

# Imperial Imagination in *Cymbeline*

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**Abstract**—Though telling the story of the Roman conquest, *Cymbeline* features alliance and fraternity, instead of enmity, between ancient Briton and the Roman Empire. *Cymbeline*, through its appropriation of the Roman-Briton tie, gives shape to the imperial imagination of the Stuart court. Shakespeare depicts the historical King of Briton, Cymbeline, the legendary warrior raised by the Romans, as the British counterpart of Caesar Augustus and heir of the mythical Brutus. Cymbeline can also be seen as an avatar of James I, who at that time willed to become the second Brutus and was keen to conquer. Shakespeare presents a Romanized Briton as the proper heir to the Roman Empire, degrading the Empire's natural descendent Italy for their moral corruption. The sense of moral superiority caters to the burgeoning imperial practice of the Jacobean monarch.

**Index Terms**—Cymbeline, Shakespeare, Roman, imperial

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Cymbeline* was created and on in the Christmas season of 1609-1610, when Prince Henry, James's elder son, was invested Prince of Wales. This tragicomedy was especially conditioned for the investiture entertainment, with its story set in the ancient Briton, when Britain was still a remote Roman colony under the threat and harassment of the Empire. Shakespeare's allusions to the historical Augustus and legendary Brutus in the play cater to the taste of the incumbent reign James I, who out of both admiration and ambition had willed to become the second Brutus, and what Glynne Wickham (as cited in Parolin, 2002) calls a "British Augustus" (p. 192). Northrop Frye (1968) viewed that the "reconciliation between the two Trojan nations" is central in the play (p. 210). Alliance of the ancient Briton and Roman is core to the play and palatable to the Jacobean imagination. Shakespeare's rendering of the Romans and Britons originates from and is embedded into the Jacobean imagination of an empire.

Shakespeare based his story on Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), and created a new narrative of history conditioned to please the imperial throne of James I. Cymbeline, the historical King of Briton around the last half century BC and the first half century AD, a contemporary of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, as is known to us, was raised and trained by the Romans to become a fierce warrior and ordained to be the King of Briton. Cymbeline maintained good relations with the Roman Empire, conducting trade and business with the Empire and paying a tribute out of respect for the Empire instead of a duty. Cymbeline's story appeared in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136), and was later incorporated in Holinshed. Shakespeare made a faithful adaptation of Holinshed in the play. The name of the heroine Imogen, daughter of Cymbeline, is allegedly taken from Innogen, wife of the legendary Trojan founder of Britain, Brutus. In the play, Cymbeline's story, the political one, and Imogen's story, a romance, are woven together to give shape to the imperial imagination of the burgeoning empire.

## II. A ROMAN BRITAIN

The ancient Briton as depicted in *Cymbeline* is more an assimilation of the Stuart court which holds high of the Roman style than a reliable representation of Briton as a Roman colony. The Roman style is cast in high-profile as examples of nobility that finds its advocates in Cymbeline and his court. The upholding of the Roman style in Cymbeline's court reveals the strong desire of the Jacobean monarch for identification with its conqueror and the secret wish of adjusting its history as the conquered. The Romanized Briton stands proof to the Jacobean efforts to appropriate the history of the Roman conquest.

*Cymbeline* is Shakespeare's last Roman play<sup>1</sup>. In all the six plays about the ancient Rome or Romans, the Romans are held as masculine examples of clemency and discipline, of constancy and valiancy as needed in war and conquest. The constant epithet for the Romans is "noble," as "What's brave, what's noble" (4.15.) in *Antony and Cleopatra*, "Like a Colossus" (1.2) in *Julius Caesar*. The Romans are above all civilized and decent, as they are always cast against the barbarous. In *Coriolanus*, the hero is thus admonished: you are a Roman, be not barbarous. The popularity of the Roman play and the sublimation of the Roman style indicate, as Clifford Ronan (as cited in Raman, 2011) explains, "as an age of colonization and empire was launched, England found in Rome a glass where the island could behold its own image simultaneously civilized and barbarous, powerful and hollow." (p. 16) In spite of the colonizing experience in Britain, the Romans are viewed more as patron than a predator, a modal to follow in Shakespeare's Roman plays. When

