

Five British Writers

Day 11



“What is a text?”

“We assume...that the authority of a text derives from the author... I suggest that this proposition is not true: in the case of Renaissance dramatic texts it is almost never true” (Orgel 83).

What evidence does Orgel use to support his argument? How is his argument different from Barthes’s theory?

Writing On Stage

In the first dialogue between Olivia and Viola/Cesario, references to writing appear repeatedly, from the “excellently well penned” praise Viola/Cesario comes to deliver, to the “text” of Orsino’s heart and the “schedules” of physical features Olivia pretends she will write to preserve her beauty (1.5.165, 214, 234).

Does the play present writing as an adequate means of expressing the emotional or the physical self?

Does writing appear to be an appropriate or adequate system of committing words or absent persons to memory?

What other kinds of memorial, making present feelings or absent persons, are at work in this scene (for Olivia’s dead brother, for example)?

How are the limits of writing exposed?

How is the value of writing expressed?

Does the play’s frequent reference to writing in any way suggest the written or fictional nature of the play itself?

Writing On Stage

Let's re-consider what we've just discussed in relation to the presentation and discussion of Sir Andrew's challenge letter in Act 3, Scene 4.

Writing in this scene appears to represent Andrew's character admirably; indeed, Sir Toby refuses to deliver the letter to Cesario since the letter is "so excellently ignorant [...h]e will find it comes from a clodpoll" (3.4.183)

What is the function of writing in this scene?

How does it differ from the use of writing in other scenes? Why?

Writing On Stage

Now let's re-re-consider our discussion of writing on stage in relation to the presentation and discussion of Malvolio's letter of appeal in Act 5, Scene 1. Writing in this scene seems to convey only the thoughts and the state of the present reader, rather than accurately reflecting the absent writer. Read as "madness," the writing suggests the reader is himself insane, but read in a different voice, the letter "savours not much of distraction" (5.1.287, 305).

How does this scene bear upon the presentation of writing's ability to invoke the feelings or image of an absent person?

Next: Twelfth Night... On Film



Remember to watch Nunn's film
for Thursday (and again before the following
Tuesday).

Our Media Room has the missing readings
intended for Tuesday, posted there yesterday.