SIR PHILIP SIDNEY'S SERIOUS "TOYS"

BY

JOAN THORNBURG

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DR. WILLIAM LISTON

ADVISOR

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[Signature]

Thesis Advisor
Department of English

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Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Defence of Poesy*, declares that the poet

...goeth hand in hand with Nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit.

Sidney does not exhaustively explore the "zodiac of his own wit" in the *Astrophil and Stella* sonnet cycle, and in fact, sometimes he seems to deny the principles of his *Defence*. The cycle does offer considerable enlightenment to a part of that heavenly map, however, especially when considered in conjunction with the *Defence*. According to many authorities, among them Hyder E. Rollins and Herschel Baker, in their anthology, *The Renaissance in England*,

*Astrophel and Stella* initiated the vogue of sonnet sequences that is one of the most conspicuous developments of later Elizabethan literary history.

The poet names his poetry, his inventions, "toys," and there has been much criticism directed to whether or not Sidney believed his own poetry worthy of serious consideration or whether one may regard *Astrophil and Stella* as a trifle, concocted to satisfy the current fad—as one might invest in an elaborate lace collar or a new wide tie. This question has puzzled many fine

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scholars and will surely puzzle more, just as the question of the sonnets' biographical value does.

I believe that Sidney's denials of his poetry as serious works are examples of sprezzatura, defined by Kenneth Myrick as

...the courtly grace which conceals a sober purpose and is, indeed, the mark of consummate artistry.

The court of England needed men to represent and serve who were irreproachable not only in matters of art, grace, and manners, but in matters of nobility, of diplomatic astuteness, and of military sagaciousness. While a courtier was aspiring to positions in the latter classification his skills in the former served as manifestations of inner virtue. Sidney could not represent himself as only a poet, for indeed he was not only a poet. The court finally favored him with a responsible military command as a result of his devoted service, shrewd judgment and discernment, and as one who could apparently shrug off a fine artistic talent with humble disdain.

Sidney begins his Defence of Poesy by relating a personal experience with an avid horseman. He uses Pugliano's "defence" of horsemanship and the nobility of horseback soldiery as examples of the fact that assuming proper regard for the activity one engages
himself in is an indication of one's sense of personal dignity and worth. Sidney says:

But thus much at least with no few words he drove into me, that self-love is better than any gilding to make that seem gorgeous wherein ourselves be parties. (p. 1)

No more would Sidney write a "defence" of a mere summer-time diversion than would his teacher in the skills of horsemanship deliver his "...contemplations therein which he thought most precious" (p. 1) upon a subject of little consequence to himself. Although a member of a society which considered horsemanship, cunning in war, and animal husbandry more noble than artistry, Sidney did consider his poetry a matter of serious worth, as did many of his contemporaries.

Few have questioned the seriousness of Sidney's Defence. The poet's use of several devices in both the Defence and Astrophil and Stella adds a further shred of credence to the theory that the Astrophil and Stella parody is a serious effort. He approaches the matter of poetry in the Defence, for instance, as a court proceeding, which is the typical approach for the classical oration on which the Defence is patterned. Likewise, some of the sonnets depend heavily upon court imagery. Sidney assigns to poetry the role of the
accused and abhorred, although unconvicted, defendant. He first makes a strong character defense for his client, calling upon classic civilizations back through the Greeks Musaeus, Homer, and Hesoid. He demonstrates that poetry was so worthwhile to this early and wise culture that learned

...philosophers of Greece durst not a long time appear to the world but under the masks of poets. (p. 3)

He includes in this noble conclave even Plato, who placed his philosophy in fictional settings and used imagined dialogue to convey it in poetic language.

To the Renaissance audience the only witnesses more highly regarded than the Classics were the Godly and near-Godly. Sidney, the diligent defender of poesy, does not fail in calling them to the witness seat. First he points out the verse of Virgil, which inspired a superstitious British forefather to valorous deeds of war; then he calls upon the gods of the pagan Greek oracles who delivered the prophecies of Delphos and Sibylla in verse; then he calls upon his own Christian God to prove the poet's worth. Sidney cites the Psalms of David for verse and meter and the Christian prophecies for poetic figures.

Through the etymology of the Greek term for "poet" Sidney proves that the poet is indeed a maker; a maker,
of course, is a creator, and creator is nearly synonymous with God. The poet, then, becomes a demigod or a man with some attributes of God which other men do not possess. He is a step, in fact, above nature. The purpose of God's creation, according to Christian myth, is the delight of the Creator. After the Creator's delight in His works (and especially man, who was given dominion over all the rest), His chief delight is in man's achievement of perfect virtue and praise to Him.

It follows then that the first purpose of the poet-creator, according to Sidney, is rightfully the instruction of man toward virtue for the delight of God. Sidney numbers among these poets the divinely-inspired Biblical authors and the Classical ones who appealed to man's reverence for god or gods, as they understood them.

