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# *Sidney's “Astrophil and Stella” and Ecocriticism*

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*A Nonna Cesira e Zio Piero,  
Le Stelle più luminose  
Che illuminano il mio cammino*



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## Introduction

Since its development, astrology was perceived as the primary cause to explain natural phenomena and the human psyche. The critical reference dated its origins back to Babylonian times, an era in which the reading of the stars was applied to interpret and foresee weather phenomena. The Syrian Wars of the third century B.C. played a major role in spreading astrological knowledge in Greece, and consequently in Western Europe, where it had become notorious due to the Pythagorean and Platonic studies in their academies. Their main concern consisted in calculating the celestial movements so as to determine a calendar of meteorological events and to organize time motion throughout a year. Mathematical studies applied to music theory allowed to firstly create a proto model of the universe, where the four major elements (air, fire, water, and earth) were combined in a perfect equilibrium that could be inscribed in the geometrical shape of a dodecahedron, which mostly resembled the perfection of the sphere. Being the Earth the element with the major weight, it was collocated at the centre of the cosmos, whereas the other planets and stars rotated around it in a perfect harmonious choreography in concentric spheres around the Earth. Aristotle focused on the explanation of celestial movements, justifying them through the supposition of the First Mover, or *primum mobile*. This affected planets' revolution around the Earth, which remained still, and was located beyond the dominion of air, in the *aether*. This characterized the tension between the Earth's immobility and planets' motion and the whole existence of the cosmos, struggling to reach perfection within the finiteness of the spheres. There were no further implementations to Aristotle's description of the universe. Ptolemy rested his analysis on the works of the Greek philosopher, too, and improved Aristotle's research by reporting a hierarchical order of planets and their motions, positing a precession for the equinoxes in order to take note of the passing time within a day. Thus, he presumed a nine-sphere model of the universe, where the First Mover coincided with the Empyrean and the planets were placed in the following descending order: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon, and the Earth. The Ptolemaic system became a pivotal aspect of both scientific and religious studies due to its strong imaginative impact: the vision of the Empyrean beyond the sphere of the fixed stars was adopted by Christianity to explain the afterlife and Paradise. Furthermore, this representation of cosmological order functioned as a literary tool both for Middle Ages and Renaissance's authors like Dante and Chaucer.

Nonetheless, the complexity of Ptolemy's calculations to demonstrate the authenticity of the geocentric theory led scholars to investigate a mathematical simplification to study the Ptolemaic system. Among them, Copernicus managed to reconcile both Arabic and Greek studies with Ptolemaic analysis, hypothesizing that the Earth rotated on its own axis, as supposed by Heraclides. The calculation of the equinox a day before Ptolemy did together with the presumed Earth's rotation allowed Copernicus to reduce the number of planets' rotations and hierarchical order: this helped him to presume the Sun's position at the centre of the universe surrounded by the other planets revolving around it, including the Earth. The findings, which were discussed in his work *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (1543), were received as revolutionary, sometimes even heretical<sup>1</sup>, but mostly controversial, for they appeared to revolutionise the old beliefs and meanings associated to the planets' motions and stars' positions. The influence of the geocentric system could be found also in literary and artistic representations of the *harmonia coelestis*, which was considered a symbol of perfect union with the natural world. Metaphors related to the night sky were widespread not only among intellectuals, but also among peasants; similarly, the belief that each celestial sphere could exercise a given influence over mankind contributed to establish the attempt of portraying the celestial harmony and favourable conditions on Earth. They even overcame Church's dissatisfactions towards astrological superstitions and animistic receptions of the natural world; particularly, during the Renaissance, astrological knowledge became part of a complete education of the ideal humanist, despite the oppositions that emerged from some radical religious movements.

As regards the Renaissance, the debate concerning the value of astrology together with the new astronomic discoveries was only a piece of the multiple changes early modern society was experiencing. After the terrible events that marked the 14<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Black Death, a desire of rebirth and to be surrounded by beauty began to spread among people. Therefore, the development and use of practical skills applied to the natural world helped humanity to find new ways to express themselves both in arts

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<sup>1</sup> See Galileo's declarations in Swerdlow, N.M. (2004). "An Essay on Thomas Kuhn's First Scientific Revolution, *The Copernican Revolution*". *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 148, No. 1.

and science. For example, the innovations brought to agriculture contributed to a reconsideration of the relationship between human beings and Nature. People did not suffer the arbitrariness of external phenomena, but were gradually establishing their own control through a different point of view. The introduction of perspective applied to painting and architecture also gave a major contribution to the recognition of individual identity, and consequently it could reflect people's ability to rethink and reorganize the world according to their own vision. On the other hand, the praising of the humanist genius comported a slow abandonment of the animist perception of Nature. The effects of pagan animism were therefore threatened by mechanical discoveries and by the doctrines of the Church, which condemned ideas concerning the magical origins of the natural environment, as they did not coincide with Christ's redemptive message. One possible suggestion adopted to discourage the spread of pagan beliefs was promoted by the Calvinist movement. Since salvation involved a movement of the heart towards God, human beings could start working for their own salvation as well. Such an instrumentalist vision of human life seemed to mark a clear cut with the old perception of the physical world so as to take advantage of it. Recognizing their own identities as the centre of the universe, people did give up the old equilibrium that had established with Nature centuries ago. The need of controlling and owning every element that was found in the surrounding environment influenced also the relationship between men and women. The female counterpart had always been associated with Nature due to their ability of giving birth; however, when uncontrolled, Nature could turn into a negative force that might produce destruction, such as thunderstorms or earthquakes. Likewise, women's inability to control their desire would lead to an uncontrollable lust, and therefore an unmoral conduct. As the Christian faith proposed models of virtue like the Virgin Mary, the idea that women should be devoted to male authority grew in importance due also to the comparison with the natural forces.

Language and literature were affected by those slow changes, too. Formerly, poetry and other literary instruments served to the praising of Nature: the poet's primary concern was to be an intermediary between humanity and the physical world. This contributed to the construction of literary *topoi* that enforced the influence of the animistic philosophy in society. Nevertheless, writers and poets of sixteenth and seventeenth century were becoming aware of the growing distance between mankind and the physical world, and

of the changes early modern society was experiencing: therefore, they felt the urge to recreate an illusionary boundary with an idyllic world that was progressively getting lost. Hence, literature became a tool to discuss and denounce the loss of the ancient equilibrium that had been characterizing humanity's existence for eons. The rediscovery of the works of ancient poets like Ovid and Virgil gave its contribution to the spread of pastoral poetry and of the praise of a 'golden world' where the old harmony was to be contemplated. Despite recollecting metaphors from the pastoral world, writers always placed themselves in a condition of controlling the environment and to exercise their dominion over it. It is within this context that some poets felt the need to explore once again the arcadian universe depicted by poets of Antiquity, in contrast to the scientific and literary innovations brought during Renaissance. For example, in his *Shepheardes' Calender*, Spenser analysed the natural motion of time inside the natural world as a topic to be discussed and not as a mere decoration. Such a choice was partly influenced by the rediscoveries of the inheritance left by classical poets like Virgil, who firstly wrote poetry starting from pastoral lyrics, and then moved to epic poetry. As a consequence, a primordial approach to the literary tradition based on the example of poets of Antiquity would offer the opportunity to reaffirm the identity of the poet within the court, and not as a mere pastime or as strictly related to satire.

Similarly, Sidney considered poetry a method to depict a poet's inner life into an intimate portrait. Such a philosophy was exemplified in his *Defence of Poesy*, where he discussed the importance of poetry not only as an imitation, as declared by Aristotle, but also as an act to prove the mind's ability in imaginative recreations. Sidney investigated this philosophy in *Astrophil and Stella*, published in 1581. Generally, the evidence that mostly emerged from this sequence was a conventional speculation on Sidney's relationship with Penelope Deveraux. Even though the discussion about the authenticity of the romantic and would-be adulterous relationship is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is worth noticing the literary use of natural-derived metaphors, which were influenced by the Petrarchan tradition. Astrophil's self-conflicts and his emotions were explored through a massive choice of terms deriving from the natural world, especially from astrological tradition. Complying with the attitude that was spreading among early modern poetry as influenced by both scientific and religious discoveries, Astrophil appears to suffer the power of the astrological elements. The use of some phrases and

figures of speech highlights Astrophil's desire to look for a connection with the natural world beyond the scientific revolution, and the imposition of conventional roles in the literary tradition and the dialectic of religion.

The aim of this dissertation will be to focus on the contrast between the conventional language of poetry in *Astrophil and Stella* and the relevance of astrology in Sidney's work. It will discuss the origins and the application of the conventional natural-derived metaphors as subject matter of a poet's works. Then, it will consider the importance of astrology in the literary field, highlighting its coexistence within the improvements and discoveries of sixteenth century Europe and England. A key component of this study will be an analysis of the use of astrological metaphors in Sidney's collection through an ecocritical approach. In particular, this last aspect encouraged me to examine the peculiarity of the astrological imagery during the Renaissance England, as well as its development throughout centuries. Consequently, an ecocritical stance might offer an alternative method to explore both the roles of the poet and the muse in the astrological language, and how they deal with each other. I will analyse the matter particularly in terms of using elements from the night sky in literature, and the way offer an insight towards the relationship between humanity and Nature. Thus, this thesis will explore the astrological imagery as related to the poetic language, and how the former remains an important element within early modern society. An ecocritical perspective might play a pivotal role into reading the astrological language in *Astrophil and Stella* with respect to the ecological attitude in the Renaissance.



## 1. The Proto-Copernican Universe: Plato and Aristotle

Nature has often been the main addressee of both poetry and art. There is no innovation in asserting that natural elements played a major role in influencing people's lives during the centuries. Being the environmental aspects part of a non-human sphere, they were often associated to supernatural origins. As a consequence, the ability of praising the elements of Nature has been considered a supernatural gift, for no living being would have been able to describe with words of wonder the greatness of Nature. Classical parallels between natural elements and aspects of every day's life determined a relevant background for literary theory. By the time of Philip Sidney, while a slight change in the perception of the importance of the natural world was experienced, the belief that Heavens could have the power to affect life on Earth was still strong and widespread. To narrow down the relevance of these aspects, some key elements need to be explained.

The origins of astrology date back to the Mesopotamian studies on the analysis of the sky, which was considered a source of foretelling. It was mainly practiced in the Assyro-Babylonian period of astral religion when predictions were firstly made to forecast weather and the geographical area where a meteorological phenomenon would have occurred. The impact of reading the stars as instruments of prediction widespread to Europe in the third century B.C. thanks to the Syrian Wars and the Roman Empire. Astrology in Greece began as the organization of fixed stars into constellations so as to create a calendar that could correlate dates and weather phenomena to them, as stars were assigned to no coordinates<sup>2</sup>. Prior attempts to find a mathematical explanation of their distribution in the sky, and consequently to organize and study the time motion of everyday life, were made by Pythagoreans and Plato. The inspiration was given by the theory of the science of music, which analysed this aesthetic phenomenon, melodious sound, by means of whole-number ratios. A Pythagorean science of music was well established in the fifth century, for Archytas of Tarentum (428 B.C. – 347 B.C.), a Pythagorean contemporary of Plato, presented his own harmonic theory. This analysis was then adopted by Plato, who associated the circular motion of heavenly bodies to a moral order that could be studied by means of the same whole-number ratios of music.

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<sup>2</sup> See Goldstein, R., Bowen, A.C. (1983). "A New View of Early Greek Astronomy". *Isis*, Vol. 74, No. 3, pp. 331-332.

The choice of music as strictly related to arithmetic, and later to geometry, was considered helpful to conduct investigations on the structural order of the universe, which was firstly explored in Plato's *Timaeus*. As stated by Crickmore, Plato used the three methods of measure of music (the octave, the perfect fifth, and the perfect fourth) as a metaphor for how a person could represent justice in tune as performed on a tetrachord: "[t]he basic concordant ratios can all be expressed by means of the integers 1,2,3,4, which define the Pythagorean tetractys. The tetractys or 'four-group' is made up of the first four integers which added together make ten."<sup>3</sup> Basing on this aspect, Plato presumed a geometrical progression of planets among the spheres to the perfection of number 3. The material world was believed to be finite, and therefore to have a limit. As noticed by Berghaus,

[t]his limit is inherent in the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4. They create the point, the line, the plane and the volume. Adding up these dimensions,  $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$ , we exhaust the limits of physical extension. There is no number following 10 that is not incapsulated in the tetrad. Nothing can be added that does not exist as a combination of these four numbers. Tetrad and decad are therefore the models of perfection. They create unity out of multitude, and multitude out of unity. They originate in the unlimited, absolute world, but when they extend into the physical world, they create a limited, yet perfect, unified system, a universe.<sup>4</sup>

Resting on this arithmetical notion, Plato posited a multisphere finite model of the universe referring to atomists' ideas of the perception of four elements. To each of the four elements he assigned one of the regular solids as the proper form for its particles. These elements had a tendency to group themselves around the earth in concentric spheres, because of their differences in weight and stability. Earth was in the centre, then came water, air, and lastly fire. Planets and the stars were assigned beyond the sphere of fire and composed of a fifth element. That element corresponded to the dodecahedron, the most perfect element, since its figure most nearly approximated the sphere. Consequently, it was believed that bodies, included planets, rotated in circles around the Earth and had an additional rotation of their own that did not admit any variation. They

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<sup>3</sup> Crickmore, L. (2006). "The Musicality of Plato". *Hermathena*, No. 180, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Berghaus, G. (1992). "Neoplatonic and Pythagorean Notions of World Harmony and Unity and Their Influence on Renaissance Dance Theory". *The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 45.



followed the same period of the Sun, although they were displaced in the spheres according to their distance among celestial bodies, i.e. the Moon in the first circle, the Sun in the second, and all the other planets outside. As Bodnár noticed, in the *Timaeus* Plato's animistic character prevailed, assigning each planet and star a divine nature, claiming that

[a]ll of the celestial entities—planets and fixed stars alike—are visible and generated gods. [...] These entities, then, possess some greater, divinely ordained stability than what their constitution, on its own, could ever provide them with. Moreover, the divine guarantee of the eternity of created corporeal entities also rests on the fact that celestial bodies, and the body of the whole cosmos as such, are under the causal influence—or even: the guidance and care— of soul.<sup>5</sup>

This perception of the world portrayed in the need of reading people's fate in order to know a kind of divine will, and to dance together accordingly to the order of the cosmos. This guaranteed an equilibrium in the whole machine of the universe, bringing unity and harmony as if in a musical tune or a dance. I will provide further details concerning this topic later on in this dissertation.

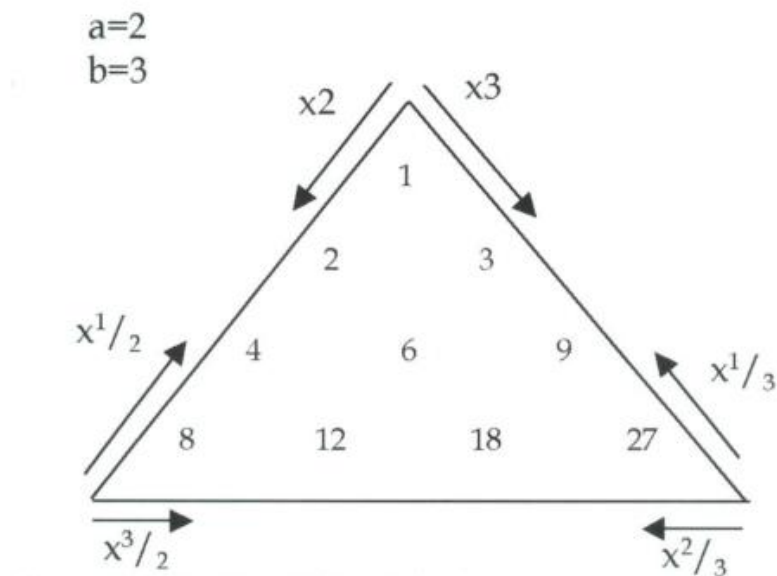


Figure 1. A combination of tetractys with  $a=2$ ,  $b=3$ .<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bodnár, I.M. (2021). "The Day, the Month, and the Year: What Plato Expects from Astronomy". In *Plato's Timaeus: Proceedings of the Tenth Symposium Platonicum Pragense*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 117-118.

<sup>6</sup> Crickmore, L. (2006). "The Musicality of Plato". *Hermathena*, No. 180, p. 25.

On the other hand, Aristotle's *De Caelo* only took the Platonic distribution of planets in the universe in order to report the daily motion of the stars and planets. Aristotle broadened the previous studies on the Universe by claiming that the primary explanatory factor of the universe was its form. In giving an account of the movement of the planets and the stars, Aristotle identified a duality between the Earth's steadiness and the pieces of earth moving downwards, such as apples falling on the ground. Aristotle thought of Earth as stationary because it had actualized this capacity in order to embrace its whole entity, yet pieces of earth removed from the centre would have fallen towards it as if they were free to do so. The centre and the periphery of the universe figured in the laws that governed the motions of the elements, which were considered by Aristotle as natural places which corresponded to the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth, which possessed more than a conventional significance. Aristotle claimed that if a part of those elements was taken away from its natural place, it came back in a natural motion. The natural places were determined by their weight, as the philosopher stated by conducting very simple experiments, such as stones falling down in the water and fire blazing upwards. As regards the universe's structure, Aristotle supposed that planets were placed on spheres, relying on Plato's prior studies on the geometrical progression of celestial elements. Those spheres were classified in concentric spheres according to the weight of their natural place in the following order from downward to upward, that is earth, water, air, and fire.

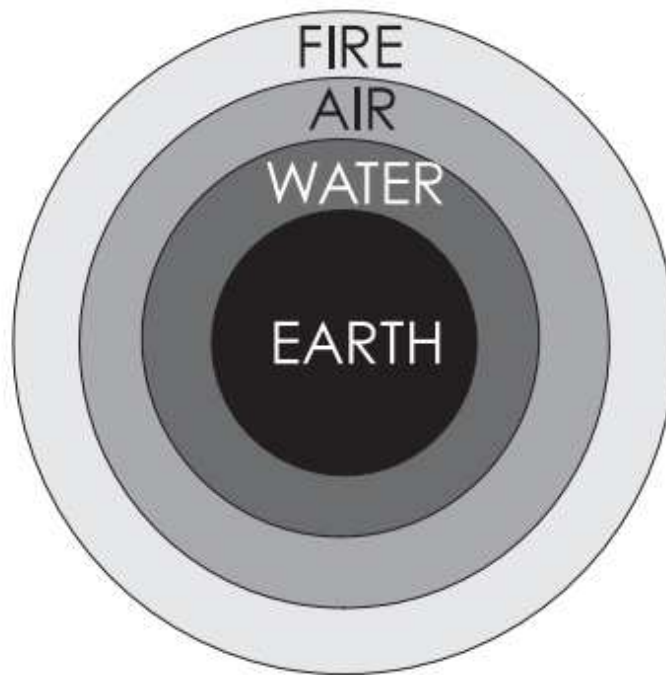


Figure 2. Aristotle: concentric shell of elements.<sup>7</sup>

As it can be seen from the picture above, this would have explained the reason why the planet Earth stood at the core of the universe, while everything else would rotate around it. Assigning the elements of the universe to the right sphere allowed the natural places to exercise a given influence on them in their fullness. Anyway, the elements could not move by themselves, as they were in between a class of things that moved on account of their own nature and the actuality of that nature. To justify the transmission of the movement of each planet to each sphere, Aristotle placed a number of ‘unrolling spheres’ in between the axis of the upper planet, which corresponded to their totality:

Since the stars are spherical, as our opponents assert and we may consistently admit, inasmuch as we construct them out of the spherical body, and since the spherical body has two movements proper to itself, namely rolling and spinning, it follows that if the stars have a movement of their own, it will be one of these. [...] For nature leaves nothing to chance, and would not, while caring for animals, overlook things so precious. Indeed, nature seems deliberately to have stripped them of everything which makes self-originated progression possible, and to have removed them as far as possible from things which have organs of movement. This is just why it seems reasonable that the whole heaven and every

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<sup>7</sup> Gregory, A. (2014). “William Harvey, Aristotle and Astrology”. *The British Journal for the History of Science*, Vol. 47, No. 2, p. 205.

star should be spherical. For while of all shapes the sphere is the most convenient for movement in one place, making possible, as it does, the swiftest and most self-contained motion, for forward movement it is the most unsuitable, least of all resembling shapes which are self-moved, in that it has no dependent or projecting part, as a rectilinear figure has, and is in fact as far as possible removed in shape from ambulatory bodies. Since, therefore, the heavens have to move in one place, and the stars are not required to move themselves forward, it is reasonable that both should be spherical—a shape which best suits the movement of the one and the immobility of the other.<sup>8</sup>

Those spheres would have existed *a posteriori*, as without them there would have been a lack of tendency to move. This movement originated from the first mover, or the *primum mobile*, an external force that affected the planets' revolution around the Earth. A support to this inducted force came from the analysis of the stars' movement that rotated by natural tendency in a place outside the spheres, which Aristotle ascribed as *aether*. The induction of motion of heavens was explained by the nature of *aether* itself, which was the main component of celestial bodies and of the First Mover. Taking the movements upwards, downwards, and rectilinear into consideration, the universe would find itself stable basing on the tension among the concentric spheres. As reported by Matthen and Hankinson, "[T]he extent of the starry sphere cannot then be infinite (apeiron); if it were, its diurnal rotation would require infinite velocity, which is a physical impossibility"<sup>9</sup>; therefore, the universe was finite and structured in order to allow this kind of rotation. Particularly relevant to this perception of the world was Plato's prior analysis of the classification of things according to the number three, which would make everything complete, as it refers to the maximum number of dimensions in space; this was also proved by mathematical tests that demonstrated that there can be three orthogonal lines through a point. Broadly speaking, every celestial body in the universe is defined as an indetermined extension in a perfect space that struggles towards totality in terms of perfection.

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle (1984). "On Heavens". In Barnes, J. (Eds.). *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 1049-1050 *e passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Matthen, M. and Hankinson, R.J. (1993). "Aristotle's Universe: Its Form and Matter". *Synthese: Logic and Metaphysics in Aristotle and Early Modern Philosophy*. Vol. 96, No. 3, p. 418.

Therefore, immobility became a pivotal principle for cosmology, according to the idea of eternity and infinity supported by Aristotle. The same spheric shape of the earth, which was proved by the circular shadow of the Earth on the Moon during eclipses, represented perfection itself. Even the regular brightness of stars and planets during their orbits was considered a proof of a uniform stars' distribution in the cosmos. Nevertheless, it stood in contrast with the Christian beliefs in the end of the world (the Apocalypse) and in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ that would have redeemed humanity. Aristotle's cosmology succeeded in maintaining its hegemony for centuries and permeated the common imagery of philosophers and artists until Copernicus. This might explain why Aristotle's homocentric system was no longer boosted after its development, leading following scholars to rely on it. Astronomers and mathematicians compiled the use of calculations together with the study of celestial movements by depending on the philosopher's studies. Similarly, in his works *Almagest* and *Tetrabiblos*, Ptolemy structured a detailed synthesis of planets' movement both in circles (around the Earth) and epicycles (around the planet itself) by implementing mathematical calculations.

### **1.1. Ptolemy and Copernicus' cosmology**

Resting on Aristotelian and Babylonian studies, the Ptolemaic system of the cosmos was arranged to provide a logical proof of planets' motion and gave them a hierarchical distribution among the spheres as it can be seen below. Ptolemy accepted the physical theories of Aristotle, the central position of the earth, and the doctrine of the four elements, each with its own sphere in the sublunary region. He thought of the starry sphere as rotating about a motionless earth; yet, in order to account for the precession of the equinoxes, he assumed a ninth sphere, above the fixed stars, which became the *primum mobile*. This would have turned about once every twenty-four hours, whereas the eighth sphere, holding the fixed stars, was assigned a movement of its own in a direction opposite to that of the first mover, so as to justify the epicycles of planets around a given point:

For if one were to suppose that the stars' motion takes place in a straight line towards infinity, as some people have thought, what device could one conceive of which would cause each of them to appear to begin their motion from the same starting-point every day? How could the stars turn back, if their motion is towards infinity? [...] if one assumes any motion whatever, except spherical, for

the heavenly bodies, it necessarily follows that their distances, measured from the earth upwards, must vary, wherever and however one supposes the earth itself to be situated. Hence the sizes and mutual distances of the stars must appear to vary for the same observers during the course of each revolution, since at one time they must be at a greater distance, at another at a lesser. Yet we see that no such variation occurs. For the apparent increase in their sizes at the horizons is caused, not by a decrease in their distances, but by the exhalations of moisture surrounding the earth being interposed between the place from which we observe and the heavenly bodies, just as objects placed in water appear bigger than they are, and the lower they sink, the bigger they appear.<sup>10</sup>

Ptolemy consequently posited a conceptual scheme of the universe as composed by nine spheres. At the highest point there was the Empyrean, the source of the primum mobile. Beneath it there was the Stellatum, or Firmamentum, a sphere where a never-ending fire burned and spread its light all over the world. In descending order, the following planets were to be found: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon; at the lowest point stood the Earth as steady. Led by the force of the First Mover, planets rotated around the Earth in circles (around the Earth) and epicycles (around themselves) within a year.

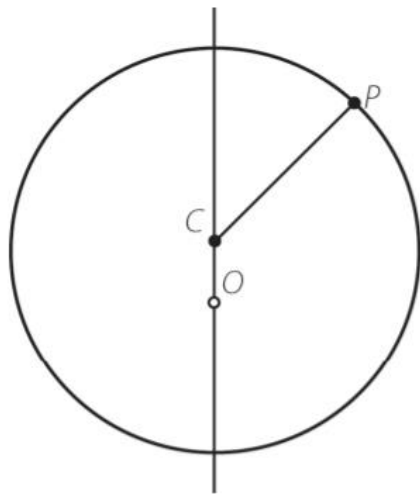


Figure 3. Eccentric model of a planet's rotation (*P*) around the Earth (*O*).

