

4-4-2014

# The Concern over Qualified Creative Genius: A Look into Eighteenth-Century Poetic Fancy

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## Recommended Citation

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THE CONCERN OVER QUALIFIED CREATIVE GENIUS:  
A LOOK INTO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POETIC FANCY

by

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B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2011

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts

Department of English  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 2014

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of English Literature

Approved by:

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March 27, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

ALEXANDRA D. RUDE, for the Master of Arts degree in ENGLISH LITERATURE, presented on March 27, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE CONCERN OVER QUALIFIED CREATIVE GENIUS: A LOOK INTO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POETIC FANCY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Ryan Netzley, Director of Graduate Studies

Using the non-fictional works of eighteenth-century authors like Dugald Stewart, James Beattie, and William Wordsworth in conjunction with the poetry of Charlotte Smith and Ann Radcliffe, among others, the eighteenth-century poetic “Fancy” develops as a representation of the period’s concern over genius and the imaginative mind. Fancy emerges as an entity which overcomes any gendered consideration, and acts as a powerful vessel in which contemplation on understanding and creativity can be identified.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Within eighteenth-century literature, one does not need to look far in order to discover an incorporation of ‘fancy’ or a description of fanciful thought. Within eighteenth-century poetry, it becomes even easier to identify the common incorporation of both fancy and its personified counterpart, the female figure of Fancy. Although fancy’s prevalence has not escaped the notice of critics, both during the eighteenth century and today, much of the current criticism focuses on what Julie Carlson describes as fancy’s “gendered warfare” (167). Within this essay, my argument is two-fold, positing that: (I) contrary to what may initially be inferred, the reality of the invoked fancy – and more specifically that of the personified, female Fancy – is more complicated than it is trivial, working within the poetry of both male and female poets to invoke a strong, female figure of poetic inspiration and power, as well as potentially dangerous emotional agency; and (II) the eighteenth-century preoccupation with defining fancy comes, not from any true gendered suggestion, but instead from an overarching desire to define the mind, thus positioning fancy outside of any true female experience, and into, instead, the human experience as formed through the poet’s mind.

## CHAPTER TWO

## FANCY AS POWERFUL FIGURE

In *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, published in 1783, James Beattie argues for the difference between the concept of imagination and that of fancy: “Imagination and Fancy are not perfectly synonymous. They are, indeed, names for the same faculty; but the former seems to be applied to the more solemn, and the latter to the more trivial exertions of it” (82). Although Beattie immediately recognizes that the two words are often used interchangeably, and by accomplished writers, he recognizes a clear difference in their influence. He suggests that “A witty author is a man of lively Fancy; but a sublime poet is said to possess a vast Imagination,” thus setting up a hierarchy of imaginative forms in which fancy ranks below that of the true imagination (82). The simple author – the man of wit – finds inspiration in Fancy, whereas the poet – the truly sublime mind – invokes imagination. See, also, Coleridge’s thoughts in his *Bibliographia Literaria* (1817), where, according to Bullit and Bate, Samuel Taylor Coleridge placed significant importance on his distinction between fancy and imagination, stating that fancy is “a faculty which is inferior in its scope” and “lighter in character” than that of imagination (8). Yet, when looking within eighteenth-century writing, these stated distinctions begin to blur.

William Wordsworth’s distinction between the concepts of fancy and imagination, as can be seen in his Preface to the *Poems of 1815*, exemplifies a theory that is lacking in concrete observations. In her article, “‘Nice Arts’ and ‘Potent Enginery’: The Gendered Economy of Wordsworth’s Fancy,” Julie Ellison identifies Wordsworth’s distinctions between the two concepts as “ambivalent” (442). She notes that prior to Wordsworth’s writing of *The Excursion*,

and even prior to that of the 1815 Poems, “fancy as a kind of imagination was [...] regarded as feminine – a category variously including the attributes of domesticity, diminutiveness, youth or immaturity, decoration, charm, and sentimentality” (442). Further, “definitions of fancy take the form of catalogues of verbs referring to things *done to* images and ideas” (Ellison 446), definitively taking agency away from any inspiration created by the notably feminized fancy, and subordinating it to the creative process of imagination.

