



## Shakespeare's Knowledge of Imagination

Sigmund Méndez<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** In this essay, the various lines of Shakespeare that involve philosophical and “pre-scientific” notions about imagination are analysed, showing how often the technical knowledge and theoretical features of specialized issues underlie his words in a more diverse and sophisticated way than frequently supposed. Certainly, some of those ancient learned opinions on fantasy were previously assimilated into European and English poetic tradition that in turn are taken up and transfigured by the Bard. This matter has multiple facets and covers medical, philosophical, and theological speculations, and many passages in Shakespeare's works display a plausible acquaintance with those concepts that are studied in this article: the problem of the organic location of imagination, its relations with the eyes and other organs (brain, heart, and liver) in psychophysiological processes, active fantasy's ability to change one's own body and another's body, altered states of consciousness which were attributed to a physical disorder or a supernatural agency, the mental representation of the self and the other; also an analysis of Duke Theseus's famous speech on the lover, the madman, and the poet is included, along with other references to the inner senses and the artistic creation. All these topics are presented to show the wide and subtle knowledge of this subject possessed by one of the finest imaginations in history.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, imagination, fantasy, inward wits, Renaissance medicine

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### 1. Introduction

Since the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the role of the imagination in artistic creation is a vastly studied and debated issue; certainly, it has acquired a greater relevance and depth in the 18th and 19th centuries, thus underlining its conceptual significance in the history of art and literature. It has even been argued that “The Enlightenment created the idea of the imagination” (Engell 1981: 3).<sup>2</sup> However,

<sup>1</sup> Instituto de Estudios Medievales y Renacentistas, Universidad de Salamanca (Spain)  
E-mail: sigmundmendez@yahoo.es

<sup>2</sup> However, it is worth quoting a remark by Klein (1996: 19): “The concept of imagination, which plays a predominant role within the eighteenth-century and Romantic theories of literature and of the fine arts, is not at all an invention of this specific period”.

imagination or fantasy<sup>3</sup> is not, as evidenced by the very terms, just a modern invention but (at least in part) a notional legacy of Greco-Roman antiquity. Both words have had, traditionally, two basic meanings: the mental faculty forming images of things and these same inner representations created by it (*phantastica virtus* and *formae rerum*; Ludovicus de Prussia 1498: D<sub>6</sub>va-b). The origin of the theoretical reflections about fantasy can be traced back to Greece and further doctrines in the Middle Ages;<sup>4</sup> they were developed and criticized in the Renaissance and have involved across time many human experiences: the basic cognitive abilities of men, the accurate or distorted perception of reality, dreams, altered states of consciousness as madness and melancholy, love (also treated as a “disease” that compromises the fantasy), prophetic visions, as well as artistic and poetic creation. It is true that in Shakespeare’s time there were only sketches or incidental observations of an aesthetic theory of imagination in a modern sense;<sup>5</sup> still, it is remarkable that from the time of Plato and Aristotle until the Renaissance there are multiple theoretical approaches to it with different backgrounds. Given its importance in cognitive processes, both philosophical and medical doctrines in antiquity and their medieval continuations could not ignore the study of the mental power that retains and generates images, and sought to explain its origin, functions, and dangers within their own theoretical frameworks and ideological needs.

The Renaissance, which was undoubtedly one of the most flourishing periods of human imagination, had not lost interest in it and continued many teachings from ancient sources; certainly much of the intellectual heritage of the past survived, but the various enquiries into fantasy had also taken new directions.<sup>6</sup> For example, in the field of medicine, the long-standing notions of “Galenic” nature (Harvey 1975) which placed in distinct cavities of the brain the various psychological faculties (including imagination, traditionally located in the front part) were refuted by new medical authorities (Vesalius 1543: 623; Valverde 1556: 79’-80’); on the other hand, specific examinations proposed moderately critical approaches that accepted, even if reducing their competence to an indirect level of influence, fantasy’s supposed capabilities of being receptive to heterogeneous external factors and of

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that, before the Enlightenment distinctions between “imagination” and “fantasy” or “fancy”, these terms were synonymous (see Roscky 1958: 50, n. 4) until the eighteenth century and so they could frequently be used—as Addison (1965: 536) did—“promiscuously” (*Spectator*, No. 411, Vol. 6, 21 June 1712). Nevertheless, “fancy” has meanings of its own (‘caprice’, ‘frolic’, ‘something that pleases or entertains’, according to Johnson’s *Dictionary*) and so it cannot be regarded as fully equivalent to “imagination” in any context.

<sup>4</sup> On imagination from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, see notably the old but still useful studies of Bundy (1927), Wolfson (1935), and Harvey (1975); and the essays included in the books edited by Fattori and Bianchi (1988); Formigari, Casertano, and Cubeddu (1999); and Lories and Rizzerio (2003).

<sup>5</sup> There may be mentioned some highlights in the general development of “pre-aesthetic” doctrines with relevant implications on art and literature: notions of the Stoics, ancient rhetoric (Cicero, Quintilian, Pseudo-Longinus), the “Second Sophistic” (Flavius Philostratus), Neoplatonism (Plotinus, Synesius, and Proclus), and the teachings of St. Augustine on the *spiritus* and different ideas on the image in the early centuries of Christianity; see Schweitzer (1925), Rispoli (1985), Dronke (2003). On the creation of a “*pneumofantasmologia*” in medieval tradition, it is valuable the suggestive essay of Agamben (2006).

<sup>6</sup> For overviews of the knowledge of imagination in the Renaissance, especially in the English medium, see Bundy (1930) and the classical article of Roscky (1958); also O’Brien (1993), the texts in the book edited by Nauta and Pätzold (2004), and Lyons (2005).

producing effects on other bodies (Feyens 1608). Regarding the philosophical and theological assessments, there was still alive a very old mistrust to it as a faculty which generates a distorted view of things and a dubious knowledge of reality that required constant vigilance (Pico della Mirandola 1930 [first ed. 1501]), valuations that corresponded to “a societal prejudice against the imagination” present in Elizabethan England (Mack 2004: 71). Nonetheless, it had continued the acceptance of *imaginatio-phantasia* as a basic cognitive power of Aristotelian roots endorsed by scholasticism; and stepping beyond, it came to be speculated its virtual equivalence with the intellect itself promoted by authors of different philosophical tendencies (Fracastoro 1555: 176<sup>r-v</sup>; Bruno 1890 [1583]: 133; later Gassendi or Caramuel). Moreover, there are noteworthy approaches that have reappraised the importance of this inner power as a creative agent of human existence in its various orders. Thus imagination acquired a renewed value within the metaphysical hermetic conceptions of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (Proteus as an allegory of man and his imagination: Garin 1988; Tirinnanzi 2000, 79-80) that later made possible to exalt it as the supreme medium of human transformation, as Paracelsus did; these magical views were well represented in England by the figure of John Dee, who exerted an interesting influence on the poetical ideas of Philip Sidney (French 1972). Furthermore, the old Aristotelian theory of melancholy and talent was blended with the Platonic teaching on *mania* and assimilated in turn with the influence of a *daemon* on the *imaginatio* in new theories of “genius” (Brann 2002) that could help to explain the artistic labour (Agrippa 1992 [1533]: 214; Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl 1964: 351-360). Another singular concept, the old *spiritus phantasticus*—with the background of authors such as St. Augustine and Synesius, and with “esoteric” meanings not even discarded by the physicians: Walker 1958; Klein 1970; Garin 1988—could reappear in Giordano Bruno as a “technical” repository of forms with infinite combinatorial possibilities (Tirinnanzi 2000: 249-250). Besides, there is a gradual appreciation of the central role played by imagination in poetry (Mazzoni 1587; Puttenham 1970 [1589]; Sidney 1968 [1595]), and several remarks recognized it as the generative faculty both in the visual and the verbal arts (Huarte de San Juan 1989 [1575]: 395-396; Bruno 1890 [1583]: 133; Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* [1621] 1.1.2.7; Bacon 1858 [1623]: 494; Junius 1637: 25; etc.). Also outstanding artists of the time made significant contributions in the field of art theory (Kemp 1977), as shown by the various explorations of the subject made by Leonardo da Vinci (Méndez 2013), Albrecht Dürer, or Michelangelo (Summers 1981), who have developed valuable reflections on the artwork as an intellectual and imaginary “creation” produced by a talent regarded as innate but capable of being improved by technical and empirical training.

