

between his mistress and his friend. He expresses the opinion that if it was true that his 'saint', who had been writing 'hymns' in Sonnet 85, had slept with the woman coloured ill, then his beloved 'idol' would have become a 'fiend' and would be condemned to 'hell'. The profile reads: **The author knew that his friend and his mistress were suspected of being lovers.**

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By the 1580s, 'the concluding whisper' at court 'was that the handsome and witty young wife of the aged earl of Pembroke' was 'an immoral hussy who indiscriminately made every man of her circle her lover'.¹³ However, the scandal grew worse. All Sidney's biographers agree that 'no man was closer to him than his sister'¹⁴ and that a 'most perfect accord characterised their relations with one another'. In Mary, Philip 'found a fellow lover of literature and drama, and at Wilton he discovered a perfect place to write'.¹⁵ It seems clear that Sidney was happier at Wilton 'than anywhere else on earth',¹⁶ and from 1577 until his death in 1586, Sidney often 'retired to his sister's house' which in time became a 'retreat for writers'.¹⁷ Nicholas Breton described Wilton House as 'a kind of little Court' and Aubrey said it was like 'a College, there were so many learned and ingenious persons' there.¹⁸

From March to August 1580, Sidney, while in disfavour at court, stayed at Wilton in close attendance on his sister, and in the summer of 1580, while Captain Fulke Greville R.N. was climbing for eagles in Ireland, Sidney and his sister 'seem to have retired to a small house at Ivy Church, near Wilton, in which (according to Aubrey) the countess "much delighted"'. At the little house, 'jointly they versified the Psalms' and 'it was probably there also' that Sidney, 'at his sister's desire and suggestion', wrote the *Arcadia*,¹⁹ a pastoral romance where a world is created in which shepherds and shepherdesses sing, pipe tunes and make love while their flocks graze carelessly in green valleys bright with the sunshine of eternal summer, and the characters are absorbed entirely in the problems of love, as only the shepherds and shepherdesses of romance can afford to be. The *Arcadia* is 'divided into five books or acts, separated from each other by collections of pastoral eclogues which reflect the theme and mood of the narrative at the point where they are introduced, and at times carry on the action, forming little pastoral plays within the bigger dramatic structure'.²⁰ 'At its most superficial

level' the *Arcadia* has 'something of the quality of light opera' because 'the characters break into song at every opportunity' (there 'are over fifty songs in addition to those of the pastoral interludes').²¹

The members of the Sidney Circle who were 'privileged to read or hear the book which Sidney wrote for his sister looked for references to themselves and other courtiers' and the various keys which followed its publication make certain that 'the book was regarded as to some extent a *roman à clef*'.²² 'For his material, Sidney naturally drew upon his own experience at Court' and it is generally agreed that he 'undoubtedly had himself', his 'sister' and 'his friends Dyer and Greville in mind at various times while writing the book'.²³ Mary Pembroke appears in the *Arcadia* as Mira, 'the heroine of *Amphialus*'s song to *Philoclea*'.²⁴ In Book 2, Sidney himself 'makes a brief appearance as the Shepherd Knight, *Philisides*',²⁵ and later, '*Philisides* sings the praises of his unfavourable mistress, calling her *Mira* throughout'.²⁶ Coredens (Dyer) is 'mentioned in the third and fourth eclogues'²⁷ of the *Arcadia* 'as a shepherd friend of *Philisides* who like him is hopelessly in love with *Mira*'.²⁸

In the fourth eclogue of the original version of the *Arcadia*, '*Philisides* speaks of a rivalry between himself and *Coridens* for this lady's favour' and 'upon this and the allusion to *Corydon* in the third eclogue Sargent has 'raised a theory that Sidney (*Philisides*) and Dyer (*Coridens* = Cosn Dier) were rivals for the affection of Sidney's sister Mary'.²⁹ According to Bullough, if Sargent's theory is correct, then 'we should have to make it a quadrilateral affair, adding Greville to the list of suitors'.³⁰ Greville's 1590 edition of the *Arcadia* contains the longest poem Sidney ever wrote (it breaks off suddenly at 500 lines). In Sidney's poem 'two friends lament the absence of their mistress', interspersed with 'a narrative in ottava rima'³¹ telling how Strephon and Klaius [two "virtuous shepherds"] first fell in love with the "noble shepherdess" *Urania* (Mary Pembroke),³² and of their pursuit of her during a country game of Barley-break'.³³

Then couples three be streight allotted there,
 They of both ends the middle two do flie,
 The two that in mid place, Hell called, were,
 Must strive with waiting foot, and watching eye
 To catch of them, and them to hell to beare,
 That they, as well as they, Hell may supplye.³⁴