

# **Third Time's a Charm: W. Blount Reads Sidney's *Arcadia***

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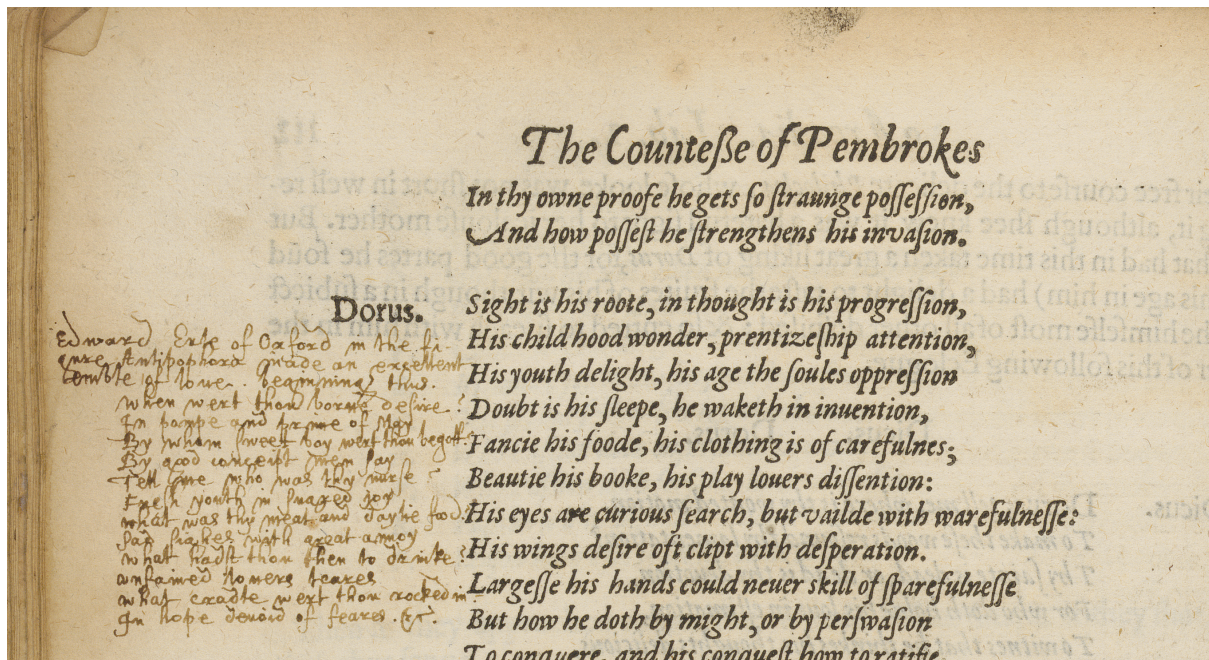
An examination of marginalia in the Folger's 1593 *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*

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I first encountered the Folger's heavily annotated copy of Sir Philip Sidney's *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* (London, 1593) ([Folger STC 22540 copy 1](#)) while hunting down witnesses of a poem ("When wert thou born, desire") by the Earl of Oxford. On leaf T4 verso of the Folger copy, I found just such a witness—neatly copied in the margin. But it soon became clear this was no independent version. The twelve lines of verse had been transcribed directly from the same-length extract in George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), where the poem likewise illustrates the figure of "Antipophora" and even preserves the same unusual spelling, "emblem of loue." The annotator, one *W. Blount*, had clearly been working with Puttenham open beside him; elsewhere in the volume he makes further verbatim references to *The Arte* (see [Schurink \(2007\)](#), 17 n. 69, 21 n. 83).



[leaf T4 verso](#)

The marginal note at T4v was not, however, Blount's first. On the opening leaves of Book 1, in response to a description of the shepherds' mutual love of Urania ("loue-fellowship") as "frindship between riuals," Blount observes: "what the enmitie of riuals is, is shewed in many places of this book." He then carefully enumerates the examples—"Pyrocles and Amphialus, Philoxenus & Amphialus, Ginecia & her daughter Philoclea &c."—and augments them with citations from the classics.

vp our thoughts about the ordinary leuell of the worlde, so as great clearkes doe not disdain our conference: hath not the desire to seeme worthie in her eyes made vs when other were sleeping, to sit vewing the course of heauens: when others were running at base, to runne ouer learned writings: when other marke their sheepe,

