

“Constant Art”: Concept of Love in Poetry of Mary Wroth in Dialogue with the Male Poetic Tradition

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ABSTRACT

The paper intends to analyse development of the literary representation of women in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, forming an integral part of female authorship during this period, especially on the basis of Mary Wroth's poetry in the dialogue with the male poetic tradition (William Herbert, William Shakespeare). However, instead of taking aim at the male view, the genius of Wroth is to absorb it and use it for her own ends. Reclaiming the virtues of the woman through constancy, she upends the conventional views of the woman. Thus, Wroth strengthens the autonomy of the woman by allowing her to make the decision to accept a role subordinate to man.

KEYWORDS

Lady Mary Wroth; Literary Culture; Elizabethan Renaissance; Jacobean Court; William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke; Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare.

Introduction: “Indistinguished space of woman's will” as the important motif in Elizabethan culture

*I know thee well – a serviceable villain,
As duteous to the vices of thy mistress
As badness would desire. [...]
O indistinguished space of woman's will...¹*

In the fifth scene of the fourth act of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Edgar reads a letter written by Lear's daughter Goneril to his bastard brother Edmund. In it, she reveals her longing for Edmund, inciting him to kill her husband in order to win her heart and body and lay claim to her husband's title and property. Shocked by the discovery of her treachery, Edgar cries out, “*O indistinguished space of woman's will!*”² In Shakespeare's time, the word “distinguish” meant “to differentiate or to classify” and was synonymous with “faithfully acknowledging or recognizing something and giving reason... its due.”³ The meaning of “will” in a modern context is related to desire, longing, even lust. But traditionally, a woman's “will” was thought of as irrational, unpredictable, capricious, amoral. In Hilský's Czech translation of the play, “will” is compared to a bottomless ocean, a fitting metaphor given that the ocean itself is often characterised as indistinct, unfathomable, mutable, illogical and dangerous. I argue that this “indistinguished space” is one of the important motifs in Renaissance culture, which allows us to explore the restrictive gender roles during this time.⁴

1 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisamanmaus (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 2463.

2 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2463.

3 Corinne S. Abate and Elizabeth Mazzola, “Introduction: indistinguished place,” in *Privacy, Domesticity, and Women in Early Modern England*, ed. C. S. Abate (Routledge, 2003), 2.

4 Compare Abate and Mazzola, *Introduction*, 2.

It is worth delving into Edgar’s response more closely. Since Goneril, the eldest of Lear’s three daughters, shares with Edmund a Machiavellian craving for power and ambition, her attraction to him is understandable. But does Edgar’s use of the term “will” simply describe an extramarital forbidden desire or symbolise a cunning move in Goneril’s political game? Or does he equate “will” with lust as a way of rationalising the male fear of female behaviour, which represents for him an “indistinguished space”?

In the next section, we will focus on Mary Wroth’s concept of constant love, i.e. her answer to the male traditional interpretation of the woman in the terms of “indistinguished space”.

“Something more exactly related than a fiction...”: life and work of Lady Mary Wroth

*No time, no roome, no thought, or writing can
Give rest, or quiet to my loving heart,
Or can my memory, or Phant’sie scan,
The measure of my still renewing smart.*⁵

*No sighs, no tears, no blood but mine was shed
For her that now must bless another’s bed.*⁶

The literary representation of the “indistinguished space” was largely a male invention. This hegemony was shaken in 1621 with the publication of Lady Mary Wroth’s romance *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* and her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. The daughter of Robert Sidney and niece of Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, Wroth was the first English woman to compose a prose romance (*Urania*) and original dramatic comedy (*Love’s Victory*)⁷ and the second English woman to write a sonnet sequence (*Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*). Incidentally, her emergence as one of the first female writers in Britain comes later than that of her female counterparts in a European context. In the final poem of her collection *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Pamphilia, Wroth’s alter ego, rejects “*the discourse of Venus, and her sunn*”.⁸ I contend that this marks the point at which Wroth creates an alternative discourse of love based on a new erotic mythology in which the key element is Constancy.⁹ As Pamphilia herself remarks: “Now lett your constancy your honor prove.”¹⁰

5 Mary Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus by Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Gary F. Waller (Salzburg: Univ. Salzburg, 1977), 89.

6 William Herbert, *The Poems*, ed. R. Krueger (Bodleian Library. University of Oxford, 1961), 29. Accessed July 7, 2017 at <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:21334c91-6e00-4a19-a71c-83e80d752e83>.