For his part, Shakespeare offers a range of possibilities for studying some aspects of those teachings and the valid and free appropriation and transfiguration that poetry and art make of them within a new historical domain of literary imagination. Understandably, the theme has received some scholarly attention

dealing with various facets of it (the medical, psychological, or philosophical aspects, its role in poetic and rhetorical invention or theatrical performance, etc.),<sup>7</sup> but there are still several topics to be considered in order to ponder Shakespeare's information about this subject. As a matter of fact, there is no compendious source of his knowledge of imagination available in one text, but multiple hints scattered throughout his works. For this reason, it is necessary to make an overall review in order to illustrate his more or less technical information on this matter in some of its various features. Therefore, this article has the object of offering a transversal analysis of this complex question, covering the work of the poet to notice the most significant passages that imply fantasy and can be explained by diverse concepts developed in Western culture, from antiquity to the Renaissance, proposing some links that have so far not been detected or issues that have not yet been sufficiently clarified by scholars. Presenting the interrelationships of the various levels of meaning involved, it is shown how Shakespearian lines are related to specific contents according to philosophical and pre-scientific beliefs, mainly with reference to the brain and organic processes attributed to this inner sense, its roles in erotic and cognitive contexts and artistic creation. Thus the richness, diversity, and subtlety of the poet's knowledge of imagination can be suitably substantiated by textual evidence and comparative enquiry.

## 2. "Or in the Heart, or in the Head?": The Seat of Imagination

Maybe a good place to begin is the famous question formulated in the song performed at Portia's palace in *The Merchant of Venice*: "Tell me where is fancy bred, / Or in the heart, or in the head? / How begot, how nourishèd?"<sup>8</sup> (3.2.63-65). Interpreted from a modern point of view, these verses seem to imply a general statement on (erotic) fantasy and its dubious origin, mental or sentimental. However, the thought involved was complex in a manner that is now unfamiliar. It is more than likely that Shakespeare—who had a surprising knowledge of medical

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<sup>7</sup> On Shakespeare and imagination, the reading of Armstrong (1963) has pointed out the inventiveness of the inner powers in the travail of composition creating "image clusters". On his dramatic fantasy and some practical applications in staging, see the opinions of Jones (1941). About the medical aspects of the question, noteworthy contributions include Mandel (1973), Pope (1985), Hoeniger (1992), and Iyengar (2014). Sensory and affective effects of poetic and theatrical imagination and contemporary theories of it are studied in the essays included in the book edited by Craik and Pollard (2013). On the relationship between dramatic imagination and the visual art, considering "the visual imagination as a structural force in the plays", see Sillars (2015); and about its musical connotations, Minear (2011). Several philosophical concepts and hermeneutical pathways are explored by Bates (2010) and Pascucci (2013); an original reading that combines a philosophical model with technical hermeneutics of theatrical construction is offered by Palfrey (2014). The presence of alchemical imagery and imagination, especially in the *Sonnets*, is investigated by Healy (2011). Some aspects of the poet's religious imagination (exploring the tensions between mercy and justice) are treated by Fiddes (2015). For some political implications, related to "personification" and "consent" in a legal sense and collective and inner spaces of meaning, see Bailey (2016). With regard to Shakespeare's Romantic successors, see Bate (1986).

<sup>8</sup> The reference edition used is the Oxford Shakespeare (1986).

matters<sup>9</sup>—is in fact introducing, in the context of that festive representation, one “genuine question” (Pope 1985: 178a) in scientific terms with regard to a large debate held in philosophical and medical traditions from antiquity to the Renaissance. In order to show its controversial core, it will be useful to quote a passage from the little treatise *De imaginatione* of Pico della Mirandola (the younger), published in 1501, that points out the nub of the matter: “We must pass over what has also tormented many—the question of the place and seat of the imaginative power [*imaginariae potestatis*]. Aristotle assigned to it the heart, and Galen the brain, and the Arab Averroes, taking an intermediate position, said that the imaginative power proceeds from the palace of the heart, and ascends to the citadel of the head, where it establishes its seat and residence” (Pico 1930: 34-37).<sup>10</sup> Pico summarizes the discussed subject of the functional localization of imagination, but he clearly avoids taking a position on it. Indeed, the hypothesis that the heart is the centre of inner faculties had a long life in good part indebted to its most famous promoter, Aristotle.<sup>11</sup> Through him, and sustained by his authority, this opinion could be defended against the ancient medical remarks, already made by Alcmaeon of Croton and the *corpus hippocraticum*, on the brain as the organ of perceptual and cognitive faculties that later Galen (1824: 174-75) has confirmed as the seat of the soul and the ruling part of man (also Pseudo-Galen 1824: 711). Later, in the Middle Ages distinct authors have attempted possible agreements between both theories. Averroes (1553: 16<sup>v</sup> a-b; 1949: 85), the great commentator on Aristotle’s works, stated the shared role of both organs in the inner functions of *sensus communis* and *imaginatio*, but giving greater emphasis to the heart in accordance to his master’s tenets. Likewise, in thirteenth-century England, Robert Kilwardby (1987: 119-22) accepted the *imaginatio*’s residence in the brain, but he recognized also that in a second degree the heart takes part in it as the generative centre of “vital spirits”. Perhaps it is possible to infer from this conception an answer for the Shakespearian queries (fancy is generated in the head and nourished by the heart). The sixteenth-century medical investigations certainly confirmed that the brain is the centre of all mental functions. Nevertheless, the matter was still not definitively resolved in the seventeenth century and Thomas Willis gives a good proof of its enduring validity. The distinguished physician thought that there are “affections” common to both organs implying “the multiplicity of thoughts and images” (“*cogitationum & phantasmatum multiplicitas*”); thus it is understandable that theologians and philosophers could conceive the heart as wisdom’s dwelling place (Willis 1664: 187-88).

<sup>9</sup> “Shakespeare’s plays bear witness to a profound knowledge of contemporary physiology and psychology, and he employed medical terms in a manner which would have been beyond the powers of any ordinary playwright or physician” (Kail 1986:14).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is wise to consider that Shakespeare was fundamentally an “eclectic” (Pope 1985: 183a) in these matters, so it is easier to detect a technical concept expressed in particular passages of his works than to determine a specific source used by the poet.

<sup>11</sup> See Aristotle (*De juventute et senectute* 469a6-12, *De memoria et reminiscencia* 450a27-30, *De somno et vigilia* 456a5-6, *De generatione animalium* 743b25-26). The Stoics shared this belief (*Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* 2.837-39).

### 3. Sight and Erotic Imagination

The reply in the passage of *The Merchant of Venice* left the question of the fantasy's location unresolved, but suggests another relevant aspect to consider: "It is engendered in the eyes, / With gazing fed; and fancy dies / In the cradle where it lies. / Let us all ring fancy's knell" (3.2.67-70). The visual emphasis corresponds particularly well to the erotic mode of fantasy that is thematized in the song; sight has been usually reckoned as the beginning of love (Plato compared it to "a disease of the eyes": *ophthalmia*; *Phaedrus* 255d5) and is a main element of Andreas Capellanus's (1972: 3) famous medieval definition: "Love is a certain inborn passion proceeding from sight and immoderate thought on the form of the opposite sex". But the remarkable part of the mocking answer in the song is the emotional hypertrophy of the eye that stresses the evanescence of passion: "For looks kill love, and love by looks reviveth" (*Venus* 464); "Young men's love then lies / Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes" (*Romeo* 2.2.67-68). From a technical perspective, it can be said that in that context "fancy" has a synonymous meaning to "sensation" as the "bare appearance" of something as presented to the eyes; the object's image seen *in praesentia* is lost as soon as it is out of the field of view without leaving any lasting impression in the observer's mind. What this kind of love would lack is the second element in Capellanus's definition: the retentive capability of *imaginatio* (*imago in absentia rei*) in an intensified manner characteristic of the lover, who has an obsessive thought about the beloved as a form of "fixed imagination". It looks likely that the poet's intention is satirical, suggesting that love—and especially youthful passion—is not an enduring process of emotion but a superficial and ephemeral phenomenon of sight.

