

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) *Astrophil and Stella* (A, 451-455)

Sir Philip Sidney was a high born courtier, who moved in circles not far from the Queen, and though his early death in battle cut short a life widely admired, he left behind intense sonnets which established a form and move us still with their passion as well as their formality. His life acquired no less great a reputation than his work. Close servant to the Queen, entrusted with diplomatic missions on the Continent, and conspicuous in London society, Sidney remains the cameo of an Elizabeth courtier.

Question: Can Passion be conveyed in a Highly Formal Metric

The question, so put, is simplistic. We know we find these sonnets wonderfully wrought, and even the wit of a line like "Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write," startles us with a direct freshness. But can a 14 line verse structure, rigidly tied to a complex metric—abba/abba/cdcd/ee—delight our ears without stifling the shaggy heart in our breasts? Can passion be cut to such an intricate form? We may trust that you will say yes, but if so, how does that effect work? What makes the emotion survive? How is the work of lyric poetry different, in this way, from the far rangier verse lines of narrative poets like Spenser, the nine line stanzas of whose *Faerie Queene* —abab/bcbc/c—conceal their style more talkatively?

Comparative Literature

1. The sonnet form was used as early as the work of Chaucer and Dante, in the 14th century, and gained widely admired currency—especially among lovers—with the sonnets of Francesco Petrarch in Italy, and of Shakespeare, who was himself the author of over a hundred sonnets. The form has flourished throughout the development of English literature, and in certain poets of the last century and a half—Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Gerard Manley Hopkins—the sonnet has acquired new forms and emphases. Suggestion: take a close look at the rare, and rarely used, *curtal* sonnet in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

2. Sir Philip Sidney was an astute literary critic, whose *An Apology for Poetry* was one of the principal Renaissance theoretical works on the nature of literature. You might want to look at that brilliant essay, which takes you, in the mode of Comparative Literature, back in thought to Aristotle, whose view of art as imitation is strong in Sidney, to Plato, whose view of ideal forms is dominant in Sidney, and forward to Shelley, the Romantic poet who most admired Sidney's inspired view of the poet as an "unacknowledged legislator of the world."