Fig. 1. Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619) Portrait of Henry Percy, Ninth Earl of Northumberland, c. 1594-5, miniature on parchment, 25.7 x 17.3 cm (slightly small than A4), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

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3. Impresa, Archimedes, Galileo, ‘Tanti’
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This article can be downloaded from http://www.shafe.co.uk/art/Northumberland.pdf
1. Introduction

Patronage

This is arguably the most cryptic Tudor cabinet miniature. It is likely that is was commissioned by Henry Percy the Ninth Earl of Northumberland (1564-1632), a well known Elizabethan intellectual and cultural figure. He was known as the ‘Wizard Earl’ because of his scientific and alchemical experiments and his large library. In 1594 Henry Percy married Dorothy Devereux sister of Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex.

His southern estates were Petworth and Syon House, the latter he acquired through his marriage to Dorothy Devereux. He was a non-Catholic but argued for Catholic toleration and tried to negotiate with James VI of Scotland to reduce Catholic persecution when he became king of England. This did not happen and Henry’s second cousin and agent Thomas Percy became one of the five conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. As a result Henry Percy suspected of complicity and spent the next 17 years in the Tower of London and was financially ruined by a fine of £30,000.

Date

The most likely date for the painting is between 1593 and 1595, probably 1594-5. According to Roy Strong the style appears to be influenced by Oliver which suggests a date later than 1593.1 In 1593 Henry Percy became Knight of the Garter but there is no Knight’s insignia in the painting suggesting an earlier date. However, two other paintings of Cumberland and Essex do not show their Knights insignia so it appears that this was acceptable.

Description

The painting is unusual in that it does not appear to be homage to the cult of Elizabeth except for the Earl being dressed in black and white (Elizabeth’s colours). However, black is also the colour of melancholy.

The programme for the miniature would have been specified by the Earl to show him as a student of ‘deep philosophical and mathematical studies but imbued with Renaissance occultism and hermeticism.’ 2

It is also unusual because the conventional representation of a melancholic man such as Oliver’s painting of Edward Herbert (Fig. 5) shows the melancholic in an uncultivated greenwood, beneath a tree and often beside a brook. Hilliard shows (or rather Henry Percy specified) a melancholic within a cultivated garden. This raises complex issues about whether the deep thought of the melancholic genius is a return to untamed nature (explored in the eighteenth century by Jean Jacques Rousseau) or associated with the construction of rational thought and the taming of nature. Here we have a melancholic genius associated with rational thought and the measurement and control of nature as indicated by the impresa and the cultivated garden. Roy Strong suggests the rectangular hedge is meant to be square and is a reference to the mathematical arts and one of the ‘four guides to religion’ of which the others are Love, Art and Magic.3

The painting of Henry Percy does not appear to link to Elizabeth although one of her representations as Astraea, the just virgin of the golden age, was associated with Saturn and Saturn is associated with melancholia.

3 Strong (1983), p. 110
The elements of the painting would have been specified by Henry Percy and include:

- Henry Percy, shown reclining in the pose of a melancholic man with a discarded book, hat and gloves. He is dressed in black and white and his shirt is in disarray.
- A cultivated garden on the top of a hill or mountain. The garden consists of a rectangular or square of trees and clipped hedges within a rectangular or square outer clipped hedge. An analysis based on conventional rules of perspective suggest an inner hedge parallel to an outer hedge with a vanishing point in the sky above the top of the picture. This makes the garden look as though it is tilted up or we are looking down on it from a great height. If we are looking down then the background is inconsistent, in fact there is no consistent interpretation based on the rules of perspective. This uncertainty is increased by the base of the far outer hedge becoming the inner wall of the right outer hedge and then the top of the near outer hedge. Henry Percy’s toe rests on the top of the near outer hedge causing difficulties regarding the interpretation of its height. Alternatively this light brown area can be regarded as a path. The single tree in the nearest hedge has a sawn branch and there are four trees in the receding hedge and two trees beyond the far outer hedge.
- Hanging on a branch of the nearest tree in the inner right hedge is a pair of scales. Suspended from the left arm is a globe or a cannon ball balanced by a feather on the longer right arm. Near the feather is the word “TANTI”.

