

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



The Shaping of Wit in the Euphuistic Prose of John Lyly

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Nowhere in the corpus of early modern English literature is the idea of ‘wit’ given a more central expression than in the prose tradition that was to produce what is now termed euphuism. This began with John Lyly and his first major work, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, first published in 1578.¹ Widely popular and reissued a further twelve times by end of the century, Lyly’s work placed at the centre of its thematic explorations a multivalent wit and did so while employing an excessively copious style, a choice which had resulted in Lyly’s work gaining its fair share of detractors.² *Euphues*, and its equally popular sequel *Euphues and his England*,³ nevertheless inspired the writings of a loose group of Lyly’s fellow university-educated authors, known today as the University Wits.⁴ Their works often imitated Lyly’s style, dealt with similar thematic concerns and even alluded to Lyly’s protagonist in titles such as

¹ Lyly, *Euphues. The Anatomy of Wit*. London: Gabriel Cawood, 1579. STC 17052.

² Especially notable are Philip Sidney’s attack of euphuism and its similitudes in *The Defence of Poesy* as ‘a most tedious prattling’ (1433); and Gabriel Harvey, who coined the term “euphuism” in his *Four Letters* of 1592 (STC 12900) and dismissed it as ‘pretty stale’. See Douglas Bruster, ‘The Structural Transformation of Print in Late Elizabethan England’ in *Print, Manuscript, & Performance: The Changing Relations of the Media in Early Modern England*, ed. by Arthur F. Marotti and Michael D. Bristol (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), pp. 49-89 (p. 60). For more on Lyly’s contemporaries’ responses to euphuism, see Catherine Nicholson, *Uncommon Tongues: Eloquence and Eccentricity in the English Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2014), pp. 73-4.

³ Published in 1580 (STC 17068) and reprinted a total of ten times before 1600.

⁴ For more on Lyly’s own life and education in Oxford see G.K. Hunter *Lyly and Peele* (Harlow: Longman, 1968), pp. 9-13; Juan Carlos García-Lorenzo, *Complementation in Early Modern English: A Study of John Lyly’s Euphues* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2004), pp. 6-8; R. Warwick Bond, ‘Life of John Lyly’, *The Complete Works of John Lyly. Vol. I, Life, Euphues, The anatomy of Wyt, Entertainments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902 [2012]); Ruth Lunney, ‘Introduction’, *John Lyly* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. xi-xiii.

Rosalynde, Euphues golden legacie by Thomas Lodge⁵ or *Arisbas, Euphues amidst his slumbers* by John Dickenson.⁶ This paper is concerned with the shaping of the emerging euphuistic wit, as a self-referential quality that is intimately bound with the identity of the euphuistic writer. Its focus is on wit's first emergence as a performed and discussed quality in Lyly's early work, in which it is reimagined as a potent but dangerous force within the precarious tradition of Ciceronian rhetoric.

Introducing the Euphuistic Wit

Lyly may not have been the first to employ in English what is now termed the euphuistic style: parataxical parallelisms and antitheses; an extensive use of alliteration; and an abundance of analogies utilizing examples from both classical and proverbial sources.⁷ The practice goes back to medieval sermons, themselves echoing structures present in classical texts,⁸ and appears in literary prose form in George Pettie's *A petite pallace of Pettie his pleasure*, published two years before Lyly's maiden work.⁹ Nor is his narrative particularly novel, and its theme of a prodigal rebelling against accepted wisdom is common to early modern prose, from Gascoigne's 'The Adventures of Master F.J.' onwards.¹⁰ His work is nevertheless credited as the first masterful execution of the form and, more significantly, as a greatly innovative work in being 'the first book to advertise itself in relation to its narrative unity'.¹¹ This unity, as Kesson suggests, presents itself in the work's extended title: 'Very pleasant for all gentlemen to reade, and most necessary to remember. wherein are contained the delights that Wit followeth in his youth by the pleasantnesse of loue, and the happinesse he reapeth in age, by the perfectnesse of Wisdome'. Wit in its relation to wisdom is a crucial locus for

⁵ First published in 1590 (STC 16664).

⁶ Published in 1594 (STC 6817).

⁷ For more on the euphuistic style, see William Ringler, 'The Immediate Source of Euphuism', *PMLA* 53.3 (1938), 678-86 (p. 678); Leah Guenther, "'To Parley Euphuism': Fashioning English as a Linguistic Fad', *Renaissance Studies* 16.1 (2002), 24-35 (p. 24); Nicholson, p. 75.

⁸ See Andrew H. Plaks, 'Where the Lines Meet: Parallelism in Chinese and Western Literatures', *CLEAR* 10:1/2 (1988), 43-60 (pp. 43-4); Hunter, *Lyly and Peele*, pp. 17-8.

⁹ STC 19819. See also J. Swart, 'Lyly and Pettie', *English Studies* 23:1-6 (1941), 9-18 (p. 10).

