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0521616948 - Shakespeare's Styles: Essays in Honour of Kenneth Muir

Edited by Philip Edwards, Inga-Stina Ewbank and G. K. Hunter

Excerpt

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Rhetoric and insincerity

L. C. KNIGHTS

- What, dost thou turn away, and hide thy face?
 75 I am no loathsome leper – look on me.
 What, art thou like the adder waxen deaf?
 Be poisonous too, and kill thy forlorn Queen.
 Is all thy comfort shut in Gloucester's tomb?
 Why, then Dame Margaret was ne'er thy joy.
- 80 Erect his statue and worship it,
 And make my image but an alehouse sign.
 Was I for this nigh wrecked upon the sea,
 And twice by awkward wind from England's bank
 Drove back again unto my native clime?
- 85 What boded this but well-forewarning wind
 Did seem to say 'Seek not a scorpion's nest,
 Nor set no footing on this unkind shore?'
 What did I then but cursed the gentle gusts,
 And he that loosed them forth their brazen caves;
- 90 And bid them blow towards England's blessed shore,
 Or turn our stern upon a dreadful rock?
 Yet Æolus would not be a murderer,
 But left that hateful office unto thee.
 The pretty-vaulting sea refused to drown me,
- 95 Knowing that thou wouldst have me drowned on shore
 With tears as salt as sea through thy unkindness;
 The splitting rocks cowered in the sinking sands
 And would not dash me with their ragged sides,
 Because thy flinty heart, more hard than they,
- 100 Might in thy palace perish Margaret. (2 *Henry VI*, III,ii,74–100)

In 1932 I wrote an essay for *The Criterion* on 'Education and the Drama in the Age of Shakespeare', in which I tried to show that far more of Shakespeare's audience were likely to have had some formal education than was then assumed, and that the methods of school and university education – reinforced by the many books on rhetoric and the arts of

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speech – were likely to have influenced the approach to dramatic poetry made by many of the original auditors. Today my essay seems to belong to the pre-history of modern Shakespearian scholarship. Rather large works by T. W. Baldwin, Sister Miriam Joseph, B. L. Joseph and Brian Vickers – to name no others – have established beyond doubt the importance of rhetoric in Elizabethan poetics; and it is commonplace that Shakespeare was well versed in, and made effective use of, the rhetorical training of the schools. His early plays make abundant, indeed ostentatious, use of the well-known tropes and figures. And although his vigorous self-delighting verbal imagination could leap from the serious to the satirical, as in *Love's Labour's Lost*, even the greatest poetry of his later plays can be shown to have a rhetorical base. As Vickers puts it: 'Shakespeare's poetic language was nourished on rhetoric.'¹

We should be grateful to the scholars who have established this, though, as they are themselves aware, the really interesting questions remain on our hands: one concerning the ways in which the greater poets went beyond their rhetorical base, another concerning the ways in which a knowledge of the common forms helped – or helps – a reader or auditor to appreciate the poetry more fully. As regards the first, Vickers, referring to some of his predecessors, speaks well of 'the development which they trace from a stiff, "external", use of rhetorical forms to a supple and flexible absorption of them', and he quotes an admirably succinct statement from Hardin Craig: 'In Shakespeare and his later contemporaries rhetoric is so naturally employed as almost to escape notice. There is no longer any creaking of the machine. . . "the art itself is nature"' (pp. 44–5). True: but there is still a tendency to obscure an important question. Rhetoric was primarily an art of persuasion: its teachers assumed that the speaker or writer already knew what he wanted to say: rhetoric helped him to present his 'material' clearly and effectively. Vickers speaks of 'a definite range of emotional and psychological effects' associated with the figures; and he refers to 'the classical–medieval–Renaissance concept of literary composition as being a deliberate process, involving a plan, a definite aim, and a distinct range of emotional effects on the audience' (pp. 12, 57). There is testimony from the poets of course that they sometimes find what they want to 'say' by concentrating on what they want to 'do', i.e. by concentrating, as craftsmen, on technique. But it is the emergent meaning, a living power that can't be caught in the conceptual net of 'a plan, a definite aim', that distinguishes the poets whom we continue to read for profit and delight. This may be obscured

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by too strenuous an advocacy of the – admitted – importance of rhetoric in the history of English poetry.²

