

MYCETES' RHETORICAL FAILURE IN CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S *TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT*

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Tamburlaine the Great is a good instance of Marlowe's mastery of scholarly rhetoric. In this play, the author's portrait of his hero as great warrior is achieved through the emphasis on his rhetorical skills. Metaphor, hyperbole, and *amplificatio* throughout his speeches. The '...Scythian Shepherd' is a successful leader insofar as he is a skilful rhetorician. By contrast, the failures of Mycetes, the Persian King, are presented through his rhetorical inability and inaccuracies. These render his speeches nonsensical, and therefore he comes to be represented as a ridiculous figure. Using Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* as a major referent, I intend to prove that Mycetes misunderstands the rhetorical precepts and the philosophy of language of Marlowe's time. His linguistic isolation is taken here as the key feature that explains his political failure.

During the sixteenth century, rhetoric and magniloquence were essential disciplines in any type of education, and they also constituted the main tool for any work of literature. Literary compositions were enriched with all types of rhetorical devices and writers knew which stylistic tools were necessary on every occasion. This is exactly what Christopher Marlowe does in *Tamburlaine The Great*: he chooses the most suitable stylistic figures to shape all the characters in the play. *Tamburlaine The Great* is a display of magniloquence and oratorical language, which provides the story with an attractiveness that goes far beyond the play's plot. And, even though T.S. Eliot disagreed with this idea affirming that "Marlowe's rhetoric consists in a pretty simple huffe-snuffe bombast" (cited in Leech 1964: 13), most critics, especially Donald Peet (1959) and Harry Levin (1954), have pointed out that, as a master of rhetorical rules, Marlowe selected precisely what he needed to define the protagonists of his play. Donald Peet claims that the fact that all the characters speak rhetorically is merely intended to show that Tamburlaine is the supreme orator, as he surpasses everybody in this field. Presented as his opposite, Mycetes, the Persian King, fails in the task of being a good speaker due to his lack of understanding of all the stylistic rules and the philosophy of language of his time. In spite of all Mycetes' attempts to

succeed in his aims, Tamburlaine soon defeats him discursively, and therefore all the king's lords, including Theridamas and Meander, mock him.

Mycetes is linguistically isolated and helpless; to explain the cause of his inefficacy, I would like to concentrate first on the philosophical concept of language up to the sixteenth century, in order later to proceed with a deeper analysis of the stylistic features present in his orations.

Michel Foucault's linguistic analysis of the Platonic and Aristotelian universals, and the idea of similarity between the different ethereal and material entities, demonstrates how inferior things have a tendency to emulate the superior ones in order to improve their own qualities. This idea of imitation was present in every field of study and, from a more literary and linguistic perspective, it is presumed how important it was for anyone to follow the rhetorical rules if they wanted to imitate and speak as correctly and persuasively as an excellent orator. It is Marion Trousedale's *Shakespeare and the Rhetoricians* (1982) that best explores the connections between these philosophical concepts and their repercussions in the study of language and literary works. According to Trousedale, the Elizabethans were not structuralists, but methodists as they were especially concerned with theories and rules that could be aiding for their tasks. If these thoughts are applied to the play, it could be seen how Mycetes attempts to emulate a proper orator by using rhetorical skills, but he fails because he lacks that knowledge of eloquence. He is unable to understand the precepts correctly due to the confusion in his mental schemes since he mistakes the correspondences between *the forms of things* and *the forms of discourse*. Let us compare at this point how both characters, Mycetes and Tamburlaine, use the same epithet on two different occasions. In the first act, the Persian noble speaks to Theridamas about his powerful army, which, according to him, would easily destroy the enemy:

That I may view these milk-white steeds of mine,
All loaded with the heads of killed men.
And from their knees, even to their hoofs below,
Besmeared with blood, that makes a dainty show. (1.1.77-80)

The epithet "milk-white" is also present in one of Tamburlaine's interventions, but in a very different way, as the warrior is addressing and flattering his beloved Zenocrate:

With milk-white harts upon an ivory sled,
Thou shalt be drawn amidst the frozen poles,
And scale the icy mountains' lofty tops:
Which with thy beauty will be soon resolved. (1.2.98-101)

Though the adjective is the same, the contexts are disparate and it obviously seems an epithet more suitable for a topic like the one described by Tamburlaine. It does not seem appropriate to be used in the warlike background depicted by Mycetes. He knows the attribute may sound effective, but, as he confuses the correspondences between the signs and the meanings, he does not realise that this is not the right occasion for that adjective to be used. On the other hand, Tamburlaine knows how to choose the appropriate words on every particular

occasion, and, when describing his army, he uses grandiloquent and powerful words that seem more convenient for a military context:

And bullets like Jove's dreadful thunderbolts,
 Enrolled in flames and fiery smouldering mists,
 [...]

 And with our sun-bright armour as we march,
 We'll chase the stars from heaven, and dim their eyes
 That stand and muse at our admired arms. (2.3.19-24)

As a skilful orator, Tamburlaine would never say a word in an inappropriate context. Nevertheless, not only does Mycetes misuse the epithet, but, besides this, he is making use of a figurative language that could be interpreted as failure instead of the victory he is trying to suggest: his image may not represent his army with the bleeding heads of his enemies, but rather his own forces returning defeated. The Persian King tries to be eloquent, he knows what he is trying to do but he fails to do so, as his knowledge of words, things and the way they correspond is fundamentally flawed.

