

# Sir Phillip Sidney and Lady Mary Wroth: Navigating the Labyrinth of Love





# *Astrophil and Stella*



- **Based on Sidney's love for his cousin Penelope Devereaux**
- **Begun approx. 1576 during his courtship of Penelope**
- **Match broken off**





## *Astrophil and Stella* continued.

- **She was married (against her will) to Sir Robert Rich in 1581**
- **Her forced (and subsequently unhappy) marriage only intensified his love for her, although he married Francis Walsingham in 1583 (two years after Penelope's marriage to Rich)**
- **Published after Sidney's death in 1591**
- **Consists of 108 sonnets and 11 songs**
- **Circulated in manuscript in court circles**
- **Astrophil means "Star-lover"**
- **Stella means "Star"**





## *A&S: Sonnet #1*

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,  
That the 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 sunburned 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 treward pen, beating myself for spite,  
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."





## *A & S: Sonnet #2*

**Not at first sight, nor with a dribbèd shot**

**Love gave the wound, which while I breathe will bleed,**

**But known worth did in mine of time proceed,**

**Till by degrees it had full conquest got.**

**I saw and liked, I liked but lovèd not,**

**I loved, but straight did not what *Love* decreed;**

**At length to Love's decrees, I, forced, agreed,**

**Yet with repining at so partial lot.**

**Now even that footstep of lost liberty**

**Is gone, and now like slave-born Muscovite,**

**I call it praise to suffer tyranny;**

**And now employ the remnant of my wit,**

**To make myself believe that all is well,**

**While with a feeling skill I paint my hell.**





## **Love is vain: unreasonable, foolish – and unmanly**

In Sonnet 4, Astrophil claims it is a “fault” in him to allow himself to be so “oppress’d” by “vain love.”

**WHY? Sonnet 5 gives three reasons:**

1. The “heavenly part” -that is reason- “ought to be king”
2. Only “fools” worship an idol they carve for themselves
3. Manly virtue is the soul’s true beauty

**Sonnets 18, 21, and 27 give us more reasons:**

4. He should be ashamed (“shent”) to waste his natural gifts and intelligence in writing silly love poetry and in striving “those vain passions to defend” (18.10).
5. His friends blame him for letting love “windlass” him (21.2), because he has political/social/literary “Great Expectation” that he is throwing away on her (21.8).
6. He is ignoring his friends (27.12).





## Sonnet 16 & 19

**The result is NOT pretty:**

**I have now learned love right, and learned even so,  
As who by being poisoned doth poison know. (16.13-14).**

**And not only that: Astrophil even publishes his  
shame to the world:**

**On Cupid's bow how are my heart-strings bent,  
That see my wrack and still embrace the same?  
When most I glory, then I feel most shame;  
I willing run, yet while I run repent;  
My best wits still their own disgrace invent... (1-5)**

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**Enough about Astrophil's shame and disgrace at his  
apparent helplessness. When does the sonnet cycle begin  
to be about Stella – or at least addressed to Stella?**



# Sonnet 9

**Blazon: typical Petrarchan conceit: Astrophil describes Stella feature by feature:**

- Forehead is “alabaster” (white) - (9.3)
- Hair is “gold” (blond) - (9.4)
- Lips are “red porphir” - (9.6)
- Teeth are of “pearl” - (9.7)
- Cheeks are marbled “red and white” (9.8)
- Eyes are “touch”-- a glossy black stone that is magnetic (9.12)

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**This seems a little better; but notice that the blazon is a form of metaphorical dismembering. Is Stella more than the sum of her (albeit attractive) parts?**







## Sonnet 14: is desire sinful?

Alas, have I not pain enough, my friend,  
Upon whose breast a fiercer gripe doth tire  
Than did on him who first stole down the fire,  
While Love on me doth all his quiver spend-  
But with your rhubarb words ye must contend,  
To grieve me worse, in saying that desire  
Doth plunge my well-form'd soul even in the mire  
Of sinful thoughts, which do in ruin end?  
If that be sin which doth the manners frame,  
Well stayed with truth in word and faith of deed,  
Ready of wit, and fearing naught but shame;  
If that be sin, which in fix'd hearts doth breed  
A loathing of all loose unchastity,  
Then love is sin, and let me sinful be.





