

Abstract

Newton, David Travis. A New Reading of John Donne's "Song. Goe, and catche a falling starre." (Under the direction of Dr. M. Thomas Hester.)

"Song. Goe, and catche a falling starre" has long been a popular Donne poem, but it has not received the critical attention given to others of the *Songs and Sonets*. Even in the frequent references to it in critical studies, those commentaries are only brief and general. Dismissed often as merely a comic poem without seriousness of theme, "Song" has been mostly only noted as "comic," "lighthearted," "cynical," "flippant," and "delightful," but not considered one of Donne's "better," "more serious" works. More often than not, the poem is dismissed as one of those deeply cynical poems about woman written when Donne was a young bachelor in and around the courts in London during the 1590s. Failing to consider its reliance on a fictive persona invented by an ironic wit, it has been noticed too often only as one of "Jack" Donne's so-called "misogynistic," "promiscuous" poems (like "The Indifferent") as exemplifying a Donne trend of remarking negatively on "Womans constancy." This study examines more thoroughly "Song. Goe, and catche a falling starre" within the literary and historical contexts of its composition in order to suggest that Donne creates such a speaker for more specific and significant ironic aims than the dismissive critics of the poem have noted.

This thesis argues that Donne is intentionally mocking the Petrarchan poetry popular during the day and its idealization of woman. Additionally, Donne's poem is a reaction to the Protestant campaign of the Sidney coterie of politicians and poets who were fueling a Sidney poetic revival and promoting their religio-political agenda, by using the heroic death-in-battle of Sidney along with the publication of his works to fashion a Sidney legend, setting

him up as the ideal English Petrarchan gentleman, courtier, and Protestant warrior. In “Song,” Donne undermines this movement by pointing out the irony of Sidney’s selection of Lady Penelope Rich—a known adulterer—as the idealized subject of *Astrophil and Stella*. Donne points to Sidney as his subject through a numerological code in the poem and through poetic allusions to the life and works of Sidney and his elegists.

A New Reading of John Donne's "Song. Goe, and catche a falling starre"

by
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Dedication

For Kim, a woman true and fair.

And to Jason, my inspiration. Don't ever quit.

Biography

David Newton was born in Winston-Salem, NC, September 19, 1969, the son of a Baptist Minister. He spent the majority of his childhood in Los Angeles and Bakersfield, CA, until moving to Whiteville, NC, where he graduated from Whiteville High School in 1987. Mr. Newton attended NC State University and received a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in journalism in 1994. Mr. Newton is married to Kimberly McPhatter Newton, who graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and also earned a Master of Arts in English from NC State University in 1996. Mr. and Mrs. Newton have a son, Jason Edwin, who was born on December 8th, 2001.

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Introduction

“Song. Goe, and catche a falling starre” has long been a popular Donne poem, but it has not received the critical attention given to others of the *Songs and Sonets*.¹ Even in the frequent references to it in critical studies, those commentaries are only brief and general.² Dismissed often as merely a comic poem without seriousness of theme, “Song” has been mostly only noted as “comic,” “lighthearted,” “cynical,” “flippant,” and “delightful,” but not considered one of Donne’s “better,” “more serious” works, more often than not dismissed as one of those deeply cynical poems about woman written when Donne was a young bachelor in and around the courts in London during the 1590s.³ Failing to consider its reliance on a fictive persona invented by an ironic wit, it has been noticed too often only as one of “Jack” Donne’s so-called “misogynistic,” “promiscuous” poems (like “The Indifferent”) as

¹ The poem has been often imitated. These imitations include William Camden listing “Impossibilities” in *Remaines Concerning Britain* (Smith vol. 1, 39); Sir J. Mennes in two separate epigrams from *Witts Recreations selected from the finest Fancies of Moderne Muses* in 1640 (Smith vol. 1, 49); John Playford’s “On Women’s Constancy” in 1669 in *The Treasury of Musick: Containing Ayres and Dialogues To Sing to the Theorbo-Lute or Basse-Viole* (Smith vol. 1, 59); and “A Song. Blow, blow, thou Winter Wind” in *The London Magazine: And Monthly Chronologer*, in June 1741 (Smith vol. 1, 172). Also of note is that William Habington answers the poem in mock fashion in *Castara* with “Against them who lay Unchastity to the Sex of Women” in 1634 (Smith vol. 1, 46).

² For example: N.J.C. Andreasen reproduces the poem but provides only a single sentence of commentary in *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary*. Arnold Stein writes two paragraphs on the poem as an example of “epigrammatic reversal” in *John Donne’s Lyrics*. Clay Hunt mentions “Song” in a discussion of “The Indifferent” as being a similar example of an anti-Petrarchan poem in *Donne’s Poetry*.

³ George Saintsbury, for example, in his introduction to *Poems of John Donne*, edited by E.K. Chambers in 1896, gave little consideration to “Song,” using it as a counterexample to his “natural and genuine” works, he said the poem, “delightful as it is, is perhaps only a delightful quaintness” (Smith 2, 97). Sir Herbert J.C. Grierson, in his seminal edition of Donne poetry in 1912, focused on the poem’s cynicism, applying a biographical reading: “But the Petrarchian love, which Shakespeare treats with light and charming irony . . . Donne openly scoffs. He is one of Shakespeare’s young men as these were in the flesh and the Inns of Court, and he tells us frankly what in their youthful cynicism . . . they think of love, and constancy, and women” (Smith vol. 2, 320). In a 1920 essay, Robert Wilson Lynd says, “*Go and Catch a Falling Star* is but one of a series of delightful lyrics in disparagement of women” (Smith vol. 2, 425). More recently, Roger B. Rollin refers to “Song” as a “trifle” that is “intended merely to entertain,” in contrast to the Holy Sonnets (Summers and Peabworth, 131).

exemplifying a Donne trend of remarking negatively on “Womans constancy.”⁴ This study aims to examine more thoroughly “Song. Goe, and catche a falling starre” within the literary and historical contexts of its composition in order to suggest that Donne creates such a speaker for more specific and significant ironic aims than the dismissive critics of the poem have noted.

The existing critical commentary on “Song” has been within the context of asking to what extent Donne may be called a Petrarchan poet. In these examinations, many critics find the poem to be explicitly anti-Petrarchan; others simply find it un-Petrarchan. “Song” is indeed an anti-Petrarchan poem. Donne uses Petrarchan conventions to mock the popular Petrarchan poetry of the day; however, the poem’s purpose is more than simply ridicule of a set of Renaissance poetic conventions so clearly articulated in Shakespeare’s sonnet 130. To understand the ways in which the poem engages specific Petrarchan performances as well as the commonplaces sonnet 130 so successfully sends up, we need to consider the poem within its historical context, in terms of both the literary and the religio-political landscapes of late sixteenth-century England.

At the time of “Song,” English Petrarchanism was experiencing a vibrant revival of popularity that was due in large part to the publication and enthusiastic reception of Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*. Interconnected with this Petrarchan poetical

⁴ Judah Stampfer classifies the poem among “Promiscuity Poems” in Stampfer, Judah. *John Donne and the Metaphysical Gesture*. NY: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970. Similarly, Helen Gardner groups “Song” with other “cynical generalizations”: “Community,” “Confined Love,” “The Indifferent,” “Love’s Usury,” and “Love’s Diet.” Gardner says in her introduction: “In all of these poems it is taken for granted that women are willing but not constant; but this is no matter for grief since man is not constant either” (li-lij). Gardner, Helen. General Introduction. *John Donne. The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965. For more on this period of Donne’s poetic career, see Richard E. Hughes’ *The Progress of the Soul*, Chapter 1.

revival fueled by Sidney's work was the continuing promotion of Protestantism by Protestant zealots who wished for England to launch aggressive military campaigns in order to convert neighboring European countries to Protestantism, a growing controversy. To promote their religio-political agenda, these men used the heroic death in battle of Sidney along with the publication of his works to fashion a Sidney legend, setting him up as the ideal English Petrarchan gentleman, courtier, and Protestant warrior. Deeply involved in this campaign was the poetic heir apparent to Sidney, Edmund Spenser, the most influential poet of the day who published in 1595 a lengthy collection of elegies in honor of Sidney entitled *Astrophel*. As a Catholic recusant, Donne was reacting to this Protestant campaign in his poetry, including "Song."⁵

In "Song," Donne mocked the recent hero worship of Sidney by pointing out the irony of the poet's selection of Lady Penelope Rich as the subject of *Astrophil and Stella*. At the time *Astrophil and Stella* was published in 1591, Lady Rich was a well-known scandal, a known adulteress having an affair openly. By highlighting this ironic choice of a model for virtuous Stella, Donne sought to mock and perhaps even to undermine the mythmaking (and the myth) of Sidney as a poetic and Protestant hero. In Donne's view, as Sidney undeservedly elevated Lady Rich to the Petrarchan ideal of a woman, so did Sidney's worshipers undeservedly elevate Sidney to the ideal courtier poet warrior. Donne satirized this situation in "Song" by instructing his audience to "Goe, and catch a falling starre," the "starre" simultaneously representing Lady Rich and Sidney himself.

