

Questioning Men's Love in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil  
and Stella* and Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to  
Amphilanthus*\*

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It is something of a cliché that the interest of the sonnet sequence form in early modern England lay primarily in the interrogation of the concept of love. Indeed, the achievement of the English sonnet sequences of the period may have been their construction, examination, and redefinition of the nature of love, a process which makes the sonnet sequences discussed here particularly

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fascinating. The current article focuses primarily on Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (c. 1591) and Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621); representing the best-known and the last such poetic enterprises in early modern England—the former by a man, the latter by a woman—both sequences are united by their similar portrayal of male inconstancy, self-indulgence, and even deviousness and sexualized aggression. In the process, this article will contribute to ongoing work in the areas of gender studies and early modern English poetry, not only with respect to Wroth's poetry, but also by identifying in Sidney a quasi-feminine—if not, indeed, proto-feminist—sensitivity, a response contrary, yet, I would contend, linked, to that of misogyny, both elicited by the extraordinary circumstances of a female-centered court in what one critic has labeled a “nation of men” (Levin 89). In these circumstances, courtiers like Sidney were not only peculiarly feminized, or emasculated, but also were in a position in which—to use a modern formulation—they may have deemed it desirable, or profitable, to *be in touch with their feminine side*.

Sidney and Wroth—the former writing shortly before Shakespeare, the latter publishing her work in the same years in which Shakespeare's posthumous fame was assured through the compilation and publication of the Folio edition of his works—both painted a wry, scathing portrait of male heterosexual love, and therefore present significant continuities. There were, of course, some differences, since *Astrophil and Stella*, written in the voice of a male hero-narrator, is necessarily implicit in its critique of the deviousness, materialism, and self-centeredness it exposes—in contrast to the explicit critique of Amphilanthus, and, hence, of the love of men, voiced by Wroth's female narrator. The points of convergence where the treatment of male fickleness, self-centeredness and deviousness are concerned, however, warrant comparison of these two sequences. It is, therefore, this particular aspect of these sonnet

sequences that we shall now examine.

In *Astrophil and Stella*, the sequence largely responsible for the sonnet vogue in Tudor-Stuart England, Astrophil's quest as poet-lover is one of self-discovery—not so much that he matures, as that he discovers, or reveals, himself to the reader. There is, indeed, a lot to be said for Thomas P. Roche's argument that Astrophil “teaches morality by negative example” (Roche 188); much of what the reader learns from the unconscious Astrophil concerns human weakness, and, specifically, the power of passion over reason.

In Sonnet 10, for instance, Astrophil contrasts reason and “sense” (i.e., emotion; passion); however, he does this not for moralistic reasons but in order to define himself as a devotee of love, one of “sense's objects” (10.7). As such, he urges reason to “leave Love to Will” (that is, desire); with labyrinthine logic, he reasons that reason itself would fall under the spell of his mistress's beauty and would immediately seek “to prove, / By reason good, good reason her to love” (10.13-14). Sidney's technical skill as a poet should not obscure the irony attached to the figure of the amoral Astrophil. Similarly, in Sonnet 20, while the figure of Cupid awaiting in ambush, and love's dart shot from the beloved's “heavenly eye” (20.7), may be conventional—if inventive—the dramatic bombast of the sonnet's opening, “Fly, fly, my friends, I have my death wound, fly!” (20.1), far from inviting the reader to be receptive to the tradition of courtly love, is farcical; so, too, the figure of Cupid, “that murth'ring boy” (20.2):

Who, like a thief, hid in a dark bush doth lie  
Till bloody bullet get him wrongful prey. (20.3-4)

Behold: Cupid with a matchlock! There is little doubt that Sidney's

treatment of the tradition of courtly love—and of his poet-lover—is ironic. Moreover, the irony, manifested here in comic form, pervades the sequence at a larger, dramatic level in the figure of Astrophil; the result is an often unpleasant sense of objective instability.

