



4-1998

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Recommended Citation

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**"Who is't can read a woman?":
Shakespeare's Cymbeline and the Renaissance Woman**

**Nicole Williams
Senior Research Honors
April 1998**

The temple
Of virtue was she; yea, and she herself.
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My queen, my life, my wife! O Imogen,
Imogen, Imogen!
Cymbeline¹ (5.5.220-23, 226-27)

At the end of Shakespeare's Cymbeline, the villainous Iachimo unravels the sordid details of his scheme to convince Posthumus that he has "enjoyed the dearest bodily part of [his] mistress," and Posthumus is struck with the horrible realization that he has commanded the murder of his innocent wife (1.4.40-1). Referring to his wife as a "temple / Of virtue," Posthumus laments that he has destroyed Imogen's physical body, a holy space that contained a pure and righteous spirit. To his great relief, he discovers moments later that his wife is still alive and that the beauty of both her body and her spirit has not been marred.

This connection between Imogen's physical body and spiritual being represents a central theme throughout Cymbeline. Imogen's body becomes the primary source of conflict in the play when Posthumus and Iachimo wager on her chastity. Imogen is falsely accused of adultery, but the extraordinary strength and virtue of her spirit eventually disprove the defamation of her body. The relationship between Imogen's body and soul also functions on a thematic level in the play, defining a model for human relationships that insists humans connect on both a physical and a spiritual level. In fact, Iachimo testifies to Cymbeline that he "was taught / Of your chaste daughter the wide difference /

¹ The text used for all quotations from Cymbeline is the The Pelikan Shakespeare edition, printed in 1979.

‘Twixt amorous and villainous” (5.5.193-5), suggesting that Imogen imparts a lesson on human love that can reform even the most villainous characters.

Imogen, like many of the women in Shakespeare’s plays, displays a depth of characterization that has captured the attention of audiences for centuries. Shakespeare’s female characters continue to engage our imaginations, as demonstrated by the overwhelming abundance of contemporary criticism focusing on these fictional women. Many critics continue to debate Shakespeare’s personal opinions about women and the nature of gender relations. But, as Irene Dash states, it is not only very difficult to determine the playwright’s own attitudes toward women, but also unnecessary for understanding and appreciating the female characters that he created.

[H]e recorded what he saw and heard with such extraordinary skill that his works, probing motivation for human action, continue to challenge interpretation. . . . For, despite their apparently nonpolemical nature, Shakespeare’s dramas address issues, even if obliquely, about the human struggle. And this includes, of course, the struggles facing women as well as men. (Women’s 17)

In his plays, Shakespeare “recorded” the world of Renaissance England, a society that fastidiously investigated and questioned its surrounding universe. So naturally, “[o]ne would expect the astonishing cultural impetus of the Renaissance to encompass ideas about women” (Dusinberre 1). The fictional world of Cymbeline reflects the world of Renaissance England and, as a result, the heroine of the play is placed not only in the center of the plot , but also in the center of the contemporary debate on the nature of

womankind. Writers of the time filled page after page with instructions and advice on the proper methods of fashioning and preserving the ideal Renaissance woman -- her mind, her body, her soul, and her social status. As a product of Renaissance society, Imogen is constructed in the context of this ideal woman, and, through her characterization, Shakespeare stages the “reality” of female experience and examines the relationship between a “real” woman and the writers and texts that define the “ideal” woman.

Imogen cannot be reduced to a simple textbook case of the Renaissance woman, but many aspects of her character reveal that she is indeed a reflection of these ideals. Shortly after the banished Posthumus arrives in Rome, he finds himself in the middle of an argument over Imogen’s character. He proclaims that Imogen surpasses the women of all other nations in her beauty and virtue and that she embodies all the qualities that the Frenchman lists as the marks of a true lady. She is “fair, virtuous, wise, chaste, constant, qualified, and [not] attemptable” to men’s seduction” (1.4.53-4). Imogen, who maintains her fidelity to her husband, yet silently suffers through accusations of adultery, proves herself to be “the truest princess/ That ever swore her faith,” as Iachimo affirms at the end of the play (5.5.147). Indeed, Imogen personifies the ideal Renaissance woman that Ruth Kelso reconstructs in her Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance, based on the literature of the time period. She demonstrates the “virtues of chastity, humility, piety, and patience under suffering and wrong,” as well as “the suppression and negation of self” (Kelso 36). Kelso’s observations about the ideology behind this image of the proper female provides an interesting framework for not only recognizing Imogen’s characterization and her relationships with others but also for understanding the structure of the play as a whole.

Traditionally, Cymbeline has been identified as one of Shakespeare's "problem" plays. Critics argue that its fragmentary style and its overt artifice (especially Jupiter's descent and the rapid succession of revelations that neatly sum up the end of the play) evidence Shakespeare's declining skills as a playwright. Also, many critics are puzzled by the play's genre; most define the play as a tragicomedy, yet it also contains elements of romance and historical narratives. D.R.C. Marsh observes that "Cymbeline has remained something of an ugly duckling," citing Dr. Samuel Johnson's opinion of the play as "unresisting imbecility" and "too gross for aggravation" (8). Likewise, G. Wilson Knight states that "the play is not . . . easy of approach" because it incorporates a multiplicity of disparate elements and themes (129). Cymbeline, clearly not Shakespeare's 'tidiest' plays, certainly demands an imaginative response from its audience.

One of the play's most problematic features is its setting. Many critics have considered why Shakespeare chose to set the play in the reign of Cymbeline. Robin Moffet cites a passage from Holinshed's Chronicles that describes the reign "Of Kymbeline, within the time of whose government Christ Jesus our saviour was born" (207), as Shakespeare's source for this material. Moffet argues that by setting the play in the time period just before Christ's birth, Shakespeare can

show the straits into which men have fallen as a result of sin, error, and misfortune, followed by a supernaturally effected restoration and reconciliation which will be both an imperfect analogue of the full

restoration to come and a fitting preparation and greeting for the divine child soon to be born. (208)

However, as Patricia Parker notes, Cymbeline contains “deliberate achronicity -- a flattening out of two historical times into the single space of the stage,” because the play “superimpos[es] a ‘jay of Italy’ [3.4.49] like Iachimo -- and language suggestive of a bourgeois setting of Italian and English Renaissance merchants -- on a plot and scene that are . . . set at the time of Augustan Rome” (“Romance” 190). Furthermore, Hugh Richmond contends that the juxtaposition of pagan and Renaissance elements offers an “advantage for an Elizabethan playwright forbidden by government policy to handle biblical material directly” and allows Shakespeare “to comment on Christianity’s contributions to civilization more subtly and discreetly” (130). Cymbeline loosens historical boundaries by juxtaposing these two eras, and it refuses to let its viewers settle comfortably into a certain moment in time. Instead, Shakespeare prompts his audience to compare and contrast different junctures of history.