7 Michael G. Brennan, Margaret P. Hannay and Mary Ellen Lamb, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to The Sidneys, 1500-1700. Volume 2: Literature* (Ashgate, 2015), 77.

8 Mary Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 142.

9 Compare Jane Kingsley-Smith, *Cupid in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 128.

10 Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 142.

Mary Wroth drew on her own life experience as inspiration for her literary characters. One such biographical example is Lindamira's sonnet sequence in *Urania*, which describes Lindamira's expulsion from court by the jealous queen because of her fondness for her lover. Forced to return to her jealous husband before winning her lover back for a time, she is left abandoned to bitter disappointment. Of course, Wroth's alter ego Pamphilia narrates the verses in keeping with the key theme in *Urania* of sharing stories and the company of women:

A surgeon I would ask, but 'tis too late,
To stay the bleeding wound of my hurt heart:
The root is touched, and the last drops depart
As weeping for succeeding other's fate.¹¹

In reciting the verses, Pamphilia recounts her own story through the voice of Lindamira. Confronted with struggles of coercion and consent, Pamphilia is bound to reveal the constancy of her love for her unfaithful lover Amphilanthus. And just as Lindamira is Pamphilia's conduit for the telling of her own story, Mary Wroth uses Pamphilia as her own mouthpiece. Drawing again from her own relationships, Amphilanthus, son of the Queen of Naples, was the literary shadow of her cousin and lover, William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, Pamphilia's father, King of Morea, mirrored Wroth's own father, Robert Sidney, while the role of Pamphilia's uncle was fashioned on the author's real-life uncle Philip Sidney, the celebrated poet.¹²

Mary Wroth, the eldest daughter of Sir Robert Sidney and Lady Barbara Gamage, was born under the name Mary Sidney in 1587. She spent her childhood and adolescence at the family's home in Penshurst as well as at Wilton House and Baynard's Castle, the residences of her aunt, the prominent writer and patron Mary Sidney Herbert. There she became ensconced in the literary circle of her aunt and grew close to her cousins Philip and William, eventually entering into a relationship with the latter.¹³

In September 1604, at the age of seventeen, she married Sir Robert Wroth. However, as early as one month after the wedding, her husband wrote of his displeasure at his wife's behaviour in a letter to Robert Sidney. The discord was probably the result of complications concerning the payment of Mary's dowry and their different personalities. While Robert was an enthusiastic huntsman in accordance with his function at King James's court, Mary devoted herself to literary endeavours and dancing, performing alongside Queen Anne and other ladies in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* in 1605. Indeed, Jonson proved to be another of Mary's admirers, dedicating his comedy *The Alchemist* to her and extolling her virtues in two epigrams and a sonnet. One month before Robert's death, their son James was born and, given Robert's testament expressing their mutual marital loyalty and respect, matters between them seemed to have been largely resolved. However, following her husband's death, Wroth was saddled with substantial debts (even worse

11 Mary Wroth, "The Countess of Montgomery's Urania," in *Mary Wroth. The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, ed. Mary Ellen Lamb (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 164.

12 Compare Gavin Alexander, *Writing after Sidney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 285.

13 Mary Ellen Lamb, "Introduction," in *Selected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert Countess of Pembroke*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon and Michael G. Brennan (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 10.

after the death of their son), which proved so burdensome that she was compelled to ask for the king's protection against her creditors.¹⁴

Wroth's most important works, written between the years 1616 and 1620, coincided with her relationship with William Herbert. Their affair became something of a well-known secret and the birth of their two children William and Catherine (thought to have been twins) in 1624 bore evidence of its erotic realisation. As it turns out, William's affair with Mary was not his first, as some years before he had claimed responsibility for fathering the illegitimate child of Mary Fitton, one of the queen's ladies, eventually refusing to marry her. Subsequently, in 1604, he married Mary Talbot, the daughter of the wealthy Earl of Shrewsbury. However, the marriage was not a happy one, with their only son dying in 1620 at the age of just three months. Herbert's liking for clever and educated women also extended to Lucy Harington, the Countess of Bedford and Christina Cavendish, the Duchess of Devonshire.¹⁵

“The Constant Art”: constancy as the main motif in Wroth's work

*Yet is there hope, then Love but play thy part,
Remember well thy selfe, and thinke on me;
Shine in those eyes which conquer'd have my heart,
And see if mine, be slacke to answer thee.*¹⁶

