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Crowning the Sonnet Tradition: Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

Laura Linker

Reading early modern sonnets can often feel like a demoralizing experience for undergraduates, particularly for women. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the sonnet first flourishes in England, female figures appear in sonnets as objects—beautiful, cold, disdainful, unavailable, silent. English writers took their cues from Italian ones. Petrarch's famed Laura—the blue-eyed, idealized beauty—might not have been Petrarch's "real" Laura at all; her name signifies poetry, alluding to the Ovidian myth from *The Metamorphoses* that tells a story of silence, abuse, and near rape. In Ovid's myth, the god of poetry, Apollo, chases Daphne, whose Latin name is Laura. Rejecting his love, Laura turns into a laurel tree to escape his unwanted embraces. Her body, now naturalized, becomes the laurel wreath, the symbol of poetry mythically associated with Daphne's would-be rapist. Ever after, her body-as-object becomes a decorative symbol of the poet's achievement, his reward for writing. The symbolic crown is often visually depicted with poets who have achieved the poet laureate. It is likely that Petrarch had this poetic, mythic Laura in mind along with a real young woman named Laura, blending literary, earthly, and heavenly models in his sonnets.

The earliest versions by English sonneteers often communicate scorn, bitterness, and anger towards women even as the speakers of the sonnet purport to idealize them. But how "real" were these women? Sonnets--Italian or English--often seem to focus on lost, unrequited, or unreturned love, but the desired mistress appears remote, an abstract ideal that the reader can (and often does) lose, either in

the sonneteer's metrical dexterities or abstruse images or complicated symbolism. The longed-for mistress often becomes a symbol for the church, the state, the monarch, or some other entity the sonneteer feminizes.

Representing "real" women was not the point either for Petrarch or the early English sonneteers. No doubt Sir Philip Sidney began cursing the stars (and Lady Rich) when he began to pen his famous sequence making her into a star, *Astrophil and Stella*, but Penelope Rich—whoever the *real* lady was--seems far removed from the remote Stella whose married last name, “Rich,” primarily serves to assuage Sidney’s obsession with puns. Though enough is known about the lives of Sidney and Lady Rich, married and unavailable, to reconstruct biographical readings of the sonnet sequence, the poems are not really about their relationship. Stella becomes an unattainable ideal that shifts landscapes and focal points in each sonnet. Once students identify and discuss the metrical and rhetorical gymnastics in the first sonnet of the sequence, which famously begins “Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,” they begin to see that Sidney’s purpose is less to express any personal heartbreak over a woman and more to show readers his linguistic talents.

Shakespeare's experimentation in his sonnets is in dialogue with earlier sonneteers, whom he sometimes targets. His humorous “Dark Lady” sonnet is a witty parody of the blazon tradition. After weeks of studying the major English sonneteers from Sir Thomas Wyatt to Shakespeare, however, even this sonnet cannot sell most students on the possibility that Shakespeare depicts a "real" woman in any meaningful way. Too often, it appears that women provide inspirational models for fourteen-line puzzle-poems, which strikes students as a sophisticated game played by men.

This is a good point in the course to introduce students to Sir Philip Sidney's niece, Mary Wroth, also a sonneteer. Her complete sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, was first published with her longer prose work, *The Countesse of Montgomeries Urania* (1621). *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* was the first complete sonnet sequence written by a woman in England. Influenced both by her aunt, the poet and literary patron, Mary Sidney, and her famous uncle, Sir Philip, Wroth shows evident debts to *Astrophil and Stella* in her sequence. Her sonnets examine erotic tensions and barriers to secular love, often in ways that flout religious ideas. Unlike Sidney, however, Wroth features a female speaker in each of her sonnets, and her speaker is nothing like the women we have seen in sonnets written by men in the English or Italian traditions. Wroth's speakers possess strongly articulated sexual desires, likely drawn from her lived experience. Unhappily wed in 1604 to Sir Robert Wroth, Mary soon tired of her domestic role, and after her husband's death she had a well-known love affair with her cousin, William, third Earl of Pembroke, with whom she had two children. She began writing by 1613, though her work was not published until 1621. A scandalous woman in her time, Wroth embraces the identity, making illicit love the focus of her sonnets.

Students find Wroth's life interesting, but they also find her perspective in the sonnets worth investing their time; they often choose her sonnets for further research in their final papers. Wroth's most introspective poems in the sequence, the "Crowne of Sonnets," demonstrate her metrical versatility. While Wroth lacks her uncle's literary genius, she nevertheless shows lyrical intensity and attention to language in her works. Wroth often shows tensions—poetical and social—that women in seventeenth-century England endured, and her life choices lend her credibility with

students to speak about women's experience of love in the period. Wroth rebels against normative boundaries established for women in the time, and students see this struggle communicated through vivid, often violent images and technical variance. The latter is an important point because it is through Wroth's technique that she shows the reader how she plays the sonnet "game" even as she bends the rules.

