
John Lyly's *Sappho and Phao*: From Light/Dark Imagery to Shadows of a Likeness

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ABSTRACT

This article examines John Lyly's second court comedy, *Sappho and Phao* (1584) in light of its appropriation of the interplay between brightness and darkness. While *chiaroscuro* may be an anachronistic descriptor, the term points at significant similarities. This artistic technique was still new to English painters before the late 1590s. It derives from Greco-Roman approaches to light/dark contrasts and black-white juxtapositions. The Italian artist Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo introduced this skill in his *Trattato dell'Arte* (1584), which was first rendered into English by Richard Haydocke in 1598. Haydocke, however, did not use the term *chiaroscuro* directly, but interpreted it as the interplay between light and shadow. In response to Haydocke's translation, Nicholas Hilliard's *Arte of Limning* (1600) also elaborated on the extent to which a painter must capture the substance with the effect of shadow, especially when the sitter for a likeness is Queen Elizabeth I. Although these references could not have appeared on Lyly's reading list when he was composing the play, *Sappho and Phao* presents a cycle of pictorial episodes limned through the euphuistic effect of light/dark imagery, a dramatic device derived in part from Lyly's classical training and also exemplifying Lyly's euphuism (a subtle style of antithesis and balance).

KEYWORDS *Sappho and Phao*, euphuistic, light/dark imagery, shadow, likeness

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*The right coral needeth no colouring. . . . We commonly see that a black ground doth best beseem a white counterfeit, and Venus, according to the judgement of Mars, was then most amiable when she sat close by Vulcan.*¹

--John Lyly, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*

Introduction

John Lyly's euphuistic writing style illustrates the nebulous and ever-shifting magic of light upon darkness. Since his first prose fiction, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578), Lyly's works have presented a series of analogous effects of contrast to highlight both the antithetical and collaborative relationships between juxtaposed items. As depicted in the quotation above, black and white are distinct from each other, but in terms of their combined effect, a light image is brightened rather than shadowed against a dark background. Similarly, the deformed, dark-skinned Vulcan might not be an ideal spouse for the beautiful, white Venus of Greek mythology. And yet, the aesthetic disharmony between the members of this couple foregrounds the fairness of Venus, to which not only Mars but a painter was attracted.²

Lyly's second play, *Sappho and Phao* (1584), should be contextualized against his notion of interlocking light/dark imagery.³ It was first performed as a nominal rehearsal at the Blackfriars Theatre, shortly before it was brought to the queen's court on March 1, 1584 (the same year of its first publication).⁴ The play is also Lyly's only court comedy that introduces the coal-black Vulcan as an onstage character, with whom the ivory-white Venus has a need-hate relationship as

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¹ For consistency, "colour" instead of "color" is used throughout this article.

² In Lyly's first play, *Campaspe* (1583), Apelles is working on Venus's unfinished face (2.2.175-81). Historically, *Venus Rising from the Sea* was completed by this well-known Greek painter around the fourth century BC.

³ The title of the play has been modernized based on David Bevington's edition of *Sappho and Phao*. Since further textual references cited from this play are to the same edition, *Sappho* instead of *Sapho* is used as the name of the eponymous heroine throughout the article.

⁴ According to Bevington and Martin Wiggins, the Shrove Tuesday 1584 date of the court performance is established by the payment made to Lyly in the Chamber Account (MSC 6), which supersedes Richard Bond's assumption that the play had been performed much earlier than its first publication. For further details regarding the play's chronology, see Bevington 151-52; Wiggins 334-36.

though they were bound to each other like black and white, correlated and antithetical. Feeling unease while staying in the darkness of her husband's forge, Venus expresses her jealousy of Sappho's bright, princely court and is wary of this female ruler of Syracuse as her rival in beauty. Venus then commands her son Cupid to wound the eponymous heroine and make her fall helplessly in love with Phao, a ferryman whose natural good looks have been further amplified by Venus, thus shining excessively for somebody of low social status. Phao, feeling darker than bright despite his extremely handsome appearance, seeks counsel from Sibylla, an aged soothsayer who has been living in a dark cave near Sappho's luminous court. Meanwhile, Venus is accidentally affected by her son's trick, also becoming enamored with Phao, and suffers from unrequited love for her own work of art, just as Pygmalion experiences an unbearable adoration for his own work. The goddess of love and beauty, although denying that Vulcan's blackness is compatible with the luster of her whiteness, seeks help from her husband, seducing him into satisfying her unnatural love for Phao through his labor of crafting arrows in the dark forge. With the arrows made by his father, Cupid is instructed by Venus to "cause Phao to languish in [her] love and Sappho to disdain his" (5.1.50-51), which in fact has a more protagonistic than antagonistic effect on Venus's rival in love, for Sappho's mind is hence set free from the darkness. Struggling against Venus's hostile assault on her royal disposition and experiencing the sudden withdrawal of her unnatural affections for Phao, Sappho flatters Cupid into betraying his mother, causing Phao to "loathe only Venus" (5.2.21). Subsequently, Sappho adopts Cupid, usurping Venus as the embodiment of love and beauty, whereas Phao, like a shadow to its substance, must keep a certain distance from this bright new queen while continuing his adoration for her.

The play is indeed centered on the allegory of Elizabeth I, and Lylian scholars tend to debate whether it was written to flatter the queen or to subvert flattery.⁵ This popular and trite topic, however, limits the analysis of Lyly's writing style to his panegyric or anti-panegyric patterning. By contrast, this article reads *Sappho and Phao* as a cycle of pictorial episodes limned through the euphuistic effect of light/dark imagery, a less adopted but more direct approach to Lyly's dramaturgy.⁶

⁵ For example, exploring the dark side of human nature, Theodora A. Jankowski reads the play as a court comedy for Lyly to subvert flattery directed at the queen (80). Michael Pincombe refers to Sappho as "a comic heroine" (52). Bernard F. Huppé (98), Peter Saccio (168), John Weld (112), and David Bevington (152) all stand on the bright side of her queenship, interpreting the play as a panegyric that compliments Queen Elizabeth I on her likeness to the goddess of love and beauty.

⁶ Pincombe comments, on the early success of the play, that "Lyly's original audiences at court and at the Blackfriars must have been highly amused by *Sappho and Phao*; not simply because it is witty, but because Lyly does his usual trick of making black seem white" (62-63). Pincombe does not use colour confusion in

Light-dark contraries are rhetorical skills that can be traced back to Greco-Roman sources (such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Pliny the Elder), many of which were adeptly applied by Lyly to capture various illusions of likenesses that symbolized ideological resemblances. Pictorial visions, associated with light/dark interplay or black/white juxtaposition, were significant to classical rhetoric in Elizabethan pedagogy, with which Lyly had been imbued in his schooldays. Moreover, black and white were Queen Elizabeth I's personal colours. White symbolized her chastity whereas black stood for her constancy. Their combination served to denote the queen's eternal virginity. As a court playwright, Lyly knew Her Majesty's taste for colours and their rhetorical connotations, which were also of much concern to his contemporary painters.

The closest term in visual art to describe a similar effect in Lyly's dramatic writings is *chiaroscuro*, which demonstrates a chromatic interplay of extremes rather than a mere tug of war between them. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "*chiaroscuro*" is an Italian word combining *chiaro* (bright) with *oscuro* (dark). The term was not acknowledged as English until the second half of the seventeenth century. Pictorially, *chiaroscuro* is a device popular during the Italian Renaissance that renders light and shade in such a way that brightness seems to play with darkness. In the early 1590s, Elizabethan painters were about to discover this technique; however, it was not widely articulated in English until near the close of the century. The Italian Renaissance artist Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, although not the first to paint using this technique, was the first to write about the art of *chiaroscuro*. He theorized it in his 1584 treatise *Trattato dell'arte*, which was translated into a shortened English version in 1598 by Richard Haydocke, a physician and amateurish engraver. In response to Haydocke's rendering of Lomazzo, Nicholas Hilliard, who had been active as a limner and miniature painter of portraits of Queen Elizabeth I since the 1570s, published his pictorial treatise *Arte of Limning* in 1600. Hilliard's treatise includes a retrospect of his career, illustrating his acceptance of classical disciplines as well as the queen's taste for portraiture. Like Haydocke, Hilliard agreed with Lomazzo that light is significant to human vision, that is, when the light/dark interplay yields considerable effect on the stability of

its literal meaning but refers to it as a trick—a dexterity of Lyly, who used it to engage his audiences with a comical twist of classical sources. Similarly, elaborating on Lyly's metaphor of painting, Katherine Wilson writes, "Raising children has turned into an aesthetic experience of comparing colour contrasts, which readers might remember as being comparable to watching *Venus with Mars*" (58). However, Wilson limits this aesthetic experience to the pedagogy of rhetoric in Lyly's prose fictions rather than extending it to the visual effects of Lyly's dramaturgy.

colours, inadequate shadows tend to ruin the naturalness of a substance. Nevertheless, rather than confirming a three-dimensional effect in painting through the Italian art of chiaroscuro, both Haydocke's and Hilliard's approaches to Lomazzo increased their hesitation regarding the overuse of pictorial shadows.

