

Cymbeline: Michael Almereyda returns to Shakespeare

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A decade and a half ago, Michael Almereyda, the American filmmaker, directed a modern-day version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with Ethan Hawke in the lead role. We wrote that "Almereyda...has seen the play as the tragedy of idealistic youth caught up and destroyed by official greed and corruption." Hawke's Hamlet, we commented, "is not a tour de force performance, but an element of a calm, serious approach to the play."

Almereyda (born 1959), who has had an uneven filmmaking career, perhaps not all his fault, has now returned to Shakespeare, but to one of his lesser known and less frequently performed plays, *Cymbeline*. The work is not a complete success, but it has an urgency and seriousness that are unusual in American movies at present, and is certainly worth viewing (it is available online).

The original play is set in ancient Britain. The British king Cymbeline (a historical figure who lived around the time of Christ, although much of the play is based on legends and literary sources, or was simply invented by Shakespeare) has stopped paying tribute to the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. War threatens. Complicating matters, Cymbeline's daughter Imogen has secretly married a man raised in her father's court, Posthumus Leonatus, infuriating the monarch, who wants her to marry Cloten, the brutish son of his second (and treacherous) wife.

Posthumus is banished. In Rome, he encounters the sinister Iachimo. The latter bets Posthumus that he can seduce Imogen and bring Posthumus evidence of his triumph.

When Iachimo later pays Imogen a visit at the British court, she angrily rejects his advances. Nonetheless, he manages to produce sufficient fraudulent "proofs" of her infidelity back in Rome to convince Posthumus. In a letter, he instructs his servant, Pisanio, to kill Imogen after luring her to Milford Haven, on the west coast of Wales. However, in the course of their trip there, Pisanio shows Imogen the fateful message and urges her to carry on to the Haven dressed as a boy.

Meanwhile, Cymbeline's other two sons, believed to be dead twenty years previously, were actually kidnapped by an

unfairly disgraced nobleman, Belarius, and live a relatively idyllic existence in the Welsh mountains. Their real sister, Imogen, calling herself Fidele ("the faithful one") now stumbles on Belarius and the two youths in their lair and is welcomed as a member of their household. Cloten, having been unceremoniously rejected by Imogen, sets out after her with bloody, sadistic revenge on his mind.

Ultimately, a battle takes place between the invading Romans and the native forces, which goes badly for the Britons until Posthumus, Belarius and the king's two sons (although they are still ignorant of their royal birth) make a stand. Everything unravels and unfolds in a lengthy final scene, with relatively benign results. Forgiveness and reconciliation are the order of the day. In fact, it is one of Shakespeare's few plays about "tumultuous broils" that end on a harmonious note, so much so that even King Cymbeline seems surprised: "Never was a war did cease...with such a peace."

Almereyda has transposed the action to contemporary America. *Cymbeline* (Ed Harris) is the head of a motorcycle gang at odds with corrupt police, i.e., the Romans. Posthumus (Penn Badgley) is a somewhat unlikely, skateboarding member of the gang hopelessly but immaturely smitten with Imogen (Dakota Johnson, daughter of Melanie Griffith and grand-daughter of Tippi Hedren). The scheming Iachimo (Hawke) shows Posthumus apparently compromising photos of Imogen on his iPad. And so forth.

The director has retained the general outlines of the play, although the national-patriotic British element is obviously downplayed. The language is still Shakespeare's, but Almereyda has edited it down perhaps by half and also re-arranged portions of it.

Like all such modernizing attempts perhaps, this *Cymbeline* has its ups and downs. The greatest strengths of the film, as they were of Almereyda's *Hamlet*, are its simplicity and directness. The filmmaker does without special effects, bombast or much effort to explain his choices. The film simply begins near a baseball diamond at

night, with Imogen's lines to Posthumus from Act I, Scene II, or a slightly amended version of them: "Look here, love; / This diamond was my mother's: take it, heart; / But keep it till you woo another wife, / When Imogen is dead," and proceeds from there.

The scene between Iachimo and Imogen in which he attempts to seduce her, by slandering Posthumus, and then changes tack, pretending that his effort was merely a test of her loyalty to her husband, is well done. Johnson is not always up the challenge, but her sincerity in playing Imogen—one of Shakespeare's great female characters—wins one over, here and in other sequences. She is effective and moving when she tells Iachimo early on in the scene: "You do seem to know / Something of me, or what concerns me: pray you, — / Since doubting things go ill often hurts more / Than to be sure they do; for certainties / Either are past remedies, or, timely knowing, / The remedy then born—discover to me / What both you spur and stop."

Milla Jovovich, who has generally been stuck in stupid films, is a revelation as the scheming queen, a would-be Lady Macbeth. Her version of Bob Dylan's "Dark Eyes" is also memorable. Delroy Lindo as Belarius stands out, as do Vondie Curtis-Hall, as Caius Lucius, the leader of the Romans, Peter Gerety as the doctor, and Kevin Corrigan, in a small part, as the hangman. The others are generally adequate or better.

Almeryda told an interviewer: "I'm very grateful to actors who will work for low budgets because that shows true commitment. So everyone who was involved in this movie was working because they wanted to collaborate with William Shakespeare."

The imagery is relatively creative and thoughtful, the score is disturbing, melancholy. This is a film without a wide range of emotions, they remain mostly on the somber side, but those explored are seriously explored. The overall mood is one of sympathy for the young, the marginalized, the rebellious.

And one has Shakespeare, which is an advantage. There are beautiful and powerful lines in the play that Almeryda has kept. Imogen, in agony over her separation from Posthumus, laments: "O, that husband! / My supreme crown of grief!" Iachimo, perhaps laying the basis for his eventual change of heart, tells Imogen that "the Gods have made you unlike all others," and after sneaking into her bedroom at night and snatching compromising images of her while she sleeps, exclaims to himself and about himself, "Though this a heavenly angel, hell is here." When Imogen imagines that the decapitated Cloten is her beloved Posthumus, she cries: "O Posthumus! alas, / Where is thy head? where's that? / ... And left this [her own] head on." And in the final moments, when a happy Posthumus lifts Imogen off her feet and holds

her in mid-air, he tells her lovingly: "Hang there like a fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die!" And Cymbeline, finally: "Pardon's the word to all."

Almeryda has limited himself to relatively elementary ideas about the play's content. He told an interviewer that the movie is "about a family and broken trust. It's a kind of a blighted love story, and almost every man in the story has some imbalanced relationship with a woman. And that intrigued me. It seemed, in some ways, a very modern set of relationships."

Nonetheless, as noted above, his imagery suggests something more critical about the wider, contemporary world, and more threatening, in the spirit of the play itself. Harold C. Goddard, in his well-known *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (1951), writes that while "Shakespeare was no Jacobin," the play paints a picture of "*The Power of the English throne wedded to Corruption, who is slowly poisoning it.*"

Goddard, writing of the queen's vicious son, observes: "Nor does Cloten stand alone. He is merely the dark consummate flower of a nobility and court society that is rotten to the core. The Queen is villainous, the King pusillanimous, the British lords cowardly and panicky in battle." Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* provided an intensity that the director had sufficient intellectual wherewithal and integrity to have absorbed and passed along to his audience.

The author also recommends:

Youth's anguish: *Hamlet*, from the play by William Shakespeare, adapted for the screen and directed by Michael Almeryda

[26 July 2000]



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