A Garden, A Forking Path: Interactive Branching Narrative in *The Lady of May* (1578)

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Abstract. In *interactive branching narrative*, a story is experienced partly through choice, with interactor decisions altering the course of the plot. While conventional belief positions Ayn Rand's 1934 play *Night of January 16th* as the earliest example of the form, the poet Philip Sidney supplied an antecedent more than 350 years prior. In *The Lady of May* (1578), a young woman faces a romantic dilemma, which in turn yields a choice point for the work's interactor, Queen Elizabeth I. While Brian Moriarty recently articulated its status as the earliest known example of interactive branching narrative, this paper provides the first extensive account of *The Lady of May* as a work of interactive media.

Keywords: branching narrative · media archaeology · history of ideas

1 Introduction

Queen Elizabeth was strolling through a garden in Wanstead, the new estate of the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley, when she and her walking party were suddenly accosted by "one apparelled Like an honeste mans wyf of the Countrie" [24, p. 11]. Other bucolic characters soon appeared, and from there transpired a singing contest and a debate, leaving the queen, finally, with a choice. It was the middle of May, 1578, and this dramatic situation, an invention of the young poet Philip Sidney, is the earliest known work of interactive branching narrative.[1]

Let us begin by defeating some potential claims for earlier examples. Indeed, nonlinear narrative structures can be found as far back as antiquity. The scholar Michael Squire, for example, has argued that the ancient *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina*, shown in Fig. 1, cleverly embeds multiple narrative paths onto a single stone face [48]. In ancient Egypt, nonlinear narrative inscriptions were mapped onto the multidimensional architectures of religious temples [15]. Though arguably branching narrative, these examples are not especially interactive—or

[1] Sir Philip Sidney was eventually knighted, but a few years after the events recounted in this paper, therefore I refer to him without the title.

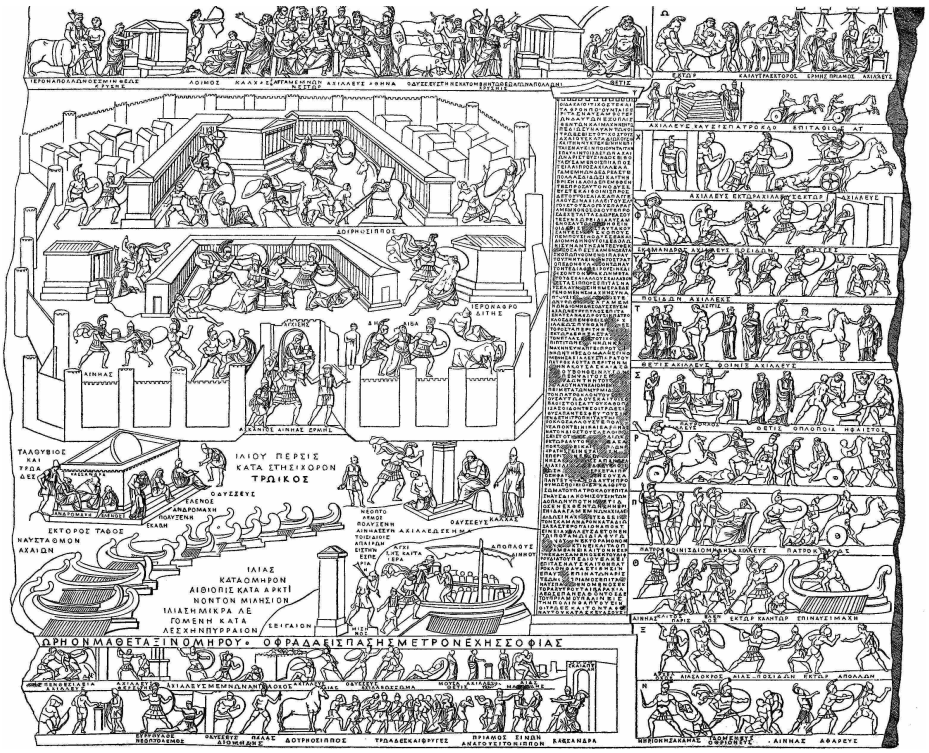

Fig. 1. The scholar Michael Squire had argued that the 1st-century (AD) *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina* embeds multiple narrative paths onto a single stone face [48]. The result is visually striking, as this drawing of the tablet exhibits, but it is not an example of interactive branching narrative as defined in this paper.

more precisely, *ergodic*, to use Aarseth's handy term[2]—though there were certainly ergodic *non*-narrative texts in antiquity. Here, the *I Ching* is a classical example [5]. Nick Montfort has written about the riddle, itself an ancient tradition, as an antecedent to interactive fiction [32]. In her dissertation, Serina Patterson explores a (more recent) medieval form that she calls the *game-text*, with special attention to the genres of *demandes d'amour* and the fortune-telling string game [37].