Because I teach close interpretative reading skills, including the more technically dense variances in poetic meter, I spend time helping students think through Wroth's language and metrical choices. I ask them to consider points when she employs the Petrarchan octave and sestet and compare them with sonnets when she departs from the decision. We consider how the poetic form follows her themes and images. I start a discussion on Wroth's sequence by doing a close reading of her most provocative sonnet about her alter-ego, Pamphilia (her name meaning "all loving") in "When Night's Black Mantle." The dream vision represented in this sonnet blends horror with sexuality, combining erotic with religious tensions. The speaker imagines herself in the cover of night, filled with dark sexual passion. The unholy lust is tied in the dream to Venus and her son, who martyrs hearts in a massive conflagration. The sonnet, adapted from Petrarch, shifts to the profane when cupid holds the speaker's heart, all on flame, and makes the speaker a martyr to love rather than to God. The sonnet ends with, "Oh me, a lover I have been." The line bursts with sexual promise, a remarkable position to take as a woman writer. Wroth risked much in her life and her poetry.

Traditionally, the speaker/lover in the Petrarchan tradition concentrates on the object of desire, but in Wroth's "When Night's Black Mantle," the speaker concentrates

on her own psychological and emotional torments without explicitly naming an object. The last line, “*Ay* me, a lover I have been,” engages these binaries because it focuses attention on the “me” speaking, a woman rather than a man. The Ay/I pun, reinforced in “me,” becomes the central tension in many of her poems, and finding a mode to articulate a sexual identity, or even a lyric self, becomes of prime importance to Wroth’s female speakers in all her sonnets. The tension is both religious, as the enacting of profane love is unorthodox, and social. For a woman to address and act on sexual desire was considered indecorous during the time period, and Wroth’s entering into an established male poetic tradition signified a rebellious spirit. She cannot get to the object of love here because she must first assert a self that becomes martyred to its desire.

I explain to students that women’s sexuality was sometimes associated with the demonic in the seventeenth century, and the figure of Venus, her son, Cupid, and the pile of burning hearts, collapses symbols of eros and hell that at once authorize and problematize Wroth’s position as a woman writer. It is a potentially dangerous move in an era when women could still be executed for witchcraft. I explain to students that likely this would not have happened given Wroth’s familial connections in the Sidney-Pembroke circle. The connections instead protected and empowered Wroth, whose upper class background and associations with her famous aunt and uncle, Mary and Philip Sidney, gave her more authority to break the rules.

Asking students to compare Wroth to the other sonneteers helps them to see that early modern women could and did write, even in genres or modes that traditionally excluded them. Their perspective was often much different than

contemporary ones by male sonneteers, even when they follow the same technical poetical patterns. Class discussions about these perspectives help students to think about the ways that Wroth engages difficult formal challenges in subject-object positioning. Students debate the tensions in the relationship between Pamphilia and Cupid, and we examine Cupid as a representation of Pamphilia's most illicit sexual drives. Is there any chance, I ask students, that Wroth draws on themes of same-sex desire; must her illicit love be solely or even always for a male? If she enters a traditionally masculine poetical tradition, then the beloved *should* be a female. Might she, like Shakespeare in such sonnets as the ambiguously gendered object of desire in the "Master Mistress" be in love with both men and women?

The erotic possibilities open opportunities for broader class discussions of the literature of self-fashioning in a period marked by highly stylized performances such as the court masques. Wroth performed in such masques, and many of the sonneteers, including Shakespeare and Wroth, wrote plays as well as sonnets. Where can we blur the lines between sexual and literary performances? Might not the sonnet sequence show us yet another highly sophisticated set of performances? These kinds of questions provoke a lively class debate. Wroth's sonnets help students to see these and other questions in a new way that accounts for women's experiences, desires, and abilities. They demonstrate that women wrote more than devotional poetry and could find a written space that was not prescribed for them by their patriarchal culture.

Wroth set an important precedent for later women writers, including the first professional woman writer, Aphra Behn. Virginia Woolf once famously suggested that all women writers should pay homage to Behn, who taught women to speak their

minds and raise their voices through their writing. Perhaps Wroth deserves the same attention as Behn, now an author widely taught to college students, has achieved. Women writers, starting with Charlotte Smith, reclaimed the sonnet from obscurity in the late eighteenth century. Smith influenced major and "minor" voices, including William Wordsworth, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and August Webster, a Victorian woman writing sonnets about same-sex desire. Wroth may not have made her living by her pen, as Behn did, but her experience as a woman writer in an oppressive world shows us how to write outside normative boundaries.

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