

# The Lady of May

**Sir Philip Sidney**

This [Stony Run Press](#) edition was transcribed, with an introduction, notes, and bibliography, by [Richard Bear](#), [University of Oregon](#), January 1992. Converted to HTML, June 1996.

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## Note on this e-text edition.

This etext edition of *The Lady of May* derives from the British Museum copy (Catalogue # C.39.h.8) of the 1605 edition of *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, pps. 570-576. Long "s" has been modernized, and catchwords and marginalia have been removed. Sixteenth century usage of "i" for "j" and of "u" and "v" has been retained, along with the original spelling. A few errors have been emended within brackets. Many italics, such as those used for proper names, have been omitted. Endnotes are indicated within braces. The editor gratefully acknowledges helpful suggestions on the Introduction from Dr. Lyell Asher. Copyright & for this etext (1993,1996) is owned by the University of Oregon; it is distributed for nonprofit use only. Send corrections and comments to Richard Bear, [rbear@oregon.uoregon.edu](mailto:rbear@oregon.uoregon.edu).

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## Introduction



National Portrait Gallery

**I**N his [Defense of Poesie](#) Sir Philip Sidney avails himself of many arguments, but perhaps the most convincing is that the poet, unlike the scientist or social scientist, need not specify his referent:

The astronomer, with his cousin the geometrician, can hardly escape, when they take upon them to measure the height of the stars. How often, think you, do the physicians lie, when they aver things good for sicknesses, which afterwards send Charon a great number of souls drowned in a potion before they come to his ferry? And no less of the rest, which take upon them to affirm. Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false. So as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies.

Though all human activity constructs with unknown materials toward an unknown end, the construction of texts in which no referent to a given particular need be specified releases the author from the charge of libel. This is a significant advantage in Sidney's cultural setting.

The Elizabethan courtiers, trained in "rhetorique" and provided with great store of tropes from classical and biblical sources, found ready employment for their craft in seeking that most desired and most dangerous prize: preferment. Preferment was understood to be a reciprocal arrangement; the Queen might shower her favourite with gifts and lands, but she could and did expect competent, and in the case of favourites, superior service. Yet, to serve, one could not offer only flattery. Dangerous as it might be to advise an absolute autocrat, it was necessary to show that one could exercise competence and judgment in affairs of state. The courtiers learned to create, or if they could not create, to commission, texts in which they might approach the Queen to offer competence while at the same time implying that all competence and judgment was hers alone. In Parliament this was almost impossible to achieve. Hence the proliferation, in Elizabeth's time, of "entertainments": masques, pageants, and dramas offered by well-to-do subjects at the Inns of Court and at great country houses throughout the realm. On these occasions Elizabeth was in a sense already "on stage":

Her regal chair, in full view of the audience, surmounted by an embroidered canopy, was known simply as 'the state'. Even when it was unoccupied, as it was when Leicester

celebrated St George's day in Utrecht in 1587, the Queen's presence was assumed and ceremony performed as though she were seated on it (Axton 48).

Thanks to her constant use of allegory in interpreting herself to her subjects, Elizabeth's presence as audience heightens the distinction between her "two bodies"; as herself, she is assailed by the same thoughts and emotions as any other, and with her access to power, the danger of these variables is very great; but as Prince of the realm, she embodies eternal verities and virtues through a host of known and popular symbols. The courtier-players can play to this heavily idealized representative of the Ideal even if the Queen is not physically present. When present, she is constrained within the bounds of decorum set by her own symbolic presence, thus affording a safe arena for the display by her courtiers of, not independent judgment, but allegorical depictions of independent judgment. In the Elizabethan entertainments, surrogate courtiers court a surrogate sovereign. "If you like this semblance of my service," they might be heard to say, "think how much more you stand to gain from true service from me, your humble servant."

Sir Philip Sidney's *The Lady of May* was originally, perhaps, an untitled bit of masque thrown together for an evening's entertainment at his uncle the Earl of Leicester's estate of Wanstead to honor Queen Elizabeth's visit. He may or may not have been working on behalf of Leicester's penchant for wild escapades, particularly a secret marriage which earned the Queen's displeasure. The masque would have been a relatively safe approach to the problem of reintroducing the new wife of the Earl to Court and seeking to turn aside royal wrath. At the same time, Sidney could point out, rather obliquely, his own fitness for service to the Queen, and perhaps even offer (from a relatively safe distance) some criticism of her tendency to accept the courtship of men who might appear to have much to offer (foreign money and connections), but who could not be expected to have her best interests at heart (due to the same foreign money and connections). At this point the dangerous foreigner was the Duke of Anjou. Alan Haynes remarks that French envoys, whose work in hand was the pressing of the Duke's suit, were on hand for the presentation of Sidney's entertainment (*The White Bear* 134).

