Astrophel And Stella: Sir Philip Sidney's Didactic Intent

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ASTROPHEL AND STELLA:
SIR PHILIP SIDNEY'S DIDACTIC INTENT

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INTRODUCTION

Poesy...is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word "Mimesis"—that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight.

The above quotation from Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* expresses well his intentions for writing the sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*. In this lengthy series of poems, Sidney satisfies his characteristics of poetry—a representation of a real-life situation which both instructs and delights. The situation is that of a Renaissance lover caught between reason and passion; the delight arises in Sidney's masterful use of the sonnet. But the real art of the sequence, and the area of concern in this paper, is the instructive aspect.

Sidney's story of Astrophel and Stella instructs us in the philosophy of Christian Neoplatonism. By introducing us to Astrophel's conflict of reason and passion, his deliberate choice of the latter, and the consequences of such a decision, Sidney has outlined an entire lesson. As we witness Astrophel's failure and the suffering which results from it, we realize the truth behind those Neoplatonic conventions which Astrophel had rejected. Sidney has succeeded in his intent to teach through poetry.
What follows, then, is a study of the didactic aspect of *Astrophel and Stella* as examined under Christian Neoplatonism. The Neoplatonism referred to is that particular form presented by Marsilio Ficino and Baldassare Castiglione, with which I will attempt to familiarize the reader in the first chapter. In Chapter Two, I hope to show how Astrophel, in the earlier sonnets, struggles for Ideal Love in the true Neoplatonic sense. Chapter Three will analyze Astrophel's rejection of Neoplatonic conventions and the suffering he consequently undergoes. Chapter Four will clarify my particular interpretation of *Astrophel and Stella* as opposed to that of other critics.
CHAPTER I

PLATONISM AS AN INFLUENCE

To proceed further with Sidney's lesson in Christian Neoplatonism, it is necessary to understand exactly what this philosophy is. We must consider those individuals who influenced Sidney in his writing of *Astrophel and Stella*.

The presence of Neoplatonism in Sidney's works is obvious. His *Defence of Poesy* is filled with Neoplatonism and both the *Arcadia* and *Astrophel and Stella* were written "clearly under the influence of Plato."¹ John McIntyre, in his analysis of Sidney's literary theory, asserts that "Sidney's *Apology* represents an apogee of Renaissance Neoplatonism."² Sidney himself explicitly declares in his *Defence of Poesy* "that Plato...of all philosophers, I have ever esteemed most worthie of reverence."³

Yet, merely to tag Sidney as a Neoplatonist is too broad a sweep. It is only under the aspect of particular philosophers and their Platonic ideals influencing sixteenth-century England that we are able to show parallels in the works of Sidney. Such philosophers include the Italian Platonist, Marsilio Ficino, and an early sixteenth-century writer, Baldassare Castiglione.
Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium and Castiglione's Book of the Courtier were undoubtedly the two most important works on the nature of love during the Renaissance. It was through these two sources that Sidney, one of the century's most prominent love poets, became acquainted with Neoplatonism.

Marsilio Ficino

Sidney's exposure to Ficino's works is clear; Cornell March Dowlin tells us in his study of Sidney that The complete works of both Plato and Aristotle ...were conveniently at hand in one-volume Latin translations. One of these was Marsilio Ficino's celebrated translations of Plato's works, revised by Simon Grynaeus and published in Venice in 1556.4

And even if Sidney had not had direct access to Ficino's works, he certainly would have become acquainted with the Italian Neoplatonist, for, as Platonic scholar Sears Jayne notes, Ficino was "the real fountainhead of Renaissance Neoplatonism" and his ideas were "atmospheric" in England during Sidney's time.5

Ficino, a fifteenth-century Florentine priest, is best known for his interest in Platonic philosophy. Ficino established the Platonic Academy of Florence which became one of the foremost intellectual centers in Europe. While studying at the Academy, Ficino wrote several translations, commentaries, and treatises, including a translation of Plato's dialogues, the Platonic Theology (Theologia Platon-
ica), and his most famous work, Commentary on Plato's Symposium (De Amore), in which he attempts to unify Platonism with his religious beliefs.

Ficino believed there was a basic harmony between true religion (Christianity) and true philosophy (Platonism). Ficino considered it his mission, assigned by divine providence, "to revive true philosophy for the benefit of true religion." This blending of Platonism with Christianity evolved into a new strain of "Christian Neoplatonism" consisting primarily of Ficino's doctrines of contemplative life, immortality of the soul, and human love.

According to the first of these, the doctrine of contemplative life, the mind finds itself restless and dissatisfies in everyday life. Through a process of purification, however, the soul is able to concentrate upon its inner substance and transcend the physical, external world. It thus enters the contemplative life and attains a higher knowledge, allowing insights into the intelligible world while at the same time engaging in ordinary external experiences. "Ficino interprets this contemplative life as a gradual ascent of the soul toward always higher degrees of truth and being, an ascent that finally culminates in the immediate knowledge and vision of God." Ficino's substitution of God for the Platonic idea of the good and beautiful as the pinnacle of the ascent marks the reconciliation of Platonism with Christianity.
This is, he feels, the ultimate goal of our human existence.

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul was hardly unique to Ficino's writings. Yet, in Ficino's doctrine, immortality was an especially necessary element in the goal of human existence. If man is constantly seeking for the highest perfection, it must be attainable or his efforts will be in vain. Ficino's entire interpretation of human life as an ascent toward God would be meaningless without the possibility of the immortal soul's fulfillment in the eternal afterlife.

