

“My wants and yowr perfections”: Elizabethan England’s Newest Poet

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MY title is taken from the twenty-fifth sonnet of the largely unpublished sequence of poems by Sir Robert Sidney, which has only recently surfaced in London after virtually disappearing from public view for nearly four hundred years.¹ The words seem to serve as an ironical commentary on the relative fame and reputation of Robert and his brother Philip. Before the existence of the 90-page manuscript notebook of Robert Sidney’s poems was announced in 1973, the younger Sidney was known as a courtier, a faithful soldier and diplomat, a loving husband and father, and a concerned horticulturalist — but not as a poet. References to his general literary interests are frequent, but there are few overt indications that he practised what he patronised. Ben Jonson wrote of how his children

. . . may, every day
Reade, in their vertuous parents noble parts,
The mysteries of manners, armes, and arts²

— which, at the very least, is ambiguous. In 1609, Chapman wrote of him as “the most Learned and Noble concluder of the Warres Arte, and the Muses,” and there are traditions that he wrote the lyrics in Robert Dowland’s *Musicall Banquet* (1609), and some verses in honor of his daughter’s marriage.³

While the poems that have now been established as Robert Sidney’s do not perhaps match the sum of Philip’s “perfections,” nevertheless their substantial merit and enormous historical interest should compensate for the “wants” his reputation as a poet has suffered since he wrote them, in exile in the Low Countries in the late 1580’s. The pur-

pose of the present essay is to extend work now undertaken on Robert Sidney's poetry,⁴ and by analysing the sonnet, already introduced, in the context of other poems in the collection, to open for critical as well as scholarly scrutiny the poems of a man who now must rank high in the galaxy of invariably competent, frequently magnificently eloquent lyric poets of the late Elizabethan age. A full study of Robert Sidney's poems must await a modern edition of the manuscript, a task shortly to be undertaken by P. J. Croft and the Clarendon Press.

The manuscript in question, now in the British Library, London, has been fully described by Croft and the present writer, and readers are referred to those accounts.⁵ My present purpose is to initiate some critical discussion of the nature and quality of its contents — the 66 sonnets, songs, pastorals, elegies and other miscellaneous pieces which make up the collection. It is of course interesting to speculate why the poems lay unrecognized for so long. Their initial home was in the Countess of Pembroke's library at Wilton House, and then probably subsequent to the dispersal of the Wilton Library by the fifth earl, and after turning up in Thomas Thorpe's sales of 1833, 1834 and 1848, they eventually found a home for nearly a century in one of the libraries of Warwick Castle.⁶ It is still unclear why so few references to the poems are to be found, but some speculations are in order. Neither before nor after 1586 did Robert have anything like the prestige of Philip, or even of his sister Mary — to whom his poems were dedicated. He dutifully undertook the prescribed Grand Tour of Europe, pursued by advice from his brother as to his reading, chivalric bearing, friends, and finances.⁷ He followed Philip to the Low Countries, was present at the battle of Zutphen, returned to England upon his brother's death, attended the funeral, and then resumed his tour of duty in the Netherlands in his brother's former post as Governor of Flushing. In the meantime, he had married a young Welsh heiress after some rather sordid negotiations

on his (and others') behalf; in fact, the marriage ripened and his letters to his wife are full of affection and sadness at being parted from his family on unpalatable or seemingly pointless military and diplomatic missions.⁸ Constantly exhorted to follow his brother's ideals, he seems to have been regarded by the Queen rather contradictorily — as both a convenient drudge and a somewhat superficial and irresponsible playboy.⁹ His letters reveal him, however, as a conscientious if reluctant soldier and courtier, even willing at times to pawn family plate in order to feed and pay his soldiers.¹⁰ His fortunes improved gradually during the 1590's as he returned home to Penshurst, and under the new reign he slowly acquired fortune, property and honors. In 1605 he was created Viscount de L'isle and in 1618 Earl of Leicester. He died in 1626, at age 63, having survived his elder brother by forty years and his sister Mary by five.

