

THE CHAMELEON'S BLUSH AND THE POETIC IMAGINATION FROM SHAKESPEARE TO KEATS

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ABSTRACT. *The Chameleon's Blush and the Poetic Imagination from Shakespeare to Keats.* When English Romantic poet John Keats likened William Shakespeare to a chameleon, far from being original, he was tapping into a venerable tradition of drawing analogies between human beings and the colour-changing reptile. In literary criticism, the analogy is usually taken to refer to poetic indeterminacy; in sociopsychology, to conscious or unconscious, opportunistic versatility of identity. This study traces the evolution of the polyvalent chameleon trope from the zoological treatises of antiquity, through wonder literature and Renaissance and early modern works on psychology and witchcraft, to Shakespeare's plays. It shows more specifically how the chameleon came to acquire an imagination and how that imagination was, on the one hand, instrumental in prompting the sort of inter-subjective absorption Keats emblematised in the blush, and, on the other, projective in a sense akin to Hazlitt's own theory of the imagination. As a result, new light is thrown not only onto specific features of Shakespeare's art and Romantic poetics, but also onto past conceptions of the imagination and the generative role of zoological analogy in their formulations.

Keywords: *imagination, chameleon, William Shakespeare, John Keats, blush*

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REZUMAT. *Cameleonul roșind, imaginația poetică de la Shakespeare la Keats.*

Atunci când poetul romantic John Keats l-a asemuit pe William Shakespeare unui cameleon, departe de a fi original, el recurgea la o venerabilă tradiție de a trasa analogii între oameni și reptila ce își poate schimba culoarea. În critica literară, analogia e de obicei înțeleasă ca referindu-se la nedeterminarea poetică; în socio-psihologie, la versatilitatea oportunistă a identității, conștientă ori inconștientă. Studiul de față urmărește evoluția tropului cameleonului polivalent de la tratatele de zoologie din antichitate, prin literatura de mistere și opere de psihologie și despre vrăjitorie renaștentiste și din modernitatea timpurie, până la piesele lui Shakespeare. Lucrarea arată în mod specific modul în care cameleonul a ajuns să capete o imaginație și cum aceasta a fost, pe de o parte, un instrument în declanșarea aceluia tip de absorbție inter-subiectivă pe care Keats a emblemizat-o în actul de a roși, și, pe de altă parte, proiectivă într-un sens apropiat teoriei asupra imaginației a lui Hazlitt. Ca rezultat, lucrarea pune într-o nouă lumină nu doar trăsăturile artei lui Shakespeare și poetica romantică, dar și concepțiile anterioare asupra imaginației și asupra rolului generativ al analogiei zoologice în formulările acestora.

Cuvinte-cheie: *imaginație, cameleon, William Shakespeare, John Keats, a roși*

Absorption and projection: Keats and Hazlitt

John Keats's letter of 27 October 1818 to his publisher, Richard Woodhouse, on "the poetical Character" is well-known; so too its impact on conceptions of the poet in general and of Shakespeare in particular:

As to the poetical Character itself [...] it has no self - it is every thing and nothing - It has no character - it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated [...] What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. [...] A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity---he is continually in for---and filling some other Body [...] he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. (1952, 226-7)

The poets Keats admires are unpoetical in their un-Wordsworthian self-effacing or self-annihilating absorption into or "informing" other bodies. Elsewhere Keats associates self-annihilation with the inter-subjective absorption of lovers and finds an analogy in pelicans, who draw their own blood to nourish their "brood" (*Endymion* l. 813-15); he would later tell Fanny Brawne, "You absorb me in spite of myself" (1952, 362). Keats clearly felt such absorption keenly: in another letter to Woodhouse he wrote: "When I am in a room with People [...] the

identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated" (227). Surrendering identity this way seems less any ethical openness (Dutoit 1998, 97) than a cowed derogation of selfhood, or that lack of character with which the shy and the weak-willed, in contrast to the egotists, are often stigmatized. Yet self-annihilating absorption into the other is a prerequisite of the brand of chameleon poet to which Keats affiliates himself, a brand epitomised by Shakespeare, present in this passage's allusions to Iago and Imogen and, via the chameleon reference, to Richard of Gloucester in 3 *Henry VI*. As Coleridge put it, "Shakespeare's poetry is characterless; that is, it does not reflect the individual Shakespeare" (1991, 1.125). The chameleon poet counterposes personal *anéantissement*² to egotistical self-assertion, which in the same passage from which I have just quoted some excerpts, Keats identifies with William Wordsworth:³ it is as if poetry can never flow with the poet's identity clogging its arteries. Of course, outside or after the poetic act of creation, the poet will be restored to himself, but it will be a self enhanced by the accretion of aspects of other selves, much as will be the reader's on reading the outcome of that creative act. At writing and reading ends, chameleon poetics hinges on that "alternate contraction and dilation of the soul" (Keats 1939, V.282; qtd. Camarda 2019, 54) which Hazlitt noticed in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale".

