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Imogen and Desdemona: A Comparative Study of Shakespearean Heroines

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Introduction

Shakespeare's plays have been extensively discussed by a great number of researchers, and so have *Othello* and *Cymbeline*, respectively a tragedy and a romance. Given the similarities in the storylines of the two plays, some parallelism has been made, especially between Othello and Posthumus and Iago and Iachimo. Yet, one question that is partially missing is the comparative analysis of the two female protagonists of these plays, Desdemona and Imogen. The focus of this dissertation will therefore focus on the analysis of these two heroines. More specifically, the core of the study is the comparison of their characters and their reaction to the accusations of infidelity, paying particular attention to the duality of active and passive attitudes. The research tries to offer a different point of view from the traditional analysis of the women, in particular the usual picture of Desdemona as a passive figure and Imogen as an active one. The sources used for the study gave a different look: for example, Bartels and Dickes affirm Desdemona is not simply an innocent victim, but somehow knew what was going to happen and did very little to avoid it, and Holmer defines Desdemona as a warrior.

At first glance, Imogen seems an active and fierce figure defending herself no matter what, while Desdemona is splitted in two: the former Desdemona is a daughter that stood up in front of her father and justified her love for the husband, the latter Desdemona is a hopeless wife incapable of uttering a word. The aim of this study is to prove that this partition is not so accurate, nor is it possible to accept the duality of Imogen as active and Desdemona as passive. For this purpose, I analysed various scenes of both plays, first looking for active behaviour, especially for Desdemona in the second half of the play, and then highlighting passive aspects, especially for Imogen.

Since the categorisation of Shakespeare's plays has been widely discussed, the first chapter focuses on the different terminology regarding the last plays, highlighting that it is not possible to consider as sole criterion the First Folio division in histories, tragedies and comedies, but it is also important to consider the time in which the plays were written, because it give more context to what we are going to read. Furthermore, the chapter analyses some aspects of *Cymbeline* such the representation of the Jacobean period, especially King James and his family: the political unification between England and Scotland somehow resembles the reconciliation of England and Rome in the last act of

the play. Finally, the analysis is focused on the description of Imogen's and Desdemona's features. Criticism is used as a starting point for the further deconstruction of the traditional point of view in chapter two and three, so that a more nuanced representation of the heroines can be given.

The second chapter focuses on the active features of the heroines. In *Cymbeline*, the bedchamber scene is crucial, because it will lead Posthumus to believe Imogen is innocent. Yet, the centre of activity is when Imogen is in Milford Haven and will decide to disguise herself as a man. In *Othello*, the reason for the jealousy is the handkerchief, but it is more difficult to find a moment in which Desdemona clearly defends herself, because Othello's rage erupts only at the very end, and before that moment the accusations are subtle and less clear. Yet, it is possible to notice that Desdemona does not always stay silent, especially when she tries to talk Othello in reinstating Cassio or when she is struck by the husband. Moverover, the final proof of her active behaviour can be found in the final act, when she uses her final words to say she died a guiltless death.

As before, through the analysis of the play's scenes, the third and final chapter aims to find passive characteristics and reactions in the heroines. In *Cymbeline*, the spotlight is in the very final scene, when Imogen gladly gives up her claim to the throne in order to give it to her newly found brother, but it is also important to notice that it is not the only scene when Imogen shows female obedience. In fact, when Pisanio brings her to Milford Haven, her sorrow is so great that she will ask Pisanio to accomplish what he was asked to. In *Othello*, the female protagonist is so layered that some scenes I analysed in the second chapter to prove her activeness are the same deployed in the third to prove her passiveness. In particular, the emphasis is on the fight about the handkerchief and the moments previous to her death, when she obeys Othello's orders without questioning them. Her major act of passivity can be spotted in the end: she knew what was going to happen, and she accepted it, even though the consequence was her death.

Chapter 1: 17th Century Gender Dynamics through Imogen and Desdemona

1.1 Shakespeare's last plays

Cymbeline was written between 1608-10 and is therefore accounted as a part of Shakespeare's last plays, the romances. It seems there is a clear division between two genres, tragedy and romance, with tragedies being a group of four plays (including *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*) written when the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men, after James I granted them the crown's protection. However, this partition is not always so clear.

According to Edward Said, late productions are not necessarily linked to "creative decline"¹. On the contrary, they can be very powerful, energetic and creative works. For some scholars, Shakespeare's last plays give a sense of serenity and resolution that express the "sensitivity of an old man reaching the end of an extraordinary career"². There are some characteristics that define Shakespeare's late plays, first and foremost the genre, which is also known as romantic tragicomedy. This hybrid involves several journeys, separation between family and lovers and eventually their reencounter.

Among the late plays we find *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Even though *The Tempest* is widely considered Shakespeare's last play, this is not completely true. In fact, there are several plays that were written in collaboration after that: *Cardenio*, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Another significant issue we encounter is the fact that for some critics *King Lear* is to be put among the last plays. Probably *King Lear* "exist[ed] in two versions: the quarto ... and the folio"³, and that impacts the way we interpret the play: "for mid-century late-play critics ... Lear was the pivot, the play that provided the connection between mid- and late Shakespeare"⁴.

McMullan suggests that if the only criterion we take into account when categorizing the plays is time, the term "last plays" should be preferred to "late plays". The term "late plays" was created to refer to a group of Shakespeare's works that could not be classified

¹ E. Said, *On Late Style*, London, Bloomsbury, 2006, quoted by G. McMullan, "What is a late play?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, ed. Alexander Catherine M. S., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 5.

² G. McMullan, "What is a late play?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, ed. Alexander Catherine M. S., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 6.

³ A. Hafield, *The English Renaissance 1500-1620*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p. 104.

⁴ G. McMullan, "What is a late play?" p. 9.

according to the classic First Folio division (histories, tragedies, comedies), yet it includes only the four plays mentioned before. When exploring this point of view that includes a broader range of plays and detaches from the primary “stylistic and generic features”⁵, it is more difficult to talk about late plays.

Nonetheless, McMullan argues that there might be some problems when considering the chronological principle alone. First of all, it is difficult to determine the precise date of the first publication: some texts are fragmentary or incomplete works, and it is not always possible to set a specific time in which they can be placed. Moreover, playwrights worked with each other. The plays must be read bearing in mind other productions of both Shakespeare’s company (the King’s Men) and other competing ones.

The last plays, especially from *Cymbeline* on, are linked to a significant change in the setting. In 1608 the company acquired Blackfriars theatre: it seems that the plays were “composed specifically with the indoor theatre in mind”⁶. The theatre was not opened until 1610 due to the plague, and it was much smaller than the Globe. That is probably why, according to Lindley, it appears there are two different repertoires for indoor or outdoor theatres. The author argues that this led to the creation of a different public: Blackfriars theatre involved elite members, keen on modern drama, while the Globe appealed to a simpler public, fond of a more popular approach. The turn in Shakespeare’s writing was a result of all these changings, but there is another notable change worth mentioning: the use of music. At the Blackfriars theatre, interruptions were mandatory due to the presence of candles; during these moments of pause between the acts, the musicians accompanied the play, which was not common before.

1.2 *Cymbeline*: a mirror of Jacobean challenges

King James Stuart was crowned as James I of England and Ireland in 1603, after the death of Elizabeth I. He was already king James VI of Scotland, since his mother Mary Stuart died in 1567, having him as successor at the age of one. He was the first monarch of all British Isles, but from the very beginning of his reign there were some tensions. He was very popular in Scotland, where the majority of people were presbiterians, but not so

⁵ Ivi, p. 12.

⁶ D. Lindley, “Blackfriars, music and masque: theatrical contexts of the last plays” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, ed. Alexander Catherine M. S., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 29.

much in England, especially for his political absolutism. In addition to that, English Protestants ignored his tolerant policies towards Catholicism. The tensions between the two kingdoms were not simply religious. Many in England thought the Scots were “poor and backward”⁷. According to David Bergeron, Shakespeare’s last plays seem to represent the issues of the Jacobean era, in particular King James and his family⁸.

In *Basilikon Doron*, King James explained his idea of kingship: he assumed that a king was God’s representative on Earth. So, he ruled following divine rights, not earthly ones. From this perspective subjects have no power to question the king, and this might lead to perceive his reign as absolutism or tyranny, which some members of the parliament were worried about. This image of monarchy may be reflected for example in *Cymbeline* with Jupiter: James was frequently linked with that god. Something similar happens in *Pericles*, when in Act 1 the titular character announces that “Kings are Earth’s gods” (1.1.104).

King James’s desire for the unification of England and Scotland somehow echoes the agreement between England and Rome that is reached in the final act of *Cymbeline*. However, saying that *Cymbeline* is a straightforward allegory for the Union would perhaps be too much, since both parliaments backed the idea of unifying the two legal systems at the time the play was staged. Thus, it would be incorrect to affirm that *Cymbeline* is the literal representation of an historical moment. According to Butler⁹, in 1603/4 James asserted that he was the husband of the nation: since he had two crowns, one of the interpretations of this statement could be twisted into the idea of a husband with two wives. There may be a connection between this idea and Cloten’s proposal to Imogen, them being stepbrothers, signaling the dangers of endogamy.

As far as religion is concerned, from the very beginning of his reign King James attempted to create of a peaceful kingdom. A very important work is the *Authorized*

⁷ K. Britland, “Politics, religion, geography and travel: historical contexts of the last plays” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, ed. Alexander Catherine M. S., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 71.

⁸ David M. Bergeron, *Shakespeare’s Romances and the Royal Family*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1985 quoted by K. Britland, “Politics, religion, geography and travel: historical contexts of the last plays” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, ed. Alexander Catherine M. S., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 72.

⁹ M. Butler, *Cymbeline*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005 quoted by K. Britland, “Politics, religion, geography and travel: historical contexts of the last plays” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, ed. Alexander Catherine M. S., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 74.

Version Bible, or *King James Bible*, commissioned by the king and published in 1611. The Gunpowder Plot of November 1605 had fostered the tensions among Catholics and Protestants. According to Donna Hamilton, this situation is well represented in *Cymbeline* with the plot of Imogen. Hamilton argues that it is “the struggle of the true church against the false church”¹⁰, clearly supporting Protestant faith and opposing the Catholic church, that was brought to England after the birth of the one true church. Hamilton also claims that the play is not simply endorsing the Protestant line: she focuses on the character of Belarius, who is a “threatened English Catholic subject”¹¹. He had no reasons to support king Cymbeline, but in the end he shows up and gives support.

