

John Lyly's Poetic Economy*

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John Lyly's *Euphues*—an inventive, imaginative, provocative, allusive, and learned literary investment first published in 1578—is, for Leah Scragg, “a literary phenomenon” (1) that went through an unprecedented 17 editions by 1638. No other work of imaginative prose came close. As a work in verbal expenditure, as an index to the disposition—and dissimulation—of the human mind, it was a foundational work in phenomenology long before that word was invented. By 1586, William Webbe, in his *Discourse of English Poetrie*, singled out its special market value:

I thinke there is none that will gainsay, but Master *John Lilly* hath deserued moste high commendations, as he which hath stept one steppe further therein then any either before or since he first began the wyttie discourse of his *Euphues*. Whose workes, surely in respect of his singuler eloquence and braue composition of apt words and sentences, let the learned examine and make tryall thereof through all the partes of Rhetoricke, in fitte phrases, in pithy sentences, in gallant tropes, in flowing speeche, in plaine sence, and surely in my iudgment, I thinke he wyll yeelde him that verdict, which *Quintilian* giveth of bothe the best Orators *Demosthenes* and *Tully*, that from the one, nothing may be taken away, to the other, nothing may be added. (sig. E1v)

Early on, typical of the novel's linguistic currency, the elderly self-appointed teacher Eubulus says, in a dizzying passage that, according to Leah Scragg, develops “in the process [of] an ever-widening circle of uncertainty” (5):

*For debates inspired by this article please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkinney0221.htm>>.

As thy byrth doth shewe the expresse and lively Image of gentle blood, so thy bringing up seemeth to mee to bee a great blotte to the lynage of so noble a brute, so that I am enforced to thinke that either thou diddest want one to give thee good instructions, or that thy parents made thee a wanton with too much cockering; eyther they were too foolish in using no discipline, or thou too froward in rejecting their doctrine; either they willing to have thee idle, or thou wilful to be illemployed. (sigs. B2v-B3)

Scragg comments further that “[h]ere a variety of alternative childhoods are postulated for the hero, endowing him with a multitude of personalities rather than a single identity, and thus problematizing the assignment of blame for his present condition. The reader is left to speculate whether his parents were ignorant, over-indulgent, or neglectful, and whether he was a spoilt, wild or recalcitrant child” (5).

The fumbling, noetic response of Lucilla, his beloved, is sharply etched and, like the description of Euphues, essentially unsettled:

I know, so noble a minde could take no original but from a noble man, for as no Bird can looke against the Sunne but those that bee bredde of the Eagle, neither any Hawke soare so high as the broode of the Hobby, so no wight can haue suche excellent qualyties except the descende of a noble race, neither he of so highe capacitie, vnlesse he issue of a high progeny. (sigs. I2v-I3)

At once allusive and specific, learned and proverbial, the desirable Lucilla’s description both approaches Euphues to describe him and retreats in uncertainty. Long before literary critics thought of such a move, Lyly was writing in aporias. But it is the lexical coin of the realm. Lucilla’s father Ferardo comments on his friend Philautus:

Lucilla, as I am not presently to graunt my good wil, so meane I not to reprehend thy choyce, yet wisdom willeth me to pawse, vntill I haue called you what may happen to my remembraunce, and warneth thee to be circumspect, least thy rash conceipt bring a sharp repentance. (sig. I3)

This correspondingly wide-ranging answer with its own accumulation of possibilities—I do not like this; I will not rebuke (censure) your choice in men; I will delay responding until all this blows over; I will wait until I can determine the cause of your defection; do whatever

you wish, if you must, but be discreet about it—only bewilders Lucilla. The style of all these remarks is precise, polished—and multi-valent. What seems straightforward is in fact angular, made partial; by indirections the speakers must find directions out. Self-dividing sentences lead to self-dividing paragraphs and speeches and eventually to self-dividing actions. Sentences are anatomized. Sense erodes. In the marketplace of conversation, thoughts are displayed, exchanged, purchased, recirculated. Such broken language is indicative, reflective of the larger, broken plotlines. Euphues breaks with his teacher Eubulus for a new friend, Philautus, then betrays Philautus by courting his beloved Lucilla and, when she scorns him, Euphues attempts to repair his friendship with Philautus. Euphues seeks out Philautus, rejects him, pursues Lucilla, is rejected by her, and returns to Philautus. Lucilla, meantime, displaces Philautus with Euphues and then replaces Euphues's with Curio, such linear patterning both parallel and interlocking with Euphues's actions. The action, like the language, is a kind of nimble gymnastics, constantly reworking limited material in endless ways in a display of ingenuity; Scragg calls it a "kaleidoscopic assemblage" (13). Words clothe actions and release them; thoughts, like exemplary instances and references, are constantly deposited, borrowed, withdrawn, transformed, returned to a cultural bank of records. Nothing, Lyly writes, is constant but inconstancy.

"Euphues is a truly intellectual work in that it considers also the limitations of intellectuality," Merritt Lawlis contends (118). "What appears to interest [Lyly] is not ideas as much as the process of reasoning, not the ideas themselves, but the manipulations of them" (114). The title-page of the first edition in 1578 reads, *Euphues. The Anatomy of Wyt. Very pleasant for all Gentlemen to reade, and most necessary to remember: wherein are contained the delights that Wyt followeth in his youth by the pleasauntnesse of Loue, and the happynesse he reapeth in age, by the perfectnesse of Wisedome. By Iohn Lyly, Master of Arte Oxon,* and it too is confusing. While *anatomy* was an increasingly popular word in his time for analysis or deconstruction, *wit* was more problematical. It

could refer to the mind, to any process of the mind such as reason and memory; to learning; or, on the other hand, to playfulness, to joking. That Lyly seems to want both, perhaps simultaneously, is made clear in the phrase "Very pleasant for all Gentlemen to reade" and "most necessary to remember." Entitling a work with words of vastly varying references would be a natural exercise for a Master of Arts from Oxford who was also widely known as the grandson of William Lyly, the famous Tudor grammarian and servant to the scholarly Cardinal Pole as well as Master of St. Paul's School in London and a friend of William Grocyn and John Colet, Henry VIII's most distinguished scholars of Greek.

Such irresolution is maintained by developing the novel through debates that are themselves never reconciled, that keep matters open and associations of thought and characters inconstant. The opening debate between the young and immature Euphues from Athens (read Oxford) and his older tutor Eubulus from Naples (read London) presents the traditional argument of the humanist who distrusts undisciplined human nature and of those who proclaimed the need to foster it through classical precept. Such declamatory speeches can at first seem contrived, static, even ceremonial, but Lyly invariably makes the most obvious rhetorical set piece at first narrative (in its context), then polysemous in reason and reference, and finally dramatic (in that it forwards characterization and theme). Then such bifurcated thinking gives way to multiple if inherent discontinuities. "Did they not remember that which no man ought to forgette, that the tender youth of a childe is like the tempering of new Waxe, apt to receiue any forme?" one character asks (sig. B3).

Still, the abstractions of Eubulus are pocket change of the realm, so general and familiar that they insult Euphues, known for his "sharpe capacity of minde" (sig. B1), whose Greek name is itself double-sided, translating both as "well endowed" (as Thomas Elyot uses it in *The Scholemaster* of 1580) but also "manipulative," his very being a synecdoche for the novel itself. Eubulus responds by acknowledging that he comes from Naples, is a traveller and a citizen of the world vastly

more experienced than is Euphues as a product of the schoolroom. But this, too, draws on the double meaning of "wit," since in 1575 a popular book by Jerome Turler, called *The Traveiler*, noted that Naples was "full of bragginge and boastinge, insomutche that they despise the counsell of othermen, and prefer their owne wittes before al others" (sigs. N4v-N5). Eubulus conveniently forgets the reputation of Naples, forgets he hardly knows Euphues, forgets even the significance of his name, and appointing himself the instructor of the boy his own parents could not teach, he plunges into a somewhat random and so incoherent speech of humanist and classical platitudes, well-worn coins of humanist currency:

Descend into thine owne conscience, and consider with thy selfe, the great difference betweene staring and starke blynde, witte and wisdom, loue and lust: be merry, but with modestie: be sober, but not too sullen: be valyaunt, but not too venterous. Let thy attyre bee comely; but not costly: thy dyet wholesome, but not excessiue: vse pastime as the word importeth to passe the time in honest recreation. Mistrust no man without cause, neither be thou credulous without prooffe: be not lyght to follow euery mans opinion, nor obstinate to stande in thine owne conceipt. Serue GOD, loue God, feare God, and God will so blesse thee, as eyther heart canne wish or thy friends desire. (sig. B4v)

To insure value of his advice he refers to a number of classical heroes—to Trojans and Lacedemonians, Persians and Parthians, meant to give weight to his teachings, although larding commonplaces (Leah Scragg has called Lyly's novel "a commonplace book on a grand scale" [13]) on phrases and thoughts long since trivialized by overuse. Meaning to sound exceptionally wise and informed, he now seems only to anticipate Shakespeare's Polonius.

But "so many men so many mindes" (sig. C1): in a work composed of repeatedly contrasted equivalents, by pairs of words, clauses, attitudes, and events that stamp it with the impress of the disputation, the other half of Eubulus's advice is to be sought in Euphues's reply. Euphues's quick wit—alluding to another Elyotonian reference to the word "euphues"—seizes on Eubulus's discrepancy between the proposition and the conformation. Eubulus has consented to Eu-

phues's good nature by ignoring it in his argument for good nurture. So Euphues, aware of the possibilities of language, rephrases Eubulus's premise: "If nature beare no sway," he replies, "why vse you this adulation? If nature worke the effect, what booteth any education?" (sig. C2). The response is both logical and rhetorical and employs the disjunctive proposition that was also associated in humanist minds with the skeptic Sextus Empiricus: (a) If my nature insures my goodness, then I do not need your training; and (b) If I need your training, then you have just proven yourself too unwise to give me lessons, for you said I was well endowed without it. The dilemma Euphues employs as respondent is unanswerable; pointedly, he displaces the Aristotelian use of classical precedent known to Erasmus and Thomas More with the flashier Ramist logic that, in his own day, had come to stress schemes and tropes divorced from logic, style severed from substance.

If Eubulus shows a deficiency in the use of persuasive rhetorical techniques, Euphues shows excess—so much that Lyly is forced to add his own authoritative voice to the debate so as to reassert the narrative shape on which the work would normally rely (cf. sig. C4) and restore the Aristotelian balance such as we would find in Castiglione's contemporary *Courtier*. Eubulus and Euphues miss the resolution of the moderating middle ground, much as they choose the "pleasure" or "pietie" of Naples, because they do not recognize the saving middle term of profit inscribed by Lyly. But without such a corrective resolution "wit may be seen as wit praising wit," as Richard Haber remarks, "as self-praise in Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*" (58). Self-revelation is thereby confounded with self-congratulation, self-righteousness with self-infatuation, before Philautus enters the fiction. Only the narrative voice remains to address the gentlemen readers. Here it is:

Too much studie doth intoxicate their braines, for (say they) although yron the more it is vsed the brighter it is, yet siluer with much wearing doth wast to nothing: though the Cammocke the more it is bowed the better it serueth, yet the bow the more it is bent & occupied, the weaker it waxeth: though the Camomill the more is troden and pressed downe, the more it spreadeth, yet

the Violet the oftner it is handeled and touched, the sooner it withereth and decayeth. (sigs. C4-C4v)

The formal speech of adjudication is raised here to the pitch of a dramatic chorus and begins a new strain to continue the novel.

This first debate in *Euphues* is an accurate paradigm of the entire work. Behind such contrary and apparently irreconcilable positions voiced by Eubulus and Euphues lie the dual environments of Euphues's education: Athens, which figures the values of classical Greece, and Naples, which images corrupting centers of contemporary experience. From the start, Lyly asks us if both locations are potentially complementary or mutually destructive—or if one is sufficient alone.

Lyly excuses nothing from his examination. The actions of life are captured in explicit and implicit disputations laden with classical and biblical references, literary allusions, and popular maxims.¹ Without the liminary advice of Eubulus, however, the incipient Euphues is soon adrift in the inconstant and unpredictable world of Naples, the book's landscape reduplicating the confused mind of its protagonist, the multiplicity of Lyly's language conveying the multiple ideas his layered prose insists on. The Aristotelian moderation that Lyly had suggested authorially is countered by Aristotelian epistemology, which holds that the imagination controls the will and impedes wisdom, and by Euphues's own self-description (out of Plutarch) whereby he likens his unformed mind to wax, open to all experiences indiscriminately. Wisdom and will cancel each other—or at least weaken each other temporarily—and Euphues descends more and more often into eristics, his logic irrational, his metaphors problematic, his analogies frequently false, his allusions contradictory; and some evidence taken from popular unnatural natural history is even created by Euphues in self-defense. Through his cleverness, Euphues learns that both the classical oration and the Ramist logic of dichotomies assume truths they do not provide. Repeatedly Euphues tries to clarify his position as well as his argument by defining polarities, only

to learn that, rather than illuminate the inner consistency of an organic world as he might have supposed from his training in Greek philosophy, they in fact display affinities at some points, destructive antipathies at other points, and ambiguities at still other points. Soon Euphues is forced to admit to himself that, given the fluidity of language, words are not necessarily reliable or stable in their meaning. As the book progresses, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* thus analyzes the evolution of the fallen—that is, the irrational, undignified—intellect. Euphues, like us, needs to place his faith in some capacity, if not some process of human thought, however, he must evaluate his words like coins to spend them wisely.

So, rejecting Eubulus, whose precepts are too distant from the desires and activities of his daily life, Euphues finds a new instructor in Philautus. From the beginning, he sees their friendship as an occasion for a new learning that is more practical than the philosophical maneuvering of Eubulus:

Wayinge with my selfe the form of friendshippe by the effects, I studied euer since my first comming to *Naples* to enter league with such a one as might direct my steps being a stranger, and resemble my manners being a scholler, the which two qualities as I find in you able to satisfie my desire, so I hope I shal finde a hearte in you willinge to accomplish my request. (sig. D2)

Euphues observes of Philautus, whichever meaning is assigned to wit, with whatever pleasure it might serve, the utility of spending language depends on a deconstruction of its processes in ways that reap rewards not otherwise attainable. But “[n]o lofty philosophic speculation is safe from contamination in Lyly’s fictive universe,” Joseph W. Houppert reminds us (60). Seeking a companion for purely selfish purposes, Euphues falls in love with himself once again: “I view in [Philautus],” Euphues remarks, “the liuely Image of *Euphues*” (sig. D1v). In an elaborate rhetoric—what Thomas Elyot calls “an artificiaall fourme of spekyng” in *The Boke Named the Gouvernour* (1531; sig. G1)—Philautus shows himself equally blinded:

And seeing we resēble (as you say) each other in qualities, it cannot be yt the one should differ from the other in curtesie, seing the sincere affection of the minde cannot be expressed by the mouth, & that no art can vnfolde the entire loue of ye heart. I am earnestly to beseech you not to measure the firmness of my faith, by ye fewnes of my wordes, but rather thinke that the ouerflowing waies of good wil, leaue no passage for many words. (sigs. D2-D2v)

Eubulus has seen learning as an evolutionary struggle (cf. sig. B4v), but in choosing the satisfaction of an agreeable friend both Euphues and Philautus mistake feeling for learning. In making their encomia essentially autobiographical, they deceive each other and themselves.

How blind to reason self-love has made Euphues is apparent when Philautus takes him to supper to meet Lucilla and Livia. He chooses the evening entertainment, a debate on "whether the qualities of the minde, or the composition of the man, cause women most to lyke or whether beautie or wit moues men most to loue" (sig. D4). Euphues has it all ways and no way, arguing first for the mind, then against coy ladies and for courtly lovers, and then, in still another reversal, in favor of women's reason. A lack of social grace is compounded with a blindness to social sophistry, and his argument becomes an assault until his emotions suddenly overtake his feigned eloquence. With his aposiopesis, we are bluntly reminded that the performing Euphues remains untrained and inexperienced. His audience is not deceived: "Well Gentlemen, aunswered *Lucilla*, in arguing of the shadow, we forgoe the substance" (sig. D3v).

Such an abrupt halt would be a clear enough victory for Lucilla in a world free of sophistry and posturing. But "so often," G. Wilson Knight reminds us, "a seeming conclusion in Lyly turns into its opposite" (153). Lucilla cannot tell whether Euphues's emotion is real or feigned. The exaggerated lovesickness of Euphues is mirrored in the Petrarchism of her own disturbed soliloquy about her feelings for Euphues immediately after his hasty departure (cf. sigs. E2-E2v). For both of them, love upsets reason and language. As a consequence, Lucilla borrows the language of contrarities that until now had characterized only Euphues's rhetoric: "But," "Aye," "but," "If," "Tush," "Wel, wel." She also borrows his argument that a man of good nature

cannot be transformed, cannot be corrupted. In her recital of folly and wisdom, Lucilla dwells on foolish ignorance and unwise folly; she wins for herself similar abusive behavior by robbing Euphues of his issues and positions. But as she does so she also transforms the issue from one of nature versus nurture to one of concupiscence versus conscience. Lucilla's trust of human nature is riddled with doubts, and her attempts to defer to fixed systems of classical and Renaissance thought likewise reduce them to mere rationalizations. Will overcomes principle, and her twisted rhetoric disrupts her powers of logic (cf. sig. E3). Convinced that infidelity to Philautus will warn Euphues of her fallen nature, Lucilla is unable to reason her way unaided to a solution for her dilemma (cf. sigs. E3v-E4). As the mirror of Euphues, Lucilla figures for Lyly human nature devoid of humanist education in which language falters rather than informs.

Once we understand that it is the resilience of Lyly's mind, its restless inventiveness and its overall toughness that are most impressive, we can understand why for him the linguistic investment provided its own rewards, even when it seemed incomplete or controversial. The more we read the works Lyly read alongside his grandfather's grammar in the book that would teach Latin to British children for four centuries, the more we realize how ranging, synthetic, and accomplished his mind is as he builds through associations and contraries. Fortune consists not finally in the return of linguistic coinage or delight in playing with it in the open market of humanism, but accumulating it in the form of ideas and propositions. For Lyly, then, possessing words—and spending and obtaining them—is not only a means of human contact but, more than that, a way of keeping open to possibility and exchange.

Lurking always behind the plot of *Euphues* such as we have it then, is a key passage from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* on friendship in which the multiple possibility of the basis and practice of friendship takes on the multivocality of words themselves for Lyly—actions and thought are always potential signifiers.

There are [...] three kinds of friendship, corresponding in number to the three lovable qualities; since a reciprocal affection, known to either party, can be based on each of the three, and when men love each other, they wish each other well in respect of the quality which is the ground of their friendship. Thus friends whose affection is based on utility do not love each other in themselves, but in so far as some benefit accrues to them from each other. And similarly with those whose friendship is based on pleasure: for instance, we enjoy the society of witty people not because of what they are in themselves, but because they are agreeable to us [...]. And therefore these friendships are based on an accident, since the friend is not loved for being what he is, but as affording some benefit or pleasure as the case may be. Consequently friendships of this kind are easily broken off [...]. The perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue. For these friends wish each alike the other's good in respect of their goodness, and they are good in themselves; but it is those who wish the good of their friends for their friends' sake who are friends in the fullest sense, since they love each other for themselves and not accidentally. (8.3.1-6)

This would seem a satisfactory answer to Euphues's troubled relationships, but if we substitute "words" for "friends," we find that rather than deny the power or possibility of language, it releases both. Fluidity of language gives it negotiable power. Rather than cooling investments, it enlivens them. The process of anatomizing (both as analyzing and deconstructing) the functions and employment of wit as polysemous language, carrier of multiple and simultaneous meanings, may just be, in the end, man's greatest potential for liquidity. Lyly made language fungible.

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NOTE

¹Scragg gives, as examples, such Renaissance writers as Stephen Gosson, Sir Thomas North, and Erasmus; such classical authors as Pliny and Homer, Xerxes and Alexander; and such biblical persons as Jezebel and Isaiah (13), all made contemporaneous alongside proverbs (139) and unnatural natural history.

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