‘a most curious mantle’: Shakespeare’s late materialities

ABSTRACT:

Considerable attention has been paid to Shakespeare’s late plays since the turn of the millennium, exploring the mechanics of their most prominent features. This essay makes a case for the significance of their distinctive materiality, a consideration of which forces us to pay due attention to both text and performance, and has the potential to get to the heart of their distinctive use of genre, language and temporality. Whilst there have been many interesting local readings of the plays’ props, we lack a general understanding of the function of a more broadly-conceived materiality which aims to explore its function in the creation of their unique effects. Focusing on *Cymbeline*, the essay aims to make some initial suggestions about what ‘late materiality’ might encompass, by what forces it might be constrained, and what it might tell us about the effects of the plays on their audiences – to begin to think through a method by which we might assess its role in the making of these late plays.

KEY WORDS: materiality; emblematic staging; romance; temporality; *Cymbeline*

Significant attention has been paid to Shakespeare’s late plays since the turn of the millennium, in writing which has finally begun to grapple bodily with the specific nature of their oddness. Scholars have largely agreed for some time – perhaps as many as four centuries – on the features that set them apart from his earlier works, lately summarized as ‘the comparative unimportance of character...the fabulous plots and fairy-tale atmosphere...the episodic and putatively undramatic structure of romance...the relative lack of differentiation among speakers...[and] the high degree of fantasy in the late work – the magic of the masque’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Recent analysis has tasked itself with exploring the mechanics of these features, most prominently in trying to pin down their genre, identifying the significance of their position at the end of Shakespeare’s career and their playfulness with temporality, and going back to basics with their language.

The language work in particular has been at pains to develop a holistic view of the operation of the various features of Shakespeare’s verse, seeing its characteristics as aiming at a coherent artistic effect, but also exploring the ways in which that linguistic purpose supports the other elements of the plays. Russ McDonald refers to theatre as ‘a mingling of the verbal and the visual’, and states that scholarship has failed successfully to triangulate ‘ideas, genre, poetry’.[[2]](#footnote-2) This essay argues that there is something important missing here. It makes a case for the significance of materiality as a dimension of the late plays, one deeply interwoven with the verbal and the visual, and extending the triad of ‘ideas, genre, poetry’ to include stagecraft, whilst being implicated in the connections between them. Mediating between text and performance, considering the late plays’ materiality forces us to pay due attention to both, and it has the potential to get to the heart of the curious features of genre, language and temporality which these plays exhibit. Using this provocative new work as a starting point, I aim to make some initial suggestions in what follows about what ‘late materiality’ might encompass, by what forces it might be constrained, and what it might tell us about the effects of the plays on their audiences – to begin to think through a method by which we might assess its role in the making of these late plays. Whilst there have been many interesting local readings of the plays’ props, we lack a general understanding of the function of a more broadly-conceived materiality which aims to understand its function in the creation of their unique effects.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It might be useful to start with an inventory of some of the broad types of material culture which appear especially prominently in these plays:[[4]](#footnote-4) there are the formal, public markers of memory such as statues, monuments, and graves, which are linked through memory and spectacle to scenes of pageantry and procession; there are the large formal set pieces of masque and the descent of heavenly figures; there are bodies – stinking and perfumed bodies, but also limbs and heads which encourage us to think about coherence and separation, and are linked both to clothing and reclothing and to the prints of individuals and the traces which they leave. Also linked to characters as personal things are the jewels and other objects which ensure a constant identity for individuals utterly changed by time and circumstance, and which thereby identify the constants of birth and lineage, but also of value and principle, which anchor the plays.

I focus on *Cymbeline* in what follows, using it as test case for how an analysis of late materiality might work.[[5]](#footnote-5) To look in more detail at the specifics of ‘remarked upon’ objects in the play gives us, as the first prominent objects, the diamond and bracelet which Imogen and Posthumus exchange as love tokens. These are props which appear at various points in the play, as is the box of dubious contents set on its way through the cast by the Queen. Then, attention is drawn to numerous types of clothing, including the linen which stinks on Cloten and ‘proves’ the ‘death’ of Imogen, the ‘doublet, hat, hose, all that answer to them’ which Pisano brings for her to change into in his cloak-bag, the clothing belonging to his master which he brings for Cloten to wear and in which the latter is murdered, and the Italian and then rustic British dress into which Posthumus changes in the last act of the play. Like the clothing, numerous letters, sent back and forwards to mark the space and time between Britain and Rome draw attention to themselves as a category of object. They are connected, through their ability frequently to frustrate honest communication and reliable record, to the pen and notebook with which Iachimo registers Imogen’s chamber. Lesser repetitions are caused by the flowers which are gathered by the Queen’s gentlewomen and strewn over the body of Fidele, and the fetters with which a guilty Posthumus is chained, in echo of his own ‘shackling’ of his wife in her bracelet. Both the trunk and Jupiter’s eagle, thunderbolt and tablet appear only once, but have considerable visual and narrative impact. Other objects are either less prominent occasional props like the taper in Imogen’s chamber, or things mentioned once specifically in the narrative but probably used more widely by the characters, such as the instruments with which Cloten’s hired musicians try to woo her and the pikes and partisans with which the soldiers propose to provide a grave for his headless corpse.