<sup>1</sup> The Roman plays are usually recognized as: *Titus Andronicus* (1593-1594), *Julius Caesar* (1599-1600), *Troilus and Cressida* (1601-1602), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607-1608), *Coriolanus* (1607-1608), *Cymbeline* (1609-1610).

musings on the relation between culture and imperialism, Edward Said (1993) says: “appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. ... and how we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and views of the present” (pp.3-4). Indeed, the high Roman imagination in the Jacobean England is exactly the imperial amour needed by the keen conqueror.

Identification with the Romans is the high fashion of the Stuart court, which is mirrored in Cymbeline’s court in the play. Shakespeare was known as knowing little Latin and less Greek. His little Latin leads him to the works of Ovid and Plutarch, whose works in English were also available in the sixteenth century England. Shakespeare’s interest in Latin and the appeal of his Roman plays reflect the high Roman enthusiasm of the milieu in which he lived and created his work. Shakespeare’s two narrative poems of Roman origin were especially dedicated to his patron, Earl of Southampton, and Baron of Tichfield. Among the courtiers and aristocrats, enthusiasm for the Roman antiquity was high and on the rise. Peter A. Parolin (2002) explains that in the Stuart court, the antiques from Italy are signs of prestige. (p. 195) The Roman origin is a sign of nobility and civility. The contemporary enthusiasm for the Romans and the Roman way is well reflected in the play. Cymbeline, the King himself takes pride in his bond with the Romans. When Lucius, Augustus’s envoy, declares war on Briton, instead of defying the Romans, Cymbeline nostalgically recalls his debt to Caesar. “Thy Caesar knighted me; my youth I spent / Much under him I gathered honor” (*Cymbeline*, 3.1.67-69). The intimate bond is resumed at the end of the play when Cymbeline facilitates the peace alliance and tribute commitment. Parolin (2002) views that “the basis of James’s comparison of himself to Augustus was their common commitment to peace, a commitment that, within the play, is shared by another British king, Cymbeline, a contemporary of Augustus who can also be seen as an avatar of James” (p. 192). Cymbeline and Augustus prototype features James’s ambition as both an imperialist and pacifist. Cymbeline’s final call for fraternity and peace stands proof to that ambition. “let / A Roman and a British ensign wave / friendly together. So through Lud’s Town march, / And in the temple of great Jupiter / our peace we’ll ratify, seal it with feasts” (*Cymbeline*, 5.5.480-483). And not at all surprising, the victory is celebrated in the Roman style: parades to the temple of Jupiter and feasts.

Shakespeare renders a Romanized Britain in *Cymbeline*. The names of the Roman deities frequently occur in the characters’ oaths and articulation. “Jove” and “Jupiter” become the habitual utterance of both Princess Imogen, and the banished Belarius as well. Jove’s bird, a Roman eagle is the catchphrase of the soothsayer. The Roman deities also make their way into the British household. Princess Imogen’s bedroom roofs a Rome within a British Court. Imogen is found to be reading Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* before her sleep. The furtive Iachimo even notes that the story she was reading was the rape of Philomel. Ironically, Iachimo’s stealthy presence in the chamber is also interpreted as metaphor for rape. The chamber’s interior is as exotic as the remote Empire itself. The hangings depict Cleopatra on the River Cydnus, meeting her Roman, Antony; the roof is decorated with golden cherubim; Goddess Diana perches on the chimneypiece; and two winking Cupids of silver served as fire irons.

