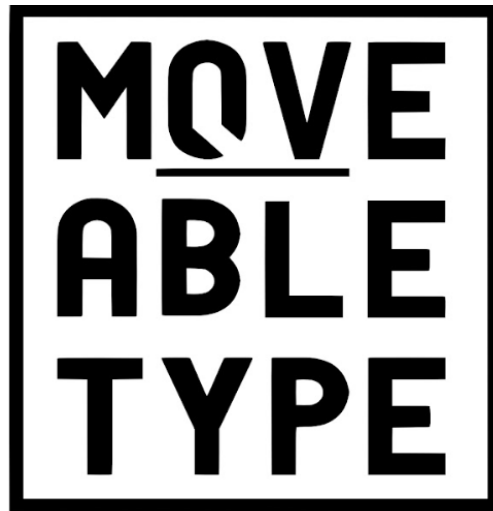




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ARTICLES

Philoclea's Vows: Falling in Love, Protestant Neoplatonism, and the Structure of Romance in Sidney's 1593 *Arcadia*

BRET VAN DEN BRINK

Romance as a literary mode is deeply involved with ideas of chastity, virginity, falling in love, and marriage, and Sir Philip Sidney's 1593 *Arcadia* is no exception. Since Sidney's romance was written in a period when, as a consequence of the Reformation, ideas of virginity, chastity, and marriage, and the vows people made concerning them, underwent major changes, and since the *Arcadia* was a vital influence on many subsequent early modern texts, from Shakespeare to Milton and beyond, Sidney's treatment of these topics is of great interest. Historically informed by Protestant and Christian Platonist texts and otherwise methodologically indebted to Northrop Frye's conceptualization of romance, this article considers (paying special attention to the character of Philoclea) how the plot of Sidney's work is organized by the trope of falling in love, and the relationship of this trope to the Christian narrative of Fall and Redemption.

Keywords: Marriage, Virginity, Chastity, Elizabethan Literature

Early in Sir Philip Sidney's Elizabethan prose romance, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1593), the heroine Philoclea vows to live a virginal life. Soon thereafter, she falls in love with Pyrocles, and she realizes that she cannot uphold her vow. Instead, she and Pyrocles exchange a promise of marriage, which is fulfilled by the end of the romance. This article examines Philoclea's apparently conflicting vows of virginity and of marriage, along with the very idea of *falling* in love, in light of Northrop Frye's structuralist vision of romance as well as the Christian Neoplatonism of Sidney's early modern contemporaries. Its examination concludes that in Sidney's romantic and Christian Neoplatonic vision, the act of falling in love is a loss of the metaphysical unity of the self, and this loss of self-unity can only be amended through marriage. Hence, Philoclea's false vow of virginity (which, as we shall see, Martin Luther would say she was under no obligation to uphold) is redeemed by her true vow of marriage and the marriage itself. There are deeper obligations at play than she initially assumes. Thus, in the course of the romance, Philoclea passes from chastity in one mode to chastity in another. The structuralist portion of the argument finds its starting place in Harold Bloom's comments on the trope of 'falling in love' in *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles*:

The paragon of erotic justice, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, charmingly says to Celia, 'From henceforth I will, coz, and devise sports. Let me see—what think you of falling in love?' (Act 1 Scene 2). I recall an exchange between John

[Hollander] and me in which I wondered aloud at the trope of ‘falling,’ and he replied: ‘Harold, it could hardly be *rising* in love.’¹

Elsewhere in that work, Bloom comments on love using the archetypal categories of ‘temple’ and ‘labyrinth’ as Angus Fletcher devised them (under Frye’s influence) in *The Prophetic Moment*:² ‘If achieved love is templar, then the perplexing road to get there will be labyrinthine, and pragmatically most of our erotic relationships will take place on the threshold between assurance and perplexity.’³ In the context of this study, one must add to Bloom that the virginity that precedes falling in love is itself templar, and that the templar state of ‘achieved love,’ in early modern England, would be a contented marriage.

