

RHETORIC AND TRUTH IN *THE SPANISH* *TRAGEDY*

Cinta Zunino Garrido
Universidad de Huelva

Rhetoric was an essential discipline in the Renaissance to fully understand plays such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Paying special attention to the figurative devices present in the play, this paper intends to be a new contribution to the study of this rhetorical language in Kyd's tragedy. I will mainly focus my study on the descriptions of battles that appear in the first act of the play, and on how these descriptions seem to be tightly connected to the Humanist rhetorical tradition revised by Erasmus in his *De Copia*. When describing the terms *enargeia* and *evidentia*, Erasmus is constantly concerned with the relationship between words and things, emphasising in that way the importance of truth-telling as expressed by means of an accurate rhetorical language. Rhetorical accuracy, words and things are therefore bound and interconnected, which renders language a vital tool for communicating faithful information. Following this leading idea offered by Erasmus, this paper seeks to provide a new perspective of how the language and richness in discourse used to describe the battle in *The Spanish Tragedy* are related to Erasmus' interest in shaping the thoughts with a trustworthy and accurate rhetoric.

“Stand up I say, and tell thy tale at large” (1.2.58). These are the words that the Viceroy of Portugal employs to demand from Villuppo a full narration of the events that have taken place in the war against Spain. However, with these words, not only does the Viceroy command Villuppo to expose the matter at large, but what he expects is some kind of pleasure from the narrator and as much detail as possible from Villuppo's words. Yet, he may be aware of the pain that they may cause, as he infers that the true content of the events is the death of Balthazar, his son and Prince of Portugal. There is no doubt, nevertheless, that the Viceroy's request goes far beyond the mere imperative form. His words have a further importance if taken in the Humanist context where the play was written, and if immersed in the dominant rhetorical tradition in the Renaissance. These are not just empty words, but they are full of significance, and it is presumably quite obvious that Kyd's rhetorical skills and purposes are behind this utterance. Its analysis is the main goal of this paper.

Detailed descriptions, that is, giving as much faithful information and detail as possible —and this is exactly what the Viceroy is demanding— were

the clues to a good rhetorical composition as proposed by Erasmus in his treatise *De Utraque Verbores ac Rerum Copia* (1515). Erasmus's work, mainly based on Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* and other classical rhetorical treatises, was extremely influential during the 16th century, and a good proof of it are the numerous editions that were published during that same century and the widespread circulation all over Europe. In *De Copia*, Erasmus's central concern is the idea of *copia* in a text, which he describes, not as the imitation of other authors, but as the enlarging of a text with rhetorical devices to beautify the thought and produce pleasure in the reader or hearer:

The first way to embellish thought is to relate at length and treat in detail something that could be expressed summarily and in general. And this, in fact, is the same as if one should *display* merchandise first through a latticework, or rolled up in carpets, then should unroll the carpets and disclose the merchandise, *exposing* it completely to sight. (1963: 43, my emphasis)

According to Erasmus, and to other English rhetoricians such as Thomas Wilson ("Of the Figure of Amplification," *The Art of Rhetoric*, 1560), the most appropriate way to enlarge and beautify a text is by means of the *amplificatio* of words and things, that is, by expanding the text as to produce delight with its content and with its choice of words, with its *res* and with its *verba*. Choosing the words "display" and "expose" in his definition, which directly refer to the act of oratorical delivery or *elocutio*, Erasmus is suggesting the importance of being fluent and of having a profuse, well-organised, and copious, and at the same time meaningful argument. Following this idea, Erasmus therefore considers the concept of *enargeia* or *evidentia*, due to its aptness to extend a text and to provide pleasure, the best method of *amplificatio*, and by *enargeia* he means a powerful mental picture and description or the possibility to bring a faithful and striking image to the eye (*res*) by means of words (*verba*).

We use this [*enargeia*] whenever, for the sake of amplifying, adorning, or pleasing, we do not state a thing simply, but set it forth to be viewed as though portrayed in color on a tablet, so that it may seem that we have painted, not narrated, and that the reader has seen, not read.

...