¹⁰ First printed in *A hundreth sundry flowres bounde vp in one small poesie* in 1573 (pp. 201-293. STC 11635). See also G.W. Pigman's edition of Gascoigne, *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See Richard Helgerson's *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976) for a full-scale discussion of prodigal narratives.

¹¹ Andy Kesson, *John Lyly and Early Modern Authorship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 48.

Lyly's narrative, concerned with 'the moral debate that arises when "wit" ("Euphues" means a man of natural endowment, "he that is apt by goodness of wit") spurns good advice (Eu-bulus) and becomes involved with self-love (Phil-autus)'.¹² And yet understanding merely what Lyly signifies when he discusses the concept of wit, as well as the thinking on which he rests his own, are the least mystifying parts of *Euphues*.

The grandson of William Lily, a noted humanist grammarian whose textbooks set the standard for instruction in the classics,¹³ Lyly's work bears most strikingly the marks of Roger Ascham, one of his grandfather's ardent disciples. Considering Ascham's idea of wit along the lines of the classical *ingenium*, *Euphues* (the first of Ascham's seven requirements of a good wit) is described as the ideal humanist student:

Is he, that is apte by goodnes of witte, and appliable by readines of will, to learning, hauing all other qualities of the minde and partes of the bodie, that must an other day serue learning, not tro[u]bled, mangled, and halfed, but founde, whole, full [...] (*The Scholemaster*, pp. 38-9)¹⁴

The most distinguishing feature of Lyly's protagonist embodies the potential inherent in Ascham's *Euphues*. His wit 'lyke waxe apte to receiue any impression' (sig. 1v) is naturally suited to learning, and the wise Eubulus appeals to his birth that shows 'the expresse and liuely Image of gentle bloude' (sig. 2v). It is his natural wit, in fact, that is Euphues' chief resource – 'such a sharpe capacitie of minde' (sig. 1v) – a resource much sought-after by his Neapolitan companions, which 'courted hym continuallye wyth sundrye kindes of deuises, whereby they myght eyther soake hys purse to reape commoditie, or sooth hys person to wynne credite' (sig. 2r). This idea of wit as a social commodity is imbued, as others have noted before, in the very language that makes up euphuism, a language that 'enacts exchange through strategies of calculation – compare, contrast, weigh, balance' through its extensive similitudes and parallelisms.¹⁵

¹² Hunter, *Lyly and Peele*, p. 15.

¹³ Especially the revised compilations of his earlier collaborations with Erasmus and John Colet, first published posthumously in 1548 as *A short introduction of grammar generally to be vsed in the Kynges Maiesties dominions* (STC 15610.10). The only grammar textbook authorised for schools, 'Lyly's grammar' as it came to be known was republished a further 31 times by 1600. See also C.G. Allen, 'The Sources of "Lily's Latin Grammar": A Review of the Facts and Some Further Suggestions', *The Library* s5, IX.2 (1954), 85-100 (p. 85).

¹⁴ First published in 1570. STC 832. Citations are to Ascham, *The Scholemaster* (London: Edward Arber, 1870).

¹⁵ Joan Pong Linton, 'The Humanist in the Market: Gendering Exchange and Authorship in Lyly's Euphues Romances' in *Framing Elizabethan Fictions: Contemporary Approaches to Early Modern Narrative Prose*, ed. by Constance C. Relihan (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1996), pp. 73-97 (p. 77).

Ingenium without wisdom, however, often proves a dangerous concept for early modern authors, and it is immediately apparent that Lyly's protagonist, whose wisdom and virtue are lacking from the first, is far from the ideal humanist student.¹⁶ His wit, rather than producing moral wittiness, is placed in opposition to wisdom and partakes of a degenerate will rather than a ready one:¹⁷

This young gallaunt of more witte then wealth, and yet of more wealth then wisdom [...] gaue himselfe almoste to nothing, but practisinge of those things commonly which are incident to these sharpe wittes, fine phrases, smooth quippes, merry tauntes, iestinge without meane, and abusing mirth without measure. As therefore the sweetest rose hath his prickell, the finest veluet his bracke, the fairest flour his branne, so the sharpest wit hath his wanton will [...] (sig. 1r)

Euphues recalls to us not Thomas Wilson's idea of the most eloquent as a demigod, but rather Ascham's warning in the *Scholemaster* against being given too much to vain desires: 'will, and witte [...] allured from innocencie, delited in vaine sightes, fil[l]ed with foull talke [...]' (p. 46).¹⁸ The importance lies in the discord inherent in *Euphues'* idea of wit, a discord that hinges on Lyly's use of the term, in the sense of rhetorical ability, as a certain novel 'liveliness of fancy' that is Euphues' defining trait.¹⁹

Euphues' wit, like the wax it is likened to, is malleable and changeable, and his interests lie in 'fancie before friends, his present humor, before honour to come' (sig. 1v). Rather than relying on Ascham's idea of *Euphues*, Lyly's initial concept of his protagonist therefore is more akin to Ascham's idea of a "quick" wit.²⁰

Quicke wittes commonlie, be apte to take, vnapte to keepe: soone hote and desirous of this and that: as colde and sone wery of the same againe: more

¹⁶ See for example Thomas Wilson's warning (p. 64r) against witty men working on behalf of evil causes in *The Arte of Rhetorique* (Published in 1553. STC 25799). See also Theodore L. Steinberg, 'The Anatomy of Euphues', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 17.1 (1977), 27-38 (p. 28).

