The Interplay of Love, Reality, and Poetic Imagination:
Astrophil and Stella as a Sonnet Sequence

Aşk, Gerçeklik ve Şiirsel Hayal Gücünün Etkileşimi:
Bir Sone Dizisi Olarak Astrophil ile Stella

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore a complicated interplay of the notion of love, the perception of reality, and poetic imagination in Sir Philip Sidney's famous sonnet sequence, Astrophil and Stella. By looking at the complexities of unreciprocated love and sexual desire, the use of auto/biographical details, and the most important of all, the reflections of poetic imagination, the study briefly examines the echoes of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition in Sidney's sonnet sequence that he composed in his own distinctive style. Examples selected from one hundred and eight sonnets and eleven songs that articulate Astrophil's unfulfilled love and desire for Stella unfold the role and importance of the poet's imagination in constructing the themes of love and beauty in the English sonnet form. The study also reveals the embedded relationship between reality and poetic imagination through auto/biographical details given from Sidney's own life. Therefore, Sidney's Astrophil and Stella, which is innovative in its employment of the poetic persona, serves as an outstanding sonnet sequence for examining the dynamics of love, reality, and poetic imagination.

Keywords: Sidney, Astrophil, sonnet sequence, poet-lover, poetic imagination

ÖZET

Bu makale, Sir Philip Sidney'in ünlü sone dizisi Astrophil ile Stella'da aşk kavramı, gerçeklik algısı ve şiirsel hayal gücünün karmaşık etkileşimini keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, karşılıksız aşk ve cinsel arzunun karmaşıklığına, oto/biyografik detayların kullanımına ve en önemlisi de şiirsel hayal gücünün yansımalarına bakarak Sidney'in kendi üslubuyla yazdığı sone dizisinde Petrarca sone geleneğinin yansımalarını ana hatlarıyla incelemektedir. Astrophil'in Stella'ya olan karşılıksız aşkını ve arzularını dile getiren yüz sekiz sone ve on bir şarkı arasından seçilmiş olan örnekler, İngiliz sone formunda aşk ve güzellik temalarının inşasında şairin hayal gücünün rolünü ve önemini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma aynı zamanda, Sidney'in kendi hayatından verilen oto/biyografik detaylarla, gerçeklik ve şiirsel hayal gücü arasındaki iç içe geçmiş ilişkiye de işaret etmektedir. Sonuç olarak, Sidney'in şiirsel personayı ele alması bakımından da yenilikçi bir eser olan Astrophil ile Stella'sı, aşk, gerçeklik ve şiirsel hayal gücünün dinamiklerinin incelenmesi açısından göze çarpan bir sone dizisi olarak değerlendirilebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sidney, Astrophil, sone dizisi, aşık şair, şiirsel hayal gücü

INTRODUCTION

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was one of the most significant poets of the Renaissance England. His literary works include almost a hundred and fifty sonnets, songs, translations of Latin and French poetry, pastoral narratives, and so forth (Brooke and Shaaber, 1967: 478-479). Sidney owns the authorship of "the most important work of prose fiction, the most important piece of literary criticism [*The Defence of Poesie*, also known as *An Apologie for Poetrie*, written c. 1583], and the most important sonnet cycle of the Elizabethan age" (Abrams, 1993: 459). Furthermore, "no previous English poet, from Old English to Tudor Times, even approached Sidney in the variety and complexity of metrical forms that he used" (Ringler, Jr., 1962: lviii). Besides all these attributes, Sidney is known to have developed his own literary policy—to be followed by his literary circle—while searching for "a distinctly national literary identity" (Umunç, 1995: 113).

