

THE DESIGN OF BENEVOLENCE IN CYMBELINE

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the design of benevolence in Cymbeline. Whether it is Posthumous banishment from the court, or it is Imogen's leaving the court for the search of truth or her temporary stay in a Welsh mountain or her coming into contact with her lost brothers, they all lead to the design of benevolence. Good characters are rewarded and assured for justice on the Day of Judgment. Evil characters are destroyed. There is a constant pattern of sin, suffering, repentance, and redemption. The play begins with the domination of malevolent thought of the queen and his son but reaches to its climax with the domination of the benevolent thoughts. The benevolent characters dominate at the end. Cymbeline's statement that 'pardon is the word to all' serves the perfect benevolent design of the play.

KEYWORDS: *Benevolence, Malevolence, Sin, Suffering, Repentance, Redemption*

INTRODUCTION

Benevolent design of the play stems from the biblical idea of life and death. As soul separates from the body, reaches hell or heaven, after purgation, similarly characters separate from their dear ones, live in a state of purgation during their trial and unite at the end. The union of characters at the end of the play seems to be a replica of doomsday. Their enjoyment, their happiness, and their merriment all lead to the benevolent design of the play. Hence, Joel G. Fink writes 'Cymbeline is a play in which redemption is achieved through forgiveness and reconciliation.'¹

The benevolent design of the play has religious overtones. In Shakespeare's day, death was thought of as "the separation of the Soul from the body"². The Church taught that on the Day of Judgment body and soul would come together again. This idea has been taken up effectively by Cynthia Marshall. She says, "Each eschatological motif in *Cymbeline* -death, judgment, and apocalypse -- is comprehended in both individual and communal senses."³ Marshall, further elaborates, "The play illustrates the individual understanding of eschatology by presenting concrete images of death, which remind the audience of their personal mortality. It illustrates communal eschatology by suggesting the last day on which the private should be judged"⁴

The play begins with a rift between father and daughter. The father under the influence of his second wife wants his daughter Imogen to marry his second wife's son Cloten, which she refuses. Her refusal sets the stage for conflict.

¹Director: Joel G. Fink. *Cymbeline. The Colorado Shakespeare festival 2006*<http://www.coloradoshakes.org/index.php>

² Mornay p.240

³ Cynthia Marshall. *Last Things and Last Plays: Shakespearean Eschatology*. Southern Illinois University Press. 1991. p. 14

⁴ Ibid, p. 14

Gradually the queen's malevolent design appears on the surface. Her motif is the main source of evil in the play as she wants to see her son a future king. Apparently, she plays the role of a mediator between Posthumus and the king. Secretly, she is preparing ground for her son's marriage with Imogen. She advises Posthumus to avoid the king but declares her real intention in an aside, showing how secretly she influences Cymbeline:

yet I'll move him

To walk this way: I never do him wrong,

But he does buy my injuries, to be friends: Pays dear for my offenses.⁵

(I.ii.34-37)

Her love for Imogen and the king is a sham. She had poison ready for both. She wants just absolute power. She knows that Cymbeline will be angry with her allowing Posthumus access to Imogen but she will use the resulting conflict with her husband to promote her objective: the advancement of Cloten under the pretence of protecting Posthumus. These early scenes reveal her as an agent of evil. Wilson Knight writes:

His Queen is more firmly realized as a 'crafty devil' (II. i. 51) and 'A mother hourly coining plots' (II. i. 58). Her considered villainy is amazing and her only unselfishness her instinctive support of her fool son, Cloten. She is a composite of Lady Macbeth and Goneril, though without the tragic dignity of the one and the cold rationality of the other. She is cruelty incarnate.⁶

When Cymbeline comes to know the fact that Imogen has married Posthumus, he is outraged and banishes Posthumus from the court. Imogen gives a diamond ring to her husband and Posthumus, a bracelet to his wife as a token of love. They promise never to part it as long as they are alive. His banishment, however, is an opportunity for him to be away from a place which has been corrupted because of the evil queen.

Posthumus after banishment from the court reaches Rome where he indulges in a wager with cunning Iachimo. He engages in the wager because he loves Imogen deeply and has complete trust in her. Had he not the deepest love for, and implicit trust in Imogen, he would never have made the wager with Iachimo. Challenging Posthumus' love for Imogen, Iachimo provokes Posthumus love for Imogen and says that Imogen too can be easily enticed. Under the impulse of his male pride, he accepts the challenge and gives a letter asking Imogen to take care of his friend Iachimo. Imogen welcomes her husband's friend but rejects his advancement outrightly. He, then, pretends that he was just testing her love for Posthumus. Poor Imogen believes it. Iachimo plays another trick on her saying that he wants to keep a trunk of valuable gifts in her bedchamber which she accepts. Iachimo hides in the trunk and comes out during midnight. He observes Imogen closely and discovers a mole on her breast. He also looks at the room minutely, takes off her bracelet, and goes to Posthumus with all these details claiming that his wife is not loyal to him. Posthumus is outraged. Without confirming it he orders Pisanio, a servant to murder Imogen. This is Posthumus' sin, for which he has to suffer and receive punishment on the Day of Judgment. Both Cloten and Posthumus plan to kill Imogen, and Parker observes that

