

STUDIES: RUSTVELOLOGY

The Man in the Panther Skin and Literary Sources of Cymbeline

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Abstract: The present work analyses the MPS being the literary source of *Cymbeline* by Shakespeare, in relevance with other sources.

Key words: “*The Man in the Panther Skin*”, “*Cymbeline*”, “*Decameron*”, “*The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune*”.

English literary criticism has long been aware that Shakespeare tended to transpose, rethink and modify both previously unknown and fashionable plots of his time in their entirety as well as separate passages, thus creating masterpieces of “novel” inspiration and world view. A multiplicity of literary sources is one of the defining characteristics of Shakespeare’s dramatic works. *Cymbeline* is especially noteworthy in this regard. In the introduction to *Cymbeline* in Volume VIII of his *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Geoffrey Bullough pays particular attention to eight sources: the first

book of Holinshed's *Chronicles*; the second book of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, *History of Scotland*; Boccaccio's *The Decameron*; *Frederyke of Jennen*; the comedy by Lope de Rueda *Eufemia*, Bandello's *Discourses*; *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune*, and *Jerusalem Delivered* by Torquato Tasso [18, pp. 38-114]. The relationship of *Cymbeline* to these sources is not homogeneous. Extracts from several of them (*Eufemia*; Bandello's *Discourses*; *Jerusalem Delivered*) are considered to be analogous to several passages in *Cymbeline*. Shakespearean literature also points out the likeness of *Cymbeline* to other sources. It has also been noted that, like other plays of Shakespeare, here, the traditions of ancient narrative, especially those of Greek romance, are also visible. Specifically, the following parallels are indicated: the story of the wager; the disappearance and eventual reappearance of King Cymbeline's sons; Imogen's mistaking the corpse of Cloten for Posthumus; the war of the Ancient Britons against Rome; the central line of the plot of the play: separation of the couples; intricate adventures; and finally, the couples' reunion. The following sources are named for the play: Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Heliodorus' *Æthiopica*, Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, and Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesiaca* [8; 2, p. 8]. In this tradition, we can only see the ancient prototype of the plot of *Cymbeline* or its separate episodes. Scholars also point to reminiscences or allusions from plots closer to Shakespeare's time: Sidney's *Arcadia*, and *Macbeth* by Shakespeare himself [10, p. X]. I have already discussed two allegorical sources, the reminiscences of which in *Cymbeline* are more probable (the fairy tale of Snow White and the seven dwarves on the one hand, and the story of Caesar Augustus' family on the other).

In addition to these literary sources for *Cymbeline*, I would point to a mediaeval Georgian epic – the love story of Nestan and Tariel, which is the central plot of Shota Rustaveli's *The Man in the Panther Skin* (MPS). Moreover, I believe that this cycle from MPS occupies a substantial place among the literary sources of *Cymbeline*. In order to develop my argument, I shall proceed to consider the love story of Nestan and Tariel as a source for *Cymbeline* alongside its other essential sources.

Among the plot sources of *Cymbeline*, an anonymous play – *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* – occupies a special place. This play was first staged in 1582, published in 1589, and republished many times between 1610 and 1670.

Its special place is conditioned by the fact that, unlike other sources, *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* overlaps with *Cymbeline* to a significant extent regarding compositional modelling. For instance, the intrigue at the royal court: the falling in love of the heiress to the throne with a courtier of a more lowly background but reared in the palace; the banishment of the lover; the development of the action beyond the palace; and a happy ending. Other sources for the same play by Shakespeare overlap regarding either a certain episode of *Cymbeline* (the episode of the wager – the ninth story of the second day of *The Decameron*) or serve to mark temporal or spatial localisations of the plot (Holinshed's *Chronicles*).

