

Heinrich F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence, International Studies in the History of Rhetoric* 4. Leiden – Boston 2012: Brill. Pp. xii +240. ISBN 978-90-04-22702-6.

This book constitutes a further contribution to a field which has been gathering momentum spectacularly over the last forty years, the study of pictorial vividness, *enargeia*, in Classical literary theory and practice. It is different from other studies in its scope, because it not only deals with the Classical scene, but examines the history of *enargeia* in the Renaissance and Early Modern period. Further, it widens out the field from literature, which it studies in six chapters including three on *enargeia* in Shakespeare, to the visual arts and even music.

Plett's definition of *enargeia* is based on a brief introductory chapter. Essentially, it is that of the treatise *ad Herennium*: "It is Ocular Demonstration when an event is so described in words that the business seems to be enacted and the subject to pass vividly before our eyes" (4.54.68). Plett presents it as a quality primarily associated with rhetoric, despite statements like that in an anonymous *Ars Rhetorica* of the age of Augustus that "This fault [the so-called descriptive passages] has crept into rhetorical declamations through emulation with history and poetry" (II.372.9 Usener-Radermacher), a remark followed up with a down-to-earth warning to the would-be orator that he isn't going to win his case by the excellence of his description of a storm. In fact, it is the absence of this kind of complexifying detail that weakens the persuasiveness of Plett's definition. In the interests of an unproblematic starting-point no debates are entered into, like the relationship of *enargeia* and *ekphrasis*, or the (non-Classical) use of the latter term principally to denote descriptions of works of art. This simplifying approach is reflected in Plett's mode of citation, which is to cite scholars once, and in support of his own position; scholarship on the subject thus appears as a cosy consensus. Yet the issues I mention are hotly debated in the modern secondary literature. In any case, anyone who tells us that the painter Apelles, born (Plett tells us) in 375 BC, painted his *Calumny* in the time of the ruling "pharaoh", "Ptolemy IV Philopator (221–205 BC)" (p.16), reveals that he is not quite at home in the Classical context.

However, Plett is in general right to connect Classical *enargeia* with vivid pictorialism in literature. When we move to the Renaissance and Early Modern Period, however, we find that the term is applied to almost any stylistic quality or device which arrestingly places the recipient "in the presence of" the literary, artistic or musical moment. These can include *exclamatio* and *interrogatio* in operatic libretti like Christoph Martin Wieland's *Alceste* of 1733, where Admet addresses his youth and Alceste, or in Monteverdi's *Arianna* of 1608, where the same rhetorical devices are employed; but they are not *visual* devices. In the visual arts, especially painting, Plett argues that according to Nicolas Poussin the painter should imagine voices and thoughts before drawing figures, and that "This means that it is *enargeia*...that transposes the idea of beauty – or more generally

speaking, the rhetorical semiotics of the visual arts – into the concrete visuality of beauty” (p.158). Heady stuff indeed.

What happened to the Classical concept of especially visual vividness? A primary source of the semantic widening is the Renaissance’s curious misreading of Horace’s dangerously memorable formulation *ut pictura poesis* in the *Ars Poetica* (lines 361–5), which was taken to commend all kinds of *vividness* in poetry. In fact, after the *bon mot* the text continues *not* to talk of pictorialism or even general vividness in poetry, but for example whether a poem gives pleasure from close and repeated reading just as some paintings repay close and repeated viewing. Another confusion seems to have been occasioned by the passage in the *Poetics* where Aristotle says that the dramatic poet should keep his plays *pro ommatôn*, “before the eyes” (*Poetics* 1455a22–6), which seems to have been taken up in the early modern period as referring to the “theatricality” of *enargeia*; but Aristotle only makes the demand so that the playwright won’t commit blunders of staging, entrances and exits. Finally, there is the confusion of *enargeia* with the *energeia* discussed by Aristotle at *Rhetoric* 3.11.1–4 1411b22–1412a10, which refers to vivid depiction of things in a state of actuality, though this more often than not involves metaphor like Homer’s saying that spears “stuck in the ground longing to have their fill of human flesh” (*Iliad* 11.574); though it may be full of life, it is hardly pictorial – none of Aristotle’s examples are. None of these Classical texts supports the early modern transition from *visual* vividness in poetry to vividness of any kind in any medium.

Moreover, we are often left with the impression that Plett wants to go further in this direction than even his Renaissance, humanist and baroque literary, musical and artistic theorists and practitioners. Time and again we are told that *enargeia* is central to a pronouncement or effect when there is no reference to it in the early modern texts he discusses. This is particularly the case with his treatment of visual art. Visual art is by definition already visual, and conveys meaning in a lifelike, vivid manner by perspective, directed gazes, gestures, expressions, personifications, allegory and the like, but these are nowhere, even in Plett’s assemblage of the evidence, called *enargeia* by the early moderns (nor were they by the ancients). Poussin’s own *Judgment of Solomon* (1649) may be full of dramatic life and meaning, but we are hardly entitled to say that “The sensory presence, or surface structure, of the gestures refers by means of *enargeia* to the imaginable absence, of deep structure, of the passions” (p.160; my underlining). And we certainly don’t have to call art’s lifelike quality or the Pygmalion factor “enargetic empathy” (p.162).

Plett is on firmer ground with the poetic texts of his early modern period. This is demonstrated in his three separate and non-contiguous chapters on Shakespeare. The first (pp.29–36) deals interestingly with the prologue of *Henry IV* and the epilogues of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest* under the heading of *hypotyposis*, which is a variant term for *enargeia* from the Classical authors onwards, and which was discussed by Shakespeare’s contemporary, George Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589). Here, at least, we do have the contemporary use of a word in the semantic field of *enargeia* attested in reference to descriptive poetry. The second (pp.65–8) briefly discusses Ophelia’s graphically pictorial account to Polonius of Hamlet’s trance-like appearance

before her (*Hamlet* II.i.77–100); the narrative’s visual power is heightened by her lapses into the historic present. The third instalment (pp.125–33) offers a brief but striking account of Shakespeare’s descriptions of works of art; Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* (V.iii.23–42) is moved to repentance as he views Hermione, who has been presented to him as a statue; in the *Rape of Lucrece* (1366–1449) Lucrece sees her fate mirrored in a painting of the Trojan War, with its “lifeless life”; Hamlet’s mother responds guiltily when Hamlet confronts her with two paintings, the one of his father and the other of his uncle Claudius (*Hamlet* III.Iv.53–91); and Iachimo describes a painting in Imogen’s bedroom with eye-witness precision (and with admiration for its lifelike quality), in building his case to convince Posthumus that his wife has been unfaithful to him (*Cymbeline* II.iv.80–5).

In summary, Plett makes things rather too easy for himself by his *ipse dixit* account of the Classical evidence on *enargeia* and *ekphrasis*, by pushing the boundaries of their meaning even beyond the early moderns’ extended use of them, and by widening their application to music and visual art in ways which are not likely to convince everyone. His concluding claim for the fundamental centrality of *enargeia* to all the arts (pp.196–7) is in fact merely another way of saying that all the arts of the Early Modern Period strive to capture our attention through vivid immediacy of presentation, but that isn’t saying much that is new.

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