Arms Akimbo: Kinesic Analysis in Visual and Verbal Art

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Parlor Press LLC, Anderson, South Carolina, USA, 2011
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According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, kinesic communication is communication effected nonvocally through body movements and gestures. Kinesis is an aspect of human behavior studied by social scientists and anthropologists in real-life situations. But the perception and understanding of bodies portrayed in art also relies on kinesic intelligence. My purpose in this essay is to explore the way in which visual and verbal artifacts convey complex kinesic information, both shedding light on and reinforcing cultural narratives and values. My argument is based on a definition of kinesic intelligence offered by critic Ellen Spolsky in "Elaborated Knowledge: Reading Kinesis in Pictures": "Human kinesic intelligence is our sense of the relationship of parts of the human body to the whole ... and the spatial understanding of the relation of limbs to torso—their relative lengths and bulk and their relative extension and natural orientation" (1996, 159). Spolsky demonstrates that kinesic analysis may be usefully applied not only to real bodies but to bodies in art as well.

In this essay, I concentrate on one particular gesture: the arm akimbo. The English word *akimbo* is defined as an arm gesture in which the hand is placed on the hip and the elbow is turned outward. Sociocultural studies reveal that the interpretation of gestures such as this relies on culturally established systems of signification. A single gesture may have widely varied meanings that are dependent on the time, place, and the broader context in which it is performed. The arm akimbo can be read as an expression of relaxation, fatigue, satisfaction, anger, surprise, defensiveness, defiance, threat, bluff—and this list is not exhaustive. It may also be interpreted as a sexually oriented signal. In many Western cultures today, the akimbo pose can be coded as seductive and flirtatious when one arm is set akimbo to accentuate the curves of the chest or the hip. In contrast, it is read as assertive when both hands are squarely placed on an upright torso. These two variations of arms akimbo are closely connected with performances of gender semiotics, the former case being often construed as feminine and the latter as virile.
My purpose in this essay is to explore kinesic communication in art and to highlight the complexity and cultural weight of such a commonplace gesture as the arm akimbo. Kinesis in visual arts concerns the ways in which bodies' shapes and structures organize space and communicate information, whether in a painting or a website.* In order to explore kinesic communication in art, I practice the type of analysis named "thick description" by anthropologist and ethnographer Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973, 3–30). In his discussion of Geertz's theory, critic Wolfgang Iser explains that the procedure of thick description is "an unfolding of the implications of the manifest, which thus becomes all the more richly orchestrated" (2000, 160–61):

Reading signs is a matter not so much of grasping what they represent as of spotlighting what they imply. There is always a gap between what is manifest and what is implied in either saying or doing something . . . . By revealing the observable manifestations, thick description establishes a semiotic web of interacting features, which we are given to read. (2000, 160–61)

Thick description of kinesic communication entails that we pay attention to the visual rhetoric that informs the representation of gestures and postures. As will be illustrated shortly, a gesture's thin description is a "superimposition of concepts on what one is given to observe" (Iser 2000, 161). By contrast, a thick description of kinesic data in art involves an analysis of the way in which a given image organizes bodies spatially, thereby inducing complex inferences. These inferences are produced by the picture's visual rhetoric. I use the notion of rhetoric because, in the images I discuss, recurring visual features function as pictorial tropes, which oscillate between literal and figurative levels. Kinesic communication takes place between the literal and the figurative and requires a rhetorical awareness of what separates and also connects the two. Kinesis pertains to both registers and entails a continuous back-and-forth movement between the literal, physical reality of the gesture and the figurative, semiotic impact produced by the represented body. In other words, the arm akimbo in art is never just a sitter's limb touching his or her hip; it inevitably conveys more than a sheer anatomical fact. In the artworks selected in this essay, the arm akimbo is an eloquent bodily sign that elicits a variety of inferences.

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Meanwhile, these inferences cannot be detached from the physical anchorage of the represented limb. A brusque translation of the gesture into "what it represents" is never sufficient. The literal gesture and its figural implications are inextricably intertwined within the performance of kinesic communication, which takes place in the interplay between the represented body and its viewer. The arm akimbo in art prohibits a dissociation of its corporeal visibility from the meanings it evokes for the onlooker. In order to analyze accurately kinesic communication in general and the arm akimbo in particular, it is necessary to maintain our attention constantly in balance between visible corporeal facts and the inferences they induce.

The first part of this essay is devoted to thick descriptions of images in which the arm akimbo expresses male power through body expansion. A diachronic reading of the akimbo pose from the Renaissance to the twenty-first century—over time and across media—reveals a rhetoric of male power. I discuss this rhetoric in a Renaissance painting as well as in a photographic image of 1950s television icon Superman, and I propose that the rhetoric of power as body expansion also plays out in the visual form of a contemporary website and two contemporary logo designs.

After highlighting similarities in the rhetoric of artworks created in different eras and media, I next stress variations in the visual rhetoric of oil paintings belonging to the narrower historical period spanning the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I have selected images that share common visual tropes. In these images, the spatial impact of the arm akimbo gesture is extended through the sitter’s gaze and by means of artifacts that trespass visual boundaries. Gloves, in particular, play a significant role in each portrait. The recurrence of motifs such as gloves is an important cue in our capacity to identify cultural tropes despite historical distance and to read a visual rhetoric based on kinesic communication. Indeed, the semiotic value of gloves in early modern portraits is partially based on their kinesic treatment, that is, on the way in which they are held (strenuously or loosely), displayed (discreetly or conspicuously), and used (often by the very hand that is set akimbo).

In the second part of this essay, I study kinesic intelligence in the anonymous fifteenth-century Interlude and Tale of Beryn, the first surviving text that uses the word akimbo. This text develops a peculiar verbal rhetoric of gestures, which ultimately expresses the idea that kinesic communication, on the one hand, pervades human interactions and, on the
other, escapes linguistic disambiguation. As Beryn will show, it is a challenge to translate nuanced kinesic data into words. This task differs from spelling out the culturally established conceptual meaning of a gesture, as, for example, that “the arm akimbo means pride.” A thin description like this simply superimposes the concept of pride on the akimbo gesture.