This journey from one temple to another through an intervening labyrinth relates closely to Frye’s structuralist model of romance as a pre-generic literary mode (or, rather, ‘*mythos*’).⁴ As Emily Griffith Jones explains, ‘Frye’s structuralist model’ envisions romance as ‘a secular quest that echoes the scriptural narrative of fall and redemption—and that tends to be creatively fixated not just on the redemption but also on the fallenness, loss, and longing’.⁵ In Sidneian romance (and very often in early modern romance more generally), the correlates for paradise, fall, and redemption are virginity, falling in love, and marriage.⁶ Virginity and marriage are ideally both forms of self-unity: the first is a unity of the self and the second is the unity of oneself with another. Thomas P. Roche Jr. states the matter well in *The Kindly Flame*: ‘To surrender one’s self to love is either to lose one’s integrity or to transmute it into a higher unity.’⁷ Both states of unity (virginity and marriage) are analogous to the unity of the Godhead, yet virginity was traditionally the more privileged of the two in Christianity before the Reformation, as well as in Neoplatonism. Before we deepen this discussion of chastity and virginity in the early modern romance, it will be worthwhile to underscore a comment that Frye makes in *The Secular Scripture*: ‘What is symbolized as a virgin is actually a human conviction, however expressed, that there is something at the core of one’s infinitely fragile being which is not only immortal, but has discovered the secret of invulnerability that eludes the tragic hero.’⁸ Virginity, in this context, is not primarily a physical but a metaphysical reality. While it is inextricably linked with one’s corporeality, with the flesh being a kind of medium through which one experiences the world, virginity as an essential quality is nonetheless very much distinct from the exterior world. It is a vital aspect of the incorporeal integrity of one’s being. For Frye, ‘the objective correlate for

¹ Harold Bloom, *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles: The Power of the Reader’s Mind Over a Universe of Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 438.

² Angus Fletcher, *The Prophetic Moment: An Essay on Spenser* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971). For Fletcher, the temple is an archetype for what is sacred and ordered (pp. 14-23) and the labyrinth is the archetype of what is profane and chaotic (pp. 24-34).

³ Bloom, *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles*, p. 491.

⁴ Northrop Frye, ‘The *Mythos* of Summer: Romance’, in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 186-206.

⁵ Emily Griffiths Jones, *Right Romance: Heroic Subjectivity and Elect Community in Seventeenth-Century England* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p. 5.

⁶ One might point to *The Faerie Queene*’s Belphoebe or the Lady of Milton’s *Comus* as heroines whose virginities are tried but not lost, and who are portrayed, in some ways, as paradisaic; similarly, *The Faerie Queene*’s Britomart is a figure whose chastity must be perfected through marriage after falling in love. One might compare this suggestion with Frye’s discussion of the ‘Heroes and Heroines of Romance’ in *The Secular Scripture*, pp. 65-93.

⁷ Thomas P. Roche, Jr., *The Kindly Flame: A Study of the Third and Fourth Books of Spenser’s Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 55.

⁸ Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study in the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 86.

this kind of integrity' is 'the diamond set in a black horn' worn by Sidney's Pamela, which bears the motto, 'yet still myself'.⁹

In the Christian Neoplatonism of the Renaissance, virginity was not simply a matter of whether or not one has had sex. Rather, it was more exacting and enigmatic, requiring one to be virginal in both body and in mind. This exacting status was envisioned as something divine. Marsilio Ficino writes in his *Platonic Theology*, 'The seventh and most outstanding of all the soul's alienations is that which results from the chastity of a mind devoted to God, as Orpheus teaches Musaeus in the hymn to all the gods.'¹⁰ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa considers the matter similarly in his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*.¹¹ Of course, Renaissance authors drew from earlier sources. Methodius of Olympus, for example, notes in his *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, a work modelled on Plato's *Symposium*, that *parthenia* (virginity) is just one letter away from *partheia* (nearness to God). Ambrose affirms that 'he who has preserved his chastity is an angel'. In *The Confessions of the Flesh*, Michel Foucault comments thus on this passage:

