

## MANIPULATION OF THE TOPIC OF *PUELLA DIVINA* IN *ASTROPHEL* AND *STELLA*'S SONG I. BLASPHEMOUS CONNOTATIONS\*

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Fulke Greville's narration of Sir Philip Sidney's life (1652) presents the poet as a model of virtue and Christian piety highlighting some legendary episodes previous to the moment of his death in which he behaved as a merciful and exemplary knight. The biographer intends to consolidate the figure of Sidney as the European leader of Protestantism he had enthusiastically tried to be during his life as a courtesan and politician. One of his major political ambitions had been to create an active Protestant League that fought against the Catholic imperialism of Philip II of Spain. Nevertheless, in spite of the historical references that point him as a devout Calvinist, recent criticism has tended to cast doubt on the authenticity of his spiritual aims; his interest in destroying the Spanish king could have had its roots in the political ambition of becoming a relevant figure in the English Court, an aim that he always desired and the Queen insistently denied him. In addition, one of his main concerns in foreign affairs was that England achieved the European leadership that Spain enjoyed at that time; religion then could have become for him the material weapon in the contest for sovereignty over the continent. M. Hunt (1992: 21) suggests that the best way of approaching the real identity of Sidney is to draw a distinction between his political ambitions and his personal way of living his faith.

These doubts about the true nature of Sidney's religious feelings are not only founded on his public and sincere friendship with eminent Catholics such as Giordano Bruno or Thomas Champion, a fact that suggests that his interest in Humanism and knowledge was much above his Puritan prejudices, but also on the ideological contradictions of his poetic writings derived from the 'persistent tension between religion and literature' that, according to A. Sinfield

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(1983: 21), divided the ego of those he calls "Elizabethan Puritan Humanists", whose severe Calvinist education prevented them from freely developing their literary anxieties along the line of Erasmist Humanism and their tendency to assimilate in their works the classical pagan tradition.

Whether purposefully or not, *Astrophel and Stella* is clear evidence of its author's internal debates. In fact, love poetry provided the main battleground for the coexisting ideological positions of the period; although they did not utterly reject classical poetry, many Calvinists censored those literary works that were devoted to passionate love. L. Humphrey condemned the upper classes for reading 'human things, not divine; love toys, not fruitful lessons; Venus's games, not weighty studies tending to increase the godliness, dignity or true and sound commodity; as Ovid, *Of the Art of Love* (*The Nobles*, 1563)<sup>1</sup>. Within this field, Neoplatonism meant an attempt at reconciliation between love poetry and religious decorum; it considered love between both sexes as a reflection of God's love on Earth and a means for humankind to raise their souls to divinity. But this was a double edged argument, for it contradicted the Protestant theory of predestination and of human incapacity to win God's mercy. Meanwhile, the increased popularity of pagan classic love poetry compelled Elizabethans to elaborate allegorical interpretations for works such as Ovid's *Metamorphosis*<sup>2</sup>. In Sidney's sonnet sequence, elements of these different Elizabethan discourses coexist and confront each other in a hazardous way; in poems such as Song 4 he reveals the Ovidian pragmatic conception of amorous relationships with a continuous invitation to his beloved to follow the precepts of the *carpe diem* motif; in Sonnet 5, for instance, he makes a burlesque defense of the spirituality of Neoplatonic love; in some others, he septically develops the Petrarchan *topoi* of *militia amoris* (12, 29, 36), *descriptio pulchritudinis* (9, 77) or *vulnus amoris* (2, 2, 20, 1), among many others. But the discursive confrontation in AS is not simply derived from a parallel imitation of two opposite discourses such as Neoplatonic spirituality and Ovidian sexual materialism; Petrarch's mediating task oriented towards achieving a peaceful coexistence between religion and the attraction between sexes by means of love's transcendentalism is an utter failure in Sidney's sonnet sequence. On some occasions, the hyperbolic use of Petrarchan *topoi* sets this discourse on the verge of a conflict with Protestant precepts.

