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Thanhouser's 'Fierce Abridgement' of *Cymbeline*

Lindsay Ann Reid

Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* 'is singularly well-adapted,' or so a 1913 piece in *The Moving Picture World* once claimed, 'to rendition in motion pictures'.¹ It would seem that posterity has not concurred. One of Shakespeare's least-filmed plays, *Cymbeline* has inspired few screen adaptations over the course of the last century: the Thanhouser Film Corporation's inaugural 1913 version – the very film that motivated the above reviewer's overly optimistic forecast of the play's cinematic prospects – has been followed only by Elijah Moshinsky's BBC Television Shakespeare *Cymbeline* of 1983 and Michael Almeyreda's 2015 biker gang adaptation. Indeed, this Shakespearean play has been remarked far more often over the last hundred years for its alleged generic incomprehensibility and structural incongruities than its inherent filmability. It is with this disjunct in mind – that is, the obvious discrepancy between the anonymous 1913 reviewer's projections in *The Moving Picture World* and *Cymbeline*'s subsequent lack of cinematic exposure – that I pose three interrelated questions. Firstly, what was it about the Thanhouser film of 1913 that made Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* seem so felicitously well-suited for screen adaptation? To what degree did this relatively short, silent film reproduce the qualities and characteristics that scholars and theatrical audiences alike have typically used to describe and define *Cymbeline* as a play? And, finally, how much can a so-called Shakespearean romance like *Cymbeline* be cut and reshaped, as it unquestionably was in the Thanhouser film adaptation, before it ceases to present as a Shakespearean 'romance' and begins to look more like *something else*?

In what follows, I thus consider the thorny questions of what kind of play Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is and what features have particularly come to define it in the contemporary imagination before shifting focus to revisit the earliest cinematic interpretation of this Shakespearean text.² Examining the particular cuts, emphases, expository glosses and narrative streamlining of the 1913 film, I ultimately argue that it reworks the material of Shakespeare's generically ambiguous play into a fairly straightforward romantic comedy –

¹ *The Moving Picture World* (5 April 1913) as reproduced in Q. D. Bowers, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History, 1909-1918*, online version 2.0 (Portland: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 1997), n. p., www.thanhouser.org/tcod/ (accessed March 2015).

² This film has attracted little critical attention to date. The most sustained discussions appear in R. H. Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History* (New York: Routledge, 2013 [1968]); J. Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005) and J. Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

albeit one that occurs in a vaguely historicized and bucolic setting. Essentially eliminating *Cymbeline*'s most notorious villains and prizing an Imogen-Leonatus love narrative that bears a striking resemblance to the Hero-and-Claudius plot in *Much Ado About Nothing*, this adaptation does away with many of the more fanciful elements for which its Shakespearean source is most often remembered. The resultant *Cymbeline* may seem 'singularly well-adapted to rendition in motion pictures,' yet it is a *Cymbeline* curiously devoid of those fairy-tale elements and 'mark[s] of wonder' (5.4.365) that are so closely associated with Shakespeare's metatheatrical and self-consciously excessive original.³

In addressing the central questions posed in this chapter, it is useful to start with a consideration of *Cymbeline*'s defining characteristics. Loosely inspired by chronicle history and often associated with fairy tales, pastiche, melodrama, fantasy and/or parody, this Shakespearean piece is undoubtedly a 'glorious mishmash'.⁴ It is brimming with ghosts and gods, coincidence and confusion, recognitions and revelations, prophesies and portents. Implausibly peopled by lost heirs, Roman legions and noxious villains, it relies on such unlikely curiosities as a tell-tale mole, a drug-induced slumber, a revelatory ring and a misconceived 'manacle of love' to further its plot (1.1.122).

Like *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is fraught with taxonomical difficulties. Known variously in academic parlance as a 'tragicomedy,' a 'romance,' a 'late play,' or – as the relevant *Cambridge Companion* of 2009 would have it – one of the 'last plays,' this text both invites generic criticism and remains notoriously difficult to categorize. Numerous editors and commentators have quipped that it is 'tragical-comical-historical-pastoral' and it has been widely observed that Shakespeare's so-called 'Tragedy of Cymbeline' could just as easily have been classed by Heminges and Condell as a comedy or a history when they compiled the First Folio of 1623.⁵ As Stephen Orgel once put it, 'the play more or less fits all three' of the categories available to Shakespeare's first editors, yet 'comfortably fits none'.⁶

Cymbeline's generic unintelligibility is only further confounded by the play's unrelentingly meta-Shakespearean character: Imogen's relationship with Cymbeline reprises Cordelia's with her similarly myopic father Lear, another of Shakespeare's semi-legendary

³ Subsequent in-text citations to Shakespeare's works refer to the Cambridge edition but we have chosen to use the name 'Imogen' rather than Cambridge's 'Innogen'.

