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Stella, Elizabeth, and the Dark Lady: The Character of the Beloved Mistress in Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences

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Stella, Elizabeth, and the Dark Lady
The Character of the Beloved Mistress in Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences

by

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Note to the Reader:

All definitive texts, unless otherwise noted, come from these sources:

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I. Introduction

By the time the sonnet tradition reached England, certain aspects of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, such as the portrayal of the beloved woman, had been practically codified. In general, the mistress of the sonnet sequence is beautiful, distant, and scornful of her lover, a caricature repeated so often it became cliché and flat. The mistresses of sonnet sequences tend to all resemble each other, following the precedent of Petrarch's Laura. The individual character of the mistress is not developed and even her beauty is an imitation of Laura: blonde, blue-eyed, with teeth like pearls and lips red as roses. Given the depth of love expressed in the romantic sonnet sequences, it is surprising how little the speakers actually reveal about the mistresses.

This phenomenon is, in part, due to tendency of the authors to focus the sonnet sequence on the emotional reaction of the lover to the woman; what is important is the subject of love, not the object of love. As a result, the mistress only appears to the readers through the eyes of the lover and remains separated from the audience just as she is removed from the lover. Spenser, Sidney, and Shakespeare distinguish themselves from other Elizabethan sonneteers by changing the character of the beloved mistress and readjusting the relationship between the mistress and the lover. Examining the ways in which Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare adhere to or deviate from the Petrarchan portrayal of the mistress reveals how each author plays with and comments on the conflict between spiritual love and desire inherent in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*.

Although it is still difficult to know the woman, since she remains filtered through the eyes of the lover, Elizabeth, Stella, and the dark lady are more individualized than other mistresses of sonnet sequences; all three give some sort of love back to the lovers,

which makes their reactions to the lover different than the average aloof beauty.

Although Elizabeth is the most distant of the three, there are moments when her wit shines through the sequence as the lover answers back to her in his sonnets. Also, the relationship between Spenser's lover and Elizabeth in the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* is the only one in the Elizabethan tradition that ends happily through marriage. Sidney's sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, presents the only mistress who gets her own voice. Like Laura, Stella is already married, but Astrophil pursues her anyway. Although she refuses to engage in any sort of activity that is outside of the moral boundaries of the church, she does grow to love him. She offers Astrophil her friendship, which he ultimately rejects since he is unable to have his desire as well as her companionship. In Shakespeare's sonnets, the dark lady is practically the antithesis of Laura, for she readily enters into a sexual relationship with the speaker. Although he can gratify his sexual desire, he does not seem to respect her since he refers to her in demonic imagery and speaks of the shame that he feels after he has been with her. Spenser, Sidney, and Shakespeare all treat Petrarch's central theme in different ways, but they come back to a common view: too sharp a delineation between the physical and spiritual aspects of love creates an impasse to the realization of romantic love. That is not to say that the lovers must be engaging in sexual activity to achieve romantic love, but that to eliminate permanently either spiritual or physical intimacy between the two partners is to kill any hope that their love can be fulfilling or stand the test of time.

It is important to clarify the meaning of "spiritual love" and "desire." For the purposes of this paper, "spiritual love" is broadly defined to include both the emotional elements of romantic love and Christian devotion to God; therefore, this term includes

worship of God, but is not limited to it. If the speaker is attracted to the internal, immortal part of the mistress, such as her soul or virtue, or if he sees her as an agent of spiritual or moral goodness that leads him directly to God, then his love for her moves outside of the physical realm and would be classified as “spiritual.” Spiritual love is associated with *caritas*, Latin for “dearness.” *Caritas* is often used as a translation of the Greek *agape*, signifying the love of God and fellow man, in order to avoid sexual suggestion. *Caritas* is often translated to English as “charity,” and therefore carries with it the connotation of selfless love, compatible with Christianity. “Physical love,” or “desire,” includes lust but is not necessarily restricted to it; any admiration for the beauty of the woman’s body, no matter how innocent, would be classified as “physical love.” Desire is associated with *cupiditas*, Latin for “passionate love” and the root of “cupidity.” Both *cupiditas* and *caritas* are components of romantic love, which, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as the relationship between two people (within the sonnet tradition, usually heterosexual) that involves an intense longing to connect to the other in an intimate way.

Petrarch tries to resolve the tension between the body and the soul by insisting that the love he has for Laura is an imperfect imitation of God’s love for mankind and that his love for Laura leads him to blessedness (Durling, 20). This movement to bridge the gap between the physical and the spiritual suggests Neoplatonism, a philosophical system that believes transcendence is possible through the aid of love. This theory originally comes from Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium* where she postulates that the desire for one person’s beauty will lead to love and desire of all people’s beauty, which will ultimately lead to love of the form of Beauty.

Neoplatonists put a Christian spin on this concept: the love of one person could eventually lead a lover to God, just as Petrarch's speaker claims that Laura leads him. One famous Renaissance neoplatonist, Castiglione, delivers this philosophy through the words of Pietro Bembo in the fourth book his *Book of the Courtier*:

[Just] as from the particular beauty of one body [love] guides the soul to the universal beauty of all bodies, so in the highest stage of perfection beauty guides it from the particular intellect to the universal intellect. Hence, the soul, aflame with the most holy fire of true divine love, flies to unite itself with the angelic nature; and not only completely abandons the senses, but has no longer any need of reason's discourse; for, transformed into an angel, it understands all things intelligible, and without any veil or cloud views the wide sea of divine, pure beauty, and receives it into itself, enjoying that supreme happiness of which the senses are incapable... [It is] so beautiful that all other beautiful things are beautiful because they participate in its beauty...

(Javitch (ed.), 256-7).

Thus, there is a world of the senses and a world of divine beauty. Love for one woman's beauty moves the lover to love of all physical beauty and then to divine beauty. Beauty moves a lover from individual knowledge to divine wisdom through the desire it sparks in the lover to know the eternal Beauty that makes an individual woman beautiful.

Knowledge of Beauty is outside of the physical realm, and therefore requires the lover to abandon his senses and even his reason; knowledge of God's beauty comes from love and revelation, not from discourse. In order to reach the pinnacle of wisdom "and unite with God" the lover must ascend the ladder of love "that bears the image of sensual beauty at its lowest rung... to the lofty mansion where heavenly, lovely, and true beauty dwells, which lies hidden in the inmost secret recesses of God" (Javitch, 258, 257). Thus, while the world of the spiritual and the world of the physical are separate from each other, physical beings have access to divine beauty through romantic love.

Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare react to this philosophy in different ways, affirming and denying basic precepts of Neoplatonism. Because each develops his

respective mistress into a relatively individualized character, it is difficult to deny the physical presence of the woman in the sonnet sequences. The neoplatonic goal is essentially to abandon the physical in order to connect with the greater reality of the divine. Although, in general, the poets show a preference for spiritual love over physical desire they all deny the basic goal of Neoplatonism; they do not advocate a complete rejection of the physical. The different portrayals of the mistresses of the sonnet sequences nuances how each author both affirms and denies this basic premise of Neoplatonism.

II. Laura – the Standard of the Sonnet Sequence Mistress

Laura sets the standard for the beloved mistress within a sonnet sequence, starting with her physical appearance. She is a blonde haired, blue-eyed beauty who, when she walked, did not walk “the way of mortals/ but of angelic forms, and when she spoke/ more than an earthly voice it was that sang: / a goodly spirit and a living sun” (Sonnet 90.9-11). She is not merely a woman, but a miraculous wonder that epitomizes perfection. Laura is set apart from the speaker of the poem as an unreachable goal. The lover-persona appreciates her beauty from afar and links her physical beauty to moral virtue:

Who seeks to see the best Nature and Heaven
Can do among us, come and gaze on her,
Sole sun, and not for just my eyes alone
But for the blind world which cares not for virtue;

...
He shall see, if he come in time, all virtue,
All loveliness, all regal-mannered ways
Joined in one body, tempered marvelously.
(Sonnet 248.1-4; 9-11)

Both physical beauty and moral virtue are symbolized in the metaphor of the sun. In this way, Laura acts as an agent of moral inspiration to the lover-persona, who is attracted to

her beauty and her goodness simultaneously; however, because she is sun-like, the lover can never get too close to her. She is too bright in her goodness, and thus the speaker must avert his gaze from her. He cannot focus too intently on her, but instead must examine the effects that she has on those around her.

Laura is too distant from the lover-persona for sex to be even a possibility. Ideas about sex are therefore communicated through fantasies. When the speaker meditates on Laura's virtue and beauty, he is aroused by sensual desire, which he immediately sublimates into a "religious" experience. This transition is evident in Poem 126, when the speaker remembers seeing Laura beside a riverbank. He is overcome by her beauty and imagines seeing flowers drifting down from the trees above, falling onto her hair and breasts. He is so mesmerized by his fantasy that he thinks he is in heaven, and asks, "How and when did I come here?" (Poem 126.62). The sensual desire he feels, which is so closely related to the creative impulse that spurs him to write, ironically has the effect of counteracting the very things he loves in Laura; she must remain his lofty idol and cannot become his lowly sex object. The speaker is stuck where he is; either to leave her or to be sexually satisfied it to lose not only his pathway to God, but also his literary inspiration.

In order to keep his desire from becoming destructive, the poet-speaker assimilates his fantasies into the safe religious category of contemplation. This seeming ability to reconcile sexual fantasy with contemplation suggests a twist in the Augustinian tradition that sex distracts one from contemplating the higher good of God's love (Durling, 20). Instead, Petrarch's acceptance of his earthly love for Laura offers an alternate view of erotic love: sex is an imperfect imitation of God's grace for man. Until

the final palinode, Petrarch's speaker insists that his fantasies about Laura are "blessèd" and that contemplating her is an almost holy experience (Sonnet 61). This defense is essentially neoplatonic, because the speaker insists that he moves up the ladder of love, from contemplating Laura's beauty to contemplating God.