Yet Ellison suggests that Wordsworth’s personally ambivalent distinctions become overpowered by his later work in *The Excursion* (1814), in which he invokes “fancy’s role as the link between industrialization, domesticity, childhood, and poetic response” (462), thus leaving fancy “[o]scillating between defensive firmness and associative release [;] it has too important an ideological role to delight any longer in its own triviality” (464). Wordsworth’s critical fancy and poetic fancy remain at odds. Carlson suggests that the Wollstonecraft–Godwin–Shelley family opposes what much of eighteenth-century criticism would suggest as fancy’s more frivolous mental existence, and instead “accentuate[s] the centrality of fancy to their conceptions of life and their commitment to enlightenment” (167). In Wollstonecraft, specifically, Carlson identifies a resistance to a gendered perception of the “passing fancy,” and a simultaneous rejection of “the gender warfare at stake in efforts to claim the supremacy of imagination” over that of fancy (167). Where, as Carlson suggests, many critics view Wollstonecraft’s fancy within her work, “The Cave of Fancy,” as a cautionary tale against its function within the formation of love, “Wollstonecraft’s [true] criticism is not of fancy but of a world that has constrained women’s choices in life to love and in love to romance heroes. The only hope for changing this reality for women rests in fancy and its capacity to envision other worlds” (168).

However, where Carlson identifies the historical and political power of fancy within Wollstonecraft's – as well as Godwin's and Shelley's – prose, she rejects any possible positive connotation to the commonly called-upon poetic fancy of the period. “What women need is space,” she states, “not regulation, and a view of fancy that is not derived from poets.” Citing Wollstonecraft, herself, in her novel *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*, Carlson suggests that “[p]oets paint a ‘heaven of fancy’ that, by always ‘fencing out sorrow,’ excludes ‘all the extatic emotions of the soul, and even its grandeur’” (169). Yet, where this disparaging usage of fancy may find potential verification within *some* of the poetics of early Romanticism, the reality of its existence is far from entirely void of validity and power. Although much of the criticism surrounding the concepts of fancy and imagination during the late eighteenth century seems to support Carlson's supposition toward the gendered warfare of the poetic fancy, the reality of fancy's poetic usage, calling upon powerful Romantic images of melancholy and the sublime, is seen to possess a powerful agency not otherwise identified within the criticism. Where eighteenth-century critical dismissals of Fancy may seem to undermine any concrete role or positive valuation for its existence, the opposite is actually true; for, ultimately, it is in its complexity – or, using Wollstonecraft's phrase – its varied “emotions of the soul” – that Fancy's true power becomes evident.

Even within Beattie's own poetry, the lesser rankings of fancy begins to lose its clarity when the effects of the phenomenon are traced in conversation. Take, for example, the second book of Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771/4), arguably his most lasting contribution to the poetic sphere, in which fancy (as well as Fancy personified) has a much more complex role than Beattie's phrase “trivial exertions” would suggest. Within the plot of *The Minstrel*, Edwin expresses to the Sage that “Careless what others of my choice may deem, / I long where Love

and Fancy lead to go, / And meditate on heaven; enough of earth I know” (lines 340-2). In Edwin’s opinion, Fancy, linked here with Love, leads toward heaven. The Sage, however, disagrees, telling Edwin that, although he understands his desire, “For soft and smooth are fancy's flowery ways” (line 344), Edwin does not fully understand the dangerous potential that fancy maintains: “And yet even there, if left without a guide, / The young adventurer unsafely plays” (lines 345-6). Edwin’s youthful innocence could find him at the mercy of fancy’s seemingly deceptive ways. This is not to suggest that Edwin’s positive views of fancy are not validated; for, within the poem, there is evidence that Edwin’s flowery fancy does also exist, even the Sage agrees; however, it is the Sage’s impression of danger that most obviously depicts a more complicated view of fancy, and his warning, as it continues, only grows stronger in opposition to Fancy’s powers:

