A woman to a man: femininity and the sonnet genre in ‘pamphilia to amphilanthus’

In Pamphilia to Amphilanthus, Mary Wroth becomes one of the first women in history to write a sonnet sequence, which was first published in her romance story The Countess of Montgomery's Urania. Pamphilia, meaning " all-loving," is the main character and Amphilanthus, meaning " lover of two," is her cousin and lover, suggesting that Pamphilia and Amphilanthus mirror Wroth and her lover, William Herbert (Norton 1560). Within Renaissance literature, poets like John Donne, Shakespeare and Wroth's uncle Philip Sidney write about love as a result of a voiceless woman's irresistible beauty. Wroth ends the female silence and shows that women can be the patron of love as well as the recipient, determining that love and desire are universal feelings fabricated internally. Through the persona of Pamphilia, Wroth transforms stereotypes of seventeenth-century women set forth by contemporary male poets, limiting them as the object of the male gaze, by supplementing her own version of the sonnet form with an inverted rhyme scheme while reversing the gender roles as a female poet in love with a man in the sonnet " 16" of Pamphilia to Amphilanthus. Furthermore, the diction of the sonnet portrays love as a pervasive, ruthless force that does not threaten a woman's innocence but her independence from men, leaving Wroth in a state of instability subject to the mercy of her beloved and society.

While the sonnet was previously seen as a male-dominated genre, the most obvious inversion of the sonnet tradition is that Pamphilia to Amphilanthus is from the perspective of a woman writer. However, through Wroth's manipulation of the Petrarchan rhyme scheme and the dismissal that a woman's beauty is to blame for eliciting feelings of desire, Pamphilia

becomes a symbol for an unheard feminine voice. For purposes of comparison to Wroth's uniquely feminine voice, her uncle Sidney sequence, Astrophil and Stella, heavily influenced the creation of Wroth's sonnets but still conveys a vast difference in perspectives, " Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,/ That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain" (I. 1-2). Sidney expresses his need to write about how his love for a female object causes him anguish. Until he can write women and articulate his precise feeling of unrelenting desire, he cannot be satiated. Moreover, Sidney presents the idea that women take pleasure in being a man's muse, desiring male validation. Be that as it may, Wroth dispels the validity of male fantasies of women as she describes the impossibilities of love, " Love first shall leave men's fancies to them free,/ Desire shall quench Love's flames, spring hate sweet showers,/ Love shall loose all his darts" (XVI. 5-7). Wroth's love is almost the opposite of the once established idea because she will not submit to the unattainable " fancies" or fantasies of men. For male poets like Sidney, the idea that the fulfillment or " quenching" of lust hinders the pain of love is only a misconception. For Wroth, love is much more complicated and unstable, even after two lovers join. Congruently, the relief from pain becomes even more of an impossibility demonstrated by the oxymoron of " hate sweet showers," juxtaposing the bittersweet aspect of love for both sexes. In placing the responsibility of indulging " men's fancies" on women, it takes responsibility away their own personal desire as men. Wroth further complicates the role of women in love sonnets by personifying Love as a man, Cupid, who causes all desire, instead of the beauty or poise of women. She does not concern herself with blazons describing an aesthetic motivation for romantic desire but describes it as an uncontrollable, unwarranted

emotion within herself, almost like a virus. Furthermore, it is an impossibility that Cupid will ever run out of arrows, which facilitates the metaphor that love cannot placate desire and vice versa. Wroth does not only reverse and redefine love through her personal experience as a woman but by reclaiming the sonnet form itself, a creation of the male poet. The rhyme pattern of the octave of the Petrarchan sonnet is almost always abba abba; however, in sonnet 16, the rhyme pattern of the octave is abab baba. Whether intentional or not, the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is inverted in the next four lines, possibly illustrating the reversal of genders. There is evidence that the change in rhythm was done purposefully because the two middle lines that rhyme consecutively, “ And captives leads me, prisoner, bound, unfree?” (XVI. 4) and the following line, “ Love first shall leave men’s fancies to them free” (XVI. 5), juxtapose the confining experience of love for women with the freeing experience of love for men. If the role reversal was a conscious decision on the part Wroth, then it leads the reader to believe that she was not only aware of the discrepancy between female and male voices in sonnets but that she was actively fighting any institution that perpetuated misconceptions about women.

Challenging the integrity of love as a concrete institution in a society dictated via the patriarchy, Wroth uses the common, poetic convention of rhetorical questions to discuss the volatility of love. Sonnet 16 begins with a query proposed by Pamphilia, “ Am I thus conquered?” (XVI. 1). The speaker does not immediately specify who conquers her; men in general, her lover, Cupid, or whether she is actually conquered. Instead, the sonnet begins with an ambiguous question about an unknown force that does not have an

answer. Wroth continues to ask herself and the reader questions meant for dramatic effects, such as “ Have I lost the powers/ That to withstand….?” (XVI. 1-2) and “ Must I be still while it my strength devours….?” (XVI. 3). The majority of the sonnet is a string of lingering questions that nobody can answer, not even Wroth; however, the existence of love and desire are never questioned. As seen in the above sequence of questions, Wroth changes between the present tense, “ Am I,” to the past perfect tense, “ Have I lost,” to a future implying, “ Must I,” while repeating the same form and rhythm, to show love as an ever-present influence and confusion in her life. In fact, the rhetorical questions in the first four line of the sonnet seem to doubt the speaker’s own agency more than love. The question then becomes whether or not it is possible to resist love and what possible effects love could have on Wroth’s personal identity as a woman of strength. Her uncertainty about everything except for the existence of love brings to light a huge difference in the tone of contemporary male poets towards romance. While Wroth approaches desire cautiously, poets like John Donne prefer the principle of “ carpe diem” or “ seizing the day” in his poem “ The Flea,” “ Wherein could this flea guilty be,/ Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?” (Donne 21-22). Similarly to Wroth, Donne uses rhetorical questions to express his opinion on love, but Donne appears to insinuate that women should not question their desire. The flea is a metaphor for lust, and the blood it sucks to survive stands for the gratification of those urges when two lovers join. Donne asks his muse what could possibly be wrong with love and minimizes the consequences of lust by explaining that the flea only takes a “ drop” of blood. Wroth, on the other hand, doesn’t trust the status quo as readily in her sonnet, “ Why should we not Love’s purblind charms resist?” (XVI. 9). It

