

Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophil and Stella

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Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophil and Stella

The literary fortunes of Sir Philip Sidney illustrate nicely the contrast between the Elizabethan and twentieth century views on imitation and originality in literature. Sidney's sequence of 108 sonnets entitled Astrophil and Stella which appeared at the end of the sixteenth century drew immediate praise from English readers who appreciated his "blend of wit and sensibility, of intellectual brilliance and temperamental ardour" (Lever 53); they liked especially the "directness and spontaneity" (53) of the poems. [Sidney](#) himself contributed to his reputation for sincerity with the immortal lines of first sonnet: "Biting my truant pen, beating my self for spite, / Fool, said my Muse to me, look in thy heart and write." Teachers repeat this good advice endlessly. I tell my College Writing students to use personal experience; one can hardly go wrong with early childhood memories because the material is pure--not yet contaminated with the clichés of what we are supposed to believe and feel. Astrophil and [Stella](#) inspired literally thousands of sonnets and Sidney's admirers thought that he was greater than Spenser or Shakespeare.

The idea that Sidney, himself happily married to Frances Walsingham, could be passionately in love with Penelope Rich and jealous of her husband bothered Victorian

critics. How can one justify Astrophil's pursuit of adultery? Various excuses were made for Sidney: Elizabethan morals tended to be lax, it was Astrophil and not Sidney who was at fault, the marriage of the Riches was not what it should have been, etc.

But the story of a passionate Astrophil who pursues the chaste Stella lost much of its appeal for another reason with the advent of historical critici...

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... most insightful and intelligent persons succumb to rationalization--in effect allowing reason to switch camps.

Or in Sonnet 71 we see how beauty and Virtue naturally live together in Stella; Virtue "bends . . . love to good." But then, again, all is lost in the last line as the flesh triumphs over the spirit: "But, ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."

The sequence never does reconcile reason and desire; it reminds me of the battle Paul describes in Romans 7. The last sonnet depicts Astrophil's psychological disarray, for he is unable to separate misery from ecstasy. Stella's influence upon him prevails so "That in my woes for thee thou art my joy, / And in my joys for thee my only annoy."

Works Cited

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