For each of these purposes Sidney's text faces the danger that a direct public statement may bring about the opposite effect to that which is intended. During the performance of *The Lady of May* at least two texts unfolded: that of Sidney's script, and that of the Queen's reaction to it. Elizabeth must have been carefully scrutinized throughout by members of Leicester's party, the opposition party, and that of the French ambassadors. Each text consisted in part in that which was said and that which was left unsaid. Each partook of *personae* in ways that recognize the expendability of these surrogate selves, images woven in the air of May in a magician's struggle for mastery of the moment. In such an atmosphere of risk, a masque -- an allegorical performance in which one thing may be understood to stand for another -- is a suitable vehicle, for the objects of potential royal wrath are "masked" as fictions, and their actions "masked" as fictional actions. The word "play" works equally well for this distancing, for what might be taken as an affront in earnest may be taken lightly in "play," the imitation of life by actions understood to be fictions. How can anyone, even a great Queen who "even with her eye can give the cruel punishment," be willing to break decorum to punish a clown? The courtier-players are accordingly transformed into rustic shepherds and foresters. The question at hand is that dangerous one of marriage, but it is not the supplicant whose marriage is in question, merely her daughter's. If the Lady of May is

played by Penelope Devereaux, Leicester's new step-daughter, she would be a child of eleven or twelve, and might well expect her efforts to be kindly received.

The supplicant who begins the action is on the scene for one short speech only, and makes a hasty (and probably quite wise) exit. Yet she is present even in her absence, first, by leaving with the Queen a verse Supplication, and second, by her having asked the Queen to judge of matters addressed by the remainder of the play. The Supplication sets the tone for the entire piece with its praise that is, in Camille Paglia's words, "secular prayer:"

To one whose state is raised over all,  
Whose face doth oft, the bravest sort enchant,  
Whose mind is such, as wisest minds appall,  
Who in one selfe these diuerse gifts can plant;  
How dare I wretch seeke there my woes to rest,  
Where eares be burnt, eyes dazled, harts opprest?

Your State is great, your greatnesse is our shield,  
Your face hurts oft, but still it doth delight,  
Your mind is wise, your wisdome makes you mild,  
Such planted gifts enrich even beggers sight:  
So dare I wretch my bashfull feare subdue,  
And feede mine eares, mine eyes, my hart in you.

Although protected by the fiction in which the Queen is not recognized by the rustics, the Suppliant here boldly presses upon the boundary of fiction by identifying her as one whose "state is great," and offering fealty. This offer is choral in its effect, and carries the voices of the entire Leicester party in one presumed *persona*. The question in the first sestet is answered in the second: how dare I address myself to one so powerful? I dare, because that power is vested in you for the protection of your subjects, of whom I am one. Elizabeth is addressed here, not as the jealous woman who would have her courtiers never marry, but as the Queen of the second body, the embodied State, who must know that matrimony is for the good of that same State it is her sworn duty to uphold. "Your mind is wise" may be taken as pure flattery, but "your wisdom makes you mild" maneuvers the addressee into a position in which a display of pique must seem indecorous. As the Supplication is presented, but not necessarily read aloud, the maneuver is the more compelling in that it need not be obvious to all present. The Queen's *noblesse oblige* is heavily drawn upon without bankrupting her good will.

The rest of the company now make their appearance: the Lady of May, half a dozen shepherds and as many foresters, and a comic schoolmaster, Rombus. After a bit of symbolic slapstick in which neither the shepherds nor the foresters succeed in pulling the Lady among them, Rombus emerges as the would-be emcee of the proceedings. But from his first sentence, spiked with inkhorn terms, he establishes that he is, or is to be taken for, a great fool: "Now the thunderthumping Jove transfund his dotes into your excellent formosity, which have with your resplendent beams thus segregated the enmity of these rural

animals." In case we have missed the point, he begins to enmire himself in alliterations: "*pulchra puella perfecto... crafty coward Cupid...dire doleful digging dignifying dart.*" And the May Lady underscores all by plainly labeling him a "tedious fool" of "foolish tongue." Yet, like so many fools, including those of Shakespeare, Rombus is entrusted with many of the masque's more penetrating insights. His indiscretions are Sidney's discreet handling of inflammatory material. This absent presence of Sidney in Rombus is so strong as to lead easily to the speculation that here may be the role played by the author in his creation. Although none of the rustics is said to know the Queen, Rombus is on the mark in recognizing that her "resplendent beams" have parted the fray, and offers her the quite appropriate title of *Potentissima Domina*.

The May Lady, cutting Rombus short, presents to the Queen her suitors as combatants in a singing contest. Espilus, a shepherd, is richer than Therion, a forester, but Therion has served the Lady as best he can while Espilus has but recorded her name "in doleful verses." So the Queen is to judge "whether the many deserts and many faults of Therion, or the very small deserts and no faults of Espilus be to be preferred."

Sidney gives Therion the first real word, by having him challenge Espilus to sing; the challenge itself is however the first verse. It contains a compliment to the Queen: "Great sure is she, on whom our hopes do live/Greater is she, who must the judgement give." Espilus might be expected to respond to the challenge in kind, and with a better compliment, but rather rudely launches into the contest itself, like one who begins a race before his opponent has had a chance to dig in. This confusion of beginnings masks Sidney's maneuver in giving also the last word to Therion. Espilus expresses himself in terms of property, transaction, commodity: "Sweet soul, to whom I vowed I am a slave" -- a slave is property; also Espilus explicitly says that he has said this, not that it is true, that is, he's reserving an escape clause in the fine print. "Two thousand sheep I have" -- this is mercenary; "All this I give, let me possess thy grace:" -- signed and sealed into the bargain. Therion, on the other hand, speaks of freedom, significantly not merely his but hers as well: "Them I can take, but you I cannot hold." Even the direct appeals to the arbitress show the distinction, for Espilus emphasizes that to Elizabeth beauty's force is but *lent*, while Therion calls on her to judge of love as the embodiment of ideal love itself, with the implication that she is beyond the reach of mercenary considerations and should be able to recognize and come to the aid of a fellow traveler.

