

Philip Sidney's Poetical Rhetoric in *Astrophil and Stella*

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I.

The opening sonnet of Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* presents an overview of the subject matter of the sonnet sequence, together with a manifesto of sorts seemingly for a new kind of poetry. Seeking the most appropriate ways to express his condition so that Stella might be moved to pity him and thence to accept his love, Astrophil looks to the conventional topics of invention and the examples of other poets. To his dismay, they are all ill-fitting, and he finds himself in a quandary where he is so pregnant with ideas that it becomes painful not to release them to the world, and yet is unable to do so for want of proper ways to express them. His exasperated muse then tells him to look in to his

own heart and copy out what is already there.

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;

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain;
 Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
 Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain.

But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
 Invention, nature's child, fled step-dame study's blows,
 And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.

Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
 'Fool,' said my muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'¹⁾

Its place as the first sonnet in the first sonnet sequence in English literature brought (and still brings) the poem into unusual prominence, as a model for others to emulate, but such prominence came with unexpected consequences.

George Herbert's "Jordan (2)," has been so often aligned with the poem (I am repeating the practice even as I am pointing it out) that Jonathan Post wryly points out that "few critics fail to cite the Sidneyan 'sources' in *Astrophel and Stella* underlying this poem" (145).²⁾ In it Herbert rejects conventional modes

1) *Astrophil and Stella*, Sonnet 1. Quotations from Sidney's poems are from *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones. Quotations from *Astrophil and Stella* will be indicated by the abbreviation *AS* in parentheses in the main text, followed by sonnet number and line number(s), when necessary, separated by a period.

2) The *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, perhaps most influential in disseminating such commonplaces among the uninitiated, unfailingly points out the

of invention. "Thousands of notions" (6) swarm in his head, until a "friend" quietly tells him: "*There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd: / Copie out onely that, and save expense*" (17-18). These lines echo the last line of Sidney's Sonnet 1, with the potentially important difference in Herbert's making more explicit the act of mimesis ("*Copie out onely that*").

Combined, the two poems reflect a trend in 16th- and 17th-century from copious and elaborate rhetoric towards a simpler, more functional one; furthermore, they also seem to suggest a larger trend—questioning the status of rhetoric itself as a humanistic art. In turn, interpretation of the two poems have been refracted by these changes, minor and major, in the history of rhetoric. What was once very obvious to those trained in the art of rhetoric has now become obscure. Rhetoric's place in humanistic learning has now been replaced by poetics, and rhetorical elements within poetics are largely not understood.

My aim in this paper is to approach Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* through the now largely ignored art of rhetoric and thus recuperate some of the lost implications of frequently anthologized poems like Sonnet 1. In the sonnet sequence I detect a struggle between Sidney's desire to preserve an ideal (in the form of Stella) and a competing desire to communicate that earlier desire through a medium of communication that makes preservation of that ideal impossible. En route, I discuss issues of the classification of rhetoric and its parts in relation to the sister arts of logic and poetics, and this is where I begin.

II.

Rhetoric, now a forgotten art that is often mentioned in writing classes but

association between the two Jordan poems and Sonnet 1 of *Astrophil and Stella*. (Greenblatt Gem ed. *Norton Anthology* 1615, n.1).

is rarely understood, was once the flower of all learning in renaissance Europe. According to Thomas Conley, rhetoric meant for renaissance thinkers “true eloquence, [. . .] not an empty pomposity of language or the extravagant artifice sometimes associated with rhetoric, but the harmonious union of wisdom and style whose aim was to guide men toward civic virtue, not to mislead them[. . ..]” (109). Rhetoric held a special place in humanism as a mainstay against the turbulence of the times characterized by religious and political upheavals: “rhetoric is an alternative to the use of force, as it is the art *par excellence* of persuasion in place of coercion, of deliberation by examination of alternatives in place of autocracy” (Conley 110). Despite its being a practical art, rhetoric was also imbued with an ideal in the model of Cicero, who asserted in *De Oratore* that the ideal orator must be a *vir bonum* who possesses knowledge and wisdom (Cicero 1.20, 3.56-143).

Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine’s study of the sixteenth-century transformation of ‘humanism’ (an ideal) to ‘humanities’ (subjects taught in school) illustrates how the dissemination of humanism in the school curriculum ironically turned it into a form devoid of matter (ch. 6 and 7). The lofty ideals of rhetoric were submerged under rote memorization of its topics and schemes. Thus John Milton complains of universities

forcing the empty wits of children to compose Theams, verses, and Orations, which are the acts of ripest judgement and the finall work of a head fill’d by long reading, and observing, with elegant maxims, and copious invention. These are not matters to be wrung from poor striplings, like blood out of the nose, or the plucking of untimely fruit. (“Of Education”; 372-373).

