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Review Article

Living with a Legend: Sir Philip Sidney

Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet. By Katherine Duncan-Jones. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991. Pp. xviii, 350. \$29.95.

The death of Sir Philip Sidney, on 17 October 1586, turned out to be a literary event in more ways than one. The career of a writer and patron of writers came to a premature close; Sidney was not quite 32 when he died. But in this case the end of a life was also a signal that the effort of life-writing could now begin. George Whetstone's *Sir Phillip Sidney, His Honourable Life, His Valiant Death, and True Vertues* (c. 1587) may have been the first biographical representation of Sidney to reach print, but there were soon a variety of competing narratives by Edmund Molyneux, John Stow, and Lodowick Bryskett, among others. By far the most influential of these early Lives is the one by Sidney's boyhood companion and lifelong friend, Fulke Greville. Written in about 1611, but not published until 1652, Greville's account is fundamentally nostalgic: Sidney's early death has robbed the author of an irreplaceable friend and deprived the world of a pattern by which to measure the qualities of the Renaissance gentleman:

Indeed, he was a true model of worth: a man fit for conquest, plantation, reformation or what action soever is greatest and hardest among men. . . . The universities abroad and at home accounted him a general Maecenas of learning, dedicated their books to him, and communicated

every invention or improvement of knowledge with him. Soldiers honoured him, and were so honoured by him as no man thought he marched under the true banner of Mars that had not obtained Sir Philip Sidney's approbation. Men of affairs in most parts of Christendom entertained correspondency with him. (21)

Katherine Duncan-Jones does quote several of these sentences, and many other judgments by Greville, in *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet*, but whenever she does so, the signs of her irritation with Greville are likely to show. In one instance "Greville's chronology is different from that of modern biographers" (163); "other assertions made by Greville are demonstrably false" (71); and even when he does get it right, the best compliment Duncan-Jones can throw his way is the admission that "Greville for once hardly overstates the case" (154). Clearly she is writing against the grain of the tradition, heavily endorsed by Greville, in which every action of Sidney's is hallowed with admiration. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Duncan-Jones has taken as her subject precisely those aspects of Sidney's life which Greville chose to suppress.

1. Women

Queen Elizabeth is a powerful presence in Greville's account, but with this exception women are virtually unmentioned. Sidney's mother is praised for her domestic virtues and pitied for her disfigurement by small-pox, but her name (Mary Dudley) is never given. Sidney's wife is alluded to only once, parenthetically and negatively in a sentence which praises his magnanimity by arguing, in passing, that "his chief ends" were "not friends, wife, children or himself" (25). You couldn't guess that her first name was Frances, from anything in Greville, though you could infer that her surname was Walsingham from the detailed celebration of the developing bond between Sidney and his father-in-law. As for Penelope Devereux, the real-life woman who served as the model for Stella, she never appears at all. Greville has Sidney living in an all male world: accompanied by Hubert Languet in his European travels, seconded by William of Nassau in his analysis of international politics, abetted by Sir Francis Drake in his (unsuccessful) attempt to embark on a voyage to the New World, surrounded by soldiers in his military manoeuvres in the Netherlands, prodded by physicians after sustaining his leg wound in the

skirmish at Zutphen, wept over by his brother in the final moments of his life.

The title of Duncan-Jones's opening chapter, "1554: His Sisters and his Cousins and his Aunts," implies that women are going to get more than token acknowledgment in this book. Duncan-Jones provides and interprets a copious fund of information about Sidney's mother; about his aunt Catherine, the Countess of Huntington; about his aunt Lettice, the Countess of Leicester; about his sister Mary, the Countess of Pembroke; about Anne Cecil, the girl to whom he became engaged when he was a teenager; about Penelope Devereux, the girl he may really have wanted to marry; about Frances Walsingham, the girl he did marry; and about Anne Mantel, the woman who may have been Sidney's wet nurse during his infancy and who was certainly responsible for childcare during his boyhood. The book reproduces a portrait of Penelope Devereux and her sister Dorothy, which Duncan-Jones glosses as follows:

A recently re-identified portrait, now at Longleat, shows the sisters about this time [1581], in elegant red velvet dresses over white smocks edged with 'black work', and pearl and jet necklaces and hair ornaments. Both girls have wavy, reddish-blond hair, and distinctively long upper lips which may conceal the large front teeth so characteristic of English girls. (196)

Duncan-Jones doesn't play down Sidney's many important relationships with men; indeed, her second chapter is called "1564-7: Dutch Uncles." But the research and thinking she has devoted to the subject of the women in Sidney's life make a decisive if understated contribution to the recovery of female culture in the Renaissance. "Sidney had the unusual advantage of being surrounded from birth by sophisticated women who had enjoyed the benefit, all too rare for girls, of a humanist education" (3). The judgments implicit in this claim may be contested (by scholars less respectful of humanist education, for example), and the critical assumptions which follow from it (that misogyny in Sidney's writing never escapes ironic censure, for example) are open to debate. Still, Duncan-Jones deserves credit for having addressed the larger issue of the sheer prominence of women in Sidney's life, and she has added to the pleasure of her text by addressing it.

