

“In Stella’s face I read”:
Stella as Palimpsest in Sidney’s Sonnet Sequence

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Much contemporary attention has been given to establishing to what extent this famous sonnet sequence is autobiographical, *i.e.* to whether Astrophil stands for the author and Stella for Penelope Devereaux. It is known that there was at least an attempt to bring about their match, though Penelope would in fact be married to Lord Rich in 1582, and Sidney to Frances Walsingham the following year. Internal evidence does seem to point at the identification of Stella with Lady Rich, as some of the poems (most prominently sonnets 24 and 37), and scattered allusions in still others, highlight the polysemic nature the word “rich” acquires in *Astrophil and Stella*.

Nevertheless, it is not my purpose here to argue in favour or against such an identification. On the contrary, I would like to contend that, regardless of whatever real-life model Sidney may have used, Stella is in fact a fictional entity, not only because she remains bound by the limits of the text, but also, most importantly, because she *is* a text. The sequence thematizes woman as a text, and as such, she/it is read, written, re-read and re-written, in an endless process that bears light on its analogic correlative, poetry writing in Elizabethan England, and its politics.

Astrophil and Stella starts with the much-quoted statement that the reason for writing is no other than love, the poet/lover attempting by this means to win the grace of a certain lady, a “dear she”. This unnamed lady is then identified, in sonnet 3, as one Stella, although no further information is provided. This early part of the sequence abounds in disembodied allusions to Stella, whose name is mentioned simply as the cause of the feelings of the poet/lover, and to whom all manner of virtues are assigned. Thus the locus of attention is placed on the articulate lover, simultaneously obscuring the figure of Stella, as this strategy actually prevents questions (and, we could also argue, builds suspense) about her. As Rebecca Merrens has said:

Astrophil and Stella traditionally has been read as the demonstration of Astrophil’s unrequited love for Stella and the torturous process he endures to win her love in return. For a cycle ostensibly concerned with love, however, the sonnets display a relative lack of interest in the supposed object of Astrophil’s affection –Stella– and in

her responses to his protestations of love. Stella, in fact, remains notably flattened and undercharacterized throughout the sequence (...) (1992: 184)

A paradigmatic example of the treatment of Stella at this early stage of the sequence is sonnet 16, which contextualizes the discourse of love while de-contextualizing Stella. This sonnet contextualizes the discourse of love by historicizing it, *i.e.* by placing it in the context of the personal history of the poet/lover, and by framing it as an experience of learning. Structurally, it moves from past, and presumably worthless love relationships, to the present and full realization of the meaning of that feeling: the presence of Stella heralds the arrival of true love.

But of the woman herself little, if anything, is to be gathered, even though her name is foregrounded, strategically positioned at the beginning of line 11, and part of a sentence that, starting in the previous line, runs on into the next, abruptly separating the direct object (Stella) from its verb (beheld). Instead, what matters is the voice of the learner, the subject who feels, the personal history we get acquainted with.

The blazons scattered here and there throughout the sequence should help us endow Stella, who so far is simply a linguistic sign, with a more material essence. Typically, however, they do not. Instead, they itemize the female object of desire according to the conventional Petrarchan catalogue. The ideological implications of the employment of the blazon has attracted wide discussion in recent years, Nancy Vickers' prominent 1981 analysis of the strategies of dismemberment in Petrarch's Rimes being one early example, which Merrens has taken up more recently: "Stella is repeatedly dehumanized by the dismembering use of the blazon: her face becomes 'alabaster', 'red porphyry', 'pearl', and rare 'marble'. She does not exist as a character but rather as a signifier for material and social value . . ." (Vickers 1992: 184)

This Petrarchan practice has received even more radical assessment from Gary Waller, when he says:

Historically, Petrarchism was predominantly a male discourse, and its central psycho-cultural trope is the quintessential male perversion, fetishism. It characteristically incorporates other typically male perversions, including aspects of both sadism and masochism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and –at times, catering for more specialist tastes– transvestism, pedophilia, and necrophilia. (1993: 147)

Sidney's use of the blazon is no exception. The fragmentation of the female body in sonnet 77 is a case in point. What matters for the purpose of this paper, however, is how the processes of reading and writing come together in the sonnet. Reading, because the poet/lover takes up a series of signs (*i.e.* physical features) and assigns to each of them a value; writing, because in so doing the poem is being composed and offered to other extratextual readers for interpretation. Stella is at the same time read as a text and written as one: interpretation and representation merge here.

