

# Names Shakespeare Didn't Invent: *Imogen, Olivia, and Viola* Revisited

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Just as Shakespeare's plays left their indelible stamp on the English language, so too did his names influence the naming pool in England at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Today, certain popular modern names are often described as inventions of Shakespeare. In this article, we revisit three names which are often listed as coinages of Shakespeare's and show that this received wisdom, though oft-repeated, is in fact incorrect. The three names are *Imogen*, the heroine of *Cymbeline*; and *Olivia* and *Viola*, the heroines of *Twelfth Night*. All three of these names pre-date Shakespeare's use. Further, we show in two of the three cases that it is plausible that Shakespeare was familiar with this earlier usage. We conclude by briefly discussing why these names are commonly mistakenly attributed to Shakespeare's imagination; and we examine the weaker, but not mistaken, claims which may underlie these attributions.

KEYWORDS *Imogen*, literary names, *Olivia*, Shakespeare, *Viola*

## Introduction

Shakespeare's plays are well-known for the variety of the characters' names, and the variety of the sources, both linguistic and temporal, that he used. Just as his plays left their indelible stamp on the English language, so too did his names influence the naming pool in England at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Many popular modern names are often noted as being inventions of Shakespeare, giving them just that little bit more cachet. In this article, we revisit three names which are commonly listed as coinages of Shakespeare's and show that this received wisdom, though oft-repeated, is in fact incorrect. The three names are *Imogen*, the heroine of *Cymbeline* (Shakespeare 1623a; written c1611); and *Olivia* and *Viola*, the heroines of *Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare 1623b; written c1600–1602). All three of these names pre-date Shakespeare's use. In addition, we demonstrate in two of the three cases that it is likely that Shakespeare was familiar with this earlier usage.

## Imogen

The current standard explanation for the origin of the name *Imogen* is that it is a typo—quite literally—for *Innogen*, in the Folio edition of Shakespeare’s play *Cymbeline* (Hoeniger 1957, 132; Levith 1978; Withycombe 1977, s.n. Imogen). Shakespeare is said to have taken the name, as he did so many others, from Holinshed and Monmouth, where *Innogen* is the wife of Brute (Brutus), king of Britain. (These are also the sources for Spenser’s use of the name, in the spelling *Inogene* (Boling 2000, 64).) *Innogen* is mentioned in the first and second chapters of volume 2 of Holinshed’s chronicles (Holinshed [1574]1587), first when she is proposed to Brute and then after she is married. In Monmouth, *Innogen* has the distinction of being “the first British proper name in the *Historia*” (Hutson 1940–1944, 8). The name was in use in Brittany in the period running up to Monmouth, with the spellings *Ennoguent*, *Innoguend*, and *Innoguent* found in the Redon cartularies (9th–11th centuries), and an 11<sup>th</sup> century *Inoguen* in the *Histoire de Bretagne* (Hutson 1940–1944, 8). The origin of *Innogen* is disputed. Förster (1921) suggests that it derives from Proto-Celtic \**eni-genā*, the same root as the root of Old Irish *ingen* “daughter”, but the Breton spellings in *-guen(t/d)* suggest a connection with Proto-Celtic \**windos* “white” (mod. Wel. *gwyn*, *gwen*) instead.

Coates (1976) disagrees with the “Weekleyan printer’s error theory” of the origin of *Imogen*, arguing that “Shakespeare may have deliberately altered a name ... to suit his purposes” (2). Treating *Imogen* as a genuine name, he follows Long and states that it is derived “from an unattested Latin \**imo(?)-gen(a)*” (Coates 1976, 1); however, he differs from Long in suggesting that this compound was intended to mean “lowest-born” rather than “last-born” (Coates 1976, 2).

It is not our point here to settle the issue of whether Shakespeare’s *Imogen* was merely a typo or a deliberate alteration of Holinshed. Instead, the primary contribution of this paper is to draw attention to a hitherto unknown or overlooked pre-Shakesperean example of the name.<sup>1</sup> In a Latin charter dated 5 January 1256, Werner IV von Bollanden waived his rights to his lands in Udenhusen, Richartshusen, Nuendorf, and Berghusen, and “*hoc facimus favore uxoris nostre Imogenis*”—“This we do with the approval of our wife Imogenis” (De Gudenis 1768, 887, no. XXI). If this citation is reliable, it represents a genuine example of the name *Imogen* some three and a half centuries before Shakespeare.

