dance performance moves only downwards on the great chain of being, and definitely not in the other direction. Hence if he represents the aspirations of the Jailer's Daughter, it is no wonder that she is frustrated in her hopes in the end:

> The lower orders were already dangerously near the carnal by their very natures, so that morris dancing and other lecherous pleasures could readily cause their further descent. (Forrest qtd. in Lamb 74)

> Considered vulgar by the elite and immoral by sober sorts, morris dancers signified a physical exuberance, a bold sexuality, and a potentially oppositional politics that rendered them, for these groups, as satyr-like hybrids of animal and human. (Lamb 74)

For all these reasons it is difficult to read the morris dance in a Bakhtinian way as a carnivalesque moment in which rules are temporarily suspended and divisions—operating on the social level or otherwise—breached or annulled even

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for an instant. Quite the opposite, the performance only seems to intensify a sense of an almost ontological rift between the Chaucerians and the nameless others.[4]

Comparing *The Two Noble Kinsmen* with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Douglas Bruster argues that the two plays are a good example of the general tendency of Jacobean playwrights to stress social divisions more than their Elizabethan counterparts; he (159) points to the fact that:

> the Jailer's Daughter is given no lines to speak in the performance before Theseus. It is as though Shakespeare and Fletcher did not know what she could say to Theseus, or Theseus to her. Unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is no dialogue between and among the various levels of society: Bottom hears the nobles talking about him and responds; the Jailer's Daughter does not, perhaps cannot.

Moreover, the verbal interchange between Theseus and the Schoolmaster (who is the pageant-master) in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is quite unlike the attitude of Theseus in the *Dream*. In the latter work, the Duke's words cannot conceal his warmth and a mood of gentle affection towards the craftsmen:

> I will hear that play;
> For never anything can be amiss,
> When simpleness and duty tender it.
> Go, bring them in: and take your places, ladies. (5:1:83-86)

In the former play things look much different: the Schoolmaster stops the train of the Duke by shouting at him crudely "Stay, and edify!" (3:5:94). In response to this, Theseus answers for himself and his court in a munificent though somewhat cold manner that "we will 'edify'" (3:5:97) and decides to stay, remarking, however, as soon as the Schoolmaster begins his address to the audience, that "This is a cold beginning" (3:5:100). He also ironically addresses the Schoolmaster as "domine" a few times, mocking his Latinate verbosity. All in all, there is nothing here of the cheerful bantering that characterizes the Mechanicals' play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Subjecting the play to closer scrutiny, one is bound to notice the immensity of its focus on social disjunction. In order to understand the ultimate function of this thematic preoccupation, however, it is necessary to turn to a fragment of the play often overlooked by critics—the prologue. Reacting against critical tendencies to dismiss prologues as largely conventional and irrelevant for

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[4] Although the countrymen who perform in front of Theseus remain nameless, the name of the Schoolmaster (Gerald) is actually known. So is the case with some of the names of the women involved in his pageant, though not with the Jailer's Daughter. It is probably not without its significance that absolute namelessness characterizes only the Jailer's group.

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understanding Shakespearean plays, Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann explain in *Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre* that such openings of early modern dramatic works, understood both textually and performance-wise, often provide a unique extratextual and metaliterary perspective on the plays they introduce. Bruster and Weimann (1-2) acknowledge the obvious fact that such prologues are often conventional apologies for the inadequacies of the performance or of the playtext, but point out that what is more valuable in them

> than an apology for such features […] is the simple point that it is precisely because dramatic prologues were asked to—among other things—introduce and request that they took up a position before and apparently 'outside' the world of the play. From this crucial position, prologues were able to function as interactive, liminal, boundary-breaking entities that negotiated charged thresholds between and among, variously, playwrights, actors, characters, audience members, playworlds, and the world outside the playhouse. The conventional nature of early modern prologues facilitated rather than diminished their ability to comment meaningfully on the complex relations of playing and the twin worlds implied by the resonant phrase *theatrum mundi*.

Following this lead, I will now look at how the prologue to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* connects and combines its pronouncement on the impossibility to bridge social gulfs with metaliterary reflection.

The conventional nature of the passage naturally ought to be recognized by any critic. Like in the well-known prologue to *Henry V*, the speaker presents the play that is to follow as a modest effort of feeble minds and makes a gentle request that the audience play along, giving the actors (and playwrights) the benefit of the doubt and allowing them to do their best, not judging them too harshly:

> We pray our play may be so [good], for I am sure
> It has a noble breeder and a pure,
> A learned, and a poet never went
> More famous yet 'twixt Po and silver Trent.
> Chaucer, of all admired, the story gives;
> There, constant to eternity, it lives.
> If we let fall the nobleness of this
> And the first sound this child hear be a hiss,
> How will it shake the bones of that good man
> And make him cry from under ground, 'Oh, fan
> From me the witless chaff of such a writer
> That blasts my bays and my famed works makes lighter
> Than Robin Hood!' This is the fear we bring;
> For, to say truth, it were an endless thing
> And too ambitious to aspire to him,

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> Weak as we are, and, almost breathless, swim
> In this deep water. Do but you hold out
> Your helping hands and we shall tack about
> And something do to save us. (PROLOGUE: 9-27)

At the same time, the prologue establishes a contrast between the playwrights and actors on the one hand, and the source of the story—Geoffrey Chaucer—on the other. Whereas Chaucer's verse is characterized by "nobleness" and "eternity," the play is said to be dangerously close to being "the witless chaff" of an amateurish writer. Both the playwrights and the actors are also "in deep water," and thus far below the airy heights at which one may find Chaucer's masterpiece and to which they can only aspire.