Pride is the primary meaning John Bulwer reads in the arm akimbo. Bulwer’s *Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric* (1644) is the first English treatise entirely devoted to the meaning of gestures. It offers a systematic elucidation of body language based on the assumption, “widely entertained in the seventeenth century,” that “gesture could serve as a universal language” (Kendon 2004, 326). This treatise of hand rhetoric explains that, “To set the arms akimbo [akimbo] or aprank, and to rest the turned-in back of the hand upon the side is an action of pride and ostentation, unbeseeming the hand of an orator” (Bulwer 1974, 219). Bulwer provides a remarkably unambiguous moral and social interpretation of the arm akimbo. In stark contrast, the late medieval *Interlude and Tale of Beryn* plays with actors’ and orators’ rhetorical art of delivery in a story based on semiotic uncertainties and kinesic ambiguities. On the other hand, uncommon lexical choices in *Beryn* enhance the elusive nature of kinesic communication. On the other, it is central to the plot that interacting protagonists are capable of drawing multilayered inferences from ambiguous kinesic signals. I will argue that the ambivalence of kinesic communication in *Beryn* also concerns the reader and his or her reception of the text. The peculiarity of gestures in this narrative and the characters’ propensity to dramatize their demeanor prompt the reader to visualize the kinesic information described in the text. The act of reading *Beryn* relies heavily on the reader’s capacity to produce dynamic mental images of kinesic communication. The supplement of meaning that imbues all perceptions of kinesic communication in real situations is thus produced by the semiotic event of visualizing gestures mentally while reading *Beryn*—a text that thematizes the difficulty of expressing kinesic nuances and idiosyncracies by means of words.

**KINESIS IN VISUAL RHETORIC**

While the arm akimbo is rare in medieval art, it is pervasive in the Elizabethan and Jacobean portraiture of male aristocrats. The prevalence of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portraits of powerful males with their arms akimbo suggests that there probably were commonly...
understood interpretations of this gesture. Joaneth Spicer, curator of Renaissance and baroque art at the Walters Art Gallery of Baltimore, argues in “The Renaissance Elbow” that:

the introduction of purposeful gestures will usually represent a distillation of generally accepted societal codes which rise out of collective experience—otherwise they wouldn’t be recognized—and which convey an impression which the sitter is content to give off, seen through the prism of the individual artist’s aesthetic sensibilities. (1992, 85)

The arm akimbo is prominent in Hans Holbein the Younger’s 1537 mural depicting Henry VIII in his London residence, Whitehall Palace. Holbein’s akimbo influence may be traced back to Italian art: Donatello sculptures David Victorious standing with an arm akimbo over Goliath’s head in 1409, and a second David akimbo in 1430. Andrea del Verrochio portrays his Young David akimbo in 1473–75, and Hans Holbein the Elder paints an akimbo St. George towering above the dragon in 1522. When Holbein the Younger represents Henry VIII standing akimbo, he is developing an early modern iconography.

Holbein’s mural was destroyed by fire in 1698, but its general composition is known thanks to a cartoon Charles II commissioned from Remigius van Leemput in 1667. The cartoon represents Henry VIII and his third wife, Jane Seymour, with the king’s parents, Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, standing in the background. Another source of information is the Chatsworth Cartoon, a part of Holbein’s original drawing that survived and is now in the National Portrait Gallery. It contains the section representing Henry VIII and his father, Henry VII. Henry VIII’s portrait was also reproduced many times in isolation from the group. “Three full length versions, all 16th century in date, are of immense importance in conveying to us something of the impact of the original” (Strong 1967, 44). The Walker Art Gallery portrait is one of them (Figure 1).

Holbein’s Henry VIII akimbo bears a kinesic resemblance to the no longer functioning website home page design of the defunct Internet company akimbo 3 (http://www.akimb03.com/index.htm) (Figure 2 and Figure 3). To be sure, the painting is figurative and the home page is not, but this very fact enables me to highlight the particular nature of kinesic data. In both renderings, spatial expansion serves to express
success and power. The text at the center of the home page reads: “Internet success stories built here.” The company is announcing that the customer will be empowered via his or her connection to *akimbo*. This phrase at the center of the home page is surrounded by four smaller captions whose spatial distribution echoes the form of the background image with smaller units surrounding a larger caption. The background image is made up of a central oval shape with seven similar smaller shapes connected to it by straight lines. The background image behind the central shape forms a tilted

**Figure 1.**
After Hans Holbein the Younger, *Henry VIII*, after 1537, oil on canvas, 233.7 x 134.6 cm, © Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool, United Kingdom.
rectangular area whose slanted position emphasizes the fact that the smaller ovals extend beyond the borders of this area; they cross over the boundaries of this rectangular zone, while being firmly connected to the central body by means of the straight lines. The spatial organization of the captions and the visual vocabulary of the background design communicate an expansion reminiscent of extended limbs. The visual rhetoric of the design confirms its textual rhetoric: *akimbo 3* pronounces itself an expanding source of power.

The phrase “Success stories built here” echoes the visual rhetoric of Henry VIII’s portrait as a purposeful monarch. The composition of the painting, which is visually and rhetorically dominated by the king’s broad shape, can likewise be read as spatial expansion signifying success and power. The compositional connections among Henry’s limbs and costume
ornaments correlate with the conjoined elements I described on the *akimbo* 3 home page. Henry's legs are apart with locked knees, a stance that is evocative of two straight lines angled out. His feet are turned outward, as is a dagger held by the cord of its sheath in Henry's left hand. Just above the pommel of the dagger, Henry's codpiece protrudes and is framed by his girdle's fringes. Power is here associated with sexual potency, and spatial expansion is signified by the king's padded codpiece as much as by his legs and dagger. His shoulders, greatly enlarged by his surcoat, form a line that stretches horizontally on both sides. His arms seem to support this line of force. Henry's body expands spatially through his limbs, codpiece, dagger, and clothing. His right arm is akimbo, but the shade under his hand suggests that the latter is actually not resting on the monarch's side. The king pushes his akimboed arm even further from his torso, thus amplifying his intense physical expansion.

The outline of the king's shoulders and arms becomes more intelligible when compared to the logo of another website company, the design company *Akimbo Design* (http://www.design-agency.com/Akimbo-Design/) (Figure 4). *In* this logo (http://www.design-agency.com/Akimbo-Design/), the figure's bent arms are extended so much that they are practically at right angles. The design's cartoonish quality makes this feature more visible.

Because the arms are basic lines, the visual impact of akimboed arms in this image is enhanced. Furthermore, both arms are akimbo, and the angles formed by the elbows echo the angles shaped by the figure's remarkably wide crotch. The angles of the elbows are in sharp contrast with the logo's circular frame and with the figure's perfectly round head in the same way as the angles formed by the crotch contrast with the upper curvilinear limit of the legs. The figure's large and steady legs are markedly apart, as are Henry VIII's in his portrait. In both images, to stand akimbo is to fill up space as effectively as possible by setting arms akimbo and by increasing the visibility of one's crotch.

