

Natasha Simonova
University of Oxford

Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies special issue: 'Reception and Early Modern Culture,'
January 2020.

'A book that all have heard of...but that nobody reads': Sidney's *Arcadia* in the Eighteenth Century

Sir Philip Sidney's unfinished romance, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, first appeared in print in 1590, four years after the author's death. In 1593, it expanded from quarto to folio, with an ending added from its earlier manuscript version; in 1598 the volume grew to encompass several of Sidney's other works. Ten further editions and multiple issues followed over the course of the seventeenth century, testifying to the *Arcadia*'s appeal.¹ It was quoted as a model of rhetoric, continued and adapted by numerous writers; during the Civil Wars it was read for coded political messages and featured in a pamphlet war involving John Milton and Charles I. But eventually interest waned: the last direct continuation was published in 1651; the last three folio editions in 1655, 1662, and 1674. Dennis Kay writes that 'With the Restoration came a change of taste that was to lead to a marked decline in Sidney's literary reputation,' despite his continuing fame as an Elizabethan hero.² In the eighteenth century, the *Arcadia* and its generic brethren were, as Clara Reeve would put it, 'exploded,' as romance was superseded by the new realist novel spearheaded by authors like Samuel Richardson. By 1804, Anna Laetitia Barbauld prefaced her edition of Richardson's correspondence with a history of English prose fiction describing the *Arcadia* as 'the once famous romance... a book that all have heard of, that some few possess, but that nobody reads.'³

All of this is a familiar story found in many accounts of the reception of Sidney's work, including my own.⁴ That story ends with the first wave of response to the *Arcadia*, with perhaps a few glances forward to the condemnations of Horace Walpole and William Hazlitt (discussed below) in order to demonstrate its fall. The purpose of this essay, however, is to ask an apparently counterintuitive question: how was this text published and read *after* it substantially ceased to be published and read? By what methodologies could such a question be answered, and what might be the value in doing so? Even Barbauld's dismissal, after all, comes while introducing the writings of a man who took the name of his first heroine (in *Pamela*) from the *Arcadia*, and who, as a printer, had directly contributed to the dissemination of Sidney's work.⁵ Further, in calling it a book 'that some few possess' and 'all have heard of,' Barbauld alludes (however backhandedly) to both the continued material circulation of the *Arcadia* and the awareness of Sidney's work in the popular consciousness.

Tracing the reception history of the *Arcadia* in the long tail after its commonly accepted 'end,' to see *how* people came to hear of and possess it, allows me to shed light on topics ranging from eighteenth-century publishing practices to the reception of Renaissance literature in this period, the generic relationship between the romance and the novel, and the way that individual readers' experiences help to transmit particular texts forward through time.

1. Cuttings from Sidney's Orchard

As a physical object, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* remained remarkably consistent from 1593 through the late seventeenth century. While subsequent editions accumulated material continuing or commenting on Sidney's work (including two bridging passages, a *Sixth Book*, and a biography),

when it came to the bulk of the text, most were page-for-page reprints. In form and presentation, all thirteen folios are also very similar, with elaborate frontispieces announcing them as aristocratic prestige objects. Even a 1599 Edinburgh piracy, which was intended to undercut William Ponsonby's edition by retailing at six shillings rather than nine, is still in this expensive large format.⁶ It is only after 1670, when demand for the folios was evidently decreasing, that we start to see greater experimentation in the way that the *Arcadia* was reprinted, including reductions in size and price. These demonstrate not only a change in approach to the text itself, but also the way that different booksellers catered to a growing market for fiction over the long eighteenth century.

One example of this is *The Famous History of Heroick Acts: or, the Honour of Chivalry, Being an abstract of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1701). At 158 pages, this small duodecimo features a fast-paced abridgement of the *Arcadia*'s main plot, told in simplified language and divided into chapters with summary headings. Renée Pigeon, whose dissertation includes the only sustained account of this text, sees it as evidence that the *Arcadia* 'no longer seem[ed] living or relevant' in this period.⁷ Indeed, the abridger's preface discusses his efforts 'to Revive this present History' 'which was in a manner covered all over with Weeds.'⁸

Yet if this abridgement's existence testifies to a need to revive the *Arcadia*, it also records the potential of doing so. As Lori Humphrey Newcomb writes of Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, which followed a similar trajectory at this time: 'Instead of reading the romance's conversion to chapbook form as a downward slide...material changes enabled the...story to move onward, reaching new readers and offering new interpretations.'⁹ In both price and style, the abridgement helps to make the *Arcadia* accessible to a new audience, for whom the folios and Sidney's elaborate prose would have been a barrier. However, it never loses touch with its roots: the subtitle suggests that provenance as 'an abstract of Pembroke's Arcadia' is something worth advertising.¹⁰ By speaking the language of romance – addressing readers as 'Fair Ladies' and crediting them with a thirst for 'Honour, Fame and Renown' – the preface also invites its audience into the aristocratic world of the *Arcadia*, showing its continued appeal as escapism and aspiration.

However, in focusing both its paratexts and its narrative on adventure rather than rhetoric and moral teaching, this text also aligns the *Arcadia* with another tradition – that of the shortened prose chivalric romances (such as *Guy of Warwick* and *The Seven Champions of Christendom*) that were highly popular from the late seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Margaret Spufford's study of them divides these narratives into chapbooks proper (24 pages or fewer) and longer 'pleasant histories,' to which *The Famous History of Heroick Acts* belongs.¹¹ While it shares features with other 'histories,' however, Spufford focuses on books retailing for sixpence and below; at one shilling bound, *The Famous History* (while much cheaper than the *Arcadia* folio) falls beyond the upper end of this market, which may account for its lack of known reprints.

