

# Mary Wroth's Critique of Female Constancy: Pamphilia's Chastity-like Virtue and Constant Will\*

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## I. Introduction

Constancy is the main theme of Mary Wroth's prose romance, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621; hereafter *Urania*). It seems that Wroth deals with constancy as chastity-like female virtue by providing numerous love stories where the relationship between man and woman is explored. In early Stuart regime, constancy was related to female virtue at one level, and a constant woman of the Jacobean era signifies a chaste and faithful woman. In *The Book of the Courtier*, "woman's enduring love for the man with whom she has first been" is referred to as "constancy of women," and this "steadfast gravity" of women is admired as "perfection of women" (221). On the other hand, unlike this defender of female virtue, misogynists of early 17<sup>th</sup> century England discussed female inconstancy as

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women's sexual delinquency. For instance, the title of *The Araignment of Lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women: Or the vanitie of them, choose you whether* (1615),<sup>1</sup> Joseph Swetnam's misogynistic pamphlet itself indicates that being inconstant means being unfaithful to a spouse or being insatiable with lust since the term "unconstant" is juxtaposed with "lewd." As such, women's constancy was undoubtedly interpreted as chastity whether coming from defenders or attackers of female virtue. In other words, for women, constancy is defined as a social or cultural imposition. Constancy is such gendered virtue that a constant woman is not different from a woman enjoined to be chaste, obedient, and silent.

However, female constancy is not simply identical to chastity as passive virtue since the idea of constancy in late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century England is inextricably linked to acts of will. Female constancy can be specifically defined as chastity of willing women because the term constancy is intrinsically associated with Stoic virtue whose core is steadfastness, self-assertion, and authority of the will. Generally, men's will is believed to serve as the human good will with good education and the use of right reason. Stoicism teaches that "with the right people in the right environment, 'Do what you will' is not an incitement to anarchy but a declaration of moral faith in the convergence of impulse and propriety" (Braden 82). On the other hand, the female will is considered negative as it is associated with women's unruly desire. Jacobean misogynists' attack upon women demonstrates their unease over willful women. For Swetnam, the feminine will is identical to the female license to do what women please: "Except a woman haue what she will, say what she list, and goe where shee please,...thy house will be so full of smoke that thou canst not stay in it" (59). Swetnam views the female will in abhorrence, claiming

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<sup>1</sup> This pamphlet was first published under the pseudonym Thomas Tel-troth in 1615, and printed at least ten times by 1637 and at least more six times by 1880 (Woodbridge 81).

that its evil cannot be warded off by any means: "thou canst not wrest them from their willes, and if thou thinke to make her good by stripes, thou must beate her to death" (59). Likewise, Arthur Newman's *Pleasures Vision: With Deserts Complaints and a Short Dialogue of a Womans Properties, between an old Man and a Young* (1619) accuses women of their willingness, indicating that their will is a source of all their flaws: "Many of them [women] are good, and many ill, / Yet all in this erre, all must haue their will" (qtd. in Woodbridge 79). This enumeration of male complaints of the female will attests to male misgivings over uncontrollable and indocile women. In this vein, chastity of willing women blurs the line between passive virtue and active choice. Female constancy can be a potential threat to patriarchy since it implies the female will as a sign of transgression. Namely, women willingly performing prescribed feminine roles are not only helpful but also disruptive for sustaining the social order. Male anxiety over "women who willfully do what they should" is no less than anxiety over uncontrollable women driven by their desire (Schwarz 3). Such discomfiting women in literary history range from Lucrece—whose determination to kill herself in order to further the project of chastity incites a full-scale revolt against the Tarquines and leads to the founding of the Roman republic—to Britomart in Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene*—who willingly starts a quest in search of her future husband and rescues Amoret for whom her male lover Scudamor is unable to do anything. In other words, their acts of will ultimately bring big changes to a nation's destiny on a grand scale. The mixture of chastity and volition has such a strong influence that male subjects expected to be powerful and authoritative appear relatively helpless and impotent. In this fashion, female constancy brings to the fore male impotence in sustaining social order. Namely, patriarchy turns out to be dependent on willing women in the service of stabilizing the social order. Female constancy does not work effectively as passive virtue, and such an unruly virtue can be a challenge to the

hetero-social system.

Under circumstances where constancy has ambiguous meanings in the Jacobean period, Wroth's use of constancy requires a thorough investigation. Does Wroth adopt in her work the concept of female constancy simply as passive chastity? Even though she presents the allegedly constant women who strive to passively endure any affliction without complaint in *Urania*, Wroth takes issue with female constancy to pose the question as to whether this virtue is worth preserving by highlighting the victimization of constant women. Furthermore, it is intriguing that Pamphilia, who embodies female constancy, is constant to her lover rather than to her husband as she does not marry the man her affection is attached to. In addition to this problematic representation of chastity, Wroth's biography suggests that she does not wish to accept passivity-based chastity. This female writer in Jacobean society where women were denied voices was not daunted by reprimands against her writing, and she made a counterattack upon those who hurled "spiteful words against a harmless book" including Edward Denny<sup>2</sup> by labeling them as "Hirmaphrodite in sense in Art a monster" (*Poems of Lady Mary Wroth* 90). By waging warfare through words, Wroth herself was determined to become a monster as a woman and writer in her times. In