Shadow as a metaphor in *Sappho and Phao* and shadow as a technique in Elizabethan painting prove equally unstable. The term "shadows" may refer to counterfeits, pictures (including paintings, drawings, and portraits), reflections, representations, imitations, and repetitions, or to something incomplete, lacking in light, partially lit. In addition, the play was performed by a combined troupe of Children of Paul's and Children of the Chapel's. If "children are shadows of adults" and players are mere shadows,⁷ Sappho, as the queen's theatrical stand-in played by a boy actor, becomes a shadow's shadow, one who is foregrounded against different layers of shadows as the background. As claimed in the court prologue of *Sappho and Phao*, there is no "hair so slender which hath not his shadow" (line 11). Sappho indeed has her own shadow—a shadow (a likeness of a virtuous queen) she would like to follow as well as a shadow (an unrequited lover) that would like to follow her. Incorporating the prosaic style of *Euphues* into this allegorical context, *Sappho and Phao* was performed before Queen Elizabeth I, the chief royal audience for Lyly to entertain, and of whom Sappho also plays as a shadow. Given the presence of shadows both rhetorical and physical, it is interesting to note that the first venue for *Sappho and Phao* was the Blackfriars Theatre, which, according to Sarah Dustagheer, can be imagined as "a candlelit, glowing and glittering playhouse" (18). Therefore, considering Haydocke's rendering of Lomazzo and Hilliard's artistic treatise as a retrospect of Elizabethan taste for pictorial shadows, this article examines how Lyly's approach to the light/dark interplay between background and foreground elements helps present a complex spectacle with various close and distant shadows of a substance at the court (brightened with the queen's glow) and at a private theater (illuminated by various lustrous materials).

Hilliard and Haydocke: A Retrospect of the Queen's Taste for Portraiture

A correlated development of the written works and visual arts produced to celebrate Elizabeth I was encapsulated in the cult of the queen, which, according to Roy Strong, unfolded as a sudden emblematic fashion emerging "in the years immediately before and after 1580" (42). This was also the time when Lyly achieved his

⁷ The notion of "children are shadows of adults" is borrowed from R. Nichole Rougeau's doctoral dissertation.

second success, *Euphues and His England* (1580), which followed his debut fiction *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*. The popularity of his prose publications also led to Lyly's burgeoning career as a dramatist for the Elizabethan court during the 1580s. Lyly's first play, *Campaspe* (1583), juxtaposes the male sovereign Alexander's overcoming of human desire with the painter Apelles's embrace of love and beauty. His second play introduces no classical painter; however, Lyly implies that the playwright was his analogue, enabling us to associate Lyly's dramaturgy with the portraiture of Elizabeth I, portrayed in many paintings even if she rarely sat physically for them. Hilliard and the Italian Federigo Zuccaro were two of the few artists allowed to paint before the queen in the 1570s. Both artists were cautious regarding their use of light and shadow, for their regal subject never liked too much shade on the likenesses of her face, as demonstrated in the extant pictures of the queen and confirmed in Hilliard's *Arte of Limning*.

References to shadows, grounded in the perspective of light/dark alternations or in the pictorial perception of black/white interplays, were more familiar to the Elizabethans than chiaroscuro. "What is shadow but the defect of light?" (Hilliard 69). Hilliard could not have agreed more with this formulation, originally proposed by Lomazzo. Lomazzo had become blind circa 1571, but his physical blindness did not prevent him from artistic creation. He not only continued to paint but also wrote on painting. In his treatise *Idea de tempio della pittura*, first published in Italy in 1590, Lomazzo begins the chapter "On the method of situating objects in perspective" referencing Aristotle's concept of "the true vision of lights and objects" (129). The success of this effect, in Lomazzo's terms, depends on the collaboration of three things: "the object [or the visible], the organ [the eyes] and the medium [something diaphanous and transparent like water or glass]" (129). According to the *OED*, "perspective" involves "senses related to light, vision, and visualization"; and it can refer to "[t]he art of drawing solid objects on a plane surface so as to give the same impression of relative position, size, or distance, as the actual objects do when viewed from a particular point." Although Haydocke's rendering of Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte* does not directly use the term *chiaroscuro*, he does acknowledge the need of "perspective" (*prospettiva*) in his preface, believing that "[a] Painter without the Perspectiues was like a Doctor without Grammer" (8). This idea must have been familiar to Elizabethans as well as to the translator himself. For example, Hilliard's concern about the effect of shadows also reveals his interest in perspective. He agrees that a painter's choice of adopting either a distanced or a close-up view of a subject—namely, the optical distance between the observer and the object viewed—determines the extent to which shadows rather than light are required in the rendering. Implicit in this light/dark interplay is the concept of

perspective in relation to the effect of vantage angles and optical distance. Hilliard appropriated this pictorial approach to his portrayal of Elizabeth I, who, according to her limner, testified that the “best to show oneself needth no shadow of place, but rather the open light” (65).

When the queen and Hilliard first met, the queen was curious about “why the Italians, the best painters, did not use shadow in their work,” to which Hilliard replied that “shadow was used only by painters whose pictures possessed a ‘grosser line’” (Strong 16).⁸ The queen’s assumption was as curious as her painter’s explanation, for light/dark interplay had been a pictorial fashion adopted by Italian painters such as Titian during the reign of Mary Tudor and by Zuccaro before his arrival in England.⁹ It seems that the queen had been misinformed about European paintings, that she had become fed up with superfluous shadows in rhetorical writings, or simply believed that no shadow was allowed to overtake the focal point in the likeness of a subject. Horace Walpole, an eighteenth-century English writer and art historian, states in his *Anecdotes of Painting in England* that “[t]here is no evidence that Elizabeth had much taste for painting; but she loved pictures of herself” (84). The queen especially loved those portraits without too much shade on her face—a principle that, as mentioned above, both Hilliard and Zuccaro, the only Italian painter whom Elizabeth ever sat for throughout her reign, had borne well in mind. Therefore, although this idea is adopted from Hilliard’s late treatise and written partly in response to Haydocke’s translation of Lomazzo, it is also a principle on which Hilliard had relied since his days as a court limner for the queen.

The queen attended most of Lyly’s court performances, but she rarely sat for her own portraits, most of which were thus based on the same or similar face patterns as approved by the queen, and then were eccentrically and elaborately adorned in the emblematic fashion of the time. Since the early 1590s, Elizabeth I had stopped sitting for any of her likenesses. Hilliard’s portraits of the queen in her final years not only traced the regal appearance in retrospect to some of the queen’s earlier face patterns but also aimed to capture the queen’s look in her perpetual youth in

⁸ I use Strong’s concise paraphrase of Hilliard’s reminiscence of his first conversation with Queen Elizabeth immediately before he started drawing her. For the original and complete account, see Hilliard 65.

