

## 1994 Study Guide for *The Two Noble Kinsmen* by William Shakespeare

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### Before seeing/reading the play

1. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* was inspired by “The Knight’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer. Read and/or research “The Knight’s Tale.” These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/knight/>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/PART2.html>
2. John Fletcher is generally thought to be Shakespeare’s co-author of this play. Research Fletcher and his body of work. These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/fletcher/fletchbio.htm>  
<http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/fletcher001.html>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Fletcher\\_\(playwright\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Fletcher_(playwright))
3. What is a tragicomedy? How does it differ from both comedy and tragedy? What emotional effect does each form traditionally have on the reader or observer? What might be the effect of a play that incorporates these elements? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragicomedy>  
<http://bits-n-pieces.hubpages.com/hub/tragicomedy>
4. Define friendship as you understand it. What benefits does friendship offer that no other relationship does? What does it mean to be a good friend? What qualities do you consider essential in a friend? What is your obligation to your friend if you both want something that only one of you can have?
5. Who was Hippolyta? Who were the Amazons? How were the Amazons reputed to deal with men, marriage and children? How is Hippolyta associated with Heracles and the Twelve Labors? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/amazons.html>  
<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/h/hippolyta.html>  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazons>  
<http://www.mythindex.com/greek-mythology/A/Amazones.html>

6. Who was Theseus? Relate some of his adventures. Who was Pirithous? Describe his friendship with Theseus. These and other websites provide information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theseus>  
<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/t/theseus.html>  
<http://www.inzgreece.com/english/historymyth/mythology/names/theseus.htm>  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pirithous>  
<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/p/pirithous.html>

7. Who was Creon? Where is Thebes? Read or research *Antigone* by Sophocles, which involves a situation similar to that confronting the three queens in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Describe the contention that is known as “The Seven Against Thebes.” These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creon>  
<http://www.timelessmyths.com/classical/thebes.html>  
<http://www.inzgreece.com/english/historymyth/mythology/names/creon.htm>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven\\_Against\\_Thebes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Against_Thebes)  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ant/>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antigone\\_\(Sophocles\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antigone_(Sophocles))  
<http://www.attleboroschools.com/ahs/teachers/GormanEnglish/antigone.htm>

8. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* was written about 1613, during the reign of King James I in England, a period sometimes called the Jacobean Era. What was occurring politically, socially, economically and culturally during that time? What characterized Jacobean drama? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/ent/A0858002.html>  
[http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacobean\\_era](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacobean_era)

9. What is Morris dance? Where did it originate? On what occasions does Morris dancing occur? What are the rules of Morris dance? How many people are involved? What characters are traditionally portrayed? These and other websites provide information:

[http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morris\\_dance](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morris_dance)

<http://www.themorrisring.org/morris-history/morris-history-restoration>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZjLATAUwao>

10. When is the May Day celebration customarily held? What does it celebrate? What decorations and activities does it traditionally feature?

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May\\_Day#Great\\_Britain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_Day#Great_Britain)

<http://www.theholidayspot.com/mayday/history.htm>

11. What states of mind and behaviors were regarded as madness in Shakespeare's time? How were mad people treated then? How did treatment in institutions differ from treatment in smaller milieus, such as homes and villages? What therapies were used to help individuals recover their sanity?

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insanity>

<http://laingsociety.org/cetera/timeline.htm>

12. Historically, what was thought to cause madness in women? How are “mad women” represented in literature, theatre, film and art? How was madness in women thought to be different from madness in men? What remedies were prescribed for a woman’s madness? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.herstoria.com/discover/madness.html>