While these are all fascinating examples of ergodic texts, they are not quite in the purview of this paper: *interactive branching narrative*. What exactly is interactive branching narrative? I am making a claim about the earliest example

[2] Here is Aarseth's definition of it [1, p. 1]: "In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages."

of the form, so it would seem politic to now explicitly define what I mean by that term. Let us begin with a preliminary definition: *interactive branching narrative is a media mode in which a narrative artifact is experienced partly through choice, with interactor decisions altering the course of the plot.*[3] In the simplest case, works in this genre have a single branching point—for instance, one that diverges into multiple possible endings. Notice that this definition excludes many forms of interactive media, and even many forms of interactive storytelling. First, branching *non*-narrative works of interactive media are excluded by the stipulation of a 'narrative artifact'. Second, by employing a strict notion of plot, we actually cast aside the majority of interactive narrative works.[4] To illustrate, let us consider the case of a medieval play in which the audience is encouraged to heckle, cheer on, or even physically interact with the actors on stage.[5] Such a work is clearly interactive, and the audience interactions would likely affect the production of the play—but the plot, at a high level, will not be altered. The actors may deliver their lines differently—they may even deliver altogether different lines—but the plot will still take its course. As a more nuanced case, let us consider a hypothetical work of improvisational theatre in which the course of the plot *is* altered according to audience interactions. This satisfies our preliminary definition, but it is not interactive branching narrative for the reason that it does not branch: the course of the plot is guided by the audience, but the alternate paths that could have been traversed are never reified. In a work of interactive branching narrative, all the possible paths through the plot are reified in the artifact.[6] Our amended definition will then read as follows: *interactive branching narrative is a media mode in which a narrative artifact* with multiple reified plot paths *is experienced partly through choice, with interactor decisions altering the course of the plot.*

When it comes to interactive branching narrative, and even to interactive storytelling more broadly, the popular historical account probably begins with

[3] Following Nick Montfort [32], in this paper I will use the term 'interactor' in lieu of 'reader', 'player', or 'audience member.'

[4] Here, I use 'plot' in the sense of *fabula* [43], that is, the series of events recounted in a narrative artifact, rather than any telling (*syuzhet*) of those events.

[5] Though the ancient examples above allude to this point, it is worth explicitly noting that this has actually been, throughout human history, the more typical mode of storytelling. That is, storytelling is interactive by default. Non-interactive storytelling, as we think of it today, is critically enabled by technologies and materials that enable the recording of ideas, such as writing systems and paint.

[6] Note that these conditions might not appear to be satisfied in, for example, a computational work in which branching plot paths are dynamically assembled at runtime. To resolve this, we may treat as reified all the implicit plot paths contained in the space of possible paths that can be generated by the system. This kind of thinking has appeared in writings by Michael Mateas [31] and Mark Riedl and R. Michael Young [42], for instance. It is for this reason that I'm using the term 'reified' in place of 'explicit', though at the risk of diminished comprehension, I acknowledge.

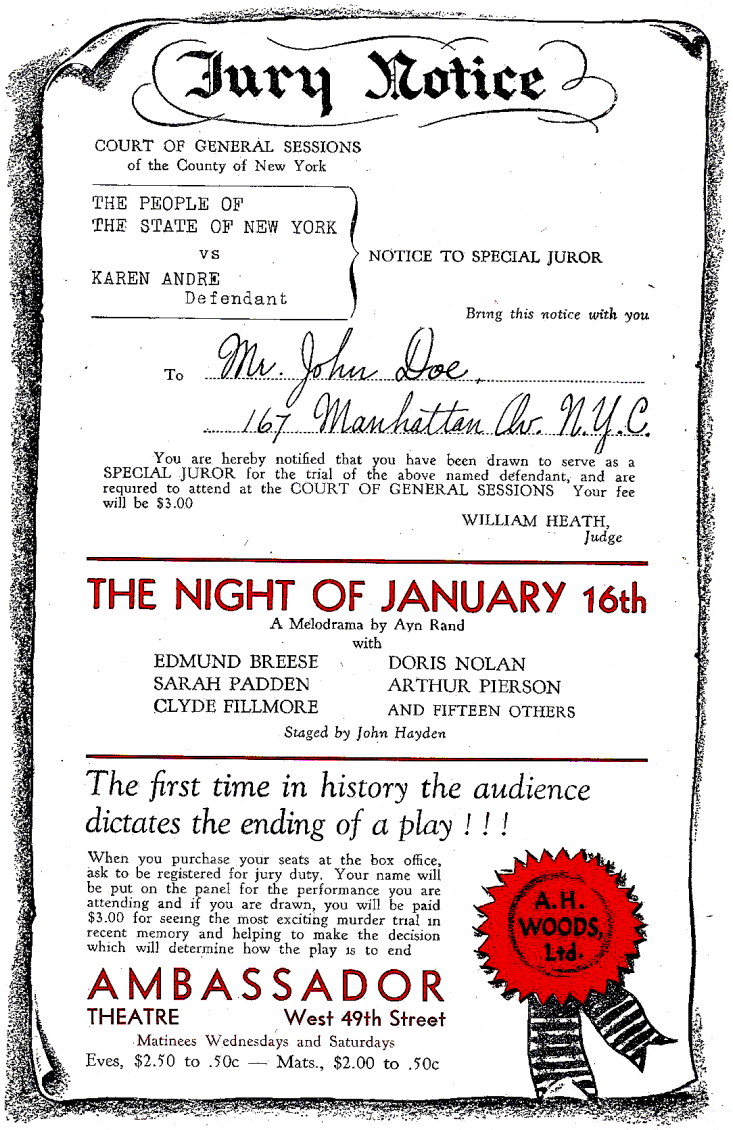

Fig. 2. In Ayn Rand's courtroom drama *Night of January 16th*, a jury of audience members is tasked with furnishing the story's climactic verdict, thereby determining which of the play's two possible endings will close the performance. The play was first performed in Los Angeles, in 1934, as *Woman on Trial*. Pictured here is the reverse side of a flyer, from the play's 1935–36 Broadway run, highlighting the device of audience interaction. While the advertisement claims the unprecedented use of this device, Philip Sidney had already employed it more than 350 years prior.

