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The Representation of Women in Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences

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Introduction

This thesis examines Elizabethan sonnet sequences, traditionally written by male poets, by focusing on the representation of women that emerges from the considered works: a feminist perspective has been adopted to analyse the texts, paying particular attention to the depiction of the female objects of affection around whom the fictional courtships revolve. The present research aims at contributing in an investigation of past sources, attempting to individuate the origins of harmful stereotypes and common places about women, and to help in the eradication of the systemic discrimination and oppression of the female gender. This line of academic effort brings to light sources that describe the conditions of life of women in centuries gone by to better understand when and how the present issues originated, and it is to be partnered with the more practical fights the feminist movement has been conducting for several decades to secure women's civil rights: this joint enterprise looks to uplift women, to guarantee them better conditions of life, and to substitute harmful imaginaries about the female population with more positive ones.

One of the areas in which the mentioned investigation of past sources has been carried out is literature, which contains clues about customs of ages past, explicit or covert descriptions of what life was like for women in different time periods. I have elected to focus my research on the Elizabethan age because of the interest that Queen Elizabeth herself rouses as a female monarch reigning over a solidly patriarchal structure such as XVI century English society. It would stand to reason that the presence of a woman on the English throne would influence the terminology and imagery that literates and poets employed when describing not only the Queen herself, but other ladies belonging to her court. This obviously restricts the research area to the representation of women in the upper classes of society, aristocrats who associated with the monarch or who frequented the highest spheres of influence in the kingdom. The resulting works of literature are sonnet sequences, collections of fictional situations in the forms of poems, often dedicated to women, and, most importantly, centered around love and courtship: this last feature makes them particularly relevant

to understand how ladies who frequented the court were considered, as these women were fundamental in the development of such works. Their category was the one addressed by poets in their sonnets, referred to as muses and beloveds – whether in apparently real or entirely fictional terms is irrelevant to the present study – and the culture of the time played a role in the imaginary poets employed to compose verses on love, its participants and its dynamics.

The criteria employed to select the four sonnet sequences on which this study is based pertain mostly to the recurrence of certain poetic tropes and common places, topoi that can be found in all four sequences and can therefore be understood to be culturally significant. Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592), Henry Constable's *Diana* (1592), and Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) not only offer a quantity of sonnets that allows for the development of similar themes in different directions, but also present several thematic congruences among each other, three of which are analyses in as many chapters. The analytical chapters are preceded by chapter 1, which deals with the different perspectives that, over time, have been employed to analyse sonnet sequences: the feminist perspective, elected as the main mode of examination in this thesis, the post-structuralist one, with its turn to the concepts of pluralism, discontinuity and uncertainty, and the structuralist one, concerned with the overall architecture of the sequences and the technical features of the individual sonnets. Chapter 2 explores the representation of women's physical beauty, the objectification and dismemberment of the female body through poetic devices such as the blazon, and the value of female beauty in the eyes of men through the *Carpe Rosam* topos in Samuel Daniel's poems. Chapter 3 presents examples of female behaviour when faced with sexual advances, the consequent adoption of the "Cruel Fair" topos and the development of the fictional relationship between poet-lover and beloved into a contrast that sees reason and virtue on one side, and passion and desires on the other one; finally, female absence is presented as a female non-behaviour, which still has consequences on the male lover. Lastly, chapter 4 focuses on the representation of women as creatures beyond the limits of humanity, in the forms of artwork, of Greco-Roman mythological creatures, and of Christian heavenly beings.

Chapter 1 – Major changes in the critical approach to Elizabethan sonnet sequences

In the last decades of the XX century and the first two of the XXI century, the question of the representation of women in literature has become more and more central. The analysis of the Early Modern sonnet in English has deserved a new influx of attention for what this topic can reveal of the perception of the female gender at the time, and for the consequences of such beliefs on the life of real women of that period. This concern can be attributed to the modern day rise of the feminist movement, which calls for the emancipation of women: the issue of 'what should women be emancipated from?' has led to researches into the origin of certain stereotypes and assumption about the female population, leading to the development of a new point of view on several-centuries-old texts.

The feminist approach to literature, however, is a relatively new one, and before its appearance, academics had been studying sonnet sequences according to other criteria. The XX century saw the rise of Structuralism, a school of thought according to which artwork of any kind should be understood through the lens of the internal structure of the thematic and linguistic elements, believing that such a reading would lead to a more accurate interpretation of the author's thoughts and intended meaning (Harland, 1987). A different current then developed from the structuralist one, that of Post-structuralism, which put in doubt the solidity of the correspondence between a certain piece of art and its perceived meaning; specifically in the context of literary works, academics started questioning fundamental concepts taken for granted, such as truth and the authority of an author on their own work (Harland, 1987).

This chapter proposes a brief excursus through the major changes in critical approaches to literary texts – specifically to Elizabethan sonnet sequences – from most to least recent: the first section will focus on the feminist perspective, the second of the post-structuralist method, and the third on the structuralist school of thought.

1.1- Women in a man's world: feminist readings of sonnet sequences

Early Modern England cannot be talked about without Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth I claiming a spot in the discourse. Critics who approach any text written under Elizabeth’s rule, especially love-sonnet sequences written by her courtiers, are inevitably confronted with her influence on such works. Not only because poets of the calibre of Samuel Daniel and Edmund Spenser directly mention or address the queen in their verses, but also because her ascension to the throne forced her contemporaries to bend the knee to a woman, a being that, according to the discourse of the time, was supposedly physically and morally inferior to men (Brenner, 2009). It is no surprise, then, that Elizabeth’s rule in the second half of the XVI century would be of particular interest to feminist critics in their endeavour to shine a light on the condition of women in different historical periods. Elizabeth’s status as a ruling monarch afforded other women in her court a respect and credibility they didn’t previously enjoy:

> Elizabeth had been for almost forty years a sort of divinity to her people. She had acted well her part in the ideal of chivalry, which her poets and statesmen had tried to instil into the hearts of her subjects, and had thereby done much to exalt the position of women and to make the Petrarchan reverence and exaltation of them the conventional attitude of Elizabethans. Under the influence of the various phases of Italian love doctrine, which entered England with the Italian literature, poets, authors, and dramatists vied with one another in raising the Queen and English womanhood to an unprecedented height. (Pearson, 1933, 232)

Despite the “unprecedented heights” reached by the ladies of the English court, when analysing texts such as sonnet sequences, it becomes apparent that women were not part of the production of this artform: they were the inspiring muses, often patrons, and part of the target audience, but not acclaimed poets themselves. The only image to be found of a woman in this kind of poetry is that of a beloved, the object of a poet’s affection, and critics have taken this opportunity to delve into the different ways in which these ladies have been portrayed, from their physical traits to their behaviours. Every feature of Sidney’s Stella, Daniel’s Delia, Constable’s Diana and Spenser’s Elizabeth is filtered through the gaze of a man, who is either praising his lady’s beauty

and virtues, or lamenting her cruelty, always utilising the highly coded and conventional medium of poetry. These sonnet sequences constitute a well of tropes and common places for researchers to analyse in order to better understand what English society thought of women in the XVI century.

Because of this, in opposition to the structural approach, which takes into consideration factors like the overall architecture of a sequence, the connections between poets and their social background, the feminist approach to sonnet sequence analysis relies heavily on trope examination. Women's bodies, their beauty and virtues, as well as their behaviour and morality can be said to be the fulcrum of feminist academic exploration of the sonnet sequence genre.

A first, fundamental step in the research on women's role and condition in Early Modern society is understanding what made them different from men, and the most basic answer is to be found in their physical bodies, "considered inversions or corruptions of the male ideal, their constitutions unstable, their desires menacing" (Gaskill, 2010, 24). Women were regarded as the weaker vessel, descendants of a corrupted Eve and thus more easily manipulated by the Devil. This supposedly justified the patriarchal need for strict control over the female half of the population. It is in this context that a need for a clear distinction between 'good women' and 'bad women' emerged, prompting the production of texts – mostly pamphlets – meant to guide women on the path of proper behaviour, in their roles of perfect daughters, wives and mothers, lest they fall prey to temptation once left to their own devices (Brenner, 2009).

The 'good woman/bad woman' dichotomy is not only applied on a practical level in society, it can also be noted in poetic production: sonnet sequences do not have as didactic an aim as the mentioned pamphlets and publications, but they certainly show signs of having been conceived in the same culture. The preferred version of a poet's beloved lady is clearly outlined in the duality of praise and shame doled out to her, in terms that paint a world where women need to strive for male approval in order to be deemed worthy of respect. Each lady mentioned in these poems is praised as bearer of "all the womanly virtues. Accordingly she is chaste and fair; she exercises a

beneficent influence upon those around her; above all, she inspires the poet to noble and unselfish conduct" (Lever, 1956, 71); these women are commended in such hyperbolic terms that they reach the status of heavenly beings. However, when the ladies resist all advances and fail to reciprocate the poets' affection, they are quick to gain the epithet of 'Cruel Fair' and they are suddenly accused of being ruthless tyrants with no regards for men's feelings or for the pain that unrequited love inflicts onto the victims of the ladies' feminine wiles. The main difference between the pamphlets Brenner references and popular sonnet sequences is apparent in the fact that the 'bad women' seem to behave in diametrically opposed ways, either too loose or too prude. This confusing paradox is easily explained: the main criteria for being labelled as 'bad' women is simply not doing what a man is asking of them at that precise moment.

Inextricably intertwined with the issue of female sexuality, is the Early Modern concern with the production of heirs, especially in the highest spheres of society: this topic created anxiety and unrest in England under the rule of both Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, given the uncertainty surrounding the identity of the respective designated heirs to the throne, to the point feminist critics have noticed how sexuality and reproduction figure prominently in the literature of the age. As a consequence of the doubts surrounding the royal line of succession in such a patriarchal society as XVI century England, female chastity became a paramount virtue to ensure the identity of children's fathers, while rape was a powerful weapon to wield against uncooperative women: if attacked, they would be considered tainted by this impurity and their very worth as people, as well as their morality, would be brought into question – no matter their position of victims in the assault (Catty, 2011). Furthermore, childbirth became fertile ground for a powerful paradox, as it is a moment of utmost importance for the birth of an heir, but at the same time the person responsible for giving birth is devalued as a weak individual.

The intrusion of a male presence into the female-coded sphere of childbirth appears to create further confusion in a world that expresses such rigidity in regards to gender roles and differences between the sexes. When, at the beginning of their sonnet sequences, poets like Sidney, Daniel, Constable and Spenser choose to claim that the

process of writing poetry constitutes a labour at the end of which they delivered words that had been gestating inside of them, a XXI century critic with contemporary knowledge of the human reproductive system might be inclined to view the poetic childbirth trope as appropriation of the birthing role of women.

The main school of thought in regards to anatomy and childbirth during the Elizabethan period, however, was the Galenic one, a theory that proposed the existence of only one basic genital structure in human beings, with the principal difference between sexes being that the female organs were an inverted version of the perfect male ones. Moreover, both sets of organs were thought to emit semen, and the mixing of these two substances, with the prevailing of the hotter male seed over the colder female one, was what made impregnation possible (Mischio, 1998). This does not mean male childbirth was thought possible in real life, but it made its image congruent with the medical knowledge at the poets' disposal; this, together with the dedication of many sonnet sequences to a patroness of higher status than the poet himself, facilitated the identification of the poet with a female gestating body whose (amorous and poetic) contents had been planted by a lady more socially powerful than him.

There are instances, however, in which feminist critics would be correct to postulate a prevaricating intent on the part of the poet. An example of this would be Spenser's second sonnet in his sequence *Amoretti*, in which he attests that he is both the breeding force and the fertile womb that made the creation of his poetic work possible. This shows how "the Elizabethan sonneteer's childbirth metaphors do not consistently operate by Galenic principles but often strive to create contrary metaphors by which to define literary production in such a way as to exclude the female procreative principle" (Mischio, 1998, 63).

According to Early Modern principles, it can then be surmised that women were considered fundamental in the creation of physical life, but intellectual creation, here represented through the mean of metaphorical poetic childbirth, was to be understood as a solely male endeavour, or, as Susan Stanford Friedman puts it, in "Western patriarchal ideology [...] the pregnant body is necessarily female; the pregnant mind is the mental province of genius, most frequently understood to be inherently masculine"

(1988, 52). In light of this, and of how women were thought too weak to be entrusted with self discipline when it came to resisting the temptation of vices, needing constant and strict male surveillance, contemporary feminist criticism explores issues that are not dissimilar from those that today's society still faces, making the exploration of the English literary past relevant for the understanding of the present state of affairs.

This very continuum in the condition of women in society is most likely a factor in feminist academics' interest in the Elizabethan period. A critique that could be moved to this approach is that of being a flawed, perhaps anachronistic, method of exploration, since topics like bodily autonomy and reproductive rights can be said to be contemporary lenses through which feminist critics look at texts written 400 years ago: past and present historical contexts could be perceived as too different to be analysed through the same criteria. However, this exploration does raise valid sociological questions about XVI-century society's attitude toward women, and one possible method to answer these queries is the employment of text analysis, which provides examples of imaginaries and thought processes of the age. The image of women that emerges from analysing Elizabethan sonnet sequences is that of individuals living under very polarised parameters of existence, who can only be heavenly beings or cruel tyrants; in both cases, women as represented in sonnet sequences are not defined by their own interests and personalities, but by how others view them, passive objects of either scorn or admiration, never really encouraged to be autonomous subjects.

1.2- Pluralism, discontinuity and uncertainty: the new criteria of Post-structuralism

Sonnet writing is a highly coded mode of expression, which presents strict rhyming rules and a set number of syllables or feet for each line of text. As far as poems go, sonnets are solidly structured and, metric-wise, do not leave much space for innovation. There are rules to the art of sonneteering, the breaking of which would lead to the sonnet to lose its identity, turning it into a different form of poetic expression. Knowing this, a critical approach in which there is no use for "the concept

of objective ideas socially embedded in laws and customs and institutions" such as post-structuralism appears as the natural nemesis of an art form regulated by fixed rules and accepted by the artistic community in virtue of the long-standing tradition behind sonnets (Harland, 1987, 124).

Because of this incompatibility between subject matter and analytical method, the post-structuralist approach has not often been used to interpret Elizabethan sonnet sequences. This current of thought was, however, instrumental in leading to the development of new insights on the relationships between the texts and the societal context of the Elizabethan court, and new points of view that were missing in earlier structuralist critical works. In fact, post-structuralism is the very stepping stone that made a feminist approach possible at all, while also enabling Roger Kuin to postulate a new form of criticism he generally addresses as "modern" in his *Chamber Music: Elizabethan sonnet-sequences and the pleasure of criticism.*

Admittedly, the author of this "modern" model of criticism explains how there is no "need [...] to dismiss structuralism as prehistory" and that "its practice is more valuable than its theory" to justify his "choice of such a practice over available, and currently more fashionable, poststructuralist ones of various kinds" (1998, 6-7). Although the author himself aligns his critical philosophy more with structuralism than with post-structuralism, I would argue that his development of such a work of literary criticism would have been impossible if the search for the one true meaning of the text had not been overcome, thus widening the horizon of textual interpretation and enabling Kuin to look at Elizabethan sonnet sequences through the lenses of pluralism, discontinuity, and uncertainty.

In fact, the link between the feminist and "modern" critical approaches mentioned in these first two sections is the fact that the post-structuralist school of thought does away with the absolute authority of the authors over their own texts. This school of thought takes into consideration the notion that whatever cultural context the reader carries with them when interacting with a text influences the text's meaning, enriching the literary work with new interpretations that were perhaps not initially meant by the original author. Jaques Derrida, who can be considered the main representative of this current, "denies an assumption that we ordinarily make without even thinking about it:

the assumption that the original form of a thing is somehow also its 'truest' form," thus, "against the orthodox logic of origins [Derrida] pits an unorthodox logic of supplements, where what's added on later is always liable to predominate over what was there in the first place" (Harland, 1987, 129-130). Analysing the text according to this method makes it so the reality of the textual meaning becomes relative to the reader, a shift in perspective that later enabled the feminist reading of such old texts, by allowing academics to apply categories outside of those strictly pertaining to the Elizabethan age to XVI century sonnet sequences.

Kuin's "modern" art of criticism similarly hinges on the three principles of pluralism, discontinuity and uncertainty, criteria that a structuralist approach would not and could not have taken into consideration when analysing a text. The reason for this is to be located in the fields of study structuralism originated in, which are those of linguistics and of semiotics, or the study of signs: academics such as Saussure and Jackobson were concerned with looking for a correspondence between a signifier and a signified, between a sign and its intended meaning; this principle of perfect correspondence would not have tolerated pluralism, discontinuity, and uncertainty, as ambiguity of this kind would have undermined the whole structuralist school of thought. It then becomes clear how a "modern" criticism is indebted to post-structuralism and to its deviation from a binary system that posited one meaning for each sign or, given the literary context this analysis is rooted in, one meaning for each word.

Pluralism as intended by Kuin

> does not mean that a text has many dimensions (which is commonplace), but that its radical meanings can be many; that this multiplicity is linked to, and depends on, the reader; and that this state of affairs is not only justifiable but inevitable, as it is in tune with what, to us, *meaning* means. It also implies that, on the basis of both scholarship and experience, we can simultaneously regard the text more honestly in its Elizabethan context and approach it more freely as citizens of our own world. (1998, 11)

One clear example of how a singular literary work such as a sonnet sequence might hold several meanings is the fact that it is a (more or less) cohesive entity made up of

smaller units, the sonnets: these focus on different topics, making the meaning of the sequence dependant on the sum of the meanings of the singular poems. Furthermore, there arises the issue of the identity of the characters portrayed in the sonnets: these are narrated in the first person singular, leading to the identification of the poet with the narrator, and are addressed to a specific person, as well as implicitly to a larger audience. Considering, for example, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, the reader could identify the narrating character of Astrophil with the poet Sidney, and the addressed Stella with the poet's real-life alleged beloved, Penelope Deveroux; at the same time, the whole sequence could be understood as the fictional narration of a story between made-up characters, with the added, underlying layer of a writer-reader relationship between the poet and the audience who approaches his sonnets.

Kuin also signals a linguistic approach to pluralism in Spenser's *Amoretti*, this time given by the use of archaisms, which the author identifies as references to Chaucer's work (1998, 52). The function of these old words in a (at the time of publication) new text was supposed to bring the readers' attention on the language itself, by forcing them to reflect on the meaning of unfamiliar words, effectively

> reminding us of the role of language in love. Love [...] is above all, to the Western consciousness, what is spoken, what is sung. From the Song of Songs, from Sappho and Catullus and Propertius, via the troubadours, Dante, and Petrarch, the school of love is the school of love's language. (Kuin, 1998, 53)

After loosening the audience's traditional grasp on the opposition between fiction and reality in regards to the identity of the characters, as well as on the meaning of certain words, Kuin further destabilises the reader by bringing attention to a kind of discontinuity inherent to the act of reading, which is particularly marked in the reading of sonnet sequences: diegetic time and textual time do not perfectly overlap. What this means is that the time in the text does not correspond to the time the reader spends on the text in real life, both in the case of finishing a text in a single sittinging and in the case of interruptions occurring during the reading, since a text might narrate events that span the course of several months or years. In approaching a sonnet sequence, this

discontinuity between times appears underlined by the fact that the poem are fourteen-lines-long instalments, and that

> The more modular the units, the more easily the reader may interrupt and/or select: how many of us read a whole sonnet-sequence at a sitting? Thus the modularity of the microtext minimizes the text's control of its decoding by the reader, and valorizes the reader's role in varying and controlling (co-creating) textual time. (Kuin, 1998, 63)

Thus interruptions influence textual time in real life. However, interruptions also have an effect on diegetic in-text time, as sonnets are not necessarily linked together in a linear succession, narrating events out of order and forcing the reader to make an active effort in order to reconstruct the timeline. This is made possible by the kind of narration typical of poetry, which is one that focuses on a specific moment or event, and does not relate the passing of time at all. For example, a poet could be focusing on a specific feeling, describing the effects it has on his body, or he could be praising his beloved's beauty: these instances do not take into consideration the passage of time, but are conceived as memento of specific instances, which tell a developing story only when observed together.