<sup>10</sup> Ptolemy (1984). "That the Heavens Move like a Sphere". In Toomer, G.J. (Eds.). *Almagest*. London: Duckworth, pp. 38-39.

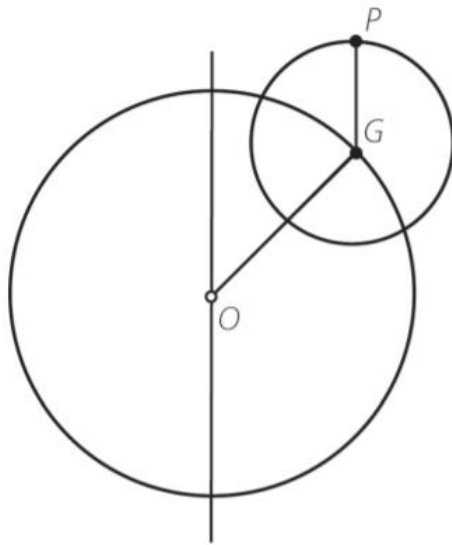


Figure 4. Epicyclic model of a planet's rotation around itself ( $P$ ) and around the Earth ( $O$ ).<sup>11</sup>

This description of model as well as the distribution of planets in the universe became a key point for both scientific and religious studies. For example, the equilibrium represented by the number three was adopted by Christian doctrines to describe God's manifestation and perfection. The vision of the fixed spheres functioned as a prominent inspiration for Christian view of the afterlife, which placed God beyond the First Mover, in the Empyrean, an imagery of Paradise that lasted throughout the centuries. The choice of the numbers (the repetition of the number three) was utterly meaningful in reading the Ptolemaic structure from a religious perspective, because the number three corresponded to the Holy Trinity. Middle Ages and Renaissance literary authors emulated similar descriptions in their works or poems, for instance in Chaucer's *House of Fame*.

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<sup>11</sup> As described in his *Almagest*, Ptolemy noticed that the movement of the celestial spheres could be accounted in circular motions. Taking the typical epicyclical and eccentric movements, he added a third point distinct from the centre of the Earth and from the centre of the planet, called equant. This third point would guarantee and equalize the kinetic revolution of the orbs around the Earth and around the planet itself.

See Zainaldin, J.L. (2017). "The Philosophical Justification for the Equant in Ptolemy's *Almagest*". *Phronesis*, Vol. 62, No. 4, p. 419 (Figures 3-4).

Yet, according to Swerdlow there was a fallacy in the complexity of calculations of Ptolemy's theory of the geocentric system, an issue that had begun to be investigated during the early Renaissance:

Because Ptolemy's observed date of equinox was a day late, there was a systematic error of about  $-1^\circ$  in all longitudes at his own time and a cumulative error in mean longitudes of about  $-26' 25''$  per century. [...] And this error in mean longitude has a variable effect in different parts of each planet's synodic cycle, the period between conjunctions with the sun, reaching its maximum, far greater than the mean, in the retrograde arc. This cumulative error was periodically corrected by finding a new, more accurate epoch, a position at a given time, for the mean longitude of the sun, presumably by observation, and then correcting the epochs and mean motions of the planets accordingly, more likely by computation than observation.<sup>12</sup>

As a consequence, a slight but generally widespread dissatisfaction towards the Ptolemaic vision of the universe led scholars to search for mathematical simplifications to study this cosmological system. Copernicus' studies stood at the core of this search: he was able to reconcile the old Greek and Arabic beliefs together with the Ptolemaic studies, leading him to presume the Earth could rotate on its own axis as a simplification to the Ptolemaic system.<sup>13</sup> Particularly relevant to his research was the analysis of Heraclides' theory of Earth rotation, which was taken into consideration neither by Aristotle nor by Ptolemy. Giving the Earth its own motion and placing the Sun as fixed at the centre of the cosmos, Copernicus proceeded by calculating the orbits of the planets and reduced the number of their rotations. Hence, he provided a new theoretical basis for determining the motion of the planets as well as their dimension and order in the universe. Swerdlow agreed with the fact that much support to Copernicus' studies was provided by the reading of ancients who held that opinion, even though this might appear to be an after-the-fact reason for approving his new theory. What mainly convinced Copernicus of the validity of his theory was the criteria of harmonies, which derived from the Platonic philosophy. The findings were discussed in his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (1543) where he rethought

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<sup>12</sup> Swerdlow, N.M. (2004). "An Essay on Thomas Kuhn's First Scientific Revolution, *The Copernican Revolution*". *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 148, No. 1, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> See Knox, D. (2005). "Copernicus's Doctrine of Gravity and the Natural Circular Motion of the Elements". *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 67.



the old vision of the universe with clear references to the old astronomical principles. He described and proved the evidence of a unified system in which

[...] (1) the sphere of the earth is the common measure of the spheres of all the planets, giving the order and distances of the planets without ambiguity or additional assumptions, and (2) the heliocentric periods of the earth and the planets correspond to their order from the central sun, while the geocentric periods of Mercury and Venus do not correspond to their order from a central earth. Next, the same heliocentric periods of the earth and planets (3) define the planets' synodic periods-the periods between successive conjunctions with the sun-which had previously been periods of revolution on the epicycle defined, for no apparent reason except that they fit, by the periods between conjunctions with the sun, a pure coincidence in geocentric theory explained completely in heliocentric.<sup>14</sup>

This deeper mathematical examination showed the biases of the geocentric system, supporting the validity of the heliocentric one. Several questions concerning the order and the physics of planets led Copernicus to put the Aristotelian philosophy of the elements and of the fixed stars into discussion. This topic brought to debates concerning the authenticity of the heliocentric and geocentric system, even though the latter was diminishing in importance. The Aristotelian postulates on physics were nonetheless still considered authoritative, as the imagery derived from his cosmology had grown stronger in age. The adoption of Aristotelian cosmology by Christian theology as a possible explanation and logical understanding of God's plan made it even more difficult to accept this revolutionary change. Despite that, there was no strong opposition to the heliocentric theory, for Copernicus himself presented it as a mathematical device to recalculate the universe, and so it was acknowledged by others. However, when Galileo's latest declaration of the physical reality of the Earth's motion started to catch on, an opposition from the Church to the heliocentric system became stronger, as "[T]o move the earth was to break the continuous chain of created being"<sup>15</sup> that struggled towards the perfection of God. Namely, the idea that the Earth could rotate went against to the Aristotelian and Biblical principles, and therefore it was believed to be a heresy.

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<sup>14</sup> Swerdlow, N.M. (2004). "An Essay on Thomas Kuhn's First Scientific Revolution, *The Copernican Revolution*". *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 148, No. 1, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 82.

Within this broader background of changes, literature was influenced by the changes and the astronomical concepts. Utterly salient to this aspect was the belief that each sphere had a given power and influence over the sublunar world. In a time of radical change, the survival of specific metaphors and their long-lasting effects until today caused a remarkable impact on common thoughts and culture.

## 1.2. The Meaning of Celestial Elements and Poetic Conventions

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the meaning of metaphors related to the night sky was enlarged both consciously and unconsciously by emblem books and imagery. As regards this aspect, Rovelstad and Camilli noticed how *The Building and Its Ornaments*, a treatise written by pope Clemens VII (1478-1534), was filled with allegoric representations of Christian virtues with a given motto<sup>16</sup>. The artistic representation played a key role in stating the importance of what both prose and poetry declared, a theory that derived from the structure of the geocentric universe, which was described as a perfect dance among planets, a concept derived from the Pythagorean principles of unity. The aesthetic of dance as a syncretism of elements had a huge impact on the concept of *harmonia* as a pivotal aspect to symbolize perfection and to perform spiritual connection between the human world and the Nature. As far as the starry sky is concerned, cliché and common representations both in poetry and paintings were influenced by the scientific doctrines I have previously discussed. Hence, a general overview of the planets' effects over people's lives is necessary in order to explain in a clearer way the importance those beliefs had.

I have previously analysed the structure of the spheres and where each planet ruled its own sphere. Their distribution along the spheres corresponded to a given power performed over people; this was strictly related to the concept of judicial astrology (*astrologia judicialis*). This principle did not restrict only its mastery to people's lives: it

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<sup>16</sup> "Prophecy: The prophets of the Old Testament speak for God and interpret his will; thus representing divine communication. They are to be shown as a matron, eyes veiled, a sword in her right hand and a chain in her left, with a dove above her head. Inscription: On the watchtower of God I stand constantly". Rovelstad, M.V., Camilli, E.M. (1994). "Emblems as Inspiration and Guidance in Baroque Libraries". *Libraries & Culture*, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 153.

was a fundamental aspect for medicine too. A bad influence of a given power was considered responsible for a determined illness or a particular patient's condition. Interestingly, planets shared the name of pagan gods, and so they do nowadays; therefore some characteristics of those gods were attributed to those planets, as well as the effects of their divine power on human lives<sup>17</sup>. An exemplification done by Lewis may help to better understand the relationship with the deity and the referring planet.

Right beneath the Stellatum there was Saturn, whose influence produced lead; on Earth it was responsible for disastrous events in history and the melancholy complexion in men; the common imagery of Father Time was identified with this planet. Under Saturn, Jupiter's sphere was to be found which produced tin on Earth; its character was identified with a cheerful and yet temperate behaviour on men, as proved by the adjective 'jovial'. Being a good planet, it was also called *Fortuna Major*, The Greater Fortune, for Jupiter was the King; when it was dominant, people might expect prosperity. Mars came next: being the God of war and being called *Infortuna Minor*, a 'bad planet', it was considered responsible for wars and gave the martial temperament. The sphere of the Sun, or Sol, stood as a joint between the mythical and the astrological. Even though Jupiter represented the King, Sun produced fortunate events and made men wise and liberal. Just like Jupiter, Venus was also considered a *Fortuna Major*, for it produced fortunate events, love, and beauty. Mercury was responsible for inspiring men in being curious and studious: the derived adjective 'mercurial' is used to describe a 'skilled eagerness' or a 'bright alacrity'. At Luna, or Moon, one moved from the aether to air, from the incorruptible to the corruptible, as it was distinguished for its mutable nature: it produced wandering in men both in terms of losing the mind and inspiring travels. Those certainties allowed people living in between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to completely rely on superior knowledge. Experiencing a surrounded life and knowing where to look at during the night was one of the pillars of ancient beliefs.

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<sup>17</sup> See Ludwig, W. (2005). "Astrology in Antiquity, in the Renaissance and Today". *The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Associations*, Vol. 27, pp. 21-22.

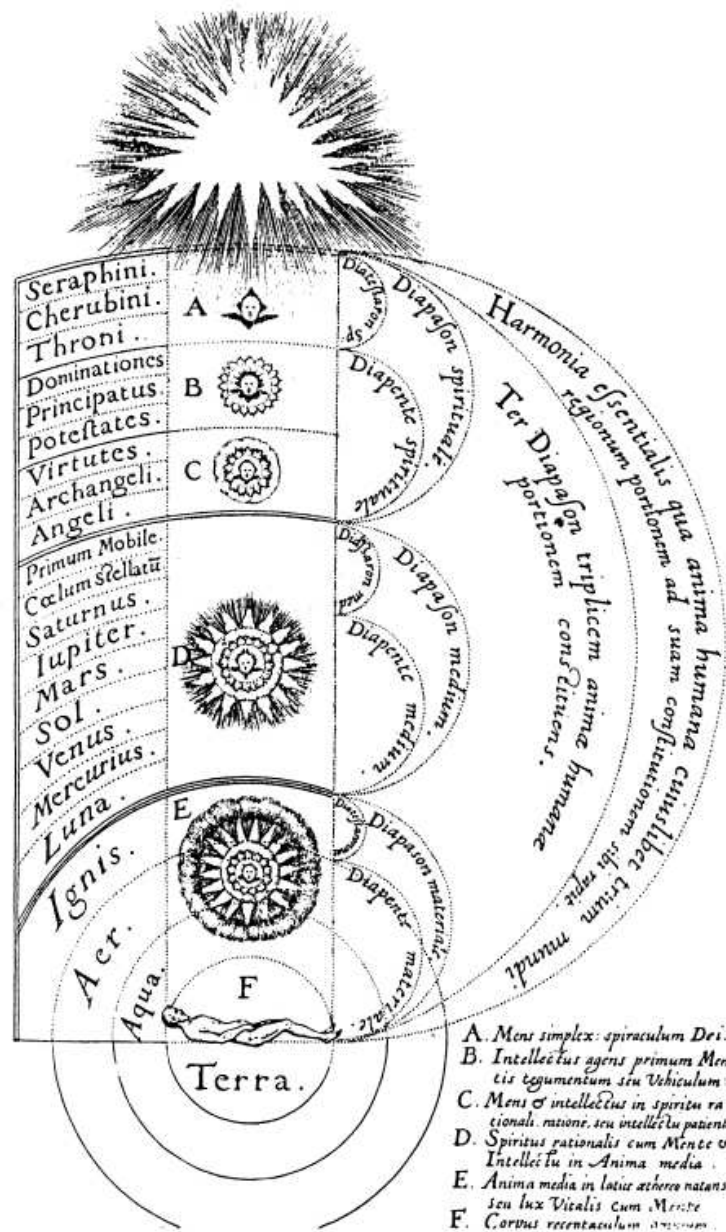


Figure 5. The harmony of planets.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Berghaus, G. (1992). "Neoplatonic and Pythagorean Notions of World Harmony and Unity and Their Influence on Renaissance Dance Theory". *The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 46.

As far as poetry is concerned, the level of abstraction related to harmonious dance created by visual and textual experiences had a huge effect on people's common sense and their personal representation of the world. Allegories referring to being in tune permeated the early Renaissance, such as the notorious painting of Hans Holbein the Younger *The Ambassadors* (1533), in which the broken lute string meant discord. For example, in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, he declared that phantasy produced unclear shapes of dispersed memories of unclear forms, when uncontrolled by reason, something that might have been due to a melancholic status of people born under the influence of Saturn:

Emongst them all sate he, which wonned there,  
That hight Phantastes by his nature trew;  
A man of yeares yet fresh, as mote appere,  
Of swarth complexion, and of crabbed hew,  
That him full of melancholy did shew;  
Bent hollow beetle browes, sharpe staring eyes,  
That mad or foolish seemd: one by his vew  
Mote deeme him borne with ill disposed skyes,  
When oblique Saturne sate in the house of agonyes.<sup>19</sup>

Even though it was built as an allegory of Christian virtues, Spenser's poem might work as an example of the relationship with the world of Ideas and Reason surrounded by the wonder generated by the influence of zodiac elements, which exercised their power over people in terms of a harmonic organization. As claimed by Berghaus, "[d]uring the Renaissance period, the philosophical and aesthetic foundations were established for the development of a complex and sophisticated art of dancing"<sup>20</sup>, and so were the symbols and implications expressed by the starry night in texts. In addition to that, he stated that

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<sup>19</sup> Spenser, E. (1995). Book 2, Canto IX, 460-468. In *The Faerie Queene*. Eugene: University of Oregon, p. 270. (Originally published in 1590).

<sup>20</sup> Berghaus, G. (1992). "Neoplatonic and Pythagorean Notions of World Harmony and Unity and Their Influence on Renaissance Dance Theory". *The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 62.

the arts of music, poetry and dancing were closely interwoven as a reflection of cosmological unity. A good or a bad arrangement of constellations or planets determined human psychology. The impact that Aristotelian and Ptolemaic studies had on everyday life reflected itself in artistic and poetic works, which were strongly related with elements of the natural world. As Steadman declared,

[...] Renaissance conceptions of the relationships between the poetic image or "idol" and the realities that the latter professed to "imitate" or "shadow" showed remarkable diversity. Ranging widely between the poles of scrupulous verisimilitude and seemingly unlicensed fantasy, they exhibited a complex and variable mixture of moral or historical "fact" and free, imaginative invention. [...] Even in the same poem the modern reader may detect (if it is permissible to vary one's metaphor) a sort of sliding scale of reality-an epistemological slide-rule that involves diverse (and sometimes incompatible) degrees of fiction and truth.<sup>21</sup>

This concept followed the principle of beauty that developed from the Neoplatonic philosophy, a school of thought that developed in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth century at the court of Cosimo de' Medici, and then spread among Europe. Under his patronage, there was a flourishing undertaking of academics, such as Pico della Mirandola, that encouraged the rediscovery and the discussion of classical manuscripts regarding Platonic moral principles<sup>22</sup>.

Concerning visual and textual arts, this philosophy took into consideration the Platonic principle of a direct experience in connection with the role of art, that is the contemplation of the Idea behind the physical world in a sense of unity. This would generate a *topos*, a convention, whose role was to bring together the visible copies of the world and the true beauty of Wisdom behind it. In addition to that, the inheritance of Greek and Roman culture played a key role in confirming the idea of unity both in art and poetry. Since the ancestors of poets and artists were praised as authorities, and since creative talent had been considered a supernatural gift, Renaissance poets looked back at them as teachers. The authority expressed by poets and philosophers like Homer or Plato

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<sup>21</sup> Steadman, J.M. (1998). "Image-Making in the Verbal and Visual Arts: A Renaissance Obsession". *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> See Hankins, J. (1990). "Cosimo de' Medici and the 'Platonic Academy'". *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 53, pp. 144-145.

marked an absolute trust in researching the causes and reasons in what had become a scientific and literary archetype by investigating the relationship behind the observed object.

Although in the Renaissance the boundaries between superstition and science were becoming only slowly evident, this rhetoric had entered the consciousness of people in a way that it was difficult to seize a strong-affected belief of the world, as well as an external influence:

The analogy between physical and intellectual vision, and the metaphor of knowledge as sight-so much a commonplace that it had largely ceased to be metaphorical-tended to heighten the emphasis on sight as a medium of knowledge, on the efficacy of the poetic image, and on the assimilation of the poet's office to that of the painter.<sup>23</sup>

Particularly relevant to the reception of Ideas and their understanding was the correspondence between the figure of the poet with the astronomer, for both recognized a reign of order in what they saw and carried their quests of a meaning in what it existed and the way it could have been accessible for those who lived on Earth. Nevertheless, it was becoming clearer that astrological assumptions were nothing but superstitions, especially those conveyed by the studies of judicial astrology. The change science was slowly experiencing seemed not to affect the literary Renaissance yet.

### **1.3. Astrology in 16<sup>th</sup> Century England**

The age of Philip Sidney was marked by relevant changes in terms of science that marked indirectly the life of poets. It is because of this view that an oversimplification of the complex cultural and religious background of the time is risky.

Firstly, it is necessary to remember that the new empirical developments in science weakened astrology, as well as the Calvinist belief in God's total control over human life undermined the idea of stars exercising power on earth. The establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire made the suppression of popular superstition

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<sup>23</sup> Steadman, J.M. (1998). "Image-Making in the Verbal and Visual Arts: A Renaissance Obsession". *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 69-70.

urgent in order to prevent the speculations of pseudo-sciences as well as heresies. A massive support to this endeavour came from the Scriptures and from Biblical commentators like St. Augustine, who claimed that astrology played no vital role in people's lives. Much attention was driven to people's free will and rational choice on behaving in a specific way rather than being determined by a zodiac sign. Strictly related to this aspect was the suppression of fortune-tellers and fake prophets who speculated on judicial astrology, as the blind faith people gave to external forces had nothing to do with the message Christ left. During her kingdom, Queen Elizabeth rejected and condemned the beliefs in judicial astrology, which was considered felony. She took a distance from her grandfather's reception of astrology, Henry VII, who was a patron of astrology, and had employed an Italian court astrologer, William Parron of Piacenza. However, the Queen's orthodoxy in religious matters allowed to spread notions concerning the sky. Namely, it was acknowledged that astrology was useful for navigation or orientation:

[...] Astrology was not incompatible with revealed religion. [...] Astrology explained one of the ways in which God's divine will was enacted on earth, and for an early modern world in which the moon demonstrably influenced the tides and somatic rhythms like menstruation and the phases of lunacy, it was still largely commonsensical that the celestial bodies — placed by God in the skies — also exercised sway over some aspects of human experience.<sup>24</sup>

A pivotal role in astrology's credibility was given by the rise of almanacs, and consequently the expansion of astrological awareness of the importance of space and time. Almanacs soon became the most popular books of the sixteenth century, and their flexibility made them useful tools for basic assumptions, even though those texts provided both complicated and precise descriptions of space and time:

Early modern almanacs were often printed for a specific city in England, and the astrological data in the almanac was accordingly calculated for that exact latitude and longitude. This spatial pinpointing, along with the presence of other kinds of local geographical information, suggests the almanac makers' keen awareness of the significance of place. Similarly, over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the calendars found in the majority of almanacs became more crowded with data, and most almanacs also provided other kinds of temporal descriptions

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<sup>24</sup> Chapman, A.A. (2007). "Marking Time: Astrology, Almanacs, and English Protestantism". *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 4, pp. 1261-1262.



as well: such as listings of the year's law terms, dates of the moveable feasts, chronologies of past historical events, and dates of monarchical reigns.<sup>25</sup>

This marked a distinction between the religious belief in God's irrelevance of earthly time, as He was available everywhere and every time, and astrological perceptions of specific units of time and place. Nonetheless, almanacs and early modern astrologers argued that their work could have offered a hint to explore God's cosmic harmonies. Even in Milton's *Paradise Lost* it was asserted that stars predicted the matters that God had put under people's influence, although the spiritual relevance of Christ's kingdom lied outside their dominion. Such an attitude led to a major proliferation in universities, too, where astrology became a dignified discipline.

Yet, some religious movements like the Calvinist one expressed their dissatisfaction with pagan beliefs, stressing the importance of divine will in judgement. From their point of view, astrology could have been accepted only in terms of aid to study an interrelationship with the Creator's divine plan and the stars. Churchmen and theologists like William Perkins (1558-1602) believed that works coordinated with the divine plan would be most effective. Consequently, a tension between astrology and early modern Protestantism became stronger when it came to discuss about the significance of place. The clergy denied any geographical importance for them, as only a temporal succession was relevant to a theocentric view of history. Support to this aspect was given by the Bible, especially by the Book of Psalms where the omnipresence of God was constantly repeated. Similarly, debates concerning time followed the same lead. Up until mid-sixteenth century, calendars were very likely to share similarities with religious works, for instance the Book of Hours or the Bible, and they listed the days of a month, the saints' day, and daily prayers. On the other hand, calendars included in almanacs provided precise information for each day, including the configurations of planets and the position of the moon. Astrologers thought that places had a relevance in understanding heavenly forces, as reported in almanacs. In order to find a support to their position, astrologers quoted some passages from the Bible that were involved with stars foretelling, such as the Magi's journey to Bethlehem, without succeeding. The attacks on astrologers'

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<sup>25</sup> Ivi, pp. 1259-1260.

supposed charlatanism found no easy argumentation to protect themselves from the accuse to make a profit on people's ignorance. Another attempt of defence was done by invoking some terms from the Baconian philosophy when referring to astrology, e.g. 'experiments', but the result did not change.

Rutkin claimed that "[r]ecent scholarship indicates clearly that chivalry, humanism and astrology— each in their individual and interrelated domains: academic, political and cultural— provided defining elements of these Renaissance courts."<sup>26</sup> This tendency followed the example of the Italian courts of Ferrara and Florence, where all the three previously mentioned components were fully developed. As the court was the centre of culture and power, astrological studies became part of the humanist schoolmaster: it was also associated with the intellectual inheritance of Greek philosophers and reflected the image of the Italian court. Queen Elizabeth counted on the presence of a court astrologer, John Dee, who was fond of casting horoscopes, diagrams of the heavens in a particular moment in time: "The purpose was to train the sons of the nobility and gentry to [...] all higher learning"<sup>27</sup>, including the ability of reading signs from the sky and knowing their meaning.

The debate over the value of astrology as a manifestation of the general intellectual involved court poets, too, and Philip Sidney among them. It was within this context that the pregnant imagery of the previously described socio-cultural background found a fertile land to grow and to reaffirm the concreteness of literary *topoi*, for instance a woman's virginity represented by a flower to be picked up. In concordance with the Neoplatonic philosophy, in his *Defence of Poesy*, Sidney stated that "Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimēsis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking

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<sup>26</sup> Rutkin, H.D. (2019). "Astrology in Society, Politics and Culture". In *Sapientia Astrologica: Astrology, Magic and Natural Knowledge, ca. 1250-1800*. Archimedes (New Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology), vol 55. Berlin: Springer, pp. 429-430.

<sup>27</sup> Greenblatt, S., Lewalski, B.K., Logan, G., Maus, K.E. (2012). "Introduction". In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century*. New York: Norton, p. 535.

picture—with this end: to teach and delight.”<sup>28</sup> Sidney dealt with the use of imagery and concepts with which he liked to describe what poets did when they created those fictions. Additionally, the act of creation was not limited to the poet’s office, but it broadened itself to the reader’s activity, who was invited to go beyond the literary meaning while approaching to a poem. The reader was asked to be an active part in the process of narration and investigation behind the experience, searching the value of uniqueness decanted by the Neoplatonic philosophy. It seems that Sidney adhered to the old literary tradition while pursuing a concrete imagery of the world, instead of accepting the changing reality of the cosmos, in which the old certainties were slowly falling apart.

This turning point was not simply due to the new astronomical discoveries; the desire and the need for an anthropocentric order in the cosmos reflected a longing for a period of peace after a long time of desolation. The gradual independence people were gaining after the socio-economic crisis of the fourteenth century made them to start looking for a flourishing beauty. Furthermore, the new scientific discoveries helped people to find their own independence from external agents and helped to develop a sense of self-consciousness as single individuum with a free will to recreate beauty. It was this human awareness that led to a change in perspective in terms of arts and relationship with the Nature. While people started to see the natural world as mindless and without any direction, Philip Sidney stood in the opposite side, looking for an inspiration and a model to be emulated in the natural elements, especially those of the night sky. According to Platonic philosophy, Sidney recognized that “art offers representations of the visible world, and that visible world is itself a set of copies of the ideas; and copies of copies are of little value.”<sup>29</sup> He was very likely to recognize a dependent relationship both with the object of poetry as well as the source of inspiration. This aspect is to be found in *Astrophil and Stella* in which he contemplated the ‘dominium’ of Stella on his persona with reference to the nightly elements’ influence in determining the relationship. It appears that Stella may determine Astrophil’s fate, in accordance with the old principles of judicial astrology. With respect to this aspect, the use of natural metaphors and the need

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<sup>28</sup> Sidney, S. (2002). “The Defence of Poesy”. In *Selected Writings*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, p. 108. (Originally published in 1581).

