My project aims to study the complex web of interconnections that grows out of the presentation of portraits in drama. Questions of literary history, art history, semiotics, and transmediality will be central to my work. The time period under consideration ranges from the Elizabethan age up to the closing of the theatres. I intend to carry out a study of the diverse ways in which the structure of the dramatic text and the characters’ psychologies are shaped and changed through the process of observation and interpretation of pictures in their dramatic actions and dialogues.

The project will be articulated in three main broad sections:

1. Aims, methodology and critical tools
2. The main features of visual culture in early modern England
3. Discussion of a number of significant primary dramatic texts

The first part will be dedicated to a discussion of the methodological premises and instruments to be applied. I will illustrate certain fundamental notions pertaining to visual semiotics and the semiotics of drama. Relevant issues stemming from gender studies and the Lacanian theories of the gaze (including e.g. Barbara Freedman’s insights) will also be taken into consideration.

The second part shall examine specific elements from the visual culture(s) circulating in early modern England. English painting featured specific stylemes which are dissimilar from the ones in use on the continent. In particular, the poetics of the miniature, encoding the actual English tradition of painting, will be investigated. These practices find a precise correlative in the drama of a society facing anxiety toward the image as such. In fact old beliefs concerning picture magic, the well know Baconian attack against “idols”, and the new discoveries in the field of optics, are at work in this context and promote a great epistemological shift from a system based on “resemblance” to one hinged on “representation”.

In the third part of the thesis, the plays that best illustrate the potentialities of portraits on stage will be closely analysed, through the methodological lenses outlined in the first part. Among these...
texts, I will discuss *Hamlet* (the closet scene), John Webster’s *The White Devil*, William Sampson’s *The Vow-Breaker*, and Philip Massinger’s *The Picture*.

A typology of the semiotic functions played by the portrait will be delineated (e.g. mnemonic reference, sympathetic magic, etc.). Such functions will then be associated with the aesthetics and stylemes of early modern English painting. Special attention will be devoted to the examination of such elements as ekphrastic motifs, intertextuality, and the clash between Neoplatonic aesthetical notions and Protestant and Puritan iconophobia.