Related Works

Fig. 2. Now attributed to Rowland Lockey, *Henry Percy, Ninth Earl of Northumberland*, c. 1590-95?, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 51.5 × 63.5 mm

Fig. 3. A full length portrait, outside, with an *impresa* in a tree. George Clifford, Third Earl of Cumberland, c. 1590 25.8 x 17.6 cm, National Maritime Museum.

Fig. 4. It also relates to Hilliard’s painting of a young man in a garden shown full length in a cabinet miniature, *Young Man amongst Roses*, c. 1588, V&A

Fig. 5. It is perhaps most closely associated with Isaac Oliver’s *Edward Herbert, 1st Baron Herbert of Cherbury*, c.1610-14

Fig. 6. This painting of the Ninth Earl of Northumberland was by Van Dyck and shows a similar pose with the Earl leaning on the first page of *De A Equeponderantibus* by Archimedes.

Fig. 7. The pose is also related to tomb paintings, such as this detail from the *Memorial Picture of Sir Henry Unton* at the National Portrait Gallery, c. 1596.
2. Melancholia

The best known melancholic of this period is Shakespeare’s Hamlet whose contemplation of alternative possible paths of action leads to madness and inaction.

The ancient Greeks associated the four humours with the four elements and four planets and a person with an excess of the humour was associated with a type of personality. In 190AD Galen associated these types with four temperaments.

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<th>Element</th>
<th>Earth</th>
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<td>Humour</td>
<td>Black bile</td>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>Yellow bile</td>
<td>Phlegm</td>
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<td>Planet</td>
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<td>Temperament</td>
<td>Melancholic</td>
<td>Sanguine</td>
<td>Choleric</td>
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Erwin Panofsky wrote *Saturn and Melancholy* in 1964 about the emergence of melancholy as an artistic temperament. An early writer on this aspect of melancholy was Marsilio Ficino who wrote *De Vita Libri Tres* (1480) and *De Vita Sana* ("On a Healthy Life"). He was the first Renaissance writer to interpret melancholy positively and link it with genius although it was Aristotle who asked ‘Why is it that all men who are outstanding in philosophy, poetry or the arts are melancholic?’ Aristotle concluded that for great intellectuals it was not as a result of overheated humours but a disposition to melancholy and he cited Socrates and Plato as examples of particularly gifted sufferers. Ficino links this with Platonic ideas about different kinds of mania. As a result, in the Ficinian tradition, genial melancholy is distinguished from melancholy associated with black bile which is said to cause not prodigious aptitude but madness. The melancholic was also associated with an interest in mathematics, measuring, numbering, counting and acquiring assets.

The most famous image of Melancholy is by Dürer:

![Fig. 8. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), Melancholia I, 1514, Engraving; 9 1/2 x 7 3/8 in. (24 x 18.5 cm)](image_url)

- The winged personification of melancholy is surrounded by the tools of geometry.
- The 4 × 4 magic square, with the two middle cells of the bottom row giving the date of the engraving.
- The truncated rhombohedron has been the subject of numerous articles.
- The hourglass showing time running out.
- The unbalanced scale despite lack of contained substance.
- The comet and rainbow in the sky.
- Mathematical knowledge is referenced by the use of the symbols: compass, geometrical solid, magic square, scale, hourglass.

There were three types of melancholy—of the imagination (artists), of the reason (philosophers) and of the spirit (theologians and saints).

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3. Impresa

William Camden defines in *Remaines* (pp. 366-7) an *impressa* as:

An Impress (as the Italians call it) is a device in Picture with his Motto or Word, borne by Noble and Learned Personages, to notify some particular conceit of their own, as Emblems... do propound some general instruction to all... There is required in an Impress... a correspondency of the picture, which is as the body; and the Motto, which as the soul giveth it life. That is the body must be of fair representation, and the word in some different language, witty, short and answerable thereunto; neither too obscure, nor too plain, and most commended when it is an Hemistich [a half line of verse], or parcel of a verse.

