

How relationships  
were presented  
through sonnets in a  
patriarchal society  
essay s...



This essay concentrates on the portrayal of male heterosexual love within two sonnet sequences. I will be analysing Pamphilia to Amphilanthus by Mary Wroth, and Astrophil and Stella by Sir Philip Sidney. Pamphilia to Amphilanthus and Astrophil and Stella are cohesive in their themes of male hedonism, unpredictability and guile. At the time that these sonnets were written, females had very little power and influence in society; men were accepted as the more dominant and important sex. This in turn influenced Wroth and Sidney to challenge these Patriarchal views of males being of higher worth than females through their sonnets. Both Wroth and Sidney present their opinions on male heterosexual love in a particularly derisive manner, and the convergence of these opinions is the basis for this examination. Love is not heralded as a bringer of joy in these sequences, but more a destructive force which controls and inflicts pain upon the protagonists, leaving them dumbfounded.

Mary Wroth was an English Renaissance poet, and the niece of Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney, both of whom were accomplished poets. Wroth spent most of her childhood in the care of her aunt and uncle due to fact that her father, Robert Sidney, was appointed as the Governor of Flushing in 1588. Mary Wroth came from a family where it was expected that females should be educated and have access to culture and literature; beliefs which were not widely held at the time. Mary Wroth was married to Sir Robert Wroth in 1604, a man who was a reputed gambler, drunkard and womaniser, and his death in 1614 left Mary in vast amounts of debt. Mary was also mistress to her cousin, William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, and bore two illegitimate children to him. This scandal lead to Mary being exiled from court, which

may have been the catalyst for her most prolific piece of work; Pamphilia to Amphilanthus, published first as a part of *The Countesse of Montgomeries Urania*.

Pamphilia to Amphilanthus was the only sonnet sequence to be written by a woman, which gives a unique insight into the ideals and beliefs of love that women at the time held. Mary Wroth was evidently challenging the double standards that permitted men to be adulterous, by creating such a constant and faithful character as Pamphilia. The sequence contains an underlying sense of anger towards the Petrarchan sonnets which preceded her work, as they portrayed themselves to be great, passionate seducers of distant women. I will focus primarily on the *Crowne*, (Sonnets 77-90), a collection of fourteen sonnets which document Pamphilia's constant striving to understand love, both through her personal life and her spirituality. It is also interesting to note that Pamphilia means "all-loving," and Amphilanthus means "lover of two."

To understand Pamphilia's views on male love, we first have to explore her femininity. In the *Crowne*, Pamphilia actively connects with love, both on a personal and spiritual level. In order to symbolise her dilemma, Pamphilia relates her struggle to a labyrinth. Not only is this a metaphor, it is also a literal reference to Theseus finding his way out of the labyrinth by following Ariadne's thread, and his subsequent abandonment of her. This introduces a sense of irony into the *Crowne* as Pamphilia chooses "to leave all, and take the thread of love" (77. 14) which indicates to the reader that the outcome of the sequence cannot be an entirely happy one. Mary Moore stated that by relating Pamphilia's struggle to a labyrinth, Wroth allowed her to develop a <https://assignbuster.com/how-relationships-were-presented-through-sonnets-in-a-patriarchal-society-essay-sample/>

markedly female “ sense of self,” which is “ isolated, enclosed, difficult and complex.”

Pamphilia’s commitment to love is apparent throughout Pamphilia to Amphilanthus, and we are given an implicit insight into Pamphilia’s perception of love with obvious religious implications in Sonnet 78:

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)

Pamphilia exemplifies and advocates her own feminine ideals of love, but will never find her ideals reciprocated by Amphilanthus due to his changeable nature. If this is the case, I can assert the theory that Mary Wroth intended for the reader to understand that ‘ lust’ is personified by males, and love, as something consistent, is personified by females. This is illustrated by Pamphilia’s referring to love as something nurturing in Sonnet 83, which may be a reference to the female ability to produce life:

Whereas fire destroys this doth aspire,  
Increase, and foster all delights above. (83. 7-8)

Cupid is first introduced into the Crowne in Sonnet 85 as the king of spiritual love, and Venus is held responsible for “ What faults he hath” (85. 7). The last sonnets in the Crowne confront the bringer of Love who is heralded as the “ maintainer” of “ lyfe,” “ Defence of right” and “ punisher of skill / And fraude” (89. 6-8). Pamphilia asks Cupid to help her remain constant with her

love in return for her offering him the “ Crowne” (89. 13). Mary Wroth describes Cupid in Song II as “ Monarck of loves crowne” (II. 4) which insinuates that he is not only the god of love, but also the figure which the sonnets are dedicated to, “ Crowne of Sonnetts dedicated to Love.”

Mary Wroth successfully manages to turn the figure of Cupid entirely on its head in Song II, when he is found to be engaging in an act similar to masturbation:

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

“ His godhead” defines both Cupid himself and his penis, and another double meaning appears as the nymphs fail to realise Cupid’s arousal, “ his will’s his right” (II. 12). The use of the word “ will” is a literal phallic slang, as well as the possibility it may be referring to his sexual desire. Also, when Cupid takes revenge on Silvia and her nymphs for their spying, he shoots a “ murdering dart...Through a poore nimph” (II. 17-20) which is a very obvious referral to penetrative sex. This act infers that love cannot be simply looked at as pure, but is a fervent and vicious misfortune, where the affected person has no control over their actions. By placing the act of dispensing love in this flawed Cupid, Mary Wroth shows that love through the eyes of a male differs greatly to Pamphilia’s female view of what love should be.