The cross identification with the Romans reveals both the imperial ambition of the Stuart England and the undercurrent desire to adjust its history of once being colonized by the Romans. The complex feeling reflectively prevails in the Roman Briton in *Cymbeline*. Cymbeline’s chamberlain, Posthumous, as his name indicates, the posthumous son of the late Lord Sicilius Leonatus, who is a glorious warrior against the Romans, is taken by Cymbeline to his protection, raised as a Roman soldier. He is held up as an ideal, “most praised, most loved, / a sample to the youngest, to th’ more mature / a glass that feated them, and to the graver / a child that guided dotards” (1.1.47-50). Posthumous is banished to Rome, and returned to Britain on the battlefield as a Roman soldier. He was introduced as a Briton to Rome and returned as a Roman. At his return, though he decides to peel off his Roman uniform and fight for Britain, he still holds himself high as a Roman. “I will begin / The (Roman) fashion, less without and more within” (5.1.32-33). Running across a British Lord on the battlefield, he encourages him as to “Stand, / or we are Romans” (5.3.26). He had hardly determined to fight at a disguise of a British peasant when he got arrested. He answers the British capturers, saying he is “A Roman, / who had not now been drooping here if seconds/ Had answered him” (5.3.89-91). The heroic emulation of the Roman style reflects his devotion and determination to live up to the training of the Romans. Nonetheless, his British status ridicules his emulation, for as a Briton, Romans are to be speared against not to be followed behind. As Coppelia Kahn (as cited in Parolin, 2002) observes, Britain’s relationship with Rome “express both identification and rivalry” (p. 192). The mixture of impulses displays in the battleground where the Britons should follow the Roman style to defeat the Romans. Posthumous says, the British soldiers with their discipline learned from the Romans, “Now mingled with heir courages, will make known/ To their approvers they are people such/ that mend upon the world” (2.4.24-26). The mixed feeling of admiration and competition is what the imperial ambition speaks loud.

In the friend-and-foe relation between the Britons and the Romans, the rivalry status lies secondary to the strong desire for identification. The willful identification with the Romans is presented as both righteous and necessary. This can be observed in the two princely brothers, Guiderius and Arviragus. They are raised in the Welsh mountains by the banished Belarius. They complain that the exclusion makes them look barbarous. “We have seen nothing. / We are beastly: subtle as the fox for prey, / like warlike as the wolf for what we eat” (3.3.39-40). Fear of barbarism and desire for civil status epitomizes the ethos of Britain as a burgeoning empire. Jodi Mikalachi (as cited in Innes, 2007) views that “in early modern England an originary engagement with Rome was necessary for the formation of an autonomous national identity.” (p. 9) *Cymbeline* compromises the rivalry between the conqueror and the conquered, introducing

instead an intimacy and fraternity. The Anglo-Roman alliance, as well as the Roman Briton, undermines the prey-predator dichotomy between Britain and Rome. The fraternity of the cousin nations invokes not only a peace vision, but also a sense of historical and cultural continuity. The Romanized Britain embodies the Jacobean appropriation of the colonized history that the imperial Britain can comfortably identify with and lean upon.

### III. THE RIGHTFUL HEIR

Shakespeare depicts the Roman-orientated Briton as the rightful heir of the Empire, debasing the natural heir, Italy, as both corrupt and enfeebled. The fraternity between Briton and Rome is explained and bound by the legendary history and the mythical prophecy of the westward transfer of Empire. Anachronisms are employed to accentuate the disparity between the Roman way of the British and the degraded style of the contemporary Italian. The identification with the Romans is properly verified in the process of seek its inheritance.

The parallel between the ancient and modern empires is well observed by the 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist, Joseph Conrad (1983). His colonial narrative *Heart of Darkness*, begins with the bold association of the now colonizer and once colonized British. While idling on the Thames, Marlowe begins his story, "And this also, has been one of the dark places of the earth ...I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago. ...it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds." (pp. 29-30) Conrad's comparison of Romans to lightings may indicate both the immensity of the Roman legion and the enlightenment following the conquest. The Romans came to rule and to tame. He elaborates, "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." (p. 32) Conrad refers to the sense of superiority behind the logic of conquest, which to Conrad is not a privilege endowed to the conqueror, but the darkness of the human heart. The sense of superiority is also observed in *Cymbeline*. In Shakespeare's historical narrative, England's suffering and subjugation under the Roman invasion fades into oblivion. Instead, the colonized past becomes a history needed to be appropriated and a heritage to be claimed and inherited.