The balance in the tree is a type of *impressa* although John Peacock suggests it is a visual pun in which the words 'sphere' (O.F. espere) and 'feather' (penne) are pun's on the words 'hope' (espoir) and 'affliction' or 'pain' (peine). The pun is made by Rabelais (1494-1553) and links to Northumberland's family motto 'Esperance en Dieu' (Hope in God) written round a crescent moon (perhaps signified by the sphere). Also note that green is the colour of hope.

The globe balanced by the feather also links to Archimedes' famous dictum 'give me a place to stand on and I will move the earth.' This statement is meant to have been made to King Hiero and was based on his work on levers in which he concludes "Proposition 3: Unequal weights will balance at unequal distances, the greater weight being at the lesser distance' and 'Proposition 6: Commensurable magnitudes balance at distances reciprocally proportional to the magnitudes." 6

Archimedes texts had been translated in 1269 by Moerbeke including a translation of *De canonio* concerning the problems of the steelyard or Roman balance (i.e. the balance of unequal arm lengths). 7

The word 'tanti' is difficult to interpret. It is either Latin or Italian with opposite meanings and is the plural form. In Latin it means 'so much' referring to a trifling amount which is suggested by its scornful use in Marlowe's *Edward II* (Northumberland was a friend of Marlowe). 8 In Italian the 'pene' (feathers) are 'tanti' in the sense of 'so many', numerous and excessive. 9 Constance Kuriyama suggests 'tanti' simply means 'worth so much' or 'this much I weigh'.

Peacock suggests the affliction is the beheading of both his uncle and great uncle signified by the 'beheaded' branch on the left. This is balanced by hope and between the sphere and the feather there are two trees referring to the two generations of ancestors dishonoured. Because two is not many there could even be a suggestion that his father's death in the Tower was a government murder rather than a suicide. The impressa could therefore refer to the family's precarious balance between hope and affliction or it could demonstrate his learning through its reference to a theorem of Archimedes. Note that between 1583 and 1589 Galileo discovered Archimedes and in 1586 he wrote a treatise called 'The Little Balance'. 10

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**As for the multitude, that are but sparks**

**Raked up by embers of their poverty,**

**Tanti! I'll fawn first on the wind,**

**That glanceth at my lips and flieth away** (*Edward II*, I.1.20-23)

9 Peacock (1983), p. 146 provides the reference to this use in a book on symbolism by Giovanni de’ Rinaldi.
4. “Secret Knowledge”

The Elizabethan’s loved secret codes and devices and this painting can be seen as an interlocking sequence of cryptic messages.11

In William Shakespeare’s Love Labour’s Lost (1594) a ‘School of Night’ is mentioned which is thought to refer to a group that met at Syon House that included Christopher Marlowe, John Dee and Walter Raleigh. The School of Night combined esoteric and scientific studies, with hermetic and cabalistic studies.

Hermeticism is ancient knowledge based on the writings of Hermes Trismegistus and thought to pre-date Plato and be based on ancient Egyptian texts. It includes alchemy, astrology and magic and its own religious beliefs in creation, reincarnation and morality. It is related to Rosicrucianism. The Cabala (Kabbala or Qabalah) is based on interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and classical Jewish texts and became popular following the writings of Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572).

The secret knowledge studied by Elizabethan scholars included magic, occultism, numerology, alchemy, astrology, Cabbala and Neo-Platonism. What we call science today was only gradually becoming distinct from these areas of knowledge and the distinguishing attribute was that science is based on observation and measurement of the world rather than interpretation of texts.

Maybe a clue to the painting is provided in George Peele’s poem the Honour of the Garter, dedicated to Northumberland and including the lines:

Through uncouth ways and unaccessible,
Doost pass into the spacious pleasant fieldes
Of divine science and Phylosophie.12

This describes ‘pleasant fieldes’ that are ‘unaccessible’ (on a mountain top) where ‘divine science and Phylosophie’ may be contemplated.