This article focuses on Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (written c. 1580), the first and the most significant English sonnet sequence, which is also regarded as "one of the world's great collections of lyric poetry" (Craik, 1967: 7). The sequence was posthumously printed from a manuscript circulated by Thomas Newman in 1591 (Stillinger, 1986: 169), and the circulation of the manuscript "released a flood of Petrarchan sonnet sequences" (Salingar, 1976: 92). As Robert Kimbrough states, Sidney's sonnet sequence "triggered an explosion of sonneteering," through which "Sidney taught a whole generation how to write English poetry" (1971: 113). Hence, while *Astrophil and Stella* took its place as a literary work "wherein the excellence of sweet poesy is concluded" (Newman qtd. in Hamilton, 1977: 10), Sidney gained the title of "English Petrarch" with its circulation (Muir, 1960: 26). As Gary Waller likewise underlines, Sidney's sonnet sequence

> marks the triumphant maturity of Elizabethan poetry and the first full, belated but spectacular, adaptation of Petrarchism to English aristocratic culture. It remains today one of the most moving, delightful and provocative collections of love poems in the language, all the more powerful in its impact because of the variety of discourses that strain within it for articulation—erotic, poetic, political, religious, cultural. (2013: 136)

More notably, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* as a sonnet sequence has cultivated the existing convention of love poems through its one hundred and eight sonnets and eleven songs. While Sidney expresses "all the conflicting feelings of a lover—hope and despair, tenderness and bitterness, exultation and modesty—by the use of 'conceits' or ingenious comparisons" (Abrams, 1993: 459) in *Astrophil and Stella*, the sequence stands out in its portrayal of a self-conscious poetic persona, namely Astrophil. Representing Sidney himself as a poet, Astrophil narrates his feelings of unrequited love and desire for Stella in the style of a dramatic monologue while commenting on the art of writing poetry.

Hence, this study seeks to explain how feelings of love and desire, Sidney's personal experiences given as auto/biographical periphrases, and most importantly, the poet's creative mind altogether blur the distance between reality and imagination in *Astrophil and Stella*. Sidney plays with the boundaries of lived experience and imagination through poetic creativity in his sonnet sequence. He illustrates the emotions of love, passion, hope, despair, sorrow, and anger in vivid and vibrant ways, which contributes to the creation of a sense of reality. He also incorporates auto/biographical elements, which increases the authentic quality of the sequence. Above all else, Sidney's skilful use of poetic language and imagery plays an important role in blurring the distance between the real world and the imagined world.

ASTROPHIL AND STELLA AS A SONNET SEQUENCE

'Sonnet' is briefly defined as "a *lyric* poem consisting of a single *stanza* of fourteen iambic pentameter lines linked by an intricate rhyme scheme" (Abrams and Harpham, 2015: 369). It can be categorised into two main groups according to its structural and stylistic features, which are the Petrarchan and the English. The Petrarchan sonnet was named after the Italian poet Petrarch of the fourteenth century. It usually consists of an *octave* of eight lines rhymed as "*abbaabba*" followed by a *sestet* of six lines rhymed as "*cdecden*" (Abrams and Harpham, 2015: 369). The sonnet form reached its peak with Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (1327), a sequence of three hundred and seventeen sonnets, the main theme of which is the poet's platonic love and adoration for a woman

named Laura ("Laura," 2024). Petrarch's *Canzoniere* was "a kind of encyclopaedia of love and passion" (Cuddon, 1999: 844), in which the idealized woman was probably Laure de Noves of Avignon, a married woman, whom Petrarch allegedly met in a chapel. While Laura's identity remains unclear, some scholars believe that Laura was only a production of the poet's creative mind rather than being a real person. Petrarch's sonnets made the poet himself and his beloved Laura an eternally famous couple, Dante and Beatrice being "their nearest rivals" (Trapp, 2001: 56). In fact, as Trapp underlines, "[b]ecause Petrarch's own words have ensured that he and Laura are among the most famous—and certainly the most often portrayed—pairs of lovers of post-classical times, it is hardly possible to consider her portraiture in isolation from his" (2001: 56).

Petrarch's love poetry was widely imitated in Europe, especially in the 16th century. The tradition is known as "Petrarchism," and it is characterized by "the increasingly conventional presentation of courtly love, in which the despairing poet speaks in fanciful and paradoxical terms of his torments as the worshipper of a disdainful mistress" (Baldick, 2001: 191). Petrarchan sonnets often employed vivid metaphorical expressions of an idealized woman's "physical beauty such as "coral lips, pearly teeth, alabaster neck etc." (Baldick, 2001: 191).

