SHAKESPEARE’S USE OF RHETORIC

From Brian Vickers in “A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies” Muir & Schoenbaum 1971
Edited & emphasis added (Patrick Imrie)

I

Rhetoric was for over two thousand years the most important discipline to anyone interested in literature. It was in existence as an art several centuries before Aristotle and it extended its influence on Western literature right up to the time of Wordsworth. It began life as a practical tool in the law-courts, for our earliest knowledge of rhetoric is as an aid to litigation (Kennedy) and it was developed and applied to politics in Greece and still more so in Rome. The Romans took especially seriously the importance of rhetoric in education, and although they derived the principle and much of their system from Hellenistic schools it was thanks to their thorough establishment of the rhetorical education throughout the Roman Empire that rhetoric established itself in both secular and Christian contexts strongly enough to survive the fall of that Empire and continue in vigour through the Middle Ages (Curtius, C. S. Baldwin, Faral), indeed gathering momentum in the Renaissance partly through the separate developments in Byzantium and their influx into Florence (Bolgar). In England rhetoric was persuaded with the same fervour as in other Humanist cultures (Howell) perhaps more so, because of the increasing role it played in education (Curtius, T. W. Baldwin). Indeed the English rhetoric-books of the sixteenth century seem more inventive, more imaginative in their realization of the literary applications of rhetoric than their continental counterparts.

Rhetoric was rejected by the Romantic movement as an ‘artificial system’ which hampered the expression of individuality, and much abuse was attached to its supposedly ‘rigid’, ‘sterile’ nature. Today we still live with the post-Romantic animus to rhetoric …..

But the issue of ‘system’ needs more discussion, for unless we settle it satisfactorily there is always the danger that readers unconvinced of the literary importance of rhetoric will regard Shakespeare’s indisputable mastery of that art with suspicion, and may transfer to him the unenlightened animus which they attach to rhetoric. The ‘art of speech’, the ‘art of speaking well’ was indeed developed into a system with its own conventions, but it was no more harmful to expressiveness in literature than those conventions which we all accept in the other arts, the laws of perspective in painting, the laws of harmony in music: rhetorical figures are to be regarded as artistic conventions of the same order as rhyme or metrical patterns in poetry, sonata-form or fugue in music. The paradox is that by subordinating himself to artistic conventions, to agreed limitations and shorthand modes of expression, the artist working within a traditional system was then able to achieve a freedom and spontaneity which had a universal relevance, for the language of art was understood by all. One of the fascinations of studying the development of writers using the rhetorical tradition is to trace just this process of assimilation, from an external form to something lived through, imbued with life. Some of the most knowledgeable rhetoricians have been the greatest poets: Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Racine, Herbert, Milton, Pope. Considering this fact few would want to accuse them of rigidity or sterility, and many might consider the possibility that rhetoric, instead of being a hindrance, was a creative help.

II

Although rhetoric began as a tool for public life, its relevance to literature was soon realized. The eloquence of the lawyer or orator was a quality which the poet also needed, and at a very early date (aided of course by the dominance of rhetoric in education) rhetoric was regarded as the repository of all eloquence, and both poetry and prose were equated with rhetoric and with each other. Poetry merely had the extra complication of metrics, and indeed throughout the life-span of rhetoric poetry was seldom granted an autonomous existence (fleetingly in Tasso). Hence the methods of rhetoric, originally developed for the needs of the orator in a law-court or political assembly, were adapted to literature, not always with relevance. For instance the five stages of composition were inventio, dispositio, elocutio, pronuntiatio, memoria: invention (that is ‘finding’ one’s material, usually with the corollary that one ‘found’ it in the various places where one had stored it, the loci or ‘places’, ‘seats’ in one’s notebooks), disposition or arrangement, elocution or style, delivery and memory. Evidently the last two stages were relevant to the orator memorizing his speech and delivering it with appropriate gestures, but they were not much use to the dramatist, nor indeed were invention and disposition except in the generalized sense of the selection and ordering of plot-material. But since this ‘material’ was the stuff of human life, the interaction between human beings, then the various rhetorical techniques for ‘invention’ and structure were of little relevance.
Thus it would seem, in theory as in practice, that the relevant teaching for the poet or dramatist was that contained within elocution, style: ....and the most popular compilations in the Renaissance, .......gravitate towards a list of the figures which was often the most thumbed part, as surviving copies show. For nearly two thousand years what the student and budding writer most wanted from rhetoric-books was a list of the tropes and figures, set out as clearly as possible, and this fact seems to me good evidence for man's intuitive recognition that rhetoric was fundamentally different from logic or philosophy: it was a literary discipline, and it was properly concerned with the details of language and expressiveness.