A judgment is anticipated at this point but put off by further controversy among the contestants' supporters. A shepherd, Dorcas, rudely usurps the Queen's prerogative by proclaiming Espilus the winner. This presents one of the foresters, Rixus, an opportunity to once again praise the Queen while apparently praising Therion. The new impasse leads to a new opportunity to distinguish shepherds from foresters. Dorcas and Rixus are to meet in rhetorical combat; a formal debate on the familiar *topos* of the active versus the contemplative life is proposed, with Rombus as umpire. Dorcas, like Espilus, goes first, so that Rixus may have the chance to demolish him. But again, there is a confusion introduced to put the scent off Rixus, as before it was put off Therion. For Rombus steps in, as an over-officious umpire might do, and does the demolishing himself. Dorcas is accused, quite accurately, of employing the fallacious *enthymeme a loco contingentibus*: "that which is found in the same place is the same." Nature is good; shepherds are found in natural surroundings, *ergo* shepherds are good. Elizabeth has had a life of

training in spotting weaknesses in arguments of this kind, and hardly needs Rombus to explain it to her. That he should try is part of the comic effect.

Rixus thus escapes the work of tearing down, and is allowed to build up. He makes his case, not from position, for the forest is not all good, but from equivalence, using a penetrating metaphor:

O sweet contentation to see the long life of the hurtlesse trees to see how in straight growing up, though never so high, they hinder not their fellows; they only enviously trouble, which are crookedly bent.

That is, in beholding the forest one may read it as a text, give it meaning, and see in it the way to rightly read the meaning of men's lives. It is a direct and audacious instruction to the Queen, and the climactic sentence to which the entire effort of *The Lady of May* is bent. Your best servants, Sidney/Leicester/Therion/Rixus informs Elizabeth, are those of us who seek freedom of action so that we may exercise our natural abilities the more effectively on your behalf. One who is more mercenary may be more useful to you in the short term, but he has his own profit to consider, and will therefore be a slave to two masters. An adventurer, on the other hand, having the less to lose, can offer all the more. Yes, this is risky, but it will be worth the small risk for the great advantage you stand to gain through our freedom. This is a very large claim, and one which later events hardly supported. Sidney's own end illustrates that the risk was not small. Drake had better results on the Pacific coasts of the New World, but in singeing the King of Spain's beard at Cadiz might easily have set England ablaze; Raleigh fared poorly overall and Essex would have done much better to have stayed home. But none of this could have been predicted in 1579. The Queen has only her conservative instinct to guide her, honed by the terrifying political education afforded by her father's, brother's, and sister's reigns. Always an astute critical reader of the timing of literary events ("I am Richard the Second, know ye not that?"), she sees the game at once, and when the moment comes to judge between Espilus and Therion, she takes the May Lady quite at her word that "in judging me, you judge more than me in it." She chooses, against the best that Sidney can do, in favor of the *shepherd*. In this, she is very like the deer described by Rixus as craftily conserving her strength by remaining near her pursuers, not to keep them company, but to "take breath to fly further from them."

Sidney is prepared for the possibility, for Espilus now sings "tending to the greatness of his own joy," but the god whose joy he compares to his own is Silvanus, a forest deity, while his opponent's defeat is compared to that of Pan, a pastoral deity. The song is so written that it can convey the appropriate sentiments regardless of the choice made by the Queen, and so helps to smoothe the abrupt transition, required by her choice of the shepherd, from obedient willfulness to willing obedience. Immediately following the music, the May Lady concludes the festivities in glowing praise of the sovereign:

Lady your selfe, for other titles do rather diminish then add vnto you. I and my little company must now leaue you. I should doo you wrong to beseech you to take our follies well since your bountie is such, as to pardon greater faults. Therefore I will wish you good

night, praying to God according to the title I possesse, that as hitherto it hath excellently done, so hence forward the flourishing of May, may long remaine in you and with you.

A chorus of voices are packed into this farewell speech. The sense in which the Lady is a young woman of the Court in a mask appears in the conventional hyperbole of the player's plea for pardon. Since the Queen's bounty is such as to pardon those greater faults that occur, not in the controlled world of the masque, but in that larger world of dangerously free men, the May Lady is also, perhaps, Lettice Knollys; certainly she is Sidney and Leicester. There is, as there has been throughout, nothing whatever of the rustic bumbling in the May Lady that we see in her companions. She has about her a certainty that authenticates her claim to be the Lady of May. This is a clue to at least one of the Lady's identities, for as she is the Lady, not only of one May, but May forever (as the title is, like any title, the sign of the second and eternal body), so is she the sovereign -- Queen Elizabeth herself. The Lady relinquishes to her the title, and in fading away into the woods at this moment, leaves the new May Lady in possession of the stage.

This benediction is the proper ending, surely, and it is so found in printed versions (including this e-text) of the masque. But from the Helmingham Hall manuscript we learn that Master Rombus, in what must have been a risky move, carries the ball for the losing team long after the goal posts have been torn down. In his determination to be heard, he is somewhat reminiscent of George Gascoigne's improvisations on Leicester's behalf even as the Queen was riding away from Kenilworth in 1575.