Given the low survival rate of cheap print, we cannot know whether this was the only abridgement of the complete *Arcadia*. Certainly, its interwoven narratives would have made this difficult to accomplish while both retaining fidelity to the original and meeting the needs of a wider audience. However, one individual subplot – the tragic story of Argalus and Parthenia – was able to make the transition successfully. Francis Quarles contributed to popularising it as a standalone tale in his poetic version, which appeared at the height of the *Arcadia*'s popularity in 1629 and had a long afterlife in its own right.¹² At least 31 editions of Quarles' poem were published over the following century, with a marked upward trend following the Restoration. It was also in this period that prose retellings of the narrative began to appear, depending to various degrees on both Quarles and Sidney. Due to their

similar titles, the bibliographic history of these texts has only recently been detangled by Helen Vincent, who demonstrates that there were actually three separate versions (not two, as previously assumed).¹³

The earliest was *The Most Excellent History of Argalus and Parthenia*, first published in 1672 but reprinted in editions tentatively dated to 1770, 1780, 1788, 1800, and 1810-1830. This is a 24-page 'true' chapbook, further conforming to the format by being initially printed in black-letter and distributed by booksellers associated with popular print; Vincent suggests that its cheapness contributed to its longevity in this market. The second, *The Pleasant and Delightful History of Argalus and Parthenia*, was longer at fifty-six pages, and had only two editions (1683 and 1691). However, one of its booksellers later published another, still lengthier version of the story, which may have been intended to replace it. Titled *The Unfortunate Lovers, or, The Famous and Renowned History of Argalus and Parthenia*, it resembled *The Famous History of Heroick Acts* as a duodecimo publication of over a hundred pages. It had more lasting success, however, with at least eight editions (many undated) between its first appearance in 1703 and 1790.

The variation in length, format, and price between these different versions of *Argalus and Parthenia* demonstrates the segmentation of the popular fiction market in the eighteenth century, as well as the ability of this story to be adapted to every level of that market (as Vincent notes was commonly the case).¹⁴ It also parallels the process that Newcomb charts for Greene's *Pandosto*, which was republished in chapbook form as *The History of Dorastus and Fawnia* and often advertised side by side with *Argalus and Parthenia*. However, these adaptations continued the distinction between Greene and Sidney's status as authors that had existed since the sixteenth century: *Dorastus and Fawnia* was not attributed to Greene, while *Argalus and Parthenia* 'was always identified as a story taken from Philip Sidney....Sidney's name was held to confer value to chapbook consumers, while Greene's was not.'¹⁵ However they may differ in length and style, all of these texts, like *The Famous History of Heroick Acts*, explicitly signal their attachment to the *Arcadia*.

Quarles had described his *Argalus and Parthenia* as 'a *Siens* taken out of the Orchard of Sir *Philip Sidney*... which I have lately grafted upon a Crab-stock, in mine own' and the prose adaptations often adopt this horticultural metaphor.¹⁶ Throughout its 150-year publication history, the title page of *The Most Excellent History* announces it as 'a choice flower, gathered out of Sir Philip Sydneys rare garden': a way of making the aristocratic *hortus conclusus* more widely available. The preface to *The Unfortunate Lovers* alludes to the story's success in verse:

Nor cou'd any thing less be expected from the Product of so celebrated an Author, as the Immortal Sir *Philip Sidney*, whose Original Thought it was. Mr. *Quarles* having only transplanted it out of the *Arcadian* Plains into the Garden of the Muses; where, tho' it has flourished very well, yet I doubt not but it will thrive much better in its Original Soil.

Here, greater accessibility is seen as an effect of returning to the 'Original,' plain medium of prose, re-dressing the text in its 'native Garb' in order to furnish readers with a '*Lover's Common Place-Book*' of suitable expressions.¹⁷ As B.S. Field concludes, this text 'uses Sidney to appeal to people interested in upward social mobility,' with its longer format being 'intended for either more sophisticated readers, or readers who pretended to more sophistication.'¹⁸ The earlier and humbler *Pleasant and Delightful History*, however, had laid more stress on the writer's role in making Sidney's and Quarles's texts comprehensible:

This I have formed in a more plain and easie Method, that it may universally be acceptable to all Capacities. The famous *Sidney* (of never-dying Memory) first laid the Foundation, on

which we both [the writer and Quarles] have built; the Ground-work being so firm, I question not but that the structure will for Ages stand.

Like *The Famous History of Heroick Acts*, the emphasis is not only on ease but modernisation: the title-page calls it ‘newly reviv’d’ and the preface talks of ‘reviving what through time was almost brought to decay.’¹⁹ If the *Arcadia*’s text is now partially decayed, however, Sidney’s memory as both man and author is ‘never-dying,’ and it is this solid foundation that underwrites the publication’s success.

The lasting popularity of *Argalus and Parthenia* adaptations forces even critics telling the story of Sidney’s literary decline into concessions. Kay writes that ‘these cheap and crude retellings of *Arcadia* forcefully demonstrate the degree to which Sidney’s stories were still read into the eighteenth century,’ while Paul Salzman concludes, ‘Here is evidence that the *Arcadia* really was a widely-loved book, for while the most refined members of the reading public consulted their folios, anyone who had a few pence could read at least one of Sidney’s stories, in more or less his own words.’²⁰ Yet the emphasis on their cheapness and crudeness reflects concerns about ‘cultural distinction’ that, as Newcomb argues, are themselves inherited from the eighteenth century.²¹ The story of *Argalus and Parthenia* was popular enough – in both senses of the word – to be alluded to by early novelists as an example of the low-status literature they wished to set themselves against. Henry Fielding, for example, ironically echoes the preface to *The Pleasant and Delightful History* in mentioning examples of English fiction that are ‘very easy to be comprehended by Persons of modern Capacity,’ including ‘the History of *John...the Giant-Killer*’ and ‘the Lives of *Argalus and Parthenia*.’²²

Yet, as Newcomb writes, ‘while elite observers repeatedly portrayed popular romances as fit only for the socially marginal, publishers refitted them in accord with changing literary fashions.’²³ Through the early nineteenth century, a version of at least some part of the *Arcadia* was available at every price point in the print market. Moreover, all of these publications maintained a connection to Sidney and his original as a selling point, even when it was common for abridgements of other Early Modern texts not to do so.²⁴ This suggests that Sidney retained a reputation, not only as a historical figure or Protestant hero, but as the author of a particular renowned work of imagination: that the *Arcadia* itself, in fact, remained a recognisable ‘brand.’ What these versions of it lost in prestige and complexity, they – much like the *Reader’s Digests* and film adaptations of today – gained in market reach, giving the romance an afterlife in the popular imagination that Sidney’s literary executors could not have anticipated.