Keats's chameleon analogy did not appear out of the blue⁴ and was quick to generate offspring. After reading Keats's letter to Woodhouse, in circulation shortly after the poet's death, Shelley wrote to Maria Gisbourne in 1821 that "Poets, the best of them - are a very cameleonic race: they take the colour not only of what they feed on, but of the very leaves under which they pass" (1964, 115).⁵ Here Shelley seems to distinguish two facets of poets. On the one hand, poets' identities change sympathetically from one situation to another ("what they feed on"); on the other, poets are nourished intertextually on the writings ("leaves") of others. Beneath Shelley's chameleonic intertextuality, it is tempting to detect traces of William Godwin's earlier statement of his own intellectual chameleonicity: "When I read Thomson, I become Thomson; when I read Milton, I become Milton. I find myself a sort of intellectual camelion, assuming the colour of the substances on which I rest" (1797, 27; qtd. Camarda 2019, 51).⁶

² Early Modern French mysticism cultivated *anéantissement* or "enthusiastic self-sacrifice" or "abandonment of [personal] will in order to unite with that of God", and even Pascal experienced "oblivion and union with the divine" (Martin 2012, 99-100).

³ See Ball (2013) for an exhaustive treatment of the egotist/chameleon binary in the Romantic and Victorian imagination.

⁴ On Romantic theatrical chameleonism, see Brewer (2015); on Romantic scientific accounts of the chameleon, see Camarda (2019, 46-54).

⁵ For Shelley's other references to the chameleon, see Thatcher (2000).

⁶ On the relationship between this passage and Keats, see Roe (1997, 247).

As for Hazlitt, in 1821 he wrote of “Genius in ordinary” that, compared with Shakespeare, “the Proteus of human intellect” capable of “transforming himself at will into whatever he chose”, “it is a more obstinate and less versatile thing [...] It is just the reverse of the camelion for it does not borrow but lends its colour to all about” (1901, 54). Hazlitt’s comments arise in a discussion of imagination, which he defines as “the power of carrying on a given feeling into other situations” (53). Here the imagination is, so to speak, “translative” in its capacity to transfer a feeling from one context to another, albeit the more familiar Hazlittian term is “projective”; in this, it differs from the “absorptive” chameleon, which “borrows its colour” from its environs. In Hazlitt’s 1818 lecture “On Shakespeare and Milton”, the direct source of Keats’s reflections in the letter to Woodhouse,⁷ Shakespeare’s imagination is more firmly projective:

He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be [...] he throws his imagination out of himself [...] He had only to think of any thing in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it [...] The poet may be said, for the time, to identify himself with the character he wishes to represent, and to pass from one to another, like the same soul successively animating different bodies” (Bate, 1992, pp. 181-2).

Shakespeare’s chameleonic imagination proactively generates its material, including the characters, with whom identification is once again translative (“pass from one to another”), not absorptive, and whose existence depends on infusions of the poet’s spirit. This is not any Keatsian self-annihilation under pressure from an overbearing reality but a more Wordsworthian impregnation of reality with the poet’s own soul. Thus, Hazlitt’s minimally egotistical poet actually joins forces in its proliferations of selfhood with Wordsworth to declare the world the “great I am”, while Keats’s continual negations of subjectivity lead to self-effacing whisperings of the “great I am not.”⁸

There seems, then, to be a difference of emphasis between the Hazlittian projective and the Keatsian absorptive models of the Shakespearean imagination. The notion of a Shakespearean poetic absorption of other identities is as old as Shakespeare criticism itself: Margaret Cavendish averred in 1664 that “so Well he hath Express’d in his Playes all Sorts of Persons, as one would think he had

⁷ Fitzpatrick (1981) claims Locke’s psychology is a more direct influence on Keats’s chameleonic imagination than Hazlitt; but influence is not a competition, and Hazlitt himself was a close reader of Locke.

⁸ Cf. Natarajan (2010, 106): “Where to Keats, selflessness is the key to poetic achievement, for Hazlitt, in any other instance than Shakespeare, the absence of a powerful sense is the condition of artistic failure.” Camarda finds Keats’s chameleon poet to be more active in its “embrace of circumstance” (2019, 71).

been Transformed into every one of those Persons he hath Described", while John Dryden gushed famously that "he was the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul" (Vickers 1974, 43, 138). Similarly, the association of the imagination with the chameleon was no Romantic invention but had a long and complex history. Again, although it was Keats who established the connection between poetic chameleonicism and Shakespeare, it is actually Hazlitt's projective imagination which comes closer to Shakespeare's own conception of the chameleonic imagination. Yet as we shall also see, it is Shakespeare's notion of the sympathetic imagination which brings us closer to Keats's poetics of embarrassment, the key figure of which was the blush.