Sidney employs a thin fiction in which the absent rustics, still present in Rombus, retain possession of the grove, and the schoolmaster refers to Master Robert of Wanstead as a neighbor. Leicester is thus present in his naming yet absent as the fictional owner of a nearby estate. He is depicted as a beneficial force in the community but hampered by adherence to the hated Catholic religion (a patent falsehood but suitable for explaining the gift which Rombus now offers to the Queen). The gift, an agate necklace, apparently resembles a rosary:

I have found *unum par*, a pair, *papistorum bedorum*, of Papistian beads, *cum quos*, with the which, *omnium dierum*, every day, next after his *pater noster* he *semper* saith 'and Elizabeth', as many lines as there be beads on this string (Duncan-Jones 13).

The phrase-by-phrase translating retains some of Rombus' ineffectual pomposity, for Elizabeth is quite fluent in Latin herself. At the same time, some of those present might miss the point without it; although no other audience is addressed than the Queen, this is a convention; the same technique which is used to establish the character of Rombus serves also to make him accessible on multiple levels.

Master Robert's "religion" is an idolatry (which is the Protestant idea of Catholicism). When he prays over his beads he always adds "and Elizabeth" after the "our Father." This likely means that he has expanded the *in nomine* to "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and Elizabeth." A less likely but not impossible interpretation, made possible by the difficulties presented by the scribal text, is that he adds "an Elizabeth," (Duncan-Jones 337), that is, an *ave Elizabeth* in place of an *ave*

*Maria*. Either choice comes near to blasphemy; either is rich in possibility. By adding Elizabeth to the Trinity, Master Robert shows that he regards her as a proper object of praise, worship, and obedience, and as the intermediary between his soul and salvation. By saying an *ave Elizabeth* he steals the archangel Gabriel's lines -- with a difference: "Hail, Elizabeth! The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the *fruit of thy womb*...." This arrogation of the cult of the Virgin Mary was one that Elizabeth herself was not above using. Leicester had by this time given up his hope of marrying Elizabeth and siring a line of kings; so the implication here need be no more than that Elizabeth is the "mother" (by means of her body of State) of her people.

Rombus refers to the Queen, not as the eternal May Lady of the benediction, but in the terms Leicester has preferred for many years: Juno, Venus, Pallas, the three among whom Paris judged by awarding the golden apple. They were common *personae* for the Queen during the early decades of her reign (Axton 38-40). Pallas, goddess of wisdom, is the second body of the Queen, concerned with matters of State. Venus, goddess of erotic love, is the first body, the woman who is desired for herself. Juno combines both bodies in one presence, as Goddess of empire and of, significantly, marriage. Although Diana has by this time made herself thoroughly at home in Elizabeth, the huntress' name is not yet current among the courtiers; this betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of Elizabeth that underlies the consistent "failure" of the propaganda in their entertainments. Leicester and Sidney, well versed in the classics of antiquity and the allegorical uses of their own faith, have great mastery of the available *personae*, and *The Lady of May* retains even today much of its persuasive power, though many of its allusions are lost to us. But their comprehension of the problem of gender and the throne of England falls short. Critics refer to *The Lady of May* as a failure, but no other result was possible. Elizabeth was exposed to a steady stream of entertainments in which she was invited to play a game with the dice loaded, as it were, against her policies, yet held her own. She "showed a marked predilection for freeing pageant virgins whose deflowering would produce heirs" (Axton 66). The Spanish Ambassador, De Silva, described attending a Gray's Inn entertainment with the Queen in 1565:

...we went to the Queen's rooms and descended to where all was prepared for the representation of a comedy in English, of which I understood just as much as the Queen told me. The plot was founded on the question of marriage, discussed between Juno and Diana, Juno advocating marriage and Diana chastity. Jupiter gave the verdict in favor of matrimony after many things had passed on both sides in defense of the respective arguments. The Queen turned to me and said, 'This is all against me' (Axton 49).

We might add yet another name to the long list of the Queen's identities: Penelope. The Virgin Queen, like Penelope, unweaves each day's seeming promises, so that the suitors -- whether Leicester or Anjou -- who might eat up her substance may attend an endless round of entertainments but must return empty-handed. In a world in which power naturally gravitated to men, subterfuge is often a woman's only means to faithfulness. And Elizabeth, as everyone was always forgetting, was already married:

...I am already bound unto an Husband, which is the Kingdome of England, and that may suffice you: and this (quoth shee) makes me wonder, that you forget yourselves, the pledge of this alliance which I have made with my Kingdome (And therewithall, stretching

out her hand, shee showed them the Ring with which shee was given in marriage...)  
(William Camden, *Annales*, qtd. in Axton 35).

Elizabeth has no more *personae* to work with than her courtiers; but, in some ways a greater artist than any of them, she knows which images to use when. What historians call her sense of timing or political balance is often no more than her matchless capacity for returning the "answerless answer." She makes of her presence as Queen an absence by simply returning "no" to every expectation of "yes," leaving the ambitions of great men of power to twist slowly in the wind. That is the power of protective coloration in a fiction: if you give to others no more of yourself than a *text*, whether acted, spoken, or written, then they have no more of you than their own interpretation. This was her means to her own freedom of action and the key to her greatness.

