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“Transform’d in Shew, but More Transform’d in Mind”: Philip Sidney’s Adventures in Gender and Othering

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Abstract

Philip Sidney’s *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, both in its incomplete, revised version (published 1590) and the original ‘*Old Arcadia*’, features a number of remarkable adventures that explore gender identities and identities that are redefined either from within or by the force of external manipulation, deceit, coercion or error. Under the umbrella of the pastoral setting, in other places, in the ‘not here’, Sidney’s personas face troubles that ‘other’ who they are—to themselves and to others. “And let us see what power is the author of all these troubles: forsooth, love; love, a passion, and the basest and fruitlessest of all passions”. The troubles are never simple. In the words of one of the protagonists, who undergoes a complex case of gender shift: “For, indeed, the true love hath that excellent nature in it, that it doth transform the very essence of the lover into the thing loved, uniting and, as it were, incorporating it with a secret and inward working”. This essay explores the performative complexities of these secret and inward workings, drawing on theatrical versions of Sidney’s *Arcadia* and its cognate parallels: both from the early modern period and in recent performances and theatrical experiments. The essay theorises Sidney’s concept of ‘poesy’ from *The Defence of Poesy* and brings it in line with the notion of dramaticity.

Keywords: Philip Sidney; *The Old Arcadia*; transformation; gender; otherness; performance; drama; practice-research

1. Introduction

Transformations are central to Philip Sidney’s prose heroic-pastoral romance *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, known also as *The Old Arcadia*, not only in what is visible, “in shew”, but “more transform’d in mind” (Sidney 1994, p. 26), as demonstrated in a series of practical explorations that, in turn, refocus literary analysis. The power behind these metamorphoses is *love*, the catch-all culprit of all adventures and tribulations in the genre Sidney works in—but *love* not as a word but as a visceral passion that determines not just the words spoken but first and foremost the very existences and identities of those affected. This essay studies the actual catalyst and the ways it inspires characters to undergo transformations and perform different, ‘other’ identities and other genders. The material analysed here is not just Sidney’s work but several theatrical explorations of his *Arcadia* I have undertaken with my students. It is there, in the theatre, I argue, that the transformation catalyst most fully manifests its performative potential.

Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586), despite his brief life, left a lasting mark on English literature in many ways. His sonnet cycle *Astrophil and Stella*, first printed only posthumously (1591) like all his other works, played a key role in the sonnet vogue of the last decade of



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the 16th century. His *An Apology for Poetry*, printed also as *The Defence of Poesy* (Sidney 1595), remains a decisive contribution to English literary theory. His contribution to English prose—namely, his *Arcadia*, a heroic romance in five “books or acts”—is as significant but has had a complex genesis and reception history. At the turn of the 1570s and 1580s, Sidney created an ambitious prose romance dedicated to, and in part also co-authored with his sister Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke.¹

Even before completing the first version of the *Arcadia* at the turn of 1580, Sidney embarked on a revision that was meant to transform the work into a much more complex and novelistic artefact. However, Sidney didn’t live long enough to carry out his plan. Dying aged just 31, he left “his *New Arcadia*”, as Katherine Duncan-Jones has observed, “unfinished, possibly unfinishable” (Sidney 1994, p. ix). For the printed version, Fulke Greville completed the torso of the first two and a half books of the incomplete revision with the earlier version—“as if the head and shoulders of a man were grafted on to the hind quarters of a horse”, in Duncan-Jones’s words (Sidney 1994, p. ix). The composite *Arcadia* has had a mixed reception: from enthusiastic appreciations of the ambitious project to damning rejections.² It was only in 1907 that a manuscript of the “old” *Arcadia* was discovered. Viewed variously as an immature work or an unsuccessful first version, *The Old Arcadia* has not been recognised as a work of art with its own integrity. Arguably by design—with its Terentian five-act structure—it was suited for the oral, performative delivery in the presence of Mary Sidney and her company; it is much closer to a piece of performance—as I analyse below.³ By contrast, *The New Arcadia* had literary ambitions. If *The Old Arcadia* was dramatic by design, *The New Arcadia* was much more novelistic.

This essay builds on the close reading of *The Old Arcadia* and on three separate theatrical explorations, focusing primarily on the formative and transformative moments in the narrative: the many and various ways of becoming a gendered, other persona. The Section 2 discusses Sidney’s *mixed mode*—his ambition, I argue, to incorporate not just different genres in his *Old Arcadia* (classical romance, the pastoral, the heroic romance, tragedy, comedy and tragicomedy) but also the basic forms of prose, poetry and drama. In this way, Sidney seems to have aimed at demonstrating his theories, as presented in *The Defence of Poesy*, in practice. The Section 3 focuses on the dramatic transformative force or power that effects transformations in *The Old Arcadia*. Building on Sidney’s reflections on *poesy* and its Greek etymology (*poein* as *making*; *poet* as *maker*), I argue that the transformative force at play is tantamount to *poesy*—the act of *making* or *creating*. Giving fictional personas names gives them their ontology and substance. The Sections 4 and 5 reflects on practical explorations of *The Old Arcadia* in theatrical settings. Individual moments of transformation from *The Old Arcadia* served the performers as opportunities to play out complex modern agendas of gender and otherness. The dramatic situations became metaphors allowing modern bodies *here and now* access to experimental identities, empowering performers to embody identity and social possibilities and try them in the presence of others.

