

**A Guide to  
CYMBELINE**

*by William Shakespeare*



Alistair McCallum

*“The Shakespeare Handbooks open the plays up admirably. Excellent for all levels of reader – everybody will get something from them.” Simon Callow*

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## **Setting the scene**

Shakespeare probably wrote *Cymbeline* during the period 1609–10. He was in his mid forties, and had been one of England's foremost dramatists for the past twenty years. He was a member and shareholder of the King's Men, the country's most prestigious theatre company. The company's chief patron was King James I, a great lover of the theatre, and they gave frequent performances at court.

At this stage in his life, Shakespeare seems to have taken a decisive step away from the traditional forms of comedy, tragedy and history. The plays he produced during this period – particularly *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* – are more enigmatic, experimental and mystical than his earlier works. Various theories have been proposed to explain this change in direction: perhaps Shakespeare was spending less time in London, and living a more contemplative life in the calmer surroundings of his home in Stratford-upon-Avon; perhaps he had grown weary of theatrical conventions; or perhaps he was simply following the changing tastes of the time. There was a practical consideration too: as well as the large open-air Globe Theatre, the company's home since the start of the century, the King's Men had recently started performing in the Blackfriars Theatre, a smaller indoor space with an intimate, candlelit atmosphere. This venue offered exciting new possibilities in terms of sound, lighting, and special effects, all of which Shakespeare was quick to exploit in these later works.

*Cymbeline* is generally considered the strangest of Shakespeare's plays. The setting is a mixture of ancient and modern; the plot combines history, myth, and folk tale; and events are driven on by coincidence and confusion as much as by human intention. Critics have struggled to classify *Cymbeline*. Is it a comedy? A tragicomedy? A romance? Regardless of definitions, this strange, eventful tale of loss and deception, of reunion and redemption, provides an exhilarating and uplifting experience for audiences:

*"Critics have difficulty with Cymbeline. Theatregoers feel otherwise. Problems of genre, and even of inconsistent characterization, disappear in the delight of enthralling spectacle, a succession of splendid surprises, and constant theatrical suspense: three hours of wonder. In performance, the play appears the work of a superb dramatic craftsman at the very height of his virtuosity."*

Levi Fox, *The Shakespeare Handbook*, 1987

## **A state of disharmony**

The ever-expanding Roman Empire, led by Augustus Caesar, is threatening the shores of Britain. Fifty years ago, Augustus' predecessor, Julius Caesar, had staged an invasion of the kingdom; and the invading army only withdrew when the Britons agreed to pay an annual levy to the empire in return for the kingdom's peace and safety.

In recent years, the British king Cymbeline has neglected to make these payments, confident that Britain can successfully resist another invasion. However, it is impossible that Augustus Caesar will ignore Britain's provocation, and the prospect of war cannot be taken lightly.

The troublesome relationship with Rome is not Cymbeline's only concern. He has family problems, too: his daughter, the princess Imogen, has married without his permission, refusing even to contemplate the husband chosen for her by Cymbeline and his wife.

Unable to see a way out of his present difficulties, the king is in a constant state of anxiety. A mood of pessimism hangs over the royal court like a dark cloud, and the king's courtiers can only look on helplessly.



**Curtain up**

## A troubled king

I, i

Two gentlemen at the court of Cymbeline, King of Britain, are discussing the latest news. There is a gloomy atmosphere at court; but one of the men, a court insider, suggests that the general unhappiness may be apparent rather than real. Courtiers are notorious, he points out, for their insincerity. With their show of anxiety, perhaps they are simply imitating the king:

*1st Gentleman:* You do not meet a man but frowns.<sup>1</sup> Our bloods  
No more obey the heavens than our courtiers  
Still seem as does the king.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *who does not frown*

<sup>2</sup> *in the same way as our characters are dictated by  
the heavens, courtiers always mimic the king's  
outward behaviour*

The reason for the king's displeasure, it now emerges, is the recent marriage of his daughter Imogen.

The king's first wife, mother of princess Imogen, died some time ago, and he has now remarried. His second wife is herself a widow, with a son named Cloten; and both the king and his new queen were keen to see the marriage of Imogen to Cloten. Imogen, however, has dashed their hopes by marrying another man, Posthumus Leonatus, without their consent. The king, furious at his daughter's disobedience, has imprisoned Imogen at court and ordered Posthumus to leave the kingdom.