The masculinity of Cupid is an important key to understanding the portrayal of male love, as it makes Pamphilia’s stance as a woman all the more

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apparent. Song IV is aimed at the males who heralded successful philanderers, therefore compromising the sacrament of 'true love.'

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)

Sonnet 96 expands upon the theme of amorous duplicity by placing Cupid as a child, found "Cold, wett and crying" (96. 2) who cruelly repays the "kind compassion" (96. 4) the speaker has shown him by shooting them with his dart. Cupid, in this context, seems to represent all fickle, disloyal men and may not be just a representation of love.

Sir Philip Sidney was one of the most prolific English poets of the Elizabethan era whose sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, is widely regarded as the first of the famous English sonnet sequences. *Astrophil and Stella* is purported to be based on Sidney's love for his cousin, Penelope Devereaux, who was forced to marry Sir Robert Rich in 1581. The sequence was published posthumously in 1591.

*Astrophil*, the main protagonist, reveals himself to the reader through his voyage of self-discovery. Thomas P. Roche argued that *Astrophil* "teaches morality by negative example"; through *Astrophil*'s example we learn about the power of passion over logic. Roche "sees *Astrophil* in his role as unrequited lover not as a heroic figure but as a figure of man's obsessive concerns with his own desires, man creating for himself his own private hell, in which his every hope brings him closer and closer to the despair that <https://assignbuster.com/how-relationships-were-presented-through-sonnets-in-a-patriarchal-society-essay-sample/>

engulfs the conclusion of the sequence.” In Sonnet 10, Astrophil juxtaposes reason and “sense” (i. e. sentiment, passion) in order to assert his position as one of “sense’s objects” (10. 7). He pleads with reason and states that even reason would fall for his beloved and would instantly want “to prove, / By reason good, good reason to her love” (10. 13-14). The amoral Astrophil is stating that love cannot be sensible, and passion should lead the way over reason in matters of the heart.

Astrophil claims throughout that he has true feelings of love for Stella, but in Sonnet 45 he symbolically places lust above honour with the likely innuendo, ‘I am not I; pity the tale of me’ (45. 14) which could be slang for his genitalia. This is followed by numerous ironically loaded statements which Roche states “exposes the material, at times grossly physical, quality of his desire for Stella.” The consequence of Astrophil’s sexually suggestive language may be a device used by Sidney to reveal to the reader Astrophil’s underlying carnality.

Stella’s love for Astrophil is starkly contrasted throughout the sequence as she adheres to the rules of reasonable love, and displays the ‘correct’ way to discipline yourself when engaging in the practice of love, due to being already married. Astrophil in Song II finds Stella asleep, and begins to fantasize about his chance to “invade the fort” (II. 15) which is an obvious allusion to sexual assault. In Song X, Astrophil is fantasizing again about seeing Stella again, which again has foreboding undertones of power and control:

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

Astrophil's obsession with physical love indicates his lust for possession of Stella, rather than desiring an emotional connection or 'reasonable' love:

Think of my most princely power  
When I blessed shall devour  
With my greedy licorous senses  
Beauty, music, sweetness, love. (X. 31-34)

Also, Astrophil's claim that he "shall devour" (X. 32) Stella, reveals to us that his true intentions are entirely dishonourable, and then goes on to discuss the deplorable possibility of taking Stella by force if she refuses him:

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

When Astrophil realises that his advances on Stella came from "wit confus'd with worries," he admits that he has "harmed" Stella and begins to seem genuinely remorseful about his actions until he self-pityingly and wrongly contends that his pain equals Stella's in measure:

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)



In Sonnet 97, Diana, the virtuous Goddess of Roman mythology is used as a probable representative of Stella. The speaker comments on her 'peer,' a more available 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)

Despite denying the thought of ever finding someone else to shower his affections on other than Stella, it is at this point in the sequence that Astrophil starts to cast his eye to other, more procurable women:

Store of ladies meet  
Who may with conversation sweet  
Make in my heavy mold new thoughts to grow. (106. 9-11)

Astrophil dismisses the idea of finding a new love interest, yet the fact that he would consider replacing Stella when he claimed her as his muse indicates to the reader the fickleness of male love, especially when compared to female love.

It is hard to determine whether Astrophil's love for Stella is love, or simply love of the concept of love, and indeed, a love for himself. It appeared to me upon inspection that Sir Philip Sidney created Astrophil as a devious lover whose inconsistency and self-serving nature served to illustrate the fickle nature of male love. The sequence concludes with Astrophil finally withdrawing in despair from love, a disgraced man who is accepting of his shame.

Although Wroth's Pamphilia presented a female protagonist, Sidney's Astrophil came to the same damning conclusion that in their eyes, the absence of real love may be placed firmly on men. This is due to their inability to adhere to respectfulness, trust and selflessness. Insincerity, deceitfulness and most importantly, the desire for control over their partner appear to be traits that the all of males in these sequences possess, whereas the women focus on the idea of a love that knows no selfishness. Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Wroth both went about their exploration of love in entirely different ways, but seemed to end up at a similar conclusion. Themes of slavery, honest love and unavoidable turmoil run through both of these sonnets. They both seem to say that love is a merciless master, who snatches its victim's freedom and sense of reason from them. Despite the differences in these sequences, they both embody the inevitable conflicting turmoil that every person has to conquer when falling in love.

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