The kinesic message of Henry's posture is easy to grasp: the king is *big*—with all the polysemic force of the word. To enlarge one's body and take up more room can be performed and read as a signal of domination and threat. This reading is not relevant,
however, in Akimbo Design's logo, whose cartoonish and hence humorous quality deflates such an effect. The logo has, nonetheless, the shape and look of a regulatory traffic sign. The visual efficacy of the logo thus relies on a semiotic system intended to regulate behavior and movement. Presumably, the logo intends to have the viewer stop and pay attention, and it accomplishes this by activating humorously what may be a codified response to the akimbo pose.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the crotch in the Akimbo Design logo is not gendered. Indeed, neither the absence of a codpiece (or of anything of the sort) nor the wearing of pants may be read as a straightforward gendering signal in the context of Western, twenty-first-century visual rhetorics. Thus, I propose the hypothesis that the highly visible and yet un-gendered crotch of the Akimbo Design figure suggests that power in the twenty-first century is not inevitably bound to one dominant gender anymore. It is today imaginable that power may be male and female.

To return to Henry VIII, the background in his painting increases the impression of voluminous strength. His limbs and artifacts, which are projected outward from his densely packed torso, trespass a number of vertical visual lines in the composition. The dagger, for instance, connects his crotch area to the curtain fold on the right and penetrates this
vertical line horizontally with its pointed end. In Holbein’s original drawing, this line is formed by the long coat of Henry VIII’s father, Henry VII. It is noteworthy that the copy reproduces the detail of a vertical line transgressed by the king’s dagger, even though the literal identity of the object being transgressed has been lost.

This effect of boundary-crossing expansion is comparable to that in the *akimbo* 3 home page as well as to that in a picture of George Reeves as Superman (http://www.legendsofamerica.com/photos-ghosts/GeorgeReeves.jpg). In this image, Superman’s arms are both akimbo. The backs of his hands with highlighted knuckles are presented to the viewer. Because his arms are set on his hips with fisted hands, the volume of space covered by his body is augmented, forcing his elbows to “burst” out of the picture frame. His crotch also trespasses the picture’s frame, and Superman’s external “underwear,” characteristic of this hero’s sartorial makeup, increases the focus on his crotch and pelvic area despite 1950s decorum.

The typography of the word *SUPERMAN*, flying at full speed through space, seems also ready to burst out toward the viewer, mimicking Superman’s style of transportation. Similarly, the typography of the *akimbo* 3 logo (in the upper-right corner of Figure 2) seems to imitate the spatial distribution of a human body. The logo is made up of a lowercase letter *a* with three dots placed at the “elbow” of the letter. The “elbow” of the first letter of the word *akimbo* is thus expanded by the three dots, akin to extending limbs. Returning to George Reeves, in the logo’s design on Superman’s torso, the *S* fills up its frame maximally, echoing Reeves’s akimboed body. The way in which the *S* inflates its size to occupy the entire space of the logo’s frame typographically confirms the desired visual effect of the very body it serves to mark. The logo symbolizes Superman’s body and signifies, in and of itself, the expanding and thus powerful impact of the hero’s physicality—another way of promising that “success stories are built here.”

In the introduction to the TV series *The Adventures of Superman* (1953–1958), the hero appears standing akimbo in outer space, his cape flapping energetically in an interstellar breeze (Figure 5). Spatial expansion reaches an expressive peak with Reeves’s body akimboed to the extreme, hands on knuckles, situated in a space beyond human space, and linking supernatural locomotion to political ideology.
Indeed, the voice-over during the introduction describes Superman with these words of anthology:

"Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings at a single bound."

"—Look up in the sky!"

"—It's a bird!"

"—It's a plane!"

"—It's SUPERMAN!"

Yes, it's Superman, strange visitor from another planet, who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands and who (disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper), fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way! The Adventures of Superman (1953–1958), Warner Brothers.

In sum, the universe is pro-American, and Superman's akimboed arms, flapping cape, and locked knees prove it with the force of evidence.

So far I have explored the nature of kinesic data by showing that Henry VIII's portrait, akimbo 3's home page, Akimbo Design's...
logo, and George Reeves's kinesic rhetoric in *The Adventures of Superman* all share significant similarities regarding kinesic information. Despite obvious visual and cultural variations, kinesic information in these images eloquently associates *akimbo* with body size, spatial expansion, potency, and power.

**THE GAZE AND GLOVES OF AKIMBOED MALES**

I wish now to augment my analysis of Henry VIII's portrait by introducing two additional components used in Western art in association with the arm akimbo, namely, a sustained gaze at the viewer and the peculiar treatment of gloves. I will consider this specific association in Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII and in two other masterpieces: Nicholas Hilliard's portrait of Earl Clifford, and Van Dyck's portrait of Charles I. The recurrence of the aforementioned association (*akimbo, gaze, glove*) shows, on the one hand, that specific visual tropes circulated in early modern art, and it suggests, on the other hand, that these tropes were used for specific rhetorical purposes, to communicate distinct inferences. Shared visual tropes contributed to the invention of original "visible discourses."

In Henry VIII's portrait, the king's small eyes look straight out from his round face toward the viewer, and his right hand firmly holds his gloves. In the Chatsworth Cartoon, Henry's gaze is more threatening and his hand squeezes the gloves more strenuously than in the Walker Art Gallery portrait. The same is true for yet another portrait by Holbein and his school, based on the Whitehall Palace prototype (Figure 6). Combined with his intensely akimboed and space-saturating body, Henry's image reads like a propagandistic call for submission. As such, the picture triggers a production of meaning geared toward a programmed behavior. Henry's body language suggests that the viewer is expected to recognize that it would be in his or her best interest to submit. In Holbein's design, submission is advertised as the most advantageous, and hence desirable, option for the viewer in relation to the Tudor monarch. In the frame of Henry's densely akimboed body, the king's grip on his gloves serves to suggest the likely consequences of a failure to yield to this script of compliance.

