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## HOW TO JUSTIFY A MURDERER: ANCIENT RHETORICAL ECHOES IN ALEXANDRE SYLVAIN VAN DEN BUSSCHE'S *ÉPITOMES DE CENT HISTOIRES TRAGIQUES*

**Abstract.** In 1581, Alexandre Sylvain Van den Bussche published in Paris his most significant work, *Épitomes de cent histoires tragiques*, a collection formally indebted to Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae*. The thematic material is derived both from classical and contemporary sources, while also reflecting the inventive capacity of an erudite author who freely appropriates ancient *exempla* in order to illuminate the realities of the sixteenth century. Each epitome is structured in three parts: an initial exposition of the case, followed by two opposing orations articulating *pro et contra* positions. Of particular scholarly interest is the judicial discourse that subjects the act of homicide to moral evaluation. In this context, one observes – often with considerable astonishment – the paradoxical construction of the speaker's ethos (whether as prosecutor or advocate), the deployment of a rigorously organized network of arguments and rhetorical figures, and the calculated appeal to the affective disposition of the reader, who assumes the role of witness to a simulated trial. Through these strategies, the author foregrounds a striking form of axiological relativism. Such a procedure deliberately destabilizes the interpretive horizon of the audience, compelling them to interrogate values that might otherwise appear self-evident. It provokes a series of unsettling questions: must the individual who has killed with premeditation necessarily be judged guilty? Are we confronted with sophistic reasoning? Can the author be regarded as a neutral arbiter? Ultimately, it is the reader who bears the responsibility of exercising critical initiative in the search for answers.

**Keywords:** Alexandre Van den Bussche, epitomes of tragic stories, murderer, ethos, logos, pathos, rhetorical speech, persuasion, ancient rhetoric, 16<sup>th</sup> century

A Flemish author residing in France from around 1570, Alexandre Sylvain Van den Bussche, gratified by the considerable publishing success of his *Procès tragiques* (1575), expanded the work after several reissues by adding forty-five



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further narratives. In 1581 he brought out in Paris this enlarged edition under the title *Épitomes de cent histoires tragiques, partie extraittes des Actes des Romains et autres, De l'invention de l'Autheur, avecq' les demandes, accusations et deffences sur la matière d'icelles*<sup>1</sup>. As the title itself indicates, the author drew upon both classical and contemporary sources, while adopting Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae*<sup>2</sup> as a formal model. This collection of epitomes<sup>3</sup> – generally regarded as the most significant work in Van den Bussche's corpus – continued to attract attention into the seventeenth century, but subsequently lapsed into obscurity<sup>4</sup>. Even today, only a handful of scholars devote sustained attention to its distinctive character and to the wealth of material it still conceals.

It must be stressed that the present study does not aim to undertake a comparative analysis of those narratives that appear in both Seneca and Van den Bussche, since such an attempt has already been made<sup>5</sup>. Rather, within the tripartite division of rhetorical genres, our concern lies with those instances of judicial discourse absent from the Rhetor, or, more precisely, with those that prove most “controversial”: namely, the discourses that subject the figure of the murderer – understood as one who either committed premeditated homicide personally or commissioned another to do so – to moral evaluation. Because Van den Bussche's epitomes assume

<sup>1</sup> The full title of the work, published in 1575 by Nicolas Bonfons in Paris, is *Le Premier livre des proces tragiques, contenant cinquante cinq histoires, avec les accusations, demandes, et deffences d'icelles*. The author stresses that this constitutes only the first volume, and that the appearance of the second depends upon the reception of the first by its readers. The book was subsequently reprinted under the same title by Guillaume le Niergue in Antwerp in 1579 and 1580. An expanded edition, issued with a revised title, was once again printed by Nicolas Bonfons in 1581 and reissued in 1588 (*Théâtre de la cruauté et récits sanglants en France (XVI<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, ed. Ch. BIET, Paris 2006, p. 70, 72; A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle. Alexandre Van Den Bussche, Lecteur De Sénèque*, [in:] *La Nouvelle De Langue Française Aux Frontières Des Autres Genres, Du Moyen Âge à Nos Jours*, vol. I, Ottignies 1997, p. 44, 50–51; H. HELBIG, *Œuvres choisies d'Alexandre Sylvain de Flandre, poète à la cour de Charles IX et de Henri III*, Liège 1861, p. XIV, LIII).

<sup>2</sup> Sources of inspiration include, for instance, Thucydides, Gaius Hyginus, and Valerius Maximus, as well as Italian novellas, the so-called *discours bigarré*, and various miraculous and tragic narratives (*Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 72–73; H. HELBIG, *Œuvres choisies...*, p. LVI).

<sup>3</sup> The term “epitome” was employed in the sixteenth century with the meaning of “summary”, “abridgment”, or “compendium” (*breviarium, abbreviatio, vel compendium: à verbo Græco ἐπιτέμνω, quod est abbrevio*, A. CALEPINO, *Ambrosii Calepini Dictionarium, Quanta maxima fide ac diligentia fieri potuit accurate emendatum, multisque partibus cumulatum*, Paris 1578, p. 434). As will become evident, this semantic range aptly conveys the character of the narratives presented by Van den Bussche.

<sup>4</sup> *Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 72; A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 44, 51; H. HELBIG, *Œuvres choisies...*, p. XXXII–XXXIII, LV–LVI.

<sup>5</sup> Based on the *Procès tragiques*, Alain Cullière compared the first “process” (which corresponds to epitome 35 in the *Épitomes de cent histoires tragiques*) with the related “controversy” (A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 45–50).

the form of orations, they may be fruitfully examined through the lens of the Aristotelian rhetorical triangle, which presupposes the interplay of a credible speaker (ethos), a discourse that advances evidence in logical support of a thesis (logos), and an audience disposed to persuasion through affective appeal (pathos)<sup>6</sup>. Such a perspective makes it possible to discern how the structural organization, topical strategies, and rhetorical devices employed in the *Épitomes* may shape the evaluation of criminal acts to the point that the guilt of the accused is rendered problematic. We shall also inquire into the extent to which Van den Bussche was indebted to the ancient rhetorical tradition, and the extent to which he produced a work that functions as a testimony to the intellectual and cultural climate of his own epoch.

### Ethos

Van den Bussche's work may be situated not only within the poetics of short narrative forms characteristic of the late sixteenth century, but also within a broader conception of literature as an instrument of persuasion, rather than as a vehicle for the author's self-expression or the articulation of subjective value judgments prioritized over the views of authorities (*auctoritas*)<sup>7</sup>. This does not imply, however, that the author neglects the cultivation of ethos; on the contrary, the deliberate construction of credibility and authority constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for effective rhetorical influence upon the audience. Such cultivation is achieved exclusively through verbal strategies, since in this case elements of *actio* are virtually absent.

The epitomes of tragic narratives provide a particularly illuminating case in this regard, insofar as they simulate the presence of three distinct voices: that of the narrator and those of the two opposing orators. It should be recalled that the structure of the *Controversiae* – at least in the extended versions transmitted to us – is markedly more polyphonic, with multiple rhetors intervening in the course of the proceedings. Van den Bussche, by contrast, appears to have adopted the *excerpta* as his model: concise compilations of anonymous quotations (*sententiae*) that could be mobilized in the construction of arguments either for the prosecution or for the defense. These abridged forms also dispense with the division into *sententiae*, *divisiones*, and *colores*, which in Seneca's case permitted the presentation of an anthology of statements by individual speakers on a given theme, followed by a twofold elaboration of the issues at stake: on the one hand, through the

<sup>6</sup> Τῶν δὲ διὰ τοῦ λόγου ποριζομένων πίστεων τρία εἶδη ἐστίν. αἱ μὲν γάρ εἰσιν ἐν τῷ ἤθει τοῦ λέγοντος, αἱ δὲ ἐν τῷ τὸν ἀκροατὴν διαθεῖναι πως, αἱ δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ λόγῳ διὰ τοῦ δεικνύναι ἢ φαίνεσθαι δεικνύναι (ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*, 1356 a, 1–4; this source is cited: ARISTOTE, *Rhétorique*, vol. I, Paris 1960, p. 76).

<sup>7</sup> A landmark work in this field is Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, first published in 1580.

interpretation of legal norms, and on the other, through a subjective evaluation of the circumstances surrounding the crime<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, while retaining the tripartite compositional scheme characteristic of the *excerpta*, the Flemish author structures each of the one hundred cases according to the canonical components of rhetorical discourse: *narratio*, *probatio* and *refutatio*. If one were to seek an *exordium* within this framework, its function could be ascribed either to the title of each epitome or to the formulaic citation of the legal provision that inaugurates the trial (“the law is such that...”, “the law commands that...”)⁹. The latter, however, does not invariably appear, as is also the case in Seneca.

