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Symbolic and Real Loci in John Lyly's *Euphues* Books: The significance of Naples, Athens and London

ERZSÉBET STRÓBL

“There dwelt in Athens a young gentleman . . .”—with these words begins one of the most successful narratives of the Elizabethan era, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) by John Lyly.¹ The book's witty hero, Euphues is characterized from the first moment with the name of the city of Athens. The enfolding plot introduces another city, Naples, which becomes the scene of the adventures and experiences that educate the young gallant:

. . . a place of more pleasure than profit, and yet more profit than piety, the very walls and windows of whereof showed it rather to be the tabernacle of Venus than the temple of Vesta. There was all things necessary and in readiness that might either allure the mind to lust or entice the heart to folly—a court more meet for an atheist than for one of Athens, for Ovid than for Aristotle, for a graceless lover than a godly liver, more fitter for Paris than Hector, and meeter for Flora than Diana. (33–4)

The two loci of the book, Athens and Naples, thus become emblematic oppositions from the first pages of the book, and their names signify symbolic concepts—one standing for university and study, the other for court and courtliness—rather than real geographical locations on the map of sixteenth-century Europe.

As opposed to this image, the sequel *Euphues and His England* (1580), introduces a real land, England and its capital, London. John Lyly gives a description of them with chorographic precision, quoting and paraphrasing well-known ancient texts as well as contemporary publications. While G. K. Hunter, Lyly's biographer, declares that there is “no need to take the place-names quite literally” (59), the following paper will endeavour to probe how literally one can understand the references to London in Lyly's text, how the image of the real city of London contributes to and balances the symbolic images of Athens and Naples, and what significance these descriptions have in the *Euphues* narratives.

Symbolic Spaces: Athens and Naples

There is a general consensus among literary critics that Athens signifies the place of learning in the opposition with Naples, where the latter stands for life at court. The

¹ It had three editions in the first year, followed by a sequel *Euphues and His England* (1580), itself having four editions by 1581, and both more than 30 among them by the 1630s.

real city of Athens had been at the time of the writing of the book under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for more than a hundred years, being occupied in 1458 by the Turks. Yet for the educated reader brought up on classical literature, the city of Athens signified the place of philosophy, “the mother of Sapience, and the palaice of musis and all liberall sciences”—as Thomas Elyot phrased it in his *Book named the Governor* in 1531 (1.11). In the text no description of Athens is included; actually very little mention is made of the city itself, except for using it as an attribute of learning and a reference to a place of study.

Euphues is not only characterized by the place he came from, but also by the name he bears. The name can be derived from the book of the famous educator Roger Ascham, who speaks about the ideal disposition of a student to study and names such a person Euphues:

Euphues. Is he, that is apte by goodnes of witte, and appliable by Witte. // readines of will, to learning, hauing all other Will. // qualities of the minde and partes of the bodie, that must an other day serue learning, not trobled, mangled, and halfed, but sounde, whole, full . . . a tong, not stammering, . . . a voice, not softe, weake, piping, wommanishe, but audible, Face. stronge, and manlike . . . a personage, not wretched and deformed, but taule and goodlie Learnynge. (194)

Thus for the reader Athens, learning, and Euphues should be combined into one image, yet this image is probed by the challenges posed by Naples, the city identified with a metropolitan, urban setting, and with courtliness.

Sixteenth-century Naples was part of the Spanish empire and was one of its largest and best-fortified cities. Its court, pomp, and the art patronage of its viceroy were famous—Naples has been considered one of the centres of Italian Renaissance. Thus it was an ideal metaphor for urban life and courtly existence. Yet in *The Anatomy of Wit* Naples was associated with vice and greed as the reader learned from the old gentleman, Eubulus, at the beginning of the book:

Here mayst thou see . . . drunken sots wallowing in every house, in every chamber, yea, in every channel; . . . not the carved vizard of lewd woman, but the incarnate visage of a lascivious wanton, not the shadow of love, but the substance of lust. (37)

Referring to the ancient trope of contrasting court and country, as places of vice and virtue, Eubulus warns Euphues of the dangers of Naples and courtly life: an advice—as so many others in the book – not heeded by the young man. Euphues deserts his friend Philautus, though friendship is esteemed “the jewel of human joy” (44) by the narrator, just to win the love of a fickle woman, who in turn deserts him. The plot of the *Anatomy* ends with Euphues learning his lesson and making his choice between

the two cities: “I will to Athens there to toss my books, no more Naples to live with fair looks.” (84)

