

# From Roman Britain to the Twenty-First Century United States: The Construction of White Masculinity in the *Cymbelines* of William Shakespeare and Michael Almereyda

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## Abstract

Michael Almereyda sets his *Cymbeline* (2014) in the post-Great Recession United States, using his Shakespearean source material to explore questions of white grievance in a multicultural society. Whereas Shakespeare's play draws on the Roman past to conceptualize an emerging imperial identity for Britain, Almereyda's film examines a United States in decline in which white men feel embattled. Echoing themes in Kurt Sutter's television show *Sons of Anarchy*, the film pits a predominantly white, drug-trafficking motorcycle club called the Britons against the corrupt multicultural state, represented by the Roman police force. Like *Sons of Anarchy*, Almereyda's film sensationalizes white masculine rebellion against a liberal, multicultural state, even as it exposes white grievance as toxic. Despite this critique, though, the film suggests that white masculinity can be remediated—and recuperated—by incorporating a more progressive, inclusive sensibility. As such, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* ultimately recenters white masculinity, and it stops short of exposing systems of racial and gendered oppression that are endemic to American society. Even more perniciously, the film's amalgamation of color-blind and color-conscious casting associates Black people with corrupt state power, thereby misrepresenting the nature of white supremacy in the United States. Ultimately, despite its diverse, countercultural aesthetic, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* illuminates the potential of Shakespeare appropriation to validate racist and misogynist ideas—a potential, as I argue in my conclusion, that is more fully realized in white nationalist Stephen Bannon's "rap opera" appropriation of *Coriolanus*.

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## Introduction

Michael Almereyda's 2014 film *Cymbeline* sets Shakespeare's play within an American motorcycle culture replete with revving engines, shootouts, and black leather. King Cymbeline

is a drug kingpin and leader of the Britons Motorcycle Club, a biker gang that exists in uneasy tension with the Roman police force (Almeryda 2014). By collapsing the play's multiple timeframes and geographies, Almeryda creates a distinctly American film; as he states, "I unified it and generalized it by setting it in America. It became a willfully American version with American characters and an American subtext" (Almeryda 2015b). Almeryda's setting informs his interpretation of *Cymbeline*'s racial and gender politics, turning Shakespeare's play into a commentary on white male identity in the twenty-first century United States. Appropriations have the power to radically reimagine the racial ideologies embedded in Shakespeare's plays, as Vanessa I. Corredera demonstrates in a recent essay on Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Othello* (Corredera 2020). Almeryda's film, however, reveals the dangers of uncritically applying Shakespeare's racial logics to modern contexts. Although Almeryda's film draws on Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* to distinguish between problematically chauvinist and acceptably tolerant forms of white masculinity, it nonetheless remains invested in whiteness, which it works to center and recuperate.

Many critics have wondered why a filmmaker famous for the postmodern *Hamlet 2000* would turn to the convoluted and lesser-known *Cymbeline*. One answer to this question is that, whereas *Hamlet 2000* presents New York City as the epicenter of deracinated global capitalism, *Cymbeline* affords the opportunity fifteen years later to explore post-Great Recession American hegemony in decline.<sup>1</sup> As Almeryda explains, he was thinking about "the American empire, fatigued and confused" when he wrote the film (Almeryda 2015a). Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* facilitates this exploration, as it articulates a national, and aspirationally imperial, identity for early modern Britain, forged from the ashes of the Roman Empire. By transposing the play from the multinational context of the late Roman Empire to an increasingly insular United States, Almeryda transforms the nationalism of Shakespeare's Britons, which is itself infused with a nascent racial whiteness, into something approaching white nationalism in the case of the Britons Motorcycle Club. The post-Great Recession United States thus emerges as a crumbling empire conducive to xenophobia, racism, and misogyny.

While white nationalism is critiqued in Almeryda's film, it is also glorified in a manner often found in twenty-first century television dramas such as *Breaking Bad*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *The Wire*. These shows are "postmasculinist," writes Geraldine Harris, in the sense that they reflect an "ambiguous/ambivalent relation not just towards feminism but to other twentieth-century movements that were concerned with the de-centring and de-naturalization of the normative, white masculine subject" (Harris 2012, 443). Like *Sons of Anarchy* especially, the postmasculinist drama whose aesthetics and thematics most strongly resemble *Cymbeline*'s, Almeryda's film

sensationalizes white masculine rebellion against a liberal, multicultural state, even as it exposes such white grievance as toxic. Despite this critique, though, the film suggests that white masculinity can be remediated—and recuperated—by incorporating a more progressive, inclusive sensibility. As such, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* ultimately joins much postmasculinist television in recentring white masculinity, and it stops short of exposing systems of racial and gendered oppression that are endemic to American society. Even more perniciously, the film's amalgamation of color-blind and color-conscious casting associates Black people with state power, thus misrepresenting the nature of white supremacy in the United States. Ultimately, despite its diverse, countercultural aesthetic, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* illuminates the potential of Shakespeare appropriation to validate racist and misogynist ideas—a potential, as I argue in my conclusion, that is more fully realized in white nationalist Stephen Bannon's "rap opera" appropriation of *Coriolanus*.