Queen Elizabeth may have fashioned herself to suit national and international exigencies, and her subjects may have fashioned themselves to the exigencies of her Court, but their environment predates them and their behaviors have origins lost in that social antiquity in which our progenitors fashioned themselves to their surroundings as as naturally, as necessarily, as unthinkingly as any butterfly. There are critics who find the posturing in courtier poetry distasteful, either because it appears to them to consist in cynical dissembling, or appears to them as unconscious masking of a self-serving teleology of temporal power. Either the cynicism perceived in the text calls forth in these critics a value judgment, or the value judgment perceived in the text calls forth in the critics a cynicism. More is required of the text than it can deliver, because the ideal that poesy should embody undying truths is a chimera. Every poetic text is rhetorical, that is, its nonspecificity of reference is a consciously employed strategem for misdirecting that first and final reader whose name is Death.

-- Richard Bear

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{text}

Her most Excellent Maiestie  
***WALKING IN WANSTEED***  
GARDEN, AS SHE PASSED DOWN INTO THE  
*GROVE, THERE CAME SVDDENLY AMONG THE TRAINE,*  
one apparelled like an honest mans wife of the countrey, where crying out  
*for iustice, and desiring all the Lords and Gentlemen to speake a*  
good word for her, she was brought to the presence of her  
*Maiestie to whom vpon her knees she offered*  
*a supplication, and vsed this speech.*

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*The Suitor*



Ost faire Lady, for as for other your titles of state statelier persons shall giue you, and thus much mine owne eies are witnesses of, take here the complaint of me poore wretch, as deeply plunged in miserie, as I wish you to the highest point of happnesse.

One onely daughter I have, in whom I had placed all the hop[e]s of my good hap, so well had she with her good parts recompenced my paine of bearing her, and care of bringing her vp: but now alas that shee is come to the time I should reape my full comfort of her, so is shee troubled with that notable matter, which wee in the cuntry call matrimonie, as I cannot chuse but feare the losse of her wits, at least of her honesty. Other women thinke they may bee vnhappily combred with one master husband, my poore daughter is oppressed with two, both louing her, both equally liked of her, both striuing to deserue her. But now lastly (as this iealousie forsooth is a vile matter) each haue brought their pertakers with them, and are at this present, (without your presence redresse it) in some bloody controuersie now sweete Lady helpe, your owne way guides you to the place where they incomberd her: I dare stay here no longer, for our men say in the cuntry, the sight of you is infectious.

And with that she went away a good pace, leauing the supplication with her Maiestie, which very formerly contained this.

Supplication.

Most gracious Soueraigne,  
To one whose state is raised over all,  
Whose face doth oft, the bravest sort enchant,  
Whose mind is such, as wisest minds appall,  
Who in one selfe these diuerse gifts can plant;  
How dare I wretch seeke there my woes to rest,  
Where eares be burnt, eyes dazled, harts opprest?

Your State is great, your greatnesse is our shield,  
Your face hurts oft, but still it doth delight,  
Your mind is wise, your wisdom makes you mild,  
Such planted gifts enrich even beggars sight:  
So dare I wretch my bashfull feare subdue,  
And feede mine eares, mine eyes, my hart in you.

Herewith the woman-suiter being gone, there was heard in the woods a confused noise &

forth-with there came out six sheapheards with as many fosters {1} hailing and pulling, to whether side they should draw the Ladie of May, who seemed to encline neither to the one or the other side. Among them was maister Rombus {2} a schoolemaster of a village thereby, who being fully perswaded of his owne learned wisdome, came thither, with his authoritie to part their fray; where for aunswer he receiued many vnlearned blowes. But the Queene comming to the place where she was seene of them, though they knew not her estate, yet something there was which made them startle aside and gaze vpon her till old father Lalus stepped forth (one of the substantiallest shepheards) and making a legge or two, said these few words.

May it please your benignity to giue a little superfluous intelligence to that which with the opening of my mouth, my tongue and teeth shall deliuer unto you. So it is right worshipfull audience, that a certaine she creature, which we shepheards call a woman, of a minsicall countenance, but by my white Lambe not three quarters so beautious as your selfe, hath disannulled the braine pan of two of our featioust yong men. And wil you wot how? by my mother Kits soule, with a certain fransical maladie they call Loue, when I was a yong man they called it flat folly. But here is a substantiall schoole-master can better disnounce the whole foundation of the matter, although in sooth for all his loquence our young men were nothing dutious to his clarkship; Come on, Come on maister schoole-maister, be not so bashlesse we say, that the fairest are ever the gentlest: tell the whole case, for you can much better vent the points of it then I.

*Then came forward Maister Rombus, and with many speciall graces  
made this learned oration.*

Now the thunder-thumping Ioue transfund his dotes into your excellent formosity which haue with your resplendent beames thus segregated the enmitie of these rurall animals I am *Potentissima Domina*, {3} a schoole maister, that is to say, a Pedagogue, one not a little versed in the disciplinating of the iuuentall frie {4} wherein (to my laud I say it) I vse such geometricall proportion, as neither wanted mansuetude {5} nor correction, for so it is described.

