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Figures of Virtue: Margaret Fell and Aemilia Lanyer’s Use of Decorum as Ethical Good Judgment in the Construction of Female Discursive Authority

Kirsten Marie Osmani

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Figures of Virtue: Margaret Fell and Aemilia Lanyer’s Use of Decorum as Ethical Good Judgment in the Construction of Female Discursive Authority

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Understanding how the Renaissance rhetorical curriculum taught style as behavior makes it possible to unite the study of women writers’ identities with formal criticism. Nancy L. Christiansen shows that early modern humanists built on the Isocratean tradition of teaching rhetoric as an ethical practice because they adopted and developed lists of rhetorical figures so extensive as to encompass all human discourse, thought, and behavior. For them, knowing, selecting, and applying these various forms was the ethical practice of good judgment, also called decorum. This type of decorum plays an important role in the rhetorical function of two key texts by early modern women. Margaret Fell and Aemilia Lanyer each use a humanist notion of decorum as the virtue of good judgment to formulate their intellectual and moral authority and to argue that women can exercise the same.

Keywords: rhetoric, style, rhetorical figures, good judgment, decorum, ethics, virtue, form, formal criticism, stylistic analysis, identity, women’s writing, women writers, intellectual authority, spiritual authority, Renaissance, Early Modern, Christian humanism, Margaret Fell, Aemilia Lanyer, Erasmus, Cicero, Isocrates
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Introduction

In Early Modern Women Studies, the last several decades have seen moves away from gender and New Historicism as critical frameworks. However, Dodds and Dowd in 2018 acknowledge that “critical interest in women’s negotiation of their identities as women writers is a preoccupation that continues to shape the field today” (84). They argue that we should no longer divorce interest in gendered experience from formal criticism because the return to formalism in Early Modern Studies now embraces cultural significance. In this framework, “matters of style have ideological import and, consequently, […] understanding a text’s full cultural significance requires analysis of form structure” (84). The connection between form and a writer’s identity is an important component of the Ciceronian and Isocratean rhetorical tradition, which rhetorical scholar Nancy Christiansen has identified as the predominant tradition of the Renaissance in Figuring Style: The Legacy of Renaissance Rhetoric. Early modern humanists, Christiansen shows, had a unique understanding of style as an index to an individual’s social, intellectual, and psychological identity; in their curriculum “[…] all forms, being mental behaviors, map cognitive movements that point essentially to motives, judgments, and character” (“Revisioning” 171). A humanist rhetorical education would likely help an early modern woman think of her own style as a formal picture of her mind’s activities and a representation of her character. As Christiansen clarifies: “This character can be crafted and changed from situation to situation, since stylistic versatility is possible. Nevertheless, behind each performance is a mind doing the constructing, and the motives and qualities of that mind inevitably appear in the construction” (“Revisioning” 170). This Renaissance theory of style as behavior provides tools and rationale for understanding early modern women’s identities as women writers in terms of their formal accomplishments.
Renaissance educators described form via extensive lists of rhetorical figures, which, Christiansen argues, comprise or attempt to comprise every possible form and display an attitude toward style as behavior. To explain how this attitude works, she contrasts it with the last century’s most prominent attitudes toward style, which are either dualistic or monistic. Dualists distinctly separate style and content, while aesthetic, psychological, and cultural monists say that style cannot be separated from content (Figuring Style 1–2). However, Renaissance rhetoricians subscribed exclusively to neither. They united dualism and monism by treating style as behavior:

“Specifically the Renaissance language arts program, as ideally conceived, treats the fundamental pairs of content and expression, idea and form, mind and speech, and nature and art not as contradictory things, as do dualists who split them into oppositions, nor as the same thing, as do monists who collapse them, but rather as different but coextensive and complementary dimensions of the same thing—human behavior, the true center of style” (Figuring Style 8).

The pairs unite but remain separable in the rhetor’s act of aligning them. The rhetor’s judgment and behavior in understanding and using form then becomes the focus of rhetorical instruction and interpretation.

This theoretical understanding of style not as form only—but as the act of judgment in utilizing form—helps explain why Renaissance educators believed the language arts could give students tangible tools for improving not only linguistic performance but also cognitive and social behavior, and why early modern humanists frequently equate rhetorical excellence with moral excellence. They hoped to foster the ability to judge and act well, which they call decorum: “Without exception humanists stress decorum or good judgment as the wisdom the art teaches” (Figuring Style 104). These humanists were unique in understanding how good
judgment, combining cerebral and practical wisdom, was essential to achieving decorum, and in understanding decorum as a measure of the quality of a rhetor’s intellectual and moral character.

The intellectual and moral aspects of style are apparent in Christiansen’s claim that all Renaissance rhetorical instruction amounts to stylistic instruction. In the Trivium, rhetoric, grammar, and logic all fell under the umbrella of style, wherein rhetorical figures included grammatical knowledge and logical proofs such as inductive and deductive reasoning. Decorum, then, involved not only doing and saying what is appropriate or charming in a social situation, but also having accurate knowledge and good reasoning. “Indeed, the principles of decorum translate directly into moral virtues: congruency is integrity, relevance or appropriateness is justice, wholeness in framing wherein the parts all have place is mercy, the golden mean is temperance, a balance between adaptability and stability is prudence” (Figuring Style 179). This notion of virtuous speech precedes religious and social systems because it makes virtue a quality of conscious rhetorical expression. The virtue of a text—its congruency, relevance, appropriateness, wholeness in framing, and balance—indicates the virtue of the speaker’s mind and character. Excellent rhetorical expression is virtuous when the rhetor behaves virtuously according to rhetorical principles of correctness and aptness. This theoretical understanding of style makes it difficult to dismiss Renaissance interest in virtuous speech as arbitrarily moralistic. Decorum is excellent judgment in thought, speech, and action, and the use of decorum indicates a “virtuous” character.

While they appear over 50 years apart, in 1611 and 1666, the texts I use here as a case study for the application of this theory each demonstrate signs of a rhetorical education based on the same broad Renaissance curriculum, and both writers seek to legitimize female participation in discourse using a definition of decorum that includes not only verbal but also cognitive ability
and ethical behavior. Focusing on two examples of women who successfully published unusually proto-feminist arguments, earning esteem in their own time and in modern scholarship, offers a unique opportunity for us to examine how the period’s rhetorical philosophy might have contributed to the successful formal accomplishments of women and what those accomplishments tell us about their experiences and sociocultural identities. My analysis of these two early modern proto-feminist texts reveals how the humanist concepts of style as behavior and decorum as ethical good judgment help Fell and Lanyer establish female discursive authority by rooting their identities as women rhetors in a particular virtue: women’s ability to exercise their own good judgment.

I will first review the literature to identify the commonly accepted theories of rhetoric and style that have so far been applied to early modern women writers and compare them to a humanist theory of style and decorum. I then turn to Margaret Fell, whose shorter tract helps me develop the concept of decorum as good judgment. Finally, I turn to Aemilia Lanyer, whose book of poetry extends decorum from good judgment to good character and enables my assessment of decorum as a means of developing personal identity and moral authority.