The very fact that these singular instances are placed out of order signals to the reader that the very act of composing a sequence was not linear, and that the sonnets might have been written at different points in time and then stitched together to conform to the form of the sequence so in vogue in the 1590s, "therefore lack[ing] all pretence of unity". This appears to be the case of "the sonnet-cycle in the hands of Henry Constable [which] seems to have been in the first place rather a record of a succession of 'moment's monuments' than a single dramatic scheme, even an embryonic one" (Crow, 1896, 83). Similarly, Samuel Daniel's sequence *Delia*

> is really an anthology of sonnets in the process of being converted into a unified work. In composing, revising, and expanding the collection for publication and republication, Daniel obviously was at pains to construct a plausible thematic development, a high degree of literary polish, and a consistent portrayal of the sonnet-mistress. To this end he took what were probably, in many cases, occasional poems and fit them into an artful arrangement. (Mariotti, 1982, 409)

This realisation erodes the mimesis of the text: the moment the readers try to compose the linearity of the narrative and come in contact with puzzle pieces that do not necessarily fit one another, they are pulled out of their suspension of disbelief and brought into the dimensions literary criticism and text analysis.

As seen, the possibility to decide between different interpretations of the same text is inherent to the sonnet sequence, as the modular nature of the macrotext implies the existence of gaps between the poems, spaces in which the reader might exit or re-enter the text, gaps in the narration of events which "span a wide range of signification, from philosophical indeterminacy to blank paper" (Kuin, 1998, 196). The narration of the love story happens in fourteen-lines instalments that only focus on snippets of the relationship between the poet-lover and the lady, thin slices of the life lived by the main characters of this narration, screenshots that take place in an overarching structure, most of which remains silent, not narrated. The physical gaps between sonnets on printed paper, as well as everything left unsaid and not described in detail, are exactly the spaces where the personal interpretation of the readers comes into play. Here, real life intrudes into fiction by exerting the influence of external factors onto the text and depending on the lens through which an individual approaches the sequences, these will tell a different story.

In fact, the crux of the post-structuralist, reader-informed school of thought - and thus of Kuin's "modern" criticism – is that in any way the audience might choose to interpret all the details left unsaid by the author, thus linking the sonnets in a way that alters their meaning, there will always be another possible interpretation. This fact makes it impossible to pinpoint what exactly constitutes the 'truth' of the sonnet. Indeterminacy appears then to be a fundamental feature of sonnet sequences. Far from being fixed entities that relate unequivocal facts, these poems can be understood to be provocations, meant to actively involve the readers in the creation of meaning or, as Kuin puts it,"not being given a decidable meaning, [the reader] is driven to *make* sense: and thus, to participate" (1998, 198).

1.3- The architecture of a sonnet sequence: the Structuralist approach

As formerly stated, structuralism is a school of thought that sees literary works as based on the correspondence between a text and its univocal meaning, the one meant by the author of the work. Given the impossibility of interviewing Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and their contemporaries to ascertain what they meant to convey through their literary works, structuralist critics have turned to the analysis of the internal structure of their literary works and to intertextual references for clues on how to "correctly" interpret XVI century sonnet sequences. The structuralist method is therefore comprised of elements of text analysis, such as the identification of certain recurring sections and motifs in the sequences, as well as the intertextual relationship of such features with their sources.

As the English sonnet tradition is based on the Italian one, sources such as Dante and Petrarch are fundamental in the understanding of the overall structure of sequences like Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*: both of these works present a turning point in the development of the fictional relationships they portray, one that Kuin identifies as an adaptation of the divide created by Beatrice and Laura's death in the works of their Italian predecessors. This clear distinction between "in vita" and "in morte" of the beloved women has consequences on a thematic level: the ladies' beauty and virtues are first admired with earthly, carnal desire only to be subsequently elevated and purified by their new existence as heavenly beings in paradise, leading the poets by degrees back to the adoration of God after they strayed in the adoration of mortal women.

Astrophil and Stella, too, presents a development in the way the two fictional protagonists interact with each other: "the shift in the poet-lover's attitude is precipitated by the shift in [Stella's], in her growing responsiveness which is marked in the blush of sonnet 66, the giving of her heart "conditionally" in 69, the kisses of 79-82, and the agreement to rendezvous with the poet-lover" (Neely, 1978, 372). This, however, is not yet the aforementioned turning point, as generally it marks the moment the relationship is doomed to failure (Spenser's happy ending in *Amoretti* is an exception that will be analysed shortly). The convention for these kinds of fictional

courtly flings was to end poorly because the beloved lady was already married, and only death could rescind her marriage contract with her husband, thus legitimising the poet's feelings toward her. This was true for the Italian sources, but Kuin argues that Renaissance English poets such as Sidney and Spenser were also concerned with presenting their stories as real, and this "insistence on the Beloved's (and thus the love's) *reality,*" meant they could not elect death as the great divide that would precipitate the loose plot they created with their chains of sonnets, as the ladies they alluded to were, in fact, not dead (1998, 159). Kuin goes on to note that "In terms of values, what this insistence on reality semiotically accomplishes is an intense magnification of *personal risk*", which contributes to the importance of giving closure to the sequence (1998, 160). The solution Sidney chooses to employ is to detach the figure of the lover from himself, giving Astrophil his own name in order not to compromise himself, and then faults his protagonist for the failure of his relationship, as death was not an option anymoreFurthermore, after portraying Stella as progressively more welcoming of his actions, still never openly encouraging any scandalous behaviour, he could not write her as suddenly changing her mind without good reason. The reason, then, is to be found in Astrophil: Sidney "let go is the integrity of the Poet/Lover" and created "a Lover who is not only morally fallible but terminally so" (1998, 164). When Astrophil abandons himself to one of his bouts of resentment toward Stella's cautious attitude in the Fifth Song, he repeatedly insults her as revenge. At this point she can do nothing but reject the unreasonable man he has become, thus condemning their relationship to a metaphorical death which substitutes her physical one.

Spenser chooses a completely different approach, adjusting his turning point to the fact that his sequence ends in the marital bliss of the *Epithalamion*, an ode which narrates the happiness of a successful union. The wedding itself becomes, then, the great divide, achieving the complete subversion of the natural "in vita" and "in morte" sequence of events: according to Kuin, the sacrament of marriage marks "the birth of a new flesh, [...] created out of the 'old' man and the 'old' woman" (1998, 167), meaning that before their union, lover and beloved had not been truly alive. Once born as a new creature, a merging of two individuals into a single entity of love, they can

leave all the typical struggles of doomed lovers behind, abandoning the traditional representation of courtly affairs.

As mentioned in the previous section, Samuel Daniel and Henry Constable's sequences have less of a defined structure than Sidney and Spenser's works do: in this case, the structuralist approach immediately focuses its analytical process on the individual sonnets. This brings to light poetic choices regarding the technical fields of vocabulary, rhyming schemes and syntax, as well as choices in content, through the individuation of recurring themes, tropes and common places. Once this analytical process is brought to a conclusion with the end of the last sonnet, all the steps taken by structuralist critics in their reconstruction of the meaning behind Philip Sidney's words will have lead the readers to a specific understanding of *Astrophil and Stella*, one that is informed by a web of interconnected influences, be those social, historical, economical or literary.

This first chapter aimed at illustrating different critical approaches to Elizabethan sonnet sequences in order to contextualise analytical choices made in the writing of this thesis. The structuralist interpretation proposed in this section only requires the audience's participation in the form of acceptance, positing a poet's socio-historical culture of origin and his personal life as interpretative tools to understand their texts, whereas post-structuralism encourages a joint participation of poet and readers in the creation of meaning. A feminist approach, enabled by the post-structuralist shift, requires the audience to critically engage with a text, applying categories that are contemporary in name only, such as bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, which have always existed but which were not taken into consideration in the past for cultural reasons. In light of these different critical methods employed in the past century to approach sonnet sequences, this thesis will proceed to align itself with other feminist interpretations, choosing to focus on the representation of women and femininity which emerges from the reading of Elizabethan sonnet sequences published in the last decade of the XVI century.

Chapter 2 - “Let eyes see beauties totall summe summ'd in her face”: the woman’s body and the importance of her physical beauty

2.1 - The blazon as a dismembering poetic device

During the Renaissance, one of the most popular philosophies among the higher classes of society, informing literates and artists’ representation of objects and ideas, is the Neoplatonic one (which will be touched upon later in the chapter), in addition to certain sets of Judeo-Christian religious beliefs and of scientific facts: in section 1.1 the Galenic understanding of human genitalia and reproduction is mentioned, as well as the belief that women were weak-willed and prone to sin if not controlled. These philosophical, religious and scientific factors contribute to the positioning of women in a subordinate role to men in XVI-century English society, thus men think they have the right to dispose of women’s bodies in a way that is not reciprocal, not on equal ground. This inequality in treatment is perfectly exemplified in the lyrical topos of the blazon, “an exercise of style in which the Poet examines the beauties and qualities of the Lady” (Ginestet, 2008, 3). This examination is performed by narrowing the focus on singular, distinct parts of the lady - her facial features, her skin, her limbs – which are often compared to either precious stones or natural elements in order to exalt her beauty.

This literary technique has been observed in a majority of Elizabethan sonnet sequences, and has been interpreted differently depending both on the poet and on the analytical school of thought employed by the critics. Sidney’s blazons, for example, have been deemed instances of his “impulse [...] to control the feminine, […] characteristic of patriarchal sexual discourses”. This is because “the act of praising the woman is an act of self-fashioning as he dismembers her body and divests it of its autonomy”, and “he asserts his subjectivity as a poet, manipulating and controlling [the woman’s] objectified person” (Baker, 1991, 9-10). Sidney’s friction with a clearly

feminist approach, however, is not the only possible outcome of an analysis of the blazon trope. It is not so negatively perceived when considering Spencer's use of it in *Amoretti,* especially when looking at his descriptions of the beloved through the lenses of the erotism of the Song of Songs and the mother/son bond as proposed by psychoanalysis: read through both the ancient and the modern filters, the woman's body as described by Spenser becomes more of a symbol of freely offered comfort and nourishment, than a passive object of carnal desire. The Biblical references to a bride willingly inviting her groom to share in her intimacy lend an autonomy to the female subject that is wholly absent in Sidney. In addition to this, the jealousy and possessiveness of the Spenserian lover, who searches for the reassurance of a motherly presence in his beloved lady, is to be seen as only the first step in the relationship between betrothed: this will later evolve into a more mature bond between adults who stand on a more equal ground (Krier, 1998). Yet a different approach to the blazon topos is to set aside its representation of women altogether, and to focus on its technical features, examining for instance Samuel Daniel's interest in the mere form of it, sparked by his work on emblems. These were devices "designed to carry a figure and "mot," and the two together were worn by a prince or captain in order to signal the world that here was a man of noble mind and strong will, a man who would fulfil his intention in any affair" (Goldman, 1968, 50). A possible interpretation of his sequence *Delia,* then, is stating that Daniel was attempting "to produce a Petrarchan sequence of verbalized emblems" (50), which means that the different body parts used to describe the lady are symbols, in the same way that images are used on emblems to represent the qualities of the families they belonged to. Thus the poet's focus is interpreted as being on the lyrical possibilities the study of the blazon inspired, while his love for Delia was only a pretext for his rhetorical exercises. Because of this perspective, this kind of critical approach doesn't linger on the impact this disjointed representation of women might have on the readers, as it is not concerned with the social impact of poetry, but with its technical features.

Whether the blazon was used as a rhetorical strategy or as a tool of oppression, the fact remains that poets in the late XVI century often choose to describe their beloved

ladies in bits and pieces, in eyes, lips, and hair, rather than whole. It is understandable that poets, in their efforts to create art, should employ all the rhetorical instruments at their disposal, making many of these sonnets lyrical exercises, not necessarily meant to degrade a woman; on the contrary, the aim is to exalt her. However, these sequences still express a specific point of view on the value men placed on the female body, which is to be beautiful according to the standards of the time, and to be available for admiration, often split from the identity of the whole woman whose parts the poet was admiring.

A fitting example of this point of view is the first quatrain of Spenser's *Amoretti* XV recites:

> Ye tradefull Merchants that with weary toyle,
> do seeke most pretious things to make your gain:
> and both the Indias of their treasures spoile,
> what needeth you to seeke so farre in vaine?

These verses set the scene for the lady to become an exposition of features, a collection of dismembered pieces to be ogled by merchants, an ensemble of precious stones and metals with an assigned monetary value, put on the same plane as spoils retrieved from a foreign land, with an implied layer of military conquest. Thus the lady's eyes become sapphires, her lips rubies, and her teeth pearl; her forehead becomes a sample of ivory, her hair one of gold, and her hands one of silver. The poet tries to soften the harsh image he created in the three quatrains by reminding the audience that, despite his physical attraction to his beloved, "that which fairest is, but few behold," is "her mind adornd with vertues manifold" (13-14). The final couplet, despite the poet's efforts, appears as a throwaway attempt to refocus the audience's attention on the lady's intellect and high moral standing, after an intense zoom-in on parts of her body that have nothing to do with her "vertues manifold".

The same voyeuristic intent is to be found in the first song of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, in which the poet-lover dedicates six stanzas to the celebration of six different parts of Stella's body – eyes, lips, feet, breast, hand, and hair. Here Sidney uses references to classical mythological figures to include a description of the beloved's character and personality, incorporating factors which remind the audience of Stella's personhood more than Spenser's final couplet does. This doesn't

necessarily place on a higher moral ground than Spenser, however, and it is sufficient to look no further than sonnet XIII of *Astrophil and Stella* to find proof of this. The poem stages a competition between gods, in which Jove, Mars and Cupid present their shields and weapons for Apollo to judge: whereas Jove and Mars present ornate arms with classical symbols of power and victory, Cupid presents Stella's head as a shield, her beautiful facial features winning over the favour of the god of art himself. In a gesture that reminds the audience of the display of Medusa's decapitated head, the god of love makes use of a part of the lady's body in a competition: while surely the poet-lover's intent is to praise the aesthetic qualities of his beloved by enumerating them one by one and exalting their charm above the divine, he does so in a way that speaks of separating the physical body from the soul and intellect which, according to the Neoplatonic philosophy of the time, inhabit it.

Such a dismemberment is also encouraged by Daniel when he addresses his lady in sonnet XVIII: in each line the poet-lover urges Delia to give up one of her outstanding features in order to restore them to either nature or the goddesses from which she stole them. Thus divested of her beauties, Delia is lastly invited to "restore thy fearce and cruell minde,/ To Hyrcan Tygers, and to ruthles Beares", and to "Yeelde to the Marble thy hard hart againe" (11-13). Here the poet slightly departs from the topical use of the blazon to exalt a woman's beauty, and introduces the concept of the Cruel Fair, citing the lady's hardness of heart and harsh behaviours as features equal in greatness though opposite in nature compared to her positive qualities. During these thirteen lines the readers are made to imagine the lady plucking both appealing and unappealing pieces of herself out of her body, and the reason why she should subject herself to such torture is given in the very last line of the sonnet: "So shalt thou cease to plague, and I to paine". Ultimately, the goal is to spare the man the emotional pain of unrequited desire by placing the fault of the attraction on the uninterested lady, a behaviour that corresponds shockingly well to, and could be considered as a precursor to, today's concept of "friend zone".

2.2 - A compendium of beautiful features

As exemplified in the analysis of *Amoretti* XV, the trade metaphor is the most explicit one when talking about the objectification of women's bodies in sonnets. However, the custom of only giving space to certain physical features is not limited to such explicit cases of laundry-list poems as the blazons. The lack of cohesion in the representation of the female body in sonnet sequences is pervasive, appearing in multiple poems even when the main focus is on another topic. The poet might be talking about the pain of love, the process of falling in love, and still, he will choose specific parts of his beloved's body to represent her qualities, turning singular features into tokens of her beauty and of her virtues. This section will focus on four features in particular, which are recurrent in the sonnet sequences considered in this thesis: a lady's eyes, hair, bosom, and lips.

Great favourites of the poets among the singled-out features of the female body are surely the eyes. Beacons of light and mirrors of the soul, during the Renaissance period eyes hold considerable importance in the philosophical discourse around love. Henry Constable gives a clear example of this understanding of love:

> Thine eye the glass where I behold my heart,
> Mine eye the window through the which thine eye
> May see my heart, and there thyself espy
> In bloody colours how thou painted art. (*Diana*, V, 1-4)

Following in the tradition of Dante and Petrarch, the eyes were thought to be the door through which love could enter the body, so that it could plant an image of the beloved in the heart of the lover. As Dante explains in one of his most quoted lines, "amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona", reciprocation was a key ingredient of love, as it could not be deemed perfect unless it was requited (*Inferno*, V, 103). In his sonnet, Constable describes only the first half of what constitutes falling in love by Renaissance standards, drawing a clear parallelism between the lady's eye and his own to encourage the reciprocation of his feelings. As the poem progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that the second half of this process won't be completed, causing

great suffering in the poet-lover: the lady's eyes are first described as arrowheads targeting the lover's heart, and then as fires that the lover hopes to subdue with the tears that spring from his own eyes. He wishes to extinguish the flame of love his beloved ignited in his heart, since she does not share in his passion. The sonnet closes with the image of a weeping man who is denied access to his beloved's heart, since her eyes – the gates to it – are described as scalding weapons and not, for instance, as welcoming, open doors.

As the eyes were such an important element in the process of building reciprocal love, it is no surprise that they would be mentioned repeatedly in all the sequences this thesis examines, as the organ responsible for vision: without it, it is impossible to behold a lady's beauty, and thus to fall in love at all. During the Renaissance period, the philosophy of XV-century Italian intellectual Marsilio Ficino was popularised by his followers: the concept most relevant to this chapter is the link between the sense of sight and the contemplation of divine beauty, which paved the way for the culture of the time to consider the admiration of earthly beauty as a step toward the contemplation of the divine. The spread of this idea was aided by its association with the Neoplatonic view of the world, which is fundamental in the understanding of this thought. Neoplatonism posits the existence of a higher sphere where perfection reigns – either in the form of Platonic Ideas or in the form of the Christian God –, and the presence of a lower plane where object and people are imperfect copies of the perfection which inhabits the Heavens. In other words, it could be said that Ficino considered "earthly love [...] the shadow of heavenly love", as "sight [...], though at a greater distance from the divine, make[s] possible the greatest possible apprehension of earthly beauty" (Goldman, 1974, 338).

But if all these sonnets see the poet-lover as the observing subject, the one who gets a glimpse of Heaven through the vision of his beautiful beloved, why are the lady's eyes also mentioned so often? That is because the beloved's gaze is the instigating factor of the lover's feelings, and her glances, as seen in Constable's sonnet, are often described as rays of light or as arrows piercing through the lover's heart, two recurring themes this section proposes to analyse.

The theme of light is developed through precise vocabulary choices, as can be observed in Sidney's poems, describing the eyes as "beams so bright" (*Astrophil and Stella*, sonnet VII, 2), "brave gleams" (7), and entities that, "sunlike, should more dazzle than delight" (8). The astronomical metaphors continue in sonnet XXVI, where Stella's eyes are compared to "those lamps of purest light" (2) which "fooles" think have only been hung in the sky to light the night: the lover instead knows that "those two starres in Stella's face" (14) are "bodies high" which "raigne on the low" (11), implying his beloved's status as a heavenly being, thus superior to other humans and within her right to command and rule over them. Sonnet XLII further emphasises the celestial nature of Stella's gaze by drawing the reader's attention to the sky in the very first line, calling her eyes "the spheres of beauty". He then urges his beloved's eyes to "keep still my zenith, ever shine on me" (8), cleverly underlining the peak of sunlight by positioning this verse in the middle of the poem. A movement akin to sundown in the last quatrain leaves no doubt the the equation of Stella's gaze to the sun, as the lover asks the "majestie of sacred lights" (12) to "dart down [their] rayes"(11) on him, wishing to spend his whole life in the brightness and warmth of his lady's gaze.

