

The Seven Wonders of England by Sir Philip Sidney

Near Wilton sweet, huge heaps of stones are found,
But so confused, that neither any eye
Can count them just, nor Reason reason try,
What force brought them to so unlikely ground.

To stranger weights my mind's waste soil is bound,
Of passion-hills, reaching to Reason's sky,
From Fancy's earth, passing all number's bound,
Passing all guess, whence into me should fly
 So mazed a mass; or, if in me it grows,
 A simple soul should breed so mixed woes.

The Bruertons have a lake, which, when the sun
Approaching warms, not else, dead logs up sends
From hideous depth; which tribute, when it ends,
Sore sign it is the lord's last thread is spun.

My lake is Sense, whose still streams never run
But when my sun her shining twins there bends;
Then from his depth with force in her begun,
Long drowned hopes to watery eyes it lends;
 But when that fails my dead hopes up to take,
 Their master is fair warned his will to make.

We have a fish, by strangers much admired,
Which caught, to cruel search yields his chief part:
With gall cut out, closed up again by art,
Yet lives until his life be new required.

A stranger fish myself, not yet expired,
Tho', rapt with Beauty's hook, I did impart
Myself unto th' anatomy desired,
Instead of gall, leaving to her my heart:
 Yet live with thoughts closed up, 'till that she will,
 By conquest's right, instead of searching, kill. *

Peak hath a cave, whose narrow entries find *
Large rooms within where drops distil amain:
Till knit with cold, though there unknown remain,
Deck that poor place with alabaster lined.

Mine eyes the strait, the roomy cave, my mind;
Whose cloudy thoughts let fall an inward rain
Of sorrow's drops, till colder reason bind

Their running fall into a constant vein
Of truth, far more than alabaster pure,
Which, though despised, yet still doth truth endure.

A field there is, where, if a stake be prest
Deep in the earth, what hath in earth receipt,
Is changed to stone in hardness, cold, and weight,
The wood above doth soon consuming rest. *

The earth her ears; the stake is my request;
Of which, how much may pierce to that sweet seat,
To honour turned, doth dwell in honour's nest,
Keeping that form, though void of wonted heat;
But all the rest, which fear durst not apply,
Failing themselves, with withered conscience die.

Of ships by shipwreck cast on Albion's coast,
Which rotting on the rocks, their death to die:
From wooden bones and blood of pitch doth fly
A bird, which gets more life than ship had lost. *

My ship, Desire, with wind of Lust long tossed,
Brake on fair cliffs of constant Chastity;
Where plagued for rash attempt, gives up his ghost;
So deep in seas of virtue beauties lie.
But of this death flies up the purest love,
Which seeming less, yet nobler life doth move.

These wonders England breeds; the last remains -
A lady, in despite of Nature, chaste,
On whom all love, in whom no love is placed,
Where Fairness yields to Wisdom's shortest reins.

A humble pride, a scorn that favour stains;
A woman's mould, but like an angel graced;
An angel's mind, but in a woman cased;
A heaven on earth, or earth that heaven contains:
Now thus this wonder to myself I frame;
She is the cause that all the rest I am.

Comments and Notes.

Sidney died of a gunshot wound in the thigh suffered during battle when he was only 31. He is a pure lyric poet; a knighted governor and ambassador. In his time he was famous as a brave and learned courtier. Somehow Sidney allegedly did not see himself primarily

as a writer, but perhaps a servant to the monarchy first. He published nothing in his lifetime.

This poem is from a collection called “Certain Sonnets”, and was written in his mid-twenties. There are different versions of the text, and a far more ambivalent ending is sometimes added to the previous as follows.

Thou blind man's mark; thou fool's self-chosen snare,
Fond fancy's scum, and dregs of scattered thought:
Band of all evils; cradle of causeless care;
Thou web of will, whose end is never wrought:

Desire! Desire! I have too dearly bought,
With price of mangled mind, thy worthless ware;
Too long, too long, asleep thou hast me brought
Who shouldst my mind to higher things prepare;

But yet in vain thou hast my ruin sought;
In vain thou mad'st me to vain things aspire;
In vain thou kindlest all thy smoky fire:
For Virtue hath this better lesson taught,
 Within myself to seek my only hire,
 Desiring nought but how to kill Desire.

Here Sidney enumerates his seven wonders of England, which are in order: Stonehenge, Brereton Lake, the pike fish of the Thames, Peak District caves, the field at the ruins of Winburn Monastery, the barnacle goose, and the angelic lady. Some of these do require explanation.

Stonehenge, was sometimes described as being filled with a massive number of stones. Mary Sidney lived at “Wilton”, 8 miles from this site.

The legend of Brereton Lake was that when its sunken logs rose to the surface, the head of the family would die, and so Sidney writes it is the mark that “the lord's last thread is spun”. Sidney may have known this family from his school days.

Pike were sometimes caught and had their gallbladders harvested before release.

Sidney's uncle, the Earl of Leicester, frequently went to the Peak cave district, as did many in the Elizabethan court.

This field turns wood, probably living roots, as well as dead stakes, to stone in terms of coldness, hardness, and weight. Sidney's metaphor depends on the idea of the root immersed becoming petrified as it were and thus making inert the still exposed wood.

These geese were supposed to have sprouted from the barnacles on the shipwrecks.

He calls his love the seventh wonder.

In this version of the poem a quatrain rhyming abba alternates with a sestet rhyming ababcc. The quatrain gives the wonder. The sestet tops this wonder by applying it figuratively to Sidney's love life.

If we look at the following remarkable stanza, Sidney shows a boldness in handling the metaphor, moving freely between metaphor and explicit language.

My lake is Sense, whose still streams never run
But when my sun her shining twins there bends;
Then from his depth with force in her begun,
Long drowned hopes to watery eyes it lends;
 But when that fails my dead hopes up to take,
 Their master is fair warned his will to make.

Consider the second line of the stanza, where he mixes the figures, “sun” and “shining twins”. The stanza is so compressed that he uses the reference to eyes in line four to help explain this poetic reference “shining twins” in line 2.

This is a difficult stanza so let's try to break it down. The love is the sun (she has a feminine pronoun in that line). She bends her eyes down to look at the speaker. This moves the depths of his sense, causing long drowned hopes to surface before her watery eyes. Perhaps sense is here a way to involve all his collected psyche, bringing the world into his total capacity of desire and judgment or “common sense”. His lake is sense. All that enters is void; nothing enters, for there is death, but the would be lover peers. And when she fails to raise his hopes, but by her presence, this master of despair must 'make his will,' a pun on the testimony of his decease.

An alternate take on this stanza would maintain that the female sun is his soul, characterized as feminine. It would be moved by those eyes of his soul, and turn over despair and grief to that reflection. This entire psyche would be found and discovered through sense. However, because this poem is about the woman he is in love with, this interpretation is probably simply wrong.

Where Fairness yields to Wisdom's shortest reins. //
A humble pride, a scorn that favour stains;

In the lines above “wisdom's shortest reins” probably refers to self-control.

While “a scorn that favour stains” may refer to a virtue and refinement in the lady so

great that desiring her is shameful.

A one sentence synopsis of this poem could be: While natural England has six mysteries what power is greater than my love, who kills with loveliness but inspires no regret? The alternate ending however, is full of regret.