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Puppet, Death, and the Devil:
Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

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Special Section

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Stephen Orgel, *Wit's Treasury: Renaissance England and the Classics*[1]

Abstract

Stephen Orgel's book examines how during the Renaissance the English culture tried to mould a new literary and artistic language into becoming "classical", in the sense of civilized, elegant, and refined. The model for artistic advancement was found in ancient Latin and Greek texts, which were revived and translated into vernacular. So were some continental authors as well, especially Petrarch, whose sonnets were imitated and transformed. By adapting, and revising, the classics, English poets and dramatists were able to leave behind their native medieval tradition, through renewing rhythms and prosody, introducing new genres, and discovering unprecedented themes. Besides the influence of ancient authors on literature and the arts, classical thought also modified manners and morals, resulting in an unstable but constant relationship between Christian doctrine and Humanistic secular principles.

The original common thread in the text is provided by Orgel's considerable expertise in the history of the book, which enriches his analysis of new Renaissance printing methods, illustrations, as well as of the importance of different publications, not only for literature but even more so for the relationship between theatrical productions and printed drama.

Keywords: Renaissance England; classics; literature; history of the book; theatre

Reading a book by Stephen Orgel is always an intellectual pleasure. His clear, intelligent, and acute writing leads the reader through the reconstruction of a past literary and cultural tradition, by showing how seemingly small events can have a remarkable meaning when compared with, or set in relation to, a larger panorama. Writing a review of a book by Stephen Orgel is quite a different thing: his essays deserve to be analysed and commented upon one by one, as they all are consistent and enlightening. *Wit's Treasury*, his latest volume, is no exception. It consists of seven chapters plus a "Coda", held together by the theme indicated by the subtitle: "Renaissance England and the Classics". This is indeed a major subject when we generally think of the Renaissance as a rebirth of ancient authors, but it is even more crucial for

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English history in particular. To use the term "Renaissance", instead of the more recent and anonymous "early modern", means to recognize the debt England owed to continental culture, past and contemporary. It also means to enlarge the scope of an historical analysis to contemplate the many links, influences, relations, in a word, the cultural *interaction* that made Europe a vast field of exchange, in a period when all countries were divided by religious wars and political struggles.

The sixteenth century saw an enormous rise of English power; with the advent of the Tudor dynasty national medieval traditions started to wane giving way to a more liberal, courtly way of living, whose models were to be found abroad, in the Italian *signorie* and at the French court. Throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries England could profit from the concurrence of momentous changes in European civilization, which took a while to be known and widely accepted, but in the end proved to be the germ of modernity: the discovery of the New World, new hypotheses on the structure of the universe, the invention of a new printing method, as well as the religious Reformation. If in the long term all these factors would be decisive for a future world picture, the English felt at the time that they were not enough to claim a position of excellence in Europe; something was still missing. The English Renaissance thus looked for a cultural canon, for models to confront, emulate, and maybe to surpass. It was felt necessary to look back at the past, where there were authors and texts whose authority had not yet been questioned. These were the ancient giants supporting modern dwarfs on their shoulders, but this metaphor, which had been used since the Middle Ages, could turn out to be ambiguous: the moderns are seen as dwarfs, smaller in size than the ancients, but their higher position can help them see better and farther. Thus, the acknowledgement of past authority contained in itself also the awareness of some new values which belonged to modern times: slowly the meaning of invention would start to change from the rhetorical *inventio*, namely finding the topics to be dealt with, to the new connotations attached to the notion of "originality", the discovery of something which did not exist before, at least in that form.

The Renaissance in England came rather later in comparison to what had taken place on the continent – especially in Italy and France – from the fourteenth century on; and yet, just through this fresh approach to rediscovering a past that did not belong to it, English culture was able to acquire complexity and an unprecedented prominence. In all this, the national past, vernacular and medieval, was perceived as demotic and uncouth: and, doubtless, impossible to be exported abroad. Refinement, elegance, and universality were qualities attributed to ancient Greek and Latin texts, as well as to Italian and French authors universally recognized as models. In other words, as "classics".

