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Cymbeline

William Shakespeare · *c. 1610 · original English text*

In a Britain that owes tribute to Rome, King Cymbeline's daughter Imogen secretly marries Posthumus. A wager, a villain in a trunk, a poisoned cordial, lost princes in the Welsh hills, and a battle that rights the tribute all come home in a last scene of piled recognitions. 'Pardon's the word to all.'

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How many errors can a marriage and a kingdom bear, and what does it mean that the last word spoken over them is pardon?

"Pardon's the word to all."

Cymbeline · Act V, the last recognitions

Posthumus wagers on Imogen's chastity and believes Iachimo's false report; he orders her death and later begs to be punished. Imogen, disguised as Fidele, finds her unknown brothers in Wales and wakes beside a headless body she thinks is her husband's. The queen's plots fail; the tribute is settled not only by arms but by a recovered humility. The dirge 'Fear no more the heat o' th' sun' is sung over a girl who is not dead. The play is a late romance: wounds, disguises, and a mercy large enough to cover a crowded last act.

KEY CHARACTERS

Imogen
Cymbeline's daughter, faithful, courageous in disguise, the play's center of constancy.

Posthumus Leonatus
Her husband, who wagers, believes a lie, and must be forgiven.

Iachimo
The Italian who wins the wager by theft and later confesses.

Cymbeline, the Queen, and Cloten
A king, a plotting stepmother, and her loutish son.

Belarius, Guiderius, and Arviragus
The banished guardian and the two lost princes, raised in Wales.

PARDON'S THE WORD

> *"Fear no more the heat o' th' sun,"*
> Act IV, the dirge over Fidele

> *"Pardon's the word to all."*
> **Cymbeline** · Act V

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Secret Marriage, and a Wager

ACTS I–II

Posthumus is banished. In Rome, Iachimo bets he can seduce Imogen, hides in a trunk, and steals the sight of a chamber and a bracelet.

- The wager is a stain on Posthumus before any proof is offered.
- Imogen's courtesy is used against her.
- 'By Jupiter, I had it from her arm!' is the oath that sells the lie.

> *"By Jupiter, I had it from her arm!"*
> **Iachimo** · Act II, reporting the stolen bracelet

02

A Letter, and a Flight

ACTS II–III

Posthumus sends to have Imogen killed. Pisanio cannot do it, gives her a disguise and a path toward Milford. The queen, meanwhile, deals in poisons that are not quite poisons.

- Pisanio's disobedience is fidelity.
- Imogen's journey is the romance's road.
- Cloten, the queen's son, follows in Posthumus's clothes—a crude, dangerous parody.

03

Wales, and a Dirge

ACTS III–IV

Belarius and the two lost princes take in 'Fidele.' Cloten is killed. Imogen wakes beside his headless body and thinks Posthumus dead. The dirge is sung.

- The princes' mountain life is a school of honor outside the court.
- 'Fear no more the heat o' th' sun' is this text's wording (o' th', not o' the).
- The false body is one of the play's hardest theatrical images.

04

The Battle

ACTS IV–V

Rome invades for the tribute. Posthumus, seeking death, fights instead for Britain. Belarius and the boys turn the day. Posthumus, taken, would still die for Imogen.

- The war is tribute and honor, not only spectacle.
- Jupiter, in a vision, promises that the eagle will bless the lion.
- The plot is now ready to be untied all at once.

05

The Tree, and a Pardon

ACT V, THE CLOSE

Identities flood the court: the princes, Iachimo's confession, the queen's death, Imogen alive. Posthumus: 'Hang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die!' Cymbeline makes pardon the word to all, and even the tribute is offered freely.

- The last act is crowded on purpose: romance as overflowing repair.
- The marriage is restored after a man's grave fault.
- Peace with Rome is humility after victory, not humiliation only.

> *"Hang there like fruit, my soul, Till the tree die!"*
> **Posthumus** · Act V, holding Imogen

Constancy · A False Wager · Pardon · Disguise and Recognition · A Kingdom Restored

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #1538, a late romance in five acts, sometimes classed with the tragedies in the Folio but ending in pardon.
2. The dirge in this text is "Fear no more the heat o' th' sun," (o' th', not o' the). Also exact: "By Jupiter, I had it from her arm!" "Hang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die!" "Pardon's the word to all."
3. The plot includes a wager on a wife's chastity, a man hidden in a bedchamber, a headless body, and a poisoned cordial. It is strange and sometimes lurid; frame it as romance, not as a thriller only.
4. The last act piles recognitions on purpose. Help students keep the threads, and do not skip the pardon that names them.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1538, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/cymbeline/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.