

Corrupted Platonism in *Astrophil and Stella*: The Expression of Desire

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Astrophil's love for Stella is not the conventional Platonic love of Petrarchist poems. We cannot fully consider him the romantic lover who aspires to a spiritual enjoying of his lady's virtues and beauty for, though he attempts to represent his feelings according to the parameters of Platonism, he also makes his basest sexual desire flourish in many of the sonnets or songs of *Astrophil and Stella*. It is not that his begins by being a pure love that progressively degenerates into a blatant expression of his sexual needs due to an increase of his desire. The material nature of his love as opposed to spiritual love is obvious from the very beginning of the sequence. It is, however, a fact that Astrophil does frequently express his amorous feeling by means of Platonic topics such as the correspondence between physical beauty and spiritual virtue, as in sonnet 48 when he refers to Stella's eyes as "where Virtue is made strong by Beautie's might" (l. 2) or that he identifies himself with the agonizing lover of Petrarchist sequences who suffers the wounds of Cupid as in sonnet 20: "Fly, fly, my friends, I have my death wound" (l. 1) or with the slave of his beloved as in sonnet 47: "What, have I thus betrayed my libertie?" (l. 1). But the Platonic representation of his love is continually corrupted by frequent ironic allusions to it and to sexual desire. It is a fact that the material inclinations of his love are less obvious in the first quarter of the sequence, where the violation of spiritual love is only indirectly expressed under the appearance of conventional love sonnets; but it is approximately from sonnet 46 that the sexual irony becomes more obvious and Astrophil gives freedom to his basest instincts.

His sexual discourse becomes a subversive element in the sequence because not only does it attempt against the literary conventions of the Platonic expression of love, but it also means a rebellious attitude towards the strict moral and religious canons of Elizabethan England. With his ironic allusions to sex, Astrophil questions the spirituality of love proclaimed by Neoplatonism, which meant a way of reconciling love to religion. P. A. Miller emphasizes the subversive implications of the sequence when he affirms that:

(...) *Astrophil and Stella* presents its audience with an open-ended, self-questioning lyric consciousness whose ultimate implications (if not actions) are subversive of the established order, especially when paired with the witty sexuality and materialism of the Ovidian tradition. (1991: 551)

Virtue, alas, now let me take some rest,
Thou sets a bate betweene my will and wit,
If vaine love has my simple soule opprest,
Leave what thou likest not, deale not thou with it.
Thy scepter use in some old Catoe's brest; 5
Churches or Schooles are for thy seate more fit:

(...)

But if that needs thou will usurping be,
The little reason that is left in me, 10
And still th'effect of thy perswasions prove:
I swear, my heart such one shall show to thee,
That shrines in flesh so true a Deity,
That Vertue, thou thyselfe shalt be in love.
(ll. 1-6, 9-14)

With terms such as “usurping” (l. 9) or “perswasions” (l. 11) the lover reveals that Virtue, one of the main Platonic values of love, is an obstacle for the free development of his will. If the rejection of Virtue is in itself an attack against the established moral precepts, Astrophil emphasizes his rebellious attitude when he associates it to churches or schools, declaring himself not fit for such a high level; Alan Sinfield (1980: 30) affirms that “Astrophil confronts the Christian implications of passionate love by relegating virtue to *Churches*”. Having stated that his feelings are not virtuous, he calls his love “vaine love” in line 3, he dares use Christian language to express his idolatry to Stella (l. 12-14); he refers in religious terms to a love that is far from being a religious feeling, as Platonic love is considered. When referring to his beloved in terms that make alusion to Christ's incarnation, his words can be considered close to blasphemy.

Once he has revealed the material nature of his love, Astrophil expresses in sonnet 5 his rebelliousness to the transcendentalism of Platonic love. At first, he adopts the reasonings that Pietro Bembo develops in *The Courtisan* regarding spiritual love:

It is most true that eyes are form'd to serve
The inward light: and that the heavenly part
Ought to be king, from whose rules who do swerve,
Rebels to Nature, strive from their own smart.
(ll. 1-4)