In the several letters attached to the main body of the *Anatomy*, the contrast of Athens and Naples is further adumbrated. For instance, in one of the final letters, written to Euphues by Livia, a virtuous lady living in the emperor’s court, it is summarized as “I have wished oftentimes rather in the country to spin than in the court to dance; and truly a distaff doth better become a maiden than a lute, and fitter it is with the needle to practice how to live than with the pen to learn how to love.” (147) In the answer by Euphues it is interesting to see that Athens becomes part of this virtuous countryside as he urges Livia to “come into the country” where he will have her “first learn to forget all those things which thou hast seen in the court” (149). Instead of the life in an ageless Arcadian setting, the scholarly community is substituted as the scene of learning virtues.²

Yet some further material included in the first Euphues book upsets the straightforward image of Athens as the epitome of virtue and humanistic study. In a treatise about the education of youth Euphues offers a severe criticism of Athens:

I cannot but lament Athens, which, having been always the nurse of philosophers, doth now nourish only the name of philosophy. For to speak plainly of the disorders of Athens, who doth not see it and sorrow at it? . . . Such a confusion of degrees, that the scholar knoweth not his dutie to the Bachelor, nor the Bachelor to the Master, nor the Master to the Doctor. Such corruption of manners . . . such open sins, . . . such privy villainy, such quarrelling in the streets, . . . such subtle practices in chambers that it maketh my heart to melt with sorrow. (110)

Athens is shown as a place where students are mistreated, methods of education are old-fashioned and ridiculous, and morals are loose. This passage is often seen as a reference to contemporary Oxford where Lyly studied, and Bevington even states that “vices and virtues at court and university are antithetically equal” in *The Anatomy of Wit* (164). While it cannot be disputed that the description of life in Athens by Euphues is very similar to the image rendered from Naples by Eubulus, one must notice the distancing factor inherent in the multiple narrators involved throughout the work of Lyly, which destabilizes meaning. Let me now turn to this aspect of the Euphues books, the multiple frames through which the reader is expected to read the lines.

² In Lyly’s later court plays there are similar references to Athens as contrasted with the court. In *Campaspe* the ancient trope of condemning courtly vice surfaces as Alexander the Great moves his court to Athens only to be censured by Diogenes who would rather be crooked of body and “endeavour to make [himself] straight, from the court, as to be straight, and learne to be crooked at the court” (1:3:126–28). In *Sappho and Phao* Athens is given as the homeland to characters that are associated with Philosophy and learning.

The Narrative Frames

Both books contain a main text telling the adventures of Euphues and his friend Philautus, which is narrated by an authorial voice. The narrator links the soliloquies and dialogues of characters and also addresses his audience directly by commenting on the plot or even forecasting coming events. Yet a further narrator's voice is introduced into the second book by tales told by the main plot's characters themselves, who comment and link the dialogues and soliloquies of the characters in their own story. The reader experiences a multiple distancing as the voices of the authorial narrator, the characters, the characters as narrators, and the narrated tale's characters speak. Leah Scragg called this a "series of frames" and a "process of regression" where "competing perspectives . . . create a double-faceted framework for a narrative that itself evolves through the narration of tales within tales" (9). Yet an even further distancing is achieved by Lyly with the web of paratexts placed after the text of the main plot in both books, in the form of letters and treatises on various topics by the fictional characters.

The ambiguity created by this narrative structure is in line with the style of the book, commonly referred to as "euphuism." Lyly uses a style, in which antithesis is one of the major devices. Antithesis is not just used "to intensify the terms under consideration," but also to propose "alternatives" without resolving them, or actually offering a "coexistence of contrary properties in one phenomenon" (Barish 18–19), so that "the more absolute of its kind a thing may appear to be, the more certain it is that somewhere within it lies its own antithesis, its own anti-self" (ibid. 22). The many frames used by Lyly's narrative structure create the same effect as his stylistic use of antithesis, adding a playful multiplicity to his work and strengthening the feeling of equivocation. Such an ambiguity is created by problematizing the reference of the city of Athens. While Athens was referred to as a place of learning and as opposed to the court of Naples throughout the main text, a separate treatise written by Euphues depicts it as the place of vice. The reader is confronted with the alternatives of distrusting this information provided by Euphues, as Euphues proved to be a shaky authority in matters of judgement in the plot or believing him and discrediting the authorial narrator's generalizations about Athens. A further possibility is to believe Euphues's negative image painted about Athens, but to suspect a further narrative layer, where Athens becomes a real geographical locus—not the city in Attica occupied by the Turks—, but a location referred to outside the plot by the real organizer of the text, the author John Lyly.