### Imperial Whiteness in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*

Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* uses the context of Roman Britain to explore questions of race, nation, and empire. As Coppélia Kahn argues, Rome functioned as a "cultural parent" to early modern England: the Roman Empire, in particular, figures centrally within the project of English nation formation, with both dramatists and chroniclers frequently drawing on England's colonization by Rome and promoting a mythical history in which Britain was founded by the Roman Brutus (Kahn 1997, 3). This ideological lineage is racial as well as national; as Arthur Little observes, "To the extent that Rome was 'a cultural parent,' part of what it infused in or passed on to them was a classically derived and historically fixed whiteness deeply embedded in human freedom" (Little 2016, 102-3). *Cymbeline* works to transpose this Roman whiteness to Britain through the process of *translatio imperii*, in which Britain adopts and furthers Rome's imperial legacy.<sup>2</sup> The English sought to capitalize on their Roman past while also shifting the locus of power and racial normativity from the Mediterranean to the British Isles. As Ian Smith demonstrates, the English revised Greek and Roman racial paradigms, which took the Mediterranean as their center, so as to endow the English with racial normativity and to displace England's purported barbarity onto Africans (Smith 2009). In the process, as we see in *Cymbeline*, Rome is Anglicized and further whitened, distanced from early modern Italy in a manner that aligns with its assigned status as the progenitor of an increasingly white Britain.

As in many early modern plays, questions of race and nation in *Cymbeline* are negotiated in reference to the sexual purity of a woman. Calling herself "Britain," Cymbeline's daughter Imogen announces her metonymic association with the nation state and her connection to Elizabeth I, who famously mobilized her chastity as a sign of national virtue and stability (Shakespeare 1.6.134).

As Kim F. Hall argues, whiteness is most commonly represented by women, with the quality of fairness acquiring increasing racial significance throughout the seventeenth century (Hall 1995, 3-4, 9). Imogen's physical fairness thus connotes racial as well as sexual purity, a condition captured in Iacomo's description of her as a "Fresh lily, / And whiter than the sheets" upon which she sleeps (2.2.18-19). Her fate—her marriage prospects, as well as a series of threatened sexual assaults—thus reflects concerns about England's national and racial identity and the extent to which it can incorporate otherness.

Imogen's betrothal to Posthumous, an orphan who has been raised at court, exposes fissures in the aristocratic class structure, which rested upon a belief in the essential superiority of noble blood. Though Posthumous is widely considered "a poor but worthy gentlemen" (1.1.8), King Cymbeline banishes him, calling him "poison to [his] blood" (1.1.151) and claiming that the marriage would make the "throne / A seat for baseness" (1.1.169-70). Positing this interclass union as tantamount to miscegenation, Cymbeline is especially distressed that Posthumous's race, in the sense of ancestry, is unknown; although the king respects the contributions of Posthumous's family in the resistance against the Romans, Posthumous's obscure heritage makes it difficult to "delve him to the root" (1.1.33), a comment that evokes the possible etymological connection between the French and English word race and the Latin *radix*, or root.

Imogen rejects this aristocratic ideology by emphasizing Posthumous's merit as well as his sameness as a member of the community, reminding her father that Posthumous was "bred" as her "playfellow" (1.1.176). To Imogen, her father's nearly racial distinction between herself and Posthumous rests on social constructions which would lose meaning were she a "neatherd's daughter, and my Leonatus / Our neighbor shepherd's son" (1.1.181-82). The play ultimately validates Imogen's perspective, which draws members of the British nation together into one polity and imagines all light-skinned British people as part of the same race. The king's view, by contrast, proves short sighted, as his class-based approach engenders depletion and degeneration rather than purification. Cymbeline would rather that Imogen die than for royal blood to be adulterated, and he responds to her grief over Posthumous's banishment by saying, "let her languish / A drop of blood a day, and being aged / Die of this folly" (1.1.192-94). Given Imogen's association with the nation, this statement reflects the enervating effects of aristocratic insularity: the King's quest for purity ultimately drains the nation of its lifeblood, cutting off reproductive futurity.

A more nationalist insularity is promoted by Cloten and the Queen, who encourage Cymbeline to stop paying the Roman tribute. In her poetic appeal to English nationalism, the Queen reminds Cymbeline of the "natural bravery of your isle" (3.1.21) whose "rocks unscalable and roaring waters" (3.1.23) defend the self-sufficient island. Recapitulating the questionable history

relayed by Geoffrey of Monmouth, she emphasizes Britain's proud past prior to the Roman invasion and presents the British as nearly repelling Caesar.<sup>3</sup> Augmenting his mother's argument, Cloten draws a physiological division between the Britons and the Romans, focusing in particular on the Romans' "crooked noses" (3.1.40). "Britain's / A world by itself," he insists, "and we will nothing pay / For wearing our noses" (3.1.14-16). Both Cloten and the Queen inflect their anti-imperialist arguments with isolationism and xenophobia. Inspired by their appeals to Britain's former and future greatness, Cymbeline vows to "shake off" the "yoke" of Rome, proclaiming that the act "Becomes a warlike people, whom we reckon / Ourselves to be" (3.1.54-56). The refusal to pay the tribute thus becomes an act of racial and national definition, characterizing the British people not only as militantly autonomous but also as possessing phenotypical traits that distinguish them from the Romans. With the King inappropriately influenced by the Queen and her son, however, the court is presented as lacking the masculine vigor necessary to attain this warlike ideal. Moreover, xenophobic nationalism proves unsuited to seventeenth-century England's desire for imperial expansion and for union with Scotland and Wales, and Cloten's racialization of the Romans conflicts with England's desire to position itself as heir to Roman imperial hegemony.

