

**Gabriela Dragnea Horvath**

**The Brightest Heaven of Invention: Renaissance Platonism, Word and Creativity in  
Shakespeare**

**Imitation**

As known, for Aristotle the art of theatre, implying both the poetic text and the performance of tragedies and comedies, represents a mode of imitation (*mimesis*) (1447a). Pertinent to his own ethical and aesthetic assets, the philosopher ranks tragedy higher than comedy.<sup>1</sup> In Shakespeare's time the theatrical genres were more numerous and their distinction was not hierarchical. In *Hamlet*, Polonius enumerates, “tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>tragic-historical, tragic-comical-historical-pastoral” (II. II. 424-5). The imitation was not only of life, but also of literary models of the past, mostly Seneca and Plautus. Shakespeare draws continuously on models, yet his aspiration is to be inventive, not to imitate, in an obvious commitment to mould a microcosm with a complete aesthetic autonomy, which does not have to be, for example, “a base imitation” of “fashions in proud Italy”<sup>2</sup>. His desire to distinguish his art from that of his predecessors does not annul the complexity of the discourse on imitation and invention in his work, which can be addressed in the art of staging and in the art of poetic creation.

The performing art is understood explicitly as a form of *mimesis*. To interpret a text on a stage is to give it life in the spirit of verisimilitude, so the actors, as Hamlet instructs them, have to “suit the action to the word, the word to action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature” (III.II. 17-19). The end of the art of theatre “both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (III.2. 21-24). This means that for Shakespeare the imitation of

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<sup>1</sup> Tragedy is “the mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions”(1450 a); while comedy is an imitation 'of men worse than the average', based on the ridiculous, that “may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others...” (1449a ). In Aristotle *The Poetics*, Edited and Translated by Stephen Halliwell in *Aristotle Poetics, Longinus On the Sublime, Demetrius on Style*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1995, pp.48-49

<sup>2</sup> Edmund of Langley, Duke of York, in *Richard II* (II.I.22-3).

nature substantiated on stage aims at presenting the spectator with a reified image of his virtues and vices and of the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of his time. This induced process of self-awareness, of objectifying one's innermost drives and secret acts was expected to culminate, as in Aristotle, in a cathartic self-disclosure. So, Hamlet:

I have heard  
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,  
Have by the very cunning of the scene  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;

(Hamlet, II. II. 528-534).

In the *Poetics* Aristotle grounds imitation in the human nature. In Book 4 he states: "It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature. **Imitation is natural to man** from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it **is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation.**" A delight originated by man's inner necessity to know, to learn, to gather the meanings of things, which is not specific only to the philosopher, 'but also to the rest of mankind'.<sup>3</sup> For Aristotle, imitation regards thus both the process of creation<sup>4</sup> and the process of reception of the play.

### Nature

An inquiry into Shakespeare's conception of imitation setting out from Aristotle, brings forth two questions: what does Shakespeare understand by 'nature' and in what way is the poetic creation the result of nature imitation. The various contextual meanings of nature in the plays lead to one basic concept which corresponds to natural theology. Even when he refers to Nature as *goddess*, the great mother, dispenser of bounty, evocative of classical culture, as in *Cymbeline* (Belarius, IV.2)

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, In *The Complete Works of Aristotle, The Revised Oxford Translation*, Edited by Jonathan Barnes, Bollingen Series LXXI, 2, Princeton University Press, 1995., pp. 2316-2340.

<sup>4</sup> as 'the poet should even act his story with the very gestures of his personages. Given the natural qualifications, he who feels the emotions to be described will be the most convincing" (1445 a) Ibid., p.2329.

Shakespeare understands nature as God's creation in its postlapsarian status, the Nature that “hath meal and bran, contempt and grace” (Cymbeline, IV. 2). Man, as part of this nature deprived of its original integrity, stays in the tension between good and evil. This does not exclude Nature's being the perpetual explication of God's creative forces<sup>5</sup> and the medium through which he manifests his grace as Celia points out in *As You Like It*:

Therefore heaven Nature charge'd  
That one body should be fill'd  
With all graces wide enlarg'd  
(III.II.138-140)

