

Catherine BATES, ed. 2025. *The Oxford Handbook of Philip Sidney*. Oxford University Press

Jonathan P. A. SELL
Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Philip Sidney is one of history's greatest also-rans. Yet on paper he had almost everything: good looks, athletic physique, influential family, solid education, and considerable intelligence, all of which he put to use in a short but intense and varied vital trajectory as courtier, diplomat, colonial promoter, soldier, jouster, writer, and poet. He knew everybody who was anybody at home and abroad, where he rubbed shoulders not only with literati like Ramus, Ronsard, Du Bartas, Justus Lipsius, Philippe Du Plessis-Mornay, and Bruno, but also with the powerful. Except for his rumored succession to the throne had Leicester's hopes to marry Elizabeth come to fruition (26), Sidney's "relatively unremarkable record of [...] English courtiership" (87) paled in comparison with his European reputation: Charles IX irked Elizabeth I by creating him Baron de Sidenay; he attended the wedding celebrations of Henri of Navarre and Marguerite de Valois; he deputized for his uncle Leicester at the christening of William of Orange's daughter, Elisabeth; he was for a time the candidate to lead a European Protestant league. Queen Elizabeth was one to bear a grudge, and Sidney's maternal grandfather and great-grandfather had both been executed for treason; a stickler for hierarchy, she was riled by gentleman Philip's tennis-court affrontery towards noble Oxford; and, like all absolutists "whom many feare," she "feare[d] many" (*Certain Sonnets*, 143 [sonnet 14, lines 1–2]). The Leicester faction was permanently uppish, and Sidney's penning of the anti-Anjou petition didn't help matters, nor, probably, his Ciceronian friendship with Calvinist anti-tyrannist Hubert Languet. Furthermore, Sidney was unfortunate in the marriage stakes: he was mooted as husband for Ursula, sister of Count Palatine Casimir and for Marie of Nassau, daughter of Orange; and pipped to the post for the hand of Penelope Devereux, daughter of Essex, a setback which gave us *Astrophil and Stella*. Frances Walsingham proved a modestly lucrative second-best. More importantly, Sidney was twice disappointed as prospective heir, first of Leicester, then of Warwick, and there being no will, there was no way he could muster the wherewithal to purchase the status and favor

his blood denied him. Yet on a revisionist account (see below), Sidney's courtly trajectory may have been more one of careful grooming than regal snubbing, while his religious-political color may have been less militantly Protestant than thoughtfully tolerationist. If he had survived to the age of sixty, his CV would justifiably be regarded as thin, but Philip Sidney died at the age of thirty-one. Whatever future at court his premature decease foreclosed, it may no longer be so certain that in death he did his queen his greatest service, removing a querulous thorn from her side and distracting attention from the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. It was his death which probably vouchsafed the preservation of *The Defence of Poetry* (191). And it was also his death which catapulted him to postmortem stardom in the literary heterocosm, which understands little of court politics, less of personal foible and pique.

All this, and much more, emerges from Part I ("Contexts") of the *Oxford Handbook of Philip Sidney*, edited by Catherine Bates. The overall thrust of chapters on "Life" (Michael G. Brennan), "Legend" (Kevin Pask), "Family" (Mary Ellen Lamb), "Friends" (Wendy Olmsted), "Court" (Lisa Celovsky) and "Patronage" (Richard A. McCabe) is familiar, the texture thicker than ever, the scholarship impeccably reliable. Quite what Sidney was remains an enigma, but in Part II ("Works") a violent streak emerges, especially in the predatory *amores* of *Certain Sonnets*, in the *Old Arcadia* and in the letters; it crops up again in later chapters on "Pastoral" and "Sidney and Class". There is a chapter apiece for *Certain Sonnets* (Paul A. Marquis), *The Lady of May* and *The Four Foster Children of Desire* (Timothy D. Crowley), *Two Pastoralls* (Patrick Cheney), the Psalms (Kimberly Johnson), and the letters (Andrew Gordon) in an authoritative bid for the expansion of the Sidney canon beyond *Astrophil and Stella* (Catherine Bates, who pits Sidney against Petrarch in a thrilling battle of the giants), *The Defence of Poesy* (Vladimir Brljak, who brilliantly combines intellectual panache and common sense), the *Old Arcadia* (Alex Davis) and the *New Arcadia* (Nandini Das). Part III ("Literary Contexts") provides a sound account of "Education and Pedagogy" (Sarah Knight), a welcome assertion of the Sidneian sublime in Cheney's important chapter on "Authorship and Literary Career," and useful, complete, and readable guides to "Manuscript Circulation" (Joshua Eckhardt) and "Early Publication" (Joel B. Davis). Part IV ("Sidney's Forms and Genres") begins with William J. Kennedy's masterly panorama of the "Sonnet" and Gavin Alexander's elegantly crafted reflection on "Lyric." Tiffany Jo Worth writes eagerly on "Pastoral" but is sidetracked into unconvincing ecocriticism. Corey McEleney is provocatively pre-

sentist in his application of Sidney's pronouncements on "Fiction" to the post-truth age of fake news. Catherine Bates writes irresistibly on "Drama," finding it particularly in the "uncanny power" of "the dissonance effect" generated in *Astrophil and Stella* by Sidney's casting "natural language" in the artificiality of verse, something Shakespeare may have learned from him (453). In Part V ("Sidney's Poetic Craft"), Robert Stagg ("Prosody") eruditely explains Sidney's "reinvention of vernacular versification" through his "accentual-syllabic and classical-vernacular compromise" (469); Gavin Alexander on "Song" blends expertise and sensitivity; Jonathan P. Lamb is entertaining on "Sentence"; and Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld cleverer than convincing on "Style."

