Shakespeare’s Cymbeline is an extraordinarily complicated play, even for a romance. Set in prehistoric Britain, it combines elements of his’ tory play and Roman play, but it still ranges over an Elizabethan Italy and a timeless pastoral world in Wales. By allusion, it also ranges widely over Shakespeare’s own earlier plays. Its wicked Queen evokes Lady Macbeth; Iachimo evokes Iago; and the hero Posthumus recalls Othello, although Shakespeare seems to be making mere cartoon versions of those earlier complex characters.

If the external allusions are complicated, the on-stage action is even more so. There are more than twenty separate strands of action, and al’though sorting them out into three major plot lines helps some, the action is still confusing, even in the way that it is primarily about Posthumus’ marriage to Imogen, rather than about Imogen’s father Cymbeline, who gives the play its name. And finally, the play is written in a very man’nered, elliptical, and self-conscious style. While most modern audiences can respond immediately to Othello, Posthumus’ adventures in Cymbeline present many difficulties and call for an acquired taste.

These difficulties are precisely what interest me, however. This essay will be an experiment to see how a psychoanalytic bias can be of use in coming to terms with difficult works, like Cymbeline, which do not readily fit into expected patterns. I am not interested in trying to psychoanalyze either Shakespeare or the reader, nor in discovering all an analyst might say about the ‘unconscious meaning’ of the play, but only in trying to use some psychoanalytic categories to explain its puz’ zling details. I hope to avoid the familiar dichotomy between analyst’s and critic’s explanations’ or between ‘unconscious’ and ‘conscious’ meaning. ‘Meaning is an affair of consciousness,’ says critic E. D. Hirsch, while the analyst Ferenczi claims that the conscious meaning cannot be understood until the unconscious ‘depths are plumbed.’[1] I think, though, that what happens as we look at Cymbeline, even more clearly than with the other plays, is that we can see the terms conscious and unconscious as a misleading polarity. What we really experience in’ stead of either of these extremes is a range of different ways of being aware.

There is no such thing as a neatly separable conscious meaning, nor a meaning of which we are totally unconscious, but only a range of dif’ ferent ways of being aware of and representing things’ different ‘modes of consciousness,’ as one analyst has called them.[2] Locating their ef’ fect is not simply a matter of finding an
unconscious meaning behind the action, but rather of finding a play between two ways of seeing the details already visible in the action. The effect, as two French analysts have described it in their revisionary essay on ‘The Unconscious,’[3] is like a newspaper puzzle-game in which Napolean’s hat is hidden though perfectly ‘visible’ in the leaves of a tree. This ambiguous interplay affects all levels of Cymbeline, from moral interpretation to plot to language, and it recreates for us the shifting ambiguities of experience in our own lives that we normally do not notice.

I want to begin not with psychoanalysis but rather with the simple fact that Shakespeare’s plays are about families. It is remarkable how many of the plays develop out of specific moments in what we might call the cycle of generations that makes up a family. Both comedies and tragedies begin in those moments of crisis or transition that open new worlds, the rites de passage through Jaques’ seven ages of man’or, rather, in Shakespeare, the ages of the family. Characters grow up in and then out of families; they start their own families and struggle to keep them together; they watch their children leave to set up new families; and, finally, they fall back to become their children’s children.

The early plays, for example, are often organized around the transition from childhood to adult passion and its responsibilities. A Midsum’mer Night’s Dream, its action poised on the threshold of a royal marriage, reveals the passage from a sexless spring when Hermia and Helena sat sewing together as calm as two cherries on a branch (while Leontes and Polixenes, in The Winter’s Tale, frisked together like twinned lambs in their boyhood days), to the midsummer heat that sends the girls to the forest scrabbling at each other like animals. We watch Romeo’s pas’sage from a sexless puppy love for Rosaline’which his family could approve’to the dog days of passion that nearly tear Verona apart.

