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# Indecorous Thinking: Figures of Speech in Early Modern Poetics / Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld

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**Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld. *Indecorous Thinking: Figures of Speech in Early Modern Poetics*. Fordham University Press, 2018. 312 pp.**

Reviewed by JAMES KUZNER

*Indecorous Thinking* is not just a book about early modern poetry and its concern with artifice. Instead, it is “a book about artifice at its most conspicuous,” about “poetry that rings out with the bells and whistles of ornamentation and lays bare the time and effort of poetic labor” (2). That, in this context, is what it means to be *indecorous*. Rosenfeld thus shows how Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and Mary Wroth resist the notion, at least as old as Aristotle, that we ought “to be wary of obvious art” (3). If poetry is to represent the world clearly, and to persuade its reader as to a truth of the world, then its language must be as unobtrusive as possible. But what if we take Sidney seriously, and poetry aims not so much to represent worlds as to make them? What might such worlds look like? How do figures of speech work to organize poetic worlds and to create knowledge within them? *Indecorous Thinking* answers these questions.

Rosenfeld divides the book into two parts. The first includes three chapters on the status of figures of speech in three separate contexts: that of Ramist reforms, the humanist schoolroom, and the history of poetics. These chapters also treat literary texts, but here the primary focus is context. The second part of the book, by contrast, pairs one of Rosenfeld’s focal literary figures with a particular figure of speech: Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* with *simile*, Sidney’s *Arcadia* with *antithesis*, and Wroth’s *Urania* with *periphrasis*. In each case, Rosenfeld shows how figures work to define poetic worlds. “The slow thinking of *simile*,” for instance, allows Spenser to make a world resistant to abstraction (100), while Sidney uses *antithesis* as a grounding principle that “establishes the conditions of possibility with the world of the *Arcadia*” (122). Rosenfeld helps us see how *periphrasis*, in *Urania*, allows readers to glimpse a poetic world structured by “a logic of possession that grants the beholder ownership over precisely that which she does not have” (144), and concludes the book with a coda on Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humour*. Here we see how Jonson restricts himself to already-existing figures of speech—what Rosenfeld calls “the law of the conversation of forms” (166)—yet ends up, like Rosenfeld’s three other figures, in the realm of the virtuosic.

In all of the most important respects, Rosenfeld’s book succeeds beautifully. To begin, it is extraordinarily learned, offering as comprehensive, as nuanced, and as insightful an exploration of figures of speech as one could ever hope to find. In her list of figures who consider whether figures of speech should call attention to themselves or deflect attention away, we find not just Aristotle, Cicero, Ramus, Puttenham, and Sidney himself, but also Thomas Blundeville, Thomas Blount, John Brinsley, and many others. One of the chief values of the book resides in just this: how thoroughly it presents how figures of speech have

## Reviews

been—and might yet be—understood. Rosenfeld’s ability to mine and synthesize such a wide range of material is nothing short of staggering.

Rosenfeld also excellently demonstrates how Spenser, Sidney, and Wroth engage in debates about the role that figures of speech can play and about the broader aims of poetry. There has been quite a bit of work in recent years about how poetry’s value resides not only, or even primarily, in how it represents the world, but also, and principally, in how it makes worlds. Rosenfeld’s book explains with uncommon precision how figures of speech allow poetry to do this, producing knowledge that is distinctly poetic and defining the rules that structure alternative worlds. Through its attention to the world-making capacity of poetic figures, Rosenfeld’s book should inspire further thought about precisely how poetry can make worlds; it might be considered a companion not just to books in early modern studies but also, for instance, to Michael Clune’s *Writing Against Time* (Stanford, 2013). Rosenfeld also situates *Indecorous Thinking* well with regard to strong recent work on early modern language, for instance that of Sean Keilen, Paula Blank, Margaret Ferguson, Carla Mazzio, Jenny C. Mann, and Catherine Nicholson. Rosenfeld is humble enough to show herself to be a fellow traveler of such scholars while also showing how distinctively she contributes to our understanding of early modern poetics.

As with any book, there are things that I might have done differently. Rosenfeld herself describes the organization of her book as “not linear but recursive” (13), but at times recursion can—to this reader, at least—feel a little too like repetition. The coda on Jonson, for instance, was fascinating in itself, but at the same time seemed to me often to reiterate earlier claims through a different figure. I also think that, at times, Rosenfeld could further clarify and develop a sense of how the book’s focus on figures of speech adds to our understanding of individual authors. Rosenfeld is a careful, conscientious scholar, and she does address this issue, but with Spenser in particular I did not feel that I fully understood the payoff of her argument for Spenser studies (as opposed to for early modern poetics more generally).

These are minor quibbles about a wonderful book. In one of the promotional blurbs for *Indecorous Thinking*, Gordon Teskey writes that “[i]t is a rich and sustaining book, one anyone working in the field of English Renaissance literature will want to own and have readily at hand.” We expect a certain hyperbole in what we find on the backs of books, and while much of Rosenfeld’s book details the excess that marks the indecorous, Teskey’s words are, I think, full of decorum. The words match the matter.

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