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<sup>2</sup> Denny was primarily enraged at Wroth's allusion to his family story through the tale of the father-in-law of Seralius, but he revealed through his attack upon Wroth his resentment that women writing was not acceptable. He discloses antipathy towards female authorship in his poem entitled "To Pamphilia from the father-in-law of Seralius" to criticize Wroth and demand her prose romance's withdrawal. Castigating Wroth as a "Hermaphrodite in show, in deed a monster" (qtd. in Wroth, *Poems of Lady Mary Wroth* 32), Denny points out that her writing is such a transgression of the gender boundary that she deserves to be treated as a monster, an unacceptable being in the male-centered world (Salzman 111). Wroth's creative writing unlike her aunt's translation of the holy psalms is undoubtedly deviation from her ladyship and invasion into the realm of male voices, and he concludes his poem by giving advice to Wroth, "Work o th' Workes leave idle books alone / For wise and worthier women have written none" (33).

this sense, Wroth's notion of female constancy is not simply the acceptance of prescribed feminine roles. Wroth's use of female constancy deserves more careful scrutiny.

## II. Pamphilia's Female Constancy

Wroth designates Pamphilia among a great number of characters as the incarnation of constancy, who is the most loyal lady to open the tower of Constancy in the episode of Throne of Love.<sup>3</sup> Wroth explicitly identifies Pamphilia's constancy with the virtue of chastity. Pamphilia's constancy is recounted based on her relationship with Amphilanthus. Pamphilia's decision to be constant means to be faithful to her love under any circumstances. She is determined to set her affection on Amphilanthus as the only one who "should enjoy all love and faith from her[self]" even though he is often in love with other women and hence her love is not reciprocated. For this reason, Pamphilia is ceaselessly filled with bitter grief due to her unrequited love "in the humblest subjection of Loves" (*Urania* 1: 64). Nevertheless, it is inconceivable for Pamphilia to change her love as demonstrated in her wonder at the shift of Urania's love. Pamphilia believes that the change of love is the opposite of constancy. She desperately lays claim to the virtue of constancy although the ramifications of her attachment to constancy are "cruell paines" like "fire" which

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<sup>3</sup> In the scene of Throne of Love, there stand three towers, where the figures of Cupid, Venus, and Constancy (a woman holding the keys) are respectively located. The statue of Cupid in the first tower is a symbol of Desire, and hence people given to lust and earthly pleasure are enclosed and tormented in this tower. The second is the tower of Love where lovers can enter but have to suffer emotional tortures caused by love. The third, the tower of Constancy, is open only to the most valiant knight and the most loyal lady, who can break the spell of the Throne of Love. In short, the three towers devised for "the triall of false or faithfull lovers" await the couple of constancy (*Urania* 1: 48).

consumes her whole self. Pamphilia, who styles herself “the true patterne of true constancy,” endures distress from constant love for Amphilanthus, but finds the change of heart to allay the “cruell paines” unacceptable (*Urania* 1: 244). In this fashion, Wroth on the surface delineates female constancy as a woman’s faithfulness in the relationship between man and woman.

Contrary to Pamphilia’s faithfulness, Amphilanthus is emblematic of the changeable mind. There is a striking contrast between Pamphilia and Amphilanthus since Amphilanthus is frequently inconstant in his love. As his name signifies the lover of two (*Urania* 1: 300), Amphilanthus both loves many and is loved by many. Disparity between the inconstant Amphilanthus and the constant Pamphilia is accentuated, and the two react differently to a shepherd’s song that love’s rewards are only losses. Amphilanthus praises the shepherd for his being wise while Pamphilia insists that Amphilanthus and the shepherd are of the same kind who loves “varietie” (*Urania* 1: 569). Amphilanthus refutes her, claiming that “varietie [is] the sweetest pleasure under Heaven, and constancy the foolishhest unprofitable whining vertue” (*Urania* 1: 571). This contrast between male inconstancy and female constancy is the seed of trouble causing the female constancy-seeker to endlessly mourn her lost love. Pamphilia as *the true pattern of true constancy* is proven to be “the sad example of forsaken love” after the trial of the enchanted Theater<sup>4</sup> (*Urania* 1: 463). Amphilanthus continues to waver between her and other ladies. Pamphilia’s commitment to constancy is unable to remove her long-suffering. Rather, Pamphilia, who never dries “tears which [she has] shed for inconstancy” becomes the embodiment of “the foolishhest unprofitable whining virtue” as

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<sup>4</sup> In the episode of the enchanted Theater, many couples are entrapped within the enchanted Theater. They are freed as Veralinda (shepherdess) arrives at this Theater and touches a book which contains her origin and identity. Each man holds his lover by the hand when the spell is completely broken. At this point, Amphilanthus holds Musalina’s hand, not Pamphilia’s.