In these terms, Sonnet 45 raises questions about the status of art, the construction of the lover-poet relationship in the sequence, and about the figure of Astrophil as an ironically-compromised narrator:

Stella oft sees the very face of woe  
*Painted* in my beclouded stormy face,  
 But cannot *skill* to pity my disgrace,  
 Nor though thereof the cause herself she *know*. (45.1-4; my emphases)

The implications of Astrophil's figuratively painted woe are of artifice and insincerity. Sidney gives Astrophil loaded words; his use of the word “skill”—which, like “art,” carries connotations of artfulness, or deception—implies the *sexual* sophistication that this ostensible courtly lover desires to find in his chaste mistress.

When Stella's pity is inspired by the “grievous” tale of love (45.5-7), Astrophil, who marvels that “fancy drawn by imag'd things” should inspire pity (45.9) aspires to such—fictional, or fabricated—textuality. The irony is that, in so doing, Astrophil debases, yet further, his tenuous claim to truth:

Then think my dear, that you in me do read  
 Of lovers' ruin, some sad tragedy. (45.12-13)

Faced with this sort of sophistry, one is reminded of *Hero and Leander* (c. 1593), by Sidney's contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, whose heroine, the

priestess Hero, responds sharply to her suitor's artfully seductive pleading: "Who taught thee rhetoric to deceive a maid?" (l. 338).

In contrast to his initial claim to sincere feelings—the love-sickness of which Stella is said to "know" herself "the cause" (45.4)—Astrophil now abandons his claim to sincerity through a kind of self-denial, whereby our narrator-hero symbolically puts desire above integrity. Also interesting, in view of his earlier desire that Stella would "skill to pity" his "disgrace" (45.3), there is a very likely sexual pun, involving the words "tale" and "tail" (a slang for the penis): "I am not I; pity the tale of me" (45.14)—part of a pattern of ironically loaded language which exposes "the material, at times grossly physical, quality of his desire for Stella" (Roche 200). This is more than a simple example of Astrophil aspiring to textual subjectivity, whereby, in Anne Ferry's formulation: "Astrophil borrows what in 36 he calls 'all sweet stratagems sweet Art can showe' to turn himself into a tragic 'tale' that Stella may pity him" (Ferry 24). In fact, the significance of Astrophil's suggestively phallic language; it is either deliberately sexual—the product of a self-consciously impudent poet-hero—or, else, it is an example of dramatic irony, exercised by Sidney at the expense of his hero—what we would think of as a Freudian slip, which reveals Astrophil's true, underlying sensuality.

Sonnet 62, which shows us an ironically-qualified Astrophil in the act of passing judgment on Stella's love, contributes to Astrophil's construction as a sexually materialistic figure. Reproaching Stella for not pitying him, he says that:

She in whose eyes love, though unfelt, doth shine,  
Sweet said, that I true love in her should find. (62.3-4)

What Stella calls “a love not blind” (62.6), which compels her to take into account Astrophil's interests and responsibilities, Astrophil likens to his “wine” being “water'd” (62.5)—a metaphor which is, itself, suggestive of his sensual appetites.

Further suggesting his materialistic conception of love, Astrophil perceives Stella's discourse of virtue as an undesirable “metal” used in love's new coinage (62.12-13), the pun on “mettle” further suggesting the sensual, ardent nature of Astrophil's desires. Lastly, the closing line—epigrammatic, appropriately enough for a pragmatic wooer—confirms this: “Dear, love me not, that ye may love me more” (62.14).

Roche describes Stella's love for the poet-hero as “one of Sidney's most brilliant strokes,” a detail which “removes Stella immediately from the category of proud and aloof sonnet lady”; in addition, being unattainable, nevertheless, due to her being already married, she displays “the proper discipline of the passion of desire by reason” which Astrophil should emulate (Roche 216). In turn, Astrophil's incapacity to appreciate his mistress's spiritual love turns *him* into an object of interest, while, at the same time, the model of love embodied by Stella is affirmed as the textual point of view. Indeed, what follows raises serious doubts about the possibility of a love that is both sensual and unselfish, and it casts Astrophil in the unattractive role of a rhetorically-delusive, and sexually-rapacious, anti-hero.

