Torres Naharro’s Rhetorical Skirmish in *Comedia Himenea*

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**Abstract** Bartolomé de Torres Naharro’s (1485–1530) most well known comedy to the modern reader is his *Himenea* (1516?). There are outstanding similarities between this work and works that would be written by the later dramaturges, especially Lope de Vega. In Torres Naharro’s plays, a wide range of characters appear, each generally speaking in a register appropriate to his or her station. Another notable use of language is Torres Naharro’s deployment of formal rhetoric in the work. I demonstrate that throughout the play, characters often use the precepts expounded in classical rhetoric in an attempt to persuade or convince other characters of their guilt or innocence (the judicial genre) or to convince others to follow a course of action (the deliberative genre). I conclude that far from being a casual or accidental characteristic of the work, these highly stylized rhetorical passages, the context in which they are delivered and the effect that they have lead the spectator to consider the very nature of rhetoric. Torres Naharro consciously exposes the seamy underside of rhetoric and exposes its weaknesses—the inherent corruptibility of the art by the unscrupulous, and rhetoric’s ultimate failure even when expertly deployed.

**Keywords** Torres Naharro · Rhetoric · Humanism · Comedia Himenea · Spanish theater (pre-1600)

Bartolomé de Torres Naharro’s most well known comedy to the modern reader is his *Comedia Himenea*. The similarities between this work and works that would be written by the later dramaturges, especially Lope de Vega, call attention to its author as a playwright ahead of his time. His use of an urban setting, the love interest, the brother who must maintain his family’s honor, the *gracioso*, all point to the core
characteristics of Lope’s great commercial successes of the next century (Lihani 1979, p. 108). Indeed, had Torres Naharro had any disciple who carried on his work, he would probably be known today as the founder, or at least precursor, to the comedia that would be the theater rage in seventeenth-century Spain. Yet just as interesting as Torres Naharro’s work is from the standpoint of the history of the theater, the Comedia Himenea also foregrounds a fundamental aspect of Renaissance culture, one that has not been often examined in the context of Spanish Renaissance theater: the role of rhetoric.

The plot of this comedy is immediately recognizable to a reader of the seventeenth-century comedia. Himeneo falls in love with Febea and courts her. She also loves him, and though she protects her virtue, she allows him to visit her at her window, and after a brief conversation, promises to allow him to enter the house the next night. Himeneo’s servants Eliseo and Boreas appear to help Himeneo, but like Calisto’s Sempronio and Pármeno in La Celestina, they are more careful to look after their own interests. The next night, when Febea’s brother the Marqués appears with his servant Turpedio, Himeneo’s servants flee from outside Febea’s house. The Marqués enters and finds Febea and Himeneo, the Himeneo immediately flees. The Marqués vows to avenge the stain on the family’s honor by killing his sister. In the end, though, Himeneo reappears to declare his honorable intentions to the Marqués, who in turn recognizes the benefits of marrying Febea to Himeneo. The Marqués acquiesces to Himeneo’s plea for mercy and all ends happily.

Among the work’s features stands Torres Naharro’s use of classical rhetoric. Throughout the play characters often use the precepts expounded in classical rhetoric to attempt to persuade or to convince other characters of their guilt or innocence (the judicial genre) or to convince others to follow a course of action (the deliberative genre). Far from being a casual or accidental characteristic of the work, these highly stylized rhetorical passages, the context in which they are delivered and the effect that they have lead the spectator (or the modern reader) to consider the nature of rhetoric itself. Like Plato’s distrust of the Sophists, Torres Naharro consciously examines the seamy underside of rhetoric and exposes its weaknesses—the inherent corruptibility of the art by the unscrupulous and the possible failure of rhetoric even when used in defense of a just and good cause.

Rhetoric formed an important part of the world in which Bartolomé de Torres Naharro lived. Politically, the Crowns of Castile and Aragon had been united in the persons of Ferdinand and Isabel, America was being explored and conquered, and Spain was a world power, and rhetoric shaped political thought and discourse. Culturally, humanism was changing how people thought about the world, and rhetoric, as one of the touchstones of the studia humanitatis, the humanistic

1 “La honra de la doncella y el honor familiar, que culmina en el último acto (vv. 1454–1507), pero que se esboza hábilmente desde el primer diálogo de los amantes (vv. 699–713) es el verdadero eje de la comedia. El fenómeno está ya presentado con todas sus tintas y el mismo mecanismo psicológico-social del teatro barroco está ya en marcha; la muerte causante del la deshonra como recuperadora del honor mancillado” (López Morales 73). Zimic notes that “es probable que a partir de la segunda mitad del s. xvi … la Comedia Ymenea, atentamente leída por algún dramaturgo interesado en el tema del honor, haya servido de estímulo … contribuyendo así a la pervivencia y continuidad del genuino sentimiento cristiano en el teatro del Siglo de Oro” (Zimic 1990, p. 363).