Sidney's second group of poets includes those who deal in the various philosophies of astrology, history, and moral instruction. His treatment of these poets seems a trifle ambiguous. He places them next to the inspired writers and he praises the "sweetly uttered knowledge" (p. 9) which they impart, but he censures their failure to teach their knowledge in a delightful way so that it will be acceptable to apparently puerile mankind. Sidney holds this type of maker (also used synonymously with teacher) in least regard. Sidney intimates that the
complete absorption of one's interest by a particular body of knowledge stifles the intellect and that these "subject"-pressured poets do not have an understanding of the realistically diversified human psyche which is necessary for "right" poets.

Finally, Sidney names the third type of poets, who invent from the "zodiac" of their own wits. They may invent men who are more "true," or "constant," or "valiant," or "right," or more "excellent in every way" than the actual fallen mankind of nature. They may invent a more "lovely" earth than nature has done (p. 7). They may invent such a man as Sidney's Astrophil.

In sonnet 45 Sidney doubles the technique of the true poet. He uses his wit to create a persona who in turn creates "...a fable, which did show/ Of lovers never known, a grievous case" (5-6). His Stella, being a tender-hearted woman, cries in sympathy for the make-believe hero. Astrophil sees the solution to his own dilemma in her reaction and proffers himself, in the sestet, as a "paper-tiger" to win her favor:

Alas, if fancy drawn by imag'd things,
Though false, yet with free scope more grace doth breed
Than servant's wrack, where new doubts honor brings;
Then think, my dear, that you in me
do read
Of lovers' ruin some sad tragedy:
I am not I, pity the tale of me.

David Kalstone calls Astrophil

...the complex, questioning hero in
love,...an excellent persona; for
Astrophel has no one stance, but
moves flexibly among a number of
changing attitudes.

Astrophil is not an example of perfect man. He falters
in his public duty—his "virtue of public life." In
his role as lover and critic, his attitudes shift from
time to time and we see a persona who could truly demon-
strate the excesses of universal man, along with the
delights and antagonisms which abound in the human life.
Sidney's purpose remains, however, true to the poet's
purpose: "to teach goodness, and delight the learners
of it" (p. 29).

The reader hears what Kalstone calls

...the rueful, quasi-serious, at times
mocking voice that Sidney has develop-
ed for Astrophel (p. 150),

and knows it

...is the perfect vehicle for regis-
tering his doubts and ours about love
while at the same time conveying
love's energy. (p. 151)

(I interpret Kalstone's use of "energy" here to mean a
deep desire to express feelings in a poetic manner.)
The reader may sorrow at scornful treatment from his idealized object of desire; he may ridicule and rebuke himself for behaving foolishly; he may burn with unsatisfied passion or be uplifted momentarily by successfully averting temptation. The reader will be aware of the disillusionment caused by his own weakness and, finally, he will droop, with Astrophil, in disappointment, despair, and resignation. He will see himself and mankind more clearly, and through all of this instructive mirror-house of man's emotion, the reader never fails to be delighted and therefore to pay earnest attention, as Sidney's Defence promises.

In sonnet 29, the lover is aware of the fact that he has been taken advantage of, as everyone is at one time or another, and stands helpless before a conspiracy. The persona sees Stella as a weak feudal lord who offers her territory and services to the colonizing war lord, Love. By an illicit pact, she saves her own heart from Love's onslaught but in the process, she allows Love to use her eyes, her lips, her breasts, legs, flesh, and skin to enslave another—the vulnerable persona, whose coastal position (or his susceptibility to her captivating charms) make him liable to the attack of ambitious Love. This is Astrophil's first direct reference to 8.
Stella's cruelty. She is revealed as one who sacrifices an adoring and assailable simpleton to appease her own vanity. (Indeed, what can it be called but vanity when a woman uses her loveliness to conquer a man's heart, for which she does not offer her own in return?) Astrophil expresses his feelings of undeserved bondage and his sorrow at her scornfulness of him in the final lines:

And I, but for because my prospect lies
Upon that coast, am giv'n up for a slave.

Sonnet 31 is famous for its melancholy music as the poet calls upon the moon for understanding. The reader (although an invocation to the moon seems trite and overly dramatic to the modern reader) remembers his own feelings of loneliness and an empathy occurs between persona and reader. The loneliness born of the scorn of a loved one is common to nearly everyone who has passed through the period of adolescence and young adulthood. Astrophil's sense of isolation from his beloved and from the world, especially the courtly world, is quite and poignant in the first two lines. Kalstone says that especially in the octet, he conveys a sense of his own awkwardness and separateness.... (p. 165)

The next two lines introduce the question of whether
love plays a role in astrodynamics, followed by an identification of lover with the "wan" moon (2), who like him, droops with restless longing. The tempo picks up in the sestet and the poem ends with a rhythmic, hissing resentment of female scornfulness. Kalstone calls sonnet 31

...the closest thing in Sidney's sonnets to the pastoral meditations...in Petrarch's poetry. (p.163)

In his conclusion Kalstone further states that

when love enters the pastoral world, that world ceases to resemble Eden and becomes chaotic.... (p.179)

We witness this progression into chaos in the sestet of the poem.

