

# VIRTUS

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Thomas Kullmann

## The construction of female nobility in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*

146

In *Astrophil and Stella*, a cycle of 108 sonnets and eleven longer poems or songs, the Elizabethan nobleman and man of letters Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), as 'Astrophil' or star-lover, expresses his love for 'Stella', Lady Penelope Rich, a young courtly lady who is married to somebody else. The sonnets record expressions of sexual desire on the part of Astrophil, as well as Stella's refusal to give in to her lover's wishes. Critics have long debated about the biographical background of these sonnets. The sonnets were read as an account of a real love affair, which may have taken place in the years 1581 and 1582, when Sidney and Lady Rich were certainly in close contact.<sup>1</sup> Interpretations based on this assumption usually regard the poems as Sidney's attempts to seduce Lady Rich and stress his failure to achieve his aims.<sup>2</sup> According to some of these readings, Sidney accuses himself of immorality and warns his readers not to fall into the same error.<sup>3</sup> Other interpretations assume that the love affair of Astrophil and Stella is largely fictional, allowing Sidney to demonstrate his mastery as a lyrical poet.<sup>4</sup>

In this contribution I should like to suggest that neither of these interpretations does justice to either the circumstances of the sonnets' circulation or to the underlying concept

1 See for example E. Berry, *The making of Sir Philip Sidney* (Toronto, 1998) 106.

2 See for example R.L. Montgomery, 'Astrophil's Stella and Stella's Astrophil', in: G.F. Waller and M.D. Moore, ed., *Sir Philip Sidney and the interpretation of Renaissance culture. The poet in his time and in ours* (London, 1984) 44-55; and Berry, *The making of Sir Philip Sidney*, 113-141.

3 T. Roche, jr., 'Astrophil and Stella. A radical reading', in: D. Kay, ed., *Sir Philip Sidney. An anthology of modern criticism* (Oxford, 1987) 185-226; 187-188.

4 See for example A.C. Hamilton, *Sir Philip Sidney. A study of his life and works* (Cambridge, 1977) 82-86, and Alan Hager, *Dazzling images. The masks of Sir Philip Sidney* (Newark, Del., 1991) 63-102.

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) (oil on panel, unknown artist, circa 1576; collection National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG 5732)



147

of Platonism and the courtly use made of Platonic philosophy in Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* (1528). In retracing the circumstances of circulation and interpreting the sonnets in the light of Castiglione's courtly Platonism, I would like to shed light on the roles played by noble ladies in English Renaissance culture.

The sonnet cycle first appeared in print in 1591, five years after Sidney's premature death on a Dutch battlefield. Its textual basis was obviously a collection of handwritten copies which had been widely circulated among Sidney's and Lady Rich's personal friends.<sup>5</sup> Sidney was acquainted with Lady Rich as they both frequented the household of Sidney's sister, the Countess of Pembroke.<sup>6</sup> Sidney would hand his sonnets to Penelope Rich who would

5 On the circumstances of the 1591 publication and the light it sheds on 'the tradition of circulating poems in manuscript' see J. Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Basingstoke, 1987) 183-185.

6 On the Countess of Pembroke's household see for example Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English*

show them to her friends and allow them to take copies. This way of circulating poems, which was certainly common among the English aristocracy, implies a great deal of collaboration on the part of the lady addressed, and involved a certain degree of publicity. When a gentleman wrote a sonnet to a lady, this was obviously part of the social interaction of the parties concerned; and so was the act of sharing these sonnets with other courtly ladies and gentlemen. They constituted a public or semi-public record of the ups and downs of a friendship or love affair.

Concerning the *Astrophil and Stella* sequence, it appears to me incontestable that no sonnet would have reached the stage of courtly circulation which had not been approved by Lady Rich. Sidney would not have dared to circulate poems referable to Penelope Rich behind the back of this lady, and Lady Rich would have returned or destroyed the sonnets which were not to her liking. This implies that, whatever the real facts of the relationship of poet and addressee may have been, the sonnet sequence represented an act of self-fashioning.<sup>7</sup> It constituted the public (or semi-public) face of both Philip Sidney and Penelope Rich, in a way comparable to present-day postings on Facebook and Instagram. The public quality of what was originally a form of private communication certainly adds an important layer to the element of representation. I propose to read these poems as representations of noble womanhood, as they describe and discuss the qualities of the lady addressed. As I should like to argue, the sonnets, apart from describing a noble lady, also have a prescriptive element, as they set out to define what nobility means and what the obligations are which pertain to nobility in general and to a noble lady in particular.