Machiavels, flatterers, lovers and godlike men

The colour-changing chameleon has inspired proposals for a chameleon poetics of indeterminacy. Thomas Dutoit (1998, 95) has defined poetic chameleonicism quite categorically as a Keatsian negative capability, as an existential in-betweenness or "différance". Caught between subject and object, between itself and the other, the chameleon has and is nothing but is a becoming of the other without being the other. In its defiance of binaries and the philosophers' logic of "yes" or "no" (Deshoulières 1998, 10), the chameleon's indeterminateness is naturally at home in the postmodern dispensation of contingency, dispersed selfhood and semiotic destabilization. Yet that dispensation is nothing new. A long line of writers and thinkers from Montaigne to Hume to Nietzsche have questioned the liberal humanist notion of unitary, stable and coherent subjective identity, while the social performance of the self as theorised by Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman and Judith Butler,⁹ among others, had already been explained by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes was only adding a philosophical gloss to a behavioural code which was essential to survival in the upper echelons of Renaissance and early modern European society. Far from inaugurating a new millennium of identitarian flux, "social chameleon[s]" (Smith 2001, 269) like Zadie Smith's Millat have been around and recorded for a long time.

Shakespeare would have been aware of the moral ambivalence of the chameleon trope. Its well-known ability to change colour, which cropped up in texts as diverse as Du Bartas's sonnet 24 (?1570s) and George Hakewill's treatise (1608) on the eye,¹⁰ was applied to the Machiavellian "actor-politician" (Barish

⁹ See Taylor (1989) and Sell (2010, 114-19, 127-29).

¹⁰ "Chameleon-like, each objects colour prying" (Du Bartas 1611, 750); "tis a matter agreed on on all hands that hee [the Devil] hath the power, Vertumus or Proteus-like, to turne himselfe into any shape, or, Chameleon like, into any colour" (Hakewill 1615, 58).

1981, 101) implementing Iago's aphorism that "Men should be what they seem" (*Othello*, 3.3.131):¹¹ in pursuit of effectiveness, "image is all, the reality nothing" (Barish 1981, 96), for, as Machiavelli pointed out, at bottom men are "wretched creatures [...] always impressed by appearances and results" (1981, 101-01). If the best-known instance of this application of the trope is to be found in Richard of Gloucester's speech in *3 Henry VI* (see below), it also drove George Burton's *Chamaeleon* (w. 1570), his satirical attack on the slippery Scottish politician William Maitland, and turns up in Stephen Batman's *The Golden Book of the Leaden Goddess* (1577), the anonymous *Tragedy of Tiberius* (1607) and Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) (Barish 1981, 100-02). Across Europe, tropological contamination meant that the chameleon also came to serve as an analogy for those who milled around the halls of power and whose survival depended on their allied capacities for actorly dissembling—according to George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1970 [1589], 305; Rebhorn 2004, 107-08), the key qualification of the successful courtier—and fawning adulation. Plutarch had likened flatterers to the chameleon in *De adulatore et amico* (Verdegem 2010, 274-76). Erasmus did likewise, explaining that living on the air as it does, the reptile's mouth is always open, much as "those who thrive on the tawdry fame of popular approval are always on the lookout for something that may increase their reputation" (1978, 241). The chameleonic flatterer turns up too in Andrea Alciato's *Emblemata* (1577) (Hartwig 1996, 192) and Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1603) (Barish 1981, 103). By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, across Europe the chameleon had become a standard figure of courtly dissimulation and flattery (Sahlins 2015, 18; Álvarez-Ossorio 2000) and of *homo politicus* in general;¹² while in "Flecknoe, an English Priest at Rome" Andrew Marvell would later use it of the religious turncoat:

But were he not in in this black habit decked,
This half-transparent man would soon reflect
Each colour that he passed by, and be seen,
As the chameleon, yellow, blue, or green" (1972, 31 [ll. 79-82]).

Add to all this the colourful reptile's association with the unscrupulous slyness of a Ulysses, Lysander or Alcibiades (Barish 1981, 103) and it would seem that the innocent chameleon received a very bad press in early modern Europe; not for

¹¹ All references are to Shakespeare (2005).