At the very end of his volume, in the "Coda", Stephen Orgel poses the fundamental question: "What is a classic?", and shows how uncertain and relative, though apparently clear, the definition is. This last short chapter goes back to the origin of the term, to its first uses, and recalls the debates around it in more recent times, from T.S. Eliot to Italo Calvino. The notion of classic has to do with quality (of the first class, "classy"), but also with chronology (perfect, mature, advanced, devoid of the roughness of the primitive); in any case, it is always associated with the establishment of a canon, i.e. the list of the most influential texts in a national or universal tradition: those one would save for future generations in the event of catastrophe. David Lodge, in a highly amusing scene in his novel *Changing Places*, has his characters – all scholars of English literature – play a game called "Humiliations": one by one they have to confess the title of the most important book they have *not* read. The winner is a professor who reveals to an appalled audience of colleagues he has never read *Hamlet*: he gets the top score, but predictably loses his job. Even in the satirical tone of the story, there is a well recognizable truth: *Hamlet* is undoubtedly part of the English (or even the world's) dramatic or literary canon, and it is taken for granted that it is on top of the whole list.

Interestingly canons are not permanent – *pace* Harold Bloom –, they change according to different places or times, even if some authors have a longer lasting life. Many of those accepted as canonical in the Renaissance are still essential at present, but many others are now merely names, except for specialists.

This relativity, this impermanence of the literary panorama, as well as of the notions of source and of model, are central in Stephen Orgel's volume and therefore, I think, he turns to the definition of a classic at the end of his work: in the previous essays different issues are dealt with, all connected and slowly uncovering a network of relations and of transformations in the English literature of the time. As a matter of fact, there is no need to precisely define a notion such as that of classic, which is so widely used that everyone can imagine what it means, even tentatively; thus, there is no need to delimit the field of study from the beginning. I really appreciate the arrangement Orgel chose for his volume, as all chapters focus on different topics, but they are so interrelated as to build up a complex puzzle, maybe impossible to complete, as all historical pictures are.

The first of these topics is language. In England, as all over Europe, Latin was still the *lingua franca*, known by educated people and read far more than Greek. The "question of language" had in any case already been debated in Italy for two centuries and the Italian or, better, Tuscan vernacular was no longer in doubt as a suitable medium for literature. In contrast, the English vernacular was limited to the insular situation of the country and not spo-

ken elsewhere, as Florio made clear in his *First Fruites*: "a language that wyl do you good in England, but passe Dover, it is worth nothing" (Florio 1578, xxvii, f. 50).

And here the classics come to the fore. To become a refined language in order to be considered elegant and fit for poetry and drama, English had to look at Latin, doing what had already been done on the continent: considering the ancients as *auctoritates* both for the perfection of their style, and for their wisdom, which was felt as a continuous cultural flow. Orgel convincingly shows that Humanism came to England late "and even then, much classical scholarship was devoted to biblical exegesis and theology, rather than to the revival of what we think of as the classics" (1): a statement seemingly contradictory with the common view that Humanism meant desacralization of culture. Yet a few decades after Erasmus and More secularization was achieved, moving from the Bible to profane literature, still translating the ancients and imitating them, but also trying to become the "new ancients", to be "classics". Models were sought in Greek and Latin authors, but not in a servile way. The first chapter of *Wit's Treasury*, entitled "Classicizing England", examines from the beginning the basic issues of originality and of the ambiguous relation between devotion to the ancients and new paths for artistic expression. Original poets, such as Marlowe and Sidney, owed much to their classical education but moved away from the models they chose: the sonnet sequence of *Astrophel and Stella* established a new 'classical-sounding' model, renewing Petrarch's lyric in a way none of the continental poets would do. Two interesting assumptions in Orgel's initial discussion underlie, like a watermark, the whole volume: the idea that the imitation of the ancients was never neutral and resulted in transformation and domestication and, even more important, that imitation gave way to a style designed to be classical, both wanting to sound like the classics and wanting to be considered classic in their place. This classical 'effect' is analysed through the formal revisitations of ancient poetry, and the efforts to recreate the sound and the rhythm of Latin quantitative verse. Many pages are thus devoted to prosody, which is the main topic of two whole chapters: "The Uses of Prosody", centred on Ovid, and "The Sound of Classical". Though this subject may seem demanding and specialized in a world like ours, which is too often satisfied with easy and superficial critical assessments, this is not the case. Orgel examines the difficult task of adapting English to the rhythm of syllabic verse, both in the translations of classical texts and in new lyrics. This long and elaborate discourse on the different experiments in prosody is probably, in my opinion, the most remarkable part of the whole volume. It provides a clear picture of the slow itineraries followed by different meters till they either established themselves as 'traditional' or disappeared into oblivion. Blank verse, which is now considered the most 'English' of all meters, was