Briton's status as the rightful heir to the Empire is justified by the theory of *translatio imperii*. The idea of *translatio imperii*, the translation or transferal of empire, evolves from biblical connotation of a golden empire, followed by ones of silver, bronze, iron and clay. Margaret Ferguson (2003) uses *translatio imperii* to interpret the succession of empires, or substitution of one empire by another. Generally speaking it is a westward transition of imperial powers. Accordingly, "Protestant England will simply replace the ancient Romans, the medieval Church, and the Normans as colonizer of new territories." (p. 97) The westward movement of the imperial center parallels the observation of the soothsayer in *Cymbeline*.

For the Roman eagle,  
From south to west on wing soaring aloft,  
Lessened herself and in the beams o' th' sun  
So vanished; which foreshadowed our princely eagle,  
Th' imperial Caesar, should again unite  
His favor with the radiant Cymbeline,  
Which shines here in the west. (5.5.470-476)

In *Cymbeline*, Britain's history as a Roman colony is understood to serve as an inevitable qualification of an imperial heir. Besides, Shakespeare also promotes Britain as the proper heir against the Empire's natural descendant Italy.

Shakespeare depicts the Renaissance Italy and Italian in the ancient period of the Roman conquest. Italy and Italians are presence of anachronisms in *Cymbeline*. Phyllis Rackin (1990) views anachronism as disruption of historical context, as radical dislocations of past and present. Anachronism causes striking effect on the audience, and special theatrical effect in performance. Rackin notes that "Shakespeare's anachronisms usually function as tokens of debasement." (p. 104) In *Cymbeline* the Renaissance Italy is depicted as corrupted and degenerated as "drug-damn'd Italy" (3.4. 15). Posthumous is banished to Rome. However, the place is frequently referred as Italy; and Imogen worried about the "shes of Italy" (1.3.30). The juxtaposition of Rome and Italy functions as dramatic irony which only enhances the disparity of the two. Shakespeare incarnates the dichotomy between the ancient Rome and the contemporary Italy in two characters: the virtuous Lucius and the vicious Iachimo. Lucius, as the envoy of Augustus, represents the civil and refined Roman tradition and value, while Iachimo speaks for the contemporary decadent Italy. Iachimo stands for the "false Italian, / as poisonous-tongued as handed" (3.2.4-5). In the final scene, Posthumous defies him as the "Italian fiend!" (5.5.210).

In Shakespeare's other Roman plays, the Romans are usually cast against the mob, the common herd, or the tag-rag people, which are usually a crowd of inferior origins, or peoples of colors. However, in *Cymbeline*, the opposition between the barbarism and civility is less distinct than the contrast between civility and decadence, between righteousness and Machiavellianism. The contrast reaches its culmination in Iachimo's conspiracy against Imogen's fidelity. Iachimo sees no hope to seduce Imogen to win his wager with Posthumous against Imogen's fidelity. So he hides himself in the trunk, which Imogen, ignorant of its contents, has agreed to keep in her bedroom for the night. After Imogen falls asleep, Iachimo sneaks out of the box to note down the interior details of the bedroom. He also notices a mole on her left breast and takes away her bracelet as proof against Posthumous. As afore-mentioned, the