As is already clear in the ways in which I’ve grouped these objects, not only are they repeated types of thing (dress, writing materials), but a significant proportion of *Cymbeline*’s objectsreappear at important points in the play. The diamond and bracelet have the longest trajectory, being most closely linked to the development of the narrative. Introduced in I ii, they form a significant aspect of the crescendo of the final scene of the play, and I will keep returning to them as examples of various types of analysis that we might undertake to ascertain the nature of late materiality. Their centrality to the various aspects of the plot, as tokens of the love between the play’s central couple, is set up clearly and insistently at their first appearance: Posthumus, concerned that he should be going more swiftly as parting in exile is so painful, bids ‘Adieu!’, but Imogen, who desires a more appropriately weighty and meaningful event, begs him to ‘stay a little:/ Were you but riding forth to air yourself,/ Such parting were too petty’. She therefore offers him her diamond: ‘But keep it till you woo another wife,/ When Imogen is dead’ (39-44). Putting it on his finger, Posthumus speaks the inevitably ironic lines ‘Remain, remain thou here,/ While sense can keep it on: And sweetest, fairest,/ As I my poor self did exchange for you/ To your so infinite loss; so in our trifles/ I still win of you’. He continues, reciprocally, ‘For my sake wear this,/ It is a manacle of love, I’ll place it/ Upon this fairest prisoner’(48-54). The explicit discussion of the meaning of the items as symbols of the couple’s relationship ensures that these questions can be revisited in ways that allow the props to cast light on the qualities of Imogen’s and Posthumus’ love and faithfulness throughout the play. In I v Posthumus wagers the ring with Iachimo; in II iv Iachimo gives him the bracelet, and they therefore spend the scene passing the ring between them as Posthumus shilly-shallies between conviction and doubt in an almost comically-excessive focus on exchange: ‘O, no, no, no, ‘tis true. Here, take this too’(106), ‘Very true...Back my ring’ (17-8), ‘’Tis true, nay, keep the ring’ (123), and finally ‘take thy hire’ (129). In the final scene, ‘this ring’ chimes out as a phrase across Iachimo’s incredibly dilated speech which purports to answer Imogen’s initial question ‘Of whom he had this ring’ (V.v.136).

In contrast to this prominent distribution across the play, the Queen’s box of ‘poison’ appears only twice physically on the stage. It enters first in I vi when Cornelius gives it to her and tells the audience that it is not what she thinks it is because he knows ‘her spirit;/ And will not trust one of her malice with/ A drug of such damn’d nature’. It leaves the stage with Pisano, who is told to ‘take it for thy labour’ and as ‘an earnest of a farther good/ That I mean to thee’ (61-6), in other words as present payment and the lure of future patronage, the Queen explaining that she made it herself as a cordial, its power proved as it has revived the king from death five times. In III iv Pisano gives it to Imogen, telling her it will ‘drive away distemper’ if she is sick at sea or ‘stomach-qualm’d’ on land, but after that we only see its effects in IV ii, and hear its history as part of the litany of the meaning of many material things in V v. Here, the explanatory stories which turn a prop into an object which does work within the narrative change each time, playing on the function of containers to protect by concealing their contents, substituting for it their outsides.