The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune as a plot source for *Cymbeline* is also unique in terms of differing scholarly opinion towards it as a source. This anonymous play was first named as a plot story for *Cymbeline* in 1887 (Boodle, R. W., Notes and Queries, 7th Ser. IV, 1887 – [see. 5]). This opinion was also shared by J. M. Nosworthy, who presented solid

arguments in favour of such an approach in his 1969 edition of *Cymbeline*. Moreover, Nosworthy is of the view that this anonymous play also acted as the main source for Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* as it "presents this scheme of things most fully and most consistently, and which should, in consequence, be regarded as Shakespeare's primary source or impulse" [19, p. XXVII]. At the same time, it has also been noted that this play is extremely banal, and all the details that it shares with *Cymbeline* ("a banished lover, a banished duke, a cave and a sleeping potion) are part of the stock-in-trade of every writer of romance" [19, p. XXVI.]. The same author maintains that "It would be unwise to attach too much weight to such parallel features" [19, p. XXVI]. This conclusion was followed by an important indication of the fact that Shakespeare relied on this "banal" primary source for some unknown reason, and it has yet to be defined what led Shakespeare to such a 'ramshackle old play'¹.

The supposition that *Cymbeline* must have another (unknown) source was put forward in the literature dedicated to the issue quite early on. As early as the 19th Century, it was supposed that there may have existed something like *Pre-Cymbeline*, or some other unknown source, which was associated with Beaumont and Fletcher (H. R. D. Anders, *Shakespeare's Books*, 1904). Shakespearean studies of the second half of the previous century did not consider *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* a sufficient, or the indisputable, source for *Cymbeline*. Along with the resemblances between these plays, it was also noted that the plot of *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* was inorganic and arbitrary, did not

¹"Precisely what led Shakespeare to this ramshackle old play in this first place, I do not pretend to know" [19, p. XXV].

possess sufficient intricacy or dramatic tension, and lacked solidity of background [17, p. 259]². As mentioned above, these banal parallels, features or images (an ousted lover or nobleman; a cave; a sleeping draught), were considered to be regular tools and commonplace tricks used in romances. The resemblance between the main protagonists in the plays (Fidele and Fidelia) was explained by the popularity of the name over a vast area, whereas a number of phraseological or semantic resemblances was accounted for by the similarity of the situation [5]³. Owing to these circumstances, this anonymous play is referred to only as a probable source for *Cymbeline* in contemporary Shakespearean literature [18].

I believe Shakespeare must have been familiar with this anonymous play (although it is still difficult to postulate whether in published or staged form). The overlap with *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* is obvious in other late romances by Shakespeare (*The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*). As indicated above, however, the parallels are of a different nature: the resemblance between protagonists' names, an orphan raised in the palace, the princess's oafish brother; the nobleman ousted from court; the cave, and the arrival of the princesses. In spite of the fact that each of these details is indeed banal and widespread in works of the

²Kenneth Muir: "The plot was inorganic and arbitrary, with too little complication and dramatic tension. It lacked also solidity of background" [17, p. 259].

³Robert Detobel: "But Fidele and Fidelia are fairly common names in romances (see, for example, Anthony Munday's play *Fidele and Fortunio*, licensed in 1581). There are a few parallels in act II but Nosworthy makes far too much of them. They may be accounted for by the similarity of the situation" [5].

period, all of them taken together point to their interrelation. However, the most significant thing is that the subject matter and composition of these works reveal this connection: the princess falls in love with a commoner raised in the palace; the king banishes this young man from his kingdom; the action moves to the cave; and finally, the king makes his peace with the couple in love.