The omission of an introductory section and the immediate transition to the narrative itself may be interpreted as a deliberate strategy of ethos-construction. It should nevertheless be emphasized that the collection of one hundred epitomes, considered in its entirety, is prefaced by a paratextual introduction containing a *captatio benevolentiae*<sup>10</sup> and an explicit articulation of cognitive and didactic objectives that guided the author’s compositional practice<sup>11</sup>. On the one hand, this prefatory discourse projects an authorial persona intent on persuading the reader of the utility of the work by underscoring its exemplary value for the formation of moral attitudes and civic conduct – an entirely conventional procedure in sixteenth-century literary production<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, the absence of such extradiegetic framing devices within the epitomes themselves is calculated to produce the impression of a neutral narratorial voice, whose presence is dictated solely

<sup>8</sup> A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 40–41, 47; Ch. GUÉRIN, *Extraction, remémoration et discontinuité dans les Controverses de Sénèque le père: du déclamateur au texte*, [in:] S. MORLET, *Lire en extraits. Lecture et production des textes, de l’Antiquité à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Paris 2015, p. 2–3, 15.

<sup>9</sup> *la loy est telle que...* (f<sup>o</sup> 83 v<sup>o</sup>), *la loy ordonne que...* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires tragicques, partie extraittes des Actes des Romains et autres, De l’invention de l’Auteur, avecq’les demandes, accusations et deffences sur la matiere d’icelles*, Paris: Nicolas Bonfons, 1581, f<sup>o</sup> 185 v<sup>o</sup>).

<sup>10</sup> *Le restant [de mes arguments], sauf les histoires, est de mon labeur propre, lequel vous supplie, lecteur amiable, recevoir avecq’une benignité egale à ma bonne volonté* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f<sup>o</sup> à iiij r<sup>o</sup>).

<sup>11</sup> Engagement with the contents of the *Epitomes* is intended to serve a threefold purpose: first, to enable the reader to recognize the multitude of misfortunes from which he has been spared; second, to cultivate greater endurance in the face of those adversities he has in fact encountered; and third, to impart the capacity either to avoid dangers altogether or to extricate oneself from them through prudent self-defense. In this respect, the act of reading functions as a means of fostering prudence and of acquiring, within a relatively brief span, an experience otherwise attainable only over the course of a lifetime. The assumptions articulated in the introduction (together with the fundamental characteristics of the epitome) have been discussed in: J. GIERNATOWSKA, *Delectare, movere, docere – dualizm w krwawym fait divers szesnasto- i siedemnastowiecznej Francji*, [in:] *Dualizm w dawnych literaturach romańskich*, ed. A. CHMIEL, A. RABSZTYN, Katowice 2021, p. 118–120.

<sup>12</sup> W.K. PIETRZAK, *Le Tragique dans les nouvelles exemplaires en France au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Łódź 2006, p. 381–382.

by the necessity of recounting the factual nucleus that initiates the judicial debate. Narratorial interventions are rare and generally confined to two functions: either to underscore that a given trial was transmitted by a trustworthy informant<sup>13</sup>, or, anticipating possible objections to the chosen discursive method, to affirm its grounding in ancient rhetorical models<sup>14</sup>. The narrator's credibility, however, rests less on the factual veracity of the situations depicted – for in the introduction the author himself acknowledges that, in accordance with the principle of *varietas*, he does not hesitate to resort to creative invention<sup>15</sup> – than on the consistent maintenance of impartiality in the treatment of the anecdotal material. Epitome 94 may serve as a paradigmatic example in this respect:

Un Comte de Flandres nommé Baudouin, et surnommé Apquin, estoit grand justicier, et tenoit grosse court, surquoy advint, que quelques Marchans Joyauliers le vindrent trouver, et vendirent quelques bagues, puis partant de là furent suivis et vollez par quatre gentils hommes favoris du Comte, lesquels estant accusez par ledits marchans et eux ne pouvant nyer le fait, le Comte s'en collera tellement qu'il jura de ne dormir jamais, qu'il ne les veid pendre par le col. Mais les biens renduz aux marchans, plusieurs seigneurs et dames vindrent interceder pour les gentils hommes prisonniers, ausquels le Comte après longues prieres donna bonne esperance, puis devant que se coucher, feit mener les prisonniers en la salle, et feit attacher quatre touailles de lin à une poutre, puis dit aux prisonniers : « Vous sçavez le serment, que j'ay fait : parquoy vous attacheray à ces touailles par le col : puis chacun de vous leve, ou hauce les jambes, les retirant tellement que je puisse dire vous avoir veu penduz, puis remettant voz pieds sur la table, pourrez desfaire les touailles, et dire que mon serment est accompli, mais n'autrefois soyez plus sages ». Les prisonniers feirent le commandement du Comte, lequel les voyant bien attachez jetta la table à terre, et les laissant penduz, ferma la salle où d'eux mesmes sestranglerent, mais les parens des patiens, accuserent le Comte, devant le Roy de France, son souverain seigneur.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The case in question concerns epitome 87, in which a Piedmontese man petitions for the restitution of his property after having been presumed dead for fourteen years: *Ce proces precedent est veritable et m'a esté compté par le sieur Jean Chasteillier, Chevalier, Conseiller du Roy, et intendant des finances de sa majesté, qui m'a asseuré d'avoir esté en Piedmont, durant le proces susdit* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 212 r°).

<sup>14</sup> This is the crowning remark of the final epitome and, indeed, of the entire work: *J'ay traduit ces deux harangues de T. Live, pour monstrer que la façon des miennes n'estoit inusitee entre les anticques* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 259 r°).

<sup>15</sup> *Or d'autant que la variation est à plusieurs delectable, j'ay prins partie de mes arguments, des historiens Romains, partie de Seneca, autres de mon invention, et le restant de choses advenues par plusieurs provinces* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° à iij v°).

<sup>16</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 233 r°–v°. Cf. the much shorter descriptions – which likewise address interesting circumstances of the crime – in epitome 9: *Une femme lavant un petit enfant, void sa petite fille qui tombe dans le feu, parquoy estant trop hastive pour la secourir, laisse tomber son fils dans le cuveau, tellement qu'il se noye, le mary de la femme survient, qui la tue: les parens de la femme l'aprehendent et l'accusent à la Justice* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 36 v°–37 r°), or in epitome 21: *Sadoc et Gamalyel entre autres estoient freres l'un excellent en lettres, et l'autre en armes. Sadoc predict par Astrologie à son frere que s'il se marie sans le consentement de tous ses freres qu'il en adviendra un grand malheur, et deshonneur à tout leur lignage.*

At first glance, one might expect that by invoking a narrative derived from the medieval Ghent legends<sup>17</sup> concerning the deeds of Baldwin VII Hapkin, ruler of Flanders in the twelfth century, the narrator would inevitably lapse into evaluative commentary – whether through the selective use of epithets or through moralizing embellishment couched in evocative description, in the spirit of sixteenth-century *emulatio*<sup>18</sup>. Yet, contrary to this expectation, the narrator confines himself to the presentation of ostensibly factual material<sup>19</sup> and minimizes the deployment of adjectives, adjectival past participles (*participes passés*), and adverbial modifiers, employing them only insofar as they are necessary to delineate the historical context, the social status of the protagonists, and the sequence of events. Even the brief passage which, by means of an expression of intensity (*expression d'intensité*), articulates the Count's emotional response to the theft (“le Comte s'en collera tellement que...”) refrains from moral evaluation; rather, it functions as a causal explanation of the character's subsequent conduct. The narrative texture is dominated by dynamic verbal forms (“partir”, “donner”, “hausser”, “retirer”, “pendre”, “jeter”, “fermer”, *etc.*), supplemented by auxiliary and semi-auxiliary constructions (“faire mener”, “faire attacher”, “venir trouver”, “venir intercéder”), which collectively produce an effect of briskness, clarity, and objectivity. On the macro-structural plane, the passage may be interpreted as an instance of hypotyposis, which, through concise yet vivid delineation, enables the reader to visualize the tragic incident with immediacy. The insertion of Baldwin's direct speech does not undermine this effect; rather than introducing an affective surplus, it provides a rationalizing explanation of how four men, by their own volition and without protest, “hang themselves” at the Count's command.