This view however, creates problems for Petrarch's speaker; Laura's physical beauty is too overpowering for him, and although he tries continuously to sublimate his desire to his devotion to God, he ultimately does not accomplish this goal until he renounces his love in the final palinode. Although he defends his love for her on neoplatonic grounds, he experiences the exact opposite of the neoplatonic ideal; instead of ascending the ladder of love toward God, he is held back by his love for her beauty. He undercuts his own thesis, and in the end he retracts his love for her, claiming that he should not have consumed so much of his time in loving an earthly being: "I go my way regretting those past times/ I spent in loving something which was mortal/ instead of soaring high, since I had wings/ that might have taken me to higher levels" (Sonnet 365.1-4). The speaker admits that the kind of adoration that should be reserved for God was instead directed toward Laura, turning the love he has for her into idolatry.

The fact that we have no clear picture of Laura's personality by the end of sequence further illustrates the point that Petrarch's speaker has fallen in love with a deified version of Laura. She remains distant, both to the audience and the speaker; he does not engage in any interaction with her through the sequence, and he does not report her reactions or, more importantly, her speech to him. She resembles a transcendent being, similar to God, who is at once loved and unknown. Romantic love cannot endure a situation like that, and so eventually Petrarch's passion for her is relinquished. In direct

contrast to the other heroines of the sonnet sequences, it is Laura's *inaccessibility* that informs the nature of the conflict between body and soul.

III. The Character of the Mistress

Because the character of the mistress is always filtered through the eyes of the lover, it is necessary to fill in the blanks of her "personality" by looking at the physical description of her, examining the metaphors that the lover uses to describe her, deciding whether or not the mistress emerges as a static or dynamic figure within the sequence, and paying special attention to direct or reported speech of the beloved.

In general, the physical beauty of the mistress manifests her inner beauty (Lever, 109). Because Petrarch's Laura sets the standard for physical beauty as blonde and blue-eyed, any deviation from that stereotype indicates a movement away from the norm of a typical Petrarchan mistress. Spenser's Elizabeth follows the Petrarchan prescription for beauty, and indeed she is very similar to Laura in the first half of the sequence. Spenser offers no glimpses into the everyday life of the lover and Elizabeth as Sidney does in his sonnets about Astrophil's jousting and boating. Spenser is more concerned with the general emotional state of the lover, which makes Elizabeth seem almost as distant as Laura is (Lever, 115). Sidney's Stella has brown eyes, which marks a step away from the Petrarchan norm in both her physical beauty and her personality. Stella is unlike Laura in that she engages in a relationship with the lover, but she is also similar to Laura in that she inspires moral goodness and is essentially out of reach of the lover. Shakespeare's dark lady, on the other hand, is physically and emotionally the complete opposite of Laura. Shakespeare stresses this fact in Sonnet 130, a parody of the Petrarchan conventions: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; / Coral is far more red than her

lips' red... / I grant I never saw a goddess go; / My mistress when she walks treads on the ground" (Sonnet 130.1-2; 11-12). Shakespeare's lover rejects a mistress who is anything like a golden goddess. It is his friend, the young man, whom the speaker admires for his beauty and virtue. The dark woman he describes has no problems with engaging in illicit sexual affairs and distorting truth.

The symbolic significance of blackness is important in both Sidney and Shakespeare; however, Shakespeare develops the symbolism of blackness more fully than Sidney. In both sonnet sequences, the speaker considers the black eyes of his mistress to be a distinctive mark that sets her apart from others. They both make reference to the color black as signifying mourning or pity, which links the color to sadness and loss as well as to empathy and compassion. Through the dark lady who is physically and spiritually darker than Stella, however, Shakespeare explores the associations of the color black with shadow, doubt, and obscurity. The physical "blackness" of the dark lady reflects the obscuring of the truth in the relationship between her and her lover. Not only the trust between the two, but also her very beauty is uncertain since the lover will declare her beauty to be supreme only when she loves him (Sonnet 132). While Stella's beauty is apparent to all minds, only the speaker's "dear doting heart" sees the dark lady's beauty (Sonnet 131.3). Throughout the sequence, Shakespeare reveals that the speaker's attraction is based on willful self-deception. Still, even though he knows that she is dark, he calls her "the fairest and most precious jewel/ ... [whose] black is fairest in my judgment's place" (Sonnet 131.4,12).

Moreover, the symbolic associations of the color black with impurity, evil, and lust reveal even more of her personality and the state of their relationship. This is the

only romance in a renaissance sonnet sequence that is consummated (Roche, 390). In fact, sex becomes the main focus of the relationship. The dark lady rejects the idealism associated with love and is “content to interpret love as a lust of the blood and permission of the will” (Lever, 182). She takes what she wants, whether it is the speaker, or his friend the young man. The speaker knows of her attitude, yet he accepts it saying, “When my love swears that she is made of truth / I do believe her though I know she lies” (Sonnet 138.1). His lady is sinful, simultaneously desirable and repugnant, reckless and wild. So he winks at her indiscretions and lies back to her: “And in our faults by lies we flattered be” (Sonnet, 138.14). Thus the deception that began their affair plays out later in its development. The pun on the word “lie” to mean either “to tell a falsehood” or “to sleep with” illustrates the state of their affair; both are willing to sacrifice honor and truth for sex. Therefore, their affair degenerates into simply the “joyless mating of human animals” (Lever, 179). The physical union between them, which should be something sacred and meaningful, is corrupt and hollow.

In direct contrast to Shakespeare, who uses demonic metaphors to describe a mistress who tempts him away from moral goodness, Sidney consistently refers to Stella as the very best teacher of virtue. In this way she is more like Petrarch’s Laura, guiding the speaker to blessedness. Compare the vision of Laura as a golden sun with Sidney’s portrayal of Stella in Sonnet 71: “Who will in fairest book of Nature know, / How Virtue may best lodged in beauty be, / Let him but learn of love to read in thee, / ... sweetest sovereignty / Of reason, from whose light those night-birds fly: / That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so” (Sonnet 71.1-3; 6-8). As one critic comments, “In Sidney’s poem the heightened tone, the transcendental vision, is lacking. His Stella is no miracle wrought

by the combined powers of nature and heaven.... As ‘the fairest book of Nature’, she may at any time be read for edification – though not gazed at in wonder” (Lever, 59). Again, physical beauty is tied to moral goodness. Stella’s eyes shine like the sun, but unlike Laura, who is *herself* a sun, Stella’s eyes are luminous because of her inherent reason. Moreover, her name itself leads away from linking her too closely with the image of the sun; she is instead a star, which can be scrutinized without any danger to the stargazer. She is good and she is beautiful, but she is a teacher and not an angel.

Although Elizabeth is also noted for her beauty and moral virtue, Spenser imbeds images of violence throughout the speaker’s praises of her. The sonnets within the sequence vary back and forth between presenting images of Elizabeth through war, hunting, and violence and images of sweetness, goodness, and education. One critic argues, “[from] such discrepancies it is clear that we have to face not merely. ... [a] hesitation between a ‘conventional’ and a ‘lover-like’ approach, but an attempted blending of two collections of sonnets, differing in subject matter, characterization and general conception” (Lever, 99). The view that is currently accepted by most scholars, however, is that the symbolic structures of time contradict this hypothesis. According to this theory, the *Amoretti* is divided into three basic parts: the Petrarchan group, the Lenten group and the final group, which is the period of preparation before the wedding that takes place in the *Epithalamion* (Dunlap, 595-6). Although the narrative presents problems since there is no absolute, linear movement away from the bloody, violent images of Elizabeth as predatory animal towards images of her as a benevolent teacher, the calendrical intricacies indicate that the sonnets were purposely set in order to indicate the unity of the sequence. The images of benevolence and violence are therefore not

trustworthy images for determining Elizabeth's character since these images seem wholly dependent on the mood of the lover as he adjusts to changes in their relationship: "The fact that he nearly always presents his attacks on the mistress in a way which maximizes their dramatic impact ... suggests that there is little foundation to his hostile descriptions of the mistress, and that it is his emotional response to her rejection of him that is being expressed" (Gibbs, 38-9). Insight into the persona of Elizabeth will have to come from elsewhere than the metaphors the poet uses to describe his mistress.

One of the glimpses into Elizabeth's character comes from her ability to change. The idea of change is fundamental to a sonnet sequence; it is usually restricted, however, to the masculine domain. It is the lover who has to change, who must sublimate his desire to spiritual love as Petrarch does and Astrophil fails to do. One of Spenser's innovations is that the heroine changes as well (Villeponteaux, 30). The subject of Elizabeth's pride comes up rather often, and the theme of the lady as a combative warrior occurs in at least fifteen poems, suggesting that the lover finds the lady too domineering, which proves to be a "serious obstacle to the attainment of true love" (*Ibid*, 31-2). This willfulness is coupled with a fear of being mastered and then subjected to the will of another. These two obstacles are possibly overcome in Sonnet 67, the engagement sonnet: "she beholding me with mylder looke, / Sought not to fly, but fearlesse still did bide: / Till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke, / And with her *owne goodwill* hir fyrmely tyde" (Sonnet 67.9-12 emphasis mine). The sequence suggests that Elizabeth's submission to the lover is "a submission to captivity that brings about freedom from captivity" (Villeponteaux, 37). Elizabeth does not want to be coerced into a relationship with the lover, but she chooses on her own terms to allow the relationship to unfold. She

is no longer a proud and lofty Petrarchan mistress, but an “intelligent individual who is capable of involving herself in an intimate relationship, though human enough to be nervous about its outcome” (Gibbs, 56).

Likewise, Stella emerges as a dynamic character in *Astrophil and Stella*. She also begins the sequence as a somewhat conventional mistress, initially disdainful of Astrophil. She grows to love him, and when she is forced to cut off their relationship she suffers with him as indicated from Sonnet 87 to the end of the sequence. “Stella is no fool” and she will not let Astrophil seduce her despite the love she has for him (Klein, 87). She is not so cold as to deny him any affection as Laura did Petrarch’s lover, but she insists that the love they share be honorable: “love she did, but loved a Love not blind, / Which would not let me, whom she loved, decline/ From nobler course, fit for my birth and mind” (Sonnet 62.6-8). Stella is one who tries to blend two seeming contradictions, her growing love for Astrophil and her desire to be a virtuous woman, by offering Astrophil a friendship that will not result in an illicit, extramarital affair. When he rejects her offer because his desire for her is too strong, she holds fast to her virtue, and thus she is simultaneously a static and dynamic character. She reacts to Astrophil, but she is only willing to allow him to move her so far.