**Early Modern Women’s Rhetoric and Style**

Twentieth-century critical studies of Renaissance women writers were primarily focused, after recovery, on providing historical and biographical context. Also, due to feminist interest in how women were able to “write their resistance,” as Lewalski put it in 1994, scholars have tended to assume that women’s writing must be a counternarrative to the dominant culture. This modern paradigm has fostered the notion of a uniquely female literary tradition. However, manuscript studies have, as Sasha Roberts and Alice Eardley have shown, added to our understanding of early modern women participating in literary culture across multiple genres and
contexts. Eardley argues that despite efforts to integrate women writers into the canon, scholarship still too frequently frames women’s work as relevant only to their gendered perspective and accomplishments. Close attention to formal elements, she says, will enable proper assessment of their work in their own context. “The history of form and how it enables a text to perform cultural work was initially an integral part of New Historicist criticism, and it is only relatively recently that critics have begun to focus more exclusively on context and historical content” (281–282). My attempt to understand these writers’ crafting of their sociocultural identities through formal elements responds to Eardley’s advocacy of formal criticism, which considers how women were participating in a literary and rhetorical culture rather than simply resisting it. Likewise, the rhetorical theory and method I apply to these texts is in line with Christine Sutherland’s call for feminist readings that are not framed by modern paradigms but by attention to the writers’ own rhetorical context: “We need to read and re-read these women’s works with a ‘rhetorical’ eye—that is, on the lookout for their own ideas about their practices” (120).

In Rhetoric Retold, Cheryl Glenn recognizes the influence of “the cult of Cicero, praising eloquence and goodness (both moral and civic)” (126), on the wider culture, and she points out that “Christian humanism managed to inspire another kind of ideal woman, the educated Christian woman” (127). She considers, however, the stylistic flourishing of the Renaissance to be an Aristotelian art: “The long-practical art of rhetoric came to focus on the study and improvement of style. In doing so, rhetoric subsumed the productive art of poetics, recognizing it as a particular case of persuasion, just as Aristotle had originally envisioned” (138). So even though she recognizes that the humanists appreciated language’s “civilizing, didactic power” and associated the art of rhetoric with poetry, drama, and culture (138), her subsequent analysis of
early modern women’s contributions views rhetoric as an Aristotelian, persuasive art, and she
does not explore the ethical consequences of the Ciceronian and Isocratic traditions in those
contributions, which were more pervasive than the Aristotelian. While she sees women writing
in the margins of the discourse community, my analysis will seek to discover how this tradition
may have enabled women to directly participate because of its underlying values.

Sasha Roberts has identified the use of rhetorical figures as “literary capital” for early
modern women and used her analysis of figures to defend the rhetorical skill of women writers
such as Katherine Phillips. “Women’s eloquence in verse may persuade the reader not only of
their chosen arguments and emotions but also of their skill with words: the very substance of
literary capital” (257). While she demonstrates the value of analyzing rhetorical figures in early
modern writing, including an “understanding of the dialogic dimensions of figurative language”
(260), she takes the position that figures are a performative material accessory rather than a
fundamental description of the way that language and thought work. My argument makes an
assertion similar to hers in that it considers how women used figured speech to stake a territory
in discourse, but it differs in its theoretical assumptions about the rhetorical purpose of figures. I
will consider how their education gave women control over form and style so they could wield
figures not just as ornamental tools to gain entry into a primarily masculine rhetorical tradition,
but as choices appropriate to their circumstances and motivations in a primarily humanist
rhetorical tradition. I share Roberts’ interest in “early modern modes of formal composition,”
and I think that one of these which has so far been overlooked is the humanist mode of
interpreting style as behavior and decorum as the practice of exercising good judgment in
addition to or sometimes instead of complying with social standards.
Scholars such as Jane Donawerth have noted Renaissance humanism as the foundation of rhetorical theory of the period and a contributor to “the sudden rise of rhetorical theory by women” (“Humanist Dialogues” 18). She recognizes that despite humanism’s denial to women of formal education for public speaking, it made available classical texts that allowed women to participate in the development of the rhetorical art of conversation in a culture where rhetoric was more important to dialectic than public speaking. There was not such a sharp divide between the public and domestic sphere. “Their success […] calls into question the confinement of power to the public sphere in the use of classical rhetorical theory in the seventeenth century” (40). While she focuses primarily on women’s contributions to the rhetorical art of conversation, Donawerth’s work supports the idea that women were participating in a rhetorical culture and that the rhetorical curriculum affected all kinds of discourse at every level of society, which requires us to understand various kinds of discourse as contributions to rhetoric. While she acknowledges the influence of humanism on early modern women and their use of humanist genres, Donawerth does not explore the Isocratean influence on that humanism or its theory of style. That theory can add complexity to the way we interpret women’s use of humanist genres and strategies. I see Lanyer and Fell working right in line with the philosophical underpinnings of an ethical theory of style that pervaded Renaissance discourse. Lanyer and Fell use style not only as a persuasive strategy but as a means of taking individual ownership over their own intellect and ethos, offering a contribution to rhetoric in addition to and different from the conversational rhetoric that interests Donawerth.

Of Amelia Lanyer, Lyn Bennet explains that “[…] critical readings have largely been limited to acknowledging that the art of rhetoric is at work in Lanyer’s verse without really exploring the implications of this observation—at least not in early modern terms” (171). Bennet
then explores those implications in a thorough rhetorical analysis before concluding, “I will again stress that early modern habits of thought were as rhetorical as they were religious, and argue that Lanyer’s verse offers yet another clear example that women shared with men these predominant habits of thought” (244). The rhetorical habits of thought that she importantly identifies at work in *Salve Deus* are for her in accordance with Aristotelian rhetoric. She identifies Lanyer’s demonstration of logical proof such as inductive and deductive reasoning, and she defends the “rhetorical” persuasive nature of the text that previous critics were reluctant to associate with poetry. However, since Bennet’s reading uses the framework of a rhetorical theory that limits rhetoric to persuasive public speech, it does not account for the influence of a Christian humanist education. Lanyer’s education would have treated rhetoric as the art of all human discourse and shaped her understanding of her own style as expressions of her judgment and character. I seek to offer a reading of Lanyer true to the early modern terms of a humanist rhetorical education, noticing how she connects style to her own character and to the character of the women she praises. This approach will show the compatibility of the rhetorical and poetic genres at play under the universal category of “wise speech”—essential to any degree of education the middle-class Lanyer was able to attain.

Margaret Fell has received much less rhetorical attention than Lanyer. Jane Donawerth talks about her use of religious myth and sermon rhetorics (“The Politics” 263), and she has explored what Fell’s inclusion of memorized Bible quotations reveals about humanism’s influence on women’s reading practices (“Women’s Reading” 985). Others have been primarily interested in Fell’s religious or feminist contexts. Her work has not been considered in light of the Christian humanist rhetorical philosophy that would have shaped her skill and thinking. In light of this existing scholarship, my essay takes a different, but needed, approach to early
modern women, exploring the impact a humanist rhetorical education that connected style to ethics had on their identities.

Nancy Christiansen has shown that many scholars accept Aristotle as the primary source of Renaissance rhetorical practices in “Revisioning Stylistic Analysis.” She explains that Aristotle takes a dualistic view of style and content, as have too many Renaissance scholars who understand form as separable from meaning. “Because they accept this dualistic characterization of the art when they notice a Renaissance tendency to focus on style, scholars thus far have concluded that Renaissance rhetoricians are reducing rhetoric to merely ornamentation—a decorated high style in both prose and poetry” (160). But Christiansen shows that early modern humanists do not approach style dualistically. They take a broad view of rhetoric as all human discourse in its linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions: “Isocrates is the Greek ancestor of this broad view and Cicero its Roman proponent, both of whom many Renaissance rhetoricians widely proclaim as their intellectual forebears” (“Revisioning” 165). In this tradition, speech performance demonstrated mastery not of verbal form only but of stylistic application in all contexts. Erasmus, the leading educator and interpreter of the classical tradition, explains the rationale for copious lists of rhetorical figures. Erasmus teaches that a student should obtain copia of words and ideas to develop good judgment, first knowing a variety of possible options and then being able to select the appropriate utterance. Words and ideas, he says in his De Copia, “are so closely combined that you cannot tell them apart at all easily, so much does one serve the other, so that they might seem to be distinct only in theory, rather than in fact and in use” (Chapter 7)). And he lists both words and ideas as rhetorical figures. In this framework, a person’s ability to select words is inseparable from her ability to select ideas. Erasmus’s view of
style helps explain Christiansen’s claim that Renaissance style did not consist of form only but of a person’s “practical and moral judgment” (Figuring Style 4).

