Stella’s Voice: Echo and Collaboration in Astrophil and Stella 57 and 58

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The fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sonnets of Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* present a curious scenario: in these poems, Astrophil narrates the event of Stella reading and singing (to Astrophil) poems that Astrophil has written (to or about Stella). Astrophil does not dwell on the situation’s implications for their chances as a couple, though we might expect him to—she is after all reading and reacting to his poems, and in his company. Nor does he explore the tantalizing possibility that as she utters his words she comes to inhabit the position of the pleading lyric “I,” placing him in that of the much desired “thou.” Sonnets 57 and 58 in fact contain little to no insight into Stella’s inward responses to his poems. Instead, each ends with an account of how Stella’s voice utterly transforms the poems from pitiable laments to sources of “ravishing delight.” This is all the more striking given that several earlier sonnets in the sequence anticipated Stella’s reading as the starting point for a chain of sensual, intellectual, and emotional reactions ultimately leading to Astrophil’s gratification: “Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know; / Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain” (Sonnet 1, lines 3-4).¹ Instead of a reaction in Stella, the poems provoke a profound and unlooked-for response from Astrophil:

A pretty case! I hoped her to bring
To feel my griefs, and she with face and voice
So sweet my pains, that my pains me rejoice.

(57.12-14)

O voice, O face, maugre my speech’s might,
Which wooed woe, most ravishing delight
Even those sad words even in sad me did breed.

(58.12-14)

In their account of Stella’s power to move and to delight, this pair of sonnets provides a rich site for investigating Sidney’s development of her as a character external to Astrophil’s Petrarchan poetic practice. Writers on Stella’s separate self-hood and the ways in which its particularity and force disrupt Astrophil’s attempts to idealize, objectify, and manipulate his beloved, however, have tended to assign only minor importance to Sonnets 57 and 58.² The poems generally acknowledged as crucial to understanding Sidney’s development of Stella include Sonnet 30, in which Astrophil first addresses her as “you” and begins to close the door on the narcissistic inward-gazing stance of the earlier sonnets; Sonnets 44 and 45, in which Stella and Astrophil first interact over texts that both do and do not elicit emotional responses from her; and the Fourth, Eighth and Eleventh Songs, which record Stella’s actions and speech as she interacts with Astrophil.³ Taken together, these poems trace a general movement, described by Nona Fienberg as Stella’s “emergence” and by Katherine Roberts as Astrophil’s and the reader’s increasing awareness of Stella as a “complex character who is a life-like woman, and not just an unattainable ideal.”⁴


⁴ Fienberg, “The Emergence of Stella,” 5 and throughout; Roberts, “Realism in Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella,” 31.
Because they afford Stella a “voice” of her own, the songs are often seen as the culmination of this movement. In the Fourth Song, Sidney directly represents her speech for the first time. Her “No, no, no, no, my dear, let be” forms a remarkably expressive (if rigidly repetitive) response-refrain to Astrophil’s pleading stanzas. In the Eighth Song, Stella speaks eloquently and at length; in the Eleventh Song, she produces the last word in their dialogue (“Well, be gone, be gone, I say / Lest that Argus’ eyes perceive you”), banishing Astrophil from her presence. These depictions of Stella speaking for herself lead Rudolph Almasy to claim, “If Stella has an arena, it is the songs.”

Analyses that privilege the songs as a site for investigating Stella’s characterization tend to equate “voice” with the production of original and expressive speech. Clearly the voice that transforms Astrophil’s laments to sources of delight in Sonnets 57 and 58 does not meet these criteria. Stella’s utterances are not original (at least in terms of semantic content) and, if her voice is expressive, we cannot easily pinpoint what she might intend for it to express. The poems only verbalize Astrophil’s aesthetic and emotional responses, leaving Stella as something of a cipher. To paraphrase Sonnet 44, Astrophil’s words do not set forth her mind. As a result, Sonnets 57 and 58 are seen as stepping stones along the way to Stella’s emergence at best and repressions of her proper voice at worst. For Roberts, they hint at the “softening” of Stella’s heart. For Fienberg they are examples of how, “for much of the sequence, when [Astrophil] mentions her voice, it is a sound devoid of meaning … When Stella first steps out of silence, she merely echoes the hero’s words, and reads his poetry.”

If we shift our definition of “voice” to include sound as well as sense, we find that Sonnets 57 and 58 are crucial to an account of Astrophil’s and the reader’s apprehension of Stella as an independent being. The transformative power named in these poems is not words, but sound, which Sidney here grants its own, proper aesthetic and affective efficacy. These sonnets call attention

5 Fienberg, “The Emergence of Stella,” 5 sees “autonomy of voice and character” afforded to a female figure as the sequence’s major departure from conventional lyric representations of women. She charts Stella’s “emergence” in terms of vocal productions: from silence, to echoic repetition and indirectly represented speech, to generating her own language in the songs.

6 Almasy, “Stella and the Songs,” 4. In this brief account of the songs I am particularly indebted to pages 2-3 of his essay.