Stella is the only one of the three heroines who is given her own voice. Perhaps the most important example of this is in Song 8 of the sequence when she confronts Astrophil and tells him that they must end their growing intimacy:

“Then she spake; her speech was such,
As not ears but hart did touch:
While such wise she love denied,
As yet love signified.
‘Astrophil,’ said she ‘my love
Cease in these effects to prove...
Trust me while I thee deny,
In myself the smart I try,

Tyrant honor doth thus use thee,
 Stella's self might not refuse thee."
 (Song 8.69-74,97-100).

There is some critical controversy about the interpretation of these lines. Some critics, sympathetic to Astrophil, claim that Stella's speech reveals that she enjoys playing the game, for "Stella's protestations of love are somewhat undermined by the reasons she gives for leaving Astrophil.... If Stella had been totally chaste during Astrophil's pursuit of her and so had demonstrated how highly she rated honour, then it would have been easier to accept submission to 'Tyran Honour' at this stage as genuine" (Gibbs, 46-47). This interpretation is biased, for the kiss that Astrophil and Stella share is one that he steals from her while she is sleeping. Stella does love Astrophil, but she upholds her honor by remaining physically faithful to her husband. She tells Astrophil time and time again to love her in an honorable way, probably because she wants to be able to continue seeing him. She does not lead him to expect any sort of sexual gratification from her; indeed she is angry with him after he kisses her. Stella is advocating a division between the physical and the spiritual in the love between Astrophil and herself. She wants him to love her soul and not her body, and when he cannot do that, she chooses to safeguard her virtue. This decision is not easy, and she suffers for it. Thus from both her presentation in the sonnets through Astrophil's perspective and her own voice in Song 8, Stella emerges as a kind, loving woman who does not allow herself to be ruled by passion.

Although Stella is the only one of the three to speak with her own words, both the dark lady and Elizabeth's voices appear in the sonnet sequences through reported speech. In Shakespeare's sequence, the dark lady's words tend to "add to the ambiguity which surrounds her, rather than cast light upon the nature of her relationship with her suitor, or with his rivals" (Gibbs, 43). The first few lines of both Sonnet 138, "When my love

swears that she is made of truth,” and Sonnet 152, “thou are twice forsworn to me love swearing,” play with the ideas of “truth and falsehood, swearing and forswearing” in such a way as to raise doubts about the truth and value of what has been sworn (Gibbs, 43). Whether the narrator is admitting to the reader that he and the dark lady have entered into a mutual understanding to lie to each other or accusing the lady directly of lying to him, it is clear that she uses words to manipulate situations to her liking, and that she has no scruples about obscuring the truth. In Sonnet 145 the lover presents her words, “I hate not you,” as a change of heart that luckily has saved his life, truly a major change of heart; in reality, however, all she has actually said is that she does not currently hate him. “It is not after all, that the mistress is confessing to loving,” or even that she is showing him that much mercy; she still taunts him by taking her time to reassure him that it is not he whom she hates (Gibbs, 44). Thus, even in a sonnet in which the speaker presents his mistress as merciful and good, her reported speech reveals her to be manipulative and even cruel.

Spenser uses the reported speech of Elizabeth in a far different manner. He presents her as a good-humored, laughing figure who does not match up to the lover’s description of her as cold-hearted:

But when I pleade, she bids me play my part,
 And when I weep, she sayes teares are but water:
 And when I sigh, she says I know the art,
 And when I waile, she turnes hir selfe to laughter.
 So doe I weepe, and wayle, and pleade in vaine,
 Whiles she as steele and flint doth still remayne.
 (Sonnet 18.9-14)

Her reactions to the lover “indicate that she is aware that his pleading, weeping, sighing, and wailing are strategies to win her...she chides him for not playing his part well or for playing it too well. This may not be the response that he wanted from her, but

nevertheless it is a response; she is not merely denying him as a matter of course” (Gibbs, 49). She is playfully teasing him rather than being a disdainful, unapproachable sonnet mistress; she is actually engaging in his courtship of her, rather than remaining unmoving like the steel and flint that he claims she is. Other indications of Elizabeth’s reported speech reveal her wit. In sonnet 28, the lover rejoices at seeing his mistress wearing a bay, or laurel, leaf. Since this is the symbol of poets, he takes it as a sign of her favor. She turns it around in the following sonnet and lets him know that the bay leaf is also the symbol of victory: “And by the bay leaf which I unto her gave,/ Accoumpts me selfe her captive quite forlorne./ The bay (quoth she) is of the victours borne, / Yielded them by the vanquisht as theyr meeds” (Sonnet 29.3-6). She rebuts his claim, stating that he has not won her but rather that it is the other way around. This sonnet is not only witty, but it also “suggests a sort of friendly banter between lover and lady” (Villeponteaux, 32). Although Spenser does not present a completely developed character in Elizabeth, through her reported speech he suggests that she is a witty, playful and engaging partner.

The fact that Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare do not present their mistresses as completely conventional changes the way that they approach the Petrarchan conflict between *caritas* and *cupiditas*. All three women engage with their lovers much more than Laura does with Petrarch’s speaker. This interaction does not allow the lovers to separate the two broad aspects of love into separate categories, with physical desire for the woman’s beauty continually sublimated to admiration for her moral goodness and the poet’s love of God. Stella and Elizabeth are too human to be “lofty idols” like Laura, and so Astrophil and Spenser’s speaker either cannot or will not sublimate their desire to

a holier kind of love. Shakespeare's dark lady, on the other hand, is a complete reversal of Laura in that she seems to appeal only to the speaker's sexual appetite. Whereas Petrarch's speaker continually emphasizes his respect and admiration for Laura, Shakespeare's speaker seems to be grasping at straws when he praises his lady's virtue, as evident by the great mercy she shows when she spares his life after saying that she does not hate him. Her personality, as suggested by her physical description and reported speech, is dark, manipulative, and simultaneously magnetic and tortuous. She is not virtuous, but rather lustful. If the problem of Petrarch's speaker's resulted from a imbalance of *cupiditas* and *caritas*, with Laura being too perfect for him to desire sexually, then Shakespeare's speaker faces the opposite problem; the dark lady ends up being a somewhat flat character, because she is too closely identified with raw sexual energy for the speaker to respect her, or see her as a possible agent of moral goodness.

IV. The Relationship of the Lover-Persona to the Mistress

Although this subject is necessarily linked to the previous discussion, the character of the mistress, each lover-persona approaches his beloved with a different mentality about her and a different goal for his relationship with her. The element of control in the relationship, and the reasons for which the lover pursues his mistress, temper the way each poet deals with the tensions between physical and spiritual love.

The power dynamic between Spenser's speaker and Elizabeth changes over the course of their relationship; at the beginning of the sequence the poet is "the humble suitor, watching every transient expression on the face of the beloved for some hint of favour" (Lever, 124). Although it is evident from Sonnet 29 that Elizabeth engages in the lover's courtship of her, she *does* hold the upper hand and does not respond to his

attentions the way he would want her to. The lover perceives her friendly banter as combativeness: “Sweet warriour when shall I have peace with you? / High time it is, this warre now ended were” (Sonnet 57.1-2). He sees her playfulness as willfulness, and the relationship between them as a struggle for control.

This conflict between them appears as “a serious obstacle to true love” (Villeponteaux, 32). Elizabeth seems to be afraid of being mastered by another, for the speaker tries to reassure her, “The doubt which ye misdeeme, fayre love, is vaine, / That fondly feare to loose your liberty” (Sonnet 65.1-2). However, it appears that her fears are in fact justified, for he goes on to say within the same sonnet that the “gentle bird feeles no captivity / Within her cage, but singes and feeds her fill” (Sonnet 65.7-8). Although he gently reassures her that he will take care of her, she will in fact be losing her liberty if she becomes a caged bird in consenting to marry him. Although this response to the lady is not uniform throughout the sequence, at moments like these he appears “to desire possession and control of the lady rather than mutual love” (Villeponteaux, 34). It makes sense that Elizabeth would resist uniting herself with some one who wants to own her. In the betrothal sonnet, she does not consent to marry him until after he forsakes the chase, backing off from his “long pursuit and vaine assay” (Sonnet 67.5-7). It is not until he lets go of her enough that she can decide of her own accord that she consents to the union.

Despite the fact that Elizabeth waits to consent until after the speaker relaxes his pursuit of her, his desire to master Elizabeth is especially evident in the sonnets immediately following her acceptance. Once she has given him her consent, “his status rapidly changes. Henceforth he appears as the superior partner, and is accepted as such by the lady, who has voluntarily committed herself to his keeping” (Lever, 124). He

compares himself to a warrior of antiquity who will erect a monument to “record the memory/ Of my loves *conquest*, peerelesse beauties prise” (Sonnet 69.6-7 emphasis mine). He sees her acceptance of him as a victory, and she is his conquest.

Although he knows that she has come to him of “her owne goodwill,” he still wants to think that she is like a bee caught in a spider’s web; Elizabeth, the bee, is “caught in cunning snare: / of a deare foe, and thrall’d to his love: / in whose streight bands [she] now captived [is]/ so firmly, that [she] never may remove” (Sonnet 67.12; Sonnet 71.5-8). This discussion arises from Elizabeth’s embroidery, which depicts a bee in a spider web. The speaker mutes his interpretation of her needlework by saying that just as she has stitched around this picture of captivity a border of beautiful flowers, her subjugation to him will be a “sweet... prison” because of the love they share (Sonnet 71.11). Although some critics read this poem as “easy pleasantry,” which reveals that the “lady’s self-subordination is... no longer a serious issue between the lovers,” the image of captivity is exactly what Elizabeth seemed to fear earlier in the sequence; no matter how sweet the prison is, it is still a loss of liberty from which she cannot escape (Lever, 126). It is important to note that the bestial images reveal more about the speaker than they do about Elizabeth; these images reflect the speaker’s deep-seated insecurity since he evidently feels the need to control the object he fears he may lose. His decision to link himself with the spider reveals his desire to be the one that captures the other. He wants to hold onto Elizabeth so that she cannot escape.