We shall enrich speech by description of a thing when we do not relate what is done, or has been done, summarily or sketchily, but place it before the reader painted with all the colors of rhetoric, so that at length it draws the hearer or reader outside himself as in the theatre. (Erasmus 1963: 47)

And this desire of rhetorical portraying, of acquiring a righteous description of past events or actions is continually present in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1588-1592). As it has already been said, the Viceroy of Portugal asks for a report of the battle against Spain (1.3.55-58); but this is not

the only case in the play. In the previous scene, the King of Spain equally asks for a description of the fight (1.2.16-22), in the same way Bel-Imperia will also demand from Horatio another detailed statement of the combat where her beloved, Don Andrea, died (1.4.1-5). And, apart from these requests, there are other three descriptions of the struggle and Don Andrea's decease all along the play,¹ which obviously increase the rhetorical power of the tragedy. The main characters request, therefore, from their reporters a detailed explanation of the battle and Don Andrea's death, that is to say, an example of the *enargeia* defined by Erasmus.

Let us compare, then, the manner in which these three characters, the King, the Viceroy, and Bel-Imperia, solicit these reports, these acts of *enargeia*. The first one, the King, talks like this to the General:

But General, unfold in brief discourse
Your form of battle and your war's success,
That adding all the pleasure of thy news
Unto the height of former happiness,
With deeper wage and greater dignity
We may reward thy blissful chivalry. (1.2.16-22)

The second request is the one presented by the Viceroy to Villuppo:

Speak on, I'll guerdon thee whate'er it be:
Mine ear is ready to receive ill news,
My heart grown hard 'gainst mischief's batery;
Stand up I say, and tell thy tale at large. (1.3.55-58)

Finally, the third entreaty is the one claimed by Bel-Imperia to Horatio:

Signior Horatio, this is the place and hour
Wherein I must entreat thee to relate
The circumstance of Don Andrea's death,
Who, living, was my garland's sweetest flower,
And in his death hath buried my delights. (1.4.1-5)

In spite of asking for the same favour, their petitions seem to be very different in form and tone. There is no need to say that, due to their circumstances (the death of their beloved son and lover, respectively), the entreaties by the Viceroy and Bel-Imperia are much more distressed than the one by the King of Spain, who only awaits for good news of success. As far as the concept of *enargeia* is concerned, one can perfectly argue that the Viceroy's

¹Carol McGinnis Kay (1977: 20-38) states that there are five accounts of the battle in the play. I slightly differ, notwithstanding, as I consider that the brief description offered by Balthazar in his conversation with Lorenzo (2.2.119-123) also adds another, though tenuous, perspective to the final view of the struggle.

request is the one seeking for the most exhaustive description, as it has already been said at the opening of this paper. With the sentence “tell thy tale at large” (1.3.58), the Viceroy’s petition seems to be the opposite to that of the King as this last one expects the General to “unfold [the account of the battle] in brief discourse” (1.2.16). Both of them demand the same record, but, whereas the King prefers a “brief discourse”(1.2.16), the Viceroy desires a more explicit account. The King seems to be impatient about the record of the struggle, and that is why he is only concerned with the *res*, with the content of the General’s report, with the victory he supposes. However, the General’s answer to the King turns out to be one of the longest speeches in the play, 67 lines, in spite of the succinct exposition requested by the King. He takes his time to describe the battle, embellishing his narration with all kinds of figures of speech, similes, parallelisms, metaphors, among others; with all those “colors of rhetoric” proposed by Erasmus. He is conscious of the pleasure that he may cause in the King with his good news, and to make it doubly pleasing, he enlarges it to such an extreme as to offer the most vivid portrayal of the scene. The King’s words have promised him a reward, so he works hard for the sake of the gift. This fragment will illustrate the General’s rhetorical mastery:

Where Spain and Portingale do jointly knit
 Their frontiers, leaning on each other’s bound,
 There met our armies in their proud array:
Both furnished well, both full of hope and fear,
Both menacing alike with daring shows,
Both vaunting sundry colours of device,
Both cheerly sounding trumpets, drums and fifes,
Both raising dreadful clamours to the sky,
 That valleys, hills, and rivers made rebound,
 And heaven itself was frightened with the sound. (1.2.22-31, my emphasis)