Of course, in different passages Shakespeare gives emphasis to the other side, the inner permanence of the darling image that, in a conventional way within erotic literary tradition, is frequently located in the heart<sup>12</sup> where allegedly images seen are stored ("For it [the eye] no form delivers to the heart"; *Sonnets* 113.5).<sup>13</sup> The eyes, "infected" or "affected" with passion, could show themselves their amorous condition, in the way Boyet describes to the Princess of France the effect of love on the King of Navarra in *Love's Labour's Lost*: "His heart like an agate with your print impressed, / Proud with his form, in his eye pride expressed" (2.1.236-37). Boyet formulates the epistemic metaphor used since antiquity for naming "sense impressions"<sup>14</sup> in the forceful and durable variant of an engraved stone; at the same time, the description attests how love is reflected in the eyes implying a bidirectional flow in the deep inner affection of the lover's soul that is outwardly expressed as well. The idea of enduring recollection is suggested by the agate

<sup>12</sup> Already used by Virgil (*Aeneis* 4.4-5) and Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 9.25.10-12).

<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the topical correlation between the eyes and the heart with regard to love was used by many English contemporary poets; for examples: Philip Sidney ("The Bargain" 9); Thomas Lodge ("Rosalind's Madrigal" 5-6); George Peele ("What Thing is Love?" 7-9); Christopher Marlowe (*Hero and Leander* 1.158-66); etc.

<sup>14</sup> It must be remembered the metaphor of the seal in wax, which appears in Plato (*Theaetetus* 191c-d); Aristotle (*De anima* 424a17-20, *De memoria* 450a30-2). The *phantasia* is, according to the Stoics, "an impression on the soul" (*Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* 1.58, 484; 2.53, 55, 59).

metaphor, but the wax block simile for memory and fantasy is the most commonly used in literary and philosophical texts and it is applied to the heart<sup>15</sup> as a place easily affected by “impressions”: “How easy is it for the proper false / In women’s waxen hearts to set their forms!” (*Twelfth Night* 2.2.29-30). In fact, love poetry often represents the inner form by metaphors of the visual arts (the image painted or sculpted in the heart),<sup>16</sup> and Shakespeare does it, too: “Mine eye hath played the painter, and hath steeled / Thy beauty’s form in table of my heart”<sup>17</sup> (*Sonnets* 24.1-2). Plato represented the soul’s appropriation of images with the figure of an inward painter (*Philebus* 39b); in the Renaissance, Pico (1930: 26) applied the Platonic comparison to the *imaginatio* and even Descartes (1996: 507) wrote some observations in like terms. In addition, the repository of images, when “technically” considered from the perspective of the arts, may be conceived as proposed by a famous Albrecht Dürer’s (1893: 227) phrase: “the gathered secret treasure of the heart”. In effect, fantasy is a sort of *thesaurus* whose function is to keep sensible apprehensions in a mental storehouse. It is also the inner artist and contemplator of the images guarded for reproduction and continual looking, and devoted in love to the beloved’s image: “to sit and draw / His archèd brows, his hawking eye, his curls, / In our heart’s table—heart too capable / Of every line and trick of his sweet favour. / But now he’s gone, and my idolatrous fancy / Must sanctify his relics” (*All’s Well* 1.1.92-7).

In the previous examples, Shakespeare continues a long tradition of wisdom and poetry that has located in the heart many psychological processes, including imagination; but inasmuch as *The Merchant of Venice* song can distinctly show, it is remarkable that the poet had had an interest in some medical and philosophical questions that involved the inward wits. In other passages, he takes note of the possible cerebral location of the soul: “his pure brain, / Which some suppose the soul’s frail dwelling-house” (*King John* 5.7.2-3). This matter was complex in many ways, because distinct authors disputed not only the precise locus of the soul in the body but also the actual validity of any hypothesis about its physical localization (the rational soul was thought to be *inorganica*). Be it as it may, other texts insist on assigning to the brain the role of receptacle of images: “to scrape the figures out of your husband’s brains” (*Merry Wives* 4.2.201-02); and also of altered forms of consciousness, as in the visionary inquisitions of Macbeth: “Or art thou but / A dagger of the mind, a false creation / Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?” (2.1.37-39). In this case, Macbeth’s doubt is appropriately raised in medical terms with regard to the disordered mental processes of the imminent murderer; maniacal and delirious states distort reason and imagination with strange forms, and these psychological phenomena, as believed by medical lore, were produced by fever and as a result of an excess of hot humours and vapours or thick spirits that exert

<sup>15</sup> According to the allegorical explanation that Plato provides: “things that come through sensations, are printed in this ‘heart’ [*kear*] of the soul, as Homer said, hinting at the likeness to the wax [*keros*]” (*Theaetetus* 194c).

<sup>16</sup> See for example its usage in Petrarch (*Rime* 50.63-69, 96.5-6, 155.9-11, etc.).

<sup>17</sup> “Steeled” is the reading of the *editio princeps* of 1609, preserved by the modern Oxford edition; in this case, “steeled” should be understood to mean ‘engraved’ or ‘carved’. But doubting its fairness, often Edward Capell’s emendation is accepted in place: “stell’d” (stell: ‘to place, fix, or portray’).

pressure on the brain, thus overexciting imagination.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the ambiguity is sustained throughout the plays alluding one or another theory of organic location of fantasy, in the heart or in the head, and even using both in the same passage without hierarchical distinction (*Merry Wives* 4.2.143-46).

It is worth adding here, and based on physiological teachings current at that time, that there is a third organ importantly involved in love processes: the liver. Really, it was believed that this organ interact with the other two, the heart and the brain, in the development of sexual appetite (Constantinus Africanus 1536: 299; Hoeniger 1992: 172-74); the harmonic and subordinated agreement between them in higher feeling would suppose the perfect expression of love (*Twelfth Night* 1.1.34-38.). Anyway, its importance is distinctly enunciated in several passages (*Love's Labour's Lost* 4.3.71, *Merry Wives* 2.1.111-12, *Twelfth Night* 2.4.96-97, 3.2.19, *The Tempest* 4.1.55-56). It should be remembered that the "concupiscent soul" was located in the liver;<sup>19</sup> for this reason it is considered the generative organ of passions, particularly love, as testified by ancient poetry<sup>20</sup> and medieval and Renaissance texts.<sup>21</sup> But it was also related to imagination, since sexual impulse has a basic starting point in the desire of imaginative thought that, although created in the head, requires the involvement of the liver's heat (Constantinus Africanus 1536: 299; Bernard de Gordon 1491: viij<sup>r</sup> a). Perhaps the link between this organ and the *vis phantastica* is even deeper if there is a possible association of this faculty with the mantic power assigned to the liver and its capability to serve as a sort of mirror that reflects images observed by the intellect (Plato, *Timaeus* 71b).

