

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld, *Indecorous Thinking: Figures of Speech in Early Modern Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). 312 pp. ISBN 978 0 8232 7792 6.**

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This study examines the formal and epistemological significance of figures of speech in early modern English literature. It begins by stating that early modern poets rejected the conventional (and ancient) prioritisation of *inventio*, the discovery of arguments and proofs, over *elocutio*, or style, and that they exploited the imaginative capacities of figures of speech to explore new, distinctively poetic, ways of knowing. Rosenfeld calls this ‘*indecorous* thinking’. (Presumably for the sake of defamiliarization, the adjective, like the names of the figures under study, is italicised throughout.) Literary scholarship, Rosenfeld explains, has tended to treat figures of speech as merely decorative, rather than generative. As a result, it has limited our appreciation of the range of functions they could perform. This approach to figure is said to be symptomatic of a broader issue: namely, that rhetoric has been held hostage by the assumptions and prejudices of philosophy. Defenders of rhetoric consistently emphasise its role in promoting and sustaining civilisations; in doing so, they respond directly to philosophy’s attacks on the art, which associate rhetoric, especially figures of speech, with ethical and intellectual vacuity. The problem with this defence, we are told, is that it does not account for the aspects of rhetoric that do not fit its paradigm, including deployments of figure with no discernible ideological commitments, no particular *telos*. This is the situation in which Rosenfeld intervenes. She argues that figures should be understood on their own terms, as playful, pleasurable, and powerful ‘engines of knowledge’ (p. 12) which inform ‘a method of thinking’ and even redefine ‘what counts as thinking as such’ (p. 13).

In order to ‘excavate the vexed place of figure within English humanism’ (p. 13), Rosenfeld brings together theoretical discussions of figure and examples of how they

were used in practice. The study is organised in two parts, each consisting of three chapters. Part One highlights the importance of figures of speech to early modern literary culture by reconstructing aspects of the histories of rhetoric, dialectic, poetics, and pedagogy. Chapter 1 deals with the pedagogical reforms instituted by Peter Ramus and his English proponents, which limited the scope of rhetoric to the canon of *elocutio*, and reassigned *inventio* to dialectic. For Ramists, figure had no place in the procedures of disciplined thought; it could embellish knowledge, not produce it. The chapter offers an alternative to the Ramist account, suggesting that the figures of *elocutio* in fact ‘usurp[ed] the role traditionally reserved for the places of *inventio*’ (p. 46), enabling poets to create worlds which are not beholden to what is, but freely venture into (in Philip Sidney’s phrase) ‘what may be’. Using the example of *epanodos* (a figure which draws distinctions between things through reiteration) in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, it reveals that figure ‘supplies something like the physical laws of its [the poem’s] imaginative world’, establishing the ‘parameters of possibility’ (p. 45) within which it operates.

Chapter 2 turns to the humanist classroom. It explains that students were taught to treat the figures as formulas for composition, and that they thus functioned as a pivot between the acts of reading and writing, analysis and genesis. Through a reading of a scene from Sidney’s *Old Arcadia*, it discusses the tension between the pleasures of poetic making (specifically, the pleasures afforded by the artifice of figure), and the humanist imperative to ‘profit’ the audience. Chapter 3 considers the social and ideological dimensions of decorum, by foregrounding the ways in which figure is used to assign value to people and things. From the viewpoint of the rhetorical tradition, the problem of the ‘*indecorous*’ is twofold: first, it constitutes a failure of judgment (as in Aristotle’s example of a fig tree described as ‘queenly’, a descriptor that makes it seem more valuable than it really is); second, it constitutes a failure of style, in that it violates the ‘ideal of harmony, proportion, measure, and rule’ (p. 80) for which decorum stood. Taking the example of *epithet* in Mary Wroth’s *Urania*, the chapter makes a case for the ‘*indecorous*’ by looking at its role in creating ‘an alternative hierarchy of values’ (p. 81) and, in doing so, engaging with ‘social and ethical problems’ (p. 93).

Part Two consists of a series of case studies, each of which is devoted to the mechanisms of a single figure of speech in an early modern romance. The selected figures (*simile*, *antithesis*, *periphrasis*) have formal counterparts in the places of *inventio* (comparison, contraries, and definition, respectively), and thus amplify Rosenfeld’s earlier discussion of the contested boundaries between the canons of

rhetoric. The chapters return to the authors discussed in Part One: Spenser, Sidney, and Wroth. Chapter 4 argues that *simile*, a figure traditionally aligned with ‘slow thinking’, organises the temporality of the *Faerie Queene* by creating delays, deferrals, and digressions. Focussing on the character of Braggadochio, it suggests that the accumulation of *ornamenta* — a term which, as Rosenfeld points out, stands for both rhetorical figures and weapons — serves as a vehicle for social advancement, a means by which he can fashion himself into a knight, or something like it. Extending the theme of words as weaponry, the following chapter shows that the final battle scene of Sidney’s revised (and incomplete) *Arcadia*, described through a series of *antitheses*, literalises the notion of *antithesis* as a ‘setting against’ of opposites, a fight in which no winner emerges. Having done so, it suggests that the incompleteness of the *Arcadia*, and the digressiveness of romance more generally, should be viewed not as a commitment to narrative, but as a commitment to style. The final chapter is concerned with the use of *periphrasis*, a figure which names an object by ‘talking around’ it, in Wroth’s *Urania*. It identifies a central paradox of the *Urania*: that when its characters withhold words, particularly when they refuse to speak the names of their beloveds, it only amplifies the quantity of their speech. In attending to the poet’s handling of figure, the chapter departs from a major trend of Wroth criticism, which reads her work in topical, primarily biographical, terms. Further, it positions *periphrasis* as an example of a figure which challenges received ideas about the relationship of ‘words’ (*verba*) and ‘things’ (*res*), and, in the process, transforms philosophy’s attacks on rhetoric into a source of creative power.