<sup>29</sup> Alexander, G. (2017). “Loving and Reading in Sidney”. *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 114, No. 1, p. 49.

of boundary with the starry element appeared very strong in Sidney's poetic. At the same time, some critical considerations concerning the relevance of Nature for early modern society might be taken from this unconventional use of nightly metaphors, both in terms of science and culture and its consequent development.

## **2. An Historical Outline of the Ecological Crisis**

Having discussed the relevance of the scientific discoveries regarding the perception of the universe in the Renaissance, one might notice a change in the consideration of the cosmos as well as a change in the reception of the natural order. As regards the cosmological systems, they presented two different equilibria among the planets, the stars, and the Earth, and conveyed a desire of reorganizing chaos in the surrounding environment. Concerning this aspect, poets have been sought to portray this principle in their works by finding this same inspiration in the physical world surrounding them, also by using the representation of the night sky, in particular the metaphors derived from a supposed influence of a given planet. Nevertheless, it would be hazardous to determine whether the Copernican or the Ptolemaic theory mostly corresponds to an idea of perfect harmony, as the representations differed from one another despite sharing the same purpose in reflecting the idea of a choreographic unity. Yet, the idea of order emerged in the same representation of the universe, although it appeared to have been perceived as alien to everyday life, probably due to the physical distance between the sky and the Earth. Therefore, the two aspects seem completely different and apparently not correlated, even though they both share an intrinsic desire of control. Resting on this aspect, the main question concerns the importance of the human dominion and reception of the order, in particular the involvement of the night sky in this issue, despite its distance. Before moving on to its importance on a literary field, a brief overview of the changings in the reception of order in nature and early modern society are required, as the major inspiration derived from the surrounding terrestrial elements, such as waters, forests. This passage will be necessary in order to detect the similarities and the importance of the cosmological idea of unity.

The roots of the ecological crisis are as complex as the analysis of the crisis itself, as they lie in a range of constant changes and social progresses that keep forming human society. Human culture has always been connected to the physical world, both affecting and being affected by it. An attempt to trace this relationship of interdependence was made by anthropologists, who focused on the systems that allowed primal cultures to survive and cope with Nature in a sustainable way. As declared by Glotfelty, even in philosophy

various subfields like environmental ethics, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social ecology have emerged in an effort to understand and critique the root causes of environmental degradation and to formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with earth.<sup>30</sup>

Anyway, when including human factors in the natural environment, a multifaced picture of this interrelationship appears. Merchant observed that historical changes could be considered ecological changes, for the human impact on the natural ecosystem influences the stability of a given environment. As I said in the previous chapter, the scientific revolution gave its contribution to a slow change in perspective regarding the relationship between Nature and the human being. Along this revolution, the innovation brought on agricultural implementations functioned as a tool to personal self-awareness long before the scientific revolution; therefore, an explanation of the former is requested.

In Antiquity, a widespread animism affected people's perception of the world. It was believed that every tree, plant, and animal had its own guardian spirit, or *genius loci*. These spirits were represented as anthropomorphs, e.g. centaurs, mermaids, etc. According to White, "[b]efore one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated."<sup>31</sup> There was then a kind of reverential relationship between humanity and Nature, which provided everything people needed for their own sustainment in turn of respect and equilibrium: it might be defined as a sort of interconnection between the Book of Nature and the Book of the Divine, which determined the rhythm of everyday life. This dynamic exchange characterized life through centuries and established a specific way to relate to the physical world with respect to the natural element, that is a common sharing and disposal of goods. As regards this aspect, agriculture could function as an example of this reciprocity between people and Nature.

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<sup>30</sup> Glotfelty, C. (1996). "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis". In Glotfelty, C., Fromm, H. (Eds.). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University Press of Georgia, p. xxi.

<sup>31</sup> White Jr., L. (1996). "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis". In Glotfelty, G., Fromm, H. (Eds.). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, p. 10.

Being cultivation the chief occupation of the large majority of the population, the land was distributed in 'territorial communes' in which each family had an individual lot and shared natural resources such as water and pastures with others living in the same village. This harmonic connection stood at the core of medieval society: the harmony of community was in tune with Nature like a musical instrument:

The communal resources were regulated by officers elected or appointed by the members of the peasant community. The community grounds within the village and inside the edges of forests were subject to governance concerning the gathering of firewood and bedding litter for animals, common pasture, and hunting. Peasant jurisdiction and self-regulation of these common lands exemplified an interaction between individual needs and those of the group as a whole. Cooperation and interdependence maintained the health of the ecosystem.<sup>32</sup>

Things started to change by the latter part of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. due to the invention of the plow, which brought help to the labour of land, even though it could merely scratch the soil. This instrument was then improved and equipped with a vertical knife, which gave the opportunity to cut the soil deeper and consequently to use the mostly of natural resources with an implement in crops. Although this innovation might appear as meaningless in the chain of the human-Nature relationship, it contributed to a new awareness towards the perception of the natural world along with historical events that marked Western Europe's history strikingly.

Between the eleventh and fourteenth century, Europe experienced a significant growth both in population, manufacturing, and crop agriculture; thus, people were experiencing an increase in the demand of goods. In order to support the high requests, farmers were given land according to its productivity, although it was previously given to families in units capable of supporting their needs. The fields were then enclosed, declaring the unicity of that given piece of land to whom it belonged. This new agrarian world turned human beings into exploiters of Nature. Such a new point of view was visible in artistic representations, too: calendars painted men chopping trees, butchering pigs, and so on; if formerly human beings were part of the physical world, now they were

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<sup>32</sup> Merchant, C. (1990). "Farm, Fen, and Forest: European Ecology in Transition". In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, p. 44.

the masters of Nature. What is more, commerce was expanding throughout Afro-Eurasia, too, encouraging new trades that could connect those continents. However, around 1300, a deep crisis started to spread all over European countries. The feudal system of production and the land were also involved in the origin of this crisis:

Organized on the political extraction of surplus, yet (in most cases) recognizing the peasantry's customary rights to the land, feudalism provided neither the coercion nor the incentive necessary to ensure rising productivity. On one hand, the peasant proprietor could only rarely be displaced from the land—even more rarely could market forces displace him. [...] On the other hand, productivity gains, such as they were, tended to be undermined by feudal exactions (Dobb, 1963, pp. 42-44). Rising peasant surpluses were subject to appropriation by the seigneurs and the states—indeed, the appropriation of surplus through rent, levies, and taxes was the primary means of increasing ruling-class revenues.<sup>33</sup>

Despite limiting the possibilities to reinvest surpluses on agriculture, the feudal system did not stop the growth of peasantry in terms of generating surpluses, that is fragmenting households among families so as to fetter productivity. However, this growth was proportionally direct to the one of noble families, which led to a higher demand in goods. This development brought to exhaust soil in order to respond to high levels of productivity, which shortly conducted to malnutrition. The three-field system did not work enough to guarantee food for everyone; it reduced the land available for pasture and consequently reduced the livestock requested to replenish soil's nutrients. The lord-peasant relationship was an obstacle to long-run ecological sustainability; feudal agriculture had degraded the land within fertile area by one third in England between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century. At the same time, the growth of population was proportional to a new urbanization, and therefore it diminished the land's productivity, as fields turned into urban areas. Furthermore, unfavourable weather conditions during the twelfth and thirteenth century went along with the agrarian recession that produced widespread famines, undermining people's resistance to diseases. Alongside this issue, landlords were trying to turn arable fields into pasturage, because it required less labour force, and landowners were trying to readjust the labour-land ratios. The reduction of

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<sup>33</sup> Moore, J.W. (2002). "The Crisis of Feudalism: An Environmental History". *Organization & Environment*. Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 304.



grain acreages biases European old economics, power, diminishing returns on livestock and cereal production and causing widespread land degradation:

[F]eudalism's ecological contradictions gave rise not only to soil degradation but equally to a dietary regime that virtually guaranteed epidemic disease. [...] Agrarian recession, bad weather, and a new disease pool proved a fertile juncture for the bacillus that carried the plague from Southeast Asia to Europe in 1348.<sup>34</sup>

An internal crisis was affecting both countries and landlords before the Black Death: states were struggling to exact higher taxes to peasants so as to invest money on wars, although the possibilities of conquest other European countries proved to be unsuccessful. Political geography's issues played a key role in influencing the feudal crisis: when internal crisis deepened, European countries went to war against one another so as to get back what they had lost in the agrarian recession. The competition grew together with the search for sources of power that could stand the comparison with other European forces. Hence, European countries felt encouraged to find new routes abroad and to expand on a geographical level towards the Atlantic Island and the Indian Ocean. According to the principle of *divide et impera*, the aim was to build an overseas empire, as a divided but central power could have been harder to conquer and would have increased the strength of a given country. Additionally, a geographical expansion contributed to create new agrarian spaces to sustain the bare necessities by European population, who were starting to rely on cattle, sheep, and horses, as soils had exhausted the properties that made them suitable for agriculture: "Europe's highly fragmented political geography, manifest most importantly in the inability of any one ruler to establish a continental empire, created competitive states with no holds barred on expansion."<sup>35</sup> Europe was close to the New World, which gave a pivotal contribution to first overseas expansions, leading economic powers like Spain and Portugal to colonize Atlantic isles. England was alien neither to those changes nor to this change of perspective that was spreading all over Europe, too, although with no counter verses on a social level.

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<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 306.

<sup>35</sup> Bolthouse, J. (2014). "Rethinking Capital's Relations to Nature: From the Production of Nature Thesis to World-Ecological Synthesis". *Japanese Journal of Human Geography*, Vol. 66, No. 6, p. 584.

## 2.1. The Socio-Economical Changes in the Renaissance

The previously mentioned events and changes played a major role in turning the relationship with Nature from a 'vis-à-vis' to 'master-servant' one. Yet, it was not simply only a matter of innovation on a sociological or industrial level, but also a matter of science: the Scientific Revolution was involved in this change of perspective, as well as in the idea of exercising control Nature. The Renaissance framework was filled with images permeating a tightly organized and interconnected cosmos, where everything revolved in choreographic movements. The impact the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic visions had on people's imagery contributed to the perception of the universe as a living unit, in which the four elements combined together formed plants, animals, minerals. Hence, Heavens were affected by the Empyrean, the place where God resided, whereas men were linked to the animal world, with which they shared sensations, and to the angels above, with whom they shared rationality. Each part of the body was governed by zodiac signs, so that "as a microcosm, he was a miniature replica of the celestial spheres, or macrocosm."<sup>36</sup> This hierarchical order was portrayed in social organization, too, with peasants at the bottom, and kings and clergy at the top. Basing on this perception, Nature was seen as a nurturing mother, in which its components were directly functionals to mankind's sustainment in a planned universe.

Nevertheless, the innovation brought by Copernicus and the Scientific Revolution contributed to a new vision of the cosmos itself, as well as a new relationship between mankind-deity. Furthermore, the idea of cosmological order also reflected in the reception of society and social relationships: although the two events were not directly involved, some similarities both in the reorganization of society and of the perception of the surrounding environment. For example, after experiencing the crisis that affected 1300-1400, the improvements on the industrial and scientific level contributed to rethink the idea of the Self within the universe and society. As a result, a new order and innovation in perceiving social structures and the physical world appeared necessary after the terrible events that marked the previous century, like the Black Death. The reception of a world's new collocation mirrored itself in a new perspective both on the artistic level and on the

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<sup>36</sup> Merchant, C. (1990). "The World an Organism". In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, p. 101.

self-perception of one's identity. The change in the order of the universe was moving along to a rethinking of the influence of the sky: the order proposed by Copernicus, which presented the Sun at the centre of the universe, corresponded to a change of focus in human perception. Even though it was being demonstrated that the Earth was not the centre of the universe, it did not apparently apply to people's self-perception, who started to give the world a new order, as if they were aware of the planet's new position in the cosmos.

This gradual awareness followed the mechanization of world's view: the transformations of the agricultural and pastoral systems (the enclosures), and new patterns of economics and manufacturing things created a new vision of the world. The innovation brought by the use of coal derived from tree chopping represented a turning point in the relationship between humanity and physical world, as people started slightly to dispose of natural resources in a massive way. Particularly related to early modern England, enclosures and the commodification of the land established a new money economy, which aimed to increase the power of government over people's lives and to reduce them to a new subject status, as discussed by Northcott. He also claimed that the new agrarian developments and the new money economy were one of the primary causes in the abandonment of moral, ethical, and religious controls over agriculture, trades, and the relations between humanity and nature. As a consequence, agricultural small holders found themselves expropriated by their own land and lost their local autonomy and self-sufficiency for a housing scheme that sanctioned nature's manipulation.

The focus had now turned to the individual self as a conscious dominator and creator of a personal vision of the world from the materials available in Nature. According to Merchant, "[T]he substitution of mechanically describable components would become the most significant and far-reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution"<sup>37</sup>, as it broke the old vision of Western Europe order. Mankind was consequently becoming aware of being able to determine their own destiny, and to establish their own rules on the surrounding socio-economic environment starting from the relationship with Nature. Regarding early modern England, it seemed that the Copernican Revolution together with the flourishing economics of the country offered them the opportunity to discuss their search of a new

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<sup>37</sup> *Ivi*, p. 125.

identity just like other European countries did: “[A]n individual's identity is composite, and a particular component of an individual identity becomes pre-eminent through conflict or contrast.”<sup>38</sup> In establishing a new economic system, and consequently a new arrangement with the natural world, it became clear that a new hierarchical structure was settling in the Renaissance society, where only few were actually given total control over people and Nature. One approach to this search of a new order and identity was in the polarity between ‘centre’ and ‘locality’ in terms of sociological interest. One example of centralization of identity could be seen in the new conceptualization of the economic system which I previously described. Sixteenth century inhabitants started to distinguish a controlling elite that was starting to establish the dominant group. This circle was the one involved in the jurisdiction of marketing and trades, regulating the transition between the state, the community, and the centre. The development of national churches was an attempt to enforce religious entities strictly related to a restricted government. Thus, the new method of transmitting political and economic ideologies laid the groundwork for a new system of interrelations whose cluster was centralization among dislocation. As noticed by Braddick,

The concept of centralization [...] refers to the development of more extensive regulation of various aspects of social life, and a consequent increase of the distributive power of those in co-ordinating positions. This is one way of avoiding the accusation of determinism: the impulse toward centralization may be uniform, but its expression is not necessarily homogeneous. The process of centralization is institutionally moulded.<sup>39</sup>

The dislocation of power appeared to be necessary to face the growth early modern Europe was experiencing around sixteenth and seventeenth century, which had consequences on the representations of the natural world.

Moving on to the artistic field, the invention of perspective was as an example of representation of order as perceived by human's idea of control. The use of geometric calculations was utterly helpful in the depiction of the individual objects within a bigger and apparently homogeneous context in natural and urban environment: linear

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<sup>38</sup> Braddick, M. (1991). “State Formation and Social Change in Early Modern England: A Problem Stated and Approaches Suggested”. *Social History*, Vol 16, No. 1, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ivi*, p. 12.

perspective applied to pictorial space could be seen as one of the first instruments in the change of focus and awareness of people's point of view. Although perspective was not directly involved with none of the cosmological theories, they shared a principle of order within Nature and a presented a difference in environment's reception. One the one hand, Ptolemy and Copernicus proposed a specific disposition in the cosmos and its components; on the other, perspective aimed to present a new structure of the natural elements in the urban setting, which derived from the human point of view. Therefore, the longing for a harmonious dance appeared to depend on the human view perception of order, which soon spread among Renaissance Europe.

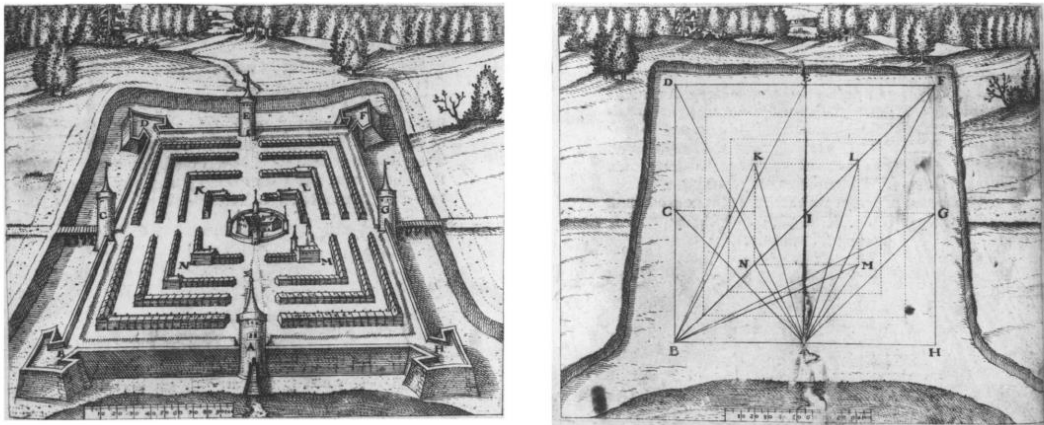


Figure 6. A town and its schema, from L. Zubler, *Novum Instrumentum Geometricum*, Basel 1607.<sup>40</sup>

As far as perspective was concerned, direct observations enlarged by the use of optical instruments contributed to an authentic and yet unified construction of the depicted object, like in the picture above. This principle could rely on antecedent studies on gathering town views led centuries before the invention of perspective, for example in Ptolemy's *Cosmographia*; as Nuti reported,

[t]his group of manuscripts, illuminated by the same hand, shares a singular feature: following the old and new Ptolemaic geographical maps, each displays ten images of towns, the capitals of the ancient and medieval world. The

<sup>40</sup> Nuti, L. (1994). "The Perspective Plan in the Sixteenth Century: The Invention of a Representational Language". *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 76, No. 1, p. 116.

enrichment of the manuscript's decoration responded to the hunger for images of the world<sup>41</sup>

Starting from town mapping, it was slowly becoming clear that a proportionate representation of the whole landscape and an isolated part of it from a direct observation was giving more value to the world as it was seen, as a real one, not an abstract model. On an artistic level, the use of perspective applied to painting might be seen as a need to create a personal vision of the world, as much similar as its realistic representation and actual measurements.

It is interesting to notice how a slight movement in the reception of the sky was correlated to a new analysis of life on Earth, with the human being standing at the core. Such awareness might have derived from the Ptolemaic system, which presented the Earth as the centre of the cosmos. What mostly emerged from the events that marked the fourteenth and the fifteenth century was a flourish of ideas that appeared to be linked by a desire of control and reorganization of the surrounding environment. It is also worth noticing how those changes interconnected with the rising of the heliocentric theory, although it was not directly used to convey a new idea of order on an artistic field. The interaction of both fields was likely found in people's aspiration to understand the world around them, and consequently to give themselves an explanation, scientifically and literally<sup>42</sup>.

This new arrangement was to be experienced even on a religious level, too. The idea of a human being as a superior and conscious creator of beauty by claiming power of the physical world was very likely to intersect with religious matters; the new centre of the universe was moving from transcendent authorities to mortal ones. Those were gradually assuming the control over the surrounding environment, although blurred elements and contradictions were widespread since the imposition of Christianity over pagan animism.

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<sup>41</sup> Ivi, p. 105.

<sup>42</sup> See Smith, P.H. (2009). "Science on the Move: Recent Trends in the History of Early Modern Science". *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 2, pp. 346-348.

## 2.2. The Effects of Religion on Early Modern Ecology

I have mentioned before the animistic reverence that people had towards Nature in ancient times. This belief presumed that every natural element had its own spirit that governed its life and could affect human's life when badly treated. Earth was perceived as a nurturing mother that sustained its children by providing them what they needed. This animism of nature contributed to the development of an immediate relationship with mankind, "[a]n I-thou relationship in which nature was considered to be a person-writ-large was sufficiently prevalent that the ancient tendency to treat it as another human still existed."<sup>43</sup> According to this belief, the Platonic philosophy postulated a tripartite division of the macrocosmic world, that is the body, the soul, and the spirit as the components of a living organism, including the world itself. The harmony of the world was so emphasized in set of a pantheistic view of a *spiritus loci* that linked everything together. The natural magic of elements was infused with this spirit, and consequently it drew a distinction between elementary qualities and the properties of matter, and supranatural properties, which were expressed through their own language. Those influenced the physical world, which revealed itself capable of interaction with humanity for it was considered intelligible. Hence, it was through the animistic language that occult virtues found a correspondence with the human world; natural spirits contained more form and less materiality, and they could affect and alter bodies on Earth, especially those who managed to get in touch with it. The effects of pagan animism mirrored in the organismic idea of a principle that animated the cosmos, binding together the creation. The human body was seen as a mirror to the wonders of the physical world, too: just like Earth was pervaded by fluids (rivers, lakes, etc), so was the human body, which produced saliva, for instance. Earthly liquids had its own evacuation system as well, flowing from little veins to bigger ones, until they broke wind causing earthquakes, volcanic exhalations, and so on. As far as pantheistic religions are concerned, this link with Nature revived in statues representing the natural element in the shape of a man or a woman able to change aspect, such as the Egyptian Api, god of the Nile, or the Roman Diana, goddess of the wild and the Moon. As Borlik asserted, the English Renaissance

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<sup>43</sup> Merchant, C. (1990). "Nature as Female". In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, p. 27.

depicts an earth-centred cosmos in which astrological energy radiating from the planets engenders metals and affects human behaviour so that, for instance, men are swayed by the sun and women by the sun and moon. Human sciences (alchemy, botany, animal husbandry) are represented as “natural arts” through which a simian humanity both imitates (following the principle of monkey see, monkey do) and improves the art of Nature. Following a neo-Platonic tradition, it exalts a female Nature as a semi-deific force that mediates between humanity and God, but is, therefore – as Richard Hooker and Walter Raleigh maintain in excerpts from this section – not an autonomous agent.<sup>44</sup>

In the early modern macrocosm, empirical observations placed Earth, the matter, under the sky, the spirit. Being the human soul part of the spiritual world, it did not belong to the physical one: therefore, a coherent approach to this belief was required to support the order within the macrocosm. As regards the maximum systems, both the geocentric and heliocentric theories suited as means of reflection on the difference between spirit and matter: the ambo hierarchical structures described a communication that moved from upwards, from the matter to the spirit, and vice versa. A constant dialogue emerged as one of the main characteristics and key points of the order presented in the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems, which would exist *a priori*, being the main responsible for *harmonia coelestium*<sup>45</sup>. Nevertheless, this idea of perfect and harmonious order of giving-receiving stood in contrast with the rising of Christianity, and consequently monotheism, with later effects on the ecologic level.

Christianity, and particularly the Church, did neither allow nor recognize this idea of a natural magic that could manipulate people’s lives: those kind of assumptions were considered heretical as they did not coincide with Christ’s redemptive message. Although the human body was conceived as a harmonious unit between physics and rationality, the pantheistic vision of the natural world stroke against the sense of harmonious creation as a gift from God. The Old Testament condemned it as a heretical worship long before the Coming of Christ. Religion maintained the duality expressed by God and the world, good and evil, spirit and matter: any other interference was not contemplated. Humanity was

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<sup>44</sup> Borlik, T.A. (2019). “Introduction”. In *Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> See Goddu, A. (1996). “The Logic of Copernicus's Arguments and His Education in Logic at Cracow”. *Early Science and Medicine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 50-57.



therefore given dominion over Earth's resources since their origins according to God's plan: the universe itself was created by a rational being and each part and imperfection existed for the perfection of the whole. As a result, since Nature was created by God as a gift for humanity, it needed to be praised and treated as the gift it was:

In pre-modern Europe, land and work were seen as part of God's creation ordinance and as properly subject to objective and religiously inspired ethical standards. Nature was conceived by the monastic agriculturist as gift not property, for land belonged absolutely to God not humans. Similarly time, like space, was conceived before modernity as God's time. The offices of prayer governed the monastic agriculturalist's day, and together with holy days and Sundays, set a pattern of work, contemplation and recreation which regulated human work and economy.<sup>46</sup>

Nonetheless, some scholars claim that the innovation brought on the economical field together with the traditional picture of a male Christian God legitimating a new account for the human role inside the living chain of the cosmos, contributed to change the perception of the care of creation. As people were God's creatures, they were responsible for maintaining their place within the natural order. One fight that was carried on by the Reformation in Elizabethan England was the purge of Rogation costumes, the processions that aimed to ensure land's fertility by self-purification<sup>47</sup>. Since they were seen as a lasting effect of pagan animism, they should have not been promoted in Protestant countries. An effect of this doctrine was the Calvinist belief in redemption through work, which was also promoted by Protestants: since the work of salvation involved a movement of heart and faith towards the divine, human beings among all God's creatures could work for their own personal salvation through work. This instrumental vision of redemption seemed to claim and confirm the supremacy of humanity and humanity's right to use creation for any purpose that may be desired. Being an anthropocentric religion, Christianity broke the inhibitions that protected nature from exploitation by humanity.

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<sup>46</sup> Northcott, M.S. (2009). "The Origins of the Environmental Crisis". In *Environment and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 77.

<sup>47</sup> See Borlik, T.A. (2011). "The Reformation and the Disenchantment of Nature". In *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures*. New York: Routledge, pp. 105-107.