This reification of Stella is evident in other sonnets as well, like sonnet 9, where the blazon is held together by a conceit, made explicit in its very first line: Stella's face is like Queen Virtue's court. Likewise, the conceit brings to the surface the textual nature of Stella. The sonnet offers a reading of her as a building: Stella is constructed just as Queen Virtue's palace is being literally built, line after line. Here as in sonnet 77, Stella is only perceived as a composite of features. In fact, the very conventionality attributed to Stella in this sonnet would seem to function very much as the abstractions of 77, both qualifying and blurring the qualified.

Consequently, Sidney's deployment of the blazon points towards the identification of "Stella" with a sign. Stella is the sign which confers meaning to the poems, but whose own meaning paradoxically remains unrepresented. It/she acquires meaning only in the transaction between speech and silence; it

autonomy a male poet allows the woman in his verse. She (and the personal pronoun is barely appropriate since 'she' is so completely 'his' creation) is entirely a product of the discourse that she supposedly shares. She is asserted to control her lover's destiny, and yet she is allowed to operate only within a structure of control and domination. She is the object by means of which he can indulge his anguish, his pleas, his manipulations. Either way, despite his assertion of despair and dependence, in no sense is she ever an agent: she has no choice but to be sexualized, and she is not accorded reciprocal power. (1993: 153)

Thus, what is foregrounded in these poems is not the woman as a 'maker' of meanings, but as 'bearer' of meanings. Besides, if the woman is, by definition, always the object and never the subject of discourse, then Stella-as-text, *i.e.* possessed, could never become Stella-as-reader, *i.e.* possessor. Due to the fact that Stella is an *object* of representation, one that is given a substance in the poem by the voice of Astrophil, the direction of the discourse of appropriation cannot be reversed. Stella cannot be at the same time the *object* being represented and the *subject* of interpretation. Thus, significantly enough, in sonnet 45, Stella is represented in her refusal to read, *i.e.* to interpret and bring into being her own meaning:

Stella oft sees the verie face of wo
Painted in my beclouded stormie face;
But cannot skill to pitie my disgrace,
Not though thereof the cause her selfe she know (...) (ll.1-4)

If, as we discussed above, 'Stella-as-sign' can and does acquire different meanings, the sequence further suggests that the more complex entity 'Stella-as-text' can be erased and rewritten. This possibility comes into being in the Fifth Song. Placed after sonnet 86, and starting a subsection of songs (fifth to ninth), thematically this poem follows Stella's rejection: that is why it is a song of retaliation or revenge, with a very spiteful tone. Revenge does not take place in 'real life', however, but as it would be expected, in discourse, and especially in the field of representation: "I think now of thy faults, who late thought of thy praise; / That speech falls now to blame, which did thy honour raise; / The same key open can, which can lock up a treasure" (ll. 16-18).

Retaliation is enacted by erasing the meanings previously conferred on Stella, and inscribing new ones. Thus, the first few stanzas (mainly 2 and 4) recapitulate on what has previously been said of her, the praises that those other poems sang, in a gradation: stanza 2 starts with a physical description that progressively acquires the dimensions of heavenly beauty, and from a rather straightforward "thou wert most fair" to a conventional hyperbolic comparison of her eyes to stars.

