

Kristin Phillips-Court. *The Perfect Genre: Drama and Painting in Renaissance Italy*.

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An investigation of the interrelationships between painting and drama, Kristin Phillips-Court's book focuses on crucial texts of Italian Renaissance drama, exploring their genesis, reception, and development as a literary genre. Informed by an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary history, art history, and theory, the book aims to provide a new understanding of seminal theatrical texts, which, thanks to their adoption of visual structures into words, draw the reader more effectively into the pages. As a literary phenomenon, this form of Renaissance drama, including translations of rediscovered Greek and Roman theatrical pieces and humanist plays, dates to the mid-fifteenth century, when a new mimetic language of art capturing the viewer's mind through its aesthetic force was emerging. Renaissance drama includes secular and religious subjects that modern scholars have tended to consider as separate entities. It is one of Phillips-Court's achievements in this volume to study both forms of drama as interconnected components, and to discuss how this body of literature shared a conceptual structure with Renaissance painting.

The book's five chapters trace the emergence of Renaissance drama, examining Feo Belcari's Annunciation play (1469), Giangiorgio Trissino's *Sofonisba* (1514–15), and Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* (1573), among other texts. Discussions clarify painters' and playwrights' common aims and the effects of the norm of geometric perspective on theatrical performances, but Phillips-Court's sensitive intertextual analysis of theatrical texts above all reveals how their engagements with visual conventions and subjects made drama and painting mutually supportive arts in Renaissance Italy. In an initial chapter dedicated to the *sacre rappresentazioni*, Phillips-Court investigates the extraordinary Annunciation play composed by Feo Belcari in mid-Quattrocento Florence. Belcari's major innovation was the use of the vernacular in his play. Giorgio Vasari's and other writers' descriptions of the Annunciation performances have provided scholars with clues of the interdependencies between painted and performed representations, and the artists' role in staging vivid plays in which the Virgin was presented in varied emotional attitudes echoing and mimicking contemporary painting.

In the chapter on Trissino's *Sofonisba*, Phillips-Court intertwines her discussion of the tragedy's referential sources with their interrelationships with the art of

painting, creating “a stratification of meaning that intimately links language, thought, and ideology to image in a text that was read, not performed” (60). Trissino’s tragedy on a classical heroine like Sofonisba is an experiment in figural imitation, inviting contemplation and meditation on the part of a reader placed in a space of ambiguity and duality. A compelling representation of Sofonisba painted by the Veronese master Giovan Francesco Caroto, ca. 1515, reflects this tension: an erotized Sofonisba is portrayed at the moment just before she drinks the lethal poison, when an outside noise catches her attention, causing her to suspend her action. Sofonisba’s sensual body and posture are emphasized by the transparent dress that artfully exposes her left breast and clings to her abdomen, citations from Raphael’s *Fornarina* that create a contrast with the heroine’s contemplative gaze and suspended emotions. With less compelling argumentation Phillips-Court proposes that Caroto’s image portrays the Duchess of Mantua Isabella d’Este as Sofonisba. Phillips-Court’s intertextual excavation into the nexus between drama and painting of Renaissance Italy is, however, a major contribution towards explaining the development of the genre of drama and its multiple cultural ramifications in early modern Italy.

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