Ficino's doctrine of love was derived from other sources also. Sears Jayne describes fifteenth-century Florence as a city at the convergence of three love philosophies: "from the East, the philosophy of Platonic love...; from the West, the strain of Renaissance courtly love...; and from the South, the stream of Christian love." Ficino was influenced by all three and combined elements from each in his doctrine of human love, popularly known as "Platonic love."

Platonic love consists of progressions. Under this doctrine, love begins as a desire for reflected beauty and goodness viewed in another individual. However, this love for another human being is merely the preparation for the steps to be taken in reaching the ultimate goal of love and union with God.

Here is where the "ladder of love" fits in. The lover, in his quest, ascends from lower rungs of a sensual nature,
gradually, through a process of idealization, to the spiritual or higher rungs, eventually culminating in union with God. Here again, the Christian notion of God replaces the Platonic ideal of the Highest Good as the goal, or uppermost rung of the ladder.

These three doctrines of Ficino's were undoubtedly a great influence on Sidney's writings. In Astrophel and Stella, the doctrine of human love is most obvious, although to understand it we must also be aware of the doctrines of contemplative life and immortality of the soul. Yet, there is an additional influence evidenced in Sidney's works as noted previously, that of Baldassare Castiglione's Book of the Courtier.

Baldassare Castiglione

Sidney was almost certainly exposed to Castiglione's Courtier. A close friend of the Sidney family, Thomas Hoby, performed the translation into English and had been known to send a copy of his work, Epitome of the Italian Tongue, an aid in the translation of Castiglione, to Sidney's father, Sir Henry Sidney, in 1552. Besides, we also know that the younger Sidney learned the Italian language as a boy, so there is a possibility that he performed the translation himself. Regardless, it would again be nearly impossible for Sidney to escape acquaintance with the work, as Castiglione's Courtier was quite
prominent during the Renaissance; in fact, it was considered to be the proper "gentleman's handbook."

Castiglione, like Ficino a fifteenth-century Italian, is best known for this work, The Book of the Courtier (Il Libro del Cortegiano), published in Venice in 1528. The book was written as a memorial to the Duke of Guidobaldo, a great ruler and friend of Castiglione's who died in 1508, but became popular as a handbook on etiquette for the courtiers of the day.

The Courtier takes the form of a conversation among real characters who contribute their opinion on the main subject, the formation of a perfect courtier. He is to be a man of noble lineage, skilled in the use of weapons and laws of chivalry, carefully trained in the letters and fine arts, gracefully polished in demeanor, and accomplished in conversation. The book sets forth every attribute essential to a perfect courtier. Yet, the portion of the book which probably would have been most appealing to Sidney and other poets was Pietro Bembo's eulogy of Platonic love in Book IV.

Bembo's closing comments on love, which summarize the theories of the Italian Neoplatonists, did more than anything else to popularize Neoplatonic love in English literature. Spenser's Hymns of Heavenly Love and Heavenly Beauty are undoubtedly derived from Bembo's oration. Shakespeare's sonnets show some of the same influences.
It has even been shown, and quite plausibly, that Lady Emilia Pia and Lord Gaspar Pallavicino were the fore-runners of Beatrice and Benedik of *Much Ado About Nothing*. And, of course, there are some obvious similarities in Sidney's works, most especially, *Astrophel and Stella*.

**Prospect**

The following discussion of *Astrophel and Stella* is divided into sections most conducive to an analysis of Sidney's didactic intent. His intent is found in the Neoplatonism of the sequence, throughout which *Astrophel*'s struggle with Platonic conventions is apparent. Yet, there is a marked change in *Astrophel*'s attitude toward these conventions as the sequence progresses. In the earlier sonnets, *Astrophel* struggles with Platonism, but never displays any pessimism or dissent toward the Platonic view of love. His goal of reaching the highest rung on the ladder of love is considered most ideal and highly attainable. This attitude remains throughout the first fifty-one sonnets. In sonnet 52, however, *Astrophel* rejects these earlier thoughts and begins his downfall. Undoubtedly, Sidney had a purpose behind this drastic change, which was to teach a lesson through *Astrophel*'s change in attitude. To understand it, we must follow *Astrophel*'s situation beginning with the earlier sonnets.
THE STRUGGLE AND ATTAINMENT

In the first 51 sonnets, Sidney presents a lover attempting to carry out his relationship according to the dictates of Neoplatonism. The process is not an easy one, but the lover is determined and confident in his success. The sonnets explore this process in three areas: one group deals with Astrophel's desire to idealize his love for Stella; a larger group of sonnets focuses on his continued struggle to attain his goal, and a third group describes Astrophel's realization of that goal in which he successfully expresses his love for Stella in the true Neoplatonic ideal.

As indicated, a group of the earlier sonnets deals with Astrophel's desire to idealize his love for Stella both in reality and through his poetry. In keeping with Platonic conventions, he must remove any sensuality in his expression of love and turn instead to a spiritual fulfillment. Examples of such sonnets include numbers 1, 2, 3, 28, and 50.

In sonnet 1, Astrophel introduces his intentions for writing:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show
That she, dear She! might take some pleasure of my pain;
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain.
Astrophel desires to express his love for Stella through his poetry in order to obtain her pity and grace. This is the initial step toward idealization of their love. To express his feelings, Astrophel turns "others leaves" for inspiration. "But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay." In the true Neoplatonic spirit, his Muse tells him, "Fool...look in thy heart and write." It is in his heart, which was considered the source of inspiration by Renaissance poets, that Astrophel will find the image of Stella—all the inspiration he needs.

Ficino had emphasized the importance of the heart in his Commentary on Plato's Symposium. The heat of the heart creates a "very thin and clear vapor" called the spirit. This spirit, acting as a median between the body and soul, reflects images to the soul of what the senses perceive:

While it sees these images, it conceives... images like them, but much purer...The images conceived here are kept in the memory. Through these, the eyes of the soul are wakened to behold the Universal Ideas of things which the soul holds within itself. Therefore it sees a certain man by sense and conceives him in imagination. The Muse directs Astrophel to turn to this ideal image of Stella found in his soul, rather than to her outward, physical appearance.