This juxtaposition of pagan and contemporary societies in Cymbeline can also be associated with the way the play defines gender and gender roles. Ruth Kelso argues that “the ideal set up for the lady is essentially Christian in character, and the ideal for the gentleman is essentially pagan” (25). Kelso notes that women are taught to focus on “the inner life of the individual” and are praised for passivity and “the suppression and negation of self” (24, 36), while men are taught to focus on “self-expansion and realization” and admired for their active pursuit of authority (36). This distinction is

evident in a passage from Juan Luis Vives' Instruction of a Christian Woman. Vives writes,

a man needeth many things, as wisdom, eloquence, knowledge of things, with remembrance, some craft to live by, justice, liberality, lusty stomach, and other things more that were too long to rehearse. . . . [B]ut in a woman no man will look for eloquence, great wit, or prudence, or craft to live by, or ordering of the commonweal, or justice, or liberality. Finally no man will look for any other thing of a woman, but her honesty [chastity], the which only, if it be lacked, is like as in a man, if he lack all that he should have.

For in a woman, the honesty is in stead of all. (106-7)

The nature of Posthumus and Imogen's marriage responds to this design since Posthumus' worth is increased by "marrying his king's daughter" (1.4.12), while Imogen's is decreased by "foil[ing] / . . . herself with a base slave" (2.3.121-2). Posthumus promotes his value and social status because he is now "weighed rather by her value than his own" (1.4.13). But Imogen demotes her value because, as Kelso explains, "[I]f a woman of high birth married with a plebeian she . . . lost her own nobility" (34). The exchange of individual worth between Posthumus and Imogen suggests that the gender criterion outlined by Kelso applies to the structure of their marriage.

In contrast to most of Shakespeare's plays, Cymbeline begins, rather than ends, with a marriage. By reversing this convention, Shakespeare immediately focuses on the foundations of this religious and social institution and exposes the troubles that can result

from married life. Imogen, the new bride, does not settle into an abode of domestic bliss, but rather she is subject to

A father cruel and a stepdame false,
A foolish suitor to a wedded lady
That hath her husband banished. O, that husband,
My supreme crown of grief, and those repeated
Vexations of it! (1.6.1-5)

Carol Thomas Neely notes that marriage is a central issue in many of Shakespeare's plays as it functions as "a focus for tensions and reconciliations between the sexes" (1). She also contends that the marriage theme is inextricably tied to gender roles in the plays, especially for women because it

is the social context that centrally defines the female characters in Shakespeare's plays; with few exceptions their conflicts, crises, and character development occur in connection with wooing, wedding and marriage. Their roles and status are determined by their place in the paradigm of marriage -- maiden/wife/widow -- which likewise governed the lives of Renaissance women. (2)

By opening the action with a chaotic, condemned marriage, Shakespeare turns this "paradigm of marriage" inside out and investigates the ideology that shapes this institution.

Imogen is clearly in love with her husband and willing to sacrifice a great deal for their love. However, she refers to her husband as her "love" and "heart" (1.1.111, 112)

and also her “supreme crown of grief” (1.6.4), suggesting that Posthumus is a source of both happiness and despair. Imogen’s contradictions reflect a common theme found in Renaissance marriage tracts -- marriage can be “a very Paradise” yet it is also an “estate [that] doth outwardly bring more trouble” (Whately, Care-Cloth 3, 40). This opposition corresponds to the Reformation debate between Catholics and Protestants about the nature of marriage, an important issue for Renaissance England. Protestant preachers like William Whately attempted to reconcile their notion of marriage as a holy and sanctified institution with passages from the Bible,² traditionally used by the Catholic Church to advocate a life of celibacy. To counter Catholic claims, Protestant writers interpret such passages not as a complete denunciation of marriage, but rather as a warning of the difficulties involved in joining the flesh and spirit of a man with the flesh and spirit of a woman. According to the “Homily of the State of Matrimony,” the source of these difficulties is linked to the nature of womankind:

For he [St. Paul] saith more, that the woman ought to have a certain honor attributed to her, that is to say, she must be spared and borne with, the rather for that she is the weaker vessel, of a frail heart, inconstant, and with a word soon stirred to wrath. (16)

Here the “Homily” differentiates between the biological and emotional nature of men and women and uses these distinctions to blame the trials of married life on women.

The problems of Posthumus and Imogen’s marriage draw attention to gender stereotypes used in the Renaissance paradigm of marriage to assert that the wife is the

² A commonly cited passage is St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: If thou marriest, thou sinnest not; and if a virgin marry, she sinneth not, but such shall have trouble in the flesh (7:28).

weaker partner in both body and spirit. In the first scene of the play, a gentleman of the court reveals that Imogen is not to blame for the problems in her marriage. He pins the fault on Cymbeline and the Queen and admits that the entire court sympathizes with Imogen: “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” (1.1.12-5). Despite all this chaos and distress, Imogen retains her hope that the love she shares with Posthumus will prevail and that they will some day be reunited. She assures Posthumus that she can “abide the hourly shot / Of angry eyes” knowing that “there is this jewel in the world / That I may see again” (1.1.89, 91-2). Posthumus’ servant, Pisanio, also praises her physical and spiritual stamina, observing that “[s]he’s punished for her truth and undergoes, / More goddess-like than wife-like, such assaults / As would take in some virtue” (3.2.7-9). Furthermore, even though she is physically separated from her husband, she believes that she can connect with him in spirit. She tells Pisanio that she can be with Posthumus “[a]t the sixth hour of morn, at noon, at midnight” because then they can commune “with orisons, for then / I am in heaven for him” (1.3.31-3). In other words, Imogen proves to be a patient, persistent woman who believes that the spiritual bond she shares with her husband transcends the separation of their physical bodies.

Imogen’s concept of marriage as a physical and spiritual union represents a common doctrine found in Renaissance marriage treatises. In his Praise of Matrimony, Erasmus defines marriage as “the privy and wonderful conjunction of the divine nature with the human body and soul” (74). He also argues that the connection between husband and wife is the most sacred bond between human beings:

For what thing is sweeter than with her to live, with whom ye may be most straightly coupled, not only in the benevolence of the mind, but also in the conjunction of the body? . . . with our wife we be coupled with most high love, with permixtion of bodies, with the confederate band of the sacrament, and finally with the fellowship of all chances. (82)

Imogen echoes these ideas when Pisanio tells her that Posthumus believes she is guilty of adultery. Imogen is convinced that she has lost that ‘most high love’ that she shared with Posthumus, and, when this spiritual connection is destroyed, she asks that her physical body also be destroyed. She tells Pisanio,

I draw the sword myself. Take it, and hit
The innocent mansion of my love, my heart.
Fear not, ‘tis empty of all things but grief.
Thy master is not there, who was indeed
The riches of it. Do his bidding, strike! (3.4.67-71)

For Imogen, the sacred and physical bonds of her marriage are inextricably bound, yet she values her spiritual connection with her husband more than her own body. When she is separated from her husband, she attempts to handle the problems by distancing herself from her physical being and by concentrating on the spirit of their love -- “Love’s counsellor should fill the bores of hearing, / To the smothering of the sense” (3.2.57-8). Furthermore, when she learns that she is accused of adultery, Imogen denounces the body as a site of deception and betrayal; she is convinced that Posthumus has been tricked by “[s]ome jay of Italy, / Whose mother was her painting” (3.4.49-50), and she states that

“[a]ll good seeming, / By thy revolt, O husband, shall be thought / Put on for villainy, not born where’t grows, / But worn a bait for ladies” (3.4.54-7). She recognizes that the body -- both male and female -- can be masked by false appearances, so a love based solely on a physical union is insincere and untrustworthy. Moreover, it is this distrust of physical appearances that allows Imogen to maintain belief in her marriage. She understands that Posthumus could have been tricked, so she listens to Pisanio, who is convinced that his “master is abused. Some villain, / Ay, and singular in his art, hath done you both this cursed injury” (3.4.121-3). Imogen heeds Pisanio’s advice, and, determined to save her marriage and reunite with her husband, she masks her own physical appearance with male clothing -- “Though peril to . . . [her] modesty” (3.4.153).