As seen above, along with the multiple and crucial functions that are performed by inner organs in generating and developing sexual passion, the sight plays a very significant role. For its part, imagination has itself a strong visual component and is so closely related to the erotic impulse that "love" and "fancy" could be mutually implicated terms (one vestal, under the care of the chaste Diana and invulnerable to Cupid's arrows, passes by "In maiden meditation, fancy-free"; *Dream* 2.1.164). Primarily, love is regarded as a visual-imaginary phenomenon (hence Spenser's first image in "*the maske of Cupid*": "The first was *Fancy*, like a louely boy"; *The Faerie Queene* 3.12.7.1). One passage from *As You Like It* provides an illustrative example of this idea and some related notions: "O dear Phoebe, / If ever—as that ever may be near— / You meet in some fresh cheek the power of fancy, / Then shall you know the wounds invisible / That love's keen arrows make" (3.5.28-32).

<sup>18</sup> See Fernel (1554: 123; 1565: 324); Argenterio (1566: 318); Erastus (1590: 228). Chapman says: "th' imagining power / (Stirr'd up by forms hid in the memory's store, / Or by the vapours of o'erflowing humours / In bodies full and foul, and mix'd with spirits) / Feigns many strange, miraculous images" (*The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois* 5.1.43-47); see also Burton (*The Anatomy of Melancholy* 1.2.3.2).

<sup>19</sup> According to the known Platonic doctrine of three souls (*Timaeus* 69c-73d, *Republica* 440e-1a, *Phaedrus* 253d-e); Aristotle (*De anima* 432a25-26, etc.), functionally assumed by Galen (*De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* 2.3.24, 9.9.7).

<sup>20</sup> Horace (*Carmina* 1.25.13, 15, 4.1.12, *Epistulae* 1.18.72); Seneca (*Hercules Oetaeus* 574).

<sup>21</sup> For instance, in a widespread medieval Salernitan collection of versified medical lore: "cogit amare jecor" (*Flos medicinae Scholae Salerni* 4.3.3.1243; Renzi 1852: 486). St. Thomas registered the saying (*Summa theologiae* 2. q.48. a.2. r.1). It was used by Gabriel Harvey in a poem dedicated to Philip Sidney, which Nashe (1966: 92) quoted adding a translation: "Sum iecur ex quo te primùm Sydnee vidi, / Os oculósque regit, cogit amare iecur. // All liuer am I, Sidney, since I saw thee; / My mouth, eyes, rules it, and to loue doth draw mee".



In this text, “the power of fancy” is located in the cheeks (also the place where Eros sleeps or keeps watch)<sup>22</sup> and triggers love by “visual contact”. Poetry from antiquity to the Renaissance employs the metaphor of “the dart of the eyes” (“I’ll look to like, if looking liking move; / But no more deep will I endart mine eye / Than your consent gives strength to make it fly”; *Romeo* 1.3.99-101), and the optical theory of “visual rays” (“eyebeams”; *Love’s Labour’s Lost* 4.3.26) and the topic of Eros’s arrows are sometimes even interwoven with this image.<sup>23</sup> The beholder’s innocent or voluptuous gaze, like arrows, produce at distance an affection (the “invisible wounds”) in the lover’s fantasy;<sup>24</sup> in fact, the “imaginary rays” wound the eye by the look of another, because the eyes are directly connected to the front ventricle of the brain, seat of the imagination, where the “visual spirits” are generated (Grassus 1996: 49). Some ancient theories of vision, in which it was held that the eyes were “light bearers” (Plato, *Timaeus* 45b) and of a similar nature to the sun (“O eye of eyes”; *Lucrece* 1088), were suitable for such a purpose. Thus the eyes do emit visual spirits or rays like sharp weapons (“his eye / Is like an engine bent or a sharp weapon / In a soft sheath”; *The Two Noble Kinsmen* 5.5.41-43) and they have the capacity to affect in different ways other bodies. Having a “harmful” or—figuratively—a “lethal” effect, they were linked with imaginary animals like the basilisk and the cockatrice, credited with a deadly gaze by the emission of poisonous visual beams: “Come, basilisk, / And kill the innocent gazer with thy sight” (2 *Henry VI* 3.2.52-53; also *Henry V* 5.2.17, *Romeo* 3.2.47, *Twelfth Night* 3.4.191-92).<sup>25</sup> Then there was a set of pre-scientific beliefs that supported those expressions about the aggressive charming or “fascination” (*fascinatio*), which entails the injurious power of imagination directed by looking intensely at another body.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. The Diverse Powers of Fantasy

The vast theme of fantasy has many aspects treated throughout medical and philosophical texts from the Ancient World to the Renaissance; the multifarious

<sup>22</sup> Consider the image of Sophocles (*Antigona* 782-84), particularly in the active form of Horace: Cupid “keeps watch in the beautiful cheeks” (“pulchris excubat in genis”; *Carmina* 4.13.8).

<sup>23</sup> See among the many possible examples: Aeschylus (*Supplices* 1003-05, *Agamemnon* 742-43); Heliodorus (*Aethiopica* 3.7.5.2-8); Dante (*Purgatorio* 31.115-17); Petrarch (*Rime* 86.1-2); Ariosto (*Orlando furioso* 35.1.1-4); etc.

<sup>24</sup> For example, that love’s imaginary fire is even more dangerous than elemental fire was indicated by Equicola (1536: 131”).

<sup>25</sup> On the basilisk: Pliny (*Naturalis historia* 29.19.66); Heliodorus (*Aethiopica* 3.8.2); St. Isidore (*Etymologiae* 12.4.6); Neckam (*De naturis rerum* 2.153). The “cockatrice” seems to derive from the basilisk itself, either by its enmity to the rooster (Aelianus, *Historia animalium* 3.31, 5.50) or the belief of being generated by rooster eggs (Neckam, *De naturis rerum* 1.75). In any case, that lethal quality was ascribed to both animals and was a topic belief employed in English poetry of the sixteenth century: “and kill with looks, as Cockatrices doo” (Spenser, *Amoretti* 49.10).

<sup>26</sup> “Fascination is indeed the force and intensive action of imagination in other body” (Bacon 1858: 608). At the time it was still believed, as a matter of scientific interest, that the imagination “has the power of begetting and producing visible bodies, and it can bring out whatever wonderful operations there are, in presence or absence, beyond the comprehension of human reason [...] the eager imagination not only changes one’s own body, but sometimes also another’s” (Croll 1609: 37, 39).

components of all that knowledge comprise a kind of “fantastical science”. According to it, the imagination has really the power to produce changes, not only psychologically, but physically as well. For instance, Ficino (2004: 110-21) acknowledged the different effects derived “from the fantasy’s emotions” (“*ab affectibus phantasiae*”) showing the mastery of the soul over the body. An expression of this power was the capability, attested in biblical and classical texts, that the imagination supposedly has to modify the biological formation of a living being, both in humans and animals. This and none other is the conceptual background behind King Henry’s justification of his appearance, determined before his birth: “Now beshrew my father’s ambition! He was thinking of civil wars when he got me; therefore was I created with a stubborn outside, with an aspect of iron, that when I come to woo ladies I fright them” (*Henry V* 5.2.222-26). The warlike thoughts of his father have conditioned his ferocious aspect in such a way. Indeed, the most common belief asserted that the mother’s imagination had the power of changing the foetus, but this force could be attributed also to the father at the time of conception (Avicenna 1903: 768; Ficino 2004: 110; Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* 1.2.3.2).<sup>27</sup> On this issue, Shakespeare seems to emphasize the active power of the paternal principle (an opinion held in ancient theatre by Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 658-66) in a similar way in other passages (*Cymbeline* 2.5.2-6), a thought also reflected in male dominance that shapes women’s minds (*Lucrece* 1240-46, *Dream* 1.1.46-41). In any case, it is not too surprising that the poet would believe in such a way, if there was a place in the seventeenth century for theories as Van Helmont’s (1648: 42-43; 1652: 33-34) doctrine on the *archeus faber* and the *imago seminalis* in the biological genesis, in which process the imagination plays a central role as a formative and fecundating principle (in fact, the matter was still debated in the eighteenth century).