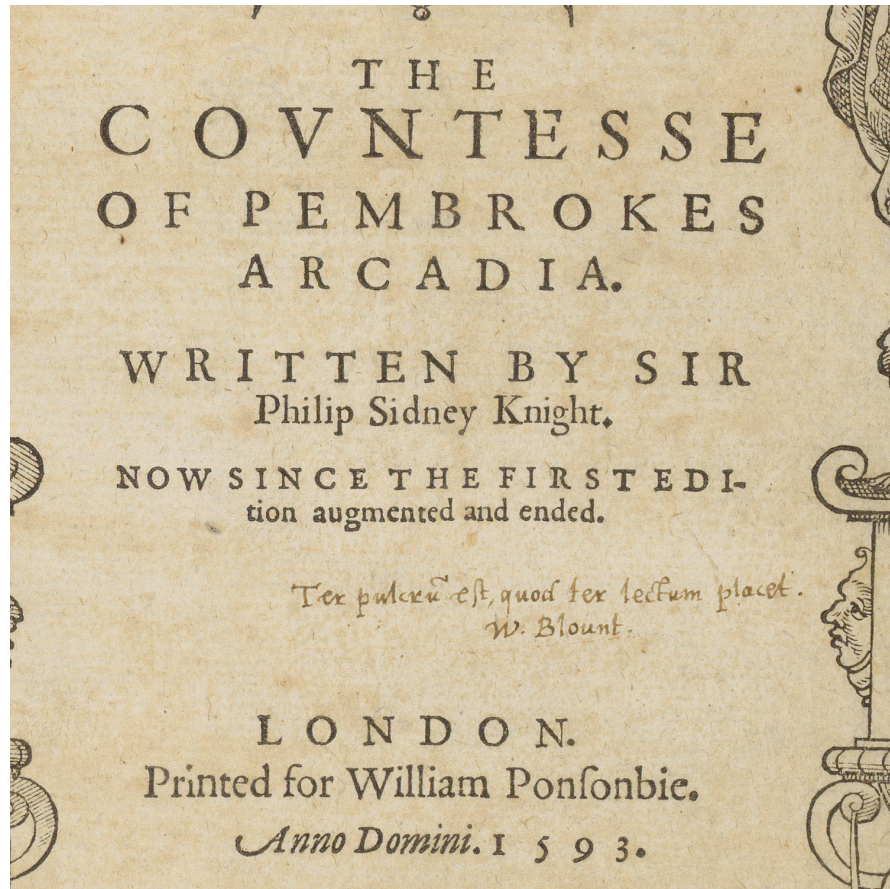
5 we two marke our selues: hath not shee throwne reason vpon our desires, and, as it were giuen eyes vnto *Cupid*: hath in any, but in her, loue-fellowship maintained frindship between riuals, and beautie taught the beholders chastitie: He was going on with his praises, but *Strephon* bad him stay, and looke: and so they both perceaued a thing which floted drawing nearer and nearer to the banke, but rather by the fa-

10 uourable working of the Sea, then by any selfe industrie. They doubted a while what it should bee, till it was cast vp euen hard before them: at which time they fully saw that it was a man. Whereupon runing for pitie sake vnto him, they found his hands (as it should appeare, constanter frendes to his life then his memorie) fast griping vpon the edge of a square small coffer, which lay all vnder his breast: els in him selfe

15 no shew of life, so as the boord seemed to be but a beere to carrie him a land to his Sepulchre. So drew they vp a young man of so goodly shape and well...

leaf A1 verso

The comment reveals that Blount had already read the romance in its entirety before setting down his notes: his annotations do not accompany a first reading but a rereading, with the whole work already in view. The title page confirms this reading practice. Before his signature Blount inscribed the motto “Ter pulcrum est, quod ter lectum placet” (“what pleases read thrice is thrice beautiful”).



