



## Illinois Wesleyan University Digital Commons @ IWU

---

John Wesley Powell Student Research  
Conference

1998, 9th Annual JWP Conference

---

Apr 18th, 11:30 AM - 11:45 AM

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

Nicole Williams

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Mary Ann Bushman, Faculty Advisor

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc>

---

Williams, Nicole and Bushman, Faculty Advisor, Mary Ann, "Who Is't can Read a Woman?: *Cymbeline* and the Renaissance Woman" (1998). *John Wesley Powell Student Research Conference*. 5.  
<http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc/1998/oralpres2/5>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Oral Presentation 2.5

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

Nicole Williams and Mary Ann Bushman\*  
Department of English, Illinois Wesleyan University

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.