The Players' Speech in *Hamlet*: A Synthesis of Virgilian Narrative and *Ecphrasis*

Scholars have long noted that the Player's speech (2.2.408-476) in *Hamlet* constitutes a creative reworking of the episode of Priam's death in *Aeneid* 2 (486-558). In contrast to previous studies, which have focused exclusively on Shakespeare's appropriation of the second book of Virgil's epic, this paper argues that the dramatist blends masterfully in the Player's speech the narrative of Book 2 with the *ecphrasis* of Book 1, in which Aeneas gazes at the Trojan war scenes decorating the frieze of Juno's temple in Carthage (*Aen.* 1.453-493). The way Shakespeare achieves this is by representing Pyrrhus simultaneously as a living character in flesh and blood and as a figure depicted in a painting.

One possible antecedent for Shakespeare's innovative narrative technique is Marlowe's *Dido*, where the immobilized Pyrrhus is implicitly depicted as a statue (*Dido* 2.1.261-262). The Marlovian description is echoed in Shakespeare's potrayal of Pyrrhus as standing still "like a painted tyrant" upon hearing the downfall of the Trojan citadel (*Ham.* 2.2.432-440). The playwright may have derived from his predecessor the image of the motionless Pyrrhus, but has transformed the statue metaphor into painting imagery, so as to allude to the *ecphrasis* of *Aeneid* 1. The chief model, however, for Shakespeare's merging of *ecphrasis* and narrative can be found in his own earlier lyrical epyllion, *The Rape of Lucrece*, in which the female protagonist after her violation by Tarquin turns for consolation to a tapestry which depicts several episodes from the Trojan war (*Lucr.* 1366-1568). The description includes both scenes drawn from the *ecphrasis* of *Aeneid* 1 (e.g. Troilus) as well as episodes from *Aeneid* 2, including Priam's murder. Therefore, whereas in *Lucrece* the playwright incorporates in the *ecphrasis* episodes recounted in *Aeneid* 2, in *Hamlet* he does the exact opposite, namely he obliquely introduces ecphrastic elements into the narrative.

Select Bibliography

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