title page recto

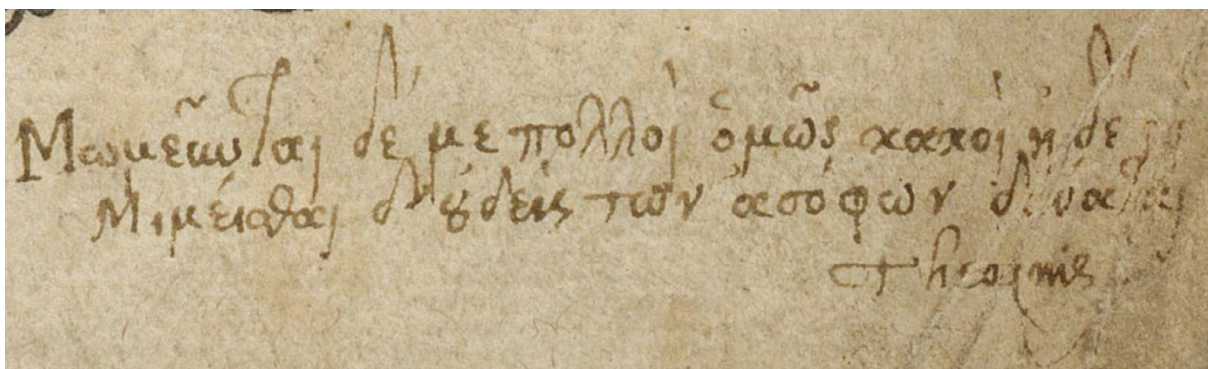
As Fred Schurink tells us the phrase adapts the Erasmian adage “Bis, ac ter, quod pulchrum est” (“what is beautiful, should be repeated twice or thrice”). It is likely also inspired by Horace’s analogy of poetry and painting: “ut pictura poesis...haec placuit semel, haec deciens repetita placebit” (“a poem is like a picture ... this pleased but once, that though ten times called for, will always please”). As a maxim for (re)reading, the motto resonates with Blount’s annotations, which sometimes trace more than one passage through Sidney’s work. Further evidence of Blount’s pleasurable rereading comes from his six-page *Index rerum* (folio [244]r-back endleaf 3 verso), a general index to characters and themes of the work, a feat that would have required repeated examination of the volume.

It’s worth pausing briefly to explain why the hand that signs W. Blount can also be identified with the annotator of the volume. [Brayman Hackel \(2005, 168 n.106\)](#) and [Schurink \(2007, 4\)](#) both conclude that the Latin phrase signed W. Blount—a neat italic with some secretary forms—was written by the same hand responsible for the extensive marginal annotations throughout the volume, in a mixed secretary–italic hand. Brayman Hackel also observes that Blount’s Latin phrase matches exactly the Greek inscription at the foot of the title page, attributed to Theognis:

μιμεῦνται δέ με πολλοί, ὁμῶς κακοὶ ἢ δὲ καὶ ἐσθλοί·

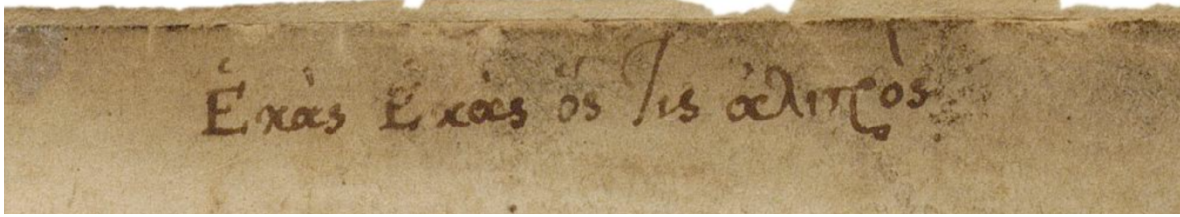
μιμεῖσθαι δ’ οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀσόφων δύναται.

(“Many, base and noble alike, find fault with me, but none of the fools can match me.”)



[title page recto](#)

The identical layout, small letterforms, ink tone, and ductus indicate that both were entered by the same scribe, probably at the same sitting. Their themes also align: both praise the *Arcadia* as a work of enduring excellence. A third Greek line at the top of the title page, ἐκὰς ἐκὰς ὅστις ἀλιτρός (“Away, away, whoever is sinful”), written in the same hand, completes the set.<sup>1</sup>



[title page recto](#)

Together the three inscriptions point to a single hand—Blount’s—deliberately framing the *Arcadia* as a work of moral and literary merit.

Who was this W. Blount? At first, I made no attempt to find out. I had come across the Blounts before while editing a verse miscellany: its scribe, Humfrey Coningsby—an early reader of Sidney in manuscript—had ties to two branches of the family. In infancy, he was a ward of Thomas Blount of Kidderminster, the Earl of Leicester’s leading household officer; he was also related to Sir George Blount of Sodington, to whom he left one of his “three greate Venetian looking-glasses,” the other two reserved for close family members (see [Edmondson \(2022\)](#), xxxi). It was only later, thinking again about these Coningsby–Blount links, that I turned back to the Folger *Arcadia* for a closer look.