It is noteworthy that, in the epistemological frameworks in which such concepts were developed, the barriers between the objective and the subjective, the physical and the psychological, were substantially more diffuse than those valid in the rational-empiricist scientific world conception in modern times. There was also a closer correspondence in the interaction between world and man and his inner world itself. Imagination is certainly a faculty of great relevance for this correlation between the material and mental realms, because through it the mind appropriates the sensible forms converting them into “sensations without matter”, and then these inward representations are subject to multiple alterations. The already-noted relationship between eye and imagination in the theories of vision and its erotic and damaging implications have common theoretical assumptions. In this regard, if it is possible to conceive something as “a fantastic power” that could affect psychophysiological other bodies by sight, then there is also “a visionary imagination” within man. Sure enough, the primary power of fantasy consists in

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<sup>27</sup> The influence of the father in conception is explained in the early seventeenth-century treatise by Thomas Feyens (1608: 172): “The mother can imprint at the time of conception, then the father can imprint as well [...]. Because when the mother imprints by the imagination at the time of conception, then he imprints, since the fantastic forms are communicated through the nerves with the semen that exists in the testicles”.

the ability to represent absent things that the soul can see within itself. This is just the concept behind Hamlet's famous phrase that he uses before his first meeting with the Ghost, when he says that he has seen his father recently "In my mind's eye" (1.2.184).<sup>28</sup> It is an ancient metaphor, "the soul's eye", already used by Plato and repeated for centuries;<sup>29</sup> and it implies in fact "an imaginary sight", identified with imagination itself; so Leonardo (1995: 140) wrote about the *immaginazione* of a body arising internally "in the tenebrous eye". Besides, John Davies (1975 [1599]: 41) has indicated how "Phantasie" observes and judges if the forms are good, bad, or neutral "in her *phantasticke* eye" (*Nosce Teipsum* 1092); and it is worth remembering the engraving of the *Oculus Imaginationis* included in Robert Fludd's (1619: 47) *Ars memoriae*.

The double nature of vision, inward and outward, gives rise to altered forms of perception also created, in their measure, by erotic experiences: "Incapable of more, replete with you, / My most true mind thus makes mine eye untrue" (*Sonnets* 113.13-14). As long as the subjective prevails over the objective, the forms produced by the eye of fantasy appear to have an external existence; these include the uncommon apparitions seen by one character or more (but visible to the spectators as well) that are displayed in the ambiguous space of an imaginary phenomenology. Thus Hamlet's reference to his own inner vision indicates that transitional point between the seen in the inner world and something strangely sighted as an external appearance. The soldiers serve as testimony to the seemingly impossible ("Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy"; *Hamlet* 1.1.21), then the sceptical Horatio confirms the experience and later the prince himself, giving credit that it is not an illusion but "a real fantasy" shared by several witnesses. This is, indeed, beyond the realm of the subjective entering into the scope of the intersubjective, but it continues to contradict what can be considered empirically possible; mysteriously, fantasy widens normal cognitive functioning ("With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls"; 1.4.37). But subjective ambiguity itself subsequently seems to make an epistemic withdrawal into the area of individual perception, either Hamlet's vision or Gertrude's inability to see the Ghost: "This is the very coinage of your brain. / This bodiless creation ecstasy / Is very cunning in" (3.4.128-30). Also Macbeth's spectral visions, that only he can see ("This is the very painting of your fear", his wife tells him; 3.4.60), involve divergences in perception that resemble in the history of theatre the terrified Orestes of Euripides, who looked at the Erinyes that remain imperceptible to the herders or his sister Electra.<sup>30</sup> In the famous Shakespearian examples, "the fantasy's eye" looks or does

<sup>28</sup> The poet has employed this image in other passages: *Lucrece* 1426, *Sonnets*, 27.9-10, 113.1, *Much Ado* 4.1.226-31.

<sup>29</sup> Plato (*Respublica* 533d); Aristotle (*De anima* 427b18-20): "the inward eyes"; Philo Judaeus (*De officio mundi* 71): "the eye of thought"; Boethius (*Consolatio Philosophiae* 5.4[P].30): "*intellegentiae oculus*"; Pseudo-Augustine (1841: 785): "*oculus animae*"; Dante (*Convivio* 2.13.19.92): "*l'occhio dello 'ntelletto*"; Ficino (1576: 1607): "*animae oculus*"; Leone Ebreo (1929: 14'): "*i nostri occhi de la mente*"; etc.

<sup>30</sup> Euripides (*Iphigenia Taurica* 286-95, *Orestes* 255-59); see the technical commentaries on these texts, in philosophical and literary terms, of *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* (2.54; the *phantasma* as an empty attraction of the *phantastikon* in melancholics and madmen), and of Pseudo-Longinus (*De sublimitate* 15.1-2; the *phantasiai* giving elevation to the discourse).

not look outwardly at the spectral figures invisible to the bodily eye; the occlusion or opening of this visionary capacity is subject to the specific circumstances of each case, even in contradictory ways: guilt makes Macbeth a tormented “seer” as perhaps Gertrude is blind to the supernatural because of her mental sanity or even her own guilty conscience.<sup>31</sup> The emotional condition of the characters (fantasy mingles with the emotions: “He waxes desperate with imagination”; *Hamlet* 1.4.64) seems to determine their relationship to such apparitions, but the active quality of them is also contemplated, as agents that exert their influence on the imagination of certain characters. Furthermore, in the theological tradition of Christianity there is the belief that spiritual beings, including demons, have the ability “to move the imagination”: “What spirit, what devil suggests this imagination?” (*Merry Wives* 3.3.204-5);<sup>32</sup> hence the legitimate enquiry of Hamlet about his father’s Ghost as a possible ruse of the devil to lose his soul.

Such forms can be explained as the symptomatic expression of a physical condition (“I think it is the weakness of mine eyes / That shapes this monstrous apparition”; *Caesar* 4.2.327-28) or as the effect of a supernatural agent (“Thy evil spirit, Brutus”; 4.2.333). They are halfway between disease and revelation, or even both in actual concurrence, but in any case often associated with altered states of mind such as insanity or melancholy that afflict characters “with great imagination / Proper to madmen” (*2 Henry IV* 1.3.31-32). In such conditions, they are prone to see the invisible and fill their mind with terrifying visions that expose their abnormality and the probable need of medical treatment: “There’s hell, there’s darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie; pah, pah! Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, sweeten my imagination” (*Lear* 4.5.124-27).<sup>33</sup> On the edge of madness or experiencing the supernatural, iconic characters like Hamlet or Macbeth present altered and extended forms of fantasy, which in turn alter and widen the reality in which they interact. The dramatic fiction thereby shows a reflexively self-conscious representation (*phantasia*) of its own representative power; theatre is a fictive extension of reality through the imagination that in turn serves to widen the boundaries of experience. As in the vacillations of Innogen, when she wakes up to discover the headless corpse of Cloten, being half-awake and half-asleep finding wakefulness like a nightmare (*Cymbeline* 4.2.301-9). Under the influence of a pathetic shock, the boundaries between dream and reality, between internal and external world vision, are blurred.<sup>34</sup> Poetry and theatre objectively achieve this

<sup>31</sup> Maybe the Ghost appears to whom he wills, as commented by Moorman (1906: 201).

<sup>32</sup> See St. Augustine (*De Trinitate* 4.9.14.6-11); St. Thomas (*De malo* q.16. a.11 re.); Wier (1583: 260-68). Le Loyer (1608: 145) remarked that the devil could hold the damaged fantasy, in the various brain disorders that compromise it (epilepsy, mania, melancholy, lunatic fury), causing experiences of supernatural phenomena in the patient. See also Healy (2011: 185).

