

“High Flying Liberty of Conceit”

in the Poetry of Sir Philip Sidney and John Donne

CLARA MCGAUGHEY

In the early part of *The Defense of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney offers two different definitions of poetry, one emphasizing its metrical form in what he calls “an exquisite observing of number and measure in the words” and the other emphasizing its imaginative freedom or what he calls its “high flying liberty of conceit.” Clara deftly explores the tension in these differing emphases by offering a close reading of sonnets by Sidney and Donne. A sonnet’s meter is exquisitely demanding, and both poets employ it to impressive effect. But in both cases, the poem’s form is finally subordinate to a quite astonishingly imaginative liberty. As Clara shows, both sonnets deploy an interesting and unconventional handling of the sonnet’s standard turn or *volta*, which customarily appears at line 9. In sonnet 5 of *Astrophil and Stella*, “It is most true that eyes are formed to serve / The inward light,” Sidney, or more properly speaking, Astrophil delays the *volta* until the last possible moment in line 14, setting his love for Stella in opposition to the Christian Neo-Platonism of the preceding 13 lines, a move that certainly highlights his “liberty,” even when it is not so high flying. Donne’s *Holy Sonnet 18*, “Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse” similarly delays its *volta* to line 11, with its shocking prayer: “Betray, kind husband, thy spouse to our sights.” This surprising treatment of an ultimate revelation of the true church as a kind of betrayal takes some obvious liberties, even as it aims to fly high. It is also a “conceit”; as Clara so skillfully shows: it makes you think.

—Dr. John Baxter

In his late sixteenth-century text “The Defense of Poesy,” English poet Sir Philip Sidney highlights two components of poetry: “that exquisite

“HIGH FLYING LIBERTY OF CONCEIT”

observing of number and measure in the words, and that high flying liberty of conceit proper to the poet” (1048). With “high flying liberty of conceit,” Sidney refers to the idea behind a poem, its imaginative conception, and its ability to elicit an emotional response. The importance that Sidney places on imagination is ambiguous at times due to his focus on knowledge over emotion early in the text. Sonnet 5 of Sidney’s poem *Astrophil and Stella* reflects this ambiguity, recalling the struggle between imagination and philosophy that Sidney explores in his “Defense.” Sonnet 18 of John Donne’s seventeenth-century poetic series *Holy Sonnets* is less conflicted than Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*, more fully manifesting the imaginative conception that Sidney argues is necessary to poetry. While Sidney’s sonnet displays an inability to decide whether to emphasize knowledge or imagination, Donne’s sonnet definitively favours imaginative content over careful metric pattern.

Early in “The Defense of Poesy,” Sir Philip Sidney defines poetry as a combination of knowledge and imagination. He bases this definition on an examination of Greek and Roman culture. Sidney writes, “Since the authors of most of our sciences were the Romans, and before them the Greeks, let us a little stand upon their authorities” (1048), contending that an exploration of ancient practices could inform the purpose of poetry in the sixteenth century. He describes the Romans’ relation to poetry:

Among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much a diviner, foreseer, or prophet [...] and so far

were they carried into the admiration hereof, that they thought in the chanceable hitting upon any such verses great foretokens of their following fortunes were placed. (Sidney 1048)

Sidney emphasizes the poet's influence in ancient Rome: they predicted the future, elicited prophecy, and were respected as nearly divine figures. Sidney takes interest in the effect that poetry in the ancient world had on the public - the capacity to move the people, encouraging them to "find a pleasure in the exercises of the mind" (1048). Sidney focuses on the knowledge behind poetry and the contemplation it inspires. Early in the "Defense," he argues that the purpose of poetry is to exercise the mind while using knowledge and reason to gain public attention.

Sidney offers a preliminary definition of poetry, arguing that it is made up of two components. He writes, "that exquisite observing of number and measure in the words, and that high flying liberty of conceit proper to the poet, did have some divine force in it" (1048). Sidney emphasizes the importance of both knowledge and emotion, arguing that Greek and Roman oracles are influential because of their ability to combine number and measure with imaginative content. Sidney writes, "only the poet [...] lifted up with the vigor of his own invention [...] [makes] things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature" (1050). The poet is exceptional because of his peculiar ability to imagine beings that do not exist in nature: "Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies" would not exist without the poetic imagination (1050). Unlike painters, who "counterfeit only such faces as are set before them"

(1052), simply imitating what they observe in nature, poets are godlike in their unique ability to imagine the supernatural and make it come alive in writing. The poet’s capacity to turn imagination into knowledge by combining it with number and measure makes him powerful.

