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THE POWER OF WORDS, THE POWER OF SILENCE WITH SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract: *The following paper attempts at highlighting the paramount importance that each uttered or unuttered word had in Shakespeare's works, the force with which words were endowed and the power they conferred to their user. Two attitudes are clearly marked as to the power of words as used by Shakespeare's characters: on the one hand, there is the belief in the infinite ability of words to bring forth action, and on the other hand, the lack of trust in the capacity of words to achieve anything.*

Key words: *power, words, confidence, silence.*

1. Introduction: Speech and Power

In one of his works, called *"De Inventione Dialectica"*, a fundamental treatise concerning the teaching of rhetoric and logic in the 16-th century, Rudolph Agricola makes several considerations on the discourse scope as follows: *"...all speech... has this for its end, that one person make another the sharer of his mind"* (407).

In Agricola's view, any successful discourse requires three conditions, each corresponding to the scope of one of the language arts: *"that the speaker be understood, that the listener be eager to listen, and that what is said be rendered convincingly and be accorded belief"* (407).

As communication act, Agricola proceeds, the discourse is subject to different degrees of efficiency. A grammarian, for instance, will share a series of ideas to his audience without simultaneously disclosing his own views. Only a master of all three arts of language will fully communicate his vision, only the one who *"teaches in such a way as to desire to produce belief by his speech, and by speaking to draw the mind of the hearer to himself"* (Agricola 408).

2. Words as Means to an End

It is only natural for us now to wonder to what extent the Elizabethans, Shakespeare included, were confident that language is a means to a noble purpose.

In view of providing an accurate answer to the issue, we, nowadays' readers and listeners, should approach the Shakespearean text and achieve a re-appropriation of it by altering our own perception of the text. We should be able to find again the material perception of language which Shakespeare and his contemporaries certainly shared. As Molly Mahood points out in "*Shakespeare's Wordplay":"...when Elizabethan rhetoricians spoke of the power and force of words, their meaning may have been as much literal as metaphorical"* (171).

This physical perception of language clearly manifests itself with Shakespeare's characters.

Let us consider the way in which Malcolm characterizes Macbeth: *"This*

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tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues" (*Macbeth*, IV,3,12) >> *„Tiranul al cărui nume singur ţi-arde limba ..."* (transl. I. Vinea, 1988), or the way in which Ulysses thinks that Nestor should act: *"Knit all the Greekish ears / To his experienc'd tongue"* (*Troilus şi Cressida*, I,3,67-8) >> *„Urechile greceşti să le-nnădească / De limba-i meşteră cu lanţul vorbei..."* (transl. L. Levitchi, 1987).

It is not seldom that language becomes a sexual organ, an instrument of breeding words, just as it happens with the protracted exchanges between Katerine and Petruchio or between Beatrice and Benedick. Northrop Frye, a well-known researcher in the field, showed that this sexual union between partners promised for the end of every play is integrated within the positive artistic experience, and such a conviction underlies the belief in the revealing, unifying and harmony creating capacity of language [5, p. 58-73].

To illustrate these ideas, here are Portia's words in *The Merchant of Venice*:

"It is almost morning,
And yet I am sure you are not satisfied
Of these events at full. Let us go in,
And charge us there upon inter' gatories
And we will answer all things faithfully".
(V,1,295-299)

Thus, ears and tongues, as organs of perception and breeding, tend to be significant both literally and metaphorically; and any linguistic enterprise appears as a physical act as much as a moral one.

Truth be said, from beginning to end, from *Titus Andronicus* and *Henry VI* to *The Tempest,* the Shakespearean plays are a vivid testimony of the constant interest manifested by Shakespeare towards the reactions that people can inflict upon one another by means of language.

Moreover, the power of words is quite an ancient topic. To support this assertion, here is, in Democrit's own phrasing, the idea that the word is a haven for the human power: *"The word is stronger than gold when it comes to induce persuasion".* Or, in Gorgias' view, the *logos* acts upon the soul quite the same as medicine acts upon the body: *"Some medicine cleanse the body of evil, others stop diseases or even life, and just the same words bring about misery or joy, they frighten or inflame the listeners, and some others, with bad persuasion poison the soul".*

Since language rather tends to leave room to imagination than to represent the truth, it is amazing how the phantasms of language can exercise their immense power - be it beneficial in Edgar or evil in Iago. Thus, Shakespeare's interest in the art of language presupposes both a purely practical component, and a functional component, just like with ancient rhetoricians. Eventually, Shakespeare's purpose seems to be that of persuading us, his audience, of the humane materiality of thoughts and feelings in his plays. Indeed, this is quite possible since words *"stab"* (*Much Ado About Nothing*, II,1,255), they *„bear fruit"* (*All's Well when It Ends Well*, I,2,55); words *"charm"* (*Henry VI*, B, I,1,157), they *"are an odd feast"* (*Much Ado About Nothing*, II,3,22), they *"inflict more pain than wounds"* (*Henry VI*, *C*, II,1,99). Simply put, *"the whole world is a word"* (*Timon of Athens*, II,2,162).