<sup>33</sup> See Hoeniger (1992: 257); Iyengar (2014: 68). The aromatic secretions of the *zibetta* or *felis zibethi* were used as odoriferous remedy for some brain and nervous disorders, “as in apoplexy or epilepsy” (Paracelsus 1572: 76). It was employed “in preparing a specific odoriferous compound, with a fragrance of scent that relieves wonderfully the weakened spirit” (Croll 1609: 181). Also served to scent gloves (*As You Like It* 3.2.61-66).

<sup>34</sup> “It is clear”, as Mandel (1973: 65) points out, “that no absolute distinction or separation could be made in the Renaissance [...] between what belongs to experiential reality and what belongs to imaginative reality”.

aesthetic continuum, and in some revealing moments create legitimate expressions of their self-consciousness as fantastic creations.

The changes that imagination exerts on perception are manifold. In his exalted Queen Mab speech, Mercutio points out that those dreams that feed the illusory hopes of men—particularly those in love—have a fabulous “supernatural” origin; all this, Romeo objects, interrupting the flow of words, is but “nothing”, although Mercutio voluntarily expands his verbal phantasmagoria making an ironic mirror for those same excesses: “I talk of dreams, / Which are the children of an idle brain, / Begot of nothing but vain fantasy, / Which is as thin of substance as the air, / And more inconstant than the wind” (*Romeo* 1.4.96-100). For those who are strongly influenced by the “vain fancy”, this actually seems like a kind of “fairy” or “inner witch” who can subject the senses to her power; so in Troilus’s amorous expectancy: “I am giddy. Expectation whirls me round. / Th’imaginary relish is so sweet / That it enchants my sense” (*Troilus* 3.2.16-18). Then fantasy is reflective and adopts the mode of the thing that it reflects (“And my imaginations are as foul / As Vulcan’s stithy”; *Hamlet* 3.2.81-82); it reproduces but also transforms reality; it is able to present a true reflection but can also become a distorting mirror: “and oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not—that your wisdom then, / From one that so imperfectly conceits” (*Othello* 3.3.152-54); or an unfaithful version of things that degrades them substantially, as it occurs in interested misrepresentations: “thousand escapes of wit / Make thee the father of their idle dream, / And rack thee in their fancies” (*Measure* 4.1.61-63).

These processes affect how a character is perceived not only by others but also by himself. Fantasy becomes the obsessive inner eye that looks repeatedly at its own distorting mirror, so long as it has as its main concern its own look. Indeed, vanity and foolishness are defective states associated with fantasy (“fancy”, “fantasy”, and derived words are particularly used for this purpose, a level of meaning already functioning in the original Greek terms). Shakespeare exploits this possibility on several occasions. A classic example is the portrait that Ulysses draws of Achilles’s *hubris* (*Troilus* 2.3.168-74); for the mighty hero, the magnitude of his pride becomes an enemy within unleashing an “inner battle”, a *psychomachia*, that virtually nullifies him. The “fantastical character” is transformed by his own projections, he swells with his own fantasy, as in the induced illusions of Malvolio: “Look how imagination blows him” (*Twelfth Night* 2.5.40-41); vanity is inflated with air of imagination. It is also implied the projected self-image of an individual in relation to the others, like a character that makes a character, a mask of a mask. A good example is the foolish Spaniard Armado in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, presented as a “child of fancy” (1.1.168), “A phantasm, a Monarcho” (4.1.98), as a grotesque and delirious figure of such excesses. Also the affected manners whipped by Mercutio: “The pox of such antic, lipping, affecting phantasims, these new tuners of accent!” (*Romeo* 2.3.26-27). Verily, these expressions are used to describe, almost always in a derogatory way, different individuals and their distorted behaviours, caused by erotic melancholy, vanity, or ridiculous thoughts: “that fancy-monger”, “fantastical”, “fantastical knave” (*As You Like It* 3.2.352, 396, 3.3.96-97). But beyond these degraded and laughable cases, there is in the “fantastic” forms of pride a greater transgression

that affects man in an essential way: “But man, proud man, / Dressed in a little brief authority, / Most ignorant of what he’s most assured, / His glassy essence, like an angry ape / Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven / As makes the angels weep” (*Measure* 2.2.120-25). A supernatural play is performed on the theatre of the world where angels gaze with tragic eyes at the grotesque human comedy; man degrades himself in an unworthy representation and vainly executes “fantastic tricks”, while perverts his “glassy essence”, his rational soul and his own fantasy—also a representative capacity of higher realities<sup>35</sup>—turned into a dispenser of chimeric visions.

## 5. Duke Theseus’s Speech on Imagination

Naturally, a review on the theme of fantasy in Shakespeare cannot ignore the lines in which Duke Theseus significantly touch the subject; it is necessary to quote them at length because of their importance:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
 Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
 More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
 The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
 Are of imagination all compact.  
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:  
 That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,  
 Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt.  
 The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,  
 And as imagination bodies forth  
 The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen  
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
 A local habitation and a name.  
 Such tricks hath strong imagination  
 That if it would but apprehend some joy  
 It comprehends some bringer of that joy;  
 Or in the night, imagining some fear,  
 How easy is a bush supposed a bear! (*Dream* 5.1.4-22)

<sup>35</sup> Figural representations of fantasy as a mirror are recurrent (particularly in Neoplatonism), exemplifying its capacity to reflect both the sensible and intellectual spheres: Plotinus (*Enneades* 4.3.30.9-10); Synesius (*De insomniis* 15.149C); Ramon Llull (1986: 433): “the mirror is especially an image and sign of the imagination”; Ficino (*Theologia platonica* 12.4.6); John Davies: “Phantasie” is “wits looking glasse”, and wit (“understanding”) “Lookes in the mirrour of the phantasie” (*Nosce Teipsum* 1072, 1159); defending the poet’s fantasy, Puttenham (1970: 19): “that by it as by a glasse or mirrour, are represented vnto the soule all maner of bewtifull visions”; and Greville (1939 [1633]: 156): “Knowledges next organ is *Imagination*; / A glasse, wherein the obiect of our Sense / Ought to reflect true height, or declination, / For vnderstandings cleare intelligence”.

It is convenient to analyse “the technical content” of this passage, which extends beyond the delimited context of its formulation.<sup>36</sup> The first characterization regards “lunatics”<sup>37</sup> and lovers (“Love is merely a madness”, “It is to be all made of fantasy”: *As You Like It* 3.2.386, 5.2.89); both are distinguished by an excessive heat (which affects the imagination and the reason)<sup>38</sup> in the brain and by a disposition to form images abnormally; in fact, love and madness were considered “diseases of the imagination” according to the medical science of the time.<sup>39</sup> This psychophysiological condition implies an excessive amount of one faculty at the expense of “well-tempered reason” and the appropriate conditions for its functioning (Segarra 1596: 348). Then Theseus introduces a third type, the poet, in addition to the other two; but it is very probable that this third subject was not included in a previous draft and “‘the poet’ was an afterthought, inserted” (Wilson 1924: 85)<sup>40</sup> by Shakespeare in a revision of the passage, underscoring its importance. In the final text, the three types are gathered together because of the psychological power that dominates them to the point of becoming almost their own substance. Next is a brief description of each type involved. Firstly, the madman is credited with an overwhelmed vision of hell (Porta 1589: 310);<sup>41</sup> secondly, with clear scorn, the lover is subject to unwarranted idealization of the beloved’s beauty (these both imply the two basic disorders of disturbed imagination: either seeing what is not there or seeing reality in a distorted way; Mercuriale 1606: 32).