⁵ See for example M. Thomas Hester "Let Me Love." *Sacred and Profane: Secular and Devotional Interplay in Early Modern British Literature*. Ed. Helen Wilcox, Richard Todd, and Alasdair MacDonal. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1996; and "'Over Reconing' the 'Undertones': A Preface to 'Some Elegies' by John Donne." *Renaissance Papers 2000*. Ed. T.H. Howard-Hill and Philip Rollinson. NY: Camden House. 2000. 137-53.

As is usual for Donne, the “monarch of wit,” his satire of Sidney’s worshipers was very cryptic; however, those familiar with Sidney’s life and works would have been able to detect the embedded allusions to Sidney in Donne’s poem. At the time, Sidney was closely identified with the “star-lover,” Astrophil in his poem, and was referred to as a star himself, so that Donne’s audience would have made the connection between his poem about a “falling starre” and Sidney. Additionally, Donne alluded to Sidney through a subtle numerological symbolism in “Song” that recalled and satirically distorted the images of Sidney portrayed by elegists such as Spenser.

Critical History of “Song. Goe, and catche a falling starre”

Critics have long sought to place Donne within or outside of various poetic traditions, especially the Petrarchism so popular in the Tudor and Stuart court.⁶ In 1933, for example, Lu Emily Pearson claimed that “Most critics list John Donne . . . as an anti-Petrarchist, but such a description of him is most inadequate” (223). She was responding in large part to H.J.C. Grierson’s who in his edition of *The Poems of John Donne* claimed that prior to 1599, Donne “revolted against Petrarchism.” According to Grierson, “Song” was written during this period. Pearson argues that Grierson, “does not, I believe, quite appreciate the fact that the poet is, on the whole, independent of the revolt against Petrarchism” (224-25). Modern critics agree that, with regard to love poetry, Donne moved beyond the Petrarchan foundation solidified by Sidney in the English Renaissance, but to what extent he revolted against Petrarchism remains a subject of debate.⁷

⁶ Deborah Aldrich Larson, in *John Donne and Twentieth Century Criticism*, finds attempts to classify Donne into no less than nine separate literary traditions, including the Petrarchan, Anti-Petrarchan, Spenserian, and Neoplatonic traditions (113).

⁷ For example, Anthony Low says, “Petrarchan love came to its unsustainable climax and inevitable breakdown in high Renaissance England, as it first merged with courtly ideals and internalized them, and then proved incapable of satisfying the intense desires that were unleashed by this combination of poetic traditions at just the moment that the broader culture was moving away from the feudal vision of worth and nobility” (31) and, “Donne was a chief actor in what may be called the ‘reinvention of love,’ from something essentially social and feudal to something essentially private and modern.” Donne accomplished this “by means of a brilliant and unexpected redirection of the communal” (33). Another way Donne alters conventions, according to Low, is to literalize a worn out convention and proceed to examine what might happen next. For example, a Petrarchan poem might end with the death of the spurned lover, but “The Dampne” begins after the lover is dead: “Since the lover is dead to begin with, it follows that there is no immediate place for the feudalistic assumptions about social relationships that would be implicit in a haughty mistress rejecting an unsuccessful servant-lover. Nor, to move closer to the social conditions of Donne’s time, does his stance resemble that of a client lover pursuing the rewards of patronage and generalized desire from a mistress-patroness, the pattern taken by Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*” (41). In “The Dampne” the sought after lover’s resistance becomes a source of plague and the seeking lover becomes a “disinterested social critic” he becomes concerned for his mistress and her victims above his own ambitions. Through this “witty permutation of conventional Petrarchisms” Donne “disarm[s] the conventionalities” of Petrarchism (42). The result is that while we “continue to admire Sidney, who stands at the threshold of the early modern transformation of love,” Donne “is more equivocal” as a dramatic reinventor of love through his contortions of the Petrarchan convention (206).

“Song” has played its most prominent role within this conversation about Donne and Petrarchism. Critics have considered “Song” and its central topic, the promiscuity of woman, in terms of how the opinion expressed by the speaker in the poem reflects upon Donne’s relationship to the Petrarchan tradition. Most critics have read “Song” as an anti-Petrarchan poem. Douglas L. Peterson and Ina Nelly each described “Song” as mocking the Petrarchan idolization of women.⁸ Clay Hunt, who devoted an entire chapter to “The Indifferent” as anti-Petrarchan, considered “Song” to be a similar example: “The most successful of his early love poems are those which . . . ridicule Petrarchism Donne is having his fun in poems like ‘The Indifferent’ and ‘Go, and catch a falling star’ . . . ” (10).

Even critics who have argued in favor of Donne as a Petrarchist—most prominently Silvia Ruffo-Fiore and Donald Guss—have made exception for “Song.” Though Ruffo-Fiore asserts that “Song” does not totally reject Petrarchan ideals, she acknowledges that it is a departure from Petrarchism.⁹ Guss, the most widely read and cited proponent of Donne as a Petrarchist, avoids dealing with “Song,” which he calls “un-Petrarchan,” by classifying it as

⁸ Peterson identifies Donne’s rhetorical technique as “mockery through contradiction” saying Donne “attacks the practice of deifying a mistress by describing her attributes as if they were absolutes. . . . Donne attacks hyperbole with hyperbole by asserting the equally preposterous contrary: ‘No where / Lives a woman true, and faire.’” In addition, he adds that the inability of the experienced speaker in the poem to find a true and fair woman makes the notion of the ideal woman meaningless, to search for one would inevitably lead to disappointment (Peterson 297). Una Nelly also classifies “Song” as an attack on the Petrarchan ideal, calling it “a wholesale breach of all the sacred rules of decorum” that goes well beyond the slight rebellion of Spenser and Sidney (Nelly 26).

⁹ Ruffo-Fiore takes issue with the previously held view that “Song” is wholly anti-Petrarchan, but acknowledges that “Song” “varies the Petrarchan motif of the ideal lady who elicits her lover’s constancy.” The poem seems to be a response to Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, but Ruffo-Fiore argues it is “not simply an iconoclastic parody, for there is no outright rejection of Petrarchan absolutes” (Ruffo-Fiore 29-31). Other critics have downplayed the cynical aspects of the poem by focusing on the sweet pilgrimage. Ilona Bell takes a similar stance.

an “epigrammatic” poem, along with “Womans constancy,” “The Indifferent,” and the other “evaporations” that are generally considered to be Donne’s anti-Petrarchan poems (113).¹⁰

In some ways, reading “Song” as an anti-Petrarchan poem is not contradictory to the general findings of Guss and other proponents of Donne’s supposed Petrarchism, except as a matter of definition. After all, it is commonly said that “‘Anti-Petrarchism’ is . . . only an aspect of petrarchism” (Forster 57). Guss defines “Petrarchan” as working within the conceits and conventions of all of Petrarchism, especially the Italians who preceded the English Petrarchism popular in Donne’s time (16-17). He finds Donne working within those conceits and conventions and thus considers him to be a Petrarchan poet, allowing for quite a bit of creative maneuvering within that broad scope. According to Guss, to be anti-Petrarchan would be a “programmatic attack upon literary and sentimental conventions” represented by all of Petrarchism. Thus, he would not find a poem, such as “Song,” that rebels against the idealization of woman to be anti-Petrarchan (137). Still, Guss acknowledges in various places that “Song” is “un-Petrarchan,” that “Song” has Petrarchan elements, and that Donne expresses skepticism of “idealizing Petrarchists” in many of his works (113, 136, 137).¹¹ What Guss does not do is connect these conclusions to provide a cohesive reading of “Song.” He fails to explain satisfactorily the poem’s relationship to Petrarchism.

¹⁰ The epigram label for “Song” was first given by Arnold Stein, *John Donne’s Lyrics*, p. 105.

