Latrice Stevenson  
English 406  
Dr Etheridge  
November 7, 2011

Not At First Sight, but The Second

*Cymbeline* by William Shakespeare was a play that finds the reader in the midst of a love story and a family reunion. The tale of Imogen and Posthumus was intertwined with the story of Cymbeline’s long lost sons. Contrary to many of Shakespeare’s more notable plays such as *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the main characters in this play conquer what could have been tragic outcomes, and can be an example of how an individual can overcome and find their way. Shakespeare uses subtle language and dialogue to bring to life each character and propel the storyline forward. The action does not happen as often with the characters, but with their words. This play is a prime example of how one’s actions, reactions, and fate can be so closely connected to another’s.

*Cymbeline* is Shakepeare’s last Roman play. His early plays *Titus Andronicus, Julius Ceasar, Antony and Cleopatra,* and *Coriolanus* all depicted Rome’s military background, stoic characters, oratorical mode, and a sense of family (*Cymbeline: Shakespeare’s Last Roman Play)*. Shakespeare infuses his intrigue with Roman culture and history with the romance of *Cymbeline*, which is unlike any other romance Shakespeare has written. The focal point of the play is the war which brings every essential character back to the king’s castle in order for all issues to be resolved and family to once again be together (V.v). The setting of the play is first century A.D. Britain, but the influence of Rome’s literature and spirituality is present with the reference to Greek mythology (V.iv.93-99). Although the core of this play is founded upon English and Roman history, the romance aspect is not overwhelmed, but smoothly works together to build more substantial characters. G. Wilson Knight is quoted as saying that Cymbeline should “be regarded as a historical play” (*Cymbeline: The Last Roman Play).*. David M. Bergeron states that dramatizing the Agustan era during the Jacobean is a stroke of genius that Shakespeare executes when he unites ancient Rome and ancient Britain.

To understand the genius of Shakespeare’s *Cymbelne,* one would have to start at the beginning just like the fairy tale this seemed to be. The play immediately introduced us with the conflict and who’s fate will affect the other. Imogen, beloved daughter of the king is unable to be married to a more chivalrous Posthumus, but less worthy courtier to king. The newlywed king has promised his new Queen’s son, Cloten, to his daughter. According to Cynthia Lewis’s *With Similar Proof Enough* the introduction of this dilemma presents duplicity,

“He that hath lost her too. So is the Queen/  
 That most desired match. But not a courtier,  
 Although they wear their faces to the bent  
 Of the King’s looks, hath a heart that is not   
 Glad at the thing they scowl at,”

Not only with the love triangle between Imogen, Cloten, and Posthumus (l.i.11-15). These lines spoken by the Gentlemen insinuate that the Queen was not who she said she was, and foreshadowed her motives toward the Queen were less than reputable. Lewis states that this playwright weighs heavily on imagery and a play on “sight”. The conflicts and their resolutions are in plain sight.

There is a way speech can captivate an individual and either delude or inspire. Within the this play the witty use of language is at the forefront. Primary issue is unable to detect foul play with the tongue. Imogen, the most clever of all characters is able to see through not only the Queen’s undesirable traits, but also Cloten and Iachimo’s With the use of language and miscommunication being the foundation of the play, and Imogen clearly the most intelligent character if she alone could not have seen past the many faulty traits of her counterparts this entire romance would be lost. This begins not with her defiance against her father, because any child can begin to rebel. It starts with Imogen being to see through the Queen’s pseudo sincerities, “If the King come, I shall not incur I know not/ How much of his displeasure. *[Aside]* Yet I’ll move him/ To walk this way” (l.i.103-105). If Imogen of all characters were to become a fool, gullible and easy to deceive this play she would not have found a way back to Posthumus nor overcome Iachimo’s advances. Elena Glazzov-Corrigan states,

“In drama words generate action, or rather a plot unfolds out of a series of Speech Acts the action rides on a train of illocutions. Thus, the attractiveness of Speech Acts still consists in their central concern with language as action…”

Glazzov-Corrigan refers to the Speech Acts Theory and how Shakespeare so fiercely used language and imagery words as the action in this play *(Speech Acts, Generic Differences and the Curious Case of Cymbeline*). Where there is manipulation from Iachimo, Cloten, and the Queen, Imogen is resourceful and aware. Instead of this play being one full of action, violence, and gore, it is one of words and wit and manipulation.

Shakespeare cleverly intertwines one character’s fate around another’s with the slightest decision, reaction, or speech. William Hazlitt describes this play as having “a certain tender gloom overspreading the whole” (*Cymbeline*: *Characters of Shakespeare Plays)*. The conflict is immediately introduced at the beginning of the play and lets the audience know the first obstacle Imogen and Posthumus have to overcome. As the play continues each trial is layered over another along with conflicts that indirectly affect the couple and their perception of each other. When the Queen and Cloten convince Cymbeline not to bay tribute to Caius Lucius it puts both Posthumus and Imogen at opposite sides of the war that will eventually lead them back to each other.

