

A Feminist View of Imogen:
Subversive or Subservient?

by

Judith Gero John

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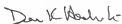
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The Women...haue dublets & Jerkins as men haue...buttoned vp the brest, and made with wings, welts and pinions on the shoulder points, as mans apparel is, for all the world, & though this be a kinde of attire appropriate onely to man, yet they blush not to wear it, and if they could as wel change their sex, & put on the kinde of man, as they can weare apparel assigned onely to man, I think they would as verely become men indeed as now they degenerat from godly sober women, in wearing this wanton lewd kinde of attire, proper onely to man.

It is writtē in the 22 of Deuteronomie, that what man so euer weareth womans apparel is accursed, and what woman weareth mans apparel is accursed also.

(Anatomy of Abuses, Sig. [F5]-[F5]^V).

In quoting this passage from Anatomy of Abuses, by Phillip Stubbes, Linda Woodbridge, in Women and the English Renaissance, notes that writing in 1583, Stubbes viewed cross-dressing as a "deliberate challenge to the immutability of sexual distinctions" (139). She offers evidence of objections throughout English Society

concerning women in trousers. Public printed objections seem to have begun around 1576 with the publication of The Steele Glas (139). It is not unusual, then, since the fashion recurred throughout the next two centuries, that Shakespeare would reflect, in his plays, a fashion which repeatedly raised eyebrows on London streets. What's more, as a playwright, it seems to have been intriguing to him to design roles in which his boy actors, playing women, had an opportunity to play men; moreover, he was able to place these women characters in positions of control which actual Elizabethan women were infrequently able to achieve. It is easy to imagine that plays which featured powerful women disguised as men would be popular when Elizabeth was on the throne, but Shakespeare wrote one of his disguise plays, Cymbeline, after she died when the popularity of the motif might have faded. The idea of a powerful woman would have been distasteful to the misogynist James I especially because of the doubts which Elizabeth created concerning his right of succession. Shakespeare risked offending James I in writing Cymbeline and in creating one of his most powerful transvestite heroines, Imogen.

It may be impossible to prove that Shakespeare himself had a concept of women which might be referred to as feminist, but it does seem that in his plays Shakespeare is often struggling with basic questions concerning

people and relationships, including the role that gender plays in such relationships. Many critics, including Coppelia Kahn, see Shakespeare's plays as dealing with "the expressed and hidden feelings in the human heart."

(1-2) Kahn believes that Shakespeare was a psychologist struggling with the question of identity. If he was interested in human beings and relationships, it seems very likely that his interest went beyond males to a questioning of all aspects of the patriarchal system which suppressed females. I believe that Shakespeare was unique and ahead of his time in exploring the significance of androgynous women. If I am correct, then it should be possible, within the context of his plays, to discover actions and dialogue which specifically reflect the author's radical point of view. In researching this question, I have discovered not only that Shakespeare deals with specific problems concerning women in his society, but also that his view of women changes throughout his career. It becomes obvious that he is struggling with the idea of powerful women; it is somewhat less clear what conclusions he reached.

In all, Shakespeare had five transvestite heroines: Julia (The Two Gentlemen of Verona), Portia (The Merchant of Venice), Rosalind (As You Like It), Viola (Twelfth Night), and Imogen (Cymbeline). These androgynous characters are often the focus of feminist criticism, and

critics seldom agree as to the importance of these characters from a feminist perspective. As a woman reading Shakespeare, I found Imogen to be an especially powerful heroine, and I was astounded to discover that almost no modern critic has spent much time exploring her as a character or as a possible vehicle for Shakespeare's "feminist" leanings. More than any other character, Shakespeare recognizes in Imogen the wasted potential of women in his society. He uses the play to test her--test her courage, her spirit, her sense of honor--just as he might test a male protagonist, and she successfully passes the tests. He judges her against Elizabethan standards of masculinity, as we would not, but this was the only standard which was available to judge any human behavior. Today, we believe that Elizabethan Society considered cross-dressing problematic because chastity was overemphasized, that women were forced to wear disguises in order to participate in life, and that masculine expectations were the sole standard of judgment. We must also accept the Elizabethan patriarchal order as a provisional framework for understanding behavior and expectations concerning behavior at the time. Women who performed intelligently under the conditions which Imogen faced must have certainly been viewed as a challenge to the masculine order. It is significant that Imogen does not act in the same ways as do the heroines of the

comedies. I intend to judge her by the standards already set for women by the dramatist in his comedies. This evaluation will show both Shakespeare's changing view of women and his judgment. of women at the time Cymbeline was written.

Feminist criticism is an elusive creation. In Making a Difference: Feminist Literacy Criticism, edited by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, the joint editors declare that there are

two major foci of feminist scholarship:
 deconstructing dominant male patterns of
 thought and social practice; and
 reconstructing female experience previously
 hidden or overlooked (6).

Nina Baym objects to any criticism being called feminist if it relies on dominant patriarchal themes or methodology. Once, argues Baym, feminist criticism was for and by women, a feminine perspective which was outside the male approach, but now "feminist criticism is working in ground which men have made vogue--Marxist, deconstructionist--building on misogynistic foundations" (45). It is often difficult, with all of the explanations available, to understand how one is to write if one is to be considered "feminist." However, any literature that women read and write about is appropriate to be studied by women. If feminist criticism

is to establish anything, it must assume that there is more than one right way to read, write, or criticize literature. I agree with Elaine Showalter when she states:

While feminist criticism will proceed on both fronts, [both the male prescribed canon and women's texts] this does not mean that we are torn by dissension, but rather that we are enriched by dialectical possibilities (36-37).

Feminist criticism is expanding and stretching out in many different directions. In recognizing this, I became concerned that an in-depth character analysis, especially of a character in a masculine play, might not represent a forward step in feminist criticism. Not only have several brilliant women already discussed Imogen to some extent, but also I feared that character analysis might be passé. I found, however, that few critics, her champions as well as her detractors, take time to examine Imogen carefully, and I found logic in Jane Marcus' comments:

If feminist criticism has taught us anything, it has taught us to question authority, each other's as well as our oppressor's (88).

It is important, however, to review briefly what has already been written concerning Imogen.

