Humanities. Institute.
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Cymbeline 1611

Shakespeare.

Overview.

History. *Cymbeline* is both a history and a comedy. It belongs with those *history* plays, of Shakespeare, that are concerned with one of two periods—**ancient Athens** *(Timon of Athens, Pericles*), and **ancient Rome** (*Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus*. *Cymbeline,* concerned with action across the Roman Empire, with its center in first century A.D. Britain. (Shakespeare's ten history plays devoted to the British monarchy, and to the formation of the British nation, have a certain coherence from the interlinkages of their lineages and from their broad concern with a single cultural tradition). *Cymbeline* is one of the history plays.

Comedy. At the same time, though, *Cymbeline* shares with Shakespeare's greatest comedies—*As you Like it, Love's Labor's Lost, The Comedy of Errors*—the intricate upbeat romantic themes that go with hidden identities, rediscovered connections, and love-obstacles overcome, all of which turns of event make up the lengthy narrative of *Shakespaerean comedy.*

Extensiveness. The *double sized narrative package* of *Cymbeline* also deserves initial noting. It is a lot for the audience, and even more for the contemporary reader, to put your head around. There is a tale of lost sons, who will reemerge as major players, of slanderous allegations concerning the bedroom, of cross dressing heroines, and finally of all-is-forgiven reunions of spirit in the essential Shakespearian finale. Samuel Johnson found the plot of the play a little too much, too many turns and twists, and we too may wonder what we have stepped into, a near final play in which the master both seems to parody his own style, and to force that style forward into a new place, where extensive narrative fiction makes almost a novelette out of comedy.

In Britain

Cymbeline, modeled on the historical king of first century A.D. Britain, Cunobeline.
Queen, Cymbeline's second wife and mother to Cloten
Imogen, Cymbeline's daughter by a former queen, later disguised as the page Fidele.
Postumus Leonatus, Imogen's husband; adopted as an orphan and raised in Imogen's home.
Cloten, the queen's son by a former marriage, step brother to Imogen
Belarius, banished in exile, living under the name, Morgan
Gulderius, Cymbeline's son, kidnapped in childhood by Belarius
Arvirargus, Cymbeline's son, kidnapped in childhood by Belariusto
Pisanio, Posthumus' servant, loyal to both Posthumus and Imogen

In Rome

Philario, Posthumus' host in Rome
Iachimo, Roman lord and friend of Philario
Caius Lucius, Roman ambassador and later general
Philharmonus, soothsayer

Story.

Chit chat. Two citizens chat in the gardens of the palace of King Cymbeline, in Britain. (Cymbeline is the vassal King of the province of Britannia under the Roman Empire, in the first years of the Roman Empire. The usual sources, especially Holinshed's *Chronicles,* but also the *Decameron* of Boccaccio, and some contemporary dramas tossed in, provided Shakespeare with what he needed to flesh out this extremely little known area of Roman provincial history.) Their topic is the two sons of Cymbeline, who were kidnapped from him twenty years before, by an exiled traitor Belarius, who has not been heard from since.

Imogen. Cymbeline's only daughter, Imogen, has remained at court, but has refused to marry the choice of her parents, having instead and secretly married her lover Posthumus, a member of Cymbeline's court. It is the strong preference of the Queen that Imogen should marry her own son Cloten, an oafish but ardent suppliant for the love of Imogen, who, like her father, dismisses the young man as beneath consideration. Even Cymbeline, no special friend of his own wife, will not hear speak of Cloten, and is fretful about the private decisions of Imogen, who we already know as headstrong. By the end of the first Act, the Queen has decided to poison both the King and Imogen, clearly with the intention of clearing the way for Cloten and her own lineage.

Posthumus. The major action of the play takes place around Posthumus, the faithful lover who is now banished from the court, where Imogen is tightly confined. Posthumus makes his way to Italy, where he starts hanging out with Iachimo and other fast lane young lads; Posthumus praises the beauty of his beloved, mentioning such special tour items as her jewelry, especially her ring, and a beautiful mole under her breast. From this point, given a little knowledge of Shakespeare, we begin to sense how the entire play will unfold. In fact it is from just this point that the humor and tenor of the whole narrative landscape make sense.

Unfolding. Posthumus and Iachimo make a bargain; Iachimo will seduce Imogene, and give ample proof of it, or he will lose a large wager and find himself fighting a duel to the death. Trapped in Imogen's room, and at risk of being discovered by her, Iachimo jumps into a large casket of jewels and silks, and emerges to find the lady asleep; he has no time to do more than make a thoroughly documented diagram of the lady's room, proof enough, as it turns out, to convince Posthumus that a terrible seduction scene has taken place, and that his wife has trampled on their vows. The die is cast, and cannot be withdrawn.

Disgust. The horror of this presumed seduction drives Posthumus hysterical. He grills his man, Pisanio, for further evidence on the matter, finds no way to free himself from the burden of proof, and pens a letter to Imogen, who has disappeared in the Welsh mountains, telling her of his terrible sense of betrayal, his disgust with her, and asking Pisanio to deliver the letter to her in the coastal town of Milford Haven, in Wales. The wild card here is Pisanio, whom Posthumus has given the assignment of killing Imogen after delivering his message, a job Pisanio will not consider performing. It is in fact Pisanio who will move the plot in directions that will ultimately save Imogen's life. He urges her to assume a disguise, a fake name, Fidele, and to head for the hills.