Ayn Rand's 1934 play *Night of January 16th* [39].[7] In this courtroom drama, a jury of audience members is pulled on stage to furnish the story's climactic verdict, which determines how the play will end. While the flyer shown in Fig. 2 proclaims this as "The first time in history the audience dictates the ending of a play," Philip Sidney had already employed this device more than 350 years prior. In this paper, I tell the story of this earliest known example of branching narrative in terms of the intellectual, interpersonal, and media contexts that framed its invention in the middle of May, 1578. *The Lady of May* is an obscure work in Sidney scholarship, let alone in the study of literature or media (or interactive media). I first heard about it in Brian Moriarty's 2015 talk "I Sing the Story Electric" [34], where it is briefly mentioned; my project is indebted to his. What appears below is, to my knowledge, the first extensive account of *The Lady of May* in the context of interactive media.

2 A Pattern

Philip Sidney was not like his father. If Sir Henry Sidney was the model of staid service to the queen, his son was the volatile poet [10]. When in 1578 Philip suspected his father's secretery, Edmund Molyneux, of dispatching private correspondence between the two Sidneys, he wrote this in a letter to the humble secretery [29, p. 69]:

> For that is to come, I assure you before God, that if ever I know you to do as much as read any letter I write to my father, without his commandment, or my commandment, I will thrust my dagger into you.[8]

In a more public display of rage the following year, Philip challenged Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, to a duel after the latter, citing his higher rank, demanded precedence on a tennis court [7]. This disregard for hierarchy angered the queen, Elizabeth I, but it was a scheme perpetrated with his uncle—his mother's brother, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester—that would trigger Philip Sidney's temporary exit from court life.

Elizabeth is called The Virgin Queen, and though she never married, she had many courtships [13]. The most prominent of these dalliances was with Leicester, who was a childhood friend and lifelong favorite of the queen—and, for a time, married to someone else [21]. When his wife died in an accident in

[7] There are exceptions to this, a notable one being the Brian Moriarty talk that I mention below, but I think it is fair to use the term 'popular conception' here, since many scholars cite Rand's play (or a later work) as an earliest example of interactive storytelling [1,27,26,25,41]. Rather than an oversight, these scholars merely have other aims than cataloguing the earliest works of interactive storytelling. To my knowledge, only Moriarty has attempted such a project, and this is why I am carrying out a likeminded effort.

[8] Philip's suspicions appear to have been unfounded [29], and Molyneux would eventually write glowing biographies of both Sidneys (though recent scholarship has worked to excavate critical undertones in that prose [30]).

1560, it was suspected that Leicester may have arranged the fatal circumstances so that he could marry Elizabeth [51]. While a union had become possible, the notion was hampered by vocal disapproval from advisors to the queen and the prospect would not materialize at that time. By the 1570s, the queen still had not married, but a foreign suitor much younger than her—Francis, Duke of Alençon, of France—had entered serious contention. Leicester vehemently opposed the idea, and in 1579 he urged his nephew, Philip Sidney, to do something about the queen's romantic dilemma. Sidney wrote a letter to Elizabeth that was, as one scholar put it, "bold—too bold" [33, p. 10]. Again, Sidney had flouted hierarchy, and when it was inadvertently made public the queen was especially incensed [29]. This was, moreover, not the first time that Sidney and his uncle had conspired to intervene in Elizabeth's romantic affairs.

3 A Garden, A Forking Path

Queen Elizabeth was strolling through a garden in Wanstead, the new estate of the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley, when she and her walking party were suddenly accosted by "one apparelled Like an honeste mans wyf of the Countrie" [24, p. 11]. Other bucolic characters soon appeared, and from there transpired a singing contest and a debate, leaving the queen, finally, with a choice. It was the middle of May, 1578,[9] and this was a dramatic situation of the young Philip Sidney's invention.

Though a kind of theatrical production in the woods—some modern scholars have called it a "happening" [16, p. 499]—Sidney would preserve the event in an untitled literary text, his earliest extant work. It first appeared, without title, in a posthumous 1598 edition of Sidney's *Arcadia* [33]. Since its inclusion in a 1725 collection of Sidney's works, the piece has been known as *The Lady of May*. Centuries later, in 1961, an earlier manuscript "written throughout in a single sixteenth-century secretery hand" [24, p. 107]—and containing hitherto lost material, but still no title—was discovered [45] and eventually published, as 'the Helmingham Hall manuscript' [24]. In each version, the text serves as both a script and a record of the event itself, interspersing Sidney's authored dialogue with descriptions of the queen's interactions with the piece. As the scholar Stephen Orgel notes [36, p. 198]:

> What we possess is a text which is intended as a description of the actual production: no rewriting seems to have been done, and it remains as a unique record of an audacious experiment which went wrong.

In this paper, I will rely primarily on the Helmingham Hall manuscript, since it is probably a more accurate record of the event as it actually occurred. The text begins in this way [24, pp. 107–108]:

[9] While earlier scholars were not sure whether this event occurred in 1578 or the following year, we now know with certainty that it happened during the queen's May 13–16, 1578, visit to Wanstead [6].