Wroth was the author of three major works in different genres: the prose romance *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, the collection of poems *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and the pastoral comedy *Love's Victory*. The first part of *Urania* was published in 1621 along with her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, which appears in a separately numbered section at the end. An early autographed version of the poems can be viewed at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington.¹⁷ *Love's Victory* was probably written for Wroth's family and friends and intended to be performed among them, and contains many allusions to two generations of the Sidney family. It exists in two significantly different manuscripts (the Huntington MS and the Penshurst MS) but was not printed until the twentieth century.¹⁸ The first volume of *Urania* created such a scandal at court that it put paid to any thoughts of publishing a second instalment; it is evident that *Urania 1* was to be continued as it ends with the word “and”. In any case, *Urania 2* (the Newberry Case MS) did survive, but remained virtually unread until its printing in 1999.¹⁹

The central theme that runs throughout these works is constancy; of love, deception and betrayal. Many of Wroth's poems evoke the vulnerability of the role the woman played at court. Her depiction of love is negatively associated with deception and perceived as something that is restrictive, even unsafe. While man emerges as seemingly autonomous and independent, the lot of the woman's

14 Lamb, *Introduction*.

15 Lamb, *Introduction*, 10–11.

16 Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* by Lady Mary Wroth, 25.

17 Brennan, Hannay and Lamb, *The Ashgate Research Companion to The Sidneys, 1500–1700. Volume 2: Literature*, 77–8.

18 Brennan, Hannay and Lamb, *The Ashgate Research Companion to The Sidneys, 1500–1700. Volume 2: Literature*, 80–81.

19 Brennan, Hannay and Lamb, *The Ashgate Research Companion to The Sidneys, 1500–1700. Volume 2: Literature*, 83.

life is to be kept waiting in passive helplessness. For example, Amphilanthus is free to experience ceaseless adventures and countless lovers, consigning Pamphilia to abandonment. Her fate is to remain in a state of constant insecurity, and all on account of her loyalty to her beloved.²⁰ However, this conventional interpretation barely scratches the surface of Wroth's real preoccupations. In the next section, I will interpret Wroth's work in terms of the "indistinguished place" and show how she subverted traditional gender roles to reveal the autonomy of one woman's self-fashioning and authorship. As a leading example, I have chosen one of the poems from *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*:

Yet is there hope, then Love but play thy part,
Remember well thy selfe, and thinke on me;
Shine in those eyes which conquer'd have my heart,
And see if mine, be slacke to answer thee.

Lodge in that breast, and pittie mooving see,
For flames which in mine burne in truest smart,
Excelling thoughts, that touch Inconstancy,
Or those which waste not in the Constant Art.

With but my sleepe, if I take any rest,
For thought of you my spirit so distrest,
As pale and famish'd, I for mercy cry.

Will you your servant leave? thinke but on this,
Who weares Love's Crowne, must not doe so amisse
But take their good, who on thy force doe lye.²¹

The relationship between Pamphilia and Amphilanthus in *Urania*, which is perhaps lent an impression of authenticity due to the autobiographical nature of the characters, is so compelling because it is viewed from the perspective of the female protagonist. The title itself is testament to the autonomy of the narrator, as it is an address by Pamphilia to Amphilanthus. Although Wroth uses a Petrarchan model and other classical patterns, the speaker is a singularly female voice.

The poem quoted above contains three of Wroth's most typical motifs: hope, the constancy of love and subordination. In her exploration of the constancy of love, the author turns the conventional understanding of women's subservience to men on its head. The woman may be subject to the caprice and will of the man, but ultimately it is *she* who decides to love and, through her choice, is released from the passive role of the victim. This makes her capable of reclaiming her dignity when confronted with infidelity and deception. Wroth also draws a comparison between woman's dependence on man and the subject's reliance on the king. Through this metaphor, she reveals that the woman's reliance on man is essentially a natural relation that is profitable for both sides. A good lover is seen as a good ruler, one that takes care of those who depend on him. Similarly,

20 Gary F. Waller, "Introduction," in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus by Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Gary F. Waller (Salzburg: Univ. Salzburg, 1977), 16–17.

