

Poster, Carol and Richard Utz, eds. 1996: *Disputatio. An International Transdisciplinary Journal of the Late Middle Ages. Vol. I. The Late Medieval Epistle*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 229.

The record of the letter as a tool of formal report and display goes back to the birth of Rhetoric. The literary tradition ascribes to Corax of Syracuse the invention, and to Tisias the development and later expansion, of a specific formal pattern that shows a new discursive style. Both Corax and Tisias compelled by the multiple litigations that the tyrants of Syracuse had to confront during the 5th century BC, devised an unknown judicial rhetorical system based on a discursive “disputatio” between two definite subjects: an accuser and an accused (James J. Murphy, *Medieval Eloquence*, Berkeley, 1978; G. Kennedy, *Art of Persuasion in Greece*, Princeton, 1963, 26). However, this relationship intended as a strictly formal one, gave rise to some kind of individual attitudes and ways of acting, especially within the classic Greek society, where oratory was profiled as an instrument to be frequently used in social, cultural and political issues, since it emphasised the primacy of spoken expression, where the presence/ absence of a subject became more remarkable, over written one.

What at the beginning happened to be an accepted and suitable path of oral transmission for any kind of messages, rhetorical or not, began to appear in written documents. This migration was questioned by Plato who considered writing as a disturbed and untrue transcription of oral performance, with a greater degree of formalisation. Aristotle found a point of equilibrium in this connection between oral and written performances, and in his work *De Interpretatione* (I, 1) asserts: “The spoken words are symbols of mental experiences, while the written words are symbols of the spoken words”, giving thus way to the idea that the written can be a legitimate and truthful vehicle of the spoken expression. Once he establishes the legitimacy of the written text, the Stagiran, in his *Ars Rhetorica* (1358b, 1-20) develops in a clear way a theoretical system of discourse, suitable to be applied to any kind of expression, will it be oral or written. There are three clearly defined and distinctive types of discourse: a) Συμβουλευτικόν or deliberative speech, whose

end is advice and dissuasion; b) δικανικόν or judicial speech, whose end is accusation or defence; c) επιδεικτικόν or demonstrative speech, whose end is praise and censorship, a type that fits better into interpersonal discourse.

This last type of speech is explained in detail in the work attributed to Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, where spoken speech is divided into six specific and basic parts: *exordium*, *narratio*, *divisio*, *confirmatio*, *confutatio* and *conclusio*. This division is followed closely and without any important modifications by the medieval “dictatores” and makes up the ground for the subsequent conformation of the *Ars Dictaminis*. In this way all those theoretical principles became a formal pattern of reference for style and property of discourse, in all kinds of critical and political works, in their use in literary texts, and in the epistolary texts.

All the studies in the present collection, show the confluence between tradition and modernity, in a wide period of time and in a genre, the epistolary. They all deal with the problems outlined when we want to establish, from a pragmatic point of view, where is the subject who writes and which is the real message behind what he/ she says. We have seen that the epistolary tradition is created not only by the forms and standards described mainly by Aristotle and Cicero, but also by the implicit controversy between form and subjectivity. The rising of the “economic” subject, due to the change from a market economy to a monetary one, dragged, especially in the 14th century, the rising of the literary subject (Ricardo J. Sola, *Dinámica Social en The Canterbury Tales*. Zaragoza, 1981), masculine as well as feminine and stressed his/ her presence in all areas of life. The issue consists in establishing if the awareness of this “change” and this “presence” are just conclusions of our post-modern era, in which new sociological, linguistic, pragmatic and feminist thinking check this dissociation between text and context and confirm that the meaning of a text is indebted to the context in which it is given, or if they were already detected and unveiled by the commentators and literary authors of the period that is analysed.

In line with the foregoing, the article of Martin Camargo, “Where’s the Brief: The *Ars Dictaminis* and the Reading/ Writing Between the Lines” (1-17), presents a clear and introductory view of the letter as a means of spoken and written transmission, listing the most important definitions of the classic standard accomplished by medieval “dictatores”, as Guido Faba, in *Summa*

