

## Notes

1. ed. E. Kölbing, *Arthur and Merlin nach der Auchinleck-Hs. nebst zwei Beilagen*, Altenglische Bibliothek vol. III (1890). Re-ed. O. D. Macrae-Gibson, "An Edition of the Middle English Romance 'Arthur and Merlin'", unpubl. D. Phil. thesis (Oxford, 1964); it is hoped that an edition based on this will in due course appear in *EETS*. For a description of the Auchinleck MS. see E. Kölbing, "Vier Romanz Handschriften," *ESt*, VII (1884), 177-201, considerably amplified and corrected by A. J. Bliss, "Notes on the Auchinleck Manuscript," *Spec.*, XXVI (1951), 652-658.
2. Most commonly found in the form of the 3rd. ed., rev. J. O. Halliwell (London, 1848).
3. Letter to Ellis, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, Centenary Edition, ed. Sir Herbert Grierson (London, 1932-37), XII, 192.
4. An Anonymous *Short English Metrical Chronicle*, ed. E. Zettl, *EETS*, CXCVI (1935).
5. I cite by date, and by volume and page in the Centenary Edition. Grierson's transcripts of a few portions of letters excluded from this edition can be found in MS. 1750, National Library of Scotland, but none of these portions concern the present article.
6. I cite by date, and by folio number in this MS. Three more of Ellis's letters to Scott are in fact preserved, in MSS. 865 (foll. 48 and 58) and 870 (fol. 16) of the National Library, but these are all too late to concern the present article.
7. or possibly in a lost part of the letter of June 10, 1801, printed in the Centenary Edition (I, 115-6) only from Lockhart's extract.
8. His second and third extracts are from the Auchinleck version, lines 193-220 and 477-493, and certain points in his linking prose summaries clearly rest on the Auchinleck rather than the Lincoln's Inn version.
9. Receipt acknowledged by Ellis August 3, 1801 (fol. 12; Centenary Edition XII, 186, footnote 1).
10. It is not clear what these were. The Secretary to the University of Edinburgh tells me that a Robert Leyden (who can hardly be other than Scott's amanuensis) enrolled for classes there in October 1799 and October 1800, but he does not appear to have enrolled in 1801 or to have graduated (letter of June 21, 1965).
11. Marginal note by transcriber: "I am not certain of this word."
12. Halliwell's re-ed. *agré*.
13. above *louieþ* deleted.
14. Halliwell *lovieth*.
15. *u* and *n* in this hand are formed of separated minims; the word could be read as *burioinis*, etc.
16. Halliwell *Burjouns springeth, medes greeneth*.
17. I have used those in MS. Montagu d. 18 (Bodleian Library).

## THE METAPHOR OF CONCEPTION AND ELIZABETHAN THEORIES OF THE IMAGINATION

In the *Abrégé* on French poetry, Ronsard declared that invention is "the principal thing." And what is invention? It is "nothing other than the natural virtue of an imagination, conceiving the ideas and forms of all things that can be imagined, whether of heaven or of earth, living or inanimate, for the purpose of afterwards representing, describing, imitating . . ." <sup>1</sup> Language, "conceit's expositer," to use a favorite Elizabethan expression, is the means through which the conceptions of the imagination may be so represented, described, imitated. If in the Renaissance we do not have a theory of symbolic imagination, we may yet find in the criticism of Ronsard, in Sidney's *Apology*, and in other similar utterances, as well as in the metaphor of conception as used by Shakespeare and his

contemporaries, sufficient evidence that the imagination was not in their view merely a reproductive faculty of the intellect, but was frequently, and even essentially, creative.