3. An Ambivalent Attitude towards Speech

Slightly altering the analysis viewpoint we might even assert that, for instance, Juliet, Cordelia, and Antony question the ability of words to express the abyss of love, while Armado, Orlando and Lear bear the conviction that words possess this power.

As Shakespeare's readers, we attempt at perceiving and understanding both attitudes, although contradictory, since

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they are both epitomes of the vacillating attitude that the great playwright himself, and, by and large the Elizabethans, manifested towards words.

On the one hand, there is with Shakespeare an anticipation of the modern lack of confidence in the power of language, of acknowledging language limitations; on the other hand, Shakespeare, just as most educated Elizabethans, seems to completely trust the ability of words to express thoughts and feelings, and to finally reach the purpose of human relationships.

In what follows, we shall demonstrate that the Shakespearean plays clearly reflect both attitudes of the people back then towards language, having at one extreme the deep distrust as to the revealing force of words, and at the other extreme the complete confidence in the expressive nature of language.

3.1. Complete Belief in the Power of Words

Let us by all means begin by highlighting the most obvious attitude concerning the power of words, although not the prevailing one.

Indeed, Elizabethans loved words. Let us just consider John Lyly's impressive number of proverbs, the catalogue of invectives belonging to Ben Jonson, Sidney's exuberance, and last but not least, the proliferation of volumes on the arts of language, of dictionaries, histories, and so on, and so forth.

The origin of this indisputable love of words lies in the humanistic upbringing, dominated by the interest in language and in the arts of language.

"I would I had bestow'd that time in the tongues that I have in fencing, dancing, and bear-baiting", regrets Sir Andrew in *The Twelfth Night*; *"I had but follow'd the arts!"*

(I,3,92-94)

What Sir Andrew had not however noticed was that the attention paid to language was cultivated by humanistic teachers with a clear view to preserving knowledge, and, moreover, to educate young apprentices into becoming virtuous and wise adults.

Erasmus, the strongest supporter of this pattern of education, explains things as follows: *"Language, indeed, is not simply an end in itself, as we see when we reflect that throughts neglect whole disciplines have been lost, or, at least corrupted"* (199).

Thus, the purpose of studying language is that of learning what exactly can be expressed with its help. The humanistic ideal was not a pure love for words, but love for *res et verba*, things and words, truth-ideas expressed through words.

When Erasmus divides knowledge in two categories - knowledge of things and knowledge of words - the former category gain a plus of importance for him. However, words should by no means be neglected, because, if we do not understand words we will not understand the ideas conveyed through those words.

"They are not to be commended who, in their anxiety to increase their store of truths, neglect the necessary art of expressing them. For ideas are only intelligible to us by means of the words which describe them; wherefore defective knowledge of language reacts upon our apprehension of the truths expressed" (Erasmus, 162).

To uphold however that William Shakespeare wrote plays on words means to ignore the humanistic context, and to interpret his plays just as Armado and Osric would do, without any idea as to the ultimate purpose of language.

The ideas about language with Shakespeare are subject to the ultimate purpose of the play, namely that of offering an ethical reflection upon human nature.

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For instance, in *Richard II*, the ideas about language are focused on its power: the immediate power of a king ordering banishment, the visionary power of words uttered on the death bed by Gaunt, and, finally, the power of ambiguous words by means of which Exton confuses his interlocutors. In context, however, the ideas about language lead us to the central idea of political power being used and abused by two kings together with their counselors who would soon become their murderers.

Extracted from the context, the ideas about language would make up a play whose substance would center around contemplating art, and not around political action as was the initial authorial intention.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* the interest for language concentrates on its power to undo fame and to bear rumours; Hero's life is nearly destroyed by this force, while the same force triggers the love between Beatrice and Benedick. In *King Lear* the overwhelming power of language points at the cruel difference between flattering lie and mere truth.

In all these cases, the ideas about language do not occupy front position within the plays, but represent a means to dramatize characters and stories of ups and downs of human sense and sensibility.

A partial conclusion here would be that the Elizabethan playwright, who loved words, deemed language as the perfect means to reach everything outside the human being. Words and the study of words represented a constant interest for the Elizabethans, but only as a tool of knowledge. This is a noble passion, and it certainly is much older than Elizabethan times.

„Cred însă că se află mai multă frumuseţe şi mai mult avînt în toate astea atunci cînd cineva, folosind arta dialectică şi luînd în grijă un suflet pe măsura ei, răsădeşte şi seamănă în el nu orice cuvîntări, ci pe acelea unite cu ştiinţa, acelea în măsură să-şi vină şi lor înşile în ajutor şi celui care le-a sădit, cele ce nu sînt sterpe, ci au în ele o sămînţă din care, odată semănată în alţi oameni, cu alte firi, încolţesc alte gînduri şi rostiri; da, cuvîntări ce au în ele, fără moarte, puterea de a dărui toate acestea, iar celui înzestrat cu ele cea mai mare fericire dată fiinţei omeneşti" (Platon 276e-277a). Let us just keep in mind that these are Socrates' words excerpted from Platon's dialogue *"Phaidros"*.