¹⁷ See Richard A. McCabe, 'Wit, Eloquence, and Wisdom in "Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit"', *Studies in Philology* 81.3 (1984), 299-324, which defines it as a 'wilful wit' (p. 310). Also Morris W. Croll in G.K. Hunter, *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 10.

¹⁸ On Wilson's idea of the witty as 'halfe a GOD', see the preface to *The Arte of Rhetorique*.

¹⁹ Hunter, *John Lyly*, p. 10.

²⁰ See also Mike Pincombe, *Elizabethan Humanism: Literature and Learning in the Later Sixteenth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), p. 120; R.W. Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 250.

quicke to enter spedelie, than able to pearse farre [...] Soch wittes delite them selves in easie and pleasant studies, and never passe farre forward in hie and hard sciences [...] (p. 32)

Euphues quickly falls in love with Lucilla and betrays his friend Philautus. He falls out of it just as quickly when she, expectedly, betrays him in turn. His rhetoric often basks in its own delightfulness, mimicking the Ciceronian rhetoric – exordium, proposition, confutation and confirmation²¹ – of the wise Eubulus but turning it, in its quest of securing Euphues’ desires with no regard to social constraints, to a mocking attack: ‘The similytude you rehearse of the waxe, argueth your waxinge and meltinge braine, and your example of the hotte and harde yron, sheweth in you but colde and weake disposition’ (sig. 5v). Euphues’ sharp mind holds the promise of attaining reason but, lacking wisdom, it is suggestive at the start of only the corrupt parts of wit such as imagination. Appropriately, the consciously witty form of his language and its appeals to marketplace negotiations are suggestive not only of language’s power but of the dangers of its reliance on a negotiated value rather than a universal one, and thus connected to the earthly reason of the philosophers of old which Euphues so often copies, that ‘can neuer haue any certaine resolution’.²²

Like Lucilla, his partner in vice, who claims to have ‘neyther wyt to decypher the wiles of man, nor wisdom to dissemble our affection [...]’ (sig. 25v), so is Euphues’ *ingenium* both morally and epistemologically suspect. Lyly links wit as *ingenium*, jesting, and lively imagination with an opposite of wisdom, and thus captures within his use of the term what to the rhetoricians that precede him signifies both the importance of eloquence and its dangers. Wit thus becomes a virtue that is nevertheless apt to be misused, like Wilson’s cunning man that can persuade even to an evil cause, but it also promises the possibility of leading its possessor to learning and away from entertainment, into what Quintilian describes as real eloquence:

But the man who, by some divine instinct, has formed a real concept of eloquence, who sets before his eyes that ‘speech, queen of the world,’ of which the famous tragic poet speaks, and who seeks that enduring reward which does

²¹ See Walter N. King, ‘John Lyly and Elizabethan Rhetoric’, *Studies in Philology* 52.2 (1955), 149-61 (p. 156).

²² As noted by La Primaudaye (p. 6) in *The French Academie*, whose first full English translation was published in 1618 (STC 15241). See also Linton, p. 79. This, unlike the Erasmian notion of using the classics as models while producing an individual character. See Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 36.

not depend on fortune, not in the fees of advocacy but in his own heart and contemplation and knowledge—he will easily persuade himself to spend the time which is wasted in the theatre or the Campus, in gaming or idle talk—not to say sleep and long-drawn-out dinners—in listening to the geometrician and the teacher of music. (*Institutio Oratoria* I.xii.18)²³

Lyly promises a similar reformation to his Euphues, as his wit is to turn into a wise wit that is ‘the better if it be the deerer bought’ (sig. 1v). This reformation, as we shall see, takes up the entire second half of the story.

