

Text, Power and Authority, and the Secrets of *Cymbeline*

This play has many just sentiments, some natural dialogues, and some pleasing scenes, but they are obtained at the expense of much incongruity. To remark the folly of the fiction, the absurdity of the conduct, the confusion of the names, and manners of different times, and the impossibility of the events in any system of life, were to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility, upon faults too evident for detection, and too gross for aggravation.¹

Such was Samuel Johnson's seminally scathing verdict on Shakespeare's play about the first century British king, Cymbeline, who, as Shakespeare has it, bravely spurned demands from the Romans for tribute, defeated their invading army in ferocious battle, but then with a great fanfare and smiles all round, agreed to pay them the tribute after all. Subsequent scholarship on this play could be characterised as 'footnotes on Johnson'; many critics have been kinder than he, but none have succeeded in resolving the manifest incongruities and 'delving' this play 'to the root'. Even Martin Butler, editor of the Cambridge *Cymbeline* (2005) who declares this play the product of a dramatist 'at the height of his powers' and waxes lyrical about a narrative that 'grips and compels, rising inexorably ... to a peripeteia of dazzling artfulness', has to admit to a 'problem' that he suggests 'is not implausibility so much as the difficulty of identifying the play's inner dynamic'.² Precisely, this is indeed the issue. The answer, I propose, is that *Cymbeline* is an allegory, but this is a possibility that Butler, in company with other recent scholarship, dismisses. He declares, 'At worst, [*Cymbeline's*] topicalities have been seen as a puzzle to be cracked, a code that could be broken were the right cryptographic key found.' In similar vein, Alison Thorne, in *Shakespeare's Romances*, (2002) could write:

Instead of trying to solve the riddle of the play's 'meaning' by identifying the key to its multiplicity we might more profitably attend to the ways in which this, the most elusive of Shakespeare's so-called 'romances', reflects ironically on the question of its own illegibility.³

The problem these modern critics have is that they sound like modern critics. It seems to me that the very first thing the sophisticated Jacobean audience is going to do is assume that there is a puzzle here to be cracked. They may not be able to crack it, because they may not be part of the coterie audience with access to the key, but that was all part of the game. In this paper I will claim that this elusive, riddle of a play, appears illegible because it is an allegory, and I propose a key that resolves

1 Samuel Johnson, *General Observations on the Plays of Shakespeare* (1756) quoted in Nosworthy, *Cymbeline*, (Arden edn) xl.

2 Butler, *Cymbeline* (Cambridge edn) 1, 2.

3 Alison Thorne, *Shakespeare's Romances*, 177.

it. The credibility of such a reading of the play, rests to a great extent on the detail of the analysis. For this reason, and in deference to the theme of this conference, I propose to sketch the allegory itself very briefly, and then move on to specific textual issues. I make the claim that there are at least four occasions where the earliest text of *Cymbeline*, that in the *First Folio*, has been emended by editors of the critical editions, but where the original spelling fits precisely the subtext that I identify in this play. I will focus on two of these instances: the question of Imogen versus Innogen (with a double n) and 'oaks' versus 'rocks' in the queen's 'Neptune's park' speech, (3.1).

In considering the meaning of the text, let me start by uttering the heresy that I read *Cymbeline* as a Catholic play. The point has often been made that allegory tends to emerge in circumstances of repression as a means of speaking in a veiled fashion that which it is difficult to speak openly, and Catholics in England in the years following the Gunpowder Plot, when it is believed *Cymbeline* was written, certainly had reason to veil their speech. I am not the first to argue along these lines; Clare Asquith and Peter Milward have both argued strongly that there are elements of Catholic allegory in *Cymbeline*, as has, more tentatively, Velma Richmond.⁴ Willy Maley remarks in his book *Postcolonial Shakespeare: British identity formation and Cymbeline*, that Shakespeare, 'could be seen to be ... championing a residual Catholicism'.⁵ The most obvious indication of the Catholic standpoint is in the tribute storyline referred to above. Roman power and authority can stand for Roman Catholic, or Papal, power and authority (as in the Protestant, *Mirror for Magistrates*).⁶ The refusal to pay the tribute, evokes the banning of Peter's Pence, a significant step in the English Reformation that was both a symbolic and real rejection of power and authority.⁷ Conversely, if the refusal to pay evokes the English break with Rome, King Cymbeline's magnanimous decision to recommence payment evokes the Catholic hope that the British crown would at some future providential time accept the authority of the papacy once again. One can see both why this might appear ridiculous to Samuel Johnson and also why Shakespeare might want to throw a veil over it, albeit a rather transparent one - transparent because this element of the subtext is more or less evident to the contemporary audience without any particularly specialised knowledge. This is in contrast to that which I wish to move on to next, which is the more concealed allegory I propose at the core of the play designed for a coterie audience of English and Welsh

⁴ See, Asquith, *Shadowplay*, 253-257; Milward, *Shakespeare the Papist*, 251-258; Richmond, *Shakespeare, Catholicism & Romance*, 168-172.

