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Renaissance Literature

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The Inevitable Triumph of Desire over Reason throughout Renaissance Literature

A theme throughout Renaissance literature is the competition between the mind and the body, virtue and beauty, intelligence and passion, and reason and desire. The realms of the mind are unanimously considered to be superior; however, realms of the body are fierce competition, and the latter usually wins. The terminology varies across literature, but for the sake of the simplicity of this essay, the realms of the mind will most often be referred to as Reason, and the realms of the body as Desire (capitalized to be easily identified). Compositions such as *The Courtier* by Castiglione cautions against the strength of Desire, and the sonnets of Sidney and Shakespeare freely admit to the victory of Desire. However, *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More is quite different, because while it does not explicitly caution against falling prey to bodily Desire in the constraints of marriage, it does laud pleasures of the mind above all else, while simultaneously losing to Desire in a more prominent way than other literature. An abundance of Renaissance literature consciously exhibits a triumphant Desire despite the superior Reason; however, in *Utopia*, a book which supposedly frames the ideal world guided by reason, the citizens are defeated by Desire without even realizing it.

In *The Courtier* by Castiglione and translated by Sir Thomas Hoby, Desire already has to dwell within a person for Reason to rise and conquer it, which makes the competition a constant battle and Desire a formidable opponent. The main philosophy presented within *The Courtier* expounds that internal beauty is greater than external beauty, and the only way to reach this

higher level of perception is with the guide of Reason. Furthermore, the ability to recognize true, internal beauty comes with age, for "It may be granted the Courtier, while he is young, to love sensually; but [...] in his riper years, [...] he ought to be good and circumspect, and heedful that he beguile not himself to be led willfully into the wretchedness that in young men deserveth more to be pitied than blamed, and contrariwise in old men more to be blamed than pitied" (183). Granting young men the fault of sensual love intimates that it requires all of a man's faculties to fight Desire, and young men lack the experience needed to acquire all of the necessary faculties. Even in older courtiers, Desire induced by beauty already has to be present for Reason to enter the equation: "as soon as he is aware that his eyes snatch that image and carry it to the heart, and that the soul beginneth to behold it with pleasure, […] he ought in this beginning to seek a speedy remedy and to raise up reason" (184). In this scenario, Desire is already beginning to take hold. Then, when the Courtier "perceiveth he is taken," he must "shun thoroughly all filthiness of common love, and so enter the body into the holy way of love with the guide of reason" (184). This might be the only work of literature discussed in this essay that has Reason triumphant in the end, but it is implied that only the wisest are able to yield Reason, and many fall into the traps of Desire, or they would not have a rational to warn against it.

In contrast, Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Shakespeare's sonnets present Desire as an undefeatable force, although they seem to have differing opinions on what is true beauty. Sidney seems to subscribe to Castiglione's idea that virtue is true beauty, while external beauty is only a facade. Sonnet 5 proclaims that "true beauty virtue is indeed, / Whereof this beauty can be but a shade" (ln 9-10). However, throughout the sonnet, the narrator of the poem seems to be trying to convince himself rather than the reader. This is evidenced by the repetition of the word "true" in lines 1, 5, 6, 9, 12, and 14. Despite Astrophil's conviction that all he

proclaims is “true,” the final line of the poem admits “True,” but continues “and yet true that I must *Stella* love” (14). By saying “True, and yet,” he admits that he is overcome by Stella’s physical beauty. Furthermore, Astrophil addresses Reason in Sonnet 10, claiming that since Reason insists on fighting with love and sense within the narrator, rather than dealing only with his thoughts, Reason is inevitably defeated: “For soon as they strake thee with Stella’s rays, / Reason thou kneel’dst, and offeredst straight to prove / By reason good, good reason her to love” (12-14). In these lines, Reason “kneel’dst” to Stella’s physical beauty, admitting submission. In Sonnet 21, the narrator admits that “to my birth I owe / Nobler desires” (6-7). He is most likely referring to passion or Desire as a base desire, since he alludes to Plato’s story of Reason reigning in Passion in the lines 5-6: “That Plato I read for nought, but if he tame / Such coltish gyres.” Throughout the sonnet, he thanks a friend for his virtuous teachings, which he compares to “healthful caustics,” but the last line reveals that the narrator is not swayed, and most likely can never be swayed by the ways of Reason, because the power of physical beauty has arrested him: “Hath this world ought so fair as Stella is?” (14).

Sidney’s sonnets strengthen the susceptibility of Reason by presenting a hierarchy of love and desire, and declaring that Reason is defeated by both in addition to physical beauty. It has been previously established that physical beauty dominates Reason, which leads us to see the internal beauty. In Sonnet 71, Astrophil praises Stella’s internal beauty, or “inward sun” (8), and claims that “So while thy [internal] beauty draws the heart to love, / As fast thy Virtue bends that love to good” (12-13). Virtue is led by the “sweetest sovereignty / Of reason” (6-7). Yet again, the last line of the sonnet inverts the entire poem, similar to Sonnets 5 and 21. Line 14 says “‘But, ah,’ Desire still cries, ‘give me some food.’” In the next sonnet, Sonnet 72, the theme of Desire is continued. Desire often clings to Astrophil’s “pure Love” (2), but “Virtue’s gold now

must head my Cupid's dart" (8). He resolves to banish Desire, but ends the poem by asking himself, "But yet alas how shall?" (14). Not only does physical beauty trump Reason, but Desire taints pure love, which Reason guides to virtue.

