

“The Sweet Smoke of Rhetoric”: Some Observations on Shakespeare’s Theory of Language

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In *The Arte of Rhetorique*, primarily conceived as an attempt to show the capabilities of the vernacular for eloquence, Thomas Wilson denounces “affected rhetoric” and calls for “one manner of language for all” (qtd in Gorlach, 1992, p. 221). Like his fellow humanists, Sir John Cheke and Roger Ascham, Wilson’s opposition to rampant borrowing was founded on the principles of classical rhetoric. These precepts can be summarized as the use of *propria verba*, *usitata verba* and *perspicuitas*. *Propria verba* essentially meant using words in their literal meaning, not in the strict sense of a closely referential language but rather, the use of words appropriate to the matter. *Usitata verba* signals the conservative nature of the theory: Quintilian requires words to be stamped in the mint of customary usage. Strict adherence to these principles resulted in *perspicuitas*, that is, clarity and transparency. Classical rhetoric, therefore, places the communicative function at the core of language and Wilson is untiring in underlining the importance of common speech and customary usage. Failure to adhere to these principles results in “affected rhetoric” which undermines the very nature of language. Wilson identifies three sources of abuse, namely, the court, the academic establishment and the half-learned.

LLL,¹ written in 1595, is an examination of the confusion, deception and insincerity which result, either willingly or through a blind following of fashion, from the improper use of words. In the play, “affected rhetoric” impedes, not only interpersonal communication but also weakens the social bond between citizens. This “Curtazin-like painted affectation” as Philip Sidney (1975, p.49) called it, is epitomized in the king and his advisors, the first group identified by Wilson. There is little that is novel in identifying the Court as a wasp’s nest of “outrageous usage”, ridiculous dress and moral decay. Roger Ascham (1570) for example, repeatedly condemns the flattery and superficiality of court language and behaviour.

Those of the academic world whom Wilson accuses of “dark meanings” and “obscurity”, those “more careful to speak curiously then to speak truly” (qtd. in Gorlach 1992, p. 306) are represented in the play by Holofernes the schoolmaster and Nathaniel the cleric. They are “The misticall wise menne, and Poeticall Clerkes, [who] will speak nothyng but quaint proverbes and blind allegories, delyting muche in their owne darkness, especially when none can tell what thei doe saie” (qtd in Gorlach, 1992, p 220.) Their over-indulgence in borrowed words, especially from Classical sources infringes the principles of both *propria verba* and *usitata verba*.

Wilson’s third typology, the half-learned, appears in the figure of Armando who has no more than a nodding acquaintance with learning and Court practices. Wilson calls them the “foolish fantastical”, “suche fellowes as have seen learned fellows in their days”. In *LLL* Armando is described as a phantasm, “...our court, you know, is haunted / With a refined traveller of Spain” (I: i, 154) and as a foreigner, is a caricature of the accumulated ills of both Court and schoolroom.

¹ All references to the play are from the Bretislav Hodek’s (n.d.) *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, London: Spring Books

Shakespeare adds two more groups who heighten comic effect and place the discussion of language in a wider context than that contemplated by Wilson. While the latter was chiefly concerned with the use of English for literary expression, the former investigates language as a social phenomenon. These groups are the peasants, who become lost in a maze of false cues and distorted words and secondly, the entourage from the French Court, especially the women who provide the voice of commonsense and plain speech. The exchanges between the groups dramatise the impossibility of expressing meaning whilst entangled in the conventions dictated by fashion on the one hand and rooted in antiquity on the other.

The unmasking of rhetoric occurs, paradoxically through the presentation of a masque in V: ii, where all the contending parties are brought together in a dizzying kaleidoscope of disguise, dissimulation and pretence. The four suitors, the King, Biron, Dumaine and Longaville, disguised as Muscovites² present themselves before the princess and her ladies-in-waiting: Rosaline, Katherine, and Maria, all of whom appear veiled, having previously exchanged the gifts their suitors had bestowed on them. Their assumption of anonymity, their literal facelessness, is a deliberate attempt to display the falsehood in which the men are engaged, to reveal their juggling with words for what it is, a mere enactment of wit divorced from heart.³ Their performance portrays the qualities of an intelligence out of control, an abnegation of the sense of responsibility which Sir Thomas Elyot defined as one of the qualities central to the ruler and his courtiers.⁴ Moreover, it represents a theory of language where the relation between names and things has broken down.

Language, dance and courtly poetry in this scene form three highly conventionalized forms of behaviour. In the Elizabethan court, it was expected that Courtiers should write sonnets and lyrics to the objects of their desire. George Puttenham writes explicitly for "idle courtiers desirous to become skillfull in their own mother tungue, and for the private recreation to make now & then ditties of pleasure" (1936, p. 158).⁵ The capacity of courtly poetry as a vehicle for real sentiment is revealed in *L L L* to be null and void. The various declarations of undying love are exercises in verbal acrobatics and represent what Philip Sidney condemned as "using Art to show Art, and not to hide art" (1975, p. 50).

