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Notes on Cymbeline

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Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* stands as one of the most enigmatic and compelling works in the playwright's rich canon. Written in the later stages of Shakespeare's career, likely around 1609–1610, the play resists easy classification. Although it was grouped as a tragedy in the First Folio of 1623, modern scholars and audiences are more apt to describe it as a romance or tragicomedy. This ambiguity is emblematic of the play itself: *Cymbeline* oscillates between tones and genres, interweaving elements of history, tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale into a single theatrical tapestry.

The setting of *Cymbeline* is a semi-mythic Britain during the Roman Empire, ruled by the titular king whose legend, though rooted in historical chronicles, quickly dissolves into a world of Shakespearean invention and imagination. Against this backdrop, the play explores a host of themes that range from romantic love and marital fidelity to deception, jealousy, forgiveness, national identity, and the ever-persistent question of how appearances can mask reality. Shakespeare draws on a diversity of sources—drawing plots both from British historical tales and from Italian novellas—which results in a play as intricate in narrative as it is rich in character.

For students approaching *Cymbeline*, its complexity can be daunting. The convoluted plot involves lost princes, a wicked queen and her foolish son, a virtuous but wronged heroine, and villains whose cunning sets in motion a spiral of misunderstanding and suffering. Yet, beneath the sometimes bewildering surface, *Cymbeline* offers profound insight into human motivations and the forces that shape families, nations, and the individual soul. It is a play where disguises fall away, true identities are revealed, and the pain wrought by error and suspicion is ultimately healed through forgiveness and recognition.

The play's genre-blending qualities also reflect the broader changes in Shakespeare's career. *Cymbeline* shares much with other late romances such as *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, and *The Tempest*: separation and loss followed by improbable reunions, a faith in providence or divine oversight, and a narrative arc that bends ultimately toward mercy and restoration rather than unrelenting tragedy. These plays signal a mature Shakespeare—a writer fascinated by transformation, redemption, and the possibility of grace after suffering.

Stylistically, *Cymbeline* showcases the dense poetry and imaginative range of Shakespeare's late period. Its language can be challenging, marked by compressed phrases and complex syntax, but it is also luminous, especially in moments that conjure the beauty of the Welsh wilderness or the tenderness between estranged lovers and long-lost kin. The play's structural audacity, use of disguise and mistaken

identity, and shifting moods (from darkness to joy, danger to deliverance) all enrich the student's experience and encourage deep reading beyond first impressions.

In this book, students of English literature will find comprehensive notes and commentary to guide their exploration of *Cymbeline*. Each chapter addresses key aspects of the play—its context, structure, characters, themes, and performance history—while highlighting connections to Shakespeare's broader works and the enduring questions his plays raise. Whether new to the play or seeking to deepen their understanding, readers will discover in *Cymbeline* a work of astonishing depth, invention, and ultimately, hope.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical and Literary Context of *Cymbeline*

To fully appreciate the unique landscape of William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, it is essential to understand the historical and literary currents that fed into its creation. Written at a time when Shakespeare was exploring new dramatic forms, the play looks both backward into Britain's legendary past and sideways to the popular literary styles of the era, creating a tapestry that is at once familiar and strange. The setting itself is a deliberate blend of verifiable history and ancient myth.

The reign of King Cymbeline places the play squarely in a period of significant historical resonance for Britain: the cusp of Roman imperial influence. Cymbeline, or Cunobeline as he is known historically, was a real or at least legendary British king who ruled around the turn of the Common Era, roughly contemporary with the reign of Augustus Caesar in Rome. This era was marked by increasing contact, and often conflict, between the burgeoning Roman Empire and the Celtic tribes of Britain.

While Cymbeline was a historical figure, ruling a large territory in southeastern Britain, the play quickly departs from strict historical chronology or biographical detail. Shakespeare's primary source for the historical framework was likely Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, a widely read and influential historical account that blended factual reporting with legend and folklore. Holinshed provided the backdrop of Cymbeline's reign, the existence of his sons, and the contentious issue of tribute to Rome.