148

Structure and contents basically follow the formula instituted by Francesco Petrarca: the poet is in love with a beautiful lady who cannot or will not return his love; he thus alternately praises the lady's beauty and virtue and utters complaints about his own unhappiness. Sidney's expressions of unrequited love, however, gain a particular twist through the implications of Platonism. Plato contended that we can aspire to a knowledge of perfection through developing an erotic love for perfection, a love which can pass through the intermediate stage of loving beauty in human shape, that is the love of beautiful boys. In the Italian Renaissance this concept was extended to heterosexual love. Leonardo da Vinci's paintings of Ginevra di Benchi and Mona Lisa Gioconda were obviously intended as pictorial attempts to represent the beauty of virtue, in the shape of beautiful and virtuous ladies.<sup>8</sup> Sidney explains this understanding of Platonism in his sonnet 25:<sup>9</sup>

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*Renaissance*, 95-118, and A. Stewart, *Philip Sidney. A Double Life* (New York, 2000), 238-240.

7 Compare Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980).

8 Compare D.A. Brown, ed., *Virtue and beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance portraits of women* (Princeton, 2001), especially 142-147.

9 Edition quoted: P. Sidney, *Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella and Other Writings*, ed. E.P. Watson (London, 1997).

The wisest scholler of the wight most wise  
 By *Phoebus'* doome, with sugred sentence sayes,  
 That *Vertue*, if it once met with our eyes,  
 Strange flames of *Love* it in our soules would raise;  
 But for that man with paine this truth descries,  
 While he each thing in sences ballance wayes,  
 And so nor will nor can behold those skies  
 Which inward sunne to Heroicke minde displaies,  
 Vertue of late, with vertuous care to ster  
 Love of her selfe, takes *Stella's* shape that she  
 To mortall eyes might sweetly shine in her.  
 It is most true for since I her did see,  
 Vertue's great beautie in that face I prove,  
 And find th'effect, for I do burne in love.

149

The 'wight most wise/ By Phoebus doom' is, of course, Socrates, whom the Oracle at Delphi proclaimed the wisest man on earth; his wisest scholar was Plato. Lines 3 to 8 rather closely paraphrase Plato's wording in the *Phaedrus* (250d) and the *Republic* (516b),<sup>10</sup> except that the philosopher becomes a 'heroic mind', which already seems to indicate that noblemen might take over the competence of philosophers to look at the sun of truth and virtue. The personification of virtue in line 9 serves to highlight the specific Renaissance interpretation of Plato's pathway towards a knowledge of virtue: the motif that a beautiful person is also virtuous – which Plato did not intend to claim. Sidney apparently adopts the motif of approaching virtue by loving a noble lady from Cardinal Bembo's speech in the fourth book of Castiglione's *Courtier*. If the beloved lady personifies virtue the implication is, of course, that the speaker's erotic love cannot be requited as this would involve a loss of this very virtue which has elicited the speaker's admiration. The lady's refusals not only intensify the lover's passion, as in Petrarca's sonnets to Laura, but also help him to redirect, or sublimate his passion, to render it a striving for virtue. The courtier, Bembo asserts in Castiglione's treatise, ascends a 'stayre of love' (318) to arrive at a contemplation of 'heavenly beauty' (319), and more than that:<sup>11</sup>

[...] love giveth unto the soule a greater happinesse. For like as through the particular beautie of one bodie hee guideth her to the universall beautie of all bodies: Even so in the least degree of perfection through particular understanding hee guideth her to the universall understanding.

<sup>10</sup> *Platonis Opera*, ed. J. Burnet (5 vols.; Oxford, 1901-1905).

<sup>11</sup> For convenience's sake I am quoting from Thomas Hoby's English translation of the *Cortegiano* (1561), even though Bartholomew Clarke's Latin rendering was more widely known and may have been the one used by Sidney. See: S. Hutton, 'The Renaissance and the seventeenth century', in: A. Baldwin and S. Hutton, ed., *Platonism and the English imagination* (Cambridge, 1994) 67-75, 71-72); B. Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*. Done into English by Sir Thomas Hoby, Anno 1561, Everyman's Library (London, s.d. [1928]).

