

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Cymbeline*, a film directed by Michael Almereyda (2014)**

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Released as *Anarchy* in some markets. Produced by Benaroya Pictures and Keep Your Head Productions. Music by David Ludwig. Cinematography by Tim Orr. Editing by John Scott Cook and Barbara Tulliver. Production design by Happy Masee. Art direction by Marc Benacerraf. Set direction by Michele Munoz. Costume design by Catherine Riley. With Penn Badgley (Posthumus), Spencer Treat Clark as (Guiderius), Vondie Curtis-Hall (Caius Lucius), Ed Harris (Cymbeline), Dakota Johnson (Imogen), Milla Jovovich (The Queen), Delroy Lindo (Belarius), John Leguizamo (Pisanio), Bill Pullman (Sicilius Leonatus), Harly Ware (Arviragus), and Anton Yelchin (Cloten).

A beat begins, the sound of a single synthesized drum. Red text against the black screen informs us, 'For years Cymbeline, King of the Briton Motorcycle Club, has maintained an uneasy peace with the Roman Police Force.' Cut to a shot of Cymbeline (Ed Harris) and Pisanio (John Leguizamo) arming for battle, with machine guns and hand grenades. Cut to text: 'The Queen, Cymbeline's second wife, has her own agenda.' Cut to the Queen (Milla Jovovich) putting on lipstick in front of a mirror and a picture of her son (Anton Yelchin). 'But she's losing hope that her son will pair up with the King's only daughter, Imogen.' Imogen (Dakota Johnson) crouching, beside a bed, looking pensive. 'Without consulting her royal parents, Imogen decides to marry Posthumus, Cymbeline's penniless protégé.' Posthumus (Penn Badgley), wearing a cast on his right forearm. 'The marriage triggers the King's rage, setting in motion a series of disastrous events.' Cymbeline, carrying an AK-47, kicking open a door. 'But fortune brings in some boats that are not steered...' Imogen, now wearing a close-cropped, boyish, brown wig, sitting in the back

of a police car, looking pained. Then Sicilius Leonatus (Bill Pullman) leaning over the captive Posthumus, murmuring ‘My poor boy’ (5.5.129).¹

So director Michael Almereyda establishes the characters and essential plot points before cutting back—again the red on black: ‘ONE WEEK EARLIER’—to the scene of Imogen and Posthumus parting ways, here set beneath the bleachers of a high-school football field. For those already familiar with *Cymbeline*’s story, the intro is probably plenty (maybe too much?) exposition. For those not familiar... I wonder, would it be enough? In his DVD commentary, Almereyda calls *Cymbeline* a ‘kooky, wild play,’ a ‘fairy tale,’ and a ‘comic book,’ and while his cinematic vision fully embraces each of those descriptives, I remain concerned that an audience without more background could quickly get, and sadly stay, lost in the convoluted narrative.

Does it help or hurt that the action unfolds in just over an hour and a half, about half of the time it would probably take to stage the full text? Hard to know. Almereyda has cut the script mercilessly, but that’s the norm in screen adaptations of Shakespeare, and not necessarily unwarranted. Perhaps the pace would appeal to modern movie viewers. Certainly I did not feel rushed, as many scenes unfold with long stretches of silence between the lines left from the trimming.

But something in the film wasn’t working. On the online movie review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, *Cymbeline* scores an unimpressive 29% on the Tomatometer, with just 7 of 24 critics weighing in in favour of the film. (The audience score is even lower: 12%, with 1675 ratings.)

Surely that is not the fault of the cast. Star power does not, of course, guarantee quality performances, especially when it comes to Shakespeare, but these particular celebrities deliver fine work. Indeed, it’s hard to imagine Ed Harris delivering anything but; despite his long hiatus from Shakespeare (apparently he played Laertes in high school), he handles the poetry admirably and brings a depth to one of Shakespeare’s arguably less developed titular characters. Witness the way he threatens Posthumus in their first confrontation, grabbing him by the bandaged arm, putting a gun under his chin, and commanding, ‘Thou basest thing. Avoid hence from my sight’ (1.1.126). Yet there is genuine regret in his eyes, even as he reiterates the banishment. Plainly he loves the young man who, he believes, has betrayed his trust.

¹ Act, scene and line references refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenlatt, 2nd edn (New York: Norton, 2008).

Ethan Hawke has more substantial Shakespearean credentials, including, of course, his Hamlet, filmed for Almereyda a decade and a half earlier. Offered any part he wanted, Hawke predictably picked Iachimo, giving the villain gravelly tones perfect for his speech in which he spies on the sleeping Imogen, here presented as a voice-overed internal monologue while snapping selfies with a cell phone and lifting up her nightshirt to photograph her breast-borne 'mole, cinque-spotted' (2.2.38).

Lovers Posthumus and Imogen are likewise capably portrayed. Johnson, especially, endows Imogen with a refreshing vocal spontaneity that makes 400 year-old phrases sound like current day slang. 'I pray you, spare me' (2.3.91) she says to Cloten, rubbing her eyes in tired frustration, making the rejection come across as much millennial as Renaissance.

As for Cloten, Anton Yelchin's sulky slouch and his near-constant sneer speak volumes about the spoiled, unpleasant prince's sense of entitlement. In the initial exchange with Caius Lucius (Vondie Curtis-Hall), Cloten spills a trash bag full of tinfoil wrapped candy kisses onto the table between them, a mocking gesture instead of the demanded tribute. His mother, another arguably less-than fully fleshed-out figure in the text, receives completely sufficient interpretation from Milla Jovovich, most of all in an extra-textual scene in which she serenades Cymbeline and his gang with a superb rendition of Bob Dylan's 'Dark Eyes.' Almereyda also wisely adds the agonizing moment of her realization of her son's death—she sees the news on the television, and her shrieks are horrible.

Delroy Lindo as Belarius, Spencer Treat Clark as Guiderius, and Harley Ware as Arviragus are also all more than adequate, although their portion of the plot comes across as maybe it must: awkwardly, at best. As impressive as Belarius with a flamethrower is, his and the princes' presence in the battle—and even the narrative as a whole—feels forced. This awkwardness, especially in the infamously intricate final scene, is symptomatic of the likely reason for the general dissatisfaction with the movie as a whole. *Cymbeline* is, simply, an extremely complex play, and full of circumstances requiring more suspension of disbelief than many may be able to muster. Consider Imogen's reaction to Iachimo's claim that he attempted to seduce her only to test her fidelity. Johnson and Hawke sell it well, he literally applauding her resistance, and she calming down but remaining obviously wary. But are her words, 'All is well, sir' (1.6.180), believable, however hesitant? Even Almereyda acknowledges the difficulty of managing the story in an acceptable manner: 'I'm not convinced I knew how to make all the elements pay off,' he confesses.

Many, apparently, agree, but given the excellence of some of those elements, and the lack of other film adaptations with which to compare Almereyda's, I'm inclined to borrow the expression of my overall opinion from the conclusion of the play itself (or at least the last lines we hear before Posthumus and Imogen sneak away to ride off on a motorcycle—with her up front, by the by): 'Pardon's the word for all' (5.6.423). Actually, frankly, I wish more movie-makers would take such risks with such difficult texts, whatever the results.