However, Shakespeare felt no obligation to adhere rigidly to Holinshed. The historical Cunobeline, for instance, paid tribute to Rome and maintained relatively peaceful relations; the conflict over tribute is heightened for dramatic effect in the play. This fluidity with historical fact is characteristic of many of Shakespeare's history plays, where the past serves as a springboard for exploring contemporary concerns and universal human dramas, rather than as a subject for academic dissection.

The period itself, around the time of Christ, held symbolic weight. It represented a crucial moment in the formation of British identity, poised between ancient independence and the transformative, if sometimes oppressive, influence of a vast external empire. The play's engagement with themes of sovereignty, tribute, and the relationship with a dominant foreign power resonated with the political climate of Jacobean England.

King James I, who ascended the throne in 1603, was actively pursuing the union of his

kingdoms – Scotland, England, and Ireland – under the single title of "Great Britain." This project involved complex negotiations, national pride, and grappling with what it meant to be 'British'. *Cymbeline*, set in a mythical 'Britain' dealing with external pressures from Rome, provided a historical mirror, albeit a distorted one, for contemporary debates about national unity and identity in the face of potential external threats or internal divisions.

The play's interest in British origins and its complicated relationship with European powers was thus not merely an antiquarian pursuit but had direct relevance to the political landscape of the early 17th century. The Roman invasion depicted in the play, while not precisely historical in its details or outcome relative to Cunobeline's time, symbolizes the perennial challenge of maintaining national autonomy and integrity.

Beyond the historical framework, *Cymbeline* is deeply embedded in literary traditions that were popular and well-understood by Shakespeare's audience. Most notably, the central plot involving the wager on Imogen's fidelity comes not from British history but from Italian literature, specifically Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This collection of novellas, written in the 14th century, included the tale of a merchant whose wife's chastity is falsely slandered through trickery after a wager.

This particular narrative motif, often referred to as the "calumny narrative," was a common trope in European literature. It typically involves an innocent woman whose reputation is unjustly attacked, often through false evidence or malicious gossip, leading to her suffering and banishment, before her eventual vindication and restoration. This theme resonated deeply with audiences and appears in various forms across different cultures and time periods.

By borrowing the wager plot from Boccaccio, Shakespeare introduces a dramatic engine of suspicion, betrayal, and suffering that is distinctly different from the historical or legendary material. This blending of a historical-political narrative with a domestic drama rooted in a popular literary trope is characteristic of *Cymbeline*'s structural and generic complexity. It immediately signals that the play will operate on multiple levels, combining the public sphere of kings and empires with the private world of marital trust and individual virtue.

Furthermore, the structure and thematic concerns of *Cymbeline* align it with a group of plays Shakespeare wrote in the final years of his career, often labeled the "late romances" or "tragicomedies." These plays, including *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, share common features: a movement from separation, loss, and near-tragedy towards eventual reunion, reconciliation, and restoration.

While the full definition and characteristics of the late romances are explored in a later chapter, it is important to recognize that *Cymbeline* fits comfortably, if sometimes awkwardly, within this grouping. Its narrative arc, which involves seemingly

irretrievable suffering giving way to miraculous discoveries and forgiveness, is a hallmark of this dramatic mode. The play's journey through darkness to light distinguishes it significantly from the unrelenting tragic trajectory of plays like *Hamlet* or *Othello*.

The presence of elements often found in romance literature – lost children, a journey through a pastoral or wild setting (Wales), divine intervention (the appearance of Jupiter), and a final scene of recognition and joyful reunion – all place *Cymbeline* firmly in this literary context. Shakespeare was experimenting with form and tone in his later years, creating plays that defied simple categorization and explored complex emotional and spiritual landscapes.

The blending of genres in *Cymbeline* was not always appreciated by earlier critics, who sometimes found the shifts in tone and plot jarring or inconsistent. However, modern scholarship tends to view this generic fluidity as one of the play's strengths, allowing Shakespeare to explore a broader range of human experience and dramatic possibilities than a single genre might permit. The play moves from the political intrigue of the court to the domestic tensions of a troubled marriage, to the rustic simplicity and hidden nobility of life in the wilderness.