Within this framework wit signifies both Euphues’ natural capabilities and at the same time a quality, apt to be shaped, that is a product of his rhetoric. In the first part of *Euphues* it is quick wits, lacking in wisdom, that Lyly investigates, and along the way his term emerges as a complex one. On the one hand, the natural wit of the young student is morally indifferent, as it had been for Wilson, and possesses both great potential and the possibility of danger. On the other, rhetorical wit is related to moral judgement, whether that of wickedness at the first or as the wit that the narrator claims will eventually lead to Euphues’ reformation and real eloquence. Wit therefore becomes morally ambiguous, rather than merely indifferent: ‘the word “wittie,” [...] stands as a virtue in spite of which Euphues was wicked. Earlier on the same page [...] wit, Euphues’ preminent attribute, is placed lowest on a scale of values’.²⁴

What is more significant for the current discussion is the result of Lyly’s characterization of wit as inseparable from eloquence in conjunction with his own utilization of eloquence. This connection has been the subject of few studies thus far, all relatively recent. These few studies nevertheless share a common perception of a certain deterioration of eloquence that accompanies Euphues’ (and other characters’) moral wickedness,²⁵ an observation that appears to be at odds with the common critical view of the past that relegates euphuism to Lyly’s ‘rhetorical manner as distinct from the experience and moral stance of his protagonist’.²⁶ The common implication of these studies is that, though his wit (in the sense of *ingenium*) is morally indifferent, Lyly does produce a Ciceronian coupling of morality and rhetorical wit. But as the next few

²³ In Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education*, trans. D. A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²⁴ Steinberg, 29.

²⁵ See Arthur F. Kinney, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), pp. 146-9; McCabe, pp. 305-6, 324; Steinberg, 38; and Nicholson, pp. 91-2.

²⁶ Helgerson, p. 59.

pages will suggest, Lyly's rhetorical wit is a practical one produced through witty eloquence, and his Ciceronianism becomes not unambiguously formalized but a personal, anxious one in which rhetorical wit is placed in both moral and epistemological peril.

***Euphues'* Wit in Practice**

Euphues' rhetoric is noted to be problematic especially for its incessant use of commonplaces, an engagement warned against by Ascham:²⁷ 'But to dwell in *Epitomes* and common places, and not to binde himselfe dailie by orderlie studie [...] maketh so many seeming, and sunburnt ministers as we haue [...]' (p. 111). Euphues, rather than being a faithful student, uses his rhetoric in precisely the way in which Ascham's sunburnt reveller is expected to:

[...] so I haue most euident and infallible argumentes to serue for my purpose. It is naturall for the vine to spread, the more you take by arte to alter it, the more in the ende you augment it. It is proper for the palme tree to mount, the heauier you load it, the higher it sprowteth. Though yron be made soft with fire, it retourneth to his hardnesse. (sig. 5r)

Similarly, Euphues' use of contradictory arguments and 'false parallels' is taken by critics to suggest an anxiety surrounding the negotiable value of rhetorical truth:²⁸

The ratling Thunderbolt hath but his clap, the lightning but his flash, and as they both come in a moment, so doe they both ende in a minute.

I, but *Euphues*, hath she not heard also that the dry touchewoode is kindled with lyme? that the greatest mushrompe groweth in one night? that the fire quickly burneth the flaxe? [...] (sig. 17r)

Much critical weight has been given to Lyly's studies in Oxford, in which he was noted to be a less-than-perfect student, as the trigger for presenting a wicked humanist student, but the results of these considerations in *Euphues* nevertheless retain the conclusion that Lyly is walking still within the footsteps of Ciceronian rhetoric. The wicked Euphues, it is suggested, flirts with the abuse of copiousness that is often a source of anxiety for

²⁷ See also Nicholson, p. 88.

²⁸ Raymond Stephanson, 'John Lyly's Prose Fiction: Irony, Humor and Anti-Humanism', *English Literary Renaissance* 11.1 (1981), 3-21 (p. 12); Linton, pp. 81-2.

humanist authors or, more significantly, even with the Ramist danger of pursuing style regardless of substance.²⁹ Ramus indeed would have seen no problem with wicked characters using perfect rhetoric.³⁰ It could be argued that Lyly reflects on the vices of Ramism via euphuism, as a mode of writing often differentiated based on its sound, and faithful to Ramus' desire for ornamentation based on 'the sound of speech alone'.³¹ Using his protagonist's wit for the detailed production of problematic eloquence, Lyly can be seen as instructing against the dangers of moral corruption and Ramism while keeping his gaze ever fixed at the ideal of Ascham's *Schoolmaster* and Erasmus' *De Ratione Studii*. If we are then to consider Lyly's presentation as a straightforward exercise in exemplifying (and thus warning against) wickedness in mind and tongue, the conclusion would be that by showing its opposite, Lyly is merely reaffirming the Ciceronian relationship between a 'right rhetoric' and a 'right mind'.