Foucault suggests that *seeing* and *proving* are not the steps to attain any type of learning; it is only by interpretation that knowledge can be reached. Once the similarities between the ethereal and the material worlds have been interpreted we can approach knowledge itself. This is precisely the problem for Mycetes. He is incapable of a correct interpretation of the forms of discourse, as his comprehension of the rules is limited. As Marion Trousedale puts it, "it is evident that if we do not understand the particulars, it is not because they cannot be understood by their own nature, but by reason of our defect: because we cannot comprehend the infinite multitude of them" (1982: 12). It seems that this defect is an innate quality in Mycetes: he was destined to be an unsuccessful leader since his birth because the favourable stars were not then present. Cosroe expresses it thus:

Now to be ruled and governed by a man,
 At whose birthday Cynthia with Saturn joined,
 And Jove, the sun and Mercury denied
 To shed their influence in his fickle brain. (1.1.12-15)

On the other hand, Tamburlaine is constantly boasting about the fact that the gods are always favouring him, and that he even equals them, as he is able to control his own destiny:

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains
 And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about
 [...]

 And Jove himself will stretch his hand from heaven,
 To ward the blow, and shield me safe from harm. (1.2.175-75; 180-81)

The place of birth and origin were two factors that were considered extremely influential by rhetoricians such as George Puttenham and Thomas Wilson, because these elements took an important part in the development of a good orator. Mycetes was not favoured at his birth, hence his rhetorical inability. He

does not succeed in deciphering the signs and their meanings, and this renders all his interventions ridiculous. Probably, the dialogue between him and Tamburlaine in the second act could be used to best illustrate this inadequacy. Mycetes feels insecure and does not even know what to say in response to Tamburlaine's assertions, so he repeatedly changes his answers, being in the end unable to find the most appropriate ones. In the second act, we read:

TAMBURLAINE

I would entreat you to speak but three wise words.

MYCETES

So can I when I see my time. (2.5.25-26)

It is obvious that Mycetes needs time to process all the information he needs to use words appropriately. Even with this time he fails as a result of his oratorical inefficacy.

It should also be noticed at this point that this is the only occasion throughout the play when both characters are together. Tamburlaine's superiority is presented in opposition to Mycetes' weakness: the King is discursively beaten in slightly more than twenty lines. It takes Tamburlaine more effort, though, to beat Bajazeth as they seem to be at a more similar rhetorical level. But, despite trying hard to endure Tamburlaine's attack, Mycetes fails, although he is unaware of this defeat as once again he misinterprets the situation.

The Scythian warrior plays with the meanings of words because he has the necessary linguistic skills to do so. Marion Trousdale, as well as Michel Foucault, makes a distinction between words and things. According to the first, "knowledge of words comes first in time" while "knowledge of things first in importance" (1970: 25). Mycetes, nevertheless, could never be a good orator since both types of knowledge are scarcely present in him, and, even when they are, they are often misinterpreted, as we have seen, for instance, in the usage of the epithet "milk-white" in contrast to Tamburlaine.

Siegfried Wyler suggests that Marlowe endeavours to use words referring to their basic meanings, omitting their complex senses (1967: 311), and this indicates that the word denotations in the play are defined by what the characters really mean, and, if they play with them, as Tamburlaine does plenty of times, they are aware of what they are attempting to imply on doing so. On the other hand, Mycetes is incapable of making the right decisions, of matching the words with their real meanings, and that is why, as Richard A. Martin claims, "his threats are empty and his choice of words inept" (1978: 251). It might have been striking for the audience of the play to hear Mycetes say "Theridamas farewell ten thousand times" (1.1.82) in the moving tone in which we suppose he utters the sentence. This formulaic construction is more in keeping with a sentimental setting, as it happens, for example, in *Romeo and Juliet* when the main characters are saying farewell. Once more, despite knowing the structure, Mycetes does not provide the proper context for the linguistic effect demanded by a particular situation.

"When words are separated from things, they become discursive as well as expressive" (Trousdale 1982: 21). Tamburlaine takes advantage of this fact and

uses it in his speeches, playing, as said above, with words. However, this skill is missing in Mycetes; he does not know how to make proper use of the different parts of speech.

Richard A. Martin explains that the King's metaphorical incompetence is due to his misunderstanding of the concepts; he fails in the attempt to match the relevant similarities. In contrast to Tamburlaine, Mycetes' employment of metaphors is far from being plausible. Even though Martin also mentions the internal confusion in Mycetes, he argues that the fact that Mycetes fails is a consequence of his lack of interest in the arts of rhetoric. When Mycetes affirms, as he is talking to Meander, that "'tis a pretty toy to be a Poet" (2.2.54), Martin has suggested that "Mycetes dismisses poetry as a *toy*" because "the low esteem in which Mycetes holds poetry reveals his further ignorance of the power poetry possesses in the dramatic world" (1978: 253). However, I do not totally share this opinion, as I believe that Mycetes really means what he is saying, that poetry and rhetoric are precursors to acting wisely and persuasively. To be a good leader, he considers it important to be able to master as perfectly as possible the figurative and oratorical skills fashionable during that period, as described by Puttenham: "learning and art teacheth a schollar to speak, so doth it also teach a counsellour, and aswell an old man as a yong man, a man in authoritie, aswell as a private person, and a pleader aswell as a preacher, every man after his sort and calling as best becommeth" (Willcock & Walker 1936: 140).