As for the ways in which a knowledge of rhetoric helped the more learned auditors at, say, the Globe, to respond intelligently to the plays they saw, no one has yet improved on what Gladys Willcock and Alice Walker said in the Introduction to their edition of Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*:

Poets who took so much trouble to follow Art would not wish this Art to be ignored in the reading and would expect their listeners, and still more their readers, to respond with aural and mental agility. The 'schemes' are nothing but the organisation of patterning; this patterning contented the ear like rhyme and the identification of the patterns was a delight to the instructed mind. Such a response to poetry was never vague or half-awake.³

There are, however, other ways of approaching poetry – ways that distinguish between the dead and the living – that are neither vague nor half-awake. At all events, I don't think it is only my lack of a classical grounding, or a constitutional inability to remember the difference between *auxesis*, *epanalepsis* and *epizeuxis*, that makes me wonder whether – or to what extent – the modern reader needs to be familiar with the tropes and figures taught in Elizabethan school-rooms.

I intrude these doubts, though I think them important, merely in passing. What I mainly want to do is to suggest that one of the ways in which Shakespeare used his knowledge of rhetoric has been ignored. He discovered this addition to his dramatic resources early, and continued to use it, though with increasing subtlety. In the first tetralogy of English History Plays it is easy to pick out examples of very many 'figures' used in the way the schoolmasters said they should be used.

Dead life, blind sight, poor mortal living ghost,
Woe's scene, world's shame, grave's due by life usurped,
Brief abstract and record of tedious days,
Rest thy unrest on England's lawful earth,
Unlawfully made drunk with innocent blood.

This, from *Richard III*, IV,iv,26–30, is part of a long formal scene in which the Duchess of York, Queen Elizabeth and Queen Margaret lament their woes and accuse the monster, Richard: through emphatic rhetorical patterning Shakespeare leaves the spectators in no doubt of the shape of the plot or, for that matter, of the nature of his moral. Significantly, the episode ends, as Richard approaches, with the virtually technical, 'be copious in exclams'.⁴

This is rhetoric used 'straight'. But turn to the passage printed under

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my title and something different comes into view. Margaret is here protesting against the grief of Henry VI at the death of his uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, to the neglect of his 'forlorn Queen'. The passage I have extracted starts with three rhetorical questions (ll. 74–8), all neatly balanced. Lines 80–1 use identical structure to emphasise the contrast of 'his' and 'my'. In lines 82–91 there are three more rhetorical questions, with corresponding structure, or *parison* ('Was I for this. . .?'; 'What boded this. . .?'; 'What did I then. . .?'), thick with alliteration, initial or medial – 'Plosives for the wind, gutturals for the rocks, and sibilants for the winds and waves', as the New Arden editor says, but also for more complicated effects: all this concluding with the end-of-line contrasts, 'brazen caves', 'blessèd shore' and 'dreadful rock'. In lines 94–6 the emphatic repetition of 'sea. . .sea', 'drown. . .drowned', whether or not we label it *ploce*, adds to the obvious attempt at pathos. The last few lines quoted return to alliterative s's, with *paronomasia* in the clinching 'heart. . .hard', 'palace perish'. The speech goes on for another twenty lines or so, including a classical comparison of the approved sort, with Margaret–Dido 'witched' by tales of Henry–Aeneas told her in France by Suffolk–Ascanius. She breaks off with, 'Ay me, I can no more!', which is not surprising after nearly fifty lines, but the device was well known to the rhetoricians.

Margaret, then, is skilled in rhetoric. She is also insincere. How do we know? Well, in this case we have the plot to guide us. In *1 Henry VI* Suffolk had declared his love for Margaret, and on that account wooed her on his king's behalf, persuading Henry to break his previous engagement. In the present play Margaret is shown in collusion with Suffolk against Gloucester (I,iii; II,i), and they both agree with the Cardinal that he must die. At the end of the scene from which I have quoted, when Suffolk is banished, their parting is that of lovers. But even without these clues I think we should feel in Margaret's rhetoric what Coleridge, referring to Lady Macbeth's welcome of Duncan, called an 'insincere overmuch'. It is the rhetoric that virtually tells us how to take the speech.

