

FEIGNING HISTORY:

The early modern imagination and the theatre



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This article will examine the conception of imagination in relation to the theatrical mirroring of history in an early modern English context. While imagination was conceived as an essential cognitive capacity, it was at the same time also the most fragile mental faculty – like a mirror of glass in which strange shadows appeared – within a precarious mental hierarchy that was always on the verge of collapsing. Theories of poetics accordingly sought to establish imagination either as being in league with the superior faculties of reason and memory or conversely strived to demonstrate how it undermined them.

In *Advancement of Learning* (1605) philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626) set up a strict division between the disciplines of history, poetry and philosophy stating that: “The parts of human learning have reference to the three parts of Man’s Understanding, which is the seat of learning: History to his Memory, Poesy to his Imagination, and Philosophy to his Reason.”¹ While far from all thinkers set up similarly rigid divisions of disciplines of learning and corresponding cognitive faculties, they did share the – more or less – same cognitive model of separate mental faculties. In particular, the faculty of imagination was considered problematic. Both in its being the cognitive intermediary between sensation and reason and in its being the medium for feigning the historical reality as theatre and poetry.² In this article, I will discuss how the early modern theories of the imagination as a cognitive faculty conceived the transition from empirical, historical fact to theatrical feigning. One concern was the practice of feigning historical reality, another the impact of the theatrical, feigned representation on the minds of the spectators.

Feigning history

In the efforts to counter the numerous attacks on the theatre and dramatic poetry that surfaced during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the theatre’s potential for working as an instructive medium for portraying English history

¹ Bacon 1962a, 329.

² ‘Feigning’, like ‘fiction’, derives from Latin *figĕre*, i.e. to form or mould. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry elucidates, the notion of feigning not only involves a material sense, i.e. “to fashion, form, shape” but “to fashion fictitiously or deceptively.”

and historical, heroic figures were highlighted as virtues of the stage. For example, in *An Apology for Actors* (1612), actor and playwright Thomas Heywood (c. 1570–1641) argued that:

plays have made the ignorant more apprehensive, taught the unlearned the knowledge of many famous histories, instructed such as cannot read in the discovery of all our English chronicles: and what man have you now of that weak capacity that cannot discourse of any notable thing recorded even from William the Conqueror, nay from the landing of Brute, until this day, being possessed of their true use? For, because plays are writ with this aim and carried with this method, to teach the subjects' obedience to their king; to show the people the untimely ends of such as have moved tumults, commotions, and insurrections; and to present them with flourishing estate of such as live in obedience, exhorting them to allegiance, dehorting them from all traitorous and felonious stratagems.³

However, historical dramas notoriously played quite freely with the past and drew liberally from their sources. It makes little sense to speak of historical accuracy since the scale of correctness ranged from a relatively close adherence to the source to the downright invented. Shakespeare, in *Henry V* (c. 1599), for example, omitted several key aspects from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577/1587), especially those involving the French side of the Battle of Agincourt, to produce an essentially English narrative that spoke to his own time. And a historical tragedy such as *Macbeth* (c. 1606) is a hybrid of two unrelated historical events which together form a narrative that was devised as to indicate the newly appointed King James I's heritage as well as the current political events in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot of 1604.⁴ Fictionalising history thus involved a fusing of past as well as current events. This was, perhaps, a necessary move, since state censorship prohibited representations of, for instance, portrayals of living monarchs, catholic propaganda, and politically subversive plays – but not of political drama as such.⁵

Similarly, the only surviving sketch of a contemporary Shakespearean performance, the so-called Longleat manuscript or Peacham drawing (c. 1595), presumably depicting the first act of *Titus Andronicus* (see Figure 1),⁶

³ Heywood 2004, 241. Heywood himself was the author of a two-part history play chronicling the life of the recently deceased Elizabeth I *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody; or The Troubles of Queen Elizabeth* (1605).

⁴ For an analysis of imagination in *Macbeth*, see Kallenbach 2012.

⁵ For a study of the censorship of early modern theatre and drama see Dutton 1991.

⁶ The details and interpretations of the drawing are complicated, though. See e.g. Levin 2002.

demonstrates that theatrical performance involved a fusing of historical eras. The drawing shows the Gothic Queen Tamora, who was played by a young male actor, in a lavish Renaissance dress with Elizabethan embroidery pleading for the lives of her sons who are wearing costumes in classical style. Facing her is a laurel-crowned man, probably Titus Andronicus, in Roman attire and cuirass, while behind him, two soldiers in two different styles of armour can be observed – one in Elizabethan armour with a bonnet in Spanish style and a scimitar, the other in a German or Gothic 15th century uniform and helmet. Aaron, the dark-skinned moor, is wearing a Roman shirt with sleeves in Elizabethan fashion. The drawing accordingly displays a veritable patchwork of anachronistic and historically imprecise styles that clearly illustrates that the early modern theatre made no pretence of veracity, but rather functioned as an emblematic collage. The Peacham drawing in itself may also, as e.g. Richard Levin has pointed out, be “a ‘composite representation’ of two or more moments in the play” since it does not correspond fully to any one particular scene from *Titus Andronicus*, including the excerpt from the first act of the play which accompanies the drawing.⁷

Theatrical representation of history thus involved a fusing of a variety of sources and performative means. Imagination and its capacity for feigning lies at the heart of this.