The inscription "ANNO ETATIS SUAE XLIX" means "His year of age, 49." Roy Strong points out concerning Holbein's original
mural that “Henry alone communicates with the onlooker, and the effect on visitors to the palace was such that they ‘were abashed, annihilated’ in his presence” (1967,39).9

Henry’s gaze may be understood as one more organ projected into space. Similarly, the contact page of akimbo 3’s website features the image of a man with a surprisingly complex facial expression and a gaze seemingly ready to burst out of the computer screen toward the customer (Figure 3). The mouth of this highly expressive masculine face is open as if caught in the act of speaking in a vehement tone to the user. The face appears in the foreground of a frame askew within the picture, which is slashed with streams of bright colors and flashes of light. Such designerly and kinesic data convey a sense of urgency, which is further enhanced by the exclamation mark in the sentence "contact us!"

The visual association of arm akimbo, gaze, and glove is further exemplified by Nicholas Hilliard’s full-figure portrait of George Clifford, Earl of Cumberland, in his knightly attire after his victory over Sir Henry Lee at the tilt (Figure 7). Hilliard claimed to be a great admirer of...
Hans Holbein and, as court painter, he may have been inspired by the Whitehall Palace mural. However, the kinesic variations between the two paintings are significant. While Henry VIII's overwhelming physicality and crushing grip embody the monarch's political program, that is, his demand for general submission, Clifford's portrait tells a different story, in which he dominates because his head carries the token of the Queen's preference.

George Clifford was a favorite of Elizabeth I, who gave him the bejewelled glove displayed on the Earl's feathered hat. Significantly, the glove is laid on his head; Clifford does not touch the queen's glove. Gloves can function metonymically as an extension of the hand. I propose, therefore, that the sociopolitical purpose of Hilliard's painting is to exhibit and celebrate a symbolized kinesic contact performed by means of the queen's glove, indicating that power is bestowed upon men by Elizabeth; she is the source of masculine power. The correlated message conveyed by
Hilliard's masterpiece is that Elizabeth's metonymic hand touches but is not touched. Her glove is not to be held; no one lays a hand on the Virgin Queen.10

This does not diminish Clifford's success in any way, as is made clear by the champion's akimboed arm and clenched fist fitted in the sharp angle of his hip and torso. Spatial expansion is expressed in this image in association with the arm akimbo, but it is spelled out by means of distance rather than contact, which enhances the treatment of the queen's untouched glove. The knights' equipment—shield, helmet and gauntlets—surround Clifford's body at a distance and serve to fill up space. In this painting, the gauntlets are metallic gloves that show rather than touch. They point toward the champion, and this deictic function stresses their metonymic status; they stand for hands and pointing fingers. Thus, artifacts enact Clifford's spatial control, revolving around the body instead of thickly protruding from its dense core, as is the case with Henry VIII. When physically in contact with Clifford, artifacts further elongate his body by thinning out into space. The spear's point disappears into the foliage above, which increases the visual effect of its length. The hat achieves a similar effect by means of large feathers crowned with thinner ones, which caress the picture's upper limit formed by the tree.

The akimbo iconography likewise communicates a modified rhetoric of power in Sir Anthony Van Dyck's 1635 portrait of Charles I (Figure 8). In the painting, Charles jabs his elbow at the viewer.

While the arm akimbo is common in seventeenth-century art, jabbed elbows are rare. However, Dutch and Flemish painters were, at times, prone to display their mastery of perspective in this fashion. Anthony Van Dyck was a Flemish artist, working at the royal court of England, and he possibly knew, for instance, Evert van der Maes' Standard-bearer (1617), painted in the Netherlands eighteen years before his portrait of Charles I. In both paintings, the sitter's torso is drawn in profile so that the bent elbow protrudes and visually trespasses the "fourth wall," which separates the figure from the onlooker. Spatial expansion in this design takes the form of a nudging movement toward the audience. In Van Dyck's painting, the king's pointed elbow is highlighted with pigments of bright yellowish white, and the size of his arm is strikingly larger than that of his thighs and calves.
Here, as in the other akimbo portraits, the subject gazes toward the viewer. But the effect is modified by the head’s twisted position. The relation of head and gaze to torso parallels the relation of upper limb to torso; both the arm and the gaze expand laterally toward the spectator. These kinesic data signal to the viewer that he or she stands on the side of the king. To stand on someone’s side has multiple implications. One implication is that the viewer is not important or dangerous enough to be faced frontally by the king. Charles’s lateral posture, side-glance, low eyelids, and jabbed elbow disempower the viewer to some extent. But the meaning is ambiguous since the very same spatial configuration places the viewer in relative proximity to the king, suggesting that, despite social and spatial inferiority (the viewer stands on a slightly lower level), he or she is close to and hence in agreement with the monarch. While Henry VIII’s body commands a kind of top-down submission, Charles I’s kinesic rhetoric peremptorily enlists the viewer to abide by the king.
Of major significance in the success story narrated by Van Dyck's picture is the way in which the glove is handled. Charles, like Henry VIII, holds his glove in the hand of the arm set akimbo. But instead of crushing the glove, he holds it loosely and casually with his thumb on his open palm. His hand is turned backward, and the point of contact between hip and hand is the back of the wrist. If compared to Hilliard's painting, it appears that, while Clifford's glove is displayed prominently and reverently on the Earl's forehead, Charles also shows his glove, but on his backside. The lower half of the glove is on the king's left buttocok. It is important to this particular akimbo narrative that the reader's eye must travel down this glove in order to reveal its subtext. The tips of two of Charles's glove's fingers extend beyond the line drawn by the king's jacket, eliciting visual contact between the glove and the tips of two fingers that belong to the groom who carries the king's cloak in the background. In real space, the glove and the page's fingers do not touch; but Van Dyck's bidimensional elaboration of perspective closes the gap. The reader of the painting is thus made to take note of the contact, albeit pigmentary, between the king's glove and the groom's hand. The line transgression is excessively small, yet it is more daring and its impact more provocative than all other spatial trespassing considered so far. The male assertion of power extant in the paintings of arms akimbo is spelled out here as a kingly boast of sensuous polyvalence.11