Shakespeare's main interest in rhetoric lay in the tropes and schemes and we must re-create, re-experience that interest if we are properly to understand his poetic development. This is easier said than done, for several reasons. The terminology of the figures is not their most attractive aspect, and even the rhetoricians were sometimes confused by variations of terms. Then there are so many figures (any moderately complete list looks frightening),......

One thing is certain, that every person who had a grammar-school education in Europe between Ovid and Pope knew by heart, familiarly, up to a hundred figures, by their right names. As Puttenham's best editors have said:

A well-educated modern reader may confess without shame to momentary confusion between Hypozeuxis and Hypozeugma but to his Elizabethan prototype the categories of the figures were, like the multiplication-table a part of his foundations... We are all aware of the patterning of Elizabethan verse of this period, but we are generally content to name the genus — balance, antithesis, repetition, and so on. The educated Elizabethan could give a name to every species.

And although we may continue to have difficulty distinguishing the figures, even an hour's practice will make it surprisingly easy.

All rhetorical devices were thought of as deviations made from the norm of 'plain' communication (strictly conceived) for some emotional or structural purpose. These devices were divided into tropes and figures (figures were sometimes called schemes'). A trope (or 'turn involves a change or transference of a word's meaning: from the literal to the imaginative plane, in such devices as metaphor, allegory, irony, litotes (understatement), hyperbole (overstatement), synecdoche (substituting the part for the whole), metonymy (substituting greater for lesser). Modern criticism has rediscovered the tropes extremely well and there are many valuable studies of Shakespeare’s imagerv. but the figures have yet to be generally accepted, and it is on these that I shall concentrate. The figures sometimes involve changes of meaning, but they are primarily concerned with the shape or physical structure of language, the placing of words in certain syntactical positions, their repetition in varying patterns (to make an analogy with music, tropes exist in a vertical plane, like pitch or harmony; the figures exist in a horizontal plane, like rhythm or other stress-devices). It will be convenient, perhaps, to define the most popular figures, and for convenience I take all my illustrations from Richard III.

First, the very familiar group of figures which create symmetrical structure, often found together. Anaphora the most common of all rhetorical figures, repeats a word at the beginning of a sequence of clauses or sentences:

Then curs'd she Richard, then curs'd she Buckingham,  
Then curs'd she Hastings.  

That example also used parison, in which within adjacent clauses or sentences word corresponds to word (either repeating the same word -"curs'd" — or else grouping noun with noun, adjective with adjective etc.). A more exact use of parison, putting great ironic stress on the final word, is this:

Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?  
Was ever woman in this humour won?  

Both these examples increase the effect of symmetry by using isocolon, which gives exactly the same length to corresponding clauses, as again in the Duchess of York's catalogue of a family's distress:
She for an Edward weeps, and so do I:
I for a Clarence weep, so doth not she.
These babes for Clarence weep, and so do I:
I for an Edward weep, so do not they.

(II, ii, 82-5)

The obverse of anaphora is epistrophe, the same word ending a sequence of clauses. Shakespeare rightly chooses this figure to spotlight the sinister effect of Richard's 'planted' prophecy which says that G
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be.
(I, i, 39-40)

As intended suspicion falls on Clarence, who protests that the King
hearks after prophecies and dreams,
And from the cross-row plucks the letter G
And says a wizard told him that by G
His issue disinherited should be;
And, for my name of George begins with G,
It follows in his thought that I am he.