⁵ Maley, *Postcolonial Shakespeare*, 56.

⁶ See Asquith 252-253.

⁷ Of more current relevance to the Jacobean audience were arguments over the justification of rebellion against lawful rulers in the light of King James' strident assertions of the Divine Right of kings. This was particularly relevant to the Dutch revolt against the Hapsburgs, and in this context it was argued (by Grotius in *Commentarius*) that the unjust exaction of taxes, contrary to custom, was a legitimate cause of rebellion. The Dutch revolt, as a Protestant rebellion against a Catholic authority, in that respect obviously parallels Henry VIII's rejection of the authority of Rome. See Ros King, *Cymbeline: Constructions of Britain*, 85.

Catholics.

In this instance, Shakespeare does not give his 'caviare to the general' (*Hamlet* 2.2), and he does not *give* his caviare to the coterie audience either. He makes them work for it. He sets them a series of cryptic clues or devices. He expects them to ask 'Who is Imogen? What is she?' and the like. He leaves them trails of clues, and he depends on very specific in-crowd knowledge. It is meant to be complex. It is designed as an intellectual challenge. Essentially my proposal is that he deploys the same allegorical key that he had used several years earlier with his intensely cryptic poem, 'The Phoenix and Turtle'. In brief, the phoenix and the turtle-dove correspond to Anne Line, a Catholic hanged in 1601 for assisting priests, and her exiled husband Roger Line who pre-deceased her by about seven years. The latter interpretation was proposed by John Finnis and Patrick Martin in 2003, and I have extended it in one crucial respect, which is this: Anne and Roger Line represent the spiritual and temporal dimensions of the Roman Catholic Church in England/Britain.⁸ They function as synecdoche in other words, and Shakespeare's poem then becomes a lament on the 'death' of Catholicism in England. Just as the death of the phoenix is not the end because new life emerges from the ashes, so the death of Catholicism marked in Shakespeare's 1601 poem is not final. He returns to this same allegorical schema in *Cymbeline* where Imogen corresponds to Anne Line and thereby to the spiritual dimension of the Church, and Posthumus to her husband, Roger Line of Ringwood, who corresponds to the temporal aspect of the Church. The play *Cymbeline* then becomes a reflection on the Catholic experience during the intervening period, when hotheads among the 'temporals' had almost destroyed that which they professed to love by engaging in the Gunpowder Plot. Shakespeare examines these traumatic events through the medium of the wager story and the descent of Posthumus into fury and hate. By the end of the play, however, he has offered a profoundly hopeful vision to his Catholic audience whereby division in the Christian Church and in the wider world is overcome.

So we move on to the textual issues, the first being the case of Imogen versus Innogen (with a double 'n'). The first record of *Cymbeline* is an account of the play in Simon Foreman's diary in which he refers to the female protagonist as Innogen, though the first edition of the play, that in the *First Folio*, has her name as Imogen. In recent times, notably since the Oxford Edition of 1986, the name has often been amended to Innogen on the assumption that the 'Imogen' of the Folio is the result of a typographical error, and this is clearly a possibility. The name Imogen is almost unknown prior to Shakespeare's play, but Innogen, though not commonly used, was highly significant as this was the name of the wife of Brytus, the supposed founder of Britain, and therefore Innogen could

⁸ Finnis, Martin, 'Another Turn for the Turtle: Shakespeare's intercession for Love's Martyr', *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 April 2003, 12-14; Dodwell, *Anne Line: Shakespeare's Tragic Muse*, 128-177.

be considered the mother of the British nation. The case for Innogen is further enhanced by the fact that in *Cymbeline*, the Imogen character is married to Posthumus *Leonatus*, and in *Much Ado* we have a Leonato, who, in an early version, has a wife called Innogen. This earlier pairing of names is taken to reinforce the case for Innogen in *Cymbeline*. On the face of it then, Stanley Wells *et al.*, who opted for Innogen in the *Oxford Edition*, have a strong case, but it has been challenged, notably by Ros King and John Pitcher, and I have my own contribution to add to their objections.⁹

I mentioned earlier that Shakespeare sets trails of clues to his subtext. There are two that I wish to draw attention to in this paper. One concerns coins and medals, but the one we are concerned with here, is the trail of names.¹⁰ I propose that Shakespeare intends to allude to Innogen, the pseudo-historical figure, but he chooses quite deliberately to change the name slightly. Why would he do that? Because this is the beginning of a trail: there are a whole series of names in *Cymbeline*, I suggest, that allude to historical or pseudo-historical figures that have names that are very slightly different. For example, Belarius, relates to Belisarius; Posthumous to Postumus; Polydor to Polydorus; Cadwal to Caedwalla; Euriphile to Herophile, etc.¹¹ Shakespeare is indicating to his sophisticated audience that Innogen, for example, the mother of the British nation, tells us something about the character Imogen: she is not exactly the same, it is not a straight-forward identification, but the one tells us something about the allegorical identification of the other; in this case, that Imogen represents something about Britain as a whole.

