The Arcadia: From Sidney’s Prose to Shirley’s Drama

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Detractors of Philip Sidney’s The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia sometimes seem to ignore the fact of its fifteen printings by 1674 (whether in new or pirated editions). However, its popularity was not unnoticed by James Shirley, whose play entitled The Arcadia, a Pastoral was but one of at least seven seventeenth-century plays indebted in varying degrees to Sidney’s work. In addition to the evidence provided by Shirley’s adaptation of continued interest in Sidney’s partially revised Arcadia (remembering, of course, that the Old Arcadia was not to be printed until the present century), Shirley’s play is said to mark the beginning of his second dramatic period, a period of some nine plays in which he turned from the dramatic influence of Jonson, and “without wholly abandoning the realistic style, he devoted himself primarily to romantic plays.” Said to have been first acted on 19 November 1632, “The Arcadia . . . is Fletcherian romance in treatment and material; not romantic comedy, but dramatic romance of the type of Philaster and of Cymbeline. Nothing could be farther from the Jonsonian comedy of humors.” For such reasons, The Arcadia shows Shirley striking off in a different dramatic direction.

Whatever the unidentifiable reasons, few scholars have seen fit to devote detailed attention to the relationships that exist between Shirley’s play and what has been called Sidney’s “heroic poem.” With the exception of a dissertation or so, only R. S. Forsythe, in 1914, has attempted to examine Shirley’s Arcadia in point of episodes in Sidney’s voluminous work as retained in the five acts of the play, and he makes no analysis of the correspondences to which he directs attention.
fairness, it should be pointed out that Forsythe's volume attempts to treat each of the forty-odd plays attributed to Shirley.

There are, however, several aspects of the previously mentioned relationships which should be of interest to students of both Shirley and Sidney (admitting that the latter has received more extensive critical attention in recent years, perhaps for obvious reasons). The original genesis of the present study is two-fold. First, too little attention has been accorded the humor to be found in both versions of Sidney's Arcadia. Secondly, given that Shirley's play has been called "a practically complete acting version of the main plot of The Arcadia," to what extent did he see fit to retain humorous episodes or other possibly comic qualities in a "dramatic romance"? In addition, what is the degree of Shirley's indebtedness; how close to the source are some of his "borrowings," and what is the nature of instances of his improvising?

Understandably, the oracle which is focal to the existence of the narrative of Sidney's Arcadia appears in the first scene of the play; it also occupies a similar position in the Old Arcadia, but in the revision with which it is to be presumed Shirley was familiar, the oracle has been moved well into Book II (p. 204 of the 1627 folio edition, to be exact). Other than a few minor differences in wording, Shirley reproduces the oracle exactly. He had little choice, for the ten-line poem sets the stage for the actions resulting from the efforts of King Basilius to circumvent the cryptic threats of the oracle: Pamela, his oldest daughter, will "By Princely meane be stolen"; the younger Philoclea "shalt . . . embrace / An uncouth loue"; Basilius will be "made dead" and the two princes "wedded" to the princesses "shall pleade" at his bier; a foreigner shall sit in his seat, and before all that he will commit adultery with his own wife, Gynecia. To the resolution of this complex situation, to which Sidney devotes several hundred pages, Shirley is restricted to the thirteen scenes (some rather brief) of his five acts. However, other than the positioning of the oracle and the fact that it is almost an exact quotation, little more need be said about it.

Shirley's play begins with a scene which, inclusive of the oracle, dramatizes the retreat of Basilius and his family from the Arcadian court to "lodges" in a forest. The dialogue of the first scene is based upon what Sidney presents as a letter