2. Immeasurable Folios

The reception of these cheap retellings is inherently difficult to trace, but Sidney’s legacy in the eighteenth century also included more up-market publications. *Arcadia Moderniz’d* (1725), a line-for-line rewriting by Dorothy Stanley, shares the chapbooks’ desire to update his prose for a new readership, but does so in the service of elegance and politeness rather than broad appeal. Like the seventeenth-century editions, this is a prestigious and monumental volume, advertised as ‘beautifully printed in Folio’ with extra-wide margins, dedicated to the Princess of Wales, and initially priced at 15 shillings.²⁵

Critics have largely been dismissive of Stanley’s *Arcadia*, with what interest it has garnered focusing primarily on her gender and authorial role.²⁶ Yet Stanley’s choice of text, with what it implies about Sidney’s eighteenth-century reputation, is worth considering. In her dedication and preface, Stanley takes Sidney’s status as the ‘politest Author of his Age’ as a justification for her project; like the

chapbook compilers, she talks of ‘reviving’ his work but also stresses faithfulness as the goal: ‘I have been very careful not even in the minutest Point to vary from his Tract, either in the Thoughts or in the Story.’ Sidney’s text and its ‘Beauties’ (as conveyed by Stanley) are the main attraction: she has ‘followed him so closely as entirely to pass over any Additions that have been made to him,’ including the supplements and continuations bridging gaps in the narrative. On the other hand, Stanley is cavalier about making certain *cuts*, omitting the poetry that had defined the *Arcadia*’s pastoral genre but which later commentators would see as a hindrance: ‘As to the leaving out of the *Eclogues*, I have the Opinion of most of my Subscribers for it; and it is to them alone I think my self accountable.’²⁷

Subscription publishing is thus an important part of Stanley’s project, and marks it as a distinctly eighteenth-century one. This form of publication was still new and fashionable in the 1720s, making economic sense for such a substantial and time-intensive undertaking. Proposals for a ‘New Arcadia; in imitation of the late fam’d Sir Philip Sidney’ were first printed in January 1723, leaving time to gather subscribers while Stanley carried out the work.²⁸ Advertisements then appeared in various newspapers from early 1724, claiming the book was nearly ready and issuing final calls to subscribe.²⁹ The finished volume, published in June the following year, includes two pages of names subscribing for a total of 188 copies, ranging from duchesses to provincial booksellers. Pat Rogers has recently cautioned against taking this list as direct evidence for the popularity of Sidney’s work: the number of subscribers is on the low end of average, and many of them have links to the political circle of Stanley’s brother-in-law, rather than being known lovers of literature.³⁰ Even if this was partly a vanity project on Stanley’s part, however, her chosen work testifies to the continued status of the *Arcadia*, while the existence of the volume within the marketplace contributed to its dissemination.

While early advertisements claimed that only enough books would be printed for subscribers, or perhaps ‘a very few’ more, this was likely intended to create the illusion of scarcity. In fact, a number of extra or uncollected copies apparently remained, since they were still being advertised years later. By 1733, one bookseller decided to shift his remaining stock by selling it off in ‘numbers’: the entire volume could now be had for 6 shillings, purchased one quire at a time, ‘to be deliver’d weekly at Gentlemen’s Houses...stitch’d in blue Paper.’³¹ Dianne Osland calls this ‘the ultimate indignity,’ while Fielding’s *Tom Jones* alludes to it as a common bookseller’s practice by which ‘the heavy, unread, Folio Lump, which long had dozed on the dusty Shelf, piece-mealed into Numbers, runs nimbly through the Nation.’³² Yet serial publication in blue-paper covers was also another distinctive innovation of the eighteenth-century book trade: most often used for large works of history and reference, its application to prose fiction remains underexplored.³³ Although Stanley’s *Arcadia* was not originally intended for such distribution, there must have been some ‘Gentlemen’ who purchased it in this way, showing the text’s continued adaptation to new conditions.

Indeed, recorded reactions to Stanley’s work, however mixed, demonstrate that it did not sink without a trace. A commendatory poem in the *London Journal* may have been commissioned, although another comparing the poet’s mistress to a heroine from the ‘*Moderniz’d Arcadia*’ appears sincere.³⁴ Clara Reeve was still aware of it in 1785, writing that the *Arcadia* ‘underwent a kind of Translation by Mrs. Stanley, by which it was thought’ – by people who must have discussed the matter – ‘to lose more beauties than it gained.’³⁵ As late as 1830, Robert Southey recalled it as his first exposure to the *Arcadia*: although Stanley’s prose had only ‘worsened it,’ her streamlining had helpfully ‘thrown away the pastoral parts, and the miserable pieces of metre...therefore I had nothing to interrupt my enjoyment of the romance.’³⁶

Stanley's work can be seen as part of a wider, controversial trend for modernising Early Modern literature, such as Edward Howard's *Spencer Redivivus* ('His Essential Design preserv'd, but his obsolete Language and manner of Verse totally laid aside').³⁷ Some feared the same fate would befall Shakespeare, warning that interventionist editing would mean that 'our venerable bard may, in time, be made to look as awkward as his cotemporary Sir Philip Sidney now does, as trick'd out by the hands of his modern tire-woman Mrs. Stanley.'³⁸ The possibly-parodic 'Proposal for Regenerating and Modernizing Shakespeare' by one Will Stanley cites 'my grand-mother, the well-known Mrs. Stanley... a very able artificer in this way: she did not content herself with merely renovating particular parts of Sir Philip Sydney's celebrated romance... but completely modernized the whole.'³⁹ The overwhelming canonisation of Shakespeare can make it difficult to accurately measure the reputation of his contemporaries in this period, yet if Sidney (like Spenser, with whom he is often mentioned in the same breath) did not reach the same heights, the comparison still suggests that his work was well-known enough to be subject to the same debates between updating and authenticity.⁴⁰ The argument against modernisation was not only that it was poorly-done but that it was not needed, with the original still perfectly intelligible for readers of taste.