Walter Blount (1594-1654), the son and heir of Coningsby’s legatee, soon emerged as a plausible candidate for the Folger annotator.<sup>2</sup> Further ownership marks in the Folger *Arcadia* from members of the Wylde family into which Walter married provide the strongest evidence.

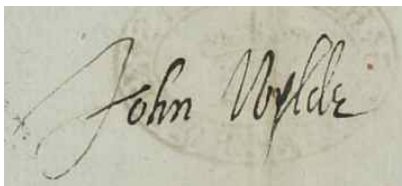
The Blounts of Sodington were a long-established family of landed gentry—seated at Sodington Manor in Worcestershire since the fourteenth century. An earlier ancestor, also named Walter Blount, even [appears as a leading character in Henry IV](#). The Wylde, by contrast, descended from a wealthy mercantile family of Worcester clothiers, and the match arranged by Sir George for his young heir (aged seventeen) with Elizabeth Wylde, daughter of George Wylde of Droitwich, looks like a classic case of prestige marrying money.

The coincidence of the ownership inscriptions *Blount* and *Wylde* in the same volume is highly suggestive, more so in the knowledge that Elizabeth’s brother was called John Wylde—the same name that appears at the head of the title page, where Blount’s name and motto also occur.



“John Wylde” (and again “John wyld” in a secretary script on the stub of [front endleaf 1 recto](#))

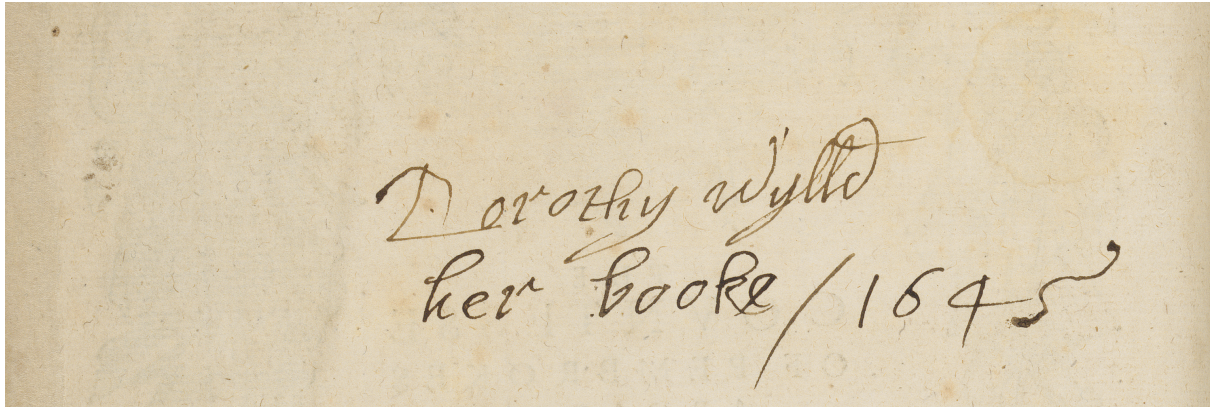
Although inscribing one’s name in a book is not equivalent to a signature—which can be more or less stylized—there is a striking similarity in several letter forms in the 1654 signature of Blount’s brother-in-law, by then (like his father before him) a serjeant-at-law).



“Assignment by John Wylde [as aforesaid], serjeant-at-law.” 23 June 1654 ([SP 63/293](#), f.130).

In October 1611, at the time of his sister’s marriage to Walter Blount, John Wylde (1590-1669) was already an established member of the Inner Temple and soon to be called to the bar. In 1616 he took part in the mock tournament held at the Whitehall banqueting house to mark the installation of Charles as prince of Wales. A distinguished lawyer and parliamentarian, Wylde enjoyed a stellar career, while Blount’s recusancy—he was indicted in Middlesex in 1640—prevented him from holding significant public office. Even so, the brothers-in-law served together for Droitwich in the Parliament of 1624 and Blount’s appointment to the shrievalty in 1619 was surely thanks to his influential relation. Wylde’s support for the 1629 recusancy bill did not stop him from promoting the admission of the sons of his Catholic brother-in-law, to the Inner Temple in 1631 and 1636.

