

Richard Bradbury

"HOWSOE'ER 'TIS STRANGE,
[...] YET IS IT TRUE":
THE PROBLEMS OF *CYMBELINE*

The two most recent productions of *Cymbeline* by the Royal Shakespeare Company have demonstrated two poles of possibility in the staging of this work. In 1987 Bill Alexander directed Harriet Walter, Nicholas Farrell and Donald Sumpter at The Other Place, in a production which emphasised aspects of psychological exploration. The small scale dictated by the size of the theatre became a positive advantage as the audience were invited into an intimate contact with the actors as they picked their way through the maze of events. More recently, Alexander has re-directed the play in the main house at Stratford-upon-Avon using a cast dominated by much younger and less experienced actors. Here the vast bronze and stone effect set - which opened on occasion into a still larger space - propelled the performance away from psychology and towards a clear, fast-moving explication of the events which circumnavigated, rather than engaged with, the soliloquys which punctuate the text. Indeed, the opening scene was re-organised so that it became an ensemble recitation of the beginnings of a chronicle-tale rather than the stilted conversation between the two gentlemen of the text. In these two productions, then, Alexander has explored the divergent elements of this play. The purpose of this paper is to enquire whether or not these elements, of plot and psychological exploration, are at odds with each other in Shakespeare's text.

The greatest difficulty any first-time reader or viewer of *Cymbeline* faces is that created by the plot, by the tangle of disparate threads of story which weave their fantastic way be-

tween three places with little regard for chronology, narrative integration or, indeed, likelihood.

Simon Forman's contemporary account of the plot is a good example of the problems one can encounter in attempting to come to terms with its complexity.

The storri of Cymbalin king of England in Lucius time, howe Lucius cam from Octauus Cesar for Tribut and being denied after sent Lucius w^t a greate Armi of Souldiars who landed at milford hauen, and Affter wer vanquished by Cimbalin and Lucius taken prisoner and all by means of 3 outlawes of the w^{ch} 2 of them were the sonns of Cimbalin stolen from him when they were but 2 yers old by an old man whom Cimbalin banished, and he kept them as his own sonns 20 yers w^t him in A cave. And howe on of them slewe Cloten that was the quens sonn goinge To milford hauen to sek the love of Jnnogen the kings doughter and howe the Jtalian that cam from her loue conveied him selfe into A cheste, and said yt was a chest of plate sent from her loue & others to be presented to the Kings. And on the depest of the night she being aslepe, he opened the cheste & cam forth of yt. And vewed her in her bed and the mared of her body, & tok a wai her braslet & after Accused her of adultery to her loue &c. And in thend howe he came w^t the Romaines into England & was taken prisoner and after Raueled to Innogen, Who had turned her self into mans apparel & fled to mete her loue at milford hauen, & chanced to fall on the Caue in the wods wher her 2 brothers were & howe by eating a sleping Dram they thought she bin deed & laid her in the wods & and the body of cloten by her in her louses apparel that he left behind him & howe she was found by lucius &c¹.

This account is interesting for its concentration on particular elements of the plot, for its apparent uninterest in the qualities of psychological exploration, and for the confusions it introduces into a reading of the play. It seems incapable of integrating the various aspects of the story with each other so that the account we receive is a hodge-podge of points from the play, arranged in what appears to be the order of Forman's memory rather than importance or chronology. Furthermore, he leaves crucial matters unexplained - the relationship between Imogen, the Queen and Cloten - and makes simple mistakes.

¹ S. Forman, *Booke of Plaies*, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 208, as in: S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975.

My purpose here, however, is not to demonstrate Forman's inability to remember accurately but rather to demonstrate the difficulty in dealing with the plot of this play and to suggest that this problem resides in the sheer complexity of the events. And if it was a problem for Simon Forman, it is clear that these problems have not been solved during the development of the play's stage history. This is demonstrated by Guy Doran's (the assistant director of the most recent RSC production) comment that any play with 24 dramatic climaxes was bound to present both audiences and casts with some difficulties!

