

Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance: appropriation, transformation, opposition

Paul Franssen

To cite this article: Paul Franssen (2016) Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance: appropriation, transformation, opposition, Shakespeare, 12:1, 103-106, DOI: [10.1080/17450918.2015.1077268](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1077268)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1077268>



Published online: 16 Sep 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 66



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

equivalence, whereas one might wonder whether the association of knocking with “the present action of the play” (151) might function as the primary response, while its relation to the harrowing of Hell constitutes a lesser and more secondary echo. One might raise similar doubts about one of Schreyer’s favorite phrases, “synchronic diachrony” (the term is, unfortunately, a little mind-numbing for me). Likewise, the arguments for this effect can become complicated, as in the chapter on the Porter. Still, these reservations speak to the stimulating and provocative power of Schreyer’s study. It addresses itself directly, ambitiously, and imaginatively to one of our most pressing current debates. The book is also written with succinctness, clarity, and wit, is a pleasure to read, and displays masterful scholarship. *Shakespeare’s Medieval Craft* deserves wide readership and serious attention and constitutes a timely and significant contribution in the fields both of early English drama and of periodization.

Kent Cartwright

University of Maryland

kcartwri@umd.edu

© 2015 Kent Cartwright

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1075582>

Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance: appropriation, transformation, opposition, edited by Michele Marrapodi, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, xiii + 373 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4724-4839-2

Shakespeare and Italy is a topic on which so much has been written that it is surprising to find that there are still new angles to explore, yet that is what Marrapodi and his co-authors attempt to do. Partly this can be realised by no longer concentrating on similarities between Shakespeare and his Italian sources, between his plays’ settings and their real-life counterparts, but by exploring ways in which Shakespeare also resisted the influence of Europe’s dominant culture. In his introduction, Marrapodi promises that the volume will study “the Italian world in early modern England . . . as a potential cultural force, consonant with complex processes of appropriation, transformation, and ideological opposition through a continuous dialectical interchange of compliance and subversion” (7). It is not merely the Italian settings or narrative sources that are at issue, but also Italian drama including *commedia dell’ arte*, the visual arts, music and philosophy with which Shakespeare was in a dialogue.

Among Italian texts, Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* is given pride of place. Many of the book’s contributions detail the traces it has left in Shakespeare’s work, usually as a powerful civilising force. Thomas Kullmann argues that the courtly code recommended by Castiglione and others provided an alternative for patriarchal models of dealing with marriageable children, for homosocial ideals of male friendship, and gave guidance on what was still permissible in practical jokes, and what went too far. Kullmann gives examples from a wide range of Shakespearean texts, including *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Twelfth Night*. Such concerns for civilised society are put in a wider context by Maria Del Sapio Garbero, who approaches *Coriolanus* from the perspective of the

laws of hospitality. Her argument begins with a scene where the protagonist fails to return a favour to a former host because he has forgotten his name. Invoking theories of hospitality and reciprocity in bestowing gifts and benefits, ranging from Seneca and Castiglione to Derrida, Garbero shows that Coriolanus' ultimate isolation and downfall are due to his failure to understand that there are other, social, virtues than just courage. Yet, courtliness also has its dangers: John Roe shows convincingly how those female characters (Desdemona and Hermione in particular) who strive to behave in the artificial courtly way promoted by *The Book of the Courtier*, with its mildly flirtatious wit, make themselves vulnerable to suspicions of their chastity. Castiglione is also the focus of Lawrence Rhu's contribution, and provides a starting point for Harry Berger's chapter on "*Sprezzatura* and Embarrassment in *The Merchant of Venice*". The connection between the two, Berger explains, is that *sprezzatura* "is a defense against embarrassment" (21). The remainder of the article, however, is only concerned with embarrassment, showing how Portia deals with her frustrating relationship with Bassanio by waging a relentless war against her rival Antonio, using generosity and mercy as her weapons. Her deft manipulation of Shylock, too, is a tool in coping with Bassanio's disloyalty and helps her put Antonio in his place. Whether Portia's wiliness is supposed to be an example of Castiglione's grace, however, remains unclear: after the opening pages, the concept of *sprezzatura* is lost sight of.