⁴ I borrow this phrasing from M. Billington, 'Cymbeline: The Swan, Stratford', *The Guardian*, 8 August 2003, www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/aug/08/theatre (accessed March 2015).

⁵ Perhaps the most recent instance of the 'tragical-comical-historical-pastoral' joke appears in the introduction to J. Bate and E. Rasmussen (eds.), *Cymbeline* (New York: Modern Library, 2011), vii.

⁶ S. Orgel, 'Shakespeare Performed: *Cymbeline* at Santa Cruz', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52.2 (2001), 277.

British monarchs; Imogen, defying her father and insisting that she marry a suitor of her own choice, shares in Hermia's rebellious romantic determination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the odious Iachimo, who steals Imogen's bracelet, plays a role strikingly similar to that of *Othello's* Iago, thief of Desdemona's handkerchief; the death-like trance of the play's heroine, brought on by a potion, is a device excerpted wholesale from *Romeo and Juliet*; the wager plot echoes both the opening of *The Rape of Lucrece* and the last act of *The Taming of the Shrew*; and like Viola, Julia, Portia and Rosalind before her, Imogen pluckily disguises herself as a boy mid-play. The list could go on, but suffice it to say that *Cymbeline's* exaggerated host of thematic – and even appellative – connections with other texts in the Shakespeare canon once led Northrop Frye to quip that it might well have been subtitled 'Much Ado About Everything'.⁷

Less often criticized than it once was for its perceived aesthetic shortcomings, historical anachronisms and structural incongruities, *Cymbeline* nonetheless strains (perhaps even farcically so) under the weight of an improbable, labyrinthine plot. It is, to borrow Shakespeare's own phrasing, 'a thing perplexed/ Beyond self-explication' (3.4.7–8). No wonder, then, that when the imprisoned Posthumus is visited by familial apparitions in Act 5, these 'poor ghosts' (5.3.154) – who claim to have been taking in the play's action 'from stiller seats' (5.3.145) – end up metatheatrically quibbling with Jupiter over their inability to make sense of the scenes they have just watched. Posthumus' deceased relations assume that the 'king of gods' must be neglecting his directorial role (5.3.149). Given the ghosts' pleas for the restoration of order in this scene, it would appear that even the theoretically omniscient Jove is no longer following along by the play's final act: 'Thy crystal window ope; look out; no longer exercise/ Upon a valiant race thy harsh and potent injuries' (5.3.151–2), these spectres implore, hoping to draw the great deity's attention to the theatrical chaos unfolding on stage.

Given the play's generic ambiguities, its over-the-top meta-Shakespeareanisms and its teasing references to its own incoherence, it is unsurprising to note that *Cymbeline's* academic interpreters have often remarked on its conspicuously wry and riddling feel. Frank Kermode long ago suggested that it is hard to shake the feeling that Shakespeare is 'somehow playing with the play' throughout *Cymbeline*, for instance.⁸ And more recently, Alison Thorne has

⁷ N. Frye, 'A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance', in T. Grande and G. Sherbert (eds.), *Writings on Shakespeare and the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010 [1965]), 168.

⁸ F. Kermode, *The Final Plays* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1963), 22.

advanced the related argument that *Cymbeline* ‘reflects ironically on the question of its own illegibility’ by ‘staging ... the problems and the pitfalls involved in interpretative practices’.⁹ The 1913 *Cymbeline* was not the Thanhouser group’s first foray into Shakespearean film adaptation. Following the release of the Thanhouser Company’s first commercial film in March of 1910, the New Rochelle-based studio – which would go on to create over a thousand films before its closure in 1917 – announced its intention to create ‘a strong series of Shakespearean releases ... of which *The Winter’s Tale* is first’.¹⁰ Though a formalized Shakespeare series never seems to have emerged as such, over the next few years a number of Shakespearean pieces were released by the company as part of its loosely conceived series of ‘Thanhouser Classics’: a line of ‘status-conscious literary adaptations,’ to borrow Judith Buchanan’s phrasing, that began, as promised, with *The Winter’s Tale* in May of 1910.¹¹