We traditionally regard Robert as the "other" Sidney;¹¹ certainly, until the discovery of the manuscript under consideration, we did not recognize him as a poet, and we may speculate about his apparent reticence not just to publish but even to acknowledge his poetry. Surprisingly few references to Philip's poetry were actually published during his lifetime, but it is clear that *Astrophil and Stella*, the *Arcadia* and the *Defence* were well-known, especially in the Sidney Circle.¹² But as I noted earlier, there are no references to Robert's poetry. Croft argues that it was customary "for the Elizabethan courtier-poet to compose and to renounce such youthful vanities in later life,"¹³ which is true enough, but settles nothing. Renunciation must have come much earlier. From some rather cryptic but important references in a few of the poems, we may speculate that Robert, in part, turned to poetry in the Low Countries, as an emotional compensation for his exile and partly as a dutiful attempt to continue his brother's literary ideals. A helpful parallel may be found in the literary career of his sister Mary. Her extant writing all post-dates Philip's death, when she

took upon herself the vocation of continuing his work in forwarding the Elizabethan poetic Renaissance. What had existed, probably, as spasmodic meetings of courtiers, poets, divines and family friends thereafter became a more organized "College," to use John Aubrey's phrase.¹⁴ The Countess' own work grew directly from Philip's inspiration: she edited his manuscripts, revised, completed (and in the process improved upon) his metrical versions of the psalms, and composed or translated a number of works dedicated to his memory and directly influenced by his literary theories. It is possible that Robert's verse was undertaken, at least in part, as a similar, although less public attempt, to continue the Sidneian literary revolution. He may eventually have decided that Mary, more permanently settled at Wilton, with the numerous comings and goings of Greville, Spenser, Daniel and others, could more readily direct the movement.

The Sidney family is a phenomenon unique in literary history. As well as having connections, through blood, friendship, or patronage with virtually every important and many minor writers of the age, five closely connected members of the family — including Robert — were themselves impressive, and in at least one case exceptional, writers. There is, of course, Philip, who has long been served well by biographers, editors and commentators. There is Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, not only the age's most important patroness but a poet of striking virtuosity — indeed, arguably, the most unjustly underemphasised poet of the age.¹⁵ We can now add a third member of this generation in Robert and to complete this remarkable family group, there are Mary's son William, not only one of Shakespeare's "incomparable brethren," but a subtle poet sensitive to the changing lyric fashions of the 1620's and 1630's, and Robert's daughter Mary, Lady Wroth, who wrote the prose romance *Urania* and an impressive although little-known collection of love sonnets probably modelled upon her father's and containing some striking verbal similarities

to his.¹⁶ Indeed, the connections between the members of the Sidney family are stylistic as much as familial. Although Robert's poems in many ways are in the form of a typical Petrarchan miscellany of the fifteen-eighties and nineties, they show a greater variety of metrical and stanzaic patterns than normal, a characteristic he may derive from his sister. In the Countess of Pembroke's one hundred sixty-five psalms, there are one hundred sixty-four distinct stanzaic and metrical patterns, many of remarkable complexity and subtlety. Many of Robert's complex rhyme schemes and varying line lengths are reminiscent of his sister's experimentations and in his twenty-four songs he never repeats the same stanzaic pattern. Similarly, there are clear stylistic affinities between Robert's and Philip's poems. He does not quite possess his brother's variety or intimate control of tone or mood within a poem and the emotions of his poems express themselves in broader sweeps and in a more limited range of themes — pain, disillusion, absence, death. More than most of the English *petrarchisti*, however, Robert shows a remarkable and consistent control of form, tone and movement strongly reminiscent of the finesse of his brother's work. We are dealing with poetry of an exceptionally high level of craftsmanship, written by a poet not just skilled in the conventions of a popular mode but committed to the value of poetry.

Perhaps the closest comparison we can make with Robert is with another gentleman poet whose verse existed in fragments and who often (literally) just dropped his poems into ladies' pockets — Sir Walter Raleigh. For both courtier-poets, poetry may have taken up a small part of their lives, but their commitment to its demands was intense. Like Raleigh, Robert brooded over the age's great commonplaces — time, absence, grief, deprivation. The thought of their verse is similarly weighty, as if they had experienced with intensity the emotions their poems reflected. Both seemed to have turned to poetry occasion-

ally to escape the pressures of the world, and both found in it a commitment that went beyond mere emotional solace.

