

English 345: Shakespeare

Professor S. Flores

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"Are You a Man?": Power and Gender in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*

Shakespeare's play *Cymbeline*, as all of his works, has numerous levels of interpretation, and it is difficult to extract just one or two angles for consideration; doing so runs the risk of neglecting other possible interpretations as well as losing some of the play's richness. Nevertheless, it is possible to view *Cymbeline* as a dramatization of the marginalization of strong, powerful women and the substitution in their place of weak, tractable men, and as a dramatization of masculine fears of female power and authority. Because the play is set in very early England, around the first or second century A.D., it is also possible to view this dramatic substitution in its historical context--the Roman invasion of England that displaced the native pagan/matriarchal culture with a Christian/patriarchal order. Looking at the play with this historical context in mind provides a possible explanation of how these masculine fears may have began. Moreover, the play can also be viewed as a critical commentary about James I, who had been on the British throne for about eight years at the time the play was written.

We have discussed in class the notable absence of women from the conclusion in several of Shakespeare's plays, especially *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline*. Furthermore, if women are present on the stage at the end of the play, they are often under masculine disguise. Jodi Mikalachki sees this exclusively male ending in Jacobean drama that is set in Roman Britain, as is *Cymbeline*, as a "... masculine embrace, staged literally or invoked rhetorically as a figure

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for the new relation between Rome and Britain" (303). She also explains that with women absent or under disguise, the stage becomes the exclusive preserve of men and dramatizes masculine fears about female threat to male authority as well as anxiety about male homosexuality. However, an all-male government that seeks to vanquish female power and authority by excluding women from the action is not necessarily effective, nor is it necessarily desirable, even in a society that privileges patriarchal authority.

If male homosexuality was indeed a fear that nagged early English men, it is peculiar that Shakespeare chose to create an all-male government or stage in his dramas, such as *Cymbeline*. There are several ways to view such dramatizations: perhaps Shakespeare is trying to present the epitome of the most desirable form of government, free from feminine influence and threat, or, perhaps he is trying to demonstrate that homosexuality was covertly desired as it was overtly despised. In any event, it seems that Shakespeare's men want to include women only in instances when they (women) enhance masculinity--sexual prowess and reproduction, for example--but exclude women in instances where the women threaten masculine authority--such as politics and other areas necessitating power and authority. That is, Shakespeare includes women in the action when women enhance men's masculinity and exclude women when they threaten masculine authority.

Mikalachki points out the fascinating contrast that, despite these fears of feminine threats to authority, "... the Britons [of early modern England] made no distinction of sex in government. Powerful females loomed large in early modern visions of national origins . . . ." (302). Consider, for example, the early British warriors Boadicea and Caractacus, who both lost battles to the Romans. At least one critic (J. P. Brockbank) has suggested that *Cymbeline's*

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Queen is based on the historical female figure of Boadicea who "... opposed the Roman conquerors but ultimately failed to free Britain of the imperial yoke, taking her own life (or dying of a 'natural infirmity') after a conclusive battle" (309). Similarly, Caractacus, who also was defeated by the Romans but taken captive, impressed Emperor Claudius with his speech and "manly courage" and thus gained Britain's pardon (310). Despite the similar outcomes of their respective battles, historians malign Boadicea but, ironically, praise Caractacus for "... both his initial resistance and his eventual *submission* to Rome" (310, emphasis added). Mikalachki does not suggest that Caractacus is remembered for regaining Britain's independence--he is remembered for his *submission* to Rome, a typically feminine characteristic. It is a cruel irony that Caractacus is remembered for a feminine characteristic and, as Mikalachki observes (discussed below) provides a counterbalance for Boadicea's female incivility and savagery. She states:

In this standard pairing of the male and female British rebels against Rome, then, Boadicea represented "the rankest note of Barbarism," that state in which gender distinctions are collapsed. Caractacus, on the other hand, was a figure of exemplary manliness, invoked to counterbalance the overwhelming female savagery of Boadicea and to reestablish British masculinity. ... (311)

Perhaps the treatment of these two leaders may be explained by the encroaching patriarchal religion and government into a culture that was more tolerant of female power and authority. It is possible that the Roman invaders tried to introduce Christianity, a patriarchal religion, into England, which was at that time a pagan, matriarchal country, and, if so, the Romans certainly must have encountered resistance. Not only would this matriarchal society present an

