

CYMBELINE

COMMENT

The people who published Shakespeare's *Works* in 1623 included *Cymbeline* with the "Tragedies." That's odd. True, a Queen and a prince die (offstage) toward the end of the play, but that Queen is a cunning, evil stepmother who tries to poison the heroine; and that prince is a stupid, evil stepbrother who wants to rape the heroine. We are about as sad to hear of their deaths as we are when the Wicked Witch of the West tells us she's melting.

Shakespeare himself seems to have ridiculed the idea of genre in *Hamlet* when he has Polonius praise the travelling players who have come to Elsinore as

the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy,
history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral,
tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral. (2.2.397-400)

Tongue similarly in cheek, I think we should classify *Cymbeline* as a tragical-comical-historical-romantic fairytale.

Like a fairytale, *Cymbeline* has a good but misled King (Cymbeline), his daughter a Beautiful Princess (Imogen), her stepmother an Evil Queen who uses magic potions on him and on her stepdaughter, an Evil Prince (Cloten) who wants to marry the Beautiful Princess, a dangerous villain (Iachimo) who tricks the Beautiful Princess and the hero, her true love (Posthumus), a faithful servant (Pisano) who protects the Princess, a long-lost friend of the King (Belarius), and two long-lost sons of the King (Guiderius and Arviragus). And, better even than a Fairy Godmother to supervise, it has Jupiter, the King of the Gods to preside over a happy ending. Shakespeare has stuffed this play with so many once-upon-a-time elements that he has a hard a time fitting it all in. That's one reason *Cymbeline* is Shakespeare's fourth longest play (behind only *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Coriolanus*).¹⁵ It seems to have a little of everything theatre can afford.

Those theatrical goodies include some of the crowd-pleasing treats we find elsewhere in Shakespeare: The heroine disguising herself as a boy (for the last time in any of his plays); armies passing over the stage and "in skirmish"; the capture in battle of a king and his rescue; a sword fight won by the true prince; two beautiful songs, "Hark, Hark, the Lark," and "Fear No More the Heat of the Sun"; a supernatural spectacle featuring the apparitions of Posthumus' dead father, mother, and brothers, before "*Jupiter descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle. He throws a thunderbolt.*" So: pretty cool.

Most interesting to me, *Cymbeline* also includes three theatrical moments that require a notable workload for any production – an intense theatrical ergonomics that speaks to

¹⁵ At a speaking speed of 140 words per minute, while *Macbeth* would take 2 hours to perform, *Cymbeline* would require 3 hours and 15 minutes.

Shakespeare's continued eagerness to prod at the relationship between an audience and the play it is watching.

In Act Two, scene 2, the villain Iachimo has hidden himself in a trunk that Imogen is keeping safe in her bedchamber. The audience must absorb into the imagined narrative of the play the disruption of thinking about the real world physics of that prop – its size, the physique and flexibility of the actor inside it, the weight of it, and the logistics of getting it on stage. Whatever the size of the trunk and the mechanical effort of bringing it on, audiences will have done the guesswork of concluding that a Roman cad is inside the trunk. That correct suspicion thus puts the audience in a position of superior knowledge not only to Imogen, the victim of the plot, but also to Iachimo, the villain executing it; and guessing the villain's game implicates an audience in this invasion of the heroine's most private place. We become co-voyeurs and violators.

Consider the power of the stage picture Shakespeare has created with unprotected Imogen sleeping on a bed and near her a box containing a Iachimo certainly wide awake but invisible to us. The time between Imogen's falling sleep and Iachimo's opening the trunk is the stage version of the thrill of intense suspense a child experiences winding up a Jack-in-the-box. The actor in the box controls that radioactive moment. He decides how long it is. He decides if the lid opens slowly or pops up. He owns us.

Once the lid is open, Iachimo's compares himself to the rapist of Lucrece:

Our Tarquin thus
did softly press the rushes, ere he waken'd
the chastity he wounded. (12-14)

Rape? We wonder how close to pornography this scene might go. He turns his attention to Imogen, "whiter than the sheets," and exclaims, "That I might touch!" (16). But he wants more than to touch and takes a kiss as his language goes into a close-up. Her lips are "rubies unparagon'd" and "her breathing that / perfumes the chamber thus" (17-19). Still in poetic close-up, he imagines how "the flame o' the taper ... would under-peep her lids" (19-20). Then abruptly he interrupts our voyeurism to attend to business

But my design:
to note the chamber: I will write all down... (23-24)

He gets out a tablet, apparently leaves her bedside, and, delays his main objective, teasing us for as long as he wants with stage business to record the pictures hanging in her room, the window, the stories woven into the tapestry. "Ah," he says at last, as if it has just occurred to him, "some natural notes about her body... would testify, to enrich mine inventory" (28-30). He slips her bracelet off, and then "under-peeping" her bedclothes, reports that on her "left breast" there is "a mole cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops I' the bottom of a cowslip" (37-39).

