CHAPTER 1

LIKENESS, DEVICE, COMPOSITION: SHAKESPEARE'S VISUAL SURROUNDINGS

I

Shakespeare's concern with visual art, and the visual sense in all its dimensions, is not a primary concern for most readers and critics. Certainly, open addresses to such matters, in the debate between Poet and Painter in *Timon of Athens*, or Hamlet's injunction that Gertrude 'Look here upon this picture, and on this' (3.4.53), are justifiably well known and much discussed; but a larger acceptance of the power of the visual within the working of the plays and poems has not as yet been achieved, if even considered. In part, this astigmatism is the result of surrounding issues. Critical and curatorial approaches to visual forms in England, emphasising hieratic portraiture and the portrait miniature, have tended to overshadow other traditions that contribute much to the visual furniture of the age. Academic divisions between theatre, literary studies and art history have further obscured a reading that accepts the elision of verbal, visual and performative genres as at the least a possibility and at most a constant presence. If instead we accept the exchange between word and image as occurring on a larger, compositional scale, and the possibility that the dramatist and much of his audience were familiar with major visual forms and the ideas on which they rested, a richer prospect emerges. Put simply, the aim of this book is to explore ways in which the structures, allusive practices and concepts of the visual art of Shakespeare's time were appropriated and transformed into the forms and ideas of the poems and plays, and to argue that an awareness of these processes greatly enriches our knowledge of the canon.

As this larger relationship emerges, what becomes clear is that, with few exceptions, it rests not on the appropriation of specific individual paintings,

tapestries or other works, in the manner of literary texts long familiar as Shakespeare's sources.[1] Instead, longer iconographic conventions of painting, or traditions of writing or speaking about painting, are more often fundamental to poetic or dramatic design and effect. Equally important, and strikingly original in some works, is the direct rejection of such tradition. What is repeatedly revealed is the absorption of visual elements into dramatic or poetic forms, through their reinvention within verbal or theatric structures, their contribution to the themes and ideas of a play or poem, and a larger reflection on the workings of poetry or theatre in relation to the sensible universe.

The exact nature and function of this absorption takes various forms in different works and at different times in the canon. In some of the earliest plays, it operates through the development of compositional forms familiar from traditions of painting to become an essential element of stage design and to engage with ideas and themes. Elsewhere, it is the dramatic reinvention of the emblem tradition that works with similar innovative force. In the narrative poems and some of the *Sonnets*, engagement with much earlier conceptual exchanges between verbal narrative and visual construction results in new approaches to the presentation of event and response.

A further level of significance within these intersections lies in the exploration of the intrinsic natures of drama and poetry. In part this is achieved through extending the much earlier rhetorical exchanges between artists of different media to establish the parity of one over the other, generally known as the Paragone debate – a term that, like many others, demands and will receive further exploration. Another, more immediate result of this bringing together of verbal and visual is to reveal in both a tension between representation and autonomy, reminding viewer or reader that while a play or poem is in one sense a representation of external actuality it is also, like a portrait or landscape painting, an object constructed in its own formal terms. Play and poem are doubly enriched through this analytical address between forms that interrogate, undermine, parody and extend each other, word and image held in balance as mirrors that depend on and intensify each other's compound identity. The self-reflexive processes of metatheatric or metapoetic examination, rarely absent in the canon, are thus further enhanced.

The absorption of visual traditions and compositions into the structural and conceptual fabric of the plays and poems is particularly prevalent in the works of the 1590s. At around the turn of the century a change occurs, aligned with the suggestion, long commonplace, that the plays somehow tighten at this time. Later plays develop an engagement with seen or reported events that builds on

rhetorical practices introduced in the narrative poems. The reasons for this movement, if any may be plausibly established, are for later. For the moment, my aim is to make clear that, taken together, all these orders of involvement reveal in Shakespeare's theatre and poetry a new dynamic of visual and conceptual aesthetics. The title of this book therefore reflects the construction of a new category – conceptual, textual, performative: Shakespeare's visual imagination.