In Song II, finding Stella asleep, Astrophil reveals an egotistic resentment toward her that raises doubts about the affection, or even respect, that he claims to feel towards her elsewhere:

Now will I teach her that she,  
When she wakes, is too too cruel. (II. 3-4)

More demeaning still, he reduces Stella—the woman he claims to love—to “Her tongue” which “waking, still refuseth” (II.9). Astrophil proceeds to fantasize about his chance to “invade the fort” (II.15), a euphemism for sexual assault, and—too morally blind to see the irony—he sententiously gives himself courage by saying: “Cowards love with loss rewardeth” (II.16); he fails to realize, of course, that such audaciousness, rather than restraint, is, in fact, what defines a coward, actions for which Love will punish *the transgressor*. Thus, when Astrophil's kiss awakens an angry mistress—such anger, Sidney is telling us, is Love's reward for cowards—Astrophil, quick to “flee,” curses himself “for no more taking” (II.27-28), a remark which further highlights his furtive, rapacious mentality.

Song X is Astrophil's fantasy in anticipation of seeing Stella after some time apart. While Roche suggests that this “deliberate sexual fantasy” is intended “to persuade the absent Stella” (Roche 218), I would suggest, alternatively, that its function is primarily as a dramatic *soliloquy*—a very explicit and disturbing one, particularly when read, as it will be here, in conjunction with Sonnet 93, which follows. Firstly, there is an example of imaginary voyeurism, as Astrophil instructs “Thought” to go before him, where:

unseen, thou mayst be bold  
Those fair wonders to behold  
Which in them my hopes do carry. (X.16-18)

Secondly, Astrophil's fantasy takes on more aggressive qualities similar to his earlier desire, in Song II, to “invade the fort” (II.15):

Thought, see thou no place forbear,  
 Enter bravely everywhere;  
 Seize on all to her belonging. (X.19-21)

Self-indulgent by nature, Astrophil's focus on sensual, physical love is manifested in this desire to "seize" Stella's sexual *possessions*. In these terms, the climax in the sixth stanza seems to be at first a passionate encounter hyperbolically envisaged by a sexual *gourmand*, if not, indeed, a veritable glutton:

Think of my most princely power  
 When I blessed shall devour  
 With my greedy licorous [i.e., "lecherous"] senses  
 Beauty, music, sweetness, love. (X.31-4)

More than a simple sexual fantasy, Astrophil's strong intentions are revealed, as he says that he "*shall devour*" (X.32; my emphasis). However, what makes it particularly disturbing is that the stanza ends with the suggestion of what modern readers will recognize as the deplorable phenomenon of *date-rape*:

While she doth against me prove  
 Her strong darts and weak defenses. (X.35-36)

Astrophil envisages nothing less than rape; Stella, doomed to be overcome, struggles against him, and resorts to scratching him with her nails (her "strong darts"). Sonnet 93 strengthens this impression, dealing as it does with what Astrophil calls "fate . . . fault . . . curse . . . child of my bliss!" (93.1). Anne Ferry is right to note that "Stella is 'vexed' because Astrophil has somehow



'harmed' her, caused 'hurts' to her heart"; Ferry stresses that "the reader is helpless to identify Astrophil's stumbling, or confusion, or care, because familiarity with sixteenth-century love poetry provides no associations to fill out the meaning of the phrasing" (24). Indeed, it is precisely my point here that the reader is confronted with a scenario for which there is no correlation in the poetry of the period—except, that is, for one of the best-known long poems of the period, Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). To return to Sidney's sequence, in Song X, Astrophil negotiates his sense of guilt, as well as Stella's grief and anger:

What ink is black enough to paint my woe?  
Through me (wretch me) even Stella vexed is. (X.3-4)