With examples such as Henry Constable's sonnet V, "Thine eye a fire is both in heat and light" (9), the thematic proximity between light and heat is an easy one to spot for any reader. Especially so when the most common image linked to both properties is the sun – and, by association, the stars in general –, and it is employed to describe the eyes quite frequently. The step from sun to fire is short, making flames a symbol favoured by love poets. This is due to several factors, one of which is the illuminating property of fire. Another factor is the fact that, according to the Neoplatonic philosophy, fire was considered a pure element that strived to be reconnected with its divine Creator, since it naturally tended to reach for the sky – in line with the original Platonic thesis that earthly objects are just imperfect copies of perfect ideas inhabiting the Hyperuranium. A third and most influential factor in the choice of fire–imagery is the Petrarchan association of the heat of fire with the intensity of love, a staple of love poetry that still persists today.

It is in this context that Constable writes *Diana*'s second sonnet, in which his beloved's eyes, themselves flames, ignite a fire in him, which makes his desires reach

for higher spheres: “thine eye a fire, [...] draws up my love;/ My love a fire, and so ascends above”. (13-14) As a heavenly being, Diana is the perfect source of the imperfect love the poet feels, and the choice of fire as a volatile element that strives to reach the sky is a fitting image to describe the neoplatonic phenomenon of an earthly copy yearning to be reunited with its perfect corresponding idea. Fiery eyes, however, are not only meant as a beacon to nobler purposes and as a bridge toward the contemplation of God, but also as weapons the lady can wield against the lover, thus an exchange of glances can become dangerous:

> Yet as thou turned thy chaste fair eye aside,
> A flame of fire did from thine eyelids go,
> Which burnt my heart through my sore wounded side. (LV, 10-12)

The lover is here scorched by a single glance, assaulted by the brightness of her eyes and by a beauty too close to that of the divine for his mortal eyes to contemplate. The perceived aggression of the lady’s gaze is also linked to fire in the form of lightning in *Diana* LXIII, where the poet-lover, wondering about what he saw in his beloved’s eyes, states that

> [...] Doubtless it was Amen,
> Armed with strong thunder and a lightning's flame,
> Who bridegroom like with power was riding then,
> Meaning that none should see him when he came. (9-12)

These lines attribute to Diana’s gaze the power of the Egyptian god Amon, lending male prowess to the female object of affection in the poem, and once again associating the lady’s gaze with a power too great for the lover to perceive with his human senses. Lightning appears as a substitute for fire in *Amoretti* VII as well, as one of the two moods in which the lady might be when looking at the lover:

> when ye mildly looke with louely hew,
> then is my soule with life and loue inspired:
> but when ye lowre, or looke on me askew
> then doe I die, as one with lightning fyred. (5-8)

The image that being struck by lightning evokes is one of a natural phenomenon impossible for an individual to control or contrast, leaving the helpless victims to deal with the pain and the permanent scars the heat and electricity imprint on their bodies.

Love, then, is also a naturally occurring phenomenon that wreaks havoc on the victims and forces them to deal with the aftermath of sudden and life-changing encounters.

The image of the lightning gives the lady's eye-dart an elemental origin, but there are other, more popular projectiles poets commonly turn to when describing their ladies' gazes, and these are Cupid's arrows. Sidney's Astrophil, for instance, accuses Cupid of ambushing him from the cover of Stella's dark eyes, whose gaze becomes a weapon:

> But straight I saw the motions of lightning grace,
> And then descried the glistrings of his dart:
> But ere I could flie thence, it pierc'd my heart.
> (*Astrophil and Stella*, XX, 12-14)

Similarly, Spenser's narrator explains

> how in her glauncing sight,
> legions of loues with little wings did fly:
> darting their deadly arrowes fyry bright,
> at euery rash beholder passing by.
> One of those archers closely I did spy,
> ayming his arrow at my very hart. (*Amoretti*, XVI, 5-10)

Only the lady's direct intervention saves him for being shot when she averts her gaze. Constable's lover also employs the imagery of arrows in sonnet V while explaining how he first fell in love with Diana – "Thine eye the pile is of a murdering dart;/ Mine eye the sight thou tak'st thy level by/ To hit my heart, and never shoot'st awry" (5-7). Later in the sequence, in sonnet LV, the narrator states:

> Dear, to thine eyes, eyes that my soul hath pained,
> Thoughts turned them back in that unhappy hour
> To see if love kept there his royal bower,
> For if not there, then no place him contained.
> There was he not, nor boy, nor golden bow. (5-9)

The absence of the boy-god Cupid and of his golden bow from Diana's eyes implies the equivalence of her gaze with arrows made of love, leading the poet-lover to fall into a masochistic state of mourning: he is saddened by the lack of weapons that could hurt him, because that hurt was still proof of his beloved's partial interest in him. Now,

he can never obtain reciprocation, all hope gone with the disappearance of Cupid's weapons from within her eyes.

It is worth noting that the murderous intent of Cupid's arrows is not pinned on the ladies themselves, none of which reciprocate the lovers' feelings in the sonnets referenced in this section: the killing blows aimed at the narrators' hearts are fired by the god of love, who appropriated the eyes and gazes of the beloved women and turned them into weapons unbeknownst to their owners. The use of the resulting darts is attributed to a third party, not the poet-lover and not the beloved, in order to justify and excuse the failed reciprocation of love. The poets composing these sequences were referencing real-life women of the aristocracy, and couldn't afford to offend them by calling them cruel and unfeeling without inserting a loophole in the narrative that would allow the ladies plausible deniability for their behaviours.

The eyes are not the only female weapon that poets write lyrics about, golden tresses are often seen as nets in which lovers find themselves entangled. Spenser dedicates an entire sonnet to the description of his beloved's hair:

> What guyle is this, that those her golden tresses,
> She doth attyre vnder a net of gold:
> and with sly skill so cunningly them dresses,
> that which is gold or heare, may scarse be told?
> Is it that mens frayle eyes, which gaze too bold,
> she may entangle in that golden snare:
> and being caught may craftily enfold,
> theyr weaker harts, which are not wel aware?
> Take heed therefore, myne eyes, how ye doe stare
> henceforth too rashly on that guilefull net,
> in which if euer ye entrapped are,
> out of her bands ye by no meanes shall get.
> Fondnesse it were for any being free,
> to couet fetters, though they golden bee. (*Amoretti,* XXXVII)

The opening lines marvel at the skill with which the lady braided her golden hair into a net, a feature as precious as it is dangerous: bold stares get caught up in the snare of it, and the hearts of men are captured while in their weak state of marvel. The union of natural beauty and craftsmanship necessary to create this enthralling trap has the

narrator weary: he warns his own eyes not to follow the fate of so many others, lest they also be captured and put in bonds they will never be free of. The final couplet sees the poet-lover give a last warning about how foolish it would be to wish for chains, however beautiful and golden they may be, when one is free. Despite the final message being apparently destined to the readers, it can easily be interpreted as the self-reproach of a man who has already fallen into the trap and berates himself for his own foolishness. Later in the sequence (sonnet LXXIII), after resigning himself to his captivity, the poet-lover compares his heart to a bird so free only the lady's hair could ever have captured it, underlying her power over him. Moreover, the lady is so captivating, that the only force which could ever free the lover is the lady herself: the bird-heart identifies the beloved's eyes as a fruit of love, and manages to free itself of the tangled locks, only to ask to be gently held in the cage of the lover's chest. The lady's hair, in the end, acts as a very efficient snare, and despite not being the bird-heart's final enclosure, it still fulfils its duty as a trap.

Spenser's narrator is not the only one to get caught in a net of golden threads: in sonnet XII, Sidney's Astrophil conceives the whole of Stella's body as belonging to Cupid, who disposes of it as a general does of fortresses and weapons. If line 2 is interpreted as a reference to Stella's hair instead of her eyes – as "lockes" has been said to be a printing mistake for "lookes" (Gentili, 1965, 243) – then the god of love is weaponizing Stella's dazzling blonde strands to confuse and capture male hearts as a hunter would a bird with mirrors and nets. These are "those same nets my deere,/ Wherewith my libertie thou didst surprize" (1-2) which Daniel writes about in *Delia* XIV: "strong is the net" (5), states the captive,

> Yet doe I loue, adore, and praise the same,
> That holdes [...] me in this sort.
> And list not seeke to breake, [...]
> The bonde, [...]
> By knife, [...] to deale:
> So much I please to perish in my wo. (7-12)

The lover is happily caught in his bonds, and despite the pain love causes him, he refuses to escape them. He does, however, realise that the situation is weighing on him, and, still refusing to be the one to struggle out of his beloved's unwitting

clutches, he addresses the lady, asking for his freedom: "Ye[t] least long trauailes be aboue my strength,/ Good Delia lose, quench, heale me now at length." (13-14)

If the matter of freedom is left uncertain in Daniel's poem, captivity is instead guaranteed in Constable's sonnet XXXII, where images of war are evoked as the background for the narrator's feelings of love. "So many hearts bound in thy hairs as thrall" (3), that Diana is described as having "such means to conquer men withal,/ As all the world must yield or else be slain" (7-8). A woman of such prowess gathers and binds to herself a large army of enamoured men, compensating them with the gold of her blond locks and keeping them fed with her beauty alone.

From the analysis of these and other sonnets that mention a lady's hair, the notion emerges of a feature both precious and dangerous, alluring and damning, a part of the lady which causes great admiration and weariness alike, despite the poet-lovers rarely complaining about their state as victims of the lady's wiles. As it happened for the eyes, once again women are portrayed as possessing characteristics which inspire contrasting emotions in the poets, without ever having to lift a finger: the ladies are passive models, and could be pictured as sitting in the middle of a room while the artists paint them with words instead of colours, objects of interest picked for their external features and never asked to actively participate in the creative process.

Here is Spenser's *Amoretti* LXXVI:

> Fayre bosome fraught with vertues richest tresure,
> The neast of loue, the lodging of delight:
> the bowre of blisse, the paradice of pleasure,
> the sacred harbour of that heuenly spright.
> How was I rauisht with your louely sight,
> and my frayle thoughts too rashly led astray?
> whiles diuing deepe through amorous insight,
> on the sweet spoyle of beautie they did pray.
> And twixt her paps like early fruit in May,
> whose haruest seemd to hasten now apace:
> they loosely did theyr wanton winges display,
> and there to rest themselues did boldly place.
> Sweet thoughts I enuy your so happy rest,
> which oft I wisht, yet neuer was so blest.

With a first quatrain that draws upon Tasso's sonnet "Non son sì belli i fiori onde natura", Spenser focuses his attention on the lady's bosom, meant as "the chest cavity as well as the enclosure formed by the chest and arms in an embrace" (Larsen, 1997, 210). This is addressed as a treasure chest containing an abundance of virtues, love and delight, and the confines of it are seen as a safe nest, a secure dwelling and even as a "sacred harbour" and a paradise. In the second and third quatrain the narrator's thoughts linger on the beloved's chest, moving the comparison to natural elements like quickly ripening fruits and gentle hills, using the final couplet to lament the fact that only his imagination can find comfort in and rest on her bosom, a privilege denied to his physical body.

Constable also describes the lady's chest as a place of rest, as his "heart within thy bosom sleepeth;" (*Diana*, XLVIII, 2): the lover is robbed of this safe haven when the lady runs away, leaving him at the mercy of his own tempestuous emotions and begging the elements to listen to his pain, wondering "What shall become of me?", now alone in the stormy seas of his unrequited feelings and without a figurative harbour to dock his love at. In Constable's poem the bosom is still considered a safe place, but its positive connotations are threatened by the fact that this safety can be taken away by the beloved. Daniel completes the shattering of the bosom imagery as a "sweete sanctuary" in sonnet XXVI: the first quatrain introduces a dynamic scene in which the lady's eyes hunt the lover's heart like pray, following it even as it flies "Into the sacred bosome of my deerest" where the heart "presum'd his safetie to be neerest" (*Delia*, 2 and 4). Thus chased by Delia's unrelentingly frowning gaze, the narrator admits defeat: "Then there I dye, where hop'd I to have liuen" (13). Instead of a cosy nest of love and virtues in which to build a life, the lady's heart becomes the lover's final resting place, a concept expanded on by Constable in sonnet XXXV. The poet-lover has angered his beloved, who frowns at him and makes him desire death over the torment of her contempt:

> Dear, if all other favour you shall grudge,
> Do speedy execution with your eye;
> With one sole look you leave in me no soul!
> Count it a loss to lose a faithful slave.
> Would God, that I might hear my last bell toll,
> So in your bosom I might dig a grave! (7-12)

Thus the transformation of the lady's bosom from a place of wonder and love to a place of darkness and death is complete. Despite the radical change in tone, however, there remains this idea that the dwelling of the beloved's heart – her chest – is an enclosed space in which the lover will be able to rest, either in comfort or in death, embraced by his lady's presence. As this thesis proposes a feminist reading of these sonnets, the reader might notice that in the poetic metamorphosis of the beloved's bosom from a refuge into a tomb, the beloved herself is never an enthusiastic receiver of the lover's attention, and when she is shown actively choosing a course of action, she is depicted as either shunning or reproaching her admirer, never showing him positive attention or signs of affection.

After staring into a lady's eyes and wishing he could be trapped in both her hair and her embrace, a XVI-century poet could shift his attention and his imagination onto yet a different part of his beloved, fixating on her lips and thinking about receiving kisses from her. As such an intimate contact would be considered reprehensible at court, despite aristocrats undoubtedly having extramarital affairs, sonnets written by courtier poets needed to maintain a certain decorum. Lips are then described with metaphors pertaining to the natural world or to the arts and classical mythology, and despite being suggestive of the poets' intentions, the poems maintain a façade of propriety by having the narrator observe the beloved's mouth from a distance, and, for the most part, only fantasising about or recollecting past amorous encounters.

Constable, for instance, portrays a starving Cupid as the personification of love toward Diana: the winged god is begging the lover's lady "at [her] mouth, the door of beauty" for food, so "that thence some alms of sweet grant might proceed" (*Diana*, XVII, 3-5). While waiting for sign of affection that would nourish Love, thus keeping the lover's feeling alive, Cupid's attention lands on his beloved's lips in the forms of "a cherry tree before the door" (6), and he claims that "'two cherries may suffice./ Two only may save life in this my need'" (7-8). After having expressed the depth of his yearning through the metaphoric figure of Cupid, the narrator brings the focus back to himself and takes the defences of his personified love: as a beggar, the winged boy should have been content to receive any scraps of nourishment (see: attention)

from the beloved, but in virtue of his divine origins, dared to ask for a more substantial token of affection in the form of a touch of lips, a kiss. As Love is a god, the narrator explains that “only the sweet fruit of this sweet [cherrie] tree/ Can give food to my love and life to me.” (13-14) Cherries are also elected as a proxy for the lady’s lips by Sidney, who employs mythological references to a higher degree than Constable. In sonnet LXXXII Astrophil addresses Stella as a garden-nymph “which keepes the Cherrie-tree/ Whose fruit doth farre the Hesperian tast surpasse”. (5-6) These lines separate the lady from her own lips and praise them as tasting better than the golden apples of legends: in Greek mythology these fruits belonged to Hera, queen of the gods, and were guarded in the garden of Hesperides by either the nymphs themselves or by a dragon, depending on the different versions of the tale. The golden apple Paris gave to Aphrodites when he elected her as the most beautiful goddess, a choice that would result in the Trojan war, also belonged to this group of golden fruits, and still Astrophil elevates Stella’s cherry-lips above them, dedicating the first two quatrains to the hyperbolic praise of this single feature on his lady’s face. The “metaphorical frame of a pagan-like Eden” is the setting for Sidney’s “naturalistic variant on the tale of the forbidden fruit” (Gentili, 1965, 405, my translation). The function of this background appears to be mitigating the erotic subtext of Astrophil’s desire: he begs not to be kept from such a sweet fruit after he has managed to steal a bite, a reference to a kiss stolen in Stella’s sleep in the second song and in sonnet LXXII. Astrophil’s intention of initiating physical intimacy is clear, but Stella is now jealously guarding her lips, refusing to let him close again, and the lover hopes to entice her into giving in to his desires with a promise to be more gentle the next time he approaches her, swearing that “I will but kisse; I neuer more will bite.” (14) Before resorting to begging not to be shut out from paradise, however, Astrophil had tried to ask Stellas for another kiss with a veritable ode to her lips in sonnet LXXX:

Sweet-swelling lip, well maist thou swell in pride,
  Since best wits thinke it wit thee to admire;
  Natures praise, Vertues stall; Cupids cold fire,
  Whence words, not words but heau'nly graces slide;
The new Parnassus, where the Muses bide;
  Sweetner of Musicke, Wisedomes beautifier,

Breather of life, and fastner of desire,
Where Beauties blush in Honors graine is dide.
Thus much my heart compeld my mouth to say;
But now, spite of my heart, my mouth will stay,
Loathing all lies, doubting this flatterie is:
And no spurre can his resty race renewe,
Without, how farre this praise is short of you,
Sweet Lipp, you teach my mouth with one sweet kisse.

The lips are praised as worthy of the attention of the best intellectual minds, as a compliment to nature and a seat for virtues to rest upon. The mythological element is present in the comparison of the lips to the fire of Cupid's love and to Mount Parnassus, the dwelling of the Muses who inspire all forms of art. Lips are then equated to enhancers of all the music, the wisdom, and the very breath that passes through them when the lady sings, converses or simply *is*. The last expression of praise in the series, "fastener of desire" (7), betrays Astrophil's true intent, that of being allowed to openly express the desire Stella's lips inspire and to kiss her, which is made clear in the last line of the sonnet. The turning point of the poem at the beginning of the sestet is marked by Astrophil doubting his own intent in the emphatic praise thus far carried out. All the epithets found in the first two quatrain are now deemed mere flattery: the lover claims his lyrical abilities are insufficient to faithfully describe Stella's mouth, and invokes the help of her "sweet Lipp" to "teach my mouth with one sweet kisse", as only the very subject of his praise could give him the necessary knowledge and skill to express its virtues in words.

Eyes, hair, bosom and lips. All these pieces of the ladies are detached from the whole person, and despite being given emphatic epithets and being associated with positive qualities that mark the women as attractive and desirable, the praise rarely offers an insight on the ladies' responses to the attention and adulation they receive. Most are shown resisting and shying away from affection and attempts at creating a bond, and despite this being possibly due to court etiquette and not wanting to ruin their reputation by implicating themselves with a man they were not married to, they are still shown as not appreciative of the attention centred on specific parts of them. While keeping in mind that the ladies portrayed in the sonnets have no agency as they are

fictional representations, and not living people, it is true that the image of women that emerges from the analysis of these sonnets is not necessarily flattering for the poets themselves: they are not shown making any real progress in their wooing attempts, but admiring from afar and insisting on approaching ladies who seem uninterested.

2.3 Recomposing the female body: Daniel's *Carpe Rosam*

In contrast to what has been observed of the dismembering tendencies of sonneteers thus far, Daniel's narrator calls Delia, as an intact individual, to action, to take him as a lover now that she is young (and beautiful, despite the poet claiming in sonnet XXXIII that beauty is not the main quality that attracts him to a lady). It is a different approach to the eternalising powers of poetry: the poet-lover could try his best to portray Delia in all of her splendour, but the fact remains that she will only be able to enjoy the perks of her beauty and youth for a short time, despite the poet's effort to freeze the image of her in his poem. Therefore, the lady should make the most of her youth and beauty, with the implication that the man she should bestow her favour upon is the very same poet-lover who is trying to entice her with his poetry about her physical and spiritual virtues. The theme of poetic immortality and the power of representation are not original to Renaissance, they find a predecessor in Petrarch, with the substantial difference that Petrarch would have never encouraged Laura to give herself over to him in an intimate setting, whereas that is exactly what Daniel does in his poems. In some of his sonnets he is "stressing the power of the poet to eternize [Delia's] perfections of mind and body, looking forward to the day when age shall have faded that beauty and when her heart may soften to his pleading" (Pearson, 1933, 155). While waiting for old age is an acceptable option for the poet-lover, he would still rather take part of his beloved's graces in the present, thus his exhortations to action. "The carpe diem imperative – or more specifically in these poems, the *Carpe Rosam* imperative – urges a young woman to succumb to admirers before her fleeting prime is gone" (Sagaser, 1998, 147).

