

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CYMBELINE

CYMBELINE is one of the most delightful of Shakespeare's historical plays. It may be considered as a dramatic romance, in which the most striking parts of the story are thrown into the form of a dialogue, and the intermediate circumstances are explained by the different speakers, as occasion renders it necessary. The action is less concentrated in consequence; but the interest becomes more aerial and refined from the principle of perspective introduced into the subject by the imaginary changes of scene, as well as by the length of time it occupies. The reading of this play is like going a journey with some uncertain object at the end of it, and in which the suspense is kept up and heightened by the long intervals between each action. Though the events are scattered over such an extent of surface, and relate to such a variety of characters, yet the links which bind the different interests of the story together are never entirely broken. The most straggling and seemingly casual incidents are contrived in such a manner as to lead at last to the most complete development of the catastrophe. The ease and conscious unconcern with which this is effected only makes the skill more wonderful. The business of the plot evidently thickens in the last act: the story moves forward with increasing rapidity at every step; its various ramifications are drawn from the most distant points to the same centre; the principal characters are brought together, and placed in very critical situations; and the fate of almost every person in the drama is made to depend on the solution of a single circumstance—the answer of Iachimo to the question of Imogen respecting the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

obtaining of the ring from Posthumus. Dr Johnson is of opinion that Shakespear was generally inattentive to the winding-up of his plots. We think the contrary is true; and we might cite in proof of this remark not only the present play, but the conclusion of *Lear*, of *Romeo and Juliet*, of *Macbeth*, of *Othello*, even of *Hamlet*, and of other plays of less moment, in which the last act is crowded with decisive events brought about by natural and striking means.

The pathos in CYMBELINE is not violent or tragical, but of the most pleasing and amiable kind. A certain tender gloom overspreads the whole. Posthumus is the ostensible hero of the piece, but its greatest charm is the character of Imogen. Posthumus is only interesting from the interest she takes in him; and she is only interesting herself from her tenderness and constancy to her husband. It is the peculiar excellence of Shakespear's heroines, that they seem to exist only in their attachment to others. They are pure abstractions of the affections. We think as little of their persons as they do themselves, because we are let into the secrets of their hearts, which are more important. We are too much interested in their affairs to stop to look at their faces, except by stealth and at intervals. No one ever hit the true perfection of the female character, the sense of weakness leaning on the strength of its affections for support, so well as Shakespear—no one ever so well painted natural tenderness free from affectation and disguise—no one else ever so well shewed how delicacy and timidity, when driven to extremity, grow romantic and extravagant; for the romance of his heroines (in which they abound) is only an excess of the habitual prejudices of their sex, scrupulous of being false to their vows, truant to their affections, and taught by the force of feeling when to forgo the forms of propriety for the essence of it. His women were in this respect exquisite logicians; for there is nothing so logical as passion. They knew their own minds exactly; and only followed up a favourite purpose, which they had sworn to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CYMBELINE

13

with their tongues, and which was engraven on their hearts, into its untoward consequences. They were the prettiest little set of martyrs and confessors on record.—Cibber, in speaking of the early English stage, accounts for the want of prominence and theatrical display in Shakespear's female characters from the circumstance, that women in those days were not allowed to play the parts of women, which made it necessary to keep them a good deal in the back-ground. Does not this state of manners itself, which prevented their exhibiting themselves in public, and confined them to the relations and charities of domestic life, afford a truer explanation of the matter? His women are certainly very unlike stage-heroines; the reverse of tragedy-queens.

We have almost as great an affection for Imogen as she had for Posthumus; and she deserves it better. Of all Shakespear's women she is perhaps the most tender and the most artless. Her incredulity in the opening scene with Iachimo, as to her husband's infidelity, is much the same as Desdemona's backwardness to believe Othello's jealousy. Her answer to the most distressing part of the picture is only, "My lord, I fear, has forgot Britain." Her readiness to pardon Iachimo's false imputations and his designs against herself, is a good lesson to prudes; and may shew that where there is a real attachment to virtue, it has no need to bolster itself up with an outrageous or affected antipathy to vice. The scene in which Pisanio gives Imogen his master's letter, accusing her of incontinency on the treacherous suggestions of Iachimo, is as touching as it is possible for any thing to be:—

Pisanio. What cheer, Madam?

Imogen. False to his bed! What is it to be false?
To lie in watch there, and to think on him?
To weep 'twixt clock and clock? If sleep charge nature,
To break it with a fearful dream of him,
And cry myself awake? That's false to's bed is it?

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

14

CYMBELINE

Pisanio. Alas, good lady !

Imogen. I false? thy conscience witness, Iachimo,
Thou didst accuse him of incontinency,
Thou then look'dst like a villain : now methinks,
Thy favour's good enough. Some Jay of Italy,
Whose mother was her painting, hath betray'd him :
Poor I am stale, a garment out of fashion,
And for I am richer than to hang by th' walls,
I must be ript ; to pieces with me. Oh,
Men's vows are women's traitors. All good seeming
By thy revolt, oh husband, shall be thought
Put on for villainy : not born where't grows,
But worn a bait for ladies.