Thus the soule kindled in the most holy fire of true heavenly love, fleeth to couple her selfe with the nature of Angels, and not onely cleane forsaketh sense, but hath nor more neede of the discourse of reason, for being chaunged into an Angell, she understandeth all thinges that may be understood: and without any veil or cloud, she seeth the maine sea of the pure heavenly beautie and receiveth it into her, and enjoyeth the soveraigne happinesse, that can not be comprehended of the senses. (319)

Castiglione uses images of heaven, fire and the sea to denote the boundlessness of Platonic desire, and it is certainly with reference to Castiglione's imagery that Astrophil is 'burning' in love in the last line of sonnet 25. While the speaker in this Platonic context cannot reproach the lady for being cruel or insensitive, as sometimes Petrarca and his imitators do, it should be stressed that the speaker's erotic desire, i. e. the desire for 'the particular beautie of one bodie', as expressed in the last line of the sonnet, is by no means misplaced, as some interpreters assume,<sup>12</sup> but an integral part of the Platonic progress towards perfection, 'the soveraigne happinesse, that can not be comprehended of the senses.'

150

As other sonnets show, the lady's virtue is quite closely associated with courtly manners. Stella not only embodies perfect virtue but also teaches her lover how to behave in a courtly world, as in sonnet 14:

Alas have I not paine enough my friend,  
 Upon whose breast a fiercer Gripe doth tire  
 Then did on him who first stale downe the fire,  
 While *Love* on me doth all his quiver spend,  
 But with your Rubarb words yow must contend  
 To grieve me worse, in saying that Desire  
 Doth plunge my wel-form'd soule even in the mire  
 Of sinfull thoughts, which do in ruine end?  
 If that be sinne which doeth the maners frame,  
 Well staid with truth in word and faith of deed,  
 Readie of wit and fearing nought but shame:  
 If that be sinne which in fixt hearts doth breed  
 A loathing of all loose unchastitie,  
 Then Love is sinne, and let me sinfull be.

The friend's admonishment in lines 6 to 8 reiterates the medieval discourse on passion, while the speaker contends that love frames his manners, rendering him a perfect gentleman. This ties in with the Platonic revaluation of erotic passion; it also has medieval antecedents, such as the motif of a knight's valour and prowess when fighting for the honour of a noble lady. This motif is taken up in sonnet 41 which describes the speaker's victory in a tournament, as well the reasons to which other people assign the victory:<sup>13</sup>

12 See for example Montgomery, 'Astrophil's Stella and Stella's Astrophil', 45; Berry, *The making of Sir Philip Sidney* 122; and J. Roe, 'Italian Neoplatonism and the poetry of Sydney, Shakespeare, Chapman, and Donne', in: A. Baldwin and S. Hutton, ed., *Platonism and the English imagination*, 100-116.

13 On this sonnet compare K. Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney. Courtier poet* (London, 1991) 209-210.

Some luckie wits impute it but to chauce;  
 Others, because of both sides I do take  
 My bloud from them, who did excell in this,  
 Thinke *Nature* me a man of armes did make.  
 How farre they shoote awrie! The true cause is,  
*Stella* lookt on, and from her heav'nly face  
 Sent forth the beames, which made so faire my race. (41.8-14)

