Same-Sex Erotic Friendship
in The Two Noble Kinsmen
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At the end of The Two Noble Kinsmen, having vanquished his cousin and friend Arcite in chivalric contest for the hand of Emilia, Palamon belatedly grasps the irony of his triumph:

O 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!
(5.4.109–12)

Palamon’s bitter sense of the price of victory goes to the heart of the play’s dilemma. The Two Noble Kinsmen makes strenuous efforts to balance competing sets of desires—in the cousins’ case, between friendship and romantic love. But, as Palamon notes, the achievement of one “dear love” entails the loss of another. On the one hand, the play insists on the ascendancy of marriage over friendship: the kinsmen renounce their amity and become violent rivals for the affections of the beloved. On the other hand, the play equally asserts the price of that ascendancy: if marriage prevails over same-sex friendship, it does so at a “cost.” Violence is the most obvious cost, but it is not the only one. Marriage is shown also to co-opt same-sex desire, to regulate and so ultimately to exact the “loss of our desire.” The effect of the play’s representation of such rival allegiances is to challenge dominant discourses of marriage. Friendship becomes the
site of what marriage costs. By bringing competing kinds of desire into relation with one another, the play insists more upon the ruin of desire than on the triumph of married love.

This essay traces a range of desire in this prominent literary treatment of friendship by identifying in that text embedded affinities between Renaissance discussions of friendship and discursive expressions of sexual desire.\(^1\) *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is especially important because it highlights the web of affiliations between the erotic and the homosocial; in this play erotic friendship converges with male rivalry for the beloved, issuing in a violence represented as constituent of erotic desire. The conflict between friendship and eros shows what must be sacrificed if illegitimate same-sex desire is to be monitored. Same-sex erotic friendship becomes the focus of what the superintendence of desire requires. Moreover, the play claims attention as one of the few Renaissance literary treatments of both male and female same-sex erotic friendship.

The erotic structures of Renaissance friendship discourse are signaled in Montaigne's canny essay "Of Friendship" (1580), an early modern proof-text on the subject that can serve as a brief prolegomenon. In appraising why the bonds of male friendship transcend the erotic attachments between men and women, Montaigne, like most of his male contemporaries and predecessors, dismisses women on two grounds. First, women cannot form friendships—with either men or one another—of the caliber Montaigne requires, for their friendships are not capable of stability and permanence: "nor seem their mindes strong enough to endure the pulling of a knot so hard, so fast, and durable" (199). Second, women cannot satisfy for men the spiritual (as opposed to physical) demands of friendship. The possibilities intrigue him, though, because the physical intimacies offered by men's relationships with women would, on the face of it, seem to fulfill his requirement of closeness. Indeed, dominant discourses of marriage in the period—certainly in Protestant England, if not in Catholic France—celebrate "companionship" between husband and wife as one of the chief benefits of matrimony.\(^2\) If, muses Montaigne, one could imagine a relationship where both mind and body "might be wholy engaged," then friendship would be "more compleat and full" (199). Having rejected women's ability to sustain such companionship—and thereby putting himself outside newly regnant discourses of marriage that celebrate friendship between husband and wife—Montaigne leaves open the possibility of achieving such a union between men. Although Montaigne perceives, he instantly

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\(^1\) Montaigne, *Essais*, 41.

\(^2\) Ibid., 40.
rejects the next logical step: same-sex erotic friendship. To acknowledge the legitimacy of what he calls “Greeke licence” would be to contradict that such a union is “justly abhorred by our customes” (199). Which customs? The notion of sodomy that inspires such revulsion (and confusion) in his contemporaries? Not exactly: it is not same-sex desire but rather the Greco-Roman “disparitie of ages, and difference of offices betweene lovers” that fail “sufficiently [to] answer the perfect union and agreement, which we here require” (199). This thought leads him to a lengthy divagation, buttressed by classical literary examples, of the “disparitie” he objects to, particularly those cases in which the older lover responds immoderately to the beauty of the younger and thereby surrenders an “equitable and equall manner” (201). The sort of friendship Montaigne celebrates, however, features not merely balance but sameness: “If a man urge me to tell him wherefore I loved him, I feele it cannot be expressed, but by answering; Because it was he, because it was my selfe” (201).4

Montaigne has both confronted and slyly skirted the issue of eroticism in friendship. He nearly acknowledges but then quickly represses a potentially erotic linkage between (male) friends.5 Although he rejects eros as a legitimate component of friendship, however much it may be staring him in the face, the grounds he holds are not those of his contemporaries, namely that sodomy is a form of debauchery, a political and religious offense.6 He argues instead from the issue of equality. Montaigne thereby opens a viable route for tracking same-sex friendships in literary discourse. What are the implications of Montaigne’s model for a Renaissance text that treats eroticized friendships between equals? His nervous erasure of same-sex erotic friendship, whose validity he very nearly grants, is similar to what happens in The Two Noble Kinsmen. Like Montaigne, this play both acknowledges and refuses to accept the possibilities of erotic friendship between equals. The play then overgoes Montaigne in what it says about literary friendships between women as well as between men. If we rise to Montaigne’s implicit challenge and assay a literary treatment of erotic friendship as relations between same-sex equals, we can watch his argument extend to its logical analytic end—an end that will challenge contemporary discourses of marriage.

The Two Noble Kinsmen warrants scrutiny through just such a lens, for it speaks to Montaigne’s several criteria. First, Shakespeare’s and Fletcher’s play about the friendship between two young knights satisfies Montaigne’s demand for “equality.” Furthermore, it features both male and female
friendships—and presents them as erotic same-sex unions. Although this last feature of the play has usually been evaded or ignored, the rivalry of Palamon and Arcite for Emilia has recently been treated (warily) under the auspices of male homosocial bonds, relationships, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has theorized, that are not usually or explicitly homoerotic. To examine the homosociality of this play, however, points us determinedly toward the homoerotic, if this construct is contextualized within the matrix of the values of heterosexual marriage the text seems to endorse. The play’s friendships are qualified so severely by erotic complications that companionate marriage cannot feasibly resolve its struggles. Romantic comedy, particularly earlier Shakespearean comedy, typically occludes same-sex desire by resolving competing ambiguities in a matrimonial bond that idealizes opposite-sex couples (Pequigney, Traub). Indeed, this is the very problem this play addresses: can marriage defeat or even quell intense same-sex eros? The play makes tangible the threat of same-sex eroticism and attempts to police that transgressive desire by enforcing marriage as its antidote. But the play also dramatizes the futility of the policing and its cost to both love and marriage: none of the characters achieves anything like happiness or erotic fulfillment. Marriage is demanded of the characters as a mechanism for controlling desire, but its enforcement has the effect of highlighting the resistance of desire to compulsory marriage.