Amphilanthus argues (*Urania* 1: 464-65). Because of Amphilanthus's recurring inconstancy, it is evident that Pamphilia's constant love is not returned forever and she withers in grief as the poorest creature who deserves "[a]ll things heavenly earthly pitie" (*Urania* 1: 465). Wroth shows that constant women are subject to never-ending sufferings since men do not feel qualms about their inconstancy. Amphilanthus justifies his habitual infidelity as he claims that men's changeable mind is triggered by the male desire to "knowe the best" (*Urania* 2: 28). His protest reflects the gendered bias of social conventions that chastity-like constancy is a cultural imposition upon women alone. Under this condition, the balanced union between man and woman is impossible. Through Pamphilia's "loyall sacrifice to [constant] love," Wroth brings to the fore the constant woman's misfortune caused by the imbalance between male inconstancy and female constancy (*Urania* 1: 465).

Wroth eventually highlights that chastity-like constancy victimizes women as the passion of constant love and endless pain from unreciprocated love consumes the subject of female constancy (Hannay 190). Although the narrator unquestionably praises chastity-like constancy, the question arises as to whether this constancy is actually to be admired as much as the narrator prefers since the constant women in *Urania* are proven to be finally helpless sufferers due to the disparity between male infidelity and female fidelity. The happy union with male lover is unattainable because of this unbridgeable gap. Consequently, the author poses the question as to whether such futile constancy is worth pursuing. The reaction of Perselina, right after listening to the story of Pelarina as another sacrifice to constant love who decides to remain faithful to her changeable lover, raises uncertainty over the value of female constancy.

Perselina found in her selfe [Pelarina] she should never come to that excellency of constancy; wherefore she admired, though scarce

commended her riches, in that plenty, and fulnesse, and being call'd by Rosindy, left the constant Lady to her virtuous vowes, and religious truth, who lived the rest as she had begun her days in fervent zeale and affection. (*Urania* 1: 534)

The narrator tells that this addressee highly extols Pelarina as unrivaled in female constancy immediately after Pelarina expresses bitter grief due to her adherence to this virtue. The persistent vow of chastity is itself overestimated although it is not rewarding at all. In this sense, Pelarina's absolute constancy is rather associated with pertinacity. Her clinging to virtue for nothing good is no other than obstinacy in negative terms. The description that the self-consuming female virtue is praised extravagantly is open to the question whether the author views this female virtue from the same standpoint of the narrator. Besides, it would seem difficult to justify the fetishization of female constancy in Pelarina's vow to be always constant with such unquestioned religious fervor. Such mystification of female virtue brings to the fore the question of the Jacobean discourse of religion as ideological practice. As Jonathan Dollimore points out, religion begins to come under the process of demystification in early 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Under the influence of Niccolo Machiavelli,<sup>5</sup> many including John Calvin, Richard Hooker, Robert Burton, and Thomas Hobbes, discuss the ideological function of religion by elucidating that keeping people in awe of almighty God is far more effectual than governing them by positive laws (11-13). In other words, religion is the most effective ideology to make people passive and controlled. It is possible to see in *Urania* that religion and female constancy have something in common in the way both are used to expediently keep people in obedience. The analogy between religion and

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<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli argues in *Discourses on Livy* that religion is one of political expedients (39-40). In addition, as J. G. A. Pocock indicates in his work on Machiavelli's influence on development of republicanism, *The Machiavellian Moment*, Machiavelli greatly contributes to the secular history of republicanism, separated from religion (200-03).



female constancy drawn by Wroth allows readers to heed the author's sarcastic voice on blind devotion to chastity. As Margaret P. Hannay notes, the purpose of emphasizing Pamphilia's constancy is not to praise virtue itself but to give her a victimized position from which she cannot but complain of her lover's inconstancy (191). The constant women in *Urania* serve to problematize female constancy as passive virtue.

Wroth furthers the project of critiquing constancy as total commitment to chastity by reminding readers of Edmund Spenser's portrayal of chastity. As Helen Hackett indicates, the episodes of the Throne of Love and the Hell of Deceit in *Urania* are the strongest recollection of the House of Busirane devised by Spenser (173). However, Wroth echoes Spenser to demystify his idealized notion of chastity. She brings out her criticism of female constancy by parodying Spenser. Spenser presents the virtue of chastity as a female mission to be accomplished at all costs. In a sense, Spenser's chastity appears more bold and active than passive virtue. Britomart, the living personification of chastity, undertakes a knight-like quest in search of her future husband, Artegall. The chastity of Britomart, who starts her amorous quest of Artegall as a cross dressed knight, is undeniably aggressive. However, such boldness is justified only when women prepare for an equal match, which leads to the fulfillment of an ideal marriage. In other words, Spenser claims that women should actively achieve the state of married chastity.<sup>6</sup> Spenser's notion of chastity is a more challenging assignment for women to undertake than mere passive virtue.