II

There remain, of course, many questions to be answered and explorations conducted fully to support the assertions made in these paragraphs, especially regarding the wider knowledge of visual texts and concepts, and their bringing together in theory and practice, at or a little before the production of Shakespeare's works. What elements characteristic of Tudor and earlier visual art, both in England and throughout Europe, reveal a relationship already existing between word and image? What kinds of knowledge related to visual art and the debates surrounding it might Shakespeare's audience have brought to the plays and poems? And, equally important, what is the effect of such features on viewers and readers unaware of the traditions which Shakespeare's works extend? Approaching such questions is far more than an exercise in broad *Kulturwissenschaft*: it offers a path to deeper analysis of the visual actualities and concepts available to Shakespeare and his audience, and how the plays and poems harness them in structure, idea and self-reflection. They may best be addressed by examining some important individual works.

The portrait painting now known as *Sir John Luttrell* exists in two versions. The first, signed with the monogram HE, was painted in 1550 and is currently in the galleries of the Courtauld Institute, Somerset House, London.[2] The second is a copy made by a different hand in 1591 at the request of Sir John's nephew, George Luttrell, now in Dunster Castle (Plate 1).[3] As the more accurately conserved of the two, produced at the start of Shakespeare's working career, this version is the more appropriate for discussion here. The painting's referential and allegorical frames are highly complex, first clarified by Frances Yates in an essay that itself reveals much about a tradition of approaching images of this kind.[4]

Compositionally the painting is divided into two largely separate elements, a main central image and a second one in the upper left-hand quadrant. Both contain a number of individual elements, some naturalistic, some symbolic, all related to a sequence of personal and historical events placed within a larger frame

of classical allusion. The whole is united by a series of inscriptions. That on the rock, appearing above the date, Luttrell's initials and the artist's monogram, reads:

MORE THE ROCK AMYDYS THE RAGING SEAS
THE CONSTANT HEART NO DANGER DREDDYS NOR FEARYS

Luttrell wears two bracelets with Latin inscriptions, 'Nec Flexit Lucrum' and 'Nec [fregit discremen]' (neither swayed by avarice nor deterred by danger). All three texts are representative personal mottoes of the kind adopted by aristocrats, or used in portraits symbolising their natures, and their presentation here makes immediately clear a feature of much painting of the period: its inclusion of inscriptions that define or extend the overall effect and meaning, uniting idea with a constructed individual identity.

A second inscription appears in the Dunster Castle version, prefaced by the subject's initials:

.SIL.

Effigiem renouare tuam fortissime miles
Ingens me meritum fecit amor [que] tui,
Nam nisi curasses haeredem scribere fratrem
Hei, tua contigerant praedia nulla mihi.

The passage may be translated as: 'Your great merit and my love for you cause me, O brave soldier, to renew your effigy; for unless you had taken care to make your brother your heir, none of your possessions would have become mine.'[5]

English paintings of the period include inscriptions of many kinds, from personal mottoes to fragments of narrative. Often presented within visual treatments analogous in some way, representational, metaphoric or narrative, the words form a scripted armature of symbolic and referential meaning on which the image rests. For the more complex images of the day, written outlines were commissioned, functioning as verbal blueprints as the basis of the image's visual and conceptual design, uniting narrative, symbol, classical allusions and verbal-visual puns, to convey a single complex of meaning. For paintings like the Luttrell portrait no such schemes survive, but some exist in the form of explanatory poems for the frontispieces of books. Those for Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (1612) and Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614) are among the best known, but a rare earlier example is provided in an image, technically an armorial decoration, prefacing the dedication to Stephen Bateman's *Batman Upon Bartolome* (1582: Figure 1).[6] This offers a full verbal explication of each element shown, brought together in the Latin motto 'Conserva me domine'.

Figure 1 Unidentified artist: Armorial decoration and sonnet from *Batman Upon Bartolome* by Stephen Bateman, 1582.