1.3 Comparing Desdemona and Imogen: Active and Passive Resilience

According to Yates, the striking idea behind *Cymbeline* is the synchronization with the reign of Caesar Augustus in Rome, which overlaps with the birth of Christ, giving a kind of spiritual meaning to the play, “an atmosphere of the sacred”¹². David Bergeron shares the same idea, identifying some similarities between the two rulers: they both have a daughter, Imogen and Julia, who disappoint them, and they do not have a male heir. Cymbeline does not banish Imogen for marrying Posthumus, yet his words are quite harsh against her; Augustus exiled for twenty-three years Julia, who will die without any reconciliation with the father.

Imogen is one of the most interesting characters of the play. There is a significant similarity with another female Shakespearean character: Desdemona. They both rebel against their father’s wishes, Imogen marrying Posthumus Leonatus instead of Cloten, as Cymbeline wished, and Desdemona marrying Othello rather than Roderigo, as Brabantio would have liked. Both plays stage a deception at the expenses of the husbands, who are led to believe that they were cheated on. Imogen and Desdemona respond differently to the husbands’ reactions.

Imogen is the central character of *Cymbeline*. The fame of the play, and its performances, was particularly fascinating for late eighteenth-century critics. According

¹⁰ Donna B. Hamilton, *Shakespeare and the Politics of Protestant England*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1992 quoted by K. Britland, “Politics, religion, geography and travel: historical contexts of the last plays” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, ed. Alexander Catherine M. S., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 80.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² A. Yates, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays: A New Approach*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975, p. 43.

to Eaton, the female heroine was a bit neglected and harshly commented on Garrick's adaptation in 1761-62, where we find a predominance of male figures. The late eighteenth-early nineteenth century re-discovered the persona of Imogen with Sarah Siddons, who started playing that role in 1787. James Boaden, an English biographer, in her performance appreciated Imogen's power as a strong woman, but at the same time he was attached to the stereotype of the passive woman. He valued Imogen's rejection of Iachimo's advances, but he was also fond of her vulnerability in other parts of the play. Eaton mentions another important actress that contributed much to the role, Helena Faucit, in a 1843 representation. Critics described her as charming and perfectly suited for such a Shakespearean woman. Carol J. Carlisle, when talking about the seduction scene so praised by Boaden criticised him for her vehemence: "Faucit rejected the conception of a passively sweet Imogen"¹³. Faucit's Imogen was mostly admired for her performance.

"For the Victorians, Imogen was the perfect realization of an ideal of respectable womanhood on which the nation's strength was founded"¹⁴, claims Bonnie Lander when talking about Imogen, especially the one staged by Helena Faucit. She is docile and tender, yet her actions show that she is also somehow different from a compliant woman. The perfect way to describe her is affirming that "Imogen is a woman who is active but never shrewish... a woman who will fight for truth, her man, her chastity, and her country, but who will gladly allow her brother to take the throne from her"¹⁵. She is a vital, active character: to the Victorians, she represented the ideal of a free woman, because she recognizes her natural inferiority. That is because women have limitations, especially in the idea of their role as dedicated wives, daughters, sisters and mothers. But within these restrictions, she is as free as she could, never transgressing social limitations. In recognising these restrictions, she is the ideal woman, because she understands she can not do everything, but she does the best of what she is allowed to. In order to be liberated from the idea of being a property, it was necessary for women to accept their subordination in marriage, which meant to be a dedicated wife, as Imogen exactly does.

¹³ Carlisle, Carol J, "Macready's Production of Cymbeline", in *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. Richard Foulkes, New York, Cambridge UP, 1986 quoted by Barbara L. Eaton, "Shakespeare's Imogen: The Development of a Starring Role", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 13: 2, 1995), p. 28.

¹⁴ B. Lander, "Interpreting the Person: Tradition, Conflict, and Cymbeline's Imogen", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 59:2, 2008), p. 159.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 161.

Even when dressing like a man and running away, she never transgresses: she easily gives up the throne to her brother. According to Lander, this idea of femininity matches the necessity for national stability, which is established through female chastity. Controlling the female chastity means determining purity and being a respectable female, which both helps in the growth of the nation. While male virtue is tested actively through good deeds and battles, female virtue is tested passively: a woman is chaste, and therefore she does not have to do anything. But even though Imogen is actually active, it does not mean she is not chaste. Her motives are pure: she was locked up in her chambers, her privacy was invaded by Iachimo, so she is forced to act. Her actions seem antithetical to chastity and purity, yet her reasons are pure.

Another interesting point of view on Imogen is offered by Harold Bloom. Everything in *Cymbeline* is chaotic and mad, yet Imogen is the only character that remains sublime and not grotesque at all. Posthumus is a fool, Iachimo resembles Iago and is a comic villain along with Cloten, and the king is controlled by the evil queen: Imogen is the only voice that seems genuine and reasonable. Bloom argues that in the beginning of the play we might mistake Imogen's integrity with naivety. Iachimo offers himself to Imogen, and she threatens him to inform the king for this attempt, which leads Iachimo to change his approach, starting to praise Posthumus' worth. Despite the weakness of this strategy, it is strong enough to convince Imogen, who does not question Iachimo's words. The same naivety is perceived when Iachimo uses the "Trojan Horse strategy"¹⁶, asking Imogen to keep his trunk in her bedchamber (in which he will hide to spy on her), and she agrees and asks nothing. Yet, she is strong enough to make her decisions (dressing up as a man, fleeing away from her father, not bending to the lies told about her). Shakespeare stops the satire every time Imogen speaks, making her the most authentic voice and the center of the play. She recovers from the "suicidal impulse"¹⁷, finding a way to overcome her difficulties and acknowledging her strength in her most difficult moment.

Desdemona is more difficult to analyse. Apparently, she represents the three qualities of an early modern woman: chaste, silent and obedient. Confronted in private with her husband, she does not defend herself from the false accusation of betrayal and this will, eventually, lead her to death. Comparing her character to Imogen, Desdemona "seems

¹⁶ H. Bloom, *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 618.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 626.

much less a player”¹⁸. Yet, this perspective of being just a compliant victim may be hardly convincing. According to Bartels, we have two versions of Desdemona: the first one is a daughter that rebels against her father (which resembles Imogen), marries a Moor and escapes with him to Cyprus; the other one is a submissive wife standing passively while the husband is destroying her life and reputation based on a lie. These two sides seem to be incompatible. It is possible to find a moment in the play where we see this sudden change, the middle of act III. Yet, up to that moment, it would be unthinkable to assume that she will become such a submissive figure. In fact, when testifying in front of the senators she is able to defend herself insisting that “her marriage fulfills her duty to turn from father to husband, as daughters must and as her mother did”¹⁹. We know hers is not a normal situation: she is marrying a Moor and she is going against her father’s will. Yet, she is able to twist her situation making an act of disobedience not only as something easily acceptable, but also required of a devoted daughter and wife. Moreover, Bartels argues that Desdemona puts her desires in front of Othello’s ones in domestic life, and it is particularly clear when she intercedes for Cassio, asking Othello to rehabilitate him as lieutenant: on this occasion it is clear she wants her voice to be heard, impersonating one of the “two male fantasies that most define early modern wives”²⁰, namely the shrew, opposed to “the ideal of the submissive subordinate”²¹. Desdemona is capable of impersonating both roles, the good wife and the shrew. As Bartels affirms, “her performance highlights... that to be a shrew is, in fact, to follow the rules, to be obediently disobedient, to fill a role created by (male) authorities who needed shrews in order to contain, by criminalizing, female speech”²². The situation changes drastically in the middle of act III, when Desdemona becomes fatally passive when confronted by the husband privately; she is not passive in public, since Othello does not accuse her explicitly, except when he slaps her in the face. The more Othello accuses her of infidelity, the more silent and submissive she is, forcing us to ask ourselves what happened to the woman that stood up against her father. Even though she feebly tries to

¹⁸ Emily C. Bartels, “Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire”, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 36:2, 1996, p. 423.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 424.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 426.

²¹ Ivi, p. 426.

²² Ivi, p. 427.

defend herself when Othello calls her a strumpet, it seems like she has accepted her death before the deed is completed.

The idea of Desdemona as an active figure in the first part of the play is shared also by Dickes, who brings up another interesting aspect of the relation between Desdemona, Othello and Brabantio: the Oedipus complex. At the very beginning of the play, Iago uses three terms in his discourse to Brabantio that are curious in this sense: devil, horse and black man, all references for Othello. Following Freud, Dickes affirms that all these terms are the unconscious representation of the father figure: “in three different ways, Othello is symbolically represented as the father”²³. Dickes agrees with Bartels in saying that Desdemona (at least in the first part of the play) is not the innocent figure that is usually portrayed. On the contrary, he claims that “she is actually portrayed as a somewhat domineering woman who works actively to obtain her ends. She wanted Othello and worked to win him. She wanted Cassio reinstated in his position and she worked to the point of folly to obtain his reinstatement. Finally, she wanted death”²⁴. The author focuses not only on Desdemona’s declaration in front of the senators, which is the primary example of her expressing her will like a man, but also on the help she gives Cassio to have his role back. It would be normal to assume that she will defend her husband, but that is not what happens: she makes quietly clear that she will help Cassio in his reinstatement. “A loyal wife would support her husband's position, especially in public, even when he is in error. Desdemona does not, even though Cassio was at fault, a point which she ignores”²⁵. Even when it is clear that Othello is irrationally jealous because of the handkerchief and truly believes in her adultery, she keeps talking about Cassio and how Othello should forgive him. This supports Dickes’ theory that Desdemona was not an innocent victim of her husband: rather, she contributed to her own death manifesting a “a total disregard for her own safety”²⁶.