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<sup>6</sup> The meaning of chastity in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries includes not only virginity but also the value of monogamy as E. M. Tillyard suggests that the conception of chastity is culturally determined by the climate of society (90). Likewise, Lawrence Stone notes that virginity or abstinence idealized in the medieval ages is replaced with chastity based on marriage since the Renaissance period (313). Under this condition, C. S. Lewis argues that Spenser presents a picture of "wedding chastity" within the bound of marriage (340), and Susannah J. McMurphy agrees that Spenser's chastity is referred to as "conjugal love" (31).

The House of Busirane is the main scene where Spenser shows the way married chastity is to be accomplished. Busirane's castle is a symbolic place in which Britomart's psychology is vividly represented. Britomart's heroic chastity is acquired not through her triumph over external enemies but through overcoming the force of her intestine storm, the overpowering strength of love, pain, fear, and anxiety prior to the union with the future husband. Lesley W. Brill indicates that Britomart's inner hardship and strife threaten her success more than any dreadful enemy (19). In this sense, Britomart does not defeat by force of arms the last enemy Busirane who embodies male sexual desire. Britomart's rescue of Amoret imprisoned and tortured by the enchanter Busirane is the most important and severe trial to fulfill the virtue of married chastity since Amoret's anxiety over male desire reflects Britomart's own anxiety prior to the union with Artegall. Amoret, an abducted bride, is indeed seized with fear that the wedding night would threaten her as devirgination. Her fear of the union with Scudamour is visualized as torture under confinement (Hieatt 509). For Spenser, such anxiety and fear is an obstacle to attaining the virtue of chastity, which ultimately brings about the harmonious unification between man and woman and subsequently a hopeful future progeny. As Merlin prophesies that the union of Britomart and Artegall is not merely the change in personal terms but a *terminus a quo* for founding of a great nation through their fruitful offspring, Britomart's married chastity should be accomplished for the destiny of whole society (McManus 111). Through the extrication of Amoret, Britomart overcomes her own anxiety and makes progress toward the ideal union with her male lover based not on sexual desire and passion but on conjugal love and faith. In this vein, the House of Busirane is undoubtedly the climax in the quest for the virtue of chastity.

Wroth's Throne of Love is undeniably an echo of the Britomart's trial in the castle of Busirane. On the surface, the scene of the Throne of Love is not very different from Spenser's in that the "loyallest, and therefore

most incomparable" Pamphilia rescues and frees imprisoned people in the enchanted palace of Venus on Cyprus (*Urania* 1: 169). As soon as Pamphilia touches the keys of the statue in the tower of Constancy, the personification of constancy enters Pamphilia's breast. This metamorphosis demonstrates that this heroine is the living personification of constancy. In this fashion, Wroth seems to imitate Spenser's work on chastity. However, Wroth's unquestioned homage to Spenser would make sense if *Urania* concludes with the first book whose denouement is the Throne of Love.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Wroth locates this part not at the end but at the beginning of her narrative. Besides, from Book 2, *Urania* provides too many characters and plots to remember, and leaves many problems unresolved or more entangled. As Mary Ellen Lamb indicates, "[the] refusal to cohere" is the central feature of Wroth's work (165-66). Within such a strange structure, the seemingly complete and perfect world of the first book is to collapse suddenly because the happily ever after of the first book does not last for long. The grand finale of the Throne of Love is characterized by Polarchos (son of the King of Cyprus) winning the approval for marriage with his beloved. He is described as an ideal and enviable knight since his sense of achievement for winning his beloved is what "the other amorous Knights wisht to know" (*Urania* 1: 174). The happy union of this amorous knight with the Princess of Rhodes seems to be assured for evermore. However, Polarchos's love is suddenly turned into hatred because of the Princess of Rhodes's disdain for his defeat in the joust of Morea which he promises to attend before leaving the Iland of Rhodes. Moreover, they engage in war against each other as the Princess of Rhodes, indignant at his spurning, locks him in a tower. Their perfect union promised in the last scene in the first book

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<sup>7</sup> Part 1 of *Urania* consists of 4 books. Interestingly, only the first book is coherently and consistently directed to the ending, the Throne of Love. On the other hand, the remaining books (from Book 2 of the first part of *Urania* to the continuation of its second part) unfold in a digressive and incoherent way.

is not fulfilled, but an unexpected discord ensues. In this fashion, the happy ending of the first book is in no way significant to the whole body of work of *Urania*. Rather, this temporary happiness and conclusion serves as a prelude to an even more knotty problem. Wroth's revision of the most important scene concerning chastity in *The Faerie Queene* deserves careful scrutiny.