Nevertheless, on the other hand, the Viceroy requests an in-depth and detailed description. The supposed decease of his son distresses him, so he needs to know as much as possible about the strife and about his son’s fortune. In that way, particulars and exhaustiveness are extremely weighty. But, as opposed to the King’s circumstances again, Villuppo’s account is much more concise and direct than the General’s, which surely increases the Viceroy’s pain. The desire of getting an amplified and detailed record has not been fulfilled; twelve lines are enough for Villuppo to report the business, his words, contrarily, bringing a powerful and striking image, which is in fact one of the main purposes of the *enargeia*:

Then hear that truth which these mine eyes have seen.
 When both the armies were in battle joined,
 Don Balthazar, amidst the thickest troops,
 To win renown did wondrous feats of arms:

Amongst the rest I saw him hand to hand
 In single fight with their Lord General;
 Till Alexandro, that here counterfeits
 Under the colour of a duteous friend,
 Discharged his pistol at the prince's back,
 As though he would have slain their general.
 But therewithal Don Balthazar fell down,
 And when he fell, then we began to fly:
 But had he lived, the day had sure been ours. (1.3.59-71)

Finally, Bel-Imperia's wish and curiosity are equally satisfied by Horatio as he gives, following the General's line, an itemised, but more personal, portrayal of the conflict and of her beloved's death.

The word, as the main device of *enargeia*, becomes, in that way, the means to set forth the actions, to portray and describe, and to bring forth these powerful images. Yet taking this idea into account, once that the characters have their needs and curiosity satisfied, another question arises, and this is the efficacy of the language to prove the veracity of the deeds related by the reporters. Carol McGinnis Kay (1977) wonderfully explains the ambiguity of the records narrated and the validity of the language in the play. According to her, there is no trustworthy account in the tragedy because the reporters exclusively look for their own benefit, manipulating in that way the information that they have been asked to state.

The multiple accounts of Don Andrea's death have established a milieu in which language has lost its conventional stability and has become a tool of manipulation and deceit. The normal relationship between language as symbol and the reality it symbolizes has been shattered, and we can no longer assume any correspondence between words and intents. (1977: 28)

If language is an unreliable via, then, the validity and faithfulness of the *enargeia* is open to question, above all, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, where the audience gets up to six different versions of Don Andrea's decease and the struggle between Portugal and Spain. To what extent can we then rely on the descriptions offered in the play? Following again Erasmus on the idea of *copia* and beautifying a text, one can read that "to express these things well, not only is art and genius necessary, but also it is of paramount importance to have actually seen what you wish to describe" (1963: 50). Erasmus is in this way stating the importance of giving a precise account of what has actually been seen. And this is what Villuppo declares in his speech: "Then hear that truth which these mine eyes have seen" (1.3.59) and "I saw him hand to hand" (1.3.63), making thus convincing that what he is going to narrate is exactly what has happened on the battlefield, whereas the audience does not trust him as his statement differs from the others present in the same act as well. Doubts about

the true facts unquestionably arises in the audience. Horatio also claims his description to be faithful because, at the end of his report, he introduces the sentence “I saw him honoured with due funeral” (1.4.41), which obviously emphasises the fact that he was present in the armed conflict, and that he definitely took part in the business. Yet, despite their claiming to have witnessed the strife, it is undeniably noticeable that both are giving different versions of the same event, as well as they slightly differ from the ones proposed by the General and Balthazar. Which account are we then supposed to believe?

If we have a look again at Erasmus’s treatise, we can read that, regarding this hankering for *amplificatio* and rhetorical pleasure,

specially are the narratives of messengers in tragedy remarkably rich in this excellence, because they are presented instead of the spectacle and they report the things which it is either impossible or inappropriate to present on the stage... Nor does it matter for this purpose whether they are true or false. (1963: 48)