Such compositional similarity is of greatest interest here. The fact is that all the obvious plot sources for *Cymbeline* (Holinshed's *Chronicles*, the story from *The Decameron*) are but fragmentary sources for the play. *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* shows more or less complete similarity to Shakespeare's play. The question is whether *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* is the principal or sole basis for Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, or whether this particular play provided the Stratford playwright with the theme and idea for the play which he then processed and combined with other sources. I believe the answer to both questions is negative for the following reasons:

Cymbeline presents a number of the author's ideas, the most important of which is the issue of the heir. By seeking to marry Imogen, Cloten has royal power in his sights. This is one of the goals of the queen, Cloten's mother. She desires either to marry her son to Imogen, or to get rid of Imogen altogether by having her poisoned to clear the way to Cloten - her son, and Cymbeline's stepson - to become sole heir to the throne. The author's thoughts and attitude openly demonstrate his preference for rightful heir: Cloten is killed by Guiderius, heir to the throne and Cymbeline's eldest son. This is a detail of extreme importance. It is patently obvious that the same political idea is also prevalent in *Philaster* by Beaumont and Fletcher, a

play unanimously considered in English literary circles to be principally close to *Cymbeline*. In *Philaster*, the invited bridegroom also disappears, and the issue of heredity is resolved through the marriage between the united heirs of two kingdoms. In *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune*, the issue of royal heredity is not considered at all, and King *Phizanios*/Phizantius has an heir - Armenio.

This development in the plot brings about the specific modelling of the main plot line in the play: the king has an only daughter, and he, together with his queen, has found a suitable prospective groom for her. The princess refuses to marry the man. However, the theme does not receive similar treatment in the anonymous play. The king has not chosen a groom for Fidelity, although her brother and father are annoyed at her decision to marry a commoner, and advise her to select a lover more appropriate to her station (Act 2) [21].

Thus, it is obvious that neither the theme nor the idea of *Cymbeline* is based on this anonymous play.

The plot of *Cymbeline* resembles that of *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune*, although the latter should be considered as only one of the sources, and not the principal one. The structure of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is far more complex: (1) intrigues at court; (2) shift of the action to the "other space", intrepid and dramatic adventures of the ousted lover and the lost princess; search for the lost lover; (3) the cave scene (narration of old tales from the palace); (4) the great battle and military perseverance of the heroes; (5) the scene at the royal court: the happy end - defeat of evil, and reconciliation and forgiveness. On the other hand, *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* does not exhibit such plot development: the action is initiated and ended by the gods; scenes are set alternately in the

royal palace and the cave. Moreover, neither is the strict compositional scheme of *Cymbeline* present here: the conflict in the palace; shift of the action to the “other space”, far from the palace, Welsh woods and the cave, the battlefield; discharge of the conflict, and a happy end at the royal court. In the anonymous play, the main collision of *Cymbeline* - the dramatic adventure verging on the tragic - is not present, either. In addition, the prelude conditioning the happy end of the play - heroism and the patriotic tenacity of the heroes - is not obvious, either. I therefore propose that the conclusion is quite clear: *Cymbeline* does not owe its compositional structure to this anonymous play.

The romance narrative on which the main theme and idea, as well as the compositional structure, of *Cymbeline* must be based is the love story of Nestan and Taniel told in MPS. I believe that this story depicts the political ideal and the main thematic pattern discussed above: the throne is retained by the heir to the dynasty; the king and queen choose a prospective husband of royal descent for their only daughter, the heiress to the throne. The daughter defies her parents' decision, and the action moves to “the other space”: the search for a lost lover; the prospective groom is killed by the heir to the throne; heroic prowess and tenacity, and the final battle; safe return to the kingdom, and the happy ending.

Thus, the resemblance between *Cymbeline* and *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune* does not provide a convincing foundation for us either to believe that the theme and idea of this anonymous play formed the basis for *Cymbeline*, or that *Cymbeline* was written according to this play. I certainly believe that Shakespeare was familiar with this story. The likeness is especially obvious in the construction of one episode - the ousting of the princess from the palace. However,

the overlap with this episode is much less than that with another episode in a well-known story in *The Decameron* by Boccaccio. In addition, I find Shakespearean reminiscences regarding the selection of a name for Imogen, disguising her as a man, and constructing the cave episode, also obvious.