Wroth does not view the virtue of chastity as a great achievement. Pamphilia too easily works out a solution in the Throne of Love, unlike Britomart who goes through a series of hardships. Pamphilia demonstrates with no difficulty that she is the incarnation of constancy. Britomart, on the other hand, endures numerous trials such as Malecasta's temptation at Castle Joyous and the fight against various characters of anti-chastity or non-chastity in order to face the last and most challenging task. Especially in Busirane's castle, "Tapet" portraying "all of love" and "all of lusty-hed" is to testify Britomart's strength not to be mesmerized by anti-chastity (FQ 3.11.29.1-3). Britomart gradually reaches the climax of her quest, and her success in the last trial becomes the completion of her chastity. Pamphilia meanwhile is not well-prepared for the trials. What she prepares with regard to constancy is merely making a vow to be constant before arriving at the palace of Venus. Not yet hardened, Pamphilia is promptly faced with a test of constancy, but the key of constancy easily comes to her hand. Consequently, she becomes a hero who rescues imprisoned people suffering from the passion of love. However, the heroic figure herself is greatly tormented by the passion of love for long after the scene of the Throne of Love. The question arises as to whether Pamphilia's feat at the palace of Venus is ultimately relevant to her own interiority. Wroth intentionally presents the unprepared and premature Pamphilia as the heroine of constancy who can complete a quest for constancy without any hard work or risk. Therefore, Spenser's effort to embellish Britomart's risky task is nullified through Wroth's revision in which the achievement of chastity is

painless. Thus considered, Wroth reviews Spenser's serious claim that women should attain the virtue of chastity at all costs.

The precariously established world of the Throne of Love collapses as Wroth deploys the scene of Hell of Deceit. In this symbolic scene, Musalina (once loved by the youthful Amphilanthus) attempts to separate Pamphilia and Amphilanthus by practicing the black arts. Under this spell, Pamphilia notices the missing Amphilanthus during the hunt surrounded by Musalina and Lucenia. She tries to save him from Musalina, who is about to raze her name out of his ripped heart, which implies that Musalina attempts to obliterate Amphilanthus's affections for Pamphilia. However, Pamphilia is not able to pass the flames to rescue him because this cave of the Hell of Deceit does not admit faithful lovers, for it is written in the stone of entrance: "Faithfull lovers keepe from hence / None but false ones here can enter" (*Urania* 1: 584). Her failure is in stark contrast with Britomart's success in passing through the flame which does not yield to Scudamour, who tries to enter the house with "greedy will, and envious desire" (*FQ* 3.11.26.3). In this symbolic place of the Hell of Deceit, the situation of Pamphilia is more parallel to Scudamour's whose bold desire makes him helpless and powerless in the moment of crisis, rather than to Britomart's case in which the power of salvation lies with her indomitable chastity. Wroth suggests that Pamphilia is helpless and impotent although this faithful woman proves that she is virtue itself. Wroth shows that Pamphilia's chastity does not exert any power to save, unlike Spenser who highlights the heroic aspect of Britomart's chastity. As Maureen Quilligan notes, this site of the Hell of Deceit is the polar opposite of Wroth's Throne of Love in the first book where Pamphilia is able to free the other lovers "by virtue of her virtue" (197). Pamphilia ironically cannot save her own lover and herself, and remains trapped within this Hell of Deceit. Therefore, the completion of her virtue in the Throne of Love is irresistibly annulled and the meaning of her virtue needs to be reconsidered. As Elaine

V. Beilin notes, Wroth reverses “the trope of the beloved raising the lover to a vision of heavenly love” (230). Wroth challenges the myth of female chastity with regard to salvation by disclosing that Pamphilia remains a torture victim like Amoret potentially never to be rescued from this Hell of Deceit.<sup>8</sup>

### III. Pamphilia’s Constant Will

Wroth’s delineation of female constancy as unquestioning chastity reveals a serious critique. Interestingly, Wroth uses the term constancy although her direct use of chastity would seem to serve more effectively in an attack upon the ideology of chastity. Why does she choose the concept of constancy rather than chastity itself to criticize the gendered virtue? Female constancy, on the one hand, is defined as a cultural injunction to be chaste and passive. But the same term can be referred to as willful chastity since constancy connotes willingness and assuredness. At the core of will lies the power to enable the willing person to be an agent who exerts a certain amount of control over things as well as oneself. In this sense, will is linked to active choice and freedom to govern oneself in a positive term on the one hand, but license and laxity of morality bringing about unruly behavior on the other. The female will in particular is associated with unruly desire which challenges patriarchal authority. Willing/willful women are recognized as intractable and uncontrollable, which is culturally proscribed. In this vein, there is a gap between chastity

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<sup>8</sup> There are two versions of the Hell of Deceit in *Urania*. Amphilanthus sees a similar vision created by Musalina in which Pamphilia looks dead with her heart open and his name in her heart. In the beginning, he tries to release her, yet he promptly forgets her to follow Musalina, and goes after the vision of Lucenia in trouble. Because of Amphilanthus’s love of varieties, Pamphilia is not saved but remains a torture victim.

of willing women and the conventional virtue of chastity. Wroth's selection of this ambivalent term deserves special notice.