The Renaissance’s adoration of style and the moral orientation of its textbooks are not arbitrarily related. Renaissance rhetoricians built on the Isocratic concept of paideia and Quintilian’s famous declaration that the good orator must be a good man. Not only is becoming a “good” person the hopeful goal of rhetorical training in the Renaissance—it is also the logical and theoretical consequence of gaining knowledge of forms and wisdom to apply them well in the constantly shifting circumstances of life. The extensive Renaissance lists of rhetorical figures included most choices that a rhetor could make, including things like inductive reasoning, historical references, harsh speech, volume, facial expressions, or accents—just to name a few. Almost any behavior can be a rhetorical figure. “We must notice too that Erasmus describes each form as a behavior, thereby making evident that figures or forms—whether verbal, gestural, or cognitive—are behaviors” (“Revisioning” 167). Choosing a good form meant choosing good behavior. These behaviors, even when used manipulatively, reveal a person’s true character. “Erasmus criticizes those imitators who attend only to the words and verbal devices—the superficial veneer—of text; he insists instead that style encompasses all the decisions of composition and hence reveals the composer’s judgment” (“Revisioning” 168). Style reveals the speaker. “[I]t is also a natural mirror of the mind of a speaker. Style can be taught and changed; at the same time it always reflects the speaker’s mannerisms, attitudes, judgment, and qualities of character” (Figuring Style 28).

The evidence that Renaissance educators understood style an expression of a person’s true character appears in Erasmus’s own treatise on style, Ciceronianus: A Dialogue on the Best Style of Speaking. This dramatic dialogue criticizes those who attempt to imitate the markers of
the “Ciceronian” style, or the style that many Renaissance rhetoricians accepted as the best, without practicing good judgment. The character Bulephorus attempts to cure his friend Nosoponus of a “disease,” which is an obsession with the Ciceronian style, dismantling the notion that the ideal is purely aesthetic. Where Nosoponus thinks he must use only Ciceronian words because Cicero was the master of style, Bulephorus teaches that Cicero’s mastery did not consist so much in the beauty of his words as it did in his good judgment in knowing how to use them well. The form itself achieves nothing, but the appropriate application of form, set in motion by a thinking individual, demonstrates mastery. A rhetor must integrate good judgment into his own mind and character.

Bulephorus argues style is not only the dress of ideas, but that it is also the dress of a character: “a dress which is becoming to a boy is not becoming to an old man; one suitable for a woman is not suitable for a man; what is meet for a wedding is not meet for a funeral; nor would fashions of a hundred years ago be approved of today” (59). Form is both separable and inseparable from content in the same way that clothes are interchangeable, but the wearing of certain apparel matches the life and actions of the person wearing it. Erasmus does not say that the form should mask the content, as a costume does, but that the form should work the way that well-fitting clothes fit an individual.

Good judgment and virtuous intentions are inherent to good style, Erasmus shows. Bulephorus proposes a scenario in which a painter shows great artistic power but chooses the wrong style for the occasion and misrepresents his subject, then asks, “Is he great artist? […] Is he a great man?” “Neither,” Nosoponus responds, “since, indeed, it is the height of art to represent things as they are.” Comparing the painter’s representational art to rhetorical eloquence, Bulephorus explains that “there is no especial need of Ciceronian eloquence; for our
rhetoricians grant to eloquence the license to lie [...] to steal by strategy into the minds of the
listener, and finally by appealing to the emotion which is a kind of sorcery to force conviction”
(61). A particular form, Ciceronian in this case, does not indicate mastery, Erasmus shows,
because that type of eloquence can lie and manipulate, while a true artist shows one’s subject and
oneself as they are. By implication, the practice of style requires accurate knowledge, a belief
that unites rhetoric and philosophy instead of separating them as do Plato’s dialogues.
Bulephorus later says, “Two things are conducive to good speaking: that you know your subject
thoroughly, and that the heart and feelings furnish words” (66). Stylistic excellence then depends
on cognitive and emotional ability. It reveals the mind and character of the speaker.

The moral dimension of decorum in a Christian context appears in this text too.
Bulephorus points out that rhetoricians use the same beautiful figures for different purposes:
“Hannibal strove for the destruction of the Roman people while Paul introduced a religion of
salvation. If you compare the words, I ask what is the difference?” (72). The moral application
earns merit, and our moral instincts color our assessment of style: only a “deep-rooted fancy has
taught us that the words of the one are polished and splendid, of the other ugly and crude” (71).
This tract shows that Erasmus believes decorum to depend on a person’s true character,
specifically in the person’s ability to judge well and act morally. He concludes,

Nor will the speech of any one seem charming which is not in accord with his character
and not accommodated to the subject in hand [...] He who is so much of a Ciceronian
that he is not quite a Christian is not even a Ciceronian because he does not speak
fittingly, does not know his subject thoroughly, does not feel deeply those things of
which, he speaks; lastly he does not present his religious beliefs with the same adornment
with which Cicero presented the philosophy of his times. The liberal arts, philosophy, and
oratory are learned to the end that we may know Christ, that we may celebrate the glory of Christ. This is the whole scope of learning and eloquence. (129)

As a Christian humanist, Erasmus understands style as a tool that produces moral sensibility. The scope of eloquence, what we may call decorum, was logical, moral, and particular to an individual speaker’s character.

Emerging from Christiansen’s broad overview of the rhetorical curriculum and the particulars of Erasmus’s own treatise on style is a concept of decorum far from superficial. Decorum becomes both moral and ethical because it is the mastery of form in action, and it is an indexical expression of an individual’s good judgment as well as the individual’s character.

For the sake of analysis, I divide good judgment into two aspects: it involves knowing and doing. Knowing is the cognitive or intellectual aspect of decorum and doing is the moral or social aspect of decorum. Both thinking and doing are behavioral, so decorum is a behavioral phenomenon pointing to character in both aspects. But it is helpful for me to understand good judgment/decorum as the combination of good thinking and good acting. I understand acting, the application, as a primarily social and therefore moral practice, because when a behavior appears in relation to self or others, it has moral consequences. It demonstrates the way one treats self and others, and it shapes a rhetor’s internal concept of self as well as making an external impression on others. In my analysis of Fell and Lanyer, I first identify decorum as good judgment in knowing and doing, and then identify how that definition helps each writer communicate virtuous character and develop female discursive authority.

**Fell’s Decorum and the Power of God**

Margaret Fell wrote her most well-known work, the 1666 pamphlet *Women’s Speaking Justified*, while imprisoned for holding religious meetings of more than five people without
permission from the Church of England. A founder of the Society of Friends, Margaret Fell (1614–1702) majorly contributed to the religious movement later called Quakerism. She exercised her leadership as a preacher and writer, and “is the only woman of this group generally accepted as a rhetorical theorist” (Donawerth “Conversation” 192). A critical volume of her work has been edited by Jane Donawerth and Rebecca M. Lush in The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series. In opposition to the Church of England, Fell and her followers proselytized a personal relationship with Christ and fostered “holy conversation”—a way of speaking that reflects personal conversion (Levy 130). In prison, she likely conversed with other dissenting Protestants, and this text addresses a general Protestant audience (Donawerth and Lush 47).