Pisanio. Good Madam, hear me—

Imogen. Talk thy tongue weary, speak :
I have heard I am a strumpet, and mine ear,
Therein false struck, can take no greater wound,
Nor tent to bottom that."——

When *Pisanio*, who had been charged to kill his mistress, puts her in a way to live, she says,

“Why, good fellow,
What shall I do the while? Where bide? How live?
Or in my life what comfort, when I am
Dead to my husband?”

Yet when he advises her to disguise herself in boy's clothes, and suggests “a course pretty and full in view,” by which she may “happily be near the residence of *Posthumus*,” she exclaims,

“Oh, for such means,
Though peril to my modesty, not death on't,
I would adventure.”

And when *Pisanio*, enlarging on the consequences, tells her she must change

———“Fear and niceness,
The handmaids of all women, or more truly,
Woman its pretty self, into a waggish courage,
Ready in gibes, quick-answer'd, saucy, and
As quarrelous as the weazel”———

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CYMBELINE

15

she interrupts him hastily—

“Nay, be brief;
I see into thy end, and am almost
A man already.”

In her journey thus disguised to Milford-Haven, she loses her guide and her way; and unbosoming her complaints, says beautifully—

—————“My dear lord,
Thou art one of the false ones; now I think on thee,
My hunger's gone; but even before, I was
At point to sink for food.”

She afterwards finds, as she thinks, the dead body of Posthumus, and engages herself as a footboy to serve a Roman officer, when she has done all due obsequies to him whom she calls her former master—

—————“And when
With wild wood-leaves and weeds I ha' strew'd his grave,
And on it said a century of pray'rs,
Such as I can, twice o'er, I'll weep and sigh,
And leaving so his service, follow you,
So please you entertain me.”

Now this is the very religion of love. She all along relies little on her personal charms, which she fears may have been eclipsed by some painted Jay of Italy; she relies on her merit, and her merit is in the depth of her love, her truth and constancy. Our admiration of her beauty is excited with as little consciousness as possible on her part. There are two delicious descriptions given of her, one when she is asleep, and one when she is supposed dead. Arviragus thus addresses her—

—————“With fairest flowers,
While summer lasts, and I live here, Fidele,
I'll sweeten thy sad grave; thou shalt not lack
The flow'r that's like thy face, pale primrose, nor
The azur'd hare-bell, like thy veins, no, nor
The leaf of eglantine, which not to slander,
Out-sweeten'd not thy breath.”

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The yellow Iachimo gives another thus, when he steals into her bedchamber:—

—————“Cytherea,
How bravely thou becom'st thy bed! Fresh lily,
And whiter than the sheets! That I might touch—
But kiss, one kiss—'Tis her breathing that
Perfumes the chamber thus: the flame o' th' taper
Bows toward her, and would under-peep her lids
To see th' enclosed lights now canopied
Under the windows, white and azure, laced
With blue of Heav'n's own tinct—on her left breast
A mole cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops
I' th' bottom of a cowslip.”

There is a moral sense in the proud beauty of this last image, a rich surfeit of the fancy,—as that well-known passage beginning, “Me of my lawful pleasure she restrained, and prayed me oft forbearance,” sets a keener edge upon it by the inimitable picture of modesty and self-denial.

The character of Cloten, the conceited, booby lord, and rejected lover of Imogen, though not very agreeable in itself, and at present obsolete, is drawn with much humour and quaint extravagance. The description which Imogen gives of his unwelcome addresses to her—“Whose love-suit hath been to me as fearful as a siege”—is enough to cure the most ridiculous lover of his folly. It is remarkable that though Cloten makes so poor a figure in love, he is described as assuming an air of consequence as the Queen's son in a council of state, and with all the absurdity of his person and manners, is not without shrewdness in his observations. So true is it that folly is as often owing to a want of proper sentiments as to a want of understanding! The exclamation of the ancient critic—Oh Menander and Nature, which of you copied from the other! would not be misapplied to Shakespear.

