

Pye, Christopher

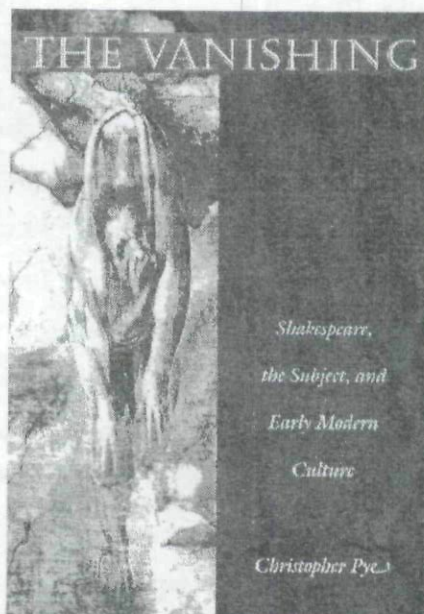
The Vanishing. Shakespeare, the Subject, and Early Modern Culture.

Duke University Press, 2000
200 páginas.

A dazzling analysis of early Renaissance culture against the backcloth of the Shakespearean text, this book by Christopher Pye studies the formation of modern subjectivity. The author calls it "a series of forays into the problem of the subject in early modernity".

The first chapter –"The Theater, the Market, and the Subject of History"– studies the relationship between economy and representation in the apparition of early modern subjectivity.

Drawing on the economic concept of circulation, the author analyzes how, at various levels, the economic metaphor seems to explain the loss of totality that appears with the Renaissance. This analysis is exemplified through *Henry VI, Part 1*, by William Shakespeare. Pye explores the play to show that "both in and beyond the stage a subject is indeed constituted in economic terms".



After a detailed analysis of the Shakespearan text, Pye concludes that "spectacle and market, subjectivity and history converge in *Henry VI* not as explanatory givens but as contingent phenomena". And he closes this first chapter by affirming that subjectivity is conditioned from the beginning by the proximity of history to the crypt and all the forms in which the theatre captured the imagination of the people.

In the second chapter, "Froth in the Mirror: Demonism, Sexuality and the Early Modern Subject", the author states that few modern phenomena call forth for analysis with a louder voice than the array of events, practices, and beliefs that have come under the label of witchcraft. Recognizing the paramount importance of Greenblatt in the field of Renaissance New Historicism, the author teases out fascination not only as an element of demonism but also as an object of analysis. The concept of "fascination" is used to reveal the relationship between witchcraft as a social formation and the erotic component of the early modern subject. Pye also admits having the purpose of "complicating" a traditional division between 'high' and 'low' Renaissance studies; that is, the difference between witchcraft phenomenon or "history from below" versus philosophy or theory as "high" knowledge.

After exploring his field of interest from the point of view of the "odd and anamorphic manifestations", Pye focuses on the appearance of the pictorial vanishing point. In this third chapter, he analyzes what he calls "the ur-instance of subjective interpellation in Western culture: the scene of the Annunciation, in which the Virgin is hailed into her sacred destiny".

Admitting beforehand that he may be accused of imposing a modern and secular set of ideas on an "alien domain", the author states that, even running the risk of complicating the subject, these Annunciation scenes resonate with "contemporary accounts of the performative character of symbolic inscription". Resorting to modern psychoanalytic discourse, the author says that the sense of recognition is startling if we consider the fact that the words of the angels –in many of these paintings– are inscribed upside down and backwards, enacting, as it were, Lacan's dictum that "in the field of the Other, the sender always receives her message in inverted form". This is what the author calls "symbolic interpellation, in all its temporal ellipticalness".

Christopher Pye argues that those images that announce the coming of the Lord also anticipate, in a paradoxical manner, an iconoclastic and negational logic that is related to the appearance of the subject. This aspect is explored in the play *King Lear*. According to Pye, the play suggests the "linguistic and erotic underpinnings of the perspective effect, and the emergent empirical subject associated with it". The articulating opposition between empiricism and fantasy –the vanishing point and its beyond– coincides with the birth of a very different social and political subjectivity.

Throughout this chapter, the author explores *King Lear* and concludes that "the cliff scenes show the modern subject, that expressly temporal/historical being, to be inseparable from the break through which it simultaneously becomes groundless and phantasmatic."

In Chapter Four, "Dumb Hamlet", the author plays with the word 'dumb', which has been traditionally applied to the 'dumb show' by which Old Hamlet's death is re-enacted. Quite paradoxically, Claudius does not

realize that the "dumb show" is being enacted for his benefit and thus the whole effect is lost.

Departing from here, Christopher Pye reviews several explanations for Claudius' reaction –or his lack of it– and comes to the conclusion that it is not that the King does not react because he is absorbed and therefore has not heard the words of the actor, but because he can't miss the show. "It is inherent in his response", says Pye, "it is Claudius's own response to his captivation that captures him". "Boundaries have dissolved, the mind has turned on itself".

Advancing in his analysis, Christopher Pye says that the play *Hamlet* is about the "workings of interpellation, the experience of being called into a symbolic destiny". In this way, the 'dumb show' has to be read not so much as a mirror mechanism by which a disciplinary regime sets things right, but as "a sweeping form of solicitation that is at the center of Hamlet's mystery". The play's very first words: "Who's there?" and the retort: "Nay, answer me" already signal the interpellatory quality of the text.

The last chapter –"Subject Matter"– begins with the affirmation that "It is not a coincidence that matter has come so deeply to matter in early modern studies". The author here returns to a theme he had dealt with before: the relationship between early modern subjectivity and materialism. His purpose now is to historicize matter, to place it in contact with the subject, to analyze how "phantasmatic a thing matter is during the era."

The writer will focus his analysis of the object on an intriguing moment: that interim between portents considered as signals and that moment in which the neutral facts of scientific reason command. He stands now

between the world of similitude and that of empiricism and his analysis will be both cultural and literary.

Thus, to study the phenomenological status of the early modern object he chooses the *Wunderkammen*, or wonder cabinet. These eclectic collections of objects are representations of the whole theater of the world. Pye affirms that "the wonder cabinets, in their deliberate severing of syntax –the mummy next to the winged cat next to the horn of the unicorn– demonstrates a dawning preoccupation with the 'brute thing-ness' of objects".

To the question: Why should this type of the thing appear in a partial form and not in its totality?, the author says: "The answer lies in the singular object's relation to the seeker of knowledge. The curious person was defined –says Pye– as one who "pries into secrets and as one who enjoys a special relationship with totality".

Finally, the author moves from the wonder cabinet to the closet scene in *Hamlet*. Posing interesting questions on the famous little scene where Hamlet kills Polonius hidden behind an arras, the author says that in this scene Hamlet is able "to speak directly and truly". But, at the same time, the act of stabbing Polonius through the curtain seems to engage more precisely some of the most important themes in the play: secrecy and voyeuristic intrusion.

Finally, this rich and thought-provoking book shows how smoothly the focus passes from body to body politic in the Shakespearean play and how closely connected are the play's psychic problems to a historical moment of fragile and unclear individuation of the subject.

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