Imaginative power takes precedence over knowledge as Sidney’s *Narratio* progresses. He describes verse as “but an ornament and no cause to poetry,” instead emphasizing the “*idea* or fore-conceit of the work” (1052). It is not rhyming or verse that makes a poet. While “each syllable of each word” certainly counts (1052), it is the unique poetic imagination that builds public interest. Sidney is clear that the poet is not divinely inspired; poetry is emphatically grounded in the human mind, but verbal artfulness and “high flying liberty of conceit” capture the reader’s attention (1048), making the poet seem godlike. Sidney’s “high flying liberty of conceit” is thus characterized by divine authority, the bringing forth of figures that are beyond nature, and a Platonic conception of poetry as participating in ideas established before the poem attained verse form. Early in the *Narratio*, Sidney gives knowledge a privileged position over imagination, causing him to be unclear at times about the importance of imaginative conception. However, his preliminary definition of poetry emphasizes the importance of combining number and meter with emotional power, to create poetry that has the capacity to “draw the mind more effectually than any other art doth” (1062). Poetry is the highest art: it meditates on man’s ability to strive, love, and to imagine, while encouraging him to turn towards

rational contemplation, celebrating at once imagination and reason.

In Sonnet 5 of *Astrophil and Stella*, Sir Philip Sidney invokes the two elements of poetry that he highlights in "The Defense of Poesy." The entire sonnet meditates on the nature of poetic truth. He uses the word "true" seven times, identifying philosophical truths he accepts: "It is most true that eyes are formed to serve / The inward light" (1-2); "It is most true, what we call Cupid's dart / An image is" (5-6); "True, that true beauty virtue is indeed" (9); "True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made" (12). In these lines, Sidney concedes to ideas that Christian Neoplatonism accepts as truth: that beauty is only a shadow of inner virtue, that erotic love is idolatrous, and that the purpose of humanity on earth is to raise itself to divine potential through reason. All these statements give priority to knowledge over beauty: he writes, "True, that true beauty virtue is indeed, / whereof this beauty can be but a shade" (9-10). Beauty is important because it reflects inner virtue, which, according to Sidney, is always greater than physical beauty. A woman's beauty is not remarkable as such, but is notable for the way that it reflects inner nature and for its ability to direct a male observer towards the contemplation of beauty in general.

Sidney's subsequent argument that "on earth we are but pilgrims made, / And should in soul up to our country move" (12-13) invokes the Platonic idea that, like pilgrims traveling to a sacred place, humanity has the capacity to rise to nearly divine status through reason. The footnote reads:

“HIGH FLYING LIBERTY OF CONCEIT”

The concessions made in the argument are to Neoplatonic and Christian doctrines opposed to romantic love. Neoplatonic theory held that physical beauty is only a shadow of inner virtue, which is at one with the true, transcendent, and immortal Idea of Beauty. (1085)

The purpose of physical beauty is not to inspire romantic love; it is instead to incite rational contemplation of divine beauty, to move man to ascend Plato's metaphorical ladder to the Platonic good. The first thirteen lines of this sonnet emphasize the importance of knowledge over imagination, highlighting the significance of rational contemplation against love, lust, and desire. Sidney's argument in his "Defense" that poetry's purpose is "to teach and to delight" reflects this insistence on truth and philosophic contemplation in Sonnet 5 (1111).

In the final line of Sonnet 5 Sidney shifts emphasis from philosophy to romantic love. Sidney writes, "[t]rue, and yet true that I must *Stella* love" (14). In this line Sidney contradicts his previous argument that physical beauty's purpose is to inspire divine love, instead suggesting that it governs his romantic feelings. By only declaring his dedication to Stella in the final line, Sidney highlights the struggle between knowledge and love. He believes in philosophy and reason, but will ultimately direct his love towards another human rather than to the divine. Like his later elevation of imaginative conception in the *Narratio*, Sidney's emotional power overcomes his reason in the final line of this sonnet. His love for Stella is beyond reason's control and poetry allows him to contemplate this struggle. Sidney's "high flying liberty of conceit" in this

sonnet provides a meditation on the nature of truth: Sidney is confident in the truth of all the ideas he presents throughout the poem, even though the final line contradicts the assertions of the first thirteen lines. His trust in his imaginative conception of Stella, his love for her, and his emotional power serve to question the nature of truth and its relationship with reason and imagination, which, reflecting the "Defense," conflict with one another.

While Sonnet 5 of *Astrophil and Stella* reflects Sidney's meditation on the relationship between knowledge and emotional power, Sonnet 18 of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* more fully portrays the imaginative conception that Sidney celebrates in the "Defense." Sonnet 18 opens with an appeal to Christ: "Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse so bright and clear" (1). This line is reminiscent of ancient epic poetry, which tends to begin with an invocation to the gods. The opening lines of *The Iliad* ("Sing, O Goddess, the Anger of Achilles"), *The Odyssey* ("Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story") and *The Aeneid* ("Muse, tell me why") all invoke goddesses who inspire poetry (Homer *Iliad* 1.1, Homer *Odyssey* 1.1, Virgil 1.11). By beginning his sonnet with a supplication to Christ, Donne makes his poem distinctly Christian while giving it an epic character that reflects the ancients. This reflects Sidney's appeal to the ancients in his "Defense," when he allows his argument to "stand upon [Greek and Roman] authorities" (1048). Part of Sidney's "high flying liberty of conceit" is the poet's ability to use imagination to gain influence (1048). Sidney insists that the ancient world, where "great reverence [poetic] wits were held" and "spirits were

commanded by [poetic] verses” is the best example of a culture that grants authority to the poetic imagination (1048). By appealing to ancient verse in his opening line, but invoking the Christian God rather than a pagan goddess, Donne similarly allows his writing to rest upon ancient authority while contemplating the nature of Christianity.