Attentive to the male anxiety about willful women, Kathryn Schwarz explores the incongruous compound of volition and chastity. Schwarz notes that the doubled nature of will—at once freedom of choice and license—“functions as a useful tool and as an independent, potentially renegade force” (2). Will as the power to sustain or disrupt the social order empowers the agent either in a positive or negative way. Accordingly, the problem is posed when such powerful will is conjoined with the extreme passivity of chastity. Considering “women who take [those] expectations as a mandate for purposeful acts,” Schwarz raises a question over the willing acceptance of prescribed feminine roles (2). According to her, women both performing prescribed roles and proscribed roles are different from women passively forced to comply with social conventions. Chastity of willing women as the “compromised mode of self-direction”—the amalgamation of compliance and transgression—serves as the means of sustaining or destroying social order (3). Women willingly performing prescribed feminine roles are dedicated to stabilizing patriarchy. However, under the process through which they become leading figures to sustain social order, the question arises as to who actually rules and who is ruled. As patriarchy comes to rely on willing women in sustaining itself, patriarchal authority can be either established or powerless according to women's virtuous will. The gap between constant will of female virtue and passive virtue discloses the insecurity and instability of patriarchy. Accordingly, “women pose a threat when they willingly conform to social conventions,” as Schwarz argues (2).

Pamphilia's constancy belongs to this curious pattern of the compound of volition and chastity. Pamphilia performs both the proscribed and prescribed roles because her devotion to female constancy is the declaration of her own will although she remains vulnerable to the male-centered world. Pamphilia proclaims that she chooses to be constant of her own

volition in her discussion with Urania who criticizes Pamphilia's obsession with a fruitless virtue. Pamphilia's "zealous affection" for Amphilanthus is not a passive response to his affection for herself, but her free choice to love him under any circumstances (*Urania* 1: 47). Unconcerned about the return for her love, she is determined to be the living pattern of constancy that she believes is true love. Pamphilia's intentional pursuit of constancy is regarded as the possibility of female autonomy by many critics. Her willingness can be a heroic virtue capable of transforming a lovelorn woman into a great queen, a poet, and finally, "a transcendent image of divine love," as Beilin points out (208). Besides, Pamphilia's constancy is not the traditional female virtue of chastity to establish matrimony but a freely chosen love of a desiring woman (Trull 461).

Furthermore, Pamphilia's constancy can imply the devastation of patriarchal decrees as she is constant to her lover and not to her husband. Pamphilia, who enjoys a temporary union with Amphilanthus in a *de presenti* ceremony, is soon separated from him due to his recurring betrayals, and later marries another man, the King of Tartaria. But Pamphilia is reconciled with Amphilanthus as a true and good companion on whom she constantly sets her affection even during her marriage. To her husband, Pamphilia's constancy functions as unchastity, which leads to the birth of an illegitimate son, the knight of Faire Designe. Such faithfulness towards a lover contradicts "the Protestant (largely Puritan) idealization of 'holy matrimony' participated in a new ideology of the private life" since the Renaissance period (Lamb 179).<sup>9</sup> Contrary to the new ideological tide, Wroth shows the persistent woman who remains constant to her lover, and unmindful of matrimony. The presence of a son born out of wedlock points to Pamphilia's transgression as a willful woman. This illegitimate son is described as the unknown youth who does not know his parentage as well

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<sup>9</sup> Spenser's married chastity underlies this Protestant ideology, which is compared with Wroth's constancy as the revival of the medieval courtly love.



as his name but has a cipher on his heart. As this cipher is decoded, his mysterious parentage will be revealed, and this serves as the main narrative interest of the second part of *Urania*. There are a number of hints to his identity as Amphilanthus's son although Wroth never names Amphilanthus as his father. Lamb suggests that Amphilanthus's strong attraction towards this unknown knight and Amphilanthus's previous use of the cipher during the rescue of the imprisoned Polarchos serve as telling cues (183). The knight of Faire Designe is described as the most gallant warrior just as the young Amphilanthus was incomparable in prowess. Moreover, Wroth calls this knight "his [Amphilanthus's] Faire Designe" when she depicts Amphilanthus and the knight of Faire Designe lodge together after they cooperate to rescue the King and Queen of Bulgaria (*Urania* 2: 302). The knight of Faire Designe is literally pictured as another pattern of the most valiant Emperor Amphilanthus's perfections.

However, Wroth does not satisfy the readers with the expected moment of parental recognition in *Urania*. Andromarko, Prince of Cyprus, tells Amphilanthus that the knight of Faire Designe is seeking Amphilanthus as his presumed father in Cyprus. Andromarko asks Amphilanthus to put an end to the enchantment of the knight of Faire Designe,<sup>10</sup> identifying Amphilanthus as his father through the use of phrase, "your Faire Designe." Amphilanthus's response to Andromarko's report remains unknown forever because his remark ends in the interrupted and incomplete sentence "Amphilanthus wa[s] extreamly" which is also the strange ending of *Urania* (*Urania* 2: 418). Readers do not know whether this father figure is "extremely" pleased or "extremely" bewildered at the unveiling of a (constant) love child born out of wedlock. Pamphilia's

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<sup>10</sup> In order for the knight of Faire Designe to know his origin, he should meet a woman with the same cipher. This knight starts a quest in search of his identity like an amorous knight. However, his winning the lady is described as recognizing his father, Amphilanthus.

constancy would be revealed to have led to an illicit affair of a desiring woman if Amphilanthus acknowledges this love child. Pamphilia's will to serve patriarchy is paradoxically proven to be a loophole in the hetero-social system. Wroth captures the moment of the highest tension when the knight's cipher is about to be explicitly deciphered as the consequence of Pamphilia's willful fidelity. The strange ending of *Urania* (which does not actually end) is designed to create the most intense suspense since the true meaning of the cipher can be a threatening message to the ideology of holy matrimony. In this way, constancy as the mixture of feminine duty and will is distinguished from chastity as the intervention of female will in the passive virtue is considered a challenge to the male-oriented society.