The plays written near the turn of the century often show another kind of transition, when the young heroes emerge from their boyish isolation and irresponsibility to take over leadership, whether from a literal or a symbolic father. Prince Hal leaves his prodigal days behind to become a sober king when his father dies; Hamlet moves from his student days to an even more sobering burden of leadership when his father dies, because for him it soon requires that he really must steal the crown. Brutus’historically Caesar’s stepson’moves from a quiet filial devotion to a sense of authority that leaves no more room for Caesar as soon as Brutus thinks of himself as head of Rome. And even Angelo in Measure for Measure crosses the threshold, leaving the clois’tered virtues and an ‘unsounded self’ to confront adult responsibilities and temptations. Elsewhere we can see a movement in the other direc’tion, when a Titus or a Lear thinks he can retire to his children’s nur’sery.

Cymbeline and the other romances differ from the earlier plays in their scope; they present the whole cycle, often ranging over several crises in different generations. The histories present such cycles too, of course, but what distinguishes the romances is the way they focus on one particular aspect of family experience that I
want to examine here. The romances make explicit a paradox about families that Shakespeare put at the center of his plays long before the anthropologists began to study kinship relations: the family is so important that characters can not even imagine themselves without one, yet every family must bring on its own destruction. Its very success in raising children ensures that they will want to leave’ or to take over in the wrong way. As the crisis recurs in each generation, both parents and children have to find the right balance between holding on and letting go; they must avoid both the threat of an ingrown family collapsing in on itself and the threat of an explosion that will tear the family apart.

The romances stage several of these crises, and in them the two threats take many forms. The threat of holding on too tightly is seen most strikingly in the threat of incest in these plays.[4] Pericles opens with a story about incest; incestuous longing is just hinted in The Winter’s Tale, when Leontes sees his daughter for the first time in sixteen years; and there may be a more obscurely implied incestuous attraction making Prospero jealous of his potential son-in-law. Shakespeare also suggests an incestuous ambition on the part of characters like Cloten and Caliban, who want to marry their lovely step-sisters, usurping their proper role within their foster families and refusing to leave.

But incest is only one form of a more general danger that family bonds will become too strong. Parents in particular threaten to swallow up their children. Mothers are quite literally ready to eat their ‘little darlings’ during the famine in Pericles (reversing the threat from Lear’s ‘pelican’ daughters). More often the parents simply do not want their children to leave or to shake off parental power. Antiochus in Pericles delays his daughter’s wedding because he wants her for his own use, but even the less perverse parents like Simonides in Pericles, or Cymbeline or Prospero, delay weddings. And Alonso ‘who lets his daughter go’ is sorry: she is in another country; it’s as if the wench were dead.

The opposite threat of families exploding outwards comes sometimes from parents who throw their children out, as Dionyza does in Pericles, or as Leontes does. Cymbeline merely loses track of his sons, but the effect is the same. More often, however, it comes from the children who try to break out of the family too soon. So Florizel refuses to ask his father’s blessing on a dubious marriage, and Perdita herself denies her shepherd ‘father’ in running off with Florizel, just as Cymbeline’s sons defy their shepherd ‘father.’

These family dramas are interesting in themselves, but they are also the outward accompaniment of an equally important inner drama that I want to look at more closely. It is a drama that each new generation feels: the conflict between family inheritance and personal individuality, between old memories and new perceptions, between being part of the family unit and being the head of a new family. This is the universal drama that Freud saw in the very specific fate of Oedipus. What psycho’analysis adds to the traditional western understanding that
the past shapes us is the idea that the past works on us unconsciously and in even stranger, less direct ways than it did for Oedipus, permeating our present lives without being literally true as it was for him.

Too much emphasis on the past, of course, is reductive, and we have all read psychoanalytic criticism that reduces an ongoing drama to a perpetual repetition of the same old family drama. So the analyst finds that Prince Hal and Hamlet commit oedipal crimes’ as do Brutus, Macbeth, Angelo, and Florizel. Shakespeare’s plays resist such reductions’ but they do so partly by taking them into account.

The plays present a uniquely balanced vision. Without ever reducing present experience to mere repetition of the past, they never leave out the shadowy resonances that the analyst finds in present experience. In’deed, Shakespeare finds a way of representing the ambiguity of current experience that re-creates ‘out there’ some of the complexity of what it is like inside our own overlaid minds. We are each tied to a family with bonds stronger than any an overbearing father can impose because those bonds are part of our sense of ourselves, taking the form of mem’ories or attitudes of mind and perception. The child can leave his family behind, but he cannot escape its influence, and in some sense he cannot know who he is until he knows where he has come from’ until he knows his roots.