Imogen and Posthumus contrast in every way, epitomizing the term “opposites attract”. Hazlit’s description of the two makes them seem as if they were still one entitiy. He mentions that they would not be as interesting if one were not as entranced with the other as they were. This couple and thus the play would lose its appeal if Imogen and Posthumus were not as attached and did not react to one another as they do. That is another critical aspect of this romance. Yes, Posthumus is an insecure and erratic man, but some may see him as passionate and lost without Imogen. Should Shakespeare have replaced Posthumus with Iachimo or Cloten, characters with clear ulterior motives and impure hearts, the play would not have the same romantic appeal. The heroine of the play, Imogen saves the play in many ways with her quick wit and graceful nature including her encounter with Iachimo and how she allows herself to be run away to Wales and be disguised as a boy and a male just to find her irrational husband (III.ii, III.iv). Much of the play’s appeal heavily relies on Imogen’s intelligence, comprehension, and reaction to every situation she is in.

Imogen is the heroine, and it is as if Posthumus is the one in distress and she is running off to save him. No, he may not be in any direct harm, but his own doubtful thoughts of Imogen and the perception of their relationship is harmful to their marriage. Posthumus is easily influenced, jealous and insecure. Whereas Imogen is rational, quick witted, and secure in her love and devotion. According to *Boy Actors, Female Roles, and Elizabethan Eroticism* by David Kashan-Scott and Peter Stallybass the roles of masculinity and femininity between Imogen and Posthumus are slightly reversed. Yes, Imogen is still portrayed as the ideal woman: virtuous, faithful, devoted, and loving. However, whereas many women may have fallen to the seduction of Iachimo, dumbstruck by the hit put out on her by her husband, or the lengths it took to reunite, Imogen is graceful. It is Posthumus who begins to unravel in Act V, “Tis enough / That, Britain, I have killed thy mistress; peace, / I'll give no wound to thee,” (V.i.19-21) by fighting disguised as a British peasant and trying to get himself killed. This ironic seeing as all characters are played by men. So a man must play a woman as the strong independent secure role, and another as the emotional and insecure. Posthumus’s irrational emotions and some may say lack of masculinity is what caused Imogen to run to Wales to find him. Although Posthumus is remorseful and redeems himself by the end of the play, it is Imogen that is the critical character. She alone holds every component together, despite the flaws of other characters, if she had been more faulty and less put together this play could have easily been a tragedy.

It is not Posthumus’s decision to have his wife killed that makes him so unfavorable. It is the act of wagering a bet over her faithfulness and virtue, that alone is what turns the tide in what started off as a stereotypical fairy tale. In *Cymbeline* Iachimo and Cloten are not the only ones looked at as a villain (I.iv.125-170). Posthumus has two critical flaws, insecurity and jealousy, and because of these two flaws it leads him to make a decision that labels him among many critics as the least favorite. This is because with Iachimo and Cloten they are who they are and their true colors are shown from the beginning. One critic in particular, William Lawrence, unleashes his distaste for Posthumus’s with Iachimo. To many critics it is clearly unfounded and unjust, no matter the time era. William quotes another critic, Sir Walter Raleigh as saying, “Why did Shakespeare create so exquisite a being as Imogen for a jealous & paltry Posthumus” (*The Wager in Cymbeline).*According to Lawrence, critics go to Shakespeare for moral teachings. Though these may be grown men, this could be related to peer pressure. In the beginning of Iachimo and Posthumus’s dialogue about women’s virture he defends Imogen, “You are mistaken. The one may be sold or given, or if there were wealth enough for the purchas or merit for the gift. The other is not a thing for sale, and only a gift of the gods” (I.iv.83-86). Posthumus begins by comparing Imogen to the diamond ring that she gave him when they parted. Unfortunately, when making this wager Posthumus devalues Imogen’s virtue, their relationship, and the symbolism of the ring. The ring and the bracelet that they traded for each other symbolized maintaining a union despite the hardships their marriage was undergoing at the present. Imogen, when finding out the bracelet that had been given to her by Posthumus was missing was beyond distraught. However, it was because of Posthumus and his lack of trust that it was gone, allowing Iachimo to travel to her home and into her bed chambers to prove a point that he seemingly lost. It was within this wager Posthumus created his own misery and lost the symbols that were holding together his marriage.

In comparing Imogen and her virtue to the diamond and the gods we can truly see how devoted Posthumus is and that he does realize her worth. Critics such as Sir Walter Raleigh and R. G. Moulton look at Posthumus’s lack of trust in making the wager with a disapproving eye, however Homer Swander has a different perspective. *Cymbeline* was set in ancient Britain and published around 1610, therefore some may view his actions of rage as one of passion and chivalry and the protection of purity during that time era. It is easy to forget the time that *Cymbeline* was written and judge Posthumus with a modern perspective. Swander defends Posthumus actions as a man lost in love and pushed to irrational action, which is like any other individual who has seen what true love is like. However, Swander calls Posthumus “gullible”, after not much of an argument he is easy to believe Iachimo’s words about Imogen when Posthumus alone knows her (*The Blameless Hero).* Morally, Posthumus is not a favorable literature character because of his decisions, pertaining to literature he is a popular character because his decisions and reactions cause catalysts that keep the story interesting and in motion. Just as if Imogen were less put together the plot would fall apart, but if Posthumus were more put together the play wouldn’t be as interesting. Within his critique, Swander analyzes William Witherie Lawrence and his views on *Cymbeline* and the wager. Lawrence believes it is Shakespeare who wants Posthumus to be a blameless hero. Imogen is the image of perfection in her role as a women, her faithfulness to herhusband, and her will to prove her virtue as still pure. Posthumus continues to believe Imogen to be dead until the end of the play where they are all reunited at Cymbeline’s kingdom because they are all Roman captives. Iachimo finally confesses the truth of his trickery to both Posthumus and Imogen. Posthumus finally realizes that his greatest flaw is not trusting his beloved and honest wife,