Imagination and early modern faculty psychology

The early modern conception of the mind divided the cognitive faculties into three to five inner wits, each of which had its designated function.⁸ This division of the mind usually made a distinction between imaginative, rational and recollective faculties, which were located in three ventricles (i.e. hollow cavities) of the brain. Bacon, as described above, counted three mental faculties – imagination, memory, and reason – while Robert Burton (1577–1640) in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) made a distinction between three ‘inner senses’ – common sense, phantasy, and memory.⁹ Robert Fludd (1574–1637), in contrast, followed the model of Gregor Reisch’s influential *Margarita Philosophica* (1503, Figure 2) and set up five faculties as seen in Figure 3.¹⁰

The cognitive process was commonly envisaged as follows: In the anterior ventricle, imagination copied, mirrored, or transformed sensory impressions received from the five ‘outer’ senses into mental images. The imagination was either, often inconsequently, labelled or subdivided into *sensus*

⁷ Levin 2002, 329.

⁸ For an extended analysis of the early modern imagination in both the cognitive, theatrical and dramaturgic context, see Kallenbach 2018, chapters 3–4.

⁹ Burton 1977, 159.

¹⁰ Fludd 1617, 171.

communis (common sense, which collected and ordered perceptions), *imaginatio* (imagination, which copied perceptions as *phantasmata*, i.e. mental images) and *phantasia* (phantasy of fancy, which could manipulate these mental images by dividing and combining them anew). The mental images were then passed on to the rational faculties, or sensible reason, located in the middle ventricle, and often subdivided into *cogitativa* and *aestimativa* (cognition and estimation). Whereas the ventricle that lodged imagination was connected to the physical senses, the rational faculty was connected to the divine, intellectual world as Fludd's visualisation shows. Finally, the faculty of memory was located in the posterior ventricle, where mental images were stored or imprinted and from where they could later be retrieved.

This cognitive model was, however, an extremely precarious one, not the least due to the central role that imagination played in mediating between sensation and the intellect. Following Aristotle's assertions set forth in *De Anima* (*On the Soul*, c. 350 bc) that "[i]magination cannot occur without perception, nor supposition without imagination"¹¹ and that "the soul's never thinking without a mental picture,"¹² imagination was essential for rational thought, while no mental images could be created without sensory input. But, Aristotle had also warned, "[w]hile perceivings are always veridical, imaginings are for the most part false."¹³ This precarious cognitive model was, for example, described by Fulke Greville (1554–1628) in *A Treatie of Humane Learning* (not published until 1633). Greville added to Aristotle's suspicion of imagination, however, a distrust in sensation. Firstly, he describes how sensation, while it is "Mans first instructor" that ought to "free him from deceit," in fact "deceiues him most."¹⁴ Then, he continues, "must th'Imagination from the sense|Be misinformed, while our affections cast|False shapes, and forms on their intelligence."¹⁵ Moreover, imagination is so "shadowed with selfe-application|[a]s makes her pictures still too foule, or faire;|[n]ot like the life in lineament in the ayre."¹⁶ In consequence, Greville concludes, "[e]ven through those instruments wherby she [comprehension] works,|Debility, misprision, imperfection lurkes."¹⁷ Lastly, memory, the "Register of Sense|And mould of Arts [...] Corrupted with disguis'd intelligence|Can yeeld no Images for mans [sic] instruction"¹⁸ and the

¹¹ Aristotle 1986, 427b.

¹² Aristotle 1986, III.7, 413a.

¹³ Aristotle 1986, 428a.

¹⁴ Greville 1939, Stanza 5, 155.

¹⁵ Greville 1939, Stanza 10, 156. For an account of the problems of visual sensation, see Clark 2007.

¹⁶ Greville 1939, Stanza 10, 156.

¹⁷ Greville 1939, Stanza 18, 158.

¹⁸ Greville 1939, Stanza 14, 157.

understanding has “such a staine [From our corruption.”¹⁹ The entire line of cognition is thus characterised by an inherent uncertainty. While sensation was considered deceptive, imagination was conceived as inherently unruly, extremely powerful, and potentially dangerous. The unruliness of imagination involved its capacity for feigning. And it necessitated that reason acted as a guardian of the sound mind.

