Wanton Music and Wanton Toys: Sidney and Bad Poetry

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The worst poem in the *New Arcadia* may be the long apology that Musidorus writes for Pamela after grabbing her and trying to kiss her. Written in quantitative elegiac meter, "Unto a Caitiff Wretch" opens by assuring its intended reader that she need not worry about being persuaded to pity. In this, at least, the poem is correct: one can hardly imagine much sympathy being produced through the string of twenty-odd rhetorical questions like this one: "Can those eyes, that of eyes drownd in most harty flowing teares, / (teares and teares of a man) had no returne to remorse…" (15-16).[1] The tangled grammar and reduplicative imagery make the difficulties of writing in English quantitative meter stand in for the poetic speaker's frustrated confusion. The poem knows that the speaker can't apologize and the beloved shouldn't pity him, and so it ties itself in knots. In the place of apology, it imagines the beloved's disfigurement, instructing her that she should have "[her] beauty have hidden": veiling her eyes, dispersing her hair through the wind, and defacing her face with her "hand's nails." The narrator then performs his devotion as a retraction of his wish for violent retribution. True love, here, is the desire to exempt the beloved from the poet's own misogynistic anger.

[1] Quotations of Sidney's poetry are drawn from William Ringler's *Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Quotations from the older text of the *Arcadia* are drawn from Jean Robertson's edition, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia: the Old Arcadia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). Quotations from the *New Arcadia* are drawn from Victor Skretkowicz, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia: the New Arcadia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). The letters u and v have been silently regularized in quotations from early modern texts throughout.

Yet notice how I slip, in those last few sentences, from evaluating the poem's grammar, meter, and imagery to describing its content, as if aesthetic judgement follows directly from moral failing. The yoking—or unyoking—of the aesthetic and the moral is a major crux of Sidney studies. Scholars continue to study the tension in Sidney's thinking between the moralized aesthetics of the *Defence* (where sweet and forceful expression moves a reader closer to the divine) and the frustrated desires of *Astrophil and Stella*. Positions range from T.P. Roche's suggestion that Astrophil is a negative paragon—a model of the abuses of poetry—to Melissa Sanchez's proposal that Sidney wasn't opposed to extramarital sex at all.[2] The most compelling recent approaches share a search for words and concepts that Sidney himself might have used, with Robert Stillman unpacking the "semantic field" of "sweetness," Jonathan P. A. Sell tracking the "expressive vocabulary" of the sublime, Catherine Bates exploring the theology and aesthetics of "grace," and Ilona Bell offering the "material practice" of letter-writing as a lens on the erotic dynamics and "wanton words" (53) .[3] In what follows, I want to add one more term: "wanton." Among the most frequent Elizabethan words naming the failures of poetry, the word becomes a key site for debates over the morality and psychology of art.

This context helps us to see how Sidney thinks about bad poetry in a scene he stages repeatedly, which generates the poem with which I started. Overmastered by desire, a lover moves from verbal flirtation to unwanted physical touch in ways that incur moral disapproval. What interests me about this scene (as it recurs in *Astrophil and Stella* and the *Arcadias*) is that Sidney rearranges a shared set of elements: beauty, the psychological power of art, lack of self-control, the failure of poetry. Yet the proposed relations among them are constantly shifting. Tracking these scenes in the context of the Elizabethan debate over wantonness allows us to catch Sidney thinking about bad poetry.

The most distinctive characteristic of Sidney's writing about bad poetry is how it slips registers: fault moves freely from the material to the social, the rhetorical to the aesthetic. Take this description of Musidorus writing a poem:

[2] Thomas P. Roche, Jr, "Astrophil and Stella: A Radical Reading," *Spenser Studies* 3 (1982): 139-91; Melissa Sanchez's "'In Myself the Smart I Try': Female Promiscuity in Astrophil and Stella," *ELH* 80.1 (2013): 1- 27.

[3] Robert Stillman, "Sweet Philip Sidney: Premodern Aesthetics in the Noösphere," *Sidney Journal* 40.1-2 (2022), 75-97 (p. 77); Jonathan P. A. Sell, "Philip Sidney's Sublime Self-authorship: Authenticity, Ecstasy and Energy in *The Defence of Poesy* and *Astrophil and Stella*," in Zenón Luis-Martínez, ed., *Poetic Theory and Practice in Early Modern Verse*, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 165-190 (p. 184); Catherine Bates, "Obtaining Grace: Poetic Language and the Language of Reform in *Astrophil and Stella*," *Reformation*, 26:1, 23-41; Ilona Bell, "Reading Might Make Her Know," *Sidney Journal* 40.1-2 (2022), 33-56 (p. 37, 53).