In 1885, Lady Helena Faucit Martin published a book

entitled On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters. She was a Victorian actress who played, at one time or another, most of the women in Shakespeare's plays, and Imogen was among her favorites. In fact, Imogen was a Victorian favorite since she possessed the qualities the Victorians expected of women. She was patient and faithful in love, obedient to both husband and father; and, although she spends a great deal of the time in the play dressed as a man, she never denies her gender. It is essentially these characteristics which made her a model of womanhood for the Victorians and Elizabethans alike, but these are the very characteristics which draw criticism from some modern critics. For other critics, she represents, as she does for me, one of Shakespeare's more believable portrayals of a woman; but it is his attitude, in general, which attracts the most attention.

Juliet Dusinberre was one of the first recent critics to write about Shakespeare's attitude towards women; she views him as essentially progressive. She feels that drama, in general, "from 1590 to 1625 is feminist in sympathy" and that "Shakespeare's modernity in his treatment of women has always attracted attention" (5). She finds in many of Shakespeare's women, especially the transvestite heroines of the comedies, a freedom which women had been denied; these women were set free of husbands and fathers and able to articulate their goals and

intelligence (96). But, although she finds this true for the women of the comedies, she is not as certain about Imogen. She does not praise Imogen's cross-dressing nor her ability to control her own circumstances.

The more traditionally feminine the woman the more ill at ease she is in breeches.

Rosalind and Portia thrive on the masculine life where Imogen wilts beneath it (263).

Dusinberre does find subversion of the masculine order in Imogen, but not in a willingness to take control of her own life; rather, she claims that Imogen, like Desdemona, subverts masculine order through patient suffering (91-92). Dusinberre judges Imogen to be passive, and appreciates the role of passive resistance in the history of women's liberation.

Linda Woodbridge challenges most of Dusinberre's arguments. While Dusinberre claims that "disguise freed the dramatist to explore...the nature of women untrammelled by the custom of femininity" (271), Woodbridge counters that

most dramatists...regarded femininity as a matter of nature rather than custom; and as such it could never be sloughed off with clothes. Granted masculine disguise gives heroines certain unwonted freedoms...dramatists saw clearly enough that woman qua woman could

not easily travel alone, plead a case at law, have adventures. It is at least possible, given the spirit and intelligence with which they endowed their heroines that they saw something unfair about these restrictions. But the dramatists insistently remind us that such behavior, however necessitated by emergency circumstances, is unnatural....To advance from this convention [that of the braggadocio] to the perception that the 'true' masculinity and the 'true' femininity of a Rosalind are merely artificial roles is a large step--a step Shakespeare did not take (153-54).

There is one point, however, where Woodbridge and Dusinberre can agree--that Imogen suggests very little about Shakespeare's attitude towards women, and that she does not make a very convincing man:

Imogen in Cymbeline , is ill at ease in her masculine weeds....There are many possible explanations for Shakespeare's abandoning such a cherished plot device, among them is that he recoiled from the sight of real-life women in breeches (Woodbridge 155).

Woodbridge sees Imogen as one of Shakespeare's strong-minded female characters, but she does not feel

that this proves anything about the feminist leanings of the dramatist (213-14).

It matters a great deal how one defines a feminist writer. Shakespeare was apparently dissatisfied with the beliefs concerning women which were popular during his lifetime. At a time when women were viewed according to a virgin/whore dichotomy and female frailty was preached from the pulpit and satirized in popular literature, Shakespeare's plays show that he considered women to be more intelligent, more capable than was defined by his culture. He wrote only one play in which he used the shrew, and even now critics are at odds as to the interpretations which should be given to Kate's final soliloquy. Gertrude is an example of a woman who is ruled by her sexuality, but aside from these questionable examples, Shakespeare seldom resorts to portraying women who fit the Elizabethan stereotype. I view Shakespeare as a feminist because in his plays he was able to move beyond stereotypical images, beyond what most people imagined for a woman in Elizabethan England, and envision women as people.

Judith Cook, investigating Women in Shakespeare in 1980, did not attempt to join the argument concerning Shakespeare's feminist viewpoint, but she did explore the feelings of several actresses towards Imogen. She seems to agree with Ellen Terry and Judi Dench that Imogen is strong and impulsive--a rebel, in fact (81-82). She

implies that Shakespeare gave Imogen spirit because he fell in love with her, contradicting Woodbridge's assertion that he "recoiled" from such women.

Other modern critics have less to say on the subject of Imogen, and much of the latest work ignores the question of Shakespeare's feminism, or the lack of it. There are, however, still important feminist critics of Shakespeare. Lisa Jardine, in Still Harping on Daughters, mentions that Imogen is among several of Shakespeare's heroines who fit the mold of patient Griselda (184); and Angela Pitt, in Shakespeare's Women, says:

The character of Imogen...emerges as complex as any in Shakespeare. Although she bears a similarity to some of the earlier comic heroines..., she seems older than they are, her sensibility shaped by suffering. However, there is an elusive quality about her, perhaps because her significance recedes in the final act (127-28).

Paula Berggren also finds a maturity in Imogen which is lacking in earlier heroines; she finds Imogen to be "less assertive" than the heroines of the other romances, but although she seems confused by the events, "she never lets them defeat her" (28-29). Clara Claiborne Park, however, judges Imogen to be inferior in spirit to the women of the comedies; she is lost without a man to guide

her (107).

Gayle Greene lists Imogen among the strong female characters which save Shakespeare's heroines, as a whole, from Hamlet's curse of frailty (133). And Irene Dash includes Imogen in a list of Shakespeare's strong "attractive, triumphant women" (274). It is unfortunate that one prominent feminist critic, Coppelia Kahn, has said almost nothing about the female characters of the romances, but Carol Thomas Neely says: "Imogen, ...is not permitted to take the initiative in meeting them [threats and challenges] or to remain central" (180).

It is very difficult to understand how one character can elicit such a variety of responses from critics, and yet escape close and careful analysis. The play itself may have chapters in books dedicated to it, but most of the discussion centers on the misogynist attitude of Posthumus, rather than on the heroine. Posthumus is a misogynist, but the play does nothing to support his attitude. Imogen is the central focus of the story, in spite of the title, and it is her point of view which is important throughout most of the play. Imogen does not fade out of the play; she is the central figure--even when she has finished her lines.

