# The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia

Philip Sidney

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*Philip Sidney*

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# THE COUNTESS OF PEMBROKE'S ARCADIA

## BY SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

## WITH THE ADDITIONS OF SIR WILLIAM ALEXANDER AND RICHARD BELING,

A LIFE OF THE AUTHOR,
AND AN
INTRODUCTION
BY
ERNEST A. BAKER, M.A.

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# INTRODUCTION

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In a broad survey of the early history of English prose fiction three periods mark themselves out with great distinctness. The later centuries of the middle ages were the age of romance, when both poet and proseman worked upon the same mass of legendary material, expanding and embellishing the current stories in precisely the same spirit, the difference between prose romance and metrical romance being simply one of mechanical form. When in the Elizabethan age the literature of tradition gave way to the literature of invention, a decisive step in advance was made; but the novel still retained all the essential features of its poetic ancestry. Then, with the invention of a genuine prose, in the succeeding epoch, came a revolution. Discarding the romantic spirit, as their predecessors had abandoned the romantic legends, the first modern novelists turned themselves to the portrayal and interpretation of actual life, and the history of realism began. Sir Philip Sidney's _Arcadia_ holds an important place in these three stages of gradual evolution, as the type and culmination of the middle period, the age of poetic invention; how important in the long history of the genesis, the successive transformations, and the final development of English fiction, can be realised only by going back right to the beginnings, when the earliest

prose romances took their rise from the _chansons de gestes_.

In the exordium of his _Apologie for Poetrie_, Sidney himself lays stress on the priority of the poet in the history of literature. Modern research has found that this rule holds good in the literatures of many more races than Sidney was able to adduce as examples. From free imagination to realism, from mythology to science, from sensuous and passionate rhythms to cold, abstract prose--this is the natural line of progression. And the same course of development is repeated in the evolution of the various literary species. The first Hellenic {viii} philosophers wrote in hexameters; history began with epos, and went through the semi-poetic phase of Herodotus before it emerged in the form of abstract prose and the generalising method of science with Thucydides. Scientific and technical literature had its birth in poetry and mythology; and even when it became practical and experimental maintained for a while the fashions of poetry, and sought the inspiration of the muse. In the same way, the novel, whose evolution seems to have culminated in unpoetic days, must have its origins sought in far-off times when authors wrote instinctively in metre.

Narrative or dramatic poetry and the novel must always of course be very nearly related together. A poem and a novel, it might be said, are but two different sorts of fiction. But to make this statement literally true, the word fiction would have to be interpreted in two different senses. For the difference between poetry and prose is not simply one of style, but lies in the circumstance that the imagination of the poet, inspired with emotion and ideality, appeals directly to imagination, whilst prose addresses the understanding. The poet merely asks us to imagine; but the prose-writer has to reason and convince. Writers of such prose fiction as the Elizabethan novels, and the Greek and Latin

novels that arose in the decadence of classical literature, did not realise that the mind of the reader is reached in essentially different ways by prose and poetry; that in the one case the imagination is working on a higher plane, and responding to another kind of stimulus. Both accordingly produced something that was really neither prose nor poetry, and both had slight influence on the subsequent development of the novel. It will be worth while a little later to compare the Elizabethan novel with this curious product of an earlier age of culture and decadence. For the novel of Sidney, Lyly, Lodge, and Greene, though it belongs to the Elizabethan era in time, was not a native growth of that age of great beginnings, but rather a final and unproductive efflorescence of the romantic literature that had its roots in times already ancient. Sidney the critic and interpreter of letters looked back, not forward. He did not discern the signs around him of the tremendous birth that was commencing, but would have been proud to be compared with {ix} Heliodorus and Longus, and with Sanazzaro and Montemayor, whom he acclaims as genuine poets, preaching with seductive eloquence throughout his _Apologie_ the fallacious doctrine that poetry is the name for all imaginative literature.

The first English examples of fiction in prose were stories from the great chivalric cycles of Arthur, of Charlemagne, and of Troy and Alexander. Some of these were written in prose originally, but the majority were translations, paraphrases, or recensions of metrical narratives. Some were turned into verse again, and again in that form were the material for further prose recensions. And throughout these transformations the matter, the style, and the spirit of the stories underwent hardly any change. It was only now and then that the

versifier gave a rein to imagination in his battles and pageants; or was hurried by the swing of the metre into bursts of lyricism, or a more dramatic curtness in the dialogue; or cut short the explication of motive and plot, which the prose-writer was inclined to elaborate. How well the prose sufficed to the minstrel converting it into his own idiom may be seen by comparing such a metrical romance as the Scots poem, _Lancelot of the Laik_, with the samples of the French prose story from which it was translated, in the edition by the Early English Text Society. There is very little poetical heightening except where the minstrel tacks on a prologue of his own composing; the rest is but the effect of the paraphraser's occasional impulse to change and invent.[i01] Certainly these {x} writers were not embarrassed by any preconceptions of a strict boundary line between prose and the language of poetry, and the uses for which either was especially ordained. The traditional themes were handled, in both verse and prose, in the same traditional manner, and were animated by the same spirit of romantic adventure.

