Shakespeareat

Search this site

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE | KING LEAR | HAMLET | MACBETH | OTHELLO | ROMEO AND JULIET | JULIUS CAESAR | CORIOLANUS

CYMBELINE | TITUS ANDRONICUS | TIMON OF ATHENS | TROILUS AND CRESSIDA | ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA | KING JOHN

HENRY IV, PART 1 | HENRY IV, PART 2 | HENRY V | HENRY VI, PART 1 | HENRY VI, PART 2 | HENRY VI, PART 3 | RICHARD III

HENRY VIII | ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL | AS YOU LIKE IT | THE COMEDY OF ERRORS | LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST

MEASURE FOR MEASURE | THE MERCHANT OF VENICE | THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR | A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING | PERICLES, PRINCE OF TYRE | THE TEMPEST | TWELFTH NIGHT | THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA

THE TWO NOBLE KINSMEN | THE WINTER'S TALE | LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON | THE HISTORY OF CARDENIO | A LOVER'S COMPLAINT

THE RAPE OF LUCRECE | THE PASSIONATE PILGRIM | VENUS AND ADONIS | THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE | SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

COMEDIES

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Tragedies >

Cymbeline

Subscribe to posts

theme

posted Aug 3, 2013, 12:32 PM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 3, 2013, 12:32 PM]**

Britain and Rome

Britain and Rome are, so to speak, brother empires in the English imagination. English mythology has it that the same Trojans who founded Rome continued on to found London, and in Shakespeare's day, when the English were formulating their self-concept as an imperial state, they most often alluded to their ancient heritage as justifying present-day conquest. Thus *Cymbeline* is a play that is concerned, in an important way, with British self-definition. Shakespeare is careful throughout the play to use the term "Britain" when discussing Cymbeline's domain. In fact, during the time that the historical Cymbeline ruled England the term "Great Britain"-which refers to the combined states of England and Scotland, Wales and Ireland-was not in use.

Thus, as ever unconcerned with factual history, Shakespeare dramatizes the bumpy but ultimately harmonious relationship of brother empires. The story of Cymbeline's conflict with Lucius, whom he greatly admires, is akin to that of a son rising against a father, or a younger brother against an elder. In the end, "Britain" wins the conflict-led against impossible odds by the representative "brain, liver and heart" of England, respectively, Belarius, Guiderius and Arvigarus-only to renege upon this victory and realign with Rome. This ending would have obviously appealed to the audience of Shakespeare's day, demonstrating as it does both the pluck and resolve of the English over the Roman as well as the ultimate harmony between the two states. In Shakespeare's time, the English were indeed ambivalent about Rome-they identified with the Ancient Empire while struggling with the Roman Catholic Church. Shakespeare effectively captures this ambiguity in his political plot.

Birds

One of the consistent sets of imagery running throughout *Cymbeline* is that of birds. Posthumus, for instance, is referred to as an eagle-first by Imogen in Act One scene two. The Roman Empire is also called an eagle in Philarmonus' prophesy. Imogen is referred to on two occasions as the Phoenix, which appropriately illustrates both her singularity (she is, after all, virtue among the virtuous) and her death and restoration. Bird imagery pervades description of the other characters as well-Belarius is called a wise crow; Cloten is called "a puttock."

In general, this bird imagery-like other imagery in the play-tends to reinforce the element of divine guidance that emerges in Act Five. All along, the soothsayer suggests, the gods have been guiding the action of the play, so that in the end, after considerably bumpy going, the rightful heirs to England are restored, the wicked Queen and her prince are dead, the virtuous Imogen is reunited with the duped but noble Posthumus, and so on. In the same way, the characters very language appears, throughout the play, to be guided by a divine hand. When they refer to one another and themselves as birds, each ignorant of the other's imagery, they are in fact making up a great harmonious choir, where each has its place. Shakespeare the poet guides this mystic order, just as the gods guide us to the harmony in Act Five, which is in turn symbolized in part by avian imagery. Each element of the play, then, becomes a part of a narrative order greater than the individual participant's knowledge; this is as true of the poetry as it is of the action.

