

# Some Comments on Sir Philip Sidney's *Certain Sonnets*: Heterogeneity and Unity

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In what is already a classical edition of Sir Philip Sidney's poetry, that by William Ringler in Oxford UP, we read in the introductory pages (devoted to giving an account of the whole of the Elizabethan writer's production) that during the years he spent in the actual writing of the "Old" *Arcadia*, his literary endeavours also had other interests: "In addition –Ringler remarks– he wrote a number of other poems, totally unconnected with the *Arcadia*, that he later collected under the title *Certain Sonnets*, all but two of which were composed before the end of 1581" (Ringler 1962: xlii). I would like to draw your attention to a precise point Ringler makes in the above mentioned lines: "he –meaning Sidney– later collected" are the actual words he uses. That is to say, he takes for granted –as scholars after him have done– that it was Sir Philip Sidney himself who was the person responsible for the putting together of what originally must have been a number of unconnected poems. The implication is that the grouping of them was an afterthought of the author, who did not even give a title to the collection as the name *Certain Sonnets*, by which we know them, appears for the first time in the folio edition of Sidney's works produced by the Countess of Pembroke in 1598. How much of a structure we can find in the collection, i.e. how much of a unifying principle keeping them together, is the question I am going to deal with in this paper.

It is apparently beyond any doubt that the temporal scope for the creation of all of the compositions in *Certain Sonnets* goes from 1577 to 1581. It encompasses, then, Sidney's first official mission abroad as ambassador to the Emperor Rudolph in Prague (February-June 1577) and his becoming a member of Parliament in 1581, his writing of a defence of his father's policies in Ireland, of *The Lady of May* (1578), the *Old Arcadia* and *The Defence of Poesie*, and his quarrel with the Earl of Oxford, probably on the projected marriage of the Queen to the Duke of Alençon, which he opposed. Additionally, it covers Spenser's dedication of the *Shepbeardes Calendar* to him, Penelope Devereux's marriage to Lord Rich and his beginning to write *Astrophil and Stella*.

We have here some external evidence which speaks in favour of the basic unity of *Certain Sonnets*, even when granted that it is of a negative nature. None of them were included in the *Old Arcadia*, they have nothing to do with *Astrophil and Stella*, Sir Philip did write other poems at the time (as the very detailed notes of Ringler show in his comments to the poems of miscellaneous nature he groups under the heading "Other Poems" in his previously quoted edition).

*Certain Sonnets* is the work by Sidney which has received the least attention by critics and scholars precisely on the dubious grounds of its heterogeneous nature. If its basic unity can be ascertained we would be facing the first important collection of poems written by a major Elizabethan writer.

Development which is, I think, of paramount importance in the literary history of the period.

In order to be able to attempt to determine whether such is the case with *Certain Sonnets*, we should start by establishing what we understand by “unity” when talking of works of this nature. In a narrow sense, the epitome of such writings is Petrarch and his sonnets on the subject of Laura. Sidney himself is following that model in his *Astrophil and Stella*: Lady Rich being the idealized object of his amorous complaints. As Mark R.G. Spiller puts it “since the sonnet is a very short poem, it has always had to be aggregated for transmission, or, if written as an occasional piece, inserted into its occasion (...). Some occasions are very evidently textual: epitaphs are intended to mark the place of the person now dead, so that the text as it were replaces the person; dedicatory or complimentary sonnets refer to the volume in which they occur. But most occasions –giving a present, professing love, sending a rebuke– do not assume a textual form, but vanish once they have been lived, and the sonnet remains as the only thing from which the occasion can be reconstructed” (Spiller 1992: 92). Petrarch, and Sidney in *Astrophil and Stella*, managed to solve that problem by using their lady as the unifying link.

