One's first reaction to this book is to wonder why it was needed. Surely we have enough books now on rhetorical backgrounds, especially in regard to the English Renaissance, which, despite its title, is where almost all of this book's emphasis lies. But one's first reaction is not infrequently wrong, and this turns out to be a pleasing case in point. Brian Vickers has provided what has been missing all along, a just, evenhanded, and comprehensive treatment of this subject.

One reason such a book has been so long lacking is that until comparatively recently most criticism has hesitated to acknowledge the importance of rhetoric for the Renaissance, fearful (sometimes justifiably so) of a simplistic application of rhetorical concepts that would reduce Renaissance poetry to a dry-as-dust subject for pedantry from which critics who could not tell antimetabole from epizeuxis would be barred. The most significant treatments of rhetoric have until now lain chiefly either in those writers who discuss the topic while on their way to other pursuits—as does Madeleine Doran in her admirable Endeavors of Art—or in tendentious treatments such as that which characterizes Rosemond Tuve's Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery.

Vickers manages neither to despise rhetoric nor to claim too much for it as an aid to our understanding. He is admirably aware of the twofold dangers in a mechanistic, too-technical approach to the interrelationship of rhetoric and poetry: that of losing sight of the poem and that of losing the interest of a large proportion of his readers. When he does bring his book to its natural climax in the final chapter, with rhetorical analyses of poetry by Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Herbert, he is gentle to both poem and reader, even to the point of warning us that these "are samples and demonstrations, and suffer from the usual fault of demonstration pieces, that the points have probably been too myopically and laboriously spelled out. For a sustained piece of rhetorical criticism one would not need to point to every figure, and in order to absorb rhetorical analyses into the body of critical method we have to balance it against other approaches (the study of imagery, rhythm, structure, argument), which will sometimes be of more value in interpreting a particular poem, sometimes of less" (p. 166). Caveats similar to this one abound throughout the book concerning the potential misuses and abuses of rhetorical approaches to literature: "...although more work needs to be done on the influence of the large-scale rhetorical processes on literature, it must not be prosecuted in a narrow-minded way or on the assumption that it alone holds the key to the problem of literary structure. Especially in the mimetic narrative forms of the novel and the drama, writers were working increasingly with nonrhetorical methods, and the farther we get away from the specific processes of rhetoric the harder it is to establish any connection" (p. 80).

However, while stressing the moderate nature of his claims, Vickers does believe that understanding rhetoric is worthwhile and important for English poetry, especially Renaissance English poetry. It would never be thought of as a dull and fruitless occupation, he suggests, if we fully recognized the function that rhetoric had for the poets; if there is one central idea, and one fresh perspective which Vickers wishes to offer his reader, it is this: "...that rhetorical figures are the conventional representation of verbal patterns expressed in states of extreme emotion" (p. 94). His argument in support of this contention is both persuasive and attractive. The most seemingly awkward or stiff rhetorical figures thus have
artistic function in context: they are stylized disruptions of normal syntax designed to reflect disturbances internal to the speaker.

Vickers' book does have some limitations, chief among them a distressing overdependence on secondary sources at times when he could easily have gone to the original, a fact which his choice of parenthetical documentation can painfully point up. This dependence on things secondhand shows up in his apparently total reliance on translations of the Latin and Italian originals that he does use (though I confess a preference for his use of quotations in English to the assumption that every reader is at ease in four languages). In his defense it must be said that Vickers seems to conceive of his main task as being that of synthesizing the work that modern scholarship has already done, and that as a synthesizer he is a judicious one (see, for example, his attempt to reevaluate and moderate the claims for Ramus and his influence in rhetorical and intellectual history).

The book's larger limitations are in thoroughness of treatment and, at times, even in scope of knowledge. These are limitations that Vickers is himself aware of. "I am conscious that much more needs to be said about rhetoric in the Middle Ages and in the eighteenth century. Perhaps my inadequacies will provoke others to fill the gaps" (p. 11). Some variant of this statement occurs at least a half dozen times in the course of the study, and it gives the book an odd quality, rather that of a work-in-progress, its author apparently conceiving of part of his duty as pointing the way for future studies, delineating the gaps and the weaknesses in present scholarship, calling attention to the pitfalls and wrong turns. In itself this is not an unadmirable task, but meanwhile, while waiting for others to follow the indicated paths, this work is a good start in the right direction. The scholar already familiar with current studies of rhetoric will still find the book a convenient addition to his library; the student looking for easy access to the field will find it a valuable tool indeed.

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The windfall of seventy-six unpublished letters from 1573 to 1576 gave James Osborn the opportunity, in a partial biography of Sidney, to detail the actions, friends, and thoughts of the young man during these formative years. In addition, twenty-four letters hitherto unpublished strengthened the impetus to tell the story of this part of Sidney's life. Many backgrounds and occupations are covered by Sidney's correspondents of that time, among them two young sons of Admiral Coligny, survivors of their father in the St. Bartholomew's massacre; Wolfgang Zündelin, almost a syndicated newsgatherer residing in Venice; Jean Lobbet, a professor of law in Strasbourg; Andreas Pauli, an adviser of the elector of Saxony; Cesare Carrafa, an Italian Catholic poet; Théophile de Banos, a Huguenot minister in Frankfort; the Bohemian Baron Slavata, a sometime student in Padua, sometime freeloading traveler in England; Charles de l'Ecluse, the eminent botanist; Jean de Vulcob, the French ambassador to Vienna. Many of these were the friends and intellectual allies of Hubert Languet, who eagerly opened all doors for the impressive youth Philip Sidney.