Woland. Incontri letterari
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Collana diretta da
Emilia Dı Rocco e *Chiara Lombardi*

Questo testo è stato sottoposto con esito favorevole
al processo di valutazione scientifica in *peer review*.

Se pareba boves, alba pratalia araba,
et albo versorio teneba, negro semen seminaba.
Gratia tibi agimus, potens sempiternus Deus.

P. Boitani, S. Helgesson, P. Horta,
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P. Madsen, F. Marenco, G. Mariani,
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EMPIRES

AND WORLD LITERATURE

a cura di Piero Boitani

Contents/Indice

The Sublime and the Rotten: *Imperium* and Empire in Shakespeare

Chiara Lombardi

In *Geroglifici del sublime*, Ezio Raimondi interpreted Piranesi's *Roman Antiquities* and *Prisons* (figg. 1-2) as a celebration of the republican idea of justice (*lex romana*): by the amplification of the architectural dimensions, and the concentration of symbols beyond the limits of reality, these pictures convey a sense of admonishing terror and passionate celebration that emerge from the historical magnificence and the moral heritage of Roman history (10).

Shakespeare wrote more than half a century before Piranesi, but his view of the Roman Empire (or more generally, the Roman political world) similarly provides a wide symbology that suggests what his contemporary history less distinctly expressed: the representation of the extremes or *limits* in the analysis of power, along with the strong tensions they create[1]. I mean, on the one hand, moral greatness, justice and struggle for freedom, and, on the other, arbitrary power, violence and moral corruption, and vanity. As I will try to show in this paper, Shakespeare often uses the rhetorical forms of the sublime in order to emphasize this tension, providing a powerful tragic effect which has a strong visual impact as well; at the same time, the language and the forms of the sublime[2] proves to be extremely effective in the solution of these tensions and in highlighting alternative forms of government, as shown in the romances (for example in *The Tempest*, and in particular, as I will try to demonstrate, in *Cymbeline*).

It is significant, too, that Shakespeare refers to the Roman world not only in the classical plays, but also by opening visual perspectives on Roman imagery, with symbols, metaphors, visions, pictures, intertextual cross-references, and *mise-en-abyme* of historical episodes, with the effect of intensifying their symbolic density, and *sublimity*.

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1. Cantor; Miola; Del Sapio Garbero.
2. For the origin and development of the sublime in medieval and Western literature, I refer to Boitani.
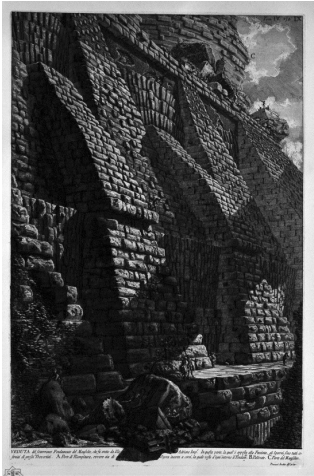
Fig. 1. G.B. Piranesi. *The Roman Antiquities*, "The Great Foundation of the Mausoleum of Adrian".

Fig. 2. G.B. Piranesi. *The Roman Antiquities*, "Via Appia and Via Ardeatina".

Beyond its historical embodiment, moreover, the concept of *empire* – a term which does not recur many times in Shakespeare's work, and which is sometimes used metaphorically[3] – also implies the notion of *imperium* conceived as the exercise of power, both juridical and military, which is the first and most important meaning of the Latin word.

In Shakespeare's work, Roman history may be seen in the following sequel: *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* (1606-1608: one of the most ancient episodes

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3. See *Titus Andronicus,* I.i.183; 303; *Timon of Athens,* IV.iii.394, *Richard III,* IV.v.401; *Henry VI* 2, I.i.161; *Hamlet*, I.i.12 (add. pass.); III.iv.89; *Antony and Cleopatra,* I.i.36; I.iii.178; III.vi.66; IV.ii.22 etc.