> But pen did never more quakingly perform his office; never was paper more double moistened with ink and tears, never words more slowly married together, and never the muses more tired than now with changes and rechanges of his devises—fearing how to end, before he had resolved how to begin, mistrusting each word, condemning each sentence. This word was not significant, that word was too plain: this would not be conceived, the other would be ill-conceived. Here, sorrow was not enough expressed; there, he seemed too much for his own sake to be sorry. This sentence rather shewed art than passion; that sentence, rather foolishly passionate, then forcibly moving. At last, marring with mending, and putting out bette, than he left, he made an end of it…
>
> (*Arcadia* 310)

We see both the physical and mental difficulties of writing—a tremor in the hand shakes the pen; tears wet the paper; anxiety impedes composition. For both Ceri Sullivan and Frances X. Connor, the result is a triumph of writing over self-doubt. It's "good-enough"; it's a "poet's triumph" over recalcitrant materials.[4] But it is also important to note that Musidorus is *right*. Sidney depicts the self-conscious guilt of apology. Yet just because Musidorus is self-conscious doesn't mean that he's wrong. The poem he writes is the one with which I began, and the problems diagnosed here are exactly the ones that the poem struggles with. It does, indeed, express too little sorrow while representing the poet as sorry for his own sake. By confusing art for passion, the poem becomes foolishly passionate rather than forcibly moving.

When Pamela reads the poem, she doesn't know what to do. Before she can formulate an opinion, she's interrupted, first by her sister and then by six flower-bedecked maids who use beauty, music, and art to lead them into an ambush. Sidney adopts an image from the *Defence* for the pleasures of the scene:

> The maids besought the ladies to sit down and taste of the swelling grapes, which seemed great with child of Bacchus, and of the divers-coloured plums, which gave the eye a pleasant taste before they came to the mouth.
>
> (*Defence* 316)

[4] Ceri Sullivan, "Sidney and Herbert on Failure: Modesty Topos or Writer's Block?," *Essays In Criticism,* Vol. 73 No. 2, 2023, 142-155 (p. 149); Frances X. Connor, "'Delivering Forth': Philip Sidney's *Idea* and the Labor of Writing", 53-75 (p. 64).

This fruit literalizes the *Defence*, which imagines poetry as a "cluster of grapes," offered, "that full of that taste, you may long to pass further" (388).[5] Here, the motivating pleasures of art—represented in the "wanton modesty" (*New Arcadia,* 315) of the maids with their instruments—becomes a trap, drawing the women into a wood where they are vulnerable.

The image tempts us to read the abduction as a response to the poem. That scene, with its beautiful bait and dangerous trap, offers a familiar warning about poetry, love, or any other pleasure. The siren, the baited hook, even the panther with its beautiful smell and sharp teeth, are all figures for this tension shared among antipoetic writers, poetic theorists, and writers of amorous verse: they seem fundamental to period conceptions of lyric.

This reading, which construes poetry as a parallel to and metaphor for desire, works even more clearly in old *Arcadian* version of this scene: Musidorus and Pamela's escape. There, the two lovers find themselves alone at last, walking together and flirting in verse. The "virtuous wantonness" (*Old Arcadia*, 200) of their poems causes her to fall asleep, whereupon Musidorus is about to assault her, when interrupted by abducting villains. A series of carefully structured parallels track how the pleasures of natural beauty, sexual desire, and poetry cause Musidorus to be "overmastered with the fury of delight" (202).[6]

As the new *Arcadia* reorganizes Sidney's original materials, it keeps the same elements, but causality breaks down. In the revised text, non-consensual sexuality comes first, followed by enchanting artistic pleasure, and then the literal ravishment of abduction. Sidney's revisions to the *Arcadia* regularly defuse poetry, music, and rhetoric, marking them as less likely to overpower their auditors.[7] Here, Musidorus's failed poem

[5] Quotations from Sidney's *Defence* are drawn from Sidney, *A Defence of* Poetry, ed. Brian Vickers, *English Renaissance Literary Criticism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 336-391.

