“Oh, the cold sweating cares which I conceived after I knew I should be cut like a French summer doublet!” (Nashe 349). Thus speaks Jack Wilton in Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller*, when his body betrays his imaginative fears. Such was the focus of the previous chapter, but my attention turns now to the first verb he uses in his exclamation of fear: “conceived.” The word is a telling one, for, I shall argue, it reveals the peculiarly *gendered* nature of the imagination, particularly in its effect on the body. Of course, men, women, children and even animals can use—and are influenced by—the potent force of the physical imagination. Every person’s brain contains the imagination as a physical organ, and every body responds to that imagination, but do men’s and women’s bodies respond in the same ways? If they can control their imaginations, early modern women theoretically have the same rhetorical power as men: their imaginations can influence their own minds (and others’ through publicly disseminated texts) and their imaginations can exert “fascination” over other bodies. While they clearly link women with the body (and therefore assign women considerable influence over material manifestations of the imagination), surprisingly, English male theorists do not seem unduly concerned about the possible social and physical power imagination may grant women. This seeming lack of caution about women presents a conundrum in the history of English Renaissance imagination: do male theorists ignore distinctions between the imaginations of men and women because they did not make any such differentiations, or because the distinction was so taken-for-granted they did not need to mention it? To consider that question, this chapter examines a wide range of texts: theories of imagination as expounded by Renaissance men and women, and also a Shakespearean play about men, women, and the imagination: *The Winter’s Tale*.

**Women, Bodies, and Imagination**

Although most early modern English theorists make apparently little differentiation between men and women and their respective uses of or responses to the faculty of imagination, they still emphasize the variations in men’s and
women’s bodies. Variety in the supposed humours of the male and female body results in powerful implications for the imagination as it operates in both sexes. Timothy Bright, for example, does not deny women the imagination; rather, he emphasizes their susceptibility to a certain manifestation of it: its influence on the body. Women, he contends as an illustration, are especially prone to blushing, a physical materialization of the heart and mind (170). As a Renaissance commonplace, women were often associated with the body, so there is little doubt that they must have, and must be affected by, the imagination which (as I demonstrated in the previous chapter) is inextricably linked to the physical. Bright writes this about the bodily distinctions between men and women and children (the latter two he groups together), a description with diverse humoral implications for a “gendered” imagination:

The third pointe remaineth, for the most easie declaration of this dolefull gesture, of what disposition of body they are of, who are apt to teares. They are almost altogether of a moist, rare, and tender body, especially of brayne and heart, which both being of that temper, carie the rest of the parts into like disposition: this is the cause why children are more apt to weeppe, then those that are of greater years, and women more then men, the one having by youth the body moist, rare & soft, and the other by sex. (143–44)

While this explanation for the weeping of women and children may seem to have very little to do with the imagination, it displays the humoral characteristics assigned to early modern women. Most early modern theorists considered the predominant humours of men and women to be essentially different: men were hot and dry, women cold and moist. This humoral differentiation determines—and complicates—the imagination's impact on and by the different sexes. Bright writes here that women (and their brains) are “moist, rare & soft...by sex.” Thomas Wright agrees that women's bodies and natures are particularly malleable: “Women, by nature, are enclined more to mercie and pietie than men, because the tendernesse of their complexion moveth them more to compassion” (40). Because they are “soft” and “tender,” women's brains must be more receptive to “imprints,” a word both Thomas Wright and Philip Sidney use to describe imagination's impact on the brain.1 Considering the common early modern argument that a malleable brain best receives the impression of imagination, women's brains must be especially well suited for thoughts and imagination.

1 Wright, 114 and Sidney, A Defence of Poesie, 102.