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Ekphrasis in Tudor Drama: The Representation of Representations

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THE PAPER will explore, within the verbal texts of certain Tudor plays, descriptions of non-verbal “texts”: the latter might include not only pictures, tapestries, and sculpted objects but also apparitions and enacted spectacles. We might imagine that all of these could have been “read” by fictive characters before being re-presented in the dramatic texts that we read.

What is the function of such rhetorical strategies? Verbal descriptions of the “characters” or figures depicted in these sister forms can serve to mediate the perception of the audience, often by establishing homiletic or proleptic windows into the action. This had been their function since Homer described the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the *Iliad*; we might also think of the descriptions of the temples of Mars and Venus in Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale” or the set-piece descriptions of paintings in nineteenth-century novels like *Villette* and *Middlemarch*. (Such extended descriptions of paintings, of course, would scarcely suit theatre.)

“Ekphrasis” is a term used by late classical rhetoricians (Aphthonius of Antioch, for example) to describe techniques for bringing people or places to the “mind’s eye”, for verbal description, for making a poem resemble a picture. Later, after generations of school-

boys had imitated the exemplary descriptions in textbooks like the *Progymnasmata* (a set of exercises by Aphthonius), it came to designate a narrower range of descriptions: descriptions or representations not of *realities* but of *representations*, textual strategies that might make pictures like poems or make pictures “speak”. It is not surprising that the subject is topical now: ekphrasis is not only a touchstone for many Renaissance projects, in that many embedded descriptions are concerned with classical subjects, but is a common concern of post-modern texts and post-modern criticism. It reverses the usual direction of comparison contained in the tag “*ut pictura poesis*”. On the MLA online Bibliography in October 2004, the word generated 419 hits, although the modern meaning has not yet found its way into the *OED*.

In my main exemplars, Lyly’s *Campaspe* and, from *Hamlet*, the verbal and visual appearances of the Ghost, as well as the Pyrrhus narrative, we can see how these ekphrastic figures are deployed not just morally, or to modulate *fabula* and *sjuzet*, but psychologically: they are ways of registering internalised perception, of rendering what is both “outside” the action and “inside” the characters. They bind the visible and invisible, what Claudius calls the “exterior” and the “inward man” (II.ii.6).¹

In fact, there are not many extended descriptions of artefacts in Tudor drama; I shall deal briefly with a few before turning to *Campaspe* and *Hamlet*. A picture of the hero, Wit, in a Court play of 1568, *The marriage of Witte and Science*, figures as a ritual token sent to his inamorata, Science. Like photographs on lonely-heart sites today, this image is obviously idealised. However, Wit’s servant, Will, who has to carry the portrait to Science, mocks its quality—or perhaps the actual appearance of the hero:

Sir, let me alone: your mind I understand,
I will handle the matter so that you shall owe me thanks,
But what if she find fault with these spindle shanks,
Or else with these black spots on your nose? (spelling modernised)

This obviously serves two functions: as a comic device for debunking the hero, typical of servant cross-talk in the period, and also as a metatheatrical marker, drawing attention to the distance between role and actor, what may be represented and what can be conceived.

1. See Ackerman.

Pictures could be not only hazardous, by virtue of inviting realities to be set against their flattering idealizations, but also powerful. Despite decades of Reformation iconoclasm, images are often invested with something akin to a talismanic force. In the Painter addition to *The Spanish Tragedy* (which may be by Shakespeare himself [Edwards, p. lxii]), Hieronimo in his madness commands a gallery of pictures depicting the progression of his agony in order to proclaim his pain. These ghostly ekphrases both recapitulate the action and are an index of a crazed mind. Later, in *2 Henry IV*, here is Falstaff, who has just captured Coleville of the Dale and is yielding him up to Prince John. He contrasts the power of a written record with the power of a picture:

Here he is, and here I yield him, and I beseech your grace let it be *booked* with the rest of this day's deeds; or, by the Lord, I will have it in a particular ballad else, with mine own *picture* on the top on 't, Coleville kissing my foot. To the which course if I be enforced, if you do not all show like gilt twopences to me, and I in the clear sky of Fame o'ershine you as much as the full moon doth the cinders of the element (which show like pins' heads to her), believe not the word of the noble. Therefore let me have right, and let desert mount. (IV.i.394-405; emphasis added)

The second part of this reads like the verbal part of a Renaissance emblem—emblem books are prime examples of ekphrases.