In the 16th century, Petrarch's works were translated into and imitated in the English language by names such as Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey, who laid the foundations of the English sonnet tradition (Cuddon, 1999: 845). Wyatt and Surrey popularized Petrarch's sonnets; however, "in the process they also modified the established Italian sonnet structure in ways that would allow the English vernacular tongue to speak most eloquently in verse" (Regan, 2019: 15). Furthermore, in Seber's words, "[t]heir translations from Petrarch not only formed a literary link between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance but also made the traditional attitude of love the basis of a rich variety of amorous verse" (1995: 117). Meanwhile, Elizabethan writers such as Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, and William Shakespeare were highly concerned with establishing "a distinct English literary identity" (Umunç, 2024). In this respect, as Umunç argues,

> they increasingly turned away from the imitation of Continental literary norms and explicitly rejected Petrarchan populism; instead, they were involved in a deliberate and focused engagement in a process of theoretical and pragmatic politics for the creation of national literature. (2024)

Hence, for Elizabethan poets, although Petrarch's sonnets provided a model, they established the English sonnet tradition in their own style, with similar themes but structural differences. The English sonnet form developed by Surrey and others from English literary circles is also known as 'the Shakespearean sonnet' since it was employed famously and successfully by Shakespeare. This sonnet structure involves three *quatrains* and a concluding *couplet*, rhymed as *abab cdcd efef gg*. Another outstanding variant is the Spenserian sonnet, "in which Spenser linked each quatrain to the next by a continuing rhyme: *abab bcbc cdcd ee*" (Abrams and Harpham, 2015: 369). The sonnet form was later employed, both in form and in the subject matter of "the hopes and pains of an adoring male lover" among various other subjects (religion, for example, as in the case of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, published in 1633) by poets such as William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), "who sometimes made it technically easier in English" (Abrams and Harpham, 2015: 369).

In addition to such structural developments in the sonnet form, Elizabethan poets such as Sidney and Shakespeare composed 'sonnet sequences' as well, following Petrarch's early examples in their own style. In sonnet sequences, "a series of sonnets are linked together by exploring the varied aspects of a relationship between lovers, or else by indicating a development in the relationship that constitutes a kind of implicit plot" (Abrams and Harpham, 2015: 370). The framework of the plot marks "the stages of a love relationship from its starting point in the lover's attraction to the lady's beauty, through various trials, sufferings, conflicts, and occasional encouragements, to a conclusion in which nothing is resolved" (Abrams, 1993: 459). Shakespeare's sonnets, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, and Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) can be regarded as the best examples of the sonnet sequence as a literary form.

Although English poets often produced sonnet sequences that followed Petrarch's style strictly, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* differs from other examples in terms of the poet's ability to maintain a balance between the "borrowed material" and "his own innovations" (Seber, 1995: 118). In other words, rather than staying within

the defined limits of the Petrarchan sonnet form, Sidney chooses to go beyond what is considered acceptable. To exemplify, although the main theme of love for a glorified and magically beautiful woman persists in Sidney's work, the focus sometimes moves from the beloved lady to the poetic persona and the act of writing poetry. Moreover, as Seber argues, while Petrarch displays "the refining power of love" in his sonnets, Sidney focuses more on

> the disruptive nature of love, a sensuous love in which the lover is not content with carrying the image of the beloved in his heart in adoration but in which the demands of the appetite clash with the world of Platonic ideas, precluding any possibility of reconcliation [*sic*]. (1995: 118)

It can thus be argued that Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* successfully combines the structural and thematic features of the Petrarchan sonnet form and the poetic persona's self-conscious voice enriched with the power of imagination. In this regard, the next section delves into exploring the interplay of love, reality, and poetic imagination in Sidney's sonnet sequence.