Constancy in love, an honorable trait, is considered dullness by women of the persona's acquaintance. The love of a worthy courtier, or whatever socially appropriate man, according to sixteenth-century, ancient, and Biblical traditions, should have been the most ennobling experience a female could hope for below the spiritual level. The court-ladies, including Stella, however, "scorn" (13) this ennobling experience. Astrophil implies that their scorn is unnatural. "Virtue" and "ungratefulness" (14) are opposites and the bewildered lover plaintively wonders whether heavenly females make the same
unnatural equation of them. He wonders whether the same unnatural pride prevails among fair celestial beings.

Sidney's persistent theme of the relationship between the heavenly bodies and human behavior is foremost in sonnet 31. The sestet further demonstrates the persona's resentful loneliness as he reveals his suspicion that the celestial stars make a model for his scornful, earthly Stella. Kalstone suggests that the most significant element of sonnet 31 is

...the tone of wonder and frustration with which Astrophel assumes his critical role. (p. 165)

Sidney's criticism in the sonnet cycle attacks the sonnet convention generally, poets who contribute to poetry's bad reputation in England, and even extends to some anonymous contemporaries; the persona's criticism, though, is directed to his subjective impressions of society, the securing of an honorable place in society, and especially to court ladies' emotional shallowness in the courtly love convention. The persona's subjective views lead the author into some heretofore rare uses of the sonnet.

Although the poem's setting is celestial and Sidney does suggest a strong influence upon human behavior from heavenly bodies, Astrophil's earth-bound Star and her
sisters in the courtly love game receive his criticism. Heretofore, sonnet heroines had remained unscathed by worldly criticism. Their only wrongs were involuntary and grew out of their inherent gifts of beauty and grace, which were misinterpreted by the ignoble desires of man. Leonard Forster, in his book, The Icy Fire, asserts that Petrarch's Laura, for example, "...can command nature itself." The many continental ladies who follow her in dozens of Petrarchan sonnet sequences possessed similarly deified positions. According to J. W. Lever, however,

...Sidney declares with much emphasis that Stella is no cryptically-conceived Una or Britomart, but a character drawn from life.

Again we see that the Astrophil and Stella inventions are delightfully instructive to and reflective of Sidney's reader. Few readers of normal psychological bent could relate to a "cryptically conceived" being, except as a model of perfection. One can, however, identify oneself with characters who demonstrate inconsistency, vanity, resentment, and the other human weaknesses observed in the hero and heroine.

Few men are favored with such sound judgment that they cannot recall having acted in a foolish manner or having missed an important opportunity. Neither is our
hero so favored. This human imperfection is another
universal characteristic of man which Sidney demonstrates
through his persona. Before examining Sidney's delight-
ful teaching in this matter in sonnet 33, however, I
think it pertinent to discuss the contention of many
authorities that Sidney's sonnet cycle is a biographical
narrative.

In his "Commentary and Notes" on the sonnets,
Futzel gives extensive and convincing reasons from
sonnet 33 for identifying Stella with Penelope Devereux
Rich. He pursues the same line of reasoning to support
the contention that Sidney helped to arrange Miss Devereux's
marriage to Lord Rich. Putzel says,

There would have been a bitter irony
in his falling in love with Penelope
after helping to arrange her marriage
to Rich, but we have no warrant for
assuming that he did.

Indeed there would and indeed we do not! Putzel offers
a wealth of evidence from other sonnets, including the
elaborate puns on Penelope's married name in sonnet 24
with its famous reference to her husband as "that rich
fool" (9). Sonnet 13 plays at length with the Devereux
family coat-of-arms and Putzel further points to Astrophil's
identification with the author (30.9-10). The sonnets
are too ripe with such evidence and puns to deny the
identifications, at least on the surface level. After all, Miss Devereux was considered as a marriage partner for Sidney at one time. In spite of the identifications and puns, however, it does not follow that the sonnets are biographical.

One may speculate at some length as to why Sidney chose to include such identifications. Perhaps he made the associations out of a high-spirited disposition to mischief or perhaps he used them as a "particular" consideration of history from which the poet nurtures the "universal consideration" of his art (Defence, p. 17). Perhaps many things. But of a certainty we have Sidney's Defence which, C. S. Lewis explains,

...is a defence not of poetry as against prose but of fiction as against fact. The word poetry often covered all imaginative writing whether in prose or verse, and even those critics who did not so extend it thought of poetry primarily as invention. What is in question is not man's right to sing but his right to feign, to 'make things up.'

Sidney defends the invented example in the Defence. He says that

...a feigned example hath as much force to teach as a true example, (for as for to move, it is clear, since the feigned may be tuned to the highest key of passion.) (p. 18)

A reasonable, clear-headed courtier, even though impetuous at times, would not have become so completely steeped
in passion and self-evaluation, at least for so long a time, as we find Sidney's Astrophil. Even granting the irony expressed by Putzel (for the sake of tuning passion to a higher key, not as fact) Sidney was not writing a personal history.