7 Fienberg, “The Emergence of Stella,” 5, 10. For an alternate view of these sonnets’ significance, see Duncan-Jones, “Sidney, Stella, and Lady Rich,” 188-189. Duncan-Jones argues that Stella’s musical and rhetorical abilities, depicted in Sonnets 57 and 58, resonate with what we know of Lady Rich’s accomplishments in these areas.
to the particular sonic texture of Stella’s voice, its special “sweetness,” and its capacity for inspiring unexpected joy. Taking seriously Sonnet 57 and 58’s account of how immediate, material sound can supersede and overpower semantic content, this essay argues that Stella’s versions of Astrophil’s poems cannot be understood as mere echoes of his words. They are not mirrors where he, Narcissus-like, encounters only himself. Instead, they are vehicles whereby Stella makes herself present to Astrophil, not simply as an object for his love, but primarily as a separate subject, an Other whose existence resists, challenges, and ultimately renews that love.

In order to make this argument, I put these poems in conversation with contemporary theories of voice and love, and then, in light of these theories, revisit the objectifying tendency of Astrophil’s desire and Petrarchan poetic practice. I then turn to a Renaissance context particularly concerned with voice: theories of reception encoded in sonnet sequences and explored in dramatic, poetic, and theoretical texts. If these sonnets theorize voice and its effects, they do so by dramatizing poetic reception; in them, Sidney explores reading as a site of enormous potential for affective and erotic connection. As Jacqueline Miller has observed, in Sonnets 57 and 58 reception is doubled. Stella is the reader of Astrophil’s poems, and Astrophil is the audience to Stella’s performance. Looking at ways in which vocalization disrupts the anticipated outcomes of reading poetry, I suggest that Astrophil gains access to Stella’s separate self-hood in the moment that her voice transforms his words and thwartsts his poetic and

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erotic intentions. In this moment, Astrophil becomes co-author and audience for a new, previously non-existent text. Stella’s “echoes” are in fact collaborations.

**Voice as Love Object**

In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart selects voice as a privileged category for investigating questions of love, presence, and representation. Reflecting on what it means to love another person’s voice, she writes: “We love voices as we love eyes—as vessels of that presence we call the soul. To love the voice and the eyes is far different from loving the color of someone’s hair or even someone’s way of walking.”\(^1\) The voice doesn’t serve as a metonym for the beloved individual’s body and its endearing idiosyncrasies as the hair or gait might. Nor is it simply the sign of what we might call that person’s soul or self. The voice lies somewhere in between—a connecting seam between body and spirit. It is material and embodied, having its own particular inimitable texture. At the same time, it grants access to the private interior space of the speaker.\(^12\) Stewart suggests that voice serves as the sign of the whole living being; through the voice, another person becomes present to us. That presence is ephemeral, nearly impossible to capture in memory or in words; the voice persistently eludes representation.\(^13\)

Though Stewart examines examples only from later literary texts, the relevance for Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* is apparent. For Astrophil, Stella’s voice grants access to Stella’s self. When she speaks or sings, she becomes present to him. At the same time, he cannot represent her voice directly. What he experiences in the moment of listening as

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\(^1\) Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 107

\(^12\) Roland Barthes offers a different model of vocal particularity in his essay “The Grain of the Voice,” *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977, 1988), 179-189: He defines the “grain” as “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (182). In his account, vocal particularity is not a feature of a person so much as of personalized (in the sense of embodied, particularized) langue. The grain is “individual” but not “personal” (182). While Stewart’s sense that the voice of the beloved signifies—for the lover, at least—a whole person and personality is more in line with my central argument, Barthes’ essay has been influential in my thinking. His suggestion that the grain can be detected and analyzed when the text is pre-set meshes with my sense that Stella’s voice becomes “clearer” to Astrophil when she reads words that are not of her own making.

irreducible particularity, he represents after the fact in generic terms of “sweetness” and “delight.”

A different but equally illuminating theoretical model of voice can be found in the edited volume of psychoanalytic theory *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (1996), which seeks to describe how voices inspire and nourish love. Working from the premise that the sound of a speaking or singing voice bears significance in itself, over and beyond semantic content, several of the included essays explore how the sound of a particular voice becomes an object of love. Like Stewart, the volume’s authors hold that the voice stands for the irreducible reality, the having-a-self, of that voice’s possessor. Unlike Stewart, though, they de-emphasize vocal particularity in itself and focus instead on what that particularity signifies: the fundamental otherness of the beloved. This understanding of voice as both love object and sign of otherness fits into a larger theoretical model of the way love structures subject-object relations:

> Love cannot be reduced to a mere illusion or imaginary phenomenon: beyond its fascination with the image of its object, true love aims at the kernel of the real, at what is in the object more than the object itself...16

In the authors’ account, the voice signifies the “kernel of the real” that lies beyond love’s image-making power. Passionate love may distort, amplify, or otherwise reshape its object, the beloved. Paradoxically, the volume’s authors suggest, love often fixates on those attributes—voice chief among them—that resist the lover’s creative, reshaping gaze. The voice of the beloved serves as evidence that he or she is more than an imaginative or emotional projection, originating in the lover’s psyche. The voice proves that the beloved really exists. I suggest that this dynamic is at work in *Astrophil and Stella* 57 and 58, in which Stella’s voice reinforces and particularizes Astrophil’s love, while signaling her separateness from him.