¹¹ On p. 136, Guss states that “Petrarch is not blind to feminine weaknesses: indeed he states as a principle that no woman is both chaste and beautiful.” His note refers to “Song” as an example of Donne doing the same. On p. 137 he acknowledges that “Donne’s references to Petrarchists suggest that he shares with the anti-Petrarchists a deep skepticism about sentimental idealization. Such skepticism does appear in his love poetry.

Guss' goal is "to relate the Songs and Sonets to the dominant poetical tradition of Donne's time—that is, to Petrarchism" (16).¹² Yet, Guss does not compare and contrast Donne specifically to English Petrarchism in his argument. Although Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591) was the most admired Example of English Petrarchism when Donne was writing his poems, Guss briefly mentions Sidney only a few times and only mentions *Astrophil and Stella* once, in a note.¹³ In none of these instances does he compare Donne's poetry to Sidney's. Yet, if Donne were to write "anti-Petrarchan" poetry, it seems likely that he would do so in response to the poetry of his day, the English Petrarchism best represented by Sidney and Spenser, as much as to Italians from centuries earlier.¹⁴ To be understood fully, then, "Song" must be read and analyzed in terms of English Petrarchism, the literary context within which the poem was written and read.

¹² Guss explains his rationale for defining Donne's Petrarchism within the Italian context on pages 16-17.

¹³ Guss mentions Sidney thrice in the main text and twice in notes of his book.

¹⁴ See Forster, pp. 50-51, 69, and 105 for the influence of Sidney and Spenser.

New Reading of “Song” Within Its Literary and Historical Context

Petrarchism reached its vogue during the 1590s, when Donne was likely writing his earlier poems such as “Song.”¹⁵ Petrarchism was revived in England by the works of Sidney and Spenser, such as Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1590) and *Astrophil and Stella* (1591). With *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney went beyond the individual poems of Wyatt and Surrey and gave us the first successful English Petrarchan sonnet sequence. Additionally, Spenser produced *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) and *The Faerie Queene* (1590), both of which figured forth Elizabeth as the ideal Petrarchan lady.¹⁶ This is the literary context within which “Song” was written and read.

As described by Hunt, the typical Petrarchan songs and sonnets to which Donne responded elaborated the stock situation of the lover’s worship of a disdainful lady. Though she did not return his love, he was constant in his devotion. He accepted the role of faithful, unrewarded subject of the tyrannical mistress, and the poems in which he told of his love were most often love complaints, which analyzed his emotional frustrations. The lover was woeful and wrote of “tear floods” and “sigh tempests.” As in *Astrophil and Stella*, the poems dealt with a love affair which could not be consummated and which might even be entirely imaginary, and they tended to treat love as more spiritual than physical and to express that impulse to chivalric idealization of woman, which found a parallel manifestation in Renaissance Platonism. One stock metaphor was to present the love affair as high-minded religious worship, with the lover as devotee of a faith in which the lady was a saint (2-3).

¹⁵ See Gardner’s introduction, pp. lvii-lxii, which argues that half of the *Songs and Sonnets* were written before the end of the century. Gardner and most scholars put “Song” among the earliest poems.

¹⁶ For a history of Petrarchism in England, including Sidney and Spenser’s influence, see Forster “Petrarchism as Training” and “The Virgin Queen” in *The Icy Fire*.

The fundamental convention of Petrarchism then was to set the woman on a pedestal, and “we are introduced to a world in which women dominate, seen through the eyes of men who languish and adore” (Forster 2).

Popular trends are often answered by counter-trends; thus writing in opposition to this Petrarchan movement also became a literary trend during this period. Quitsland observes that Sidney provided a good standard to rebel against. Of the lyric poets writing between 1580 and 1630, he says, few “wrote without respect for Sidney’s verse—or indeed, without imitating or otherwise echoing it.” In fact, “The range of Sidney’s influence includes many who could be seen as *reacting against* the Petrarchan mode” (110). Dubrow and Marotti also observe that Sidney was a major person of interest for the men at the Inns of Court and speculate some backlash from competing poets. Dubrow provides evidence that Donne himself would have been one of those at court when *Astrophil and Stella* was published. According to Dubrow, Sidney’s work was likely received at the Inns of Court with some excitement; however,

At the same time, they may well have felt some competitive unease, perhaps fearing that their own great expectations as men of letters would be hampered or at least threatened by the adulation Sidney was receiving posthumously.

(220)

She notes that “later in the decade many members of the Inns reacted virulently against the stylistic abuses of Petrarchism” and finds Donne clearly writing against Petrarchism in poems such as “The Indifferent,” “Communitie,” “The Good Morrow,” and “Loves Diet.”

Though Dubrow does not include “Song,” it could certainly be listed in this group as well. In fact, “Song” normally is grouped with these poems.

Dubrow writes:

If, as seems likely, many of Donne’s love poems were written during the 1590s, their original readers were inundated by Petrarchan sequences and hence intensely conscious of such contrasts. Thus the stance of a poem like ‘The Indifferent’ must have seemed to readers during that period—and to the poet himself—as not merely a reversal but also a rebuttal of Petrarchan idealizations. (221-22)

The same can be said about the cynicism of “Song” compared to the optimism of *Astrophil and Stella* regarding the faithfulness of women. Readers would have noticed a contrast in the attitudes projected by the two poems. After all, “Song” is a far cry from the idealization of woman that characterizes so much Petrarchan poetry, especially English Petrarchism. The speaker in Donne’s poem is cynical about women, and if Donne’s poem fails to rise to a direct attack on the Petrarchan ideal, it at least questions its premises.

In “Song,” the speaker—a persona created by Donne—asks his audience to consider seven impossibilities, such as to “catche a falling starre” or “Tell me, where all past yeares are” (1,3), in order to suggest that these Herculean chores would be simpler than the impossible task of finding a “woman true, and faire” (18). He tells his companion to “Ride ten thousand daies and nights” (11) in search of a contemporary Laura or a Stella, but that

after his journey he would agree with the speaker,

And swear

No where

Lives a woman true, and faire (15-17).

“True and faire” are the standard features of the Petrarchan women, such as Laura and Stella (*donna anglicata* or “cruel fayre”). “Song” says this conventional Petrarchan woman of Renaissance love complaints does not exist.

The poem closes with the speaker allowing for a moment that perhaps a “true and fair” woman might exist, but he quickly retracts, saying that by the time he were to meet her—even if she lived next door—she would already have been false to “two or three” men.

Some critics, such as Ruffo-Fiore, have attempted to argue that this momentary acknowledgement that “Such a Pilgrimage”—to find the ideal, true and fair woman—“were sweet” indicates that the Petrarchan romantic ideal remains strong in the poem (line 20). However, this momentary acceptance of a thesis is a typical rhetorical device of Donne poems. For example, “A Valediction: forbidding mourning,” “The Canonization,” “The Anniversary,” and “Aire and Angels,” follow the same pattern by which a male speaker argues a position, allows for an opposing idea, then reargues his position.¹⁷ In “Valediction,” after arguing that “Our two soules . . . are one,” the speaker allows that

If they be two, they are two so

As stiffe twin compasses are two. (25-26)

¹⁷ For more detailed descriptions of this pattern in the poems listed, see Guss, pp. 138 and 150.

Like these examples, “Song” follows the rhetorical pattern—that of anticipating and refuting counterarguments—common to many of Donne’s poems. In “Song,” Donne is essentially saying, “Even if you did find a ‘true and faire’ woman, it would not last.” His stance remains cynical throughout.

Beyond the cynical stance of the poem, the twisted Petrarchan conventions and word choice in “Song” also make clear that Donne is mocking the typical Petrarchan poetry of the day. Readers of “Song” would have recognized what Donne was doing from the opening lines:

Goe, and catche a falling starre,

Get with childe a mandrake roote,

Petrarchan poetry is about stars, such as Sidney’s Stella, not *falling* stars, and pastoral Petrarchism is about flowers, not mandrake roots: “Her cheeke, her chinne, her neck, her nose, / This was a lillye, that was a rose.”¹⁸ Furthermore, the poem is presented as a song written to “certain ayres which were made before,” but hard consonant sounds, such as “catche,” “mandrake roote,” and “cleft the divel’s foote,” make Donne’s “Song” harsh sounding, choppy, and difficult to sing.¹⁹ Even at its best, “Song” is more similar to a bouncy limerick to be sung by a court jester than to the Petrarchan love songs of a troubadour. As Leishman urges, the feel of “Song” is “as of a man talking excitedly” (155).

¹⁸ George Puttenham, 1579, quoted in Forster (136).

¹⁹ The manuscripts which make up the Group II collection indicate that “Goe, and catche a falling starre” . . . [was] written to “certain ayres which were made before” (Hughes 38).