And it is not just in a metaphorical sense, or to designate a certain attitude of the soul, that the angelic nature of virginity is invoked. It is substantial. It passes through matter. It operates throughout the world and transfigures things. Here on earth it is not simply waiting for the other world: it really carries the latter into effect¹²

It is clear, then, that virginity is the state of life that most overcomes one's attachment to the flesh and draws one into the life of the spirit. Human beings, as compounds of flesh and spirit, may live like beasts, or like angels, and the virginal life is the life that actualizes one's angelic potential. Nonetheless, reformers often harboured skepticism concerning virginity in its form of vowed abstention. In a sense, these theologians thought virginity was against nature, but in another sense, they thought of it as surpassing nature. As such, they contended that it was chiefly a gift from God rather than an exercise of the will; and because of its unearned nature, one was not in a position to determine how long it would last. Hence, one could not make a vow to be a virgin because one lacked the agency to make this choice. In a wedding sermon on 4 August 1545, Luther made this point with great vehemence: '[I]t is worth nothing that you swore your vow or oath to remain chaste when you do not have the power to keep it. If you have sworn this, you have sworn it to the devil and are not obliged to keep it, for it is opposed to God.'¹³ Roche cites John Jewel, the Bishop of Salisbury, who makes a similar point in a milder register: '[C]hastity is no ill thing: it is the special gift of God. But an unclean and a filthy life under the colour of a "vow," or the name of "chastity," is a wicked thing before God . . . Though chastity be a singular gift of God, yet is it not good for him, that hath not the gift of chastity.'¹⁴

In Philoclea, Sidney presents a character who vows herself to a virginal existence but wavers because her vow is not supported by the necessary grace. In fact, the heroine makes and revokes

⁹ Ibid., 86.

¹⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, trans. by Michael J. B. Allen, 6 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001-6), IV, p. 167.

¹¹ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, 'Of Abstinence, Fasting, Chastity, Solitude, Tranquility, and Ascension of Mind', in *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. by Eric Purdue, 3 vols. (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2021), III, pp. 698-703.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh: Volume 4 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 2020), pp. 129, 147.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, ed. and trans. by Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 99.

¹⁴ Roche, *The Kindly Flame*, p. 115.

her vow in the same chapter.¹⁵ Here, a few days before the arrival of Pyrocles, she invokes this sentiment in verse: 'You living powres enclosed in stately shrine / Of growing trees', and vows, 'My virgin life no spotted thought shall staine' (172). Sue P. Starke associates the *topos* of the *hortus conclusus* with 'the pure and isolated self';¹⁶ here the enclosure of trees in which the divinities presiding over virginity abide is connected with the *hortus conclusus* of the virgin whom they protect. She inscribes her verse on 'a goodly white marble stone', the pureness of which she takes to represent her 'purest minde' and the hardness of which she takes to represent the constancy of her 'tempred hart' (172). In her poem's third stanza, Philoclea utters an apostrophe to chastity which would suit with equal justice those literary paragons of early modern chastity, Spenser's Belphoebe and Milton's Lady:

O Chastitie, the chiefe of heavenly lightes,
Which makst us most immortal shape to weare,
Holde thou my hart, establish thou my sprights;
To onely thee my constant course I beare.
Till spotlesse soule unto thy bosome flye,
Such life to leade, such death I vow to dye. (172)

Here Chastity is equated with Diana, the virgin goddess of the moon, and the angelic life of chastity is portrayed as leading to the soul's superlunary flight. This process is very close to the deification the virgin undergoes in Milton's *Comus* (according to the Elder Brother):

[O]ft convers with heav'nly habitants
Begin to cast a beam on th' outward shape,
The unpolluted temple of the mind,
And turns it by degrees to the souls essence,
Till all be made immortal.¹⁷

In Milton's work, the person-turned-daemon may follow the Attendant Spirit '[t]o the corners of the Moon'.¹⁸ In her apostrophe, Philoclea commits herself to the supernatural vocation of the virgin life and is (seemingly) fully cognisant of its merits and austerity.