<http://www.littlereview.com/getcritical/reviews/2noblham.htm>

**Learn more about Shakespeare’s life and times at the following websites:**

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

**After seeing/reading the play**

1. What do the Three Queens entreat of Theseus? What could be their reason for coming together rather than separately?

2. Through their interaction with the Three Queens, what do we learn about Hippolyta, Emilia, Theseus and Pirithous?
3. Compare and contrast Palamon and Arcite in terms of their physical and emotional characteristics. What distinguishes them from one another? Why is the word “noble” a suitable label for both?
4. Who is King Creon of Thebes? How is he regarded by the Three Queens, Palamon, Arcite and Theseus? How does he influence the play’s action?
5. Refer to your research on tragicomedy. List the tragic elements of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. List the comic elements. Where do the two merge? What effect did this combination have on you?
6. How is manhood defined in the play? How do the characters invoke manhood in order to justify their actions, inaction, as well as the actions or inaction of others?
7. How do Arcite and Palamon define honor? What justification does each offer as to their right to woo Emilia?
8. What do the judgments Theseus hands down to settle disputes and levy punishment suggest about his philosophy on justice and fairness?
9. What is the role of loyalty in the play? In what circumstances is a character expected to be loyal? Allowed to expect loyalty? What causes loyalties to shift in the play?
10. Describe the relationship of Theseus and Hippolyta. If you have read or seen *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, compare the relationship of Theseus and Hippolyta there to their relationship in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. To what extent are they in love in each play? How well do they know each other? Who holds the power in their relationship, and on what grounds? To what extent does Hippolyta retain her independence and sovereignty? How does Theseus change his behavior because of love?
11. Refer to your research on Hippolyta and the Amazons. How do her actions in the play correspond to your expectations of an Amazon? In what respects is her behavior un-

Amazonian? To what extent has she relinquished her independence and why? Answer the same questions for Emilia.

12. Compare and contrast the desires of Hippolyta, Emilia and the Jailer's Daughter. What power do they have to attain what they want? To what extent are they defined by the men who are associated with them?
13. Consider the Three Queens in the early scenes as mirrors of the three principal women. What do they want? Who is denying their wishes? What power do they have to attain what they want? Who are their allies, and why? Who has the power to grant their request?
14. What are the instances when a character stoutly declares an intention and subsequently does something else? What is the dramatic effect of each of these reverses?
15. Which characters wear disguises, or masks—both actual and symbolic? What is the purpose of each disguise? How is the action altered when masks are removed?
16. A lot of the action in the play occurs offstage. What is the dramatic effect of being told rather than shown these events?
17. In what ways is love at the center of the action in the play? Other than romantic love, what other forms of love are expressed?
18. Why do you think the Jailer's Daughter is identified by her father's occupation rather than by a name? What does the absence of a name suggest about her?
19. Why does the Jailer's Daughter fall in love with Palamon? Why does she know her love is doomed? What risks does she take for him? What does she hope to gain by helping him?
20. Refer to your research on women and madness. What causes the Jailer's Daughter to go mad? What signs of madness does she exhibit? How do others treat her in her madness? What remedy is suggested to cure her madness? What do others do to help her?

21. Compare Palamon, Arcite and the Wooer as lovers. How well does each know his beloved? What does each love in her? What does each hope to gain from her and for her? What is each prepared to sacrifice for her?
22. According to Emilia, who has she always loved most? What became of her love? Why does she think she will never love any man? Why does Theseus demand that she marry? By the end of the play, to what extent has she embraced the necessity of marrying? What other options does she have?
23. What does Emilia appreciate about Palamon and Arcite individually? Whom does she prefer? How does she feel about causing contention between them? What outcome would please her best? To what extent does Theseus consider her wishes in resolving the quarrel between the kinsmen?
24. In “The Knight’s Tale,” the source for *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, one hundred queens plead with Theseus, and Palamon and Arcite each bring a hundred knights to fight with them for Emilia. What are possible reasons for reducing the number in both cases to three? What are the dramatic effects of this choice?
25. There are many friendships in this play. How are the friends enriched by these relationships? How are they tested? What, if anything, interferes with the friendships? What do we learn about friendship through the relationship between Palamon and Arcite?

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