“Fancy enervates, while it soothes, the heart,  
 And, while it dazzles, wounds the mental sight:  
 To joy each heightening charm it can impart,  
 But wraps the hour of wo in tenfold night.  
 And often, where no real ills affright,  
 Its visionary fiends, an endless train,  
 Assail with equal or superior might,  
 And through the throbbing heart, and dizzy brain,  
 And shivering nerves, shoot stings of more than mortal pain.” (lines 352-60)

Fancy’s powers, within *The Minstrel*, go far beyond those of lively wit. In fact, Fancy’s power goes beyond even Beattie’s validated sublime imagination. Where his critical views of fancy belittle the concept to a trivial entity, his poetry suggests quite the opposite. For, as the Sage

suggests, Fancy has the power to not only heighten charm, but also to wrap the hour of woe tenfold, and shoot stings of *more* than mortal pain. Fancy can both present current sorrow and create its own dizzying, shivering pain. Yet, as the Sage does suggest, fancy can also embrace “soft and smooth” and “flowery” ways. It is this versatility that most clearly contradicts a dismissal of fancy’s powerful nature. It is in these very gaps that fancy (specifically, here, the personified female Fancy) gains its power. In other words, fancy’s greatest appeal as a poetic concept comes from its complexity; its power is in its ability both to transcend to the sublime and terrifying, and to idealize the sweet and lively. Critically, both Wordsworth and Beattie are able to dismiss Fancy as lesser, but, arguably more tellingly, they are unable to dismiss its appeal within their own poetic works.

To gain even better access to Fancy’s multi-tiered power, one need only to look further to the work of other late-eighteenth-century poets. Specifically, the poetry of Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Smith provides an excellent window into viewing these complex notions of Fancy as artistic power. Falling directly between the publications of Beattie and Wordsworth on a historical timeline, both Radcliffe and Smith give Fancy numerous moments in the spotlight within their poetry. What evolves from their work is a strong, often darkened, figure of poetic inspiration and power.

Looking first at Smith, it seems only natural to begin with her Sonnet XLVII: “To Fancy,” in which she first presents the image of Fancy in terms of darkness, opening the poem with the image of a dark queen: “Thee, Queen of Shadows!” (line 1). Fancy, from the start, is not identified as a frivolous entity, but instead as a ruler of the shadows, as a powerful force amidst the darkness. Although femininely personified, the personification allows for fancy to develop as

a complicated entity, not a passing whim. Yet, within Smith's sonnet, Fancy is not limited to darkness:

Thee, Queen of Shadows! – shall I still invoke,  
 Still love the scenes thy sportive pencil drew,  
 When on mine eyes the early radiance broke  
 Which shew'd the beauteous rather than the true! (lines 1-4)

Fancy is recognized both as ruler of the shadows and as the creator of scenes of beauty amidst the early radiance. Taking Fancy one step further, Smith begins to describe a seemingly greater power that Fancy has over the poet as a whole – the power to *choose* whether or not to show the beauteous or the true. It is the Queen of Shadow's pencil which has drawn the beautiful scenes, and Smith's complex image of fancy suggests that it is also within Fancy's power to bring these images to an end.

Alas! Long since those glowing tints are dead,  
 And now 'tis thine in darkest hues to dress  
 The spot where pale Experience hangs her head  
 O'er the sad grave of murder'd Happiness! (lines 5-8)

Within Smith's poem, similarly to Edwin's dilemma, there exists the question of whether Fancy should be allowed to continue to invoke images of unrealistic beauty, or should, instead, be denied in order for the speaker to accept her desolate situation in life. When the speaker finds herself surrounded in sadness, it is only Fancy who can "dress" the darkest hues, for "Experience hangs her head" and "Happiness" has been "murder'd." But again, the speaker is unsure if she should allow Fancy to continue to exert her power over reality. For if she were "no longer" to view Fancy's "false medium" (line 9),