That is a rather special use of epistrophe but it conforms to the theoretical justification of the figure as stressing a word of importance.

Symmetry is also invoked for antimetabole, which repeats words but in a inverted order:
Since every Jack became a gentleman,
There's many a gentle person made a Jack,

Next a group of figures which repeat individual words in various ways.
Ploce is one of the most used figures of stress (especially in this play), repeating a word within the same clause or line:
... themselves the conquerors Make war upon themselves - brother to brother, Blood to blood, self against self.

Epizeuxis is a more acute form of ploce, where the word is repeated without any other word intervening:
O Pomfret, Pomfret! O thou bloody prison

Epanalepsis repeats the same word at the beginning and end of the same line, as with 'themselves' in the example for ploce above, or again with Richmond's reflections on Hope:
Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings,

A related figure is anadiplosis, which gives the same word the last position in one clause and the first (or near the first) in the clause following. It rightly expresses causation, as in Richard's impatience:
Come, I have learn'd that fearful commenting
Is leaden servitor to dull delay;
Delay leads impotent and snail-pac'd beggary

If anadiplosis is carried through three or more clauses, it became a figure known in Greek as climax ('a ladder'; in Latin gradatio), and is again suitably used for causation in Richard's despair:
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain,

A more cutting type of repetition is the figure polyptoton which takes a word and echoes it with another word derived from the same root:
Thou bloodless remnant of that royal blood!

This figure is sometimes said to be a pun, and can be grouped with the four main types of pun distinguished by rhetoric: paronomasia repeat a word similar in sound to one already used (and in its mature applications with an ironic distinction of sense):
or - a favourite Elizabethan pun, this -

_Cousins, indeed; and by their uncle cozen'd._

_Antanaclasis_ has a similar effect, in that it repeats a word while shifting from one meaning to another, as in Anne's curse on Richard for having killed her husband:

> **O,** cursed be the hand mat made these holes!
> Cursed the heart that had die heart to do it!
> Cursed me blood that Jet his blood from hence!

By contrast _syllepsis_ uses a word having two different meanings, without repeating it (an 'ambiguity', in modern terms), as when Richard promises Clarence _'your imprisonment shall not be long; / I will deliver or else lie for you'_ (i, i, 115), where 'lie' means (a) go to prison or (b) tell lies about. This is an especially apt figure for the double-faced Richard, and Shakespeare makes him comment on the fact:

> Thus, like the formal vice, _Iniquity_,
> I moralize two meanings in one word.

The last type of pun is _asteimius_, particularly useful in drama, in which a word is returned by the answerer with an unlooked-for second meaning, as when Gloucester converts Brakenbury's defence into a bawdy joke.

> - With this, my lord, myself have nought to do.
> - Nought to do with Mistress Shore! I tell thee, fellow,
>    _He that doth nought with her, excepting one,_
>    _Were best to do it secretly alone._

There is no need to illustrate a group of figures which are in general circulation: _Zeugna_ (the same verb for two disparate objects), _periphrasis, ellipsis, apostrophe_. If one reader's experience may be trusted to begin with, I would think that the figures listed here would provide the minimum necessary technical knowledge for an appreciation of a great deal of rhetorical usage.

But I am conscious that some readers may have another objection to the figures which I must briefly deal with before coming to discuss Shakespeare's developing use of rhetoric in prose and verse. The objection has indeed been made even by historians of rhetoric and scholars who have helped to reclaim other aspects of rhetoric for serious humane literary study, the objection that the figures are mere toys. 'husks', 'dry formulae', sterile patterns with no imaginative function. This is still the most serious objection to rhetoric, and if it were true then two thousand years of teaching and writing were disastrously wasted. But in fact rhetoricians of Greece, Rome and Renaissance England all argued that the figures had definite emotional and intellectual effects (see Vickers, 1970, ch. 3, for a fuller account). Rhetorical figures were conventions which had an important rationale, for theory held that by using them writers could best express feeling, could express it most naturally. This is an essential point to grasp, and if the illustration of it must be limited to the rhetoricians who were Shakespeare's contemporaries the functional nature of the figures will nevertheless be seen clearly.

