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Sidney's Astrophil and Stella, Sonnet 108.
By Jeffrey P. Cain, University of Connecticut

When sorrow, using mine own fire's might,
Melts down his lead into my boiling breast,
Through that dark furnace to my heart oppressed
There shines a joy from thee, my only light;
But soon as thought of thee breeds my delight;
And my young soul flutters to thee, his nest;
Most rude despair, my daily unbidden guest,
Clips straight my wings, straight wraps me in his night,
And makes me then bow down my head, and say:
"Ah, what doth Phoebus' gold that wretch avail
Whom iron doors do keep from use of day?"
So strangely, alas, thy works in me prevail,
That in my woes for thee thou art my joy,
And in my joys for thee my only annoy.

The final sonnet of Astrophil and Stella so offended the sensibilities of Sidney's early editors that they tried to supersede it by ending the sequence with two poems from the "Certain Sonnets" that Sidney's sister authorized in 1598, thus providing a "more satisfying" conclusion in which Astrophil could recant his adulterous love affair.[1] Although sonnet 108 is now considered to represent Sidney's final statement on the relationship of the two lovers, it remains largely ignored in most critical treatments of Astrophil and Stella. It is not enough simply to note that this poem ends the cycle with typically Petrarchan frustration and despair: An adequate appreciation of sonnet 108's textual complexity and depth rests on a thorough understanding of its unique alchemical and emblematic imagery (which has gone unnoticed by critics), as well as on a close reading of the sonnet's turn at line 10.[2]

The opening of the poem strongly evokes the esoteric Renaissance science of alchemy by referring to melting lead, fire, and a "dark furnace," all required for alchemical practice. Alchemy, of course, was far more than a method for making gold; as Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs points out in *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy*, the alchemist's own spiritual, moral, and emotional state was always implicated in the symbolic process of transformation (27). Sidney himself was well acquainted with the actual techniques, terms, and "hermetic" symbols of alchemy, because he was carefully trained in it by the foremost English alchemist and magus of his day, John Dee.[3] Given Sidney's literary talents, he would certainly have seen the rich possibilities for spiritual and emotional expression underlying alchemy's symbolic codes.

The first three lines of sonnet 108 bear out this conjecture, because Sidney makes the alchemical images internal to Astrophil. "Sorrow" appears as a personified emotion who uses Astrophil's "own fires might" to melt lead into the despairing lovers breast. The mythological and astrological figure most often connected with lead by the alchemists was Saturn, and something of the personified sense of "sorrow" in line one survives in our word "saturnine." Thus the spiritual essence of the melancholy and downcast Astrophil is imprisoned in a sealed alchemical furnace, or athanor, in which the fire of his own desire ironically serves as the agent to infuse saturnine lead into his heart or soul.

An understanding of the rest of the sonnet depends on a firm comprehension of Sidney's reference to the "wretch" in line 10. Given Astrophil's emotionally imprisoned and decidedly gloomy state, it is easy to mistake this wretch for the narrator of the poem, But the rest of the sonnets in Astrophil and Stella do not support such a reading. When Sidney refers to a wretch, he usually intends a pun on the surname of Lord Rich, the husband and, in a metaphorical sense, jailor of Penelope Devereux (who was of course the biographical Stella). Sonnet 24 makes the connection clear:

Rich fools there be, whose base and filthy heart
Lies hatching still the goods wherein they flow;
And damning their own selves to Tantal's smart,

Wealth breeding want, more blessed, more wretched grow. (162)

To Lord Rich, Stella is just another of his many possessions, so he locks her away behind the "iron doors" mentioned in sonnet 108. Happiness, in the form of the blessed Stella, is within Rich's grasp, but the "rich fool" is distracted from it by his "base and filthy" desire for more wealth, and thus he grows more "wretched," condemning himself to the same fate as Tantalus. As sonnet 24 goes on to explain, the wretched Rich is "depriv'd of sweet but unfelt joys." With sonnet 24 as a gloss, then, the meaning of sonnet 108's turn at line 10 emerges clearly: Astrophil is really saying that his rival's love of material wealth ("Phoebus' gold") avails nothing because it causes Rich to ignore Stella and deny himself the "use of day": Stella's inward light.