May fancied pain and fancied pleasure fly,  
 And I, as from me all thy dreams depart,  
 Be to my wayward destiny subdued:  
 Nor seek perfection with a poet's eye,  
 Nor suffer anguish with a poet's heart! (lines 10-14)

Although Smith identifies Fancy as casting a more positive light upon an otherwise dreary life, she does not limit Fancy's powers to the frivolous or witty. Instead, Smith creates a clear connection between Fancy's power to represent and that of melancholia, recognizing the uniquely difficult emotional situation that is placed upon the truly gifted poet – no longer to invoke the “Queen of Shadows” would be no longer to render her need to “suffer anguish with a poet's heart.” Calling upon Fancy not only allows for her to “seek perfection” through a poetic eye, but it simultaneously causes her to “suffer” the “anguish” of the “poet's heart,” which provokes the question: if she ceases to invoke Fancy, will she be *able* to seek perfection – will she be able to maintain the poet's eye? Smith seems to be telling us no; that it is only through the enabling mechanism of invoked fancy that these greater powers come to pass. Fancy is needed where the poet fails, in order to navigate through the scenes of life and emotion.

Ann Radcliffe, in her “To the Visions of Fancy,” gives the female personification of fancy a similar agency, equating Fancy, in the very first line of the poem, with the “wild illusions of creative mind” (line 1). Within the poem, it is these illusions that are “combin'd” by Fancy's “magic force” (line 3) with “scenes that touch the heart” (line 4). Like Smith, Radcliffe clearly identifies Fancy's oscillating powers – her potential to inspire feelings both “wildly thrilling” and “sweetly bright”:

Oh! Whether at her voice ye soft assume

The pensive grace of sorrow drooping low;  
 Or rise sublime on terror's lofty plume,  
 And shake the soul with wildly thrilling woe;  
 Or, sweetly bright, your gayer tints ye spread,  
 Bid scenes of pleasure steal upon my view,  
 Love wave his purple pinions o'er my head,  
 And wake the tender thought to passion true... (lines 5-12)

Before presenting images of Fancy's lighter side, Radcliffe's poem identifies Fancy as fully capable of invoking solemn imagery, pointing to images of both sorrow and terror, which "rise sublime" on a "lofty plume." These are far from the lively images created by Beattie's witty author. And although within Radcliffe's poem, similarly to Smith's, she identifies a disconnect between Fancy's vision and that of reality, it is through this very power of manipulation – whether it be through visions of pleasant beauty or through the terrifying sublime – that Fancy's poetic appeal is at its height. In the final line of the poem, as in the opening, Radcliffe again mentions Fancy as an illusion: "O! still-ye shadowy forms! Attend my lonely hours, / Still chase my real cares with your illusive powers!" (lines 13-14). As in the opening line, where the illusions are "wild" and of the "creative mind," they are notably directly presented here as *powers* – as being powerful, through a means that cannot be tied down, which remain elusive, even to the artistic mind of the poet.

Calling back to Smith's sonnet, as well as Beattie's Sage, the picture of fancy within Romantic poetry takes on a complicated purview, in which the personified Fancy seems to not only envelop a sense of personal power, but also to project these powers onto the mind of the poet. It is through Fancy's inspiration that poets reach the beautiful and sublime, but, also, it is

through Fancy that poetic minds can find danger. It is Fancy that holds the poetic power. Within the opening stanzas of Smith's most famous poetic work, "Beachy Head," for example, Fancy seems to progress beyond the space which the poet is willing to travel:

On thy stupendous summit, rock sublime!  
That o'er the channel rear'd, half way at sea  
The mariner at early morning hails,  
I would recline; while Fancy should go forth,  
And represent the strange and awful hour  
Of vast concussion... (lines 1-6)

In a tone completely devoid of the frivolous nature of the witty poet, Smith chooses to invoke Fancy. "Fancy fondly soars" (line 87) among the sublime, and often frightening, landscape – she goes forth and represents "the strange and awful hour," while the poet remains behind.