It would, however, be quite naïve to take Lyly's moral lessons at face value. Though it has been suggested that 'Lyly provides plenty of hints that reading [*Euphues*] should be regarded as an aesthetic rather than a moral experience', the moral dimension of *Euphues* is omnipresent, though not as it superficially appears.³² Rather, the engagement with the follies of wit in the first part of *Euphues* reflects not simply an aspiration to the ideal but a practical approach to humanist ideas. The insistence of Ascham on the primacy of learning over experience and practice, for example, is turned on its head. For the wicked Euphues of the first part of the narrative, though his education is greatly criticized as overly reliant on commonplacing, appears to lack neither native wit nor learning and indeed finds it quite easy to respond to Eubulus with carefully crafted sentences to match Eubulus' own.³³ Thus Eubulus' exclamation that

²⁹ See also Kinney, p. 137. Lyly, like Ascham before him, is echoing Erasmus' opening chapter of *De Copia*, in which he warns that 'the aspiration to Copia is dangerous' for it may lead to an 'amorphous loquacity' (I.I) that threatens to obscure the subject.

³⁰ See for example Ramus, *Arguments in Rhetoric Against Quintilian*, trans. C. Newlands (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010): 'Nor is rhetoric a moral virtue as Quintilian thinks, so that whoever possesses it is incapable of being a wicked man' (p. 87). On how this affected later Ramist literature, see Neil Rhodes, *The Power of Eloquence and English Renaissance Literature* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 60; and Gary R. Grund, 'From Formulary to Fiction: The Epistle and the English Anti-Ciceronian Movement', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 17.2 (1975), 379-95 (pp. 379-80).

³¹ Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 274. See also Morris W. Croll and Harry Clemons, 'Introduction: The Sources of the Euphuistic Rhetoric', *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit; Euphues & His England* (London: Routledge, 1916), p. xv.

³² Katharine Wilson, *Fictions of Authorship in Late Elizabethan Narratives: Euphues in Arcadia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 55.

³³ In the spirit of a university disputant. See also Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 58-9.

‘One droppe of poyson infecteth the whole tunne of wine: one leafe of *Colliquintida*, marreth and spoyleth the whole pot of porredge [...]’ (sig. 4v) is answered by Euphues with ‘The Sunne shineth upon the dunghil, and is not corrupted: the Diamonde lyeth in the fire, and is not consumed [...]’ (sig. 6v) – a manipulation of exempla that is suggestive of Euphues’ abilities and bookishness. He even possesses a quality that hints at the humanist ‘judgement’ (which Hoby’s translation of Castiglione’s *Courtier* suggests arises out of employing one’s wit in learning and practice) in his ability to ‘easily discerne Apollos musike, from Pan his pype’ (sig. 2r), seeing through his guests’ intentions.

Euphues’ rhetoric, in fact, is quintessentially humanist. His (and Lucilla’s) argumentation of opposing points of view, most evident in the wicked discourse of lust, is suggestive of ‘the endless iterability of the commonplace’ in the spirit of Erasmus’ *De Copia*, in which it is argued that material can and should be twisted to serve opposing purposes.³⁴ Similarly his tools – analogies and aphorisms that make extensive use of historical, mythological and proverbial sources – are those of the ideal student of Erasmus’ *De Ratione Studii*.³⁵ Rather than serving as Euphues’ unique trait, these tools of the humanist student become a convention of euphuism itself, used by everyone from the wicked Euphues and the treacherous Lucilla to the seemingly-omniscient narrator and the wise Eubulus, even as the latter refrain from the explicitly contradictory arguments of the two lovers. Thus Lyly’s narrator, reflecting on Euphues’ wickedness despite his qualities, remarks that ‘Venus had hir mole in hir cheeke which made hir more amiable: Helen hir scarre in hir chinne [...] Aristippus his Wart, Lycurgus his Wen [...]’ (sig. 1r-1v), freely mixing examples of the well-known with the made-up, the very images of unchasteness (Helen of Troy and Venus) with Lycurgus of Sparta, whom Ascham lists as one of the greatest in ‘eloquens and ciuill lawe’ (p. 59).³⁶ Even arguments for Euphues’ Ramism lose their sway when we consider Ramus’ own rejection of putting *verba* before *res*, or the correspondence between characters’ moral positions and subject matter that is a consistent feature of Lyly’s narrative – Eubulus’ speech, though ineffective, advocates a moral position, while that of the wicked Euphues celebrates folly.

³⁴ See Nicholson, p. 89.

³⁵ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus, Vol 24*, trans. by B. McGregor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. 676-8. These are also manifested in the eleventh method of embellishment in Book II of *De Copia*.

³⁶ See also Jonathan Sell, ‘The Origin of John Lyly’s “Cos Amoris”’, *Notes and Queries* 61.2 (2014), 212-14 (p. 212).