Even knowing what is to happen is no relief, for the audacity demanded in the final scene to resolve all the complications created within the previous four acts and four scenes almost inevitably gives a comic note to *Cymbeline's* wonder-filled cry: "Does the world go round?", especially when the play is seen in performance. Rather than attempting to make apologies for a plot so riddled with problems that it moved George Bernard Shaw to re-write the final scene, I wish to make a defence of a different kind.

Let me begin by rejecting two common assumptions about Shakespeare's works. One, that if a play is by the 'bard' then it must of necessity, be a great work because it is by the 'bard'. The continuing existence of bardolatry is perhaps the greatest single block to the further development of serious study of these late plays. At the same time as admitting that some of the plays are better than others and that, even, some plays by other writers might be better than some of the great 37 we should avoid another pit-fall. Namely, the establishment of a core canon, of a group of plays which are the great plays which are the works for serious intellectual engagement and regular performance whilst the others are confined to the status of curiosities.

This latter position, reinforced as it is by the commercial failure of the 'peripheral' plays on the stage of the Main House in Stratford-upon-Avon and by their exclusion from school syllabuses, is essentially an argument in favour of an untroubled and consistent interpretation of Shakespeare's work. An interpretation which sees the plays as containing a core of truths and attitudes expressed within a more or less tightly defined set of

formal structures. The logical conclusion of this argument is that Shakespeare is a great playwright because he expresses a set of eternal truths in a language and form accessible to a twentieth-century audience.

I wish to reject this position on all of the grounds on which it stands. First, by abandoning the idea of eternal truth in favour of the understanding that Shakespeare's words speak to a contemporary audience (when they still do, for of course the argument carefully avoids all the embarrassing moments and points at which Shakespeare clearly and unequivocally expresses ideas long since abandoned under the pressure of modern science and developing social attitudes) because he was writing at the moment of birth for the society in which we all now live - he was present during the birth pangs of the modern world and recorded in vivid detail the impact of those changes on the minds of a whole social range of characters. It is this plenitude which is all too often translated into the argument that Shakespeare had no opinions of his own because he expresses so many (contradictory) opinions. It is not the content of any statement which is at issue, but rather the fact that opinions clash and collide within the plays as Shakespeare dramatises waves of social upheaval which penetrated into every aspect of the social fabric.

Secondly, I wish to reject the idea that at some level Shakespeare was a writer who did not develop during the course of his career, who was not constantly experimenting and trying out new ideas. Because that, at base, is the implication of the argument about a core of consistent ideas: that in approximately 25 years this writer's fundamental attitudes to the form and the content of his work was not open to continual radical revision and alteration.

On both counts, then, my defence of Shakespeare's greatness rests upon dynamic qualities in his writing. With this understanding, *Cymbeline* (1609?) can be seen not as a decline from the magnificence of the previous 5 years (which produced the late tragedies), not as the product of an exhausted imagination for which apologies have to be made, but rather as a work standing at the cusp of a change in his career. From this perspective, *Cymbeline* becomes a transitional work between the last tragedies and the romances. This argument does not maintain that

it is a great play worthy of comparison with either those works written immediately before or after it, but it does see the weaknesses of *Cymbeline* as the weaknesses of an experiment.

The accusation of weakness in this play usually rests on the grounds that the plot is improbable to the point of ridicule and relies altogether too heavily on the incidence of coincidence and unlikelihood. This argument is routinely made in a quantitative, rather than qualitative, fashion. There are too many coincidences, too many unlikelihoods, to sustain an audience's suspension of disbelief. Again, I wish to point out the weaknesses in this argument. First, that for this argument to have any validity it has to be made quantitatively because there are numerous examples of unlikelihood and coincidence in the plays which are routinely regarded as the great works. Secondly, it is clear from Forman's account that the question of improbability is not the one which occurs to this contemporary observer. We forget, at our critical peril, that one historical period's improbability is another's routine event and, still more, that the point at which quantity becomes qualitative is even more the product of the moment and place of reception. That we have to believe in at the very least Hamlet's belief in the reality of his father's ghost creates difficulties for twentieth century European audiences which, presumably, would have been incomprehensible to an Elizabethan audience (or indeed to a contemporary audience from a culture in which the literal reality of ghosts is acceptable).

