The Dream of *Cymbeline:* Ovid and the Idea of Late Shakespeare

Gabriel Lonsberry
Purdue University

We can, in part, thank the Victorians and their interest in assigning a narrative to Shakespeare's body of work for the very idea of Shakespeare's "late plays." Russ McDonald recounts this development:

> Since *Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale,* and *The Tempest* undeniably resembled one another and differed from the rest of the canon, the decision to group them into one category and interpret them as the culmination of an artistic career—of the artistic career—struck a cultural chord, harmonizing with Victorian ideas of struggle and triumph, sin and redemption.[1]

And the sentiment has proved enduring: in *Shakespeare: The Four Romances* (1989), for instance, Robert M. Adams engages with the now-ubiquitous notion that "Shakespeare in his final period was completing on a life-large scale a kind of tragic pattern, defined as prosperity-destruction-re-creation which he had previously adumbrated in other plays but here brought to triumphant completion," and in *Shakespeare's Late Plays* (2009), Nicholas Potter compares these works to "Beethoven's 'late' string quartets and piano sonatas, . . . in which an accomplished and celebrated artist turns in upon himself and reflects upon his art and his success in a mood of introverted self-absorption.[2] Such descriptions do lend an attractive element of finality to Shakespeare's career, and it

is unquestionably tempting to see the playwright himself in "the figure of Prospero," to quote Potter once again, "turning his back on his art having completed a work from which he will personally benefit directly very little, . . . becom[ing] a figure of . . . artistic self-abnegation."[3] In a similar manner, *The Winter's Tale* can be understood as picking up where *Othello* left off, resurrecting Desdemona as Hermione and self-consciously bringing the high tragic period to a celebratory close. But what about *Cymbeline,* the remaining of Shakespeare's final solo-authored works?

Lacking obvious potential for biographical interpretation and neglecting to conclude any of the playwright's greatest stories, *Cymbeline* has always fit uneasily alongside the other late plays. And, in contrast to the more revered *Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale,* the plot of *Cymbeline* is "almost incoherent," as Emrys Jones complains—"a chaos," in Harold Bloom's estimation, or, to borrow Posthumus's own description of his experiences in the play, "a dream, or else such stuff as madmen / Tongue and brain not; . . . a speaking such / As sense cannot untie" (5.4.115–8).[4] In fact, we do find allusions to Shakespeare's earlier works in *Cymbeline,* but there are dozens, each adding to the mess, and they are gross distortions—"parodies," according to Bloom. "What was [Shakespeare] trying to do for himself as a maker of plays," Bloom asks, speaking for anyone invested in the idea of late Shakespeare, "by the heap of self-parodies that constitute *Cymbeline?*"[5]

The answer to that question and the best means of approaching this perplexing drama may lie in one of its most memorable scenes, Giacomo's intrusion into Imogen's bedroom. "The crickets sing, and man's o'er-labored sense / Repairs itself by rest," Giacomo narrates,

> Our Tarquin thus
> Did softly press the rushes ere he wakened
> The chastity he wounded. Cytherea,
> How bravely thou becom'st thy bed. Fresh lily,
> And whiter than the sheets! That I might touch,
> But kiss, one kiss. Rubies unparagoned,
> How dearly they do't. 'Tis her breathing that
> Perfumes the chamber thus. The flame o'th' taper
> Bows toward her, and would underpeep her lids
> To see th'enclosèd lights, now canopied

> Under these windows, white and azure laced
> With blue of heaven's own tinct.
>   . . . On her left breast
> A mole cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops
> I'th' bottom of a cowslip . . .
>   She hath been reading late
> The tale of Tereus; here the leaf's turned down
> Where Philomel gave up. I have enough. (2.2.11–46)