The problem that these sonnets address is resolved in two ways: the lover’s awareness that he is likewise held captive by the mistress and his assertion that her submission to him in marriage will paradoxically bring about a greater kind of freedom.

Despite the speaker's explicit mention of himself as a spider, Elizabeth is the one who plays the part of that animal. She is the one who embroiders, which links her to the spider that is weaving its web. Although the speaker claims that he has snared her, it is, in fact, he who is drawn to her "web." After presenting the image of the bee trapped in the spider's web, Spenser's speaker turns around and tells his mistress that his heart is a bird, which she should take into her bosom to "gently encage" (Sonnet 73.10). This image of captivity is more sentimentalized and less violent, indicating that the speaker is attempting to upgrade his rhetoric about Elizabeth. He mitigates the earlier, cruder images with softer ones as he tries to demonstrate to Elizabeth that he is captive to her as well.

In the Easter sonnet immediately following the betrothal, the speaker demonstrates that he understands that mutual love should bring freedom from the insecurity that holds him captive. He rejoices that Christ, "having harrowd hell didst bring away captivity thence captive us to win," and then exhorts his lady: "let us love, deare love, lyke as we ought, / love is the lesson with the Lord us taught" (Sonnet 68.4, 13-14). The speaker says that as Christ submitted to the pains of hell in order to bring all of humanity into a greater kind of freedom (the freedom from sin and death), the lovers should accept the pain of losing some personal liberty in order to gain the freedom that comes with mutual love. The speaker advocates equality in the love between the two of them; he specifically says that they should love *each other* with the same kind of self-sacrificing passion with which Christ loved humanity. The speaker recognizes the ideal of mutual, companionate love; his desire to control his mistress is a major temptation that

he faces, and he spends the rest of the sonnet sequence trying to move closer to the ideal of love that he establishes in this Easter sonnet.

Overcoming the temptation to master his mistress is not the only obstacle that Spenser's speaker faces in the *Amoretti*; he must also overcome the problem of reconciling his desire for virtue with his sexual desire for Elizabeth. Spenser alone is able to combine successfully these two aspects of romantic love, perhaps because he, unlike any other sonneteer, redirects "desire away from an unobtainable mistress to a woman the poet can marry and whose erotic nature can be aroused without dishonor" (Maclean, 638). The speaker's ultimate goal in the relationship is marriage. Since that goal is an actual possibility, "Spenser's lover can hope to satisfy [his sexual desire] through a legitimate and earthly consummation of his passion, which is why the Easter sonnet, 68, records both Christ's victory over death and the poet's victory over the tradition Petrarch had fathered" (*Ibid*, 639). Unlike other sonneteers, Spenser's couple is not in a situation that prevents them from uniting physical desire and virtuous respect for the other. The desire that Spenser's speaker feels for Elizabeth is therefore not illicit, and he does not have to attempt to sublimate his desire to religious devotion as Petrarch did.

The conflict that Spenser's speaker encounters is not the presence of physical desire, but the excess of it; despite the fact that desire for Elizabeth is sanctioned by the church within the context of their future marriage, the speaker's desire for her can still be illicit if it descends into lust. The speaker is aware of this, and so he tells himself, "Let not one sparke of filthy lustfull fyre/ breake out, that may her sacred peace molest" (Sonnet 84.1-2). Although this sonnet can be read as if the speaker is talking about Elizabeth's lust, a reading that is more in keeping with the overall tone of the sequence is

that the speaker recognizes that his intense pursuit of her can take on the implications of sexual conquest. She has already agreed to marry him, and he no longer needs to molest her sacred peace with protestations of his overwhelming passion for her.

That is not to say that he attempts to do away with his desire. The sonnets following the betrothal sonnet are some of the most sensual sonnets of the sequence (see sonnets 76 and 77), indicating that he has no shame about his physical attraction to Elizabeth. He recognizes, however, that concentrating too much on her physical beauty can degrade his love, and so he redirects his focus to an appreciation of the totality of her beauty. In a catalogue of Elizabeth's beauties, he ranks her smile as her best feature, because it is through her lips that "her words so wise do make their way/ to beare the message of her gentle spright" (Sonnet 81.11-12). Although he loves the physical beauty of her lips, he loves them more for the words that come forth from them. Again, the speaker is attempting to upgrade his rhetoric about Elizabeth, this time to emphasize his intellectual and spiritual love. This sonnet is an example of the marriage of physical desire and attraction to Elizabeth's soul that Spenser's speaker displays in his relationship with Elizabeth.

Although the movement to balance *caritas* and *cupiditas* is not a completely linear movement, the overarching movement in the *Amoretti* is one towards a unification of these two elements of romantic love. The greatest problem to be overcome for a realization of the love between Elizabeth and the speaker is therefore not the struggle between the body and the spirit, but rather the "narcissism, manipulation, and ... aggressive reach for mastery," which mark at least the beginning of their relationship (Maclean, 639). Compared to Sidney's speaker, who has the shortsightedness and

misfortune to love a married woman, Spenser's speaker faces problems that are relatively easy to overcome; the obstacles to the love between Elizabeth and Spenser's speaker are internal and remediable.

Sidney's speaker, on the other hand, finds himself in a situation where he cannot win. Two immutable obstacles make the realization of his love virtually impossible: Stella's marriage, and the setting of their relationship within the court. Although sonnet sequences are often semi-autobiographical (most scholars theorize that Stella was in fact Lady Rich, that is Penelope Devereux, a member of Queen Elizabeth's court at the same time as Sidney), the court setting also functions as a poetic device (Herman, 43). It is indicative of their relationship in that it is beautiful, but highly ordered; the artfulness surrounding the elaborate rules of court society functions to keep them apart from each other. The sonnet is perfect for the expression of this aspect of Astrophil and Stella's relationship because it is the crystalization of language into a very structured form.

An example of Sidney's manipulation of the sonnet form to mirror his larger conflicts is in Sonnet 7, a poem dedicated to Stella's eyes. This sonnet is almost identical in subject to Shakespeare's Sonnet 132, and while neither sonnet is remarkably significant in its respective sequence, the similarities in subject matter warrant close readings to elucidate the subtle differences in the ways that the two authors manipulate the sonnet form to portray the relationships within their respective sequences.

Astrophil admires Stella and praises the beauty of her eyes; however, even in his praise he remains constantly aware of the artfulness surrounding the couple keeping them separate from each other. Sidney uses alliteration as a word game to mimic the main point of each quatrain. In the first stanza, Sidney wraps a pair of alliterated words around

a pair of differently alliterated words that are placed side by side as a framing technique similar to that which Astrophil claims Nature uses to beautify the shade and light of Stella's eyes. Astrophil asks, "In color **black**, why wrapped she beams so **bright**? / Would she in **beamy black**, like painter wise..." so that the "b" and "w" sounds surround each other like the dark lashes around shining brown eyes (Sonnet 7.2-3). In the second quatrain Sidney uses alliteration to illustrate the ability of Stella's eyes to dazzle. He pairs the connected sounds with each other, so that they, like Stella's eyes, "sun-like should more dazzle than delight." The alliteration in this line is so noticeable that it almost stops the poem, startling the reader instead of pleasing him. In the final stanza, Sidney mixes sounds from the preceding two quatrains back into the framing technique previously established: "She even in **black** doth make all **beauties** flow? / **Both** go and thus, she minding *Love* should **be**..." (Sonnet 7.11-12). By uniting formerly established sounds and patterns Sidney mimics Nature who, in this quatrain, displays her miraculous power by blending in Stella's eyes beauty and blackness – two things that appear to be in contradiction according to the standard of beauty that Petrarch had established.

The tone of the poem shifts dramatically at the final couplet of the poem as the speaker turns away from the beauties of Stella's eyes to the internal violence he feels at the unrequited love he has for her. Her eyes are not merely a dazzling example of unconventional beauty; they are also mourners who "honor all their deaths who for her bleed" (Sonnet 7.14). Although Astrophil temporarily loses himself in the beauty of Stella's eyes, he remains cognizant of the fact that he is separated from Stella. The language of the sonnet itself is beautiful, both carefully and deliberately chosen. This kind of poem resembles the courtly setting of the sequence in that it is a world of beauty

and ideals; however, this highly structured world keeps the lovers separate from one another. Stella adheres to the rules of their society, and their love is therefore broken off so that she does not break her marriage vows. This separation between the lovers is also manifested in the way that the speaker addresses the poem. Sidney avoids using “I” or “you” pronouns, so that the speaker seems to be distant or removed from the beloved. This pronoun choice stresses the distance of their relationship; he is not close enough to Stella to address the sonnet to her directly.

In contrast to Stella, the dark lady is anything but distant from her lover. This is made immediately clear with the first and second person pronouns and adjectives of Sonnet 138, which announce this poem as being addressed from the lover to his beloved. Even the first word of this sonnet, “Thine,” establishes that the poet is close enough to the woman that he can address this sonnet to her directly (Sonnet 132.1). Moreover, he uses the elevated pronoun “thine” instead of “your” to show how intimate their relationship already is.

This intense relationship between the two is further explored in Shakespeare’s use of alliteration. The major alliteration is in the first quatrain with the repeated “p” sound: “Thine eyes I love, and they as pitying me,/ Knowing thy heart torment me with disdain, / Have put on black, and loving mourners be, / Looking with pretty ruth upon my pain” (Sonnet 132.1-4). The repetition of this particular sound suggests a linkage between pitying, put, pretty, and pain. The beloved’s eyes are dark because they are mourning for, or pitying, the pain of the speaker. As his pain grows, she pities him more and puts on darker eyes, which only render her more beautiful, thereby increasing his pain since it causes him to desire her even more. The cycle created by the repetition of the “p” sounds

mimics the cycle of their growing intimacy, and also the growing confusion between pleasure and pain as the deception within their relationship increases.