In these lines, the lover seems to accept the Platonic precept that pure love comes into the senses directly towards the heart or soul, which are the organs that relate love to the divinity. Those whose passion remains for ever in the senses, rebel to nature and suffer the anxiety that insatisfaction provokes. Astrophil also enunciates the correspondence between Beauty and Virtue established by Bembo: “True that true Beautie Virtue is indeed” (l. 9). However, in spite of these apparently orthodox utterances, the irony of line 14 transforms the preceeding lines into a mocking of the precepts they proclaim. Astrophil introduces it as the apparent conclusion of the preceeding lines: “True, and yet true that I must Stella love”. With this utterance, the young man seems to be trying to justify his love for Stella. Nevertheless, taking into account that on the opening sonnets of the sequence he has made evident the material inclinations of his love (sonnet 1) and his rejection to virtue (sonnet 4), the logic between the four propositions contained on the first thirteen lines of sonnet 5 and its conclusion in line 14 can be considered quite absurd; the blatant truth that this final line proclaims contradicts the precepts expressed above. The whole sonnet 5 turns out to be a “false syllogism” as Odette de Mourgues (1953: 14) has called it because, as she affirms, the conclusion stands in contradiction of

the premisses. Line 14 has an adversative meaning and I agree with de Mourgues' paraphrasing of it as if the lover would be saying: "in spite of all these arguments and in spite of Stella's being only earthly beauty, I cannot help loving her" (1953: 14).

If the opening sonnets of the sequence warn us of the material nature of Astrophil's love, the abundant allusions to sexual desire of some of the following sonnets confirm this idea. We find that many of the Platonic topical images of pure love frequently used by Petrarchan poets are corrupted with sexual connotations. This is for instance the case of the simile between love and fire that, although it also appears with the Platonic purity of Petrarchan sequences, in sonnet 46 adopts really obscene connotations. The flames of love that in sonnet 25 had their origin in the lover's soul ("Strange flames of *Love* it [*virtue*] in our soules would raise", l. 4), in sonnet 46 need to be fed by the material fuel of sex. Astrophil feels pity for Cupid, who is now hungry of Stella's food after her repeated refusals:

I curst thee oft, I pitie now thy case,
Blind-hitting boy, since she that thee and me
Rules with a becke, so tyrannized thee,
That thou must want or food, or dwelling place.
For she protests to banish thee her face, 5
Her face? O Love, a Rogue thou then shouldst be,
If Love learne not alone to love and see,
Without desire to feed a further grace.

(...)

Yet Deare, let me this pardon get of you,
So long (though he from booke myche to desire)
Till without fewell you can make hot fire.
(ll. 1-8, 12-14)

In lines 7 and 8 Astrophil utters a protest on behalf of Cupid against the Platonic idea that love must be satisfied just by the visual enjoying of the beloved's beauty and not by the satisfaction of any further desire. On the closing lines, he offers his sympathy to Cupid for his suffering as long as his sexual needs continue being unsatisfied by Stella's rejection, that is, till that day when the flames of love can be maintained without any sexual stimulation.

In sonnet 76 the lover describes how, while his lady is coming near him, light and warmth invade his senses:

She comes, and streight therewith her shining twins do move
Their rayes to me, who in her tedious absence lay
Benighted in cold wo, but now appeares my day,
The onely light of joy, the onely warmth of *Love*.
(ll. 1-4)

However, the images of light and warmth of the opening lines are transformed in allusions to the sexual heat her nearness provokes on him and that is the cause of an erection, as Sinfield (1974) interprets it:

But lo, while I do speake, it groweth noone with me,
Her flamie glistring lights increase with time and place;
My heart cries 'ah', it burnes, mine eyes now dazled be:
No wind, no shade can coole, what help then in my case,

But with short breath, long lookes, staid feet and walking hed,
Pray that my sunne go downe with meeke beames to bed.
(ll. 9-14)

The double meaning of the expression “it groweth noone with me” (l. 9) makes reference on one hand to the increase of heat the lover suffers due to Stella’s rays, and on the other, to the erection itself, that is the real cause of this heat. Lines 13 and 14 suggest that a sexual intercourse would be the only way of appeasing his sexual desire, that is, of making his “sunne go downe (...) to bed” (l. 14).