Song I is a good example of this discursive manipulation. T. Roche (1987: 204) has considered its hyperbolic praises of the beloved as an "idolatrous blasphemy". In this poem Sidney develops Stella's praising by employing Biblical echoes and a psalmic structure; these stylistic resources go further beyond the connotations of the Neoplatonic topic of the *puella divina* that,

<sup>1</sup>This quotation appears in Sinfield (1983: 22).

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Golding's translation of this work (1567) is an example.



according to G. Serés (1996: 91), was frequently employed by Petrarquists, who preserved its meanings close to the Christian conception of love, and not in the context of a sexual passion as in Astrophil's instance. Sidney grants Stella the exclusive place of the Christian God when he plagiarizes the Biblical paraphernalia.

The first Song of the eleven that are scattered throughout the sequence fits to the structure of a conventional *descriptio pulchritudinis*, numbering one by one several of Stella's physical features, such as her eyes (l. 5), lips (l. 9), feet (l. 13), breast (l. 17), hand (l. 21), haire (l. 25) or voice (l. 29). The singularity of this description of the beloved is that it takes the systematic form of rhetorical questions. In the first and second lines of each stanza the poet wonders who the only deserver of his song of praise is (stanzas 1 and 9) and who possesses extraordinary attributes (stanzas 2 to 8); in the fourth line of each stanza the poet himself answers in the second person singular that his beloved is the only promoter of his praisings (stanzas 1 and 9), and he ascribes to her several exceptional qualities that could be considered more suitable for the Christian God than for a Petrarchan lady (stanzas 2 to 8). The third line of each stanza asserts that Stella is the only motif of the poet's praising: "To you, to you, all song of praise is due". The iterative repetition of this line as a refrain echoes the musical structure of the psalms and their insistent emphasis on God's veneration. Taking into account the Protestant context in which it was composed and Sidney's severe religious education, T. Roche (1987: 206) considers this song a blasphemous praise. He argues that Sidney ascribes to Stella the qualities of the Christian God:

In each of the riddling questions (unless we are persuaded by Astrophil's rare logic) we will see the hyperbole applies only to the ineffable fullness of God, the Creator, and is ultimately demeaning to the creature.

There is evidence of Sidney's deep knowledge and consideration of the Biblical psalms in his attempt to translate some of them into English meter. Furthermore, some of the metaphors of the psalms, such as the allusion to God as the only star ("O God our only star", Ringler, 1962: 281), are sometimes employed by the poet in his praising of Stella (73.5).

Let us examine in what terms each of these lines trespasses the border between the mere Platonic motif of the *puella divina* (Lieberg, 1962) and the appropriation of God's qualities for the idolatrous praising of the beloved. Lines 3 and 4 are the first example: "To you, to you all song of praise is due/ Only in you my song begins and endeth". Sidney proclaims Stella as the only deserver of his praise, she is the only beginning and end for his need of veneration of a superior being, a need derived from the Protestant idea of human helplessness and incapacity to elude predestination. This idolatrous



praising of Stella is clearly blasphemous from a Protestant point of view; it overthrows the Christian God as the unique motif of the psalms. T. Roche (1987: 201) translates these lines into what he considers the proper intention of their praising should be: "Only to God all song of praise is due; only in God do we begin and end". In fact, this was the real conception of human existence established by Elizabethan Puritanism; all the activities of life, even literature, should be oriented to serve God. A. Sinfield (1983: 20) quotes a fragment of the Homily *Of the Salvation of Mankind* that invites the Elizabethan Christian community to consider religion as the axis of their existence:

these great and merciful benefits of God (...) move us to render ourselves unto God wholly with all our will, hearts, might...pleasures and vainglory.