Incorporating drama in his ambitious literary project made *The Old Arcadia* start bursting at its seams: the extraverbal, non-literary aspect of the “third” form threatened to tear its unity apart. The central dramatic passions that define and transform *Arcadia*’s characters equally unhinge the verbal tissue of his literary project. Drama, once allowed its full potency, becomes the *primum mobile* of Sidney’s creation, leaving other components in tow. In other words, by including dramatic action, the visceral agency of impulses and instinctive, often non-verbal behaviours overrides the modality of the purely verbal genres of verse and prose fictions. This essay focuses on the third—visceral, potentially disruptive, and wholly transformative—mode of drama, which determines the identities, gendered interactions and othering strategies of *The Old Arcadia*’s *dramatis personae*.

2. Sidney's Mixed Mode

[S]ome Poesies haue coupled together two or three kindes, as Tragicall and Comicall, wher-vpon is risen the Tragicomicall. Some in the like manner haue mingled Prose and Verse, as *Sanazzar* and *Boetius*. Some haue mingled matters Heroicall and Pastorall. But that commeth all to one in this question, for, if seuered they be good, the coniunction cannot be hurtfull. (*The Defence of Poesie*, F2v)

In *The Defence of Poesie*, Sidney offers his moral and axiological views on *poesie*—writing or literary creation, as we might refer to it, rather than narrowing the notion down to *poetry*.⁴ The much-cited passage refers to his impassioned commentaries on the mixed mode that combines genres indiscriminately. Writers then create:

these grosse absurdities, how all theyr Playes be neither right Tragedies, nor right Comedies: mingling Kings & Clownes, not because the matter so carrieth it: but thrust in Clownes by head & shoulders, to play a part in maiesticall matters, with neither decencie, nor discretion. (*Defence*, K2r)

Stephen Greenblatt, in an early essay reflecting on Sidney's mixed mode, discusses the *Arcadia* in relation to *The Defence* (Greenblatt 1973, p. 271). He refers to the mixed mode as a combination of the pastoral, of romance, of heroic romance and similar generic modalities. Elizabeth B. Bearden draws detailed parallels between Sidney's *Arcadia* and several Spanish examples of tragicomedies, most prominently Francisco de Rojas's *La Celestina*, arguing that Sidney consciously combined “contrasting elements in romance and tragicomedy” in order to achieve “generic contamination [and] mix elements of the tragic and comic” (Bearden 2010, p. 31).⁵ Greenblatt and Bearden touch only tangentially on the mixing of basic forms, i.e., prose, verse, and drama. I would argue that it is these fundamental form mixtures that most preoccupy Sidney. Discussing heroic prose and pastoral verse, Sidney claims: *If severed they be good* (if the written components are good writing in themselves), *the conjunction cannot be hurtful* (combining them cannot be a negative thing).

The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia not only combines prose and verse in a cornucopia of generic modalities, as A. C. Hamilton methodically demonstrated in his discussion of Sidney's sources (Hamilton 1972). Structured in five “books, or acts”, the *Arcadia* tries to fulfil the ambition to combine all three basic forms in one. It follows a Terentian dramatic structure—as Robert W. Parker and Clark L. Chalifour observed, among others (Parker 1972; Chalifour 1976)—with individual acts aligning with the conventional components of protasis, epitasis, catastasis, etc. To be sure, these observations relate primarily to *narrative* structure, not to the *dramatic* structure as such. But they are helpful in articulating Sidney's writing craft, and they point specifically to the *Old Arcadia* as the more “dramatic” of the two versions. One could also add to it the prominence of direct speech and dialogue in the first version. Sidney's *Old Arcadia* attempted to achieve a complete mixed mode. In many ways, the work is a catalogue of what prose, poetry and drama in English are capable of doing—and in that way the book can be seen as a practical demonstration of Sidney's theoretical views from *The Defence of Poesie*.

The three basic literary forms—prose, verse, and drama—are not of a kind, of course, and operate differently. Sidney knew well that they cannot connect to one another in a commensurate fashion. In the *Old Arcadia*, the drama subsumes prose and lyrical poetry. It has been argued that this organising principle began to unravel as Sidney worked, and it was this structural rift that necessitated the revision that led to the incomplete *New Arcadia* (Greenblatt 1973, pp. 272–73). The revision attempted to resolve the internal incoherence by excising drama. The imagination of the *New Arcadia* moves towards the purely literary: Sidney's characters are no longer dramatic personas with agencies born out of action and nonverbal incentives, performing their interactive identities—gendered and othered—in

response and reactions to others. They are literary creations born out of words, concepts and notions, living their fictional lives in them.