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The Petrarchan Context: Love, Writing, and Reception

The notion that passionate love may create or re-shape its own object, one of the central premises of *Voice and Gaze as Love Objects*, is a familiar element of the Petrarchan tradition. Countless sonnets express anxiety that the lover’s gaze (and his poetry) might create a distorted image of the beloved. Less familiar is the idea that the beloved’s voice is a specific kind of love object, one that resists amorous and poetic distortion. In order to understand the remarkable expression of this idea in *Astrophil and Stella* 57 and 58, it is worthwhile to examine these poems in light of the wider Petrarchan tradition. Two aspects of the tradition, in particular, prove illuminating: the related themes of poetic production (which, like love itself, may produce an inaccurate image of the beloved) and poetic reception (the beloved’s encounter with her own image in verse). Though something out of the ordinary does indeed happen in this pair of sonnets, they draw on traditional anxieties about poetic production and reception, and on the dramatic scenario shared by many poems in which these themes find expression: the poet presenting his beloved with her image in verse.

In various ways, and with differing answers, sonnets and other love lyrics ask whether the beloved is real or a projection of the poet-lover. In *Rime* 64, to take a rueful, playfully explicit example, Petrarch makes the claim that he has created Laura, or is creating her, central to his seduction:

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Si voi poteste per turbati segni—
per chinar gli occhi o per piegar la testa,
o per esser più d’altra al fuggir presta,
torgendo ‘l viso a’ preghi onesti et degni—

useir giamai, o ver per altri ingegni,
del petto ove dal primo lauro innesta
Amor più rami, i’ direi ben che questa
fosse giusta cagione a’ vostri sdegni;

ché gentil pianta in arido terreno
par che si disconvenga, et però lieta
naturalmente quindi si diparte.

Ma poi vostro destino a voi pur vieta
l’essere altrove, provedete almeno
di non star sempre in odiosa parte.
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[If you could, by any angry gestures—by casting your eyes down or bending your head or by being more swift to flee than any other, frowning at my virtuous and worth prayers

if you could ever thus or by any other stratagem escape from my breast where love engrafts many branches from that first laurel; I would say that would be a just reason for your disdain;

for a noble plant clearly does not belong in arid ground, and therefore it is naturally happy to depart from there:

but, since your destiny forbids you to be elsewhere, at least take care not to stay always in a hateful place.]17

The poem is at once a threat—I am not going to get rid of this image in my heart—and a plea—love me back, or at least don’t hate me. Its humor and pathos depend on a simple but surprisingly bald move, which is to acknowledge (while claiming to collapse) the gap between the sequence’s two Lauras: the one that exists as an image in his heart and in his poems, and the one external to himself and his work—the Laura he creates in poetry, and the one to whom he addresses his creations.

A similar dynamic of two Stellas, one external and “real” and one created by Astrophil’s desire and pen, plays out in Astrophil and Stella. It is embedded in the sequence’s title and begins to be dramatized in the first sonnet, when Astrophil looks in his heart in order to write. Stella is “in” Astrophil’s heart and Stella is “what” Astrophil will write. But this cannot be same being as the external Stella, the “dear she” (2) to whom he has previously tried and failed to write. Indeed, the early sonnets in the sequence dramatize Astrophil’s struggle to write about Stella and to “write my mind” simultaneously.18

Sonnets 57 and 58 represent a turning point, in which Stella resists being re-shaped by Astrophil’s desires or seduced by his poetry and so demonstrates her independent self-hood. Uniquely in the sequence, these two poems present her response to him outside of the usual terms of deferral and denial. At this juncture, there is no “no” in Stella’s speech (“no,” in shorter and longer forms, is finally the content of most of her speech in the songs). Nevertheless, her transformative reading of his poems

18 Fienberg, “The Emergence of Stella,” 12.
constitutes a genuine response to his pleas, and to the version of herself she finds presented in verse. What Astrophil proffers as “the thourough’st words, fit for woe’s self to groan” (57.4) and “the anatomy of all my woes” (58.10) she returns to him as “most ravishing delight” (58.13). Her reading is a dialogic response to his writing, and his experience of listening is, in turn, a response to that.

But what is the content of this dialogue? We know that the poem sung in Sonnet 57 is a pitiable complaint intended to break down Stella’s defenses. The sonnet begins:

Woe, having made with many fights, his own
Each sense of mine, each gift, each power of mind,
Grown now his slaves, he forced them out to find
The thorough’st words fit for woe’s self to groan,
Hoping that when they might find Stella alone,
Before she could prepare to be unkind,
Her soul, armed but with such a dainty rind,
Should soon be pierced with sharpness of the moan.

