

**THE TENTH MUSE:  
HEMP AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION  
FOR SHAKESPEAREAN LITERATURE?**

Francis Thackeray  
South Africa

P.O. Box 37526, Faerie Glen 0043  
Pretoria, South Africa  
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*Cannabis sativa*, hemp, hashish or "dagga", is a "weed" with psychoactive properties. The potency of the hallucinogen varies, depending on the strain of the plant and on the mode of consumption of resins derived from its flowers, seeds or leaves, smoked or eaten (Conrad 1997). Moderate use of hemp and other hallucinogens can allow users (including artists and poets) to function in stimulated states, but when used in excess the effects can be deleterious.

Individuals under the influence of hallucinogenic compounds often perceive bright multi-coloured imagery in darkness. Such images, frequently geometric in nature ("entoptics"), have their origin in excitation of the central nervous system (Siegel, 1977). Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988), Thackeray (1990) and others have discussed perceptions of entoptic imagery and "out-of-body mind-travel" in the context of hallucinogens, prehistoric art and ethnography from various regions of the world. It is considered that "out of body travel" and entoptics can be experienced by people of many cultures, determined by neurological processes but influenced by individual perceptions and cultural traditions. The possibility that at least some literature as well as art may be associated with hallucinogenic stimuli, deserves consideration.

In terms of a "trance hypothesis", Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988) suggested that much of the prehistoric art in southern Africa may have been associated with imagery related to altered states of consciousness, including the perception of "entoptics". 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic data, including descriptions of rock art by so-called "Bushmen" (Khoisan) informants, indicate metaphors for trance experiences expressed in art. Thackeray (1990) showed that some concepts reflected in prehistoric rock art of southern Africa may also be expressed in the ethnography and language of Nguni people, including Xhosa, and certain examples of rock art showing human figures at or near the top of ladders could be imbued with associations of "being high" (*cf* trance states). Associations between trance (hallucinations), entoptic imagery, and prehistoric art may apply not only to certain rock engravings and paintings of southern and eastern Africa, but also to some Upper Palaeolithic rock art in Europe, as well as to various geometric designs in American rock art (Lewis-Williams and Dowson, 1988).

Hallucinogens are not necessarily essential to induce entoptic imagery, but hemp can have been

used as a source of inspiration for authors as well as artists. Siegel (1997) notes that French writers belonging to the "*Club des Haschichins*", including Dumas and Victor Hugo, "testify to the richness of imagery induced by hashish". In terms of a recently proposed hypothesis (Thackeray 1998), it has been suggested that Shakespeare was aware of the hallucinogenic qualities of hemp. If he used hemp during part of his life, notably the period during which his sonnets were written, perhaps between 1590-1600, he may have wished to hide his identity and his use of this substance, for fear of being an "outcast" (*cf* Sonnet 29) in Elizabethan society.

In this manuscript, I cautiously question whether Shakespeare made veiled reference to hemp as a "noted weed" in Sonnet 76; whether (in at least some of the sonnets) he addresses trance-inspired imagery as if he were addressing someone in person ("thee" and "thou"); and whether the person whom he addresses as "thee" represents a perceived source of inspiration (*cf* muse) for at least some of his verse. Shakespeare does in fact refer to "thee" as his "tenth muse" (Sonnet 38) when he addresses the otherwise unnamed subject of his sonnets.

Conrad (1997) states that the use of hemp can lead to subjective experiences of "inner dialogue". In sonnets attributed to Shakespeare, the almost conversational verse addressed to "thee" or "my sweet love", may be interpreted in various ways. In at least some of the sonnets, it may reflect an expression of a bond between the sonneteer and his personification of imagery perceived in altered states of consciousness. This possibility allows for novel re-assessment of some Shakesperian sonnets, in terms of imagery and "out of body mind-travel" perceptions of the kind previously explored in the study of art. Particular attention is given here to Sonnet 27:

*Then begins a journey in my head, to work my mind, when body's work's expir'd:  
For then my thoughts (from far where I abide) intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee*

and Sonnet 76:

*...invention in a noted weed, [so] that every word doth almost tell my name,  
showing their birth, and where they did proceed..*

It may be suggested that the sonneteer's use of "weed" is not only a veiled reference to hemp, but is also a reference to a perception that the use of hallucinogenic compounds was a source of inspiration (*cf* muse) for verse. In the same sonnet, he refers to his disregard for other "compounds", preferring instead the "noted weed".

