
 WILLIAM BROWNE

1591–1643

Although he produced a great deal of poetry, most of it pastorals in the extended style of Spenser, William Browne (called “of Tavistock” in tribute to the tiny Devonshire village where he was born) wrote only six lines of permanently memorable verse. While in the service of the Earls of Pembroke, he had occasion to compose a tribute to one of the great ladies of the Elizabethan age, Mary, Countess of Pembroke, the sister of Sir Philip Sidney, who had suggested to her brother the composition of that *Arcadia* known ever since as “The Countess of Pembroke’s *Arcadia*.” She was the wife of Henry Herbert, the second Earl of Pembroke, and the mother of William Herbert, the third Earl; in addition, she was a distinguished patroness of the arts. She died in 1621, aged 60; and the famous epitaph, though it was not published till 1660, seems to have been written at or near the time of her demise. It has been denied to William Browne and assigned to Jonson because it is so good; but it exists in a manuscript collection of Browne’s poems, in his own hand, and cannot fairly be refused him. Even a mediocre poet is entitled to his one inspired moment.

On the Countess Dowager of Pembroke

Underneath this sable hearse
 Lies the subject of all verse:
 Sidney’s sister, Pembroke’s mother;
 Death, ere thou hast slain another,
 5 Fair, and learn’d, and good as she,
 Time shall throw a dart at thee.
 Marble piles let no man raise
 To her name for after days;
 Some kind woman born as she,
 10 Reading this, like Niobe¹
 Shall turn marble, and become
 Both her mourner and her tomb.

1660

ca. 1621

1. Niobe, whose twelve children were slain by Apollo and Artemis, was turned into a stone which continued to weep; she thus became an ideal subject for garden statuary and mortuary sculpture.