



School of English & American Studies
University of East Anglia, Norwich

Renaissance Poetry

A detailed analysis of Sidney's
Astrophil and Stella,
'Let dainty wits...'

James Goffin, EAS 3

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University of East Anglia

'Let dainty wits...'

Let dainty wits cry on the sisters nine, 1
That, bravely masked, their fancies may be told: 2
Or, Pindar's apes, flaunt they in phrases fine, 3
Enamelling with pied flowers their thoughts of gold: 4
 Or else let them in statelier glory shine, 5
Ennobling new-found tropes with problems old: 6
Or with strange similies enrich each line, 7
Of herbs or beasts, which Ind or Afric hold. 8
 For me, in sooth, no Muse but one I know: 9
 Phrases and problems from my reach do grow, 10
And strange things cost too dear for my poor sprites. 11
 How then? Even thus: in Stella's face I read 12
 What loves and beauty be; then all my deed 13
But copying is, what in her Nature writes. 14

A detailed analysis of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, 'Let dainty wits...'

'How is one to write a love poem?' is the central question posed by Sidney in 'Let dainty wits...'. Do we look to tradition, and emulate the experts of the past, or do we attempt to find a new way of recording our love, a way that is perhaps more honest? Sidney appears to side with the latter, although, as ever, in love, things are not that simple.

The opening lines of the sonnet are a contemptuous dismissal of grand poets, who perhaps flatter to deceive. "Dainty wits," groans Sidney, should be free to beseech the Muses to help them impart their love, but he will have no part in it. In doing so, they "bravely" mask themselves - that is to say act not courageously but with bravado - hiding their beliefs behind a false mask of borrowed words, thieving their phrases from past poets, and in doing so robbing them of any meaning more than "fancy"; their words are reduced to trifling, passing affections. Sidney develops the theme in line three, referring now to the "dainty wits" as "Pindar's apes", a double blow that both associates them with poor imitation of the Greek poet and with the qualities of a primate; they are not men but beasts. Without the discretion befitting a reasoned creature, they "flaunt" their love in public and unseemly ways, in biographic contrast to Sidney, who reserved his poems for his own private pleasure and that of a few close friends, with the texts generally receiving publication only after his death. These witless wits have no sense of moderation, "enamelling with pied flowers" their already over-worked "thoughts of gold," beautifying their already worthy subject with an excessive of mottled, colourful flowers. They strive to "in statelier glory shine" but rather than serve to enhance their work, "shine" becomes not a dazzling reflection but a laboured act of polishing that leaves them cheapened. Next, Sidney raises the prospect of a deception through awe, with the unnamed poets introducing "strange" or foreign similes throughout their work, invoking the climes of India and Africa that would have seemed as wonderful to an Elizabethan poet (and their prospective lover) as the gods to the Greeks.

At line 9, we reach the poems *volte*, where Sidney moves from his tirade against the wits to an explanation of his own (more honest?) approach to writing about his love. He claims that "in sooth", that is truly, he only knows one Muse, and that the kind of "phrases and problems" he objected to earlier are beyond his

learning (“from my reach do grow”), and similarly his “poor sprites” - his spirit - cannot afford the imported luxuries from new territories that are available to the other scribes, becoming - paradoxically for a poet - tongue-tied in his beloved’s presence. The only Muse, the only inspiration he has and the only inspiration he needs is “Stella’s face”. In reading her countenance, he surpasses all the metaphor and wordplay of other writers and simply needs “to copy” what Nature has bestowed on Stella’s visage, and what she demonstrates “in her [n]ature”. False words, however fine, cannot excel her beauty or her grace, and in writing a love poem we should not look to fancy footwork to entice our beau, but an honest appraisal of their inner and outer beauty, or as Sidney has earlier told us in *Astophil and Stella*, “Look in thy heart and write.”

There are, however, problems with this reading, principally that Sidney relies on his denigration of “dainty wits” to elicit sympathy for his apparently more straightforward style. As he admits in the first sonnet of the sequence he is attempting to gain affection through pity, an approach that can only succeed if he can be compared to some other, luckier, poet. He is also guilty of indulging in such a bold conceit himself that he can hardly “in sooth” claim to be plain and honest, the pure transcribing monk implied by “my deed But copying is.” The whole sonnet is a self-reflexive look at the use of poetry in wooing a woman, and Sidney must have been playfully aware that he flagrantly contradicts himself when claiming that “phrases and problems from my reach do grow” only six lines after delivering “Enamelling with pied flowers their thoughts of gold.” What is more, the very fact that Sidney was writing in the traditional sonnet form is evidence of his own ‘aping’, raising the question of how seriously we should take the poem.

The ‘exulting’ reading concentrated on so far, then, while perhaps the most obvious interpretation, is not the only one possible. A baser view of the poem sees it conclude not with a gentlemanly exultation of Stella, but with something more material. “All my deed but copying is” does not only imply imitation, but also reproduction, the “deed” of which is sex; “deed” also carries with it overtones of ownership, with the ultimate possession coming through copulation. With this in mind, we can also recast the rest of the sonnet. Instead of seeing the “dainty wits” as other poets, we can see them as rival suitors for Stella’s hand, at a court function, for example. Perhaps attending a masque ball, they could be “bravely masked” and so able to reveal their “fancies” with impunity, although their intentions and methods could still be duplicitous. Their fine phrases remain denigrated as overblown flattery, but their “thoughts of gold” pivot from being golden thoughts to thoughts of money, payable as a dowry by Stella’s father. Similarly, worries about “statelier glory” and “ennobling” can be read as direct biographical references to Penelope Devereux’s position (as marriage to

her would ensure membership of the prominent Essex family), and the “strange similes” become less obscure, representing instead the promise of riches from the new world being explored during Elizabeth’s reign. The “lines” being enriched here are not lines of poetry but chat-up lines.

In contrast to these wealthy paramours - one of whom, Lord Rich, Sidney lost out to in the chase for Devereux’s hand - Sidney can offer none of these coaxing blandishments, one meaning of “sooth” as a noun. His only device is his physical lust for Stella’s face, “phrases and problems” being beyond his “reach”. As “reach” also has the meaning of an expanse or stretch (for example, of land), the problem may not be one of Sidney’s wit but of his wealth in terms of physical property - he is literally too “poor”. All he can hope is that simple praise of Stella’s beauty will win her over, together with a reflection of his “read[ing]” of her face, in her reading of his: in short, that lust will win through.

This very different readings demonstrate the breadth of Sidney’s skill. The same sonnet can be seen as a fairly straightforward abstract ode on the problems of writing love poetry, dealing explicitly with the terminology of writing and with Stella as a generic object of affection, or as a disguised attack on the politics and economics of noble courtship, operating on a deeply personal and biographical detail. It can be seen as an elevated mental exercise, or a base attempt to gain physical satisfaction.

Both, however, suggest that whatever the intention behind a courtship, a simple and direct approach may be just as effective as an elaborate entrapment, and that to write a love poem, we simply need to say “I love you”. Sidney, of course, says much more, both in this sonnet and in the lengthy *Astrophil and Stella* sequence, and that in part is the charm of the poem, and it is also the paradox at its heart. There are explicit messages carried in the verse, as in speech, and implicit stories, told in looks and intonation. The adored, like the stars, are numerous, and all respond to different stimuli. As a lover ponders which method they should employ to win his beloved’s heart, so does Sidney when he attempts to seduce his reader.

Bibliography

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