Women’s Speaking Justified takes on the apostle Paul, whose words in Corinthians 14:34–35 and Timothy 2:11–12 were used to forbid women’s speaking in church in the wider Protestant movement. Fell, however, does not seek to discredit or argue with Paul. She rather grants herself the intellectual and spiritual authority to interpret his words more correctly than others had done. In this bold rhetorical move, she must justify her own speech in the act of justifying the speech of other women. A humanist notion of style as behavior and decorum as ethical good judgment can help explain how she achieves this impressive ethos in terms that go beyond Aristotelian persuasion and that offer insight into her identity as an individual.

In Aristotelian terms, we understand that a speaker must build credibility with the audience. Fell needs to persuade her audience that she is knowledgeable and pious, and we can, in a traditional way, analyze how she does so. However, to read the text in her terms, we might reconsider Fell’s own assumptions about how rhetoric works. A humanist view of Renaissance style would cause us to question whether Fell sees herself only as a persuasive speaker—one
who must manipulate her audience into believing and doing something, fabricating a certain ethos as a means to that end. With a notion of decorum not as a persuasive device but as a behavioral habit tied to internal character, we can connect Fell’s rhetorical and stylistic behavior to the likely self-concept that forms her thinking and which she offers as a model for both men and women to follow. Decorum does contribute to the persuasive power of her ethos, but it goes beyond particular strategies at the level of performance to encompass a sincere internal conviction of her own right to speak.

Evidence that humanism influenced Fell has already been considered. Donawerth and Lush argue that Fell used humanist rhetorical methods of reading and writing. Her frequent but inexact quotation of the King James Bible indicates that she committed great portions of it to memory, and she uses the humanist method of cross-referencing verses and comparing different translations of texts, sometimes substituting a better phrasing from another translation or adapting the phraseology to her own context (24–28). She also employs classical rhetorical commonplaces (31–35). Donawerth and Lush identify several of these in Women’s Speaking Justified: “argument by notation (meanings of words), argument by induction (similarity among examples), and argument from contradictories (both sides of a contradiction cannot be true)” (33). Donawerth and Lush consider these devices tools for invention and memorization, but they do not call them stylistic figures. In other words, they use a definition of rhetoric that separates content from style. Style, in this perspective, would likely be an ornamental layer on top of this argumentative content. However, these same logical commonplaces are listed as figures in Renaissance style manuals, meaning that the act of invention, and the shape of an argument, is also style. With this training, Fell would not think of style as a secondary move or a layering of ethos as a delivery mechanism for separately formed content. Rather, the style is intrinsic in her
ability to first know, then think, reason, and apply her knowledge. Fell would understand the forms she employs not as tools but as honest mirrors of her mind and character. To enact good judgment and behavior, she would first need to obtain it, and so she would assume that her text, or figured behavior, was synonymous with her character, or with who she really is in her mind and heart.

That Fell does make such an assumption is evident in the text because she uses a standard for justified speech consistent with a humanist and ethical definition of decorum. While others discriminate against speech on superficial grounds—i.e. whether a man or a woman delivers it—Fell creates criteria for acceptable speech that depend totally on whether it reflects what we may call decorum. She does not say that women should speak whenever they want to because they deserve equal rights. (For this reason, the sermon is perhaps more attractive for its rhetorical theory than it is for its feminist theory.) Rather, she says that anyone, regardless of gender, may speak well when the speech is correct, inspired, and faithful, or when conversion to Christ motivates it. So, her criteria for justified speech comprise the dual qualities of intellectual and moral viability. The “women that were under the law” (164) in Paul’s day, or to whom Paul was speaking in that particular verse, she clarifies, lacked good thinking and good behavior. They were “in the transgression, and were in strife, confusion, and malice” (165). It was in response to the poor intellectual and moral quality of their form that Paul admonished them not to speak, Fell explains. However, all should speak according to inspiration because God “gave his good Spirit, as it pleased him, both to man and woman” (198). She does not consider the character of the speaker in terms of class, gender, or race, as would a purely Aristotelian rhetorician, and as did her contemporaries who dismissed the power of a feminine ethos. Her argument aligns more closely with Quintilian and Cicero, who believe that the good orator is the good person. Ethos
depends on the good judgment and the good character of the speaker, which the speaker obtains and demonstrates in the act of style.

Fell, of course, does not use the word “decorum,” but she formulates a concept of justified speech that coincides with the achievement of decorum, or good judgment. The ultimate quality of justified speech, for her, is that it communicates what she calls “The Power and Spirit of the Lord Jesus.” That or some variation of the phrase she repeats at least 6 times. Anyone with this power and spirit “poured upon them,” and “the message of the Lord Jesus given unto them” must not be restrained from speaking, she argues (Fell 166). This standard may seem difficult to measure because it is so subjective. Anyone could claim that she is delivering the message of God. However, Fell’s speech offers a qualitative description of “Power” and “Spirit” that amounts to intellectual viability. Justified speech has the power and spirit of God, and the power and spirit of God is good judgment. While marshaling evidence that God’s mind and will toward women is different from man’s, Fell shows that women are capable of understanding the word of God. She points out that Christ was “pleased to preach” to them, and cites three examples of women who were ready to receive his word because of what they knew. The woman at the well says, “I know.” Martha “said she knew” and in so doing “manifested her true and saving faith” (Fell 160). The “woman that came unto Jesus with an alabaster box of very precious ointment and poured it on his head [...] knew more of the secret Power and Wisdom of God than his disciples did” (Fell 161). Fell’s first point in the argument that women should speak is that women are capable of the intellectual quality of knowing. We can see this because she highlights not only their faith but also the fact that they were privy to revelation, particularly to wisdom.

She connects wisdom to speech by pointing out that women were the ones wise enough to first know and then share the message of Christ’s resurrection. She cites Acts 18, in which
Aquila and Priscilla “expounded unto [Apollos] the way of God more perfectly, who was an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures” (163). These examples show that women’s rhetorical ability is rooted in their capacity to know and understand, which is the cognitive aspect of good judgment. Finally, a negative description of the power and spirit of Christ appears in the next section of the text where Fell goes on to reinterpret the Paulene verses. Here, she says, “the man is commanded to keep silence as well as the woman, when in confusion and out of order” (164). The speech which should be forbidden, she emphasizes over and over, is that which is confused, “for God is not the author of confusion, but of peace” (164). A version of the word *confusion* appears 6 times in the space of 3 paragraphs. Justified speech would therefore have the opposite quality. Instead of being confused, it would be clear, correct, and ordered. Here is where Fell’s sermon transcends religious theory and feminist theory and becomes rhetorical theory. She creates a rhetorical standard for speech manifesting the assumption of a humanist rhetorical education that we can judge style by the intellectual behavior it demonstrates, that the speech itself indicates its speaker’s capacity for knowing.

In addition to the cognitive aspect of good judgment, Fell’s standard for justified speech includes the behavioral application of knowledge in all forms, both verbal and non-verbal. She seems to assume that evidence of behavior and character is evidence that women can speak correctly and authoritatively because she devotes the first third of her argument to laying out God’s “will and mind” concerning women, making Christ the ultimate judge of women’s behavior: “Thus we see that Jesus owned the love and grace that appeared in women, and did not despise it, and by what is recorded in the Scriptures, he received as much love, kindness, compassion, and tender dealing towards him from women, as he did from any others” (162). Examples of women’s “tender dealing” toward Jesus include the women who followed Jesus
from Galilee, the women of Jerusalem who wept for him, and women who were healed of evil spirits (161–62). To argue that women are capable of preaching God’s word, her first move is to provide evidence of their behavior and of God’s perception of their character. She is building on the assumption that her rhetorical education would have fostered—that rhetorical decorum is behavioral decorum, and so one’s ability as a rhetor, a thinker, and a preacher is directly related to the quality of her behavior in all contexts, both verbal and non-verbal. A speaker, for Fell, must be a good person to deliver the Word of God. Fell’s particularly religious development of the notion of decorum builds on the Isocratic tradition of style as an ethical practice.