The metaphor of conception is at least as old as Plato. The *Symposium*, for example, refers to the “pregnant souls” of certain kinds of men who are “more creative in their souls than in their bodies.”<sup>2</sup> They include “poets and all artists who are deserving of the name of inventor.” So the metaphor continues throughout the passage in which Diotima describes the “lesser mysteries of love” to Socrates. We need not here consider the doctrine of inspiration in the *Ion*, for despite certain attractive parallels to the imagery of conception, that would carry us along a different path. The imagination as such is decried in the *Republic*, but as M. W. Bundy long ago suggested,<sup>3</sup> the *Sophist*, the *Philebus*, and the later critical dialogues are sources for the Aristotelian and Stoic views of the imagination as useful to the proper function of the intellect. In these views, the imagination is instrumental to the process through which the mind arrives at understanding of the raw data conveyed by the external, or primary, senses. This terminology already suggests the faculty psychology of the medieval empirical tradition, which Renaissance writers such as Pico della Mirandola largely inherited. The several descriptions, or systems, of this psychology vary among themselves, making any consistent definition of terms futile; but through the mass of conflicting details we can recognize the imagination as one of the three major powers of the intellect. Its location is in the front cell or ventricle of the brain, and one of its main functions is to convey impressions (in the forms of images) from the senses to the rational judgment, or reason, situated in the central cavity of the head. The third power of the intellect is the memory, at the back of the head, in which the images or ideas are appropriately stored, to be recalled later as occasion demands.<sup>4</sup> In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser represents these faculties pictorially in the House of Alma episode (II.ix.47 ff.), and Phineas Fletcher similarly draws his figure of Phantastes from them in *The Purple Island*.

According to this faculty psychology, everything is fine so long as the images that the imagination conveys to the reason are accurate. When it conveys images that are inaccurate, trouble begins. For the imagination cannot always—or often—be completely trusted. It is like a mirror—a common image of the imagination in the Renaissance—which can distort appearance as well as reflect it. Thus in *A Treatie of Humane Learning* Fulke Greville describes the imagination as –

A glasse, wherein the object of our Sense  
Ought to reflect true height, or declination,  
For understandings cleare intelligence;  
But this power also hath her variation,  
Fixed in some, in some with difference;  
In all, so shadowed with selfe-application  
As makes her pictures still too foule, or faire;  
Not like the life in lineament, or ayre.

(St. 10, ed. G. Bullough)

Influencing the imagination, and a major cause of distortions, are the passions, or affections, as Greville says in the stanzas that follow. But according to faculty psychology, the imagination functions not only as a conveyor of images; it also assists the reason by recalling and reshaping images from among those stored in the memory, thus providing the rational judgment with a more vivid or concrete representation to contemplate than the products of its own powers of abstract thought. Along with the image of the imagination as a mirror, Renaissance writers therefore had recourse to an alternative metaphor of the imagination as a fertile womb awaiting stimulation, or impregnation (usually from some external source), ready to begin its work of forming “shapes” or “fantasies.” (Hence the frequent mention, even today, of the imagination as “teeming.”) In Renaissance theories of the intellect, the imagination as matrix is not always specifically identified, as when in *Microcosmos* John Davies refers rather generally to the three “wombs” of man’s internal parts—“the *Braines*, the *Brest*, and *Belly*”; but from other references in Davies’ works and elsewhere it is clear that the shaping power of the mind is a special function of the imagination, or phantasy, as it was also sometimes called.<sup>5</sup> Again, in *Daphnida* Spenser seizes upon the metaphor of conception to describe the development of an idea, and in the phrase, “my weaker wit,” alludes all but directly to the imagination as matrix:

There came vnto my minde a troublous thought,  
Which dayly dooth my weaker wit possesse,  
Ne lets it rest, vntill it forth haue brought  
Her long borne Infant, fruit of heauinesse,  
Which she conceiued hath through meditation  
Of this worlds vainnesse and lifes wretchednesse,  
That yet my soule it deeply doth empassion.  
(ll. 29–35, ed. de Selincourt)

The ambiguity inherent in the term, *conception*, naturally lent itself to much punning on the Elizabethan stage. Shakespeare quibbles on it often, as in *King Lear* I.i.12 ff., and Chapman also uses it, as at the end of *Byron’s Conspiracy*, in a scene full of courtly, sexual double-entendres:

*Savoy*. You take me still in flat misconstruction, and conceive not by me.  
*1st Lady*. Therein we are strong in our purposes; for it were something scandalous for us to conceive by you.  
*2nd Lady*. Though there might be question made of your fruitfulness, yet dry weather in harvest does no harm.