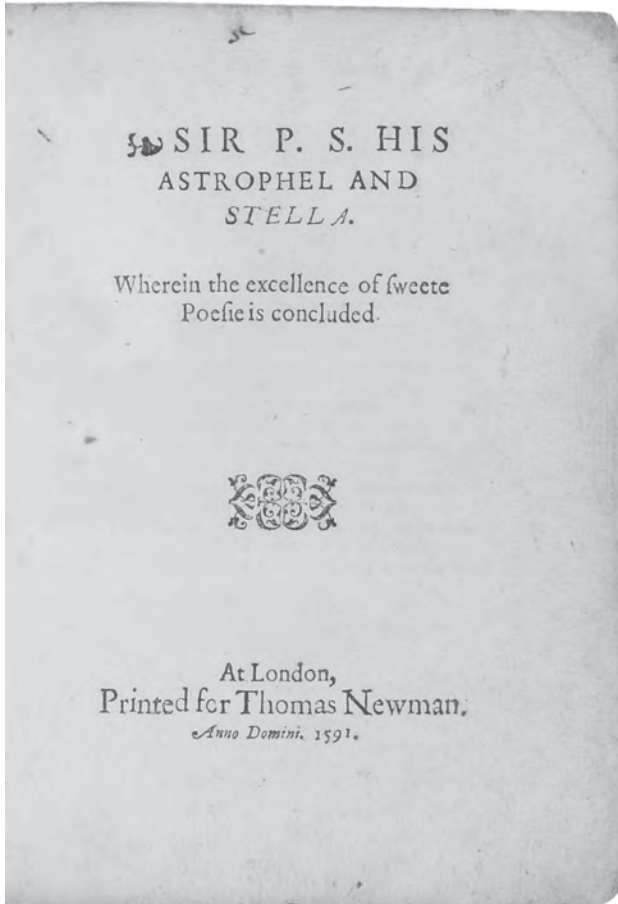
A notion which is added to the medieval motif is the notion of Stella's face being 'heavenly', which on one hand implies a hyperbolic praise of Stella's beauty but on the other hand also attributes to Stella that competence which neoplatonic philosophy assigns to the divine spirit, the Holy Spirit in Christian Doctrine: that of sending out influences onto this world. The term 'heavenly' thus comprises the two qualities which in Plato's *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* emerge as identical when reaching the highest degree of perfection: beauty and goodness, or virtue. The connection of virtue and beauty runs through the whole cycle of sonnets. We read, for example, that '*Vertue* is made strong by *Beautie's* might' (48.2) or that '*Vertue* may best lodg'd in beautie be' (71.2). The motif of a lady rendering a knight more eager to win is expanded into the Platonic notion of sublimation: 'So while thy beautie draws the heart to love,/ As fast thy *Vertue* bends that love to good' (71.12-13). As Astrophil admits, however, he cannot let go of his sensual desires: "But ah," *Desire* still cries, "give me some food." (71.14).<sup>14</sup>

151

Virtue and Beauty are poetically represented by images taken from aristocratic environments. In sonnet 9 Virtue is a queen living in a palace which allegorically represents the features of Stella's face. Her Grace, that is Queen Virtue, sometimes comes out of the porch, for example when Stella is speaking. Sadly, when virtue is looking out of the windows of her palace (her eyes), she 'can find nothing such,/ Which dare claime from those lights the name of best' (9.10-11). The common world is quite distinct from the perfection of 'Queen Vertue's court'. When competing with Jove and Mars, two other gods with aristocratic attributes, Cupid uses Stella's face as a shield 'Where roses gueuls are borne in silver field'. Phoebus, the sun-god, who acts as referee, then decides that 'the first, thus matcht, were scantly Gentlemen' (13.11, 14), i.e. that Jove and Mars if matched with Cupid fall short of gentlemanly attributes. In sonnet 21 the speaker refers to a friend's reproaches including 'that to my birth I owe/ Nobler desires' (6-7), to end up asking 'Hath this world ought so faire as *Stella* is?', indicating that a desire for Stella's perfection might be a fitting desire for a nobleman, after all.

Another aristocratic attribute of Stella's is her 'great powrs' (34,14) which confuse Astrophil. In sonnet 42 Stella's eyes are 'Tyrants', but also partake of a divine quality: 'Majestie of sacred lights' (42.12); and so does Stella's wisdom, referred to as 'wisdomes heav'nly sway' (51.8), experienced by Astrophil listening to Stella's discoursing 'of courtly tides' (51.9). These are specified as 'of cunningst fishers in most troubled streames,/ Of straying wayes, when valiant errorr guides' (51.10-11). While these images may rather remind us of courtly

14 Compare Berry, *The making of Sir Philip Sidney*, 123.



Title page of Sir P. S. His  
*Astrophel and Stella*,  
published in London, 1591

gossip than wisdom, they certainly provide an insight into day-to-day practices of noble ladies. Other courtly practices Stella engages in are singing (sonnet 57) and keeping a lap-dog (59).

