
Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, & Katrin Ettenhuber (eds.):

Renaissance Figures of Speech

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007

306 pages (bibliography; index)

ISBN: 978-0-521-86640-8

Price: \$99; £57

Renaissance Figures of Speech explores the relationship between rhetoric and literature in the English Renaissance, especially during the Tudor period, by presenting case studies of, as far as this reviewer can tell, quite arbitrarily selected rhetorical devices. The explicit and ambitious aim of the book is to provide “a new method for approaching the figures of speech” (p. 14), a method, which is then carried out by exploring the wider cultural significance of rhetoric and rhetorical reading practices during the period in question. The book originated in two series of lectures arranged by Sylvia Adamson and the late Jeremy Maule at Cambridge University in 1995 and 1996. The contributors also exchanged their ideas at a symposium ten years later, in 2005; these earlier collaborations add to the book’s overall cohesion. The book consists of thirteen “chapters” by thirteen scholars, and is well organized, though there could have been more cross-references between the various contributions.

The chapters focus on the following rhetorical devices: *synonymia*, *compar* or *parison*, *periodos*, puns, *prosopopoeia*, *ekphrasis*, *hysteron proteron*, *paradiastole*, *syncrisis*, testimony, *hyperbole*, *metalepsis*, and ‘vices’ of style. Some of these are figures of speech, but others, like *periodos* and testimony, are definitely not. Furthermore, in rhetorical theory *prosopopoeia* is often classified as a figure of thought, and *hyperbole* and *metalepsis* as tropes. Thus, the title of the book is somewhat imprecise. However, as stated in the “Introduction” (“Introduction: the figures in Renaissance theory and practice”, pp. 1-14), the division between tropes and figures, on the one hand, and the classification of figures as the figures of speech and the figures of thought, on the other, vary considerably in rhetorical handbooks. The editors also suggest some causes for this “taxonomic confusion”, such as “a recurrently felt need to discriminate between figurative operations that *represent* thought and those that actively *provoke* it” (p. 8). This statement refers to one of the illuminating ideas of the book, namely that rhetoric not only represents but also inspires thoughts, because writers provoke thoughts both with *res* and with the figurative use of *verba*.

The book has been prepared with care, and the imprecise title of the book can be forgiven because each writer successfully and firmly places her or his rhetorical device in the context of English Renaissance rhetorical terminology and often in the wider context of the history of rhetoric. Each article is introduced by a definition quoted from an early modern English rhetorical manual along with an example of the use of the figure in English Renaissance literature. The contributors most commonly refer to Shakespeare’s plays, which appeal, of course, to a wide audience.

The “Introduction” presents the contributions in five groups, the first of which contains four chapters on four figures – *synonymia*, *compar*, *periodos*, and puns – that “pose particular challenges for modern reading practices” (p. 12). Thus, in “Synonymia: or, in other words” (pp. 17-35), Sylvia Adamson notes that modern readers often share the Coleridgean ideal of finding the exact ex-

pression for any given thought, and therefore feel impatient with the Renaissance idea of *synonymia* with its emphasis on lists of variant expressions. Adamson first discusses *synonymia* as a pedagogical practice exemplified by Erasmus's influential *De copia* (1512), and then provides examples of *synonymia* in different literary genres (oratory, drama, essays), arguing that the excessive use of synonyms sometimes highlighted the most important parts of the text – a circumstance that resonates well with what is known of the Renaissance culture of public display: as Adamson points out, the most essential subject matter was adorned with synonyms just as the noble classes showed off fine garments.

The following two chapters deal with the syntactical aspect of rhetoric, the structuring of sentences. In “Compar or parison: measure for measure” (pp. 38-58), Russ McDonald shows how the figure of parallel syntax (*isokolon* in Greek) reflected the taste for syntactical equivalence and symmetry, characteristic of Tudor literature as well as of the architecture of that period: there had to be correspondence not only between the parts of a sentence but also between the parts of a building. Thus, an analogy was seen between sentence composition and architecture. McDonald also provides examples of architectural metaphors from the early modern manuals and from Roman rhetoric. However, he does not mention that these kinds of metaphors are also described in classical Greek rhetoric (e.g., in Dionysius of Halicarnassus).

Janel Mueller's contribution (“Periodos: squaring the circle”, pp. 60-77) is interesting because, in modern scholarship, *periodos* is usually discussed in philological rather than in rhetorical contexts. Mueller presents Juan Louis Vives's treatment of *periodos*, which combines, according to Mueller, Quintilian's theory and Cicero's practice. Giving some examples of periodic style from early modern English historiography and John Donne, and analyzing these long and well-rounded sentences and their balanced antitheses, Mueller argues that periodicity was used in sixteenth-century English historiography, for instance, to reveal the internal disorder of a person. Most strikingly, periodic sentences combined with simple sentence units could even have had aphoristic effects, as she shows with examples from a sermon by Donne.