As a first step toward an adequate critical placing of Robert Sidney's poetry, then, I wish to examine one poem, the twenty-fifth sonnet, in the context of the sequence as a whole. Apart from the advantage of its already being published and therefore open to public scrutiny, sonnet twenty-five, if not the best, is typical of the sequence as a whole.¹⁷ Most of the poems lead us into the familiar world of Petrarchan paradox. The lover's "sowle" exists "in purest fyre" (Song four) as he toils in his "bands of service without end" (Sonnet thirteen). He simultaneously praises the beauty of "those fayre eyes" (Song twelve) and bemoans the "paines which I uncessantly susteine" (Sonnet two). So in Sonnet twenty-five he contemplates the pleasurable agony of her itching "pleasure in yowr cruelty," but the poem becomes something more than the conventional complaint. I quote the sonnet in full:

Yow that take pleasure in yowr cruelty,
 and place yowr health in my infections:
 Yow that add sorrows to afflictions
 and thinck yowr wealth shines in my poverty
 Since that there is all inequality
 between my wants and yowr perfections
 between yowr scorns and my affections
 between my bands and yowr sovereignty
 O love your self: be yow yowrself yowr care:
 Joy in those acts, in which yowr making stood;
 Fayre, lovely, good: of these made, these yow are:
 Pity is fayre, grace lovely, mercy good.
 And when Sunn like, yow in yourself yow show
 let mee the point bee, about which yow goe.⁸

The argument of the sonnet is commonplace enough. It draws on the recognizable paradoxes of the typical Petrarchan situation, where love is presented as much as a psychological battle within the lover's mind as a conflict between two lovers. Its distinctive note is, however, the way in which the typical complimentary expression of frustration is turned subtly into a struggle for mastery. The lover starts by addressing his lady with appropriate despair. She multiplies his emotional tortures by her delight

in cruelty; worse, her very perfection (her "health" and "wealth") are highlighted by and dependent upon ("placed" and "shines") his agonies. The lover then proposes an argument, still (apparently) in approved submissive frustration. Because there is such an unbridgeable gap between them, a gap necessary to her beauty and to their love, he proposes that she should abandon such an unworthy object of her disdain. She should no longer love him, but love her own self. In its familiar neo-Platonic guise, the argument to this point is innocuous enough: just as the lover is frequently enjoined (as by Bembo in *Il Cortegiano*)¹⁸ to gaze upon the beloved's beauty as a means to ascend ultimately to the Beauty of God, so here the beloved is enjoined to contemplate those characteristics which make up her perfection. By not caring for him she will turn to her own true nature, discovering in her beauty an ethical dimension of moral perfections. Thus she will be saved the perversity of loving an improper object, and by revering her self, will discover the beauty of her pity, the grace of her loveliness, and the goodness of her mercy. She is indeed the source of the beauty of the universe, a type of its universal creativity — at which point the lover comes by indirection to suggesting the very relationship he has had in mind all along, one that in fact is the reverse of the high Platonic scheme he has proposed to her. Just as the earth is the center of the universe, even though the sun is the source of light, heat, and beauty, so the center of her orbit should be him. At this point too, we might look back and sense an ambiguity in line 10 ("Joy in those acts, in which yowr making stood") which is taken up in the overt sexual demand of the couplet.

Although the poem's argument grows recognizably out of the typical Petrarchan situation, it is developed with particular subtlety and neatly executed as the lover eventually takes command of a situation over which he had apparently had no control. The argument is carefully built up by the parallelisms and repetitions of the octave and the

increasing argumentative mode which develops through the sestet. What starts as a poem of compliment develops into a seduction argument. The apparently nonchalant, mellifluous effect of the octave is reinforced by the typical Sidneian (or perhaps more accurately, Philip Sidneian) use of feminine rhyme, creating a pleasing if commonplace tone of melancholic brooding. Then in the sestet the mode changes: the poet starts to use a much sparser, more cryptic form of address. The diction becomes less latinate, the tone more urgent and ironical. It is as if Robert Sidney's poetic voice has suddenly shifted from that subtle mellifluity of his brother Philip to the aphoristic irony of Fulke Greville. With the final couplet, the argument is further extended. Were it not that the analogy Sidney uses here is so commonplace it would be tempting to make a connection with Donne's "Valediction: forbidding Mourning," but the temptation cannot be entirely resisted: there is something of Metaphysical compression in this couplet. Robert Sidney is not using his couplet either to gracefully mirror the poem's delicate beauties or, as Shakespeare frequently does, to epigrammatize its arguments: here the couplet extends the argument, forcing the reader's response into an extra dimension of ratiocinative brooding, as we are made to contemplate not merely the conventional cosmic analogy, but much earthier, specifically sexual suggestions as "the point" of the analogy brings the poem to its fine, witty, direct conclusion.