We may begin with the play’s principal female friendship, if only because it so prominently jeopardizes the text’s ideologies. Emilia’s friendship with her childhood friend Flavina is the most intensely described female erotic friendship in the Shakespearean canon. As far as the audience is concerned, if not her would-be suitors, Emilia’s same-sex erotic credentials are firmly established early on. In conversation with her Amazonian sister Hippolyta about the power of same-sex friendship and its "intertangled roots of love" (1.3.59), she reveals her inmost erotic thoughts about women. A salient feature of Emilia’s friendship with Flavina is her recollection of their equality and balance. As though she were challenging Montaigne’s asseverations that women are incapable of the demands and union of friendship, Emilia describes an absolute equality between the two girls: “our souls” were balanced “like the elements”: “What she lik’d / Was then of me approv’d, what not, condemn’d” (1.3.61–65). Furthermore, that friendship satisfies Montaigne’s criterion for physical closeness. But the “Greeke licence” Montaigne recoils from takes in Emilia’s autobiography
an unexpected Sapphic turn. After a lyrical account of the girls’ bonds, in highly charged erotic terms (“The flow’r that I would pluck / And put between my breasts [O then but beginning / To swell about the blossom], she would long / Till she had such another, and commit it / To the like innocent cradle, where phoenix-like, / They died in perfume” [1.3.66–71]), Emilia comes to this conclusion: “the true love ’tween maid and maid may be / More than in sex dividual” (1.3.81–82). Hippolyta leaps to the obvious inference: “you shall never (like the maid Flavina) / Love any that’s call’d man.” Emilia responds: “I am sure I shall not” (84–85). But Hippolyta does not fully accept this information. She’s determined “no more [to] believe thee in this point / (Though in’t I know thou dost believe thyself)” (87–88). On the other hand, despite her halfhearted skepticism, Hippolyta does not regard Emilia’s allegiance to another woman as scandalous or even especially surprising. It’s a fact the two women acknowledge and share. Emilia’s first-person story has set forth a model of same-sex desire that deliberately excludes men from her erotic life. Hippolyta’s averred reluctance to “believe” her is undermined by her own evaluation that Emilia will never love a man, and by Emilia’s ready confirmation of that judgment.

This conversation does more than reveal Emilia’s individual unconventional erotic allegiance. It also implicitly challenges larger social structures of marriage and patriarchy. Hippolyta acknowledges as much by noting that Emilia has “said enough to shake me from the arm / Of the all-noble Theseus” (1.3.92–93), a patriarchal would-be husband if ever there were. Emilia’s claims about the power of erotic friendship make Hippolyta uncomfortable enough to want “assurance” of Theseus’s affections, to seek security that she “possess[es] / The high throne in his heart” (94–96). Emilia responds by coolly reasserting the strength of her own erotic affiliations: “I am not,” she tells Hippolyta, “[a]gainst your faith [in Theseus], yet I continue mine” (96–97).

Furthermore, the play challenges the marital value that excludes from its economy same-sex desire by not confining Emilia’s same-sex longings to the distant past but by also dramatizing her same-sex erotic life as having an ongoing present in the action onstage. In a crucial and usually overlooked exchange, Emilia engages in an erotic negotiation with her handmaid. “Thou art wanton,” says Emilia. Playing with a proverb (I could laugh and lie down) that lent itself to much bawdry, the women continue the flirtation (Tilley 370).
...I could laugh now.

WOMAN
I could lie down, I am sure.

EMILIA
And take one with you?

WOMAN
That's as we bargain, madam.

EMILIA
Well, agree then.

*Exeunt Emilia and Woman.*

(2.2.146–52)

This brief and teasing transaction again highlights the potential for eroticized friendship between women, as though to challenge the Montaignesque disbelief in women's ability to form such strong attachments. Furthermore, the entire conversation between Emilia and her handwoman defies the boundaries of class, for the two exhibit an openness to one another that breaks down social barriers. By contemporary stage convention, the bawdiness of the servant is not usually shared by the mistress. In this play, however, the intimate ties between lady and handwoman, reinforced by the naturalness and candor of their conversation throughout this scene, suggest a friendship more than a mistress-servant relationship. That their friendship is eroticized only heightens the daring character of the bonds between women in the play.

Yet the play takes pains to mute the transgressive overtones of this friendship, much as it downplays Emilia's attachment to Flavina by safely placing the girlhood friendship in the remote past. In the case of the handmaid, subversive homoerotic colorations are undercut or decentered by placing the conversation in a male homosocial context. The teasing exit of Emilia and her handmaid immediately precedes the ludicrous wrangling between Palamon and Arcite over Emilia, whom they seize on as the erotic focus of their rivalry (“I saw her first... / I saw her too... / I, that first saw her; I, that took possession / First...” [2.2.160–67]. Note that the men see Emilia; would they have reacted differently had they beard what she and the handmaid say?). The flirtation between Emilia and her handmaid is made more socially permissible, then, by its inclusion in a homosocial setting, an inclusion that has the effect of erasure. Emilia is the competitive focus between two knights, thereby deflecting attention from her defiance of convention toward an endorsement of heterosexual values.
Homosociality, then, which reduces the woman's status to that of erotic object, paradoxically confers a quasi-legitimacy on the expression of same-sex desire between two women. And it masks the illicit character of that desire. The enveloping narrative homosociality diminishes the cultural threat of same-sex eros and so permits that dangerous desire to be voiced, however quietly, and enacted, however ambiguously. The women's flirtation imperils neither the kinsmen's desire to "possess" Emilia nor the audience's expectation that marriage will be her eventual lot. Surely the diminishing of the danger to marriage ideology is one reason critics have been so slow to recognize the same-sex eroticism of this scene and of the play in general. Another reason may be the culturally discounted value of female desire, particularly if men are excluded from the erotic economy. Finally, the scene's emphasis on conventional male rivalry for women, whose end is usually matrimony, decen ters critical attention from the covert intimacies women negotiate between themselves, intimacies acted out under the very noses of the kinsmen who squabble over the woman.

