

# **“A Love Much More Vehement”: Reconsidering Male Friendship in the *Old Arcadia***

**Nakyoung Lee**

University

## **I.**

The rich and diverse discourse on gender and sexuality in the English Renaissance literature greatly contributed to the unprecedented critical attention to Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, once “unread classic of English literature,” during the recent couple of decades (Worden xix). Among others, the critics who discussed the relationship between its heroes, Pyrocles and Musidorus, as an example for the literary representation of homosexuality in the period established a new discursive framework. Those critics tried to posit the romance in the long list of masterpieces praising male beauty and/or male same-sex desire. The attempts were destined to end in a rather inevitable and frustrating conclusion in which the structure of the romance was labeled as fundamentally heteronormative. For example, Bruce R. Smith focused on how Musidorus' gaze upon his friend's

body drew pleasure and delight from the readers, but he had to admit that the plot made the hero work “his way from infatuation with his friend toward connubial love for the king’s elder daughter” (143). Similarly, Gregory Bredbeck concluded his discussion on *Arcadia* by saying that the short, golden ur-world of homoeroticism between Pyrocles and Musidorus was marginalized as the romance was “ultimately rewritten into the more proper couplings of Musidorus/Pamela and Pyrocles/Philoclea” (107).

Instead of ‘homosexual’ and ‘sodomy’, other critics have adopted subtler and more ambiguous terms such as ‘friendship’ or ‘homoerotic’ to describe the relationship between the heroes. Following Alan Bray’s argument on idealized masculine friendship, these critics have generally interpreted their friendship as a positive form of homosociality. Although almost everything from kisses and embraces, to jealous slanders and assistance in drag happens between them, it is regarded as the signs of “the placid orderliness of the relationship” (Bray 47). Goran V. Stanivukovic places the friendship between Pyrocles and Musidorus firmly in “the humanist narrative of virtue” based on their equality in power and the social acceptability of the male alliance (178). The princes are described as equal in virtue, near in ages and blood, and thus in rank; which, in the critic’s view, effectively eliminates any potentially excessive and deviant element from their friendship. Furthermore, this kind of friendship is supposed to function as a foundational element to strengthen the social and political structure in the early modern England:

In romances, the structures of friendship suggest a nongenital form of bonding between men, whose purpose is to solidify, not subvert, the very fabric of the nationalist Protestant English state. The link between this kind of homoeroticism, politics, and power, therefore, opens up a new way of looking at queer relations in Renaissance fiction, especially romances. Because it is, in its most frequent manifestations subsumed into masculine friendship, romance homoeroticism is constructed in

romances less as an erotic pleasure but more as a confirmation of masculine bonds within the social and political spheres of power they occupy. (Stanivukovic 185)

In this context 'friendship' is a highly genderized term. Both the classical and humanist discourses on *amicitia* or friendship clearly state that the quality is always already exclusive of women. They set it firmly in the realm of masculine virtue, which is closely related with the early modern social and political imperative of male alliances. The relationship which critics like Stanivukovic call 'homoerotic' comes from this nationalist, thus patriarchal ideological structure. Accordingly, the exemplary masculine friendship pervasive in this period's romances may well react as well as reflect the historical and cultural assumptions behind this humanist project.

Consequently, another group of critics see the relationship between Pyrocles and Musidorus as an example of patriarchal liaison praised by ideal masculine friendship and solidated cemented by their subsequent marriages. Using Eve Sedgwick's discussion of "a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" as a vantage point, these critics often find that the marriage plot in *Arcadia* works for the contemporary antifeminist agenda (25). Bi-Qi Beatrice Lei argues that Sidney constantly praises the love between males "in perfect harmony with moral, social, and political ideals" as opposed to the love for women which creates tensions and disturbances in the hierarchical order (28). Stressing how the marriage structure works in *Arcadia*, Lisa Hopkins sums up the relationship between the male heroes as the bonds "the two sisters[Princesses Pamela and Philoclea] will further cement" (71). Maureen Quilligan also treats the romance as "Sidney's consideration of the problematic Tudor traffic in women" (87). In this framework of discussion, the friendship between Pyrocles and Musidorus easily falls under the

category of male bonding which uses the sisters as a conduit for consolidating their patriarchal status and power.

