Henriette Stößl


When it comes to Polish Jesuit Baroque drama, research is by no means abundant. This is partly due to the substantial loss of plays and manuscripts during the many wars that raged in Poland and Lithuania, but also due to difficulties in finding and identifying the manuscripts in the archives of Warsaw, Lublin, Poznań, and Vilnius, among others. Henriette Stößl sets out to narrow this gap by focusing on one particular play (Kommunia Duchowna S.S. Borysa y Hleba [The Spiritual Communion of Saints Boris and Gleb], written anonymously, performed c.1693) with a view to its rhetorical structure and its use of emblematic meaning. Although the text itself has been known and has also existed in edited form for some time (see Julian Lewański [ed.], Dramaty staropolskie, vol. VI [Warsaw: PIW, 1963]), it has not yet been interpreted in the contexts of its production, performance, and poetical character. Stößl locates her interpretation within a framework of emblem theory and concepts of intermediality (chap. 3), offering at the same time a thorough close reading of the drama (chaps. 4 and 5).

After situating her study within a tradition of research about emblematic interpretations of Baroque drama (mostly from the field of Slavic philology: Pelc, Okoń, Sofronova), the author intensely discusses theories on the interrelations of literature and the visual arts. While she only briefly touches on this topic in Jesuit poetic theory (referring, for example, to Jacob Masen, S.J.’s very influential Speculum imaginum veritatis occultae and Franciscus Lang, S.J.’s poetics), Stößl repeatedly refers to aesthetic theorists from the early twentieth century, such as Boris Uspenskij, Jan Mukařovský, Jan Białostocki, and Erwin Panofsky, to further illuminate the “anthropological ground of intermediality” (44–52). Although the reader might enjoy her overview, which arches from transcendental aesthetics (Kant) to more recent empirical approaches (Dewey), one might also note the absence of research on early modern and particularly Jesuit emblems as put forward by Peter M. Daly, to name only the most important representative. If I am not mistaken, there is only one reference to one of Daly’s works to be found in Stößl’s text (264n72). At least the essential monograph of Albrecht Schöne (Emblematik und Drama im Zeitalter des Barock, 3rd ed. [Munich: Beck, 1993]) is mentioned several times. The author does not seem to aim at a historicizing point of view on intermediality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but rather appears to argue for a timeless constant
in the perception of works of art, visual or textual. By connecting the theories of Uspenskij, Panofsky, and the German church historian Konrad Onasch concerning literature as well as icon painting in the Eastern church, she is able to establish “common structural principles” (53) of visual and textual arts. But these principles have mostly been developed by a comparison of painting and narrative literature. Unfortunately, Stössl misses the opportunity to apply this theory to drama.

The reader finds this application implied in the subsequent analysis of the Kommunia Duchowna, which is covered in the monograph’s main part. Stössl opens with a kind of second introduction, and it is only at this point that she illuminates the contemporary (i.e., seventeenth-century) context of literary theory in greater detail by quoting from and commenting on Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (1595–1640) and his De perfecta poesi of 1626 (81–96). This is all the more welcome since, despite the fact that Sarbiewski and his works are very important not only for the Polish/Lithuanian but also for the European poetry and literary theory of his time, the amount of German and English research on him is comparatively small. Stössl inexplicably omits the most recent German publications on Sarbiewski, namely Eckart Schäfer (ed.), Sarbiewski. Der polnische Horaz (Tübingen: Narr, 2006) and chapters in: Volkhard Wels, Der Begriff der Dichtung in der Frühen Neuzeit (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2009). Sarbiewski’s modifications of classical Aristotelian and earlier Jesuit poetics are as fascinating as his transfer of modern stage machinery (such as the mechanical psaltery and the laterna magica) from Rome, where he studied, to Jesuit schools in eastern Europe. Stössl’s aim, however, is to find in Sarbiewski’s poetics an early modern testimony for Uspenskij’s “common structural principles” (i.e., modern intermediality), and she claims to have done so in the Jesuit’s frequent comparisons of poetry and painting (92). One might wonder if this perspective of “ut pictura poesis” was more than a Horatian truism and an established topos in European poetics, but Stössl has a point when she interprets certain phrases by Sarbiewski, such as Virgil “being about to draw on his canvas of the epic poem a portrait of the perfect prince” [perfectissimi principis in tabula epopeae effecturus imaginem], as more than examples of random metaphor. As far as Jesuit literary theory—as well as the rest of early modern Jesuit culture—is rooted in a particular estimation of picture, perception, and meditation (the Ignatian applicatio sensuum), the lines between visual and textual arts indeed seem to be blurred. This holds true especially for the Kommunia Duchowna, in which Stössl now detects textual and visual art, machinery, gesture, and performance as deeply intertwined. This observation, drawn from Sarbiewski, can indeed supplement and enrich other recent investigation into Jesuit “synaesthetical theory” (96–99).