Although I disagree with Neely and Pitt as to Imogen's lack of importance, I believe they are correct in recognizing her maturity. Woodbridge's attitude that

Shakespeare treats his female characters as children playing at being grown up makes sense in light of the comedies, but is not an accurate description of Imogen (155). Woodbridge claims that "his obvious good will... keeps the condescension from being offensive. But neither is it feminist." She insists that in Shakespeare "a woman's essential nature...shines through any kind of clothes" (155). This "essential nature" which can be discussed and identified in the comedies is very different in Cymbeline. Shakespeare allowed one of his "children" to grow up, and when she did, she was able to undermine authority and demand justice in ways which the comedic heroines did not. Imogen is not a girl playing grown up or dress up. She is a woman--active, sure of herself, in command. It is possible to compare the actions, attitudes, language, and intentions of Portia, Rosalind, Julia and Viola to those of Imogen and thus identify Shakespeare's changing attitude and the challenges to the patriarchal order of the society and to the Elizabethan notion of the stereotypical woman in his plays.

The objections and arguments concerning transvestite dress increased during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Because in England women were not allowed to perform in plays, the argument often centered on the theatre and the androgynous appearance of the boy actors. The debate was certainly one which Shakespeare had to consider when

writing his plays.

The hermaphrodite, an androgynous creature from Greek mythology, had been adopted by the early church as a symbol of Christ, a symbol of unity and equality for both men and women. As countries gained national (as opposed to religious) identities and as inheritance began to be determined through patriarchal lines, this symbol was no longer useful to the society. Artistic renderings of the hermaphrodite deteriorated from the Christ-like to the grotesque. Ministers and pamphleteers argued that the transvestite actors created unnatural desires in the men in the audience. In the desire to preserve the patriarchal structure of society, this moral crusade increased in fervor, and eventually, in 1642, it was one of the major causes for the temporary closing of the English theatre.

Although it is the androgynous nature of these heroines which continues to attract our attention, we must avoid seeing this as an either/or situation. For Angela Pitt, the use of boy actors was reason enough for Shakespeare to employ the double disguise device. She says:

In terms of impact on the audience Shakespeare must have had the effect of his boys' true identity in mind when he wrote many of his comedies, for six of his heroines change into doublet and hose (168).

Pitt feels that Shakespeare merely recognized that boy

actors could be more effective when allowed to play themselves. If he had stopped writing with the comedies this might prove a more convincing argument. Even the tragedies which followed contained very powerful, almost masculine women (Lady MacBeth for example), but if he felt that boy actors were more convincing as transvestites, then it is doubtful that he would have invested much time in the very feminine roles of Ophelia, or Imogen or any of the other women of the comedies.

Dusinberre, however, sees the transvestite dress of the comedic heroines as an acknowledgement by Shakespeare that women could be and were important members of society.

Acting as a woman disguised as a boy, the boy actor looked all too like himself. The consciousness that they were not dealing with women actors spurred dramatists to discover a femininity more durable than that which might be put off or taken off with a set of clothes (233).

I believe that Shakespeare, when he created Imogen, envisioned a woman who could embody the ideals set by Elizabethan society for both men and women. It is doubtful that the use of boy actors would be of any special importance to an Elizabethan playwright, as Dusinberre suggests, because boys invariably played women's parts on the Elizabethan stage. I agree with Dusinberre that

Shakespeare discovered a great deal about the potential of women, but this could hardly be considered a common occurrence among Elizabethan playwrights. Certainly Marlow, and with few exceptions Jonson, failed to develop female characters with the power or believability of Shakespeare's women characters.

Virginia Woolf, in A Room of One's Own, suggests that Shakespeare's women are real to us because he was able to accept the androgynous aspect of his own nature. This position is more defensible, but should not be used as a blanket statement to include all of his women. While he used transvestite dress for many women, it was not until he wrote Cymbeline that he took care to produce what might be viewed as a positive version of androgyny. His early transvestites provided him with the material he needed to test and reject theories, but the challenge which they posed to prevailing myths about women and the patriarchy were always softened by a complete return to the "proper" male dominant social structure by the time the curtains fell. In fact, his initial experiments may have begun less because of a true interest in the nature of woman than because his own society made use of transvestite dress.

Natalie Zemon Davis in Society and Culture in Early Modern France studies the contemporary use of cross-dressing throughout Europe and discovers that

practice had many uses which could both subvert and reinforce the patriarchal system. Regarding transvestites as reinforcers of order, Davis says:

They can clarify the structure by the process of reversing it. They can provide an expression of and a safety valve for, conflicts within the system. They can correct and relieve the system when it has become authoritarian. But, as it is argued, they do not question the basic order of the society itself. They can renew the system, but they cannot change it....These new forms offered increased occasions and ways in which the topsy-turvey could be used for explicit criticism of the social order...[but] a world-turned-upside-down can only be righted, not changed (130-31).

This use becomes clear in the comedies. Portia reaffirms her love for Bassanio, and she recognizes throughout the play that, once she is married, her independence is lost forever. The entire point of Julia's disguise is to find Proteus so they can marry. Rosalind finally reveals herself to her father so she can be handed over to Orlando. Viola is the only comedic heroine who retains her disguise at the end of the play, but it is due to her passive nature and any challenge she may present is lost in the

heroine's confusion. Imogen does not turn the world upside-down because she does not attempt to become a man; she merely disguises herself as one in order to preserve herself. She can challenge the order because she remains herself in spite of her appearance.

Cymbeline is considered by many to be a problem play. The title of the play leads one to approach it with certain expectations. It seems to be drawn, primarily, from the Holinshed chronicles as were most of the history plays. Cymbeline was a great king from Britain's remote past; and yet, he is far from taking any leading role in the main action. In fact, as far as the action of the play is concerned, he becomes important only in the number of mistakes he makes. From exiling Belarius (Morgan), to marrying a less than suitable second wife, to exiling Posthumus, to refusing to pay tribute to Rome, to leaving his daughter in the care of would-be rapists and murderers, he fails to live up to his expected greatness.