Philoclea, however, cannot follow the path of virginity. Although she 'did not dissemble' when she wrote her verse, she has 'chaunged since' (173). Philoclea's change accords with the view of reformers such as Luther who, as noted above, advised against vows of chastity as being against (or, rather, as surpassing) human nature. Starke's evocative comment that Philoclea's change 'involves a fall out of eternity and into time, like a fall out of Eden into mortality' touches at something essential for the work.¹⁹ Nonetheless, for Sidney, and for his *Arcadia* (the pagan world of which is tinged by his theology), such a fall lies in the shadowy past of prehistory, and it is presumed that all persons must endure the postlapsarian world's trial by existence. The angelic life of virginity is a flight from this fallen world, which is why Foucault, in explicating Ambrose's view, contrasts 'virgins who, because of their chastity, pass from the world to heaven',

¹⁵ Philip Sidney, *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. by Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), I, bk. 2. Ch. 4. All quotations are from this edition and are cited in text in parentheses.

¹⁶ Sue P. Starke, *The Heroines of English Pastoral Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), p. 32.

¹⁷ John Milton, *Complete Shorter Poems: With Original Spelling and Punctuation*, ed. Stella P. Revard (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), ll. 459-63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 1017.

¹⁹ Starke, *The Heroines of English Pastoral Romance*, p. 61.

with ‘the fallen angels who, because of their “intemperance”, have fallen into the world’.²⁰ Given Sidney’s generally Protestant audience, Philoclea’s mistake was less in breaking the vow than in making it at all.

The life of perpetual virginity, if it is to have any spiritual value, must be exacting in both mind and body. As Foucault writes in a discussion of Basil of Ancyra, ‘What soul could be called a virgin if it kept the one that it loves in an embrace “with the incorporeal hands of thought”?’.²¹ Having fallen in love with Pyrocles, the virginity of Philoclea’s mind is spoiled. She says as much herself: ‘[T]he purenes of my virgin-minde be stained’ (260). Were she to attempt to live by the vow that she inscribed in marble, she would but ‘labour to lay marble coulours over [her] ruinous thoughts’ (260). Rather than becoming a whitened sepulchre, she pursues the virtuous road open to her—married chastity. She might be guilty of ‘a more quick opening of her minde, then she minded to have done’ (261); however, the viciousness of such an opening is venial at most, and it still allows for what Roche calls marriage’s ‘higher unity’.²² It, in short, sends her into the labyrinth between temple and temple.

Both the fall into love and the possibility of attaining a higher, templar unity through love are enabled by love’s unitive nature. Early in the romance, Sidney emphasizes this aspect through a discourse between Musidorus and Pyrocles. While the latter is already smitten with Philoclea and disguised as a woman, the former has yet to fall in love with Pamela. As such, Musidorus’s eulogy of love’s unitive power is degraded by a misogynistic view of woman:

[T]rue love hath that excellent nature in it, that it doth transform the very essence of the lover into the thing loved, uniting, and as it were incorporating it with a secret & inward working. And herein do these kindes of love imitate the excellent; for as the love of heaven makes one heavenly, the love of vertue, vertuous; so doth the love of the world make one become worldly, and this effeminate love of a woman, doth so womanish a man, that (if he yeeld to it) it will not onely make him an Amazon; but a launder, a distaff-spinner; or what so ever other vile occupation their idle hands ca[n] imagin, & their weake hands performe. (78)