The distress felt by Cymbeline, however, is not shared by his followers despite their apparent sadness:

*1st Gentleman:* ... not a courtier,  
Although they wear their faces to the bent  
Of the king's looks,<sup>1</sup> hath a heart that is not  
Glad at the thing they scowl at.

<sup>1</sup> *although they all put on expressions that match  
the king's dejected appearance*



Cloten is universally despised, the gentleman reveals, and there is a general sense of relief that the princess has avoided the fate of marrying him. Posthumus, on the other hand, is widely regarded as virtuous and honourable, a worthy husband for the woman who is next in line to the throne of Britain.

Posthumus, the gentleman goes on to explain, was an orphan. His father Leonatus had been a renowned warrior in Britain's struggle against the invading Roman Empire. Having lost two sons in the wars, Leonatus eventually died of grief; and his wife too died as she was giving birth to their third son.

This child, given the name Posthumus, was brought up in Cymbeline's court. The boy was bright and good-natured, and gained the admiration of the whole court as he grew to adulthood. Posthumus' worth is confirmed, the gentleman declares, by the fact that princess Imogen has fallen in love with him and married him.

Imogen, it appears, is the king's only child. However, the gentleman now reveals a strange and disturbing event in Cymbeline's past:

*1st Gentleman:* He had two sons – if this be worth your hearing,  
Mark it<sup>1</sup> – the eldest of them at three years old,  
I'th' swathing clothes<sup>2</sup> the other, from their nursery  
Were stolen, and to this hour no guess in knowledge<sup>3</sup>  
Which way they went.

<sup>1</sup> *take notice of it, don't forget it*

<sup>2</sup> *in swaddling clothes; still a baby*

<sup>3</sup> *there have been no informed guesses; no one has a clear idea*

The abduction of the two children happened about twenty years ago. It seems incredible, the gentleman's companion remarks, that a king's sons could have disappeared in this way:

*2nd Gentleman:* That a king's children should be so conveyed,<sup>1</sup>  
So slackly guarded, and the search so slow  
That could not trace them!

*1st Gentleman:* Howsoe'er 'tis strange,<sup>2</sup>  
Or that the negligence may well be laughed at,  
Yet is it true, sir.

<sup>1</sup> *stolen away*

<sup>2</sup> *however strange it may be*

## A cruel separation

The two gentlemen hurry away as the queen approaches. She is in conversation with the young couple, Imogen and Posthumus.

The queen assures Imogen that she will not play the role of the wicked stepmother, so often portrayed in folk tales. In fact, she will work to release her stepdaughter from the captivity ordered by the king:

*Queen:* No, be assured you shall not find me, daughter,  
After the slander<sup>1</sup> of most stepmothers,  
Evil-eyed unto you. You're my prisoner, but  
Your jailer shall deliver you the keys  
That lock up your restraint.

<sup>1</sup> *as in the conventional, unjust image*

The queen turns to Posthumus, who is shortly to be banished, and promises that she will do her best to help him too. However, the king is still in an angry frame of mind, she warns, and for the time being Posthumus should accept the sentence handed down to him.

As a favour to the young couple, the queen leaves them on their own to say a final farewell before Posthumus leaves the country. She realises that, in doing so, she is going against Cymbeline's command:

*Queen:* I'll fetch a turn<sup>1</sup> about the garden, pitying  
The pangs of barred affections,<sup>2</sup> though the king  
Hath charged<sup>3</sup> you should not speak together.

<sup>1</sup> *take a walk*

<sup>2</sup> *the pain of your forbidden love*

<sup>3</sup> *ordered*

As soon as the queen is out of earshot, Imogen makes it clear that she does not trust her stepmother in the slightest:

*Imogen:* O dissembling<sup>1</sup> courtesy! How fine this tyrant  
Can tickle<sup>2</sup> where she wounds!

<sup>1</sup> *deceitful*

<sup>2</sup> *flatter, charm*

Imogen weeps as she foresees a lonely life in the hostile surroundings of her father's court, comforted only by the hope that one day she may be reunited with her husband. Posthumus, vowing to be faithful to Imogen even in exile, is on the verge of tears too. Banished from Britain, he will live in Rome with Philario, a friend of his late father's. Knowing that he will be desperate to hear from Imogen, he urges her to write often:

*Posthumus:* ... thither<sup>1</sup> write, my queen,<sup>2</sup>  
And with mine eyes I'll drink the words you send,  
Though ink be made of gall.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *there; to Philario's house in Rome*