The degradation of Stella starts in the seventh stanza, where she is accused of the first of a series of crimes, each worse than the previous one. First seen as ungrateful, she then becomes a thief, a murderer, a tyrant, a rebel, a traitor, a witch and a devil. As you can see, the degradation starts in the field of the personal (thief, murderer), intrudes in the political (tyrant, rebel, traitor) and reaches its climax in the religious (witch, devil). All those terms are then put together in the last stanza, 15: "You then ungratefull thiefe, you murdring Tyran you, / You Rebell run away, to Lord and Lady untrue, / You Witch, you Divill (...)" (ll. 85-87).

By uttering them, Astrophil is re-creating and radically transforming Stella: he is unsaying what he said; in fact, the repetition of "I said" before each positive qualification, and later on "I say" before each of the new, negative ones, reinforces the assertive tone, and highlights the power of speech as creator of reality. Assertive force is also achieved in the gnomic quality of the last line of each stanza which, by adopting the form of general statements, sanction the validity of Astrophil's judgement for the particular case that is Stella.

By calling her (those) names, Astrophil is quite literally rewriting her: notice, to that effect, how he claims that he is "staining (her) white" in line 68. Stella then proves to be not just a text, but also a palimpsest, *i.e.* a text from which the original writing has been effaced and something else is written in its place. It is by this means that the subject, Astrophil, re-establishes its control over the object represented, Stella, and re-possesses her/it.

In that sense, the discourse of power that Astrophil enacts here in this song refutes and subverts the very mechanics of the Petrarchan discourse of love, where the subject that feels love overtly submits himself to the power of the object of that love. In other words: Astrophil is trading his power (representation) for other powers (rewards), as becomes apparent in the last few lines of the song: "You see what I can say; mend yet your froward mind, / And such skill in my Muse you reconcil'd shall find, / That all these cruell words your praises shall be proved" (ll. 88-90). This is only possible because the relevance of this power of interpretation/representation transcends the limits of the text, and goes far beyond, into the context of its production. That is what Jones and Stallybrass imply when they say that:

One can identify a set of homologies between lover/beloved, suitor/patron and courtier/prince. As the lover must have absolute loyalty to his beloved, the courtier must have absolute loyalty to his prince; as the lover is apparently totally subjected to his lady, the courtier must appear to be totally subjected to his prince. But at the same time, both lover and courtier can attempt to influence and even to subject the beloved/prince to their own will through their accomplishments. (1984: 64)

It is in this courtly setting where the transactions of power take place. It is in that field where the discourse of gender and love (the lady as potential granter of favours) and the discourse of more material powers (the Queen as potential, and indeed, only granter of favours in a society that has become intensely centralized) overlap, the fact that there was a female ruler on the throne of England being the catalyst. As Waller points out:

The Elizabethans perceived Petrarch's poems as a rhetorical master-text, adaptable to the increasingly self-conscious rhetorical world of the court, where display and self-aggrandizement were, paradoxically, associated with appropriate humility, and thus became the means of acquiring place and the possibility of power. Elizabeth turned her position as a woman to advantage by encouraging her courtiers to adopt the role of a Petrarchan lover. (1993: 136)

This becomes most clear in the 5th Song, which actually reads as an assertion, and a reminder, of the power of representation. It is known that the Queen herself was well aware of this power, and that though she did not personally sponsor writers, she did encourage her courtiers to do so, thus establishing a pattern of patronage that did continue in Jacobean England. Marotti mentions, in that respect, how Sidney:

(...) crafted a sonnet sequence as a form of mediation between socioeconomic or sociopolitical desires and the constraints of the established order. He was the first Englishman to use a Petrarchan collection for this purpose. In so doing, he spoke to some of the central social concerns of an ambitious, educated elite. (1982: 399)

Stella, then, is merely the necessary link between both spheres; that is why I have argued that she is entirely fictional; her reality lies in the way she encodes the dominant discourses of the time. Stella is a text, and a palimpsest, on which Astrophil's desire for rewards is inscribed. She is therefore necessarily ambiguous, and liable to other inscriptions, always resisting closure. This is not, I hope, a fresh reification of Stella. What I suggest instead is that the discourse of gender cannot be understood in isolation, since in this case, it is conflated with other discourses in a struggle for power.

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