

*The Perfect Genre.*

*Drama and  
Painting in  
Renaissance  
Italy*

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**2009 MLA**

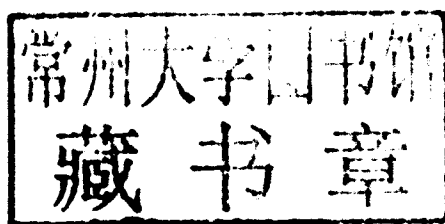
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KRISTIN PHILLIPS-COURT

# The Perfect Genre. Drama and Painting in Renaissance Italy

Kristin Phillips-Court

*Winner of the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Publication Award for a Manuscript in Italian Literary Studies, 2009, sponsored by the Modern Language Association of America*



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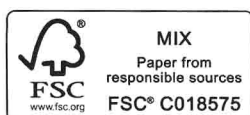
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## THE PERFECT GENRE.

### DRAMA AND PAINTING IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

Proposing an original and important re-conceptualization of Italian Renaissance drama, Kristin Phillips-Court here explores how the intertextuality of major works of Italian dramatic literature is not only poetic but also figurative. She argues that not only did the painterly gaze, so prevalent in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century devotional art, portraiture, and visual allegory, inform humanistic theories, practices and themes, it also led prominent Italian intellectuals to write visually evocative works of dramatic literature whose topical plots and structures provide only a fraction of their cultural significance.

Through a combination of interpretive literary criticism, art historical analysis and cultural and intellectual historiography, Phillips-Court offers detailed readings of individual plays juxtaposed with specific developments and achievements in the realm of painting. Revealing more than historical connections between artists and poets such as Tasso and Giorgione, Mantegna and Trissino, Michelangelo and Caro, or Bruno and Caravaggio, the author locates the history of Renaissance art and drama securely within the history of ideas. She provides us with a story about the emergence and eventual disintegration of Italian Renaissance drama as a rigorously philosophical and empirical form.

Considering rhetorical, philosophical, ethical, religious, political-ideological, and aesthetic dimensions of each of the plays she treats, Kristin Phillips-Court draws our attention to the intermedial conversation between the theater and painting in a culture famously dominated by art. Her integrated analysis of visual and dramatic works brings to light how the lines and verses of the text reveal an ongoing dialogue with visual art that was far richer and more intellectually engaged than we might reconstruct from stage diagrams and painted backdrops.

*Kristin Phillips-Court is Associate Professor of Italian at  
the University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA.*

*For Ricardo*

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Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York

## Preface

This book explores Italian Renaissance drama's participation in the conceptual world of Renaissance painting. Two avenues admit approach to the question of how painting shaped drama. One avenue takes us through fields of technical inquiry, the areas of investigation in which we uncover the overt effects of painting on the practical aspects of stagecraft. Here the critic might examine how painters and playwrights collaborated in mounting performances, or how the technology of linear perspective changed the presentation of dramatic stage sets. But another path pursues a more subtle understanding of the debt of literary drama to the visual art that preceded it. The chief concerns of this approach are not objects but ideas.

When examining a culture dominated by visual art and religious imagery, scholars can speak of few hermetic spaces. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writers and artists often served the same patron and shared subject matter; but more than that, viewing devotional art was as much a collective activity as an individual activity. I aim at showing how drama and painting were mutually supportive arts, the one borrowing from the other, and how both were susceptible to the influence of philosophical thinking. Drawing our attention to this inter-medial conversation, I examine how playwrights took productive advantage of a devotional gaze in their writing. The analyses and arguments offered here forward the idea that the refinement of dramatic literature in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy came to embody the changing epistemology of the self that had revolutionized painting in Florence and other cultural centers. In a context of collective perception, this changing epistemology of the subject was not the privileged discussion of philosophers; poets and playwrights, too, speculated about self-determination and even thematized it in the dramatic texts that comprise this study.

Recent interest in drama emerges within predominantly historicist and cultural-materialist frameworks that place the object in its historical, social, and cultural contexts. Cultural poetics is understood in this discussion as that exchange of ideas across media that resulted in a malleable philosophy of forms (aesthetics) and in a constellation of themes, some of which aspired to transcendent signification. Such borrowing reveals how language, science,

and art were vitally intersecting experiences in the Renaissance. An emphasis on how visual art shapes the written text does not stem from a lamented dearth of theater artifacts, nor does it spring from the performance/text divide that aggravates theater studies. Instead, an interest in how poetic and pictorial expression commonly engaged a receptive audience in the post-Albertian noetic world has led me to consider drama's prodigious debt to painting.