2. Poetry

Greville's Sidney is a statesman, a soldier, a scholar, an orator, even a writer on occasion, but hardly if ever a poet. Greville mentions the "Arcadian romances" (8), and recommends that they be read as allegorical treatises on political and moral themes. "But the truth is," says Greville, "his end was not writing even while he wrote" (12). Greville's Sidney is a man of action for whom poetry could have been no more than a diversion; hence, as Duncan-Jones adroitly points out, *Astrophil and Stella* is not even mentioned in Greville's text.

Why this quite spectacular occlusion? Duncan-Jones has a theory which she advances perhaps more cautiously than necessary. It's clear that she believes Greville was gay; having made allowances for the differences between Renaissance cultural categories and our own, and having admitted that assessing a sixteenth-century person's sexual orientation is "deeply problematic," she proceeds in this way:

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Sidney's close friend Fulke Greville did approximate to what would now be called homosexual, and that Greville was determined to suggest that his friendship with Sidney had priority over all other bonds. (240)

The poems in which Sidney seems most obviously absorbed in the pleasurable pain of heterosexual infatuation may have been the aspect of Sidney's legacy that Greville most wanted to forget. I say "seems" because Duncan-Jones isn't at all sure about Sidney's sexual orientation. Given his status as a youthful celebrity and, for several years, one of the most eligible bachelors in England, Duncan-Jones finds it odd that no traces of a sexual reputation have survived; there's no evidence that he fathered any bastards, and there is evidence to suggest that women found him deficient in sexual motivation. "The courtly nymphs" of *Astrophil and Stella* notice that Astrophil doesn't wear a lovelock, or cultivate any of the signs of erotic alacrity: "'What, he?' say they of me, 'now I dare swear, / He cannot love; no, no, let him alone'" (Sonnet 54).

Duncan-Jones doesn't believe that Sidney was gay, but she considers him a pretty reluctant heterosexual; she suspects "that male friendship was in some ways more congenial to him than heterosexual union" (240). This point of view allows her to construct an unusual if incomplete critical reading of *Astrophil and Stella*. "It is possible," she writes, "that

Sidney/Astrophil's devotion to Penelope/Stella was an elaborate act of reparation or face-saving" (200). Having twice been the conspicuous loser in the mating game (Anne Cecil married the Earl of Oxford; Penelope Devereux married Lord Rich), Sidney has to do something to revitalize his image. So he writes, at great length, about a passion he has in fact never felt. "Perhaps all along, we suddenly suspect, Sidney may have been writing these explosively passionate love poems because Penelope Devereux . . . had asked him to do so," the argument continues; "it may be that the whole Astrophil-Stella love affair was a kind of literary charade, in which both real-life participants knew exactly what was going on" (246).

If Duncan-Jones is right, then we've all been taken in for the last 400 years. We've been taken in by the rhetoric of Sidney's text itself, which asks us to treat the emotional raptures and frustrations it represents as absolutely authentic: "'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart, and write'" (Sonnet 1). Still, I don't want to dismiss Duncan-Jones's reading, however counter-intuitive it may seem, because I think it helps to account for the artificial quality of Sidney's sonnet sequence. Stella's eyebrows are Cupid's bows, her forehead is a carving in alabaster, her lips are "scarlet judges, threatening bloody pain" (Sonnet 73). Her moral and emotional attributes are suggested by comparing her to a citadel, a fortress, a territory to be defended, and an obscure "text" which yields its meaning only by way of "blushing notes" recorded in the "margin" (Sonnet 67). These metaphors strike me as the work of someone trying to imagine what a rapturous sexual obsession would be like, rather than the confession of someone caught in its grip. I don't think it's necessary or in fact plausible to suppose that Penelope/Stella was a willing collaborator in this exercise, as Duncan-Jones wishes us to do. But her view of Sidney's erotic world as nine parts contrivance to one part experience is a persuasive one. Indeed, it's possible that the intended first reader of these sonnets was not Penelope Devereux, as Duncan-Jones assumes, but Fulke Greville. That would account for the appearance of the disapproving friend who, in some half-dozen of the sonnets, tries to call Astrophil back to his senses with the "rhubarb words" of correction (Sonnet 14).