Astrophil's plea is that his "foul stumbling" (93.6) did not result from "carelessness" (93.7)—that is, literally, from lack of caring—but from "wit confus'd" with worries (93.8). In a volta, followed by an expression of remorse, Astrophil admits that it is a "vain 'scuse," and he has "harmed" Stella (93.9-10). However, while, at first, Astrophil's remorse seems sincere, given the apparent relief he finds in pain and self-condemnation (93.11-12), he, then, seems too satisfied with his penance, content that his pain equals that of Stella. As such, he consequently appears to be pretending, perhaps in love with his own rhetorical display of sensibility:

Only with pains my pains thus eased be,  
That all thy hurts in my heart's wrack I read  
I cry thy sighs my sighs my dear, thy tears I bleed. (X.12-14)

Astrophil's development as a dramatic figure contributes to a subversion of whatever claim to objectivity he may have enjoyed as a poetic persona. The rest of the sequence deals with Stella's illness, Astrophil's feelings in response to Stella's absence, and his apparent desire to make virtue of necessity by turning to public life; there is also his ominous first reference to the attentions of other ladies. Thus, in Sonnet 97, while Diana—the chaste Goddess of Roman mythology—is a probable representative of Stella, the speaker comments on her “peer,” an implicitly more available, or receptive, “lady”:

Even so, alas, a lady, Dian's peer,  
 With choice delights and rarest company  
 Would fain drive clouds away from out my heavy cheer. (97.9-11)

Although Astrophil dismisses the possibility of finding joy in anyone except his “sun's sight” (97.14), tellingly, it is at this stage in the sequence that he notices the attainability of other women. For instance, in Sonnet 106, Astrophil infantilizes himself by bemoaning Stella's absence from the court—“this orphan place” (106.3), but also mentions that he does:

store of ladies meet  
 Who may with conversation sweet  
 Make in my heavy mold new thoughts to grow. (106.9-11)

Astrophil proceeds to dismiss the possibility of finding in such ladies a substitute for his love, or to love anew:

Sure they prevail as much with me, as he  
 That bade his friend, but then new maim'd, to be  
 Merry with him, and so forget his woe. (106.12-14)

Nevertheless, the reader may well suspect that for Astrophil to have even brought up the subject of other women does not bode well for his relationship with Stella; in the words of Shakespeare's Gertrude, Astrophil seems to "protest too much" (Hamlet 3.2. 239). Not surprisingly, then, that in the very following sonnet Astrophil asks Stella to release him from the duties of courtship, so that he may assume his responsibilities in a "great cause" (107.6). Indeed, he conveniently reminds her that this had been her "own will" (107.11). Much as Elizabethan readers might have associated that "great cause" with Sidney's own involvement in the Protestant struggle against Spain in Flanders—military duties which were to cost him his life—taken in the context of the sonnet sequence as a whole, Astrophil's embrace of public duties seems almost like something of a subterfuge; it is not so much that Astrophil has grown willing to sacrifice personal desire, but that he wishes to withdraw his suit from a mistress who will not reward him on his own terms, and whose affection he cannot appreciate.

Very little can be said with certainty, but, if something is apparent about Astrophil, it is that his love—for *himself*, and for an *idea of love*—is too strong for him to sacrifice his ironically-flawed construction of himself as a courtly lover. According to a common critical formulation, illustrated by Gary Waller, in *Astrophil and Stella*, "Astrophil's cleverness consists in trying to avoid or repel the claims of reason or virtue, and the outcome of the sequence is the inevitable end of self-deception" (Waller 142). It seems, however, that such a reading idealizes the figure of Astrophil, whom my own reading exposes as not simply fickle, or inconstant, but also much more disturbingly self-serving and devious than has hitherto been realized.