That is not the case with our collection. Ringler concisely describes it as “a gathering of thirty-two poems of various kinds”. In many ways, this is a generic description that is, at the same time, as accurate as accurate can be. Three of the poems are translations from Latin (the ones numbered 12 –Horace–, 13 and 14 –Catullus–) and two from Spanish (numbers 28 and 29, both by Montemayor). Only thirteen of the poems are, strictly speaking, sonnets: this could be shocking in the first place. But it is not so if we pay attention to the actual usage of the term “sonnet” at the time. We know that the reference in Italian and Provençal was originally to a short lyrical poem. And, as M. Spiller clearly states in his book on the development of the sonnet “In Britain... throughout the sixteenth century and even in the seventeenth, the word ‘sonnet’, particularly in the phrase ‘songs and sonnets’, often meant no more than a ‘light poem’”: not always short, and not always lyric, since in some collections ballads are called ‘sonnets’ (Spiller 1992: 94). *Tottel’s Miscellany* is a good example of this circumstance, being the title in its first edition that of *Songes and Sonettes* (1557). Barnabe Googe’s small volume under the title *Eclogues, Epitaphs, and Sonets*, printed in 1563, is an even better example as not one of the poems under the heading “sonnets” corresponds to our conception of such a composition. George Gascoigne tried to solve the confusion by offering a definition which reads as follows: “some thinke that all Poemes (being short) may be called Sonets, as in deede it is a diminutive worde derived of *Sonare*, but yet I can beste allow to call those Sonnets whiche are of fourtene lynes, every line conteyning tenne syllables. The first twelve do rhyme in staves of foure lines by cross meetre, and the last two ryming together do conclude the whole” (Spiller 1992: 95). After these considerations, the apparent formal heterogeneity of *Certain Sonnets* has to be reconsidered: Sidney, when christening his collection by the name of “sonnets”, was following the usual pattern of behaviour of his time. It is true that the bulk of it is formed by short compositions of between 15 to 20 lines, but together with them we also find seven stanza poems that have as many as 70 verses (such is the case of n° 22, “The Seven Wonders of England”). On the other hand, we come across 2 line long poems, as n° 14, paraphrased from Seneca: “Faire seeke not to be feard, most lovely beloved by thy servants / for true it is, that they feare many whom many feare”.

If we pay attention for a while to the question of metrics, here again we find that diversity is the rule. We have several examples of quantitative verses, some of which are really unique. Take, for instance, poem n° 7 (*vide* textual appendix, poem n° 1), a song to the tune of the Spanish “Si tú señora te dueles de mí”, being the first “true accentual trochaics in English” (as n° 26 and 27, again two songs –on Italian airs in

this occasion—). But we also have rhymed quantitative verse in n° 5 (n° 2 in the textual appendix), sapphics rhyming abab; quantitative elegiacs in his translations of Catullus, “terza rima” for Horace (metre used in English for the first time by Sir Thomas Wyatt). He would also use “eights and sixes” in his translation of Montemayor to render the original Spanish octosyllables (10 quatrains rhyming abba, “redondillas”) in the poem n° 28, the initial line being the famous “¡Cabellos, cuánta mudança!”, a traditional depiction of the fickleness of love. Sir Philip’s version was later on included in the most famous anthology of pastoral literature of the time, *Englands Helicon*.

Summing this point up what we have here is (in Ringler’s words) “a variety of metrical forms which show the range and variety of Sidney’s poetical experiments even beyond the multiplicity of kinds he had essayed in the eclogues and songs of the *Old Arcadia*” (Ringler 1962: xlii) (in a way this characteristic reminds us of the work by Montemayor, already quoted —*Los siete libros de la Diana*— which is one of the books in Spanish with a larger collection of poems written using different metrical forms). Of course, “it is not ryming and versing that maketh a Poet” (Feuillerat 1912: 10), that Sidney himself states in his *Defence of Poesie*, but we cannot forget that “the Senate of Poets hath chosen verse as their fittest raiment” and poets try to convey meaning “not speaking table talke fashion, or like men in a dreame, words as they chanceably fall from the mouth, but peasing each sillable of eache word by just proportion, according to the dignitie of the subject” (Feuillerat 1912: 11). Sir Philip abides by his principles and he offers a large display of metrical forms in *Certain Sonnets*. But, once more, we can find a common thread in practically all of them: either they were originally conceived to be sung or were adapted for such an aim later on.

Now, I wonder whether we could consider the occasions in which the poems were conceived as a kind of cement holding them together. A pretty good number of them were written because, as M. Spiller puts it “some occasions are very evidently textual”. Let us examine this point with some more attention.

When wondering on the essential nature of *Certain Sonnets*, Katherine Duncan-Jones, in the notes to her critical edition of the major works of our poet, comes to the conclusion that there is a basic difference between this collection and *Astrophil and Stella*: “Whereas in AS *Astrophil* is isolated from his friends and his obsession with Stella, CS has a high proportion of light, easy lyrics with a manifest or implicit social setting—the four sonnets ‘made when his lady had pain in her face’ (8-11), the sonnet written to complement one by his friend Dyer (16), the ‘Seven Wonders’ poem which takes its bearing from his sister’s house at Wilton (22), and a scattering of translations in which he may have been trying his hand alongside friends and relations” (Duncan-Jones 1989: 338). If we take Duncan-Jones’ suggestion as a working hypothesis I think we could easily add more poems to the list: all of the songs could be considered lyrics with a manifest social setting; n° 15, apparently associated with a tiltyard appearance, or n° 20, with the heading “A farewell”, could on their own turn be included in the group of those having “an implicit social setting”.