¹² By the mid-eighteenth century, however, Lord Chesterfield was recommending to his son this sort of socially pragmatic chameleonic which he viewed not as "criminal or abject, but a necessary complaisance; for it relates to manners" (1992, 106; qtd. Camarda 2019, 52) and facilitated social communion.

nothing did its mimetic skills lead Antony Munday to use it to slander the very worst of society's worst: "Plaiers cannot be better compared than to the Camelion" (*A Second and Third Blast of Retrait*, 1580; qtd. Barish 1981, 104).

But not all was gloom in the chameleon's garden. Its characteristic ambiguity was reflected in Erasmus's approval of the apostle Paul's ability, on the model of Jesus Christ, to "play the chameleon" when adapting himself to his audiences (Bietenholz 1966, 86). It also served as an emblem of the true lover, who sympathetically identified with the changing feelings of his beloved (Barish 1981, 107) or, in George Turberville's "To his Mistress, declaring his life only to depend on her looks" (c. 1574) (McPeck 1941), was sustained vitally by the breath of his beloved: "You are the pleasant breathing ayre, and I your poore Chameleon". The chameleon's alleged diet of air was proverbial¹³ and became a serviceable trope in amorous contexts; thus, John Lyly: "Love is a chameleon which draweth nothing into the mouth but air" (*Endymion* [1581] 3.4; qtd. Mowatt and Werstine 1999, 50n.l.177).¹⁴ More grandly, the chameleon became one of the figures for the endlessly self-transformative, quasi-divine potential of man in Florentine Neoplatonism. Marsilio Ficino's *Theologia Platonica* (1482) anticipates and reconciles what we have designated Hazlittian projection and Keatsian absorption in its celebration of the capacity of the human intellect and the human will to unite with all things, the former by transforming them into itself, the latter by transforming itself into them (Barish 1981, 108); in Pico della Mirandola's *De dignitate hominis* (1486) the chameleon emerges into the full glare of sunlight as the figure of man, "this our chameleon", divinely endowed with "the seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life" (1956, 9, 8); while man was the protagonist on the metaphysical world-stage erected in Juan Luis Vives's *Fable about Man* (1518), where his self-suspending ability to jump from one role to another, now a beast, now a star, now a god, "so changing like a polypus and a chameleon" (Cassirer et al. 1956, 390; qtd. Barish 1981, 110), led to his apotheosis in heavenly assumption.¹⁵ Predictably, among the Puritans of Reformation Europe changeability was regarded as a weakness, a view authorised in Platonist aversion to the mutability of the phenomenal world and to the poets who imitated it (Barish 1981, 110-12).

¹³ "Love is a chameleon that feeds on air" (Dent M266; qtd. Carroll 2004, 173n.l. 159-60)

¹⁴ McPeck (1941, 242n9) cites two similar references from two lyrics from Francis Davison's (?) *A Poetical Rhapsody* (1602-21).

¹⁵ The "polypus" (octopus) was generally taken as a figure of commendable, strategic versatility, in contrast to Proteus, the chameleon's more frequent and similarly ambivalent comrade-in-arms. With what looks like remarkable foresight, William Scott wrote in 1599 that the poet "is to be that polypus [octopus] of, which in sundry shapes must transform himself to catch all humours" (2013, 14).

Shakespeare's chameleons

Such was the varied tropical polyvalence of the air-eating, colour-changing chameleon: it could connote a political and social Machiavel, a courtly flatterer, a subservient lover or a Neoplatonic superman. But there is no association with the imagination. What, then of its presence in Shakespeare? In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* Speed enquires of love-smitten Valentine:

SPEED: Why muse you, sir? 'Tis dinner-time.

VALENTINE: I have dined.

SPEED: Ay, but hearken, sir. Though the chameleon love can feed on the air, I am one that am nourished by my victuals, and would fain have meat. (2.1.159-64)

A little later, Thurio's red-faced anger leads to this exchange:

SILVIA: What, angry, Sir Thurio? Do you change colour?

VALENTINE: Give him leave, madam, he is a kind of chameleon.

THURIO: That hath more mind to feed on your blood than live in the air. (2.4.23-27)

So far, so conventional. The best-known instance in Shakespeare of the chameleon trope is in Richard of Gloucester's marvellously wicked review of the personal qualities that will enable him "to catch the English Crown" (*3 Henry VI*, 3.2.179), among them his ability to dissemble:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry 'Content!' to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions (182-87);

his Ulysean deceitfulness: "I'll play the orator as well as Nestor, / Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could" (188-89); and his Machiavellian chameleonic:

I can add colours to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machiavel to school. (187-9)

Once again, so far, so conventional. The chameleon takes its Shakespearean bow in *Hamlet*. On arriving to watch "The Mousetrap", Claudius asks the prince, "How fares our cousin Hamlet?", to which Hamlet replies: "Excellent, i'faith, of the chameleon's dish. I eat upon the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons

so" (3.2.389-91). As in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the reference is to the chameleon's ability to feed on air; but unlike Valentine, Hamlet is not in love but punning sardonically on Claudius' earlier reassurance that he is "the most immediate to our throne" (1.2.109), that is, occupies his rightful place as heir.