#### IV. Pamphilia's Will to Be Autonomous

Wroth's shift of constancy from feminine virtue to active desire for subjectivity is also unmistakably found in her sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*.<sup>11</sup> The speaker of this lyric sequence has the same name as the heroine of *Urania*. Besides, both are depicted as a lovelorn lady and such grief leads them to write poems. Pamphilia of *Urania* determines to carve the sonnet of her tale on a tree to "make others in part taste [her] paine, and make them dumbe partakers of [her] grieffe" (*Urania* 1: 92), and the female speaker of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* claims that her writing is "[l]ed by the power of grieffe" (P9, 1).<sup>12</sup> As Gavin Alexander points out, the

<sup>11</sup> The poems of the sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* were allegedly written and circulated several years before the publication of *Urania*. Wroth appended the revised and arranged 103 sonnets and songs to the published *Urania*. I cite *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* from Roberts's edition, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*.

<sup>12</sup> The total of 103 sonnets and songs in the lyric sequence are composed of the first fifty-five poems—forty-eight sonnets (numbered sequentially by Wroth) and 7 songs, arranged in eight sets of six sonnets followed by one song—and the

perspectives of the two Pamphiliads are not different because both of them choose to constantly love whether their love is requited or not (300). That is, Wroth interweaves the *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* with the plot of *Urania*. Through this intertextuality,<sup>13</sup> it is possible to inquire further into Wroth's views on female constancy.

The lyric sequence serves also a picture of Pamphilia's quest for the virtue of constancy. A series of sonnets is no other than a process where the speaker is faced with her fickle passion. This sequence devotes more attention to Pamphilia's own interiority than to her beloved Amphilanthus's infidelity which merely serves to trigger the female speaker's complaint (Roberts 51). In other words, the main issue of Wroth's sonnet sequence is whether or not to govern one's own heart. The beginning of this sequence is Pamphilia's dream vision, where Venus and Cupid triumph over her heart and hence she is situated as a helpless victim. As Heather Dubrow indicates, the emphasis on dreaming—what is out of control—locates the speaker in an extremely passive position (139). Such a passive speaker claims that she is a slave to Cupid: "I am thy subject, conquer'd, bound to stand," (P8, 6). Vulnerable to Cupid's "babish trickes," Pamphilia realizes that she is caught in the throes of foolish passion (P16, 12). Wroth brings to the fore the loss of self-control due to passion of love through the representation of a love-struck Pamphilia who must bid farewell to liberty. In this situation, Pamphilia's "lost hart" is identified with her "hurt" (P16, 13). The sequence opens with Pamphilia's lamentation for her imprisonment in this hurtful passion. The grief is intensified with awareness that passion of love is like the wheel of Fortune in its fickleness:

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remaining forty eight poems—divided to several shorter sequences and numbered discretely. Roberts re-numbered all these poems sequentially from P1 to P103 in her edition.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Keifer Lewalski identifies the lyric sequence of sonnets, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, with the poems Amphilanthus finds in Pamphilia's closet in *Urania* (252).

"Justly on Fortune was beestow'd the wheele / Whose favors ficle, and unconstant reele; / Drunk with delight of chang, and sodaine paine;" (P63, 9-11). In other words, Pamphilia enslaves herself to changeable and uncontrollable emotions. She is beset with a number of love torments – suspicion, fear, doubts, jealousy, etc., which are no other than foolish and changeable human emotions. Therefore, she cries for the way out: "In this strang labourinth how shall I turne? / Wayes are on all sids while the way I miss:" (P77, 1-2). The pivotal point in this sequence is whether Pamphilia can escape from the labyrinth which stands for her restless mind. Wroth places emphasis on Pamphilia's inner strife with the boy-tyrant Cupid as the personification of foolish passion. Pamphilia here proclaims subordination to Cupid rather than to Amphilanthus, just as Pamphilia of *Urania* names herself "loyall sacrifice to love" (*Urania* 1: 465). The two Pamphiliads' concern is how to be freed from tyrannical passion. The ultimate goal of Pamphilia in love is not to win the heart of Amphilanthus but to control her own heart.