⁹ Evidence also suggests that Lyly integrated his knowledge of pictorial metaphors into his works, or at least as John Dover Wilson acknowledges, he “evinced a considerable, if somewhat superficial, interest in painting” (136). For example, in *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, Lyly puns on the term “shadow,” referring to it as a friend’s likeness, a lady’s dislike, and a shade shielding a “beauty from the parching sun” (47). In addition, in *Euphues and His England*, he foregrounds the “chase virgin Elizabeth” (337) with an implicit reference to the “Sieve” portrait by George Gower in 1579. Moreover, considering the theme of love, Lyly refers to the Italian writer Ariosto, who lists Titian along with Raphael, Leonardo, and some other great Italian painters in *Orlando Furioso*. This epic poem, first published in its entirety in Italy in 1532, had become widely known in England by the time of Lyly’s early fiction.

a more allegorical and more goddess-like manner—a nostalgic approach recalling Lyly's portrayal of the queen's theatrical stand-in in *Sappho and Phao*.¹⁰

Phao in a Mirror and a Ferryman in a Boat

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Water and glass may function as likely media for the true vision Lomazzo defends, but their unstable qualities can also perform contrary reflections, as depicted in *Sappho and Phao*. The play begins with a scene by the water, where Phao, meditating over his life at Sappho's court, appears in the foreground as an alternate reflection of our eponymous heroine. Rowing onto the stage, the young protagonist regards his simple life as a satisfactory continuity between extremes, where "gentle labours in the day turn to sweet slumbers in the night" (1.1.6-7). His contentment is grounded in a commoner's understanding of the alternation between day and night, a matter of fact corresponding to what the author of *On Colour* says: "darkness follows when light fails" (5; ch. 1 col. 1).¹¹ The image of this free ferryman becomes the foreground against those who are bound to serve in court and thus live as if they had to "climebeth, standeth on glass and falleth on thorn" (1.1.3-4). The word "glass" is a tricky term in Lyly's usage, especially when we recall "Euphues' Glass for Europe," the hero's reflection on his short experience at the queen's court in England.¹² Figuratively, "glass" can imply a kind of reflection, or serve as a byword for mirror, a material that aims to reflect something faithfully but sometimes distorts the image by reflecting light at different angles. Furthermore, according to the *OED*, "glass" also carries the figurative meaning of gloss, connoting a "deceptive appearance, fair semblance, and plausible pretext." Thus, our first impression of Phao is of his eagerness to distance his life from court but, ironically, he articulates this desire in terms of a glass reflecting Sappho's sovereignty. Phao is aware of his unlikeness to Sappho in status, but he takes this unlikeness as a means to mirror the function of his "oar in a calm stream" with the effect of Sappho's "scepter in her brave court" (1.1.7-9). Phao is delighted to "rule" in his profession whereas Sappho is destined to "sway" by her authority. The ostensible discord between Sappho and Phao is twisted into an imagery of rhetorical concord, in which Phao appears as a focal character in the background who introduces another

¹⁰ During Elizabeth's final years, Hilliard produced two miniatures featuring the Queen as the epitome of beauty and love. According to Roy Strong, "One depicts her as a young girl, her hair falling on to her shoulders like a bride, while others show her equally young but with the crescent moon of Cynthia in her hair." The former makes Elizabeth the "Queen of Beauty," whereas the latter, as Cynthia, the "Queen of Love and Beauty" (48). For Hilliard's painting of Queen Elizabeth I, see Strong, figs. 26, 27.

¹¹ Although *On Colour* is included among Aristotle's minor works, its authorship is still difficult to confirm.

¹² For "Euphues' Glass for Europe," see *Euphues and His England* 322-44.

focal character to the audience, who, however, can only imagine this absent sovereign through the ferryman's verbal description. Sappho is rhetorically positioned between the audience and Phao, who is situated away from court but mirrors the reflection of a regal subject. In this opening scene, Lyly contradicts the reliability of water and glass. The water is not always calm, and a piece of broken glass can be as dangerous as a sharp thorn. This realization leads, in turn, to more confusing visions that Lyly expresses via the perception of theatrical space and with his style of situating one role in perspective to another role.

Phao's account of Sappho does not immediately summon her on stage, but rather leads to the entrance of Venus and Cupid, his first passengers. This not only recalls the goddess's affair as illustrated in black and white in Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, but also furthers Phao's paradoxical position, portrayed as observer and observed, a background reflection and a foreground participant. Contrasting Phao's contentment with liberty, Venus expresses discontent with her marriage and laments that she is an unhappy goddess confined in an inadequate space:

It is no less unseemly than unwholesome for Venus, who is most honoured in princes' courts to sojourn with Vulcan in a smith's forge, where bellows blow instead of sighs, dark smokes rise for sweet perfumes, and for the panting of loving hearts is only heard the beating of steeled hammers. (1.1.21-25)

Venus extends this lamentation into a reluctant comparison of herself with Sappho, who, according to Venus, "shall know, be she never so fair, that there is a Venus which can conquer, were she never so fortunate" (1.1.39-41). Venus's emphasis on her superiority foreshadows her fear of being substituted by Sappho, whose fairness and fortune even this deity of love and beauty cannot deny. As if she were afraid of becoming a shadow to Sappho, Venus is eager to seek recognition for her irreplaceability as an impeccable goddess shadowed by her other roles such as Mars's paramour and Vulcan's unfaithful spouse.

Venus's well-known and infamous history may remind the audience (including offstage spectators along with onstage Cupid and Phao) that this goddess of love and beauty indeed can be replaced effectively in many roles. Meanwhile, Phao is standing aside until Venus recognizes him as "the ferry boy ready to conduct" (1.1.56) them to Syracuse, voicing her doubts about his reliability. To reassure Venus of his experience in his trade, Phao says somewhat flatteringly: "These waters are commonly as the passengers be, and therefore, carrying one so fair in show, there is no cause to fear a rough sea" (1.1.61-63). Whether the waters are disturbed or placid is an effect of the quality of the passengers, of whom Venus and

Cupid are the first and Sappho the second in Act II. Moreover, considering the similarities between waters and mirrors, it seems that these media for the true vision are pleasant when the reflection of fairness is captured upon them. Thus, although a sea may be rough, the fear of it is not the focal point; rather, this rough quality should be observed as the background against which featured images stand out more conspicuously. Nevertheless, the closer Venus is transported to her destination, the more she is unlike what she sees alone in herself, causing her to shift between background and foreground, to behave as the one to command and the one to be commanded.

Fair though Venus is, she is a goddess more frequently associated with turmoil than tranquility. For example, the blind bard Homer narrates a topsy-turvy moment in the *Odyssey* in which “Hephaestus or Vulcan, by means of a net, caught his wife in *flagrante delicto* with her lover Ares (Mars) and held them up thus to the laughter of the Olympians” (Lyly, *Campaspe* 209; Bevington’s annotation 1.1.73). In the visual arts, Titian’s oil painting *Mars, Venus and Amor* (c. 1550) removes Vulcan from the scene while highlighting Venus’s passionate entanglement with Mars on the left and Amor/Cupid flying above them on the right with a bow and arrow in hand, as if this infant god were the cause of their passion and obliged thus to watch or undo their knot before the approach of Vulcan. Titian paints Venus’s affair with Mars in a comparatively dark, pastoral setting shaded with grayish and brownish hues, directing his viewers to experience the tension of a calm before the storm and clearly offering a pictorial example of chiaroscuro. Although it is unknown whether Lyly or his audience had ever seen Titian’s *Mars, Venus and Amor* in person, it is evident that at least Lyly had read Homer’s *Odyssey* and known Titian as a renowned painter of the Italian Renaissance.

Phao certainly has a role to play in Lyly’s revised version of Venus’s affair. When Venus asks him what amusement he can devise for his passengers to “pass the time” (1.1.64-65), he answers, “If the wind be with me, I can angle, or tell tales; if against me, it will be pleasure for you to see me take pains” (1.1.66-67). Fishing is not of interest to Venus, although she claims to have been “born of the sea” (1.1.69), in response to which Phao says it would be a blessing if one did happen to catch Venus as a trophy (1.1.70-71). Venus then corrects Phao, claiming that “a net” is more effective than “an angle” to achieve such success (1.1.72), which reminds Phao of the tale in which “Vulcan caught Mars with Venus” (1.1.73). Venus is clearly not pleased with Phao’s tale-telling, especially when he touches on “some tale” (1.1.74), namely, the “mere story” or “falsehood” about her (Lyly, *Campaspe* 209; Bevington’s annotation 1.1.74-76). To reassure Venus that he is innocent of spreading unflattering tales about her, Phao states that “[he] did mean to make

[his] tale" (1.1.75-76), that is, to make up his "discourse" or "narrative" (Lyly, *Campaspe* 209; Bevington's annotation 1.1.74-76). Thus, Phao can be a poet like Homer and tell tales while also pointing out its fictionality, or he can be a spectator and a fisherman waiting for any potential creature if "the wind be with" him. He can also be like Vulcan, who is perhaps behind the scenes ready to catch Venus and Mars, or he can act as a player in his own tale, rather than as a mere narrator, to delight his audiences, as reflected in Phao's offer of another pastime for his passengers: "if [the wind be] against me, it will be pleasure for you to see me take pains" (1.1.66-67). Indeed, Venus derives more pleasure placing Phao in the foreground as a player in her game of love than casting him into the background as a narrator who "talk[s] of gods' loves" (1.1.77). Not wanting to be overshadowed by any rumor in her history, Venus involves Phao in her new tale, turning him into an extremely beautiful creature who must rely more on a mirror than on his oar.