This cyclical pattern is also manifested in the way that Shakespeare plays with the word “mourning.” He uses four variations of this word in this sonnet: as a pun on the word morning, a participle, an infinitive, and a gerund (Sonnet 132.5, 9, 11). This word play further develops the idea that he established in the first quatrain, namely that as their intimacy grows, so does her blackness. As she pities him more and more she will clothe every part of herself in mourning, and in contrast to the morning sun, which becomes brighter over time, she will grow darker (Sonnet 132.5). When his beloved is completely black, she will have given herself over to pitying him, completely relinquishing her initial disdain. The polyptoton in line 11, “mourn for me, since mourning doth thee grace,” demonstrates that this pity in the beloved is growing because the word’s influence is growing in the poem itself; the word takes over the line just as black pity is taking over the beloved. It is not only her eyes that are dark but her entire beauty will wear the dark sympathy of blackness.

It is important to remember that, in the selected sonnets, both Sidney and Shakespeare, in talking about the black beauty of their mistresses’ eyes, choose to emphasize their distinctive beauty and *not* the other symbolic significances of the blackness. As explored earlier in this paper, blackness is not only symbolic of mourning and sympathy but also of grief, evil, and corruption. The choice to ignore these connotations of blackness reveals a willing self-deception of the speakers in these particular sonnets. Apart from these two sonnets, Sidney and especially Shakespeare

manipulate the Petrarchan sonnet sequence tradition to explore the darker side of a love relationship (Lever, 166-7).

Sidney overturns the Petrarchan standard of sublimating sexual desire to religious devotion; instead of eventually subordinating his desire to a holier kind of love, Astrophil comes to reject Stella's offer of chaste love. Although he does love Stella for her virtue, he refuses to renounce the love and desire he has for her physical beauty. Despite his emulation of Stella, whom he sees as a great teacher of virtue, Astrophil does not idolize Stella the way Petrarch's lover-persona does Laura. "Stella becomes a palpable existence that can be the object of Astrophil's desires," which allows him to see her as a sexual creature (Ibuki, 52). Although he tries to focus on her reason and virtue, his desire breaks through, as in Sonnet 71: "So while thy beauty draws the heart to love, / As fast thy virtue bends that love to good. / 'But ah,' Desire still cries, 'Give me some food'" (Sonnet 71.12-4). Astrophil does not hide sex in religious imagery but outright declares that his desire craves Stella as food. Sex and sexual fantasy are not dressed up in heavenly language because sexual union between the two of them would be adulterous and is therefore unholy. Unlike Petrarch, Sidney draws attention to the preexisting marriage of the mistress, denying Astrophil the option of claiming that his fantasies about Stella are holy. Stella is acutely aware that any physical intimacy would be illicit, and so her love for Astrophil moves her to offer him a different, platonic kind of love. Astrophil describes the kind of love that Stella mandates: "And therefore by her love's authority, / Willed me these tempests of vain love to fly, / And anchor fast my self on *Virtue's* shore" (Sonnet 62.9-11). Astrophil does not understand that Stella is offering him a virtuous, chaste love reminiscent of Augustine's distinction between *cupiditas* and *caritas* (Roche,

226). He doubts that she has any love for him at all asking, “Is that love? Forsooth, I trow, / If I saw my good dog grieved / And help for him did know, / My love should not be believed / But he were by relieved” (Song 9.36-40). He basically argues that her denial of any physical affection in love is like denying a dog his food. On the one hand, this is an argument that sex is a basic desire, as elemental as the need for food; on the other hand, Astrophil descends to a bestial level since, in his own analogy, it is he who is represented by the dog.

Shakespeare goes beyond Sidney in reversing Petrarchan standards; he divides *cupiditas* and *caritas* into two separate people: the dark lady and the young man. The formula that both Petrarch and Sidney follow is of a young speaker who is ardently devoted to a varying aloof woman who is both virtuous and beautiful. In Shakespeare’s sonnets, the admiration of virtue and beauty is concentrated in the poet’s friendship with the young man, and his sensual desire is concentrated in his relationship with the dark lady. Even when the speaker suspects that the dark lady and the young man are having a secret affair, he tries to maintain this distinction of virtue and sexual appetite by portraying the young man as an innocent victim of the dark lady.

This bifurcation of love allows Shakespeare to explore issues that arise in a love relationship that had not previously been explored. For example, the speaker urges the young man to marry a woman, any woman, so that he can pass on his virtue and beauty to subsequent generations. This portion of the sonnet sequence allows Shakespeare to talk about the procreative dynamic in a love relationship, which would not have been appropriate for the speaker to mention if he were addressing himself to a beloved woman (Lever, 166-7). By concentrating most of the sensual desire into the dark lady’s

character, Shakespeare is able to look at the darker side of love/lust more carefully than even Sidney could describe through Astrophil's rejection of Stella's *caritas* (Lever, 166-7). Shakespeare's examination of lust is perhaps most thoroughly explored in Sonnet 129. Through an abundance of repetitions and adjectives and a focus on the temporal, Shakespeare indicates that lust cannot be overcome by sexual consummation; it entraps the speaker before, during and after sexual union.

Shakespeare uses polyptotons and other word repetitions to call attention to the fact that lust is an entrapment. The words "mad" and "past reason" appear several times, and the words "lust" and "action" each appear twice in line 2. The word "had" appears in various forms in line 10, to indicate past, present, and future, and the word "proof" of line 11 appears later in the line as the past participle, "proved." The speaker sounds like a broken record, repeating the same words over and over, which calls attention to the fact that he is unable to overcome his lust. This continues to the end of the poem, as evident in the chiasmus in line 13: "All this the world *well knows*, yet none *knows well*..."(emphasis mine). This inversion suggests that lust has not only entrapped the speaker, but it has turned him inside out as well. His inability to overcome lust is painful, and feels like hellish torment.

Repetition is not the only poetic device that indicates the nature of lust; the predominance of adjectives over verbs suggests that lust is not an action but a state of being. Even though the second line of the poem mentions, "lust in action," the rest of the sonnet suggests that lust is a feeling, emotion, or a response. In the first quatrain alone, the speaker lists nine adjectives, one after another. This catalogue suggests a degradation of the speaker, as it is almost a degradation of the sonnet into a simple list; however, the

structure of the catalogue sets up the structure for the rest of the poem. The descriptions of lust in the second and third quatrains are past participles completing the opening statement, “till action/ lust is...”, which moves the sonnet into passive voice. Although the presence of verbs moves away from simple description, the verb choice still stresses the inaction associated with lust. Instead of the speaker admitting that *he hunts* the fulfillment of his lust, he claims that “lust/ Is.../ past reason hunted” (Sonnet 129.2-3,6). Although this structure enables the speaker to analyze lust, it minimizes his own involvement in the process of lust by merely implying his actions. The passive voice also limits the action within the poem itself. Even though the speaker opens the poem by talking about “lust in action,” lust does not actually do anything but rather “is hunted” and “is hated” by the speaker. Lust is the recipient of the action and does not act on its own.

Time is another important element in this sonnet, for Shakespeare examines the effects of lust before, during and after consummation. The first quatrain focuses on the state of mind of the lover before the sexual act: “till action lust / is” (Sonnet 129.2-3). Since the rest of the quatrain consists of nothing but adjectives, the speaker suggests that before consummation, lust is so powerful that it takes over the mind just as its description takes over the poem. The second quatrain focuses on the reaction of the speaker immediately after consummation, which is immediate hatred. Thus, consummation only brings more suffering to the speaker. In the third quatrain, the speaker puts the lessons of the first two quatrains together realizing that lust provokes extreme suffering both before and after the sexual act, with only a tiny interlude of “bliss” separating the continuum (Sonnet 129.11). This realization raises the question of whether this tiny moment of

pleasure is worth such an extended period of suffering. The final couplet concludes that it is not: “shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.” The speaker equates lust with the suffering of hell, and problematically links the “bliss” of an orgasm with heaven. Both heaven and hell are supposed to be eternal, thus this metaphor is a false comparison; sexual intercourse is so temporary that it cannot be an adequate metaphor for heaven. Even as he asserts that this kind of sexual relationship should be shunned, he overvalues it by using this metaphor.

This poem is significant in understanding the relationship between the speaker and the dark lady, because it shows how central the role of sex is to their relationship, and the potential that sex has to degrade his feelings for her. The speaker thinks about sex all the time, and even when he claims that illicit sex should be avoided, he reveals that he still values the pleasure associated with it. When they have not consummated their relationship in a while, he can think of nothing else; when they have just finished, he can only think of his shame over what he feels is an illicit sexual act. He tries to shift some of the blame for this act off of his own shoulders: “Past reason hunted.../ Past reason hated as swallowed bait, / On purpose laid to make the speaker mad” (Sonnet 129.6-8). The speaker moves from being the hunter to being the hunted; in line 6, it is he who is hunting the object of his lust, presumably the dark lady. In the next line he realizes that he only thought he was the hunter; in reality, the dark lady hunts him by laying a trap and purposively provoking lust in him. Both partners are actively pursuing sex, which makes it the main goal in the relationship, and causes a degeneration of their relationship to the point that it is impossible for the two to have a relationship that includes reciprocal trust and admiration.

Despite the fact that Shakespeare completely reverses the Petrarchan tradition of sublimating the physical to the spiritual, each poet comes to the same conclusion: without both emotional attachment/spiritual admiration and eventual physical fulfillment, romantic love is unsatisfying. The spiritual element of romantic love is completely lacking in the relationship between the dark lady and her lover. Unlike Petrarch's speaker, who renounces the physical at the end of his sequence to pursue the spiritual (in that case devotion to God), Shakespeare's speaker allows sex to dominate and eventually drown out the emotional and virtuous elements of love, which leaves him unhappy and hating both himself and his mistress.