Taken together, these four instances of the chameleon index, apparently unremarkably, commonplaces about chameleonic air-eating and colour-changing in conventional amorous and political contexts. They may also disclose the occult influence of Vives's human chameleon treading the boards of the world-stage. But they seem bereft of all connection with the imagination. Yet given its privileged centrality in Romantic poetics, before attributing the equation Shakespeare-chameleon-imagination to a sudden Keatsian insight, it might be worth trawling other sources of chameleon lore for possible origins.

Ancient zoology, wonder literature and humanist psychology

The three standard authorities from antiquity on the animal world were Aristotle, Pliny the Elder and Aelian.¹⁶ After his pioneering vivisection of the chameleon (Cosans 1998, 324),¹⁷ Aristotle described its anatomy in *History of Animals* (c.350 BCE; 530^b2-5) and noted its ability to change colour "when it is inflated with air; it is then black, not unlike the crocodile, or green like the lizard but black-spotted like the pard" (1984, 800). In the earlier (Lennox 2001, 329) *De partibus animalium* he had suggested that both chameleon (692^a20-24) and octopus (679a12-14) changed colour out of fright, when they lost heat due to falling blood pressure (Fortenbaugh 2006, 187). Aristotle was right to link colour change to emotions, wrong to explain it in terms of blood pressure—it actually has to do with the reaction to light of chromatophores. Colour change as an emotional reflex is absent from the early modern loci noted so far, although Thurio's red face is a clear instance. Four centuries after Aristotle, Pliny the Elder stated in his *Natural History* (77 CE; 8.51) that the chameleon's body assumes "the colour of whatever object is nearest, with the exception of white and red"; Thurio's flush would have baffled him. Neither Aristotle nor Pliny mentioned the chameleon's ability to feed on the air, although the former mentions its self-inflation.

Nor did Aelian, whose attention in *De natura animalium* (c.210 CE; I.ii.14) was fixed firmly on colour change:

¹⁶ Aullus Gellius' (*Noctes Atticæ*, 10.12-1-5) account of the chameleon is merely derivative (Kitchell 2014, 28).

¹⁷ It used to be thought erroneously (Soury 1898) that the chameleon was the only animal to have come under Aristotle's knife.

The chameleon is not disposed to remain of one and the same colour for men to see and recognise, but it conceals itself by misleading and deceiving the eye of the beholder. Thus, if you come across one that appears black, it changes its grey tint and appears different, like an actor who puts on another mask or another garment. (1980, 112-13)

What is remarkable is Aelian's theatrical metaphor, whose transformation of reptile into actor seems an ancestral source of Vives's chameleonic human treading the boards of the world-stage and, therefore, of Munday's anti-thespian slur and Richard of Gloucester's speech, where self-glorification of that capacity for actorly dissembling exploited in *Richard III* (Barton 1964, 96-100; Murry 1967, 125-6; Rossiter 1961, 17-19) is capped by metaphorical mutation into the versicoloured reptile. What is more, Richard's combination of histrionic weeping ("And wet my cheeks with artificial tears, / And frame my face to all occasions") with chameleonic is replicated in *Hamlet*. There, the Prince expresses wonder at the "tears" shed by the player, "his visage wanned" and "his whole function suiting / With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing. / For Hecuba!" (2.2.556-60). Hamlet's perplexity at the player's Ricardian knack of paling his complexion and turning on the waterworks is followed two scenes later by his quip on eating of "the chameleon's dish". The contiguity of play-acting and the colour-changing reptile replicated in both works suggests a barely coincidental consistency in Shakespeare's conceptualisation of actors as chameleons which belies any suspicion that the connection is purely accidental. This does not mean that Shakespeare had read Aelian, who was only available in Greek until translated into Latin, side-by-side with the relevant extracts from Aristotle and Pliny, in Conrad Gessner's *Historia Animalium* (1551-1558); nor that he had read Gessner. For the chameleon and other marvellous beasts had entered popular lore and the proverbial repertory via the paradox books, medieval bestiaries and books of marvels, as we shall see.

