‘Eridanus,’ Pontano’s sequence of poems to Stella, may at first glance appear an unlikely source for and strange company with Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet sequence ‘Astrophel and Stella’. Pontano’s lover is elderly; Sidney’s young and earnest. Yet on closer examination the way in which both poets work out their respective sequences suggests some interesting parallels and perhaps connections between the two poets.

Eridanus did not appear until 1518, fifteen years after Pontano’s death, but it soon acquired a reputation as an amatory sequence. Perhaps because of its clear biographical associations Pontano did not published Eridanus during his lifetime. Stella was a real person, a young Ferranese, who was Pontano’s mistress for about fifteen years. He did publish an epitaph on her death in his works in 1505, but that poem does not hint at their close relationship. Sidney was well versed in neo-Latin poetry and could well have known Eridanus as it had become a popular amatory sequence in the sixteen century. Sidney does not cite it, but does cite in ‘The Defence of Poesie’ another of Pontano’s works, his astronomical poem ‘Urania’, which he commends.

Like Pontano Sidney himself did not publish ‘Astrophel and Stella’. Five years after his death, Sidney’s executors published the sequence in 1591 with other unpublished work. It remained unpublished until then, perhaps because as with Pontano’s sequence, it possessed clear biographical connections or perhaps simply because Sidney’s premature death prevented it. Stella – Penelope Devereux, later Lady Rich – was a well-known person in the Elizabethan court, the sister of the Earl of Essex, and after the publication of the sequence her identification as Stella was readily established.

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The work itself provides the clues. In sonnet 13 Sidney identifies Stella as Penelope by alluding to the Devereux coat of arms: “the roses gueles . . . in silver field” (13.11). He similarly identifies “myself” as Astrophel in sonnet 65 by describing his own coat of arms. Sonnet 78 and song 8 tell us that Stella is married, and sonnets 24, 35, and 37 identify her as Lady Rich by making several puns on her husband’s name. There are other clues as well to the biographical nature of the sequence. At the time of her father’s death a match had been suggested between Sidney and Penelope, a match alluded to in sonnet 33 as one that might have been but that he “then would not, or could not see [his] blisse” (33, 2). Although the early sonnets might pose an unmarried Astrophel and unmarried Stella, throughout most of the sequence Stella is a married woman whom Astrophel belatedly loves and courts.

Neither ‘Eridanus’ nor ‘Astrophel and Stella’ follows exactly the biography of its creator, and neither is realized fully as a finished literary work. Both tell the story of a love affair from its inception, charting its ups and downs, but leave its ultimate dissolution and the disappointment of the lover implied rather than fully spelled out. ‘Astrophel and Stella’ is composed of 108 sonnets, with eleven songs interspersed in the latter half. Eridanus is composed of two books with 41 elegies in the first, 32 in the second. Not every sonnet in Sidney’s sequence and not every elegy in Pontano’s work directly concerns Stella or even love as a topic, although most of them, even those addressed, for example, by Pontano to friends manage to work in references to Stella and to the love affair. Others simply have Stella and the affair implicitly as a sub-text. In ‘Astrophel and Stella’ Stella is never far distant, but like Pontano, Sidney is interested not only in describing his mistress but also in examining and analyzing his own feelings, dissecting love as an emotion and perforce a suffering. Pontano takes for granted that to be a lover is to be miserable, and in more than one of his elegies he specifically spells out his own feelings. Sidney compares his sad languishing to that of the moon: “With how sad steps, ô Moone, thou climb’st the skies, / How silently, and with how wanne a face” (31.1–2). Clearly the moon must be a lover, as he is, and must suffer, as he does, from the neglect of a mistress.

Do they above love to be lov’d, and yet
Those Lovers scorne whom that Love doth possesse?
Do they call Vertue there ungratefulnesse? (31.12–14)4