In his anti-Petrarchan reading of “The Indifferent,” Hunt describes that poem in similar terms:

... most of the stanza does not have the metrical quality of verse at all but rather the shifting rhythms and uneven dynamics of urgent, impassioned speech.

He goes on to say:

Metrically, the speaker’s love complaint is virtually an anti-song: its rhythmic roughness and vigor are as sharply opposed to the smooth numbers of conventional love poetry as its attitudes toward love are opposed to the conventional attitudes of the Petrarchan lover (6).

Donne may be up to the same trick in “Song.” The uneven meter and rough rhythm of “Song” contrasts to what Hunt calls the “smooth numbers” of the Petrarchan songs and sonnets. The joke is that Donne’s “Song,” besides contradicting the “woman as virtue” theme of Petrarchan songs, is also virtually unsingable. Donne cleverly satirizes Petrarchan songs using their own convention against them. In “Song,” Donne uses irregular meter and line length to create an “anti-song.”

“Song” begins with four trochaic seven-syllable lines (three trochees followed by a single stressed syllable):

Goe, and *catche* a *falling starre*,
Get with *childe* a *mandrake roote*,
Tell me, *where* all *past* yeares *are*,
Or who *cleft* the *Divels foot*,

Midway through, an extra eighth syllable is added:

Teach me *to* heare *Mermaides* *singing*,

Or to *keep* off *envies* *stinging*,

This sudden addition of an extra syllable disrupts the timing and rhythm of the song. If the reader continues the rhythmic pattern of the first four lines, the final accents are placed on “sing” and “sting,” but there is now an extra, unstressed syllable (-ing), which feels left over and thus forced. The effect is clumsy and a reader or singer is likely to stumble over this additional syllable. This view is affirmed by examining the ill-advised attempt to put “Song” to music that appears in the Egerton manuscript (reprinted in Shawcross, 91). The rhythm of “Song” is fairly simple and consistent for the first four lines, until the measure that contains the final lyrics from line 5, “Mermaydes singinge.” Here the rhythm becomes complex as the composer tries to account for the extra syllable. The measure consists of a dotted $\frac{1}{4}$ note (Mer-), two $\frac{1}{8}$ notes (-maydes, sing-), and another dotted $\frac{1}{4}$ note (-inge). This awkward phrasing calls for the singer to hit the final note (-inge) on the off beat (the “and” of 3), and thus sustain the suffix of “singinge” for a beat and a half after only holding the root (sing-) for half of a beat. In other words, the suffix is sung and sustained while the root is merely a passing note. This is the opposite of normal, graceful speech in which the emphasis falls naturally on the root. This ungraceful and complex rhythmic maneuvering is necessary to place the lines of “Song” within the standard four-beat structure of Anglo-Saxon music. Donne has satirized Petrarchan songs by writing a “Song” that does not lend itself well to musical interpretation.

The awkwardness created by the sudden introduction of the eight-syllable lines is compounded further by the two-syllable lines that immediately follow, and which continue to disrupt the rhythmic consistency:

And finde

What winde (7-8).

After the staccato and rushed feel of the first six lines, the pause presented by these two lines is unnaturally abrupt. Again, the musical application we have for “Song” is illustrative. Prior to these lines, the melody consists primarily of $\frac{1}{8}$ and $\frac{1}{4}$ notes (equaling half and single beats, respectively). However, these two lines contain the longest held notes of the song, with each measure having a sustained dotted $\frac{1}{2}$ note (three beats). Two-thirds of the way through the stanza, there are notes sustained awkwardly for 3 to 6 times the length of any other note in the “Song.” This strange slowing of the meter is made necessary by Donne’s inexplicable introduction of short, two-syllable lines. He seems to be intentionally wreaking havoc on the meter of “Song.”

After this abrupt braking, the final line returns to the previous eight-syllable length of lines 5-6. The sensation is that of stop-and-go. Additionally, the rhythm is disrupted by the early incidence of the two-syllable word “advance” (9). If the reader were to continue the trochaic emphasis of the previous eight-syllable lines, the accents would land on “serves,” “ad-,” “an,” and then awkwardly on the second syllable, “-nest,” leaving the final word “minde” de-accented:

Serves to advance an honest minde.

To overcome this awkward un-rhythmic stress pattern and make the “Song” more natural, the reader must adjust his timing by de-emphasizing and eliding “to” and “ad-” so that the second syllable “-vance” is stressed. This explains why the line is often, though not always, printed with an apostrophe joining “to” and “advance,” as in Shawcross:

Serves to'advance an honest minde.

This phrasing effectively reduces the line to seven syllables in speech and puts the stresses in the proper metrical place, but the eliding of “to'ad-” is difficult to sing or even speak fluidly. The musical application again calls for unusual timing. “Serves” is held for two beats in order to move “ad-” to the fourth beat and “-vance” to the accented first beat of the next measure, an awkward division across measures. So in the first stanza of “Song,” Donne has switched-up line length, syllables, and stresses while choosing words full of hard consonant sounds. The end result is an ugly sounding poem that is difficult to speak or sing, the very opposite of a Petrarchan song.

This general syllabic pattern of nine uneven lines (7-7-7-7-8-8-2-2-7/8) continues through the remaining stanzas of the poem, with additional un-rhythmic meter due to the problematic division of syllables within words and lines. The poem ends with one of the more awkward lines rhythmically (line 27): “False, ere I come, to two, or three.” The line contains the problematic eight syllables, comprising single-syllable words and a sort of triplet, “ere I come” inserted into the line, which breaks up any attempt to establish a smooth meter.

Donne's "Song" was awkward enough that a multitude of imitators modified the poem to make it more musical.²⁰ For example, Larson asserts that Samuel Johnson's revision of the poem "'improves' the lines by giving them the couplet form of his age; he regularizes meter and rhyme, producing lines that have the same sense and please the ear—at least Johnson's ear—more than the original" (Larson 27).

Thus in "Song," Donne borrowed the Petrarchan song convention, but turned the convention on its head to satirize Petrarchism by writing a "Song" that was not only thematically in conflict with the Petrarchan ideal of a "true and fair" woman, but also in contrast to Petrarchan love songs in its sound. Rather than a flowing Petrarchan love sonnet that one might expect, Donne's poem is an awkward, un-rhythmic and hard sounding limerick-like song.

If that is not enough to convince readers of Donne's target, he wrote his "Song" in the form of another Petrarchan convention, which is the list of impossibilities, or *adunata*, for which "Song" is perhaps most famous. In fact, Guss, while not pointing to "Song" specifically, cites Donne's use of "a list of impossibilities" as "specifically Petrarchan" (50). He must be referring to the "un-Petrarchan" "Song." Donne's use of this Petrarchan convention, like his use of the song, is again in contrast to the conventions of English Petrarchan poetry. For Petrarchists, the list of impossibilities was used to express recognition of the impossibility of ever winning the lady's love or to affirm to impossibility of any refutation of their own constancy to the lady (Redpath 119). For example, neither Petrarch nor Astrophil could ever deserve requital of their love by Laura or Stella. Petrarch even says

²⁰ For imitations, see note 1 above.

eventually that Laura is a sort of human image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, while Sidney compares Stella, at the end of *Astrophil and Stella*, to Queen Elizabeth. Each woman is identified with the obviously unachievable religious icons of their ages. Donne, however, twists the *adunata* convention to his own purposes. Rather than as a method of idealizing the Petrarchan woman, he uses the convention to affirm the impossibility of the “true and faire” woman’s existence.

Within this list of impossibilities, Donne’s choice of words and images reinforces the idea that his poem is a commentary on Petrarchism by recalling Petrarchan conceits.²¹ “Goe and catche a falling starre” recalls the conceit of the lover as an astronomical wonder, such as Sidney’s Stella. “Show me where all past yeares are” questions the popular concept of having loved a woman for all time. “Teach me to heare Mermaides singing” recalls the conceit of adoration of the lady’s musical skill and the Homeric references common in Petrarchan poetry. “Or to keep off envies stinging” alludes to the idea that man, nature, the wits, and perhaps even the gods are envious of the Petrarchan lover’s lady or jealous of the poet’s adoration for his lady. “And finde / What winde / Serves to advance an honest minde” brings to mind the “sigh tempests” that the lover creates because of the lady. This reference to advancement also calls to mind the fact that the Virgin Queen Elizabeth was often idealized as a replacement for Laura in English Petrarchan poetry written in an attempt to win her favor at court.²²

²¹ For descriptions of these conceits and their use in Petrarchan poetry, see Forster pp. 15-16 and Guss pp. 17 and 23-24.