Like Castiglione, Italian novelle such as Bandello's made for civilised behaviour, particularly in promoting female patronage of the arts, as Melissa Walter argues, in real-life England as well as, less directly, in Paulina's role in presenting Hermione as a living statue in *The Winter's Tale*. Yet, Italian and Italianate novelle also provided models for villains like Webster's Bosola and Shakespeare's Iago, with an interiority made more interesting by mysteries, or incompatible strands of characterisation, as Karen Zyck Galbraith argues. Bruce Young, by contrast, stresses Shakespeare's deviations from his Italian sources in *Romeo and Juliet*. The play, Young argues, owes its special quality not to the Italian setting but to the way Shakespeare revised the time scheme, compressing the action into a far shorter period and making Juliet younger than she is in any of the Italian, French or English novelle he may have consulted. Italian philosophy comes into play in Rocco Coronato's contribution, which compares Hamlet's paradoxes to those of stoics like Ortensio Lando. Coronato concludes that Hamlet betrays a far more modern sensibility.

The Italian visual arts, too, made their influence felt in Shakespeare's England. Using iconographical analogues, Hanna Scolnicov argues for the centrality of Justice in the self-image of Venice, which prided itself on its impartial legal system. Shakespeare's *Merchant*, she argues, parodies the personification of Justice by having Shylock bring scales and a knife to the courtroom, whereas Portia can be read as its incarnation. In one of the most interesting contributions to the volume, Camilla Caporicci links Shakespeare's work to the chiaroscuro of Caravaggio and the monistic philosophy of Giordano Bruno, in their blending of the spirit and the flesh, darkness and light. Caporicci's claim that also the earlier clear-cut opposition between black and white was of Italian provenance may be an overstatement, as it is surely rooted in the Bible; but the reaction against this simple dichotomy by Bruno and Caravaggio, seen not as an influence on Shakespeare but as an analogue, does illuminate his plays and his sonnets.

The not-so-fine arts, too, found their way from Italy to England: Keir Elam asks what was the provenance of the “wanton pictures” that Christopher Sly is promised (but never shown) in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, and answers, convincingly, that the reference is to the scandal surrounding Marcantonio Raimondi’s pornographic engravings based on work by Giulio Romano, and subsequently published along with sonnets by Pietro Aretino in the latter’s *Sonetti lussuriosi* (1527). This turns out to be only one thread in a complicated but intriguing web of relations between Italy and England, the visual and verbal: also Ovid’s evocation of erotic adventures, and the barely disguised homoeroticism of Aretino’s comedy *Il Marescalco* serve as intertexts for the induction of Shakespeare’s *Shrew*. Michele Marrapodi, too, analyses the link between the Induction and Aretino’s *Il Marescalco*, which turns on a practical joke in which a Lord makes his servant marry a cross-dressed page. However, whereas Aretino’s duped servant is a homosexual who is actually pleased when he finds out he is not married to a woman, which is in line with the play’s general misogyny, Shakespeare’s play, according to Marrapodi, subverts such gynaephobia. *Commedia dell’arte* is discussed by Iuliana Tanase, focussing on Italian models for Shakespearean fools, and by Eric Nicholson, who argues that Helen from *All’s Well* recalls a stock character of the Italian theatre – the “*innamorata*” – as well as the famous travelling actress Isabella Andreini.

As for the remaining arts, Anthony Guneratne approaches Shakespeare’s work from the perspective of music and ballet, including modern musical adaptations of Shakespeare as well as historical connections with early modern Italian music. When the discussion turns to contemporary Russian and American ballets and operas based on Shakespeare, however, the link with Italy becomes rather tenuous.

