

Images of Rule in *Cymbeline*

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Jonathan Goldberg closes his excellent book, *James I and the Politics of Literature*, with a brief glimpse at *Cymbeline*, a play, he suggests, that captures the images of rule that were 'the ruling images of James's reign' (240). What Goldberg merely observes I will pursue. Such an investigation takes us beyond the analogy of *Cymbeline* to James on the matter of peace, a point which many critics have remarked. The question is not identification of characters in the play with James and members of his family, such as Frances Yates and Glynne Wickham have proposed,¹ but rather with understanding the kind of rule that *Cymbeline* as king represents. The images of rule in this play link it with the absolutist reign of James I. I will focus on the issues of self-division, succession, and interpretation.

The royal coin stamped on the play *Cymbeline* by Shakespeare has contrasting sides that reflect self-division, a quality essential in the reign of an absolutist monarch: the ruler is both known and unknown, open and remote, transparent and yet the possessor of state secrets. *Cymbeline* and his Queen re-present two sides of James's rule: the opaque and the transparent text embodied in the sovereign. Various interpreted or ignored by critics, the Queen is far more than the wicked witch of folklore. She is a mixture of the wily serpent in the Garden of Eden, of Augustus' wife Livia, of Lady Macbeth, and of Dionyza in *Pericles*, who would not shrink from murder in order to advance her own child. The Queen obviously constitutes a major threat to the stability and even survival of *Cymbeline*'s family. Her game is politics. Insensitive to the power of love, she pursues the love of power.

Like Antiochus in *Pericles*, or like King James, the Queen possesses dark secrets that affect the kingdom. When Imogen disappears and the distraught *Cymbeline* expresses his fears, the Queen coolly says:

gone she is,
To death, or to dishonour, and my end
Can make good use of either. She being down,
I have the placing of the British crown. (III.v.63-66)²

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The Queen's regard for her husband shines through her comment when learning of Cymbeline's despair: "All the better: may/ This night forestall him of the coming day!" (69-70). This perverse wish for Cymbeline's death turns out to be the Queen's final statement in the play. For many of the play's characters, especially Cymbeline, the Queen remains an unfathomable text. Thus he can incredulously ask this question in the play's last scene when learning of his wife's treachery: "Who is't can read a woman?" (V.v.48). Unlike James who boasted of his interpretive skills in the 1605 address to Parliament shortly after the Gunpowder Plot, Cymbeline has been incapable of reading the text of his wife's actions: she is opaque.

But an absolutist ruler also remains open, transparent. The sovereign is thus self-divided in purpose and image. Cymbeline, I suggest, represents the open, forthright image of rule—nothing mysterious or devious here. James in his 1605 Parliament address wished that there were a crystal window so that all could see into his heart; he said the same thing again in 1607, and by the 1610 Parliament speech he had decided that he indeed offered "a great and a rare Present, which is a faire and a Christall Mirror, . . . as through the transparantnesse thereof, you may see the heart of your King."³ Cymbeline as king is something like that: clear in his intentions and actions with the Romans and with his daughter, if at times misguided. Though he is reasonably transparent, we actually see little of him: until the final scene of the play Cymbeline has spoken a mere 100 lines. Clear but dramatically remote or mysterious: a perfect image of rule.

Posthumus and Imogen reinforce the idea of self-division; as such they illustrate how their ahistorical plot intersects the politics of ancient Britain. Imogen and Posthumus move in different directions, she busily cutting herself off from her royal family and he in search of his family. Being cut off from their families provides an image of their self-division. Each also struggles with an internal division. Part of the play's task is to resolve these divisions, which if allowed to persist would have serious political implications. Posthumus' search brings clarity and change in him and helps Cymbeline accept him as the husband of his royal daughter. The Vision of Jupiter and of Posthumus' family in V.iv completes the quest for Posthumus' family.

Facing the ocular proof of Imogen's presumed infidelity, Posthumus lashes out: "O, that I had her [Imogen] here, to tear her limb-meal!/ I will go there and do't, i'th'court, before/ Her father. I'll do something—" (II.iv.147-49). Sensing possible danger, Philario says: "Let's follow him, and pervert the present wrath/ He hath against himself" (151-52). Wrath directed not only at Imogen but also at himself underscores the idea of self-division. Shocked at the counterfeit nature of Imogen, Posthumus also wonders about his mother. He begins to explore what he calls the "woman's part in me" (172). That self-divided part accounts for all vices that man experiences. Having enumerated these vices, Posthumus claims: "I'll write against them . . ." (83). Writing against vices, as the example of King James clearly demonstrates, may be another image of rule, making part of oneself manifest in a written text.