A term for hemp is "shake", which happens to be very close to the name "Shakespeare". It cannot be certain that Shakespeare was intentionally avoiding the fact that that word "*doth almost tell my name*", in the context of "*a noted weed*". However, in Sonnet 17, Shakespeare asks:

*Who will believe my verse in time to come...  
If I could write the beauty of your eyes  
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,  
The age to come would say, 'This poet lies,  
Such heavenly touches ne'er touch'd earthly faces'.  
So should my papers, yellow'd with their age, be scorned,  
Like old men of less truth than tongue;*

*And your true rights be term'd a poet's rage*

It could be suggested that the sonneteer is referring to imagery "touched" by heaven perceived in an altered state of consciousness. Perhaps he is expressing a concern that others may scorn him in future times, dismissing his attempted descriptions of beautiful entoptic imagery as a reflection of a "poet's rage".

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the character Theseus describes imagery associated with a poet's "frenzy" that could potentially be associated with altered states of consciousness, and in the same play there are references to the potency of certain plants that induce dreams (hallucinations).

Was hemp known in Europe or used as a hallucinogen in Elizabethan times? Certainly. Portuguese travellers in India were aware of hallucinogenic hemp in the sixteenth century. Notably, just one year before Shakespeare's birth, G. da Orta (1563) had written "*Colloquies or the simples and drugs of India*", which included reference to the properties of resinous *Cannabis*. European explorers passing through southern Africa were also aware of the use of *Cannabis* among indigenous African populations (Abel, 1980).

Industrial hemp has been used for clothing, rope and paper for several centuries in Europe, and a number of lines in Shakespeare's plays make use of the word hemp or "hempen" to refer to garments. (Incidentally, in South Africa, the Afrikaans word for a shirt is "hemp", evidently derived from former use of the word in Europe, referring to items of clothing). However, the following line would seem to reflect at least a knowledge of the use of resinous hemp in the context of weapons that might have been used in assassinations:

*Ye shall have a hempen candle then, and the help of a hatchet* (Henry VI Part 2, Act 4, Scene 7).

The use of resinous hemp (hashish) to encourage assassins is documented for the period of the Crusades, and a candle impregnated with hemp-derived resins could "fire up" human spirits before assassination plots.

Shakespeare uses the word "phantasma" in the context of an assassination plot, when Brutus speaks the lines

*Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar, I have not slept. Between the acting of a dreadful thing and the first motion, all the interim is like a phantasma or a hideous dream* (Julius Caesar. Ac II, sc. 1).

In a tormented mind, Macbeth "sees" an imaginary dagger <sup>before</sup> ~~after~~ carrying out an assassination, and Lady Macbeth similarly perceives an imaginary "damned spot". Such perceptions are consistent with the use of hemp to "fire up" the spirits of assassins, inducing imagery (including spots) of the kind perceived by Lady Macbeth and her husband.

In the context of the assassination plot to kill Caesar, Shakespeare describes the experience of a "phantasma" as a time when "*genius and mortal instruments are then in council*". Extending a Shakespearean metaphor, one may perhaps consider Shakespeare's own "genius" in terms of

the use of hemp as a neurological stimulant and an emotional stimulus: a source of inspiration or "muse" for writing. Perhaps this can be identified with the "tenth muse" (Sonnet 38).

Conrad (1997) notes that the use of hemp (in moderation) can stimulate creativity. Of course, excessive use of hallucinogenic substances can lead to addiction, but it is tempting to consider that some of the sonnets reflect disillusionment associated with addiction ("vassalage", Sonnet 26; and "vassal", Sonnet 58).

Did Shakespeare perceive geometric entoptic imagery? It is tempting to consider reference to "seeing" images in darkness as support for this possibility. Notably, in Sonnet 27 (previously cited in the context of a "*journey in my head*"), the sonneteer writes:

*Looking on darkness which the blind do see,  
Save that my soul's imaginary sight  
Presents thy shadow to my sightless view  
Which, like a jewel hung in ghastly night,  
Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new.*

The very nature of a multi-faceted jewel, cut geometrically to reflect a multidimensional spectrum of dynamic colours, is potentially identifiable with trance-related (entoptic) imagery.

Sonnet 43 refers to eyes of the sonneteer seeing "thee", the subject of the sonnet:

*When I sleep, in dreams [mine eyes] look on thee, and darkly bright,  
are bright in dark directed...when dreams do show thee me.*

Such imagery is also potentially identifiable with trance-related imagery, where bright and dark images can be perceived in a dynamic array. Reference to "dressings of a former sight" (Sonnet 123) offers further support for trance-related interpretations. The term "dressings" could be considered to refer obliquely to hemp (cf garment), but the reference to "dressings of a former sight" could (in context, with reference to pyramids and antiquity) be conceptually associated with perceptions inspired by trance in distant times, including geometric imagery such as triangular and pyramid-shaped objects, perceived in trance. In sonnet 53, Shakespeare writes "you in Grecian tires are painted new", and Grecian art certainly does incorporate geometric imagery of the kind known to be associated with "entoptics". Geometric imagery perceived in altered states of consciousness, and expressed in prehistoric art of various cultures of distant times, has been the subject of discussion by Thackeray *et al* (1981) and Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988), who referred to entoptic imagery in the context of "The signs of all times" in a paper published in *Current Anthropology*.