> Her most excellente Maiestie walkinge in wansted garden as she passed owne into the grove there came sodenly amonge the trayne one apparelled Like an honeste mans wyf of the Countrie where crienge oute for Iustice and desieringe all the Lordes and gentlemen to speake a good woorde for her, she was broughte to the presence of her maiestie to whome vppon her knees she offered a Supplicacion & vsed this speech

In her speech, the woman explains how her daughter, called 'the Ladie of maye' and so "trobled with that notable matter of *Matrimonie*," is facing a romantic dilemma [24, p. 108]:

> other weomen thincke theie may be vnhappie with one housbande, my poore dawghter is oppressed with tooe both lovinge her, both equally liked of her, both strivinge to deserve her

The mother soon departs, and the rest of the characters emerge [24, p. 109]:

> ther was hard in the woodes a confused noise and fourthwith there came oute sixe shepheardes, with as many fosters [foresters] halinge and pullinge, to whether side they should Drawe the Ladie of maye, whoe seemed to enclyne, nether to the one nor other side, Amonge whome was mr Rombus A Scoole mr of a village

From here, Rombus launches into a decidely pedantical monologue. Like many of drama's fools, this one is entrusted with conveying much of the work's hidden message. Some scholars speculate that Sidney may have even played Rombus in the production: "This absent presence of Sidney in Rombus is so strong as to lead easily to the speculation that here may be the role played by the author in his creation" [44, p. 5]. Cutting Rombus short, the May Lady introduces her suitors—a boring but wealthy shepherd, Espilus, and a vigorous forester, Therion, who gives her "manie pleasures" [24, p. 111]—and the two commence with a singing contest. Here, both structure and content serve the author's rhetoric, as the scholar Richard Bear explains [44, p. 5]:

> Sidney gives Therion the first real word, by having him challenge Espilus to sing; the challenge itself is however the first verse. It contains a compliment to the Queen: "Great sure is she, on whom our hopes do live/Greater is she, who must the judgement give." Espilus might be expected to respond to the challenge in kind, and with a better compliment, but rather rudely launches into the contest itself, like one who begins a race before his opponent has had a chance to dig in. This confusion of beginnings masks Sidney's maneuver in giving also the last word to Therion.

By this point, the queen's decision is already expected, but rudely a proponent of Espilus interjects to proclaim that the shepherd has already won. One of the foresters retorts in support of Therion, but in a way that cleverly also praises

the queen. A debate breaks out between the two, with Rombus as moderator, and the forester wins handily. The foolish schoolmaster then begins to offer his verdict on the matter, but the May Lady cuts him off to furnish, to Elizabeth, the earliest known choice point in interactive branching narrative [24, p. 117]:

> No noe your ordinarie braynes shall not deale in that matter I have alreadye submitted yt to one whoes sweete spiritte hath passed throughe greate difficulties neyther will I that your blocke heades Lye in her waie. Therfore o Ladie worthy to see the accomplishemente of your desiers, since all your desiers be most worthie of you, vouchesafe our eares suche happines, and me that particuler favor as that you will iudge whether theis tooe be moste worthie of me or whether I worthie of them, and this I will saie that in Iudinge me you Iudge more then me in yt.

4 Foldback in a Grove

Sidney's production had clearly favored the forester, Therion. He and his proponents speak eloquently, cleverly flattering the queen, while Espilus and his cronies proceed arrogantly and out of turn. Moreover, Therion's forester handily defeats Espilus's shepherd in verbal debate, a fundamental art of the Elizabethan period, and one with which the queen was well studied [44]. As Edward Berry explains, the matter at hand is the determination of a May Lord, since the dispute is for the May Lady's hand, and "only Therion embodies the attributes of a Lord of May": "A figure of festive misrule, he translates into courtly service the vitality, virility, and license of the spring rite itself" [6, p. 256]. To further emphasize this connection, the dispute plays out, as it were, on the forester's home field—Sidney intentionally staged the production in a grove [6]. To quote Orgel, "no case at all has been presented for the shepherd" [36, p. 202].

Surely, the queen would pick Therion; *spectacularly*, she did not. Elizabeth chose Espilus! In the text, Sidney recounts the queen's decision in a rather brief way [24, p. 117]:

> This beinge saide yt pleased her Maiestie to Iudge yt *Espilus* did the better deserve her, but what woordes and Reasons she vsed for yt this paper which carryeth so base names is not worthie to conteyne

As the scholar Robert Stillman points out, Sidney's brevity here was likely a sort of authorial curtness, meant to express his disappointment in her choice by recording it with a subtly veiled begrudingness: "Sidney's solution was to design his gloss on Elizabeth's judgment in such a way as to make its injustice apparent" [50, p. 37].

If it was not yet clear enough that Sidney's preferred plot course had been diverted, the rest of the production left no doubt. Upon the queen's decision, "the sheppheardes and fosters made a full consorte of theire Cornettes and Recorders" [36, p. 118] and Espilus launched into a song that *made no sense* in light of Elizabeth's verdict. As Orgel explains [36, pp. 202–203]:

> the song recounts how Silvanus, the archetypal fo(re)ster, *won* his love, and Pan, the archetypal shepherd, *lost* his, defeated moreover by Hercules, the archetypal man of action [cf. Therion]

Furthermore, Espilus's song was a *loser's lament*—its final couplet clearly expresses that he has lost:

> This wofull I in woe this salve doe fynde
> my fowle my happe [mishap] came yet from fayrest mynde

At this point, the May Lady thanks the queen in a generic way, and the text ends there. In the Helmingham Hall manuscript, however, Rombus sticks around to provide an epilogue, but this is also generic with regard to the decision.

Clearly, Elizabeth's strange decision had thwarted the author's intended plot. As Stillman writes, "When Elizabeth awarded the May Lady to Espilus [...] she destroyed the work's unity, making nonsense out of its main concerns" [50, p. 37]. So why did she make this choice?