While imagination was not conceived as an originally creative, or inventive, capacity, but rather as a reproducing faculty,²⁰ it could, however, feign or re-create the images received by sensation or stored in memory. The subdivision of imagination, inherited from Medieval philosophy, into common sense, imagination and phantasy, was largely dissolved during the 16th century, making imagination the crucial and, as Stuart Clark points out, “single mediator between the incorporeal soul and the corporeal human body.”²¹ In consequence, rather than it being a capacity for copying sensory impressions, imagination became a capacity for transforming, or corrupting, sensations. This became all the more critical seeing that imagination was believed to be vulnerable to a variety of both internal and external influences – ranging from disease to devilry – that would, in turn, obstruct the rational faculty. For example, Thomas Wright described in *The Passions of the Mind in General* (1601), how the passions of the body might disrupt the mind by triggering “the imagination [to put] greene spectacles before the eyes of our witte, to make it see nothing but greene.”²² The autonomous actions of the imagination were, accordingly, to be suppressed, or regulated, by reason. This was stressed by e.g. Burton, who emphasised, that “this phantasie of ours be a subordinate faculty to reason, and should be ruled by it.”²³ The exertion of the authority of reason over imagination was a warrant for the upholding of order, not only of the mind but also of the state by subduing the political imagination. As Bacon warned:

Neither is the Imagination simply and only a messenger; but is invested with or at leastwise usurpeth no small authority in itself, besides the duty of the message. For it was well said by *Aristotle: That the mind hath over the body that commandment which the lord hath over a bond-man; but, that reason hath over the imagination that commandment,*

¹⁹ Greville 1939, Stanza 15, 157.

²⁰ “Elizabethan doctrine pictured imagination as almost literally cutting up its images into parts and then rejoining them into forms that never exist in the external world of nature.” Rossky 1958, 58.

²¹ Clark 2007, 43.

²² Wright 1604, 51.

²³ Burton 1800, 133f.

*which a magistrate hath over a free citizen; who may come also to rule in his turne.*²⁴

The misgivings about the capacity of imagination to corrupt the mind, to misrepresent reality, and to disrupt political stability were mirrored the aesthetic debate. The danger being that stirring the imagination would not only infect, affect and destabilise the mind of the spectator but also public order.²⁵

Mirrors and shadows

The metaphor of the mirror, or glass, was regularly used to describe both the faculty of imagination (or the mind) and theatrical representation.²⁶ The reflections of the mirror of imagination were described as likenesses or shadows – again a metaphor often applied to stage actors. For example, Fludd described how imagination “beholds not the true pictures of corporeal or sensory things, but their likenesses and as it were, their shadows,”²⁷ while Shakespeare let the character Robin describe actors as shadows in the epilogue to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: “If we shadows have offended,|Think but this, and all is mended.”²⁸

George Puttenham (1529–1590), in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), makes the comparison that “fantasy may be resembled to a glass,” followed by the caution that “some be false glasses and show things otherwise than they be indeed, and others right as they be indeed, neither fairer nor fouler, nor greater nor smaller.”²⁹ Greville, in similar terms, describes the faculty of imagination as “[a] glasse, wherein the obiect of our Sense|Ought to reflect true height, or declination.”³⁰ And Fludd (see Figure 3) conceived the world of imagination, the *Mundus imaginabilis*, as a shadow world with the *Umbra terrae* (a shadow of earth) mirroring the sensible world, *Mundus sensibilis*.

While ideally, imagination would mirror the factual reality truthfully, this was, as seen above, not always the case. Accordingly, Puttenham advised that:

There be again of these glasses that show things exceeding fair and comely, others that show figures very monstrous and ill-favored. Even so is the fantastical part of man (if it be not disordered) a representer of

²⁴ Bacon 1962a, 382. In consequence, imagining treason was punishable by law since 1571 when a law had been passed “which defined a traitor as one who would ‘compass, imagine, invent, devise or intend’ harm to the Queen.” Butler 2008, 2, see also Lemon 2006.

²⁵ See Butler 2008.

²⁶ The conception of imagination as a mirror derives from Plato’s view of the sensible world as a copying of the eternal forms or ideas.

²⁷ Cited in Warner 2006, 127.

²⁸ Shakespeare 2008, 5.1:414–15.

²⁹ Puttenham 2007, 110.

³⁰ Greville 1939, Stanza 10, 156.

the best, most comely, and beautiful images or appearances of things to the soul and according to their very truth. If otherwise, then doth it breed chimeras and monsters in man's imaginations, and not only in his imaginations, but also in all his ordinary actions and life which ensues.³¹

And in *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon warned that: "the mind of man is far from the nature of a clear and equal glass, wherein the beams of things should reflect according to their true incidence; nay, it is rather like an enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture, if it be not delivered and reduced."³² A warning that was repeated in *The New Organon* (1620) where Bacon states that "the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it."³³ The mirror of imagination was thus more likely to be a distorting, and potentially dangerous, mirror.