Shakespeare also presents Desire as dominant, although he does not seem to elevate internal beauty over the physical. In Sonnet 1, the narrator begs a beautiful person to procreate, "That thereby beauty's rose might never die" (2). He even ventures to say that the beautiful man would be selfish to keep all of his beauty to himself: "mak'st waste in niggarding" (12). In contrast to Castiglione and Sidney, Shakespeare praises physical beauty and does not appear to hold internal beauty superior. However, despite this absent element, Desire is still presented as the enemy that Reason must try to overcome (although Reason always fails). Shakespeare provides perhaps the most explicit imagery of Desire versus Reason in Sonnet 147:

> My reason, thy physician to my love,
> Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
> Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
> Desire is death, which physic did except. (5-8)

Since Desire rejected Reason's treatment when trying to cure the narrator's feverish love, the narrator's love is likened to a terminal disease. Furthermore, in Sonnet 35, Shakespeare belomans the foolishness of trying to reason with Desire: "For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense" (9), which only leads to "Myself corrupting" (7). Thus, Desire wins out over Reason.

While Castiglione's *The Courtier* and the sonnets of Sidney and Shakespeare all focus on the individual, whether it is for the purpose of self-improvement or bemoaning the futility of internal struggle, Thomas More's *Utopia* explores what this struggle looks like in a cultural context, and reveals that the struggle is futile even when an entire community tries to be guided

by Reason. Thomas More does not explicitly discuss Desire in the sensual sense; instead, he gives a relatively lengthy account of what the Utopians see as true pleasure. The Utopians believe that true pleasure differs from "false" pleasures, which includes material wealth, empty honors, gambling, hunting, and hawking (89). On the other hand, true pleasure is divided into pleasures of the body and pleasures of the mind. Pleasures of the body are also divided into two facets, the first of which is immediate pleasure. This includes the satisfaction of eating and drinking, of pooping, of giving birth to a baby, relieving an itch, and pleasurable senses, such as hearing music. The other bodily pleasure is the "calm and harmonious state of the body," such as the good feeling of simply being healthy (90). Note that among the bodily pleasures, sensual pleasure is not expressly included. Pleasure from the mind is the "practice of the virtues and the consciousness of a good life," and the Utopians "prize them most highly" (91). There is also a hierarchy of bodily pleasures: "Among the pleasure of the body, they give the first place to health. As for eating and drinking and other delights of that sort, they consider them desirable, but only for the sake of health" (91). All physical pleasure is deemed inferior to mental pleasure. As mental pleasure includes "practice of the virtues" and the Utopians "define virtue as living according to nature, and [...] When an individual obeys the dictates of reason in choosing one thing and avoiding another, he is following nature" (87). Therefore Reason is indeed considered superior within the Utopian community, and they take pride in being guided by it.

The Utopians claim that Reason guides them in choosing mates and identifying virtues, however, their societal rituals reveal that Desire actually has more of a role than they realize. When considering mates, Hythloday claims that Utopians "have learned that no physical beauty recommends a wife to her husband so effectually as goodness and respect. Though some men are captured by beauty alone, none are held except by virtue and compliance" (98). However, a

"solemn" and "serious" ritual the Utopians follow when choosing marriage partners is as follows: "the woman is shown naked to the suitor by a responsible and respectable matron; and similarly, some respectable man presents the suitor to the women" (97). They place importance in this ritual, because if people marry not knowing of each other's physical defects, they are "running great risk of bitter discord, if something in either's person should offend the other" (97). Hythloday excuses this behavior by saying, "Not all people are so wise as to concern themselves solely with character; and even the wise appreciate physical beauty, as a supplement to the virtues of the mind" (97). This begs the question of the difference between the "wise" and those who are guided by Reason. If the Utopians make decisions based on Reason, Reason allows the appreciation of physical beauty, the Utopians develop a cultural ritual based on physical beauty, the Utopians consequently place importance on physical beauty. The importance of physical beauty has influenced Utopia's very culture. Therefore, physical pleasure, which has previously been referred to as Desire, ultimately wins out over Reason: Reason says that virtues should be lauded over physical beauty, but the latter has the biggest influence on Utopia's infrastructure.

Throughout Renaissance literature, authors portray physical beauty and Desire as inferior to virtue and Reason, but the former is usually perceived as stronger. Only in *The Courtier* is Desire seen as defeatable. Even when authors try to present Reason as the dominant guide in an ideal world like in the case of More's *Utopia*, Desire is the ultimate winner, supplanting Reason and becoming the controller of men.

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