I have quoted this passage at some length because I will be referring to it several times, but also in order to provide a sense of the "Ovidian opulence" of the chamber, to borrow Charles and Michelle Martindale's description—as they go on to note, the room is furnished with "a silk tapestry, showing the story of 'proud Cleopatra, when she met her Roman,' and a chimney piece with 'chaste Dian, bathing' . . . as well as 'two winking Cupids / Of silver.' . . . There is too an Ovidian stress on the lifelike artistry of the work."[6] At the center of all this opulence, mythological images swirling about her, lies Imogen, asleep, with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* open on her lap. And here is the key to comprehending the drama, a play that Bloom claims "will not abide a steady contemplation."[7] As Imogen sleeps we can recognize *Cymbeline* as a rich, Ovidian dream, swirling with images less from classical mythology than and from Shakespeare's own mythology as it changes shape again and again. It is in a sense, Shakespeare's *Metamorphoses*, and reading the play from this perspective goes a long way toward unlocking both *Cymbeline* and Shakespeare's late art as a whole.

Like Ovid's epic, which details such mythological tales as those of Apollo and Daphne, Tereus and Philomel, and Diana and Actaeon, the action of Cymbeline revolves almost entirely around literal and metaphorical hunts. We have already seen how Giacomo stalks his prey in the bedroom, evoking several scenes of Ovidian conquest while, in his mind, violating the sleeping Imogen, and we are reminded of Ovid again as Cloten tracks Imogen and Posthumus through the woods, seeking to "ravish her—first kill him" before ironically becoming game to Belarius, Arviragus, and Guiderius—"We'll hunt no more today," Belarius says in reaction to the slaying (3.5.134, 4.2.161). Long before this violent turn, in fact, Cloten conceives of his pursuit of Imogen as an Ovidian hunt, imagining that Actaeon bribed Diana's ladies in order to reach the

goddess: "I know [Imogen's] women are about her: what /
If I do line one of their hands?" he wonders, "'Tis gold /
Which buys admittance . . . and makes / Diana's rangers false
themselves, yield up / Their deer to th' stand o'th' stealer"
(2.3.62–6).

Moreover, *Cymbeline* shares with the Metamorphoses the
sentiment that hunting a person—treating them like one's
prey—has a dehumanizing effect, as when the Queen, who will
pursue Posthumus and Imogen for much of the play, attempts to
deceive Cornelius, the physician: "I will try the forces / Of these
thy compounds on such creatures as / We count not worth the
hanging," she says of her poisons, betraying her true designs, "but
none human" (1.5.18–20). In hunting the two lovers, then, the
Queen transforms them into animals, but the effect almost always
works both ways in Shakespeare's story: Cloten, for instance,
"observes the same forms of courtly wooing" as the honorable
Posthumus, as Joan Carr observes, "yet they cover a bestiality that
shows through," most blatantly when he is in nature, on the hunt.[8]

Returning to Giacomo's bedroom intrusion, we find even
more of what Jonathan Bate characterizes as an "Ovidian […] use
of a language which fuses the characters with the natural world."
Bate notes that Giacomo's narration morphs Imogen into a "fresh
lily" (2.2.15), and the "flame o'th' taper / Bows toward her" just as
"wind or water, warm with desire, would playfully touch a nymph
in Ovid; the mole on her breast," he continues, "takes its identity
from the marking on a cowslip" (2.2.19–20).[9] Similarly Ovidian
transformations are to be found throughout the play, as when
Belarius likens his adopted sons to "zephyrs blowing below the
violet" (4.2.171), and in Imogen's metamorphic description of the
parting Posthumus: "I would have broke mine eyestrings, cracked
them, but / To look upon him," she insists,

> till the diminution
> Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle;
> Nay, followed him till he had melted from
> The smallness of a gnat to air, and then
> Have turned mine eye and wept. (1.3.17–22)

In her grief, Imogen reconstitutes her lover first as a needle, then
as a gnat, and, finally, as air. And later, when Arviragus mourns the
apparently dead Imogen, his eulogy transforms her into flowers in
the same, gradational way:

> With fairest flowers
> Whilst summer lasts and I live here, Fidele,
> I'll sweeten thy sad grave. Thou shalt not lack
> The flower that's like thy face, pale primrose, nor
> The azured harebell, like thy veins; no, nor
> The leaf of eglantine, whom not to slander,
> Out-sweetened not thy breath. (4.2.217–23)