²² See Forster, Chapter 4.

Another conventional Petrarchan conceit is the physical reaction the lover has in response to exposure to his idealized lady (Forster 16). One such reaction is that love turns the hair white, symbolizing that the lover is dying due to love or its denial. In Donne's poem, however, it is age rather than love that turns the hair white while the seeker spends 10,000 days and nights in search of the ideal "true and faire" woman. Donne's line could well recall the Italian Petrarchan poet, Ariosto, who pledges in *Orlando Furioso*, a model to Spenser for *The Faerie Queene*, that he will find a true woman before any more white hairs appear.²³ In a critique of the English Petrarchan view of love, Donne is saying that the Petrarchan idealist in search of the perfect woman will reach old age without having found such a lover.

The refutation of the existence of this Petrarchan companion in "Song" has been called misogynistic, but it is the Petrarchan idealist who is the target of Donne's poem, not woman. Though the speaker sounds bitter towards woman, "Song" is not simply misogynistic, arguing against the ability of woman to be chaste. After all, Petrarch himself argued that woman could not be both chaste and beautiful. Instead, Donne is arguing in opposition to the very notion of Petrarchan love put forth by English Petrarchists, such as Sidney and Spenser, that calls for the idealization of woman to a pedestal of virtue that does not allow for love to be consummated. That unrealistic version of love between the Petrarchan man and the virtuous and chaste idealized woman is the impossibility Donne wishes to expose.

²³ See Kathleen M. Lea, "Harrington's Folly."

This position is consistent with that found in Donne's more esteemed love poetry. Donne's poems, says R.V. Young, "deal with the reality of human existence" (258). This reality calls for the consideration of many contrary, struggling elements and characteristics at work within the love relationship, Eros and Agape, lust and greed, and, most important to "Song," spiritual and physical love:

... a woman is not who she is and love "not all spirit, pure, and brave" except when it is realized in the flesh. It is a seducer's paradox that argues for the identification of purity and spirituality with physical consummation (Young 264-65).

Petrarch's idealized "true and faire" woman cannot possibly exist in Donne's reality because, she will be "false" to the Petrarchan ideal if she is "true" to Donne—"true" equating to a willingness to consummate the relationship physically.

This notion is illustrated in the final lines of "Song." Donne's disillusioned speaker says that even if the "rider" on his "pilgrimage" were to find a "true and faire" woman, she would be "false . . . to two or three" after he came to meet her. For a hint at what Donne means, we can look to a line in "Woman's constancy": "...you / Can have no way but falsehood to be true?" (12-13). In these lines, Donne suggests the idea that sometimes being true can necessarily cause a lover to be false to another, or even to herself. The riddle of to whom the lady is false at the end of "Song" relies on similar logic. One answer to the riddle is that to remain true to the Petrarchan ideal by being chaste, the lover must be false to

Donne's speaker who demands physical consummation. Consider lines 7-8 of "The Dreame"—

Thou art so truth, that thoughts of thee suffice,
To make dreames truths; and fables histories.

—which urge that the woman is:

“so truth” that she . . . is divine—but only so long as she stays:

Coming and staying show'd thee, thee,
But rising make me doubt, that now,
Thou art not thou. (21-23)

The woman in his bed, in his arms, is truth itself: palpable, concrete, existential reality (Young 268-269).

On the other hand, fulfilling Donne's demand of physical contact in order to be “true” would cause the woman to be false to the Petrarchan lover and ideal of chaste virtue. This is reinforced by the pun in the line, “she would be false, ere I come . . .” Donne is not then being misogynistic—claiming that no woman is mentally or spiritually capable of being “true and faire”—but rather is undermining the entire English Petrarchan idea of love. That one can truly love or be loved within this English Petrarchan ideal is the impossibility.

This conflict is about more than love poetry, however. As phrased by Young, Donne's version of truth in love represents a larger spiritual doctrine that counters the “aggressive Protestant, Neo-Platonic idea of Truth” represented by many of the English Petrarchan poets, especially Sidney and his poetic heir, Spenser (268). Thus, the understanding of “Song” as anti-Petrarchan is valid, but this reading alone does not fully

explain the poem. The reader must “search” for a “truer” and “fairer” understanding for why Donne, in Sidney’s critical terms, “made what he made” in the creation of this poetic voice or character by looking at the historical, religio-political context within which the poem was written. Such a search should lead to the “possibility” that Donne’s own target in “Song” is Sidney himself, or at least the myth of Sidney, who in the 1590s was being widely discussed and praised for his recently published Petrarchan sonnet cycle, *Astrophil and Stella*, even as the real-life model for Stella, Lady Penelope Rich, was being exposed as a scandalous adulteress. Beyond poetic Petrarchism, the movement to which “Song” is responding consisted largely of efforts by the Sidney coterie of politicians and poets to use the circumstances of their hero’s death to promote the Protestant and courtly ideals exemplified by Sidney and his works.²⁴ Pursuing this path in search of connections between Donne’s “Song” about a “falling starre” and Sidney’s collection of songs and sonnets about a “star-lover” and “star” intimates that, in addition to being considered in terms of Petrarchism, “Song” also belongs in the conversation about Donne’s poetry as a response to the Protestant poetic, religious, and political movement of the day. Within this historical perspective, “Song” can be plausibly read as a poetical / political attack on both the now lionized Sidney and his recent admirers.

The Sidney hagiographic project has been clearly confirmed by Lanham and Hagar.²⁵ As Lanham explains, “the significant and instructive chapter of mythmaking which surrounds

²⁴ The members of this Sidney coterie, the creators of the “Sidney legend,” and their works in support of this cause include Edmund Spenser with his *Astrophel*, Thomas Moffet with *Nobilis, or a View of the Life and Death of Sidney*, Fulke Greville and his hagiographic *Life of Sidney* (written in the genre of the protestant saint’s life initiated by Fox’s *Acts and Monuments*), and Sir Walter Raleigh with his self denigrating epitaph, which makes the hyperbolic comparison of Sidney to Scipio, Cicero, and Petrarch (Hagar 17).

²⁵ For more, see *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the Creation of a Legend*, Ed. Arthur F. Kinney and F.J. Levy, “Philip Sidney Reconsidered,” in *Essential Articles: Sir Philip Sidney*, Ed. Arthur F. Kinney.

[Sidney's] death" in response to relative uneventfulness of the dead "hero's" life relied on his "heroic" military death at Zutphen, providing propaganda for the current Protestant cause (319). The Sidney legend—to recall the term that Spenser used to define his own "epic" Protestant "Cyruses"—"was created not by Sidney's life so much as by his heroic death. It was this crucial event which began the legend. It supplied the great action his life had lacked and, no less important, it brought the flood of elegies which created the Sidney legend" (335). Foremost in this project was the effort of Sidney's childhood friend, Fulke Greville in his (politicized) biography that he called *A Dedication to Sir Philip Sidney*. It was, in fact partly a tribute to his beloved friend but was underpinned by a fervent call to war against the Catholic Spaniards to the south. Greville's "biography," hagiographic in praise, figured forth Sidney as a martyr to the Protestant cause that Greville and the new "Sidney circle" supported: "Sidney seems to have come from the grave to defend again that implacable hatred toward Catholic Spain which united and inspired Walsingham's war party" (Lanham 324). As Hagar phrases it, "Sidney's exemplary image [created by Greville engages] the product of Elizabethan propagandistic design . . ." (16). For Greville and the rest of the "Leicester faction"—the group of men aligned with Sidney's uncle, Sir Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester—the chorus of "Dedication[s]" translate Sidney's relative obscurity into the mythic story of "a martyr to the cause of the Protestant League" (17). Greville's hagiography did not appear until 1610 (published in 1652), but parts of it circulated at the court and in London earlier and, even if not read by many, it established the grounds of his argument by its courtly reputation alone. Beyond Greville, undoubtedly the most significant published contributions to the myth came from the pen of Sidney's major poetic protégée, Edmund

Spenser who also was in the Protestant Leicester faction.²⁶ Donne would have been surrounded by the presence of Spenser during the time he was living and writing at Lincoln's Inn. As Alpers phrases it, "Spenser burst on the Elizabethan literary scene with considerable éclat, and he was immediately influential" (253). In fact, as much as to Sidney's poetry and politics, Donne's poem is likely a response to Spenser's collection of elegies to Sidney, *Astrophel*, which was written between 1591-95 and printed in 1595 (De Selincourt xxiii). Then too, of course, was the publication of Sidney's own works to great acclaim throughout the decade. Sidney's admirers, the Protestant Leicester faction, were creating a Sidney poetic revival through the posthumous publication of his works. *New Arcadia* was published by Greville in 1590, *Astrophil and Stella* was first published in 1591, *Old Arcadia* was published by Sidney's sister, Mary, in 1593, and new versions of *Astrophil and Stella*, *Arcadia*, the *Defence of Poesy*, and other texts were published by Mary in a collection in 1598.