Posthumus’ commitment to the bonds of marriage and his faith in their love fail to match his wife’s. Unlike Imogen, Posthumus is tricked by appearances when Iachimo presents Imogen’s bracelet and describes the mole under her breast as “corporal sign[s] about her” (2.4.119). Even though Philario points out that Iachimo’s evidence “is not strong enough to be believed / Of one persuaded well of” (2.4.131-2), Posthumus quickly loses faith in his wife’s vows and insists that “[s]he hath been colted by him” (2.4.133). Posthumus is fixated on his wife’s body, and, as a result, he is fooled by appearances. Cynthia Lewis points out that in Cymbeline “love based on sight can only come to ruin, as does Posthumus’s, because the concrete things of this world are mutable and because human vision is too short to perceive anything other than this world” (356). Pisanio realizes that his master has been easily deceived because Posthumus’ anxiety about Imogen’s physical body overwhelms his faith in Imogen’s virtue and in their love:

O master, what a strange infection
 Is fall'n into thy ear! What false Italian,
 As poisonous tongued as handed, that prevailed
 On thy too ready hearing? Disloyal? No.

.

O my master,
 Thy mind to her is now as low as were
 Thy fortunes. (3.2.3-6, 9-11)

Pisanio implies that not only has Posthumus allowed his senses (physical *and* intellectual) to be warped by Iachimo's lies but he has also demonstrated that Imogen surpasses him in intelligence and spiritual worth, just as she does in social status.

Imogen's superiority clearly conflicts with the idea that the husband is the head or the leader of the wife. In his collection of marriage treatises, Of Domesticall Duties (1622), William Gouge argues that if a wife is wealthier than her husband, their marriage will be chaotic and dishonorable because "she will looke to be the master, and to rule him: so as the order which God hath established will be cleane perverted: and the honour of marriage laid in the dust. For where there is no order, there can be no honour" (190). Further, Whately informs women that they must acknowledge their husbands' predominance in all matters:

[T]he wives judgement must be convinced, that she is not her husbands equall, yea that her husband is her better by farre. . . . If ever thou purpose to be a good wife, and to live comfortably, set downe this with thy selfe.

Mine husband is my superior, my better; . . . If the wife doe not learne this lesson perfectly . . . there will bee wrangling, repining, striving, vying to be equall with him, or above him; and thus their life will be but a battell, and a trying of masteries. A wofull living. (Bride-Bush 36)

Imogen's higher status is a source of conflict in the play, and, despite her efforts, it does lead to "wofull living." Posthumus reveals that he is very much aware of his wife's status and of his own position below her -- "I my poor self did exchange for you / To your so infinite loss" (1.1.119-20). Cymbeline is also very aware of this difference, as he separates Posthumus and Imogen to preserve the nobility of his bloodline and chastises Imogen because she "took'st a beggar, wouldst have made . . . [his] throne / A seat for baseness" (1.1.141-2).

Like her father and her husband, Imogen recognizes the difference in status between Posthumus and herself, but, unlike the men in the play, Imogen does not view her marriage as something that decreases her own worth. She does not determine a human being's worth in terms of wealth or social authority, but rather in terms of inner virtue and intellect. She degrades her own value and elevates her husband's by describing Posthumus as a "man worth any woman; overbuys me / Almost the sum he pays" (1.1.146-7). Here Imogen focuses on Posthumus' dedication to their marriage, arguing that his worth is demonstrated by his willingness to sacrifice for their love and to suffer through Cymbeline's punishment. Imogen also attempts to detach her marriage from the materialistic world, and she declares that she would trade all her worldly wealth and prestige for a simple life with her husband. Soon after her separation from Posthumus,

she states, “Would I were / A neatherd’s daughter, and my Leonatus / Our neighbor shepherd’s son” (1.1.148-50). She regrets that her brothers were stolen from the court as children, leaving her the sole heir to the throne of Britain because “[t]hen had my prize / Been less, and so more equal ballasting / To thee, Posthumus” (3.6.76-8). Thus, Imogen repudiates her own material worth because it is an obstacle in her marriage, and she will readily sacrifice her position as the most wealthy and powerful woman in Britain to be reunited with her husband.

In contrast to Imogen, Posthumus translates his marriage into a material transaction and demonstrates that he is not willing to sacrifice his own physical and social well-being for his spouse’s sake. Posthumus tells Iachimo that Imogen is “a thing not for sale, and only the gift of the gods” (1.4.77-8), yet moments later he accepts Iachimo’s wager on Imogen’s chastity. By betting on “the honor of . . . [his] mistress” (1.4.88), Posthumus assigns a material value to Imogen. Imogen is appraised in financial terms as Iachimo negotiates the conditions of the wager: “If I come off and leave her in such honor as you have trust in, she your jewel, this your jewel, and my gold are yours” (1.4.142-4). Thus, Imogen’s body, like the diamond ring and Iachimo’s money, is a prize for the winner of the bet. According to Lawrence Danson, Posthumus’ behavior identifies him as one of “Shakespeare’s jealous husbands . . . [who] discover the pathos and panic of male sexuality within a marital economy of masculine possessiveness” (69). By objectifying Imogen in this way, Posthumus attempts to mark Imogen as his possession and thus to take her ‘off the market.’

Based on this “marital economy,” Posthumus’ ego and his own reputation are wounded by this assault on Imogen’s chastity because he is convinced that Iachimo has stolen his possession. Posthumus tolerates this threat to his own property and honor for only a short period of time before exclaiming that Imogen “hath *bought* the name of whore thus dearly” (my emphasis, 2.4.128). Furthermore, Posthumus refuses to suffer through this humiliation, but rather he orders Imogen’s execution, insisting that Imogen must sacrifice her life for the damage done to both of their names. Imogen herself recognizes that Posthumus is the one who is truly responsible for jeopardizing their reputations, but she must bear the burden of her husband’s mistakes. She tells Pisanio that the amount of suffering she withstands is “no act of common passage, but / A strain of rareness” (3.4.92-3) because she is an innocent “lamb” placed before “the butcher” (3.4.97).

The aftermath of the wager fits into a pattern that emerges throughout the play: Posthumus initiates turmoil within his marriage, and Imogen is forced to suffer the consequences. In fact, Imogen reveals that the marriage started in this manner because Posthumus “didst set up / . . . [her] disobedience ‘gainst the King . . . [her] father” (3.4.88-9). Yet Imogen is left to face Cymbeline’s “wrath” and is “penned up” according to his commands (1.1.135, 153). Posthumus behaves like a coward throughout most of the play, which is perhaps why J.M. Nosworthy describes him as “one of the dullest of Shakespeare’s heroes” (x). Nosworthy also notes that Posthumus disappears from the action on stage during the third and fourth acts, a fact which I read as structural evidence of Posthumus’ habit of shirking the responsibility for his mistakes. When Posthumus

does reappear in the fifth act, he is finally ready to admit his own culpability and to accept the consequences of his mistakes. He states, “Gods, if you / Should have ta’en vengeance on my faults, I never / Had lived to put on this [his order for Imogen’s death]” (5.1.7-9). He is even prepared to give up his own life for his transgression: “[S]o I’ll die / For thee, O Imogen, even for whom my life / Is every breath a death” (5.1.25-7).