Although the two aspects of romantic love are not as sharply delineated in Spenser and Sidney, the conflict between *caritas* and *cupiditas* is still evident. Unlike Petrarch's speaker, Sidney's Astrophil does not love Stella from afar; the two interact with each other but it is always within the setting of the court. Thus Astrophil can neither idolize Stella as a being of supernatural virtue nor satiate his desire for her. He cannot move towards either extreme, but is pulled back and forth between his admiration for her virtue and his desire for her body. The two elements of romantic love do not move towards each other, nor does one dominate the other; rather, they stand in suspension side by side so that Astrophil has no hope of resolving the conflict between the body and the spirit. Spenser's speaker, on the other hand, is in a situation that allows the two sides of romantic love to merge into each other through the marriage in the *Epithalamion*. Like Sidney, the two elements of romantic love coexist, but unlike Sidney, the two are not in irresolvable conflict.

Spenser is the only one of these poets who is able to resolve the conflict between physical fulfillment and virtuous love, and he is the only one who ends his sequence happily. The fact that neither of the other poets is able to bring the lovers together in a happy union suggests that the resolution of the conflict between body and soul is necessary for maintaining romantic love. Yet, the fact that Spenser's speaker experiences a different kind of conflict in his desire to master Elizabeth suggests that a resolution of the conflict between *caritas* and *cupiditas* does not guarantee the realization or maintenance of romantic love; it merely creates a setting in which romantic love is possible.

V. The Mistress as a Spiritual Agent

Since the conflict between the emotional/ spiritual aspects of love and physical desire is often seen as a conflict between the heavenly and earthly, the poets often translate this conflict in terms of spiritual language. The mistresses become spiritual agents acting as forces of goodness or evil in the speakers' lives. Petrarch establishes his Laura as an angelic figure, who renders his thoughts and even his poetry blessed, so that thinking and writing of her makes him a holier man. This characterization, however, is problematic for Petrarch's speaker when he cannot move beyond her physical beauty to closer communion with God.

The tensions that Petrarch experiences in describing a sexual relationship in spiritual terms arise in the sonnets of the English sonneteers as well. The speakers in Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare all struggle to reconcile sexual desire and spiritual morality, and, as in Petrarch, the dialogue between sexuality and spirituality has the potential to transform the mistress into a spiritual agent. Sidney and Shakespeare imbue

their respective mistresses with spiritual attributes in order to suit the Petrarchan tradition to their purposes. Although Spenser does not present Elizabeth as a spiritual agent, the relationship between the speaker and Elizabeth does have spiritual implications, and it allows Spenser to comment on the relationship between spiritual morality and sexuality.

Unlike Petrarch, Sidney does not attempt to present Stella as a divine agent who draws his soul upwards to God; he insists on drawing attention to her body as a physical presence on earth. She is a teacher who demonstrates to Astrophil a holier kind of love; her offer to Astrophil of chaste love is an intermediary between physical desire and spiritual/social morality. That Stella is not an angelic figure does not mean that she does not serve as a spiritual agent; she is a mixture of the heavenly and the earthly, and she therefore emerges as a symbol of grace, an earthly embodiment of heavenly love.

An excellent example of Stella in her role as a spiritual agent is Sonnet 62, which depicts a meeting between the two lovers. Through a repetition of the word “love,” metaphors for love, and a change in the way that the speaker addresses the poem, Sidney makes it clear that this poem is a dialogue on the nature of love between Stella and Astrophil. Stella acts as an advocate for *caritas*, trying unsuccessfully to convince Astrophil that they can share a true love that remains within the boundaries of societal and spiritual proscriptions.

The word “love” is repeated twelve times throughout the fourteen-line poem; the frequency of this word in the poem suggests that the word is being bounced around like a ball on a tennis court. With so much talk about love, it becomes evident that the two characters define love in different ways, and the misunderstandings between them are a result of their different conceptions of love. Astrophil is delighted to learn that Stella is

in love with him; however, he questions the integrity and strength of her love since she loves him with “a love not blind” (Sonnet 62.6). Stella’s voice is reported indirectly through Astrophil, revealing that she insists that it is because of the strength of her love that she will not allow him to act ignobly; counter-intuitively, the passion she feels for him is evident in her willingness to restrain herself. In a poem packed so densely with this single word, the line containing the greatest usage of the word “love” is the opening to Stella’s argument: “That love she did, but loved a love not blind” (Sonnet 62.6). The emphasis on this word at this moment suggests that Stella possesses a greater, subtler understanding of love, which leaves Astrophil’s understanding looking weak by comparison.

The dialogue between the two is also laid out as a series of images, which serve to elucidate the kind of love that each seeks from and offers to the other. Stella will not let Astrophil steer off the “noble course,” and therefore wills him to flee the “tempests of vain love... / And anchor fast... on virtue’s shore” (Sonnet 62.8, 10-11). She plays into the conventional Petrarchan metaphor of the lover as a ship. She therefore assumes the role of the star (her namesake) that will help the lover to navigate around dangerous waters. She chooses for herself a role of a heavenly body, which therefore has spiritual connotations. As a spiritual agent, she is showing the path to an earthly agent, Astrophil, the “ship” that is still anchored to the earth. She is acting as an agent of grace to guide Astrophil to salvation by showing him what he should do in order to keep himself from being destroyed by the “rage of love” (Sonnet 62.2).

Unlike Stella, Astrophil sees love in terms of give and take, which is indicated by the metaphor for love which he uses: money. Astrophil does not buy all of Stella’s talk

about love. He disregards her metaphor about the ship and immediately starts talking about the value of what she has given him as being very poor. He would rather not have Stella be concerned for the nobility of his soul because, “if this the only metal be / Of love, new-coined to help my beggary / Dear, love me not, that you may love me more” (Sonnet 62.12-14). He imagines her as a rich woman, who only gives a small coin to a beggar. He wants her to love him with a blind, passionate love, and he feels that her restraint is the same as stinginess in alms giving. His desire for her is so strong that he wants to disregard mutual respect and admiration, and he therefore tells Stella not to worry about the “noble course” if it holds her back from giving herself to him sexually. In this sonnet, Astrophil insists on viewing love as carnal love, or *cupiditas*. Like grace, Stella’s love is offered freely, but it cannot be forced on the recipient. She herself is not divine, and she cannot forcefully lead Astrophil to a higher kind of love; she can only inspire him to virtue like a star leading a ship to its proper destination.

In the final tercet, there is a dramatic change in tone and also the manner of Astrophil’s delivery, which mark Astrophil’s rejection of Stella’s *caritas*. He turns from addressing the poem to the reader, using the third person pronoun “she,” to addressing the poem to Stella directly with the pronoun “you” in the final line. This change in address effects the tone by making the closing lines seem more aggressive; moreover, the fact that Astrophil is allowed to have the last word foreshadows the eventual triumph of Astrophil’s carnal love over Stella’s offering of *caritas*.

Astrophil’s rejection of Stella’s grace reveals the extent of her love for him. It is unclear why Stella loves Astrophil, when it is questionable whether or not he deserves her love. Nevertheless, she gently offers him her chaste love. In his ungrateful rejection

of it Astrophil says, “straight thus watered was my wine” (Sonnet 62.5). He is only cognizant of the immediate disappointment of finding her love to be less than what he originally expected, the diminished pleasure of watered wine; he does not see the spiritual significance of the water and the wine, which represents the cup of the Eucharist, “the food of charity” (Roche, 227). Stella offers, and therefore symbolizes, grace for Astrophil; she combines two seemingly incompatible things, spiritual love in an earthly form.

Like Stella, Elizabeth is a combination of the heavenly and the earthly; however, Elizabeth does not serve as a spiritual agent. Spenser, like both Petrarch and Sidney, desired to combine the spiritual and the physical in a romantic relationship. This desire is in line with neoplatonic tradition; Spenser’s placement, however, of the love relationship in a legitimate context skews some of the basic premises of Neoplatonism: “the culmination of the work in marriage denies the Neoplatonic impulse to transcend the earthly: Spenser remains a poet of the world” (Dunlap, 589). Spenser distinguishes his *Amoretti* from the other sequences because he does not make Elizabeth into a spiritual agent; although she is spiritually worthy, she is, for the speaker, a physical body of this earth who can become his bride at the end of the sequence. Since Elizabeth is not a spiritual agent, she alone cannot be the measure of the spiritual element within the romance; it is the relationship *between the two characters* that takes on spiritual significance, through which Spenser is able to talk about the relationship between holiness and sexual desire.

The relationship between Elizabeth and the speaker develops through a simultaneous affirmation and qualification of Neoplatonism. Spenser shows that the

lover moves in the overall direction of a purer, holier love, but he does not ascend the ladder of love to its summit. A good example of Spenser's qualification of Neoplatonism is in Sonnets 35 and 83. Spenser places almost identical versions of this poem at two different places in the *Amoretti*. Editor of the *Amoretti*, Oram, suggests that if the repetition is intentional, "the sonnet takes new meaning from its new context" (Oram, 650). The first instance is in Sonnet 35, when the speaker is deep in the throes of longing for Elizabeth, believing that his love is unrequited. The second occurrence of this sonnet is after her acceptance of him, when he already knows that she returns his love. Through word repetition and alliteration, Spenser links ideas throughout the poem, which in the case of Sonnet 35 can emphasize the speaker's devotion to Elizabeth, but in the case of Sonnet 83 can reveal both neoplatonic tendencies and the limitations of Neoplatonism in the *Amoretti*.

The first major linking of ideas is highlighted by the repetition, "having"/ "having not" in line 4, which is thematically linked to the alliterated words "plenty"/ "poor" of line 8. In each case, the speaker asserts that he is both connected to and apart from Elizabeth at the same time. In the sonnet immediately preceding Sonnet 35, the speaker compares Elizabeth to a star used for navigation, suggesting that his life depends on seeing her and maneuvering himself by following after her. Thus, from the context surrounding Sonnet 35, it seems that the disparity he feels comes from the fact that the speaker loves Elizabeth, but is not sure of her love for him; he needs to see her all the time, but when he does see her he is reminded that he has no hold over her heart. This reaction is related to the previously mentioned theme of mastery in the *Amoretti*; because the speaker loves her, he wants to possess her but Elizabeth is beyond his reach.

