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Beauty and Virtue as Complements in Sonnet 71 of *Astrophil and Stella*

The concept of Platonic love, which holds that the outward beauty of the body ultimately serves to draw attention to the inward beauty of the soul, was born in the philosophy of Ancient Greece but has since appeared thematically in countless literary works. Sir Philip Sidney, a poet during the Elizabethan era, was one writer who vigorously explored the relationship between desire for the body and desire for a higher morality. His Italian sonnets, which praise both the physical and moral beauty of the speaker's object of desire, Stella, question whether the pull towards earthly desires and the upward pull towards virtue are at odds with one another.

Although the last line of Sonnet 71 of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* seems to present desire and virtue as irreconcilable forces, Sidney's manipulation of both the meter and structure of traditional Italian sonnet form and his inclusion of figurative language evocative of primal human drives express an opposite truth: irrepressible human desire is a complementary earthly manifestation of eternal virtue.

Since the traditional Italian sonnet is written in iambic pentameter, Sidney's intentional deviation from the established meter draws attention to the message he designs to stand apart from the rest, which is the idea that fervent passion need not take away from the undeniable beauty of a virtuous character. The lines of iambic pentameter typical of Italian sonnets, which contain five feet of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, result in a predictable

rising and falling rhythm. When Sidney disturbs this fluidity in his sonnet with a break in the meter, he does so with purpose. The first and only time the sonnet strays from its steady iambic pentameter is in the word “Stella” (4), which is pronounced as a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Sidney wants this word to feel and sound different on his reader’s tongue to communicate that just as her name interrupts the iambic pentameter, Stella — the object of desire — interrupts Astrophil’s train of rational thoughts, which had focused heavily on Stella’s moral character. However, despite the speaker’s underlying passion for Stella surfacing in this interruption, he launches back into devout praise for the virtue he observes in her in perfect iambic pentameter. The momentarily distracting and passionate thought of Stella only drives his admiration of her character forward with greater sincerity. Therefore, Sidney’s distraction from and return to the normality of the poetic meter acknowledge that focus on physical beauty can slip in and out of a deeper focus on virtuous beauty with the same ease.

The most noticeable inversions of traditional Italian form in Sidney’s sonnet are the unorthodox functions of the octave, sestet, and volta, which Sidney manipulates in his poetry to paint an image of Stella that remains an undeniable compliment to her character, despite the speaker’s clear display of lustful desire in the last line. In the prototypical Italian sonnet, the first eight lines of the octave present a problem, the following six lines of the sestet seek a resolution, and the *volta*, or signaled turn of the poem’s primary tone, lies at the beginning of the sestet. Sidney, however, utilizes an unconventional structural division; the first thirteen lines of his sonnet carry on in enduring praise for Stella’s innate goodness, and only in the very last line — which harbors the volta — does the speaker’s desire emerge to alter the sonnet’s tone. Indeed, the composed tone the speaker possesses while praising Stella’s status of “perfection’s heir” (9)

and her virtue, which “bends [love] to good” (13), contrasts greatly with the ravenous tone of the fourteenth line: “But, ‘Ah,’ Desire still cries, ‘Give me some food!’” (14). The dramatic effect of the volta appearing in the last line rather than at the start of the sestet has a tremendous resonating power, which leaves the reader tempted to conclude that desire, in the end, overshadows any thought of morals. However, the volta’s delayed location allows Sidney to use five out of the six lines of his sestet, which are normally used to shift the subject of the poem, to instead further augment his acclamation of Stella’s inner beauty. Of course, human passion does inevitably play a significant role in romantic love, so it is only natural that the impassioned line comes forth at the end to remind to reader that the speaker is, above all, still human. Even so, Sidney’s allotment of thirteen lines towards non-desirous thoughts places the true emphasis on the righteousness of Stella’s character.

A final attempt by Sidney to express the harmony of physical beauty and virtue lies in the figurative language of the pivotal last line, which plays on strikingly primal urges to attest that because human passion is natural and therefore not altogether wrong, it cannot logically stand in the way of morality. The first indication of the speaker’s inherent human desire is his utterance of “‘Ah’” (14), which is a short yet significant word, since Sidney has only ten syllables to work with in this line and still chooses to devote an entire syllable towards it. Although it may carry no definable meaning on its own, this word appeals to a universally understood emotional urge and expresses the authenticity and depth of the speaker’s desire for Stella. Interestingly, every other word in this last line is also monosyllabic besides “Desire” (14), which, in addition to drawing attention towards desire, prompts the reader to unknowingly increase the tempo to the end. This rhythmic intensification mirrors the racing heartbeat of a person in love, an uncontrollable

human sensation. The primitive drives of the human condition are further exploited when the speaker claims that his lust for Stella “cries” (14). The utterly human experience of crying is, much like falling in love, an often unannounced and irrepressible phenomenon. Sidney concludes his emphatic sonnet by stressing the insatiable nature of the human appetite with the exclamatory command: ““Give me some food!”” (14). With this forceful assertion, desire does not politely ask, but demands to be fulfilled. And, of course, Sidney could not have selected a more fitting word to end on since “food” (14) is the most basic representation of a fundamental human need that aches to be met. In his word choice, Sidney expresses that the animalistic sexual drives of humans are no different from hunger, and since desire is an innate part of the human condition, there is no logical way in which its existence can stand as a barrier to morality.

The words of Sir Philip Sidney in Sonnet 71 of *Astrophil and Stella* beautifully attest to the complex yet compatible nature of the physical and moral attractions that overwhelm a person in love. Although the last line of the sonnet could easily be interpreted as a negation of the first thirteen, Sidney utilizes the non-traditional form and figurative language of his verse to argue that the last line is in fact an augmentation of the previous lines. Sidney’s work reflects the belief that the surface-level human drives of the temporal world are merely tangible manifestations of a deeper, more spiritual form of love. In other words, Astrophil’s physical attraction to Stella’s outward beauty indicates his spiritual attraction to the virtue he sees in her. Desire is entrenched deep within the biological makeup of the human being, and any efforts to fight or suppress it are futile. By basing his argument on human nature in this way, Sidney delivers the irrefutable truth that Platonic love is driven by the simultaneous functioning of virtue and desire, which should be embraced.

Works Cited

Sidney, Sir Philip. "Astrophil and Stella Sonnet 71." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Julia Reidhead, W.W. Norton & Company, 2012, 1095.