21 Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, 25.

the woman gives her affection not as a consequence of her subordination, but on the basis of her own free choice to love and in acceptance of her natural association with man.²²

In *Urania*, the metaphor of “love’s crown” is similar to the longed for “throne of love”. The bad lover is likened to a tyrant and his love to slavery. In the stanzas that follow here, the false deceptive hope that this generates is met head on by the genuine, constancy of love:

False Hope which feeds but to destroy and spill
What it first breeds, unnaturall to the birth
Of thine owne wombe; conceiving but to kill
And plenty quies to make the greater dearth.

So Tyrants doe, who falsly ruling Earth,
Outwardly grace them, and with profits fill,
Aduance those who appointed are to death;
To make their greater fall to please their will.

Thus shadow they their wicked vile intent,
Colouring evill with a show of good:
While in faire shows their malice so is spent;
Hope kills the heart, and Tyrants shed the blood.

For Hope deluding brings us to the pride
Of our desires the farther downe to slide.”²³

In framing the woman’s love as constant, Wroth picks apart the conventional understanding of the woman as an unwise, unfaithful creature driven by lust. In contrast to the “bottomless ocean”, the author presents the constancy and calmness of the woman, not in any wooden or schematic way, but as a character all the more authentic for remaining steadfast and withholding the desire for erotic fulfilment. Wroth’s response to man’s black-and-white understanding of the woman as either virtuous and virginal or lustful and deceitful, is to empower the woman with rational will. In this way, Wroth creates a worldly heroine that accepts desire as a natural part of love; not as something to be feared, but as a steadying, calming force.

In contrast, the man is portrayed as deceitful, volatile and inconsistent, the very attributes that are usually assigned to his female counterpart:

Hee vows nothing but false matter,
And to couzen you hee’l flatter:
Let him gain the hand, hee’l leave you,
And still glory to deceive you.

Hee will triumph in your wailing
And yet cause be of your failing:
These his vertues are, and slighter

22 A similar interpretation of this relation between man and woman can be found in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*.

23 Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, 49.

Are his guifts; his favours lighter.²⁴

At the same time, it would be wrong to view Wroth's work as foregrounding an isolated voice. It is more apt to look at her work as forming a dialogue with the male poetic tradition, as exemplified by William Herbert and William Shakespeare. And although she borrows other poetic patterns, especially from her father Robert and uncle Philip, her thematic preoccupations are very much her own. Although her uncle Sidney used irony as a way of representing the female as an inaccessible, even passive object, his verse was by and large confined to the limits of Petrarchan convention. But for Wroth's Pamphilia, constancy is not borne of remaining passive and unerringly chaste, but is rather derived from the struggle with subsuming an imperishable sexual longing, which is made all the more difficult given that her beloved is both absent and out of reach. Indeed, this confession of sexual jealousy undermines her stronger will for transcendent love.²⁵

The poetry of William Herbert is a remarkable source for interpreting Wroth, not least because of their personal relationship. Many of his poems form an explicit response to Wroth's view of constancy and her rallying against the falsehoods of men. It is reasonable to assume Wroth was also familiar with Shakespeare's sonnets, which were published only twelve years before *Pamphilia*. Iona Bell observes that "[l]ike Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* began as manuscript poetry, written for a private lyric audience. The printed text contains only the barest traces of this earlier, private lovers' dialogue, just enough to tease and frustrate, to hide and conceal, and to mystify what we yearn to uncover."²⁶ This tension is clearly on display in Herbert's own verse:

Can you suspect a change in me
 And value your own constancy?
 O no! You found that doubt in your own heart,
 Where Love his images but kissed,
 Not graved, fearing that dainty flesh would smart
 And so his painful sculpture would resist,
 But wrought in mine without remorse,
 Till he of it thy perfect statue made
 As full of sweetness as of force.
 Only unkindness may the work invade,
 And so it may defaced remain
 But never can another form retain.²⁷

Rather than denying his lover's accusations, however, Herbert calls into question her own supposed virtue in what one might call a case of the pot calling the kettle black. He lays the blame squarely at her door, arguing that it is rather a fiction of her own mind, invented as a way of dealing with the pain and fear of having her love rejected. Having carved a statue of their love, the implication

24 Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, 71.

25 Gayle Gaskill, "Mary Wroth and William Shakespeare: A Conversation in Sonnets," in *Mary Wroth and Shakespeare*, ed. Paul Salzman and Marion Wynne-Davies (New York – London: Routledge, 2015), 48.

26 Iona Bell, "Sugared Sonnets Among Their Private Friends. Mary Wroth and Shakespeare," in *Mary Wroth and Shakespeare*, ed. Paul Salzman and Marion Wynne-Davies (New York – London: Routledge, 2015), 9.