Once the reader has received the essential information from an ostensibly impartial narrator, he is already positioned to formulate a preliminary judgment concerning the crime described. Yet the decisive moment is deferred until the delivery of the speeches of the accuser and the defender. It is important to recall that in Seneca these roles were assumed by magistrates or other public officials – figures whose institutional authority and social reputation conferred credibility even prior to the utterance of their first words<sup>20</sup>. In Van den Bussche, by contrast,

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*Gamalyel negligéant cest advis se marie en pays estrange, puis au bout d'un temps meine sa femme (qui estoit fort belle) en son pays, et obtenant de ses freres sa part du patrimoine vit paisiblement: estatnt un jour malade, Sadoc le visita si souvent qu'il devint amoureux de sa belle sœur, et trouva le moyen d'en jouyr quasi par force, laquelle declairant le fait à son mary il tue son frere Sadoc, et un autre qui venoit pour le deffendre, dequoy les autres freres, et parens irritez l'accusent à la Justice (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 75 v°– 76 r°).*

<sup>17</sup> *Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 73; H. HELBIG, *Œuvres choisies...*, p. LVII.

<sup>18</sup> Moreover, adherence to this most accomplished form of imitation was a defining feature of the authors of the series of tragic narratives to which the title of Van den Bussche's work alludes.

<sup>19</sup> *Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Yet, according to Aristotle's theory, such an effect ought to be produced by the discourse itself rather than by the reputation of the orator (ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*, 1356 a, 8–10).

it is not uncommon for the accused to plead his own case. Such is the situation with the Counts of Flanders (epitomes 2, 94), Gaius Servilius Ahala (10), Gamaliel (21), the judge (31), Romulus (74) and a surgeon (81). In other instances, the defense is undertaken by the accused's kin (9, 88), an anonymous friend (78), or a designated representative (Marcus Atilius Regulus in epitome 1). The accusatory role is frequently assumed by the victim's family (9, 21, 31, 78, 94), but it may also be voiced by institutional or collective entities: the tribune (10), the Roman Senate (74), the Attorney General (81) or the people themselves – the Capuans (1), the Flemings (2), the Romans (88). Thus, in the majority of cases, the speakers are individuals of recognized authority or elevated social standing. At the same time, these figures are rarely professional orators, and their direct involvement in the matter lends their interventions a markedly personal character<sup>21</sup>, even though their arguments paradoxically often appeal to universal principles. In every case, the speaker reinforces his ethos by destabilizing the moral credibility of his opponent.

What emerges most strikingly, however, is the rhetorical construction of the ethos of the murderer, whether articulated by the accused himself or mediated through a representative (in which case two character images are simultaneously fashioned). In neither scenario does the accused resort to the first defensive strategy identified by Cicero<sup>22</sup> – namely, the outright denial of the charge – for such a move would compromise his credibility and integrity. The rhetorical task, rather, is to demonstrate moral worth despite the commission of a violent act: “He does not deny his fault”<sup>23</sup>, declare the parents of the wife-killer (E. 9). The defense thus proceeds by interrogating the very concept of crime, seeking to demonstrate either that the act is not as heinous as it appears, or that – even if it is – circumstances exist that render it justifiable, or at least deserving of clemency<sup>24</sup>. It is precisely in the elaboration of these defense speeches that Van den Bussche displays his greatest rhetorical inventiveness.

<sup>21</sup> A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> CICERO, *Oratoriae partitiones*, XXIX, *Oratoriae partitiones*, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0474.phi038.perseus-lat1:29.102> [26 IV 2025].

<sup>23</sup> *Il ne nye point sa faute* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 38 v°).

<sup>24</sup> *Et quoniam semper is qui defendit non solum resistat oportet aliquo certo statu aut infitiando aut definiendo aut aequitate opponenda, sed etiam rationem subiciat recusationis suae, primus ille status rationem habet iniqui criminis ipsam negationem infitiationemque facti; secundus, quod non sit in re quod ab adversario ponatur in verbo; tertius, quod id rectum esse defendat quod sine ulla nominis controversia factum esse fateatur* (CICERO, *Oratoriae partitiones*, XXIX).

## Logos

It is, of course, impossible within the scope of this discussion to enumerate exhaustively all the arguments and the intricate – at times even deliberately paradoxical – logical connections to which the opposing parties resort in the context of these staged trials. Nevertheless, even a selective indication of the motifs most frequently mobilized at the level of *inventio* suffices to demonstrate that the same argumentative topos may be strategically redeployed both within the *probatio* and the *refutatio*. Such polyvalent applicability underscores the distinctive axiological relativism that permeates the content of the epitome.

Among the most frequently recurring concepts is the appeal to the good of the state. Within this framework, the victim is consistently construed as an individual whose existence constitutes a grave threat to the fatherland and to civic order, so that his elimination is represented not merely as a permissible act but as a civic obligation (*officium*). Thus, when Sadoc's surviving brothers accuse Gamaliel<sup>25</sup> of having assumed the role of an executioner<sup>26</sup> rather than fulfilling his proper duty – since, in their view, his life *should be devoted solely to instruction, and to the defense of his country and his family*<sup>27</sup> – he dismisses the charge as a conventional calumny. He presents himself instead as *who did what they ought to have desired, namely, to remove from among them a superstitious soothsayer, not only harmful to his own but to the entire Republic*<sup>28</sup>.

In order to accentuate the social danger embodied by his brother, Gamaliel enumerates his vices and reinforces the accusation through a rhetorical question: *Is it not more than evident that such people are so swollen with ambition that they would rather see the death of one million men than allow anyone to know*

<sup>25</sup> A curious detail lies in the fact that the names of the epitome's protagonists call to mind biblical figures, while their qualities seem to set them in opposition to those very figures. Sadoc (Zadoc), whose name signifies "righteous", was a priest renowned for his loyalty to King David. Yet, as the history of Gamaliel's brother reveals (see note 17), such virtues are by no means his own (*A Dictionary of the Bible Comprising its Antiquities, Biography, Geography, and Natural History*, vol. III, London 1863, p. 1811). Likewise, Gamaliel ("God the avenger") himself bears the name of a learned and widely revered Pharisee who once counseled the Sanhedrin with wisdom. In the epitome, however, he is charged with recklessness and with scorning sound advice (*Dr. William Smith's Dictionary of the Bible; Comprising its Antiquities, Biography, Geography, and Natural History*, vol. I, Boston 1890, p. 863).

<sup>26</sup> Comparisons with members of this profession are frequently employed in epitomes. Cf. *Il a esté pis que bourreau de sa pauvre femme* (E 9, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 37 r°); *Quelle vilité peut estre plus grande à un grand Seigneur, qu'uzurper, et faire luy-mesmes l'office de bourreau* (E 94, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 234 r°).

<sup>27</sup> *ne se devoit employer que seulement par la tuition, et deffence de sa patrie et de sa famille* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 77 r°).

<sup>28</sup> *qui a fait ce qu'ils devoient desirer, à sçavoir oster d'entr'eux un superstitieux devin, non seulement dommageable aux siens, mais à toute la Republique* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 78 v°).

that they have erred even in a single point in their predictions?<sup>29</sup> By foregrounding the pettiness, unhealthy ambitions, and dubious morals of a relative who appears to legitimate violence as the outcome of a self-fulfilling prophecy, Gamaliel simultaneously fashions a counter-argument in the form of a compressed syllogism that both justifies the killing of his two brothers and highlights his own virtues: *And then you say that you have lost the best of your brothers; it seems to me that if that one was the best, then the other was worth nothing at all*<sup>30</sup>. This rhetorical exchange demonstrates that the criteria for defining both criminality and threats to the polity diverge fundamentally between the two parties. The brothers construe the danger not only in Gamaliel's conduct but also in the potential emergence of an external adversary against whom the homeland must be fortified. The defendant, by contrast, grounds his argument in the necessity of internal purification, insisting on the strengthening of the state through the expulsion of individuals marked by *wickedness, and [...] lewdness*<sup>31</sup>, epitomized by Sadoc.

This conceptual framework finds further expression in the recurrent analogy between the state, conceived as a political organism, and the human body – an organic metaphor already attested in Plato (*Republic*, V, 462c–d; 464b) and Aristotle (*Politics*, III, 11), and one that enjoyed particular currency in sixteenth-century thought<sup>32</sup>. It is precisely this line of reasoning that the Senate invokes against Romulus, who had slain his brother for allegedly transgressing the law<sup>33</sup>:

Quel bon-heur ou felicité pouvons nous esperer de nostre republicque ou cité, puis qu'au commencement d'icelle non seulement l'un frere gemeau a osé tuer l'autre, mais le roy mesmes a tué le Roy, quel bien ou secours pourroit on esperer d'un corps humain, si l'une main couppoit l'autre? Si l'un pied fouilloit l'autre, si l'un œil offusquoit l'autre, et que finalement tous les membres se voulessent entreprejudicier?<sup>34</sup>

This parallelism – equating a crime against consanguinity, both fraternal and royal, with a violation of corporeal integrity – constitutes a particularly sophisticated and rhetorically potent element of the accusatory discourse. Reinforced by

<sup>29</sup> *N'est-il plus qu'evident que telles gens sont si enflezz d'ambition qu'ils aimeroient mieux voir la mort d'un million d'hommes que permettre que d'aucuns fusse cogneu qu'ils ayent failly un seul point en leurs devinations?* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f<sup>o</sup> 78 v<sup>o</sup>).