Nature's capacity to regenerate itself is accounted for in the natural theology of Platonic extraction as the reiterated instantiation of God's seminal reasons. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are perfectly aware of this. The latter suggests Banquo's and his son's murder, by claiming “But in them Nature's copy's not eterne.”(III.II), while the king delivers himself to the weird sisters, in the fourth act, in spite of their devastating actions: “Though you untie the winds and let them fight/Against the churches”...”though **the treasure/ Of nature's germens tumble all together,** /Even till destruction sicken, answer me/To what I ask you (IV. I. 74...80-2). The Scottish medieval King knows that Nature's capacity of regeneration is based on the treasure of germens or archetypes of creation and that the demons' attempt to ruin God's work consists precisely in destroying them. The same play makes it clear that this damage is not possible without man's willful siding with the demons<sup>6</sup>, which brings together, as in natural theology, Lucifer's fall and Adam's fall.<sup>7</sup>

Already Macdonwald's betrayal of his lord and king was perceived as a reiteration of Lucifer's cosmic rebellion in the Scottish kingdom, which made the Sergeant saw him as “Worthy to be a rebel, for to that/<sup>[SEP]</sup>*The multiplying villanies of nature*/<sup>[SEP]</sup>Do swarm upon him” (I. II.10-12). Yet,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.123: “Schöpfung ist ein Prozess, der in der Welt-Zeit nicht aufhört”.

<sup>6</sup> W.Schmidt-Biggemann, op.cit., p.125: “Dämonen stören die Entwicklung der Seminalgründe der Schöpfung”

<sup>7</sup> This corresponds to the ideas of natural theology, in which “der Engelsturz, in dem die Heiligen Boten Gottes sich in Dämonen und Teufel wandelten, ist ganz parallel zum adamitischen Sündenfall imaginiert. Seine Folgen bestehen in der Doppeldeutigkeit der Natur, die auch gegen ihren ursprünglichen Sinn gebraucht werden kann; und dazu haben die Dämonen die Macht.W.Schmidt-Biggemann, *Welche Natur wird nachgeahmt? Beobachtungen zur Erscheinung der Natur in der barocken Literatur* op.cit., p.124.

while demons are doomed and thus limited in their action, man has free will, so the evil Macbeth causes is worse than the devils'. This explains why for Macduff “Not in the legions/ Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd/ In evils to top Macbeth” (IV.3).

Macbeth and his wife experience co-participating in *nature's mischief* as self-destructive: one cannot ruin nature without ruining the nature in oneself. Deprived of sleep, as he had deprived Duncan of his life in sleep, Macbeth finds out that he had disrupted “great nature's second course”, “innocent sleep”, “the death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,/Balm of hurt minds,...Chief nourisher in life's feast (II.II.38-43)”, interrupting the sequence of consuming days and restoring nights, wonderfully planned since the creation of the world.

### Nature, Art and Platonism

Renaissance culture introduced the argument of man's art as competitor to nature. Whereas 'Nature shows art', as Lysander declares, when he discovers Helena's beauty (MSND, II.II), Shakespeare doubts man's capacity to change things in nature by his own knowledge and ability. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, the skill and knowledge of Gerard de Narbon, Helena's father, could not make 'nature immortal'<sup>8</sup>, as “labouring art can never ransom nature/From her inaidible estate” (II.I. 119-120). In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita mentions an art which can improve flowers 'in their piedness', an art that shares “with great creating nature” (IV. IV), but according to Polixenes:

Yet nature is made better by no mean  
But nature makes that mean: so, over that art  
Which you say adds to nature, is an art  
That nature makes.

(IV. III. 89-92)

Human art is limited to the clever use of natural principles. And even Prospero's art, which troubles the minds of the shipwrecked and makes Alonso acknowledge “there is in this business more than nature” (V.I), is just a cunning mastery of psychological control, rejected by its performer in the end

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<sup>8</sup> *All's Well That Ends Well*, I. I.

as 'rough magic'.

Platonic theology is also manifest in Shakespeare's opinion on poetic creation. In *MSND*, Theseus says that “The lunatic, the lover and the poet,/Are of imagination all compact” (V.I.7-8) and describes the poet's process of creation as follows:

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.

(V. I. 7-17).

The immediate association is “the Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry” in Plato's *Phaedrus* (245a) and the Platonic theology of the Renaissance, particularly Ficino's references to art and creativity.<sup>9</sup>

The poet's role is thus one of translating *forms* into *shapes*. This process implies a perception of the *divine forms*, *archetypes* or *seminal reasons*, an insight into God's plan of creation, a hypostasis of his wisdom<sup>10</sup>, which encompasses whatever has come and is to come into being. Shakespeare is consistent in considering God's *archetypal forms* as an inspiration for the poet. For example in the Prologue to *Henry V*, the Chorus invokes “a Muse of fire, that would ascend/The brightest heaven of invention,<sup>[[SEP]]</sup>A kingdom for a stage, princes to act/<sup>[[SEP]]</sup>And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!”, whereby the classical Muse fuses with the Holy Spirit, represented by fire and accounting in Christianity for the gift of grace, without which poetic inspiration was not conceivable.

