

***ASTROPHIL AND
STELLA: AN
UNPROFITABLE
RELATIONSHIP?***

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In his *Defence of Poesie*, Sidney insists on poetry as a means of attaining “fruitful knowledge” and thus he underlines its profitable nature. This seems quite coherent with the spirit of his narrative production, but reading closely his sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, the same conclusion is not so obvious. The poems are quite controversial as regards their moral benefit, and moreover the story-line that can be traced is one of loss and frustration. To what extent can these sonnets be read as a profitable composition? The dialogue that can be established between the *Defence* and *Astrophil and Stella* will lead the argumentation put forward in this paper.

On the SEDERI Conference at Huelva, we delivered a paper in which we analysed how Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie* is pervaded by a vocabulary that makes of poetry a puritan value based on the ideas of profit, usefulness and action. Inspired by the suggestion of an attendant at that lecture, we have decided to pursue this topic, only this time searching for that same idea of fruitfulness and profit in Sidney’s actual production of poetry and, more specifically, in his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*.

Defence of Poesie and *Astrophil and Stella* were both written between the first composition and the revision of the *Arcadia* so we can group them together in one period of Sidney’s career and assume that they should share some common ideas about the value and purpose of poetry. However, when read together, it is outstanding how apparently contradictory they are.

In the first place, in the *Defence*, Sidney does not even assume the role of himself as a poet. He goes as far as considering himself a “paper blurrer,” but when it comes to the title of poet he confesses: “I never desired the title, so have I neglected the meanes to come by it, onely overmastered by some thoughts, I yeilded an inckie tribute unto them.” And with this “them” he definitely excludes himself from the group of acknowledged “poets.” It is also surprising how when he comes to analyze the “Lyricall” mode he advises that it should better be employed in praising “the immortal bewtie, the immortall goodness of

that God,”¹ whereas love poets are dismissed as false and awkward: “If I were a mistress, would never persuade me they were in love.” This seems totally inconsistent with the spirit of a man that wrote 108 sonnets plus eleven songs inspired by the love of a woman. Such considerations should place the composition of *Astrophil and Stella* after and not before the composition of the *Defence*, that would make more sense, at least from the point of view of internal evidence in the text; however, important critics believe it was written in the opposite order, which creates an apparent inconsistency in Sidney’s words.²

But the greater incongruity is apparently manifest when we try to come to terms with the moralising position of the *Defence* as regards *Astrophil and Stella*. The love story that is portrayed in the sonnet sequence is one that, despite the claims of the star lover to cultivate a virtuous love (sonnets 25 and 64), is burdened by the unavoidable presence of desire and sexual attraction. Moreover, the lover, halfway through the sequence, assaults the sleeping lady to rob her of a kiss and is clearly unsatisfied with the timidity of his act as he recriminates himself “fool for no more taking” (2nd song). Later on, his penitence is not a question of repentance for the sexual course his love has taken, but just of sorrow for having lost the favour of Stella (sonnets 94 to 99).

The aim of Sidney when writing these poems does not seem to follow exactly the precepts he exposes in the *Defence* regarding the mission of the poet: “to draw us to as high a perfection, as our degenerate souls can be capable of” or, in another passage, to “teach to make them (the readers) know that goodness whereunto they are moved.” The reader of the sonnet sequence would not be moved to “vertuous action” because the example of the lover leads us away from virtue into frustration and passivity. The sequence does not “giveth praise, the reward of virtue to vertuous acts,” on the contrary, action is counterpoised by passivity and virtue by lust and sexual desire as is seen in sonnets (52, 63, 72 and songs 2 and 8, among the most notable). Sidney seems to make real in writing his sonnets the very same arguments he attributes to “poet haters” in the *Defence*: “that poets abuseth mens wit, training it to wanton sinfulness and lustfull love.” But instead of refuting this type of argument, Sidney admits that poesie being abused “can do more hurt than any other army

¹The same idea was to be found a few years later in the essay by Robert Southwell In Praise of Religious Poetry (Vickers 1999: 395). Actually, that was the course that lyric poetry would follow at that time. Lyric poetry, and love poetry particularly, was one of the main targets of the attacks of the puritans. More or less timid defences of it can be found in works such as Elyot’s *The Value of Poetry in Education* and Puttenham’s *English Poetics and Rhetoric*.

²In his edition of Sidney’s *Defence*, B. Vickers assumes it is probable that the sonnets were written before the *Defence*, but also admits the oddness of Sidney’s words in such a case: “Only, overmastered by some thoughts, I yielded an inky tribute unto them” (1999: 379). Katherine Duncan Jones quotes these same words to illustrate Sidney’s contribution to love poetry (1986: 174).

of words,” and the only solution he suggests is to put poesie “upon the right use.”