Originally founded by Edwin Thanhouser, a man described by one contemporary critic as ‘a quiet, cultured, far-seeing impresario’ who had, unlike most of his counterparts, already ‘made a striking success in the theatrical world’ prior to beginning his career as a filmmaker, the Thanhouser Company aimed to distinguish itself from the competition by producing *quality* films.¹² To wit, an advertisement for *The Winter’s Tale* bragged it had been ‘Done in the Thanhouser way and produced at just three times the cost of an ordinary release’.¹³ In an interview with *The Moving Picture News* published early in the company’s history, Thanhouser expressed his desire to create only ‘artistic productions, particularly in the field of legitimate drama and comedy’. Thanhouser, who declared himself ‘strongly opposed to producing any picture that contains brutal and uncalled-for crimes, or anything with a suggestive nature,’ seems to have been attracted to Shakespearean subjects for their perceived morality as well as their cultural capital and ‘artistic’ nature: ‘There are tragedies that make great picture stories and that are in every way interesting and proper and instructive, as, for instance, many of the plays of Shakespeare.’¹⁴

The Thanhouser Company’s earliest Shakespearean experiment, *The Winter’s Tale*, appears to have been an overwhelming critical success. It was called ‘an excellent piece of work,’ a film ‘most intelligently and clearly constructed’ that would indubitably appeal to

⁹ A. Thorne, “‘To Write and Read / Be Henceforth Treacherous’: *Cymbeline* and the Problem of Interpretation”, in J. Richards and J. Knowles (eds.), *Shakespeare’s Late Plays: New Readings* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 177.

¹⁰ This announcement is from *The Moving Picture World* [no date provided], as reproduced in Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, 68.

¹¹ Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, 43.

¹² *The Moving Picture World* (12 March 1910) as reproduced in Bowers, *Thanhouser Films*.

¹³ Untitled advertisement, *The Billboard*, 28 May 1910, 25.

¹⁴ *Moving Picture News* (26 February 1910) as reproduced in Bowers, *Thanhouser Films*.

‘students of Shakespeare’.¹⁵ One reviewer suggested that ‘there was nothing for us to do but give our full approval and applause,’ while another mused ‘there is no reason why tales from Shakespeare illumined and apostrophized as has been done in *The Winter’s Tale* should not be given a better reception by the public than some of the cheap, gaudy modern productions now commanding so much attention in the moving picture field,’ encouragingly adding ‘I hope to see others of this type in the market in the near future’.¹⁶ Such pictures did, indeed, appear. In the wake of its earliest Shakespearean triumph, the Thanhouser Company (later renamed the Thanhouser Film Corporation, following a 1912 buyout) went on to produce versions of *Romeo and Juliet* in September of 1911, *The Tempest* in November of 1911 and *The Merchant of Venice* in July of 1912 before turning its attention to *Cymbeline*. The directorial debut of Frederic Sullivan, *Cymbeline* was produced by Lucius Henderson, a former stage-actor, who, like the company’s by-then-abdicated founder, was popularly perceived to have come ‘from the ranks of the [theatrically] legitimate’.¹⁷ The two-reel production, released on 28 March 1913, featured James Cruze as Leonatus alongside Florence La Badie in the role of Imogen.

Widely recognized as one of ‘the finest features produced by Thanhouser,’ *Cymbeline* garnered both critical and popular acclaim.¹⁸ One review in *The Moving Picture World* praised, amongst other things, the film’s ‘scenic effects,’ ‘balanced’ cast, ‘sumptuous’ costuming and ‘clean-cut staging’. A second, slightly less exuberant, review from the same issue pointed to minor ‘blemishes’ such as the anachronistic ‘obtrusion of a decidedly modern house,’ yet noted the ‘praiseworthy ambition on the part of the producer’ who had ‘laudab[ly] endeavor[ed] to be correct in historic details’ and ‘deserves very great credit for seeking to aim high’.¹⁹ Meanwhile, a review in *The New York Dramatic Mirror* hailed the film as ‘a beautiful piece of work [that] might do credit to any company,’ echoing an appreciation for the ‘the care and skill’ evident in the staging and costuming.²⁰ Gulfport, Mississippi’s *Daily Herald* reported that the Thanhouser *Cymbeline* was ‘one of the most artistics [sic] films ever shown in the South’,

¹⁵ *The Moving Picture World* (11 June 1910) as reproduced in Bowers, *Thanhouser Films*; *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (4 June 1910) as reproduced in Bowers; and *The Moving Picture News* (21 May 1910) as reproduced in Bowers.