We saw that the tip of Henry VIII's dagger trespasses the vertical line formed by the curtain's fold, thus complementing a visual narrative wherein the king's sexual potency is overwhelming and dangerous—a fact to which his wives' short biographies indirectly attest. In contrast, Charles I's glove, rather than a dagger, is the artifact chosen to convey a sexually eloquent rhetoric of power. Charles's hand, extended by means of his glove, is not turned toward the pommel of his sword—combat is apparently not his cup of tea—but toward the fingertips of his servant. The English king stands in a posture of authority, holding a baton in front of him, yet the design of the painting, and the coloring and size of the left arm, lead the viewer's eye toward the elbow, which is highlighted and placed in close proximity to the glove story. Charles's pointed elbow is a joint—in the physical sense of bodily joint—which, in addition to connecting his arm bones, ambiguously articulates in the painting's space the softly gloved behind of the monarch to his baton-holding authoritative front.
My goal in reading pictures of akimboed bodies is to explore kinesic analysis of visual material and to highlight the way in which a supplement of meaning is inevitably involved in kinesic communication. As far as reception is concerned, the persistence of the akimbo posture with the same fundamental script of success and power in early modern and contemporary Western iconography suggests that this posture produces culturally significant inferences, which can still be decrypted coherently. Meanwhile, each version of the akimbo narrative offers specific variations. Regarding artistic production, kinesis in imagery communicates information that belongs to a specific cultural context and that is at the same time an occasion to create original visual narratives. Indeed, each akimboed arm discussed here presents its own idiosyncratic gestural qualities that express a particular rhetoric of success and power. Henry VIII, Clifford, and Charles I have different ways of displaying power by standing akimbo. In Holbein’s painting, the king is powerful because he can crush all opposition; in Hilliard’s portrait of Clifford, a man becomes powerful when touched by the queen’s untouchable hand; and in Van Dyck’s provocative masterpiece, a ruler displays his power by subtly extending it into the realm of homoerotic propensities.

The purpose of the next section is to address the difficulties inherent in verbal expressions of kinesic intelligence. My main focus is on the fifteenth-century text titled *The Interlude and Tale of Beryn*, in which the word *akimbo* appears for the first time in written English. In the first section of this essay, I analyzed the way in which kinesic communication in visual arts grounds the rhetoric of images in an important way. In the next section, I argue that *Beryn* plays with kinesic communication verbally in order to induce dynamic mental visualizations in the reader. The act of reading this text produces a visual supplement of meaning, and, interestingly, this supplement concerns kinesic data that, precisely, defy lexical denotation.

**THE VERBAL RHETORIC OF GESTURES**

*Beryn* is remarkable in its treatment of kinesis because, instead of reducing gestures to narrow culturally codified meanings, it conveys the idea that there is a supplement of meaning to kinesic communication. This supplement of meaning permeates human interactions while it resists linguistic translation and control.
Kinesic analysis reveals Beryn's affinity with acting and delivery. Delivery concerns vocal intonation, body movements, and gestures; it is of central importance in classical rhetorical treatises. Beryn describes characters' delivery in deliberately awkward ways, which, I wish to argue, emphasizes the difficulty of translating the nuances of kinesic communication into linguistic signifiers. Mental images of kinesic data are produced in Beryn's reader because this text stages and also plays with the difficulty of denoting kinesic nuances.

The Greek noun theatron derives from the verb theaomai, "to watch." Gestures in Beryn are theatrical in that they are explicitly performed to be watched and interpreted by other protagonists in the narrative. What is more, they are often performed with exaggeration. Psychologist and pediatrician Daniel Stern explains how actors use kinesic intelligence: "a good actor will probably exaggerate just that part of [an] entire [kinesic] pattern that has the highest communicative value. And a good director will pick out for exaggeration exactly the most potent behavior evoker or stimulus releaser" (1973, 120). An association of the akimbo gesture with visual performance, acting, and kinesic exaggeration in the twentieth century echoes its late medieval use in the Tale of Beryn. In his discussion of akimbo in "Just Another Word," writer Ivor Brown comments:

Akimbo has settled down as the proper, if inexplicable word, for the arm-on-hips position commonly adopted by masterful ladies in the music-hall, Pantomime Dames, and others who address the world and deliver sharp commentary on men and matters. "She got terribly akimbo" became a species of Mayfair slang for what was earlier called "high horse." I have also heard it used by stage people for over-acting. "So and so was a bit akimbo to-night." (1946, 159)

Understanding akimbo as a spirited female theatrical gesture helps explain the woodcut, printed by John Rastell between 1510 and 1516, on the title page of Henry Medwall's Fulgens and Lucre, the earliest surviving fully secular comedy of English literature.

The title page of the copy held by the Huntington Library contains a woodcut showing a woman standing with an arm akimbo speaking to a suitor (Figure 9). Despite this theatrical setting and twentieth-century associations of the posture with women, akimbo
in early modern iconography is predominantly masculine; success and power is a script devoted to men. Exceptions only confirm the rule: akimbo females are women of exceptional power.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Fulgens and Lucre} is based on the humanist debate concerning true nobility and the dichotomy between aristocratic birth and personal virtue. Since Lucre is given the power to judge two suitors, it is significant that she is portrayed with an akimboed arm. Lucre must discriminate—according to a set of values debated in the play—between genuine and inherited nobility in order to decide which man she should marry. A woman is granted the power to decide who is worthy of her attention, and power is expressed visually by means of her arm akimbo. However, it is probable that the woodcut of \textit{Fulgens and Lucre} was intelligible and palatable to its audience in part because Lucre is a theatrical role—performed in any case by a male actor. A woman can be represented performing an eminently masculine gesture of power because this gesture is theatrical.

Figure 9.
Henry Medwall, \textit{Fulgens and Lucre}, 1512, title page, woodcut.
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\textit{ARMS AKIMBO: KINESIC ANALYSIS IN VISUAL AND VERBAL ART}
Major scholarly interest in *Fulgens and Lucre* concerns the ways in which the play thematizes acting and the hiatus between performance and identity, an issue relevant to a study of *Beryn*. In the following passage from *Fulgens and Lucre*, the protagonists who open the play pretend to be members of the audience and not actors. They are labeled A and B because the actors' real names were probably used during performances, which further blurred the boundary between identity and performance.

A
But I pray you, tell me agayn:
Shall here be a play?
B
Ye[a], for certeyn.
A
By my trouthe, therof am I glad and fayn.
...
I trowe your owyn selfe be oon
Of them that shall play.
B
Nay, I am none.
I trowe thou spekyst in derision
To lyke me thereto.
A
Nay, I mok not, wot ye well,
For I thought verely by your apparell
That ye had bene a player.
B
Nay, never a dell.
(Medwall, 2000, 36–51)

A takes B for an actor because of his lavish clothing, "a playful allusion," according to critic Greg Walker, "to the liberty enjoyed by actors to dress above their social status for the purpose of playing" (2000, 108). The problem raised by this interplay concerns bodily signals (including clothing) interpreted by protagonists who must decide whether others are acting or not. In *Fulgens and Lucre*, actors exaggeratedly pretend not to be actors in a theatrical context. Although it is not a play, *Beryn* is characterized by a similarly perplexing array of bodily information. This information is performed by overacting deceivers who fervently protest against all accusations of duplicity.