This use of rhetoric in the early History Plays is, I think, exceptional.⁵ But in the light of the later plays it does seem an interesting anticipation of some of Shakespeare's ways of prompting the audience, without explicit comment, to see some kind of insincerity, whether in the sense of a deliberate attempt to deceive others, or in the sense of a half-conscious or unconscious attempt to deceive others, or oneself, about the true state of affairs. Kenneth Muir, at the end of an essay in which he makes some

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lively discriminations between Shakespeare's different uses of rhetoric, tells us that 'we should not fall into the error of contrasting rhetoric and sincerity'.⁶ Indeed we shouldn't; everything depends on particular use in a particular context. What, in a rhetorical speech, warns us to suspect 'insincerity'?

Vickers remarks that 'Spenser's creation of specious rhetoricians is one of his finest achievements, and demonstrates the truth of Aristotle's argument that all good things can be abused'; and in his fine account of 'the Persuasions of Despair' (*The Faerie Queene*, Bk I, Canto 9) he rightly observes that the effect of Despair's highly figured speech to Red-Cross Knight, like that of the deliberate sophistry put in the mouth of Faustus or Falstaff, 'relies on our logical sense being stronger than that [of the speaker]'. We recognise, though until Una intervenes Red Cross does not, 'the professionalism of the rhetoric coating these flimsy arguments' (pp. 157–60). This is well said; but it is not only, or always, false logic that puts us on our guard, or helps us to distinguish what Vickers calls 'white rhetoric' from black. It is often the mere presence of a particular kind of rhetoric – lying somewhere between its 'straight' use, as in the more formal speeches of *Richard III*, and the total absorption of the devices in a powerful imaginative current – that prompts us to ask the question about the speaker's 'sincerity' that needs to be asked.

Shakespeare, to be sure, sometimes alerts us to the speciousness of some kinds of formal word-use by other verbal means. Thus the Dauphin's love-rhetoric supporting the politic alliance with Blanch in *King John* is promptly deflated by the Bastard when he exaggerates it and leads it to a different conclusion (II, I, 496–509). In the opening scene of *Henry V* the tactic is less direct but no less effective. Canterbury gives a rhetorician's encomium of the reformed Henry, relying mainly on simple *anaphora* and *parison*, but with a marked shift of manner from that of the two bishops when, a moment before, they were really engaged: 'This [the bill against church revenues] would drink deep' – 'Twould drink the cup and all.' The laconic idiomatic expression is our cue for understanding much that follows: it's almost the equivalent of a wink. Such cues, however, are not always present, and we are left to our own intuitive – not uninformed – sense of tone and manner on which to base our judgements. The more interesting cases are of course the more difficult ones, where we are left in more doubt of dramatic function than in, say, Antony's funeral oration in *Julius Caesar*.

An example is the Duke's long speech to Claudio – unfortunately too

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long to quote in full – at the beginning of the third act of *Measure for Measure*.

Be absolute for death; either death or life
 Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life.
 If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing
 That none but fools would keep.

The speech is a formal ‘persuasion’ – ‘Reason thus with life’ – and T. W. Baldwin points out that Shakespeare faithfully follows the account in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* of how to organise one’s arguments – *propositio, ratio, rationis confirmatio. . . complexio*.⁷ The speech is indeed rhetorically effective, but the ‘confirmations’ deserve rather more than a label. They are in fact an odd mixture of truths of very different full-truth status: some are irrelevant, some call out for a complementary ‘but’, one (about the expectant heirs) takes a limited class for the whole; there is also some quibbling and straight sophistry. Of course the Duke is using his argument to bring Claudio to a more resolved state of mind; and even out of context his speech is the powerful expression of an attitude to life that we need to assimilate, one indeed that in some moods we may find especially attractive, as it seems to have been to Eliot when he wrote ‘Gerontion’. My point is that although rhetorical analysis does nothing to help us towards the necessary discriminations, the accomplished rhetoric *is* a way of suggesting that we taste rather carefully before we swallow the whole. It may not be unreasonable to suspect a tinge of dry irony in Claudio’s ‘I humbly thank you. / To sue to live, I find I seek to die.’ At all events both speech and speaker demand something less than full assent, even before we come to Claudio’s tremendous assertion of the instinctive recoil from death, ‘Ay, but to die, and go we know not where. . .’.

