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Developing a Comprehensive Theory on Imagination through Intertextuality

The driving force behind Montaigne’s essays is his desire to document what he knows best. And he believes that one’s own experiences and personal knowledge are the extent of what he can have expertise over. However, in presenting his case on the powerful force of the notions of our thoughts and their consequent apprehensions in “On the Force of Imagination,” Montaigne continuously employs intertextuality, a communication with external voices from literary tradition, to advance his own view of what comprises an imagination and what effects such vivid images can induce. More importantly, there is a tension in this text because of his desires of limiting to a view of the self as he emphasizes in his preface to the essays that “it is [him]self [he] portray[s].” Although such a subjective perspective confers credibility upon the author and his work, Montaigne cannot develop a complex, multifaceted theory on imagination without intertextuality to help expand on the powerful force impressions have on the mind. The purpose of this paper is to show how exactly Montaigne constructs a more comprehensive theory on imagination through intertextuality, because I think that when Montaigne’s limited understanding is juxtaposed with the divergent traditional modes of thinking, a very rigorous and all-encompassing theory is established and highlighted. The juxtapositions aid not only in overcoming the shortcomings in Montaigne’s ‘subjective perspective’ approach, the inability to substantially account for all possible imaginative sentiments, but the juxtapositions also lead off towards developing a theory that can go beyond the simple black and white and delve into the grey ambiguities of human feelings and expressions. The varied and diverse notions of
imaginative perceptions demonstrates the inherent incapacity of an individual to perceive all forms and effects of a force such as imagination. In order to show this development of a broader idea of imagination through intertextuality, I will analyze the difference in the manner in which Montaigne’s interacts with literary tradition (texts of Lucretius and Ovid) and common folklore or fable in regards to what the juxtaposition reveals about the impact/strength of the force of imagination, its modes of transmission, ambiguities and its prevalent corporal reality (visible effects on the body).

Montaigne constructs a theory on imagination that is mediated heavily by intertextuality in order for it to be more comprehensive and inclusive of the broad spectrum of human imagination. I will first analyze the manner in which Lucretius, a well-established philosopher, is woven into Montaigne’s essay and contrasted with his subjective perspective before comparing this literary intertextuality with the intertextuality of folklore. Lucretius, as a direct interlocutor, has his words directly juxtaposed with those of Montaigne in the discussion of imagination’s corporal reality and such a juxtaposition resonates with Montaigne’s experiences but at a higher degree. Montaigne uses the literary practice of amplification to increase understanding and add worth (through variety) in presenting the various common and recurring phenotypes portrayed on the human body from basic emotions. He believes that the instances where “we start, tremble, turn pale, and blush [when] we are variously moved by imagination” (1) represent the scope of the basic attributes exhibited on an almost daily basis. These effects are almost archetypal of the physical effects that most can relate to as being a result of an impression upon the mind. There is hardly any ambiguity to the bodily effects of a force like imagination as the displayed phenotypes can easily be thought of as direct consequences. That is, a cold sensation, even of the minutest degree or sensation of thought, can move one to “tremble” and the body, in
Montaigne’s view, simply acts as a canvas that immediately reflects the simplest of sensations. But to broaden the type of imagination and effects endured upon the human physique, to go beyond just the basic apprehensions of fear, heat/cold and happiness, the corporal effects of which most would relate to, allows Montaigne to elaborate upon his comprehensive theory and to take into account atypical bodily actions that are results of exaggerated imaginations. Such aspects that tread on the boundary of almost reality cannot be expected to be a part of Montaigne’s limited subject self-perspective as it would be highly unlikely that he would be exposed to them frequently enough to gain expertise over the events. Through intertextuality, however, he integrates the graphic low-order diction of Lucretius that depicts a very vivid image of an effect of imagination: “[So that as though it were an actual affair, they pour out mighty streams and stain the clothes they wear]” (1). The imagery in Lucretius’ depiction of bodily effects when aroused exclude any polite connotation and relies on just literal depictions to portray ejaculation in sleep. While this does not add any layers of ambiguity to imagination, integrating a direct quote from revered literary tradition gives credibility to the corporal reality of imagination as it depicts rare sensations aroused as a result of powerful imaginations. Juxtaposing the two views of imagination through such intertextuality creates a more thorough theory that does not exclude aspects that go beyond his own subjective perspective. The highly pictorial imagery is still rather black and white in terms of bodily effects as the corporal impact is directly dependent upon the strength of the imagination and would have repeatable effects, despite the rarity of occurrence.