Religion did not simply seem to authorize the dominion over Nature, but also over other peoples:

concentration on the hope for human personal salvation in another future world tended to encourage turning of the back on matters perceived to be of this present natural and sinful world. This set humanity apart from nature and other-worldliness engendered an indifference to the state of the earth.<sup>48</sup>

This was particularly remarked in Calvinism and Protestantism, in which the emphasis lay on personal success. The stress on the rule over Nature found a correspondence in the Bible, although in the Scripture the ruling ability was underlined by the responsibility. The necessity of controlling might be interpreted as a desire not to tame the natural phenomena, and to improve land in order to ease the human existence on Earth. This vision derived from the Hebrew reception of Nature as having an instrumental value to mankind, as one might find in the story of Noah in which the dominion over natural elements were followed by blessings only if people proved to be worth of it. Likewise, the idea of superiority and control emerged in both cosmological theories, as symbols of experiencing dominion derived from an external agent, which appeared stronger in the geocentric system. According to Ptolemy, the Earth, and therefore the human being, was displaced as the core of the cosmos. Despite that, the position appeared to determine a subjection to external phenomena, as well as to internal ones, that is related to the physical world.

Particularly relevant to this topic of dominion was the association of Nature's wilderness to women's lust. Just as women gave life to other creatures, so did Nature in producing everything a person needed for personal sustenance. The idea of Nature as a caring mother was part of the animistic perception of the physical world, which was later symbolically associated to women: "women's physiological functions of reproduction, nurture, and childrearing are viewed as closer to nature, their social role is lower on the cultural scale than that -of the male"<sup>49</sup>. However, Nature was capable of disastrous events,

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<sup>48</sup> Gillmor, D.A. (1996). "The Ecological Crisis and the Judaeo-Christian Religion". *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 85, No. 339, p. 262.

<sup>49</sup> Merchant, C. (1990). "Nature and Disorder: Women and Witches". In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row p. 144.

like thunderstorms or floods that could not be completely controlled by men: so, this was symbolically associated with the dark side of woman, her sexual desires. Even though the Biblical imagery had embodied the female figure with models of grace, such as the Virgin, women were still considered closer to Nature, and like Nature they had to be submitted and kept in their place. Those who perpetuated the disorder were associated to witches, and consequently to the violence of nature. This common feeling and imposition of a patriarchal system was one of the changes the new perception of religion caused in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. Consequently, the control over women went along the control over Nature; similarly, the submission of the woman to her husband or father worked as a symbolic reference of man's power over Nature, confirming the new order of a society that was turning to an economy based on environmental exploitation. Even though this social change was gradually taking place within this historical context, language itself was slowly being influenced by all these events, for new words were required to convey a changing vision of the world.

### **2.3. Early Modern literature and ecology**

The animistic view of nature seemed not to require too many complex words to deepen the relationship between men and natural elements, for there was a deep concern for the 'non-said' of nature which were expressed through natural sounds, like the wind blowing through the trees. This was poets' mission, who were considered magic intermediators between the spiritual sphere of Nature and mankind. They were seekers for an unknown meaning that lay beyond the visual world, and they were responsible for praising it and letting other people know it. Consequently, they were holders of an equilibrate relationship between human beings and the surrounding environment. However, Manes argued that the written word

encouraged the epistemological inference, apparently impossible in oral cultures where language exists only as evanescent utterances, that meaning somehow resides in human speech (more particularly in those aspects of it susceptible to rational analysis), not in the phenomenal world.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Manes, C. (1996). "Nature and Silence". In Glotfelty, G., Fromm, H. (Eds.). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, pp. 19-20.

The change that early modern Europe was experiencing on a literary level was impacted by the events and the innovations brought among fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. While the effects of Christianity in Middle Ages had turned the worship of nature as a mean to worship God, placing Him at the top of the big chain of the living organism, i.e. the world, Renaissance replaced the human position inside the macrocosm, and therefore in literature and nature:

When the Renaissance inherited the *scala naturae*, however, a new configuration of thought that would eventually be called humanism converted it from a symbol of human restraint in the face of a perfect order to an emblem of human superiority over the natural world. Originally a curriculum emphasizing classical learning, humanism came to emphasize a faith in reason, progress, and intellect that would become the cornerstone of modern technological culture. Drawing on humanity's position in the Great Chain between "dumb beasts" and articulate angels, humanism insisted there was an ontological difference between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the biosphere, infusing a new and portentous meaning to the ancient observation that humans had rational discourse while animals did not.<sup>51</sup>

As the human beings were starting to investigate their new role in the macro universe, they looked for more links with the physical world in order to declare their gradual dominion over it. Such reflection appeared to find a correlation in a new awareness concerning society, which has been previously discussed. Although it was not directly involved, the subversion in the cosmological hierarchical structure appeared significantly relevant when relating it to the act of observation. The first approaches to the sky's order depended on the act of observing, which led to a gradual awareness of the real perspective of the natural world and the actual representation of the celestial movements. As far as early modern literature is concerned, the Renaissance rhetoric absorbed the act of direct observation as means of elaborating a new language that stressed human's dominion over Nature.

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<sup>51</sup> Ivi, pp. 20-21.

### 2.3.1. The Impact of Pastoral Poetry

As regards the improvements concerning early modern society, Elizabethan poets and playwrights also bear witness to the changes around them, although they appeared to present a particular sensitivity towards the natural elements, that is they seemed to recognize and preserved the old literary *topoi* nature bound. On a literary level, they became a tool to investigate and discuss natural politics and the environmental situation, particularly in early modern England. This would lead back to the pastoral tradition, which had been rediscovered mainly in Virgilian texts in the late Middle Ages. Pastoral texts focused on the description of an uncorrupted rural world, where human beings could meditate the beauty of nature away from urban life's anxieties. This is one of the main differences that emerge from medieval and early modern texts, which described the rural world as related to human work<sup>52</sup>; indeed, humanity remarked its presence in Nature, proving its control over the physical world. According to some virtues proclaimed by the Reform, labourers contributed to the determination of their supremacy over the surrounding environment, and consequently to their own redemption. As a result, the influence of religion was striking, in particular in the multiple references to agriculture and pasture, which were the basis of rural work.

Nevertheless, religious allegories did not correspond with the rising humanist spirit that characterized and involved the large majority of Renaissance scholars. As Borlik claimed, "[T]hese studies insinuate that Renaissance pastoralists were more preoccupied with mediating their relationship to their literary predecessors than humanity's relationship to nature."<sup>53</sup> It might be assumed that in choosing a natural element as the main subject of a poem or a play, Renaissance authors were trying to build a counterimage of the *homo oeconomicus* that was growing in importance in the society due to the new innovations on the scientific and economical level. Going back to what Borlik stated, early modern authors seemed to invite the reading public to question the new lifestyle

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<sup>52</sup> See Little, K.C. (2013). "Medieval Tradition of Writing Rural Labor". In *Transforming Work: Early Modern Pastoral and Late Medieval Poetry*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Indiana Press, pp. 1-2 *et passim*.

<sup>53</sup> Borlik, T.A. (2011). "'Hast any Philosophy in Thee, Shepherd?'" Environmental Ethics and the Good Life in Renaissance Pastoral". In *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures*. New York: Routledge, p. 138.

gained through the acquisition of status and wealth, taking into consideration environmental politics through the pastoral lyrics. This kind of nostalgia reflected both the longing for a Golden Age, and was often related to real environmental trauma. Everything was done with no mention to the Creator, as if writers were trying to separate the transcendental from the real life. The emphasis was particularly placed on Renaissance pursuit of happiness inside the new market economy of Elizabethan England. The rediscovery of classical eclogues coincided with the landholding and agricultural problems that I described at the beginning of this chapter, and consequently to a new establishment in the natural order. Resting on these elements, Borlik enumerated three aspects that could conduct to an environmental well-being in Renaissance pastoral:

“environmentally responsive virtue”—a recognition of agency in nature, which in turn encourages us to view non-human life forms as subjects eligible for moral consideration; (2) “environmentally justified virtue”—in which the human subject gauges the moral goodness of an action by its potential impact on the biosphere; and (3) “environmentally productive virtue”—associating the good with behavior that actively promotes or maintains the flourishing of a larger ecological community. [...] Elizabethan pastoral is not nature writing, nor does it consistently endorse what we would today call a biocentric outlook. It often is, however, a meditation on the good life and a culture’s understanding of that concept is very much an environmental issue<sup>54</sup>

It might be deduced that in using natural metaphors, both poets and scholars longed for moving on to the opposite direction of the economical and scientific improvements. Metaphors encouraged a distinction of what should have been considered contemplative and what consumptive, always with an ethical glance to the environmental politics. However, in pastoral contemplative poetry Nature was described as benevolent and as a fulfilment of humans’ need for nurture, that is basically passive; consequently, it would have appeared legit to exploit and manipulate it, as it might be found in Sidney’s *Arcadia*. On the other hand, the harmonious representations of animals and shepherds were aimed to stimulate readers to live for something beyond the immediate reception of senses. The *locus amoenus* was supposed to cultivate people’s temperance and other pastoral virtues that would recreate the primordial relationship with the physical world. Temperance was also praised as a mean to condemn the economic injustice of high land-use during Stuart’s

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<sup>54</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 144-145.

aristocracy, as Borlik observed. The same appeal to the Virgilian tradition of the eclogues as a mode of describing rural labour seemed to link together the perception of the self with social changes and reforms that occurred during the Renaissance. The idea of *anima mundi* reported by Pythagoreans did not serve only as an escape from the new ordinary life, but served as elements of satire that could make people reflect on what they were experiencing in terms of loss. As a result, all these natural aspects offered the ideal mirror of a changing society, particularly of the attitude of human beings towards the natural world. Despite the meaning attributed by the clergy to the history of salvation, Nature served to allegorically portray the importance it had in the human dimension, and how it represented the same social world human inhabited.<sup>55</sup> Yet, it would be hazardous to declare that these phenomena derived from one another, but what mostly emerges is a coincidence regarding when they occurred. Approaching this from an ecocritical perspective, such a correlation might be due to a desire of establishing a new equilibrium or restoring an idyllic contemplation between humanity and the surrounding environment, both in terms of work and literature.

Despite their relevance on a cultural level, the celestial motions were not taken into consideration by pastoral texts of classical literature nor by early modern pastorals. Yet, the idea of harmony and order is strictly related to it, and it is very likely that derives from astrological studies. On a literary level, the references to the night sky or the cosmical spheres were adopted in terms of metaphors came from the astrological tradition. Ecocritical studies related to Renaissance did also focus on a ‘terrestrial’ level, a choice that might be due to the possibility to directly observe and predict the phenomena related to the bucolic world, conversely to the independence of celestial motions. It is within this context that a major difference might be noticed: this could be described as a cut between natural predictability, which could be dominated, and celestial arbitrariness, which was alien to human control probably because of its physical distance. Such a difference in the use of natural and celestial elements in early modern literature might provide an interesting insight regarding the discourse on human control and order over physical

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<sup>55</sup> See Little, K.C. (2013). “The Invention of English Eclogue”. In *Transforming Work: Early Modern Pastoral and Late Medieval Poetry*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Indiana Press, pp. 32-33 *et passim*.

world. Resting on this, an overview of the relevance of natural components is firstly necessary to emphasize this difference.

### **2.3.2. Forests and Trees**

Trees occupied a central place in Western Europe civilization, starting from the Bible itself, where the Tree of Knowledge stood in the middle of Eden: they might be read as a metaphor of the origins of the world and a generation. In early modern manuscripts, various characters were compared to trees, particularly parents were the Ur-tree and children the fruits; similarly, woods and trees offered a flexible tool to discuss the origins of a nation as well as the roots of noble families. Alongside this aspect, the tree was used a symbol for national identity and strength as well. The attribution of trees' properties to human beings and vice versa contributed to represent a nation or a family's genealogy with solid and valuable roots, beginning with the remotest or mythical ancestor<sup>56</sup>. The linear shape of the tree also offered itself as the best ordinate graphic illustration of various generations from human perspective. Thus, trees' humanization process could be considered an attempt of reorganizing people's own self-perception within the natural context. Nevertheless, forests were personified also to inject into the economical discourse of sixteenth century England for the disposal of alternative energy, the coal. The loss of woodlands became a metaphor of beauty's loss, which was determined by natural features of land itself<sup>57</sup>. Therefore, the features of pastorals were adopted in terms of denouncing poems towards the sustainability of woods so as to protect the real beauty in the changing of the natural order as originally perceived.

The iconography of trees was not only employed in political issues as means of denounce, but it was also adopted in terms of trend to describe the symbiotic and ordered relationship between art and nature both in poetry and plays in accordance with the

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<sup>56</sup> See Klapish-Zuber, C. (1991). "The Genesis of Family Tree". *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, Vol. 4, pp. 107-108.

<sup>57</sup> See McRae, A. (2012). "Tree-Felling in Early Modern England: Michael Drayton's Environmentalism". *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 260.



classical pastoral tradition. For example, in *Arcadia*, Philip Sidney underscored the cultural and psychological value of the forest and of trees:

Laurel shows what I seek; by the myrrh is showed how I seek it;  
Olive paints me the peace that I must aspire to by conquest:  
Myrtle makes my request, my request is crowned with a willow.<sup>58</sup>

This attitude appears to look back to the primordial order that characterized Virgilian eclogues, where the human being would contemplate and imitate the natural environment through lyrics<sup>59</sup>. In the Sidneyan work, Nature seemed to be restored with its original authority, and consequently with an idyllic order of the natural world. Likewise, this reception might share similarities with the astrological beliefs of celestial spheres exercising power over people's lives, even though both aspects were not directly correlated despite their belonging to the non-human world. Although no explicit nor implicit reference emerges in the *Arcadia*, some similarities concerning the longing for an old equilibrium seem to be noticed.

### **2.3.3. Rivers and Garden**

Rivers were compared to human blood circulation, for they were the main way to conduct mercantile traffic; consequently, they were responsible for potentiating social and economic flow. Rivers were used to give a perception of national space, particularly when based on mobility. On the literary level, the image of flowing water also offered a spatial background for the generation of narrative and mythology, for example in the figure of the god Proteus that became a representative for the artist. Britain underlined the importance of water as a striking physical sign of difference from Europe: the British Isles themselves were associated to mythical ones like the Hesperides, remarking a superior

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<sup>58</sup> Sidney, P. (1987). *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. London: Penguin Classics, p. 197. (Originally published in 1593).

<sup>59</sup> See Borlik, T.A. (2011). "Mute Timber? Environmental Stichomythia in The *Old Arcadia* and *Poly-Olbion*". In *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures*. New York: Routledge, pp. 78-80.

position compared to inland countries, as argued by Kilgour. Resting on this image, Britain built its symbols on the relationship with waters, which was also confirmed by the victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588.

As regards poetry, water became a symbol for the poet tuning his art to the sound of water falling, and thus finding inspiration in the local rivers. An example of this process could be found in Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, where water was seen as a symbol of unification and political cohesion, especially in referring to England and Ireland. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, river poems became extremely popular, defining a genre on its own, for they could adapt to every topic in poems, whether they were pastoral or elegiac. In particular, rivers marked the kinship with the Roman poetic landscape and the British one, and thus to serve to chorographical descriptions of the environment and to coordinate the aspects of the landscape itself.<sup>60</sup>

In Sidney, rivers are part of the idyllic environment of his *Arcadia*, where they were placed in a choreographic order with trees and flowers, reminding of the Garden of Eden in its totality. References the poetry of Horace and Ovid are to be found in the dialogue between Philisides and Echo that marked the second eclogue, where “an encounter with a natural world that talks back, that responds to—but is not controlled by—the human subject”<sup>61</sup>:

Philisides	Echo
Fair rocks, goodly rivers, sweet woods, when shall I see peace?	Peace.
Peace? What bars my tongue? Who is it that comes to me so nigh? I.	
Oh! I do know what guest I have met; it is Echo.	‘Tis Echo.
Well met echo, approach: then tell me thy will too.	I will too.
Echo, what do I get for yielding my sprite to my griefs?	Griefs <sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See Herendeen, W.H. (1987). “Castara’s Smiles... Sabrin’s Tears: Nature and Setting in Renaissance River Poems”. *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp. 294-295.

<sup>61</sup> Borlik, T.A. (2011). “Mute Timber? Environmental Stichomythia in The *Old Arcadia* and *Poly-Olbion*”. In *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures*. New York: Routledge, p. 94.

<sup>62</sup> Ivi, p. 78.

The effect appears to state the superiority of the natural world which exists *a priori* of human existence and control; this vision might be noticed in the reorganization of the garden too. The garden would be perceived as the major expression of people's idea of order and control over nature, as they could easily supervise and predict the time of flourishing and pruning. The care of the garden focused on the aesthetic delight, proportions, and symmetry, concordantly to the ideals discussed through perspective I introduced before. Nevertheless, the passage above appears to highlight a different vision of order determined by Nature itself, which moves in an independent and unpredictable way despite attempting to categorize it, like the celestial movements. Even though the sky is not directly mentioned nor explored in pastoral poetry, some similarities seem to emerge, as well as a correspondence between an idea of order and control which could not be completely studied nor classified.

#### **2.3.4. The Shepherd**

The figure of the shepherd shares both religious and pagan roots. It was the representation of God taking care of His sheep; prophets were also represented as shepherds, such as Moses. In the New Testament, Christ was represented also as the Good Shepherd, referring to the Hebrew major occupation and to the references spread among the Old Testament, such as the one mentioned before. This metaphor mostly stood for the representation of the human being in harmony with Nature. This image had a huge impact on the common representations, as it symbolised the incarnation of the primordial man: a nomad, a person who followed the rhythm of seasons, and showed a deep respect towards the natural world, long before he turned to a sedentary life.

It is hardly surprising that this figure was mostly used in pastoral lyrics as a reference to a Golden Age of the past, as the shepherd created an emotional link with the human community as belonging to every culture. Hence, Elizabethan poetry found in the figure of the shepherd the perfect character to convey a sense of nostalgia for a world close to nature. As the main character of pastoralism, the shepherd appeared to embrace the ideals of gentility as mean of emblem for virtue. In those poems, the activity of the shepherds was occupied by singing and piping. According to Montrose, those descriptions could be considered an alternative to the aristocratic world that was getting involved in the social

changes I previously discussed: surprisingly, this need was felt by nobles that were looking for a way out of the social environment of the court: “[T]he conventions of pastoral romance transpose this marker into those refinements of carriage and complexion that manifest the natural superiority of rusticated aristocrats to the coarse and sunburned rustics among whom they sojourn.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, it seemed that the pursue of this primordial life was longed for by an elite who could afford it: aristocrats wished for an idyllic life away from the duties of the courtly life, emphasising the positive aspects of a natural routine. This affinity derived from the pastoral conventions of labor and leisure, which determined the cultural Renaissance tradition deriving from biblical and classical sources mixed together with features of Elizabeth economy and society.

The metaphor of the shepherd was also used as a mean of ambitions as well as to investigate the problems of poetry by Spenser in his *Shepherd's Calendar*, a poem dedicated to Philip Sidney, in which Spenser presented satirical comments and offered reflections on the role of poetry relying on the classical tradition. As a consequence, it could be deduced that the allegory of the shepherd could serve to multiple reflections in pastoral poetry, in which he was described as the protagonist of the lyrics or the ideal figure that interacts with the surrounding environment. This might be due to the same attitude of the shepherd that requires a closer contact with the rural world and its primordial order, which was longed for a recreation in Renaissance pastoral lyrics. As regards to this aspect, this unconventional reflection on pastoral poetry appeared to have offered humanist a new mean to put literary issues and problematics into discussion, despite the stereotypical use of pastoral imagery and the poet's office, which might be found in Sidney's work too.

#### **2.4. Spenser and Sidney: Unconventional Pastoral Approaches**

*The Shepherd's Calendar* was inspired as a response to the Reformed approach to poetics as a conservative link to pagan animism. The passing of seasons defined the longing of a poetry related to the tradition and the recognition of the art of poetry as part

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<sup>63</sup> Montrose, L.A. (1983). “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form”. *ELH*, Vol. 50, No. 3, p. 428.

of a true office, not a merely escape to ordinary life, a feeling that Spenser shared with Sidney. According to Herman, in that work

[B]y incorporating antipoetic sentiment into the poem, Spenser implicitly defends his project by fashioning a public persona who recognizes the political, religious, and aesthetic limits and dangers of his craft; [...] the aspiring poet is always at risk in one way or another; if he tries to woo, he risks rejection; if he tries to teach, he again risks rejection; and if he aspires too much, he risks a much more serious form of transgression.<sup>64</sup>

Even though at the beginning I mentioned the numerous pastoral images that filled calendars, Spenser as a humanist looked back to former poets and the use of natural elements not as a simple decoration, but as an element that offered topics to be discussed not necessarily related to the pastoral world. Herman claims that “[r]ather than providing the examples of poetry’s amatory, pedagogical, and political successes that one might expect in a poem announcing itself as the prelude to an epic, many of the eclogues explore the *problematic* of poetry.”<sup>65</sup> So, Spenser was concerned with the antipoetic sentiment that spread among conservative wings of Reformers like William Tyndale (1494-1536)<sup>66</sup>, who claimed that poetry be concerned with reality. As stated by Greenblatt et al., “[P]astoral was viewed as the prelude in a great national poet’s career to more ambitious undertakings”<sup>67</sup>, and consequently it offered Spenser the possibility to discuss the figure of poet as a complete occupation and not a mere pastime. This might express what Spenser aimed to convey relying on Virgil’s model, who firstly started his career with pastoral poetry and then moved on to epic poetry with the *Aeneid*. Resting on this, the approach chose by Spenser pointed to express satirical comments on the controversial religious and political issues as well as to comment on the moral influence of literature by choosing the theme of eclogues. This marked a desire to emulate Virgil, and classical

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<sup>64</sup> Herman, P.C. (1992). “The *Shepherd’s Calendar* and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment”. *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 29-30.

<sup>65</sup> *Ivi*, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> See Herman, P.C. (1992). “The *Shepherd’s Calendar* and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment”. *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 16.

<sup>67</sup> Greenblatt, S., Lewalski, B.K., Logan, G., Maus, K.E. (2012). “Edmund Spenser (1552? – 1599)”. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century*. New York: Norton, p. 769.

poets in general, in order to re-appropriate and reaffirm the identity of the poet within society and the court.

As far as his pastoral microcosm is concerned, Spenser traced the life of his protagonist as a shepherd throughout a year, which was marked by twelve eclogues and recreated through elements of natural enchantment and the discussion on the role of the poet, before the Arcadian world described by Sidney. Unlike the conventional use of the pastoral figures of speech, Spenser adopted them in relation to the reform of English poetry as well as a mean to discuss the moral influence of literature through the elements of idyllic representations. It is in this shift in the symbolic imagination around pasture labour that Spenser's novelty relies on. In particular, one of the bigger differences that seemed to emerge was the perception of time, which was conveyed through the choice of the calendar. This appeared to be related to the eclogues' pastoral character of seasons, although Spenser showed a desire of breaking with the pastoral conventions, as the space of seasons became the setting to explore the multiple mutations of human lives:

Calendar, by understanding time in terms of the cyclical rhythms of nature, forces time to flow in an enclosed, circular course of eternal return. Through calendar man grasps the otherwise ungraspable time. Yet in doing so, man is shut in the endless repetition of the same movement. The calendar framework thus simultaneously involves the question of how man deals with and can transcend the year's round and his mutability.<sup>68</sup>

This might express Spenser's concern in man's relation to the cycle of nature, which seems to mostly emerge in the recurring and eternal life of Nature versus the linear progress towards an end of human life. The attention seems to be drawn on the dependent relationship between mankind and Nature regardless human attempts to control the physical world. As I briefly introduced, rural elements would always survive the passing time and the changes people made over them, despite human attempts to leave a sign that could survive its existence. A similar attitude appears to emerge in poetry, particularly in the poetic office previously mentioned, despite the fact that the role of the poet for poetry's sake was being mortified and instrumentalized. Therefore, the eclogues inspired

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<sup>68</sup> Lee, SW. (1991). "Time and Colin Clout: Pastoralism of Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*". *English Studies*, Vol. 15, No.1, p. 2.

by the classical tradition offered Spenser a new way to explore the insights of poetry choosing a non-human element, time, as organized through a year and its months.

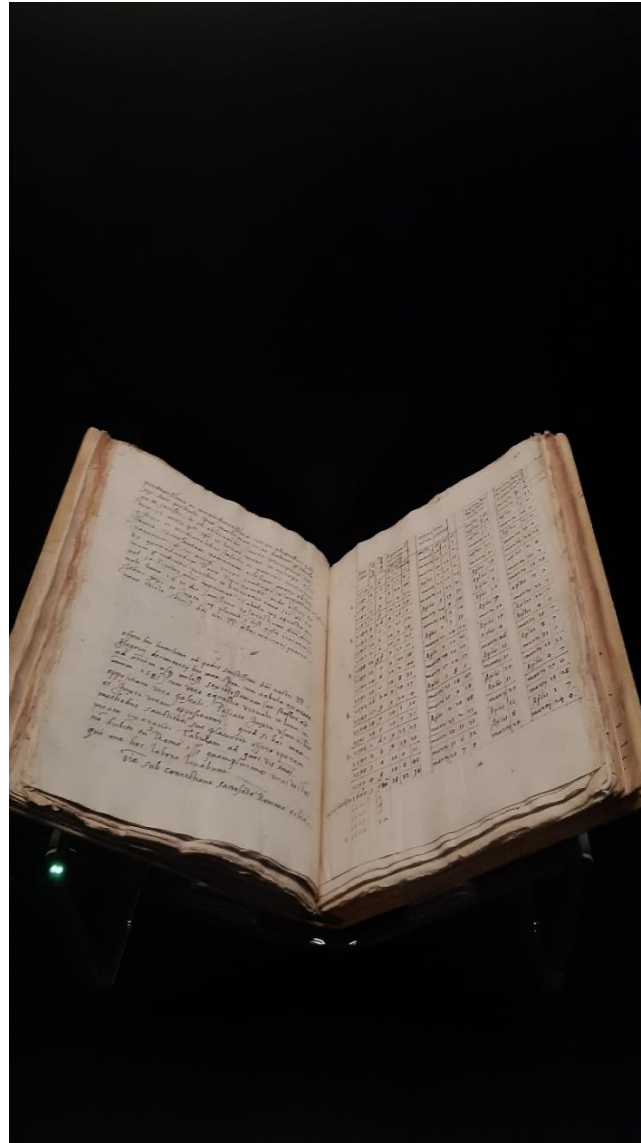


Figure 7. The Gregorian Reform of the Calendar, XVI century. (Vatican City: Vatican Archive)<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> The manuscript is currently exposed at the Holy See Pavilion in EXPO 2020 Dubai. Picture taken courtesy of Mr. De Nicola, Pavilion director.