As an attempt to develop and comment on this view on the friendship between the two heroes in *Arcadia*, this essay aims to demonstrate how Sidney's text disturbs and challenges, however fragmentarily, the dominant ideology on sexuality and gender. Sidney's *Arcadia* is an exceptionally complex work with multilayered tones and shifting perspectives especially on the matters of gender and sexuality. While maintaining his characteristic *sprezzatura*, the narrator's attitude constantly swings between sympathy and mockery, playfulness and solemnity, fascination and admonition. As Stephen Greenblatt states in his essay on the mixed mode of *Arcadia*, Sidney's resistance to a "unified, pure form with a single style, a uniform set of characters, and a fixed perspective" is deeply related to the poet's pluralistic view of the world and its standards (271). While the overall structure of the romance points to rigidly moral and normative doctrines, we can still encounter those moments that unsettle the values and perspectives which endorse those doctrines. Reading two scenes where the friendship between the heroes may clash with the social and political norms, this essay further tries to argue that Sidney's romance disrupts the ideological doctrines embedded in the masculine quality and even launches some truly humanist reconsideration on the doctrines.

## II

Masculine friendship collides and competes with love between the sexes in the *Old Arcadia*. When Pyrocles, Prince of Macedon, confesses that he is secretly in love with Princess Philoclea and intends to dress up in Amazon attire to gain access to her, his friend/cousin Musidorus tries to dissuade him from the "effeminate love of a woman" (OA 18).<sup>1</sup> As a friend and

comrade in their quests for princely fame, Musidorus cannot just sit and watch Pyrocles divert his mind from the way of goodness, the masculine world they can share, and become degraded to a sub-heroic state. Pyrocles is doomed to lose his heroic, masculine identity, for he has to disguise himself in the pursuit of love. Musidorus attempts to discourage this love for a woman in favor of the love between male friends. This effectively sets up a rivalry between a male friend and a female beloved. Musidorus urges Pyrocles to remember "the love betwixt us" and to "purge your head of this vile infection" and even threatens to disavow their friendship in case he has to suffer "the continual pang of seeing your [Pyrocles'] danger with mine eyes" (OA 22).

In the course of this rivalry, Musidorus contrasts the effeminate, rebellious love for a woman with masculine friendship, using the established discursive framework of gender ideology. Calling out every misogynistic idea provided by the rich contemporary cultural context, he labels the love for a woman as giving up the manliness defined by the absolute commandment of the reason over any sensual weakness.<sup>2</sup> Musidorus further elucidates his argument by saying that this kind of love "subverts the course of nature in making reason give place to sense, and man to woman", which is, in Musidorus' opinion, confirmed by Pyrocles' cross-dressing (OA 18). Pyrocles is supposed to lose reason, the chief element of his masculine self, as well as his identity through loving a woman.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Musidorus assumes securing male identity from the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *The Old Arcadia* are from the edition by Katherine Duncan-Jones.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the chief examples are Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and the pamphlet against transvestism, *Hic-Muler* (1620). For the gender ideology and the anxiety on masculinity working in those contemporary texts, see Orgel and Breitenberg (chapters one and five).

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this theme had long been explored before Sidney elaborated it here. As Hyonjin Kim has shown, "to choose between his lady Guinevere and his friend Galehot" was closely related with Lancelot's identity pursuit in the Old French

perils of the love as a patriarchal imperative. First, he urges his friend to remember his status as a prince “desired of your old father, and wanted of your native country” (OA 17). Then, by positing himself along with Pyrocles’ father, the wifeless king, Musidorus smoothly forms a male homosocial unit, which sits opposite to the realm of lust, idleness, base weakness, and sensual pleasure. Finally, he claims the due share of his friend in the name of father and the love between themselves. By the binary structure he has built, love between men falls under the realm of reason, order, action, and filial duty.

Moreover, Sidney continues to show that the love for a woman and the effeminacy induced by it do not limit its destructive influence on Pyrocles, the lover. In his Amazonian disguise, Pyrocles provokes unruly desires from the ducal family members of Arcadia and ends up disturbing the order and peace of the entire dukedom and the Greek nations. The subversive quality is imposed upon femininity, which Pyrocles dressed himself in, and thus works in all directions. This becomes most obvious when he actually changes his clothes, aided by his friend. The moment he is changed into a beautiful Amazon, the excellent friendship now verges on homoerotic desire.