Of course, a more detailed study of the poems and the precise time when they were composed might add more of them to the aforementioned classification. And this could have a dramatic effect on the problem we are considering in this paper: somehow, we would be able to draw a dividing line between *Certain Sonnets* and *Astrophil and Stella*. They would belong to two completely different worlds: that of the public and that of the private. And, then, we would have not a negative criterion as the defining element of the collection, but a positive one (being it manifest or implicit, conscious or not), very much related to Sidney’s essential quality: that of the courtier and its basic characteristic, public life.

There are two more criteria I would like to consider in this brief examination of CS, as both of them are obvious and determinant of a possible final statement on the matter we are dealing with: those of topic and tone.

If asked what CS is about, could we find an answer, even in the most general terms? The structure and organization of the poems could be a first clue we have to take into account. Both Ringler and Duncan-Jones, in their editions of Sidney's poetry, underline the fact that the author produced not one, but several possible orderings of the material in CS. The sequence, as we know it, "has a beginning—the two sonnets yielding to love— and an end—love's funeral, followed by the two sonnets rejecting desire in favour of 'higher things'" (Duncan-Jones 1989: 338). Could, then, we say that they are simply love lyrics? There is not a figure that stands clear as the recipient of those romantic protests, and what is much more important, not all of the poems, by any means, are the expression of amorous feeling strictly speaking. At least, not in the same sense as we would say that of *Astrophil and Stella*. This said, we have to accept that, stereotyped or not, the amorous feeling pervades the whole of the collection: the first two compositions, as we have already mentioned, represent the author's yielding to love. In n° 3 the poet is already complaining of the terrible effects of love on him and there is an appeal to the forces of nature to deliver him from his lover's power: "Alas, from all their helps I am exiled,/ for hers am I, and death feares her displeasure./ Fie death, thou are beguiled,/ though I be hers, she makes of me no treasure". If we proceed to n° 4 we come across the mythological episode of Theseus and Philomela's and we find that Sidney is comparing his own destiny to that of the woman, raped by her brother-in-law and transformed into a nightingale, and affirming that he has fared worse (shocking as it may seem to contemporary eyes, Sir Philip seems to imply that rape springs from an excess in love!): "O Philomela fair, o take some gladness,/ that here is juster cause of plaintful sadness;/ thine earth new springs, mine fadeth;/ thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth" (this song was one of the most popular pieces by our author at the time). In n° 5 we have a lament for the absence of his love and so on. Before going any further we have to underline a constant characteristic, ever present in the collection: the feeling of grief, complaint, and negativity of which it is imbued. Even those compositions exalting the vividness of the pleasure of looking at his love (a very Platonic setting, indeed, and not very common in Sidney's production, as Duncan-Jones remarks) also share in this gloomy atmosphere. Take, for instance, the song that makes n° 7 in CS. The last stanza reads as follows:

"O fair, ô sweet, when I do look on thee,  
 In whom all joyes so well agree,  
 Heart and soule do sing in me.  
 Sweet, thinke not I am at ease  
 For because my cheefe part singeth,  
 This song from deathe's sorrow springeth:  
 As to Swanne in last disease:  
 For no dumbness nor death bringeth  
 Stay to true love's melody:  
 Heart and soule do sing in me"

Even those poems of a lighter nature, which are apparently less concerned with personal feelings, or

the topic of which would invite us to think of having a smaller engagement on the part of the poet present links with this pessimistic general tone. Such is the case in his translations of Catullus and Seneca (poems n° 13 and 14), proverbial in nature and dealing with the fickleness of women in love, and the topic of the “mulier brava”. Duncan-Jones strikes this precise point when she underlines the basic opposition between the brightness of social life and the high expectations of Sidney as a courtier and how reality somehow fell short of those expectations: “the splendid rhetorical show of the public courtier conceals inward torment, though for some of his audience the concealment may be effective (...) the attentive reader will find that time and again deep misery is swelling up beneath the bright, witty, metrically assured surface of Sidney’s verse lines” (Duncan-Jones 1989: xii). Even though she is thinking basically of *Astrophil and Stella*, I think that every word of her statement is also true for CS.