It is therefore hard to say that Desdemona is the perfect daughter and wife and an unquestioningly passive character for the play. Ranald offers an opposite view to the critics who want to see Desdemona as an innocent victim. In England there was indeed a

²³ R. Dickes, “Desdemona: An Innocent Victim?”, *American Imago*, 27:3, 1970, p. 280.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 279.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 290.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 293.

code of feminine behavior, deemed too free by the rest of Europe. It is in the words of Iago that we understand what this code is about:

She that was ever fair and never proud,
Had tongue at will and yet was never loud,
Never lack'd gold and yet went never gay,
Fled from her wish and yet said, "Now I may;"
She that being ang'red, her revenge being nigh,
Bade her wrong stay and her displeasure fly;
She that in wisdom never was so frail
To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail;
She that could think and ne'er disclose her mind,
See suitors following and not look behind,
She was a wight (if ever such wights were)...
To suckle fools and chronicle small beer²⁷ (2.1.148-160)

At first Desdemona looks like the perfect maiden, performing her duties fully, as Brabantio himself says. Yet, even before the play starts, she did something not appropriate for an unmarried maiden, which is to talk alone with Othello, her father's visitor. She is indiscreet "especially since it is she who speaks first of love to Othello, although her declaration is veiled"²⁸. Her deeds are unnatural and unfilial, not only because she marries without her father's permission, but also because she uses this (unusual) freedom to choose a husband that is not fit for her: a Moor soldier. Even at the very beginning of the play, we understand that she is not the ideal young lady. This is confirmed further on in the play, when she speaks up for Cassio. While in love with Othello, whom she loved and esteemed him to the point that she goes against her time's formality, she does not obey her husband completely, as a new wife should be.

The aim of this study is to highlight the active and passive nature of both characters, emphasising the presence of elements of activity and passivity in both heroines, while avoiding the obvious binomial of Imogen being active and Desdemona being passive.

²⁷ All the quotations are from Shakespeare, *Othello*, edited by M. R. Ridley, London, Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1958.

²⁸ M. L. Ranald, "The Indiscretions of Desdemona", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 14: 2, 1963, p. 132.

This research will seek to analyse the features and behaviours of the protagonists, favouring a comparison of scenes or situations throughout the plays, or in order to examine the similar or different approach of the characters to comparable dynamics.

Chapter 2: Feminine resilience in *Cymbeline* and *Othello*

2.1 Between Imogen's bedchamber and Milford Haven

In the previous chapter we focused on the description of Imogen and Desdemona and their two characters, underlining that there are similarities but also differences in the way they act, considering the numerous correspondences in the plot of the plays. In this chapter I would like to further explore the alleged betrayal of the two women and how Posthumus Leonatus and Othello were brought to believe that, paying particular attention to the reaction of the two female leading characters. This conspiracy is developed in two different ways in the plays, but both are effective: in *Cymbeline*, Iachimo spies on Imogen while she is in her bedroom, acquiring important details that will make his story credible to the eye of Posthumus; in *Othello*, Iago pulls off the trickery of the handkerchief with the unaware help of his wife Emilia.

According to Barret, the bedchamber scene in *Cymbeline* is crucial for the play, because it opens up to the realm of what might have happened, to the world of allusions, giving advantage not to the reality of the scene, what really happened, but to the unrealized alternatives that might have been. This is brilliantly carried out by Shakespeare through Iachimo, whose activity is to peep on Imogen while she is sleeping. He could have lied or used the stolen bracelet to prove the intercourse: instead, he decides to describe the room, gathering proof of something that never actually happened to make his story more convincing. Thanks to this allusion, we have a clear visual of the staged scene (the bedchamber scene with Iachimo in the trunk, the things Iachimo says to Posthumus later on in Rome) and then an imaginary scene that never happened, just told by Iachimo. Shakespeare uses a narration that is both real and potential at the same time. Iachimo gives an ekphrastic description of the chamber, focusing on the art objects that we can only imagine through verbal description: "In the bedroom, those classical allusions marked storylines that might have happened but didn't; in Rome, Iachimo's words display artwork we might have seen but didn't"²⁹. Ekphrasis is used as memory: it is in the place of memory, and memory is a fundamental part of allusion, which is the core of *Cymbeline*. Iachimo uses his images to place them as memory in the audience. An interesting example

²⁹ J. K. Barret, "The Crowd in Imogen's Bedroom: Allusion and Ethics in "Cymbeline", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 66: 4, 2015, p. 447.

of that is the description he gives of Diana, painted on the chimney of Imogen's bedroom: "Iachimo's speech does not inform us of our earlier voyeurism but rather reminds us of it, and Diana holds a place as that reminding artifact"³⁰. The myth describes when Actaeon watched Diana bathing, and as a consequence of this violation he was transformed into a stag. In *Cymbeline*, the scene is very similar: Iachimo is spying on Imogen, and while he is describing the room, he notices the painting of Diana, which creates a resemblance with these two scenes. This does not mean that the audience needs to identify with Actaeon. Since in the painting there is no Actaeon and he is never mentioned by Iachimo, Shakespeare would want us to take over from him. What Barret is trying to prove, is that the audience is part of the allusion: "we are retroactively cast in the role of Actaeon"³¹. In a way, the spectators are aware of the illicit nature of Iachimo's deed, but they are accomplices of what he is doing. Though it seems just a simple description of Imogen's bedchamber, this scene is crucial: Diana brings on a number of associations at once through the Actaeon-Diana myth. "He supplants both the actual events of the past and what might have been with an unfounded memory"³². Then Iachimo describes Cleopatra, and we understand that every piece of art he brings into matter is a symbol for Imogen's (false) infidelity. Yet, the most important evidence of her adultery is the mole on her left breast. This is the only description that Iachimo does not consider "such and such", as he did before with everything else in the room:

Iachimo: If you seek
 For further satisfying, under her breast-
 Worthy the pressing- lies a mole, right proud
 Of that most delicate lodging. By my life,
 I kiss'd it; and it gave me present hunger
 To feed again, though full. You do remember
 This stain upon her?

Posthumus: Ay, and it doth confirm
 Another stain, as big as hell can hold,

³⁰ Ivi, p. 448.

³¹ Ivi, p. 450.

³² Ivi, p. 451.

Were there no more but it.³³ (2.4.133-141)

In this scene Iachimo describes the mole on Imogen's breast, which he considers as his ace in the hole to prove the betrayal, and he calls it a stain. Posthumus, confirming the presence of that particular mark on the wife's skin, uses the same term. Having a mole was associated with being wicked; therefore the mole is not just a physical imperfection: it also has allegorical meaning.

The setting where Imogen is placed is also interesting. She has been absorbed for three hours in the reading of a book, which we will later on find out is the story of Tereus' sexual violation of Philomela in *The Metamorphoses*. Ovid was a mandatory reading for a humanist curriculum, but it was prohibited for women because of its alleged bad influence. Imogen reading Ovid is, once again, a symbol for illicit sexuality, which is not something happening for real: it is just assumed by Iachimo. His first words when seeing Imogen asleep are the following:

The crickets sing, and man's o'er-labour'd sense
Repairs itself by rest. Our Tarquin thus
Did softly press the rushes ere he waken'd
The chastity he wounded. (2.2.11-14)

The reference here is Tarquin, the villain of Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*, a narrative poem about Lucrece, the wife of Collatinus. According to Sanders, Iachimo's words differ from what he is doing: he talks about resting after a day of work, yet he is awakening his senses in front of the object of his desires, a sleeping Imogen. "The linkages here between sensual images (lily scent, white bedsheets) reorient the frame of reference from that of the female reader of a rape narrative to the prurient gaze of its villain urged to touch and possess her"³⁴. For Sanders, Iachimo with his movements is creating a connection between himself and Tarquin, as if Imogen were Lucrece, invoking the same image of a male attacker watching the woman he means to harm. Iachimo's meticulous description of the room is no less harming to his victim than the rape was to

³³ All the quotations are from Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, edited by J. M. Nosworthy, London, Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1955.

³⁴ Eve R. Sanders, "Interiority and the Letter in "Cymbeline"", *Critical Survey*, 12: 2, 2000, p. 59.

Lucrece: both women are supposed to die after the attack (Lucrece commits suicide and Posthumus orders Imogen's murder). The violation in *Cymbeline* does not take place physically, but psychically: the abuse takes place in the eyes of Iachimo, for which a normal skin patch is a sign of sexual intercourse. He starts from the outside, the bedchamber, and proceeds with the inside, her lips, eyes, bracelet and finally the mole on her breast, trying to mark her as no good from outward to inward. When he is done with the observation, he points out Imogen stopped reading when Philomela was giving up. This is, yet, another hint of Imogen's illicit behavior: she is adulterous with a crime he set up because she read about it, at least for Iachimo.

When Iachimo reports the things he saw in Imogen's chamber to prove the (false) adultery, Posthumus believes him and writes to Pisanio to arrange Imogen's homicide. But him losing his faith so easily is a sign of the violation of the betrothal staged at the very beginning of the play. According to Jordan, their promise is "a matter of conscience"³⁵. Cymbeline and the queen were not very happy with this marriage because they would have liked Cloten better, yet Posthumus was virtuous, and nobody could say anything bad about him. If anything, the courtiers cheered Imogen's pick: he was an impeccable choice. Anyway, their marriage was not completely valid. They did not marry in the presence of the king, family and friends: there was no written contract either, just a verbal one which declared they were to be married soon. This does not mean they did not have to respect marriage bonds. On the contrary, they had the same obligations of a married couple, first and foremost to be faithful with one another. Fidelity also means not losing faith in the other's faithfulness. That is where, says Jordan, the couple differs: while none of them is unfaithful, Imogen never doubts the husband's fidelity, but Posthumus, driven by Iachimo, does. Initially Posthumus had a very different vision from Iachimo, for which all women were for sale, comparable to objects whose value was easily defined. When talking of his wife, Posthumus says there is no way of giving his marriage a value: their love was beyond calculation.

Iachimo: What do you esteem it at?

Posthumus: More than the world enjoys.

³⁵ C. Jordan, "Contract and Conscience in "Cymbeline"", in *Renaissance Drama*, 25, ed. Frances E. Dolan, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press for Northwestern University, 1994, p. 35

Iachimo: Either your unparagon'd mistress is dead, or she's
 outpriz'd by a trifle.

Posthumus: You are mistaken: the one may be sold or given, if there
 were wealth enough for the purchase or merit for the gift; the
 other is not a thing for sale, and only the gift of the gods.
 (1.5.81-88)

Posthumus replies to Iachimo's provocation saying that a trifle can be sold or given, but his love for Imogen is a gift of the gods. He is putting at the same level the realm of the gods with the feelings he has for Imogen. His love is not for sale, it could be not traded with anything worldly. But things start to change when he describes the gifts they exchanged before his exile. She gave him a diamond ring, while he gave her the infamous bracelet, later stolen by Iachimo. In describing these gifts, and always under the bad influence of Iachimo, Posthumus "removed his wife from an inner world of feeling and faith and placed her in a market of items and objects"³⁶.