Sidney too alludes to this loss of the ideal and fall into pedagogy in Sonnet 1 of *Astrophil and Stella*: “Invention, nature’s child, fled step-dame study’s

blows" (*AS* 1.10). Astrophil studies "inventions fine" (6) to describe his pitiful state, "[b]ut words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay" (9). Invention, that crucial part of rhetoric that helps the speaker discover and build his argument, is driven away by pedagogy and leaves Astrophil stammering for things to say. This is the extent to which most readers of the sonnet will understand the role of invention in the sonnet sequence. Astrophil seemingly writes without invention, looking directly into his heart and writing what he sees there. A dichotomy emerges between the artificiality of invention and the naturalness of heart-searching.

Taken one step further, in tandem with Sidney's distinction between the rhetorician (and logician) and the poet in *An Apology for Poetry*, the sonnet may serve as an example of Sidney's poetics that offers a whole new dynamics between nature and art. Whereas the rhetorician and the logician "considering what in nature will soonest prove and persuade, thereon give artificial rules," while being confined within the boundaries of "the proposed matter" (13), the poet "goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit" (14). If we interpret "heart" in line 14 of Sonnet 1 to mean "mind," as William Ringler does in his commentary (459), then we arrive at a poetic formula in the sonnet similar to the one expounded in the *Apology*. Astrophil, freed of the constraints of conventional invention (and of rhetoric) can now roam freely "within the zodiac of his own wit." Sonnet 1, then, rather than being merely an example, becomes itself a manifesto of a poetics that eschews conventional rhetoric.

II.

If invention had already fled the whips of schoolwork, we are still left with

“inventions fine” that Astrophil diligently studies “her wits to entertain” (*AS* 1.6). This separation of invention from invention may be construed as a distinction made between invention the child of nature and a mere husk of that invention that is left behind. If we follow this distinction, neither nature’s child (having fled) nor the husk (falling short of expectation) contribute to the writing of Sonnet 1. A theory, a poetics of sorts emerges in the sonnet, but the actual composition of the sonnet and that of other sonnets in *Astrophil and Stella* tells us that theory and practice often do not go together.

The use of pathos is one of the easiest methods of invention to identify, and the first four lines of Sonnet 1 begin with an appeal to pathos:

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[.] (*AS* 1.1-4)

This type of invention is, according to Cicero, powerful and persuasive.

[P]ity is aroused if the listener can be induced, when other people’s circumstances are lamented, to relate these to his own experiences, either to the bitter experiences he has suffered or to those that he fears. In this way, when he looks upon someone else, he may often be reminded of himself. And while every case of human misery causes people pain if it is described mournfully, the affliction and ruin of virtue are particularly distressing. (2.211)

Other sonnets (like Sonnet 2, immediately following upon the declaration of pain in Sonnet 1) similarly appeal to pathos: “with a feeling skill I paint my hell” (*AS* 2.14); “I now have learned love right, and learned even so / As who

by being poisoned doth poison know" (16.13-14); "yet she hears, yet I no pity find, / But more I cry, less grace she doth impart" (44.5-6), etc. Sonnet 18 is especially poignant in that its subject matter is "the affliction and ruin of virtue" that Cicero emphasizes above. In fact, the Petrarchan sonnet form's combination of the octave and the sestet formally invites all modes of invention.³) Writing without invention is a near impossibility, and suggesting that one can do so is an open lie.

The discovery that Astrophil secretly employs invention while protesting that he does not heightens the distinction between the artificiality of rhetoric (and logic) on the one hand and the naturalness of poetry on the other.⁴) As Anthony Low points out, *Astrophil and Stella* engages the Petrarchan conventions, questioning and scoffing at them in a "rhetorical move" that ironically places him "still thoroughly within the Petrarchan tradition":

His protests of sincerity and of naturalness are a nice instance of courtly *sprezzatura*, of art concealing art yet allowing itself to be seen and to be admired for its skill. This is only a superficial or a pretended resistance to convention. (13-14)

Sidney is said to have carried around a copy of Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*

3) The rhetorical modes of definition (Sonnet 14), comparison (Sonnet 59), relationship (Sonnet 27), circumstances (Sonnet 69), testimony (Sonnet 21), enthymemes (Sonnet 48) and fallacies (Sonnet 63), all fall within the purview of topics that can be generated by the 8 + 6 structure.