By these last examples we see that these sonnets cannot be interpreted as exercises in the art of writing love poems or abstract expressions of philosophical or ethical concepts, as some scholars have assumed, but are obviously based on the specificities of a real-life situation. Many of the other sonnets of this cycle can also be interpreted as commenting on specific moments of the relationship of Astrophil and Stella, and, taken together, the cycle of 108 sonnets and eleven songs can be understood as a novelistic account of the progress of this relationship. The Platonic notion of the lover being rendered more virtuous through loving a beautiful and virtuous person, is explicitly adopted by Stella herself: Stella tells Astrophil that she loves him, albeit in a modest and rational way:



She in whose eyes *Love*, though unfelt, doth shine,  
Sweet said that I true love in her should find.

I joyed, but straight thus wated was my wine,  
That love she did, but loved a *Love* not blind,  
Which would not let me, whom she loved, decline  
From nobler course, fit for my birth and mind: (62.3-8)

Stella quite consciously takes good care of her lover, by not allowing him to depart from the courses of nobility and his superior talents. She thus emerges as a guardian of aristocratic values.

This role is asserted in a more emphatic way in sonnet 69, which records an understanding between Astrophil and his beloved Stella. Addressing a friend, he exclaims:

Gone is the winter of my miserie,  
My spring appeares, O see what here doth grow.  
For *Stella* hath with words where faith doth shine,  
Of her high heart giv'n me the monarchie:  
I, I, O I may say, that she is mine.  
And though she give but thus conditionly  
This realm of blisse, while vertuous course I take,  
No kings be crown'd, but they some covenants make. (69.7-14)

153

The image of kingship emphasizes the relationship as one befitting a nobleman. Being king over Stella's 'high heart', he may enjoy a 'realm of blisse'. In order to enjoy this monarchy, however, he has to make a covenant, to pledge virtuous behaviour. Virtue becomes an attribute of high rank, the properties of which are safeguarded by Stella.

What matters here is that Stella is not just a passive recipient of Astrophil's attentions, as Petrarca's Laura may have been, nor are these attentions unwelcome. Stella explicitly allows Astrophil to profess his love for her and give voice to his desires while she also sets limits as to how far he is allowed to go. She thus follows the practice recommended to a *donna del palazzo*, a 'gentlewoman of the palace' in the third book of Castiglione's *Courtier*. As Lord Julian points out, she should be esteemed 'no lesse chaste, wise and courteous, than pleasant, feate conceited and sober; and therefore muste she keepe a certaine meane verie hard, and (in a manner) derived of contrary matters, and come just to certaine limittes, but not to passe them' (191), she should accept a gentleman's praises as 'courtesy' (238). If he persists, she should 'graunt her lover nothing els but the minde; nor at any time to make him any certaine token of love [...]' (239); if she is not married yet, she may 'shew him whom she loveth all tokens of love, but such as may bring into the lovers minde a hope to obtaine of her any dishonest matter' (240); she should

with her deserts and vertuous conditions, with amiableness and grace drive into the minde of who so seeth her, the very love that is due unto everie thing worthie to bee beloved, and the respect that alwaies taketh away hope from who so mindeth any dishonest matter. (240)

*Astrophil and Stella* publicises a relationship which not only follows Castiglione's Platonism in that a lady's beauty serves as a stair to reach perfection, but also the practical advice given to the lady in making this ascent to virtue possible.

The progress of the relationship is marked by a kiss. As recorded in the second song Astrophil kisses Stella while she is asleep. Sonnets 73 and 74 take their cue from this stolen kiss. Stella, who was aware of this kiss, is, or pretends to be, angry, while Astrophil claims that Stella's kiss inspires him to write good poetry:

How falles it then, that with so smooth an ease  
My thoughts I speake, and what I speake doth flow  
In verse, and that my verse best wits doth please?  
Guesse we the cause: 'What, is it thus?' Fie no:  
'Or so?' Much lesse: 'How then?' Sure thus it is:  
My lips are sweet, inspired with *Stella's* kisse. (74.9-14)

154

Astrophil, or Sidney himself, is proud of the kiss stolen from Stella, and if she is displeased about it, she has to put up with quite a bit of poetical teasing. In this context we should recall that Pietro Bembo in Castiglione's *Cortegiano* considers kissing lawful and acceptable in an honest, and reasonable, love affair:

[...] the reasonable lover woteth well, that although the mouth be a parcell of the bodie, yet is it an issue for the wordes, that be the interpreters of the soule, and for the inwarde breath, which is also called the soule.