In many ways, the play fits the traditional model of the romance, but, even in this, critics have developed the terms tragi-comedy or serene-romance to describe the odd nature of Shakespeare's last plays. One of the primary reasons new terms were developed has been the nature of the heroine. In the typical romance pattern, the heroine is often very passive, and if, as many critics

believe, part of Shakespeare's story was taken from the fairy tale Snow White, there is every reason to believe that his source also pictured an inactive heroine (Cook 114). Joyce Sexton points out that Shakespeare's sources could have also included the ninth novel, the second day of the Decameron, and the wager plot is very similar to a French miracle play Miracle d'Oton, roi d'Espagne. Shakespeare's heroine, if modeled after any of these sources, would have been quite passive. The heroines wait patiently for assistance from a god or fairy who will restore their good names (61-62). Although Shakespeare remains true to his sources by introducing a deus ex machina, in the form of Jupiter, the god arrives to chastise the misogynist, not to help the heroine. Imogen, crossing the Welsh mountains, fighting with the Roman army, risking her life to expose Iachimo, needs no eagle-riding god to save her. It is through the determination and action of the heroine that the problems are resolved and the play achieves a happy ending. In fact, by setting the play in ancient Britain, it is not inconceivable that Shakespeare implies that if Imogen had remained passive, Rome might have had more influence on England's destiny. It is very probable that some critics who have determined that Imogen is passive may have done so primarily because the play is considered a romance rather than a history.

Even as the play opens, the audience discovers that Imogen has been neither subservient nor submissive. The entire court has been disrupted by her choosing and marrying Posthumus against her father's will, and her audacity has angered her father so that no one in the court is allowed to smile: "(Gentleman): You do not meet a man but frowns. Our bloods / No more obey the heavens than our courtiers / Still seems as does the King's" (I.i.1-3). She is not, however, a rebel trying to upset the social order. She rebels against her father's choice of a husband, but she does not rebel against what she perceives to be her duty as a princess. In the first lines she speaks, she recognizes the difference between choosing her own husband and her duty as heir apparent to the throne. It would be easier to leave and there is no pleasure in staying:

Imogen:	My dearest husband,
I something fear my father's wrath but nothing--	
Always reserved my holy duty--what	
His rage can do on me. You must be gone,	
And I shall here abide the hourly shot	
Of angry eyes, not comforted to live	
But that there is this jewel in the world	
That I may see again (I.i.85-92).	

She recognizes her "holy duty" to her kingdom and her father at the same time she attempts to own herself and

assert her independence. She knows her stepmother is "a fine tyrant," and that her father is to be feared; she would not give up what she perceives to be her duty as a princess for her husband, even though she would give up her home for him. Once alone in the palace, she must retain her spirit and not give in to the grief which she bears alone. The loutish Cloten, her stepbrother, is forever trying to seduce her; her father does not forgive her disobedience; and she is aware that her stepmother is not to be trusted. In fact, it is only her spirit which enables her to survive. Juliet Dusinberre sees her language as her "susceptibility to decorum" (216). She knows her manners, but she is not so concerned with manners that she will allow Cloten to make verbal advances to her in Posthumus' absence.

Imogen: I am much sorry, sir
 You put me to forget a lady's manners
 By being so verbal; and learn now for all
 That I, which know my heart, do here pronounce
 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 to make't my boast (II.iii.102-11).

Dusinberre feels this speech reveals Imogen's entirely too feminine nature, in that she is concerned that by being verbal she will not be considered a lady. Since Imogen is

addressing only Cloten in this speech, however, it seems quite impossible that she is very concerned with her appearance in his eyes. By reminding him that she is a lady and apologizing for having to admit that she hates him, she is also reminding him that he is a gentleman, and needs to apologize for his advances. Her concern is aimed as much at herself for failing to maintain the virtue of charity, as it is at Cloten for not acting like a gentleman. Throughout the play, her concern is not with appearances (her disguise is just another appearance as far as she is concerned) but with how she sees herself. Above all, she maintains her honor, and it is not honorable to admit to hatred.

When Iachimo attempts to seduce her, as part of the wager he made with Posthumus, she repels him in an equally assertive manner, and reminds him of the need to remain honorable. Imogen says:

Away, I do condemn mine ears that I have
So long attended thee. If thou wert honorable,
Thou wouldst have told this tale for virtue, not
For such an end thou seek'st, as base as strange.

(I.vi.141-43).

Iachimo has breeched the Elizabethan code of honor--as it applies to men--and Imogen recognizes intentions. She is a woman, and she threatens the social structure because she not only understands what is meant by honor in the

masculine sense--but she practices it. Lawrence Stone, in The Family, Sex and Marriage: In England 1500-1800, explains that a woman's sole worth, sole honor, was her chastity (315-16). Imogen sees honor, in the fullest sense of the word, as something which both men and women may have, and she is properly alarmed at the lack of honor she finds among the men of the play. (Even the courtiers in the opening scenes, who give us the background details necessary to the action, are gossiping about the king and the problems he is having with his wife and daughter, as though their king were a commoner subject to ridicule. They mock his choice of a wife, deplore his behavior to Imogen and Posthumus, and are embarrassed at his inability to find his sons.) Imogen attempts, with little success, to teach the men who surround her about honor. And, it is for her own breach of honor that she apologizes to Cloten for having to admit that she hates him. Shakespeare, in this play, seems to be extremely interested in discovering what is meant by the word "honor." Perhaps he has discovered that it is a word which is used often and means little in his society. Perhaps he is attempting to shock his audience into recognizing the lack of real honor in England by using a woman to both conduct herself in an honorable manner and teach the men around her what it means.

Honor is certainly never a central issue in the comedies. The women of the comedies are, however,

extremely concerned with fulfilling their defined roles as "ladies." Julia, the most obviously concerned with her image, asks Lucetta: "How will the world repute me / For undertaking so unstaide a journey? / I fear me it will make me scandalized" (II.vii.60-61). And, Rosalind, often applauded as one of Shakespeare's most independent heroines, discovers Orlando is in the forest and says: "Alas the day! what shall I do with my doublet and hose?" (III.ii.208-209). If Rosalind could have trusted that Orlando was a truly honorable man, she could have trusted that he would understand the necessity of her disguise. She is primarily concerned, as is Julia, with appearances, and she fears exposure. Later, when she discovers she can use the disguise to test Orlando's love, she forgets to be ashamed. Her very changeability, moreover, fits into the definition of "woman," and into the Elizabethan concept of the nature of woman. Imogen's constancy, not her moonishness, is emphasized by her disguise.