Bate too highlights this passage, noting, "Here Shakespeare is writing in the same key as the Ovid who turns golden lads and girls into flowers."[10] But the picture is not always so pretty: in the throes of misogynistic jealousy, for instance, Posthumus supposes that Giacomo "found no opposition" when seducing Imogen, that he "spoke not, but / Like a full-acorned boar, a German one, / Cried 'Oh!' and mounted" (2.5.15–17). Giacomo thus becomes a brutish beast in Posthumus's mind as he imagines the sexual conquest he believes took place. This leads us to another important and equally Ovidian way that transformation functions in *Cymbeline:* as a means of deception.

In Ovid we find numerous scenes of transformative trickery, whether in the story of Callisto, where Jupiter takes the form of Diana as a means of embracing the unsuspecting nymph, or in the case of Europa, who is abducted by Jupiter in the guise of a bull. Transformation and manipulation go hand in hand in *Cymbeline,* too, most often in the form of distorted stories and signs which, as Cynthia Lewis explains, "lure the characters into perceptual traps."[11] Posthumus's jealousy is inspired by Giacomo's manipulation of reality—a misrepresentation of events that causes Posthumus to misread the bracelet, once "a manacle of love," as "the cognizance of [Imogen's] incontinency" (1.1.122, 2.4.127)—and, Lewis continues, the "malleable" Posthumus falls right into "the hands of [this] polished and daring illusionist."[12] As a result, Imogen loses faith in her own interpretive abilities, deciding that "all good seeming [is] put on for villainy" (3.4.53–5), yet she too mistakes "the garments of Posthumus" for proof that Cloten's headless body is that of her husband (4.2.307). Belarius, albeit to less malicious ends, has likewise skewed the story of Guiderius and Arviragus in order to keep them under his control. As John Pitcher observes, by employing transformative, natural imagery (the boys are "beetles rather than eagles," Pitcher summarizes), Belarius "has

been holding them back, in his version of an idyll, to prevent them leaving him."[13] Addressing further distortions and manipulations, Pitcher notes that "the Britons have been conned into paying for a conquest the Romans never made . . . and similarly Posthumus will pay [Giacomo], a Roman lord, for a phoney conquest over Imogen, the British princess."[14]

The parallel is significant, for it leads us back to the bedroom scene. We have already noted how most if not all of the inciting actions in *Cymbeline* involve Ovidian transformation of some kind, whether in hunting, deception, or both, and the protean nature of the plot may explain why Bloom and so many others find the play an incomprehensible chaos. But what are we to make of the flood of Shakespearean allusions? Looking again at Giacomo's midnight soliloquy, we see him imagining himself as "Tarquin . . . softly press[ing] the rushes" (2.2.12–3), but for us— and for the playwright too, it can be assumed—the image recalls Shakespeare's Tarquin as much as Ovid's. The tapestry on the wall, depicting "the story [of] / Proud Cleopatra when she met her Roman," more obviously invokes the celebrated barge scene from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra,* when, in Giacomo's words, "Cydnus swelled above the banks, or for / The press of boats or pride" (2.4.69–72), and in this light, Giacomo's references to Tereus and Philomel may remind us more of *Titus Andronicus* than the *Metamorphoses*, as it does for Ann Thompson, who argues, "In *Titus Andronicus* [Shakespeare] is depending largely on an elaboration of Ovid. . . . In Cymbeline he seems to be relying fairly directly on his own earlier work in *Titus.*"[15]

Indeed, when one is looking for them, allusions to Shakespeare's earlier works emerge in truly staggering numbers, and while the plot of *Cymbeline* is certainly Ovidian in all of the senses I have been describing, the play may represent Shakespeare's *Metamorphoses* even more in that it is a rapidly transforming myriad of Shakespearean mythology. It is immediately apparent that we have returned to the ancient British world of *King Lear,* for instance, and we next recognize *Romeo and Juliet* in Cornelius and his sleeping potion, this play's Friar Lawrence. But something is not quite right: Pitcher remarks that "Arviragus should enter *'with Imogen, dead'* (not 'as if dead'), which looks like a purposeful recollection of Lear carrying Cordelia," but the reader knows that