BLURRED LINES BETWEEN REALITY AND IMAGINATION IN *ASTROPHIL AND STELLA*

In the above-mentioned context, this article focuses on Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* as a sonnet sequence, which "took the Petrarchan way of loving and adoring the beloved" as a model (Seber, 1995: 117) and was developed in a highly authentic style by the poet. In his sequence, Sidney has advanced the sonnet form while articulating a poet-lover's emotional state in creative ways, through which he also reveals his literary policy. To explain further, according to Salingar, *Astrophil and Stella* "runs through the whole gamut of the self-dramatizing lover, with his ecstasies of hope and despair, of reproach and entreaty, of 'living deaths, dear wounds, fair storms, and freezing fires'" (1976: 92). For this purpose, as Edward Berry argues, Sidney

> offers a sustained and creative experiment in metrical and poetic forms, a sophisticated exploration of the wide-ranging emotions of love, witty meditations upon the nature of love poetry, an engaging and richly human pair of lovers, and a subtle narrative design. (1998: 102)

More remarkably, Sidney introduces Astrophil (meaning 'star lover,' with a pun on the poet's first name, Philip), a poetic persona representing himself, in a "radically innovative" manner (Berry, 1998: 102), displaying the highest elaborateness of poetic imagination and creativity. The sonnets are based on Astrophil's inner monologues rather than on a dialogue with his beloved Stella (meaning 'star'). In this respect, as Abrams also points out, "what gives Sidney's sonnets their extraordinary vigor and freshness is his ability to dramatize Astrophil's state of mind through the use of dialogue, colloquial speech, and probing self-analysis" (1993: 459).

Furthermore, while most sonnet sequences adhere to Petrarchan conventions in which the poet articulates the dilemmas of love, Sidney rejects these conventions to convey his own ideas on writing poetry through the poetic persona that he has created. In this regard, Sidney, taking the role of Astrophil, stresses that "he uses no standard conventional phrases, that his verse is original and comes from the heart" (Abrams, 1993: 459). In other words, according to the poet himself, his poems that reflect the poet's true love and burning desire for the beloved, are also stylistically authentic and unconventional.

In the opening sonnet of the sequence, Sidney draws attention to the relationship between love and poetic creativity. Astrophil the poet-lover—or Sidney—expresses his literary intentions, by introducing the themes of love and poetic inspiration together and setting the scene for the rest of the sequence. Astrophil also reveals that he has a strong desire to show his true love for Stella through his poetry. He believes that Stella might read his poems, take pleasure from his pain of love, and eventually understand and appreciate his feelings for her. He also

explains that he has read other poets for inspiration—in vain—, looking for better ways of expressing his deep feelings of love and admiration:

> Louing in trueth, and fayne in verse my loue to show,
> That she, deare Shee, might take som pleasure of my paine,
> Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,
> Knowledge might pittie winne, and pity grace obtaine,
> I sought fit wordes to paint the blackest face of woe;
> Studying inuentions fine, her wits to entertaine,
> Oft turning others leaues, to see if thence would flow
> Some fresh and fruitfull showers vpon my sun-burnd brain. (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

Despite all his efforts, Astrophil cannot find the right words to express his deep love for Stella. While he likens poetic creativity to "Natures childe," he compares himself to a pregnant woman in labour pain, "helpless" to deliver his emotions:

> But words came halting forth, wanting Inuentions stay;
> Inuention, Natures childe, fledde step-dame Studies blowes;
> And others feet still seemde but strangers in my way.
> Thus, great with childe to speak, and helplesse in my throwes,
> Biting my trewand pen, beating myselfe for spite,
> Fool, said my Muse to me, looke in thy heart, and write. (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

His "Muse"—representing poetic inspiration—finally comes to him and calls him a "[f]ool" when Astrophil is so frustrated that he is biting his pen, as a sign of his inner struggle. While the sonnet concludes, Astrophil realizes that he can write his poem from his own heart, out of love, and he does not need another source of inspiration.