of Roman history, after the expulsion of the Tarquin kings and the Roman conquest of the Volscian city of Corioles), *Julius Caesar* (1599: the death of Caesar, 44 B.C.); *Cymbeline* (1609-1610: the transference of the Roman *imperium* to the Western territories of Britain with the favor of the gods, after an intricate series of conflicts, misunderstandings and separations, and finally of recognitions); *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-1607: the crucial ages of the transition from the Republic to the Empire with the battle of Actium and Cleopatra's suicide, in 30 B.C.); *Titus Andronicus* (1588-1591: the latter, gloomy and bloody days of the Roman Empire, probably under Theodosius at the end of the fourth century A.D., but from a fictional, non-historical perspective). We may consider that, except for *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar*, the other plays were staged after James I succeeded Elizabeth I, in a period characterized by new religious conflicts and parliamentary tensions, due partly to James I's much stronger belief in the absolutist theory of monarchy[4]. From a juridical point of view, moreover, if it is true that both the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I are to be defined in terms of a Kingdom, it is also true that these sovereigns put England on a course of imperial policy, by conquering colonies in several parts of the world[5].

Roman history, as well as Greek and Trojan history[6], therefore, plays a pivotal role in Shakespeare's work. More precisely, the playwright looks at the historical pattern and the literary metaphor of the Roman Empire to speak not only *of* his time, but especially *to* his own time and *to* his own audience.

But why and how does Shakespeare use and elaborate this subject? Among his sources, we should consider first of all how legendary and nationalist historiography, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle *History of the Kings of Britain* (*Historia Regum Britanniae*), connected the myth of the foundation of Rome – by the grandson of Aeneas, Brutus – to the origins of the English Kingdom. This national myth has been revamped several times for nationalist propaganda, and especially under James I, whose "project of union" between the two crowns of Scotland and England would be recalled throughout *Cymbeline*, as it refers to the king's "appropriation of Roman, British, and Welsh historiography, its manipulation of anachronism and historiographic anglocentrism" (Wayne 389). In general, as we shall see, Elizabethan theatre contributes to the reassessment of the fundamental basis of the connection between the origins of the English Kingdom and the myth of the foundation of Rome, by using the same images and plots, but changing their meanings.

Roman history, moreover, implied a chronological distance that, thanks to

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4. I refer to James I's books: *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598); *Basilikon Doron* (1599), which argues a theological basis for monarchy; *A Premonition to All Most Mightie Monarches* (1609).
5. Kenneth; Quinn.
6. I am thinking of *Troilus and Cressida* in its treasure of meanings and references (see James).

the appeal of myth and ancient narrations, allows a wide-ranging analysis of the phenomenology of power free from contemporary political implications. The influence of Latin and Greek authors, and historiographers in particular, then, stems mostly from a method that was not based on separate fields of research, but on the relationships between historical facts and human behavior or psychology. These correspondences form what Carlo Ginzburg, in *History, Rhetoric and Proof*, analyzed as *power relations*. As well as in Plutarch's *Lives*, in the work of Tacitus, whose *Histories* and *Life of Agricola* had been partially translated into English by Sir Henry Savile in 1591[7], the human character is at the heart of the narrative; historical development depends on human actions, plots and passions: *libido dominandi*, lust for power, envy, fear, suspicion, love, hatred etc., not only as single phenomena, but also in their interrelationships. Hence the label of 'dramatic historiography' or 'tragedy of history' stuck on Tacitus' style of recounting and investigating history, with the use of techniques such as indirect characterization and discourse, or pathetic visual elements (see, for instance, the description of decomposed corps in *Hist*., II, 70). In *Histories,* spanning from 69 to 96 A.D., and *Annales*, from 14 to 68 A.D., Tacitus describes the passage from the *res publica* to the *principatus* and the degeneration of the latter, focussing on the person of the emperor (choices, failures, plots etc.) and on the difficult balance between *libertas* and *principatus*. In the short biography entitled *Agricola* or *De vita Iulii Agricolae* (based on Tacitus' father-in-law enterprises in the conquest of Britannia), the historian does not exclude the brutalities of Roman imperialism, even if uttered by an enemy, Calgagus, the Caledonian chief who led the North Britons against the invading Roman army:

> Nos terrarum ac libertatis extremos recessus ipse ac sinus famae in hunc diem defendit: nunc terminus Britanniae patet, atque omne ignotum pro magnifico est; sed nulla iam ultra gens, nihil nisi fluctus ac saxa, et infestiores Romani, quorum superbiam frustra per obsequium ac modestiam effugias. Raptores orbis, postquam cuncta vastantibus defuere terrae, mare scrutantur: si locuples hostis est, avari, si pauper, ambitiosi, quos non Oriens, non Occidens satiaverit: soli omnium opes atque inopiam pari adfectu concupiscunt. Auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus *imperium*, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant (30, 3-5).