<sup>2</sup> *mistress; ruler of my heart*

<sup>3</sup> *even if the ink were bitter and noxious*

The queen returns briefly to hurry the couple along; she is worried, she tells them, that the king may pass by at any minute and scold her for allowing them to meet. As she slips away, however, she secretly reveals that she will ensure that the king does see them together. Even when she offends the king, she always manages to benefit from the situation:

*Queen:* [aside] Yet I'll move him  
To walk this way.<sup>1</sup> I never do him wrong  
But he does buy my injuries to be friends,  
Pays dear for my offences.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *I'll make sure that he comes in this direction, so that he can see Posthumus and Imogen together*

<sup>2</sup> *even when I cause him offence, he treats me as if I were doing him a favour, and ends up indebted to me for my wrongdoing*

Posthumus and Imogen, knowing that they will very soon be parted, exchange tokens of their love. Imogen gives her husband a precious ring that belonged to her mother, now dead; but in her despair she suggests that one day he may no longer wish to keep it. That day will never come, Posthumus vows:

*Imogen:* ... This diamond was my mother's. Take it, heart,  
[gives him a ring]  
But<sup>1</sup> keep it till you woo another wife,  
When Imogen is dead.

*Posthumus:* How, how? Another?  
You gentle gods, give me but this I have<sup>2</sup> ...

<sup>1</sup> *only*

<sup>2</sup> *just allow me to be with my one true wife*

In return, Posthumus places a bracelet on his wife's arm. His gift is less valuable, he confesses. He has gained in the exchange just as he did when, as a penniless orphan, he won the love of a princess:

*Posthumus:* ... As I my poor self did exchange for you  
To your so infinite loss, so in our trifles  
I still win of you.<sup>1</sup> For my sake wear this:  
[puts a bracelet on her arm]

It is a manacle of love. I'll place it  
Upon this fairest prisoner.

<sup>1</sup> *in our exchange of tokens I gain more than you do,  
just as I did when we fell in love*

## Banishment

The couple's loving, sorrowful farewell is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of Cymbeline and his entourage. When the king catches sight of Posthumus, he cannot contain his anger; the young man has been sentenced to banishment, and should have left the country by now. He orders him to depart immediately, on pain of death. Posthumus, remaining calm and courteous, takes his leave:

*Cymbeline:* Thou basest thing, avoid hence,<sup>1</sup> from my sight!  
If after this command thou fraught the court  
With thy unworthiness,<sup>2</sup> thou diest. Away!  
Thou'rt poison to my blood.

*Posthumus:* The gods protect you  
And bless the good remainders of the court.<sup>3</sup>  
I am gone.

<sup>1</sup> *get away from this place*

<sup>2</sup> *you inflict your disreputable presence on the court*

<sup>3</sup> *the good people remaining at court*

Imogen cries out desperately as her husband leaves. Cymbeline turns on her furiously, accusing her of tormenting him in his old age. She has shown deliberate disobedience by marrying a commoner, a man of no social standing, rather than the husband chosen for her. She is next in line to the throne, and her marriage is a matter of great importance. Imogen, in response, argues that Posthumus is an admirable addition to the royal family:

*Cymbeline:* Thou took'st a beggar, wouldst have made my throne  
A seat for baseness.<sup>1</sup>

*Imogen:* No, I rather added  
A lustre<sup>2</sup> to it.

<sup>1</sup> *a source of shame and dishonour*

<sup>2</sup> *brilliance*

Impervious to her father's criticism, Imogen reminds him that he was the one who rescued Posthumus as a young orphan, nurturing him at court almost as if the boy were his own son. She wishes, in her distress, that she were the daughter of a shepherd, not a king, and that Posthumus too was no more than a local herdsman's son.

The queen now approaches, and for a moment Cymbeline directs his anger at her: by allowing the couple to meet before their separation, she has disobeyed his instructions. His attention quickly returns to his daughter, however, and he orders his attendants to confine her to her room. The queen, with a show of sympathy towards Imogen, persuades Cymbeline to relent. Still complaining bitterly, he leaves the two women together:

*Queen:* Sweet sovereign,  
Leave us to ourselves, and make yourself some comfort  
Out of your best advice.<sup>1</sup>

*Cymbeline:* Nay, let her languish  
A drop of blood a day<sup>2</sup> and, being aged,  
Die of this folly. [*leaves with his lords*]  
<sup>1</sup> *spend some time in calm reflection, and you will feel less troubled*  
<sup>2</sup> *grow weak as her grief gradually eats up her vitality*

The queen and Imogen are now joined by Pisanio, Posthumus' servant. Pisanio reports that the queen's son Cloten drew his sword and attempted to attack Posthumus as he left the court. The servant hints that Posthumus is far superior to Cloten as a swordsman, and dealt with his attacker calmly and safely:

*Pisanio:* My lord your son<sup>1</sup> drew on my master.  
*Queen:* Ha?

