

The Best Sir Philip Sidney Poems Everyone Should Read

MAY 8

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Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) was one of the finest poets of the English Renaissance and a pioneer of the sonnet form and English love poetry. Many of Sidney's finest poems are to be found in his long sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* – the first substantial sonnet sequence in English literature – but he wrote a number of other poems which are much-loved and widely anthologised. Below we've chosen what we think are ten of Sir Philip Sidney's best poems.

Sonnet 1: 'Loving in truth'. One of the best poems about writing poetry, this sonnet, written in alexandrines or twelve-syllable lines, opens Sidney's great sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, a sequence of 108 sonnets – and a few songs – inspired by Sidney's unrequited love for Penelope Rich (nee Devereux), who was offered to him as a potential wife a few years before. Sidney turned her down, she married Lord Robert Rich, and Sidney promptly realised he was in love with her. In this sonnet, Sidney searches for the best way to marshal his feelings and put them into words that will move 'Stella'.

Sonnet 31: 'With how sad steps'. In this, one of Sir Philip Sidney's most famous poems and the first of four poems from the '30s' in the sequence *Astrophil and Stella* to appear on this list, 'Astrophil' apostrophises the pale moon in the night sky, wondering whether its pallor stems from hopeless love (as Astrophil's own unhappiness down on Earth does). Sidney deftly steers his sonnet away from the sentimental excesses of courtly love poetry by introducing a note of bitterness in the final line, accusing the unimpressed Stella of 'ungratefulness'.

Sonnet 33: 'I might (unhappy word!), O me, I might'. As we mentioned above, the poems numbered in the 30s in *Astrophil and Stella* yield several real classics of Renaissance poetry. Here, Sidney/Astrophil chastises himself for not having immediately fallen in love with Penelope/Stella; as we know from the second sonnet in the sequence, it was not 'love at first sight'. If it had been, he could have wooed her and married her, and lived happily ever after: if only he had been more foolish (and fallen headlong into love right away) or more wise (and been able to forget her altogether), he would be happier now...

Sonnet 38: 'This night, while sleepe begins with heauy wings'. This is not quite so famous as some of the other poems on this list of classic Sidney poems, but we think it's a wonderful description of how love takes over our minds entirely, even during the hours of sleep: as Astrophil lies asleep, his 'fancy' conjures up an image of his beloved Stella – but she doesn't merely shine, she sings as well in this vivid dream of her. But then, when he wakes up, this delightful vision of Stella vanishes, and with it the ability to get back off to sleep. It's an experience every unhappy lover will have felt; but who has said it as well as Sidney does here?

Sonnet 39: 'Come sleep, O sleep'. In this sonnet, one of Sir Philip Sidney's most oft-anthologised poems, Astrophil tries to strike a bargain with sleep (which eludes him because of his passionate love for Stella), promising the personified 'Sleep' a nice reward if the poet's request for rest is granted: that there, in Astrophil's dreams, we will be able to see the beautiful image of Stella. One of the cleverest sonnets in the sequence – though 'clever' should not be confused with 'contrived' here.

Sonnet 71: 'Who will in book of fairest Nature know'. Beauty is meant to lead us to virtue, according to Renaissance ideas of virtue. Anyone who wants to know where in nature you can

observe beauty and virtue together should look at Stella, for the lines of her figure reveal what true virtue and decency are. But then, in the final line, we get a classic Sidney twist: into this Edenic world of beauty and virtue, Desire (personified, and suggesting lust and baser drives) is heard to cry out for satisfaction: 'Give me some food.'

Sonnet 99: 'When far-spent night persuades each mortal eye'. Our eyes are like arrows, darting a look here and there; but what do we do at night when it's dark? Sleep, of course. But not so for Sidney, or rather Astrophil: his eyes are wide open, like windows letting the darkness in – that external darkness which so neatly chimes with the 'inward night' of his mind, thanks to his hopeless love for Stella. Look out for the masterly use of 'i' sounds at the end of each line of this sonnet, suggesting the eye/night theme of the poem.

'My true love hath my heart, and I have his'. We'll conclude this pick of the best Sir Philip Sidney poems with three poems that are not from Astrophil and Stella. This poem is a sonnet – and, what's more, an example of the English, or 'Shakespearean', sonnet form – but not one taken from Sidney's sonnet sequence. Instead, it comes from the *Arcadia*, the long pastoral romance which Sidney wrote. This is one of the poems that feature in this long prose work. The poem is easy to summarise. The (female) speaker states that she and her lover have pledged their hearts to each other, and it's the best exchange or 'bargain' that could have been contrived.

'Thou blind man's mark'. This is another sonnet, but, like the poem immediately above, is not taken from Astrophil and Stella (though it reads as though it would be at home in that sequence). Sidney condemns sexual desire in this poem: it takes up all one's time and energy, distracting one from higher things, and worst of all, it's all in vain. The ultimate desire is to kill desire itself. This sonnet shows what Astrophil and Stella also demonstrates so well: that Sidney understood erotic desire and sought to depict its complex nature in skilfully crafted verse.

'Ye Goat-Herd Gods'. One of the finest examples in English poetry of the sestina form. Like 'My true love hath my heart', this poem was part of the *Arcadia*, and is about two heartbroken shepherds who are lamenting their unluckiness in love and trying to out-sing each other.

Sidney's best poetry, along with a helpful scholarly introduction to his life and work, can be found in Sir Philip Sidney *The Major Works* (Oxford World's Classics).

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