*Parcare Subiectos & debellare superbos. {6}*

Yet hath not the pulchritude of my vertues protected me from the contaminating hands of these plebians; for comming, *solumm[o]do* {7} to haue parted their sanguinolent fray, they yeilded me no more reuerence, then if I had bin some *Pecorius Asinus* {8} I, euen I, that am, who am I? *Dixi verbus sapiento satum est.* {9} But what sayd that Troian Aeneas, when he soiorned in the surging sulkes of the sandiferous seas, *Haec olim memonasse iuuebit.* {10} Well well *ad popositos reuertebo* {11} the puritie of the veritie is, that a certaine *Pulchra puella perfecto* {12} elected and constituted by the integrated

determination of all this topographicall region, as the soueraine Lady of this Dame Maias month, hath bene *quodammodo*{13} hunted, as you would say, pursued by two, a brace, a couple, a cast of yong men, to whom the crafty coward Cupid had *inquam* deliuered his dire-dolorous dart.

*But here the May Lady interrupted his speech saying to him:*

Away away you tedious foole, your eyes are not worthy to looke to yonder Princely sight, much lesse your foolish tongue to trouble her wise eares.

*At which Maister Rombus in a great chafe cried out:*

*O Tempori, O Moribus!*{14} in profession a childe, in dignitie a woman, in years a Lady, *in caet[e]ris* a maid, should thus turpifie the reputation of my doctrine, with the superscription of a foole, *O Tempori, O Moribus!*

*But here againe the May Ladie saying to him,*

Leaue off good Latine foole, and let me satisfie the long desire I haue had to feede mine eyes with the only sight this age hath graunted to the world.

*The poore scholem after went his way backe, and the Ladie kneeling  
downe said in this manner*

Do not thinke (sweete and gallant Lady) that I do abase my selfe thus much vnto you because of your gay apparell, for what is so braue as the naturall beautie of the flowers, nor because a certaine Gentleman{15} hereby seekes to do you all the honour he can in his house; that is not the matter, he is but our neighbour, and these be our owne groues, nor yet because of your great estate, since no estate can be compared to be the Lady of the whole moneth of May as I am. So that since both this place and this time are my seruants, you may be sure I wold look for reuerence at your hands, if I did not see something in your face which makes me yeeld to you; the troth is, you excell me in that wherein I desire most to excell and that makes me giue this homage vnto you, as the beautifullest Lady these woods haue euer receiued. But now as old father Lalus directed me, I wil tel you my fortune, that you may be iudge of my mishaps and others worthines. Indeed so it is, that I am a faire wench or else I am decieued, and therefore by the consent of all our neighbours haue bene chosen for the absolute Lady of this mery moneth, with mee haue bene (alas I a ashamed to tell it) two yong men, the one a forrester named Therion, the other Espilus a shepheard very long euen in loue forsooth, I like them both, and loue neither, Espilus is the richer, but Therion the liuelier: Therion doth me many pleasures, as stealing me venison out of these forrests, and manie other such like prettie and pretier seruices, but with all he growes to such rages, that sometimes he strikes me, sometimes he rails at me.

This shepheard Espilus of a mild disposition, as his fortune hath not beene to do me great seruice, so hath he neuer done me any wrong, but feeding his sheepe, sitting under some sweet bush, sometimes they say he recordes my name in dolefull verses. Now the question I am to aske you faire Lady, is, whether the many deserts and many faults of Therion, or the very small deserts and no faults of Espilus be to be preferred. But before you giue your iudgment (most excellent Lady) you shall heare what each of them can say for them selues in their rurall songs.

*Therevpon Therion chalenged Espilus to sing{16} with him,  
speaking these six verses:*

Come Espilus, come now declare thy skill,  
Shew how thou canst deserue so braue desire,  
Warme well thy wits, if thou wilt win her will,  
For water cold did neuer promise fire:  
Great sure is she, on whom our hopes doe liue,  
Greater is she who must the iudgement giue.

But Espilus as if hee had beene inspired with the Muses, began forthwith to sing, whereto his fellow shephardes set in with their recorders, which they bare in their bags like pipes, and so of Therions side did the foresters, with the cornets they wore about their neckes like hunting hornes in baudrikes.{17}

Espilus.

Tune up my voice, a higher note I yeeld,  
To high conceipts the song must needs be high,  
More high then stars, more firme then flintie field  
Are all my thoughts, in which I live or dye:  
Sweet soule, to whom I vowed I am a slaue,  
Let not wild woods so great a treasure haue.

Therion.

The highest note comes oft from basest mind,  
As shallow brooks do yeeld the greatest sound,  
Seeke other thoughts thy life or death to find;  
Thy stars be fal'n plowed in thy flinty ground:  
Sweet soule let not a wretch that serueth sheep  
Among his flocke so sweet a treasure keepe.

Espilus.

Two thousand sheep I have as white as milke,  
Though not so white as is thy louely face,  
The pasture rich, the wooll as soft as silke,  
All this I giue, let me possesse thy grace,  
But still take heed least thou thy selfe submit  
To one that hath no wealth, and wants his wit.

Therion.

Two thousand Deere in wildest woods I have,  
Them can I take, but you I cannot hold:  
He is not poore who can his freedome saue,  
Bound but to you no wealth but you I would:  
But take this Beast, if beasts you feare to misse,  
For of his beasts the greatest beast he is.