"Yow that take pleasure" does not pretend to be a great poem on, say, the level of the best of *Astrophil and Stella* — or even of Robert Sidney's own Walsingham poem (the sixth Song of the collection), but it may serve to stress the degree of competence and sophistication Robert Sidney brought to his verse. Its immediate effect is to mark him as a poet a cut above the host of second-level Elizabethan poets like Dyer, Watson, or Constable, Breton or Lok, even (in the lyric at least), Drayton and possibly Daniel. What distinguishes his verse from such respectable poets or from

the anonymous verse of a miscellany like *Englands Helicon* is the consistent, and frequently remarkable, control of form, tone and movement. In most of his poems there is more than the conventional Petrarchan regret when he asserts that even "the most parfet stile kannot attaine" (Sonnet 11) to expressing his mistress' beauties or the pangs of love. Sidney is committed to the craft of poetry at a consistently high level. His poems are the work of a craftsman with a highly sensitive ear, and a range of tones which while not as broad as either his brother's or sister's, is nevertheless deeply receptive to the emotions of loss, absence, delay and loneliness. Such common motifs are consistently rendered movingly through the grave, deliberate melancholy which is the typical tone of his poems, or given an effective variation through stylistic contrast or carefully modulated argument, as in "Yow that take pleasure . . ."

Other examples of Robert Sidney's technical sophistication might be briefly mentioned here. As I noted, he was like both his brother and sister — constantly experimenting with different stanzaic and metrical patterns. Song thirteen, for instance, uses a complex 13-line stanza:

Upon a wretch, that wastes away
 Consum'd with wants: whose last decay
 threatens each night to see no day
 Some speedy help bestow
 whoe prostrat heer before yow lyes
 and casting up his begging eyes
 sighs owt to you his hotter cryes
 in whome his health must grow.
 A poor wretch
 but yowr wretch
 whom misery so driueth
 as onely that hee liueth
 his sens of paine doth show.

In this, the first of three stanzas, the complex rhyme-scheme (aaab cccb ddeeb) and the varying line-length (886 886 33 666 syllables) are reminiscent of the Countess of Pembroke's psalms. An effect of melancholic formality is built up through the first six lines, the two three-syllable lines then provide an effectively simple emotional node, and the argument is formally built to a sustained climax. A

similar mixing of lines of varied length can be seen in Sonnet one:

O eyes, O lights deuine
 which in unmatched face
 like twoe fayre suns, in cleerest heaven do shine
 and from so glorious place
 voutsafe your beames to move
 on humble mee to raise my thoughts to love.

Another indication of Robert's intense commitment to the craft of poetry is in the many interlinings and "tinkerings" (to use William Ringer's phrase)¹⁹ in the manuscript. These corrections reveal a man continually concerned with improving on his first drafts. Sonnet twenty-eight, "Ayre which about these wanton leaves dost play" is heavily revised, with only three of the fourteen lines remaining untouched. "Yow that take pleasure . . ." is more typical here, with one full line and a number of individual words changed. Thus line 4 read at first "and Triumphs leade in my captiuity" which would have slightly marred the formal parallels of the opening quatrain; in line 11 "composd" was the original reading of "made, these", and Sidney decided to make the point of his final lines clearer by changing the original "heaven-like" to "Sunn like". Although nothing as ideologically systematic emerges from such revisions as from his sister's, nevertheless, we can see that Robert must have worked over the manuscript with some care and judging from revisions elsewhere, in different inks, perhaps for some time.

I hope to develop these and other observations on Robert Sidney's verse in further essays. One especially intriguing aspect of the collection is the biographical level found especially in the sixth song, based upon the old Walsingham ballad, on which I have commented elsewhere, and also in an intriguingly brief, pessimistic song, number seventeen. While Robert does not seem to have written any poem upon his brother's tragic death (unlike his sister, who wrote three), Philip's futile heroism must have been frustratingly present to Robert each moment of his seemingly pointless tour of duty in the Low Countries, and it is conceivable that

his turning to poetry may have been motivated not only by his depressing exile from England, but by the melancholy of following in his brother's old post. The seventeenth song does seem to reflect some deeply tragic event in the poet's life. It is a brief melancholy meditation, in two stanzas. The first reads:

The Sunn is set, and masked night
 Vailes heavens fayer eyes.
 Ah what trust is there to a light
 that so swift flies.

The second stanza then looks forward to a new world which enjoys the presence of a flaming spirit the poet mourns, presumably his brother.