<sup>30</sup> *et puis dittes qu'avez perdu les meilleurs de voz freres, il me semble que si cestuy-là estoit le meilleur, que l'autre ne valoit rien du tout* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f<sup>o</sup> 78 v<sup>o</sup>).

<sup>31</sup> *meschanceté, et [...] stupre* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f<sup>o</sup> 79 r<sup>o</sup>).

<sup>32</sup> G. VIGARELLO, *Histoire des pratiques de santé. Le sain et le malsain depuis le Moyen Âge*, Paris 1999, p. 86–87.

<sup>33</sup> Pursuant to a law enacted by the Senate, any individual who crossed the walls of Rome without the authorization of the ruling authorities was liable to the penalty of beheading. In order to demonstrate to the builders that the fortifications remained insufficiently high, Remus leapt over the wall beyond the city limits, whereupon he was immediately executed by Romulus.

<sup>34</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f<sup>o</sup> 174 v<sup>o</sup>.

the reiterated use of the pronoun “l’autre”, it accentuates the symmetrical importance and functional indispensability of both rulers for the maintenance of the polity conceived as an organic whole. The state, envisioned through the metaphor of the body politic, is acknowledged as hierarchically structured, yet its optimal operation presupposes the integrity of all its constituent parts. Romulus, however, demonstrates considerable rhetorical dexterity in appropriating this very argument to his own advantage:

Aussi est-il souvent non seulement licite mais necessaire, que l’une main coupe l’autre pour conserver le restant du corps, ainsi a esté besoing oster du monde a mon grand regret: ce mien frere infracteur des loix, et perturbateur de la republique: car comme vous dittes, les Rois sont, ou doivent estre vrais miroirs du peuple, parquoy en tout et par tout leur doivent monstrier exemple, d’observer et non d’enfreindre les loix, car sans l’observation d’icelles, la republique seroit semblable à un corps corrompu de mauvaises humeurs, auquel le sang et toutes les intestines ne peuvent faire leurs operations requises, parquoy après quelque langueur ce corps prend fin par mort: ainsi la corruption des loix et des meurs en la republique engendre la ruine d’icelle.<sup>35</sup>

By invoking the same analogy, the fratricide underscores that the efficiency of the human organism – and, by extension, of the political body – is not necessarily contingent upon the inviolability of its integrity; on the contrary, those parts that prove deleterious must be excised<sup>36</sup>, even at the cost of an acute and painful sense of loss. Alongside this motif, and the reference to the Hippocratic doctrine of the four humors (which, placed in the mouth of Romulus as a mythical figure, acquires unmistakably anachronistic overtones), the discourse introduces yet another element of topicality, one rooted not only in antiquity but also resonant with sixteenth-century political thought. For the destructive agency of Remus is accentuated through recourse to the Ciceronian topos of the mirror: situated at the apex of the social hierarchy, the ruler ought to function as a reflection and exemplar of virtues, thereby shaping the ethical disposition of the community<sup>37</sup>. This constitutes yet another instance of an argument appropriated from the accuser’s discourse and countered through an inversion of values: Romulus demonstrates his ostensible agreement with the Senate on the necessity of cultivating exemplary

<sup>35</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 176 v°.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the use of this concept by a surgeon (E. 81), who secretly performed an autopsy on a living man and formulated the question of the social utility of his act as follows: *ue seroit ce si toutes les fois qu’il faut couper le bras ou la jambe d’un homme, ou le sein d’une femme pour sauver le restant du corps, s’il falloit demander conseil ou congé du Senat?* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 194 v°), and the metaphor of the spread of infection employed by Count Baldwin: [je] *suis ennemy des vicieux, et crains qu’ils nuisent aux bons, ou qui ne les contaminent* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 236 v°).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Baldwin’s argument: *Le seigneur d’un pays ne scauroit mieux se monstrier miroir, que faisant justice, laquelle ai faite* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 237 r°).

models among his subordinates, while paradoxically suggesting that, under the given circumstances, the paradigmatic act may consist precisely in the commission of fratricide. These theses – at times further elaborated through physiological analogies that depict the ruler as the head (*chef*) of the body politic<sup>38</sup> – belong to the broader current of humanist reflection on the ideal of monarchy, on the nature of absolutism, and on the perils inherent in it, a current exemplified in France by the writings of Guillaume Budé (*Institution du Prince*, 1547), Pierre Boaistuau (*L'Histoire de Chelidonius Tigurinus sur l'institution des Princes Chrestiens, et origine des Royaumes*, 1556), or Jean Bodin (*La République*, 1576)<sup>39</sup>.

Because the pernicious example emanating from those in positions of authority engenders a form of illegitimacy comparable to tragic humoral pathology<sup>40</sup>, the Count of Flanders, Lyderic – who condemned his own son to death by hanging in the forest for having failed to remunerate a merchant for a basket of fruit – may paradoxically be construed as a “benefactor” of the commonwealth (E. 2). The woman, having long awaited payment, lost her way in the forest after nightfall and was unable to return home, an accident that contributed to the death of her infant, whom she could not feed in time. Confronted with public indignation, the Count articulates the rationale for his actions in the following terms:

Vrayement rien ne peut estre plus odieux, ny plus aliené du naturel humain que la cruauté, comme aussi rien n'est plus necessaire pour la conversation humaine que la justice, conjointe à la prudence : car sans icelle vrayement la justice semble estre cruauté, comme aussi la prudence sans justice semble plustost malice qu'autre chose, mais tenant ces deux vertus conjointes, l'homme peut faire mourir son enfant, sans estré taxé de cruauté, mais plustost avecques louange d'estre piteux et plein de zelle vers eux, ou vers la Republique : ainsi furent jugez tels les Numantins, tuants leurs enfans plustost que les laisser esclaves, ainsi fut estimé Virginius, tuant sa fille pour luy sauver la chasteté. [...] Et qui voudra considerer, sans passion, mon fait, trouvera que toutes les quatre vertus principales y sont observees.<sup>41</sup>

In this section of Lyderic's speech, one discerns further elements characteristic of the judicial discourse exemplified in the *Epitomes*. When deliberating on the notion of cruelty, the Count invokes a charge that recurs with notable frequency in accusatory oratory, where this disposition of human nature is subjected to

<sup>38</sup> *Le plus souvent tout le peuple se conforme, et veut contrefaire les actions de ceux qui commandent: et plustost les mauvaises que les bonnes. D'où s'ensuit que le Chef d'une Republique ou Province ne peut pecher mediocrement* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 6 v°).

<sup>39</sup> A. JOUANA, P. HAMON, D. BILOGHI, G. LE THIEC, *La France de la Renaissance. Histoire et dictionnaire*, Paris 2001, p. 255–257; R. MUCHEMBLED, *Une histoire du diable*, Paris 2000, p. 159.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the words of the judge (E. 31), who refused to allow a wealthy family to purchase a murderer out of slavery, but instead paid the designated sum himself and ordered the condemned to be hanged: *Sans icelle [Justice] la republique est comme un corps corrompu de mauvaises humeurs, qui prend fin par langueur* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 102 r°).

<sup>41</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 8 r°–v°.

vehement censure<sup>42</sup>. The prominence accorded to this theme is hardly surprising for at least two reasons. First, cruelty had already been the object of sustained philosophical inquiry in antiquity: reflections on human brutality and callousness – always in the mode of condemnation – are found in Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 5), Plutarch (*Moralia*<sup>43</sup>), Cicero (*De officiis*, III, 6; 11)<sup>44</sup>, and Seneca the Younger, who even attempted to delineate cruelty conceptually, contrasting it with clemency and identifying it with an unrestrained severity in the administration of punishment<sup>45</sup>. Second, the historical and literary horizon in which Van den Bussche composed his work – an epoch increasingly dominated by bloody conflicts of religious and ideological provenance, and progressively less receptive to the utopian projections of humanism – proved especially conducive to such considerations<sup>46</sup>. The extraordinary popularity of the so-called bloody *faits divers*, which in written form mirrored the quotidian spectacle of human wickedness and bestiality, provides eloquent testimony to this cultural climate.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Maintenant ne se void qu'une cruauté vindicative, excogitee par une seul* (E. 1, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 2 r°); *Vrayement en tous hommes est mal seant la cruauté, mais plus qu'en tous autres est vituperable és Princes et és Juges* (E. 31, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 100 v°); *Infelice la Republique où les Roys sont vicieux et principalement si leur vice est cruauté* (E. 74, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 175 r°).

<sup>43</sup> *Des moyens de réprimer la colère*, 456f – 457b.