In the same fashion, however strong Emilia's attachment to Flavina may be and however it implicitly challenges marital values, it will not thwart her socially prescribed role as future marriage partner. Although in conversation with Hippolyta she explicitly rejects heterosexual romantic love, Emilia's same-sex affection is not presented as a rejection of marriage. She does not say she will never marry: she simply says she will not love men, a quite different statement and not as patently jeopardizing to social compositions. This feature of the play, then, does not conspicuously repudiate the bases of patriarchy or marriage. Furthermore, she later utters no protest when Theseus instructs her to marry whichever of the suitors proves his chivalric superiority. Finally, a prominent feature of her girlhood erotic friendship is that Flavina is safely dead ("she the grave enrich'd" [1.3.51]). The text downplays the illegitimacy of same-sex eroticism by cautiously locating the friendship in the far-off past of girlhood, with a partner accessible only to memory. Emilia's same-sex girlhood longing is voiced only to another woman (her sister and an Amazon, at that), in private conversation, and is not overtly characterized as impeding her societal role as a would-be married woman.12

The friendship between Emilia and Flavina, on the other hand, does forecast dramatic events, for, as Hippolyta accurately predicts, Emilia will not "love any that's call'd man." Although she is as embattled as any romance heroine, she never loves or willingly commits herself to either
of her young suitors. 13 Her same-sex erotic attachment extends to the roots of young adulthood. Emilia calls herself "a natural sister of our sex" (1.1.125), sexually and psychically attached to women from pubescence on, and not, like some of the women in Shakespearean comedies, as having a female companion ad hoc until the right man comes along. Her betrothal to Palamon has a funereal, rather than a nuptial, air, and demonstrates how chivalric rivalry reifies her. The absurdity of the situation is palpable: the winner dies, and so Emilia is betrothed to the loser.

The play, then, in its depiction of female friendship, offers a dark view of marriage as a woman's portion. Neither marriage nor heterosexuality is Emilia's choice; indeed, both are compulsory. She scarcely indicates interest in either suitor, and she is married willy-nilly to the loser of the contest they wage for her. Here is where the Jailer's Daughter stands out by contrast. Her heterosexual credentials are unexceptionable. The Daughter is portrayed as a devotee not to Diana, as Emilia is, but instead to strong sexual appetites. Yet she, too, is compelled to marry someone other than the partner she chooses, someone other than the one she loves. The will of the Jailer's Daughter, like that of Emilia, is disregarded by the men who determine her match. 14 By showing Emilia's erotic imagination to be governed by the remembrance of Flavina, and by slyly interjecting the exchange with the handmaid, the play discredits marriage as Emilia's emotionally (as opposed to socially) appropriate lot. After all, the play's sorrowful conclusion, with its ambiguous aftermath of the chivalric contest, focuses on Emilia's plight rather than her happily married future. And so while paying obeisance to the cultural obligation to marry, the play's ending gives scant sense that Emilia has emotionally accepted that the female friend is subsidiary to a new allegiance to her future husband. The play thereby emphasizes the cost of regulating same-sex desire. Emilia gives voice to her desire, provides autobiographical details of it, and then acts it out before the audience's (and her suitors') eyes. And yet she is married at the end of the play, and her desire is erased, as though in fealty to a societal obligation that sees marriage as her destiny, even if that means disregarding the evidence throughout the play of its inappropriateness to her. Are we meant to be pleased that Emilia is married at the play's end? Or has marriage been so discredited as her rightful emotional condition that we must leave the theater disturbed by her lot? Are the conventions of comedy and romance so powerful that we disregard the harm of forcing a young woman to marry against all the testimony the play provides that this
course will be for her unsuitable? The female friendships in the play are constructed with such erotic and social ambiguity that it's unclear what the play, with its grave interrogations of female friendship, endorses.

So, too, with the male friendships. The title characters are at first presented as textbook examples of Renaissance male friends, seeming eager to exemplify Montaigne's assertions about the power of friendship to produce "perfect union and agreement" (199). Indeed, as critics have often noted rather querulously, these two young men are often indistinguishable, as if modeled on the Montaignesque notion of sameness. Also as if observing Montaigne's hypothesis about physical intimacy between friends, the play heightens the erotic expressions between the young knights.15 Having earlier (1.2) made plain their affection for one another, Palamon and Arcite in prison lament their lot. "Let's think this prison holy sanctuary," says Arcite to Palamon (2.2.71). The prison becomes the play's first domain for expressing same-sex male intimacy.

Arcite laments that they will never know the "sweet embraces of a loving wife" and that “[w]e shall know nothing here but one another" (2.2.30, 41). But he immediately goes on to find comfort in this privation: "Whilst Palamon is with me, let me perish / If I think this our prison" (61–62). Arcite here takes explicit pleasure in the prospect of being alone in prison with Palamon. He urges Palamon to think that “[w]e are one another's wife, ever begetting / New births of love" (80–81). He even imagines the advantages of their not being able to find a "loving wife": “[w]ere we at liberty, / A wife might part us lawfully" (88–89). This possibility seems to have a blandishing effect on Palamon, who replies like someone successfully wooed: "You have made me / (I thank you, cousin Arcite) almost wanton / With my captivity" (95–97). Wanton, indeed: hardly a word to be used apart from its charged libidinous undertones, and appropriate to Arcite's fantasy of imagining themselves "one another's wife."16 Concluding this heady interchange with a vow that mimics the wedding service, Palamon says, "I do not think it possible our friendship / Should ever leave us." Arcite (prophetically) answers, "Till our deaths it cannot" (114–15). Their "holy sanctuary" now echoes with the suggestion of "holy matrimony." But the "new births of love" they generate in prison will not be fulfilled until they exchange their amity for another bond, in another all-male arena, the field of chivalric competition. In that domain (another "holy sanctuary"), births of love become something more sinister: erotic desire grows into homosocial violence.
That violence is born in the prison scene, when the youths' devotion to one another changes to the rivalry occasioned by Emilia's entrance. The sequencing is supposed to be comic: the instant reversal of their shared affection at the mere glimpse of Emilia. A homosocial contest replaces erotic friendship with farcical, puerile alacrity: "You love her then? Who would not? And desire her? / Before my liberty. / I saw her first" (2.2.158-60). The play emphasizes its sequencing of the structures of desire: it first defines the erotic bonds between the young men and only then transforms those bonds to homosocial aggression. By directing the youths' erotic energies into homosocial violence, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* will again cast a dark shadow on marriage and all kinds of love. The play does so by focusing on the sinister connections between same-sex erotic passion and homosocial rivalry. The play enacts not merely an ardent same-sex male eroticism; it also accentuates that intimacy to explore the malignant bonds between eros and violence.