It is safe to posit that, at a period in which both the terror and awe of the sublime were cherished for their artistic values, the critical association of Fancy with trivial modes of wit, at best, inconsistent. For the frivolous fancy of Beattie, Wordsworth, and other critics of the period is not the Fancy personified within Smith's and Radcliffe's works, nor is it the Fancy present in the poetic works of the critics themselves. What takes shape, instead, is a powerful, Muse-like entity, inherently possessing and dispensing a sense of poetic agency to the invokers of its power. For it is in Fancy's very ability to transcend both the terrifyingly sublime and the fantastically beautiful that her greatest power is invoked. For Fancy has the power to not only distract the aching heart, but to also, as Beattie's own Sage suggests, "Assail with equal or superior might, / And through the throbbing heart, and dizzy brain, / And shivering nerves, shoot stings of more than mortal pain" (lines 358-60).

Yet, even further, beyond fancy's ability to depict the sublime and dangerous, comes its power to transcend the poet's own limitations. In this way, it becomes evident that fancy is not, as is often contended, wrapped within a specific gendered economy of the eighteenth-century. Fancy is, instead, more clearly linked to the period in that its powers and inspiration match the time's interest in cultivating and understanding the complexities of the mind. The repeated desire of eighteenth-century critics to distinguish between passing fancy and true imagination only further points to a culture that is attempting to develop a deeper comprehension of the faculties of the human psyche.

## CHAPTER THREE

## FANCY AS CONTEMPLATION OF GENIUS

Sascha Talmor argues, in her article “Fancy and Imagination in Coleridge’s Poetics,” that Coleridge’s distinction is “not a psychological but a critical distinction; the use to which these terms are put in his applied criticism is not descriptive but evaluative; the difference between fancy and imagination is, in the final count, simply the difference between good and less good or bad poetry” (240). Where this may be true of Coleridge’s distinction to a point, Talmor undervalues the most telling point of the distinction – his attempt to make it. It is Coleridge’s, as is Wordsworth’s and Beattie’s, continuous attempt to qualify the powers of both imagination and fancy that provides a relationship to the common notion of eighteenth-century qualifications of the faculties of the mind.

Ellison, in her discussion of Wordsworth’s complex gendered ideology of fancy, relates her view of “[t]he way fancy’s associated qualities reinforce its feminine gender” to “a study in the association of ideas” (448). She further suggests that “[b]y the time Wordsworth is thinking seriously about fancy, it was well established as an inferior but therapeutic faculty or mental genre” (447). Showing a similar established link of fancy to that of a mental genre, Carlson identifies Wollstonecraft’s “The Cave of Fancy” as “position[ing] fancy at the heart of the problematic that her writings repeatedly explore: how a woman with thinking powers is at odds with her heart and the world. Even more intriguingly, it places the education of a young girl under the auspices of fancy and equates the acquisition of knowledge with storytelling” (167). Although both Ellison and Carlson wrap their conclusions on the exploration of fancy as a mental faculty in a question of feminist perspective, they notably recognize its position as that

which is being defined in terms of the mind. It is this underlying distinction that I argue is actually more accurate, and yet thus far undervalued, in defining fancy's role in eighteenth-century poetry.

Joel Black, in writing for *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, suggests that

“[t]he Romantics’ great critical achievement [...] was their investigation a century before Freud into the mind’s vast unconscious processes. The Romantics did not discover the unconscious; the mind’s dark side had been known in a variety of forms since antiquity, and was conceptualized in the eighteenth century as the magnetic fluids and animal electricity which the mesmerists supposedly manipulated in an early form of hypnotism. But it was during the Romantic period that the role and range of the unconscious operations in human life and artistic creation became widely recognized.” (130).

It is this recognition of unconscious operations and their relationship to artistic creation that underwrites the debates between that of imagination and fancy. Where fancy may appear to be gendered through its depiction of the beautiful, not only does this prove to be only a portion of fancy’s vast depictions, but categorizing eighteenth-century poetic fancy along these lines limits the historical context in which it can be understood. Fancy exists more adequately as a projection of unconscious operations and their relation to natural imagery.