There also seemed to be an interconnection with the calendar reform decreed by Pope Gregory VIII in 1577<sup>70</sup>, which eliminated ten days from the calendar to make it coincide with the celestial movements, and thus structured a new organization of the calendar. The calculations made by Pope Gregory seemed to affect the poet concordantly to the principle of harmony: in choosing that given structure, Spenser appeared to urge the reader to find in his work the same harmony found in nature, and which was praised by ancient poets. Some examples of this aim were provided by the woodcut at the beginning of each eclogue, where the classical season/activity was represented together with the dominant zodiac sign of the time.



Figure 8. “October”, from Edmund Spenser, *Shepherds Calendar* (London: 1580).<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> See Chapman, A.A. (2002). “The Politics of Time in Edmund Spenser's English Calendar”. *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 42, No.1.

<sup>71</sup> Greenblatt, S., Lewalski, B.K., Logan, G., Maus, K.E. (2012). “Edmund Spenser (1552? – 1599)”. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century*. New York: Norton, p. 770.

In the woodcut, two men are discussing with their sheep, a mark that pasture season is over, while the Scorpio is spotted in the cloud on the right corner above, showing its presence in the month.



Conversely to the typical tradition of pastoral, the adoption of a non-human concept to explore literary issues was certainly innovative. A correspondence with the elements represented in the woodcut and in the poem might be found in the reading of the former: for example, the Scorpio was a symbol for seeding, and therefore it could be the perfect inspiration to discuss the meaning of poetry in early modern society, as if poetry was a seed that needed to spread its roots before blooming. The characters themselves showed a correspondence between the topics to be discussed and the zodiac symbol; as stated by Herman in analysing the figure on the left,

his broad, handsome face, his distinguished beard, his posture, and his laurel crown present an idealized image of a poet whose disappointments represent poetry's ineffectiveness in Elizabethan England. On the other hand, the artist portrays Cuddie's interlocutor, Piers (the printer sometimes spells his name "Pierce" or "Pires"), as beardless, suggesting a youthfulness borne out by his idealism. Thus, the illustration casts October as another Youth- Age debate, only this time the argument explicitly centers on poetry's marginality.<sup>72</sup>

Similar references are to be found in the other woodcuts at the beginning of each eclogue, symbolizing not only an interaction between allegory of the month and the topic to be discussed in the lyrics, but also specifying the eternity of time represented by the zodiac sign beyond human existence. This same sign might symbolize the influence of a given sphere or astrological combination that would inspire the topic to be discussed within the lyrics. For example, the eclogue "November" is an expression of human grief, particularly when referring to the end of human life: the same structure reminds to the one of the elegies,<sup>73</sup> marking a debate between youth and age; in the woodcut the image of the Sagittarius watches from the sky. Being that zodiac symbol half human and half animal, it is filled with enough rationality to witness a debate between the inevitability of passing time and the animal instinct of survival, which was metaphorically absorbed by human desire to endure time motion. Regarding this aspect, another correspondence with the almanacs' structure transpired from Spenser's work, which "adopts this same cosmic

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<sup>72</sup> Herman, P.C. (1992). "The *Shepheardes Calender* and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment". *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 20-21.

<sup>73</sup> See Alpers, P. (1985). "Pastoral and the Domain of Lyric in Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*". *Representations*, No. 12, p. 96.

framework and even more eloquently appraises the physical and psychological dynamic that exists between mankind and nature.”<sup>74</sup> Such an aspect could be applied to human improvements on the environment, which could be read as a proof of control over Nature. The approach adopted by Spenser offered him the opportunity to develop the qualities of poetry and to criticise the treatment reserved to poetry in general within the cosmic and generative cycles of months and stars. “Enduring qualities of poetry, continuity through procreation-these were the two main forces by which Spenser thought man could transcend time.”<sup>75</sup> It might be assumed that Spenser managed to humanize the sky within another non-human element, time, and adapted it to literary and sociological aspects.

The pastoral elements revealed to be useful to investigate moral issues resting on the ideals expressed by classical poets, contrary to the typical use of idyllic landscape as an escape from ordinary life and as means to criticise environmental politics of the time. Thus, an ecocritical approach could serve to an alternative literary analysis, showing a link between the sociological and literary aspects. Sidney appeared to be familiar with the pastoral elements and their multiple uses in poetry too. These characteristics were widely employed in *Arcadia*, just like other humanists did when searching for an inspiration in Golden Age poetry. Nevertheless, Sidney was involved in typical poetical issues as well, especially in terms of expressing love in poetry, as it might be found in *Astrophil and Stella*. Being love the theme of this collection, the large majority of the analysis was concerned with the relationship between Sidney and his Muse, Penelope Deveraux.

Given the previous background, the discussion over Nature’s control and love theme in *Astrophil and Stella* seems incompatible, for they do not seem to communicate with one another. However, the presence of celestial metaphors in the sonnet sequence might present some similarities with what was analysed before. As I discussed above, the woman was associated with the Nature: according to the early modern perception of her role and her comparison with the natural world, she should be controlled and ruled by the man. Yet, Sidney does not choose to use pastoral *topoi* when talking about Stella,

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<sup>74</sup> Borlik, T.A. (2011). “The Reformation and the Disenchantment of Nature”. In *Ecologism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures*. New York: Routledge, p. 118.

<sup>75</sup> Lee, SW. (1991). “Time and Colin Clout: Pastoralism of Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*”. *English Studies*, Vol. 15, No.1, p. 3.

preferring those of the sky. That the sky was not being explored nor in English pastoral studies nor in classical ones, it might be due to the physical distance between the Earth and the sky or to the impossibility to directly observe and totally predict celestial phenomena, even though there had been attempts to classify them and to organize celestial motions (e.g. the Ptolemaic system). This attitude might be read as a conscious or unconscious turning point concerning the early modern idea of controlling the woman and the Nature. Whilst Spenser chose time to offer a reflection on human transience and helplessness in front of Nature's eternal mutation, Sidney was likely to opt for the unpredictability of celestial influence to discuss the independence of natural phenomena from human control. As a Renaissance humanist, he might have found a comparison with the unpredictability of human feelings towards his mistress, which are also independent from human rationality. According to the courtly love tradition, Sidney placed his beloved lady in a superior position so as to contemplate her figure; at the same time, he should himself worth of her grace, proving his virility despite the amorous struggles. However, the presence of Stella within the collection of poems might offer an alternative perspective and interpretation to the canonical order of poetic tradition.

Resting on this, the rest of my dissertation will focus on the approach formerly presented by Spenser, discussing whether that kind of analysis might offer an alternative interpretation on the Love theme expressed in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. My analysis will therefore concentrate on the use of astrological metaphors adopted by Sidney, and offer an alternative proposal to the study the collection as a correspondence and influence of non-human elements with human ones in order to prove its validity for the study of a literary text.



### 3. Sidney's Approach to Poetry

In this part of my dissertation, the analysis will concentrate on an alternative ecocritical approach in relation to *Astrophil and Stella*. As it is known, this collection of poems was conceived as guided by the theme of love. My intention is to present a correspondence between the nightly elements and the relationship with the human life.

A correspondence exists between the use of natural elements in poetry and their relevance for people's lives, which reflected the inspiration derived from the surrounding environment, as a source of imagery. Sidney chose Nature to recreate a golden place where the poet's wit could exercise his ability in transcending reality. Every aspect was rhetorically engaged with the real world and events, which enabled Sidney to escape confinement to historical, leading him to evoke the grandeur of ancient poets.<sup>76</sup> Those assumptions were explored in his *Defence of Poesy*, in which Sidney imagined a readership independent from the historical events and therefore free to act upon it. This was due to a kind of comparison between history and mind, which were associated with Nature and imaginative capacity by Sidney:

In the *Defence*, Sidney several times refers to history as a form of bondage. [...] The historian, according to the *Defence*, is "bound to recite" what has occurred (89.29), "tied . . . to what is, to the particular truth of things" (85.18-19), "captived to the truth of a foolish world" (90.13-14). Slavery, as in the songs and sonnets, is the subjection of mind to what should be beneath it. [...] In the *Defence*, the historian's subject dominates thought. He takes "a conceit out of a matter" rather than making "matter for a conceit" (99.8-9). History enslaves the mind by forcing it to receive precepts from the mutable, physical world.<sup>77</sup>

Being Nature the subject of history, it could not choose what to include and what to exclude, just like history itself: every event and every phenomenon was to be detected and described for their own essence. It is within this context that Sidney's exploration of the mind seems to become the perfect place to set and experiment the infinite possibilities of a poet's imaginative power, in particular concerning the natural world. This aspect was

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<sup>76</sup> See Stillman, R.E. (2008). "Introduction: Poetry and the Public Domain". In *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism*. London: Routledge, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> De Grazia, M. (1981). "Lost Potential in Grammar and Nature: Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 24.

used as means of discussing the principle of order as explored by human rationality. The freedom expressed by the poet's mind had the faculty to go beyond the limits imposed by real life and to live within the idea of Nature as originally perceived, as he claimed in his *Defence*:

There is no art delivered unto mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they become actors and players, as it were of what nature will have set forth. So doth the Astronomer look upon the stars, and by that he seeth, set down what order nature hath taken therein. So do the geometrician and arithmetician, in their diverse sorts of quantities. So doth the musician in times [rhythmic measure] tell you, which by nature agree, which not. The natural philosopher thereon hath his name, and the moral philosopher standeth upon the natural virtues, vices, or passions of man: and "follow Nature" saith he, "therein, and thou shalt not err". [...] Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature: in making things either better then nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew - forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chymeras, Furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with Nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit.<sup>78</sup>

As a result, the opportunity to improve one's image gave Sidney a chance to emulate the models of Antiquity and to participate in the creative activity of the cosmos. The references to the Ptolemaic system and to the Pythagorean musical theory recalled a longing for a primordial unity in which the essence of Nature is complete and undivided. Striking was the influence of Platonic philosophy, too, resting on the idea of harmonious order that got lost within the changes and discoveries of the sixteenth century. As reported by Heninger Jr., "[i]n the Platonic system, in fact, priority is regularly given to formal properties, such as poetic meter, and mathematical forms become a major means of signifying."<sup>79</sup> Thus, the act of creation was adopted as a model for every creative act in terms of recreating and experiencing the harmonious order of the universe. Everything was supposed to be in tune and arranged to it: as a consequence, music was inspired and organized in meter, which suited the divine inspiration of it and appeared to work

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<sup>78</sup> Sidney, S. (2002). "The Defence of Poesy". In Dutton, R. (Eds). *Selected Writings*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, pp. 106-107. All the quotes taken by this book will be signed by the capital letters *DoP*.

<sup>79</sup> Heninger Jr., S.K. (1991). "Spenser, Sidney, and Poetic Form". *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 88, No. 2, p. 144.

perfectly for poetry, as musical theory applied to verbal text, as well.<sup>80</sup> The vision of poetry and Nature seemed to come close to God's original thought of the world, just as it was reported in the principles of the Platonic Hyperuranion (the world where original ideas were conceived and created) as means to reconcile the qualities expressed by the harmonious organization of the cosmos, as I explained in Chapter 1. This schematic representation of objects was independent from the existence of objects on Earth, and was therefore associated to Plato's concept of *idea* as a mean of relationship between the physical extension of universal harmony and what lied under it. Furthermore, the idea embraced both mathematical and philosophical implications, which were explored and adopted in modelling the structure of poems: for example, in Spenser's *Shepherds' Calender*, the annual unit of time became a means to arrange the multiple and infinite possibilities of what may be in a year, as if it was organized on a score.

Sidney was not alien to the influence and the importance of Platonic philosophy: as a humanist, he was also aware of Antiquity poets and philosophers' pastoral tradition which was being recollected by early modern scholars. As a result, the choice to rethink a Golden world through poetry marked his literary activity. Utterly relevant to his work was the same principle of imitation investigated by Aristotle, which was expressed by the philosopher in terms of *mimesis*, "a position that identifies poetry as primarily a fictive art, regardless of its being verse or prose."<sup>81</sup> Resting on this statement, Sidney constructed his vision of poetry as art of imitation, even though he stressed the value of verse over prose. Although it might seem that Sidney was initially agreeing with the Aristotelian definition of poetry, which is not in dispute, he seemed to move the focus on the poetic taxonomy so as to highlight the importance of imaginative form. Taking all these elements together, Sidney's attitude might be applied to the idea of recreating the order of Nature from the human perspective, just as Renaissance artists did architecture and painting. This would be helpful in order to teach and to produce pleasure in reading and writing. In addition to that, this kind of imitation in the poetic office might also function as a new method to recreate the imagery in one's mind and to recognize its creative ability

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<sup>80</sup> See Heninger Jr., S.K. (1991). "Spenser, Sidney, and Poetic Form". *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 88, No. 2, p. 144.

<sup>81</sup> *Ivi*, p. 142.

as a proof of human control over the physical world. The result will be a personal creation of a natural representation boundless from historical circumstances. Accordingly, McEleney et al. declared that “[B]y making poets rather than poetry the subject, Sidney clearly signals an emphasis on the act of writing.”<sup>82</sup> Sidney then ‘borrowed’ the Aristotelian principle of imitation in order to create something new and different from the representation of the real world, emphasizing the recreative ability of invention. Just like Homeric epic poems, Sidney intended to reproduce a *mimesis* of reality so powerful to need not justification for its authenticity, that is to produce a fictional world as if it was real in the text.

Furthermore, the action that Sidney took to investigate the value of poetry aimed to focus on the interiority and imaginative capacity not only of his being a poet, but of readers, too, transcending historical facts. Therefore, it appeared logical to enhance with a distinct world of events, where the main protagonists of poems could explore a singular and flawless vision of reality close to the classical poetic tradition. In this golden world, every particular was likely to be transformed into an allegorical representation of virtues and vices, whereas historical characters into fictitious<sup>83</sup>. As regards to the ideology of Ideas, Sidney appeared to provide it with universal import<sup>84</sup> in order to combine all the elements together in the production of pleasure both in reading and writing. The previously mentioned “zodiac of his own wit” aimed then to offer a remedy to historical confinement, both in terms of facts and natural phenomena. In Sidney’s vision of poetry, readers were a sort of elite guided by the pursuit of a fictional power of an inclusive and

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<sup>82</sup> McEleney, C., Wernimont, J. (2013). “Re- Reading for Forms in Sir Philip Sidney’s Defence of Poesy”. In Theile, V., Tredennick, L. (Eds). *New Formalisms and Literary Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 120.

<sup>83</sup> “But let those things alone, and go to man - for whom as the other things are, so it seemeth in him her uttermost cunning is employed - and know whether she have brought forth so true a lover as Theagenes, so constant a friend as Pylades, so valiant a man as Orlando, so right a prince as Xenophon’s Cyrus, so excellent a man every way as Virgil’s Aeneas. Neither let this be jestingly conceived, because the works of the one be essential [real], the other in imitation or fiction; for every understanding, knoweth the skill of each artificer standeth in that Idea, or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself.” (*DoP*, p. 107).

<sup>84</sup> See *DoP*, pp. 107-108.



comprehensive representation of personal experience, whether it was perceived as romantic or nostalgic towards the natural world. Stillman argued that

[a]s the most important exercise of his zodiacal wit, then, Sidney's poet creates golden worlds that transcend through imagination the partisan and the particular, what the *Defence* calls the brazen world of history, securing freedom from that tyranny of the mind whose devolutions in the realm of events produced the spectacular violence. [...] Matter and manner engage from the start in a sophisticated and stylishly engaging competition.<sup>85</sup>

While historical events seemed to be linked to describe events for what they were, just as Nature, poetry gave the opportunity to escape what reality was so as to deal with a Golden Age, where the intellectual light of the poet could focus on what it should be in the idealised world. Hence, poetry had the chance to awaken human potentiality to look beyond the mere subjection of events, enabling it to create a new order in Nature, which was juxtaposed to the unchangeable one of History. This desire might have helped Sidney to find a new discourse that could offer him new instruments deal with the changings of culture and society which I discussed in the previous chapter.

From this point of view, Sidney was aware of the changes early modern society was experiencing, and consequently he appeared to conform himself to the desire to recreate his own order in the natural world. Consistent with the Renaissance intellectual man, Sidney proved his control over human capacities in recreating a primordial world that recalled the Golden Age of Antiquity. An example of this attempt might be found in his *Arcadia*, where the use of images taken from pastoral poetry found a resemblance with images coming from ancient texts. In particular, the innovation brought by Sidney focused on structuring the geography of the setting of the events set in *Arcadia* together with the references to classical poems' tradition. The events that took place in the 'golden world' created by Sidney offered an opportunity to discuss the mind's ability to invent world as similar to the real one, so as to give them a chance to discuss their independence of fictionality, of what it may be.

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<sup>85</sup> Stillman, R.E. (2008). "Introduction: Poetry and the Public Domain". In *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism*. London: Routledge, pp. 25-26.

On the one hand, this might sound unconventional, as that kind of imitation was somehow criticised by Sidney for his rustic language which was the opposite of the emblematic poetry of classical poets.<sup>86</sup> However, it might be also deduced that Sidney was aware of the impact that pastoral metaphors had in the common imagery of early modern reading public, as well as their evocative power. Since Sidney was conscious of the changes that Renaissance society was experiencing, he went searching for an inspiration in the pastoral world as an original source of inspiration to recreate fictional scenarios of a likeable world. However, Nature presents an intrinsic freedom that is alien from the human perception, just like the celestial motions and phenomena: in this idea of arbitrariness, some correspondence with the unpredictability of amorous feelings and astrological motions appeared to be highlighted in Sidney's work. This might have been the reason why Sidney chose the stars and night elements to explore his role as a poet and as a lover. The discussion about the relevance of male dominion over a female character could be read in terms of human control over Nature.

In the same way, Sidney's experience while writing *Astrophil and Stella* seemed to have taken all the previous aspects together. The circumstances of the relationship between Sidney and Penelope Devereaux are not precise, nor is the development of the poems<sup>87</sup>. Additionally, there is no biographical truth of a possible adultery of Penelope with Sidney, or perhaps it will not ever be known. Anyway, the poetic genius found fertile ground within this situation. Resting on the principle of imitation and fiction, the 'plot' of a would-be adulterous relationship became the ideal instrument to investigate and explore the emotions of what one would expect from this literary genre. As a result, the opposition of the natural elements with the classical literary tradition offered Sidney the opportunity to discuss the problematics of unrequited Love.

*Astrophil and Stella*, which was written around November 1581, presents 108 sonnets and eleven songs in which the main narrative thread focuses on Astrophil's

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<sup>86</sup> [Referring to Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*] "That same framing of his style to an old rustic language I dare not allow [commend], since neither Theocritus in Greek, Virgil in Latin, nor Sannazzaro in Italian did affect it." *DoP*, p. 139.

<sup>87</sup> Penelope married Lord Rich in November 1581, so it might be deduced that Sidney wrote his collection of poems after that event.

attempts to obtain Stella's grace and love. Being amorous struggle the focus of Sidney's sequence, the large majority of courtly poetry *topoi* are found, for example in placing Stella, the mistress, in a higher position with respect to Astrophil:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,  
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain:  
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,  
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain<sup>88</sup>

(*A&S* 1.1-4)

As a Renaissance poet, Sidney also employed many allegories derived from the natural world when describing parts of Stella's body or face, for example in Sonnet 91: "Some beauty's piece, as amber colour'd head / Milk hands, rose cheeks"<sup>89</sup>. The use of natural metaphors and references was juxtaposed to the one I introduced in the previous chapter, as Sidney seemed to look at the natural world as a source of inspiration and subjection, particularly when referring to Stella. In creating a fictitious world permeated by the nightly elements, Sidney appeared to move on the opposite directions of his contemporaries. Instead, he chose to look at the models of Greek and Roman poetry, and therefore to describe Nature as exercising power over his emotions within a possible relationship with natural elements. Whilst rural descriptions were under human control, as the old relationship with the physical world was being subverted by the changes on the economical, religious and cultural level, Sidney looked above to the elements of the sky, which were distant and superior to the power mankind. The impossibility to totally determine and control the celestial phenomena appeared to share some similarities with the arbitrariness of human feelings and reactions in front of the object of love.

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<sup>88</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). Astrophil and Stella 1: Loving in Truth. In Dutton, R. (Eds). *Selected Writings*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, p. 29. All the in-text sonnets are taken by this edition and will be signed by the capital letters *A&S*.

<sup>89</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). Astrophil and Stella 91: Stella, While Now by Honour's Cruel Might., p. 90.

### 3.1. “Invention: Nature’s Child”: Analysis of Natural Elements in *Astrophil and Stella*

Sidney underlined the importance of mind’s proper invention, which allowed to recreate the possibility of an alternative imaginative golden world based on the model of classical poets. The model he relied on recalled the Ovidian mythological poet of Orpheus, who mostly could represent the perfect equilibrium between Nature, poetry, and the man, who supervised harmoniously the environment. Similarly, the canons expressed by courtly poetry tradition could mirror the ideas conveyed by Orphic poetry concerning the harmonious equilibrium: women were considered virtuous, and men should not only praise them, but also prove to be worth of their grace. Poetic art inspired by Orpheus’ virtues could offer the ideal method to obtain the lady’s favours<sup>90</sup>. Apart from the influence of poetic conventions, which shares similarities with Petrarchan poetry, the correspondence of a dependent relationship might offer interesting insight within the historical context in which *Astrophil and Stella* was written. Before proceeding to the analysis of the poems, I will provide a brief explanation concerning the importance of the socio-cultural background and one possible answer to the reasons that might have led Sidney to adopt nightly metaphors.

In the previous chapter, I underlined the awareness that human beings were getting towards their role and stance in society. Humanity was finally proving its power and control over the supplies available in nature, e.g. the introduction of perspective in paintings. This aspect is probably the one that appears to share more similarities with the growing awareness of people’s rule over Nature. Perspective describes the surrounding environment for what is actually is; when applied to urban settings and consequently to architecture, perspective seems to become a mirror to human control on the physical world, which is shaped by human vision so as to be contemplated in terms of aesthetic. In courtly poetry, the lover places his mistress in a higher position in order to better contemplate her figure, but at the same time he is expected to prove his virility so as to prove himself worth of the lady’s love. Just like perspective in urban setting, this *topos* appears to be invented and influenced by religious and social philosophies, which stressed

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<sup>90</sup> See Prendergast, M.T.M. (1995). “The Unauthorized Orpheus of *Astrophil and Stella*”. *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 25.

the importance of female passivity, for example by using metaphors derived from the garden language<sup>91</sup>. However, human feelings and Nature do not totally depend on people's control: despite attempting to moderate the amorous impulses in accordance with Renaissance moral conduct and principles, there appear to be always a chance to an unexpected outcome. Natural phenomena and love feelings appear to be as much unpredictable and mutable as the night sky; as a result, everything was opened to infinite possibilities despite the attempts of control that one could have had over personal feelings and the rhythm of Nature. The analysis therefore focuses on poetic conventions and whether it might convey the idea of arbitrariness, as it might be found in celestial phenomena.

It is therefore interesting that Sidney might have opted for the characteristics of celestial arbitrariness to recreate a world of possibilities to explore the creative ability of a poet's mind and to discuss the passivity of the human being. The contrast between the superiority of mankind and the physical world offered the perfect subject matter to investigate the principles of controlling the unexpected outcomes, particularly when it came of discussing virtues and desires. In accordance with the Renaissance beliefs, chaos would generate disasters, while organized space would emulate the harmonious movements of the cosmos. Similarly, the opposition between desire, virtue and common sense revealed itself as harmonious and not chaos-generative, aspects that were celebrated by paintings, architecture, and by Christian modesty. These struggles appeared to be at the core of the triviality and exploration of the themes of *Astrophil and Stella*, which portrayed a sort of contrast between the poetic and sociological conventions of the time and the relationship with the physical world. One significant innovation emerges from Astrophil's struggle towards his desire to have Stella: in accordance with the conventions of courtly poetry, he is trying to prove his worth to his mistress, and yet he is aware of the strength of his amorous impulses. As a consequence, it might be assumed that the poetic composition offered Sidney a mean to convey Astrophil's struggles between the

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<sup>91</sup> "Her cheeks with their colour most delicately mixed would have entertained his eyes sometime, but that the roses of her lips (whose separating was wont to be accompanied with most wise speeches) now by force drew his sight to mark how prettily they lay one over the other, uniting their divided beauties".

Sidney, P. (1987). "Book Three: Chapter 39". In *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. London: Penguin Classics, p. 202.

virtuous conduct he was supposed to have towards Stella and the desire of his senses which appear to overcome his rationality in total arbitrariness. Similarly, the sky might then offer the perfect scenario to explore the blurred lines of possibilities and the action that mind might take on it, as Sidney discussed in the *Defence*. The sequence of the protagonist feeling divided towards moral Virtue and Desire revealed to be an opportunity to project the infinite and uncontrollable changes that might occur in the night sky, which were due to its mutable nature. This aspect is very likely to emerge in the stress Sidney gave to the verbal phrase within the sonnet sequence; according to De Grazia, “The phrase is crucial to Sidney’s theoretical poet but poses a stumbling block to his fictional one. The discourse maintains repeatedly that the poet’s main concern is with what “may be” and “should be.””<sup>92</sup>. Unlike the optative and indicative mood, the potential mood helped to create a correlation between the speaker and the discourse of the feelings he is experiencing:

O dear life, when shall it be,  
That mine eyes thine eyes may see?  
And in them thy mind discover,  
Whether absence have had force  
Thy remembrance to divorce,  
From the image of thy lover?<sup>93</sup>

(*A&S*, Tenth Song, 1-6)

There is no praising nor advoking, but a mere discussion and reflection on the personality and what it would be to be under an external submission which appears distant in space, and consequently merely observable.