*Pisanio:* No harm, I trust, is done?  
There might have been,  
But that my master rather played than fought  
And had no help of anger.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cloten*

<sup>2</sup> *was not motivated by anger; maintained his self-control*

Imogen asks Pisanio why he has left his master rather than accompanying him to the port, where his ship is waiting to take him into exile. Pisanio replies that Posthumus has instructed him to return to court and become Imogen's servant. Desperate for news of any kind about her husband, Imogen asks him to follow him again to the port; when the ship has left, Pisanio is to return and tell her everything about his departure.

## Self-delusion

I, ii

After his unsuccessful attack on Posthumus, Cloten is sweating profusely, and one of his attendants advises him to change his clothes. Cloten asks, hopefully, whether he has drawn blood from his opponent. Another attendant remarks, out of his master's hearing, that Posthumus was barely inconvenienced by the encounter:

*1st Lord:* Sir, I would advise you to shift<sup>1</sup> a shirt. The violence of action hath made you reek as a sacrifice<sup>2</sup> ...

*Cloten:* If my shirt were bloody, then to shift it.<sup>3</sup> Have I hurt him?

*2nd Lord:* [*aside*] No, faith, not so much as his patience.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *change*

<sup>2</sup> *like the body of a burning sacrificial animal*

<sup>3</sup> *if there's blood on my shirt, it would be a good idea to change it*

<sup>4</sup> *you have not even tried his patience*

Cloten boasts that Posthumus was afraid to fight with him, but another sarcastic comment from his attendant suggests that the opposite was the case:

*Cloten:* The villain would not stand me.<sup>1</sup>

*2nd Lord:* [*aside*] No, but he fled forward still,<sup>2</sup> toward your face.

<sup>1</sup> *stand his ground, face up to me*

<sup>2</sup> *continually*

It is clear that Cloten deeply resents the fact that Imogen has rejected him, instead choosing Posthumus as her husband. One of his companions argues, unconvincingly, that the princess is not bright enough to appreciate Cloten's good qualities. The other has a less flattering opinion, though he is careful not to let his master know:

*Cloten:* ... that she should love this fellow and refuse me!

*2nd Lord:* [*aside*] If it be a sin to make a true election,<sup>1</sup> she is damned.

*1st Lord:* Sir, as I told you always, her beauty and her brain go not together. She's a good sign,<sup>2</sup> but I have seen small reflection of her wit.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *a sound choice*

<sup>2</sup> *she has a good outward appearance*

<sup>3</sup> *evidence of her intelligence*

## The exile begins

I, iii

As instructed by Imogen, Pisanio has been to the port to witness Posthumus' departure. He is now back at court, and Imogen is questioning him urgently, desperate to know everything that happened as the ship set sail. Posthumus' parting words, reports Pisanio, were of his beloved wife. Imogen can hardly contain her distress:

*Imogen:* What was the last  
That he spake to thee?

*Pisanio:* It was his queen, his queen.

*Imogen:* Then waved his handkerchief?

*Pisanio:* And kissed it, madam.

*Imogen:* Senseless<sup>1</sup> linen, happier therein than I!

<sup>1</sup> *inanimate; unfeeling*

If she had been at the port, says Imogen, she would have stayed until her husband disappeared from view completely. She imagines him vanishing as his ship sails into the distance:

*Imogen:* I would have broke mine eye-strings,<sup>1</sup> cracked them, but<sup>2</sup>  
To look upon him till the diminution  
Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle;<sup>3</sup>



Nay, followed him till he had melted from  
The smallness of a gnat to air, and then  
Have turned mine eye and wept.

<sup>1</sup> *tissues attached to the eye, believed to break when  
a person went blind or died*

<sup>2</sup> *just*

<sup>3</sup> *had made him seem as tiny as the point of a needle*

There are so many things, Imogen complains, that she wished to say to Posthumus before the king forced him to leave so abruptly. She wanted her husband to know that she intends to think about him and pray at certain times of day. Above all, she wanted him to promise that he would remain faithful:

*Imogen:*

Ere<sup>1</sup> I could tell him

How I would think on him at certain hours,  
Such thoughts and such,<sup>2</sup> or I could make him swear  
The shes<sup>3</sup> of Italy should not betray  
Mine interest<sup>4</sup> and his honour, or have charged him  
At the sixth hour of morn, at noon, at midnight,  
T'encounter me with orisons<sup>5</sup> ...