Nevertheless, the problem remains that the incidence of coincidence bulks considerably larger in *Cymbeline* than in other plays. My defence of this rests on the assertion that Shakespeare was, by this point in his writing career, not primarily interested in the production of plots in which events interlock into a smooth mechanism of cause and effect. In this play (and still more in *Pericles*) credibility appears to be sacrificed in favour of the generation of extreme moments. The creation of situation, I would argue, is the primary motive behind the assembly of the plot. The vital question becomes not how characters arrive at the point at which they find themselves, but how they react once they are there. Characters respond to the incomprehensible and often incredible motions of the world around them with the one tool available - language. To emphasise this

point, I wish to use an example from a better-known (and better?) play: *Othello*. Here, the unlikelihood of the plot is disregarded in favour of a defence which rests directly on the memorable quality of certain speeches, especially:

I pray you in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme;²

The difference between this and a comparable moment in *Cymbeline* is instructive: the speech begins thus

These flow'rs are like the pleasures of the world;
This bloody man, the care on't. I hope I dream:
For so I thought I was a cave-keeper,
And cook to honest creatures. But 'tis not so;
'Twas but a bolt of nothing, shot at nothing,
Which the brain makes of fumes. Our very eyes
Are sometimes, like our judgements, blind. Good faith,
I tremble still with fear; but if there be
Yet left in heaven as small a drop of pity
As a wren's eye, fear'd gods, a part of it!
The dream's here still. Even when I wake it is
Without me, as within me; not imagin'd, felt.

(*Cymbeline*, IV. ii. 297-308)

A passage which is, I would argue as powerful in its rhetoric thought and evocation of emotion as that from *Othello*. The problem comes with the rest of the speech, for it continues

A headless man? The garments of Posthumus?
I know the shape of's leg; this is his hand:

² W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. P. Aleksander, London 1951, Collins, *Othello*, V. ii. 343-348. All the references in the text to Shakespeare's plays will be to this edition.

His foot Mercurial: his Martial thigh,
 The brawns of Hercules: but his Jovial face -
 Murder in heaven! How! 'Tis gone.

(*Cymbeline*, IV. 11. 309-313)

As J. M. Nosworthy, editor of the Arden edition of the play, remarks in his notes: "In romance mistaken identity is sometimes carried to incredible lengths, as here" (*Cymbeline*, Arden edition, p. 135). The problem is that the language cannot take the strain of both accounting for the emotional state of the speaking character and serving the needs of the plot for sustained periods in this situation of examination of extreme positions. The distance between the demands placed on the rhetoric and its actual capacities means that it is only for brief moments that this space can be bridged. And often the attempt collapses; hence, the laughter at *Cymbeline's* wonder in the final scene.

This is symptomatic of the more general strain which exists throughout the whole construction of the play. It pulls simultaneously towards complex plotting and moments of psychological examination. The former of these two impulses demands a large cast of characters organised into a form which comes close to the chronicle, whilst the latter needs focus in order that its exploration may be concentrated. At the same time, plot strains against thematic construction as we are lead into an increasingly fantastic series of situations designed to test the characters. Our problem is the same as that faced by the second gentleman when he finds his companion's version of the events prior to the opening of the play incredible: but we should remember the first gentleman's reply:

Howsoever 'tis strange,
 [...] Yet is it true, sir.

(*Cymbeline* I. 1. 65-67)

The element of wonder is both central to the construction of the romance play and also its (potentially) weakest point. It would be pedantic to insist on a strict sense of verisimilitude because that is the surest way of eliminating any sense of wonder. But the opposite problem is equally acute, namely that the

route to the wonder-filled moment may stretch our sense of strange truth to (and beyond) the point of dramatic acceptability. That that point is not fixed is obvious. Indeed, it is the source of much critical debate not only among critics but surely within them as well, as they watch different performances of the same play.