One way Shakespeare portrays all this, of course, is to put the literal parents onstage. Thus Hamlet really is struggling with his parents, and so is Coriolanus. No wonder the analyst takes to these plays, as Norman Holland says, like a kitten to a ball of wool. But another way Shake’ speare portrays the family influence is by symbolic reenactments of the original family situations, so that a character leaves home and comes to a new world, seemingly to a new family, but we can see that he is also simultaneously working out his relationships to his old family as he tries out the new one. We can neither reduce his current to his past ex’perience, nor can we ignore his past. The family references flicker on the surface. They are neither a psychoanalytic skeleton behind the sur’face, nor are they quite part of the literal meaning. And this is precisely the role they have in life. The family’s role comes out most strikingly in the case of Posthumus in Cymbeline, and it is to his adventures that I want now to turn, to see how the cycle of family crises reverberates as part of his own separate experience as an individual, and particularly how all this emerges in the strange climactic dream he has at the turning point of the play.

Of course, to the casual audience, Posthumus in this play is primarily a husband, but we shall see that there is no way for him to find himself as husband until he finds himself as son, as part of the family he was torn from long ago. The story of Posthumus learning to be a proper son is not literally part of the main plot, and in fact it is hardly noticeable and seldom noted in discussions of the play. But it is nonetheless a shaping influence on the story of his learning how to be a husband.
No one would claim that Cymbeline is solely about families. It is, in fact, about several different relationships that hold men together. Its three main plots examine political, generational or familial, and marital ties, so that the story of Posthumus’ marriage takes place only in this larger context. All three plots are about human bonds gone wrong ‘exploded or imploded’ and then being righted by a new faith or mutuality of trust.

The first, or political, plot is the story of King Cymbeline of Britain, who refuses to pay tribute money to Rome and is getting ready to go to war about it. In the second or dynastic plot, we learn that Cymbeline’s two sons disappeared long ago, and his good wife has died. He is now remarried to a wicked Queen with an unsavory son whose name Cloten, rhymes with ‘rotten.’ Cymbeline is foolish enough to insist that his daughter Imogen marry Cloten instead of letting her marry the orphan Posthumus, whom Cymbeline has been bringing up as his own son.

In the third plot (really the main one), Imogen and Posthumus do get married secretly anyway, but with almost disastrous results. Post’humus is banished, and while he is away he succumbs to an Iago-like villain, Iachimo, and makes a bet with him on his wife’s chastity. Iachimo promptly worms his way into Imogen’s bedroom by hiding himself inside a trunk so that he can come out in the night to inspect her room and see the telltale mole on her left breast and to take the bracelet Posthumus gave her. All this ocular proof convinces Posthumus that Imogen has betrayed him, and, rashly, he orders her killed. Of course he soon repents ‘too late, as he thinks, to save her, so instead he vows to serve her father, Cymbeline, by fighting in the British army against Rome. (We begin to see how the plots mesh.) He makes a heroic stand with three other rustic soldiers, and these happy few save the King and win the war. Posthumus, however, gets himself arrested as an enemy to Britain, still trying to repent and now willing to die.

Although, as I said, these plots are not literally about families, all three have family resonances behind them. Even in the first plot, Cymbeline’s politics are a magnification of family rebellion. He was brought up at the court of Rome where he learned a Roman honor that now teaches him to rebel against Rome itself. The second plot is literally about family conflicts, and it presents the crisis I have described. Cymbeline is Imogen’s possessive father; he wants to ‘pen her up,’ as he says, and make his Queen her jailer. Such restraint takes an alternate form in Cymbeline’s pastoral alter-ego, Belarius, who has stolen the King’s two sons and keeps them penned up in a cave. The two fathers have opposite motives: Cymbeline wants to prevent Imogen from mar’rying outside the courtly circles appropriate to his dynastic expectations, and Belarius wants to keep his stolen ‘sons’ from entering into the same courtly world. But in both cases the children are being kept at home and treated as things, not people (‘Foolish thing!’ Cymbeline calls Imogen, ‘Disloyal thing!’). Cymbeline further tightens the family circle by insisting that Imogen marry ‘his wife’s sole son.’
It is in the Posthumus plot, as I have suggested, that the family resonances are most striking, however. Posthumus’ trouble at the beginning of the play is that he does not know who he is and this is partly because he does not know who his family is. Literally, of course, everyone does know his family, but he is introduced as an orphan; his very name, Posthumus, proclaims his status as one born out of his parents’ death, just as he was ‘ript’ from his dying mother’s womb. The first thing we hear about him is that he cannot be ‘delved to the root’; a dubious note in a play about family trees, in which every man who founds one is associated with a tree. And, just listening to Posthumus, we hear an immature young man good, but not yet able to distinguish independence from rash rebellion, Posthumus is cut off from his elders; he him’self tells us that the weakness which led him to wager on Imogen’s chastity in the first place was his swaggering refusal to ‘be guided by others’ experience.’ If Cymbeline imposes his own experience in too stifling a way, Posthumus tries too soon to break free from the experienced elders’ as perhaps he broke free too soon from his mother’s womb when he was ‘ript’ from it.