The theatre too was likened to a mirror, most famously, perhaps, in Hamlet's statement that "the purpose of playing" is to hold "the mirror up to nature."³⁴ To anti-theatrical critics such as Stephen Gosson (1554–1624), whose *School of Abuse* and *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (written in 1579 and 1582 respectively) were among the most influential treatises in the late 16th century, theatrical imitation posed a real danger, because, Gosson (who was a former actor and playwright) argued, "the expressing of vice by imitation brings us by the shadow, to the substance of the same."³⁵

Even the most celebrated defence of poetry, poet and courtier Philip Sidney's (1554–1586) *Apology for Poetry* (1595), conceived the poetic representation as a distorted or, perhaps more precisely, modified image, albeit in a much more affirmative sense. Poetry, he famously argues, feigns the world "better than Nature bringeth forth," and more beautifully, more truthfully, or of a higher truth, than the empirical world renders it; "Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden."³⁶ What is more, since the poet does not make any pretences of presenting truth, but offers a feigned representation of a higher truth, Sidney claims that "of all the writers under the sun the poet is the least liar, and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar."³⁷ Hence, Sidney contends that, in contrast to the historian,

for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false; so as the other artists,

³¹ Puttenham 2007, 110.

³² Bacon 1962a, 394–95.

³³ Bacon 1962b, 54.

³⁴ Shakespeare 1982, III.2, 22.

³⁵ Gosson 2004a, 108.

³⁶ Sidney 1977, 100.

³⁷ Sidney 1977, 123.

and especially the historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet (as I said before) never affirmeth. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in truth, not labouring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be. And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not.³⁸

The poet thus makes no claims for an empirical truth, and – transferring this argument to the stage – neither should the spectator believe or seek any empirically truthful representation. Rather, Sidney argues for an ideal truthfulness. As such, the ideal, feigned representation of *Macbeth* evolving from the two unrelated accounts of Scottish history, would be more truthful than the actual accounts of the historical events.

Greville's *A Treatie of Humane Learning* is an example of the deeply ambiguous problem that imagining and mirroring posed. Firstly, in stanza 34, he states that the humane arts are but "[s]eas of errors" and wherein one "[o]f truth finde onely shadowes, and no ground."³⁹ Later on, he first seemingly dismisses the purposefulness of both music and poetry which are characterised in stanza 111 as "Arts of Recreation" – which is "idle mens profession" concerned merely with "contentation."⁴⁰ How, Greville rhetorically asks in conclusion to stanza 112, "*if the matter be in Nature vile,| [...] can it be made pretious by a stile?*"⁴¹ While Greville here seems to deem the arts futile with no powers to "enrich the Wit,"⁴² the following stanzas seem to turn the argument around with the statement that "in this Life, both these play noble parts."⁴³ And in stanza 114, Greville grants that poetry, albeit only a shadow of truth, may transform into an instructive medium via the "glasse" of poetic representation:

And like a Maker, her creations raise,
On lines of truth, it beautifies the same;
And while it seemeth onely but to please,
Teacheth vs order vnder pleasures name;
Which in a glasse, shows Nature how to fashion
Her selfe againe, by ballancing of passion.⁴⁴

³⁸ Sidney 1977, 123–24.

³⁹ Greville 1939, Stanza 34, 162.

⁴⁰ Greville 1939, Stanza 111, 181.

⁴¹ Greville 1939, Stanza 112, 182.

⁴² Greville 1939, Stanza 111, 81.

⁴³ Greville 1939, Stanza 113, 182.

⁴⁴ Greville 1939, Stanza 114, 182.

As Maria Philmus (among others) has observed in her study of Greville, “the justification of the two arts [music and poetry] on moral grounds that always formed a primary modality of theoretical treatments of them in the period.”⁴⁵ This justification relied on the faculties of reason and memory to discipline imagination.

History, philosophy, and poetry

Puttenham turned to memory, claiming that: “There is nothing in man of all the potential parts of his mind (reason and will except) more noble or more necessary to the active life than memory” since memory aids “sound judgment.”⁴⁶ The events of the past he regards as instructive as examples for future actions.⁴⁷ Therefore, Puttenham argues, “the poesy historical is of all other – next the divine – most honorable and worthy.”⁴⁸ Because the poet may “fashion” the historical material “at his pleasure” Puttenham reasons that “more excellent examples may be feigned in one day by a good wit, than many ages through man’s frailty are able to put in ure.”⁴⁹ Puttenham further makes a distinction between three sorts of histories:

wholly true and wholly false and a third holding part of either, but for honest recreation and good example they were all of them⁵⁰

Puttenham thus allows for a great deal of artistic, creative license (judging from the Peacham drawing the theatre seems to have employed the third variation), and in the conclusion of *The Art of English Poesy*, he praises the poet’s “sharp and quick invention, helped by a clear and bright fantasy or imagination.”⁵¹

Sidney, conversely, would claim that it was in the philosophical character of poetry, that made it purposeful, beneficial and appealing to reason. The philosopher’s knowledge, Sidney states, “standeth so upon the abstract and general,” whereas “the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine.”⁵² The poet in contrast, Sidney argues, is superior to the philosopher, in that he “coupleth the general notion with the

⁴⁵ Philmus 1999, 153. See also Rossky 1958.

