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## Teaching Lyly's *Endymion* in Undergraduate Survey Courses

By Nancy L. Simpson

After a lengthy absence from the stage, John Lyly's *Endymion* has now been produced twice in the past four years--most recently, at the University of Kent in March 2012. <sup>[1]</sup> In light of this revival, it makes sense to examine the play's potential in the classroom, as well as on the modern stage. While *Endymion* is written in dense prose, and features a few obscure classical allusions, it also provides an excellent jumping-off point for discussions of old and young bodies, the cult of Elizabeth, and early modern allegory. In doing so, the play fits well into a survey syllabus, covering a specific historical moment while forming a bridge between a play like *Everyman* and a text like *Pilgrim's Progress*.

First staged in 1588, by the Children of Paul's, *Endymion* tells the story of a courtier who becomes obsessed with the moon-goddess Cynthia. This obsession angers the earth-goddess Tellus, who asks witches to curse Endymion with lasting sleep. During the rest of the play, other courtiers must decide how to react to Endymion's plight, and Cynthia must intervene, both to revive Endymion and to restore civic order.

Allegorically, this plotline holds out a number of suggestive possibilities for teaching. While early critics of the play tended to debate the "true" identity of each "allegorical" courtier (for example, aligning Endymion with the Earl of Oxford or another prominent figure), another strand of criticism has approached the play as an allegory for the relationship between a courtier and Queen Elizabeth more generally, or even the relationship between the contemplative philosopher and Wisdom. <sup>[2]</sup> This range of possibilities provides an excellent opportunity to discuss the multiply signifying nature of Elizabethan allegory, making *Endymion* a helpful introduction to the more complex allegory found in texts like the *Faerie Queene*.

Additionally, because *Endymion* was actually staged in front of Elizabeth I, this discussion of allegory can be carried further by blending it with a discussion of acting protocols. How does Elizabeth's allegorical presence on stage change when she views the play from the audience? Does her physical body verify or falsify any claims made about the allegorical Cynthia? Or are these claims instead made on a trans-material level, despite the embodiment of actors and spectators? These questions provide an interesting way to approach Lyly's prose, which is full of Euphuistic praise for the moon goddess. Students may be particularly interested in juxtapositions of the queen's idealized self and her visibly aging body, in passages like this one:

*Endy.* O fair Cynthia, why do others term thee unconstant whom I have ever found unmoveable? Injurious time, corrupt manners, unkind men... finding a constancy not to be matched in my sweet mistress, have christened her with the name of wavering, waxing,

and waning... Flowers in their buds are nothing worth till they be blown... (1.1.35-40, 45-6).<sup>[3]</sup>

In this speech, Endymion questions the rhetoric surrounding an aging queen, using a highly mannered rhetorical style himself. He also raises the issue of constancy, which can be fruitfully refracted through the idea of staged representation, and then used to further explore the nature of dramatized allegory. As a text that both prompts and complicates discussions of representation, allegory, and embodiment, then, *Endymion* fits handily into a survey syllabus, exploring these larger issues within a uniquely Elizabethan context.

At the same time, *Endymion* also enables a discussion of allegory in metatheatrical moments. During Endymion's sleep, two dumbshows act out the subject matter of his dreams--and they do so in a way that raises new questions about the notion of embodied allegory in the play:

Music sounds. Three Ladies enter, one with a knife and a looking-glass, who by the procurement of one of the other two, offers to stab Endymion as he sleeps, but the third wrings her hands, lamenteth, offering still to prevent it, but dares not. At last, the first lady, looking in the glass, casts down the knife. Exeunt [the Ladies]. (2.3.68-73)

This passage invites a wide-ranging discussion of both metatheater and the goals of representation on stage. Is the audience supposed to learn a lesson, to experience a dream-state, to interpret props and figures in a specific way? What particular work does a dumbshow do (especially in a play with such elaborate rhetoric), and what do the ladies' actions say about the nature of allegorical/staged bodies? Finally, if

Endymion's body is both threatened and ultimately unharmed during his sleep, what does the dumbshow imply about the material form of the philosopher, as well as the allegorical concepts that he may portray? By inviting these questions about the nature of actual bodies, figurative/allegorical bodies, and metatheatrical moments, the play serves as a helpful bridge into early modern revenge tragedy (and it resonates with *Hamlet* in some particularly interesting, unexpected ways.)