[6] Connie Scozarro has written brilliantly about how that scene adopts the rhetoric of poetics to justify violent sex in "Justifying Sex in the *Arcadia*," *Modern Language Quarterly* September 2023, 273-297. For a full reading of this scene, see also my forthcoming "Sidney's Penetrations: Metaphors and Ideas," *English Literary Renaissance*, Winter 2024.

[7] Thus, when Musidorus explains the nature of his disguise to Pamela by singing "My sheep are thoughts," in the older text we learn that he does so because his speeches "had given alarum to her imaginations, [and] to hold her the longer in them and to bring her to a dull yielding-over her forces" (106). By contrast, in the revised text, the nature of music is merely to "mollify" (111). Similarly, when he hears Pyrocles singing in the guise of Cleophila, he is "moved to pity by the manner of Cleophila's singing…—so lively an action doth the mind, truly touched, bring forth" (29). Sidney's revision cuts this account of music entirely. We can find similar revisions elsewhere in the text. Two such changes are made to the scene in which Cleophila/Zelmane first encounters Basilius: in the old Arcadia, he is "charmed" by this "young siren" and "transported with delight"; the later text merely relates that he is "more cunning… than any greedy host…to well paying passengers" (*Old Arcadia* 36, 38; *New Arcadia* 60).

is distinct from the "force of music" (316) that carries the women away. Where the older text mirrors the dangers of poetry and desire, here, the wanton art of the six maids stands more ambiguously. Is Musidorus's double lapse—first into stealing a kiss and then into terrible poetry—supposed to be paralleled by this abduction or contrasted with it?

Bad poetry is part of Sidney's intervention into the Elizabethan debate about poetry's wantonness. After all, "wanton" (and its cognates) may be the term used most often in dispraise of poetry in Elizabethan era: sounds, words, thoughts, subjects, addressees, styles, poems, poets, and whole poetic traditions might all be judged "wanton." Such flexibility is among the word's affordances, bridging licentiousness and rebelliousness into a concept that floats from sin's psychological origins (in "wanton will") through its embedding in the social ("wanton behavior," "wanton disobedience") to the material forms of representation ("wanton sound," "wanton rhymes"). For Renaissance writers, the word extends outwards from two paradigmatic cases: childhood and sexuality. As a synonym for "lascivious" or "lustful," "wanton" expands to include all sexual desire. By contrast, the figure of the "wanton" child emphasizes unruliness, rebellion, and selfishness, licensed by an Augustinian sense of the child's sinfulness. This range of referent makes "wanton" useful for thinking about poetry's faults and failures. As such, it recurs for translators (like Golding, Churchyard, and Timothy Kendall), for reformers contemplating the relation between sin and sensuality (like John Northbrooke, Gervase Babington, and Thomas Lovell), and for satirists theorizing the poetics of moral reform, among many others.

I'll let the poet and song-writer Thomas Watson articulate the coordinates of the word. In the second song in his *Italian Madrigals Englished*—immediately after one of the first references to Astrophil and Stella in print—Watson bemoans moral objections to love lyric, memorializing a "merry world"

> where euery louer with his mate,
> Might walk from mead to mead and cheerfully relate
> Sowr pleasures and sweet griefs following a wanton state:
> Those daies knew no suspect…
>
> O hunny dais, and customes of antiquite:

> But the world now is full of so fond iealosie
> That we term charity wanton iniquitie.
>
> (2.1-4, 7-9)[8]

Shaped by its elegies for Francis Walsingham and Sidney, Watson's volume introduces Sidney's characters in its first song to exemplify that kind of poetic desire—"wanton state"—that would now be dismissed as "wanton iniquitie." First the word names harmless erotic discourse; then, a moralized negative judgment applied to all flirting and love poetry. Wanton thus names two very different positions about the morality of art.

The second refers to Protestant critiques of art. As Patrick Collinson points out, around the time that Sidney is writing, religious objections to poetry harden.[9] In so doing, the referents of the word "wanton" shift. Does the term name poetry's classical heritage, its erotic content, its sensual appeal, its effect on the reader, or all of the above?