The other characters in this play are represented with great truth and accuracy, and as it happens in most of the author's works, there is not only the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CYMBELINE

17

utmost keeping in each separate character ; but in the casting of the different parts, and their relation to one another, there is an affinity and harmony, like what we may observe in the gradations of colour in a picture. The striking and powerful contrasts in which Shakespear abounds could not escape observation ; but the use he makes of the principle of analogy to reconcile the greatest diversities of character and to maintain a continuity of feeling throughout, has not been sufficiently attended to. In CYMBELINE, for instance, the principal interest arises out of the unalterable fidelity of Imogen to her husband under the most trying circumstances. Now the other parts of the picture are filled up with subordinate examples of the same feeling, variously modified by different situations, and applied to the purposes of virtue or vice. The plot is aided by the amorous importunities of Cloten, by the persevering determination of Iachimo to conceal the defeat of his project by a daring imposture : the faithful attachment of Pisanio to his mistress is an affecting accompaniment to the whole ; the obstinate adherence to his purpose in Bellarius, who keeps the fate of the young princes so long a secret in resentment for the ungrateful return to his former services, the incorrigible wickedness of the Queen, and even the blind uxorious confidence of Cymbeline, are all so many lines of the same story, tending to the same point. The effect of this coincidence is rather felt than observed ; and as the impression exists unconsciously in the mind of the reader, so it probably arose in the same manner in the mind of the author, not from design, but from the force of natural association, a particular train of thought suggesting different inflections of the same predominant feeling, melting into, and strengthening one another, like chords in music.

The characters of Bellarius, Guiderius, and Arviragus, and the romantic scenes in which they appear, are a fine relief to the intrigues and artificial refinements of the court from which they are banished.

H.

2

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nothing can surpass the wildness and simplicity of the descriptions of the mountain life they lead. They follow the business of huntsmen, not of shepherds; and this is in keeping with the spirit of adventure and uncertainty in the rest of the story, and with the scenes in which they are afterwards called on to act. How admirably the youthful fire and impatience to emerge from their obscurity in the young princes is opposed to the cooler calculations and prudent resignation of their more experienced counsellor! How well the disadvantages of knowledge and of ignorance, of solitude and society, are placed against each other!

“*Guiderius*. Out of your proof you speak : we poor unfledg’d

Have never wing’d from view o’ th’ nest ; nor know not
What air’s from home. Haply this life is best,
If quiet life is best ; sweeter to you
That have a sharper known ; well corresponding
With your stiff age : but unto us it is
A cell of ignorance ; travelling a-bed ;
A prison for a debtor, that not dares
To stride a limit.

Arviragus. What should we speak of
When we are old as you ? When we shall hear
The rain and wind beat dark December ! How,
In this our pinching cave, shall we discourse
The freezing hours away ? We have seen nothing.
We are beastly ; subtle as the fox for prey,
Like warlike as the wolf for what we eat :
Our valour is to chase what flies ; our cage
We make a quire, as doth the prison’d bird,
And sing our bondage freely.”

The answer of Bellarius to this expostulation is hardly satisfactory ; for nothing can be an answer to hope, or the passion of the mind for unknown good, but experience.—The forest of Arden in *As you Like it* can alone compare with the mountain scenes in *CYMBELINE* : yet how different the contemplative quiet of the one from the enterprising boldness and precarious mode of subsistence in the other ! Shake-

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays
 William Hazlitt
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

CYMBELINE

19

spear not only lets us into the minds of his characters, but gives a tone and colour to the scenes he describes from the feelings of their supposed inhabitants. He at the same time preserves the utmost propriety of action and passion, and gives all their local accompaniments. If he was equal to the greatest things, he was not above an attention to the smallest. Thus the gallant sportsmen in CYMBELINE have to encounter the abrupt declivities of hill and valley: Touchstone and Audrey jog along a level path. The deer in CYMBELINE are only regarded as objects of prey, "The game's a-foot," &c.—with Jaques they are fine subjects to moralize upon at leisure, "under the shade of melancholy boughs."

We cannot take leave of this play, which is a favourite with us, without noticing some occasional touches of natural piety and morality. We may allude here to the opening of the scene in which Bellarius instructs the young princes to pay their orisons to heaven :

—————"Stoop, boys ! this gate
 Instructs you how t'adore the Heav'ns ; and bows you
 To morning's holy office.
Guiderius. Hail, Heav'n !
Arviragus. Hail, Heav'n !
Bellarius. Now for our mountain-sport, up to yon hill."

What a grace and unaffected spirit of piety breathes in this passage ! In like manner, one of the brothers says to the other, when about to perform the funeral rites to Fidele,

"Nay, Cadwall, we must lay his head to the east ;
 My Father hath a reason for't"—

—as if some allusion to the doctrines of the Christian faith had been casually dropped in conversation by the old man, and had been no farther inquired into.

Shakespear's morality is introduced in the same simple, unobtrusive manner. Imogen will not let her companions stay away from the chase to attend her when sick, and gives her reason for it—

2—2

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00529-6 - Characters of Shakespeare's Plays

William Hazlitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

20

CYMBELINE

“Stick to your journal course ; *the breach of custom*
Is breach of all !”

When the Queen attempts to disguise her motives for procuring the poison from Cornelius, by saying she means to try its effects on “creatures not worth the hanging,” his answer conveys at once a tacit reproof of her hypocrisy, and a useful lesson of humanity—

—————“Your Highness
Shall from this practice but make hard your heart.”