Indeed, even if the ultimate success of Mrs. Stanley's project is debatable, it did seem to have prompted a reissue of Sidney's text as *The Works of the Honourable Sir Philip Sidney*, in three volumes octavo (1725) and reprinted in Dublin in duodecimo (1739).⁴¹ Despite the change of title and format, these are in a direct line of descent from the thirteen *Arcadia* folios, being advertised as the fourteenth and fifteen editions. Textually, they are fairly unadventurous: apart from updating spelling and punctuation, they largely follow the last edition of 1674.⁴² This includes retaining most of the 'additions,' such as William Alexander's bridging passage and Richard Belling's *Sixth Book* – while the title focuses on Sidney's 'works,' therefore, the content actually privileges a complete, continuous plotline.⁴³ Such an orientation, together with the move to a smaller three-volume format, leads Peter Lindenbaum to conclude that these editions are seeking to reposition the *Arcadia* as a 'proto-novel' rather than 'a book for study and for the study,' 'popularizing' the text 'by making it accessible in a less impressive and expensive format' for a middle-class audience.⁴⁴

There are, however, several problems with this interpretation. The first is one of chronology: Lindenbaum depicts readers presciently craving books presented in a novelistic format because the novel had not yet been invented for them to read. The second is that, while it was undoubtedly more portable, the octavo initially retailed for the same substantial price (fifteen shillings) as Stanley's folio. The 1739 Dublin edition, apparently most novel-like of all in duodecimo, is also something of a red herring – its date is temptingly neat, with Richardson's *Pamela* published the following year to seemingly 'render the *Arcadia* obsolete.'⁴⁵ In fact, however, it was the 1725 octavo on which Richardson had worked as a printer and it continued to be the most recent edition for English audiences, with a longer afterlife than we might assume: advertisements for it were still appearing in the London papers well into the 1750s, often alongside those for *Pamela*.⁴⁶ As with Stanley, we might take the continued advertising as evidence that it was hardly a bestseller, although it was not atypical for backlist titles to have a long shelf life. It also serves as a useful reminder of the fact that the printing date is actually the beginning, not the end, for a particular work: 'publication' should be seen as a continuous process rather than a singular event, and even for a purchaser in the mid-eighteenth century, the works of Philip Sidney might constitute a 'new book.'⁴⁷

At the same time, the changes in format and distribution that I have described cannot solely be credited with keeping the *Arcadia*'s reputation alive in the eighteenth century. Readers were certainly aware of its status as an *old* book from a famous Elizabethan, and we must not forget that the

sixteenth- and seventeenth-century folios also had a life between their first publication and our current study of them, being found in catalogues of estate sales and circulating libraries throughout this period. While some reader comments imply familiarity with one of these older copies, they do not allude to their age or size as a barrier to reading: as one lady remarked, ‘Huge immeasurable Folios that look so dreadful...are nothing to me, but like the *Dragon*, I can {eat them up as an Apple.}’⁴⁸ It is only later references that draw attention to ‘the unfashionable length, the very physical magnitude’ of the text: William Hazlitt (1820) shudders at its ‘five hundred folio pages,’ while Virginia Woolf (1932) comments on ‘the great volumes that have sunk, like the “Countess of Pembroke’s *Arcadia*”, as if by their own weight down to the very bottom of the shelf.’⁴⁹

3. Reading the Romance

If this textual history meant that ‘some few possessed it,’ as Barbauld would write, then *did* anyone actually read the *Arcadia*, and how? While she simply claims that ‘nobody’ does, other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics refer to specific categories of readers as the last to fall away. In 1758, Horace Walpole famously condemned the *Arcadia* as ‘a tedious, lamentable, pedantic, pastoral romance, which the patience of a young virgin in love cannot now wade through.’⁵⁰ His attack was echoed in the next century by Hazlitt, who similarly alludes to its abandonment by women: ‘It no longer adorns the toilette...of Maids of Honour and Peeresses in their own right...but remains upon the shelves of the libraries of the curious in long works and great names.’⁵¹

A lack of interest even from indiscriminating and leisured women was thus seen as the final nail in the coffin of the *Arcadia*’s reputation. From its first composition and dedication to the Countess of Pembroke, the work – and romance in general – had been associated (however inaccurately) with female readers.⁵² *The Spectator* placed a copy in the library of a ‘Lady’ with pretensions to book-collecting and a love of romances, which had ‘given her a very particular Turn of Thinking.’⁵³ Clara Reeve notes that the *Arcadia* ‘has always been a favourite with her sex,’ while also being a danger in giving them ‘absurd ideas,’ while Christopher Smart suggests what those ideas might be in a pastoral scene of seduction, inviting his mistress to

There read Sydney’s high-wrought stories
Of ladies charms and heroes glories;
Thence fir’d, the sweet narration act,
And kiss the fiction into fact.⁵⁴

Such conventional threats of literary temptation strangely persist despite the fact that, by the time Reeve and Smart were writing, even susceptible young women were presumed to have given up on romance in favour of the new realist novel. Charlotte Lennox had famously parodied naïve romance-reading in *The Female Quixote* (1752), in which Arabella is given unsupervised access to her late mother’s collection and absurdly tries to live out their plots as ‘fact.’ Yet even this depiction was seen as already outdated and inaccurate – Reeve wrote that ‘the Satire of the *Female Quixote* seems in great measure to have lost its aim, because at the time it first appeared, the taste for those Romances was extinct, and the books exploded....This book came thirty or forty years too late’ – thus pushing the hay-day of romance even further back into the past.⁵⁵

As a counterpoint to these denunciations, it is instructive to look at how the *Arcadia* was read by some real women in the mid-eighteenth century, many of whom would later be associated with the Bluestockings: a group including Elizabeth Montagu, Catherine Talbot, and Jemima Campbell Yorke, Marchioness Grey (a ‘Peeress in her own right’), as well as Jemima’s daughter Amabel Grey

Polwarth and cousin Jemima Mary Gregory (who, working in the Royal Household, might qualify as a ‘Maid of Honour’).