Another ownership inscription appears on the title page verso: “Dorothy Wylde her booke / 1645.” The phrase “Dorothy Wylde her booke” also recurs several times on [front endleaf 2 recto](#), including one instance dated 1655, in an elaborate italic hand quite distinct from that dated 1645.



[title page verso](#)

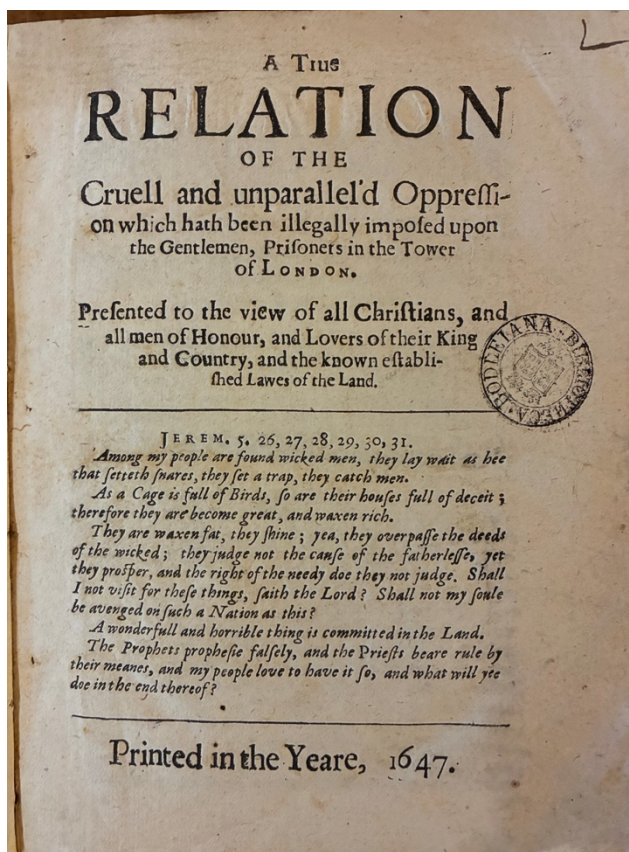
The name Dorothy recurs in this branch of the Wylde family: both a sister of John Wylde and a first cousin share the name. The former is mentioned in the monument to George Wylde, serjeant-at-law (d. 1616), in St. Andrew’s Church, Droitwich as a daughter that “God tooke young,” which rules her out as individual in question here. A second Dorothy Wylde, born in 1596, was the daughter of Sir Francis Clarke of Houghton Conquest, Bedfordshire, married Sir Edmund Wylde of Kempsey (1590-1620)—John Wylde’s first cousin, both born in the same year. Like Walter Blount, Edmund Wylde had been admitted to the Inner Temple at George Wylde’s request—his uncle in the one case, and father-in-law in the other. Dorothy was widowed early and may have spent time among her Wylde relations in Droitwich. Whoever this Dorothy proves to be, the names establish that the Folger volume circulated within the Blount–Wylde family network.

In tracing these owners we can see how Sidney’s romance continued to appeal to the next generation of readers—those born around the time of its first publication. In 1645, at the height of the civil war, Dorothy had the book in her hands. We can’t be sure how John or Dorothy actually read it, but even a cursory look at Walter Blount’s copious annotations suggests that he regarded the work much as Fulke Greville had described it in his *Life of the Renowed Sir Philip Sidney* (London: 1651, 245): as a collection of

*morall Images, and Examples, (as directing threds) to guide every man through the confused Labyrinth of his own desires and life.*

In 1646, a year after Dorothy added her inscription—Walter Blount’s family home had been burnt down by the Parliamentarians and he was being held prisoner, in the Tower of London. According to *A true relation of the cruell and unparallel'd oppression which hath been illegally imposed upon the gentlemen, prisoners in the Tower of London* (1647) (Folger 171- 363q), which includes a list of the gentlemen prisoners then held in the Tower, “Sir Walter Blount of Worcestershire [was] committed the 22. of January, 1646” (sig. C3r).

The publication is a joint production by the Royalist prisoners and a plea for some means for maintenance “in this hard Bondage and Famine” (sig. A3v).