Iachimo, who opened his speech as Tarquin, then reminds us of the rape he is *not* attempting when he says Posthumus will "think I have pick'd the lock and ta'en / the

treasure of her honour” (41-42). And as soon as he has raised that thought in us,¹⁶ he cuts us off – “No more” – and then, noting Imogen’s book where she had left off reading of Philomel’s rape, he leaves her bedside and hides himself again in the trunk.

In *Othello* Shakespeare had created a similarly intimate bedroom scene when Othello goes to the sleeping Desdemona’s bed to murder her. As in the trunk scene, the audience guesses what is in store for the heroine; and, as in trunk scene, we watch a man set on a task briefly distracted by the beauty of his victim. But in *Othello* the sleeping woman is Othello’s wife, and we hope that Desdemona will wake up and somehow reconcile with her husband. In *Cymbeline* Shakespeare has inverted our response. The theatrical dynamics of the scene make us accomplices as the voyeur’s voyeurs, who fear rather than hope Imogen will wake, and who may (to their shame) be frustrated that the distraction of her beauty does not lead Iachimo further.

Let’s turn from this scene about the theatrical power of one kind of trunk – Iachimo’s chest – to a scene (4.2) about the theatrical power of another of a kind trunk – Cloten’s headless body.¹⁷ Each chest belongs to one of the two male villains and each chest is connected to our sleeping heroine. Of course, bodiless heads appear in other plays of Shakespeare (*2 Henry VI*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth*), but this is the only play in which Shakespeare brings on stage a headless body. As usual, what interests me is what the workload (for playwright, actors, company, and/or audience) required by a scene tells us about its importance to its creator.

By that measure this trunk scene mattered a lot to Shakespeare. The script, for example, goes to unusual lengths to have Imogen wake up beside Cloten’s headless body and mistake it for her husband’s. To get Cloten into Posthumous’ clothes, Shakespeare has to have Cloten obsessed by Imogen’s taunt that he’s not worth the “meanest garment” of her husband (2.3.136). Cloten repeatedly echoes that insult and uses it to justify his acquiring “the same suit [Posthumus] wore when” he last saw Cymbeline (3.5.26-27). Then to contrive that Imogen find herself beside the headless trunk, Shakespeare has Belarius wax pious about Cloten – “Our foe was princely / bury him as a prince” (4.2.249-51) – and insist that out of respect his sons lay Cloten’s body next to hers. This kind of hyper-manipulation of the plot prompted Samuel Johnson to say of *Cymbeline* that its faults were “too evident for detection and too gross for aggravation.” But the evident jerry-rigging required to produce this moment is itself evidence that Shakespeare felt the scene was essential to his play.

Even more obviously, the headless trunk itself raises the workload of the production and its audience. I have never seen a convincing one. The dummies are too big or too small

¹⁶ With this word “lock” or “honor” the actor playing Iachimo will frequently look down toward Imogen’s groin.

¹⁷ The fact that both these kinds of trunks appear in *Cymbeline*, that each is connected to one of the two male villains, and that each is part of deception connected to Posthumus seems outside the realm of coincidence. The word “trunk” appears 29 times in all of the plays, eight of them (including stage directions) occur in this one play and no more than 2 times in any of the others. But I have no idea what to make of that fact.

or they bend in the wrong places. Did the King's Men have a master props person with capabilities beyond our most affluent theatre companies? Or did Shakespeare, as I suspect, know that the headless trunk would strain almost to breaking the audience's ability to stay in the fictive world? Did he calculate that the mental work they must invest in belief would pay the dividend of ownership?

Of the three scenes in *Cymbeline* with challenging theatrical ergonomics the final scene of the play is the most extraordinary. Agatha Christie mystery fans will be familiar with the endings in which Hercule Poirot gathers all the suspects in a parlor and reveals whodunit. Well, in *Cymbeline* that parlor (the stage) has to hold at least fifteen people of whom thirteen speak in a scene that has at least twenty-five recognition moments (*Comedy of Errors*, with the next most, has eleven). In production terms, a scene so crowded with anagnorises is a heavy workload for the playwright who has to structure the unfolding of each new discovery in a logical order, for the actors who have to arrange themselves on a crowded stage so that the everyone can be seen and have his or her individual moment, and for the audience who must delight in rather than scoff at the cascade of revelations.