Completed in 1621, Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* was the last English Renaissance sonnet sequence, and the only one to be written by a

woman, one who was, ironically enough, the daughter of Sir Philip Sidney's younger brother, Robert Sidney. *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* is also noteworthy for its “Crowne of Sonnetts dedicated to love,” a cluster of fourteen linked sonnets that appears late in the sequence (Sonnets 77-90). In the “Crowne,” and in the four songs and nine sonnets that follow it, Wroth's female poet-lover, Pamphilia, engages intensely with love, both at a personal level and as a spiritual concept.

In the *Crowne*, which serves as climax for the sonnet sequence, Pamphilia uses the image of the labyrinth to represent her dilemma. This is not simply a figurative maze but the Labyrinth from which Theseus found the way out, following Ariadne's thread only to abandon her afterwards. As Mary Moore has explained in a fascinating discussion of the figure of the labyrinth in Wroth's “Crowne of Sonnets,” this classical setting, and concept, “symbolized both conscious craft and perplexity in the Renaissance” (Moore 109). According to Moore, the labyrinth trope enabled Wroth's heroine, Pamphilia, to articulate a distinctly *female* “sense of self,” a gender-model which she depicts as “isolated, enclosed, difficult and complex,” even as she portrays “herself as a typical Petrarchan poet, evoking labyrinthine themes of blindness and desire” (Moore 110-14). This allusion to the myth of the Labyrinth—a tale of love and male betrayal—introduces bitter irony into the “Crowne,” as Pamphilia takes the implicitly ill-fated step in choosing “to leave all, and take the thread of love” (77.14). The single-minded sense of commitment suggested here finds full expression in Sonnet 78, which invests love with religious overtones:

Love is the shining starr of blessings light;  
 The fervent fire of zeale, the roote of peace,  
 The lasting lamp fed with oile of right;  
 Image of fayth, and wombe for joyes increase. (78. 9-12)

The irony, however, is that despite the depth of Pamphilia's zealous commitment to love—which culminates in a figurative martyrdom in which love's “flames are joyes” (78.14)—there is no sense that love's “bands” (l.14) attach her to a true lover.

Moore suggests that the image of the womb in the phrase “a wombe for joyes increase,” associates the labyrinth itself with female subjectivity, whereby “the womb's femininity is complemented by the masculinity of love, which Wroth personifies throughout the labyrinth as male” (Moore 118). While I find Moore's arguments very enlightening in other instances, I strongly disagree with her, here, as a distinction needs to be drawn between *love* and *lust*. For Pamphilia clearly embodies and upholds her own model of *love*, one which she would like to see—but will fail to find—reflected in her male beloved, the fickle Amphilanthus. As a result, I would contend, *lust* is depicted as male, while *love*—not merely spiritual, but something both sexual and constant—is associated with female subjectivity.

In these terms, the association of love with fertility and abundance, suggested by the phrase “wombe for joyes increase” (78.12), is developed in Sonnet 83, which describes love as a life-giving, nurturing force:

whereas fire distroys this doth aspire,  
Increase, and foster all delights above. (83.7-8)

By way of contrast, in Sonnets 85-87 lust is associated with a monstrous or noxious fertility. Lust is the figurative bastard which the lecherous “begett / . . . for love” (85.12-13); the paternity of lust, in other words, is wrongfully attributed to love. Pamphilia associates lust with monstrosity; lust, she says: “ought like monster borne / Bee from the court of Love, and reason torne”

(85.13-14). In Sonnet 86, lust is the noxious “Fruit of a sowre, and unwholsome ground / Unprofitably pleasing and unsound” (86.13-14), while, in the following sonnet, the “unseasonable birth” (87.5) is likened to “hemlock”, a toxic, narcotic plant fit to “feed a sick-witts mirthe” (87.7).