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obstacle for the Roman invaders to overcome, but ". . . powerful and rebellious females in native historiography threatened the establishment of a stable, masculine identity for the early modern nation" (303). There is a connection between the native pagan women and the female figures in Shakespeare's play. Mikalachki argues that it is, ironically, the females who are banished from the play's conclusion "who articulate British nationalism and patriotism" (303). We can see her point clearly illustrated in the characters of Imogen and her step-mother, the Queen, both of whom are banished from the concluding acts of the drama (although Imogen is on stage in masculine attire). Imogen represents the faithful, subservient women that the native (pagan) women are supposed to emulate, and the Queen represents the powerful, authoritative native women that pose a threat to the new, emerging nation. Posthumus, in his efforts to control Imogen, represents the new patriarchal structure and its desire to subordinate and control the native culture it encounters.

Mikalachki conflates nationalism and respectability as she explains their connections in her engaging essay. Mikalachki, citing George L. Mosse, explains that there is

an alliance between nationalism and respectability [that is] crucial to the formulation and dissemination of both. He [(Mosse)] . . . finds both to be informed by ideals of fraternity for men and domesticity for women. (305)

She explains that nationalism and respectability are drawn together and are eventually represented by femininity in what she calls respectable nationalism: nationalism (associated with barbarism) that is tempered by patriarchal ideas of feminine domesticity.

Even though Mikalachki points out the irony that women "articulate British nationalism and patriotism" she concedes that "Cymbeline's Queen is hardly a figure of national respectability" and she eventually concludes that Imogen, the Queen's dramatic opposite, could represent the

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respectable woman/nationalism (303, 306). Mikalachki explains that "[t]his duality of feminine respectability and wickedness reveals how fraught early modern English nationalism was with fears of the unrespectable . . . [and] [i]t also indicates how important gender was as a category for working out these fears" (207). She suggests that of all the characters in the play "Imogen alone remains as a possible icon of pure Britishness in the complex of gender, sexuality and nationalism . . ." (316). It is difficult to accept that Shakespeare intended his audience to perceive Imogen as a symbol for respectable nationalism, however, considering his apparent preoccupation with feminine threat to masculine authority. Mikalachki concedes this problem, and admits that, ultimately, Imogen does not offer "... a stable masculine identity for Britain" (320). Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that some of the strongest characters in the play, and certainly the strongest English characters, are women.

Shakespeare may provide his audience with a role model for womanhood in the character of Imogen, but he does not provide an equally idealistic male role model. None of the English men in the play demonstrate an ideal for masculine behavior, because they all lack the inner strength that, ironically, the women (the so-called weaker sex) possess. The male characters are susceptible to outside influence; they cannot seem to express themselves without resorting to deception; or, as is the case with Cymbeline's sons, they are ignorant of their power and authority. Even if one forgives Guiderius and Arviragus for their ignorance (for it is, after all, not their fault) one cannot fully accept them as idealistic masculine role models: Guiderius is barbaric, as evidenced by his unwarranted execution of Cloten, and they both exhibit possibly homosexual behavior in their adoration of Fidele. The Roman Lucius is by far the most stereotypically masculine character of all the men in *Cymbeline*. Mikalachki describes Lucius

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as "... resolutely masculine, deriving his identity from military and political functions . . ." (318). Unfortunately for the British characters in the play, who want to wear their "own noses," he is an inadequate role model simply because he is Roman (III.1.14). Perhaps the lack of truly respectable British males in *Cymbeline* reflects Shakespeare's and/or his audience's lack of faith in English men in general, and King James in particular.

By the time *Cymbeline* was written (around 1611) James had ruled England for eight years--sufficient time for him to prove his effectiveness as a ruler. D. E. Landry states that "... Milford Haven, [in] the play confers lasting significance on a particular time and place in history and makes obeisance to James as a peacemaker . . ." (77). Moreover, Landry sees a flattering connection between *Cymbeline* and James I. While such a connection is possible, it seems more likely that James I is more accurately represented by Posthumus, although it is unwise to rule out a connection to either character. Both Landry and Mikalachki note that Milford Haven plays a significant historical role in England's history, since it is "... the landing-place of the Earl of Richmond, soon to be Henry VII, and thus its function as a cradle for the Tudor-Stuart line of which James was the latest embodiment" (76-7). Since Posthumus is more closely connected to Milford Haven (the place where the Tudor-Stuart line emerged in England) because he directs Imogen to venture there, perhaps we should consider Posthumus as a possible representation of James. Regardless of which, if either, character Shakespeare intends to flatter/represent/malign James, neither character provides a truly flattering portrayal or representation of the king, suggesting a certain dissatisfaction with him and/or his rule.