The remainder of the play works to recuperate Briton's rebellious past, positing it as the foundation of a new imperial nation while also solidifying England's relationship to Rome and, in so doing, mitigating isolationist impulses so as to accommodate the hybridity of empire. Central to this dynamic is Cymbeline's appropriation of the Lucretia myth, which Shakespeare transposes geographically from the Roman Republic to Roman Britain and generically from tragedy to tragicomedy.<sup>4</sup> Questions of nation and race are fundamental to story of Lucretia, in which the rape sacrifice promotes the fantasy that a purified, "chaste" condition can be restored both to the female body and to the body politic once corrupting forces have been expelled. This purifying fantasy, as Little contends, has racial implications: Tarquin's moral "blackness" is commonly racialized while Lucretia's sexual purity is associated with whiteness that is then conferred upon the state (Little 2000, 2). By revising the Lucretia story within the genre of tragicomic romance, *Cymbeline* complicates this dynamic, exploring the racial identity appropriate for an aspiring imperial nation that seeks to expand its colonial presence into Ireland and the Americas. Although *Cymbeline* follows the Lucretia myth in imagining a chaste national origin born of resistance to tyranny, its tragicomic trajectory facilitates the intercourse of marriage and, analogously, of international engagement. *Cymbeline* thus negotiates the boundaries of British whiteness in the service of empire, combating insularity by drawing in those from the lower classes and the geographic margins.

A key element of *Cymbeline*'s appropriation of Roman whiteness, as understood through the Republican Lucretia myth, is its denigration of early modern Italians, the more logical heir to Roman virtue.<sup>5</sup> In *Cymbeline*'s recasting of the Lucretia myth, the Italian Iachimo refers to himself as "Our Tarquin" (2.2.15), invoking the rapist whose racialized lust threatens to pollute Lucretia's fair chastity (Little 2000, 44-48). Rape by "yellow Iachimo" (2.5.15) would constitute adulteration more severe than would the interclass mixing of Imogen and Posthumous, a point underscored by Posthumous's bestial and xenophobic image of Iachimo mounting Imogen in the manner of a German boar (2.5.17). Just as Iachimo infiltrates Imogen's bedroom, and by extension threatens the body politic, he also infiltrates Posthumous's mind. In response to Posthumous's missive ordering Imogen's death, Pisanio asks, "what a strange infection / Is fall'n into thy ear? What false Italian / As poisonous tongued as handed, hath prevailed / On thy too ready hearing?" (3.2.3-6). Imogen similarly conjectures that "drug-damned Italy hath out-craftied him" (3.4.16).<sup>6</sup> The letter itself, presumably mirroring the moral condition of its author, becomes "Black as the ink that's on thee!" (3.2.21). In this way, anti-blackness structures *Cymbeline*'s hierarchies of European whiteness.

Posthumous's resistance to Rome, paradoxically combined with his *Romanitas*, facilitates his integration into the royal bloodline and, more figuratively, into English whiteness itself. Although Iachimo's false revelation initially causes Posthumous to "forg[e]t Britain" (1.6.134), he redeems himself by joining the fight against the Romans. Posthumous's disguise as "a Briton peasant" (5.1.24) affirms a merit-based understanding of personal value as well as his national and racial identity, with his valor shining through his beggar's weeds. When Belarius reports of Posthumous, "I never saw / Such noble fury in so poor a thing" (5.5.9), it is clear that, while class distinctions remain salient, the trait of nobility is spreading beyond the ranks of the aristocracy to white Britons more generally.

The journeys of Imogen and her brothers through Milford Haven function alongside the recuperation of Posthumous to further assimilate potentially threatening outsiders and to display the durability of white Englishness in colonial settings. As with Posthumous in his beggar's weeds, the noble virtue of Imogen and her brothers is immediately evident in the romance setting of Milford Haven. Though dressed as a boy, Imogen is recognized as "an angel—or, if not, / An earthly paragon" (3.6.46-7). Similarly, as royals raised in the Welsh hinterland, the boys are both "gentle" (4.2.220) and "rough" (4.2.222), with an "invisible instinct" manifesting a "royalty unlearned, honour untaught, / Civility not seen from other, valour / That wildly grows in them" (4.2.227-9). In this way, *Cymbeline* affirms the intrinsic superiority of noble blood while also

suggesting that British whiteness is regenerated in foreign climes. At the same time, Shakespeare recuperates the supposed barbarity of the ancient Britons, as the influence of the rugged Welsh countryside reinvigorates the excessively insular and effeminate court. Wales thus functions within the play's imperial imaginary as a symbol of England's ability to incorporate those at its margins, providing ideological support for the Act of Union.<sup>7</sup>

The scenes in Milford Haven solidify the association of Britishness with whiteness. As Jean Feerick contends, the British (as opposed to English) climate whitens the brothers: "Their exposure to British topography...imprints their bodies with northern features, whitening and strengthening their bodies beyond compare" (Feerick 2003, 57). Though "hot summer's tanlings" (4.4.35), the brothers are also described as "fairer / Than those for preservation cased" (5.3.24-5), with their acquired tans contributing to an impression of essential fairness. Imogen similarly underscores her fairness while in Milford Haven when she marks her face with blood from Cloten's corpse, asking it to "Give colour to my pale cheek" (4.2.403). Britishness thus comes further into alignment with whiteness, as the spirit of the Welsh countryside is incorporated into a national identity defined largely against Iachimo's racialized Italianness. By indicating that early modern Italians have fallen from their Roman heights, *Cymbeline* carves out space in which to connect Britain's Roman heritage to Wales, the fabled birthplace of King Arthur and origin of the Tudor/Stuart line. As Smith contends, this linking of a recuperated Celtic past to Roman civilization shapes emerging ideologies of whiteness, as whiteness is "detached from savagery and primitivism and reformulated as the distinct, esteemed ethnic feature of the new national historiography" (Smith 2009, 6).