3. Aggression

Greville's Sidney is the paragon of everything implied, in his day and ours, by the word "gentleness." He is generous to a fault, even when you'd expect him to be self-interested. Hence the famous description of Sidney's reaction to the bullet which eventually cost him his life. While riding off the field of battle, Sidney called for and was given drink,

but as he was putting the bottle to his mouth he saw a poor soldier carried along, who had eaten his last at the same feast, ghastly casting up his eyes at the bottle; which Sir Philip perceiving, took it from his head before he drank, and delivered it to the poor man with these words: "Thy necessity is yet greater than mine." (77)

Duncan-Jones doesn't quote this passage in her long and richly documented chapter on Sidney's death, for the simple reason that she doesn't believe any of it is true. Greville was not present on this occasion, and none of the eyewitness accounts that survive include an incident resembling this one. The similarity between Greville's anecdote and a story told by Plutarch about Alexander the Great is further cause for scepticism. So Duncan-Jones quotes Greville's passage in her Epilogue, as a poetic evocation of Sidney's much-praised magnanimity, but not as evidence of an actual event in his life.

Her Sidney is overbearing and self-assertive in ways that Greville would never admit. During his European travels, for example, Sidney suspects that his letters home have been opened by his father's secretary, Edmund Molyneux. This provokes a letter to Molyneux which contains the following sentence: "I assure you before God that if ever I know you do so much as read any letter I write to my father, without his commandment, or my consent, I will thrust my dagger into you" (22-23). The violent streak in Sidney's temperament was probably related to his success as a competitor in tournaments, and doubtless helped to keep alive his long-standing antagonism to the Earl of Oxford. But Sidney's self-assertion didn't always benefit from the superficial glamour of arrogance. When the Earl of Leicester informed him that he could profit by accepting a share of the wealth confiscated from English Catholics, Sidney declined, not on grounds of loyalty to his many Catholic friends, but because the offer simply wasn't good enough.

The portrait of Sidney which emerges from this book is unflattering but sympathetic. Through his many failures to gain employment commensurate with his abilities and his self-esteem, through his disappointment at being displaced as the Earl of Leicester's heir by the birth of young Robert Dudley, through his exasperation with the Queen's flirtation with the Duke of Alençon, Duncan-Jones remains an appreciative and level-headed witness. When Sidney appears to be making the best of a marriage he had accepted rather than sought, Duncan-Jones eagerly supports him; the birth of his daughter Elizabeth is a positive sign, and his wife's second pregnancy proves "that conjugal relations were successfully resumed" (290). Perhaps Sidney's most characteristic pose, in this book, is the attitude of frustration. For someone as talented, as celebrated, and as highly placed in society as Sidney was, the world turned out to be a surprisingly recalcitrant oyster. And, as Duncan-Jones observes, her subject was not an accommodating person:

Sidney's restless, fiery temperament did not equip him well for the rôle of Elizabethan courtier. Though he had inherited his father's affability and charm with close friends and dependants, he was also under the influence of his mother's almost paranoid bitterness and insecurity about the position of the Dudley family at Court. To this was added his own peculiar volatility of temperament, in which periods of melancholy lethargy alternated with bursts of manic energy. (152)

This assessment of Sidney's character deserves to be placed alongside the description by Greville which I quoted at the outset. The willingness to accept a man with all of his "bad parts," as Beatrice shows in *Much Ado About Nothing*, is a gesture beyond the reach of ordinary friendship.

Northrop Frye once remarked, with reference to Byron in particular, that the legendary status of a writer's life can have an overbearing effect on the ways in which his work will be read. In Sidney's case, the story of an individual's life is also the narrative of a culture in which allegiances to old values (such as chivalry and piety) are competing with the lure of new opportunities (such as colonial expansion and humanism). So a biographical reading of his performance as a writer needn't be a process of reducing great art to life-size scale. Rather, and this seems to me the real value of Duncan-Jones's book, personal anxieties and cultural exigencies are the matters of substance which fill the need for something more

than rhetorical finesse. Her book makes it a little more difficult to admire Sidney for the wrong reasons, and a little easier to read him for the right ones.

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