Even Shakespeare has not written many plays where flawed or near opaque perception draws such a veil between one character and another or between one set of personages and another as in Cymbeline. Shared perception or mutability of knowledge which is the basic necessary condition for any measure of meaningful functioning of society seems to have withdrawn in favour of an alarming solipsism which serves to build up a number of exclusive personal worlds accounting for an almost fatal fragmentation of society. The king is unaware of the general response of his subjects to Imogen's secret marriage to Posthumus; his annoyance and grief are only outwardly shared by his court. He is, besides, a complete alien to the private world of the queen whose every single act of deception is cunningly contrived to secure the glad approval of the king.

Posthumus is understandably alien to the Italian Iachimo's sly ways but shows a lamentable ignorance of the steely integrity of Imogen with whom he had grown up and whom he is expected to have known thoroughly unlike Claudio who had had only a semblance of a knowledge of Hero before he married her. Arviragus and Guiderius are ignorant of their true identity and of their true relationship with Belarius. Neither the two brothers on the one hand nor Imogen on the other know
who they are in relation to each other. Lucius is unaware of his page's true identity. Posthumus is now a Roman, now a Briton, keeping his identity only to himself. Iachimo is denied the knowledge that he is fighting Posthumus. Posthumus on one hand, and the three heroes of the battle, viz, the old man and his supposed sons, have, by their incredible feats of bravery, caused excited speculations about their true identity. Earlier on, Imogen had mistaken the headless trunk of Cloten for that of Posthumus.

There is, thus, an enormous measure of confusion, of muddled thinking and action. Frailty of knowledge and active evil ironically combine to befoul the atmosphere as the action progresses and nothing short of the hand of providence can be believed to guide the erring mortals on to self-knowledge and light. Indeed, some invisible supernatural beneficence is referred to repeatedly to explain the miraculous discoveries and reunion at the end.

When one looks closely at the play, we can recognise that two crucial episodes, later to have their necessary bearing on the plot, have already taken place before the drama opens. These are the marriage of Imogen and Posthumus and the abduction of Cymbeline's
The abduction took place some twenty years before and, in spite of the trauma caused then, seems now almost forgotten. What is of immediate relevance and profound concern is the princess's secret marriage in total disregard of the king's wishes.

It would therefore be appropriate to say that the play begins after a crisis has already overtaken the house of Cymbeline, the king of Britain. This crisis which has been omitted from the action of the play is the decisive factor in the complicated development of the plot. The action emanates from this crisis and hence one would be justified to see it both within and outside the play. The disorder portrayed in the general structure of the play comes about because of it and our study would be directed specifically to how this disorder moves to order or how mutual ignorance of frightful proportions is eventually resolved into a stable vision.

The secret marriage of Leonatus and Imogen is the immediate cause of the troubled note the play introduces. And the sinuous and diverse movements of a deepening crisis which overtakes society can be
seen to arise out of or be connected with that 'original sin.'

It is Posthumus's conviction that Imogen is faithless that makes him write those two letters—one to Pisanio and the other to Imogen herself. And it is these two letters that take Pisanio and Imogen to Milford Haven where Imogen disguised as a boy called Fidele, first meets Belarius, Guiderius and Arviragus who take care of her and later, after her supposed death and revival, meets Lucius, the Roman general, who engages her in his service as a page. This is how Imogen is enabled to be present at Cymbeline's tent after the Roman rout where the recognition scene takes place. It is again Posthumus's belief that Imogen has been killed by Pisanio according to his instructions, that makes him, in a mood of repentance, leave the Romans and fight for Britain whose princess was his wife. The final British victory thus finds Posthumus at Cymbeline's tent.

Cloten would not have come to Milford Haven and met with his death but for Pisanio having told him that Imogen had gone there. And the queen would not have died the way she did but for Cloten's 'strange absence' from the court. Besides, the central role played by Iachimo both in Imogen's calumny and in
the final scene in clearing the mist thus helping in
her rehabilitation to the joy and amazement of all,
takes us at once to the heart of the theme of supposed
unchastity and the final resolution of the plot bring-
ing knowledge where there was none.

It can thus be seen how Imogen's or-
deal consequent upon Iachimo's presenting her as a
false woman to her husband is a device used both to
project a spreading crisis, at once social and politi-
cal, and to resolve it, bringing order out of disorder
and in the process shedding an illumination upon the
human situation abounding in error, misconception and
evil.