This reclaimed whiteness becomes central to the imperial vision King Cymbeline promotes as he volunteers to pay tribute to Rome, "Let[ting] / A Roman and a British ensign wave / Friendly together" (5.5.580-82). With this act, he recuperates a normative, cosmopolitan, Roman racial lineage for the English that has been severed from its association with racialized Italianness. He also signals that Britain will no longer exist as a political and economic island—the policy stance held by Cloten and the Queen—but will instead claim a place of primacy within the larger empire. Cymbeline embraces Imogen's figuring of Britain relative to the world—"T'h'world's volume / Our Britain seems as of it, but not in 't" (3.4.159-60)—but with an imperialist edge, suggesting that those "livers out of Britain" (3.4.162), as Imogen calls them, may one day be subjected to British supremacy, just as they are currently subjected to Roman power. Having inherited from the Romans the mantle of cosmopolitan imperialism, the British are poised to enact "the westward translation of Rome's imperial tradition to the nascent European empires" (Innes 2007, 11).

Imogen's reunion with Posthumous, moreover, signals an incorporation of difference necessary for empire building. At the end of the play, English whiteness is no longer defined by insular purity, but rather by hybridity, encompassing aspects of Roman, British, and Celtic ancestry.<sup>8</sup> This renewed understanding of whiteness is enabled by a shift in gender as well as in genre: if British whiteness is initially embodied by Imogen, by the end of the play it is embodied by Arviragus and Guiderius, the discovery of whom demotes Imogen in the line of succession. With racist xenophobia dismissed as both ineffectual and effeminate, whiteness is reconstituted by the close of the play, energized by Roman cultural supremacy and by a rugged masculinity appropriated from the Celts. Despite Shakespeare's qualified critique of chauvinistic nationalism, *Cymbeline* ultimately participates in the articulation of an imperial whiteness, which defines itself as capacious and resilient, but which, even in the absence of marked characters of color, nonetheless buttresses its supremacy through racial logics marked by anti-blackness and coloniality. In his adaptation of *Cymbeline* to the twenty-first century United States, I contend, Almereyda reproduces these imperial racial logics: even as his film critiques white nationalism, it promotes seemingly more sustainable forms of white masculinity that, it follows, could help the United States reclaim its rightful place of prominence in the world order.

### American Whiteness in Almereyda's *Cymbeline*

Whereas Shakespeare's play articulates a British identity that is increasingly identified with whiteness, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* explores whiteness in the twenty-first century United States and interrogates its capacity to adapt to a liberal state that is understood as both multicultural and degenerating. Set in an unidentified American city (and filmed in New York), the politics of Almereyda's film are more intra-national than international, with characters marked by ethnicity and race rather than by nation of origin. The racial dynamics of Shakespeare's play morph in this American context, where they are filtered through the conventions of "postmasculinist" television. In particular, the film's marketers have capitalized on its similarities with Kurt Sutter's *Sons of Anarchy*, a serial drama chronicling the fortunes of the gun-running Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club. Although Almereyda himself denies being influenced by the series, the film was briefly titled *Anarchy* and was released under the name *Sons of Anarchy* in parts of Europe and Latin America. A promotional poster describes it, somewhat inaccurately, as "a mashup of *Sons of Anarchy* and *Game of Thrones*" (Lanier 2017, 248n.10). Whether this intertextual connection is intentional or not, *Cymbeline*'s racial and gender politics can be illuminated by *Sons of Anarchy*'s depiction of white outlaw masculinity.<sup>9</sup>

*Sons of Anarchy* itself draws on Shakespearean paradigms. It is most frequently connected to *Hamlet*, as the central character Jax has a vexed relationship with his mother and his stepfather, who killed his father (Slobdoia 2012; Withers 2010). But the series also shares surprising commonalities with Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, particularly with regard to its racial politics. Paralleling King Cymbeline's competition with ancient Rome and other contemporary European nations, the Sons' rivals include the local police force as well as gangs such as the Mexican Mayans, the Black Niners, and assorted bands of neo-Nazis, whose overt white nationalism contrasts with the largely unmarked whiteness of the Sons. Whereas Cymbeline fends off Roman domination, the Sons resist the encroachment of the Feds and corporate America into their small California town of Charming. The general ethos is one of self-determination, anarchistic rebellion, and American individualism. As with Cymbeline's court, however, the Sons are in need of rejuvenation; the criminality and provincialism of their leader Clay blurs the distinction between the club and their neo-Nazi rivals, necessitating the ascendance of the younger Jax, who is both an outsider, with a more liberal political outlook, and a representative of a purer, older lineage. Serving a function similar to that of Guiderius and Arviragus, Jax becomes a paragon of hegemonic whiteness, who reinvigorates the Club with his masculine sex appeal, sensitivity, and post-racial sensibility.

