Introduction: speaking pictures?

In the third Act of John Lyly’s comedy *Campaspe*, Alexander the Great attempts to learn to draw under the instruction of the ancient Greek painter Apelles. Midway through this unusual art lesson, the emperor finds that since he draws ‘like a king’ he is ‘nothing more unlike a painter’, and quickly abandons his attempt at image-making.1 Alexander’s failure to draw is illustrative of the depiction of visual representations in many early modern English plays; the unsuccessful process of image-making is on display at least as much as is the image itself, which remains notably incomplete. In early modern England, ‘display’ could mean to ‘unfold’ or ‘expose to view’, but from the late sixteenth century this term also indicated verbal revelation, since as a noun it referred to ‘the act of setting forth descriptively’.2 When dramatists put image-making on display, therefore, they often do so using words as well as spectacle; in Robert Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, we are told of the making of a magical brazen head by a demon named Belcephon, and see the destruction of this item onstage by means of a magical hammer.3 In Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, meanwhile, we hear of the carving of a sculpture of the supposedly dead queen Hermione by ‘that rare Italian master, Giulio Romano’, before we are shown the statue seeming to come to life.4 In these examples visual representation is associated with processes of construction rather than with the display of a finished, formal object. This book is about why playwrights are so interested in visual things that are ‘under construction’, and what that display of construction processes might have meant for those playwrights and their early audiences.

In order to address this question I explore drama as a part of a changing post-Reformation culture in which reception is a key aspect of cultural production. In this approach my study builds on research that demonstrates the interactivity of reading and spectatorship in this period, from the violence of early modern writing and reading practices, to the iconoclasm so often associated with England in this period.5 Drama participates in this culture of interactive reception; prologues, epilogues and chorus speeches are littered with calls for audience members to contribute to the production of onstage illusion. *The Winter’s Tale* provides a famous and pertinent example, as the figure of Time,
serving as Chorus, tells the audience to ‘imagine me, / Gentle spectators, that I now may be / In fair Bohemia’ (4.1.19–21). Depictions of spectatorship in plays frequently figure viewers as participants in processes of making; again, in The Winter’s Tale, the awed inset spectators who behold Hermione’s statue are invited to ‘awake … faith’ in the possibility that the Sicilian courtier Paulina can ‘make the statue move’, and are also advised not to ‘kiss’ or touch the statue, which is ‘newly fixed’ (5.3.46–95). In Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, meanwhile, Miles, a young scholar, is pointlessly armed with ‘pistols’ and acts ineffectually at the moment at which the brazen head awakes and speaks (xi.74). Accepting that spectatorship is understood as an important aspect of image-making in early modern England, this study considers depictions of passive and interactive viewers as a vital component of playwrights’ portrayal of processes of making and unmaking. The metatheatricality of allusions to spectators in plays means that playwrights’ depictions of image-making, when centred on reception, become highly metatheatrical. Consequently, it is possible to investigate dramatists’ engagements with processes of visual construction as metatheatrical moments of reflection on the significance of representational activity.

This study, then, takes theatre’s engagement with an active visual culture in process of ‘re-formation’ as a starting point from which to understand concepts of cultural production and reception as these register in early modern English drama. In this respect my argument is highly unusual, since most studies in this area start from the point of the supposed absence of visual culture in an iconoclastic post-Reformation England blighted by lack of knowledge about the Italian visual arts. Frederick Kiefer opens his study of the emblematic portrayal of abstract figures such as Time in The Winter’s Tale with an anecdote about Elizabeth I’s ‘preference for words over pictures’ which, he concludes, ‘suggests a major direction of sixteenth-century culture in England’. James A. Knapp, meanwhile, notes that ‘Reformation hostility towards religious images and a paucity of native English visual artists created an atmosphere in which the word was not only privileged over the image, but the visual sense was denigrated in its favor’. Knapp suggests that Protestant hostility cultivated a ‘preoccupation with visual experience in early modern English culture’, ‘even in the absence of a significant tradition in the visual arts’. In focusing on post-Reformation English cultural activity in the ‘absence’ of the visual arts, Knapp follows a critical tradition traceable at least as far as an influential article by Leonard Barkan on the relationship between Elizabethan literature and the visual arts. In this article, Barkan declares that ‘we may learn more about the place of the visual arts in Elizabethan literature by focusing on absence than by focusing on presence’. For Barkan, this focus on ‘absence’ is justified because ‘theatre is England’s lively pictorial culture’. Regardless of whether or not the aesthetic premise of this argument is convincing, the suggestion that Elizabethan theatre accounts for English pictorial culture is an exaggeration, since the Shakespearean theatre
that Barkan discusses was largely centred on the commercial theatres of early modern London.\textsuperscript{13}