Donne’s sonnet is more figurative than Sidney’s. He uses the bride of Christ as a metaphor for the church, personifying the church as a promiscuous woman. He refers to the Catholic church as “she which on the other shore / Goes so richly painted” and the Lutheran and Calvinist churches as “[she] which, robbed and tore, / Laments and mourns in Germany and here” (2-4). He writes that men are “adventuring knights / First travel we to seek, and then to make love” (9-10). This poem is entirely figurative: Donne envisions the church to be a promiscuous bride and Christ to be a cuckold, betrayed by knights like himself who journey to the church to declare their love. Through imaginative metaphor, Donne accomplishes a subtle meditation on the nature of the church and its complex relation to scripture.

In the final lines of Sonnet 18, feeling triumphs over reason. Donne writes:

Betray, kind husband, thy spouse to our sights,
And let mine amorous soul court thy mild dove,
Who is most true and pleasing to thee then
When she is embraced and open to most men. (11-14)

Donne portrays religion as an erotic quest and the church as a licentious woman, open to most men. Throughout the

poem, desire motivates the narrator, who understands that his actions are a betrayal. Emotion rather than reason governs his speech, and the shock value of the sonnet's final line highlights Sidney's argument that imagination and emotion can be powerful.

Donne's verse form suggests that the idea behind the poem is greater than its number and measure. By structuring his sonnet with the rhyme scheme *abba abba cdcd ee* instead of the more standard *abab cdcd efef gg*, Donne connects the first quatrain to the second with a couplet, so that the poem is not disjointed but instead gains pace as it progresses. An enjambment in each quatrain and one in the final couplet further push the poem forward, so that the questions the narrator asks advance on themselves as the poem moves. While the standard sonnet would see a turn at line 9, Donne delays the volta to line 11, spending the first ten lines of this sonnet asking questions. By running the questions beyond eight lines, Donne creates the effect that they are uncontainable, that he has more questions than he can fit in a standard frame. The unconstrained way that he presents his ideas, advancing onto one another as the speaker advances in his quest, suggests that Donne's ideas exceed his form, and thus that attention to the poem's fore-conceit is more important than maintaining a standard verse structure.

This elevation of passion over reason, eroticism over contemplation, and idea over form, reinforces Sidney's argument that verse is "but an ornament and no cause to poetry" (1052). While Sidney argues that verse can be

“HIGH FLYING LIBERTY OF CONCEIT”

useful, and Donne certainly makes use of it, it is, according to Sidney, “that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by” (1052). Sidney appeals to knowledge by emphasizing poetry’s purpose of teaching, but he argues that the most important components of poetry for teaching are imagination and ideas, rather than careful verse and measure. Donne’s poem reflects this idea: Sonnet 18 is in verse and asks its reader to contemplate real theological and social problems, and thus does not neglect the importance of knowledge. However, the way that his ideas seem to go beyond the bounds of the sonnet’s formula, his imaginative metaphors, and his emphasis on emotion and eroticism over reason, raise poetry’s “high flying liberty of conceit,” its power to imagine, above its responsibility to abide by metrical standards.

In “The Defense of Poesy,” Sir Philip Sidney highlights two components of poetry: number and measure and the “high flying liberty of conceit” (1048). By the second component, Sidney refers to the idea behind the poem, its capacity to imagine beyond nature, and its ability to establish power over its reader by eliciting an emotional response. In his “Defense,” however, Sidney seems conflicted regarding which component of poetry he should favour. His poem, *Astrophil and Stella*, Sonnet 5, highlights this conflict, establishing philosophic truths for most of the poem and then breaking them down in the final line’s turn to romantic feeling. While this sonnet highlights the contradictions that Sidney explores in his “Defense,” John

Donne's later poem, *Holy Sonnet 18*, more fully exhibits the power of Sidney's "high flying liberty of conceit" (1048). His use of imaginative metaphor, his portrayal of religion as an erotic quest, and the way his ideas exceed his form, come together to suggest that imaginative conception is more important and more powerful than attention to poetic verse standards.

“HIGH FLYING LIBERTY OF CONCEIT”

Works Cited

- Donne, John. *Holy Sonnets*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century/The Early Seventeenth Century*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 1410–15. Print.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. R. Fitzgerald. 1961. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Samuel Butler. *The Internet Classics Archive*. Web. Atomic and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Web. 19 November 2014.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. “The Defense of Poesy”. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century/The Early Seventeenth Century*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 1044–83. Print.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. “Astrophil and Stella”. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century/The Early Seventeenth Century*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 1084–1101. Print.
- Virgil. *The Essential Aeneid*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2005. Print.