The racial dynamics of *Sons of Anarchy* reflect the conventions of "postmasculinist" television, which negotiate a crisis in white masculinity precipitated by neoliberal economic policies and seemingly aggravated by social movements advancing the rights of white women and people of color (Harris 2012; Robinson 2000). As Michael L. Wayne argues, such dramas often secure hegemonic whiteness by advocating colorblind ideologies that occlude structural inequality. They often pit a tolerant white antihero against overtly racist characters, "mitigat[ing] the moral consequences of colorblind racism by using stereotypical depictions of the White underclass to promote the myth that only those with overtly prejudicial beliefs are racist" (Wayne 2014b, 184). The juxtaposition of these divergent models of white masculinity, Wayne argues, allows white viewers to disavow their own racism, all while vicariously enjoying the racism of others (Wayne 2014a, 207). *Sons of Anarchy* conforms to this model, promoting a post-racial sensibility while also suggesting that white men are justified in rebelling against an oppressive liberal state.

Drawing on the conventions of postmasculinist television, Almereyda recasts Shakespeare's conflict between an ancient and an emerging empire as a battle between the corrupt liberal state, as represented by the Roman police force, and a motorcycle gang engaged in illegal drug trafficking. The racial identity of the Britons is infused with the predominantly white heritage of American motorcycle culture. While motorcycle gangs embrace aspects of the counterculture, a legacy that characters such as Jax in *Sons of Anarchy* seek to recuperate, they are also deeply conservative

and mired in the culture of white grievance. In a 2016 article in *The Nation*, Susan McWilliams draws connections between the Hell's Angels' attitudes and those of Trump supporters, citing a shared desire to lash out against "a technologically advanced and economically changing America in which they felt they'd been counted out and left behind" (McWilliams 2016). More broadly, as W. E. B. Dubois, David R. Roediger, and others have demonstrated, white working class Americans have been impoverished by the forces of global capitalism, but have been encouraged to direct their resentment toward people of color (Dubois 1998; Roediger 1991). Cymbeline's motorcycle gang seems similarly aggrieved, as members take their anger out against the multicultural state and people of color more generally.

The Britons' rebellion against the police force has racial significance as well. In their refusal to pay the tribute, they assert that they no longer need illicit police protection to continue their drug trafficking. The police chief Caius Lucius (played by Vondie Curtis-Hall) is the film's most prominent Black character, and he serves as a metonym for a corrupt liberal state that first enables and then proscribes Cymbeline's predominantly white drug operation. The association of the state with people of color is underscored by the presence of Barack Obama on a television screen in Milford Haven, thereby creating a visual link between the Black president and the Black police chief. As Carol Anderson writes in *White Rage*, "the trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement," and the election of a Black man to the office of President constituted "the ultimate advancement, and thus the ultimate affront" (Anderson 2016, 3, 5). The rage of the Americanized Britons is thus fueled not only by economic decline, but by Black advancement, of both the President and the police chief.

In this political context, the extreme nationalism of Cloten and the Queen comes to resemble white nationalism. For instance, although a phenotypical reading is not encouraged by the actor's delivery, Cloten's comment that "We will nothing pay for wearing our noses," hints at the racial divisions between Cymbeline's family and the police and calls attention to the racial dynamics underlying the motorcycle gang's resistance. This reading aligns with the premise of *Sons of Anarchy*, in which the Club seeks to protect their predominantly white town from "outsiders," an umbrella term that covers corporate interests, the FBI, and people of color. By resisting the demand to pay tribute, Cymbeline's followers seek to reclaim white prominence from a state whose corruption is implicitly associated with its incorporation of people of color, particularly Black people, who are believed to both cause and manifest that corruption. As in Shakespeare's play, this provincial insularity proves counterproductive, as it instigates war with the Romans and contributes to the persecution of Imogen.

In Almereyda's film, the racial significance of Imogen's sexual purity is muted, but still present. Dakota Johnson's waif-like Imogen wears short shorts and tank tops that display her pale white limbs as well as her youthful sexuality, which is captured when she kisses Posthumous on the playground, and then again when, clad in her underwear and lying on her childhood bed, she sensuously caresses and buries her face in Posthumous's shirt. Cymbeline seems distressed by both his daughter's sexuality and her choice of partner. Almereyda retains Cymbeline's lines calling Posthumous "poison to my blood" (1.1.151) and averring that the marriage will make the throne a "seat for baseness" (1.1.170)—reflecting the character's anachronistic fear that his line will be polluted and debased. As in Shakespeare's play, the desire to circumscribe the white woman's body evokes a xenophobic impulse and thus informs Cymbeline's decision to cut ties with the Romans, a point underscored in the film's opening text, which states that "The marriage triggers the king's rage, setting into motion a series of unfortunate events." This link between the marriage plot and more "masculine" political events is characteristic both of Shakespearean romance and of postmasculinist television, which often draws on the traditionally feminine form of the serial melodrama (Mittell 2013). This mixed genre, like Shakespearean tragicomedy, underscores the sexual and racial dimensions of politics, both national and local.