Significant numbers of scholars have subsequently agreed with the basic premise of Barkan’s thesis. In studies in this area early modern literature and drama are frequently described as an inventive presence stimulated by the absence of images. Lucy Gent claims that ‘conditions in England where the visual arts were concerned meant that a poet could all the more easily launch into a realm of painting which actually existed only in his head’.\textsuperscript{14} Emphasising that the theory of linear perspective was not properly understood by English viewers during the early seventeenth century, Alison Thorne argues that English lack of understanding of perspectival techniques allows figures such as Shakespeare to ‘experiment’ with these techniques from a unique standpoint.\textsuperscript{15} The narrative of the absence of early modern English visual culture is particularly strong in criticism that centres on dramatists’, and particularly Shakespeare’s, handling of ekphrasis, a literary mode that entails ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ and therefore implies the absence of an image described in words.\textsuperscript{16} For example, Richard Meek observes that ‘pictorial culture’ in early modern England was ‘relatively underdeveloped compared to the rest of Europe’, and pursues Shakespeare’s development of a mode of ekphrastic writing that is dependent on language ‘and the audience’s imagination’ to fill in the visual ‘absences’.\textsuperscript{17} In Thorne and Meek’s analyses, drama and literary production more broadly are fluid, adaptable modes contrasted with a stolid visual culture constituted by images which are implicitly exchangeable but not adaptable. Visual works are available or unavailable, present or absent where drama may alter, change and progress.

At the summit of this critical outlook is the assumption that a play constitutes a ‘speaking picture’, in the phrase used by Sir Philip Sidney in his An Apology for Poetry.\textsuperscript{18} Sidney alludes to speaking pictures in order to suggest that poetry is a verbal mode of representation, a way of ‘representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth’ (p. 86, lines 18–19). The phrase derives from Plutarch’s oft-used analogy between painting and poetry, which he, in turn, derived from Simonides:

\begin{quote}
Now, Simonides calls painting silent poetry, and poetry voiced painting, because whereas painting presents us with events as if they were actually happening, words describe and relate the same events in the past.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Plutarch’s allusions to ‘silent poetry’ and ‘voiced painting’ contribute to the discourse of \textit{ut pictura poesis} (‘as is painting, so is poetry’), which was highly influential amongst early modern writers, and which is based on a recognition of painting as the supreme model of mimetic representation.\textsuperscript{20} In early modern Europe, circulating alongside the notion of \textit{ut pictura poesis} were the \textit{paragone} (‘comparison’) debates, which revolved around the struggle for superiority amongst modes of representation.\textsuperscript{21} The \textit{paragone} were known to English
playwrights in this period and shape a number of dramatic treatments of the relationship between word and image. For example, Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton’s Timon of Athens (written 1607?) opens with a competitive dialogue between a poet and a painter that is often taken as an example of an onstage paragone.\textsuperscript{22} Shakespeare presents some links between the two characters: both seek the patronage of ‘Lord Timon’, and as they discuss the poet’s ideas, the painter refers to ‘our condition’, indicating a sense of shared experience (1.1.57–78).\textsuperscript{23} At the same time, however, the conversation between the poet and the painter is competitive. The poet is keen to promote what he calls his ‘rough work’, and describes it at length (1.1.44). The painter, meanwhile, responds with an assertion of the superiority of painting to poetry:

\begin{quote}
A thousand moral paintings I can show  
That shall demonstrate these quick blows of Fortune’s  
More pregnantly than words. Yet you do well  
To show Lord Timon that mean eyes have seen  
The foot above the head. (1.1.92–6)
\end{quote}