There is some uncertainty concerning the reliability of this citation. Gudenus’s transcription has a marginal note informing us that his reading of *Imogenis* is “*indubie corrupt*” (“undoubtedly corrupted”).<sup>2</sup> Such a comment immediately indicates that personally viewing the original manuscript is advised. Unfortunately, Gudenus gives no information about the provenance of his source, nor would it be any easy task to follow the manuscript forward in time 250 years to locate it today, if it still exists. So in order to determine the

likelihood that Gudenus's transcription is "undoubtedly corrupted", one must consider what *Imogenis* could be a corruption or misreading of.

This question would easily be answered by an independent reference to the same person. Werner's wife was the daughter of Konrad von Merenberg and his wife Guda. A number of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century German sources<sup>3</sup> call their daughter *Imagina*, a name for which many other 13<sup>th</sup> century examples can be found.<sup>4</sup> However, we have yet to find any contemporary record which refers to her as *Imagina*. It may be that modern historians, following Gudenus's uncertainty concerning *Imogenis*, misidentified her name as *Imagina* on the basis of the other 13<sup>th</sup> century examples, without any positive evidence that she was in fact called this contemporarily.

One reference to this wife of Werner's (his second), in an unreliable, non-scholarly website that cites no sources (Schommer 2016), calls her *Irmagenis*. We have found no evidence to corroborate this, and thus this example must be treated with caution, if not discarded outright. Further, we have been unable to find any independent examples of *Irmagenis*, leading us to doubt the existence of such a name. The name itself is not especially plausible as a constructed Germanic name. *Irma-* or *Imm[ola]-* is a hypocoristic of Old High German *ermen*, Old Saxon *irmin* "strong" found both as a prototheme and as a monothematic name in France and Germany in the 7<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries (Morlet 1971, 84b–85a; Uckelman and Uckelman 2017b). But while the prototheme is well established, the deutertheme, *-genis*, is problematic. No other Germanic names using this theme have been found, and dithematic names combining Old German and Latin elements are rare, and no other more plausible origin presents itself.

Another possibility is that *Imogenis* is a misreading or a miswriting of *Imogenis*, just as *Imogen* is (purportedly) a misspelling of *Imogen*.<sup>5</sup> This is unlikely. First, none of the Breton examples of the name spell the deutertheme in this way. Second, the cultural context of the citation makes it unlikely, for it is implausible for this Celtic name to have occurred in Germany in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Lacking independent evidence that Werner's wife was called *Imagina*, and lacking another plausible alternative candidate name, the most likely explanation is that the form *Imogenis* is genuine, and that Gudenus's skepticism is misplaced.

## Olivia

The second name commonly, and incorrectly, noted as an invention of Shakespeare that we consider is *Olivia* (Hough 2000, 5). Here, our evidence is much less controversial and more definitive than our evidence for *Imogen*. The name *Olivia* occurs in Latinized English contexts as early as the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, as a variant of *Oliva* (Uckelman 2017a). That *Oliva* and *Olivia* are variants of each other is demonstrated by records showing the same person known

by both forms. For example, a record from 1296 refers to both “Elizabetham filiam et heredem Olive de Gurneye” (“Elizabeth daughter and heir of Olive de Gurneye”) and “eadem Olivia mater ipsius Elizabeth” (“the same Olive mother of Elizabeth herself”) (Anonymous 1805, 95b). Another example of the spelling *Olivia* occurs in 1321. The interchanging of *-a* and *-ia* in Latinized forms of English feminine names can be found in other names, for example, *Sibilia/Sibilla*, *Amabilia/Amabilla*, *Mabilia/Mabilla*, and *Cecilia/Cicilla*, all found in 1381 (Le Get et al. 2017; Uckelman and Uckelman 2017a; Uckelman 2017b).

Variants of this *Oliv(i)a* were, not surprisingly, also used in France, Italy, and Spain, and the vernacular form *Olive* was not uncommon in England in the 16th century (Uckelman 2017a). There is no reason to think that this name would have been unfamiliar to Shakespeare, or that using *Olivia* as opposed to *Oliva* as the Latinate/Italianate form of the name would have been considered unusual.