In sonnet 33 Astrophil recounts the things which might have caused him to miss the opportunity of claiming Stella (although courtly love, with the possible exception of that in Spenser's sonnets, was inherently adulterous.) He has no "Lovely Paris" (33.6) to blame for stealing his beloved, as Menelaus did; he cannot blame "Fortune" (7) for never having presented the opportunity. The sestet lays the blame where most blame lies: "But to myself my self did give the blow" (9).

Putzel goes into some biographical detail in exploration of line eleven, but it is unimportant here. The final lines of the sonnet display a man truly repentant of wrongdoing:

And yet could not by rising morn forsee
How fair a day was near, oh punish'd eyes,
That I had been more foolish or more wise.

Had Astrophil been more foolish (from a practical viewpoint) and ignored his reasoned, socially-oriented excuses for passing up the opportunity to have Stella for
his own or had he been truly wise enough (from an aesthetic viewpoint) to ignore the same excuses, he would now have the "rising morn" he speaks of in line twelve. Putzel, in the passage cited above, suggests that the "rising morn" refers to the blossoming of a young girl into lovely womanhood (assuming this woman to be Penelope Devereux Rich.) At any rate, Astrophil is looking backward pessimistically to bewail "spilled milk," as all men do sometimes.

The Cupid sonnets are a fascinating lot and at least one of them, sonnet 19, illustrates the human habit of rebuking oneself for foolish behavior. The lover's heartstrings are drawn taut, as the cruel boy's bowstring, and we see a ruined man (ruined for his public responsibilities, since he thinks only of Stella) who can only welcome his ruin with open arms, and "glory" in his "shame" (3). An excessive supply of such Petrarchan "contrarities" appear in this sonnet. Astrophil repents as he runs toward that which he both dreads and desires. One is reminded of the "...degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings" striving to be "capable of" a higher "perfection" in the Defence (p. 11). He declares that his "best wits" (19.5), his poems, disgrace him because he cannot resist writing about
Stella, although he knows she will reject him, causing further despair and loss of the virtue of self-respect. The sestet likens the lover to the ineffectual astronomer in the *Defence* who, "...looking to the stars, might fall in a ditch..." (p. 11). Even when the lover looks to the greatest beauty and good which life holds out to him (the astronomer's skies, Astrophil's Stella) he falls into a pit. Oh! One seldom sees such blatant self-pity when separated from one's mirror! But as Sidney further declares on page 11 of the *Defence*, even one who "falls in a ditch," or who "might be blind in himself," like the moral philosopher, or the mathematician who "might draw forth a straight line with a crooked heart,"--all these learned men--profess sciences which are "...directed to the highest end of the mistress-knowledge...." Even poor Astrophil, whose carnal desire fights so furiously with the virtue in his breast, struggles for "...the knowledge of man's self..." so as to reach "...the ending end of all earthly learning..., virtuous action...."

The complete courtly love sonnet cycle, typically, is concerned with this ungratified carnal desire for the chosen lady's physical favor and the idealistic glorification of her for denying such favor. The ideal Petrarchan progression of the courtly love affair would
see the persona's sensual, carnal desire moving on to an idealized platonic state in which man's virtue becomes strong because of the "trial by fire" of being denied what he so desperately longs for. Astrophil does not resolve the inner conflicts which romance produces, however. He does not ascend from the sensual level to the spiritual. He continues to lament his desire. He values the exalted mind, but like most men, he finds more delight and energy in the "beggery" he describes in sonnets 62 and 47. He maintains an ironic quasi-bitterness through the ordeal, never quite achieving the humbleness of spirit which finally goads the completely conventional sonnet lover into gratefulness for his lady's denial.

As usual in the Cupid sonnets, Sidney assumes an elevated tone in sonnet 46, but the conceit he paints belies the tone. The concurrently pathetic and impish child-god, hitting indiscriminately with the darts, conveys nothing of the dignity and reserve implied by the poet's tone. Astrophil acknowledges his (or Love's) desire for the first time in sonnet 46. He roguishly points out to Stella that should she stop adding fuel to Love's desire, the fire of desire would soon burn out along with the pique she claims.

18.
Having finally acknowledged desire directly, Astrophil does not let it become obscure again immediately. He goes on in sonnet 47 with an extended metaphor which transforms the lover into a self-condemned slave of desire. His reason implores him to "Let her go!" (12), but he does not. J. W. Lever's comment on this sonnet makes an appropriate analogy:

Yet, despite all principles, desire persists: Stella must be loved. Like any philosopher with the toothache, Astrophel perceives that no amount of reasoning will ease the pain. (p. 79)

Lover's impatience reaches the tempo of a frustrated tot's tantrum in sonnet 56. The "fire" of sonnet 47 is recalled as a contrast between the heat of desire and cold patience. The persona demands of personified, phlegmatic Patience:

...if thou wilt my good, then make
Her come, and hear with patience
my desire,
And then with patience bid me
bear my fire. (12-14)

We see no humbleness in this demand, nor do we see any inclination to accept the lady's denial and to become spiritually elevated by it.

