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CAMILLA CAPORICCI*

Emanuel Stelzer, *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 259

Abstract

This review of Emanuel Stelzer's *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances* underscores the originality and fruitfulness of the author's multi-disciplinary approach. The complex topic of staged portraits is explored from a great variety of perspectives and in connection with several aspects of early modern culture. The author is able to reveal the web of interconnections engendered by the staging of portraits in early modern drama, fostering a profound understanding of the ways in which these special props interfaced with issues crucial to the culture of the period.

KEYWORDS: portraits; early modern drama; visual culture; material culture; performance

"No nation in the world delights so much in having their own, or friends' or relations' pictures", Richard Steele wrote in the pages of the *The Spectator* in 1712. This is why, he proudly affirmed, the art of portraiture or "face-painting is nowhere so well performed than in England" (Steele 1837: 337-8). Whether we share Steele's opinion or not, this statement bears witness to a common idea that circulated among English intellectuals in the Renaissance. In response to what they felt as the overwhelming (and rather suffocating) superiority of Continental and particularly Italian painting, they began to claim portraiture, and especially miniature portraiture, as their own: the one field in which the English were "incomparably the best in Europe" (Norgate 1919: 20). This assertion also reflects an actual feature of English early modern painting, which, for a great variety of reasons beyond the scope of this review, was dominated by portraiture. It is to these enormously popular artworks, and particularly to their employment in the equally popular English dramatic production of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that Emanuel Stelzer's book, *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances*, is devoted.

Rooted in the field of intermedial studies, Stelzer's volume fully participates in a wave of scholarly interest towards the relationship between early modern literature and visual arts that has steadily grown in the last century. This trend

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has reached a peak in recent years: suffice it to think of the amount and variety of works published on the subject in 2017 alone, including Michele Marrapodi's *Shakespeare and the Visual Arts*, John H. Astington's *Stage and Picture in the English Renaissance*, Keir Elam's *Shakespeare's Pictures*, Rocco Coronato's *Shakespeare, Caravaggio, and the Indistinct Regard*, and also B.J. Sokol's *Shakespeare's Artists*, published in January 2018.

Focused on the complex topic of staged portraits in early modern drama, the aim of the book, clearly stated at the beginning of the introduction, is an ambitious one: "to investigate how the presentation of portraits changed the interactive dynamics between actors and spectators; how staged pictures could address socially charged topics of the rich, though embattled, visual culture of the time; how these special props were employed by the playwrights and the playing companies to interrogate subjectivity, and, in particular, issues related to gender and class" (2). Availing himself of diverse approaches, ranging from those offered by semiotic and intermediality studies to those proper to visual and material culture, and placing his study at the crossroads of various disciplines, including art history, history of drama and literature, philosophy, sociology, and religious and gender studies, the author does not limit himself to a strictly 'literary' interpretation of the examined portraits. Indeed, he considers them from different and sometimes neglected perspectives and in relation to several aspects of early modern culture, in order to fully reveal, as he affirms, "the web of interconnections that grows out of the presentation of portraits on the early modern English stage" (243).

The book is divided into two main sections. The first one, entitled "The Meanings of Staged Portraits: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives", is devoted to an investigation of the web of interrelated meanings and functions generated by the staging of portraits in early modern England, which is done primarily through an inter-disciplinary, multifocal and well-documented exploration of the visual culture of the period. The section opens with a brief but dense methodological introduction, in which the author, entering in direct (and rather courageous) dialogue with a great number of scholars, discusses the complex dynamics characterizing the theatrical use of portraits as special props and their impact on the audience from a primarily semiotic standpoint. He then proceeds to highlight the importance of considering them as embedded in a specific visual culture. As he explains, the particular form of communication that portraits establish with their spectators is "regulated by subjective as well as socio-cultural pragmatics and modes of sense making", which is why "studying staged portraits requires knowing which type of portraits were present in early modern England and which uses they had in everyday life in different social backgrounds" (22). The next two chapters, therefore, explore several aspects of the visual culture of early modern England, focusing on the history and nature of early modern English portraiture and the ambiguous status of pictures in relation to the Reformation's iconoclasm – a long-debated question that the author treats in an original way, rejecting the iconophobia-iconophilia dualism and underscoring the impact of the early modern transition from speculative to enclosed visibility. In the chapter dedicated to the history of portraiture, the author leads the reader through a comprehensive

exploration of the portraiture of the period, with particular attention to the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, delving into both material and theoretical aspects. He shows how the portrait as we intend it today was in fact born in the late fifteenth century, contributing to new ways of conceptualizing the self and privacy; and he discusses the status of the English painters as well as the development of the market for portraits, which, far from being limited to royalty and aristocracy, extended also to the gentry and the middling sort. Finally, he offers a particularly insightful interpretation of the epistemological value of what he terms the “poetics of limning”: “a complex framework of tropes and rhetorical paradigms that correspond to gnoseological practice of coming to terms with a reality which was understood to be simultaneously opaque (needing revelatory illumination) and vacuous (needing demiurgic re-fashioning)” (62).