Posthumus re-enters the play in Act V a changed person, chiding himself for his action towards Imogen and ready to fight in her father's behalf. Invoking his family, he surges into battle, vanquishing Iachimo and helping

rescue Cymbeline. Arriving from Italy for the battle, Posthumus changes his garb, taking on the guise of a "Briton peasant" (V.i.24). He says: "so I'll fight/ Against the part I come with" (24-25). Nosworthy in the Arden edition glosses "part" to mean "side, party"; but I suggest that his term also carries a hint of self-division: he fights against his former self, perhaps also against the woman's part in him. He changes his garments yet again, putting on his Italian clothes: ". . . I have resumed again/ The part I came in" (V.iii.75-76). Since this comment follows the rescue of Cymbeline, Posthumus may mean that he will eventually resume the part, the position at court that he formerly held. At least the play works out this way.

Merely being separated from one another aggravates the problem of self-division for Imogen and Posthumus. Imogen also consciously moves away from her family, a family marked by self-division; part of it, the Queen and Cloten, seeks political advantage at the expense of the other part, Cymbeline and Imogen. Insofar as the Queen substitutes for Cymbeline's first wife and Cloten substitutes for the lost sons, we have another version of familial division. Not knowing that Posthumus has entered in a wager with Iachimo about her faithfulness, Imogen nevertheless assesses her predicament: "A father cruel, and a step-dame false,/ A foolish suitor to a wedded lady . . ." (I.vii.1-2). This constitutes sufficient reason for Imogen's desire to leave this royal family. Acts III and IV belong to Imogen as she sets off to Wales in quest of Posthumus.

That quest reveals Imogen's divided self. Imogen heeds Pisanio's advice: "You must forget to be a woman" (III.iv.156). Like Posthumus who evaluated the "woman's part" in him, Imogen will now explore through disguise the masculine part of herself. When Pisanio instructs her, she exclaims: "I see into thy end, and am almost/ A man already" (168-69). Appearing in Wales dressed like a man, Imogen comments: "I see a man's life is a tedious one,/ I have tir'd myself" (III.vi.1-2). While Cloten wanders about in Wales dressed in Posthumus' garments, Imogen looks for Posthumus while dressed like a man: the issue of self-division compounds in difficulty. Responding to the kindness of the Belarius family that she meets in Wales, Imogen says that she would change her sex in order to be a brother to Guiderius and Arviragus (III.vi.60). These two brothers are of course Cymbeline's long-lost sons—another dimension of the divided family.

Imogen's apparent death in IV.ii sketches another angle of self-division: the part of her treated as dead by Belarius and his foster sons is not in fact dead. Indeed, she awakens from the trance only to experience a nightmare: the apparent death of Posthumus. The headless corpse of Cloten she mistakes for Posthumus, not knowing that he has been divided from these garments that now clothe Cloten. Imogen does not understand the truth of her own statement: "Our very eyes/ Are sometimes like our judgements, blind" (IV.ii.301-2). When she tells the Roman Lucius, who finds her, that her name is "Fidele," he responds: "Thy name well fits thy faith; thy faith thy name" (381). What he cannot know is that this supposed "Fidele" is in truth Imogen, daughter of a king. Lucius sees her as whole; we see her as self-divided. What Lucius perceives as transparent is in fact opaque. These examples of the self-division of various characters highlight one of the dominant images of rule in James's reign.

Genealogy is destiny, Jonathan Goldberg reminds us,⁴ a point that Shakespeare concentrates on in the Romances. Knowing one's heritage is vital for the matter of political succession. With his arrival in England, King James not only solved the succession problem immediately, but he also apparently solved it for the future because he brought with him a wife and three royal children—the first royal *family* to control the English throne in nearly a century. The question of succession constitutes the dominant political issue in Shakespeare's last plays. An absolutist monarch becomes more absolute if through his own progeny he establishes a clear line of succession.

The essential political problem in *Cymbeline* is how to guarantee future stability of the kingdom through orderly familial succession and how to deal with the immediate threat of the Roman invasion. At moments, the latter seems easier than the former. At the play's beginning, two anonymous Gentlemen summarize the basic strife within the royal family. The First Gentleman reports about Cymbeline's family:

His daughter, and the heir of's kingdom (whom
He purpos'd to his wife's sole son—a widow
That late he married) hath referr'd herself
Unto a poor but worthy gentleman. (I.i.4-7)

Shakespeare crams many facts about the domestic and political life of the family into those four lines: Cymbeline is distraught that his presumed heir of the kingdom (his daughter) has married Posthumus rather than Cloten, the new Queen's son. Apparently Cymbeline and his wife have agreed on a dynastic arrangement by having Imogen marry Cloten. Such a marriage would presumably solidify family bonds and assure the stability of the kingdom.