Not surprisingly, critics have found that Donne responded to this aggressive Protestant onslaught in his own poetry. For example, Hester reads Donne's "profane lyrics" in part "as a witty critique of the poetry, the poetics, and the Protestant polemic best represented by Sidney's works" Central to the poems' wit, says Hester, "is Donne's attempt to distance himself from the views of love, religion, and poetry represented by the example of Sidney":

These poems, we should not forget, were composed by the great-grand-nephew of Sir Thomas More, the nephew of the Jesuit leader Jasper Heywood and his

²⁶ See A. Leigh DeNeef, *Spenser and the Motives of Metaphor*, introduction and Chapter 2.

exiled brother Ellis, the son of a woman who was living in virtual religious exile during the time of her son's lyric compositions, the other brother of the recently martyred Henry Donne; these lyrics, that is, can be profitably read as *analogies* 'currant' to the Donne's situation as he himself defined it in the first work published under his own name: the works of someone 'ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdome, by being derived from such stock and race, as, I believe, no family . . . hath endured more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine' ("let me love" 131).

In "Song," Donne recalls Sidney and the mythmaking of the Leicester faction when he instructs his audience—an imaginary member of a coterie (like the most likely actual audience of the poem)—to "Goe, and catche a falling *starre*" (italics mine). Could any reader in Donne's anti-Sidneyian coterie have heard this line and not thought of Sidney and his famous Petrarchan sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*? Sidney was so closely identified with "Astrophil" (the "star-lover") in his 1591 sequence that the Lant engravings of his funeral portray stars upon his armor (Ringler 490).²⁷ This fact recalls, of course, Sonnet 104 of *Astrophil and Stella* in which Astrophil says, "If I but stars upon mine armour beare" (104.10). Additionally, the elegies honoring Sidney after his death call him "Astrophil." Spenser's collection of elegies in honor of Sidney is simply entitled *Astrophel*, and within it, the elegies assign to Sidney the biographical history, emotions, and characteristics of his character, Astrophil. "*Stella*, the faire" is the love of Sidney's life:

Her he did love, her he alone did honor,

²⁷ See Sander Bos, Marianne Lange-Meyers, and Jeanne Six, "Sidney's Funeral Portrayed" in *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the Creation of a Legend*, Ed. Arthur F. Kinney, for an in-depth discussion of the engravings.

His thoughts, his rimes, his songs were all upon her
To her he vowd the seruice of his daies,
On her he spent the riches of his wit:
For her he made hymnes of immortall praise,
Of onely her he sung, he thought, he writ.
Her, and but her, of loue he worthie deemed,
For all the rest but little he esttemed. (59-66)

Stella's real-life model, however, had become a literal "fallen starre" to rely on Donne's penchant for puns.

In *Astrophil and Stella*, Astrophil seeks to catch a "starre," virtuous Stella: "Have I caught my heav'nly jewell . . . ?" (Song 2.1). In reality however, the model for Stella, Lady Penelope Rich, was not a virtuous woman but an adulteress. Donne exploits this situation in "Song" when he compares catching a "falling starre" (or phonetically, "fallen") with the "impossibility" of finding a "true" and "faire" woman. (It should also be noted that Donne does this, as noted above, in a "song" that is virtually unsingable. Lady Rich [and Stella] was known for her singing.) By the time *Astrophil and Stella* was published in 1591, Penelope Rich was having a public affair with Charles Blount that was a major topic of court gossip. She was nothing like the virtuous Stella portrayed in Sidney's work. Lady Penelope Rich's adulterous relationship with Charles Blount first became public in 1590, the year before *Astrophil and Stella* was originally published. By the mid 1590s, Lady Rich and Blount were openly adulterous lovers with her bearing his illegitimate children (Freedman 87-89). To appreciate the extent of public disapproval of the scandal, readers need to consider that

eventually Lady Rich divorced her husband and married her lover—against the wishes of King James. When Blount died 3 months later, court gossips viewed it as divine retribution. Others spread rumors that regret over his marriage was the cause of Blount’s fatal illness (Freedman 163-169). When Blount became terminally ill, John Chamberlain wrote coldly, “the world thinckes yf he shold go now, yt had been better for him yf he had gone a yeare or two sooner” (1.222). After Blount’s death, Chamberlain added:

The earle of Devonshire left this life on Thursday night last, soone and early for his yeares but late enough for himself, and happy had he ben yf he had gon two or three yeares since, before the world was wearie of him, or that he had left that scandal behinde him. (1.226)

Chamberlain writes that Blount died of a “putrefication of his lunges, a defect he never complained of,” implying his own belief that remorse may have caused Blount’s illness. In a mocking tone, he refers to Lady Rich as Blount’s “Lady (for so she is now generally held to be)” (1.226). Though these examples are from a later period than “Song,” they illustrate the public reaction to what was a known scandal in the 1590s.

In “Song” Donne is mocking the foolish choice of the “fallen starre,” Lady Rich, as inspiration for Sidney’s Stella, “for though she were true when [Sidney] met her and last til [he] wrote [his] letter” (his sonnet cycle), she was “false” by the time *Astrophil and Stella* was published “to two, or three.” Or in the words of a mock epitaph published upon her death:

Here lies Penelope or the Lady rich
Or the Countess of Deuonshire choose you which.

One stone sufficeth soe, what death can doe
Who in here life was not content with two.
Here is one dead under this marble stone
Which when shee liud lay vnder moe than one. (Kay 25)

Such public discrediting of Lady Penelope Rich was not uncommon. According to Kay, Sidney's reputation was threatened and Penelope Rich was an object of ridicule through works "which implicitly contrasted the perceived idealism of *Astrophil and Stella* with 'Stella's' colourful later career" (25). Henry Brown even argues that Shakespeare's *Dark Sonnets*, written in the 1590s, were "covertly leveled at Lady Rich" (Stump 547-48). Shakespeare's Sonnet 52 also seems to pun on the love affair between Lady Rich and Charles Blount, also spelled "Blunt":

So am I as the *rich* whose blessed key
Can bring him to his sweet up-locked treasure,
The which he will not every hour survey,
For *blunting* the fine point of seldom pleasure (italics mine).

In Donne's case, the mockery is an effort to expose and undermine the efforts of the Sidney coterie to idealize Sidney in support of their Protestant poetic / political goals. Donne seeks to expose not only Sidney's poetic foolishness, but also perhaps the parallelism between Sidney's undeserved and irrational idealization of Lady Rich into virtuous "Stella" and the Protestant Leicester faction's propagation of the Sidney myth, the undeserved elevation of Sidney into the "Astrophel" of Spenser's work. Pursuing this parallelism, it is plausible even to identify Sidney himself as the "fallen starre" in Donne's poem; for even

though Astrophil was the “star-lover,” Sidney took on the “star” label more than Lady Rich ever did. In their attempts to glorify Sidney, his elegists often praised Sidney in astronomical terms, just as Sidney idealized Lady Rich by calling her “Stella.” In “An Epitaph,” deceased Sidney is said to “sit in skies” (20), and in “The Lay of Clorinda,” Sidney’s “immortall spirit” is “deckt / With all the dowries of celestially grace” (60-61). In “Elegie,” it is remembered that he “was a Sun” (132) and that, dressed in his armor prior to his death, Sidney appeared:

As of the nation of the skies,
He sparkled in his armes afarrs,
As he were dight with fierie starrs. (166-68)

After his death, Sidney is literally a “fallen starre”: “My star is falne, my comfort done” (67-68). Yet, his elegists, in their attempt to forward their political cause, were seeking to “catche” the “falling starre” and elevate Sidney to a heroic and political status beyond what he ever achieved in life. Donne aims to undermine this attempt by deriding Sidney for his idealistic poem about a “strange” lady and in the process the Protestant, Neo-Platonic vision of Truth put forth by such Petrarchan works. “Wit,” as Herbert reminds, “is an unruly instrument”—and lethal in the inventions of a poet-satirist as clever as Jack Donne.