Though his real family is dead, Posthumus’ story is a sequence of substitute-family adventures. It is not at all obvious, but we can see that he associates himself with two new families and works out his relation each time to a new father and two older brothers, all as part of his other adventures. His first foster family is Cymbeline’s, and here he makes a mistake and usurps his proper place when he elopes with Imogen. We may certainly sympathize with his desire to marry Imogen, but it is at best precipitous and at worst tainted with the disrespect and incest that show most clearly in the stepson Cloten. For, in a sense, Cymbeline’s degenerate stepfamily is a symbolic reflection of Post-humus’ actions, and Cloten is a parody of Posthumus himself.[5] Cloten is of course Posthumus’ opposite in so many ways: mean, proud, and cowardly and he smells. Yet there are similarities, and these lie in more than their common passion for wagers and gambling. Imogen mistakes Cloten’s body for Posthumus’, and as for the spirit, Cloten’s potential for selfish possessiveness is the very thing Posthumus must come to terms with. In fact, it is a Clotenish trait that nearly kills Posthumus’ marriage, when he makes that bet and gives in to a boorish rage.

So Posthumus’ mistakes with his first family coincide with his mis’takes in his marriage. But he goes on to a second foster family, and this one leads to the healing of his marriage. Having killed Imogen (or so he thinks), Posthumus repents by joining Imogen’s father’s army, as we saw, and he promptly winds up fighting beside an unidentified father and two sons. (We of course know that these are really Cymbeline’s own sons and their kidnapper, in disguise, and we can appreciate the ironic play among various levels of ‘real’ and only apparent family ties.) This time Posthumus takes his proper place: brave, but not over-bearing; accepting his position as nameless third son; subduing his own ends to those of the little family. He stands with Belarius in the ‘nar’ row lane,’ but instead of killing ‘the old man’ in a repetition of an oedipal crime at the crossroads,[6] he defends him selflessly, and the group single-handedly saves Britain. It is only when he has become a proper son
that he becomes a man and takes his father’s place, for Posthumus’ father was known and named for his brave defense of Britain. Significantly, it is only when Posthumus goes into battle that he in’vokes his family’s protection and takes on its name.

It is only when Posthumus moves from the older, suffocating family bonds, in which members are imprisoned and imprisoning, to this more generous conception of what it means to be part of a family, that he can establish a new and more mature relationship with his wife. At first he himself had been like a possessive parent, jealously guarding Imogen; when exiled, he left her with a ‘manacle of love,’ the bracelet he comes to believe in more than he believes in Imogen herself. Finally he winds up in his own prison, manacled and doomed. But once the char’acters find the right way of giving themselves to each other, the mana’cles of love become living, strengthening bonds. And when Imogen and Posthumus finally find each other at the end of the play, whether we hear ‘rock’ or ‘lock’ in the disputed word of Imogen’s greeting, her words transform all the rocky prisons, bonds, bolts, and locks we have heard about earlier. Posthumus, not recognizing her, had pushed her away, but she embraces him, saying:

Think that you are upon a [l]ock, and now
Throw me again.
(V.v.262-63)

All the strongholds in the play are similarly transformed: the British island, ‘paled in with rocks unscalable,’ or the ‘temple’ Imogen, whose ‘lock’ Iachimo did not pick after all.