The jewellery and the poison box, then, are differently significant within the interpersonal dynamics of *Cymbeline*, but they serve both a common and an aggregative purpose which is well suited to the particular challenges of the late plays. The plays’ largely episodic form, their wide geographical and/or temporal spread and their lack of ‘everyday’ causality leads to a kind of narrative looseness, particularly in *Cymbeline* and *Pericles*, in which the various plots and characters are hard to keep in the audience’s head.Things, then, form stopping points: they pace and shape the narrative by reappearing at different points, giving it, if not a clear shape then at least a sense of the significance of pattern and repetition. These are also, of course, often circular stories which return to the same places and ideas again and again, and gain a great deal of their power and emotional force from doing so. The resurfacing of objects makes for a reiterative process in which things form the milestones in the ‘wide field of possibility’ which romance narratives represent, generating meaning from their physical likeness and verbal reinterpretation.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So what does all this tell us about the late plays’ materiality? How might we, in the light of it, think about late materiality as a part of late style? What would constitute such a materiality, and what paradigms would control its representation? The new work on language in particular pays a detailed, holistic attention to style and effect of the kind which not only offers a potential model for unpacking the fullest possible range of elements of materiality, but also intersects with that enterprise in interesting and useful ways. Russ McDonald, in his book-length study of the verbal structures of peculiarity, adopts a method that connects the micro level of language and the macro level of plot: his interest is in the ‘calibration of dramatic speech to the content and shape of the narrative being staged’, and his method, developed from Gérard Gennett’s narratology, ‘assumes that the smallest grammatical and poetic details not only correspond to larger narrative or dramatic preferences but also serve, especially in the aggregate, as reliable indicators of an artist’s way of apprehending the world’. Such an analysis turns parallels between speech and structure into ‘manifestations...of the same artistic impulse’.[[7]](#footnote-7) This holistic and coherent view of the elements of theatrical representation allows McDonald to trace the relationships between the spaced out events and atomised geographies of the plays and Shakespeare’s ‘narrative amplitude and structural looseness’, his removal of ‘inessential syllables so as to pack the line with weightier words’, or ‘parts of speech that normally tighten relations between parts of a sentence, particularly pronouns’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Meaning is made in and between the gaps, by allowing the mind to connect up the disparate elements of the language: ‘The remaining words transport the listener, by means of allusion, back through the play to other significant moments and phrases.’ In other words, the plays are designed to encourage a sensitivity and develop attention to pattern and repetition – this is their way of making meaning.

We can see the material features of the play as similarly carefully designed to serve this wider interpretive scheme of romance narrative. Helen Cooper, talking about the nature of repetition in *Pericles*, identifies it as ‘not just plot progression, but a process of commentary, or rather overwriting’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Such a strikingly palimpsestic practice highlights the breadth of analysis needed to account for materiality within this form of story: in each case the repetitions are a striking mix of verbal and material qualities. This realisation compels us to explore in some depth the way language intersects with the material features of the staged events – if we can explore how this intersection works then we will truly understand how the plays force their spectators’ attention.[[10]](#footnote-10) We need to nuance semiotic analyses of the relationships between props and language with a sense of the peculiar demands of these late plays’ distinctive uses of both.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In *Cymbeline*, we can observe tiny details of language which attach to the things presented on stage: for instance, the dew which adheres to the ‘violets, cowslips, and the primroses’ (I.vi.83) gathered by the Queen’s ladies in the morning, but also to the herbs ‘that have on them cold dew o’ th’ night’ (IV.ii.284-5) which are ‘strewings fitt’st’ for Imogen’s and Cloten’s graves. The repetition of the dew links the scene in which the ‘poison’ is introduced to the one in which its effects are felt, reminding the audience that it is not mortal, but also patterning the honest cave-dwellers against the evil Queen. Belarius’ final blessing on the boys in the concluding scene, ‘The benediction of these covering heavens/ Fall on their heads like dew’ (V v 351-2) reprises this theme, reiterating their goodness and their substitution for the venomous queen; the resurrection of a previous dynasty in place of the disastrous future promised by Cloten’s putative rule. The box is present twice, but its trajectory in the play is much more extensive. The care with which these plays are constructed suggests that Shakespeare expected audiences to be sensitive to such detailed repetition.

The verbal extension of material things is most obviously foregrounded, and also complicated, in relation to the trunk in which Iachimo enters Imogen’s chamber. First mentioned as a proposition in I vii, it appears on stage very soon afterwards in II ii, only a short comic scene with Cloten later. In I vii it was a home for the ‘plate of rare device, and jewels/ Of rich and exquisite form’ (189-90) which is a present for the emperor, bought by Iachimo as ‘factor’ in France and now travelling through Britain on its way to Rome. This thing in motion is a well-travelled element of political diplomacy, but it is substituted, in II ii, by his body as a deceitful opposite, a thing of underhand and illegitimate peregrination. As the means of entry into Imogen’s chamber, the trunk focuses the scene’s various nested spaces: its microscosmic, materially-present interior giving narrative grounds for the generation of her macrocosmic chamber, which is woven before the audience’s imagination in Iachimo’s detailed description. The materiality of the trunk – its locatedness on stage – guarantees, underwrites what we take at this point to be a straightforward piece of materialising language – Shakespeare’s shorthand for environment which operates in a similar way to his establishment of straightforward environments such as stage darkness.

