Trevor McNeely:

Proteus Unmasked. Sixteenth-Century Rhetoric and the Art of Shakespeare

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Rhetoric and its development before and during the early modern period is essential to all students of sixteenth-century literature, and it is virtually impossible to approach Shakespeare's works without some knowledge of its workings. Despite the need to understand the uses of this indispensable tool and its high status in the Renaissance, there is a conspicuous lack of studies that discuss and present the history of rhetoric itself. Most frequently scholars investigate one particular author's rhetorical practice; at the same time the term 'rhetoric' is used to denote one particular scholar's view of rhetoric, sometimes with excellent results, but more frequently with less than satisfactory usefulness.

In *Proteus Unmasked. Sixteenth-Century Rhetoric and the Art of Shakespeare*, Trevor McNeely promises much in proposing to unmask Shakespeare's rhetorical art, and on first inspection the book with its brief Preface (pp. 9-13) and ten chapters presents itself as a handsome and serious academic study with the full apparatus of scholarship (copious notes, pp. 305-343; a bibliography of works cited, pp. 345-361; and an index, pp. 363-369). Unfortunately the book leaves at least this reader unmoved by its argument. With some exceptions, for example its treatment of a likely influence on Shakespeare of the ideas of the second-century Greek rhetorician Hermogenes, its many pages do not convince. The book does not greatly advance our understanding of how Shakespeare uses rhetoric, but remains within the safe critical parameters of established textual and thematic analyses rooted in New Criticism.

Furthermore, the author spends time discussing critical works not even he finds useful, so one wonders whether these pages should not have been cut out of the book at an earlier stage. On the other hand, there are but few traces of the important contributions to the field made by Brian Vickers, Richard Helgerson, Lorna Hutson, Wayne A. Rebhorn, and Neil Rhodes, to mention but a few of the leading scholars who have engaged innovatively with the topic.[1]

As an inevitable result, the book strikes this reviewer as being strangely out of tune and out of touch with research on the relationship between rhetoric and literature in the sixteenth century, and on Shakespeare and rhetoric in particular. In the first chapters, however, there is some merit in the discussion of rhetoric in its cultural context (Chapter 1, "Introduction: The Cultural Connection", pp. 19-49) and in the survey of the relationship between rhetoric and the theatre (Chapter 2, "Rhetoric, Theater, Poetry, and Shakespeare", pp. 50-81) as contributions to the history of rhetoric, but then again this is a partial history that is subservient to McNeely's larger argument.

[1] Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Richard Helgerson, *Self-crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Lorna Hutson, *Thomas Nashe in Context* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Wayne A. Rebhorn, *The Emperor of Men's Minds: Literature and the Renaissance Discourse of Rhetoric* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Neil Rhodes, *The Power of Eloquence and English Renaissance Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

So what is the main argument of the study? McNeely's thesis is presented in many guises and first finds expression in Chapter 3, "Shakespeare's Conscious Art" (pp. 82-104), in the far from revolutionary but surprising proposition that "Shakespeare is a fully conscious artist" (p. 82). Thus on p. 83, McNeely claims:

> Shakespeare's overall, firm, and continuing total control over every nuance of his medium and his expression, no commentator has to my knowledge ever been so bold as to affirm with complete conviction. I should like to correct this omission [...].

All the dramatist wrote, then, was consciously developed as a part of a rhetorical strategy, which McNeely is the first to draw attention to and explain in full, in spite of the fact that he also deems it to be "self-evident" (p. 76). To prepare for his argument, McNeely draws a caricature of an entire branch of rhetoric, by contrasting the "doctrinaire rigidity" found in "the sterile taxonomical apparatus of *Elocutio* and *Amplificatio*" (p. 25) to creative innovation. It is certainly easy to poke fun at "the endless lists of 'figures' of rhetoric" assembled by a sixteenth-century grammarian/pedagogue like Johannes Sturm, if we compare them with the original and powerful metaphorical language of Shakespeare's characters. Nevertheless, the poet's work is full of the kind of figurative language listed by Sturm and others, who are presented by McNeely as mere producers of "a largely unconscious smokescreen" (p. 27).

Incidentally, Sturm – who is not included in the Bibliography – is one of the main transmitters of Hermogenes's ideas of style that McNeely so interestingly links to Shakespeare's poetry through his schoolmaster Thomas Jenkins (p. 135). This is a really interesting and novel topic that would have deserved a chapter of its own. Would it not, one wonders, have proved more fruitful to study why such lists of figures became so important and how they were forged into lines that outshine, as it were, marble and gilded monuments? Here McNeely's attitude to an important part of rhetoric – elocution – is unhelpful and merely repeats the kind of facile criticism that has been heaped on figurative rhetoric for centuries. Surely, it is not difficult to see the vital function of figurative rhetoric in Shakespeare's dramatic speech. And many of the speeches cited by McNeely clearly demonstrate why, for example, rhetorical repetitions were important for both the creation of character psychology (cf. p. 232) and speech cohesion. It is also a tall order to claim that Renaissance practitioners of rhetoric were naïve about the possible dangers inherent in the art of persuasion. McNeely tends to forget that those who write and print books would like to be read, and surely the best way to achieve that objective is to argue the usefulness and power of their works. It is simple salesmanship.