Before I skip on rapidly to the second textual issue, a word about the pairing of Leonato and Innogen in *Much Ado*, because this is often noted but never explained. The action takes place in the house of Leonato. The lion is the heraldic symbol of England. The implication to the sophisticated audience may be either that this play is really about what is going on in England, or possibly about English exiles in Italy. The reference to a wife called Innogen is simply to reinforce the hint that this is a play with an English/British setting hidden under an Italian veil.

In Act III, scene I of *Cymbeline*, the queen is trying to put some backbone into her husband to persuade him to defy the Roman demands for tribute and she gives us the patriotic 'Neptune's park' speech. What Shakespeare has done here, I suggest (following Asquith and Butler, among others), is put into the mouth of *Cymbeline*'s queen an English, Protestant, nationalist, rhetoric - the

⁹ See, Wells & Taylor, *Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*, 604; Bate & Rasmussen, *RSC Shakespeare*, 2244, for the 'Innogen' view, and for a defence of 'Imogen', Ros King, 72; John Pitcher, 'Names in *Cymbeline*', 3-10, *Essays in Criticism*, Vol XLIII, No 1 (Jan 1993) 1-16.

¹⁰ Ros King (*Cymbeline: Constructions of Britain*, 65-70) notes a borrowing from the imagery of coins in *Cymbeline*.

¹¹ As far as I am aware, the Belisarius, Postumus and Herophile proposals were first made by the present author (See, *Anne Line: Shakespeare's Tragic Muse*, 128-177). Herophile may be one of a cluster of associations of the name Euriphile; Simonds (356) suggests Eurydice the wife of Orpheus; Cambridge *Cymbeline* suggests 'lover of Europe'; I have argued that Belarius and his cave represent on one level the first Catholic seminary (Douay/Rheims). The first school for Catholic children abroad was at Eu – later moved to St Omer – so together Belarius and Eu(ri)phile can represent the whole movement of Catholic education abroad.

defiance of Roman power and authority, a thinly-veiled, thumbing-the-nose-at-the-pope.¹² The queen's son Cloten is the other character with a similar voice, and it is one of the more telling indications of the Catholic standpoint of the text as a whole that this Protestant rhetoric is put into the mouths of the two wicked characters in the play.¹³ I have referred previously to clues involving coins and medals, and in the Neptune's park speech we find an instance of this. The imagery deployed appears to reflect the designs on medals struck in 1588 and 1589 to commemorate the victory over the Armada.¹⁴ To take just one of a number of parallels, these medals commonly depicted Britain as a park in the middle of the sea. Here is the speech:

Remember, sir, my liege,
 The kings, your ancestors, together with
 The natural bravery of your isle, which stands
 As Neptune's park, ribbed and pal'd-in
 With oaks unscaleable and roaring waters,
 With sands that will not bear your enemies' boats,
 But suck them up to th' topmast. A kind of conquest
 Caesar made here, but made not here his brag
 Of 'came and saw and overcame:' with shame
 (the first that ever touch'd him) he was carried
 From off our coast, twice beaten: and his shipping
 (Poor ignorant baubles!) on our terrible seas,
 Like egg-shells mov'd upon their surges, crack'd
 As easily 'gainst our rocks. For joy whereof,
 The famed Cassibelan, who was once at point,
 (O giglot fortune!) to master Caesar's sword,
 Made Lud's town with rejoicing-fires bright,
 And Britons strut with courage. (3.1.17-34)

Now, just to point up a couple of the other medal links: there were two principal designs of Armada medals struck in England, one has the park image, the other has Spanish ships being smashed on the rocks and one of them looking somewhat like an egg being broken open with men spilling out into the sea.¹⁵ Moreover, on this medal, ironic reference is made to Caesar's '*Veni, vedi, vici*', with the inscription '*veni, vedi, vive*' – 'come, see, live'.¹⁶ The depiction of England as a park on one of the medals shows what looks like a fence of wooden paling around it, and this brings us neatly to the textual issue. Where the *Folio* has 'Neptune's park, ribb'd and pal'd in with oakes unscaleable and roaring waters' the editors of the Arden Shakespeare, have amended 'oakes' to 'rocks'.¹⁷ Another suggestion is 'banks'. The Oxford, *Textual Companion*, tells us, 'Editors agree in

¹² The Cambridge *Cymbeline* (43) notes the 'Armada rhetoric' in this speech as does Asquith (253).