With this apparent awareness of how behavior represents character, Fell would have been sharply aware of how her own stylistic behavior in this sermon reveals her character. The content of her message is that women are justified in public speaking when their speech is correct, ordered, and inspired, so her own speech must satisfy that standard. Her own style, or formal behavior, also contributes to that argument. If her speech is ordered and inspired, then she is ordered and inspired. Her stylistic behavior and character add evidence to her argument that women are justified in speaking because of their character. She must have intellectual and spiritual authority. Aristotelian criticism gives us certain tools for understanding how she builds that ethos. But to regard this artifact as a product of the Isocratean tradition requires that we see the entirety of its form as a behavior, or as a network of figures that paint an honest picture of her mind and character. Those figures include expressions of emotion and argumentative structures. And so both the pathos and the logos of the argument are aspects of its style that contribute to her ethos, which is not contrived but authentic, embodied by the text that is her mind in action.

We can understand the “virtue” of her character based on the architecture of her form, which is also the architecture of her mind. Here is where we can separate the word “virtue” from
its socio-cultural implications and where it is useful as a rhetorical concept. A text such as Cicero’s *On Duties* also provides rationale for understanding form as behavior indicating moral virtue, because this text describing the behaviors belonging to each of the four cardinal virtues was used as a rhetorical manual in the Renaissance. (In his Renaissance introduction to this classical work, Melanchthon recommends it for rhetorical study not in spite of its moral focus but because of it). To identify Fell’s “virtue” as a rhetor, I use Nancy Christiansen’s definition of decorum: “Indeed, the principles of decorum translate directly into moral virtues: congruency is integrity, relevance or appropriateness is justice, wholeness in framing wherein the parts all have place is mercy, the golden mean is temperance, a balance between adaptability and stability is prudence […] (*Figuring Style* 179). Fell’s stylistic behavior includes congruency, relevance or appropriateness, wholeness in framing, the golden mean, and balance between adaptability and stability. The evidence of this behavior in her text reveals that she has integrity, justice, temperance, and prudence, qualities of a virtuous character that can be evaluated in terms of style.

First, Fell’s style shows congruency or consistency between her words and her actions. Her behavior is congruent with her own standards for clear, ordered, and pious speech. She says she will “show clearly” how “the clergy, or ministers, and others” misinterpret Paul’s intentions, and that she will first “lay down how God himself hath manifested his will” (157). In Renaissance style manuals, setting forth the points to be made is a classical part of an oration and also a rhetorical figure called *partitio*. Predicting the order of her sermon and then following that order shows congruency, or what Christiansen would call integrity. Fell’s entire argument is clearly structured, demonstrating congruency between her standard of order and her actual behavior. She follows the six parts of an oration, beginning with a concise exordium, narration,
and division. She provides evidence (proof), refutes her opponents’ arguments (refutation) by censuring them for restricting “the Power and Spirit of the Lord Jesus” (166), and finally summarizes her argument and concludes that opposing women’s inspired speech is opposing God (peroration). Giving thanks to God and speaking with his Power and Spirit are marks of justified speech, Fell claims. And she behaves consistently, giving her own thanks in spontaneous exclamation: “O blessed and glorified be the glorious Lord!” (163). Doing so combines several rhetorical figures: paeanismus (expressing joy), exucitatio (emotional utterance moving the hearer to like feeling), exclamatio (sudden exclamation), and eulogia (expressing praise). These figures can be manipulative devices. However, the consistency between this set of figures and her standard for justified speech contributes to her argument by showing that she has integrity and the authority to preach God’s word.

Fell’s style also depicts relevance and wholeness in framing: qualities that Christiansen translates as mercy and justice. She explains that Paul’s words are misused in the debate over current devotional practices, and she provides information more relevant to the question: namely, God’s words. She expounds God’s expectations about women’s behavior by quoting scripture (oraculum, apomnemosysis) and reasons from a collection of examples (inductio) that God does approve of women speaking. This stylistic behavior shows, in the working of her mind, mercy, with mercy as a measurable, rhetorical concept. After laying out God’s mind and will towards women, Fell transitions to the second part of her argument, which is to provide the larger context for Paul’s words. Here she demonstrates wholeness in framing, or justice. Where others have taken isolated verses out of context, she interprets the overall message of Paul’s argument and brings in examples of other things he said which indicate his approval of women speaking in church. Here she reasons from the premise of her opponent (argumentum ex concessis) by
acknowledging Paul’s authority and citing additional quotations \textit{(apomnemonsysis)}, and reasons from a wider collection of examples of Paul’s words \textit{(epagoge)}. She quotes these from memory \textit{(apomnemonsysis)}, underscoring her knowledge and consequent authority, and she comments on them \textit{(epicrisis)}, demonstrating her ability to understand and preach God’s word. These stylistic behaviors show justice as an attribute of her mind and add to her argument by providing evidence that women are capable and authorized in preaching God’s word.

Finally, she demonstrates balance between stability and adaptability by showing a stable trust in the authority of Paul’s words while also showing adaptability in her recommendation for the correct modern application of them. After giving sufficient examples to show that both God and Paul approve of women’s preaching when it is inspired, ordered, and appropriate to the context, she implies that Protestants should not become distracted with rules extrapolated from isolated verses, but that they should look at the larger intent and purpose of Paul’s message. She places the offending verses into the larger context: “And what is all this to such as have the Power and Spirit of the Lord Jesus poured upon them, and have the message of the Lord Jesus given unto them? Must not they speak the Word of the Lord because of these indecent and irreverent women that the Apostle speaks of, and to, in these two Scriptures?” \textit{(166)}. She concludes: “And so let this serve to stop that opposing spirit that would limit the Power and Spirit of the Lord Jesus, whose Spirit is poured upon all flesh, both sons and daughters” \textit{(169)}. She shows that the correct application of these scriptures is not in terms of gender but in terms of promoting or opposing the word of God. This balance reflects temperance, an attribute of her mind and character, which offers further evidence that women are capable of decorum.

Recognizing the evidence of her education and Fell's depiction of her character in her own style reveals that style is not an arbitrary layering over the content of a message, but an
integral part of it. It shows how Fell’s sincerity and authority contribute to her argument, or how the substance of her style is part of her argument. This type of formal analysis shows that Fell does not discuss women’s virtue only in sociocultural terms. In the third and final section of this oratorical text, Fell talks about the modern church as a bride, “the Lamb’s wife” preparing for his coming. She contrasts this “free woman” with the “bondwoman, which is Hagar, which genders to strife and to bondage, and which answers to Jerusalem, which is in bondage” while the “New Jerusalem [...] brings freedom and liberty [...] and this is that woman and image of the eternal God, that God has owned, and doth own, and will own forvermore” (167–168). Fell contrasts bondage with God’s approval of his own image in a woman. It is possible that Fell overcame the bondage of social restrictions on women’s speech because she understood decorum as an ethical concept: godly and moral. She could help unbind women’s speech by inhabiting a concept of herself as a wise and virtuous rhetor, a person capable of comprehending God and delivering his word.

Fell’s standards build on an ethical notion of decorum to show that the moral dimension of rhetoric emerges from formal and stylistic mechanisms. Her development of rhetorical standards for religious speech aligns with an Isocratic belief in the power of a rhetorical education to foster ethical individuals who possess both the cognitive and moral aspects of good judgment.