> But to-day the uttermost parts of Britain are laid bare; there are no other tribes to come; nothing but sea and cliffs and these more deadly Romans, whose arrogance you shun in vain by obedience and self-restraint. Harriers of the world, now that earth fails their all-devastating hands, they probe even the sea: if their enemy have (sic) wealth, they have greed; if he be poor, they are ambitious; East not West has glutted them; alone of mankind they behold with the same passion of concupiscence waste alike and want. *To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace* (Tacitus 220-221, italics mine).

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7. Benario; Knowles; Pelling; Womersley.

Classic epic, too, provided significant symbols and narrative techniques. An interesting example is the description of Aeneas' shield in *Aeneid* VIII (vv. 626-731), with Vulcan's engraving of the most important episodes of Rome's future history, from Romulus to the battle of Actium, with an effect which connects *ekphrasis* to history and prophecy:

> haec inter tumidi late maris ibat imago
> aurea, sed fluctu spumabant caerula cano,
> et circum argento clari delphines in orbem
> aequora uerrebant caudis aestumque secabant.
> in medio classis aeratas, Actia bella,   675
> cernere erat, totumque instructo Marte uideres
> feruere Leucaten auroque effulgere fluctus.
> hinc Augustus agens Italos in proelia Caesar
> cum patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis,
> stans celsa in puppi, geminas cui tempora flammas   680
> laeta uomunt patriumque aperitur uertice sidus.
> parte alia uentis et dis Agrippa secundis
> arduus agmen agens, cui, belli insigne superbum,
> tempora nauali fulgent rostrata corona.
> hinc ope barbarica uariisque Antonius armis,   685
> uictor ab Aurorae populis et litore rubro,
> Aegyptum uirisque Orientis et ultima secum
> Bactra uehit, sequiturque (nefas) Aegyptia coniunx.
> una omnes ruere ac totum spumare reductis
> conuulsum remis rostrisque tridentibus aequor.   690
> alta petunt; pelago credas innare reuulsas
> Cycladas aut montis concurrere montibus altos,
> tanta mole uiri turritis puppibus instant.
> stuppea flamma manu telisque uolatile ferrum
> spargitur, arua noua Neptunia caede rubescunt.   695
> (*Aeneid* VIII.671-695)

Amidst these scenes flowed wide the likeness of the swelling sea, all gold, but the blue water foamed with white billows, and round about dolphins, shining in silver, swept the seas with their tails in circles, and cleft the tide. In the center could be seen brazen ships with Actium's battle; one might see all Leucate aglow with War's array, and the waves ablaze with gold. Here Augustus Caesar, leading Italians to strife, with peers and people, and the great gods of the Penates, stands on the lofty stern; his joyous brows pour forth a double flame, and on his head dawns his father's star. Elsewhere Agrippa with favouring winds and gods, high-towering, leads his column; his brows gleam with the beaks of the naval crown, proud device of war. Here Antonius with barbaric might and varied arms, victor from the nations of the dawn and from the ruddy sea, brings with him Egypt and the strength of the East and utmost Bactra; and there follows him (O shame!) his Egyptian wife. All rush on at once, and the whole sea foams, upturn by the sweeping oars, and triple-pointed

beaks. To the deep they speed; thou wouldst deem the Cyclades, uprooted, were floating on the main, or that mountains high clashed with mountains: in such mighty ships the seamen assail the towered sterns. Flaming tow and shafts of winged steel are showered from their hands; Neptune's field redden with strange slaughter, in the midst the queen calls upon her hosts with their native cymbal, nor as yet casts back a glance at the twin snakes behind (Virgil 107).