Impatient as the lover is in sonnet 56, however, he still recognizes virtue in Stella's face and he says that should he only be allowed to look at her face he
could probably bear his burden of desire a little longer. In sonnet 64 there is no such pretext. The lover fully reduces himself to beggar without personified intermediary. The reader notes, however, that he begs the same favor he has consistently sought. Astrophil is not so humble as to bless the lady for her denial. He names the virtuous endeavors to which he no longer pays attention and concludes that he has

Nor hope, nor wish....
But that which once may win thy cruel heart:
Thou art my wit, and thou my virtue art.

In a discussion of Sidney's construction methods, as compared to Petrarch's, Lever notes that

in Petrarch the dual aspects of a composite theme, implied from the start of the sonnet, were developed and balanced against one another in the sestet. (p. 61)

Lever further notes that in Sidney

...in direct opposition to the smooth working of this mechanism comes the unforeseen irruption of Astrophel's desire, casting a well-aimed spanner into the works. (p. 61-62)

Nowhere in the cycle is this "spanner" more in evidence than in sonnet 71. Putzel notes that both Janet Scott and Richard B. Young attribute the opening of the sonnet to Petrarch's sonnet 248. Indeed, the pastoral setting
and tone (unusual in Sidney and common in other sonneteers),
and personified Nature, Virtue, Love, and Perfection all
go along smoothly in thirteen lines of the poem to paint
Stella as true platonc beauty and goodness.

Astrophil's disruptive desire, however, explodes
upon the fourteenth line, completely ruining the pastoral
effect and bringing the reader quickly and unceremoniously
back to solid ground: "'But ah,' Desire still cries,
'give me some food.'" Desire's cries could be interpret-
ed as quiet, melancholy tears, I suppose, but they come
across to me as unruly, raucous shouts and noisily under-
score the fact that Astrophil has missed the spiritual
level of mind to which Stella's beauty and virtue should
be leading him.

Lever's "spanner" is evident too in sonnet 5. It
strikes the reader directly after the idealistic outline
of how a reasonable man's life is ruled by Nature, the
warning that ". . . fools, adore in the temple of our
heart" (7), and after recognition of Stella's beauty as
a likeness of true platonc beauty. Reasonably, Sidney's
persona describes man's ideal path through life as a
pilgrimage towards eternal rest and reward:

...on earth we are but pilgrims made,
And should in soul up to our
country move. (12-13)
Astrophil implies that matters of the heart should not divert him from that path. Seven times the poet repeats the word "true." He is not deceived, but the fourteenth line persists as an expression of the old deceiver, desire: "True, and yet true that I must Stella love."

The desire sonnets are plentiful in the cycle and desire also dominates the songs. In fact, one can point out desire in each one in some degree, even when the sonneteer is not specific in using the word. Sidney, as well as other sonneteers, used the ambiguous human emotion of love and its accompanying desire as the perfect vehicle to express the many facets of human feeling and perception. In service to this expression, Sidney's unusual and delightful use of the conventional love conceit deserves special attention.

Lever cites sonnet 2 as an example of Sidney's departure from tradition. The day of Petrarch's first encounter with Laura, Lever says,

...was set apart from all others in the year: Laura's advent was ever after associated in the poet's thoughts with the highest and holiest moment in Christian history. (p. 72)

Sidney's meeting with Stella records only an attraction: "I saw and liked, I liked but loved not" (5). To the modern reader, the gradual growth of feeling is just as
romantic as the breath-taking encounter and probably indicates a greater depth than "love at first sight."

But in the courtly love tradition it represents a deviation from custom. Love at first sight was regarded as almost a spiritual indication that "the beloved" was the one woman who could inspire her lover to nobility of spirit and action. Astrophil proclaims that Stella's conquest of him was "by degrees" (4), a process as insidious as the placement of underground explosives.

The weapons used against the unsuspecting hero are much more sophisticated and devastating than Love's usual darts and flowery arrows, as is the militant mole conceit the sonneteer employs in sonnet 2.

In probably the most ludicrous of Sidney's conceits the lover makes himself a horse seated upon a horse and Love, an expert horseman, rides. So great is Love's equestrian skill in sonnet 49 that although the lover is tied with the reigns of "humbled thoughts" (5-6) and his jaw is restrained with a curb of fear (7), he finally delights in his own management (14). As the lover-horse assumes the look and attitude of a fine piece of show stock, the incongruous metaphor is further extended and hope becomes gilded harness frippery; the lover's very will becomes a symbol of authority over himself as a riding crop in the hand of Love; Love's saddle is the
lover's fancy "girt fast by memory..." (10). As Astrophil spurs his horse's side, he feels his own heart pierced by the spur of Love.

Although sonnet 28 seems more consistent with the courtly love purpose than the obvious parody in sonnet 49, Sidney has used a bit of the horse-trappings imagery here too. The persona is again a tightly reigned beast and loves his restraint by Love, even "...though nations count it shame" (8).