I will wage against your gold, gold to it. My ring I
hold dear as my finger; 'tis part of it. (1.5.137-138)

Posthumus accepts the bet offered by Iachimo, and he is ready to wage with gold, because the ring is his dearest possession, it is as valuable as the finger on which it is inserted. Yet, he is driven to lend the same ring he was reluctant to give a few lines later, probably driven by Iachimo, in order to defend his pride.

Jordan concludes affirming that Imogen's fidelity was always stronger than Posthumus': when put before the chance that he could be unfaithful, she never believes that, saying that he was a true gentleman and these assumptions were unseemly. On the other hand, Posthumus is easily brought to believe her wife could be unfaithful, which shows that he sees women as objects with a price and no unique worth, like Iachimo. Some might argue that at first Posthumus thought about a conspiracy:

Hark you, he swears; by Jupiter he swears.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 39.

'Tis true- nay, keep the ring, 'tis true. I am sure
She would not lose it. Her attendants are
All sworn and honourable- they induc'd to steal it! (2.4.122-125)

A maid could have stolen her bracelet and described her mole, which would explain how Iachimo had knowledge of those things, but even this way of reasoning proves a “fundamental distrust of women”³⁷. Seeing women in this way is further proof he could not keep marriage’s promise of fidelity, something that Imogen did without a doubt.

When Pisanio gives Imogen the letter written by Posthumus in which he asked his servant to kill her in Milford Haven for the crime he thought she committed, Imogen’s reaction is very strong, probably because she is in shock. Yet, not for a second she flinches:

False to his bed? What is it to be false?
To lie in watch there, and to think on him?
To weep twixt clock and clock? If sleep charge Nature,
To break it with a fearful dream of him,
And cry myself awake? That's false to's bed, is it? (3.4.40-44)

She is in disbelief at the thought of Posthumus thinking of her as unfaithful, lamenting that he was probably seduced by some Italian woman while she was home crying for him. Still, in her dignity she will not bend for him, she will not beg him to believe her, and she asks Pisanio to accomplish what he had to do, to kill her.

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.
Thou mayst be valiant in a better cause,
But now thou seem'st a coward. (3.4.67-73)

³⁷ Ivi, p. 40.

She is saying her heart has nothing but grief, she wants to draw the sword herself, and she asks Pisanio to strike once and for all. But Pisanio never had the intention to murder her, instead he brought her to Milford Haven in order to let her escape, since he knew the Roman ambassador Lucius was coming to the same location the following day. That is when Imogen's disguise as Fidele begins. According to Mikalachki, Imogen's dressing up is a sign of the problematic nationalism of early modern England. A respectable nationalism was somehow connected to womanhood and Imogen was a perfect example of devotion, subordination and pure Britishness; even her name, Imogen, comes from Brutus' wife, Innogen, mother of the Britons. But the fact that she takes this new identity as Fidele is proof of how complex English nationalism was: "She moves from one allegiance to another in the middle acts of the play, where she leaves the princes and Belarius, abandons the seeming corpse of Posthumus, and ultimately betrays Lucius himself when she refuses to plead for his life before Cymbeline"³⁸. In all these changes, the new name and identity she took is the only thing that remains stable. Fidele is a Latin name that recalls Imogen's intention to prove, once more, her marital fidelity, but also the national fidelity when she meets Lucius, who gives her a purpose, and, finally, the last act of fidelity, when she acknowledges Rome as a master, while she was reduced to nothing by the supposed death of Posthumus.

Another significant issue is Imogen's identity. As Lander observes, the systematic erasure of her initial individualities (that of wife, daughter, chaste woman, princess) provided her the opportunity to question her true identity. While she was reduced to nothing ("I am nothing"³⁹) she had the possibility to rebuild herself and the nation. The first thing she lost is her esteemed rank. When she finds out Posthumus's murderous intentions, she loses twice: not only her husband and reputation, but also the integrity of choosing Posthumus over Cloten. These two stabilizing influences, her husband and patriotic integrity, which once anchored her in the initial act, are now absent: she has to question who she is without them. Then, in the cave, she "diminishes further"⁴⁰: she becomes more reflective, she does not speak much, and after drinking Pisanio's medicine

³⁸ J. Mikalachki, "The Masculine Romance of Roman Britain: Cymbeline and Early Modern English Nationalism", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 46: 3, 1995, p. 319.

³⁹ Cymbeline 4.2.367.

⁴⁰ B. Lander, "Interpreting the Person: Tradition, Conflict, and Cymbeline's Imogen", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 59:2, 2008, p. 179.

she “enters a death-like state”⁴¹, almost unconscious. In this moment she is her most essential self, far away from external forms: Shakespeare is trying to stage something unrepresentable, a character without social identifiers, and he does that by “pushing his heroine as close to death as possible, making her relinquish everything, and then allowing her to speak at the very moment when she is least recognizable to herself or the audience”⁴². Finally, when she mistakenly believes Posthumus is dead (when in fact it is Cloten with Posthumus’ clothes) and Pisanio poisoned her, when she therefore thinks everybody abandoned her, she is ready to say that she is nothing. It is from this point that she will begin the process of reconstruction of her true self. When she sees Posthumus’ ring on Iachimo’s hand, it is clear that the truth is part of her essential self: it is something she did not let go in this quest of her true self. When she recognizes her name, gender and rank again, she does so with far more understanding of their meaning. She experienced a real change: she is not just a woman, wife, princess and sister. They are all elements that denote her, but she is also something else. The fact that *Cymbeline* is not a tragedy makes it possible to Imogen not to disappear: the play offers a vision of a life that can be regenerated and the idea of self-awareness.

2.2 Desdemona, Othello and the Handkerchief

In *Othello* the deception does not take place one single time, as it happens in *Cymbeline*, but it is built up by Iago throughout the play and then leads to the killing of Desdemona in the last act. Iago instills the seed of doubt in Othello from the very beginning of the play, to the point the Moor will go blindly mad. Anyway, there is a moment that signals Othello’s suspicion is becoming real: when Cassio is seen with Desdemona’s handkerchief. According to Berger, the handkerchief was a gift to Desdemona signifying marital fidelity and love, and she valued it more than herself, as Emilia states when she picks it up from the floor to give it to Iago. In act three, when Othello has a headache (probably because Iago is making him believe there is something going on between his wife and Cassio and has asked the Moor to pay attention, instilling into him the doubt she might be unfaithful). Desdemona uses a specific verb, that is watching:

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Ivi, 180.

Desdemona: Why do your speech so faint? Are you not well?
Othello: I have a pain upon my forehead, here.
Desdemona: Faith, that's with watching, 'twill away again; (3.3.287-289)

She is obviously referring to the fact that her husband is working really hard, probably staying up too late, but just a few moments before Iago made a speech about observing, seeing, paying attention to Cassio and Desdemona, so it is possible that this statement sounds different to what it should in the ears of Othello.

Desdemona: Let me but bind it hard; within this hour
It will be well.
Othello: Your napkin is too little: [she drops her handkerchief]
Let it alone, come, I'll go in with you. (3.3.289-292)

Desdemona also tries to bind the husband's forehead with the precious handkerchief, but Othello tells her not to. It is in this moment that Desdemona drops the napkin, letting the course of events fall from this moment on, since the loss of the handkerchief is one of the major reasons behind Othello's jealousy. For Berger, it is an interesting choice that the handkerchief is dropped so easily, both from Othello and Desdemona. The former should have noticed that it was not just an ordinary napkin, but it was the dear handkerchief he gave her as a present, and why did the latter not pick it up before going offstage, if it was something she cared about more than her life? This negligence is hard to explain. Berger affirms it could be Othello's first rejection of the wife, sending the message she may not be worthy of such a gift.

According to Boose, the handkerchief is filled with hidden meanings: it is a piece of "white linen spotted with strawberry-red fruit"⁴³. It is sufficiently clear that the strawberries are a symbol for virginity, as they are considered one of the purest fruits. The flower from which the strawberry comes from is white, and it is the flower usually associated with love and desire. So it is not far-fetched to see the handkerchief as an allusion to the wedding bed sheets, a proof that the marriage was consumed, which gives

⁴³ Lynda E. Boose, "The Recognizance and Pledge of Love", *English Literary Renaissance*, 5: 3, 1975, pp. 362.

more power to the object itself and gives measure to its loss. The handkerchief is not just a napkin, it is a symbol for their love, and it seems Shakespeare wants to underline the difference between its external appearance and its actual meaning by calling it a “trifle”. Something similar happens in *Cymbeline*, when Posthumus referred to the ring and the bracelet he and his wife exchanged as “our trifles”. When Iachimo, in front of Posthumus, calls the ring the same way, Imogen’s husband underlines that the value of the object went beyond the object itself, as the diamond representing their relationship was in fact invaluable. The bracelet in *Cymbeline* and the handkerchief in *Othello* are not trifles: they represent love, marriage and fidelity and, consequently, the sexual act between husband and wife. As the bracelet in *Cymbeline* was a “gift of the gods”, the handkerchief in *Othello* has “magic in the web of it”:

’Tis true. There’s magic in the web of it.
A sybil that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work.
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skillful
Conserved of maidens’ hearts. (3.4.67-73)

It is this magic that brings back to the sphere of myth and symbolism, the same way the handkerchief was symbolic so far. *Othello* gives two versions of its origin. In the first one, the handkerchief came from an Egyptian who gave it to his mother, in the second one his father gave it to his mother. These two stories do not clash with each other, rather they support one another. The mother giving it to her son guaranteeing love and fidelity, and the father giving the handkerchief represents every husband making a gift of love to his bride. *Othello* will go mad because of the loss of this napkin, which is not a simple gift, but it is full of meaning.

Further on, the handkerchief becomes the reason of dispute between *Othello* and *Desdemona*: Iago tells the Moor he saw it in *Cassio*’s hand, which leads *Othello* to believe she gave it to him, increasing his jealousy. For *Berger*, *Desdemona* does not think her husband is capable of jealousy, because she did not give him any reason to be, even

though it is clear his behavior is changing. She will ignore the signs of jealousy, and she will not say she lost the handkerchief: instead, she will ask Othello to keep his promise and reinstate Cassio.