It is worth noting that while love is described in terms of light, heat and fire, such “faithfull and unfained heate” (81.5) is contrasted with lust, which is, in turn, associated with “shady pleasures” and “coole, and wann desires” (87.10-12). Similarly, lust is firmly dissociated from the idea of a passionate or a sanguine temperament, and is presented, instead, as a morbid departure from healthy vitality. By these means, insincerity and selfishness in love are depicted as cold—not as the products of healthy, natural heat. Indeed, it is not even allowed to be a fever, since that, too, is invested with religious significance—what Pamphilia describes as the “fervent fire of zeale” (78.10). Herein lies the paradox at the heart of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Pamphilia's “true desire” (81.2) gathers an implicitly sexual character which is not denied by its spirituality:

And burne, yett burning you will love the smart,  
When you shall feele the weight of true desire,  
Soe pleasing, as you would nott wish your part  
Of burden showld bee missing from that fire. (81.1-4)

The words “weight”, “burden” and “smart” all carry clear sexual connotations; in addition to their psychological import, these terms suggest not only copulation, but, in the case of “smart,” also imply loss of virginity. Thus, it seems that, through Pamphilia, Wroth may have sought to vindicate herself as a woman whose real-life, illicit love affair with her cousin had produced two

illegitimate children. Pamphilia stresses chastity and “vertuose love” (84.12). But her defence is centred on the ideas of constancy and sincerity: though her love is “hot,” its heat is presumably justifiable because it is “unfained” (81.5); as such it grants her the clear conscience and self-sufficiency of the righteous: “saulves to all feare” (85.7). We might well see in Pamphilia a literary forebear of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), who—carried away in the liberating, natural space of the forest—passionately justifies her adulterous affair with the Reverend Dimmesdale by stating that their love had “had a consecration of its own” (133). And, also like Nathaniel Hawthorne's heroine, Wroth's Pamphilia will come to accept the illusory nature of romantic, or carnal, love.

The treatment of lust in Sonnets 85-87 is indicative of Wroth-Pamphilia's insecure position in the public domain, which compels her to assume a moralistic position. Sonnet 84, for instance, is a remarkably powerful outburst, in the form of a single sentence; we can readily hear Pamphilia's anger flare out in the opening lines:

Hee that shunns love doth love him self the less  
And cursed hee whos spiritt nott admires  
The worth of love. (84.1-3)

The figure of Cupid as king of spiritual love—a position which is subsequently subverted—is introduced in Sonnet 85, where Venus is blamed for “What faults he hath” (85.7). Sonnets 89 and 90, the last in the *crowne*, address this figure of Love, who is praised as the “maintainer” of “lyfe,” sole “Defence of right” and “punnisher of skill / And fraude” (89.6-8). Such qualities of true love as vitality and sincerity of feeling, which were introduced in Sonnets

78-83, are praised here. Pamphilia asks the “Great King of Love” (89.11), in offering him the “Crowne” (89.13), to keep her “soule from fained smarts / Or thoughts of change” (89.11-12); she asks, in other words, to remain constant and free from romantic fancies. Sonnet 90, in turn, seems at first to celebrate love with almost religious (self-) righteousness:

The tribute which my hart doth truly pay  
 Is faith untouch'd, pure thoughts discharge the score  
 Of debts for mee, wher constancy bears sway,  
 And rules as Lord, unharm'd by envyes sore. (90.5-8)

The “envyes sore” may be those of the public world, which opposes the integrity shown by Pamphilia in choosing to “leave all, and take the thread of love” (79.14). But, as the self-enclosed and cyclical crowne approaches the end, doubts and turmoil surface once again:

Curst jealousie doth all her forces bend  
 To my undoing; thus my harmes I see.  
 Soe though in Love I fervently do burne,  
 In this strange labourinth how shall I turne? (90.11-14)

The last line, which reiterates the first line in the *crowne*, “embodies enclosure . . . dramatically engaging the reader in the female sense of self that Wroth depicts” (Moore 110). It is precisely this internal turmoil that Pamphilia comes to deal with in the remainder of the sequence.