Talbot and Jemima Grey were childhood friends, having first bonded over their shared love of reading – a love that evidently included the *Arcadia*. In 1736, a sixteen-year-old Talbot visited the Sidney house at Penshurst, which was becoming a tourist destination, and described it to Jemima in a sustained parody of his style – ‘O that the memory of his perfection could inspire me with such heart-delightful sweetness...or breathe in my soul that smilingness of fantasie...that sweetlie adorns his everie sentence’ – concluding with a compliment comparing Jemima and the third member of their circle, her young aunt Mary Grey (later Gregory), to Pamela and Philoclea.⁵⁶

Nine years later, the now-married Jemima wrote to Mary Gregory, expressing surprise that not all of her male houseguests were familiar with the text:

After finishing the Odyssey we have after Supper taken the *Arcadia*, some of the Gentlemen had never read it, & I am always amused by it. The Characters are mighty well drawn, the Story’s well carried on, the Speeches sometimes excellent, & at other Times such horrid Quaintnesses...it makes one laugh but puts one out of Patience.⁵⁷

Grey and her family group proceeded to read the *Arcadia* aloud through late June/July 1745; as she reports to Talbot, ‘We are growing very Pastoral & have begun the *Arcadia*; I have always been amused with it, & I think I am not yet Out-grown It.’⁵⁸ A few weeks later she notes, ‘The *Arcadia* is almost finished, it has amused us very well,’ and repeats her stylistic criticisms, concluding, ‘tis strange that the same Person should write both so very well & so exceeding ill.’⁵⁹ Grey’s appreciation of the *Arcadia* is thus a judicious one, tinged with an awareness that this text is one it would be possible to ‘out-grow.’ At the same time, however, she clearly liked it enough to read more than once, and compares it favourably to other romances.⁶⁰ A reader like this, with tastes ranging from Spenser and Ariosto to Clarendon and Locke, found no difficulty in uniting her historical interest in the Early Modern period with literary criticism and simple enjoyment.

Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, future leader of the Bluestockings, described a similar scene of communal reading in 1742, slipping like Talbot into stylistic parody: ‘We are reading Sir Philip Sidney’s famous Romance, which is *far exceeding* the *exceedingness* of the *most exceeding imagination*;...Surely *by mimicry* I have fallen into the style of Sir Philip.’⁶¹ The letter is addressed to her friend Mary Pendarves (Delany), who evidently thought more highly of Sidney’s work; Montagu subsequently writes to her sister Sarah (Scott), ‘I have laid aside the *Arcadia* ‘till Mrs Pendarvis [sic] comes, who is fond of it, and the Dutchess [of Portland] and I have agreed that she shall read it to us.’⁶² Such episodes tend to qualify Betty Schellenberg’s portrayal of the first-generation Bluestockings as suspicious of fiction generally and non-realistic fiction in particular.⁶³ Sarah Scott may (as she wrote to Montagu) have discouraged a young neighbour from borrowing ‘the *Arcadia* or any romance’ lest it make her enamoured with the heroes over a real suitor, but in doing so she is only repeating a well-worn anti-romance commonplace about a book she owned and knew herself.⁶⁴ If, in all of these letters, the *Arcadia* is sometimes the butt of the joke, it is also a ‘famous Romance,’ an unexceptionable choice of after-supper reading, and a common reference point that links communities of women together.

Like Arabella’s mother in *The Female Quixote*, Jemima Grey also seems to have passed on her fondness for it to the next generation. Her daughter Amabel and cousin Jemima Mary Gregory were not only keen readers but also writers of romance: sometimes addressing each other as ‘Silvia’ and ‘Melinda,’ their correspondence features long discussions of their prose and dramatic works in

progress, which they also shared with other family members. Both appear to be writing narratives titled *Arcadia*; although not direct adaptations of Sidney, they evidently borrowed names and elements from him, with Amabel composing an ‘Address to Sr. P. Sidney.’⁶⁵ A typical summary reads:

I do not very well know how Leonora can help the Discovery of Melidora, but if she can it is certainly...better to make all the Episodes contribute something to the main action, & she can manage the fishing up of the Casket if you please. My humble Respects to Prince Pyrophilus & shall be very glad to pay my Respects to his Highness.⁶⁶

If this romance writing was a youthful pass-time, with both women in their twenties, it was a not short-lived one: letters discussing the stories cover an eight-year period following Amabel’s marriage in 1772. It is evident, therefore, that all of these ladies had more patience than Walpole gave them credit for: they were both enthusiastic and critical readers of the *Arcadia*, and used it as a prompt for their own creative responses.