Sonnet 2 continues with Astrophel's desire to idealize his love as he affirms the Neoplatonic nature of his re-
relationship. He tells us that:

Not at first sight, nor with a dribbed shot,
Love gave the wound which while I breathe, will bleed.
But known worth did in mine of time proceed,
Till, by degrees, it had full conquest got.

His denial of love at first sight is in keeping with the Neoplatonic conventions, for in the Symposium we find out that "it's customarily considered an ignomony to be won quickly."¹² Astrophel's love for Stella comes from her worth, not her beauty--once again in agreement with the Symposium, which states that "it is...especially finest to love the highest in mind and the noblest, even when they are uglier than others."¹³

Sonnet 3 again discusses Astrophel's initial step in the idealization of his love--his poetry. But having convinced us in sonnet 2 that his love for Stella is truly Platonic, Astrophel approaches his methods of writing with greater confidence than he had in sonnet 1. Astrophel reviews the chief literary movements of his time, including the "furor poeticus," Pleiade imitations of the Greeks, rhetorical embellishers, and Euphuists.¹⁴ Yet, he doesn't need his Muse to tell him where to go for inspiration anymore:

For me, in sooth, no Muse but one I know.
Phrases and problems from my reach do grow,
And strange things cost too dear for my poor sprites.
How then? Even thus. In Stella's face I read
What love and beauty be. Then all my deel
But copying is, what in her Nature writes.

Astrophel realizes that the true beauty does not
arise from the senses but Nature itself; a Platonic belief also expressed by Bembo in the *Courtier*: "Let him lay aside therefore the blinde judgement of the sense, and enjoy with his eyes ye brightness, the comelinesse, the loving sparkels, laughters, gestures, and all the other pleasant furnitures of the beautie."¹⁵

In sonnet 28, we find the clearest explanation of Astrophel's purpose for writing. He wants to express his love for Stella in a truly Platonic sense and feels poetry is the best means:

Know! that I, in pure simplicity,
Breathe out the flames which burn within my heart.

The flame imagery had been discussed in Ficino's *Commentary* where he had referred to "the white-hot flames of your hearts."¹⁶ and also in Castiglione's *Courtier* where he speaks of the influence of love "setting his hart on fire."¹⁷ Both are describing the Neoplatonic idea of love kindling flames of passion in the lover's heart. Astrophel wants it completely understood that for this reason alone he is writing. He warns against reading into his poetry meanings which are not intended:

You that with allegory's curious frame,
Of others' children, changelings used to make:
With me, those pains for God's sake do not take.
When I say Stella! I do mean the same
Princess of Beauty; for whose only sake
The reins of love I love.

It is Stella alone he is writing for and about.

He has clearly stated his purpose for writing and as readers we realize his true Platonic intentions.
Sonnet 50 joins with 1,2,3 and 28 in describing Astrophel's desire to idealize his love for Stella in his writing, but also recognizes the inadequacies of his words in their attempt to describe Stella. He addresses Stella and relates how

The fulness of my thoughts of thee
Cannot be stayed within my panting breast;
But they do swell and struggle forth of me
Till that in words thy figure be exprest.

It appears to be exactly what he had said in sonnets 1,2,3 and 28. But coupled with his desire we find regret that these words are inadequate:

With sad eyes, I their weak proportion see,
To portrait that which in this world is best,
Because their forefront bare sweet Stella's name.

Sidney has presented a pair of ideas here in sonnet 50. He has displayed all of Astrophel's pent up desire and excitement to express his love through poetry. But along with it he shows us the accompanying difficulties Astrophel encounters. This leads us into the next group of earlier sonnets which discuss such difficulties.

The second group of earlier sonnets center on the inherent difficulties in Astrophel's continual struggle to follow the dictates of Neoplatonic love. He expresses many such difficulties throughout the sequence; sonnets 16,19,23,40 and 4 are all examples. In each of these sonnets, Sidney shows that Astrophel's intentions to idealize his love have become a real strain to carry out.

Astrophel's confrontations with these difficulties
come slowly, but by sonnet 16 he fully realizes what his love entails:

In her sight, I a lesson new have spelled.
I now have learned love right; and learned even so,
As who by being poisoned doth poison know.

The "poison" is yet to come, and Astrophel knows this. What he doesn't realize is just how many forms it can appear in. But soon enough he experiences one form of love's poison in sonnet 19.

Sonnet 19 discusses Astrophel's problem of concentrating on his work. He is totally preoccupied with Stella. She controls his thoughts so completely that he is unable to accomplish any of his regular duties. Worse yet, he sees no progress in his relationship with Stella; so much so that even his words "advise themselves that they are vainly spent."

Astrophel describes himself as one "who fares like him that both looks to the skies and in a ditch doth fall." Sidney was probably well familiar with this description. Plato, in the Theaetetus, tells how Thales fell into a well while looking at the stars. This anecdote became popular with later writers. Sidney also used it in the Defense of Poesy (iii,II) when he writes: "The astronomer looking to the stars might fall in a ditch."

The most discouraging part is that Astrophel knows his mind would be capable of high attainments were it not dominated by thoughts of Stella:
O let me prop my mind, yet in his growth,
And not in nature for best fruits unfit!