... comes in my father,

And, like the tyrannous breathing of the north,  
Shakes all our buds from growing.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *before*

<sup>2</sup> *how I would think about him in various ways at  
different times of day*

<sup>3</sup> *women*

<sup>4</sup> *my right to him, as his wife*

<sup>5</sup> *to join me in my prayers*

<sup>6</sup> *interrupts us, like the relentless north wind which  
disturbs young buds and stops them from growing*

*“Loving and candid, resourceful, witty, and a little rash,  
Imogen stands at the centre of the play. The characters  
who surround her, although powerfully and effectively  
drawn, are less complex.”*

Anne Barton, Programme notes for the RSC  
production of *Cymbeline*, 1974

## A difference of opinion

I, iv

In Rome, Philario is hosting a cosmopolitan gathering. Individuals from France, Spain and Holland are present, as well as his fellow Italian, the nobleman Iachimo. The men are discussing the imminent arrival of a Briton, Posthumus, who is to be a guest at Philario's house.

Even here in Italy, Posthumus is renowned for his honour and integrity. Iachimo, however, has his doubts. Perhaps the Briton's marriage to a princess has given him a higher status than he truly deserves:

*Iachimo:* This matter of marrying his king's daughter, wherein he must be weighed rather by her value than his own,<sup>1</sup> words him, I doubt not, a great deal from the matter.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *which enhances his reputation through his wife's worth and rank, rather than demonstrating his own intrinsic value*

<sup>2</sup> *encourages people to praise him in a way that he does not deserve in reality*

Posthumus' banishment has only increased his popularity, remarks Iachimo cynically, and serves as a distraction from the fact that he is socially inferior to princess Imogen. He wonders how his friend Philario came to know the Briton. Philario replies that, as a soldier, he fought side by side with Posthumus' father, Leonatus, who saved his life on many occasions. At this moment, Posthumus himself arrives, and Philario urges his guests to treat him courteously.

It immediately becomes apparent that one of Philario's friends, a Frenchman, has already met Posthumus. Although their exchanges are polite and cordial, it emerges that the occasion of their meeting was dramatic and potentially fatal. On an earlier visit to France, Posthumus had got into a quarrel which was on the verge of developing into a sword fight; Philario's friend had stepped in to break up the duel, quite possibly saving Posthumus' life.

Posthumus remembers the incident well, and is still grateful to the Frenchman for his intervention. He was young and immature at the time, explains Posthumus, and too quick to take offence over a relatively trivial matter.

Iachimo's curiosity is immediately piqued: what was the nature of this quarrel that almost led to bloodshed? It emerges that the young Posthumus had become involved in a heated dispute over the merits of British women compared with those of France. He had argued passionately in favour of the women of Britain, and his own sweetheart in particular:

*Frenchman:* ... this gentleman<sup>1</sup> at that time vouching – and upon warrant of bloody affirmation<sup>2</sup> – his to be more fair, virtuous, wise, chaste, constant, qualified<sup>3</sup> and less attemptable<sup>4</sup> than any the rarest<sup>5</sup> of our ladies in France.

<sup>1</sup> *Posthumus*

<sup>2</sup> *ready to back up his assertion with violence if necessary*

<sup>3</sup> *accomplished, talented*

<sup>4</sup> *vulnerable to seduction, liable to be unfaithful*

<sup>5</sup> *any of the most admirable*

Iachimo, who takes a more jaundiced view of women in general, dismisses the idea of the perfect, incorruptible woman; the Briton's beloved cannot be such a paragon of virtue. Posthumus springs to the defence of his wife:

*Iachimo:* That lady<sup>1</sup> is not now living, or this gentleman's opinion, by this, worn out.<sup>2</sup>

*Posthumus:* She holds her virtue still, and I my mind.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *the lady who was the subject of the quarrel; Imogen*

<sup>2</sup> *Posthumus must have lost his idealistic view by now*

<sup>3</sup> *she is just as virtuous now as she was then, and my opinion has not changed*

Imogen cannot be superior to all the women in Italy, Iachimo claims. Noticing a diamond ring on Posthumus' finger, he points out that, however fine it may be, there are doubtless others in the world that are more precious, even if he has not seen them. In the same way, there must be women that Posthumus has never met who far excel Imogen.