And therefore hath a delite to joyne his mouth with the womans beloved with a kisse: not to stirre him to any dishonest desire, but because hee feeleth that that bonde is the opening of an entrie to the soules, which drawne with a coveting the one of the other, poure them selves by turne the one into the others bodie, and bee so mingled together, that each of them hath two soules. (315)

Sanctioned by Pietro Bembo in Castiglione's treatise, kissing appears a courtly practice which may be indulged in openly, and be discussed openly.<sup>15</sup> The concept of Platonic love outlined in *The Courtier* certainly offers a frame to Astrophil and Stella in their courtly interaction. While the male lover professes desire, his female partner has to be 'circumspect' (190) and must not give in to it but should accept her lover's attentions to a certain degree, that is allow herself to be the object of adoration. This relationship she can then turn into a means to stir her lover to virtuous action and guide him in how to redirect his energies and desires.

In doing so, a noble lady in some sense acts as a hostess, just as in Castiglione's *Cortegiano* Elizabeth Gonzaga, the Duchess of Urbino and Lady Emilia Pia, her friend and sister-in law, act as hostesses to the assembly of gentlemen who, under the supervision of the two ladies, set out to fashion the perfect courtier. We can assume that this kind of female supervision also pertained to Sidney's writings, not just *Astrophil and Stella*, but also his novel, *The Countess*

15 Compare Hamilton, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 101-102.

of *Pembroke's Arcadia*, which, as Sidney proclaims in his dedication, had mostly been written in the presence of his sister, the Countess of Pembroke, and at her instigation.<sup>16</sup> As Katherine Duncan-Jones remarks in the introduction to her Oxford Classics edition of the first version of Sidney's *Arcadia*, 'we can almost picture the young Sidney sitting as entertainer among a cluster of lively young ladies.'<sup>17</sup> While the male courtier has to come up with the literary creation, the ladies serve as prompters to male creativity. Both activities, I should like to suggest, were central to the images of themselves Philip Sidney and Penelope Rich wished to promulgate among the circle of their courtly friends and, possibly, enemies. Platonisms thus gives these two courtiers the chance to pose as passionate lovers who are able to restrain themselves for the sake of virtue, and thus to aspire to the heights of morality and courtly competence, in short, to achieve that excellence which corresponds to their aristocratic status.

In this context what really happened between Philip and Penelope does not matter so much. As Katherine Duncan-Jones remarks, 'it may be that the whole Astrophil-Stella love affair was a kind of literary charade in which both real-life participants knew exactly what was going on.'<sup>18</sup> Possibly Sidney only jocularly pretended to be in love with Lady Rich, to indulge in a courtly pastime and to find a subject-matter for his poetry. My own guess would rather assume the opposite. From what we know about Sidney's, and about Lady Rich's lives, it appears difficult to assume that their love affair really stayed on that Platonic level which the sonnets describe. My suggestion is that they may have had a full-blown sexual relationship, which they could not completely hide from their friends in the Sidney and Pembroke households. This is why they may have created this façade of Platonism which the sonnets elaborate.

But be that as it may, what the sonnets do is establish a pattern of courtly behaviour which may then have inspired other courtly ladies and gentlemen, a sense of courtliness which accords to noblewomen an important role in coordinating courtly activities and guiding men in the path of appropriate courtly behaviour.

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16 Sir P. Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The Old Arcadia)*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1999) 3.

17 Duncan-Jones, "Introduction", in: Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, xiii.

18 Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 246.

Houses divided? Noble familial and class connections during the Age of Revolution and Napoleon

9

*Mary K. Robinson*

'Le mariage m'a toujours fait peur.' Ongehuwde adellijke vrouwen in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw

27

*Evelyn Ligtenberg*

Steekpenning of welkomstgeschenk? De strijd voor eerherstel van Gerrit Burchard en Adolf Hendrik van Rechteren

55

*Michel Hoenderboom*

The politics of presence. Place making among the Swedish iron producers in the county of Västmanland ca. 1750-1850

75

*Marie Steinrud*

De Belgische orangistische adel, deel II. De rol van de adel in het Belgisch orangisme (1830-1850)

93

*Els Witte*