The contribution by Sophie Read (“Puns: serious wordplay”, pp. 80-94) is a search for classical theoretical counterparts to a literary device that ancient grammarians and rhetoricians did not recognize as such. Puns were common figurative tools in Tudor literature and were often mentioned in contemporary manuals. Read suggests that such classical figures as *syllipsis* (a word or sound having two meanings, e.g., for ironic effect), *antanaclasis* (a word repeated in a different sense), and *paronomasia* (the similarity of sound between two words) may be interpreted as punning devices. According to Read, the wider context for Renaissance puns is the idea of language as something magical or sacramental; it was thought that, by wordplay, one was able to reveal hidden and even sacred connotations of a word. These hidden meanings often related to the etymology of the word; however, Read does not refer to the Renaissance idea of Pre-Adamite language(s) before Babel, which established etymology as an esteemed field of study.

The rhetorical figures of *prosopopoeia* and *ekphrasis* appeal especially to the imagination and have been in vogue in recent studies in the history of rhetoric.¹ Gavin Alexander's contribution on “Prosopopoeia: the speaking figure” (pp. 96-112) offers many examples of this entertaining device, also in combination with the related figure *apostrophe*, i.e., the direct address of, especially, in-

¹ Cf., e.g., Bettine Menke, *Prosopopoeia. Stimme und Text bei Brentano, Hoffmann, Kleist und Kafka* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000); Ruth Webb “Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre”, *Word and Image* 15 (1999), pp. 7-18; and ead., *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

animate things. Alexander presents *prosopopoeia* in the context of Renaissance ideas of characterization and also refers to the ancient notion of identity as a mask (*persona*).

In her contribution on “Ekphrasis: painting in words” (pp. 114-129), Claire Preston briefly introduces some Neoplatonic ideas about the force of language. Although Neoplatonism certainly influenced English Renaissance literary theory, this issue is not brought up elsewhere in the book. (In passing: Greek rhetoric is sometimes treated in a casual manner in this book; for example, no one notes the problematic identity of Demetrius, the writer of *On Style*.) It is well known that *ekphrasis* was most often used in the descriptions of objects (especially of paintings). Preston defines it as an interruptive and suspending device, which attempts “to make the temporal do the work of the spatial” (p. 119). She analyzes particularly the *ekphraseis* in the third book of *The Faerie Queene* and shows how *ekphrasis* challenges the readers – along with Spencer’s characters – to be art critics and interpret the bas-reliefs and tapestries in the house of the enchanter Busirane.

Patricia Parker’s “Hysteron proteron: or the preposterous” (pp. 132-145), and Quentin Skinner’s “Paradiastole: redescribing the vices as virtues” (pp. 148-163) succeed in linking these lesser-known figures to the wider cultural, and particularly morally-oriented, context. The figure of *hysteron proteron* also denoted logical fallacy (effect coming before cause), but in English usage it began to refer to the preposterous. Parker shows with enlightening examples (some of them from the seventeenth century) how the figure was used in descriptions of alternative, even devilish, worlds turned upside down. Thus, *hysteron proteron* also served to define ‘the other’.

Unlike Parker, Skinner presents a valuable historical outline of the figure of *paradiastole* and its first occurrences in Roman rhetoric. *Paradiastole* was a tool used especially in moral descriptions: the seeming virtue could be unmasked as a vice (Rutilius), and vice versa; hence the use of *paradiastole* in exculpation (Quintilian). Furthermore, by redescribing vices as virtues, the figure became common in satirical contexts and comedy. Skinner shows how Renaissance handbooks were full of paradiastolic pairs (e.g., frugal/avaricious, careful/niggardly), and justifiably combines this observation with Aristotle’s concepts of the *mesotes*, the Golden Mean (between two opposed vices), and its further interpretations (i.e., virtue as the mean between two related vices). However, it could be that Skinner emphasizes rhetoric too strongly – and at the expense of philosophy – as a method of examining an issue from different perspectives, even though he does mention Plato’s discussion about the redescription of moral terms in the *Republic*.

