

Sidney's Old Arcadia: A Renaissance Pastoral Romance

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RENAISSANCE pastoral romance is a type of literature capable — notwithstanding its fundamentally rigid conditions — of considerable assimilation and variation. "We may do well to remember," stresses Walter Davis, "that this most hospitable of genres had opened its arms to epic games, dream vision, mystic love story, Platonic dialogue, autobiography, patriotic celebrations, courtly compliment, Ovidian myth, Greek romantic melodrama, tournaments, warfare, satire, theology and sea fights before it ever reached Sidney's hands."¹ Failure to recognize this seems to have led E. M. W. Tillyard to conclude that the *Old Arcadia* is not legitimate pastoral.² Accordingly, he probably would have agreed that

In spite of its title and its reputation the elements of Romance and Pastoral in the *Arcadia* are not of primary importance. The pastoral setting is merely decorative. Confined mainly to the eclogues with which each book ends, it amounts to little more than a series of poetic interludes. Loosely attached to the main story, these occasionally supply a vaguely pertinent comment on some aspect of Love-and-Fortune required by the plot.³

In the *Old Arcadia* there is really only a single setting, the pastoral countryside of famed Arcadia, a description of which opens the tale and ends in this manner:

Even the *Muses* seemed to approve their good determinacôn, by chosing that Contrie as their cheefest repairing place, and by bestowing their perfections so largely there, that the very *Sheperdes* them selves had their fancyes opened to so highe Conceiptes (as the moste learned of other nations have bene longe tyme since content) bothe to borrow theyre names, and imitate their Conning.⁴

Other places, such as the neighbouring country of Laconia on whose shores the princes are cast, or distant lands of former

adventure, are described briefly and by way of contrast. Even Kerxenus's house, where Pyrocles is taken after the shipwreck and which stands just beyond Basilius's rural retreat, lies outside the pastoral setting. Or at least it does for everyone except Pyrocles, who through love transforms it almost at once into the enchanted land that he is about to enter. With some trepidation does he try to explain this change to his bewildered and sceptical friend, Musidorus:

And Lorde, deare Cossyn (sayde hee) dothe not the pleasantnes of this place, carry in yt self sufficyent Rewarde, for any tyme lost in yt or for anye suche daunger that mighte ensewe? Doo yow not see howe every thinge Conspires together to make this place a heavenly Dwelling?

(IV, 12)

The physical beauty of the Arcadian landscape, and particularly the immediate locale of Basilius's residence that the princes now enter, serves as more than a background in which to act out the story. It mirrors the new state of their lives, offering a distinct point of contact between the inner and outer world, between man and nature, nature and art, indeed between the natural and the supernatural. The pastoral scene, observes Davis again, "is always presented as the place where the natural and the supernatural join, where heaven meets earth (often, concretely, as a place habitually visited by the pagan gods)."⁶ Hence, within this rarefied atmosphere, especially during moments of emotional intensity, sites and objects are chosen with particular care, and regular narrative gives way to poetic prose and poetry. Easily the most outstanding example of this in the *Old Arcadia* is the cave meeting between Pyrocles and Basilius's wife, Gynecia. In search of Musidorus, Pyrocles happens upon the cave's mouth, "made, as yt shoulde seeme by nature in despyte of Arte, so fittly did the riche growying Marble serve to beutify the vaulte of the first entrie: Under foote the ground seemed mynerall yeelding suche a glistering shewe of gold in yt as they say the River *Tagus* carryes in his sandy bedd, the Cave framed oute to many good spacyous Rowmes, even suche as the self liking men have with long and learned Delicacy founde oute the moste easefull" (IV, 169). Here Pyrocles yields to a flood of thoughts and then to a doleful song in order to assuage his spirits. But shortly, from within the cave is heard a

similar complaint, almost an echo of his own heart, which tempts him to seek the identity of its owner. Only too late does he realize that it belongs to Gynecia who, recognizing him at once, confronts him in a "Rage of Love." Without seeking very far, it becomes apparent that the cave entered by the hero is to be associated with the Feminine principle, bound up in sex and mystery, pleasure and pain, life and death. Furthermore, it is at this juncture, pressed by Gynecia, that Pyrocles initiates his tragi-comic intrigue with the royal couple, which marks the beginning of the dénouement. The cave, from this point onward, both directly and indirectly, plays a role of special significance.