¹⁶ *The Moving Picture News* (21 May 1910) as reproduced in Bowers, *Thanhouser Films*; *The Nickelodeon* (1 June 1910) as reproduced in Bowers.

¹⁷ ‘Photoplays: Henderson Now IMP Director’, *The Billboard*, 21 November 1914, 46. In 1912, Thanhouser sold the company which bore his name to a group headed by Charles J. Hite. However, after Hite’s death in 1915, Thanhouser took charge of the company once again. This particular film was made during the founder’s hiatus. See Bowers, *Thanhouser Films*, for a detailed history of the company’s history.

¹⁸ ‘Photoplays’, 46.

¹⁹ *The Moving Picture World* (5 April 1913) as reproduced in Bowers, *Thanhouser Films*.

²⁰ *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (2 April 1913) as reproduced in Bowers, *Thanhouser Films*.

and a note in the Pennsylvanian *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* declared that everyone who had viewed it ‘praised this work as being the best of its kind that they have seen’.²¹

But what was the nature of this film that the above reviewers praised? One of its most striking features is certainly its great variety of outdoor shots. This overt visual engagement with the natural world arguably replicates and cunningly transforms the pastoral dimensions of Shakespeare’s original playtext. A brief comparison with how the pastoral was represented in the earlier Thanhouser *Winter’s Tale* of 1910 demonstrates something of the subtlety of the later film’s engagement with similar generic materials. In *The Winter’s Tale*, the play’s bucolic elements are represented quite literally with shots of sheep. While there is nary a lamb to be seen in the 1913 *Cymbeline*, outdoor scenes are plentiful, with locations ranging from an enclosed garden to the seashore to rocky caverns to open hills and wide expanses of greenery.²² Moreover, as an advertisement from *The Billboard* published on 29 March makes clear, audiences were encouraged to take particular note of the scenic backdrop: along with two other Thanhouser features, *Her Gallant Knights* and *For Her Boy’s Sake*, *Cymbeline*’s release was touted as part of the company’s second promotional ‘All-California Week’. ‘Every one likes the beautiful California pictures,’ the advertisement proclaimed, with the further announcement: ‘Here’s another week in which we release ONLY California productions.’²³ The Thanhouser *Cymbeline* thus subtly translates some of the idyllic, pastoral aspects of Shakespeare’s play through its status as one of the company’s limited number of ‘California pictures’.

A second notable feature of the 1913 *Cymbeline* is its heavy reliance on text. Buchanan’s description of the film as ‘wordy’ is apt, as visual scenes of writing and reading are combined with a broader narrative strategy of elucidating the action through the copious use of title cards.²⁴ Resultantly, I would argue that this film is also tangibly imbued with a general sense of rootedness in textual culture. Characters are frequently shown in the act of creating, exchanging and reacting to written documents. At the moment that the ill-fated wager is struck, for example, Leonatus (as Posthumus is referred to throughout the film) – who has been sitting fountain-side in Rome, imbibing with his comrades – calls over a scribe to record the terms of the wager. Later, when Iachimo arrives at Cymbeline’s court and ‘The crafty Roman presents

²¹ ‘Band Concerts at Air Dome’, *The Daily Herald*, 7 May 1913, 8; untitled article, *Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader*, 23 April 1913, 18.

²² A useful point of contrast here is Moshinsky’s later *Cymbeline* adaptation, which has aptly been called ‘very much indoor Shakespeare’: R. Warren, *Shakespeare in Performance: Cymbeline* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 63.

²³ Untitled advertisement, *The Billboard*, 29 March 1913, 53.