One might detect in this passage the touching Aristotelian notion that friends become second selves for one another, as well as the harmful Aristotelian misogyny that men and women cannot be friends, because friendship necessitates equality between the friends, and men are intrinsically superior to women.²³ Freud called ‘being in love’ an ‘over-estimation’ of ‘the object’;²⁴ some of Sidney’s contemporaries, such as Giordano Bruno, might have agreed with him. In *On the Heroic Frenzies* [1585], a work dedicated to (and arguing against) Sidney, Bruno writes, ‘I could scarcely regard [a woman] as worthy, without blushing, of loving physically, even at the momentary height of her beauty and her capacity to beget children according to God and nature.’²⁵ As someone in love, Pyrocles cannot abide by this view, being unable to see his beloved

²⁰ Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, p. 147.

²¹ Ibid., p. 163.

²² Roche, *The Kindly Flame*, p. 55.

²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2019), Book 8, pp. 141-162.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1949), p. 73. See also Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 108.

²⁵ Giordano Bruno, *On the Heroical Frenzies*, trans. by Ingrid D. Rowland (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023), p. 11.

as anything other than lovable, and he explicitly links his love for Philoclea with his love for God. Even Musidorus, upon falling in love with Pamela, recants his former position, saying, '[B]y love we are made, and to love we are made' (113). In this view, the love that makes us is immediately the love of our parents, but ultimately the love of God, and we are made to love not only so that we might love one another and to create offspring, but also to love God and to create others who will likewise love him. Such love is further given an epistemological value, for to love something is to know it in a similar manner as to how God knows it, for God's knowledge is his love, or, as Nicholas of Cusa writes, 'Your seeing, Lord, is your loving.'²⁶ If one overcomes the blindness of infatuation, the person in love is in the best position to know the value of love and the value of their beloved. As Spenser writes, 'Such ones ill iudge of loue, that cannot loue, / Ne in their frozen hearts feele kindly flame.'²⁷

Love is nonetheless perilous in the *Arcadia*. Falling in love is to risk the integrity of one's selfhood, opening it in all its vulnerability to another self. Due to 'Cupides deepe incision,' the person in love lives 'in self Division' (50). Losing their intrinsic self-unity, characters in love become other than themselves until they attain the new unity of marriage. (Some characters, it must be said, are more extremely divided in themselves than others, as Pyrocles and Musidorus may be said to fall into greater degrees of self-division than Philoclea or Pamela). This inward transformation of love's self-division is portrayed outwardly in the two princes: Pyrocles becomes Zelmane the Amazon, and Musidorus becomes the shepherd Dorus. Thus, Pyrocles sings that he is 'Transformd in shew, but more transformd in minde', and that he is 'False in [his] selfe' (76). Likewise, Musidorus sings, 'Come shepherds weedes, become your masters minde: / Yeld outward shew, what inward chance he tryes' (113). The princes are fortunate to be so changed merely in mind and dress—another character finds his flesh mutilated. The nadir of *Arcadia's* unchastity is the serial lover, Pamphilus, who is only constant in his inconstancy, being reported as saying, 'I (whom you call inconstant) am ever constant; to Beautie, in others; and Delight in my self' (268). His ex-lover Dido considers him 'so naturally inconstant' as to 'marvell [that] his soule findes not some way to kill his bodie, whereto it had beene so long united' (267). His punishment is to be bound at the bottom of a tree and pricked by the (vaguely phallic) bodkins of nine gentlewoman whom he had seduced (264). While Pamphilus's name suggests that he is loved by all, his sin is that he loves all, in a merely carnal sense of love.