Mirror, glass, and water are interrelated terms in *Sappho and Phao*. Glasses could refer to mirrors in Elizabethan time; however, mirrors were not typically made of glass. Instead, steel mirrors were common and, for some delicate sorts, rock crystal became the choice of material, given its transparency and luster similar to those of water, which was also applied to Hilliard's description of "bright and transparent stones" (81). In his *Arte of Limning*, Hilliard praises "amethyst orient" as a perfect colour and a hard stone whose "water" is different from those "not of a thick or troubled water" and "more bright and lucid than any soft stone[s]" (83). When the water is "troubled," according to the *OED*, it is "physically agitated," that is, "stirred up so as to diffuse the sediment, made thick and muddy." The phrase "troubled waters" is thus used figuratively to denote "a state of agitation or disquiet." Indeed, Phao must stir up the waters with his oar to ferry his passengers across the rivers. Interestingly, whereas the birth of Venus might have disturbed the silence of the sea, those who are transported by Phao across the waters will become agitated sooner or later. As for the ferryman himself, he may have gotten used to a rough sea but is not yet ready for a mind agitated by the reflection of a fair look.

In Act II, Scene I, Phao's lamentation about Venus's curse corresponds with what Narcissus might have experienced. Leon Battista Alberti, an Italian Renaissance humanist and artist, in Judith Dundas's words, "considered a reflection in water as the origin of all painting, with Narcissus as the first painter" (23). Phao, once addressed as a "pretty youth" by Venus (1.1.56-57), is now acknowledged as a "very handsome" youth "with a small mirror" (stage direction) who even fears that he is too fair to be described by the word "fair" (2.1.7-8). "Mirrors," according to Lomazzo, "subjected to Venus, bring pleasure and satisfaction to whoever uses them well and to good ends, but cause sin and damnation if adopted for purposes

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of vanity” (142).¹³ In contrast to his earlier contentment, Phao takes Venus’s gift as something inadequate to the “poor estate” (2.1.4) of a ferryman, bringing him more woes than blessings, for now he can only appreciate his fair appearance as a reflection in water or in a “glass” (2.1.2), a device that not only reveals his “pride” (2.1.3) but also reminds both him and us of Phao’s earlier disdain for a courtier’s life.

“Ground glass,” according to Dustagheer’s description of the Blackfriars, was “added to the varnish used on the playhouse” (18). Although we cannot confirm whether a reflection of Phao may have been actually seen on such translucent ground glass from the auditorium, it was indeed an important material used for brightening Elizabethan playhouses and, perhaps, for creating “the waters” on stage as well. In Act II, Scene I, Phao enters alone just as he did in the opening scene. However, he is no longer presented as a free ferryman; instead, he speaks like a melancholy boy confined to the space of a shining body. Phao now falls away as a focal character, failing to capture his extraordinary fairness in the light, and then sinking into self-oblivion. He thus has no choice but to loiter as a shadow-like figure in the dark. Leaving his oar behind a mirror and looking into the waters rather than rowing upon them, Phao has lost his identity and longs for the self he cannot reach.

Sappho from a Court and Sibylla in a Cave

Following the first ferry scene, we are introduced to the courtiers’ reflective account of Sappho’s court and led to the narcissistic Phao seeking counsel from Sibylla in a cave. The former will discover a bright venue not yet presented on stage, whereas the latter seeks enlightenment from darkness into light. Lyly mapped out the scenes in the play through his manipulation of theatrical space. Both the back right and left side of the stage featured a door used as both entrance and exit; a central opening was interpolated between them, which, according to Dustagheer, “was used as what is now known as the discovery space, where characters or props were concealed behind a curtain to be ‘discovered’ at a particular point in the play” (24).¹⁴

¹³ Titian did associate the symbol of mirrors with Venus to compose another painting, *Venus with a Mirror* (c. 1555), in which the half-naked goddess is a relatively bright figure in the scene, turning her head slightly to the left as if to view her beauty reflected in the mirror from different angles. Two amours are waiting on her: one presents his back, with a pair of dark-greyish wings, to the viewer, while the other looks younger, facing Venus from behind her back. Each of them holds a mirror. One is placed on the left of Venus, reflecting her face; the other is smaller and held closer to her head from behind her, reflecting nothing but blackness.

¹⁴ Although Dustagheer here refers to Shakespeare’s Globe, she does confirm that “both the Globe and Blackfriars shared generic stage features” (24). Although Dustagheer limits her study to the period between 1599

By the end of Act I, neither Sibylla's cave nor the interior facade of Sappho's court has been brought to our sight, for it is not yet the time for us to discover them visually, although some related props might have been already situated in the discovery space. As Bevington suggests, "Lyly's symbolic presentational staging . . . invites symmetrical opposition . . . the 'houses' must represent the cave of Sibylla on the one hand and the bedchamber of Sappho on the other" (184). While the theatrical application of ground glass can help us imagine the supposed waters in terms of their pictorial and rhetorical effects, the configuration of discovery spaces may enable us not only to locate Sappho's court and Sibylla's cave, but also to explore how they are situated in relation to pictorial and rhetorical light/dark interplay.

Sappho's court is rhetorically revealed in Act I, Scene II when Trachinus (an experienced courtier) incites a debate with Pandion (a foreign scholar) over the contrast between the court and the university. As a court novice who has received scholarly training in Athens, Pandion can say nothing else than the word "altered" in response to his new colleague's curiosity about how he has felt since his arrival at the court (1.2.2-3). Trachinus, however, is so sophisticated that he seems more eager than Pandion to discuss how he feels about court life compared with university life: "In universities virtues and vices are but shadowed in colours white and black, in courts showed to life good and bad" (1.2.14-15). Whereas scholars are educated to imitate the past, accumulating knowledge from shadows on a page, courtiers are instructed to experience the present beyond monochromatic lenses, acting out a life of colour on stage that demands more dark/light interactions than the simple tones black and white may provide. Thus, Trachinus suggests to Pandion that he should "turn [his] library to a wardrobe and see whether [his] rapier hang better by [his] side than the pen did in [his] ear" (1.2.79-81). To survive court life, choosing proper outfits from a wardrobe seems more practical than tackling substance-less words. Nevertheless, although clothes are tactile reminders of a courtier's status, the outward effect they create on him is merely fashion. Obsessed with an object-like appearance, a courtier is likely to become a living shadow of the clothes as his substance.

Trachinus's advice triggers a paradox between shadows and reality as well as between the Syracusan court and Athenian universities. Lyly contextualized this clash in response to the pedagogical complaint made by his predecessor Roger Ascham, who was also Princess Elizabeth's Greek and Latin tutor.¹⁵ In *The*

and 1613, her citation of an earlier spectator's experience "at a performance at Christ Church College, Oxford, staged for Elizabeth I in 1565" suggests that the performing venue at that time had already been conventionally brightened up with "burning lamps, hanging lamps, and candles" (17).