The suitors, unaware of the real identity of the ladies, recite their amorous ditties, composed in high rhetorical style - each to the wrong girl. The lack of individuality of the girls highlights the interchangeability of the speeches. The point being made here is that speech must be moulded to suit the audience to which it is addressed. Ascham states quite categorically that "they [words] are to be chosen according to the persons we make speake, or the things we speake of". (1967, p. 621). Elyot, in the same manner defines 'majesty' in the ruler as being, among other things, "language and gesture apt to his dignitie, and accommodated to time, place and company" (qtd in Caspari, 1954, pp 107-8). Not to do so annuls its expressive function and moreover, raises serious doubts about the moral quality of the speaker.

This scene demonstrates to great comic effect that "affected rhetoric" is a hermetic system whose "feelers" have lost their sensitivity to reality. It actually contradicts this reality and proceeds oblivious. The princess and her ladies-in-waiting deliberately set out to demolish their pretentious suitors' "three - pil'd hyberboles" (V: ii, 439) by intentionally interpreting their figures of speech literally. They apply a narrow interpretation of Cicero's *propria verba*, that is, words representing the

² The parallel between exotic dress and the abuse of language especially in reference to borrowing was a favourite of the humanists. Ascham, Cheke, Wilson and Ben Jonson milked this image to express their condemnation of borrowing and outrageous usage of language in Court.

³ In the Quarto version of the play the ladies in act II have no names at all, being simply L1, L2, L3 or even Lad.

⁴ The king and his courtiers have more the air of shallow formality and playful elegance of Castiglione's courtier than the high seriousness of Elyot's *The Book Named the Governor* (1531). Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528) had been translated by Thomas Hoby in 1561 and was extremely popular. It is most likely that Shakespeare had read it.

⁵ As Loades, in *The Tudor Court* (1986) points out, this led to the establishment of a flourishing market in sonneteers who came to the aid of those whose passion outweighed their literary skills. Skelton and Lydgate were known to have penned sonnets to order.

things with which they are born. The men are led through a labyrinth full of blind alleys and become embroiled in infructuous, babbling attempts to give direct answers to direct questions. The source of comedy is the confrontation of two extremes, that of an absolutely functional language with a high rhetorical style. To the King's salutation "All hail, sweet madam, and fair time of day" (V: ii, 369), the princess, working on logical deduction reduces the greeting to a series of incompatibilities. In the same vein, Berowne's comparison of Rosaline's face to the sun is an unfortunate choice of metaphor as she is black. However, he has no compunction in changing the image to that of the moon. The affected rhetoric of the King and his company is unable to encompass individual differences, to adapt itself to reality. This is obvious when in fact there is a mix-up over the letters which are given to Costard by both Armando and Biron to be delivered to Jaquenetta and Rosaline respectively. Costard, entangled in the web of words woven about him by the two men, delivers the letters to the wrong girl.

The presence of the herald as a representative of the lower social orders offers a further perspective on rhetoric. Mote, who interprets words literally, plays havoc with the men's purposes. He has rehearsed an introductory speech but the force of memory proves less strong than his natural tendency to let language reflect and comment on reality. He is the embodiment of those whom Wilson describes as "the simple [who] can not but wonder at their talke and think surely they speak by some revelation" (qtd in Potter, 1968, p.48). What Mote sees happening before his eyes sabotages his prepared speech. When he should say "that ever turn'd their eyes on mortal vows," the fact that the girls have turned their backs to him prompts "that ever turned their - backs - to mortal vows" (V: ii, 169) "Once to behold" sommersaults to its contrary "not to behold" (V: ii, 174) when he is ignored by the ladies.

The girls have from the beginning, been sceptical of flowery language: the "taffeta phrases, silken terms precise" (V: ii, 438). They, like most of Shakespeare's female characters are vehicles of common sense and shrewd judgement. They adhere to the classical principles of rhetoric; to use a language fit for and adapted to the situation and in this way, highlight the rhetoric of deception. They are in touch with their emotions and express them clearly when necessary but they recognise a time for banter and a time for speaking seriously. What they demand of the men is "the apt declining of a mannes mind" (qtd in Gorchach, 1992, p. 221). Like Mariana in *Measure for Measure*, for them, the meaning of words and the strength of vows are integrated into a vast scheme of things that has moral significance. The men's speeches were strings of figures with no sound matter or consciousness of reality. In fact, Rosaline asks for the speech to be translated by "some plain man" (V: ii, 184).