Outside zoological treatises, in antiquity the chameleon was used as a negatively charged metaphor for man. In the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1.1100^b5ff) the reptile stands for the fickle nature of human happiness: "For clearly, if we were to track a person's fortunes, we shall find ourselves often calling the same person happy and then miserable, thus revealing the happy man as a kind of chameleon and infirmly based" (2002, 106). Similarly unfavourable is Plutarch's use of the simile in his character sketch of socially-cynically versatile Alcibiades, which, in Thomas North's translation (1579), is a possible source of Richard's speech:

For among other qualities and properties he had (whereof he was full) this as they say was one, whereby he robbed most men's hearts: that he could frame altogether with their manners and fashions of life, transforming

himself more easily to all manner of shapes than the chameleon. For it is reported, that the chameleons cannot take white colour; but Alcibiades could put upon him any manners, customs or Fashions of what nation soever, and could follow, exercise and counterfeit them when he would, as well the good as the bad. (1898, II. 276-277)

While there is no firm proof that Shakespeare read Plutarch's *Alcibiades*,¹⁸ there are two enticing parallels between this passage and Richard's speech. The first is a lexical echo: Alcibiades "could frame altogether with [men's] manners and fashions of life", Richard boasts he can "frame my face to all occasions". The second is conceptual in so far that both Plutarch's Alcibiades and Shakespeare's Richard outstrip the chameleon's polychrome versatility, the former "transforming himself more easily to all manner of shapes than the chameleon [which] cannot take white colour", the latter crowing, "I can add colours to the chameleon".

Writing at the start of the Christian era, Philo of Alexandria cited the chameleon's ability to mimeticise the colour of its surroundings (*De Ebrietate*, 172);¹⁹ so, too, did "Antigonus" three centuries later (*Collection of Amazing Stories*, 25) and Photius, a further five centuries after him in his summary of Theophrastus' lost treatise *On Creatures that Change Colour* (Sharples 2008, 69-70). The chameleon, together with the octopus, had also featured in the pseudo-Aristotelian *De mirabilibus auscultationibus* (Sharples 2008, 70), whose title lands us squarely in the territory of the marvellous, the monstrous and the prodigious, which still thrived even when natural history was becoming a field of scientific study in the sixteenth century.

If the classical sources yield no trace of a chameleonic imagination, what, then, of the bestiaries and the wonder literature which are also signposted by Richard's speech: "I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall; / I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk" (*3 Henry VI*, 3.2.186-7)? Together they comprised a territory exploited well into the seventeenth century by publishers catering to a market with a taste for the early modern equivalent of scientific schlock. The best-selling title in that market was Gessner's *Historia Animalium* (1551-58), which included a derivative discussion of the chameleon and whose abridgement (*Thierbuck* [Animal Book], 1563) was further abridged and Englished by Edward Topsell in two volumes (*Historie of foure-footed Beastes*, 1607 and *Historie of Serpents*, 1608). An image of a Sea Bishop, half-man, half-fish, from the Swiss polymath's *Icones animalium* (1560) has been proposed as an iconographic source of Shakespeare's Caliban (Vaughan and Vaughan 1991, 77). However, another version of the same illustration was printed earlier in Guillaume

¹⁸ But see Gillespie (2004, 433).

¹⁹ Philo also mentioned the octopus and the "tarandros" (reindeer or elk), which more amazingly changed the colour of its hair.

Rondelet's *Libri de piscibus marinus* (1554); yet another on a map in Giacomo Gastaldi's section on South–East Asia in *Cosmographia Universalis et Exactissima iuxta prostremam neotericorum traditionem* (c.1561) (Boran 2019, np).²⁰ A rude copy of the same illustration is also reproduced in Ambroise Paré's *Des monstres et prodigés*, published as part of the second volume of *Deux livres de chirurgie* (1573). But Paré's account of the chameleon is quite different.²¹ Paré says nothing of feeding on air and, after a brief morphological description, turns to what makes the reptile wonderful, namely its colour changes. For this, he proffers two explanations. The one he prefers, like Aristotle's, associates such transformations with bodily inflation ("quand il s'enfle", Paré 1652, 698) but, unlike Aristotle, he explains them not in terms of respiration and blood pressure but of transparency: the more the creature swells up, the thinner and more transparent his skin becomes so that the colour of nearby objects are represented in it as in a mirror. More extraordinary is the second explanation: "ou que les humeurs en lui esmeus diversement selon *la diversité de ses imaginations*, representant diverses coulours vers le cuit, non autrement que les pendans d'un coq d'Inde" (emphasis added). Thomas Johnson's English translation of Paré, published in 1634, rendered that as follows: "or els various humours diversely stirred up in him, according to the varietie of his affections, represents divers colours in his skin" (Paré 1649, 694). Here, Paré is assimilated to the Aristotelian theory that the ultimate origin of the colour change is emotional, although the single emotion of fear is now expanded to "the varietie of affections". But Johnson is not being faithful to Paré, who speaks of "imaginationes", but to the Latin translation of his text, which renders "selon la diversité de ses imaginations" as "pro animi affectuum varietate" (1588, 795).