Posthumus proves himself worthy of Imogen’s devotion only in the last act of the play. As Homer Swander points out, Posthumus’ transformation is motivated by Imogen’s extreme honor, which persists even when he believes she is guilty of adultery:

The fact of her sin, so far as he knows at the beginning of Act V, remains; she is still a woman that convention gives him every right to kill. But her essential virtue, now remembered, shatters his traditionally all-consuming dread of living an unavenged cuckold. (“Blameless” 268)

Posthumus forgives Imogen for her unfaithfulness because he believes that her virtue and spirit somehow transcend the most heinous crime a woman can commit with her body -- adultery. Vives describes an adulteress as a “false wretch [that] doth not keep it to thine husband, which ought to be more dear unto thee by right than thyself” (Instruction 113).

Vives asks

What greater offense can they do; or what greater wickedness can they infect themselves withal that destroy their country and perish all laws and justice, and murder their fathers and mothers, and finally defile and mar all things both spiritual and temporal? (113)

Thus, Posthumus' change of mind suggests the incredible strength of Imogen's spirit because it outweighs the most abominable deed a wife can commit. Posthumus, who was once determined "to tear her limb-meal" (2.4.147), eventually declares that Imogen has "wry[ed] but a little" (4.4.5) and seeks repentance for his excessive and violent behavior.

While Posthumus persistently creates discord in his marriage, Imogen displays the power to heal and restore their relationship through her quintessential virtue. In this respect, Imogen embodies the ideal wife, whom William Gouge describes as a being specifically designed by God "to be an helpe meet for man" and to "nourish and cherish" the "one flesh" of husband and wife (245). But Posthumus, on the other hand, represents the deficient husband, as outlined in the "Homily of the State of Matrimony," who forgets that "the woman is a frail vessel" and that he is "made the ruler and head over her, to bear the weakness of her in this her subjection" (22). In other words, it is assumed that the wife will create problems within the marriage, so it is the husband's duty to prevent dissension by patiently bearing with his wife's faults. The husband is warned that disagreements between himself and his wife are "grievous" and "intolerable" because "she is thy body and made one flesh with thee" ("Homily" 23). However, these roles are reversed in Posthumus and Imogen's relationship. Imogen, not Posthumus, is "the leader and author of love in cherishing and increasing concord" in their marriage ("Homily" 16). As Philario observes when Posthumus erupts into a violent rage after hearing the evidence against Imogen, Posthumus is "[q]uite besides / The government of patience" (2.4.149-50). In other words, Posthumus demonstrates that he is not worthy of being the "head" of this marriage, a fact that is vividly illustrated when Imogen mistakenly

identifies Cloten's dead body as Posthumus'. Karen Bamford suggests that Cloten functions as Posthumus' double; at the time of Cloten's death, he is "dressed in Posthumus' clothes, acting out their shared desire for a violent sexual revenge" (54). Imogen finds the body and exclaims, "From this most bravest vessel of the world / [has been] Struck the maintop. O Posthumus, alas, / Where is thy head? Where's that? Ay me, where's that?" (4.2.319-21) Cloten is the one actually punished for his actions, but his decapitated body and Imogen's reaction intimate Posthumus' own imperfections.

With Imogen as the leader and protector of this relationship, the play presents a version of marriage that contradicts the ideology that shapes the Renaissance paradigm of marriage. William Gouge summarizes the fundamental idea that lies beneath this paradigm when he compares the husband to Christ:

His place of eminencie, and authority requireth, that he should be to his wife, *a guide*, which title is expresly given to him by the holy Ghost, to teach him to goe before her, and by his example to instruct, and incite her to doe her dutie. What a shame would it be for a man who is *the Image and glory of God, the head of his wife*, in the same place to her that Christ is to his Church, to be provoked by his wives wive-like carriage (she being the weaker vessel, under him, to learne of him) to love her? (413)

This line of reasoning insists that it is God's design for a wife to be subservient to her husband because he is her spiritual leader and instructor. Thus, by reversing these attributes in Posthumus and Imogen, the play undermines one of the fundamental arguments used to differentiate genders and to subject a wife to her husband's authority.

For example, Vives explains that “in wedlock the man resembleth the reason and the woman the body. Now reason ought to rule and the body to obey if a man will live” (115). But Imogen proves herself to be more rational and spiritually stronger than her husband, who remains fixated on the human body and its desires (especially in his irrational tirade against all women, including his mother, when he states that “[w]e are all bastards” [2.5.2]). By reversing these gender stereotypes, Cymbeline shakes the very foundation on which Renaissance marriage treatises are based: the writings of St. Paul. The Church of England’s “Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” instructs new brides with St. Paul’s “short lesson: ‘Ye wives submit your selves unto your own husbands as it is convenient in the Lord’” (9). Vives also quotes Paul to support his argument that a wife is subject to her husband’s rule: “Also St. Paul sayth the head of the woman is the man,” and also “A woman hath no power of her own body, but her husband” (Instruction 113, 115). In contrast to these Renaissance texts, Shakespeare obviously did not base his conception of male and female character on these ‘time-honored’ generalizations.

In the context of Ruth Kelso’s argument about the ideology that shaped gender roles in the Renaissance, Posthumus and Imogen’s ‘irregular’ version of marriage challenges the basic structure of the ‘regular’ Renaissance version of marriage. Kelso suggests that masculine virtues are based on a pagan value system, while feminine virtues are based on Christian principles -- a division that definitely corresponds to Posthumus and Imogen’s characterizations. Renaissance marriage treatises repeatedly quote Christian discourse as evidence that the husband, who resembles Christ as the spiritual leader and savior within his marriage, must maintain authority over his wife; however, the worth of

the individual Renaissance man is determined by his capacity “to ensure his pre-eminence, enhance his authority, the essence of Aristotelian magnanimity,” and not by Christian values like “humility, piety, . . . [or] patience under suffering and wrong” (Kelso 36). The virtue of the individual Renaissance woman, on the other hand, is weighed by this Christian concept of morality, which urges “the suppression and negation of self” (Kelso 36). Thus, the Renaissance woman is repressed by Christian discourse within both her marriage and her own self. The Renaissance man, however, is granted authority within marriage by Christian discourse, yet he is not constrained by this system of morality as an individual. By exploiting the contradictions between Posthumus and Imogen’s relationship and the ideal marriages described by these treatises, the play exposes the contradictions between the gender molds designed for men and women as individuals and the pattern designed for the relationships between men and women. The incongruity of these ideologies materializes through Posthumus and Imogen’s characterization. Cymbeline stages the story of a woman who proves her individual virtue through trials and persecutions, yet is subject to the authority of a husband who is clearly her subordinate. As a result, the audience, like one of the Lords of the court, sympathizes with Imogen’s unjust repression -- “Alas, poor princes, / Thou divine Imogen, what thou endure’st” (2.1.53-4).