Posthumus’ prison is itself transformed by the dream he has there, in which his family forms a strong, unbroken circle around him and we see the bondage of the prison walls replaced by family bonds. (The stage directions are perfectly clear: beginning with a call for solemn music, they specify each family member and then order them all to ‘circle Posthumus round as he lies sleeping’ [V.iv.28].) For Posthumus’ achievement as a husband and a son is crowned by this vision of his family. Dead though they are, they appear physically on stage, breaking into the current action and revealing their implicit presence all along. They appear just when Posthumus finds himself, and the dream, is a perfect climax to his story.

The dream is a climax for the whole play as well, and I want to turn finally to it now to see more clearly the general role of the family in the play. The dream comes at the moment when the action has gotten more tangled than we ever see it elsewhere in Shakespeare, and when the levels of duplicity and sheer misunderstanding have multiplied so that even the audience, which sees everything, has some trouble sorting them out. The dream reassures both the characters and the audience that the complexities will be made simple and the separations will be’come reunions,
and that the ‘extraordinary blindness’[7] of the characters has been countered all along by the insight of an all-seeing god.

What sort of dream can achieve all this? The critics have come to call it the vision of Jupiter, and so it is. I have left out the best part of the dream, actually, in my first description. The great god comes down from the sky in a marvelous flourish: ‘Jupiter descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle. He throws a thunderbolt. The Ghosts fall on their knees’ (V.iv.). And when he leaves, ‘The marble pavement closes; he is entered/His radiant roof’ (V.iv.90-91). But the more homely aspect of the dream, which is a vision of Posthumus’ family, is just as important, if not more so. The family frames Jupiter’s appearance and is responsible for it. They are the ones who summon him and ask him to account for himself. (Why has he been treating their son this way?!) And they remain behind to have the last word after he leaves.

The dream can be interpreted either as a revelation of the divine forces in human affairs, or as a revelation of the familial matrix that underlies all human experience. We can name the force that guides the action in Cymbeline’s world, either by interpreting ‘from above’ and calling it Jupiter, or by interpreting ‘from below’ and calling it the effect of family.

The two phrases ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ allude purposely to Freud’s account of the interpretation of dreams, in which he distinguishes on the one hand between traditional dream interpretation, which looks to the bizarre images in dreams for prophecies and god’s word, and Freud’s own more mundane interpretation, which looks for derivatives of early infantile complexes.[8] Freud would not be surprised to discover that a dream about God was ‘really’ about the dreamer’s father. Of course, Freud’s answers to questions about how gods and fathers were related were often reductive answers: the ‘illusions’ of art and religion derive from the forgotten mundane truths about the family. But the play insists on both interpretations. What is revealed in the dream is a guiding force that comes out of the family and is associated with it but is as ‘rare,’ to use a recurring word from the play, as a divine power would be.

My point is that while Shakespeare avoids the Freudian reduction of the divine vision, he still ‘psychologizes’ or internalizes it. Shakespeare’s originality lies not only in joining gods and fathers, combining two different aspects of experience, but in joining and transforming two familiar literary traditions so that each takes on new meaning. The first of these is the divine epiphany, the entrance of a deus ex machina, who was expected in the narrative romances on which Shakespeare drew and who literally appeared in machines of various subtlety on the sixteenth-century stage, including Shakespeare’s own plays: Hy’men in As You Like It and Diana in Pericles. What is extraordinary about Posthumus’ epiphany, however, is that while Jupiter does in deed descend, he neither does nor says anything of substance’
res’ cues, no revelations, and only the flimsiest, most circumstantially creaky, of oracles. Essentially all he does is say ‘I am here.’

The same is true of Shakespeare’s transformation of the second tradition that he drew upon for the dream—the family recognition scene. For just as Shakespeare gives us an intervening god who does nothing, he gives us a recognition scene in which nothing is recognized. Posthumus is not literally reunited with his family, the way children in romances always are, and he does not learn anything literally new about his identity. He is not a prince and was not meant to be; he is merely his father’s son. After the dream, nothing has changed except his state of mind; Posthumus has simply recognized his past and therefore recognized himself. Here, as with the divine epiphany, what is usually staged as an outward movement of the plot and what appears as such in Shakespeare’s other romances has become instead an inward movement of the mind. Other young heroes (or more often heroines) in the romances must also find their parents in order to find themselves. What is different here is that Posthumus cannot find his parents in the flesh; he must find the idea of his parents. ‘Sleep, thou hast been a grandsire and begot/A father to me,’ says Posthumus when he wakes: he is the child of his own vision (V.iv.93-94). Shakespeare is not Sophocles, and he has not written another Oedipus. What he has done in this play is just what Freud did in his theory about Oedipus: he has rationalized a myth by making it into a psychological truth.

