

## ENGL1002 Essay (5)

Joshua Street

Your daughter's chastity—there it begins.  
He spake of her as Dian had hot dreams  
And she alone were cold; whereat I, wretch,  
Made scruple of his praise, and wager'd with him  
Pieces of gold 'gainst this which then he wore  
Upon his honour'd finger, to attain  
In suit the place of's bed, and win this ring  
By hers and mine adultery. He, true knight,  
No lesser of her honour confident  
Than I did truly find her, stakes this ring;  
And would so, had it been a carbuncle  
Of Phoebus' wheel; and might so safely, had it  
Been all the worth of's car. Away to Britain  
Post I in this design. Well may you, sir,  
Remember me at court, where I was taught  
Of your chaste daughter the wide difference  
'Twixt amorous and villainous.

V. iv. 179-95.

Iachimo's exposition of his past actions in this, the closing scene of *Cymbeline*, is a crucial component of the play: we observe a complex narrative approach its closure, a *dénouement* of which Imogen is (perhaps not insignificantly) catalyst. It is the idea of wronged Imogen that drives this earlier part of Iachimo's confession – it should be observed, however, that it is not only he who should bear responsibility for wronging her.

Outside of this passage, Iachimo asserts the propriety and nobility of Posthumus, declaring from line 158: “What should I say? he was too good to be/Where ill men were, and was the best of all/Amongst the rar'st of good ones—sitting sadly,/Hearing us praise our loves of Italy/For beauty, that made barren the swell'd boast/Of him that best could speak.”

His praise of the man whom he had earlier proven hasty, jealous, and in many other ways imprudent (cf. Posthumus' hysterical, misogynistic tirade in II. v.) feels, without doubt, ironic. In the context of this play such irony should appear humorous – it is, after all, categorised as comedy – yet one must surely (at the least) consider this as a deeper expression of Iachimo's repentance. His own assertions of the chastity of Imogen against even that of mythological paragon of virtue, Diana<sup>1</sup>, serve to exacerbate his own deeds; perhaps in a manner considered humorous.

There appear to be recurrent congruencies between the perceived competency of Posthumus as lover and as leader throughout the play<sup>2</sup>, and Iachimo's speech here serves to further this conception. It is his lovers' praise, for which Iachimo professes himself "wretch" having held scorn towards, that (at least in part) plays towards Iachimo's address of Posthumus as "He, true knight".

Thus, the two principle concerns of this work are found combined, inextricable from one another. From the beginning, Iachimo is a trickster, debased: his scandalous nature defined by his role as seducer and accuser. Such it is that themes of relationship (not romance) and jealousy – not confined to a marital context – are first drawn out. The folk-tale figure of an evil step-mother is the first jealous character met; though, perhaps, one may identify her jealousy as coming after the jealous love of a father towards her daughter. However, one is not necessarily disposed to considering Cymbeline a particularly great ruler; his own absent children are a possible reflection<sup>3</sup> of uncertain continuity of the royal line, surely a poor way to be in the eyes of an audience aware of the need for stability in terms of monarchical successors.

Irrespective as to who was first jealous chronologically, it seems clear that there are two types of jealousy in this play; the first, it appears, is political. Jealousy, even in the political sense, is intrinsically bound up with children and the notion of inheritance: such is the nature of monarchy. The audience witness an evil step-mother, fighting to place her own successor to the throne in first position. Betwixt

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<sup>1</sup>One must presume this is what Shakespeare means by "Dian", the contraction being purely for metrical purposes. Ambiguity at this point is introduced, as in Celtic Mythology there is, in fact, a figure known as Dian Cecht. *He* is, however, associated with craftsmanship and healing: Roman Diana/Greek Artemis' perpetual virginity is clearly a better (more logical) fit.

<sup>2</sup>In line with both Judeo-Christian conceptions of the role of a husband as leader of his wife, as valued by the society of that time; but also in the renewed ideals identified as essential for the "Renaissance man".

<sup>3</sup>I. i. 64-65

her poisoning, scheming and subversion, Posthumus and Imogen are wed; Posthumus is banished by a father jealous not so much of his love, but of his nobility and presumption such that a man could be worthy of the King's natural daughter. Cloten, though an ignorant fool, similarly exhibits jealous qualities; they are his end.