Shakespeare presents a version of marriage in Cymbeline that does not correspond to most of the discourse on marriage found in Renaissance texts. The play exposes a gap between these texts and the “real” relationship between Posthumus and Imogen. Suzanne Hull states that the proliferation of books written specifically for women during the

Renaissance suggests that education was available for an increasing number of women; but, as she points out, these books were written by men: “Thus the sizable body of literature concerning women depicts them according to men’s views of them. . . . Men’s writing was *prescriptive* and *proscriptive*, but not always *descriptive*” (Women 21, 23). Moreover, Joan Larsen Klein indicates just how pervasive these texts were. She explains that Vives’s Instruction of a Christian Woman,

originally composed in Latin, ... was translated into English, French, German, Italian, and Castilian. Its English translation went through nine editions to 1592, and was probably the most influential Renaissance treatise on the education of women in England and perhaps in Europe. (xi)

These texts define traits of femininity from a male point of view, and, as a result, they project what men desire women to be (or not to be). Nevertheless, Hull suggests that these proscribed qualities very much influenced the way a Renaissance women viewed herself and the world around her. After all,

[t]o flout the norm was to court criticisms, or worse. Punishments, such as wearing the scold’s bridle, or whippings and dunkings, were embarrassingly public. Conformity, then, was the easier route for women. And plenty of advice on how to conform was available. (Women 22)

In other words, even if a woman refused to accept these models of femininity as a way of understanding her sense of self, these standards created by male writers still shaped her life in that they determined the social standards by which she was evaluated.

Even Imogen -- the princess of Britain, known for her intelligence and social prestige -- articulates such rules for women's behavior and apologizes to Cloten (with very questionable sincerity) when her own behavior violates the rules: "I am sorry, sir, / You put me to forget a lady's manners / By being so verbal" (2.3.104-6). Imogen also identifies the paradox that these standards create for women when she tells Cloten, "But that you shall not say I yield being silent, / I would not speak" (2.3.94-5). Patricia Parker explains that "female speech or mouthing" is a conventional attribute of an unvirtuous woman in misogynist texts because it is not only "the infuriating opposite of Silence" but it is also "inseparable from the vice opposed to the corresponding virtue of Chastity" (Literary 26). In other words, if women speak out against these rules that constrain them, they automatically violate the 'silence is a virtue' rule, and, even worse, they are suspected of "unbridled sexuality" (Parker 26). But, as Imogen points out, the silence of women can also be interpreted as acquiescence, so women must speak out if they want to defend themselves against the verbal and physical assaults of misogynists like Cloten, who plans to "penetrate her with" music and "with tongue too" (2.3.13, 14). Women are caught in a trap of language, described by Constantia Munda in The Worming of a mad Dog (1617):

Nay, you'll put gags in our mouths and conjure us all to silence; you will first abuse us, then bind us to the peace. We must be tongue-tied, lest in starting up to find fault we prove ourselves guilty of those horrible accusations. The sincerity of our lives and quietness of conscience is a

wall of brass to beat back the bullets of your vituperative scandals in your own face. (253)

Munda's statement reveals that women are denied access to language as a means of expressing the truth of their experience; in fact, language is an adversary for women because it can be used as evidence against them or as punishment -- a lesson obviously learned by Imogen, who is described at one point as "a lady / So tender of rebukes that words are strokes, / And strokes death to her" (3.5.39-41). As a result, women must communicate silently, through their actions and their bodies.

The act of reading the female body, however, is also problematized in the play. For instance, when he learns of the Queen's plot to kill him, Cymbeline asks, "Who is't can read a woman?" (5.5.48). And Posthumus clearly misreads Imogen's body when he accepts "some corporal sign about her" as definitive proof that she has committed adultery. Gazing upon Imogen as she sleeps, Iachimo also demonstrates that the female body can easily be manipulated according to male desires -- "Ah, but some natural notes about her body / Above ten thousand meaner movables / Would testify, t' enrich mine inventory" (2.2.28-30). Both Posthumus and Iachimo attempt to "read" Imogen, yet Imogen herself has no control over their interpretations of her body. Valerie Traub argues that a "masculine imposition of silence, and more particularly of stasis, on women is connected . . . with a fear of chaos associated with the sexual act" (216). In this context, the men in the play project their own anxieties onto the female body rather than perceiving the reality of Imogen's character and recognizing her unquestionable chastity. In fact, Posthumus vividly imagines a carnal scene between Iachimo and Imogen, in

which Iachimo, “[I]like a full-acorned boar, a German one, / Cried ‘O!’ and mounted” (2.5.16-7).

Imogen’s chastity lies at the heart of conflict in Cymbeline. When Iachimo untangles his web of deceit at the end of the play, he tells Cymbeline, “Your daughter’s chastity -- there it begins,” revealing that this issue sets the entire plot in motion (5.5.179). When Iachimo raises doubts about Imogen’s chastity, he unleashes a power that turns the world of the play upside down. Iachimo invades Imogen’s bedroom and surveys Imogen’s sleeping body, an act that Karen Bamford describes as a “mock-rape” because “he ‘steals’ her honour, just as a rapist ‘steals’ the chastity of the woman he rapes” (53). Iachimo himself recognizes that he has set the world of the play into a state of chaos by preying upon Imogen’s innocence: “Though this a heavenly angel, hell is here” (2.3.50). Furthermore, Posthumus falls into this ‘pit of hell’ created by Iachimo when he accepts Iachimo’s “tokens” as absolute proof of Imogen’s unfaithfulness (5.5.203). When Iachimo describes the mole under Imogen’s breast, Posthumus responds, “Ay, and it doth confirm / Another stain, as big as hell can hold, / Were there no more but it” (2.4.139-41). Posthumus suggests that female sexuality is an evil, uncontrollable force that goes beyond not only the female body but also the bounds of worldly order.

The “hellish” female body that Posthumus imagines, however, stands in stark contrast to Imogen, “that paragon” of virtue (5.5.147). Imogen never performs the act of which she is accused; rather, she staunchly defends herself from Iachimo’s attempted seduction, telling him that he “[s]olicit’st here a lady that disdains / Thee and the devil alike” (1.6.147-8). She is dumbfounded by Posthumus’ accusations and devastated by his

order for her execution, asking Pisanio, “What is it to be false? / To lie in watch there and to think on him? / To weep ‘twixt clock and clock?” (3.4.40-2). Both Imogen and the audience know that Imogen has preserved her body, “the innocent mansion of . . . [her] love,” for “its master . . . who was indeed / The riches of it” (3.5. 68, 70-1). Like Imogen, we never doubt her chastity, so we see her body as space filled only with love for her husband -- definitely not the place of hell envisioned by Posthumus. This divergence draws attention to the difference between the true, chaste Imogen and the adulterous Imogen created by Iachimo’s words and conceptualized in Posthumus’ imagination. In other words, the play reveals that this notion of uncontrollable female sexuality is clearly a construct of a male imagination.