The note on which the play opens is
one of disorder and dissention.

You do not meet a man but frowns...

(I.i.)

His daughter, and the heir of's kingdom, whom
He purpos'd to his wife's sole son - a widow
That late he married-hath referr'd herself
Unto a poor but worthy gentleman. She's wedded;
All
Is outward sorrow, though I think the King
Be touch'd at very heart.

(I.i.)

Like most Shakespearian comedies, then, Cymbeline opens
on a note of disquiet

Cymbeline's family which by assumption represents the social fabric is visibly disturbed and in the throes of disruption. And, as the opening dialogue spells out, the disturbance or disorder is traceable to the secret marriage of the princess to Posthumus in the face of opposition and to the displeasure of the king.

It is clear then that the play begins after a crisis has already taken place in the house of Cymbeline, the king of Britain. This crisis which has been omitted from the action of the play is however the decisive factor in the development of the action. For the action emanates from this crisis and one would be justified to see it as much within as outside the structure of the play.

The initial dialogue not only tells us of the clandestine marriage, but also of a number of other important things. Other things apart, it introduces the note of seeming and being, of appearance and reality. The pithy phrase 'outward sorrow' is a pointer to this. The general appearance of sorrow and displeasure put on to please the king does nothing to give the
lie to the genuine approval and approbation of the princess's act.

...But not a courtier,
Although they wear their faces to the bent
Of the King's looks, hath a heart that is not
Glad at the thing they scowl at.

(I.i.)

We are also told how worthy both Imogen and Posthumus
are and how Imogen has, in public estimation, confirmed
her inherent worth by her choice of Posthumus though
she has alienated and enraged her father in the bargain.
And there is furthur vital bit of information about the
infant princes having been stolen from their nursery in
mysterious circumstances about twenty years ago.

...He had two sons - if this be worth your hearing,
Mark it - the eldest of them at three years old,
I' th' swathing clothes the other, from their
nursery
Were stol'n and to this hour no guess in knowledge
Which way they went.

(I.i.)

The actual abduction of the princes about the circum-
stances of which complete ignorance prevails looks for-
ward to the supposed seduction of Imogen and the spirit-
ing away of her bracelet by the scheming Iachimo. The
fraud on the infant princes anticipates the fraud on the
married princess. The metaphorical assault on the prin-
nces and the princess glances at the actual assault on Britain. In each case, it is a criminal violation of rights, of honour. It is an assault, direct or indirect, on sovereignty — actual sovereignty in the case of the state and a personal, delicate form of it in the other cases. The network of anticipations, echoes and the reverberations includes the censorial observation on the slackness of vigilance which made possible the abduction of the princes.

That a king's children should be so convey'd, 
So slackly guarded...,

(I.i.)

This deplorable slackness anticipates the fatal remissness that resulted in the entry of Iachimo into the princess's chamber and in the success of his designs. And as in the case of the stolen infants, there is 'no guess in knowledge' how the bracelet went. In fact, until the final discovery, Imogen has had no correct guess as to how Posthumus came to believe that she was faithless.

It is not hard to see now how the entire story is conceived of and arranged in terms of anticipations, hints and half-hints with their realised implications of points and counter-points, making up
mosaic of incidents strung together by an artistic skill and a moral vision of a remarkable order.

The secret marriage of Imogen and Posthumus cannot just be conceived of as only the immediate cause of a disorder that can pass off without causing further ado. Both morally and from the viewpoint of artistic necessity, it cannot but have far-reaching ramifications which Shakespeare exploits to great dramatic effect. The tumultuous marriage of Othello and Desdemona was not without its effect on the complication of the plot. Nor were the impetuous proceedings of the lovers in A Midsummer Night's Dream without any implications in terms of the prolonged spell of mystification in the forest.

In fact, there is much in Cymbeline that reminds one of Othello. The disparity of the lovers' social status, the ecstasy of mutual love, its heady utterance suggesting a form of hubris and pregnant with tragic forebodings, the dreadfully insinuating workings of evil – such elements as these bring the two plays close together and provide an interesting study.