At the opening of *The Wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll*, an anonymous Paul's play of 1600, the Earl of Lissenberg, disguised as a painter, declares to his love and model Lucilia that Nature created the world by painting, presumably adorning the substance of God's creation. The obvious explanation for the potency of visual images, as it is evoked in that sequence, is that pictures were much more rare than they are in our contemporary culture, super-saturated with images as it is.

Images could be instrumental too. Given the power that was attributed to pictures and figures, it is easy to see how maleficent image-magic came to be practised.² In *1 Henry VI* the Countess of Auvergne thinks that a picture has enabled her to take prisoner Talbot, terror of the French:

Talbot. Prisoner? To whom?
Countess. To me, bloodthirsty lord;
 And for that cause I trained thee to my house.
 Long time thy shadow hath been thrall to me,
 For in my gallery thy picture hangs;

2. See Thomas, pp. 612-14.

But now the substance shall endure the like,
And I will chain these legs and arms of thine. (II.iii.33-38)

In *Arden of Faversham* (1591), the villain Moseby describes a related kind of malifience, the process of casting a spell known as “fascination”. It depends upon the power of images:

I happened on a painter yesternight,
The only cunning man of Christendom;
For he can temper poison with his oil,
That who so looks upon the work he draws
Shall with the beams that issue from his sight,
Suck venom to his breast and slay himself.
Sweet Alice, he shall draw thy counterfeit,
That Arden may by gazing on it perish. (II.228-34)

In this light I want to defamiliarise a passage in *Hamlet*: the prince is quizzing Rosencrantz:

Hamlet. Do the boys carry it away?
Rosencrantz. Ay, that they do, my lord, Hercules and his load too.
Hamlet. It is not strange; for mine uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mows at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, an hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little. 'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out. (II.ii.332-38)

Does Hamlet mean that the change in the popularity of Claudius is seemingly miraculous, or that his image is reputed to have talismanic or supernatural powers?

As we might expect, there had been a significant number of references to the visual arts in playtexts by the academically inclined John Lyly. As a preliminary, we might take note of a passage in the Dedication to *Euphues* (1578) where Lyly had reminded his readers of the way images, not only verbal but also visual, are to be read as well as seen.

Paratius [i.e., Parrhasius], drawing the counterfeit of Helen... made the attire of her head loose, who, being demanded why he did so, he answered, “She was loose”. (cited Pincombe, p. 43)

This conceit hints that many “characters” are ekphrastic, representations not of “real people” but of representations or images, of textualised bodies. Ekphrasis is all around.

A few years later Lyly embarked on an extended exploration of the power of images in his first play, *Campaspe* (1583). This recounts how Alexander renounces his passion for his humble Theban captive Campaspe when he realises the intensity of the love between her and the artist Apelles. There is a parallel action depicting Diogenes the cynic. I take it that the thematic link is that Diogenes, like Apelles a man prepared to speak up freely before his prince, seeks to expose the power of images. Lyly's Plato and Aristotle with their comical mannerisms display what might be called their "philosophical lifestyle" as they pass across the stage:

Plato. It is a difficult controversy, Aristotle, and rather to be wondered at than believed, how natural causes should work supernatural effects. (I.iii.30-32)

In contrast, Diogenes lives in his tub—the image, of course, is itself a potent one. He also announces his intention to fly, to create a spectacle, and then berates the citizens of Athens when they come to absorb the show (IV.i).

In Act III, the third scene shows Campaspe arriving at the workshop of Apelles. She has been sent there by Alexander in order to demonstrate to the artist that she exemplifies, as he says, "that finished by nature that [the painter] has been trifling about by art"—that line had ended the second act. There she views pictures of Leda, Alcmena, Danaë, Europa, and Antiope, all of whom, as Ovid relates in Book VI of the *Metamorphoses*, had been raped by Jupiter.

Apelles. This is Danaë, into whose prison Jupiter drizzled a golden shower and obtained his desire.

Campaspe. What gold can make one yield to desire? (III.iii.19-21)

Perhaps the sequence was meant to portray an intermingling of the human and divine in the realm of love, that which might be painted but not enacted. However, this dialogue is nicely ambiguous: is Jove a figure for Alexander, whose desire for Campaspe may emerge Jove-like in violent form, or is this a figure for all princes whose licensed power might exceed the bounds of political morality?