In comparing a woman's beauty to a budding rose, whose bloom is spectacular but short-lived, in the *Carpe Rosam* sonnets Daniel recomposes the female body that has been considered in its dismembered parts in sections 2.1 and 2.2. Instead of fixating on certain features of the lady's face or torso, depicting them in such great detail that a whole poem is necessary to carry out the metaphors and comparisons necessary to express a poet's admiration for them, Daniel entrusts the visualisation of the beloved to the reader, and he moves onto the developments and changes a lady's appearance goes through during her life. Physical beauty is not immune to the passage of time, and while a great number of sonnets portray the radiant figure of a woman in her prime, frozen in time in the image the poet chooses to immortalise with his words, poems such as sonnet XXXI depict the physical decline all mortal beings will eventually go through, an irreversible process:

> No Aprill can reuiue thy withred flowers,
> Whose blooming grace adornes thy glorie now:
> Swift speedy Time, feathred with flying howers,
> Dissolues the beautie of the fairest brow. (9-12)

In light of this inescapable end, the poet-lover urges Delia to "loue whilst that thou maist be lou'd againe" (14), to grant her affections while she is young and she is sure someone will, in turn, be attracted to her and reciprocate her feelings. With this same sentence Daniel begins the following sonnet, placing three anaphoric repetition of "now" in three consecutive lines, underlying the importance of focusing on the present moment and of taking advantage of youth and beauty while they are at their peak. The lady's attractiveness is expressed in terms of seasons and flora, May and Summer used as broad references to the warmth and light she inspires in the poet-lover, the flowers in her lap an allusion to the fertility of her youth and to the full bloom of her beauty, as petals only open during the day of life. Delia is then warned that this day of life will leave space to the night of old age and, eventually, of death: the narrator reminds her once again that men – the poet included, since up until this point he does not explicitly separate himself from his peers – "doe not weigh the stalke for that it was,/ When once they finde her flowre, her glory passe" (XXXII, 13-14), meaning that they have no interest in a faded beauty which is not in her prime anymore.

As mentioned at the beginning of the section, sonnet XXXIII quickly remedies the lover's association of his taste in women with that of shallow men, who are only interested in a lady's florid beauty and fresh youth: these qualities will leave once her prime is past, and she will find herself alone, all shallow admirers gone. The second quatrain introduces the idea of the poet-lover's exceptional love, one that doesn't wither with time and is not subjected to the same deterioration that will affect his lady's good looks. The narrator is confident in assuring the permanence of his feelings to Delia:

> Fresh shalt thou see in mee the woundes thou madest,
> Though spent thy flame, in mee the heate remayning:
> I that have lou'd thee thus before thou fadest,
> My faith shall waxe, when thou art in thy wayning.
> The world shall finde this miracle in mee,
> That fire can burne, when all the matter's spent (5-10)

An eternally fresh wound that never heals, a heat that lingers in spite of the absence of flames, a crescent moon that keeps on waxing: the different images employed to assert the lover's ever-lasting passion express his devotion in terms of miracles, including the concluding visual of a fire that keeps on burning without fuel. It is clear the narrator is setting his affection apart from the normal development of a man's feelings toward a beautiful woman, his love so great it allows him to go against the natural flow of such feelings and persevere in his devotion, instead of losing his interest in Delia once she ages. Nevertheless, the sonnet is not a lyrical exercise in disinterested worship of the beloved, as the last four lines remind the reader:

> Then what my faith hath beene thy selfe shalt see,
> And that thou wast vnkinde thou maiest repent.
> Thou maist repent, that thou hast scorn'd my teares,
> When Winter snowes vppon thy golden heares. (11-14)

Once her beauty is gone and Delia realises the poet-lover's feelings were true all along, she will regret not granting him her affections, and she will have to repent for not having mercy on a man suffering her indifference to his love. The warning addressed to the young Delia in this poem is clear: not to waste her youth on trying to ascertain other men's intentions, but to trust the one man who so eloquently assures

her of the depth of his sentiments toward her, and to give herself over to him while they are both young.

Sonnet XLII is similarly ominous in tone, explicitly describing signs of old age in women and then apparently giving up on the thought because of women's dislike for talk of such topics. The first two quatrains develop a reflection on the brevity of youth, compared to ephemeral morning dew which evaporates with the first rays of sun, as well as to the

> Short [...] glory of the blushing Rose,
> The hew which thou so carefully doost nourish,
> Yet which at length thou must be forc'd to lose. (6-8)

The characteristics that Delia values about herself will ultimately be eroded by time, and the poet-lover reminds her that the deterioration of her body will inevitably lead to her death, in a line such as "Shalt bend thy wrinkles homeward to the earth" (10). The downward movement of wrinkled skin sagging under the burden of the years turns into the downward movement of a casket being lowered into the ground, prompting the narrator into a reflection on both his and Delia's death, an inevitable finish line toward which time will lead them, and at the crossing of which their fears will be put to rest. After such a grim thought, the poem ends with a couplet which calls the reader back to the present, with the tone of someone who was lost in his own thoughts: "But ah no more, thys hath beene often tolde,/ And women grieue to thinke they must be old." (13-14) The lover dismisses his concerns about death, citing the ladies' aversion to thinking of their fading beauty, a feature of great importance in women's lives, according to poets, and one without which a woman loses all value in the eyes of men. I would argue that what emerges from the study of these sonnet sequences is that women as individuals were valued only insofar as they displayed the necessary physical characteristics to be considered beautiful, which would be dissected and praised in such minute detail to lose sight of the person behind the eyes, the hair, the bosom and the lips. If women came to hold beauty in such high regard, it was precisely because it could help win them men's consideration as valuable individuals, and not because women were ever particularly predisposed to be vain and care for their appearances above all else.

Contrary to the trend thus far observed in Daniel's *Carpe Rosam* poems, sonnet XLIII depicts a lover urging his beloved to enjoy the pleasures of youth, despite him not being the companion she decides to share these joys with.

> I must not grieue my Loue, whose eyes would reede,
> Lines of delight, whereon her youth might smyle:
> Flowers haue a tyme before they come to seede,
> And she is young and now must sport the while.
> Ah sport sweet Mayde in season of these yeeres,
> And learne to gather flowers before they wither:
> And where the sweetest blossoms first appeares,
> Let loue and youth conduct thy pleasures thither.
> Lighten forth smyles to cleere the clowded ayre,
> And calme the tempest which my sighes doe rayse:
> Pittie and smyles doe best become the fayre,
> Pittie and smyles shall yeeld thee lasting prayse.
> I hope to say when all my griefes are gone,
> Happy the hart that sigh'd for such a one.

The first two quatrains see the narrator reminding himself he should not begrudge Delia her behaviour, since she is meant to entertain herself with pastimes that are sure to delight such a young and beautiful lady, as one would enjoy reading poetry that makes them smile. The lover urges her to indulge in the blossom-like quality of her features before maturing and taking on the duties of adult life and of motherhood that the image of seeds evokes. Her main concern should be "sporting the while", playing the game of youth. The lover goes on to explain this game as learning to take advantage of the features her age grants her before they can wither, and letting her passionate feelings and her young age guide her toward pleasure like insects are guided by instincts toward the sweet nectar of spring blossoms. The third quatrain denotes a change in the lover's tone: he is not encouraging Delia anymore, he is begging her to come to his rescue and to brighten his gloomy mood by gracing him with her presence and her attention, possibly even her affection. "Pittie and smiles" are invoked twice as the proper behaviour that best suits the lady's beauty and that will win her the lover's praise, who, after begging, has switched to bribing Delia into giving him attention by way of compliments and promises of poetic immortality. The final couplet can be interpreted in two different ways, at this point in the analysis: in

the first case, the narrator anticipates all of his efforts paying off, which would mean the lady finally picking him as her companion of her youthful delights; he would then be able to look back at the time he spent yearning and consider it worth his while to persevere in his efforts to conquer the affection of an outstanding lady such as Delia. A second, more bittersweet, interpretation would have the reader consider line 13 as an allusion to the lover's death: despite never gaining his lady's full favour, the narrator's heart would still be glad to have loved a woman who stayed true to her desires and became proactive in fulfilling them. This explicitly feminist reading distances the lady's worth as a person from the poet-lover's personal involvement in her life, separating the praising of the woman from what the man stands to gain from encouraging her to live a free sexuality, as he wouldn't have access to her in an intimate setting, making his love unconditional and not self-interested as in the first interpretation.

The *Carpe Rosam* trope helps to move the focus of the poets from single details of their beloveds' beauty to the changes that time imposes onto the human body, thus reflecting on *how* the ladies choose to use their beauty, reconstructing the unity of the female body and showing it in action. This reflection is often selfish in origin, as the poets wish their ladies were more open with their affections not so that the women they loved could be sexually liberated and in charge of their own bodies, but so that the lovers themselves could have access to their beloveds' bedchambers. As shown in the analysis of the last sonnet considered in this section, some of the poems presenting the *Carpe Rosam* topos could be construed as an honest expression of disinterested devotion toward a woman, but generally speaking, the intent of the trope is to remind young women that the gifts of youth and beauty are fleeting, and they should take advantage of them before men lose their interest, once old age renders wrinkled skin and white hair unappealing to male attention.

Chapter 3: “With rage of loue, I cald my Love vunkind”: the woman’s behaviour and morality

Love sonnets are written representations of conventional behaviours in an amorous context: men pursue their beloveds by means of poems which hint at their intentions, and the women represented in these works are generally shown refusing the insistent attentions during a confrontation, or disappearing from the scene entirely. This chapter proposes to analyse the way poets portray these two female responses to advances, with a specific focus on the conflict that arises between the social and private spheres of life in these lyrical representations of amorous pursuit.

In this context, the burden of choosing between appeasing an admirer and abiding by social norms of Christian origin is placed on the woman: the lover has no qualms in asking the lady for her affection or to start an intimate relationship with him, whereas, as seen in chapter 1, the moral conduct of a woman had to be impeccable for her to maintain a spotless reputation as a virtuous individual. The choice lovers ask of their beloveds is then, evidently, no choice at all: ladies had everything to lose and very little to gain from starting extramarital relationships, and since poets knew this, they chose to portray the ladies’ refusal and their own consequent heartbreak with a variety of common places. These range from describing women as prideful, haughty and disdainful, to cruel beauties whose physical fairness is contradicted by the callousness of their behaviours toward their devoted admirers; on a more positive note, women are also depicted as personifications of Virtue and Reason, refusing to submit to the passions raging in their suitors and insisting on the men reverting to morally and socially accepted expression of admiration. Another, less used trope is that of absence: even a lady’s non-behaviour can be painful for her suitor, as he cannot even admire her from afar, and in spite of the pain of being near the object of his affection without his love being requited, he would still rather suffer with his beloved nearby, than not being able to catch a glimpse of her at all.

3.1. Resisting sexual advances

> Loue, still a Boy, and oft a wanton is,
> School'd onely by his mothers tender eye;
> What wonder then if he his lesson misse,
> When for so soft a rodde deare play he trye?
> And yet my Starre, because a sugred kisse
> In sport I suckt while she asleepe did lye,
> Doth lowre, nay chide, nay threat for only this.
> Sweet, it was saucie Loue, not humble I.
> But no scuse serues; she makes her wrath appeare
> In beauties throne: see now, who dares come neare
> Those scarlet Iudges, thretning bloudie paine.
> O heau'nly foole, thy most kisse-worthy face
> Anger inuests with such a louely grace,
> That Angers selfe I needs must kisse againe.

Astrophil and Stella LXXIII is the most extreme representation of a man pressuring a woman into sexual intimacy that is presented in this section, as physical contact between the two characters has already happened before the start of the poem, while Stella was unconscious. Astrophil recounts having stolen a kiss from the sleeping lady in light tones, jokingly attributing the fault of his theft to unruly Cupid, “saucie Love”. Facing a smug Astrophil, Stella glowers at, chides and threatens him with consequences; seeing him unrepentant, “she makes her wrath appear” on her beautiful face, “threatening bloudie paine”, and still the suitor's only preoccupation is noticing how anger exalts the lady’s beauty. Completely ignoring his beloved’s enraged state, the lover can only focus on his own selfish wish to kiss her again, dismissing her disdain and her rejection in favour of noticing the hue of her lips and her “lovely grace”. Astrophil did not persuade Stella into returning his feelings and willingly granting him access to her person, he took his pleasure from her and, after the fact, proceeds to reminisce about the occasion and to ask for more kisses in several sonnets, convinced he is making progress in the conquest of his beloved’s heart. True awareness of Stella’s feelings will only dawn on Astrophil in sonnet LXXXVI, marking the beginning of the end for a relationship that, given the court setting, had always been doomed to fail, as it did not conform to social and moral rules.

This is a peculiar case in the depiction of the approach to the beloved, which is usually more cautious and made up of metaphors and innuendos, and is kept on the verbal plane: the codified behaviours of court prescribe that the lady refuse the poet-lover so as not to jeopardise her reputation by engaging in an intimate relationship with him, distancing herself from the man's bawdy allusions to sex.

This conventional scenario can be found in several of Spenser's sonnets, such as *Amoretti* VI: in the first quatrain the poet-lover tells the reader how his Elizabeth will not be easily won by displays of "lusts of baser kynd" (3), and that such a virtuous woman needs to be courted properly, for her to grant her undying love to a suitor. "The durefull Oake, whose sap is not yet dride" (5) is a phallic image with which the poet describes the lover's approach to wooing his lady, and despite oak being a sturdy tree which symbolises stability and his serious intentions of marriage, it is not very subtle in its sexual allusion and is met with resistance by the female counterpart. The suitor is aware that once he manages to ignite the fires of passion in his beloved, they will burn bright and steady for the rest of their lives, so he commits to the idea of marriage and urges the lady to accept his proposal, so that they may "knit the knot, that ever shall remain" (14). The "little paine" (13) she should not think long in taking, here takes on the ulterior meaning of not being afraid of losing her virginity to him, the step that would logically follow a wedding, and so the lover returns to his explicitly sexual intentions, adding his physical desires to his earnest love as a reason to pursue Elizabeth.

In sonnet XIV, Spenser abandons natural imagery and resorts to the lexicon of war, describing his lady as a personified besieged castle, refusing to let itself be conquered after a single attack: the lover rallies his strength and decides to try again, since "great shame it is to leaue like one afrayd,/ so fayre a peece for one repulse so light" (3-4). The lady is a greater conquest than the ones who came before her, and will therefore require greater effort in winning her over, as "such haughty mynds enur'd to hardy fight,/ disdayne to yield vnto the first assay" (7-8). The lady's haughtiness and disdain prevent her from giving in to the suitor's first attempt at intimacy with her, defined as an assault ("assay") both to sustain the violence of the war metaphor and to allude to the penetrative nature of the lover's wishes. These wishes are both mitigated and

confirmed in the following lines, when the poet-lover states he will “lay incessant battery to her heart” (10), refusing to give up on his goal of wooing and bedding her, but ready to turn to more intellectual means to achieve it, such as “playnts, prayers, vowes, ruth, sorrow, and dismay,/ those engins can the proudest loue conuert” (11-12). The lover concludes by pondering on the possibility of defeat, and returning to a higher subject by referring to the pain he would feel in case of failure as a death within life, resolving to adore her with what little life he will retain after such a devastating rejection.

In his *Amoretti,* Spenser employs several other metaphors to express his wish of starting an intimate relationship with his beloved, such as carving marble and hard stones, and moulding metals, in sonnets LI and XXXII. In the first case, the poet refers to the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, a Greek sculptor who created a statue in the shape of a woman so beautiful he fell in love with it, and whose sentiments turned his work into soft human flesh. The lover reproaches himself for not being able to see the hardness of his lady’s heart as proof of the steadfastness of her resolve, as marble is chosen by sculptors for memorials exactly for its durability. His feelings for Elizabeth lead him to “her hardness blame, which I should more commend” (6), finding it hard to appreciate such a quality when it keeps his beloved from reciprocating his feelings and from initiating physical intimacy with him. This more libertine aspect of his wishes is expressed in term of “lovers trade”, a skill in which he is supposedly “vntrainde” (5), and of an “assayede” (7) he wishes “t' atchiue and bring to end” (8). Moreover, all throughout the poem the hardness attributed to the lady’s heart can be paralleled by the allusion to the state of arousal the lover wants to satisfy by bedding the lady. Differently from previous sonnets, in which the final couplet serves as a mitigating conclusion in which the lover reigns in his desire and returns his verses to higher topics, here the poet-lover expresses his hopes of conquering the lady one last time: by showing her all of the pain her rejection causes him, he plans on replicating the miracle of Pygmalion’s feelings loosening Galatea’s marbled body, softening Elizabeth’s resolve, so that by “hauing her, my joy will be the greater” (14). As the melting of the beloved’s heart remains a wish expressed by the lover, the rejection of his advances is implicit, confirming the firmness of the woman’s

moral principles, which never waver or soften. The second of these two sonnets about hard materials focuses on metalwork, presenting the lover as a blacksmith who attempts to hammer the lady's iron-like resolve not to love him into a shape more welcoming of his desires. The first quatrain describes the ideal work of the craftsman, who "with his heauy sledge [...] can [yron] beat,/ and fashion to what he it list apply" (3-4), the picture-perfect image of a willful and powerful man, which also alludes to the sexual prowess the lover would display if he was granted the chance. "Yet cannot all these flames in which I fry,/ her hart more harde then yron soft awhit" (5-6), the poet-lover complains, because the heat of his passion is not enough to melt Elizabeth's resistance. Neither, he discovers, are his pleads and appeals to her feelings of compassion, "which I/ doe beat on th' anduyle of her stubberne wit" (7-8), in a constant assault meant to wear her out: this action mimics the same kind of energetic and repetitive motion the lover wishes to employ in the bedroom, rather than expend it in a hopeless rhetoric exercice. The lady, however, is not easily persuaded. On the contrary, she "harder growes the harder she is smit" (11), and the only option left to the suitor is to admit defeat, accepting that the flames of his passion will not find any fuel outside of himself, leaving him to burn to ashes. His beloved, on the opposite end of the spectrum of heat, will instead "to stones at length all frosen turne", having rejected all the warmth of the furnace of love and resisted all forms of solicitation the blacksmith-lover made use of to chip away at her stubbornness.

In these poems the more or less open allusions to sex put the addressed ladies in an uncomfortable position, asking them to choose between maintaining a socially-sanctioned chaste behaviour that rejects the lovers' advances and feelings, and giving in to their suitors' lust, risking public scorn. The poets always resolve this dilemma by sacrificing the happiness of their literary alter-ego in favour of preserving the ladies' honour, portraying themselves as the vessels of unbridled, burning passion and their beloveds as paladins of level-headed, virtuous reason. The ladies' pride, haughtiness and disdain – themselves sinful and unpleasant qualities – prevent them, however, from giving in to worse temptations. This preserves women's balance on the

pedestal on which a Neoplatonic vision of love puts them, closer to the perfection of Heaven than their lascivious suitors could ever hope to be.

3.2. A lover's revenge: the 'Cruel Fair' accusations

If it is true that the poet-lovers sacrifice their manly pride to preserve their beloveds' honour, they however claim their retribution in the form of reproaching complaints that target the ladies' cruelty. For some lovers it is initially hard to reconcile such virtuous ladies as the ones they so dearly admire with their cruel disinterest, as exemplified by Sidney's Astrophil in sonnet XLIV, where he states that

> Her heart, sweet heart, is of no Tygres kind:
> And yet she heares and yet no pitie I find,
> But more I cry, less grace she doth impart. (4-6)

This discrepancy forces him to wonder, "Alas, what cause is there so ouerthwart/ That Nobleness it selfe makes thus vnkind?" (7-8) In order to explain this strange occurrence, the lover reaches the conclusion that once his sighs of pain come in contact with Stella, who is a heavenly "Court of Bliss" (11), they take part of the happiness she houses in herself, and go through a complete metamorphosis, turning into "tunes of joye" (14). This would absolve Stella from an accusation of cruelty, as her ignorance of Astrophil's true feelings would be attributed to her very nature as a higher being, if the function of the poem were not that of pointing out her cruelty to the readers.

