

Shakespearean Authorship Trust



Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke

Dates:

1561 to 1621

Mary Sidney was the most educated woman in England, comparable only to Queen Elizabeth. She was fluent in Italian, French, and Latin; played the lute and virginals; sang; had all the refinements of an aristocratic woman, such as medical training, falconry, hunting, court life, etc. She had an alchemy laboratory and was close with the leading “magicians” of the day, including John Dee and Giordano Bruno.

For two decades Mary Sidney developed and led the most important and influential literary circle in English history, now called Wilton Circle. She is the first woman to publish a play in English (closet drama) and the first woman to publish an original pastoral piece in English. She translated and published work from French and Italian. Sister to Sir Philip Sidney, she published his sonnet sequence that created the passionate vogue for sonnet writing.

Scholars of Mary Sidney agree that her mission in life was to create great works in the English language, although as a woman she would have never been allowed to publish work for the public stage. Many of the original sources for the plays were written by herself, or her brother, writers in her circle, or were dedicated to her, and she was fluent in the three languages in which two dozen of the source materials were written. She sponsored an acting troupe and participated in courtly theatre throughout her life. Her life parallels the love story shown in the sonnets in that she had a long-term affair with a younger man who for a time she thought was having an affair with a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman. Mary Sidney died in her London home two months after the First Folio went to press.

www.shakespeareanauthorshiptrust.org.uk