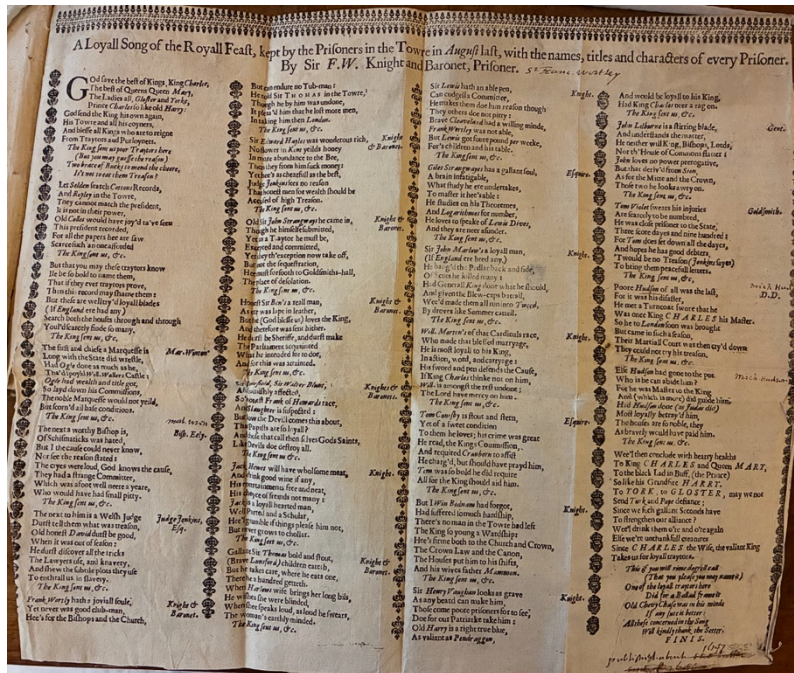


*Wee whom this present Discourse concernes, are for the most of us Prisoners of Warre, who in all ages by the Lawes of Nations, ... have, and ought to be treated civilly and with humanity, and to be maintained according to our qualities...most of us hauing been Prisoners for two, or three, or foure yeares, have been lockt up in our Chambers close Prisoners for one or two yeares together, and none of our friends suffered to come at us but with our Keepers...but our great offence is Loyalty, for acting in our severall wayes to His Majesties assistance. (sig. A2v-A3r)*

own image: Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Wood 500(1)

It is remarkable that it was possible to compose and publish such a pamphlet whilst held prisoner. One inmate, Sir Francis Wortley, even wrote and published a ballad: A

loyall song of the royall feast, kept by the prisoners in the Towre in August last, with the names, titles, and characters of every prisoner. By Sir F.W. knight and baronet, prisoner [September 16, 1647] ([Folger linked resource](#)).

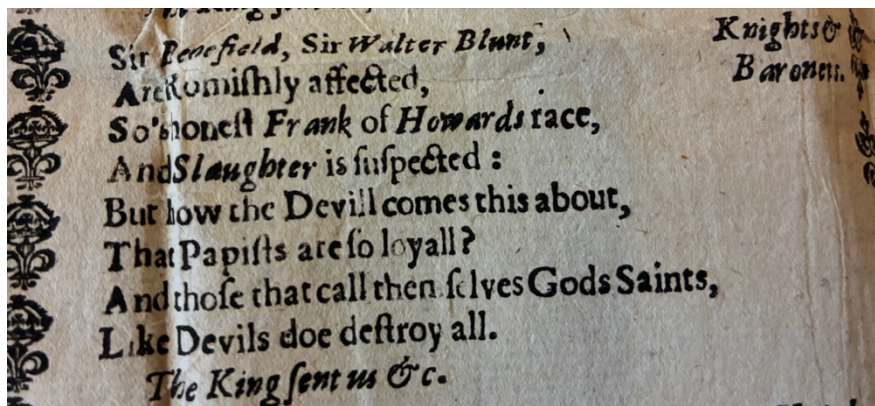


own image: Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Wood 500(2)

It immortalised the occasion of the King sending the royal prisoners two bucks for a feast; set to the well-known tune of “Chevy Chase,” the ballad was accompanied by the chorus:

*The King sent us poor Traytors here  
 (But you may guess the reason)  
 Two brace of Bucks to mend the cheere,  
 Is't not to eat them Treason?*

Each of the prisoners makes an appearance including Walter Blount who is marked out for his Catholicism:



*Sir Benefield, Sir Walter Blunt, Knights &  
Are Romishly affected, Barons  
So's honest Frank of Howards race.  
And Slaughter is suspected:  
But how the Devil comes this about,  
That Papists are so loyall?  
And those that call themselves Gods Saints,  
Like Devils doe destroy all.  
The King sent us &c.*