My title emphasizes the theoretical bent of the Renaissance mind. Even as they participated in wider philosophical debates, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poets and playwrights cast their critical gaze inward as well. Taking Alberti's theorization of painting as a starting point, I attempt to describe the way writers, too, scrutinized the ethical implications of artistic form and style. Immersed in contemporaneous debates about ideal and perfect art forms, they disputed the relative merits of the most noble genres – epic and tragedy. They combined contemporary themes with ancient plots and structures, joined Aristotelian poetics with Platonic schema, and drew on a shared repertory of visual images as a means of ethical inquiry. For the Italians, genre was an instrument of communication more than classification. That the Vicentine poet-scholar Giangiorgio Trissino vaunted his own intuition of Aristotelian *opsis* underscores not only the exemplary status of tragedy among Italian Aristotelians, but also affirms a purposeful recourse to visual modes of communication that reached beyond the theorization of *ut pictura poesis*.

Nor were the Italians purists: literary criticism has acknowledged that although sixteenth-century writers categorized comic, tragic, pastoral, and religious poetry, they also mixed generic elements. Among these mixers were Machiavelli, Ruzante, Tasso, and Bruno, whose dramatic works barely mask a tragic stain. Perhaps no text is more emblematic of the syncretic tendencies of Renaissance dramatists than Tasso's *Aminta*, which both reveals the permeability of genre and renders genre subservient to experience. Unlike Bruno's *Candelaio* – a *sui generis* implosion of Italian staged comedy that we might call phenomenological – *Aminta* positions its audience in intimate, subjective relation to its ambivalent discourse. Though I take *Aminta* to signal one moment in which drama as a literary 'radical of presentation' (as Frye called it in *Anatomy of Criticism*) overtakes genre, I do not propose an anti-generic study; my chapters address different genres and unfold in chronological order.

The crucible of interdisciplinary studies is the problem of integration. In their various contexts, historical objects of inquiry do not lend themselves to a streamlined methodology that allows for synchronic or 'vertical' interpretation. Instead the historian must often resort to a diachronic or sequential mode of presentation for contemporaneous texts and paintings, using chronology as a heuristic to make comparisons and track the exchange of objects and ideas. Sequentiality constitutes a default position in interdisciplinary studies like this one. The dramatic texts discussed in the following chapters, some of them famous, others less well-known, arise from a common intellectual or spiritual font. Together, in their chronological sequence, these texts might be

replaced by other texts exhibiting similar formal and ideological attributes. At the same time, this study offers new interpretations of individual texts, distinct by city and decade, by juxtaposing them with specific developments and achievements in the realm of painting. While I have refrained from addressing the pluralistic character of art history as a discipline and have left performance studies to others, I have nonetheless endeavored to adopt a comprehensive posture that accommodates both a comparison of texts and paintings and their analytical integration.

Within a study that invites both horizontal and vertical thinking, I hope to have acknowledged that it is only through a convergence of published texts, surviving paintings, and active patronage that I can try to describe a tiny quarter of an enormously varied artistic landscape. Leaving many plays and paintings, both standard and irregular, beyond the range of a focused view, I advance a metahistory of erudite drama that considers its debt to visual art and collective habits of beholding. As Renaissance writers and theorists endeavored to create the perfect genre, drama became part of the circle of knowledge, bringing together currents of thought that would characterize the modern condition.

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\* \* \*

Earlier versions of some sections of this book have appeared elsewhere in print. Paragraphs of analysis in Chapter 2 appear in 'Performing Anachronism: Revising the Aetiology of Italian Renaissance Tragedy,' *Renaissance Drama*, 37, 'Italy and the Drama of Europe' (2010): 41–66. Chapter

1 is a substantial revision of an article published in *Annali d'Italianistica* as 'Framing the Miracle in Feo Belcari's *Rappresentazione quando la Nostra Donna Vergine Maria fu annunziata dall'Angelo Gabriello*,' 25, 'Literature, Religion, and the Sacred' (2007): 233–61. Finally, a discussion of Titian's portrait of Pope Paul III and Giovanni Guidiccioni's *Orazione ai nobili di Lucca* is included in 'Emblematic Narrative in Caro's *Gli straccioni* (with an Eye to Titian's Paul III),' *Italica*, 81 (2004): 185–99.

‘Indeed, all the arts that pertain to humanity have a kind of common bond, and are related to one another by a kind of kinship.’

– Cicero, *Oratio pro archia*

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