Yet while the association of the romance with women was enduring, it was no more reflective of reality in the eighteenth century than in the sixteenth: the *Arcadia* was also read and appreciated by men. In 1772, for instance, Richard Brinsley Sheridan wrote to a male friend to recommend the text – ‘If you have not read it (and ever read Romances) I wish you would’ – while admitting that it is ‘unfashionable’; yet ‘for my own Part when I read for Entertainment, I had much rather view the Characters of Life as I would wish they *were* than as they *are*: therefore I hate Novels, and love Romances.’⁶⁷

Moreover, although Walpole’s condemnation has often been seen as the last word on the *Arcadia* in the eighteenth century, it was in fact deliberately provocative and became the starting point for debate. Reeve quotes it precisely in this sense – her work takes the form of a dialogue, with characters discussing the merits and deficiencies of Walpole’s assessment.⁶⁸ The *Arcadia* was also defended against Walpole in a 1767 article in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, which shares Sheridan’s admiration for the genre but takes a perspective above that of mere entertainment: ‘As to its being a romance, the romance is the only vehicle of fine sentiments and judicious reflections’ on governance and morality. As such, the *Arcadia* is to be appreciated by serious-minded readers who are able to set it in its original context, not ‘a young virgin, or (I may add) young gentleman, in love, reading, what is considered only as Love-story, the patience, every step, hastening to the end.’⁶⁹

The arguments contra Walpole continued well into the nineteenth century, with his name becoming a byword for bad criticism of the text: *The Annual Review* in 1809 addresses ‘The despicable criticisms which have been passed upon it [by Walpole], if those persons can be said to criticise who pass censure upon what they have not perused,’ and Egerton Brydges describes Walpole as having ‘called forth a feeling of indignation from all enlightened and generous minds.’⁷⁰ This period saw a general revival of interest in Early Modern literature among Romantic writers, with the *Arcadia* read by figures including Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Shelleys, and discussed at length in *The Retrospective Review* in 1820; Hazlitt’s attack against it that year should thus be seen as similarly tendentious, prompting a response from Charles Lamb among others.⁷¹

4. The Reception History of Unpopular Books

Another article in *The Annual Review*, possibly by Robert Southey, offers a direct rebuttal to Barbauld’s assessment:

Nobody, it has been said, reads the *Arcadia*. We have known very many persons who have read it, men, women, and children, and never knew one who read it without deep interest... great in proportion as they were capable of appreciating it.⁷²

Modern research databases can give us access to some of these ‘many persons’: however imperfect, they help to reduce the role of serendipity and make it easier to disprove the absence of evidence. Apart from those already cited, many other small moments of reception can enable us to re-evaluate and go beyond the citations gathered in Martin Garrett’s *Sidney: The Critical Heritage*.⁷³ Yet the difference in how we view the *Arcadia*’s reputation in this period – between Barbauld and the *Annual Review*, or myself and previous critics – tends to involve no more than a change of perspective: of seeing the vase or the faces in the figure-ground illusion. The aim of this study has not been to argue for some hitherto-unknown popularity of Sidney’s romance in the eighteenth century, but rather to ask what it meant for it to be *unpopular*, and to suggest that ‘little-read’ is not the same as ‘unread.’

The history of its material transformations demonstrates an attempt to remake the text in the image of eighteenth-century print culture at the same time as its folio editions continued to circulate, lying upon the shelves described by Reeve and Hazlitt – and sometimes being lifted from them. If we ask why the *Arcadia* was not *more* popular, this textual history may provide the answer – with the chapbook abridgements on one side and the folios on the other, Sidney’s text tended to fall between two stools, missing out on the middle-class audience who were likely to consume and discuss modern novels, and who feature most prominently in accounts of eighteenth-century reading. It is thus paradoxically positioned as *both* a guilty pleasure and an unpleasurable slog, reading for silly girls and a dusty folio of interest only to collectors and antiquarians. At the same time, however, we might question the peculiar insistence of those who claim that the *Arcadia* and other romances had gone completely out of fashion, given that many of them (including Walpole, Fielding and Reeve) had a vested interest in promoting the new fiction, which was often done through contrast with the old. The inflammatory phrasing of Walpole’s attack in particular suggests the slaughter of a sacred cow, not the flogging of a dead horse.

If writers dismissing the text protest too much, then those who claim to admire it also offer disclaimers and caveats – at times (as in Sheridan’s letter) they are defiant in their praise, suggesting that the romance came to possess a certain contrarian retro appeal. The cumulative effect is not of an absence of reception, but rather a number of overlapping views of the *Arcadia*: as a source of slightly embarrassed pleasure, a shorthand for pastoral romance, and a classic work of Renaissance literature from a famous author. A summary account is often taken from Reeve, who gives a lukewarm overall assessment – her authorial figure Euphrasia suggests skipping the poetry and considers it to be ‘equal, but not superior to any of the Romances of the same period,’ before concluding: ‘It is now time for us to leave [Sidney’s] works to their repose, upon the shelves of the learned, and the curious in old writings.’⁷⁴

These lines tend to be quoted as decisive, with Kay writing that they ‘mark the end of the *Arcadia*’s active participation in the developing tradition of English fiction.’⁷⁵ Yet they actually come in the *middle* of Reeve’s own discussion of the text: the multivocal form of *The Progress of Romance* encompasses a variety of approaches, of which Euphrasia’s is only one. Her friend Sophronia’s reply is more optimistic: ‘I shall come and awaken the *Arcadia*, in order to refresh my memory. I lov’d this book in my youth, and shall not forsake it now.’⁷⁶

We should also not draw too sharp a line (as Hazlitt does) between the real-life Sophronias of the Bluestocking circle and ‘the learned, and the curious in old writings.’ Learned readers are still readers,

and in a period predating the institutional study of English literature, there was not much to separate them from the ordinary ranks of the literate. Just as Heidi Brayman Hackel's survey of annotations shows seventeenth-century readers approaching the *Arcadia* from the standpoint of both rhetorical instruction and plot, their eighteenth-century counterparts, male and female, were able to combine literary-historical judgments with pleasure.⁷⁷

Sophonria's words make us aware of this more affective dimension to the eighteenth-century reception of the *Arcadia*, as well as the way that a single reader's lifetime can serve as a bridge across period boundaries. The experiences of the kind of reader she represents also help to restore the suppressed connections between Early Modern romance and the eighteenth-century novel. The relationship between the two genres can be likened to that of manuscript and print: despite the apparently revolutionary impact of the latter, the former continued to persist and interact with it for longer than earlier accounts have credited.