Contrary to Danby's view, then, the pastoral setting is of prime importance in the story, for not only does it provide an effective stage for the central condition of love but actually becomes an integral part of it. Within an ideal world the *Old Arcadia* explores the very nature of love, considering its causes and effects, its various attitudes and possibilities. And in doing so, it moves squarely in terms of Renaissance pastoral romance. Love causes Pyrocles to dress as an Amazon and Musidorus to disguise himself as a shepherd, transforming "the one in Sexe, and the other in state . . ." (IV, 39). Love causes Basilius, an elderly and respected ruler, dotishly to court the feminized prince, and his wife Gynecia, chaste and passionate, to strive against her husband. Love causes a princess, Pamela, to be basely and covertly wooed, and her sister, Philoclea, amorously to contend against her parents. Perhaps above all else, therefore, love transforms the individual, forcing the lover to question the very nature of things, as Philoclea does in this fashion:

Shee founde a burning affection towards *Cleophila* [i.e., the disguised Pyrocles], an unquyet desyer to bee with her, and yet shee founde that the very presence kyndled her desyer; And examening in her self the same desyer, yet coulde shee not knowe to what the desyer enclnyed, sometyme she woulde compare the Love shee bare to *Cleophila*, with the naturall good will shee bare to her sister, but shee perceyved yt had an other kynde of working: Sometyme shee woulde wish *Cleophila* had bene a Man, and her Brother, and yet in truthe yt was no Brotherly Love shee desyered of her. But, thus like a sweete mynde, not muche traversed in the Cumbers of these greeffes she woulde eeven yeelde to the burthen, rather suffering sorowe, to take a full possession, then exercysing any way her mynde, how to redress yt? (IV, 93)

All the lovers are given ample opportunity to express themselves on this subject, which quite regularly takes the form of conventional love complaints and intellectualized debate. At the beginning of the story, for example, Pyrocles argues with his cousin that love is "the highest power of the mynde" (IV, 19), a view repeatedly expressed by Basilius and others. But to the more philosophical and as yet uninitiated Musidorus, love of woman is not only unnatural but "the barest and fruitlessest of all passyons . . ." (IV, 16). Only later, having once cast eyes upon Pamela, is he forced to recant before his amused friend, unsure now whether to give it a "heavenly or hellish tytle." To be sure, it is this sense of ambivalence in the extreme, this paradoxical and completely polarized attitude to love, which predominates throughout the work, regarding it simultaneously as "a cup of poison," a "disease" and as something to be associated with the heavenly spheres.

Though perhaps less a celebration of love than Montemayor's *Diana* and more of a study, the *Old Arcadia* is essentially of the same tradition. Directly influenced by the pastoral romance,⁶ Sidney took up its fundamental issues and considerably complicated them. The Renaissance theme of friendship is obviously still important; and the contrasting values involved in pastoral and public life are repeatedly discussed, principally by Kalandar and Philanax in relation to the Duke's retirement and by the two princes due to their sudden metamorphoses. But love, while remaining the central issue, moves outward to affect and be affected by these other aspects of life. Basilius, for instance, withdraws from public life because of a riddling Delphic prophecy; yet his decision to return, misinterpreting the oracle in his own favour, comes as a direct consequence of his amorous designs on the Amazonian Pyrocles. Furthermore, though Pamela's and Philoclea's filial disobedience clearly results from their love of the princes, its roots lie in unjust family treatment. Consequently, not only is there a more complex approach than formerly taken to love in the *Old Arcadia*, but there is also one of increased realism and maturity.

In just about every case love disturbs the natural order, not only dividing the individual self but separating friend from

friend, members within families, alienating sections of society, even threatening ruin to countries. The main statement along these lines is given, ironically, to Gynecia who has not only failed to win Pyrocles to her bed but must tolerate the mistaken embraces of her husband. Afterwards she chastizes him in this manner.

Remember the wronge yow doo to mee, yt ys not onely to mee but to youre Children, whome yow had of mee, to youre Contrey, when they shall fynde they are commaunded by hym that cannot commaund his owne undecent appetites. Lastly to youre self, since with these paynes, yow doo but buylde up a howse of shame to dwell in. . . . (IV, 258)

In various basic ways the natural hierarchy may even be reversed, with reason being overthrown and rulers ruled. Pyrocles's womanish attire, as Musidorus points out, is an indication of this upset. And the scene in which the old Duke publicly prostrates himself before a young man he believes to be a woman portrays the extent of the violation.

Sidney's attitude to love, therefore, and for that matter to life generally, is far from simple. No easy answers are given and no perfect resolutions. He would likely agree with Philanax "that wisdome and vertue bee the onely destinies appointed to man to followe . . ." (IV, 4), yet he would undoubtedly grant to the princes that sexual love can be all but irresistible. William A. Ringler, in considering *Astrophil and Stella*, attempts to sum up Sidney's position in this way: ". . . though he can rationally believe that reason should prevail over the senses, that worship of the loved one is an idolatry that destroys the worshipper, that physical beauty is no more than a dim shadow of the Platonic God, that our duty is not to regard this life but to prepare for the next, though all this is true, it is 'yet true that I must Stella love' (5)."⁷

We should be especially careful, accordingly, about limiting Sidney's attitude to any single point of view or individual character. In stressing the importance of Musidorus's initial pronouncement against passionate love, for example, not only is there a danger of failing to grasp the variety and complexity of love, and above all its colossal power, but of missing the humour of the situation. For the *Old Arcadia* is an enjoyment of love as

well as a study. Pyrocles's transvestism, as Mark Rose insists, is the outward expression of the prince's disordered natural state.⁸ But our response is meant to extend beyond this, as Sidney himself makes clear in *The Defence of Poesie*:

So in *Hercules*, painted with his great beard, and furious countenance, in a womans attyre, spinning, at *Omphales* commaundement, it breedes both delight and laughter: for the representing of so straunge a power in Love, procures delight, and the scornefulness of the action, stirreth laughter. (III, 40)

Much pleasure and amusement concerning the vagaries of love is certainly intended during the course of the narrative. It is only as the dénouement unfolds that the full moral implications are insisted upon, being firmly established by the just ruler, Evarchus, in his final judgment. With regard to the suggested mitigating circumstances of love, he concludes

. . . that unbrydeled Desyer wch ys intituled Love mighte purge suche a sickness as this, surely wee shoulde have many Loving excuses of hatefull myscheefes: Nay, rather no myscheef shoulde bee committed that shoulde not bee vailed under the name of Love. . . . But love may have no suche priviledge. That sweete and heavenly uniting of the myndes, wch properly ys called Love, hathe no other knott but vertue: And therefore, yf yt bee a Right Love, yt can never slyde into any action yt ys not vertuous. (IV, 378-79)

In this pastoral world of the *Old Arcadia* everything is measured against an ideal standard, each of the lovers falling short of it in one way or another. Because it moves within the sphere of romance the tale is able to end happily, relying necessarily upon "love" potions, *deus ex machina*, ensemble scenes and similar conventions. Yet it is a form of literature well suited to a number of Sidney's most fundamental poetic principles, as he himself indicates in *The Defence*. The business of the poet, he declares, is to create the illusion of a higher reality, a "golden" rather than a "brasen" world, a sphere fit for idealized characters in which prevails a sense of poetic justice. It is different alike from this world and the next, but partakes of both, achieving a state which nature strives unavailingly to reach.⁹

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich Tapistry as diverse Poets have done, neither with so pleasaunt rivers, fruitfull trees, sweete smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loved

earth more lovely: her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden. But let those things alone and goe to man, for whom as the other things are, so it seemeth in him her uttermost conning is imploied: & know whether she have brought fourth so true a lover as *Theagenes*, so constant a friend as *Pylades*, so valiant a man as *Orlando*, so right a prince as *Xenophons Cyrus*, so excellent a man every way as *Virgils Aeneas*. (*The Defence of Poesie*, III, 8)

Sidney approved the mingling of genres, though he stressed that it must be done with "decency" and "discretion": ". . . some *Poesies* have coupled together two or three kindes, as the *Tragicall* and *Comicall*, whereupon is risen the *Tragicomicall*, some in the maner have mingled prose and verse, as *Sanazara* and *Boetius*; some have mingled matters *Heroicall* and *Pastorall*, but that commeth all to one in this question, for if severed they be good, the conjunction cannot be hurtfull . . ." (*The Defence of Poesie*, III, 22). With the *Old Arcadia* he took the genre and began testing its possibilities. Into a golden world of love he introduced a variety of literary kinds, including both tragedy and comedy, pastoral and heroic. In addition, he brought with him a greater seriousness of purpose than was usual, seeking not only to delight the reader but to "teache and moove to a truth." This emphasis, again, becomes more apparent toward the end of the work, and must have figured largely in his decision to revise it. Apparently Sidney discovered, in the course of writing the *Old Arcadia*, that its pastoral basis was not broad enough to allow for a fuller treatment of these "mingled matters" or weighty enough to support his more profound intentions — and hence, probably a short while later, began its recasting.

NOTES

¹"A Map of Arcadia: Sidney's Romance in its Tradition," in Walter Davis and Richard Lanham, *Sidney's Arcadia*, Yale Studies in English, 158 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 168.

²*The English Epic and its Background* (1954; rept. London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 296.

³John Danby, *Poets on Fortune's Hill. Studies in Sidney, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher* (1952; rept. Port Washington, N.Y., Kennikat Press), pp. 47-48.

⁴*The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols. (1912; rept. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 4, 1. Hereinafter, all references to Sidney's *Arcadia* (in its various Elizabethan versions) and

The Defence of Poesie are to this edition. The nomenclature followed here with regard to the *Arcadia*, first employed by Samuel Wolff, *The Greek Romances in Elizabethan Prose Fiction* (1912; rept. New York: Burt Franklin, 1961) pp. 344-346, has become standard usage.

⁵Walter Davis, *Idea and Act in Elizabethan Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 57.

⁶See T. P. Harrison, Jr., "A Source of Sidney's 'Arcadia,'" *University of Texas Studies*, 6 (1926), 56-58.

⁷William A. Ringler, Jr., ed., Introduction, *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. xlvi-xlvii.

⁸Mark Rose, "Sidney's Womanish Man," *Review of English Studies*, N.S., 15 (1964), 356-357.

⁹For a good discussion on Sidney's theory of poetic truth, see Kenneth Myrick, *Sir Philip Sidney as a Literary Craftsman*, 2nd ed. (1935; rept. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).