Pamphilia of the sequence struggles with the fluctuation of her passion as the main concern is to "take the thread of love" in order to go through the labyrinth (P77, 14). To free herself from changeable passion is not to renounce Cupid but to transform this wanton and mischievous child into an honored and noble King of the court of Love. Wroth redefines the nature of love from unruly desires to the spiritual love of ennobling power by replacing the Anacreontic Cupid with the figure of noble love (Lewalski 259-60; Roberts 50). The speaker confirms that she resorts to the redefined notion of love by repudiating Venus "who hath lasivious binn" (P85, 4) and by turning to the mature Cupid, "her sunn; where sinn / Never did dwell" (P85, 5-6). This exalted concept of love is re-born as constancy in P78.

Is to leave all, and take the thread of love  
Which line strait leads unto the soules content

Wher choyse delight with pleasures wings doe move,  
And idle phant'sie never roome had lent,

When chaste thoughts guide us then owr minds ar bent  
To take that good which ills from us remove,  
Light of true love, brings fruite which none repent  
Butt constant lovers seeks, and wish to prove;

Love is the shining starr of blessings light;  
The fervent fire of zeale, the roote of peace,  
The lasting lampe fed with the oyle of right;  
Image of fayth, and wombe for joyes increase.

Love is true vertu, and his ends delight;  
His flames ar joyes, his bands true lovers might. (P78, 1-14)

Constant lovers guided by "chaste thoughts" become true lovers, who can be blessed with inner "peace" and "joyes." It is under the guidance of chaste thoughts that the speaker can extricate herself from the labyrinth. In other words, the only remedy to her unstable and restless mind is to change the ruler of her mind into Pamphilia herself in order to "choyse" what she pleases of her own will. The faith that such a choice leads to true love as "the root of [true] peace" and "wombe for [true] joyes" is marked as strong self-reliance since Pamphilia's own will is described as the unquenchable "fervent fire of zeale" of "the lasting lampe." Wroth makes Pamphilia look into, transform, and harden her mind, and not be easily susceptible to changeable emotions. Like Cupid, who goes through the transformation from capricious to noble King, Pamphilia undergoes inner change by trying to govern her mind with her own will.

What Wroth illuminates through the female speaker's love-experience is the process whereby Pamphilia strives to be the ruler of her own mind. The love experience is the condition which urges Pamphilia to come to fulfill

her desire for self-governing. Accordingly, Wroth consistently highlights the speaker's self-choice and self-determination by trying to change subjection to passion of love into willing triumph of constancy. Wroth shows the distance between the inevitable submission to the turmoil of passion and the determination to seek for constancy through the comparison established between P55 and P103.

My breath nott able is to breathe least part  
 Of that increasing fuell of my smart;  
 Yett love I will till I butt ashes prove.

Pamphilia. (P55, 12-14)

And thus leave off, what's past shows you can love,  
 Now let your constancy your honor prove,

Pamphilia. (P103, 13-14)

In the last sonnet of the sequence (P103), Pamphilia herself is determined to pursue constancy, a finer type of love, by bidding farewell to her past, which is controlled by the passion of love. Throughout the sequence, Wroth dramatizes the process by which Pamphilia tries to discover the truth of her own emotional responses (Roberts 50) and undergoes a change from the helpless victim of love into the subject who strives to understand the inmost recess of the human heart and to govern it of her own virtuous will. The changed Pamphilia reassures herself that to seek constancy as inner strength is rewarding since constancy itself is the virtue to prove "honor" while her faithfulness to her lover in the past is no other than self-consuming passion, burned to "ashes." This movement from the bondage of chaotic passion to the freedom of self-chosen constancy demonstrates that Wroth re-writes female constancy as the driving force of subjectivity and no longer merely as the passive chastity or a cultural imposition upon women. Through this critique of female constancy, Wroth

attempts to alter the meaning of female constancy to women's self-directed quest for subjectivity.

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**ABSTRACT****Mary Wroth's Critique of Female Constancy:  
Pamphilia's Chastity-like Virtue and Constant Will****Chanmi Ko**

This paper investigates Mary Wroth's view on female constancy in order to show that she challenges patriarchal authority that suppresses female voices. In early Stuart England, constancy as gendered virtue is roughly divided into two types: male constancy as civic virtue and female constancy as passive endurance. Wroth's use of constancy seems consistent with this Jacobean culture as she apparently deals with chastity-like constancy in her work, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, by providing numerous love stories where the relationship between man and woman is explored. However, Wroth strategically presents Pamphilia as a victim of female constancy to resist the traditional view on a gendered concept of constancy. In other words, Wroth casts Pamphilia in the role of a passive and faithful woman in order to question the gendered bias of social conventions. Pamphilia justifies her passive endurance under the name of female constancy. Yet, she complains about the disparity between female fidelity and male infidelity, and eventually moves to search for the inner strength to control herself on her own will, and not to be subjected to passion of love any longer. As such, Wroth attempts to replace enforced chastity as a prescribed role of women with constancy as an act of will, emphasizing the female volition. Through the criticism of female constancy, Wroth strives to alter the meaning of female constancy to women's constant will to be autonomous.

**Key Words** | Mary Wroth, *Urania*, Pamphila, female constancy, chastity, female volition