Paré need not have been a direct source either of Richard's speech (his work has a section on mermaids but is silent on basilisks) or, iconographically, of Caliban. Nonetheless, as far as Shakespeare is concerned and his later reception by the Romantics, that an idea of an imaginative chameleon might have been in circulation is a tantalising proposition to say the least. The question is, where did that notion come from? In Richard's speech, the chameleon is mentioned, quite conventionally, in the same breath as Proteus, the other standard figure of human transformative identity; in the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, one of the male protagonists is called Proteus. Pico also paired chameleon and Proteus in

²⁰ After our period, the same illustration appears in Ulisse Aldrovandi's posthumous *Monstrorum historia: cum paralipomenis historiæ omnium animalium* (1642). The Sea Bishop was a "jenny haniver" or hoax, consisting of the dried carcass of a ray or skate (Boran, 2019).

²¹ In revised editions Paré also gives André Thevet's *Cosmographie Universelle* (1575) as a source. With respect to the chameleon, Thevet draws on his own observations to question, though not reject, the myth of its air diet and to suggest that the reptile does not change colour to reflect the objects in its immediate environment, except in the case of black (116v).

De dignitate hominis, in a passage generally taken to have been influenced by Ficino's commentary on Priscian's metaphrasis of Theophrastus. Priscian viewed the imagination as assimilating to itself images from the external world or the memory and of projecting onto the external world the intellectual activities of the soul (Priscian 2014, 32; Arnaud 2015, 59-60). To this assimilative, or absorptive, and projective imagination, Ficino applied the epithets of chameleonic (*chameleontean*) and Protean (*Protean*) (1962, 2.1825). It is not impossible that Ficino's comparison of Priscian's imagination with the chameleon underlies Paré's chameleon which, in an outward projection of intellectual energies, changes colour at the prompting of its imagination. Paré, royal physician and scientist, would almost certainly have been familiar with Ficino's medical works, while both prescribed the same antidote to the plague and adopted a similar scientific methodology in their treatments (Beecher 2001, 247).

Whether Shakespeare knew Paré's work or Ficino's commentary on Priscian cannot be established.²² But Ficino's coupling of the imagination with the chameleon and, now, Proteus, was taken up by Johann Weyer (or Wier) in his *De praestigiis dæmonum* (1563; extended 1583):²³ "The imagination expresses the activities of reason under the condition of sensible things, and it can produce phantasms [=mental images] far beyond the activities of the senses. It surpasses sensation, because by producing images without external stimulation, it is like Proteus or the chameleon" (Wier 1991 [1583], 186-7). Weyer's book, which was hugely influential in the witchcraft debate (its author believed that witches were victims of an imaginative frenzy due to melancholy and related conditions like hysteria and amenorrhoea), has occasionally been touted as a source of *Macbeth's* walking wood; if that influence could be proven, so too might Shakespeare's familiarity with a Ficinian, chameleonic imagination.

Love's witchcraft and the chameleon's blush

More certainly, Shakespeare had read Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584),²⁴ where on the authority of Lucretius blushing is regarded as evidence of the imagination's power to affect the body:

²² Jones's (2014) monumental study of Ficino's influence on Marlowe and Shakespeare sheds no light on this point.

²³ Also, shortly after the probable dates of composition of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *3 Henry VI*, by André du Laurens in his *Discours de la conservation de la veue, des maladies mélancoliques, des catharres et de la vieillesse* (1594). On Weyer, du Laurens and Ficino, see Arnaud (2015, 59-61).

²⁴ Scot's *The Discoverie*, "very probably" (Braunmuller 1997, 258) one of Shakespeare's sources for *Macbeth*, incorporates much of Weyer's material, but not his discussion of Ficino, Priscian and the imagination.

the imagination of a beautiful forme resteth in the hart of the lover, and kindleth the fier wherewith it is afflicted. And bicause the most delicate, sweete, and tender bloud of the beloved doth there wander, his countenance is there represented shining in his owne bloud, and cannot there be quiet [...]. (1886, 410)

Francesco Maria Guazzo commenced his *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608) by making a similar point on the authority of Aquinas:

All are agreed that the imagination is a most potent force; and both by argument and by experience they prove that a man's own body may be most extensively affected by his imagination. For they argue that as the imagination examines the images of objects perceived by the senses, it excites in the appetitive faculty either fear or shame or anger or sorrow; and these emotions so affect a man with heat or cold that his body either grows pale or reddens, and he consequently becomes joyful and exultant, or torpid and dejected. (2004, 1)