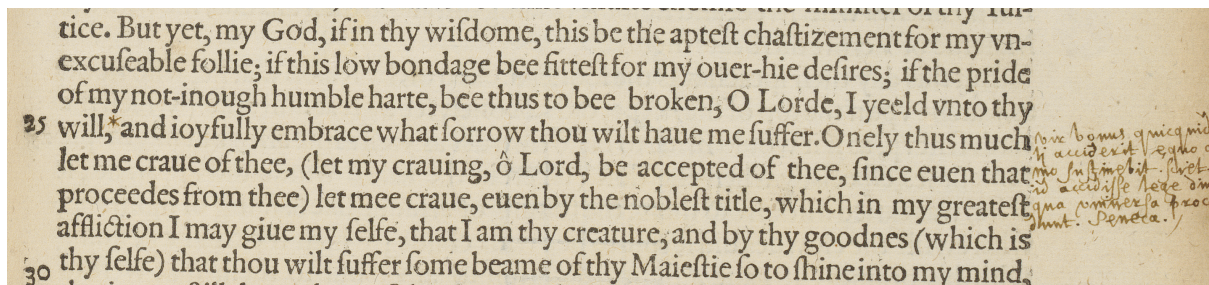
This literary activity demonstrates that composition, study, and even publication were entirely possible within the Tower. Another of Walter Blount's fellow prisoners, the Welsh judge David Jenkins, authored several tracts during his confinement, including *The vindication of Judge Jenkins prisoner in the Tower, the 29. of Aprill 1647* ([Folger J613.2](#)). Under such conditions, books too could circulate. It is plausible that Blount's brother-in-law, John Wylde—despite his Parliamentary sympathies—supplied the *Arcadia* among other works, to his relative held in the Tower.

In his study of Blount's marginalia, Schurink comments that "some of the most densely annotated sections are those dealing with political themes." He picks out a particular preoccupation of Blount's with "the qualities and actions of military commanders." In the marginalia association with the passage where Amphialus is preparing to lead an army into battle, Shurink comments that Blount "explores the different dispositions of soldiers ... [the] need for a commander to know his men well, and the proper behaviour of a leader in front of subordinates." Shurink deduces that "Blount was more interested

in the actions of military and political leaders per se” than how those actions relate to Sidney's romance (Schurink (2007), 7-10).

That interest, however, takes on sharper definition when read against Blount's own recent military and personal experience. Captured at the fall of Hereford on December 18, 1645, Blount was a committed royalist whose brothers and four sons all served in the king's armies. His notes suggest a reader writing from experience of the immediate realities of war and its aftermath.

In another passage that might have had personal resonance, Blount highlights—with his usual asterisk—a key moment in the “captivity episode” of Book 3, where Pamela shows supreme strength of character in adversity: “O Lorde, I yeeld vnto thy will, \*and ioyfully embrace what sorrow thou wilt haue me suffer.”



[leaf Y4 recto](#)

Blount reinforces this sentiment with a quotation in the margin from Seneca's *Epistle* 76:

*vir bonus quicquid illi acciderit aequo animo sustinebit sciet id accidisse lege divina qua universa procedunt*

*(A good man ... will endure with an unruffled spirit whatever happens to him; for he will know that it has happened as a result of the divine law, by which the whole creation moves)*

Read together, Pamela's prayer and Seneca's Stoic counsel seem to have offered Blount a source of consolation and moral strength—one that might well have resonated with a reader writing from confinement. Blount's motto now reads differently—“Ter pulcrum est, quod ter lectum placet” (“what pleases read thrice is thrice beautiful”) might well describe enforced rereading in captivity. We cannot prove that the book was read in prison, yet Blount's motto and annotations together suggest such a setting: a royalist gentleman, dispossessed and confined, rereading Sidney's romance of rivalries, loves, and trials with classical and Renaissance texts open beside him. In the Folger's *Arcadia*, the marginal hand of Walter Blount records not only an attentive reader, but one who found solace in reading again, and again, and again.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated the quotations and translations of classical texts are taken from Loeb Classical Library: 194, 258, 129, 76.

<sup>2</sup> Schurink (2007) identifies the annotator as William Blount, seventh Lord Mountjoy (c.1561-1594). However, as Schurink points out, not much is known about this individual who died the year after the composite *Arcadia* of 1593 was published and, according to Camden, lived a life of “vntemperate youthfulness”; but Schurink comments that with no other “plausible alternatives he remains the most likely candidate,” 6-7.