

The Spenser Review



Michael Ullyot. *The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Early Modern England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2022. 256 pp. ISBN 9780192849335. \$84.00 hardcover.

Exemplary rhetoric is all around us. In many areas of communal life—such as education, politics, religion, law, entertainment, and advertising—people push images of model individuals towards us to influence how we act and what we value and believe. It is easy to find the rhetoric of exemplarity in world literature too, including the European tradition. Tragedy, epic, homily, scriptural exegesis, and essays are some of the genres with which past studies of such rhetoric in early modern England have been concerned.

In *The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Early Modern England*, Michael Ullyot argues that we need to historicize all rhetoric because it is always “localized in the time and place of its delivery and reception” (6). Introducing a central strand of his argument, he adds that historicizing is “particularly necessary for positive exemplarity because repeating past successes while avoiding past failures is doubly difficult” (6). His focus is on occasional texts, defined here to include not only texts written for a specific event or set of circumstances (which all texts are, whether done consciously and overtly or not) but also those that aim to exert influence. The book centres on English-language texts written in response to the life and death of Henry, Prince of Wales (1594–1612).

Alluding to Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*, Ullyot tells us that the “imaginative groundplot” (ix) of his profitable invention was laid back in 2000. The passing of the years has resulted in a well-constructed book with lucid argumentation and a geometrical elegance in its overall design. There are three pairs of chapters and a conclusion. The first pair, consisting of the introduction and Chapter One, illuminates the internal logic of exemplary texts in early modern England by offering

The Spenser Review

interlocking definitions of key rhetorical terms. Whereas medieval *exempla* (in fables, allegories, and sermons) had generally promoted internal reflection, we are shown that English Renaissance exemplary rhetoric had a more public ethical character thanks to the twin forces of “Protestant habits of condensing lived experiences into imitable descriptions, or deeds into words [...and] the humanist inverse transformation of words into deeds” (33) through grammar-school reading practices. “The method of exemplarity,” Ullyot explains, “is to assemble and translate such fragments of the past, from diverse alien circumstances and distant sources, into stylistic and behavioural lessons in familiar circumstances” (34).

The second pair of chapters illustrates how, to quote another tight formulation, “the rhetoric of exemplarity relies on the right story (for taxonomic decorum) in the right form (for generic decorum) provoking the right response (for receptive decorum)” (50). A chapter called “Indecorous Spenser” illustrates how taxonomic and generic decorum work. *The Faerie Queene*, as Ullyot demonstrates, offers examples of taxonomic decorum in three episodes in which characters choose genealogies appropriate to their (and also Spenser’s) rhetorical purpose: Arthur’s perusal of *Briton monuments* in Book II.x, Merlin’s prophecy to Britomart (III.iii), and Paridell’s retelling of the Trojan wars at the house of Malbecco (III.ix). Ullyot then argues that the *Complaints* are an exercise in generic decorum: they contain “anti-occasional texts” (70) that resist the occasion of their composition to seek correction from readers who are urged to provide better examples for poets to write about (and better material conditions for them to write in). *Tears of the Muses* asks whether the present time will leave anything worth recalling in future; *Ruines of Time* searches for more suitable monuments to virtue than Rome’s crumbling ruins. The elegy *Astrophel* (written, as Ullyot reminds us, nine years after Sidney’s death) presents a version of Sidney to incite virtuous imitation.

Receptive decorum and the eponymous “exemplary cycle” of Chapter Three become the book’s central focus from that chapter onwards. Receptive decorum (i.e. responding in the right way) is integral to understanding exemplary rhetoric’s “bifold structure: it is both a rhetorician’s effort to influence, and a reader’s receptivity to being influenced” (5). The promise for Elizabethan and Jacobean nobility concerned with their posthumous legacy was that “those who interpret, adapt, and reanimate the ethical imperatives of exemplary biographies live lives worth recounting” (82). This is the rhetoric found in books dedicated to the Earl of Essex, who was often compared to

The Spenser Review

Sidney, and Prince Henry, who was also encouraged to cultivate military virtues. A key innovation of Ullyot's argument is to show that exemplary rhetoric sought to function within a dynamic exemplary cycle, a "mutually reinforcing process" through which Essex and Henry would be inspired to undertake virtuous actions so that they could become models with the capacity to provoke more rhetoric and more action "in a sort of recursive perpetual-motion machine" (5).

Perpetual-motion machines are impossible to build, though. The problem for Essex and Henry was that both died young. Essex's execution in 1601 and Henry's premature death in 1612 (hastened, Ullyot suggests, by unrealistic expectations about his physical strength) meant that they were unable to fulfil the high aspirations set for them. These events "violated" receptive decorum (to follow Ullyot's knowingly unfair phrasing, 126). An understanding of historical contingency also leads to "the core argument of this whole study: that when you historicize exemplarity, you cannot ignore the uncertainty of its success and likelihood of its failure" (127). The final two chapters pursue this claim. One reviews elegies and other verses on Prince Henry's death (listed in an appendix) together with memorial sermons, arguing that high-flown elegiac commemoration gave way to epitaphs with more realistic warnings of our mortal frailty. The other shows how positive depictions of Henry's exemplary life illustrate the "problem of metonymy" that these aspirational biographies, which required careful selection of anecdotes and evidence, were vulnerable to the emergence of other information that might contest the narrative that they present. When we read exemplars within their moments of delivery and reception, Ullyot concludes, we see that they cannot be followed satisfactorily.