In what follows, I focus on the dramatic imagination in Sidney's *Arcadia* and the dramatic impulse that engenders its personas. The poetic *love* constructs them as individualities. It transforms them inwardly and outwardly in response to various incentives. And it creates the fictional tissue of Sidney's *Arcadia*, *Arcadia* as "a state of mind" (Hamilton 1972, p. 37), a play of interactions and propositional beings, "representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, [showing] a speaking picture" (*Defence* C2v) of the creative incentives.

3. The Transforming Fire in Pyrocles

Both Sidney's *Arcadias* are full of transformations on several levels. Clare Kinney has studied *The New Arcadia* in its ambitious revisions of *The Old Arcadia* as an "appropriation and recasting of some of the most resonant fables of [Ovid's] *Metamorphoses*" (Kinney 1991, p. 461). In what follows, I analyse the metamorphic processes immanent to *The Old Arcadia*. I argue that they not only constitute its thematic core but also create the very tissue of *Arcadia*'s fictive world. Transformations catalyse all the action and are the existential energy that sustains *Arcadia*—from the pivotal breaking points to minute details.

Most prominent among the seemingly minute details are the persona's names—their own and the assumed ones which they adopt or appropriate in their transformations. Let me therefore reflect briefly on *The Old Arcadia*'s protagonists and their nomenclature. The Duke of Arcadia, in order to escape an ominous prophecy, retires with family into the Arcadian forest. His name, Basilius, directly derives from the Greek word for king (βασιλεὺς, *basileós*). His wife's name, Gynecia, means *wife* (γυνή, *gyné*). Their older daughter Pamela is *all sweetness* or *honey-sweet* (*pan* + μέλι, *méli*) and her sister Philoclea *likes glory* (*philo-* + κλέος, *kleós*). The two wandering princes who are shipwrecked on the coast of Arcadia have similarly speaking names: Pyrocles is *fiery glory* or *glorious fire* (πῦρ, *pyr* + *kleós*) and Musidorus is *the gift of the muses* (*musi-* + δῶρο, *dóro*). In addition to their onomastics, there is a relational balancing between the personas—as Alan D. Isler has argued, for instance, Pyrocles represents the active counterpart to Musidorus's contemplative nature (Isler 1968, p. 178). In other words, these personas don't aspire to be human like us. Not literal allegories, they are creations of their defining features: their impulses, social positions and qualities. If we adopt this perspective on the ontology of the personas, how does it transform the modality of the fiction?

Sidney offers a possible way of approaching it in *The Defence of Poesy*, where he reflects on the alethic qualities of fictional personas. Narration is a ground plan to support the readers' imagination, and propositional fiction is exempt from the true-false binary. The names are there *to make the picture more lively* or ostensive:

So in *Poesie*, looking but for fiction, they [the readers] shall vse the narration but as an imaginatiue groundplat of a profitable inuention. But hereto is replied, that the *Poets* giue names to men they write of, which argueth a conceit of an actuall truth, and so not being true, prooueth a falshood. And dooth the *Lawier* lye, then when vnder the names of *Iohn* of the *Stile*, and *Iohn* of the *Nokes*, hee putteth his Case? But that is easily answered, their naming of men is but to make their picture the more liuely, and not to build anie Historie. (*Defence* G1v)

Fictional names and fictional characters are there "not to build any history", but to help *put a case*: flesh out a proposition and a possible scenario of behaviour. It is this tentative, hypothetical notion of fiction that permeates Sidney's *Old Arcadia*. It has far-reaching implications for *Arcadia* as a mental landscape.

Perhaps the most prominent transformation in the *Old Arcadia* occurs early in the First Book or Act. It turns into a decisive moment that incites all the ensuing action, snowballing circumstances and numerous intervening events. Shipwrecked in Arcadia, prince Pyrocles is hosted by the good lord Kerxenus, “a principal gentleman in Mantinea” (OA 10). In his private gallery, Pyrocles sees the painting of the royal family: Duke Basilius, Duchess Gynecia, and the younger of their two daughters, Philoclea. This incident turns into the inciting moment of the narrative:

[I]t was Pyrocles’ either evil or good fortune walking with his host in a fair gallery that he perceived a picture, newly made by an excellent artificer, which contained the duke and duchess with their younger daughter Philoclea, [. . .] drawn as well as it was possible art should counterfeit so perfect a workmanship of nature. [. . .] This *moved* Pyrocles to fall into questions of her [. . .] (OA 10–11; my emphasis)

In a sequence reminiscent of the first sonnet in Sidney’s sonnet cycle *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), Pyrocles’s questioning sets in motion the process of infatuation:

[F]rom questions grew to pity; and when with pity once his heart was made tender, according to the aptness of the humour, it received straight a cruel impression of that wonderful passion which to be defined is impossible, by reason no words reach near to the strange nature of it. They only know it which inwardly feel it. It is called love. (OA 11)

Pyrocles starts planning how to get near Philoclea and convince his friend Musidorus to join him in the quest. It is worth noting that Sidney gives the agency to the passion, rather than to Pyrocles himself—as if it was not free will but the external incentive that sets action into motion:

Till at length love, the refiner of invention, put in his head a way how to come to the sight of his Philoclea; for which he with great speed and secrecy prepared everything that was necessary for his purpose [. . .] (OA 11–12)

In admitting to himself and to Musidorus that he is in love, he also apportions the blame to external causes:

For since it was the fatal overthrow of all my liberty to see in the gallery of Mantinea the only Philoclea’s picture, that beauty did pierce so through mine eyes to my heart that the impression of it doth not lie but live there, in such sort as the question is not now whether I shall love or no, but whether loving, I shall live or die. (OA 16)

On the one hand, one might dismiss Pyrocles’s words as generic romance style, a mere convention. On the other, one can equally read it as a description of the external powers that move, transform and eventually define the persona’s existence. This latter perspective also brings into play the moral complexity of the action. Pyrocles’s love is not just a positive emotion but also a potentially consuming fire, and we are left hesitating: what befell him was “either evil or good fortune”. Love is spoken of almost as a contagion, a parasite—as can be demonstrated in the passage where Pyrocles comes to terms with being called “a lover”:

This word of ‘lover’ did no less pierce poor Pyrocles than the right tune of music toucheth him that is sick of the tarantula. There was not one part of his body that did not feel a sudden motion, the heart drawing unto itself the life of every part to help it, distressed with the sound of the word. (OA 16)

Pyrocles loses himself in the passion that erupts towards the portrayed Philoclea, and it transforms him into her mirror image, as he describes in outlining the process of achieving his desired end:

For the principal point is to set in a good way the thing we desire; for then will time itself daily discover new secret helps. As for my name, it shall be Cleophila, turning Philoclea to myself, as my mind is wholly turned and transformed into her. (OA 17)

In so doing, the *fire* (πῦρ) within Pyrocles—where the name and the persona are one and the same—consumes him and his new existence derives from Philoclea, “turning Philoclea to myself, as my mind is wholly turned and transformed into her”. This inherently stems from a dramatic imagination, not a literary one: Cleophila as a persona is defined relationally, interactively, as a reaction to an external impulse. It is remarkable that Sidney, cleverly, has Pyrocles fall in love with a painting of Philoclea, rather than with Philoclea herself. The paradox not only adds to the complex dubiousness of the passion but also enhances the prominence of external show, appearances and the ontological hollowness of the fictional personas. Similarly, in keeping with the moral ambivalence of the majority of *The Old Arcadia*’s action and events—an inherently *theatrical* quality—there are other motives for Pyrocles’s crossdressing. As Pyrocles learns from his host, lord Kerxenus, “there was a general opinion grown the duke would grant his daughters in marriage to nobody” (Sidney 1994, p. 11). His transformation into the Amazon Cleophila may be interpreted as a practical ploy to gain access to Basilius’s forest retreat.

In his essay “Arcadian Ineloquence: Losing Voice in *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*”, Thomas Ward offers a different but inspiring approach to external agency in *The Old Arcadia*. What Ward refers to as “losing voice” is the unruly forces that take over songs and even actions, causing the characters to lose control over their own utterances. For instance, “the force of Musidorus’s own passion disrupts the song he sings for Pamela” (Ward 2018, p. 287), while he is trying to hide his love from his friend. These involuntary eruptions, Ward argues, open up dimensions of homoerotic interactions that break the bounds of the patriarchal order: they “constitute a threat to the logocentric order, an invasion of speech’s ‘inside’ by its ‘outside’” (Ward 2018, p. 289). They signal the ineffable, the “ineloquent” and undermine the hegemonic regimes from within. Ward’s argument is plausible and inspiring in pointing out the cracks in the restrictive range of what the written text can convey. My argument is somewhat different: I don’t assert that there is a hegemonic, patriarchal regime against which the unruly passions push. Such a perspective would assert that there is a received oppressive ideology to counter. My view of the *fire* within the personas and their action is the defining force: the substance that defines their existence; gives them their *raison d’être*; and transforms them substantively through its workings. Rather than revealing a repressed homosocial dimension—one would infer, a voice of the writer’s self-projections—the passions determine the ontology of Arcadia as a state of mind and mode of existence, as well as *Arcadia* as a work of fictive worlds.

One of the surprising revisions in the *New Arcadia* is that Pyrocles transforms into an Amazonian warrior woman and adopts a different name, Zelmane (denoting *zeal* or *passion*). In so doing, Pyrocles turns from a mirror image of Philoclea to commemorating a *female Amazon* called Zelmane whose love for him, as he only found out after her death, had motivated her to gain closer access to him by taking on the persona of a male page. Mikaela Warner argues that “in his revisions from the *Old Arcadia*’s Cleophila to the Amazon into the *New Arcadia*’s Zelmane, Sidney’s prose imbues Zelmane with an inwardness which distinguishes her as an independent character rather than a disguise” (Warner 2021, pp. 24–25). Warner draws on Katherine Eisaman Maus’s concept of “inwardness” (borrowed from Sidney’s *The Defence of Poesie* for her 1995 monograph *Inwardness and Theater in*