<sup>44</sup> In this work, moreover, Cicero asserts that tyrants ought to be removed from society just as one cuts away dead limbs from the body: *Etenim, ut membra quaedam amputantur, si et ipsa sanguine et tamquam spiritu carere coeperunt et nocent reliquis partibus corporis, sic ista in figura hominis feritas et immanitas beluae a communi tamquam humanitatis corpore segreganda est* (CICERO, *De officiis*, III, 6, <https://remacle.org/bloodwolf/philosophes/Ciceron/officiis3a.htm> [20 IV 2025]).

<sup>45</sup> The definition proves to be relatively narrow: *Quid ergo opponitur clementiae? Crudelitas, quae nihil aliud est quam atrocitas animi in exigendis poenis. [...] Sed quia nec ultionem sequitur (non enim laesa est) nec peccato alicui irascitur (nullum enim antecessit crimen), extra finitionem nostram cadit; finitio enim continebat in poenis exigendis intemperantiam animi* (SENECA THE YOUNGER, *De Clementia*, II, 4, [https://agoraclass.fltr.ucl.ac.be/concordances/sen\\_clementiaII/lecture/4.htm](https://agoraclass.fltr.ucl.ac.be/concordances/sen_clementiaII/lecture/4.htm) [14 IV 2025]).

<sup>46</sup> The discourse under consideration pertains to the intellectual framework of Renaissance humanism, conceived not solely as a revival and veneration of classical antiquity, but more fundamentally as an ambitious project of moral and intellectual regeneration of the human being. The conviction in humankind's inherent capacity for self-perfection, together with the optimistic vision of a cosmos predicated upon the harmonious interplay between the human microcosm and the divine order, proved unsustainable when confronted with the historical realities of the early sixteenth century. This dissonance is closely associated with the emergence of the Reformed ideology, which entailed a repudiation of the doctrine of free will and advanced a markedly pessimistic anthropology. The progressive intensification of confessional antagonisms between Catholics and Protestants culminated in a decisive rupture following the death of Henry II in 1559 and the subsequent restoration of the Guise family to power. Acting under their auspices, Catholic forces carried out the massacre of Protestants at Wassy in 1562, inaugurating a protracted cycle of eight religious wars, whose sanguinary course was brought to a conclusion only with the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes in 1598 (*Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 72–73; H. HELBIG, *Œuvres choisies...*, p. XXII; A. JOUANNA, P. HAMON, D. BILOGHI, G. LE THIEC, *La France de la Renaissance...*, p. 869, 875–876, 1039–1040; R. MUCHEMBLED, *Une histoire du diable...*, p. 158–159).

The Count's speech, marked by a pronounced axiological orientation, begins from the premise – shared with Seneca<sup>47</sup> – that cruelty is a disposition contrary to human nature, and he proceeds to juxtapose it with the cardinal virtues (*iustitia, prudentia, temperantia, fortitudo*)<sup>48</sup>. The rhetorical effect is striking and constitutes yet another instance of the paradoxical strategy whereby defendants transform transgression into a resource<sup>49</sup>. Thus, the act of sentencing his son to death is not construed as an expression of brutality, impulsiveness, or injustice; rather, it is presented as evidence of exceptional virtue, befitting the dignity of his office. This, he insists, will be evident to anyone who subjects the case to rational analysis. To facilitate such reasoning, the speaker employs syntactic and lexical parallelism, underscoring the inseparability of justice and prudence. He further exploits the persuasive force of *exempla*, aligning himself with the Numantines, defeated by the Romans, and with the patrician Virginius, who sacrificed his own daughter in the name of higher values – freedom and honor. Such analogies create the illusion of historical legitimation for Lyderic's deed. At the same time, they introduce the germ of the principle of equality before the law, irrespective of blood ties or social status: "The laws must be observed equally by all, for as soon as any exception is made, corruption enters along with it"<sup>50</sup>.

Among the numerous argumentative motifs mobilized by adversaries<sup>51</sup>, one in particular merits closer attention: the representation of women, or more precisely, the cataloguing of their alleged vices. With rare exceptions – such as the family of the murdered wife in epitome 9, who attempt to construct a positive image of her as *chaste, honest, and virtuous, [...] maintaining sacred friendship with the one who was her murderer*<sup>52</sup> – female figures are overwhelmingly depicted

<sup>47</sup> *Crudelitas minime humanum malum est indignumque tam miti animo; ferina ista rabies est sanguine gaudere ac uulneribus et abiecto homine in siluestre animal transire* (SENECA THE YOUNGER, *De Clementia*, I, 24).

<sup>48</sup> As the count proceeds to justify his actions, he presents himself as embodying the cardinal virtues. His sense of justice is manifested in the execution of the man responsible for the death of the innocent child and for the mistreatment of the impoverished woman. His prudence is evidenced by the manner in which the punishment was carried out – without inciting public disorder, yet with the clear didactic purpose of demonstrating that no perpetrator of evil could evade retribution. His moderation is revealed in the decision to grant his son a swift death, thereby sparing him the protracted humiliation of a public execution. Finally, his valor is displayed in the internal struggle he overcame, resisting the paternal impulse toward clemency in order to uphold the demands of justice.

<sup>49</sup> *Des vices ils font vertu* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 235 r°).

<sup>50</sup> *Les loix doivent estre observees à tous egallement, car dès que l'exception y vient, la corruption y entre quant et quant* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 9 r°). Cf. *Si aucune Loy est inique ou pernicieuse, c'est celle qui n'est egalle à tous* (E. 31, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 101 r°).

<sup>51</sup> It is pertinent to recall, for instance, the Platonic construct of the philosopher-king (E. 2), as well as the literary topos of the most degenerate age in which humankind has existed (E. 78).

<sup>52</sup> *chaste, honneste et vertueuse, [...] portant une amitié sainte à celuy qui a esté son meurtrier* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 37 r°).

in negative terms. Predictably, the defense responds with sweeping generalizations about women's deficiencies: *Most women are quick and astute only at doing wrong, devoting so much of their intellect to it that they fall short in doing good: [...] ultimately, no one can truly fathom their subtleties, mischief, obstinacy toward evil, and inconstancy in doing good except a married man*<sup>53</sup>. Other epitomes add that *women are rarely masters of their tongue*<sup>54</sup> (E. 88), that they pursue adultery and, when refused, later allege attempted coercion<sup>55</sup> (E. 21), or even that wild animals surpass them in humanity (E. 78)<sup>56</sup>.

The impression conveyed is that speakers expend little effort in refuting such claims. Counter-arguments are typically reduced to the formula articulated by Count Lyderic: *the difference between the sexes, which renders every man superior to women*<sup>57</sup> (E. 2). In practice, this reasoning amounts to the assertion that if a woman has committed or contributed to a crime, ultimate responsibility lies with the man, whose duty it is to protect her as a weak being entirely subject to him<sup>58</sup>. Such a representation of the "weaker sex" corresponds to the socio-legal realities of sixteenth-century patriarchy, in which the status of the average woman remained precarious, particularly in juridical terms<sup>59</sup>, and in which the debate on women (*Querelle des femmes*)<sup>60</sup> – and the associated topos of female imperfections, widespread since the thirteenth century with the dissemination of the second part of *The Romance of the Rose* – remained vibrantly alive.

<sup>53</sup> *La plus part des femmes n'est promptes ou avisees qu'à mal faire, à quoy applicquent tant leur esprit, qu'il leur deffaut au bien: [...] finalement nul ne peut bien cognoistre leurs subtilitez, malices, obstination au mal et inconstance au bien que celuy qui est marié* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 39 v°).

<sup>54</sup> *les femmes sont peu de fois maistresses de leur langue* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 214 r°).

<sup>55</sup> *puis se voyant refusees, se plaignent après que l'on les a voulu forcer* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 77 v°).

<sup>56</sup> This constitutes an indictment of a woman who, seized by a paroxysm of anger, put her daughter to death after the latter had, albeit inadvertently, contributed to the demise of her younger brother: *Quelle tigre, quelle louve? Ou autre animal, ou beste plus cruelle, n'a non seulement le soucy de ses petis faons, mais jusques à la mort les deffend de ceux qui les veullent nuire ou offencer, combien donc moins les voudroient ils tuer eux mesmes?* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 186 v°).

<sup>57</sup> *la difference du sexe, qui rend tout homme superieur à la femme* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 11 r°).

<sup>58</sup> *Je voudroy demander à ce meschant, en quoy are femme meritoit mourir de la main de celuy qui avoit juré de la garder, et deffendre de tout injure?* (E. 9, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 37 v°). Cf. *Celuy qui devoit la secourir, et pourchasser are delivrance, pourchasse are mort* (E. 78, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 187 r°).

<sup>59</sup> Th. PECH, *Conter le crime. Droit et littérature sous la Contre-Réforme: les histoires tragiques [1559–1644]*, Paris 2000, p. 341–343.