Taken together, in their contributions to Part VI ("Sidney and his Times") Brian C. Lockey ("Sidney and Religion"), Michael Mack ("Sidney and Philosophy"), Timothy D. Crowley ("Sidney and Politics"), Robert E. Stillman ("Sidney and Europe"), and David Landreth ("Sidney and Money") revise Sidney's militant Protestantism into what the latter defines as the "ecumenically inclusive character of Sidney's Philip-pist piety" (616); reassess positively the success of his courtly career; and trace Melanchthon's influence via Languet throughout his writings. In contrast, in what amounts to an exciting academic debate, Adam McKeown ("Sidney and Class") speaks of "a peripheral, vulnerable, and disgruntled member of an élite aristocratic circle" (663). Into the bargain, Mack raises the question of what literary theory would have been without Julius Caesar Scaliger's misreading of Plato's irony in *Ion*. Similarly thorough and illuminating are Zenón Luis-Martínez ("Sidney and Logic"), the lone European star in Bates's firmament of authors (a credit to himself and a fillip to Spanish Renaissance Studies); Andrew Hadfield, scrupulously matter-of-fact on "Sidney and Colonialism"; Chris Stamatakis, wide-ranging and lucid on "Sidney and Visual Culture"; and Matthew Zarnowiecki, commendably systematic on "Sidney and Music." For their part, Chris Barrett ("Sidney and Maps") and Rebecca Bushnell ("Sidney and Gardens") write fascinatingly about apparently minor subjects. In contrast, on the major subject of "Sidney and Rhetoric," Jenny C. Mann understandably limits the scope of her study, in this case, to ideas of decorum, but wrongheadedly infers a new rhetoric from the *New Arcadia*'s inadvertent incompleteness. The interests of Stephen Guy-Bray ("Sidney and Gender"), Freya Sierhuis ("Sidney and the Passions"), and James M. Bromley ("Sidney and Clothes") all converge on transvestitism in the *Arcadias*, leaving one rather tired of Pyrocles's cross-dressing antics. Anne M. Myers might productively

have brought Sidney's "architectonike" or *Astrophil and Stella* 9 into her narrow discussion of "Sidney and Architecture." Karen Raber ("Sidney and Animals") sniffs out with more enthusiasm than reason an Arcadian zoopoetics. The less satisfactory chapters here are more eloquent of our times than of Sidney's, while topics like diplomacy, courtiership, or soldiery would have been welcome additions were greed excusable after such a magnificent feast. In Part VII ("Reception"), Samuel Fallon and Natasha Simonova provide sound coverage of, respectively, "Reading Sidney" in the immediate aftermath of the poet's demise and "Writing Sidney" up to the eighteenth century.

This *Handbook* is a watershed in Sidney studies and, more broadly, English literary history. Sidney stands revealed as perhaps the single most innovative and searching creative writer of his period. He not only, for instance, invented pastoral tragi-comedy (Bates, 448) and English trochaics (Alexander, 475) or played midwife to "a legend of female virtue [Pamela] central to the development of the English novel" (Pask, 48), but he "single-handedly creat[ed] an environment in which vernacular literature could be taken seriously [... He] changed the face of English lyric [... and] showed the heights to which prose could rise" (Bates, 1); "without Sidney, there could be no Spenser, no Shakespeare: no modern English canon" (Cheney, 313). Philip Sidney died at the age of thirty-one.

There is little temptation to skip during an enlightening, exhilarating read. This is due in part to the magnificent constellation of forty-five scholars assembled here: when so many academic heavyweights pull with such energy and shared conviction over eight hundred and more pages, a rare momentum is achieved. This landmark *Oxford Handbook of Philip Sidney* will therefore prove indispensable and inspiring for students of Sidney and early modern poetry for generations to come. But a boat needs a cox if it is to glide with such power and purpose, and in this respect all the merit is the editor's. In Mack's judgement, "Sidney was most certainly a 'great-souled man'" (554). Catherine Bates's soul is neither meaner nor smaller; one suspects it is Sidney's.

References

Sidney, Philip. 1962. *Certain Sonnets*. In *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, edited by W. A. Ringler, Jr. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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Author's contact: jonathan.sell@uah.es

Postal address: Facultad de Educación, Universidad de Alcalá, Calle Madrid 1, 19001, Guadalajara, Spain.