The two following contributions focus on figures often used for amplification. Ian Donaldson’s study on *syncrisis* (“Syncrisis: the figure of contestation”, pp. 166-177) covers a wide area. It starts with the rhetorical exercise of comparing, which provides a tool for analysis and differentiation, and ends with the art of literary criticism. In its most common ancient and early modern usage, *syncrisis* was the comparing of literary texts (the *Iliad* with the *Odyssey*) and writers (Homer with Virgil) and other famous people with each other, as Plutarch had done in his parallel biographies. This suggests competition, for example between nations (Greece vs. Rome) and between the ancients and moderns (“The Battle of Books”). R. W. Serjeantson’s article on testimony (“Testimony: the artless proof”, pp. 180-194) presents the theory of topics (*loci communes*), in which testimonies served as the ‘commonplaces’ of argumentation. Many rhetorical figures can be used as argumentative tools, like proverbs and moral sentences (*sententiae*). In this context, Serjeantson mentions the *cento*. Historically, however, this term is used about a literary form – and not a learned treatise – woven from quotations from ancient and contemporary works. Serjeantson also compares testimonies with quotations but omits an interesting issue, namely the development of the scholarly practice of using quotations to give authority to academic work.

The three final chapters deal with the boundaries of good style, represented by two transgressive figures, *hyperbole* and *metalepsis*, and by a set of elocutionary vices. (Here the satirical *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* ("Letters of Obscure Men", 1515-17), in which the elocutionary vices are put into practice, might well have been mentioned.) According to Katrin Ettenhuber, *hyperbole* was a mark of high style and used mostly in epideictic rhetoric, but the use of it could be antithetical to Christian ideas of self-abasement. In her contribution ("Hyperbole: exceeding similitude", pp. 196-213), Ettenhuber argues that just as *hyperbole* could be a sign of youthful arrogance, it might also offer us glimpses of "a higher order" (p. 210), by way of challenging the boundaries of language and thereby providing the dynamic of moral edification. She also links this figure of exaggeration to the discussion of poets as liars (but does not refer to Hesiod's *Theogony* 27 or Aristotle's *Poetics* 24.1460a19).

According to Brian Cummings, the Renaissance theory of *metalepsis* ('transumption') differs quite radically from the recent theoretical reformulation of this difficult figure by such well-known critics as Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, and Gérard Genette. In his contribution ("Metalepsis: the boundaries of metaphor, pp. 216-233), Cummings offers a succinct survey of the history of the figure and notes that it was often discussed along with the metaphor – *metalepsis* as a mixed metaphor, a failed figure – and sometimes treated interchangeably with metonymy. Concentrating on Erasmus, who defined *metalepsis* as the gradual movement toward a final meaning, Cummings points to an interesting view of sameness and difference in Erasmus's *De copia*: to Erasmus, the metaphor and related figures such as *metalepsis* represented a rescue from the endless tautology of synonyms. Thus, even if there is no escape from the figurality of language and its ambiguities, at least the use of figures such as *metalepsis* serves as a way to say something truly meaningful – and not merely tautological or truistic – by means of natural language. Cummings cites the use of the figure in several passages from *Macbeth* and states that Shakespeare is the most 'metaleptic' writer.

William Poole's article on "The vices of style" (pp. 236-251) is justly placed at the end of the book, and serves as a kind of summary. The great question is if rhetoric is a deviation from natural speech and, as such, condemnable, or if rhetoric does, in fact, systematize our natural eloquence. Poole recapitulates the vices of style presented by George Puttenham in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589). According to Poole, it was not only a masterly writer who could change elocutionary vices into virtues: the set of vices slightly changed over time. Thus, some vices condemned by ancient rhetoricians were more mildly treated by early modern scholars, and even 'rehabilitated', as was the case with *aenigma*, because "it exercised the intelligence" (p. 249). One reason for these changes was, of course, the differences between the vernacular (English) and the Latin languages.

For a Nordic scholar, the fact that most Renaissance English rhetorical manuals were written in the vernacular is surprising. In Finland, for example, H. G. Porthan wrote about rhetoric in Latin as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Because *Renaissance Figures of Speech* is aimed at scholars of rhetoric of all nationalities, it would have been useful if it had included a short presentation of the basic Tudor rhetorical handbooks. It does contain, however, a chronological list of the main English treatises on the rhetorical figures of the period (pp. 293-294), but the list does not include Susenbrotus's treatise, despite the many references to this work all through the book.

A book like this, so full of insight, deserves a more complete bibliography than the included "Suggestions for further reading" (pp. 291-294). All the treatises mentioned in the endnotes could have been listed in the bibliography, which now seems to promote only Anglophone scholarship – even Heinrich Lausberg's *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (1960) is quoted only in English

translation (1998). However, a good index completes this useful and most welcome publication (NB: Index, s.v. Puttenham: there is no reference to an *apostrophe*, but to an *anastrophe* on p. 134).

The overall picture one gets from *Renaissance Figures of Speech* is that of quality and reliability. It can be warmly recommended to those interested in rhetoric and English Renaissance literature. Early modern texts, which employ complex figures in a creative way, demand active reading. *Renaissance Figures of Speech* gives scholars a tool to read these texts more attentively.

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