One approach, best articulated perhaps by Protestant translators of classical literature, locates wantonness at particular sites in texts. Thus Arthur Golding's "Epistle" to the Earl of Leicester before his translation of Ovid, advises that readers who meet with "any wanton woord" and feels "their myndes thereby/ Provokte to vyce and wantonnesse" to treat it like a dangerous panther and beware.[10] Translator Timothy Kendall, similarly, claims to have "weeded away all wanton and worthlesse words" from Martial (*Epigrammes*, A.v.).[11] Even the preacher and martyrologist Thomas Brice's 1562 ballad on "filthy writing" distinguishes the "wanton sound and filthie sense" of "vile corrupting rimes," which he attributes to "wanton Venus," from proper godly music ("Against Filthy Writing," 2, 7).[12] Here, "wanton" names particular abuses, whether they're located in the sound or sense. William Baldwin even describes the "wanton wordes" of the Song of Solomon.[13] Such wantonness, these writers argue, can be omitted, interpreted, or avoided.

[8] I quote from Dana Sutton's digital complete works: Thomas Watson, *The Complete Works*, ed. Dana F. Sutton, http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/watson/ (revised 2022), correcting a typo ("Fowr") in the third line. For Watson and the Sidney circle, see K. Dawn Grapes, "Italian Artistry, English Innovation," *Mediaevalia*, Vol 39, 2018, pp. 345-385.

[9] Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (Palgrave MacMillan, 1988), 98 argues that "many protestant publicists turned their back on…cultural media," circa 1580.

[10] Golding, *The .xv. books of P. Ovidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis* (London: 1567), no page given.

[11] Kendall, *Floweres of Epigrammes* (London: 1577).

[12] For Collinson's discussion of Brice and Lovell, see *Birthpangs*, 110. See also the discussion of Brice in Matthew Woodcock's *Thomas Churchyard: Pen, Sword, and Ego*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 122.

[13] William Baldwin, *The canticles or balades of Salomon* (London: 1549), A1v.

Yet as Collinson points out, twenty years later than Brice Thomas Lovell reads wantonness differently, objecting to both dancing and minstrelsy despite their potential Christian use:

> For wanton and lasciuiouse rimes,
> are cloked vnder mirth:
> And blasphemies go vncontrolde,
> though they be Sathans breth.
> And why? forsooth because these men,
> some Godly songs doo sing:
> All must be good nothing refused,
> that from the deuil dooth spring.
>
> (*A Dialogue between custom and veritie,* n.p.)

Where Brice, like others in his generation of reformers, hopes to replace secular media forms with godly ones, Lovell objects that godly music has offered cover for devilish rhymes, and so all must be rejected. Gervase Babington, chaplain for the Pembrokes in 1581, offers a slightly different argument. He proposes that "songs, and sonets of loue & lightnes" (*Fruitful Exposition* 307) are forbidden under the commandment against adultery:

> Againe, vnchast bookes and wanton writinges, who knoweth not howe they tickle to vncleannes? and therfore both they and the reading of them forbidden in this lawe.
>
> (*Fruitful Exposition* 308)

Here, wantonness slips inevitably from text to reader. In this context, Watson's "wanton iniquitie" glosses the same objection to poetry that Sidney describes as "training [wit] to wanton sinfulness" (*Defence* 371).

Watson's earlier use reflects a second shift: "wanton" is beginning to acquire non-moralizing possibilities, as we see when Watson borrows Sidney's characters to imagine a lyric space for erotic discourse. Nor is this poem Watson's first contribution to this debate. The year before, he publishes a ballad commending *The Praise of Music*, a treatise that argues (contra Babington) that music only harms those who would be sinful anyhow:

> I doubt not but that those, which are glad to take any occasion to speake against musicke, will… affirme that it maketh men effeminate, and too much subiect vnto pleasure. But whome I praie

> you, doth it make effeminate? Surely none but such as without it would bee wanton…[14]

Licensed such arguments, Watson adopts an emerging use of "wanton" for an unmoralized space of pleasure. Shakespeare, similarly, experiments with embedded metaphors of sexuality that displace both their appeal and their adjective onto the natural world:

> "When we haue laught to see the sailes conceaue,
> And grow bigge bellied, with the wanton winde."
>
> (*MND* 2.1.129, as quoted in *OED*)

The metaphor works the same way in *Coriolanus*, *King John*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Taming of the Shrew*, Sonnet 97, and *Troilus and Cressida*: human desire displaced into a gentle eroticizing of the world. For later poets, this sense of "wanton" comes to mark off a proto-aesthetic space, in which love and desire are (temporarily, at least) beyond judgement. By the mid-1590s, Marston articulates this clearly (though perhaps insincerely), when he commands his own erotic poetry to "Be not obsceane though wanton in thy rimes."[15]