4) The pairing of rhetoric and logic may be a result of Sidney's "acquaintance with Ramism," as Forest Robinson points out (Sidney, *Apology* 13, n.53). Ramus reorganized the parts of rhetoric, assigning *invention* and *arrangement* to logic, and leaving only *style* and *delivery* in rhetoric (memory was excluded from both arts). The link between Sidney and the English Ramists is tenuous, however, and Sidney in his poetry and *Apology* appeals frequently to Cicero as his authority and example.

(Matz 59), and his assertion that the poet is the “monarch” of “all sciences” (*Apology* 38) finds close parallels in Castiglione (Connell 87-88). The close association between the two, and the classic example of *sprezzatura* in Sonnet 1 show us how artificial Sidney’s claim to naturalness can be.

Let us re-examine the statement in *An Apology for Poetry* regarding the poet as maker of a second nature:

Only the poet, disdainng to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow want of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. (*Apology* 14)

New problems of interpretation arise here, when one includes the part about invention heretofore left out. To what classification should we assign the vigorous “invention” of the poet? Sidney seems to waver when he says that “poesy [. . .] is an art of imitation” (18), but soon returns to consistency when he asserts of the third kind of poets (other than the divine and the philosophical) that they “do imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate borrow nothing of what is, that been, or shall be, but range only reined with learned discretion into the divine consideration of what may be and should be” (20). The poet’s invention is then the imitation of “that *Idea* or fore-conceit of the work” (16), and “the poet only bringeth his own stuff, and doth not learn a conceit out of the matter, but maketh matter for a conceit” (50).

The notion taken from Sidney’s poetics that poet need not to look to external nature but only to his own mind seems an attractive and conclusive

interpretation of the ending of Sonnet 1: "look in thy heart and write." Thus, even while rhetoric appears to "bring forth," that is, give form to the Idea, Sidney's theory of poetry leaves no room for invention as a tool for discovery. Rather, invention merely requires a copying of the foreconceit that is already fully invented and eloquent. Touching upon the image of pregnancy in line 12 of Sonnet 1, Katherine Eisaman Maus comments that "Astrophil's pregnancy is revealed to be essentially self-generated: something comes out, but nothing came in. He becomes able to give birth when he recognizes his own self-sufficiency, stops relying on externals, and looks within his own heart" (275). The conceit is self-generated, and form is integrated into the matter.

As I have suggested above, however, the *exempla* of Sidney's poetry do not match the theory. Sonnets 44 and 45 show us Astrophil encountering new challenges. In each case, we find Astrophil diligently copying what was in his mind in the hopes of winning Stella's pity, when he gains fresh insight into her inability to pity him: though Stella is fully capable of pity, she shows none to Astrophil. The hopefully confident assumption in Sonnet 1, that what is fore-conceived in the mind is sufficient to win the grace of Stella through the mere writing of it, reaches its limits.

Sonnet 44 begins with him following the model prescribed in Sonnet 1: "My words, I know, do well set forth my mind, / My mind bemoans this sense of inward smart" (*AS* 44.1-2). Though the pains expressed can win the pity of "any heart" (3), the more he cries, the more he falls from her grace, even though her heart "is of no tiger's kind" (4). The only truth he can conclude is that "the heavenly nature" (12) of Stella's dwelling transforms his words of sorrow into "tunes of joy" (14), leaving Stella oblivious of his pains. With this conclusion, Astrophil raises the question of the efficacy of the fore-conceit (and thus of the lately achieved status of poetry) as tool of learning (for the goal of poetry is

to teach as well as to delight). Sonnet 45 addresses the opposite problem of being unable to delight as much as competing arts. Though Stella sees the right representation of Astrophil's pity and understands what she sees, she "cannot skill to pity my disgrace" (45.3). Instead, "a fable" (5), a "fancy drawn by imaged things, / Though false" (9-10) captures her heart, presumably because "with free scope [it] more grace doth breed / Than servant's wrack" (10-11). Sidney's brilliance lies in the ending that, rather than bemoans Stella's lack of taste, adapts the genre of the fable in the telling of Astrophil's tale:

Then think, my dear, that you in me do read
Of lover's ruin some sad tragedy:
I am not I, pity the tale of me. (12-14)

