RESEÑA

Laura L. Vidler, *Performance Reconstruction and Spanish Golden Age Drama. Reviving and Revising the Comedia*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York and Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK, 2014, xvi + 187 pp. ISBN: 9781137439758.

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DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/anuariolopedevega.271>>

This book is at its best when Laura L. Vidler offers some insightful close readings of aspects of early modern Spanish plays through the lens of performance studies. It is at its “not best” when she digresses, to varying degrees, with arguably unrelated literary and non-literary material taken from contemporary (and often “pop”) culture and society. While such digressions attest to the author’s vast knowledge and interests, they can wander from, if not render disjointed, the «reconstructive» project at hand, to wit cooking (including recipes for *picadillo* and «cran-gría» given in an Appendix), the development of modern Hebrew, gender inequality versus equality concerning dance routines, respectively, in orthodox Ashkenazi (or, more accurately, Chasidic) Judaism and Reform wedding ceremonies, the state of American liberal arts education and the political emphasis on academic assessment, latter-day politicians (e.g. Sarah Palin, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush), Broadway theatrical and musical productions (e.g. Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*), brain-weight-to-body-weight ratio in killer whales and chimpanzees, the orca outrage involving the death of a trainer at Sea World, and O.J. Simpson’s murder trial—to name the most conspicuous deviations. The exposition of the chapters in the «Introduction» is rather clearly delineated, but many of the wanderings in succeeding sections make it challenging to ingest the line of thought initially set forth.

Vidler’s main theoretical enterprise, set forth in Chapter 1 («Revisiting *Comedia* Reconstruction», pp. 9-23), is to deploy Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (the

system of «structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures»), developed in *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 1990), in an attempt to outline the limitations of both objectivist and phenomenological models as applied to the *corral* stage. «In this way», she states, «Bourdieu emphasizes the need to take into account, not only the structures of culture, but also the human capacity to manipulate those structures, whether consciously or unconsciously, for both individual and group expression» (p. 20). «It is not enough», she continues, «simply to deduce individual structures through historical, objectivist means, nor to analyze them solely through subjectivist, phenomenological interpretation»; they must be articulated «through an analysis of a performance of this relationship» (p. 21). *Habitus* is therefore «neither historical, nor ahistorical» but «a way of approaching the world that is both culturally determined and culturally determining» (p. 21).

For Vidler, the relationship implicit in *habitus* is comparable to Patrice Pavis's definition of *mise en scène* in his classic text, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theatre* (Performing Arts Journal Publications, New York, 1982): «the interrelationship of dramatic text and performance text» (p. 21). This wording seems more in line with the stated aim of Palgrave's *Studies in Theatre and Performance History* —«It is a series devoted to the best of theatre/performance scholarship currently available, accessible, and *free of jargon*» (p. i, emphasis mine)— than does Bourdieu's often abstruse language as applied to performance reconstruction. Happily, Vidler is careful to specify that what is called «performance or staging reconstruction» does not presume to be able to re-perform anything «accurately» (p. 22). This perspective not only goes along with one of the main tenets of postmodern criticism —the elusiveness of meaning and knowledge— but also acknowledges the perpetually present moment of (theatre) performance, its essence as a suspended world: a material space but imaginary, a here and now but past, an unrepeatable experience but repeatable— in fact, not an hour after penning those words, this reviewer came across the following age-old remark in an opening to a theatre critique in a current issue of *The New Yorker*: «We all know that theatre is an *ephemeral art*. Looking back on a given production, we dance around in and then sort out what the critic Arlene Croce called 'afterimages', fragments that are either tied together by the director's style [...] or made dull and forgettable by a lack thereof» (p. 68, emphasis mine; see Hilton Als, «The Director's Cut: A Staging of Dominique

Morrisseau's *Pipeline*», in *The New Yorker*, 24 July 2017, pp. 68-69). Drawing on Bourdieu's *habitus*, Joseph Roach's «surrogation» (which «reaches back through cultural transmission and cultural memory for clues about the development and social practice of performance»), and Richard Schechner's «restored behavior» (which expands the definition of performance «to include social, not merely literary practice», p. 22), the author gives, in succeeding chapters, concrete examples of what aspects of performance can be opened to reconstruction and analysis.