¹⁵ Parts of Lyly's *Euphuus* series, especially the sections exploring the paradox between nature and experience,

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Schoolmaster (1570), Ascham comments on the valuable effects of foreign legacies, but soon sharply laments the deterioration of Italy in the sixteenth century because “now, that time is gone, and though the place remain[s], yet the old and present manners, do differ as far, as black and white, as virtue and vice” (23). It seems Ascham was concerned with the loss of classical values in young people’s education. On the one hand, Ascham approved of contributions from classical writers, including Cicero, who was one of his favorites. On the other hand, he denounced the degradation of contemporary Italy, seeing in it a country no longer deserving the good reputation earned by its forerunners in philosophy and literature. The contrast between black and white is thus compared with the incompatibility between virtue and vice so as to delineate the gap between the past and the present. Ever since the first *Euphues*, Lyly situated the contrast between the court and the university in the relationships of Oxford to London and of Athens to Italy.¹⁶ Sappho’s court is set nominally in Syracuse, a city founded in Sicily, Italy, but more likely in a moment of nowhere and of no time. Although Lyly depicts Trachinus as a courtier more sensitive to a “rapier” than to a “pen,” the playwright, an Oxonian himself, states early in the prologue at the Blackfriars that his art can make the “ears” in the auditorium “glow” (line 16), for he knows to sift “unseemly speeches” (line 15) from worthy classics. However, if his literary efforts fail to bring the audience from distraction to alignment, the artist, pleading in the prologue at the court, would hope Queen Elizabeth I, the chief spectator and the real substance of the show, to absolve all shadows of their imperfection.

Lyly’s dialectical configuration between the court and the university can be read as an alternative extension of Ascham’s rhetoric. In *The Schoolmaster*, the dialectical incompatibility between two disputing parties brings about a collaborative consequence: the characteristics of black can acquaint us with the knowledge of white, and the existence of vice can help us understand virtue better. In *Sappho and Phao*, Trachinus’s belittling of study in Athenian universities not only purposely highlights the bright side of court life but also unconsciously exposes the dark side of his commentary on living in Sappho’s court. Showing the superiority of truth to illusion, Trachinus says to Pandion: “in Athens you have but tombs, we in court the bodies, you the pictures of Venus and the wise goddesses, we the persons and the virtues” (1.2.21-22). These remarks further Trachinus’s doubts regarding how a scholar can “see more at the candle-snuff than the sunbeams” (1.2.24-25). However, where the candle-snuff in Athenian universities may not be

parental education and pedagogical discipline in the first fiction, were written in response to Ascham’s *The Schoolmaster*. Even the eponymous protagonist owes its name partly to Ascham’s pedagogical writing.

¹⁶ This prose fiction also recounts Euphues’s experience as an Athenian scholar travelling to Naples.

bright enough to enlighten one's view, too many sunbeams in the court of Syracuse may result in too many shadows, which may distort one's sight. Like the peak of scholarly achievements consequent to the black/white struggle on a page, the finest success in court is perhaps but the effect of an optical illusion.

This debate further develops into a rhetorical exploration of Sappho's virtue, but our knowledge of the queen is still limited to a conversation between a courtier and a scholar, revealing their dialectical similarities in approaching their queen, especially on the question of whether Sappho can be compared with other subjects or not. When Trachinus asks Pandion if he agrees with his conclusion that "Sappho for virtue hath no co-partner" (1.2.53-54), Pandion replies, "with the judgement of the world that she is without comparison" (1.2.55-56), for the superiority of her virtue is unstable due to the inconsistent perspective of the beholder:

John Lyly's
Sappho and Phao

Pandion. When I behold beauty before the sun, his beams dim beauty; when by candle, beauty obscures torchlight; so as no time I can judge, because at any time I cannot discern, being in the sun a brightness to shadow beauty and in beauty a glistening to extinguish light.

Trachinus. Scholarlike said; you flatter that which you seem to dislike and to disgrace that which you most wonder at. But let us away. (1.2.62-74)

Seeing a virtuous substance either by day or by night makes no difference, for what light influences is not true beauty but human perception. Trachinus's response to Pandion's explanation reveals a curious similarity between a scholar's capacity to flatter and a courtier's ability to decode, both grounded in the embrace of shadows, though with a desire to pursue substance.

Except for the name *Syracuse*, the location of Sappho's court on stage as well as in the play remains vague. But *Syracuse* is a convenient geographical term with which to connect Sibylla's cave to Plato's cave, for Plato travelled to Sicily and also intervened in the Syracusan court.¹⁷ In contrast to the glassy waters in the opening scene, Lyly begins Act II with the implicit darkness of Sibylla's cave. While beheld by some ladies-in-waiting from Sappho's court as a bright youth in appearance, Phao is dark in spirit, wandering to "[b]ehold Sibylla in the mouth of her cave" (2.1.14-15). The cave is set in a curtained discovery space, before which stands this aged soothsayer to mark an imaginary boundary between the exit from the darkness and the entrance into the light. Lyly's dramaturgy recalls Plato's allegory

¹⁷ For details of Plato's trip to Sicily and his intervention in the Syracusan court, see LeMoine.

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in *Republic*.¹⁸ In Book VI, the physical function of light to the eye is analogized to the metaphysical function of sight for the soul. The soul is compared to the eye: without light, it cannot sense the existence of colours, and certainly cannot distinguish black from white (129). Book VII furthers this theme, having Plato's teacher Socrates recount his dialogue with Plato's brother on the issue of education in terms of dark/light effects:

Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. (131)

Human beings are portrayed as a group of prisoners having been chained since childhood and brought up facing only the wall of the cave. Their view of the world is limited to what they can see in the cave; their lack of education prevents them from accessing the truth beyond appearances. Lyly seems to have integrated the allegory of Plato's cave into the curious tragedy of Sibylla, who claims to once have been Phoebus's object of desire and to have almost lost her "maidenhead" to this "godhead" when she was as beautiful as Phao and about the same age (2.1.43-45). Approaching this old woman, Phao considers her the source of wisdom that might help him free his soul from the torment of the fair but unnatural shadow Venus has cast on his face. However, the tale that Sibylla uses to counsel Phao is the unpleasant experience of how she became a fallen creature in darkness after receiving too much light from Phoebus, the divine substance of sunbeams from which she eventually chose to step back. "Having received long life by Phoebus and rare beauty by nature" (2.1.65-66), Sibylla suffers because she must live in a cave where she has a sense of the continuity of her life but can never have the beauty of her youth again. Thus, in contrast to being ever chained in Plato's cave but released in the end to be "able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but . . . him in his own proper place, and not in another" (133), Lyly's Sibylla "loathe[s]" to see a glass, disdaining deformity" (2.1.75-76) and hides in the dark to shun the shame of being seen in the light. Perhaps a prisoner from Plato's cave will eventually learn from the effect of light how to "contemplate him as he is" (131), but light has taught Sibylla to deny what she now looks like.

¹⁸ In *Campaspe*, Lyly has Plato, along with Aristotle and other Athenian philosophers, appear anachronistically to serve Alexander the Great. This play also contains references to Plato's *Republic*. Besides, according to Bevington, Syracuse can be seen as "a natural extension of Athens in *Campaspe*" (163).

Sibylla's exit into her cave cues the entrance of Sappho, a regal body supposed to be brighter than others. Sibylla's counsel to Phao is deployed in response to a pedagogical allegory whereas Sappho's encounter with Phao is portrayed through visual rhetoric. Act II, Scene II again opens with Phao lamenting his unhappy fate. Unlike his first tête-à-tête with Sibylla, Phao's beholding of Sappho for the first time brings about an exclamation typical of a commoner ("I never saw one more brave" [2.2.6]), followed by Criticus's confirmation as a courtier's page ("this is she that all wonder at and worship" [3.1.8]). Like Venus in the opening scene, Sappho requests Phao to ferry her and her retinue "over the water" (2.2.18-19). However, according to Phao, Sappho is so bright that she enlightens much in her surroundings while obscuring Phao's sight, in turn delaying the ferryman's response:

Phao. Madam, I crave pardon. I am spurnblind; I could scarce see.

Sappho. It is pity in so good a face there should be an evil eye.

Phao. I would in my fate there were never any eye. (2.2.23-24)

Our eponymous hero and heroine thus have their first conversation, in which the mutual effects of their sight are of much concern to both. Phao's poor eyesight does not weaken the charm of his face; instead, Sappho implies that such an eye is evil, penetrating her heart when she steals a look at his fairness. Sappho as a shining substance swirls in the sight of Phao, a reflected shadow who seems to have forgotten his former life and his opposition to the life of the courtier as he chooses to embrace Sappho's invitation to "follow the court as a page" (2.3.29).