5 Layers of Intrigue

To more fully understand *The Lady of May*, and to appreciate the queen's peculiar decision, we must unravel the threads of political and romantic intrigue that would have weaved through its production at Wanstead in May of 1578. While earlier scholars proposed that the queen had misunderstood the production [36], or even that she had fallen asleep [23], more recent work has built up a much richer, multilayered account.[10]

Wanstead, as I noted above, was the estate of Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester—Elizabeth's lifelong love interest, and Sidney's uncle with whom he would scheme in writing his ill-advised letter to the queen the next year. Leicester had not remarried since the death of his first wife in a 1560 accident that some suspected him of designing. While he remained in contention for the queen's hand, by the mid-1570s he had fathered a son with a widow, Douglas Sheffield, and was rumored to be scandalously involved with a married woman, Lettice Knollys, the wife of the Earl of Essex [40,21]. In 1576, Essex died, and again Leicester was implicated in a death, though an official investigation vindicated him [14].[11] The widowed Knollys and Leicester were now free to marry, but Queen

[10] The idea that Elizabeth did not understand Sidney's design originates with Orgel [36], who was the first to notice the disconnect between her choice and the rest of the work. His argument is essentially that the queen had picked the shepherd because the work was a *pastoral*, and shepherds are the heroes of that mode. As Orgel himself notes, however, *The Lady of May* is clearly an anti-pastoral. Moreover, Berry argues compellingly that Sidney's production owes more to the *May game* than the pastoral, and in the May game the forester of the grove is hero [6]. My belief is that Elizabeth would have almost certainly apprehended Sidney's elevation of Therion, and this section operates under that belief.

[11] Curiously, this investigation was carried out by Leicester's brother in law, Sir Henry Sidney, father of Philip Sidney.

Elizabeth, always possessive of Leicester,[12] vehemently opposed the prospect [51]. Nonetheless, the two would secretly marry at Wanstead in September of 1578. This infuriated Elizabeth, who, upon discovering the marriage a year later, responded by (briefly) imprisoning Leicester and banishing his new wife from court [10,51]. While this would all transpire in just a few months, in the middle of May, 1578, both of Leicester's marriage prospects—Knollys, Elizabeth—were very much real and in play.

Many scholars have concluded that Therion, the forester whom Sidney's production clearly favors, was meant to stand for Leicester [24,46,38,4,47,6]. In one interpretation, promulgated by William Ringler, Therion manifests Leicester's stance on united Protestant activity against Spain, while Espilus represents the queen's dormant peace policies [45]. As Penny Pickett has shown, however, this reading is flawed in that Elizabeth did in fact actively support Protestant union in the years leading up to the production [38]. If this was Sidney's targeted interpretation, and if Elizabeth did apprehend it, then she did not find it necessary to choose the allegorical candidate that aligned with her actual policies.

A more personal (and more compelling) reading identifies Therion with Leicester the potential consort, and thus Espilus with a rival suitor: either Alençon, mentioned above, or Sir Christopher Hatton. Helen Cooper has even provided etymological evidence for the latter [9, p. 149]:

> The name *Θηριου*, 'wild beast', for the forester would match Leicester's badge of the bear and ragged staff; and he occasionally also used the oak, appropriate for the forester, as his symbol, from the similarity of *Robert* to *robur*. 'Espilus' is derived from *ειισ πιλοσ*, 'felt presser', a reasonable Greek approximation to 'hatter' and hence 'Hatton'

Thus, in this interpretation Leicester has schemed with his nephew to intervene in the romantic life of the queen, just as they would do again shortly in Sidney's letter of the following year. But, if Leicester was so enchanted by the widow Knollys, who he would marry just a few months later, then why would he commission this literary proposal to the queen? Axton argues that he in fact preferred Elizabeth, making *The Lady of May* a last-ditch effort to earn her hand [4]. Pickett suggests that he may have been unable to decide between the two women, so he let Elizabeth decide for him [38, p. 42–43]:

> Leicester, torn between his desire for Elizabeth and his passion for Lettice, threw up his decision to the unwitting choice of his unwary queen. With the confederacy of the young Philip, he hit on the device of a "masque" whose theme was a marriage that might not be read right. As she would certainly have disfavored him had she known of his secret passion for another woman, now he ran only the risk of her disfavoring

[12] For example: Leicester's vacation from court for a weeks in 1578 caused a minor panic, as Sir Christopher reported in a letter to him: "This court wanteth your presence. Her majesty is unaccompanied and, I assure you, the chambers are almost empty" [51, p. 230].

> him figuratively. If she chose Therion, all would be well and he would marry the queen; if she chose Espilus, he would be free at least to marry the widow.

It is also possible that he did in fact have a strong preference between the two, but conspired with Sidney to cleverly navigate the complicated situation. If it is Elizabeth whom he prefers, the production allows him to pursue her in a context with low stakes: it is a marriage proposal concealed in a game, and one that defers to the queen. If instead he prefers Lettice Knollys, the device is even more ingenious. By building up Therion (himself) as the obvious choice for the May Lady (Elizabeth), Leicester's desire to marry the queen is stated in deference, which alleviates the damage of his rumored interest in Knollys. Moreover, by offering the queen an alternative option whose selection would be a blatant affront of Leicester, especially when the production so clearly favors him, his marriage to the widow is potentially enabled: if the queen chooses Espilus, she publicly spurns Leicester, and brilliantly this affords a firm defense for his marrying of the widow. Indeed, the queen would choose Espilus and Leicester would marry Lettice Knollys just four months later.

In a final reading, brilliantly articulated by Berry, Sidney harnesses the revolutionary rhetoric of the May game to propose a reconfiguration of Elizabethan court life [6, p. 259]:

> To choose [Therion], moreover, would undermine the mystique upon which Elizabeth based her relationship with her courtiers. To choose as a May Queen would mean accepting not only a king, in itself undesirable to Elizabeth, but a May King—one who rages and beats his beloved, who steals venison from royal parks, who is unashamedly poor, and who prides himself on his independence. Such a choice would require abandoning the Petrarchan and pastoral mythology that governed the queen's relations with her court, the mythology of royal power that Espilus evokes in his description of the courtiers who turn shepherds only to sing endlessly of their royal mistress.