English literary criticism has advanced interesting suggestions regarding the main plot story of *Cymbeline*. As mentioned above, the existence of some romance structure has been proposed, for which Beaumont and Fletcher were held responsible (H. R. D. Anders). At the same time, it has been maintained that *Cymbeline* does not rely on *Philaster* (This approach was discussed by A. H. Thorndike). However, it is also worth noting that the opposite idea is maintained by Nosworthy – that Beaumont and Fletcher are indebted to *Cymbeline*. In *Cymbeline*, as well as earlier in *Pericles*, the processing of some dramatic romance plot was noted which later emerged in *Philaster* [19, pp. XXXVII-XL]. Scholars who have investigated *Cymbeline* suppose that *Cymbeline* and *Philaster* may share a literary source [1, p. 4], as there is a surprising structural similarity between them. Moreover, it has been pointed out that these two plays show a tendency to change the established style in drama, and to revive or restore interest in romance drama [9, pp. XXVIII, XLVI, XLIX].

These theories put forward by literary critics would indicate that the secret of the main plot source for *Cymbeline* should be resolved together with that for Beaumont and Fletcher's play. *Philaster* may also be an attempt at turning some mediaeval romance plot into a dramatic play, as supposed by English literary criticism [22, p. 15]. In order to identify the probable source for *Philaster*, we should also examine the tragicomedies of Beaumont and Fletcher created in

tandem with *Philaster* (or rather created in the same period) – first and foremost *A King and No King*. English literary critics have also discussed plot resemblances between *Philaster* and *A King and No King* [20, pp. 111-114, 179; 22, pp. 132-133]. It is directly indicated in *A King and No King* that the plot is set in Georgia. That *The Man in the Panther Skin* (which, as I have shown, is the plot story for *Cymbeline*, *Philaster*, and *A King and No King*) depicts a Georgian story is based on the following: (1) it is written by a Georgian author in the Georgian language, and (2) according to a widely held belief in ancient Georgia, allegorically, it narrates a story about Georgia.

There is one further striking feature which gives the love story of Nestan and Tariel the edge over the rival proposed literary sources for *Cymbeline*: the signs of the narrative from MPS are obvious in several passages of *Cymbeline*, even when their obvious proposed sources are other stories.

In this regard, the episode of the exchange of gifts between Imogen and Posthumus (*Cymbeline*, I, 5. 110-120), which I discuss elsewhere [14, pp. 21-24], would appear particularly significant. The theme of exchanging gifts does not appear to be predominant Shakespeare's early works. However, it does emerge in his later plays (*Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *Cymbeline*), acquiring a compositional function as early as *Othello*. However, it is worth noting that in *Cymbeline*, unlike the two other works, the theme of a memento (love token) pervades the entire play. In the final scene, it is the gift by which the rogue Iachimo's misdeeds are revealed. (V, 5. 130-160). The fact that the exchange of gifts carries a specific significant meaning is clear from the emphasis this scene receives, as well as from the recognition by Posthumus of the

bracelet he gave as a token to his wife, together with the specific emphasis the author places on Posthumus' extraordinary emotions (II, 4. 98-110).

In Nestan and Taniel's story, the exchange of tokens has exactly the same function: (1) in *Cymbeline*, as well as in MPS, the lovers exchange presents as a token of fidelity and remembrance in the event of being separated; (2) after a lengthy period of separation, the male lover receives certain information about his female counterpart from another participant in the story, which the former does not believe. However, as soon as he sees the memento he presented to his sweetheart, he becomes convinced of the truth of the information, and expresses surprise in an extraordinarily emotional fashion.

