II. Мова і культура

Natalia Carbajosa Palmero
(Spain, University of Cartagena)

Words and Things, or the Art of Rhetoric: An Approach to Renaissance attitudes to Language From Shakespeare's Comedies

To see the philosophical and linguistic relation between Shakespeare's own achievements and the Renaissance environment he was submerged in may add some nuances to our end-of-twentieth century approach to his texts. Starting from the comedies, I would like to trace the link between these two points, focusing above all in two relevant issues in Renaissance linguistic theory: the relation between words and things, and the uses of rhetoric.

I. Words and Things

Renaissance recovers the taste for a classical genre: the dialogue. Following Plato's method of questions and answers, dialogues abound in relation to any possible issues, such as politics, philosophy, religion. We find an exceptional example in *Il Cortegiano*, which was likely to be the most popular text in its time. Dialogic form allows its participants to state opposing ideas, to argue from different points of view, in short, to expand the range of possibilities concerning opinion and plurality. According to Cox, this attitude embodies the necessity to introduce a new definition of language from a communicative perspective, understood as the real issue and problem of dialogues:

> "It seems reasonable to assume that, when any age adopts on a wide scale a form which so explicitly 'stages' the act of communication, it is because the act has, for some reason, come to be perceived as problematic".[1]

This growing interest for language as a communicative tool is also found in teaching. In linguistic terms it could be affirmed that humanistic instruction, particularly in England, tends to a pragmatic definition of language, rather than a semiologic one (in the

Saussurean sense); that is, emphasis is placed on the meaning of an expression in its context, bearing in mind the speaker's intention, to the detriment of its referential meaning:

> "The definitions taught in school and adapted by the English humanists emphasize language as human communication over language as an abstract system of symbols: significance does not inhere in words, but arises from the interaction of speaker and listener as they order and understand the words".[2]

Such a modern attitude towards language is transferred, as could be expected, to theatre. Thanks to its privileged communicative situation (Elizabethan theatre rests mainly upon dialogue) and the double communicative axis that is established (among the characters themselves and from the characters to the public), the stage turns out to be the place where the dangers of a defective interaction are exposed more convincingly, and where language in use is the real highlight of the action, as well as the greatest catalyst of the public's reactions:

> "One would regard a play not as an artifact made from words, with an aesthetic value depending merely on the verbal construct, but as a communication through words, with aesthetic value depending on the experience that words engender in the audience".[3]

The new definition of language obeys, in its turn, a new relationship between words (signifiers) and the things pointed by them (referents). When Shakespeare is writing at the height of his fame, different conceptions of such relationship coexist in Elizabethan England. On one hand, we are witness to the survival of the medieval belief, platonic in its essence, although shifted by the Christian faith, that language is a reflection of the divine, therefore making the relation between *res et verba* a motivated, unalterable one ("nomina sint numina"). On the other hand, humanism, with its secular creed, rejects the divine origin of language, and considers it as man's creation, an artificial link with his universe. The relation between words and things, in this case, is an arbitrary one, therefore subjected to change. Seventeenth century, which shares with the Renaissance the concept of sign arbitrariness, introduces, however, unprecedented nuances of skepticism: if a unique, irreplaceable word for each thing does not exist, then language cannot

communicate, but rather, mislead. It is an instrument of deceit and manipulation.

Shakespeare does not show preference for any of these attitudes towards language. Certainly, he makes ample use of the comic possibilities that characters with a blind faith in signifiers offer, as well as of the confusions provoked by polysemia when combined with phonetic effects, to the public's rejoicing. He also explores the dark side of those characters that manipulate language with perverse aims, thus staging the dangers involved in the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign when it is not recognized as such (the most famous case, no doubt, is Othello's, incapable of reading at the bottom of Iago's words). However, the predominant attitude in the comedies is the constant exploration of language at the plot's service: its extraordinary adaptability, the profusion of styles, the faithful reflection of multiple frames of mind, as well as the experiments that drive the expression up to the boundaries of its possibilities, trespass all attempts of concretion in regard to an orderly and constant relation between words and things.