The book's second half historicizes the exemplary rhetoric of figures who can be grouped into three "concentric rings" (165) of individuals moving away from Henry: first his tutors, who used deliberative rhetoric to influence his reading (Chapter Three); then his elegists and biographers (Chapters Four and Five), who used judicial rhetoric to "describe his susceptibility to influence and his resulting actions as virtuous and imitable" (165); and finally, in a third outer ring, literary critics who study these historical texts. The introduction's opening words—"Literary criticism is exemplary rhetoric" (1)—have already made the reader alert to the author's own rhetoric. The conclusion returns to the theme by evaluating one aspect of literary critical rhetoric, namely the use of metonymic anecdotes characteristic of new historicist criticism (as, for example, in Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* [1980]).

The Spenser Review

Addressing the sorts of reader who might be reading *The Spenser Review*, Ullyot writes that “we use the rhetoric of exemplarity; we excise parts of those texts [i.e. that we study] and exposit them as representative of broader categories, of ideas and images conveyed by other parts” (183). Unlike the early modern rhetoricians he has considered, though, Ullyot is transparent that his exemplary rhetoric is vulnerable to revision in light of new evidence, and argues that “for literary criticism, metonymic evidence is not the problem, but the purpose; it provokes the humility necessary to open one’s arguments to correction and qualification” (192). Book reviews like this one are exemplary, too: they quote selectively and are an imperfect proxy for reading a book yourself.

So Ullyot has given us a book that is pleasingly entire of itself yet also mindful of its provisional nature and generous in inviting responses. How might we reply? A stock answer, following the book’s own awareness that its examples are metonymic, would be to ask how further reading within and beyond its ample twenty-plus-page bibliography might complicate the book’s arguments. Using the appendix of verses on Prince Henry’s death, we might ask what difference it would make if the book dealt closely with Latin verse in university anthologies, or anonymous ballads, or differences between English and Scottish elegists, or variation in the social backgrounds of authors and potential readers.

We might then also ask whether literary critics do not only quote selectively but also historicize selectively. Past exemplars cannot be replicated exactly in life, nor can they be described in the full richness of their historical moment. One reason is the extreme archival imbalance that means that, through accident of birth, far more was written about Prince Henry than almost any other individual alive during his lifetime. A key development since new historicism’s heyday has been increased concern for taking account of historical demographic and cultural diversity that has been occluded across time (both in what was recorded and preserved). Following Ullyot’s encouragement to approach occasional texts as rhetorical acts of historically-situated social communication, we stand to gain a richer sense of how unequal social relations shaped rhetorical practices if we give attention to the comparatively meagre biographies of the tutors, poets, clergymen, and biographers around Henry on one hand, and those they addressed as readers and dedicatees on the other. Comparing Henry’s textual legacy with works written for and about his father, James VI and I, and other royal figures would also complement this research well.

The Spenser Review

This line of enquiry would contribute to assessing exemplary rhetoric as part of a stylo-ethical ideology that mediates social interactions by informing what counts as good communication and behaviour. Exemplary texts, in this view, are cultural images that seek to transmit a set of shared values among authors and readers across time. Ulliot, ever self-aware, acknowledges this way of thinking early on, for example noting Richard Halpern's materialist reading of humanist pedagogy in *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* (1991) and Derek Attridge's observation in *Peculiar Language* (1988) that decorum maintains social exclusivity by only ever being vaguely defined, which makes it difficult to teach. Indeed, Ulliot comments that, "as Cicero and Aristotle define decorum in implicitly social terms, their early modern admirers—all men acutely aware of class distinctions—used the concept to reinforce the values of a dominant social class" (8).

The book is in fact dedicated to a member of today's dominant social class, none other than His Majesty Charles the Third or "the High, Mighty, and most Hopeful Prince, Charles Philip Arthur George, Prince of Wales, the second joy and hope of our times, the Eldest Son and Heir apparent to our dread Sovereign Queen Elizabeth's most puissant Majesty" as he still was when the book was published in 2022. (We need to know: has a copy been sent to the Royal Library?) This pastiche of Renaissance dedications makes the author's point that Charles Stuart, the future Charles I, and his son Charles (later Charles II, both are mentioned in the closing pages) provide cautionary examples for Charles Mountbatten-Windsor. The author adds that "his Highness's most unworthy servant dedicates all his labours, and wishes all felicity" to Charles. But the dedication does not read to me as a signal that the book is attempting to re-launch a recursive cycle to preserve a political regime or a classical aesthetic and ethical standard. The reason why is there on page one, in the initial description of the rhetoric of historicist literary criticism as judicial not deliberative, as aiming to help us interpret past texts better rather than advocate for how things should be in future (as important as that can be).

Self-contained yet open-ended, *The Rhetoric of Exemplarity* advances how future readers will understand the composition and reception of elegies, eulogies, epitaphs, panegyric, and other quietly common early modern English genres that present images of idealized subjects. It equips the reader with essential concepts for reading these English genres in their historical moment, and it persuasively argues that "exemplarity was a prevailing habit of mind among late Elizabethan and early

The Spenser Review

Jacobean public figures and the rhetoricians surrounding them—and moreover, that poets after Sidney’s *Defence* and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* recognized their power, even though events undermined their ambitions” (22). It also models how the same rhetorical habits of mind contain a warning for literary historians: to keep aiming at understanding the past better rather than becoming stuck in a closed conversation that merely seeks its own perpetuation.

Peter Auger
University of Birmingham