<sup>60</sup> A. JOUANNA, P. HAMON, D. BILOGHI, G. LE THIEC, *La France de la Renaissance...*, p. 812–814.

## Pathos

Determining with precision the readership of the *Épitomes* proves difficult, for the history of literature furnishes us with but scant evidence on this matter<sup>61</sup>. The poet and member of the French Academy, Guillaume Colletet, does indeed designate a particular circle of readers who might derive special benefit from the work – namely, young jurists at the outset of their engagement with the intricacies of rhetoric. His observation, however, does not foreclose the prospect of a wider reception<sup>62</sup>. Irrespective of the book's original design, what remains most apparent is the author's deliberate appeal to the reader's emotions, thereby rendering him mentally predisposed to persuasion, since rational argumentation alone so often proves insufficient<sup>63</sup>.

This phenomenon manifests itself on several levels. At the outset, it becomes evident that the very selection of the work's title was calculated to arouse interest through its association with the immensely popular series of *Tragic Histories* (*Histoires tragiques*), inaugurated in France in 1559 by Pierre Boaistuau. The adoption of the adjective "tragic" was, of course, anything but fortuitous<sup>64</sup>. It conferred a certain dignity upon the genre by invoking the Aristotelian poetics of tragedy, while simultaneously portending the presence of drastic subject matter<sup>65</sup>. The allusion

<sup>61</sup> Van den Bussche is known to have attained a measure of renown as a poet active at the court of the Valois, where his verses were read not only by prominent court dignitaries but also by fellow poets of his generation. Nevertheless, as Guillaume Colletet observed in the seventeenth century, he was by no means a poet of the first rank and appears to have enjoyed greater esteem as a prose writer. The favorable reception of his *Procès* and subsequently of his *Épitomes* – the latter dedicated to his patron, Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq – is attested both by the frequency of their re-editions and by the English translation published in 1596. The enduring appeal of the work is further evidenced by the fact that as late as 1643, 1649, and 1650, Tristan L'Hermite issued it under his own name, having altered the title and introduced only minor modifications, primarily of a stylistic nature (*Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 70–72; A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 44, 51; H. HELBIG, *Œuvres choisies...*, p. VI, XV, XXXII, XLVI–LVI).

<sup>62</sup> H. HELBIG, *Œuvres choisies...*, p. LIX, LXXVI.

<sup>63</sup> W.K. PIETRZAK, *Le Tragique dans les nouvelles exemplaires...*, p. 205.

<sup>64</sup> A. Cullière also draws attention to the evocative power of the associations generated by the very use of this adjective (A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 49).

<sup>65</sup> Witold Konstanty Pietrzak advances a nuanced synthesis of theoretical perspectives concerning the application of the designation "tragic". On the one hand, authors appear to have employed the term in order to confer a heightened dignity upon the short narrative forms they cultivated, thereby distancing them from the commonplace. On the other, they engaged – albeit in a rather superficial manner – with Aristotelian conceptions of tragedy, invoking the logical structure of events that inexorably culminate in catastrophe, the elevated and serious tenor of the works, and the epistemic value inherent in mimesis. A further interpretative avenue may be discerned in a philosophical register, linked to meditations on the misery of the human condition (*miseria hominis*), or in a "quantitative" approach, whereby a narrative is deemed the more tragic the greater the accumulation of brutal or violent scenes it contains (W.K. PIETRZAK, *Le Tragique dans les nouvelles exemplaires...*, p. 29, 31, 307–309).

to such a cycle was therefore intended to ensure the elicitation of powerful affective responses – curiosity, anxiety, disgust, anger, and, not least, *delectatio morosa* – responses reinforced by the frequent representation of scenes of violence. This, in turn, suggests that the intended audience of the *Epitomes* was likely conceived in broad terms.

An examination of Van den Bussche's representations of transgression reveals that he renders them with marked laconicism, refraining both from accentuating brutality and from assigning them any explicit evaluative weight. This restraint, however, does not entail that the reader remains unaffected by the murders depicted. On the contrary, while the narrator strives to preserve an appearance of strict neutrality, the *brevitas* that characterizes his discourse frequently proves more efficacious in securing the reader's attention – directing it toward what is essential – and in eliciting a spectrum of affective responses than would a prolix, ornate style replete with exhaustive detail. If, in this respect, the mode of narration stands in opposition to the poetics of the *histoires tragiques* to which the title of the work alludes, it is because the emphasis here lies not upon narrative exposition but upon the display of rhetorical virtuosity, whereby orators manipulate the emotions of the reader.

Indeed, in the section devoted to the speeches one encounters a wealth of material imbued with a pathetically charged tenor. It must be underscored that the orations of both accusers and defenders constitute such coherent unities that it is not always possible to demarcate clearly between ostensibly rational argumentation and the calculated manipulation of sentiment. More than one of the previously adduced examples of dialectical reasoning, after all, could move an audience. The task, rather, is to isolate those elements that most directly exemplify the emotional interplay with the addressee of the discourse, elements which, as Quintilian reminds us<sup>66</sup>, belong to a strategy already meticulously conceived at the stage of composition. Nor should it be forgotten that, although on the diegetic level the speaker addresses a representative of the judiciary, the true addressee is the reader – cast as participant in the staged proceedings<sup>67</sup> – upon whose sensitivity the ultimate moral judgment of the situation is made to depend.

How, then, is one to capture the heart of the arbiter of justice – and, by extension, that of the reader? Although the *exordium* and *peroratio* of both accusatory and defensive speeches are often but residual, one nevertheless discerns within them the recurrent presence of a single rhetorical figure: the apostrophe. On the one hand, forms of address directed to representatives of social authority – such

<sup>66</sup> *Postremo intuendum, quemadmodum iudex sit conciliandus; neque enim, nisi totis causae partibus diligenter inspectis, scire possumus, qualem nobis facere animum cognoscentis expediat, severum an mitem, concitatum an remissum, adversum gratiae an obnoxium* (QUINTILIAN, *Institutio Oratoria*, III, 9, (<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi1002.phi0013.perseus-lat1:9> [14 IV 2025])).

<sup>67</sup> *Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 73.

as “ô Peres conscrits”<sup>68</sup>, “ô Sénateurs incorruptibles”<sup>69</sup>, “Sire”<sup>70</sup>, “ô Patrices”<sup>71</sup>, “ô juste Juge, et vous Sénateurs equitables”<sup>72</sup> – function as conventional expressions of courtesy, an awareness of convention, and an adaptation to the gravity of the occasion (*bienséance*). On the other hand, by underscoring the power and independence of the addressees, such invocations reaffirm their sense of authority, influence, and decisiveness, thereby disposing them more favorably toward the orator. The likelihood of such an effect is heightened when the speaker interweaves elaborate praise of the sovereign with a self-presentation marked by humility and fidelity (*topos modestiae*), thereby rendering himself all the more dependent upon the magnanimity, integrity, and sense of justice of the ruler: *Most magnanimous and just Prince, the renown of your equity has impelled us to become your most loyal, most affectionate, most humble, and most faithful subjects, and to choose you as our sovereign Prince and most redoubtable lord*<sup>73</sup> (E. 31); *Sire, if your justice and clemency were not equal to your greatness, we would have appealed to your Majesty in vain*<sup>74</sup> (E. 94). To inundate the addressee with laudatory epithets and to invoke his reputation is to encourage him to preserve this image, and thus to engage more attentively with the discourse of one who perceives him in such exalted terms.

Yet orators do not invariably seek to awaken positive emotions in their audience – though, as Cicero reminds us, this constitutes an essential element of judicial eloquence<sup>75</sup>. The father of Horatius, who slew his daughter after she reproached him for killing her husband in a duel (E. 88)<sup>76</sup>, commences his defense with the following words: *Where do you have the heart and understanding, O Romans, to choose to persecute your Redeemer in such a manner? Do you not know that, among all vices, ingratitude is displeasing to the Gods? How then can you prosper?*<sup>77</sup>. From the very outset, the appeal to the emotional and moral sphere is manifest. It is reinforced by terms of strong negative valence (“persecuter”, “ingratitude”, “despaysante”), which

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>69</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 3 v°.

<sup>70</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 6 r°, f° 8 r°, f° 11 r°.

<sup>71</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 176 r°.

<sup>72</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 194 r°.

<sup>73</sup> *Tresmagnanime et juste Prince, le renom de votre équité nous avoit incité à nous rendre vos tresloyaux, tresaffectionnez, treshumbles et tresfidelles sujets, et vous choisir pour nostre souverain Prince et tresredoutable seigneur* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 99 v° – 100 r°).

<sup>74</sup> *Sire, si vostre justice, et clemence, n'estoit egalle à vostre grandeur, en vain aurions nous recours à vostre Majesté* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 233 v°).