According to Umunç, Sidney's first sonnet in the sequence can be regarded as the "key to the whole cycle" since it reflects Sidney's "literary policy" (1995: 114). As Umunç underlines,

> [t]his fundamental principle of Sidney's literary policy is metaphorically expressed in the last line of the sonnet where the woeful and frustrated poet-lover is directed by his 'Muse' to the expression of his own self and true feelings. Instead of concentration solely on the study and use of other poets' versification techniques and stylistic embellishments, he is advised to reveal in his poetry his individuality and inner reality. (1995: 115)

In this respect, while the poet-lover's intention is to explore the theme of love through his poems since writing poetry becomes the only way to express his true feelings and to capture Stella's attention, Sidney—represented by Astrophil—emphasizes the particulars of writing genuine poetry—in other words, using 'his pen.' Hence, the themes of love and poetic inspiration are elaborately intertwined in the very first sonnet, implying that the experience of true love feeds the creative imagination to write poetry.

It should be noted that Sidney underlines his literary strategy as a poet in his *An Apologie for Poetrie* (c. 1583) as well. Sidney appreciates the value of poetry and the poet as the creator in this work, defending the idea that "imaginative literature is a better teacher than philosophy or history," and "literature has the power to reproduce an ideal golden world, not just the brazen one we know" (Ousby, 1994: 32). Among many critical references, he refers to Plato's verdict to ban poets from the state in his *Republic* (c. 375 BCE), and Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) in order to underline the importance of the art of poetry, both to teach and amuse the reader. According to Sidney as he explains in *An Apologie for Poetrie*,

> Poesie therefore is an arte of imitation, for so *Aristotle* termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfetting, or figuring foorth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight. (in Smith, 1904: 158)

In this context, Sidney's literary approach as a poet and Astrophil's desire to draw "a speaking picture" to convey his love for Stella are noticeable from the very beginning of the sequence. Therefore, it can be argued that Sidney reformulates figures of speech, employs unusual conceits, and refers to works by other poets to create an authentic work of art in his *Astrophil and Stella*.

Sidney reveals his literary strategy in the sixth sonnet as well. Representing Sidney, Astrophil proves that he is aware of all the conventions employed by previous poets, and he explains, with specific examples, why he should not imitate them. He states that other poet-lovers express the overwhelming feelings "of hopes begot by feare," "of force of heau'nly beames infusing hellish paine," "of liuing deaths, dere wounds, faire storms, and freesing fires" (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). He adds that some poets refer to mythological stories in their expressions of love while some others employ the "humbler wit" of the pastoral tradition (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). The poet further explains that some poets use heavy metaphors such as tears pouring out as the poet's ink, or sighs breathing out his words while "[h]is paper pale despaire" (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). The poet ends the sonnet by emphasizing, once more, that he can write his poems only in his own style directed by his feelings, as an expression of his genuine love for Stella:

> I can speake what I feele, and feele as much as they,
> But thinke that all the map of my state I display
> When trembling voyce brings forth, that I do *Stella* loue. (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995).

As another outstanding feature of his poetic style, Sidney employs nature imagery throughout *Astrophil and Stella*, to delineate Stella's beauty and Astrophil's platonic love for her. The employment of nature imagery exposes Sidney's—and the poet-lover's—creativity as well. To explain further, as Gül Kurtuluş underlines, "[a]rt and nature exist in a creative tension in Sidney's sonnets, and the aspect of art which is most closely related to nature is the poet's use of natural images" (2015: 694). While Sidney in the role of Astrophil calls "inuention"—poetic inspiration or imagination, in other words—"Nature's childe" (Sonnet 1) as mentioned earlier, he uses scents, hues of colours in nature, birds, lions, trees, flowers, season changes, planets, and so forth in a highly picturesque manner in most of the sonnets. Some examples of nature's visible aspects in *Astrophil and Stella* can be "morning sun on snow" (Sonnet 8), "the curtaines of the skies" (Sonnet 13), the shade of a "pleasant Orange-tree" (Sonnet 30), "Sweet-gard'n-nymph, which keepes the Cherrie-tree" (Sonnet 82), "[a] nest for my young praise in lawrell tree" (Sonnet 90), "rose cheeks" (Sonnet 91) and "rose-enameld skies" (Sonnet 99), "that sweete aire which is [m]ornes messenger" (Sonnet 99), "wanton winds" (Sonnet 103), "[t]he beasts, birds, stones, and trees feele this, and, feeling, loue" (Third Song), and so forth. Hence, as Kurtuluş further notes,