After drawing a contrast between Cloten and Posthumus, the Second Gentleman asks: "Is she [Imogen] sole child to th'king?" (I.i.56). The First Gentleman replies: "His only child./ He had two sons . . . / . . . from their nursery/ Were stol'n . . ." (56-57, 59-60). Imogen is in effect the only child, her brothers having been stolen some twenty years earlier. Therefore she assumes great importance in the politics of the realm: on her rests the future of the kingdom, a future to be established through the female line, as is the case in the other Romances. With the choice of Posthumus, however, Imogen betrays her father's wishes. When Cloten exits in II.i, the Second Lord analyzes the play's royal family: Cloten is an "ass" and his mother a "crafty devil"; Imogen is caught "Betwixt a father by thy step-dame govern'd,/ A mother hourly coining plots . . ." (57-58) and a repugnant wooer. This Second Lord closes with hope for the royal child: ". . . that thou mayst stand,/ T'enjoy thy banish'd lord and this great land!" (63-64). Running through this sentiment is a concern for the political future of the kingdom, which Imogen represents.

The great issue of the Roman invasion dissolves into domestic concern when Cymbeline asks: "Where is our daughter?" (III.v.30). When the report comes that her doors are all locked, Cymbeline cries out: "Grant heavens, that which I fear/ Prove false!" (52-53). The Queen, as noted above, has quite a different perspective. Later, Cymbeline, feeling very much alone and

vulnerable, summarizes his predicament: "Imogen,/ The great part of my comfort gone: my queen/ Upon a desperate bed, . . . her son gone . . ." (IV.iii.5-7). His legitimate and understandable conclusion is that the royal family has been destroyed. His sons stolen twenty years earlier and now Imogen gone, Cymbeline has no immediate heir to the throne of Britain. Such a situation weakens his position as an absolutist ruler. The play eventually resolves the issue by reuniting Imogen to her father and by recovering the two sons. From such a position of renewed strength Cymbeline deals magnanimously with the defeated Romans.

The final image of rule is interpretation, by which I mean that members of the royal family are subject to and in need of interpretation. In a sense they are "texts"; certainly King James was occasionally referred to as a text needing interpretation. If self-divided, then rulers of necessity must be interpreted by subjects. In *Cymbeline* Shakespeare explores, as I think he does throughout the Romances, the critical matter of interpretation of texts. Imogen even notes an element of danger or risk involved in such endeavors when she says: "To write, and read/ Be henceforth treacherous!" (IV.ii.316-17). Ironically, as she says that, she busily misinterprets the headless corpse that lies beside her. Earlier in that scene she had noted another misinterpretation: "Gods, what lies I have heard!/ Our courtiers say all's savage but at court . . ." (32-33). Her experience among the Belarius group in Wales disproves such analysis. Trying to understand Pisanio's behavior when they first arrive in Wales, Imogen says of his perplexing stares and sighs: "One [sigh] but painted thus/ Would be interpreted a thing perplex'd/ Beyond self-explication" (III.iv.5-8). If beyond self-explication, then obviously in need of interpretation. Posthumus' letter, full of false accusations about her, Imogen interprets thus: "The scriptures of the loyal Leonatus,/ All turn'd to heresy" (82-83). The text of Posthumus has been corrupted, become heretical. She refers, I think, not only to his letter but also to his whole character.

Even Belarius suggests that he is text when he says to Guiderius and Arviragus: "O boys, this story/ The world may read in me: my body's mark'd/ With Roman swords . . ." (III.iii.55-57). As these royal sons listen to Belarius' story, they become part of his text. Guiderius, for example, lets his "spirits fly out," Belarius says, "Into my story" (91), putting "himself in posture/ That acts my words" (94-95). At such a moment Belarius may seem a dramatist and Guiderius an actor, suiting the action to the word. Arviragus' response is less immediate, less a matter of action than of contemplation or interpretation: he "shows much more/ His own conceiving" (97-98). Captured here is an image of Shakespeare's representation of texts, including the Jacobean royal family which the dramatist has responded to with "his own conceiving."