In Chapter 2 («The *Habitus* of Corral Scenic Space», pp. 25-54), Vidler aims to show how space, manifested in both the visual arts and novelistic discourse of the early modern period, is appropriated and «dislocated» on the *comedia* stage to convey dramatic meaning in terms of characterization, conflict, and theme (p. 26). She argues that the go-between figure of Fabia in *El caballero de Olmedo* was appropriated by Lope de Vega, not merely from the prototypical character of Celestina in Fernando de Rojas's dialogical novel, but also from the woodcut iconography that accompanied early editions of the text (six woodcuts from the Burgos edition of 1499 are reproduced in the chapter); or, in the rather recondite language of *habitus*, such visual images were the «structured structures, strategically structuring the character of Fabia» (p. 28). If theatre professionals might prefer not to grapple with the theoretical framework presented, they might well be keen on the proposed expansion of Fabia's character through a study of *La Celestina*'s woodcut iconography. The chapter then turns to the set piece of the *reja*, the iron grille that appeared in the inventory of theatre companies and had multiple scenic functions, indicating, for example, garden gates, prison cells, balconies, windows, and chapel grilles (p. 39). The *reja* works, according to Vidler's application of *habitus*, as «a scenic element [that] strategically structured, not only the physical scenic space, but also scenic spatiality» (pp. 53-54). It is often «appropriated and dislocated to create dramatic meaning» (p. 53) as, for example, in the text of *El caballero de Olmedo* (pp. 50-52), and in Ariel García Valdés's 1996 staging of *La vida es sueño* with the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico.

In Chapter 3 («[Re]Placing the Corral Body: Problematizing Semiotics and Gesture», pp. 55-73), Vidler's premise is that «culturally laden structures of body carriage, body interactions, and treatments of space . . . can inform interpretations of Spain's classical theatre» (p. 65). This premise leads the author to a discussion of dance as an art form, as presented in Juan de Esquivel Navarro's *Discursos sobre el*

arte del danzado (1642). A connection is also made with modern times: dance is evoked in George Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco*; in Labanotation, a standardized system developed for recording body movements, steps, and gestures but not facial expressions; and in the anthropological work of Schechner, which «situates the performer in relationship to the space-time of history, myth, and performance» (p. 60). Curiously, choreometrics, a study of dance as formalized, *culturally-conditioned communicative functioning*, first launched by Alan Lomax and Forrestine Paulay in 1965 (see, for example, Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture*, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, New Jersey, 1968; republished by Routledge, 2017) is not mentioned in the discussion on dance, though it might well have been useful for its cross-cultural approach. Details of body carriage in Spanish dance and swordplay (the latter, for Vidler, evocative of Luis Pacheco de Narváez's *Libro de las grandezas de la espada* of 1600) are then said to «demonstrate a clear, intimate connection between physicality, culture, and class» (p. 67), as shown, for instance, in *Fuenteovejuna*, where Lope «juxtaposes the stance and foot position of the nobles and peasants» (p. 68).

Chapter 4 («Staging the Object», pp. 75-106) is framed by some disparate discourse of Roland Barthes, Bertolt Brecht, and Mikhail Bakhtin on modern theatrical communication and interpretation. This leads to a discussion of the ways in which clothing and other inanimate objects, which have real-world functions, are transformed on stage, becoming imbued with multiple levels of meaning and even symbolic significance, all the while that they serve as «visual, concrete representations of a character, social status, or personal quality» (p. 106). This so-called dislocation of props as actors manipulate them on stage, deemed to be different from «the practical and the dramatic functions of individual objects» (i.e. the object's status as a literary leitmotif), is examined in terms of the deployment of the ribbon / shoelace (or *listón*), letters, swords, and capes in Lope's *El caballero de Olmedo*. That such dislocation-analysis can lead, finally, to new insights is implicit in the polemical observation that «the staging of swords and swordplay in [*El caballero*] counters [A.A.] Parker's view that Alonso deserves to die» (p. 106). By effectively stimulating dialogue and debate between the academic critic and the theatrically sensitive reader and/or theatre practitioner, Vidler's challenge to a received critical viewpoint comes as a welcomed supplement to the task of examining dislocated functions of everyday objects on stage.