The disparity between the feelings of connectedness and estrangement do not result from the same source in Sonnet 83, where the lives of Elizabeth and the speaker are already intertwined, but instead they result from different kinds of knowledge that the speaker has of Elizabeth. The poems surrounding Sonnet 83 suggest that the speaker is struggling between lust and virtuous desire. The separation that the speaker feels is, therefore, the knowledge that he has of her body from looking at her with his physical eyes, and the incomplete knowledge that he has of her spirit which he can only glimpse with his metaphorical eyes, the soul. Thus although he knows the shape of her face, and the color of her eyes, he does not know all of the internal realities of Elizabeth and the more he sees of her, the more he realizes that he wants to know her better.

The next pair of linked ideas is “loathing” and “liking” in line 11, which in both Sonnet 35 and Sonnet 83 suggests a change in the speaker; he has redirected his focus to a higher kind of beauty. In Sonnet 35, it seems that the poet wishes to “distinguish between different objects of beauty, i.e., between the lady and any other aspect of earthly creation” (Oram, 650). That his eyes, “loath the things which they did like before” suggests that he is no longer attracted to the women he admired before Elizabeth. The use of the word “things” is problematic in this reading; although it is possible that Spenser is referring to people in using the word “things,” it is an unflattering way to signify people. An interpretation that circumvents this problem and is more consistent with the context surrounding Sonnet 83 is that “things” does not refer to people but to the lesser beauties that once captivated the speaker. In this way, even the physical beauty of Elizabeth could be a “lesser beauty” since it could possibly distract the lover from ascending the ladder of love to her spiritual beauty and ultimately to God.

The final instance of alliteration is perhaps the clearest reference to the notion of Neoplatonism: “all theyr shewes but shadows saving she” (Sonnet 35/83.14). In the context of Sonnet 35, it seems that the speaker rejects any other woman’s beauty as nothing but a shadow of Elizabeth’s beauty. In a more neoplatonic reading of this poem, it seems that this line is a reference to Plato’s allegory of the cave; Elizabeth is spiritually beautiful, which renders her physically beautiful, and all other women are pale imitations of her physical beauty. Thus, Elizabeth becomes the form of Beauty, and any other beautiful woman is only an imitation of an imitation. This reading shows the limitations of Spenser’s Neoplatonism, since the ultimate form of Beauty should be God and not the beloved lady.

Moreover, both in this sonnet and the final sonnet of the sequence and the *Epithalamion* Spenser shows the limitations of Neoplatonism by insisting on Elizabeth’s physical presence. The attention to the physical is emphasized in Sonnet 83 by the repetition of the word “eyes” three times throughout the poem; although the word “eyes” could have symbolic meaning to represent the soul, the insistence on this word draws attention to the act of seeing, and the physical presence of Elizabeth is required in order for him to see her. In the three final sonnets of the sequence, the lover and his mistress are inexplicably separated. Since the lover is not pure spirit, he pines for Elizabeth; “he misses the physical presence of the lady and longs for reunion with her” (Oram, 653). In the *Epithalamion*, Spenser’s speaker prays for a fruitful union of the two, making it clear that “his business will not be the mystical ascent of a disembodied soul toward the One, but the engendering of an earthly posterity” (Dunlap, 589). Elizabeth is neither an angel leading the speaker to heaven, nor the earthly embodiment of chaste love; she remains in

the physical world so that she can be a wife and a mother. Unlike Petrarch and Sidney, who bridge the gap between the physical and the spiritual by having Laura and Stella rise to heaven, Spenser does so by having God reach down to earth (Dunlap, 588). Whereas Petrarch and Sidney paint their mistresses as agents of moral goodness through whom the speakers have the ability to love and worship God, Spenser insists on the earthiness of Elizabeth, and he asks God to bless their union in the *Epithalamion*. Instead of moving beyond physical intimacy as if it were unholy, Spenser's speaker asks God to bless their union.

Spenser's emphasis on the unity of spirituality and sexuality is reflected in his choice of an interlocking rhyme scheme for his sonnets, ABAB BCBC CDCD EE, as opposed to the Petrarchan or Italian rhyme scheme, ABBA ABBA CDE CDE, or the English rhyme scheme, which Shakespeare favored, ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Spenser's choice of rhyme scheme suggests both progression and unity, so that even though there is a movement toward the final couplet, the poem lingers over the initially established rhymes. Spenser builds on the sounds of the first quatrain to establish the rhymes of the second quatrain, and then the third, so that the entire poem is tightly integrated. The emphasis Spenser puts on the cohesiveness of the rhyme scheme anticipates the *Epithalamion*, where nature, God, society, and sexuality are all brought together in the wedding song. Spenser refuses to allow the sonnets to be clearly and distinctly compartmentalized into quatrains, just as he refuses to divide romantic love up into sexual and spiritual elements. As opposed to Sidney and Petrarch who emphasize the distinctness of sexuality and spirituality, Spenser emphasizes the unity of the two experiences into one love.

Spenser's turning away from Neoplatonism is informed by English Protestantism, which particularly affected his work by its reappraisal of marriage in the sixteenth century. The neoplatonic ideal, to move beyond the physical to a "higher" love, is steeped in the Catholic privileging of the priestly and religious life over married life. The Petrarchan sonnet sequence tries to deal with this stark choice between holiness and sexuality by painting Laura, symbolic of both sex and literary ambition, as an angel who leads both the poet's desire and his poetry to blessedness. Although Laura serves to raise the speaker's mind above *cupiditas*, or blind sexual passion, it is at the price of non-consummation, and later Petrarch retracts even this relationship for being a distraction from what he should have been loving (Baker-Smith, 313). Spenser instead, takes the view that marriage can be a *fulfillment* of human nature, and that true chastity can be found within married love. This theory of marriage stems from the Protestant theme of the "mystical marriage of Christ and his bride, the purified Church" (Baker-Smith, 313). Thus, a marriage between a man and a woman is holy because it mirrors the union between God and his people; sex, as part of a marriage, is not blind passion, but symbolic of the intense love that God has for his people, which penetrates into their lives.

This view of marriage and sex is most clearly seen in Spenser's *Epithalamion*. In the central line of this numerically structured poem the speaker mentions "endlesse matrimony," and the final line describes the poem itself as an "endlesse moniment" to the wedding and the marriage. Thus both "the marriage and its image in the poem [are described by the] apocalyptic epithet 'endlesse'.... [as] Christ's union with the Church at the end of time," when the New Jerusalem emerges, "'prepared as a bride adorned for her husband'" (Baker-Smith, 314; Revelation 21:2, quoted in Baker-Smith). The prayer at

the end of the *Epithalamion* is to raise a large posterity, so that by the fruit of their sexual union they can add to the number of saints on earth and later in heaven. Their marriage is meant to be productive, like Christ's union with the church. In this strain, the longing that the speaker feels for Elizabeth throughout the *Amoretti* is compatible with the longing that a Christian feels for Christ (Oram, 653). Elizabeth does not emerge as a Christ-figure, but the feelings of longing that the speaker feels for a closer relationship with her are in accordance with the desire that a Christian feels for Christ. Thus desire for holiness and sexuality are not diametrically opposed, but rather two versions of the same story: a desire to be more intimate with the beloved. Although Elizabeth does not act as a spiritual agent, the relationship she shares with the speaker mirrors a spiritual relationship.

Although Shakespeare also mirrors the speaker's sexual relationship with a spiritual relationship, he differs from Spenser in depicting a *corruption* of sexual and spiritual desire instead of a fulfillment of those desires. Unlike Spenser, but like Petrarch and Sidney, Shakespeare divides romantic love into seemingly incompatible parts: desire to emulate a spiritually worthy object of admiration and desire for sexual fulfillment. As noted earlier in this paper, the division between these two aspects of romantic love is delineated into two characters so that admiration is embodied in the young man and sexual desire is embodied in the dark lady. This stark division makes Shakespeare's characters similar to the characters of a morality play, agents of goodness and evil who try to corrupt or save the soul of an "Everyman" character.

The structure of the morality play adds a complexity to Shakespeare's sonnets; although it allows for seemingly simplistic division of good and evil between the two

desires of the speaker, it suggests that the entire struggle between the two is an *internal* struggle. The young man is actually the best part of the lover-poet persona, the part he most cherishes and wishes to preserve, and who serves as his good angel (Roche, 402; Jackson, 221). The dark lady is an evil spirit or a bad angel tempting the speaker and so the saint as well (Jackson, 221). This concept runs as an undercurrent throughout the sequence; however, it is dramatically portrayed in Sonnet 144: “The better angel is a man right fair, / The worser spirit a woman coloured ill” (Sonnet 144.3-4). Through both diction and poetic devices, Shakespeare uses the first octave of this poem to assert the autonomy of the dark lady and the young man while using the sestet to unravel this thesis, admitting that the two are not as separate as he originally insists.

The first octave focuses on what the speaker feels that he knows: “Two loves have I, of comfort and despair;” he has two loves/spirits that are easily dividable into clear categories (Sonnet 144.1). The woman is colored ill, leads the speaker to despair, tempts the weaker spirit, and is associated with pride and the devil. The man is fair-colored, brings comfort, is tempted by the “worser” spirit, and is associated with purity and saintliness. These distinctions are reinforced by alliteration, which links the words, “worser,” “woman,” and “win” in the fourth and fifth lines. The linking of these words suggests that these concepts are linked as well, so that the dark lady is actually less spiritually worthy than the young man and will use her feminine sexuality both to persuade and triumph over the better angel/young man. These two lines, along with line 7, “And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,” are emphasized even more by the addition of an extra beat to the line. The change in the length of the line draws attention to these particular lines, which insist on the innocence of the young man who has fallen victim to

the dark lady's seduction. Furthermore, the alliteration of "purity" and "pride," especially linked with the masculine and feminine possessive pronouns "his" and "her," further divides the two characters into two separate camps (Sonnet 144.8).