27 Herbert, *The Poems*, 23.

made here is that she is determined on destroying it with her suspicion (far be it from Herbert to bear any responsibility). The tone of address is remarkable, in fact, since he was by all accounts the one far more liable to have cheated and betrayed their love. Indeed, the vehemence with which he conducts his defence accentuates his own fears and doubts all the more.

Lindamira's stanzas in *Urania* take up the gauntlet:

But doubt myself lest I less worthy am,
Or that it was but flashes, no true flame,
Dazzled my eyes, and so my humor fed.

If this be jealousy, then do I yield,
And do confess I thus go armed to field,
For by such jealousy my love is led.²⁸

Clearly, the way toward constancy is won not without struggle. The contention is based on the assumption that a lover may only mount the “throne of love” upon rejecting both the “tower of desire” and the “tower of love” from which false lovers fall and false passions die. Only a lover of sufficient will is able to scale the “tower of constancy”. Notably, it is only women that ultimately enter this last tower (the men grow too distracted by drinking the magical water).²⁹ However, all is not plain sailing, as constant love must then fight against the “enchanted theatre” and the “hell of deceit”.³⁰

As Herbert would have it, the quest for constancy is predicated on foregoing jealousy:

Canst thou love me and yet doubt
So much falsehood in my heart
That a way I should find out
To impart
Fragments of a broken love to you,
More than all being less than due?
O no! Love must clear distrust
Or be eaten with that rust:
Short love liking may find jars
The love that's lasting knows no wars.³¹

Stylistic and thematic parallels with Shakespeare's well-known Sonnet 116 are obvious. How much Herbert was conscious of the similarity, however, can only be speculated, other than to say that Herbert knew Shakespeare well.³²

28 Wroth, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, 165–166.

29 Wroth, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, 26–27.

30 Wroth, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*.

31 Herbert, *The Poems*, 25.

32 Some authors have raised the possibility of a romantic triangle between Shakespeare, Herbert and Wroth. Compare Penny McCarthy, “Autumn 1604: Documentation and Literary Coincidence,” in *Mary Wroth and Shakespeare*, ed. Paul Salzman and Marion Wynne-Davies (New York – London: Routledge, 2015), 37–46. I do not agree with the speculation that Herbert was the “W.H.”, the “begetter” of Shakespeare's sonnets; I rather find Henry Wriothesley, Earl

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments. Love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,
 Or bends with the remover to remove.³³

For Herbert and Shakespeare, the question of the absence or presence of a beloved object and the preoccupation with fidelity and infidelity are actually irrelevant. The “*marriage of true minds*” has nothing to do with marital union. Rather, it perpetuates a view of constant love that is accepting of change and that responds to inconstancy. But unlike Wroth, for Herbert and Shakespeare, the idea of remaining faithful is not the be all and end all. Love is not pre-conditioned on the qualities of being sincere or faithful, but is rather based on a couple’s mutual understanding that love be retained even in spite of deceit. The presumption of doubt is in variably a reflection of uncertainty in the lover’s own mind. In this conception, love becomes a mutually accepted illusion, a requirement in order for love to endure.

Wroth responds to this acceptance by offering an apologia for constancy. Shakespeare, Herbert and even Philip Sidney admitted the idea of reason being a necessary part of being able to love, but were also keenly aware that it was fundamentally contradictory. To a considerable extent, succumbing to love is an act that makes man vulnerable and that exposes himself to the danger of letting himself go. Upon entering into the pact of love, as it were, insecurity suddenly becomes a critical element of that agreement. The differentiation between lust and love also becomes blurred, whereby the admission of lust as an essential component of a loving relationship means putting oneself at risk of overstepping the thin boundary between reason and madness. *Sonnet 129* describes this inherent danger:

Thèxpense of spirit in a waste of shame
 Is lust in action; and till action, lust
 Is perjured, murd’rous, bloody, full of blame,
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
 Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight,
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had
 Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
 Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
 A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
 Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
 All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.³⁴

of Southampton, a more convincing candidate. Nonetheless, Herbert was the patron of Shakespeare’s theatre company as well as his sponsor, so he knew Shakespeare’s works well.

33 Shakespeare, William. “The Sonnets,” in William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisamanmaus (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 1985.

34 Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, 1990.

