

## Jeanne Heuving: On "The Paper Nautilus"

If "Bird-Witted" depends for its meaning on a conventional narrative sequence and the contrast between the quick instinctive bird and the slow, intellectual cat, "The Paper Nautilus" is unified through its central symbol, a chambered nautilus shell, and an opposition between inner and outer. The poem, in fact, was written as a gift to Elizabeth Bishop in return for her gift to Moore of an actual nautilus shell. Moore herself seems to have had mothering as well as mentoring inclinations toward the younger Bishop--a kind of mothering that, like the nurturance provided by the chambered nautilus and Moore's own mother, helps by hindering the young. Indeed, as noted previously, Moore seemed to have taken on the behavior of her own mother and urged Bishop--contrary to Bishop's own poetic interests--to express "significant values."

"The Paper Nautilus," about the act of creation as maternal protectiveness and watchfulness, moves from images of an externality, to an internality, and back again:

[. . .]

The poem initially repudiates external enclosures--"teatime fame" and "commuters? comforts"--in the interest of its own definition of an internal and internalized enclosure, love, outwardly symbolized by the nautilus shell. The internality which the poem proposes, while highly intimate, is not stifling: the paper nautilus may "bury" the eggs but it does not "crush" them. The strength of the eggs to free themselves is emphasized by comparing them to Hercules who, although "bitten by a crab loyal to the hydra," succeeded in killing the hydra. The paper nautilus as both crab and hydra, keeps her young eggs from hatching too easily, lest in reaching their full size too quickly they are hindered to succeed, rather than hindered to succeed. (The ambiguity of "hindered to succeed" may be an insiders joke for Bishop, an acknowledgment by Moore of the potentially negative effects of an intense maternal watchfulness.) The poem concludes with its own freed eggs--an external image of arms wound around a Parthenon horse, freely electing love--that links an internal love to its outer appearance, it's "chiton-folds."

Despite its appealing and careful definitions, "The paper nautilus," in comparison with Moore's earlier poems, depends on and reinscribes the conventional oppositions of internal and external, valuing the former over the latter.

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