

“CHAUCERIAN RENAISSANCE: PERICLES ENCOUNTERS THE TWO NOBLE KINSMEN” FOR “THE WHOLE WORLD IS BECOME A HODGE-PODGE: GENERIC CHANGE IN CONTEXT”

S. HOLLIFIELD*

The genre-blending of Troilus and Cressida, from the Prologue’s Henry V-like presentation of epic history in microcosm to the interventions of comedic romance, romantic satire, tragic romance and neoclassical tragedy, suggests that Shakespeare discovered in Chaucer a kaleidoscopic refraction of the medieval world and the English literary past. Rooted in the histories, refashioned as a touchstone of human interaction in the comedies, revisited as setting and tone in the tragedies, Shakespeare engaged his “memory” of Chaucer most directly in the tragicomedies. Inspired perhaps by Chaucerian juxtapositions of poet-narrators and their tales, Shakespeare explored the potential of generic multiplication and recombination most successfully in The Winter’s Tale and The Tempest, wherein narrator figures appear for narrative expediency (“Time”) or effect. In collaboration with other playwrights on “medieval” material, however—notably Pericles and The Two Noble Kinsmen, their narrators either ubiquitous or conspicuously absent—Shakespeare’s lens on the past tends to fracture.

Key words: *renaissance, pericles, noble, Kinsmen*

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To declare the obvious, we cannot compare Shakespeare with Chaucer or Gower as a dramatist. But we can compare them as poets and use that comparison to connect them even more deeply as dramatic poets. I suggest this not with the desire to stage Chaucer but in the sense that Chaucer, in setting the stage for his storytellers and dreamers, often prefigures early modern staging and narrative techniques.

* University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Imagine what Shakespearean *ekphrasis*, had the description of objects rather than human surfaces and souls suited his dramatic needs, might sound and look like on the stage. The voices closest to this abstraction might well be the *Henry V* Chorus' explications of history-as-artifact and the tableaux-as-dumbshows narrated by Gower in *Pericles*. The former are so evocative as to render a backdrop or background action redundant, while the latter derive their effects from the epic tendency to restate and rephrase. What makes each approach unique, however, is its service to stage narrative—furthering rather than reminding, blending verbal and visual into coherent wholes rather than presentational dichotomies. To describe the statue of Hermione requires not only Paulina's equivocal instructions but Leontes' awestruck reactions; the effect itself depends not on performance or staging but the audience's imagination. Pushing the boundaries of presentation beyond the didactic and literal, Shakespeare relies more than his contemporaries on the auditor's engagement with the performance-text. In the tragicomedies, Shakespeare repurposes the poetic and rhetorical techniques of his sources as if to discover their reasons for being, using the limitless stage as venue for poetry and modes of delivering it to the ear. While Chaucer uses poetic artifice and effect to create an inhabitable world of words, his literary descendant manipulates stage artifice to ground the most poetic flights in a hyper-reality all the more effective for being no less artificial or constructed.

Pericles, its Shakespearean contributions drawn primarily from Gower's spin on "Tale of Apollonius of Tyre," visits as many genres and narrative traditions as it does Mediterranean ports. As the sole Shakespearean through-narrator beyond *Henry V*'s Chorus, "Gower" (arguably George Wilkins' creation) materializes as dramatically necessary tour guide and resident moral authority. With the complexities of *Pericles* in mind, Fletcher and Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is an exercise in restraint—of Fletcherian pageantry (though not of masquing and bawdry), Shakespearean poetry and the hallmarks of medieval romance—predicated on conspicuous awe of its Chaucerian source. In an attempt to discover a source-code of generic recombination, this essay considers disjunctions in Shakespeare's tragicomic collaborations as defined by his

apparent regard toward source material and audience. As compared to that of his collaborators, Shakespeare's acknowledged contributions to these plays demonstrate increasing emphases on medieval orality and on Chaucer as literary authority.

It may well be true that the older an old thing is the better but Wilkins is intent on justifying the presence of this medieval version of a Greek novella on the Jacobean stage, constantly emphasizing the power of the poet to conjure the visual over the words of the poet's spell. His Gower implores the audience to hear his song but never his *sententiae*, suggesting a Homeric singer who forgets his words once they leave his lips. Rather than reciprocally enhancing each other's potential meaning, the pantomimes Gower conjures seem designed to prevent his words from distracting the spectator.