¹³ So, Asquith, 253.

¹⁴ See Dodwell, *Anne Line: Shakespeare's Tragic Muse*, 154.

¹⁵ Dodwell, 154.

¹⁶ Dodwell, 154.

¹⁷ See Arden, *Cymbeline*, 75.

rejecting F [the folio 'oakes']; but *banks* seems preferable to *rocks* in suggesting both 'sea-coast' ... and 'an artificial earthwork, an embankment for military use'.¹⁸ This question has long been at issue on the grounds that Britain is not surrounded by a defensive wall of oaks, and hence 'rocks', for example, would seem to make a lot more sense. It also alliterates. The *Textual Companion* is slightly out of date, however, because more recently the Cambridge *Cymbeline* has reverted to 'oakes'. The latter version is supported by the description of Neptune's park as 'ribbed and paled-in' because paling is wooden fencing such as might surround a park.¹⁹ Moreover, a deer-park would have high, 'unscaleable', fencing and would commonly have strong uprights at regular intervals like ribs. Where is the great rocky cliff-face that has this feature? Hence, I concur with the Cambridge *Cymbeline* that Shakespeare wrote 'oakes' because he meant oaks, but I have some new evidence to present that gives us a very specific reason why he might have done that, as we shall see.

The queen declares, 'A kind of conquest Caesar made here, but made not here his brag / Of 'came and saw and overcame'. We can take this at face value: Caesar's '*veni, vedi, vici*' refers to a rapid and decisive victory achieved in Asia Minor, very different from his foggy adventures in Britain that were a much more bruising affair.²⁰ But with his 'made *here*, but made not *here*', Shakespeare is drawing attention to location, and alert contemporaries, aware of his propensity to play with times and places, may have detected another subtle clue to the subtext. About 90 years after Julius Caesar's incursion, another Caesar – Claudius - made 'a kind of conquest' at the settlement of *Camelodunum*, as this was the town where he received the ritual submission of the British chieftains, that great historic occasion that formalised the Roman conquest. *Camelodunum* had been the location of King Cymbeline's court, and therefore is the place where the queen is making her speech. So, when the queen declares, 'a kind of conquest Caesar made here' there is at the very least a note of irony, but I suggest there is more than that. It was believed by Shakespeare's contemporaries (notably Camden) that *Camelodunum* was at the coastal town of Maldon in Essex that stands at the head of the Blackwater estuary, a location that matches imagery in the queen's speech (and a town where Shakespeare may have performed early in his career). Significantly, the coast at this point has 'sands that will not bear your enemies boats', and there is an archaeological site just outside Maldon, at Maylandsea, where an ancient boat has literally been sucked up to the topmast. The really telling point is that embedded in the mud of this estuary are long lines of ancient wooden posts, including oak posts nine inches in diameter and regularly spaced as though the remains of a great fence. There are a number of these structures at different points around the estuary and one of them is no less than 390m long. Wood from these structures has been carbon-

¹⁸ Wells and Taylor, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*, 606.

¹⁹ *35 Henry VIII*, c.17, para. 6. See *OED* 'paling', n1.2.

²⁰ This information was available to Shakespeare via Plutarch among other sources.

dated to the 8th century though some are thought to be considerably older, and they are now believed to be the remains of fish-traps, though this was unknown to Shakespeare. I suggest that Shakespeare's oaks are one hint among many, by which he is directing his sophisticated audience to Maldon. He does this because he is giving clues that will unlock his allegory. If his coterie audience register that Cymbeline and his daughter Imogen lived at Maldon, and they know that Anne Line and her angry father also lived at Maldon, they can begin to make a connection. Once they start to explore this they will soon discover other clues that confirm the identification.

To conclude: I am suggesting that overzealous editors have smoothed the text of *Cymbeline* according to the surface layer of the play but in the process have destroyed deliberate discrepancies which are there in the First Folio as clues to the subtext.

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Paper for British Shakespeare Association conference, 'Shakespeare: Text, Power and Authority', University of Stirling, 2014, Panel 1a, 3 July, 'Shakespeare and Religion'.

Publications:

'Revisiting Anne Line: who was she and where did she come from?' *Recusant History*, Vol.31, No 3 (May, 2013).
London: Catholic Record Society.

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Note

Two other examples of textual emendations:

If you seek for further satisfying, under her breast, worthy her/the pressing, lies a mole. (2.4)

Richer than doing nothing for a babe/robe (3.3)