⁴⁶ Puttenham 2007, 128.

⁴⁷ Puttenham 2007, Chapter 19.

⁴⁸ Puttenham 2007, 129.

⁴⁹ Puttenham 2007, 129.

⁵⁰ Puttenham 2007, 130. Puttenham mentions, amongst others, Homer and Xenophon as writers who employed the latter form.

⁵¹ Puttenham 2007, 386

⁵² Sidney 1977, 107.

particular example.”⁵³ And, he continues, “where the historian, bound to tell things as things were, cannot be liberal (without he will be poetical) of a perfect pattern [...] a feigned example hath as much force to teach as a true example”⁵⁴ Sidney here draws on Aristotle, who had argued that the poet needn’t adhere strictly to the actual truth. For example, he states in the *Poetics* (c. 335 bc) that the poet might represent not only “the kind of things which were or are the case;” but also “the kind of things that people say and think; the kind of things that ought to be the case.”⁵⁵ Hence, in contrast to the historian, who “relates actual events” the poet represents “the kinds of things that might occur.”⁵⁶ The poet, according to Aristotle, thus goes beyond the actual reality in order to represent, as Stephen Halliwell has put it,

an imagined world [...] in which the underlying designs of causality, so often obscured in the world as we encounter it, will be manifest.⁵⁷

Sidney further notes that “The lawyer sayeth what men have determined. The historian, what men have done,” but, he proceeds:

if this imagining of matters be so fit for the imagination, then must the historian needs surpass, who bringeth you images of true matters, such as indeed were done, and not such as fantastically or falsely may be suggested to have been done.⁵⁸

Arguing for the superiority of poetry over history, and for its being the more philosophical art of the two, Sidney (referring again to Aristotle) states that:

Truly, Aristotle himself in his discourse of poesy, plainly determineth this question, saying, that poetry is *philosophoteron* and *spoudateron*, that is to say, it is more philosophical and more studiously serious than history. His reason is, because poesy dealeth with *katholou*, that is to say, with the universal consideration, and the history with *kathekaston*, the particular: ‘now’, saith he, ‘the universal weighs what is fit to be said or done, either in likelihood or necessity (which the poesy considereth in his imposed names), and the particular only marks whether Alchiabiades did or suffered this or that.’⁵⁹

However, Sidney is also cautious that poets may abuse the feigning means of poetry: “For I will not deny but that man’s wit may make Poesy, which should be *eikastike*, which some learned have defined, ‘figuring forth good things’,

⁵³ Sidney 1977, 107.

⁵⁴ Sidney 1977, 110.

⁵⁵ Aristotle 1995, 1460b.

⁵⁶ Aristotle 1995, 1451a.

⁵⁷ Halliwell 1986, 135.

⁵⁸ Sidney 1977, 109.

⁵⁹ Sidney 1977, 109.

to be *phantastike*, which doth contrariwise infect the fancy with unworthy objects.”⁶⁰ If abused, Sidney warns,

though I yield that Poesy may not only be abused, but that being abused, by the reason of his sweet charming force, it can do more hurt than any army of words.⁶¹

Sidney refers here to Plato’s distinction between forms of imitation, *eikasia* and *phantasia* concerning likenesses and appearances respectively. Whereas *eikasia* signifies a ‘passive’ mirroring, Plato’s *phantasia* refers to that which “appears, but is not like, an appearance.”⁶² Consequently, Plato identifies “two forms of the image-making art,” namely “the likeness-making and the fantastic.”⁶³ In Sidney’s argument, the poetry which is *eikastike* is thus the didactic, instructive feigning subservient to reason, whereas the *phantastike* poetry is the unruly, harmful feigning. Puttenham had likewise made a distinction between the disorderly and orderly imagination, where on the one hand “the evil and vicious disposition of the brain hinders the sound judgment and discourse of man with busy and disordered fantasies,” while, on the other hand, the imagination which is “well affected, [...] very formal, and [...] well proportioned” lets, “as by a glass or mirror, [be] represented unto the soul all manner of beautiful visions, whereby the inventive part of the mind is so much helped, as without it no man could devise any new or rare thing.”⁶⁴ So while the feigned, poetic representation was in this line of argument precisely *not* an accurate representation but one that – in its idealised and didactic orderliness like a mirror that beautifies – was structured by and appealed to reason.