The opposite of Pamphilus's infatuations is a committed love, which seeks true union with the other. Such commitment is seen, to give but one pair, in the characters of Philoclea and Pyrocles. When they first embrace, '[I]t seemed their soules desired to meete, and their harts to kisse, as their mouthes did: which faine Pyrocles would have sealed with the chiefe armes of his desire, but Philoclea commaunded the contrary; and yet they passed the promise of mariage' (46). The desire of souls to meet and hearts to kiss as mouths do is reminiscent of a passage from Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*. The passage is thus rendered in Dryden's early modern translation:

They gripe, they squeeze, their humid tongues they dart,
As each would force their way to t' other's heart—
In vain; they only cruise about the coast,
For bodies cannot pierce, nor be in bodies lost²⁸

²⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Writings*, trans. by H. Lawrence Bond (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 239.

²⁷ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A.C. Hamilton, et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), bk. 4, proem, ll. 10-11.

²⁸ John Dryden, 'Lucretius: Concerning the Nature of Love (from Book IV)', in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. by Paul Hammond, et al., 5 vols. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), II, p. 332-344, ll. 75-78. While the exact of image of

William Butler Yeats famously commented on this passage, 'The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul.'²⁹ The Lucretian echo hints that Pyrocles' desire to join his heart with Philoclea's through sexual intercourse would be 'in vain', two bodies cannot wholly mix with one another, yet Philoclea offers a solution beyond Lucretius: Christian marriage. To this end, Philoclea declines Pyrocles' offer of sex, and instead the two become engaged to one another, promising to marry. Their eventual marriage will achieve their kiss of hearts, bringing their souls into their higher unity.

This fuller union is delayed until the end of Sidney's romance, where they, along with Musidorus and Pamela, finally wed. In the final sentence of the *Arcadia* it is revealed that Pyrocles and Philoclea have a son named Pyrophilus, and that Musidorus and Pamela have a daughter named Melidora (207). The final wonder presented by Sidney's *Arcadia*, the fruit of the 'coupled joys' freed from Cupid's 'emboyson'd darte', is generation, the bearing of new life (64). The higher unity achieved in marriage is figured forth in the names of the children, which each contain half the names of their parents. Were Sidney's romance to unfurl in a Christian setting rather than in Arcadia, the heroic offspring would undoubtedly be raised in the ways of God, with the hope that they might increase the number of saints, as Luther extolls in *The Estate of Marriage*,³⁰ and as Spenser aspires towards in the 'Epithalamion'.³¹ As it is, they will be raised in the ways of heroic virtue.

The erotic journey from virginity, through love's fall, into marriage, takes a circular form, resembling both the Christian schema of Fall and Redemption, as well as the Neoplatonic cycle of *exitus* and *reditus*, procession and return.³² Philoclea's vow of virginity was in vain, because it offered something that was not in her power to give. She could not know whether or not she would fall in love, and, shortly thereafter, she did. She passed through a stage of inward disorder, losing her identity with herself, but, in comparison with others (including her love, Pyrocles), she proceeds through this stage with virtue and grace, governing her passion by her reason. She engages herself to Pyrocles, and she is faithful to her promise unto the close of the romance, whereupon the two characters marry one another, to their mutual delight. In this narrative, Sidney weaves together the concerns both of his literary mode of romance, as well as his Renaissance Platonist philosophy and his Protestant theology. Sidney's context is not our context, and not all aspects of his thought will be amiable to his twenty-first century reader, yet he touches on something resonant about the nature of falling in love and the promises we make concerning love. In considering Sidney's *Arcadia*, one may better understand Hollander's rejoinder to Bloom with which we began: 'Harold, it could hardly be *rising* in love.'³³ Yet, as we have seen, after love falls, it may also rise.

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hearts failing to kiss may not be in the original Latin text, the crucial idea is the failure of souls to achieve union with one another due to the limitations of embodiment.

²⁹ Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 486.

³⁰ Luther, *Luther on Women*, p. 108.

³¹ Edmund Spenser, *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. by William A. Oram, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 660-679, l. 423.

³² Cf. M. H. Abrams, 'The Great Circle: Pagan and Christian Neoplatonism', in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), pp. 146-154.

³³ Bloom, *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles*, p. 438.

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