A change of style is almost invariably the result of a change of thought and feeling; but no profound mental and moral revolution like that which underlay the romantic movement of the nineteenth century, was the occasion for turning the mediaeval romances into prose. When all literary compositions were intended for singing and recitation, they naturally took a metrical form; but when books were meant to be read in bower and cloister, it was left to the writer to choose his vehicle. Thus, while there were true poets like Chrestien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach among those working upon the material of legend, many arrayed themselves in the poetic vesture without having a spark of divine fire; and the style of many of these

metrical narratives strikes one as too prosaic for the subject, especially if we base our expectations on Malory, to us the chief exemplar of mediaeval romance, whose prose, though not in the least resembling in structure that bastard thing, prose poetry, is thoroughly epical in its stark simplicity, its sensuous colour, and the haunting suggestion of beauty and ideality. It was not an age of poetry in the way this can be said of the early period of Greek literature, when philosophers, historians, and lawgivers spoke in metre because the muse was in them. Romance is the decadence of poetry; and while the traditional forms survived, the poetic impulse grew weaker and weaker.

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By Caxton and his successors the prose romances of the age of chivalry were multiplied and circulated among wider audiences than even those who listened to the mediaeval jongleur: these were the first popular novels of the Tudor age, yet they were already getting out of date, inasmuch as they reflected the manners and the ideals of a bygone period. But there had arisen on the continent two forms of romance that represent another stage in the development of fiction; the Spanish chivalric romance typified in _Amadis of Gaul_, and the pastoral novel of Sanazzaro and Montemayor. The three great legendary cycles, no matter how wild and fabulous their later excursions, always claimed to be a reading of history; each writer was careful to state his authorities, real or fictitious; and though he added life and circumstance to his narrative, the substance was put forward and accepted as history. In Spain romance had begun exactly as in Britain with poetic chronicles of heroic periods, such as the story of the Cid, round which gathered in the process of time a vast accretion

of anonymous legend. But in the _Amadis_, printed in 1508, but current in oral or manuscript versions for two centuries at least, Spain gave birth to a kind of romance in which such history even as that in the legendary chronicles had no place. Amadis himself, it is true, was connected with the Arthuriad by his lineage; but with this exception, the author or authors let both history and historical tradition go, and in the various knight-errantries of Amadis gave to their imaginative powers their full fling. In the beauty of its ladies, the size of its giants, the valour, constancy, and self-denial of its heroes, the _Amadis_ eclipses all its rivals; and in the _Palmerins_ and _Esplandians_ that were the sequel, these exaggerations are carried to even more ridiculous lengths. The older romances had usually been localised in actual places and countries, though these were often idealised out of all likeness to reality; but Amadis and his successors met with their adventures and performed their feats of arms in a region created by the fancy of their authors. Spenser's Fairy Land, and Sidney's Arcadia were no doubt suggested by this romantic geography.

Pastoral romance had a classical origin, for the _Eclogues_ of Baptista Mantuanus, pastoral dialogues satirising allegorically the social and moral vices of the fifteenth century in Italy {xii} were avowedly inspired by the bucolic poetry of his countryman Virgil. Longus also, one of the Greek novelists already alluded to, had in his _Daphnis and Chloe_ depicted the life of pastoral simplicity. But if Petrarch, Boccaccio, and others whose works contained germs of the new movement are left out of account as of minor importance in this respect, it is accurate enough to say that the modern pastoral novel began its course with the _Arcadia_ of Jacopo Sanazzaro, a Neapolitan whose aim it was to refresh the minds of his

contemporaries, weary of a sophisticated and artificial life, with pictures of a simple existence in fields and woods, the felicities of truth and virtue, and the sentiment of a pure and refined love. Prose and verse are intermingled in his book, as they are in the only example of the style accessible to the modern reader in an English translation, the _Galatea_ of Cervantes. Sanazzaro was surpassed in interest by his Portuguese imitator, Jorge de Montemayor, the author of _Diana_, who added a pathos and a touch of real life to the pastoral, making a deeper appeal to the imagination of his readers, and securing such a popularity in England, that his novel was translated in 1583 by Bartholomew Young. The pastoral novel and the Amadis cycle of romances were the two direct progenitors of Sidney's _Arcadia_, in which the spirit of knightly heroism and the idyllic atmosphere of a sentimental Utopia are blended in fairly equal parts.

The pastoral, however, was only a digression in the slow advance of the English novel towards its goal; and though it furnished perhaps half the inspiration of Sidney's romance, it does not bear upon the present theme, the significance of the Elizabethan novel as represented by the _Arcadia_ in the evolution of English fiction. The pastoral romance, it should nevertheless be noted, is more closely allied to poetry than to prose fiction proper, not merely because it mingles verse with a flowery and emotional prose, but chiefly because it is an offspring of the free imagination and not of the study of real life. The pastoral impulse has always been something factitious and retrograde in the history of literature and art, something exactly contrary to the return to nature to which Wordsworth gave the strongest impetus, and which exercised such an enormous effect on

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