## Viola

The third name often cited as being invented by Shakespeare that we consider is *Viola*. Law argues that *Twelfth Night*'s *Viola* derives from removing the letters “sil” from *Silvio-Silla*, the pair of names (masc./fem.) used by the character's counterpart in Barnabe Riche's *Farewell to Militarie Profession*, and includes *Viola* as an example of “names ... I take as invented by Shakespeare” (Law 1951, 65). But this postulates invention where none is needed. The name *Viola*, deriving from the Latin word *viola* “violet”, was already in use in Italy, Hungary, and Ukraine (Uckelman 2017c). Other words for this plant also gave rise to given names used throughout Europe. The Greek root *ιολανθο*, “violet flower” gave rise to the names *Yolanda* and *Violante* that were found in France, Hungary, Italy, and Spain from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century (Slíz et al. 2017). There is also the name *Violet* or *Wyolet* which is identical to the name of the flower and is derived from an Old French diminutive of the Latin word. This name was moderately popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Scotland due to the influence of the name in France at the same time (Uckelman 2017d). Thus, Shakespeare's use of the name follows his established pattern of co-opting Italian or Latin names.

## Conclusion

We have considered three names commonly cited as being inventions of Shakespeare, *Imogen*, *Viola*, and *Olivia*. We have shown that latter two certainly pre-date Shakespeare and that the first likely does, though our evidence is not definitive. What this evidence demonstrates is that one must treat statements that a certain name was invented by a certain august literary figure for a certain literary application with some caution, for they may not always be true. One reason that these statements might be false but commonly repeated is that they are being used as proxies for different statements which *are* true: for example,

(a) that the author thought he or she was coining a name; (b) that the use of a particular name in an important literary source is the cause of the name's later popularity; or (c) that the use of a particular name in a particular linguistic context is due to a particular author's use of the name. The three names that we have considered here illustrate each of these three possibilities.

With respect to *Imogen*, it is important to stress that we are not arguing that Shakespeare was familiar with an obscure 13<sup>th</sup> century German charter, or even with the person referred to in the charter. There is no reason to think that his inspiration for the name was anything other than Holinshed and Monmouth. If he did indeed deliberately change *Immogen* to *Imogen*, then he likely thought he was coining a new name by doing so.

On the other hand, given the common currency of *Viola* and *Olivia* and related forms of these names, it is plausible that Shakespeare was familiar with these names and did not think of himself as inventing them for this play. However, it is clear that his choice to use these names had repercussions for the future use of the names outside of literature. With respect to *Olivia*, there is no reason to doubt the claim that the name's enduring popularity in English-speaking contexts is due to Shakespeare (Withycombe 1977, s.n. Olivia), while *Viola* does have some genuine claim to being an invention of Shakespeare in a limited sense. While *Viola* was already in use as a name before Shakespeare, we don't yet have any evidence that the name was used in England. Thus, it certainly counts as a novel import, and so in this respect it is correct to say that Shakespeare invented *Viola* as an English name.

## Notes

1. Thus contradicting Coates (1976), "The female personal name Imogen is first recorded as the name of the heroine of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*" (1).
2. The charter is reprinted, without the marginal note, in Hennes 1845, 149, no. 158. A portion of it is reprinted in Grusners 1775, 62, with the relevant text reading "Et hoc facimus favore Vxorist nostre Imoginis", which introduces its own typo!
3. For example, Grusners 1775, 63; Heyer 1828, 27; von Reisach and Linde 1835, 4; and others.
4. In the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, both the wife of Gerlach, Count of Limburg, and one of his daughters, who was later married to Adolf, Count of Nassau, were named *Imagina*. The daughter is named as *Imagina* in 1279 (Anonymous 1830, 104–106, nos 1, 2), while her mother (daughter of Heinrich, Count of Blieskastel), and Agnes von Sayn, are recorded as *Ymagina* in 1266 (Lacomblet 1846, 329, no. 565). Adolf also apparently had a sister named *Imagina* (von Behr 1870, 98, table XCVIII). These are not the only instances that can be found in 13<sup>th</sup> century German or Netherlandish contexts.
5. Though *Immogenis* is more likely to be misread as *Irmagenis* or *Irmogenis* than *Imogenis*, since "nn" and "rm" share the same number of vertical strokes, while "m" has one fewer.

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