(V.ii. 127–132; ed. T. M. Parrott)

In *Discoveries*, Ben Jonson frequently alludes to the matrix of the imagination in his comments upon language and style, but in the lines addressed “To the Reader” omitted from the Quarto version of *Poetaster* he extends the metaphor to contrast true poetic composition with the spurious work of hacks:

O, this would make a learn’d, and liberall soule,  
To riue his stayned quill, vp to the back,  
And damne his long-watch’d labours to the fire;

Things, that were borne, when none but the still night,  
 And his dumbe candle saw his pinching throes:  
 Were not his owne free merit a more crowne  
 Vnto his trauailes, then their reeling claps.

(209–215; ed. Herford and Simpson)

From these examples and others we may infer that Elizabethan writers did not regard the imagination as merely a mechanical instrument, although modern scholars only lately—and then quite reluctantly—seem willing to concede as much. Of the **inventive power of the imagination** K. G. Hamilton says that “its functions were understood by the sixteenth century . . . as ‘creative’ only in the sense that it was able to make new combinations out of the materials furnished to it by experience. Even by Sidney the imagination was not seen as a truly idealizing activity, but rather as an ‘invention’ of such as will transcend the individual species in nature.”<sup>6</sup> But if the Elizabethans were still some distance from a more “dynamic” theory of the imagination than Coleridge’s two centuries later, and seem less interested in the mental life of the poet as such, as Hamilton goes on to argue, they nonetheless appreciated the real power of the imagination—a fact which explains their great distrust of it. On the other hand, though **less concerned with creating entirely new mental experiences**, or of fashioning a light that was never seen on sea or land, they *were* concerned with the **uses of the imagination in dealing with realities** that already did exist. For them, it was enough that the imagination served a **dual function** in **apprehending the nature of the reality** in question, and in devising an **appropriate means of responding** to it. Nor should these functions seem contemptible to the modern critic.

As we might expect, Shakespeare gives us the clearest illustrations of both the **advantages and the dangers inherent in the shaping power of the imagination**. In one of the opening episodes of *Troilus and Cressida*, the metaphor of conception is used extensively along with related images to demonstrate the working of Ulysses’ mind when he is forced to deal with the challenge that Aeneas delivers from Hector to the Greek camp. As Agamemnon offers the Trojan his hospitality, Ulysses draws Nestor apart, saying, “I have a young conception in my brain. / Be you my time to bring it to some shape” (I.iii.312–313).<sup>7</sup> In his fertile imagination the challenge has already implanted the germ of an idea that will emerge as a plan of action useful not only in disposing of the challenge, but in dealing with the recalcitrance of Achilles as well. He asks Nestor to be his “time,” that is, to provide him with a necessary period of gestation; and as their dialogue continues, Ulysses’ idea develops or takes shape. Significantly, his metaphor changes but slightly as he describes the dangers to the Greek cause:

The seeded pride  
 That hath to this maturity blown up  
 In rank Achilles must or now be cropped,  
 Or, shedding, breed a nursery of like evil  
 To overbulk us all. (315–320)

As Nestor analyzes the purport of Hector's challenge, he continues Ulysses' original metaphor, consciously or unconsciously using a series of sexual double-entendres that emphasize the parallel development of the action: Ulysses' brain-child must be brought to birth before the challenge can become ruinous, before it stimulates even such infertile intellects as Achilles':