*ACTING KINESIS AND THE ART OF*

*Guillemette Bolens*
DELIVERY IN THE TALE OF BERYN

Beryn describes kinesic communication in a way that triggers visualization in the reader precisely because the descriptions play with the difficulty of accurately translating kinesic data into words and meanings. The Interlude and Tale of Beryn is an anonymous fifteenth-century continuation of Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. While Chaucer’s pilgrims never reach Canterbury, the group in the Interlude arrives in town, settles at an inn, and spends the afternoon visiting Thomas Becket’s shrine before returning to London the next day. On the way back, the merchant tells the Tale of Beryn. In both parts of the continuation, kinesic narrative emphasizes the communicative purpose of gestures, and stages the protagonists’ skill—or pathetic lack thereof—at reading gestures effectively. Although gestures in medieval literature are usually associated with culturally codified meanings, Beryn describes puzzling physical attitudes whose clear meanings are patently problematic.

Several characters in Beryn put on exaggerated demeanors, which increases the theatricality of certain passages. The characters’ success at tricking each other relies on their convincing acting skills, which they utilize in a whole variety of fraudulent posturing. Such is the case when a man called Macaign convinces Beryn to use his help and support at court, where he unexpectedly falls face down onto the ground, accusing Beryn of murder with a huge, grievous complaint: “He fill plat to the erth; a grevous pleynt and an huge / He made” (Bowers 1992, 2270–71). Macaign’s deceiving and histrionic behavior shows that he is acting; his pain is contrived and is only intended to trap his victim in a nefarious trial.

Beryn is also sued by Syrophanes, the character in Beryn who sets his arm akimbo. Beryn has been tricked into swearing an oath implying that he would have to drink all the saltwater in the sea if Syrophanes beats him at chess. Claiming that Beryn, who lost, is legally bound to carry out his promise, Syrophanes decides to take Beryn to court and overreacts to his victim’s expectation of an amicable settlement of their dispute:

The host made an hidouse cry in gesolreut the haut [at the top of his voice]
And set his hond in kenebowe [akimbo]. He lakked never a faute [didn’t miss a beat]:
“Wenest thowe [do you expect],” seid he to Beryn, “for to
scorn [to defraud] me?"
(Bowers 1992, 1837–39)

An analysis of this comical passage requires that we acknowledge its theatricality. It matters that Beryn's anonymous poet refers to the akimbo posture in association with a manipulation of the voice. Syrophanes's fraudulent action is expressed in terms of delivery (i.e., voice intonation and gesturality).

Two important classical rhetorical treatises deal extensively with the question of delivery: the widely circulated Rhetorica ad Herennium, written in the first century BC and attributed to Cicero during the Middle Ages; and the Institutio Oratoria, whose Spanish author, Quintilian, a lawyer and rhetorician, worked in Rome in the first century AD. Interestingly, the complete text of Quintilian's Institutio Oratoria was rediscovered in the fifteenth century, when Beryn was written. According to the Rhetorica ad Herennium and the Institutio Oratoria, delivery, of prime importance to orators, concerns vocal intonation and physical movement, vox and gestus. The gestus comprises postures and gestures as well as the gait, called habitus, and the facial expression and look, called vultus. Delivery is labeled actio when the emphasis is on gestus and pronunciatio when it is on the voice. The anonymous author of the Rhetorica ad Herennium underscores the difficulty of describing delivery: "I am not unaware how great a task I have undertaken in trying to express physical movements in words and portray vocal intonations in writing" (Caplan 1964, III. xv. 27). Describing vocal intonations and kinesic nuances verbally is extremely difficult. The problem lies neither with naming a gesture, say, an arm akimbo, nor with translating it into a concept such as pride but rather with conveying, by means of linguistic signifiers, the style and idiosyncratic nuances wherewith the gesture is performed.

While Syrophanes's vox and gestus hardly conform to the composure and self-control of the ideal Roman orator, Syrophanes's kinesic and vocal reaction can be related to the challenging task of putting into words the style of a man's delivery. In order to accomplish this literary feat, Beryn's poet resorts to two phrases absent from earlier extant literature: "in kenebowe" and "in gesolreut the haut." I contend that these lexical oddities in Beryn serve to evince the difficulty of translating kinesic nuances into
words as well as to highlight the theatrical propensity of human exchanges in Beryn—a fact best perceived when the scenes are visualized. I will first discuss “in kenebowe,” and then turn to “in gesolreut the haut.”

The Middle English form of akimbo is in kenebowe, and it only appears in the Tale of Beryn. This phrase is not used in written English for an entire century after Beryn and then reappears in the seventeenth century, when it begins to be widely used. As already discussed, “17th-century portraits experienced an explosion of male elbows” (Spicer 1992, 86). This suddenly increased interest in bent elbows in visual art echoes the spreading use of the word akimbo in written English in the seventeenth century. The early and isolated occurrence of akimbo in Beryn therefore calls for attention. Akimbo’s etymology “baffles the learned” (Brown 1946, 159). The morphological transformations of the word, from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, are: in kenebowe, a kenbow, a kemboll, a kenbol, a-gambo, on kimbow, a-kenbold, a kimbow, a-kimbo, akimbo (Oxford English Dictionary). This evolution suggests that the etymology of the written expression was lost early in the mists of oral usage, creating one of the most exotic-looking words in the English language. The Oxford English Dictionary lists etymological hypotheses but concludes that none is fully satisfactory. One hypothesis relates kenebow to the Icelandic keng-boginn, “bent staple-wise” or “in a horseshoe curve,” and another to the Middle English phrase a cambol, “in the manner of a crooked stick,” possibly derived form Medio Latin cambusca, “a crooked stick or piece of wood.” The unique etymology given in the Middle English Dictionary is preceded by a question mark. Kenebowe may comprise the English bow and the Old French chane, cane, or quenne, from Latin canna, “can, pot, jug.” The phrase in kene-bowe would thus mean “like the handle of a jug.” In short, the mysterious looks of akimbo resist etymological solutions. Experts have failed to derive it from convincing roots and original meanings. In fact, the visual appeal of this lexical unit may be due, in part, to the way in which it resists resolution. It is not impossible, I propose, that Beryn’s poet used “in kenebowe” because, in the fifteenth century already, the phrase was felt to be as peculiar as the gesture it denotes, a gesture uncommon in medieval literature and iconography.

