

'Pervert the present wrath': a Conjecture on *Cymbeline*

The first word of my title has caused some disquiet in editors and commentators, though there is no difficulty in the meaning required or the context.¹ At the end of *Cymbeline* II.iv, Iachimo has just convinced Posthumus, in the presence of Philario, that he has seduced his wife Innogen (or Imogen), and all three exit, though not together, with these words (147-52):²

Posthumus: O, that I had her here to tear her limb-meal!

 I will go there and do't, i'th' court, before

 Her father. I'll do something – [Exit.

Philario: Quite besides

 The government of patience! You have won: 150

 Let's follow him and pervert the present wrath

 He hath against himself.

Iachimo: With all my heart. [Exeunt.

Commentators gloss 'pervert' in 151 with "divert" (Arden², Riverside, Bevington) or "avert" (RSC), or translate it as if it were one or the other ("turn aside", RSC again, NCS, OWC), and we may well wonder why Shakespeare did not write one or the other, since either would scan. Both Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary* and the OED give 'pervert' in this passage it's own sublemma, since this non-pejorative use of the word is apparently unique, not just in Shakespeare, where it otherwise means "to lead astray, to corrupt, to seduce" (Schmidt), but in the English language. Emendation seems advisable. If I agree with Nosworthy (Arden²) that "The proposed emendations 'divert' (Jervis), 'prevent' (Heath) are superfluous",³ it is only because I have a better idea – no, not 'avert' (too obvious).⁴

¹ Unless we wonder why Philario fears suicide where Posthumus promises homicide. However, 'something' with an aposiopesis would naturally imply something more or different than what he has just promised, and suicide is the obvious second choice for a man in a homicidal cuckoldly rage. Murdering a princess "i'th' court, before / her father" is hardly something that anyone could attempt with any great confidence of success.

² Perhaps not quite at the end: some editions (e.g. Nosworthy's 1995 Arden and Warren's 1998 OWC) include Posthumus' immediate reentry and soliloquy as part of II.iv, but most print that separately as II.v. Other textual differences are insignificant or irrelevant.

³ The Wells and Taylor *Textual Appendix* apparently agrees, omitting any note on 'pervert'.

⁴ If the speaker were Iachimo instead of Philario, and if Iachimo were a ruthless Iago aiming at the utter destruction of Posthumus, we could take the odd word choice as revealing something of the speaker's character, but those two 'ifs' are two too many.

‘Pervert’ comes from the Latin verb *pervertere*, with much the same range of meanings as the English cognate, though it doesn’t seem to be used sexually in classical Latin: *vertere* ‘to turn’ + *per* ‘through, thoroughly’ = *pervertere* ‘turn completely around’, hence ‘overthrow’, ‘ruin’, ‘corrupt’, and so on. As it happens, there is another Latin compound of *vertere* whose shades of meaning would be perfect here: the second and third meanings listed in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* are ‘outstrip, outrun’, and ‘forestall, anticipate (often with the idea of preventing)’, and these two things, especially the latter, are exactly what Iachimo and Philario need to do for Posthumus. The verb is *praevertere*, which would come into English as ‘prevert’. Corruption of the rare, if not unparalleled ‘prevert’ to the relatively common ‘pervert’ would have been almost inevitable. Reversal of two letters is a trivially easy error, particularly for so rare a word as ‘prevert’. (How rare? the OED gives a single instance, in Gavin Douglas’ 1513 Scots translation of the *Aeneid*, where it translates Vergil’s *praevertere*.) ‘Prevert’ in *Cymbeline* would thus have been extraordinarily vulnerable to what we might call a trapdoor corruption: one that is easy to make and difficult to recognize. If I had not been reminded of the Latin verb *praevertere* in reading one of Pliny’s letters (3.9) a few days before I first saw the play,⁵ I might not have noticed the incongruity of ‘pervert’ in the context, and thought of the easy remedy on the spot.

Unfortunately, though I think my conjecture “liable, congruent and measurable . . . well culled, choice, sweet and apt” and (if I am not flattering myself) precisely what Shakespeare wrote, I cannot unreservedly recommend that actors and directors actually use it in performances of *Cymbeline*. It would tend to distract the audience with unwelcome and inappropriate connotations or pseudo-connotations. Assuming for the moment that Shakespeare wrote it, the word has been, as it were, ruined, during its long absence from the English language, by being used as a jocular or subliterate mispronunciation of ‘pervert’, most famously in *Dr. Strangelove*, where a stereotypically southern colonel tells the British exchange officer:

“I think you’re some kind of deviated prevert. And I think General Ripper found out about your preversion, and that you were organizing some kind of mutiny of preverts.”

That is not a text we want audiences to think of while watching *Cymbeline*.

⁵ At the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia, one year ago today, as it happens. Pliny uses the word to describe a governor of Spain who “forestalled” (*praevertit*) prosecution for corruption “by dying, whether by chance or suicide, the cause of is death being uncertain though suspicious” (*Letters* 3.9.5, tr. P. G. Walsh).