Why, so I can, but I will not now,
This is a trick, to put me from my suit,
I pray let Cassio be receiv'd again. (3.4.84-86)

She does not want to show him the handkerchief. Even though she knew she did not have it, she says she will show him later, when he will agree to talk to Cassio. She keeps asking Othello to receive him, quite insistently. Ignoring her husband's jealousy allows her to defend herself and to carry on her promise to Cassio, because in her eyes it was beyond impossible that Othello suspected a betrayal. This blind resolution she has in believing him impossible of jealousy will eventually be the cause of her death.

From now on, events escalate quickly, to the point Othello will strike Desdemona in front of other people:

Desdemona: My lord?
Othello: I am glad to see you mad.
Desdemona: How, sweet Othello?
Othello: Devil! [striking her]
Desdemona: I have not deserv'd this. (4.1.233-236)

On this occasion she will try to defend herself, saying she did not deserve this treatment. Some critics argue she did not defend herself properly throughout the play. Dickes affirms that any other woman, accused of being false like she was, would have reacted differently, and not with her mild "What's the matter?". Anyway, Othello does not accuse her directly: his unjustified rage comes from untrue speculations building up in his mind, fueled by Iago, but he is not clear towards his wife, nor does accuse her in a direct manner. He asks about the handkerchief, and when Desdemona says she did not lose it he does not believe her, he is already biased by Iago's perspective. In the following fight, Othello is clearer in his accusations:

Desdemona: Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?
Othello: Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
Made to write “whore” on? ... What committed?
...
Desdemona: By heaven, you do me wrong!
Othello: Are not you a strumpet?
Desdemona: No, as I am a Christian:
If to preserve this vessel for my lord
From any other foul unlawful touch
Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.
Othello: What, not a whore?
Desdemona: No, as I shall be sav’d.
Othello: Is ’t possible?
Desdemona: O heaven, forgiveness. (4.2.72-90)

He calls the wife a “whore” and a “strumpet”, so it is understandable for Desdemona what the problem is, yet again he does not mention Cassio or the things Iago reported to him. Desdemona tries to defend herself by saying she is a good Christian and she did not betray her husband, but Othello is long lost at this point. The one single time in which he will accuse her directly is in the final act, a few moments before the killing, but in that moment Othello is not even interested in the truth anymore.

Desdemona will defend her husband until the very end, she will be an obedient and loyal wife and she will sacrifice herself for love. One particular scene marks a subtle change in her behaviour, when she gives up her defence. That is when Othello commands her to go to bed and dismiss Emilia. According to Grennan, she defends her love without a second thought even in this situation, turning Othello’s behaviour and his flows into something gracious when she says:

My love doth so approve him,
That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns -
Prithee unpin me, - have grace and favor in them. (4.3.19-21)

The acceptance of her love is very realistic: “such speech makes her love seem as natural to her as her physical existence, as much to be taken for granted as the ordinary acts of dressing and undressing”⁴⁴. Desdemona then tells the story of Barbary, her mother’s maid who was killed by her lover, and dying she sang the song of the willow, a love song. She starts to sing it while Emilia prepares her for the night: Desdemona is the last in a long line of abandoned women, from Barbary to a multitude of others who sang the same song, a poor soul joining a sisterhood of grief.

Desdemona: *[singing] The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow:
Her hand on her bosom her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow.
The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans,
Sing willow, willow, willow.
Her salt tears fell from her, which soften'd the stones; —
Lay by these: —
Sing willow, willow, willow.
Prithee hie thee: he'll come anon: —
Sing all a green willow must be my garland.
Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve, —
Nay, that's not next. Hark! who is 't that knocks?*

Emilia: *It's the wind.*

Desdemona: *I call'd my love false love; but what said he then?
Sing willow, willow, willow:
If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men. (4.3.40-56)*

For Grennan, it is easy in this scene to sympathise with her, and Shakespeare interrupts the songs a few times, probably to avoid the excessive sentimentalism it effortlessly creates. According to Dickes, the fact that Desdemona tells the story of Barbary is an identification with Barbary itself. She was almost expecting her death, she was aware of

⁴⁴ E. Grennan, “The Women's Voices in "Othello": Speech, Song, Silence”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38: 3, 1987, p. 277.

what was going to happen, and nonetheless she obeyed the orders of her husband to go to bed and dismiss Emilia. She does not avoid the prospect of her death: in fact, she embraces it. Maybe for her the most important thing was being actually loyal to her love and marriage, rather than prove it to an almost unrecoverable man.

According to Grennan, the exchange between Desdemona and her maid, Emilia, just before she goes to bed, exposes their differences: the former is naive and pure, the latter is much more pragmatic and realistic. In any case this conversation between the two of them is a sign of female fellowship: they speak about a subject their husbands usually silence them or do not listen to them about. Emilia in particular gives a defence speech on wives and the double standards for male and female: “It argues for women's freedom in sexual matters, stressing the common humanity of the sexual natures of men and women”⁴⁵. Even though they do not agree on the matter they are discussing, which is the possibility for a woman to be unfaithful, they are sure they are going to be heard, especially Emilia. “The nature of this scene as a protected enclosure where the women may, for a few minutes free of a world that puts checks upon their voices, speak (or sing) their minds and hearts.”⁴⁶ This scene covers a number of topics, such as female sexuality, infidelity and love, and it seems it is a brief parenthesis where women can share their thoughts freely.

Holmer gives another interesting analysis: for him Desdemona can be considered as a female warrior. It is with those exact same words twice in the play: the first time by Othello, when he meets her after the battle and refers to her like his “fair warrior”, and the second time by herself in the following act, when she defines herself an “unhandsome warrior”. Othello and the Duke both thought she would stay in Venice while her husband was in Cyprus, but she insisted on going with him, and that was an unusual request. She not only fights for herself to be near her husband, but also she stands up for Cassio and for the right reason: despite her husband’s temper, she “rightly interprets Cassio's friendship”⁴⁷. For Holmer, the most relevant moment in which she shows her being a warrior is at the very end, when she is killed by Othello. Initially she tries to beg him to

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 281.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 282.

⁴⁷ Joan O. Holmer, “Desdemona, Woman Warrior: “O, these men, these men!”” in *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England, 17*, ed. John Pitcher and S. P. Cerasano, New Jersey, Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp DBA Associated University Presses, 2005, p. 139.

let her live, but he listens to no reason and smothers her. Yet, Desdemona does not passively submit after looking dead: she uses her voice to say something, to state that she was “falsely murdered”, to clear her name. It is Emilia who listens to her, asking who was responsible for what happened, and in her last line she blames herself:

Desdemona: O falsely, falsely murder'd.
Emilia: O Lord, what cry is that?
Othello: That? What?
Emilia: Out and alas! It is my lady's voice;
Help, help, ho, help! O lady, speak again,
Sweet Desdemona, O sweet mistress, speak!
Desdemona: A guiltless death I die.
Emilia: O, who has done this deed?
Desdemona: Nobody, I myself, farewell:
Commend me to my kind lord, O, farewell! (5.2.118-126)

According to Holmer, she wanted to protect Othello until the very end, in a way that almost sanctifies her, and that is what happened to Othello when he finds out the truth: he changes her view of her from damned to saved.

A question arises from this end of the play: why did Shakespeare script such a finale for Desdemona, the heroine of this play? For Holmer, the answer has to be found in the sources the playwright used for Othello, which are three: Cinthio's *novella*, Bandello's Italian tale and Fenton's English translation of it. In Cinthio, the woman does not revive after being killed, but she managed to pray for herself just before, while in Bandello's tale the wife revives to speak to the jealous husband, and Shakespeare was familiar with both. "Several critics have argued that Shakespeare most likely used Fenton, especially at the end of his drama.⁴⁸" However, Shakespeare's Desdemona begs for some time to pray, unlike Bandello's, and when she revives, she does not pray for herself, and she commends herself to her lord Othello, not God. That is probably because she is aware of

⁴⁸ Joan O. Holmer, "Desdemona, Woman Warrior: "O, these men, these men!" in *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, 17, ed. John Pitcher and S. P. Cerasano, New Jersey, Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp DBA Associated University Presses, 2005, p. 141.

her innocence and she is so honest about her faithfulness she does not need to pray for her salvation, as if she already knew she was going to be saved.

The two plays end very differently: in *Cymbeline*, the play ends well, with Imogen revealing her disguise, Iachimo admitting his interference between husband and wife, Belarius revealing Guiderius and Aviragus are the lost sons of the king, the reunification between Posthumus and Imogen, but also between Imogen and her father, let alone Cymbeline with his two sons. Since the play has a good ending, there is a sense of hope for the future, the idea that eventually contrasts can be solved, and Imogen has a central role in this, because she is the true protagonist of all the adventures that take place in the comedy. On the other hand, *Othello* ends not only with the death of Desdemona, but also with the suicide of Othello over the dead's wife body. Due to this tragic finale, Othello is the representation of the morbid jealousy that misguides love passion and eventually leads the protagonists to self-destruction and death, and Desdemona is the true representation of the outcome of this dreadful jealousy.

Chapter 3: Imogen's and Desdemona's acts of passivity

3.1 Imogen and obedience

In the previous chapter I analysed various scenes of *Cymbeline* and *Othello*, focusing on the reaction of the female heroines, especially when confronting their husbands or defending themselves from false accusation, in order to underline the strength in both characters, even though Desdemona is generally considered a passive wife. In this final chapter I will focus on the opposite: I would like to analyse the heroines' partial or total weaknesses or passivity, to further prove it is not possible to simply define Imogen as active and Desdemona as passive, because it would be too simplistic; both characters have some active and passive features, this dichotomy is represented in both plays.