**Lanyer’s Decorum and Personal Moral Authority**

Writing fifty years before Fell in a different context and genre, Aemilia Lanyer makes an argument similar to Fell’s. While Fell writes an oration to persuade a general Protestant audience that women are capable of justified speech because of their decorum, the Catholic Lanyer writes poems to persuade an audience of women that they are virtuous because they exercise decorum.
Fell is primarily interested in women’s ability to contribute to religious discourse, while Lanyer is interested in how women perceive their own moral and intellectual abilities within the broader definition of rhetoric as a behavioral indication of character. While Fell’s text hints that her grasp of decorum shapes her confidence in her own moral authority, Lanyer’s text directly encourages women to see their decorum as evidence of their moral authority. Lanyer’s poetic praise of women’s virtue reveals that decorum is useful as a rhetorical principle not only for outward show and compliance with social standards but also for shaping an inward concept of self and a rhetor’s confidence in her own ability to judge. Her single published volume of devotional and patronage poetry extends the ethical dimensions of decorum from inspiration, good judgment, and moral social behavior (as they appear in Fell) to the formation of a stable inward ethos. Lanyer shows in “Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum” that women with decorum can speak God’s words, and she adds that women with decorum may see themselves as godly, an attribute that she understands in the intellectual and ethical rhetorical terms of decorum.

Some explanation of this book’s form and subject matter is necessary for my analysis. “Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum” is the name of the focal poem. The book includes an additional nine dedicatory poems, a prose dedication to Margaret Clifford, a prose introduction “To the Virtuous Reader,” and a country-house poem tacked on at the end: “The Description of Cookeham.” The book forms a kind of triptych with “Salve Deus” as the centerpiece, the dedicatory poems on the left panel, and the country-house poem on the right panel. Friend and patron Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland, apparently asked Lanyer to write about the country estate Cookham, where they had spent treasured time together. This request inspired Lanyer’s production of the much longer Passion poem “Salve Deus.”
The subject matter of “Salve Deus” is the Passion of the Christ: an account of his suffering, death, and resurrection. This long poem includes elements of epistle, epideictic, and narrative genres. For example, in the second verse, Lanyer writes, “To thee great Countesse now I will applie/My Pen, to write they never dying fame” (9–10), and similarly addresses characters throughout the narrative. The book is remarkable because it highlights the women surrounding Jesus Christ. In addition to the scriptural and historical women appearing in the central narrative, the Countess appears when the poet addresses her mid-story. The side panels then assemble contemporary women on the left and right. The dedicatory poems are all addressed to women, and the Description of Cooke-ham praises women, describing the estate as a kind of Edenic paradise.

This devotional poem can be read as a purely rhetorical text, with the stylistic and poetic elements of the Passion serving as rhetorical devices for delivering a defense of women. It can also be read as a purely poetic text which happens to have rhetorical elements, such as those identified by Lyn Bennet. But if we regard the text from a humanist rhetorician’s point of view, it is impossible to separate its “rhetorical” content from its style. Lanyer’s devotional material is not a front for her passionate defense of women. Her interest in Christ as the ultimate example of virtue to which women should devote themselves works together with her argument that women are capable of decorum. In addition to crafting a relationship with Christ as a source of personal intellectual and moral authority, she frequently praises women for their “virtue,” a word I will show she understands in terms of decorum as ethical good judgment.

If we read the entire text as a unified rhetorical argument in both content and style, we can locate its thesis in her prose introduction “To the Virtuous Reader.” Here she frankly describes the poem as a defense of women, but I contend that she more specifically seeks to
counter a perceived deficiency in women’s characters because of their poor rhetorical performances and that she does so to increase women’s confidence in their own rhetorical abilities, primarily their ability to exercise good judgment. “Often I have heard, that it is the property of some women, not only to emulate the virtues and perfections of the rest, but also by all their powers of ill speaking, to eclipse the brightness of their deserved fame” (1–3). She notices either that women verbally disparage themselves or that by speaking “ill” they discredit themselves. She is writing, she clarifies, “contrary to this custom, which men I hope unjustly lay to their charge” (4–6). So, she writes to counter a custom of disparaging women or a custom of “ill” speaking (as opposed to skillful and moral speaking). She hopes she will lead women to stop speaking “unadvisedly against the rest of their sexe” (15) because doing so only shows “their owne imperfection in nothing more” (16–17). And she specifically speaks to an audience of women, stating, “I have written this small volume, or little booke for the general use of all virtuous Ladies and Gentlewomen of this kingdome” (1–7). Its particular usefulness will include their improved self-esteem and confidence: “Therefore we are not to regard any imputations, that they undeservedly lay upon us, not otherwise than to make use of them to our owne benefits, as spurres to virtue” (“To all” 26–29). I see Lanyer striving to correct negative perceptions of women’s character by offering new rhetorical evidence—in the form of her own decorum in the verbal text of her poetry, and by describing contemporary, scriptural, and historical women in relationship with Christ as an intellectual and ethical model of decorum.

**Virtue as Decorum**

Like Fell, Lanyer does not use the word *decorum*. Her synonym is virtue, and in discussing women’s virtue, she highlights their capacity for good judgment of the intellectual kind, showing that she uses a humanist notion of decorum not as performative, superficial, and
linguistic only but dependent an individual’s judgment and internal character. Lanyer’s dedications to her patrons do more than flatter or request support; these poems assemble a community of good women (Woods, xxxi), and I add that these characters provide evidence for Lanyer’s thesis that women have decorum, if not in verbal style, then in intellectual ability. Lanyer begins with their ability to exercise good judgment by setting them up as judges of her book. The first dedication is to the Queen (Anne of Denmark) and the next to the Queen’s eldest daughter, but immediately following these appears the dedication “To all Virtuous ladies in generall,” which invites all women to follow the Queen’s example in reading this book: “Let this faire Queen not unattended bee,/When in my Glasse she daines her selfe to see” (6–7). Only after Lanyer uses this formal arrangement to dignify all women by associating them with the Queen’s image—in the mirror of Lanyer’s own text/character—does she go on to mention other ladies who happen to be famous. In the course of these dedicatory poems, she clarifies that she wants not only to flatter but encourage them to use their intellectual ability. She first calls the Queen to be a scriptural judge of congruence in Lanyer’s interpretation of Eve: “To judge if it agree not with the Text” (“To the Queens Most Excellent Majestie” 76). Then “all virtuous Ladies” are invited to “let the Muses your companions be,/Those sacred sisters that on Pallas wait;/Whose Virtue with the purest minds agree” (29–31). The poet immediately creates a relationship between these women and the text that depends on their wisdom, or their intellectual ability to comprehend and judge, and she connects this ability with virtue.

First trusting their cognitive ability, she then expects her own writing to lead them to increased intellectual and moral capacity as formalized by religious salvation. In “To the Ladie Katherine,” Lanyer encourages her patron to meditate on Christ’s virtues, on “his rare parts [...] /The perfect line that goodness doth direct” (101–102) so that the desires springing from her
“perfect thoughts” will increase, “mounting your soule unto eternal rest” (107). Intellectual efforts such as “meditating, and in contemplation” (100) were common methods of rhetorical study in the Renaissance. In fact, parts, as in the parts of a speech or of a grammatical sentence, were also considered figures. And Lanyer outlines that in studying a text built from Christ’s parts, or figured behavior, her readers will improve their own virtue, meaning that she understands formal aspects of the texts as embodiments of Christ’s character and a means of shaping the mind and heart of its readers. Lanyer chooses to spotlight women who are superior examples of judgment. In “To the Ladie Lucie, Countess of Bedford” she imagines a personified Virtue standing with a key, ready to “unlocke” Lucie’s heart with “the key of Knowledge” (2–3) to let in Christ with his “heavenly wisdom” (10). Lanyer praises her “whose cleare Judgement farre exceeds my skil” (15). In praising these women for their judgment and inviting them to increase it by reading the text, she creates a standard of virtue that aligns with a definition of decorum as good judgment.