Bad productions of this play assume that audiences are not up to that work and will lampoon or "send up" the finale, but good productions trust the playwright. Shakespeare knew that an audience, given the tools, will work to produce the play they want; and in *Cymbeline* he provides the tools, not by keeping the audience ignorant of the answers as Agatha Christie does, but by giving only to them all the answers. They alone have all the secrets of the play, and, as the knowing colluders in its finale, they joy in the discovery, secret by secret, of what they already know as this tragical-comical-historical-romantical fairytale rolls to its happily-ever-after.

PLOYS

A. Pitching *Cymbeline* to Film Producers

<p>Prep: Prior class intro, find props Homework: reading and writing In class: 45-50 minutes Props: table, chairs, timer.</p>

Wicked stepmother, evil sexual predator, comic idiot villain, long lost brothers who live in a cave; this play has the makings of a hit movie, and the objective of this ploy is to explore those possibilities by having your students "pitch" the idea of "*Cymbeline, the Movie*."

Pre-class prep

- (1) Create a five-person team of "producers" and assign each of them a different studio. You can decide which studios to include, but they should differ in significant ways. For example, the five producers might represent Disney (cartoons), Miramax (art movies), HBO (series), 21st Century Fox (blockbusters), and Comedy Central (comedies). Their homework is to be familiar with the kind of movies made by their respective studios and, based on that, be ready to consider movies pitched by screenwriters.
- (2) Create (ten two-person teams of screenwriters.

- (3) The job of each screenwriter team is to prepare a two-minute pitch for a film based on the play. Warn your students that the short time allowed for the pitch means more not less homework. The rules of the pitch are as follows:
- a) The pitch is strictly two minutes.
 - b) Both members of the team must speak during the pitch.
 - c) The pitch should be presented as a totally new idea of the screenwriter team and should not mention Shakespeare.
 - d) The pitch should *not* use a chronological narrative. (For example, here is a non-chronological pitch for the film *Spotlight*: “A prestigious American newspaper puts its reputation on the line by investigating a sex crime. The perp is the Catholic Church.”)
 - e) The pitch must include only characters and events from the play.
 - f) The pitch must use a five-word phrase or sentence from the play. (This is the one rule that will require students to look at the text.)
 - g) The pitch must include the name of a famous actor interested in the project and the role that actor will play.
 - h) The pitch should suggest a title for the movie.
 - i) The pitch should take into account the kind of movie that the studio makes.

In-class Prep

- (1) Have a large table at a 45° angle in the front of the class with five chairs behind it and have the producer team take their appropriate seats behind the clearly legible nameplates you have created for each of the studios.
- (2) Put a timer on the table that all can see.
- (3) Explain that each screenwriter team must choose one of the five studios to make its pitch to and – here’s the kicker – each of the studios can only take two pitches. Thus, the longer a screenwriter team waits to make its pitch the less choice it has of studios for their pitch.
- (4) Have the first screenwriter team choose the studio it wants to pitch; address its pitch to the student representing that studio; customize that pitch to the particular studio.
- (5) After the two-minute pitch, have the five producers confer among themselves for no more than one minute.
- (6) On the basis of that conference, the student representing the pitched studio, give thumbs up or down to the project, and says why in no more than 30 seconds.

This play requires no discussion. Its object is to have your students think about *Cymbeline* in fresh terms, to see its applicability to today’s audiences, to put those thoughts into a concise form, and to speak well in the context of high stakes. If you want to have discussion and you have the time when the activity is finished, then you ask such questions

as: Which of the pitches seemed truest to the play? Which pitch was the most intriguing – had the best “hook”? What aspect of the play was the hardest to pitch? What aspect of the play was the easiest to pitch? You can be sure that this is a ploy the class will enjoy.

B. Serenade Imogen

Prep: Intro and assign 4-7 “bands” of 4-6 students each
Players: 1 Cloten per band of 4-6 students
Homework: put sampled song, performed or lip-synced

In Act Two, scene three, Cloten brings in musicians to serenade Imogen to see if they can “penetrate her with [their] fingering” (14-15). And then they (or he and they) sing a song that Shakespeare sampled from his own sonnets. In this ploy, your students will present their serenades to you.

Set-up

- (1) In a previous class divide your class into serenade bands of 4-6. They are each to choose their Cloten and their lead singer (it cannot be the same person).
- (2) They are to choose their band names from language in the play (for example, “The Milford Havens”)
- (3) Their assignment is to put together a serenade sampled from anywhere they like.
- (4) They can choose to play it and sing it themselves or they can lip-synch and play it, but they must all participate.