Another problem Astrophel encounters is the impression he has on people around him. In sonnet 23 he refers to

The curious wits, seeing dull pensiveness
Bewray itself in my long settled eyes
Whence those same fumes of melancholy rise
With idle pains and missing aim do guess

These observers account for Astrophel's change in attitude in several ways. Some believe his Muse is the cause, others feel he is bothered by matters of state, while still others say his ambition is to blame. Astrophel discounts each of their conclusions in relating the true cause of his pensive mood:

O fools! or overwise! alas, the race
Of all my thoughts hath neither stop nor start,
But only Stella's eyes and Stella's heart.

Yet Astrophel must suffer silently with the assumptions of those around him. Although he is able to explain himself in his poetry, he knows he cannot do it publicly, for in the Courtier Bembo tells us that the Neoplatonic lover "shall not be in case, with much a doe otherwhile to refraine his eyes and tongue from discovering his desires to others." 

Sonnet 40 takes up the common yet frustrating annoyance of insomnia. Astrophel's case is quite severe as seen in his words:
O Stella dear! how much thy power hath wrought
Thou hast my mind, none of the basest, brought
My still kept course, while others sleep, to moan.

His suffering may even go to the extent of suicide:

...my heart I offer still to thee.
O do not let thy temple be destroyed!

Stella's image still rests in his heart, and Astrophel pleads for some release from the torment brought on by his love for her. The surest means of relating this torment would be to destroy its source, the "temple" of Stella.

Perhaps the greatest problem Astrophel encounters is the conflict in his mind between reason and desire. It is taken up in a great number of the sonnets; one cannot escape its presence in the sequence. Most analyses performed of Astrophel and Stella approach this very conflict. It is described as the struggle between will and wit, heart and head, or love and virtue, but always means the same basic conflict. Astrophel pleads:

Virtue! Alas, now let me take some rest.
Thou sett'st a bate between my will and wit...
Thy sceptre use in some old Cato's breast:
Churches or schools are for thy seat more fit.

Virtue has set his reason to opposing his desires, and he begs for a rest from the struggles.

Although it seems Astrophel may succumb to his desires as an end to the conflict, we are assured that he doesn't. In lines 9 and 10 he notes that "the little reason left in me" is still in command. To strengthen
this he closes with an address to Virtue:

I swear my heart, such one shall show to thee,
That shrines in flesh so true a deity;
That Virtue! thou thyself shalt be in love!

Even Virtue will fall in love with the Neoplatonic image of Stella found in Astrophel's heart. Astrophel has overcome the conflict posed in sonnet 4. He maintains his desire to climb the ladder of love. This desire is carried to fulfillment in the final group of earlier sonnets.

The third group of early sonnets describes Astrophel's successful idealization of his love for Stella according to Neoplatonic conventions. Just as Ficino's interpretation of human life as an ascent toward God required the possibility of fulfillment, Astrophel's ascent up the ladder of love requires the possibility of fulfillment also. The fulfillment occurs when Astrophel removes all sensuality from his relationship. "The Platonic lover (Astrophel) in his poetic role must de-materialize his mistress, forming her as an abstraction, a universal symbol of Love and Beauty and Virtue." Astrophel does so in such sonnets as 36, 32, 38, 39, 25, 41, 26 and 48.

Astrophel succeeds in removing any sensuality in his love for Stella in sonnet 36. Stella is described only by her sight:

...through my long battered eyes,
Whole armies of thy beauties entered in.

and by her voice:
With so sweet voice, and by sweet Nature so
In sweetest strength; so sweetly skilled withal.

These two senses, sight and sound, are those which
Bembo had considered to be associated with non-sensual
love: "...these two senses...have little bodily substance
in them, and be the ministers of reason, without entering
farther towarde the bodie, with coveting unto any longing
otherwise than honest."21

Sonnets 32, 38 and 39 find Astrophel idealizing Stella
by envisioning her in a dream. In 32, he addresses Mor-
pheus, who has the special function of bringing dreams
that appear in human shape.22 In sonnet 38, Astrophel
envisions the image of Stella singing—-even in his dreams
he follows only the senses of sight and sound.

Knowing that dreaming had once before produced the
image of Stella, Astrophel begs for sleep again in son-
net 39:

Come Sleep! O Sleep! the certain knot of peace!
The baiting place of wit! the balm of woe!

But even if he doesn't receive sleep he knows that
he can always turn to the Neoplatonic image of Stella
found in his own heart:

And if these things as being thine by right
Move not thy heavy grace; thou shalt in me
Livelier than elsewhere, Stella's image see.

Another means of "de-materializing" the mistress
is by referring to her as a natural image, and Astrophel
does so in sonnets 41 and 26. Using the typical Petrach-
an conceits of the sun and stars, Astrophel universalizes Stella, removing any personal note of affection. This is all in keeping with Platonic love philosophy, for Stella "must remain physically and emotionally withdrawn to be ideally worthwhile."²³

Sonnet 41 presents Stella as the sun. Astrophel has obtained the prize in horsemanship and the townsfolk are trying to attribute his success to various causes—skill, strength, practice, heredity or chance. But Astrophel closes the sonnet by naming the true cause:

Stella lookt on, and from her heavenly face
Sent forth the beams which made so fair my race.

The tournament described in the sonnet was often used in Petrarchan poetry also, thus adding further to the note of convention and generality. Stella is never considered a flesh and blood person, but only a vision to be honored and loved at a distance.

Along with the popular comparison of the lady's eyes to the sun, is the notion that they are like stars:

The Petrarchan lover commonly protested the strength of his affection by praising his lady's features in the most beatific language. Her eyes were stars or suns, her hair golden wire, her skin ivory...²⁴

Astrophel uses this natural imagery in sonnet 26:

For me, I do Nature unidle know;
And know great causes, great effects procure;
And know those bodies high reign on the low:
And if these rules did fail, proof makes me sure.
Who oft fore-judge my after following race,
By only those two stars in Stella's face.
Of course the name "Stella," meaning "star," states it best of all. As a star, Stella can go no further as far as being emotionally and physically withdrawn; she is definitely at a distance.