Posthumous's difference from the other members of the club is expressed mainly by his hipster sensibility—and by his skateboard, which he rides in lieu of a motorcycle—but there are hints of ethnic or racial difference, which mirror the sense in Shakespeare's play that Posthumous's obscure ancestry renders him racially inferior. Posthumous is played by the white, though potentially racially ambiguous, actor Penn Badgley, but he is depicted as having darker skin in a childhood photo. Additionally, Posthumous is identified with Mexican *Día de los Muertos* iconography, which reflects the history of loss embedded in his name, having been born after the deaths of his father and brothers in battle. The skull on Posthumous's shirt (the shirt Imogen caresses and that Cloten wears in his ill-fated attempt to rape her) resembles a Mexican *calavera* more closely than it resembles the skull and crossbones imagery common in biker circles, and the note he sends to Imogen contains a similar image. This ethnic difference implicitly informs Cymbeline's discomfort with Posthumous and with Imogen's desire for a more cosmopolitan life beyond the confines of the motorcycle club. The image of the skeleton/*calavera*, moreover, infuses the film, which takes place around the time of Halloween and *Día de los Muertos*, a melding of Anglo and Latinx traditions that gestures toward a broader racial and cultural fusion that Cymbeline and his court find threatening.

The threat of interracial sexuality is augmented by the film's portrayal of Posthumous's servant Pisanio, who is played by Latinx actor John Leguizamo. Speaking in a working class Italian-American accent, Pisanio assumes the ethnic difference that Shakespeare attributes to Iachimo,

who in Almereyda's film is played by the normatively white Ethan Hawke. Pisanio thus presents as an ethnic amalgam, an impression that connects him to his "master" Posthumous. As such, Pisanio accrues much of the play's racial anxiety, as it is he who absconds with Imogen after Posthumous orders him to kill her. Removed from the romance setting of Shakespeare's play to a Chinese restaurant in a working class neighborhood, this scene emphasizes Imogen's vulnerability in the presence of this member of the household staff. When Imogen cuts her forearm with Pisanio's knife in a halfhearted suicide attempt, the racial and sexual politics of the Lucretia myth intertwine with those of twenty-first century America, with the bloody penetration of the knife raising the possibility of interracial violation and conjuring fears of a non-white rapist.

Cymbeline's violent torture of Pisanio, therefore, reads as retribution for this potential transgression against the sanctity of the white female body. The torture scene, in which Pisanio is beaten, bound, and suffocated with a plastic bag and then placed in a cage, emphasizes his racial difference and evokes images of torture from military prisons such as Abu Ghraib. That Pisanio turns out to be Imogen's savior, rescuing her from the sexual and physical assaults of two white men, unsettles the racist narratives surrounding the protection of white women's bodies. As in Shakespeare's play, racist insularity correlates more closely with sexual violence than does racial, cultural, or class-based difference: Imogen's sadistic stepbrother Cloten is the only true rapist of the film, and Cymbeline's torture of Pisanio exposes the racist sadism of white supremacy. Nonetheless, as in post-masculinist television, the torture scene seems to promote what Wayne terms the "transgressive pleasure" of witnessing overt racism, as it objectifies Pisanio and encourages identification with the hypermasculine Cymbeline (Wayne 2014a, 207).

Despite this glorification of violent masculinity, Cymbeline's misogyny and xenophobia are ultimately exposed as misguided, and, as in Shakespeare's play, the lost brothers offer a more progressive and hybrid version of whiteness that promises rejuvenation. Guiderius and Arviragus (played by Spencer Treat Clark and Harle Ware) represent a more normative and tolerant whiteness than do the leaders of the Britons. Raised away from "the city's usuries" in a cabin in the woods, they embody rural, middle-American boyhood. We first see them buying gallons of milk, for example, signaling their wholesomeness. But their lives in Milford Haven have been infused with multicultural influences, owing in part to their upbringing by Belarius (played by Delroy Lindo), a Black exile from Cymbeline's club who kidnapped the brothers and raised them as his own. The reggae beats of Toots and the Maytals' "Pressure Drop" play in the background during Imogen's first night at the cabin, and Guiderius sports a Che Guevara t-shirt, from which Imogen gleans the inspiration for her masculine name Fidel(e). As the shirt suggests, the boys embrace a revolutionary ethos informed by international movements for racial and economic justice that

contrasts with Cymbeline's white rebel outlaw mentality. It is this radical lineage upon which Guiderius draws when he kills Cloten in self-defense, symbolically defeating xenophobia and misogyny. The brothers thus represent ideal specimens of a vigorous, rural, white masculinity that simultaneously embraces racial difference. This renewed white identity, however, is forged through the appropriation of the resistance of people of color, just as that of their Shakespearean counterparts depends upon the appropriation of Welsh and Celtic cultures, and it ultimately recenters whiteness.

Whereas in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* the boys' rustic cosmopolitanism endorses the imperial goal of unifying Great Britain, in Almereyda's film it translates into grudging support for the liberal multicultural state, an implication that explains Cymbeline's otherwise odd decision to resume paying the tribute even after the Britons defeat the police force in battle. The battle itself features moments that could be construed as racist violence, particularly the burning of a Black police officer in his car and the forcible submission of Caius Lucius, who is handcuffed and brought to his knees. As these moments suggest, the battle recalibrates the balance of power between the state and the motorcycle club, reinforcing the impression that the state is weak and crumbling and, as in *Sons of Anarchy*, presenting underworld gangs as an alternate source of political and personal power. The club's willingness to reconcile with the Romans reflects its embrace of the multicultural ethos implicitly associated with Guiderius, Arviragus, Belarius, and Posthumous, whose aid permits them to triumph in the battle. But despite its appropriation of Black and Latino masculinity, Cymbeline's club—like the outlaw rebels of *Sons of Anarchy*—remains hegemonically white. This revived whiteness is reflected in part by the club's move toward Posthumous's hipster sensibility.<sup>10</sup> Cymbeline, then, resumes his *détente* with the state only after white masculinity has been re-empowered, leaving characters of color on the periphery.

