

The Man or the Bear? How *Imogen Says Nothing* uses Shakespeare to Reflect Modern Themes

What if something, or someone, doesn't want to be erased? *Imogen Says Nothing* features Imogen, a silent character in the first folio of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, who is never seen again. It is speculated that she is most likely a typo. *Imogen Says Nothing* acts as Imogen's origin story, explaining what led to her erasure and the consequences that follow.

Imogen Says Nothing, by Aditi Brennan Kapil, was commissioned for Yale Repertory Theatre by Jennifer Kiger, Associate Artistic Director and Director of New Play Programs at Yale Rep, in March 2011. The play took 7 years to complete. While perusing the Yale Center for British Art, Kapil first found the town of Quaere. However, when she found a map from around 1578, she discovered that the town had indeed been mislabeled for 145 years. The village of North Burcombe was labeled the village Quaere (Latin for 'to question') which was presumably a placeholder and meant to be fixed. The mapmaker likely used the name Quaere to make a note to look up what the town's name was. The mistake extended when the previous map was utilized around 1611-1612 in "The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine," the first English attempt at creating a large-scale atlas. A quote from Kapil in CT Inside states, "The play examines what happens when entire voices, entire people are systematically cut from history and the canon of literature....it's about the responsibility of erasure." Although there are many themes prevalent in *Imogen Says Nothing*, the consequences and responsibility that comes with erasure are the most important.

Furthering the importance of erasure, ink itself acts as the driving force of *Imogen Says Nothing*'s narrative, determining ownership of words and presence. How are stories made and who owns them? Who decides how you are written in history? This can be seen in the history of the First Folio. The First Folio was a collection of Shakespeare's plays, first published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death in 1616. John Heminges and Henry Condell used Shakespeare's original prompt books, quartos, and notes to put together the final collection. The entire process was difficult, with financial and procedural issues. It ended up that mistakes became fixed as the books were printed, so every First Folio is an amalgamated collection of corrected and uncorrected pages. Without the First Folio, there would be no record of 16 of

Shakespeare's plays. This history is also explored in another play, Lauren Gunderson's *Book of Will*. The usage of the First Folio in Imogen's story demonstrates the power of writing things down.

The erasure of women in history and story is also prevalent in the main plot of *Imogen Says Nothing*. Women's roles being portrayed by male actors began in Ancient Greece, with sexist restrictions that continued into Shakespeare's England. Commercial acting forbade women from being on stage until 1661. What should be noted is that acting was seen as a "lowly" profession, especially by the orthodox Christian church, which rejected theatre, but saw all-male companies as socially legitimate due to the idea of women being portrayed and not "reality." There were illegal street performances done by women which were associated with prostitution, lasciviousness, and indecency. The treatment of male vs. female performers was hypocritical: it was normalized for men to portray women in theatre, but women that dressed as men faced stigmas and had the added risk of arrest and imprisonment.

Finally, there is the connection to freedom vs. captivity. An important aspect of *Imogen Says Nothing* is the practice of bear-baiting in the story. Bear-baiting was a blood sport from the 12th to 19th century, popular specifically in Shakespearean England. The sport featured bears, dogs, bulls, chimps, and other animals that fought to death. These took place in the Bankside District of London, where there were arenas built specifically for this extremely violent sport. Other than theatre, bear-baiting was one of the most popular forms of entertainment. The bear would be brought into the arena and chained, then taunted and attacked by dogs. It would end when multiple dogs were killed or the bear went into submission. A lot of care was taken that bears would not be killed due to their value for the impresarios. These actions were inhumane, with teeth being filed short and bears were blinded and whipped for amusement. Theatre and blood sports had a lot of influence on each other. The arena for these sports likely influenced the theatrical stages. Due to the close proximity to the Globe, there is a possibility that real bears were used for *The Winter's Tale*. Two of the bears featured in *Imogen Says Nothing*, Ned Whiting and Harry Hunks, were real celebrities of the sport.

Imogen Says Nothing uses the past and Shakespeare to tell a modern story. Ink, the First Folio, women on stage, and bear-baiting are rewritten to remix history. The show is accurate and

inaccurate, allowing audiences to break down what has been written, and rewritten, to create their own story.