scene is usually viewed as a virtual rape, and Iachimo is compared to the rapist Tarquin or Tereus. Shakespeare depicts a sleeping beauty and relates Imogen to the Roman goddess of love Venus. “Cytherea, / How bravely thou becom’st thy bed, fresh lily, / And whiter than the sheets!” (2.2.14-16). Imogen, the heir of the kingdom, stands for chastity and angel, while Iachimo for malice and the lodger of hell. Parolin (2002) argues that Iachimo’s presence in the chamber may signify a violation of the integrity of Britain court by the poisonous Machiavellianism within. Imogen’s status as heir is later naturally transferred to her recovered brothers. Cymbeline’s court is not free of dangers within. However, the Imogen-Iachimo contradiction unequivocally registers the superiority of Britain over the contemporary Italy. In *Cymbeline* the south symbolizes “spongy” (4.2.349), unhealthy, rotting damp as in Cloten’s words “the south fog rot him” (2.3. 133). In contrast, *Cymbeline* raises Briton, the shinning west, as the rightful heir of the Empire and the values it incarnates.

Jules Harmand (as cited in Said, 1993) views that “the basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority” (p. 17). In *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare renders this sense of superiority through aligning Briton with Rome against the contemporary Italy. The sense of superiority lays foundation for the imperial imagination. Therefore, it seems natural for Shakespeare to write his colonial story *The Tempest* right after *Cymbeline*.

#### IV. CONSTRUCTING HISTORY AND BRITAIN

Shakespeare’s writing of *Cymbeline* co-occurs with Briton’s colonization of America. It’s the common imperial imagination that underwrites the history writing of Shakespeare and the history making of James I. Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the New World, was established in May 1607 by the English Virginia Company after several unsuccessful attempts, including the first English colony Roanoke in North America build in 1585. After brief abandonment, Jamestown became permanent, and served as the capital of the colony for more than eighty years. That was more than a century since the discovery of this land by Christopher Columbus. Following Jamestown, more settlements were built; more colonists were shipped in. The full colonization of America was ushered in. *Cymbeline*, as all the other history writings of the same period, was meant to construct history in a way so as to connect the past with the present.

Shakespeare’s adaptation of Holinshed is not accidental. The historical Cymbeline as depicted by Holinshed meets the expectation for the Roman bond and the justification for the empire enterprise of the day. Cymbeline is thus reported in Holinshed as being brought up in Rome and knighted in the court of Augustus. He ever showed himself a friend to the Romans, and chiefly was loath to break with them because the youth of Briton nation should not be deprived of the benefit to be trained and brought up among the Romans; whereby they might learn both to behave themselves like civil men and to attain to the knowledge of feats of war. When Shakespeare picked out Holinshed’s Cymbeline to dramatize him to be both a British King and Roman warrior, the image of the warrior emperor like Caesar and Augustus was ready to make its way to its audience.

Shakespeare for all his prestige and popularity in literature helps to build the cultural memory of the British. Jan Assmann (as cited in Grabes, 2010) defines cultural memory as:

the characteristic store of repeatedly used texts, images and rituals in the cultivation of which each society and epoch stabilizes and imports its self-image; a collectively shared knowledge of preferably (yet not exclusively) the past, on which a group bases its awareness of unity and character. (pp. 311-312)

Memory is what we know about the past. Either the individual or collective memory is vital to the sense of identity. Different from the individual memory that is bound by personal experience, the cultural memory is subject to the mechanism of history and is shaped by careful and purposeful maneuvers of the prevailing power. Shakespeare’s history writing is a well-chosen of history. Herbert Grabes (2010) notes, “the collective canon widely determines, after all, what remains in a society’s cultural memory, and this again influences the view of the present and the future” (p. 312). Literature, especially canonic literature, is a major medium of cultural memory, and therefore a vital force in constructing national identity. Shakespeare embeds the Jacobean imperial imagination in Cymbeline’s Britain. History is appropriated for contemporary purposes. Moreover, the reconstructed past further shapes the imagination and self-identification of the new generations where Shakespeare find his new readers.