Imogen’s chastity is a constant throughout the play, and it alters only within Posthumus’ mind. He expresses the utmost confidence in Imogen’s chastity when he first makes his bet with Iachimo, but this confidence quickly erodes when Iachimo returns from Cymbeline’s court. His original assertion that her chastity “is not a thing for sale, and only the gift of the gods” changes to his claim that his wife has been “above measure false!” (1.4.77-8, 2.4.113). Homer Swander compares Shakespeare’s version of the wager story to earlier accounts and notes that “Shakespeare’s hero alone capitulates to the relatively weak force of the token” (“Blameless” 263). In this manner, Shakespeare signifies that Posthumus is not as confident in his wife’s chastity as he would like people to believe. In Act V, Posthumus confesses that he reacted like a “most credulous fool, / Egregious murderer, thief, anything / That’s due to all the villains in past, in being, / To come!” (5.5.210-13). Posthumus finally admits that he -- not Imogen -- is wholly

responsible for the slander of her reputation. Imogen remained “[t]he temple / Of virtue” (5.5.220-1), but his anxiety distorted his perception and led him to ‘misread’ the signs of her body.

Posthumus’ anxiety raises interesting questions about the status of Posthumus and Imogen’s marriage. The married couple is obviously not happily settled into a state of domestic bliss: Imogen is “wedded” but “imprisoned,” and “[h]er husband banished” (1.1.7-8). Carol Thomas Neely describes this state of disrupted marriage as one of Shakespeare’s “broken nuptials,” a situation that reveals the “anxieties, desires, and conflicts of the couples who enter into marital unions as well as the external pressures placed on these unions by parents, rulers, [and] the community” (1). In the opening scene, a gentleman from Cymbeline’s court explains that the newlyweds were separated by the king, but he does not state the amount of time that passed between the couple’s marriage and separation. However, his choice of words questions whether or not Posthumus and Imogen have had an opportunity to consummate their marriage. He refers to Posthumus as “he that hath her -- / I mean, that married her” (1.1.17-8). Also, after Iachimo convinces him that Imogen has been unfaithful, Posthumus recalls in anger that “[m]e of my lawful pleasure she restrained / And prayed me oft forbearance -- did it with / A pudency so rosy” (2.5.9-11). The text, which seems to be intentionally ambiguous on this matter, forces the audience to do the same thing that many of the characters in the play do -- to pry into the private relationship of Posthumus and Imogen. The couple’s sexual relationship is open to general speculation as people both inside and outside the world of the play attempt to fill in the gaps of this marriage that appears incomplete. This type of

public probing is a rather emasculating activity, which helps to explain Posthumus' insecurities.

The act of reading Imogen's body is further problematized because her marital and sexual status is open to question. According to Erasmus, a fully consummated marriage entails "the privy and wonderful conjunction of . . . the human body and soul" (74). Also, William C. Carroll states that

the hymen is an ultimate threshold, a barrier to men, marking the fall into sexuality, the transition from maiden to woman, the making of the virgin not. The hymen's liminal status gives it an enormous symbolic importance as a construct of patriarchal discourse. (110-11)

As a married woman who could still be a virgin, Imogen is certainly within a liminal state, a position that is subject to male rhetoric. Consequently, she is vulnerable to a man like Iachimo, a self-proclaimed "master of . . . [his] speeches" who is "singular in his art" of manipulating language (1.4.131, 3.4.122). In a sense, Imogen is 'possessed' by Iachimo through his language, at least in Posthumus' eyes. According to Lawrence Danson, Posthumus remembers Imogen's "chaste refusal" of his advances and is filled with a jealous rage, which "opens a space both between Imogen and Posthumus and within Imogen herself, a space filled now not with erotic tension but with the anxiety of Posthumus' inability to know her appetites and intentions" (76). In other words, Posthumus' faith in Imogen's chastity crumbles when he hears Iachimo express Imogen's body in language that has been denied to Posthumus.

During the course of the play, Imogen discovers that she is repeatedly betrayed by male discourse. At the beginning of the play, Imogen is filled with excitement and hopefulness at the thought of receiving a letter from Posthumus. She tells Pisanio, "If he should write / And I not have it, 'twere a paper lost / As offered mercy is" (1.2.2-4). But after reading Posthumus' letter to Pisanio that accuses her of adultery and orders her death, Imogen removes Posthumus' other letters from her bodice and asks,

What is here?

The scriptures of the loyal Leonatus

All turned to heresy? Away, away,

Corrupters of my faith! You shall no more

Be stomachers to my heart. (3.4.80-4)

Pisanio describes the destructive power that language can possess after Imogen reads Posthumus' letter: "What shall I need to draw my sword? The paper / Hath cut her throat already. No, 'tis slander, / Whose edge is sharper than the sword, whose tongue / Outvenoms all the worms of Nile" (3.4.32-5). Also, when Imogen misidentifies Cloten's dead body as Posthumus, she believes that Pisanio has tricked her and that she has once again been betrayed through language. She exclaims, "To write and read / Be henceforth treacherous! Damned Pisanio / . . . with his forged letters -- damned Pisanio" (4.2.316-8). By this point, Imogen has lost all faith in words because she can no longer trust them.

Imogen's conflict with language relates to her distrust of physical appearances. The words that betray her the most are the words of Posthumus and Iachimo, who attempt to control her physical body through language. For example, the clinching evidence of

Iachimo's argument is the mole on Imogen's breast, which he describes as "a voucher / Stronger than ever law could make" (2.2.39-40). But, as discussed earlier, Imogen refuses to accept the body as the basis of truth because she realizes that physical appearances are deceptive. Likewise, language based on physical appearances is deceptive. According to Karen Newman,

In the early modern period, the female body is the site of discourses that manage women: by continually working out sexual difference on and through the body, the social is presented as natural and therefore unchangeable, substantiated, filled with presence. (4-5)

The distance between the "real" Imogen and the Imogen portrayed by the male discourse in the play testifies that the social constructions of the female gender are *not* substantiated, but rather they are driven by men who attempt to articulate the female body according to their own emotions and desires. For example, Posthumus' vehement monologue on the vices of female nature clearly is not based on a logical argument, because he makes broad generalizations about women based on faulty evidence against his wife. He goes so far as to accuse his own mother of adultery, claiming that "[w]e are all bastards" (2.5.2), and he refers to women as the source of all evil because "[a]ll faults that man may name, nay that hell knows, / Why, hers, in part or all, but rather all" (2.5.27-8). He even admits that his words have a malicious intent: "I'll write against them, / Detest them, curse them" (2.5.32-2). Posthumus, a man fixated on the female body, demonstrates that writings that define gender stereotypes are often based on personal experiences and emotions rather than objective truths.

Throughout the play, male characters attempt to control Imogen through their words and to establish their authority with language. When Iachimo invades Imogen's bedchamber and gazes upon her sleeping body, he attempts to gain power over both Imogen by memorizing the details of her body. Patricia Parker describes the signification of a masculine 'blazon' of the female body, a literary convention which conveys an "inventory or itemizing impulse" that corresponds to "the motif of taking control of a woman's body by making it, precisely, the engaging 'matter' of male discourse, a passive commodity in a homo-social discourse or male exchange in which the woman herself . . . does not speak" (131). When Imogen does speak to Iachimo, she makes it perfectly clear that she will never give him access to her body. But, as she sleeps, the voyeuristic Iachimo controls her body by breaking it into fragments; he refers to her lips as "[r]ubies unparagoned" and her eyelids as "windows, white and azure-laced / With blue of heaven's own tinct" (2.2.17, 22-23). Iachimo cannot possess her entirely, so he creates metaphors for certain parts of her body, hoping that these individual metaphors will function as synecdoches that will signify the whole when he recounts them to Posthumus. As a result, the individual signs of Imogen's body are manipulated and taken out of context, so these metaphors do not link back to her complete body or the actual circumstances. With his blazon, Iachimo undermines the integrity of male discourse, demonstrating how language can be manipulated to suit masculine desires.