Furthermore, there is a parallel between Posthumus' representation of the Roman invasion and his representation of James. Posthumus can be construed as representing the invading

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Romans and their desire to subjugate and control the culture they encounter, dramatized by the death sentence Posthumus' pronounces for Imogen, as well as representing James I. Perhaps Shakespeare viewed James I as a monarch with a gullible nature and a propensity to overreact, as well as possessing a desire to exert absolute control, like Posthumus. Additionally, *Cymbeline* is dated approximately 1611---eight years after James I (James VI of Scotland) ascended to the British throne. In addition to dramatizing masculine fears about female threat to male authority, *Cymbeline* could dramatize British anxiety about James I's effectiveness as a ruler and the union between England and Scotland his ascension created. James I was commonly deemed to be more interested in recreation than ruling the country, and even though some of his subjects may have considered him a peacemaker between the two nations, there certainly would have been some people who opposed that alliance. It seems possible that, in part, *Cymbeline* may have been intended to speak to and for those opposed to James I.

Shakespeare repeatedly presents his audience with merging antitheses, thus creating a new entity, such as the paradox he presents with Posthumus. His name--Posthumus--reflects the literal circumstance of his birth after his father's death and it, figuratively, suggests his rebirth after his self-demeaning acceptance of Iachimo's base proposition. In the beginning of the play, the audience is informed of the steadfast worthiness and character of Posthumus, but his actions after the first act belie this commendation as he succumbs to Iachimo's accusations of his wife's infidelity. Posthumus's true character is revealed by his decision to accept Iachimo's bet and later in his belief in Iachimo's accusations about Imogen's infidelity. Even the noble and renowned Posthumus demonstrates the unacceptable characteristics of barbarism and incivility when he orders Pisanio to kill Imogen. It is only after Posthumus awakes from his dream--a sort of

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pseudo-death--that he is endowed with the qualities that the gentlemen praise him for in the opening act of the play.

Superficially, Posthumus facilitates the reunion between Cymbeline and his sons, and hence, the consolidation of England, which is further support for the argument that Posthumus, rather than Cymbeline, represents James. Landry remarks that

Posthumus's experience is . . . both profoundly individual and social, at once peculiar to him--the recovery through dream, of his personal history--and, by analogy, comparable with a larger movement--the recognition of a growing sense of national identity through the dramatization of national history, with its politic blend of fact and legend, reportage and myth. (74)

Indeed, the play works to a rapid conclusion after Posthumus' dream, with several recognition scenes and Cymbeline's ultimate reunion with his sons. Even Imogen's disguised presence on the stage can be construed as a death and rebirth; although she is not fully restored to her female character because of her masculine attire, she is reunited with her father and Posthumus and thus recognized, or reborn. Guiderius and Arviragus also experience another type of death and rebirth, as evidenced by their abduction from their father's castle, Belarius's attempt to raise them in ignorance of their true identities, and their reunion with Imogen and their father. It is the figurative death and rebirth of Guiderius and Arviragus, whose reunion with Cymbeline brings peace and new life to England, as the Soothsayer explains.

Considering that nations are frequently referred to as feminine, it is curious that Shakespeare chose to represent the emergence of England's peace and prosperity in the masculine character of Cymbeline. It is equally puzzling why the weak and gullible Cymbeline is compared

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to the strong and stately cedar, and his strong (at least in the case of Guiderius) sons are compared to the weak and dead branches lopped off of the tree's trunk. Moreover, since some of the play's strongest characters are women, and in light of Mikalachki's arguments, it seems even more appropriate to embody England in a woman, such as Imogen. There is, of course, no conclusive explanation for this choice, but it is likely that portraying England in a feminine character would only heighten masculine fears about feminine power and authority.

It is sad, to the extent that *Cymbeline* addresses England's primitive colonization by the Romans, that an apparently successful indigenous culture must be uprooted and destroyed to make way for the conquerors' government and religion. If we look at *Cymbeline* from the perspective suggested herein, we can almost see the birth of patriarchal institutions in early England, institutions that in turn gave birth to the patriarchal institutions that still subjugate women today.

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## Works Cited

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