From our point of view, what it is most intriguing is how Shakespeare absorbs and develops these forms of narration through the lens of his times and the language of performance[8]. We have only to think of *Antony and Cleopatra*'s representation of erotic grandeur in the context of the battle of Actium. Though mostly based on Richard North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, the play involves epic symbols and mythological characters, such as Neptune, whose image relates to military power (*imperium*) on the sea:

> ANTONY […] I, that with my sword
> Quartered the world, and o'er green Neptune's back
> With ships made cities, condemn myself to lack
> The courage of a woman.
> (*Antony and Cleopatra* IV.xiv.55-58)

Unlike Aeneas' glorious fate, however, what Antony would have been in Shakespeare, against the course and the will of History, only belongs to Cleopatra's dream:

> CLEOPATRA
> I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony.   75
> 0, such another sleep, that I might see
> But such another man!
> DOLABELLA If it might please ye—
> CLEOPATRA
> His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck
> A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted
> The little 0 o'th' earth.
> DOLABELLA Most sovereign creature— So
> CLEOPATRA
> His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
> Crested the world. His voice was propertied
> As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;
> But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
> He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,   85
> There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas,
> That grew the more by reaping. His delights
> Were dolphin-like; they showed his back above
> The element they lived in. In his livery
> Walked crowns and crownets. Realms and islands were

8. Wilson Knight; Martindale 89-108.

As plates dropped from his pocket.
(*Antony and Cleopatra* V.ii.75-91)

The resonance of Roman imagery serves Shakespeare to emphasize his representation of the British Kingdom and its growing *imperium*, which implies a significant acquisition and transformation of the classical notion of the *sublime*. The word *sublime* comes from Latin *sub* and *limes*, i.e. "lintel", "threshold", "sill", used from 1580 at expressing lofty ideas in an elevated manner. I refer to the treatise *On the Sublime* (Περὶ ὕψους, *Perì hýpsous*) attributed to Pseudo-Longinus, probably written in the third century A.D., and printed in 1554 by Francesco Robortello. The sublime was there conceived as an artistic form of elevation based on the correspondence between the work of art and its effects, involving feelings such as enthusiasm, possession, ecstasy, and expressed with the ability to transform passions into images and into rhetorical figures and forms:

> The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport. At every time and in every way imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer. Similarly, we see skill in invention, and due order and arrangement of matter, emerging as the hard-won result not of one thing nor of two, but of the whole texture of the composition, whereas Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude. But enough; for these reflexions, and others like them, you can, I know well, dear Terentianus, yourself suggest from your own experience. (I, 4)

In Shakespeare – and in particular in his representation of history and the Empire – the concept of the sublime implies a sort of challenge to the ineffable and the limits of language. The use of the *hyperbole*, for example, is much more daring in Shakespeare than in the classics, where the figure should not surpass the notion of *prepon* (*ivi*, XXXVIII), i.e. Lt. 'decorum', Engl. 'convenient'. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, the playwright stages the rich illusions of history amplifying a love-erotic "dotage" (or even better *passion*) that challenges not only the limits of the world ("If it be love indeed, tell me how much…", I.i.14), but also the limits of history, and the limits of language:

> CLEOPATRA
> I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved.
> ANTONY
> Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth. […]
> (*Antony and Cleopatra* I.i.16-17)

[…]

ANTONY

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch   35
Of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space.
Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man. The nobleness of life
Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair
And such a twain can do't—in which I bind   40
On pain of punishment the world to weet—
We stand up peerless.
(*Antony and Cleopatra* I.i.35-42)

This kind of representation has an impressive visual resonance as well, which contributes to redefining the sense of the tragic, as in Marlowe[9], and earlier still in Seneca. At the beginning of *Oedipus*, translated into English by Thomas Newton in 1581 (*His Tenne Tragedies*), for example, the protagonist's suffering depends not only on his involuntary error (according to the Aristotelian concept of *hamartema* or *hamartia* and the famous plot represented by Sophocles), but above all by the nature of power. *Quisquamne regno gaudet?* (6): "Does anyone find joy in kingship?", we read in the first lines of the tragedy. For Seneca – who vainly tried to exercise his role as counselor-philosopher at the court of the emperors Caligula, Claudius and Nero – Oedipus's power is not a reward for answering the Sphinx's riddle, but a sort of damnation. Accordingly, the first oracular response in the tragedy, which has been extracted from the entrails of a heifer, visually shows the image and the symbol of a 'rotten' heart: *Cor marcet aegrum penitus ac mersum latet / liventque venae* (356-357): "The heart is diseased and wasted throughout, and deeply hidden".