As far as the figure of Sidney is concerned, the focus he aimed to underline in *Astrophil and Stella* regarded the contradictions of human impulses and desires as if he

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<sup>92</sup> De Grazia, M. (1981). “Lost Potential in Grammar and Nature: Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*”. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 21.

<sup>93</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella: Tenth Song*, p. 91.

was tracing an anatomy of love.<sup>94</sup> Opposite feelings like hope and despair, longing for Virtue and accomplishing Desire set a sort of literary ‘game-playing’ that appeared to escape human control and offer a possibility to explore self-knowledge at the same time<sup>95</sup>:

I do not envy Aristotle’s wit,  
Nor do aspire to Caesar’s bleeding fame,  
Nor aught do care, though some above me sit,  
Nor hope, nor wish another course to frame,  
But that which once may win thy cruel heart,  
Thou art my wit, and thou my virtue art.<sup>96</sup>  
(A&S 64.9-14)

In the sonnet above, Astrophil recollects the virtues of charismatic characters, although he is aware of not having none of those qualities. Yet, he invokes at least one of those virtues to inspire his works and consequently to conquer Stella’s heart and persona. These conflicts were to find one possible explanation in what lied beyond human dominion, i.e. the night sky. Apparently, Sidney looked for an uncontrollable subjection that offered many alternatives or recreation to study mind’s ability and to express the torments that were haunting him on an emotional level, which might mirror what he claimed when comparing history and the world of possibilities: “She light’ning Love, displaying Venus’ skies”<sup>97</sup>. Sidney’s collection might be approached as a series of unconventional examples of a counter the rhetorical canons of courtly poetry: according to the tradition, the lover depicted himself as humbly subjected to his beloved one although he demonstrated his masculinity through an act of mastery, whereas “Astrophil, with uncharacteristic

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<sup>94</sup> See Greenblatt, S., Lewalski, B.K., Logan, G., Maus, K.E. (2012). “Philip Sidney (1554-1586)”. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century*. New York: Norton, p. 1084.

<sup>95</sup> See Dutton, R. (2002). “Introduction”. In Dutton, R. (Eds.). *Selected Writings*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, pp. 20-21.

<sup>96</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). Astrophil and Stella 64: No More, My Dear, No More These Counsels Try., p. 62.

<sup>97</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). Astrophil and Stella 63: O Grammar Rules., p. 60.

frankness, lays bare his control of Stella.”<sup>98</sup> This aspect might be noticed in numerous references to the Sun and burns, such as in Sonnet 25: “It is most true, for since I her did see, / Virtue’s great beauty in that face I prove, / And find th’effect, for I do burn in love.”<sup>99</sup> In those lines, Astrophil’s conflict between Virtue and Desire is underlined by the celestial metaphor in a overturning of roles as expected in the courtly love tradition.

What is more, the claiming of a private space, separated from the control of public life, could have given Sidney the instruments to discuss the correspondence of feelings beyond his human and limited conception of order with his figure of poet. As a consequence, a correlation and a reconciliation between the assertions expressed in the *Defence* and the writing of *Astrophil and Stella* seemed to have found an uncompromising relationship in the principle of imitation that was explored in the former work<sup>100</sup>. The act of emulating as a source of investigation to an uncontrollable event, or an uncontrollable Muse in this particular case, might reflect a desire to an impulse of an innate chaos derived from love instincts which could find an explanation in the old beliefs of a bad/good planet or star influence. In addition to that, a search for a reason behind human desires in the stars might also be due to the fact that the kind of passionate love praised by Sidney through the figure of Astrophil cannot match with Christian implications of virtue, which appeared to be relegated to “Churches”:

It is most true, what we call Cupid’s dart,  
An image is, which for ourselves we carve;  
And, fools, adore in temple of our heart,  
Till that good god make Church and churchman starve.  
True, that true beauty virtue is indeed,  
Whereof this beauty can be but a shade,

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<sup>98</sup> Jones, A.R., Stallybrass, P. (1984). “The Politics of *Astrophil and Stella*”. *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 24, No.1, pp. 54-55.

<sup>99</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella* 25: The Wisest Scholar of the Wight Most Wise., p. 41, lines 12-14.

<sup>100</sup> “Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis* - that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth (to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture), with this end, to teach and delight.” *DoP*, p. 108.



Which elements with mortal mixture breed;  
True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made,  
And should in soul up to our country move;<sup>101</sup>  
(A&S 5.5-13)

Even though the conceptualization of the female figure aimed to depict a symbol of purity according to the Petrarchan tradition, her same fragmentations in poetry could move along with unpredictable celestial events. Particularly related to this sonnet is the wandering of human soul originate from amorous torments: it seemed that Astrophil was under the Moon influence, which is mutable in its nature and generally associate with the woman. However, Stella is associated with lunar qualities only few times, whilst she is mostly attributed Sun characteristics, an element generally associated to the man, as I will explain later. The idyllic representation that characterized classical and English pastoral poetry is juxtaposed to the unconventional order proposed by Sidney in *Astrophil and Stella* by using nightly metaphors. In accordance with the classical tradition, Sidney's sonnet sequence relied on the observation of the natural environment, showing a closer attention to the collaboration provided by Nature on the model of Antiquity.<sup>102</sup> In addition to that, Kurtuluş declared that "Sidney bestows a responsibility on the poet to represent virtues and vices in a more lively and telling way than nature does."<sup>103</sup> However, Sidney's innovation in perceiving his feelings as unpredictable as the night sky seemed to mock the readership in a kind of psychological realism. The operation allowed Sidney to explore the tension between a moral conduct and the desire derived from the object of love in a fictitious situation. The fragmentations through which Stella was described might have offered Sidney the chance to explore the possibilities of a poetic theme by looking back to the primordial order of the stars and planets. For example, this aspect was highlighted in Sonnet 68 when Astrophil referred to Stella as planet and light of his life.

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<sup>101</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella* 5: It is Most True, that Eyes are Formed to Serve., p. 31.

<sup>102</sup> "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely." *DoP*, p. 107.

<sup>103</sup> Kurtuluş, G. (2015). "Ecology, Love, and Relationships in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*". *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 9, p. 695.

The harmonious order appeared to rely on Stella's active position, whilst Astrophil placed himself into a passive role, in contrast to courtly love tradition in a hypothetical idyllic world, whose control was given to the beloved woman.

Sidney accepted the subjection of a superior and mutable lover that could influence his behaviour and perhaps it could better help him to cope with the multiple desires that seemed not to find an answer in the moral conduct of the changes that society was experiencing. Furthermore, the references to the Greek and Roman mythological tradition did not simply help Sidney to get close to the original texts in the pursuit of a golden idyllic age for the poet, but could have given him the possibility to recreate a specific situation in which the fate of people was assigned to a given power, affecting their actions and contradictions. One example might be found in Sonnet 74 when Astrophil recalls the nymph Aganippe, who was believed to provide poetic wit to those who would drink at her well. Given these premises, in the following paragraph I will aim to demonstrate this kind of correlation and influence of nightly elements to the character of Sidney as an alternative reading and appreciation of his notorious collection of poems.

### **3.2. Exercising Dominion, Experiencing Submission**

In this part of my thesis, I will focus on the elements that highlight the correlation between submission and dominion through nightly metaphors presented in Sidney's collection.

As I have previously mentioned, one of pastoral poetry's peculiarities concerned the recreation of a harmonious relationship between the man and the surrounding environment. A recalling representative character of this relationship might be found in Orpheus, the mythological poet who had the ability to charm both Nature and people. According to Warden, "he is the champion of humanism, symbol of the power of the word to soften the wild hearts of man and bring civilization. As prophet and mystagogue he is the spokesman for an exotic mysticism which offers space to both Christian and Neoplatonist."<sup>104</sup> As regards Renaissance literature, his character could embody the ideal of human control over Nature, and consequently guarantee a harmonious order with the

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<sup>104</sup> Warden, J. (1982). "Introduction". In *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. xii.

surrounding environment. However, Sidney seemed to move on the opposite direction, as he searched for a control derived from the object of his love, by looking back at the astrological tradition. The choice of the night sky offered him the possibility to better discuss the unpredictability of Nature and human feelings, as well as the problematics of dominion. In the previous chapter, I explained the legitimate rule of man so as to maintain a harmonious equilibrium, for the male character was filled with the idea of rationality, in contrast to Nature, which was perceived as caring and dangerous at the same time. Similarly, in a social context the husband expected his wife to be subjected to him, as the man was supposed to represent the rationality in the couple, and consequently to represent the spirit that controlled the matter (the woman). Bringing these aspects on an astrological level, the man might be associated also with the celestial elements which were believed to exercise a determined control over human life, as inscribed in the cosmological theories. Yet, there was always a margin to let an unexpected phenomenon happen despite attempting to categorize Nature, as if it was reaffirming its superiority over mankind. It is within this context that Sidney appeared to represent an overturning in the dominant roles: even though Astrophil and Stella's relationship might be fictitious, courtly love canons seemed not fully adopted due to the arbitrariness of the celestial elements, which are the *fil rouge* of the sonnet sequence. This unpredictability of celestial motions might share similarities with the unpredictability of human feelings, too. Consequently, Sidney appeared to propose an interesting analysis between the male feelings and desires: although early modern conventions would expect the man to control his impulses, Sidney's Astrophil seemed to let himself be overwhelmed by his desires, which were influenced by the stars. This same influence derived from Stella, who was unreachable due to the physical distance:

Unhappy sight, and hath she vanished by,  
So near, in so good time, so free a place?  
Dead glass, dost thou thy object so embrace,  
As what my heart still sees, thou canst not spy?  
I swear by her I love and lack, that I  
Was not in fault, who bent thy dazzling race  
Only unto the heav'n of Stella's face,

Counting but dust what in the way did lie.<sup>105</sup>

(*A&S* 105.1-8)

At the same time, she was attributed with rationality and power roles, in contrast with the courtly poetry tradition, as it might be found in the Ninth Song: “Stella fiercest shepherdess”<sup>106</sup>. What mostly emerged from this verse is a declaration of the female power and a recognition of her authority through a pastoral metaphor, which might be considered as a significant innovation in the literary field. Astrophil therefore experienced a passive role, being subjecting to Stella’s influence and to the sky’s arbitrariness at the same time. Hence, it might be asserted that the exchange of dominion and submission looked back to the ancient principles of science and astrology, relying on the common beliefs of zodiac and stars’ effects. The contrast between the power exercised over Nature in pastoral poetry and the tradition of courtly poetry seemed to clash in a discussion over sovereignty. Winston declared that

Astrophil paradoxically becomes “sovereign” himself in his abjection, insofar as his desire makes him un able to act or restore himself through virtuous work, and in his consequent dissolution as a “subject.” Instead of a dialectical resolution that reconciles Astrophil with the world, in the gulf between the two contradictory, irreconcilable forces, the writing emerges, deprived of a subject, to similarly develop its own “sovereignty,” unfolding in its own heterogeneous space ultimately beyond the use, manipulation and homogenization of the court.<sup>107</sup>

The paradox expressed in this comparison between the control over one’s feelings and the demands of courtly life, that is the one Sidney was conducting being an aristocrat. The struggle between the moral behaviour and personal desires acknowledged the complexity of the experience of love beyond the conventions, even though it regarded a fictitious one, which could have mirrored Sidney’s desire to elevate himself as a poet and

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<sup>105</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella* 105: Unhappy Sight, and Hath She Vanisht By., p. 100.

<sup>106</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella* Ninth Song., p. 86, line 20.

<sup>107</sup> Winston, S. (1991). “The Struggle over Sovereignty in *Astrophil and Stella*”. *Criticism*, Vol. 33, No. 3, p. 313.

his frustrated desire towards Penelope Deveraux. This same separation might be approached also on a private/public sphere. As noticed by Jones and Stallybrass,

[B]ecause public careers move through predictable stages, the “wits” take Astrophil’s beginnings as premises by which his present distraction can be explained: his youthful study of poetry, his appointment as a state servant. According to Astrophil in his new role as lover, however, such explanations fail because they fail to admit the contradiction he insists upon between public performance and private desire.<sup>108</sup>

Unlike the typical conventions of aristocratic and pastoral poetry, the equilibrium between the desires and self-control seemed reversed and interchanged in the same perception of the classic inheritance. Stella’s femininity was not controlled, but instead controlling and exercising dominion over the lover. This recognition of female superiority might firstly emerge from the eye contact, recalling the common imagery of night sky’s observations during navigations. Concerning this aspect, the first element to be discussed and through which the influence is received regards the eyes, which appeared to be considered the receivers and the exerciser of control in this exchange between lover-object of love will be the focus of my first dissertation.

### 3.2.1. Stella and Astrophil’s Eyes

The element through which a first contact towards the night sky and the Muse, and sovereignty, too, concerns the eyes. It is the first image the reader gets of Stella in terms of an ecstatic experience of the meeting with the beloved lady derived from the Petrarchan tradition and similarly is conveyed in Sonnet 5, where the lemma eye firstly appears:

It is most true, that eyes are form’d to serve  
The inward light: and that the heavenly part  
Ought to be king, from whose rules who do swerve,  
Rebels to Nature, strive for their own smart.  
It is most true, what we call Cupid’s dart,

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<sup>108</sup> Jones, A.R., Stallybrass, P. (1984). “The Politics of *Astrophil and Stella*”. *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 24, No.1, p. 56.

An image is, which for ourselves we carve;  
 And, fools, adore in temple of our heart,  
 Till that good god make church and churchman starve.  
 True, that True Beauty virtue is indeed,  
 Whereof this beauty can be but a shade,  
 Which elements with mortal mixture breed:  
 True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made,  
 And should in soul up to our country move:  
 True, and yet true, that I must Stella love.<sup>109</sup>

(A&S 5)

Just like in the celestial spheres, the eyes are the first movers that exercise a control over Astrophil's life and desire. The cession of sovereignty and acceptance of his subjection is underlined by the stress on the behaviour a man should have concordantly to his Reason "the heavenly part / Ought to be king", "should in soul up to our country move". The struggle emphasised by the potential mood make clear a likely struggle between the moral conduct a man should maintain and the absence mercifulness of the Muse, who is mining Astrophil's Sense. Through the eyes, Stella is producing joy and animating a longing for beauty in knowing the weaknesses of the poet;<sup>110</sup> Reason tries to maintain a control and to remind the poet the philosophical and religious doctrines<sup>111</sup>, but it finally decides to surrender to the unconditional power of Desire and new mission, which is highlighted through the indicative mood ("I must Stella love"). The contemplation of "True Beauty" and its bare imitation is overcome the Cupid's dart that affected the control and the attempt of achieving sovereignty by Astrophil. A similar attitude might be found in Sonnet 42:

O eyes, which do the spheres of beauty move,  
 Whose beams be joys, whose joys all virtues be,

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<sup>109</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella 5: It is Most True, that Eyes are Formed to Serve.*, p. 31.

<sup>110</sup> See De Grazia, M. (1981). "Lost Potential in Grammar and Nature: Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 23.

<sup>111</sup> "True Beauty virtue is indeed / Whereof this beauty can be but a shade".

Who, while they make Love conquer, conquer Love,  
 The schools where Venus hath learn'd chastity.  
 O eyes, where humble looks most glorious prove  
 Only lov'd tyrants, just in cruelty,  
 Do not, O do not from poor me remove,  
 Keep still my zenith, ever shine on me.  
 For though I never see them, but straightways  
 My life forgets to nourish languished sprites;  
 Yet still on me, O eyes, dart down your rays:  
 And if from majesty of sacred lights,  
 Oppressing mortal sense, my death proceed,  
 Wracks triumphs be, which Love (high set) doth breed.<sup>112</sup>

Here the concept of dominion and submission is made even clearer than in the previous sonnet, just like the association with the night sky. The influence Stella has on the poet is conveyed through the eyes, emphasising Astrophil's desire to be controlled by that light. For Stella stands for plenitude shining through her eyes, she evokes the lover's feelings and limits in the assault of Sense over moral Virtue. The act of serving a lady and demonstrating male power at the same time finds no fertile ground: the individualism of male control is abandoned for a complete sovereign in the cycle of Love chasing Love and moving towards Love. As stated by Winston,

[...] there is no reciprocity or continuity with which to salve his abrupt discontinuity with the world. Instead he is plunged into a pit of anguish, into an abjection which nevertheless possesses a sovereignty of its own, one that holds him parallel but heterogeneous to the sovereign beloved.<sup>113</sup>

The self seems to disappear inside the poetry, recognizing the superiority of the object of love: as a consequence, Astrophil seems to gradually accept the impossibility of controlling his mistress. The action is stressed towards the action of the beloved one, until

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<sup>112</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). Astrophil and Stella 42: O Eyes, which do the Spheres of Beauty Move., p. 49.

<sup>113</sup> Winston, S. (1991). "The Struggle over Sovereignty in *Astrophil and Stella*". *Criticism*, Vol. 33, No. 3, p. 315.

it reaches the highest point of contemplation and abandonment. This effect produced by Love brings submission to an ultimate state because Astrophil has given up on his self: on the act of Nature, he is affirming the superiority of an uncontrollable event in renouncing of his persona. The action of moving and acting is projected to the relevance of the movers, i.e. the eyes of Stella, that induce the action on Astrophil. The courtly love conventions reveal to be incomplete when referring to the portray of movements from the sky, which might be detected and depicted, but not fully determined, and so the action of accepting an alternative power over him. As a result, a slow recognition of the man as the passive counterpart is emerging. The same references of the concept of Stella without firstly calling her by her fictitious name referred to the conjunction of her majesty, which might be associated to the one of God: Astrophil can look at her figure and at shapes of her but he appears to be unable to speak what he has in mind “not because it is like God inconceivable, but because it is indecorously unmentionable”.<sup>114</sup> His act of contemplation reveals his complete abandonment to Beauty and Desire through the gaze direct to the sky.

It is through the same eyes that Stella that the influence and the association with the deity is transmitted to the reading public, and exercised over Sidney himself, particularly in Sonnet 42. As reported by Winston,

The eyes are isolated as powerful, cruel, iconic figures, separate from any other signifying element of the mistress. Yet despite, or perhaps because of its utter conventionality the image fails to quite perform its function as a synecdoche: instead of the part signifying the whole, the part becomes the whole and a latent ambivalence, an anxiety, about the function and value of the eye in the exchange of love becomes manifest. On the one hand, the mistress’s eyes possess the ultimate value: they are meant to embody a plenitude of virtue and beauty. On the other hand, however, their value and utility are nil: Stella’s eyes, to adopt a cheap phrase, are not for seeing but for being looked at; if they possess a gaze of their own it is one wholly imagined, constructed by the gaze of the love.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *Ivi*, p. 28.

<sup>115</sup> Winston, S. (1991). “The Struggle over Sovereignty in *Astrophil and Stella*”. *Criticism*, Vol. 33, No. 3, p. 318.



This insistence becomes than a limit of those spheres on her face where the mere action is subjected to these determined boundaries that Sidney tries to overcome in the literary field. Nevertheless, he appears to be totally influenced and relegated by the glance of Stella, who redraws his action in the harmonious order of the sky, as Sidney recalls in the Eight Song:

If those eyes you praised, be  
Half so dear as you to me,  
Let me home return, stark blinded  
Of those eyes, and blinder minded.<sup>116</sup>

(A&S Eight Song, 81-84)

The act of contemplation looks back at the classical tradition in praising and contemplating the superiority of Stella; at the same time, the devotion and the impossibility of describing the experience of the conceiving Stella herself recall Dante's experience of *Visio Dei* in his *Commedia*. Stella's eyes function as a light in dark sky, whose brightness catches Astrophil's attention and are consequently looked as a reference in the night; the immediate absence of Stella's light demonstrates the fragility of the lover's status, who finds no self-determination in his persona, contrary to the hope praised by Christian beliefs. Thus, Astrophil is completely dependent on the sky dominion and accepts the boundaries imposed by a restricted cosmos. Even though it might seem that beyond the origins of Stella's face there is God's presence, the eroticism and desire conveyed by her eyes might occlude His presence in favour of a pagan and non-transcendent contemplation, with regards to the old astrological doctrines. Concerning this issue, the eyes are mostly referred to in the act both of attacking the lover and being the main prey of the mistress. The eyes become the predilect instrument to prove and discuss the reception of Stella as a Muse and as a guidance, and the feelings she evokes in Sidney. Hence, it might seem that the cycle of the movements in the sky and regarding reception of Stella begins with the act of seeing.

As in pastoral poetry, the first reception takes place through the eyes, similarly to the creation of the architecture and painting during European Renaissance. The eyes serve as

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<sup>116</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella: Eight Song.*, p. 85.

an instrument of first contact with the surrounding environment and in the reception of Nature, just like the contemplation and the praising of God. Nonetheless, the contemplation Sidney reserves to Stella seems to have no positive nor actual realization in the real life. Even though Astrophil is constantly attracted by the presence of Stella, invoking her like a shepherd, and contemplating the possibility of realizing his heart's desires, even in the chance of an eye contact, he is reduced to the blindness. In front of the fullness of Stella, Astrophil underlines the poorness of language in describing his Muse: the impossibility of finding the appropriate words seems to stop a further alternative to his relationship with Stella. In approaching the superiority of the First Mover, Astrophil faces the impossibility of overcoming the barriers of lexicon and forms to convey his total submission to Stella. In the cyclicity of the movement of the celestial spheres he faces the absence of Stella, who has reached her highest point like the Sun, and consequently is unable to see her. The end condemns Astrophil to fall like Icarus, being blinded by the splendour of Stella's light. Hence, there is no salvation like the one offered by Christianity, but the realization that possibilities explored by Sidney might reveal a complete defeat, despite the attempts of approaching his Desire over Virtue. According to Kurtuluş,

Astrophil is not able to reach Stella, who is part of the nature that is above mankind. Stella belongs to a perfection that is created and can be controlled only by God. She is beyond Astrophil's human boundaries and rank in the universe, which is equal to the idea of placing nature above the rank of human beings in the chain. In the Elizabethan world-view, human beings possess the utmost capabilities such as virtue, love, perfection, desire, and other qualities derived from nature. However, these qualities are incomplete, and human beings have limited capabilities.<sup>117</sup>

As a result, Astrophil surrenders to Stella's dominion and gradually accepts the unpredictability of ruling Nature and own desires. The arbitrariness of this change in perspective might also be noticed in the collocations proposed by Sidney when referring to Stella as the active counterpart in poems by choosing an astrological element.

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<sup>117</sup> Kurtuluş, G. (2015). "Ecology, Love, and Relationships in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*". *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 9, p. 696.

### 3.2.2. Stella The Sun

One of the imageries related to Stella that might be found in the collection of poems is related to the Sun, and so its references. Inches concerning the interaction between the persona of Stella and solar elements may be noticed from the first sonnet (“my sun-burn’d brain”) as marking the peculiarities of the cyclicity expressed by the representatives of Stella’s eyes. Although the Sun is not explicitly mentioned, various are the references to the common imagery of it. However, a slight difference is required before proceeding with my analysis.

In 1.2. I discussed the meanings of the Sun as a *Fortuna Major*, the beneficent factor for positive events; when referring to *Astrophil and Stella*, the metaphors and the associations to the sphere of Sun have both meanings of benevolent and contradictory aspect. The affliction of Stella’s dominion over Astrophil is made clear in Sonnet 1, whose struggle to catch Stella’s attentions seems to find no resolution at all, but in Sidney’s own inspiration driven by his heart. At first, the main associations with the Sun are made with her eyes, as in Sonnet 8<sup>118</sup>; the gradual change slightly begins in the reconstruction of Stella physical imagery in the association of the sky and planets. For example, Sonnet 22 marks the influence of the astral elements to the physical aspect of Stella.

Phoebus was judge between Jove, Mars, and Love,  
Of those three gods, whose arms the fairest were<sup>119</sup>  
(*A&S* 13.1-2)

Phoebus, the deity of the Sun, offers himself to be the representative and the conjuncture between the characteristics of Strength, Virtue, and Love. The elements that might be destructive when taken singularly find an equilibrium in the creation of the object of love, whose place is collocated in the community with the radiant Sun. By the end of the sonnet, Phoebus will identify the conjunction point in Stella, whose presence is revealed in the darkness. Her bright is expected as sunrise, although it does not depend on Astrophil’s

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<sup>118</sup> “Whose fair skin, beamy eyes, like morning sun on snow”. *A&S* 8. 9.

<sup>119</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella* 13: Phoebus was Judge between Jove, Mars, and Love., p. 35.

will to appear; this might underline the superiority of the natural element over the human being, who might long for the light, but cannot control its appearance. This comparison might be applied to Stella: the identification with healthy daylight reaches its highest point in Sonnet 33, which marks a division in the cycle of the Sun, too:

I might, unhappy word, O me, I might,  
And then would not, or could not see my bliss:  
Till now, wrapped in a most infernal night,  
I find how heav'nly day wretch, I did miss.  
Heart rent thyself, thou dost thyself but right,  
No lovely Paris made thy Helen his:  
No force, no fraud, robb'd thee of thy delight,  
Nor Fortune of thy fortune author is:  
But to myself myself did give the blow,  
While too much wit (forsooth) so troubled me,  
That I respects for both our sakes must show:  
And yet could not by rising morn foresee  
How fair a day was near, O punisht eyes,  
That I had been more foolish or more wise.<sup>120</sup>

The division here appears clear and reveals the gradual personification of Stella with the Sun; Keena claims that in the first section (Sonnets 1-32) the movements recall the act of sun rising from the darkness<sup>121</sup>. As regards to Sonnet 33, it marks a pivotal identification with the light of the day, despite Sidney chose a pseudonymous that recalls night imagery. In searching for his own salvation from the Desires, he might have foreseen a possibility to escape the “infernal night” where he was imprisoned. In particular, by the end of this

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<sup>120</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella 33: I Might, Unhappy Word.*, p. 45.