> [b]y creating a resemblance between his beloved and nature, the persona elevates his beloved Stella's beauty or personality to a rank higher than that human beings usually occupy in the chain of being, and thus illustrates how beautiful, gracious, and virtuous Stella is as a part of the perfection of nature. (2015: 694)

The relationship of love, reality, and poetic imagination is also emphasized in references to sleep and dreams in Sidney's sonnet sequence. As a matter of fact, writers have always been fascinated by the world of sleep and dreams since they both represent a liminal state of consciousness, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. To be more specific, "dreams [and sleep] can surpass the rational boundaries," which makes anything possible (Altunsoy, 2021: 183). Furthermore, it is not surprising to find endless examples of the use of sleep and dreams in literature (e.g., Chaucer's dream visions; Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and his sonnets 27 and 43; sleep and dreams as a recurrent theme in examples from British romantic poetry such as John Keats's

"Sleep and Poetry" and "Lamia," and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan: or A Vision in a Dream;" fairy tales such as "The Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White") since, as Ed Simon underlines, "[d]reaming is the substance of literature. It's what comes before, during, and after writing and reading, and there can be no fiction or poetry without it" (2020). In this context, Astrophil refers to Morpheus, the Greek god of sleep and dreams, described paradoxically as "the liuely sonne of deadly Sleepe" in Sonnet 32 (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). He feels the urge to picture Stella's unmatched, dazzling beauty in his mind, and he asks Morpheus where and how he can find this in his own dreams:

> But by thy worke my Stella I descrie,
> Teaching blind eyes both how to smile and weepe;
> Vouchsafe, of all acquaintance, this to tell,
> Whence hast thou ivory, rubies, pearl, and gold,
> To shew her skin, lips, teeth, and head so well? (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

Hence, Sidney's employment of sleep and dreams as a theme represents, once more, the significance of imagination and creativity in poetry since the art of writing poetry necessitates a transformative level of consciousness, or the act of seeing beyond what is real.

Likewise, Astrophil kisses Stella in her sleep because of his irresistible desire for her, which is, in fact, "a stock subject" of literature "for more than a thousand years" (Muir, 1960: 28). As Seber argues, Astrophil "seems to forget the difference between the stolen and the freely given kiss" in Sonnet 73 (1995: 121). While kissing becomes a delightful experience for Astrophil that needs to be repeated, it makes Stella very uneasy, as understood from Astrophil's monologue:

> And yet my Starre, because a sugred kisse
> In sport I suckt while she asleepe did lye,
> Doth lowre, nay chide, nay threat for only this.
> Sweet, it was saucie Loue, not humble I.
> But no scuse serues; she makes her wrath appeare
> In beauties throne: see now, who dares come neare
> Those scarlet Iudges, thretning bloudie paine.
> O heau'nly foole, thy most kisse-worthy face
> Anger inuests with such a louely grace,
> That Angers selfe I needs must kisse againe. (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

Some of the following sonnets in the sequence—especially 82 and 83—make it clear that Astrophil wants to go further and make love with Stella. In fact, as John Roe argues, "[t]here is no doubt that the love he proposes is technically adulterous—or would be were Stella to accede to it—since she is a married lady" (1998: 104). However, as a platonic lover depicted in the Petrarchan style, Astrophil must be rejected, and his love must remain unreciprocated. Although Astrophil wishes to come together with Stella, he realizes that she has been married, which draws him into deep sorrow.