The punishment meted out in V.ii. has the death of the Princess' father as its pretext but is clearly symbolic. It implements Wilson's advice that "we must of necessitie banishe al suche affected rhetoric" (qtd in Gorchach, 1992, p. 221). The men are to spend a year and a day in a hermitage where they are to go naked and lead a frugal life in order to purge the disease that has them in their grip. Just as they will be stripped of their finery, they will also reform their language, aiming at Sir John Cheke's ideal of a language "cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled" (qtd in More, 1910, 94). The Ladies are not exempt either and must make amends for their own excesses. It is expected that the curbing of linguistic folly will have a morally cleansing effect but it is not made clear which will come first, the moral or the linguistic rebirth. It is significant that it is only after the shadow of death is cast on the play that "Honest plain words" (V: ii. 795) are used.

Thus, in the final scene, there is a direct correlation between linguistic impropriety in the king's personal relations, his moral qualities and the consequences that this carries for the state. Shakespeare was no doubt in agreement with the humanists who believed that the qualities of the ruler and the art of governing are virtually identical: no level of the ruler's acts are exempt from the moral responsibility contingent upon his position. As Fritz Caspari (1954) observes, "Love and friendship are never merely private affairs but are intimately connected with the well-being of the community and therefore are of great political importance and consequence" (p.165). Shakespeare also follows Ascham's line of thinking in seeing a close parallel between language and virtue. He deplored those "not onlie mared for speaking, but also corrupted in judgement" (1967, p.7).

Elyot had identified as fundamental to the good ruler, the quality of intelligence accompanied by a concomitant sense of responsibility. The king here clearly lacks the second quality. He is driven

by whim and caprice. The breaking of the vows made in Act 1 brings his ethical integrity into question. The men had pledged themselves to a life of fasting, abstinence and frugality in the pursuit of learning. The arrival of the princess and her retinue was disconcerting initially but posed no insurmountable problems. The King openly and candidly revokes his vow. Biron best typifies the philosophy that any verbal commitment can be metamorphosed to suit the will of the user and words can mean as much or as little as is convenient. "... having sworn too-hard-a-keeping oath, / Study to break it and not break my troth" and "then I swear in jest" (I: i, 64). Having so lightly broken the first oath, the value of the king's subsequent pledges must be seriously questioned. The logical conclusion is clearly stated by the princess: "Your oath I will not trust" (V ii, 840). His words are no more than "Vaine soundes to please the eare" (Ascham, 1967, p.87).

Language is a moral barometer. The abuses perpetrated on the linguistic level are merely symptomatic of a stain that has seeped through all levels of human activity; from the strictly emotional to the highest levels of diplomacy. Speech, for Renaissance man was not the mutable voice and transcendental significance existing in a hierarchy. It represented the integration of human nature; physical and rational: heart, tongue and mind. When language declines, when words are severed from their meanings and prostituted for popularity there can be no moral rectitude. Therefore the king's abuse of language has a correlative in his actions as ruler. This more sinister element is present from the start. Throughout the play the King is guilty of 'uncivil' behaviour. The princess' mission is to reclaim a sum of money owed to her father but which the King maintains has been paid. His treatment of the Princess and her retinue, keeping them outside the bounds of the castle walls: "like one that comes here to besiege his court" (II: i, 85) infringes the norms of diplomacy and is clearly unbecoming of a sovereign. The princess's refusal to dance with the King and his courtiers is highly symbolic given that dancing was much more than a pleasant recreational pastime and was an integral part of diplomacy and international relations. Her refusal amounts to the breaking off of diplomatic relations and dramatises how closely the personal and the public were associated in the humanist concept of man and state.

The themes dealt with in *LLL* reflect Shakespeare's acute awareness of the language debate of the preceding half century. He feeds on the conventional imagery that colours the writings of Wilson, Ascham and Cheke and identifies with their philosophy of language. He treads the middle ground between the Court and the academic world, between the airy nothingness of rhetoric and the morass of leaden pedantry. He vouches for a language in tune with the sentiments, a vehicle for communication at all levels and for all social classes; precisely what Wilson prescribed when speaking of "one manner of language for all". He sides with the "russet yeas and kersey noes" (V: ii, 445) and endorses the linguistic ideal expressed by King James VI, a language "Plaine, honest, cumlie, clene, short and sententious" (qtd in Gorlach, 1993. p. 324) or that of his contemporary Sidney "but for uttering sweetly, and properly the conceits of the minde, which is the end of speech" (1975, p. 307). In short, language which communicates real feelings and emotions, which is expressive, which unites social conventions and individual feelings, which is flexible enough to encompass all situations and be used in different registers. Shakespeare was to reiterate this philosophy in Hamlet (III: ii,17) "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with the special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature".

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