The poet needs also 'earthly' models to turn the spiritual perception, the 'airy nothing' into something 'bodied forth', a new piece of existence to be localized in space and named, just as God needed earth to create the first man. Turning a spiritual project into a *shape* occurs through the poet's pen, that is through the written word. In the *Genesis* and the beginning of St.John's Gospel<sup>11</sup> God's word is both ontological foundation and instrument of world creation. By grounding the

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<sup>9</sup> Add.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.123.

<sup>11</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

shapes in words, the poet is thus an imitator of God's creative process, the one who marries heaven and earth in the spirit of Ficino's and Pico's writings.<sup>12</sup> His poetic invention presents itself as an *imitatio dei*.

In the oftenly quoted third book of the *Republic*, Plato discards the dramatic poets, as imitators of copies, but in *The Sophist* (265) the discussion of imitation sounds more detailed. First *mimesis* divides into acquisitive and productive<sup>13</sup>. The production is “any capacity that causes things to come to be that previously were not” ( 219 b; 265b). To the question if nature produces things by some spontaneous cause that generates them without any thought, or by a cause that works by reason and divine knowledge derived from a god (265 c) the Visitor replies: “I’ll assume divine expertise produces the things that come about by the so-called nature, and that human expertise produces the things that humans compound those things into. According to this account there are two kinds of production, human and divine.” (265 e). Shakespeare's poet partakes equally in the plan of the divine production, and in the divine production made manifest in Nature. In the end, the poetic composition is *literally a con-position*, a way of positioning or placing together elements that are divinely projected and produced, while the real invention takes place in the *brightest heaven*.

Along with the *divine archetypes* and the *shapes* of Nature, the poet has to take into account the preexistent tradition. In sonnet 59 he wonders “If there be nothing new, but that which is/Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled, /Which, labouring for invention, bear amiss/The second burden of a former child!”. He would like to trace the lover's image “in some antique book”, “Since mind at first in character was done!”. This implies that for the writer, the *logos* was initially made manifest in the written records of the ancient authors, the ones who were historically closer to the divine creation. In this declared challenge of ancient models, he asks himself “Whether we are mended, or whether better they, /<sup>11</sup><sub>SEP</sub>Or whether revolution be the same.”, in a sort of prefiguration of Vico's *corsi e ricorsi* theory. Yet, if human creativity is relative to human appreciation, his lover's beauty, an actualization of God's power to create, is superior to the literary subjects of former days.

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<sup>12</sup> Give quotes.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Complete Works*, Edited with Introduction and Notes, by John M.Cooper, Associate Editor D.S.Hutchinson, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis,/Cambridge, 1997., p. 289.

Shakespeare's understandings of *imitation* and *invention* converge in one word: *shadow*, which refers platonically to the *blessed shapes* in nature as *shadows* of the One, - Sonnet 53 explicates as *external grace*<sup>14</sup>, and *shadow* as actor<sup>15</sup>, the human who literally incarnates the poet's *shapes*. The poet participates in God's communication through the *shadows-shapes*, while the *actor-shadow*, who identifies himself with the *shapes* completes the disclosure of divine archetypes. In this system of thought where the light of divine knowledge is platonically delivered through shadows, it sounds natural to semantically seal the bond between the *forms* captured in words and the humans who embody and voice them, as the theatre is simultaneously incarnated *logos*, and communication, that is *dialogos*.

Thus if theatre as mirror held up to nature allows an aristotelean approach to the performing art in Shakespeare, his conception of nature and poetic creation is informed by Platonic theology.

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<sup>14</sup> What is your substance, whereof are you made, <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
 That millions of strange shadows on you tend?  
<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>Since every one hath, every one, one shade,  
<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>And you, but one, can every shadow lend.  
<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit  
<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>Is poorly imitated after you; <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
 On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set, <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
 And you in Grecian tires are painted new: <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
 Speak of the spring and foison of the year, <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
 The one doth shadow of your beauty show, <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
 The other as your bounty doth appear; <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
 And you in every blessed shape we know.  
<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>In all external grace you have some part,  
<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

<sup>15</sup> Puck:If we shadows have offended,  
 Think but this, and all is mended -  
 That you have but slumbered here  
 While these visions did appear.  
 And this weak and idle theme,  
 No more yielding but a dream,  
 Gentles, do not reprehend.  
 (Epilogue, MSND, V.1)

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