isn't only vital to explore how her rhetoric attempts to define love as a capricious emotion but to recognize that, in questioning love at all, Wroth leads the reader to be cautious of the entire institution of love. Thus disparaging the careless nature of " carpe diem," she warns of following one's desires blindly, or " purblind," and affirms that " we," meaning both men and women, should not accept established understandings of society simply because they are " charming." Wroth designed unanswerable questions because the ambiguity, perpetuated by her own confusion and reluctance, surpasses commentary on the nature of love to questions about the implications of the male poet's voice on societies understanding of romance. Before sonnets like Wroth's, there was only one perspective on relationships dominated by a male voice. By reclaiming tools of poetry once used by men to write women, like rhetorical questions and sonnet form, she is able to write herself, similarly to how modern-day minority groups reclaim words that once confined them.

Regardless of the flaws of love and love poems, the striking and at times harsh diction used by Wroth reveals her attitude towards love as overtly negative. By the end of the poem, her tone does not change, yet she still involuntarily succumbs to the oppressive force of love. The untraditional word choice used to describe love, like " ruin" (2), " devours" (3), " captive" (4), " prisoner" (4), " bound" (4), " unfree" (4), " hate" (6), " shame" (8), " servile" (10), " hurt" (13) and " lost" (13), mutates romance into something not only bad and elusive but something that is willfully cruel and nonconsensual for women, compared to the common idea of romantic love as the ultimate form of life fulfillment. Truly, Pamphilia's tone in the love

sonnet is depressing to the point of hopelessness and fear as it quickly takes complete control of her past, present, and future. She answers her ambivalence towards love with emphatic resistance in the sestet, “ No, seek some host to harbor thee: I fly/ Thy babish tricks, and freedom do profess” (XVI. 11-12). These lines are Wroth’s final attempt to defy evil love as well as actively free herself from its talon-like clutches, refusing to trust an institution that promotes the fantasies of men. Particularly, Cupid’s “ babish tricks” and false claims of freedom, full of insincerity and instability, expose love as inherently deceitful or artificial. From the perspective of a woman limited socially and legally by the supposed superiority of men, it is understandable that Wroth would be both cautious and resentful of anything that has the power to take her agency and free will so easily, especially since she recognizes the duplicity of desire. Nevertheless, Pamphilia cannot resist her own feelings in the last lines of the sonnet, “ I love, and must: So farewell liberty” (XVI. 14). Although the depreciative tone only worsens as love erases Wroth’s identity along with her very freedom, one’s desire and thoughts are an extension of the patron, and therefore, emotions cannot be eradicated whether consensual or not. The unrelenting force of love drives Wroth to forsake her equally strong desire for stability through complete independence. In reversing the male gaze, Wroth not only denies male attention as conducive to women’s equality but contradicts the delusion of male poets, like Donne, that women fear love because of the loss of chastity instead of the loss of freedom. As Wroth accepts her conflicting desire to be with her lover, she says goodbye to “ liberty,” not her innocence, meaning she prizes her independence over Christian values of virginity. In conclusion, all of her questions, complaints and negative diction culminate to reveal a

fear of unpredictability as a result of a dependence on a possibly unfaithful, imperfect lover, producing a power dynamic where the one who loves the other less becomes dominant. Consequently, Wroth's dilemma originates from her loss of freedom, but love would not threaten her liberty if the object of her affection were dependable, implying that the ultimate desire for Wroth in sonnet 16 is stability in romance so neither lover holds more power over the other. In a world where perfect people exist and men don't romanticize women in sonnets, love could possibly be fulfilling for both genders without infringing on either of their independence. The sad conclusion is that a perfect world does not exist, so strong women like Wroth must fight for their voice to be heard buried under the legacy of men.

While sonnets slowly died out in the 20th century, love poems maintained popularity to the present day. Now, it is impossible to turn on the radio without hearing a song about love or desire, and though the concept of love has transformed over time, men and women alike still obsess over obtaining a perfect, unconditional idea of romantic love to make their lives meaningful. There are still men that write blazons about how women's beauty elicits lustful desires, but there are also women poets that anguish over love's thrall just as much as men. However, today love poetry comes from multiple difference perspective, voices, genders, races, cultures, and languages, and each person feels and shares love in their own unique way. It wasn't until brave female poets like Wroth came about in the Renaissance that previously unheard voices were allowed into the discussion of what love is, how we experience it and why it is so irresistible. Before Wroth, love poems were limited to men, and the singular perspective confined women to be

nothing more than a pretty face for men to admire. Though women have established their voice; arguably, they are more subjected to the male gaze today because of the accessibility and ease of media that constantly advertises an unattainable female figure to appease men. While this may be true, there will always be women like Wroth, ready to tackle the current misconception of love and women even it takes another 400 years in whatever form necessary.