(1-8)

Moreover we know the poem read in Sonnet 58, also intended to inspire pity, means to do so through rhetorical persuasion rather than blunt emotional force. Astrophil’s “piercing phrases” (9) are “clothed with fine tropes, with strongest reasons lined” (6). But the words themselves are not available to us—perhaps we have encountered the poems Stella reads elsewhere in the sequence, or perhaps not. We are similarly shut out from any but the most generalized account of her singing and speaking voice. It is described above all with the generic praise term sweet: her voice “sweets my pains” (57.14) and her “sweet breath” (58.11) drowns out the notes of lament in his verses. The descriptor reinforces the sense that Stella’s voice is a love object, both inspiring Astrophil’s passion and reminding him of its limits. “Sweet” is a term the sequence repeatedly associates with Stella. Her sweet voice serves as a token for her sweet entirety, her sweet self—a self to which he has limited access and so anatomizes with a limited, if loving, vocabulary. The vagueness of Astrophil’s main descriptive term precludes insight into Stella’s intentions as author of her vocal performances, or co-author of the texts read aloud, the poems momentarily shared between herself and Astrophil.

It is therefore easier to see what does happen here when we look at what does not happen. The dialogue between Astrophil and Stella in Sonnets 57 and 58 has precedents in two poetic
traditions concerned with reception. In Petrarchan love poems that link writing, reading, and loving and in English echo poems, depictions of poetic reception abound, but rarely end joyfully. In *Astrophil and Stella*, the theme of reception first appears in Sonnet 1:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she (dear she) might take some pleasure of my pain;
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know;
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain.

(1-4)

Before he decides he wants to write about Stella, Astrophil knows that he wants to write to her. As Wendy Wall puts it, “Sidney defines his poetic collection in terms of the possible effects reading can have on Stella’s sensibilities.”19 Sidney defines his sonnets in terms of reception, and, more specifically, in terms of its reception by one privileged, ideal reader. In his fantasy, Stella’s reading will play out in quasi-Horatian terms: pleasure will compel her to knowledge of his state, and onwards to sympathy. His verse will delight her, in order to teach her, in order to move her to pity—which is, as Shakespeare’s Olivia put it, “a degree to love.”20

Wall’s work reminds us that the concern for reception that marks late Medieval and early Renaissance love lyric, exemplified by the “go, little book” of envois and tornade, resurfaces with particular urgency and force in Elizabethan sonnet sequences.21 Countless sonnets look forward to the moment when they will be read, either by the beloved to whom they are written, or (especially in Shakespeare’s sonnets) by future generations of non-diegetic readers. For Wall, the first kind of reception sonnet allegorizes erotic desire:

The speaker portrays himself as unfulfilled in desire and hence incomplete, thus analogous to his incomplete text, which is similarly unfinished because it lacks her response … The texts’ anticipated moment of reception rests at the core of the speaker’s presentation of poetic creativity and erotic desire.22

Reading functions as a strong metaphor for erotic fulfillment, because the beloved comes into emotional and psychological contact with the longing lover who has poured his soul into lines of verse, and in physical contact with the written poem. Her hand touches the ink and paper that his touched. Communication at a less material level usually fails. In quite a few poems, the moment of reception is disappointing, even catastrophic. The fact that the beloved “cannot skill” to read the proffered sonnets stands in for the fact that she has not been seduced.

As Wall’s analyses of individual poems suggest, these poems are not only about the persistent gap between lover and beloved. They are also about the gap between the beloved as invention, contained “in” the poems, and the beloved as reader, necessarily external to them. Reception sonnets bring the issue of the two beloveds to the fore. Samuel Daniel’s *Delia* 54 provides a clear example:

Unhappy pen and ill-accepted papers,
That intimate in vain my chaste desires,
My chaste desires, the ever burning tapers,
Inkindled by her eyes celestial fires.
   Celestial fires and unrespecting powers,
That deign not view the glory of your might,
In humble lines the work of careful hours,
The sacrifice I offer to her sight.

(1-8)

Delia is the inspiration for Daniel’s verses; they were “inkindled” by her eyes (the lurking pun, ink-kindled, reinforces the problematic connection between loving and writing). She is also their subject matter and ideal audience. But the next line reveals that this set of equivalences cannot stand. The very eyes that inspired desire and poetic creativity look unkindly on poems celebrating their owner. “She scorns her own” (9), Daniel writes in the following line. At the moment of reading, when Delia scorns *Delia*, the possibility for equivalence between the image in the poet’s heart and his intended reader is shattered.

In *Astrophil and Stella*, the poems best-known for exemplifying the theme of reception are probably Sonnets 44 and 45. In these sonnets, as in Daniel’s, Stella “misreads” the texts Astrophil presents to her. In Sonnet 44, however, there is a suggestion that whatever makes Stella a bad reader is also the thing that makes Astrophil love her. It begins:
My words, I know, do well set forth my mind;
My mind bemoans his sense of inward smart;
Such smart may pity claim of any heart;
Her heart (sweet heart) is of no tiger’s kind.

(1-4)

If these propositions are true, why is it, the poem asks, that “She hears, yet I no pity find” (5)? Astrophil proposes an answer:

I much do guess, yet find no truth save this:
That when the breath of my complaints doth touch
Those dainty doors unto the court of bliss,
The heavenly nature of that place is such
That once come there, the sobs of mine annoys
Are metamorphosed straight to tunes of joys.

(9-14)

The answer praises Stella. Mere contact with Stella’s ears turns sad sighs into happy songs. She is so sweet that she simply can’t hear him properly. This is more than a pretty compliment. Conjecturing that Stella “can’t hear” his verses because of who she is, Astrophil hits on a more basic truth. Her “nature” (12) is different from his own, and this fact necessarily affects her reception of his poetry.