This last group of the earlier sonnets presents Astrophel at his finest. After expressing his desire to idealize Stella and then facing the difficulties in such a decision, he proves himself to be a true Neoplatonic lover as he successfully idealizes his love for her. It would seem that the story would end here—an example of the victory of reason over passion. But we soon discover Sidney's lesson has just begun as Astrophel's passion proves stronger in the second half of the sequence.
THE DOWNFALL AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Just as soon as Astrophel has us convinced that he's a true Neoplatonic lover, he makes a complete turnaround. This occurs in sonnet 52, when Love (desire) and Virtue finally come into open combat over ownership of Stella. Love asserts title to Stella by citing the fact that she outwardly displays her allegiance to him. Virtue admits this fact but denies that it establishes legal title by questioning whether the essential Stella is her inside feelings or her outside actions. The climax arises in the closing lines when Astrophel asserts:

Well, Love! since this demurrer our suit doth stay, Let Virtue have that Stella's self; yet thus That Virtue but that body grant to us.

In saying this, Astrophel has abandoned his prior allegiance to Ideal Platonic love and has chosen instead to seek physical consummation of his love. He has lost his place on the ladder of love, for Ficino had warned: "...the lust to touch the body is not a part of love, nor is it the desire of the lover, but rather a kind of wantonness and the derangement of a servile man." In the sonnets that follow, Astrophel strays even further as he turns against those Neoplatonic doctrines which he had respected in the earlier sonnets.
The second half of the sequence consists largely of sonnets in which Astrophel argues with Stella over the nature of their relationship. Astrophel, of course, has chosen the body over the soul, whereas Stella wishes to maintain her role of Platonic mistress. In one such sonnet, Astrophel begins his strategy by reciting Neoplatonic conventions:

Who will in fairest book of Nature know  
How virtue may be best lodged in beauty be;  
Let him but learn of love to read in thee!  
Stella! these fair lines which true goodness show.  
There, shall he find all vices overthrow;  
Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty  
Of Reason: from whose light those night birds fly.  
That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.  
And not content to be perfection's heir.  
Thyself dost strive all minds that way to move;  
Who mark in thee, what is in thee most fair:'  
So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,  
As fast thy virtue bends that love to good.

Thus far, he is right on track with Plato, but in the final line Astrophel subverts these doctrines entirely by saying:

But ah! Desire still cries, "Give me some food!"
(Sonnet 71)

Sonnet 71 displays Astrophel's direct contradiction with Neoplatonic ideals. In the first 13 lines he is drawing Stella's attention by his seemingly good intentions. However, in the final line we see his true motive—definitely not Platonic. He has done exactly what Bembo had forbade the lover to do in the Courtier:

...let him have a care not to suffer her to run into an errour, but with lessons and good exhortations seeke alwaies to frame her to modestie,
to temperance, to true honestie, and so
to worke that there may never take place
in her other than pure thoughts, and farre
wide from all filthinesse of vices. 26

As was discussed earlier, Neoplatonism considered
the two senses of sight and sound to be superior to the
others by the fact that they are associated with non-sensual
love. In accord with such beliefs, Astrophel had described
Stella almost entirely by sight and sound throughout the
first half of the sonnet sequence. But from sonnet 51
onward, we note less use of these two senses, and more
attention paid to the senses of taste, smell and touch.
Sonnet 70 describes Astrophel's Muse who "Oft hath drunk
my tears," but who now "hopes t' enjoy Nectar of mirth,"
and in 71 we find that Desire cries "Give me some food!"
"Lips drink nectar from that tongue" in sonnet 83, and
in sonnet 85, Astrophel cries out:

Let breath suck up those sweets! Let arms embrace
The globe of weal! Lips, love's indentures make!

He further adds in sonnet 77:

That hand! which without touch, holds more than Atlas' might;
Those lips! which make death's pay, a mean price for a kiss;
That skin! whose past-praise hue scorns this poor term of
white.

And sonnet 78 tells how:

The pleasant airs of true love be
Infected by those vapours, which arise

Even though Astrophel does continue the use of the
senses of sight and sound in the later sonnets, they adopt
a more physical note. Take for instance two descriptions
of the sun, found in sonnets 22 and 76.

Sonnet 22 reads:

In highest way of heaven, the sun did ride
Progressing then from fair Twins' golden place;
Having no scarf of clouds before his face,
But shining forth of heat in his chief pride.

Whereas sonnet 76 reads:

She comes! and straight therewith her shining twins do move
Their rays to me; who in her tedious absence, lay
Benighted in cold woe: but now appears my day,
The only light of joy, the only warmth of love.
She comes with light and warmth which like Aurora prove
Of gentle force, so that mine eyes dare gladly play
With such a rosy morn; whose beams, most freshly gay,
Scorch not: but only do dark chilling sprites remove.
But lo! while I do speak, it growthen noon with me;
Her flamy glistening lights increase with time and place...

In the first example, the sun is portrayed as a man, riding across the heavens and "shining forth in his chief pride." It evokes a sense of power and reserve. The later sonnet presents the sun as a woman who is warm and playful--almost seductive. It is obvious that Astrophel is not only emphasizing the senses associated with "sensual love" but also using the senses of sight and sound in ways that would certainly be shunned by Platonic philosophy.