The sequencing—and the promptness of the transformation—suggest the inseparability of eros and aggression. The play thoroughly spans and thoroughly voices the hypothetical continuum Sedgwick posits between homosocial and homoerotic discourses—although the characters rarely seem to realize what they're voicing. "To draw the homosocial back into the orbit of desire, of the potentially erotic," notes Sedgwick, "is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual" (1). Over the course of the conflict the youths will dramatize (i.e., potentialize) numerous features of that spectrum of desire between men. In fact, the play dramatizes the intimacy of the links between eros and aggression. It thereby suggests that the continuum Sedgwick posits is more than hypothetical. In this play the homosocial and the homoerotic are indivisible.

In the prison scene, for example, although the same-sex erotic bonds are soon broken, a similar diction of desire defines the youths' rivalry. Emilia is almost incident to the homosocial antagonism (Palamon: "Friendship, blood, / And all the ties between us, I disclaim / If thou once think upon her" [2.2.172–74]). Arcite cannot at first believe he's being treated this way: "am not I / Part of your blood, part of your soul? You have told me / That I was Palamon, and you were Arcite" (184–86)—very like Montaigne in identifying himself wholly with his friend. The scene dramatizes how homosocial discord emerges from eroticized friendship. So close are the bonds of same-sex eros and homosocial rivalry that one may postulate that because erotic
desire between the youths has no legitimate possibility of fully fledged physical expression, it emerges instead as violence. Thwarted same-sex desire is channeled into socially sanctioned aggression. The closeness of eros and aggression gives a retrospective poignancy to Palamon’s bemused thought upon first seeing Emilia: “Might not a man well lose himself and love her?” (155). To “love” Emilia will indeed entail sorrowful loss by the play’s end, not only of himself but also of his friendship with Arcite and indeed of Arcite’s life. As Arcite himself later says as he recognizes what the friends have lost: “I could wish I had not said I lov’d her / Though I had died” (3.6.40–41). But having “said” they love her, both young men commit themselves to a course of animosity that will destroy at least one of them as well as the bonds between them. The irony, then, is all the greater that during the prison scene Emilia carries on the erotic transaction with her handmaid, while the men literally overlook (if not overhear). The sour joke is on the would-be suitors, who are simultaneously entangled in an intense homosocial/erotic agon, and are unable to distinguish between the two. This irony gravely complicates the conventional homosocial triangle that makes the bond between the rivals at least as potent as the bond that links the rivals to the beloved. The beloved, in this case, is not only unconsulted but also emotionally unavailable—by her own admission, she will never love any that’s called man.

Although Arcite is at first shocked by Palamon’s turning from him to Emilia, he quickly recovers from feeling rejected and comically redirects his ardor for Palamon into enmity. He will, he boasts, “pitch between her arms to anger thee” (2.2.217), a textbook expression of the homosocial displacement of motivations that elevates the bonds between the rivals over those with the beloved. Freed from prison, Arcite later ponders how Palamon will react to his rival’s proximity to Emilia. In soliloquy he says, “But if / Thou knew’st my mistress breath’d on me, and that / I ear’d her language, liv’d in her eye, O coz, / What passion would enclose thee!” (3.1.27–30). His exaltation is clearly a product of displaced desire. The “passion” he imagines is Palamon’s, not his own for Emilia, much less Emilia’s for either of the men. In fact, neither youth ever tries to imagine Emilia’s feelings or anything about her situation; they’re entirely preoccupied with one another. The spurned erotic friend has become the competitor; the homoerotic is undivided from the homosocial. For his part, Palamon, too, barely conceals (from the audience, if not himself) his own
longing for Arcite. After he has been freed from prison, he fantasizes openly in soliloquy:

Were I at liberty, I would do things  
Of such a virtuous greatness that this lady,  
This blushing virgin, should take manhood to her  
And seek to ravish me.

(2.2.256–59)

Palamon obviously yearns for Arcite’s erotic attention. Which blushing virgin, Emilia or Arcite, does he imagine taking “manhood” and ravishing him? In the next scene, Arcite is shown as wistfully soliloquizing along the same lines as Palamon, for he employs similarly ambiguous wishes for the “free enjoying of that face I die for” (2.3.3). Whose face? He mentions only Palamon by name. Indeed, by a not difficult reconfiguring of the erotic triangle, we can see his jealousy directed against Emilia, not Palamon: “Palamon! . . . thou shalt stay and see / Her bright eyes break each morning ’gainst thy window, / And let in life into thee; thou shalt feed / Upon the sweetness of a noble beauty” (2.3.7–11). How is the homosocial triangle formed here: whom is his antagonism directed toward, whom his longing? Which noble beauty does he long to see in prison each morning? The youths’ erotic confusions are expressed in their cryptic phrasings and their muddled longing, confusions not deeply cloaked beneath their expressions of competition.

