

Santos Antonio López
(University of Salamanca, Spain)
Carbajosa Natalia
(University of Cartagena, Spain)

Henry V: Hyperbole as an alienation-effect technique

If we start from the assumption that art's issue is the sum of all the possible discourse objects, we cannot approach the text merely as an idea; on the other hand, applying the rhetorical technique of both the handling of ideas (*res*) and its literary formulation (*verba*) turns essential. Thus, the relation between the discourse object and the addressee should be analysed. We must start, therefore, considering the role the hearer assumes, either as the decision referee or as a passive spectator simply enjoying the discourse aesthetics.

In regard to *Henry V*, it seems obvious that Shakespeare is seeking for his contemporaries' complicity, even compelling them to establish the comparison with situations from their age. This is why he doesn't hang about past-belonging events which would involve, following the Aristotelian model, a judge's role on the spectator's side; rather, he projects the discourse on to the future, obliging him or her to take political decisions which would affect solutions-to-be.

Acknowledging that *Henry V* is simply an epic canto of national glories or, on the contrary, a direct criticism of the narrated events would involve admitting that the discourse object were referring to a *certum* (Quint. 3,4,8;3,7,3) instead of a *dubium*. As a result, the author will try to gain the spectators to his cause, attempting to convince them by means of any of the different persuasion degrees: teaching, delighting or

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moving. In his case, his fundamental strategies have to do with adequate rhetorical resources.

It must be taken into account that the *defensibility* level of the cause is not high, as what we find is an obscure cause that, besides, clashes with the authority established values. Hence, the author will have to make use of rhetorical practices available in order to simplify such a complex issue, even if paradoxical concepts could be at stake.

In order to achieve this simplification and provoke the *pathos* in a more efficient way, several means can be used, among which rhetorics highlights those defined as resources of thought; from these, we can single out *amplificatio*, which affects not only *inventio* or, in other words, the productive-creative process, but also *elocutio*, or the transfer of ideas to language.

We mentioned above that the intention of *Henry V's* author was to persuade, as he is not dealing with a *certum* but with a *dubium*. This does not depend on the content's answering to real or invented events. The fact of working with real events does not guarantee a more convincing result. It will all depend on the way of expressing it through the adequate artistic resources of persuasion, mostly needed when the content is only partially true. We can speak, in this case, of a credible plot, not necessarily real or true. The narration, therefore, should try to guide us towards persuasion via resources which would not resemble such. An example may be found on the evoking of past events, displayed as if they were taking place before the public's sight.

Thus, Shakespeare starts from the amplification of a historical event, which the spectator can compare with the present and link it with the epideictic genre. The character will become the most 'virtuous' hero, thanks to the accumulation of eulogistic terms and unthinkable feats. This amplification of not absolutely true events is turned into an intellectual phenomenon whose aim is credibility, whereas amplification applied to real events wouldn't need to be proved. That is the difference between verisimilitude and truth.

In order to achieve the attempted aim of persuasion, the discourse disposition will be fundamental: it will have to leave the natural order of events and submit to an artificial order organised by the author, where the omissions of certain facts or the special relevance of others, according to narrative needs, acquire a specific value. Above all, though, linguistic clothing, i.e. the *ornatus* in which the discourse is wrapped, will be essential.

Henry V would no doubt allow a voluminous study of countless literary tropes, which could vary the concrete meanings of the text. But we have considered two 'referential' figures especially relevant: hyperbole and irony (Gans 1975: 24). Through the use of these kind of tropes the author may be able to add a new meaning to his discourse, which the hearer will identify by the sentence context or the situation. It seems evident that its use introduces an enigmatic aspect in the text, but at the same time it implies that the author acknowledges a certain degree of maturity in the public, as well as the ability to decide what they are seeing onstage.

From these two figures, although irony (a figure "d'expression par opposition") appears in *Henry V*, it is not easy to use, if we bear in mind the play's topic and the representational context. The author must avoid the censorship's action and irony is clearly a weapon of partiality, as it does not mean to persuade, but to ridicule. That, in such times, could turn out to be risky.

To persuade the spectator (to reach *significatio*), the use of hyperbole (figure "d'expression par réflexion") is preferred: it does not entail a sense change or a semantic opposition, but just a break of logic, a formal opposition between two reading layers. Hyperbole assumes an onomatological excess; it belongs to the ornamental field of discourse; it is a form of amplification.