The impetuous secrecy of their proceedings almost makes it morally necessary that the marriage of
Imogen and Posthumus be subjected to the ways of the world. That is how it can prove its strength and ability to withstand any cunning and devious assault. It would also be a means of dramatically demonstrating how unguarded, over-trusting, even gullible man and woman united in wedlock can be.

To be secure in one's knowledge of the loved one's fidelity is one thing, but to be boastful in public about the pricelessness and invulnerability of her integrity is another. Such a vaunt can only tempt one's fate by exposing one's unawareness of the accidents of life, of the potential topsyturviness of the human situation.

Posthumus's defiance of Iachimo ironically reveals his ignorance, his fatal blindness to the incalculable and unpredictable potential for mischief imbeded in the human psyche. And in his blindness he does Imogen wrong in exposing her to the unfathomable wiles of a Machiavellian character.

Iachimo's assault brings out the chinks in their armours of mutual faith. Contrary to their profession, they are liable to suspect each other's loyalty. Revealingly, it is Philario who has to point
out that the bracelet may have come into Iachimo's possession through one of Imogen's women who may have stolen it. Posthumus who had already jumped to a conclusion pauses for a while only to express his belief that none of her women could have done it.

...I am sure
She would not lose it. Her attendants are
All sworn and honourable — they induc'd to steal it!
And by a stranger! No, he hath enjoy'd her.

(II.iv.)

Ironically, the husband has more faith in his wife's women than her. He is all too inclined to believe the worst of her.

Directly, after Iachimo mentions the mole under her breast as a conclusive evidence of his having enjoyed her, the dialogue between the calumniator and the wronged husband is worth noting.

Iachimo: Will you hear more?
Posthumus: Spare your arithmetic; never count the turns.
Once, and a million!
Iachimo: I'll be sworn —
Posthumus: No swearing.
If you will swear you have not done't, you lie;
And I will kill thee if thou dost deny
Thou'st made me a cuckold.

(II.iv.)
On the eve of his departure for Rome, when Posthumus had put on the ring given by Imogen to be kept "till you woo another wife," When Imogen is dead," he had said addressing the gift:

...Remain, remain thou here
While the sense can keep it on.

(I.i.)

Obviously, Posthumus has now lost his 'sense.' He has fallen victim to Iachimo's 'arithmetic.' He has allowed himself to be a prisoner of 'consecutive reasoning,' having lost his faith.

Significantly, it is Pisanio who sees the truth.

...What false Italian —
As poisonous—tongu'd as handed — hath prevail'd
On thy too ready hearing?

......

O my master!
Thy mind to her is now as low as were
Thy fortunes.

(III.i.)

As we saw in the preceding chapter, Shakespeare seems to be making the point that while those who are privileged in society run into errors holding proudly to their armour of self-sufficiency, it is the lesser ones who retain a clarity of perception and of perspicacity
of judgement which eventually turn out to be a sure basis for society to return to sanity and health.

As for Imogen, on the other hand, it is again significant that after having asked her women to 'search for a jewel that too casually Hath left mine arm', she seems to forget all about it. She would not be inclined to connect the disappearance of the bracelet with the dubious visit of the Italian. Her complacency is indeed astonishing in the context of her steely integrity. And later when she learn, to her horror and dismay, of her husband's accusation, she can only think of blaming some Italian women who must have corrupted his mind.

...Some Jay of Italy,
Whose mother was her painting, hath betray'd him.

(III.iv.)

Like her husband, she too is too ready to believe the worst of him.

Now if Iachimo, by the triumph of his insolence and cunning, has brought the couple to this sorry pass, it must be recognised that he would have had no opportunity to enter the scene if it were not for
the queen who, in her self-aggrandisement, has brought about a complete estrangement between the king and his daughter. The king does not see the evil that she is. A victim of appearances, he does everything at the instance of the queen who is hell-bent on promoting the interests of her foolish son, Cloten. She has got the king to banish Posthumus with the hope of seeing Cloten gain the attention and win the favour of Imogen who is now separated from her husband. Pisanio, Posthumus' man and Cornelius, the physician, know the evil she is and would not trust her, even though they are outwardly _deferential_. She reminds one of Lady Macbeth, of Goneril and Regan and dies of despair when Cloten, putting on the clothes of Posthumus, rushes out towards Milford Haven in search of Imogen hoping to take forcible possession of her and never return. As Cornelius is to put it in the final scene of the play:

> First, she confess'd she never lov'd you; only Affected greatness got by you, not you;

(V.v.)

