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Sillars, Stuart. *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. £64.99, USD 99.99. 317 pp. ISBN 9781107029958)

Approaching Shakespeare's work from the perspective of its contemporary visual culture, *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination* testifies to Stuart Sillars's programmatic undertaking to explore the complex relationship between visual arts and the Shakespearean canon. If in the previously published books, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (2013), *Shakespeare, Time and the Victorians. A Pictorial Exploration* (2012), *The Illustrated Shakespeare 1709-1875* (2008), and *Painting Shakespeare: The Artist as Critic, 1720-1820* (2006), Sillars analysed the visual reinvention, reinterpretation, and record of Shakespeare's plays in the works of eighteenth-century and Victorian artists, the volume under review interrogates the dynamics between coeval modes of literary and visual representation with a view to understanding the ways in which the visual culture of the day influenced the composition of Shakespeare's plays and narrative poems, thus broadening our understanding of the Bard's sources, creative process, and perspective on the visual identity of the theatre.

Beginning with an insightful survey of the allegorical schemes, the allusive character, and the complex symbolism of the visual culture of the Tudor period (emblems, engravings, compositions, portraits, frontispieces, architectural designs and other forms of visual expression), the book moves on to explore Shakespeare's "particular way of weaving visual forms and ideas into the textual and performative fabric" (30). For example, the discussion of the conceptual structure of *The Taming of the Shrew* (Chapter 2) focuses on the two brief Induction scenes that, in Sillars's opinion, testify to Shakespeare's appropriation of the tradition of visual arts, his "knowledge of, and fascination with, the workings of word and image" (54). The allusions to the artificial nature of the image in the first Induction are construed as an "exposition of aesthetic falsehoods in theatre and visual art" (36), while the ekphrastic lines in the second Induction scene are related to their potential visual sources. Thus, the

reading of the play extends into the reading of images and of the assorted network of implications. Central to this discussion is the interplay between the competing notions of identity and representation.

Similar methodological strategies are applied in the next six chapters: poems and plays are read in connection with visual elements and compositional practice. Looking into the structural organization of Shakespeare's poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* (Chapter 3) from the perspective of visual composition transforms their reading into that of "a Renaissance multitemporal narrative painting" (76). The poems are admired for their compositional balance, particularly when poised against each other. The analysis of these two poems also touches on the discussion about "truth and deceit in art and writing" (93), a key aspect that becomes a common denominator in the exploration of other Shakespearean texts in the chapters that follow. In *Love's Labour's Lost* (Chapter 4), Sillars avers, the influence of the tradition of visual arts is stronger than in *The Taming of the Shrew*, in that it also shapes the play's stage organisation. The increased use of techniques of visual representation is related to the development of landscape painting and to the symbolic value that landscapes had acquired. An insightful approach to *Richard II* (Chapter 5) reveals the triadic structure of the play, thus challenging previous, more simplistic critical perspectives. In Sillars's words,

The play is built on three compositional forms. ... The three forms are the notion of anamorphic painting and the importance of seeing from the right viewpoint; a single devotional painting that, extravagant in medium and assertive in symbolism, reveals elements essential to the nature of kinship; and the perspectival centrality of the monarch. The first functions almost as a symbolic key to the play's operation; the second is the basis of a series of increasingly complex, increasingly multivalent presentations; and the third is, in theatric as well as painterly form, a structure that enfolds the entire action in its composition and the belief system it enacts. (134)

Similarly complex and well-argued is the analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Chapter 6. It explores the elaborate interplay of text, image, and performance in a play appreciated as "a display of compositional and referential sprezzatura equal to anything in visual or verbal art of its time" (164).

The following two chapters no longer centre on a single text, but focus on the development and manipulation of various visual forms and conventions. Chapter 7, for instance, tackles the deployment of painterly tropes, emblematic images, elements, and processes, and the reordering of visual composition in several Shakespearean plays. Chapter 8 looks into plays that show a more subtle engagement with various traditions of visual representation. The discussion begins with the analysis of the “exchange between the Poet and the Painter in *Timon of Athens*” (234) and then moves towards a perceptive analysis of the sophisticated relationship between the visual and the textual rhetoric in Shakespeare’s later plays, centring on ethopoetic strategies. Finally, the last chapter of the book situates the research within the panoply of approaches to the Shakespearean work, summarises the major points of each chapter, and concludes the discussion of Shakespeare’s aesthetic engagement.

Clearly organized, logically structured, and beautifully illustrated, Stuart Sillars’s *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination* is a well-documented and insightful study. The importance of the research stems from the fact that it approaches Shakespeare’s work from within the broader tradition of visual and conceptual aesthetics, thus enlarging the perspective on the Shakespearean canon and opening up new ways of engaging his plays and poems. Such an approach allows a better grasp of the intricate network of allusions and concerns in Shakespeare’s work and a better understanding of Shakespeare’s exploration of the artificiality and self-referential potential of the work of art.

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