The kinsmen’s reunitings in the forest (3.1, 3) clarify some of their flustered yearning. In the first of these scenes, they alternate comically between affection and antagonism, summed up in Palamon’s suggestive statement: “sir; your person / Without hypocrisy I may not wish / More than my sword’s edge on’t” (94–96). Palamon responds equally evocatively: “Most certain / You love me not; be rough with me, and pour / This oil out of your language” (101–3). Their tone alternates between amatory and hostile, for neither youth recognizes the boundaries between longing and violence. In the second reuniting, Arcite proposes a reconciliation that excludes Emilia:

Pray sit down then, and let me entreat you  
By all the honesty and honor in you,  
No mention of this woman. 'Twill disturb us.
Palamon responds: “Well, sir, I’ll pledge you” (3.3.13-16). Having deliberately bracketed the unnamed Emilia and removed her from between them, they then eat and drink, “thaw” (18) and remember happier times. Those recollections, “[w]hen young men went a-hunting” (40), include their amorous conquests—and contests. This competitive homosocial dialogue leads in turn almost inevitably back to Emilia and the source of their current rancor, which breaks the bonds they have just reestablished—or redirects those bonds from friendship to rivalry. The kinsmen cannot touch on eros without rupturing the ties of friendship (or, more accurately, intensifying them into rivalry), so anxious does the subject make them, and so inexorably does it lead them to aggression: “he dies for’t,” says Palamon, as Arcite exits, with exquisite evocativeness (53). What critics have seen as the play’s “struggle between collaboration and competition” is more accurately seen as the struggle to define the boundaries between the homoerotic and the homosocial, and the characters’ inability to see that their friendship spans that unified continuum (Hedrick 56).

Key to the ironies of their desire is the arming scene (3.6), whose subtext is acute same-sex longing, just beneath the desire to kill one another. The terms of the dialogue alternate among chivalric ritual, crude hostility, and joking erotic familiarity, as though to emphasize the intimacy of these modes of expression. It begins with Palamon wishing that “my embraces / Might thank ye, not my blows,” answered by Arcite’s claim that “you show / More than a mistress to me” (22–26), for “[y]our person I am friends with” (39). This scene, right in the middle of the play, is its moral and emotional centerpiece. Here the grim connection between eros and death is seen at its most naked and absurd. The friends struggle to articulate desire and wind up desiring violence. Longing is not permissible, but violence is. As Bruce Smith analyzes male-male desire on the Renaissance stage, the “desiring subject [in tragedy] defines the [same-sex] object of his desire in terms of power; desire finds its end in violence” (“Making a Difference” 135). Hence the domains in which male desire is voiced in this play: the all-male arenas of the prison and the arming area. The paradoxes of the arming scene are heightened by the two men having vowed to kill one another for a woman who seems unable to love either of them.

This scene is colored by an erotic-military air, and rather heavy-handedly underlined with a number of sexy double entendres (“Do I pinch you? . . . I’ll buckle’t close,” “thrust the buckle / Through far enough,” “I’ll strike
home. / Do, and spare not” [54–68]), as well as a solicitation about one another's persons (“How do I look?” asks Palamon, and Arcite answers, “Love has us'd you kindly” [66–67]).

This erotic tomfoolery poignantly acccents their attempts to destroy one another. The subsequent description of their retinues is also telling, for it dwells on male physical appearance. The dialogue sketches a series of male blazons (e.g., “His hair hangs long behind him, black and shining / Like ravens' wings” [4.2.83–84], or, even more, “All his lineaments / Are as a man would wish 'em, strong and clean” [113–14]) that out-Marlowe Marlowe for queer erotic intensity. These two men are not devotees of Mars and Venus, as their feeble prayers before the tournament would have it, but rather find their avatars, as Emilia's musings about them suggest (4.2.15, 32), in Ganymede and Narcissus.

She points out, in a Marlovian echo of Leander, that Arcite is another “wanton Ganymede [who] / Set Jove afire,” one “[s]moother than Pelops' shoulder” (4.2.15, 21). These affiliations account at least in part for why the young men are nearly indistinguishable, despite the ingenious efforts of critics to find differences in characterization, and they account, too, for the unusual emphasis throughout the play on the young men's physical attractiveness. These two youths (Ganymede, Narcissus) gaze at one another (longingly), not at Emilia. The central scenes, with their baffled intermingling of sex and violence, might take as their epigraph/epitaph Theseus's subsequent comment: “Can these two live, / And have the agony of love about 'em, / And not kill one another?” (3.6.218–20). It's a good question. Could they have permitted that agony of love (for one another) without wanting to destroy it by destroying one another and themselves? If the play had depicted the youths as showing any convincing romantic interest in Emilia, an affirmative answer to Theseus's question would be a possibility. But neither of them ever has a conversation with her or exchanges more than a few ritualized and public lines of dialogue with her (e.g., 2.5). They are interested overwhelmingly in one another. The deflected eroticism of that interest takes a violent expression. In killing one another, they kill same-sex desire and so contain its transgressive potency.

If we place these considerations in the light of the remarkable dialogue early in the play that gloriﬁes male friendship, the play's method of containing that transgression will become visible. In a conversation that forecasts the friendship to be deﬁned by Palamon and Arcite in prison, Hippolyta and Emilia extol the friendship between Theseus and Pirithous: “They two have cabin'd / In many as dangerous as poor a corner, / Peril and
want contending," says Hippolyta (1.3.35−37), suggesting the intimacy of the all-male arena and the friendship it breeds. This expression of what Emilia calls “Pirithous’ and Theseus’ love” (1.3.55) proleptically defines the kinsmen’s relationship: “Their knot of love, /Tied, weav’d, entangled” can be undone only by death, so “intertangled” are the “roots of love” (1.3.41−42, 59). Although the depiction reflects some of the truisms of Renaissance idealizings of male friendship, it also suggests, in the light of later developments in the play, the entanglements of eros and violence between Arcite and Palamon. So entwined are the two young men that only death will undo them, and indeed death is the inevitable goal of their relationship and this play. For the play to have ended otherwise would countenance a profound sexual and cultural infraction that needs to be suppressed even as it is dramatized.

