Consciously or unconsciously weaving an elegant variation on Walpole’s
disgust with “a tedious, lamentable, pedantic, pastoral romance, which the
patience of a young virgin in love cannot now wade through,” Hazlitt some
six decades later judged of the Arcadia: “the effeminacy of modern taste
would, I am afraid, shrink back affrighted at the formidable sight of this
once popular work, which is about as long (horresco referens!) as all Wal-
ter Scott’s novels put together.”1 Perhaps Hazlitt rather pointlessly replaced
Walpole’s gender-based stereotype with another, matching but not beating
him at his own game; perhaps even the height of ingenuity could achieve
no greater variety when delineating a ne plus ultra of indigestible prolix-
ity. But Hazlitt attacked Sidney with a vigor and persistency suggesting he
was unaware of Walpole’s less forceful precedent, and thus regarded such
iconoclasm as all the more overdue. Hazlitt also produced his own, subtler
version of Walpole’s litany (“tedious, lamentable, pedantic”), styling the
Arcadia “the most involved, irksome, improgressive, and heteroclite sub-
ject that ever was chosen to exercise the pen or patience of man” (6: 325).
Moreover, whereas Walpole could probably have made his gibe about “the
patience of a young virgin in love” without having bothered himself to
“wade through” the Arcadia (an unreadable book should remain unread),
Hazlitt’s rueful comment about “the . . . patience of man” reflects at least
sufficient familiarity with that text to generate a note of authentic exasper-
ation in no way minimized by its accompanying humor at the expense of “a
riddle, a rebus, an acrostic in folio” encompassing “about 4000 far-fetched
similes, and 6000 impracticable dilemmas, about 10,000 reasons for doing
nothing at all, and as many more against it” (6: 325).
Hazlitt did not restrict his condemnation of Sidney to the *Arcadia* and sometimes made gratuitous slurs. In 1830, he idly speculated that this author “might have written a play at his leisure, and locked it up in some private drawer at Penshurst, where it might have been found two hundred years after,” whereas Shakespeare “had no opportunity to leave such precious hoards behind him, nor place to deposit them in” (11: 208). Here, Sidney so perfectly epitomizes a cavalier poet that he neglects to publish even conjectural works. On this score, Hazlitt has his cake and eats it too: he had earlier demoted Sidney from his customary status as England’s quintessential all-rounder by offering him a backhanded tribute as “one of the ablest men and worst writers of the age of Elizabeth” (6: 325). Such praise amounted to more than just an insincere setup prefacing a definitive put-down, however, for Hazlitt promoted that “age” more ardently than any other Romantic author: “Jousts and tournaments were still common with the nobility,” he enthused, of whom “Sir Philip Sidney was particularly distinguished for his proficiency in these exercises (and indeed fell a martyr to his ambition as a soldier).” Even so, a discernible impulse to belittle Sidney colors Hazlitt’s immediately ensuing remark: “the gentle Surrey was still more famous, on the same account, just before him” (6: 189). In his edition of Richard Lovelace, Hazlitt’s grandson made partial amends when looking beyond “the age of Elizabeth” and Surrey’s precedent to rehabilitate Sidney by reconfiguring his standing in relation to the categories “ablest men and worst writers.” He echoed the comparison ventured by William Winstanley, with the important caveat that it “be understood to signify a resemblance between Lovelace and Sidney as men, rather than as writers”: though this Hazlitt primarily sought to upgrade the neglected Caroline author by pairing him with the still respected Elizabethan author through their perceived nobility of character, he also helped secure the earlier figure’s literary achievement through the related contrast between his writing and the later one’s “rugged,” “unmusical,” and “unpardonably slovenly” efforts.²

Though Hazlitt senior found little to pardon in Sidney, none of his strictures justify Lamb’s claim to have written his essay “Some Sonnets” in reaction against “the wantonness . . . with which W. H. takes every occasion of insulting the memory of Sir Philip Sydney,” as motivated by “an accidental prejudice” arising from this calculation: “Milton wrote sonnets, and was a king-hater; and it was congenial perhaps to sacrifice a courtier to a patriot.”³ As he explained in 1822, Hazlitt did favor Milton’s sonnets (“truly his own in allusion, thought, and versification”) over William Drummond’s (less original, as too Petrarchan), and even more so over Sidney’s: “elaborately quaint and intricate, and more like riddles than sonnets” (8: 175). Whereas Lamb had begun his essay by appearing to wrestle with