T. W. Baldwin, after instancing this speech, follows with other examples that emphasise the importance of *confirmatio* (including *The Winter’s Tale*, II,i,172ff.: by this time we know what to think of Leontes’s logic), and then notes ‘one other instance where Shakespeare has pointed the technicalities of this type of speech’, namely Gaunt’s attempt to console his son who is going into banishment (*Richard II*, I,iii,275ff.). Sister Miriam Joseph adduces the same speeches of Duke Vincentio and Gaunt as ‘examples of sustained and closely knit syllogistic reasoning’, and adds to them Pandulph’s lengthy explanation of why it would be right for the King of France to break his oath to King John (*King John*, III,i,263ff.).⁸ Baldwin and Sister Miriam Joseph are of course right in what they say, but what they do not say is equally important; for the fact remains that

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the appeal to, or the use of, formal rhetorical procedures is often – as I think it is in all these instances – the dramatist's tacit admonition to the audience that the persuasions are not, and are not intended by him to be, fully persuasive.

Such considerations could of course be pursued further, not only by collecting more examples. In some of his soliloquies Hamlet lapses into rhetoric (the phrase feels right when we contrast his other modes of utterance) when he tries only too hard to persuade himself of the appropriateness of a particular attitude. We are not simply moved to sympathetic participation by his rhetorical *pathos*: the dramatist has more subtle means at his disposal than the rhetorician. And there are characters whose habitual mode of speech we properly label rhetorical, whether or not, in defining it, we need the help of any *ars dicendi*. All dramatic poetry is a heightening of ordinary speech; but the modes I am referring to are heightened in relation to norms and expectations established within the play itself. Tackling big subjects with unseemly brevity, I would say that the characteristic speech of both Richard II and Othello, though in very different ways, is, for much of the time, rhetorical in this more general sense. It is framed, whether the speaker is supposed to know it or not, to express and seek endorsement for a particular – and vulnerable – posture. But to say that both Richard and Othello deceive themselves, and that, as in the more easily definable examples I have given, one of the ways in which we are made aware of this is the use of a particular mode of utterance invented for them by the dramatist – to say this is not to detract from the genuine pathos, the genuine tragedy: it is simply that a complex dramatic art demands from the audience a complex response. In 'Shakespeare and the Limits of Language' Anne Barton speaks of aspects of Shakespeare's later style that anticipate so much post-Chekhov drama: 'Words define the gap between individuals; they do not bridge it.'⁹ This fine essay has different concerns from those I have pursued here, but the sentence I have extracted is pertinent. Sometimes the more rhetorically heightened the words, the greater the gap.

To sum up. We may agree that Shakespeare's poetry was 'nourished on rhetoric', provided we remember that, even more importantly, it was nourished by the language of common life. Although Shakespeare sometimes made fun of his rhetorical training he certainly used it, at first in rather obvious ways, then with increasing skill and subtlety. But through his early perception that rhetorical devices could be used not only to express but to disguise, to manipulate, or to 'put across' an attitude not

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wholly sincere, he learnt yet another way of alerting his audience to the importance of the unspoken. To become aware of this is to get some further insights into the infinitely varied resources of his art.

NOTES

- 1 *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* (London, 1970), p. 163.
- 2 The distinction between what a poet 'wants to say' and what he 'wants to do' is Valéry's ('Au sujet du *Cimetière Marin*'). I have quoted other remarks by poets to similar effect in 'Poetry as Discovery' (in *Reality and Creative Vision in German Lyrical Poetry*, ed. A. Closs (London, 1963)), and in my essay on Ben Jonson's poetry in *Explorations 3* (London, 1976).
- 3 Cambridge, 1936, p. lxxvi.
- 4 'Copious', a familiar term for cultivated abundance of words and examples; *exclamatio*, 'the figure which expresses grief or indignation by means of an address to some man or city or place or object' (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, IV, xv, quoted by Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric*, p. 32).
- 5 In the second scene of *Richard III*, however, there is an interesting example of Shakespeare's feeling his way towards the expression of psychological truth by comparable means. When Lady Anne laments over the coffin of Henry VI she speaks in the approved rhetorical fashion: 'Cursèd be the hand that made these fatal holes! / Cursèd the heart that had the heart to do it!', etc. Richard's increasing influence over her is shown when the two are made to share between them various rhetorical figures (1,ii,68ff.), and the implausibility is to some extent lessened: when Anne engages in word-games with Richard she is lost.
- 6 Kenneth Muir, 'Shakespeare and Rhetoric', *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch*, 90 (1952), p. 68.
- 7 *William Shakspeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols (Urbana, 1944), vol. II, pp. 84ff.
- 8 *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (New York, 1947), pp. 182ff.
- 9 *Shakespeare Survey 24* (1971), pp. 19-30.