In *Hamlet* the ghost has the function of revealing this *wasted heart deeply hidden*, the "rotten", behind the glamorous face of Elsinore – while Claudius "takes his rouse, / Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring reels", and "drains his draughts of Rhenish down" (I.iv.8-10); it is the space that Hamlet perceives as a "prison" (II.ii.244), "in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons" (II.ii.246-247): "Something is rotten in the State of Denmark" is the proverbial sentence pronounced by Marcellus (I.iv.67). Just as the plague in *La Peste* by Camus involves *le soupçon d'autre chose*, in *Hamlet* the ghost's "portentous figure" is presented by Horatio as "a mote […] to trouble the mind's eye" (I.i.5 *add. pass.*). And it is not by chance that, in order to represent the political and the moral corruption at the court of Elsinore, Horatio alludes to the death of Julius Caesar (*ibid.*), whose play had been staged in the same years. In *Julius Caesar*, the death of the Roman general represents the 'traumatic event' par excellence (the *pathos*, according to Aristotle), which is emphasized by several premonitions (such

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9. See *1Tamburlaine the Great*, where the tragic action was presented in a "tragic glass", *Prologue*, 7-8.

as Calpurnia's dream), and portrays a similar, symbolic landscape (II.ii.17-24), characterized by lofty and terrifying images which are defined "beyond all use" (II.ii.25): yawning graves, stars with "trains of fire" and "dews of blood", warriors fighting upon the clouds; the "deads" / "ghosts" who "squeak and gibber" / "shriek and squeal" in the streets; the allusion to Neptune's empire etc. These are images that evoke at the same time the Biblical tradition (and especially the prophetic and the apocalyptic texts), and the classical world of the epic and tragedy (Vergil's *Aeneid*, Lucan's *Bellum civile*, Seneca's tragedies etc).

Through the opening of these perspectives, therefore, Shakespeare's sublime language does not celebrate the triumph of History (as the *Aeneid* does, or tries to do), but highlights, with striking effect, the moral abjection and the "rotten" implied in any historical embodiment of power, and its vanity. Let's also consider *Julius Caesar*'s first scene, where we hear the chatter of low characters (a carpenter, a cobbler, and "certain commoners") and Murellus, a tribune of the people, who argues what the whole play indirectly shows: the inconsistency of power ("mere foolery", I.ii.231), the intimate violence and the vanity of any *translatio imperii*. The words pronounced by Murellus resound with that sublime magniloquence the language of power is steeped in, but are aimed at depriving the "universal shout", echoed by the Tiber and its symbology, of any substance. It is just an echo, "made [...] in concave shores" (49-50):

> MURELLUS
> Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?
> What tributaries follow him to Rome
> To grace in captive bonds his chariot wheels?
> You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless
> things!   35
> O, you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome,
> Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft
> Have you climbed up to walls and battlements,
> To towers and windows, yea to chimney-tops,
> Your infants in your arms, and there have sat   40
> The livelong day with patient expectation
> To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome.
> And when you saw his chariot but appear,
> Have you not made an universal shout,
> That Tiber trembled underneath her banks   45
> To hear the replication of your sounds
> Made in her concave shores?
> (*Julius Caesar* I.I.34-57)

At the same time, if the use of the sublime emphasizes these tragic tensions, it may also have the function to suggest a tale of reconciliation, especially in those extremely touching moments of blissful recognition and

revelation that characterize the ending of the romances.

From this point of view, I like to conclude focussing on *Cymbeline* (originally entitled *The tragedy of Cymbeline* or *Cymbeline, King of Britain*), based on Holinshed's chronicles and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, and defined as a "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral play" (Wayne 379). Here history, and the Empire as its embodiment, are set in a place where, as argued by August Strindberg, "everything can happen, everything is possible and probable" (Strindberg 175).

Cymbeline's intricate plot involves the convergence of three stories: the war between Romans and the Britons over Cymbeline's refusal to pay the tribute to Rome (with references to the pre-Roman monarch Cunobelinus, who reigned until the 40s A.D.); the abduction of the two sons of Cymbeline, Guiderius and Arviragus, by Belarius, who had been suspected of being a traitor and conspiring with the Romans; the exile from Cymbeline's Court to Rome of Posthumus Leonatus, tempted by Giacomo to believe in his wife Innogen's unfaithfulness, according to a similar pattern developed in the *Decameron* II, 9. Nevertheless, Boccaccio's episode of the wager between Ambrogiuolo from Piacenza and Bernabò from Genoa on Zinevra's infidelity, assumes in *Cymbeline* a wider and deeper significance as it is set in the political conflict between Rome and Britain for supremacy. The representation of power, embodied by the two opposing Empires (Rome and Britain, which *de facto* belongs to Rome), represents the *fil-rouge* connecting the three plots. Giacomo tries to woo Innogen by promising her a brilliant position in the high society of the Roman Empire, while blaming Posthumus for not giving her the right public honor (I.vi.120-126):

