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Sir Philip Sidney's An Apology for Poetry and Astrophil and Stella: Texts and Contexts.

Edited by Peter C. Herman. Glen Allen, Virginia: College Publishing, 2001. Pp. 285.

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by Mickey Casper

Professor Herman's edition – *Sir Philip Sidney's An Apology for Poetry and Astrophil and Stella: Texts and Contexts* – is an ambitious work, one that “attempts to situate” both texts “within their various cultural discourses” (51). As such, Professor Herman begins by introducing readers to the Elizabethan world of which Sidney was a part. A lengthy discussion is given of Sidney's parentage, his early education, his political aspirations, his relationship (or lack thereof) with Queen Elizabeth and, finally, his literary ambitions. This information is followed by a joint discourse on the importance that the *Apology* and *Astrophil and Stella* hold for Renaissance Literature. Professor Herman locates the *Apology* alongside contemporary works from the period (i.e., Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse* and Julius Caesar Scalinger's *Poetics*) and more classical influences (Plato's *Republic*). He is quick to critique the *Apology* for what it is. While pointing out that Sidney's essay “bring[s] together an extraordinary mosaic of earlier Renaissance thought about the nature and purpose of poetry,” Herman also

takes pains to mention the text's "many [...] contradictions" (37, 38). This rather balanced discussion is useful as it not only shows readers a variety of viewpoints, but also allows undergraduates to place Sidney's work within a larger poetic context. Herman's discussion of *Astrophil and Stella* primarily revolves around how Sidney's sonnet sequence mirrors "the wide variety of verse forms" made famous by Petrarch (42).

The strength of Herman's edition lies in his introduction and in his inclusion of various excerpts from important poetic discourses. Aside from the aforementioned introductory material, readers are also treated to selections from the following texts: Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*; Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*; Juan Luis Vives' *Truth Dressed Up, or of Poetic License: To What Extent Poets May Be Permitted to Vary from the Truth*; Scalinger's *Poetics*; Gosson's *The School of Abuse*; and George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy*, amongst others. Readers are also given a rather lengthy and thorough section on "Suggestions for Further Reading."

The edition, however, does have some weaknesses. While the text specifies that it will give equal contextual discussions on both the *Apology* and *Astrophil and Stella*, Herman shortchanges his readers when it comes to fully contextualizing Sidney's sonnet sequence. Herman's study of *Astrophil and Stella* would be aided by the inclusion of sample sonnets as taken from Petrarch and from Sidney's Elizabethan

contemporaries: namely Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, and William Shakespeare. Sample sonnets from the aforementioned writers, and an explanation of these literary examples, would aid in a more thorough understanding of why *Astrophil and Stella* is so important to Renaissance Literature and give undergraduates a better contextual grasp of the material being covered.

That being said, Herman's edition of *Sir Philip Sidney's An Apology for Poetry and Astrophil and Stella* is a solid academic effort overall. Instructors teaching Elizabethan poetry to undergraduate juniors and seniors will find much to enjoy in the text when it comes to discussing Sidney's *Apology*. Undergraduate readers will also benefit from Professor Herman's easy to follow literary style and format.