Although the prologue compares the playwrights to a great master of a past age, Alex Davis argues that the contrast between Chaucer and the play's authors is not voiced here in historical terms, that it is not a contrast between things past and present. Perhaps that is why Chaucer does not appear in the prologue in person (unlike Gower in *Pericles*), for that would amount to bringing the past to life. According to Davis (176), the division here is actually "between popular and elite—or, as the prologue would have it, 'noble'—cultural production". The play is metaphorically described as a child, and the question asked in the prologue is ultimately whether the child will be as noble as its father, that is "The Knight's Tale," and, metonymically, Chaucer. Thus the discourse of social disjunction and stratification is introduced already in the prologue and used for a distinctly metaliterary commentary. And much as a lot of the "nobleness" in question may be lost in the transition from heroic couplets to the play's often prosaic tone, the contrast established in the passage has more to do with persons than genres: not only is emphasis laid on Chaucer the man—"that good man," a learned "breeder"—but what remains to be seen by the audience is also to what degree the child will take after its father, with the metaphor of fatherhood applied here with the effect of producing an image of contrast along personal rather than generic lines.

The prologue establishes something of a four-term homology between authors on the one hand and characters on the other, becoming a "liminal, boundary-breaking entity" (Bruster and Weimann 2) that sets the stage for the play proper:

SHAKESPEARE + FLETCHER : CHAUCER :: SUBPLOT CHARACTERS: CHAUCERIANS

The two contrasts constitutive of the homology are both based on the dichotomy of the common and the noble. Social distinctions are in this manner linked in the text to the problem of authorship, and the great gulf between the two groups of characters may be seen as a metaphorical extension of the basic and ultimate

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problem the play raises: the anxiety of the playwrights faced with an exercise in creative imitation. If the social gulf between the Chaucerians and the Jailer's group can never be bridged, are all attempts at reviving old stories doomed to become bastard children of their illustrious fathers? Or should they be seen as impostors, like the Wooer, who at some point pretends to be Palamon for the Jailer's Daughter not to succumb to greater madness. And, above all, is the uneasy, problematic and disjunctive coexistence of the two social groups in the play a model for the coexistence of "The Knight's Tale" and its child, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, in the canon? Seen in this light, the entire plot becomes a metaphorically loaded metaliterary narrative.

One cannot hope for simple answers to all these questions. To eliminate the virtually ontological gap between the low characters and the Chaucerians, one would practically have to eliminate the former altogether. Only then would the play unproblematically present a world of harmonious social decorum and unity. Yet, by the same token, the play would then amount to being little more than a twin of Chaucer's tale rather than its child, legitimate or otherwise. Without the addition of the Jailer's group, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* would only be a slightly distorted mirror image of the original medieval tale. Any attempt to make a move away from Chaucer necessarily entails a break, and this break inevitably made its way into the text in the form of the social disjunction that structures the world of the play's characters. The two sides of the homology may therefore be seen as related in a necessary and inescapable way. This is why the impossibility to negotiate the distance between the two groups of characters ought to be read as a definitive statement about the anxiety of influence. Through the way it foregrounds the theme of social divisions, the text of Shakespeare and Fletcher's play betrays an awareness of the fact that, try as they might, their play cannot equal Chaucer. Whether this should be also read as an awareness of a generic and historical difference is open to debate, but the prologue clearly voices it in personal terms, which definitely invites one to read the relationship between the authors in Bloomian terms.

There seems to be little room for positive assertions here. If the noble and common birds from the Boy's song in the first scene of the play are indeed Chaucer and the playwrights, as the above homology would suggest, then, clearly, the latter "may" not on the former's "bride-house perch or sing" (1:1:22). Not that they dare not, for an attempt is obviously made, but the deontic, rather than epistemic, use of "may" in the song indicates that it can never be fully successful. Reading the whole story of the Jailer's Daughter in metaliterary terms, perhaps the most negative pronouncement of this conviction comes in the scene of the girl's wild run towards the city. The Wooer narrates the events of their encounter:

> She saw me, and straight sought the flood; I saved her,
> And set her safe to land, when presently

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> She slipped away, and to the city made,
> With such a cry and swiftness that, believe me,
> She left me far behind her. Three or four
> I saw from far off cross her – one of ‘em
> I knew to be your brother – where she stayed,
> And fell, scarce to be got away. (4:1:95-102)

Spotted by the Wooer and rescued by him just as she is about to commit suicide by drowning, possibly uniting thus with Palamon in her fantasies, she suddenly races away, leaving the man behind, unable to keep up her pace (4:1:98-99). But what happens next is that, confronted by a few men, including her father's brother, she comes to a standstill and falls to the ground. If her dreams of romantic union with Palamon and escape from her vulgar milieu metaphorically stand for the aspirations of the playwrights to reach the heights of Chaucer's "nobleness," then the play surely accords with the disclaimer made in the prologue, reinforcing in this scene the impression of its own shortcomings far more that a merely conventional apology in the prologue ever could.

This double reading of the story of the Jailer's Daughter takes the audience of the play back to the authorship issue. It is, nonetheless, quite a different problem from the one raised in traditional criticism. Whereas the latter was mostly prescriptive, often amounting to statements that Shakespeare simply could not have written some of the passages (cf. Waith 8), the view on the subject found in the text itself is distinctly more complex. Ultimately, the entire narrative that forms the plot of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* could be read as a metanarrative of the creative process in the shadow of a great precursor poet. Whereas early critics looked for signs of disjunctions in the text where the roughness of Shakespeare and Fletcher's collaboration would show, the play proffers its own, distinctly smooth image of unity between the two. It is not between the two playwrights that the tension is to be found; it lies in their relationship with their "father," Geoffrey Chaucer. And this is the perspective from which the legacy of earlier, disjunctive readings of the play may and ought to be reassessed.

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