

Astrophil and Stella:

Sonnet 42:

Sir Philip Sidney

O eyes, which do the spheres of beauty move,
Whose beams be joys, whose joys all virtues be,
Who, while they make Love conquer, conquer Love,
The schools where Venus hath learned chastity;
O eyes, whose humble looks most glorious prove
Only loved tyrants, just in cruelty,
Do not, O do not from poor me remove;
Keep still my zenith, ever shine on me.
For though I never see them, but straightways
My life forgets to nourish languished sprites;
Yet still on me, O eyes, dart down your rays;
And if from majesty of sacred lights,
Oppressing mortal sense, my death proceed,
Wracks triumphs be, which Love (high set) doth breed.

Comments:

This poem gives Stella so much flattery, but retains a kind of harsh posture nonetheless. Does the impulse to be a little “cruel” to your crush persist even when there is no fun teasing?

That “rude” address can be found in the way Stella is called a 'cruel tyrant', a conqueror of love, and has high set eyes that multiply death in men.

We know from previous sonnets that Stella is possessed, or inhabited spiritually, by Cupid. So when he says that her eyes “make Love conquer, [and] conquer Love,” Sidney is referring to Cupid's powers at work yet failing nonetheless. Just as Stella is pursued by the speaker and other men, so she is companion to Cupid and Venus, who, accustomed to pagan revelry would habituate her to dissipation, but are frustrated. Venus is brought by Stella's apparently modest eyes to learn chastity. This paints her Venus almost as “whorish”.

The very beams of Stella's eyes take joy in the virtues. With thoughts like these Sidney consoles himself for his lack of success in his courtship. But this rings true. There is a woman, excellent, and surpassing beautiful, who holds to modesty and purity in her flirtation and dealing with men. In fact these two things, a woman's great desirability, and her chastity, it seems tend to couple. That excellent woman must practice discretion because otherwise she would be pulled apart by the world; she can afford to be choosy; and moreover, the flattery of men often will inspire humility in her. She can then be a truly loved tyrant over the man's heart who falls in love with her because he also respects her, and she withholds easy assent. Sidney would die for a woman like this.

Astrophil and Stella has something greater than Shakespeare's Sonnets. Shakespeare's beloved youth has almost no characteristics, of personality or virtue apart from being very physically attractive to the poet. Sidney on the other hand is far more personal about Stella. Shakespeare's Sonnets are more

focused on the act of rhetoric, and the establishment of an ideal mode of praise. It is almost as though despite swearing his love up and down for 100 sonnets he didn't really know how much in love he was, nor does he give us reason to know (though he acts it out) until everything falls apart. Sidney's Astrophil is grounded in pain and a kind of wonderful melody of praise, that I at least, really relate to.