“Of virtue was she, yea, and she herself./  
 Spit, and throw stones, cast upon me, set/  
 The dogs o’th ‘ to bay me! Every villain/  
 Be called Posthumus Leonatus, and  
 Be “villainy” less than ‘twas! O Imogen!/  
 My queen, my life, my wife! O Imogen,”

Swander suggests that Shakespeare has written this play in the way that he has so that the audience may see the growth of Posthumus as a lover and a man (V.v.223-228). While Imogen is flawless, Posthumus and his flaws may make him a antagonist in some ways but will make him relatable in many others after he sees the error of his ways.

One characters who stays unfavorable and stagnant throughout the play are Cloten and the Queen. The self-absorbed arrogant son of the Queen, nor herself have an epiphany nor a revelation before their death in the play. No matter how stoic they are their deaths do play a role in the play and are significant in order for Cymbeline to be free of a cynical influence. It is evident how much of an influence the Queen has over Cymbeline in the scene with Cauis Lucius. Cauis Lucius’s role in the play is a dramatic foil, to show the audience how manipulative the Queen is over Cymbeline. Cymbeline refuses to play the Roman tribute because of the Queen and Cloten’s influence, “Though Rome be therefore angry. Mulmutius made our laws./ Who was the first of Britain which did put/ His brows within a golden crown and called/ Himself a king” (III.i.58-62). According to Warren D. Smith’s *Cloten with Cauis Lucius* it is essentially Cloten and the Queen refusing to pay the tribute, not Cymbeline, “By itself, and we will pay nothing./ For wearing our own noses” (III.i.12-13). Cymbeline allowed his love of the Queen to affect his role as a leader and king, therefore put his kingdom in jeopardy and initiate an unnecessary war. Although ,the war did have reunited all of the characters except for the Clotenn and the Queen. It was because of their deaths that Cymbeline could rule fairly and precisely as he should, and also allow Imogen to be with Posthumus now that Cloten was not clouding his judgement on who a suitable husband should be.

*Cymbeline* is a play with an abundance of a play on words and language. A particular name for this method is ‘sleight of hand’. Originally the term sleight of hand referred to the performance of a juggler or a magician, however in literature and specifically in *Cymbeline* has intertwined the foundation of the plot, the background and introduction of the characters, and and the dialogue within the play (*Sleight of Hand in Cymbeline).* The introduction of the characters by the Two Gentlemen lead you to believe it will be the ordinary romance play with a plot of a young couple rebelling the authority that is against their love (I.i .11-15). It is the introduction of Iachimo that gives the play its originality. Despite how unfavorable Iachimo and Cloten are, it is because of these two characters and their cynical personalities and decisions that gives the play its underlying drama. After Cloten runs after Imogen to Wales “with Posthumus's suit upon my back will I ravish her, first kill him, and in her eyes,” it gives the allusion that Imogen’s end is near (III.v.135-6). Cleverly intertwined in the plot are the long lost sons of Cymbeline, Guiderius and Arviragus, kidnapped by a former British noblemen at childhood. Living out in the Welish wilderness that Imogen ends up in, if it were not for them having not already been settled Cloten would have surely overcome Imogen. That is at least the illusion that is given seeing as it is Imogen’s unknowing step-brothers that kill Cloten. It is Cloten’s own asinine behavior that is the cause of his death as he challenges the three to a fight. Sleight in hand, leaves the audience with several ‘what if’ questions after every scene until they are answered in the next scene or the next few scenes to come. However, the technique Shakespeare uses to write *Cymbeline* will always make a reader question a character’s characteristic and how a slight change could effect the entire outcome of the play.

Shakespeare brilliantly showcases his mastery with diction and language in Cymbeline. This play is by far unpredictable and intriguing. Shakespeare’s use of history within the play adds depth to each character and scene. Despite any character flaw a character may have, in some way in the way in which this is written each character has a relatable trait. Whether it be jealousy, longing, love, pride, perseverance, Shakespeare does not create hollow characters. Therefore, the decisions they make, insignificant or significant, can have an extreme affect on the next character. Even subtle differences in a decision or action can lead to an overwhelming reaction. Throughout its existence *Cymbeline* has generated several arguments from various perspectives from critics and that is what a monumental literary work does.