Taking, therefore, a real event, through the use of historical facts and names, Shakespeare re-enacts, amplifying it, an unreal though credible situation, where he enjoys a wider freedom, both in the situation manipulation and the use of the linguistic clothing. In this sense, the use of hyperbole perfectly suits his objectives. Obligated by historical and ideological

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circumstances, Shakespeare doesn't want to praise, but he cannot criticise openly either. So, a rhetorical figure close to a panegyric, though different from it, is the best option.

There may have been the closeness between these two techniques what has induced many to regard *Henry V* as a canto of monarchy and nationalism. But a more attentive look can offer different perspectives. A panegyric belongs to the 'epideictic' type of discourse, destined to praise or to condemn. It is based on real facts and is usually applied to rulers or prominent soldiers. The writer builds an encomiastic biography of the character around his external circumstances, his physical attributes or his character's qualities. It is an external operation.

However, Shakespeare builds his character in a different way. Henry V is a witty, scandalous, irreverent and sometimes even amoral character. His personality comes from within, it is not the product of any chronicler's story, not even the Chorus's. Although his origin is historical, the character is not. He rather seems an excessive, impossible figure, especially if we analyse all his career, from his youth between the court and the tavern, until his death, after his apparently glorious triumph over France. While the play goes forward, the king seems to act between a triumphant rhetoric and a hidden cynicism, as if inviting the spectator not to believe all what is narrated, to decode some purposefully hidden meaning or to reach the truth through a lie. It is not that hyperbole's intention be to lead us into a lie, but its final aim is the search for a kind of truth.

Probably because of this, Shakespeare insists on depicting Henry V like the ideal action man, exaggeratedly fair and unselfishly dedicated to his country's service. But he deliberately omits those historical details which could cast a doubt on the king's epic figure, such as the lollards' conflict, Sir John Oldcastle's execution or the presence of the Archbishop of Bourges in Winchester to offer Katharine's hand. Henry's dramatic personality is built, more than in the English history, in the military victories of biblical heroes, like Moses or David, or in Alexander the Great's conquests. In several passages,

Henry V resembles a political hagiography, if we focus on the abundant “rhetoric of deification” spread all over the text. In this sense, several expressions referred to the king, singled out at random, are significant, as they suggest an undoubted relation with the heroic-religious myth and, concretely, with the holy war, offering an image of faithful server of the divinity:

“The mirror of all Christian kings” (Prol. Act II),
“Praise and glory on his head!” (Prol. Act IV),
“In thunder and in earthquake, like a Jove” (II, 4, 100),
“God and his angels guard your sacred throne
And make you long become it!” (I, 2),
“God for Harry, England and Saint George!” (III,1).

The use of hyperbole, however, offers the spectator the opportunity to situate the king and his actions in its real dimension, revealing the monarch’s Machiavellian paradox: there is a reality of hidden interests behind an appearance of generosity. The Elizabethan author didn’t enjoy the freedom to present war as a cruel slaughter; on the contrary, he had to do it as an act of glory or heroism –as an bloodless story-, so as to avoid the puritan censors’ hand as well as guarantee, at the same time, commercial success. In consequence, if he wanted to introduce a critical note in his depiction, he was obliged to look for oblique literary strategies which could allow him to explore the real causes and effects of that massacre. Needless to say, though, that the spectators, also encouraged by the constant exhortations from the Chorus to use their intelligence, would perceive the oblique hints about the war’s disaster with clarity, alert as they were in those years about the massive sending of soldiers to foreign wars (Jorgensen 1956: 130)¹.

The most conspicuous examples, in the play, where hyperbole is used in its amplified variation, can be classified into six main scenes; in the extracts given, this figure enables to exaggerate the facts to the extent of creating a reality which

¹ Between 1596 and 1599, about 30.000 soldiers are estimated to have left England on their way to different wars.