And, after all, this is what happens in Kyd’s tragedy: we get the reports of different messengers and presumed witnesses, each of them with their particular versions, it makes no difference whether they are completely credible or not. They only offer what their petitioners want to hear, so they feel free to expose the facts that seem to be most profitable for them, even though this implies that they have to make up what they are supposed to have attended. The Viceroy of Portugal addresses Villuppo like this: “Speak on, I’ll guerdon thee *whate’er it be*: / Mine ear is ready to receive ill news, /” (1.3.55-54, my emphasis). His only concern is that Villuppo tells the story, no matter “whate’er it be,” which undeniably gives Villuppo the freedom to expose what he considers best for his own advantage, leaving aside the veracity of his report, as he will be rewarded at any rate:

Thus have I with an envious, forged tale
Deceived the king, betrayed mine enemy,
And hope for guerdon of my villainy. (1.3.93-95)

Being conscious of his fraud, Villuppo does not hesitate to make up an appropriate description profitable for him. Similarly, the General also feels at ease to relate what seems to be better for him if he takes for granted the King’s request: “But General, unfold in brief discourse / *Your form* of battle and *your war’s success*” (1.2.16-17, my emphasis). Consequently, with this phrase, the King is granting him the liberty to expose the facts from the General’s point of view, from “his form of battle and his war’s success.”

As a result, one can observe that a dichotomy arises. On the one hand, we have all these descriptions of the battle. On the other hand, these portrayals are

confusing and do not seem to reflect the true events. In McGinnis's view, this puzzlement is caused by the break between language and the reality that it symbolises, the relationship between word and thing has been rendered ineffectual (1977: 28).² There is no clear correspondence between the General's, Villuppo's, and the other characters' words and the events that they give account of because they differ from the actual *res*. Words do not present reality. Nevertheless, if we draw our attention to the comments made by Terence Cave, we may open a new perspective that may be more in accordance with the validity and purpose of these speeches:

Copia in the form of *enargeia* overrides the distinction between "true" and "false" representation. The linguistic surface renders with equal colour and evidence the face of real things and of imaginary things. Speaking of tragic *écits*, Erasmus says: "It is not relevant for this purpose whether they are true or false." Potential as well as actual occurrences may become the material of *enargeia*: the possible future, no less than the historical past, may become present in language. (Cave 1979: 30)

In other words, anything either actual or imaginary can be described by means of the language; as Marion Trousdale points out, "Erasmus is interested in the ability to communicate to the audience all that the speaker can conceive in his mind" (1982: 44). The veracity of the facts is thus irrelevant. And, in this case, the real purpose of the descriptions is the satisfaction of the hearers or the own benefit for the reporters, so they manipulate the *res* and the *verba* to offer what is most profitable. Whether the language of the records represents reality or not is no longer important. The correspondence between words and things has ceased to be effectual. Language is a tool to create, to narrate what is most interesting for the hearer, and Cave states it like this:

Ideally, then, true linguistic plenitude is attained when "verba," coalescing into "res," point towards a "sententia" (idea); but conversely, the movement of the treatise [Erasmus's *De Copia*], asserting the priority (if not the primacy) of words, reveals that "things" can only become apparent by virtue of language. "Res" are neither prior to words such as their "origin", nor are they a productive residue which remains after the words cease. "Res" and "verba" slide together to become "word-things"; the notion of a single domain (language) having a double aspect replaces that of two distinct domains, language and thought. (1979: 21)

Res and *verba* entail themselves mutually. Language is not a mere vehicle of representation, it is what shapes the thought, no matter how much this thought resembles reality. That is why we may not need to question the veracity of the reports of the battle in *The Spanish Tragedy*, all of them have a function

²Similarly, Jonas A. Barish supports this idea stating that in *The Spanish Tragedy* "speech deteriorates as an instrument of reality and an agent of truth" (1996: 82).

in the story and that is the main point. Kyd beautifully embellishes them with all kinds of rhetorical devices, yet, sketchily, the success and acceptability of these portrayals depend, as a last resort, on the perspective of the speaker and on their mastery of the conventional rhetorical skills. In that way, in the dramatic fiction, the instrument that provides a speech with a “true” or “false” value does not depend therefore on truth or falsehood in themselves, but on the adaptability of this speech to all those rhetorical devices present in the Humanist tradition, which Kyd undoubtedly knew and used in his works, as we have seen in this paper.

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