> GIACOMO
> […] A lady   120
> So fair, and fastened to an empery
> Would make the great'st king double, to be partnered
> With tomboys hired with that self exhibition
> Which your own coffers yield; with diseased ventures
> That play with all infirmities for gold   125
> Which rottenness can lend to nature
> (*Cymbeline* I.vi.119-126)

Unable to have any effect on Innogen's intelligence and her trust in Posthumus' honesty, Giacomo adopts the same trick used by Ambrogiuolo in the *Decameron*: he hides into a trunk to observe some details of Zinevra's room and takes some of her personal objects while she is asleep, in order to prove that he has successfully wooed the woman:

> GIACOMO
> […] On her left breast
> A mole, cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops

I'th'bottom of a cowslip. Here's a voucher
Stronger than ever law could make. This secret   40
Will force him think I have picked the lock and ta'en
The treasure of her honour. No more. To what end?
(*Cymbeline* II.ii.37-42 *passim*)

"To note the chambre: I will write all down" (II.ii.23-24). But what does he note, beyond "A mole cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops / I' the bottom of a cowslip" on her left breast (II.ii.37-38)? "Such and such pictures […] the arras; figures […] and the contents o' th' story" (II.ii.24-25). Giacomo also says that Innogen has been reading "the tale of Tereus" late at night, and that she stopped at the page "Where Philomel gave up" (II.ii.45-47). The Ovidian tale thus establishes an immediate contact with *Titus Andronicus* (II.iv.22 sgg.; IV.i.45 sgg.), where the tragic story of Philomela emphasizes the episode of the mutilation of Lavinia, which is set within the gloomy context of conflict and revenge between the Romans and the Goths.

In bringing his alleged proofs to Posthumus, then, Giacomo describes in rich details Innogen's room, showing to his audience another historical and intertextual picture:

GIACOMO First, her bedchamber—
Where I confess I slept not, but profess
Had that was well worth watching—it was hanged
With tapestry of silk and silver; the story
Proud Cleopatra when she met her Roman,   70
And Cydnus swelled above the banks, or for
The press of boats or pride: a piece of work
So bravely done, so rich, that it did strive
In workmanship and value; which I wondered
Could be so rarely and exactly wrought,   75
Such the true life on't was.
(*Cymbeline* II.iv.66-76)

In a "tapestry of silk and silver" was represented "the story / Proud Cleopatra, when she met her Roman, / And Cydnus swell'd above the banks, or for / The press of boats or pride" (II.iv.66 ff.). The arras is described as "A piece of work / So bravely done, so rich, that it did strive / In workmanship and value; which I wonder'd / Could be so rarely and exactly wrought, / Since the true life on't was" (II.iv.74-76). Why does Shakespeare open up this perspective? In *Cymbeline*, Cleopatra's picture appears as a sort of internal reference and, at the same time, represents a *mise en abyme* of the whole story and of History in general (with a technique which is similar to that used in Aeneas' shield). This *ekphrasis* creates intriguing correspondences with the episode told by Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra* (II.ii.198-211).

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Based on Plutarch (*Life of Marcus Antonius XXVI*), the passage gorgeously describes the two lovers' meeting upon the river of Cydnus (II.ii.198-211), starting from the comparison between "the barge" where Cleopatra sat, and "a burnished throne, / burned on the water", and focusing on the Egyptian Queen's ineffable splendor. As already expressed in the words of Enobarbus ("a wonderful piece of work", I.ii.152-153), Cleopatra is portrayed between apotheosis and reification, within a labyrinth of images, that go and exalt well beyond Venus ("O'erpicturing that Venus where we see /The fancy outwork nature"), and beyond any representation and language ("It beggared all description", I.ii.205).