The relatively polite tone of this debate between a writer and a visual artist is not reflected in an example of a paragone debate in an entertainment presented before Elizabeth I at Mitcham in 1598. Here, a poet and painter each strive to prove the inferiority of the other’s profession.\textsuperscript{24} The poet, for example, attacks the ‘fantastical paynter’, suggesting that if he did not ‘suck all from Poetry’ there would be no ‘difference betwene paynting and dawbing’ (p. 22). The painter’s response is to ‘curse the teates that poysoned my invention’ (p. 22). It is at this point that the struggle between the two draws towards a close, suggesting a bias in favour of poetry which is presented as a nurturing source upon which visual representation depends. Reflecting the combination of unity and opposition associated with the \textit{ut pictura poesis} and paragone discourses, however, this entertainment concludes with the poet and painter united, with a ‘musitian’, in a tribute to the queen (pp. 26–8).

More than most early modern English writers, Sidney can be connected to the advanced continental visual arts considered ‘absent’ from England by so many scholars. For example, visiting Venice in 1574, Sidney sat for a portrait by Veronese; he had also contemplated having his portrait painted by Tintoretto.\textsuperscript{25} We might expect Sidney, the cultivated connoisseur of the continental visual arts, to be relatively sympathetic to visual images in his deployment of the rhetoric of \textit{ut pictura poesis}. And yet there is more than a tinge of the divisive tones of the paragone in Sidney’s allusion to poetry as a ‘speaking picture’. Plutarch associates painting with urgent immediacy, ‘events as if they were actually happening’; verbal expression, meanwhile, may unfold a narrative of past events. In \textit{An Apology for Poetry}, in contrast, all sense of motion is concentrated in the ‘figuring forth’ accomplished by poetry, which combines the immediacy of painting
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with the unfolding reach of narrative (p. 86, lines 18–19). Visual representation is useful in Sidney’s analogy only so long as it is ‘lacking’ in comparison with the liveliness of verbal modes of expression.

Reflecting Sidney’s preference for verbal expression in his allusion to the ‘speaking picture’ trope, critical usage of this phrase often emphasises the literary bridging of a perceived gap between early modern word and image in which the former gives ‘voice’ to the latter. This configuration is especially visible in writing on early modern emblem books, in which meaning is communicated via a combination of image and text. John Manning, for example, suggests that emblematic meaning is mobilised by verbal expression when he finds that the recycling of ‘woodblock designs’ across emblem books indicates that ‘the woodblock image was not emblematic in itself, but only when attached to emblematic verses’. The emblematic model of pictorial representation as a passive, semantically limited body awaiting enlivening contact with inherently meaningful verbal signification extensively informs critical appropriations of the ‘speaking picture’ motif in discussions of early modern drama. In these critical readings, theatre goes beyond the verbal reach of the emblem, further mobilising static spectacle in a living, breathing version of the emblematic mode. For example, Barkan advances a reading of the ‘statue scene’ in *The Winter’s Tale* to support the claim that Shakespeare ‘celebrates the drama as speaking picture’. As noted at the outset of this introduction, *The Winter’s Tale* presents a statue of the supposedly dead Sicilian queen Hermione that appears to come to life. This event is depicted in the concluding scene of the play; in the penultimate scene, the statue is said to have been ‘newly performed by that rare Italian master, Giulio Romano’, an inaccurate allusion to the Italian painter of the same name that constitutes the only reference to a living sixteenth-century visual artist in Shakespeare’s works (5.2.94–5). Barkan takes Hermione’s sculpture as a ‘real person’, and ‘the Hermione who has taken these years to be performed in the sense of perfected’:

But she cannot be perfected so long as one can only speak to her but not receive an answer in response, so long, in other words, as she is only a statue. In that sense, the event becomes theater only when, simultaneously, the statue moves and speaks, or when word and picture are joined. It is at that moment that the central dream of all ekphrasis can finally be realized, that is, that the work of art is so real it could almost come to life. Theater removes the almost.