Divinity

For four fifths of *Cymbeline*, the presence of divinity is purely rhetorical. Characters evoke the gods for emphasis, and though there is one prophesy, it appears to be totally wrong. In the last Act, however, during a bizarre mini-drama involving the descent of the god Jupiter and the ghosts of Posthumus' family, divinity becomes the organizing force at the center of the play. Jupiter suggests that he himself has deferred the redemption of his favorite characters in the play because, he says, "Whom best I love I cross; to make my gift, / The more delay'd, delighted." In a phrase, this is the dramatic schema of the play as a whole-resolution of all the characters compounded misunderstandings is delayed until the last possible minute, when the pressure of truth finally bursts through. When he gives Posthumus a tablet with a prophesy inscribed on it, we get the impression that Jupiter himself is taking charge, and that it is His virtuosic capacity for harmonious resolution that creates such a head-spinning scene five.

Additionally, Cymbeline is himself considered in English mythology to be the king who reigned during the life of Christ. The play's redemptive trajectory, as well as Jupiter's allusion to "cross[ing]" the one he loves best, provides some basis for a reading of *Cymbeline* as Christian allegory. Additionally, the tablet that Jupiter leaves in Posthumus' cell resembles, in a way, the tablets God gave Moses on Mount Sinai; like those tablets, Jupiter's prophesy represents a covenant of sorts, a promise that Posthumus will be freed. Such a reading might oversimplify a play that intrinsically resists simplification, but certainly Christian elements of forgiveness and resurrection are also strongly present generally in the drama's resolution.

SITEMAP.XML

TIMON OF ATHENS

TITUS ANDRONICUS

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

RECENT SITE ACTIVITY

Clothes

In *Cymbeline*, "the clothes make the man" is more than a clichÃ©-it's a theme of sorts, and an ambiguous one at that. Many of the characters in the play obsess over the relation between one's identity and one's clothes. Cloten, to take the most obvious example, is offended to the quick, and driven to contemplate rape and murder, simply because Imogen declares that Posthumus' "mean'st garment" is worth more than he is. She insults Cloten in countless other ways as well, but it is this one that sticks in his mind, which is fitting, because the play as a whole obsesses over clothes as well.

This makes sense, of course, in a drama that is so concerned with appearances. Cloten appears to be a prince, thus placing enormous value on his clothing; in fact, he behaves in a completely un-princely manner. He is all show, no substance. Because he places such value in appearances, it makes sense that Imogen's preferring of Posthumus' appearance-which Cloten knows to be less valuable, in a strictly superficial sense, than his-would drive him insane. The true princes in the play-Guiderius and Arvigarus-are royal despite their rustic appearances. Similarly, the penitent Posthumus best shows his substance when he fights, on the British side, dressed as a peasant. Simple, lower-class clothes provide relief from which true character distinguishes itself.

But perhaps in no case do the clothes make the man so much as in Imogen's. When she puts on a man's doublet and hose, she becomes a man, pure and simple. Because she performs a man, she is a man in others' eyes, even in those eyes to which she was known in her female identity. Shakespeare suggests that gender is a matter of performance. Characters are not, perhaps, essentially male or female, it is all a matter of how they act, and how they are perceived. Certainly in the end Imogen is restored to her female identity, but keep in mind that during Shakespeare's era women did not act professionally. The person who played Imogen in the original production was, in fact, a man. And so Imogen is a man playing a woman playing a man, who is restored to a woman. It's enough to make anyone's head spin, and it most likely creates complication-which Shakespeare exploits again and again in his plays-as to what makes a man a man, or a woman a woman. Maybe it *is* the clothes.