Equally unusual is the phrase “in gesolreut the haut,” which describes Syrophanes’s vocal intonation. The compound G(e-sol-re-ut) in Middle English is almost exclusively used in musical treatises; Beryn is an exception. The phrase combines the musical note G with the

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hexachord syllables sol, re and ut. This combination belongs to the medieval musical system of solmization invented in the early eleventh century by Guido d'Arezzo. The system is made of relative scales called hexachords. A singer performing a melody had to change or “mutate” from one hexachord to another. Depending on the hexachord in which it appeared, G could correspond to either sol, re or ut. In the phrase “gesolreut the haut,” the haut is the French en haut, (i.e., “above”) which means that the note G here is above middle C and pertains to the upper part of the singer's vocal range. It is certainly deliberately ironic that this sophisticated reference is used to explain how Syrophanes strains his voice to produce a scream. The peculiarity of Syrophanes's reaction is conveyed by lexical choices that force the reader to pay attention to signifiers that accentuate the problem of kinesic and paralinguistic interpretation.

Furthermore, Syrophanes's akimbo gesture is ambivalent. At the level of thin description, Syrophanes's action of setting an arm akimbo reads like defiance and threat. But the context of the action and the patently preposterous claim that Beryn must drink all the saltwater in the sea also imply that Syrophanes is bluffing, pretending to be upset, that he is acting and even overacting—an aspect of the scene underscored by the narrator's comment: “Syrophanes set his hand akimbo, he didn't miss a beat.” Besides, the reference to the hand specifically and to the action of setting it akimbo induces a mental visualization of the moment of contact between the hand and the hip. Syrophanes's incongruous claim and vocal excess suggest that the contact between hip and hand is equally exaggerated, that it is ludicrously vehement, which highlights the histrionic quality of the gesture. Theatrical exaggeration must be read in Syrophanes's delivery style of defiance.

Borrowing the notion of “thick description” from philosopher Gilbert Ryle, Clifford Geertz refers to Ryle's discussion of increasingly complex instances of winking, ranging from a mere twitch, to a wink, a fake-wink, a parodied-fake-wink, a parodied-fake-wink rehearsed before a performance, and so forth. A thin description would refer to all such instances as a rapid contraction of the eyelid, while a thick description tries to account for the “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsal of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted” (Geertz 1973, 7). In the case of Syrophanes's akimboed arm, lexical choices, a focus on kinesic data, and
the narrative context all converge to increase the semiotic complexity of this otherwise ludicrous moment. A perception of the stratified semantic layers that inform Syrophanes’s gesture entails that Beryn’s reader visualizes the scene and thereby recognizes the theatrical flavor of Syrophanes’s overacted gesture. The text does not simply refer to a gesture; it formulates and stages it so as to increase the complexity of its reception.

A thick reception of Syrophanes’s gesture is necessary to appraise fully the fact that Beryn ends up in court despite the absurdity of Syrophanes’s claim. Kinesic communication has consequences. As will appear, success in Beryn is conferred to protagonists who can best manipulate kinesic signals. Geoffrey, the character who eventually saves Beryn from an iniquitous trial, best epitomizes this fact, as his antics are occasions to play with the kinesic intelligence of his interlocutors.

When Beryn first meets him, Geoffrey hides his true identity by faking lameness:

And when that Beryn in this wise had i-made his mone [moan],
A crepill [crippled man] he saw comyng with grete spede and hast,
Oppon a stilt [peg-leg] under his kne bound wonder fast [tightly],
And a crouch [crutch] under his armes, with hondes al forskramed [contorted].
(Bowers 1992, 2378–81)

Geoffrey’s hands are all forskramed. The past participle skrammed means “paralyzed, twisted, contorted, shriveled up.” It derives from the Old English verb scrimman, “to shrink.” The added prefix for intensifies the meaning of the participle, indicating that Geoffrey’s hands must be thoroughly maimed and distorted. But soon Geoffrey explains to Beryn, who fears another trap, that his deformity is nothing but a disguise, that he, like Beryn, is a Roman and that he will save him from his accusers’ contrivances if Beryn agrees to take Geoffrey back with him to Rome. Geoffrey had been the victim of the same gang twelve years ago and so decided to disfigure himself, he says, for protection.

To convince a fearful and distrusting Beryn that his disability is faked, Geoffrey acts in a peculiar way:

“My lymes [limbs] been both hole and sound [healthy];
me nedeth stilt ne crouch."
He cast asyde hem both and lepe oppon an huche [chest],
And adown ageynes [again], and walked too and fro,
Up and down within the shipp, and shewed his hondes tho,
Strecching forth his fyngers in sight over al aboute,
Without knot or knor [swelling] or eny signe of goute,
And clyghte [clinch] hem eft ageyns right disfeterly [misshapenly],
Som to ride eche other and som aewayward wry [twist].
(Bowers 1992, 2510–16)
A problematic relationship between acting, gestures, and kinesic interpretation is underscored by the fact that Geoffrey has been feigning his disabled condition successfully for so many years. He behaves for twelve years as if he were a cripple by transforming the appearance of his hands, contorted into knots and swellings, and by using two props expressive of disability, a crutch and a peg leg. But the peg leg is attached to an undiminished leg, ready to hop about when needed, and Geoffrey proves his health by deliberately making his fingers contort and twist. Here again, the reader must mentally visualize dynamic kinesic communication in this scene to appreciate the humorous and histrionic quality of this demonstration.
I contend that such a parody of semiotic processes is intended, ultimately, not so much to undermine the value of these processes as to highlight the prevalence of semiosis and the necessity of knowing how to decipher as well as to perform kinesis successfully.