<sup>121</sup> See Keena, J. (2019). “Sidney’s Sun Sonnets: Solar Imagery in *Astrophil and Stella*”. *Sidney Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 153.

sonnet Sidney blames himself<sup>122</sup> for not having been more foolish or wiser to embrace the opportunity in admiring Stella light.

The correspondence that could be noticed recalls the longing for redemption of a sinner towards God that reveals Himself in the dark; in this case, the salvation and the devotion would be justified, but it seems not to match Astrophil's situation. The persistence of the potential mood underlines a possibility of not choosing redemption in the recognition of the positive influence of the rising Stella. In contrast to Sonnet 22, where the conjunction of elements deriving from the tradition remarked the 'pagan origins' of Stella as the perfect realization of highest virtues, Sonnet 33 combines elements of Christian and pagan tradition together. Astrophil does not try to stare at the rising light deriving from Stella and feels ashamed for not embracing it. There is no sense of piety nor longing for mercy: being the rising Sun, Stella appears as revealing his doubts and struggles in wishing her and being totally devoted to her light in accordance with the courtly tradition. Line 4 of Sonnet 33 ("I found how heav'nly day wretch, I did miss") might offer an interesting insight, too. Astrophil compares his missing the light as an enormous fault he attributes to himself, but it is not clear whether he aimed to be blessed by the light of the beloved woman or to capture it, and consequently showing his male control over celestial agents. The theme of Fortune plays a pivotal role here, for it remarks the condition of harmonious chaos which is proper of natural laws. Although it is notorious that Fortune is independent from human dominion, in Sonnet 33 human will is reduced to the complete subjection of human forces. The contemplation of the light becomes a mean to discuss the value of Nature itself, which was once adored, and it was now being spoiled by the new perception people had about themselves in early modern society.<sup>123</sup> In recognizing the unworthiness of staring at her face, Astrophil declares the superiority of the physical world over the possibility of describing and receiving it rather than controlling natural phenomena. He recognizes his passive role, as well as Stella's perfection: he does not seem to long for controlling her, but to be accepted by his mistress, without the arrogance of dominating her figure.

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<sup>122</sup> "O punisht eyes". *A&S* 33.11.

<sup>123</sup> See Kurtuluş, G. (2015). "Ecology, Love, and Relationships in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*". *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 9, p. 698.

Such a declaration is given voice throughout the sequence of sonnets that recall the solar imagery, such as 68, 76, 88, 91, 96, 97, 98, and 101. The graduality of the movements of the Sun corresponds to the growing influence of Stella over the poet, and so in the acceptance of an uncontrollable movement over man's intellect. She becomes the only source of joy and reason of existence that can relief Astrophil's pains.<sup>124</sup> At the same time, the attempt of facing the majesty of establishing a contemplation with Nature reveals to be too harsh for his persona, and so he is forced to turn down his eyes. The gradual climb of Stella in the sky and possible touching of Astrophil follow the cycle of the Sun until she reaches the zenith and Astrophil possibly almost comes close to her before falling:

And my young soul flutters to thee his nest,  
Most rude despair my daily unbidden guest,  
Clips straight my wings, straight wraps me in his night,  
And makes me then bow down my head, and say,  
Ah, what doth Phoebus' gold that wretch avail,  
Whom iron doors do keep from use of day?  
So strangely (alas) thy works in me prevail,  
That in my woes for thee thou art my joy,  
And in my joys for thee my only annoy.<sup>125</sup>

(A&S 108.6-14)

The hazardous attempt of contemplating the fullness of Stella's beauty turns into a recognition of the sovereignty of Nature over man by means of zenith. Keena argues that the evocative force derived from the flight of Icarus to the Sun turns out to be the primary of cause of the darkness of the man in the falling<sup>126</sup>.

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<sup>124</sup> "She comes with light and warmth, which like Aurora prove / Of gentle force, so that mine eyes dare gladly play / With such a rosy morn, whose beams most freshly gay / Scorch not, but only do dark chilling sprites remove". A&S 76.5-8, p. 69.

<sup>125</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). Astrophil and Stella 108: When Sorrow (Using Mine Own Fire's Might)., p. 101.

<sup>126</sup> See Keena, J. (2019). "Sidney's Sun Sonnets: Solar Imagery in *Astrophil and Stella*". Sidney Journal, Vol. 37, No. 1 p. 157.

The benefits of the light of Stella offers two possibilities of interpretation: on the one hand, this ending might be interpreted as the impossibility of returning to an idyllic relationship with the natural environment, despite longing for the dominion of the latter on the example of the classical tradition of Greeks and Romans. The restoration of a primordial order remains far from the changing reality and incompatible with the relevance humanity was gaining thanks to the discoveries of sixteenth century. On the other hand, the falling of Astrophil and consequent return to darkness might be read as a male attempt to conquer and control the female force as it might be found by the courtly poetry tradition, without succeeding. Even the slightest possibility of controlling the beloved woman and her comparatives in Nature turns out as an unsuccess; as a result, any salvific attempt remains vague and restricted to the animistic reception of the object of love. The certainties derived by the new awareness of the self and the doctrines proclaimed by religion admit their defeat in front of the unpredictability of the female persona and the movements in the celestial spheres, which still determine their influence over somebody's fate in approaching a growing darkness along to the brightness of the Sun.

Stella is to be blamed for her resistance to the love of Astrophil and the outcome will be the tragic case of the unresolved love affair. The Renaissance, with its great inventions of the printing press, the compass, and gunpowder helped to propel the explorations of the New World, but at the same time led to a great transformation. A man-made, new social order replaced the uncultivated, untouched but pure balanced state of nature. Thus the Fall and Salvation were experienced simultaneously, as was the feeling evoked by Sidney's poetry when Astrophil seeks Stella's approval and consequently harmony, and ends up with unresolvable case of love.<sup>127</sup>

It is interesting to notice that Stella is never associated to the Moon, in contrast with the typical canons of poetry. The Moon is generally part of the female imagery due to the comparison between the lunar cycle and women's period; furthermore, the lunar phases are compared to an unstable temperament, as underlined by the adjective 'lunatic' or 'moony'. Whether Sidney did this choice consciously or unconsciously, the absence of

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<sup>127</sup> Kurtuluş, G. (2015). "Ecology, Love, and Relationships in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*". *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 9, p. 701.

lunar metaphors, which were replaced by solar imagery, might be read as a declaration of male submission to Nature. The man was supposed to be a symbol of stability, as the male figure was generally associated with rationality; in the sonnet sequence, the roles are overturned. Astrophil looks at Stella as his reference point while he is overwhelmed by the chaos of his feelings. It might be deduced the lunar characteristics, which are usually linked to the female element, become part of the man. This would emphasise man's impossibility to completely control his feelings, which are as unpredictable as natural and celestial phenomena, as if they were under the influence of a given planet.

### 3.2.3. Stella the Planet(s)

Various are the references to Stella as a planet determining the influence over Astrophil. Similarly, the major association made by Sidney refers to the given power and influence a determined planet or constellation in the sky might have on somebody's destiny and personality<sup>128</sup>. As regards astrological references, the presence of ancient deities and the correspondent planets might offer interesting insights in exploring the feelings of Astrophil towards Stella and the possible alternatives in the constant struggle between Virtue and Desire. There is only one declaration of Stella as a planet throughout the whole collection of poems, Sonnet 68 ("Stella, the only planet of my light / Light of my life, and light of my desire"); any other association is attributed to the personality of the given planet and marks the unpredictability of love feelings towards the beloved lady and the difficulties in controlling them just like the night sky phenomena. Hence, the concept of sovereignty enlarges its dominion to the subjection and acceptance of the uncontrollability of love and of natural laws, looking back at the longing for a harmonious chaos of feelings. The references to the planets are presented in contrast with their perception and the influence one should expect them to exercise over Sidney's persona.

As I discussed in 1.2. and in 3.1.3., it was believed that the presence of the Sun in somebody's birth date did have a positive meaning for the life of that given person. Similar positive conventions were attribute to the presence of Jove or Jupiter, which was conceived as the King of ancient gods and planets. It was believed to be a *Fortuna Major*,

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<sup>128</sup> See Chapter 1.2.



and consequently to stimulate a cheerful attitude in people on Earth. Yet, Sidney remarks the positive connotations of the planet by including the flaws and the vices of the god, as it might be noticed in Sonnet 6:

Someone his song in Jove, and Jove's strange tales, attires,  
Broidered with bulls and swans, powdered with golden rain:  
Another, humbler, wit to shepherd's pipe retires,  
Yet hiding royal blood full oft in rural vein.<sup>129</sup>

(*A&S* 6.5-8)

In this poem, the awareness of the early modern man appears as referring to the control of the natural elements, an image that stands in contrast with the shepherd smoking in the following line. The tale of ancient Greece and from the pastoral tradition might recall the ability of the creating wonder through written and spoken words, which might be referred to the possibility of dominating the surrounding environment in the act both of contemplation and controlling the passive character, that is the woman. A similar symbology is to be found in Sonnet 13 and 70, when recalling the imagery of the shield and the thunderbolt of Jove, and his cup. In this potential experience, the recalling of Jove's influence might be read as a possible attempt of the sovereignty over the beloved woman in accordance with the classical tradition. Other associations are presented in invoking the strength of Mars, mostly linked to the male figure just like its imagery<sup>130</sup>. However, the personification and the power proclaimed by the deities and the influence related to their spheres turn into a tale that appears to mock the courtly tradition:

Phoebus was judge between Jove, Mars, and Love,  
Of those three gods, whose arms the fairest were:  
Jove's golden shield did eagle sables bear,  
Whose talons held young Ganymede above:  
But in vert field Mars bare a golden spear,

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<sup>129</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella* 6: Some Lovers Speak When They Their Muses Entertain., p. 31.

<sup>130</sup> "But in vert field Mars bare a golden spear". *A&S* 13.5.

Which through a bleeding heart his point did shove.  
 Each had his crest: Mars carried Venus' glove,  
 Jove on his helm the thunderbolt did rear.  
 Cupid then smiles, for on his crest there lies  
 Stella's fair hair, her face he makes his shield,  
 Where roses gules are borne in silver field.  
 Phoebus drew wide the curtains of the skies  
 To blaze these last, and sware devoutly then,  
 The first, thus matched, were scarcely gentlemen.<sup>131</sup>

Here the heraldic references to power and consequently their common male association with the male character might be linked to a possible claim of recalling Sense to the act of controlling the impulses. The presence of arms as symbols for masculinity work as a demonstration of supremacy over the female, also in terms of sexual performance ("Mars carried Venus' glove" stands for skill and control in the sexual sphere). Yet, Kambasković-Sawers noticed that those arms are being judged in terms of beauty rather than strength or effectiveness: the powerfulness and the male talents in ruling and showing mastery are being defeated by the emblem of love and beauty symbolized by Cupid:

The outcome focuses on Cupid's authorship of a powerful 'brand' and ownership of the arms, symbolising his masculine and creative power. But lest the reader take Astrophil too seriously, this power is immediately subverted by a mention of Ganymede, the cup-bearer to the gods, a reference to Sidney's loathed status as cupbearer to the Queen. With layer upon layer of ironic hints and reversals, Sidney simultaneously asserts and tempers traditionally masculine traits of victory, creativity and authority, weaving third-person ambiguities into a charismatic first-person figure and his story.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). *Astrophil and Stella* 13: Phoebus was judge between Jove, Mars, and Love., p. 35.

<sup>132</sup> Kambasković-Sawers, D. (2007). "Never was I the golden cloud": Ovidian Myth, Ambiguous Speaker and the Narrative in the Sonnet Sequences by Petrarch, Sidney and Spenser". *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 5, p. 652.

Sense seems to have subjugated Wit, determining the act of devotion of Sidney, whose influence of Mars and Jove is minorized (“The first, thus matched, were scarcely gentlemen”). As a consequence, the attempt to potentially explore the control over Astrophil’s own feelings and to take advantage of the favour of two powerful influences of the spheres reverses the outcome. Despite trying to conceive the language as an instrument to portray Stella’s persona into his own desires, it is Astrophil that ends up submitted to the influence of Venus and the impossibility of activity of his power, taking what one would suppose as a feminine passivity. This is also underlined by the contrast of fleeing Desire in Sonnet 72 and “Tyran honour” in the Eight Song. In Sonnet 72 the amorous feelings conveyed by Venus is associated to the figure of Dian, goddess of hunting and female virginity, as means of placing the figure of Stella in a higher position, as if she was a *donna angelica* that one can contemplate and does not want to chase the desire to possess her sexually (the “Tyran honour” Stella is subjected to, i.e. her chastity). Astrophil invokes the benefits of Cupid to conduct his love morally, in accordance with the courtly tradition and the expectations of the dominant male figure: thus, he tries to temporarily put aside his burning Desire in advantage of the martial personality. Yet, he fails:

Desire, though thou my old companion art,  
And oft so clings to my pure love, that I  
One from the other scarcely can descry,  
While each doth blow the fire of my heart;  
Now from thy fellowship I needs must part,  
Venus is taught with Dian’s wings to fly:  
I must no more in thy sweet passions lie;  
Virtue’s gold now must head my Cupid’s dart.  
Service and honour, wonder with delight,  
Fear to offend, will worthy to appear,  
Care shining in mine eyes, faith in my sprite.  
These things are left me by my only dear;  
But thou, Desire, because thou wouldst have all,

Now banished art, but yet alas how shall?<sup>133</sup>

Despite the ethical implications one would expect from Sidney, his choice to explore the possible subjection to the rules of his Muse marks a turning point in Astrophil's role. The premises presented in the first lines of Sonnet 72 remark a claim in love's control in the public sphere, according to the Petrarchan tradition in the separation of the two areas Sidney's services are required, i.e. politics and his love towards Penelope Devereaux. Furthermore, the moral standards praised by Christianity assume that human beings proclaim their devotion modestly and that they do not subject to sinful behaviours, such as adultery or lust. The problematics conveyed by the opposition of true love/desire seem therefore clearer than in other sonnets: whether Sidney feels lust, he must give it up, if he feels pure love, he has nothing to worry about<sup>134</sup>. However, the emphatic final of the poem underlines the failure of separating both the private desire and the public behaviour. Astrophil's "alas" might express the impossibility to overcome the influence of the sphere of Venus over his wits, which leads him to declare his total abnegation to Stella's Love and erotic desires. The ambiguities discussed in the last part of the poem show a potential interior crisis in which the contradictions that emerge from the whole sonnet sequence highlight the inequalities between the positions of the lovers. As noticed by Prendergast,

In fact, as Stella is increasingly linked with a sublime "masculine" love, Astrophil associates himself more and more with "feminine" lust. [...] for if Sidney is not the only English Renaissance poet to suggest that his beloved is an artist, he is unique in implying that she has complete authority over poetry, and that the poet-protagonist is, by implication, a charlatan. Indeed, as Stella increasingly takes on the role of masculine poet, Astrophil appears more like the feminized, subordinated audience to the work-the position into which he had originally hoped to place Stella.<sup>135</sup>

Hence, the control over the beneficial movements of the stars is unlikely to take place; as a consequence, the reversal of the conventional *topoi* of courtly poetry offers an

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<sup>133</sup> Sidney, P. (2002). Astrophil and Stella 72: Desire, Though Thou My Old Companion Art., p. 66.

<sup>134</sup> See Jones, A.R., Stallybrass, P. (1984). "The Politics of *Astrophil and Stella*". *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 24, No.1 p. 59.

<sup>135</sup> Prendergast, M.T.M. (1995). "The Unauthorized Orpheus of *Astrophil and Stella*". *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 25-26.

alternative scenario in which the elements of the natural world, in particular the ones belonging to the night sky, return at the core of the discussion. The action inspired by the influence of celestial spheres may remark the old geocentric model as well as the belief that a dominant planet within a sphere might determine the outcome and the development of a given situation or even feelings.

The uncontrollable impulses derived from an interior struggle between public life and love desires might be perfectly recreated within the context of an astral influence, which was as uncontrollable as the responses on a sentimental level. Therefore, the infinite possibilities that one might experience emotionally seem to perfectly match with the infinite movements in the night sky, where the observed planet or star could still exercise a determined power over people on Earth. Likewise, the position in which Sidney placed Stella is particularly relevant because it highlights the arbitrariness of the movements of the spheres despite the attempts of categorizing them. The outcome is unpredictable as well, although Astrophil has favourable celestial conditions by his side. This analogy might be found in the time when Sidney probably wrote *Astrophil and Stella*, that is after Penelope Devereaux's marriage with Lord Rich in November 1581. November is usually associated with the sign of the Sagittarius, a fire sign ruled by Jove. It was very likely that Sidney wrote the sonnets also in December, a month which is associated to the earth sign of Capricorn, and it is ruled by Mars.<sup>136</sup> It might seem that the inspiration and advocacy Sidney was referring to aimed to report the positive male and dominant aspects inside the poetry, and consequently to potentially explore the influence the qualities conveyed by those signs and planets might have on a human being. Even though Astrophil is apparently filled with positive expectancies to conquer his mistress due to the benevolent influence of Mars and Jove, Stella prevails, and so does Venus in her sign and every natural aspect associated to her character. Astrophil tries to balance both impulses he feels and to dominate the beloved woman, both physically and emotionally, but he does not manage to overcome the struggle Stella provokes in him. Astrophil finds it difficult to control the woman, preferring to be consciously subjected by her figure; as a result, he appears to reproduce a primordial context within his

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<sup>136</sup> See Finey, M. (2009). *Secrets of The Zodiac: An in-depth Guide to your Talents, Challenges, Personality and Potential*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.

collection of poems where the reasons behind love lie beyond Virtue and Sense, as they are kept by the celestial influence of the Muse. Astrophil tries to reach that knowledge and to prove himself worth of the grace of his mistress, but the projection of his desire results futile: despite having apparently favourable conditions, the unpredictability of a woman placed in a higher position makes Sidney consciously submitted to her control. He therefore assumes a passive role inside the sonnet sequence, taking down the expectations an early modern reader might have had about the conventions of love poetry.

### **3.3. Female Nature and Male Nature**

Conversely to the Renaissance awareness discussed in Chapter 2, Astrophil lets himself guide from the celestial influence of Stella, struggling to reach her and to dominate her, but without succeeding. He deliberately chose to be submitted to his mistress, vaguely referring to the wilderness and unpredictability of women's desires. This dramatization of the tension between seductive utterances and personal exaltation of the poet in public life in accordance with courtly poetry canons finds a subversion in the two main characters. Despite attempting to prove his worth to Stella, Astrophil gradually loses his conception of the self, allowing his feelings to be influenced by the movements of stars and planets to dictate the outcomes of his actions. The rhetoric of a passive role, which was commonly associated with the female character, found a place in the male character of the poem, unable to charm his mistress and to self-satisfy his desires. Utterly relevant to this perception were the references to the poetic of Orpheus, and the presence of Stella, who disappears and appears inside the collection of poems.

In addition to what was previously mentioned, the appropriation of Orpheus seems to embrace both qualities associated with the Ovidian character, mastery in poetry and the submission to the beloved woman, which were previously mentioned. The invocation of Orphic poetic wits is to be found throughout the whole sonnet sequence, even though the mythological poet is not actually mentioned directly until the last components. For example, Astrophil's attempts to evoke *gradatio* in Stella might be interpreted as a proof of mastery language as means of courtship. Nonetheless, the temptation to self-isolate from the source of inspiration, and therefore Sidney's attempt to prove himself capable of transcending desire from public life, portrays the discrepancies that might be found in

poetic narcissism and the actual dominion deriving from Stella. As Prendergast stated, the creative process of the early modern man affected Sidney throughout the whole collection of poems: for example, in Sonnet 9, Astrophil tries to turn Stella's face into architecture<sup>137</sup>; by dramatizing Stella, he tries to recreate beauty from the desires he feels. The same stress on her name and multiple references to her beauty attempts to envision Stella as art object to be shaped according to Sidney's image and resemblance. Yet, the attempts to shape her image reveal the anxiety generated by the unpredictability of the feelings and the influence of the beloved woman, therefore allowing her to disrupt Astrophil's mastery. Whether this choice was consciously or not, Astrophil is finally allowing Stella to raise her voice, no longer imprisoning her in the poet's narcissism. If Stella was firstly approached as a woman with household responsibilities and consequently constrained by moral laws of marriage, she finally reveals her autonomy gradually:

Until the Eighth song, when Stella herself begins tentatively to produce a sign system, she remains passively subject to the speaker's fixed system of male-female relations. Yet she partially breaks in to deconstruct his assumptions. Although he may use her as his text, she also colors the black ink words on a white sheet with a blush that seems not under his control. She smiles; she and the speaker touch hands; she is kissed (but does not kiss), and she is the mistress of a household at whose window she stands. When Stella first steps out of silence, she merely echoes the hero's words, and reads his poetry. Then her language is reported in indirect discourse, subject to the speaker's mediation. When she begins to generate her own language, she achieves a measure of reality. But just as important, she also loosens Sidney's speaker from the constraints which his efforts to define and control her have imposed upon him. As she becomes more real, Sidney's speaker, also, tests the world beyond narcissism.<sup>138</sup>

This sporadic acknowledgement of Stella's independence, even in sexual terms, reveals Astrophil's fragility in front of the inspiring powers derived from the beloved woman,

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<sup>137</sup> "Prepar'd by Nature's chiefest furniture, / Hath his front built of alabaster pure; / Gold is the covering of that stately place. / The door by which sometimes comes forth her grace, / Red porphyry is, which lock of pearl makes sure: / Whose porches rich (which name of cheeks endure) / Marble mixed red and white do interlace". *A&S*, Sonnet 9, lines 2-8.

<sup>138</sup> Fienberg, N. (1984). "The Emergence of Stella in *Astrophil and Stella*". *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 25, No.1, p. 10.

inverting the conventions of Renaissance poetry. In this sonnet sequence, Stella is increasingly linked with the sublime 'masculine' love dictated by wisdom, whereas Astrophil incarnates the feminine lust, appearing more and more the feminized and subordinated audience that is subjected to the superior decisions of the celestial wisdom.<sup>139</sup> A support to this study might come from Sonnet 36, in which Sidney compares himself to stones and trees,<sup>140</sup> two elements from the Orphic natural tradition that mark the gradual acceptance of Astrophil's passive role with respects to Stella's superior position.

In contrast with the typical early modern associations of the woman with a noble virgin or a witch, who symbolised natural catastrophes and disorders, Sidney seems to have found a proper balance in inverting the dominant power inside the literary tradition. Despite concerning for the organization of the inner chaos generated by his feelings, Sidney seemed to recognize a balance in Stella's superiority: in recalling the images derived from the old astronomical model, Sidney replaced the female element in the purest sphere of the *primum mobile*, which encircled the Earth, like the figure of Elizabeth I<sup>141</sup>. As a consequence, the representations of the supreme wisdom were generated by a terrestrial and nurturing force, which conveyed its benefits and gifts on people placed below the female figure. That male bodily corruption was implied by female's temptation permeated the Renaissance beliefs found no fertile ground in Sidney's perception; unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, the apparent savagery attributed to Stella's independence allows Sidney to recreate an idyllic and arcadian environment where the contemplation and the passivity of the man serve to better contemplate the harmonious and original choreography of the physical world. Hence, this suggestion might offer an alternative explanation of the ending of the last sonnet: the attempt to dominate the female element might be read as a contamination of the primordial beautiful order with a limited vision

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<sup>139</sup> See Prendergast, M.T.M. (1995). "The Unauthorized Orpheus of *Astrophil and Stella*". *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 25-26.

<sup>140</sup> "With so sweet voice, and by sweet nature so, [...] / That not my soul, which at thy foot did fall, / Long since forc'd by thy beams, but stone nor tree / By sense's privilege, can scape from thee." *A&S*, Sonnet 36, lines 9-14.

<sup>141</sup> See Merchant, C. (1990). "Nature as Disorder". In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, p. 128.



of the world, which was merely circumscribed to the human vision of Renaissance<sup>142</sup>. The perfection expressed in the harmonious dance of the celestial spheres might allow to temporarily experience an idyllic world, whose inspiration for poetry was subjected to the influence of never-ending celestial movements. The constant struggle towards unreachable perfection, which was independent from human will, would encourage poets to emulate the ideal world praised by Greek and Roman poets, which seemed getting away from the Renaissance culture, sacrificed to politics of economy, as I discussed in Chapter 2.

It would be hazardous to assert that Sidney aimed to emulate the relationship between Nature and classical poets within an amorous context, and yet the contrast between an active and a passive role emerges within the collection of sonnets, and it might apply to the ecocritical studies of early modern society. Notwithstanding the sides taken by Sidney's contemporaries regarding ecological issues, Sidney might have emphasised the reconsideration of the man's role inside the harmony of the world and the harmony based on his point of view. This would function as a memorandum of mankind's fragility in front of the greatness on Nature, as emerges from the image of an ingenuous lover forced to wander by the influence of an unreachable starlight, shattered by human multiple flawed conception of the world.

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<sup>142</sup> See De Grazia, M. (1981). "Lost Potential in Grammar and Nature: Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*". *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, Vol. 21, No.1, p. 35.



#### 4. Conclusions

My dissertation has focused on the reception of critical attitudes towards the natural world within the changes Renaissance society was experiencing, both on a scientific and literary level. The core of this study aimed to demonstrate a correlation between the poetic language and the relevance of astrology in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* in order to detect similarities or differences the night sky might have in early modern ecocritical studies.