*The Two Noble Kinsmen* checks the potential illicitness of same-sex desire by several means. First, the play secures same-sex eroticism within a matrix of heterosexual marriage values. Marriage is the only long-term erotic option the characters can consider, however inadequate marriage proves as a solution to their conflicts. And it is farcically inadequate, for all three principals. Second, the play displaces same-sex erotic desire into culturally acceptable homosocial aggression. Here the chivalric antecedents help ameliorate illegitimate same-sex erotic colorations: these knights reenact a respectable Chaucerian chivalric contest. That the play cannot prevent the conflict from spilling into same-sex longing does not diminish the rearguard action it undertakes by placing the rivalry in the nostalgic and culturally agreeable context of chivalry. Third, the play performs what D. A. Miller has theorized as the “open secret” of same-sex eros in literary discourse. The function of the secret is “not to conceal knowledge, so much as to conceal the knowledge of the knowledge” (205−6). Alan Sinfield has extended this insight to suggest that the purpose of the open secret is to keep “a topic like homosexuality in the private sphere, but under surveillance, allowing it to hover on the edge of public visibility. If it gets fully into the open, it attains public recognition; yet it must not disappear altogether, for then it would be beyond control and would no longer effect a general surveillance of aberrant desire” (47).

What acts as the surveillance mechanism in most literary discourse, of course, is heterosexual marriage, which replaces most same-sex friendships. The characters envision themselves as married partners, and the literary work usually leaves them that way, with much of the same-sex erotic tension dissolved or masked or ignored.
Shakespeare's and Fletcher's play, on the other hand, has a more difficult task in superintending same-sex eroticism. That desire is too powerful to be fully contained by marriage, and the play could hardly be said to take happy leave of its characters. The play uses homosocial strife as the means of exercising surveillance over, and so containing, same-sex eroticism. The price of that containment is violent death and compulsory marriage. As Arcite says on his deathbed: "Emily, / To buy you I have lost what's dearest to me" (5.3.111-12). Or, as we have heard Palamon say with equal ambiguity and sadness: "O cousin, / That we should things desire which do cost us / The loss of our desire!" (5.4.109-11). Both speak unknowingly: what is desired most dearly cannot be fully owned or voiced by the (male) desirers themselves. Both employ financial tropes to express the emotional price that the characters have had to pay to insure that marriage is not threatened by erotic friendship.

Hence the homoerotic has been allowed to hover on the edges of public visibility.22 And yet, as Sinfield's paradigm suggests, same-sex eros has obviously not "disappeared altogether" and so gotten beyond control. Same-sex desire hovers—not at the margins, but rather at the center of the play. The play performs its own policing of male same-sex desire by obliterating it in murderous homosocial antagonism—but not before having made its ironies painfully apparent. This is why the sequencing is so important: the play first dramatizes the erotic alliances of the principal male characters. Then it contains, controls, polices that eroticism by transforming, with comic promptness, that same-sex desire into homosocial rivalry. Or, to look at the issue another way, it contains same-sex desire by killing off the characters who occasion it—Flavina and Arcite. With both of them enriching the grave by the play's end, the text has seen to it that marriage triumphs, at least institutionally, if not emotionally. And the cost of that triumph is made clear by the fates of the young characters: at the end of the play none of them enjoys happiness, which is, after all, promised as a chief benefit of matrimony. The societal organization of marriage is victorious, but the price to be paid for that victory is sexual and emotional fulfillment.

Here we see another function of the Jailer's Daughter. Her socially impermissible longing for Palamon is presented as a class issue, but her desire is just as ideologically illegitimate as the same-sex longing of the noble characters. Desire that violates the boundaries of either class or sexuality cannot be permitted by the play's conclusion. The madness of the Jailer's Daughter and her subsequent loveless union uphold marriage
ideology as effectively as the loveless union of Palamon and Emilia. Neither woman has a voice in her marital arrangements, and neither projected match finally threatens the play’s marriage values. If either Emilia or the Jailer’s Daughter had been permitted to fulfill her desires, the play would inscribe an unthinkable subversion of ideology, whether social, in the Daughter’s case, or sexual, in Emilia’s. In each instance, marriage is the woman’s “cure,” as the Doctor characterizes the plan to have the Wooer sleep with the Daughter (5.2.19). Theseus decrees Emilia’s marriage to the chivalric victor, whoever he may be; the Doctor decides that the Daughter’s “cure” is sex with a male stranger. In each case, the woman is claimed by a man to whom she has no erotic or emotional attachment. But the play never explores this issue of lovelessness. In both cases, although male authorities direct the young women into marriages with men for whom they have no feeling, the play never dramatizes the consequences of this erotic surveillance. It is as though the play itself acts out its opening lines: “New plays and maidenheads are near akin— / Much follow’d both, for both much money gi’n / If they stand sound and well” (Prologue.1–3). For this play to stand sound and well means that it upholds marriage values. Emilia’s maidenhead, for example, must be presented at the conclusion to the highest bidder, the chivalric champion. The triumph of “marriage” over the threat of class and sexual impropriety would seem enough to quell objections to the sterility of the matches. And yet in his final speech Theseus himself calls attention to doubts the play has dramatized: “O you heavenly charmers, / What things you make of us! For what we lack / We laugh, for what we have are sorry” (5.4.131–33).

Emilia’s role, too, accentuates how close the play comes to rupturing the audience’s ideological complacency. Her position emphasizes the destructiveness of the play’s attempts at erotic surveillance. She fully recognizes her powerlessness throughout the contest waged over her. Her long soliloquy with the kinsmen’s pictures accurately indicates the same-sex subtext: she identifies the young men with Ganymede and Narcissus, two well-known code names for same-sex erotic types. “O, who can find the bent of woman’s fancy?” (4.2.33), she asks. In fact, Hippolyta earlier seems exactly to have found it (in Flavina), and Emilia herself seems to know which way she’s bent. “I have no choice” (4.2.35), she complains, saying more than she intends. She has no choice between the men because neither would constitute her choice, if she were to be given any significant choices. Later she points out that she is “bride-habited, / But
maiden-hearted" (5.1.150–51), a play on the word “maiden” that sums up her sexual predicament. The heart and fancy of this maiden are bent toward another maiden, however she may be bride-habited toward men who are clearly more interested in one another than in her. This is why, when the young men are discovered in the forest, she entreats Theseus to spare their lives and banish both. Theseus refuses her this convenient resolution of her plight, on the grounds that she lacks “understanding” (3.6.213–16). But Emilia understands her difficulty more clearly than the young men understand theirs. To remove them by banishment would solve her problem and theirs, for they, too, would be free from the homosocial rancor into which they have channeled their desire.