The following six lines unravel the thesis established in the octave. The opening line of the sestet begins, "And whether," signifying a change in the speaker's thinking. He moves from asserting that "she is this" and "he is that" to confessing that he does not know the true relationship between the young man and the dark lady. The alliteration no longer emphasizes the distinctions between the two, but instead it emphasizes their similarities: "But being both from me, both to each other friend" (Sonnet 144.11). The fact that this line is an entire foot longer than the standard pentameter draws special attention to it; in order to include all these alliterated words, Shakespeare sacrifices the line's iambic pentameter, the standard meter of a sonnet. This moment is an epiphany for the speaker who realizes that his angelic friend is not entirely innocent, and that he does, in fact, share certain characteristics with the demonic dark lady; he chooses to separate himself from the speaker in order to be with the dark lady. The speaker's reaction to the young man changes subtly as seen by the usage of the word "angel." The word "angel" is mentioned five times in this sonnet; the young man is consistently referred to as the "better angel" in the octave, and although he still figures as a superior to the dark lady in the sestet, he is no longer referred to by this epithet.

The growing blurring of the distinctions between the "good" man and the "evil" woman is further emphasized by the sexual imagery in the sestet. Line 12, "I guess one angel's in another's hell," recalls the story from Boccaccio's *Decameron* about "putting the devil back in hell." Hell becomes a vaginal metaphor, and the angel is "in" hell by an

act of sexual penetration. The image is vulgar because it is so graphic, and the speaker's disgust is rendered perfectly clear by the jarring interaction between the sexual and the spiritual; an angel has no business in hell and a celestial being should not be engaging in an act of physical gratification. Unlike Spenser, who shows the beauty of a sexual relationship by insisting on the blessedness of the wedding between Elizabeth and the speaker, Shakespeare combines the sexual and the spiritual in such a way as to provoke the same feelings of shock and repulsion that the speaker feels as he begins to suspect his friend of being just as carnal as the dark lady.

The ambiguity of the distinction of the mistress from the young man is reflected in the blurred distinction of the speaker as being apart from the other two. The speaker has already established that he and the dark lady have been sleeping together. The uniting in sex of the dichotomized sides of the dark lady and the young man suggests a blending back together. Through sex, two become one flesh; therefore, all three are in fact one since everyone is sleeping together.

This interpretation still allows that the different characters are external to the poet-speaker; however, looking at the diction of the poem allows the reader to interpret the spirits as internal desires that are in conflict with each other. The word "suggest" in the second line is glossed in *The Norton Shakespeare* as "entice"; however, "suggest" could also mean "imply," which changes the meaning of that line to "the two loves/spirits I have both imply (mean) me." The same anthology glosses line 11, "being both from me, both to each friend," to mean "both away from me and lovers to one another." Yet, it is possible to read this line more literally: "both are part of me, and therefore akin to each other." Thus both at the beginning and end of this poem, ambiguous lines suggest that

the three characters are simply three versions of the same man. Shakespeare identifies his better side with a fair young man, while the baser part of his nature is relegated to a “woman coloured ill” (Sonnet 144.4). The man throughout most of the sequence appears to be a rational, virtuous person, and is therefore symbolic of reason and virtue, both of which are usually considered to be superior to strong passions. The dark lady represents this passionate side of human nature, for she is the one who immediately surrenders herself to lust. The speaker describes his inward state; he feels that his violent passion is overcoming his reason, corrupting what is saintly in him to become devilish (Sonnet 144.4-8). The dark lady is more than a corrupting influence in the speaker’s life; she is an internal demonic force.

The delineation of the mistresses into agents of goodness and evil influences the way that each poet is able to comment on the interaction between spirituality and sexuality. Petrarch’s insistence throughout the *Canzoniere* on Laura’s role as an angel suggests that he initially believes that sexuality and spirituality are not incompatible and that his desire for her leads him to blessedness. In order to achieve this goal, he must sublimate his sexual desire to admiration for her virtue and devotion to God. This schema is a delicate balance of restraining and encouraging desire; the speaker depends on his desire for Laura to lead him to God, but he cannot allow himself to be too focused on her particular beauty, which could lead to idolatry. Petrarch includes the palinode as an authorial comment on the danger of this neoplatonic schema; by depending on a Laura to lead him to God, the speaker is able to skew the proper hierarchy, and he ends up deifying Laura instead of arriving at holiness.

Sidney's portrayal of Stella as a figure of grace does not allow Astrophil to deify her; instead, she becomes representative of *caritas* and is juxtaposed with Astrophil's *cupiditas*. Sidney's choice to end the sonnet sequence in an anticlimax is an authorial comment on the inadequacy of either understanding of love to bring about the realization of romantic love. Stella's *caritas* may be privileged over Astrophil's carnal desire, but Sidney's lack of resolution suggests that her attempt to offer Astrophil chaste love is inappropriate and cannot give satisfaction. Even though Stella's love is spiritually worthy, it is not sufficient to sustain a romantic relationship, which cannot be described *solely* in terms of spirituality.

Shakespeare turns this conclusion around; his speaker's relationship with the dark lady is unsatisfying because it lacks the qualities that would make it spiritually worthy. By linking the dark lady, with whom the speaker is sexually active, with demonic imagery, Shakespeare links sex with spiritual corruption. The result is an internal division in the speaker, manifested by his good and bad angels. Almost as a response to Astrophil, Shakespeare's speaker demonstrates that physical gratification does not ensure the realization of romantic love. Just as Stella's offer of a wholly spiritual love leaves Astrophil unsatisfied, the dark lady's offer of a completely sexual love leaves Shakespeare's speaker unhappy and divided against himself.

Only Spenser, who does not describe Elizabeth as a spiritual agent, ends his sequence happily. Although the extent of Elizabeth's individuality is controversial, she is not described within the limited terms of a spiritual guide or temptress. The absence of this metaphor allows Spenser to sidestep the immediate association of sexuality with evil or immateriality with angelic beings; he refuses to equate sex with the profane, and he

does not deny the reality of Elizabeth's physical body. The absence of these associations establishes a setting in which the union of spirituality and sexuality is possible. Spenser's speaker does not use Elizabeth as a pathway to his devotion of God, but invites God into their marriage through his prayer for a fruitful union in the *Epithalamion*.

VI. Conclusion

Through the mistresses' characters, the lovers' interactions with the respective mistresses and spiritual metaphors describing the mistresses, Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare approach the relationship between *caritas* and *cupiditas* in different ways. All three question how it is possible to give voice to physical desire while maintaining virtue in a relationship.

Sidney's Stella is a generous and virtuous woman whose offer of chaste love links her to the idea of *caritas*. Because she is already married, any physical intimacy is automatically associated with moral degradation, which vilifies sex. Astrophil struggles between his desire for virtuous love and his desire for physical satisfaction; although part of him loves Stella for her moral virtue, seeing her as an instrument to achieving grace, his desire relentlessly interjects itself into his love for her. The interaction between Stella and Astrophil becomes a dialogue between *caritas* and *cupiditas*, but because the two aspects of romantic love are too sharply delineated, Astrophil and Stella cannot resolve their differences. The sequence ends without conclusion, suggesting that without a resolution of sexuality and virtue romantic love is simply unable to blossom.

Spenser's Elizabeth is, like Stella, spiritually worthy; unlike Stella, however, she is not symbolic of a certain kind of love. Elizabeth is not in a situation that prevents her from honorably receiving the love of the speaker, although she rejects his amorous

advances for the first half of the sequence. The speaker projects cruel, violent images onto her, side by side with images of gentle virtue. The metaphors and similes used to describe Elizabeth have more to do with the speaker than with her character, as the same kind of images appear later in the sequence as indicators of the deep-seated insecurity he feels over the fact that he cannot prevent her from leaving him. Elizabeth changes over the course of the sequence, softening to the speaker when she feels that he can overcome his temptation to dominate and control her. The growth of the lovers towards each other suggests Neoplatonism, especially in the overall movement of the speaker from the physical to the spiritual. Because Elizabeth changes, it is difficult to classify her as a spiritual agent, but the relationship between the two takes on spiritual implications; their sexual union in the marriage becomes holy, like the relationship between Christ and his church. Spenser is the only one of these authors who refuses to vilify sex, and he is the only one who ends his sequence happily. This resolution does not so much depend on the satisfaction of desire, but the belief that appropriate desire is not morally objectionable and does not need to be sublimated toward some worthier end.

The dark lady is physically and spiritually darker than the other mistresses, and Shakespeare manipulates this to demonstrate that the vitality of a romantic relationship also depends on having a spiritual center. The dark lady is a somewhat flat character, for although the speaker is undeniably attracted to her, it is never really clear why. There is too much ambiguity surrounding the relationship to trust the speaker as a reliable narrator; however, it is clear that the two are engaged in a sexual relationship that is physically, but not emotionally, intimate. If romantic love is defined as the desire to connect to the other in an intimate way, then Shakespeare's lover never realizes romantic

love. He does not connect to any of the objects of his love; the young man is removed from the speaker by the ambiguity surrounding the relationship between the three characters, and the dark lady is unknowable to the speaker because of the manipulation and deception in their relationship. Shakespeare's speaker expresses his dissatisfaction through images of demons, and the dark lady emerges as a demonic figure, suggesting that a sexual relationship without a spiritual connection of the members will only lead to spiritual corruption, suspicion, and anguish.

Reading these three sequences in light of the Petrarchan tension between *caritas* and *cupiditas* suggests the universal need for both spirituality and sexuality in a love relationship. It is necessary to be drawn to the loved one because of his/her virtue. Sexual desire must be allowed as a legitimate expression of the longing to intimately know the other; however, it must not counteract either the admiration of the other's virtue or the lover's ability to worship God in order for romantic love to be sustained. Not only is the other loved for her body and soul, but also the lover respects his own body and his own soul, so that in the realization of romantic love bodies and souls are united into one. This unification by love of distinct parts into a whole is suggestive of the holy trinity; all parts are intricately interwoven so that one cannot be separated from the others. Moral admiration, sexual desire, and even God's presence in the union of the two lovers are all part of the same love, suggesting that neoplatonic transcendence is possible in a qualified way. Instead of using the beloved or the relationship as a means to ascend to a holier end of communion with God, it is possible to pull God into the relationship so that the lover, the beloved, and the divine form a new kind of trinity that is a reflection of the Christian trinity. *Caritas* and *cupiditas* are not quite as distinct as Petrarch, Sidney, and

Shakespeare make them seem; as Spenser illustrates, they are two different components of the same love.

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