The secret garden contains a rectangular tended inner sanctum that could be intended to be square as the square represents wisdom. In fact it would then be a square within a square which may refer to the technique of *ad quadratum* design based on a double square. This is described by Jonathan Foyle in the design of Hampton Court and it appears likely that Shakespeare’s Globe was based on an *ad quadratum* system of interrelated squares when it was reassembled from the Burbage’s Theatre in 1599.13

The symbolism of squares also included the idea of stability and as the square is ‘firm and constant’ so a ‘constant minded man, even equal and direct on all sides.’14

Fig. 9. The tree trunks in the painting could relate to the straight tree as a symbol of constancy. However, this is not a lovesick man in Arcadia contemplating Elizabeth so the constancy may be the constancy of the contemplative life.

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14 Peacock (1985), p. 147
If we consider the design of the trees we see the tree with the ‘beheaded’ branch is the seventh tree, perhaps referring to the Seventh Earl who was beheaded. Opposite is the feather (‘peine’) and its pun ‘pena’ are words for ‘sorrow’ and ‘affliction’ and for ‘legal penalty’.\(^\text{15}\) In this way Northumberland is saying the beheading was the correct legal penalty but it has left his family balanced between hope and despair.

The figure of Northumberland on the ground could also be a subtle symbol according to Peacock. The book near the head referring to the intellectual effort associated with science and mechanics while the gloves at the other end of his body and near his hand signify the manual labour of scientific experiment and so the complete symbol signifies the balance between theory and practice in all science. The debate about whether the science of mechanics was an intellectual or manual activity was much debated in the sixteenth century as Aristotle had said the intellectual arts are nobler than the manual arts.

5. Conclusion

The programme for the painting would have been constructed by Northumberland possibly in discussion with Hilliard because of his experience in the French Court. Northumberland was one of the scholars of the period and cryptic messages were loved by the Elizabethans so many level of meaning would have been expected.

We have seen the secret garden on a mountain top contains reference to Northumberland’s learning, his melancholic pose and his knowledge of many classical sources both theoretically and practically. The combination of the theoretic and the practical references a new approach to learning that is the beginning of what we understand as science.

Northumberland also possible includes references to his dishonoured family and how this has left him balanced between hope for the future and despair. We know that the balance tilted to despair as he spent years in the Tower (1605-1621) because of his cousin involved in the Gunpowder Plot and Northumberland ironically died on 5\(^\text{th}\) November 1632.

‘Hilliard’s miniatures were often linked with spy missions...Hilliard’s miniatures were considered somehow appropriate...for this kind of undercover work...Sidney’s sonnet devices and Hilliard’s limning devices are in a way themselves “ciphers”...Both poet and limner in developing an artifice of secrecy were “On Her Majesty’s Secret Service.”’\(^\text{16}\)

Unfortunately, we have lost the key and are left with tantalizing glimpses of hidden meanings.

Provenance

9\(^\text{th}\) Earl of Northumberland; to his son Algernon, 10\(^\text{th}\) Earl (1602-68); to his son Joceline, 11\(^\text{th}\) Earl (1644-70); to his only child Elizabeth who married Charles Seymour, 6\(^\text{th}\) Duke of Somerset (the ‘Proud Duke’) documented by George Vertue in 1728, to Charlotte daughter of his second wife Charlotte who married Heneage, 3\(^\text{rd}\) Earl of Aylesford in 1750, then it descended in the family of the Earls of Aylesford until sold by Christie’s, London, 23-VII-1937, no. 45 to Dr. N. Becvh, Amsterdam, then sold by Fred. Muller, 9-IV-1940, no. 66, as a portrait of Sir Philip Sidney, to Dr. M.E. Kronenberg, Rotterdam. The Rijksmuseum bought the miniature in 1981; its catalogue number is RP-T-1981-2.

\(^{15}\) Peacock (1985), p. 147
\(^{16}\) Fumerton (1986), p. 97, footnote 80.
Bibliography