Stone points out that for the Elizabethan woman her honor, the sum of her worth, depended not on her clothing, beauty, position, or wealth, but on her chastity (316). Imogen's beauty is not doubted by Posthumus' acquaintances, and only Iachimo has the audacity to doubt her virtue. Later, Iachimo is exposed as having no virtue; his attempted seduction of Imogen, his lies to Posthumus, his cowardice in battle, his fainting spell as Imogen exposes

him: each of these acts would have been detestable behavior in a man to an Elizabethan audience. By his misogyny, Posthumus inadvertently underscores the point that to value chastity above all else does not make sense. He not only foolishly rails against every woman born when he accepts Iachimo's lies against his wife, but his attitude is appropriately juxtaposed with Imogen's own attitude of self-assurance and faith in her husband. With this juxtaposition, Shakespeare acknowledges both the worth of woman and the worthlessness of chastity without real honor. Appearances are not important to Imogen, therefore she does not comment on them.

While the heroines most resemble one another in the matter of disguise, there are significant differences which become important, especially when comparing Imogen to the heroines of the comedies. If Shakespeare believed that all women share an "essential nature" as Woodbridge contends, his view of what this nature might be seemed to change between the time he started writing the comedies and the time he started writing the romances. By comparing the action, language, and motivation of each of the five heroines, it is possible to follow a progression in Shakespeare's dramatic interest in women.

Among writers who find Imogen disagreeable, one of the chief objections is that the women of the comedies have chosen their masculine disguise themselves, while Imogen

is told to dress as a man by Posthumus' servant Pisanio. Clara Claiborne Park views the situation in this manner:

The late comedies no longer present these forceful young women, and the faithful Imogen of Cymbeline retroactively exposes the extent of Rosalind's autonomy. It is not Imogen but her husband's servant who originates the idea of the male disguise; the necessity for her journey originates not in her own position but in relation to her husband, as soon as she lacks a man to guide her she gets lost (107).

As for the position of these two particular characters there is not much room for differentiating--unless it be that Imogen's reasons for assuming her disguise far outnumber Rosalind's. She does not merely go off in search of her husband, as Julia, who is ruled by her lust, does. Her husband's accusations give her journey direction, but she is only abandoning her "holy duty" (to serve England) because her position at home is intolerable. Her virtue has been assailed on two fronts (Cloten and Iachimo), and she knows Cloten is not above raping her. She recognizes the Queen as her enemy, and it is the Queen who is her jailer. Rosalind has been exiled from her father's castle on a whim of the duke, her uncle. There is nothing in the play to indicate that her life or

her virtue is in any real danger. She very much enjoys the plans she makes for her escape.

It is certainly true that the idea for Imogen's disguise originates with Pisanio, but scarcely 150 lines intervene between Imogen's first knowledge that Posthumus has ordered her murder and Pisanio's suggestion for the disguise. Pisanio had received his orders early enough to give him a chance to prepare a plan. If this scene is viewed by some as being typical of Imogen's lack of initiative, I wonder where she is expected to get her clothes. She accepts the plan without question and is grateful for Pisanio's foresight. There is initiative in her quick recovery from the shock of Pisanio's news and her successful implementation of the plan. There is initiative in crossing the Welsh mountains in search of the Roman army. I would not find her to be a more powerful character if she had told Pisanio that she would rather wait until she had a chance to think of her own plan. She says: "Nay, be brief. / I see into thy end and am almost / A man already" (III.iv.167). She is alert and ready to act even though she has scarcely had time to recover from the painful news which she has just received. She knows now that she cannot go back to the palace, and that her life is in danger; so she chooses a reasonable alternative. There are plenty of examples of her taking the initiative in the play, beginning with her marriage,

but this is an example of a woman who can behave sensibly under impossible circumstances--hardly a demeaning comment about women from an author in Elizabethan England.

Dusinberre complains that Pisanio is wasting his breath when he admonishes Imogen to adapt the behavior of a man. He says: "Well then, here's the point: / You must forget to be a woman; change / Command into obedience" (III.iv.154-56). Dusinberre feels that Imogen never becomes a man, and so all of the advice in the world would not improve her position. She also believes that Pisanio is mistaken in telling her to "change / Command into obedience." He has forgotten, she claims, that "women obey and men command" (247). Dusinberre seems to have forgotten that Pisanio is speaking to a princess of Britain, heir apparent to the throne. She has commanded all of her life, and as a boy pressed into the service of the Roman army, her prerogative to command would create a great deal of danger for her, and very likely expose her identity. Pisanio has known her for many years, and he forgets nothing at this crucial moment. Her initiative is such that he fears she will not heed the decorum of her new position. He commands "You must" because he rightly fears for her safety.

Her need to flee, to escape the persecution in the castle and avoid another attempt on her life by Posthumus, is far more serious than even Rosalind's escape from her

uncle's house, but Imogen is driven by a stronger impulse: she must rescue her good name. She intends to flee the danger of the castle but she is also seeking a greater threat to her safety--her husband. None of the heroines in the comedies flee into danger, nor are they moved to act from any sense of honor. Irene Dash sees Imogen as strong-willed, but feels only Portia is able to challenge "the notion of the acquiescent wife" (274). Portia's reasons to disguise herself are very noble, but she offers no true challenge to the patriarchal system. What's more, she, personally, has nothing to lose if she is unsuccessful in her quest. She is anxious to save Antonio, but no one is trying to kill her, no one has disowned her, and regardless of the outcome of the trial, she will marry Bassanio. It is fortunate that she is successful, but it is never any more than an important game for her. Portia:

They shall, Nerissa, but in such a habit
 That they will think we are accomplished
 With what we lack. I'll hold thee any wager,
 When we are both accoutered like young men,
 I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two.

(III.iv.60-64).

Besides the fact that Portia has very little at stake in the entire business (even if she loses, Bassanio will not know she was responsible because she is disguised), she also moves to insure her own success by applying to her

cousin, the real Dr. Bellario, for assistance in winning the case. Portia is aggressive and intelligent, but she is an early model in Shakespeare's experiment concerning the nature of women. If she has done an honorable thing in saving Antonio's life, she refutes this in the final scene. She has trapped Bassanio into giving her his ring and offers to cuckold him--even before they are married. Her disguise is necessary if she wishes to try a case in court, but it is also a source of protection in case she fails. The entire final scene returns her to a position more familiar to the audience of an Elizabethan comedy. The lewd word play and the recognition that her power rests in the cuckolding of her husband offers the audience a source of comic relief and reduces the importance of her actions.