In-class

- (1) Choose what order you like and have the first band come up.
- (2) Have the Cloten in the group introduce the group by name and then either say these words:

Come on, tune: if you can penetrate her with your
fingering, so we’ll try the tongue too...but I’ll ne’er give o’er. (14-16)

or use some other lines of Cloten’s from the play.

- (3) Have the class vote for the awards such as “Funniest Serenade,” “Most Penetrating Serenade,” “Most Clotenish Serenade,” etc.

SCENES FOR ALTERNATIVE READINGS

A. Imogen Responds to Iachimo’s Advances. Act One, scene 7, line 129 (“How should I be revenged?”) to 199 (“Oh no, no.”) 4 minutes per version. Two speaking parts.

The wager with Iachimo that her idiot husband Posthumus makes over Imogen’s faithfulness rivets an audience’s attention to her meeting with Iachimo in 1.7. We know, of course, that she’ll stay faithful to her husband, but *how* will she deal with this creep? How will the actress negotiate between the outrage she should feel and her status as the Princess of Britain, and then, after Iachimo says he was only testing her, does she forgive him?

In *the first version* have your Imogen both physically and vocally outraged at Iachimo’s proposition. She’s in a fury as soon as she realizes what Iachimo is suggesting, and we hear

that fury as soon as she first calls out “What ho, Pisanio!” Then, when Iachimo gives his excuse, she completely accepts it and forgives him, she’s delighted to keep his trunk, and she’s really sorry he’s leaving the next day.

In *the second version* Imogen is also outraged at Iachimo’s suggestion, but this Imogen tries to maintain her composure while she still makes it vividly clear how repugnant Iachimo is to her. In this version, when he explains he was only testing her, she doesn’t at all believe him but has too much class to say so; she’s suspicious of the trunk; and she’s relieved he’ll be going the next day.

Have a discussion – include the student playing Iachimo (but not Imogen until later) – about what works best for them and then glean from that conversation some suggestions (never more than three) to give Imogen for *the third version*. After that version, ask her what she liked and did not like about the three versions and why.

B. Imogen Responds to her Stepbrother Cloten’s Advances. Act Two, scene 3, line 87 (“Good morrow, fairest”) to 137 (“How now, Pisanio!”). 3 minutes per version. Two speaking parts.


You might want to have a class in which you pair this scene with the one above and watch Imogen say “no” to both of the play’s villains. This scene raises similar issues regarding status for Imogen, but in this case the frame is comic rather than dramatic.

In *the first version* have your Cloten play the self-regarding idiot, completely unaware of how odious he is. You might bring in some props or costume pieces your actor can use to make him more obviously a comic character– goggles, bicyclist’s helmet, cravat, bowler hat, swimming cap, eye patch, oversized dark glasses, riding crop, galoshes. In this version, have your Imogen play a mean, spoiled princess, incensed that such an idiot would even speak to her.

In *the second version* have Cloten play it straight – he’s sensitive, in love, and only wants what’s best for her – and have Imogen as amused and gentle in her scorn as she can be.

Leaving your two actors out of the discussion, ask your students to compare their reactions to the two versions of these two characters. Which Cloten, comic or earnest, best fits the text? Where does the earnest Cloten least fit the text? Which Cloten do they like better? Why? Drawing on that conversation, make three suggestions to each of your actors to try in *the third version*. Then include the two actors in a general discussion of how this scene has reverberations in Act 4 where Guiderius kills Cloten and Imogen later wakes up next to his headless trunk.

ON SCREEN

 **1/2** In his 1983 BBC production of *Cymbeline*, director Elijah Moshinsky uses Vermeer-Rembrandt interiors very like those he used in *All’s Well that Ends Well*. But *Cymbeline* is set in the wilds of Wales with outdoor activities such as hunting, sword fighting, and large battles with the Romans. The result is that the parts of the play that benefit from a sense of containment—Posthumus’ bet with Iachimo, Iachimo’s invasion of Imogen’s bedroom—

work well enough, but the parts of Cymbeline that releases us from that kind of confinement to a more spacious world do not. Helen Mirren's Imogen is steely enough to be our heroine. Michael Pennington's Posthumus has the charm to explain Imogen's devotion, and he makes us attentive—even though it's the last act—to Posthumus' large load of monologues. The descent of Jupiter—here merely overhead angles and dark backgrounds—will disappoint for your students.