Portraits in Early Modern English Drama:
Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances

My dissertation aims to study the complex web of interconnections that grows out of the presentation of portraits as props in early modern English drama. The time period under consideration ranges from the Elizabethan age up to the closing of the theatres. The two overarching critical tools I use are the semiotics of theatre and drama, and visual culture studies, but this research calls for an interdisciplinary approach that includes the history of drama and literature, art history, material culture studies, and gender studies. I carry out a study of the diverse ways in which the structure of the dramatic text and the subjectivities of the *dramatis personae* are shaped and changed through the process of observation and interpretation of pictures in their dramatic actions and dialogues.

The theatre is etymologically the site for watching. Spectators look at actors, and actors look at each other; furthermore, in England, both in the private and in the public playhouses, members of the audience could exchange glances at each other, and the players could often frontally interact with them, in almost direct facial communication. I wish to argue that staged portraits foreground the processes of theatrical representation and can problematise them, creating a particular form of metatheatre. The presentation of portraits on stage in early modern English playhouses could interrogate the processes of re-presentation: the ways we make sense of the world aesthetically and ethically, and the construction of subjectivity. This dissertation also confronts the elusive question of reconstructing the size and format of the staged portraits.

The dissertation includes an analysis of five case studies: William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (with a particular focus on the 1603 First Quarto); John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612); Philip Massinger’s *The Picture* (1630); William Sampson’s *The Vow Breaker* (1636), and William Cartwright’s *The Siege* (1651).