Introduction: the figures in Renaissance theory and practice

> The common scholemasters be wont in readynge, to saye unto their scholers: Hic est figura: and sometimes to ask them, Per quam figuram? But what profit is herein if they go no further?
>
> Richard Sherry (1550)

> A figure is ever used to a purpose, either of beautie or of efficacie . . .
>
> George Puttenham (1589)

> Critical sophistication in this period comes in the form of rhetorical analysis, but while we may be impressed by the technical acumen which can applaud a 'pretty epanorthosis', it is more difficult for us to feel the same kind of enthusiasm for such verbal effects.
>
> Neil Rhodes (1992)

The central concern of this volume is to provide a more complete account of the value and appeal of the figures of rhetoric to literary studies than has previously been available. Our method of enquiry takes the form of a set of case studies of specific figures, which, taken together, aim to elucidate the opinion of Puttenham and answer the scepticism represented by Rhodes.[1] The role of this introduction is to provide a context for the case studies by setting the figures in their place in the larger rhetorical system and setting rhetoric in its place in Renaissance literate culture.

To ask questions about the role of the rhetorical figures in English Renaissance literature is to engage with a theoretical system that at first glance might not seem to fit at all. The system of classical rhetoric inherited by the Renaissance had theorised public speaking, rather than private writing, and was an expression of the political and legal cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, a world away from those of early-modern Europe. To understand the relevance of rhetoric to Renaissance literature, we need to appreciate both how central to many areas of Renaissance society rhetoric became, and how complex were the longstanding relations between literature and rhetoric.

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Central to the rebirth of classical learning that gives the Renaissance its name was the reappraisal of classical rhetoric and the rediscovery of key texts by Quintilian, Cicero and others.[2] The northern humanists who influenced and led the overhaul of England's educational system in the early sixteenth century put rhetoric at the heart of the school and university curriculum, with a new sense of the vital continuity between this training and civic life. Courtiers, civil servants, politicians, churchmen, lawyers – ideally all were expected to apply their rhetorical education for the good of society. Editions of key classical texts – such as Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; Cicero's various orations and treatises; the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* ['Rhetoric to Herennius']; and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* ['Education of an Orator'] – were supplemented by editions of less well-known Greek and Latin rhetoricians, and complemented by a host of new treatises, almost all in Latin and with schoolroom use in mind, by scholars such as Erasmus (1512), Susenbrotus (1540) and Talaeus (1544).

A humanist education emphasised practice as well as theory. In addition to learning the terminology and techniques of rhetorical composition – including long lists of the rhetorical figures – sixteenth- and seventeenth-century students would practise what they had learned, first with the traditional *progymnasmata* (literally 'pre-exercises') and then with larger-scale declamations or debates, including arguments *in utramque partem* ['on both sides of the question'] which developed an ability to see things from more than one point of view. The school exercises or *progymnasmata* were based on those developed by such pedagogues as Aphthonius (4th c. AD); extended editions of Aphthonius were reprinted many times in the sixteenth century, and Rainolde's English version was printed in 1563.[3] A student might be required to write a speech in the person of a figure from myth, or a description of a scene, to praise a subject, or to undertake a comparison between two historical figures. These exercises were seen as developing some of the building blocks of larger-scale orations, but we can recognise their affinity to literary techniques too.

All writers of the period had been trained to understand their use of language in traditional rhetorical terms: how they selected a subject and its key points (*inventio*), how they organised their argument (*dispositio*), how they clothed it in language (*elocutio*), and how they memorised the oration (*memoria*) and then performed it (*pronuntiatio* or *actio*). A particularly important distinction was that involved in the interplay between *res* or matter – what was said – and *verba* or words – how it was said. Renaissance rhetoric, both as a practice of education and as an object of theory, followed the lines of classical rhetoric closely, but not uncritically. Each