Further, by harnessing rhetoric that originates with the May game, and not with Sidney, his proposal is a safer one to make [6, p. 259]:

> The rhetorical strategy, setting, and form of *The Lady of May* thus go beyond the specific political and marital aims of Leicester to attempt a remaking of the metaphors for power at court. Sidney's challenge is subtle, ambiguous, and graceful enough to avoid outright offense; the license of the May game, after all, made possible the release of inhibitions and the reversal of customary roles.

Indeed, indirection was critical when advising Elizabeth—as Kimbrough and Murphy note, "no one ever addressed the Queen directly without endangering his standing, as Sidney was reminded the next year" [24, p. 106]. Finally, Berry agues that Therion, rather than embodying Leicester, can be viewed as Sidney's conscious modeling of himself [6, p. 260]:

> The rebelliousness seems as much expressive as rhetorical, as if Sidney were allowing himself the same kind of holiday release he celebrates in Therion, who mingles service with blows. From this perspective the entertainment becomes as much a psychological symptom—a projection of Sidney's own aggressive tendencies—as a conscious political stratagem. Such an interpretation becomes increasingly plausible if one examines the aggressive tendencies that link Sidney to Therion.

6 Ludonarrative Dissonance in the 16th Century

Now that I have established the multiple layers of intrigue that would have underpinned the production of *The Lady of May*, let us reconsider the queen's choice. In Ringler's reading, where Sidney's work is really about international policy, the queen's choice endorses the stance of peaceful compromise. As noted above, however, Pickett has shown that the queen's actual position in these matters was more interventionist [38]. In the more personal reading, where the May Lady's suitors stand for Elizabeth's prospective consorts, she spurns Leicester in favor of either Alençon or Hatton. Or perhaps she does not mean to endorse anyone—she would never marry, after all—but chooses Espilus solely as a function for rebuffing Leicester. As I noted above, in this reading the queen's choice may have actually been Leicester's desired one, since it could be viewed as freeing him of Elizabeth and thereby enabling him to marry the widow Lettice Knollys. It appears that we will never know for certain whether the queen's choice did in fact contribute to the two's decision to wed the following September, but we do know that Leicester still hid the marriage from the queen. Moreover, Elizabeth clearly did not view her choice as a gesture of permission: as mentioned above, upon discovering the marriage, she briefly imprisoned Leicester and permanently banished the new Lady Leicester from court.[13] Thus, even if Leicester did hope for Elizabeth to release him by choosing Espilus, the decision ultimately did little to attenuate the queen's wrath.

Perhaps the most compelling account of Elizabeth's choice emerges from Berry's reading of the work, where Therion embodies Sidney's revolutionary spirit. Writing after Berry, the scholar Alan Hager speculates [17, p. 23]:

> we should consider the possibility that Elizabeth intentionally chose the rich, unerratic shepherd to remind Sidney and the public of the importance of economic and social hierarchical relationships.

By this interpretation, Elizabeth diverts Sidney's favored path because it is meant to subvert the hierarchical structure that she sits atop. Moreover, and more personally, she may have chosen against Sidney to put him in his place.[14]

[13] In fact, Elizabeth may have seen her choice as a sort of punitive action—one that, to quote Pickett, "banished virility to the bed of another, mere, woman" [38, p. 43].

[14] This would not be the first or last time. As Pickett notes, Elizabeth periodically exiled Sidney from court for his writings and actions [38].

In explaining this angle, Hager references the tennis incident that I noted above (and recall also Sidney's aggressive letter to the queen) [17, p. 23]:

> We should remember that Elizabeth's main cause for anger with Sidney in the tennis court incident with Oxford was not its near violence, but Sidney's insufficient regard for his inferiority of rank. Recognition of social hierarchy was, naturally, of special importance to Elizabeth. Her own claims to highest rank in the kingdom were questioned on several scores and periodically challenged by plot and rebellion. And she was a woman, surrounded by impulsive gallants of the new and old aristocracy, [Sir Francis] Drake and Leicester, [Sir Walter] Ralegh and Essex. These men were not easy to rule.

Note that the interpreted rejections of Leicester and Sidney are not incompatible. As Robert Kimbrough and Philip Murphy have argued, she may have rebuked both men, simultaneously, with her indignant choice: "like Caesar, she knew what kind of men she wanted around" [24, p. 106].

Finally, I will offer a last interpretation of Queen Elizabeth's choice—one that relies on the concept of *ludonarrative dissonance*. First proposed by Clint Hocking [19,20], this notion characterizes works of interactive storytelling whose gameplay systems and narrative themes are incompatible. To illustrate, Hocking writes about the phenomenon as it manifests in *Bioshock* (2007) [19]:

> The game begins by offering the player two contracts. One is a ludic contract—literally 'seek power and you will progress'. This ludic contract is in line with the values underlying Randian rational self-interest. The rules of the game say 'it is best if I do what is best for me without consideration for others'. [...] The game's second contract is a narrative contract—'help Atlas and you will progress' [...] [But] this contract is not in line with the values underlying Randian rational self-interest