Posthumus refuses to accept Iachimo's assertion; both his ring and his beloved are without equal in his eyes. Iachimo mocks his attachment to the ring. If it is the most valuable thing in the world, as he claims, Imogen must come a poor second. The two cannot be compared, declares Posthumus:

*Iachimo:* What do you esteem it at?<sup>1</sup>

*Posthumus:* More than the world enjoys.<sup>2</sup>

*Iachimo:* Either your unparagoned mistress is dead, or she's outprized by a trifle.<sup>3</sup>

*Posthumus:* You are mistaken: the one may be sold or given, or if there were wealth enough for the purchase or merit for the gift;<sup>4</sup> the other is not a thing for sale, and only the gift of the gods.

<sup>1</sup> *how much is the ring worth to you?*

<sup>2</sup> *more than all the world's wealth*

<sup>3</sup> *either your incomparable beloved must be dead, or she's worth less than a trinket*

<sup>4</sup> *the ring could go to anyone wealthy enough to purchase it, or worthy enough to deserve it as a gift*

Italy had a reputation in Shakespeare's day as an exotic, dangerous place, a land of treachery, courtesans and conspiracies. The notorious Machiavelli had died a century before *Cymbeline* was written, but he still loomed large in the English popular imagination:

*"Shakespeare makes Iachimo a contemporary Italian; the Rome he comes from is no antique world capital of eagles and classical pillars, but lies in the hot, corrupt, Machiavellian Italy which bred, so the Elizabethan English believed, 'devils incarnate'."*

John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*, 1964

Neither man is prepared to back down, and beneath the refined wordplay their growing hostility is becoming clear. Iachimo, determined to provoke the newcomer, now goes even further. Just as Posthumus' ring may be stolen, he suggests, his wife too may be vulnerable. Adultery happens from time to time, and Imogen, like all women, is not immune:

*Iachimo:* ... strange fowl light upon neighbouring ponds.<sup>1</sup> Your ring may be stolen too, so your brace of unprizable estimations;<sup>2</sup> the one is but frail and the other casual.<sup>3</sup> A cunning thief or a that-way-accomplished courtier<sup>4</sup> would hazard the winning both of first and last.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *just as wildfowl may visit neighbouring ponds, a man may attempt to seduce his neighbour's wife*

<sup>2</sup> *your two priceless possessions, your ring and your wife, may both be stolen*

<sup>3</sup> *one is weak and defenceless; the other is insecure, and subject to accident or misfortune*

<sup>4</sup> *a courtier adept at seducing women*

<sup>5</sup> *might attempt to possess both your ring and your wife, even if it involved a degree of risk*

Posthumus retorts that no man in Italy could ever persuade his wife to be unfaithful. He is confident that his ring too is secure even if, he remarks casually, there is no shortage of thieves in the country. At this point the host, Philario, intervenes. The argument is getting out of hand:

*Posthumus:* Your Italy contains none so accomplished a courtier to convince the honour<sup>1</sup> of my mistress ... I do nothing doubt you have store of thieves;<sup>2</sup> notwithstanding, I fear not<sup>3</sup> my ring.

*Philario:* Let us leave here,<sup>4</sup> gentlemen.

<sup>1</sup> *overcome, seduce*

<sup>2</sup> *I have no doubt that you have plenty of thieves*

<sup>3</sup> *I'm not worried about*

<sup>4</sup> *stop now*

## A question of honour

Posthumus is only too glad to bring the conversation to an end, he claims. He remarks, sarcastically, that Iachimo has been very welcoming in discussing matters so freely with him on their first meeting. Iachimo, for his part, refuses to change the subject. He himself could easily seduce Imogen, he declares, if the circumstances were right:

*Iachimo:* With five times so much conversation<sup>1</sup> I should get ground of your fair mistress, make her go back even to the yielding,<sup>2</sup> had I admittance and opportunity to friend.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *with a conversation five times as long as the one we have just had*

<sup>2</sup> *gain the advantage over her, as in a duel, and persuade her to surrender*

<sup>3</sup> *if I had the chance to meet and befriend her*

Posthumus refuses to respond. Iachimo now goes even further; he is prepared to back up his words by wagering half of everything he owns on his ability to seduce Imogen. It is Posthumus' stubborn refusal to accept that his wife could ever be unfaithful, says Iachimo, that provokes him. He does not wish to insult Imogen, as he would make the same bet involving any woman. If he wins the bet, all he wants in return is Posthumus' diamond ring:

*Iachimo:* I dare thereupon pawn the moiety of my estate to your ring,<sup>1</sup> which in my opinion o'ervalues it something.<sup>2</sup> But I make my wager rather against your confidence than her reputation;<sup>3</sup> and to bar your offence herein too,<sup>4</sup> I durst<sup>5</sup> attempt it against any lady in the world.