To cast the youths into the outer cultural darkness of banishment would remove the need to subdue their erotic longing for one another. But the play cannot allow that possibility, either; it needs, in Sinfield’s terms, to contain the homoerotic on the edges of public visibility. And so banishment is not culturally feasible. In suggesting banishment, Emilia speaks only for herself, however, not for them, and expresses only her need to be free from their attentions. And so she next begs Theseus to make them “[s]wear . . . never more / To make me their contention, or to know me” (3.6.252–53). Desperately trying to use whatever means she can to remove them from her life, she only incites a loud volley of homosocial hostility from the young men. Neither of them evinces much more than a perfunctory interest in her, of course, but instead a great deal more in one another (Palamon: “I must love, and will, / And for that love must and dare kill this cousin,” 261–62; can there be a more pregnant statement of the youths’ erotic confusions?). “They cannot both enjoy you” (275), says Theseus with wonderful ambiguity. Indeed, neither can “enjoy” her, for reasons none of the principals comprehends. Death seems almost the only solution to this nexus of misunderstood and inarticulate desire. Such confusions have forced the characters into an emotional cul-de-sac. None can enjoy any of the others, in any sense of the word “enjoy.”

And so in the specifics of the youths’ enmity, too, the play erodes cultural certainties about the redemptive properties of marriage. Despite their earlier imbalanced erotic partnership, the play could have concluded, in the fashion of a comedy, by depicting the suitable matches of the young knights (to women) and given them a life happy ever after. Another play—even an early Shakespearean comedy—might have concluded with little disruption from the youths’ entanglement, which
would be simply dissolved in the culturally harmonizing discourse of marriage (Pequigne 218). This disturbing play, though, presents a fervent and reciprocal erotic affiliation between the two youths, intertwines it with homosocial competition of the crudest kind, and then “resolves” the rivalry with a highly unsatisfactory triumph of one knight over the other. Even the winner is not the winner, but dies. And Palamon, as we saw, regrets the loss of Arcite far more than he joys in winning Emilia. His regret that “nought could buy / Dear love but loss of dear love” (5.4.111–12) captures the essence of the youths’ relationship: the price paid for thwarting desire between them is loss of one another through violence. He also suggests, rather bizarrely, that in death Arcite has become the focus of the rivalry—or would be if Emilia had evidenced much interest in either of them. “O miserable end of our alliance! / . . . I am Palamon, / One that yet loves thee dying” (5.4.86–90), he says as Arcite expires.

The play closes on the note it began, with a funeral-marriage. The homosocial triangle is broken. But the play is not resolved by an even superficially happy marriage. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* instead formulates a union between two characters attached to same-sex dead friends more than to one another. The marriage tetrad the ending of the play fails to construct is between Arcite-Palamon and Emilia-Flavina. *That* (unwritten) play’s wedding night has proleptically been accomplished on the battlefield, where the young men have what one critic rather sensationally calls a simultaneous orgasm (Abrams 73), or in Emilia’s case, in the far reaches of bygone youth. For the surviving characters in the play as written, though, erotic happiness seems over, attached to dead lover-friends. What remains is an empty hull of public married respectability. That emptiness is the cost that marriage pays in suppressing the characters’ desires.

Notes

1. Until recently, Renaissance idealizings of friendship seemed to have no truck with same-sex desire. If only by virtue of scholarly silence on the subject, the unmentionable vice of Sodom was judged to measure vast distances from friendship discourse. But historians and literary scholars have started to fill the gaps—with both positivist and more theoretical interventions—between friendship and same-sex eros. Alan Bray traces “the unacknowledged connection between the unmentionable vice of Sodom and the friendship which all accounted commendable,” primarily in historical evidence (“Signs” 47). Bruce R. Smith provides the most complete picture of the connections between friendship and “homosexual desire”

2. Early modern English views of marriage have been widely investigated. Mary Beth Rose (29–32) sums up Protestant idealizations of matrimony; Anthony Fletcher provides a thorough survey of recent scholarship, especially work that sees Protestant discourses of marriage as a celebration of companionship.

3. Bray’s pathbreaking book argues that sodomy was unclearly defined in the period: e.g., “It was not a sexuality in its own right, but existed as a potential for confusion and disorder in one undivided sexuality” (Homosexuality 25). See also Bruce R. Smith (Homosexual Desire 41–53) on the sodomy laws and their confusion. Goldberg (Sodometries 17–26, 109–26) develops Foucault’s insight (101) that sodomy is a “confused category.”

4. Compare Cicero on the subject: “What is sweeter than to have someone with whom you may dare discuss anything as if you were communing with yourself” (131); “[a]gain, he who looks upon a true friend, looks, as it were, upon a sort of image of himself” (133).

5. William J. Beck examines the half-dozen references to ‘l’homosexualité’ in the Essays and concludes that Montaigne’s emendations of 1592 suggest Montaigne’s “attraction pour La Boetie” (45). Carla Freccero notes the diction of anthropophagy, a practice Montaigne condemns among the “cannibals,” in his views on friendship. Bruce R. Smith considers Montaigne’s essay in the Greco-Roman context of friendship discourse and points to Montaigne’s insistence on friendship as a meeting of equals (Homosexual Desire 36–37, 41).

6. The point has been amply demonstrated by recent scholarship. Bray’s treatment (Homosexuality 13–32, 68, 103, 112) of the historical setting has been refined and amplified by Bruce R. Smith (Homosexual Desire 10–19, 41–53) and Goldberg (Sodometries 3–18).

7. See, e.g., Hedrick 45–77. Although I disagree with Hedrick’s downplaying of same-sex eros in the play (e.g., “We need not look for a homoerotic or homosexual subtext if we acknowledge the governing structure of ‘male homosocial desire,’ ” 55), I find productive his mapping of the cultural narrative of homosociality onto the action. Sedgwick is the already classic account of homosociality (1–27). She does not see “genital homosexual desire as ‘at the root of’ other forms of male homosociality” (2), but instead finds a “radically disrupted continuum . . . between sexual and nonsexual male bonds” (25).