<sup>75</sup> CICERO, *Oratoriae partitiones*, IV.

<sup>76</sup> The passage pertains to a narrative, most likely transmitted by Titus Livius, concerning one of the three Horatii, who secured Rome's triumph in the conflict with Alba Longa by vanquishing in combat the three brothers representing that city.

<sup>77</sup> *Où avez vous le cueur et l'entendement, ô Romains, de vouloir ainsi persecuter vostre redempteur? Ne sçavez vous point que sur tout autre vice l'ingratitude est despaysante aux Dieux? Comment pourrez vous donc prosperer?* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 213 r° – v°).

stand in antithesis to “redempteur” and “prosperer”, words connoting the cessation of anguish and war, the advent of joy and prosperity. The Romans are thus compelled to recognize what they stand to forfeit should they condemn Horatius. This recognition is rendered all the more vivid if accompanied by fear. And since the father of the accused apparently deems his own authority insufficient to instill such fear, he invokes the highest and most formidable instance: the gods and their wrath<sup>78</sup>.

Similarly, the assassins endeavor to persuade their audience that the charges leveled against them are but calumnies and monstrosities unworthy of a just ruler’s credence: *Without responding to all your calumnies, trusting in the fairness of the Prince, I freely entrust my property, my honor, and my life to his most just judgment*<sup>79</sup> (E. 31). Here, too, one discerns elements of ethos-construction: the speaker presents himself as so honorable, and so steadfast in his conviction of unimpeachable morality, that he is willing to stake all upon it. Yet the emphasis falls less upon self-presentation than upon the manipulation of the judge’s emotions: by extolling his virtues and surrendering himself unreservedly into the ruler’s hands, the speaker implicitly demands that the latter prove himself equally righteous, incorruptible, and impartial. To condemn such a man would be to betray boundless trust and to act wickedly.

Other manifestations of pathos – such as the orator’s overt expression of the intense emotions that accompany him – likewise intersect with the construction of his own image. This process frequently follows a recognizable pattern, as may be observed, for instance, in epitome 9.

Seigneurs Juges, tant plus ce cas est estrange, tant plus nostre douleur est grande, qui nous fait doubter si noz plaintes sont ouyes, si estant ouyes, sont entendues, si estant entendues, sont senties, d’autant que difficilement se peuvent sentir, par ceux à qui elles ne touchent de pres, d’autant que le mal d’autrui, ne semble jamais si pesant qu’il est, parquoy vous assureons bien, que nous pouvons mieux sentir le nostre, que l’exprimer, car quand l’ame, est occupee de passion, les esprits defaillans, retiennent les organes, et empeschent la langue:

<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, the families of Baldwin’s executed nobles went so far as to exert overt political pressure upon the monarch, amounting virtually to blackmail. In consequence, he was expected to acknowledge both the extremity of the petitioners’ desperation and the deleterious consequences for the polity that would ensue were he to refrain from divesting the Count of his office: *Si ne pouvons obtenir du Roy le remede esperé, de la reparation deue, faisons vœu, nous, les nostres, parens, aliez, amis, et clyens, d’aller plustost habiter entre les Scites, ou toute autre nation plus cruelle, que demeurer plus souz la juridiction d’un homme tant infame* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 235 v°).

<sup>79</sup> *Sans respondre à toutes voz calomnies, me confiant en l’equité du Prince, [je] remets librement mes biens, mon honneur, et ma vie, à son tresjuste jugement* (f° 102 r°). Cf. *Comme vous dittes qu’est injustice pardonner un coupable, ainsi est justice punir un meschant comme j’ay fait, parquoy n’ay offencé, sinon que justement stimulé ay fraudé l’authorité des Juges, ausquels demandant pardon de cette faute, me soubmets totalement leur priant aussi me deffendre de voz outrages* (E. 21, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 79 v°).

considerez vous mesmes, s'il est possible, ô Juges, nostre misere, et nostre silence soit sup-  
pliment de ce que ne pouvons dire, soyez, donc autant justement severes que ce malheureux  
est inique, et cruel.<sup>80</sup>

Paradoxically, although the accusers have already delivered a vehement and emotionally charged speech, they nevertheless resort to the rhetorical device of *praeteritio*, thereby intimating that the harm they have endured entails an inef-  
fable – both literally and figuratively – pain that deprives them of the capacity to  
articulate their despair adequately. What emerges from this monologue is a Plato-  
nic conception of the supremacy of the soul over the body – here, however, a soul  
constrained by *passiones*, which contemporary medical discourse identified as  
the source of numerous infirmities and corporeal maladies<sup>81</sup>. One also discerns an  
allusion to Plato's thesis concerning the fallibility of the senses<sup>82</sup>, a theme closely  
tied to the anxiety surrounding the arbiter's ability to render a correct judgment.  
The danger is all the greater inasmuch as human beings exhibit a natural propen-  
sity to privilege their own experiences – an inclination that Seneca the Younger  
condemns as inimical to the Stoic ideal of life<sup>83</sup> – while the experiences of others  
“do not concern” them to the same degree<sup>84</sup>. Such rhetorical strategies enhance the  
resonance of the final appeal to the judges: it is they who must assume responsibil-  
ity in direct proportion to the wickedness of the perpetrator and the impotence  
of the victims, and only they can mitigate the latter's suffering through an appro-  
priate sentence. On the one hand, the expression of emotion may lend credibility  
to the speaker's ethos, presenting him as a more “human” figure whose motives

<sup>80</sup> A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 38 r°. Cf. *Finallement je sens que la tris-  
tesse trop juste me transporte tellement, que mes propos ne s'entresuivent comme seroit requis, parlant  
devant ce noble Senat lequel se daignera m'excuser, considerant que jamais ne gardent bien l'ordre,  
ceux qui sont oppressez de douleur extreme* (E. 1, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*,  
f° 3 r°- v°); *La juste douleur me garde de sçavoir plus parler* (E. 78, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de  
cent histoires...*, f° 186 v°) or *Noz justes larmes, jointes au silence, demandent justice* (E. 2, A. VAN DEN  
BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 8 r°).

<sup>81</sup> M. KOZŁUK, *Πομφόλυξ ὁ Ἀνθρώπος (L'homme Est Une Bulle) – Les Passions de l'âme Selon Louis de  
Caseneuve*, [in:] *Corps et Âme Sous l'empire Des Passions Dans La Littérature Française Des Origines  
à Nos Jours*, ed. EADEM, Ł. SZKOPIŃSKI, Wiesbaden 2024, p. 90.

<sup>82</sup> PLATO, *Phaedo*, 82e – 83e.

<sup>83</sup> *Curam nobis nostri natura mandavit, sed huic ubi nimium indulseris, vitium est* (SENECA THE YOUNGER,  
*Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, CXVI, 3, [http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi1017.  
phi015.perseus-lat1:116.3](http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi1017.phi015.perseus-lat1:116.3) [14 IV 2025]).

<sup>84</sup> This constitutes a recurring motif in the orations of both the accusers and the defendants. Cf.  
*Tousjours le mal d'autrui est leger à ceux qui ne le sentent, et chacun presche la patience, et temperance  
en l'affaire d'autrui* (E. 21, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 78 r°) or *La coustume  
des meschans, voire de la plus part des humains est telle, d'escrire en sable les injures qu'ils font aux  
autres, et de graver en cuivre les griefs qu'ils reçoivent* (E. 1, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent  
histories...*, f° 4 r°).

are neither calculating nor vindictive. On the other hand, the very display of such affect functions as a calculated instrument of persuasion, designed to manipulate the audience through affective involvement.

The question thus arises whether the defense can effectively counter such a mode of persuasion. A striking strategy consists in the inversion of roles, whereby the accused is presented as the true victim, more grievously afflicted than the murdered individual and his family: *Ultimately, it shall please the Judges to pay greater heed to the misery of the poor accused rather than to the insolent loquacity of his malicious accusers: for who can be more deserving of pity than one for whom life is more bitter than death?*<sup>85</sup> (E. 9). The murderer is depicted as fully conscious of the gravity of his deed, compelled by an uncontrollable outburst of anger – since the mastery of sudden and violent passions lies beyond the capacity of ordinary men<sup>86</sup> – and as experiencing such profound remorse that death appears not merely the lightest of punishments but even a form of salvation<sup>87</sup>. This juxtaposition of *miseria hominis* with the arrogance of the accusers is intended to elicit sympathy from the audience and culminates in a paradoxical conclusion: the man who wronged his virtuous wife assumes the guise of a martyr, and the very act of bringing him to trial inflicts upon him an even greater injury. He, paradoxically, emerges as the one who is most deserving of justice<sup>88</sup>.