Can *Astrophil and Stella* be considered the right use of poetry? It is at least enigmatic. Whereas in *Defence of Poesie* Sidney puts great emphasis in the profit that the reader should obtain from literature through its moral teaching, the sonnet sequence cannot be easily considered as an example of virtuous action; therefore, the profit of the reader at this level might be discarded at first. Still, we can ask ourselves what other profit, if any, could have Sidney obtained from writing *Astrophil and Stella*. We only need to read the first verses of the first sonnet of the sequence to learn what is Astrophil’s (not necessarily Sidney’s) confessed object in writing the sonnets:

Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
That the deare She might take some pleasure of my paine:
Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know
Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine.

Astrophil wants to obtaine the grace of his “deare She” (which is the conventional purpose of all lovers in this type of compositions), and his declared means of obtaining this grace is through the process of stimulating in his lady pleasure and pity. This sounds extremely familiar with the “delightful teaching” that Sidney ascribes to poetry in the *Defense*. Poetry should “delight to move men to take that goodnesse in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger.” And here we can find a clear connection between both works in that the means of obtaining a benefit, be it didactic or emotional, is sustained on the idea of pleasure, pleasure as a kind of bait to facilitate access to his goal. Pleasure drives us towards literature and therefore towards learning in the *Defense*, whereas in the sonnet sequence Astrophil uses this same pleasure of poetry to try to obtain Stella’s favour. Pleasure and delight are therefore the recurring elements in both works.

However, this strategy turns out to be a failure when put to practice, at least in the outcome of *Astrophil and Stella’s* plot. Astrophil never gets Stella’s favour, all he gets is a stolen kiss and later on reproach and disdain. Read from this perspective, *Astrophil and Stella* recounts a story where no profit is obtained from either part. Images of loss and poverty can be read in different sonnets and the sequence traces a metaphoric process that leads Astrophil from an initial state of poverty to the ambition of Stella’s richness, to total bankruptcy at the end.

To illustrate this we can start by quoting sonnet 18, where a conceit with poverty is developed as the lover recognises he is “bankrout”:

Unable quite to pay even Nature's rent,
Which unto it by birthright I do owe:

The cause of this bankruptcy, however, is not the lady as could be expected, but is attributed to his own fault as having been incapable of proving worthy of his initial expectations in life.

It is well known, both to his contemporary audience and to later generations, how Sidney led a life of social frustrations as the positions and titles he was expecting to inherit were lost when his uncle, the Earl of Leicester, married and had a son at an unexpected advanced age. Moreover, the incident in which he sent a letter to the queen advising her against her marriage to the French Duke of Alençon discredited him for a time as unfit for official offices at a high level. This biographical evidence has led a number of critics to interpret *Astrophil and Stella* as a political metaphor in which Astrophil's impossible love should be interpreted as a symbol of Sidney's unsuccessful social career.³ Sonnet 18 is an evident comment on his status in court which he laments, but all the responsibility derives from his own fault:

And which is worse, no good excuse can show
But that my wealth I have most idly spent.
My youth doth waste, my knowledge brings forth toys,
My wit doth strive those passions to defend,
Which for reward spoil it with vaine annoyes.
I see my course to lose my selfe doth bend:
I see and yet no greater sorow take,
Then that I lose no more for Stella's sake.

Stella is only mentioned in the last verse, appearing as a secondary concern which should be mentioned for the sake of conventionality, and even then it is ambiguous whether he wants to keep the little he has got left for Stella's benefit or whether he is afraid to lose more by Stella's cause. In any way that we interpret it, the result is the same, the poetical persona is pictured in deprivation and in the rest of the sequence this state of shortage is sought to be overcome thanks to Stella's richness. No matter if we prefer to read the sonnets as a story of love or as a story of material self seeking in the context of the court, the final result is unprofitable. A sad story of hope and loss.