In her essay on the *Arcadia*, Virginia Woolf imagines a single folio copy passing through the hands of many readers – Elizabethan 'Richard Porter,' Restoration 'Lucy Baxter,' and even 'Thos. Hake, still reading, though now the eighteenth century has dawned with a distinction that shows itself in the upright elegance of his signature.'⁷⁸ Focusing on those who were 'still reading' in this period makes visible the chains of reception and transmission that carry a text forward through time – from Jemima to Amabel Grey, from the young Sophronia to the older Sophronia, from Dorothy Stanley to Robert Southey – as well as how it is altered in the process. While any such study demands a stopping point relying on established period boundaries, we should be aware that this process never actually ceases. As Woolf concludes, 'Let us keep up the long succession of readers; let us in our turn bring the insight and the blindness of our own generation to bear upon the "Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*", and so pass it on to our successors.'⁷⁹

¹ See Bent Juel-Jensen, 'Sir Philip Sidney, 1554-1586: A Check-list of Early Editions of his Works,' *Sir Philip Sidney: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, ed. Dennis Kay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 289-314.

² Dennis Kay, 'Introduction: Sidney – A Critical Heritage,' *Sir Philip Sidney: An Anthology of Modern Criticism* 29.

³ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, ed. *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* (London: Richard Phillips, 1804) 1.xviii.

⁴ Natasha Simonova, *Early Modern Authorship and Prose Continuations: Adaptation and Ownership from Sidney to Richardson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 48.

⁵ A character in Richardson's sequel makes the connection explicit: 'Methinks I like her *Arcadian* Name,' *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (London: 1741) 3.141. For Richardson printing the 1725 edition of Sidney's *Works*, see T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 37.

⁶ Henry Plomer, 'The Edinburgh Edition of Sidney's "Arcadia"' *The Library* 2-1.2 (1899): 195-205. Book prices cited throughout should be viewed in light of inflation over the period.

⁷ Renée Pigeon, 'Prose Fiction Adaptations of Sidney's *Arcadia*' (Diss. University of California, 1988) 241.

⁸ 'J.N.' *The Famous History of Heroick Acts* (London: William Spiller, 1701) A2r.

⁹ Lori Humphrey Newcomb, *Reading Popular Romance in Early Modern England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 4.

¹⁰ Pigeon takes this for a misattribution (242), but the *Arcadia* was frequently referred to thus in the eighteenth century: Clara Reeve notes that 'it is commonly called, Pembroke's *Arcadia*.' *The Progress of Romance* (Colchester: W. Keymer, 1785) 1.78.

¹¹ Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (London: Methuen, 1981) 225-250.

¹² B.S. Field, 'Sidney's Influence: The Evidence of the Publication of the History of Argalus and Parthenia,' *English Language Notes* 17.2 (December 1979): 98-102.

- ¹³ Helen Vincent, 'Mopso's Arcadia: Choice Flowers Gathered out of Sir Philip Sidney's Rare Garden into Eighteenth-Century Chapbooks.' *Medieval into Renaissance: Essays for Helen Cooper*, eds. Andrew King and Matthew Woodcock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016): 235-250. The following paragraph is indebted to Vincent.
- ¹⁴ Vincent, 'Mopso's Arcadia' 238.
- ¹⁵ Newcomb, *Reading Popular Romance* 31.
- ¹⁶ Frances Quarles, *Argalus and Parthenia* (London: John Marriott, 1629) A3r.
- ¹⁷ *The Unfortunate Lovers: The History of Argalus and Parthenia* (London: Thomas Norris, 1715?) A2r-v.
- ¹⁸ Field, 'Sidney's Influence' 102.
- ¹⁹ 'W.P.', *The Pleasant and Delightful History of Argalus and Parthenia* (T. Passenger, 1683) A2r.
- ²⁰ Kay, 'Introduction' 23; Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction 1558-1700: A Critical History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 132.
- ²¹ Newcomb, *Reading Popular Romance* 9.
- ²² Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (London: Andrew Millar, 1742) 3.
- ²³ Newcomb, *Reading Popular Romance* 10.
- ²⁴ Vincent, 'Mopso's Arcadia' 241.
- ²⁵ *Daily Courant*, 8 August 1730.
- ²⁶ Recent studies include Marea Mitchell, 'Dorothy Stanley's Enterprise: *Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia Moderniz'd* (1725)' *Sidney Journal* 28.2 (2010): 63-76; Clare Kinney, 'The Gentlewoman Reader Writes Back: Mrs. Stanley's *Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia Moderniz'd*' *Sidney Journal* 27.2 (2009): 39-52; and Dianne Osland, 'Introduction.' *Continuations to Sidney's Arcadia, 1607-1867*, eds. Marea Mitchell and Ann Lange (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014) 2.vii-xxviii.
- ²⁷ D[orothy] Stanley, *Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia, Moderniz'd* (London: 1725) a1v-b1v.
- ²⁸ *Daily Courant*, 18 January 1723.
- ²⁹ For instance: *Universal Journal*, 26 February 1724; *London Journal*, 19 June 1725.
- ³⁰ Pat Rogers, 'Family, Kinship, and the Evidence of Subscription Lists: Dorothy Stanley and *Arcadia Moderniz'd*' *Review of English Studies* 66.275 (2015): 501-519.
- ³¹ *Universal Spectator and Weekly Journal* 4 August 1733 (advertisement for number VI).
- ³² Osland, 'Introduction' 2.xix; Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (London: Andrew Millar, 1749) 3.218-219.
- ³³ See R.M. Wiles, *Serial Publication in England Before 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).
- ³⁴ *London Journal*, 17 August 1725; *Versus inopes rerum / Poems on Several Occasions* (London: J. Peele, 1729) 18-19.
- ³⁵ Reeve, *Progress of Romance* 1.79.
- ³⁶ *The Autobiography, Times, Opinions, and Contemporaries of Sir Egerton Brydges* (London: Cochrane and McCrone, 1834) 2.266.
- ³⁷ Edward Howard, *Spencer Redivivus* (Thomas Chapman, 1687).
- ³⁸ Richard Warner, *A Letter to David Garrick, Esq.* (London: 1768), 73-4.
- ³⁹ *Gentleman's Magazine* 61.6 (December 1791), 1098. The authenticity of this is questionable: its proposals are extreme and Stanley had no descendants by her first husband.
- ⁴⁰ On Spenser in this period, see Hazel Wilkinson, *Edmund Spenser and the Eighteenth-Century Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- ⁴¹ Volumes 1-2 of the former edition are dated 1724 but it was not advertised until December 1725 (Osland, 'Introduction' 2.ix). Peter Lindenbaum suggests that it was published to compete with Stanley, 'Sidney's *Arcadia* as Cultural Monument and Proto-Novel.' *Texts and Cultural Change in Early Modern England*, eds. Cedric C. Brown and Arthur F. Marotti (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 88.
- ⁴² The 1725 editor is believed to be John 'Orator' Henley: he may have worked from multiple copies but did not equal the scholarly efforts being undertaken for Shakespeare at this time (Osland, 'Introduction' 2.xxv).
- ⁴³ The octavo was also advertised as 'The Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*,' for example in the *Daily Post* 1 January and 25 February 1727.
- ⁴⁴ Lindenbaum, 'Sidney's *Arcadia*' 84, 87-88.
- ⁴⁵ Lindenbaum, 'Sidney's *Arcadia*' 89.
- ⁴⁶ In booksellers' and lending library advertisements, the *Arcadia* was included both within lists of Early Modern literature and intermixed with other romances and novels, showing the double nature of its reception: examples include *Daily Post*, 10 April 1742; *London Daily Post*, 14 December 1741; and *London Evening Post*, 20 January 1753.
- ⁴⁷ This is one issue with Martin Garrett's otherwise very useful study of Sidney's reputation: he argues that 'in the absence of eighteenth-century publication... after 1739' readers could only have been familiar with Sidney's text indirectly; *Sidney: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1996) 51.
- ⁴⁸ Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, Bedfordshire Archives L30/9A/3.86.