However, their ability to judge is not always purely intellectual. Like Fell, Lanyer claims God’s power and inspiration as justification for her speech, again connecting intellectual to moral viability. Speaking to her Muse, she writes, “The little World of thy weake Wit on fire,/Where thou wilt perish in thine owne desire./But yet the Weaker thou doest seeme to be/In Sexe, or Sence, the more his Glory shines,/That doe infuze such powerful Grace in thee,/To shew thy Love in these few humble Lines; (287–292). These lines deflect any deficiency in intellectual capacity and instead offer God’s inspiration as the mark of successful style. “Therefore I humbly for his Grace will pray,/That he will give me Power and Strength to Write” (297–298). Like Fell, Lanyer establishes God’s power as a source of decorum. Figures are not the capital that help Lanyer make an argument for women’s characters. Rather, their decorum, or their capacity for
inspired knowing, validates their wisdom. The function of decorum in this context is not always to charm and persuade others, but to be able to know and judge for oneself what is true and good.

Lanyer and other women could access God’s inspiration despite lacking formal education and entry into male-dominated discourse communities with superficial formal standards. In a passage rejecting superficial virtues and instead praising women for their inspired intellect, Lanyer subtitles 8 verses of commentary as “An Invective against outward beauty unaccompanied with virtue” where she declares, “That outward Beautie which the world commends, / Is not the subject I will write upon [...]” (185–186). This proclamation follows her cursing of those who judge on a superficial level. Just as his unwise contemporaries misunderstood and slandered Christ, she implies, unwise critics fail to properly assess women’s character using superficial means only. Seemingly in response to that problem, Lanyer rejects superficial qualities to show that true beauty is an enlightened mind: “A mind enrich’d with Virtue, shines more bright,/Addes everlasting Beauty, gives true grace,/Frames an immortal Goddess on the earth” (197–199). Lanyer’s use of the word frames here is important because her education would have taught her the rhetorical figures for framing an argument. The word frame was common in the rhetorical textbooks of the time, and it signals that she understands virtue as an intellectual quality. Instead of relying on superficial formal standards only, she argues that the internal quality of a woman’s mind creates a true picture of her character.

Lanyer’s criteria for virtuous character and decorum as inspired knowing is further apparent in her figuration of men’s judgment. She uses metaphors of light, sight, and blindness to contrast women’s capacity for inspired knowledge with men’s blindness. Women readers she encourages to think clearly: “Let no dimme shadows your cleare eyes beguile” (40). Meanwhile, she says of deficient judges, their “Owly eyes are blind, and cannot see” (712). Saint Peter
mistakenly “thought no mote could happen in so cleare a sight” (341). “No imperfection in himself he spies” (350). Later the sleeping Apostles “shut those eyes that should their maker see” (420). “Their eyes were heavy, and their hearts asleep” (465). She criticizes the soldiers and spectators because they are “blinde” (505) […] “Gainst him that was the Lord of Light and Truth” (510). While Lanyer often figures the Savior as the sun and a source of light, the men in the story are frequently unable to perceive this light. The Jews have “no light of grace” (547), and they “pretend/Against the truth” (548–549). The priests, elders, and people “Blinded their eyes” (681) and they could not “discern the light” (682). She is not only generally criticizing men; she is specifically criticizing their lack of judgment and inspiration.

Figuration of blindness as a deficiency in intellectual and inspired knowing is evident in her criticism of Pilate, underscoring the different between society’s formal standards for moral authority and a person’s true internal authority. Lanyer compares Pilate’s formal authority to his wife’s ethical and intellectual moral authority: “Art thou a Judge, and asketh what to do/With one, in whom no fault there can be found?/The death of Christ wilt thou consent unto,/Finding no cause, no reason, nor no ground?” (857–860). Though Pilate is a man of “knowledge,” his reasoning fails because he allows wickedness to “blindfold Heavens bright light” (931–933). By contrast, Pilate’s wife tells him to “open thine eies, that thou the truth mai’st see” (735). Pilate is blind to logical reasoning and to inspiration, while his wife has the capacity for moral, inspired knowing. Lanyer uses evidence of the wife’s wisdom as evidence of all women’s characters: “Witnesse thy wife (O Pilate) speakes for all” (834). While passages such as these show men’s failures in their capacity to understand Christ and exercise good judgment, Lanyer depicts women finding favor with Christ because they are capable of understanding him: “Most blessed daughters of Jerusalem,/Who found such favour in your Saviors sight,/To turne his face when
you did pitie him;/Your tearefull eyes, beheld his eyes more bright;/Your Faith and Love unto
such grace did clime./To have reflection from this Heav’ny Light;/Your Eagles eyes did gaze
against this Sunne” (985–991). Metaphors of light and sight here contrast with criticism of men’s
blindness to show that women obtained inspired wisdom by uniting both intellectual and moral
judgment.

The poem also shows women living up to a standard of decorum that is evident in their
practical and ethically persuasive application of knowledge, demonstrating Lanyer’s
understanding of behavior as style and evidence of character. While men have knowledge, they
use it badly, especially in their speech: “Against the truth, untruths they seek to frame” (546).
“Though they protest they never will forsake him/They do like men, when dangers overtake
them” (631–632). Women, on the other hand, exercise powerful rhetorical influence through
virtuous behavior. The crying of the daughters of Jerusalem is more persuasive than efforts of the
“greatest Princes” (975) who by “all the Questions that they could devise,/Could make him
answer to no manner of thing/Yet these poore women, by their pitious cries/Did moove their
Lord, their Lover, and their King,/To take compassion, turne about, and speake/To them whose
hearts were ready now to breake” (979–984). The Virgin Mary is another example of decorum in
moral behavior. The poem praises her silence as appropriate behavior in response to Christ: “His
wisdom strikes the wisest persons mute” (1025). The poet has earlier praised silence as
appropriate behavior in Christ, whose silence “answers Folly with wisdom” (701). Through this
example, Lanyer indicates that silence can demonstrate decorum and indicate good character
even when society misjudges. Rather than praising speech alone as an indication of character,
she praises women’s decorum, which includes good judgment in all forms of behavior.
Evidently, Lanyer regards virtue as the capacity for intellectual, inspired knowledge and its wise and moral application, indicating that she treats virtue not necessarily in terms of subjective social or religious standards but in the humanist rhetorical terms of stylistic decorum in thought, speech, and action. I will now explore how the rhetorical concept of style as behavior helps Lanyer persuade her female readers that they are capable of exercising ethical good judgment. This capacity helps her form her own identity as a rhetorical practitioner of verbal decorum, and it helps her female readers form their identities as women with the capacity to judge for themselves.

*Decorum as Inward Authority*

Like Margaret Fell, Lanyer would have been aware of her writing as an expression of her own character, but she is also aware of the stylistic behavior of characters who appear in the poems, including Christ, who makes up its focal substance, and “all virtuous” women who read it in the less tangible behavioral style of their active interpretation and interaction with Christ in its substance. Lanyer deliberately figures Christ as a book: “Thy Soule conceaves that he is truely wise:/Nay more, desires that he may be the Booke,/Whereon thine eyes continually may looke (1350–1352). And she describes her book as an embodiment of Christ. The dedicatory poems explain that she wants her readers to here encounter Christ as a sacrament and a spouse, not only in an abstract religious exchange but in the intellectual act of reading. Reading the text, they both embrace and consume him. For example, in “To the Ladie Katherine,” the poet presents the text as a eucharist to Katherine’s daughters: “On heavenly foode let them vouchsafe to feede” (51). Consuming the text in meditation will mount their souls to eternal rest. And in “To the Ladie Anne,” she presents “His lovely love [...] Whome your faire soule may in her armes infold;/Loving his love [...] That you in heaven a worthy place might gaine” (113–120). These
metaphors of eating and holding Christ via the text indicate that Lanyer thinks of stylistic substance as a metaphorical if not tangible embodiment of a real character whose figured behavior provides access to his mind and heart.