The condemnation of life in Athens was understood by contemporaries as a criticism of a real town, Oxford, where Lyly attended university. *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* was a type of commonplace book, but Lyly took the opportunity to insert not just common wisdom and knowledge into it, but also topical references. The allusions were so well understood that Lyly felt obliged to introduce an apology to the scholars of Oxford in its second edition. This shift would not have been possible without the web of differing lenses Lyly used in the structural layout of the books.

The change from a generalized concept of Athens as representing learning to a concrete city is a decisive moment as it foreshadows the second book's treatment of loci, where London is not an idea any more, but a real living city of Elizabethan England.

London

Euphues and His England challenges the first book's concept of loci used in a metaphorical manner. In the storyline of the adventures of Euphues and Philautus, the two friends go to the court of London to probe its reputation of embodying both courtliness and learning, "to see a court both braver in show and better in substance, more gallant courtiers, more godly consci[ence]s, as fair ladies, and fairer conditions" (150). Thus the abstracted images of Naples and Athens as court and hub of learning are contrasted with London, a real space situated within England. Both London and England will become scenes with geographical identities, with their own histories, landmarks, and people. While the first book explored questions of courtliness in general terms, the sequel adds genuine details about a living city.

Before the friends arrive in England, Lyly dedicates a relatively long interlude to the description of the journey, in which the details are narrated by the authorial voice, but the character of Euphues delivers a long tale and provides some information about England.

Euphues's story is about an old hermit, who himself tells a tale about his years as a young lad. The story forms a parallel to the opening dialogue of Euphues and Eubulus in *The Anatomy of Wit*, as in both old men offer advice to young gallants without their words being heeded. It also underscores the prodigal son motif of the first book (Euphues's education through his experience in Naples),³ as in the tale of the hermit the original biblical story is paraphrased (the hermit as a young man asks for his share of the inheritance, travels for fourteen years learning "more vices than [he] went forth with pence" (175), and decides to return home seeking pardon for his deeds). But the most striking feature of the tale is that it underlines the uselessness and fickleness of travel, thus it forms an antithesis to the main plot of the book in which Euphues and Philautus travel to England. Both the moral of the hermit's tale and the ancient authority of Homer quoted argue against leaving one's homeland as "he that leaveth his own home is worthy no home" (176).⁴ Euphues, who tells the hermit's tale, comments: "either never to travel, or so travel as although the purse be weakened the mind may be strengthened . . . for not he that hath seen most countries is most to be esteemed, but he that learned best conditions; for not so much are the situation of the places to be noted as the virtues of the persons" (180). As opposed to this statement, when Euphues and Philautus arrive in Dover they spend three or four days admiring its castle, buildings, and harbour, and in Canterbury they first visit the

³ See Henderson (13) and Scragg (11) about the prodigal narratives.

⁴ Pincomb points out the parallel with Plato's travel to Syracuse and its similarly negative associations (8).

cathedral and its monuments, before getting acquainted with an old Englishman. Lyly also introduces chorographic descriptions of both England and London, which in the light of Euphues's and the hermit's pronouncements seems worthless. Furthermore, it is through the speech of Euphues that the reader hears about the particularities of the land, and it is later in a letter of Euphues that an even more detailed account of both the country and its capital is provided. Amid such equivocation about the worthiness of visiting new lands the description of a real locus, England and London, is inserted.

England is first depicted according to an ancient source, Julius Caesar's *The Gallic Wars*. Euphues delivers on board the ship an oration-like speech, which is—as he himself calls the reader's attention to it—a free translation and paraphrase of the classical text. It is through the eyes of a foreigner, and an aggressive conqueror, that England's image is first painted. We are reminded that a similar foreigner—aggressive or not—is uttering the words, who is on his way to prove the good reputation of London's court true or false. A note of national sensitiveness can be detected on the part of Lyly, as in his narrative Euphues breaks off quoting from the well-known paragraphs, just before the barbarous custom of a dozen men sharing the same wives is described (5:14)—thus suppressing unwanted detail and editing its source. Yet harmless but exotic elements, such as the English dyeing their faces blue to look more horrible in battle, are retained for amusement's sake.