²⁴ Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, 43.

himself to Imogen as her husband's best friend,' as the title card informs us, we see him presenting a scroll to the King. Presumably a letter of introduction, it is read both by Cymbeline himself and the Queen, who peers over his shoulder with interest.²⁵ When the treacherous Leonatus sends word for Imogen to meet him at Milford Haven, we are again treated to and asked to participate in a scene of onscreen reading as we see both Imogen's reception of the letter and its contents, clearly modelled on the similar epistle of 3.2.40–47. After she has donned her male page's garb (earlier here than in Shakespeare's play), another letter is revealed to Imogen by Pisanio as they stand at the seashore, *en route* – or so she believes – to meet her husband. Again inspired by a message found in the playtext (this time at 3.4.21–30), the textual content of this note is visually presented to the audience. In yet another scene, we find a very nervous looking Leonatus approached by a messenger as he is standing alone on a hilltop; as he opens a scroll to learn of Imogen's supposed death, we are once again made privy to the written content of a personal missive, this one signed by Pisanio.

Though the Thanhouser film's overt aura of inscriptedness arguably mirrors what Thorne has described as 'the conspicuous presence of letters in the play (which exceeds any requirements of the plot)' or *Cymbeline*'s 'superfluous proliferation of letters, papers, books and tablets,'²⁶ it is hard to miss the authenticating implications of Shakespearean authority also conveyed by a number of particularly 'wordy' title cards that integrate pseudo-quotations into the film. The first of these, which reads 'Do his bidding: strike. My heart is empty of all things but grief' (words attributed to Imogen as she grieves her betrayal by her husband), represents a recognisable rearrangement and abbreviation of the heroine's more long-winded directive to Pisanio at 3.4.65–71. A second quotation is worked into the film when the siblings are first reunited. After the woodsmen return to find their domestic space surprisingly occupied, Imogen-in-disguise is graciously plied with food while her brothers exclaim via title card: 'But that it eats our victuals I should think here were a fairy' – a rendition of Belarius' lines from 3.6.40–1. A fast succession of further Shakespearean quotations appears in the final minutes of the second reel as the film draws to a close. Just after a title card announces 'A few brave men save the day for Britain', the victorious King Cymbeline humbly thanks them for their bravery in battle with words adopted from 5.4.1–2: 'Stand by my side, you whom the gods have made/ Preservers of my throne.' This is quickly followed up with yet another Shakespearean quotation, the wounded Iachimo's title card confession 'I belied a lady. The princess of this

²⁵ This is similar to the short note we are made privy to at 1.6.22–6 of Shakespeare's play when Iachimo introduces himself to his friend's wife.

²⁶ Thorne, 'To Write and Read', 179.

country,' which substitutes words from 5.2.2–3 in place of the much lengthier confessions found at 5.6.153–68 and 179–209 of the playtext. Mere moments later, just before the final reunification of the lovers, a truncation of 5.1.25–7 reveals Leonatus' sentiment: 'I'll die for thee, oh Imogen, even for whom my life is.' And, finally, Leonatus' lines from 5.4.263–4, rendered as 'Hang there like fruit, my soul, till the tree die,' grace a final Shakespearean title card before the film draws to a close with the reunited lovers' passionate kiss.

In spite of the carefully cultivated sense of verbal alignment between the 1913 *Cymbeline* and its Shakespearean source that is created through the use of such title card quotations, we find a number of events represented that have no counterparts in Shakespeare's playtext. In a perceptible attempt to explain key elements of the back story, for example, the film opens by dramatizing rumours about Cymbeline's kidnapped sons. Visual images of the missing princes eating, drinking and arming themselves demonstrate how, as the relevant title card puts it, 'The king's sons are reared as woodsmen by the former courtier who stole them'. Other information about Imogen and Posthumus, similarly relayed as court gossip in the play, is also dramatized in the film. In the first reel, we see the nascent relationship between the young lovers blooming in an idyllic garden scene; we witness Cymbeline's futile efforts to arrange his child's marriage to his own preferred suitor (here unidentified either by name or familial relationship) and, having been textually informed via title card that 'Imogen refuses to marry one that she does not love,' we are also made privy to a wedding ceremony in which Imogen's identity as chaste bride is visually emphasized.