This argument is complicated by subsequent debate on the extent to which Hermione is a ‘real person’ in the statue scene, a subject discussed in the second chapter of this book, and which I will therefore leave to one side for the moment. For now, I want to call attention to Barkan’s investment in the ‘perfecting’ and ‘completion’ of Hermione. Pictorial representation is in this view unsatisfactorily static, lifeless and defunct until united with the movement and language
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of performance. The aim of theatre here is to present a finished product that moves, speaks and so resists, or even ‘transcends’, the supposed limitations of pictorial representation. Barkan understands theatre as transcending what W. J. T. Mitchell would later call the ‘impossibility’ of ekphrasis, reflecting on the fact that ‘words can “cite,” but never “sight” their objects’. Ekphrastic readings of Shakespeare’s plays frequently suggest that in its function as a ‘speaking picture’, early modern theatre overcomes this impossibility, uniting spectacle and speech while simultaneously allowing dramatists to build playfully on the absence of the paintings and sculptures described, ‘opening up a space for the imagined, the missing or unsaid or inconsistent’. Building on Mitchell’s study of ekphrasis, for example, Richard Meek identifies language as a mobilising force in Shakespearean theatre’s exemplification of the ‘speaking picture’ motif, as Shakespeare’s descriptions of paintings are held to demonstrate that words can ‘make us see’. Once again, theatre is a mobile, animated, lively and inventive arena that flourishes in relation to stolid visual objects that elsewhere clash unproductively with verbal modes of expression.

The corpus of ‘speaking picture’ criticism presents troubling assumptions. At its heart is the notion that early modern plays aim to reach towards some kind of ‘perfect’ unification of the verbal and the visual. In this way, appropriations of the ‘speaking picture’ trope in discussions of early modern drama reflect what Mitchell identifies as a cultural history of attempts to ‘overcome’ the perceived ‘gap’ between poetry as ‘an art of time, motion, and action’ and painting as ‘an art of space, stasis, and arrested action’. Writing on visual representation from a literary perspective in 1986, Mitchell suggested that in discussing the relation between word and image, we should adopt a historicising approach, and aim ‘not to heal the split between words and images, but to see what interests and powers it serves’. This recommendation has not been pursued amidst continuing scholarly reliance on the speaking picture motif as a means through which to understand early modern drama in connection with word and image debates. To counter the critique implied by this observation, it might be argued that critical preoccupation with the speaking picture trope is historicising in focus, since playwrights were engaged with the discourse of *ut pictura poesis* and the *paragone* debates, and were therefore interested in the opposition between and possible union of verbal and visual modes of expression. As Alison Thorne has shown, moreover, rhetoric shaped the role of visual experience in Shakespearean theatre. Yet exploration of attitudes to word and image in early modern English drama from rhetorical perspectives paints only one side of the picture, presenting dramatists as literary figures whose works may be explained in predominantly rhetorical terms. A view of Shakespeare and his contemporaries as ‘literary’ dramatists who wrote for readers as much as for performance is available; in this study, however, I am concerned with plays as performed, material works that were enjoyed by audiences. The collaborative nature of
performance positions rhetorical influences against a host of material, visual and textual contexts informing the construction of the drama as it is played. It would be possible at this point to reassert the notion that drama in performance bridges the ‘split’ between word and image. In light of Mitchell’s suggestion that we should be alert to the cultural function of this perceived ‘split’, however, it can also be suggested that in discussions of drama in performance, such a split becomes discursively dysfunctional as multiple contexts combine in our view of the making of the play. When considering drama in performance as a part of visual culture, the ‘split’ between word and image is especially exposed as a rhetorical construct that informs the play but does not fully cohere with the aesthetic world of early modern performance.