A similar issue troubles Spenser's narrator in *Amoretti* XLI, in which the lover has already come to the conclusion that his beloved is cruel, but is unsure about the origin of this attitude toward him, asking himself if it should be imputed to her nature or to her will. Depending on the source, the solutions to fight it are different: "if nature, then she may it mend with skill,/ if will, then she at will may will forgoe." (3-4) The thought that Elizabeth might not be able to control her cruelty, as it is an integral part of her, gives rise to a bleak thought: that of all of her other virtues and beauty only are only a bait for unsuspecting victims such as the lover. Men like him lose themselves in the tempestuous seas of the desire they feel for the lady, and end up shipwrecked on

the unwavering rocks of her rejections, like a siren tempting sailors to their deaths, collecting the spoils left behind. The final couplet is a desperate plead for Elizabeth to deny this hypothesis: "O fayrest fayre let neuer it be named,/ that so fayre beauty was so fowly shamed" (13-14), but as this is where the sonnet ends, the reader is left without an answer, and is lead to assume the worst.

Through his poetic narrator, Spenser also articulates another reflection on the reason behind Elizabeth's behaviour, addressing the issue in the very first line of sonnet XLIX: "Fayre cruell, why are ye so fierce and cruell?" He thinks it might be a show of power, comparing the lady's ability to cause him considerable distress with a single look to the deadly power of the Cockatrice's gaze: basilisks were in fact known as mythological figures who could turn people into stone with their gazes. The lover reproaches Elizabeth, pointing out "that mercy is the mighties iewell,/ and greater glory thinke to saue then spill" (3-4). He also urges her to redirect her cruelty onto her enemies, away from the man who loves her and does not deserve to have his affections repaid with "th' vtmost of your crueltyes" (9); she should instead to "him that at your footstoole humbled lies,/ with mercifull regard, giue mercy too" (11-12). He promises that if she heeds his advice and abandons her hurtful behaviours in favour of kinder ones, "Such mercy shal you make admyred to be" (13). Instead of following in the footsteps of a monstrous, deadly creature, she could be considered a creature of life, sharing her own with her suitor, and could thus be proud of her conduct, instead of being shamed as she is presently.

Daniel approaches the issue of cruelty from a different direction than that of its motivation, and does not wonder about its origin: in sonnet VI he points at beauty as the clear source of Delia's attitude toward her suitor. The first 10 lines of the poem alternate praise of the lady's beauty and mentions of her unpleasant actions or attitude, irrevocably linking the two together. In the first quatrain her cruelty is said to be as great as her beauty, and her gaze, although bright, is stuck in a frown; her flashing smile coexists with her pride, source of despair for her lover, and the series of juxtapositions ends by pairing her obnoxious disdain with the sweetness of her favour. The second quatrain goes on to describe Delia as

> A modest maide, deckt with a blush of honour,
> Whose feete doe treade greene pathes of youth and loue,
> The wonder of all eyes that looke vppon her:
> Sacred on earth, design'd a Saint aboue. (5-8)

These lines insist on the positive image the lady projects on the outside, her appearance that of the perfectly modest maiden worthy of being made a saint. In her, beauty can peacefully coexist with chastity, without carrying lust with it, as it would in a lesser woman. In spite of this virtuous accomplishment, the lady still lacks one quality which would make her truly perfect, and that is pity. In fact, the suitor uses the last four lines to lament his suffering as a rejected lover, stating that there would have been no need for him to write the poem, had she been kinder with him, because he would have had no reason to express his pain. Alas, she is "faire, and thus vnkinde" (13): this association of ideas appears a logical conclusion after the premises posited by the first quatrain, but it contradicts the classical concept of *kalokagathìa,* a Greek word that fuses together the terms 'beauty' and 'goodness'. "For a long time, scholars viewed *kalokagathìa* as a term that encapsulated a distinctively Hellenic idea of combined moral and physical excellence that was characteristic of the aristocratic class" (Reid, 2020, 122). This means that external beauty was believed to be a sign of moral goodness, a link which persisted in Western cultures through the centuries well past its origin in V century Greece. The frustration of a lover's affections and desires, however, manages to crack this long-lasting connection between these two concepts, and beauty, instead of being a guarantee of morality, becomes instead the very reason for a woman's cruel treatment of a suitor.

Taking this concept further, Daniel's sonnet XX stages a full blown accusation of cruelty toward Delia. The lover invokes death as the "last Resort whereto my soule appealeth" (2), and laments having wasted his youth in vain pursuit of

> [...] the cruelst faire that lyueth:
> The cruelst faire, that sees I languish for her,
> Yet neuer mercy to my merit giueth." (6-8)

The insistence on Delia's status as the cruellest beauty gives way to a grave accusation of sadism: the lover states that the accomplishment she values the most – "her Lawrell and her triumphes prize" (9) – is "To tread me downe with foote of her disgrace" (10).

The lover has spent his youth hoping he could build a life with the lady, but she rejects him and relishes in seeing all of his dreams vanish, all of his effort wasted. The dissociation of beauty and moral qualities is complete, and cruelty has taken the place of mercy and pity in the lady's heart, at least when dealing with her suitor.

In sonnet XXXVI, Daniel tries yet a different angle in the writing of the 'Cruel Fair' trope, that of making Delia's misbehaviours the focus of a poem dealing with poetic immortality. The first quatrain conventionally cites her beauty and the lover's own feelings as the subject rendered eternal by his poetry, apologising for his poor artistic skills, as they will not make justice to Delia's fairness. A first deviation from the norm comes at the beginning of the second quatrain, when the suitor addresses the lady: "Thinke not sweete Delia, this shall be thy shame,/ My Muse should sound thy praise with mournefull warble" (5-6). He reassures her that his art will be in praise of her, and although the tone of it will betray the pain of the rejection he suffered, he does not plan on shaming her in his verses. He hopes she will be remembered by posterity through his poem, until it will "haue redeem'd/ Mee from the vulgar, thee from all obscurenes" (11-12), meaning that the strength of his surviving feelings will bring a future reader to excuse his lacking artistic skills as well as the cruelty of her attitude in the face of his love. Despite the lover's assurance that the content of his poems is meant to be flattering, the implicit warning to Delia rings clear: if she does not wish to be remembered as a cruel lady for eternity in his poems, she should mind the way she interacts with her suitor. This is expressed in what is effectively a threat to the woman's reputation, which will not only be at risk with her contemporaries, but also with posterity, turning her behaviour into a cautionary tale for other ladies who find themselves dealing with more or less wanted admirers.

While poets generally keep the specifics of the ladies' cruel behaviours vague, letting the readers imagine how the rejection of their feelings happened, the metaphors some of them pick to convey the magnitude of the emotional hurt they suffered can be quite striking. Constable's sonnet XVI and XXXVI, for example, employ the images of Christian acts of charity being denied, respectively giving alms to beggars and dressing the orphans, and pardoning prisoners sentenced to death. In the first case the narrator states that it is a pity that a lady

> In whom all beauty's treasure we may find,
> That may unrich the body and the mind,
> Towards the poor should use no charity. (2-4)

The play on the rich/poor dichotomy continues in the image of the lover's heart begging for a glimpse of her beautiful looks and for her pity, only being able to feed on crumbs of the former as he is denied the latter. The third quatrain introduces the imagery of orphans by addressing the suitor's feelings as Cupid, the boy-god:

> Love, naked boy, hath nothing on his back
> And though he wanteth neither arm nor leg,
> Yet maimed he is sith he his sight doth lack. (10-12)

Naked and blind, he paints an unfortunate picture, being deprived of even the crumbs of his beloved's sight he had managed to enjoy in the previous lines. The poem suggests that when Diana rejects her suitor, this blind, naked, begging orphan is who she denies her affections to, in a show of hardness of heart that not even such pitiful representations might soften. The final couplet assures that little Cupid can, even sightless, behold the lady's beauty, and the naked boy is warmed by the intensity of his own existence as a passionate feeling: these statements, however, do not entirely mitigate the strength of the images employed in the previous twelve lines, leaving the readers wondering about the piousness of the lady. The tone drastically changes from the optimistic one in spite of difficulties of sonnet XVI, to a definitely bleak one is sonnet XXXVI. Constable's dejecter lover laments his daily sufferings, to the point he has chosen exile from the presence of the lady as a way to alleviate his pain, "like him, the which by judge condemned to die,/ To suffer with more ease, his eyes doth blind." (7-8) In this context of prisoners and charges, the lover cries that "Your lips in scarlet clad, my judges be,/ Pronouncing sentence of eternal «No!»" (9-10), explaining how the lady offers no mercy, no hope to escape the capital sentence of living a life of emotional pain so acute, it is akin to death.

Next to the plain display of cruelty of the lady, Constable also employs more covert strategies to condemn the rejection of his feelings, through different uses of the rhetorical figure of apophasis. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, this device is defined as "the raising of an issue by claiming not to mention it", a clear

example of which can be observed in *Diana* XLII:

> I Do not now complain of my disgrace,
> O cruel fair one! fair with cruel crost;
> Nor of the hour, season, time, nor place;
> Nor of my foil, for any freedom lost;
> Nor of my courage, by misfortune daunted;
> Nor of my wit, by overweening struck;
> Nor of my sense, ly any sound enchanted;
> Nor of the force of fiery-pointed hook;
> Nor of the steel that sticks within my wound;
> Nor of my thoughts, by worser thoughts defaced;
> Nor of the life I labour to confound.
> But I complain, that being thus disgraced,
> Fired, feared, frantic, fettered, shot through, slain,
> My death is such as I may not complain.

In the last lines, the lover firmly states that the crux of his complaint is not his own painful emotional death: since it comes at the hands of his beloved, he is ready to accept it. What he really laments is his inability to be upset over his own unfortunate demise. Despite the lover's claims, this is only the conclusion of the sonnets, which comes after three full quatrains of detailed examples of how exactly Diana torments him and causes him pain: each line from 3 to 11 apparently reinforces how his intention is not that of complaining of his unfortunate situation, "nor of" any aspect of his predicament that is caused by the lady. The true aim of the poem, however, is exactly the opposite, as the suitor exposes to his audience the loss of his freedom and the failing of his courage when faced with what can be understood as the lady's continuous rejections; his intellect and his senses fail to protect him from his unfortunate fate as an unrequited lover, as they are rendered useless in the presence of the lady, confounded as if by a spell; he describes the physical pain of being stabbed by the lady's penetrating and reproaching looks, as well as the loss of control over his own thoughts, which are "by worser thought defaced", implying that passionate lust has taken over purer and more chaste ideas of love. If it wasn't for ample space given the complaints the suitor denies lodging, the image that would emerge from these verses would be that of an heroic man who accepts the magnitude of his suffering without rebelling against the cause of it. It appears clear, though, that it is only a

creative way for a scorned lover to express his grievances. The poem exposes the lady's cruelty in a way that hopes to evoke the most pity in the reader, showing the mistreated lover as stoically resilient, to the point he cannot even find it in himself to condemn his beloved Diana for her behaviours, as he still loves her in spite of everything.

Less forgiving of the lady's cruelty is sonnet XXI, which also employs apophasis, but this time it summons the spectre of divine punishment for her cruel behaviour. Composed in "Complaint of his lady's sickness", as the caption of the poem states, the setting is that of Diana falling ill, which prompts her suitor into sonnet writing. In berating the sickness for daring to attack his beloved, the poet-lover makes a dig at the lady's own lack of mercy toward him: "Spare thou her health, which my life hath not spared" (5) hints at the lover being more compassionate than a supposedly virtuous lady. He goes on to state that

> Too bitter such revenge of my unrest!
> Although with wrongs my thought she hath opprest,
> My wrongs seek not revenge, they crave reward. (6-8)

As in sonnet XLII, the suitor denies having any adverse reaction to his mistreatment, refuting the notion that he could ever wish for revenge over his beloved, least of all by rejoicing for her poor health: what he wants is for his feelings to be reciprocated, not for Diana to suffer as she makes him suffer. Again, the poet-lover addresses the sickness, inviting it to take residence in his own body, "Whom love long since hath taught to suffer in!" (11), and is thus no stranger to pain. The final tercet is an invocation to God, in which the suitor asks "that I might so revenged be,/ By my poor pain might have her pain released!" (13-14) This way he shows to possess that compassion which his beloved has never shown him, making himself a positive example from which the cruel fair might learn, and distances himself from the notion of revenge, turning it into a charitable action toward a sick person, aligning himself with Christian morality. I would argue, however, that the poet's own suggestion that Diana's sickness could be construed as divine retribution for her cruelty is a covert threat to the lady, as was Daniel's sonnet XXXVI. In Constable's case, the warning is against a kind of cosmic justice that might hit the lady, and not against something the

lover himself might do to make her pay with a marred reputation for her lack of affection, but the source of the poets' inspiration is the same: their frustrated feelings demand a retribution of some kind, as being rejected hurt their ego.

What I suggest emerges from the analysis of the 'Cruel Fair' topos is that in the creation of a fictional relationship between their poetic alter-ego and a lady of the court, the poets include codified instances of rejection. This allows them to portray some undesirable traits in their love interests, such as resistance to their advances, and to show the consequences for their refusal to comply with male desires: as mentioned earlier in the section, poems filled with accusations of cruelty serve as cautionary tales, advising the women reading the poems against following in the footsteps of their fictional representations. In fact, men only depict suitors as scorned and failing in their attempts at wooing in order to preemptively affirm the kind of action they would take should such a situation happen in real life. The 'Cruel Fair' topos, then, can be seen as both a threat and a warning: it firmly places the power in a courtship in men's hands, showing that if women took for themselves the freedom to choose who they associate with, they would be punished for expressing free will, as what is asked and expected of them is meek submission to the men's desires.

3.3. A great conflict: Reason vs Passion

As mentioned repeatedly thus far in this chapter, love sonnets display a conflict of the public versus the private sphere, personal wishes versus socially acceptable behaviours. This conflict is explored in the poetic theme of Reason versus Passion, and sees the ladies as vassals of the former while the suitors in love fall under the dominion of the latter. Thus, there is an opposition of cruel virtue and pitiful vice: the poets show themselves as having fallen into the hands of passion, and despite the readers being led to side with them, by society's standards the ladies who refuse and reject the lovers' propositions are the ones behaving correctly. This section analyses

some of the ways in which the conflict between Reason and Passion has been portrayed by the four poets this thesis takes into consideration.

As mentioned, in this moral battle men are shown struggling to keep their desire under control, plagued by lustful thoughts and driven to sin by their passionate feelings, while the ladies are portrayed as not suffering any of these symptoms of love, beings of reason and heavenly perfection, virtue incarnate. The blame of the poet-lovers' condition of suffering, both because of the torment of the internal conflict and because of the unrequited nature of their feelings, it is put on the ladies: as explained when talking about the representation of the female body, the perfection of a woman's appearance was the trigger that ignited a man's feelings, and women are described as so irresistible, that Virtue and Reason in their purest forms could not themselves resist such great female power. Poets justify their alter-egos as being only human, and despite the inner tumult they live through, indicative of some degree of resistance to sin, they are helpless in their fall.

Sidney mentions this conflict as early as sonnet IV in his sequence, where Astrophil addresses Virtue and asks it to leave him to his destiny, admitting that he is irrecoverably lost to passion. He also admits that Virtue's teachings are too hard for him to follow – "My mouth too tender is for thy hard bit" (8) – and that they might be more appropriate for places such as churches and philosophical schools, among people that value reason over desires. These references to clerical and intellectual gatherings make it clear that Astrophil is aware of the clash between his passionate feelings and social standards, as virtue and reason are considered the only acceptable code of conduct in the public sphere represented by such places. Despite knowing this, Astrophil still asks Virtue not to stir feelings of guilt inside of him, as Stella "shrines in flesh so true a deitie,/ That, Virtue, thou thyself shalt be in loue" (13-14), which means he, a simple man, never had any hope of resisting the pull of his desires toward her. Sonnet LXXI similarly awards Stella the title of "Perfections heire" (9), she who displays all virtues and is a model of morality that inspires others to be the best versions of themselves. Yet, Astrophil is not one of those men who, in Stella's presence,

shall he find all vices ouerthrow
Not by rude force, but sweetest soueraigntie
Of reason [...] (5-7);

he instead acknowledges that “Desire still cries, Giue me some food” (14), showing how his passion has not turned to chaste love by virtue of being exposed to Stella’s goodness, and so the conflict between what society expects of his behaviours and the actual intensity of his emotions remains.

This same conflict, before translating onto the plane of self against society, originates in an internal struggle between the Christian ethics of the time and irrational, more instinctive desires. One example of this inner turmoil is displayed in Constable’s *Diana* LVII: the narrator tells the audience of an argument between his eyes and his heart, which are accusing each other of being responsible for the unrest of the lover’s thoughts. The heart “avows mine eye let in the fire,/ Which burns him with an everliving light” (5-6), while the eye “affirms my heart's unconstant faith/ Hath been his bane” (3-4) and “replies my greedy heart's desire/ Let in those floods, which drown him day and night” (7-8). The heart is identified as the seat of reason, while the eyes are the gates thought which passion conquered the lover’s thoughts, to the point he declares that “A kingdom thus divided cannot stand!” (14), announcing his inevitable fall.

In the face of this inner struggle, the lovers can either try to oppose passion, or submit to it, but it is mostly a lost battle: three out of four the poets considered in this thesis write of how men succumb to their desires, with varying degrees of effort in their resistance. Only Spenser’s lover will come out of this conflict victorious, as since the beginning his goal is shown to be a serious courtship followed by marriage. The purity of his intent grants him his wish, while suitors who aim at extramarital relationships and scandalous affairs cannot but be frustrated in their intentions, according to court conventions.

An example of Sperser’s representation of inner struggle can be found in *Amoretti* LXXXIV, where the lover is described as dealing with a “filthy lustful fyre” (1). Here the lover is addressing the passions of his more carnal self, which “molest” Elizabeth’s “sacred peace” (2) with their “sensuall desyre” (3). The lover, however, also expresses

“pure affections bred in spotlesse brest,/ & modest thoughts breathd from wel tempred sprites” (5-6), showing that men are also capable of such elevated sentiments. Despite the lover’s effort and good intentions, however, the battle against his baser wants is not won yet, and he invites his “purer affectios” to “speake no word to her of these sad plights” (11), referring to the fact he has yet to gain access the “ioyous sights” (9) of her resting in her private chambers, and can only yearn for such a privilege.

Despite showing his poetic alter-ego struggling to reign in his more lustful desires, in the end Spenser’s suitor succeeds, and is rewarded with the love of his lady. In complete opposition with this victory of reason and virtue over passion and lust, Samuel Daniel does not appear to be concerned with the intellectual conflict presented in this section. In his *Carpe Rosam* sonnets his narrator explicitly tempts Delia into letting go of social conventions and to indulge in the pleasures of youth, among which is taking on a lover. He does not describe feelings of guilt, and does not define his desire to be intimate with his beloved as morally reprehensible: he hopes Delia will also abandon her qualms about maintaining a spotless reputation, and anticipates the moment they will be together. Sidney and Constable are the two poets who focus on the lost battle between passion and reason the most.

Sidney, in fact, writes several sonnets in which Astrophil admits defeat when it comes to the struggle between Reason and Passion: sonnet IV is the first one, but that of yielding is a recurring theme, also present in sonnets X and XIV. In the first case, Astrophil addresses Reason as it had already done with Virtue, crying “Leaue Sense, and those which Senses obiects be;/ Deale thou with powers of thoughts, leaue Loue to Will.” (7-8) If Love is to be left to his Will, following passion is then a conscious choice, even if an obligated one: even Reason itself, once hit with the vision of Stella’s eyes, would have to admit defeat, and would “By reason good, good reason her to loue” (14), its power turned against itself to justify an unreasonable love for Stella. In the second case, Astrophil deals with a friend warning him that his passion is a sinful one, which only adds to the pain of an unrequited love he is already dealing with. The sins the “friend” refers to, however, are to be understood as a reference to the social behaviours of the Elizabethan court, made of conventions and etiquette, to which Astrophil opposes the “truth in word and faith of deede” (10) he offers to Stella.