Shakespeare employs a similar image in *"All's Well That Ends Well"*, when the king praises Bertram's father, recently deceased for reasons of too vivid an eloquence:

"...his plausive words
He scatter'd not in ears, but grafted them,
To grow there and to bear".
(I,2,53-55)

"Plausive" means both [convincing] - words with purpose, and [worth applauding] - words the palywright had hoped to write, bearers of ideas and supporters of human evolution.

3.2. Utter Disbelief in the Power of Words

All this being said, we shall not, however mistake Shakespeare the language practitioner with his characters. Thus, we mentioned at the beginning of this paper the opposite attitude towards language, worded once again by characters, and manifested by clear distrust in the force of words, in their capacity to capture the absolute truth.

Here is how, one of the sequences that display an impressive linguistic charge refers to the emptiness of words. When

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Angelo is tormented in the agony of an inner breakdown, perceived as rupture between language and meaning, the self-reflexive nature of language emerges:

"When I would pray and think, I think and pray,
To several subjects. Heaven hath my empty words,
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
Anchors on Isabel. Heaven in my mouth,
As if I did but only chew his name,
And in my heart the strong and swelling evil
Of my conception -"
(*Measure for Measure*, II,4,1-7).

Or, in *Romeo and Juliet,* where the issue of language, of its limitations is directly approached: *"What's in a name?"* wonders Juliet, and her question projects both herself and the audience in an spontaneous analysis of proper names and other verbal signs, namely of language. As we very well know, a few centuries later, more precisely during the 20-th century, Ferdinand de Saussure was the one who laid the brought forth the idea that language is a convention , along with the view according to which linguistic signs are fully arbitrary, representing a mere conventional agreement between the members of a certain linguistic community. In Juliet's words, "*That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet"* (*Romeo and Juliet*, II, 2, 85-86).

If that is the case, if everything comes down to a convention, how can one ever trust the power of knowledge through words? This quite modern question, if not post-modern one, caused many critics to see in Shakespeare a radical skepticism, similar to what Thomas Hobbes manifested during the 17-th century; several other critics go so far as to deem Shakespeare as a proto-modernist who anticipates by a few centuries our present-day distrust in the power of language, and by extension, the tragedy of language.

This lack of trust would eventually lead to entirely giving up word and adopting silence, as silence appears to be the ultimate consequence of learning the power of words in Shakespeare's last play, *TheTempest*. It has often been said, and rightly enough, that *TheTempest* depends on everything that is suppressed and unspoken.

"No tongue! All eyes! Be silent" - thus sounds Prospero's urge to silence, to a different opening towards vision and epiphany, to becoming aware of a profound corruption that language undergoes because of its user, or the user undergoes because of language.

Prospero's words cannot but echo another famous phrasing, namely the heart-felt *Catren* belonging to Lucian Blaga:

„Limba nu e vorba ce o faci
Singura limbă, limba ta deplină
Stăpână peste taine şi lumină
E-aceea-n care ştii să taci".

We should not blindly surrender however to either attitude concerning the power of language that both Shakespeare and his contemporaries weighed in a conceptual manner and adopted simultaneously. There should be neither absolute enthusiasm nor complete denial. As long as both attitudes are as strongly outlined, and favouring one or the other is sometimes just a matter of interpretation, our stance, that of the modern audience, should be an unbiased one, that of a cautious observer.

What we mention here is interpretation as operation, which in itself can distinguish several tones of meaning. At this point, it might be useful to return to *The Tempest*, one of the most controversial plays in what concerns selecting verbal hints that would

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suggest one or the other of the two attitudes; in what follows, we shall quote two views belonging to prominent Shakespearean critics, two views that, although opposed, are equally valid, being natural answers to the Shakespearean offer of hints for and against the power of words.

The first opinion belongs to M.M. Mahood and is an openly optimistic one: *"The world of words has once seemed to Shakespeare tragically incompatible with the world of things. Now he finds in the world built from Prospero's words of magic the truth of what we are. Belief in words is foremost among the lost things which are found again in Shakespeare's final comedies"* (16).

The other opinion, this time a skeptical one, belongs to Anna Barton: *"Unlike M.M. Mahood, whose book 'Shakespeare's Wordplay' I have otherwise found extremely illuminating, I cannot see the final romances as embodying a new faith in words after the skepticism of tragedies. Not even Prospero, the magician dramatist who orders the play-world, can bring about a true coherence of minds. He stands among characters sealed off in private worlds of experience, worlds which language is powerless to unite. It seems at least possible that 'The Tempest' was Shakespeare's last non-collaborative play because in it he had reached a point in his investigation of the capabilities of words beyond which he found it difficult to proceed"* (66).

4. Conclusion

Let us not forget that when we read one of Shakespeare's plays, we must not expect to necessarily find in it one or the other of the two attitudes regarding language, but be content with *finding*, and that is all.

As translators, readers or audience of the Shakespearean text, we certainly have the duty to correctly understand not jut the meaning of each isolated word or contextualized word, but moreover, the reasons why that particular word appears where it does in the play; our duty is to perceive and *translate* - also in the sense of deep understanding - both silence and speech, both plenty and void of language.

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