When Mycetes is talking about the threat that Tamburlaine represents, he affirms: "And as I hear, doth mean to pull my plumes,/ Therefore ...tis good and meet for to be wise" (1.1.33-34). With these words, he declares that he is aware of the necessity of being an intelligent and persuasive orator if he wants to beat Tamburlaine. The expression "to pull my plumes" works as a metaphor and a synecdoche, representing Mycetes' army. However, it could also be tightly connected to the idea of a rhetorical combat between Mycetes and Tamburlaine, especially if we take into account that the plumes in the helmet could be associated with the feathers, that is, the quills, used in writing. Hence the connection between the military and the linguistic aspects represented by the plumes. If Tamburlaine wants to pull Mycetes' plumes, this suggests that the idea of a combat of wit and rhetoric is implied in the metaphor. Tamburlaine knows that, and that is why, when Mycetes' army is approaching, he asks if he "should play the orator" (1.2.129).

Mycetes knows that he needs to be wise for this linguistic combat. But, being aware of his stylistic limitations, he assumes that it is essential for him to have someone he can rely upon, and so, he feels confident because he presumes that he can count on Meander and Theridamas to help him to defeat his enemy. Addressing Meander, he declares:

Well, well, Meander, thou art deeply read:
 And having thee, I have a jewel sure:
 Go on my lord, and give your charge I say,
 Thy wit will make us conquerors today. (2.2.55-58)

With these sentences, Mycetes is implying that he knows it is not his intellect, but Meander's wit that will lead them to victory, in the same way he declares

that Theridamas will provide them success by the way he talks:

Go, stout Theridamas, thy words are swords
And with thy looks thou conquerest all thy foes. (1.1.74-75)

Not only does Mycetes need other people to talk on his behalf to help him, but, when he speaks, he is always looking for approval for his words. He feels insecure about them because he does not know whether they are appropriate. In act I, he asks Meander: "I might command you to be slain for this, / Meander, might I not?" (1.1.23-24). And in the same act, the necessity of confirmation is repeated: "How like you this, my honourable lords? / Is it not a kingly resolution?" (1.1.54-55). He needs refutation for his speeches and other people's words to help him to succeed in being a good king. He is dependent on his lords. Even when he argues with his brother and asks for revenge, he seems defenceless:

Well here I swear by this my royal seat
Embossed with silk as best beseems my state,
To be revenged for these contemptuous words. (1.1.97)

Besides this need for other people's rhetoric, Mycetes makes clear at the very beginning of the play that he lacks the wit and magniloquence necessary to be a good orator, being this the cause of his reliance on other people to help him:

I find myself aggrieved,
Yet insufficient to express the same:
For it requires a great and thundering speech
Good brother tell the cause unto my lords
I know you have a better wit than I. (1.1.1-5)

As he affirms (1.1.22), his lords know his little wit, and, therefore, the fact that he cannot speak eloquently. This flaw is what leads other wittier characters as Cosroe or Tamburlaine to mock him. They know Mycetes would never be as good an orator as them because of his lack of rhetorical understanding. Both of them mock the king's failure: Cosroe openly declares that to Mycetes on more than one occasion, and Tamburlaine either ridicules Mycetes with his irony or talks to other people about Mycetes' inability, as he does, for instance with Theridamas: "In thee, [...] I see the folly of thy emperor" (1.2.166-167).

But, although Mycetes is conscious of this, he says to Meander: "I am abused Meander" (1.1.106), he resigns himself to this mockery because he knows he cannot do anything to prevent it. This mockery will eventually be the cause of his failure as a ruler and an orator.

Mycetes fails because he misinterprets situations and lacks the understanding of the order of words and things. He does not succeed in matching the words with their appropriate meanings and that is the reason why his speeches sound nonsensical and incongruous. He tries to speak persuasively, but his rhetoric can only render him ridiculous because he cannot fully comprehend the linguistic precepts. Mycetes knows his inability and that is why he needs to rely on other people. He is isolated and does not find the required support because his lords know his rhetorical inefficacy and his gradual failure as a political ru-

ler. His mental schemes and his correspondences between signs and meanings are confused, so his speeches. It is his flaw. And, even though the Latin maxim "*scientia non habet inimicum nisi ignorantem*" (Willcock & Walker 1936: 140) affirms that knowledge is accessible to anyone interested in it, it is our defect if we cannot reach it. In spite of knowing what it is all about, Mycetes is out of the rhetorical game because he is unable to understand and apply the rules correctly. And, though he tries hard, he knows he will always be the loser.

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