Imogen is an active figure: she rebels against her father, marrying Posthumus instead of Cloten, she runs away when she finds out her husband believes her unfaithful and she dresses up like a male to go under the service of Lucius. All these actions are quite uncommon for a woman, since female virtue was tested passively. Action was traditionally a way of proving men's honour: they were challenged in battles and encouraged to overcome challenges to prove their virtue and worth. Therefore, it seems Imogen is not the usual image of a devoted wife, daughter and woman, after everything she does in the play. Yet, it is not possible to say that she is not a representation of female virtue: her actions, even though far away from the usual behaviour, are directed towards chaste ends. According to Marsden, Imogen "would seem to be a striking example of proper female behaviour"⁴⁹. Everything she does throughout the play is done out of love for her husband or duty towards her marital obligations. She is properly grieving when Posthumus is banished from the court, and she adopts the name Fidele, another sign of her wifely devotion. Shakespeare's Imogen conveys all the features a woman should have: she respects her husband, she knows her place both in the domestic and in the political hierarchy, she is compliant, and compliance, combined with passive virtue, is a necessary feature for "feminine survival"⁵⁰. Lander shares the same idea, saying that "Imogen was everything that a free woman could be within clear definitions of the

⁴⁹ Jean I. Marsden, "Pathos and Passivity: D'Urfey's "The Injured Princess" and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*", *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700*, 14: 2, 1990, p. 72.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 73.

dedicated wife, sister, daughter, mother”⁵¹. She is vital, yet she does not transgress, recognising her natural inferiority. For Helena Faucit⁵², one of the most famous actresses who brought Imogen to life on the stage, Imogen was intrinsically graceful, and that could be seen in her fine taste, her actions, even her singing.

Faucit reads the first lines of the play as an example of devoted woman:

I beseech you sir,
Harm not yourself with your vexation,
I am senseless to your wrath; a touch more rare
Subdues all pangs, all fears. (1.2.64-67)

In this scene Imogen is indeed expressing her resolution in marrying Posthumus, underlining that there is a much more delicate feeling that covers her fear (the fear of Cymbeline, the fear of having disappointed him with her choice), which is her love for the husband. Yet, she also put into words her apprehensiveness for her father, stating that with his rage he is only harming himself. Helena Faucit reads not only a dedicated wife in “a touch more rare”, but also a devoted and loving daughter in “harm not yourself with your vexation”, expressing her fear of him hurting himself with his strong bad temper. For Faucit, she was concerned about her father’s instability. It is possible to begin to understand that Imogen can not be seen simply as a rule-breaker, an active character doing everything she should not. Part of her can be described like that, but she is also something else, her behaviour is in some occasions partially “passive”, or at least in line with the traditional qualities of a woman.

The examples of Imogen’s fidelity and love are countless in the play, and one of them is when Posthumus leaved and asked Pisanio about him:

I would have broke mine eye-strings, crack'd them, but
To look upon him, till the diminution
Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle;
Nay, followed him till he had melted from

⁵¹ B. Lander, “Interpreting the Person: Tradition, Conflict, and Cymbeline's Imogen”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 59:2, 2008, p. 163.

⁵² Ivi, p. 163.

The smallness of a gnat, to air: and then
Have turn'd mine eye and wept. (1.4.17-22)

In her words her love for Posthumus is clear. She states she would have looked at him for as long as possible, and then she would have cried. Her devotion as a wife is evident: she is behaving like a loyal wife. The same happens when she receives the letter from Posthumus, informing her he was at Milford Haven, asking her to join him. In that moment, she does not want to wait a second more to meet him:

O, for a horse with wings! Hear'st thou, Pisanio?
He is at Milford-Haven: read, and tell me
How far 'tis thither. If one of mean affairs
May plod it in a week, why may not I
Glide thither in a day? Then, true Pisanio-
Who long'st, like me, to see thy lord; who long'st-
(O let me 'bate) but not like me yet long'st,
But in a fainter kind. O, not like me:
For mine's beyond beyond. (3.2.49-56)

Her first escalation is “for a horse with wings”: she is clearly longing to see her husband, so much that she wishes for something impossible, a horse with wings to reach him as fast as possible. She also put into words her desire, saying that her wanting to see Posthumus was not like Pisanio, because her own was “beyond beyond”). It is clear in this scene that she respects all the characteristics that a wife should have, especially obedience, since she starts to plan her trip to Wales as soon as she reads the letter. Yet, it is in the moments in which she is tested in her love that we can see both the traditional and uncommon features of a woman. When Pisanio shows her letter Posthumus gave to him, asking to kill her for her betrayal, she does not flinch:

I false! Thy conscience witness: Iachimo,
Thou didst accuse him of incontinency;
Thou then look'dst like a villain: now, methinks,

Thy favour's good enough. Some jay of Italy
(Whose mother was her painting) hath betray'd him:
Poor I am stale, a garment out of fashion,
And, for I am richer than to hang by th' walls,
I must be ripp'd - to pieces with me! - O,
Men's vows are women's traitors! All 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. (3.4.46-57)

In these words and those just before, she protects herself. She does not accept the accusations of Posthumus, she defends her chastity and marital fidelity. She does not bend to the allegation of the husband, rather she stands up to her confidence, because she knows nothing happened and she is not unfaithful. According to Lander, when Imogen discovers that Posthumus humiliated her and ruined her reputation, she is well aware of the social roles implied in her relationship. For Lander, her choice of words shows that she knows she is a princess, and therefore she is “richer tha to hang by th’ walls”, and precisely because she is a princess, Posthumus can not simply dismiss her: he must ruin her reputation, or rip her, as she says in line fifty-three. “These are social truths Imogen accepts unquestioningly”⁵³. Her pain is thus caused not only by the husband’s false accusation, but also by her knowing of the social forms that have decided her faith. But the most interesting thing of this scene is that, even though she defends herself and her pride by the untrue statements of her husband, she also want to accomplish what Posthumus asked Pisanio to do:

Look!
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

⁵³ B. Lander, “Interpreting the Person: Tradition, Conflict, and Cymbeline's Imogen”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 59:2, 2008, p. 177.

The riches of it. Do his bidding, strike.
Thou mayst be valiant in a better cause;
But now thou seem'st a coward. (3.4.66-73)

She is saying she will draw the sword herself, and then she asks Pisanio to carry out the order his master gave him, to strike her innocent heart, the home of her love. Now her heart is just full of grief, there is no space for anything else. Posthumus filled her heart with love, it was what enriched her, but now there is nothing left. In her words, it is clear she wants to follow Posthumus' orders: even in this humiliating time she will be obedient, she will not disregard her role and position. Her heart is "obedient as the scabbard" (3.4.80), she wants the deed to be completed as soon as possible, because now she is left with nothing. The most important parts of her life are gone: she is the daughter of a king, but she ran from the court, and then she was Posthumus' wife, and now she finds out about these false accusations. It is in Pisanio's suggestion that she decides to go away, disguising herself as Fidele.

According to Hunt, in Wales Imogen "acts the role of their housewife, dutifully cutting their root diet into letters for an alphabet soup that symbolises the nurture she would give them"⁵⁴. For Hunt, she has the chance to experience her wifely faith, which was questioned by Posthumus but is not strengthened and practised, thanks to this experience of taking care of her brothers (even though she did not know they were actually her brothers). The author also adds that for Imogen the supposed infidelity of the husband (it is what she assumes after the letter) is much less painful than her believing him dead: "a greater grief displaces an extreme sorrow"⁵⁵. First, she does not feel her father's anger, because she is too hurt from Posthumus being banished. Then, this melancholy caused by the distance from her husband is overcome by the sorrow she feels when she is accused of being unfaithful. At last, even this misery is overthrown by the idea of Posthumus being dead. This climax of sadness is what, according to Lander, will help Imogen to diminish herself completely in order to become a renewed woman.

⁵⁴ Maurice Hunt, "Shakespeare's Empirical Romance: Cymbeline and Modern Knowledge", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 22: 3, 1980, pp. 332.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

The greatest act of passivity or obedience we can find in Cymbeline is in the very last act. When Cymbeline finds out his two sons are still alive, these are his words:

O, what am I?
A mother to the birth of three? Ne'er mother
Rejoic'd deliverance more. Blest pray you be,
That, after this strange starting from your orbs,
You may reign in them now! O Imogen,
Thou hast lost by this a kingdom. (5.5.369-374)

Cymbeline is obviously joyous to find out his sons are alive and at his court: he compares it to the happiness of a mother giving birth, and even some more. At the same time he is saying to Imogen that she has lost a kingdom, because it is implied in this discovery that the crown will go to the male heir of the king. Nevertheless, Imogen does not have any hard feelings against her brothers:

No, my lord;
I have got two worlds by't. O my gentle brothers,
Have we thus met? O, never say hereafter
But I am truest speaker! You call'd me brother,
When I was but your sister: I you brothers,
When we were so indeed. (5.5.374-379)

She is happy for this reunion, she does not have any resentment or hostility for the crown: she is just glad of this blessing, meeting her two brothers and reuniting the family. She says she had the chance to reunite two words, and she could not be happier. In these final words we see the greatest act of obedience of the whole play. As Lander says, Imogen is the combination of a woman who will stand up for herself, and she does it numerous times throughout the play, but she is also absolutely pleased to allow her older brother to take the throne from her. She is the perfect realisation of the ideal woman.

3.2 The other side of the picture: Desdemona's submissiveness

Desdemona is generally considered as an active figure in the first part of the play, and a passive one in the second half. She rebelled against her father, marrying Othello, a man that, as virtuous as he was, was not suitable for Desdemona, or at least this is what Brabantio thinks. She stands in front of the senate and defends her reason, her love of Othello, her choice to marry him, and she does not back off from her position. This is the image of a woman that is not submitted to her husband. Yet, in the second part of the play, when the married couple is in Venice, it seems she changes completely. This brought the critics to think of her as a passive woman, bent to the will of her husband, and this is proven by the conclusion of the play, which ends with the tragic murder of the heroine. As in the previous chapter I tried to underline her moments of strength, not only when she is clearly an active woman (like when she were in front of her father in a room full of men) but also when she seemed to be overcome by her husband, I would like to approach the matter differently, giving emphasis to her moments of weakness or passivity, where she is so silenced that we ask ourselves where the woman warrior of the first act is.

According to Bartels, the more Desdemona interacts with her husband, the more she becomes silent and submissive, giving up speaking for herself. The key scene that starts Desdemona's decline is the one in which she asks Othello to reinstate Cassio, but Othello is focused on the loss of the handkerchief:

Othello: Lend me thy handkerchief.
Desdemona: Here, my lord.
Othello: That which I gave you.
Desdemona: I have it not about me.
Othello: Not?
...
Othello: Is 't lost? Is 't gone? Speak, is 't out o' th' way?
Desdemona: Heaven bless us!
Othello: Say you?
Desdemona: It is not lost, but what an if it were?
Othello: How?
Desdemona: I say it is not lost.

Othello: Fetch 't. Let me see 't!