*Espilus kneeling to the Queene.*

Iudge you to whom al beauties force is lent.

Therion.

Iudge you of Loue, to whom al loue is bent.

But as they waited for the iugdment her Maiestie should giue of their deserts, the shepeheards and foresters grew to a great contention whether of their fellowes had sung better, and so whether the estate of shepheards or foresters were the more worshipfull. The speakers were Dorcas an olde shepeheard, and Rixus a young foster, betweene whom the schoole-maister Rombus came in as moderator.

*Dorcas the shepheard.*

Now all the blessings of mine old grandam (silly Espilus) light vpon thy shoulders for this honicombe singing of thine; now of mine honestie all the bells in the town could not have sung better, if the proud heart of the harlotrie ly not downe to thee now, the sheepes rot catch her, to teach her that a faire woman hath not her fairenesse to let it grow rustish.

*Rixus the foster.*

O Midas{18} why art thou not aliue now to lend thine eares to this drivle, by the precious bones of a hunts-man, he knowes not the bleaying of a calfe from the song of a

nightingale, but if yonder great Gentlewoman be as wise as she is faire, Therion thou shalt haue the prize, and thou old Dorcas with young maister Espilus shall remaine tame fooles, as you be.

Dorcas. And with cap and knee be it spoken, is it your pleasure neighbour Rixus to be a wild foole?

Rixus. Rather than a sheepish dolt.

Dorcas. It is much refreshing to my bowels, you haue made your choice, for my share I will bestow your leauings vpon one of your fellowes.

Rixus. And art thou not ashamed old foole, to liken Espilus a shepheard to Therion of the noble vocation of hunts-men, in the presence of such a one as euen with her eye onely can giue the cruell punishment?

Dorcas. Hold thy peace, I will neither meddle with her, nor her eyes, they sayne in our towne they are dangerous both, neither will I liken Therion to my boy Espilus, since one is a theeuish proller,{19} and the other is a quiet as a lambe that new came from sucking.

*Rombus the schoole-maister.*

*Heu Ehem, hei, Insiuidum, Inscitium vulgorum & populorum.*{20} Why you brute Nebulons{21} haue you had my *Corpusculum* so long among you, and cannot yet tell how to edefie an argument? Attend and throw your eares to mee, for I am grauitated with child, till I haue endoctrinated your plumbeous cerebrosities. First you must divisionate your point, *quasi* you should cut a cheese into two particles, for thus must I vniforme my speech to your obtuse conceptions; for *Prius dividendum oratio antequam definiendum exemplum gratia*,{22} either Therion must conquere this Dame Maias Nimphe, or Espilus must ouerthrow her, and that *secundum* their dignitie, which must also be subdiuisionated into three equal species, either according to the penetrancie of their singing, or the melioritie of their functions, or lastly the superancy of their merits *De* singing *satis. Nunc* are you to argumentate of the qualifying of their estate first, and then whether hath more infernally, I mean more deeply deserued.

Dorcas. O poore Dorcas, poore Dorcas, that I was not set in my young dayes to schoole, that I might haue purchased the vnderstanding of master Rombus misterious speches. But yet thus much I conceiue of them, that I must euen giue vp what my conscience doth find in the behalfe of shepeheards. O sweet hony miken Lommes, and is there any so flintie a heart, that can find about him to speak against them that haue the charge of such good soules as you be, among whom there is no enuy, and all obedience, where it is lawfull for a man to be good if he list, and hath no outward cause to withdraw him from it, where the

eye may be busied in considering the works of nature, and the heart quietly reioyced in the honest vsing them. If [con]templation as Clarks say, be the most excellent, which is so fit a life for Templars as this is, neither subiect to violent oppression, nor servile flatterie, how many Courtiers thinke you I haue heard vnder our field in bushes make their wofull complaints, some of the greatnesse of their Mistresse estate, which dazled their eies and yet burned their harts some of the extremitie of her beauty mixed with extreame crueltie, some of her too much wit, which made all their loving labours folly. O how often haue I heard one name sounded in many mouthes, making our vales witnesses of their doleful agonies! So that with long lost labour finding their thoughts bare no other wooll but dispaire of young Courtiers they grew old shepherds. Well sweet Lams I will ende with you as I began, hee that can open his mouth against such innocent soules, let him be hated as much as a filthy fox, let the tast of him be worse then musty cheese, the sound of him more dredfull then the howling of a wolfe, his sight more odible then a toade in ones parreage.

Rixus. Your life indeede hath some goodnesse.

*Rombus the schoole-master.*

O *tace, tace*, or the fat will be ignified, first let me dilucidate the very intrinsicall maribone of the matter. He doth vse a certaine rhetoricall inuasion into the point, as if indeed he had conference with his Lams, but the troth is, he doth equitate you in the meane time master Rixus, for thus he saith, that sheepe are good, *ergo* the shepherd is good, an *Enthymeme a loco contingentibus*, {23} as my finger and my thumbs are *contingentis*. againe he saith, who liueth well is likewise good, but shepherds live well *Ergo* they are good; a *Sillogisme* in Darius king of Persia a *Coniugatis*, as you would say, a man coupled to his wife, two bodies but one soule: but do you but acquiescate to my exhortation, and you shall extinguish him. Tell him his major is a knaue, his minor is a foole, and his conclusion both. *Et ecce homo blancatus quasi lilium*. {24}