Cupid's appearance, in Song II, as “Monarck of loves crowne” (II.4) suggests that he is not simply the god of love, but, specifically, the figure in the “Crowne of Sonnetts dedicated to Love.” However, this song succeeds in



subverting the figure of Cupid. Firstly, "Silvia" and "her Nymphs" surprise him:

All naked playing with his wings  
Within a mirtle tree  
Which sight a soddaine laughter brings  
His godhead so to see. (II.5-8)

Cupid's dignity dissolves when he is surprised engaged in something figuratively akin to masturbation. Comically shifting between the divine and the mortal—as between a royal and a commoner—the words "His godhead," of course, define both Cupid himself and his penis. The nymphs fail to recognize that Cupid was getting heated up, or that "his will's his right" (II.12): again, there is a *double-entendre* in the word "will"; the word refers not only to his willfulness, or even to his sexual desire, but is, literally a phallic slang. Similarly, Cupid's revenge in shooting his "murdring dart . . . through a poore nymph" (II.17-20) carries very clear connotations of sexual penetration, even while it suggests willfulness, and arbitrariness. As a result, love can no longer be seen simply as a pure sentiment, linked to reason, but as a passionate, even brutal, affliction.

Another important factor—only implied in Song II, but made more notable on account of later developments on the theme—is the relevance of Cupid's masculinity, which also helps to make all the more distinct Pamphilia's perspective as a woman. In these terms, Song IV is an exhortation to *male* lovers to be sincere and constant in love. It is aimed against a male *homosocial* discourse—to use Eve Sedgwick's term for the culture of social relations between men—which glorifies the successful philanderer:

Doe nott think itt glory is  
 To intise and then deseave  
 Your chiefe honors ly in this  
 By worth what wunn is, nott to leave. (IV.9-12)

Pamphilia presents the perspective of women caught in a system of double-standards. This system she now subverts, or, rather, *inverts*. According to Pamphilia, women are guilty in their being acted upon, rather than in acting:

In ovr bounty ovr faults ly  
 When you to do a fault wilt chuse. (IV.15-16)

While this seems to compromise the speaker, and to reveal some self-righteousness, it remains remarkably convincing as the utterance of a person who is reacting against a sense of being oppressed. For Pamphilia delivers her message with considerable force and urgency; there is a certain bitterness in her tone that is qualified by the very impression of enthusiasm and immediacy of the “nott . . . and . . . and”-construction when she says: “You can nott sweare, and ly, and love” (IV.24). Sonnet 96 also develops the theme of romantic betrayal, this time involving the figure of a child Cupid, who is found “Cold, wett and crying” (96.2), and who callously repays with his dart (96.13-14) the “kind compassion” the speaker has shown him (96.4). In this context, Cupid is not simply a representative of love. Like Jupiter in Sonnet 97, whom his sympathetically-portrayed wife Juno describes as “One, in whom vertue never ground did prove” (97.8), Cupid also represents inconstant, faithless men. Pamphilia, in turn, tells Juno that, although she did not see Jupiter pass by, “heere are / many in whose harts love hath made like warr” (97.13-14).

To understand this “war,” it is worth considering the *Countess of*

*Montomeries Urania* (1621), the prose romance which the sonnet sequence accompanied, and in which Pamphilia was central among a myriad of figures. In her discussion of this romance, Elaine Beilin notes that "Wroth continually draws attention to the changeable natures of her male characters" (Beilin 231). Indeed, in *Urania*, Amphilanthus is constructed as a figure of male inconstancy; on one occasion, when he comes to Pamphilia's aid, after she is imprisoned in the magical Theater of Rocks, he arrives with two women in disguise, providing Pamphilia not with the ideal of chivalric love she hoped for, but with a realization of the limitations of masculine fidelity, manifested in Amphilanthus' fickleness (*Urania*, 1621 Newberie manuscript. II.377; cited in Roberts 188).