Through their interaction with the text, women can comprehend him and obtain his favor, even the attainment of heaven, which is the ultimate approval of their virtue. The women who are characters in the dedications and the Countess, whom the poet addresses mid-narrative, become part of the textual fabric via this interaction. Lanyer calls the text a mirror of their minds: “Looke in this Mirrour of a worthy Mind” (“To the Queen” 37). Because its purpose was to teach good judgment, Renaissance rhetoric valued reading just as much as writing. Interpreting the text is also stylistic behavior, so a mirrored and “worthy” interpretation of the text also demonstrates decorum. That assumption is apparent in Lanyer’s choice to craft the characters of the women in this text through their behavioral interaction with it and then to describe them as examples of virtue.

That Lanyer wants women to specifically understand their virtue in terms of ethical good judgment is evident in her focus on women’s wisdom and rhetorical power. In a catalogue of virtuous historical women, the poem discusses at most length and in most detail a woman distinguished for her clear and logical thinking, someone who can contend rhetorically with a man famed for his wisdom. A series of lines emphasize that this woman, Sheba, is equal to Solomon in rhetorical ability:

Here Majestie with Majestie did meete,
Wisdom to Wisdome yielded true content,
One Beauty did another Beauty greet,
Bounty to Bountie never could repent;
[…]
Spirits affect where they doe sympathize,
Wisdom desires Wisdome to embrace,
Virtue covets her like […] (1585–1596)
Sheba wanted nothing more than to gain understanding: She came “onely to see, to heare, and understand/That beauty, wisdom, majestie, and glorie” (1607–1608). This list of comparisons highlighting good judgment as a quality of virtuous women indicates that Lanyer’s praise of their virtue is concerned with persuading women their ability to exercise autonomous good judgment is on par with men’s.

*Lanyer’s Style and Self-Concept*

Lanyer understands her style as behavior and evidence of her own character, and we can make some assessment of how her style depicts the way she thinks of herself as a rhetor. She has motives in addition to piety for writing a religious text. She claims her primary motive is to empower female readers, but she is a commoner writing patronage poems to gain assistance (Woods xxxiii), so she needs money. This position makes suspect her professions of sincerity. She claims not to seek “The Vulgars breath, the seed of Vanitie,/Nor Fames lowd Trumpet” (309–310) but “in plainest words to showe/The Matter which I seeke to undergo” (310–312). So is she interested in getting praise or in making a substantive argument? The dedication “To the Ladie Susan” would indicate that she seeks respect over profit: “Onely your noble Virtues do incite/My Pen, they are the ground I write upon;/Nor any future profit is expected,/Then how can these poore lines go unrespected?” (45–49). These statements show congruency with her stated intention to defend women’s virtue. She wants to earn respect for women more than to earn their money, which desire she substantiates by denigrating her own rhetorical ability and crediting the poem’s merit to inspiration from God. In a coda called “To the doubtful Reader,” the poet claims that she was given the name “Salve Deus Rex Judaerorum” in a dream, which she takes for a sign that she was “appointed to perform this Worke.” Such a rhetorical move shows congruency with the standard of decorum she establishes in her own text, which includes inspired knowing and
God’s approval. Her source of wisdom is God, and she uses this source for her personal benefit, to interpret scripture for herself and to persuade other women that they too have this power.

In addition to claiming that she has been called by God to write, her criticism of men is emphatic and unrelenting, showing that that her style seeks not to impress according to society’s standards, that she is not acting according to a definition of decorum as appropriate behavior, but as reasoned and sincere behavior. For example, in one stanza she lists their faults in succeeding exclamatory parallel statements (*amplificatio*, *accumulatio*, *exclamatio*, *isocolon*, *anaphora*):

“How blinde [...] How dull! [...] How weake! [...] How stony hearted [...] How void of Pitie” (505–509). Her bold and passionate behavior indicates sincere feeling and a search for evidence. While she does stand to benefit from patronage, this behavior is not likely to invite monetary compensation from the men of her time, so it adds to evidence that her primary motive is sincere: to change how women understand their own character and to give them an empowering sense of their own virtue. While praising women for their virtue, she also admonishes them to look to Christ as a source of virtue, so her praise is not mere flattery. Needing only to flatter, Lanyer could have chosen a variety of qualities to extol in her patrons. And yet she consistently argues that beauty, status, and worldly fame (all qualities to which women might aspire) have no importance.

Another way that she demonstrates consistency between her person and persona is that she claims to speak with decorum, and she does so. She claims that she wants only “in plainest Words to showe,/The Matter which I seeke to undergo” (311–312). If we understand the plain style as the low style, then we must say she does not keep this promise, because her style varies. Especially when describing the resurrected Christ, she imitates the Petrarchan tradition and her style becomes flowery. However, if we understand plain style as the perspicuous style, another
way of describing decorum, then her decision to depict Christ in this way is consistent. She promises to give these women a picture of their dearest love, and she makes her text synonymous with Christ’s body for them to consume and embrace. When describing his body in romantic and amplified detail (*enargia*), then, the text plainly and perspicuously conveys its matter.

A reading of Lanyer’s style through the lens of the rhetorical curriculum which influenced her thinking reveals the rhetorical dimensions of her interest in women’s virtue and helps explain how she can speak with so much confidence and authority on a religious subject in a time when it was not common for women to do so. Her education gave her the tools to understand virtue as good judgment and so to occupy the identity of a moral and intellectual authority. We can read her text as a unified argument encouraging women to uplift their opinion of themselves because of their ability to exercise ethical good judgment. Her use of decorum as evidence for women’s virtue provides rationale for interpreting early modern women’s identities as women writers in terms of their style, and it shows the potential of a rhetorical education in style to empower a writer’s self-concept and strengthen personal moral authority.

**Conclusion**

The oratorical and poetic arguments presented by these women build on the ethical notion of decorum provided by their education to create a stylistic standard that women can achieve. Rhetoric, for them, is not only a matter of persuasion, but also a matter of ownership over one’s own mind and character.

Fell uses an ethical notion of decorum to create a religious rhetorical standard. Her treatise shows that she understands the intrinsic connection between ideas and words, between good judgment and good style. This connection enables her to create stylistic criteria within a woman’s ability to control, not imposed by superficial formal standards but available to all who
behave ethically. Lanyer is an example of Fell’s claim that women can speak with God’s inspiration, and her earlier work adds additional stylistic evidence that the Renaissance built on Isocratic faith in rhetorical education as a means of creating the “good” person by teaching decorum as an ethical practice. Lanyer’s poetry shows how early modern women could use decorum to develop their own identities as virtuous interpreters, preachers, and enactors of God’s wisdom, no matter the particulars of diverse religious and social contexts across seventeenth-century England. Early modern decorum provided women the means to understand their identity as women writers in terms of their formal accomplishments, and it can also provide modern scholars the means of interpreting women writers’ identities within the material of their own text, independent of the subjectivity of modern formal or socio-historical theories.

It is impossible to precisely reconstruct the rhetorical education of individual early modern women writers, or to say how they would define rhetoric and describe their rhetorical methods, and yet we have a quantity of evidence about how rhetoric was generally taught. The assumption apparent in this curriculum is that rhetorical figures of speech, thought, and action—when in use—can indicate the mind and heart of a real person. Such an assumption makes it possible for us to see writers like Fell and Lanyer working in an Isocratean rhetorical tradition because they appear to understand that by exercising decorum, they could legitimate their own speech as well as the rhetorical ability of women in all contexts. A humanist rhetorical education gave them the tools and the rationale to believe in their own intellectual and spiritual authority as a demonstrable rhetorical virtue.
Works Cited


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