The larger significations of the Luttrell portrait, while more complex than many, are representative of this schematic process. The painting commemorates the victory of the English over the Scots and French in the battle of Pinkie-Musselborough (now more commonly known as Pinkie Cleugh) and Luttrell's subsequent isolation on the island of Inchcolm, before being rescued, subsequently recaptured, and imprisoned by the Scots until release in 1551. His rescue is shown by the ship in the main images, the battle's human cost by the floating body of a soldier. Seen with the English motto above which it appears, the figure resembles the form of a funerary monument where a sculpted likeness is balanced by a memorial text, in further demonstration of verbal-visual exchange. At the painting's centre, Luttrell's heroism is revealed by his depiction in the posture associated since classical Greece with the sea-God Neptune or Poseidon, and in this the image demonstrates a common habit of appropriating earlier forms to give authority, or sometimes comic effect, to a living figure or contemporary event.[7] The image of Neptune, one arm raised above his head and the other often concealed beneath waves, or holding the reins of sea-horses, is frequent in Greek and Roman statuary (see Figure 2).[8] Its use on coins, such as those of the Emperor Vespasian, confirms its meaning as a symbol of authority. Its currency in the sixteenth century is shown through its use in low-relief carvings, drinking vessels and most frequently in prints, such as that showing the Triumph of Neptune by an anonymous Italian engraver (*c.*1500–1520: Figure 3).[9] This cluster of visual associations makes inescapable the link between Luttrell and an ancient deity of the sea, his power transferred across to the land, at the same time as presenting him as a figure of aesthetic appeal. To these meanings is added the figure's quality as a likeness or 'effigy' of Sir John Luttrell, strong enough that his nephew and legatee had the image copied forty years later, giving the painting a quality of personal, and rather affectionate, family allusion. The figure is thus both an identifiable, living man and the incarnation of a long tradition of power, given increased resonance by classical allusion. This reference draws attention to itself as a mark of learning and artistic skill – elements not infrequent in the presentation of individual figures on stage or in print.

Such developments of earlier forms are in both concept and execution far more than imitations. Following the Renaissance notions of *copia*, they modify their earlier originals with directly contemporary references, adding immediacy and enrichment by yoking together the two areas of experience and artistic statement.[10] Imitation of an earlier form, with its narrative or political meanings, is thus not simple reproduction: as David Lowenthal remarks, the word copy at

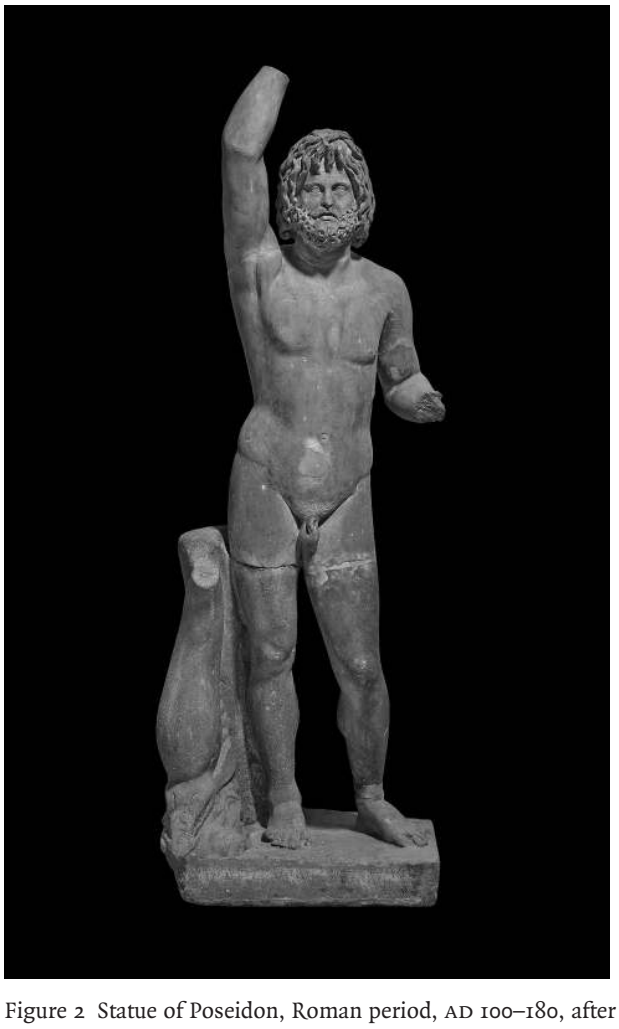

Figure 2 Statue of Poseidon, Roman period, AD 100–180, after a Hellenistic Greek original of c.300 BCE.

this time 'denoted eloquent abundance',[11] reflecting through a macaronic pun the concept of copia to reflect fullness caused by such doubly enriched significance.