Desdemona: Why, so I can sir, but I will not now,
This is a trick, to put me from my suit,
I pray let Cassio be receiv'd again.

Othello: Fetch me the handkerchief, my mind misgives.

Desdemona: Come, come.
You'll never meet a more sufficient man.

Othello: The handkerchief!

Desdemona: I pray, talk me of Cassio.

Othello: The handkerchief!

Desdemona: A man that all his time
Hath founded his good fortunes on your love,
Shar'd dangers with you, —

Othello: The handkerchief!
I' faith, you are to blame. (3.4.48-94)

In this scene Desdemona is not completely honest, because she knows she lost the handkerchief and she does not know where it is. Yet, she tells Othello it is not gone, even though he is insistently asking her to show him the napkin. To Othello, this is like a confirmation of her loss, and thus of her guilt: it was the most precious item he gave her, and she lost it. Othello's mind was already poisoned by Iago's false accusation, but it certainly did not help in that moment that Desdemona is not compliant in showing him the handkerchief. Instead, she keeps asking about Cassio's reinstatement, repeatedly, without even considering answering Othello's demand to see the handkerchief. According to Dickes, with this conversation she has worsened the situation, letting Othello's anger pile up until the final fatal events. Her attitude towards Othello when asking about Cassio has led many critics to think that Desdemona was somehow responsible for her death. For example, Kottman writes: "Some suspect that Desdemona wanted to die all along, that she sought death at Othello's hands"⁵⁶. The same thought is shared by Dickes, who is convinced Desdemona can not be seen as an innocent victim

⁵⁶ P. Kottman, "On Othello and Desdemona", *Memoria Di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies*, 2017, p. 143.

and has somehow contributed to her own death. However, she promised Cassio to intercede for him, and though she seems repetitive in her request, she also had the best intentions and she was not doing this out of love with Cassio. In her innocence, she was just trying to help a friend out.

Othello is growing more and more mad, and his accusations have no foundation: they are just blind allegations caused by unmotivated jealousy. His outburst of anger is shown when he strikes Desdemona in front of other people:

Desdemona: My lord?
Othello: I am glad to see you mad.
Desdemona: How, sweet Othello?
Othello: [striking her] Devil!
Desdemona: I have not deserv'd this.

I chose this scene in the previous chapter to prove she is trying to defend herself, because Desdemona shows a bit of character, but this same scene can be proof of the opposite tendency. She does not say why she did not deserve this, she does not explain how she feels or why she is suffering, unlike Imogen, who, in front of Pisanio, makes a whole speech about how betrayed she felt. A few lines after, she leaves the room as soon as Othello commands her to, to the point that even Lodovico defines her “Truly, an obedient lady” (4.1.243). According to Bartels, this scene shows two important outcomes: “outspokenness may hurt her and obedience will not help her”⁵⁷. For Bartels, Othello was irrecoverable, Desdemona was already doomed and her death had to be expected. Even the most desirable trait in a woman, obedience, which can be seen more and more towards the end of the play, leaves her defenceless. The more she is accused, the less she defends herself, but now not even this attitude will help her in surviving.

The situation worsens in the following fight, when Othello accuses her more clearly, yet not mentioning Cassio’s name. Desdemona, having understood that her husband was angry at her, does not mention the reinstatement, but she is appalled to the accusations of infidelity:

⁵⁷ Emily C. Bartels, “Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire”, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 36:2, 1996, p. 428.

Othello: Impudent strumpet!

Desdemona: By heaven, you do me wrong!

Othello: Are not you a strumpet?

Desdemona: No, as I am a Christian:
 If to preserve this vessel for my lord
 From any other foul unlawful touch,
 Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

Othello: What, not a whore? (4.2.83-88)

According to Kottman, Desdemona cannot understand Othello's accusation, and that is why she keeps asking him why he calls her a whore or a strumpet, since she was nothing but a faithful wife. For Kottman, she cannot accept those accusations, and she is trying to give a sense to Othello's words. But in trying to do that, she acts innocent, or rather she is innocent. Her attitude may be exchanged with passiveness, because rather than defending herself she makes an attempt to meet Othello half-way, but she does that because she cannot truly understand her husband's rage, since she did nothing wrong. This innocence can be seen not only in the way she talks with Othello during the fight, but also in the following lines, when she asks Iago if it was possible to call her that name. Despite the false accusations, Desdemona does not rebel against Othello's will, and she goes to bed as he asks her to.

As in *Cymbeline*, the greatest act of passiveness can be found at the very end of the play, when Desdemona is murdered. Even in those final lines, when Othello faces her clearly, and she is accused of lying, she responds with the plain "What's the matter" (5.2.47). In this final act her devotion to the husband is complete, so complete that she will let him kill her even though she knew he was in the wrong. As Bartels says, she defends Othello to the very end, she sacrifices herself for love. This may be considered the biggest representation of obedience and silence, two valuable qualities for a wife. She knows she was not unfaithful, and she was helping Cassio not out of love, as Othello thought, but because she was willing to support a friend wrongly dismissed. Yet, she refuses to blame her lover and she willingly let herself be killed as her last act of love. For Dickes, in her last words she wants to protect Othello: she is astonishingly passive,

to the point that she will be falsely killed, as Emilia says, yet still defending her love for the husband, as she says the only person to blame was herself.

Desdemona can not be considered simply a passive figure: this definition would be too shallow, not only because at the beginning of the play she is the exact opposite of a passive woman, but also because throughout the play she does, or at least tries, to defend herself to some extent. Yet, it is clear that, while the play develops, she is not the same person she was in Venice: she is less talkative, unable to stand up in front of her husband and saying that his accusation are totally false, that he should have never doubted about her love because she never gave him the chance to. Some might argue that at some point she does say she is not unfaithful and she is being falsely accused, but it seems that, even when she is actually defending herself, she is not confident of her own words. It appears she is in the grip of Othello, totally hurt by the accusation, trying to preserve her dignity, but not even sure of her words.

Conclusion

The traditional overview on Imogen and Desdemona identifies a clear dichotomy between the two. The latter is considered a passive wife, brought to be the helpless version of herself (especially when compared with the Desdemona of the beginning of the play, who fought her father for her self-determination), innocent, with the only fault of being extremely in love with Othello, so much that she will die rather than oppose to him. The former is viewed as an active figure, who not only married against her father's wishes, jeopardising the family and the stability of the crown, but also escaped from the court and the husband when accused of infidelity, ready to give up her previous life and start a new one in the wilderness. This approach does not hold up completely. If Imogen were to be merely active and Desdemona simply passive, we could not explain Desdemona's behaviour in front of the senate, which is very similar to the rebellious conduct of Imogen against Cymbeline.

My attempt was to demonstrate that the analysis of Shakespeare's heroines in *Cymbeline* and *Othello* cannot be simply identified as a dichotomy between two opposites. Both have elements of activity and passivity, both have moments in which their behaviour is more compliant and moments in which it was not. Through the analysis of central scenes in both plays, especially when the two are confronting the husband or expressing their state of mind and emotions, hence in those scenes where they are the protagonists, I tried to compare their active and passive features, moments and behaviours.

This analysis suggests that not only both characters have moments of activity and passivity, but also that there is a difference in how they perform active or passive deeds and what those deeds bring to. Desdemona defends herself and her love for Othello in the first part of the play: she marries without her father's consent, faces an assembly of men that includes her enraged father, moves to Cyprus with the husband. All these actions define an uncommon behaviour for a woman: Desdemona does not flinch, as her feeling for Othello and the possibility to be with him wipes away any obstacle. She is also quite insistent in her request to help Cassio for his unjust demotion: she brings out this topic numerous times with the husband, and even when Othello is clearly bothered by her

demand, she seems to keep on her track, almost as if she did not really care about Othello's annoy. Her behaviour is evidently active.

The situation changes when Othello starts to accuse her of infidelity, not openly, but in a subtle way. It seems that the more he is bad to her, the less she reacts. He calls her a whore, he strikes her in front of other people, but Desdemona does nothing rather than accept her husband's rage. Actually, it is not fair to say that she does not defend herself, because she tries to say something on her behalf, especially when Othello clearly accuses her or when he treats her very poorly. For example, when he strikes her, she says she did not deserve the slap, or when he calls her a whore she tries to say that she is a faithful woman and does not deserve the names Othello is giving her. Yet, it is possible to see a change in her actions: in the second part of the play she becomes passive. She could use the same energy she spent in the confrontation with her father to defend herself and escape from Othello's grip, saving her pride from those wrong accusations. But she decides not to, or at least not enough, and this will eventually bring her to death. A death she sees coming, as it is possible to understand first in the Barbary song, and then in her final words before she passes. All these elements lead me to think that she goes from being extremely active, especially if we consider women's decision-making power in Shakespeare's time, to being a compliant woman, who suddenly lost her ability to stand up for herself and will transform her into a victim of her husband's jealousy.

On the other hand, Imogen seems an active woman throughout the entire play. She decides to ignore her father's wish to marry Cloten in order to be with Posthumus, knowing perfectly that she is putting in danger the crown and consequently the country. Like Desdemona, she is not afraid to do so, being ready to defend her love no matter what. Moreover, when she is accused of infidelity she does not accept it: she decides to go away and to change her life completely, and, from her point of view, forever. She does not bend to her husband's claims, she defends her pride and her virtue, at the cost of starting a new life in the countryside, away from the life she has always known. This can be considered an active attitude: unlike Desdemona, she does not bear the mark the husband put upon her, because she is well aware that it is not the truth. Yet, Imogen is not only this. Imogen is also the woman that, finding out what Posthumus' accusations are, asks Pisanio to accomplish his orders and kill her. To be precise, the idea of leaving her previous life and starting a new one away from the husband was not hers, but Pisanio's. Therefore, it is not

fair to state that Imogen is only active: she has moments in which she is active indeed, because she embraces Pisanio's idea quickly, but her first instinct would be to cry of sorrow and fulfil Posthumus' orders.

Another interesting approach Imogen has can be found at the end of the play, when she wholeheartedly welcomes her newly found brothers to the family, even though she knew she had to give up her claim to the throne. However, she is nothing but happy about the situation: for her, the most important thing is to reunite the family, which is why she is happy to renounce the crown. This final passage is a clear representation of Imogen's passivity, and it is another reason why it is not possible to say that she is simply an active woman.