Imogen is not dead, and this comical scene is a far cry from the one it reenacts—among the most harrowing in all of Shakespeare.[16] It is, in fact, almost offensive to compare the two, and the same could be said of *Romeo and Juliet:* like Juliet, Imogen wakes to find her slain lover and delivers an impassioned speech over his corpse—but this is no Romeo; it is the idiot Cloten who was only just trying to rape her.

Bloom refers to these many moments not as allusions but as parodies, and he is right to do so. In robbing Imogen of just a bracelet, Giacomo is not Tarquin but a shadow of that imposing predator. Nor is he the savage Chiron with Demetrius, despite invoking Tereus and Philomel as he does. Giacomo is sometimes likened to Iago, as Bloom observes, but he is "a mere trifler compared with the more-than-Satanic greatness of Othello's destroyer," and by the end of the play "we badly miss the true Iago, who defies the coming torture and will not speak. The wordy [Giacomo] all but recapitulates the entire play, and declines from being Iago's parody to being the travesty of a chorus."[17] Bloom contends that Posthumus's childish, misogynistic outbursts make him a "parody-Othello" in turn, and he continues identifying burlesques in every corner of the play: "Through patriotic rant," Bloom writes, "Shakespeare shockingly parodies his John of Gaunt, Faulconbridge the Bastard, and Henry V, by assigning the British defiance of Rome . . . to the wicked Queen and the rotten Cloten"; "Posthumus, in peasant disguise, vanquishes and disarms [Giacomo], and then abandons him, in a debasement of the Edgar-Edmund duel"; "we are suddenly back in *Measure for Measure* with the jovial Pompey, bawd turned executioner's assistant, exuberantly informing Barnadine that the ax is upon the block"; "The last scene opens cheerfully with the announcement that the Queen, herself a parody of Lady Macbeth, ended 'with horror, madly dying,' like Queen Macbeth"; and his list goes on.[18] What is important to note in all this is that the play *keeps changing,* and once it has changed it refuses to stop: as Thompson notes, "Imogen has begun as Rosalind, fleeing from court to find her lover in the wilderness, turned into Desdemona, the innocent victim of a jealous husband, and has just woken up as Juliet beside her husband's corpse."[19] This metamorphosis occurs in all of the characters in this strange drama, and, furthermore, we find the

very story metamorphosing back and forth between genres at will, much oftener and more dramatically than was common to the increasingly popular tragicomedies of the day. One moment we are in one of Shakespeare's festive comedies, with an empowered, cross-dressing heroine lost in the green world; the next, someone's severed head is being thrown into a river before a deus ex machina sets everything right again. The play itself is as protean as its plot.

So how are we to understand this? The sole constant in our discussion of *Cymbeline* has been the *Metamorphoses*, so it only makes sense to return to Ovid. "Many of the earlier plays are lavishly decked out with Ovidian mythological references," A. B. Taylor observes, but "in the great tragedies Ovid goes underground."[20] Charles and Michelle Martindale attempt to account for this change, writing, "A more plausible explanation lies in changes of taste and fashion among audiences, for which Shakespeare always had keen antennae. Thus in the 1590s there was a general vogue for Ovidian narrative, which waned thereafter [and] came to be felt as old-fashioned."[21] In one sense then, Shakespeare's bringing Ovid back to the fore of *Cymbeline* can be understood as the ultimate expression of self-conscious finality, confirming what so many believe about the playwright and the narrative arc of his career. "Ovid was Shakespeare's favorite poet," the Martindales assert, the foundation of much of Shakespeare's early work, and, in a way, looking back to Ovid is like looking back to the start of himself as an artist, bringing his work full circle.[22] The Martindales go on to note that in his earliest uses of Ovid, Shakespeare, like the Elizabethans in general, often "emphasized a vein of pathos, glamour and romance," but "Shakespeare's conception of Ovid matured as he grew older," and in the later, tragicomic *Cymbeline,* "the results were . . . more genuinely Ovidian in the curious mixture of tones."[23] This too suggests that, through Ovid, Shakespeare was reflecting on and perhaps amending his previous work, and at this point it may be useful to consider the final lines of the *Metamorphoses:* "Now I have brought a work to end which neither Jove's fierce wrath / Nor sword, nor fire, nor fretting age with all the force it hath / Are able to abolish quite." Ovid writes:

> Let come that fatal hour
> Which, saving of this brittle flesh, hath over me no power
> And at his pleasure make an end of mine uncertain time.

> Yet shall the better part of me assurèd be to climb
> Aloft above the starry sky; and all the world shall never
> Be able for to quench my name. For look how far so ever
> The Roman empire by the right of conquest shall extend,
> So far shall all folk read this work. And time without all end
> (If poets as by prophecy about the truth may aim)
> My life shall everlastingly be lengthened still by fame.[24]

In permeating the play with self-references—in cataloguing his canon and mythology in his own version of the *Metamorphoses*—Shakespeare may be channeling Ovid's triumphant epilogue and completing his life-long project on a note that reaffirms his immortality as an artist, reiterating his many claims throughout the sonnets that "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of Princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme" ("Sonnet 55" 1–2). And if this is the case, *Cymbeline* deserves to stand alongside *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* as one of Shakespeare's great late plays.

But of course if we remember to look closely at *Cymbeline*—to recognize it as a text of constant transformation and deception, an Ovidian dream that not even the soothsayer can correctly interpret—and if we manage not to forget that the play contains no Shakespearean self-allusions, only self-parodies, we may understand this romantic sentiment of artistic permanence as a parody itself. We may realize that this rapidly transforming *Metamorphoses* has lured us, the readers, into its trap, and that the endlessly clever Shakespeare, aware of the approaching close of his career, has laid that trap for us to fall into. Perhaps Ovid would be proud.

Notes

1. Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare's Late Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22.

2. Robert M. Adams, *Shakespeare: The Four Romances* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 18; Nicholas Potter, *Shakespeare's Late Plays: Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, The Tempest,* ed. Nicolas Tredell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

3. Potter, *Shakespeare's Late Plays,* 3.

4. Emrys Jones, "Stuart *Cymbeline,*" *Essays in Criticism* 11.1 (1961): 98; Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1999), 616; Quotations from Shakespeare are from are from *The Norton Shakespeare,* ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., third edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016).

5. Bloom, *Invention,* 621.

6. Charles Martindale and Michelle Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity: An Introductory Essay* (London: Routledge, 1990), 55.

7. Bloom, I*nvention,* 616.

8. Joan Carr, "*Cymbeline* and the Validity of Myth," *Studies in Philology* 75.3 (1978): 320.

9. Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 218.

10. Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid,* 218.

11. Cynthia Lewis, "'With Simular Proof Enough': Modes of Misperception in *Cymbeline*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 31.2 (1991): 348.

12. Lewis, "'With Simular Proof,'" 351.

13. William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. John Pitcher (London: Penguin, 2005), xxxi, 232.

14. Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, 211–2.

15. Ann Thompson, "Philomel in Titus Andronicus and *Cymbeline,*" *Shakespeare Survey* 31 (1979): 25.

16. Shakespeare, *Cymbeline,* lv.

17. Bloom, *Invention,* 616, 636.

18. Bloom, *Invention,* 619, 622, 632, 634–5, 636.

19. Thompson, "Philomel," 32.

20. A. B. Taylor, *Shakespeare's Ovid: The Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 212.

21. Martindale and Martindale, *Uses of Antiquity,* 83.

22. Martindale and Martindale, *Uses of Antiquity,* 45.

23. Martindale and Martindale, *Uses of Antiquity,* 45, 54.

24. Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses,* ed. Madeleine Forey, trans. Arthur Golding (London: Penguin, 2002), 15.984–95.