used in the 1530s by Surrey in his translation of two books of *Aeneid*, where it was supposed to imitate Virgilian hexameter. Looking back over its history Orgel shows that blank verse met with some resistance, being felt as "strange", and "was reinvented several times before it became a norm" (6). Some observations made about English prosody from a diachronic point of view are remarkable: many examples show not only the long coexistence of fourteeners with iambic pentameters, both used to translate Virgil and Ovid, but also the relevance of rhyme. Ultimately both rhymed couplets and blank verse were felt as "classic", but the latter became the proper and almost universal means for dramatic poetry. The use of either meter is especially meaningful in Marlowe, who introduced blank verse into the English dramatic tradition but almost always adopted couplets for what he conceived as epic, thus following Aristotle in acknowledging a sort of higher status to narrative heroic poems and echoing in that form the common elegiac couplets of ancient verse. His choice of writing *Hero and Leander* in pentameter couplets shows that he considered his composition as an *epyllion*, a little epic; and, on the other hand, Milton's use of blank verse in *Paradise Lost*, according to Orgel, was not influenced by Surrey's translation of Virgil, as has recently been claimed, but is in a way justified by the fact that it "was originally conceived as a drama" (4). Formal structures are thus shown as tightly connected to authorial generic intentions and to the cultural circulation of the time.

In Renaissance England, translations both from the classics and from foreign texts (mainly Italian) meant the creation of an active 'globalization'. Confronting ancient or foreign cultures led to the updating of ideas and of linguistic and rhetorical instruments. Poetry and prose coming from ancient traditions enlarged the sense of the past from the perception of national history to a wider, almost universal, and continuous dimension of excellence and wisdom. This past knowledge was not taken at face value, as a model to be naively followed and imitated. Though generally praising its greatness and the notion of permanence and coherence of the classics, some texts presented harmful and dangerous ideas. Orgel traces in Marlowe's translation of *Amores* the design "of a poetic career consciously modelled on Ovid, an anti-Virgilian, and anti-Spenserian, model" (23). Besides the importance of his poetical innovation, Marlowe also provides evidence of himself as a daring poet, of the difficult issue of eroticism and sex, and of the secular adaptation of a transgressive, mythical world.

Orgel is in any case right when he wonders whether the accusations of homosexuality against Marlowe, which have conditioned the reading of his poems and of the account of his murder, were after all our anachronistic projection. Moralistic views most often belong to the reader. An example of this is how modern scholarship finds it difficult to see the finale of *Hero and Leander* as an ironic way of transforming a story into a fragment and a tragedy

into a baffling fulfilment of love. Orgel summarizes the meaning of the poem in an illuminating sentence: "The most subversive of Marlowe's subjects is how you get away with pleasure, and omitting the conclusion, the punishment of the lovers' – and the readers' – enjoyment is a neat way of cheating the moralists" (27). To confirm this, I would add that the very last lines of the epyllion seem to underline a conscious and ironic removal of the "dark" ending of the myth: the Sun's chariot "with his flaring beams mock'd ugly Night / Till she, o'ercome with anguish, shame, and rage, / Dang'd down to hell her loathsome carriage" (331-333).