Cleopatra is a figure of the sublime. Nereides and Mermaids come back to life in her train (II.ii.212-213). She is the "royal wench" (II.ii.227), and even "the holy priests / Bless her, when she is riggish" (240-241). Here the sublime is ambiguous: Cleopatra will be seen as the "whore" to whom Antony "hath given his empire" (III, vi, 65-67), and she will become the symbolic center (and the sacrificial victim) of the battle of Actium, and of the celebration of Roman *imperium* on the sea, with the transformation of Rome from a Republic into a *principatus* (and the consecration of an Empire already founded):

```
CAESAR
No, my most wronged sister. Cleopatra          65
Hath nodded him to her. He hath given his empire
Up to a whore; who now are levying
The kings o'th' earth for war. He hath assembled
Bocchus, the King of Libya; Archelaus
Of Cappadocia; Philadelphos, King              70
Of Paphlagonia; the Thracian King Adallas;
King Malchus of Arabia; King of Pont;
Herod of Jewry; Mithridates, King
Of Comagene; Polemon and Amyntas,
The Kings of Mede and Lycaonia;                75
With a more larger list of scepters.
(Antony and Cleopatra III.vi.65-75)
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In *Cymbeline* this glimpse of the story of Antony and Cleopatra (and play) is to be connected with the episode of Giacomo, Innogen and Posthumus Leonatus, and with the other two plots developed in the play (the war and the life of Arviragus and Guiderius with Belarius in the pastoral setting near Milford Haven), for the correspondences between private relationships and public forces, and between history and anthropological models. In this way, Shakespeare recalls and sums up many topics, images, modalities and techniques of representation which he had already experienced in his theatre, in order "to ask fundamental questions about England's place in history, her experiment with religion, and her future in the world", as Ros King puts it

in *Cymbeline: Constructions of Britain* (1–2). The Empire is at the heart of this question and asks for a new perspective of representation that would be able on the one hand to undermine the triumphalism of any patriotic myth, and, on the other, to recreate a myth of national identity on other basis. As Peter Parolin argues in *Anachronistic Italy. Cultural Alliances and National Identity in Cymbeline*, the play "reads historical process disruptively, deconstructing rather than confirming tenuous Jacobean fantasies", in order to "subvert a straightforward nationalistic narrative", avoiding "*desirable* forms of national identity purged of unwanted elements" (Parolin 190). But at the same time, what *Cymbeline* should guarantee is "a legal system whose universalistic foundations can be said to be grounded"; from this point of view, "Rome and the Roman conquest of Britain serve as the universal examples which the now civil realm of Britain can follow"; therefore "*Cymbeline* preserves native custom and law but upholds Roman law and civility as the basis of this nascent imperialism" (Lockey 137).

Shakespeare, therefore, rethinks and brings forward this idea of Empire throughout the use of his artistic means and, in particular, those extolled in the romances: the magic of the theatre and of the tale, a symbolic and "lofty" language, and the special "order and arrangement of matter" (to quote the *Sublime*). Once that old (political and social) order had been broken up, identities were disguised and changed, heads cut off – Cloten's head, for instance, which Guiderius desires to throw "into the creek / Behind our rock, and let it to the sea, / And tell the fishes he's the queen's son, Cloten" (IV. ii.113-115) – a horrible but very modern sublime image – his audience may believe in a dream of individual and political reconciliation.

In *Cymbeline* the final alliance between the two Empires of Rome and Britain may be identified through the symbol of the eagle, which is the image par excellence of the Empire (see, before Dante, Suetonius's *Life of August*, X and XCVII, and Plutarch's *Life of Brutus*, LVIII). At the end of the play Jupiter descends on the stage sitting upon an eagle, which the god invites to come back to his "palace crystalline" (V.iv.113). Posthumus' father Sicilius, a spirit, gets the impression that Jupiter's "ascension is / More sweet than our blest fields"; and "his royal bird / prunes the immortal wing and cloys his beak, / As when his god is pleased" (V, iv, 110-113).

After the last recognitions in the play, these images will go back to form a dream of peace in the words of Posthumus Leonatus ("Great Jupiter, upon his eagle backed, / Appeared to me", V.v.428-429), that completely fulfills the soothsayer's vision ("the Roman eagle, / From south to west on wing soaring aloft, / Lessen'd herself, and in the beams o' the sun / So vanish'd…", prophesying that "The imperial Caesar, should again unite / His favour with the radiant Cymbeline…", V.v.470-475), and Cymbeline's final words: "let / A Roman and a British ensign wave / Friendly together" (V.v.470-481).

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