The second part of the description of England comes right at the end of the main plot, in the treatise of “Euphues' Glass for Europe” attached to a letter sent by Euphues to Livia after arriving back to Athens. It contains long passages of borrowings from another famous source, William Harrison's *Description of England* published as part of the first edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles* only three years earlier. What is remarkable about this borrowing is the way Lyly handles its source: he sometimes takes over long passages verbatim, at other instances compresses several chapters in one sentence, or even comments or criticizes his source text. He strictly follows the order of the description by Harrison (e.g. geographical description, mention of the twenty-six cities, the bishops, the universities, the navy, and baths etc.). Much humour and a bit of satire appears with the personal reflections that are sometimes added to the source text, and by the twisting and reordering of sentences or phrases. E.g. Harrison's chapter “Of fauage beaftes and vermines” starts with the haughty sentence “It is none of the leaft blessinges wherewith God hath indued thys Ilande, that it is void of noysome beafts, as Lions, Beares, Tygers . . .” (1:3.7), but Lyly's paraphrase “Of savage beastes and vermyn they have no great store, nor any that are noisome” (325) ridicules the pretentious sentence by reordering its parts and simplifying it. A similar satirical moment is Euphues's aside about Harrison's chapter “Of the Marueyles of Englande” (1:2.18) which he skips with the remark “many wonders there are to be found in this island, which I will not repeat because I myself never saw them, and you have heard of greater” (324).⁵

⁵ About Harrison's answer to Lyly's satire in the second edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles* see Terry Reilly's article.

These two descriptions of England are further examples of the distancing of information presented to the reader through the multiple narrative frames. The accounts are not delivered by the general narrator of the plot, but appear as part of a speech or as an appendix to a letter by Euphues. A further level in this “regression” is introduced by co-opting ancient or contemporary texts well known to early modern readers, and editing them. This maze of disorientation is a sign of caution about the objectivity of the seemingly dry chorographic details of the source texts and of Lyly’s work, underscoring the possibility of multiple interpretations.

It is in this complex context that the praise of London is inserted. Harrison does not describe London as the capital of England in detail in his text, yet Lyly following Harrison’s dry manner and style manages to get away with the trick of offering his lines on London as a Harrison paraphrase.

The main theme is mercantilism. London is presented as “the Store-house and Marte of all Europe” and the contrast of the nobility of the city and its dependence on money is astonishing: “What can there be in anye place under the heavens, that is not in this *noble* Citie eyther to be *bought* or *borrowed*?” (322, emphasis mine) This sentence is followed after a paragraph-long break with a shocking conformation of the presence of the poor that questions the worth and value of the previous statement: “It hath divers Hospitals for the relieving of the poore.” Together with the poor two further classes of people are mentioned: “It hath divers Hospitals for the relieving of the poore, six-score fayre Churches for divine service, a gloryous Burse which they call the Ryoll Exchaung, for the meeting of Merchants of all countries where any traffique is to be had” (323). These people are further characterized:

This maketh Gentlemen brave, and Merchaunts rich, Citisens to purchase,
and sojourners to morgage, so that it is to be thought, that the greatest
wealth and substaunce of the whole Realme is couched within the walles
of London, where they that be rich keepe it from those that be riotous ...
(323)

This mercantile spirit echoes an earlier statement of the book that called London “the garden of the world, where among many flowers we shall see some weeds, sweet roses and sharp nettles, pleasant lilies and pricking thorns” (224). Thus the image of the real London is at variance with the idealized city which Euphues sought to discover. Is this the city that was to prove its superior virtues to the entire world?

Lyly’s work definitely makes this statement, yet it equivocates by meaning the royal court of London rather than the real mercantile London. It is the court of Elizabeth I that forms the antithetical balance to the image of Naples. John Lyly here again relies on Harrison’s *Description of England*. Printed in the same year as the *Anatomy of Wit* Harrison’s work contains a description of the English court as if it were a refutation to the statements and general condemnation of courts advocated in *The Anatomy of Wit*:

In some great Princes Courtes, it is a worlde to see what lewde behaiour is vsed among dyuers of those that reforte vnto the same, & what whoredoe, swearing, rybaldry atheisme, dicing, carding, carowling, drun|kennesse, Glotony, quareling, and such lyke inconueniences, doe daily take holde, and sometimes euen among those, in whose e|states such behaiour is leaft conuenient: all which inormities, are eyther vtterly ex|pelled out of the Court of Englande, or else so qualified by the diligent endeuour of the chiefe officers of hir graces houfholde. (1:2.9)

Harrison provides the major themes to Lyly's work so closely (the praise of grave councillors, learned courtiers and virtuous ladies, as well as depicting the court as a place of learning) that the idea of writing a sequel to the *Anatomy* may have been inspired by Harrison's description of the English court:

This farder is not to be omitted to the singular commendation of both sorts & sexes of our Courtyers here in Englande, that there are verye fewe of them, which haue not the vse and skyll of fundry speaches, beside an excellent vaine of wryting, before time not regarded. Truly it is a rare thing with vs nowe, to here of a courtier which hath but his own language, & to say how many Gentlewomen & Ladies there are that beside sound knowledge of the Greeke & Latin tongues, are therto no lesse skilful in y^e Spanish Italian & French, or in some one of them, it resteth not in me.