Conventional wisdom has it that *Cymbeline* is a play in need of cutting. And no wonder, for, amongst a flourish of other metatheatrical touches, this Shakespearean text seems presciently to highlight its own predisposition for abbreviation. What we might describe as the play's self-conscious sense of *cuttability* permeates its final act in particular: various characters attempt to 'speak truth' (5.4.274) and accurately paraphrase the play's convoluted action for the benefit of King Cymbeline (who has, in effect, been ruling *in absentia* for most of the previous four acts). 'Let *me* end the story' interrupts Guiderius at one point, discerning that Pisanio's rendition is limited by his lack of knowledge about Cloten's final fate (5.4.286; emphasis my own). Meanwhile, Cornelius cannot seem to fit everything he knows into his own miniaturized version of events, either: 'O gods!' he exclaims in frustration as he realizes that he 'left out one thing which the Queen confessed' (5.4.243–4). Apprehending the propensity of those around him to cut the play's action in retelling it, the British monarch pointedly refers to his second-hand knowledge of events as a 'fierce abridgment' (5.4.382). Sensing the limitations of his individual courtiers' explanations as they try to 'Winnow the truth from falsehood,' he muses:

‘When shall I hear it all through?’ (5.4.134; 382). As Cymbeline recognizes, it would require ‘long inter’gatories’ – presumably to be conducted offstage after the play has concluded – to sort through the text’s mess of ‘circumstantial branches’ (5.4.392; 383). By the play’s end, we are left wondering if, indeed, the retrospective clarity that the king seeks is even possible.

Katherine Duncan-Jones was echoing something of the play’s own concluding sentiments when, in a 1983 review of Moshinsky’s BBC Television *Cymbeline*, she cautiously noted that ‘any modern director ... must make some positive decisions about how to deal with this clogged, often obscure and highly complicated romance’.²⁷ As Duncan-Jones’s comment suggests, *Cymbeline* has a long history of ‘fierce abridgement’ in performance. The play’s stage history has been notably characterized by emendation – often changes inspired by a desire to bring a greater sense of coherence, plausibility and/or narrative clarity to the Shakespearean text.²⁸ And, clocking in at just over twenty minutes in length, the 1913 Thanhouser *Cymbeline* is no exception to the rule; of necessity, the two-reel film participates in a wider, pre-existing tradition of abridging the play.

Shakespearean scholars have often described *Cymbeline*’s unusual structure as a triad of non-hierarchical plot strands: 1) the wager plot; 2) the dynastic plot and 3) the political plot. While retaining elements from all three of these strands, as is obvious from my above *précis* of the film’s opening scenes, the 1913 *Cymbeline* noticeably privileges the wager plot. In fact, with the exception of the first scene dedicated to Cymbeline’s missing sons, the remainder of the first reel is given over to exclusively tracing developments in the lovers’ affair: the exchange of jewellery; Leonatus’ banishment; the ill-advised bet; Iachimo’s testing of Imogen; Leonatus’ reaction to his wife’s perceived infidelity; the heroine’s receipt of Leonatus’ letter; and Imogen’s disguised departure to meet her husband. This emphasis on youthful romance and its attendant complications, as focalized through the perspective of Imogen, is carried over

²⁷ Katherine Duncan-Jones, ‘Sitting Pretty’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 22 July 1983, 773.

²⁸ On the play’s performance and reception history, see C. M. S. Alexander, ‘*Cymbeline*: The Afterlife’, in C. M. S. Alexander (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Last Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 135–54; and V. Wayne, ‘*Cymbeline*: Patriotism and Performance’, in R. Dutton and J. E. Howard (eds.), *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works: The Poems, Problem Comedies, and Late Plays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 389–440. No doubt, the most famous of these reworkings is George Bernard Shaw’s delightfully audacious rewriting of the final act in his *Cymbeline Refinished*, but Shaw’s was certainly not the first attempt to ‘fix’ the play. In 1682, less than a century after *Cymbeline*’s original composition, it was rewritten by Thomas D’Urfey as *The Injured Princess or the Fatal Wager*. In 1759, William Hawkins’s adaptation of the play renamed characters and reordered the plot so it would conform with the classical unities. Two years later, David Garrick’s influential version made cuts and rearrangements which involved omitting Posthumus’ imprisonment and dreams. J. P. Kemble published, in 1815, a version that reworked the play’s opening scene for greater clarity. And Henry Irving’s famed production at London’s Lyceum Theatre in 1896 (the very version that inspired Shaw’s irreverent rewriting) sought to simplify the plot by cutting the Shakespearean text to roughly three-quarters of its original length.

into the film's second reel, as well. The characters of Imogen's brothers, when we again encounter them, remain both unnamed and underdeveloped and, furthermore, when the audience is presented, nearly fifteen minutes into the film, with a title card announcing that 'Cymbeline, King of Britain, is informed of the Roman invasion,' this is the first time that we have heard about any political tensions in the British kingdom.