*Nestor.* . . . make no strain  
 But that Achilles, were his brain as barren  
 As banks of Libya – though Apollo knows,  
 'Tis dry enough – will, with great speed of judgment –  
 Aye with celerity – find Hector's purpose  
 Pointing on him.  
*Ulysses.* And wake him to the answer, think you?  
*Nestor.* Yes, 'tis most meet. (326–332)

In this vein the dialogue continues for another twenty-five lines. By this time Ulysses is fully alert to what may happen if Achilles does answer (358 ff.), and he brings forth his plan to have Ajax, through a rigged lottery, meet Hector instead:

Our project's life this shape of sense assumes,  
 Ajax employed plucks down Achilles' plumes. (385–386)

In the Nunnery Scene, Hamlet summarizes the sequence of thought-  
 imagination-action in his speech to Ophelia, and credits the imagination  
 with its important intermediary function:

I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more  
 offences at my beck than I have thought to put them  
 in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act  
 them in. (III.i.125–129)

The imagination does not always begin work, however, with such concrete impressions as Hector's challenge conveys to Ulysses, and it can help formulate emotions as well as ideas. In *Richard II*, her lord's departure for Ireland is hardly cause enough, the Queen feels, to explain her sense of grief. As she traces the growth of this yet unknown sorrow within her soul, she realizes that its origin is but a vague presentiment of trouble—a “nothing” almost (II.ii.6–13). Resisting Bushy's efforts to distract her with talk of grief's “shadows,” she is both unwilling and unable to resolve the paradox of her “conceit.” When Green brings her the news of Bolingbroke's return and the revolt of the Percies, she proclaims at last the birth of her “prodigy”:

So, Green, thou art the midwife to my woe,  
 And Bolingbroke my sorrow's dismal heir.  
 Now hath my soul brought forth her prodigy,  
 And I, a gasping new-delivered mother,  
 Have woe to woe, sorrow to sorrow, joined. (62–66)

The whole process of the conception, gestation, and birth of an emotion is summed up in *Pericles*:

The passions of the mind,  
 That have their first conception by mis-dread,  
 Have after nourishment and life by care;  
 And what was first but fear what might be done  
 Grows elder now and cares it not be done.  
 (I. ii. 11–15)

In these examples, some external agent, however well- or ill-defined, stimulates the functioning of the imagination, showing a typical and actually desirable relationship between the self and the world, or a healthy awareness of external reality. Elsewhere, Shakespeare reveals the dangers of a “self and vain conceit,” of the mind turned in upon itself. It is this which leads Richard II to his downfall (III.ii.166), and which Greville, in the lines quoted earlier, specifically warns against. Thus, a solitary Richard, that eminent contriver of conceits, meditates in his cell shortly before his death and causes his intellect to function hermaphrodite fashion:

My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,  
 My soul the father, and these two beget  
 A generation of still breeding thoughts . . .  
 (V. v. 6–8)

In a parallel passage, Hamlet, otherwise troubled by the literal fact of his mother's incest, suggests another kind of incest—the unnatural operation of the soul, forced by the will, to embrace the product of its own imagination:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
 That from her working all his visage waned,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,  
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.  
 For Hecuba! (II. ii. 577–584)

Perhaps it is not too much to infer from such passages another reason why Shakespeare and his contemporaries did not devote more attention to the mental life of the poet, for they seem to have glimpsed the kind of solipsism that romantic idealism may lend itself to, and their impulse was to shun it.

Externally begotten conceptions, nevertheless, may also be unsafe, since monsters may be borne of an unsound or corrupted intellect. In *Measure for Measure*, the developing phases of an evil idea punctuate the action, as Angelo traces the origin, growth, and final deliverance of the “strong and swelling evil” of his conception engendered by his meeting with Isabella (II. ii. 142–3; II. iv. 6; IV. iv. 23–24). The “monstrous birth” of Iago's plot is, in a sense, self-engendered (I. iii. 409–410), that is, if we accept his hatred of the Moor as motivated from no sufficient external cause. Its more vicious growth continues then when it serves to stimulate Othello's imagination and has taken root there (III. iii. 106 ff., esp. 147–151).

