

Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld

*Indecorous Thinking: Figures of Speech in Early Modern Poetics*

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Colleen Rosenfeld's *Indecorous Thinking* is a book about poetics, in the sense both of the literary and rhetorical theory of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England and of the practical acts of *poiēsis* to which that theory corresponds, or fails to correspond. Its specific concern is with figures of speech, here understood as *formulae* of poetic making which indecorously parade their own artifice on the surface of the literary text, and as constitutive elements of the worlds poets make.

The book's two parts roughly correspond to the theoretical and practical sides of Rosenfeld's topic, although one of its most notable and laudable features is its refusal to treat theory and practice as neatly exclusive terms. After an introduction which considers how "figures of speech function both as formal elements of an object and as vestiges of a process that offer an explanation of how that object came to be" (11), chapter 1 studies the rigorous theoretical distinction between *inventio* and *elocutio* in Ramist pedagogy, which tended to promote the idea that thinking belonged strictly to the former—a dogma which, Rosenfeld argues, is belied by literary practice. While there is much to agree with here, the focus on Ramism is somewhat distortive, largely neglecting other strains of English and continental rhetoric which might have complicated Rosenfeld's analysis, and serving as a sacrificial straw man for her argument (not the first time Ramus has been martyred). Chapter 2 studies the place of figures in the humanist schoolroom, and chapter 3 explores the formal and ideological entanglements of the concept of decorum.

The crucial evidence for the book's larger ideas is drawn not from theoretical poetics, however, but from the poetic making embodied in three major romances: Spenser's *Faerie*

*Queene*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, and Wroth's *Urania*. These are considered in relation to the figures of simile, antithesis, and periphrasis, respectively, in chapters 4 to 6—figures chosen for their amphibious roles in both *inventio* and *elocutio*. Rosenfeld's generic focus is justified, fleetingly, on the grounds that romance is "the genre within which my exemplary poets send the period's affection for figures of speech into a kind of hyperdrive" (15). Some will object that this claim could easily have been made of lyric, or drama, or various other kinds of prose; but Lyly, Nashe, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Donne, Andrewes, Browne, Herbert, and Milton receive either scarce or no mention. There is a mismatch, then, between the book's implicit claim to address figurative *poiēsis* in general and its more restricted scope as a study of style's world-making agency in romance. Rosenfeld closes, however, not with a conclusion about romance but with a coda about comical satire, arguing that in *Every Man Out of His Humour* "Jonson holds open the possibility of an alternative conception of style, one in which figures of speech drive thinking and act as the constitutive engines of imaginary worlds" (166). While many of the coda's local observations and insights are welcome, the sudden and unexplained shift in generic focus, and narrow restriction to a single play, are puzzling.

Rosenfeld's work bears an acknowledged affinity to recent studies of vernacular rhetoric and poetics by Sean Keilin, Carla Mazzio, and Jenny Mann; the close readings of part 2 are likewise avowedly informed by the influential essays in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, edited by Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander and Katrin Ettenhuber (2007). These debts apart, however, the book exhibits a certain theoretical and critical narrowness, engaging neither, for example, with the rich recent formalist work on Spenser, nor, despite Rosenfeld's central argument that figures of speech were, in the hands of poets, "generative forms of thinking" (5), with recent studies of figuration in cognitive literary criticism like Raphael Lyne's *Shakespeare, Rhetoric, and Cognition* (2011). This seems a missed opportunity, and

detracts from the book's authoritativeness. Some of Rosenfeld's more ambitious claims would have required longer elaboration to be fully convincing, including the provocative but underdeveloped ideas that the indecorous thinking performed by figurative language "provided poetry with a means of distinguishing itself from the world and its dominant ideologies" (7), or that its "artifice ... takes on the project of world making while deviating from the moral imperative of what should be" (93).

MICHAEL HETHERINGTON, *St John's College, Oxford*