Lyly, rather than merely critiquing youthful folly or Ramist degeneration, suggests a playful but sober view of rhetorical wit in practice. Thus epistemological anxiety permeates even the speeches of the wise – Eubulus extols an educational ideal of universal truth, but his own euphuism suggests a negotiated one³⁷ – and the rhetoric of the wicked may be burdened by questionable aphorisms, overdone copia and contradictory analogies,³⁸ but it is ultimately in line with the teachings of the humanist curriculum.³⁹ Euphues may have been educated poorly, but what he really lacks and Eubulus has in his ‘hoarye haire’ (sig. 2v) is *experience*, precisely that which produces wisdom. This practical view of wit as maturing through an active participation in the world, rather than an idealized version dependent solely on learning, is echoed by Lyly’s use of the noun as an active agent:⁴⁰ ‘he well knew that so rare a wit would in time, either breed an intolerable trouble, or bring an incomparable treasure to the commonweal’ (sig. 2v). The result is that rhetoric in the first half of the narrative is invariably bound to fall short of the ideal. Euphuism thus becomes a tool of expressing not a perfect example of Ciceronian rhetoric (or a critique of Ramist rhetoric) but rather the shortcomings inherent to the humanist rhetorical tradition, the same ones often entertained by theoreticians like Wilson and Ascham but quickly pushed aside in favour of renewed interest in the theorized ideal. For Euphues and Lucilla these shortcomings are perhaps obvious, because their intentions and moral character are flawed, and the outcome of their association is betrayal and abandonment. But even the rhetoric of the wise and moral Eubulus fails in that it does not achieve Cicero’s goals of rhetoric: it fails to persuade Euphues, and it fails to teach him. Lyly’s narrator therefore captures the idea of an imperfect practical wit, but retains the promise of defending it as well:

I goe not about (gentlemen) to inueigh against wit, for then I wer witlesse but frankely to confesse mine own little wit. I haue euer thought so superstitiously of wit, that I feare I haue committed idolatrie against wisdom, and if Nature had dealte so beneficially with me to haue giuen me any wit, I should haue bene readyer in the defence of it [...]

³⁷ See Linton, pp. 81-2.

³⁸ ‘For by a similitude you maye as soone proue a wrong matter, as a righte’ (N2v) as Ralph Lever suggests in *The Arte of Reason, rightly termed, Witcraft* (STC 15541). See also K. Wilson, p. 55; Stephanson, 19.

³⁹ Euphues ‘uses the apparatus of logic and rhetoric without the wisdom that should govern it’. See Judith Rice Henderson, ‘Euphues and his Erasmus’, *English Literary Renaissance* 12.2 (1982), 135-61 (p. 158).

⁴⁰ ‘Too much studie doth intoxicate their braines’, claims Lyly’s narrator when he discusses quick young wits (p. 8r).

The implication is that a different, better kind of wit exists that the narrator, through what little wit he false-modestly claims to have, is attempting in earnest to bring to the surface. This different kind of wit is always at the background of the first part, from the title page's promise of a wit gaining wisdom and reaping happiness to the narrator's promise of a better wit bought with experience that 'in the sequele of this history shall most manifestly appeare' (sig. 1v).

Following the practical presentation of imperfect wits, it is perhaps then not surprising that the first part of the narrative ends with Euphues' rejection of Lucilla and the practical world in a self-declared reformation that seeks to re-establish the proper use of wit:

If witte be employed in the modest study of learning, what thing so precious as wit? if in the idle trade of love what thing more pestilent then wit?

The prooffe [...] hath bene veryfied in me, whome nature hath endued wyth a lyttle witte, which I have abused with an obstinate will: most true it is that the thing the better it is, the greater the abuse [...] (sig. 37v)

Euphues asserts that learning is a necessary activity in shaping a young wit, and ultimately conceives of learning as also the proper *end* of one's use of wit. Though still bound by the antitheses of euphuism, the protagonist thematically positions himself as a disciple of Ascham's, who argues that learning is superior and more necessary than experience: 'Surelie long experience doth proffet moch, but moste, and almost onelie to him [...] that is diligentlie before instructed with preceptes of well doinge' (p. 61).⁴¹

This idea is thematically taken to its conclusion in the letters that form the second half of Lyly's work, pointing to a retirement into academic pursuits and eventually to theology as the noblest use of one's wit. The first part's subversion of the 'right mind', however, is echoed by the difficulty in assessing the merits of right eloquence in the book's 'reformed' second part. If the first part explored, and implicated Lyly in, the notion of the 'quick' wit, it is worth considering the second part in the light of its opposite, hinted at as we have seen before by Lyly, that is Ascham's notion of a 'hard' wit:

Hard wittes be hard to receiue, but sure to keepe: painefull without werinesse, hede full without wauering, constant without newfanglenes: bearing heaue

⁴¹ Cicero and Quintilian claim similar things. See also Chris Holcomb, "The crown of all our study": Improvisation in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31.3 (2001), 53-72 (p. 56).

things, though not lightlie, yet willinglie [...] They be graue, stedfast, silent of tong, secret of hart. Not hastie in making, but constant in ke[e]ping any promise. Not rashe in vttering, but war[y]e in considering euery matter [...] (*The Scholemaster*, p. 35)

Lyly's narrator, who in a previously quoted passage attacked those young wits that berate 'hard' learners, now professes to deliver somewhat of this more steadfast wit. His narrative becomes a series of epistles and treatises, one of which he even frames with the following declaration: 'which discourse followinge, although it bring lesse pleasure [...] yet will it bring more profite' (sig. 49v). The results, however, are rather ambiguous, as similarities between *Euphues*' two parts suggest that thematic choices are often not seen to be Lyly's main concern.