Yet other circumstances must be considered to be of greater significance here. The acts of stealing the bracelet (given to Imogen by Posthumus) and winning the wager are part of the episode taken from the ninth story of the second day of *The Decameron*. This particular likeness between Shakespeare and this source has been discussed many times. Scholars have also proposed that in this episode, Shakespeare follows two sources: *The Decameron* by Boccaccio, and *Frederyke of Jennen*, an anonymous German story translated into English [7]. Several details of the episode from *Cymbeline* demonstrate a connection only to the text of *The Decameron*, whereas others show a link only to *Frederyke of Jennen* [1, pp. 17-18]. In spite of this, there is additional detail in the episode in *Cymbeline* which has led scholars to the conclusion that Shakespeare may have used another intermediary source [15, p. XIX]. At this stage, what is most striking to me is that neither *The Decameron* nor *Frederyke of Jennen* makes mention of the bracelet presented by the husband and later stolen from the sleeping wife by a

rogue. There is no mention of an exchange of tokens between the spouses either in *The Decameron* or *Frederyke of Jennen*. At the same time, as mentioned above, the bracelet has a most significant function in *Cymbeline*, a fact emphasised not only by Shakespeare himself, but also brought out in European art inspired by Imogen's literary image. I am thinking here of paintings in which Imogen is depicted wearing a bracelet (for instance, the 19th-Century portrait of Imogen with the caption "Imogen contemplating her Bracelet" [16, p. 50], as well as the cover of Nosworthy's 2014 Bloomsbury edition of *Cymbeline* [4]).

Scholars have been at pains to explain the appearance of the bracelet among the items stolen from Imogen, when a bracelet does not feature in the generally accepted literary sources for this passage. For instance, in *Frederyke*, the wife has "a girdle of fyne golde set with costly pearls and stones". This may have suggested the bracelet stolen by Iachimo, it has been argued (II. 2. 33). However, clearly, first of all, *Cymbeline* mentions a bracelet and not a girdle, and secondly, *Frederyke* does not contain a single word regarding the exchange of tokens between the spouses. The precious girdle referred to in *Frederyke of Jennen* is specifically stolen from Bernabo's wife's bedroom by Ambrogiulo. It is also presumed that Shakespeare may have been acquainted with another version of the wager story from *Westward for Smelts*, known only from its 1620 printed version. This work also presents the story in a similar manner to *Frederyke of Jennen*. Although some slight differences between these sources have also been discussed, neither work contains any reference to a bracelet given as a gift by the spouse [6, p. 8].

Therefore, the episode describing the wager – one of the central episodes of *Cymbeline* – is clearly based on one of the tales from *The Decameron* by Boccaccio, and also on a modified version of this tale well known in Shakespearean England – that of *Frederyke of Jennen*, and probably on *Westward for Smelts* as well. Shakespeare makes one extremely important deviation from these literary sources which is an organic part of the episode in order to express the strength of love and devotion between the spouses (the exchange of mementos, and the intense emotions triggered by the recognition of the gift presented by the lover). It is my firm belief that this deviation from these literary sources was engendered by the reminiscence of the literary image of Nestan and Tariel's love story.

This episode in *Cymbeline* displays a further deviation from these same literary sources. According to *The Decameron*, the rogue Ambrogiulo dies a horrible death by torture. A similar fate awaits the rogue in *Frederyke of Jennen*. Although the rogue is not executed in *Westward for Smelts*, he is imprisoned and forced to pay triple compensation to the aggrieved family for their loss. However, Iachimo in *Cymbeline* is forgiven, which, as I see it, cannot be explained only by the specificity of the genre (tragicomedy). In *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare does not shirk from the death of his characters: Cloten is murdered. I propose that the final scene of forgiveness in *Cymbeline* (V, 5), which organically fits the general spirit of Shakespeare's late plays, may have its partial analogue in one (surprisingly indulgent, for mediaeval times) episode in MPS. In MPS, King Ramaz of Khataeti, obliged to pay tribute to India, not only betrays that country by his arrogant manner of speech and by challenging the Commander-in-Chief of India, Tariel, to a duel, but also makes an attempt to have the latter

arrested by wiles and treachery. Tariel defeats King Ramaz, and delivers him, together with his noblemen, to the King of India, who, after discussing the matter with Tariel, forgives him his treachery, and not only returns Ramaz and his noblemen to their country, but also indulges them with gifts. This extraordinary episode of forgiveness continues to surprise scholars pursuing mediaeval studies even today [12, pp. 50-51].