“Well,” said he[Musidorus], “sweet cousin, since you are framed of such a loving mettle, I pray you, take heed of looking yourself in a glass lest Narcissus’ fortune fall unto you. For my part, I promise you, if I were not fully resolved never to submit my heart to these fancies, I were like enough while I dressed you to become a young Pygmalion.” (OA 25)

Musidorus, in identifying himself with the sculptor who fell in love with his own creation, more or less clarifies the nature of the ‘fancies’ Pyrocles’ feminine attire arouses. Femininity, even on a knightly prince, instantly

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Lancelot-Grail cycle (307).

threatens to transform the relationship based on true, Platonic love into 'the bastard love' subject to Ovidian eroticism. Considering that the love between the protagonists was supposed to long for "the essence of their beloved ones, of which bodily beauty is merely the formal and outward expression" (306), the amazement, and the insatiable desire of Musidorus at the sight of womanly disguise, further affirms the disastrous state the effeminate love of a woman brings about.

However, this stern admonition is quite surprisingly toned down by the fascination the cross-dressing derives from both the readers and the witness/assistant. With a dazzling list of everything the prince wears virtually top to toe, the narrator describes how he turns into an Amazon in a detailed and disturbingly voyeuristic manner.

Upon his body he wore a kind of doublet of sky-colour satin, so plated over with plates of massy gold that he seemed armed in it; his sleeves of the same, instead of plates, was covered with purled lace. And such was the nether part of his garment; but that made so full of stuff, and cut after such a fashion that, though the length fell under his ankles, yet in his going one might well perceive the small of the leg which, with the foot, was covered with a little short pair of crimson velvet buskins, in some places open (as the ancient manner was) to show the fairness of the skin. (OA 24)

These carefully depicted garments are rich and sumptuous enough to successfully feminize the hero and to lure his friend into fancies. However, with the narrator providing "tantalizing glimpses of flesh" of Pyrocles, it is hard to determine which has more powerful effect on Musidorus, the feminine clothes or the male body (Smith 141). Or rather, is it that the feminine parts are innate in the beautiful, young hero? Even as Musidorus puts all the blame on effeminate love and bravely checks his own desire, this extremely pleasing and even enticing display tends to obscure the

boundary within his binary structure. Given that Sidney's narrator does not--or needs not--to endeavor so much to describe the heroine Philoclea's bodily parts on her first appearance, it is tempting to say that Pyrocles' fair and slender body serves to disturb the ideal of friendship as well as the gender ideology behind it.

While cross-dressing provides this brief, dazzling moment of potential disruption in the ideological order, one can easily overlook the fact that the wise and worthy Musidorus has already yielded to his friend's unreasonable plea. For all the long speeches and grave warnings, he seeks to withdraw what he said at the sight of Pyrocles in tears. "Kissing the weeping eyes of his friend," Musidorus tries to persuade his friend that his speech, if cruel and unkind, "came out of a love much more vehement" (OA 22-23). Then out comes the final blow from Pyrocles. Faced by Pyrocles' bewildered question, asking if it is possible for Musidorus to threaten to leave him, Musidorus finally falls into silence and agrees to help him court the princess. Even before Musidorus resists the fancies and desire aroused by the femininity embodied, he has already surrendered to another quality traditionally imposed on women. As the narrator coyly suggests by calling Pyrocles' tears 'manlike', this emotional outburst is opposite to the temperance and self-control Musidorus assumes to be truly manlike. After all, sorrow is one of the passions that should be governed by reason. The disturbance thus may have already occurred more forcefully. Musidorus, though fully aware of the princely duty for the state and the father, dissolves into complicity in the microcosmic rebellion through the true, compassionate love for his friend.