Gradually, Sappho's regal imagery is revealed to us in her relationship to Phao by means of Lyly's approach to light, an approach inspired by an Elizabethan taste and already documented in Haydocke's translation of Lomazzo, albeit in retrospect. Light plays an important role in creating visual deception. The sunbeams and candle-snuff in Trachinus's and Pandion's respective references to the contrast between the court and the university belong to the same category: primary light. Such light, in Haydocke's terms, "falleth vppon and is received in that part of a coloured body, which is opposite vnto the body giuing light" (143). Although Trachinus sees the superiority of sunbeams over candle-snuff, Pandion perceives that they are similar in performing illusive effects on the eye without altering the true nature of beauty. Thus, when Phao is juxtaposed with Sappho, he is captivated as if he were blinded by Sappho's excessive light. When he returns to the stage in Act II, Scene IV, he once again appears as a victim haunted by a visual flash,

lamenting Sappho's indescribable beauty, not his own: "Unhappy, canst thou not be content to behold the sun, but thou must covet to build thy nest in the sun?" (2.4.3-5). Obviously, to Phao, Sappho is not merely a "coloured body" having received much light. Instead, as an observer bewildered by the vision in his eyes rather than by the mere reflection of his own, Phao sees Sappho as "the body giving light," and it frustrates him to live as a shadow inseparable from a substance yet never able to acknowledge its true virtue.

Emphasizing Phao's virtual blindness from overexposure to the excessive light emitted by Sappho, the final scene of Act II is again set near Sibylla's dark habitation. Revisiting this soothsayer, Phao is invited into her cave, rather than standing outside as he did during their first meeting. Presumably, this action is not limited to the discovery space but extended to the main stage, which serves as the interior of the cave. There, Phao claims to repay Sibylla's "tale of Phoebus with one whose brightness darkeneth Phoebus" (2.4.49-51), to which no "counsel" but "pity" can Sibylla offer to requite (2.4.52-53). Whereas Sibylla is suffering in the darkness due to Phoebus's brightness, Phao is entrapped in a tale with a brightness that is an effect of having met Sappho, for whom he reveals his love, complaining about something Sibylla herself might have experienced in her youth. So, if that which is merely an effect (Phao's tale) is sufficient to darken the original cause (Phoebus) of Sibylla's darkness, we can imagine how bright the source (Sappho) of Phao's tale can be. The paradox of Sappho's shiny effect is thus elaborated through Phao's visual rhetoric. With her overwhelming presence, the context becomes bewildering, but, without her dazzling effervescence, the tale is dark. Meanwhile, the conversation between Sibylla and Phao directs the audience back to pedagogical rhetoric. Before exiting into her cave again, Sibylla reminds Phao that things may develop into their opposites, just as "[w]hite silver draweth black lines, and sweet words will breed sharp torments" (2.4.141-42)—wisdom derived from Pliny's *Natural History*. The pedagogy of Plato's cave reflected in Sibylla's advice to Phao is linked to Pliny's observation of the contrary as well as collaborative qualities of black and white or dark and light through his examination of various aspects of nature.¹⁹

Sappho is first compared with Phao and then with Venus, who does not make her second entrance until near the end of Act III. But Venus's troubled waters have already come flooding in Act II, where the audience is directed to see Phao seeking bridges over them: first through Sibylla in a cave and then through Sappho from a

¹⁹ For example, Pliny personified the sun and thus regarded it as an organic source of light that "removes darkness" and enlivens the world (2: 197; bk. 2, ch. 6). Also, according to Pliny, lead can be divided into black and white (9: 241; bk. 34, ch. 47), and "[i]t surprises most people that silver," which is apparently white, "traces black lines" (9: 75; bk. 33, ch. 31).

court (both are implicitly set in part of the discovery space). As the bridges were built upon the waters troubled by the goddess of love and beauty, visual rhetoric and pedagogical rhetoric are integrated through the bridge between Phao's interactions with Sibylla and Sappho. Nevertheless, whereas Sibylla's cave is symbolically revealed on the main stage, Sappho's bedchamber still waits to be discovered.

John Lyly's
Sappho and Phao

Sappho/Venus in Love

Finally, we are drawn to Sappho's court—a place Venus is extremely jealous of, for it is brighter than Vulcan's forge, where the goddess of love is reluctant to stay. Considering Lyly's visual rhetoric and a performing venue that is likely to have been decorated with "opulent candlelight," "polished metal reflectors," and "ground glass" (Dustagheer 18), Sappho's lodge is supposed to be a luminescent place, fitting Dustagheer's description of "a candle-lit, glowing and glittering playhouse" (18), or at least not far from the one portrayed by Sappho's courtiers, or the one that Venus has envisioned in her jealous rage. Nonetheless, Sappho's unexpected emotion upon first seeing Phao in Act II, Scene II does not enlighten the queen much; instead, it darkens her mind, weakening her regal power to brighten her surroundings. The opening scene of Act III has been symbolically darkened by Sappho's melancholy, which can be thus connected back to the dark and gloomy interior of Sibylla's cave in Act II, Scene IV, a scene also supposedly presented on the main stage.²⁰ By then, Sappho has faded, suffering from unrequited love and withdrawing from sight, leaving her courtiers and ladies-in-waiting to wonder at the cause of her sudden illness. While Phao loiters as a shadow between Venus's magic and Sappho's excessive brightness, Sappho, like Sibylla, behaves as if she were afraid of exposing her defects to the light, sheltering herself in bed behind drawn curtains, as in a bedchamber set implicitly (like Sibylla's cave at first) in the discovery space.

In Act III, Scene III, the Sappho we see in her second appearance in the play is a lady struggling alone in her curtained bed, as if she were shielding herself from all eyes. Here, we learn more about Sappho's own voice, which belies our earlier impression of this supposedly unaffected, shining body, as reflected in the respective views of Venus, the courtiers, and Phao. When her chamber ladies exit the stage, Sappho immediately vocalizes her complaints in a soliloquy. To her, love is not a divine gift but a curse incongruous with the status assigned to her, and Venus is

²⁰ By the time of the first performance of *Sappho and Phao*, "black bile" had been known as an alternative term for melancholy.

not a protector of lovers but a persecutor attempting to challenge a regal body's mind. Finding it too late to "perceive" (3.3.97) the danger of perceiving Phao as a mere ferryman, Sappho admits that her mind has been wounded through the eyes—the most sensitive organ to light.

Given that the effect of light on eyes and objects may either help people experience a true vision or inhibit them from it, it is worth noting that Lyly has Sappho reason her inner conflict between love and identity through classical rhetoric somewhat combined with pictorial strategies. According to Haydocke's translation of Lomazzo, "Aristotle defineth Colour to be, *a visible qualitie limited & bounded in the surface or extremity of a darke body, which before it be lightned, is visible only in possibility; & by the benefit of the light may be actually seene*" (98). In other words, light enables one to distinguish objects by colour. In *Sappho and Phao*, however, too much light dazzles one's eyes, leading one to abandon reason. Having realized the dysfunction of her eyes, Sappho turns to an analysis of her own mind:

I perceive, but too late I perceive, and yet not too late because at last, that strains are caught as well by stopping too low as reaching too high, that eyes are bleared as soon with vapours that come from the earth as with beams that proceed from the sun. Love lodgeth sometimes in caves; and thou, Phoebus, that in the pride of thy heat shinest all day in our horizon, at night dippest thy head in the ocean. (3.3.97-104)

While Sibylla received too much light from Phoebus and has since had to languish in a cave, Sappho knows very well that love may lurk in dark caves as well as in bright eyes, according to the natural principle of the alternation of dark and light. Curiously, the more we are directed to read her mind, the more the limitation of her body is revealed, and then the more uncertain we are of what we know of Sappho. Although the rays of light may be refracted far beyond what one can see, the excessive stretching of one's body may bring about more pain than benefits. Eyes, objects, and a proper medium (as transparent as water or glass) are, according to Lomazzo, pivotal to the achievement of true vision, but the vapors in Sappho's account cannot be transparent; rather, they are the effect of water having been heated by sunbeams that would obscure her vision rather than clear her eyesight.²¹ In Haydocke's rendering of Lomazzo, the "refracted or broken light . . . is ingendre by the *direct* light, as it falleth vpon glasses, Christals, water, armour, and such like

²¹ In his eighteenth-century treatise on general philosophy, Martin Benjamin's claim that "[v]apours are the effect of the Sun's attraction" is applicable to the description of this context (5).

shining things, as are apt to ingender the same" (149). Therefore, if we compare Sappho to a mere medium for temporary reflection rather than to the essence of light for brightening the surroundings, it is not surprising to see that what she has perceived in Phao (a shining reflector struck by her indirect rays) is nothing but a face that can "dazzle" her eyes, making her "spirits faint" and then "die" (3.3.117-19). In short, Sappho is cast into shadow by the brightness of Phao, as if her reflection of light had been refracted through Phao into her eyes.