Julia, in Two Gentlemen of Verona, feels she must chase after Proteus and wears her disguise in order to avoid "the loose encounters of lascivious men" (II.viii.41). She is scarcely in Milan before she realizes she can use her disguise to spy on Proteus and thwart his attempts to woo Silvia. She is undoubtedly the weakest of Shakespeare's androgynous heroines, and yet she is deceitful and clever--womanish traits very acceptable to the Elizabethan audience. She also represents a very early Shakespearean experiment. Julia seems to be derived from a stereotypical stock character--the tricky slave

from Roman comedy. Julia has many of the same qualities as the tricky slave, but Shakespeare has begun his "liberation" of women by freeing her and making her the daughter of a merchant. Regardless of her social position, however, it was a part of the Elizabethan myth that a woman is not intelligent but can be cunning and tricky.

Rosalind, in As You Like It, is often compared, and fairly so, with Portia for her spirit and cleverness. She is forced to leave the duke's castle, and her disguise seems--as it did for Julia--a sensible way to travel. Undaunted by her position of exile, she, like Portia, turns the disguise into a game.

Rosalind: Were it not better,
 Because that I am more than common tall,
 That I did suit me all points like a man?
 A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
 A boar-spear in my hand; and, in my heart
 Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will,
 We'll have a swashing and martial outside,
 As many other mannish cowards have
 That do outface it with their semblences.

(I.iii.110-18).

She is at first startled to hear that Orlando is in the forest, but she soon recovers her spirit and finds the opportunity to use her disguise to test his love for her. The plot is very rich in its complications and devices,

but even with Rosalind, there is no permanent challenge to patriarchy. She is once again clever and deceitful, but finally gives up the game to be reunited with her father--to submit to his will and to be handed over to Orlando as his future wife. The most important point which Rosalind is able to make is that men--simply because they are men--are not necessarily honorable. She can imitate a man because she has recognized the facade of other "manish cowards." As a female character, she fails to be an example of an honorable woman, but she raises a question which many in her society must have been asking themselves about men.

Viola, in Twelfth Night, cannot be accused of having any ulterior motives in choosing her disguise. She is shipwrecked in a strange land, and her disguise may seem essential for her protection. However, even Viola, confused and upset as she is, makes use of her disguise to gain Orsino's confidence and love. The mirror image of Viola and Sebastian points once again to a questioning of the differences between men and women. In spite of the heroine's confusion, she has qualities which cause both Orsino and Olivia to fall in love with her. Sebastian marries Olivia merely because he is in the right place at the right time. Viola's failure to convince the audience that she is a dominant male of the species only helps to underscore her success at showing us that lovable qualities

are lovable regardless of the sex of the person who has those qualities.

Imogen has no ulterior motives in adopting her disguise. Her plan is to pass as a boy so she might travel with the Roman army back to Italy. She uses her disguise, not to toy with her lover, but to trap the villain. It is important to her honor to prove her innocence. It may seem that in her concern to prove herself chaste she is upholding, rather than challenging, the social constructs of the day; however, if Shakespeare was trying to make a point concerning the extent of her sense of honor and the Elizabethan definition of honor, it would have been lost on the audience unless the woman was totally above reproach concerning her chastity. Before he expects her to exhibit what would have been identified as masculine honor, Shakespeare makes sure the audience cannot doubt she is chaste. She must preserve her virtue against any assaults before she can challenge the domination of men in society. A woman who is truly honorable--with all of its fine nuances of meaning--could truly challenge the stereotypical concept of men and women. Cleverness was acceptable--even expected--and putting on breeches did not guarantee that the nature of woman was anything like the nature of man. As the women of the comedies proved, anyone could put on a pair of pants and pretend to be a man, but Imogen is not

pretending. Julia intends to become a very effeminate man with her hair in "twenty odd-conceited true-love knots" (II.vii.46). Portia and Rosalind intend to have fun with their disguises, and invite the audience to laugh at their braggadocio. Woodbridge correctly identifies them as Shakespeare's children playing at being grown up, but Imogen is not playing a game. If her marriage can only be saved, if her honor can only be defended by a man, then a man she will become. More than any other transvestite heroine, her life depends on her skill in carrying out this role. Imogen is not frightened and confused as Viola is; she does not share Julia's concern for appearances; she is not playing a game. She shatters the tradition of feminine passivity and the myths concerning the essentially wicked nature of women. By taking seriously the active role which she has chosen to follow, she allows neither comic interpretation nor censure.

It is because she is active in deciding her own fate that I am attracted to Imogen. No other single heroine accepts the challenges she braves nor faces the dangers she does. It is important also that all she does, she does for herself. Her belief in her own worth makes her a formidable adversary to the worthless Iachimo, and a woman worth paying attention to. The complaint that she resembles the stereotypical "Patient Grissell," enduring

everything, is unjustified. She is patient only in those things she perceives to be important to her--her husband and her country. She has no patience with Cloten's advances, Iachimo's lies, or even Pisanio's careful advice. She is far too valuable to herself to wait quietly and hope that her virtue will be revealed or her life be spared. She is a woman, not pretending to be a man in any other way than to hide her sex and rank; and her concern is to both save and serve herself. She is truly androgynous in that she embodies what is best in both sexes--as viewed by the Elizabethan culture--and her disguise merely accentuates the qualities which she always possessed. She is a true hermaphrodite restored to the position of a god, unreal perhaps in our society, but unthinkable to most Elizabethans.

In the comedies, sexual bantering by the disguised heroines is commonplace. The bantering is part of the fun of the comedies, but it is difficult to believe that this is the trait which convinces critics (such as Dusinberre) that these are Shakespeare's most "liberated" heroines. One of the caricatures which modern feminists have been forced to cope with has been the stereotype of the pant-wearing, cigar-smoking butch, exchanging dirty jokes with the boys in the back room. Portia's delight in threatening to bed with Antonio's lawyer, and Rosalind's charade as Ganymede pretending to be Rosalind are fun

within the context of the comedies, but their words and actions do not make the kind of serious statement about women and their ability to act which encourage a society to change its attitude towards women. The transvestite heroine is important in that she helped to keep attention focused on the question of equality, but it is also true that this caricature of a feminist became the butt of jokes and satire which continues today. Many women do admire those who are willing to become man-like in order to demonstrate that women could equal men, but it is women in the tradition of Imogen--honest, strong, and feminine--who define today's liberated women. Imogen proves that women are valuable--even indispensable--and equal to men in all things, without sacrificing femininity, independence, or marriage. With this in mind, it seems unlikely that Shakespeare "recoiled" from the sight of women in breeches. Imogen does not wear breeches in order to prove anything or to play love games; she moves beyond appearances to reveal a woman of intelligence and substance. She has her own sense of honor, an honor that would be recognized by any Elizabethan, but which rarely would be applied to a woman, regardless of her status. In this, Imogen has moved beyond the women of the comedies, beyond caricature and cleverness.