There is a serious disjunction between the aesthetic implications of evidence relating to performance contexts and the aesthetic aims associated with the rhetoric of ut pictura poesis. As noted above, ut pictura poesis is often linked to the transcendence of verbal/visual boundaries in the pursuit of aesthetic perfection. Characterised thus, the aims of ut pictura poesis seem invested in notions of ‘unity’ that are most usually associated with post-eighteenth-century aesthetics. What may actually be at stake in this discourse is the investment of ‘iconology’, the rhetoric of images, in ‘similitude’, understood as the coincidence of the sign and signified, as opposed to the referential relationship between sign and signified described by Derrida’s notion of différance. As is discussed in chapter 2, the referential split implicit in mimetic representation is of great concern in the context of Reformation image controversies. In addition to this theoretically informed historical contextualisation for the concerns of ut pictura poesis, however, there remains a troubling and intriguing gap between the intellectual realm of this rhetoric and the aesthetics of plays in performance. This latter aesthetics seems invested in disunity, failure and imperfection. Jeremy Lopez, for example, argues convincingly that ‘failure’ and ‘potential for failure’ are central components of early modern performance and the popularity of plays in reception. Tiffany Stern, meanwhile, suggests the extent to which playwriting was associated with material imperfection when she emphasises that in early modern London the ‘common perception’ was ‘that a play was pieced together out of a collection of odds and ends: it was not a single whole entity’. What, in such a context of material ‘patchiness’, would a ‘perfect’ representation resemble? Could aesthetic ideals of unity survive in such a materially patchy world? The ‘speaking picture’ trope edges us towards Enlightenment, Romantic aesthetics, while evidence about the material and textual world of plays pulls in an entirely different aesthetic direction. The language of ut pictura poesis that dominates critical discussions of drama and visual culture in this period seems to come from an intellectual world distinct from that which is discussed in materialist studies of Shakespearean theatre. Part of the problem here is that Shakespeare and his contemporaries worked in a period before the formal discussion of
‘aesthetics’, a time that Larry Shiner, writing on the visual arts, refers to as ‘proto-aesthetic’.42 I am reluctant to apply the phrase ‘proto-aesthetic’ in this study, partly because it seems to speak to a rigidly linear version of the history of aesthetics. At the same time, however, this book considers aesthetics before the time of the aesthetic as part of a broader concern with early modern attitudes to what might now be characterised as aesthetic experience.

I am especially concerned to historicise and understand that gap between the aesthetic implications of writing about visuality, and the aesthetic implications of early modern materiality. Depictions of and allusions to processes of visual construction on the early modern stage are perfect exempla for such an investigation. These instances reflect the discourse of *ut pictura poesis* in using the world of image-making as a vehicle for the discussion of verbal arts, but also draw attention to the materiality of early modern visual culture by showing images that are ‘under construction’. A focus on the importance of processes of visual construction in plays frees the speaking picture trope from a limiting investment in the notion of the ‘picture’ as an inanimate, motionless, ‘fixed’ object. In this view I build on Jonathan Gil Harris’s useful discussion of physical objects as distinct forms that assume ‘a synchronic temporal framework in the shape of a historical moment’.43 Harris points out that, in contrast, matter has been understood by both Aristotle and Marx ‘as a sensuous, workable potentiality that implies pasts, presents and futures’.44 In *De Anima*, Aristotle distinguishes between ‘form’ as ‘actuality’, and ‘matter’ as ‘potentiality’.45 Marx, meanwhile, writes that ‘the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism … is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as a *sensuous, human activity, practice*, not subjectively’.46 Aristotelian and Marxist distinctions between matter and object highlight the conceptual tussle at the heart of critical appropriations of the ‘speaking picture’ trope. To set up drama as an animated, lively, ‘real’ form in contrast to the implicit stasis of visual representation is to make fixed, impotent objects of both, rather than to recognise the reworkable ‘potential’ of either.

Attention to the material culture of early modern England can expand our understanding of the rhetorical discourses that inform attitudes to visual experience in this period. It is therefore a shame that there has been a lack of dialogue between visual and materialist perspectives in early modern literary studies. Visual representations are rarely discussed in volumes concerning drama and early modern material culture. Catherine Richardson discusses portraits in her *Shakespeare and Material Culture*; Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass refer to ‘the matter of paintings’ in their study on early modern clothing and memory, but use portraiture mainly as a lens through which to understand the role of clothing in constructing early modern identity.47 Although art historians have engaged with material culture and especially the ‘everyday’ life of the early
modern English household, few literary scholars concerned with plays and the visual arts take into account the critical advances presented by these studies. Critical opportunities are often missed as a result, because early modern English playwrights are themselves preoccupied with image-making as a material practice in a way that destabilises notions of a ‘finished’ object or form. For example, Keir Elam observes that where many dramatists exploit painter characters in plays as an ‘opportunity to … talk about the act of painting and about paintings themselves’, Shakespeare ‘indulges more parsimoniously in technical painterly discourse’. This observation is made almost in passing in Elam’s survey of the ways in which ‘onstage art objects … speak’ in early modern drama. In this, Elam reflects the approach of many scholars who discuss playwrights’ accounts and depictions of image-making, only to locate meaning in the presentation and display of a supposedly finished visual product.