One of the book’s greatest strengths is the way in which it teases out the tensions, and, in some cases, contradictions, between theory (rhetorical and poetic) and practice. It also, in the spirit of a study like Wayne Rebhorn’s *The Emperor of Men’s Minds* (1995), reveals the tensions and contradictions within the ‘discourse’ of rhetoric itself. This is a necessary corrective to a tendency, sometimes seen in literary studies of the period, to ascribe to rhetoric a coherence which it did not possess. Further, Rosenfeld strikes a careful balance between situating early modern poetics within a longer (that is, ancient) rhetorical tradition, and considering the ways in which poets interacted with this legacy. This, too, is a welcome change from a trend in some recent scholarship, which attempts to simply map the conventions of classical rhetoric onto the literature of the period, as if early modern writers followed these conventions unthinkingly, exercising no creative agency. The breadth of material examined, which, in addition to the works of romance under focus, encompasses treatises, dialogues, and readers’ notes (including Jonson’s annotations in his 1617 *Spenser*), is impressive. So too is the book’s methodological

versatility: the detailed historical reconstructions of Part One, which will be gratefully received by scholars of rhetoric and pedagogy, are only surpassed by the sensitive, and very beautiful, close-readings offered by Part Two.

Rosenfeld's book is not without its problems, however. The first has to do with structure. Because it does not pursue a linear argument, its various strands (which include challenging and dense discussions of form, epistemology, and ideology) are unevenly developed, and the relationship between them is often unclear. This is exacerbated by the use of a coda rather than a conclusion, which could have usefully drawn the strands together. Another problem has to do with scope. Rosenfeld gives a clear rationale for her focus on romance, explaining that it 'provides an especially productive concentration of the artifice and labor that marked figures of speech as the instruments of poetic making' (p.16). As her readings testify, this is surely correct. But Rosenfeld claims to be revealing something about early modern poetics more broadly. It would have been helpful, then, to have this claim substantiated by discussion of how the treatments of figure in these romance works relate to poetic practices in other generic contexts. Similarly, Rosenfeld's claim that figure's conspicuousness is 'especially' important for Spenser, Sidney, and Wroth is left unsubstantiated. What is it that distinguished these poets from their peers? How did their treatments of figure in other contexts — for example, in Wroth's sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, which is not mentioned even in passing — relate to the approaches they took to romance? There is a sense in which Rosenfeld's argument enacts the indecorousness it describes: that is, it tends to prioritise part (individual poets, particular passages, a single genre) over whole. This characteristic is what makes the book so compelling, but it is also the source of its weaknesses.

Scholarship on early modern rhetoric is a large and rapidly growing field, and Rosenfeld's bibliography reveals several surprising omissions. She does not acknowledge, for example, that, until recently, most literary studies of rhetoric focussed on elocution, particularly the figures of speech. The decision to focus on figure is, therefore, not new, even if the particular approach that her book takes is both original and illuminating. Further, her argument does not engage sufficiently with recent work which has shifted discussions of rhetoric from elocution to questions of invention (and, to a lesser extent, disposition), a development that we might characterise as an 'inventive turn'. For example, it mentions Lorna Hutson's *Invention of Suspicion* (2007) only in passing, and it does not cite Hutson's *Circumstantial Shakespeare* (2015) at all. Hutson's studies reveal that the habits, techniques, and topics of rhetorical invention

were fundamental to early modern literary (particularly dramatic) composition, and thus differ from Rosenfeld's emphasis on the figures of speech in poetry. Direct engagement with Hutson, and with other studies of invention, such as Quentin Skinner's *Forensic Shakespeare* (2014), would have sharpened Rosenfeld's argument, by requiring her to clarify her position within the field. The same could be said of Rosenfeld's brief engagement with William Scott's *Model of Poesy* (c. 1599), recently edited by Gavin Alexander (2013). The fusion of logic and poetics in Scott's *Model*, discussed at length in Alexander's introduction, complicates Rosenfeld's claim that early modern poets sought to 'produce a certain kind of knowledge that is not reducible to logical arguments, affirmations, or propositions' (p. 3), not least because Scott was self-consciously writing in the wake of Sidney's *Defence*. When Scott is taken seriously, as he should be, the supposed distinction between logic and poetry becomes harder to sustain. Finally, though this is not the fault of the author, the presentation of endnotes rather than footnotes makes it difficult to access the useful, and often very interesting, material therein.

These details do not, in any way, detract from the achievement of *Indecorous Thinking*, which is a valuable contribution to early modern studies in general, and to studies of rhetoric and poetics in particular. In addition to offering fresh readings of Spenser, Sidney, and Wroth, it teaches us the pleasure that can be found in thinking and doing 'otherwise'.