Birgit Neumann (2010) views literature as a part of the prevailing processes of creating memory, which “is endowed with a (memory-)cultural effectiveness and can contribute to a new perspectivization of extra-textual orders of knowledge and hierarchies of values. ... as a medium of cultural self-reflection, literature—through its aesthetic structure—paves the way for cultural change.” (p. 341) Literature, loaded with personal or collective memories, offers opportunities for historical engagement and identification. Meanwhile, literature is conducive to construct psychological frameworks for social changes by (re)negotiating with the past, or the collective memory of the past. It’s hard to tell Shakespeare’s function in building this positive Roman image, but it’s fair to say that Shakespeare is the chosen accomplice of history.

It’s undeniable that the alignment between the Roman and British empire that feels natural and inevitable to us today is the result of the long-term pacification of the violent and savage process of invasion. John Kerrigan (2008) records an anecdote about a play depicting the ancient Romans and Britons in his book *Archipelagic English*. Director Howard Brenton put his play *The Romans in Britain* on stage at the National Theater in 1980. The play depicted the Roman

domination of the British Isles. Brenton did not shun from violence and brutality. However, he had never expected that the displaying of brutality of the Roman soldiers would put him to court. At the beginning combat scene, three Roman soldiers murdered two British and raped a third after stabbing him on the buttocks. The scene prompted a Mrs. Whitehouse to sue the director. Brenton later reflected that the play challenged “a rooted, popular myth from the British national consciousness” (p. 115). That is, the Roman invasion was vaguely related as something good. In *A School History of England*, published in 1911, Rudyard Kipling and C.R.L. Fletcher related the Roman conquest as something necessary and positive: “The Romans introduced into all their provinces a system of law so fair and so strong, that almost all the best laws of modern Europe have been formed on it.” (as cited in Kelly, 118) The British imagination about the Romans is associated with good roads and law, instead of blood shedding. Actually, the brutality of the Roman was as solid as their roads. The most famous British uprising against Rome was led by Boudica, queen of the Iceni tribe. The uprising took place around 61 AD, triggered by an incident when Boudica was whipped and her daughters raped by Romans. This revolt was well documented, and Boudica’s story made its way into the Renaissance and Victorian literature. Nonetheless, the cultural memory of the British people still seems to have been carefully screened to somehow retain the good records about the Romans.

At the height of the British empire, as Conrad’s simile of the lightning suggests, the imperial practice prevails on the surface of the earth, and it looks as rightful as it has always been. William Blake (as cited in Said, 1993), the eighteenth-century poet and prophet, writes, “The Foundation of Empire is Art and Science. Remove them or Degrade them and the Empire is No more. Empire follows Art and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose” (p. 13). The twentieth century Edward W. Said (1993) interprets as: “The literature itself makes constant references to itself as somehow participating in Europe’s overseas expansion, and therefore creates what Raymond Williams calls ‘structures of feeling’ that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire” (p. 14). Rome is not built in one day. When we look back to the early colonial days, we find that the empire building does not only involve the technical, economical and political impetuses, but the dream impetus as well. And literature is dream business. In the late nineteenth century, the sun-never-set Empire towered over its peers. We have a reason to believe that the country has lived up to the imperial vision embodied in *Cymbeline*. Right at that time, the culture scholar, Mathew Arnold was urging people to read Shakespeare for self-cultivation. It seems that the ripple effect of Shakespeare was, is and will be surging on.

*Cymbeline*, though telling the story of the Roman conquest, features alliance and fraternity, instead of enmity, between ancient Briton and the Roman Empire. The Roman Briton and the Roman tie are the embedded imperial imagination of the Jacobean era in the play. *Cymbeline* is not unlike the specimen of history where the vision for a brave new world is freshly and safely stored. Shakespeare was not of an age, but for all time! Ben Johnson’s elegiac praise is prophecy in disguise. In the postcolonial era, Shakespeare and his plays are still frequently visited and revisited, for they embody the cultural codes in which the postcolonial generation can see both the past and the present.

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