In sixteenth century England those writers committed to Humanist development faced the ideological restrictions imposed by the Church. Sinfield (1983) has coined the term 'Puritan Humanism' to refer to this persistent tension between literature and religion. He affirms that

the puritan humanist who felt the force of Protestant doctrine as well as the imaginative excitement of literature was sited at the crisis point of a sharp and persistent cultural dislocation. (23)

No doubt this is Sidney's own conflict; his expressive euphoria in the narration of a love passion, that could even be his own, makes him lose control and violate the limits of religious decorum. He probably was a vocational Humanist in greater measure than a pious Protestant, in contrary to the image of the poet that critics till the 19<sup>th</sup> century have tried to preserve. We therefore could understand that blasphemy in this poem is due to the poet's religious and cultural conflicts.

In line 5, the property of marrying "state with pleasure" is ascribed to Stella's eyes; the meaning of this metaphor has not yet been clearly explained by the critics. Roche (1987: 205) wonders: "What is the meaning of the marriage of 'state' with 'pleasure'? What have 'eyes' to do with this marriage?" In my opinion, we face once more in the sequence the motif of bittersweet love (2.11, 6.3, 48.13). The word "state", according to the meanings 1b ("a dirty, disorderly or untidy condition") and 7b ("an agitated, excited, or anxious condition of mind or feeling") given by the OED, is referring to the suffering and anxiety that Stella's eyes provoke in the lover. But, on the other hand, they also constitute a source of pleasure for him. In sonnet 48 the beloved's eyes also cause gaiety and pain in poor Astrophil:



O looke, ô shine, ô let me die and see.  
 For though I oft my selfe of them bemone,  
 That through my heart their beamie darts be gone,  
 Whose curelesse wounds even now most freshly bleed:  
 Yet since my death-wound is already got,  
 Deare killer, spare not thy sweet cruell shot (8-13)

If not blasphemous, the rhetorical question in line 6 is an offense to the Puritan conception of love between both sexes: "Who keepes the key of Nature's chieftest treasure?" It is certain that Stella is Astrophil's chieftest treasure (11.9, 71.1-2), and that it must be she who owns the key of herself. But, what exactly is "Nature's chieftest treasure?" Evidently, it is something of which only Stella is the keeper and it must be then a part of her body that remains still undiscovered by Astrophil. In sonnet 7 he refers to her eyes as Nature's "chiefe work" (l. 1), but I agree with Roche (1987: 206) that it would be ridiculous to consider her eyes as the lover's main aim concerning Stella, especially when we can find in the sequence clear evidence of his pure sexual desire<sup>3</sup>. In sonnet 32 Morpheus refers to her skin, lips, teeth and hair as even better "treasures" than those proceeding from the Indies (ll. 11-12). In sonnet 77 we find a clue that helps us to imagine what is the chieftest part of Stella's body in Astrophil's view. The poet develops a typical blason that describes by means of an *enumeratio* several features of Stella's beauty; but he abruptly interrupts his praise just before mentioning the best of her, something that his Muse, an unpolluted maid, does not dare pronounce and that makes her blush: "Yet ah, my Mayd'n Muse doth blush to tell the best" (l. 14). So, line 6 reveals Astrophil's epidermal desire, which is a direct cause for his feelings of bittersweet love, just as Castiglione's (*Il Cortigiano*, 4.51) or Ficino's (*De Amore*, 6.5) Platonic conception of love makes them assert in their treatises.

The praise in line 8 ("Only for you the heaven forgate all measure"), and in every line that closes each stanza, is more suitable for God than for a courted lady. In the sequence, Stella is often referred to as a heavenly being. In sonnet 11.3: "The heav'n to thee his best displays"; or in sonnet 20.7 the blackness of her eyes eclipses "the heav'nly eye". Nevertheless, in sonnets such as 63, where the poet foresees that Stella's divine nature could be envied by the heavens (l. 10), this motif becomes blasphemous for he ascribes to God the human vice of jealousy and places Stella's virtues above God's. According to the *dolce stil nuovo* and the troubadour tradition, love between men and women was a reflection of their love for God; the lady was the step between the lover and the divinity. It was then a commonplace to refer to her by means of religious concepts and terminology<sup>4</sup>. But on the other hand, Protestantism opposed the

<sup>3</sup>Cf. sonnets 71, 75 and Song 2, among others.

