Journal of the Spanish Society for English Renaissance Studies

1993

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
SERVICIO DE PUBLICACIONES
SEDERI
SOCIEDAD ESPAÑOLA DE ESTUDIOS RENACENTISTAS INGLESES

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Issue number IV of SEDERI contains a selection of articles and essays presented in the 4th Conference of the Spanish Society for English Renaissance Studies held at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands, Spain, in March 1993.

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REPETITION, METAPHOR AND CONCEIT IN THE RENAISSANCE

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There is a rhetorical technique systematically used by the medievals to intensify the significance, truth and reality of an object, whether thing or person, text or event. It consists in expanding the object, typically by means of repetition, duplication, multiplication, unfolding, mirroring. The allegorical mode so dominant in the Middle Ages relied for its effectiveness on the conception of the world as twofold, in the sense that every object had a significance which related it, as a mirror-image, to some object in the spiritual domain. The use of the figure of the ‘companion’ of the hero (Bran’s three foster-brothers in the Irish Voyage of Bran, Roland’s Olivier in La Chanson de Roland), or of the figure of his ‘double’ (Roland’s Ganelon, Sir Gawain’s Green Knight) exemplifies the same effort to unfold and thereby to emphasize and intensify, through repetition or through contrast, heroic behaviours and values. The exegetical technique similarly allowed commentators to present texts as twofold constructs, endowed with, beside their literal meaning, a second, spiritual level of interpretation.

The technique was known as amplificatio, and according to Quintilian it offered four main strategies: augmentation, comparison, reasoning, and accumulation (Preminger 1990:32). Any device which, from the simplest exclamation to hyperbole, division, comparison, or repetition tends to intensify the object, falls under the general label of amplificatio (Lanham 1991:8).

The technique is not alien to the Renaissance; 16th century writers used amplificatio lavishly as part of their rhetoric of intensification in poetry or drama; let me offer some examples from both Spanish and English texts. In Fernando de Rojas’ La Celestina (The Spanish Bawd, 1499), Calixto, madly in love with Melibea, compares the fire of his passion to that of Purgatory;

3 See Aguirre (X), where I discuss the uses of repetition in medieval literature and its value in the context of the medieval theory of truth and reality. A more extended treatment of Richard II’s soliloquy from the point of view of the medieval definitions of being, truth, reality and meaning is the subject of an article in preparation.