> Your daughter, whom she bore in hand of lov With such integrity, she did confess Was as a scorpion to her sight; whose life, But that her flight prevented it, she had Ta'en off by poison.

(V.v.)

...She did confess she had
For you a mortal mineral, which, being took,
Should by the minute feed on life, and,
ling'ring,
By inches waste you. In which time she
purpos'd
By watching, weeping, tendance, kissing, to
O'ercome you with her show; and in time,
When she had fitted you with her craft, to
work
Her son into th' adoption of the crown;
But failing of her end by his strange absence,
Grew shameless—desperate, open'd, in despite
Of heaven and men, her purpose, repented
The evils she hatch'd were not effected; so,
Despairing, died.

(V.v.)

The evil that is the queen is drama-
tically supported and reinforced by the evil that is
Iachimo to add to the physical separation of Imogen and
Posthumus an appalling psychic disruption—a situation
in which an unmitigated darkness reigns for a while.
Both in their own ways represent the motif of appear-
ance and reality. It is true that they themselves do
not see far into the future, but it is equally true
that they succeed in keeping for a considerable while
their victims from distinguishing truth from error,
reality from the semblance of it.

In their confounded state both Imogen
and Posthumus find themselves trapped into unpredictable
circumstances. Imogen who has come to Milford Haven
in the belief that she would be meeting her husband learns to her horror what he intends to be done to her. The solicitous and clear-eyed Pisani gets her to put on the guise of a boy, gives her a potion believed to bring her relief should she ever be taken unwell and advising her to seek employment with Lucius, takes leave of her (May the gods/ Direct you to the best!).

It so happens that she runs into Belarius and his two boys whose hospitality she enjoys for a while. It is significant that Belarius is the banished lord much like her banished husband and that the two boys are her long-lost brothers whom she obviously cannot recognise and who do not recognise her. Imogen and the boys are drawn towards each other although they are denied the knowledge of their true identity. There she falls sick and taking some of the drug that Pisani had given her she swoons. The comatoze Imogen is taken as dead and is given a sort of burial with flowers heaped over her body. She soon revives, sees the beheaded body of Cloten clothed in Posthumus' garment and jumps to the conclusion that Pisani had forged the letters and treacherously killed Posthumus.

Imogen thus can be seen to go through error to further error with the accentuation of the motif of
appearance and reality.

Weeping on the supposed dead body of Posthumus she is met with by Lucius, who, as had been so correctly predicted by Pisanio, proves to be a welcome benefactor and takes her, of course, as the boy Fidele, into his service. It is as Lucius' page that Imogen will finally arrive at the British camp.

Although Lucius is a good soul and proves to be a godsend for her, she is, to all appearances, in a quandary for she can have no notion as to her future. She believes that Posthumus has been foully murdered and this can only mean an uncertain future for her with no hope of happiness left. She has misread Pisanio's action and intention and is in a mist. She ironically proves the truth of her own words spoken on reviving from her death-seeming slumber.

...Our very eyes
Are sometimes, like our judgements, blind,

(IV.ii.)

Now if Imogen is in error about her perception of Posthumus in Cloten and believes him dead, so is Posthumus in error in his interpretation of the
bloody handkerchief.

Yea, bloody cloth, I'll keep thee;
for I wish'd
Thou shouldst be colour'd thus.

(V. i.)

He believes that Imogen is dead thanks to his own instruction to Pisanio who without much judgement has carried them out loyally. Both are victims of appearance and both find themselves in the vortex of ensuing battle.

It is important to remember that Posthumus has had no occasion yet to have any doubts about Iachimo's persuasions. However, in the face of the seemingly incontrovertible proof of Imogen's death, his heart softens and he now is led to take a lenient view of her disloyalty which now appears as a "little fault" ("You snatch some hence for little faults.") He refers to her as "noble Imogen". Resolving to atone for his conduct, he now decides to change sides and not to inflict wounds on his lady's kingdom.