Looking back at Beattie’s *Minstrel* under this lens, a greater concern over the consequences of the invoked fancy for the creative mind becomes more clearly evident. For, as stated earlier, Beattie’s Sage describes fancy as acting dangerously within her ability to choose to either soothe or bring further sorrow to the poet: “Fancy enervates, while it soothes, the heart, / And, while it dazzles, wounds the mental sight” (lines 352-3). It is the mental sight, specifically,

that the Sage is concerned for. Furthering his point, the Sage suggests that Fancy's "visionary fiends" (line 357) "Assail with equal or superior might, / And through the throbbing heart, and dizzy brain, / And shivering nerves, shoot stings of more than mortal pain" (lines 358-60). It is not only through the heart that Fancy can do its damage, but also through the dizzy brain.

Ultimately, what Edwin is requesting of the Sage is knowledge. Yet, the Sage is hesitant to honor Edwin's request, due to the loss of innocence that Edwin will endure from being educated on the realities of society. It is within this framework that Beattie approaches, poetically, the ambiguous distinctions of fancy. Defining fancy's powers becomes part of a greater scheme to define knowledge and education. Fancy's presence remains entrenched in a discussion of its mental mobility.

In his 1792 publication *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, Dugald Stewart, Scottish philosopher and member of the Common Sense school of philosophy, discusses an eighteenth-century view of the mind: "We are not immediately conscious of its existence," Dugald states, "but we are conscious of sensation, thought, and volition; operations, which imply the existence of something which feels, thinks, and wills. Every man too is impressed with an irresistible conviction, that all these sensations, thoughts, and volitions, belong to one and the same being," namely, the mind (3). Although Stewart does, briefly, try to create a hierarchy between fancy and imagination, he states that,

it is only to [the] prevailing practice [of authors] that we can appeal as an authority. What the particular relations are, by which those ideas are connected that are subservient to poetical imagination, I shall not inquire at present. I think they are chiefly those of resemblance and analogy [...] and, for this purpose, the

word *fancy* would appear to be the most convenient that our language affords.  
(284)

Stewart sees the distinction between imagination and fancy as superfluous to the discussion of the capacities of the mind. As far as poetical Fancy is concerned, and Stewart does make the distinction between general fancy and poetic Fancy, he suggests that

the favourite excursions of Fancy, are from intellectual and moral subjects to the appearances with which our senses are conversant. The truth is, that such allusions please more than any others in poetry [...] presuppose[ing], where it is possessed in an imminent degree, an extensive observation of natural objects, and a mind susceptible of strong impressions from them. [...] And hence probably it is, that poetical genius is almost always united with an exquisite sensibility to the beauties of nature. (309)

Stewart views poetic Fancy as a link between intellectual and moral subjects to subjects which the human senses can perceive, most specifically natural beauties. Relating fancy to Common Sense philosophy, Stewart bridges the gap between the personified Fancy and that of real world existence, doing so through a discussion of the mind. Similarly, I see Smith and Radcliffe as linking their own bodily experiences to that of higher thinking and creativity through fancy. Thus, fancy becomes integrated in both the beautiful and the sublime, as a way in which poets can navigate through their natural senses in order to produce poetic works.

Donelle Ruwe astutely suggests that Smith, within her poetry, uses her extensive language of botany to link the ideas of fancy to that of non-gendered science. Looking, again, at Smith's "Beachy Head," Ruwe suggests that "Smith's speaker shows no fear that she may lose herself in contemplation and shows no need to master or struggle against the nature she

describes” (127). Yet, although Ruwe is accurate in suggesting a language that brings “Beachy Head” beyond a lesser power, her suggestion that the Smith’s speaker shows no fear is not entirely true. For, as the speaker suggests in the poem’s opening lines, here on approaching the “stupendous summit, rock sublime” (line 1), the poet “would recline; while Fancy should go forth” (line 4). Stewart’s link between the physical world and poetic inspiration seems to more accurately depict this initial setup. When the physical body of the poet can no longer move forward, Fancy – or, in simplified terms, the poet’s mind – takes over to “represent the strange and awful hour” (line 5). Smith, taking part in the exploration of the mind’s faculties for knowledge, imagination, and creation, depicts Fancy as the guide through which the poet can explore more complex issues, as well as sublime images of natural scenes. This is not to say that Ruwe is incorrect in her assertion that Smith purposely places her “fanciful” poetry within a scientific realm; quite to the contrary, this fact is clearly evident. However, Smith’s integration of fancy with science goes beyond her extensive understanding of botany, and furthers itself within her time’s present preoccupation with understanding, scientifically, imagination and the mind. Furthermore, even beyond the rendering of the eighteenth-century poetic fancy as being able to traverse through physical locations that the body cannot reach, fancy is depicted as navigating beyond that which human emotions struggle to endure.

As Murray Wright Bundy discusses in *The Theory of Imagination*, fancy is linked to that of classical and medieval *phantasia*, where imagination is linked to *imaginatio*. Medieval imagination “suggested, not artistic freedom, but the making of copies, imitation” (277). *Phantasia*, on the other hand, was “comparatively free from those implications; but its virtue was also a disability. Its freedom [...] implied its dangers” (460). J. Engel furthers Bundy’s claim, positing that “[p]hantasia originally carried suggestions of creativity and free play of

mind, a power generating images and combinations of images not previously found in nature or sense experience” (*New Princeton Encyclopedia*). In her unfinished work “The Fields of Fancy,” published posthumously, Mary Shelley depicts the “lovely spirit” Fantasia as visiting her speaker in a time of need (90). Shelley’s Fantasia seems to call back to this medieval vision of *phantasia* as described. Shelley’s Fantasia delivers the poet, once she has failed to navigate her own natural space, to a space in which she is inspired and capable of creating literary works.

Within “The Fields of Fancy,” the Mary Shelley in the story – the narrator – does not willingly go with Fantasia. The narrator suggests that “the weight of grief that oppresses me takes from me that lightness which is necessary to follow your quick & winged motions” (91). Yet, Fantasia, knowing best, comes for the narrator while sleeping, transporting her to the Elysian Fields. It is there where Fantasia waits, and “as she smile[s] all the enchanting scene appeared lovelier – rainbows played in the fountain & the heath flowers at our feet appeared as if just refreshed by dew” (92). This is Fantasia’s choice – to bring the narrator to the Elysian Fields, where she can learn from Diotima, the instructress of Socrates (94), and better deal with her grief. It is Fantasia that has the power to make nature more beautiful. It is this choice of power, this decided option of Fantasia’s, that is important. She tells the Shelley-narrator, while trying to convince her to follow,

I have many lovely spots under my command which poets of old have visited and have seen those sights the relation of which has been as a revelation to the world – many spots I have still in keeping of lovely fields or horrid rocks peopled by the beautiful or the tremendous which I keep in reserve for my future worshippers – to one of these whose grim terrors frightened sleep from the eye I formerly led you but you now need more pleasing images & although I will not promise you to

shew you any new scenes yet if I lead you to one often visited by my followers  
 you will at least see new combinations that will sooth if they do not delight you –  
 (91)

Although “The Fields of Fancy” is not a poetic work, she seems to incorporate Fantasia, the figure of Fancy, in much the same light as Smith and Radcliffe. Fantasia’s exclamation to the Shelley-narrator depicts a fancy that inspires poets to write both that which is beautiful and that which is terrifying (here, specifically, Fantasia is suggesting that she previously led Shelley to her inspiration for *Frankenstein*). Fantasia is capable of delivering the poet to a space based on the poet’s emotional needs. Where the narrator is failing to overcome her emotional response to personal tragedy, it is Fantasia that leads her toward writing, for it is in the Elysian Fields that the story of Mathilda is heard. Shelley places “The Fields of Fancy,” as the frame-narrative for her novel *Mathilda*, much as other eighteenth-century poets place Fancy as the framework for their poetry.