### III

What happens after the cross-dressing in this intricately plotted



romance shows how overwhelming and in direct opposition to familial and social order is the love based on such unruly desire. As Hopkins observes, in *Arcadia* love is imagined and constructed "not so much as potential force for social cohesion and alliance-forming but as a threat to society" (70). This aspect becomes most evident when both princes end up in prison charged with treason and fornication. Musidorus and the elder princess Pamela are caught in the middle of an elopement (more pointedly, during Musidorus' failed attempt at rape) while Pyrocles has his way with his beloved Philoclea. Duke Basilius, in pursuit of Pyrocles in disguise, falls unconscious after he has mistakenly bedded his wife, who is also possessed by passionate love for the very young man. Everybody is the victim of "the notable dumb-show of Cupid's kingdom," and the state of Arcadia becomes little short of headless anarchy.

The ingenuity of Sidney's narrative lies in its ever-ambivalent attitude toward the accusation against the princes. It does not sound contradictory at all when Worden finds Sidney "more indulgent to the younger pair of princely lovers than to their seniors" while comparing Pyrocles with Mary Stuart (344).<sup>4</sup> The narrator leaves every room for their defense against the charges emphasizing their intention for royal marriages and the harmlessness of the bed trick. On another level, however, they are responsible for all the tragic consequences. It is Pyrocles that leads Basilius to throwing up the "fancy of marriage" in favor of the "paradise" Cleophila's body promises (OA 238). The earthly paradise that should be realized in order and harmony by husband and wife, along with the whole frame of ideology behind the vision, is thoroughly overturned by the desire provoked by Pyrocles and his disguise. The near-death of Basilius ultimately represents his loss of the authority as a head of the family and the state. While maintaining the sympathetic tone for the young princes, the

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<sup>4</sup> For the parallel between the deed and thought of the princes and those of Mary Stuart, see Worden 176-83.

narrator fully conveys the gravity of the situation.

The latter part of the romance is pervaded by what Lei calls “the anti-erotic sentiment. . . [which] is essentially antifeminist” in that the love for a woman is finally retracted and rewritten by the higher love between friends (29). Soon after the “high degree of their joys” and “mutual satisfaction” with Philoclea, Pyrocles loses his sword, the symbol of his heroism and masculinity (*OA* 236-37). Deprived of “the confidence in oneself,” along with the sword, Pyrocles sinks into a deep remorse even to the point of self-destructiveness (*OA* 251). The imprisoned princes still try to protect the princesses chivalrously, but the desire for them is “enjoy’d no sooner but despised straight.” They have apparently moved on to a higher realm of the Platonic ideal. During a philosophical discussion on the afterlife, Pyrocles tells Musidorus that he hopes to remember their friendship “having both united it and ourselves in that high and heavenly love of the unquenchable light” (*OA* 322). While the love for a woman has led them to untimely death, their friendship, the true and higher love presents them with the transcendental vision of heavenly joy. Musidorus’ song written “before love turned his muse to another subject” further affirms that they are back in the blissful homosociality exempt from all the earthly cares caused by passions (*OA* 323).

The ensuing, famous trial scene is a site where Pyrocles and Musidorus prove their virtue and rejoin the patriarchal order. Through the trial with their own father and uncle, Euarchus, as a judge, Pyrocles and Musidorus are restored to their own selves at last. While Pyrocles eloquently defends himself against the charges and proposes to the princess, Euarchus sternly condemns “that unbridled desire which is entitled love” and then decides that the state must not permit the marriages (*OA* 351). Euarchus’ merciless disdain for base desire reminds the readers of Musidorus before he was in love with Pamela, but unlike Musidorus he does not retract death sentences after the convicts have turned out to be his son and nephew. This

application of strict justice by the father provides an opportunity for the princes to demonstrate how truly and courageously they love each other. They start to plead for the life of each other even while giving up their own. If the nullification of their death penalty upon Basilius' sudden resurrection at the end is justifiable, it may be due to their virtue and self-sacrifice proven through this true, higher kind of love.