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suits the speaker's intentions. The resulting chart would be displayed as follows:

<u>Addresser</u>	<u>Addressee</u>	<u>Sample scene</u>	<u>Message conveyed</u>
Chorus	The public	I, prologue 1-34	1. Multiply our words with your imagination 2. Read a tale of sexual violence
Bishops Canterbury and Ely	Direct: themselves Indirect: the public ²	I, 1 22-66	1. The account of the king's qualities. 2. Justifications for the war.
Henry V	His troops	III, 1, 1-34	Get ready for the battle.
Henry V	The inhabitants of Harfleur	III, 4, 1-44	Either surrender, or suffer the consequences.
Henry V	Westmoreland	IV, 3 18-67	Be optimistic: we, the British troops, will be remembered by this victory.
Henry V	God	IV 3, 108-28	Justification: we won because God was on our side.

At first sight, we can observe that most of the speech acts shown in the chart entail a persuasive function (orders, suggestions, indications, requests), be it to establish a theatrical/semiotic relation between scenery and public (Chorus), harangue the troops, threaten the French or combat scepticism in Westmoreland. Moreover, it seems obvious that the king commands this language of persuasion, appearing by far as the most active speaker. It is only logical, therefore, that imperatives constitute a widely preferred verbal form: *suppose, piece out, make, think, carry, admit* (Chorus to public, I, prologue); *imitate, stiffen, disguise, led, set* (Henry to his troops, III, 1, 1-34); *take pity, look to see* (Henry to Harfleur, III, 4, 1-44). Nevertheless,

² All scenes, obviously, are both addressed to the characters in the scene and the public or reader, as a logical consequence of the multiple communicative system established in the theatre (*vid.* Carbajosa 2003). However, in some cases, as the one signalled, this double communicative intention is especially notorious for informative reasons (the public has to be aware of the facts previous to the action itself).

the solemn and intimidating tone that such verbs acquire in their hyperbolic context is not only conferred by the authority of the speaker, but also by the powerful, imaginative associations he is able to rouse in his audience.

Thus, the apparently simple invitation of the Chorus for the spectators to multiply the effect of words onstage with the help of their minds, turns out to be a metaphor of the sexual violence implicit in any warlike action. Terms related to representation like “cockpit” and “wooden O” make reference to male and female genital organs respectively, and “printing hoofs in the receiving earth” evokes the sexual act (De la Concha *et al.* 2002: 342). Once this ambivalent semantic field is settled, however indirectly, Henry can freely exert verbally all the sexual violence possible, and he does it by enhancing such violence in an intense “picture with words” or iconic-linguistic rendering³. His speech sounds now triumphant, ruthless, profoundly hostile. Persuasion comes by appeal to the imagination (*imitate the action of the tiger, look to see*) or phonetic strategies like alliteration (*blind and bloody*) and onomatopoeia (*shrill-shrieking*):

“But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger:
Stiffen the sinews, conjure up blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage”.
(Henry to his troops, III, 1, 5-8)

“What is’t to me, when you yourselves are cause,
If your pure maidens fall into the hand
Of hot and forcing violation?
(...)
If not, why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards
And their most reverend heads dash’d to the walls...”
(Henry to Harfleur, III,4, 19-37)

³ For more information about this concept, see Carbajosa’s article, in the same journal (vol. 5), “Renaissance representational aesthetics and the verbal icon: an example from Shakespeare”, pages 74-85.

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Aware of her own part in this account of violence which, we insist, is focused above all on sexual abuse, Katherine, the French princess, prepares her role as a war loot, i.e., as the future wife of Henry V. In act III, scene 5, she asks her maiden to teach her the English words for parts of the body (*hand, finger, nail, elbow*), pointing at them in her own person. This improvised anatomy lesson, deictically imparted, exhibits her feminine body as a sexual object. Furthermore: the princess, with her equivocal pronunciation, transforms her dutiful learning into an obscene exercise. There is not open hyperbole here; yet, the connections with that veiled language inaugurated in the Chorus's prologue are evident.

Without leaving the domain of enhanced imagination, another rhetorical exercise serves the king's purposes: the conversational strategy of positive politeness (Brown and Gilman 1989). Its use is partly exploited in Henry's harangue to his troops but especially in his reassuring of the doubtful Westmoreland in IV, 3, 18-67. Among the substrategies he employs, we can quote the following: exaggerate sympathy and approval (*My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin*); use an inclusive form to include both speaker and hearer in the activity (*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers*). As a result, Henry becomes temporarily a kind of prophet for future glory (*This story shall the good man teach his son*), continuing with his euphoric style and regardless of whatever negative consequences his action may generate.