**Stella is now forever unavailable...**

**Sonnet 24: (Penelope's husband's name is Rich)...**

**But that rich fool who by blind Fortune's lot  
that richest gem of love and life enjoys,  
and can with foul abuse such beauties blot,  
Let him, deprived of sweet but unfelt joys,  
Exil'd for aye from those high treasures which  
He knows not, grow in only folly rich!**

**Sonnet 33: (Astrophil is cursing himself for not marrying her  
when he had the chance):**

**I might—unhappy word—oh me, I might,  
And then would not, or could not, see my bliss...(33.1-2)  
O punish'd eyes,  
That I had been more foolish, or more wise! (33.13-14)**





**And the war between desire and virtue begins...**

**Sonnet 25: “Virtue...took Stella’s shape...Virtue’s great beauty in that face I prove/And find the effects, for I do burn in love.”**

**Sonnet 30: the first time a sonnet addresses Stella as “you”**

**Sonnet 36: addresses Stella directly**

**Sonnet 37: another play upon the word “rich”**

**She tries to discourage him, to no avail...**

**He struggles again to exercise a male definition of virtue;**

**Sonnet 47 is a paroxysm of male shame and rage:**

“Virtue, awake! Beauty but beauty is;

I may, I must, I can, I will, I do

Leave following that which it is gain to miss.

Let her go!”

**But then he sees her again, and again he is lost...**





## Strife between Virtue and Love

### Sonnet 52:

A strife has grown between Virtue and Love,  
While each pretends that Stella must be his (1-2).

Astrophil sides with Love, and wryly offers to cut a deal (!)  
with Virtue:

Well, Love, since this demur our suit doth stay,  
Let Virtue have that Stella's self; yet thus, [i.e. her soul]  
That Virtue but that body grant to us (12-14).

### Sonnet 69: But, eventually, Stella admits that she loves him.

This introduces new complexities: since he has managed to win her heart, she is now vulnerable to being seduced by him, and suddenly, Astrophil must master his passion and become the guardian of her virtue.



## Can desire ever be successfully resisted?

**Sonnet 71**: The ending of sonnet 71 is one of the most famous and poignant expressions of desire in English:

So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,  
As fast thy Virtue bends that love to good;  
“But, ah,” Desire still cries, “give me some  
food.” (71.12-14).

**Sonnet 72**: Astrophil tries to banish desire:

Desire, though thou my old companion art,  
And oft so clings to my pure Love that I  
One from the other scarcely can descry,  
While each doth blow the fire of my heart,  
Now from thy fellowship I needs must part... (72.1-5)  
But thou, Desire, because you wouldst have all,  
Now banished art. But yet alas how shall? (72.13-14)







## **They are playing with fire...**

**But this is a dangerous game they are playing. There have been kisses exchanged:**

**“My lips are sweet, inspired with Stella’s kiss” (74.14).**

**“Sweet lip, you teach my mouth with one sweet kiss” (80.14).**

**And Astrophil is so enraptured he can’t contain the news. He threatens to tell the world, unless Stella shuts him up with more kisses:**

**“But my heart burns, I cannot silent be.**


**Then since (dear life) you fain would have me peace,**

**And I, mad with delight, want wit to cease,**

**Stop you my mouth with still kissing me” (81.11-14).**

**Astrophil writes Stella series of passionate love songs begging her to give herself to him. Thus, Astrophil is “forced” by “iron laws of duty to depart” for a while (87.1,4). While he is gone, he still struggles with lust, toys with other women, and then writes Stella the most passionate love song yet:**





## Song 10 (rated R)

- He unwisely writes of his “Strength of liking, rage of longing” (4).
- He writes that he sends his thoughts in his place, and that he will soon follow himself.
- And those thoughts are NOT chaste:

**Astrophil lets his thoughts “enter bravely everywhere” (20) about her body, in a very erotic description that clearly ends in a sexual climax. His passion clearly passes virtue’s bounds, and he intimates that he will have his way even if she demurs.**





# Song 10 continued..

**Think of my most princely power  
When I blessed shall devour  
With my greedy licourous senses  
Beauty, music, sweetness, love,  
While she doth against me prove  
Her strong darts but weak defenses...**

**My life melts with too much thinking.  
Think no more, but die in me,  
Till thou shalt revived be  
At her lips, my nectar drinking (31-36, 45-8).**





Transgression leads to shame and grief

**The question is, did he pass this song around?**

**Somehow others find out about it, and Stella is disgraced (and since her husband is known to be abusive, it may literally have put her in danger); the next sonnet shows he realizes he has really screwed up:**

**O fate, O fault, O curse, O child of my bliss!**

**What sobs can give words grace my grief to show?  
(93.1-2)**

**I have—lived I, and know this—harmed thee;**

**Tho' worlds 'quit me, shall I myself forgive?**



## The end of the story...

**Sonnet 101: Stella falls ill**


**Sonnet 103: Stella then sails off down the Thames in a scene reminiscent of Elaine and Lancelot. Astrophil watches from a window as she leaves. Others watch him and gossip and criticize him behind his back at court. He is the cause of her disgrace.**

**Song 11: depicts a balcony scene much like *Romeo and Juliet*, where she tells him to forget her and find someone else.**

**Sonnet 108: A much-chastened Astrophil accepts his shame, and the cycle ends in his despair.**







## *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

- Published 1621 as part of her prose romance, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*
- 103 sonnets and songs
- Unique: female protagonist (proto-feminist?)
- Pamphilia means “all-loving”
- “Amphilanthus” means “lover of two”
- She questions the assumptions about women’s roles in the culture, and in literary works such as *Astrophil and Stella*.
- She especially questions the double standard in the culture that allowed men to be unfaithful; she uniquely calls for Amphilanthus to be constant (that is, to love only one woman).
- This is not necessarily in marriage, however; she herself had a long-standing affair with her cousin William Herbert (who may be Amphilanthus).





## Sonnet 1

**How would you paraphrase this sonnet?**

**When night's black mantle could most darkness prove  
And sleep, Death's image, did my senses hire  
From knowledge of myself, then thoughts did move  
Swifter than those most swiftness need require.**

**In sleep, a Chariot drawn by winged desire,  
I saw; where sat bright Venus, Queen of Love,  
And at her feet her son, still adding fire  
To burning hearts, which she did hold above.**

**But one heart flaming more then all the rest,  
The goddess held, and put it to my breast.  
“Dear son, now shut,” said she, “thus must we win.”**

**He her obeyed, and martyred my poor heart.  
I, waking, hoped as dreams it would depart;  
Yet since, O me, a lover have I been.**





## **Pamphilia as silenced, gazing subject**

**Pamphilia's initial description of her dream reads almost like a date rape: it happened so fast, and while she was incapacitated. The next sonnets in the sequence speak of her as a silenced gazing subject:**

**Sonnet 3: “For flames which in mine burn in truest smart  
Exiling thoughts that touch inconstancy” (3.6-7).**

**Sonnet 4: The memories of her love “molest” her at night in her grief (4.10). But Cupid is gone, like melted snow.**

**Sonnet 5: She can only gaze at the one she loves; she fears her constant love is intemperate and will end in misfortune (ashamed of her desire?)**

**Sonnet 6: But she does not express her love to Amphilanthus. Instead she pines away, threatening to wither up and die since he will not come to save her (sonnet 6 and song 1).**

**Sonnet 7: Then gets angry at Cupid and disdains him for being so blind as to cause her to love someone so inconstant.**