The idea that Donne targeted Sidney specifically is further reinforced by the second stanza of “Song” addressed to a rider or journeyman, which relies on a form of numerological symbolism that could well point to Sidney:

If thou beest borne to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,

Ride ten thousand daies and nights,
Till age snow white haire on thee,
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell mee
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And sweare
No where

Lives a woman true and faire. (10-18)

Divided by 365, “ten thousand days and nights” equals some 27 years: identical to the 27 lines that make up the poem. Based on what we know about the presence of numerological symbolism in other Donne poems, the number 27 in “Song” can be understood to have some importance. For example, Donne used embedded numbers to symbolize the passage of specific lengths of time in both “Elegy XII” and “The Computation.”²⁸ Donne also commonly equated structural numerology to the passage of time. For example, in The Valentine’s Day “Epithalamion” of 1613, the number of lines in the poem represent the day of the month, and in “Good Friday, Riding Westward,” the number of lines represents Donne’s own age in years (Frost 103, Shawcross 368).²⁹ “Loves growth” is yet another

²⁸ Donne often marks the passing of time by echoing numbers from the calendar in the structure of his poems. For example, in “Elegy XII,” 52 couplets represent weeks, marking the passing of a year. “The Computation” plays on the 24 hours in a day. Donne presents a numerical riddle, the answer to which is 2,400, which can have a variety of meanings. Shawcross finds that each hour away from one’s beloved is like a hundred years, meaning the 24 hours in one day apart would feel like 2,400 years (76). “*La Corona*” proceeds through a church year; and “The Autumnal” marks progression through the personal zodiac, from youth to old age (Frost 102).

²⁹ The Valentine’s Day “Epithalamion” of 1613, which celebrates the marriage of Princess Elizabeth to Count Palatine on February 14, 1613, comprises 14-line stanzas. The 14-line stanzas echo the date of the wedding on the 14th day of the month. Also, there are 8 stanzas altogether in the poem. Their numbering recalls the 8 hours of the day as the action in the poem progresses from morning until night. The epithalamion at the marriage of the earl of Somerset and the countess of Essex plays on the wedding date in a similar way. The wedding took place on December 26, 1613, near the end of the year, or the *eleventh hour*. To represent

Donne poem in which numbers embedded in the structure of the poem equate to the passing of specific lengths of time.³⁰ Thus, it is plausible to understand the numerological symbolism in “Song” to represent the passage of 27 years, represented both by “ten thousand daies and nights” and the number of lines in the poem. The significance of this sum lies in the fact that Sidney’s 27th year—1581—was a year of “dashed hopes,” illustrated by the emblem worn by Sidney to a tournament that year, SPERAVI [I have hoped] with a line drawn through it (Duncan-Jones 194). Sidney had been unsuccessful in his quest to receive a court appointment, unable to “finde, /What winde, /Serves to’advance an honest minde” (7-9). Much worse, however, was that Sidney’s uncle, Robert Dudley Earl of Leicester, produced an heir, meaning that Sidney was no longer in line to receive his uncle’s fortune. Sidney was in financial ruins with no solid prospects for the future and therefore with nothing to offer in a marriage arrangement either. In part because of this loss of fortune, Sidney’s potential engagement to then Lady Penelope Devereaux—the future model for his “starre” Stella—fell through. His “faire” lady was not “true” to him. Instead, Sidney learned by letter that Devereux would marry Lord Robert Rich. As we know, she would also be “false” to Lord Rich by openly and scandalously making a cuckold some 10 years later. Furthermore, she

this date, the poem has eleven numbered and titled eleven-line stanzas. The central stanza, *Going to the Chappell*, is the climactic marriage scene. Just as there are literally 5 days remaining in the year upon the marriage, there are 5 stanzas remaining in the poem upon the marriage stanza in the poem. The imagery of the stanza also paints a picture of two people standing side by side, silhouetted against the sun, an image that looks like the number 11 (Frost 102-3).

³⁰ Walker reads the poem as concerned with “three natural cycles of time: hours forming themselves into a day, days forming themselves into a week, and weeks forming themselves into a lunar month. Walker finds these time patterns echoed in the structural elements of the poem—line length, rhyme scheme, and stanza structure. Counting syllables in each line, she finds the number 24 to be prominent. Ten of the poem’s lines are 24 syllables, the other six of them are 4 syllables, equaling 24 syllables when added. This suggests the hours of the day. The next pattern to find is the days to weeks structure. This Walker finds in the rhyme scheme, which points to the number 7. The number of rhymes in each stanza equals 7. The lunar month is 28 days, and this number is found in the total number of lines in the poem (51).

would do this just as *Astrophil and Stella* was being published, the Sidney coterie was mythologizing their hero, and Donne was writing “Song” (Wallace 244-248 and Duncan-Jones 196). It seems possible, even likely, that Donne would have had the knowledge of Sidney’s life to be able to implement this numerological symbolism. Besides Sidney’s public celebrity status, there are many private connections between Donne and Sidney that indicate Donne would have known the details of Sidney’s personal life.³¹

Donne could have presumed an awareness of numerology from his audience. Numerological structure was very important and recognized within *Astrophil and Stella* and Spenser, the most widely read poet associated with the Sidney coterie, was writing the best-

³¹ Lynette McGrath conveniently lists these connections:

1. Donne’s oldest friend, Sir Henry Goodyer, was the son of William Goodyer of Monks Kirby and the nephew and namesake of Sir Henry Goodyer, the elder, who had been a friend of Sidney’s and was with him when he died.

2. Sir George More, Donne’s father-in-law, had been in service with the Earl of Leicester, and had traveled extensively with Sidney throughout France, Italy, and Germany

3. Magdalen Herbert, with whom Donne was linked by a close and loving friendship, as a child had known Sidney, who used to stay at the Eton house of her father during his holidays

4. Abraham Fraunce, intellectually linked by his interest in Ramism with Donne and Sidney, knew Sidney’s sister, the Countess of Pembroke, well, and dedicated his works to her. Sidney had paid for Fraunce’s early education. Fraunce outlived many of his contemporaries and ended his career in the cultivated household of the Earl of Bridgewater, where he was sure to have met Donne

5. After the death of the Countess of Pembroke, Donne wrote a poem dedicated to Lord Pembroke, celebrating the translation of the psalms made by Philip and Mary Sidney. Poems by William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, son of the Countess of Pembroke, are frequently found with Donne’s in early manuscripts

6. Donne addressed poems to Lettice and Essex Rich, daughters of Penelope Devereux, Sidney’s “Stella”

7. Donne owned a volume of poems entitled *Peplus*, on the title page of which is *Illustrissimi Viri D. Philippi Sidnaei Supremis Honoribus Dicatus*. Geoffrey Keyne’s *Bibliography of Dr. Donne* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 279, records the ownership of this volume. The book is a collection of Latin poems written by a group of men from New College, Oxford, to honor Sidney’s memory (76).

known and most influential poems of numerological symbolism of the day.³² Modern critics like Fowler and Roche have understood and explained the importance of the 108 sonnets in *Astrophil and Stella*. Elegists and admirers of Sidney in the 1590s also understood the significance of the number. Many poets used 108 as a structural device in their poetry as a compliment to Sidney. Alexander Craige's *Amorous Songs, Sonnets and Elegies* (1606), some of which are addressed to Penelope Rich, are 108 in number (Fowler 175-76). Also, Roche explains that the anonymous *Alcilia* (1595) comprises 108 poems, and the 109 poems of *Caelica*, with their numerous borrowings from Sidney, may also be an acknowledgment of praise from Fulke Greville, Sidney's closest friend. Spenser's *Astrophel* is 2 x 108 lines long and the *Lay of Clorinda* is 108 lines (Roche 140). Therefore, it only makes sense that Donne would include relevant number symbolism in his poem mocking "Astrophel" for his foolish idealization of "Stella." He would reasonably expect his readers to understand his numerical symbolism. As *The Satyres* show, Hester reminds us, Donne was fond of turning the instruments of argument and art on his opponents.

The depiction of Sidney as a rider or journeyman, riding for 27 years, also makes sense, given Sidney's well-known love of horsemanship and travel evinced in both his biography and works.³³ The *Defence* begins famously with its story of learning horsemanship and praise of horsemen. Riding also is a major theme throughout *Astrophil and Stella*, appearing in Sonnets 22, 41, 49, and 84. In Sonnet 22, along the "highest way of heav'n the Sunne did ride" (1). The "Sunne" then arrives at "some faire Ladies" who "On

³² See Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time*. New York: Barnes and Noble. 1964.

