William P. Weaver


The epyllion, “the minor epic,” experienced a vogue of popularity among English writers of the 1590s. Literary critics have tended to focus their attention on the eroticism of these mythological poems, especially the most famous of them (Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* and William Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*), but William P. Weaver offers a new and overarching theory about the form. He argues that the poems are as much about rhetoric as they are sex, and they are not so much concerned with erotic transgression as they are with educational transition.

Weaver seeks to outline a “cultural poetics of the English epyllion” (2) by tracing the representation of boys in these narrative poems. For him, what links characters like Adonis, Paris, Antinous, and the other youthful protagonists of these poems is “the cultivation of a provisional discursive abundance followed by the submission to a corrective violence” (2). This trajectory arises from “the exercises that governed the transition from boyhood to adolescence in the English grammar school” (2). What Weaver argues, then, is that the authors of the poems model the transitions of their boy characters on the transition that schoolchildren experienced in their movement from the lower to the upper levels of grammar school. As Weaver puts it, the poets “presented rites de passage from boyhood to adolescence as enacted in the institutional context of the humanist grammar school” (3). This process was defined by the *progymnasmata* (preliminary exercises), written themes that the boys produced in a specific order and which were a significant part of the humanist curriculum in the early modern period. Progression through the *progymnasmata* marked the students’ movement from grammar to rhetoric, from lower division studies to upper, from one teacher to the next, from boyhood to adolescence. It was an experience shared by most educated men and would have drilled into students a set of writing strategies and devices. So influential was this program in the shaping of English writers that Weaver claims “the English epyllion demands that we comprehend the physical violence of its adolescent figures in terms of rhetorical forms of discipline, the *progymnasmata*” (10).

Weaver uses this transition, from boyhood to adolescence, from grammar to rhetoric, to divide the English epyllion into two types: mythological and historical. The mythological he associates with pre-*progymnasmata* “verbal plenitude” and the historical with post-*progymnasmata* discipline. He notes the number of “paired epyllia” (8)—Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and *The
Rape of Lucrece for example—as evidence of this divide. Weaver structures his book around this profound division: the first part is called “Rudiments of Eloquence: Boyhood” and the second “First Exercises: Adolescence.” Hero and Leander, Venus and Adonis, and Thomas Heywood’s Oenone and Paris occupy the former, Shakespeare’s Lucrece, Sir John Davies’ Orchestra, and Thomas Edwards’ Cephalus and Procris the latter.

Within this division, Weaver traces the relation of each of the works to a different exercise in the progymnasmata. In Marlowe’s adaptation of Musaeus’ Hero and Leander he finds “two formal elements for amplification: description and declamation” (51). In Venus and Adonis he finds a resemblance to one of the exercises in Camerarius’ Chief Exercises for Boyhood Study and Style, the chreia or elaboration of an anecdote. Thomas Heywood’s Oenone and Paris draws on narration, an especially significant exercise for the schoolboy for “Quintilian, who was responsible for the subdivision of the progymnasmata, wrote that when the boy began to write narratives, he was to be handed over to the teacher of rhetoric” (95). Weaver parallels this educational threshold with Paris’ coming of age in the poem.

The second half of the book is less programmatic in its alignment of the poems with schoolboy exercises. Shakespeare’s The Rape of Lucrece presents Weaver some problems because it is not, like the other poems, clearly about the struggles and evolution of a young male. Weaver argues that Shakespeare splits the protagonist, “isolating adolescence as a single crisis of moral deliberation in the person of Tarquin, and exploring adolescence as process or initiation in the person of Lucrece” while acknowledging “Lucrece is neither an adolescent male nor an allegory of the schoolboy” (123). Rather he argues for a “homology between her use of the progymnasmata and their ritual function in the humanist grammar school” (124). Weaver finds “forensic rhetoric” in Lucrece’s speeches and aligns the poem with Quintilian’s recommendation of an exercise in which students wrote narratives followed by confirmations. In Davies’ Orchestra Or a Poeme of Dauncing Weaver sees a class-driven employment of the encomium, an exercise in which the writer develops the life of a human subject in three parts: origins, education, and accomplishments. Humanists were much given to expanding the education part of that formula. In Weaver’s reading, Davies parodies the form. Cephalus and Procris, by the otherwise unknown Edwards, employs thesis and antithesis: “So far, the student has been engaged in writing mocked-up speeches, solo enunciations of a theme, narrative, or argument. But now the student must respond as if in rebuttal—must even produce arguments to which he responds” (181). Weaver ends with a short epilogue on John Milton’s Paradise Regained in which he sees “the very process represented in the English epyllion: the transition from study to action” (196).