Sidney and his contemporaries were generous in bestowing human characteristics upon the intangible. An example of Sidney's God-like generosity was discussed earlier with Patience as the recipient. In sonnets 4 and 10 we encounter personification of Virtue and Reason respectively. Sidney's conceits turn these two platonically beautiful qualities of the soul into harping, troublesome, old school masters. Instead of acknowledging the philosophic wisdom of Virtue and Reason with respect, as usual in Renaissance literature, Astrophil sends Virtue off to some church or school with his "scepter" of goodness (4.5-6) and advises Reason to go climb a tree:

I rather wish'd thee climb the Muses' hill,
Or reach the fruit of Nature's choicest tree. (10.3-4)
The lover's tone becomes somewhat gentler in the final tercet of each poem, though, as he contemplates the reaction of each of these stern old gentlemen, should they be subjected to Stella's charms:

I swear, my heart such one shall show to thee
That shrines in flesh so true a deity,
That Virtue, thou thyself shalt be in love. (4)

For soon as they strake thee with Stella's rays,
Reason thou kneel'dst, and offeredst straight to prove
By reason good, good reason her to love. (10)

The sonnet cycle laments the lover's state as he falls victim to love's derangement of senses, which causes him to neglect his public image and responsibility, as well as his spiritual welfare. In sonnet 23 Astrophil's social acquaintances speculate on the cause of his "...dull pensiveness" (1). The lover's scolding friend of sonnets 14, 18, and 21 observes his confused state of mind. He condemns the lover's "...young mind marr'd" (21.2) and "...wits, quick only in vain thoughts..." (4). The friend sorrows over the lover's "...well-form'd soul..." which is being plunged into "...the mire/ Of sinful thoughts..." (7-8), and refers to "bankrupt" (3)
reason in sonnet 14. These sonnets make it quite clear that addled reason and a degenerate soul separate the courtier from his purpose, which is noble service to God, crown, and country.

With a little imagination Sidney's reader could regard sonnet 17 as an omen of Astrophil's impending public degradation. The sonnet appeals to the Renaissance taste for classical allusion but the allusion does not take the ordinary elevated tone. Astrophil tells a story of gods who become involved in an ungodly and undignified family brawl and as one of the mischievous boy-god's new toys strikes Astrophil, both Astrophil and the reader realize that from that moment, love alone can engross the young man's attention.

Lever says that sonnets 18 and 21

...have revealed the profound anxieties of Sidney's Protestant, Platonist self when soberly facing this revolt of the senses. (p. 78)

At this point one can become confused as to whether Sidney's "profound anxieties" or Astrophil's are being scrutinized. As indicated earlier, I tend to reject a strictly biographical reading of the sonnets. In sonnet 18, Astrophil's bankrupt situation and shame at having neglected to develop his God-given talents recalls Jesus' parable of the man who hid his one talent
instead of investing it, and was punished, as well as
the parable of the prodigal son who returned home
penniless and shamed after frittering away his inheri-
tance. In all three cases—the timid man, the prodigal,
and Astrophil—the young man wastes his youth, talent,
or wealth for an apparently unworthy prize. Sonnet
18's final couplet, however, qualifies both the loss and
repentance of the last profligate. He is sorry only
for the fact that he has no greater birthright, goods,
rents, or public honor to spend:

I see and yet no greater sorrow take,
Than that I lose no more for Stella's
sake.

Sonnet 21 is an answer to Astrophil's friend who
has compared the young lover to a wild, trapped animal
and who has criticized Astrophil's (not Sidney's) poetry
as showing "vain thoughts" and "lame virtues" (4).
Astrophil recalls in the second quatrain, his friend's
warning that the young man's study and noble birth
would end in shame if he did not "...tame/ Such coltish
gyres..." (5-6), in accordance with his platonic teach-
ings. Whether "Great Expectations" (8) are the courtier's
own expectations of himself or the court society's
expectations for him, all rightfully anticipate fine morals
and noble action from the young man. The friend's harsh
reminder that his promising career may suffer irreparable
damage touches the courtier only fleetingly.

Putzel's notes indicate that

the triteness of the metaphors in the sestet might well mimic the heaviness of some of the Caelica sonnets.

Perhaps Sidney is poking fun at Sir Fulke Greville, but again I must take issue with the extreme biographical significance which Putzel and many other critics attach to the sonnets.

In "mad March" (9), or childhood, there was every reason to expect heroic and virtuous action from the persona, but now in the "May" (10) of his manhood—what should be his most productive time—he has declined and shrunk from his obligations to public good, in complete subjection to love. The poet and his friend wonder what the mature years can bring: "What can be hoped my harvest time will be?" The ending line answers the friend's well-intentioned questions with typical Sidnean mischief and typical Astrophil redundance: "Hath this world aught so fair as Stella is?"