On a lighter note, *Endymion* also offers a comic subplot that draws deliberate attention to the presence of boy actors on stage. Following the adventures of Sir Tophas (a *miles gloriosus* figure who hunts tame animals and falls in love with one of the witches), the subplot develops through the dialogue between three young pages (Samias, Epiton, and Dares). Height jokes abound, and the pages are called "lads," "boys," and "children" during Act One, Scene Three--paving the way for a discussion of early modern attitudes toward the young, including their service in elite households and on the stage. The boys also deploy a series of Latinate puns, highlighting the cultural expectation of classical learning for young men, and the role of drama as a venue in which to display and hone this type of education.

While the subplot draws attention to boys and their social role, the main plot addresses the more subversive role of the witch, as a caster of spells that can threaten both individuals and the social order. Recently, the witchcraft in *Endymion* has started to receive a greater amount of attention from critics. Natalia Khomenka has argued that

Cynthia is the strong, exceptional woman who acts to reinforce social boundaries by "circumscrib[ing] the area of female activity" and forcing witches into supervisory marital relationships. <sup>[4]</sup> Meanwhile, Christine Neufield uses the idea of witchcraft to cast a new light on the play's allegory. She points out the category confusion caused by powerful women in the play, reading this confusion as a commentary on the socially threatening idea of female "monstrosity" that destabilizes a courtier's position under both Cynthia and Elizabeth I. <sup>[5]</sup> By attending to both of these arguments, an exploration of witchcraft in the play could underscore the gendered nature of allegory, and it could also point out the unflattering double interpretations that are often possible for even panegyric portrayals of the virgin queen.

For advanced undergraduates, the most helpful text of *Endymion* is probably the fully annotated version in the Revels series (Manchester University Press, 1996). Edited by David Bevington, the volume contains copious footnotes on Latin phrases and unfamiliar expressions. It also features an extremely useful introduction with information about probable staging practices, the history of the Endymion myth, and possible references to the Armada crisis in the play. While online versions of the text do exist, they often lack line numbers or clear, easy-to-read formatting. (For example, George P. Baker's 1894 edition of the play is available through the Internet Archive website, but it has no pagination and features a few extra letters and spaces sprinkled throughout the text.)

As a firmly Elizabethan text with ramifications for the study of allegory and the body, *Endymion* makes a unique contribution to a survey syllabus. It provides helpful talking points about boys' companies, Euphuism, and the cult of Elizabeth, at the same time that it contributes to a larger discussion of signification and materiality in early literature. As an interesting change from more traditional Elizabethan drama, *Endymion* can provide a fruitful link between allegorical medieval plays and later works like *Pilgrim's Progress*.

## Endnotes

[1] On the most recent performance, see the press release "Students give rare performance of Elizabethan play by Canterbury-born John Lyly," available at <http://www.kent.ac.uk/news/homepagestories/students-give-rare-performance/2011>.

[2] George Baker, for example, points out that "Endimion is an allegory of court life," but spends much of his argument focusing on the real Elizabethans that the characters might represent ("Biographical Introduction," in *Endymion: The Man in the Moon*, ed. George P. Baker (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1894): xliii). Josephine Waters Bennett makes a similar move, arguing that "Endimion might represent any courtier," but ultimately aligning him with the Earl of Oxford (Oxford and Endimion," *PMLA* 57:2 (1942): 361). Percy Long, meanwhile, insists that "we should assume [Lyly] depicts in Endimion not any one [specific courtier], but the type" ("The Purport of Lyly's *Endimion*," *PMLA* 24:1 (1909): 173). For an approach that emphasizes multiplicity of referents, see Robert S. Knapp, "The Monarchy of Love in Lyly's *Endimion*," *Modern Philology* 73:4 (1976): 353-367. For Cynthia as Wisdom, see Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, "The Allegory of Wisdom in Lyly's *Endimion*," *Comparative Drama* 10:3 (1976): 235.

[3] All quotations from *Endymion* are taken from the following edition of the text: John Lyly, *Endymion*, ed. David Bevington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

[4] "'Between You and Her No Comparison:' Witches, Healers, and Elizabeth I in John Lyly's *Endymion*." *Early Theatre* 13:1 (2010): 39.

[5] "Lyly's Chimerical Vision: Witchcraft in *Endymion*." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 43:4 (2007): 356, 365.

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