Euphues begins his supposed reformation with an epistle aimed at rebuking the follies of love, especially aimed at Philautus, and the uncertainties of euphuistic rhetoric rear their heads quite clearly in the text. Euphues attacks women using very similar rhetoric to that which he had used before, using natural and classical examples: 'Thinke this with thy selfe, that the sweete tongs of *Calypso*, were subtil snares to entice *Vlysses* [...] that *Hiena* when she speaketh lyke a man, deuiseeth most mischiefe, that women when they be most pleasant pretend most treacherie' (sig. 43r-v). In the following letter, however, Euphues excuses his own attack on the basis that not all women are the same:⁴² 'There is great different between the standing puddle, and the running streame, yet both water [...] great contrarietie between *Lais* and *Lucretia*, yet both women' (sig. 48v). This is precisely what Euphues had used in his condescending, wicked response to the wise Eubulus: 'Though all men bee made of one mettall, yet they be not cast all in one moule' (sig. 5r), suggesting that, at least rhetorically, Euphues' has remained unchanged.

But if euphuism served in the first part to highlight the practical, imperfect nature of rhetoric when used in active life, should the reformed Euphues be taken as an idealized response? Certainly, his previous placing of *verba* before *res* is now rectified.⁴³ His subject matter turns to education, albeit in a treatise lifted directly from Plutarch and Erasmus, and then to theology, as he debates and converts an atheist by invoking the

⁴² Leah Scragg notes this as an exercise in 'trans-historical dialogue', another attempt to encompass multiple points of view; 'Introduction', *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit; and, Euphues and his England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 12. See also K. Wilson, p. 63

⁴³ And could be excused as a necessary step for, according to Erasmus' opening lines in *Di Ratione Studii*, one must first have knowledge of words to be able to attain the more important knowledge of things (p. 666).

prodigal son (sig. 77v-78r), hinting at himself as a repentant Christian. But Euphues' strict moralizing against women in the first letters is accompanied by equal severity in his final ones, such as when he dismisses Lucilla's death as just and focuses instead on lecturing Philautus (sig. 84r), or when he attempts to console an exile by suggesting that virtue shall aid him, like 'meates which are sower in the mouth and sharpe in the mawe, but if thou mingle them with sweete sauces, they yielde both a pleasaunt tast and wholesome nourishment' (sig. 84v). The reformed Euphues doesn't seem to exhibit the marks of Ascham's hard wit: constancy in thought and wariness in speaking. Rather, he lacks the temperance upheld by Wilson as necessary for the Orator, and his abruptly gained wisdom, hardly the product of a long life of experience, is therefore doubtful as well.⁴⁴

Many critics have noted the failure of Euphues' reformation,⁴⁵ but perhaps it should be seen as a move towards thematic ambiguity that matches the ambiguous nature of wit and rhetoric, both morally and epistemologically, that is inherent to euphuism. Lyly relies on the notion that letters are an intimate medium and thus revealing of a more personal, more 'real' truth and, like many humanists before him, his letters are presented on the surface as a means of displaying his and Euphues' learning.⁴⁶ But letters are also an anxious medium, in which the present authority of oral discourse is absent and thus the authorial voice weakened, and in which misunderstandings are apt to arise.⁴⁷ Delighting in rhetorical prowess, the epistolary Euphues is far from the grave 'hard' wit that is never too hasty in speaking. Shooting his arrows of moralizing rhetoric in all directions, he is still the product of quick wit, one that has maintained its moral ambiguity while, and through, moving from excess wantonness to extreme severity.⁴⁸ '[T]he moral Euphues is unlikely to make many converts among his readers'⁴⁹ and

⁴⁴ Euphues is even explicitly noted as still being 'young' (p. 190) in *Euphues and His England*.

⁴⁵ Such as Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 93-5; Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions*, p. 250; Pincombe, p. 117.

⁴⁶ See Cecil H. Clough, 'The Cult of Antiquity: Letters and Letter Collections' in *Cultural aspects of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by Cecil H. Clough (Manchester University Press, 1976), pp. 33-67 (p. 33); Amyrose McCue Gill, 'Fraught Relations in the Letters of Laura Cereta: Marriage, Friendship, and Humanist Epistolarity', *Renaissance Quarterly* 62.4 (2009), 1098-1129 (p. 1099). On ideas of epistolary truth, see Alastair Fowler, 'The Formation of Genres in the Renaissance and After', *New Literary History* 34.2 (2003), 185-200 (p. 197); C. Guillén, 'Notes toward the study of the Renaissance letter', *Renaissance Genres : Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.70-101 (p. 100).