**Dramatic reverse of the blazon: she dismembers herself**

**She mistrusts her own eyes (symbols of desire): She describes herself as a “gazing soul”:**

**Sonnet 5: she could go blind if she looks too much on  
Amphilanthus**

**Sonnet 25: Her eyes are “greedy”**

**Her solution to desire: to “kill” her eyes (sonnets 25 and 47).  
For Pamphilia-- who describes herself as a “gazing soul”—  
killing her eyes really means killing her desire.**

**When he leaves, she sends her heart after him and wanders  
about “heartless” (Song 4):**

**In your journey take my heart**

**which will not deceive... (9-10)**

**But can I live, having lost**

**Chiefest part of me? (19-20)**





## **Pamphilia must give herself permission to desire**

**While Amphilanthus has to be discouraged from pursuing his love or giving way to his desire, Pamphilia must find the courage to pursue “the pride of her desires”:**

### **Sonnet 39:**

**Take heed mine eyes, how you your looks do cast**

**Lest they betray my heart’s most secret thought...**

**Catch you all watching eyes, ere they be past,**

**Or take yours fixed where your best love hath sought**

**The pride of your desires...**

### **Sonnet 40:**

**For hope deluding brings us to the pride**

**Of our desires the farther down to slide” (13-14).**





## The Crowne of Sonnets

**In this strange Labyrinth how shall I turn?**

**Ways are on all sides, while the way I miss:  
If to the right hand, there in love I burn,  
Let me go forward, therein danger is;**

**If to the left, suspicion hinders bliss,**


**Let me turn back, shame cries I ought return,  
Nor faint, though crosses my fortunes kiss;  
Stand still is harder, although sure to mourn.**

**Then let me take the right- or left-hand way;**

**Go forward, or stand still, or back retire:  
I must these doubts endure without allay  
Or help, but travel find for my best hire.**

**Yet that which most my troubled sense doth move,  
Is to leave all, and take the thread of Love.**





## Thoughts in the crowne:

- 1: follow the thread of love (let's think this out)
- 2: love is virtue, delight, joy and strength
- 3: love is pure and rewards constancy
- 4: even if it is painful, the pain is worth it
- 5: allow yourself to “feel the weight of true desire”
- 6: love helps you see yourself in a new and better way
- 7: “he that shuns love doth love himself the less”
- 8: don't let your thoughts stray to jealousy or lust
- 9: “if lust be counted love, it is falsely named”
- 10: love those that deserve it, and avoid “wantons”
- 11: then joy we not in what we ought to shun
- 12: divine love is clear and pure
- 13: give everything to Love in trust
- 14: except I already gave my heart to someone unworthy: so I'm back to where I started. Which way do I turn?





## Sonnet 103: Pamphilia's "Rest"

**She seems to be back where she started; but really she has made some significant gains:**

- **She is able to speak to Amphilanthus directly and confront him with his unfaithfulness, and express her desire**
- **She finally makes a defense of women: if they have "faults" it is that they love and trust too easily and are too generous to give their bodies and love (94.15)**
- **She exhorts men not to feel ashamed of constancy, even though the culture encourages men to pursue glory, honor and fame by seducing many women (94.9,11,13).**
- **Pamphilia seems to have become a strong speaking subject, and has achieved the pride of her desires.**
- **It doesn't seem to change Amphilanthus' mind about anything, but now Pamphilia can rest: "what's past shows you can love,/now let constancy your honour prove" (103.13-14).**



## To summarize the contrasts...

- Astrophil begins as a strong, speaking subject and ends as a shamed, silenced subject
- Astrophil is first shamed by his male friends for being such a wimp as to be in love
- He defends his desire
- He insistence on pursuing his desire finally ends in disgrace for Stella and himself
- He withdraws in despair
- Pamphilia begins as a shamed, silenced subject and ends as a strong, speaking subject
- Pamphilia shames herself for her desire and attacks herself, Cupid: anyone but Amphilanthus
- She denies/hides her desire
- Pamphilia finally finds “the pride of her desire” and is able to take responsibility for her hopeless situation
- She waits, but actively, not as a victim