Sidney's *Apology* was poetry's response to charges of falseness (a charge that was also aimed against rhetoric), to which he presented a second nature that was superior to the first nature because it was born of an ideal of "what may be and should be" (*Apology* 20). The lines in Sonnet 45 are tantalizingly vague. Is the fable that moves Stella a mere "fancy drawn by imaged things, / Though false"? Or, unfettered like the poet's wit, does the fancy achieve something akin to the second nature that, in the eyes of the uninitiated (Astrophil?) simply appears to be false? Such ambiguities are borne right through the sonnet to the last line, where Astrophil himself denies his own identity: "I am not I." Neither position can be conclusive, and this uncertainty directs attention once more to the efficacy and the self-sufficiency of the fore-conceit of Sonnet 1, and a concurrent re-evaluation of the role of invention and rhetoric in the sonnet sequence.

III.

Sprezzatura is an ultimate art of finesse, of carefully balancing the concealment of the art (to the audience) with the discovery of it (to the initiated).

As dissimulation or artfulness, *sprezzatura*, like irony, is inherently ambiguous and equivocal. This ambiguity necessarily introduces the question of the audience, for to be successful the courtier must conceal his artfulness, but to be appreciated as *sprezzatura*, his concealment must be perceived. *Sprezzatura* then seems to presuppose [. . .] a double audience. (Kahn 380)

Just as Astrophil depends upon being not himself in Sonnet 45, so as to win the pity of Stella, the achievement of whole sonnet sequence depends upon the hiding of art within the fore-conceit, the rhetoric behind the poetic. But, as is pointed out above, this particular art of hiding also entails an art of revealing.⁵⁾ The art of rhetoric, while being concealed, gains prominence from the beginning.

The image of male pregnancy in Sonnet 1, taken straightforwardly without regard for gender, is an emblem of a fore-conceit in search of invention. Beyond search, it is an urgent need to deliver what is begotten in the mind-womb of the speaker. Yet, as he confesses in Sonnet 50, Astrophil's art of imitating the fore-conceit often falters. He finds himself "To portrait [depict] that which in this world is best" (*AS* 50.8; i.e. Stella) with the "weak proportion" (7) of his words. Unsatisfied as he is with the offspring, he cannot stop their production: "So that I cannot choose but write my mind, / And cannot choose but put out

5) See also Attridge for Sidney's concealment of tensions and contradictions under *sprezzatura* (258).

what I write, / While those poor babes their death in birth do find” (9-11). This time, however, the sonnet makes a reversal in the direction of the fore-conceit. The one redeeming factor that assures the continued existence of the malformed lines is the clear imprint of “sweet Stella’s name” on their “forefront” (14). The reassertion of the Ideal in the face of failing rhetoric may aptly serve as an *exemplum* of Sidney’s dichotomy of the “erected wit” and the “infected will” (*Apology* 17).

Such is our fallen condition that, though the poet may conceive of things (*res*) that may improve nature, our fallen language (*verba*) will fail to make successful delivery. The recurrent cycles of assertion and retraction of the Ideal, with a concurrent withdrawal and bringing forth of invention as the medium of that ideal, becomes an elaborate game of wit: “I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe, / Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain” (*AS* 1.5-6). The word “wit” occurs with frequency in *Astrophil ad Stella*, sometimes suggesting reason (*ratio* as opposed to *oratio*), and sometimes a poetic faculty of invention, but most often (sometimes forming a double with other connotations) suggesting a rhetorical game.

Edward Armstrong points out an allusion to a “Ciceronian sunburn” in Sonnet 1: “Oft turning others leaves, to see if thence would flow / Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain” (*AS* 1. 7-8).⁶ The allusion points to a metaphor employed by Antonius of his accidental learning of oratory while searching for other knowledge (itself a pose):

It is just as when I take a walk in the sunshine: even if I do so for another reason, it is only natural that I get tanned. In the same way, when I have devoted a fair amount of attention to reading such books, [. . .] I am aware

6) Armstrong 8-10.

that my speech, through its exposure to them, takes on a different color, so to speak. (Cicero 2.60)

Ciceronian sunburn cannot be avoided, even when one is not intentionally seeking it. Astrophil's recurrent return to invention testifies to his inability, maybe even unwillingness to detach himself from rhetoric, which the new poetics suggests he must. *Astrophil and Stella*, the first sonnet sequence in English literature, embodies an openly concealed game of hide-and-seek between rhetoric and poetics in Sidney's new model of poetical rhetoric.

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Key Words

Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, rhetoric, poetics, wit, wonder, lyric, sonnet sequence

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