Unlike Golding's puritan and moralizing version of Ovid, Marlowe's was a 'subversive' way of introducing an erotic Ovidian world view into English, adapting his sources, and modelling his poetry on a classic authority: which is an example – probably the best – of how reading the classics, either in the original or in translation, always meant transforming them. This can sound like a truism, especially since modern literary theory has discovered – or invented – the notions of intertextuality, hypertextuality, and cultural appropriation. Even perfectly copying a text word by word creates a different work: a situation which Borges paradoxically described in his story about Pierre Menard who wanted to rewrite *Don Quixote*. Anyway, the important concept at stake when thinking of the Renaissance is not the similarity or the difference between the ancients and the moderns, but the transformation of the idea of plagiarism itself. In the last chapter of the volume, entitled "Looking backward" and focused on the translations of Homer, Orgel in fact looks forward, to the eighteenth century when the term "the classics" was actually established, but classical erudition started to be opposed to the values of contemporary England. Bacon's and Browne's arguments in favour of the present became successful, and the debate about plagiarism revealed that in a few generations the notion of past wisdom had changed and could be felt as an enemy to modern empirical and scientific thought. Different times gave different answers, and in the Victorian age, when new English versions of Homer were published, they were the objects of theoretical debate, but "ancients" had begun to mean "archaic", and introducing them to a modern audience, or even to the "unlearned", had become an archaeological operation. Or an editorial one, in modern commercial terms.

The circulation of the classics during the Renaissance was mainly due to translations and to imitation, but in practical terms the wide dissemination of philosophical and literary culture was possible thanks to the new printing methods. *Wit's Treasury* deals with the materiality of printed books, not just to underline the social and historical importance of such novelty, but to highlight the role each publication had on the literary stage. Stephen Orgel, both as a scholar and as a book collector, has always been interested in the history of the book, but here, in this volume, this is a *fil rouge* linking to-

gether the different topics. The influence of the classics on English authors is discussed according to the dates of their publication in the vernacular, which proves that some translations are not likely to have been known in the Elizabethan age, unlike what is commonly taken for granted. The success and the survival of some editions also explain more than the mere importance of the book market, as they are evidence of their cultural function – and sometimes their political function, as is the case with Caesar's and other historical and military texts. This draws anew the map of sources and of relationships.

The attention to the printed pages of a book adds a lot to the understanding of all the issues I have described so far: the problem of prosody is enriched if not transformed by the comparison between pronunciation and early modern spelling, the quotation of marginalia (to which Orgel devoted another volume, *The Reader in the Book*, some years ago) reveals traces of a past reading activity, which is both exegesis and appropriation.

Three chapters in *Wit's Treasury* particularly stress the importance of printed volumes, and they are respectively centred on images, typography, and the staging of written plays. In the essay "What Classical Looks Like", which is the longest in the volume and beautifully illustrated, the 'effect' of ancient 'perfect' style is traced in the Renaissance visual and plastic arts. The presumed absence of colour in architecture and sculpture, the mathematical proportions and rationality in buildings, the revival of ancient gods and myths: all these factors point towards idealization, rather than knowledge or study, of the past. Rebirth always means revision. Here again, Orgel's considerable expertise is priceless in analysing not only Renaissance iconography but also pictures as objects to be gathered in order to recover and preserve the classics. Remarkable collections, particularly the Arundel marbles but also Prince Henry's collection of paintings, played a central role in English Renaissance culture, as purchasing and owning works of important artists as well as commissioning portraits showed both connoisseurship and power. At the same time, the visual arts had a memorializing quality, and helped educate the nation in its tastes; lastly, collecting served to draw England closer to the continent, in direct contact with artists and aristocrats of other countries. With Inigo Jones, art was "classical" at second hand, through the imitation of Italian art which in its turn imitated the classics. Elements in Italian theatrical designs, in Roman monuments, and in Michelangelo's sculpture are cleverly identified in Jones's works. He was a pivotal figure, combining classical allusions with originality, giving us a picture of what was felt as "classic" in his times. And still is, if we are to accept Orgel's statement that "the meaningful re-creation of the past requires the semiotics of the present. Anachronism is essential to the very notion of historical relevance itself, which assumes that the past speaks to, and is in some way a version of, the present" (99).