With white masculinity recentered, Cymbeline embraces a gentler, more tolerant approach to racial difference. Proclaiming "Pardon's the word to all," he accepts Belarius's return, forgives Pisanio, welcomes Posthumous back into the fold, and apologizes for his treatment of Imogen. Such tolerance does not extend to the "wicked" queen, however, who is scapegoated, and Cymbeline looks on approvingly as a member of the club sets fire to her corpse, which lies in a body bag on a nearby stretcher. With her disruptive feminine presence largely neutralized at the end of the film, white men are left to operate effectively in multicultural America. Imogen and Posthumous are partially incorporated into this new paradigm, but ride away on Posthumous's motorcycle in the film's final scene, embracing their countercultural independence and perhaps a future in which Imogen will find empowerment.<sup>11</sup>

### The Racial Politics of Shakespeare Appropriation

As my analysis suggests, the fusion of Shakespeare with twenty-first century postmasculinist television leads to some problematic results. Almercyda's *Cymbeline* ultimately recenters normative white masculinity, defining it in opposition to explicit white nationalism, and it stops short of critiquing endemic gender and racial oppression. By suggesting that racism is personal rather than structural and that it manifests exclusively in the violence of extremist bigots, the film leaves systemic racism unquestioned and retains what George Lipsitz calls the "possessive investment in whiteness," which

accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educational opportunities available to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations. (Lipsitz 2006, vii)

Almercyda's *Cymbeline* further misrepresents the workings of white supremacy by presenting the state as multicultural, and specifically as Black, thereby inverting the racial inequities inherent in the American criminal justice system and validating feelings of white grievance. In the scene in which Barack Obama is speaking on television, for example, the next image to flicker across the screen is Posthumous's mug shot, suggesting that Obama's state—and more literally Caius Lucius's state—has unjustly incarcerated him. Shots of police officers beating members of the motorcycle club have the similar effect of positioning white men as victims of a corrupt justice system that is predominantly identified as Black. In turn, the anti-police violence meted out by *Cymbeline*'s club seems justified as retribution for this oppression, retribution that would be coded quite differently if enacted by Black victims of police violence. This depiction of white victimhood is particularly irresponsible, given that unarmed Black people are approximately 3.5 times more likely to be shot by the police than unarmed white people (Ross 2015).

This validation of white victimhood, I believe, emerges not only from Almercyda's uncritical engagement with the conventions of postmasculinist television, but also from the incomplete recognition of the racial politics already embedded in Shakespeare's play and from the limitations of colorblind casting. As Ayanna Thompson and others have demonstrated, colorblind casting—especially in plays that do not include explicitly nonwhite characters—can imply that Shakespeare's

plays are devoid of racial content, in effect equating whiteness with the absence of race (Thompson 2006). All of Shakespeare's plays possess racial content, and *Cymbeline* in particular interrogates evolving definitions of racial whiteness within the context of Britain's nascent empire. Almereyda seems only partially attuned to these racial dynamics and to the ideological consequences of transposing them to the twenty-first century United States. He attends to race in his depiction of Posthumous and Pisanio, characterizing them in relation to an Anglicized Iachimo, and in his depiction of the lost princes' multiracial adoptive family. But the racial identities of Caius Lucius and the members of *Cymbeline*'s court seem less deliberate, reflective perhaps of the presumed whiteness of the central characters and of attempts to diversify the cast. The resulting racial politics align with the dominant liberal thrust of colorblind casting, which neutralizes race without challenging the hegemonic universality of whiteness. Because Almereyda reproduces the racial and imperialist content of his source material, his film misrepresents the racial dynamics of state-sponsored violence in the United States.

In addition to engaging with twenty-first century American racial politics, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* elucidates Shakespeare's broader role in popular media, where several postmasculinist television programs allude to Shakespeare. *House of Cards* recapitulates *Richard III*, and Shakespearean echoes in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* have been frequently noted. With varying degrees of racial sensitivity, these programs invoke Shakespeare to work through a contemporary crisis of white masculinity, often using Shakespeare—a signifier of unmarked, universal whiteness—to recenter white masculinity within multiracial contexts in which white men are perceived to be increasingly marginalized. While Almereyda's use of actors of color to further the film's emphasis on racial tolerance reflects an ostensibly progressive manifestation of this impulse, this message is ultimately undermined by the valorization of the Britons' resistance to a multicultural state. As such, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* brings out Shakespeare's potential to lend highbrow credibility to racism and misogyny.

This racist potential, I want to suggest by way of closing, is disturbingly evident in the interest in Shakespeare appropriation shown by Stephen Bannon, former chief strategist and senior counselor to President Donald Trump and former executive of the alt-right *Breitbart* news website. In addition to serving as co-producer of the 1999 film *Titus*, directed by Julie Taymor, and writing a script for another *Titus* adaptation, this one set in outer space, Bannon co-wrote a rap musical based on *Coriolanus* in the late 1990s called *The Thing I Am*. Produced as a table reading in 2017 by the liberal media site *NowThis News*, *The Thing I Am* is set during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising following the beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers. As Jon Blistein of *Rolling Stone* writes, the play is "fraught with Bannon's problematic—to say the least—views on black life in inner

cities" (Blistein 2017). The protagonists are stereotypical gang members, who speak an awkward mix of iambic pentameter and a white person's attempt at Black "street" vernacular.

