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Who Is't can Read a Woman?: *Cymbeline* and the Renaissance Woman

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Oral Presentation 2.5

WHO IS'T CAN READ A WOMAN?:
CYMBELINE AND THE RENAISSANCE WOMAN

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Critics have often described Shakespeare's plays as "mirrors" that reflect the society of Renaissance England. In my research for Shakespeare's play, *Cymbeline*, I plan to examine Renaissance marriage treatises to compare the model of marriage represented in these texts to the marriage Shakespeare presents in the play. I will argue that the marriage of Posthumus and Imogen in *Cymbeline* reverses many of the generalizations used in Renaissance texts. As a result, Shakespeare does not simply "reflect" the relationships described by Renaissance writers, but rather he examines the duties ascribed to husbands and wives and questions the gender stereotypes used to justify these duties.

The nature of womankind was a popular topic of debate in the Renaissance, and both male and female writers argued their point of view on the matter. However, as Constantia Munda observes in her response to a seventeenth-century misogynist tract, women are trapped by language. If a woman attempts to defend herself with language, the act of speaking is used as evidence against her. In other words, if a woman speaks her mind, it proves that she is a "nag" or a "shrew." Imogen, who clearly contradicts these stereotypes written by men about women, is created in the context of this dilemma between women and language. Comparing Imogen to the representations of women in Renaissance texts, I will examine Imogen's relationship to the texts and language used to define the "ideal" Renaissance woman.