

Stephen Orgel. *Spectacular Performances: Essays on Theatre, Imagery, Books, and Selves in Early Modern England*.

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No one writes more compellingly or lucidly than does Stephen Orgel on theatrical performance as it embraces pageantry and courtly imagery in the royal entries, masques, and triumphal arches of early modern England. He is no less eloquent on the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. He lays before us verbal and visual representations of title-pages, frontispieces, stage and costume designs by Inigo Jones, architectural splendors, portraits, maps, stage productions over the centuries, and still more, all informed by an extensive command of art history, intellectual history, humanist learning, the history of book illustration, and above all the history of every kind of theatrical representation. Stephen Orgel is himself the embodiment of the humanist scholar, and this present book is a rich repository of that great tradition.

Most of the essays are recent, and five are heretofore unpublished. The eight reprinted essays (one considerably expanded) include a number of my special favorites, including “*Othello* and the End of Comedy” (2003), “*King Lear* and the Art of Forgetting” (2009), and “Jonson and the Amazons” (1990), with its revealing analysis of the growing influence of women on drama and literature in the early modern period. I cherish having all these gathered together in one volume, since most appeared in diverse collections of essays devoted to the work of numerous scholars. I should like here to sample two of the five previously unpublished essays as representing what we now have from Stephen Orgel for the first time in print.

“I am Richard II” brilliantly leads off this volume with a history of beards in representations of English monarchs from Richard II on down to James I and VI. Orgel convincingly demonstrates that beards, with their putative assertion of masculine virility, did not appear on the royal male face in portraiture until after 1519, when Henry VIII, desperately wishing to produce a male heir, grew facial hair in blatant imitation of the bearded French king Francis I. Posthumous sixteenth-century depictions of Richard II as bearded were evidently the result of a deliberately revisionary ideology, one crafted to argue for Elizabeth’s claim to the English throne by associating her with Richard, the last monarch to be able to claim an unquestionable legitimacy. Elizabeth was of course not bearded, but her coronation portrait is strikingly similar in its iconic details to that of Richard painted by André Beauneveu. The deliberate reimagining of Richard long after his death as hirsute was thus, as Orgel puts it, a return “to the last moment when the legitimacy of the monarchy was not a problem” (15). The iconographic ideology deployed for King James, when he came to the throne in 1603, was no less performative; even if more grudgingly offered, it was similar in its desire to proclaim the new king as the true heir of Henry VIII. Here then is a new and important chapter in the story of Elizabethan self-fashioning, to which Orgel has contributed so much.

Another favorite of mine from the newly published essays is “Textual Icons: Reading Early Modern Illustrations.” This essay brings together the early modern book with twenty-first-century methods of electronic scholarship, by asking what kinds of information those early works “contribute to or encode in books, and what is revealed when we turn our early modern search engines on them” (160). The answers are surprising, as is so admirably the case in so much of Stephen Orgel’s work. He focuses not on the familiar story of book illustration as complementary to the text, but rather with instances in which the pictures are in fact “dysfunctional, illogical, inappropriate or simply wrong.” Historically, he argues, the emblems of Andrea Alciato were originally designed to stand by themselves as texts, to which illustrations were subsequently appended by a German publisher of the first printed edition to make the book more attractive and to encourage the kind of ekphrastic elucidation that is so familiar today. The copious illustrations to this essay underscore Orgel’s counterintuitive argument. Often, as in the Nuremberg Chronicle, the *Liber Cronicarum* of 1493, the book is lavishly illustrated as though to emphasize how eager printers were to trumpet their new technology. The main objective is not so much to illuminate the verbal text as to declare to readers the art of the book itself.

It is for revelations like these that we prize the interdisciplinary scholarship of Stephen Orgel. The present volume is a splendid collection of his work at its best.

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