Were the pictures visible in Tudor performances? G. K. Hunter thinks that there was no need for the pictures to be shown, but that the boy-players were called upon to gesture towards a mansion or booth that represented the workshop (Hunter, ed., pp. 31-32). If there was a picture of Danaë, was it eroticised or even "bawdified" in the way that Apelles' description suggests? Or does Campaspe's female gaze scorn Apelles' suggestion that the picture depicts not a

rape but an act of prostitution? It turns out, to use Hamlet's terms, that many images or "shapes" were "questionable", ambiguous. Or, as the Poet in *Timon of Athens* remarks, perhaps somewhat acidly, "To the dumbness of the gesture / One might interpret" (I.i.33-34).

Apelles, it turns out, while painting the portrait of Campaspe, falls in love with her, but deliberately blemishes the portrait so that she must constantly return to his workshop. It comes about that Campaspe and Apelles are allowed by Alexander to pursue their love. As Hephestion, Alexander's confidant, remarks, "Commonly we see it incident in artificers to be enamoured of their own works" (V.iv.15-16). This nicely ironises their love: for it could be that Apelles was, as John Donne was reputed to be, in love with the idea of a woman, rather than a creature of flesh and blood:

- Apelles.* Whom do you love best in the world?
Campaspe. He that made me last in the world.
Apelles. That was a God.
Campaspe. I had thought it had been a man. But whom do you honour most, Apelles?
Apelles. The thing that is likest you, Campaspe.
Campaspe. My picture?
Apelles. I dare not venture upon your person. (IV.ii.42-49)

Apelles, it is hinted, may be in love with the "colours", "shadows", "counterfeits" he has created—play upon these words laces the drama. As the Page pertly reports, "The king thinketh that now you have painted it, you play with it" (IV.v.6-7). The device that Alexander deploys to extract Apelles' true feelings is to have a page rush in to say that the artist's studio is on fire, so that he tries to run out to save his painting. Then, in a long soliloquy from Apelles, we hear:

- O Campaspe, I have *painted* thee in my heart: painted? Nay, contrary to mine art, *imprinted*, and that in such deep characters that nothing can raze it out unless it rub thy heart out. (V.ii.16-19; emphasis added)

Perhaps Apelles realises this and abandons painting for verbal inscription—the former is too ambiguous.

As always, Shakespeare pushes further the debates concerning the bounds of form and representation. In Samuel Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond* (1592), Rosamond, mistress to Henry II, comes to tell of her undoing. Before he took her, the king had sent her a casket engraved with images of those classical maidens who were undone by the gods. These ekphrases can be read both as signals that the king's

desire is not to be withstood and as awful warnings to a fair woman. In his *Mortimeriados* (1596), Michael Drayton has Queen Isabel, after her husband Edward II's cruel murder, prepare for her lover Mortimer "A stately chamber with the pencil wrought / Within whose compass was imparadised / Whatever art or rare invention taught" (sig. P4^r).³ The room is adorned with paintings of the lascivious loves of gods and mortals at their sports of love.

The extended description of the painting of the destruction of Troy in *The Rape of Lucrece* (1593-94) enables Shakespeare to capture Lucrece's prophetic soul, as, *after* her rape, she surmises consequences analogous to those that had followed the rape of Helen—in the case of Lucretia, the end of the Roman kingdom. But well before this there is a kind of induction on the power of visual representation. When Tarquin is contemplating his rape of Lucrece, he ponders:

"Who fears a sentence or an old man's saw
Shall by a *painted cloth* be kept in awe".
Thus graceless holds he disputation
'Tween *frozen conscience* and *hot-burning will*. (*Lucrece*, 244-47; emphasis added)

There are two points here: the general one about the potency of images, and a more specific one that takes us forward to *Hamlet*. Pyrrhus, the avenging son of Achilles, intrudes into Hamlet's "frozen conscience" in the rehearsal scene and, within the psychomachia of the drama, can be seen as the antagonist of the Ghost, who, fresh from the fires of purgatory, fans the flames of Hamlet's will to revenge his father. The forms of representation, Pyrrhus in a pastiche of Marlovian heroic verse, the Ghost as a figure that is visible to some characters, invisible to others, and heard only by Hamlet, draw attention to their diegetic status.

The First Player's "portrait" of Pyrrhus is the perfect "outsider within", in that it is outside the action but a besieging figure in Hamlet's consciousness, and also a metatheatrical sign, a token and defining presence of epic history within the tragedy. We are to think of Pyrrhus not as a person but as a signifier: he must be *read*.