The Defence insists that the poet and his lyrics inspire man to virtuous action. During a discussion of the purpose of learning in the Defence, Sidney expresses the purpose of the poet as well:

So that the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those
skills that most serve to bring forth that have a most just title to be princes over all the rest; wherein... the poet is worthy to have it before any other competitors. (p. 11)

Delightful entertainment is not the poet's chief purpose then, but delightful teaching, and poetry accomplishes this purpose more effectively than any of the other teaching disciplines. Sidney again declares, in praise of the poet for leading man to virtue, "Now...of all sciences,...is our poet the monarch" (p. 21). Of the poet's teaching methods, Sidney says,

...he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion...and, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue. (p. 21)

This inspiration to virtue comes by way of beauty.

Sidney reiterates his concept of Stella's beauty throughout the sonnet cycle. C. S. Lewis points out that

the assumption...that the ethical is the aesthetic par excellence is so basic to Sidney that he never argues it. He thought we would know. (p. 346)

The whole conflict of the Astrophil and Stella parody of courtly love--the complete reflection of man's purpose pitted against wickedness--shines out through Astrophil's struggle to see the platonic purpose rather than the sensuous in Stella's celestial beauty.
Sidney personifies virtue and reason in sonnet 4 and 10 and Astrophil regards them as meddlesome old trouble-makers. (See earlier discussion.) Astrophil recognizes virtue and reason in their roles of king and teacher, however, and thereby acknowledges that they should rule his actions. He tries to rationalize his unvirtuous lust by a parody of reason's and virtue's battle with "sense and love" (10.2) within himself, finally using Stella's platonic beauty to overcome them both symbolically.

In sonnet 72 desire is personified in a Falstaff-like character. Astrophil takes great delight in this friend. The implication is that together the hero and his desire have plied all the pranks of wild youth with immense pleasure. But now Sidney's Astrophil tries, as Shakespeare's Hal will later try, to put off his unworthy friend. He must "no more" in Desire's "sweet passion lie" (7). He says in attempted martyrdom, "Virtue's gold now must head my Cupid's dart" (8). In the sestet he sets out specifically what his new attitude must be:

Service and honor, wonder with delight,
Fear to offend, will worthy to appear,
Care shining in mine eyes, faith in my sprite:

These things are left me by my only dear. (72.9-12)

30.
Only in the final half of the final line is the reader again gently pushed off balance. Once more Astrophil's high sounding words have no substance in virtuous action. He is still viewing the beauty of his "pure love" (2) in the hope of winning the "all" which Desire "wouldst have" (13).

But for the last line of sonnet 71, it probably expresses the platonic ideal of the courtly-beloved and her elevated effect upon the attracted man as well as any in the sonnet series. Here Stella approaches Laura's stature as a virtuous inspiration. The worshiper (for indeed, Stella's moral beauty is that of a goddess here) announces that she is the "fairest" (1) thing which Nature has made and intimates that Nature intended her for the purpose of teaching virtue. He calls her a "book of Nature" and extends the book conceit to advise anyone who wants to learn of "Love" to "read" (3) "those fair lines" (4). Her queenly, sweet reasoning (6) is able to "overthrow" all vices (5). Paradoxically, her perfection and goodness are so complete that she cannot rest with them. She "dost strive all minds that way toward perfection to move" (10).

A discussion of the final line--"the monkey wrench"--appeared earlier. This line is active in Sidney's parody.
and distorts the perspective of the picture of inspiration, which is as the author intended. It contains a different kind of conceit all together.

Lever tells us

For Sidney, as for all poets of courtly love, romance was bound to have an end in dust and ashes. Sooner or later must come a time for renouncing the vanities of sense; and for an English Protestant the end was forseen from the beginning. (p. 95)

After the ninth song, the sequence becomes more narrative. Stella and Astrophil are parted by "duty" (87.4) and Astrophil believes that he has seen love in her tears. His agitation shifts somewhat:

Thus, while th'effect most bitter was to me,
And nothing than the cause more sweet could be,
I had been vex'd, if vex'd I had not been. (87.12-14)

Instead of his quarrel for physical satisfaction—the race of desire to outrun virtue—he now bewails Stella's absence (88) and the unseasoned monotony of nights and days and days and nights without sight of her (89).

Sidney continues his parody as sonnet 91 assures Stella in overly-zealous notes that she has no cause for jealousy and in 92 as Astrophil snipes at a friend who has seen her. Sidney's parody, as always, is a
matter of timing. His reader is first aware of the poignant lines describing Astrophil's sorrowful state and secondly of the ever-so-subtle irony and hyperbole.

The lover verbally abuses himself for causing Stella to fall in love with him. "Through me, wretch me, even Stella vexed is" (93.4), recalls the doubly "vex'd" lover of sonnet 87 and the reader is aware that although parted, Astrophil and Stella "cry" the same "sighs" and "bleed" the same "tears" (93.14), of love.

The poet personifies Grief, Sighs, and Thoughts in the next three poems, touching in each upon a note of reality in the exaggerated characterizations. Neither the celestial imagery of sonnets 97 and 98 nor the flowery spring imagery of sonnets 99 and 100 illuminates the lover's bitter spirit. The later sonnets move through sleeplessness, treasured rememberances of the time Stella was near (102 and 103), and divorce from Nature in sonnet 99. Bitterness against other people and even against an inanimate object (the window pane where Stella once appeared to him in sonnet 105) are evident in sonnets 104, 105, and 106.

