

## A Note on Sir Philip Sidney's Art of Blending\*

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In "The Surprize" the poet Charles Cotton paid special tribute to Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* in an imagined account of seeing an attractive woman reading Sidney's prose fiction *Arcadia* on a riverbank:

'Twas there I did my glorious Nymph surprize,  
There stole my Passion from her killing eies.

The happy Object of her eye  
Was Sidney's living Arcadie;  
Whose amorous tale had so betray'd  
Desire in this all-lovely Mayd,  
That whilst her cheek a blush did warm,  
I read Loves storie in her form;  
And of the Sisters the united grace,  
Pamela's vigour in Philoclea's face. (180)

This brief but remarkable tribute to Sidney's work, once considered an English Renaissance masterpiece, not only describes the creative literary blendings on which it is centered in its prescient union of Pamela and Philoclea's in the united grace of the Nymph. The poet's narration, moreover, suggests that this act of blending is finally the act of the poet himself. The grace that unites the two sisters, he notes, is the result of how the two personalities—Pamela's intellectual powers and Philoclea's emotional sensitivity—are shared, creating a third imaginary entity, the Nymph, that requires a reader to combine them to establish the sort of ideal protagonist whose complicated character-

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkinney0241.htm>>.

ization would be difficult to record or access otherwise. Indeed, the presentation and reception of the *New Arcadia*—published in 1593—rests in large measure on just this practice of blending.

The art of blending as the cognitive process that lies behind writing and reading the *Arcadia* was defined not so long ago—in 2002—by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. Blending begins with “mental spaces” which Fauconnier and Turner describe as “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action” (40). Such “mental spaces are sets of activated neuronal assemblies” (40) which are conceptually framed. The protagonists in Sidney's *Arcadia* are cousins who occupy the traditional mental space of epic romance in the tradition of classical Greek heroes. They are inseparable until their ship capsizes in a sudden storm. Pyrocles clings to the ship's mast while Musidorus is brought to shore by two shepherds. Once interrupted, this epic adventure shifts radically as Strephon and Claius take the exhausted Musidorus out of Laconia to the home of a gentleman named Kalender whose country is undergoing a civil war.

His estate has no direct connection with the world of classical Greek heroism:

The backside of the house was neither field, garden nor orchard, or rather it was both field, garden and orchard; for as soon as the descending of the stairs had delivered them down, they came into a place cunningly set with trees of the most taste-pleasing fruits; but scarcely they had taken that into their consideration but that they were suddenly stept into a delicate green; of each side of the green a thicket, and behind the thickets again new beds of flowers, which being under the trees, the trees were to them a pavilion and they to the trees a mosaical floor, so that it seemed that Art therein would needs be delightful by counterfeiting his enemy Error and making order in confusion. (73)

This traditional pastoral landscape, where nature is tamed by art, is in its calm order a mental space apparently independent of, and oppositionally conceived from, that brief shipwreck which opened the carefully revised text of the *Arcadia*. This independent mental space,

however, according to Fauconnier and Turner, is what permits connectors known as “[g]eneric spaces” (47) to lay groundwork for the blend. In this instance, the character of Musidorus and the early descriptions of him join the epic to the pastoral in a way that requires the reader to redefine the apparent genre to which this novel subscribes. We cannot proceed in our reading without an awareness that Musidorus will be changed by and also shaped by both locales which will remain blended in him. “Come shepherd’s weeds,” he sings, “become your master’s mind” (169). When he changes his role to the shepherd Dorus in order to court Pamela, he retains the pastoral pose while assuming heroic actions so that our conception of him is always that of a bifocal character—shepherd and soldier—just as, earlier, his cousin Pyrocles has blended the role of the Helots’ champion Diaphantus with the persona of the Amazon Zelmane to be near Philoclea that he may court her. In this role “Transform’d in show, but more transform’d in mind” (131), Pyrocles blends the sexes as well as the cultures of the New World and the Old.

Musidorus, under the name of Palladius, finds the transformation of Pyrocles so bewildering that he casts “a ghastful countenance upon him as if he would conjure some strange spirit” (132): “[S]ee how extremely every way you can endanger your mind: for to take this womanish habit, without you frame your behaviour accordingly, is wholly vain; your behaviour can never come kindly from you but as the mind is proportioned unto it: so that you must resolve, if you will play your part to any purpose, whatsoever peevish imperfections are in that sex, to soften your heart to receive them—the very first down-step to all wickedness” (133). Yet though the blending of hero and Amazon seems ill-advised and even dangerous to Musidorus whatever the justification, it has a profound effect when he exchanges the role of hero for that of the shepherd Dorus and for the same rationale, namely that of securing frequent audience with Pamela’s sister.

That the *Arcadia* is a combination of the heroic and the pastoral is not new to Sidney studies. In 1962 William A. Ringler, Jr., the editor of Sidney’s poems, noted: “Here in the remote and abstract world of the

pastoral the actions of the princely characters of the courtly world are mirrored and given perspective in the rural songs of the shepherds" (xxxviii). A decade later, he was echoed by Stephen J. Greenblatt, who found the *Arcadia* "perhaps the supreme Elizabethan example of what I shall call the mixed mode" (269) by "playing off one genre against another" (272). For David Kalstone, "confusions and bafflements multiply rather than disappear when heroes enter the pastoral world" (59).

Such a process of imagination holding on to two or more perspectives blended together is an example of Fauconnier and Turner's new way to conceptualize the reading process by actively depending on what is implied, what the readers' imaginations necessarily supply. It is a new sense of human cognition that accommodates a world of fiction such as Sidney's. "Building an integration network involves setting up mental spaces," they conclude, "matching across spaces, projecting selectively to a blend, locating shared structures, projecting backward to inputs, recruiting new structure to the inputs or the blend, and running various operations in the blend itself" (44). Inputs, therefore, may be literal as are specific heroic actions and pastoral activities, but they must also be metaphorical. Such a new poetics arising from the current emphasis on human cognitive practices allows us new ways of understanding why and how we read—why and how we must read—*Arcadia* as we do. In other words: such a poetics of blending renews the sense of extraordinary achievement in a work like the *Arcadia* and explains once again why this work is so exceptional, why even today we consider this work so monumental.

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