The rediscovery of Robert Sidney's poems must be one of the most intriguing finds in recent years in Elizabethan literature, and once they are made generally available, scholars and critics will have to significantly rewrite some of the history of the Golden Age of Elizabethan verse. As well, we now have to radically revise our views of the younger Sidney. Jonson wrote of his preeminence in "manners, armes, and arts." We knew about the manners and armes, but until the surfacing of this manuscript we did not know of Robert's "arts." In the rediscovery of the poems of Robert Sidney — "the sadd pilgrim," as he called himself (Song Six) — we have a major event in the exploration of our literary and cultural past.

NOTES

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¹The discovery was first announced in P. J. Croft, *Autograph Poetry in the English Language* (London: Cassell, 1973). Further details are contained in Sotheby & Co., *Catalogue of Valuable Printed Books . . .* [Monday, 18th November; Tuesday, 19th November, 1974] (London, 1974), Lot 390, pp. 95-101, hereafter cited as *Catalogue*. The existence of the MS. had been noted (with various inaccuracies) in Thomas Thorpe, *Catalogue of . . . Manuscripts* (London, 1833), lot 944, p. 156; (London, 1834), Lot 601, p. 153. For a more detailed bibliographical description, see G. F. Waller, "The 'Sad Shepherd':

- the Poetry of Sir Robert Sidney," *Dalhousie Review*, LVI (1975).
- ²Ben Jonson, "To Penshurst," *Poems*, ed. G. B. Johnston (London: Routledge and Paul, 1954), p. 79.
- ³*Catalogue*, p. 96; I owe the observation on the verses for his daughter, Lady Mary Wroth, to Margaret A. Witten-Hannah, of the University of Auckland, who is carrying out some invaluable research into Lady Mary and the *Urania*.
- ⁴See Waller, n. 2 above; see also J. C. A. Rathmell, "Jonson, Lord L'isle, and Penshurst," *ELR*, I (1971), 250-260.
- ⁵See nn. 1, 2 above.
- ⁶For the Warwick library, see W. Hilton Kelliher, "The Warwick Manuscripts of Fulke Greville," *BMQ*, XXXIV (1969), 107-121. The Greville MSS, now in the British Library, were sold at Christie's on 19 June, 1968. Another Sidney manuscript from the same source is an illuminated version of the Psalms by Philip and Mary, now deposited in the Houghton Library. A bibliographical account by the present writer will appear shortly.
- ⁷See e.g. Roger Howell, *Sir Philip Sidney: the Shepherd Knight* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), pp. 60-61, 129, 138.
- ⁸See e.g. *HMC: De Lisle and Dudley*, II, 145, 160, 164.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, II, 440.
- ¹⁰*CSP: Domestic, 1591-1594*, p. 209; *HMC: De L'isle and Dudley*, II, 257.
- ¹¹Cf. J. B. James; "The Other Sidney," *History Today*, XV (1965), 183-190.
- ¹²William A. Ringler, Jr. (ed.), *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. lxi; *Catalogue*, p. 96.
- ¹³*Catalogue*, p. 96.
- ¹⁴*Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. O. L. Dick (London: Secker and Warburg, 1962), p. 220.
- ¹⁵Recent scholarship on the Countess of Pembroke includes J. C. A. Rathmell, "Hopkins, Ruskin and the Sidney Psalter", *Lon. Mag.* VI. ii (1959), 51; *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke*, ed. J. C. A. Rathmell (New York: New York University Press, 1963); G. F. Waller, "Mary Sidney's *Dialogue*," *AN&Q*, IX (1971), 100-102; "This Matching of Contraries: Calvinism and Courtly Philosophy in the Sidney Psalms", *ES*, LV (1974), 22-31; "The Manuscript Variants of the Countess of Pembroke's PSALMS", *RES*, n.s. XXVII (1975).
- ¹⁶For recent work on William, third Earl of Pembroke, see Brian O'Farrell, "Politician, Patron, Poet: William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke, 1580-1630," unpub. doct. diss. (UCLA, 1966), Gaby E. Onderwyser (ed.), *Poems written by the Right Honourable William Earl of Pembroke* (Berkeley, Augustan Reprint Society, 1959). There is little recent work of substance on Mary Wroth, but see note 4 above.
- ¹⁷The text of Sonnet twenty-five is taken from Croft, I, no. 22. Other texts are cited from *Catalogue*.
- ¹⁸Baldessar Castiglione, *The Books of The Courtier*, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby, introd. W. H. D. Rouse (London: J. M. Dent, 1928), pp. 320-321.
- ¹⁹Ringler, p. 502.