The transition from manuscripts to printed books posed some technical and graphic problems, all very well discussed in *Wit's Treasury*. What is notable is that even their solution had somehow to do with the above-mentioned subject: the allusion to the classics in the visual arts. Title pages of precious books started being decorative – again something imported from the continent – and showing ancient and modern elements fused together. Images representing triumphal arches are to be found in some editions framing the titles, and the letterings have the appearance of ancient inscriptions. Those illustrations were often unrelated to the text, so that plates could be re-used for other books. Orgel provides reproductions of at least two instances: the 1559 title page of Cunningham's *The Cosmographical Glasse*, identical to the 1605 edition of Sidney's *Arcadia*, and an earlier edition of Sidney's book, published in 1593, whose title page was used again for Spenser's works in 1611. Plates were expensive, and images were sought, to make volumes rich and elegant. I would add, by giving one more example, also meaningful, as with emblem books where the visual element was essential; the re-use of plates was common, but Quarles in his well-known book *Emblems* (1635) did something more. He re-printed the images of a continental popular work, *Pia Desideria*, published in Latin in Antwerp some years before (1624) by Hermann Hugo. This Flemish author was a Jesuit priest and his spiritual and moral emblem book was definitely catholic, but Quarles transformed it into an English protestant text: an instance of a remarkable overturning of what might seem to be just an editorial operation.

Types also were influenced by continental 'classical elegance' and the names defining new characters are telling: roman and italic. These were first used by English printers for books in Latin or in foreign languages, while black letter was associated with national tradition, so that even when roman became the most popular type for English texts Chaucer would still be printed in black letter for at least two more centuries.

Such a dense and profound analysis of the classics in English (printed) culture, as the one provided by Orgel's book, could not pass over theatre and drama, so that another interesting chapter deals with "Staging the Classical". Here the author has, as it were, to support his passion for, and knowledge of, material books with his exceptional scholarship in theatre studies. First of all, because he is well aware that theatre and stage performances are quite different from the written drama, which can be – and too often is – studied in its literary textuality. Again, this is a kind of truism, but it is even more so when examining the Renaissance theatrical tradition. In this case, scholars have to do with irretrievable performances or with vague descriptions made by spectators or other playwrights; at the same time, not all dramatic texts have survived, and those we have are unstable, as new philology knows well. There is no need here to go over the difficulty in reconstructing the 'authori-

tative' form of a text, and especially of a play destined to be performed. Orgel never falls into the trap of considering drama as literature, and, still focusing on the classics, offers a history of English theatre which always considers both staging and printing plays, highlighting the relevance of publication as a somewhat dangerous practice and of censorship, which affected the stage and the page differently.

The most interesting feature of the whole chapter devoted to the theatre is the stress on the problematic indebtedness to the classical past, which is never absolute, since the relationship with sources and analogues always presents new elements and takes a clear direction towards a unique native experience.

"We would do well to reconsider our categories" (133), and to do so Orgel questions what we usually think of as separate genres or different social classes of spectators which, to him, present more similarities than is generally assumed. A comparison between two plays – the formal *Gorboduc* and *Cambises*, which tended to meet the popular taste for low comedy – proves they had much in common and that, surprisingly, it was the latter which was to be supplanted by the Renaissance canonical playwrights especially after Marlowe coined a new language for the stage, the blank verse soon to become "classical".