In contrast with the extracts just analyzed, the scenes in which the bishops exchange their points of view and Henry addresses to God after the battle, adopt an indulging, flattering tone, where the hyperbolic stress is equally detected. Incongruity emerges from the dubious performance of the conversational maxim of quality (Grice 1985), which presupposes, for an effective communication, sincerity on the part of the utterers. In these cases, readers and spectators have ample scope to doubt from the speakers' real intentions: they have seen the bishops intriguing, the king behaving not so

piously. The force of exaggeration is underlined by cynicism: praise of the king, in Canterbury's words, is distrusted both for the human worth of the speaker and his consideration of what is good; Henry's religious feeling is suspected for his quick attribution of the victory to God, as he earlier attributed the predicted disaster over Harfleur on its own inhabitants:

"Cant. Hear him but reason in divinity,
And all-admiring with an inward wish
You would desire the king were made a prelate:
Hear him debate of commonwealth affairs,
You would say it hath been all in his study:
List his discourse of war, and you shall hear
A fearful battle render'd you in music".
(I, 1, 38-44)

"King Henry. O God, thy arm was here;
And not to us, but to thy arm alone,
Ascribe we all!"

(IV, 3, 108-110)

Working as a counterbalance, in another scene which we have divided into two, appeals to hyperbolic speech are almost completely abandoned and substituted by a plainer approach to events, all the more significant due to its scarce presence in other parts of the play. The scene alluded is the following:

<u>Addresser</u>	<u>Addressee</u>	<u>Sample scene</u>	<u>Message conveyed</u>
Henry V and his soldiers	Themselves	IV,1, 85-133	1. From disguised Henry: trust your king, he is a man like you. 2. From the soldiers: He is not like us, we have nothing to do with his war.
Henry V	Himself (soliloquy)	VI, 1,209-256	The conflict between king (public) and man (private).

Curiously enough, Henry appears disguised as a soldier: he mixes with the troops to know what they really think. Here is a theatrical strategy clearly addressed to the public; soliloquy is another. In the first part, persuasion is again exerted from

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positive politeness (the king introduces himself as *a friend*). However, the confusion his approach to the “real world” provokes between public and private realms, king and man, leaves no room for further hyperbolic, deceiving discourse. Consequently, in the soliloquy, the form of speech most prone to sincerity, this type of rhetoric is finally abandoned: “What infinite heart’s easy must kings neglect / That private men enjoy? / And what have the kings that privates have not too / Save ceremony, idle ceremony?...” The relevance of these two extracts is fully grasped when we realise that their origin is not historical, and may only be attributed to Shakespeare’s invention.

As a conclusion, we can remember Fontanier’s definition of hyperbole, which presupposes the good intention of the speaker on using such figure; according to this, things are presented far over or below what they really are, not with the purpose of deceiving, but in order to reach truth and fix, through hyperbolic lack of credibility, what really must be believed (1977: 123). In *Henry V*, things are presented always far over what they really are, thereby establishing a communicative context which requires the intervention of the audience to be correctly interpreted. Let’s not forget, though, that at the same time this chronicle recreates some vital events within the history of the British Isles, and that Shakespeare’s own version of the facts would be subjected to censorship. If hyperbole offers a way of discovering the truth in an indirect way, it doesn’t allow a definite, unambiguous reading, as the constant confrontation between pro- and anti-war re-enactments of the play suggest⁴.

We can only trust the events happened after the reign of Henry V and anticipated at the end of this work, which tell us of adverse times to come for England⁵, as well as the verisimilitude of Shakespeare’s Henry speaking his mind when

⁴ “Is this a play requiring archaeological research or updating? Is this a play about, or against, war? Is this a realist depiction, or a stylised pageant? Is condemnatory?” Introduction to the 2002 Cambridge edition of the play, page 79.

⁵ “The battle at Harfleur had proved to be a defeat for the French, but also a catastrophe for the English. Decimated from a third of his men, Henry was facing a scenario of little hopes of victory”. Vaz Tavares 2003, page 55.

he is not obliged to boast, to amplify, to use misleading oratory. In other words, when he is allowed to face the immense gap between his public and private wishes.

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