In order to be chosen as Beryn’s attorney in the trial, Geoffrey later opts for another behavioral disguise, that of a fool." He convinces Hanybald that to entrust Beryn’s defense to a lunatic would guarantee the latter’s defeat. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Important elements in Geoffrey’s rhetoric of madness are gestures, read as typical of a fool: he gambols, twirls, and “ever clapped as doth a watermyll, / And made Hanybald to laughe al his hert fell” (Bowers 1992, 3003–04.). In his Institutio Oratoria, Quintilian teaches the art of oratory by laying out in great detail the rhetorical and visual force of gestures, considering not only hand gestures but also gestures of the entire body. For example, he remarks that

We must take care not to protrude the chest or stomach.
since such an attitude arches the back, and all bending backwards is unsightly. The flanks must conform to the gesture; for the motion of the entire body contributes to the effect: indeed, Cicero holds that the body is more expressive than even the hands. (quoted in Butler 1959, bk xi.iii.122)

Geoffrey’s entire body evinces a rhetoric of folly, which corresponds to a typically fifteenth-century conception of the fool. In twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature, folly in a main protagonist manifests itself via isolating outbursts of frenzy—witness Yvain. When simulated, folly also looks like rage—witness Tristan. In contrast, late-medieval fools are gregarious and effusive sots who mimic society while taking part in it. Folly’s style adapted accordingly, and rather than an enraged outcast, the fool becomes a merry reveler who gambles, frolics, and claps his hands, just like Geoffrey in Beryn. When performing his act, Geoffrey climbs upon an improvised stage to make sure that everyone can see him (Bowers 1992, 3077). Geoffrey stages himself as fool and enacts a rhetoric of buffoonery compelling enough to delude Beryn’s smart aggressors.

The fact that such cunning and dangerous crooks as Syrophanes, Macaign, and Hanybald are duped by Geoffrey’s act indicates that gestures in Beryn are conceived as a powerful language that has a definitive impact on events. Indeed, the malevolent accusers lose the trial. Most importantly, kinesis is a powerful language for the very reason that it resists definitive semantic control; even protagonists well versed in kinesis fail at mastering Geoffrey’s bodily rhetoric properly. Indeed, the deceivers are fooled when they believe that they can tell one madman from another. The Tale of Beryn is thus a success story where success is conferred upon protagonists who can best play with the semiotic hiatus between kinesic signs and meanings. This may be seen as a comment on kinesis and the nature of its interpretation. Kinesis speaks volumes and yet resists straightforward denotative stabilization. In the game of communication, the winner is he who plays to the full with such elusive and unstable supplements of meaning.

I hope to have shown in this essay how the cultural history of akimbo evinces the complexity of kinesis in visual and verbal arts. Kinesic intelligence is activated in visual art when the viewer reacts to the rhetoric conveyed through the visual tropes articulated in the image.
In verbal art, a text such as *Beryn* dramatizes the power and pervasiveness of kinesic communication in human interactions. Kinesis in *Beryn* evokes philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s comment on gesture as “communication of communicability” (2000, 59). It also thematizes the difficulty of expressing kinesis in words and the inadequacy of reducing kinesis to a tidy taxonomy of decoded gestures and superimposed concepts. In Agamben’s words, “the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language” (2000, 59). In its use of akimbo, among other lexical and behavioral oddities, *Beryn* emphasizes the way in which the supplement of meaning that imbues kinesic communication resists the full control of linguistic expression—and here reside the eccentric skill and force of this narrative. *Beryn* builds its success story on this very stumbling block. It successfully speaks of what it cannot verbalize, and, by this very token, the reader is led to provide the supplement of information that makes kinesis meaningful, as the text elicits the visualization of disconcertingly evocative gestures.
Notes


7 “No one ever thinks of Henry VIII in any other way than as this gouty, pig-eyed, pile of flesh, whose astounding girth is only...

8 Akimbo Design is located in San Francisco.

9 Strong’s source is C. van Mander, *Le livre des peintres*, trans. H. Hymans (Paris: Librairie de l’Art, Rouam imprimeur-éditeur, 1884), 1, 218. Strong explains that "Van Mander would have derived his information from his master, Lucas de Heere, who was in England circa 1567 to 1576."

10 On the erotic value of gloves and the symbolic association of glove and vagina, see Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, "Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001), 114–32.

11 Several studies of this portrait focus on Charles I’s horse (placed on the right of the full picture), ignoring the king’s elbow and glove despite the prominent visibility of these two items in the organization of the painting. A possible reason for so much decency is that the king is perceived as “the perfect cortegiano” (Roy Strong, *Van Dyck, Charles I on Horseback* [London: Penguin, 1972], 56); as “a figure of matchless elegance, of unquestioned authority and high culture, the patron of the arts, and the upholder of the Divine Right of Kings” (Julius S. Held, “Le Roi a la ciasse,” *The Art Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (June 1958), 149, quoting E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* [London: Phaidon, 1953], 302). John F. Moffitt, “‘Le Roi a la ciasse?’: Kings, Christian Knights, and Van Dyck’s Singular ‘Dismounted Equestrian-Portrait’ of Charles I,” *Artibus et Historiae* 4, no. 7 (1983), 79–99, for his part, argues that Charles in this painting represents the epitome of the allegorical *miles christianus*. Such perspectives automatically preclude, in fact prohibit, all ambiguities in the script.


13 Nicholas Hilliard painted Elizabeth I sitting—not even standing—with an arm akimbo in the *Ermine Portrait*, made in 1585 (now in Hatfield House). And Paul van Somer represented Charles I’s mother,
Anne of Denmark, at the hunt, standing with an arm akimbo, the back of her wrist in contact with her hip in a strangely contorted fashion (1617, HM The Queen, Royal Collection, Windsor Castle). In this painting, Anne of Denmark stands next to her horse. As already mentioned, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the role of the horse in Van Dyck’s *Charles I at the Hunt* and to the unusual fact that the king is dismounted. I make the hypothesis that the fact that Charles is dismounted is a reference to the portrait of the king’s mother, standing in a strikingly masculine posture.

Paul van Somer also made a portrait of James I, father of Charles I, standing with an arm akimbo. But James I stands in a chamber, and his arm akimbo is covered with a cloak. Thus the setting in Van Dyck’s painting (the figure is at the hunt, near a wood, dismounted, and prominently displaying the arm set akimbo) suggests a link with the portrait of Charles’s mother rather than with that of his father. In sum, Charles’s version of the arm akimbo—the masculine stance par excellence—imitates the portrait of his mother standing like a man.


16 According to Muriel Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 20–26, Elizabethan actors “exaggerated movements and statuesqueness and used inflated delivery and conventional posture. The most common method of expressing grief was for the actor to throw himself to the ground.” Throwing himself to the ground to express grief is the exact theatrical move Macaign performs to accuse Beryn of his father’s murder.

17 *Non sum nescius quantum susceperim negotii qui motus corporis exprimere verbis et imitari scriptura conatus sim voces.*


Bibliography


GUILLEMETTE BOLENS