This breadth of allusion and understanding is fundamental to the aesthetic processes of the period, perhaps at its most self-declaratory in the masques of Ben Jonson, where marginal glosses make clear the origins of visual or verbal borrowings, and their transformations into new settings.[12]

Allusions of this kind, modifying and enlarging the texts on which they rest, are common in both visual and verbal forms of the time, and their use in the

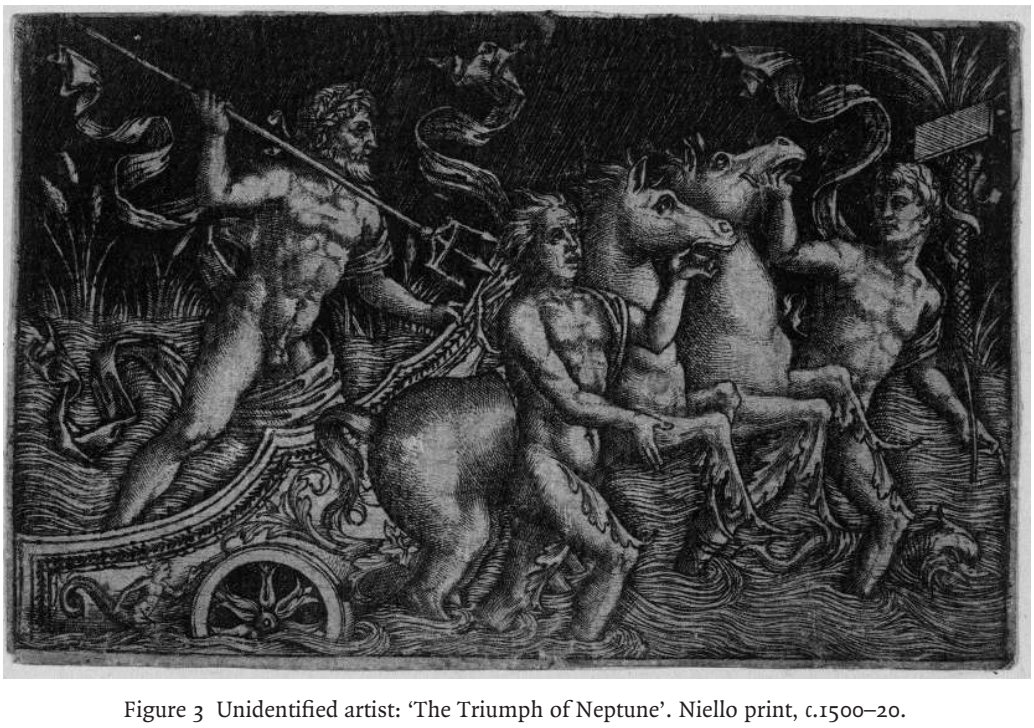

Figure 3 Unidentified artist: 'The Triumph of Neptune'. Niello print, *c.*1500–20.

works of Shakespeare will feature significantly in the chapters that follow. The musical tradition of composing what were known as 'parodic masses' is a valuable analogy here. In England, the most complex was written by John Taverner at some time in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. Known as the 'Western Wynde' mass, it is a series of 36 variations on the melody of a well-known medieval popular song, resulting in a polyphonic texture of immense richness and complexity. The use of a well-known melody as its structural basis is a fusion of the earthly and the sacred, in itself a major theological statement. Here the practical and conceptual value of copia is clear: it allows an earlier form to provide both structural basis and intellectual immediacy, something especially clear in, for example, the appropriations of the Judgment of Paris motif explored in Chapter 4. While in some instances, parody was, as now, used as a weapon of comic deflation, this was far from always the case, as will become clear in subsequent chapters.