Divinity

For four fifths of *Cymbeline*, the presence of divinity is purely rhetorical. Characters evoke the gods for emphasis, and though there is one prophesy, it appears to be totally wrong. In the last Act, however, during a bizarre mini-drama involving the descent of the god Jupiter and the ghosts of Posthumus' family, divinity becomes the organizing force at the center of the play. Jupiter suggests that he himself has deferred the redemption of his favorite characters in the play because, he says, "Whom best I love I cross; to make my gift, / The more delay'd,

delighted." In a phrase, this is the dramatic schema of the play as a whole-resolution of all the characters compounded misunderstandings is delayed until the last possible minute, when the pressure of truth finally bursts through. When he gives Posthumus a tablet with a prophesy inscribed on it, we get the impression that Jupiter himself is taking charge, and that it is His virtuosic capacity for harmonious resolution that creates such a head-spinning scene five.

Additionally, Cymbeline is himself considered in English mythology to be the king who reigned during the life of Christ. The play's redemptive trajectory, as well as Jupiter's allusion to "cross[ing]" the one he loves best, provides some basis for a reading of *Cymbeline* as Christian allegory. Additionally, the tablet that Jupiter leaves in Posthumus' cell resembles, in a way, the tablets God gave Moses on Mount Sinai; like those tablets, Jupiter's prophesy represents a covenant of sorts, a promise that Posthumus will be freed. Such a reading might oversimplify a play that intrinsically resists simplification, but certainly Christian elements of forgiveness and resurrection are also strongly present generally in the drama's resolution.

Misogyny

The debate over whether or not Shakespeare is a misogynistic writer can be argued infinitely from either side. Surely, however, the question is complicated; and given the historical period in which Shakespeare wrote, during which male supremacy was taken for granted even by powerful women, this complexity is in itself remarkable.

In *Cymbeline*, most expressions of misogyny, the most impassioned of which is Posthumus' diatribe at the end of Act Two, are starkly ironic. Posthumus blames all of womankind for all the faults of humankind. And why? Because a man, Iachimo, has falsely convinced him that his blameless wife is guilty of adultery. It is a man who gets it wrong; it is a man who does the deceiving; it is Posthumus himself who demands of Pisanio hasty revenge, only to regret it later. The common misogynistic thinking of Shakespeare's day, held, as Posthumus states in his excoriation, that women are above all inconstant. Boccaccio wrote in *The Decameron*, "I have evermore understood that man was the most noble creature formed by God...and woman in the next degree to him, But man...is the more perfect of both. Having then the most perfection in him, without all doubt he must be so much the more firm and constant." In direct refutation of this, it is the men in *Cymbeline*-especially Iachimo and Posthumus-who are mutable and Imogen who is constant.

Complicating this, however, Shakespeare provides us with the Queen, a woman who is indeed duplicitous and Machiavellian and vengeful and many of the wicked things Posthumus ascribes to womankind. But even the Queen, in her heart, is constant to the one she loves: Cloten. When Cloten goes missing, the Queen dies of grief, which is more than we can say of, for instance, Cymbeline when his daughter goes missing. Or his sons, for that matter. Even in the comically wicked Queen, then, the issue of misogyny is complex. On the whole, it appears that Shakespeare has given us a largely unjust, male-run society, one in which Imogen is judged

guilty of a crime she did not commit and forced to disguise her sex merely to survive this false judgment. The case can be made, on the basis of *Cymbeline*, for Shakespeare the proto-feminist. This is true whether the bard himself knew it or not.

Music

Even if *Cymbeline* has not always been admired as a whole, it, like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, has always been loved for its songs. It is one of Shakespeare's most musical plays, with two of his most famous songs, "Fear no more the heat o' th' sun," and "Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gate sings." Merely looking at the song titles shows how intimately these songs are bound up in the thematic concerns of the play. "The lark" reminds us that *Cymbeline*'s chief symbol-set is avian, and further reminds us that birds are distinguished, like *Cymbeline*, for their songs. "The heat o' th' sun" reminds us of the final image in the play, of the Roman eagle shrinking into the great Western sun of England. Indeed, at the time the song is sung, Imogen fears very much "the heat of the sun," that is, the wrath of her father. On top of these songs, *Cymbeline* contains a musical interlude of sorts, very rare in Shakespeare, almost more akin to Greek or Roman drama (and the analogue is obviously apt), wherein Posthumus' ancestors intercede with Jupiter on his part.