The main distinction in Tudor England was between small audiences consisting of a powerful elite or of educated people, and the mass who could only speak English, and being more or less unable to understand learned allusions, loved dumbshows, comic actions and dialogues, and spectacular shows. For a cultural elite, the classics, and especially Latin plays, could either be revived in their original form (as happened at the Universities) or imitated, or even just alluded to, in their locations and characters.

The chapter starts from the history of the earliest secular play in English, *Fulgens and Lucrece*, showing that English drama was classicized from the very beginning, since the ancient Roman setting was probably designed to give prestige to a topical political message. The source on which the play is based is a Humanist dialogue on the theme of nobility written in Latin in the first half of fifteenth century by a Florentine jurist and later translated into English. Orgel interestingly underlines that this play "survives only because it was printed" (123), and that the small number of printed plays, as well as the even smaller number of surviving copies, should make us cautious about generalizing definitions. He infers therefore that readers had a remarkable function in enjoying drama; in some cases, as for *Fulgens and Lucrece*, the audience "would have consisted entirely of readers" (124), and in other cases, reading and watching performances might be simultaneous but separate activities. Examples of this can be found in all Elizabethan plays, which could please at different levels both educated and unlearned spectators. Classical

allusions could probably be recognized only by a part of the public. In a way, things have not much changed, if nowadays only critical footnotes can highlight the presence of some ancient authors or some classical quotations in, say Shakespeare, Jonson, or Webster. The Elizabethan dramatists refigured classical history and myth by "realizing and humanizing the ancients through finding the right language for them, inventing a classical English" (136). If this is particularly true for Shakespeare, Jonson was praised for a similar quality: the reform of the language of the stage he achieved by making English classical.

At the end of the period considered in *Wit's Treasury* English vernacular would surely have acquired the prestige and the literary excellence sought by Renaissance scholars. Philosophers and writers would go on for another two centuries trying to standardize the spelling and debating about the rightness of a poetic diction and of following rules. But when, at the end of the seventeenth century, England had experienced both a political revolution and a subsequent restoration, the comparison was no longer uniquely made with ancient Rome, but with those countries which were preserving the memory of classical canons and norms, France in particular. At this point in history, what before was subjection and the feeling of missing perfection had become pride and confidence in one's own linguistic and cultural means.

In 1668 John Dryden published his *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* "to vindicate the honour of our English Writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them" (Dryden 1921, "To the reader", 4). The four voices in the dialogue introduce different points of view on (neo)classical rules; yet it is not only a matter of ancients and moderns. What emerges from their debate is the superiority of English drama over the French, to be found in some interrelated qualities: variety, imitation of nature, and the response of the audience. Regularity and perfection, so highly esteemed by the French authors, are in fact boring for an English audience, as their result is the beauty "of a Statue, but not of a Man" (Dryden 1921, 32); to imitate nature means to represent humour and passions, and a great variety of plot and characters, even if this results in "irregular" plays; drama in verse is tedious because of the monotonous cadences. Though still admired and respected, at this point the classical standards of the ancients seem to be surpassed by new dramatic needs, first of all the consideration of the audience and of the pleasure plays must provide for the spectators.

The use of popular taste as a standard of value accounts for the sceptical attitude English culture has always had toward foreign authority and imposed rules. If this would become more evident in later history with a greater emphasis on pragmatism, traces of it were already present in the Renaissance reading of the classics, as discussed in Orgel's book on several occasions. Even in Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*, English love poems were

criticized as inferior to Petrarch's, since they cannot persuade the beloved of the truth of the lover's passion, which means that to him the success of poetry is "dependent entirely on its effect on the listener or reader" (3). The popularity of plays as well as of printed books is another proof of the importance attached to the taste of the people; the classics could be the models used to teach ancient wisdom, but they had to be domesticated.

English Renaissance culture bloomed between admiration and emancipation, and between reading, translating or refiguring what was foreign, and inventing something that would become distinctively one's own.

In *Wit's Treasury* Orgel leads his reader over this narrow divide, never cutting clear borderlines but exquisitely showing the complexity of creating a cultural identity and of becoming "classics".

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