the English Renaissance; see Warner 2019) and focuses primarily on the character's dualism of "inward self and outward show". Warner refers to Zelmane "not only [...] as a drag queen, cross-dressed persona, or disguise, but [seeks] to see her for the developed, individuated, genderqueer character as Sidney wrote her" (Warner 2021, p. 26). Pyrocles transformed into Zelmane brings in complex and layered gender politics: Pyrocles represents a bifurcation, embodying a female identity as the Amazon Zelmane while also reenacting and honouring the dead girl Zelmane, as if remorsefully acting the unfulfilled passion she held for him. Despite Warner's nuanced discussion of the "inwardness of Zelmane, [which] is more than a costume taken off at the end of a performance" (Warner 2021, p. 27), the conceptual framing arguably belongs to our age, not to Sidney's. This is not to dismiss Warner's reading, but to acknowledge that the ontology of gendered personas—and especially of *gendered* personas—is a cultural construct that is relative to its age and its cultural knowledge. In my view, Sidney's revision of Pyrocles's transformation from *The Old Arcadia's* Cleophila to *The New Arcadia's* Zelmane is a literary one, as Warner analyses in detail: it gives Pyrocles a complex novelistic backstory, adding a layer that the more straightforward, dramatic persona of the *Old Arcadia* does not have and, probably, does not need.

In *The Defence of Poesie*, Sidney reflects on the importance of images of action in drama, connecting it to the *stirring* of the mind. These images of action presented on the stage are incentives for the spectator's mind: the fictions can *work* on their imagination and *make* transformations on the *inward self*:

For as the Image of each Action stirreth and instructeth the minde, so the loftie Image of such woorthies, moste enflameth the minde with desire to bee woorthie: and enformes with counsaile how to be woorthie. Onely let *Aeneas* bee worne in the Tablet of your memorie, how hee governeth himselfe in the ruine of his Countrey, in the preseruing of his olde Father, and carrying away his religious Ceremonies, in obeying gods Commaundment, to leaue *Dido*, though not onelie all passionate kindnesse, but euen the humane consideration of vertuous gratefulnessse, would haue craued other of him. How in stormes, how in sports, how in warre, how in peace, how a fugitiue, how victorious, how besieged, how besieging, how to straungers, how to Allies, how to enemies, how to his owne: lastly, how in his inward selfe, and how in his outward government, and I thinke in a minde moste preiudiced with a preiudicating humour, Hee will bee founde in excellencie fruitfull. (*Defence*, G1r–v)

Sidney's poetics operates with art and its transformative power. Like the metaphorical fire that metamorphoses Pyrocles into a new being that takes its existence from the external incentive, Sidney views poetry as the art of *making*—recalling the Greek etymology of the word:

But now let vs see how the Greekes haue named it, and how they deemed of it. The Greekes named him ποιητήν [*poietēs*], which name, hath as the moste excellent, gone through other languages, it commeth of this word ποιεῖν [*poieîn*], which is to make: wherin I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen haue met with the Greekes in calling him a Maker. (*Defence* B4r)

It is perhaps significant that he attempted to retain this demiurgical dimension of poetry by referring to it as *poesie*. In his hands, *poesie* is the ultimate and unique art that is not limited by nature but allows invention (imagination) to create ("bring forth") entities, "new formes such as neuer were in nature" (B4v). Very importantly for my present argument, he uses theatrical imagery to refer to the subjects on which the transformative powers of *poesie* works:

There is no Art deliuered vnto mankind that hath not the workes of nature for his principall obiect, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they *become Actors & Plaiers, as it were* of what nature will haue set forth. (*Defence* B4v; my emphasis)

I would argue that it is in the *Old Arcadia* that Sidney attempts to realise this demiurgical—and specifically dramatic, or *dramaturgical*—power of *poesie*. Modern stage adaptations appear to attest it.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Sidney's notion of *poesie* and its manifestations in the transformative agency are in many ways cognate with Otakar Zich's theory of dramaticity. In his seminal work, *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* (1931), Zich defines dramatic action as the agency of incentives (actions) to solicit reactions:

Dramatic action is that which results from personas' interactions. [Interaction is] a persona's ostensive activity intended to have and having an impact on another persona. (Zich [1931] 2024, p. 86)

In other words, what we perceive as *dramatic* is the interaction—the incentive and its reaction—that we can observe between personas. It is the ripple effect—to use popular idiom—that an impulse has in affecting others. The dramatic is not defined by external descriptors but by the intrinsic quality of the action and its participants. Dramatic personas are *dramatic* because they come into existence through interaction, and as spectators it is this interactive agency that we perceive and build on in our theatrical experience. Sidney's concept of *poesie* as the art of making an image that works on the inward self and the outward government (behaviour) of the action's actors and players dovetails closely with Zich's analytical concept of the dramatic. *Making*, the etymological root of *poesy*, is the agency that brings to life and sustains the entire poetic creation.

It was this shared quality—of Sidney's *poesy* and of *drama* in Zich's theory—that underpinned the practical experiments with *The Old Arcadia*, led by the question: If it is *making*—that is, becoming and giving material and aesthetic shape to ideas—that enlivens Sidney's romance, how can this *making* engender dramatic action?