⁴⁷ See Gary Schneider, *The culture of epistolarity: vernacular letters and letter writing in early modern England, 1500-1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp. 29-34.

⁴⁸ See also Pincombe, p. 117.

⁴⁹ K. Wilson, p. 64.

Lyly, whose narrator partakes in the first part of the wantonness, now partakes of the ambiguity through becoming practically indistinguishable from his protagonist and disappearing into the epistles.⁵⁰

The return to letters appears to signal a return to Ascham, who declares that ‘Much wryting breedeth ready speakyng’ (p. 29), but Lyly seems unable to provide an account of perfect wit. Much as the reception to Lyly’s work was mixed, with a significant audience accepting Euphues’ reformation at face value before more discerning critics made their voices heard, so seems to be his message of ambiguity. When he was writing *Euphues* in the late 1570s, Lyly was actively seeking patronage, having given up hopes of an Oxford fellowship. While nothing is known of the relationship between Lyly and his first dedicatee, Sir William West (Baron De La Warr), and the latter is not particularly noted as a patron of the arts, Lyly addressed *Euphues*’ sequel to the period’s quintessential patron, the Earl of Oxford, suggesting a rapidly emerging acquaintance with the demands of patronage.⁵¹ Disappointment with the humanist system in which he had failed to find a place may have moved Lyly to reproduce the anxieties of his rhetorical tradition, or the rising need for appealing to a patron may have demanded a ‘self-negating tendency’ in which rhetorical perfection could not even be pretended, let alone seriously attempted.⁵² Perhaps this is why even in *Euphues and his England*, written when Lyly’s star was rapidly rising and addressed to a very different kind of patron, the protagonist maintains his ambiguous new-found convictions and Lyly maintains his ambiguous relation to wit. Thus, Euphues reflects on a newly-found belief in experience, a belief that is at odds with his own inexperience, which suggests that ‘what is gotten with wit will be kept with wariness and increased with wisdom’ (p. 169), or on his insistence that the subject elevates the speaker (pp. 188-90). Nevertheless, he is encountered by characters that challenge these beliefs, such as the hermit Callimachus whose speech praises education over experience, and the kind Fidus who mistakes wittiness for wisdom (pp. 208-9) and is rebuked for this mistake by his wife Iffida (p. 210).⁵³ Detached from the investigation of courtship that is at the heart of the sequel,

⁵⁰ Helgerson suggests that he merges with Euphues.

⁵¹ See Bond, p. 16, 24-8; Linton, pp. 93-5; Hunter, *Lyly and Peele*, p. 10; and *John Lyly*, pp. 67-8, 79. For more on the Earl of Oxford’s eclectic literary patronage, see Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), pp. 380-4.

⁵² Nandini Das, *Renaissance Romance: the transformation of English prose fiction, 1570-1620* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 112. For more on the desire as well as the danger of patronage for authors such as Erasmus, see Werner L. Gundersheimer, ‘Patronage in the Renaissance: An Exploratory Approach’ in *Patronage in the Renaissance*, ed. by Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 3-24.

⁵³ Note also how Fidus’ attempts at persuading himself out of the folly of love only lead to his falling in it the more (p. 201).

Euphues ends up still the severe scholar, a label Lyly had by now left behind for good, as even the narrator now aligns himself with Philautus' notion of a noble consummated love rather than with Euphues' notion of friendship and admiration from afar (p. 296).

Wit is the most distinguishing feature of both Euphues and, by extension, his creator. Lyly was certainly also creating a fashion when he was writing the two *Euphues* works, and the choice of employing his wit in gaining patronage is not incidental because for Lyly, as for his protagonist, wit carried with it great social power.⁵⁴ Euphues' wit, his preeminent attribute, serves as the driving force for the plot, just as Lyly's wit paved the way for patronage, a decade of successful playwriting and a legacy of imitators and responders. And yet, Euphues's wit embodies first and foremost the moral anxiety of unrestrained youthful *ingenium* and the epistemological anxiety when wit fails to nudge *ingenium* aside and become the practical knowledge of experience. Lyly's wit may have proved successful in reality, but its literary manifestation is repeatedly characterised as precarious, reflexive of Lyly's own anxieties regarding the place of his wit between the demands of patronage – a certain modesty coupled with the production of overtly moralizing rhetoric⁵⁵ – and those of the emerging market, whose notions of value escape universality.

⁵⁴ See also Guenther, 29; Michael Saenger, *The Commodification of Textual Engagements in the English Renaissance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 67-8.

⁵⁵ On the social climate that produced moralizing literature in the 1560s and 70s, see Lorna Hutson, *Thomas Nashe in Context* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 62-4.