Pamphilia's beloved, Amphilanthus, creates within Pamphilia's heart the "warr" with which she struggles. For, as Mary Ellen Lamb argues, whereas "Chastity creates the distance from the beloved that produces the poetry of the male Petrarchan poets . . . for Wroth's sequence . . . the necessary distance . . . is created by the male's infidelity" (Lamb 167). This distance between ideals and reality allows Pamphilia to embrace a self-sufficiency that is founded on integrity, as opposed to Sidney's *Astrophil*, a would-be Petrarchan poet, whose romantic disappointments, as we saw, serve only to expose a morally-flawed character.

Pamphilia's resolve when faced with the practical disappointments of love is to continue to embrace an *ideal* of love. Earthly love is thus represented by what Pamphilia, looking retrospectively at herself, suggestively calls "the Image of my deere" (98. 1; my emphasis). As Pamphilia reveals, when she asked herself why she felt ashamed to look at him (98. 9-11), she discovered "jealousie" (98.12), the passion apparent behind the emotional and rhetorical instability at the end of the "Crowne." Pamphilia now reveals her resolve to turn from an earthly to a spiritual love—a "truer image":

Yett in my hart unseen of jealous eye  
 The truer Image shall in my hart lye. (98.13-14)

Consequently, in the conclusion to *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Pamphilia instructs her “muse” to “lay . . . to rest” and “write . . . noe more” (103. 1-3); here, Pamphilia's muse is, in a sense, part of herself. Similarly, “Pamphilia,” the last word of the sequence, is both a signature and an address, so that the sonnet appears to be a personal invocation to the spirit of love. Henceforth, Pamphilia wants her “thoughts” to be dedicated “To truth” (103.5-6), and to “Leave the discourse of Venus and her sunn / To young beginners” (103.9-10).

In relegating earthly love to “what's past” (103.13), in order to “lett” her “constancy” her “honor prove” (103.14), Pamphilia is not giving up in frustration. Nor is she bitterly, or self-righteously, confident that her constancy will justify, or demonstrate, her honor; she is, in fact, embracing such a spiritual test of her honor. The foreshadowing of a new beginning for Pamphilia, thus, allows for a sense of true closure, whereby the harmony of form and content in Wroth-Pamphilia's decision to stop writing corresponds to the abandonment of earthly love and of the interrogation of the concept of love which accompanied it.

Although Sidney's *Astrophil* presented the perspectives of a male poet-hero, whereas Wroth's Pamphilia, by contrast, is a female protagonist, both sequences question the possibility of sincere love, founded on selflessness, respect, and mutual trust. Both instances, moreover, place the blame for the absence—or betrayal—of such an ideal, in the “real world,” squarely on men. Fickleness, hypocrisy, deviousness, and the aggressive desire to possess, emerge as fundamentally *male* flaws, which render a model of love based on the sincere union of the sexes in spiritual and earthly affection illusory, even while—seemingly so tangible—it may remain eternally desirable.

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Questioning Men's Love  
in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Lady  
Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

Abstract

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The achievement of Tudor-Stuart sonnet sequences was arguably their construction, examination, and redefinition of the nature of love, a process which makes Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (c. 1591) and Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621) particularly fascinating. Representing the best-known and the last such poetic enterprises in the period—the former by a man, the latter by a woman—both sequences paint a wry, scathing portrait of male heterosexual love, by portraying male inconstancy, self-indulgence, and, in Sidney's sequence, sexualized aggression. This point of convergence warrants close examination of the two sequences. The present article contributes to ongoing work in gender studies and early modern poetry, not only with respect to Wroth's poetry, but also by identifying in Sidney a quasi-feminine—if not, indeed, proto-feminist—sensibility, a response contrary, yet linked, to that of misogyny; for both responses were arguably elicited by the extraordinary circumstances of a female-centered court. In these circumstances, courtiers like Sidney were not only peculiarly feminized, or emasculated, but also were in a position in which—to use a modern formulation—they may have deemed it desirable, or profitable, to be in touch with their feminine side.

Key Words

Philip Sidney, Mary Wroth, *Astrophil and Stella*, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, sonnet sequence, Elizabethan literature, love in literature, love and gender, gender and authorship, sexual aggression / rape, male inconstancy