The suggestion that what makes Stella Stella makes her immune to Astrophil’s pleas resurfaces in 57 and 58. In these sonnets, as in 44, the moment of reception results in a textual and erotic stalemate, rather than the devoutly wished consummation. But as we have seen, the stalemate ends up pleasing Astrophil unexpectedly. The conclusions of the two sonnets (already quoted above) run:

A pretty case! I hoped her to bring
To feel my griefs, and she with face and voice
So sweets my pains, that my pains me rejoice.

(57.12-14)

O voice, O face, maugre my speech’s might,
Which wooed woe, most ravishing delight
Even those sad words even in sad me did bring.

(58.12-14)

As she sings or reads, Stella communicates something of her own “heavenly nature” to him, even as he fails to communicate his
“inward smart” (44.2) to her. Her voice moves him to continue loving her, while simultaneously functioning as a sign of her existence beyond his feelings for her and poetry about her.

**Imperfect Echoes: Voice and Reception**

*Astrophil and Stella* 57 and 58 are not only about poetic production and reception but also, more specifically, about vocalization. In Renaissance poetic theory, voice was an important category for understanding and controlling readerly construction of meaning. In an era when reading aloud was still widely practiced, vocalization was a crucial element in the reception of any text. It was also a point at which reception could go wrong. Shakespeare illustrates this to great comic effect in *Twelfth Night*, when Feste reads Malvolio’s letter aloud. When he delivers the document’s opening words in a state of apparent agitation, his mistress exclaims, “How now, art thou mad?” (5.1.292). Feste replies: “No, madam, I do but read madness … You must allow *vox*” (5.1.294-5).

Feste’s surface claim is that as the letter’s reader, he represents its writer. In order to read a madman’s letter, he must use a “mad” voice. As the audience knows, however, the steward is not mad, and Feste reads deliberately with an intention counter to Malvolio’s.

For Shakespeare’s contemporaries, the problem of a reader’s voice—a voice that potentially distorts or conceals authorial intent, a voice that “misreads” as it reads aloud—even marked more sympathetic encounters between text and voice. As print rapidly expanded poetic readership, poets gave readerly vocalization serious thought. In a prefatory letter to the first four books of the *Franciade* (1572), for example, Pierre de Ronsard coaches his reader on vocal performance:

> Je te supliray seulement d’une chose, Lecteur: de vouloir bien prononcer mes vers et accommoder ta voix a leur passion…& te suplie encore derechef où tu verras cette merque ! vouloir un peu eslever ta voix pour donner grace à ce que tu liras.

[I will ask of you but one thing, Reader: to pronounce my verses carefully and to accommodate your voice to their passion … and I also ask you once again that]
Ronsard clearly believes that his poetry will be read aloud. Even in silent reading, though, voice comes into play in the form of “internalized enunciatory urges at the site of reception,” in Garrett Stewart’s words. Stewart suggests that reading any text but especially a poem involves less a passive process of “receiving” than an active listening to and voicing of the words on the page. The printed text resembles a musical score: an abstract visual representation of latent sound, activated in performance. Stewart’s claims resemble the Barthesian argument, also put forward by Gary Waller, that the reader produces a text’s final meaning. His emphasis, however, is on the changes a reader makes to a text at the level of sound, which in turn alter its sense.

In Ronsard’s ideal situation, reading is repetition. Correctly performed, the poem’s enunciation at the site of reception will echo its “original” sounds, and so recover its original, intended significance. As we see with Feste, however, the reader is under no obligation to recapture authorial vocal intention. Even more sympathetic readers may hear or say a poem’s lines differently from the poet. Each act of vocalized reading lies somewhere between repetition and the creation of something new. As the reader simultaneously “listens” to the words on the page and “speaks” them, he or she activates what Stewart terms the “phonotext”: the shimmering, sonic surface of a text that holds open the possibility of equally shimmering, shifting meanings.

One early modern genre overtly interested in the phonotext is the echo poem. The majority of echo poems in English appear in sonnet sequences. Sidney also included one in the Arcadia, and in dramatic form they were an occasional feature of courtly entertainments. Usually in these poems, a solitary

25 Garrett Stewart, Reading Voices, 11.
26 Eldridge Colby, “The Echo-Device in Literature,” Bulletin of the New York Public Library 23.11 (November 1919), 683-713. Colby’s treatise remains the only comprehensive treatment of the English echo poem, tracing its origins in classical and continental poetry and song and addressing English echo poems in terms of their formal features and their participation in different genres and modes. The second part of the treatise, in BNYPL 23.12 (December 1919), 783-804, discusses
speaker activates a natural or supernatural echo with his voice, and a (somewhat lopsided) conversation ensues. Generally, the echo repeats a syllable or two of the speaker’s utterances, completing the poetic line while seeming either to discourage the amorous speaker, or to offer him hope and advice—sometimes both within the same poem. This is the case in Sonnet 15 of William Percy’s 1594 *Coelia*:

What is the faire to whom so long I plead? Lead,
What is her face so Angel-like? Angellike.
Then unto saints in mind sh’is not unlike. Unlike.
What may be hop’d of one so evil nat’red? Hatred.
... 
How must I first her loves to me approve? Prove
How if she say I may not kiss her? Kiss her.
For all her bobs I must then bear, or miss her? Yes sir.
Then will she yield at length to Love? To love.
(1-4,12-14)

Here and in most other examples of the genre, the echo slightly mis-repeats the original speaker’s words, distorting his meaning or in some cases punningly revealing it.