The primacy given in this film to representing the 'pangs of barred affections' (1.1.82) and narrating Imogen's (mis)adventures in love is perhaps unsurprising. It aligns with what Ruth Nevo has termed the prevailing 'Imogenolatry' of Victorian critics such as Swinburne, who famously hailed Imogen as 'the immortal godhead of womanhood' – sounding for all the world like Posthumus bragging that his 'unparagoned mistress' is 'more fair, virtuous, wise, chaste, constant, qualified, and less attemptable' than any other woman (1.4.65; 47–8).²⁹ This Swinburnian-style idolization of Imogen's spotless character maintained particular currency in the early years of the twentieth century. Writing just a few short years after the appearance of the 1913 *Cymbeline*, Arthur Quiller-Couch declared this plucky, yet ultimately submissive heroine not only to be the 'sum and aggregate of fair womanhood as at last Shakespeare achieved it,' but also 'the most adorable woman ever created by God or man'.³⁰

What else, then, of Shakespeare's playtext has been cut to allow for this focus on the 'adorable' Imogen and her romantic escapades in the Thanhouser film? The internal power struggles of *Cymbeline*'s blended family, which come to bear on our understanding of the dynastic plot strand in the play, have all but disappeared in this 1913 adaptation. This Queen, though a meddlesome tattletale, is no deadly poisoner. In fact, unlike the 'crafty devil' (2.1.46) of the play – in which she is explicitly described as 'a widow/ That late [Cymbeline] married' who 'most desired the match' between Imogen and her own son Cloten (1.1.5–6; 12) – she is never explicitly identified as the mother of the rejected suitor, nor shown to have a particular interest in matters of the succession. Rather, her motives are simplified with the help of a title card reading 'Imogen's stepmother is jealous of her favor with the King'. The Queen's animosity towards her step-daughter is thereby reduced to an anxious tug-of-war for her new husband's affections. In a related vein, the play's Cloten, 'a thing/ Too bad for bad report' (1.1.16–17) is questionably included in the film at all. We may be inclined, based on prior knowledge of the play, to identify his character with *Cymbeline*'s favoured suitor at the outset

²⁹ For Nevo's coinage of 'Imogenolatry', see R. Nevo, 'Cymbeline: The Rescue of the King', in A. Thorne (ed.), *Shakespeare's Romances* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 91–116. I cite Swinburne's comments from A. C. Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880), 227.

³⁰ A. Quiller-Couch, *Shakespeare's Workmanship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951 [1918]), 243–4.

of the film, but there is no explicit equivocation made, no sign of attempted revenge for his slight, no gruesome beheading of his character and no confusion as to the identity of his corpse. Similarly, while Iachimo's character unquestionably plays an unsavoury role in the wager plot, and, though Imogen's bracelet is certainly filched by him, there is no mole for him to report back to Leonatus – or, if there were, this Iachimo never dared look beneath her breast to find it. No doubt, it was the mole's absence that inspired one contemporary reviewer to laud the scene's delicacy as having been 'artistically presented'.³¹

The near-elimination of two of the play's three most sinister villains and the arguably increased palatability of the third, all of which unquestionably lightens the tone of this 1913 film, is coupled with an amplified sense of historical realism. This is achieved through the exclusion of many of the play's more fanciful (and meta-Shakespearean) features. Gone from this adaptation are the play's most fantastical elements: along with Imogen's mole, the sleeping potion/poison, the soothsayer and the *deus ex machina* entrance of Jupiter are absent. This general excision of the fantastic from the 1913 *Cymbeline* may, indeed, have been borne of an attempt to distinguish the film from the Thanhouser Film Corporation's 1911 *Tempest*. This earlier Shakespearean film, which reviewers generally seem to have agreed was 'not up to Thanhouser standard,' had highlighted the fairy-tale dimensions of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, as the following review from *The Morning Telegraph* makes clear:

Few American producing companies have ever succeeded in the best presentations of fantastic or fairylike subjects, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is little else than a fantasy, and of the most difficult sort to produce, either in dramatic or other form. So it was a bold attempt of the Thanhouser Company to make a pictureplay [sic] of this so-seldom seen offering, and there is small wonder that it falls short of the mark of excellence this company has attained in other works.³²

By way of conclusion, I want to again turn to the final question that I posed at the outset of this chapter: how much can a so-called Shakespearean romance like *Cymbeline* be pared down and reshaped before it ceases to present as a Shakespearean romance and begins to look more like *something else*? As my above analyses of the Thanhouser *Cymbeline*'s cuts, additions and narrative emphases have demonstrated, a close examination of the film reveals an adaptation that shares few of those taxonomical ambiguities, metatheatrical excesses or incongruities of plotting so closely associated with Shakespeare's original playtext. I thus want to suggest that part of what made this resultant *Cymbeline* seem so 'singularly well-adapted to

³¹ *The Moving Picture World* (5 April 1913) as reproduced in Bowers, *Thanhouser Films*.

³² *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (6 December 1911) as reproduced in Bowers, *Thanhouser Films* and *The Morning Telegraph* (3 December 1911) as reproduced in Bowers.

rendition in motion pictures' may well have been the fact that it bears little resemblance to a typical Shakespearean 'romance' à la *Pericles*, *The Tempest* or *The Winter's Tale*. Rather, the *something else* that has been created through *Cymbeline*'s 'fierce abridgement' is a typical Shakespearean romantic comedy.

Much of the 1913 film's narrowed or perhaps transmuted, generic identity can be traced to its abovementioned stress on *Cymbeline*'s wager plot. The film's action follows the basic structural pattern of Shakespeare's other romantic comedies, unfolding in three more-or-less distinct stages: the hero and heroine fall in love; outside intervention and a grievous personal misunderstanding tear them apart; the circumstances that separated them are resolved and they are reunited. The wager plot of the 1913 *Cymbeline* is historicized, certainly, but issues of nationalism and the ultimate (if slightly perplexing) possibilities for peaceful coexistence between Britain and Rome that so strongly inform the political strand of the Shakespearean play are subverted in the film. Rather, the film's historical setting primarily serves as an opportunity for spectacle – an excuse to introduce sumptuous period costuming and elaborate military choreography. Resultantly, the lengthy battle scene between the Britons and Romans, given great prominence near the end of the film's second reel, is depoliticized to the extreme. Reduced in significance to a device that will reunite the various characters that have been personally separated from one another, its ultimate importance lies in that it offers Leonatus an apt opportunity to redeem his honour in the eyes of his formerly disapproving father-in-law.

In closing, I want to make the further suggestion that the 1913 film's appeal derives not merely from its broad resemblance to other Shakespearean romantic comedies but also from a more specific relationship that is cultivated between this 'fierce abridgement' and another familiar Shakespearean play, *Much Ado About Nothing*. The 1913 film's pared down version of the wager plot bears a striking and noteworthy resemblance to the Hero-and-Claudius storyline in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Like Claudio tricked into the belief that he has been erotically betrayed by Hero, Leonatus is similarly deceived about the sexual behaviour of his own female beloved. Both men's rash responses to these false rumours of infidelity are again in alignment: out of hand, they repudiate and unflinchingly denounce their innocent mates. Hero and Imogen, meanwhile, are exonerated only through eleventh-hour confessions – much to the seemingly-too-late distress of Claudio and Leonatus. Like Shakespeare's submissive Hero, who meekly accepts Claudio as her husband at the end of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Imogen, too, is unquestioning in her forgiveness of Leonatus' grave folly. These wider resemblances between *Cymbeline*'s wager plot and *Much Ado About Nothing*'s bed trick are conspicuously underscored for the film's audience in its final scene, where we see the previously mentioned

title card confession of Iachimo: 'I belied a lady. The princess of this country'. The word choice in this title card has significant intertextual resonances, for Iachimo's vocabulary when he talks about his slandering of Imogen echoes language repeatedly used to characterize Hero's predicament in *Much Ado About Nothing*: 'my cousin in belied' (4.1.139); 'Hero is belied' (5.1.42); 'thou hast belied mine innocent child' (5.1.67); 'they have belied a lady' (5.1.193). To again cite Frye, it would seem that the 'singularly' cinematic *Cymbeline* of 1913 was 'Much Ado About Everything,' indeed.

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