Moreover, *The Thing I Am* foments fear of Black power. In Bannon's rendition of the play, the Romans and Volscians become Bloods and Crips, with Coriolanus, the Bloods' leader, refusing to pander to the crowds and the media in the wake of Rodney King's beating. Coriolanus embodies the sort of political strong man that Bannon admires—"All yield to him," Aufidius states, "the press, whitey, the color aristo-cracks of his own set. Only the trash is weak" (as excerpted in Pollack-Pelzner 2016). Coriolanus is presented as admirable in part because of his resistance to the unruly Black populace, the "many-headed multitude," whose empowerment threatens the position of the gang leaders as well as the power of the white establishment (Bannon and Jones, 2017). As Brutus stirs up rebellion from the public, he asks "Dear? We're cheap, not dear. [...] White folks are dear. Their kibbles 'n' bits would relieve us, but they call us 'dear' and cast us nothing. Our suffering's their gain. Let's avenge with guns and knives" (as excerpted in Pollack-Pelzner 2016). The fear of Black resistance is heightened by the prospect of unity among the gangs. As a sign urging reconciliation between the Crips and Bloods reads, "Let it be a black thing for the little black girl and the homie Rodney King. If LAPD hurt a black, we'll kill two. Pow. Pow. Pow" (as excerpted in Pollack-Pelzner 2016). In the logic of *The Thing I Am*, unity among gangs facilitates racial vengeance. Here, ostensibly (though of course not actually) race-neutral Shakespeare acquires racial significance, of which Bannon is well aware, providing a socially acceptable means of depicting Black communities as unruly mobs and stoking fears of a coming race war.

If post-racial Shakespeare—the Shakespeare embraced by *Sons of Anarchy* and, for the most part, by Almereyda—is suited to the Obama era, then Bannon's *The Thing I Am* may be a mode of Shakespearean appropriation suited to the age of Trump, as it self-consciously stokes racial conflict and uses Shakespeare to white supremacist ends. It is tempting to attribute racism exclusively to *The Thing I Am* because of its stereotypical, almost farcical anti-Blackness, and because of Bannon's very prominent embrace of white nationalism, and thus to single it out as a wildly misguided interpretation of Shakespeare. Yet, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* is perhaps equally damaging in its liberal colorblind racism because white audiences are inclined to celebrate its artistic achievements, edgy sensibilities, and witty interpretation of Shakespeare rather than to scrutinize the way it re-centers and affirms whiteness.

As Ibram X. Kendi argues, no policy or idea is "nonracist" or race-neutral; everything is either racist or antiracist, and, if it claims to be nonracist, it likely supports racist structures, practices, and epistemologies (Kendi 2019, 18-20). Likewise, there is also no "nonracist" Shakespeare

appropriation. As Brandi K. Adams maintains, "There is no neutral Shakespeare," and productions that claim to be neutral often adopt the perspective of "a white, cisgender, able-bodied, man who often vociferously insists that he embodies the universal interpretive mode for all conversations about Shakespeare" (Adams 2020). Although Almereyda's *Cymbeline* is race conscious to an extent, it does not fully abjure the pretense that Shakespeare, and by extension the white male perspective, is universal. As a result, it fails to fully account for the racist aspects of Shakespeare's play and reproduces them in an American context. Like *The Thing I Am*, Almereyda's *Cymbeline* promotes a worldview in which white people are victims, but, whereas Bannon's screenplay is overt in its racism, Almereyda's film obscures the structural racism and white supremacist violence that define American life, thereby allowing white audiences and critics to ignore their complicity with endemic racism, xenophobia, and anti-Blackness.

### Notes

1. For the films' engagement with American culture, see Lanier (2017) and Burnett (2003).
2. For the wide influence of this framework, see James (1997). For the development of Britain's national identity in the context of empire, see Maley (1999), Feerick (2003), and Innes (2007).
3. For the Queen's citation of Monmouth, and the play's engagement with contested historical sources more broadly, see Martin Butler, introduction to *Cymbeline*, 36-54.
4. For connections between Shakespeare's "The Rape of Lucrece" and *Cymbeline*, see Ziegler (1990), Bamford (1993), Spolsky (2004), and Gillen (2017).
5. For England's usurping of Roman lineage, see Parker (1989) and Bergeron (1980).
6. For more on anti-Italian stereotypes in the play, see Olsen (1999).
7. For *Cymbeline*'s engagement with James I's plans to unify Britain, see Bergeron (1987), Marcus (1988), and Goldberg (1989). For the significance of Wales in *Cymbeline*'s presentation of British national identity, see Boling (2000).
8. For *Cymbeline*'s embrace of multiple forms of hybridity, see Miller-Tomlinson (2008). For the excision of the feminine from the play, see Adelman (1992) and Mikalachki (1998).
9. As Julie Sanders maintains, appropriations may draw on a range of cultural texts in addition to their most direct literary source: "The inherent intertextuality of literature encourages the ongoing, evolving production of meaning, and an ever expanding network of textual relations" (Sanders 2006, 3).
10. See Lanier, "Almereyda's *Cymbeline*," for a fuller discussion of Almereyda's engagement with hipster culture.

11. Lanier reads Imogen and Posthumous's "refusal of the 'comic' resolution" as reflective of "Almeryda's desire for a return to a heroic conception of youthful rebellion...as a basis for an American counterculture" ("Almeryda's Cymbeline," 245).

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