The play also draws attention to the way human beings read or interpret particular signs of the body when Imogen disguises herself as a male page named Fidele. Pisanio distinguishes between male and female traits when he advises Imogen to

forget to be a woman; change
 Command into obedience, fear and niceness --
 The handmaids of all women, or more truly
 Woman it pretty self -- into a waggish courage;
 Ready in gibes, quick-answered, saucy, and
 As quarrelous as the weasel.

.

and forget

Your laborsome and dainty trims. (3.4.155-60, 164-5)

Here Pisanio outlines external marks of gender, and he also emphasizes the fact that Imogen's disguise is merely a representation of a male. He tells her, "[M]ake yourself but like one" (3.4.168), and tells her to fashion her behavior "with what imitation you can borrow" (3.4.172). However, according to Pisanio's account of male and female qualities, Imogen is a poor "imitation" of a man. Comparing Imogen to Shakespeare's other cross-dressed heroines, Michael Shapiro notes, "Unlike Julia, Portia, and Rosaline, who display or discover assertive strength only when they don male disguise, Imogen is a far more assertive presence before she puts on the page's costume" (177). Indeed, when Imogen is in her usual feminine attire, her behavior resembles Pisanio's description of male qualities. For example, she speaks to Cloten in a very bold, witty manner when she scorns his attempts to woo her: "By th' very truth of it, I care not for you, / And am so near the lack of charity / To accuse myself I hate you -- which I had rather / You felt than make't

my boast" (2.3.108-11). However, Imogen's dynamic, forceful attitude disappears when she dons her male disguise.

Imogen's femininity is surprisingly more pronounced when she pretends to be Fidele. For instance, Imogen, the princess of Britain, is associated with the court, but Fidele is positioned within a domestic sphere when "he" is taken in by Belarius and her long-lost brothers, Guiderius and Arviragus. Belarius tells Fidele, "For you must be our housewife" (4.2.45). Despite her masculine exterior, Imogen's brothers seem to recognize her femininity. Guiderius confesses to Fidele, "Were you a woman, youth, / I should woo hard but be your groom in honesty" (3.6.69-9), and he later refers to Fidele as a "sweetest, fairest lily" (4.2.201). Imogen's outermost layer is the only sign she carries that marks her as a man, which suggests that her representation of masculinity lacks any real depth. Consequently, the audience is made aware that this is a version of gender filtered through the opposite gender. And a Renaissance audience would have experienced even more layers of gender -- a male actor portraying a female character pretending to be a male page -- which further emphasizes the different traits that are usually thought to identify gender. The cross-dressed Imogen demonstrates that one gender's interpretation of the other gender is based on a limited perspective and fails to convey the true depth of the other. Gender traits, such as those assigned to the ideal Renaissance woman by male writers, are portrayed in the play as a series of external signs that are detached from an individual's internal being.

The act of reading and manipulating gender signs was a recognized process for Renaissance England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. According to Constance

Jordan, Elizabeth carefully controlled images that identified her gender and sexuality in order to obtain and preserve her political power. She states that “Elizabeth had reason to promote -- that is, to allow to be created if not actually to commission -- works of art that provided the imagistic possibilities of the legal fiction of a second male body” (161). Elizabeth wanted to convey her authority as a “female prince,” but literal representations of the Queen as an androgynous being would have been “grotesque” and “comic”; however, “allegorical representations of the attributes and virtues of persons and types were . . . an accepted feature of the cultural language of Elizabethans, who were adept at figurative interpretation” (171-2). Interestingly, *Cymbeline* includes a possible connection between Imogen and Queen Elizabeth. Rowena Davies notes that Iachimo refers to Imogen as “th’ Arabian bird” (1.6.17), and she argues that

the Phoenix image of the Princess Imogen may likewise be a veiled allusion to the former Queen . . . who, for reasons personal and political, had cleverly appropriated to herself the qualities and attributes of the famed Arabian bird -- its chastity and excellence. (138-9)

To expand Davies’ argument, I suggest that, like Elizabeth, Imogen is a sign for this process of differentiating between external signs and the internal being. Iachimo alludes to Imogen as the Phoenix when he first meets her, stating that “[a]ll of her that is out of door most rich! / If she be furnished with a mind so rare, / She is alone th’ Arabian bird” (1.6.15-7). Iachimo implies that physical beauty does not necessarily reflect inner virtue, that external signs, such as prescribed gender traits, are distinct from internal characteristics.

Imogen's physical appearance shifts from one set of gender signs to another during the course of the play, a process which illustrates the instability of gender as a text that describes an individual's true character. In contrast to Pisanio's catalog of gender traits, Imogen is not a frail, simple-minded woman, and, likewise, "Fidele" is not a saucy, antagonistic man. As a result, Imogen disproves the gender stereotypes without falling into the language trap described by Constantia Munda. As Munda suggests, the "sincerity" of Imogen's life and the "quietness of [her] conscience" controvert the negative stereotypes that men use to suppress women (Worming 253). Imogen does not berate the men who devise these generalizations, so words, those "corrupters of . . . [her] faith" (3.4.83), cannot be used to substantiate their misogynistic arguments.

In this manner, Imogen establishes a quiet, yet powerful, way to communicate her faultless virtue. To return to Munda's statement, the silence of women is not necessarily passive; it allows women to defend themselves and also to return the fire -- "to beat back the bullets of . . . [their] vituperative in . . . [their] own face" (Worming 253). Indeed, Imogen's method of communication functions as both a defensive and an offensive mechanism. Imogen is sheltered by her quietness, but she also discovers a way to write her own text to counter male discourse. Furthermore, Imogen teaches the men around her how to read a woman's 'text' properly. Imogen's spiritual goodness inspires both Posthumus and Iachimo to change the way they perceive and evaluate women. For example, in Act I, Iachimo contends that all women are depraved, deceitful creatures who are ruled by their physical lust: "If you buy ladies' flesh at a million a dram, you cannot preserve it from tainting" (1.4.125-6). But in Act V, he concedes that Imogen is "[t]hat

paragon,” and admits that his own physical and spiritual being has been influenced by Imogen, “[f]or whom . . . [his] heart drops blood and . . . [his] false spirits / Quail to remember” (5.5.193-5). Also, as suggested earlier, Posthumus forgives Imogen’s physical transgressions based on his memory of her spiritual eminence. Disguised as a Roman soldier, Posthumus is captured and imprisoned. At this moment, he is prepared to sacrifice his own life in repentance for Imogen’s murder, and, for the first time since their separation, he attempts to communicate with Imogen on a spiritual level. He prays to the gods, asking, “If you will take this audit, take this life / And cancel these cold bonds. O Imogen, I’ll speak to thee in silence” (5.4.27-9). Thus, through her example of spiritual virtue, Imogen instructs these two men on the proper method of perceiving and judging a woman’s character. Imogen’s mode of communication removes (or at least reduces) the primary obstacle -- the body -- that interferes with women’s efforts to express themselves. Throughout the play, male characters experience anxieties, deceptions and misperceptions based on their attempts to read the female body, and Imogen quietly suffers through their misguided and inadequate readings. However, Imogen’s quietness does not reduce her to a passive, subservient female, but rather it elevates her to a position of instruction and authority.