<sup>4</sup>For more information about the motif of the *religio amoris*, cf. G. Serés (1996: 91-93 and 112).



idea that men could have the capacity to achieve God's mercy by their own will. So, in the context of these discursive tensions, the hyperbolic praise in line 8 can not be justified at all within the religious context and seems to be really inappropriate.

In lines 12 and 16 Astrophil asserts Venus's and Cupid's reign over men: "Onely by you Cupid his crowne maintaineth/Onely to you her Scepter Venus granteth". Stella allows these two pagan gods, who represent sinful love, to maintain their sovereignty over man. She is the only cause for desire's privileged position in this world. In this statement, placed within the context of a religious psalm, we can locate the blasphemy of these two lines.

To attribute to Stella the capacity of making the tree of life flourish, as in line 20 ("Onelie through you the tree of life doth flourish"), is also a subversive praise in the context of a Christian background. The tree of life symbolises the immortality mankind could have enjoyed if it had remained innocent; this is one of the trees God planted in the garden of Eden (*Genesis*, 2.2.9). The poet ignores in this line God's intervention, on which Protestant believers exclusively depended, and proclaims Stella as the only giver of eternal life.

The Platonic paradox of death in life in line 26 ("Who makes a man live then glad when he dieth?") comes into conflict with the Protestant conception that divine providence is the only means by which man can achieve eternal life. According to Calvinist doctrine, man depends on God's generosity and is unable to work in life for his eternal rest. In this line, the poet refers to metaphoric death by love, however, its ambiguous tone allows the extremist interpretation that Stella is the one who grants life after physical death.

In line 29 Astrophil refers to Stella as the one who "soules from senses sunders". According to the Christian belief, the soul abandons the senses at the very moment of death when it departs the material body. Once again, Stella appears with divine might, it is now her voice that causes the elevation of the soul.

For line 32 ("Only with you not miracles are wonders") Ringler (1962: 479) gives the following interpretation: "Only with you miracles are not wonders". We find again a blasphemous praise. Miracles, of exclusively divine provenance, are trivial facts when compared to Stella's magnificence. Once again she invalidates God's action in the eyes of the lover and appears as a rival of God's supremacy.

The hyperbolic connotations Sidney confers on the motif of the *puella divina* denote the passionate nature of Astrophil's love. The lover is unable to maintain the expression of his idolatry within the boundaries of the conventional Petrarchan motif just as he is unable to control his passion, which becomes overtly lustful in many occasions (sonnets 71, 76, 77, Song 2).



The particular appropriation of this topic is only one instance of Sidney's conscious or unconscious manipulation of the conventions of Renaissance love poetry. The mocking of Platonic precepts that have been previously asserted a few lines above, even in the same sonnet, is a frequent resource in AS, as sonnets 5 or 71 exemplify. The corruption of Platonic *topoi* with sexual meanings is also a commonplace in the sequence. In sonnet 76 Sidney employs the Petrarchan images of light and warmth to refer to the sexual arousal provoked by Stella's proximity:

But lo, while I do speake, it groweth noone with me,  
Her flamie glistring lights increase with time and place;  
My heart cries 'ah', it burnes, mine eyes now dazled be (9-11)

We have already seen above in sonnet 77 how the conventional poetic description of the beloved by means of a blason acquires erotic connotations.

Nevertheless, many of the sonnets and songs of the sequence constitute extraordinary examples of Sidney's subtle dealing with orthodox poetry. It is precisely the coexistence of different discourses, mainly Platonic and Ovidian, with contradictory or ambiguous nuances, that brings to light the inner confrontations between the literary anxieties and social and religious constraints that Sidney was compelled to suffer.

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