McNeely offers the reader a Hauserian[2] interpretation of the gap between rhetorical theory and rhetoric as practiced by Renaissance writers as a sign of what he in the preface terms a "kind of collective cultural neurosis" (p. 10). That an entire culture should fail to realise the dangers inherent in the art of persuasion is a strange claim, and that theory does not match practice is not exactly a revelation. These are some of the oddities one can read about in McNeely's book, where he attacks the cult of rhetoric in the sixteenth century but himself upholds the cult of the genius whose allegory of rhetoric reveals the dramatist to be a "supersubtle" (p. 221) practitioner of rhetoric. McNeely feels that he is "bold" (p. 83) when he proposes to unmask the protean dramatist, but his boldest claim is that he himself is the first to have understood that Shakespeare is at all times a fully conscious artist.

In Chapter 4 ("Invisible 'Rhetoric' and the Shakespearean Allegory", pp. 105-127), McNeely treats Shakespeare's "deliberate intention to communicate with his audience on the subject of rhetoric" (p. 124). McNeely explains this by means of what he terms the "absurdity

[2] Cf. Arnold Hauser, *Der Manierismus: Die Krise der Renaissance und der Ursprung der modernen Kunst* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1964).

principle of allegorical criticism" (p. 24), a term he takes over from Michael Murrin's *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). In a defensive move to save Shakespeare from accusations of "logical absurdities" (p. 125), McNeely argues, surprisingly, that the dramatist has plotted all the absurdities as part of "an allegorical message in his writings" (p. 125).

To McNeely this principle is crucial in the interpretation of Shakespeare, and in a series of five chapters from Chapter 5 ("Rhetoric and the Plays. An Overview", pp. 128-161) to Chapter 10 ("'Murdering Impossibility': *Coriolanus* and Rhetoric", pp. 273-303), he offers a series of case studies intended to demonstrate the allegorical method in use: Chapter 6, "'None are for me that look into me with considerate eyes': *Richard III* and Rhetoric" (pp. 162-189); Chapter 7, "'Much like for Madness': *Measure for Measure* and Rhetoric" (pp. 190-219); Chapter 8, "Supersubtle Shakespeare: *Othello* as a Rhetorical Allegory" (pp. 221-242); and Chapter 9, "'Nothing will come of nothing': *King Lear* and Rhetoric" (pp. 244-271). In McNeely's hierarchy of a dramatic rhetoric that is allegorical, invisible, and self-consuming (p. 128), *Coriolanus* ranks highest. The play is the topic of Chapter 10 (pp. 273-303), which arguably is the book's best chapter, but is so rather as a separate analysis of that play and not as the conclusion to a larger argument. McNeely typically leaves the last word to the dramatist (p. 303) and thus avoids offering a conclusion or a *peroratio* himself. In this manner his chapters appear as free-standing essays and as such they will not convince the critical community of his thesis.

On the contrary, in Chapter 5 few readers would agree with him that "*The Taming of the Shrew* [...] as a Pygmalionesque transformation story, achieves its happy consummation by means almost exclusively of language" (p. 159). Many will surely query this explanation of how Petruchio systematically bullies Katherine into submission by starving her, denying her sleep, and depriving her of her dignity. The treatment is surely closer to abuse than any verbal game.

To conclude, McNeely offers a surprisingly negative view of rhetoric as practiced by Shakespeare as an art form that both strives at invisibility and "seeks deliberately *to undermine its own third-level allegorical message*" (p. 113; McNeely's emphases). To believe this requires special information of a sort that is not available to the average reader. Most readers would not claim to know what Shakespeare had intended, but McNeely does. After citing King Richard's self-congratulatory lines in *Richard III*, 2.2.227-237, he confidently concludes (on p. 167) that

> it is difficult to see these words as anything else than a direct statement by Shakespeare of his conviction that the arts of language hold a persuasive power that, in his hands at least, is literally infinite.

None of this convinces the present reader and despite the author's learning, *Proteus Unmasked. Sixteenth-Century Rhetoric and the Art of Shakespeare* does not contribute much to deepening our understanding of the history of sixteenth-century rhetoric, except in its stimulating brief discussion of Hermogenes and Shakespeare.

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