The closest form of physical contact allowed in Neo-platonic love is that of kissing. Bembo tells us in the Courtier that the good lover may be granted:

...merry countenances, familiar and secret talke, jeasting, dalying, hand in hand, (and) may also lawfully and without blame come to kissing...for the reasonable lover woteth well, that although the mouth be a parcell of the bodie, yet is it an issue for the wordes, that be the interpreters of the soule, and for the inwarde breath, which is also called the soul.
With this in mind, it would seem Astrophel is merely carrying out his duties as a lover when he kisses Stella in Song 2. Yet, further analysis reveals that once again Astrophel is up to his tricks. The kiss which he celebrates in sonnet 73 was not granted to him, but rather stolen. Astrophel is a far cry from a "reasonable lover"; he only views the kiss in terms of what more it may lead to:

...my heart burns, I cannot silent be.
Then since, dear life! you fain would have me peace;
And I, mad with delight, want wit to cease:
Stop you my mouth with still still kissing me!
(Sonnet 81)

No longer a Neoplatonic lover, Astrophel is instead the "sensual lover" that Bembo advises should not partake in kissing. "For since a kiss is a knitting together both of bodie and soule, it is to bee feared, lest the sensual lover will be more enclined to the part of the bodie, than of the soul."28

This stolen kiss becomes important to Astrophel as we proceed in the sequence. Representative of his highest attainment in his quest for sensual love, it replaces Stella's image in his heart as his new-found inspiration. In two complete sonnets he addresses the kiss—celebrating it and giving it various titles:

Sweet kiss! thy sweets I fain would sweetly endite:
Which even of sweetness, sweetest sweet'sner art!
Pleasing'st consort! where each sense holds a part;
Which coupling doves guide Venus' chariot right.
Best charge and bravest retreat in Cupid's fight!
A double key! which opens to the heart.
Most rich, when most his riches it impart!
Nest of young joys! schoolmaster of delight!
Teaching the mean at once to take and give,
The friendly fray! where blows both wound and heal.
The pretty death! while each in other live,
Poor hope's first wealth! hostage of promised weal!
Breakfast of love!...

(Sonnet 79)

In the two sonnets combined, Astrophel addresses the kiss by twenty-one different titles.

Unfortunately, all his devotion will be fruitless; the Courtier tells us that it is impossible for the kiss to serve as Astrophel's Neoplatonic inspiration. There is no replacement for the original image of Stella imprinted on his heart:

...a form once loved is always loved,...
You do not love this new form because you had not loved it before; but you do not cease loving that former one...and you always will love the same form, fixed in your memory, and as it meets the eye of your soul, it kindles your love.²⁹

No matter how he tries, Astrophel cannot "love" any aspect of Stella except the Neoplatonic image. Her kiss cannot take the place of Stella herself as Astrophel's inspiration of love.

At some point in the second half of the sonnets Astrophel becomes extremely frustrated, as seen in his speech. Perhaps it is after Stella has refused him several times; it could be that he finally realizes his struggles are futile and he has failed completely. Regardless, Astrophel's frustration becomes obvious in his judgment of others. One such example is Lord Rich, the legal husband of Stella.
Astrophel had mentioned Lord Rich in two of the earlier sonnets, but in a non-critical manner. In sonnet 24, we see a play on the word "rich"—Astrophel tells of Rich fools... whose base and filthy heart Lies hatching still the goods wherein they flow: And damning their own selves to Taltal's smart, Wealth breeding want; more blest, more wretched grow. But he is speaking generally here; no particular reference to Lord Rich is made until the latter part of the sonnet when he adds:

But that rich fool, who by blind Fortune's lot, The richest gem of love and life enjoys, And can with foul abuse, such beauties blot: Let him deprived of sweet but unfelt joys, (Exiled for aye from those high treasures which He knows not) grow in only folly rich!

Astrophel criticizes Lord Rich here, but only because he has failed to appreciate the value of Stella. The implicit attitude is more one of pity than dislike. Likewise, in sonnet 37, Astrophel plays on the name Rich, but only to express pity that Stella must be married to Lord Rich:

Towards Aurora's Court, a nymph doth dwell Rich in all beauties which man's eye can see: Beauties so far from reach of words, that we Abuse her praise saying she doth excel. Rich in the the treasure of deserved renown. Rich in the riches of a royal heart. Rich in those gifts, which give th' eternal crown: Who, though most rich in these and every part, Which make the patents of true worldly bliss; Hath no misfortune, but that Rich she is.

In the second half of the sequence, Astrophel becomes much more critical of Lord Rich. His mere dislike or pity explodes into a raging hatred of the man in a sonnet de-
picting Lord Rich as "Jealousy".

Jealousy...
A monster! Others harm! self's misery!
Beauty's plague! Virtue's scourge! succour of lies!
...Who since he hath -
So piercing paws, as spoil when they embrace;
So nimble feet, as stir still though on thorns;
So many eyes, aye seeking their own woe;
So ample ears, that never good news know:
Is it not evil that such a devil wants horns?
(Sonnet 78)

The hostility Astrophel shows is now very personal—quite unlike his earlier remarks, which could have been expressed by almost anyone. There is no doubt as to whom he directs his anger, or for what reason. Astrophel is in a frenzy of frustration yet fully realizes he is going against the Neoplatonic rule that the lover shall not

bee out of all bitterness and wretchedness
That yong men feele (in a manner) continually,
as jealousies, suspitions, disdaines, angers,
desperations, and certaine rages full of madnesse,
whereby many times they be ledde into so great error.

It is further advised that the lover "shall do no wrong to the husband, father, brethren or kinsfolk of ye woman beloved."10 To Astrophel, these doctrines no longer have meaning. He has shattered any hopes of further attaining Ideal love by his intentional contradiction of such tenets.