Turning to Bacon, he too, describes poetry as an imitation of history that “represents actions as if they were present, whereas History represents them as past”⁶⁵ and accordingly defines historical drama as “Feigned History.”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Sidney 1977, 125.

⁶¹ Sidney 1977, 125.

⁶² Plato 1987, 236b.

⁶³ Plato 1987, 236c.

⁶⁴ Puttenham 2007, 109.

⁶⁵ Bacon 1962c, 315.

⁶⁶ Bacon 1962a, 343, see also 1963, 503. Bacon further states that: “The division of poesy which is aptest in the propriety thereof, (besides those divisions which are common unto it with history, as feigned chronicles, feigned lives; and the appendices of history, as feigned epistles, feigned orations, and the rest;) is into Poesy Narrative, Representative, and Allusive. The Narrative is a mere imitation of history, with the excesses before remembered; choosing for subject commonly wars and love, rarely state, and sometimes pleasure or mirth. Representative is as a visible history, and is an image of actions as if they were present, as history is of actions in nature as they are, (that is) past. Allusive or Parabolical is a narration applied only to express some special purpose or conceit” Bacon 1962a, 344.

Like Sidney, Bacon characterises poetry by its limitless possibilities for feigning, stating that: “In philosophy the mind is bound to things; in poesy it is released from that bond, and wanders forth, and feigns what it pleases.”⁶⁷ Bacon, however, in contrast to Sidney, was deeply suspicious of imagination and poetic representation. “The use of this Feigned History” Bacon says, “hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it.”⁶⁸ Bacon concedes that, as feigned history, poetry is able to represent the historical events better and more justly than the reality, which is “ordinary” and imperfect, and thereby to satisfy “the mind of man” more completely:

because the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroical; because true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence; because true history representeth actions and events more ordinary and less interchanged, therefore poesy endueth them with more rareness, and more unexpected and alternative variations. [...] And therefore it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shews of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things.⁶⁹

Hence, he acknowledges that poetry has “had access and estimation in rude times and barbarous regions, where other learning stood excluded.”⁷⁰ But whereas Sidney strived to align reason and imagination, Bacon conversely aligns reason and history. As Jonathan Dollimore notes, “Bacon retains the Aristotelian categories of poetry and history, but effectively *reverses* their priority.”⁷¹ To Bacon, as was seen above, imagination was at all times to be under the control of, rather than in line with, reason.

Imagination, feigning and the hazards of theatrical spectatorship

That the performances of drama on stage might prompt imagination to disrupt the control of reason over the mind of the was a frequent point of attack in the numerous antitheatrical treatises of the late 16th and early 17th century.⁷² The misgivings of theatrical feigning were abundant: The theatre distorted reality

⁶⁷ Bacon 1963, 503.

⁶⁸ Bacon 1962a, 343.

⁶⁹ Bacon 1962a, 343.

⁷⁰ Bacon 1962a, 344.

⁷¹ Dollimore 1984, 76.

⁷² See Barish 1981.

by staging fictitious events, the actors promoted falseness by impersonating fictive and historical characters – masking their true faces behind toxic make-up.⁷³ Male actors distorted their gender by posing as female characters. Like the infection of the mind could spread and disrupt society at large, the “players of interludes” were likened to a harmful “pestilence” that could, John Northbrooke declared in his 1577 *A Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with Other Idle Pastimes*, not only infect the mind of the spectator, but indeed also “infect a commonwealth.”⁷⁴ Theatregoing, then, rendered the mind of the spectator extremely vulnerable.

One argument against the theatre was that the mind of the spectator might be infected by witnessing the feigned performance and its profanities. In the theatre, as for example Thomas Beard, a puritan theologian, argued that:

The ears of young folk are there polluted with many filthy and dishonest speeches; their eyes are there infected with many lascivious and unchaste gestures and countenances; and their wits are there stained.⁷⁵

Gosson too argued that imitation and impersonation could cause damage to the mind and that “poets in the theaters [could] wound the conscience” of the spectator via the imagination. The theatre, because it entered the body and mind “by the privy entries of the ear” would “slip down into the heart, and with gunshot of affection gall the mind, where reason and virtue should rule the roost” and thus disrupt the mental (and subsequently also the official) hierarchy.⁷⁶ In the theatre, the space of blatantly feigned representation, the mirror of imagination turned into “*A Mirrour of Monsters*” as the title of one treatise read.⁷⁷

Counter to such claims, the defences of poetry argued that poets, via their controlled, delightful and didactic feigning, persuaded the spectator to goodness and thus achieved, as Sidney puts it, “the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue.”⁷⁸ Sidney’s mirror would be a mirror of perfection, the feigned, poetic image offering a higher perfection, superior to the earthly reality.⁷⁹

⁷³ Karim-Cooper 2006.