. . . to auoyde ydleneffe, and pre|uent fundrye transgressions, otherwise like|lye to be commytted and done, such order is taken, that euerye offyce hath eyther a Byble, or the bookes of the Actes and mo|numentes of the Church of Englande, or both, beside some hystoryes and Chronicles lying therin, for the exercise of such as come into the same: whereby the straunger that entereth into the Court of Englande vpon the sodeine, shall rather imagine himselfe to come into some publicke schoole of y^e vniuer|sities, where many giue eare to one that rea|deth vnto thẽ, then into a Princes Pallace, if you conferre this with those of other nati|ons. (ibid)

A separate paragraph of the praise of ladies foreshadows the concept of Lyly's *Euphues and His England*:

. . . our auncient Ladies of the Court doe shun & auoyde ydleneffe, some of them exercyng their fingers with the neede, other in caule|worke, diuers in spinning of filke, some in continuall reading either of the holye scrip|tures, or hystories of our owne, or forren na|tions about vs, whilest the yonger sort in y^e meane time, applie their Lutes, Citharnes, pricke|song, and all kindes of Musick, which they vse only for recreation and solace fake, when they haue leysure, and are free from attendaunce vpon the Quées maie|stye, or such as they belong vnto. (ibid)

Lyly, to enhance his version of praise, needs to elevate the theme to the regions of the supernatural by making the narrator claim that the ladies of “this blessed Island” seemed like “Fayries” in a vision when first beheld, “but comming to my selfe, and seeing . . . that the place where I stooode was no enchaunted castell, but a gallant court, I could scarce restraine my voyce from crying” (329). Yet Lyly’s panegyric is inserted into the book as part of a treatise by Euphues, so when he directly addresses the ladies of his audience to imitate the English example, his words can be understood as criticism as well through the multiple layers of narration: “Ah, good Ladies—good, I say, for that I love you,—I would yee could a little abate that pride of your stomackes, that loosenesse of minde, that lycentious behaviour which I have seene in you” (331).

Through the web of statement and contradiction of the statement, the only unchallenged authority is that of the queen. On all levels of the narration (by the author Lyly, the book’s narrator, and Euphues) the praise of Queen Elizabeth is absolute. The emerging national pride of the English mingles here with the newly introduced language of the cult of Elizabeth. The lengthy paragraphs of praise appropriate old figures of speech derived from the Bible and the contemporary metaphors from classical mythology and allusions to humanistic learning. While the reputation of London, the real city, suffers from Lyly’s euphuistic satire, London as the locus of the ideal court is exempt from criticism and offers a straightforward panegyric of the monarch and its court.

Conclusion

Looking at the significance of the cities of Athens and Naples within the two Euphues books, one must underscore their emblematic function within the plot of the story. London, on the contrary, is introduced as a real locus, but emerges as a similarly divided image: the real city of London as contrasted to the idealized court of the queen.

Hunter argues that the part of the book where the details of London and the court were described was hastily added to the second Euphues book (66), yet I believe the contrary is more probable. The image of the antithesis of the real London and the idealized city of the court of Elizabeth forms the basis of the narrative plot. Judith Rice Henderson argued that the letters appended to *The Anatomy of Wit* were “composition exercises of the Elizabethan schools” (147) that gave the *raison d’être* of the writing of the book. In a similar manner in the sequel *Euphues and His England* I believe the treatise of “Euphues’ Glass for Europe”—with its description of England and London—gave the *apropos* of writing the book.

Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit was always acknowledged as an “enchanted treasure trove of attitudes and traditions” of the age (Hunter 61) and its cultural significance was recognized as a “point of entry to the understanding of the period itself” (Lumney xxxi). One of the *topoi* of the cultural milieu of the sixteenth century was to seek an answer to the possibilities of relating ideals and realities, to connect

idealized loci of virtue and wisdom (nature, ideal city, spaces of study) with the possibilities of their realization as real spaces. The Euphues books managed to connect these regions, although sacrificing credibility through one of the most intriguing aspects of the prose: the constant equivocation created by John Lyly's witty style and narrative structure.

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