But beyond the actual music in the play, music is itself a theme of *Cymbeline*. At the play's end, Philarmonus notes, "The fingers of the powers above do tune / The harmonies of this peace," presenting the play as a musical composition in its own right, with discords and motives and ultimate harmonic resolution. Shakespeare, that most lyrical of lyricists, has created a play that is, in its very architecture, musical.

Nobility

Looking at *Cymbeline*, we might easily conclude that Shakespeare landed squarely on the side of nature over nurture. His child-figures in the play-and the nature-nurture issue is obviously most relevant to children-are predetermined, more or less, as virtuous or not. And virtuousness, in *Cymbeline*, is determined on the basis of an authentic nobility. Guiderius and Arvigarus, who have been raised from infancy in rusticity, have inexplicable noble traits. They long to charge into battle, to speak the sweet rhythms of the court. Indeed, they do these things, without training, and are totally successful. Moreover, they recognize Imogen, in her guise as Fidele, as possessing the same noble bearing as they. Posthumus, too, to a lesser extent, has qualities of nobility that beam through his peasant's garb during the battle with the Romans. This lesser extent, by the way, befits his lesser noble status. He is a mere gentleman, though a genuine one, whereas Guiderius, Arvigarus and Imogen are the children of the King.

Then there is Cloten. It is unknown who Cloten's father is-his ignoble nature suggests, perhaps, even without saying it, that he is a bastard-and his mother is another ignoble noble. Yet as the play begins he is a prince, next in line after Imogen for the throne. Nevertheless, his nobility is

not genuine. He lacks regal comportment, completely fails in the games of nobility, and does not appeal to the impeccable nose for nobility of Imogen. Even the sycophantic nobles who follow him around do so in part to make fun of him; he commands no respect. Cloten is noble in appearance only; as Shakespeare suggests (much to the pleasure of his patron, King James, we can imagine), true nobility cannot be learned. It is not a matter of nurture. It is a simple matter of blood.

summary

posted Aug 3, 2013, 12:31 PM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 3, 2013, 12:31 PM]**

Imogen, the daughter of the British king Cymbeline, goes against her father's wishes and marries a lowborn gentleman, Posthumus, instead of his oafish stepson, Cloten. Cloten is the son of Cymbeline's new Queen, a villainous woman who has made the king her puppet. Cymbeline sends Posthumus into exile in Italy, where he encounters a smooth-tongued Italian named Iachimo. Iachimo argues that all women are naturally unchaste, and he makes a wager with Posthumus that he will be able to seduce Imogen. He goes to the British court and, failing in his initial attempt to convince the princess to sleep with him, resorts to trickery: He hides in a large chest and has it sent to her room; that night he slips out, observes her sleeping, and steals a bracelet that Posthumus once gave to her.

Cloten, meanwhile, continues to pursue Imogen, but she rebuffs him harshly. He becomes furious and vows revenge, while she worries over the loss of her bracelet. In the meantime, Iachimo has returned to Italy, and, displaying the stolen bracelet and an intimate knowledge of

the details of Imogen's bedchamber, convinces Posthumus that he won the bet. Posthumus, furious at being betrayed by his wife, sends a letter to Britain ordering his servant, Pisanio, to murder Imogen. But Pisanio believes in Imogen's innocence, and he convinces her to disguise herself as a boy and go search for her husband, while he reports to Posthumus that he has killed her.

Imogen, however, soon becomes lost in the wilds of Wales, and she comes upon a cave where Belarius, an unjustly banished nobleman, lives with his two sons, Guiderius and Arviragus. In fact, the two young men are not his sons but Cymbeline's; Belarius has kidnapped them to avenge his banishment, though they themselves are ignorant of their true parentage. They welcome Imogen, who is still dressed as a boy. Meanwhile, Cloten appears, having come in pursuit of Imogen; he fights a duel with Guiderius, who kills him. Imogen, feeling ill, drinks a potion the queen has given her. Although the queen told her it was medicinal, the queen herself believed it to be a poison. However, the draught merely induces a deep sleep that resembles death. Belarius and his adoptive sons come upon Imogen and, heart-broken, lay her body beside that of the slain Cloten. Awaking after they have left the scene, she mistakes the body of Cloten for that of Posthumus, and she sinks into despair. A Roman army has invaded Britain, seeking the restoration of a certain tribute Britain has ceased to pay. (A "tribute" here is a payment given to one nation by another in return for a promise of non-aggression.) The disguised Imogen hires herself out to them as a page.