However, there is a distinction in the manner by which Montaigne chooses to communicate with literary folklore. The type of intertextuality employed continues along the trend of including a broader spectrum of perception based effects on the body but deviates in
both the strength of the imagination and the clarity of effects. Montaigne extends the belief that imagination cannot be looked upon as simply as only changes in the hue of one’s face color. But rather than presenting an intertextual version, as in the case of Lucretius, that depicts a stronger arousal leading to corporal reality of the imagination, Montaigne indirectly, and without quoting, depicts folk tales that stretch the gap between the white and black. He follows Lucretius’ quote with a stream of hyperbolic depictions on the wide array of imagination: “No new thing to see horns grown in a night […] passion gave … the voice which nature had denied […] a woman was turned into a man” (1-2). These events and descriptions, though hard to believe in terms of veracity, add a new element to the developing theory as such overemphasis through the established folk-lore and stories of Cippus, the son of Croesus and Lucius Cossitius, respectively, produces a more noticeable effect than Montaigne’s basic and archetypal depictions. Corporal effects are made very ambiguous in their nature with no gauged strength of imagination leading to a measurable bodily impact. Intertextuality in this fashion juxtaposes the earlier two scalar cause-effect relations, which varied only through multiplied intensity, with the obscure and rather imprecise effects to showcase the grey and ambiguous region of imagination between the black and white. This inclusion of literary folklore and Montaigne’s varied approach towards tackling the stories, whereby he does not directly converse with them but subtly mentions them immediately after quoting from literary tradition, paints a picture of imagination that emphasizes the lack of human control and increased randomness in the turn of events. But this manner in which Montaigne juxtaposes the two types of intertextuality equates them in terms of credibility and overall weight in the theory. Even the sporadic, once in a lifetime event of finding oneself simply “having all night dreamed that he had horns on his head” (2) leads to real corporal effects through imagination. And “the vehement desire of him and his mother” (2) contributing to a
complete gender reversal highlights forces of another person’s imagination impacting the bodily change (I will look more closely at the alternate forms of transmission in the analysis of intertextuality with Ovid). The equal emphasis towards such aspects of imagination shows the growing tension in the text that hinders Montaigne from excluding outlandish experiences at the cost of leaving the ambiguities of imagination out of his theory. The contrast in not only the different tones but also levels of exaggeration, diction and imagery channels ideas of literary folk tales. The subjective perspective that gives Montaigne credibility as an author and creates a liaison between the essay and reader due to the view’s basic nature is combined with the outlandish references in literary folklore to create a rather comprehensive view of what can encompass a theory on imagination. It becomes evident that such a juxtaposition also highlights the intertextual argument of how not-quantifiable and deceitful the strength of an imagination is and whether its corporal reality is predictable to any degree.

We have just seen that the corporal reality of imagination cannot be explained solely through comparing the relative strengths of the impressions, as seen in the intertextuality with Lucretius, because several ambiguities exist in the aspects by and the extent to which an imagination can conjure effects on the body, as seen in the intertextuality with folklore. The two types of intertextuality and the inherent difference in the manner in which Montaigne communicates his subjective perspective by juxtaposing the three gives a comprehensive understanding of all that could encompass an imagination’s impact on the mind. Now, I want to examine how the modes of transmission of imaginative forces can be much better understood through such juxtaposition because as was hinted earlier in the discussion of folklore intertextuality, an alternative form would be of another person impacting the corporal reality. In the following paragraph, I will first look at what Montaigne’s subjective perspective dictates and
where its limits lie before seeing how intertextuality with literary tradition proposes an alternative hypothesis and aids in advancement of this theory on imagination.

The strength of imagination to go against the will of one’s desires, both physical and emotional, is hard to grapple with. Montaigne brings forth this puzzle by asking “whether there is any one part of our bodies that does not often refuse to perform its office at the percept of will, and that does not often exercise its function in the defiance of her command” (3). Montaigne argues for the lack of will power playing a greater role through his subjective perspective and limited understanding. Montaigne’s argument stems from his own understanding as he believes that “we do not command our hairs to stand on end, nor our skin to shiver either with fear or desire; the hands often convey themselves to parts to which we do not direct them” (5). This argument for the lack of control stems from his own understanding but definitely cannot help explain all dimensions of a force as strong as imagination. He attributes the inability to “force an absolute conquest over [one’s] faculties” (4) as the reason behind an impression’s strong ability to mold us. This mode of thinking is consistent with the subjective perspective approach because actions and corporal reality are considered to be direct consequences of a measurable force of imagination. He uses similar diction, as he had when Lucretius served as an interlocutor, to depict the basic attributes that are experienced by everyone on an almost daily basis as “shiver[ing] with either fear or desire” (5) is rooted in the incapacity to prevent an imaginative force from immediately conjuring corporal effects. Such an inability for humans to step back each time an imagination strikes the mind and decide whether or not to have it projected on the exterior is commonly understood. But instances during which multiple persons inflict a force upon another would not be fully explained by this lack of self-control subjective perception ideology and an alternative form of transmission of its impact would need to be in place. Such an
alternative form would not only help explain how the powerful effects are relayed but also highlight a counter-mechanism for its mode of transmission; and in this way, argues against Montaigne’s limited understanding to advance towards a concrete understanding of the causes. Montaigne understands his approach’s shortcoming and is quick to move towards intertextuality through literary tradition when “the imagination works not only upon one’s own particular body, but upon that of others also” (6). Ovid, the English poet, believes that “[when we look at people with sore eyes, our own eyes become sore. Many things are hurtful to our bodies by transition]” (6). Montaigne would, under his full expertise have no means of testifying for this element of transmission as it involves another person. An exclusion of such intertextuality would inhibit Montaigne from explaining the times when imagination becomes capable of “offending the foreign object” (6). Ovid uses very simple tone and refrains from very graphic imagery to emphasize the relative simplicity of this mode of transmission that can have similar real corporal effects. Additionally, the simplicity of the sentence structure and tone compared to Lucretius suggests the lack of importance of the exact strength of the imagination necessary to transmit effects. Therefore, this literary intertextuality with a direct quote from an interlocuting philosopher is similar in its ambiguous nature to the folklore.

The theory of imagination can be best advanced through this collaborative and all-encompassing view that takes into account both what one knows best and what tradition has imparted upon the current knowledge base because such a literary technique allows an author to maintain his credibility while delving into concepts that “are not very good authority with [him]” (7). His interactions with the “ancients” (6) sets a deeper understanding of the ambiguities of an impression. A complex theory would have fallen short in the absence of such juxtaposition between the past and the self. Thus, the manners in which Montaigne juxtaposes his own
thoughts and modes of thinking against those of his many interlocutors helps develop a theory of imagination, mediated by intertextuality, that takes into account both the wide variety of sentiments aroused, from the basic to the exaggerated and unimaginable, and the multiple facets of transmitting an impression, which stands to tell the reader about its immense strength in conjuring vivid imaginations.
Works Cited