The pun that Sidney plays in sonnets 24, 35 and 37 with Penelope's married surname, "Rich," is sufficiently known and has been an important clue to identify the historical inspirer of Stella's character: Penelope Devereaux, married at the age of 18 to Lord Rich. But we can find more instances in which

³Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass affirm: "Even within the poems, the supposedly private sphere of love can be imagined only through its similarities and dissimilarities to the poetic world of the court" (1984: 34).

the metaphors of poverty and wealth recur. In sonnet 3 he says that “strange things cost too deare for my poor sprites,” in sonnet 62 we can read: “Alas, if this the only metal be / Of Love, new-coind to help my beggery, / Deare, love me not, that you may love me more.” In sonnet 68 he calls Stella “world of my wealth,” in sonnet 79 he describes the kiss he has stolen from Stella as “poore hope’s first wealth,” in the 5th song Astrophil accuses Stella: “But thou rich in all joyes, doest rob my joyes from me,” in the ninth song, once more against Stella, he calls her “only rich in mischief’s treasure,” and in the eleventh song he finally declares: “Let my chaunge to ruin be.”⁴

Notwithstanding all these considerations, the overall structure may be understood as pointing at a moralizing aim, if we assume a threefold division such as: 1) Infatuation within the Petrarchan tradition, in which the sexual aspect of love is clearly made explicit, 2) period of bliss, 3) serious disappointment. The key is found in the last two lines of sonnet 107, the penultimate of the sequence when Astrophil says: “O let no fools in me thy works reprove, / And scorning say, ‘see what is to love’.” But the sequence comes to an end in sonnet 108, and the petition of the poetic persona is not given a chance, rather proving what Astrophil is afraid it might prove, that love is a frustrating and destructive experience. This is the teaching that readers would obtain from this work, totally in agreement with the conception of literature underlying the *Defence*, according to which good and evil are imitated to encourage the one and discourage the other (Vickers 1999: 14).

The sonnets are also the best literary illustration that Sidney did ever produce of the *Defence*’s dictum that “since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is... our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.” The struggle between virtue and desire is nowhere better exemplified as in sonnet 71, with its so well-known ending:

As fast thy Vertue bends that love to good:
“But ah,” Desire still cries, “give me some food.”

Sidney is several times stating his personal plight as one of frustrated expectations in the socio-political arena.⁵

⁴In relation to this topic of material wealth, Richard M. Berrong analyses in an interesting article Sidney’s change of attitude in his *Arcadias*. Whereas in the first version, nearer to the composition of *A&S* than the other one, there is a fascination with wealth, as a sign of social and, moral quality, in the second the Protestant disdain of opulence is made explicit through a “...critique of wealth... aimed specifically at those who sought it without needing it or intending to use it” (1991: 340).

⁵In a reading in which love discourse is equated to the discourse of political ambition, Arthur F. Marotti states: “Lady Rich was for him, as was Anne Boleyn for Wyatt, a fit symbol of his unattained and unattainable social and political goals” (1982: 400).

For since mad March great promise made of me,
 If now the May of my yeares much decline,
 What can be hoped my harvest time will be?

What could that harvest be expected to be at this time of Sidney's life? Where could he find a way out for him to satisfy his personal ambitions? Clearly the activity he is carrying out in writing not only this sonnet sequence but the *Defence* itself and the *Arcadia*, with its revision, suggests that fame by poetry is what he was actually seeking, at least within the coterie readers he could find at court. Dorothy Connell states that "In redefining his way of being useful to the state, Sidney had already before 1580 begun to gravitate towards performing services of a literary nature at court" (1977: 102). His denial of this possibility in sonnet 90 is rather a confirmation of it than anything else: "Stella think not that I by verse seek fame." What need is there for such an unexpected declaration to be made nearly at the end of the sequence? Could it not be taken as proof of his bad conscience about the whole business? It is the same kind of statement as that mentioned at the beginning of this paper when in the *Defence* Sidney declares that he never desired the title of poet for himself. Who else but one who felt himself a poet could have written such a fervent defence of poetry? Thomas P. Roche considers that *Astrophil and Stella* responds absolutely to literary convention put to serve personal expectations: "Sidney as well as any other sonneteer knew that passion defeated in poetry could become praise, and thus he began his Penelope game not out of love but out of love poetry..."⁶ (1985: 222).

The language of loss and poverty in which *Astrophil* presents himself in these sonnets stresses the idea that his only wealth at the end of the sequence is that which may derive from his activity as a poet. In this way, *Astrophil and Stella* might be read as a supplement to the *Defence* as regards the issue of love poetry, proved through its practice to be profitable both for the reader and the author,⁷ and thus finally deserving the title of poetry in its best sense as understood in the *Defence*.

⁶Not only was he creating an image of himself as poet, but also, in Katherine Duncan-Jones' words, "Like many other Renaissance poets, the young Sidney fashioned a literary myth of himself as lover" (1986: 174).

⁷Thomas Elyot paraphrases the words of the puritans in their attacks against lyric poetry as follows: "...in the works of poets is contained nothing but bawdry (such is their foul word of reproach) and unprofitable (sic) leasings" (Vickers 1999: 65).

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