The eponymous hero and heroine become subjects to the goddess of love; thus, Venus seems to have won the first round in her competition between darkness and light. However, Cupid is blind, and so is love. Through the eyes, Phao wounds not only Sappho but also Venus:

Venus. Cupid, what hast thou done? Put thine arrows in Phao's eyes, and wounded thy mother's heart?

Cupid. You gave him a face to allure; then why should not I give him eyes to pierce? (4.2.1-4)

Just as Pygmalion's ivory girl, whom Venus brought to life, holds a fascination for her creator, Lyly's Venus behaves as an alternative artist of Phao, mesmerized by her own work through his Cupid-enhanced eyes. Light is important to the eye, and so is the eye to art. As Hilliard writes, "the drawer should observe the eyes in his pictures, making them so like one to another as nature doth, giving life to his work, for the eye is the life of the picture," adding that the "reflection of the light, which appeareth like a white speck, must be placed according to the light" (59). The eyes, brightened with light, enable an artist to make his pictures come alive. Nevertheless, Venus, who only beautifies Phao's face (not his eyes), has no power to deny her affections for this likeness of beauty that is enlivened through Cupid's arrow.

When she first appears on stage, the goddess of love and beauty is directed by Phao to her infamous background and is thus shadowed by her alternative identities. But, in order to compete with Sappho for Phao, she now places her other roles in the foreground in juxtaposition with Vulcan as her best opposite companion. She plans to "both play the lover and the dissembler, and therefore the dissembler because of lover" (4.2.29-30). Cupid believes that the best solution to "these extremities" (4.2.34-35) is to unite his mother with his father into a perfect combination of extremes. Venus therefore seeks help from her husband, trying by all means to curry favor with his blackness, despite his threatening tone, which may degrade her hue:

Venus. Come, sweet Vulcan, thou knowest how sweet thou hast found Venus, who, being of all the goddesses the most fair, hath chosen thee of all the gods the most foul; thou must needs then confess I was most loving. (4.4.6-9)

Vulcan. Vulcan is a god with you when you are disposed to flatter—a right woman, whose tongue is like a bee’s sting, which pricketh deepest when it is fullest of honey. Because you have made mine eyes drunk with fair looks, you will set mine ears on edge with sweet words. You were wont to say that the beating of hammers made your head ache and the smoke of the forge your eyes water, and every coal was a block in your way. (4.4.18-25)

The comical interaction between husband and wife illustrates a curious effect of black/white contrast, responding to a combination of classical rhetoric and Italian Renaissance pictorial techniques in terms of light/dark interplay. As proposed in *Meteorology*, where Aristotle comments on the rainbow colours, “white in contrast with black creates a variety of colours; like flame, for instance, through a medium of smoke” (561; bk. 1, ch. 5; 342^b18-21). Thus, “that white colour on a black surface or seen through a black medium gives red” (603; bk. 3, ch. 4; 374^b9-11). Through the function of light, the juxtaposition of black and white produces red rather than degrading into the gray produced by the mixture of black and white paint. Haydocke’s translation of Lomazzo also relates this observation: “[r]ed is made by the mixture of white and black,” noting that a painter has to know “how one colour will shadow and lighten another,” and “the light and darke colours may yeelde a sweete concord” (98, 105). Metaphorically, the concord between Venus and Vulcan is grounded in this contrast between white and black that is rendered by Haydocke as the best example to illustrate “the agreement of light and dark colours” in Lomazzo’s account, for “white agreeth only with blacke, neither can it been shadowed with any other colour then that, insomuch as they are both extreames” (105). Venus’s demand for Vulcan’s arrows is satisfied through a smith’s stoking the fire in his forge, where the black flames with glowing red coals are fanned by white lies. Thus, although knowing very well that his wife is acting more as a dissembler than a lover before him, or more as a lover of Phao’s than of his, Lyly’s Vulcan consents to work on Venus’s behalf as if he had become used to backing up his wife, whom he thinks “must have her will” (4.4.34).

Ironically, immediately after winning her husband’s support, Venus reels from her son’s betrayal in this seeming battle between darkness and light. Considering the convenience required for Venus and Cupid to shift between their house and the queen’s habitation, Vulcan’s dark forge, in juxtaposition with Sappho’s bright

court, is likely to be situated on the main stage, taking turns with the interior staging of Sibylla's cave.²² Behaving more as a goddess in love than the goddess of love, Venus relies on Cupid to alter others' affections in order to achieve what she desires. She instructs her son to shoot Sappho with an arrow that will lead her to "despise where now she dotes" (5.1.13-14). Sappho does undergo a change of mind as if feeling "a withdrawing in [herself] of [her] own affections" (5.2.3-4); however, Cupid only half completes the mission, for he reveals Venus's secret to Sappho instead of striking Phao with desire for Venus (5.2.12-13). In fact, Sappho flatters Cupid into betraying not only Venus's affections but also her profession. Usurping the motherhood of Venus, Sappho encourages her newly adopted son to use another arrow to strike Phao into "loath[ing] only Venus" (5.2.21). The arrow, as introduced by Venus in the previous scene, is "a deadly and poisoned shaft which breedeth hate only against those which sue for love" (5.1.41-42).²³

At the respective commands of his biological mother and adopted parent, Cupid directs his father's arrows to create a triangular deadlock:

Sappho. How now, my boy, hast thou done it?

Cupid. Yea, and left Phao railing on Venus and cursing her name, yet still sighing for Sappho and blazing her virtues.

Sappho. Alas, poor Phao! Thy extreme love should not be requited with so mean a fortune; thy fair face deserved greater favours. I cannot love; Venus hath hardened my heart. (5.2.42-49)

Venus receives more hatred than desire from Phao, who continues his unrequited adoration for Sappho. Sappho confesses her former love for Phao but acknowledges it as unfit for her degree (5.2.34-35). Given the complications of love, Venus, though a goddess in love, fails to control her love; Sappho, though claiming to be "on earth the goddess of affections" (5.2.70), has no passion to love; and Phao, although beloved, cannot embrace the one whom he loves. Struggling as black and

²² In comparison with Sibylla's cave and Sappho's court, Vulcan's forge acquires a symbolic meaning inviting other characters' and the audience's further discovery; besides, according to Bevington, considering the antithetical structure of Lyly's play and of his contemporary theaters, it was neither necessary to accommodate the third "house" on the main stage, nor likely to have sufficient space for doing so (184-87).

²³ The shaft, with its "feathers . . . of the night-raven" (5.1.40), is designed to harden one's mind. Venus constantly worries that the crow's foot is likely to make her look old. Whether intended or not, the amorousness of Venus is metaphorically darkened through the "crow" and "raven," creatures that often portend ominous events.

white chess pieces in the battle of darkness and light, Venus and Vulcan develop their relationship through a concord of discords, whereas Phao, as a shining reflector refracting Sappho's reflected light, is too bright to stay by Sappho's side, for he is likely to shadow the source of his indirect light. As for Cupid, he is discharged by his angry mother from bearing her "quiver" (5.2.82) and is sent by her to "blow Vulcan's coals" (5.2.81). Bathed in a colour closer to his father's than his mother's, Cupid is perhaps more suited than Phao to accompany Sappho in her new position.

Sappho in Phao's Eyes

Phao does not have much direct interaction with Sappho throughout the play; instead, he serves as a reflector refracting the indirect light of Sappho, and then situates himself as a shadow distant from the focal point so as not to dim the light of the subjects in the foreground. He regrets being recruited to Sappho's court, for he knows very well that to "behold the sun" is wiser than to "nest in the sun" (2.4.4-5). Making the sun a metaphor for both Sappho and her court, Phao describes his dilemma: whether to delight in the distant light or to be de-lighted under too much light. He is destined to keep a distance from Sappho, to whom he can only attach himself as a shadow, for only when a person is in the dark can he or she truly appreciate the light, which is harmful to gaze upon directly.