theorist offered his own version of the traditional accounts and taxonomies, and in some cases the departures were radical, as when the influential French scholar Petrus Ramus assigned *inventio* (invention) and *dispositio* (arrangement) to logic and left rhetoric proper with only *elocutio* (style) and *pronuntiatio* (performance). The rhetorical treatise of Ramus's collaborator Audomarus Talaeus thus focused almost entirely on the rhetorical figures, as other treatises did for more practical than philosophical reasons: the result was that the figures dominated the rhetorical education and for many were synonymous with rhetoric itself. Lee Sonnino talks of 'that consistently disintegrating attention to ornament alone which was the chief Renaissance abuse of the classical tradition',[4] but it might equally be argued that it was in the area of *elocutio* – and specifically the theory and description of the figures – that Renaissance rhetoric managed actually to take classical theory forwards instead of merely summarising it. Simple statistics provide an index of the period's special interest in the subject: one of the most popular of the inherited handbooks, the *Ad Herennium*, gave its students sixty-five figures to learn; the second edition of Peacham's *Garden of Eloquence* (1593) raised the number to two hundred. There is plenty of evidence that the knowledge was absorbed and applied. Milton, as T. O. Mabbott reports, left marginal jottings in his copy of Harington's English translation of Ariosto: 'He even numbered the similes (over 130 of them) . . . and treats the "sentences" in the same way. Besides pithy sayings and proverbs he often wrote the word "proverbe".'[5] One of the aims of this volume is to show that Renaissance writers were not just obsessed with spotting the figures, like schoolboys collecting stamps, but that they did something new with them. In Milton's case, the time spent studying similes in Harington's Ariosto arguably changed the relation between metaphor and simile in the English poetic tradition.

RHETORIC AND LITERATURE

Aristotle had given quite separate treatments of poetics and rhetoric, but this was an approach that was not to be repeated until the later Renaissance. Rhetoricians believed that many of their techniques were based on those of the poets, and made frequent use of quotations from literary authors in illustrating rhetorical devices. Of course, any writer in prose who had learned the art of rhetoric would tend to employ rhetorical techniques of arrangement and style just as much when writing an essay or a romance as when composing an oration. But poets found that the rhetorical figures worked in verse too. So, as Cicero famously observes: 'The truth is that the

poet is a very near kinsman of the orator, rather more heavily fettered as regards rhythm, but with ampler freedom in his choice of words, while in the use of many sorts of ornament he is his ally and almost his counterpart.'[6] It can be hard to draw the line between literary and rhetorical theory in the classical and Renaissance periods. The author of *On the Sublime*, a text that came to have a major influence on imaginative literature, believes he is writing about oratory, whereas Demetrius, in the important *On Style*, shows no such bias. Horace's *Art of Poetry* makes the important and inevitable step of writing about poetry as if it is oratory, with an aim of teaching (*docere*) and delighting (*delectare*); a point Sidney develops in *The Defence of Poesy* when he completes the transfer of the so-called 'affective triad' from rhetoric to poetry by explicitly adding the need to move (*movere*). Quintilian had borrowed examples from Ovid and Virgil to illustrate his guide to public speaking. Ben Jonson returned the compliment when he advised William Drummond to read Quintilian, on the grounds, Drummond recalls, that he 'would tell me the faults of my Verses as if he lived with me'.[7]

Rhetoric could describe literary writing on several levels. Like oratory, literary writing could usefully be analysed in terms of the fundamental Ciceronian distinction between *res* (subject matter) and *verba* (words). It also made sense to think of the author of a sonnet or play as working on parallel lines to an orator, in coming up with a conceit or plot (*inventio*), organising his materials (*dispositio*), and employing stylistic devices (*elocutio*). An actor, too, was seen as like an orator, in needing to remember his lines (*memoria*) and then perform them convincingly (*pronuntiatio*). Within a work, recognisably rhetorical situations could be represented, from debates or speeches of praise through to political argument or courtroom drama. But what about a scene between two lovers – does that count as rhetoric? It may well do so, once we remind ourselves that rhetoric is able to describe any situation in which a speaker tries to persuade a particular auditor or audience to believe something, and does so using argument (*logos*) as well as appeals to emotion (*pathos*) and his or her own self-presentation (*ethos*). We can take just one example, the scene in which Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida meet together as lovers for the first time. Left alone for a moment by Pandarus, they talk:

CRESSIDA   Will you walk in, my lord?
TROILUS   O Cressid, how often have I wished me thus!
CRESSIDA   Wish'd, my lord? The gods grant – O my lord!
TROILUS   What should they grant? What makes this pretty abruption?[8]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* records this as the first occurrence of the word 'abruption', a Latinate English term for what Shakespeare's readers (and many of his audience) would have recognised as an aposiopesis, 'a forme of speech by which the Orator through some affection, as either of feare, anger, sorrow, bashfulnesse or such like, breaketh off his speech before it be all ended'.[9] The use of that word 'abruption' nicely blurs the question of whether Troilus himself is spotting the figure, and so of whether we should view any rhetorical artifice here – any simulation of bashfulness, say – as Shakespeare's or Cressida's. The author of *On the Sublime* justifies many rhetorical figures on the grounds that they simulate the behaviour of people in real life;[10] or, as Quintilian puts it: 'It was . . . nature that created speech, and observation that originated the art of speaking.'[11] So we might make Shakespeare the rhetorician here, and say that he is using the figure to signify that Cressida really experiences the emotion that the figure simulates. Or we might infer rhetorical self-consciousness in Cressida herself, and think that she is using the figure as one of Mary Wroth's artful women does, 'desiring to bee thought bashfull, but more longing to bee intreated for the rest'.[12] Much of the difficulty of Shakespeare's play hinges on just this question of how artful Cressida is.

In reading this scene from the perspective of rhetorical theory we have been following an important Renaissance development, whereby rhetoric becomes as much a set of tools for reading as an art of composition. A rhetorically educated reader was in a position both to appreciate and to disarm a text; rhetorical reading may have begun as a preparation for composition – with schoolboys marking rhetorical figures in the margins of their Ovids to help them internalise the rules – but it did not have to stop there, and complemented increasingly complex practices of interpretation developed in the period's biblical and legal exegeses.

At the same time as the theory of rhetoric conditioned the reading and writing of literature, some scholars turned again to the task of developing theories of poetics, but these were far from being insulated from rhetoric, in either the overview or the details. Of the five parts of rhetorical theory and the five stages of rhetorical composition, however, *elocutio* was the one most readily transplanted from oratorical to literary theory. Though Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) offers comment on many aspects of poetic composition, its early editors, Willcock and Walker, are correct in saying that 'the Figures constitute the *pièce de resistance* of this book'. For Puttenham, as for most of his contemporaries, literary rhetoric meant *elocutio* and *elocutio* meant figures of speech.

the figures in rhetorical theory

Elocutio deals with certain larger categories, such as the various styles (the simplest division is that of the plain, middle, and grand styles), but its building blocks are the figures. Perhaps the most important thing to grasp, in a spirit of liberation rather than frustration, is that the theory of the figures is built on shifting sands. Definitions mutate over time, as indeed do the sets and subsets of the kinds of figures that contain those definitions. We might begin with one classification of the kinds of figures, and then see how that maps on to other classical and Renaissance accounts. A figure is a shape or form, the meaning of the Latin word *figura* as of the Greek term it translates, *schēma*. That shape may be imposed on the patterns of ordinary speech. So, for example, the catchphrase of a popular British entertainer, 'Nice to see you, to see you nice', inverts ordinary word order in its second clause for effect, thereby bringing its words into the shape or form of the figure antimetabole (or chiasmus). But the shape may also be imposed at the level of thought, as when, in making an argument, we decide to anticipate the objections of our opponent, dealing with things (rather than words) out of order, a figure known as prolepsis. We can call these two kinds of figure the figure of speech and the figure of thought. There is a third kind of operation, which in some treatises is not classified as a figure at all – the trope. A trope (the Greek word means 'turn') is what we have when the thought itself is changed, and not only the pattern of its delivery. So if I talk about my mind as an unweeded garden, for example, I am using the trope of metaphor, discussing one thing as if it were another, and thereby adding something quite new to the concept of a mind, for instance that things in it grow at varying rates, that those with the shallowest roots may die if not nourished, and that a mind might benefit from some process of regulation akin to gardening.[13]

That division of things – tropes on the one hand, figures of speech and thought on the other – is offered by Quintilian, the author of the most comprehensive classical treatise we have. But other categorisations were also offered. One problem in tracing the theory of figures through classical and Renaissance discussions is that of translation. The system comes from Greek via Latin to the modern European vernaculars, but terms from each language coexist. Peacham, in the first edition of *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577), offers a treatment of the figures, which he divides into tropes and schemes, with the schemes either grammatical (equivalent to figures of speech) or rhetorical (figures of thought), and with further subdivisions in each case. This structure is similar to Quintilian's, but differentiates the

synonymous terms figure and scheme by making the latter a subset of the former. A classical philologist might find this muddled, but it has remained popular to view a scheme as a *kind* of figure. A competing system is offered by the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and has been taken up by Richard Lanham. Here, the first division is into figures of speech and figures of thought, and it is the figures of speech that contain the further subsets of schemes and tropes. The present volume's title – like most of its contributors – follows modern practice in using the term 'figures of speech' to mean the rhetorical figures generally, and not just certain schemes.