Seeing Rich as Stella's keeper or captor therefore helps to illuminate the second quatrain of sonnet 108, which explores the tensions implicit in the lovers' forced separation from one another. Astrophil's remark, in line five, that the thought of Stella "breeds" his delight is yet another alchemical allusion, for alchemists often represented metals as vegetative or sexual in essence; the alchemical process was, in a sense, an effort to "breed" or grow metals into new forms.[4] The "breeding" image is quite appropriate to the brief moment of attempted ascendancy for Astrophil's soul, which in line six is metaphorically transmuted, or bred, into a bird. Elizabethan emblem books typically allegorized the soul as a human heart with wings, and thus the image of "fluttering" in line six neatly underscores Astrophil's aspiration to flight from the cauldron of his own emotions.[5] Fittingly, Stella becomes the winged soul's metaphorical "nest" Sonnet 108 and sonnet 24 are remarkably consistent in fine detail and in their use of analogy; not only do both poems contain puns on Rich/wretch, but they both use images of breeding. Just as the thought of Stella breeds Astrophil's delight, the thought of material wealth breeds Rich's "want."

In sonnet 108 then, there is a horizontal axis along which the thought of Stella-in the metaphorical form of light-passes from her prison to Astrophil's; on a vertical axis, Astrophil's soul struggles to escape by ascending from the dungeon of his own "boiling breast." Much of Astrophil's frustration arises because the vertical motion of his soul's flight to Stella is hampered, weighed down by the alchemical lead that functions as a metaphor for melancholy and sorrow. Sidney truncates the transcendent images of soaring and light with the personification (somewhat reminiscent of Spenser) of "rude Despair," who, Astrophil says in line eight, "Clips straight my wings, straight wraps me in his night." Astrophil's fluttering heart is cut down and then condemned to the dark furnace, a feelingly painted hell of his own desire's making.

The last three lines of sonnet 108 are paradoxical and therefore somewhat enigmatic. Realizing that they are based upon an alchemical allusion, however, provides the clue to their meaning:

So strangely, alas, thy works in me prevail,
That in my woes for thee thou art my joy,
And in my joys for thee my only annoy. (211)

The various stages in the alchemical process were known as "works": the "work in red," or "great work," for example, which resulted in obtaining the Philosopher's Stone (Read 12). In keeping with the alchemical metaphor initiated in the first quatrain, Astrophil's love is compared to an alchemical "work" that prevails in the dark furnace of his breast. But there is an important qualifier. Although Stella's works do prevail, they prevail "strangely." Hence the chiasmic form of the closing couplet and the paradoxical nature of its sentiment: in the curious alchemy of thwarted love, woe is transmuted into joy, joy into woeful annoyance.

Although part of the sense of frustration in sonnet 108 comes from the relation of Sidney's individual talent to the Petrarchan tradition, most of the "annoy" felt by readers (and editors) of this poem is generated by the figurative use of alchemical and emblematic language and symbols. A hint of recantation does emerge from the imagery, inasmuch as Astrophil sees that love's alchemy has miscarried in his case. At the closure of Astrophil and Stella, Sidney delineates the painful antithesis of the joyous transformation that is implicit in healthy and successful human love: sonnet 108 paints a dark speaking picture of failed spiritual and emotional alchemy.

NOTES

1. As late as 1965, David Kalstone invokes the two poems ("Thou Blind Marts Mark" and "Leave Me, O Love") from "Certain Sonnets of Sir Philip Sidney Never Before Printed" to provide what he sees as a "fitting conclusion" to Astrophil and Stella (178). The 1962 edition of Sidney's work, by W. A. Ringler, establishes sonnet 108 as the final

poem of the cycle by implementing Karl A. Murphy's analysis of the textual problem in "The 109th and 110th Sonnets of Astrophil and Stella." All quotations from Sidney's poetry are from Sir Philip Sidney, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones.

- 2. Sherod Cooper, in *The Sonnets of Astrophel and Stella: A Stylistic Study*, comes closest to noticing the alchemical terms in the poem when he states that it uses the "the vocabulary of the foundry" (76). In his essay on "Sidney's Humanism," A. C. Hamilton quotes the entire text of sonnet 108 but fails to notice its alchemical imagery.
- 3. For Sidney's considerable enthusiasm as a pupil of alchemy under Dee, see Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney, Courtier Poet* 115-16. See also French 126-59.
- 4. For the concept of "alchemical vitalism" see Dobbs (1990) 3-6.
- 5. For Sidney's knowledge of the "human heart with wings" emblem via his close association with the alchemist and hermetic philosopher Giordano Bruno, see Yates 107.

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