For Scot, lovers may be chameleonic not now because the beloved provides them with the oxygen they need, but because the beloved's image sets off a psychophysiological process that starts in the imagination and finishes in a reddened face. As in Priscian/Theophrastus, that process is both absorptive and projective in so far as the imagination assimilates the beloved's image either as stored in the "heart", or memory, as in Scot, or conveyed to it by the senses, as in Guazzo, and then stimulates an emotional response which is externalised in the blush. The role of the imagination as facilitating the sympathy on which what I earlier identified as a Keatsian "inter-subjective absorption" depends is crucial. No imagination, no sympathy, as Adam Smith would later argue in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which underlies Hazlitt's model of the imagination and Keats's of the chameleon poet: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his [our imagined brother on the rack] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him" (1976, 9). Neither Scot nor Guazzo draw any analogy between blushing and the chameleon, but Thomas Nashe's use in *Lenten Stuff* (1598) of the verb "to chameleonize" with exactly this sense when writing of King Herring - "from white to red you chameleonized" (1972, 434) - suggests that the connection was current.

Shakespeare knew it was possible to "meet in some fresh cheek the power of fancy" (*As You Like It*, 3.5.30). After an earlier experiment in *The Rape of Lucrece*, where "two red fires" [...] blazed" in the faces of Lucrece and her

“duteous vassal” (ll. 1353, 1360), he depicted the sympathetic embarrassment of the mutual first-sight attraction between Edward III and the Countess of Salisbury:²⁵

Lo, when she blushed, even then did he look pale,
 As if her cheeks by some enchanted power
 Attracted had the cherry blood from his.
 Anon, with reverent fear when she grew pale,
 His cheeks put on their scarlet ornaments,
 But no more like her oriental red
 Than brick to coral or live things to dead. (*Edward III*, 1.1.172-8)

In this sensitive portrayal of the inter-subjective absorption of lovers, the process by which the Countess’s cheeks draw the blood from Edward “by some enchanted power” reproduces the physiological workings of what Scot called “natural witchcraft for love” (2004, 410); and the Countess’s blush is duly met with the royal flush as Edward’s cheeks become in reciprocation “that external arena of the emotions of the soul—that focus of every involuntary exhibition of internal feeling and sympathy” (Burgess 115; qtd. Ricks 1984, 56).

The blush and embarrassment are central to Christopher Ricks’s seminal *Keats and Embarrassment* (1984), whose contention that Keats was “acute to embarrassment and probably more widely and subtly gifted with powers of empathy than any other English poet” (1984, 24) might be extended to embrace Shakespeare. Like Scot and Guazzo, Ricks makes no allusion to the chameleon but does note Charles Darwin’s view that “Blushing is the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions. Monkeys redden from passion, but it would require an overwhelming amount of evidence to make us believe that any animal could blush” (1872, 310; qtd. 50). The chameleon is only of interest to Darwin for morphological differences in the skull between males and females of the species *chameleon bifurcus* (2004, 404-5). However, Darwin’s grandfather Erasmus Darwin wrote in *Zoonomia* (1794), which Keats might have read,²⁶ that

like the fable of the chameleon, all animals may possess a tendency to be coloured somewhat like the colours they most frequently inspect [...] Nor is this more wonderful than that a single idea of imagination should in an instant colour the whole surface of a body in a bright scarlet, as in the blush of shame, though by a very different process” (1794, 1.511-12; qtd. Carmarda 2019, 52-3).

²⁵ Although the play is a collaborative work and the attribution of authorship highly contentious, Shakespeare’s contribution is generally considered to include this scene. For a recent survey of the scholarship, see Proudfoot and Bennet, eds. (2017, 49-89; on this scene, 68).

²⁶ See Camarda (2019, 53).

Between Scot and Guazzo on the one hand and Erasmus Darwin on the other there is a continuity of psychosomatic theory connecting the imagination and red-faced embarrassment which only consolidates the conceptual and practical affinities between Keats and Shakespeare, two chameleon poets whose survival into posterity is sustained by a shared capacity of self-denying, sympathetic absorption. Keats's chameleon was no spontaneous generation but the outcome of a long and complex evolutionary history of conceptual cross-fertilisation between ancient and early modern zoology and psychology. Similarly, the projective, sympathetic imagination, emblematised in the blush, was no late-Enlightenment or Romantic invention, but a long-perceived phenomenon, theorised in humanist and early modern psychological writings and represented in poetry and on stage. As is often the case in intellectual history, the trite, general conclusion would seem to be that there is nothing new under the sun, beneath which basks the bashful chameleon, unembarrassed by its ignorance, colourfully attuned to existence; and that, like the versicoloured reptile, writers and thinkers assimilate unconsciously concepts and ideas that float like Shelley's leaves on the incessant winds of history.

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