Furthermore, because of his love, he is “Ready of wit, and fearing nought but shame” (11), willing to contravene courtly rules in order to express his feelings. His closing statement is clear in showing how he values the sincerity of his emotions above social conventions:

> If that be sin which in fixt hearts doth breed
> A loathing of all loose vnchastitie,
> Then loue is sin, and let me sinfull be. (12-14)

This once again addresses the conflict between the individual and society, emphasising the role of collective judgement of personal behaviours. Given the later development of Astrophil’s feelings in a more physical and lascivious direction, it is ironic he would so firmly state that he loathes “all loose vnchastitie”. This also serves as foreshadowing for later sonnets, in which he will well and truly lose control over those desires he still attempts to keep reigned in the present verses, despite having already accepted their presence within himself.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the ladies referred to in these poems could possibly be identified with real women belonging to the aristocracy, and are thus represented as conducting themselves according to the highest of standards. Sidney expresses this by making Stella the personification of Virtue in sonnet XXV, citing the platonic theory according to which, if Virtue were to take a physical form, “Strange flames of loue it in our souls would raise” (4), and falling in love with such a perfect being would be inevitable. Astrophil states that

> Vertue of late, with vertuous care to ster
> Loue of herself, tooke Stellas shape, that she
> To mortall eyes might sweetly shine in her. (9-11)

He has proof of this miracle of incarnation, “for since I her did see,/ Vertues great beauty in that face I proue,/ And find th' effect, for I do burn in loue.” (12-14) In sonnet XLVIII he goes on to describe the characteristics that make Stella so perfectly virtuous, claiming she is the converging point

> Where Vertue is made strong by Beauties might;
> Where Loue is chasteness, Paine doth learn delight,
> And Humbleness growes one with Maiesty. (2-4)

Stella is the ideal figure in which opposites can coexist, a woman so perfect she can redeem love's tendency to lust with her chastity, where the pain of love turns to delight by virtue of being associated with her, and where majesty does not breed pride, but merges with humbleness.

Such high praise understandably attracts accusations of flattery onto Astrophil, who vehemently defends his poems in sonnet XXXV, once again referring to Plato's school of thought and to the concept of earthly nature deriving from perfect, heavenly ideas. Stella is the person in which "Nature doth with infinite agree" (4) – Reason itself suggests this to him – and she is meant to be the catalyst for love, in the for of Cupid, to be "sworn page to Chastity" (8), thus reconciling lustful passion with a higher and purer kind of love. When describing such a woman, the praise is made high by the subject, not vice versa; Honour and Fame acquire prestige when associated with Stella, not the other way around. A similar sentiment is expressed by Constable in his sonnet VII: Envy accuses the lover of flattering Diana when he addresses her as the sun, but the lover answers that the truth is the sun should be flatter for this comparison to his beloved lady. Again, there is assurance of proof for these lofty claims, when the lover tells Diana that, "Witness mine eyes, I say the truth in this,/ They have seen thee and know that so it is." (13-14) The truthfulness of the lady's virtue is evident at first glance in this poem, and the hyperbolic praise reinforces the role of the beloved as a stronghold of Reason against the tempting advances of Passion.

Thus far, this section has established the existence of a conflict between Reason and Passion, and how women are representatives of the former while men of the latter. These two polarised points of view are put in direct confrontation in several of Constable and Sidney's sonnets, with opposing attitudes. Constable's narrator, for example, insists on the purity of his affections, which are however called into question by Diana who, as the lover himself has stated, is the embodiment of Virtue, and is thus more qualified to judge the honesty of his intentions. Sonnet XLI sees the narrator give a passionate defence of his feelings:

> Ay me, poor wretch, my prayer is turned to sin!
> I say, "I love!" My mistress says «Tis lust!"
> Thus most we lose where most we seek to win.
> Wit will make wicked what is ne'er so just.

And yet I can supplant her false surmise.
  Lust is a fyre that for an hour or twain
  Giveth a scorching blaze and then he dies;
  Love a continual furnace doth maintain.
A furnace! Well, this a furnace may be called;
  For it burns inward, yields a smothering flame,
  Sighs which, like boiled lead's smoking vapour, scald.
  I sigh apace at echo of sighs' name.
Long have I served; no short blaze is my love.
  Hid joys there are that maids scorn till they prove.

When Diana bluntly proclaims the suitor's feelings to be lust, he states he "can supplant her false surmise" (5) and builds a metaphor in which lust is equated to a fickle fire, burning out quickly in a single display of bright flames. His sentiments, instead, are as constant and reliable as a furnace, in which the heat builds up enough to melt lead and scald the skin with the resulting vapours. Line 13 is a firm statement of the seriousness and longevity of his feelings, which is, however, contradicted by the closing line of the poem: the narrator refers to "hid joys" that "maids scorn till they prove", and readers would surely interpret this as the lover having seen young women enjoy intimate relationships, once they allowed themselves to partake in them. Diana's assessment of his intentions was not at all a "false surmise", then, and her rejection remains firm. The suitor again attempts to sway his beloved in sonnet XLVII with a heartfelt plead:

O dear, this care no interest holds in me;
  But holy care, the guardian of thy fair,
  Thine honour's champion, and thy virtue's fee,
  The zeal which thee from barbarous times shall bear,
This care am I; this care my life hath taken.
  Dear to my soul, then leave me not forsaken! (9-14)

The "care" mentioned in verse 9 is the one described in the preceding octave, one made of unruly passions, a "discord that disorders sweet hearts' tune!" (3), born of the weakness of a mind that is unable to hold on to reason and virtue. This kind of care leads the lady to avoid her suitor "as ill fortune", refusing to associate with a man who cannot win temptation. And yet, the narrator assures Diana of his good faith, and promises to guard and defend her honour, without making any attempt at tainting it,

and to shield her from hardships, never to add to them. Given the pathos of the last line, the reader can surmise the beloved has, in fact, left the suitor forsaken, not believing his claims and choosing to be cautious instead of trusting, and giving the audience the impression the narrator is still very much in the midst of an internal conflict between reason and passion, a struggle he has yet to come out victorious of. Or perhaps a struggle he has already lost, and has fallen so far into vice as to lie to his beloved in order to trick her into giving in to his desires.

Sidney's Astrophil who, on the other hand, has openly accepted his fall into desire, does not attempt to defend his intentions as chaste and pure, and his dialogue with Stella sees him rejecting her invitations to be reasonable. In sonnet LXII, Stella tells Astrophil that he "true loue in her should find" (4) and he rejoices, thinking he has finally won her over, but then is immediately disappointed, like one whose wine is watered down: his beloved refuses to let him follow a course of action that would make him "decline/ From nobler course, fit for my birth and mind" (7-8), thwarting his plans of seduction and thus saving both their reputations. She urges him to "anchor fast [him] selfe on Vertues shore" (11) in order to fight "these tempests of vaine loue" (10), in a display of "moralistic language typical of court Platonism" (Gentili, 1965, 360, my translation). Astrophil is disheartened by the lecture, and invites her to stop her attempts at bringing him back on the path of virtue, as her behaviour is as useful to him as false coins are to a beggar. Astrophil hopes for reciprocation of his feelings and is instead met with a pedantic chiding that does nothing to bring him any closer to his beloved. As he explains in sonnet LXIV, he wishes for his passions to run free, and perceives Stella's call to revert back to a virtuous way of thinking as an invitation to abandon his love altogether, an option he refuses to even consider.

> No more, my deare, no more these counsels trie;
> O giue my passions leaue to run their race;
> Let Fortune lay on me her worst disgrace;
> Let folke orecharg'd with braine against me crie;
> Let clouds bedimme my face, breake in mine eye;
> Let me no steps but of lost labour trace;
> Let all the earth with scorne recount my case,
> But do not will me from my loue to flie. (1-8)

Astrophil is willing to accept the consequences of his immoral behaviours, and to challenge social norms in order to freely live his passions with Stella. He is also ready to admit that his mental faculties have diminished since falling in love, but he does not envy the wit and ingenuity of famous figures such as Aristotle or Ceasar, and he is not bothered by the superior intellect of others when compared to his.

> Nor hope, nor wish another course to frame
> But that which once may win thy cruell hart:
> Thou art my wit, and thou my vertue art. (12-14)

Stella herself is all the wit and the virtue Astrophil needs, and only wishes to be granted the good fortune of winning her over, the most rewarding achievement he thinks he can reach in his life.

In analysing the conflict between Reason and Passion, between private desire and social expectations, the beginning of this section considered sonnets in which the poets argue with Virtue and Reason, with a friend, or with themselves, over the inner turmoil their love for the beloved has stirred inside them. It moved on to sonnets which firmly establish the identity of women as stalwarts of morality and examples of virtuous behaviour, in opposition with the failure of the men to oppose Passion and Desire. Having established the two sides in the debate, the conclusion of this section turned to the arguments the lovers have with their ladies about the true nature of the love they feel: Constable's alter-ego proclaims his affections to be pure, betraying himself with slips of the tongue Diana is quick to notice, standing strong in her rejection; Astrophil, on the contrary, openly admits the fault of his desires, and resists Stella's attempt at instilling virtue in his reasoning.

3.4. Absence: a non-behaviour

The beloved's absence is a recurring theme in a majority of the sonnet sequences considered in this thesis: out of the four analysed works, only Daniel's *Delia* has no mention of it, as in his descriptions of love-induced pain the poet generally attributes his suffering to rejection and to his beloved's refusal to correspond his feelings.

Sidney, Spenser and Constable, on the other hand, do explore the trope, and I have elected to divide the different declinations of it in three categories: the search for a proxy for the beloved in her absence; conceiving of the beloved's absence as an exile; and the beloved's absence altering the lover's perception of the world around him. In all three variations of the theme, the woman's influence lingers well past her physical disappearance, affecting the man's psychic state and the way he interacts with the world around him.

A first variant of the absence theme is looking for a proxy of the beloved, and it is based on the Neoplatonic belief that love would embed an image of the beloved in the heart of the lover, thus allowing for the consolation of turning inward to find a portrait of the object of one's affection should they be missing. Sidney's Astrophil employs this strategy in sonnet LXXXVIII, in which "traytor Absence" (1) wants him to abandon his hopes of reciprocation. Astrophil vehemently proclaims he will not fosake his love only because she does not show herself to him, arguing that none could take her place even in her absence, rhetorically asking "When sun is hid, can starres such beames display?" (6). Astrophil completely dismisses the notion he could direct his love to anyone but Stella:

> Tush, Absence; while thy mistes eclipse that light,
> My orphan sense flies to the inward sight,
> Where memory sets forth the beames of loue; (9-11)

The image that love and memories have built of Stella in his heart strengthens his feelings, keeping them alive as if she were present, and he seems immovable in his affections. This, however, proves to be untrue in sonnet XCI, when the beloved's absence persists and the lover's pain increases. Previously a mist, here absence is described as a veil obscuring the sun of Stella's presence, forcing Astrophil to "liue in Sorrowes night" (4). The only flickers of light he can perceive in the pitch black of his suffering, "like candle-light", thus only a pale imitation of the bright rays of Stella's beauty, are

> Some beauties peece, as amber-colour'd hed,
> Milke hands, rose cheeks, or lips more sweet, more red;
> Or seeing jets blacke but in blacknesse bright (6-8)

Astrophil's claim that he would never turn his attention to other women is dispoven, as that is exactly where he searches for relief from his sorrows. He immediately justifies his slip up by providing the Neoplatonic argument that "of you they models be;/ Models, such be wood-globes of glist'ring skies" (10-11). He could only derive comfort from other women's beauty because they are imperfect copies of the original, perfect beauty Stella possesses, allowing him to behold pieces of his beloved in other women. He keeps assuring Stella that "Not them, O no, but you in them I loue" (14), insisting on the faithfulness of his affection toward her, all in spite of her absence and, at this point in the sequence, her rejection of his love and her will to put an end to their acquaintance. Still, Astrophil does not accept the end of their relationship, and in the following sonnet (XCII) he urges a nameless "good Sir" (1) to give him information about Stella's whereabouts, picturing what she might be doing now that she is away from him. The "good Sir"'s laconic assurance of Stella's good health is not enough to placate the lover's wish to feel closer to her than she allows, and Astrophil presses for more details:

> I would know whether she did sit or walke;
> How cloth'd; how waited on; sigh'd she, or smilde
> Whereof, with whom, how often did she talke;
> With what pastimes Times iourney she beguilde;
> If her lips daignd to sweeten my poore name. (9-13)

He wants to build a mental image of her as close to real-life as possible, one which should include her clothes, her pastimes, her every expression and, most importantly, Astrophil wishes to know if she has mentioned him at all. The development of these three sonnets delineates a progressively more desperate attitude, in which the internal image produced by memories is not enough to sustain the pain generated by the distance between lover and beloved. The physical distance is also an emotional one, and the persistence of it will result in the complete deterioration of Astrophil's feelings toward Stella by the end of the sequence.

In Spenser's *Amoretti* the context of Elizabeth's absence is of a different nature than Stella's complete disappearance in order to reinforce the end of a relationship: Spenser writes about absence as an intermission in the relationship between lover and beloved, a momentary separation before the period of courtship and betrothal are crowned with

marriage. Consequently, the tone is that of a requited lover missing the object of his affection, and not the frantic desperation of a rejected lover working through denial after having been forsaken by his beloved. In sonnet LXXVIII, Spenser's narrator describes himself as a lost fawn looking for its mother, searching for her in every place she usually frequents and finding only the traces of her presence she left in her wake. His eyes are sent out in every direction, but

> they ydly back returne to me agayne,
> and when I hope to see theyr trew obiect,
> I fynd my selfe but fed with fancies vayne. (10-12)

In the end, the solution he comes to is, again, the Neoplatonic one of turning inward: "Ceasse then myne eyes, to seeke her selfe to see,/ and let my thoughts behold her selfe in mee" (13-14). As Astrophil did in sonnet LXXXVIII, Spenser's narrator also relies on love and memories to find reprieve from his sorrows in the form of beholding an image of his beloved's features.

Constable's approach to the search for a proxy for his beloved differs from that of Sidney and Spenser in two ways: firstly because it appears at the very beginning of the sequence instead of the end, with the dedication of the second sonnet, and thus of the whole sequence, "To his Absent Diana"; but most importantly, because instead of passively admiring a representation of the lady conjured by his heart and memories, Constable's narrator produces an image of her in his poems, creating a more concrete substitute. A further step away from the conventions of the inward image of the beloved is found in asking for the beloved herself to "Review these sonnets, pictures of thy praise" (6), offering her a mirror in which to behold her beauty, her virtues, and all the pain she has caused her suitor with her rejection. After this more or less conventional beginning, the last six lines of the poem present a complete inversion of the trope:

> See them forsaken; for I them forsook,
> Forsaken first of thee, next of my sense;
> And when thou deign'st on their black tears to look,
> Shed not one tear, my tears to recompence;
> But joy in this, though fate 'gainst me repine,
> My verse still lives to witness thee divine. (9-14)

The narrator asks Diana to forsake his poems, after having read them, as he himself

abandoned them. Before writing his sequence he had already been abandoned both by Diana herself and then by reason, so the resulting sonnets cannot but be a product of foolish love, the ink used to write his feelings on paper a black substitute for the tears he shed while recounting his sorrows. The lover does not, however, look for compensation in the form of his beloved's tears: he is still happy that his verses – now a proxy for himself, whereas at the beginning of the sonnet they had been a stand-in for Diana – will be granted the honour of beholding her, and "still live [...] to witness thee divine".

For the lovers, being far from their beloved is a punishment comparable to exile, forced to live in a world in which they are forbidden from perceiving the one creature that grants warmth, joy and love to their surroundings. Sidney's Astrophil (sonnet CIV) addresses an audience that has been giving him grief about the eloquence with which he expresses his sorrows. He asks these "envious wits" (1),

> Ah, is it not enough, that I am thence,
> Thence, so farre thence, that scantly any sparke
> Of comfort dare come to this dungeon darke,
> Where rigrous exile lockes vp al my sense? (4-8)

Astrophil rebukes these nosy courtiers for adding the insult of trying to police the expression of his sorrows to the injury of being banished from his beloved's presence. He is now living in darkness, so far away from his Stella's bright presence that he is only left with "scantly any sparke/ Of comfort" (6-7), forced away from her light and into a dark prison where "his sense" cannot reach him. Even catching a glimpse of Stella when passing "by a happie window" (9) would be enough to satisfy him, his feelings so strong that – he claims – separation cannot alter them. In the last verses, Astrophil openly confesses to the crowd of gossiping nobles speculating about his behaviour that he does indeed still love Stella, with a bold "I/ Doe Stella loue: fooles, who doth it deny?" (13-14). Once again the lover wants to show how, despite the worst of circumstances, he will not falter in his devotion to his beloved, not even when his pain is being treated like entertainment and the comfort of Stella's presence is inaccessible to him.

Spenser's narrator in *Amoretti* LII experiences Elizabeth's absence in a less dire situation, simply departing from her after a visit. His reaction, however, is still remarkably strong, describing himself as a

> prisoner led away with heauy hart,
> despoyld of warlike armes and knowen shield.
> So doe I now my selfe a prisoner yeeld,
> to sorrow and to solitary paine:
> from presence of my dearest deare exylde
> longwhile alone in languor to remaine. (3-8)

His melancholic state of mind makes him conceive of his separation from his beloved as a soldier losing his fighting prowess, submitting to his enemies, Sorrow and "solitary paine". The lover is stuck in such a state of depression that "no thought of ioy or pleasure vaine/ [...] may my solace breed" (9-10), hit by a pain so deep he becomes spiteful "of all worlds gladnesse" (12) that he is unable to take part in, since he is not in his beloved's presence. The final couplet proposes a solution to his problem that would be inconceivable to Sidney's Astrophil, as it presupposes the lady's willingness to see the lover again: Spenser's narrator decides to accept Elizabeth's absence as a form of punishment, in exchange for which he will be rewarded with her presence at a later time. In light of this conclusion, the sonnet could then be interpreted as the description of the lover's personal Purgatory, in which he will be granted the grace of his lady's presence after having atoned for his sins – or possibly after having proven the true nature of his love by demonstrating patience and perseverance. In any case, there is the assurance of a future reunion, which marks the sonnet as a less tragic expression of feelings than Sidney's one.

Constable's sonnet XXXVIII is another example of absence as a consequence of rejection, implying a permanent separation of the lover from his Diana. The narrator bemoans the fate of his eyes and heart, "The one to live exiled from that sweet smart,/ Where th' other pines, imprisoned without date" (3-4). The two organs are linked in their suffering for love by the process described in section 2.2, thus the lamentation in lines 11-12: "had my heart with banishment been blest,/ Mine eye with beauty never had been pleased!" This means that, had the lover not had a heart, his eyes would not have been receptive to Diana's beauty, and they never would have allowed the image

of her to take residence in his heart. Hindsight, however, does not help the narrator with his present situation, and finding himself forcibly separated from a woman who both causes him pain and delight, with no end to his exile in sight, he turns to the same solution mentioned earlier in the section: contemplating the image of the beloved that his eyes have etched into his heart.

At times, the pain of the beloved's absence can result in the alteration of the lover's cognitive functions. The poet-lover's interactions with his surroundings are hindered by the sorrow that weighs on his mind, for example interfering with the correct perception of the passage of time. Both Sidney and Spenser, in sonnets LXXXIX and LXXXVII of their respective sequences, deal with this phenomenon. In the first case, Stella's absence marks the absence of sunlight, plunging Astrophil into an eternal night. In this context, the natural succession of day and night is altered, so that "Each day seemes long, and longs for long-staid night;/ The night, as tedious, wooes th' approch of day" (5-6). At every moment the lover wishes for a peace of mind he cannot find,

> Tired with the dusty toiles of busie day,
> Languisht with horrors of the silent night,
> Suff'ring the euils both of day and night (7-9),

and he is thus stuck in a terrible cycle of perpetual hardship from which he cannot find any reprieve. This gives way to a paradoxical situation, in which he is "liuing thus in blackest Winter night,/ I feele the flames of hottest Sommer day" (13-14), conflating the worst characteristics of the two seasons with the most extreme temperatures to describe how his existence has been completely overturned by Stella's disappearance. Spenser writes about time in a similar fashion, focusing mostly on the different speed at which hours pass depending on Elizabeth's presence or absence. The first quatrain mentions how

> Since I did leaue the presence of my loue,
> Many long weary dayes I haue outworne:
> and many nights, that slowly seemd to moue,
> theyr sad protract from euening vntill morne,

explaining that the hours drag endlessly when the lover is parted from his beloved's company. Again, as it happened in Sidney’s poem, in the second quatrain there is talk of an infinite repetition of toils, a ceaseless chase of “noyous day[s]” and miserable nights, neither of which brings any comfort to the desperate lover. None of his attempts at deceiving his grief succeed; on the contrary, his plan backfires, and “further seemes his terme still to extend,/ and maketh euery minute seeme a myle” (11-12). The final couplet mentions happier times, but they are of no consolation to the lover: while “sorrow still doth seeme too long to last” (13), merry occasions also influence the lover’s perception of time, as “ioyous houres doo fly away too fast” (14). The acceleration of time during happy occasions makes them unable to compensate for all the grief the lover feels on his worst days, but they do act as bright spots in the otherwise grim and long wait for Elizabeth to become his wife and finally banish the darkness and sorrow brought on by her absence for good.