Here, reason is rendered incompatible with lust, while anticipation of joy is revealed to be a mere deception. Faced with this dilemma, Wroth proposes that lust, or even better, “desire”, be embraced through constancy, calmness and stability. Reason becomes a force that guides love, making love a part of reason:

Love, and Reason once att warr
Jove came downe to end the jarr;
Cupid said love must have place
Reason that itt was his grace.

Jove then brought itt to this end:
Reason should on love attend
Love takes reason for his guid
Reason can nott from live slide.

This agreed, they pleasd did part
Reason ruling Cupids dart
Soe as sure love can nott miss
Since that reason ruler is.³⁵

The last two lines of the third stanza suggest that love can only be secured once it embraces reason.

Conclusion: “This testament of me”

*...Keepe in thy skin this testament of me:
Which Love ingraven hath with miserie,
Cutting with grieffe the unresisting part,
Which would with pleasure soone have learnd loves art
But wounds still cureless, must my rulers be...³⁶*

Based on the imaginary dialogue between Herbert and Wroth, Wroth’s identification with the constancy of love emerges. It is difficult to assess to what degree their poetry can be seen as forming mutual responses to each other, but it is possible to assume a strong biographical basis given that both authors pick up and riff on the themes of the other, as the following verses of Herbert attest:

Dear, leave thy home and come with me
That scorn the world for love of thee;
Here we will live within this park,
A court of joy and pleasure’s ark.

Here we will hunt, here we will range,
Constant in love, our sports we’ll change;

35 Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 212–213.

36 Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 149–150.

Of hearts if any change we make,
I will have thine, thou mine shalt take.³⁷

Why else would Herbert so obsessively dwell on the topic of constancy were it not for the influence of Wroth? The tone of the following sonnet in *Urania* echoes in response:

When I unconstant am to thee
Or faulse doe ever prove,
Lett hapines bee banisht mee
Nor have least taste of love;
Butt this alas too soone criede she
Is by thee forgott
My hopes, and joys now murderd bee,
And faulshood is my lott.³⁸

In the second volume of *Urania*, Pamphilia and her lady friends discuss whether Amphilanthus is capable of fidelity, fuelled perhaps by Pamphilia's discovery of a song Amphilanthus composed for the rival to her love, Antissia. In fact, the author of these verses is believed to have been Herbert himself.³⁹ Thus, the impression given is quite the opposite to the image of Amphilanthus painted by Wroth. It is almost as if Amphilanthus-Herbert mimics Pamphilia's own voice in order to emphasise his own constancy and forbearance despite the difficulty.

Grieving also becomes a necessary part of the cycle of distrust in *Urania*. Indeed in Wroth's work in general, sharing in grief is the means by which her female characters connect. These discussions tend to revolve around the distant lover, the decision to grieve and the difficulties in remaining constant. The act of writing itself and the reciting of poetry also become important in making these thoughts and feelings bearable.

Carving her words on the trunk of a tree, Pamphilia expresses her longing for Amphilanthus:

Beare part with me most straight and pleasant Tree,
And imitate the Torments of my smart
Which cruell Love doth send into my heart,
Keepe in thy skin this testament of me:

Which Love ingraven hath with miserie,
Cutting with grieffe the unresisting part,
Which would with pleasure soone have learnd loves art
But wounds still cureless, must my rulers bee.⁴⁰

In an act of therapy, Pamphilia asks the tree to bear part of her grief. Engraving the marks of her torment visibly on its trunk, or "skin", the tree becomes a natural conduit in the sharing of her story. The carved words bring the natural world and Pamphilia closer together, both absorbed in

37 Herbert, *The Poems*, 32.

38 Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 187.

39 Wroth, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, 188–189. Compare also Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 217–218.

40 Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 149.

collective grief. The verses on the trunk also have the effect of offsetting the pain with which love has carved its pain on her own heart.

The “indistinguished space” helps to develop the literary representation of women in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, forming an integral part of female authorship during this period. However, instead of taking aim at the male poetic tradition, the genius of Wroth is to absorb it and use it for her own ends. Reclaiming the virtues of the woman through constancy, she upends the conventional views of the woman. Thus, Wroth strengthens the autonomy of the woman by allowing her to make the decision to accept a role subordinate to man.

Wroth’s narrative foregrounds the constancy of love as personified in the character of Pamphilia. “This testament of me”, as Pamphilia puts it, becomes a story of her own journey of finding solace through consolation, sharing and communication with other women, an act of self-fashioning that reasserts female power through the fulfilment of both real and fictional destinies.

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