A cursory examination of the foregoing examples may initially disorient the reader and provoke reflection on whether it is at all possible to determine which side ultimately prevails in the rhetorical contest. Yet a comprehensive reading of the *Epitomes* does not yield a definitive resolution. Indeed, a certain hermeneutic tension emerges when the interpretative frameworks proposed by scholars are applied to the cases under discussion. On the one hand, Van den Bussche appears as a moralist, a severe critic of human transgressions, who evokes them

<sup>85</sup> *Finallement il plaira aux Juges, avoir plus esgard à la misere du pauvre accusé, qu'à la loquacité insolente, de ses mal vueillans accuzateurs: car qui peut estre plus digne de pitié, que celuy à qui la vie est plus amere que la mort* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 39 v°). Cf. *Pourquoy pourchassez vous la mort d'une, qui ne demande qu'à mourir? Vous semble il que ceste pauvre femme, ne soit assez affligée? Sans encore luy agreger are douleur?* (E. 78, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 187 r°).

<sup>86</sup> This is another motif frequently attested in epitomes. Cf. *Ne sçavez vous pas que les premiers mouvemens d'une juste collere, ne sont en nostre puissance?* (E. 78, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 187 r°) or *Ne sçavez vous pas, ô Romains, que les premiers mouvemens ne sont en nostre puissance?* (E. 88, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 213 v°).

<sup>87</sup> *Aveuglé d'un courroux autant extreme que juste, [il] a fait ce qu'à l'heure mesme eusse voullu revocquer au pris de sa vie, laquelle il offre encore pour expier sa faute, de laquelle il a tel regret, qu'il s'estima heureux, finissant sa douleur par mort* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 38 v° – 39 r°).

<sup>88</sup> *Finallement, Sire, je proteste dvant vostre Majesté du tort que me font mes subjects, m'accusant et calomniant à tort, et consequemment en demade Justice* (E. 2, A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Epitomes de cent histoires...*, f° 11 r°).

solely in order to condemn<sup>89</sup>. In this perspective, speeches denouncing crime are composed with far greater attention to persuasive efficacy than those attempting to justify sacrilegious acts<sup>90</sup>. On the other hand, it is generally assumed that, from the standpoint of rhetorical theory, the second speech – namely, the *refutatio* – tends to be more effective, producing in the reader not only the impression of having been intellectually outmaneuvered but also the impulse to reassess previously held convictions<sup>91</sup>. At the same time, it is noteworthy that among the epitomes dealing with murder, only two (E. 81 and E. 88) depict the accusers as speaking second and thus engaging in refutation. This would imply that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, it is the speech of the perpetrator that proves more compelling.

This paradox may perhaps be most aptly captured in the formulation of Alain Cullière, who characterizes the Flemish author as a moralist with a profoundly pessimistic vision of reality, intent on constructing two discourses of equivalent weight in order to *render the reader completely, and even cruelly, indecisive*<sup>92</sup>. The distinctive appeal of the *Epitomes* thus lies less in didactic moralizing than in the deliberate destabilization of the reader, who is left alone with a spectrum of affective responses – surprise, irritation, admiration, disbelief, sympathy, amusement – while confronted with the radical relativity of human value systems. Having (most likely) presupposed that murder admits of only one legitimate moral evaluation – namely, a negative one – the reader becomes a “victim” of the drama staged through the agonistic dialogue of the opposing parties and comes to recognize that virtually any act may be justified, provided it is framed through the skillful deployment of arguments and the calculated manipulation of emotions.

One may legitimately pose the question of whether Van den Bussche’s work does not, at least in part, constitute an attempt to evaluate the functioning of the judicial system of his time, thereby allowing the unsettling inference that such a system might, in practice, often rest upon sophistic reasoning. A definitive answer, however, proves elusive. Christian Biet has underscored that the majority of cases presented in the epitomes could scarcely have occurred in reality, and he demonstrates through selected examples<sup>93</sup> that not all of the laws and punishments depicted therein were in force under the Ancien Régime – and, where they did exist, they applied to transgressions other than those described<sup>94</sup>. This observation does not, of course, preclude the hypothesis that the author adopted a critical stance toward the legal order; yet the critical tradition clearly suggests that we should not regard the Flemish writer as a jurist. Rather, he appears to assume the

<sup>89</sup> H. HELBIG, *Œuvres choisies...*, p. LIX.

<sup>90</sup> *Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 73.

<sup>91</sup> *Idem*, p. 74.

<sup>92</sup> *rendre le lecteur totalement et même cruellement indécis* (A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 49–50).

<sup>93</sup> They correspond to epitomes: 6, 27, 46, 60, 61, 66, 79, 81, 86, 95.

<sup>94</sup> *Théâtre de la cruauté...*, p. 73–81.

role of a “pedagogue-author”, who, by means of the judicial disputes he recounts, seeks to stimulate in the reader a profound ethical reflection<sup>95</sup> – an invitation to deliberate on the nature of good and evil, virtue and crime. The decision to be reached is situated simultaneously on the intellectual plane (Which argument possesses genuine logical validity, and which is merely sophistic?) and on the affective plane (What does my heart dictate? Which moral values do I profess?). It must, moreover, be undertaken autonomously, even if these two dimensions should prove mutually irreconcilable. To conclude these reflections, let us recall the words of Van den Bussche himself, which close the first “trial” of the initial edition of the *Procès tragiques* – a trial that would later become the thirty-fifth epitome: *The final judgment is left to the reader’s discretion*<sup>96</sup>.

\* \* \*

Within the corpus of Alexandre Sylvain Van den Bussche’s Epitomes of Tragic Stories, a particularly noteworthy subset is constituted by those narratives which – drawing explicitly on the ancient tradition of judicial oratory – stage the figure of the murderer brought before the tribunal. Murder, after all, would appear to be the paradigmatic crime for which justification is, if not altogether impossible, then at least exceedingly arduous. Yet the author succeeds in unsettling the reader’s expectations. At the level of *dispositio*, the work is modeled on Seneca the Elder’s *Controversiae*: the narrator effaces himself, recounting the crime with concision and ostensible objectivity, before ceding the floor to accusers and defenders. In Van den Bussche’s rendering, these speeches are strikingly individualized, a feature manifest in the selection of arguments and the internal logic of the discourse.

At the level of *inventio*, one encounters a dense array of topoi, comparisons, metaphors, and allusions, which attest to the author’s erudition. Although many of these motifs derive from antiquity, the text also acquires a distinctly contemporary resonance, repeatedly echoing concerns central to sixteenth-century society – such as the ideal of rulership, the harmonious functioning of the political organism, and the contested status of women. The speeches of the opposing parties are further marked by a pronounced affective charge, recalling the poetics of Tragic

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73–74; A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 49–50.

<sup>96</sup> *Le jugement demeure à la discretion du lecteur* (A. VAN DEN BUSSCHE, *Le Premier livre des proces tragiques, contenant cinquante cinq histoires, avec les accusations, demandes, et deffences d’icelles*, Paris: Nicolas Bonfons, 1575, f° 4 r°). This sentence is likewise adduced by Cullière (A. CULLIÈRE, *De La Controverse à La Nouvelle...*, p. 49). It is absent from the 1581 edition of the *Epitomes*, for it was evidently deemed unnecessary in the case of the narrative occupying the thirty-fifth position within the collection. The fact that it is likewise not found at the conclusion of the first epitome in that volume may plausibly be explained by an authorial presupposition: insofar as this constituted merely an augmented re-edition, the reader was presumed already to be acquainted with the “instructions for use”.

Stories, already signaled in the title of the collection. The *dramatis personae* seek to elicit pity, guilt, sorrow, irritation, curiosity, and, above all, disorientation in the reader – an effect intensified by the deliberate juxtaposition of antithetical statements.

The cognitive and affective dimensions are heightened at the level of *elocutio*: the deployment of rhetorical figures (parallelism, antithesis, apostrophe, epithet, hypotyposis) provides the audience with aesthetic gratification (*placere*), a goal already pursued by ancient orators, while simultaneously striking the imagination and emotions with often brutal force, thereby serving as a crucial instrument of persuasion. These elements, interwoven across the three classical registers – the speaker (ethos), the discourse (logos), and the listener (pathos) – generate a relativism consonant with the values of Renaissance humanism. They reveal the extent to which the moral evaluation of an apparently outrageous and *prima facie* condemnable act such as murder may prove far from self-evident. The disoriented reader discovers that any value may be destabilized, that any “truth” is contingent, and that its validation depends less on intrinsic moral substance than on the rhetorical dexterity of the speaker. The reader must autonomously determine with which side he is prepared to align. And although such conclusions are hardly novel within the framework of the ancient rhetorical tradition, they remain as disquieting and as complex as the historical realities in which Van den Bussche’s work was conceived.

*Translated by Justyna Sowińska*

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