Iachimo, then, is driven by what? His own jealousy is one of the few not tied up in relationship; he desires not "hers and mine adultery" – but to win the ring! Yet, despite this, his story begins with "Your daughter's chastity". The idea of unfounded jealousy pervades even Iachimo's comic greed; his devices cunning, his manner crafty, his influence deceptive. This is no *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Iachimo is no Puck. It is striking that, though this be called comedy, it is oft closer to a rapidly-executed tragedy with a great deal less introspection, and a fair number of additional subplots.

As Posthumus' cooler-than-Dian wife, Imogen, was catalyst for a large portion of this work's plot (with the exception of the "pure" politics regarding Rome... and even that is used to bring Belarius, Polydore, Cadwal, and numerous others – including Posthumus – back into the flow of the text such that all may be bound together in conclusion), she is also catalyst for its *dénouement*. Imogen chooses to question Iachimo, bringing his story to light. He speaks favourably of Posthumus in the earlier parts of his story; and is interrupted by Posthumus himself before his discourse progresses to Posthumus' inflamed response.

As it stands, this is the pivotal point upon which all the story's threads are brought to closure. Imogen's apparently didactic influence upon Iachimo ("where I was taught/Of your chaste daughter the wide difference/'Twixt amorous and villainous.") may have had little impact upon his actions of the time – indeed, it feels as though such a declaration even at this point of the play may be to appease a king who may attribute the loss of his daughter to such actions, were Iachimo to get to the conclusion of his story before Posthumus' arrival.

Such it is that the narrative is rapidly sketched, and the King appears utterly perplexed. This fantastical series of events that so befits a romance defuses anger, delays judgement, and results in reconciliation of all concerned – with the obvious exception of villains slain in valorous manner by undiscovered sons.

Valour, too, is key to Iachimo's speech. As alluded to earlier, Posthumus is addressed as "true knight". The audience is not under any illusions as to the character of Posthumus, having witnessed his outburst of II. v. and observed his somewhat-sulky behaviour for the following two (nearly three) acts. It hardly appears as though he is particularly true – that is, having faith in his wife's chastity in his absence – or valorous, having spent most of the play lamenting (some would say wallowing) in his own stupidity: first at having married and been deceived, fallen for one of those who are the embodiment of every kind of vice:<sup>4</sup>

For there's no motion  
That tends to vice in man but I affirm  
It is the woman's part. Be it lying, note it,  
The woman's; flattering, hers; deceiving, hers;  
Lust and rank thoughts, hers, hers; revenges, hers;  
Ambitions, covetings, change of prides, disdain,  
Nice longing, slanders, mutability,  
All faults that man may name, nay, that hell knows,  
Why, hers, in part or all; but rather all

Then, at having ordered her assassination (notably, he does not kill her himself – one is, it would seem, encouraged not consider a man of such effeminate outbursts as the histrionics of II. v. capable of such a deed), he spake thus:<sup>5</sup>

Gods! if you  
Should have ta'en vengeance on my faults, I never  
Had liv'd to put on this; so had you saved  
The noble Imogen to repent, and struck  
Me, wretch more worth your vengeance.

No, Posthumus is not of a greatly valorous appearance. His character in this tragic-comedy invokes both *Othello's* jealous violence, and escapes *Romeo and Juliet's* tragic suicide upon thinking one another dead, yet as military hero he is no Othello; as lover, no Romeo.

Yet, despite all this, Iachimo's praise of him to the audience is pleasant, if not true. Whilst Imogen is as faultless Diana, Posthumus forms, with her, the marital relationship that directs the action of this play. It would be deeply dissatisfying for the couple to fail in this process of "untangling".

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<sup>4</sup>II. v. 20-28

<sup>5</sup>V. i. 7-11

This passage of Iachimo's speech is clearly one from a work that is not devoted to tragedy. Iachimo presents a "true knight" such that romantic (as in relational, distinct from "romance") expectations may be fulfilled upon the restoration of Imogen and Posthumus as a couple. From that perspective, Iachimo's speech is essential. The apparent falsehood of elements of his speech is entirely excusable: his story is a segway into Imogen's own, which in turn introduces Guiderius and Arviragus – the two who are, from the outset, destined for leadership.

The audience is aware of Posthumus' unsuitability for such a role; all Iachimo's speech achieves is a restoration of him such that there is an inherent satisfaction at the restoration of their marriage. Iachimo's role is as disqualifier and restorer, as he clears way for the ascension of the true heirs to the throne, whilst – through a discourse perhaps gently biased – finally uniting Posthumus and Imogen together in happy marriage.