The scope of these various categories was never clear. Demetrius, writing in the late second or early first century BC, was the first to distinguish between figures of thought (*schēmata dianoias*) and figures of speech (*schēmata lexeos*).[14] In the early Latin rhetoricians we have instead of *figure* the terms *ornamentum* or *exornatio*, both meaning ornament, with the former carrying with it meanings also of military equipment; and these ornaments are of thought (*sententiarum*, the genitive plural of *sententia*) or speech (*verborum*). A sententia can be a thought or a sentence, either matter or words, so whether such a thing is to be imagined as already formed into words before it is shaped by the figure really depends on how one chooses to translate. When Quintilian seeks to clarify things, he gives us a host of terms most of which are hard to translate, opposing figures of thought (*dianoia*), 'that is of the mind, feeling or conceptions' ['mentis vel sensus vel sententiarum'], to figures of speech (*lexis*), 'that is of words, diction, expression, language or style' ['verborum vel dictionis vel elocutionis vel sermonis vel orationis'].[15]

Things are no clearer when we come to individual figures. As we shall see in this volume, some figures have enjoyed relative stability from one theoretical account to the next, while others have mutated over time or oscillated sharply between divergent definitions. Unsurprisingly, theorists also disagree over where to place particular figures within the broader categories of trope, figure of thought and figure of speech. Aposiopesis, the figure we saw Cressida (or Shakespeare) using, is an interesting example. Quintilian was insistent that simply to omit words was not what this figure was about – there had to be some work required of the auditor, some uncertainty about what had not been said – and so he classified it as a figure of thought. Puttenham, on the other hand, lists it as an auricular figure (the simplest kind, equivalent to a figure of speech). In the 1577 edition of *The Garden of Eloquence*, Peacham had it both ways, classifying the figure both as a syntactical scheme (equivalent to a figure of speech) and as a rhetorical scheme (or figure of thought). But by the 1593 edition, he has decided that

the figure belongs at the more complex end of his classification, where it is listed with those rhetorical schemes (or figures of thought) 'as do after a sort commit the cause in hand . . . to the consideration and judgements of others'.[16] Similar variation is found in the classification of a number of the figures included in this volume; though it may frustrate our desires for some sort of systemic stability, often it actually helps us to think about what is at stake when the figure is put into use.

Quintilian makes the sensible point, in discussing cases like these, that what matters is not the name or *genus* of a figure, but what it does: we should concentrate on 'the thing itself, by whatever name it is known'. Something can be a trope as well as a figure, and 'a Figure of Thought can contain several Figures of Speech'.[17] Richard Lanham acutely draws attention to the fact 'that the confusion has been a *creative* one . . . The vast pool of terms for verbal ornamentation has acted like a gene pool for the rhetorical imagination, stimulating us to look at language in another way.'[18]

One cause of the taxonomic confusion may be a recurrently felt need to discriminate between figurative operations that *represent* thought and those that actively *provoke* it. The way particular figures migrate between different categories suggests that the distinction is hard to sustain in particular cases, but that it remains useful as a general principle of approach and in some cases it can reveal a great deal. When Brutus speaks to the Roman people in justification of the assassination of Caesar, Shakespeare gives him a rhetoric based in figures of speech, most especially compar or isocolon, which, as McDonald's chapter points out, was the speech-pattern associated with a measured man: 'As Caesar lov'd me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honor him; but, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honor for his valor; and death for his ambition.'[19] Antony's rhetoric, on the other hand, is based in tropes and figures of thought, particularly those that directly elicit an audience's participation, such as the figure of paralepsis, by which we raise and then disappoint expectation, emphasising something by saying that we will not say it ('Let but the commons hear this testament – | Which, pardon me, I do not mean to read'; ''Tis good you know not that you are his heirs', 130–1, 145). This is accompanied by the directly affective figures of apostrophe, by which we turn to address another ('O judgment! thou art fled to brutish beasts, | And men have lost their reason', 104–5); and the vivid description (enargeia) of the moment of assassination (174–89). The different approaches of the two orators go beyond their selection of figures, however, because the figures are just a part of a larger system. What