Posthumus and Iachimo are traveling with the Roman army, but

Posthumus switches to the garb of a British peasant and fights valiantly for Britain. Indeed, in his combat he actively seeks death: He believes his servant to have carried out his orders and killed Imogen, and he regrets his actions. The Romans are defeated, thanks to the intervention of Belarius, Guiderius, and Arviragus, and Posthumus, still trying to punish himself, switches back to Roman garb and allows himself to be taken prisoner. That night, the god Jupiter promises the spirits of Posthumus's dead ancestors that he will care for their descendant. The next day, Cymbeline calls the prisoners before him, and the confusion is sorted out. Posthumus and Imogen are reunited, and they forgive a contrite Iachimo, who confesses his deception. The identity of Guiderius and Arviragus is revealed, Belarius is forgiven, and the Queen dies, leaving the king free of her evil influence. As a final gesture, Cymbeline frees the Roman prisoners and even agrees to resume paying the tribute.

characters

posted Aug 3, 2013, 12:30 PM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 3, 2013, 12:30 PM]**

Cymbeline

The king of Britain and Imogen's father. A wise and gracious monarch, he is led astray by the machinations of his wicked Queen

Arviragus

Guiderius' twin brother, who has also been living as the supposed son of Morgan under the name of Cadwal. He is distinguished by his emotional, poetic sensitivity.

Belarius

A British nobleman, unjustly banished by Cymbeline. He kidnapped Cymbeline's infant sons to revenge himself on the king, and, under the name of Morgan, he has raised them as his own sons in the Welsh wilderness.

Caius Lucius

The general of the Roman forces; a noble and respected Roman.

Cloten

The Queen of Britain's son by a former husband. He is, in short, a clod. He and the Queen want him to marry Imogen, but she will have none of it.

Cornelius

A physician. Aware of the Queen's wickedness, he substitutes a benign sleeping potion for the poison she requests of him.

Euriphile

Arvigarus and Guiderius' nurse, who stole the infants in collaboration with Belarius. In return, he married her and allowed her to raise the twins as her own sons.

Frenchman

One of Philario's friends.

Gaolers

A character who provides comic relief.

Guiderius

One of Cymbeline's twin sons. Cymbeline thinks he is dead, but he has been living under the name Polydore. He thinks his father is Morgan, who in fact kidnapped his brother and he when they were infants. Guiderius is an active, courageous, practical youth.

Helen

Imogen's attendant.

Iachimo

A clever and dishonest Italian gentleman. He makes a wager with Posthumus that he can seduce Imogen, and when his attempt at seduction fails, resorts to trickery to make Posthumus believe that he has succeeded.

Imogen

Cymbeline's daughter by his first wife. Beloved by Cymbeline and loathed by her stepmother, the Queen. Imogen is a paragon: witty, beautiful, and wise.

Philario

A good-hearted Italian friend of Posthumus'.

Philarmonus

A Roman soothsayer.

Pisanio

Posthumus' loyal servant, whom Posthumus leaves to attend Imogen in England after his master departs for Italy.

Posthumus Leonatus

A gentleman. Imogen's husband, who married her against her royal family's wishes.

Queen

Cymbeline's unnamed, unscrupulous wife, who is working behind the scenes to advance the interests of her son Cloten.

Roman Captain

One of Caius's officers.

Sicilius Leonatus

Posthumus' noble, warlike father, who appeals to Jupiter on his son's behalf while his son sleeps in jail.

Two British Captains

Two of Cymbeline's officers.

Two Gentlemen

Two men in Cymbeline's court.

Two Lords

Two more men in Cymbeline's court.

Sign in | Recent Site Activity | Report Abuse | Print Page | Powered By Google Sites