Let us consider *The Lady of May*'s ludic and narrative contracts. In its choice point, the very presence of which is the work's primary feature, we find Sidney's ludic contract: there is a dilemma that is fit for a queen—*only Elizabeth is qualified to arbitrate in this matter*. This is what the piece's mechanics express; otherwise, there would be no choice, as in every earlier known dramatic work. What, then, is Sidney's narrative contract? As every scholar since Orgel has shown, *The Lady of May*'s narrative elements work in concert to elevate Therion as the obvious candidate. While it is Espilus's proponent who interrupts to prematurely claim the shepherd's victory, the work itself does this with Therion: Sidney has already named the him more worthy by the time Elizabeth is called upon to make her decision. This neutralizes the choice point, which expresses that Elizabeth is not actually needed to arbitrate the matter. Thus, *The Lady of May*'s narrative contract contradicts its ludic one, thereby yielding ludonarrative dissonance. From this perspective, we can see the queen's choice in a new light: she chooses Espilus to honor Sidney's ludic contract. In this ludical interpretation, the queen reasserts the interactor agency that is inherent in the

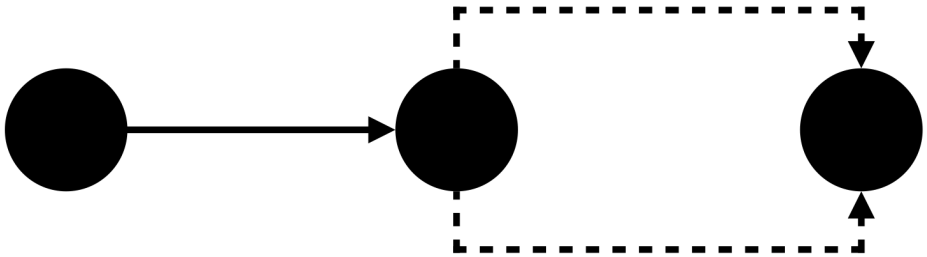

Fig. 3. This plot graph visualizes the pseudobranching structure of *The Lady of May*: the buildup of singing contest and debate (first node) leads into what is undeniably an interactor choice point (second node), but both decisions (dotted lines) lead to the same ending, Espilus's loser's lament (third node). Thus, the *foldback* authoring tactic is as old as interactive branching narrative itself.

choice point but has been neutralized by Sidney's narrative elements. That is, she makes the only choice that can actually be qualified as a choice, since the other path was preordained.

It is also possible that, more simply, Elizabeth chose Espilus to push at the boundaries of the piece, as a form of *counterplay* [2], like videogame players of today are wont to do. Or, to put it as my wife did after enduring all this conjecture, "Maybe she was just having fun?"

7 Convergence

While the piece certainly features an interactor choice point, it appears that Philip Sidney only authored one ending for *The Lady of May*. That is, Espilus would have sung his loser's lament in the event of either of Elizabeth's prospective decisions (see Fig. 3). As such, one could argue that it was not a true work of interactive branching narrative. While this is a somewhat compelling view, my feeling is that the defining characteristic of the form is the choice point, and thus the *implicitly* branching plot (regardless of whether authentic branching is actually present). Indeed, what we have witnessed here is simply the earliest known case of an authoring tactic that is ubiquitous, even necessary, in interactive branching narrative—*foldback*. Here is Chris Crawford's definition of the term, which is his coinage [11, p. 121–123]:

> Some clever people have tried to solve the geometric explosion problem of branching trees by rerouting the consequences of decisions so that they converge. [...] I call this stunt *foldback* because it simply folds the storyline back to some predetermined path. [...] Both choices ultimately lead to the same result. In other words, foldback merely tricks the user into thinking that he or she is making a choice. This is fraudulent interactivity; when users discover the fraud (as they inevitably do when they play the storyworld several times), they feel cheated.

While Elizabeth may have indeed felt cheated, her choice was not meaningless in the larger sense. As the preceding sections have shown, the queen's decision is meaningful enough to support interpretations of it that bear on various interpersonal and political contexts that would have been at play in that garden at Wanstead in May of 1578. The use of foldback here is rather extreme, however, since it causes the only two plot branches to converge onto a single ending. While foldback is typically used to combat the inherent combinatorial explosion of branching structures, as Crawford notes, Sidney was up against no such explosion here. Instead, it is likely that he simply did not expect Elizabeth to pick against the obvious choice—a case of *railroading* gone awry [28].[15]

Alternatively, one could instead argue that the queen's decision did in fact alter the course of the plot, regardless of the actual content of the ending. That is, foldback be damned: in crowning Espilus, Elizabeth crowned Espilus, and thereby the performance took the alternative path in which the shepherd has won the May Lady. Even though the victor curiously sings a loser's lament, he has in fact not lost, because that is what the queen decided. In this view, which I take, the work is an example of interactive branching narrative in every sense.

8 Princely Pleasures

I have told this story out of order. From my account of *The Lady of May*, it would appear that Philip Sidney invented the idea of interactive branching narrative more or less out of thin air. But, in all human design contexts, apparently spontaneous invention often turns out to be, upon further inspection, the culmination of an earlier sequence of incremental inventions [35,22]. The situation here is no different: the invention here of interactive branching narrative in a dramatic production was likely enabled by the earlier introduction of interactivity to that media context. Thus, in investigating Sidney's apparent invention of an interactive branching narrative, we would be wise to first look for any exposure he may have had to nontrivial interactivity in the dramatic medium. While it can be hard to trace the intellectual through lines that connect later inventions to their antecedents, in the case of Philip Sidney—and thus the earliest known case of interactive branching narrative being invented—we can do this quite easily.