Imogen ultimately guides her husband to a realization of their spiritual connection, and she restores his faith in their marital vows. Imogen is truly the spiritual leader of this marriage, an obvious contradiction to William Whately’s assertion that in order “to maintaine a familie . . . the man [performs] as Gods immediat officer, and the King in his family: the woman as the Deputie subordinate, and associate to him, but not

altogether equall” (Bride Bush 16). And Imogen does succeed in “maintaining” her marriage by inspiring Posthumus’ transformation. Homer Swander points out that the couple is reunited only after “Posthumus experiences a conversion sufficiently profound to make him worthy of Imogen” (“Blameless” 266). Posthumus must live up to Imogen’s standard in order to construct a healthy, productive relationship, because “a worthy couple: one worthy of another: being both alike in such excellent qualities, they could not but reape each from other much comfort, and profit every way” (Gouge 191). According to Cynthia Lewis, Posthumus’ understanding of love finally parallels Imogen’s at the end, a love that “rests of faith alone” and that “transcend[s] the strictures of human law [and] of rational systems” (356, 361). To extend Lewis’s idea, this is a love that transcends the laws of marriage outlined in Renaissance texts and the rationale used to subject a wife to her husband’s command.

The text that truly describes the nature of Posthumus and Imogen’s relationship is a text that literally transcends the limitations of the temporal world. While dreaming in his jail cell, Posthumus is visited by the ghosts of his father, mother and older brothers, who plead with Jupiter to “[t]ake off his [Posthumus’] miseries” (5.4.86). Jupiter “*descends in thunder and lightening*,” explains that “[h]e shall be lord of Lady Imogen, / And happier much by his affliction made,” and lays a tablet “upon his breast” (s.d., 5.4.107-8, 109). When Posthumus awakes and discovers the tablet, he declares that he is now looking for a message that goes beyond the superficial and illusive figures of the material world: “A book? O rare one, / Be not, as is our fangled world, a garment / Nobler than that it covers” (5.4.133-5). Posthumus cannot interpret this text, which he

describes as “such stuff as madmen / Tongue, and brain not; either both, or nothing, / Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such / As *sense cannot untie*” (my emphasis, 5.4.145-8). Judiana Lawrence notes that Philarmonus, the soothsayer, explains the meaning of Jupiter’s tablet at the end of the play when the “events have confirmed one possible meaning rather than another,” so his reading is based on “insight that only hindsight can provide” (449). In other words, Philarmonus does not conceive a prophesy based solely on mystic insight, but rather he interprets a divine text based on the experiences in the physical world. Without the actual experience of the events described by Jupiter’s tablet, the words fail to signify anything meaningful for the characters. The language of this text is invested with meaning after it is connected to their lived experiences. As a result, it demands a mode of reading that combines both the spiritual and the physical worlds of the play, illustrating that Imogen’s attempt to connect these two realms is finally realized. In the course of events, the lost princes have been restored to the throne, and Imogen “hast lost by this a kingdom” (5.5.373). But Imogen views the change as a gain rather than a loss, telling her father, “No, my lord, / I have got two worlds by’t” (5.5.373-4).

With this conjunction of the physical and spiritual worlds, Posthumus and Imogen have established the groundwork for a marriage that promises to yield an abundance of happiness. Posthumus embraces his wife and tells her to “[h]ang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die!” (5.5.263-4). According to William Barry Thorne, the couple’s reunion signifies the end of a “period of sterility” because the entire kingdom of Britain

profits immensely from the seasonal pulse in human life; the tremendous
good generated by enlargement of the spirit and the vital forces,

symbolized by love and the spring season, floods into the lives of the mature adults as well and revitalizes the community. (146)

Philharmonus pronounces this new atmosphere of regeneration, stating, “The fingers of the pow’rs above do tune / The harmony of this peace” (5.5.465-6). Furthermore, Cymbeline identifies Imogen as the source of this rejuvenating energy: “Posthumus anchors upon Imogen, / And she like harmless lightening throws her eye / On him, her brothers, me, her master, hitting / Each object with a joy” (5.5.393-6). G. Wilson Knight states that this “electric description of delight” illustrates Imogen’s prominence throughout the play (156). He writes,

Imogen interthreads the play’s action, touching all the persons . . . as does no one else; . . . weak but courageous, light as a feather to the winds of chance, but unswerving in her course of faith; fragile yet indestructible; . . . winning her ‘supreme crown of grief’ (1.vi.4) on her road to joy. (156-7)

Knight views Imogen as a victorious heroine who uses her subtle, yet powerful, energy to overcome her obstacles. However, other critics question the notion that Imogen triumphs in the end. Carol Thomas Neely argues that Imogen “is not permitted to take . . . initiative” against threats to her honor nor allowed “to remain central” to the events of the play (180). Likewise, Charles Frey suggests that even though Imogen is “sure, spirited and, at times, independent,” she is “exalted more as a potential wife and father-comforter than as a person in her own right”; as a result, she is ultimately a pawn in the process of constructing a “restored patriarchal society” (302-3). After all, Imogen has proved her intellectual and spiritual capabilities, yet she returns to her role as Posthumus’ “wedded

lady” (5.5.261), and she vows to her father, “My good master, / I will yet do you service” (5.5.403-4).

At the end of the play, Imogen is clearly situated in a male-dominated sphere. The Queen, the only other female character in the play is dead -- a fact which brings joy and relief to everyone, including Cymbeline, who declares, “O, she was naught” (5.5.271). In the final scene, Imogen, still wearing her male clothing, is surrounded by men. Further, with the return of the lost princes, proper order has been restored to the kingdom, which “[p]romises Britain peace and plenty” (5.5.457). These factors suggest that patriarchal authority has been reinstated and that Imogen will be subject to male prerogatives, despite the fact that she has proven herself equal (if not superior) to the men around her.

Imogen’s character questions the ideology of a patriarchal society, but Shakespeare clearly does not advocate a complete dissolution of the system. However, he does propose a revision of the order, a transformation inspired by Imogen. This new patriarchal order is governed by a ‘maternal’ Cymbeline, as he refers to himself as a “mother to the birth of three” and claims that “[n]e’er mother / Rejoiced deliverance more” (5.5.369-40). In his first act as the ruler of this ‘feminized’ patriarchy, Cymbeline agrees to pay the tribute to Caesar even though Britain won the war against Rome, an act that certainly “transcends . . . the rational systems” of a traditional patriarchal world of privilege and politics (Lewis 361). Cymbeline advocates peace and forgiveness over revenge, stating that he has been motivated by Posthumus, who offers mercy to Iachimo: “We’ll learn our freeness of a son-in-law: / Pardon’s the word to all” (5.5.421-2).

However, the initial source of this motivation is, of course, Imogen, who inspires

Posthumus' spiritual transformation and readily forgives her husband for his unjustified lack of faith in her. But Imogen does not speak out on her own behalf; instead, she remains quiet and allows her husband to receive credit for inspiring this movement towards peace. But for those of us who know the truth about Imogen, her silence proclaims the ineffable strength of her spirit.

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