Othello's subsequent torments may of course be understood to demonstrate the dangerous influence of the affections upon the intellect, and thus the action of the play, like *Hamlet*, would support Renaissance distrust of that faculty of the mind which may become so terribly and thoroughly diseased. But the pattern of imagery through which the main episodes in the play are developed compels us to regard what happens to Othello not only as a disorder prompted by his passions, but as the seduction of his soul. Certainly by the end of Act III, scene iii, Othello and Iago are bound to each other more by their act of dire conception than by their ritualistic kneeling and vows of bloody vengeance, which serve rather to confirm that act. Finally, after a period of gestation encouraged and even demanded by Iago, Othello delivers the "strong conception" that makes him "groan," and strangles Desdemona (V.ii.43-56).

As I have tried to show, the metaphor of conception has clear implications for an understanding of the Elizabethan theories of the imagination. Not devoted to an emphasis upon the poetic imagination, writers of this period were nonetheless aware of what that process involved, though they sought to direct their attention to the imagination as it more generally functioned in the intellect. As a result, Shakespeare was able to use this metaphor as a controlling symbol in certain plays, pre-eminently for the action of *Othello*. There, the assumed, *literal* understanding of Desdemona's adultery with Cassio becomes the means for the actual, *figurative* seduction of Othello by Iago and provides the play with its underlying paradox. Today, of course, the term conception, when not used in its literal sense, is invariably a "dead" or "sleeping" metaphor.<sup>8</sup> In Elizabethan English it had already begun to lose much of its figurative force, but while it was still "live" it held one of the keys by which we may unlock the secrets of the creative imagination as it was then understood.

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#### Notes

1. Pierre de Ronsard, *A Brief on the Art of French Poetry*, tr. J. H. Smith; in *The Great Critics*, ed. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks (New York, 1939), p. 183.
2. *Symposium*, 208d et seq., tr. B. Jowett.
3. *The Theory of the Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought*, in *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, XII (May-August 1927), 230.
4. See William Rossky's useful summary of these views in "Imagination in the English Renaissance: Psychology and Poetic," *Studies in the Renaissance*, V (1958), 50 ff.
5. John Davies of Hereford, *The Complete Works*, ed. A. B. Grosart (Edinburgh, 1878), I, 27; cf. *An Extasie*, I, 89; *Mirum in Modum*, I, 7-8; and *Wittes Pilgrimage*, II, 20.
6. K. G. Hamilton, *The Two Harmonies: Poetry and Prose in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1963), p. 147.
7. Quotations are from *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York, 1952).
8. An important exception is George Whalley's use of the metaphor in *Poetic Process* (London, 1953), especially in his chapter on image-making. Consider, for example, the following: "The poetic germ is not the subject or theme of the poem; its function is to crystallize, to 'seed' the images of memory into a pattern which is felt to be significant even

though the significance cannot be known until the poem has been fully extricated. By insemination the germ generates an event of reality which is compact of numerous instants of reality, remembered and forgotten, and with none of which it can be identified. One mark of poetic genius, I suspect, is the knack of recognizing the germ and fostering the mounting process of parturition, by a dainty poise between passivity and concentration, between astonished acceptance and critical severity, between stimulation and selection" (pp. 85–86). Cf. also the quotation from Rilke on p. 78.

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## KLOPSTOCK-AUSGABE

In Hamburg ist eine historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke und Briefe Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstocks in Angriff genommen worden. Die Herausgeber, Adolf Beck, Karl Ludwig Schneider und Hermann Tiemann, bitten alle privaten Besitzer von Handschriften Klopstocks sowie von Briefen an ihn und von sonstigen Zeugnissen seines Lebens und Wirkens um Mitteilung an die Arbeitsstelle der Klopstock-Ausgabe in der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Hamburg 13, Moorweidenstr. 40.

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