In a scene generally credited to Wilkins, Pericles describes Antiochus' daughter to himself and the audience, while Antiochus proceeds to dictate the terms of his description. Though there is no indication that Antiochus overhears Pericles' aside, his response follows the pattern of a father-lover who cannot praise his wrongly gotten object too highly, competing for precedence with Pericles' declaration of "ocular" love. Antiochus treats Pericles as Wilkins treats his Gower and, by extension, Gower's audience:

What now ensues, to the judgment of your eye
I give, my cause who best can justify. (1.0.41-2)

This appeal to the spectator's eye over the auditor's ear recurs throughout the choral interludes attributed to Wilkins. A later example:

Like motes and shadows see them move awhile;
Your ears unto your eyes I'll reconcile. (4.4.21-2)

Is Wilkins attempting to justify the stage's inability to represent reality to an audience already resigned to theatrical artifice? Or might his emphasis on the eye demonstrate a loss of focus on the inherent textuality of his source? The narrator frequently represents Gower and not-Gower in the same breath, the poet himself materialized on the stage and a simulacrum who cannot help but remind the spectator that, while what they hear is only an imitation of itself, it is further distanced from the theatrically possible by stage images utterly lacking in verisimilitude. This is a far cry from Gower's deferrals (or Chaucer's for that matter) to textual authority or the poet's own inability to do his subject proper homage. Shakespeare's Gower restores imaginative agency to the auditors before they engage the matter of

Act 5.

In your supposing once more put your sight:
Of heavy Pericles, think this his bark,
Where what is done in action, more if might,
Shall be discovered, please you sit and hark. (5.0.21-4)

Shakespeare's lines, presuming they are his, not only recall the "imaginary forces" invoked by the *Henry V* Chorus but encourage the auditor to use them. Rather than the poet's words functioning as mediators of ocular and aural, Shakespeare continues to advocate the word-turned-image. As processed by the active auditor, these images illuminate their onstage counterparts to create theatrical hyper-reality. To deny the privilege of interpretive agency to an engaged, expectant audience is to eliminate them from the theatrical equation.

Gary Taylor finds little evidence of Shakespeare's hand in the next Gower interlude (Scene 18, indicated as the "5 Chorus" in Arden 3). Indeed, "Your ears unto your eyes I'll reconcile" (4.4.22) reads as the kind of assurance the mature Shakespeare would hardly have found necessary to provide the audience and yet, being in, follows too closely the grain of Wilkins' style to be easily revised out. The line supports Wilkins' show-and-tell approach by deferring it to Gower, the storytelling authority. Apparently interested in more complete, Chaucerian immersions once the narrative is underway, Shakespeare also seems unlikely to have included a metatheatrical aside *in medias res*. Once established, any appearance of Gower was certain to speak for itself.

By virtue of its apparent popularity, we may presume that *Pericles* set the tone, inadvertent or not, for subsequent tragicomedies. That tone, however, is the product of two authors, each with a unique regard for their source material. Wilkins was essentially adapting himself adapting Gower (from his *Painful Adventures of Pericles, Prince of Tyre*). In the spirit of collaboration, perhaps he attempted this in a mode he thought might appeal to the senior playwright. By contrast, Shakespeare might well—as suggested by the iambic flow of the 4 and 6 Choruses—have been adapting Gower via his well-established affinity for Chaucer.

Does the source author have a better chance to be heard outside of the public stage? What, then, of conspicuously eliminating him from the narrative equation because of his "greatness"? Scholars assert, and I fully agree, that Fletcher wrote the Prologue to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Would

Shakespeare consider it needful to justify the absence of the Poet from the stage, let alone draw attention to it? *Henry V*'s Chorus appropriates the author's narrative and poetic voices and the same can be said to some extent for the several, hybrid voices of Gower in *Pericles*. The play thrives upon and derives its unique style from examples of show and tell, with Wilkins leaning heavily upon the former and Shakespeare on the latter. The shift to indoor, intimate theatres like the Blackfriars—where a more sophisticated audience might have been seeking the “serious play” exemplified by Chaucer and striven for by Shakespeare in the tragicomedies—encouraged increased mediation between stage and audience. Francis Beaumont's Merchant in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and Gower represent possible responses to the trend.