³³ Coincidentally, he received a horse as a gift when a young schoolboy from none other than Walter Devereaux, young Penelope Devereaux's father. Sidney rode the horse about the English countryside on a custom-made saddle, taking trips from school to visit his uncles and Oxford (Duncan-Jones 33).

horseback met him in his furious race” (5,6). In the latter three Sonnets, Astrophil himself is portrayed as the rider. In Sonnet 84, Astrophil is riding down the highway to meet Stella while his “Muse to some ears not unsweet, / Tempers her words to trampling horses feet” (2-3). In Sonnets 41 and 49, Astrophil is almost arrogantly proud of his horsemanship.

Consider Sonnet 41:

Having this day my horse, my hand, may launce
Guided so well, that I obtain'd the prize
Both by the judgement of the English eyes,
And of some sent from the sweet enimie *Fraunce*;
Horsemen my skill in horsemanship advaunce (1-5)

Stella's gaze is the reason for his riding excellence on this day. Sonnet 49 is a similar example:

I on my horse, and Love on my doth trie
Our horsmanships, while by strange worke I prove
A horsman to my horse, a horse to *Love*;
...
The Wand is Will, thou Fancie Saddle art,
Girt fast by memorie, and while I spurre
My horse, he spurres with sharpe desire my hart (lines 1-3, 9-11)

The horseman in Donne's poem is “. . . borne to strange sights, / Things invisible to see,” (10-11). This further associates the journeyman with Sidney by recalling instances

from both *Astrophil and Stella* and the elegies. In *Astrophil and Stella*, on several occasions, Astrophil *does not* see Stella, but yet can imagine her presence and so *does see* Stella:

Unhappie sight, and hath she vanisht by
So neere, in so good time, so free a place?
Dead glasse, doost thou thy object so imbrace,
As what my hart still sees thou canst not spie? (105.1-4)

Here “Dead glasse” is Astrophil’s physical eye, unable to see Stella, though his “hart still sees.” As put by G. C. Moore Smith, “In his mind’s eye the poet still sees Stella when his bodily eye sees nothing” (Ringler 490). Astrophil sees what is “invisible to see.” In addition, “Astrophel” in “The Lay of Clorinda” is able to see “things invisible to see.” Near the end of the poem, Sidney’s “immortal spirit” lives in “blisfull Paradise” (61, 68). There, we read that “straunge notes”:

Lull him a sleep in Angelick delight;
Whilest in sweet dreame to him presented bee
Immortall beauties, *which no eye may see.*
But he them sees and takes exceeding great pleasure” (italics mine. 75-79).

Those intimately familiar with *Astrophil and Stella* and the elegies would have perhaps recalled these specific incidences identifying one who is “borne to strange sights / things invisible to see” as Astrophil himself, and thus Sidney. At the least, the description would have been reminiscent of Astrophil to Donne’s readers and would have encouraged them to identify Sidney as the subject of Donne’s poem.

Clever readers may have had a similar reminiscent feeling about the “mandrake roote”; for the mandrake root is a parallel image to the “flowers” or “noble plants” that Sidney was or became throughout the elegies in *Astrophel*. In “A Pastorall Elegie,” Sidney, or “Astrophel,” and Stella are joined together, reincarnated as a flower:

The Gods which all things see, this same beheld,
And pittying this paire of louers trew,
Transformed them there lying on the field,
Into one flowre that is both red and blew. (181-84)

Because Sidney now lives within this flower, Spenser pleads of his audience to be gentle when picking the flower:

That hearbe of some, Starlight is cald by name,
Of others *Penthia*, though not so well:
But thou where euer thou doest finde the same,
From this day forth do call it *Astrophel*.
And when so euer thou it vp doest take,
Do pluck it softly for that shepherds sake. (193-98)

This imagery of Sidney as a plucked flower or plant is common throughout the elegies in *Astrophel*. Normally, however, the plucking is a description of Sidney’s untimely death. For example, the poet in “Lay of Clorinda” asks:

What cruell hand of cursed foe unknown,
Hath cropt the stalke which bore so faire a flower?
Untimely cropt, before it well were growne. (31-33)

Similarly, the poet in “*The mourning Muse of Thestylis*” calls Sidney the “noblest plant . . . Whom spitefull death hath pluct untimely from the tree” (9,11). This plucking imagery is frequent enough that Sacks notes it in his critical essay on *Astrophel*:

[The] mourner must, in deference to death, sacrifice not only the lost object but also his own primary sexual desire. The sacrifice, not unlike a symbolic self-castration, is necessary not only as a defense against death, but also as a means of erecting the figure for what survives—a figure that, however spiritualized, retains its connection with the phallic power of the vegetation god . . . To sketch this in *Astrophel* . . ., Astrophel suffers a mortal, castrative wound, and the flowers that image him are themselves plucked or ‘untimely cropt’ (247-48).

The “mandrake roote” is a similar image, as it was thought to “groan or shriek when pulled from the ground,” a result of castration, or perhaps even a mortal thigh wound such as the one suffered by Sidney at Zutphen (Ray 223). Precisely what to make of this similar image is unclear; however, it is probably safe to say that replacing the image of a “flower” or “noblest plant” with the “mandrake roote,” a phallic image of a potent dildo was not complimentary. If the reader recognizes Sidney as the target of Donne’s poem, the image undermines the attempts of Sidney’s elegists to idealize him by replacing the noble plant image with the vulgar mandrake root image.

Another potential reading is that the line refers to male-male homosexual love. Redpath and others have argued against this, saying that not all mandrake roots resemble the male form: “I do not think there is the additional idea here of the impossibility of a male

begetting a child on a male” (119). However, Donne’s own description of the mandrake in “The Progresse of the Soule” calls the mandrake “he” and applies masculine characteristics to the plant:

His right arme he thrust out towards the East
West-ward his left; th'ends did themselves digest
Into ten lesser strings, these fingers were:
And as a slumberer stretching on his bed,
This way he this, and that way scattered
His other legge, which feet with toes upbeare.
Grew on his middle parts, the first day, haire,
To show, that in loves businesse hee should still
A dealer bee, and be us'd well, or ill:

His apples kinde, his leaves, force of conception kill. (XV)

If Donne considered the mandrake a masculine character, then the reading opposed by Redpath is worth considering. It is feasible that Donne’s “impossibility” to “get with child a mandrake roote” is a reference to homosexual love, which would specifically recall Sidney’s hagiographic biographer Fulke Greville. In the words of Duncan-Jones, “there is little doubt that Sidney’s close friend Fulke Greville did approximate to what would now be called a homosexual, and that Greville was determined to suggest that his friendship with Sidney had priority over all other bonds” (240).

There are many other reminiscent phrases and images in “Song” that may be nuanced allusions to *Astrophel and Stella* and the elegies. “Teach me to heare Mermaides singing”

(line 5) reminds the reader of the many Homeric references in *Astrophil and Stella* as well as the typical Petrarchan importance placed on Stella's singing ability: "*Stella*, whose voice when it singeth, / Angels to acquaintance bringeth" (Song 8.39-40). Similarly, "Or to keep off envies stinging" (line 6) recalls the theme of envy that runs through *Astrophil and Stella*, such as Astrophil's claims that Envy is jealous of his love for Stella: "Envie, put out thine eyes, least thou do see/ What Oceans of delight in me do flow" (69.3-4). Donne's line also recalls the elegists' claims that "greedie envious heav'n" took Sidney away ("The Mourning Muse of Thestylis" 110) and "Envie's" reaction to Sidney's death: "Envie her sting, and spite hath left her gall, / Malice her selfe, a mourning garment wears" ("An Epitaph upon the right Honourable sir Phillip Sidney knight: Lord governor of Flushing," 55-56). Once Sidney is identified as the subject of Donne's poem, these impossibilities can seem to take on a sarcastic tone. It seems "impossible" to uncover them all: it might take more than *a thousand days and nights* to find them all in fact!

Conclusion

This study of “Song” within its literary and historical context has sought to examine more closely one of Donne’s more popular but least analyzed poems. Through an awareness of the Petrarchan literary context and religio-political historical context of the poem, “Song” is found to have greater complexity and meaning than previously assumed. “Song” is more than a “comic” trifle, but rather is a serious, though mocking, commentary by Donne on the poetic and religio-political movements during the time in which he was writing. Though perhaps not as complex or eloquent as some of Donne’s later poems, “Song” deserves greater consideration as representative of the wit and beliefs that are ascribed to Donne through analysis of his “more serious” poems. Many unanswered questions about “Song” remain. Readers should continue to investigate the details of “Song” to further develop the “how” and “why” of this neglected Donne poem.

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