Almost all echo poems seem to be at least in part about the readerly production of poetic texts, with echoic repetitions and alterations allegorizing the sonic and semantic processes of repetition, distortion, addition, and appropriation that mark reception. Because their speakers rarely anticipate the echo’s response, these poems often seem to figure a situation in which an unintended, non-diegetic reader alters a text’s sound and sense. Echo poems may also, however, illuminate the situation dramatized in *Astrophil and Stella* 57 and 58, in which Stella reads and sings. The fiction of every echo poem is that there are two speakers, but one poem. Echoes distort the original speaker’s utterance, but they also finish his lines. They alter the sonic texture of his words, but they provide metrical closure and end rhymes. Though one speaker provides all the words, the text would be incomplete without the second speaker’s interventions (interventions that, within the fictional worlds of these poems, are usually unexpected and sometimes unwelcome). These two-speaker poems, I suggest, implicitly argue that readerly reception...
(and especially readerly vocalization) constitutes a form of collaboration. This collaboration can be fraught with tension or it can be harmonious, depending on the speaker’s willingness to cede control over sound to his echo—which in turn figures the author’s willingness to cede control over sound and sense to his reader.

One example offers a particularly vivid image of echoic repetition as collaboration, though it shows such collaboration in a negative light, as an unwelcome consequence of readerly alterations to a text. The 25th poem in Thomas Watson’s sequence of quasi-sonnets, the *Hekatompathia*, which circulated in manuscript alongside Sidney’s sequence, opens with authorial instructions on vocalization, reminiscent of Ronsard’s. Watson writes in a headnote:

> It is to be considered in reading this Passion, how in some answers, the accent or pointing of the words is altered, and therewithal how the Author, walking in the woods, and bewailing his inward passion of Love, is contraried by the replies of Echo.

It is easy to misspeak Watson’s poem by failing to note the tiny changes in “accent and pointing” (emphasis and punctuation) in the echoic portions of each lines. To do so is also to misunderstand it, Watson cautions; his directions on pronunciation are ultimately a guide to getting the poem’s meaning right. But misspeaking is in fact what the poem is all about it. The headnote’s instructions to the external reader run playfully counter to the situation within the poem itself, in which author is “contraried” by audience precisely because of slight changes to emphasis and pausing:

> **Author.** In all this world I think none loves but I.
> **Echo.** None loves but I. **Author.** Thou foolish tattling ghest, In this thou telst a lie. **Echo.** Thou telst a lie.
> **Author.** Why? Love himself he lodgeth in my breast.
> **Echo.** He lodgeth in my breast. **Author.** I pine for grief; And yet I want relief. **Echo.** I want relief.

(25.1-6)

In these opening lines, the sonic changes are not signaled typographically, and the pattern of accents of the line does not

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dictate changes in emphasis. It seems likely that Watson desires the reader to place emphasis on the Echo’s pronouns, turning her repetitions into appropriative “replies”: “Thou telst a lie”; “He lodgeth in my breast”; “I want relief.” The poem goes on, with the single largest change (from “she” to “he”) occurring between lines 7 and 8, and significant changes in punctuation introduced in lines 10 and 11:

Author. No star more fair then she whom I adore.
Echo. Then he whom I adore. Author. Here hence I burn
       Stil more and more. Echo. I burn still more and more.
Author. Is then the Saint, for whom thou makest moan,
       And whom I love, but one? Echo. I love but one.
Author. O heav’ns, is there in love no end of ills?
Echo. In love no end of ills. Author. Thou prattling voice,
       Dwelst thou in th’ air, or but in hollow hills?
Echo. In hollow hills. Author. Cease of to vaunt thy choice.
Echo. Cease of to vaunt thy choice. Author. I would reply.
       But here for love I die. Echo. for love I die.
(7-18)

As the poem unfolds, the Author becomes increasingly upset with the Echo’s appropriative alterations to his lines. Though at the end he claims he will die of love, his ultimate silence seems to have more to do with intense authorial frustration than unfulfilled desire.