In addition to a skewed perception of time, the lover experiences intense anger that he unloads on innocent bystanders, as in Astrophil’s case in sonnet CV. The circumstances are those of a missed opportunity for a late night meeting with Stella, following which the lover searches for a scapegoat to blame instead of his own eyes. Astrophil swears on Stella’s very name that he

> Was not in fault, who bent thy dazling race
> Onely vnto the heau'n of Stellas face,
> Counting but dust what in the way did lie. (6-8)

It was not his distraction that made him miss the passage of her carriage and only catch the dust that settled in its wake. The anger and frustration caused by this episode are taken out with curses on three agents wrongfully held responsible:

> Curst be the page from whome the bad torch fell:
> Curst be the night which did your strife resist:
> Curst be the coachman that did driue so fast. (11-13)

Thus a clumsy page, the darkness of the night and the coachman driving too fast become the targets of Astrophil’s aggression, which can be interpreted as a mask for his own inability to seize the moment and for his helplessness in the face of Stella’s indifference.

Constable's sonnet XLIV proposes a third type of alteration of a lover's mental state, that of projecting his feelings onto natural landscapes. The poet-lover searches for comfort in places such as "secret vales", "solitary fields" and "shores forsaken" (1-2): the choice of adjectives attributed to the personified places is indicative of the desolation and loneliness the narrator is experiencing, and which he sees in his surroundings. He addresses these elements taken from natural scenes: "If ever groaning heart hath made you yield", "Then 'mongst night shadows whisper out my death" (3 and 5), and asks them to spread word of his sorrow, if they are capable of compassion. This way the echo of his "truth and true love's breaking" (8) could be spread even after his life is spent. From line 9 onward the address of the poem shifts to "You pretty flowers that smile for summer's sake", symbols of a joy and happiness precluded to the lover. They are warned of the incoming flood of tears that will "turn the meadows to a standing lake,/ By whose untimely floods your glory dies!" (11-12) The picture painted by the poem is one of a pain so great that nature itself is called to take part in it in order for the narrator to tolerate it, sharing the burden with a distraught lover whose beloved is barely mentioned.

Despite her absence, Diana – as well as Stella – is still present in the negative feelings her rejection and consequent disappearance have on her suitor. This is also true for the other variations on the theme of absence thus far considered: the section title defines absence as a non-behaviour precisely because the poets place the absent presence of their beloved at the very centre of the scene, so that she is never truly missing from their verses. Furthermore, in the cases of Sidney and Constable, absence is portrayed as an active choice on the lady's part, who willingly subtracts herself from her suitor's attention to underline the finality of her rejection of the man's feelings. Absence is thus to be considered the negation of a behaviour in the sense that the woman refuses to further interact with a man she does not care for, showing no mercy for his emotional state but, as discussed in section 3.3, displaying the ability to wield reason and virtue in order to comply with the morality of the time.

Chapter 4 - “I stand amazed, at wondrous sight of so celestiall hew”: the woman beyond human limits

The sonnets analysed in this chapter focus on how women considered worthy of admiration are at times portrayed as beyond human, where the term “human” is to be understood in light of the humanist definition of it: “Most philosophers [...] would understand humanism to be a theory which attempts to explain social relations and social facts in terms of the unchanging features of the human subject”. This form of humanism is referred to as “explanatory humanism”, and it “usually takes 'reason' to be fundamental to human nature” (Paden, 1987, 124), thus positing reason as the fundamental criterion upon which all of humanity in its moral sense is built. According to a Christian and Neoplatonic interpretation of the world, being human implies mortality and fragility, weakness to natural elements such as fire and the passage of time, as well as to devilish temptations and vices that undermine the solidity of virtuous reason. This chapter gathers examples of how, in Elizabethan sonnet sequences, women are portrayed as creatures to be considered superior to average human beings: the first section focuses on how poets write about their muses as art to be admired, directly shaped by higher powers and thus propelled past the limits of their mortal existence. The second section discusses how poets also imagine their ladies as pagan supernatural figures like goddesses, as well as creatures of myth, like beautiful nymphs and deadly monsters like the Gorgon Medusa or the basilisk. Lastly, women are depicted as heavenly beings, saints and angels belonging to the Christian tradition: at the same time, through a Neoplatonic lens, these female figures can be interpreted as perfect inhabitants of a higher sphere who, more or less benevolently, look down upon the imperfect men who worship and adore them on earth. In all three cases – those of art work, of classical mythological figures and of Christian heavenly beings – women appear as creatures that exceed the boundaries of humanity, either because of their beauty, their outstandingly firm morality or the

magnitude of their emotions, and thus deserve to be associated with terms of comparison that extend beyond the limits of human characteristics.

4.1. Women as different art forms

Among the four poets considered in this thesis, Sidney is the one who more frequently chooses to portray the female figure as an artistic masterpiece, the generation of which he attributes to Nature. In sonnet III the poet-lover considers the art of poetry, criticising the use other poets makes of it by addressing them as "dainty wits" (1) and "Pindars apes" (3), in virtue of the fancy wording and the overly ornate linguistic games they employ. Astrophil refuses to turn to such ostentatious embellishments, leaving to his peers the "statlier glorie" (5) such verses afford them, despite their merit only being that of

> Ennobling new-found tropes with problemes old;
> Or with strange similes enrich each line,
> Of herbes or beasts which Inde or Affrick hold. (6-8)

Astrophil will not look for exotic terms of comparison in faraway countries, nor will he inject innovative topoi with trite issues – or so he claims, in spite of his poems all focusing on the ailments of unrequited love as much as the works of his predecessors did. In any case, the sestet presents a declaration of poetics according to which simplicity and lived experience will be the two principles guiding his verses:

> For me, in sooth, no Muse but one I know,
> Phrases and problems from my reach do grow;
> And strange things cost too deare for my poor sprites.
> How then? euen thus: in Stellaes face I reed
> What Loue and Beautie be; then all my deed
> But copying is, what in her Nature writes. (9-14)

Here Nature appears as the supreme poet, the source from which Astrophil needs only copy to write his own masterpiece: Stella's face has been inscribed with the features of Love and Beauty, so superb in her perfection that she is identified as a work of art in which Nature exerted a particular effort. The evoked image is that of a wordsmith choosing each term and carefully placing them in each line, in order for the audience

to reflect on the great value of the poem itself: Nature has personally selected only the best features for Stella's face, and has composed it in such a wonderful ensemble, that looking at it is akin to reading poetry.

The exaltation of the woman's beauty continues in sonnet VII, where instead of words, the beloved's eyes are pictured in terms of paints:

> When Nature made her chief worke, Stellas eyes,
> In colour blacke why wrapt she beames so bright?
> Would she in beamy blacke, like Painter wise,
> Frame daintiest lustre, mixt of shades and light? (1-4)

Nature here becomes a painter, mixing the black of Stella's irises with the brightness of her gaze in a striking contrast. Astrophil wonders about the reason behind this choice, as Renaissance beauty standards would usually call for fair irises to accompany the bright and fiery light beams emanating from a woman's eyes. The poet-lover hypothesis range from the dark colour being a frame to better cast her light into relief, to having compassion for the mortals who come in contact with Stella, and who would be dazed by the brightness of her gaze, if it wasn't balanced by the veil of a darker hue. One last assumption is that painting Stella's eyes in black would give her an opportunity to show "her miraculous power" (9), her ability to "euen in black [...] make all beauties flow", despite the fact that "blacke seems Beauties contrary" – a stereotype whose implications are too deeply rooted and whose negative consequences in European imaginary are too widespread to try and summarise in the present thesis. Lastly, Nature appears to have chosen black as Stella's eye colour as a mindful gesture, "To honour all their deaths who for her bleed" (14), referencing all the men who suffer the pain of the lady and Love's joint cruelty in rejecting their affection. Again, Nature appears as a detailed-oriented artist, whose choices are never accidental, thus elevating Stella to the status of awe-inspiring masterpiece, the pinnacle of all creation.

In sonnet IX, Sidney employs yet another artform as a metaphor for Stella's greatness, electing architecture to immortalise the perfection of her face. This becomes "Queen Virtues Court" (1), the gathering place of all the moral qualities a lady is expected to possess, a dwelling that is "Prepar'd by Natures choicest furniture"

(2), again underlining how Nature spared no effort in creating Stella's appearance. In the following verses each feature is described in terms of architectural elements and building materials in a blazon that, as explained in chapter 2, isolates the characteristics the lover takes into consideration and forcibly separates them from the the person they belong to. Thus, Stella's skin is the precious alabaster that the front of the court is covered in; her hair is a golden roof, her lips are a door made of "Red porphir [...], which locke of pearl makes sure" (6) and her cheeks are porches of red and white marble. Her eyes are the last feature to be mentioned, and they are described as windows made of touchstone, a black marble "Which Cupids self, from Beauties mine did draw", meaning that Love itself mined this valuable stone in order to provide only the best of materials for the construction of Stella's face.

In all three of these sonnets Stella's beauty is attributed to a conscious effort of superior entities, Nature and Love – which could be understood to be just two facets of God, direct emanations of divinity. Her excellence in appearance is a sign of the favour she has found with higher powers, elevating her above the average human being whose life is not touched by the divine: Stella is born a mortal and yet placed outside the scope of humanity, a woman caught in a process of metamorphosis that will transform her into a heavenly being.

The figure of the beloved goes through a similar, yet diffeent change when the poet-lovers attribute her nature as a work of art to themselves. In these sonnets, poets try to carve women in a different shape than the one they originally presented, one more suitable to the lovers' own wishes and expectations. This trope has already been analysed in section 3.1, when discussing women's resistance to sexual advances in Spenser's *Amoretti* LI. The same myth of the sculptor Pygmalion and his beloved Galatea, a statue of his own making which his feelings turn to human flesh, is referenced by Daniel in *Delia* XIII. The lover complains that his fate is similar to that of the artist of myth, attempting to chip away at a woman's resolve which is made of flint, so that in striking her with his attempts at courting her, he himself generates sparks of passionate fire which burn him, "And so did perish by my proper arte" (8). Still, he endeavours

> [...] to chaunge the marble brest
> Of her, whose sweetest grace I doe adore:
> Yet cannot finde her breathe vnto my rest,
> Hard is her hart and woe is me therefore. (9-12)

The lover states his adoration, but given his explicit wish to change the very woman he claims to admire, a reader approaching the text from a feminist perspective cannot help but notice the dissonance between the two lines. The lover seems to be projecting his own wishes onto the beloved, and the version of her he actually wants to associate with is an idealised one that obeys him, not the Delia that still needs carving and sculpting to fit inside the narrow limits of the lover's imagination. In the end, his efforts are in vain, since the hardness of Delia's heart wins out against the tools he employs to mould her to his desires, marking this poem as one of the many accusations of cruelty that have been explored in this thesis so far.

The main difference between attributing the authorship of the female masterpiece to Nature on one hand, and to the poet-lover on the other, is encapsulated in the choice of artistic medium: Nature builds the woman up, be that by writing her into a beautiful poem, painting her in flattering colours or assembling her face into a grandiose palace facade. In Sidney's poetry, at the very beginning of his sequence, Nature's goal is that of elevating the essence of the woman, making her *more* than she already is. On the contrary, scorned lovers turn into carvers and sculptors, artists who subtract material from their artwork in order to shape it, leaving the object of their craftsmanship emptied of substance compared to how they found it. These suitors' aim, in the context of lovers' complaints about rejection, is not to praise the woman for her qualities, but to cut out the sides of her that do not conform to their own desires. In conclusion, whereas in both cases the woman is seen as a work of art, and thus as something other than human, in the first case she is made to exceed the limits of humanity in a way that propels her to a higher dimension of being, while in the second she is represented as an object to be shaped, a beautiful ornament deprived of that free will – otherwise known as reason – which stands as the foundation of humanity.

4.2. Women as Pagan and Christian supernatural figures

Another way in which women are portrayed as beings that transcend the boundaries of humanity is by associating them with supernatural figures, belonging to both pagan, classical cultures and to Christianity. In the first case, the figures of Greco-Roman myth referenced by poets to describe their beloveds range from beautiful nymphs, to monstrous creatures with deadly powers, and lastly to angry gods and goddesses. These metaphors and terms of comparison are used mostly to portray a woman's beauty, which is the case for Sidney's sonnet XXXVII. The poem sees Astrophil experiencing intense physical and psychological symptoms of love, in the midst of which he tells a riddle to some "lordings" in order to disclose the object of his affection:

> Toward Auroras Court a nymph doth dwell,
>   Rich in all beauties which mans eye can see;
>   Beauties so farre from reach of words that we
>   Abase her praise saying she doth excell;
> Rich in the treasure of deseru'd renowne,
>   Rich in the riches of a royall heart,
>   Rich in those gifts which giue th'eternall crowne;
>   Who, though most rich in these and eu'ry part
> Which make the patents of true worldy blisse,
>   Hath no misfortune but that Rich she is. (5-14)

The last line, as well as the triple anaphoric repetition of "rich" in lines 9-11, identify the beloved with Lady Rich – Penelope Deveroux – but the main focus of this analysis is the plethora of clues Astrophil gives in his description of Stella in order to guide the readers. She is a nymph, a daughter of deified natural elements, whose beauty defies the limits of human speech, so that she can only be described as excellent, superior to any other. Stella also enjoys a well-deserved renown like many of her supernatural peers do: their stories live on in the form of mythological tales that have survived the test of time, implying that her greatness will make her immortal as well. This is partly thanks to her beauty, and partly thanks to her plentiful virtues, which characterise her as a woman whose nobility makes her worthy of the title of royalty, and who deserves the right to lead others on the path of morality. The praise aimed at the beloved raises

her to the status of daughter of the olden gods, several steps above a mere mortal and tending towards divinity.

As already touched upon in section 2.2 when talking about poets' hyperfocus on women's lips, *Astrophil and Stella* LXXXII also associates the lady's beauty with that of a nymph, placing her in "the garden where all beauties be" (1) and mixing a Neoplatonic Eden where all perfect ideas reside in God with the mythical garden of Hesperides. Astrophil cites Narcissus – "His who till death lookt in a watrie glasse" (3) – and Aphrodite – "hers whom nakd the Troian boy did see" (4) – in order to compare their famously awe-inspiring beauty to Stella's, declaring in hyperbolical terms that she surpasses both. As seen, her lips are cherries sweeter than Hera's golden apples, the fruit of discord that was instrumental in kickstarting the chain of events that led to the Trojan war. Once again the beloved's appearance is magnified, exalted by employing immortal, however fictional, terms of comparison: in so doing, the poet-lover places on a pedestal so high, above a goddess residing on Mount Olympus, that a fall would be ruinous.

It is for this very reason - trying to preserve the lady from ruin - that Spenser's Elizabeth is invited to follow the lover's preferred course of action in regards to his suit In *Amoretti* XXVIII: she is depicted in a situation which sees her wearing laurel, thus alluding to the myth of the nymph Daphne and the sad end she she is met with in her efforts to escape Apollo's advances. The lady's ornament also serves another purpose, that of giving hope to the lover, as laurel is the plant customarily associated with poetry, which leads him to believe his beloved is expressing her favour towards him. However, the very same leaf that could mean being granted Elizabeth's hand in marriage also inevitably calls to mind the myth of "Proud *Daphne* scorning *Phoebus* louely fyre" (9). For this reason, the lover issues his warning, inviting the lady to "put you in mind/ of that proud mayd, whom now those leaues attyre" (7-8). Daphne's rejection of the god of sun and poetry was, in fact, the cause for "the gods [...] reuengefull yre" (11), a fate that the lover in no way wishes upon his beloved. It appears evident that the poet, in fabricating such a situation, is depicting the consequences of a woman's deviation from a pre-established path, showing that even immortal creatures of mythical origin can meet their end, should they choose to

oppose their fate. Women are then associated with supernatural beings such as nymphs not only for their superior looks and moral virtues, but also for their shared falls into disgrace should they anger the wrong poet-turned-Apollo, who magnanimously grants his divine attention but can just as quickly invoke a godly punishment onto a rebellious lady.

Such punishment can be enacted by associating the lady with monstrous, deadly creatures such as Spenser's Cockatrice, or basilisk, in *Amoretti* XLIX, as seen in section 3.2: this signals that cruelty is counted among the host of supernatural features the beloved exhibits, portraying her negative traits, in addition to her positive ones, through actions that go beyond human abilities. The beloved's gaze acquires deadly powers equal to those of a cruel beast, as described by Spenser, or those of the infamous Gorgon Medusa, a reference chosen by Constable in sonnet XXIX. Diana is shown admiring herself in a mirror and ignoring her suitor while he suffers through a storm-like rage of emotions, and "Whose state best shewes the force of murthering eyes" (4). The lover invites Diana to

> Then leave your glasse, and gaze your selfe on mee,
> That Mirrour shewes what powre is in your face:
> To viewe your forme too much, may daunger bee,
> Narcissus chaung'd t'a flowre in such a case.
> And you are chaung'd, but not t'a Hiacint;
> I feare your eye hath turn'd your hart to flint. (9-14)

The sestet warns the woman against looking at her reflection for too long, citing Narcissus' metamorphosis as a cautionary tale against vanity. The poet-lover expresses an additional concern in seeing Diana so taken with the mirror: because of the connection thought to exist between the eyes and the heart, she might cause her own heart to turn to stone. The lethal nature of her gaze could thus lead to her hurting herself, as well as her suitor. The underlying message is, of course, that the lady's pride and conceit will be her demise, should she elect to prioritise herself over her suitor's desires, portraying her as a supernatural agent of death as a warning against such behaviour, in line with what has been discussed when analysing the "Cruel Fair" topos.

In spite of the harshness suitors often display when faced with rejection, at times poets also portray female outrage and disdain as justified. This is the case when their literary alter-ego is portrayed as crossing a line, as Constable's narrator does in sonnet L, when he steals "living beauty's fire" (5) from his beloved, so that "Into my verse [...] it may always live,/ And change his forms to shapes of my desire" (6-7). Just as "Prometheus for stealing living fire/ From heaven's king, was judged eternal death" (1-2), so too the beloved a "sentence like dost give" (8), and is thus equated to the gods of the Greek pantheon in the greatness of her righteous rage. Here the woman is apparently shown reclaiming her authority over the way she is portrayed, but ironically having no say whatsoever over Constable's representation of her anger, as Diana remains a fictional character in a poem. This metapoetic loop frames the scene as an overreaction on the lady's part, who dishes out a mythical punishment on her suitor for the crime of manipulating her image in fictional and untrue ways, while the real "perpetrator" of this crime – the real-life poet Henry Constable – will never be punished for this, as writing fictional situation is part of a poet's occupation.