In this way, the norms of vassal institutions are preserved in MPS: the country still pays tribute, but against a backdrop of surprising tolerance. The ideology of *Cymbeline* reveals a similar principle: despite defeating Rome, Britain still pays tribute to the Empire. In terms of vassal norms, these two works clearly show similarities. Certainly, Shakespeare follows historical chronicles. Ancient Britain's resistance to Rome ended in a truce in the 1st Century as a result of which Britain remained a tributary, although *Cymbeline* does not follow the *Chronicles* to the letter: here, Britain does not defeat Rome. The final forgiveness scene in *Cymbeline* resembles the episode in MPS even more closely. In *Cymbeline*, the hostages – including the rogue Iachimo – are set free. This sets *Cymbeline* apart from all the other sources describing the wager episode. I believe that this demonstration of tolerance makes *Cymbeline* closer to MPS.

In the final scene of *Cymbeline* depicting how the rogue Iachimo is forgiven appears the legal term *nobly doom'd*, which, interestingly, does not appear in any other play by Shakespeare, yet finds its parallel in another uncommon legal term *martali samartali* (true justice) in MPS.

I believe that the opinion of English literary criticism regarding the relationship between *Cymbeline* and *Philaster* from the point of view of plot construction and setting deserves attention. The

setting and plot are of interest in that they bring out the new style these plays (and their authors) brought to English dramaturgy, thereby also changing the playwrights' own creative style.

While discussing the emergence of new trends in *Philaster* compared to earlier works by Beaumont and Fletcher, particularly *The Faithful Shepherdess*, Andrew Gurr emphasises the change in setting of this play, and maintains that "the pastoral countryside of the first play becomes the hunting country of *Philaster*, and the concerns are not the loves of literary shepherds but the loves and related dynastic complications of princes and courts" [9, p. XLVIII]. In addition, while discussing the relationship between *Philaster* and *Cymbeline*, the prominent Shakespeare scholar Geoffrey Bullough pays particular attention to the fact that "Both *Philaster* and *Cymbeline* mingle pseudo-history with romantic invention... each contains allusions to hunting, the King's favourite sport; each has a girl disguised as a boy... the forbidden marriage of a princess... movement from court to country..." [1, p. 4].

All these features which unite the two English plays and differentiate them from earlier works by the same authors also characterise the source they share – MPS by Rustaveli: hunting appears as the only sport and entertainment for kings in MPS; the love story of Tariel and Nestan begins at the royal court, and then the action shifts outside the country; the work presents a pseudo-history: allegorically depicting life at court in 12th-Century Georgia, it also narrates and emphasises the romance between the couple. The same romance further describes a conjugal vow between the main protagonists, and a desperate, devoted struggle to ensure that vow is upheld. MPS also features Nestan

disguised as a man, and almost all characteristics shared by *Philaster* and *Cymbeline* [14, pp. 12-24].

It should be emphasised in conclusion that of the literary sources for *Cymbeline*, only the love story of Nestan and Tariel should be considered as the principal literary source as regards the main theme, and compositional modelling of *Cymbeline*. All the other plot sources of the play are devices employed in order to construct the plot of a separate episode, and arrange it on a certain temporal and spatial axis, or serve as specific reminiscences of a certain literary image, situation, or proper noun.

Shakespeare's use of this literary source – the love story of Tariel and Nestan – seems logical, as this theme is also used by Beaumont and Fletcher in two plays, composed during the same period as *Cymbeline*. The plot of these plays by Beaumont and Fletcher is a slightly modified version of the same romance found in MPS. I believe the story of *The Man in the Panther Skin* – the main plot source, as I have demonstrated, for three English plays (*Cymbeline*, *Philaster*, and *King and No King*) – is likely to have been introduced in to England along with other material via the British expedition to Persia led by Sir Anthony Sherley [11].

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