

Alison Thorne. *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare: Looking Through Language*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: Macmillan Press, 2000. Pp xvi, 284.

In *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare*, Alison Thorne takes up a venerable theme of Renaissance scholarship: *ut pictura poesis*, or the discussion about relations between literary artifacts and visual representations. Exploring not only Italian thought on perspective, but also the English reception of that theory, Thorne examines anew one version of the Renaissance *paragone* and reminds Shakespeareans of important connections between the visual and verbal arts.

Chapter 1 explores 'Alberti, *As You Like It*, and the Process of Invention'. By tradition, the art of perspective fixes the spectator in one particular position and therefore validates one point of view. For instance, Masaccio's *Trinity* (1428) in Sta Maria Novella, Florence not only places the crucified Christ in a strictly constructed geometrical space, but also puts the spectator into the position of a supplicant. Hans Holbein's anamorphic production, *The Ambassadors* (1533), invites spectators to look 'aslant' (to adopt a term from the Queen in *Richard II*) and perceive a menacing skull at the heart of Holbein's detailed rendering of the ambassadors and their symbolic accoutrements. But the skull comes into focus only when the viewer moves to the side of the painting and crouches down, almost into a kneeling position; Holbein's clever use of perspective contrasts a penitential 'attitude' with a frontal or 'dominant' image of humanism's triumph.

In her chapter on *As You Like It*, Thorne contrasts Alberti's insistence on a single viewpoint in his system of artistic perspective with *As You Like It's* guarded celebration of multiple viewpoints. From Touchstone to Rosalind, characters in this Shakespeare play use the rhetorical commonplaces to turn 'an idea into more shapes than Proteus himself' (17). But somewhat predictably, the wildness of rhetorical invention is tempered by those social norms that a rhetorical society, anchored in *doxa* or cultural opinion, must by definition sustain. Shakespeare is at once a servant of common wisdom (as cultural materialists of the past decades might argue) and a rhetorical master not unlike Montaigne, emerging from his exploration of multiple perspectives with a mildly skeptical attitude that challenges dominant social ideologies without transgressing the aesthetic line between play and power.

Chapter 2, 'English Beholders and the Art of Perspective', offers an illuminating discussion of England's response to Italian perspective. Thorne argues that for both the visual and verbal arts in England, an eclectic and inconsistent

use of perspective demonstrates not so much a conservative aesthetics or cultural belatedness as an unwillingness to be tied down to a single theoretical system. Shakespeare's interest in perspective is typically English; for him, according to Thorne, perspective functions as a 'metaphor for the relativity of human perception and of the cultural value-systems by which it is shaped' (56). Chapter 3, '*Ut Pictura Poesis* and the Rhetoric of Perspective', offers a complementary discussion of the congruence between visual perspective and proportion and rhetorical decorum, focusing on Richard Haydocke's 1598 translation of Lomazzo's 1584 *Tract* and George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*. Like these more theoretical writers, Thorne argues, Shakespeare understands 'the power of spectacle to impress the eye and influence the mind – a power he conceives, like them, in terms of the capacity of the visual image to function rhetorically' (73).

In Chapter 4, '*Hamlet* and the Art of Looking Diversely on the Self', Thorne compares Hamlet's pursuit of 'that within which passes show' through the successive poses of his 'antic disposition' to the theory and practice of miniature portraiture in the period. Hamlet, like the portraitists, recognizes that inner truth is perceptible only through external artifice. While Thorne's parallel between Hamlet's self-scrutiny and Albrecht Durer's self-portraits is suggestive, in the end, Hamlet's 'antic disposition' seems too grotesque and erratic to be characterized as an exercise in self-portraiture. Chapter 5, '*Troilus and Cressida*, "Imagin'd Worth" and the "Bifold Authority" of Anamorphosis', is more sharply focused and therefore more persuasive. Like Troilus himself, the spectator experiences in this play 'multiple *gestalts*' that 'strive to keep us off our balance, in a state of radical perplexity' (140). The chapter shows, in satisfying detail, how 'Ulysses's claim that identity is actively created in and through the gaze/praise of others is borne out by the characters' habit of observing and commenting on one another' (144).

A chapter on 'Antony and Cleopatra and the Art of Dislimning' claims for Shakespeare an active role in the Renaissance reevaluation of the imagination as a licentious and errant faculty. Reviewing a range of commentary on imagination and fantasy, Thorne not only opposes Egyptian fantasy to Roman reason, but also shows that the Romans themselves offer fantastic flights of rhetorical characterization disguised as Platonic truth. The pervasiveness of rhetorical embellishment on both sides 'calls into question the hegemony of Roman values by showing how an exclusively rational paradigm of reality cannot properly account for the behavior even of those who profess to live by its rule' (177). A comparison between Cleopatra's dream of Antony as a

colossus and Francesco Colonna's 'architectural romance' (c. 1467), printed in English as *The Strife of Love in a Dream* in 1592, illustrates the intersection between the poetry of English drama and the irrational use of space in continental mannerist art. Both discourses aim to find out new heavens and new earths by stretching the limits of visual and verbal decorum. Finally, 'The *Tempest* and the Art of Masque' argues against a long-standing assumption that this play reflects the aesthetic and political values of the royal Jacobean masque, suggesting that under James, both the masque itself and its dramatic representation in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* accommodate divergent viewpoints more readily than has been recognized.

To me, the most useful and interesting sections of *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare* are its first three chapters, where Thorne discusses Italian art theory and the English variations on and responses to that theory. The chapters specifically on Shakespeare are a little less satisfying. Thorne puts Shakespeare together with writers on the visual arts in suggestive ways and provides ample documentation, but she does not offer particularly new readings of the plays themselves.

Distancing herself from current critical debates, Thorne can also seem to be theoretically limited. She might either have engaged New Historicist assumptions directly or entered into dialogue with earlier writers on rhetoric and identity in Shakespeare, many of whose names do not even make it into the bibliography of *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare*. In the end, Thorne's Shakespeare is the venerable figure of liberal humanism. Erasmian exercises in *copia* give him all the attractive qualities of a witty Tudor sophist; at the same time, his skepticism removes Shakespeare – like Rosalind herself – from the sordid world of Renaissance, Tudor, and pastoral politics. Accordingly rhetoric, as the *ne plus ultra* of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, redeems society without exacting an ideological price. My misgivings about Thorne's critical stance aside, I am happy to say that *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare* is an intelligent book, driven by thorough research and offering useful, illuminating examples of rhetorical analysis. For these reasons, it has much to offer readers.

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