Where Gower wore his sources and *sententiae* on his sleeve, Chaucer made no less use of Ovid, Horace, et al, but made a crucial distinction. As with the Monk and Troilus, Chaucer converts the Gowerian authoritative poet into a character distinct from himself or self-representation as Chaucer the Poet. It is curious that Shakespeare found himself working on a Gower play toward the end of a career spent conspicuously avoiding what he might have seen as a Gowerian approach to stage narrative. More often than not, Wilkins' approach mirrors Gower's own while Shakespeare's passages tend to advance Gower within the continuity of his Chaucerian work.

It is a relatively simple matter to discuss the Gower choruses of *Pericles* in terms of their inherent orality, but the narrator-less *The Two Noble Kinsmen* demonstrates its orality (and the presence of its source-author) through the rhetoric of lament and appeal. It is possible to read *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in terms of what *Pericles* is and its presence on the stage in stark terms of what *Pericles* is not. The same might be said of Chaucer and Gower in terms of the early modern English stage.

Throughout his career, Gower worked in French and Latin where it suited his material. Chaucer, having “Englished” popular French and Latin narrative genres (the dream vision, the fabliau, *de casibus* tragedy) began to reinvent them into a more direct prediction of “English” narrative and literary character. His nearly universal appeal to early modern playwrights, whose audiences resemble nothing so much as Chaucer's selective cross-sections—minus the clerics—must have felt as universal, as complete, as Shakespeare's influence over the past four centuries. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* opens with an explicit denial of the playwrights' ability to imitate,

FACULTATEA DE MANAGEMENT AGRICOL

let alone channel, the exalted voice of their source. The presence of Chaucer on the stage, dismissed as impossibility, curiously echoes the exclusion of divinity, though not divine authority, from the stage in reaction against the mystery plays. In this way, Shakespeare and Fletcher demonstrate a conspicuous awareness of an early modern distinction between Gower and Chaucer and their relative *auctoritee*.

Where Fletcher-attributed passages of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* regularly drop in or rephrase entire scenes from Chaucer, much in the mode of Shakespeare setting North or Holinshed in blank verse, the Shakespeare-attributed scenes appear to have been composed not only without reference to the source-text but without an edition of Chaucer in the room. Fletcher's subplot of the Jailer's Daughter begins as a direct parallel to the folly of courtly love exemplified by Palamon and Arcite but becomes a series of riffs on Shakespearean chestnuts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Ophelia and beyond. If Fletcher wrote the prologue (as is generally suggested) his approach to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* turns it into an insincere promise of reverence, almost a joke. Perhaps Fletcher wrote primarily to justify the disparity of approach to source-text and audience between himself and Shakespeare. The senior playwright was seemingly so reverent of his source, as the style of his previous Chaucer appropriations demonstrates in abundance, that his undisputed scenes make nary a direct reference to the text beyond character and context. Fletcher's Act 4, with its bawdier than bawdy bed-trick on the Ophelia-esque Jailer's Daughter, echoes the perverseness of the prologue, pushing the serious play of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*'s final scenes into the realm of comedic juxtaposition. This resonates with Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*—with Thersites rather than Pandarus bridging tragic-comedic extremes—but fails to unify the dual plots. All indications are that, by this point, Shakespeare had fully assimilated his Chaucer—there was perhaps no text for him but his Chaucerian memory-text.

Perhaps the strongest distinctions between Fletcherian and Shakespearean approaches to presenting Chaucer in the *Kinsmen* are the degrees and kinds of interaction the lovers are afforded with their audience. Fletcher's Jailer's Daughter, designed as a kind of untouchable crowd-pleaser, more sensual and sexually aware than Shakespeare's even in madness, becomes an object of ridicule easily tumbled in a bed-trick.

. . . I pitied him—

And so would any young wench, o' my conscience,
That ever dreamed, or vowed her maidenhead
To a handsome young man. Then, I loved him,
Extremely loved him, infinitely loved him!

Always inward and reactive, predisposed to describing her inner states, this Daughter also demonstrates awareness of her connection to any number of Shakespearean heroines and victims. Appearing in only a scene or two, Shakespeare's take on the young woman allows her to interpret the world of the play and narrate her perceptions for the auditor, demonstrating that the insanity of love is relative. In doing so, she reveals that her concern for Palamon is rooted in realities literal and figurative—his post-jailbreak condition and the dangers ever a-lurking in the nighttime forest of medieval romance:

I have heard
Strange howls this livelong night; why may't not be
They have made prey of him? He has no weapons;
He cannot run: the jangling of his gyves
Might call fell things to listen, who have in them
A sense to know a man unarmed and can
Smell where resistance is.

