Astrophil and Stella, Sonnet 39

Posted on December 27, 2013

Come Sleep, O Sleep, the certain knot of peace,

The baiting place of wit, the balm of woe,

The poor man’s wealth, the prisoner’s release,

The indifferent judge between the high and low;

With shield of proof shield me from out the press

Of those fierce darts Despair at me doth throw;

O make in me those civil wars to cease;

I will good tribute pay, if thou do so.

Take thou of me smooth pillows, sweetest bed,

A chamber deaf to noise, and blind to light;

A rosy garland, and a weary head;

And if these things, as being thine by right,

Move not thy heavy grace, thou shalt in me,

Livelier than elsewhere, Stella’s image see.

This sonnet, the second of three ostensibly written at bed-time, has a fairly simple outline for its message: the octave is an invocation to personified Sleep, while the sestet lists the inducements or “tribute” the speaker offers to make Sleep come. The second quatrain cleverly introduces a military conceit, to make the concept of tribute more logical than it would otherwise have been.

A reader is perhaps reminded of Macbeth’s rueful ode to sleep as he stands with Duncan’s blood on his hands in Act II, scene 2:

Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care,

The death of each day’s life, sore labor’s bath,

Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,

Chief nourisher in life’s feast . . .

The meaning of Sidney’s lines may not be immediately clear to a modern reader, because of older senses of some words. One needs to know that a “knot” is a small formal garden, so, read simply, sleep is a peaceful spot to retreat to; or, if we personify “peace,” we have the more complex suggestion that sleep is where Peace herself goes to find peace. “Bait” means a light snack (go figure!), so, in older parlance, a “baiting place” was what we now call a “rest stop” for travelers on the road, or in this instance a place where one’s brain (“wit”) can take some time off. The remaining phrases in lines 2 to 4 mean, respectively, a place where woes are healed, where the downtrodden (poor men and prisoners) can dream of better things, and (line 4) where all are alike, as status differences are not recognized (“In sleep a king,” says the speaker of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 87, “but waking no such matter”).

With shield of proof shield me from out the press

Of those fierce darts Despair at me doth throw;

Here we have a brief antanaclasis (“shield” as noun and then verb) and the pivotal word “press.” When used as an unmodified noun in this period, the typical and expected reference would be to a crowd of people; so, for just a moment, we expect the speaker to be welcoming sleep as a break from other people, possibly those friends who keep telling him his infatuation is crazy. But this noun is modified (in an enjambed line), and the “press” turns out to be a shower of “darts,” i.e., arrows, of despair, a self-inflicted emotion of futility, warring with his hopes. And with that deft pivot, we are into the language of war:

O make in me those civil wars to cease;

I will good tribute pay, if thou do so.

(The last two feet of the line, “if thou do so” are uncharacteristically uneconomical, and not Sidney’s best poetry!) Now he speaks to sleep as a sort of Emperor who might intervene in a vassal nation embroiled in internal conflict, and silence both sides. And, as one must do for such an Emperor, he offers the payments of “tribute” which he will go on to describe in the sestet. For the first three lines (9-11) these are the same ordinary things you or I might offer as inducements to Sleep, a nice bed in a dark and quiet room, and so forth. I’m not sure where the rosy garland fits in; no doubt it is “proverbial” (as footnote writers say), but one of you will need to explain the proverb to me.

Then, as if the speaker recognizes how ordinary and pedestrian these offers are (merely “thine by right”), he ends the poem with the ultimate inducement, which happens to be the chief reason he is seeking sleep in the first place: it offers his best hope (“livelier than elsewhere”) of seeing Stella as he wishes her to be, in his dreams. The wish to recover that “lively” image makes this sonnet even more clearly the sequel to the previous one.

Next time (weekend of January 10): Sonnet 40

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This entry was posted in Sonnet Analysis and tagged antanaclasis, bait, enjambed line, knot, Macbeth, octave, press, sestet, Shakespeare's Sonnet 87, Sleep, Sonnet 38, Stella by Jonathan Smith. Bookmark the permalink.

One thought on “Astrophil and Stella, Sonnet 39”

Tony Roberts on December 27, 2013 at 12:41 pm said:

A lovely sonnet nicely unpacked. I’m now looking forward to an afternoon nap.

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