Unlike the speaker in Samuel Daniel’s sonnets, who has offered his poems up to a specific reader, Watson’s Author has sought solitude in order to pour out his heart in lyric lament. Delia is an intended audience; the woodland Echo an accidental one. Delia’s misreading allegorizes her inability to return Daniel’s love, while the Echo “misreads” (or misrepeats) in order to express her own passionate state using someone else’s words. Despite their differences, Watson’s slippery Echo and Daniel’s scornful Delia share a theoretical function: they dramatize the moment at which the birth of the reader brings about the death of the author—literally, in Watson’s case. Though its emphasis on vocalization aligns it with Sidney’s sonnets 57 and 58, Watson’s poem also has much in common with the broader Petrarchan tradition, in which reception functions as a moment of rupture between author and audience and initiates a catastrophic loss of authorial control.
Echo and Collaboration in *Astrophil and Stella*

We might expect Astrophil to experience a similar fate to both Daniel’s speaker and Watson’s Author in Sonnets 57 and 58. As in the Petrarchan reception sonnets, his verses fail to seduce. As in the echo poems, the encounter of a strange voice within his own text results in a radical alteration of meaning. As Jacqueline Miller writes:

> Once his words are spoken, they become a part of the public domain, so to speak, subject to new meanings under the informing influence of others; and their efficacy is limited (he gets no pity from Stella) because he cannot limit their meaning … [I]ntention is thwarted.28

This loss of control over his text’s meaning turns out to be a source of joy, rather than of despair or frustration, and Astrophil gives himself over to it fully. In the overall narrative of the sequence, this has little impact. Sonnet 59 brings back a note of complaint, and in Sonnet 60 loving and writing have both once more become deeply problematic, intertwined activities. Internally, however, the movement of each of these sonnets is towards the production of a moment of unexpected bliss. Astrophil’s bliss is produced neither by his own words or by Stella’s voice, but by his experience of the two conjoined—an experience that makes him lose sight of his own desires in the intense feeling of Stella’s being-present to him.

In Sonnet 57 Astrophil employs a military metaphor for his writing. The poem’s argument in brief is that Love has enslaved Astrophil, and enforces him to “attack” Stella with poems, which in the poem’s military conceit are figured as weapons. Once again the ultimate goal is to inspire pity. The plan is that:

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28 Miller, “‘What Words May Say,’” 97. This passage mainly refers to Sonnet 44, in which Stella hears Astrophil’s poems, but it is perhaps even more appropriate to Sonnets 57 and 58, in which she reads them. Once his words are spoken by someone else, by Stella, they are subject not only to new meanings, but to new sounds. Miller folds a reading of these sonnets into an account of mutual misreading as one of the sequence’s structuring principles: Stella misreads Astrophil and Astrophil Stella, over and over again. Each produces “texts” (not only poems, but utterances, facial expressions, and behavior), and each consistently misunderstands the other’s intention. Rather than the mutual misreading that Miller sees enacted in these sonnets and throughout the sequence, I suggest that Sidney presents reading as collaboration.
Before she could prepare to be unkind,
Her soul, armed but with such a dainty rind,
Should soon be pierced with sharpness of the moan.

(6-8)

Once again, her encounter with his words does not result in the hoped-for emotional response. But something odd happens. Like Watson’s echo, Stella repeats the words she has just heard:

She heard my plaints, and did not only hear,
But them (so sweet she is) most sweetly sing,
With that fair breast making woe’s darkness clear.

(9-11)

These lines surge towards a climax, one in which it seems Stella will understand Astrophil. The “not only” of line 9 signals the possibility of gratification. She not only heard his poems—she sang! The singing seems to constitute the kind of breakthrough or consummation Astrophil hopes for: her “fair breast,” the bodily locus of her voice, makes “woe’s darkness clear.” The double meaning of line 11’s “clear” is, in the moment, thrilling. Stella’s voice makes Astrophil’s miserable state apparent, but it also reverses it, flooding “woe’s darkness” with light.

After this, what follows in the poem’s second turn seems catastrophically anticlimactic. Astrophil concludes:

A pretty case! I hoped her to bring
To feel my griefs, and she with face and voice
So sweets my pains, that my pains me rejoice.

(57.12-14)

Shifting into a register that is colloquial, ironic, self-belittling with the phrase “A pretty case,” Astrophil shuts down the surging forward motion of the poem. He remains in woe’s darkness, his woe remains uncommunicated, and Stella, it seems, remains unpitying. And yet his own emotional state has shifted, even if relations with Stella have not progressed. Perhaps he hasn’t communicated what he wants to Stella; but she may have communicated something to him. Turning words of woe into songs of joy, it is just possible that Stella, here, takes on the role of the Horatian poet, teaching by means of delight.

What does she teach? Sonnet 58 begins to give an answer. This poem situates the scene of reading instead in a traditional debate about rhetoric: does a speech gain its power from
the writing (the “words,” “tropes,” and “reasons” as Astrophil has it) or from the delivery (which Astrophil terms “pronouncing grace”)? After setting up the terms of debate in lines 1-8, Astrophil describes the test case: Stella’s reading poems by Astrophil. Here the writer and speaker are not the same, and their end goals are not the same either. The poem’s last six lines run:

Now judge by this: in piercing phrases late
The anatomy of all my woes I wra te,
Stella’s sweet breath the same to me did read.
O voice, O face, maugre my speech’s might,
Which wooed woe, most ravishing delight
Even those sad words even in sad me did breed.

(9-14)

Once again, woes are transformed to joys, and Astrophil cannot resist being moved by Stella’s performance. The last line’s “in sad me” echoes and perhaps answers his own earlier plea: “Pity the tale of me” (45.14). Even Astrophil can’t pity the tale of Astrophil when Stella tells it.