Dusinberre feels that Portia, Rosalind, and Viola are able to extend their ideas of self by adopting a male

disguise, but that for Imogen, the disguise serves as a sign of her lost identity (264). Rosalind accepts her male role as a part of herself when she places Celia's needs before her own when they arrive at the forest of Arden in scene four of act three. In comparison, Imogen's soliloquy in the Welsh mountains may seem "wilting" as Dusinberre observes. If the circumstances were equal, this might be accurate, but Rosalind's behavior demonstrates her concept of role-playing, while Imogen's behavior is an honest reaction to her situation. Rosalind and Celia take money and jewels from the castle before they escape to the forest. They arrive at Arden with enough money to buy a farm; therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that they either take provisions with them or buy some along the way. It is, no doubt, a difficult journey, but it can hardly compare to Imogen's plight. In scene six, act three, Imogen begins:

I see a man's life is a tedious one.

I have tired myself, and for two nights together

Have made the ground my bed. I should be sick

But that my resolution helps me (1-4).

At this point in her life, Imogen's father has threatened to disown her, and has left her alone in the castle with a stepmother who wants to murder her, and a stepbrother who wants to rape her. Her husband has been banished, but now accuses her of adultery and has ordered Pisanio

to execute her. She has given up all she has--her castle, her clothes, her possessions, her identity as a princess of Britain--in order to save her life and clear her name. Unlike the heroines of the comedies, it is not inevitable that she will be allowed to return. Without jokes, without provisions, without companionship, she has traveled for three days and two nights in the rough Welsh mountains. The journey she has undertaken may result in her death--either by starvation and fatigue, or at the hands of her husband or father. She is not escaping with money and jewels to a forest cottage with her best friend. She is searching for a man she does not know, in unfamiliar territory. If she finds him, she is certain--because of her disguise--to be enlisted in the Roman army to fight against her father, and only if her father is defeated will she be allowed to travel to Italy to search for Posthumus, who will, as far as she knows, kill her on sight. Imogen is wilting at this point, but she is also determined to proceed with her quest. If the criticism concerning Imogen centers on the problems she has in coping with the Welsh mountains, the truly impossible circumstances in which she finds herself should also be taken into consideration. Rosalind plays the man's part in taking care of Celia, but the responsibility takes the form of acquiring food--woman's work--and the sacrifice takes the form of putting Celia's needs before

her own--woman's duty. Imogen does what the women of the comedies are not allowed to do. She values herself; she incorporates the best Elizabethan masculine virtues with the best Elizabethan feminine virtues. Her sense of honor, her fortitude, her quest to defend her honor are combined with grace, chastity, and fidelity in order to make a significant challenge to the Elizabethan social structure, and to the stereotypical image of the cross-dressed woman to which Shakespeare had contributed in his comedies.

The conclusions of the plays contain the most convincing evidence that Imogen represents not only a positive expression of Shakespeare's feminist leanings, but that she is also one of the most powerful female characters Shakespeare ever created. Many critics--even those who see Imogen as a strong character--miss the power which is revealed in the conclusion. Angela Pitt says, "her significance recedes in the final act" (128), and Dusinberre believes that "the moment of her unmasking is as a consequence the least ambivalent dramatically and psychologically of any in Shakespeare's plays" because she never thinks of herself as a man (265). Dusinberre is partially correct; Imogen does not consider herself a man. She considers herself a woman who has the courage and conviction to defend herself. As will be seen, the denouement is probably the most important of any in

Shakespeare's plays.

Portia, as has already been mentioned, reveals her part in Antonio's salvation through her sexual bantering and jokes about cuckolding Bassanio. Both she and the audience enjoy the irony, but it does not enhance her character. It serves only as a reminder that her power is limited to her disguise and her "right" to cuckold her husband. Julia and Rosalind both have fainting spells which help to reveal their true natures. For Woodbridge, fainting is one quality Shakespeare uses to reveal the "natural essence" of woman. Julia, upon hearing Valentine offer Celia to Proteus, does not stand up and claim the rights Proteus promised her when he left Verona; instead, she faints and allows fate to straighten everything out for her. Rosalind is certainly more clever, but the sight of Orlando's blood causes her to swoon. As Woodbridge notes, it is more than her "feminine nature" can handle. She is able to carry on the charade a little longer, but only because her swoon was not witnessed by her father or her lover. Once Oliver reports what he witnessed, she realizes she has no choice but to quit her game and turn herself over to her father and Orlando. She is once more property--a gift--and even though she chooses to give the gift of herself, she returns the patriarchy to its "natural" order and assumes her submissive position.

Viola is able to refrain from fainting throughout the

play, but one senses she would very much like to. Her circumstances are like Imogen's in that fate has forced her to assume a disguise in order to protect herself in a strange and possibly hostile environment, but she resembles the heroines of the comedies by retaining her disguise long after her safety has been secured. Very early--in the second scene of the second act--Viola gives up any control her disguise might have afforded her. She says: "O Time, thou must untangle this knot, not I; / It is too hard a knot for me t' untie" (39-40). Nearly all the problems to which she alludes could be solved at that moment if she would simply reveal that she is a woman. The knot is actually simple to undo--Viola is not given the nature required to manipulate the threads. At the end of the play, the answer is just as simple, and Viola still has no clue as to what to do. Her passive nature complicates the denouement; she simply cannot be moved to action. One assumes that she might stand there and shake her head throughout eternity if Sebastian missed his cue. Even when her much-wished-for marriage to Orsino is within her reach, she cannot figure out how to change her clothes. She is finally surrounded by friends and family who might easily be persuaded to find or buy her a dress, but she can only claim, lamely, that "The captain that did first bring me on shore / Hath my maid's garments" (V.i.266-67). The play ends with Orsino referring to her

as Cesario instead of calling her wife, only because she cannot get her hands on a dress. It is comical, but she does not retain her disguise as a sign of her masculine nature; that she retains it at all is rather a sign of her passivity and indecisiveness.

