When Charles I borrowed Pamela’s prayer in captivity from the Arcadia for his own devotional exercises during the closing stages of his life, this choice did not remain private, shared only between himself and his God. On the contrary, it featured in Eikon Basilike (1649), the vastly successful book published in the immediate aftermath of Charles’s dignified performances at his trial and execution that helped cement his image as a Christ-like martyr. Refuting the King’s book point by point, Milton in his Eikonoklastes (1649) could scarcely refrain from addressing its indebtedness to the Arcadia. But in any case, Milton seems to have been especially disgusted by this particular aspect of Charles’s posthumous self-fashioning, regarding it as an Achilles heel. More or less creative adaptations of the themes and stories in Sidney’s romance had been legion during the decades after it became widely available in print; but Charles’s borrowing from the Arcadia contrasted with its standard treatment as an inexhaustible source of material (comparable to the legends of classical antiquity). Indeed, Pamela’s status as both fictional and pagan formed the main thrust of Milton’s assault on Charles’s piety:

Who would have imagin’d so little feare in him of the true all-seeing Deitie, so little reverence of the Holy Ghost, whose office is to dictat and present our Christian Prayers, so little care of truth in his last words, or honour to himself, or to his Friends, or sense of his afflictions, or of that sad howr which was upon him, as immediately before his death to popp into the hand of that grave Bishop who attended him, for a special Relique of his saintly exercises, a Prayer stol’n word for word from the mouth of a Heathen fiction praying to a heathen God; & that in no serious Book, but the vain amatorious Poem of S’ Philip Sidneys Arcadia; a Book in that kind full of worth and wit, but
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among religious thoughts, and duties not worthy to be nam’d; nor to be read
at any time without good caution; much less in time of trouble and affliction
to be a Christians Prayer-Book.¹

Milton avoids crude mockery of Charles’s “sad howr,” accusing him instead
of not taking it seriously himself. But this approach entails bruising treat-
ment of Sidney too. Milton makes little attempt not to throw the baby
out with the bathwater: strong condemnations sandwich the saving caveat
about the Arcadia’s “kind,” the second of which forbids its reading “at any
time,” except under otherwise unspecified conditions of “good caution.”
Though Merritt Hughes’s commentary to the edition followed describes
Milton as having “spotted” Charles’s “source in Sidney’s Arcadia,” the
sleuthing might not have been his own (159). “Milton may have steeped
himself in chivalrous romance, as he claims in the Apology,” notes James
Turner, “but neither in the divorce tracts nor in the political tirades do we
hear anything of the gentle sway of beauty, the courtly pretence that the
realms of male and female power are absolute and complementary.”²

Moreover, Milton shows no further inclination to soften his criticism
of the Arcadia itself in subsequently explaining how Charles “was forc’d to
robb Sr. Philip and his Captive Shepherdess of thir Heathen orisons” (366).
Though “thir” alone makes a revealing point, Milton adopts an even more
striking attitude when speculating:

he certainly whose mind could serve him to seek a Christian prayer out of
a Pagan Legend, and assume it for his own, might gather up the rest God
knows from whence; one perhaps out of the French Astrea, another out of
the Spanish Diana; Amadis and Palmerin could hardly scape him. Such a person
we may be sure had it not in him to make a prayer of his own, or at least
would excuse himself the pains and cost of his invention, so long as such
sweet rapsodies of Heathenism and Knighterrantry could yeild him prayers.
How dishonourable then, and how unworthy of a Christian King were these
ignoble shifts to seem holy and to get a Saintship among the ignorant and
wretched people; to draw them by this deception, worse then all his former
injuries, to go a whooring after him. (366–67).

These words accuse Charles of laziness and lack of discrimination, but their
charge partly depends on esteeming the Arcadia not more “worthy” in
its “kind” than the other popular romances listed. The recognition of all
such “rapsodies” as “sweet” registers not their excellence but their capacity,
directly and indirectly, to tempt readers “to go a whooring” after false idols.

So blunt an assessment of the Arcadia disturbs modern scholars expect-
ing more evidence of like-mindedness between Milton and Sidney. Hughes