Marlowe offered the recipe for this sort of thing. Faustus makes it plain that the conjured figures of Alexander and his paramour are not creatures of flesh and blood:

3. See Quinn, pp. 19-35.

My lord, I must forewarn your Majesty
That *when my spirits present the royal shapes*
Of Alexander and his paramour
Your Grace demand no questions of the King,
But in dumb silence let them come and go. (xii. 44-48; emphasis added)

This derives fairly directly from the *Faustbuch*, Marlowe's main source. There Faustus says to the Emperor:

My most excellent lord, I am ready to accomplish your request in all things, so far forth as I and my spirit are able to perform. Yet your majesty shall know that their dead bodies are not able substantially to be brought before you, but such spirits as have seen Alexander and his paramour alive shall appear unto you in manner and form as they both lived in their most flourishing time. (cited Jump, ed., p. 131)

As Hamlet explores what is in his mind's eye, the "shape" of Pyrrhus becomes a representation of an icon of revenge, a demonstration of how the avenger that his father's ghost wishes him to become is also a bloody murderer:

The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
When he lay couchèd in the ominous horse,
Hath now this dread and black complexion smeared
With heraldry more dismal. Head to foot
Now is he total gules, horridly tricked
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
Baked and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and damnèd light
To their vile murders. Roasted in wrath and fire,
And thus o'er-sized with coagulate gore,
With eyes like carbuncles the hellish Pyrrhus
Old grandsire Priam seeks . . . (*Hamlet*, II.ii.410-22)

Like Hamlet, Pyrrhus pauses before he sweeps to his revenge:

. . . his sword,
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seemed i' th' air to stick.
So, *as a painted tyrant*, Pyrrhus stood,
And, like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing. (*Hamlet*, II.ii.435-40; emphasis added)

This is typically Shakespearean: while he is representing the process of rehearsal or re-presentation, he throws in an allusion to a figure in a painted cloth.

Hamlet's father appears not only as a ghost but also in a picture, which is obviously both idealised and false:

Look here upon this picture, and on this,
The *counterfeit* presentment of two brothers. (*Hamlet*, III.iv.53-54; emphasis added)

As Ghost, he may be even more “counterfeit”: Hamlet senior comes from outside the kingdom, but Hamlet himself ponders whether what is rotten *in* the state of Denmark may not have something to do with the Ghost:

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy—
As he is very potent with such spirits—
Abuses me to damn me. (II.ii.551-58)

The Ghost, as has frequently been pointed out, may be a “counterfeit”, the Devil himself.

R. A. Foakes has recently argued⁴ that this is the only armed ghost in the corpus—a line in *A Warning for Fair Women* suggests that ghosts commonly “were lapped in a foul sheet or a leather pilch (l. 55). Horatio reports to Hamlet that he saw the Ghost armed “Cap-a-pe” (I.i.200), and that this was the full body armour he had worn when fighting the King of Norway. The similarities between feudal and antique hero pervade Hamlet's consciousness—emblems of a problematic revenge ethic or “obsolete militarism”, according to Foakes:

Marcellus and Barnardo have seen the Ghost:
Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us.
Therefore I have entreated him along
With us to watch the minutes of this night,
That if again this apparition come
He may approve our eyes and speak to it. (*Hamlet*, I.i.23-29)

As Alan Ackerman has written, “The slippage in Hamlet and Horatio's dialogue, from metaphorical to literal and back to metaphorical seeing, touches upon the

4. In a lecture at the International Shakespeare Conference, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2004.

very nature or roots of the theatre, in the Greek *theatron* or place of seeing” (p. 124). This “slippage”, I would submit, derives from the ekphrastic nature of the Ghost.

In the First Quarto’s version of the closet scene, the Ghost is described as entering “*in his night gown*” (*Tragicall Historie of Hamlet*, sig. G2^v). Given that here only Hamlet sees the Ghost—to Gertrude the figure is invisible—it seems to me that this is, perhaps like the armed Ghost, a projection of an image in Hamlet’s mind, an intimation that he has delayed too long, that Claudius should have been despatched when he was praying and the Ghost has started up from a brief snatch of purgatorial slumber.

These two ekphrastic figures are dreams of antique heroism and modern militarism, one depicting the horrific realities of revenge, the other invested by Shakespeare or by Hamlet—we cannot tell—with the attributes of a denizen from a theological realm whose existence had been absolutely denied by European reformers. They define Hamlet’s inward vacillation between “frozen conscience” and “hot-burning will”. Yet as ekphrastic rather than real figures, they can only be interpreted, not defined. We cannot deduce Shakespeare’s intention from contemporary debates about Purgatory. As we have seen, images of this kind are both potent and ambiguous. Perhaps this is Shakespeare’s way of preventing us from plucking out the heart of Hamlet’s mystery.

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