<sup>1</sup> *stake half of my wealth against your ring*

<sup>2</sup> *rather overestimates its value*

<sup>3</sup> *I am betting against your overconfidence rather than Imogen's good name*

<sup>4</sup> *to ensure that you are not personally offended by this wager*

<sup>5</sup> *would dare*

Iachimo is deceiving himself, replies Posthumus. Any attempt to make advances to Imogen would be met with a firm rejection. Such an attempt would deserve severe punishment, he remarks pointedly.

The situation has now taken a sinister turn. Philario once again tries to smooth things over, but for Iachimo there is no going back. He is prepared to stake a huge amount of money on his ability to seduce Imogen. All he requires is a letter of introduction to the British court so that he can meet the princess. Posthumus, utterly confident of his wife's loyalty, is willing to gamble the diamond ring that she gave him as a parting gift:

*Iachimo:* I will lay you ten thousand ducats<sup>1</sup> to your ring that, commend me<sup>2</sup> to the court where your lady is, with no more advantage than the opportunity of a second conference, and I will bring from thence that honour of hers which you imagine so reserved.<sup>3</sup>

*Posthumus:* I will wage against your gold, gold to it.<sup>4</sup> My ring I hold dear as my finger: 'tis part of it.

<sup>1</sup> *bet ten thousand gold coins*

<sup>2</sup> *if you arrange a favourable introduction*

<sup>3</sup> *as long as I can meet her more than once, I will demonstrate that her supposed loyalty to you is imaginary*

<sup>4</sup> *I will match your stake of gold with gold of my own*

Iachimo taunts Posthumus, claiming that he is afraid to accept the wager as he knows, deep down, that Imogen would be unfaithful. Posthumus, infuriated, announces that the bet is to go ahead. Philario is horrified, but the two men are resolute:

*Posthumus:* Let there be covenants drawn between's.<sup>1</sup> My mistress exceeds in goodness the hugeness of your unworthy thinking.<sup>2</sup> I dare you to this match. Here's my ring.

*Philario:* I will have it no lay.<sup>3</sup>

*Iachimo:* By the gods, it is one.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *a legal agreement drawn up between us*

<sup>2</sup> *however excessive and despicable your imagination may be, Imogen's virtue is greater*

<sup>3</sup> *I will not allow this wager to take place*

<sup>4</sup> *the wager is valid*

Iachimo now spells out the wager to which they have both agreed. He will visit Cymbeline's court, with a letter of introduction from Posthumus that will enable him to meet princess Imogen; and if he later returns without evidence that he has successfully seduced Imogen, his stake of ten thousand gold ducats will go to Posthumus.

Posthumus adds that there is more than money at stake; if Iachimo's bragging proves to be unfounded, he is likely to pay with his life. Undaunted, Iachimo embraces the challenge enthusiastically and shakes hands with his rival. He intends to set out for Britain before either of them has a chance to reconsider:

*Posthumus:* ... if you make your voyage upon her and give me directly to understand you have prevailed,<sup>1</sup> I am no further your enemy; she is not worth our debate. If she remain unsexed, you not making it appear otherwise,<sup>2</sup> for your ill opinion and th'assault you have made to her chastity, you shall answer me with your sword.<sup>3</sup>

*Iachimo:* Your hand, a covenant.<sup>4</sup> We will have these things set down by lawful counsel, and straight away for Britain, lest the bargain should catch cold and starve.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *if you prove to me that you have succeeded in your quest to seduce Imogen*

<sup>2</sup> *and you cannot give any evidence of your success*

<sup>3</sup> *you will have to face me in a duel*

<sup>4</sup> *we are agreed*

<sup>5</sup> *I will depart immediately, in case we cool down and call off our wager*

*"Iachimo is wicked for the pure pleasure of it, for the sake of the sport. At the bottom of the business is his vanity; no woman, he is confident, can resist him ... He has a quick and sensitive mind. He can size up another man's weaknesses, and play on them with artistic skill. Posthumus proves fairly easy quarry."*

Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 1930





The doctor warns the queen that observing the effects of these drugs will be unpleasant and disturbing. She will need to develop a hard heart if she is to experiment in this way, he tells her, but she brushes aside his concerns.

