

**The Women of Renaissance.
Imogen and Nestan**

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Abstract: The attitude of the Middle Ages and Renaissance regarding women gender is revealed in the present article. It is also discussed the literary image of the protagonist woman – Imogen in Shakespeare’s latest play *Cymbeline*. The fact that Imogen’s literary image shows some parallel lines with the main woman character of *The Man in the Panther Skin* is also revealed by the author.

Key words: *Renaissance, Women, Rustaveli, Imogen, Nestan.*

According to the currently available opinion in the Rustaveli Studies, the *MPS* has served as a plot story for two plays of the 17th century famous English playwrights Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, namely *King and no King* and *The Philaster*[8]. Recent researches have revealed one more significant fact for Georgian and English literary criticism, according to which the *MPS* may have served as a source for a “problematic” play *Cymbeline* by Shakespeare [9; 10]. It has also been revealed that the main heroine of *Cymbeline* - Imogen resembles the image of Nestan-Darejan from Rustaveli’s *MPS*.

The present article aims at taking this line of thought further and finding out to what extent Imogen’s literary image corresponds to the type of a woman depicted by Shakespeare in

his earlier works. Another issue is to state what kind of attitude is revealed regarding a stereotype of an ideal Renaissance woman character as depicted in English literature of the Renaissance period.

As is known in the development of European civilization Renaissance was an epoch of revival and re-awakening going back to the ancient world and re-discovering it. Orientation on human values and a search for worldly happiness as well as the idealization of a human being's potential are the main, typical traits of Renaissance. Development of various sciences (Astronomy, Geography, etc) brought about the possibility of deeper exploration of the surrounding world. These possibilities strengthened belief in personal abilities. Mental strength was recognized as a universal means of solving all the emerging issues. As noted by Khintibidze: "Novelty brought about by Renaissance lies in the primacy of beauty and at the same time, in the primacy of emotional beauty. Aesthetic thought of Renaissance relied on and trusted its own vision without ancient cosmology and Medieval Theology: the universe was created by God; however, the most important thing is that this world is beautiful, full of myriad colours, live expressions of a human face and harmony of a human soul" [7. p 89].

In spite of the fact that the emphasis was placed on the significance of a human being, according to the treatises made in the epoch of Renaissance, such changes hardly ever concerned the female [3, 5, 13, 14]. As is often outlined in the scholarly critics, the abilities of a woman were more or less belittled as it was believed that a woman symbolically expressed the fall of humanity and accumulated all the weaknesses of mankind. The bases of such an attitude are found in the Bible. Consequently, for the Medieval church woman was an evil force which prevented the man's soul from uniting with God. Presumably, the attitude of the church dignitaries was based on the authority of Paul the Apostle [Ephes. 5. 22-23; Col. 3:18; Corinth. I 11:34-36; Corinth. I 14: 12-15.]. The only ideal and perfect woman was the Virgin Mary, the mother of

Christ as her son saved mankind from the sin initiated by another woman. Such attitudes conditioned the following opinions popular in the Middle Ages: the ideal woman was the Virgin followed by the woman-widow. These were followed by a woman-mother and a runner of the family well being.

It is noted that although in the Late Middle Ages the woman evoked a certain ambivalent attitude, according to XIII century European Lyric Virgin Mary is an ideal woman but sometimes she was presented as a tempting force which interfered with the process of soul redemption as well as longing for the supreme ideal - to God [7, p. 629].

Presumably, according to the attitude developed over centuries, the significance of the woman was confined to narrow frames and her political, economic and moralistic rights were constrained. This can be confirmed by the treatises written in Renaissance period according to which the main duty and obligation of the woman was to be obedient to her husband and father and look after her family prosperity.

According to Leon Batista Alberti (XVc.), the woman in the family determined the wellbeing of the family and she was expected to take care of housework [1, p. 18]. She rarely appeared in society, most often in church, and only in the male's company [13, p. 313]. The woman was not allowed to enter her spouse's room without his prior permission. When a woman was due to give birth to a baby, or the baby was ill and required special treatment and care, the husband had a special room to retire to rest [11, p. 167].

The regulations regarding marriage also deserve our attention. Such information is supplied by the tracts made in the epoch of Renaissance. To marry a woman was a search for profit for both families - his and hers. Marrying a daughter solved a financial issue in the family as after the marriage it would no

longer be necessary to think about her food and clothes¹. As for the groom's family, they also acquired a certain profit after marriage as the bride's family paid a certain sum of money to the groom's family for marrying their daughter. As well as this, marriage also consolidated relationships between various families and kinships and sometimes even served as a solution to some conflict between pedigrees. The dowry given to the bride became the husband's property.

