

**Rocío G. Sumillera. 2019. *Invention: The Language of English Renaissance Poetics*.
Cambridge: Legenda**

Jonathan P. A. Sell
Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Published by the Legenda imprint of the Modern Humanities Research Association, Rocío G. Sumillera's *Invention: The Language of English Renaissance Poetics* is an important contribution to Renaissance and early modern literary studies. Remarkable for its daring, scope and clarity, it boldly takes on a fundamental yet unduly overlooked and difficult concept, ranges widely in time and space, and presents its findings in lucid, cogent prose. Sumillera's ambitious goal is to chart invention's expansion from classical rhetoric, through tentative arrival in late medieval poetics, to subsequent consolidation and enthronement in sixteenth-century poetic theory, a position of pre-eminence from which it would gradually be usurped by the mental faculty which had enabled it, namely, the imagination. Thus, what had acted in the process of poetic composition as intermediary between the senses and the reason eventually bypassed the latter in a long-term historical dialectic which would establish the imagination as literature's presiding genius.

"Invention" is one of a cluster of related terms including "wit," "fancy," "imagination" and "*phantasia*" which are all readily understood as having to do with the creative end of the writing business but are sometimes difficult to distinguish. To attempt dogmatic definition would be unproductive. What Sumillera offers instead is a family history whose main protagonist is invention, but which traces sibling connections and/or rivalries (invention and wit; invention and imitation; invention, imitation and emulation; invention, imitation, emulation and translation) as well as either incest or gemmation (invention and imagination). To do so she examines many of the major classical, medieval and Renaissance rhetorical, dialectical, grammatical and poetic treatises and adduces instances of related discourse in poetic texts in English, French, Italian and Spanish. From Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to John Dryden's *Annus mirabilis* (1667), her book compacts the best part of two millennia of relevant literary-rhetorical theory and practice into its relatively

modest span, being further remarkable in its judicious combination of synopsis and texture, which affords its readers a panorama of the wood and close-ups of many of its trees.

Chapter 1 sifts standard classical (Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, Quintilian) and medieval (John of Salisbury, Matthew of Vendôme, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, John of Garland, the *artes dictaminis*, the *progymnasmata*) texts on rhetoric, dialectic, grammar and poetics for conceptual definitions and functional delimitations of invention. Boethius, interestingly, is argued to have been pivotal in the transmission of topical theory, but the chapter's main contention is that invention's late medieval assimilation into poetics via the *artes poetriae* was due to school instruction in versification as part of the *ars grammatica*, the necessary prelude to a university education in logic and rhetoric. Chapter 2 traces the history of invention from the fifteenth century to the first half of the seventeenth with a more particular focus on English developments in their European contexts. Sumillera argues that while in the schools and universities invention was largely associated with the finding of ideas in rhetoric and/or dialectic (John Seton's *Dialectica* [1545], Thomas Wilson's *Rule of reason* [1551], Peter Carter's *Annotationes* [1563]), continental influence (Julius Caesar Scaliger, Joachim Du Bellay, Thomas Sébillet, Pierre de Ronsard, Jacques Peletier) gradually led to its assimilation into poetics, where its relationship with imagination and *phantasia* soon began to cause theoretical headaches. Chapter 3 introduces imitation and emulation as mirrors in which invention was able to scrutinize itself in order to sharpen its self-definition. Too dogged imitation might cramp one's style and in Petrarch's mind raised the specter of Bloomean "anxiety of influence"; in contrast, emulation provided greater freedom to create, to outstrip models and to assert one's own originality. Sumillera also discusses the theoretical grey area of plagiarism, literary imitation taken to an extreme, as well as Sidney's rapprochement between imitation and invention in the poet's ability to set in writing his privileged insight into ideal worlds.