In Sonnet 53, Shakespeare asks "*What is your substance, whereof are you made, that millions of strange shadows on you tend?*", and in Sonnet 37 he says "*This shadow dost such substance give that I in thy abundance are sufficed*". Is it possible that Shakespeare is addressing imagery perceived in trance, personified, and addressed in verse? This could also be applied to the lines in Sonnet 53: "*Then thou whose shadow shadows doth make bright, how would thy shadow's form form happy show*".

Conrad (1997: 39) states that in trance states, induced through use of *Cannabis*, individuals can be affected in such a way that they function both as participant and observer. It would seem that this kind of condition may be reflected in Sonnet 62, in which the poet writes:

*When the glass shows me myself indeed, 'Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise.*

If the sonneteer is addressing his image in a mirror, it would seem that he could be identifying himself with the "person" whom he addresses as "thee", a mirror image of himself being perhaps analogous to his perceptions of imagery in trance states.

Modern subjects have described trance-related imagery in terms of perceptions of themselves "framed". In Sonnet 24 we have:

*Mine eye hath played the painter...  
My body is the frame wherein [thy beauty's form is] held.*

Perhaps the sonneteer perceived that his writings would serve as a "monument". In Sonnet 81 we read:

*Your name from hence immortal life shall have,  
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die:  
The earth can yield me but a common grave,  
When you entombed in men's eyes shall lie.  
Your monument shall be my gentle verse.*

Reference to being "entombed in men's eyes" is not inconsistent with an interpretation associated with the use of a hallucinogen.

If Shakespeare was aware of the deleterious effect of hallucinogenic "weeds", perhaps it was this to which he was alluding in the lines:

*Weed this wormwood from your fruitful brain* (Love's Labours Lost Act 5, Scene 2).

where "wormwood" could refer to use of *Artemisia* and other substances which may have contributed to hallucinations (Thackeray and Knox-Shaw, 1992). In a play on the word "weed", this text could refer to an exhortation to drop the habit of using drugs, and instead to use a "fruitful" brain. Similarly, reference to "These weeds are memories of those worser hours: I prithee, put them off" (Lear, Act 4, Scene 7), could potentially relate to an association between certain hallucinogenic plants ("weeds"), and recollection of "worser hours" in states of addiction. To "*put them off*" may refer to an exhortation to drop the habit. The line "I'll disrobe me of these Italian weeds, and suit myself as does a Briton" (Cymbeline Act 5, Scene 1) could potentially refer to dropping the habit of using hallucinogenic weeds, of the kind which may have been used in Italy but not considered acceptable in Elizabethan England. "Disrobing" can refer to garments, and "suit" itself is a reference to a garment, but the wordplay could relate metaphorically to the use or disuse of hemp.

In Sonnet 1, the poet writes:

*But thou contracted to thine own bright eyes  
Feed'st thy light's flame with self substantial fuel...  
Within thine own bud buriest thy content.  
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,  
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.*

Hemp is known to be an appetite stimulant, especially for sweet food (Conrad, 1997), and imagery associated with eating and gluttony is consistent with hemp being an appetite stimulant. In Sonnet 1, the poet may be saying that the "buds" of hemp have not been widely appreciated. A hemp "bud" is botanically known as a calyx, rich in hallucinogenic resins. "Bright eyes" could refer to imagery associated with perceptions in hallucinatory states of consciousness. Imagery associated with "light's flame" and "fuel" is consistent with the burning and smoking of hemp. The sonneteer would seem to be saying that he considers that the world should be pitied if certain experiences cannot be shared; in this context, it should be borne in mind that smoking was prohibited by King James I.