The Roman Soothsayer interprets his vision for Lucius and the other Romans:

I saw Jove's bird, the Roman eagle, wing'd
From the spongy south to this part of the west,
There vanish'd in the sunbeams, which portends . . .
Success to th'Roman host. (IV.ii.348-51)

Here interpretation serves the need of the political state, a sure image of rule. The Soothsayer will, of course, reinterpret his vision in the play's final scene. In the marvelous Vision of Jupiter scene, V.iv, Posthumus awakens to find a tablet, a text whose riddle-nature awaits interpretation. It outlines certain conditions which if met, "then shall Posthumus end his miseries, Britain be fortunate, and flourish in peace and plenty" (V.iv.143-45). Uncertain about what his text can mean, Posthumus says that it may be "senseless speaking, or a speaking such/ As sense cannot untie" (148-49). This opaque text will become transparent through the interpretation offered in the final scene.

The play's last scene, V.v, is remarkable not only for its alleged twenty-four denouements but also for the reconciliation and reunion that occur. A skeletal outline of the scene reveals that the Queen dies; Imogen and Posthumus reunite; Cymbeline accepts them joyfully; Iachimo is forgiven; Belarius reveals that Guiderius and Arviragus are Cymbeline's sons; and Britain, having won the war, agrees to pay the Roman tribute. Images of rule pervade the scene as the dramatist clarifies issues of succession, genealogy, and interpretation. Cornelius with an account of the Queen, Iachimo, Posthumus, and Belarius all have a story, a text to tell, Belarius having the oldest story that immediately settles questions of succession and genealogy. These interpretations join those of the Soothsayer to underscore the crucial role of interpretation for a system of rule. Cymbeline's incredulous rhetorical question here, "Who is't can read a woman?" (V.v.48), finds no immediate answer; but the several interpretive acts suggest the ongoing necessity of attempting to interpret. *Cymbeline*, like the other Romances, contains a number of seemingly unfathomable texts awaiting analysis.

The poignant reunion of father and daughter, the acceptance of Posthumus by Cymbeline, and the revelation of the lost sons all point to peace and harmony in the private life of the royal family, thereby opening the prospect for peace in the kingdom. These actions heal divisions and self-divisions and assure the kingdom's future through orderly familial succession. Symbolizing this new condition, Philharmonus, the Soothsayer, comes to interpret Jupiter's text left for Posthumus. Lucius says: "Read, and declare the meaning" (435). The cedar of the riddle is Cymbeline, the two lopped branches, his lost sons. The tree now revives, "whose issue/ Promises Britain peace and plenty" (458-59). The Soothsayer also reinterprets the vision he had in IV.ii. Under those different circumstances he foresaw Roman victory; but that same dream now yields different results: the soaring eagle means that imperial Caesar "should again unite/ His favour with the radiant Cymbeline . . ." (475-76). Like visions, texts are subject to ongoing interpretation. Like James and his family, Cymbeline and his family require such interpretation.

As peacemaker, Cymbeline submits to Rome from his position of strength and magnanimity: "Never was a war did cease/ . . . with such a peace" (484-85). Cymbeline as King now embodies the "peaceable reign and good government" of King Simonides in *Pericles*; or, as Anthony Weldon wrote of King James, he "left all his Kingdoms in a peaceable condition." Strife, disorder, and division dominate the royal family at moments in this play until these conditions reverse and give way to peace and hope. Nothing like any of this exists in Shakespeare's known sources for the play; but in his emphasis on

the royal issue, on succession, on deliverance and peace, and on interpretation, I think that Shakespeare reads the text of the Stuart royal family and represents it in *Cymbeline*.⁵ Such events and ideas must have struck a responsive chord in Jacobean audiences. A ruler who understands the necessity of self-division, the need for a clearly established succession, and the ongoing process of interpretation is a ruler who understands images of rule.

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Notes

1. Frances Yates, *Majesty and Magic in Shakespeare's Last Plays* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1978); Glynne Wickham, "Riddle and Emblem: A Study in the Dramatic Structure of *Cymbeline*," *English Renaissance Studies Presented to Dame Helen Gardner*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 94-113.

2. *Cymbeline*, ed. James Nosworthy (London: Methuen, 1966). All quotations are from this Arden edition.

3. *The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles Howard McIlwain (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1918) 306.

4. *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983) 119.

5. For further discussion of this whole issue of the family of James I as a "text" that Shakespeare read and used in the Romances, see my *Shakespeare's Romances and the Royal Family* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1985).