I want now to suggest that this semi-psychoanalytic insight about the family’s presence can help us to understand and cope with the difficulties, obscurities, and ambiguities in Cymbeline because the family’s ambiguous presence in the characters’ lives is closely related to the remarkable degree of confusion unique to this play, and to the pervasive uncertainty about just what is going on. Of course, no one finally trusts appearances in any Shakespearean world at least we do not usually trust those characters who trust appearances and demand ocular proof. But in this Shakespearean world, appearances are almost never right or even determinable; the characters are literally near-sighted and otherwise inclined to misinterpret or overinterpret. But even more unsettling, not only do we mistrust external appearances here but also internal ones. We mistrust even those overwhelming inner passions that seem to be the rock-bottom reality of life.

This is the kind of distrust more familiar to the psychoanalysts, and Cymbeline, more than any other Shakespearean play, comes closest to the strange unsettling revelation of depths below depths unearthed in psychoanalysis. It presents a world where identities shift’ and so do loyalties (Posthumus dresses like a Briton to defend Britain and then puts on Roman clothes and is arrested); where past suddenly overtakes present; where one emotion turns into its opposite. Cymbeline shows us what it is like to be a creature of the past, a creature with a latency period and latent meanings in everything we do. The play shows what it is to be an individual whose identity paradoxically depends on being part of a family in which that identity is threatened; an individual whose conscious experience is colored by
unconscious, and whose current life is always shaped by a quiet, or not so quiet, symbolic force from the past.

Cymbeline has been called a history play, but it is a history play of the individual too, and it shows that what we are now comes out of what we were. Like Oedipus, its characters keep meeting their past and must give it a place, just as Cymbeline must finally ‘pay tribute’ to the Rome that generated him and his ideals, even though he has out’wardly defeated the Roman army. The play presents a world in which a ‘posthumus’ child finds life only be recreating his dead parents, and where people who had seemed dead come alive in strange ways. Inter’estingly enough, the play also ensures that we in the audience also keep meeting figures like Iachimo/Iago from our past lives with Shakespeare, and it forces us to find a way of incorporating that past without letting it take over.

There are many scenes in Cymbeline where Shakespeare demon’strstrates the family resonances enriching and confusing the characters’ experience, but I will mention only one here. The scene comes just past the middle of the action, when everyone is moving to Wales. In the political plot, the Roman forces are gathering there; in the second, or dynastic plot, Cymbeline’s kidnapped sons are living there; and in the marriage plot, Imogen is heading there (in disguise, of course) to find her husband. In addition, when Imogen arrives in Wales (dis’guised as the boy Fidele), she accidentally wanders into the cave where her kidnapped brothers have been living for the last twenty years with their kindly kidnapper, though neither they nor she realizes anyone else’s true identity. The scene I am talking about comes after Imogen, alias ‘Fidele,’ has been living with the brothers for a while and is suddenly discovered ‘dead’ by one of them, though we know she isn’t really dead but only drugged.

The scene begins when the young man, whose real name is Arviragus but who is known as Cadwal, comes onstage carrying the dead body of what he thinks is the boy Fidele. This death makes the young man re’member the death of their mother (rather, of the woman they have taken all along to be their mother, but whom we know was merely the kidnapper’s wife). But this is not all the death evokes. For us in the audience, the scene evokes Lear’s entrance with the dead Cordelia in his arms, and, if we are loose enough, it evokes the pieta behind Lear’s posture. Behind the pieta, it evokes an original image of the mother with a living child in her arms. In addition, when we hear Fidele called a ‘lily’ in this scene, we may remember an earlier scene in the play’a time when Imogen was not dead but asleep and Iachimo spied on her in order to get information to mislead Posthumus. Then too she was called a ‘lily’ as she lay senseless.