Spenser shows a different approach to a similar instance of feminine indignant anger in sonnet V: at the beginning of *Amoretti* the poet establishes the loose plot of courtship and betrothal which will give narrative impulse to the sonnet sequence, and this poem is one of many which show the serious intent of the suitor toward Elizabeth. This is made clear in the first quatrain:

> Whilst youth and error led my wandring minde,
> And set my thoughts in heedeles waies to range:
> All vnawares a Goddesse chaste I finde,
> Diana-like, to worke my suddaine change. (1-4)

The narrator blames his young age and a wrong mindset for the nature of his past self's thoughts, which were presumably of a bawdy nature, given the opposition to the "Goddesse chaste" he runs into. She is capable of producing a change of heart in the lover upon first meeting, but, just like the Diana of myth when she finds her bath interrupted by the hunter Actaeon, the lady gazes at the intruder "with disdaine to see me in that place" (6) and punishes him by splashing "water-cold disdaine vpon my face" (8). With such a gesture Elizabeth purifies the poet-lover's thoughts, turning

them into hound-like regrets which he is afraid will "pursue me to my death" (12), as Actaeon's hounds do in the Ovidian tale after he is turned into a stag and becomes himself pray to his own loyal dogs. The beloved is then depicted as having goddess-like powers, and using them to operate a conversion so sudden that it could remind the reader of Saint Paul being struck by the Holy Ghost on the way to Damascus: this choice presents the woman as a figure crossing the line between pagan and Christian imaginaries, a combination of cultures that is not uncommon in Elizabethan sequences.

Poets, in fact, switch from one set of references to another quite nimbly, as both establish the existence of mortal and immortal creatures who live according to different rules. The missing link between Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian beliefs is to be found in the Neoplatonic school of thought, which is referenced throughout all four sequences considered in this thesis. This cultural context made up of ancient myths and Christian religious imagery, as well as ancient philosophical concepts and Christian morality, offers Elizabethan poets an easy ground on which to build the polarised dichotomy of a world in which women and men inhabit different spheres of existence and abide by different codes of conduct. These depend on the expectations placed on their respective gender, which box them in fixed roles in both social and private situations.

All throughout the sonnets analysed in this thesis, a consistent image of women as extraordinary emerges, one that is solidified and brought to its extreme consequences in poems in which lovers admire their beloveds as heavenly beings. A fitting example of this is the way in which Spenser describes his female character as either having heavenly origins or striving to detach herself from her mortal nature in several poems. In sonnet III Elizabeth is perceived by her suitor as being outside of human explanation.

> The souerayne beauty which I doo admyre,
> witnesse the world how worthy to be prayzed:
> the light wherof hath kindled heauenly fyre,
> in my fraile spirit by her from basenesse raysed.
> That being now with her huge brightnesse dazed,

> base thing I can no more endure to view:
> but looking still on her I stand amazed,
> at wondrous sight of so celestiall hew.
> So when my toung would speak her praises dew,
> it stopped is with thoughts astonishment:
> and when my pen would write her titles true,
> it rauisht is with fancies wonderment:
> Yet in my hart I then both speake and write,
> the wonder that my wit cannot endite.

Elizabeth, in her splendour and beauty, has ignited a fire of love in the suitor that raises him from base desires, as the brightness of her light makes it impossible for him to even perceive them, whereas he is able to stand in amazed contemplation of her as one would a holy image without any difficulty. He then attempts to praise her as she deserves, but finds that he cannot conjure the words, neither to speak them nor to write them, as "astonishment" and "wonderment" stop him from accessing his intellect, forcing him in a state of mute contemplation, where only his heart can express in feelings and impressions what he cannot transform into explicit language.

The narrator's adoration and devotion to the lady return in sonnet VIII, where Elizabeth's heavenly birth is discussed. In fact, she is "full of the liuing fire/ Kindled aboue vnto the maker neere" (1-2), and possesses eyes which are really "ioyes, in which al powers conspire" (3). From them it is not Cupid who comes forth to inspire lustful thought in the minds of those who contemplate the lady, "but Angels come to lead fraile mindes to rest/ in chast desires on heauenly beauty bound" (7-8). In the third quatrain the poet-lover attributes several merits to Elizabeth, all of which serve to turn him into a better man:

> You frame my thoughts and fashion me within,
> you stop my toung, and teach my hart to speake,
> you calme the storme that passion did begin,
> strong thrugh your cause, but by your vertue weak. (9-12)

Reminiscent of some of Jesus' miracles, the lady acts from a position of moral superiority compared to the man, who is her faithful disciple and who is learning how to walk on the path of virtue by following her holy example. The final couplet completes the deification of the lady in terms of her being a light in the darkness and a

sacred image for the most fortunate of men to behold, firmly placing her above the lover in terms of morality by representing her with entities that are physically placed above humans.

The lady retains this tendency towards higher spheres even when she is represented as a human being herself: regardless of the condition of flawed mortality she is born into, she still strives to reach the Heavens. This is the situation Spenser present in sonnet XIII, when he portrays the lady as "her faire face she reares vp to the skie" (2), only looking down "on the earth whence she was borne" (6) at a later moment: this prompts "her minde remembreth her mortalitie,/ what so is fayrest shall to earth returne" (7-8). However fair and heavenly the lady may appear, she will one day be buried in the earth like all other mortal beings, a *memento mori* which, instead of downscaling the beloved's magnificence, underlines her virtue through her determination. In fact, despite being born a mortal, "that same lofty countenance seemes to scorne/ base thing, & thinke how she to heauen may clime" (9-10), defying her very nature as a flawed, fleeting life form in order to reach higher spheres of existence through the power of her virtues alone. The lover is aware that Elizabeth considers "treading downe earth as lothsome and forlorne,/ that hinders heauenly thoughts with drossy slime" (11-12), and is therefore endeavouring to detach herself from the base, human dimension she was born into. Still, the poet's alter-ego asks her to "vouchsafe to looke on me" (13) and grace him with her attention: this show of compassion to someone as lowly as him, he states, is going to be the means through which she will reach the spiritual heights she strives towards.

Such affirmation of a woman's superior nature, either by heavenly birth or by the extraordinary tenacity of her morality, often see the lady being turned into a goddess by her suitor's idolatrous admiration. Such is the case for sonnet IV of Constable's sequence, in which a concerned friend of the lover's is urging him to abandon all hopes of being reciprocated by Diana in order to stop his suffering. The lover, however, states that "love cannot remove/ As long as thy divine perfections stay" (5-6), which is why, in order to convince him, his friend attempts to dismantle the divine nature attributed to the lady – "Thy godhead then he sought to take away" (7) – by telling the lover that "Impossible it is her heart to move" (4). The narrator, refusing

to believe the friend, addresses Diana: “Dear, seek revenge and him a liar prove;/ Gods only do impossibilities” (8-9); this shows that he believes her capable of miracles that will convince the sceptics “of her power of divinities/ By granting me thy favour to obtain” (11-12). Despite the pain his unrequited love causes him, the lover has absolute faith in his godly beloved, a sentiment shared by Daniel’s narrator in sonnets XII and XLIX, in a significantly more dramatic lament: unlike Constable’s alter-ego, Daniel’s only holds hope of reciprocation in the first of the two cited poems, while he has accepted the rejection in the second; yet, he never abjures his belief in Delia’s divine nature.

Sonnet XII opens by comparing the lady to a place of worship into which the suitor’s love looks for entry. This is also the residence of the sacred fire of Delia’s eyes, “Which cleere our clouded world with brightest flame” (4), so powerful they can bring light to a dark world. She is the only one who can grant him honour for the way his “ambitious thoughts” (5) contemplate her face, like a devoted man contemplating the cross in a church; only her grace can give true shape to his hopes and bring him comfort, as the Holy Ghost is supposed to comfort believers in stressful situations, as is waiting for Delia herself to establish whether she loves her suitor or not. This goddess is then clearly almighty, as further proven by the fact that she is the one who can grant the lover’s heart access to paradise, and she is also the one who “Holdes in her fairest hand what deerest is:/ My fortunes wheele, the circle of her eyes” (10-11). The goddess can decide his fate, and despite her not having given him a verdict yet, and thus gaining the title of “the most vnloving one” (14), it is to her that the suitor is dedicating his whole life, displaying a bottomless well of faith in her grace and compassion.

The lover is more drastic in his judgement of his goddess in sonnet XLIX, which opens with a lament about the futility of his artistic efforts to please his beloved. The “celestiall fiers” (4) of her eyes refuse to even view the “glory of your might” produced by the “vnhappy pen and ill accepted papers” he addresses in the first line, which are supposed to be “the sacrifice I offer to her sight” (8). In such a situation, the only available course of action is for the lover to bemoan his circumstances in solitude, and to be content that Delia is the Alpha and the Omega of his humble art,

accepting that “her frownes should be/ To my' infant stile the cradle, and the graue” (12). The final couplet expresses how he will not cease in his poetic production, and like birds who, according to him, sing not to be heard by others but to entertain themselves, so too he will sing of his beloved, despite not achieving his goal of obtaining her love and having lost the hope of gaining his goddess’ favour for good.

Describing women as celestial beings and goddesses is surely meant to be interpreted as great praise and as a way of honouring the ladies who might or might not recognise themselves as the muses who inspired such comparisons. At times, however, the poets push their similes and metaphors so far that the resulting images prove to be exaggerations that run the risk of coming off as caricatures, instead of compliments. I argue that this is true for Daniel’s sonnet VIII, which addresses the lover’s heart as a priest tending to the cult of the lady, listing how it has “sacrifiz'd vnto the fairest,/ Hast sent the incens of thy sighes to heauen” (1-2), and how, despite not receiving a positive response to its efforts, “still against her frownes fresh vowes repayrest,/ And made thy passions with her beautie euen” (3-4). As these measures prove insufficient to secure the lady’s love, the lover employs his eyes as “the agents of my hart” (5), which “oft with carefull turnes, with silent art,/ Did treate the cruell Fayre to yeelde reliefe” (7-8), but again fails in gaining the cruel goddess’ favour through pointed looks and silent glances. The lover’s last resort is then his verse, “the Aduocates of loue,” (9): it has

> [...] followed hard the processe of my case:
> And vrg'd that title which dooth plainely proue,
> My faith should win, if iustice might haue place. (10-12)

The suitor’s poetry has attempted to press charges against the unjust divine lady, presenting the content of its poems as proof of a love that, if there were any space for justice in the interactions between the lover and the beloved, would have won him the reciprocation of his feelings. Yet, as it is a mortal’s art attempting to report the crimes of a deity, the suitor’s case is doomed from the start, since the goddess’ will, however unfair, will always pervail against human law, underlining the disparity of their status and the different nature of the lives they live.

Another example of exaggerated praise is to be found in Constable's sonnet LIV, which enlarges Diana's divine presence until she embodies the whole sky, with different parts of her body corresponding to the houses of the planets astronomers divided the heavens into. Despite the astronomical knowledge of the time already counting twelve houses, the blazon only recognises eight features of the lady, but the reduced number does not subtract from the exalting intent of the poem. The lady's dismembered features are presented in an ascending motion, starting from her feet, in which "the queen of silence reigns" (4): this can be understood to be the moon, since it presides over the night sky, when the majority of creation is at rest and thus silent. The connection between the feet, the lowest part of the heavenly body of the beloved, and the moon, could also be found in the fact that our satellite is not a planet in its own right, thus holding a lower status in the economy of the solar system. Climbing up Diana's body, the lover fixes his attention on her waist, around which Mercury, "Jove's messenger doth dwell" (5), while Venus, "the queen of love" (7), perches on the beloved's breasts and extensively informs Diana of her suitor's desire. The upward movement brings the attention to the beloved's face, whose blinding brightness prompts the poet-lover into stating that her "beauty is the world's eternal sun" (9), before identifying her golden hair with the great prize of "Jove and his riches" (11) which her "favours force a coward's heart to dare" (10) and win. Finally, her "frowns hold Saturn" (12) and she is said to be in possession of all the fixed stars, presumably held in her eyes, completing the lady's metamorphosis into a literal celestial body. In the final couplet the lover boldly addresses Diana one last time, stating his love and his allusive wish to be intimate with her: "Pardon me then, divine, to love thee well,/ Since thou art heaven, and I in heaven would dwell!" (13-14). This turn to the lover's earthly desires frames the lady's heavenly nature as a mere literary strategy, pretext for him to be able to allude to his presence inside of her. By coupling this low kind of impulse with the dismembering properties of the blazon, the poet appears to be claiming his own power over a divine being, in a show of male arrogance that immediately discredits his high praise of the fictional woman his alter-ego is supposed to love.

Sidney's Astrophil, on the contrary, is more poised and expresses less cheekiness when describing Stella as a peer of the sun. The star is placed at its most powerful, as it is "Progressing then from fair Twinnes golden place" (2), indicating the transition of the sun from its position in the Gemini constellation to the Cancer one between the end of June and the beginning of July, "Hauing no mask of clouds before his face,/ But streaming forth of heate in his chiefe pride" (3-4). In this setting Astrophil places "some fair ladies" (5), who "On horsebacke met [the sun] in his furious race" (6): these ladies, average humans that they are, armed themselves with fans for protection from the burning rays of sunshine that threaten to singe their pale, delicate skin. "Stella alone with face vnarmed marcht" (9), and Astrophil notes that the reason for her bold behaviour is to be attributed either to the fact that she shines of her own light just as brightly as the sun, or to the fact that, sharing in the power displayed by the star, she subjects herself to it without fear, knowing she has nothing to be envious of. Stella, true to her name, is a peer of that sun which gives light and warmth to the whole planet, a fact that the star itself recognises: in the final tercet, in fact, the "meaner beauties" have to deal with the "parcht" (12) aftermath of their ride in the summer sunlight, while Stella is unperturbed after her stroll, as "The sun, that others burn'd, did her but kisse" (14). Stella, a star in her own right, is worthy of the sun's admiration and affection, and is accepted as an equal by the higher spheres of creation.

Whether women are described as art pieces, supernatural creatures of classical mythology or heavenly beings dwelling in the highest of heavens, they are attributed qualities and abilities that fall outside of human physical and moral boundaries, portraying them as creatures who can transcend mortal limitation. This tendency to the extraordinary does not only hold true for the positive characteristics that the ladies display, but also for the negative ones, turning their every feature and action into an exaggeration of itself. Because of this, female depictions prove to be hyper-focused analyses, obsessive dissections of how a woman looks and what her actions mean, giving the impression that a lady can never only be average and blend in with the masses, but will inevitably stand out and have all eyes pointed at her, either in praise or reproach. I would go as far as to argue that, more that extending the limits of a

woman's appearance and abilities beyond those of the human sphere, sonnets such as the ones analysed in this chapter displace women entirely: female characters are pushed into the sphere of the divine, uprooted from their human origins, and are consequently expected to act accordingly. This imposition of divine standards onto mortal beings is a representation of the real-life high expectations that have been historically placed on women throughout centuries of patriarchal thought, an issue modern day society still contends with in many areas of personal and private life. Issues such as the disparity in perceived credibility among male and female academics or the imposition of impossible beauty standards on women look sadly similar to XVI-century ladies being described as heavenly beings, only to be scrutinised and harshly criticised for each and every possible mistake they might make, in a way that does not apply to their male counterparts, who are allowed to conceive of and represent themselves as humanly fallible.

Conclusion

The ladies addressed in the Elizabethan sonnet sequences considered in this thesis are represented as so beautiful that they inspire the need for a specific focus on each detail and feature of theirs, to the point their characteristics almost live an independent life, detached from the woman whose body they compose once reassembled. Beauty as a concept is revered in its manifestations on female bodies, and is coveted by poets, who shower their female characters in extravagant and hyperbolic compliments: beauty is not valued for the sake of the lady it belongs to, but as a feature that a man can come to possess and enjoy for himself, through the conquest of his beloved. This is why a lady in the bloom of her youth is reminded that her looks are fleeting, and that she should take advantage of it while she can, instead of waiting for her metaphorical petals to wither and decay in her old age.

In great contrast with their more adulating sonnets, poets insert codified scenes of rejection in their sequences, in which compliments and solicitations do not affect their lady characters in any way. In these situations, the male characters are authorised to harshly criticise their fictional beloveds for their resistance. In this context, readers are led to understand that the ladies are only being accused of being cruel and unfeeling when employing their virtuous morality against the attacks of male desires; at the same time, the audience is also made to empathise with a scorned lover thanks to the rhetorical devices employed by the poets when presenting an unrequited love.

The polarised opposition between depicting female characters as repositories of all human beauty and virtue on the one hand, and their appearance as stone-hearted tyrants who revel in their suitors' suffering on the other, is resumed and synthesised in sonnets in which women are elevated to the status of artwork, mythical creatures and, finally, of God-like heavenly beings. The extraordinary nature of women is pushed beyond the limits of human characteristics, to the point of divorcing them from human fragility and showing them as belonging to a separate plane of existence than the one men inhabit; as a consequence, their every feature and action is magnified as if under a microscope, dissected and evaluated. At the same time, in the context of these, and all other poems in the analysed sonnet sequences, male characters are rarely described

as anything other than mortal beings, either in human or non-human animal terms: men are allowed to represent themselves as flawed, imperfect creatures who are liable to falling into temptation, to suffering and to displays of human fallibility. The glaring disparity of treatment occurring between male and female characters in these works of fiction reflects on the inequalities present in a patriarchal society such as XVI-century England.

The general uniformity of the tropes found in the four sequences is combined with the peculiarities of the individual poets' styles in terms of setting, development of a more or less pronounced plot and adherence to or divergence from the traditional features of the sonnet genre. For what concerns narrative structure, for example, both Sidney and Spenser build a more complex context than Daniel or Constable do, endeavouring to depict the emotional high stakes of two lovers who are highly invested in the wooing and courting of their respective beloveds. In order to make his fictional universe more realistic, Sidney adds details to it, like portraying Astrophil's interactions with his fellow courtiers, who futilely attempt to remind him of his duties while all he can focus on are his feelings, thus showing in several poems how his love for Stella has completely taken over all aspects of his life. In addition to this, the sequence displays several sections in which Astrophil and Stella's attitudes towards each other changes as a response to key episodes, such as a stolen kiss or Stella's refusal to be in Astrophil's presence: thanks to the links established between sonnets, the development of the sequence appears to be mostly linear. Similarly, but developing his fictional love-story in an opposite direction, Spenser employs his alter-ego in a literary courtship that aims at marriage, thus advancing the relationship between his characters from youthful physical attraction to a more mature promise of faithful love through a betrothal, and finally through marriage. This attention to plot in a sonnet sequence is original to Sidney, and it is an aspect that only Spenser inherited, while his contemporaries Daniel and Constable chose to arrange the body of their work in a collection of poems only loosely connected by their central theme of love for an unattainable lady. Daniel still distinguishes himself from the other three poets, as his narrator is the only one who does not appear troubled by his passionate desires leading him astray from the path of virtuous affection towards his lady: his sequence *Delia,* in fact, lacks references to a struggle between reason and virtue, a staple of Renaissance

love poetry. This is substituted by the solicitation of the beloved to abandon caution and enjoy the gifts of youth and beauty while they last, making the most of such a fleeting phase of life by accepting the lover's affection and advances. Constable's *Diana* does not stand out for its originality, and could thus be considered the prototype of a Renaissance sonnet sequence, as the tropes he employs, as well as his rhetoric choices, are entirely conventional and do not present significant innovations to the genre, a trait that makes his poetry useful to understand the arsenal at the disposal of the average poet of the time in his portrayal of women.

It is worth noting that some of the tropes analysed in this thesis persist in today's representation of women throughout all media, a circumstance that points at a fundamentally unchanged imaginary in the conception of women, men and their respectives roles, their functions and their value in modern day society. While it is true that there has been substantial progress toward an ideal equality between the sexes, it is also apparent that further studies are needed into the pervasiveness of sexist stereotypes in literature, in order to locate the origin of harmful common places about gender expectations: this would allow for a better understanding of how exactly to dismantle them, while substituting them with imaginaries conductive of positive interactions between human beings, independently from their sex and gender.

To further explore the connections between past and present representation of women in a lyrical context, I would suggest studies that focus on the contrast between poems as old as Elizabethan sonnets and modern day lyrical works such as pop songs, which are fast-travelling, far-reaching vehicles of popular social imaginaries. A majority of songs sung in the English language focus on heteronormative love, which would allow for an easy comparison of the tropes employed by Elizabethan poets and by modern-day, male songwriters; this juxtaposition also presents the opportunity to delve into the perspective of female songwriters, to discover whether they subvert existing tropes to talk about the female experience of love and its pursuit, or if they create entirely new ones. In any case, I believe it is fundamental to keep exploring past texts through new perspectives, and to apply the findings of such academic research on a practical level in today's communicative efforts, in order to create new imaginaries that will hopefully propel society toward a more equitable future.

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