The queen has also asked Pisanio to see her, and he now arrives. Although she maintains a friendly manner, it is clear that she does not trust the man; he was servant to Posthumus before his banishment, and is now in Imogen's service. He is undoubtedly hostile to her son Cloten, and she intends to deal with him. She wishes to speak to him in private, and asks Cornelius to leave.

As the doctor departs, he remarks secretly that the drugs he has given her are not those she requested. He realises that the queen is a dangerous individual, not to be trusted with deadly poisons. He has given her instead a mixture that will bring about a deep sleep, virtually indistinguishable from death. Anyone who takes it will not be in danger, however, and will eventually awake feeling invigorated:

*Cornelius:*

I do know her spirit,  
And will not trust one of her malice with  
A drug of such damned nature. Those she has  
Will stupefy and dull the sense awhile ...  
... but there is  
No danger in what show of death it makes<sup>1</sup>  
More than the locking up the spirits a time,  
To be more fresh, reviving.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *in the appearance of death that the drug produces*

<sup>2</sup> *other than to suppress the signs of life for a while,  
leaving the taker refreshed on awakening*

A few years before Shakespeare wrote *Cymbeline*, his daughter Susanna had married John Hall, a physician who had recently set up a practice in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The world of medicine at the time was not generally held in high esteem; it was poorly regulated, and rife with fraudsters and charlatans. Where doctors appear in Shakespeare's early comedies, they are portrayed as incompetent figures of fun. However, Hall was a conscientious, attentive physician who gained a sound reputation in Stratford and the surrounding area. He specialised in the treatment of scurvy, a common disease at the time which was poorly understood and notoriously difficult to diagnose.

The relationship between Shakespeare and his son-in-law seems to have been one of mutual warmth and respect. Did John Hall, with his methodical approach and high ethical standards, change his father-in-law's view of the profession?

*"We must always be wary of attempts to map Shakespeare's life on to his work. But writers cannot avoid drawing on their experience. Is it a coincidence that in Shakespeare's earlier works there are two comic doctors ... whereas in the plays written after John Hall's arrival in Stratford-upon-Avon, there are several dignified, sympathetically portrayed medical men? Among them are the physician who has to deal with that difficult patient Lady Macbeth, the doctor who revives the exhausted King Lear, and Dr Cornelius in Cymbeline (who tricks the wicked stepmother, giving her a sleeping draught rather than the poison she desires)."*

Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age*, 2008

## Ruthless ambition

Alone with Pisanio, the queen raises the subject of her stepdaughter Imogen, who is still tormented by the departure of her husband. The princess would be much happier, claims the queen, if she abandoned any idea of seeing Posthumus again; her own son Cloten would make a much more suitable husband. If Pisanio can make the princess see sense, the queen promises, he will be rewarded handsomely:

*Queen:* Do thou work.<sup>1</sup>  
When thou shalt bring me word she loves my son,  
I'll tell thee on the instant thou art then  
As great as is thy master – greater, for  
His fortunes all lie speechless, and his name  
Is at last gasp.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *use your influence*

<sup>2</sup> *Posthumus' status and reputation, by now, are virtually non-existent*

While the queen is talking, she drops the box – seemingly by accident – that Cornelius has just given her. Pisanio picks it up, and the queen remarks that the contents of the box are very special. It contains a wonderfully restorative drug, she explains; and as a gesture of goodwill, she decides to allow Pisanio to keep the box. If he succeeds in winning Imogen over to the idea of marrying Cloten, the rewards will be much greater:

*Queen:* Thou tak'st up  
Thou knowst not what;<sup>1</sup> but take it for thy labour.<sup>2</sup>  
It is a thing I made which hath the king  
Five times redeemed<sup>3</sup> from death. I do not know  
What is more cordial.<sup>4</sup> Nay, I prithee, take it.  
It is an earnest<sup>5</sup> of a farther good  
That I mean to thee.

<sup>1</sup> *you don't realise what you are picking up*

<sup>2</sup> *as a reward for your co-operation*

<sup>3</sup> *rescued, saved*

<sup>4</sup> *I know of no other remedy that is so effective*

<sup>5</sup> *instalment, down payment*