The two extremes of pedagogical rhetoric and pictorial language meet in Lyly's approach to Sappho through the eyes of Phao. For both writers and painters, to situate characters in perspective requires an artistic sensitivity to the cognition of the eye, the effects of lights, and the distance of shadows from their subjects. No focal point in perspective can be truly measured in comparison with its subject, because perspective, in Hilliard's definition, "is an art taken from or by the effect or judgment of the eye, for a man to express anything in a shortened lines and shadows, to deceive both the understanding and the eye" (51). Given that visual judgment and visual deception are correlated effects proceeding from the cognition obtained via sight, Hilliard takes the shifting effect of perspective as the cause for "the famous and eloquent Cicero to say, 'O how many things do painters see in heightening or lightening and shadowing, which we discern not'" (51).²⁴ This makes it sound as if a painter could see more than a writer. Nevertheless, Cicero's attitude toward art stemmed from his inheritance of Socratic philosophy and its dictum that "the painter educated the individual to the knowledge of his soul"

²⁴ Hilliard is referring to Cicero's *Academica* (45 BC).

(Stephens 33). Also, in *Tusculan Disputations*,²⁵ Cicero refers to the pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus as a wise man who “was so blind [that] he could not distinguish white from black . . . but . . . knew the difference between good and evil, just and unjust, honorable and base, the useful and useless, great and small” (204; bk. 5, par. 37). Although Cicero set black against white, he did not actually cast the former as a negative quality, nor the latter positive. Instead, by enumerating a series of opposing qualities, Cicero attempts to demonstrate that one’s mental discretion cannot be obscured by one’s physical blindness. *Sappho and Phao* is dramatized through such a shift between outward darkness and inner brightness. Blind though Cupid is, the archer successfully hits Sappho and Phao, both beings of light.²⁶ On the one hand, Phao dazzles Sappho with his luminous eyes but cannot control her mind. On the other hand, wandering as if blind in his surroundings, Phao knows what his mind is fixated upon but sees only Sappho’s brightness. The likeness of Sappho thus dwells in the eyes of Phao, who becomes a loyal shadow to the reflection of his sight.

Calling again upon Sibylla in the final scene, Phao is now more envious of her life in the cave, for this dark habitation functions as a visual reminder that the defect of light is a rhetorical device supportive of the effect of light. The cave shelters Sibylla from Phoebus’s rays while she continues to complain about the cruel divinity; she is not physically chained as the humans in the allegory of Plato’s cave, but has limited autonomy, only daring to move as far as the mouth of the cave. Also a victim of divine cruelty, Phao, trapped in a narcissistic mirror, is cast into the shadow of Sappho’s brightness and then obliged to live as a shadow for “blazing” (5.2.44) Sappho’s virtues. Although physically freed from Sappho’s court, he is not freed from where his mind is called. Instead, Phao must now ferry as a shadow that can never fully embrace or completely detach from its substance. Similar to that which Sappho earlier perceived, Phao comes to understand that “[l]overs are but smokes which vanish in the seeing and yet hurt whilst they are seen” (5.4.14-15). Once he is hurt, there is no remedy to cure his wound; only his perpetual, unrequited adoration for Sappho can somewhat relieve his pain. Thus, he says with determination: “wherever I wander, to be as I were ever kneeling before Sappho, my loyalty unspotted though unrewarded” (5.4.20-22). Since he cannot reach or

²⁵ *Tusculan Disputations* was published at approximately the same time as *Academica*.

²⁶ In *Euphues and His England*, the court lady Camilla gives a speech rejecting Philautus, one of her admirers. Her speech, on the subject of courting, uses the metaphor of shooting: “An archer, say you, is to be known by his aim, not by his arrow; but your aim is so ill that if you knew how wide from the *white* your shaft sticketh, you would hereafter rather break your bow than bend it” (249). The so-called “white” here, according to Leah Scragg’s annotation, refers to the “centre of the target” (249).

remove what Sappho has impressed on him, he can only have her reflection imprinted on his vision. He then remains a loyal shadow in the distance, for Sappho is eventually released from love, having no need to keep her former affections in the dark.

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Phao. Farewell, Sibylla, and farewell, Sicily! Thoughts shall be thy food, and in thy steps shall be printed behind thee that there was none so loyal left behind thee. Farewell, Syracuse, unworthy to harbour faith, and, when I am gone, unless Sappho be here, unlikely to harbour any. (5.3.31-35)

On the one hand, since Sappho is no longer here (namely, in love), it is not necessary for Phao to stay there, in Syracuse. On the other hand, since Sappho is already here (in Phao's eyes), it is not necessary for him to seek another substance. Unfortunately, what is caught in his eyes is not substantial but a mere likeness of Sappho. Thus, as a shadow's shadow, Phao can never embrace the true substance. With her likeness lingering in his eyes, Phao, whose name echoes etymologically the Greek word for light (suggesting his brightness and also the light of his eyes), serves as another reminder that a visible reflection of light is still a mere reflection and can never surpass the direct light of a subject no matter how much the effect of light appears in the foreground in juxtaposition with the defect of light.

Conclusion

In *Sappho and Phao*, a concord of discords is presented as an effect of contrasted light and shadow. Although the technique of chiaroscuro was perhaps new to Elizabethan painters before the 1590s, the common antithesis of darkness and light and of black and white was more or less integrated into Elizabethan thought and was applied by Lyly to paint some scenes of *Sappho and Phao* with interlocking light/dark imagery and then to visualize these scenes through the features of the indoor venue where they were staged. The discovery space was meant to brighten or darken the main stage, where ground glass, candlelight, and metal reflectors might have served to illuminate or to dim the appearance of some characters. This was enacted especially when both characters (players) and the audience were aware of the subjects and the shadows as well as of the effects of light and darkness.

Through the dramaturgy of light/dark interplay, Sappho, who must leave Phao behind as her shadow, is revealed as a shadow to the presence that is Elizabeth, whom Lyly entreats in the court prologue:

I on knee for all, entreat that your Highness imagine yourself to be in a deep dream that, staying the conclusion, in your rising your Majesty vouchsafe but to say, "And so you awaked." (lines 15-18)

In other words, Sappho is cast into a dream for the queen, the chief audience of the play, who has the authority to decide when she wants to awake. However, for those still entangled in the shadow opposing reality, Lyly's cast, as indicated in the epilogue, hopes the audience can find a way to feel entertained:

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And so we wish every one of you a thread to lead you out of the doubts where-with we leave you intangled, that nothing be mistaken by our rash oversights nor misconstrued by your deep insights. (lines 11-14)

A real queen like Elizabeth I might need no shade to enhance her queenship in Hilliard's painting; however, as Phao is to Sappho, there are always some shadows, such as those of Lyly's audience who have to "thread" their way from dream to delight, willing to view Her Majesty's likeness from a distance.

Sappho and Phao belongs in emblematic fashion to the imagery of Queen Elizabeth I, who was painted in order to illustrate her virtue and was written about in order to convey her beauty and chastity. Since around 1580, the Queen had been approached as an unaffected, versatile regal body, testifying to her constant inconstancy. Lyly's approach to his chief spectator was similar to Hilliard's approach to his ideal sitter, but slightly different in their responses to the queen's taste. Both acknowledged Queen Elizabeth as the best example to evince that something of true substance needs no shadow to enhance its realness. Hilliard believed that "beauty and good favour is like clear truth, which is not shamed with the light, nor needs to be obscured" (67), for a little shadow may enhance the roundness of a picture, but too much shade can ruin the substance's glow. The queen, in Hilliard's depiction, preferred to sit somewhere with more light than shadow while being painted. This limner was thus careful not to cast her regal face in shadow. Nevertheless, Lyly did manipulate the function of shadows in *Sappho and Phao*, presenting one after another before Her Majesty. Meanwhile, the playwright counted on her judgment, pleading with her to decide whether to retain or discharge such stage shadows that had been shaped under her sovereignty. Lyly expected Queen Elizabeth to distinguish herself from the eponymous fictional queen, for she was the real and only queen in her presence at the show and discerned the play of light and dark with both her eyes and mind, rather than entrapping herself in a visual deception. Thus, regarding *Sappho and Phao* as a panegyric or anti-panegyric is a

matter attributed to the chief spectator's choice as to what shadows can be perceived with light: a principle grounded in classical rhetoric and Elizabethan portraiture that can help us explore the visual rhetoric of Lyly's later works.

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