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Some aspects of style in the *Henry VI* plays

WOLFGANG CLEMEN

Duchess. Ah, Gloucester, teach me to forget myself!
For whilst I think I am thy married wife
And thou a prince, Protector of this land,
30 Methinks I should not thus be led along,
Mailed up in shame, with papers on my back,
And followed with a rabble that rejoice
To see my tears and hear my deep-fet groans.
The ruthless flint doth cut my tender feet,
35 And when I start, the envious people laugh
And bid me be advised how I tread.
Ah, Humphrey, can I bear this shameful yoke?
Trowest thou that e'er I'll look upon the world
Or count them happy that enjoy the sun?
40 No; dark shall be my light and night my day;
To think upon my pomp shall be my hell.
Sometime I'll say I am Duke Humphrey's wife,
And he a prince, and ruler of the land;
Yet so he ruled, and such a prince he was,
45 As he stood by whilst I, his forlorn duchess,
Was made a wonder and a pointing-stock
To every idle rascal follower.
But be thou mild, and blush not at my shame,
Nor stir at nothing till the axe of death
50 Hang over thee, as sure it shortly will.
For Suffolk – he that can do all in all
With her that hateth thee and hates us all –
And York, and impious Beaufort, that false priest,
Have all limed bushes to betray thy wings,
55 And, fly thou how thou canst, they'll tangle thee.
But fear not thou until thy foot be snared,
Nor never seek prevention of thy foes.
(2 *Henry VI*, 11, iv, 27–57)

Led along in shame as a prisoner, barefoot 'in a white sheet, and a taper

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burning in her hand' (as the stage-direction indicates), the Duchess of Gloucester breaks out into this speech while Gloucester and his men, having waited for her arrival in the street, stand by. The scene terminates the personal tragedy of the Duchess, who has been convicted of treason, thereby accelerating Duke Humphrey's fall. The speech has been described as one of the many set speeches in the *Henry VI* plays which carry on the tradition of Senecan declamation, and it has been classified as a 'lamentation'.¹ But is it a typical lamentation, is it a set speech proper? Perusing these plays we notice that there is no dividing line between 'set speeches' and those lengthy speeches which arise out of various occasions but do not conform to type. Our text is an example of the way in which Shakespeare the dramatist, while carrying on the Senecan tradition of long speeches, links them up with the action, with stage-business and setting. Instead of giving us the conventional appurtenances of the lament which had been established as a well-defined genre in pre-Shakespearean tragedy,² Shakespeare 'concretises' and localises the lament. Rather than expressing her grief by means of abstract formulae, apostrophes, hyperboles and rhetorical questions, the Duchess conveys to us her woeful state by describing the scene: her own physical appearance, the painful walking with bare feet over 'the ruthless flint', the humiliation of being stared at and ridiculed by 'a rabble that rejoice to see my tears and hear my deep-fet groans'. This evocation of the outward scene imparts to reader or audience a more poignant impression of suffering than the mere rhetorical lament could have done, although the Duchess, to be sure, does not reveal what is going on within her, but looks upon this scene, in which she figures as chief protagonist, from outside. Shakespeare uses the speech to dramatise the whole scene, for the mocking remarks made by the rabble suggest something like a dialogue. The balanced metrical structure adds to the impression of objectivity (rather than subjective expression of an inner state of mind) conveyed by the first part of the speech.

We should also note that Shakespeare makes this speech grow out of the dramatic action preceding it. The scene described by the Duchess is twice prepared for, significant details being suggested by the same words ('the flinty streets', l. 8; 'flint', l. 34; 'the abject people gazing on thy face', ll. 11, 20). The first line of the speech still carries on the dialogue with Gloucester, taking up in scorn his phrase 'forget this grief'.

It is only after this 'spectacle' has been established in our minds – an early example of Shakespeare's 'word-scenery'³ – that Shakespeare has