Within “The Fields of Fancy,” there is no discernible connection to a gendered warfare against fancy. It is certainly true, to the contrary, that the figures of Fantasia and Diotima are depicted as strong, female characters, representing knowledge and inspiration. Yet, even beyond this contradiction lies the fact that there seems to be no difference between the ways in which Fantasia and Diotima inspire great writers, for it is Diotima, herself, who instructs the great, and obviously male, philosopher Socrates. What “The Fields of Fancy,” seems to be concerned with, especially in relation to its position as a frame-narrative, is a poet’s relationship to writing. Fantasia is ultimately linked, through Shelley’s work, with human emotions and artistic motivation. She bridges the divide that the narrator cannot physically surpass alone. It is only

while sleeping, while the Shelley-narrator is allowed to become detached from her physical space, that Fantasia is able to bring her to a space where she can soothe her deep depression.

It is in this same manner that I argue eighteenth-century poets depict fancy. What many critics see as a gendered existence for poetic fancy amounts to nothing more than a personified gender. The simple fact that fancy is often presented throughout eighteenth-century poetry as a female entity does not necessarily equate it to a gendered existence. Numerous critics discuss the uses of fancy within the works of dominant eighteenth-century poets, trying to flesh out the realities of fancy's gendered existence. Great strides have been made to counteract past critical reception and controversies over the separation between fancy and imagination as inadequate, positing that fancy's gendered location below that of imagination is not necessarily reflected within specific works. I expand this argument further, suggesting that, not only does fancy's existence go far beyond a limiting gender, but it is not limited by gender descriptions whatsoever.

Poetic fancy, as well as the eighteenth-century critic's desire to define and rank it, comes not from a supposition of the power of male intellect over that of female thought, but instead from a universal desire to define mental capacities. As Dugald Stewart suggests,

[i]t is obvious that a creative imagination, when a person possesses it so habitually that it may be regarded as forming one of the characteristics of his genius, implies a power of summoning up, at pleasure, a particular class of ideas; and of ideas related to each other in a particular manner; which power can be the result only, of certain habits of association, which the individual has acquired. It is to this power of the mind, which is evidently a particular turn of thought, and not one of the common principles of our nature, that our best writers (so far as I

am able to judge) refer, in general, when they make use of the word *fancy*....

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Eighteenth-century fancy exists within a world of thought that desires to locate the differences between association and imagination, between poetic genius and “natural” thought. If Coleridge’s distinction between imagination and fancy is, in fact, only a distinction between what he sees as good and bad poetry, as Sascha Talmor suggests, it is based in a broader context of late-Enlightenment thought which is similarly preoccupied with classifying mental capabilities, and their relationship to artistic expression.

Within the poetic works of Beattie, Smith, and Radcliffe, as well as within the prose of Mary Shelley, fancy emerges as an entity void of gendered politics. Fancy’s presence within eighteenth-century poetic works is born, instead, of an overarching concern with understanding genius and all that comes with it. The acquisition of inspiration, whether based in knowledge and learning, or found, instead, in some higher capacity of the imaginative mind, is a distinction that not only eighteenth-century poetry, but eighteenth-century literature, in general, is concerned with navigating through. It is in this way that fancy overcomes its gendered consideration, and comes to represent a universal contemplation of understanding and creativity. In a literary era that values both the power of education and the sublime relation of person to poet, it only makes sense that many of the period’s most popular poets would choose to try to qualify these distinctions. Fancy becomes a projection of the poetic mind, in all of its beauty and terror. When the poet’s creative presence can no longer move properly through his or her contained, physical and emotional presence, it is fancy that paints the picture of genius. The varying and specific distinctions made between the powers of fancy and those of imagination are, ultimately,

irrelevant. It is the desire to understand the creative mind that offers the greatest illumination into the mind of the eighteenth-century poet.

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The Concern over Qualified Creative Genius: A Look into Eighteenth-Century Poetic  
Fancy

Major Professor: Dr. Ryan Netzley