In the same way that the fire of pure love becomes the heat of sexual need, the grace that Astrophil aspires to obtain from Stella is that of her sexual favours. Though the term “grace” does frequently refer in the sequence to the lady’s pity for her suffering lover (sonnet 1, l. 4; sonnet 44, l. 6), or it is used to name Stella as if it were a title of nobility (sonnet 12, l. 6), or it also refers to her virtues in general (sonnet 27, l. 14), in sonnet 46, for instance, it acquires obvious sexual implications; as we have previously commented, he expresses in this sonnet his rejection of a kind love that is not to be fed by a “further grace” (l. 8). This clear allusion to sex corrupts the purity with which this term could be appearing in other sonnets of the sequence and makes us doubt of its meaning in examples such as when the lover confesses that “long thy grace hath sought” (sonnet 40, l. 7). What is Astrophil really longing to obtain when gaining Stella’s grace? In sonnet 52 he identifies this concept of “grace” with her physical qualities and expresses his desire of having her just in her material form; he disdains her heart, whose only owner is Virtue:

And therefore, though her Beautie and her grace
Be *Love’s* indeed, in *Stella’s* selfe he may
By no pretence claime any maner place.
Well *Love*, since this demurre our sute doth stay,
Let *Virtue* but that body grant to us.
(ll. 9-14)

The concept of ‘grace’ appears now related to physical love and loses the spirituality it had in previous sonnets, questioning also its meaning in later ones. Nona Fienberg (1985: 8) suggests that the term grace is an euphemism for “sexual desire”.

The kiss is another element in the sequence that loses its Platonic mysticism in favour of an erotic treatment. In Song II Astrophil kisses Stella while she is taking a nap; the lover considers this deed as just the preliminaries of a loving affair (“Who will read must first learne spelling”, l. 24) and he never shows the Platonic interest of the union of souls, which is the main aim of a chaste kiss. On the opposite, he laments not having taken more profit of that opportunity: “Foole, more foole, for no more taking” (l. 28). In sonnet 79 Astrophil insists on the idea that kisses precede a more satisfying encounter calling them “breakefast of Love” (l. 13). At the beginning of sonnet 81 he seems to repent for his taking advance of Stella’s sleeping and acknowledges the mysticism of kisses: “O kisse, which soules, even soules together ties” (l. 5); however, the sonnet concludes with an ironic proposal to Stella that she should kiss him herself as the only way of avoiding him kissing her again: “Then since (deare life) you faine would have me peace, / And I, mad with delight, want wit to cease, / Stop you my mouth with still still kissing me. (ll. 12-14).

Besides the erotism of the kiss, we find in the whole sequence some details that reveal the Ovidian sensuality of Astrophil’s feeling for Stella. In *Amores* (1979: II, XV) Ovid envies Corina’s ring because it touches her finger, runs over her breast or falls into her bosom; with the same sensuality, Astrophil comments the privilege of Stella’s dog: “Yet while I languish, him that bosome clips, / That lap doth lap, nay lets, in spite of spite, / This sowre-breath’d mate tast of those sugred lips” (sonnet 59, ll. 9-11).

The Latin poet makes allusion to the beauty of his beloved's legs and considers them an indicator of the worth of some nearby hidden parts: "I suspect from them that all else, too, that lies well hidden under your delicate gown, might please" (Ovid 1979: III, II, 451). In sonnet 77 Astrophil praises Stella's intellectual virtues and the beauty of many of her outward parts by means of a conventional blazon, but he argues that it is not possible to mention the best of all them because it would cause even his Muse's blushing: "(...)That in no more but these I might be fully blest: / Yet ah, my Mayd'n Muse doth blush to tell the best" (ll. 13-14). He does not specify the meaning of 'the best', however, he suggests with irony that it is something which would cause blush in an innocent maid.

Song IV is a clear example of Astrophil sexual aims; the lover meets Stella by night at her own house and tries to convince her that this is the ideal occasion for making some advances in their love. He mentions that the moonlight reveals her beauty and raises his desire: "This small light the Moone bestowes, / Serves thy beames but to disclose, / So to raise my hap more high" (ll. 19-21). The raising of his happiness "more high" seems to be suggesting an erection that ends with the deception caused by Stella's refusal: "Cursed be my destines all, / That brought me so high to fall" (ll. 51-52). This song is one of the clearest examples of humour in the sequence because it blatantly reveals Astrophil's desires employing a persuasive rhetoric aimed at convincing Stella of a sexual intercourse.

Although the sequence contains many sonnets which develop the beloved's extolling in Platonic terms, we have observed that Astrophil rebels against the spirituality of this conception of love and feels inclined to a physical encounter with Stella. If he sometimes tries to be in line with Platonism, the irony with which he refers to its precepts in other occasions and, what is more, the evident allusions to sex, make us consider these attempts of conventionality as one of the strategies to gain her favour.

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