Imogen does not faint, nor does she wait for anyone else to resolve her problems. Imogen discovers the truth and untangles the problems of the play on her own. In each of the comedies, the disguise and the problems interact. Without the disguise, there would be fewer problems, but the problems would never be resolved. Imogen's problems do not originate with her disguise, nor are they resolved by it. Whether dressed as a man or a woman, she is exposed to grave danger. The fact that she does not remove it at the end of the play underscores the fact that she is Imogen; she is herself, regardless of how she is dressed. In the tradition of a Britomart, in the middle of a battlefield, she alone upholds truth, demands justice, and brings peace to two empires. This may seem unrealistic to us, but it is certainly a more favorable image of a woman than the lewdness of Portia, the fainting of Rosalind or Julia, or the passivity and confusion of Viola. What's more, in case the audience should miss the obvious, Shakespeare punctuates the action by having Iachimo swoon. Over and over, it has been made clear that women--even women who imitate men very well--

faint, not men. At this point in his career, Shakespeare had a variety of devices available to unravel the problems of the play. To choose to have Iachimo faint as Imogen forces the truth from him, reveals the wickedness of his deceit, and cannot be accidental on the author's part. It shows Iachimo for the coward he is, and it emphasizes Imogen's strength. It is amazing that none of the critics mentioned in this essay happen to notice this unusual twist. It is not the male disguise which prevails; it is Imogen who prevails.

Posthumus is correctly identified as a misogynist. When he believes that Iachimo has won the bet, Posthumus does not turn his anger toward the supposed defiler but against his wife. Kahn recognizes this in the only mention she makes of this play: "He dwells on 'the woman's part' in making men; men are born of women, and all their faults derived from them, he claims" (127). Kahn points out what the audience should be able to recognize concerning Posthumus' speech in the fourth scene of the second act. She says:

The irony is that all the "vice" he attributes to them lies in Iachimo, his real enemy: Lying, flattering, deceiving, lust and rank thoughts, revenges, ambitions, covetings--it is these qualities, mediated by the perpetual

contest to get or destroy honor, that led to the wager (127).

It has been suggested that the final scene in Cymbeline restores order: the kingdom at peace, families united, and Imogen restored as the submissive wife of Posthumus. The scene can also be viewed as the final capitulation of the misogynist. Posthumus says: "hang there like fruit my soul, / Til the tree die!" (V.v.264). Imogen cannot reverse the social order--what Elizabethan could imagine such a phenomena? But, neither does she restore the order, an order which Posthumus initially expected. She is not the root of the tree, nor the watering can; she is the fruit. The image here is one of equality and difference. If both were trees there would be no union. She has taught the men--Posthumus, Iachimo, Cymbeline-- what honor and courage mean; she has challenged their misogynistic belief in the natural hierarchial order. She has moved from Posthumus' early view of woman as the scourge of man, to the position of teacher of man. She has taught the men that there is much to value in a woman, and that no one--man or woman--has an "essential nature." The Victorians may have been delighted with Imogen because of her faithfulness and her manners, but I delight in her for other reasons, for reasons which many Elizabethans must have noticed: Whatever Imogen does, she remains true, not to some ideal of woman's nature, but to her own

nature. She chooses a human husband--a man with faults--and she intends to love him as long as it is honorable to do so. Just as she is not the demon Posthumus describes, she is not perfect either. The scene in which she believes the headless Cloten to be Posthumus is so ludicrous that it is nearly laughable. She is not a machine; she grows tired and says so; she feels pain and admits it. She is not playing a trick on those she loves; she is not trying to deceive by practicing her swagger or becoming boastful. In spite of her unbroken voice and graceful manner, she is accepted as a man and walks into battle. Just as Portia and Rosalind are wrong to assume that a man is identified by certain, unchanging characteristics, Posthumus is also wrong to stereotype all women as a single group. Imogen is simply Imogen--aggressive, strong-willed, loving, faithful, honorable--these are her traits regardless of her clothes. What finer statement can be made for any human being--man or woman?

Virginia Woolf suggests that Shakespeare's women are real to us because he was able to reveal them as androgynous (98-99). Woodbridge sees him as one more male playwright condescending to the women in the audience (155). I am not sure either is correct. Shakespeare concerned himself with many aspects of womanhood. He used many theatrical staples--the shrew, the confidante, the virgin,

the whore--all common devices in Elizabethan theatre, and perhaps cultural stereotypes. However, he went beyond including women just because there were women in the real world. He was interested in testing social positions and common beliefs concerning them. Many of his women do not ring true; many are not even acceptable caricatures. Can you praise a Lady MacBeth simply because of her strength and determination? Can you damn a Gertrude because she is human and has human failings? Shakespeare may have been aware of the androgynous nature of the human mind, as Woolf suspects, but not until Imogen does he present a character who recognizes the androgyny of her own spirit and does not reduce some aspect of this to its lowest element. Regardless of dress or enterprise, Imogen retains the same virtues, the same faults. She remains herself.

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A FEMINIST VIEW OF IMOGEN:
SUBVERSIVE OR SUBSERVIENT?

by

JUDITH ANN JOHN

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AN ABSTRACT OF A REPORT

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Abstract

Feminist critics have put forth a great deal of effort in trying to determine Shakespeare's view of women. From Virginia Woolf to Coppélia Kahn, we have been fascinated with the variety of Shakespeare's female characters. However, while the wicked women of the tragedies and the tricky and devious women of the comedies have elicited a multitude of responses, few women critics have been interested in analyzing Imogen, the heroine of Cymbeline. Because Imogen spends a large part of the play disguised as a boy, she is often compared to the women of the comedies. Many feminist critics find Imogen a disappointing character, and suggest that Shakespeare lost interest in exploring female nature in his late plays. Other critics do believe Imogen stands as one of Shakespeare's strong women characters, but they fail to analyze her role as one of his most carefully developed heroines.

By comparing Imogen to the comedic heroines, Rosalind, Portia, Julia, and Viola, I intend to show not only the strength and independence of this late romantic heroine, but also Shakespeare's own development as an investigator of human nature. As he moved from the comedies to his later plays, Shakespeare also moved away from the stock characters of his early writing--such as the shrew and the tricky slave--and discovered a great deal about men and women, their relationships, and the possibilities for growth within the human spirit. Imogen is proof that

Shakespeare could move outside his society's norms and expectations to recognize the shared natures of both men and women.