An alternative approach to the depiction of visual representation in early modern plays focuses on material processes rather than finished forms. In order to demonstrate the possibilities suggested by this approach, it is worth returning briefly to the final ‘statue scene’ of The Winter’s Tale. The detailed preoccupation with image-making and its reception suggested by Shakespeare’s allusion to Giulio Romano continues here, as the Sicilian king, Leontes, asks ‘what fine chisel / Could ever yet cut breath?’ (5.3.77–8), and thus uses phraseology that extensively recalls the terms of Italian humanist praise for artworks. A huge amount of critical time has been devoted to analysing the significance and source of Shakespeare’s allusion to Romano; the correspondence between the statue and statuary that may have been known to Shakespeare, and the significance of the apparent transformation of the image from stone to flesh. But how might we approach the subject of that transformation if we consider that meaning may be linked to details about the making of the supposed statue? What if Shakespeare is as interested in the completing of an object as its completion? What if Hermione is never meant to reach ‘perfection’? How far is the displayable ‘inanimate object’ ever considered finished if the dynamics of its making mean so much for early modern viewers?

These are the sorts of questions that I pose throughout this book, as I interrogate what ‘finished’, ‘incomplete’ or ‘under construction’ meant for early modern playwrights and the contemporaries who watched their plays. By drawing attention to the extent to which playwrights are interested in image-making as a process that engages with visual ‘matter’, I hope to complicate our understanding of early modern attitudes to representational activity more broadly. I am encouraged in this approach by the metatheatrical function of allusions to image-making in plays. In Thomas Dekker’s The Welsh Embassador, for example, Carintha, wife of Penda, son of the Duke of Cornwall, displays a ‘statue’ which depicts the moment of Penda’s death, showing ‘Penda with a leadinge staff. Voltimar at his back: his sword in him’. Carintha does not realise that
Penda is merely pretending to be dead, and has framed Voltimar, a captain, for his murder. She explains the process of the making of the image:

I now remember, when I had desire
To figure out that divell which slew my Penda,
By chance a fellow fashioned just like this
Past by, my workman eyed him, and cutt this,
A more illfavord slave I nere beheld,
And such a one methought was that rogue sure,
That killd my lord, and so this stands for him. (II.iii.45–50)

The sculptor’s rather arbitrary working methods thus produce unknowingly an image which imitates, or ‘stands for’, the lie that forms the narrative of Dekker’s play. In describing the statue-making process, Carintha calls attention unwittingly to the constructedness of her husband’s ‘death’, and the potential for visual representation, like theatre, to ‘rework’ the truth, since the use of a picture to ‘figure out’ an accurate version of events has produced the opposite effect. It might be pointed out at this point that Carintha describes an object, rather than matter; it is an unstable object in that it is inaccurate, but is also apparently a completed, finished ‘thing’ nonetheless. Yet in post-Reformation terms the inaccuracy of the statue is precisely what makes it not a thing, or rather no-thing at all. In early Christianity an idol is ‘a false representation of what does not exist’, in contrast to an image, which is ‘the truthful representation of an existing thing’.55 Similarly, in a popular text on idolatry published in 1601, William Perkins writes:

The generall propertie of all Idols is that they are NOTHING in the world, as Paul saith, I. Cor. 8. 4. And they are so tearmed, because they have nothing in them of the divinitie or Godhead, whether we regard the nature or the efficacie thereof.56

The dominant Calvinist view was that God’s image was visible in his earthly works, especially in people, and in his word.57 Against this background, an idol could be any representation in which there is no correspondence between sign and signified; in other words, a ‘false’ representation that in Perkins’s and early Christian terms alludes to nothing that exists. Carintha’s sculpture on this count is an idolatrous ‘nothing’, since the ‘workman’ has depicted an event which never happens in the course of the play. Building on the metatheatricality of Dekker’s allusion to sculpture, the image of Penda’s murder is doubly ‘nothing’, since Penda’s survival and telling of the tale of his death is itself part of the fiction of the play.