As David Kalstone draws attention, "[t]he final sonnets of the cycle perform a ceremony of grief. Astrophel addresses the personified companions of his woe: Grief (94), Sighs (95), Thought (96), Tears (100), Absence (106), Sorrow (108)" (1965: 177). In Sonnet 105, Astrophil mentions that he cannot see Stella with his "Dead Glasse" eyes anymore although his "hart still sees" what his eyes cannot see (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). In Sonnet 106, Astrophil finally realizes that Stella has already been physically absent, and his love for Stella has only been based on false hopes. In other words, Stella has been an oxymoronic creation of his own imagination:

> O absent presence! *Stella* is not here;
> False-flatt'ring hope, that with so faire a face
> Bare me in hand, that in this orphane place,
> *Stella*, I say my *Stella*, should appeare (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995).

After his realisation of Stella's absence, Astrophil decides to distract himself with other women around him, as he reveals in Sonnet 106. He expresses his longing for Stella although there are many "faire ladies" available around him, with whom he can have sweet and meaningful conversations:

> But thou art gone, now that selfe-felt disgrace
> Doth make me most to wish thy comfort neer.
> But heere I do store of faire ladies meet,
> Who may with charme of conuersation sweete,
> Make in my heauy mould new thoughts to grow. (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

Therefore, despite Astrophil's attempts to distract himself, nothing is resolved at the end of his platonic love story. He is left with sorrow and despair, as they are metaphorically described in Sonnet 108:

> When Sorrow (vsing mine owne fiers might)
> Melts downe his lead into my boyling brest
> Through that darke furnace to my hart opprest,
> There shines a ioy from thee my only light:
> But soone as thought of thee breeds my delight,
> And my yong soule flutters to thee his nest,
> Most rude Despaire, my daily vnbidden guest,
> Clips streight my wings, streight wraps me in his night,
> And makes me then bow downe my heade, and say,
> Ah, what doth Phoebus gold that wretch auaile
> Whom Iron doores doe keepe from vse of day?
> So strangely (alas) thy works on me preuaile,
> That in my woes for thee thou art my ioy,
> And in my ioyes for thee my onely annoy. (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

While sorrow melts Astrophil's heart, despair appears as a rude, uninvited guest. The last sonnet also draws attention to the paradoxical nature of platonic love in which "woes" and "ioy [joy]" exist together (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). In this respect, Sidney employs vivid imagery and poetic expressions of conflicting emotions to convey the complicatedness of love. Therefore, like the Petrarchan concept of love, Astrophil's love for Stella remains unrequited, and Astrophil experiences the dilemma of love between union and separation throughout the sequence, without any solution in the end.

As for the auto/biographical aspects of the sequence, according to some critics, Stella might be representing Lady Penelope Rich (1563-1607)—also known as Penelope Devereux—for whom Sidney probably had affection (Ringler, Jr., 1962: 436). As Michael R. G. Spiller argues, Penelope Rich,

> who was certainly responsible for the erotic fascination that produced Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, may also thereby have been responsible for the whole Elizabethan sonnet sequence craze: for until she entered Sidney's life in the early months of 1581 neither he nor anyone else appears to have thought of writing a sequence of English sonnets in the Petrarchan style. (2005: 101)

On the other hand, according to some other critics, Sidney's sonnet sequence was only "imitated from continental models," and it did not reflect a representation of his true love for Penelope Rich (Muir, 1960: 27). The former commentary seems plausible, though—resembling Petrarch's association with Laure de Noves of Avignon in *Canzoniere*—especially if Sidney's 24th, 35th, and 37th sonnets in *Astrophil and Stella* are taken into consideration. In these sonnets, Sidney puns on Lord Robert Rich's surname—Penelope's husband—which may not be coincidental (Craik, 1967: 8). Sidney's wordplay is obvious especially in Sonnet 37, in which he refers to Stella's deserved reputation, her precious heart as well as her virtues that give her the eternal crown:

> Rich in the treasure of deseru'd renowne,
> Rich in the riches of a royall heart,
> Rich in those gifts which giue th'eternall crowne;
> Who, though most rich in these and eu'ry part
> Which make the patents of true worldy blisse,
> Hath no misfortune but that Rich she is. (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

This sonnet describes a woman who is endowed with admirable qualities. She has a well-deserved reputation, with a rich and noble heart. She has qualities that are worthy of "th'eternall crowne" (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). Although she has everything that brings worldly happiness, her only misfortune is being "Rich" (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). The wordplay in this sonnet cannot be disregarded since the word 'Rich' refers to both being rich and being Lord Robert Rich's wife.