It is in the fourth and last chapter of the first section that portraits are finally brought on stage. What the author is interested in is, primarily, the performative function and power of portraits, and not just their role within the dramatic text. To put it in Keir Elam’s words, Stelzer is well aware that “in the domain of the text, the reference to a picture is a verbal event, apparently no different in kind from an allusion, say, to features of the landscape. In performance, however, the picture takes on potentially a quite different, non-verbal, dimension, becoming part of the visible world of bodies, of objects and of costumes, its material and semantic neighbours” (Elam 2017: 15). It is no accident, then, that the title’s last word is “Performances”. Despite the acknowledged difficulty of retrieving the original staging conditions and effects of portrait scenes, the author, profoundly aware of the multisensorial nature of the experience offered by early modern drama, makes a significant (and, I would say, successful) effort to reconstruct the way in which portraits functioned on stage, relying also on first-hand experience of recent productions.

After challenging the scholarly assumption that early modern theatregoers went to “hear” a play rather than to “see” it, and highlighting the sensorial entirety of dramatic performance, the author focuses on the visual component of drama. In particular, he shows how this was perceived as the most dangerous characteristic of drama by Puritan antitheatricalists, on the basis that looking at pictures – meaning both paintings shown on stage but also the play itself, thought of as an essentially visual spectacle, a series of dynamised pictures – could transform the audience, altering their internal balance. Then, the author turns his attention towards his corpus: seventy-six plays, from the Elizabethan to the Caroline period, which feature the staging of a portrait. In order to throw new light onto the pictures’ multiple functions, Stelzer takes into account several material and often neglected aspects, such as the value and price of the staged pictures, and the way in which they represented female characters in a theatre in which women were impersonated by men actors. In this context, of particular importance is the discussion of the size and format of staged pictures. Opposing the dominant scholarly opinion that pictures on the early modern stages were usually miniatures – a position often bound with what the author calls the “obsolete myth of the bare stage” – Stelzer identifies thirty-seven plays in which the staged picture must have been a sizable portrait, designed to be visible to the spectators. This, of

course, opens up novel perspectives on the interaction between actors, portraits and audience, as a visible portrait engenders a set of dynamics entirely different from those prompted by the staging of an invisible (to the spectators) miniature.

In the second section of the book, entitled “Case Studies: Portraits in Action”, Stelzer puts to the test the theoretical assumptions reached in the first part, showing how they can enlighten the dramatic transactions at work in five plays in which the staging of a portrait is endowed with particular significance: William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (and particularly the 1603 First Quarto); John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612); Philip Massinger’s *The Picture* (published in 1630); William Sampson’s *The Vow Breaker* (published in 1636), and William Cartwright’s *The Siege* (published in 1651, but probably performed in 1637). Shakespearean scholars may feel a little disappointed to find no chapter dedicated to other famous portraits featured in the Bard’s plays, such as Portia’s miniature in *The Merchant of Venice*, or Silvia’s portrait in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. However, the fact that the book is deliberately not Shakespeare-centred, unlike the majority of recent studies on the subject, constitutes one of its merits. By giving equal attention to five very different plays, written by very different authors and in different periods, Stelzer offers a more comprehensive and multi-perspective view of the uses and effects of staged portraits, fostering a deeper understanding of the way in which they negotiated issues crucial to early modern visual culture.

The first play Stelzer analyses is *Hamlet*, the only Shakespearean work the author takes into account. The study of *Hamlet*’s famous closet scene, including the prince’s comparison of the pictures of his father and uncle, presents several points of originality in spite of the great amount of literature already dedicated to the subject. In particular, the comparison between the First Quarto (1603), the Second Quarto (1604-5) and the First Folio (1623) reveals that the visual dimension has a stronger role in the first version: the effects of vision, Stelzer argues, appear both more reliable and more prominent. In discussing the role of the portrait in *The White Devil*’s dumb show, both the power of the picture to shape the scene’s main dynamics and Webster’s interest in the materiality of portraiture are highlighted by the author, who claims the crucial importance of the prop as a semiotic focus as well as a transactional agent within the multimodal fabric of the play. In the study of Massinger’s *The Picture*, of particular interest are not only the gender issues that the use of the portrait uncovers, but also the relationship Stelzer establishes between the “magical” picture, humouralism, and the fascinating theories of Giovanni Battista della Porta. The discussion of an actual picture, the woodcut illustration printed with *The Vow Breaker* which features the portrait of a dead character, introduces the exploration of this portrait’s function within the play – a function that Stelzer interprets as a remarkable treatment of the English “theatregram” of the commemorative portrait in tragedy. Finally, an interesting examination of the role of the gaze in *The Siege* reveals the profound connection between the Neoplatonic doctrines permeating the Caroline court and its visual culture, and the concept of Platonic contemplation as it appears in the literature of the period.

The book closes with an extremely valuable appendix: a table detailing the seventy-six plays, from the Elizabethan to the Caroline period, which feature the

staging of a portrait. This table, as the author openly acknowledges, is based on the still unpublished dissertation of Yolana Wassersug (2015). However, Stelzer expands Wassersug's list, adding two plays and inserting useful information including the plays' genre, the names of the playwrights and playing companies who performed them, and the (supposed) size of the staged pictures. Evidently, this will be a useful tool for future studies on similar subjects.

In conclusion, Stelzer's book is both original and daring, offering innovative answers to long-debated issues as well as posing new, stimulating questions. Furthermore, and no less importantly, it is well written: despite the complexity of some of the arguments, the discussion is generally clear and easy to follow, and the dialogue established with a galaxy of extremely authoritative scholars boasts an advisable balance, the author's voice being neither gratuitously arrogant nor uselessly submissive. Finally, the style is fresh and lively, making for pleasant and enjoyable reading.

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