And yet, in this play, there is still an object, a ‘thing’ onstage; is this ‘thing’ understood as matter, as object, finished, nothing? How does incompleteness relate to nothingness, or erasure? Throughout this study I interrogate the inconsistencies, anomalies and ambiguities that mark early modern English attitudes to image-making processes and the representations that result from these proc-
esses. Given the metatheatrical meaning attendant on depictions and accounts of image-making in plays, my analysis reflects on the ways in which playwrights viewed their own practice and the ‘perfection’ of the works that they produced. Sidney alludes to painting in order to suggest the value and potential of literary work as *mimesis*. In contrast, I will suggest, playwrights such as Shakespeare focus intently on images of visual incompleteness and faultiness as a means through which to acknowledge and sometimes transgress limitations perceived to be associated with mimetic representation. A central strand of my argument is that the notion of ‘finish’ carries significant cultural weight in this period, and that the discursive evasion of finish in early modern English drama performs an important, socially conservative function. In this way, I consider the deconstructive potential of early modern plays within the workings of a supposedly divinely ordained social hierarchy that is both disturbed by and dependent on notions of aesthetic ‘wholeness’. In discussing aesthetics, I am not concerned with the revival of a discourse on the determination of aesthetic value, although this critical concern informs some studies of Shakespearean drama and visual culture. Instead, this book concerns the ideas about ‘making and unmaking’ that Shakespeare and his contemporaries may have known and formulated, and how these ideas relate to our own critical assumptions about early modern aesthetic experience.

As I explain in my first chapter, the study of drama as a part of visual culture offers the perfect context for an exploration of pre-modern aesthetic discourse. This opening chapter expounds my approach to plays as participants in a lively post-Reformation visual culture in process of ‘re-formation’. Many of the plays discussed in this book depict patrons of the visual arts, and chapter 1 concludes by linking this focus on patronage to broader concerns about the social implications of representational activity in early modern England. My second chapter extends the focus on the social meanings of patronage of the visual arts in a discussion of Paulina as patron of Hermione’s image in *The Winter’s Tale*. Noting that the supposed sculpture of Hermione is never taken to be completed, I argue that Paulina is presented as a matriarchal gatekeeper to an unreachable, non-mimetic ‘wholeness’, figured in the much-vaunted ambiguity of Hermione’s image. Accepting that interactive spectatorship is understood as a source of image-making in the early modern period, I suggest that Paulina enables Leontes to enter into a ‘fantasy of wholeness’ by forcing him to adopt a passive mode of spectatorship that rejects mimetic complicity.

My discussion of *The Winter’s Tale* pivots around the play’s troubling investment in patriarchal notions of ‘perfection’. As a result, I avoid the conventional use of this play as a vantage point from which to draw conclusions about early modern aesthetics, and instead take the famous ‘statue scene’ as a point from which to look further into the meanings attendant on making and unmaking in early modern English drama. The structure of this book is therefore not
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chronological. Instead, my argument progresses thematically from the jumping-off point of Shakespeare’s aesthetic concerns, delving from there into the meanings of ‘completion’, ‘incompletion’ and ‘destruction’ in Campaspe (1584) and Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay (1589), before drawing out again to a discussion of concepts of erasure in an early-to-mid-seventeenth-century play, The Two Merry Milkmaids. This non-chronological ‘order’ that folds in on itself before unfolding back out again seems appropriate for a discussion of dramatists’ preoccupation with deferred endings and continual processes of making and unmaking. The four plays that form my main focus are selected on a thematic basis, rather than because each is a comedy and that together these plays might tell us something about genre and visual culture. There is certainly much more that can be said about the place of the visual artist in early modern English carnivalesque humour, but questions of genre are not tackled extensively in this study.

Following my discussion of The Winter’s Tale, chapter 3 focuses on the ends and aims of ‘making’ in the Elizabethan imagination. When John Lyly’s Euphues states that his account of Elizabeth I is ‘but begun for others to end’, what endpoint does he envisage? With reference to the ‘drawing-lesson’ scene in Lyly’s Campaspe I argue that early modern awareness of God as ultimate creator situates earthly making as implicitly transgressive, and the attainment of ‘finish’ as potentially idolatrous. In response to this situation, Lyly deploys the motif of the ‘frame without a face’ as a politically sensitive mode of representation assertive of both imperfection and the potential for viewers to ‘begin’ to ‘end’ what they see. Taking into account the idolatrous status of ‘finish’, chapter 4 asks what early modern dramatists and playgoers understood by ‘destruction’ with reference to Robert Greene’s Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay. This play presents an onstage depiction of iconoclasm in the breaking of a brazen head that is under construction for much of the play. The supernatural iconoclasm directed against the brazen head is seen as an instructive example in spectatorial praxis, as I argue that Greene engages with contemporary technological discourses in order to call attention to the brokenness of visual experience. Like the supposed statue of Hermione, the brazen head is never presented as a completed object, and so Greene’s play emphasises the on-going fracture of the earthly visual world. In highlighting the urgent function of image-breaking, Greene also suggests that total erasure of images is out of mortal hands.