Even Astrophel's attitude toward Stella has changed in the later sonnets—though not so drastically nor in the same way as it had toward Lord Rich. Astrophel now sees Stella as being tremendously superior to him, with
complete control over his fate. She comes across somewhat as a harsh ruler. In sonnet 86 we find Stella is both a slavedriver and a judge:

O ease your hand! treat not so hard your slave!
In justice, pains come not till faults do call.
Or if I needs, sweet Judge, must torments have;
Use something else to chasten me withal,
Than those blest eyes, where all my hopes do dwell.
No doom should make once heaven become his hell.

This image is carried into sonnet 87 when Astrophel says he was "forced from Stella ever dear--by iron laws of duty to depart."

In two other sonnets we see examples of Astrophel's feeling of extreme inferiority to the all-powerful Stella. Sonnet 98 depicts Stella as the sun--and himself as a worm. And in sonnet 106 we find Astrophel is in an orphanage--left there, of course, by Stella and hoping for her return.

We find in the Courtier the advice that:

Our Courtier shall be most acceptable to his ladie, and she will always shew her selfe towarde him tractable, lowly and sweet in language, and as willing to please him as to be beloved of him; and the wills of them both shall bee most honest and agreeable, and they consequently shall bee most happie.

The situation of Astrophel and Stella is a definite contradiction to such advice. As was just shown, Stella comes nowhere near to being "lowly and tractable" toward Astrophel. Sidney may have characterized Stella as the domineering power purposely to bring out the drastic change that has taken place. Astrophel has deviated so
far from the path of Neoplatonic love that what relationship does exist is in complete opposition to the love he originally desired. It is also highly likely that such sonnets depict the truly inferior animal nature of the sensual Astrophel, in contrast to the superior nature of Stella, who has maintained her Neoplatonic beliefs throughout.

Sonnet 91 reveals even further the abuse of Neoplatonic doctrines by Astrophel. Here we find Astrophel telling Stella of the other women attractive to him in her absence:

If this dark place yet show, like candlelight,
Some beauty's piece, as amber-coloured head,
Milk hands, rose cheeks, or lips more sweet, more red;
Or seeing gets black, but in blackness bright:
They please, I do confess, they please mine eyes.

We learn that such attention toward other women is acceptable by Neoplatonic standards as discussed in the Courtier: "And thus shall he beholde no more the particular beautie of one woman, but an universall, that decketh out all bodies." 32

But where Astrophel goes wrong is in his intentions. Any woman hearing this from a lover would, of course, be jealous, Stella being no exception. But even if she did not become jealous at first, Astrophel later gives the hint that she did become as:

Dear! Therefore be not jealous over me,
If you hear that they seem my heart to move.

By now Stella should be thoroughly worried about her rivals and this is exactly what Astrophel had hoped for. Needless to say, he is not in compliance with Neo-
platonism in sonnet 91. The only reason Astrophel mentions the other beauties is to make Stella jealous, and, as was noted earlier, the Neoplatonic lover is to "seeke alwais to frame (his mistress) to modestie, to temperance, to true honestie, and so to work that there may never take place in her other than pure thoughts."  

Having turned his back on the Neoplatonic philosophy of love, Astrophel has demonstrated "love of the voluptuous man" and is lowered to the level of an animal in the view of the Symposium. As such, he inevitably suffers the consequences of his actions. One such consequence is the "vexing" of the soul described by Ficino:

From the dry, thick, and black blood, melancholy, that is, black bile, is made which fills the head with its vapors, dries out the brain, and unceasingly vexes the soul day and night with fearful, hideous images...this is what happened to the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius, because of love. Vexed first by love and then by madness, he finally committed suicide. This has happened usually to those who, neglecting contemplative love, have turned to a passion for physical embrace. For we bear much more easily the desires for seeing, than those of both seeing and touching the desired one.

Astrophel describes this suffering in an address to his bed:

Ah, Bed...
How is thy grace by my strange fortune stained!
How thy lee shores by my sighs storms be!
With sweet soft shades, thou oft invitest me
To steal some rest; but, wretch! I am constrained
Spurred with Love's spur, though gold; and shortly reined
With Care's hard hand - to turn and toss in thee!
While the black horrors of the silent night
Paint Woe's black face so lively to my sight;
That tedious leisure marks each wrinkled line.

(Sonnet 98)
We also read about it in sonnet 89:

Tired with the dusty toils of busy day;
Languisht with horrors of the silent night;
Suffering the evils both of the day and night.

Many of the final sonnets deal with another form of suffering Astrophel undergoes— that of absence from Stella. Stella departs when she realizes there is no hope of maintaining a Platonic love with Astrophel. This of course, places him in a state of extreme grief:

Stella! While now, by honour's cruel might,  
I am from you— light of my life misled!  
And that fair you, my sun, thus overspread,  
With absence will; I live in sorrow's night.  
(Sonnet 91)

Astrophel goes through a period of tears, laments and despair near the end of the sequence. He calls "absence" a "traitor" in sonnet 88 and mourns Stella's absence in sonnets 92, 98, 100, 102, 103, and 105. Yet, according to the Courtier, all this could have been avoided had Astrophel preserved the Neoplatonic image of Stella as his inspiration:

To avoid therefore the torment of his absence, and to enjoy beautie without passion, the Courtier by the helpe of reason must full and wholly call backe againe the coveting of the bodie to beautie alone, and (in what he can) beholde it in it selfe simple and pure, and frame it within in his imagination sundred from all matter and so make it friendly and loving to his soule, and there enjoy it, and have it with him day and night, in every time and place.  