Court. At court-- one recalls Samuel Johnson's objections to the complexities of this plot—events bring Cymbeline's own military-administratve role back to the center of the story. There Cymbeline is in heavy conflict with his Roman bosses, and refuses to pay his annual tribute. The Roman ambassador says that the situation can easily lead to war with Rome, and an invasion of Britain by Roman troops. Meanwhile the Queen's oafish son, Cloten, has left the court. He has heard that Posthumus and Imogen have met at Milford Haven; he, Cloten, decides to disguise himself as Posthumus, track down Imogen, rape and marry her. This plan coincides, unfortunately for Cloten, with the reuniting of Imogen with Belarius, the kidnapper of her two brothers, and with those brothers themselves. It is those very brothers who behead Cloten. And on and on, through this labyrinth of sub plots which led Samuel Johnson to complain of the unnecessary overdevelopment of the plot of the play—which was, however, quite a delight to such connoisseurs as Hazlitt and John Keats, a century later.

Finale. More intricate details are in store for the reader or audience who can follow the dreadful demise of the Queen, in Rome, the poison the Queen had prepared for her husband and daughter, the beheading of Cloten, who makes his way to the cave of Belarius, the wakening of Imogen from a death like sleep, to mistake the beheaded Cloten (dressed as Posthmus) for her husband. From this point to a final finale, in which Cymbeline warms toward the Roman ambassador and his soothsayer, pardons the kidnappers and court fleers and Posthumus-like retainers, and all is well in the kingdom is a long walk. In the opinion of this profile writer, yours truly, Shakespeare might well have reread that old letter of the Roman senator, Cicero, who when writing to a friend—in fact almost at the time of this play--apologized to his friend for hot having enough time to write a short letter.

Themes

True love. This tried and true topic is given a subtle and appropriate reading. The true lovers of the play, of course, are Imogen and Posthumus, but even their love is flawed. Posthumus is hopelessly enraged, at the whole human condition, when he is shown the letter from Iachimo, confirming his presence in the bedroom of Imogen. It is as though true love can melt on the slightest suspicion.

Jealousy. The most extravagant jealousies, here, are those of the Queen—in her hostility to any potential rival to Cloten—and Posthumus, in his rage at Iachimo. In each case the character's insight is sharply limited by jealousy. The mastery of *Othello* lies behind the present fine touches.

Fidelity. Imogen, who adopts Fidele as her password, is the image of all for love, and is virtually devastated by the letter in which Posthumus doubts her own love. She gives herself up to Pisanio to stab.

Cloddishness. Shakespeare is great at creating all kinds of fools and dullards, but none of his dull witted clods can beat Cloten, a self-centered, inarticulate, ruthless fool.

Cross-dressing. One case of cross dressing in the play is unusual: Cloten's dressing in the clothes of Posthumus, in order to acquire free access to Imogen. This would be cross dressing within the same gender. The other case, of course, involves Imogen dressing and acting as 'Fidele.' Imogen cross dresses for freedom and safety; Cloten for sexual predation.

Cymbeline,

Character The main character is Cymbeline, King of the Roman province of Britain. He is the *pere de famille* of a now torn apart family in which only one of his three chllldren is around—Imogen at court--and whose wife is largely hostile to him—she will attempt to poison him. He is of defiant nature, refusing to pay unjustly imposed taxes to the Roman Emperor, but in the end, when his prisoners have been identified, after the stand off battle with the Romans, Cymbeline is festive, forgiving, and pardoning.

Parallels. Shakespeare's own King Lear, or Aeschylus' King Agamemnon come to mind, as aging rulers, doting on their daughters, are ultimately undone by their inability to handle this relationship. Lear expects an expression of unlimited love from each of his daughters, and not receiving it—in the unqualified form he expects—he is driven insane with need, with the need to be loved. Agamemnon loves his daughter Iphigeneia greatly and under the pressure to have her sacrificed he is in agony, though ultimately he yields, because the whole world as he knows it depends on this murderous action.

Illustrative moments

Critical. The King is bitterly opposed to the marriage of his daughter Imogen, with the court functionary Posthumus. The King and Queen—for once –agree; the young man should be driven away.

Welcoming. In welcoming the Roman ambassador, from whom he anticipates bad news, Cymbeline is proper and professional. His personal presence is dignified.

Defiant. While proper in his functionary statements, the King knows how to resist, and defiantly informs the Roman ambassador that he wlll no longer pay tax.

Forgiving. Belarius, who kidnapped the two sons of Cymbeline twenty years prior to the opening of the play, receives a hearty pardon from the King, once the past has been reviewed, and subjected to a peaceful review.

Pardoning. It is noteworthy that Cymbeline extends his happiest pardon to the once scoundrel who tried to seduce his daughter. By play's end all is forgotten, and Iachimo is virtually a family member.

Discussion questions

Critics diverge greatly in their judgements of this play. What do you think of it? Is it a comedy? Would the happy ending be sufficient to qualify it as a comedy? Are you involved personally with the fate of the characters?

What do you think of the size and detailed development of this play? Does it seem to you to be too long or too complex? Does it give you any sense of the historical setting of its events? Is the play believable, in the sense that Shakespeare's plays about British history are often thought to be believable?

Cymbeline is nearly Shakespeare's last play. Does it seem to you the work of a playwright who is at the top of his game, or of one who is tired out? (Remember for how long Shakespeare was prolific, and how prolific he was.) Are there new tricks in the present drama, which we have not before seen in Shakespeare? Do certain characters particularly grab your attention?