Dictaminis (1228-1229) or Conrad de Mure, in *Summa de Arte Prosandi* (1275-1276). The revision features three formal conditions in a letter: the authenticity, the confidentiality and the fact of making present the absent to whom the letter is sent. This shows that the *dictatores* were aware of the possibility of distortion of the message, due to three actors/ subjects of the process: the properly said remittent or sender, his/ her secretary or notary who drafts the letter and, occasionally, the bearer or mediator who can add commentaries on the missive to the addressee. Camargo confirms that, "... such treatises do not and cannot tell us all that we need to know about medieval letters." (1), a widespread opinion among the specialists on the medieval treatises, and he adds that the main reason for this uniformity is that they are centered "...more on form than on function." (1), paying attention to "... how to construct an epistolary text" (1), depreciating the importance of the "context". In this sense, Camargo highlights the differences pointed out by the first known "dictator", Caius Iulius Victor, in the fourth century AD, between informal discourse, *sermo*, and the formal speech of the letter, or *epistola*. The interaction of these elements in the communication act reveals, Camargo says, "... that the tensions masked by the dictatores' confident assertion of the three officially sanctioned functions of a letter were actually felt by medieval "writers" and "readers" of letters" (9). A good example of the fact that this meaningful perception exists and of its literary use is seen in two well-known narrative poems of the period, *La Chanson de Roland* and *Troilus & Criseyde*, where the letters are not only mere formal expressions, but rather conceal attitudes and feelings.

Georgiana Donavin reinforces this opinion in her collaboration, "Locating a Public Forum for the Personal Letter in Malory's *Morte Darthur*" (19-36), and emphasises the importance that even Malory grants to this epistolary art, including a series of letters in his *Morte Darthur* (1469). This inclusion, however, it is not only a reflection of the interest existing in the period by this manner of communication, due to "... widespread instruction in literacy and the advent of a standard language..." (19), but also, says Donavin, attests the importance of the letter as structural and functional element in the narrative composition. Thus we pass from the "real" letter to the "fictional" letter in a fabulated world, a much freer and independent world, but where the essential question is to establish the manner by which fiction is related to life. As a form of transmission of feelings referred to a past era, the letter

stimulates, in this fictional world, a series of intimate episodes that balance between the love, the revenge, and the redemption of the protagonists. The Ciceronian literary canon is taken into account, the Aristotelian norms are followed, but the messages between Arthur and king Mark, at a time in which public letters are frequently used to uncover any type of scandal, exhibits the mixture between traditions and contemporary events, the existing tensions between what is public and what is private. The “divine letters” of the Grail Quest tale function as dissuatory advice for sinners, and as a proposal to maintain the sanctioned social order. The letters of the unfortunate Elaine of Astolat are of praise for Lancelot, and remind the hero the Arthurian ideal of “jantilwomen and wydowes socour”. The letters of Gawain are, again, a praise of and a request to Lancelot and discover the close kinship and tuning in of both gentlemen. That is to say, the tensions that appear in the different groups of letters, carefully analysed by Donavin, confirm the certainty of the existence and awareness of that subjectivity at the level of fiction, though illustrate the tensions between literary text, “a written form”, and social context, the “proper audience and public”.

The step from the classic *exordium* to the *salutatio* and the medieval *captatio benevolentiae*, accomplished by one of the most important *dictatores* of the period, Albericco de Montecassino, is seen by Grant M. Boswell in “*Captatio Benevolentiae: A Note on the Relationship of Prayer and Meditation Treatises to the Artes Dictaminis*” (147-152), as an achievement that is not limited to the area of the *Ars Dictaminis*. Treatises on prayer, like *De Modo Orandi* by Hugo de San Victor, or on meditation, like *Scalae Meditationis* by Wessel Gansfort, include intentional manners to obtain that captatio that exceed the purely formal aspects of the rhetorical standards. Sometimes these manners are expressed as a plea to the audience to capture its attention and interest, with a clear influence of Augustinian doctrine. Regardless of the fact that the writer addresses an outer one, other people, or an inner one, oneself, “These two treatises suggest an interesting connection...” (151) between the medieval epistolary art and ...”other materials found in works on prayer and meditation...” (151).

François Rigolot, “L’émergence de la subjectivité littéraire moderne: *les Epîtres de l’Amant vert* de Jean Lemaire de Belges” (153-159), analyses two peculiar epistles by Jean Lemaire de Belges (c. 1473 - c. 1525), a politician and French diplomat in the reign of Louis XII. In them a parrot, “l’amant vert”,

speaks to its dame, Margarita of Austria, and in its words, "... sur le mode de l'ironie... (157)", one guesses the pain suffered by the animal feeling her forthcoming absence due to a trip that Margarita is going to take. In the second, once the animal is dead, the fowl comments to her all it has been able to see and observe in Hell and in the Elysean Fields. In this way, with a new stylistic resource, "Lemaire met en scène un sujet énonciateur" (158), that is hidden, to mask under such an appearance the real subject, though, in Rigolot's opinion, it does not solve completely the balance between animal and man, and "L'identité de ce sujet locuteur est problématique..." (158).