As for the female's education, the majority were taught how to manage the family, clean the house, bake and sew. In addition, girls were taught refined manners and their silence and innocence were appreciated. Those who were literate were given carefully forethought and pre-selected materials (mainly of a religious literature) as Humanistic education was believed to cause undesirable results and disobedience to the husband's wishes [4, p. 12]. The majority of girls were given education only in order to become them good mothers. Women from noble families were additionally taught dancing, music and painting to create a more attractive atmosphere for the men.

As argued by the sociologist Ruth Kelso [10], the Christian Code presented an ideal life for the Renaissance women. The women were urged to focus on their inner world and curb their desires. In the treatise by Luis Vives, *Instructions for a Christian woman*, not a single man would seek mental strength, thoughtfulness, ability to run a state, fairness and liberalism in a woman [14]. However, the traits the men found important in women were her innocence and devotion. As opposed to this, according to the Renaissance thought, a man could have a pagan nature, could concentrate on the realization of his own self and could fulfill his own desires. A man accepted in society was clever,

¹ Sometimes daughters were sent to monasteries as nuns to improve financial circumstances of the family.

eloquent, intelligent, fair, tolerant, assertive, with a good memory, a healthy body and many other positive qualities.

Against this background, it is worth exploring how William Shakespeare, the greatest playwright of the XVI-XVII century depicts a woman and what kind of attitudes he reveals towards a 'weaker' gender; how he determined her role in society and how much he was influenced by the existing stereotypes. It is noted in the English literary criticism that Shakespeare does not show a uniform attitude towards the women. Some of his heroines reveal major deviations from the stereotypes accepted of those times. For instance, the plays *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Much Ado about Nothing* describe precisely the widely accepted opinion regarding the obedience of women. In these plays heroines perfectly reflect the model of the woman in Renaissance: although being illiterate, in charge for doing housework perfectly, raising exemplary children and being docile and obedient to the male members of their family.

In this case I am interested in analyzing the literary images of the women in Shakespeare's plays who are known to break the above-mentioned stereotypes and still emphasize their femininity as well as other qualities. I will talk about the protagonist of *Cymbeline* - Imogen who can be considered to be one of the best-portrayed 'rebellious' woman by Shakespeare.

Imogen's literary image has attracted attention of the English literary critics for centuries. The scholars considered her a mixture of Juliet's romantic enthusiasm, Helene's firmness and devotion and Portia's impeccable innocence. All these characteristic traits are so harmoniously mixed and combined that they make Imogen stand out from the gallery of Shakespearean women characters [15].

From the very start of the play Imogen's rebelliousness catches our attention when she openly resists her father's decision to make her marry the Prince. She is happy with a marriage to Posthumus although it causes dissidence with the King and the Queen. Imogen does not give in when the Queen's son prince

Cloten attacks her by trying to make her fall in love with him and to persuade her to sleep with him.

The relationship between Imogen and her spouse Posthumous is also worth discussing. Due to her social status Imogen's relationship with Posthumous clashes with the Renaissance stereotype. According to William Gouge [5] the woman's higher financial status could have led to a chaotic marital relationship. The financial advantage of the woman over her husband made her more powerful in marriage which put the husband's dignity under threat and became dangerous wife's predominance over her husband. Such state directly opposed the established model of relationship, the order imposed by God himself and inherited by the Renaissance culture. This is why Cymbeline reproaches his daughter for falling in love with a man beneath her social status. It is a fact that although Imogen is very much aware of the class differences between her and her beloved, she does not consider this to be a humiliating factor. Imogen stands above material values (wealth, status of the heiress and princess) and makes an attempt to save her love. She is burdened by the fact that she is the only heiress to the throne and thus is doomed to be queen. It is her status that hinders her happiness. Imogen is ready to give up the honour of being the queen to live with her husband. Whis this desire Imogen reveals resemblance with the model of a woman from Middle Ages for whom marital happiness is the matter of primary importance.

The image of Nestan in the MPS reveals some differences when compared to Imogen. Ambitious Nestan is involved in ruling the country from a very young age. There are quite a few examples to prove the above: Nestan sends her lover to keep the rebellious Khataians in subjection. According to the plan worked out by her, murder of the Khvarazmsha's son should save Nestan and Tariel's love on the one hand and India from the rule of alien rulers, on the other; Despite being captured by Kadjs Nestan asks in her letter Tariel to take care of India that suffers from the invasion of adversaries.

Posthumus looks absolutely different from the male stereotype of the time. He seems to be passive in guiding his relationship with Imogen. Instead of protesting against Cymbeline and protecting Imogen from her father's reproaches and wrath, he reveals weakness, and leaves both the kingdom Imogen as well. Arriving in Italy he reveals the weakness of willpower and turns his wife's innocence and devotion into a betting game, bargains with Iachimo for his wife's innocence and devotion. By this bargain Posthumus reduces his love to only material worth. According to Laurence Danson [2, p. 69-79], due to this behavior, Posthumus is classed as one of the most jealous men among Shakespeare's male characters.

