

**ARCITE'S HORSEMANSHIP:
A READING IN *THE TWO
NOBLE KINSMEN*, II.v.13**

IN Shakespeare and Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Theseus questions the newly captured Arcite about his origins and breeding. Arcite explains that he is a gentleman familiar with aristocratic pursuits such as falconry and

hunting to hounds, adding in the Quarto of 1634:

I dare not praise
My feat in horsemanship; yet they that knew me
Would say it was my best peece (E4v, II.v.12–14).¹

Arcite's 'best peece' is what he was best at, his outstanding attribute. Editors have accepted Q's 'feat' here, without comment or with the gloss 'skill' or 'achievement'. *OED* gives no clear support for either meaning. In normal usage, 'My feat in horsemanship' would be one particular exploit: a feat can be an achievement but not a level of achievement or expertise. Under sense 5, *OED* does supply 'a kind of action... a pursuit', so that 'the feat of merchandise' can mean 'mercantile business', but this is a poor analogue for the locution 'feat in horsemanship', with that preposition. *OED*'s sense 6 is 'the art, knack, or trick of doing anything', but none of the citations shows the word being used in a way that would be perfectly apt in Arcite's indirect boast about the quality of his horsemanship: one may possess 'the feat' (or knack) of performing some activity, but not 'feat in' (or knack in) an activity or discipline. Neither Shakespeare nor Fletcher (to whom II.v is generally ascribed) ever uses 'feat' to mean 'skill', though the word is admittedly used rather oddly by Shakespeare in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, III.i.46 and V.i.43.

No editor records the presence of a variant reading in the text of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* printed in the second 'Beaumont and Fletcher' Folio of 1679. Even Fredson Bowers, who offers a 'Historical Collation' that includes the Folio, overlooks it.² In the

¹ Act, scene, and line references are to *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, gen. eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford, 1986).

² *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, gen. ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, 1989), VII, 145–298. Bowers himself edited *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Other editions of the play consulted were by Clifford Leech (New York, 1966), G. R. Proudford (London, 1970), N. W. Bawcutt (Harmonsworth, 1977), Simon Trussler (London, 1986), Eugene M. Waith (Oxford, 1989), and Lois Potter (Walton-on-Thames, 1997), and those in Shakespeare's collected works by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford, 1986, 2nd edn 2005), G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974, 2nd edn 1997), David Bevington (New York, 4th edn 1997) and Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2007).

Folio Arcite refers to his 'seat in horsemanship' (F 1679, II.v, 311v). This makes excellent sense. Arcite's 'seat' is his bearing, posture, or deportment in the saddle. *OED* duly records, under Seat *sb.* 2, 'Manner of sitting (on horseback)'. In his *Cavalricie, or The English Horseman* (1607), Gervase Markham repeatedly employs the term. The 'Stirrop' is the 'grace or ornament' by which the horseman's 'faire seate and comelinesse' are maintained. He must sit in the saddle with his body straight and upright: by fixing his gaze between the horse's ears and keeping his nose directly over the pommel of the saddle, the rider can be sure 'to know if your seat be comely'. 'In your Horses retyring you a little', if you draw your legs imperceptibly backward you will avoid losing 'the beautie of your seate'. Maintaining 'a most perfit seate', 'the goodnesse of your seate', and so on, as the horse performs its various movements (or manège), is a requisite of superior horsemanship.³

Fletcher uses 'seat' in the relevant sense in *Bonduca*, where Judas, who, with his four companions, is about to be hanged, is taunted by Bonduca's daughters. 'Sirrah, what think you of a wench now?', inquires one. Judas is eager but hanging seems imminent. Nennius, who is also present, comments 'Why, is't no more but up, boyes?'. To which Judas replies 'Yes, ride too Captain / Will you but see my seat'. The bawdy punning continues with references to being set upon a jade, shaking, and sheets (F 1647, II.iii, 4G3v).

Long 's' and 'f' are the most readily confused of all letters in early modern texts. It is possible that Q's 'feat' is right and that Fletcher employed the word in an unusual manner. But in view of the strong association of F's 'seat' with horsemanship, it seems more likely that F corrected a Q error and that Arcite should speak of his 'seat in horsemanship'.

Ironically, when in V.vi Arcite is riding in triumph from a contest against his cousin Palamon, his horse, startled by a spark struck from the contact of its iron shoe with the flinty

³ Accessed 12 July 2007 via the search function of <http://www.oed.com>. See also *OED*, s.v. 'seat', paras 71, 77, 139, 167, 217.

pavement, attempts with 'boist'rous and rough jad'ry to disseat' his rider, who keeps his seat 'bravely', until the horse, rearing up on its hind legs, falls over backward on top of him (V.vi.72–3). Arcite's immaculate 'seat in horsemanship' contributes to his death.

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