4. Theatrical Explorations of The Old Arcadia

Given the dramatic dimensions of *The Old Arcadia*—that is, its qualities that transcend the verbal and resist a purely logocentric discussion—it is appropriate to study its inherent qualities in the modes and methods that are germane to it. What follows are findings that come from a process that combined textual and performative analyses of *The Old Arcadia*, pertaining specifically to its personas' identities, gendered interactions and othering strategies.

Sidney's *Arcadia* in its several versions has inspired numerous dramatic versions, as well as literary sequels. Probably its earliest stage adaptation, the anonymous play *Mucedorus*—in full, *A Most pleasant Comedie of Mucedorus the Kings Sonne of Valentia, and Amadine the Kinges daughter of Aragon, commonly called Mucedorus*—came out first in 1598 but went into 19 editions within a century and remained tremendously successful in popular theatre until the 1830s (Proudfoot 2002, p. 18; Kirwan 2015, pp. 99–106; Chambers 1933, pp. 190–91). *Mucedorus* treats *Arcadia* loosely, but it seems very likely that it was based on a manuscript of *The Old Arcadia* rather than on the printed amalgamate version. James Shirley drew on *The New Arcadia* for his play *The Arcadia* (1640). In the intervening half-century, Sidney's romance inspired numerous other works. Plays such as John Day's *The Isle of Gulls* (1606) or Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Cupid's Revenge* (c1607–8) took their plots from it. Shakespeare, in addition to probably adapting *Mucedorus* for the performance at Whitehall in 1609 (published in 1610), drew on *Arcadia* elsewhere: the Earl of Gloucester

subplot of *King Lear* is lifted from *The New Arcadia*; several moments in *As You Like It* have their forerunners in Sidney; and the dangers of the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* owe a great deal to *Arcadia* (see also Hill 1908 and Oram 2018). Sidney's *Arcadia* also inspired three surviving stage adaptations in France, as Richard Hillman has discussed: Jean Galaut's *Phalante* (c1598, published in 1611), André Mareschal's *La Cour bergère* (*The Shepherds' Court*, 1638), and Gaultier de Coste de La Calprenède's *Phalante* (1642). These were most likely based on the 1590 English edition (Hillman 2018, pp. 3–4).

In the twenty-first century, it is primarily *The Old Arcadia* that draws the attention of theatre makers; it has more 'give' than the *New Arcadia*. In 2013, the Drama department of the University of East Anglia staged *The Old Arcadia* in *The Arcadian Project*, a loose double bill with *As You Like It*—the one Shakespeare play closest in genre to it. Tony Gash, the director of *The Old Arcadia*, highlighted the earlier version of the romance as "a wonderful dramatic piece [. . .], a pastoral tragicomedy that seems to have all Shakespeare's plots already condensed into it" (Gash 2013). In 2015, the jukebox musical *Head Over Heels* was first staged at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Conceived by Jeff Whitty and adapted by James McGruder, the production went on to a run in San Francisco and Broadway in 2018 (directed by Michael Mayer), followed in 2023 with a UK production at the Hope Mill Theatre in Manchester. Interestingly, this adaptation also draws on *The Old Arcadia* and explores its queer and transgender potential (see also Mikaela Warner's discussion in Warner 2021, pp. 37–38). Another promising stage adaptation of *The Old Arcadia* (by D. J. Britton) was produced by Fluellen Theatre at the University of Swansea as *Pembroke's Arcadia* commissioned by the National Theatre of Wales (Kirwan 2019). This production was a concept for a future full show, but the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have discontinued the efforts.

Over the last five years, I have explored *The Old Arcadia* theatrically with young actors on three separate occasions.⁶ The first project took place at the University of Hull in May 2021, during one of the periods when distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic were loosened. Naturally, several of the scenarios adopted by the students from the *Old Arcadia* resonated with our recent experiences and concerns. I have reflected on the explorations theoretically as instances of "physical fictions": using the Arcadian, utopian setting as an opportunity for embodying othered existences, including queer and generally non-normative identities and social behaviours (Drábek 2022, pp. 32–34). The second and third practical explorations involved acting students at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (JAMU) in Brno on 29 May, 30 September and 1 October 2025. As with the 2021 project, the individual situations offered students opportunities to rhapsodically narrate the plots through theatrical means and explore their potential—by their choice capitalising on the estranged or queer social interactions, identity politics and gender, as well as fluid power structures. In this way, the three explorations became semi-improvised and non-comedic theatrical adaptations of prose (Drábek 2025, p. 18).