Now Fidele is not Fidele, of course ‘he’ is Imogen; nor is he dead. He has merely taken a potion that the wicked Queen gave to his friend thinking it was poison, but which we know is a harmless sleeping medi’cine. For that matter, not only isn’t this Fidele dead, but Arviragus’ mother, whom he mourned before, was not his mother.
either. None’theless, all these confusions do not invalidate Arviragus’ emotion’any more than they invalidate the audience’s esthetic and even playful appreciation of the scene. We take it for granted that we who are watching can bring something to our experience of this scene: other scenes in the play, scenes in other Shakespearean plays, a whole cul’tural matrix, and all our common human experience as well. What Shakespeare shows, in addition, is that even the characters most directly and least esthetically involved in the experience also bring things to it, making it richer and more complicated that it ‘really’ is.

But experience is always richer than it ‘really’ is, so long as there are people to observe it. The exaggerated complications in Cymbeline make us realize with even more force than usual that ‘reality’ finally lies in the enrichment, and the truth lies in the excess. Arviragus’ ‘ex’cessive’ or mistaken emotion, we finally realize, is appropriate after all: Fidele really is his sister. Arviragus is responding to a larger truth than the literal’just like Freud’s patients, whose literally false deja vu ex’periences are yet true representatives of their ‘psychological constella’tion’ of the moment.[10]

Partly because the play’s twists and self-consciousness encourage our detachment, they also encourage us to consider curiously those things we usually take for granted, and to ask not only ‘Who is that?’ but ‘How do I know?’” to wonder about the nature of identity. The action suggests and discards several answers to that question and leaves us, I think, with a more amorphous and unsettling one’one more like the psychoanalyst’s. We already knew that identity is more than a surface phenomenon. Only in the case of a sham like Cloten do clothes make the man and give him a lineage (his ‘tailor’ was his ‘grandfather’ [IV. ii.81-82]). And only a promiscuous Italian ‘jay’ (whore) finds her beauty’s ‘mother’ in her painting, as Imogen says (III.iv.50-51). But identity is more than skin deep too, in this play. A mole identifies Guiderius at the end, but it was just such a mole that misled Posthumus about Imogen’s true nature earlier. And not only moles but whole trunks can mislead; the trunk in which Iachimo hides to observe the mole is only a prelude to the more spectacular confusion of identi’ties when Imogen mistakes Cloten’s headless trunk for Posthumus’.

To discover his identity, Posthumus must look not only at the pre’sent trunk but at the roots. He must look to his family’but he must look in the very special, imaginative way we have seen. Instead of liter’ally discovering his family, he must simply reimagine them; he must make what he can of the past, recreate his family in his dreams. And if the puns on which I have partly based this argument seem tenuous al’ready, I will add one that is even more far-fetched and seemingly pe’ripheral. There are some literal or vegetable ‘roots’ that appear in the play during Imogen’s pastoral interlude as Fidele. For she takes on the job of cooking for her hosts and makes them dishes, as they say, fit for the gods, when she ‘cut[s] our roots in characters’ to make her brothers’ broth (IV.i.49). I am not suggesting that Shakespeare here is giving away his recipe for making characters out of their roots
(for one thing, ‘character’ did not yet mean quite what it means for us). But I am suggesting that the farcical misunderstandings in this play are matched by its seemingly trivial puns. And that it is in just such flicker’ing, uncertain, off-center signs that the unconscious meaning of our love manifests itself, and the unconscious depths of character, which are always felt, make themselves known.

Return to Cymbeline
Return to Women in Culture
Return to Reinventing Literary History


[6] Suggestions of unwitting oedipal confrontation emerge more directly in Shakespeare’s source. The Posthumus figure in Holinshed, Brute, fled from his family because he found that he had killed his father instead of a deer; the hero of The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune flees, like Posthumus, because of a taboo attachment, and then meets his father disguised as a hermit. (Note: Rare Triumphs, an anonymous dramatic romance acted in 1582, was edited by W. W. Greg in the Malone Society Reprints, 1931.)


[8] Along with the model of layered analogies described by Freud and others (e.g., Ernst Kris and Erik Erikson), see the model of mutually interacting analogies
described by Paul Ricoeur in the first chapter of Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1970). Elsewhere, of course, Freud was more interested in completely nonanalogous relationships between manifest and latent meanings, such as the ones produced by the distortions of dream work.

[9] See n. 6