- ⁴⁹ Kay, 'Introduction' 40; William Hazlitt, *Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* (London: Stodart and Steuart, 1820) 266; Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader, Second Series* (London: Hogarth Press, 1932) 40.
- ⁵⁰ Horace Walpole, *A Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England* (Strawberry-Hill: 1758) 1.164.
- ⁵¹ Hazlitt, *Lectures* 277.
- ⁵² See Helen Hackett, *Women and Romance Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- ⁵³ *The Spectator* 38, 12 April 1711.
- ⁵⁴ Reeve, *Progress of Romance* 1.78; Christopher Smart, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: W. Strahan 1752) 11.
- ⁵⁵ Reeve, *Progress of Romance* 2.6.
- ⁵⁶ This letter is one of several printed in the *Whitehall Evening Post*, 8 October 1782.
- ⁵⁷ Bedfordshire Archives L30/9A/1.51.
- ⁵⁸ L30/9A/4.42.
- ⁵⁹ L30/9A/4.48.
- ⁶⁰ Her letter to Gregory continues, 'You see we are...imitating you as to Romances, but...I think we have at present the Advantage of you, & that our Arcadia is beyond any of your Set,' L30/9A/1.51.
- ⁶¹ *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany* (London: 1861) 2.191-2.
- ⁶² *The Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu*, ed. Matthew Montagu (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1825) 1.227.
- ⁶³ Betty A. Schellenberg, 'Bluestocking Women and Rational Female Fiction' *English and British Fiction 1750-1820*, eds. Peter Garside and Karen O'Brian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 149-150.
- ⁶⁴ *The Letters of Sarah Scott*, ed. Nicole Pohl (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014) 1.56.
- ⁶⁵ L30/23/18.
- ⁶⁶ L30/23/9.
- ⁶⁷ *The Letters of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, ed. Cecil Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) 1.61.
- ⁶⁸ Reeve, *Progress of Romance* 1.75-78.
- ⁶⁹ *The Gentleman's Magazine* 37 (1767) 57-60.
- ⁷⁰ *The Annual Review and History of Literature; for 1808* (London: 1809) 233; Sir Egerton Brydges, 'Memoir of Sir Philip Sidney' *The British Bibliographer* 1.11 (1810) 81.
- ⁷¹ Garrett, *Critical Heritage* 56-59.
- ⁷² *The Annual Review and History of Literature; for 1805* (London: 1806) 547; it had reviewed Barbauld's edition of Richardson's letters the previous year (1805, 500-510).
- ⁷³ For instance: Sidney's work formed the chronological boundary for Johnson's *Dictionary* (W.B.C. Watkins, *Johnson and English Poetry before 1660* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936] 69); a dramatic adaptation by MacNamara Morgan called *Philoclea* ('the Fable of which is taken from the celebrated Arcadia of the great Sir Philip Sidney') was staged and printed in 1754 (*Public Advertiser* 14 January 1754; 2 February 1754); country picnics in Gloucestershire were compared to 'delightful scenes in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*' (*Middlesex Journal* 15 August 1769); and characters from it featured in theatrical processions at Drury Lane (*Morning Post* 23 December 1791), to say nothing of personal mentions of Sidney.
- ⁷⁴ Reeve, *Progress of Romance* 1.78-79.
- ⁷⁵ Kay, 'Introduction' 35.
- ⁷⁶ Reeve, *Progress of Romance* 1.79.
- ⁷⁷ Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- ⁷⁸ Woolf, *Common Reader* 40.
- ⁷⁹ Woolf, *Common Reader* 40.