8. Rose focuses on a variety of the play’s “dislocations,” particularly the relation of love and sexuality to marriage (212–30). Rose’s treatment is especially acute in defining the characters’ suffering as anxiety and ambivalence about sexual love.

9. Noel R. Blincoe argues that the quarto reading “sex individuell,” usually emended in modern editions to “sex individual” (i.e., persons of different sex), is correct, implying “the union of man and woman in wedlock” (484–85). In either case, Emilia pronounces on the superiority of the “love ‘tween maid and maid,” whether over that with a man or between married partners. The most straightforward view of Emilia’s “sexual preference” is held by Dorothea Kehler, who sees in Emilia’s longing for Flavina a challenge to compulsory
heterosexuality (166–68). Valerie Traub's analysis of the homoerotic significations in the friendship between Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It* may be extended to the female friendships in this play (122–30). Douglas Bruster makes just such an extension, but claims that Emilia, unlike an audience, "does not recognize the erotic potential of her speech" (12) about Flavina.

10. D’Orsay Pearson provides background for “the Renaissance image of Theseus as the unfaithful lover and husband, the abonder of women, and the unnatural father” (281).

11. Hallett Smith notes that an “old card game, “Laugh and lay down;” prompted many mildly indecent puns” (1652). Richard Abrams points to this interchange as evidence of “Emilia’s sapphic orientation” (72). See also Gwyn Williams 137–41.

12. It is, however, strong enough to make some critics uncomfortable. Emilia has been said to be “sexless” (Hallett Smith 1641) and her longing for Flavina “not the sort of thing one wants to associate Shakespeare with” (Edwards 105). Glyyne Wickham claims that the conversation between Hippolyta and Emilia “brings the discussion of platonic love perilously close to consummation in homosexual relationships, both male and female.” Wickham rescues the conversation from that peril, however, by averring that “Emilia’s views are those of a girl who has not yet been in love with a man” (183).

13. Rose sees Emilia as an “independent actor”: the play cannot decide whether Emilia is a “passive victim in regard to choosing a mate, or . . . unwilling to assert her prerogative as a subject and make a choice” (222). In an essay that otherwise reproduces a number of normative and prescriptive assumptions from earlier criticism, E. Talbot Donaldson does note that the play “seems to suggest that [Emilia’s] resistance to sexual love is mature and valid, and that the entanglement of marriage is not an inevitable prescription for all women’s happiness” (63).

14. Jeanne Addison Roberts sees the Jailer’s Daughter as the “true exemplar of Venus” whose “voracious feminine appetite must be curbed,” and whose “unbridled female sexuality . . . demands the ‘bridaling’ enacted in wedlock” (141–42).

15. Barry Weller explores the erotic intensity of the youths’ friendship; I find his essay especially insightful in tracing the conflicts in the play between friendship and marriage.

Bruce R. Smith considers the conflict in the play between male bonding and marriage (*Homosexual Desire* 69–72). He notes Arcite’s erotic initiative in the “two friends’ speeches [that] pulse with sexual innuendo” (70). On the related issue of friendship, eroticism, and textual collaboration, see Masten 280–309.

16. The word, of course, is frequently used in Shakespeare and throughout the period with erotic suggestions. In this play alone it has several relevant usages: e.g., Emilia tells her handmaid “Thou art wanton,” when they flirt beneath the men’s noses in the prison scene (2.2.146). Looking at Arcite’s portrait before the tournament, Emilia proclaims that “[[j]ust such another wanton Ganymede / Set Jove afire” (4.2.15–16). Palamon’s prayer to Venus acknowledges her power by saying that “youth, like wanton boys through bonfires, / Have skipp’d thy flame” (5.1.86–87).

17. As Bruce R. Smith points out in this acute discussion of the dynamics of same-sex desire, “one law of tragedy remains sacrosanct: the ending of homoerotic desire is death” (“Making a Difference” 136).

18. Donald K. Hedrick points to the double entendres but resists (“I will not examine the dialogue’s sexual innuendo”) their implications: “I would argue that the probable tone of this
passage is intended to produce a homosocial locker-room snickering for the male audience rather than a homosexual reference to the characters" (66).

19. In the prison scene (2.2), directly after Arcite and Palamon have declared their affection for one another, Emilia enters and asks the name of a flower. *"Tis call'd narcissus, madam," says her handmaid. Emilia answers, "That was a fair boy certain, but a fool / To love himself. Were there not maids enough?" (2.2.119–21). The interchange clearly reflects on the young men, but how? The remark has enough ambiguity to account for (1) the scene’s same-sex erotic dimensions; (2) its classical (and Montaignesque) truisms about the identicalness of true friends; (3) Emilia’s simultaneous distance from and proximity to the kinsmen; and so on.

20. Cf. the initial description of Leander in “Hero and Leander” (Marlow 432–33, lines 61–65): 

His bodie was as straight as Circes wand,  
*jove* might have sipt out *Nectar* from his hand.  
Even as delicious meat is to the tast  
So was his necke in touching, and surpast  
The white of Pelops shoulder.

21. M. C. Bradbrook makes a similar point, years before queer theory’s interventions: she claims that “the topic of homosexuality . . . become[s] pervasive without being acknowledged. The relation of the kinsmen . . . reflects what everyone knew to be the habits of the monarch himself” (32).

22. And then has been disallowed, rather loudly, by critics. Against all evidence, some have repeatedly (and defensively) maintained it is *not* about “homosexuality.” In his introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare edition, Waith censures *tout court* recent theatrical productions that “have strongly suggested homosexuality. It is most unlikely . . . that Fletcher and Shakespeare intended such suggestions or that audiences at that time would have interpreted the bond between the kinsmen in this way” (50).

Works Cited


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Same-Sex Erotic Friendship in The Kinsmen


Hedrick, Donald K. "'Be Rough With Me': The Collaborative Arenas of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*." Frey 45–77.