Whilst this scene represents the triumph of the play’s material creations, then, the work the trunk enables is not primarily as a physical presence but rather as the story which can be told as a result of it by Iachimo in II iv and again in the final scene.[[12]](#footnote-12) In these stories, however, the trunk itself is necessarily erased as the illegitimate vehicle which proves their falsehood. The movement is from prop which permits the generation of a language of description of features which are not staged, but are nevertheless presumed to form its material context, to powerful and compelling description which floats free of its material anchor, and therefore of its guarantees of ‘here and nowness’, of honest reflection of the determining theatrical environment. Such repetitions create a palimpsestic circularity in which material things provide a pattern, but not an exact echo – a repetition which calls veracity into question.

In addition to this set-piece ekphrastic speech in II iv, lesser echoes also circle back to their origins in the trunk, aided by Iachimo’s classicised description of the chamber furnishings. Now quite convinced of Imogen’s infidelity, for instance, Posthumus goes on to examine his own mother’s morality: she ‘seem’d/ The Dian of that time’ (II.iv.158-9), reminding us of the chimney piece; Pisano describes how the slander of her husband’s letter kills Imogen, and ‘outvenoms all the worms of Nile’ (III iv 36), and so takes us back to the hangings. The details of the materials of the chamber become epitomes of behaviour which mediate between aesthetics and morality. If, as has often been said, the late plays as a group exhibit a paucity of extended metaphors, then perhaps these have been replaced by prolonged meditations on things?[[13]](#footnote-13) These insistent echoes show that we have to extend our sense of materiality to include the way words relate to objects and the way narrative thought moves in and out of things and phrases. We need to be able to plot the shape of these connections across the play, but also their hooks in details and words – the places where and ways in which material description adheres to or pulls away from things.

We also need to investigate the broader contexts within and through which these connections between language and things are made – the play’s economic, political and geographic environments. While there is obviously not space to undertake such an analysis here, it might involve, for instance, taking further the important work on geographies of the late plays in order to further examine their influence on characterisation and plot: the way that the air of Britain enfeebles Posthumus in revenge when, as he thinks, he has killed its princess, for instance, or the success Cymbeline’s sons have in turning the day to their advantage in a ‘strait lane’ which was ‘ditch’d, and wall’d with turf’(V iii 7, 14), as their actions were ‘Accommodated by the place’ (V.iii.32). Simultaneously we might follow the connections between props and the type of complex, extended thinking through of different concepts of value which the ring and bracelet occasion in I v: ‘I prais’d her as I rated her: so do I my stone’, Posthumus replies to Iachimo’s taunt, getting the insistently monetary answer ‘What do you esteem it at?’ (75). In many ways this is a conventionally explicit early modern interweaving of monetary and affective worth, familiar from the contrast between Shylock’s idiom and the young Venetians’ speech for instance. But the insistence with which it is developed in this scene, taking in ideas of sale, title to property, pawn, wager, the purchase of rare stuffs from an apothecary, and the drawing of up covenants, articles and records ‘set down by lawful counsel’, all indicate a profound concern with the valuing of things and relationships, and it is an interest which we can follow far beyond explicit discussion of the jewellery too, to Iachimo’s use of the language of the inventory appraiser, a textual-material form familiar to all early modern audience members, to questions of bribery, service, reckoning, rewards and patronage.

An approach to materiality which respects the wider contexts of its circulations would be very much in keeping with developments in the analysis of non-theatrical material cultures. These have helped us to think beyond objects to environments, from things to ‘the large compass of materiality, the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological, and the theoretical; all that which would have been external to the simple definition of an artifact’, as Daniel Miller puts it.[[14]](#footnote-14) This type of anthropological understanding of ‘the material’ as the basis of an individual’s engagement with the world suggests that we explore the mutual processes by which environments and events, actions and experiences are constructed.[[15]](#footnote-15) The late plays have much to teach us about how we might think about ‘materiality’ as a richer substitute for ‘the visual’ which tends to be set against the language of a play, but lacks this sense of active and shaping environment. In the theatre the fabrication of materiality involves, of course, parallel processes of making within and outside the staged narrative, which suggests that the status of the type of representation – its investment in levels and forms of realism or otherwise – will govern the methods by which we might interrogate it.