...I am brought hither
Among th' Italian gentry, and to fight
Against my lady's kingdom. 'Tis enough
That, Britain, I have kill'd thy mistress;
peace!
I'll give no wound to thee. Therefore, good heavens,
Hear paitently my purpose. I'll disrobe me
Of these Italian weeds, and suit myself
As does a Britain peasant. So I'll fight
Against the part I come with; so I'll die
For thee, O Imogen, even for whom my life
Is every breath a death. And thus unknown
More valour in me than my habits show.
Gods, put the strength o' th' Leonati in me!
To shame the guise o' th' world, I will begin
The fashion - less without and more within."

(V.i.)

We have quoted at length the speech to make a few points. To begin with, Shakespeare, here lets us have a necessary glimpse of Posthumus's agonised and chastened soul. If his earlier mistaken belief about her death nearly bridges the chasm that had yawned between himself and his actions and repairs his damaged faith in her and this inspite of there being no occasion or need to question Iachimo's proceedings, Imogen's supposed death can be said to triumph over her supposed unchastity by renewing the flame of her husband's love and reinstating her in his heart and esteem.

And without an awareness of the full implication of what he is doing, he sets himself in opposition to the ways (the 'guise') of the world which values more the outer than the inner, more the
appearance than the reality. His motto "less without and more within" points to the spirit of inwardisation that has set in and which is calculated, in terms of the dramatic design, to put him on the path to an incredible union with his resurrected bride.

We can now turn to what happens to Iachimo who was responsible for the ascription of infidelity to Imogen who, as we have seen, is now caught up as a consequence in a frightful mess. The Romans are on the British soil consequent upon Britain's refusal to pay the tributes demanded. Iachimo as the Roman general fights the British forces when Posthumus, in the guise of a poor British peasant, gets the better of the Roman and disarms him. This is a moment of humiliation for Iachimo who pities and curses himself. The struck conscience for having maligned Imogen and wronged both her and Posthumus weighs heavily upon him. He's not himself. As Horatio puts it in a different context, he is only a piece of himself. Shakespeare's perception of the moral universe is such that for having deceived Posthumus, Iachimo now is now unmanned and made to pay the penalty in being overwhelmed and beaten by Posthumus who, unrecognised by the Italian, fights as a British peasant.

The heaviness and guilt within my bosom Takes off my manhood. I have belied a lady,
The Princess of this country, and the air on't
Revengingly enfeebles me; or could 'earl
A very drudge of nature's, subdu'ed me
In my profession?

(V.ii.)

If, thanks to Iachimo's knavery, Posthumus
had been taken in by the so-called evidence of Imogen's
disloyalty, it is ironically now the deceiver's turn,
to be taken in by Posthumus's appearance.

When in the same scene Belarius cries out:
"Nothing routs us but the villainy of our fears", in his
without his knowing it, would seem to be laying an un-
erring finger on the basic truth about the human situ-
action, which is that, in whatever situation man falls, is
defeated by his ignorance, by his mistaken notion of
things which he considers sure knowledge. In our mis-
taken self-assurance we forget that we do not know
enough, that our knowledge is hopelessly flawed and
cannot guarantee safe conduct through life unless we
bare our bosom to the graces from above.

With his increasing reliance upon the powers
of the unseen, upon a beneficent providence, Posthumus
seems to be coming every moment closer to the truth, to
the essential reality of the situation.

....for all was lost,
But that the heavens fought.

It is only when the well-meaning actors in the drama have begun to realise their insufficiency and the inscrutable will of the divine while giving of their best in the given situation, that the resolution of the complex plot seems near at hand.

The supreme irony is that it is the wronged characters (viz, Belarius and Posthumus, both unjustly exiled) who turn the tide of the battle and bring about the victory for the benighted king.

In this context, the following dialogue between the two British captains is significant:

Ist Captain: Great Jupiter be praised! Lucius is taken. 'Tis thought the old man and his sons were angels.
IInd Captain: There was a fourth man, in a silly habit, That gave th' affront with them.

(V.iii.)

While they are being so excitedly talked about, none on the British side knows who they are, what their true identity is. On the other hand, they know what they have done and what they have done the it for. The complete ignorance on the part of victorious
side about the identity of the heroes has a double meaning. For one thing, it is a telling commentary on the presumptuousness of human knowledge. For another, it works for dramatic suspense, the final removal of which in the scene of recognition and reconciliation at the end brings about an electrifying illumination.