Chapter 5 («Women/Objects on the Modern and Early Modern Stage: Two Exceptional Cases», pp. 107-121) continues the thrust of the previous chapter, presenting an applied analysis of the distinctive appropriation and manipulation of combative stage weapons by both Solmira in Lope's *El último godo* and the eponymous heroine of Tirso de Molina's *Antona García*. If these two women in theory problematize notions of gender and subjectivity in early modern Spanish theatrical performance, Vidler concludes that «it is social class, not gender, that determines their respective weapons of choice» (p. 121).

Chapter 6 («Adaptation, Translation, and the Relevance of Classical Theatrical Performance», pp. 123-139) considers how the concept of adaptation informs the overall notion of staging reconstruction. The following sorts of questions arise: «Does looking at a *forward* adaptation reveal something about how we might do a *backward* reconstruction? What limitations does this linear vision of time and history impose on the project of theater construction? » (p. 7). Vidler posits that «the so-called diversion of a performance text from the dramatic text may also be considered a reconstruction in the ways in which it not only updates but also dialogues with the past» (p. 139). The chapter offers disparate references to theory (e.g. Pavis, pp. 125-126; Wai Chee Dimock's concept of reading «rhizomatically» through a lens of «non-standard», non linear time, pp. 128-129 (see *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2006). Comments on several postmodern stagings, where choices for updating the use of weapons are foregrounded: *El médico de su honra*, *La dama duende*, and *Tres obras cortas del Siglo de Oro* (comprising Cervantes's *El retablo de las maravillas*, Calderón's *Visiones de la muerte*, and Lope's *Las cortes de la muerte*); and a discussion of the reconstruction of *Pyramus and Thisbe* within *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an early modern instance of the staging of a previously performed work that could perhaps elucidate the staging reconstruction process.

Chapter 7 («Theory Performance», pp. 141-151) interrogates, in a total of ten pages, the impact of recent directions in critical theory: principally, the digital humanities, algorithmic criticism, and cognitive approaches to interpretation, and secondarily, critical animal theory and research in artificial intelligence and artificial life. Performance theory, with its capacity to «actively [engage] and [intertwine] both subjective and objective modes of interpretation», stands out for the author as

the most promising avenue for future studies, not the least because it cannot be carried out from a single perspective (p. 150). To what extent, however, does Vidler's committed critical stance—that «[p]erformance theorists who ignore Bourdieu and others attempting to resolve [the] crisis of interpretation *do so at their own peril*»—teeter on subverting her premise that «the hetereoglossic nature of performance means that we cannot carry out performance studies from only a *single* perspective» (p. 150, emphasis mine)?

In sum, *Performance Reconstruction and Spanish Golden Age Drama* reflects Laura L. Vidler's effort to relate the various pieces of her knowledge in a synergistic way so that, to quote Aristotle, «the whole [might be] greater than the sum of its parts». While it is certainly illuminating to look beyond the dramatic or performance text, it is also wise to delimit theoretical and cultural contours and detours, so that the extra-textual material brought to bear works to advance, rather than potentially derail, the arguments at hand. This book is generally free of stylistic infelicities, though there are a few technical oversights: block quotations are often not stylistically integrated into the preceding text (e.g. p. 21); some critics are referenced informally by diminutive Christian names; some works referred to in the text and in the notes are omitted from the list of works cited; and there is orthographic inconsistency with respect to the name of one critic mentioned. All told, Vidler's encounter with theory, and her insight into the «dislocation» of inanimate objects on stage in representative *comedias* (i.e. *Fuenteovejuna*, *El caballero de Olmedo*, *El último godo*, and *Antona García*), will likely stimulate further thought amongst scholars and students, and perhaps even interest directors and other theatre practitioners involved in staging—or «reconstructing»—these (and other) early modern plays for postmodern audiences.