Finally in sonnet 107, Astrophil appears as a more composed and wiser man. He is not quite "recovered" from his love; yet the reader is aware, as Lever says, of
...renewed dignity and calm. With the waning of passion, the demands of life in the world of men are heard again and answered. (p. 81)

The frenzied circle of charming pursuit, slender hope, vigorous chase, disillusionment, and defeat finally runs itself to lifelessness. Human emotion, as well as human endeavor, is not without limit. As one slows the emotional pace, the real situation becomes clear. Astrophil, at least, sees his situation clearly. The reader is reminded from time to time through the sequence that courtier duties are being neglected but these reminders act only as acknowledgements which intensify the expressions of emotion. There is no particular urgency on the persona's part to return to his obligations. Now, with a clear-headed look at his situation, one can easily read into his lines some relief as Astrophil requests that Stella release the gentle irons from his heart, so that he may again resume his work. Putzel's note on sonnet 107 says that Astrophil

...speaks with dignity and renewed strength, affirming the divine powers of his mistress and the ennobling power of love itself.

The reader realizes, with the persona, that one cannot perform nobly while riding a carousel, or its emotional equivalent.
The sequence, up to sonnet 107, has fulfilled the purpose of Sidney's description of a true poet who feigns...notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by. (Defence, p. 10)

Astrophil has met vice, has received "delightful teaching," and stands virtuous, not only as the Defence's moral philosopher would have him, replenished...with many infallible grounds of wisdom, which notwithstanding lie dark before the imaginative and judging power...(p. 15),

but rather with these "infallible grounds of wisdom"

...illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy. (p. 15)

Not only does Sidney's artistry give his future reader an insight into the exaggerated human emotionalism and introspection in which nearly everyone indulges himself at one time or another, but he also gives his contemporaries a chance to step back from a tradition which has wandered from its original ideal. The courtly love tradition has become a sickly mockery of its first aim of serving as an example of mannerly behavior. The continuing attempts by "Pindar's apes" (3.3) to indulge an excessively imitated literary fancy had become the
brunt of jokes for literary critics as well as the non-literary public. Sidney was successful in treating courtly love in the more worldly-wise manner called for in the late sixteenth-century and in the process he was also successful in renewing some of the respect for poetic artistry which was missing from the contemporary scene.

Critics frequently comment on the "inconclusiveness" of the cycle. Putzel's note on the final sonnet says

> The inconclusiveness of this sonnet does not detract from its power or finality, for the entire structure of the cycle leads to irresolution.... It is not unfitting that the work should end with a familiar discord, for the kind of love it celebrates is incapable of bringing peace.

Lever, likewise, says

> The last sonnet of Astrophil and Stella is an inconclusive lament....

(p. 82)

According to David Kalstone,

> ...the cycle comes to no fitting conclusion; it merely ends. (p. 178)

Readers often prefer the "peace" Putzel speaks of. Victorian readers often insisted upon it. Lever says that Grosart, a nineteenth-century editor, appended "Thou blind man's marke..." and "Leave me o Love...," two of Sidney's poems which are not connected with the
sonnet cycle. This appendage was apparently an attempt to satisfy such preference. These two poems provided a retraction of the previous poems and songs and "...an irrevocable farewell...every word of which breathes resolution and spiritual integrity" (Lever, p. 82). Since there is no sixteenth-century precedent for their inclusion, they have been dropped from editions since Grosart's.

Sidney, the poet, demonstrates that he is indeed "...beloved of the gods..." and that what he wrote in his Astrophil and Stella proceeded "...of a divine fury..." (Defence, p. 53). I will not go so far as to join the artist in all of his curse upon defamers of poetry. I shall not hope that

...when you die, your memory die from the earth, for want of an epitaph, (p. 53)

but regard and admiration for the high principles of Sidney's Defence of Poesy and the delicate art and subtle irony of his Astrophil and Stella demand that I join him in his denouncement to such defamers

...that while you live you live in love, and never get a favour, for lacking skill of a sonnet. (p. 53)
Notes

1 Sir Philip Sidney, Defence of Poesy, ed. Dorothy M. Macardle, B.A. (New York: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1919), p. 7. (The edition cited follows Arber's reprint of the Olney edition, printed in 1595, which was entitled An Apologie for Poetrie. All further references to Sidney's Defence of Poesy will be to this edition and will be indicated in the text by page number only.)

2 Sir Philip Sidney, Astrophil and Stella, ed. Max Putzel (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1967). (All references to Sidney's Astrophil and Stella will be to this edition, with sonnet numbers and lines indicated in the text.)


6 Kalstone, p. 172.


10 Hallett Smith, Elizabethan Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press); see pp. 135-140 for discussion of paradoxical symptoms of the sonnet hero.


12 Kalstone, p. 178.
Bibliography