The portrait's allusive practice continues in the apparently separate component at its top left. The classical figure of Peace with the olive branch, borrowed as Yates makes clear by way of images from the School of Fontainebleau, reaches down to touch Luttrell and unite the painting's two

elements, giving further force through its long provenance. More immediately, the figure refers to the Treaty of Boulogne which ended the war between England and France, and hence England and Scotland, in which Pinkie Cleugh was a turning point. Under its terms, Boulogne was returned to the French in exchange for two payments, one made immediately and the other in the following August. These are represented by the female figure at the top left who holds a large purse in her left hand but reaches down for another with her right. On the other side of Peace, a female figure with one breast exposed, a form traditional in presenting 'Amicitia' or friendship, is embraced from behind by a soldier, while she holds a horse with her right hand, all elements presenting the end of war and a return to gentler human activity. Earlier conventions are echoed, their resonances amplified through directly contemporary meanings: the orders unite to convey literal allusion and larger moral force within the painting's aesthetic immediacy.

This unification of presentational orders makes the painting both representative of its time and deeply relevant to the central concerns of this book. There is allegory in the figure of Peace, and both referential portraiture and classical allusion in the depiction of Luttrell. A narrative, both historically specific and suggestive of the larger moral processes of history, is present in the allusions to specific war and generic peace. Direct personal allusion is made in the painting's multiple inscriptions. The process of seeing, recognising and assimilating such elements in painting in this way offers itself as analogous to the workings of a play or poem. Works of both kinds are assimilated by the probing intelligence of the educated reader, in the one moving across the image to recognise and understand the allusions, in the other assembling the sequence of event and reference to grasp plot and broader signification, in both recognising moral, political or historical resonances.

The recondite nature of the image raises an insistent question, which Yates herself is quick to note, describing the painting's juxtapositions of two elements as 'a barbaric and ludicrous effect' in which 'artistically there is no integration' with the exception that 'an effort has been made to integrate mythologically those parts of the picture which seem at first sight quite disparate' (156). Yet, although the painting is more extreme than many in its spread of style and allusion, it is representative in a broader way. What holds it together is the very process that Yates demonstrates, yet curiously overlooks, in her article: the reading intelligence that moves across the panel and unites its allusions, fusing historical with mythological and likeness with narrative. Yates in writing the article, and the reader in assimilating it, are both responding to the painting in

the manner expected of an educated and informed contemporary reader, who shares the visual imagination with which the work of Shakespeare is engaging, as well as itself demonstrating, a dialogue implicit and constant in the chapters that follow.

The painting has no direct referential relationship to any of Shakespeare's plays or poems, but this strengthens rather than diminishes its value. Based on elaborate literary planning, and including verbal elements in its visible structure and allusions to contemporary and earlier events and traditions of aesthetic construction, the painting demonstrates elements shared by poetic and theatrical works of its period, revealing attitudes and approaches familiar to at least some of Shakespeare's audience in theatre and library. The overlap between symbolic and naturalistic meaning; the appropriation of classical forms, applied to new figures or circumstances; the demand for an elaborate structure and practice; the reader's assimilation of compositional form and allusive network are all elements held in common.

One further important dimension is added to the absorption of painterly devices in literary forms: by moving away from a purely referential, plot-based organisation, such allusions remind the audience of such works' nature as aesthetic objects. This allows a simultaneous awareness of naturalistic representation and formal artifice, a duality of recurrent and considerable importance throughout the Shakespearean canon, with its constant concern for reflection and debate between levels of appearance and actuality, on stage and through imitation of a world beyond. These features are not peculiar to Shakespeare; but in the final decade of the sixteenth century it is his works that most clearly demonstrate an awareness and, more important, an appropriation of visual forms and concepts, in addressing them.

Beneath all of the preceding discussion runs a question touched on a little earlier. Given their complexity of written script and allusive frame, how could such works be seen and understood by those not trained in reading practices? The answer in the case of many of the portraits was that, since they were not available to the public, the question simply did not arise. But many others were, and so were Shakespeare's plays. If these works employed complex allusions to visual structures, how could they succeed in the public theatres? Aspects of the elaborate language of Mariolatry, adopted in the cult of the Virgin Queen,[13] may have been recognised by older viewers outside the circle of learned or aristocratic viewers, but the allusive fabric of both portraits and plays would have remained unfathomable to many.