The later type, the poet, is treated more extensively than the two previous types (six lines, against four), and this helps, along with his first separate mention, to distinguish him from the others. There are indeed negative features in his profile that reflect old and contemporary prejudices about the “fantastical poet” (Bundy 1930: 542-43; Mack 2004: 71-73), although a qualitative differentiation is made explicit by pointing out the “fine frenzy” (“*amabilis insania*”: Horace, *Carmina* 3.4.5-6; “goodly fury”: *The Faerie Queene* 6.Proem.2.6) proper to him as a higher form of a kindled imagination, an assumption that echoes the ancient arguments on the subject amplified in the Renaissance defences of poetry, that exalted “the good imagination, which is the poetic” (Rossky 1958: 65), possibly with some influence of Neoplatonism reflected in authors like Puttenham and Sidney (Healy 2013: 175-

<sup>36</sup> Theseus’s speech on imagination can be understood, as it is argued by Nuttall (2007: 122), as an “eloquent diatribe” disqualifying the magic events, derided as being absurd and illusory, and thus that “imagination is the mother of error”. In any case, the speech is rich and iridescent, and probably some part of its content goes beyond the intention of the character in the specific context of the play. At least, “there are two voices here, and one perhaps is Shakespeare’s own” (Bloom 1998: 169).

<sup>37</sup> ‘Lunacy’ was commonly used ‘as synonym for insanity of all kinds’ (Iyengar 2014: 198-200).

<sup>38</sup> Also treated in *Sonnets* 147. See Porta (1586: 11).

<sup>39</sup> For example, in his work on brain disorders, Hildesheim (1612: 109-313) dedicated a section to “the diseases of imagination and damaged reason” (“*De morbis imaginationis et rationis læsæ*”), in which are included phrenitis, mania, melancholy, folly and madness, Herculean or furious love, lycanthropy, hydrophobia, and hypochondria.

<sup>40</sup> The part of the poet is mislined and the argument that this and similar passages “can be construed as additional, is undeniable”, as Holland (1994: 258) observes in his edition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

<sup>41</sup> Timothie Bright (1586: 131) indicated that “grosse melancholicke vapours [...] cause horrible and fearefull apparitions”. A tragic example of a melancholy man afflicted by *desperatio* and hellish images is the painter Karel van Yper (Mander 1604: 253”).

178). In any case, Shakespeare has inserted a complex and ambiguous mirror that, at once, celebrates and mocks the poet's powers,<sup>42</sup> reflecting the contemporary assessment of fantasy as "an intensely ambivalent power circa 1600" (Healy 2013: 185). The speech suggests that he has gained a vision with unlimited capacity that extends from earth to heaven;<sup>43</sup> he has, in Ramon Llull's (1989: 25-26) words, a "*potentia absoluta*" (that is to say, as the Romantics will claim for poetry, "absolute power").<sup>44</sup> Therefore it is a virtual equivalent of the *ingenium* (wit), to which is assigned the function of a cognitive extension of the soul or intellect that makes it possible to know things unknown;<sup>45</sup> in particular, it is related to what artistic fantasy makes with its free inventiveness, as has been stated in a famous Horatian passage and in several texts on the soul comparing it with a painter who "shapes forms" beyond those produced by nature<sup>46</sup> (making *phantasmata*),<sup>47</sup> a capability which can be identified with the *formatrix imaginatio*.<sup>48</sup> Precisely the artist—or the poet—is almost unlimitedly "full of forms" (Dürer 1893: 298).<sup>49</sup> What fantasy can see inwardly becomes a knowable representation through the pen of the poet, who is able to give "to airy nothing / a local habitation and a name", as it is said in the aporetic statement that proposes the "unreality" while emphasizing the "paralogic" condition of the imagination's workings.<sup>50</sup> The tricks of a powerful imagination can envision both the joy and the means to accomplish its fulfilment; thus poetry uses writing, or stage performance, to give reality to something that has not existed up to that point and that since then it has remained, somehow, whirling and burning in its fantastical circle. The jocular and even childish concluding note on fantasy as a false perception produced by fear offers a distension, once the most significant—but not fully, dramatically contextual—message about the power of poetic fantasy has been enunciated in the lines lastly added by Shakespeare and covered with a previous, ironic veil of rationalist derision.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Remember also the self-ironic attitude of the closely resembling sonnet 9 of Drayton's (1961: 315) *Idea* "As other men, so I myself do muse".

<sup>43</sup> Maybe it is valid to assume an emphasis on a theatrical synthesis of both realms as considered in contemporary poetical theories: "the 'fine frenzy' of the poet's vision encompasses both 'heaven' (the golden world, the eternal) and 'earth' (the brazen world, the temporal)" (Thurman 2015: 122).

<sup>44</sup> Consider the famous Wordsworth's lines (*The Prelude* 14.188-92); also Shelley's (*Epipsychidion* 162-9).

<sup>45</sup> Pseudo-Augustine (1841: 787): "The 'wit' [*ingenium*] is that force of the soul, or intention, by which the soul extends and employs itself in knowing the unknown". See also La Rochelle (1964: 96). The definition of *De spiritu et anima* was picked up by Fludd (1619: 268).

<sup>46</sup> Horace (*Ars poetica* 1-13); Alexander Neckam (*De naturis rerum* 2.25).

<sup>47</sup> St. Isidore (*Differentiae* 216, 32C): "Then, the fantasy is a collected memory of known forms; the phantasm, a feigned form of unknown things in the soul".

<sup>48</sup> See Richard of Saint Victor (*Benjamin major* 3.1, 109B).

<sup>49</sup> Dryden (1971: 55) famously stated of Shakespeare: "All the Images of Nature were still present to him".

<sup>50</sup> Then poetry seeks, indeed, "the impossible"; according to the ancient teaching of Parmenides, what is not cannot be known or expressed in language (Diels-Kranz 28 B 2.7-8); see Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's (1557: 244) words on this ontological question.

<sup>51</sup> From another point of view, it could be said that the "interpolation" about the poet is in fact "fully, dramatically contextual", in so far as Duke Theseus is anticipating his own immediate request for the masque. So even for a hard rationalistic mind, the most tolerable form of imagination's illusions is the poetic representation, which can fill with its fantastic "airy nothing" the emptiness of leisure.



## 6. Some Passages Involving “Wit” and the “Inward Wits”

There are other Shakespearian lines concerning imagination, even tacitly, as in the references to the five “inward wits”, harmonically matched to the five external senses and repeatedly mentioned in a generic way (for examples: *Romeo* 1.4.46-47, *Sonnets* 141.9-10, *Much Ado* 1.1.62-64, *Lear*, 3.6.16). It is no wonder in any case that Shakespeare’s medical knowledge of these issues is used for metaphorical transformations; it is interesting to recall some lines spoken by Holofernes: “This is a gift that I have, simple, simple—a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions. These are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of *pia mater*, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion. But the gift is good in those in whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost* 4.1.66-72). In this case, he talks about the posterior ventricle of the brain, in which memory is located (Vicary 1888: 31; Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* 1.1.2.7), where multiple forms are engendered to be nourished “in the womb of *pia mater*” or “tender mother” (also *Twelfth Night* 1.5.109-11), as this brain membrane is called;<sup>52</sup> that is to say, the forms kept in memory are processed in the substance of the brain that is covered by the *pia mater* (the middle cell or ventricle of the brain where the reason was housed; Hoeniger 1992: 151; Iyengar 2014: 260). Also in another play: “That memory, the warder of the brain, / Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason / A limbeck only” (*Macbeth* 1.7.65-67). The memory is of course a general repository of information; but fantasy is also an inner place of forms: “So full of shapes is fancy / That it alone is high fantastical” (*Twelfth Night* 1.1.14-15).<sup>53</sup> In these Shakespearian examples, mental powers have practically the status of “semi-personifications” and they can easily remind the figurations that Spenser has depicted in “The House of Alma” (*The Faerie Queene* 2.9.47-59): *Phantastes* (fantasy), in whose room “were writ / Infinite shapes of things dispersed thin” (2.9.1.2-3), and *Eumnestes*, the memory. Moreover, Shakespeare has used other metaphorical expressions about wit: “Thy wit is as quick as the greyhound’s mouth, it catches” (*Much Ado* 5.2.10-11). Maybe the old association of dog with *ingenium* is alluded to in this case.<sup>54</sup> But it can be understood that this is a ludicrous variant and must be included among the examples of a Renaissance metaphor: the “*perro ventor*” (a hound), that in Huarte de San Juan (1989: 438-39) represents the imagination required of the orator.<sup>55</sup> In England, Bacon (1858: 649; also Hobbes, *Leviathan* 1.3.6) offered a closely related mnemonic image of

<sup>52</sup> This part of the brain was already described and studied in antiquity (*lepte menigx*): Galen (1822: 656-59). See Colombo (1559: 190); Vesalius (1616: 175). There is a remembered passage applying the same concept in Nashe (1966: 2: 184): “Therefore what did me I, but hauing a huge heape of those worthless shreds of small English in my *Pia maters* purse [...]”.