When we reach the last scene of the play (V.v.), we hear Cymbeline speak:

Stand by my side, you whom the gods have made
Preservers of my throne. Woe is my heart
That the poor soldier that so richly fought
...... cannot be found.

To his query: "No tidings of him?"
Pisanio replies: He hath been search'd among the dead and living
But no trace of him.

We know that Posthumus is very much alive and making in the eyes of his appearance soon. But for the king and others he has mysteriously disappeared. The king shares the others' ignorance about him, about his whereabouts. Nor does he know that among the people standing in front of him now, are the exiled lord and the two missing princes. It is they who have proved to be the preservers of his throne. He sees them and yet does not know their true identity. He speaks to them in a state of ignorance and he does not know it. Answering to the supposed infidelity of
Imogen, we have the supposed absence or non-existence of Belarius, Arviragus and Posthumus even when they are there. Cymbeline is still denied the knowledge that he needs must have to be truly himself and happy. But he is not at the very moment far from it either. Lucius’s commendation of Fidele ("Never master had/A page so kind, so duteous, diligent,/So tender over his occasions, true,/So feat, so nurse-like") touches a responsive chord in Cymbeline who has already taken to the boy and would like to grant him whatever boon he may ask for. The best in Lucius meets with the best in Cymbeline who is fast approaching the shores of knowledge.

When Lucius thought that Fidele who had already won the king’s favour would now work for his master’s release, Imogen’s (Fidele) attention was suddenly and understandably drawn towards Iachimo among the Roman prisoners. Iachimo was wearing the diamond ring he had won off Posthumus. She has a quick word with the king who demands to know how the prisoner had come by that ring. Imogen’s distraction is misconstrued by Lucius.

The boy disdains me,
He leaves me, scornes me. Briefly die their joys
That place them on the truth of girls and boys.

Why stands he so perplex'd?

He cannot make out why Imogen is 'perplexed' and he is himself perplexed. He does her wrong to think that she scorned him. The truth of the matter is that her eyes are rivetted on the ring which she had given Posthumus under oath never to part with it. Lucius' misreading of the situation is of a piece with the essential temper of the play where almost everybody gets everybody else wrong. Now Cymbeline's accosting Iachimo is a means of glancing at the crucial episode of the play (namely, the ascription of faithlessness to Imogen) and serves at once for revelation and reunion.

Iachimo, already a victim of self-laceration, is truly his penitent self and sorrowfully recounts the entire episode in which, to win the bet, he had made Imogen appear unchaste and thus damned her in her exiled husband's eyes.

The peasant-looking Posthumus can hardly contain his revulsion and grief. Imogen, not able to recognise her husband, makes fun of his grief whereupon Posthumus strikes her without realising that he has struck Imogen.
Shall's have a play of this? Thou scornful page,
There lie thy part. (Strikes her. She falls).

The clear-eyed Pisanio is the voice of truth:

O gentlemen, help!
Mine and your mistress! O, my lord Posthumus!
You ne'er kill'd Imogen till now.

(V.v.)

The veil of ignorance that had separated the couple and fouled their relationship is withdrawn and with a shock of illumination they come to know themselves and each other. Imogen's appearance of a serving boy and Posthumus's peasant garb are only the outer symbols of the alienation and ignorance they have suffered from so long. They are now revealed to themselves and to each other in their true selves.

Nor is the moment of knowledge far off for Cymbeline.

If this be so, the gods do mean to strike me
To death with mortal joy.

(V.v.)

As part of the same movement of the dawning of self-knowledge and mutual recognition, Iachimo confronts himself and is revealed to others and so are Belarius, Guidarius and Arviragus restored to themselves and to
the king.

The blinding fog of ignorance and evil takes leave to give way to a tide of knowledge and rejoicing. The wounds are healed.

What Posthumus says to the restored Imogen is symbolic of the Shakespearian view of the final situation in its entirety. It is the view of a restored or resurrected organism following a course of near disaster and death.

Hang there like fruit, my soul,
Till the tree die.

Cymbeline's grateful acknowledgement of the role of providence in shaping things towards the desired end is an acknowledgement of the peculiar fallibility of man and his knowledge which, more often than not, misguides.

Laud we the gods.

(V.v.)

Indeed, the supposed unchastity of Imogen is only one expression of the supposed sufficiency of human knowledge which is more error than truth, more mirage than a true haven.