In Sonnet 2, we read

*Thy youth's proud livery, so gaz'd on now  
Will be a tatter'd weed...  
How much more praise deserv'd thy beauty's use*

Perhaps here the sonneteer considers that the "use" of hemp, associated with beauty, deserves praise; if left unappreciated, hemp will be merely a "tatter'd weed". "Livery" can refer to garments, and "rainment" is associated with clothing, but in Sonnet 23 we have reference to "seemly rainment" that could (at least potentially) be interpreted in the context of hemp-inspired imagery:

*For all that beauty that doth cover thee is but the seemly rainment of my heart.*

In Sonnet IV, the poet writes:

*The unus'd beauty must be entomb'd with thee, which us'd lives th' executor to be*

Perhaps the sonneteer considers that if the world does not get to learn about hemp, the "unused beauty" of the "weed" will not be appreciated; however, if the hallucinogenic plant is used and appreciated, "executors" may ensure inheritance of an appreciation for this plant. The term "executor" can be used in a legal sense, as in execution of a will and ensuring inheritance. However, it can also be used in the context of killing, and (as mentioned earlier) we have evidence for a connection between use of hemp (hashish) and assassination.

In Sonnet V, we read:

*But flowers distill'd, though they with winter meet,  
Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet*

Flowers and seeds of hemp can of course be used after a plant has died (hence "their substance

still lives sweet"). The inhalation of hemp, burnt and "distilled" through water, is a practice associated with hashish.

Conrad (1997:20) states that use of hemp can lead to the subjective sense of "time extension". In fact, he states (p. 39) that "one of the most consistent and marked symptoms of *Cannabis* use is the sensation of prolonged time". In Sonnet 18, the lines:

*Thy eternal summer shall not fade...  
When in eternal lines to time thou growest*

are just examples that could potentially relate to the sonneteer's association between the use of hemp and images of eternity. Of course, in the introductory note to the collection of Shakespeare's sonnets, reference is made to *eternity* and *happiness*, two concepts which can be identified with perceptions experienced by hemp users, who have described their perceptions in terms of senses of time-extension and intense happiness, at least for periods during which the hallucinogen does not have after-effects.

In Sonnet 14, the sonneteer brings in references to astronomy:

*Not from the stars do I my judgement pluck;  
And yet methinks I have astronomy...  
But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,  
And (constant stars) in them I read such art  
As truth and beauty shall together thrive.*

Entoptic imagery, perceived in drug-induced altered states of consciousness, can include associations with astronomical objects, notably bright stars and meteors which are seen as flashes of light, comparable to flashes of light perceived in trance states (Thackeray and Knox-Shaw, 1992). The sonneteer says "But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive". Perhaps the poet sees an analogy between astronomical phenomena and the personification of imagery associated with use of hemp, acknowledging the use of hemp as a source of inspiration (cf the "tenth Muse") for writing?

In Sonnet 11, when the poet writes "*Nature...meant thereby thou should'st print more, nor let that copy die*", the sonneteer could be appealing for the propagation of hemp, and the printing of words inspired by the use hemp. Hemp fibre was used for paper in England in Shakespeare's time. The version of the Bible revised by James I was printed on hemp paper. However, James I was against smoking, as expressed in his *Counterblast to Tobacco*. Further, the Inquisition was against the use of herbal compounds. Inquisitors kept a watchful eye on literature perceived to be associated with supernatural powers that might have included reference to trance-related imagery, associated by some with witches and witchcraft. Perhaps for some time in Europe these factors contributed to secrecy regarding the use of hemp by poets, artists and others to whom the hallucinogenic properties of hemp were known.

Sonnet 20 is potentially identifiable with trance-related imagery, human perceptions and emotions, without referring to any stimulus or source of such imagery, other than reference to "Nature's hand":

*A woman's face, with nature's own hand painted,  
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;  
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted  
With shifting change, as is false woman's fashion:  
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling.*

In this sonnet, the sonneteer could again be referring to the personification of imagery associated with the use of hemp. Whereas mortal women may be deceptive and "false", the sonneteer may perceive that the beauty which he personifies has superior qualities. The reference to rolling eyes and eyes that are "more bright" can be potentially associated with hallucinatory experiences related to the use of hemp. Shakespeare would seem to be identifying "thou" with a person whose perceived facial appearance is like that of a woman, but he would also seem to be saying that his image of the woman's face has been "painted" by nature. A possible explanation for such expressions lies potentially in hemp-inspired imagery - hemp itself being a plant found in nature, one that contains natural substances that are known to stimulate both artistic and literary expressions. Perhaps it is hemp, or hemp-inspired imagery, that served as Shakespeare's "tenth muse" to which he refers in Sonnet 38, giving added meaning to his reference to "invention in a noted weed" (Sonnet 76).

I encourage Shakespearean scholars to explore these ideas, in the context of a growing knowledge of hemp, as a hallucinogen and as a useful plant for industrial purposes (Conrad 1997), and in the context of a growing appreciation of Shakespeare's genius and his play on words (Bate, 1997) .

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