Romuald I. Lakowsky in "Sir Thomas More's Correspondence: A Survey and a Bibliography" (161-179), makes a vast revision of Sir Thomas More's letters and the critical studies on them. He emphasises More's specific dissertation on the *Ars Rhetorica* in one of his epistles, *Letter to Dorp*, and also his *Ars Poetica*, *Letter to Brixius*, in which More shows himself as a practitioner of the "elogium" and a follower of the current medieval rhetorics. More confirms his preference for the letter-prologue, antecedent of the modern prologue, already used by king Alfred, as an example in which the speaking subject is present with greater strength and genuineness. Lakowsky understands correctly that the problem between formality and subjectivity has entered definitely in a settling process in which we find such figures as Luther and Erasmus, and that More, "a prolific letter writer", is precisely an excellent example of this tuning.

Nadia Margolis in "The Cry of the Chameleon": Evolving voices in the Epistles of Christine de Pizan (37-70), takes us to the feminine subject, and so, to a radically different approach to the problem, since she does not only deal exclusively with the distinction between form and subjectivity, but also with the possibilities and limitations of the woman as a proponent of this kind of discourse. Margolis discovers that the different poetic voices that emanate from Christine de Pizan's letters outline, in the epistolary genre, a proper discourse in which is given a certain conjunction between the formal standards known and feminine subjective expression. In the courtly genre, in French, as well as in the *dictamen*, in Latin and the genre of humanist epistolography, we see the use of tradition, especially in the *dictamen* and its later evolution, characterised by an attempt to abandon the Donatist conventions, started in the most important work of the grammarian and commentator Donatus, *Ars Minor*, and Priscianist ones, coming from the most meaningful

works by the also grammarian Priscian, as *De Metris Fabularum Terentii* or *Institutiones Grammaticae*. On the other hand, the use of three formal conventions, prose, metric verse and rhythmic prose, reflects Christine's formal concern with the new and emerging grammars in the different vernacular languages. This personal concern with formal problems of the expression, that have a clear reference in the Rhetorical treatises by Matthew de Vendôme, *Ars Versificatoria*, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, and John of Garland, *De Arte Prosayca, Metrica et Rithmica*, do not prevent, however, Margolis says, the presence of feminine subjectivity. In spite of Eustache Morel Deschamps's influence, with his work *L'Art de Dictier*, in which versification is transformed into a part of the Rhetoric and in connection with musical style, Christine appears as a emerging symbol of this feminine subjectivity with new ideals but whose "... very identity found itself often caught between cruelly arbitrary notions of "first" and "second" place: socially as a woman and widow with connections to the royal court but not noble herself and sympathetic to the lower classes... " (40).

Margolis warns us of the commented fact of the multiple voices in the text, but points out that there are especially two of them that are heard above the rest: that from the ancient gods and her own voice. Through them, Christine releases a series of distinctive emotions, criticises the courtly mores, that measure in a different way adulterous love, and reproaches the generalised corruption of the era that weakens especially the most unfortunate and poor. To do this, she appeals to the ancient science, a fact that allows also the attack on her contemporaries, recapturing the topic of the "Golden Age" in which the right government and justice were prevailing, something which recalls us Hesiod's aspirations. In her search of peace, Christine designs a form of moral literature with a nationalist scope in mind and with a deep desire for the end of the wars, in an era characterised by the constant warlike confrontations. Her compassionate voice urges the "cure for the malady within France's body politic" (55) with the remittance to "the Ovidian love-sickness repertory" (55), evoking also that of "ubi sunt", and missing, again, the Golden Age "ruled by reason" instead of "violence and chaos", a search, no doubt, of the "Pax Augusta", like the one in which Horace, Virgil, Tibulus or Propertius, those who conceived the prince August as a hope of peace, were also engaged in their moment. In the case of Christine, she finds consolation in Christian pray, when she remembers the

suffering of the widows of the wars and uses for this “the prison motif, a familiar courtly lyrical image here fused with the Christian-platonic one of the body-as-tomb or prison” (58), as well as that of the stoic acceptance of the uncontrolled evils that we cannot avoid.