All three processes followed a similar pattern: I retold the plots of the *Old Arcadia* and asked the students to identify which of the situations offer the greatest dramatic potential (or "give", to use theatrical jargon). Unsurprisingly and without fail, the students picked the inciting moments in each of Sidney's Books or Acts:

- (1) Prince Pyrocles has seen a painting of Philoclea and fell in love with her. The passion transformed him, and he assumed an alter-ego identity as Cleophila: Philoclea's mirror image. Now the two have met and declared love for one another, but Philoclea wants to know who Cleophila really is and whether she (he) loves her, or her image in the painting. (Sidney 1994, pp. 10–14)
- (2) Duke Basilius retreats from his seat into self-imposed exile, taking with him his wife and their two maturing daughters. He deliberates what he should do when

faced with unexpected events: his wife's infidelity, their daughters' desire for personal and sexual freedom, his infatuation with another woman, an impending military threat from abroad, his own self-consciousness in his roles (as king, husband, father, man, human). (Sidney 1994, p. 5)

(3) Pamela and Dorus (Prince Musidorus disguised as a shepherd) wish to spend the night together in the shepherd's hut, so want to get rid of unwelcome witnesses. They trick the gullible shepherdess Mopsa into climbing a tree, exploiting her desire for love and wealth: if she hopes to have her own desires fulfilled, she has to stay there until she receives an agreed sign. Similarly, they manipulate the shepherd Dametas to make a journey to an alleged wishing well where he can get rich. (Sidney 1994, pp. 86–90, 151–52, 169–71)

(4) Philoclea and Cleophila (the metamorphosed Pyrocles) wish to spend the night together, so play a bed trick: they manipulate Philoclea's parents, Duke Basilius and Duchess Gynecia, to retreat to a cave with the promise that there, they would spend the night with the object of their desire: Basilius believes he will sleep with Cleophila; Gynecia believes she will sleep with the man who has crossdressed as Cleophila. (Sidney 1994, pp. 187–99)

(5) Duke Basilius and Duchess Gynecia have spent a night together, believing they have slept with their lovers. In the morning they recognise the truth and are forced to face it. (Sidney 1994, pp. 238–43)

(6) Prince Musidorus pays the shepherd Menalcas to travel to his court and report on his whereabouts. That allows Musidorus to assume Menalcas's identity and disguise himself as him. (Sidney 1994, pp. 40, 354)

(7) Dorus and Pamela have eloped, and in the forest at night, Dorus tries to take advantage of the situation: he reveals his disguise and tries to rape Pamela. (Sidney 1994, pp. 267–74)⁷

Interestingly, each of the seven scenes includes an aspect of transformative othering that involves an exploration of gender. The first scene, discussed above at length, shows the gender transformation of Pyrocles into Cleophila, the mirror image of his love object. The repercussions of this action recurred in later scenes in which Philoclea questions Cleophila and the genuineness of Cleophila's love for her, given that it was a painting she fell in love with, not Philoclea herself. That dialogue allowed the actors to spell out several aspects of the gender transformation that occurs: if gender is a social construct, what does it have at its core? In keeping with the theatrical imagination, these questions could be enacted and tested out in the interaction—as propositions, possible worlds—without a conclusive outcome.

Scene 2 served as an opportunity for a narrative flashback but explored the consequences of the identities that Basilius assumed not only for himself but also imposed on his wife Gynecia and his daughters Philoclea and Pamela. The incentive for the former transformation was Basilius's fear that a prophecy he had received would come true. In this scene, Basilius also reflects on how his own fear has transformed him from what he had been—socially, politically, as well as personally, individually and mentally—into a social outcast in a self-imposed exile.

Scene 3 presents the “sweet” Pamela and the “gilded” Dorus (in fact, the Prince Musidorus, “gilded by muses”, in a shepherd disguise), and their love. Their passion transforms them into manipulators who are abusing their social and cognitive status to trick the trusting Mopsa and Dametas into undertaking arduous tasks. Very surprisingly, what appears in Sidney as a more-or-less comical ploy becomes a profoundly duplicitous and repugnant act of exploitation: the physical presence of Mopsa fasting in a tree for long

hours, and of Dametas going on a pointless journey, underscores the ambivalent morality of Pamela's and Dorus's passion. The inward transformations that take place in this scene open questions of social exclusion, ostracisation, as well as emasculation.

Scene 4 parallels the previous incident in many ways; only the stakes are higher, and the complexity of the manipulation is heightened. The fact that Basilius threatens Cleophila (Pyrocles in disguise) with rape a partial excuse for Cleophila's manipulation. Similarly, Gynecia's blackmailing of Cleophila, threatening that she would blow her cover if he didn't give in to her passion (because Gynecia can tell that Cleophila is a man in disguise), adds to the mixture. The preventive measures (poison and weapons) that are involved here raise the stakes even higher. The issues this scene opened were not only those of consent but also of exploiting the social precarity of gendered personas, and specifically transgender personas in the case of Cleophila-Pyrocles.

Scene 5 is a powerful showdown between Basilius and Gynecia, who have been unfaithful to one another *with* one another. In addition to the tragicomic elements, the scene offers rich potential for exploring the construction, reconstruction, reinvention and renewal of the self in intimate relationships. After this cataclysm, what does it mean to be man and woman? husband and wife? parents? intimate partners? public personalities?