Thus for the enlarged (1593) edition of his _Garden of Eloquence_ (1577) Henry Peacham added a section on each figure giving 'The Use' and 'The Caution', stressing the need for the rhetorical device to be related to the sense and not to be over-used. So he urges that figures like _anaphora, epanatipsis, place_ and _epistrophe_ the word chosen for repetition must be one vital to the sense (e.g. _epistrophe_ 'served to leave a word of importance in the end of a sentence, that it may the longer hold the sound in the mind of the hearer', p. 43). Peacham picks out the 'figures of sentence' as being 'very sharp and vehement' [pp. 61-2] and says that such figures 'do attend upon affections (i.e. the passions), as ready handmaids at commandment to express most aptly whatsoever the heart doth affect or suffer' (p. 120); rhetoric re-enacts feeling. In his brief but intelligent _Directions for Speech and Stilt_ (c. 1599), John Hoskins accepts that the word repeated be an important one, but seeks a psychological explanation for it: 'as no man is sick in thought upon one thing but for some vehemency or distress, so in speech there is no repetition without importance' (p. 12). Like all rhetoricians he holds that the figures not only re-create feeling in the character or action portrayed but therefore directly affect the feeling of the reader or playgoer: _anaphora_ 'beats upon one thing to cause the quicker feeling in the audience' (p. 13). Like Peacham he urges the writer to tie the figure to sense and structure (the use of a figure should come from some choice and not from barrenness', p. 17), especially having regard to the organic needs of the whole: 'In these two sorts of...
amplifying you may insert all figures 'as the passion of the matter shall serve'; polypoton 'is a good figure, and may be used with or without passion'. Finally, an equally sharp awareness of decorum and of the functional nature of the figures is shown by Puttenham in his Arste of English Poesie (1589). For Puttenham, as for many Renaissance men, the figures are essential to literature: 'the chief praise and cunning of our Poet is in the discreet using of his figures' (without them language is 'but as our ordinary talk'), yet they must be organically related to sense and feeling, and not extraneous, as in such clumsy repetitions as

'To love him and love him, as sinners should do.' These repetitions be not figurative but fantastical, for a figure is ever used to a purpose, either of beauty or of efficacy… (p. 202)

Elsewhere he shows what varied functions can be obtained by using aposiopesis (pp. 116-17), and reveals a remarkable awareness of the relationship between sound and sense in poetry (p. 196: on 'figures of sentence”). He concludes his account, as I mine, by pointing to the relationship between rhetoric and reality, Art and Nature: we all use rhetorical figures 'by very nature, without discipline' (teaching] according to our individual personalities, and rhetoric exists to refine and intensify their effect. 'Nature herself suggesteth the figure in this or that form: but Art aideth the judgment of his use and application' (p. 298). Rhetoric is not simply an imitation of nature, but almost a re-creation of it, in its own terms: 'rather a repetition or reminiscence natural, reduced into perfection, and made prompt by use and exercise’ (p. 306).

I have cited some of the evidence from Renaissance rhetoricians here, despite the limitations of space, because for so long the historians and specialists in rhetoric have rejected the figures as irrelevant. This essay can only provide an outline of its subject, and it is for that reason especially important to establish an enlightened and humane attitude to the rhetorical figures, for without this further detailed work or rhetoric could not take place with any conviction of its literary validity, Shakespeare, like Puttenham or Longinus, evidently regarded the figures of rhetoric as having each their own range of relevance to states of mind or feeling. Rather than 'dry formulae' they are channels for feeling, pockets of energy, powerful and flexible according to the mind using them………