

**SIR PHILIP SIDNEY'S
ASTROPHEL & STELLA:
WHEREIN THE EXCELLENCE OF
SWEET POESY IS CONCLUDED**

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Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel & Stella*: Wherein the Excellence of Sweet Poesy is Concluded by
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INTRODUCTION.

· ON the morning of Thursday, September 22, 1586, a body of two hundred English horsemen, with Sir Philip Sidney at their head, advanced, in the midst of a thick mist, to attack a Spanish convoy on its way to the town of Zutphen. As Sidney left the camp he had met its Marshal, Sir William Pelham, clad only in light armour, and, with the emulation of a knight-errant had thrown aside his own cuisses, that he might be no better protected. Now the fog lifted, and the little force found itself under the very walls of Zutphen, and confronted by the enemy's cavalry, a thousand strong. Twice the English charged, and only retreated after hard fighting, during which Sidney's horse was killed under him. Reinforced from the camp, a third time they hurled themselves against the Spanish troops, once more to be forced to retire, after having slain almost their own number of the enemy,

and lost in killed and wounded a fourth of their own men. Amongst the wounded in this last charge, was Sidney. A bullet, by some thought to have been poisoned, had struck his left leg, some distance above the knee, (where the discarded cuisses should have been his protection), and after shattering the bone, had torn the flesh far up the thigh. By an effort the wounded man kept his seat, and rode a mile and a half back to the camp, there, when parched with thirst, to show that spirit of fortitude and self-sacrifice which has made the story of Philip Sidney and the cup of cold water among the best known anecdotes in English history. From the camp he was borne in the Earl of Leicester's barge to Arnhem, and here he lingered twenty-six days, suffering the most wearing agonies with a patience that won the admiration of his surgeons. During these days his thoughts were set almost wholly on religion. "The guilt of sin" (his friend George Gifford records of him), "the present beholding of death, the terror of God's judgment seat, which seemed in hot displeasure to cut him down, concurring, did make a fear and astonishment in his mind, which he did overcome after conference had, touching both the doctrine and the example of the Scripture in that matter." To the exhortations of the

divine "he answered, in words expressive of his unfeigned repentance, and of his firm resolution not to live as he had done; for, he said, he had walked in a vague course. And these words he spake with great vehemence, both of speech and gesture, and doubled it, to the intent that it might be manifest how unfeignedly he meant (should he recover) to turn more thoughts unto God than ever before." A strange interlude in these religious exercises was Sidney's composition of a poem on *La Cuisse Rompue*, which he caused to be set to music and sung at his bed side. Another incident was the dictation of a will, which deserves all his friend Fulke Greville's encomiums of its thoughtfulness, and love towards all with whom he had relations, especially his poorer dependants. But his chief thoughts were given to the preparation for death, and when this came to him on the 17th of October, it found him ready. Twice after his hands seemed to have lost all power, so stiff and cold had they become, he raised them bravely in answer to the chaplain's call for a sign of his faith, but the second time it was a friend who replaced them by his side; for in that last act of devotion the soul of Sidney had passed away. When we think that he was but a private gentleman—only knighted, it may be said, by

chance, because his friend Prince Casimir had chosen him as his proxy to receive the Order of the Garter—the sensation produced by his death is astounding. The mocking lament of the Spaniard that England having been so many years in breeding one eminent spirit should in a moment be bereaved of him, seemed for the time to find a deeper echo. Elizabeth wrote that in Sidney she had lost her sturdiest champion against Spain; the Netherlands pleaded hard to be allowed the honour of his burial; we know of more than two hundred elegies and orations upon his death; “it was accounted a sin,” says the author of one of his biographies, “for any gentleman of quality, for many months after, to appear at Court or City in any light or gaudy apparel.”

To look forward to the poet's death-bed in introducing a volume of passionate love-sonnets, may seem, at first sight, infelicitous, but it is submitted that in Sidney's case it is not so. Of no man was it ever more true that his death was but the epitome of his life. The too chivalrous hardihood that earned his wound; the thoughtfulness for others; the deep sense of religion; the Platonic discussions on the soul; the lighter side of the man breaking forth in the little ode on *La Cuisse Rompue*, and the fancy of having it sung

by his death-bed ; all these are but so many echoes of the Sidney in the full vigour of youth, who had been the delight of Elizabeth's court. Even the dying command that his *Arcadia* should be burnt is in full accordance with his life-long abstinence from publication, and the small value he ever set on his own compositions. For the sensation created by his death, we have in this only the passionate climax to that eager recognition that this was no common man which had been accorded to him all his life, from his very schoolboy days at Shrewsbury. And to read these songs and sonnets of *Astrophel and Stella* aright it is essential to remember that they were written by the same Sidney who, in his hatred of Spain and Catholicism, his deep religious feeling, and the sweet gravity of his demeanour, is typical in so many ways of the earlier and yet unnarrowed spirit of Puritanism. If this be forgotten the epithets "vain and amatorious," which Milton applied to the *Arcadia*, may well be transferred to the poems, as an Archbishop and a Dean have united in suggesting. If this be remembered, then, these sonnets have a psychological interest only surpassed by that still greater series written by the Author of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. But to bring out this interest we have now to consider the circumstances

under which these poems were written, and the person to whom they were addressed.

Sir Henry Sidney was fully alive to the advantages of making a good match for his son. As early as 1569, when Philip was only fourteen, his father made overtures on his behalf to Sir William Cecil for a contract of marriage with his daughter Anne. The reply, if cautious, was kindly, and matters went so far that articles of agreement were drawn up and signed, on the one hand by Cecil, and on the other by Philip's all-powerful uncle, the Earl of Leicester. But the negotiations were gradually allowed to drop, and "our daughter Anne," as Sir Henry Sidney had playfully called her, was married in December, 1571, to the rich, pleasure seeking, and brutal Earl of Oxford, with whom Sidney afterwards came into violent collision. In the May following this inauspicious beginning of love-making, Sidney went abroad in the suite of the Earl of Lincoln, Elizabeth's Ambassador-Extraordinary to the French court. After having witnessed and escaped the horrors of the Saint Bartholomew Massacre in Paris, he spent more than two years in travelling in Germany, Italy and Austria, and did not return to England till May 31, 1575. In the following July he assisted his uncle in the