⁵ All quotations from *Cymbeline* are taken from the New Arden Shakespeare edition of the play, ed. J.M.Nosworthy. London: Methuen & Co Ltd.1976

⁶ G. Wilson Knight. *The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays*. Methuen, 1948.p. 130

'similar violence lurks inside both characters'.⁷ However, for Siemon the comparison is more general, in that 'as Posthumus yields gradually to fear and anger, his behavior becomes increasingly like Cloten's'.⁸ Hunter, like Parker, stresses their violence: 'Posthumus, then, has adopted the mindless savagery of Cloten'⁹. However, Posthumus deserves our sympathy for we know the fact that he has been deceived whereas Cloten's sole purpose to marry Imogen is to quench his lust for sex and power.

Pisano after receiving the order from Posthumus asks Imogen to leave the court and come along him in order to meet Posthumus. When Pisano reveals his real intention and shows her Posthumus' order, she is stunned. He, however, does not execute his master's command and asks Imogen, like Helicanus in *Pericles* to travel and find out the basis of Posthumus' order. Her leaving the court where the wicked queen and her son dominate is, in fact, a benevolent design which helps her explore the complex world, meet Posthumus, and clear his misunderstanding.

The British Posthumus loves Imogen and Italian Posthumus suspects her, abuses her and orders to kill her. It reminds one of the nunnery scenes in *Hamlet*. Posthumus, like Othello, is torn from his wife after Iachimo is able to persuade him by giving the details of her bedchamber, mole on her breast and bracelet. Posthumus fails whereas Iachimo succeeds. In other words, malevolence dominates and benevolence is defeated. Imogen now feels that her relationship with Posthumus was a breach of order and hence it has proved sterile. She comes to realize that a fruitful and harmonious marriage cannot be based on a relationship itself founded on the disorder, a flouting of parental authority:

And thou, Posthumus, thou that didst set up
 My disobedience 'against the king my father,
 And make me put into contempt the suits
 Of princely fellows, shalt hereafter find
 It is no act of common passage, but
 A strain of rareness...
 (III.iv.89-94)

Imogen now starts her journey for the search of the truth. Hunter describes Imogen's ordeal thus:

Imogen is moved from the evils of the court into a heightened and transforming nature... Guiderius and Arviragus provide her with comfort and love when she is sick, with weariness and despair, and they save her by killing the monster, Cloten who pursues her. They are pre-eminently creatures of nature. Their nurture has been natural.¹⁰

Hunter, however, is very categorical about Imogen's journey which takes place under the supervision of gods:

Imogen's journey is undertaken under the observation of the gods and with the fulfillment of heaven's will as her final

⁷ M.D.H. Parker, *The Slave of Life: A Study of Shakespeare and the Idea of Justice*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1955. p.45.

⁸ James Edward Siemon, 'Noble Virtue in *Cymbeline*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 29 (1976), 58.

⁹ Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*, p.158

¹⁰ Hunter, R. G. . *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*. New York: Columbia UP, 1965p.155

destination, and her movement from the court is a movement into the power of the ruler of the heavens—the sun itself.¹¹

On the way to this difficult journey she is tested and tried, but she never gives up. She is quite hopeful that truth will prevail and falsehood will be defeated.

The war between Britain and Rome erupts. Britain wins. The war proves to be a blessing in disguise as it leads to reconciliation and resurrection. Wilson Knight, who finds it natural that Posthumus, whose role in the play is 'to typify Britain's best manhood',¹² should expect Cymbeline to resist the Roman demand for tribute, 'but what we might not expect is to find precisely the same thoughts expressed even more satisfyingly by the Queen and Cloten'.¹³ Cloten is witty and the queen's arguments sound high patriotism at least on the surface level. The very names, Posthumus Leonatus, and that of his father, Sicilius, owe something to Roman influence, and it is significant that Posthumus changes sides several times in the course of the battle, showing that his allegiance is not clearly defined. The decisive battle fought at the play's end carries overtones of Armageddon. After the battle, those who have been presumed dead -- Cymbeline's three children -- are effectively resurrected and restored to life.

The last scene explodes the dramatic design of benevolent wonder. Posthumus, Imogen, and Iachimo are brought together on the stage for the first time. Posthumus, believing that Imogen has been murdered by his orders, and not recognizing her in the boy Fidele, wishes to die. As soon as Imogen sees the ring on Iachimo's finger, she begins the questioning which causes him to confess his villainy, and so informs Posthumus that he has been duped. But he still does not know that Imogen is alive. There is a poignant passage in which Imogen reluctantly refuses to beg for the life of her Roman master, who had just begged successfully for hers because she must first establish the truth of Iachimo's villainy. But Shakespeare wrings the last ounce of sensation out of the situation by making Posthumus strike Fidele, whom the audience knows to be Imogen, and thereby provoke Pisanio to reveal her identity. Posthumus blames not Iachimo but himself and forgives the slanderer as Imogen had forgiven him.