Continuing in this line, Yvonne LeBlanc, in “Queen Anne in the Lonely, Tear-Soaked Bed of Penelope: Rewriting the *Heroides* in Sixteenth-Century France” (71-87), shows the fascination and confusion of fourteenth and fifteenth century readers and writers with Ovid’s *Heroides*, a collection of love letters evoking a female voice in which “a commentator erroneously states” the Ovidian moralizing spirit, or catalogues his *Heroides* as a “redemptive work, an act of penitence by a chastised poet” (72). These thirteenth epistles were translated, imitated and reproduced in different ways and with several functions by sixteenth century French writers, La Vigne, Marot, Andrelini and Cretin. In them, the exotic environment and the Christian tone are intermingled, as well as the ancient and new ideas of chastity. The abandonment motif, taken from the Ovidian character, Ariadna, assumes a new dimension, since the loneliness of her French counterpart provokes some real fears, as compared to the imaginary ones expressed in the Ovidian original. The new French “Pentesilea”, Belle Amazonne, for example, is at the end more fragile than her Latin precedent. The Ovidian letters are remembered in all the possible circumstances and variants, especially when they are used to define and label moral attitudes, proposing the difference between those rejectable models, like that of Phaedra, and those morally required ones, like that of Penelope, used by Fausto Andrelini to describe Louis XII’s wife, Anne, faithfully awaiting “the return of her victorious husband from the war” (82).

Albrecht Classen and Malcolm Richardson review the panorama of woman in Germany and England, and by extension in all Europe, focusing on the social, economic and cultural evolution of the feminine subject, censured since Antiquity by masculine authority and who must fight sternly in order to “be” a literary subject. In this sense, Classen, “Female Explorations of Literacy: Epistolary Challenges to the Literary Canon in the Late Middle Ages” (89-121), confirms that the circles of noble women who had the chance of entering the standard level of culture and acquiring the sufficient intellectual capacity and learning, opted for the epistolary genre, considered as marginal, to exchange personal experiences. We may question the genuineness of their feelings expressed in the letters, due, in part, to the need of

concealing the feminine subject behind a “high degree of formalism”, but it is clear that the themes of the letters deal with multicoloured aspects, political as well as economic, and close to them more personal and intimate aspects. On the other hand, Richardson in his contribution, “Women, Commerce, and Writing in Late Medieval England” (123-145), insists on the difficulty that women had to establish themselves as an economic subject both in the rural as well as in the urban medium. Though she performs a series of tasks in the economic and labour fields due to the temporary absences of man, either because of war or because of businesses, the fact is that she does not, in the end, assume an independent and autonomous social and economic role, or find a series of limitations: “... women were mostly limited to occupations compatible with child care; trades which required travelling, for example, were closed to them.” (125). Yet Classen and Richardson’s contributions impress the reader with the amount and variety of topics, themes and devices that women used in order to express their subjectivity.

We might conclude this review by recognising that the scholars in this collection echo the significance in the epistolary genre of an emerging modern spirit whose most meaningful key consists in detecting the awareness and presence of one or several intentional subjects in the interior of an apparently formal and objective structure. All the difficulties enclosed in the recognition of this subjectivity, are increased when the remittent is a woman, though it seems now clear that it was precisely women who with greater strength broke free from the rhetorical formalisms and used all the emotional possibilities than the letter provided to her. It is true that this point of view opens the path for a suggestive and interesting analysis, but it is an issue that needs a wider and deeper research in order to limit and define, in a clear and “impartial” manner, the real role and influence of this “new” woman emerging within a given masculine cultural world, a role that the classic referents had obviated or accommodated. In all cases, however, the writers in this collection make it clear that, though the authors of the epistles are aware of the existence of a permanent debt to classic models, there is also a clear purpose to revise this tradition and use what was frequently done in a more hidden than open way, yet motivated by the social and economic circumstances.

Janet Luehring and Richard J. Utz’s final comprehensive bibliography copes with the rhetorical studies at large and the epistolographic ones in par-

ticular, emphasises the rhetorical and thematic aspects as well as its relevance in all the European cultures, and includes such out-of-hand places like eastern countries and Russia. The temporal spectrum analysed is rather wide, covering a span of time from the twelfth until the sixteenth century, and so, we should not talk of uniformity but rather of a process in which we still need to explain the role played by adjacent cultural worlds, besides the Classic, that flowed into European mainland in the Middle Ages, the Christian, the Jewish and the Arab -not to forget the “Andalusí heritage”- worlds.

José María Gutiérrez Arranz & Ricardo J. Sola Buil
Universidad de Alcalá de Henares

* † *