As *The Lady of May* demonstrates, the Earl of Leicester had a flare for theatrics, but never was this more on display than in the summer of 1575. The scholar Bruce R. Smith writes [47, p. 57]:

> Among other things, she had tamed a Savage Man with her presence; she had freed the Lady of the Lake, imprisoned in the castle's waters since the days of King Arthur; and now, after nearly three weeks, Queen Elizabeth was leaving Kenilworth Castle and taking her summer progress elsewhere. She had given very short notice. To George Gascoigne came

[15] Alternatively, in the complex interpretation in which Sidney and his uncle have schemed to invite Elizabeth to spurn Leicester, thereby freeing him to marry the widow Knollys, foldback is used to accentuate the queen's rejection.

Fig. 4. Before inventing interactive branching narrative in 1578, Philip Sidney would have been exposed to interactive dramatic productions commissioned by his uncle as part of the legendary Kenilworth entertainments of 1575. As in all design contexts, further investigation often recasts one individual's apparently spontaneous invention as, more accurately, the result of a series of incremental innovations by multiple individuals. This painting, dated circa 1575 and attributed to Marcus Gheraerts the Elder, is titled *Queen Elizabeth and her court at Kenilworth Castle* (though the locale, artist, and date have been questioned by recent scholars [18]). Leicester and Sidney are seen flanking the queen on either side, near the right edge of the scene.

> the Earl of Leicester's command "to devise some Farewel worth the presenting." As the queen was riding over Kenilworth one last time, then, she turned to discover trotting along on foot behind her no less a personage than Sylvanus, god of the woods. Behind the disguise was Gascoigne himself, and as the queen rode along he spun a continuous thread of what he later claimed was extempore speechmaking. Taking up objects in the actual landscape—"this old Oke," "yonder Popler," "this Ashtree," "this bramble Bryer," "this braunch of Ivy," "yonder same *Lawrell* tree"—Sylvanus discovered beneath their leaves the trembling presences of metamorphosed lovers. Under Gascoigne's Midas touch the landscape of Kenilworth Castle became an enchanted landscape, alive with ideas, growing with human feeling.

The Kenilworth Castle was Leicester's home before he moved to Wanstead, where *The Lady of May* was staged, and this extended series of dramatic entertainments played out in and around his property, spontaneously and spectacularly, in what Smith calls a *country-house revel*. Luckily, this stunning example was recorded in a pamphlet of the following year, *The Princelye pleasures, at the Courte at Kenelwoorth*, whose text was reprinted in an 1821 volume [47].

Though especially magnificent, the Kenilworth entertainments of 1575 were not unprecedented, but rather part of a larger Elizabethan tradition that began with her accession to the throne in 1558 [52]. In the summers, Elizabeth would

leave stuffy London to embark on celebrated *progresses* through the kingdom countryside, taking stays along the way at the rural homes of her nobles [3]. For these hosts, there was unsurprisingly a monumental pressure to lavishly entertain her majesty, and, from a series of increasingly theatrical ceremonies of reception and feasting and gift offering, a full-fledged dramatic art emerged: "No formal occasion contains these devices: they spill over into days and weeks, interweaving golden threads of artifice into the green fabric of Elizabeth's entire stay at a country estate" [47, p. 61]. In this mode, Leicester was a master, and he reached perhaps his greatest heights with his Kenilworth shows of 1575, where a startling brand of reactive, situated drama was cleverly distributed across time and space [47, p. 61]:[16]

> Where could the queen be caught off guard? The plotters delight in catching her as she rides back from hunting or as she walks in the garden. Suddenly characters pop out of hedges and groves; music starts up from players hidden in the bushes. Surprise, spontaneity count for all. Elizabeth's impromptu response one day might become part of tomorrow's design.

This may sound something like interactive branching narrative, but it is more akin to the exception, given toward the beginning of this paper, of a work of improvisational theatre in which the course of the plot is altered according to audience interactions. That is exactly what this is, which means it is not interactive branching narrative for the reason that I gave for the hypothetical example above: while the piece is reacting to choices made by its interactor, the alternative possible plot paths never actually come to exist in the artifact. For a narrative to branch, there must be a fork in its plot progression, but in this case there was not. Yes, Elizabeth altered the course of the various performances, but not at the level of selecting between paths. As Berry notes, she did not have the plot control afforded to her in *The Lady of May* [6, p. 258]:

> In the country-house revels at Kenilworth and Woodstock [...] Elizabeth was carefully guided into situations that permitted only one response. When her virtues were celebrated, her actions were inevitable: she freed the Lady of the Lake at Kenilworth, restored the sight of a hermit at Woodstock. When advice was offered, as in the dramatized debate at Woodstock, she was the audience, not a judge.

The country-house revel has been discussed as a precursor to live-action role-playing [49], and it should be studied for its relation to happenings, immersive theatre, interactive storytelling, videogames, and more, but it is not interactive branching narrative. That being said, it is almost certain that the Kenilworth shows of 1575 lead directly to Sidney's invention of interactive branching narrative with *The Lady of May* in 1578.

[16] For a deep exploration of the function and importance of space in the Kenilworth shows (and other contemporaneous works), see Janette Dillon's mongraph [12].

Scholars have long placed Philip Sidney at his uncle's Kenilworth estate for the country-house revel of 1575 [8,52,33,6,7]. Here, the young creative would have been immersed, quite literally, in the idea of interactive performance.[17] Once interactivity has been introduced into a particular media context—or more precisely, *ergodicity*, to again use Aarseth's term for nontrivial interactivity [1]—the idea of interactive branching narrative tends to be just around the corner. Though Sidney's innovation was an incremental one, it is still a striking design achievement—one that clearly sets it apart from the country-house revels that would have influenced it. As Smith notes, "With his 'Lady of May' device Sidney is quite clearly pointing us in a new direction" [47, p. 76].

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[17] As Berry speculates, he may have even performed in a subsequent country-house revel of that formative summer, Woodstock [7].

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