Iachimo knows he is worthy of death, but even his confession is associated with the fertility of the wedding ring, now restored, and Imogen's bracelet, both emblems of faith in marriage: And with this she makes her request to the king. The choice is explained for among the Roman prisoners she has spotted Iachimo, wearing her diamond ring:

Imo: My boon is, that this gentleman may render of whom ye had this ring.

(V.v.135-36)

She wants Iachimo to tell truth before everyone. Iachimo confesses his crime and proclaims that Imogen is faithful to Posthumus. He had, in fact, deceived him. Posthumus realizes the worth of Imogen after knowing the truth from Iachimo, and he repents from the depth of his heart. The vigorous expression of distress and remorse, hurting the one for whom he cares the most is an affirmation of Posthumus' fitness for redemption. He terms Imogen 'The temple\Of Virtue'(V.v.220-221). Iachimo returns the ring and bracelet:

Take that life, beseech you,

Which I so often owe: but your ring first,

¹¹ Ibid,p.154

¹² Wilson Knight, op.cit, p.140

¹³ Ibid., p.134

And here the bracelet of the truest Princess

That ever swore her faith.

(V.v.415-418)

Shakespeare writes about the end of the queen in a very mild manner which is indicative of the fact the sense of order, harmony and peace are at the close of the play, in which 'Pardon's the word to all' (V.v.423). However, Tinkler writes, 'A large number of the images involve ideas of muscular tension and strain... There is an insistent feeling of brutal strain',¹⁴ contributing to the violent atmosphere of the play. Though the queen meets a violent death, Shakespeare writes about her end:

Cor. With horror, madly dying, like her life,

Which (being cruel to the world) concluded

Most cruel to herself.

(V.v.31-33)

Cymbeline's generosity is unmatched. After he wins the battle with the help of Posthumus, he is not only ready to pay the tribute demanded by Rome but also forgives all the imprisoned soldiers. He agrees to give freely what he had refused to give under compulsion of the queen. Lucius' speech of defeat shows how they had lost all hope when they are about to lose their lives.

had it gone with us,

We should not when the blood was cool, have threatened

Our prisoners with the sword. But since the Gods

Will have it thus, that nothing but our lives

May be call'd ransom, let it come: Sufficeth,

A Roman, with a Romans heart, can suffer.

(V.v.76-81)

Instead of ordering for 'slaughter' (V.v.72) the Roman captives in revenge for the loss of British life, Cymbeline declares "pardon is the word to all". This is the climax of benevolent design in *Cymbeline*.

In contrast to the other last plays, in which the lost are restored singly, *Cymbeline* features a vast reunion, in which almost everyone experiences the return of a loved one believed to be dead. The gathering of the last union is also compared to the doomsday. Belarius, Arviragus, and Guiderius are baffled by the presence of "Fidele," the boy they have buried. Belarius' stunned question, "Is not this boy revive'd from death?" (V.v.119) implies the possibility of resurrection, although he hesitates to assume this has happened. Guiderius, insisting "we saw him dead"(V.v.126), apparently thinks he sees "Fidele's" ghost before him. Pisanio, who has feared for Imogen's life, recognizes her in disguise. Posthumus discovers the

¹⁴ F.C. Tinkler. *Cymbeline*, Scrutiny 7 (1938) 6.

wife he thinks he has killed. And Cymbeline's three children -- the two sons missing some twenty years, the daughter presumed dead after her flight from court -are restored to him.

Hence, what we find at the end, the disorder is a thing of the past, separation is no more, wicked characters are buried with their wickedness, and characters chose to be good flourish with their benevolent design. The war which is usually loathed in blood, horror, and death turns out to be an event of reconciliation, clearing doubts and peace. Love prevails all around and there is a general pardon to all from the king and his followers. The life in spite of its pain and its suffering, and its inevitable end in death is beautiful after all as the characters educate each other for benevolence and which is the central concern of the play. So, Posthumus spares Iachimo's life and instructs him to deal with others in a benevolent manner:

The power I have on you is to spare you:

The malice towards you, to forgive you. Live

And deal with others better.

(V.v.419-421)

Cymbeline ushers in a new era where only peace reigns He embraces the defeated army, forgives deposed soldiers and accepts his daughter and banished son-in-law. The Roman eagle of Imperialism vanishes, pardon and harmony steps in. The fountain of love floats all around and engulfs the entire kingdom. Cymbeline cries out of joy:

Cym. Never was a war did cease, (Ere bloody hands were washe'd,) with such peace. (V.v. 485-486)

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