This interplay between different worlds and modes is mirrored in the play's language and characters. Royal figures speak in elevated verse, while lower-status characters might use prose, and the tone can shift rapidly from moments of intense pathos to broad comedy, particularly involving figures like Cloten. This stylistic diversity further contributes to the play's unique texture.

The decision to set a romance plot within a semi-historical British past also allowed Shakespeare to engage with potent national myths and legends. The figure of Cymbeline and the idea of ancient British kingship carried symbolic weight for an English audience. By grafting a story of personal suffering and redemption onto this historical framework, Shakespeare creates a resonance between the fate of the individual and the fate of the nation.

The play's resolution, which sees Britain agreeing to pay tribute to Rome while simultaneously asserting its internal strength and moral authority (symbolized by the virtuous Britons overcoming the scheming Italian villain, Iachimo, and the effete Cloten), can be interpreted in various ways. It is not a simple narrative of British triumph or Roman subjugation but a more nuanced depiction of a complex relationship.

In essence, the historical context provides a stage for the action and introduces themes of governance, national identity, and external relations, while the literary context, particularly the romance tradition and the calumny narrative, provides the primary dramatic conflict focused on personal relationships, reputation, and

forgiveness. The genius of *Cymbeline* lies in Shakespeare's ability to weave these disparate threads into a single, compelling, if sometimes bewildering, whole.

By drawing on both historical chronicles and popular narrative patterns like the wager plot and the slandered woman, Shakespeare creates a play that feels both ancient and contemporary. The specific historical setting provides a sense of gravitas and national significance, while the romance elements allow for flights of fancy, exploration of profound human emotions, and ultimately, a movement towards hope and restoration.

Understanding this dual heritage – the roots in British history and legend, and the connections to wider European literary traditions – is fundamental to appreciating the unique qualities of *Cymbeline*. It explains why the play feels different from a straightforward history play or a pure comedy or tragedy. It is a work that exists at the intersection of these forms, borrowing from each to create something entirely its own.

The historical King Cunobeline ruled from Camulodunum (modern Colchester) and was known for expanding his territory and engaging in trade with the Roman Empire. His sons were historically significant figures in the lead-up to the Roman invasion under Claudius. Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, however, is less a portrait of this specific historical ruler and more a composite figure representing British kingship challenged by both internal strife and external pressure.

The choice of this specific historical period, just before the full-scale Roman conquest, adds a layer of tension and historical inevitability, even as the plot diverges wildly from documented events. It positions Britain as a distinct entity facing a powerful external force, a theme that would continue to resonate throughout British history and literature.

The literary sources provide the archetypal characters and plot devices that drive the personal drama. The wicked stepmother figure (the Queen), the foolish suitor (Cloten), the slandered heroine (Imogen), and the manipulative villain (Iachimo) are all recognizable types from romance and novella traditions. Shakespeare invests these types with psychological depth and dramatic life, but their origins lie in established literary patterns.

The interaction between these two realms – the historical/political and the literary/personal – is key to *Cymbeline*'s complexity. The public crisis of the threatened Roman invasion mirrors and amplifies the private crises of trust, loyalty, and identity faced by the characters. The resolution of the personal conflicts often depends upon or is intertwined with the resolution of the national one.

For instance, the bravery of Belarius, Guiderius, and Arviragus in fighting off the Roman invasion directly leads to their recognition by Cymbeline and the restoration of the royal line, resolving both a personal family separation and contributing to the

national defense. Similarly, Imogen's journey and disguise are set against the backdrop of political banishment and international conflict.

Thus, the historical and literary contexts are not merely background information but are integral to the play's fabric. They provide the raw material that Shakespeare transforms, combining elements from disparate sources and genres to create a play that is rich, complex, and, for students, endlessly fascinating to unpack. The world of *Cymbeline* is built on these foundations, a blend of historical echo, legendary flourish, and established literary trope, all filtered through Shakespeare's unparalleled imagination.

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