⁷⁴ Northbrooke 2004, 10.

⁷⁵ Beard 2004, 167.

⁷⁶ Gosson 2004b, 25.

⁷⁷ Rankins 1587.

⁷⁸ Sidney 1977, 113.

⁷⁹ See e.g. Sidney 1977, 104: “[t]his purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we call learning [...] the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of.”

Regardless of whether poetic feigning was considered capable of conveying a truthful, instructive image or a deceitful, corrupting representation, the imagination as an essential, potent, but fragile, unstable and deceptive capacity was at the core. The cognitive model of the mind – and the conception of imagination as a brittle and distorting mirror in which shadowy images were reflected – accordingly played an important role in shaping the debate of poetic, theatrical representation and the feigning of reality, including the representation of historical events and characters. A debate that sought to establish the imagination and its poetic feigning either as being in league with the superior faculties of reason and memory or conversely strived to demonstrate how it undermined them. The theatre as a mirror for reflecting history could thus be either an idealising mirror that feigned history in a more truthful mode than the actual events could convey – or a monstrous mirror, that perverted reality by showing false fabrications that presumed to convey historical verity. Even to the proponents of the poetic imagination such as Sidney, it was clear that imagination had to be kept in check. The precarious mental hierarchy was always on the verge of collapsing.

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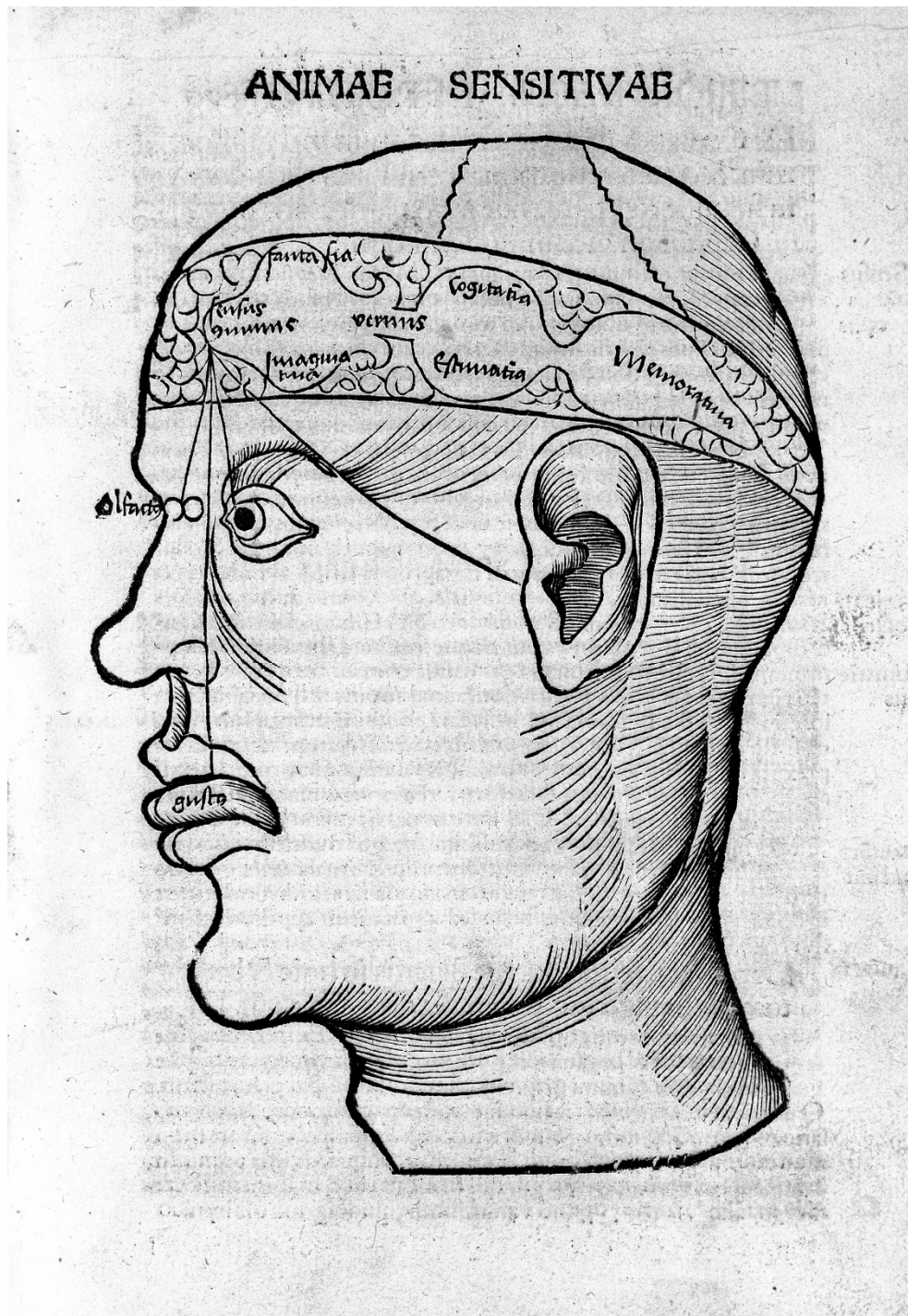


Fig. 2

The faculties of the mind, located in the three ventricles, Gregor Reisch, *Margarita Philosophica* (1503), Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.