Their romance roots make the late plays ‘tall stories’, and Kiernan Ryan, following Jonson’s lead, describes their mode as anti-mimetic: ‘a frontal assault on what counts as reality and the tyranny of realism itself’.[[16]](#footnote-16) This artifice militates against one critical move of material culture studies, which explores the meaning of staged objects by gearing their narrative functions to their off-stage significance.[[17]](#footnote-17) But if the late plays steer us away from that relationship between theatrical and everyday materiality, then they steer us towards their own narrative location in the romance tradition, and this provides another key context within which their materiality needs to be understood.[[18]](#footnote-18) Although the majority of the critical discussion of genre has been about narrative and meaning, we also need to explore the role which materiality performs in the genres from which the plays draw, as its principles guide the function of the material environments they produce. Romance brings to the plays the guiding principle of luminous things – objects of wonder and transformation – which punctuate and alter the plot. In Gosson’s sarcastic take on the popular romance tradition, the knight returns ‘so wonderfully changed, that he cannot be known but by some posie in his tablet, or by a broken ring, or a handkircher or a piece of a cockle shell’, making ‘the soul of your plays...mere trifles’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Helen Cooper’s extensive study of the genre gives evidence of various types of trifles: rings which offer their wearers protection, rings given as tokens of recognition which reunite people after a space of time, and rings which turn pale if the beloved is in trouble.[[20]](#footnote-20) In *King Horn*, for instance, the king’s daughter falls in love with an exile (Horn) who is offered refuge in her father’s court and gives him a ring to help him in battle. Such objects also have currency in Elizabethan courtly romances, as David Houston Wood shows in his analysis of Sidney’s *Old Arcadia*: ‘Sidney's romance demonstrates the ways in which strategically ambiguous material objects, such as the magical potion, can productively complicate a work of early modern fiction. Reflecting its function back to the characterisation which is so notoriously absent in a textual sense from the late plays, he sees it ‘formulating for Gynecia a subjective identity and a selfhood consonant less with mere typing than the way in which, in its time and place, it approaches a form of novelistic realism’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Romance might bring to late materiality, then, not only the numinousness of plot shape, but also the value of personal objects; props which are generically disposed to stand for the relationships between individuals and to draw out the qualities of their identities. We might also want to think through the relationship between this ‘romance characterisation’ and materiality through the idea of affordances, where the physical properties of object solicit particular types of response and behaviour.[[22]](#footnote-22)

But the late plays depend upon several theatrical forms in order to make their meaning. Their elite credentials: the fact that some of them were performed at court, the King’s Men’s engagement with indoor theatre, and the representation of masque and masque-like features in particular, have formed what has until recently often seemed a polar opposite to their engagement with the culturally more open and diverse romance forms. David Bergeron defines the technology of spectacle as the ‘intersection of built structures, emblematic costuming, and allegorical purpose’.[[23]](#footnote-23) These types of emblematic staging offer a form of open showing which suggests a distinct temporality of looking. The two-dimensionality of the emblem suggests a different focus for information. Emblems are defined in the *OED* as drawings or pictures ‘expressing a moral fable or allegory’, pictures or objects ‘serving as a symbolical representation of an abstract quality’, or symbols or people who personify, who ‘type’ virtues or qualities. Slower and more durable than the nimble props of romance, they invite the considered interpretative gaze.[[24]](#footnote-24) Like the heraldic device which is one of their expressions, these figured things with particular iconographical meaning need to be puzzled out, a process which Thaisa goes through at length in *Pericles*. They are therefore epitomising figures which gather meaning into themselves, rather than flexible figures which collate the narrative around themselves like romance objects. These two fundamental modes of presentation – the numinous objects of romance and the broad spectacles of pageant and masque – offer different types of focus, different methods of reading, distinct lines of sight and different horizons of interest and attention for their audiences.

Our understanding of the relationships between these two strands in the plays casts interesting light on our sense of the ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ elements of material forms. The plays are insistently generically mixed, inherently flexible in their style and playing locations. David Bergeron has seen spectacle as related to romance as much as masque, for instance: ‘Spectacle does not equal romance, but it certainly contributes to and resides in’ it, he says, and for him ‘Shakespeare’s decision to pursue romance opens his narratives to the supernatural and spectacle’, to which it is linked through its ‘frequent disregard for neat, unfolding narrative lines’.[[25]](#footnote-25) James Knowles, on the other hand, points out that spectacle might not have its roots solely in elite theatrical form: ‘The staging devices in the play, especially the use of descent or flight machinery, derive from the *public* playhouse...the most elaborate Jacobean descents were mounted at the Red Bull, the most downmarket of amphitheatres.’ Juno’s ‘floating deity’ entry ‘particularly common-place in the private hall theatres, such as Blackfriars’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Whilst these insights draw attention to the shape of the interpretive modes I outlined above, they also blur any neat distinctions between their potential audiences of social effects.