In spite of so many obstacles, Imogen still hopes that her love will be able to overcome all the difficulties and barriers and is ready to be loyal to her husband till death parts them. Being separated from her husband physically, she relies on their spiritual union. Imogen believes that marriage to Posthumus makes their physical separation transcendental.

It is obvious that Imogen reveals a certain difference from the model of the Renaissance woman. Imogen is a leader in the relationship with her husband. Contrary to the statements in treatise which name the man to be the leading force of the conjugal union, in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* this regulatory is presented in the reverse way. Here, the marital relationships of both couples (Cymbeline and his queen, Imogen and Posthumus) are led by the woman. Due to his weak character, Cymbeline is not able to make independent decisions and thus he treats his daughter in accordance with the instructions he gets from his wife. He even needs his wife's advice to declare war.

Thus, Imogen breaks woman's stereotype inherited by the Renaissance from the Middle Ages. *Cymbeline* presents a story of an ideal woman who defends her innocence and love against the background of the whole complex of problems. The reader as well as palatial members sympathizes with Imogen despite her

breaking the stereotypes. She is unfairly punished in the play and this evokes some kind of protest in the reader.

As already mentioned above, the literary image of one of the protagonist of the *MPS*, Nestan-Darejan shows certain parallel features with Shakespeare's Imogen. It is interesting to contemplate Nestan against the background of the Renaissance model of a woman. As pointed out in Rustavelian studies, despite the fact that the play was written in the 12th century, the Late Middle Age period, Renaissance elements already start to emerge. Together with other interesting traits¹ (plot, literary structure, style, etc.) it is also worth noting that the human concept in the *MPS* 'differs radically from the Medieval attitudes towards a human being', and it is not originality, difference from others, but the protest against the God stated rules - this is a longing, ideal for a Medieval person. The human being of the Rustaveli's work belongs to the new age. Supreme goodness of a human being – his absolute independence, which, in Christian morale, is a burden put on the human's soul, preached by the Stoics in Ancient Greece and supported by the Renaissance thought, is praised and idealized in the *MPS*. "A human being in the *MPS* is known for his independence and actions, he/she is not a literary fiction trapped in the frames of codes and conventions" [7, p. 680].

Nestan is a princess at the highest level of the social hierarchy, calm and refined also. At first sight nothing seems unusual in this portrait of hers, but as soon as she is threatened by a forced marriage with the son of Khvarazmsha while in love with Tariel, her rebellious soul awakens and Nestan is ready to do all that is possible to save her love. As was noted above, Nestan reveals political shrewdness rarely found in women. In the episode in which the groom's murder is planned, Nestan's plan avoids bloodshed while getting rid of the undesirable groom and future ruler of India. One more interesting trait of Nestan's character, her domineering nature, as well as a certain weakness

¹ For more detail see 7, pp. 676-677.

of Tariel's willpower is revealed in this passage. After discussion with Nestan, Amirbar is expected to be eager to fulfill the already made plan, but after the preparation for the wedding reception, instead of killing Khvarazmsha's son, he retires to have some rest. Tariel hesitates to fulfill the plan, which in fact, can be perceived as weakness on his side. Nestan feels her lover's hesitation and sternly urges him to fulfill the plan. Here Tariel feels humiliated and finally kills the rival.

In order to explore the inter-relationships between Nestan and Imogen, it is crucial to note that Imogen is endowed by all of the virtue, which is expected of an ideal woman of the Renaissance period. However, at the same time she shows different traits of character by which she manages to break the boundaries of the existent stereotypical frames. Both women are only heiresses of the kingdom and fall in love with a person beneath them. Both of the women's parents choose undesirable future husbands for them and both Nestan and Imogen reveal rare courage and shrewdness and act against their fate. Neither of them waits passively for the developments and both of them take an initiative and act on their own. From this point of view, Rustaveli's Nestan is more radical and reveals her impulsive nature openly. Imogen is closer to the model of the woman from the Middle Ages and Renaissance: she is more obedient and docile, more tolerant to her husband's passive disposition and mistakes he makes. Imogen only once briefly reproaches Posthumus, whereas Tariel finds Nestan furious due to his passive behaviour and betrayal. Nestan even threatens him with exile from the country.

Thus, in spite of the fact that the Renaissance brought about Anthropocentrism – considering human being as the most significant entity of the universe. These changes did not affect the female gender although. As was discussed above, the woman still remained in the shadow with her desires and aspirations. From this point of view, Shakespeare's female characters of mostly the latest period reveal an interesting diversion from the boundaries and Imogen occupies a special place among them. Imogen does not

fit in the existent stereotype of a Shakespearean woman. She is an active fighter and defendant of her personal interests against demands of the Court and her royal parents. From this standpoint Imogen's literary image shows some parallel lines with Nestan's innovative character in the *MPS*.

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