Scene 6 is another narrative flashback that allows us to explore and undermine the conventional romance decision to dress as a shepherd. Here Prince Musidorus, driven by unrestrained passion, commits identity theft. Duplicity is a means for him to be able to travel to meet Pamela in order to tell her of his genuine love.

Scene 7 portrays a generic pastoral dramatic situation. The passions at play allow the performers to explore their transformative power and *figure forth* what passions have the potential to do with individuals who find themselves in other, unknown circumstances. Both Pamela and Dorus metamorphose: here, Pamela is no longer all sweetness, especially in view of the manipulations and lies she has committed. Dorus declares himself, divesting his disguise, and assumes his other identity, so far unknown to Pamela. The sexual passions transform them further into personas neither of them recognises.

5. Conclusions

The above scenes were not the only ones included in the practical explorations. There was more stage business in the three projects, motivated by a desire for variety in spectacle, for contrast, as well as for individual actors' interest in exploring narrative techniques, interactions with their stage partners, or modes of engagement with the audience. However, the seven scenes listed above were the prominent ones: in them the transformative agency and the dramatic action manifest themselves the most. The performers who explored them valued their potential in exploring concerns they strongly resonated with, be it one's agency in intergenerational or inter-gender confrontations, the challenges of processing cognitive dissonance and social dilemmas, or one's identity politics. They become the pivotal moments in the story of *The Old Arcadia*. Unsurprisingly and by the same token, they are also the moments in which the most consequential transformations of personas—both in their inward self and in their outward government—take place. These transformations involve the processes of othering and gender construction and development. The three theatrical explorations were not finished theatre productions; perhaps they, like Sidney's *Arcadias*, were unfinishable. But they left behind the excitement of potentiality: these explorations could, one day, become fully fleshed out theatre productions. They could connect the many dots and follow through all the tragicomic and morally ambivalent consequences that occupy *Arcadia's* protagonists in the last two books or acts of Sidney's romance. But perhaps it is this incompleteness that best captures and retains the energising

potential of the story. It gives the liberty of being many things at will, rather than being formed, and in that way fixed, in a specific option.

Actors explored the time and agency spent in their assumed and malleable entities—new personas that they could shape and transform themselves into yet new identities, in interaction with others and in direct response to external and internal impetus, and—very importantly—in sight and in the presence of others. These new entities were novel social constructs that appealed to them and their audiences for several reasons. Whenever performed, they are playful; they are active; and they are created for the here and now. In that way, the creative work is empowering on a social level: the new gendered and othered personas come into existence by virtue of what they do; how they interact; and how they embody the nexus of their immediate circumstances. Such theatrical explorations show the Arcadian personas *in statu nascendi*—in the act of coming into existence as physically possible fictions.

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Notes

- ¹ On the complex issue of authorship of *The Old Arcadia*, see Joel Davis's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia and the Invention of English Literature* (Davis 2011).
- ² Duncan-Jones offers a brief overview of the mixed reception (Sidney 1994, pp. ix–x). See also Maurice Evans's account (in Sidney 1977, pp. 9–14).
- ³ For the early modern practice of reading aloud in company, see Hackel (2005).
- ⁴ It is worth observing that this inclusive concept of *poesie* that comprised all the literary forms, including verse, prose fiction and drama, survived in some theoretical traditions into the modern age. It is in this sense that Otakar Zich, building on the German, French and Czech genealogies, uses the corresponding term *básnictví* in his opus magnum *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* (1931), which I draw on later in this essay. For an insightful theory of Sidney's concept of *poesie*, see Stillman (2008).
- ⁵ I would like to thank M. A. Katritzky for drawing my attention to Bearden's article and for many helpful suggestions.
- ⁶ Before the explorations discussed here, I had studied Sidney's *Arcadia* on numerous occasions, in and out of classrooms. A prominent instance were the three 1996 productions based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Eva Tálská's staging of the tragedy at the Divadlo Husa na provázku Theatre (Brno, 1996); the dance production of *Tance krále Leara* (King Lear's Dances; Studio Dům, Brno, 1996); and Hubert Krejčí's *commedia dell'arte* version of *King Lear* entitled *Arlekino vévodu bretaňským aneb Král Leyr a jeho tři dcery neboli Zkamenělý princ* (Arlekino the Duke of Brittany, or King Leyr and His Three Daughters, alias The Petrified Prince; Studio Dům, Brno, 1996). I participated in the productions as a researcher, assistant dramaturg, performer and co-author of script. Sidney's influence on these productions would deserve a special study.
- ⁷ During the semi-improvised performance on 1 October 2025, several other scenes were inserted to carry the story and ensure cohesion. For the purpose of the narrative, Mopsa performed a stand-up for her sheep (i.e., audience); Pamela, who was the one royal not affected by the Amazon Cleophila, plays the ad hoc family therapist; Cleophila is invited to a dinner and, in turn, everyone wants to have a separate word with her, incrementally more blackmail involved; Philoclea and Cleophila have a serious word about who it is that Cleophila loves. The ending was economically untied by turning Mopsa into a goddess Diana, a moment inspired by *As You Like It* and John Lyly's *Galathea* (c1588).

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