In the first part of my analysis, I traced a brief history of astrology both as a science and later on as a superstition. I started from the spread of astrological knowledge towards Western Europe due to the Syrian Wars that occurred in the third century B.C., and how it became a pillar of European culture. Formerly adopted as a mean to detect time motion and to structure a calendar, the calculations of stars' movements offered the opportunity to firstly reconstruct the shape of the universe in accordance with musical theory. As regards this aspect, geometric and arithmetic proportions seemed to perfectly match musical rhythm. In addition to that, Greek scholars supposed the universe to be composed by four elements: fire, air, water, and earth; taken together with the geometrical calculations previously mentioned they would give the universe finite shape based on the elements that composed it. In particular, Plato presumed that the cosmos was composed by concentric shells and supposed the Earth to be the centre of the universe, as characterized by the element with the major weight. Resting on this analysis, Plato also presumed the distribution of the other planets among the spheres, which would rotate around the Earth. Aristotle implemented his predecessor's studies so as to recalculate the order of planets in the concentric shells. His research on physics would provide a justification on Earth's steadiness and equilibrium, but mostly it would explain the peculiarities of planets' revolution around it. Along to the four elements, the philosopher presupposed some natural laws that would affect the movements of the Earth's components both downwards or upwards. This same explanation would determine planets' positions on the spheres, that is according to their weight. The transmission of motion to the planets would derive from a series of 'unrolling spheres' between the axis that had always existed, whose movement derived from the First Mover, a sphere beyond the sky of fixed stars composed by *aether*. The replication of the number of spheres together with the planets and the First Mover would form the number ten, symbolizing the perfect harmony of the universe as conceived from its origins. Due to the accuracy of

proportions and studies, Aristotle's findings and discussions contributed to the reception of a determined concept of the universe, which as Ptolemy did broaden when stating his geocentric theory of the universe.

Ptolemy's research focused on finding concrete proofs of planets' revolution around the Earth; their movements were determined by the influence of the First Mover. As a consequence, he reaffirmed the validity of Aristotle's system of concentric shells, and his geocentric theory became a reference point for both scientific and literary studies. Religion was also affected, particularly by the correspondence with the repetition of the number three in the universe as it was to be found in the representation of the Holy Trinity. Nevertheless, the complexity of Ptolemy's calculations to prove the validity of his cosmological theory encouraged people to find easier alternatives to demonstrate his theories concerning the universe. Among them, Copernicus implemented the geocentric system by including Heraclides' studies on Earth's rotation on its own axis and calculating the equinoxes a day before Ptolemy did. The consequent reduction in the number of rotations of planets' motion and hierarchical order appeared to support the validity Copernican studies, which showed the fallacy of the geocentric system. Nonetheless, the innovations brought by Copernicus put into discussion the authority declared in Aristotle's works, and the importance they had for religion and science as I mentioned before, even though Copernicus himself presented his own studies on the heliocentric system as a hypothesis.

Moving on to the literary level, books and manuscripts were permeated by the meaning conveyed by the astrological concepts that it survived the scientific discoveries reported by Copernicus. Following the principle of harmony of the universe, the human being had always looked for a way to be perfectly in tune with the surrounding environment; this aspect was significantly relevant in early modern society, too. The importance of the influence of the stars played a pivotal role in the literary field, for the large majority of the metaphors related the night sky derived from the common belief of *astrologia judicialis*, judicial astrology, according to which external events could affect life on Earth. Allegories related to the power conveyed by a given planet, whether positive or a negative, stood at the core of cultural experience of people's imagery and of inspiration in literature and arts. The desire to portray the choreography of the universe related to Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy permeated the correlations between

elements deriving from the natural world, even though those attitudes were harshly condemned as superstitions by religious authorities. Astrology itself served as part of the intellectual education, relying on the tendency deriving from Italian Renaissance. As regards to this, the rediscovery of classical texts gave a major contribution to the formation of the humanist as the inheritor of ancient Greeks and Romans and influenced by the Italian courts. Despite that, the value of astrology seemed to vacillate as society was experiencing a development and improvement on an anthropological field as well.

The improvements made after the big crisis of fourteenth century led to a growing awareness of people's need for beauty and recognition of the recreation of beauty. Therefore, the environment began to be shaped based on the imagery of human beings. This change in attitude contributed to a gradual awareness of human dominion over the physical world, too: the construction of machines adopted to increase soil's production as well as the introduction of perspective applied to painting and architecture became different ways to demonstrate the importance of people's ability to shape beauty. On the other hand, this new awareness of mankind's genius led to an abandonment of the animistic relationship with the natural world, which was also condemned by ecclesiastic institutions. In addition to that, the development of economics led to the expression of new environmental politics that determined a gradual capitalization of goods provided in Nature. The formerly relationship of closeness with the surrounding physical seemed to have gotten far, as people had placed themselves in a superior position, as if they were the new creators. People did not suffer the external phenomena, independently from their violence, but were determined in asserting their control over them. Similarly, this new consciousness of dominion enlarged its complexity in the social sphere, too, in particular in the relationship between men and women. Due to their similarities with their capacity in giving birth, Nature was compared to a caring mother. However, when uncontrolled, Nature could turn into an evil creature that could bring together destruction. Likewise, when women did not accept to control their lust and their desires, they might become the reason of torment and sin, as it was condemned by the clergy. As a consequence, the estrangement of an animistic Nature appeared to mirror itself in the reconsideration of social roles, being the man the active part in contrast to the woman, the passive one. Nonetheless, the gradual abandonment of the animistic point of view for economic and social purposes was denounced by some poets of the Renaissance, who felt a sort of

nostalgia towards a 'golden age' described in texts from Antiquity that seemed no longer to be restored. As a result, the recollection of elements deriving from the pastoral world offered an opportunity to put into discussion the politics adopted against the exploitation of the environment. At the same time, pastoral poetry was to be presented as a temporary way out to the internal crisis with the physical world and its estrangement, i.e. an illusion to temporarily experience an idyllic world in perfect harmony with Nature. Yet, human beings compared themselves to the figure of the shepherd: their desire of controlling the surrounding world was now so permeated in early modern imagery that it invaded the arcadian scenarios praised in their components, which was based on the models of Ovid and Virgil. As a consequence, some poets tried to recreate the old attitudes of classical poets by imitating them in order to preserve the old link with pagan animism. Resting on Virgil's eclogues, the subject matter of Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* was time motion within a year, showing the correspondence with the seasonal activity and the celestial movements of the spheres. In choosing a lifeless element to be discussed, Spenser appeared to have caught the opportunity to develop the intrinsic qualities of poetry and to discuss the treatment reserved to poetry, which appeared to be considered as a free time activity and not as an office, as it was perceived in ancient Greece and Rome.

A similar attempt to investigate sociological and literary aspects within a natural scenario was done by Sidney in his *Arcadia*. The recreation of a pastoral world where everything single element was in tune with the harmony of the universe emerged strikingly from his long prose romance, in accordance with the humanists' longing for the Golden Age of poetry. Those assumptions also composed a conspicuous part of his essay *The Defence of Poesy*, in which the poet's ability to propose alternatives to historical boundaries was the main topic of his work. This assumption derived from a comparison of history and mind with Nature and imaginative ability: while Nature and history were not given the opportunity to choose which events or aspects to include or exclude, mind and imagination were free to explore multiple alternatives beyond a passive acceptance of historical circumstances. This affirmation of mind's free will seemed to provide Sidney with the chance to imitate the models praised by classical poets and to be an active part in the harmony of the universe. That the unity of Nature and cosmos was celebrated in the Pythagorean philosophy of music and in the references to the Ptolemaic system, it was an evidence of the longing for a primordial arcadian world untouched by the

discoveries of the sixteenth century. The act of creating in one's mind seemed also to look at the principle of imitation of Aristotle, according to which the primary act of poetry as fiction in terms of emulating a given object.

As a poet, Sidney was also familiar with the typical topics of courtly tradition, such as love's expression, which characterized his well-known collection *Astrophil and Stella*. As far as courtly poetry is concerned, the conventional *topoi* of the literature would place the woman in a superior position as a deity to be worshipped, but at the same time the man should demonstrate his virility through the verse. Therefore, the hierarchical structure which put the man above woman, and similarly man over Nature, appeared to be confirmed. Nevertheless, the use of nightly metaphors adopted to describe Sidney's amorous struggle with Penelope Deveraux seemed to present an interesting insight towards the reception of the sociological and environmental changes that were occurring between the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In contrast to the supposed literary principles, Sidney assigned Stella a celestial value and with the dominant 'male' power, while Astrophil recognized himself with a 'female' lust and desire to possess his beloved mistress. These desires did not correspond with the moral conduct he was supposed to maintain towards his 'female' feelings he felt. Resting on these assumptions, my analysis focused on this double exploration of the relationship between lover-mistress, mainly the references to the celestial metaphors and the language adopted by Sidney, as deeply involved in the changing relationship between mankind and Nature during the Renaissance. Several sonnets and songs were taken into consideration and the references to the night sky were discussed within the socio-cultural background of early modern England. Whether relationship between Sidney and Penelope Deveraux was an adulterous one, it would probably not ever be known. Despite that, Sidney managed to explore his mind's imaginative ability throughout the whole sonnet sequence. In this particular context, Sidney appeared to investigate the possibility to be submitted to his mistress, attributing her 'male' qualities conveyed by nightly metaphors. What is more, the choice of the universe and its components seemed to offer an alternative reading of the multiple outcomes of the feelings, being as unpredictable as the influence derived from planets and stars. Although one might have interpreted the movements derived from astral elements so as to succeed, there appeared to be always a margin of unpredictability, which is left to the figure of Stella. Such aspects have been analysed throughout a series of some

key elements that emerged from the sonnets and the songs of *Astrophil and Stella*, i.e. the eyes of the lover and of the mistress, the Sun, and the planets. Despite having the chances of a positive outcome in conquering Stella's grace due to the influence of two male forces derived from Jove and Mars, Astrophil's attempts to reify his Muse are useless: he ended up as the passive part in the amorous relationship, accepting the dominion of the woman, and consequently recognizing her independence from male will. The typical canons of courtly love seemed subverted in order to explore an unconventional reception of hierarchical order, which were very likely to offer a critical and alternative analysis of the relationship between mankind and Nature.

#### **4.1. Ecocritical Considerations**

After having discussed the peculiarities that emerged in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, an ecocritical consideration is required at the end of my dissertation. Throughout the whole collection there appeared to be an intent of exercising dominion over the woman: bringing this issue on an ecocritical level, this act might be read as a declaration of human dominion over Nature. The respect that had characterized primordial society was gradually getting lost due to the implementations brought by people during the Renaissance. This loss was being denounced by some poets, whereas others refuted themselves in an idyllic but fictitious 'golden world', where they could enjoy the pleasures of Nature as praised in classical poetry. According to Hiltner, these attitudes might offer an opportunity to draw the attention on a world that was changing and improving, despite damaging a delicate natural equilibrium that would harm the environment and then humanity, as it is to be noticed nowadays.

It is unlikely that Sidney was taking side for one of the two attitudes towards the estrangement of Nature, in particular when referring to Astrophil's amorous struggles in finding a way to cope with a virtuous behaviour and his desires. Nonetheless, Sidney's choice of opting for an unconventional natural element might offer an alternative method to approach his sonnet sequence as immersed within the socio-cultural background of the time. It would be interesting to assert that the changes that early modern society was experiencing influenced his perception of Nature while writing *Astrophil and Stella*: the reception of the night sky as a guidance could be a reference to the old perception of the



world, where an external force determined the fate of human lives. Although the main reception of *Astrophil and Stella* is the one of love poetry, an alternative ecocritical reading opened up to the socio-cultural changes might lead to a further discussion within the awareness of the importance the natural world had inside society, even when contextualised inside the main issues of poetic conventions. Probably, this appears to be the attitude adopted by Sidney: even though external changes might confirm a radical transformation even in the perception of society, there seems to be something beyond human control. Despite causing stress for not being able to determine a given outcome, the perception of an external reason towards a given behaviour or an unsuccess seems to be hidden in an old reception of the sky, which seems to offer a sense of control over people's own lives. This might seem challenging when applied to the ability of recreation of one's imagery, even when discussing the power of a woman over a man, who is supposed to prove his strength in dominating her, and not providing her with a natural freedom. The attempt appeared evocative in reminding to the classical Ovidian and Virgilian tradition, but these references seem to hide a sense of nostalgia towards a light that is constantly moving away, despite attempting to possess it. Yet, the longing to be part of a choreographic celestial harmony seems not intrinsic in the reception of nightly elements and Sidney's attitudes. Taken all these aspects together, there seems that a desire of equilibrium with the surrounding environment and human attitude is yearned for, but mostly a reconsideration of people's role inside the harmonious order of the universe. More broadly, this dissertation might provide insights for further research that could be enlarged to Sidney's contemporaries and poets of the twentieth century. This would be helpful so as to understand the different attitudes and sensibilities towards a longing for a 'golden past' and a desire of possessing Nature.



## Riassunto in Lingua Italiana

Con il mio elaborato ho voluto proporre una lettura in chiave ecocritica della raccolta di sonetti edita da Philip Sidney *Astrophil and Stella* e ripercorrere i molteplici spunti di analisi che essa propone a livello socioculturale. In particolare, l'attenzione si è rivolta non tanto alle componenti pastorali presenti all'interno dei componimenti, bensì all'approccio che questi ultimi adottano in relazione ai riferimenti astrali che percorrono l'opera, così come il loro coniugarsi nella relazione tra Astrophil e Stella.

La seguente tesi si è pertanto preposta di ripercorrere in principio una breve storia degli sviluppi e delle scoperte astronomiche nel corso dei secoli, così da poter pienamente comprendere il loro valore e il loro impatto nella società rinascimentale europea. Sin dal principio, l'astrologia è stata adoperata come strumento per giustificare i fenomeni celesti e per studiare la psiche umana. Testi critici fanno risalire le origini dell'astrologia all'epoca babilonese, in cui la lettura delle stelle era applicata al fine di poter prevedere fenomeni atmosferici. Le guerre siriane del terzo secolo dopo Cristo contribuirono alla diffusione delle conoscenze astrologiche nel mondo occidentale, in particolare grazie agli studi pitagorici e platonici in merito. Di maggior rilievo nelle accademie di Pitagora e di Platone fu l'applicazione dei calcoli dei moti celesti al fine di poter stilare un primo calendario dei fenomeni meteorologici nel corso di un anno. A supporto dei calcoli matematici venne affiancata la teoria della musica, la quale permise di creare un primo proto-modello dell'universo in cui i quattro elementi (aria, fuoco, acqua e terra) si combinavano in un perfetto equilibrio che poteva essere inscritto in un dodecaedro, la figura geometrica più simile alla perfezione della sfera. Essendo la Terra l'elemento dal maggior peso, venne collocata al centro del cosmo, mentre gli altri pianeti e le stelle vi rotavano attorno in una perfetta coreografia in sfere concentriche attorno al pianeta Terra. Aristotele focalizzò i suoi studi nel trovare una giustificazione ai moti celesti, giustificandoli tramite l'ipotesi del Primo Mobile. Questo determinerebbe la rivoluzione dei pianeti attorno alla Terra e si troverebbe in uno spazio antistante l'aria, l'etere. Ciò spiegherebbe la tensione tra l'immobilità della Terra e il moto degli altri pianeti, così come l'intera esistenza del cosmo, in costante sforzo per raggiungere la perfezione nella finitezza delle sfere. Tale spiegazione alla composizione dell'universo come concepita da Aristotele non venne ulteriormente implementata. Basandosi proprio sulle opere del filosofo greco, Tolomeo ampliò la ricerca aristotelica fornendo una spiegazione alla

struttura gerarchica dei pianeti e al loro moto, partendo dalla posizione di questi ultimi durante gli equinozi e calcolandone il movimento nel corso di un anno. Basandosi su ciò, Tolomeo ipotizzò un modello cosmologico di nove sfere, in cui il Primo Mobile corrispondeva con l'Empireo, mentre i pianeti erano disposti nel seguente ordine decrescente: Saturno, Giove, Marte, Sole, Venere, Mercurio, Luna e la Terra. Il sistema tolemaico divenne un punto di riferimento sia per studi scientifici che religiosi grazie al suo forte impatto immaginativo: la stessa visione dell'Empireo oltre la sfera delle stelle fisse venne infatti adoperata dal Cristianesimo per spiegare l'aldilà e il Paradiso. Inoltre, la rappresentazione di un cosmo ordinato ed equilibrato funzionò da strumento letterario per autori medievali e rinascimentali, ad esempio Dante e Chaucer.

Tuttavia, la complessità dei calcoli tolemaici atti a dimostrare l'autenticità della teoria geocentrica portò gli studiosi a cercare delle semplificazioni in ambito matematico per studiare il sistema tolemaico. Tra di essi, Copernico fu in grado di conciliare studi arabi e greci alle analisi tolemaiche, supponendo che la Terra ruotasse su un proprio asse, come da principio proposto da Eraclide. Il calcolo dell'equinozio un giorno prima di quando attuato da Tolomeo e il presupposto della Terra rotante su un proprio asse permisero a Copernico di ridurre il numero di rotazioni dei pianeti così come di rivedere l'ordine gerarchico dei pianeti: ciò contribuì alla formulazione della teoria eliocentrica, in cui tutti i pianeti, inclusa la Terra, ruotavano attorno al Sole. Le scoperte, discusse nel *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (1543) vennero accolte come rivoluzionarie, talvolta eretiche, ma soprattutto vennero definite controverse, dal momento che minavano le antiche credenze associate al moto dei pianeti e alla posizione delle stelle. Per di più, l'influenza del sistema geocentrico trovava spazio anche in rappresentazioni artistiche e letterarie dell'*harmonia coelestis*, considerata simbolo di perfetta unione con il mondo naturale. Le metafore associate al cielo notturno erano diffuse non solo tra gli intellettuali, ma anche tra il popolo; allo stesso modo, la credenza che ogni sfera celeste potesse esercitare una data influenza sull'umanità contribuiva a rimarcare il concetto dell'armonia celeste. Tali significati e modi di dire associati al cielo stellato riuscirono a prevalere sull'insoddisfazione della Chiesa circa le superstizioni astrologiche e la visione animistica del mondo. In particolare, durante il Rinascimento, l'astrologia era considerata parte integrante dell'educazione umanista, a discapito delle forti opposizioni provenienti da alcuni movimenti religiosi radicali.

Per quanto riguarda il Rinascimento, il dibattito sul valore dell'astrologia insieme alle nuove scoperte in ambito astronomico erano solo una parte minore di una serie di molteplici cambiamenti che la società moderna stava vivendo. Dopo i terribili eventi che segnarono il Quattrocento, come la peste, le persone cominciarono ad avvertire un forte desiderio di rinascita e di circondarsi di bellezza. Di conseguenza, lo sviluppo e l'uso di abilità pratiche applicate al mondo naturale giocarono un ruolo fondamentale nell'aiutare l'umanità a trovare nuovi strumenti di espressione, sia nelle arti che nella scienza. Per esempio, le innovazioni in ambito agricolo contribuirono alla riconsiderazione della relazione umanità-Natura. Le persone sembravano non essere più sottomesse all'arbitrarietà di fenomeni esterni, bensì stavano determinando gradualmente il loro dominio grazie a un nuovo punto di vista. L'introduzione della prospettiva nella pittura e nell'architettura fu uno degli strumenti che contribuì al riconoscimento della singola identità umana, riflettendo la capacità delle persone di poter riorganizzare e strutturare il mondo a propria immagine e somiglianza. Ciononostante, il genio umano stava lentamente prevaricando sulla visione animistica della Natura, la quale stava subendo un progressivo abbandono. Gli effetti dell'animismo pagano erano infatti minacciati dalle nuove scoperte in ambito meccanico e dalle dottrine ecclesiastiche, le quali condannavano ogni forma di magia associata alla Natura, poiché aliena dal messaggio salvifico di Cristo. Parte attiva di questo cambio di prospettiva sarebbe da far risalire al movimento calvinista. Secondo questa visione, poiché la salvezza e la redenzione includevano un movimento del cuore rivolto verso Dio, gli stessi esseri umani potevano iniziare a lavorare sulla propria salvezza a iniziare proprio dal loro operare. Tale visione strumentalista della vita umana sembrò marcare un taglio netto con l'antica percezione del mondo naturale al fine di poter sfruttare tutte le risorse derivanti da esso. Il bisogno di controllare e possedere ogni elemento proveniente dall'ambiente circostante influenzò anche la relazione tra uomini e donne. La controparte femminile era da sempre associata alla Natura per via della capacità generativa di entrambe; tuttavia, quando fuori controllo, la Natura poteva mutare in una forza negativa che produceva distruzione, come tempeste o terremoti. Allo stesso modo, l'incapacità delle donne di controllare il loro desiderio avrebbe comportato un'esternazione di una sessualità incontrollata, e di conseguenza a una condotta immorale. Dal momento che il credo cristiano proponeva modelli di virtù

come la Vergine Maria, l'idea che la donna dovesse essere totalmente devota all'autorità maschile crebbe in importanza anche grazie a tale paragone con le forze naturali.

Anche la letteratura e il linguaggio vennero influenzati da questi cambiamenti che stavano lentamente prendendo piede. In principio, la poesia, così come gli altri strumenti letterari, serviva alla lode della Natura: l'obiettivo primario del poeta era quello di fungere da intermediario tra l'umanità e il mondo fisico. Ciò contribuì alla formazione di *topoi* letterari, i quali rinforzarono l'impatto della filosofia animista nella società. Tuttavia, poeti e scrittori del Cinquecento e del Seicento erano consci della distanza che andava espandendosi tra l'umanità e il mondo naturale, così come i cambiamenti che la società moderna stava sperimentando. Pertanto, essi sentirono il bisogno di ricreare quanto meno un legame illusorio con un mondo idillico che si stava progressivamente perdendo. La letteratura diventò quindi uno strumento per discutere e denunciare la perdita dell'antico equilibrio che aveva caratterizzato l'esistenza umana. La riscoperta dei poeti classici come Ovidio e Virgilio fu fondamentale al fine di diffondere l'uso della poesia pastorale e la lode di un'“Età dell'Oro” in cui poter contemplare l'antica armonia. Pur riprendendo elementi e metafore derivanti dal mondo pastorale, gli scrittori si ponevano sempre in una posizione di superiorità rispetto all'ambiente naturale, al fine di poter esercitare comunque una qualsivoglia forma di controllo. Proprio in questo contesto, alcuni poeti avvertirono l'urgenza di esplorare il mondo arcadico come descritto dai poeti dell'Età Classica, in contrasto con le innovazioni scientifiche e letterarie del Rinascimento. Ad esempio, nel suo *Shepherd's Calendar*, Spenser si concentrò sul naturale scorrere del tempo nel mondo naturale come soggetto della sua opera e non come elemento decorativo. Tale scelta sembrerebbe essere parzialmente influenzata dalla riscoperta dei testi classici, come quelli di Virgilio, il quale iniziò il suo ufficio poetico partendo proprio dalla lirica pastorale per poi dedicarsi alla poesia epica. Di conseguenza, un approccio primordiale alla tradizione letteraria basato sul modello dei poeti della Classicità parrebbe aver offerto l'opportunità di riaffermare l'identità e l'attività del poeta all'interno della corte, non come semplice passatempo né strettamente relegato alla satira.

Similmente, Sidney considerava l'arte poetica come un metodo per poter delineare un ritratto intimo della vita interiore del poeta. Tale filosofia di pensiero venne esemplificata nel *Defence of Poesy*, opera in cui Sidney discusse l'importanza della poesia non come semplice imitazione, come dichiarato da Aristotele, bensì come abilità atta a

riflettere le capacità immaginative della mente. Sidney, inoltre, investigò tale filosofia nella raccolta di sonetti *Astrophil and Stella*, pubblicata nel 1581. Generalmente, ciò che maggiormente emerge da questi componimenti riguarda una possibile relazione di Sidney con Penelope Devereaux. Eppure, questa tesi si è posta come obiettivo quello di osservare l'utilizzo delle metafore derivanti dal mondo naturale, influenzate dalla tradizione petrarchesca. I conflitti interiori sperimentati da Astrophil e le sue emozioni contrastanti vennero esplorati tramite un uso massiccio di termini di origine naturale e strettamente correlati all'immaginario astrologico. Contrariamente alla nuova percezione dell'elemento naturale che andava diffondendosi nella poesia moderna, Astrophil sembra essere soggetto all'influenza degli elementi astrologici. L'uso di alcune figure retoriche sottolinea il desiderio di Astrophil di ritrovare un'antica connessione con il mondo naturale al di là delle scoperte scientifiche e dell'imposizione di ruoli convenzionali come proposti dalla tradizione letteraria e dalla dialettica della religione.

Questa tesi, dunque, ha voluto focalizzarsi sul contrasto tra il linguaggio poetico in *Astrophil and Stella* e l'importanza dell'astrologia nell'opera di Sidney. In primo luogo, si è discusso sulle origini e sull'applicazione delle metafore derivanti dal mondo naturale come oggetto dell'attività poetica. In seguito, è stato esaminato il valore dell'astrologia nell'ambito letterario, evidenziando la coesistenza di quest'ultima con le scoperte dell'Europa e dell'Inghilterra del Seicento. Parte cruciale di questo studio è stata l'analisi delle metafore astrologiche nella raccolta poetica di Sidney sotto un approccio ecocritico. Quest'ultimo aspetto mi ha permesso di esaminare la peculiarità dell'immaginario astrologico nell'Inghilterra rinascimentale, così come il suo sviluppo nel corso dei secoli. Di conseguenza, una presa di posizione a livello ecocritico ha contribuito a presentare nuovi metodi per poter esplorare il ruolo del poeta e della sua musa sotto una luce astrologica, e come ambo i personaggi si pongono l'uno di fronte all'altra. Ho inoltre analizzato l'uso degli elementi derivanti dal cielo notturno in ambito letterario e come questi abbiano fornito una lettura d'insieme nella relazione tra l'umanità e la Natura. Lo scopo di questo elaborato ha voluto esplorare l'impatto dell'astrologia nel linguaggio poetico e come il primo rimanga un elemento chiave nella società rinascimentale. La prospettiva ecocritica ha fornito gli strumenti per investigare il linguaggio astrologico in *Astrophil and Stella* con rispetto all'attitudine ecologica nel Rinascimento.





**Appendix A: Figures**

Figure 1.....15

Figure 2.....17

Figure 3.....20

Figure 4.....21

Figure 5.....26

Figure 6.....43

Figure 7.....62

Figure 8.....64



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