There are two aspects to this diversity of influence which are important to the way audiences might apprehend the materiality of the plays. First, emblematic representation is not inherently elite: there were also provincial and metropolitan, sacred and secular pageants of various kinds from which spectators could draw a sense of familiarity with these forms. Knowles and Richards therefore suggest that, ‘rather than simply seeing the spectacular staging as a sign of vapid courtly interests, we should recognise, as contemporaries did, that spectacle might operate in different ways, either *exclusively*, as in the Jonsonian masque, or more *inclusively*, as part of a wider public discourse which itself belonged to the emblematic and visual culture of the period’. Second, then, mixed genres ‘attempt to represent ‘a collective vision’, and ‘culture as a whole’: one characteristic of a mixed genre is ‘its capacity for social ‘inclusion’’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Courtly romances and popular spectacles show that, because these presentational modes are not easily separated by audience status, their politics is not uncomplicated. They can help us to understand the subtle representational methods of popular culture by developingunderstanding of the role of materiality in developing forms that sit somewhat problematically between traditional notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The final issue which we might want to consider as governing the operation of late materiality is in many ways the most obvious one – the question of temporality which is instantly raised in the name which often binds the plays together. The subject of lateness has most obviously and fully been treated by Gordon McMullan, in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, where he lays bare criticism’s investment in a post-Romantic view of the relationship between art works and biography.[[29]](#footnote-29) He points out the decades of tortuous argument in which the tensions between genre and chronology have been exposed, with critics finding refuge within the latter from the need to define the former, and showing that ‘‘Late play’ is anything but a ‘neutral term’’.[[30]](#footnote-30) McMullan’s argument goes a long way to explain both the attraction and repulsion of the plays’ distinctive temporality – for instance the appeal of the luminous futurity of the plays for Kiernan Ryan and the simultaneous abhorrence of a reading which situates them in their direct historical and political context. ‘The word ‘late’, McMullan points out, ‘itself locates the plays strictly in their relationship to a particular authorial chronology, ignoring context’.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is, in other words, a vital part of our getting to grips with how to gauge the import of their materiality.

Other recent work on time and renaissance literature more generally suggests productive ways of bringing that context back into our understanding of the plays’ material temporalities. Lucy Munro, for instance, reads the archaism of a variety of early modern texts as ‘temporal instability...which challenges the stable division between past and present, exploring ways of understanding how works of art resist ‘both linear temporality and periodization’. Her consideration of the work of Annamarie Jagose on the ‘ways in which time might be conceived of as being not invariably linear but “cyclical, interrupted, multilayered, reversible, stalled”’, offers obvious parallels between a more complex understanding of temporality and the shape of romance.[[32]](#footnote-32) Munro’s analysis of the linguistic elements of archaism – in vocabulary, grammatical and metrical forms – sits interestingly alongside Jonathan Gil Harris’ materialist approach to what he calls ‘untimely matter’, or polytemporal objects. Using Serres’ image of the ‘handkerchief of time’, experienced as crumpled up in the hand of the user rather than flattened on the ironing board of measured sequence, he insists that the temporality of materiality renders each time ‘plural and active, without subordinating one to the other’, chronologically remote times touching one another through the object or practice under consideration. His ‘intertheatricality’ is concerned with an explicit working and reworking of theatrical matter, including the actor’s body and, for instance, the smell of theatrical effects.[[33]](#footnote-33) Bringing Munro’s interest in language into conversation with Gil Harris’s concerns with performance practices allows us to consider the widest possible range of material temporalities, investigating how the late plays knit together their foregrounding of archaic mode in narrative choice and presentation (e.g. ancient Britain and Gower as presenter) and the onstage lives of their objects and practices as they unfold and shape narrative time.[[34]](#footnote-34)