Brutus gives us is *logos*, plain argument, where Antony gives us *pathos*, strong emotions. What both therefore offer is a contrast in *ethos*, the moral character the orator projects in order to persuade the audience to believe what he says; in this, Antony is far more successful, at least with his on-stage audience. But again we might be prompted to ask where does Shakespeare stand? In Skinner's chapter, we see how Brutus can be read as an exponent of the rhetoric of self-exculpation, a murderer seeking justification for his crime (in this case, the measured tread of his prose helps him convey that killing Caesar was an unavoidable necessity). But it's worth noting that Antony's speech turns him into a murderer too, when the mob, inflamed by his rhetoric, kill the harmless poet Cinna, mistaking him for one of the conspirators. Is Antony (and by implication *pathos*) then equated with the dangers of demagoguery? As we judge between the two styles and the two men, we find that, on the larger scale, *Julius Caesar* can be understood as an instance of Shakespeare turning into dramatic form the schoolroom exercise of arguing on both sides of a question [*in utramque partem*].

THE FIGURES IN PRACTICE

In *Troilus and Cressida* and *Julius Caesar*, we have seen two brief examples of the complexity of the figures in literary use. This volume makes the further contention that when Renaissance writers use a figure they are simultaneously thinking with the figure and about the figure. Practice engages with theory, and develops it. Two further examples may clarify this contention. In his poem 'No Platonic Love' (1651), William Cartwright offers us what is almost a textbook instance of the figure climax or gradatio, by which the end of one phrase is repeated as the beginning of the next, successively:

> I was that silly thing that once was wrought
> > To practise this thin love:
> I climbed from sex to soul, from soul to thought,
> > But thinking there to move,
> Headlong I rolled from thought to soul, and then
> From soul I lighted at the sex again.[20]

The figure is sometimes classified as a figure of speech, because it may appear to be a simple trick of repeating words. But in constructing a chain of consequences the figure does more than this, as many treatises recognise in classifying it as a figure of thought. The key is in the Greek and Latin terms, which refer to a ladder (Greek *climax*) or staircase (Latin *gradatio*).[21] The figure should describe an ascent and not merely a sequence, so that a

sentence 'seems to be climbing higher and higher at each step'.[22] Cartwright uses this ladder to think about another, the Platonic ladder of love. According to the Renaissance Platonists, love takes us up a ladder or set of stairs, 'which at the lowermost stepp have the shadowe of sensuall beawty, to the high mansion place where the heavenlye, amiable and right beawtye dwelleth, which lyeth hid in the innermost secretes of God'.[23] But when Cartwright tries to take that last step, from thought to God, he loses his footing and tumbles down: the Platonic search for enlightenment has become a game of snakes and ladders. The figure is brilliantly appropriate to the conceit, with rhetorical failure matching the persona's moral and spiritual failure. And the pairing serves to criticise both the Platonic model and the rhetorical figure – both can be accused of imposing patterns on human realities which seem easy but may prove impossible.

Another meta-rhetorical moment occurs in *1 Henry IV*, where Shakespeare again uses the figure of aposiopesis:

HOTSPUR   O, I could prophesy,
              But that the earthy and cold hand of death
              Lies on my tongue. No, Percy, thou art dust,
              And food for –
PRINCE   For worms, brave Percy.[24]

Here there is no suggestion that Hotspur is using the figure, either ingenuously or artfully. He is not intending to die to make a rhetorical point. Rather, his death in mid-speech represents Shakespeare's reflection on the abruption of a promising life by untimely death. Events are being read like texts. A figure is being interpreted figuratively and applied to the world beyond language.[25] This process, as many of the chapters in the volume attest, is widespread in Renaissance thinking.

What we have seen exemplified in practice in these two examples is given theoretical grounding in a rather surprising source, a school textbook on rhetoric, published in 1678, when early Renaissance optimism about the benign power of rhetoric had largely given way to scepticism or hostility. In the sixteenth century, Puttenham had figuratively testified to his belief in the power of the figures by personifying many of them, giving them agent names, for instance, the 'overreacher' and the 'loud liar' for hyperbole, 'the interpreter' for synonymia. Samuel Shaw's book, *Words Made Visible*, takes the prosopopoeia a stage further by bringing figures of speech on stage (like Vices and Virtues in old morality plays). His Prologue justifies this by positing a thorough-going homology between language and life: