

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Euphues. The Anatomy of Wit*, 1578; *Euphues and his England*, 1580**

John Lyly (1553-1606)

### *Background*

Lyly was a University wit, out of the set of Marlowe, Kyd, Chapman; In fact part of a stream of classically educated, iconoclastic, and on many occasions sassy men of letters, ornaments of the British literary landscape right through the seventeenth century to Congreve and Wycherley. Lyly, like many of his male contemporaries, was a professional writer--a 'man of letters'--but also a courtier and parliamentarian, that is a figure of significant elite society influence. (He entered Magdalen College at the age of sixteen, then was educated at King's College, Cambridge. His grandfather, William Lyly, was the Headmaster of St. Paul's School, where Milton was later to study, while Lyly's uncle, George Lyly, was a distinguished scholar and cartographer.) While Lyly was the author of eight well attended plays--six of them performed for Queen Elizabeth--he has remained of particular note---in British literary history-- for his small text *Euphues, The Anatomy of Wit*, 1578, followed by a stunning showpiece of verbal eloquence and social fastidiousness--*Euphues and his England*, 1580. Afficionados of high literary style have risked calling Lyly the 'father of English comedy,' and even 'the first English novelist.' The man was vastly popular, but for a short time, and for a highbrow audience.

### ***Euphues'***

'plot'

Is 'plot' the word? Is there a plot in Lyly's work? A modern day reader, coming from, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the so called *School of Language Poetry* (around 1970 in the United States), or perhaps the *word poetry* of Jeremy Prynne in Britain, will find in *Euphues* a pre- home being reflected for him from the Elizabethan past, for John Lyly understood the mysteries embedded in language which is in part self-referential, in part simply referential, a certain kind of creative language of our own time. (To be clear, the usual understanding is that language is a tool by which we make reference to our world and orient ourselves within it.) For Lyly, as we quickly see from *Euphues*, language is serving both functions. Language is both a guide to the way things are and a guide to what it itself *is*.

*Euphues* (the word means *well-born, of a natural finesse*, in Greek) opens with a dense paragraph, addressed to 'the gentlemen readers,' an imagined club of subtle snobs who can read for pleasure, or who can leave reading or writing for others to do. These are the kind of men who would say of themselves, like Euphues who is addressing them, 'I am content this winter to have my doings read for a toy, that in summer they may be ready for trash.' In other words the set of writers with whom Euphues associates are not believers in the 'high seriousness' of language, in the power or reality of the word. 'Gentlemen use books as gentlewomen handle their flowers, who in the morning stick them in their heads, and at night strew them at their heels.' That this position seems farcically blasé conceals the gravity of making language into an analyzable tool, which can be looked at as language while it is capturing the reader's imagination. The ground is hereby readied for a tale-- shall we say any tale?-- that fills the imagination. Why not tell a tale out of pure free choice?

That, we might say, is precisely the tale Lyly pulls out of his hat. It is a brief tale, this springboard into the story of a handsome young man and his encounter with a grumpy old man, stock descriptive words which could just as easily be interchanged. Words matter, of course, in the construction of this tale, but by and large those 'words are just words,' like the flowers the ladies strew from their hats. The present tale, at any rate, claims for author one John Lyly, a moderate scribbler like others, who has been whiling away

the time at his desk, and can't figure out whether to send his pamphlet to the printer or the peddler. It doesn't make much difference, as it doesn't GREATLY matter whether caps or small letters are used for the present aggressive looking capitals. Soooo... we meander into a tale which, while giving itself the appearance of a PLOT, is aleatory, free constructed, and bereft of the necessity a strong story builds into itself.

The story, for this is the beginning of *Euphues*, opens onto pure possibility. What follows is the way Lyly tells a tale on the verge of a take off on tale telling. There you are, you see, the literary tradition not allowed to sneak up behind him, the author takes you under his wing--remember his insistence that you accept his word-gift as a toy.

*There dwelt in Athens a young gentleman of great patrimony, and of so comely a personage that it was doubted whether he were more bound to nature for the lineaments of his person or to fortune for the increase of his possessions.*

Lyly proceeds to ring the changes on the extreme portrait of this nearly blameless paragon of youth, until a telling confession stumbles over the reader, that

*In all perfect shapes a blemish brings rather a liking to the eyes than a loathing to the mind.*

A set of tropes follow, on the ingredients of physical beauty, which mine copious contrasts from Greco Roman literature, swallowed up in Lyly's Imaginative erudition, leaving the mere corporeal presence of Euphues all but drained from him. The classical tradition finds a stupefying excess, here, which assures Lyly the freedom to continue retailing his literary work as a toy.

At this stage we may want to say that Lyly has completed the first half of a portrait in words. He is in fact delineating 'plot' at this moment and finding it a texture of words, a place where what we might want to call a *character* could be inserted. But the rules of the tale-game, that Lyly is playing, mandate an anti-Euphues. He is in fact needed right now to make Euphues live, for in fact Euphues is but a *papier mache* construction sustained by a hearty glance at his opposite-sitting other. There had to be a counter Euphues, giving life to Euphues. Otherwise what life was there for either of them? (A positional view toward 'character' in literature which we will gladly contrast with Shakespeare's belief and practice--those which lead him, say in Falstaff, Lear, Shylock or Brutus, to create *rounded characters*, each part of which is ripe with every other part.)

The counter figure is as *papier mache* as is Euphues, a voice out of the blue in the Neapolitan lodging where Euphues is living, enjoying himself but modestly, and not up for worldly wisdom, especially when it is unsolicited. The gentleman, of course, knows all this in advance, but craftily corners Euphues into the position of having to defend himself, simply because he is young, a ready made target for shysters, bad guys, and perverts. The avuncular attacker--will you be thinking ahead to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner?--gradually shifts the discussion into an enshrined issue, the classical trope of nature versus nurture. He draws attention to what he thinks must have gone wrong, with this splendidly endowed Euphues, that had stranded him here among a disparate lot of lodgers.

*Here my youth ( whether for weariness he could not or for wantonness he could not go any further) determined to make his abode, whereby it is evidently seen that the fleetest fish swallows the most delicate bait , that the highest soaring hawk trains to the lure and that the wittiest dunce is inveigled with the sudden view of alluring vanities.*

While the elderly wiseman peruses this lodging scene he concludes that Euphues suffers from an underlying disadvantage, that he was not brought up with a proper nurture. The greatest caution the elderly man can enjoin is that he should try to compensate for the defects in Euphues' nurture. Not surprisingly, Euphues takes umbrage at this intrusive suggestion, which he thinks untrue of his parents and inapplicable to his present situation. The horns of competing adages lock. The insoluble conflict between nature and nurture spills out into the center of the argument, and is left for Euphues to make what he can of it.

### ***Adage and narrative***

Earlier reference to rounded Shakespearean characters will have carried us back to the initial language based discussion with which we started, and to the theme of wit, which evidently left its mark on language, in fact conspired to create its own distinctive mark on Elizabethan writing. Wit, classical erudition, and readiness for self-reference collectively make of a language transaction less what we might call communication, a transfer of information about the world, and more nearly a display of formal characteristics of language, like the rival philosophies, smart puns, or narrative oscillations reminiscent, but little more, of the older fashioned narrative.

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Does Lyly, whose Euphues we have managed to address as a model of a kind of self-referential language work, ultimately contrive to extract a narrative line from his sequence of elegant vignettes? From his playful gravity, the gravity of the artificer intent on the idea of his work as a toy? There is of course a narrative embedded in the intricate language imbrications that at a snail's pace walk us through into the unfolding interest of one sort or another of the present narrative's followers. (After all, Lyly was welcome as a playwright, a tale teller, and cannot have exercised culture attraction without a tale, even if a culture-obstructive tale, to tell.

The narrative, which in the present minefield stumbles across many a euphuistic word-minefield, has a thin plot on which to carry the baggage of eloquence. A young Athenian visits Naples, a city known in the Renaissance for its high living and loose morals. Euphues, the young Athenian, settles in his new residence and becomes a close friend of Philolaus--who is engaged to Lucilia. Probably enough, Euphues falls in love with Lucilia--a game with the game of language, which shows high promise for authorial rights, and which anyway assumes the right to make events its toy. Philolaus comes out the loser, upended like a Lylyan sentence, all awareness of itself. The remainder of the text enables Lyly to debate himself exhaustively on the kinds of moral issues we have seen foregrounded (such issues as nature versus nurture) from the beginning. Such issues as nature versus nurture continue to move to the center of discussion. The texture of style--rhetorical questions, repetitions, alliterations and ornate classical references--assures us we remain in the familiar world of language poetry, in which the way words are used is a decisive element in what they say.