This leaves what might be called the sociological approach. Sergio Costola and Michael Saenger argue that Shylock is characterised as an outsider in Venice by his slightly awkward English, modelled on John Florio’s English usage in his *First Fruits*, an Italian course for English speakers. Their interesting and topical introduction deals with resemblances between London and Venice, as multicultural trading centres that wanted to open up to commercially valuable foreigners without completely assimilating them, and therefore erected invisible barriers of a linguistic nature. Their actual textual evidence for Shylock’s imperfect command of English, however, is less convincing. The assertion that “*at the Rialto*” would have been more idiomatic English than Shylock’s repeated “*on the Rialto*” overlooks the fact that modern English is not always a reliable guide to early modern usage, quite apart from the fact that (as they acknowledge without comment) Solanio, too, says “*on the Rialto*” (155). Besides, the phrase also occurs in Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserved*. Duncan Salkeld contextualises Claudio’s suspicion, in *Much Ado*, that Messina is a brothel, by an investigation of London court cases, showing that many Italian merchants living there were involved in prostitution. One case featured a foreigner, possibly Italian, called Benedick. The women involved, however, nearly all seem to have been English.

By and large, then, this volume delivers what it promises. Some contributions identify possible sources for Shakespeare, but others also trace discontinuities; and the range of Italian cultural products covered is fairly broad. Textually, the book is marred by a few oversights. On page 153, for instance, a quote has “the true *manyng* of a thing” for “*meanynng*”; and an article by Manfred Pfister is given as

“Inglese Italianato–Inglese Anglizzato”, where the second “Inglese” should be “Italiano”. Also, the book is inconsistent in dealing with passages in Italian: sometimes these are translated in the main text, sometimes in notes, sometimes not at all.

Paul Franssen

Utrecht University

p.j.c.m.franssen@uu.nl

© 2015 Paul Franssen

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1077268>

Shakespeare and the Imprints of Performance, by J. Gavin Paul, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, History of Text Technologies, 226 + xxiv pp., £60 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-137-43843-0

“What”, asks J. Gavin Paul in his lucid and clever book on the performance potential of the printed playtext, “did books tell readers to do?” (35). It’s a question he answers with a range of sharp and attentive readings of playbooks from *Everyman* to the latest Arden editions, and from the Shakespeare First Folio to *Hamlet on the Ramparts* online. Paul decodes the editions’ *mise en page* to reveal their implicit instructions to readers, and their negotiation of interpretative, particularly performance, potential within the discipline and fixity of the printed text. He analyses the claims of recent Shakespeare editions to incorporate performance within their protocols and commentary, showing patiently and without evident malice the intellectual inconsistencies of their position on whether performance is immanent within or anterior to the text. As a contribution to the history of the presentation of Shakespearean drama on the page from the quartos onwards, via Nicholas Rowe, Alexander Pope, Edward Capell, Edmond Malone and the ranks of editors, Paul’s study is welcome and significant.

What is perhaps less compelling than the book suggests is its central – but unnecessary – conceptual term, “performancescape”. Paul spends time identifying the ways this concept bridges an unhelpful binary between “theatrical” and “literary” texts. Performancescape calls attention to what is always pressingly absent for the reader of drama, the “play-as-performed” (23). For Paul, performancescape toggles between the terrain of the imagined scene and the materiality of the printed page, combining recent history of the book scholarship on the early modern printed text with a strong awareness of the theatre. The notion of performancescape engages the reader in mediating the relation between print and theatre, acknowledging that “theatrical events are linked to, but not determined by, the printed playtext” (24). Stage and page are seen as symbiotically linked, rather than hierarchically distinguished or even mutually exclusive, with performancescape the missing critical term that enables a new critical discussion. Nevertheless, this is a study of the page not the stage: for Paul, the interest is in the ways the materiality of the text can fire a cognitive understanding of potential performance, not the other way around. He quotes W.B. Worthen’s memorable “zombie-theory of drama”, in which performance is merely the undead animation of the text’s commands. Nevertheless, in some ways his own book might be thought simply to reverse the priorities: the printed page is the vault where the life of performance is captured but might break forth.