36

Astrophel can no longer turn to such an image of Stella. Although the Neoplatonic image "once loved is
always loved,"37 Astrophel no longer recognizes it. To do so, he would have to be the true Platonic lover once again. In his present state, he is left with no inspiration whatsoever; thus, Stella's absence leaves him suffering from the void she has created.
CONCLUSION

The sonnet sequence, Astrophel and Stella, has been analyzed many times and in many different ways. Although the interpretations differ, many critics believe that Sidney was pointing out the deficiencies in Neoplatonic love. One critic feels that through Astrophel and Stella, Sidney gives the first extended critical analysis of the principal Petrarchan and Neoplatonic attitudes toward love by drawing a psychological portrait of a self-conscious and sensitive lover in a world whose ideals were communal and active rather than individual and contemplative... Sidney questions and often ridicules the Neoplatonic, as well as Petrarchan, subordination of practical virtue to a contemplative transcendence of renunciation of all secular love.35

Isabel Rivers, in her discussion of Neoplatonism, tells us that

It is in love poetry that the largest number of allusions to Neoplatonism is to be found, but these are often negative and ironic. Critical reference to the Neoplatonic separation of ideal and physical love as untrue to the facts of human experience can be the starting point for the poet's own definition. This technique is used to great effect by Sidney in Astrophel and Stella...39

David Kalstone expresses the same opinion by saying:

The author of Astrophel and Stella... in his sonnet sequence raises explicitly the question of the fate of Petrarchanism in England and poses more problems about
Neoplatonic love in English poetry than it answers.

In contrast to these critics I have made a quite opposite interpretation of Astrophel and Stella. I believe that Sidney agreed with the Neoplatonic concept of love and that Astrophel and Stella reflects his view. Where these critics and I differ is in the consideration given to Sidney's personal beliefs. My interpretation is based on the fact that Sidney was a Neoplatonist and on his own idea of the purpose of poetry. Rivers, Kalstone and other critics have ignored these two factors that would seem to be crucial regarding the question of Sidney's intent.

As noted earlier, (in pages 3-8), Sidney was an advocate of Neoplatonism. His works are filled with Neoplatonic concepts, and the influence of both Ficino and Castiglione is obvious. Sidney even declared in his Defense of Poesy, "that Plato...of all philosophers, (he has) ever esteemed most worthie of reverence." It would hardly be appropriate for an individual to contradict his own personal beliefs in his poetry. On the basis of this assumption, I have concluded that Sidney is neither questioning nor ridiculing Neoplatonism, but has another purpose behind Astrophel and Stella.

Near the end of the sequence Astrophel states:

`0 let not fools in me thy works reprove;
And scorning, say, "See! what it is to love!"
(Sonnet 107)`
These words, "See! what it is to love!", well summarize what Sidney has accomplished through the sonnets of Astrophel and Stella. By witnessing Astrophel's plight, we truly have seen what it is to love. Or, as C.S. Lewis states, Sidney has written an "anatomy of love."\textsuperscript{42} In any anatomy we must remember that what lies on the surface is only a cover to what lies beneath. So, too, we know that the surface plot of Astrophel and Stella is only a covering. It is the "means" by which Sidney entertains his readers. But

When Sidney comes to discuss the proper effect of poetry, he gives most weight to the element of instruction in the twofold aim of Horace; delight he considers a means to that end. Poets, says he, imitate both to delight and teach, and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger; and teach to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved.\textsuperscript{43}

To uncover the full meaning behind Astrophel and Stella, it is necessary to consider this element of instruction. And we find that in each period of Astrophel's plight, Sidney has presented an underlying lesson.

The first fifty-one sonnets take us through a lover's quest for ideal Neoplatonic love. Sidney has a dual lesson here: he awakens the reader to the difficulties inherent in attaining Neoplatonic love through Astrophel's troubles, but he also enkindles a sense of optimism by showing Astrophel's eventual attainment of the Neoplatonic ideal.
The second half of the sonnet sequence (from 52 on) teaches a lesson through failure. Sidney teaches us, through Astrophel's failure, how easy it is to stray from the Neoplatonic ideal and how difficult life can become from doing so. The sequence concludes with Astrophel in a state of despair. Sidney has convinced the reader to avoid repeating Astrophel's behavior, and to choose instead to "take goodness in hand." 44

It may seem unusual that Sidney teaches a lesson on how to love by showing how not to love. But we need only to turn to his definition of poetry for an explanation. "Poesy," says Sidney, "is an art of imitation... a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth." 45 If Astrophel and Stella is to be a true representation of the Neoplatonic love process, it must be realistic. And nothing could be more realistic than the tragic story of Astrophel. If the story had ended on a successful note, it would undoubtedly have lost its impact. "Poetry, if it is to sustain its claim to be an effective moral force, a force that makes men better, must demonstrate that it not merely shows men what is good but moves them to do it." 46 It is the emotional struggle, the successes, and most especially, the failure of Astrophel that Renaissance readers will remember and be moved by. And having been moved by the sequence, they most likely understood and attempted to follow Sidney's lesson.
ENDNOTES


7Kristeller, Eight Philosophers, p. 44.

8Ficino, p. 20.


11Ficino, p. 189.


13Plato, p. 49.

(original translation)

16Ficino, p. 169.

17Castiglione, p. 316.


19Castiglione, p. 317.


21Castiglione, p. 313.


24Montgomery, p. 53.

25Ficino, p. 147.

26Castiglione, p. 314.

27Castiglione, p. 315.

28Castiglione, p. 315.

29Ficino, p. 201.

30Castiglione, p. 317.

31Castiglione, p. 314.

32Castiglione, p. 318.

33Castiglione, p. 314.

34Ficino, p. 193.

35Ficino, p. 195.

36Castiglione, p. 317.

37Ficino, p. 201.

38Dissertation Abstracts International, 35 (1975), 6090A.


41 Sidney, Complete Works, p. 32-3.

42 Montgomery, p. 118.

43 Samuel, p. 385.

44 Samuel, p. 385.


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