<sup>53</sup> Clearly, the Duke Orsino’s use of “fancy” in those lines refers to imagination and love, but Minear (2011: 129) also relates it to a musical meaning (“a piece of music without words”).

<sup>54</sup> For examples, John of Salisbury (*Policraticus* 7.2); Ruprecht von Mosham (1535: D<sub>iii</sub><sup>r</sup>).

<sup>55</sup> In the English version of Richard Carew (who made his translation from the Italian: *perro ventor / bracco / brach*): “it behouoeth that he haue a very swift imagination, and that the same supplie (as it were) the place of a braach, to hunt and bring the game to his hand” (Huarte de San Juan 1594: 131).

rhetoric *inventio* (as a *venator* or “a hunter/houndman”), and Dryden (1956: 53) used the “nimble spaniel” metaphor to illustrate the restless writer’s imagination.<sup>56</sup>

## 7. Fantasy and Artistic Representation

Perhaps it is not startling to find that fantasy acquires a significant relevance in texts generated by fantasy itself, with a reflexive power that explores its own creative activity. The characters themselves have also apperceptions that make an object of their being and actions, reflected in the mirror of their own imagination. It happens remarkably in the projects of murderers, who obsessively review their hideous prefigurations; thus their present is “derealized”, placing the mind in an intermediate state of phantasmagoria: “Between the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion, all the interim is / Like a phantasma or a hideous dream” (*Caesar* 2.1.63-5). In this condition, the imaginary power prevails, having the ability to discern “the possible”, what can be, the latency of something that has not happened yet, but it will, and that the mind sees in its imminence: “Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings. / My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man that function / Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is / But what is not” (*Macbeth* 1.3.136-41). Fantasy is prefigurative; it projects and ‘prophesies’ when it looks at the foreshadowed events, because it is really a knowledge and a power “that could set the essence into existence, as production of immanence” (Pascucci 2013: 90). In its own way, imagination is also implied in the process of reception of a work of art that should be covered by the beholder. It is noted in the ekphrasis of a painting showing the fall of Troy, whose suggestive image is described in *The Rape of Lucrece*: “For much imaginary work was there; / Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind, / That for Achilles’ image stood his spear / Gripped in an armèd hand; himself behind / Was left unseen save to the eye of mind; / A hand, a foot, a face, a leg, a head, / Stood for the whole to be imaginèd” (1422-28). It is thus a good example of “ingenious painting”, as it is described by Pliny in a eulogy on Timanthes (his *Iphigenia* was a model of wit) whose works “always signify more than what is in the picture” (*Naturalis historia* 35.72-3). The onlooker is actively involved in the process of reception of the image that may also be inwardly meaningful in a sympathetic way.<sup>57</sup> The example is particularly significant in so far as it is comparable to the procedures of poetry and theatre as they not only represent in themselves creations of imagination embodied in words and in scenic performances, but also extend their power in the minds of the viewers. As Theseus—that strict judge of the subject—says in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, on the representation within the representation: “The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them” (5.1.210-11). In

<sup>56</sup> The relationship between Huarte’s and Dryden’s texts was already discovered and studied by Höltgen (1967).

<sup>57</sup> Clearly in this case “Lucrece reads and reconceptualises the image both as a visual aesthetic structure and as something related to her own experience” (Sillars 2015: 88).

some plays, the appeals to the audience ‘to complete’ what is represented in the tables through its own fantasy are remarkable (*Henry V* “Prologue” 1-2, 3.0.1-3, 7, 18, 25, 34-35; *Pericles* Sc. 10.58-60). The vastness of the evoked representation exceeds the boundaries of its stage performance, extending beyond by means of the broad exercises of imagination and its inner sight of absent things; by the influence of powerful words, each fantasy can magnetize—according to a Paracelsian simile for imagination—the distant images drawing them to itself.

## 8. Conclusion

The theatre is a place where words are embodied and the inward becomes the outward, a truly privileged space of the magical power—as still it is conceived in the seventeenth century—of imagination. So perhaps Prospero reflects his own creator’s creative powers, able to materialize “Spirits, which by mine art / I have from their confines called to enact / My present fancies” (*The Tempest* 4.1.120-22);<sup>58</sup> his own mirror is the mirror of imagination, which is a sort of artist—as Kant (1964: 468) will say—and even magician. It can be said that Shakespeare, as “a magician of the imagination”, was a lucid and deep learner and thinker of the secrets of his art. In scattered lines of his works he recorded his knowledge of this subject and a general survey of its main aspects helps to verify the breadth and diversity of information known by the poet. Certainly, the most notorious and significant texts are found in plays from his early maturity (*Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, extending to *The Merchant of Venice*); nonetheless, the theme is present throughout his work, developing its different facets in harmony with the context—erotic, “supernatural”, “psychiatric”, of poetic and theatrical enquiry, etc.—in which it appears. Judicious readers should ask, “What were the means by which Shakespeare acquired all this knowledge?” Perhaps there is no satisfactory answer to this question; but the poet’s subtle and various acquaintance with a wide range of topics contained in ancient and modern sources is thoroughly grounded in his texts. Thus, it is possible to imagine a hard and continuous study that lies in the background, but it is also true that he ‘needed less contact in order to be able to absorb all that he required’ (Eliot 1960: 119). In any case, the poet was aware of many aspects of the medical and philosophical notions of fantasy even in some specialized issues raised in antiquity and discussed in the Renaissance. Certainly he knew the debates held on the bodily location of the imaginary power and the organs that are involved in its functioning. He recognized its importance in shaping amorous passion and also continued and enriched the metaphors applied to love in the European poetic tradition. Besides, he represented some aspects of various doctrines about the power that fantasy exerts on other bodies no less than the effects that its hypertrophied condition induces, giving

<sup>58</sup> Perhaps, taking into account “Ariel’s imbrication with Prospero’s psyche” (Harvey 2016: 374) implicating in *The Tempest* the significant use of the word “cell” (“Prospero’s dwelling place” and the brain locus of inner faculties), it could be suggested that Ariel is a “pre-allegorical” (applying Nuttall’s [1967: 159] term) representation of the *spiritus phantasticus*.

space to the ambiguous vision of supernatural phenomena. Furthermore, he has considered its key role in the inventions of poetry and its “fine frenzy”, capable of extending beyond reason and almost escaping the confines of reality. Finally, Shakespeare was fully aware not only of the poet’s imaginary power that takes part decisively in creating from the “airy nothing” characters and events, but also of the imagination of the spectators necessarily involved in co-creative processes in theatrical reception. All this, although revealing little about the unique capabilities of Shakespeare’s unique mind, may show a significant facet of his intellectual interests and artistic self-consciousness. After all, it is not that surprising that one of the most powerful imaginations in the history of literature had been interested in theoretical learning which for a long time tried to explain some of the secrets of the essential faculty for poetic creation.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Imaginatively, Shakespeare (“fancies childe”) could personify imagination, as he “darts himself forth, and passes into all the forms of human character and passion, the one Proteus of the fire and the flood” (Coleridge 1983: 27). According to Ficino (1576: 1825), “Imagination is like Proteus” (quoted by Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* 1.2.3.2).

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