Rixus. I was saying the shepherds life had some goodnesse in it, because it borrowed that quiet part, doth both strengthen the bodie, and raise vp the mind with this gallant sort of actiuitie. O sweet contentation to see the long life of the hurtlesse trees to see how in straight growing vp, though neuer so high they hinder not their fellowes, they only enuiously trouble, which are crookedly bent. What life is to be compared to ours where the very growing things are ensamples of goodnesse? wee haue no hopes, but we may quickly go about them, & going about them, we soone obtaine them; not like those that haue long followed one (in troth) most excellent chace, do now at length perceiue she could neuer be taken: but that if she stayed at any time neare the pursuers, it was never meant to tary with them, but onely to take breath to flie further from them. He therefore that doubts that our life doth not far excell all others, let him also doubt that the well deseruing and painfull Therion is not to be preferred before the idle Espilus, which euen

as much to say, as that the Roes are not swifter then sheepe, nor the Stags more goodly that Gotes.

Rombus. *Bene bene, nunc de questione prepositus*, that is as much as to say, as well well, now of the proposed question, that was whether the many great seruices and many great faults of Therion, or the few smal seruices and no faults of Espilus, be to be preferred, incepted or accepted the former.

*The May Lady.*

No no, your ordinarie braines shall not deale in that matter, I haue alreadie submitted it to one, whose sweet spirit hath passed through greater difficulties, neither will I that your blockheads lie in her way.

Therefore O Ladie whorthie to see the accomplishment of your desires, since al your desires be most worthy of you, vouchsafe [our] eares such happinesse, & me that particular fauor as that you will iudge whether of [these] two be more worthy of me, or whether I be worthy of them: This I will say[, that in] iudging me, you iudge more than me in it.

This being said, it pleased her Maiesty to iudge that Espilus did the better deserue her: but what words, what reasons she vsed for it, this paper, which carieth so base names; is not worthy to containe. Sufficeth it, that vpon the iudgement giuen, the shepherds and forresters made a full consort of their cornets and recorders, and then did Espilus sing this song, tending to the greatnesse of his owne ioy, and yet to the comfort of the other side, since they were ouerthrowne by a most worthie aduersarie. The song contained two short tales, and thus it was.

Siluanus long in love, and long in vaine,  
At length obtained the point of his desire,  
When being askt, now that he did obtaine  
His wished weale, what more he could require:  
Nothing sayd he, for most I ioy in this,  
That Goddesse mine, my blessed being sees.

When wanton Pan decieu'd with Lions skin,  
Came to the bed where wound for kisse he got,  
To wo and shame the wretch did enter in,  
Till this he tooke for comfort of his lot,  
Poore Pan (he sayd) although thou beaten be,  
It is no shame, since Hercules was he.

Thus ioifully in chosen tunes reioice,  
That such a one is wnesse of my hart,  
Whose cleerest eyes I blisse, and sweetest voice,  
That see my good, and iudgeth my desert:  
Thus wofully I in wo this salue do find,  
My foule mishap came yet from fairest mind.

The musicke fully ended, the May Lady tooke her leave in this sort.

Lady your selfe, for other titles do rather diminish then add vnto you. I and my little company must now leaue you. I should doo you wrong to beseech you to take our follies well since your bountie is such, as to pardon greater faults. Therefore I will wish you good night, praying to God according to the title I possesse, that as hitherto it hath excellently done, so hence forward the flourishing of May, may long remaine in you and with you.

*FINIS.*

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## Notes and Glosses:

{1} fosters: foresters.

{2} Rombus: *rhombus*, an equilateral parallelogram. Suggestion of pedantry.

{3} *Potentissima Domina*: most powerful Lady.

{4} iuuentall frie: iuental (juvenile) fry, young children.

{5} mansuetude: gentility.

{6} *Aeneid* 6:853: "to raise the lowly and throw down the high ones."

{7} *solummodo*: solo.

{8} *Pecorius Asinus*: silly beast. Rombus' mistake for *pecus asininus* [Duncan-Jones 335].

{9} "I have said. A word to the wise suffices." *Verbus* should be *verbum*.

{10} *Aeneid* 1:203: "In time the memory of these will be pleasant."

{11} *ad propositos reuertebo*: to return the proposition.

{12} *Pulchra puella perfecto*: girl of perfect beauty.

{13} *quodammodo*: in some mode or fashion. *Quodam modo*.

{14} Cicero, *Contra Catalinam* 1.1: "*O tempora, o mores*": O times, o morality!

{15} The Earle of Leicester, owner of Wanstead.

{16} A traditional gambling game in the form of a poetry contest, in which verses composed extempore are to be judged by a competent referee. Cf. Edmund Spenser's [The Shepheardes Calender](#).

{17} *baudrikes*: baldricks.

{18} At one point in his career, Midas was punished by having his ears turned into ass's ears.

{19} *proller*: prowler.

{20} Something along the lines of: "Woe unto you, insipid inciters of the vulgar populace."

{21} *Nebulons*: *nebulo*, a vague and unhelpful person.

{22} "Divide an oration before defining it; for example..."

{23} An argument from proximity; this is a common fallacy.

{24} "And see the man white as a lily!" An unknown reference [Duncan-Jones 336].

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