Res et verba maladjustment used for comic aims is noticed, for instance, in the characters surrounding the eccentric Don Adriano de Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost*, where they acknowledge the lack of matter in his high-sounding discourse: "He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument" (V, 1, 16-17). Feste, in *Twelfth Night*, also points out the arbitrariness of words, even when they are necessary to communicate: "Troth, sir, I can yield you none without words, and words are grown so false I am loath to prove reason with them". (III, 1, 26-28). The deceiving power of words is openly signaled by Duke Frederik in *As You Like It*: "Thus do all traitors / If their purgation did consist in words, / They are as innocent as grace itself". (I, 3, 48-50). In similar situations, however, we can find examples of a closer relationship between words and things, as in the case with the motivated name-changes (Celia, in *As You Like It*, decides to call herself "Aliena" once she has left her own environment), or with the enchanting power of discourse as we observe it, for example, in the shepherdess Phebe falling in love with Rosalind, also in *As You Like It*:

> "'Tis but a peevish boy –yet he talks well-
> But what care I for words? Yet words do well

When he that speaks them pleases those that hear". (III, V, 110-112)

A paradigmatic case of the almost magical relationship that is sometimes established between discourse and reality is offered by Queen Titania in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, where she creates and evokes, with every intervention, a natural world only existing through her words:

"So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle
Gently entwist; the female ivy so
Enrings the barky fingers of the elm". (IV, 1, 41-43)

Thus, Shakespeare's comic universe offers us examples of all nature, precisely thanks to the open debate surrounding the relationship between discourse and reality in his own time.

Although Renaissance attitude towards language, certainly based on the importance of communication and sign arbitrariness, resembles to a great extent the prevailing attitude in many linguistic sectors of our end of the twentieth century, there is a basic difference that links us to Baroque skepticism rather than to Renaissance optimism. For Renaissance theoreticians, the acknowledgement of the absolute separation between signifiers and referents does not involve an existential conflict. Detached from divine designs, words become an instrument of pleasure and play at man's disposal, and poetic language, external to reality, is projected upon it to produce aesthetic effects that the spectator will be able to appreciate and celebrate. This means that both poets and readers are fully aware of the "gap between the thought or the *res* and the words on the page".[4] Such an unavoidable gap, besides, defines the nature of art in itself; terms like aesthetics, witticism, ornament, pleasure and play substitute for others like didacticism or the search for immanent truths:

"art lies not in the matter as such, but in the language (...) Thus ornament, which by us may be redeemed irrelevant if not intrusive, is essential to the Elizabethan, not as the expression of meaning but as the pleasure of art".[5]

II. The Art of Rhetoric

The importance of ornament in art, not as an external device but as a fundamental element of the aesthetic experience, leads us directly to the consideration of the discipline that answers to this

necessity of constant embellishment of the linguistic expression: rhetoric. Recovered, once more, from antiquity, and defined like the art of persuasion, its worth in the Renaissance connects us again with pragmatics, due to the emphasis with which the perlocutive effects of its use are valued, and even further, the capacity to "do" things with words that is attributed to it:

> "[Rhetoric is] a science (or art or *techne*) of persuasion, an art, that is, of public activity, a science of *doing* rather than knowing, a means to power over others, a process whose radical fulfilment lay in victory rather than understanding".[6]

Unlike its political use in antiquity, rhetoric is transferred, in the Renaissance, from the public forum and the senate to the grammar schools, where it shares popularity with other subjects that, transcending the teaching boundaries, become indispensable elements in literature and society. It is the time when the five elements it consists of (*inventio, dispositio, memoria, elocutio, pronunciatio*) follow different paths, being the last two left to the domain of rhetoric and discourse. The fact that rhetoric was taught in relatively accessible schools meant that any reader or spectator with a basic education could recognize its mechanisms in poetry or drama, and elicit the corresponding pleasure. As it could be no other way, rhetoric matches well with the theatrical view of life in the Renaissance context:

> "The rhetorical view of life, then, begins with the centrality of language. It conceives reality as fundamentally dramatic, man as fundamentally a role player".[7]

The main feature of rhetoric as it is conceived in this moment is the technique of building arguments for and against the same issue. Following the classical model, the *ethos* does not depend on the truth bearer, but on the speaker who can talk to the public in a convincing way. For theatrical effects, and more concretely in Shakespeare's comedies, this device lets him show the different faces of reality from contrary sides. A brilliant example can be found in Benedick's speech in *Much Ado About Nothing*, where he elaborates a series of arguments for the independence of the single man, orderly exposed against his friend Claudio's imminent wedding:

> "I have known when there was no music with him but the drum and the fife, and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe. I have known when he would have walked ten mile afoot to see a good armour, and now he will lie ten nights away carving the fashion of a new doublet". (II, 3, 12-18)

Confronting this perfectly built speech in regard to its *dispositio* (parallel arguments) and the elaboration of *topoi* (the brave, virile soldier against the effeminate, distracter lover), and without leaving the same scene, Benedick refutes all that by means of the same argumentative technique, after learning that Beatrice is in love with him:

> "I have railed so long against marriage: but doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age. (...) No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I would live till I were married". (228-235)

On this occasion, starting from rhetorical questions and equally trite arguments ("the world must be peopled"), or *reductio ad absurdum* ("When I said..."), Benedick demolishes the wall of reasons *against* the thesis he now declares himself *in favour of.*

In other occasions, as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, we observe the same device embodied in two different characters holding opposing opinions. Proteus and Valentine, the two good friends, show at the beginning of the play very different attitudes towards love and the cleverness (or the lack of it) accompanying the lover:

> "Val. Love is your master, for he masters you;
> And he that is so yoked by a fool
> Methinks should not be chronicled for wise.
> Pro. Yet writers say: as in the sweetest bud
> The eating canker dwells, so eating Love
> Inhabits in the finest wits of all". (I, 1, 39-44)

Although this dialectical example finishes in a draw, the play's plot will refute the position defended by both, as Valentine, the sceptical one, will fall in love desperately, and Proteus, the faithful lover, will leave his lover for somebody else.

In spite of the freedom with which authors use rhetorical devices, they are always subjected to the limits imposed by the

concept of *decorum*, that is, the adequacy of an appropriated style to the required situation. This connects with the negative implications of the device when it is used with misleading purposes, derived from the separation between words and things in language, as it is expressed by Feste in *Twelfth Night*:

> "To see this age: a sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit, how quickly the wrong side may be turn'd outward". (III, 1, 12-15)

Comedies collect all possible nuances in regard to parodic or inappropriate uses of rhetoric. The very same characters reject its playful use when the situation requires seriousness (Lucentio to Biondello in *The Taming of the Shrew*, I, 1: "'Tis no time to jest, / And therefore frame your manners to the time"). And of course, its "mocking" derivations are exploited to the utmost, especially in the figure of the clown-servants who parody the pompous speech of their sirs by applying rhetoric, latinized concepts where they do not make any sense, as it happens, for example, in *The Comedy of Errors:*

> "Syracuse Dromio. But pray, Sir, why am I beaten?
>
> (...)
>
> Syracuse Antipholus. Shall I tell you why?
>
> Syracuse Dromio. Ay, sir, and wherefore; for they say, every why hath a therefore". (II, 2, 39-44)

On other occasions, it is the character itself who is the object of self "mock-rhetoric" of which he remains unaware, as in the case for the latinizing Don Adriano de Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost:*

> "The magnanimous and most illustrate king of Cophetua set eye upon the pernicious and indubitable beggar Zebelophon, and he it was that might rightly said *veni, vidi, vici;* which to annothanize the vulgar (O base and obscure vulgar!) *videlicet,* he came, saw, and overcame". (IV, 1, 65-68)

Rhetoric as an instrument of deceit, a pejorative sense that is still present in our days, highlights at the end of the seventeenth century the end of a whole style, giving way to a more precise, scientific conception of language. In spite of its excesses, never before, and never after, did it offer to man so many and so varied possibilities to play with language as an instrument of knowledge

and communication at its service. The linguistic philosophy which fostered its use in the Renaissance, and which lay at the very root of the signifier-referent ambivalent relation, acquired in the Shakespearean stage the greatest measure of its possibilities, as I hope to have been able, however briefly, to point out.

[1]*Cox Virginia* 1992: The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 7.

[2]*Donawerth Jan* 1984: Shakespeare and the Sixteenth Century Study of Language. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 23.

[3] Ibídem, 24.

[4]*Trousdale Marion* 1982: Shakespeare and the Rhetoricians. London: Scholar Press, 1982, 31.

[5] Ibídem, 33-34.

[6]*Hunter G.K.* 1994: "Rhetoric and Renaissance Drama" Renaissance Rhetoric, Peter Mack ed. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 103.

[7]*Lanham Richard A.* 1976: The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance. New Haven: Yale University Press, 4.

All the references to Shakespeare plays are taken from *The Arden Editions of the Works of William Shakespeare.*