Meanwhile, the love between Pyrocles and Musidorus strikingly clashes with the homosociality and justice Euarchus embodies. As Wendy Olmsted points out, "the emotional claims of lineage and honour" voiced through the friendship of the young heroes, pits against "those of humanistic impersonal justice" (26). First, calling his uncle "a destroyer of kindred", Musidorus vows his Thessalians' revenge on the death of their own prince, and then bids him to look upon Pyrocles "in whom the most curious searcher is able to find no fault but that he is thy son" (OA 356, 357). Musidorus threatens the order and harmony by Euarchus with the potential turmoils and civil war in Greece. Then, Pyrocles, in a structure clearly associated with the Christian allegory of the Holy Father who sacrifices his only Son for justice, willingly gives up his own life to be an exemplar for the sake of his father and the friend:

What you(Euarchus) owe to justice is performed in my death. A father to have executed his only son will leave a sufficient example for a greater crime than this. My blood will satisfy the highest point of equity. My blood will satisfy the hardest hearted of this country. O save the life of this prince; that is the only all I will with my last breath demand of you. (OA 357)

Pyrocles, dressed in white, obediently presents himself as a scapegoat for the justice of his father. However, he paradoxically fails to fulfill his father's will, and the patriarchal imperative of succession, through accepting his sentence in utter and complete obedience. In contrast with Musidorus'

violent slanders and threats, Pyrocles passively and heroically defies his father's "dead, pitiless law" indicating that he will want a true, lawful successor (OA 304).

If this trial provides another glimpse of the disruption of the patriarchal order by the young heroes, it is no wonder that the whole process is carefully genderized. As the absence of the princesses suggests, masculine order and male homosociality preside over the last chapter of *Arcadia*. It is true that the romance wraps up with the young heroes who successfully regain their masculine and royal identity, which is confirmed by the genealogical vision of solemn marriages and reproductions. In the meantime, just as the virtue of the princes does not smoothly subject them to the patriarchal order, their restored identity does not reveal itself through the well-established manifestation of masculinity. Especially in case of Pyrocles, who has "either a woman's face on a boy or an excellent boy's face in a woman" even after dressing up as a Greek prince, the virtue of passive obedience is already found in his feminine, "gentle and bashful" countenance (OA 326). Instead of throwing off negative feminine qualities along with the disguise, Pyrocles embodies one of the most praised feminine virtue in the pre-modern cultures. Then, surprisingly two incompatible spheres of masculine friendship and feminine obedience finally join in Pyrocles.

#### IV

As a humanist writer in the Protestant England, Sidney endeavored to treat and respond the prevalent discourse on gender and sexuality in *Arcadia*. While opposing the love for a woman to the friendship between men in *Arcadia*, Sidney relates the one with a baser kind of love, the other with a true, higher kind of love. He continues to contrast the destructive,

rebellious love towards a woman with orderly masculine friendship. Eventually, the love for a woman is safely replaced by marriage and reproduction, which bases itself on the patriarchal order and homosocial bonding among men. While the princes serve to retain the order and cohesion of society in royal marriages, it is the courage and self-sacrifice revealed through their love for each other that comprises the principal virtue of the romance. However, Sidney's text also provides the moments when the gender ideology works behind this binary structure and the ideals of homosociality are questioned and disturbed. In the course of restoring the princes back to their own status, it points out the problems of the discursive framework of patriarchal ideology by revealing the extremity and limitations of masculine ideals.

As one of the most representative and popular writer in the genre, Sidney paved the way for probing the modern literary subjects such as self and emotion. His mastery of cultural context and discourses, along with boundary-crossing genre and gender construction, has provided multiple vantage points for his various followers. In fact, he, through his co-work with his beloved sister Mary Herbert and influence on his niece Mary Wroth, contributed to the advent of early modern romances by woman writers. As one of the authors of those few canonical prose romances in the early modern ear, Sidney set an excellent model for the tactful and sympathetic observers in the later romances.

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ABSTRACT

**“A Love Much More Vehement”:  
Reconsidering Male Friendship in the Old Arcadia**

Nakyoung Lee

This essay aims to demonstrate how Sidney's *Arcadia* disturbs and challenges the dominant ideology on sexuality and gender. Being an exceptionally complex work with multilayered tones and shifting perspectives especially on the matters of gender and sexuality, it praises masculine friendship as a heroic ideal that supports the ideal patriarchal order while its presentation of romance subtly problematizes and disturbs order through the friendship between the protagonists. The romance displays the destructive effect of the love for a woman in contrast to the love between men, based on the contemporary misogynistic cultural context, but it also reveals the gender ideology working behind those discursive structure and criticizes, if briefly, the ideals of masculine homosociality.

**Key Words** | *The Old Arcadia*, friendship, romance, homosociality, gender ideology, Philip Sidney.