In sonnet 78, likewise, Astrophil explains his jealousy for Lord Robert Rich as Penelope's husband:

> O how the pleasant ayres of true loue be
> Infected by those vapours which arise
> From out that noysome gulfe, which gaping lies
> Betweene the iawes of hellish Ielousie!
> A monster, others harme, selfe-miserie,
> Beauties plague, Vertues scourge, succour of lies;
> Who his owne ioy to his owne hurt applies,
> And onely cherish doth with iniurie:
> Who since he hath, by Natures speciall grace,
> So piercing pawes as spoyle when they embrace;
> So nimble feet as stirre still, though on thornes;
> So many eyes, ay seeking their owne woe;
> So ample eares as neuer good newes know:
> Is it not euill that such a deuil wants hornes? (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

Although Astrophil's love for Stella is mostly a pleasant experience, as he underlines in the sonnet above, "hellish" jealousy is depicted as a monstrous gulf that swallows the beauty of love. Sidney's powerful depictions of jealousy as a monster, a plague, and a scourge in this sonnet and Astrophil's reference to Robert Rich as a devil without horns in the last line also reveal the blurred lines between reality and poetic imagination.

To extend the discussion, in the fourth and eighth songs in *Astrophil and Stella*, Astrophil wants Stella to lie with him. According to Craik, it may be a reference to Sidney's "adulterous love for Penelope Rich" (1967: 8). The following lines are taken from the fourth song:

> Better place no wit can finde,
> *Cupids* knot to loose or binde;
> These sweet flowers our fine bed too,
> Vs in their best language woo:
> Take me to thee, and thee to mee:
> *No, no, no, no, my Deare, let bee.* (Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 1995)

Sidney might have been inspired by his real-life experiences, and auto/biographical details may help us understand the connections between reality and literary creativity; however, it should be kept in mind that *Astrophil and Stella* is primarily a production of poetic imagination. Sidney has successfully merged auto/biographical elements with his poetic creativity in his sequence, in a similar manner to Petrarch (and his sonnets written for Laura). He even refers to Petrarch directly, in the role of Astrophil, comparing his literary style to his, in the line "[y]ou that poore *Petrarchs* [*sic*] long deceased woes" in Sonnet 15 (*Astrophel and Stella*, 1995). Hence, as Abrams also underlines, "[a]s in this case, there are often autobiographical elements behind an Elizabethan sequence, but they are subsumed into the created fiction and its Petrarchan conventions" (1993: 459). Therefore, *Astrophil and Stella* remains a prosperous exploration of the notion of love within the sonnet tradition, which blends reality and poetic imagination.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Sidney employs the Petrarchan sonnet sequence in his unique literary style in *Astrophil and Stella*, also representing a generation of Elizabethan poets who were seeking for their own literary policy. His poetic persona, Astrophil, is an authentic character whose love is depicted as a blend of reality and imagination. Furthermore, Sidney's poetic creativity, represented by Astrophil, shapes the narrative throughout the sequence, displaying the depths of a poet-lover's platonic feelings. Astrophil describes his love, desire, and longing for Stella by using the power of imagination is various ways. He—or Sidney himself—employs vivid imagery ornamented with colours, scents, dreams, and so forth, appealing to one's five senses. He visualizes Stella's beauty in every possible detail, and he makes imaginary plans to show his passionate love for her. Therefore, Sidney, in the role of Astrophil, blurs the gap between reality and imagination in *Astrophil and Stella* while exploring the themes of love, sexual desire as well as personal experiences.

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