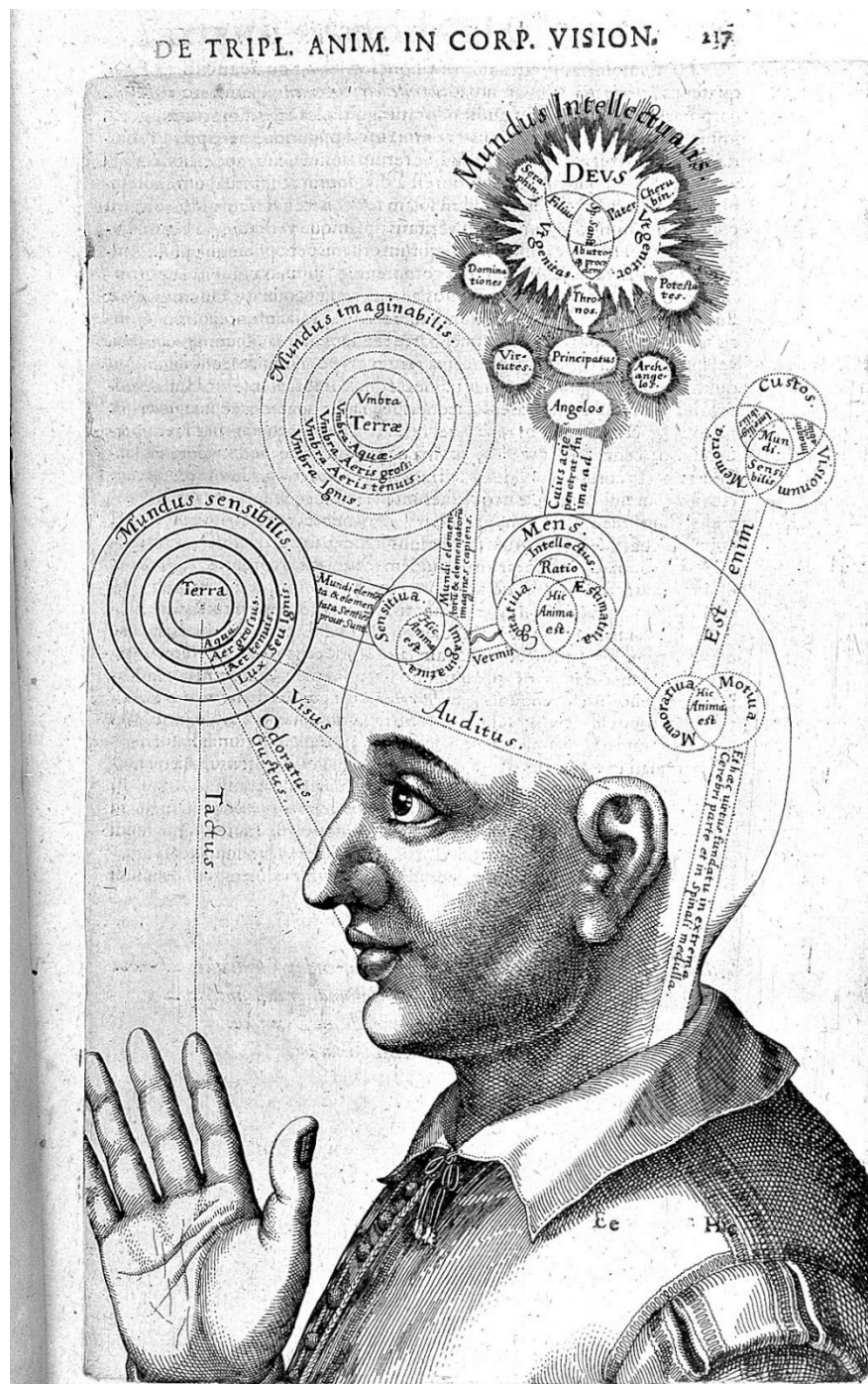


Fig. 3

Robert Fludd's visualisation of the mental faculties and the Mundus imaginabilis, the shadow world of the imagination in *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris Scilicet Et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica Atque Technica Historia* (1617), Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.