We might aim, then, at a holistic temporality of this fuller materiality of the late plays. I have already touched on the distinct temporalities of masque and romance, and the shifting triangulation of verbal meaning and staged objects.[[35]](#footnote-35) This could be extended by paying attention to the origins which the narratives of these plays give to their objects: ‘Look here, love’, Imogen says to Posthumus, ‘This diamond was my mother’s; take it, heart’ (I.ii.42-3). The object begins the new, distributed phase of their relationship, but it also takes us back to a time before the play starts, to Imogen’s origins and the institution of a very different kind of rule without the current queen or Cloten. We hark back, through this rare thing, to a moment which later connects to the stolen sons whose stories the Gentlemen of I i tell, who themselves bury the sleeping Imogen by their supposed mother (singing once more the same song they sang as her funeral), bringing events which precede the ‘late marriage’ of the king into play as an implicit political texture whose material repetitions of personal emotion make political comment. And *Cymbeline* also offers, of course, the ‘curious mantle’ (V.v.362) in which Arviragus was lapped, another object which gives a direct link to the queen his mother as it was made by her. The mantle is a richly symbolic object: a part of solemn procession and signifying high status, it is associated with royalty and coronation, appearing as the historical and political zenith of *Henry VIII* where it stands in visually for the new baby Elizabeth who is ‘richly habited in a mantle’ (V iv, SD).Its ‘curiousness’ partly signifies its foreignness, as the form of a Celtic object which was popular in early modern England but harked back to an ancient British past.[[36]](#footnote-36) But it is also curious because it is more directly out of time in the memories of the characters in this story, as part of a lost past of female labour and love which hints at the metaphorical meanings of mantle made a verb: to cover, to protect and to preserve, all things which this cloth has done to the child’s identity, continuing to mark and to guarantee his status as heir throughout his life outside the court. The mantle is not staged. Belarius says that ‘for more probation’ he can ‘with ease produce’ it (V.v.363-4). Instead, the mole on his neck is apparently shown, making more explicit the way this discovery which lays bare so much of the play’s personal and political history overwrites Iachimo’s listing of Imogen’s bodily feature. In several senses though, the mantle’s status as a potential object looks forward to a future in which such personally and politically resonant things will be staged again in Cymbeline’s new political order, so that they can retell their powerful stories of constancy and care. The mantle, as total covering, intricately wrought, linked to other things and their rhetorical display, offering a biography which is personal and dynastic and looking both backwards and forwards in time, provides an apt metaphor for the power of Shakespeare’s late materiality.

1. Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare’s Late Style*, CUP 2006, p.13; for a summary of the plays’ critical reception see Howard Felperin, ‘Appendix: The fortunes of romance’, in his *Shakespearean Romance*, Princeton, 1972, pp.287-316. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McDonald, pp. 251, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for example Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones’ analysis of Pericles armour in *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, CUP, 2000, pp.258-60 Susan Harlan, ‘’Certain condolements, certain vails’: Staging Rusty Armour in Shakespeare’s *Pericles*’, or Marion O’Connor, ‘”Imagine Me, Gentle Spectators”: Iconomachy and *The Winter’s Tale*, in Dutton and Howard eds., *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works Vol IV*, Blackwell, 2003, pp.365-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Douglas Brewster’s ‘The dramatic life of objects in the early modern theatre’ provides an essential quantitative basis for understanding the way genre shapes plays’ staging of hand props: in broad terms, ‘tragedies tend to have the most props, histories the second greatest number, and comedies the least...The romances pose a special problem’, Harris and Korda eds., *Staged Properties*,p.79. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. All quotations are from J.M. Nosworthy’s Arden edition of the play, 1997 (1955). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dr Johnson, quoted in Stanley Wells, ‘Shakespeare and Romance’, in *Later Shakespeare* ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, 1966, p.55. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. McDonald, p.27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. McDonald, p.87. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. McDonald argues that the audience are given ‘greater cognitive responsibility’ in the final scene of *Cymbeline*, for instance, p.94, because of the ellipsis. The level of thought which critics have suggested these plays require is also instructive. Listening hard involves types of judgement: J.K. Barret argues, for instance, that ‘narrative possibilities (what *might be*), once discarded, exhibit a staying power as what *might have been*’, in *Cymbeline*, and that ‘the process of staging narrative as a kind of action by linking it to interpretation furnishes a meeting point for ethical and aesthetic considerations’,‘The Crowd in Imogen’s Bedroom: Allusion and Ethics in *Cymbeline*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 66:4 (2015), 440-62, 441, 456. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a detailed investigation of such approaches see Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London, 1980, 2002); for their relation to other modes of analysis of theatrical props see Douglas Brewster, p.68. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a though-provoking account of the relationships between these scenes and Shakespeare’s manipulation of ‘allusion’s ability to shape narrative time and to negotiate the complex temporalities that impact the interpretive choices it prompts’, see J.K.Barret, quote at 442. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A.R.Braunmuller, in ‘Shakespeare’s Late Style’, identifies in Posthumus’ response to his vision ‘a meditation on the failure of analogical thinking and definition both staples of argument in Shakespeare’s earlier plays’, in Jonathan Post ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare’s Poetry*, OUP, 2013, 43-61, quote at 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Daniel Miller, ed. *Materiality*, Duke University Press, 2005, p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a summary of the importance of this kind of work for early modern studies, see Richardson, Hamling and Gaimster eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Routledge, 2016, especially Introduction and Section 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Felperin. Ryan ed., 15; Adam Zucker states that ‘it is necessary to see the ludicrous as potentially luminous’, ‘Late Shakespeare’, in Arthur F. Kinney ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare*, OUP, 2011, pp.352-70, quote at p.362. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It problematises the connection between props’ ‘twin citizenship in a timeless world of formal illusion and a diachronic universe of material labour and transformation’ as, incidentally, does their progress through a theatrical narrative which is anything but ‘timeless’, Jonathan Gil Harris, ‘Shakespeare’s Hair: Staging the Object of Material Culture’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52:4 (2001), 479-91. It is nevertheless the primary mode of much criticism of early modern drama, including my own *Shakespeare and Material Culture*, OUP, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. On the plays’ generic status see Barbara Mowat who, at the end of a careful consideration, concludes that the late plays ‘are part of a larger family of dramatized romances, that they “submerge us in romance”, and that they present highly sophisticated versions of an old form of tragicomedy with native rather than Italianate roots... deliberate transformations of very old forms that appear in new guises as part of the King’s Men’s repertory, in competition with the more Italianate, courtly forms produced by Shakespeare’s fellow playwrights’; she calls them tragicomic romances. Barbara A. Mowat, ‘”What’s in a Name?” Tragicomedy, Romance, or Late Comedy’, pp.129-149, quote at p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially chapter 3. As Cooper points out, these jewels are not magical in the technical sense: ‘[w]hat saves [the couple] is their total faithfulness and courtesy towards each other, and the ring does nothing except epitomize the absoluteness of their love’, pp.149-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. David Houston Wood, ‘“[A] Deathful Suck”: Passions, potions, and poisons in Sidney's *Old Arcadia*’, *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 28:2 (2006), 150-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See for instance see Julka Almquist and Julia Lupton, ‘Affording Meaning: Design-Oriented Research for the Humanities and Social Sciences’, *Design Issues* 26 (2010): 3-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bergeron, p.196. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. ‘As spectacle complements state and majesty in masques and pageants’, Bergeron concludes, ‘so it completes romance in Shakespeare’s last plays’, p.213. Others would argue with this notion of perfection and completeness, and with the univocal politics which appears to lie behind it: ‘the politics of the Stuart royal family permeates Shakespeare’s Romances’, he stated in 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Bergeron, p.195. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Knowles, ‘Insubstantial Pageants: *The Tempest* and masquing culture’, pp.108-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Knowles and Richards, quoting Colie, p.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For important recent work on high, low and middling cultures see Hadfield, Dimmock and Shinn eds., 2014, especially Intro and Chapter 5, Visual Culture. Felperin reminds us, for instance, that ‘*Pericles* seems to have become a byword for box-office success’, p. 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. He states that, ‘prior to the latter years of the eighteenth century, the idea of late writing as we understand it now did not exist, that it was invented as a by-product of the emergence of the Romantic idea of individual stylistic development and thus of the newly reconstructed direct relationship between life and work’, McMullan, CUP 2007, p.192. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. McMullan, p.78. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. McMullan, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lucy Munro, *Archaic Style in English Literature 1590-1674*, CUP, pp.13, 5; ‘Archaism, the “Middle Age” and the Morality Play in Shakespearean Drama’, *Shakespeare* 8:4 (2012) 356-67, pp.359, 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Gil Harris, ‘The Smell of Macbeth’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58:4 (2007) 465-486. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Other interesting responses to material temporality which should be part of such an enterprise include Chloe Porter’s *Making and Unmaking in Early Modern English Drama*, MUP, 2014, with its focus on construction, fragmentation and wholeness and its questioning of concepts of a finished object, Philip Schwyzer’s *Shakespeare and the Remains of Richard III*, OUP, 2013,which traces the way material artefacts carried traces of the story of Richard III from his death to Shakespeare’s writing, and Lina Perkins Wilder’s *Shakespeare’s Memory Theatre*, CUP, 2010, which considers the way characters construct an often contested past, prompted by objects, from ‘theatrical materials’, thereby aligning themselves ‘with the social and professional world of the theatre as much as, if not more than, with the fictional world of the plays in which they take shape’, p.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It would also have to take account of an ‘essential property of the late style that has not been accorded adequate notice: pace’, as McDonald sees it, not metrically but in terms of speed of thought. This is not, he says, ‘pace in the metrical sense...but rather speed of thought, the celerity with which our minds are expected to process multiple poetic effects and ideas...Shakespeare supplies fewer details about the metaphoric likeness he proposes and expects the audience to make the transference more rapidly’, p.36. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Elizabeth Wincott Heckett, ‘Tomb Effigies and Archaic Dress in Sixteenth-Century Ireland’, in Richardson ed., *Clothing Culture*, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 63-76 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)