We cannot honestly say that there is a drastic difference in tone or topic between CS and other works by Sidney that would constitute the foundation of its unity. In a very recent article on our collection Paul A. Marquis offers a rereading of it arguing the hypothesis of Sidney’s using the poem-endedness of a miscellany “to textualize the paradox of human desire: the poet-lover is seen at once longing for the fulfilment of sexual consummation while at the same time he is drawn to the possibility of spiritual renewal” (Marquis 1994: 75). The whole of CS is seen by Marquis as a confrontation between sexuality and virtue and I think he has a point there: there is a constant concern in the collection (and I have already made reference to it) with the drawbacks of being in love, subject to the will of another person, or simply subject to the rules of a feeling that controls behaviour on the basis of whimsicality and, practically always, pain. Tempting as it seems for its basically simple explanatory power Marquis’s hypothesis is difficult to conciliate with every one of the poems in CS (and he has to go to dubious extremes to justify his assertion).

I am more in the line of the reasoning produced by Gary Waller, which is, I think, more transcendent: “What Sidney uniquely brought to the Petrarchan lyric was a self-conscious anxiety about the dislocation of courtly celebration and Protestant inwardness, between the insecurity of man’s word and the absolute claims of God’s word” (Waller 1986: 142). Even if that means having to give up at least part of our aspirations of finding a clear and concrete leit-motiv as unquestionable proof of CS unity and homogeneity, it comes more to terms, in my opinion, with the essential characteristics of the collection. I think we cannot—and we should not try to (there is no need for that)—find a basic distinctiveness of tone and/or topic as determinant factors in the existence of CS as a whole. We do not need either a Laura or a Stella. What we have here is the voice of the man who was the embodiment of the idea of the perfect courtier, as opposed to the intimate character of *Astrophil and Stella*. The expression of the worries and dilemmas of a man who had to live most of his life in the limelight of the court.

## TEXTUAL APPENDIX

Poem n° 1:

O faire, ô sweet, when I do looke on thee,  
In whom all joyes so well agree,

Heart and soule do sing in me.  
 This you heare is not my tongue,  
 Which once said what I conceived,  
 For it was of use bereaved,  
 With a cruell answer stong.  
 No, though tongue to roofe be cleaved,  
 Fearing least he chastisde be,  
 Heart and soule do sing in me.

O faire, O sweete, when I do looke on thee,  
 In whom all joyes so well agree,  
 Heart and soule do sing in me.  
 Just accord all musike makes;  
 In thee just accord excelleth,  
 Where each part in such peace dwelleth,  
 One of other beautie takes.  
 Since then truth to all minds telleth,  
 That in thee lives harmonie,  
 Heart and soule do sing in me.

O faire, O sweet, when I do looke on thee,  
 In whom all joyes so well agree,  
 Heart and soule do sing in me.  
 They that heav'n have knowne, do say  
 That who so that grace obtaineth,  
 To see what faire sight there raigneth,  
 Forced are to sing alway;  
 So then since that heaven remaineth,  
 In thy face I plainly see,  
 Heart and soule do sing in me.

O faire, O sweete, when I do looke on thee,  
 In whom all joyes so well agree,  
 Heart and soule do sing in me.  
 Sweete thinke not I am at ease,  
 For because my cheefe part singeth,  
 This song from deathe's sorrow springeth:  
 As to Swanne in last disease:  
 For no dumbnesse nor death bringeth  
 Stay to true love's melody:  
 Heart and soule do sing in me.

## Poem n° 2

O my thoughtes' sweete foode, my ownely owner,  
 O my heavens for taste by thie heavenly pleasure,  
 O the fayre *Nymph*e borne to doo woemen honor,  
 Lady my Treasure.

Where bee now those Joyes, that I lately tasted?  
 Where bee nowe those eyes ever Inly persers?  
 Where bee now those wordes never Idelly wasted,  
 Woundes to Rehersers?

Where ys Ah that face, that a Sunne defaces?  
 Where bee those wellcomes by no worthe deserved?  
 Where bee those movinges, the Delights, the graces?  
 Howe bee wee swerved?

O hideous absence, by thee am I thralld.  
 O my vayne worde gon, Ruyn of my glory.  
 O deue allegiance, by thee am I called  
 Still to be sory.

But no more wordes, though (?such) a worde bee spoken,  
 Nor no more wording with a worde to spill mee.  
 Peace Due alledgeance, Duty must bee broken,  
 Yf Duety kill mee.

Then come, O come, then I do come, receyve (mee),  
 Slay mee not, for stay doo not hyde thy blisses,  
 But betweene those armes, never else do leave mee;  
 Give mee my kisses.

O my Thoughtes' sweete foode, my (my) onely Owner,  
 O my heavens for Taste, by thy heavenly pleasure,  
 O the fayre *Nymph*e borne to doo woemen honor,  
 Lady my Treasure.

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