Chapter 4 describes the consolidation of invention as "the trigger of poetry-writing and as a renewing force that is believed to revisit traditions and encourage innovation" (80). Proof of invention's apogee is found in the eulogies of poetic treatises and its adoption as the benchmark of poetic achievement in substitution of imitation: Castelvetro's *Poetica d'Aristotele* (1579) is pivotal, the Homer-Virgil

comparison epitomical. Sections on translation and Protestant anti-poetic sentiment might appear digressive but actually underscore the basic issue of original creation which imitation and invention brought to the fore even as they sometimes struggled to brush it under the carpet. Chapter 5 charts the reputation of the imagination from antiquity and its emergence in English poetical theory and practice just as invention was enjoying its heyday. As the mental faculty that processed sense-data for intellection in the reason, the imagination was fundamental to the thinking process, yet its avowed capacity to mislead made it and its poetic effluvia untrustworthy. Predictably enough, in England the moral controversy attaching to the imagination was in some quarters confessionally signed; that might account in part for Sidney's "cautious" (119) use of the term, which otherwise fluctuates uncertainly between a strictly psychological meaning and the God-like imagination-invention fudge/reconciliation mentioned above. Sumillera's Conclusion notes how the rise of the imagination in poetic discourse was in tandem with the rise of the empirical mode of modern science, the implication being perhaps that, thus circumscribed, it would not interfere with intellectual progress; also, how a foot-sore invention still managed to limp along as far as Mary Shelley's 1831 preface to *Frankenstein*.

Sumillera's praiseworthy ambition to prosecute her underlying case leads occasionally to a well-intentioned tendency to serve as a dish of meat and three vegetables what was actually a thick soup of mixed and indistinct ingredients. In Chapter 1, she is not quite right to claim that "neither Cicero, Quintilian, nor Horace employ *invenire* or *inventio* to refer to the process of poetry-writing" (13). The former pair's prescriptions and descriptions would have been of application to poetry, which was merely rhetoric in verse, the only differences being that poetry needed no basis in matters of fact and that its conclusions were not subjected to vote or resolution. What is more, with the demise of political and judicial oratory in Imperial Rome, rhetoric took refuge in the schools from where its principles, particularly those of epideictic, radiated outwards and "became the common denominator of literature in general" (Curtius 1979, 70). Thus, the medieval teachers may not have been so innovative in their poeticization of invention, as Sumillera tacitly recognizes in her later quotation from Jaques Peletier (*Art Poétique*, 1555) and discussion of Richard Rainoldes, Wilson, Puttenham and Sidney (40, 41-42).

That by no means detracts from the tremendous value of the book, for what it offers along the way is of such intrinsic interest and importance that to ask for more were to be ungrateful. Not only does it present a taut history of invention, but it takes us into the medieval and Renaissance schools and universities, glosses the rhetoric-dialectic debate, introduces and helps us to contextualize the major, and some of the minor, figures of Renaissance philology, provides useful précis of the Ramus affair and the Ciceronianism controversy, and unpicks key aspects of Renaissance translation theory. What is more, Sumillera impresses throughout for her enviable command of difficult sources in a variety of languages.

It occurs to this reader that in view of the recent resuscitation of an early modern sublime (largely post-dating the doctoral dissertation which is the origin of Sumillera's book), Longinus might have been adduced as an authority on emulation and the paradoxically intertextual nature of originality (Cheney 2018, 16–18); also, that Quintilian's distinction between *invenire* for rhetorical invention based on fact and *ingere* (feigning) for poetical invention of things untrue or improbable (2001, 266 [10.1.29]) might have been examined with profit. This is not to criticize, but to attest to the intellectually stimulating force of Sumillera's book, which will serve its readers not only as an excellent guide to its subject but also as a suggestive platform for further research.

References

- Cheney, Patrick. 2018. *English Literary Authorship and the Early Modern Sublime: Spenser, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Curtius, Ernst Robert. 1979. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. London: Routledge.
- Quintilian, Marcus Fabius. 2001. *The Orator's Education*, Vols, I, II, III, edited and translated by Donald A. Russell. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press.

How to cite this review:

Sell, Jonathan P. A. Review of Rocío G. Sumillera, *Invention: The Language of English Renaissance Poetics* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019). *SEDERI* 31 (2021): 188–191.

Author's contact: jonathan.sell@uah.es

Postal address: Facultad de Educación, 4ª planta, 24 - Universidad de Alcalá - Calle Madrid 1 -19001 Guadalajara, Spain