This is not the “consummation” wished for in Sonnet 1. But it is, I think, both a dialogue and a collaboration. Astrophil hopes that Stella will read his sonnets and understand him. Stella doesn’t write sonnets, but she does, here, put Astrophil in the position of audience, of listener and reader.29 The words are his, but the voice and affective content come from her. One could claim that Stella simply plays upon what was already there, what Astrophil put there. In Sonnet 58, when she reads aloud, she activates the sonic texture of his lines. In Sonnet 57, when she sings, she builds on their extant musicality. Yet her reading and her singing still constitute an active response. Choosing only to present the material, auditory aspects of the verses involves ignoring their semantic content. In so doing, she reveals to Astrophil the great delight his creations can produce. While there is no denying the frisson of narcissism of these sonnets—Astrophil is blown away by how wonderful his poems sound—this is not their central focus. More significantly, in a vocal performance apparently unhinged from any semantic referent, she reveals what the voice itself reveals: herself, that she has a self, that it is separate from him and his desires. For a moment, this revelation seems to blot out Astrophil’s own self. The key terms Astrophil

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29 Astrophil is a reader in the quasi-Barthesian sense sketched above: if her reception of his texts alters their meaning, his reception of her vocal productions in turn responds to and alters their meanings.
associates with his intentions as an author—“unhappy,” “woeful,” “pity”—melt away, in his descriptions of reception, to be replaced by a vocabulary of happiness, joy, and delight—a vocabulary consistently associated with Stella. If Astrophil tries to make himself present to Stella by means of poetry, Stella also tries to make herself present to him, and by the same means. In the texts they share (texts to which we outside readers are never made privy), we might say that Astrophil and Stella meet.

Shakespeare’s Feste insisted, “You must allow Vox.” To allow vox, to give up authorial control of vocal performance, as Ronsard and Watson resist doing and as Astrophil joyfully does, is to allow a reader to become a collaborator. The real “consummation” in *Astrophil and Stella* is not the ultimate lining up of desiring subject with desired object, or the fulfillment of the speaker’s fantasy that the woman represented in a poem is the same as the woman who reads the poem. It is the creation of a new text: the ephemeral text-read-aloud, co-authored by author and reader, words and voice, Astrophil and Stella.

**Conclusion**

A final word needs to be said about Stella, voice, and presence. I have argued that Stella becomes present to Astrophil by vocalizing his poems, and that in her presence, his desire loses its narcissistic focus and its teleological structure. To him, her presence is unmediated and overpowering; and his usual goals—poetic creation, amorous seduction—are blotted out in its immediacy. For the external reader, however, Stella’s voice remains unheard. Her presence is filtered through Astrophil’s experience of it. In fact, it cannot really be called “presence” at all. Stella’s vocal productions constitute both her reception of Astrophil’s poems and an alteration of them so profound a new, co-authored text is produced. With respect to this new text, Astrophil is in the position of a listener-reader, and we might expect his reception to constitute another act of collaborative authorship in turn. The poems he produces in response, however, seal off his ecstatic experience: temporally, by making it an endpoint, rather than a single moment in an extended back-and-forth flow of collaborative co-authorship between himself and Stella, and socially, by refusing the non-diegetic reader access to either his original words or anything more than a suggestive but non-specific representation of Stella’s voice. Both sonnets locate Astrophil’s ecstatic reception primarily in the past, and both lack the deictic language of the here-and-now which
grants certain sonnets the force of immediate, unmediated experience. Paradoxically, then, when Stella is most present to Astrophil she remains at best an “absent presence” for the reader.

In other words, the collaborative production for which I have been arguing does not really exist for us. We cannot recover it. What we get, in the end, is “the tale of me,” which contains a strong trace of Stella but no clear sense of her voice or the self it signifies. Accordingly, the Stella I have sketched in this essay is not a biographically specific person or a fleshed-out, dramatic character—neither the witty, accomplished Penelope Devereux, Lady Rich frequently detected just beyond the poems, nor the chaste, desiring, fearful, and brave Stellas sometimes found in them. Our apprehension of Stella is always mediated through Astrophil’s experience of her, as Almasy rightly notes. But it is important to remember that experience is neither uniform nor necessarily narcissistic. Though Astrophil looks in own heart for Stella, he discovers her in the world, in herself, and especially in her voice, which I have argued is the paradigmatic sign of that self. He records that discovery with confusion, surprise, and joy. He is not echoed by Stella, but re-made by her, in a collaborative union that resists direct representation and lasts only for a moment. As readers, we do not witness this moment directly. Crucially, we cannot hear Stella’s voice repeating and altering Astrophil’s words. Astrophil shuts us out, but perhaps Sidney lets us in. We might take the events of Sonnets 57 and 58 as a trope for our own reading of the sequence—an acknowledgement, from the poet, of the echoic repetitions and alterations his external readers will bring to bear on his sonnets.

While the tenth and fourteenth lines of 57 suggest that the final moment of song may coincide with the present of the poem, the bulk of 57 and 58 are in a narrative past tense. On the function of the here-and-now in Renaissance lyric, see Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 22-62, and Heather Dubrow, “‘Nor is here one single here’: Towards a Reevaluation of Immediacy in the Sonnet Tradition,” *The Literary Imagination* 12.3 (January 2010): 296-306.

Almasy, “Stella and the Songs,” 4