I believe the approach towards these two female heroines showed how reductive it is to define Imogen and Desdemona with a single feature, active or passive. The female protagonists have both properties, and they expose them in different times, places and ways throughout the plays.

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Summary in Italian

Le opere di Shakespeare sono state ampiamente analizzate e discusse, vista la popolarità dell'autore e le numerose opere che ha scritto. Lo stesso è stato fatto anche per la tragedia di *Otello* e per la commedia di *Cimbelino*. Data la similarità nella trama delle due opere, e una ricerca ancora esigua a riguardo, la seguente tesi ha come obiettivo offrire un'analisi comparativa fra le due protagoniste femminili, ovvero Desdemona e Imogen.

La critica tradizionale offre una visione binaria delle due donne, identificando Imogen come una figura attiva, e Desdemona come vittima innocente e sostanzialmente passiva. Questa netta divisione, applicabile alle due sia in quanto carattere che in quanto comportamento, non è abbastanza soddisfacente: considerando la complessità dei personaggi di Shakespeare, sarebbe riduttivo offrire un'analisi di questo tipo. È per questo motivo che lo scopo di questa tesi è mettere a confronto le due protagoniste, e dimostrare, tramite un'analisi delle scene che le vedono centrali, che entrambe presentano dei comportamenti attivi e passivi, seppur in modo differente, sia nei modi che nei tempi.

Il primo capitolo spiega la differenza fra “late plays” e “last plays”. Solitamente si fa riferimento a *Le Tempeste* come ultima opera di Shakespeare, quando, in realtà, dopo quest'ultima ci furono altre opere scritte in collaborazione, fra cui *Enrico VIII* e *I due nobili congiunti*. Considerando quindi come criterio quello cronologico, è da preferire il termine “last plays”, poiché la definizione “late plays” è stata data per fare riferimento ad un gruppo di opere che non era possibile classificare con la classica divisione del folio, ovvero storie, tragedie e commedie. Nonostante questo, considerare unicamente il criterio cronologico potrebbe creare dei problemi, poiché spesso ci sono delle difficoltà nello stabilire la data di pubblicazione.

Il capitolo analizza inoltre le problematiche dell'età giacobina, mettendo a confronto ciò che succede nel *Cimbelino* con la situazione politica e sociale dell'epoca. In particolare, l'unificazione delle corone di Inghilterra e Scozia assomiglia all'accordo preso fra Roma e l'Inghilterra nell'ultimo atto del *Cimbelino*, mentre Imogen, nel difendere la sua persona, potrebbe rappresentare la lotta fra la fede protestante e quella cattolica.

Infine, il primo capitolo comincia a fare un primo confronto fra le due protagoniste femminili, sottolineandone le somiglianze: entrambe si sposano contro il volere dei padri, vengono accusate di tradimento da parte del marito e sono vittime di un inganno a loro insaputa. Imogen è la rappresentazione della femminilità secondo i criteri del tempo, una donna attiva, che cerca la verità, ma che allo stesso tempo non supera il limite, cedendo con piacere il trono al fratello ritrovato. Di Desdemona sembrano esserci due versioni del personaggio: il primo mette in luce una donna che non teme di andare contro la volontà del padre, che sposa un marito non adatto al suo rango e difende la sua scelta davanti al senato. La seconda è una donna che diventa mano a mano sempre più passiva, che più viene accusata e meno si difende, nonostante fosse ben consapevole della sua innocenza.

Non è possibile dire solo che Imogen è attiva e Desdemona è passiva, perché la prima presenta dei momenti di obbedienza, la seconda dei momenti di grande attività. Non è quindi realistico offrire un'analisi così semplicistica delle due donne, perché entrambe presentano delle contraddizioni e dei comportamenti che sono talvolta attivi e talvolta passivi.

Il secondo capitolo si concentra sui comportamenti attivi delle due protagoniste, partendo da Imogen. Nel *Cimbelino* ha molta importanza la scena che ha luogo nella camera da letto di Imogen, perché è l'azione che dà il via all'inganno mosso da Iachimo. Quest'ultimo descrive prima la stanza, focalizzandosi sul dipinto di Diana sopra al camino, alludendo a se stesso come Atteone e a Imogen come Diana, e successivamente analizza la figura di Imogen, distesa a dormire. Iachimo si concentra sul neo che ha sopra il seno, che è un'allegoria all'essere infedele. Tutte le descrizioni e i paragoni che fa Iachimo, infatti, non fanno altro che sottolineare il presupposto, ma irrealista, di adulterio di Imogen.

Successivamente l'analisi verte sulla differenza fra Imogen e Postumo per quanto riguarda la solidità del loro amore. Imogen non crede a Iachimo quando questo la vuole convincere che Postumo sia infedele mentre si trova in Italia, mentre al marito basta un po' di pressione per cedere all'inganno creato da Iachimo e paragonare il valore della moglie a quello del suo anello, cosa che precedentemente si era rifiutato di fare.

Quando Imogen scopre della lettera inviata a Pisanio, la sua reazione non tarda ad arrivare. È incredula, ma anche decisa a difendere il suo orgoglio, motivo per cui decide di travestirsi da uomo ed andare a Milford Haven. Nel fare questo, si mette in dubbio la

sua identità. La sistematica rimozione di tutti i suoi ruoli sociali, quello di figlia, moglie, principessa, donna casta, fa sì che Imogen metta in discussione la sua identità. Quando affermerà di non essere più nulla, ha la possibilità di ricostruirsi come persona, e di conseguenza, di ricostruire la nazione.

Nell'*Otello*, il fazzoletto è stato per Iago il mezzo principale tramite cui scatenare la gelosia del moro. L'origine del fazzoletto non è molto chiara: in un primo momento si afferma che fosse della madre di Othello e che avesse origini egiziane, mentre nella seconda versione era un regalo che il padre di Otello fece alla madre. In ogni caso, era un dono che Otello fece a Desdemona come simbolo del loro amore e della loro unione. Questo rende ancora più strano spiegare perché, quando Otello chiede alla moglie di toglierglielo dalla fronte, Desdemona lo lasci cadere, dimenticandosene facilmente.

Il capitolo prosegue con l'analisi dei momenti di perseveranza di Desdemona nel chiedere che la posizione di Cassio venisse ripristinata, mentre Otello chiedeva insistentemente di sapere dove fosse finito il fazzoletto. Si arriverà al punto in cui Otello schiaffeggia la moglie davanti ai presenti, e in questo momento Desdemona afferma di non essersi meritata tale gesto. Il momento in cui troviamo maggiore attività nel personaggio di Desdemona è alla fine, quando, prima di morire, afferma di essere stata ingiustamente uccisa, di star subendo una morte senza colpa. Nonostante questo, parte della critica afferma che in verità Desdemona fosse cosciente di quello che le stava per succedere, e che semplicemente l'avesse accettato. Il dialogo che ha con Emilia e la canzone che canta poco dopo, ricordando la domestica della madre, anch'essa uccisa da un uomo geloso, fa pensare che in realtà Desdemona avesse molto chiaro quello che stava per succedere, ma che avesse deciso comunque di rimanere fedele al suo amore e alla promessa fatta tramite il matrimonio, piuttosto che cercare di salvare un uomo che ormai era impossibile salvare.

Nel terzo capitolo l'analisi verte sui momenti di obbedienza e passività delle due donne. Nel *Cimbelino*, Imogen non è un esempio di donna passiva solo alla fine dell'opera, quando rinuncia al trono per darlo al fratello maggiore, appena ritrovato. Possiamo trovare altri esempi di questo comportamento anche all'inizio, quando, di fronte alla rabbia del padre per aver sposato Postumo e non Cloteno, Imogen sembra preoccuparsi per la salute del padre. O ancora quando, dopo aver ricevuto istruzioni dal marito affinché la raggiungesse, chiede di poter arrivare il prima possibile, tanta era la

voglia di rivedere Postumo. Nonostante questo, i due maggiori momenti dove Imogen dimostra passività sono due: quando, di fronte alle accuse di infedeltà, chiede a Pisanio di compiere il fatale gesto per portare a termine la richiesta del marito, e alla fine, quando non prova nessun rancore nei confronti del fratello Guiderio, futuro re, primogenito di Cimbelino. Nel primo caso, Imogen non vuole ignorare la sua posizione di moglie, il suo cuore è obbediente anche quando il marito è così accecato dalla gelosia da volerla uccidere. È infatti Pisanio a offrirle una via di scampo dalla situazione, proponendole di cambiare identità e scappare dalla corte per sempre. Nel secondo caso, forse il più clamoroso, Imogen non prova nessuna invidia o gelosia per il fratello, che le avrebbe tolto la possibilità di essere erede al trono, cosa che solitamente spetta al primogenito. Appena ritrovato, infatti, Cimbelino stabilisce che il suo erede sarebbe stato Guiderio: questo non crea nessun tipo di ostilità in Imogen, che non prova altro che felicità per aver finalmente riunito tutta la famiglia.

Desdemona tende ad essere più passiva nella seconda parte dell'opera, quando non offre una grande difesa di fronte alle pesanti accuse di Otello. Non è possibile dire che è totalmente in balia degli eventi, perché più di una volta cerca di opporsi alle offese del marito, seppur fiocamente. Quello che la rende tendenzialmente passiva è la mancanza di convinzione: sembra che lei stessa non sappia come difendersi, ed è paradossale, visto che lei sa benissimo di non aver commesso adulterio. Il più grande atto di passività è, come nel *Cimbelino*, alla fine dell'opera. I momenti che precedono la sua morte indicano una sorta di comprensione di quello che sta per succedere, e una conseguente accettazione. Il menzionare la domestica della madre nella canzone, donna che a sua volta venne uccisa per mano di un uomo geloso, può essere un segno della comprensione, anche inconsapevole, di Desdemona verso ciò che l'aspetta. Questo porta all'accettazione del suo destino, perché continua a eseguire gli ordini che Otello le ha impartito, e di conseguenza alla morte. È possibile che Desdemona si rifiutasse di incolpare Otello di gelosia, e che preferisse venire uccisa come ultimo segno del suo amore verso il marito.

L'analisi offerta nei precedenti capitoli dimostra che non è abbastanza definire le due protagoniste femminili con una sola caratteristica: entrambe hanno dei tratti attivi e passivi, che dimostrano in modi e tempi diversi, ma che sono comunque presenti.