It is often difficult to distinguish between Palamon and Arcite in Chaucer. Like Shakespeare's Lysander and Demetrius, public opinion from Theseus on down describes them as eminently worthy and utterly interchangeable; when love's thunderbolt marks them as undifferentiated opposites, Palamon claims first sight while latecomer Arcite claims to be the truer lover. Fletcher plays with this notion, emphasizing that their only difference is the cause of their love-longing, not its intensity or their own childishness. In a fit of pique, Palamon asserts, "Put but thy head out of this window more / And, as I have a soul, I'll nail thy life to't." To which Arcite retorts, "Thou dar'st not, fool, thou canst not, thou art feeble./ Put my head out? I'll throw my body out / And leap the garden, when I see her next,/ And pitch between her arms, to anger thee."

To Fletcher's kinsmen's boyish, romantic antagonism Shakespeare revisits the politeness of their courtly origins, now forced, giving a civilized sheen to uncivilized motives and affording the boys another bone of contention. "Most certain / You love me not," intones Palamon, "be rough with me and pour / This oil out of your language. By this air,/ I could for

FACULTATEA DE MANAGEMENT AGRICOL

each word give a cuff, my stomach / Not reconciled by reason.” “Plainly spoken,” says Arcite, “Yet pardon me hard language. When I spur / My horse I chide him not; content and anger / In me have but one face.” Both playwrights gear the Chaucerian and non-Chaucerian elements of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* to divergent audiences: Fletcher courts a general audience out for a lark and a laugh with the odd flash of Chaucer recognition, while Shakespeare strives to differentiate the identical heroes and explain the ways in which the Jailer’s Daughter does not resemble Ophelia. Yet these apparent cross-purposes, though they cause consternation for scholar and auditor alike, may prove superficial when illuminated by close, detailed readings of Fletcher and Shakespeare attributions side-by-side with *The Knight’s Tale*.

Among Shakespeare’s collaborators and contemporaries, disparate attitudes toward adaptation abound. For reasons unclear beyond the simplification of staging—for these changes do little to increase dramatic verisimilitude—early modern playwrights tended to transplant their source-narratives elsewhere. George Chapman built the romantic plot of *Sir Giles Goosecap* from *Troilus and Criseyde*, reset Chaucer’s serious matter as a comedy of humours and transferred the action from Troy to England. Similarly, Fletcher set *Women Pleas’d*, largely derived from the Wife of Bath’s conspicuously Arthurian tale (with nods to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*) in contemporary Florence. Perhaps this is why that play appears more rooted in the Italian tradition than the Chaucerian. The more difficult to attribute Fletcher and Field collaboration *The Triumph of Honor* (of the *Four Plays in One*) situates Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale during Rome’s conquest of Athens. Why deemphasize Chaucer’s Arthurian setting, where a French knight seeks glory in Britain or supplant the poet’s English *auctoritee* for an artificial Classicism? While these tendencies suggest that Shakespeare’s contemporaries and later writers had also incorporated Chaucer into their frames of authoritative reference, the seeming disregard for setting as a vital component of storytelling denudes these source narratives of their links to literary tradition rather than successfully time-warping them into the early modern era.

In *Troilus*, Shakespeare built the prototype of his romances, tragicomedies in every sense save those prescribed by John Fletcher, mingling Chaucerian romance as counterpart and counterpoint to its martial backdrop. With *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare successfully fused this

innovative style—deeply entrenched in the English literary past—with the seriousness and purpose of his greatest tragedies while looking forward to the time-warping, travelogue-styled narratives of *Pericles* and, to a lesser extent, *The Winter's Tale*. Rooting *Troilus* and *Antony* in a medievalized Classical world very like Chaucer's presentation of similar material in *The House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Knight's Tale* and elsewhere, Shakespeare sought to transcend his contemporaries' appropriations of the literary past and, as Chaucer and Gower had done in the late 14th century, compose distinctively English poetry. The clashes of style in *Troilus and Cressida* derive from Chaucerian readings of the Classical world and Shakespeare's particular reading of medieval values as relevant to the early modern world, resulting in Shakespeare's own brand of early post-modernism. The result is a sort of temporal parallax: The more accessible the source or authority, particularly in the potential relationships of Chaucer and Gower to the early modern stage, the more difficult and potentially disjunctive the end product is likely to be. Many of the generic conflations and tonal shifts of *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, however, have their genesis in unsynchronized, occasionally contradictory, co-authors.