My fifth chapter takes up the theme of erasure, noting that several early modern playwrights are preoccupied with the possibility of magical disappearance from the visible world. How does this type of erasure relate to the supposed divine status of total destruction? And why did playwrights and theatre companies present invisible characters as a highly visible presence on stage? This chapter, on the anonymous comedy The Two Merry Milkmaids, is slightly different in focus to the other chapters, each of which discusses a play in which a visual object is made. Here, the partially erased, semi-complete visual object is the play itself in
performance. This chapter thus presents a reading of drama as a part of a visual culture in which incompleteness is a highly provocative concept. Invisible characters in early modern plays are ‘unseen’ rather than inherently, divinely invisible. Multiple instances of characters passing in and out of visibility in The Two Merry Milkmaids draw attention to the material incompleteness of the unseen character, but at the same time rehearse and imitate the experience of divine limitlessness and omniscience. Moreover, the dynamics of the ‘making’ of the unseen character encourages spectators to realise the fractured dynamics of vision while entering into a fantasy of omniscience. As such, the figure of the unseen in this play walks the borderline between deference and transgression, acknowledging material limitations while pushing at the limits of earthly visuality.

My conclusion attempts to piece together the different parts of my argument, and considers the critical implications of early modern English dramatists’ investments in processes of making and unmaking. This study offers an opening onto the subject of early modern attitudes to visual construction and aesthetic experience, but does not present firm conclusions. There is much more work to be done in this area, particularly through the forging of stronger connections between material, visual and literary studies. Early modern dramatists, I suggest, are implicated in the formation of commodifying aesthetic discourses that continue to shape critical interpretations of the material and literary cultures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The mid seventeenth century may present the beginnings of a turning point in the development of this discourse, but I am reluctant to apply a linear narrative to evidence that resists formal notions of ‘ending’. I therefore conclude this book with a brief consideration of the implications of my study for approaches to early modern temporality. Harris’s discussion of ‘untimely matter’ in this period offers a fruitful, ‘poly-chronic’ lens through which to understand the material workings of early modern culture, but does not account for Shakespeare and his contemporaries’ arguably forward-facing preoccupation with deferred endings. In returning so insistently to representations as permanently ‘under construction’, I suggest, playwrights repeatedly invest in a stasis stimulated by a desire to reach an ‘end’.

Notes


3 Robert Greene, Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, ed. Daniel Seltzer, Regents Renaissance Drama Series (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), ii.55–6, xi.74SD. All subsequent references are to this edition unless stated otherwise.


21 Claire Farago explains that the word ‘paragone’ has been associated with these


23 Although Shakespeare and Middleton collaborated on Timon of Athens, the opening scene is generally accepted to have been written by Shakespeare; see Timon of Athens, ed. Dawson and Minton, Appendix 2, p. 402.

24 See Anon, Queen Elizabeth’s Entertainment at Mitcham: Poet, Painter, and Musician, ed. Leslie Hotson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953). All subsequent references are to this edition.


27 Manning, The Emblem, p. 85.


29 Barkan, ‘Making Pictures Speak’, 343. The emphasis is in the text.


31 Mitchell, Picture Theory, p. 152.


35 Mitchell, Iconology, p. 44.
36 See Thorne, Vision and Rhetoric, passim.
37 See Lukas Erne, Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Meek uses Erne’s work as a starting point from which to explore Shakespeare’s destabilisation of ‘literary’ and ‘theatrical’ modes, Narrating the Visual, pp. 22–3.
43 Harris, Untimely Matter, p. 8.
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50 Elam, ‘Most truly limned and living in your face’, p. 63.
58 See Meek, Narrating the Visual, pp. 7–8.
61 Harris, Untimely Matter, p. 4.