The results of the strains placed on the structure of *Cymbeline* is a play without focus, which makes huge and unexplained emotional leaps in order to maintain its motion towards the closure of the final scene and which, in the end complicates itself so much that divine intervention is the only possible solution in the time allowed! It seizes on thematic patterns, only, to discard them into the whirlpool of the plot's obscurities. *Cymbeline* can be read as an attempt by a patronised playwright to contribute to the contemporary debates about the legitimacy of the Stuart claim to the throne by writing a play which has Milford Haven as one of its significant points - significant because it is the place where Henry VII landed at the start of his successful campaign to establish the Tudor dynasty - but the action of the play never reaches Milford Haven! Equally well, the play can be read as a meditation on the nature of service, in which Cymbeline, the faithful servant who surrenders, and Pisanio the faithful servant who is insubordinate, represent the two extreme poles of the debate. But again, what conclusions do we draw from this when Pisanio's contribution is vital to the successful conclusion of the plot whilst Cymbeline's actions are crucial to the stage imagery of the final scene? Even if coherence is not necessarily the mark of genius, some degree of its presence is necessary if genius is not to slip all too easily into madness! Even at the moments when that motion is suspended and we are allowed into the processes of thought by which these characters try to make sense of the world into which they have been plunged, the language, the poetry, of the playwright has not yet adapted itself to the demands of new forms.

Nevertheless, I wish to make a defence of the play which rests on two grounds. First, its multiplicity, precisely the element which I began by suggesting is least easy to preserve in performance. Still more, the area of multiplicity I wish to emphasise is that of thematic complexity. At this level, we can argue, service is the key term to unravelling the play, as it

examines different forms of service - from that of servants to the duties of husbands to their wives, to the responsibilities of leaders of semi-independent colonies to the colonial power - but even here there is a strain between thematic exploration and serving the needs of the plot. *Cymbeline's* surrender after victory at the end of the play is but the sharpest version of this.

Secondly, its experimentalism. To understand the play it is necessary to see it in its precise context: positioned between the last of the great tragedies and the final romances. It is the attempt to forge a new form capable of examining the same extremes of emotional and psychological pressure as those of the tragedies, but in a very different key. Not in the tones of dispersal and individualism, but those of reconciliation and community. Harriet Walter (Imogen in 1987) has said that she sees the end of the play as

a positive, intelligent choice for survival rather than doom. They have the choice to remain intractable and to feel that as long as they beat their enemy he can go under without another thought. Instead, they choose to see events globally: if the enemy goes down, they all go down³.

That gathering-together at the end is a formal mark of Shakespeare's comedies and is, archetypally, marked by a wedding. Here, all of the resources of the play are mobilised towards that conclusion, but with one small difference. The marital union which should mark the end of the action is here the catalyst which takes place before the action begins and causes the initial dispersal. Here, then, the community is of a different sort; not that of comedy but of romance. A community based on the head and the heart; on the satisfaction of a plot concluded and on the wonder at the routes by which that conclusion was made possible. This play, then, is the first essay in the form and as such can be seen as the necessary stepping-stone for the production of the later romances: it is the ladder up which Shakespeare climbed to make *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

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³ H. Walter, *Helena and Imogen: The Achievers*, in: C. Rutter and others, *Clamorous Voices: Shakespeare's Women Today*, ed. P. Evans, The Women's Press, London 1988, p. 90.

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PROBLEMY Z CYMBELIN

Dwie ostatnie premiery *Cymbelin* wystawione przez Royal Shakespeare Company to dwa skrajne sposoby przedstawienia tego dramatu. W 1987 r. Bill Alexander podkreślił w swojej inscenizacji problemy psychologii postaci. W późniejszej inscenizacji na scenie głównego teatru w Stratfordzie ten sam reżyser położył nacisk na zgłębianie zawilóści akcji sztuki.

Artykuł niniejszy stara się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy te dwa elementy, akcja i psychologia postaci, są sprzeczne w oryginalnym tekście szekspirowskim. *Cymbelin* należy traktować jako sztukę przejściową między późnymi tragediami a romansami; jej głównym celem jest przedstawienie nie rozwijającej się akcji, ale sytuacji. Sztuka ta jest więc koniecznym etapem, który doprowadził Szekspira do późniejszych romansów - *Opowieści zimowej* i *Burzy*.