Transcending their debts to Dante and Boccaccio, the Chaucer-Gower nexus represents a significant weigh-station en route to the playwrights of early modern London. Secular drama yet unformed, perhaps undreamt, even inconceivable outside of the Latin and Greek-by-way-of-Latin classics, the most profound narrative poets used verse forms, so often the stuff of monologue, to present characters, establish dialogues between them, and maintain palpable, meaningful tension between storyteller and narrative.

CONCLUSIONS

In the continuation of work begun here, I will argue that *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and key sections of Gower's *Confessio* are more inherently dramatic than anything staged at York or Wakefield. Not that the sole response is an either-or polarity, but might Marlowe, Kyd and Shakespeare have recognized in the medieval stage a void that needed filling, or a venue in which to advance the traditions of their literary forerunners?

REFERENCES

1. Prospero's Epilogue converts an early modern commonplace to a leading character's closing argument in its conflation of character and poet's voices, a possible echo of "Chaucer's Retraction," granting all credit for Prospero's success to the audience's—rather than Christ's—charity and sound judgment.
2. I perceive a similar approach to adaptation in Chaucer's appropriations of Ovid.
3. Though the debate will likely continue until the machines take over, I accept the general attribution of Acts 1 and 2 to Wilkins and Acts 3-5 to Shakespeare. The somewhat thornier issue of the Choruses leaves only 4 and 6 as most definitely by Shakespeare, with at least the initial versions of the remaining Gower sections shaped by Wilkins.
4. William Shakespeare (with George Wilkins), *Pericles*, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series. Edited by Suzanne Gossett. (London: Thomson Learning, 2004), 1.0.10.
5. Suzanne Gossett, "'Fit counselor and servant for a prince': evidence for collaboration," in *Pericles* (Arden 3), 62-76, *passim*.
6. Qtd. in Gossett, 69.
7. Gossett, "'Everyone With Claps Can Sound': The Popularity of *Pericles*," in *Pericles* (Arden 3), 2-10, *passim*.
8. According to editor Sian Echard's "Introduction: Gower's Reputation" in *A Companion to Gower* (Cambridge UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 1-22, the poet was revered as late as the Victorian Era for doing so.
9. Detailed in Ann Thompson's *Shakespeare's Chaucer: A study in literary origins* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1978).
10. See *TNK* 3.6 and 5.1 in particular, Cf. with Geoffrey Chaucer, The Knight's Tale. *The Canterbury Tales*. In *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd Edition, edited by Larry D. Benson, 37-66. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987), lines 1513-1880 and 2209-2477 respectively.
11. John Fletcher and William Shakespeare, *The Two Noble Kinsman*. The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series. Edited by Lois Potter (Surrey UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1997), 2.4.11-15.
12. *TNK* 3.2.11-17.

In Thebes, the 'two noble kinsmen', cousins Palamon and Arcite, realise that their own hatred of Creon's tyranny must be put aside while their native city is in danger, but in spite of their valour in battle it is Theseus who is victorious. Love at first sight. Imprisoned in Athens, the cousins catch sight of Hippolyta's sister, Emilia, and both fall instantly in love with her. Meeting each other, the kinsmen agree that mortal combat between them must decide who gets to marry Emilia, but they are discovered by Theseus. Theseus is persuaded to revoke his sentence of death and instead orders that a tournament shall decide which cousin is to be married to the indecisive Emilia and which is to lose his head. Stop reading now if you don't want to know the end of the story Unrequited love. The Two Noble Kinsmen is a Jacobean tragicomedy, first published in 1634 and attributed jointly to John Fletcher and William Shakespeare. Its plot derives from "The Knight's Tale" in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, which had already been dramatised at least twice before. This play is believed to have been William Shakespeare's final play before he retired to Stratford-Upon-Avon and died three years later. Chaucerian renaissance: pericles encounters the two noble kinsmen for the whole world is become a January 2009. HOLLIFIELD S. More recently, the catalyst for the proliferation of [Show full abstract] similar stories was the phenomenal success of Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code (2003), which features a Harvard professor of "symbology" who brilliantly pursues a dangerous secret of the Holy Grail through a trail of deception and violence. Whether literary or pulp fiction, the premise of such stories is generally the same: People will kill for a book or for an idea. Given the immense value of "Shakespeare" writ large, the fantasy of discovering a lost Shakespeare play or document neatly fits this genre.