A decade earlier than Watson, Sidney is drawn by both possibilities of the word: its ability to name a sinfulness that moves from life to art; its possibility of suggesting a space of desiring play that *isn't* immoral action. Take the Eighth Song, which William Oram has recently described as a "pivot" in the sequence's action.[16] This poem, too, stages a moment when desire that seems "mutual" turns into unwanted physical contact:

> There his hands in their speech, faine
> Would have made tongue's language plaine;
> But her hands his hands repelling,
> Gave repulse all grace excelling.
>
> (65-68)

[14] I cite this tract from Dana F. Sutton's digital edition: John Case, *The Praise of Music*, https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/music3/ , (2009). Sutton (like Watson) believes that the tract was by John Case. For Watson and the Sidney circle, see K. Dawn Grapes, "Italian Artistry, English Innovation," *Mediaevalia*, Vol 39, 2018, pp. 345-385.

[15] Critics disagree in how we should read the tone of the *Metamorphosis of Pygmalion's Image*. See, for instance, Philip J. Finkelpearl, "From Petrarch to Ovid: Metamorphoses in John Marston's *Metamorphosis of Pigmalions Image*," ELH , Sep., 1965, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Sep., 1965), pp. 333-348 and Lynn Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 125-151. For a reading of the meaning of "obscene" at this moment, see Ian Moulton, Before Pornography, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 26-7.

[16] William Oram, "Afterlife of Sidney's Eighth Song," *Sidney Journal* 40.1-2 (2022), 57-74.

The backdrop for this scene is the "wanton musicke" (2) of the birds. It is, indeed, this wanton music that initiates Astrophil's advances: he translates the bird's song into the injunction to "use the season" (56) for love. Their wanton music continues as the eroticization of the world that makes up the eight lines that follow. These lines, delivered immediately before he tries to grab Stella, can be read as either Astrophil's or the birds. With Stella's repulse, the metaphor breaks. Astrophil has to realize he's not a bird, and therewith, his "song is broken" (104).

Time and again, poetry fails in the wanton scene. Earlier in *Astrophil and Stella*, even, when Astrophil steals a kiss from the sleeping Stella, he describes himself as motivated by a "wanton" love (73.1). In that version of this scene, the kiss inspires a smorgasbord of saccharine Catullan kiss-poetry that Robert Stillman agrees is "bad": "it is bad poetry because Astrophil means to drown Stella in a great big vat of Catullan kisses until she forgives that kiss he stole…"[17] In all of these instances, the term both pricks out and forecloses a space of erotic possibility.

As in the historical tradition to which Sidney responds, the relationship between bad poetry and wantonness shifts across these four scenes. In the old *Arcadia*, poetry allegorizes the moral risk of desire; in the new *Arcadia*, bad poetry issues from the same fallen human desires that cause Musidorus to lose control; in *Astrophil and Stella*, wantonness first inspires bad poetry (in the kiss poems) and then, in the eighth song, comes to figure a difference between the erotic potentiality of art and the real limits of the social scene. My interest, ultimately, is in how "wanton," ringing through various discourses as a term of dispraise, might be good to think with. Sidney doesn't want to abandon the notion that literature should yield moral reform; he's well aware that art makes sensual claims on us through its materiality and its subject matter. This word that so frequently gestures towards what is "bad" about poetry (and why it might be bad for us) becomes a site where Sidney carefully engages the relationship between what we might call the social and the aesthetic, between the "wanton sinfulness" of the mind and the "wanton shewes" of art (*Defence* 371, 372).

[17] Stillman 93.

For at least one member of the Sidney circle, "wanton" would become a key term for thinking about Sidney's influence. Early in Nicholas Breton's elegy for Sidney, he offers this strange half-praise:

> Whose wisdome was not seene in wanton toies,
> And though a wanton, yet not deuoid of wit…
>
> ("Amores Lachrimae" 31-32)[18]

The first line admits two readings: that Sidney's "wanton toies" do not show his true wisdom, or that Sidney's wisdom precluded his work from being wanton. Then, in the second line, as "wanton" slips from adjective to noun, it comes to describe the poet rather than the poetry: his desire doesn't undo his intelligence. Taken together, wantonness comes to name the most that any author can ask for: that our lives not be blamed for the failures of our writing, nor our writing for the failures of our lives.

[18] Nicholas Breton, *Brittons bovvre of delights* (London: 1591), n.p.